

Baltimore Evening Sun
October 11, 1920

On Being an American

Apparently there are those who begin to find it disagreeable. One of them unburdened his woes in this place last Tuesday, under the heading of "Is America Fit to Live In?" Let me confess at once that his elegy filled me with great astonishment. I had labored under the impression that this Republic was wholly satisfactory to all Americans—that any proposal to fumigate and improve it was as personally offensive to them as a proposal to improve the looks of their wives. Yet here was a 100% American ranting against it like a Bolshevik on a soap box. And here was I, less than ½ of 1% American by volume, standing aghast. A curious experience, indeed. Can it be that all the 100% Americans are preparing to throw up their hands and move out, leaving the land that the Fathers sweated and bled for to us Huns?

God forbid! I'd as lief have some poor working girl (mistaking the street number) leave twins on my doorstep. No one would weep saltier tears than I when the huge fleet of Mayflowers sailed away, bound for some land of liberty. For what makes America charming is precisely the Americans—that is, those above 50%, those above proof. They are, by long odds, the most charming people that I have ever encountered in this world. They have the same charm that one so often notes in a young girl, say of seventeen or eighteen, and perhaps it is grounded upon the same qualities; artlessness, great seriousness, extreme self-consciousness, a fresh and innocent point of view, a disarming and ingratiating ignorance. They are culturally speaking the youngest of white races, and they have all the virtues that go with youngness. It is easy to excite them. It is easy to fool them. But it is very hard to dislike them.

Perhaps there is something deeper than the qualities I have rehearsed. I grope for it vaguely, and decide that it is probably a naive fidelity to good intentions. The Americans do everything with the best of motives, and with all the solemnity that goes therewith. And they get the reward that the jocose gods invariably bestow. I recall a scene in a low burlesque show, witnessed for hire in my days as a dramatic critic. A chorus girl executes a fall on the stage, and Krausemeyer, the Swiss comedian, rushes to her aid. As he stoops painfully to pick her up, Irving Rabinovitz, the Zionist comedian, fetches him a fearful clout across the cofferdam with a slapstick. Here, in brief, is the history of the United States, particularly in recent years. Say what you will against it, I maintain to the last that it is diverting—that it affords stimulating entertainment to a civilized man.

II

Where, indeed, is there a better show in the world? Where has there been a better show since the Reformation? It goes on daily, not in three rings, but in three hundred rings, and in each one of them whole battalions of acrobats tie themselves into fabulous knots, and the handsomest gals in Christendom pirouette upon the loveliest and most skittish horses, and clowns of

unbelievable limberness and humor perform inordinate monkey-shines. Consider, for example, the current campaign for the Presidency. Would it be possible to imagine anything more stupendously grotesque—a deafening, nerve-wracking battle to the death between Tweedledum and Tweedledee—the impossible, with fearful snorts, gradually swallowing the inconceivable? I defy anyone to match it elsewhere on this earth. In other lands, at worst, there are at least issues, ideas, personalities. Somebody says something intelligible, and somebody replies. It is important to somebody that the thing go this way or that way. But here, having perfected democracy, we lift the whole combat to a gaudy symbolism, to a disembodied transcendentalism, to metaphysics, that sweet nirvana. Here we load a pair of palpably tin cannons with blank cartridges charged with talcum-powder, and so let fly. Here one may howl over the show without an uneasy reminder that someone is being hurt.

I hold that this exhibition is peculiarly American—that nowhere else on this disreputable ball has the art of the sham-battle been developed to such fineness. Two late experiences in point. A few weeks back a Berlin paper reprinted an article of mine from the *Evening Sun*, with an explanatory preface. In this preface the editor was at pains to explain that no intelligent man in the United States regarded the result of an election as important, and to warn the Germans against getting into feverish sweats over such combats. Last week I had dinner with an Englishman. From cocktails to bromo-seltzer he bewailed the political lassitude of the English populace—its growing indifference to the whole political buffoonery. Here we have two typical foreign attitudes; the Germans make politics too harsh and implacable, and the English take politics too lightly. Both attitudes make for bad shows. Observing a German election, one is uncomfortably harassed and stirred up, observing an English election, one falls asleep. In the United States the thing is better done. Here it is purged of all menace, all sinister quality, all genuine significance—and stuffed with such gorgeous humors, such extravagant imbecilities, such uproarious farce that one comes to the end of it with one's midriff in tatters.

