

## **The Extraordinary American**

When I was in America I had the feeling that it was far more foreign than France or even than Ireland. And by foreign I mean fascinating rather than repulsive. I mean that element of strangeness which marks the frontier of any fairyland, or gives to the traveller himself the almost eerie title of the stranger. And I saw there more clearly than in countries counted as more remote from us, in race or religion, a paradox that is one of the great truths of travel.

We have never even begun to understand a people until we have found something that we do not understand. So long as we find the character easy to read, we are reading into it our own character. If when we see an event we can promptly provide an explanation, we may be pretty certain that we had ourselves prepared the explanation before we saw the event. It follows from this that the best picture of a foreign people can probably be found in a puzzle picture. If we can find an event of which the meaning is really dark to us, it will probably throw some light on the truth. I will therefore take from my American experiences one isolated incident, which certainly could not have happened in any other country I have ever clapped eyes on. I have really no notion of what it meant. I have heard even from Americans about five different conjectures about its meaning. But though I do not understand it, I do sincerely believe that if I did understand it, I should understand America.

It happened in the city of Oklahoma, which would require a book to itself, even considered as a background. The State of Oklahoma is a district in the south-west recently reclaimed from the Red Indian territory. What many, quite incorrectly, imagine about all America is really true of Oklahoma. It is proud of having no history. It is glowing with the sense of having a great future--and nothing else. People are just as likely to boast of an old building in Nashville as in Norwich; people are just as proud of old families in Boston as in Bath. But in Oklahoma the citizens do point out a colossal structure, arrogantly affirming that it wasn't there last week. It was against the colours of this crude stage scenery, as of a pantomime city of pasteboard, that the fantastic figure appeared which still haunts me like a walking note of interrogation. I was strolling down the main street of the city, and looking in at a paper-stall vivid with the news of crime, when a stranger addressed me; and asked me, quite politely but with a curious air of having authority to put the question, what I was doing in that city.

He was a lean brown man, having rather the look of a shabby tropical traveller, with a grey moustache and a lively and alert eye. But the most singular thing about him was that the front of his coat was covered with a multitude of shining

metallic emblems made in the shape of stars and crescents. I was well accustomed by this time to Americans adorning the lapels of their coats with little symbols of various societies; it is a part of the American passion for the ritual of comradeship. There is nothing that an American likes so much as to have a secret society and to make no secret of it. But in this case, if I may put it so, the rash of symbolism seemed to have broken out all over the man, in a fashion that indicated that the fever was far advanced. Of this minor mystery, however, his first few sentences offered a provisional explanation. In answer to his question, touching my business in Oklahoma, I replied with restraint that I was lecturing. To which he replied without restraint, but rather with an expansive and radiant pride, 'I also am lecturing. I am lecturing on astronomy.'

So far a certain wild rationality seemed to light up the affair. I knew it was unusual, in my own country, for the Astronomer Royal to walk down the Strand with his coat plastered all over with the Solar System. Indeed, it was unusual for any English astronomical lecturer to advertise the subject of his lectures in this fashion. But though it would be unusual, it would not necessarily be unreasonable. In fact, I think it might add to the colour and variety of life, if specialists did adopt this sort of scientific heraldry. I should like to be able to recognise an entomologist at sight by the decorative spiders and cockroaches crawling all over his coat and waistcoat. I should like to see a conchologist in a simple costume of shells. An osteopath, I suppose, would be agreeably painted so as to resemble a skeleton, while a botanist would enliven the street with the appearance of a Jack-in-the-Green. So while I regarded the astronomical lecturer in the astronomical coat as a figure distinguishable, by a high degree of differentiation, from the artless astronomers of my island home (enough their simple loveliness for me) I saw in him nothing illogical, but rather an imaginative extreme of logic. And then came another turn of the wheel of topsy-turvydom, and all the logic was scattered to the wind.

