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The Future Comes on Wings

ALMOST everybody will be air-minded next week when some of the world's fastest planes are racing from London to Christchurch. The race has a long history of planning and perseverance, and part of the reward for those most active in the enterprise will be the crescendo and climax of public interest. It is yet to be seen if there will also be a larger climax, a new achievement in the use and control of aircraft over long distances. No one will suppose, however, that new records —if any are made — will remain undisputed. Progress in aviation has reached a stage not easily understood by people who were born while men were still tethered to the earth. In some ways the advance has been too rapid. It is only about 40 years since Christchurch people went up on to the Cashmere Hills to watch a man named Scotland cruising precariously in a biplane. Since then, with the help of two world wars, the machines have improved so rapidly that our sense of the marvellous is becoming blunted.

How can the imagination keep up with planes that are flying faster than sound? Yet we are told that more is to come. The scientists and engineers have their Everest mood: a barrier must be passed simply because it is there. No doubt they will continue to make planes which can fly faster and higher, and to invent devices which will allow human beings to hurtle through space without danger from strains and pressures that should crush a man's lungs as if they were eggshells. Eventually, perhaps, men will be fitted, technically if in no other way, for the age of inter-planetary travel. And then what?

Younger people are probably untouched by heretical notions. They have grown up among scientific marvels, and for them the age has no strangeness. But many people now in their middle years can remember the first motor-cars, the first moving pictures, the first aeroplanes, the first tanks, the first radio receiving sets, the first talkies, the first atom bomb. . . They can also remember the appearance of labour-saving machines, the earliest use of electric light in their homes, and new drugs which cured disease and banished much pain. Therefore, they will not say that it would have been better to have lived in other and more leisurely times. But they cannot help wondering to what destination they are being hurried. They will soon be like passengers in an air liner of the near future, to be built without windows because at 40,000 feet there is little to see. Without windows, they will travel more safely in their metal tubes; but they will have no panoramas, and no sense of direction.

Air travel is changing the world, though nobody can be certain whether it is for better or worse. Present political divisions are already anachronistic, and frontiers which can be reached at the speed of sound are becoming frail protections for national sovereignty. There are some who believe that aviation, or the scientific spirit behind it, will unify the human race by sheer compulsion. But world government could become a monstrous tyranny if men were hurried into it before they had passed through the necessary political education. People are not changed because they can travel faster. Yet travel faster they must, whether they want to or not; and every new phase of the scientific revolution, once it is entered, will be explored until it opens into another. There are times — next week will be one of them—when the entire process is brought close to us, as if the world were spinning a little faster on its axis; and we know that whatever is to come in the future will come swiftly, on wings.