

Under the Fernle : a study of New York.

I don't believe in Freedom's cause
as far away as Paris is. Lowell.

Quarantined in New York Harbour, on an island too small for the poor lady even to sit down, stands the Statue of Liberty.

The American idealist is however permitted to take ship and land upon the island, when to his inexpressible satisfaction he discovers the Statue to be completely hollow.

However, I think that the Authorities do well to be cautious, not allowing even a simulacrum of the torch-bearing goddess upon the main island; for a spark from that torch falling upon the dusty parchments of the Law, might kindle a conflagration which only blood - the inky blood of lawyers and legislators - could quench.

I have lived in New York for three months, and have received more spontaneous kindness and sympathetic understanding than I should have had in England in three years; Liberty is the only political principle I care for; and I should like to reward my hosts by explaining to them the nature of this principle. It is singularly infectious, and if even a few persons can be inoculated, they are liable to an access of fury which manifests itself by decorating the lamp standards of the towns with many prominent citizens.

II

"By Jove, mother, that's a bad cold you've got. Don't you think you ought to stay in bed?"

The criminal who utters these appalling words has broken the law twice. He, not possessing a license to practice medicine in the state, has (a) pretended to diagnose a disease, and (b) prescribed a

medical treatment. By an oversight, there is at present no law requiring a son to take out a license to address his mother.

Of course, this is an extreme case, and so far as I know, there have been no prosecutions of this particular kind. * Indeed, the laws of other countries might be strained to include such cases. The main difference lies in the fact that in New York they are strained nearly as far as this.

The Medical Craft of New York is the strongest and worst in the world. Within its fortress may be found every type of quack; It ~~was~~ the American doctor who invented the "brain storm", now forsaken for a new love, "twilight-sleep-state", after a brief flirtation with "secondary personality" which didn't work with juries, owing to its lack of phrase-value. The coroners of New York have recently been exposed as using practices which are the apotheosis of bumptious ignorance, idleness, and venality.

In America it is quite easy to find a regularly qualified medical man who 'specializes' in forms of treatment which appear mere criminal jokes, and harmonize the obscene and the ridiculous into one grand sweet song. The general repute of the medical profession is so deservedly bad that the majority of the people seems to prefer any crank, however absurdly boastful and ignorant. For this reason the grafters employ armies of spies, and strain every engine of oppression to convict those who seem to be poaching on their preserves. For this reason Christian Science and New Thought and Mental Healing and all the rest of the rubbish thrive alike on medical incompetence and medical persecution. The doctors can't cure people themselves, and won't let others cure them; and they are concerned rather to prosecute

* However, how's this for Freedom's land?

110.
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their rivals than their own studies in medicine. License to practice medicine is really only a question of organization and money. Christian Science can fight its way to immunity and the Patent Medicine Graft* buys it outright by advertisement.

III

Another persecuted class is that of fortune-tellers. Again we find a perfectly proper law strained and twisted. People are indicted for advising others in the choice of a profession. Quite serious students of astrology are in danger of jail, and students of palmistry are fined and imprisoned without mercy, even when they happen to be hunchbacks or invalids, and thus naturally incapacitated from more strenuous forms of dollar-chasing.

I do not believe in palmistry at all, and very little in astrology; but I do believe in the right of any one to be fool enough to believe in both - "He is of age. Ask him." - ~~A~~ And while I think it noxious to the State for the fortune-tellers and their dupes to flourish, I think it still more noxious to employ the mean and treacherous methods of spies to uproot them. The palmist is no more than a house-fly; the police spy is a deadly serpent. In a country where magistrates will convict on uncorroborated evidence, and that evidence the manufacture of those whose wage and promotion depends on their obtaining convictions, there is no safety or liberty for anyone. One notorious spy, having run up against an honest and intelligent judge, and so failed to convict a very eminent student of astrology, a woman whose

* Vide the articles of Samuel Hopkins Adams in the N.Y. Tribune. I do not agree, though, that newspapers should be responsible for their advertisers.