Expanding his starry bosom and standing astraddle, with the air of one who owned the street, the strange being continued, 'Yes, I am lecturing on astronomy, anthropology, archaeology, palaeontology, embryology, eschatology,' and so on in a thunderous roll of theoretical sciences apparently beyond the scope of any single university, let alone any single professor. Having thus introduced himself, however, he got to business. He apologised with true American courtesy for having questioned me at all, and excused it on the ground of his own exacting responsibilities. I imagined him to mean the responsibility of simultaneously occupying the chairs of all the faculties already mentioned. But these apparently were trifles to him, and something far more serious was clouding his brow.

'I feel it to be my duty,' he said, 'to acquaint myself with any stranger visiting this city; and it is an additional pleasure to welcome here a member of the Upper Ten.'

I assured him earnestly that I knew nothing about the Upper Ten, except that I did not belong to them; I felt, not without alarm, that the Upper Ten might be another secret society. He waved my abnegation aside and continued, 'I have a great responsibility in watching over this city. My friend the mayor and I have a great responsibility.' And then an extraordinary thing happened. Suddenly diving his hand into his breast-pocket, he flashed something before my eyes like a hand-mirror; something which disappeared again almost as soon as it appeared. In that flash I could only see that it was some sort of polished metal plate, with some letters engraved on it like a monogram. But the reward of a studious and virtuous life, which has been spent chiefly in the reading of American detective stories, shone forth for me in that hour of trial; I received at last the prize of a profound scholarship in the matter of imaginary murders in tenth-rate magazines. I remembered who it was who in the Yankee detective yarn flashes before the eyes of Slim Jim or the Lone Hand Crook a badge of metal sometimes called a shield. Assuming all the desperate composure of Slim Jim himself, I replied, 'You mean you are connected with the police authorities here, don't you? Well, if I commit a murder here, I'll let you know.' Whereupon that astonishing man waved a hand in deprecation, bowed in farewell with the grace of a dancing master; and said, 'Oh, those are not things we expect from members of the Upper Ten.'

Then that moving constellation moved away, disappearing in the dark tides of humanity, as the vision passed away down the dark tides from Sir Galahad and, starlike, mingled with the stars.

That is the problem I would put to all Americans, and to all who claim to understand America. Who and what was that man? Was he an astronomer? Was he a detective? Was he a wandering lunatic? If he was a lunatic who thought he was an astronomer, why did he have a badge to prove he was a detective? If he was a detective pretending to be an astronomer, why did he tell a total stranger that he was a detective two minutes after saying he was an astronomer? If he wished to watch over the city in a quiet and unobtrusive fashion, why did he blazon himself all over with all the stars of the sky, and profess to give public lectures on all the subjects of the world? Every wise and well-conducted student of murder stories is acquainted with the notion of a policeman in plain clothes. But nobody could possibly say that this gentleman was in plain clothes. Why not wear his uniform, if he was resolved to show every stranger in the street his badge? Perhaps after all he had no uniform; for these lands were but recently a wild frontier rudely ruled by vigilance committees. Some Americans suggested to me that he was the Sheriff; the regular hard-riding, free-shooting Sheriff of Bret Harte and my boyhood's dreams. Others suggested that he was an agent of the Ku-Klux Klan, that great nameless revolution of the revival of which there were rumours at the time; and that the symbol he exhibited was theirs. But whether he was a sheriff acting for the law, or a conspirator against the law, or a lunatic

entirely outside the law, I agree with the former conjectures upon one point. I am perfectly certain he had something else in his pocket besides a badge. And I am perfectly certain that under certain circumstances he would have handled it instantly, and shot me dead between the gay bookstall and the crowded trams. And that is the last touch to the complexity; for though in that country it often seems that the law is made by a lunatic, you never know when the lunatic may not shoot you for keeping it. Only in the presence of that citizen of Oklahoma I feel I am confronted with the fullness and depth of the mystery of America. Because I understand nothing, I recognise the thing that we call a nation; and I salute the flag.

