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What I Saw in America*

By HENRI WIGNY

HERE are some of the impressions which I received while crossing the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific, at crazy speed. Even if I must plead extenuating circumstances, I will tell you that so many friends have asked me what I saw with my own eyes, that I prefer to answer all at one time, rather than to be always beginning the same narration.

Moreover, I had the good fortune to cross the thresholds of many Americans, to be seated at many family tables, and thus to observe this thing which escape many tourists. Finally I yielded to that temptation to narrate, which is common to nearly all, if not all, who have gone to America.

Now our transatlantic liner is anchored in the roadstead. It is Sunday evening, and we cannot enter until tomorrow morning. We await day, held at quarantine, some miles from New York. In the distance one sees the Statue of Liberty emerge from the night, brilliantly lighted by electric search lights, and, more distant, one sees the crystal arrow of the Empire building, the greatest skyscraper in New York, at the base of the halo of a great city. I am much moved.

I am effected, not because tomorrow I shall find myself lost in that active, noisy American metropolis, which rivals London for first place among the populous cities of the world. I have no longer any anxiety. I am accompanied by a friend who lived in New York in his youth, and who has since journeyed through the Union twenty times. But, I am going to see something new, of which I have often heard spoken.

I am not one of those who, seeing the ocean for the first time is confined to saying, "That is a lot of water," and I do not observe any elegance in hiding these emotions by blasé appearances. I do not conceal my sentiments which

*Translated from "La Libre Belgique," Brussels, Belgium, by John D. Clark, University of New Mexico.

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result in my being the object of certain curiosity. It may be that I am the only person on board who has not touched the soil of this great republic. The ladies are especially desirous of seeing how these fresh impressions will manifest themselves. I see myself like the Huron of whom Voltaire speaks, astonished on arriving at the coast of France. Someone says to me, "It is ridiculous to put yourself in such a state; if you show so much imagination you are going to certain disillusionment." Disillusioned? We shall see tomorrow.

The night is warm and noisy. At twelve miles from shore, prohibition has already sealed the bar, but foreseeing travelers have, in the course of the day, laid in a supply of whiskey. The evening has the air of Mardi Gras. Perhaps one or another of the gentlemen has had to have recourse to the ironic but respectful assistance of a steward in order to gain his stateroom.

A poor sleep, but at last day arrives. The steamer ascends slowly, I was going to say majestically, the course of the Hudson. Everyone is on deck. Finally from the morning fog which blurs them, there appears a collection of buildings at the foot of the nearby island. They are pressed one against the other, crowding together their colossal masses. At one side is the delicate lace-work of Brooklyn bridge. Is it beautiful or is it simply strange? It is certain that the spectacle is impressive and cannot be regarded with indifferent eye.

Is it beautiful? The Greeks, who knew beauty, classed as beautiful, among the marvels of the world, the temple of Diana at Ephesus, and the pyramids of Egypt. Beauty has manifold aspects. On seeing these grandiose structures I am set to thinking, I know not why, of the delightful little Austrian city of Salzburg, that which the friend of Goethe placed with Constantinople and Naples, among the three most beautiful cities of the world. I visited it almost exactly a year ago. Surely one cannot find more violent contrast.

On the one hand narrow, crooked streets, the delicate ribs of a Gothic church, all the modest and compelling charm of things which are no longer; on the other all the magnificence, virility and audacity of the present. On one side of the Atlantic the masterpiece of a dreaming, patient genius, here the expression of the power of man who has domesticated mechanical force.

Is it beautiful? Yes, it is beautiful, or to employ the word which Americans use and abuse, "Glorious." Must I be treated as a Philistine, as bourgeoisie, and as a peasant? I have tasted the charm which emanates from the great city. I have dined on the roof of the Astor, high, very high, so high that the noise of the avenues comes up there only as confused murmurs; I, too, have seen light up the fairy-like illumination of that part of Broadway called "Times Square," and in it I experienced great pleasure. I am seated on a bench in Central Park, on one of those beautiful nights, following a torrid day, when one has no desire to go to bed. The headlights of the automobiles slip like fireflies through the foliage. In the distance and above the earth shine the lights which form the skyline of the buildings, and I feel the mildness of the hour. Yes, it is a form of beauty. It is not necessary to compare it to ours. It has its own individual character.

Chicago has finished one of these skyscrapers with pointed arches of a cathedral. I was scandalized with it. It seemed an anachronism. Each thing has its setting; a ride in a gondola at Venice to the lazy rhythm of a single oar is delightful. A trip made on Lake Michigan in a speed-boat, which appears to bounce on the water rather than to float in it, and from which one sees the splendid avenue to which the lake has given name, leaves an indelible remembrance.

