Road Town: a Vision

He was a tall, pale-faced man, unshaven and carelessly dressed. You knew at once that he needed very much your help. My first thought was that he had an article to sell, or perhaps he was going to ask me for a loan. But before he spoke there was something about his eyes that told me that it was not at all for himself that he had come, whatever his personal need might be - he wanted something for somebody, or something else, some outside thing, very precious to him to be ~~very~~ sure - something of his no doubt, but not for himself. I talked a long time with him, and when he went away he left behind him a knowledge of the thing that had made his face so thin, his clothes so careless, his eyes so intent and full of pain. It had begun, so I found, with a discovery, - A discovery of the suffering that heat and crowds and brick and stone bring to thousands of people in great cities in the summer time. He was a hard-working young man, I take it. And, one morning early in full July heat, the cruel heat that sometimes swoops down on New York City, he had motored ~~early~~ into town. He had spent a beautiful Sunday with friends in a cool, green, sea-side place, and the early ride ~~before seven~~ had been a joyful cap to his good day. It was only about six o'clock, he told me, when he struck the upper east-side, and when he, for the first time, saw how people lived through July days there, stretched on the sidewalk, - he saw mattress after mattress where women and men and little children sprawled, some of them still asleep, some of them lying with the pale exhausted look that a restless hot night leaves behind. - then he began to discover the fire-escapes, and that on them lay little children and over their sides hung exhausted men or women already trying to gather themselves up for the day. He saw that the roofs were inhabited with ~~tens of~~ thousands ~~and hundreds of thousands~~ - then he realized that ten of thousands ~~and hundreds of thousands~~ of men and women had been seeking in the last twenty-four hours on those heated pavements, those still more heated roofs, those narrow dangerous fire-escapes, some

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respite from the cruel heat which enveloped the great city. It all suddenly seemed monstrous to him, - impossible. He went to his days work but he could think of nothing else. And all that week instead of going with his companions to the beach or to the roof-garden or to some big quiet cool room in the half deserted house of a friend, he had walked the streets, ~~seeing~~ walking the park, ~~filled up,~~ the streets, the roofs and the fire-escapes gradually filled up. He became conscious, too, the way faces were paling all about him, and worst of all how babies were pining. The young man had made a great discovery and one which he never could forget, and before the week end was over his one thought was how this monstrous thing could be stopped. Some way to get them out, that was what his idea was, to get them away. So cruel did it all seem to him that the idea of attempting to alleviate the conditions in town was unthinkable. They must be got away. People must not live in a city like New York through the heated time. He had become a man of one idea and that idea was how it could be done. As the days and weeks went on, instead of forgetting, the thought became more impressed on him. People noticed that he had changed and asked what the matter was, and when he tried to explain they laughed at him, or told him he had to get away for a few days, or quoted Scripture "The poor ye have always with you". But the mania had taken too strong a hold on him. How to get them out, that had become the one thing in life to him, - and what he had come to tell me was that he had found a way by which they could be gotten out.

It was the fear, that I might not be willing to listen to the story of the way, that had brought him to me. So many people had evidently driven him away, had pooh hood his scheme, - had told him he was ruining his business chances, - that was what had given his eyes the look of fear. And when he saw that I was going to listen, it was with a gratitude that almost brought tears to my eyes, when he told his plan.

"It is all so unnecessary", he said. "There is a place, and if we could only use it". "You know the Long Island country , you know the limitless

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of fields, you know how easily one gets into the open by a subway. Now here is what I propose. To buy the land, acres and acres, miles and miles. To run one long straight tube through the middle of my purchase, under one long straight street. And then on each side of this street to build miles and miles of houses. Simple houses, such as the poorest can afford, such as my people who sleep on fire-escapes and roofs and sidewalks can easily afford. These houses shall have one great conductive tube, electric light, heat, hot and cold water, all that can be so easily carried to houses now adays. At every mile of my street there shall be one great square tower and in this tower a wonderful cooperative store where at cost they may buy everything they need. Back of each little house there shall be a garden for those that want one, for remember I am to have but one street. There must be green things for my people. They will come from their work in town through my long tube and land at their very doors. There shall be halls for them, music and dancing and plays. All in my long one street. You don't know how little money it costs, my Road town, for that is what I call it. I have it all figured out here. There have been one or two business men who have been willing to listen to me and look at my figures, and they tell me it is a perfectly possible scheme. Mr. Edison listened to me and he tells me that if they will buy the land and build my subway, and put in my gas and water and electricity, that he will give me his model for his houses all free, for Mr. Edison sees how it might be, my Road town."

I have no time to tell here of all the details that this man, with a look of fear in his eyes, had worked out, for those whom he called "my people", - the poor who in summer must lie on the roofs and sleep in the streets. I looked at his plans for he had them worked out in the greatest detail. It was a great dream, but a dream that might come true. There is nothing impossible in "Road Town", nothing but man's inertia and money's cowardice and the lack of vision in good people who want as much as my inventor to see those whom he calls "my people" free from the terrible curse

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of summer heat in a city like New York.

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