But even in connection with this mysterious figure there is a moral which affords another reason for mentioning him. Whether he was a sheriff or an outlaw, there was certainly something about him that suggested the adventurous violence of the old border life of America; and whether he was connected with the police or no, there was certainly violence enough in his environment to satisfy the most ardent policeman. The posters in the paper-shop were placarded with the verdict in the Hamon trial; a cause célèbre which reached its crisis in Oklahoma while I was there. Senator Hamon had been shot by a girl whom he had wronged, and his widow demanded justice, or what might fairly be called vengeance. There was very great excitement culminating in the girl's acquittal. Nor did the Hamon case appear to be entirely exceptional in that breezy borderland. The moment the town had received the news that Clara Smith was free, newsboys rushed down the street shouting, 'Double stabbing outrage near Oklahoma,' or 'Banker's throat cut on Main Street,' or otherwise resuming their regular mode of life. It seemed as much as to say, 'Do not imagine that our local energies are exhausted in shooting a Senator,' or 'Come, now, the world is young, even if Clara Smith is acquitted, and the enthusiasm of Oklahoma is not yet cold.'

But my particular reason for mentioning the matter is this. Despite my friend's mystical remarks about the Upper Ten, he lived in an atmosphere of something that was at least the very reverse of a respect for persons. Indeed, there was something in the very crudity of his social compliment that smacked, strangely enough, of that egalitarian soil. In a vaguely aristocratic country like England, people would never dream of telling a total stranger that he was a member of the Upper Ten. For one thing, they would be afraid that he might be. Real snobbishness is never vulgar; for it is intended to please the refined. Nobody licks the boots of a duke, if only because the duke does not like his boots cleaned in that way. Nobody embraces the knees of a marquis, because it would embarrass that nobleman. And nobody tells him he is a member of the Upper Ten, because everybody is expected to know it. But there is a much more subtle kind of snobbishness pervading the atmosphere of any society trial in England. And the first thing that struck me was the total absence of that atmosphere in the trial at

Oklahoma. Mr. Hamon was presumably a member of the Upper Ten, if there is such a thing. He was a member of the Senate or Upper House in the American Parliament; he was a millionaire and a pillar of the Republican party, which might be called the respectable party; he is said to have been mentioned as a possible President. And the speeches of Clara Smith's counsel, who was known by the delightfully Oklahomite title of Wild Bill McLean, were wild enough in all conscience; but they left very little of my friend's illusion that members of the Upper Ten could not be accused of crimes. Nero and Borgia were quite presentable people compared with Senator Hamon when Wild Bill McLean had done with him. But the difference was deeper, and even in a sense more delicate than this. There is a certain tone about English trials, which does at least begin with a certain scepticism about people prominent in public life being abominable in private life. People do vaguely doubt the criminality of 'a man in that position'; that is, the position of the Marquise de Brinvilliers or the Marquis de Sade. Prima facie, it would be an advantage to the Marquis de Sade that he was a marquis. But it was certainly against Hamon that he was a millionaire. Wild Bill did not minimise him as a bankrupt or an adventurer; he insisted on the solidity and size of his fortune, he made mountains out of the 'Hamon millions,' as if they made the matter much worse; as indeed I think they do. But that is because I happen to share a certain political philosophy with Wild Bill and other wild buffaloes of the prairies. In other words, there is really present here a democratic instinct against the domination of wealth. It does not prevent wealth from dominating; but it does prevent the domination from being regarded with any affection or loyalty. Despite the man in the starry coat, the Americans have not really any illusions about the Upper Ten. McLean was appealing to an implicit public opinion when he pelted the Senator with his gold.

But something more is involved. I became conscious, as I have been conscious in reading the crime novels of America, that the millionaire was taken as a type and not an individual. This is the great difference; that America recognises rich crooks as a class. Any Englishman might recognise them as individuals. Any English romance may turn on a crime in high life; in which the baronet is found to have poisoned his wife, or the elusive burglar turns out to be the bishop. But the English are not always saying, either in romance or reality, 'What's to be done, if our food is being poisoned by all these baronets?' They do not murmur in indignation, 'If bishops will go on burgling like this, something must be done.' The whole point of the English romance is the exceptional character of a crime in high life. That is not the tone of American novels or American newspapers or American trials like the trial in Oklahoma. Americans may be excited when a millionaire crook is caught, as when any other crook is caught; but it is at his being caught, not at his being discovered. To put the matter shortly, England recognises a criminal class at the bottom of the social scale. America also recognises a criminal class at the top of the social scale. In both, for various reasons, it may be

difficult for the criminals to be convicted; but in America the upper class of criminals is recognised. In both America and England, of course, it exists.