^{a member of}
* She also heard from the Legislature. "We have a law on the way to make the practice of astrology a misdemeanor instead of mere disorderly conduct. I think I can get it sidetracked. If I succeed, will you and your colleagues give me a little beer will offering of say Two Thousand Dollars?"

sincerity and learning is patent to the whole city, sent her a message.
"You've got off this time, so I suppose you think you're safe. But I'll get you yet." This is not justice, but vendetta; ~~and~~ the vendetta of the rich against the poor, of the proud against the humble, of the tyrant against the people.

Alma

IV

But more than all this is the amazing slavery in which the so-called moral law has bound the people.

Again the two sides of the medal are plain to every stranger; the inhabitants of New York themselves are careful to arrange their minds in water-tight compartments.

New York is in the matter of vice the grossest, foulest, most repulsive city that I have ever seen - and I know the world well enough.

To begin at the top, I have heard a society woman, in the presence of her own son (aet. 17) and of a young girl of 16, openly endeavour to get her hostess to procure her some wretched long-haired fiddler from the orchestra of a dancing-hell - "with such wonderful sad eyes." I have explored sailors' taverns in my time from Limehouse to Shanghai, and I have never been one-third as disgusted.

I have heard the filthiest language ever uttered in the mouths of the 'Four Hundred'. But I have no great objection to it; other folk, even if they do not say it, think it. But what revolts me is the class of thought, the sordid and even mechanical outlook on love. As for shamelessness, only an American woman could telegraph "Engage gardener as lover for Mrs. at two hundred a month."

That apart, a lover is to them only a kind of manicure, a specialized masseur. This is, I am aware, the usual attitude of the coarser type of bachelor man, and has become so familiar that only the poet is disgusted with it; but to hear the hags of the Four Hundred chaffering over Hungarian minstrels like charwomen cheapening spoilt butchers' meat on a Saturday night at a stall, nauseates even a hardened sinner like myself, who can read the works of Elinor Glyn, Victoria Cross, Laurence Hope and the sob-sister school generally without too atlantic a qualm.

Here too we have the women-nearly naked to dinner - though God forbid that they should smoke! Here we see unseasonable vampires, ghouls who ought to have been buried decently in the early eighties, stauldruggs of all infirmity, haunt the 'tango tea'. Our great-grandmothers, painted fathoms deep, pirouette like galvanized clothes-props. It makes one realize Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. In London or Paris ridicule would kill this in twenty-four hours. But Americans have a totally different sense of humour to the English; this is one of the fundamental causes of misunderstanding. The proof is that they cannot see each other's jokes.

In the streets, too, one sees in their thousands perfectly respectable honest "chaste" women of all ages, faded and rouged and powdered in a way that would make ashamed the vilest prostitutes of Leicester Square. Dark blue under the eyes, necessary on the stage, is not beautiful by daylight. The eyelashes are smeared with antimony sulphide, the hair dyed with I know not what hell-broth.

"The women do it in Paris". No: they don't; not the decent women. And in Paris those who do do it can do it; the American

women can't. Why they can't is part of the Great Solution which I propose to offer in its proper place. To return to real vice from this consideration of the aping of its trappings.

I know a negro girl of the class that is only too glad to sell her body for a dollar or even fifty cents to the first comer; this girl pays sixty dollars a month to the policeman on the beat. "Can you beat that?"

In London only the frowsiest harlots drink gin - that is the stage which, beginning with port and continuing with brandy, ends all but for the last stage - water - the Thames.

In New York men and women of all classes drink it at all hours of the day and night. An average New York man's only idea of amusement is to get drunk. "Jesus Christ, I had the time of my life last night". "What did you do?" "Why, Jesus Christ, we all went to a party. I was so bloody drunk before I got there I could hardly stand." "And then?" "Oh, Jesus Christ, I don't know. We went on somewhere, I guess, but I don't remember anything after two o'clock. Oh, we had a hell of a good time." (The frequent reference to the Saviour by name is the only evidence I have yet obtained of the celebrated piety of America.)

Do I come to the conclusion from these facts that New York is a very bad place? Not at all. What do the facts mean? They mean just nothing. That is the curious part of the situation, and the Great Solution will show them in another light.

V

Now for the other side of the medal. Side by side with,

arm in arm with, this shameless, senseless, mechanical vice, we find a kind of prudery which almost takes one's breath away.

