The Old and the New

By "PIERROT."

The untravelled Colonial is apt to think of London as an old city—as a city, that is to say, in which the old forces itself upon your attention at least alternately with the new. But this does not represent the actual fact. London is a brand-new city, placed in an old setting, rather than an old city aiming to be new. To me the Abbey and St. Paul's are as out-of-place as an old gargoyle on the side of a tram-car. It is true that in the cases of those great fabrics it is a grand and glorious juxtaposition; but both buildings present to me the idea of a deliberate concession by new people to the claims of an older world. Historically, of course, such a view is an absurdity; but psychologically, I hold that it reflects a truth.

A day or two ago a Select Committee advised the State to move the clock twice a year, with a view to lengthening the hours of sunlight in the summer months. This quite revolutionary change, which promises to be made quietly and after less than a twelvemonth of agitation, is surely not the product of a civic mind, decrepit with age, but the realisation by a vigorous people of the prior claims of commonsense over precedent. I sometimes think that young countries incline to be unjust in their judgments of the old. So much of the aversion to change that is attributed to "conservatism" is really due to the immense difficulties in the way of reforms. The industrial machine, for example, is not only vast and complex, it is also so delicate that one big step might destroy the work of centuries. There was so much that one felt, and there is so much that one still feels that England ought to do; but one is now all too often beset by the awkward sequel, "But how is she to do it?" The changes must still come, but one's agitation for them is more considerate, more sympathetic, more understanding.

I dropped into Westminster Abbey the other day, and stood with a party by the brass effigies of our earliest kings, listening to the exaggerated elocution of an old guide. It had the effect on me—it must have had the effect on others—that would have been produced by an assistant in a toy shop, emphasising the claims of a doll upon a party of children. The old man made us feel a sort of superiority to the past, probably because he felt it himself. It was only as I looked up at an age-blackened beam above the tomb of Henry the Fifth, and saw the helmet the warrior had worn, and the saddle on which he had ridden to victory, that the past became a living reality. The rest were a new world's toys—a curiosity shop in a busy modern thoroughfare. Had I been alone, I could have lived over again the lives of those kings, or that of my counterpart in their days—but with a party and a guide one could but remember that the old is, after all, but the plaything of the new.

How can London dwell in the past as much as it is alleged to do? How, indeed, it can think at all in consecutive reasoning or imagination is the supreme wonder. Meditate much on the battle of Crecy, and a motor-car—the murderer of scores of even those gifted with presence of mind—would maul and mangle you past recognition. Every single man with whom I have spoken on the subject has expressed the view that in another ten years hardly a horse will be visible in the streets of London. Even now, roughly, one vehicle in six is drawn by motor power. There are at least thirty thousand motor cars and carriages and a couple of thousand motor omnibuses, not to mention hundreds of electric trams and seven lines of electric railways! Such an age looks at the past as Mr. Morgan looks at a Vandyck—as a leisured man's luxury, to be pursued not seriously, but as an ideal hobby.

The one matter in which the old does still seem to triumph over the new is in the attitude of the subject classes to their masters. Collectively, of course, there has been a great silent—or almost silent—revolt of the have-nots; individually the bearing of the great mass of the poor people—at any rate in business relations—seems to me incredibly servile as compared with that of their fellows in the colonies. It may be simply "playing the game," of course; and if it is so, there is some justification for it. But if, as one cannot help suspecting, it is deep down and the product of profound and remote social forces, the complete reform of existing conditions must still be a long, long way off. An infinity of minor social injustices are covered up by a thinly disguised conception of the employer as more or less paternal in his attitude towards his servants. I should not be surprised if the Labour party lost rather than gained power in the near future—simply because of this failure to realize the separateness of the interests of employer and employed.

But even here there is hope—and that through the gateway of despair. Things are going to get worse—infinitely worse—before they get better. That is the tale told me by workers among the poor, by policemen, by everyone who has closely watched the increase of poverty in the past ten years. Another hopeful feature is that thousands of intelligent people of all classes have agreed to learn a lesson in practical legislation from the self-governing colonies, which are infinitely better known and understood than they have ever been before. Whatever may be the nescience of the uneducated classes in regard to the geography or the fauna of the colonies, I find astonishingly accurate ideas of New Zealand and Australian industrial laws. Comparison of this kind makes for progress, and after a temporary reaction (due mostly to the old unscrupulous cry of the "poor man's beer"), I believe changes will not be long in coming.

In every other department of life, it seems to me that England is still young enough to pursue the novel course. A moment ago I saw a sort of express steam-roller—a funny little locomotive steaming at, say nine miles an hour, on a newly-laid roadway on the embankment. I remembered that the author of a melodrama once killed his villain by means of a steam-roller. Perhaps he was a little ahead of his time, and was really looking to a vehicle that had emerged like that one, from a walking to a running pace. But anyhow, that is only one of the discoveries that one can make daily in the streets of London—the new London, which no sober judge can honestly call old.

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