This is an assumption at the back of the American mind which makes a great difference in many ways; and in my opinion a difference for the better. I wrote merely fancifully just now about bishops being burglars; but there is a story in New York, illustrating this, which really does in a sense attribute a burglary to a bishop. The story was that an Anglican Lord Spiritual, of the pompous and now rather antiquated school, was pushing open the door of a poor American tenement with all the placid patronage of the squire and rector visiting the cottagers, when a gigantic Irish policeman came round the corner and hit him a crack over the head with a truncheon on the assumption that he was a house-breaker. I hope that those who laugh at the story see that the laugh is not altogether against the policeman; and that it is not only the policeman, but rather the bishop, who had failed to recognise some fine logical distinctions. The bishop, being a learned man, might well be called upon (when he had sufficiently recovered from the knock on the head) to define what is the exact difference between a house-breaker and a home-visitor; and why the home-visitor should not be regarded as a house-breaker when he will not behave as a guest. An impartial intelligence will be much less shocked at the policeman's disrespect for the home-visitor than by the home-visitor's disrespect for the home.

But that story smacks of the western soil, precisely because of the element of brutality there is in it. In England snobbishness and social oppression are much subtler and softer; the manifestations of them at least are more mellow and humane. In comparison there is indeed something which people call ruthless about the air of America, especially the American cities. The bishop may push open the door without an apology, but he would not break open the door with a truncheon; but the Irish policeman's truncheon hits both ways. It may be brutal to the tenement dweller as well as to the bishop; but the difference and distinction is that it might really be brutal to the bishop. It is because there is after all, at the back of all that barbarism, a sort of a negative belief in the brotherhood of men, a dark democratic sense that men are really men and nothing more, that the coarse and even corrupt bureaucracy is not resented exactly as oligarchic bureaucracies are resented. There is a sense in which corruption is not so narrow as nepotism. It is upon this queer cynical charity, and even humility, that it has been possible to rear so high and uphold so long that tower of brass, Tammany Hall. The modern police system is in spirit the most inhuman in history, and its evil belongs to an age and not to a nation. But some American police methods are evil past all parallel; and the detective can be more crooked than a hundred crooks. But in the States it is not only possible that the policeman is worse than the convict, it is by no means certain that he thinks that he is any better. In the popular stories of O. Henry there are light

allusions to tramps being kicked out of hotels which will make any Christian seek relief in strong language and a trust in heaven--not to say in hell. And yet books even more popular than O. Henry's are those of the 'sob-sisterhood' who swim in lachrymose lakes after love-lorn spinsters, who pass their lives in reclaiming and consoling such tramps. There are in this people two strains of brutality and sentimentalism which I do not understand, especially where they mingle; but I am fairly sure they both work back to the dim democratic origin. The Irish policeman does not confine himself fastidiously to bludgeoning bishops; his truncheon finds plenty of poor people's heads to hit; and yet I believe on my soul he has a sort of sympathy with poor people not to be found in the police of more aristocratic states. I believe he also reads and weeps over the stories of the spinsters and the reclaimed tramps; in fact, there is much of such pathos in an American magazine (my sole companion on many happy railway journeys) which is not only devoted to detective stories, but apparently edited by detectives. In these stories also there is the honest, popular astonishment at the Upper Ten expressed by the astronomical detective, if indeed he was a detective and not a demon from the dark Red-Indian forests that faded to the horizon behind him. But I have set him as the head and text of this chapter because with these elements of the Third Degree of devilry and the Seventh Heaven of sentimentalism I touch on elements that I do not understand; and when I do not understand, I say so.