

THE TOWN THAT WOULD NOT BE A CITY

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“**B**UT for me,” wrote Plutarch, “I live in a little town, where I am willing to continue, lest it should grow less.”

Plutarch was a good citizen, and it is safe to say that he had the friendship as well as the respect of his neighbors. The man who loves his town is likely to be loved of his townsmen; and one who would have his shortcomings charged to himself and not to an obscure birthplace or provincial residence could not but have been a man of influence in local affairs—the sort of man to whom the neighbors would go for advice and assistance, equally confident of his sanity and his good will.

I am afraid, though, that if Plutarch lived to-day, much as most of us might value him as a neighbor, we should secretly look upon him as rather old fogeyish and out of date.

Remain in a small town for fear that it should become smaller? Not we. If it is not going to get bigger, let us go to some town that will.

The current American idea of a town is—a place that is going to be a city.

The obsession of bigness is upon us. The census reports are the final word about our cities. Chicago in twenty years catches and then hopelessly outdistances Philadelphia. Chicago is a “live” city, one of the marvels of our time. Philadelphia has the adjectives “slow” and “sleepy” fastened upon her garments and wears them as a permanent badge of unworthiness. Down in our South country, Atlanta and Birmingham and Memphis wait for the census reports to see which is the “biggest,” the “most progressive,” the “best” town. There is joy in Atlanta and disappointment in Memphis when the reports come out.

So it is elsewhere. Urbetta wants new mills and machine shops that it may rival Greattown in population and bank clearings. Bigburg wants a new opera house and a street car line down the two main streets, so that it may get in the Urbetta

class. Littleville lays off new streets and sells good farm lands at unreasonable prices, hoping this way to start a "boom" and catch up with Bigburg. And out there at the Cross Roads where half a dozen little houses have been put up near the church and the store and the blacksmith shop, to catch and hold for a few months at a time a few families of the more transient and shiftless laboring class—out there in the sun-quicken and wind-refreshed fields, the building of another inconvenient, unsightly house to rent to some unknown straggler is regarded hopefully as another step toward the blissful goal of real townhood.

Yet what real concern to Philadelphia can it be whether that city—making a wholesome and steady growth—is second or third in the list of great cities? What can a few thousand names more or less in the census-takers' books amount to with either Atlanta or Memphis when it comes to determining their real merits as cities,—their desirability as places for men to live and work, and for children to be born and grow up in?

Does Urbetta really need new manufacturing plants, new rows of squalid "mill-hand" houses, new supplies of smoke and dust and grime, when it thrives on its trade with the surrounding country and has unimproved and unsuspected beauty spots all along the banks of the little river where the big mills "ought to be"?

Has it never occurred to Bigburg that it would add more to that place's charm and fragrance to move the pig-pens out of town, to fill up the mudholes where the "streets" dwindle down to country roads, and to pull down the ramshackle old fire-trap across from the depot, than to build an opera house or street car line with the prospect of seeing the builder get two per cent. on his money?

And Littleville, where each family has, from either front or back yard, a fine view of a wooded cliff, and where all wade through mud in wet weather and kick up the dust in dry weather as they go to church or post-office—cannot Littleville realize that what it needs is to put down a few rods of concrete walk and to make sure that the trees on the cliff will not be cut? The fields can grow grass and grain and help to pay for the walks,

if they are left as fields; cut up into lots, they will grow up in weeds, most likely, and yield no return.

And our Cross Roads friends, why do they want more children of uncertain ancestry and unpatched trousers in their schools; more ugly little three-room houses to mar the beauty of the pastures? Can't they see that what the Cross Roads needs is a hitching shed for the farmers' horses, a coat of paint on the "storehouse," and some vines and hedges to screen some of the unkempt-looking outhouses?

Suggest these things to the people of these towns—tell them to make a park of the river bank, to get rid of the mudholes, to put down the new walks, to build the hitching shed—and they will tell you in all seriousness that they have not the money, that the taxes are too high now, and that what the place needs is new settlers and new enterprises.

Yet the city will buy a site by the river and give it to some corporation, if the corporation can only be induced to build its new mill there instead of elsewhere. There will be big meetings, too, to start that new street car line which is not needed and cannot pay. And if Littleville has a struggling newspaper, that paper will print long accounts of the big sale of lots and the "phenomenal growth of our young city," with never a word about the beauty of the green-clad cliff, or the needlessness of the mud-spattered shoes.

The question with towns is not, "How good?" but "How big?"

Surely it is not so everywhere. There must be at least one little city that does not wish to be a big city next year; one country town that does not aspire to be a city at all; one little hamlet that has no desire to push the wheat fields back from its doors. Such places must be, and into their keeping, I am persuaded, has been given the key to the future. Their citizens it will be who shall dream the dream of the city that is possible, the town that ought to be, and bring this dream to pass. For as surely as it is more important that the town be beautiful and clean and well-governed than that it be big, so surely will the present cult of numbers pass away and the more rational appreciation of homelikeness and wholesome surroundings take its

place in the minds of the people who dwell in our American towns.