If you take a girl for an auto-ride to Long Island, it may be called abduction. If you bring her back again, you can be indicted twice. Probably a draper can be held to account for inveigling a woman into his shop for immoral purposes, if the woman be anxious to buy "attractive" lingerie. I do not know if this point of law has been tested yet, but all who know New York know that the idea is not too fantastically improbable. And when it comes to merely being shocked!

It is shocking for one of these naked, crudely painted society women to smoke in public.

And it was shocking for Maxim Gorky to live with a woman who was not his legal wife. This in a town where the best and biggest hotels allow their rooms to be used by common prostitutes and their clients, and their lounges to be used by the said women for soliciting.

In America naked statuary is 'disgusting'. The only decent statue ever produced by any one even remotely claimed by America, the Bacchante of McMonnies, was barred in Boston. No man ever fashioned sculpture purer than that.

On the other hand, on the door of the lavatory of the Claridge, one of New York's best hotels, is a copper relief, crude and clever, of two naked men embracing as they micturate.

"Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel!"

It will be many years before America can live down the shame of the treatment of that great writer, a man who stood for freedom, and was only not married to the woman in question because of the very laws that Americans thought harsh!

Lately, of course, they have tried to draw a *red herring* across the track, to turn the whole affair to ribald laughter. They held up Marie Lloyd! Here was a steamer with two thousand immoral people landing at a port with five million immoral people. Marie Lloyd to the pillory!

The fact is that Americans go mad if any one mentions 'sex' in public. A friend of mine, a prominent sodomite of New York, took me to a club dinner of the most whisky-sodden blackguards I have ever met. "For God's sake", he whispered, when I was asked to speak, "keep off sex; they're all frightened of sex."

It reminds one of the girl who always blushed when she saw the number six. Because she knew Latin.

But besides this peel prudery and core grossness is another matter. There is a real fear in the people. They harbour among them a monster of hypocrisy, graft and craft whose name this preliminary description has already made it unnecessary to mention. He threatens all men; his hideous shadow chills the city. Who is he? Who is it that has the greatest library of indecent books and instruments in the world? Who is it that delights to flagellate children, and practices what Americans delight to call the "honey stunt"? Not a man in New York that reads this but knows at once whom I mean; yet this creature is not only tolerated, but feared. The word sex is so tabu that every one is not only afraid to mention it in public, but afraid lest for any other cause whatever his name may somehow be mixed up with it. If

two business men wish to ruin a third, they ask "Couldn't we frame up some sex stunt, and *soak* him? It's a cinch."

This is the country which babbles daily of "soul-mates," "affinities," "love-wives", and the rest of the nauseating drivel. But stand for any real principle of purity or decency, and the shadow of the monster moves, and so potent is that mere oracle of pestilence that even brave men cower and flee. So will not Aleister Crowley.

In these three months I have continued to lead the unostentatious life of an Irish gentleman; and I have rendered myself liable to several thousand years of imprisonment. But I have so far not been prosecuted, and let those who might wish to do so remember the story of the Indian tyrant who rode over what he thought was an ant, but turned out to be the god *Vishnu* incarnated as an elephant, who trampled him to death.

VI

I had as lief live in Germany or Switzerland. There nearly everything is 'verboten' and sometimes 'strengstens verboten'; but one always knows what, and one nearly always knows why. There is a definite disciplined standard of right conduct with an intelligible aim. In New York one can never be certain whether one is breaking the law, and if so, whether some busybody will take action. For example, there is a proposed law to prohibit "ball-dodgers" at country fairs! * Again, consider spitting on the sidewalk. This accomplishment - for it is certainly that, though I hesitate whether to classify it as an art, a science, or a social pleasure - is the key to the happiness of eleven-

* Evening Post, Feb. 9, 1915

twelfths of this unsophisticated people. I have not noticed any arrests. But the point is that if some person became obnoxious to those in Power by the Will of the People, he may be seized and held up to execration as a disseminator of tuberculosis. A lumber-room law of this kind is only used - can only be used - as an instrument of oppression. It is useless for the defendant to urge that judge, counsel, jury and spectators might all be indicted for the same offense. They merely reply that they are innocent until they are proved guilty - and meanwhile the question is whether the man in the dock is guilty or no. He is, and that settles it. Hence prudent citizens take care to keep in with some powerful graft, the clerical, or the medical, or the financial; and they choose the lawyer who advertizes the largest number of judges on his pay-roll.

