

In the American Country

The sharpest pleasure of a traveller is in finding the things which he did not expect, but which he might have expected to expect. I mean the things that are at once so strange and so obvious that they must have been noticed, yet somehow they have not been noted. Thus I had heard a thousand things about Jerusalem before I ever saw it; I had heard rhapsodies and disparagements of every description. Modern rationalistic critics, with characteristic consistency, had blamed it for its accumulated rubbish and its modern restoration, for its antiquated superstition and its up-to-date vulgarity. But somehow the one impression that had never pierced through their description was the simple and single impression of a city on a hill, with walls coming to the very edge of slopes that were almost as steep as walls; the turreted city which crowns a cone-shaped hill in so many mediaeval landscapes. One would suppose that this was at once the plainest and most picturesque of all the facts; yet somehow, in my reading, I had always lost it amid a mass of minor facts that were merely details. We know that a city that is set upon a hill cannot be hid; and yet it would seem that it is exactly the hill that is hid; though perhaps it is only hid from the wise and the understanding. I had a similar and simple impression when I discovered America. I cannot avoid the phrase; for it would really seem that each man discovers it for himself.

Thus I had heard a great deal, before I saw them, about the tall and dominant buildings of New York. I agree that they have an instant effect on the imagination; which I think is increased by the situation in which they stand, and out of which they arose. They are all the more impressive because the building, while it is vertically so vast, is horizontally almost narrow. New York is an island, and has all the intensive romance of an island. It is a thing of almost infinite height upon very finite foundations. It is almost like a lofty lighthouse upon a lonely rock. But this story of the sky-scrapers, which I had often heard, would by itself give a curiously false impression of the freshest and most curious characteristic of American architecture. Told only in terms of these great towers of stone and brick in the big industrial cities, the story would tend too much to an impression of something cold and colossal like the monuments of Asia. It would suggest a modern Babylon altogether too Babylonian. It would imply that a man of the new world was a sort of new Pharaoh, who built not so much a pyramid as a pagoda of pyramids. It would suggest houses built by mammoths out of mountains; the cities reared by elephants in their own elephantine school of architecture. And New York does recall the most famous of all sky-scrapers--the tower of Babel. She recalls it none the less because there is no doubt about the confusion of tongues. But in truth the very reverse is true of most of the buildings in America. I had no

sooner passed out into the suburbs of New York on the way to Boston than I began to see something else quite contrary and far more curious. I saw forests upon forests of small houses stretching away to the horizon as literal forests do; villages and towns and cities. And they were, in another sense, literally like forests. They were all made of wood. It was almost as fantastic to an English eye as if they had been all made of cardboard. I had long outlived the silly old joke that referred to Americans as if they all lived in the backwoods. But, in a sense, if they do not live in the woods, they are not yet out of the wood.

I do not say this in any sense as a criticism. As it happens, I am particularly fond of wood. Of all the superstitions which our fathers took lightly enough to love, the most natural seems to me the notion it is lucky to touch wood. Some of them affect me the less as superstitions, because I feel them as symbols. If humanity had really thought Friday unlucky it would have talked about bad Friday instead of good Friday. And while I feel the thrill of thirteen at a table, I am not so sure that it is the most miserable of all human fates to fill the places of the Twelve Apostles. But the idea that there was something cleansing or wholesome about the touching of wood seems to me one of those ideas which are truly popular, because they are truly poetic. It is probable enough that the conception came originally from the healing of the wood of the Cross; but that only clinches the divine coincidence. It is like that other divine coincidence that the Victim was a carpenter, who might almost have made His own cross. Whether we take the mystical or the mythical explanation, there is obviously a very deep connection between the human working in wood and such plain and pathetic mysticism. It gives something like a touch of the holy childishness to the tale, as if that terrible engine could be a toy. In the same fashion a child fancies that mysterious and sinister horse, which was the downfall of Troy, as something plain and staring, and perhaps spotted, like his own rocking-horse in the nursery.