But let us not anticipate. I was still at the side of the ship when our steamer touched the wharf. That does not mean that we are going to get off at once. There are immigration and customs formalities to go through. One

does not enter the United States like going into a mill. Before being admitted I must answer questions of which here are some: Are you an anarchist? Have you designs on destroying the established order by violence? Are you a polygamist? Have you been insane? Are you attainted with skin diseases or with infirmities which make your appearance repugnant? Who knows what else?

We must not complain that this country of liberty opens its door only with caution. Due to its prosperity it was for a long time the promised land, exerting its magic mirage on all bold but miserable people. Immigration in mass of European or Asiatic races would have diluted, submerged the national species; the American Union would become Latin or Slavonic, its economic conditions might be subject to brusque overthrow. The country has, therefore, decided to allow only those assimilable by the nation to enter, only those elements which can become grafts on the tree. The "Immigration Act" is the consequence of the manner of growth of the population, a rapid formidable growth which was not the result of births but of immigration of foreigners. For a long time entry has been denied to the black and yellow races. The colored and the Chinese quarters, very important in all the large cities, are peopled by American citizens who have been located in the country for several generations. It is needless to say that they are not assimilated. The Chinese quarter is an attraction.

At last I passed the gate. We are in New York. Such an immense city. It welcomes me with the most gracious of its smiles, the most agreeable and most charming of its young couples. I had often heard Bill and Kay spoken of, but I did not know them. Bill and Kay had often heard of me but had never seen me. Bill and Kay were awaiting me as I debarked. In clasping hands we understood each other, the ties of sympathy were knotted.

Later I shall have occasion to speak of pleasing young Americans. They have perhaps impressed me more than

anything I saw in the course of my trip, and of these young folks I saw none more charming than those whom I visited in their home, (Bill and Kay), a home of comfort and of joy.

And as there is no time to lose we set out at once to see the town. Bill has to go to his office; we shall see him again at lunch, and still later at dinner. Kay takes the steering wheel and we depart, three of us squeezed lightly in the front seat. I say three of us, for Kay brought with her a friend as charming as herself. The car slips along rapidly through the streets. It stops and we go to the top of the Empire building. To do this one must change elevators at the 40th, 80th, and 122d floors. 1,200 feet high it dominates the city. From the summit, 100 meters higher than Eiffel Tower, the blocks below appear very small, and at the bottom of the great thoroughfares people and vehicles appear to be in miniature.

But what is the use of detail? I have really seen New York, its immense buildings of which I am told, one designed for dwelling, has 15,000 suites. I have seen it—Fifth avenue, the center of its high class commerce, its Park avenue, the residence of multimillionaires, its extraordinary museum of natural history, and even, (I confess it), dined in one of those restaurants of barred doors, to which one is admitted only after he has made known his identity by answering cross-questions through a peep-hole, but where, the threshold once crossed to the noise of chains and bolts, one can drink a cocktail which has above all, the flavor of forbidden fruit.

Some thousands of places of this sort are in existence. They are visible to the naked eye. What films must be over the eyes of the prohibition officers? Well, we are in the land of prohibition, the country of ice water, of lemonade and of tea. What a strange use of liberty.

Liberty for a man consists in doing what he wishes. For a nation it is to make laws which the majority impose on the minority by force, in other words, with which the

majority annoys the minority, and I saw people who were thoroughly bored. Alcohol, disgraced, banished, and driven out, rules in spirit. They think of it. They talk of it. And perhaps the longing for it is more harmful than taking it. At a luncheon of lawyers in Chicago I heard a lecturer condemn the Eighteenth Amendment. Never were prisons so full or insane asylums so populated. Folks hope for much at the next election. Will they return wine and beer to the position they should occupy in all civilization? Some believe they will, while others think not. They fear the rich powerful bootleggers who are using their money and their influence to support the prohibition law in order to profit by violating it. What an amusing paradox.

But bad things have a good side. When on the train, in a public place, an American wishes to show more than ordinary kindness to you he goes through a ritual. First, he puts a finger to his lips, which in every language means, "Silence." Then he shows two embracing fingers which, over there means, "Would you like two fingers of whiskey in a glass of water?" You accept discretely and with understanding. He pulls a long, slim aluminum flask containing the precious liquor from his pistol pocket. You drink, shake hands, wipe your tongue over your lips, and friendship is sealed.

Even before prohibition, it appears that the Americans did not know how to drink. They didn't know about the terrace of the cafe, the toying with the appetizer, of that hour when one empties a glass sip at a time, exchanging many ideas which are perfectly useless. They did know the saloon, which they say dates from an ordinance of Cromwell forbidding people to be seated while partaking of spirituous liquor in a public place. What was law became habit. They took at one gulp whatever they ordered. It is no longer a beverage; it is a ration.

