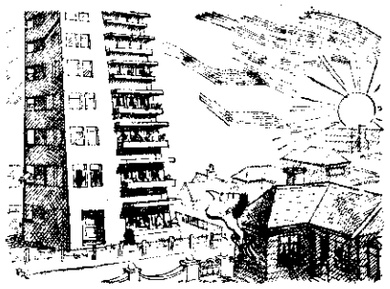

Strap-hanging Conversation—

"WE MUST HAVE FLATS"

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.)

"WELL George, we'll just have to build flats in New Zealand."

"But I've told you, I don't like flats. I wouldn't live in one if you paid me."

"And where do you live at present?"

"Er—I suppose you'd call it a flat—a miserable, filthy sardine box—nine couples and roomers in a building that once housed a single family in the good old days before housing shortage. You should know why I don't like flats."

"But it's not a flat you live in, it's a rack-rented tenement. Still, if you don't like it why don't you get out?"

"And where the heck to? There's not a house in the city to be rented or bought, and at the present rate of building there won't be for years. The only place I could get would be somewhere miles out on the edge of the suburbs where you jolt for hours every day to and from work, and never can get to the pictures."

"But won't building more houses push these suburbs still further out into the country, and won't it mean, too, sub-dividing the decent-sized sections in the present outer suburbs? Then living there will have no advantages at all, neither those of country nor of town, but the crowdedness of one and the travel-distance of the other?"

"Of course. That's obvious."

"And so, George, we'll have to build flats in New Zealand."

"But I don't like flats, I've told you."

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I CHANGED my ground and my strategy. I became long-sighted and cunning.

"Your dislike of our outer suburbs is just sour grapes," I suggested. "Where could you be better off than at my place? Lawns, trees, shrubs, sun, shelter, view. Eight rooms and a garden. No noise. No smoke. Beach six minutes away. Good walks round the hills. Green fields and plantations for the kids to play in. And only half your rent in town."

"Mebbe. But what else does it cost you?"

"Fourpence halfpenny to town on a concession ticket—that's under four bob a week."

"Plus three times in for your wife and at least once for yourself at night. Not to mention the kids. You can call it eight bob, maybe more. But fares are the least that you pay. How long do you spend in the tram?"

"Thirty-five minutes each way."

"And ten minutes walking from tram to house or vice versa. And five minutes waiting on the kerb. One hour forty minutes every day you spend just travelling to work. When you have to get to a meeting or a show *at least* once a week, and you didn't object when I said your wife came in to town three times for one reason or another. That's 18 trips in all of 50 minutes each that the two of you—not to mention the children—have to make every week, or 900 minutes, or 15 hours, or nearly two whole working days, spent simply in travelling."

It did sound a big slice out of life, I admitted.

"It's worse," declared George, getting indignant on my behalf. "It's a criminal waste of energy—even if you do get a seat. Just when you should be taking things easy at the end of the day you get this extra work—because that's what it amounts to—thrust on you. Then after tea, when you should be freshened up and beginning the evening's jobs, you are too tired to start. The amount of weariness these spread-out suburbs of ours create must be colossal. No wonder we have no national culture! We live too scattered to meet in the evenings and too tired to do anything creative or socially useful if we did. No wonder that. . . ."

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BUT it was restful to get away from town, I protested mildly. I had quiet, and a view, or the garden when I arrived, and the beach at week-ends.

"What, quiet with the radio on! And how much view or garden do you see this half of the year anyhow? It's nearly dark when you leave home and nearly dark when you return. I see a sight more in the town. And I can spend all Saturday and all Sunday at the beach whenever I like. Whereas you're always painting or digging or mending or mowing whenever we call on you."

Not if I lived in a nice new modern house I wouldn't be so busy, said I.

But if you had bought that sort, said he, it wouldn't have any garden or lawns to speak of. The early-comers had taken all the good possies, sunny, sheltered, and spacious. Why travel miles out of town simply to inhabit a box, however nicely appurtenanced, jammed tight against one neighbour on the right, and with the sun shut off by another on the left?

"Yes, why?" asked I, triumphantly taking off my mask and turning the tables. "Just because in our spread-out cities the sheer number of separate houses leaves no decent grounds and garden space for any but a handful of them. I agree on every point with you, George. The more new houses and new suburbs we keep on tacking on the less good life is possible in them. We'll just have to build flats in New Zealand."

"But I don't like flats, I've told you."

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FOILED again, I reflected. But the pocket-book approach is a sure knock-out. So—

"Our rates are too high in this blasted town."

"I'll say!" agreed George heartily. (He does not pay rates. But he always feels on principle that every sort of taxation is scandalously overdone).

"Did you ever, for example, work out the cost of making a street? Well, it's about £400 a chain. We don't average as many as three houses to the chain in a New Zealand town. So you can add at least £150 to every residential section in the Dominion besides what you pay to buy it. I mean that you pay interest on that amount to the Council for having made the approaches, put down sewers, water-pipes, gas-pipes, storm-water outlets, electric power, and so on."

"Sheer profiteering!"

"Oh, no, it couldn't be done for less so long as there are so many miles of all these things to be laid down to serve so comparatively few people. But concentrating the populations of cities

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