

New York Evening Mail
May 3, 1918

The American

The notion that Americans are a sordid money-grubbing people, with no thought above the dollar, is a favorite delusion of continentals, and even the English, on occasion, dally with it. It has, in fact, little solid basis. The truth is that Americans, as a race, set relatively little store by money; surely all of their bitterest critics are at least as eager for it. This is probably the only country in the world, save Russia under the Bolsheviki, in which a rich man is *ipso facto* a scoundrel and *ferae naturae*, with no rights that any slanderer is bound to respect. It would be a literal impossibility for an Englishman worth \$100,000,000 to avoid public office and public honor; it would be equally impossible for an American worth \$100,000,000 to obtain either. The moment he showed his head the whole pack would be upon him.

Americans, true enough, are richer than most. Their country yields more than other countries; they get more cash for their labor; they jingle more money in their pockets. But they also spend more, and with less thought of values. Whatever is gaudy and showy gets their dollars; they are, so to speak, constantly on holiday, their eyes alert to get rid of their change. The only genuinely thrifty people among us, in the sense that a Frenchman is thrifty, are foreigners. This is why they are ousting the natives in New England and in large areas of the Middle West. But as soon as they become Americanized they begin to draw their money out of the savings banks and to buy phonographs, Fords, boiled shirts, yellow shoes, cuckoo clocks and the works of Bulwer-Lytton.

The character that actually marks off the American is not money-hunger at all; it is what might be called, at the risk of misunderstanding, social aspiration. That is to say, he is forever trying to improve his position, to break down some barrier of caste, to secure the acceptance of his betters. Money, of course, usually helps him in this endeavor, and so he values it—but not for its own sake, not as a thing in itself. On the contrary, he is always willing to pay it out lavishly for what he wants. Nothing is too expensive if it helps him to make a better showing in the world, to raise himself above what he has been.

It is the opportunity that founds the aspiration. The cause of all this unanimous pushing is plainly the fact that every American's position is always more or less insecure—that he is free to climb upward almost infinitely, and that, by the same token, he is in steady danger of slipping back. This keeps him in a state of social timorousness; he is never absolutely safe and never absolutely contented. Such a thing as a secure position is practically unknown among us. There is no American who cannot hope to lift himself another notch—if he is good. And there is no American who doesn't have to keep on fighting for whatever position he has got. All our cities are full of aristocrats whose grandfathers were day laborers, and clerks whose grandfathers were aristocrats.

The oldest societies of Europe protect caste lines more resolutely. A grandee of Spain, for example, is quite as secure in his class as a dog is in his. Nothing he can do in this world can raise him above it, and nothing he can do can bounce him out of it. Once, a long while

ago, I met a Spanish count who wore celluloid cuffs, was drunk every afternoon and borrowed money for a living. Yet he remained a count in perfectly good standing, and all lesser Spaniards deferred to him and envied him. He knew that he was quite safe, and so he gave no thought to appearances. In the same way he knew that he had reached his limit. He was a grandee, but he had no hope whatever of making the next step; he knew that he could never be royal.

No American is ever so securely lodged. There is always something just ahead of him, beckoning him and tantalizing him, and there is always something just behind him, menacing him and causing him to sweat. The preposterous doings of what we call our fashionable society are all based on this uncertainty. The elect are surrounded by hordes of pushers, all full of envy, but the elect themselves are by no means safe. The result is a constant maneuvering, an incessant effort to get a firmer hold. It is this effort which inspires so many rich girls to shanghai foreigners of title. A title, however paltry, is still of genuine value. It represents a social status that cannot be changed by the rise of rivals, or by personal dereliction, or by mere accident. It is a policy of insurance against dangers that it is very difficult to meet otherwise.

