

Our Civilization

The Jerry Builder

Frank Kitz

May 1885

In utilising the space at my disposal for this paper I do not concern myself with advocacy of the abstract principles of Socialism, but prefer to exhibit the foulness, discomfort and filth which capitalism inflicts upon us in our every-day lives, and thus negatively to make Socialism understood. The utility and justification of this gospel of discontent is found in the patience with which the people bear the evils which the gushing scribes of the press assure them are inseparable from "Our Civilisation."

One, and by no means the least weighty of the counts in the indictments by which Socialists arraign the present system of production for profit, is that wherein our health and lives are directly affected, viz., the construction of our houses, owing to our infamous land system, which robs the people of their natural inheritance and forces them into towns ; we have, especially in London, a vast increase of urban population. To meet this artificially-created and unnatural increase, our fields, and ere-while pleasure resorts, have been given over to the reign of the Jerry Builder, who has disfigured them with miles of hideousness. Under his sway, trees, grass and hedgerow disappear, the pleasant wayside brook becomes a noisome sewer, villages are reached, swallowed up and passed. What few characteristics of their once rural environment remain, only stand as sad mementoes of a simple past, and soon degenerate into slums. Over the poor man's common the Jerry Builder casts a greedy eye, and thereon builds his shoddy houses for the shoddy City plutocrat, who, true to his instincts of shop, designates the few starveling soot-beladen stalks which his friend the Jerry Builder has allowed to remain around his house as the "Grove" "Shrubberies," "Sylvania," etc. The poor mourn the loss of their open spaces, once within a stone's throw of their homes ; the Sunday walk in the fields is now replaced by a sojourn in the sweltering gin palaces. Wages are falling, rent is rising, and the railway trip to the country is out of their reach. As the circle widens and the oxygen-giving trees and grass recede before the march of the invader, and are replaced by smoky chimnies, sulphurous brickfields, and dust-heaps, so does the atmosphere of the huge city become vitiated and enervating, the poor penned and overcrowded are literally asphyxiated, and killed by hundreds through the lung diseases set up by these causes. Glorious civilisation ! how apropos are the burning words of Rouget De Lisle in the "Marseillaise," "They mete and vend the light and air."

The Press, actuated by the same benevolent principles toward Land Jobbers which prompts their articles in favor of colonial emigration, advise the working class to seek “fresh air” by living in the suburbs and renting those “Desirable Residences “ constructed by the Jerry Builders.

The evidence given before the Commission to inquire into the Building Acts throws a clear light on the manner in which our suburbs are run up. Dr. Tripe, medical officer for Hackney, deposed that he knew whole streets and roads that were built upon foundations composed of the filth and refuse of dust-bins, the soil having been excavated to a depth of ten feet or more and replaced with the refuse from dust-yards, and the builder commences proceedings by announcing that “Rubbish may be shot here.” The houses themselves were constructed with road- drift and street-sludge mixed with inferior mortar. Anent the sludge, he explained that it contained a large amount of sewage and faecal matter. The general evidence was to the effect that the houses so constructed decrease the health, and in large numbers of cases actually cause the death, of their inmates. Many were so flagrantly bad in construction that, despite the collusion between parish officials, landlords and builders, they were condemned. Others saved them trouble by falling down from their own weakness. This has happened with detached houses; when built together, they have supported each other as two inebriates do by leaning against each other. All this has not gone on without some protest. Occasionally some remnant of open space, from which natural beauty is riven, is snatched from the devouring grasp of the land-grabber, and the public are made to pay handsome compensation for the exercise of their own rights.

Lovers of art like Matthew Arnold and Ruskin declaim against the rampant spoliation of Nature, and Ruskin queries whether the “Greatness of the British Empire is as loosely stuck in the ground as are the houses of its inhabitants.” Scientists like Richardson formulate a City of Health and teach sanitary truths, but they reckon without their host. The same cause, which make the filthy reeking slums of the central districts “profitable investments of capitalists and others” as per advertisement of highly-respectable auctioneers, is at work in the newer quarters. Rent — that corner-stone of the whole system — packs humanity together as a source of exploitation by this form of robbery. The causes of physical and moral degradation, so rife amongst us, are fast lowering the morale and physique of the people. We are told that we are advancing in the path of civilisation. If it involves loss of health, of happiness and culture to us as workers, *Cui bono?* Time was when the homes of a people betokened their degree of culture, when art and architecture were allied, and were not the handmaidens of greedy speculators; when masonry was an honourable craft, not forced to create the hideous eccentricities which disfigure our thoroughfares to-day. The monuments of the past still with us prove this. If it is left to our posterity, when freed from the rent fiend, to develop the Socialistic ideas now leavening the mass, and to give them concrete expression in the construction of their houses and surroundings, we may gauge the feelings with which they will view the paltry remnants of our present ugliness, if any remain, of an age which fostered sanitation in its hospitals and prisons, and neglected it in its houses; gauge the ridicule they will bestow upon the brick boxes in which we exist as the *reductio ad absurdum* of individualism gone mad, of a people puzzled how to feed and house their own poor, yet striving to force Arabs to live their lives ; and as they till their communal lands and enjoy their communal halls, they will bless those who now are hastening the end of the reign of Shoddy.

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