

THE END OF AN EPOCH*March 22, 1933*

THE nineteenth century! What a long time we have been held up by these 100 years! For four months, off and on, I have written to you about this period, and I am a little weary of it, and so perhaps will you be when you read these letters. I began by telling you that it was a fascinating period, but even fascination palls after a while. We have really gone beyond the nineteenth century and are fairly well advanced into the twentieth. The year 1914 was our limit. It was in that year that the dogs of war, as the saying goes, were let loose on Europe and the world. That year forms a turning-point in history. It is the close of one epoch and the beginning of another.

Nineteen hundred and fourteen! Even that year is before your time, and yet it was less than nineteen years ago, and that is not a long period even in human life, much less in history. But the world has changed so greatly during these years, and is changing still, that it seems that an age has passed since then; and 1914 and the years that preceded it go back into the history of long ago and become parts of a distant past of which we read in books, and which is so different from our own day. Of these great changes I shall have something to tell you later. One warning I shall give you now. You are learning geography at school and the geography you learn is very different from what I had to learn when I was at school in the years before 1914. And it may be that much of this geography that you are learning to-day, you may have to unlearn before long, even as I had to do. Old landmarks, old countries disappeared in the smoke of war, and new ones, 'with names difficult to remember, took their place. Hundreds of cities changed their names almost overnight; St. Petersburg became Petrograd and then Leningrad, Constantinople must now be called Istanbul, Peking is known as Peiping and, Prague of Bohemia has become Praha of Czechoslovakia.

In my letters about the nineteenth century, I have necessarily dealt separately with continents and countries; we have considered different aspects and different movements also separately. But of course you will remember that all this was more or less simultaneous, and history marched all over the world with its thousands of feet together. Science and industry, politics and economies, abundance and poverty, capitalism and imperialism, democracy and socialism, Darwin and Marx, freedom and bondage, famine and pestilence, war and peace, civilization and barbarism - they all had their place in this strange fabric, and each acted and reacted on the other. So if we are to form a picture in our mind of this period or any other period, it must be a complex and ever-moving and changing picture, like a kaleidoscope, although many parts of the picture will not be pleasant to contemplate.

The dominant feature of this period was, as we have seen, the growth of capitalistic industry by large-scale power production - that is, production with the help of some mechanical power, like water, steam, or electricity (we have the name "power-house" for an electricity-generating plant). This had different effects in different parts of the world, and these effects were both direct and indirect. Thus the production of cloth by the power-loom in Lancashire upset conditions in remote Indian villages and put an end to many callings there. Capitalistic industry was dynamic; by its very nature it grew bigger and bigger and its hunger was never satisfied. Its distinguishing mark was acquisitiveness; it was always out to acquire and hold, and then acquire again. Individuals tried to do so, and so did nations. The society that grew up under this system is therefore called an acquisitive society. The aim was always to produce

more and more, and to apply the surplus wealth thus produced to the building of more factories and railways and such-like undertakings, and also, of course, to enrich the owners. In the pursuit of this aim everything else was sacrificed. The workers who produced the wealth of industry benefited least from it, and they, including women and children, had to pass through a terrible time before their lot was improved a little. Colonies and dependencies were also sacrificed and exploited for the benefit of this capitalistic industry and the nations which possessed it.

So capitalism went blindly and ruthlessly forward, leaving many victims in its trail. None the less its march was a triumphant progress. Aided by science, it succeeded in many things, and this success dazzled the world, and seemed to atone for much of the misery it had caused. Incidentally, and without planning deliberately for them, it also produced many of the good things of life. But underneath the bright surface and the good there was plenty of bad. Indeed, the most remarkable thing about it was the contrasts it produced, and the more it grew the greater were these contrasts: extreme poverty and extreme wealth; slum and skyscraper; empire-state and dependent exploited colony. Europe was the dominant continent, and Asia and Africa the exploited ones. For the greater part of the century America was outside the currents of world events, but it was going ahead rapidly and building up vast resources. In Europe, England was the wealthy and proud and smugly satisfied leader of capitalism, and especially of its imperial aspect.

The very pace and grasping nature of capitalistic industry brought matters to a head and produced opposition and agitation and ultimately some checks to protect workers. The early days of the factory system had meant terrible exploitation of the workers, and especially women and children. Women and children were employed in preference to men because they were cheaper, and they were made to work, sometimes eighteen hours a day, in the most unhealthy and abominable conditions. At last the State intervened and passed laws - factory legislation they are called - limiting hours of work per day and insisting on better conditions. Women and children were especially protected by these laws, but it was a long and a hard struggle to pass them in face of the strenuous opposition of the factory-owners.

Capitalistic industry further led to socialistic and communistic ideas which, while they accepted the new industry, challenged the basis of capitalism. Working-men's organizations and trade unions and internationals also developed.

Capitalism led to imperialism, and the impact of western capitalistic industry on long-established economic conditions in eastern countries caused havoc there. Gradually even in these eastern countries capitalistic industry took root and began to grow. Nationalism also grew there as a challenge to the imperialism of the West.

