

The new century

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THE NEW CENTURY.

Had a journalist set out to welcome the new century a hundred years ago, and ventured to indicate its course and character, it is astonishing, almost bewildering, to reflect on how much he must necessarily have omitted. He would have been environed on almost every side by limitations that have been so completely swept away as to make it difficult to realise their existence. Not a mile of iron railroad had been laid down, and the locomotive engine had not been invented. There was not a steamship (unless an experimental model) on any of the rivers and seas of the world, and steam power as applied to machinery was yet in its infancy. Electricity was a scientific curiosity, but its utility as the world's messenger, illuminant, and motive power was undreamt of. Anaesthetics were unknown, and both medicine and surgery were largely empirical and unprogressive. The political horizon was dark with war clouds, and the social system was heaving and throbbing in unrest. Education was practically unobtainable by the poor, and there were no such means of communicating information as are afforded by the modern newspaper press and the penny post. Public life was sadly corrupt, the standard of morals low, the state of religion unsatisfactory, and organised efforts for the amelioration of evils were but feeble and few.

It would be easy to extend the list of negatives along nearly every line, civil and military, scientific, sanitary, and commercial, industrial and literary, until one would begin to wonder what there was in the world of those days at all. A catalogue of things familiar to us, but which our imaginary predecessor of a hundred years ago never saw and could not guess or imagine would be voluminous. It would include ironclads, torpedoes, quick-firing guns, magazine rifles, smokeless powder, telephones, linotypes, photographic cameras, postage stamps, typewriters, bicycles, and hundreds more of articles now in common use. The industry[?]¹ movements had scarcely begun that have reconstructed society, given impulse and direction to expanding charity, revolutionised and purified the churches, widened and strengthened the basis of constitutional government, emancipated millions who were avowedly enslaved, and millions more who were as really under the yoke though not in name.

In view of all this, and of almost infinitely more that can be but faintly suggested and indicated, it is evident that any sane forecast of the century must have been utterly wide of the mark and immeasurably below what has been attained. Such considerations must be a drag on the pen when the opening of the twentieth

¹ This word is completely obliterated in the newspaper image, except for what is likely to be "i" and "ry".

century is the theme, for they teach that speculations as to the future should be indulged in with cautious reserve. Some historian yet unknown may read these lines a hundred years hence, and wonder with equal amazement at the limited knowledge they seem to him to convey.

Yet in spite of the possible rough handling of such a posthumous criticism, in which, after all, neither writer nor readers will have much personal interest, it must be fully acknowledged that the world is about to open its eyes on the twentieth century with high hopes and unbounded confidence. The past has wrought one great effect in the human mind by ridding it for good and all of the crippling notion that new ideas are valueless. For generations and centuries it was an article of faith that what is true is not new, and what is new is not true. How much the world has lost, and how terribly its progress was retarded, by the destructive theory that there is nothing new worth looking at under the sun can never be estimated. In past ages it branded discoverers with scorn and perhaps burnt them for witchcraft, it locked up its inventors in mad houses, compelled scientific investigators to recant, stoned its reformers, and crucified its prophets. We have changed all that, and if from disbelief the pendulum has swung to credulity, so that every faddist can obtain a hearing, and every nostrum a trial, we have gained immensely on the whole. Even were it admitted that we are overdone with cranks and charlatans, that some of us are too prone to believe in self-originating power like that absurdly attributed to liquid air, that speculation runs riot about faith-healing, telepathy, a fourth dimension and the like, we may remember the tenacity with which our predecessors held to the flatness of the earth, and sought for the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life.

The nineteenth century has done much for the twentieth if only in such things as enlarging the area of the possible, turning the revelations of science to practical use, and encouraging the brainiest of its children instead of putting them under arrest. Hence the general conviction at the dawn of the coming time that it will be brighter, fuller, richer, and more progressive than any that has gone before. We are moderately proud of our achievements, but instead of weeping, like Alexander because there are no more worlds to conquer, we have a cheerful assurance that the greatest victories are still to be won. This is the prevailing mood of mind in all departments of human life. Militarism presses like an incubus on some of the most enterprising and energetic peoples, but war is by no means so absorbing an occupation as it was a hundred years ago. Our civilisation is far more highly organised, intelligent, and equipped than it was then, and one of its marked characteristics is an impatience of the fetters that bind it, and the influences that retard its advance. The conscience and common-sense of Christendom working together, were there no ally, would make a ruinous war for personal ambition or national glory impossible, and one of the brightest auguries for the future is the concentrated energy directed towards securing the triumphs of peace.

In some directions it may be supposed that the nineteenth century has left the twentieth little or nothing to do, but this is probably a too hasty conclusion. It is

true we have explored the waste places of the planet pretty thoroughly, circumnavigating and traversing its continents and charting its seas. Little remains unknown except the spaces about the poles, but the knowledge we have may prove to be only the beginning instead of the end. Who will venture to say that the moon will not be as accurately mapped before long as the British Islands, and that there will not be communication opened with the inhabitants of Mars? Some of the weird suggestions of Mr. Wells may prove to be prosaic beside the new edition of the fairy tales of science yet to be issued.

One thing is certain — there is no sense of finality anywhere, and not a chapter of the book of human knowledge is definitely closed. A hundred years ago discoveries of the eighteenth century were awaiting the application by bold and skilful hands which they subsequently received, and there is a parallel to that condition now. It is fitted to excite surprise that at so many points we seem to be trembling on the verge of what would once have seemed wildly absurd. The navigation of the air and of ocean depths also seems to the moderately sanguine fairly within sight. Niagara has been harnessed, and the mighty power thus brought under control is but the prelude to indefinite multiplication of the same form of energy with astounding possibilities. The augmentation of heat intensity and pressure combined is producing a crop of marvels already, and we are only at the threshold. The production of aluminium may yet mean as much to the race as that of iron; the transmutation of baser materials into the precious metals cannot be scouted as an impossibility, nor can the production of diamonds in any quantity desired. No one can tell what bacteriological science will do in stamping out diseases hitherto unconquerable, and in prolonging life. We are promised both telegraphy and telephony without wires, which may affect methods of communication as much as the inventions of Wheatstone and Cooke.

There is equal promise in the social and moral as in the material domain. We are on the way "to make the bounds of freedom wider yet". Evil is abound, but the doctrine of despair is exploded, and multitudes are already being saved by hope. The broadening of political rights has been accompanied by greater legislative purity and justice, which have in themselves reproductive and reforming power. Enlightened public opinion has stamped out duelling and made drunkenness shameful, so that it is not too much to believe that it may do the same for gambling and other forms of vice. Criminality is decreasing and the tendency is towards greater reduction, while education is a progressive science, bringing refinement in its train. Organised religion was never more zealous of good works, freer from internecine dissension, or more confident of its divine mission. Poverty, sickness, and sin are still with us, but the poor are more willingly helped, the sick more tenderly cared for, and the sinful more sternly rebuked, more gladly assisted to reform.

Putting all this together the man must be a craven who does not greet the new century with courage and hope. A brighter time is assuredly at hand. May the harbinger of the benefits it has in store for the world be to every reader --
A HAPPY NEW YEAR!