Take Every Empty House!

The Tenement House Commissioner of New York City, Mr. Frank Mann, was quoted some two weeks ago as saying that the shortage of residence apartments in the city aggregated 40,000. Mayor Hylan was reported to have said that the figure was too low and should be nearer 100,000; while Mr. Edward P. Doyle, secretary of the Mayor’s Housing Conference Committee, put the shortage at 160,000. Chicago real estate men reported in June that 50,000 families in that city could not find proper living quarters, that stores and tumble-down barracks were being converted into residences, and that the situation was growing steadily worse. There are 61,000 more families in Detroit than there were three years ago, but accommodations for only 28,196 families have been built in that time. Philadelphia reports a housing shortage of 80,000. Atlanta in May had less than a dozen habitable houses to meet the demands of about one thousand families who were seeking homes, while hundreds of houseless families in Fort Worth were living in tents or portable cottages. Similar conditions are reported from Washington, Pittsburgh, Denver, Kansas City, and Los Angeles.

Everybody knows why this startling state of things has arisen and why it continues. There was practically no building for residential purposes during the war, save for a certain amount of temporary construction near munition factories and a few other war industries, and there is very little building now. New York City, which needs 28,000 new apartments annually in order to house its normal increase of population, built only about 90 houses, with 2,171 apartments, in the first seven months of the present year. In the same period 1,964 apartments were converted to non-residence uses, leaving an actual gain of only 207 apartments for the largest city in the country. According to the New York Times, plans for one apartment house and one dwelling were filed in the Borough of Manhattan in July, as against plans for five theaters, 115 garages, and 3 loft buildings.

Everybody knows not only that there is no building, but why there is no building. High prices of land, labor, and material in the cities have made it impossible to build at a profit unless the owner can be assured of a high rental; and rentals, thanks in part to scarcity, in part to the high cost of building, and in part to atrocity profiteering by landlords, have about reached the limit of human endurance. It is well-nigh impossible to obtain building material, for the producing industries have not revived, reserve stocks are small, and the demoralization of the railways has thrown freight transportation into chaos. The railways which cannot move coal fast enough to prevent the danger of an appalling fuel famine next winter, or which cannot get their coal cars unloaded at tidewater because barges or other vessels are not available, are in no position to handle bulky building material, and in any case could not give it priority.

To all this have been added widespread disputes between contractors and labor unions as a part of the policy of the steel producers to force a nation-wide acceptance of the open shop; with the result that contracts have been canceled and would-be builders are waiting for “better times.”

This, in brief, is the situation. What does it mean for the people? For one thing, it means that some hundreds of thousands of families are threatened with the loss of the apartments or houses which they now occupy, and with not even a remote prospect of finding any others. In Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, which “move” about the middle of May, from 50,000 to 75,000 persons were reported as under the necessity of leaving their existing quarters, with practically no houses awaiting occupants. Many were moving because the houses which they occupied had been sold, others because they could not stand an increase of from 40 to 50 per cent in rents. New York City, which has some 4,000,000 people living in apartments, moves on October 1. Of the 3,000 moving-truck concerns in the city, 1,500, it is announced, will do no family moving on moving day; they cannot be assured that apartments to which they carry goods will be vacant, they are liable to damage suits if they leave goods on the sidewalk or otherwise unprotected, and storage warehouses are packed to the roofs. Meanwhile the press reports that city marshals in the Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens are making from $100 to $500 a day for serving dispossess warrants, which are being issued by the courts at the rate of from 500 to 1,000 per day.

All this spells calamity. A population without homes means not only inconvenience; it means sickness and exposure and suffering for men, women, and children; and it may mean death. Without greater forbearance and self-restraint than a houseless population has ever yet exhibited, it also means riot, disorder, and crime. What is the government doing about it? Nothing whatever as yet that can have any appreciable effect for many months to come. Governor Smith of New York has called a special session of the Legislature. Mayor Hylan of New York City has appointed a Housing Commission. There are innumerable commissions and committees elsewhere that are considering the problem. All this is admirable and praiseworthy, but it will be winter before any remedial legislation can possibly be enacted, and it will be spring and summer and next fall before the houses which are being talked about will be ready for occupancy. Meantime, the country is short a million houses or apartments, and the day of crisis is at hand.

There is one thing that should be done at once in every large city in which the housing problem is acute. That is to take possession of every unoccupied house, or building, or apartment that is fit or that can be made fit for human habitation, and make it available for the people who need homes. There are hundreds of houses in every large city that are unoccupied. Some of them have been unoccupied for years, as their boarded doors and windows testify. Some are the superfluous houses of the superfluous rich; some are the town houses of well-to-do owners who pass all of the year in the country or abroad. There are stores and shops and lofts which are vacant, in which families could be housed. In a crisis such as now confronts us, no man has a moral right to close the doors of a building which he does not use; and if he will not rent at a fair rate, the municipal government should not hesitate to take possession, fix a fair rental, and let the people in. There are, in addition, houses which are unoccupied because they no longer meet the requirements of the tenement house laws—from 21,000 to 33,000 of them, it is reported, in New York City alone. Beyond question, many of these could be made habitable at
small expense, and that expense the city should assume for the time being. It will need a robust Mayor and city government thus to take the law into their own hands; but the people would support them. The crisis is too acute and too near to wait for slow and formal processes. The emergency is as great, and calls for as prompt and energetic action, as any that could arise out of a war. Let every empty house be opened for the people who will have no homes.