So capitalism shook up the world, and in spite of the terrible human misery it caused, it was, on the whole, a beneficent movement, at any rate in the West. It brought in its train great material progress and raised tremendously the standards of human well-being. The common man became far more important than he had ever been. In practice he did not have much of a say in anything, in spite of an illusory vote, but in theory his status grew in the State, and with this his self-respect increased. This applies, of course, to the western countries, where capitalistic industry had established itself. There was a vast accumulation of knowledge, and science did wonders, and its thousand applications to life made life easier for everybody. Medicine, especially in its preventive aspects, and sanitation, began to suppress and root out many diseases which had been a curse to man. To mention one instance: the origin and prevention of malaria were discovered, and there is no doubt now that it can be rooted out of an area if the necessary steps are taken. The fact that malaria still continues and has millions

of victims in India and elsewhere is not the fault of science, but of a careless government and an ignorant populace.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the century was the progress in the methods of transportation and communication. The railway and the steamship and the electric telegraph and the motor-car changed the world completely, and made it for all human purposes a vastly different place from what it had always been. The world shrank, and its inhabitants grew nearer to each other, and could see much more of each other, and, with mutual knowledge, many barriers, born of ignorance, went down. Common ideas began to spread which produced some measure of uniformity all over the world. Right at the end of the period we are discussing came wireless telegraphy and flying. They are common enough now, and you have been up in an aeroplane several times, and journeyed by it, without thinking much of it. The development of wireless telegraphy and flying belongs to the twentieth century and our own times. People had often gone up in balloons, but no one, except in old myths and stories, the flying carpets of the Arabian Nights, and the *urankhatolā* of our Indian stories, had gone up on anything which was heavier than air. The first persons to succeed in going up in a heavier-than-air machine, the parent of the present aeroplane, were two American brothers, Wilbur and Orville Wright. They flew less than 300 yards in December 1903, but, even so, they had done something which had not been done before. After that there was continuous progress in flying, and I remember the excitement that was caused in 1909 when the Frenchman Blériot flew over the English Channel from France to England. Soon afterwards I saw the first aeroplane fly over the Eiffel Tower in Paris. And many years later, in May 1927, you and I were present in Paris when Charles Lindbergh came like a silver arrow flashing across the Atlantic and landed at Le Bourget, the aerodrome of Paris.

All this goes to the credit aide of this period when capitalistic industry was dominant. Man certainly did wonderful things during this century. And one thing more to the credit aide. As greedy and grasping capitalism grew, a check to it was devised in the co-operative movement. This was a combination of people to buy or sell goods in common and divide up the profits among themselves. The ordinary capitalist way was the competitive cut-throat way where each person tried to over-reach the other. The cooperative way was based on mutual co-operation. You must have seen many co-operative stores. The co-operative movement grew greatly in Europe in the nineteenth century. Perhaps it succeeded most in the little country of Denmark.

On the political aide there was a growth of democratic ideas, and more and more people got the right to vote for their parliaments and assemblies. But this franchise, or right to vote, was limited to men, and women, however capable they might otherwise be, were not considered good or wise enough to have this right. Many women resented this, and in England a great agitation was organized by the women during the early years of the twentieth century. The woman suffrage movement this was called, and because men did not treat it seriously and paid little attention to it, the women suffragettes took to forcible and even violent methods to compel attention. They upset the business of Parliament by creating "scenes" and bodily attacked British Cabinet Ministers, so that these ministers had to be under continual police protection. Organized violence on a big scale also took place, and many women were sent to gaol, where they started hunger-striking. Thereupon they were let out, and as soon as they got well again they were put back in prison. Parliament passed a special law to permit this being done, and this was popularly called the "Cat and Mouse Act". These methods of the suffragettes, however, were certainly successful in attracting widespread attention. A few years later, after the World War began, women's right to the vote was recognized.

The women's movement, or the feminist movement as it is often called, was not confined to asking for votes. Equality with men in everything was demanded. The position of women in the West was very bad till quite recent times. They had few rights. English women could not even own property under the law, the husband took the lot, even his wife's earnings. They were thus even worse off legally than women are to-day under Hindu law, and that is bad enough. Women in the West were, indeed, a subject race, as in a host of ways Indian women are now. Long before the agitation for votes began, women had demanded equal treatment with men in other respects. At length, in the 'eighties, in England they were given some rights as to owning property. Women succeeded in this partly because factory-owners favoured it; they thought that if women could keep their earnings, this would be an inducement for them to work in the factories.

On every side we note great changes, but not so in the ways of governments. The great Powers continued to follow the methods of intrigue and deception recommended long ago by the Florentine Machiavelli, and 1800 years before him by the Indian minister, Chānakya. There was ceaseless rivalry between them, and secret treaties and alliances, and each Power was always trying to overreach the other. Europe, as we have seen, played the active and aggressive role; Asia the passive. America's part in world politics was relatively small because of her own preoccupations.

With the growth of nationalism the idea of "my country right or wrong" developed, and nations gloried in doing things which, in the case of individuals, were considered bad and immoral. Thus a strange contrast grew between the morality of individuals and that of nations. There was a vast difference between the two, and the very vices of individuals became the virtues of nations. Selfishness, greed, arrogance, vulgarity were considered utterly bad and intolerable in the case of individual men and women. But in the case of large groups, of nations, they were praised and encouraged under the noble cloak of patriotism and love of country. Even murder and killing become praiseworthy if large groups of nations undertake it against one another. A recent author has told us, and he is perfectly right, that "civilization has become a device for delegating the vices of individuals to larger and larger communities".