

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RAILWAYS ACROSS THE DECKS

THE measure of a civilization is in its highways. A people like the ancient Greeks, whose lands were all islands and peninsulas, or the Phenicians and Carthaginians, who dwelt on coasts, to whom the ocean was a universal highway, might climb to great heights of civilization in certain specialties; but when a people is spread over great expanses of land, it must build highways, like the canals of China, or roads like those of the Romans or like ours or it must remain semi-civilized and nomadic like the hordes of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, or the tribes of Arabia.

Lord Bacon says: "There be three things which make a nation great and prosperous: a fertile soil, busy workshops, and easy conveyance for men and commodities from one place

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to another." This is the dictum of the greatest mind, perhaps, which the world has ever produced, in favor of what the Socialists call "economic determinism".

We have considered in these letters the matter of soil fertility. Let us now look at the question of "easy conveyance of men and commodities from one place to another." We speak glibly of the "annihilation of distance", and "the triumph of mind over matter"; but it is perfectly clear that we passengers and crew of the good ship *Earth* are dreadfully cramped in our activities by the limitations which matter imposes on mind in the matter of easy conveyance of men and commodities from one place to another. If by taking thought the goods of Europe and North America could be magically moved to the places where they are needed to feed, shelter and clothe the poor of the world; if by a magic carpet the products of farms, forests, stock ranges and mines could be transferred to the cities and mills; if by seven-league boots the rotting fruits and woods and precious growths of the tropics could be re-

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moved to the marts of trade; if by mind force people could really annihilate distance and appear where their needs and desires might dictate; if by occult power the mineral fertility of the earth could be redeposited in our depleted soils—then there would be no need in the world, in the absence of robbery or theft.

The spread of the people on this huge planetary *Zeppelin* over those portions of her surface which are far from seas and navigable rivers, under conditions of progress and civilization, is a new thing. It has been made possible by the invention of the steam-engine and the railway of iron and steel. The camel, the bullock cart, and the horse-drawn vehicle could serve a sparse population and a barbaric development, and when supplemented by slavery could produce a state of affairs which presented many of the outward aspects of civilization—but it was civilization which was monopolized by the few and for which the masses slaved and died in darkened agonies.

The railway changed all that. It carried

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commerce across continents, and democratized the civilization of the nineteenth century. For it harnessed to huge cars bigger than the ships of the Greeks and rolling on wheels set on smooth metal tracks, enormous artificial draft-animals swifter than the horse of Phœbus, and more powerful than the Minotaur. The railway has done more for democracy than has any other one material agency.

It has done enormous labors—and it must do more. Most of the civilized nations have seen the error of allowing these highways to be owned by some men, rather than by all men through governments; and nearly all of them have now reduced these roads to public ownership. Great Britain, Turkey and the United States are the only ones that still adhere to the outworn notion that the ownership of the highways should be left in private hands.

The needs of the people in the future can not be met by privately owned railways. This must be apparent from almost any view-point; but if for no other reason, the railways must be publicly owned because they must be called

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upon for public service to be rendered regardless of profit. Transportation is a huge collective job which must be performed with reference to the development of the nation, rather than any sort of profit. Germany, through her government railways, is able to develop any part of the empire at will, through railway service. We have tried to develop our industries by means of protective tariffs—and no man knows with reference to these industries how much of their prosperity is due to the tariff, and how much to advantages of soil, people and situation. But a government railway can equalize conditions all over a continent, so far as the limitations of a railway transport will admit. Government railways could carry to a region devoid of stone and timber, for instance, whatever might be needed, and thereby create prosperity where poverty might otherwise reign. It could carry these things regardless of profit. All it need determine would be the question, "Is there here a region on which population

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can be supported, if its natural disadvantages are compensated for by transportation!"

A government system of railways must be called into service to carry back to the depleted lands of the United States their lost fertility. The privately owned railways can not be justly asked to do this except at a profit; but the publicly owned system would assume the work as a clear duty. Highways are necessary to the development of the hinterlands of the world. They are as indispensable as are elevators for the utilization of the top stories of high buildings. Symmetrical and uniform development of the good lands of the world is not a private question, but a public one—a question of world-wide significance. It can not be left to a solution along lines of profit to the owners of railways. Railways in private hands fall short of the needs of the occasion in modern civilization, just as slavery fell in ancient times. No lands separated from the sea by continental distances, and unprovided with waterways, can ever be completely

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developed by privately owned railways—they must always remain in that stage of arrested development in which such states as Iowa and the Dakotas now find themselves, and in which they are mere feeding territory for the fully developed communities of the seaboard.

After all, why should profit be considered in the matter of transportation? Absolutely free use of railways for both freight and passengers would create such property values in the districts reached that they could easily carry the burden in taxation. To the average mind the suggestion of free highways at once calls up the vision of traffic blocked by both freight and passengers; but no freight would be sent for amusement, or for any other reason than to satisfy human wants, and no one would travel save for some object. So we are brought to the conclusion that humanity will never be free to satisfy its wants until the railways are free, as the elevators are free in great buildings. Free highways would bring to perfection Bacon's ideal of a nation with "easy con-

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veyance of men and commodities from one place to another.”

Does the thing look visionary? Well, take the state of Iowa. Give her free railway transportation to the lakes and the ocean. Tax the city and rural land values of Iowa to pay the cost of the building and operation of the railways. Can it be doubted that the values created by the free ways would pay for their operation? Would it not pay a corporation owning Iowa to build railways for its free accommodation? Then why would it not pay the people of Iowa? Free transportation may never come, but that it is an economic possibility under a proper system of taxation, I have no doubt. I believe, too, that the most economical way to pay transportation charges would be at the court-house rather than the railway office wicket.