It might be said symbolically that Americans have a taste for rocking-horses, as they certainly have a taste for rocking-chairs. A flippant critic might suggest that they select rocking-chairs so that, even when they are sitting down, they need not be sitting still. Something of this restlessness in the race may really be involved in the matter; but I think the deeper significance of the rocking-chair may still be found in the deeper symbolism of the rocking-horse. I think there is behind all this fresh and facile use of wood a certain spirit that is childish in the good sense of the word; something that is innocent, and easily pleased. It is not altogether untrue, still less is it unfriendly, to say that the landscape seems to be dotted with dolls' houses. It is the true tragedy of every fallen son of Adam that he has grown too big to live in a doll's house. These things seem somehow to escape the irony of time by not even challenging it; they are too temporary even to be merely temporal. These people are not building tombs; they are not, as in the fine image of Mrs. Meynell's poem, merely building ruins. It is not easy to imagine the ruins

of a doll's house; and that is why a doll's house is an everlasting habitation. How far it promises a political permanence is a matter for further discussion; I am only describing the mood of discovery; in which all these cottages built of lath, like the palaces of a pantomime, really seemed coloured like the clouds of morning; which are both fugitive and eternal.

There is also in all this an atmosphere that comes in another sense from the nursery. We hear much of Americans being educated on English literature; but I think few Americans realise how much English children have been educated on American literature. It is true, and it is inevitable, that they can only be educated on rather old-fashioned American literature. Mr. Bernard Shaw, in one of his plays, noted truly the limitations of the young American millionaire, and especially the staleness of his English culture; but there is necessarily another side to it. If the American talked more of Macaulay than of Nietzsche, we should probably talk more of Emerson than of Ezra Pound. Whether this staleness is necessarily a disadvantage is, of course, a different question. But, in any case, it is true that the old American books were often the books of our childhood, even in the literal sense of the books of our nursery. I know few men in England who have not left their boyhood to some extent lost and entangled in the forests of Huckleberry Finn. I know few women in England, from the most revolutionary Suffragette to the most carefully preserved Early Victorian, who will not confess to having passed a happy childhood with the Little Women of Miss Alcott. Helen's Babies was the first and by far the best book in the modern scriptures of baby-worship. And about all this old-fashioned American literature there was an undefinable savour that satisfied, and even fed, our growing minds. Perhaps it was the smell of growing things; but I am far from certain that it was not simply the smell of wood. Now that all the memory comes back to me, it seems to come back heavy in a hundred forms with the fragrance and the touch of timber. There was the perpetual reference to the wood-pile, the perpetual background of the woods. There was something crude and clean about everything; something fresh and strange about those far-off houses, to which I could not then have put a name. Indeed, many things become clear in this wilderness of wood, which could only be expressed in symbol and even in fantasy. I will not go so far as to say that it shortened the transition from Log Cabin to White House; as if the White House were itself made of white wood (as Oliver Wendell Holmes said), 'that cuts like cheese, but lasts like iron for things like these.' But I will say that the experience illuminates some other lines by Holmes himself:--

Little I ask, my wants are few, I only ask a hut of stone.

I should not have known, in England, that he was already asking for a good deal even in asking for that. In the presence of this wooden world the very combination of words seems almost a contradiction, like a hut of marble, or a

hovel of gold.

It was therefore with an almost infantile pleasure that I looked at all this promising expansion of fresh-cut timber and thought of the housing shortage at home. I know not by what incongruous movement of the mind there swept across me, at the same moment, the thought of things ancestral and hoary with the light of ancient dawns. The last war brought back body-armour; the next war may bring back bows and arrows. And I suddenly had a memory of old wooden houses in London; and a model of Shakespeare's town.

It is possible indeed that such Elizabethan memories may receive a check or a chill when the traveller comes, as he sometimes does, to the outskirts of one of these strange hamlets of new frame-houses, and is confronted with a placard inscribed in enormous letters, 'Watch Us Grow.' He can always imagine that he sees the timbers swelling before his eyes like pumpkins in some super-tropical summer. But he may have formed the conviction that no such proclamation could be found outside Shakespeare's town. And indeed there is a serious criticism here, to any one who knows history; since the things that grow are not always the things that remain; and pumpkins of that expansiveness have a tendency to burst. I was always told that Americans were harsh, hustling, rather rude and perhaps vulgar; but they were very practical and the future belonged to them. I confess I felt a fine shade of difference; I liked the Americans; I thought they were sympathetic, imaginative, and full of fine enthusiasms; the one thing I could not always feel clear about was their future. I believe they were happier in their frame-houses than most people in most houses; having democracy, good education, and a hobby of work; the one doubt that did float across me was something like, 'Will all this be here at all in two hundred years?' That was the first impression produced by the wooden houses that seemed like the waggons of gipsies; it is a serious impression, but there is an answer to it. It is an answer that opens on the traveller more and more as he goes westward, and finds the little towns dotted about the vast central prairies. And the answer is agriculture. Wooden houses may or may not last; but farms will last; and farming will always last.

