ARE WE BECOMING "CIVILIZED" TOO RAPIDLY: BY W. CARMAN ROBERTS

WHEN Frankenstein succeeded in constructing in his own image a man of cogs and levers so cunningly devised that it developed an independent life and certain embarrassing propensities of its own, the inventor’s triumph marked the death-hour of his soul’s tranquility. The creature of his own ingenuity assumed thenceforth a monstrous domination over his life. To one who pauses in the astounding onward swirl of our mechanical civilization long enough to take stock of his soul’s assets, it must sometimes seem that the lot of modern man is not unlike that of Frankenstein. In the course of one fleeting century—a period sometimes spanned by a single human life—man’s inventive genius has clothed him with powers which in the youth of our grandparents lay hidden beyond the farthest dreams of necromancy. Yet so readily by usage does the incredible become the commonplace, that today we are amazed, not that we have made of the lightning a messenger boy and a household servant, nor that we can chat in our own voice with friends hundreds of miles away or send an instantaneous message round the world by the pressing of a key, but rather that our forebears should so lately have lacked these conveniences. We accept without conscious wonder the mechanical and scientific miracles which are part of the fabric of our daily life; but are aroused to incredulous interest when reminded that all of this is relatively a mushroom growth, a palace of marvels raised by the genii in a single night.

Only when we view the past hundred years from a vantage point of imagined remoteness do we fully realize that they make up a century of physical progress so unparalleled as to savor of the miraculous. We have taught the sunlight to reproduce our features upon paper, steam to haul us swiftly and smoothly across continents and oceans, and electricity to turn night into day for us and to carry our messages to the ends of the earth in the twinkling of an eye. Focusing the results of a thousand discoveries in one engine of destruction, we have produced the super-dreadnought, beside which the most terrific and death-dealing dragon of romance would appear less
formidable than a lady’s lap-dog. With the submarine we have invaded the secret depths of the sea, with the aeroplane we have proclaimed our dominion in the sky. As our early ancestors broke the wild horse to the bridle, so we in this age have harnessed an explosive mixture of air and gasoline which bowls our automobiles smoothly and swiftly up hill and down dale. Everywhere in the field of transportation and communication the units of time and space have taken on changed values. Distances have steadily dwindled and are still diminishing before the growing onslaught of steam railroads, electric trolleys, motor cars, fast steamboats and aeroplanes. Even more astonishing has been the part played by the telegraph and telephone in our conquest of space. And in all these directions we have learned to expect new advances at any moment. Thus it seems only a day since we realized that wireless telegraphy had suddenly robbed shipwreck of half its terrors. Yet mingled with our appreciation of these and a thousand other facts of like nature which differentiate our age from its predecessors, is there never an uneasy suspicion that our individual growth is being subordinated to the marvelous mechanical civilization which we have created for our convenience and comfort? Having wrought a physical miracle is it not possible that a spiritual reckoning is being exacted?

In the case of Japan we have recognized and lamented the irrevocable price an ambitious people has had to pay for our own particular brand of progress. Watching that nation, with the facility of a vaudeville “lightning change” artist, cast off her ancient flowerlike civilization for the modern and materialistic substitute that we had to offer, we have wondered a little whether her bargain was not in some respects a bad one. But it has not occurred to us that our own case, while less spectacular, is perhaps not fundamentally different from that of Japan. We too, it may be, have paid in certain elusive treasures of the spirit for the thing we call progress.

Consider for a moment what advances, measured in purely material terms, the past century has witnessed, and the suggestion that man himself stands in some danger of being dwarfed by his own creations will seem less grotesque. There is not a field of human interest or activity which during that period has not felt the influence of changed conditions.

Thus in the home the flint and steel have made way for the friction match, the candle has been replaced by the kerosene lamp, and that again by gas and electricity. In the matter of heating the impersonal but efficient furnace, with certain appurtenances in the form of hot-water pipes or steam radiators, has taken the place of the
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companionable and beloved fireplace. It is almost startling to be reminded that so indispensable a comfort as the modern bathroom, with its unlimited supply of hot and cold water, is really very modern indeed. Linked by telephone to its neighbors near and far, and invaded, at all hours, through the medium of the daily paper, by the strident news of the outside world, the modern home has become less a secluded haven, a place of intimate personal significance, than of old. In the general bewildering flux of things we sometimes feel as though its sheltering walls are becoming transparent, and its hearthstones as unstable as a will-o’-the-wisp. In the big cities—and they, after all, focus and epitomize our civilization—the public restaurant and the apartment hotel are helping us to forget the meaning of home life. For the sake of the conveniences, the comforts, the luxuries, we are willing to sacrifice the personal equation. Having built a great impersonal machine for our convenience, we have grown dependent upon it, and now pay unconscious toll to it in individuality and independence. And we go on complacently reproducing our mistakes in their own image. Thus having achieved a certain standard of lavish tastelessness in a great caravansary like the Waldorf-Astoria, we can think of nothing better to do than to copy it in the interior fittings of an ocean steamship like the Mauretania.

