

A city in the forties

by David Ackley

One by one the factories closed, in the industrial migration that seems to have become the general condition of our lives. And in Nashua, as he grew up, Philip would have felt as his nephew did, the emptiness, that “hollowed out feeling,” like an abandoned wasp's nest, fully built and substantial in form and design, but grey and empty too, that is so of towns and cities now, all over this country, and Britain and Europe as well. Where have they gone now, those factories? It is said to Asia and Mexico and Indonesia, but we wonder: to us their functions simply vanished, leaving the shell around the activity that is that hollowness, that empty nest of wasps. The work is what's missing.

There is a certain look, common to a good many of these cities and towns that reached their initial maturity with the advent of mass manufacturing, of leather in tanneries and shoe shops, and fabric in the cotton and wool textile mills in the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

Along the main street are two and three or four story buildings of brick, but a peculiarly dark and uniform deep red, ox-blood as the color is called, which seems accurate and conveys the inescapable ugliness; the windows on the upper stories are high and narrow, as if to crimp the amount of light allowed to enter. Sometimes, in lieu of shades, the top half of the window glass has been painted green, a practical and indifferent solution for offices whose tenancy seems continually transient, occupied briefly by door-to-door salesman; the private census takers of city directories; tax preparers and travelling bookkeepers or bookmakers. Inside, along warped floors and up iron-railed staircases, where the light is dim and contained, will be rows of rooms, offices, evidently, with frosted windows concealing the business within. One is put in mind of the dreary spaces occupied by Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener,” who seems abraded halfway to the ambient powdery dust by the rub of the coarse walls, the flaking ceilings, and rippled flooring,

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They are almost always laid on a grid with the Main street running north south so that in most of the months of the year, say from September through May, the traverse of the sun keeps the west side of the street in shadow and the sidewalk on that side a conspicuously colder stroll.

But the thing that seems most striking and individual is the width of the Main street, which is five lanes across—a challenging trot for a jaywalker. Out of the shade of the west sidewalk, the rest of the way is sunlit, and absent much traffic, as vast and metaphysically barren as a Hopper cityscape. Here too, as with the darkened storefronts, the broken phalanxes of factory windows, the untenanted upstairs offices, is the sense of the missing. True enough; down the middle of the street once ran the companionable trolleys, a democratic ride from the outskirts to the center and back which stopped running in the '30's when car ownership became commonplace, and the need of factory hands and clerks for cheap transportation to the center dried up along with their jobs.