The houses may look like gipsy caravans on a heath or common; but they are not on a heath or common. They are on the most productive and prosperous land, perhaps, in the modern world. The houses might fall down like shanties, but the fields would remain; and whoever tills those fields will count for a great deal in the affairs of humanity. They are already counting for a great deal, and possibly for too much, in the affairs of America. The real criticism of the Middle West is concerned with two facts, neither of which has been yet adequately appreciated by the educated class in England. The first is that the turn of the world has come, and the turn of the agricultural countries with it. That is the meaning of the

resurrection of Ireland; that is the meaning of the practical surrender of the Bolshevik Jews to the Russian peasants. The other is that in most places these peasant societies carry on what may be called the Catholic tradition. The Middle West is perhaps the one considerable place where they still carry on the Puritan tradition. But the Puritan tradition was originally a tradition of the town; and the second truth about the Middle West turns largely on its moral relation to the town. As I shall suggest presently, there is much in common between this agricultural society of America and the great agricultural societies of Europe. It tends, as the agricultural society nearly always does, to some decent degree of democracy. The agricultural society tends to the agrarian law. But in Puritan America there is an additional problem, which I can hardly explain without a periphrasis.

There was a time when the progress of the cities seemed to mock the decay of the country. It is more and more true, I think, to-day that it is rather the decay of the cities that seems to poison the progress and promise of the countryside. The cinema boasts of being a substitute for the tavern, but I think it a very bad substitute. I think so quite apart from the question about fermented liquor. Nobody enjoys cinemas more than I, but to enjoy them a man has only to look and not even to listen, and in a tavern he has to talk. Occasionally, I admit, he has to fight; but he need never move at the movies. Thus in the real village inn are the real village politics, while in the other are only the remote and unreal metropolitan politics. And those central city politics are not only cosmopolitan politics but corrupt politics. They corrupt everything that they reach, and this is the real point about many perplexing questions.

For instance, so far as I am concerned, it is the whole point about feminism and the factory. It is very largely the point about feminism and many other callings, apparently more cultured than the factory, such as the law court and the political platform. When I see women so wildly anxious to tie themselves to all this machinery of the modern city my first feeling is not indignation, but that dark and ominous sort of pity with which we should see a crowd rushing to embark in a leaking ship under a lowering storm. When I see wives and mothers going in for business government I not only regard it as a bad business but as a bankrupt business. It seems to me very much as if the peasant women, just before the French Revolution, had insisted on being made duchesses or (as is quite as logical and likely) on being made dukes.

It is as if those ragged women, instead of crying out for bread, had cried out for powder and patches. By the time they were wearing them they would be the only people wearing them. For powder and patches soon went out of fashion, but bread does not go out of fashion. In the same way, if women desert the family for the factory, they may find they have only done it for a deserted factory. It would

have been very unwise of the lower orders to claim all the privileges of the higher orders in the last days of the French monarchy. It would have been very laborious to learn the science of heraldry or the tables of precedence when all such things were at once most complicated and most moribund. It would be tiresome to be taught all those tricks just when the whole bag of tricks was coming to an end. A French satirist might have written a fine apologue about Jacques Bonhomme coming up to Paris in his wooden shoes and demanding to be made Gold Stick in Waiting in the name of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; but I fear the stick in waiting would be waiting still.

One of the first topics on which I heard conversation turning in America was that of a very interesting book called *Main Street*, which involves many of these questions of the modern industrial and the eternal feminine. It is simply the story, or perhaps rather the study than the story, of a young married woman in one of the multitudinous little towns on the great central plains of America; and of a sort of struggle between her own more restless culture and the provincial prosperity of her neighbours. There are a number of true and telling suggestions in the book, but the one touch which I found tingling in the memory of many readers was the last sentence, in which the master of the house, with unshaken simplicity, merely asks for the whereabouts of some domestic implement; I think it was a screw-driver. It seems to me a harmless request, but from the way people talked about it one might suppose he had asked for a screw-driver to screw down the wife in her coffin. And a great many advanced persons would tell us that wooden house in which she lived really was like a wooden coffin. But this appears to me to be taking a somewhat funereal view of the life of humanity.