The New War Drive

The drive for a new war is on. Let no American who believes in peace or loves humanity underestimate the intention or the strength of the forces that have been loosed by the Wilson-Colby note to the Italian Ambassador, announcing the Administration's purpose not merely to harass but, if possible, to destroy the Russian Government. The note was precisely what a powerful element of sordid, selfish, and relentless interests in this country had been waiting for, and a pack of editors, special writers, and opinion-makers have already begun to bay noisily for American participation in a new international holocaust. We mentioned last week the assertion of a military critic that our war with Germany would be fruitless unless followed by another against Russia. Now comes Dr. Frank Crane, who ought to know better, and declares in regard to the Russian Government: "Sooner or later, unless it falls to pieces from its own rottenness, it must be faced and fought by the civilized nations. We can keep out of this row no more than we could keep out of the war with Germany."

Now it may be said that this is mere rhetoric; that the public is disillusioned in regard to European conditions and will not give, either of money or men, for another burnt offering on the altar of big business, special privilege, and world imperialism. But, after our experience in 1917-1918 with a censorship and a gigantic government-directed propaganda, nobody knows what can be done. For three years the seed has been planted through systematic suppression and misrepresentation of the facts in regard to the most interesting political experiment of modern times. The cartoonists have already distorted our late allies into hairy cave men and apes, and hundreds of editors are ready to prove them ten-fold more dangerous and inhuman than the Germans. The last was a holy war; the next would be a holy of holies.

Nor must it be forgotten that we are still in a state of war and Mr. Wilson can of his own volition revive the old machinery in so far as funds permit. "To the full extent of the constitutional power conceded in the Executive every measure that can be legally taken will be adopted to render effectual the position of this country," said Secretary Colby to a Polish-American delegation. But Mr. Wilson did not let his "constitutional power" limit him unduly in his last war, and there is no reason to believe that he would in another. "The attitude of this Government can only be the attitude of its people," Mr. Colby continued, "and you, as American citizens, have the power to determine the trend and the weight of American public opinion." Perhaps so, now; but public opinion is easily superseded by government-made thought and national hysteria.

While there is still time, therefore, let every American who loves his country and humanity make his opposition as plain to Mr. Wilson as British labor has made its attitude to Mr. Lloyd George, which action Mr. Christensen, the Farmer-Labor Party's candidate for President, has well described as "the foundation for a real World League of Labor by setting the glorious example of labor's power to veto war." Let us refuse to make or move a pound of war supplies or give a cent of money. Let us rather fill the jails from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, until their doors burst from overcrowding. For concurrence in Mr. Wilson's latest madness would not merely loose the dogs of war; it would unchain the jackals that would devour mankind.

A New England Wayside

The mind disturbed by a world in change and tumult should seek these roads. They wind gently among the hills and are very quiet. Once in an hour you meet a team or a harmless, necessary Ford, and, now and then, you pass a farmhouse hidden among maples and apple trees. But if your soul is wounded by the search for an absolute that does not exist, turn your eyes to the roadside itself and consider the frail, indomitable flowers. The yarrow is everywhere. Its golden centers are faint among the tiny, white petals and, closely regarded, this tough weed is a thing of beauty. The shy bluebells tremble on their feathery stems; the buttercups sway and flash. Nearer the ground the heall has something of the hieratic, like a small, winged column, and puts to shame the lazy pertness of the black-eyed Susan. Here and there, as the road grows remoter, you meet the sim and fiery wood-lily and the reserved and delicate blue vervain. Clusters of waxy immortelles show their silvery leaves, and, lifting your eyes, you see the great, velvety flowers of the sumac. There are purple asters and innumerable ferns; the fierce thistle has a crown-like, lilac flower and already, as all these fade and even the daisies begin to look a little rugged, the golden-rod is lifting the glow of its widespread splendor.

The fading of these wayside flowers has in it nothing mournful. Nor does it pain the heart to see the ploy pass over some bank which they once crowded with their many-colored heads. Summer will bring them back here or a little farther on. The place of their growing, the order of their grouping—these are but negligible and pasing things. The flowers remain; the flowers return. There is a loyalty and steadfastness in life itself that triumphs over chance and change. Some of the flowers are, like ourselves, but immigrants from other continents. Yet, like ourselves, they are undaunted by that great transition and have established here their enduring home. Space irks and diminishes them as little as time. Within the framework of nature as seen by man they are eternal. It is they that might easily have given Plato his notion of archetypal ideas in an intelligible world, even as they gave Wordsworth the thoughts that lie too deep for tears. The lily may withdraw a little deeper into the woods or the bluebells in this meadow appear more thickly than in one higher up the slopes. Both may thrive better in their now abodes. Or, falling that, they may return and the bluebell quiver once more among the oaks. These things are trivial while the flowers remain.