The underlying effort of the age seems to be to find a highest common denominator for all classes of mankind, and to grow rich by catering to it. The attributes and tastes and idiosyncrasies which differentiate one personality from another are disturbing factors which complicate the age’s problem in arithmetic, and as such are to be ignored for the present, and in time eliminated. The influence of this must be to make us more and more alike. The time was when the followers of the various callings and professions proclaimed themselves to the eye by distinctive features of costume. But the spirit of the age has changed this, and our fear of “being different” is reflected in a drab uniformity of dress.

PICTURE the consternation of an imaginative boy transplanted by some nameless magic from a New England farmhouse of a hundred years ago to the midrush of our present-day life! Taking New York as the focal point of our civilization, the center through which all the tendencies of an age pass in constant review, we will imagine such a boy, under the guidance of a metropolitan newspaper reporter, contemplating the multitudinous activities of that city. His sensations, we may surmise, would partake of the nature of a monstrous nightmare. We can picture him whirled from one point of interest to another, smothered and deafened in the
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subway, jostled and buffeted by the rush-hour crowds, shouted at in bullying tones by guards and conductors, and sent scurrying for safety by the insolent hooting of automobile horns, until he wonders whether he is a stray dog or a human being. From eight to nine in the morning he would see the hurrying human tide surging southward into the city's business section. From five to six or seven he would see the great current reversed, its units streaming toward rest or recreation. And looking into their faces he would ask, "Are these men or automata?"

Every field of human activity, it seems, bears in some form the insistent impress of the times. Even our art is affected by our restlessness and sense of hurry. In sculpture Rodin, who never finishes his work, and whose marbles capture movement where earlier masters limned repose, typifies the age. Photography has entered into rivalry with brush and pencil. In painting, the impressionists, pursuing the eternally fleeting phenomena of light, have opened new doors of beauty at the cost of much troubling of the artistic atmosphere. To architecture the age's contribution has been the many-storied steel-framed office building—the skyscraper. In the music of such men as Strauss or Debussy we catch the distinctive and disturbing note of our time. If poetry has any place in our scheme of things, we at least treat the poet as though he had none. From the hands of the craftsman hurry and commercialism have snatched his loved materials and tossed them to the insatiable machines, whence they issue as eloquent witness alike to the triumphs and to the shortcomings of a mechanical civilization. By grace of the advertiser we have the popular magazines, which purvey assorted information and entertainment prepared for speedy and effortless absorption, like the viands on a quick-lunch counter. These magazines, again, are straining breathlessly to keep up in timeliness and sensationalism with the pace set by the daily paper. Yet it seems even the hysterical methods of daily journalism are too slow, since it is said that the United States public "does not read the news—it reads headlines." We hear the lament that the modern newspaper is debauching the judgment and conscience of the American people. Is it not more accurate to say that it is the mirror which reflects more truly than anything else the strangely artificial social structure which we are so diligently rearing for our soul's discomfort?

In the field of thought the age's spirit of compromise is reflected in pragmatism, the newest of the philosophies.

In religion we have the restless hunger for new things, the mingling of the mystical with the utilitarian, in such modern movements as Christian Science, New Thought and Spiritualism.
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Our flustered educators, fearful lest some corner be left untilled in the ever-expanding field of human knowledge, have decreed that the child shall study a multitude of subjects. To this end they have so scattered their effort that an inevitable lack of thoroughness results.

IT WAS in the field of medicine and surgery, curiously enough, that our grandparents prophesied disaster. Thus when Simpson announced his discovery of chloroform, with its power to rob childbirth and surgery of most of their terrors, the thing was denounced from the pulpit by eminent divines, who predicted dire penalties to the race as the consequence of any effort to evade the terms of the curse under which man was driven from the Garden of Eden. Yet as a matter of fact, in this one field at least, it is difficult to see that our progress has cost us anything. Patent medicines, it is true, have had more than their fair innings in our day, but this is due solely to the greater facilities of advertising and distribution.

What, then, let us ask, has been the price of this century of unprecedented progress? To begin with, we have largely lost the sense of wonder, we have grown distrustful of enthusiasm, and have become somewhat cynical and superficial withal. We skim the surface of life, without time to make our impressions our own. We are on the way to become a spiritually impoverished people, somewhat lacking in the generous qualities which can sustain a great friendship or a splendid dream. We are ultra-sophisticated, yet easily deluded. In the place of zest, appreciation, we have acquired unrest. We are like men who, while following the chase, have forgotten what is the quarry. If it is happiness we are pursuing, who knows but what she has doubled on her tracks and is now behind us! Yet we strain breathlessly forward, never pausing to ask, "To what purpose?"

Having become cogs in the great machine that we ourselves have builted, how are we to snatch opportunity for thought, for contemplation, for the leisurely savoring of life, amid the ceaseless whirring of the wheels? Is mediocrity to be the price the race must pay for its civilization? The modern schedule leaves no time for the secretion of those by-products of the soul which give joy and distinction to life. In the past our great men, men who have been leaders through their red-blooded humanity, through the mellow opulence of their personal human qualities, have come to us in the first place from the country. There, in their youth, at least, they had opened their souls to the great fundamental mysteries and sweetness which envelop life and sustain it. But if the race continues to cut itself off more and more from this sustaining communion, where at last will we turn for leaders, or even for men?