For, after all, on the face of it at any rate, this is merely the life of humanity, and even the life which all humanitarians have striven to give to humanity. Revolutionists have treated it not only as the normal but even as the ideal. Revolutionary wars have been waged to establish this; revolutionary heroes have fought, and revolutionary martyrs have died, only to build such a wooden house for such a worthy family. Men have taken the sword and perished by the sword in order that the poor gentleman might have liberty to look for his screw-driver. For there is here a fact about America that is almost entirely unknown in England. The English have not in the least realised the real strength of America. We in England hear a great deal, we hear far too much, about the economic energy of industrial America, about the money of Mr. Morgan, or the machinery of Mr. Edison. We never realise that while we in England suffer from the same sort of successes in capitalism and clockwork, we have not got what the Americans have got; something at least to balance it in the way of a free agriculture, a vast field of free farms dotted with small freeholders. For the reason I shall mention in a moment, they are not perhaps in the fullest and finest sense a peasantry. But they are in the practical and political sense a pure peasantry, in that their

comparative equality is a true counterweight to the toppling injustice of the towns.

And, even in places like that described as Main Street, that comparative equality can immediately be felt. The men may be provincials, but they are certainly citizens; they consult on a common basis. And I repeat that in this, after all, they do achieve what many prophets and righteous men have died to achieve. This plain village, fairly prosperous, fairly equal, untaxed by tyrants and untroubled by wars, is after all the place which reformers have regarded as their aim; whenever reformers have used their wits sufficiently to have any aim. The march to Utopia, the march to the Earthly Paradise, the march to the New Jerusalem, has been very largely the march to Main Street. And the latest modern sensation is a book written to show how wretched it is to live there.

All this is true, and I think the lady might be more contented in her coffin, which is more comfortably furnished than most of the coffins where her fellow creatures live. Nevertheless, there is an answer to this, or at least a modification of it. There is a case for the lady and a case against the gentleman and the screw-driver. And when we have noted what it really is, we have noted the real disadvantage in a situation like that of modern America, and especially the Middle West. And with that we come back to the truth with which I started this speculation; the truth that few have yet realised, but of which I, for one, am more and more convinced--that industrialism is spreading because it is decaying; that only the dust and ashes of its dissolution are choking up the growth of natural things everywhere and turning the green world grey.

In this relative agricultural equality the Americans of the Middle West are far in advance of the English of the twentieth century. It is not their fault if they are still some centuries behind the English of the twelfth century. But the defect by which they fall short of being a true peasantry is that they do not produce their own spiritual food, in the same sense as their own material food. They do not, like some peasantries, create other kinds of culture besides the kind called agriculture. Their culture comes from the great cities; and that is where all the evil comes from.

If a man had gone across England in the Middle Ages, or even across Europe in more recent times, he would have found a culture which showed its vitality by its variety. We know the adventures of the three brothers in the old fairy tales who passed across the endless plain from city to city, and found one kingdom ruled by a wizard and another wasted by a dragon, one people living in castles of crystal and another sitting by fountains of wine. These are but legendary enlargements of the real adventures of a traveller passing from one patch of peasantry to another, and finding women wearing strange head-dresses and men singing new songs.

A traveller in America would be somewhat surprised if he found the people in the city of St. Louis all wearing crowns and crusading armour in honour of their patron saint. He might even feel some faint surprise if he found all the citizens of Philadelphia clad in a composite costume, combining that of a Quaker with that of a Red Indian, in honour of the noble treaty of William Penn. Yet these are the sort of local and traditional things that would really be found giving variety to the valleys of mediaeval Europe. I myself felt a perfectly genuine and generous exhilaration of freedom and fresh enterprise in new places like Oklahoma. But you would hardly find in Oklahoma what was found in Oberammergau. What goes to Oklahoma is not the peasant play, but the cinema. And the objection to the cinema is not so much that it goes to Oklahoma as that it does not come from Oklahoma. In other words, these people have on the economic side a much closer approach than we have to economic freedom. It is not for us, who have allowed our land to be stolen by squires and then vulgarised by sham squires, to sneer at such colonists as merely crude and prosaic. They at least have really kept something of the simplicity and, therefore, the dignity of democracy; and that democracy may yet save their country even from the calamities of wealth and science.