Taken in its entirety, the town of to-day, big or little, is an unlovely thing. Exceptions there may be, but the rule holds good. In almost every town, too, may be found beauty spots—fine residence sections where trees border the curving avenues and the lawns are kept green; public buildings, not faultless perhaps, but dignified and purposeful enough to give the citizens a feeling of pride; smooth, well-lighted streets, and noble business houses towering above the hurrying throngs. There are few even of the smaller towns which have not some feature either of natural beauty or civic achievement which they are proud to possess and glad to see each day. Even the tall smokestacks of the mills, waving the dark plumes of industry above roof and spire, and the grim-fronted furnaces which brighten now and then with the unexpected and thrilling splendor of leaping flame and billowing vapor, crimson and purple and rose and turquoise and tender gray—even these most utilitarian structures have their charm. The town is not devoid of beauty; but how seldom can it be said to be beautiful!

Against the noble avenues, clean, fair-fronted on either side, may be placed the unpaved streets of the slum districts or the negro quarters with their dismal lengths of poverty and squalor. Against the stately buildings may be placed the ramshackle old structures which are allowed to stand, often menacing as well as unsightly. Against the flowering parks may be placed the tenements with the street for playground. Against the strength and majesty of mill and furnace, the wretched cheapness and slatternly monotony of the long rows of houses, all alike, in which the men who work in mill and furnace are expected to live, as if a laborer had no sense of beauty or no aspiration for the finer things of life.

But why continue the list? We all know these defects of our cities—the hopeless squalor and the reeking filth that hide behind the skyscraper; the ragged, unkempt district that both joins and separates town and country. We have seen them, and a thousand other unlovely sights, so often that we have come complacently to accept them as part of the natural order of

things; or else have imagined that the way to get rid of them is to "boost the town" and have it grow. If only people came in and land went up and a few men grew rich because of that, all was well, and we need not concern ourselves about the noble trees that were cut down, the clear springs that became defiled, or the poorer families who were ever crowded into less and less desirable homes.

Surely there is another type of city, a finer and higher town ideal. The city that shall be all beautiful, the town that desires more inhabitants less than better and happier citizens—surely these things exist not only in imagination, but somewhere in the splendid palpable reality, built by the cheerful toil of men who love their homes and firm-planted on rocky hillside or billowing prairie with which they recognize kinship. Surely, too, these overly ambitious towns of ours, blind in their worship of size and numbers, may yet open their eyes and see the possibilities that lie about hamlet and village.

"A city is not builded in a day," sings one of our present-day poets; and we need not expect to see our ideal city, our contented town, spring suddenly into existence. The passion for virtue and beauty and sanity of life is not going to possess any existing "metropolis" and convert it into the city of our dreams. There is no Merlin of industry to build for us a modern Camelot. Nor can we more than hope that our little town will speedily recognize its kinship with the fields and deliberately set itself the mission of living not only among but with them, of having the atmosphere flow through its streets and extending its modernities out into their lanes until town and country become but parts of a single well-defined and well-organized whole.

Yet something like this, it seems to me, must come to pass. Slowly, no doubt, as the growth of the trees in the forest or the city street, but none the less surely and irrevocably, the little town will come into its own. Some day this little town will know itself not as a means but an end, and plan to become the right sort of town instead of longing to become any sort of a city.

Some day, let us hope, our little city will realize that the pleasant views from the banks of the river and the shadowy

"courting lanes" leading down to the water's edge are real assets, and that properly conserved and developed they will add more to the satisfaction and daily serenity of life of the city's people than would a new factory, the building of which would spoil the vista and make necessary the cutting down of the immemorial elms and stately sycamores. When the city has realized this, beauty in any part of it will be cherished, and untidiness or unwholesomeness in a backyard will be considered a crime against the community.

Then, if the promoter of the new factory comes to town, we can imagine the city's head man taking him far down the river bank and saying: "Here, we think, would be a good place for your plant. You see that your smoke will drift away from the town; the railroad spur you need will run behind this bank almost out of sight; your buildings will not spoil our fine view across the river; and up there on that slope will be a fine place for your workers to live if you wish to build a village for them. We shall insist on paved streets, liberal front yards and gardens, neat exteriors and modern conveniences for these houses. We are willing to help you all we can in getting all the land you need at a reasonable price, and our city engineer and architect will be at your service."

"Small chance for this city to secure the factory after such talk"?

I am not so sure.

If a few towns said it, the men who wished to build the mills would consider it seriously. Then, if they should be the kind of citizens our city needed, they would begin to see something in it. The town that considered first of all the welfare of its citizens would not be a bad town for an honest business enterprise to locate in. If the town cared enough for the men who worked in the mills to insist that they have neat homes and attractive surroundings, it would surely do its part to keep the mills going and the pay-checks coming.

Some manufacturers think of their employees as co-workers in a great enterprise rather than as a lot of hirelings whose only mission in life is to add to the factory's dividends. Such men would not be driven away by a regard for beauty and an

insistence upon decency. The other type of employer our little city by the river would not need.

