

A HOPE FOR THE DECLINE OF CIVILIZATION

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The other day I drifted dreamily into a taxi-cab. I was subconsciously aware of being late for an appointment; probably the more remote American provincial papers would still call it a date complex. And I remember the dear old days when one could get from one part of London to another quicker in a cab than on one's feet. By entering the cab, I found myself privileged to form part of a solid block or fixed settlement of cabs, which remained motionless while some distant policeman tried to coax the whole cross-traffic of London through some little crack between two barricades, blocking the street better than the barricades of a revolution. I did not object to this delay, for I am of a contented and unprogressive disposition. It rather pleased me to fancy that we might remain there permanently; and the crowd of cabs gradually change into a crowd of cottages. It pleased me to think that ivy might soon be wreathing itself round the wheels and crawling up the windows. It also pleased me to think that all the people there had purchased or hired motor vehicles in such vast numbers because they were all intent upon speed. But, above all, it struck me that this situation was singularly symbolic of the general social situation to-day. It is not impossible that our hustling industrialism may be simplified in spite of itself, as the cabs might turn into cottages. It may become stable by becoming what it would call stick-in-the-mud. Communications may break down, and men be forced to live where they are as best they can; and by this broken road simplicity may return.

Some still look hopefully to progress, in the sense of the advance of a scientific civilization. Others look hopelessly for the decline of civilization. But few are so eccentric as to hope for the decline. Yet I am not sure that there is not something to be said for such eccentrics; indeed, I am far from sure that I am not one of them. There are moods at least in which my spirits rise into hearty cheerfulness and hilarity when I think how probable, after all, is the prospect of a relapse into barbarism. Who shall say that all is dark before us when this bright star of hope hovers over the path? Man has before now broken down in the elaborate labours of empire and bureaucracy and big business and been content to fall to a simpler life. He has been content to picnic like a tramp in the ruin of his own palaces. He has been content that his wild horses or his wandering cattle should feed on the grass growing in the streets of the cities he has made. What man has done, man can do. We will not be downhearted. Our cities also may be deserted and our palaces in ruins; and there may be a chance yet for humanity to become human.

Some tell us that there must be more and more marvellous scientific inventions; but we will not listen to these gloomy prophets of woe. Moreover, they are not only gloomy, but ignorant. They are ignorant of the past; that is why they go in for being prophets of the future. It is not in the least necessary that scientific invention, having once started and done wonderful things, should go on indefinitely doing more and more wonderful things. The story of the earth is a stratification of such inventive civilisations that stopped dead or were broken off short. Did the Arabs that rode behind Mahomet and Omar set themselves to work with elaborate engineering to reconstruct the Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Not they; the jolly fellows enjoyed themselves much more fighting and dying for their simple faith. Did the monks dotted all over the desert of the Thebaid set themselves to improve the marvellous lighthouse of Alexandria, because it was among the Seven Wonders of the World? Of course not; the world was having a rest cure, which it sadly needed. So do we need a rest cure; and so shall we not improbably go in for it. The prehistoric Minoan civilisation, named after the mythical Minos and traced in faint and fragmentary lines amid the rocks of Crete, was as neat and scientific as a Utopia invented by Mr. Sidney Webb. Its drainage, its hydraulics, its mere machinery of life are things at which the professors who excavate them stand in stiff attitudes of admiration. Minoan hygiene progressed very far; but it did not go on progressing for ever and ever. There came an interruption; an invasion of simpler ideas from somewhere else. Men ceased to be hygienic and became healthy.

Such was the return to simplicity at the beginning of the Dark Ages, of which some people talk as if they were literally and materially in the dark; as if Bede or Dunstan or Gregory the Great went groping about as though they were in a London fog. But a London fog is a product of modern science. It is full of carbon and chemicals and is produced by the efficiency of industrial factories and furnaces. Men lived in a much clearer world in the sixth century; in what has been finely called "that long evening by the Mediterranean." Even the miraculous or legendary glamour seemed only to prolong that beautiful evening light. The riddle of that legendary age is not to be read by asking, as in the other riddle, "Where was Moses when the light went out?" It is to be read rather by asking "Where was Joshua when the sun stood still?" He was in the light; even if we ourselves find it an incredible or a legendary light. That was exactly the way in which the Catholic Church prolonged the dying daylight of the Roman Empire. Certainly the people round the Mediterranean did not feel as if they had ceased to be civilised even if they had. The Greeks had merely turned their highly civilised intellects from philosophy to theology. The Romans with their marching legions had merely seen in the sky the cross of Constantine instead of the Roman birds that aroused the great gesture of Germanicus. If society did eventually and slowly sink to sleep, it was in a sense a soothing and refreshing sleep; for with the dawn of the true Middle Ages men rose again like giants refreshed with wine. It was the springtime

of the troubadours and the friars; of the new and natural heraldry in which St. Francis wore his heart upon his sleeve.

There might be worse fates for us than the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. It would have been much worse for the old heathen empire if it had not declined and fallen, but only risen higher and grown richer in its old heathen way. What would have been the good of tracing amphitheatres larger than the amphitheatre of the Coliseum? What would have been the use of building baths more elaborate than the Baths of Caracalla? What, relatively speaking, would have been the advantage even of making taller aqueducts for grander fountains or longer roads for larger legions? This is exactly what corresponds to the modern vista of scientific improvement; of quickening our quickest modes of transport, or linking up yet closer our network of communications; of something more rapid than racing-cars or more ubiquitous than wireless telegraphy. We can see at this distance that increasing the old heathen machinery would not have made the heathen world happy; and we know in our hearts that increasing the modern machinery will not make the modern world happy. It would not have restored manhood to the mob of Rome to give them yet more bread and more circuses. It will not restore manhood to the modern proletariat to give them yet more doles and yet more cinemas. What is the matter with *Panem et Circenses* is not that there is anything wrong in charity or anything wrong in amusement. It is that people are getting things that they cannot control or comprehend; they are receiving them in an indirect and artificial form instead of finding them in a direct and natural form. They receive bread instead of growing corn; and they receive it like slaves instead of growing it like free men.

What I suggest may seem a somewhat gloomy sort of good news; and a gospel of rather ironical gaiety. But I do think it worth while to insist that even if our industrial civilisation did dissolve, its dissolution would not be merely a destruction. Even if it broke up into its component parts, the parts would be rather liberated than lost. Even the breakdown of money or the medium of exchange might restore the position of the man who makes things as compared with the man who merely buys and sells them. Even the shrinking of the city might mean the enlargement of the citizen. This is not, of course, a reason for relaxing any efforts to save our civilisation, such as it is, or to soften any of its evils while they remain. But it is a reason for suspecting that, if the darkest hour did come, some of the wisest men would for the first time begin to hope. There is something to be said for simplicity; and, when systems have gone to the dogs, it is sometimes found that they are jolly dogs.