But, while these farmers do not need to become industrial in order to become industrious, they do tend to become industrial in so far as they become intellectual. Their culture, and to some great extent their creed, do come along the railroads from the great modern urban centres, and bring with them a blast of death and a reek of rotting things. It is that influence that alone prevents the Middle West from progressing towards the Middle Ages.

For, after all, linked up in a hundred legends of the Middle Ages, may be found a symbolic pattern of hammers and nails and saws; and there is no reason why they should not have also sanctified screw-drivers. There is no reason why the screw-driver that seemed such a trifle to the author should not have been borne in triumph down Main Street like a sword of state, in some pageant of the Guild of St. Joseph of the Carpenters or St. Dunstan of the Smiths. It was the Catholic poetry and piety that filled common life with something that is lacking in the worthy and virile democracy of the West. Nor are Americans of intelligence so ignorant of this as some may suppose. There is an admirable society called the Mediaevalists in Chicago; whose name and address will strike many as suggesting a certain struggle of the soul against the environment. With the national heartiness they blazon their note-paper with heraldry and the hues of Gothic windows; with the national high spirits they assume the fancy dress of friars; but any one who should essay to laugh at them instead of with them would find out his mistake. For many of them do really know a great deal about mediaevalism; much more than I do, or most other men brought up on an island

that is crowded with its cathedrals. Something of the same spirit may be seen in the beautiful new plans and buildings of Yale, deliberately modelled not on classical harmony but on Gothic irregularity and surprise. The grace and energy of the mediaeval architecture resurrected by a man like Mr. R. A. Cram of Boston has behind it not merely artistic but historical and ethical enthusiasm; an enthusiasm for the Catholic creed which made mediaeval civilisation. Even on the huge Puritan plains of the Middle West the influence strays in the strangest fashion. And it is notable that among the pessimistic epitaphs of the Spoon River Anthology, in that churchyard compared with which most churchyards are cheery, among the suicides and secret drinkers and monomaniacs and hideous hypocrites of that happy village, almost the only record of respect and a recognition of wider hopes is dedicated to the Catholic priest.

But Main Street is Main Street in the main. Main Street is Modern Street in its multiplicity of mildly half-educated people; and all these historic things are a thousand miles from them. They have not heard the ancient noise either of arts or arms; the building of the cathedral or the marching of the crusade. But at least they have not deliberately slandered the crusade and defaced the cathedral. And if they have not produced the peasant arts, they can still produce the peasant crafts. They can sow and plough and reap and live by these everlasting things; nor shall the foundations of their state be moved. And the memory of those colossal fields, of those fruitful deserts, came back the more readily into my mind because I finished these reflections in the very heart of a modern industrial city, if it can be said to have a heart. It was in fact an English industrial city, but it struck me that it might very well be an American one. And it also struck me that we yield rather too easily to America the dusty palm of industrial enterprise, and feel far too little apprehension about greener and fresher vegetables. There is a story of an American who carefully studied all the sights of London or Rome or Paris, and came to the conclusion that 'it had nothing on Minneapolis.' It seems to me that Minneapolis has nothing on Manchester. There were the same grey vistas of shops full of rubber tyres and metallic appliances; a man felt that he might walk a day without seeing a blade of grass; the whole horizon was so infinite with efficiency. The factory chimneys might have been Pittsburg; the sky-signs might have been New York. One looked up in a sort of despair at the sky, not for a sky-sign but in a sense for a sign, for some sentence of significance and judgment; by the instinct that makes any man in such a scene seek for the only thing that has not been made by men. But even that was illogical, for it was night, and I could only expect to see the stars, which might have reminded me of Old Glory; but that was not the sign that oppressed me. All the ground was a wilderness of stone and all the buildings a forest of brick; I was far in the interior of a labyrinth of lifeless things. Only, looking up, between two black chimneys and a telegraph pole, I saw vast and far and faint, as the first men saw it, the silver pattern of the Plough.