The mention of social aspiration always suggests the struggle to be accepted as fashionable, but it is really quite as earnest and quite as widespread on all lower planes. Every men's club, even the worst, has a waiting list of men who are eager to get in, but have not yet demonstrated that they are up to it. The huge fraternal orders are surrounded by the same swarms of aspirants: there are thousands of men who look forward eagerly to election to the Masons, the Odd Fellows or the Knights of Pythias. And among women—but let us keep away from women. The dominating emotion of almost every normal woman is envy of some other woman. Put beside this grand passion her deep, delirious affection for her husband, and even for her children, fades to a mere phosphorescence.

As I have said, the fruit of all this appetite to get on, this desire to cut a better figure, is not the truculence that might be imagined, but rather timorousness. The desire itself is bold and insatiable, but its satisfaction demands discretion, prudence, a politic and ingratiating habit. The walls are not to be stormed; they must be wooed to a sort of Jerichoan fall. Success takes the form of a series of waves of protective coloration; failure is a succession of unmaskings. The aspirant must first imitate exactly the aspects and behavior of the class he yearns to penetrate. There follows notice. There follows confusion. There follows recognition and acceptance.

Thus the hog murderer's or soap boiler's wife horns into the fashionable society of Chicago or New York, and thus the whiskey drummer insinuates himself into the Elks, and the rising retailer wins the toleration of wholesalers, and the rich peasant becomes a planter, and the servant girl penetrates the movies, and the shyster lawyer becomes a statesman, and Schmidt turns into Smith, and all of us Yankees creep up, up, up. The business is not to be accomplished by headlong assault; it must be done quietly, insidiously, pianissimo. Above all, it must be done without exciting alarm and opposition lest the portcullis fall. Above all, the manner of a Jenkins must be got into it.

It seems to me that this necessity is responsible for one of the characters that observers often note in the average American, to wit, the character of orthodoxy, of eager conformity—in brief, the fear to give offense. "More than any other people," said Wendell Phillips one blue day, "we Americans are afraid of one another." The saying seems harsh. It goes counter to the national delusion of uncompromising independence and limitless personal freedom. It wars upon the national vanity. But all the same there is a good deal of truth in it.

What is often mistaken for an independent spirit, in dealing with the national traits, is not more than a habit of crying with the pack. The American is not a joiner for nothing. He joins something, whether it be a political party, a church or a tin-pot fraternal order, because joining gives him the feeling of security—because it makes him a part of something larger and safer than he is —because it gives him chance to work off his steam within prudent limits. Beyond lie the national taboos. Beyond lies true independence—and the heavy penalties that go therewith. Once over the border, and the whole pack is on the heretic.

The taboos that I have mentioned are extraordinarily harsh and numerous. They stand around nearly every subject that is genuinely important to man; they hedge in free opinion and experimentation on all sides. Consider, for example, the matter of religion. It is debated freely and furiously in almost every country in the world save the United States. Here the debate, save it keep to the superficial, is frowned upon. Let an individual uncover the fundamentals of the thing, and he is denounced as a disturber of the public peace. Let a journal cut loose and at once an effort is made to bar it from the mails. The result is that all religions are equally safeguarded against criticism, and that all of them lose vitality. We protect the status quo, and so make steady war upon revision and improvement.

Nor is our political discussion much more free and thorough. It concerns itself, in the overwhelming main, with non-essentials; time and again the two chief parties of the country, warring over details, have come so close together that it has been almost impossible to distinguish them. Whenever a stray heretic essays to grapple with essentials he finds himself denounced for his contumacy. Thus the discussion of the capital problem of industrial organization, in so far as it has gone on at all, has gone on under the surface, and almost furtively. Now, suddenly bursting out in wartime, it takes on an aspect of the sinister, and causes justifiable alarm. That alarm might have been avoided by threshing out the thing in the days of peace.

Behind all this timorousness, of course, there is a sound discretion. With a population made up of widely various and often highly antagonistic elements, many of them without political experience, the dangers of a too free gabbling needn't be pointed out. But at the same time it would be useless to deny the disadvantages of the current system of taboos. It tends to substitute mere complacency for alertness and information. It gives a false importance to the occasional rebel. It sets up a peace that is full of dynamite.