The worst sign that any community can show is that its citizens are afraid of the police. It implies that one or both parties are composed of scoundrels, and this is certainly the case in New York. Fear is the dominant emotion, after greed.

VII

It is fortunately easy to explain all these strange facts, so obscure and so conflicting, so strenuously startling to the stranger. The Great Solution is simple enough. America is a toy republic, and its inhabitants are children.

Everything goes to show this. Consider the eager rush for every new plaything, be it scandal, opera singer, or idea. They grab it, use it up, throw it away. They make no use of it, never develop it, never become attached to it. It is a nine days' wonder. The

attention rises suddenly to full pitch, flags, is diverted by the next new thing.

Even their seriousness is childish. The habitual irony of the English is utterly lost on them. They take everything au pied de la lettre, and au grand serieux. In England if you say you have a machine to fly to the moon, the common sense of the people assumes some symbolic meaning; some satire or fable is expected, or it is mere extravaganza, demanding repartee on the same string. In New York they simply give you a page in the Sunday paper, with illustrations and photographs of you, and of the machine, and of the moon.* If the story is a priori impossible beyond the credulity of even the lower classes of America, they take the author to a lawyer, and make him swear an affidavit to its truth.† And he does it!

* I wrote this at random. On re-reading, I remembered Poe's "Moon-Hoax", which did actually fool a number of quite responsible people in the United States.

Similarly, I happened to be discussing chemical theory the other day with a most distinguished man of science, who can change the colour of precious stones. I suggested certain experiments to him. This conversation took place in the presence of a third person who told me ^{John} that all that had come of my suggested experiments was that the man had spoiled several diamonds. I chanced to ring him up today, and began, "I hear you've spoiled a million dollars' worth of diamonds over my experiments." An Englishman would have replied "Well, the exact sum is nine hundred and ninety-seven thousand dollars and eight cents, and I'm expecting a cheque from you in the morning." But my friend replied quite seriously that it was not through my suggestions at all, and that the diamonds spoiled were few and valueless.

† N/Y. World, Aug. 2, 1914

Even the sky-scrapers, magnificent in their sublime simplicity, are somehow like children's constructions with boxes of bricks.

Again, the love of exaggeration is childish. They do not care for beauty, ^{a man for greatness; only} ~~but~~ for bigness.

A bell-boy took me over the Hotel McAlpin. He was an English boy, and five years in America had subdued him. The native awe of the great was upon him. He spoke like a verger showing a cathedral. His voice was a hushed monotone. "This is the biggest hotel in the world" "There are more rooms in this hotel than in any other hotel in the world" "There are more elevators in this hotel than in any other hotel in the world" "This is the biggest Turkish bath in the world" "This is the biggest dancing floor in the world" and when we got to the roof, and like Nebuchadnezzar looked forth upon the city: "This is the biggest harbour in the world" "More people pass that corner in Broadway than any other corner in the world" "That's the biggest building in the world" And so on, until when I tipped him, I said "You've forgotten one thing"- He looked startled, but sorrowful. - "you're the biggest liar in the world" He took it quite seriously, and as a compliment.

Children - why, their very diseases are the ills of childhood - the "mullygrumps and the collywobbles". The gum-chewing is the symptom of childish restlessness, and no adult people would tolerate this stinking habit in public. Only the possession of a buzzard's breath could justify it. So also is the craze for amusement, in one class, the craze for 'education', in another. It is just like a school: some of the children restless, excited, always crying for new toys and sweets and pleasures; the others owlshly serious, hardworking, anxious to 'get on', and to win prizes and scholarships. But where do you

find Americans with a fund of pleasure within themselves?

Childlike, too, is the absence of true moral responsibility. They argue in copy-book phrases. There is (even today, after eight months of world-war) an influential school of 'pacifists'. They say the Allies would be more Christ-like^{*} if they did not resist. They cherish idealisms about right, and justice, and democracy, never having grown up to learn that these are figments, and that the world is run by bold unscrupulous men who care for nothing but wealth and power, and for their sakes despise even luxury. There are just a few adults in the country, and they are its millionaires. The average American really believes that the war is the 'fault' of some wicked person - the Kaiser, or Sir Edward Grey: does not understand that it has been economically and politically inevitable for decades, and that the only alternative was universal pestilence.