The greater part of the Canadian provinces permit the sale of liquors, beers and wines at government depots, but

they must be consumed at home or in the room of a hotel, which is not drinking but getting surfeited.

I also believe that the Americans do not know how to dine. Can one live well without French wine? In many restaurants one serves himself. He passes before a serving table and selects the dishes which are already prepared. Taken from the serving table on a tray, the food is eaten at small tables. In places where one is served, everything is placed on the table at the same time. Repasts so arranged are soon disposed of, taken in silence, and without a single rite of sophisticated dining. They are only a stop in the work of the day, a necessary task, performed like any other.

In contrast to the cafeterias, which are more or less modest, in the large cities there are luxurious establishments in which one pays five dollars for the privilege of being seated. Everywhere the ordinary is quite simple.

Culinary art is the result of old civilization which has arrived at the wise conviction that the great charm of life lies in that which is lost in the common call of time. It presupposes on one side, expert artists who can measure the harmony of spices and the symphony of perfumes, and on the other dilettantes who not only know how to appreciate the Chef d'oeuvre, but who enliven the table with a light and rapid conversation in which words bound and rebound like tennis balls from racquet to racquet.

The United States does not understand irony, nor does it see the sparks which burst forth in the collisions of opposing ideas, which make French conversation so entertaining. This manifestation of Latin temperament escapes them, causing a naive astonishment among the ladies, which is far from being without charm.

What shall we say of the cuisine? Simply that it is different from ours. In a restaurant one can easily avoid the creations of foreign taste, but in the home of some individual he risks the assaults of frightful mixtures. The hospitality of the host increases the risk, for he carves at the table, and hands you your plate completely filled.

But let us resume our trip, less capricious than the voyage of imagination or that of remembrance. Near to New York there is an awe-inspiring sight, Niagara Falls. Being nearby, it is only a night's ride, a passage of 400 or 500 miles, the distance from Brussels to Berlin, a nothing in this country, large as a continent. So many magnificent descriptions have been made of this cataract, I shall not attempt another. I refer my readers to Chateaubriand or to Jules Verne. I refer others to the cinema.

As for myself, I retain the remembrance of a splendid auto trip from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, with stops at places of interest or curiosity, notable among them that odd spring whose water burns like petroleum. You drink it and find the water no worse than petroleum, then touch a match to the empty glass and the moisture adhering to the walls takes fire like a torch. Disinfection is complete. A little further up stream, held by projecting rocks, are the crumbling hulks of two boats. One is a customs service motor boat, the other a freighter. They had been navigating the lake and carelessly approaching too near the falls, were caught in the terrible current. Their engines were powerless. The frightful end was inevitable. After several days of effort their crews were saved but one trembles to think of the anguish of these men, hearing some 200 meters away, the terrible roar of the cataract, which at any moment might overwhelm them.

During our entire trip the Pullman waited for us. As, in the smaller towns stations were not enclosed by fences, we could, at any time, enter the car to get things from our baggage or to rest. The porter was always on duty. Finally in the evening we turned in, and the next morning awakened in Chicago.

Proudly built on the shore of a great commercial lake, as large as a sea, a lake whose far shores are invisible, and on whose surface one sees the silhouettes of great steamers, this city rivals the metropolis of the east in the glory of its

buildings. They stretch out the length of marvelous Michigan Avenue and into the Loop. They reach the aristocratic section and then stop suddenly, giving way to the leperous miserable outskirts of every large city. Chicago is larger than Paris. It has its wretchedness and misery like all large cities. Whether this is more widespread than in the European capitals one cannot say. From the Pullman window I saw many small American towns with dwellings neat and comfortable in appearance. Do the large cities alone pay exorbitantly for the magnificence of their facades?

One must not conclude that the working classes are poorly housed. In New York and in Albany I saw very neat cottages, many with garages, in the sections occupied by the average person. I know from experience that many factories provide parking grounds for the cars of their employees. Everyone knows of the extensive use of mechanical transportation over there. Statistics are gathered for each state. A detail will suffice to show the madness of the traffic. Near New York is a beach accessible only by a large one-way avenue. The parking place at the beach can hold 80,000 cars. We may add that due to hard times, the last Sunday in June, in spite of most depressing heat, (New York is in the same latitude as Madrid), there were fewer than 40,000 autos parked.

They say that Chicago is the very center of alcohol smuggling or rum running, and that its streets are sometimes the theatres of bloody struggles. At the time all is calm. The population which fills the streets is going peacefully to its pleasures or to work, and business is at high tension as fits a great commercial center, having the greatest grain trade in the world. In the Exchange, around amphitheatres, the famous Pits, the daily bread of millions is bought, sold, and bought again.