In our country town, too, I can imagine that with the ruts and mudholes filled, the broken sidewalks repaired, the old wooden landmark of early days condemned as a menace and the little dinky depot kept at least clean and neat by the town's authority, there would begin to come a feeling that maybe Big-burg did not need to be a city after all. There might come a rest room for visiting shoppers. The merchants and the farmers could join to build it and it would help to make them neighbors. Then the merchant might decide he had just as soon sell goods to the steady customers he had known for years as to folks he had never heard of and whose tastes and whims he did not know. It would be an easy step from the rest-room to an entertainment hall, and there the needed opera house would be! With cleaner streets, the yards would brighten up, and after a while the telephone linemen might find out that they could string a few wires without cutting the town's finest trees to pieces. When that came to pass, anything would be possible—a clean courthouse, a sanitary inspector who really inspected, everything, in fact, necessary to make the people of the town proud of it and glad to live there.

And Littleville, dreaming of city ways and future bigness, while the pigs and cows roam through its streets, and the young autoists scatter mud on the dodging pedestrians, what could not Littleville be if only its citizens set themselves to the task of making it an ideal place to live in? Beauty of surroundings it has, close, wholesome contact with woods and fields, easy access to real cities. A thousand towns have all these and do not count them assets or put them to use. Littleville can have electric lights and still keep the brook that runs through it clean and pure. It can drive the pigs off the streets, and have a high school, and get out of the mud, and have the grocer screen his doors, and at the same time lay aside all dreams of city greatness, devoting its energies to improving real conditions rather than to advertising advantages, more or less mythical. When Littleville does this, it will be a fine place indeed to live in, and will find no trouble in securing new families as fast as it can locate them satisfactorily, absorb them into the community life and turn

their ideas and energies into effective channels of community work.

The Cross Roads, too, meant to be a centre of community life, does not need more people living about it. What it needs is a better school-building with one big room for community gatherings, a baseball diamond, a playground for the girls, some honeysuckles and wistarias on porch and fence, and a few trees to shadow and shelter it all. This, with some grass about the church steps and some of the storekeeper's paint on his own buildings, and it could become a place to which old and young would turn with pleasure and from which they could come instructed and bettered, instead of being, as so many such cross roads now are, a place where energies are slackened and respectability is questionable. Some time country life will be organized and ten thousand such community centres will come into being to the great enrichment of the nation's mental and spiritual perceptions.

But I meant not to speak of the country, only to ask aloud what I have often asked in silence. Is there no town left that does not prevaricate about its population, or none that will tell the stranger what it is now doing to become a better place to live in, instead of how much it expects to grow in the next five years?

In such towns, I can believe life will be better ordered, more purposeful and fuller of "durable satisfactions" than is the town life of to-day. There will be no hint of stagnation, no slacking of enterprise because some rival town has made more rapid growth. Instead there will be more beauty, and a deeper and finer local pride. In such towns Plutarchs may not live; but there will surely be men of worth and strength—men whom Plutarch would have been glad to know, and whether or not they attain distinction beyond their own town, these men will add distinction to it. With men willing to live in little towns and to serve them, lest they should grow less, not merely in numbers, but in beauty, desirability and friendliness, the future of the nation will be assured.

THE CONFESSIONS OF A HARVARD MAN

HAROLD E. STEARNS

HARVARD'S imperishable glory lies in the fact that it, of all American colleges, still speaks the most stirring invitation to our youth,—“here is your fullest opportunity.” But Harvard, I believe, has three grave faults. It fails to stimulate the majority of its students to take advantage of this rich opportunity. It furnishes a totally inadequate intellectual discipline. And instead of teaching a man good habits of work and steady concentration, it encourages lazy and vicious habits. These three faults are organic weaknesses of the college, its customs and its system of teaching; they do not arise from the moral quality or intellectual fibre of the students.

Unlike many men, I did not go to Harvard because it was “the thing to do.” Neither did I go because the prospect of four years of friendships and easy, pleasant “work” seemed enticing. Although of an old New England family, none of my relatives urged me to enter Harvard. Only moderately interested in athletics and of small physical build, I had no visions of becoming the popular football or crew hero. I went to Harvard hoping and purposing, first of all, to find new interests, to meet intelligent and serious-minded young men, and to gain a genuine culture. Secondly, I hoped and purposed to become a better and more accurate workman. I had the misfortune to be “precocious,” and these hopes and purposes I therefore held with more than usual clearness. I believe they represent, with some degree of justice, those of all men who enter college intending to take it seriously.

How well are such hopes and purposes realized at Harvard? And how much failure and success are due to the college itself? How much to the inherent qualities of the student body?

Looking back, a year away from academic life, I find that for whatever is deep and rich in my own individuality I owe much to Harvard. With its excellent instructors, its libraries and its traditions of learning, Harvard furnished me my greatest intellectual opportunity. Yet during only one year did I