* To illustrate the difference of English and American ideas of the ridiculous, the "Forum", a high-class 'advanced thought' magazine, printed "The Sermon on the Mount" by "Jesus of Nazareth" just as if it were an ordinary article by a promising young writer. The idea of the publication was to influence opinion against war!!!

I despair of getting any American to see the complex ribaldry, the ludicrous blasphemy, and the childish fatuity of the act. To any European mind it is a masterpiece at which comment stands agog and agape. One gets a real God-glimpse at humanity, knows not whether to be more amused at them, or ashamed of them.

The purblind professor that is President is truly a symbol of America - educated America - as Roosevelt was of the real backbone of the country in the strenuous West. He is polished, far-sighted, an 'Highbrow' of the 'Highbrows', all for the 'uplift'. And his policy is like Martin Tupper. "Watchful waiting" is a rotten phrase when the interests he is supposed to protect are ruining under his eyes. "All Mexico is not worth the life of a single American" is true; but it was uttered when Americans were being murdered unavenged; and the British policy is nobler. "Perish the Empire, but let the meanest half-caste horse-thief be safe, or be avenged, if he be a British subject." That Britain did not instantly and terribly avenge the murder of Benyon was the sign of her decadence; no victories on sea or land can ever undo the damage of that one cowardice.

And now America stands on the verge of war - which will include civil war. For the moment Wilson should indeed wait. Instead, buttressed by academic arguments which would convince any University, he tried to push through a shipping bill which will give England and Japan (which are not universities, but aggressive nations) the excuse they want. They are already afraid of American *hegemony* resulting from the exhaustion of the other nations; and they wish to exhaust her also. I am told ^{not} this is the idea of a crank; but I know British diplomacy, and I am prepared to abide by the decision of Referee Time.

Again, the universal attitude toward sex is that of children. There is one class who ^{as members} discuss sex just as naughty children tell each other dirty stories; ⁱⁿ the other class ^{they} refuse to discuss sex just as good children 'resist the corruption of evil companions through the Blood of the Lamb'.

There is none of that ardent reverence for sex which comes of *knowledge, none of that silence about sex which comes of*

that reverence. Half-maniac, half-grafter, Billy Sunday's blasphemies and antics in the pulpit shock every one ^{who has} ~~with~~ real religious feeling; but in this country there are plenty of quite serious people ready to defend him. A prize-fight in a church with an imaginary "Satan" punctuated by vivid description in the manner of the ring journalist is just as much a symptom of absence of true apprehension of the meaning of religion as the "Jesus Christ, what the hell, the god-damned son of a bitch", which amplifies the exiguity of thought in nearly every sentence that comes from the class of American whom he is trying to

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One day it will come, and suddenly. The nation will spring to Manhood in an hour. What will call it forth I am not prophet enough to foresee; but that it will come I doubt not. If not, America will continue to depend for population on the immigrant; for the old families

The complete moral incapacity of the community. The logical conclusion is to put everybody in a padded room.

He likes to self-entertain; elaborate about. A man holds his family & himself with a "Man's silence" on his wife. He only merely suggested not to stop the tide of "Man's silence"! Suppose some one should live with level of life a mad-man, or having his mind with a slave? Pardon this, if anything at all, is the silence of

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are already sterile in fact, as in genius. There is no art, no poetry, no science in America; only a sort of playing at art and science and poetry; and the smart lad's handiness in the application of principles elsewhere discovered. American literature is infantile diarrhoea.

But it will come. I sometimes think that the war, collecting as it has Europe's men of genius in New York, is Nature's scheme for the impregnation of this continent with the sex-principle. It will come.

IX

The night after I landed a very distinguished Englishman, tall, languid, aristocratic, took me after dinner for a walk. "They will tell you," he said, "that it is impossible or dangerous to tell the truth about this country in this country. Do not believe it. You can write the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in fiery letters ten feet high if you go the right way to work." "Look!" he continued "how's that for Truth?" and he pointed to a tall building south of Central Park on whose roof was the blazing sky-sign

U N I T E D S T A T E S

T I R E S

"It won't tire me," said I. "I love children."

Aleister Crowley