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Bombs over the World

February 13, 1938

We read our newspapers this morning and we almost ^{expect to see,} ~~see in them~~ once again: such-and-such a city (it will be somewhere in Spain or China) was bombed by enemy airplanes; eighty or three hundred or a thousand civilian inhabitants perished in the attack; the air raid lasted only a few minutes —

We read this so often that we have nearly forgotten the shock we once felt over such reports. We are indeed shocked when some local assassin murders five people; but eighty, three hundred or a thousand murdered people has somehow become impersonal, the reader can no longer visualize it; and he shrugs his shoulders and reads on, to what some important gentleman has said about it, to what kinds of concessions would have to be accepted to ensure peaceful relationships with the neighbors for a few years.

But no longer do we even need to visualize it for ourselves; it is shown to us, graphically and conveniently, at the cinema. A demolished street from which clouds of dust and smoke are still rolling; torn-up bodies, burnt corpses, children howling in an insanity of terror — these children are cruelly similar, whether they are Chinese or our own. So now we can see what happened almost at first hand. This constricts our throats, for the moment, at least, and we have the obscure feeling that with things as they are we must really do something — call out, protest, rebel and go out into the streets with the cry that humankind must not allow something like this to happen. But I'm afraid that we are apt to become accustomed even to these impressions, as long as they are only on the screen. And spectators at the movies may say, in disappointment: It was much worse last week.

And yet: surely no one believes that what is happening right now is

the ultimate stage in the development of the world and that the slaughtering of women and children will become the chief mode of international relations. Such Tatarism in humankind does not seem likely. Rather, we can count on this: at some time in the future people will look upon today's air raids quite simply and unambiguously as vile murder, as a sort of moral running amok into which these particular nations sank during a time of temporary derailment from the evolution of the rest of humankind. What matters is that in the future people do not look with horror and also disgust on today's world because on the whole it passively and unworthily made allowances for this sort of mass bestiality.

Surely we don't delude ourselves that the new international condemnation of air raids on open cities, to which England wants to give a boost, is saving a few thousand poor defenseless people in China or in Spain, is preventing bombs and apartment buildings from falling ^{top of} on their heads. It isn't easy to convince either nations or their rulers that they are doing something senseless or degererate. But even if you cannot count on the fact that mere condemnation, unaccompanied by punishing sanctions, will civilize the manner of those who have already signed the history of our age in blood, it is still terribly important and certainly time that such condemnations were voiced. It must be repeated further that crime is crime and that it is and always will be considered crime. Not even for a moment should the feeling that universal moral order has temporarily been suspended be allowed to spread in the world. No matter what happens, the continuity of ethical beliefs, which was handed down to us and which we must hand on, must be preserved. True, mere verbal condemnation is not action; but indifferent silence would be evil action; it would be complicity, and contemptible and inhuman behavior as well. Let all of us who do not exclude ourselves from the great community of humankind succeed most emphatically in avoiding this complicity, at the very least.