Tourists can make unfavorable comment on American cities. They look too much alike. That uniformity prevails throughout the nation. The stretch from New York to

Chicago is 912 miles which is close to 1500 kilometers. If you travel that distance in Europe how many different aspects appear, how many frontiers, customs houses, and languages and ways of doing things, you will encounter. A traveler in the United States seems not to have budged. He loses the idea of distance and it is true that New York and Chicago are considered close together; eighteen hours apart, the distance from Brussels to Warsaw, going at the average speed of 83 kilometers an hour.

We have a long journey ahead. We have gone only about a quarter of the way. En route then for the long stretch. The train moves night and day and most monotonous prairies pass by the windows.

Concerning our traveling companions. The American is rarely seated in the position that we consider normal. He extends his feet to the seat in front or crouches over like a hunting dog. The women give more attention to appearance than to comfort. The men want comfort. They are careless with cigaret stubs and with remains of fruit, but by way of compensating they are very careful not to disturb the rest of others, and the night in a sleeping car is as quiet as a chapel. They do not leave the wash room in the morning until they have carefully washed and wiped the wash basin. The observation of the little things of courtesy have great importance when traveling such immense distances in this vast territory. One must ride day and night toward the extreme west, toward Seattle, 3,700 miles from New York, which is more than 6,000 kilometers. It is 2,769 from Brussels to St. Petersburg.

Whether the fast trains in America are more comfortable than ours is open to debate. They are assuredly adapted to long journeys. Passengers find in them a little of everything: lounge, writing room, barber shop, shower bath, club car, etc. One night some gentlemen sat up very late following the discussions of the Democratic convention then in session in Chicago. They learned that prohibition was

being attacked, and that there were numerous advocates of a change of political attitude toward Europe. If Roosevelt triumphs in November, we may perhaps be able to assist in bringing about some fortunate changes, such as reduction in tariff, and entrance of the great republic across the Atlantic into the League of Nations.

Train service by dark skinned porters is irreproachable. They are attentive to calls, bringing tables to bridge or checker players, and are constantly removing the dust which in dry regions, literally comes in, in abundance. They constantly supply fresh linen to the wash rooms. Americans will not tolerate use of linen a second time. On the train or even in a hotel where you alone occupy a room, each towel or wash cloth is condemned if wrinkled even so little. In the movies where it would be impossible to give such service, the hands are dried on paper towels or over blasts of hot air. By association of ideas, easy to understand, I thought several times of the numberless dish rags which hang in my country, even in places of public assembly.

Americans are insistent upon cleanliness and comfort. Workers who pack cigarets, or who pack lard in the packing houses of Chicago, are clothed and gloved in white. Articles destined for human consumption are not touched by hand. Each cigar in the box has its cellophane cover. For comfort just look at the hotels: each room has most modern plumbing, hot, cold, and ice water, and still is a working office with desk, paper, envelopes, (ordinary and for air mail), as well as telegraph blanks. You can throw a letter into a glass tube on any floor and it goes to the letter box in the lobby. The telephone first connects with the hotel office, and from there with other rooms, which is very useful for Mister number 750 who wishes to speak with Mister number 2780, or with someone in town or in the world. The hotel staff answers every call immediately, and except for handling baggage or extra attention, expects no tips.

The triumph of the hotel resides in the laundry. In each room are laundry bags and slips. Twenty-four hours after sending, your linen is returned and in what fine condition: ironed, sparkling, spic and span, nicer looking than when new, each piece in tissue paper, and all in a cardboard box. The Chinese specialists in this industry have worked miracles. The miracle is not free.

But let's come back to the train which rapidly goes on and on, and from each side we see marvelous views. We have reached the Rocky Mountains, and before us there is spread out a fairyland of snowcapped peaks, lakes, and gorges, which for 18 or 20 hours present to the wondering eye, wild and solitary vistas. The Rockies differ from our Alps.

Here nature is in the rough. One sees never-to-be-forgotten spectacles from the observation car, which has a little terrace at the rear end. It is worth the trouble of getting there and braving the dust. The aspects are varied. I saw thousands and thousands of curious rocks planed by glaciers, noticing particularly certain high plateaus which the Germans call, "Wohlen Sacken." One sees examples of these in Europe, but in America everything is colossal.

Every voyage comes to an end. We are arriving in Seattle, which just now we only touch, and a short crossing of 81 miles takes us to Victoria on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. It is a short passage but how magnificent.

("What I Saw in America" will be concluded in the August QUARTERLY.)