III

But feeling better for the laugh. As the 100% pleurour said last Tuesday, the human soul craves joy. It is necessary to happiness, to health. Well, here is the land of joy. Here the show never stops. What could be more steadily mirth-provoking than the endless battle of the Puritans to make this joy unlawful and impossible? The effort is itself a greater joy to one standing on the sidelines than any or all of the joys that it combats. If I had to choose between hanging Dr. Kelly and closing all of the theatres in Baltimore, I'd surely shut up the theatres, for nine times out of ten their laborious struggles to amuse me merely bore me, whereas Dr. Kelly fetches me every time. He is, it seems to me, the eternal American, ever moved by good intentions, ever lifting me to yells with the highest of motives, ever stooping a la Krausemeyer to pick up a foundered chorus girl and ever getting a thumping clout from the Devil.

I am sinful, and such spectacles delight me. If the slapstick were a sash-weight the show would be cruel, and I'd probably go to the rescue of Dr. Kelly. As it is I know that he is not hurt. On the contrary, it does him good: it helps to get him into Heaven. As for me, it helps to divert me from my sorrows, of which there are many. More, it makes me a better American. One man likes the republic because it pays better wages than Bulgaria. Another because it has laws to keep him sober, pious and faithful to his wife. Another because the Woolworth Building is higher than the cathedral at Chartres. Another because Roosevelt could not leave the job to his son. Another because, living here, he can read the *New York Journal*. Another because there is a warrant out

for him somewhere else. Me, I like it because it amuses me. I never get tired of the show. It is worth every cent it costs.

IV

I have never heard of such a show in any other country. Perhaps one goes on in Russia, but, as the European *Advocatus Diaboli* said last Tuesday, it is difficult to be happy when one is hungry. Here one always gets plenty to eat, even in the midst of war, and, despite Prohibition, quite enough to drink. I remember many postprandial felicities, inconceivable in Europe, Asia, Africa or Oceania. Four nights, for example, at the Billy Sunday circus; one night in particular. I had got down a capital dinner, with three or four coffin-varnish cocktails and half a bottle of Beni Carlo. (Ah, those days!) Proceeding to the holy place, I witnessed the incomparable spectacle of a governor of Maryland, the president of a bank and the president of the Western Maryland Railroad moaning and puffing in a bull-ring together. Match it in Europe if you can! I defy you to name the country. The governor, prefect, lord lieutenant, Oberprasident of an ancient and imperial province sobbing out his sins in the presence of 20,000 neckstretchers, the while a florid man with an elkhorn mustache played "Throw Out the Lifeline" on a trombone!

Another memory. The other day, in New York, I gave ear to a publisher soured and made hopeless by the incessant forays of the Comstocks—The "Genius" and Jurgen suppressed out of hand, half a dozen other good books killed abornin', the national letters hamstrung and knee-haltered by a violent arbitrary and unintelligible despotism. That night I went to the Winter Garden to see the new show. During the first part, 40 or 50 head of girls with their legs bare marched down a runway into the audience, passing within four or five centimetres of my popping eyes. During the second part two comedians came out and began to make jokes about what Havelock Ellis calls inversion. Revolve the thing in your mind. Here was I, an innocent young yokel, forbidden by law to read Jurgen, and yet it was quite lawful to beguile me with a herd of half-naked vampires and to divert me with jests proper only to banquets of interns at the Phipps Clinic! After the show I met Ernest A. Boyd. He told me that he had a fearful beer thirst and would gladly give \$5 for a Humpen of 2-/14%. I raised him \$1, but we found that malt was forbidden. But down in Greenwich Village we found plenty of 100-proof Scotch at 65 cents a drink.

(Source: UNZ.org,