

PROVINCIAL PECULIARITIES OF WESTERN LIFE.

It is an old truth, but only old men seem to understand the particular importance of honesty, simplicity, and order. Young towns, like young men, are constantly trying experiments, only to discover that the old way is so much better than any other that they are at last compelled to come back to it. Much has been said as to what is the greatest pity; I think it is that young men and young towns do not accept the lessons of their elders without the punishment of experience. Most Western country towns are guilty of all sorts of mistakes, because few of them have reached years of discretion. However wise a man may be in his individual capacity, and however wise he may have been as a resident of an older community, as a citizen of a new town he votes bonds with the recklessness that characterizes young men in giving notes, forgetting that pay-day will inevitably roll around and that they will probably not be prepared to pay.

Many of the great fortunes in the East were gifts from communities in the West. When it was decided to build a railroad in a certain direction, the people were asked to vote bonds, and the line selected by the engineers as the most feasible always had apparent opposition, which caused the people living along the best route to give liberal aid. In many cases the aid amounted to more than the cost of the railroad. The railroad companies usually made conditions favorable to the communities voting the aid; but in all cases of which I have any knowledge these conditions are violated, generally by agreement with the people themselves.

The usual plan is for the railroad company to agree to issue stock to the community voting aid; but this stock is finally given back to the railroad company in return for promises that are never fulfilled. The official representatives of the people who engage in these transactions are not dishonest men, as would be suspected; they are simply Western boomers, who receive some sort of a flimsy promise from the railroad company, and nearly always there is a public sentiment in favor of the transaction. A private car is uncoupled in a town and a railroad dignitary is known to be on board. A report is easily started

by some interested person that the company is thinking of building shops to employ a thousand men. The dignitary says not a word, and the people fix up a story to suit themselves. Two or three visits of this kind result in the turning over by the county or city of its stock to the railroad company for a consideration of one dollar. I know of a case where a party of railroad officials stopped in a town in a private car, and although the people imagined that very grave questions were being discussed, I learned afterward that the officials talked about nothing save a plan to enlarge the ice-box in the official car so that it would hold another case of beer. In such cases the railroad company acts on the best business principles, the people on the worst; and this sort of carelessness distinguishes them in nearly everything they do.

The mania of Western people for voting bonds has been so pronounced that as States grow older legislative restrictions upon it have been found necessary; and these laws extend gradually Westward with the settlement of the country. In spite of their terrible experience with bond-voting, Western communities often evade the law. The people conspire for months to get control of their valuables, in order that they may give them away. If there is a valuable franchise in a Western country town, the people usually manage to give it away, the recipients being men who have probably been victims themselves in some new community. Not long ago Omaha voted an enormous lot of bonds to a railroad company, and the methods were those of the earliest bond elections in the West.

The theory of voting bonds is that posterity will have them to pay. The county in which I live has already paid more interest than it ever voted bonds, and the debt is still unpaid. In voting one hundred thousand dollars of seven per cent twenty-year bonds, people forget that they are creating a debt of something like two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. This indifference to fact ruins most men; it is the trouble with most Western country towns. Experience teaches that many of our theories have no foundation in fact; yet we continue to teach them, to the exclusion of the truth. The Western orator never mentions the hard times that inevitably follow the good; he seldom mentions the follies of the people, but rather encourages them to continue their mistakes, by giving them a character they never possessed. We are forever dealing with theory, although the truth is different, and we all know it.

Most old men and most old towns live by the rule of fact; but

there are so many young men in the West and so many new towns that the country is ruled by theory. The great lessons of life are few in number and very simple, but we make the mistake of calling them "old-fogy" ideas. The wisest men in the West are known as "old fogies"; you will find them opposed to every wild and impracticable scheme. They are the men who opposed voting the bonds we are now compelled to pay. The Jews are said to possess a secret with reference to Moses, and all good Jews are supposed to keep the secret quiet if they discover it by accident. We Western gentiles also have a secret, which is that there is not so much in theory as we have pretended for years, and we are all supposed to keep the fact quiet when, between the ages of thirty and forty, we discover it.

I wonder that a great poet does not come out of the West. The confidence of the Western man that his town lot will finally make him rich, somehow reminds one of the bard who longs so ardently for ambrosia and nectar, although about all he ever gets is cornbread and creek water. I have known men in the West who have been rich for years, and never had a dollar they could truthfully call their own. Magnificent fellows, these Western men, but they are poets, every one, content with a Pegasus in the absence of the horse they really need to plough corn. The boomer is only another name for a poet, and his plats are as unreal as the verses of his brother who has turned his attention to unrealities of another kind. You can go into the average Western country town with a scheme to manufacture oysters, and the people will attend your meetings and respectfully listen to your foolish plans rather than offend you by expressing the opinion that you are crazy, a probability they have discussed among themselves. Such politeness would surely nurture poetry.

I should say that towns came of age about as men do. At twenty-one a town has a good deal more corporate sense than it had when ten or fifteen years old; but it is not at its best, so far as common sense is concerned, until it is thirty or forty. The great mistakes in towns have been made early in their history. By the time a Western country town has learned that it is not to become a city, it has made mistakes that will forever interfere with its prosperity. This is also true of men; very few young men believe that they will be ordinary men at forty or fifty, but when they start down the hill they realize that their discomforts in old age will be largely due to mistakes in youth. To some extent this must always be true, but matters could be very much improved by admitting and teaching the truth, to the

neglect of theories of no consequence whatever. Many of the cherished theories of Americans, which we nurture with great care, actually lead us away from the simple and important truth. It would be a good idea to employ a man to preach one day in every week against the folly of planting soft-maple trees, since sugar-maples may be had at the same expense; but in the absence of such practical preaching, the people do not discover their mistake until their soft-maple trees are covered with green worms and break in every high wind.

The great sin of Western men, if not of all Americans, is careless indifference to the simple and important rules of life. We do not make the best use of the abundance with which we are surrounded. We strive for rewards which are no rewards at all, and neglect the paramount virtues of economy, industry, and patience. Wherever there is poverty, we invent a theory and an apology which covers up the main fact that we are usually poor because we are shiftless. In the field of gold in which we have settled we run about undecided what to choose, and at last we save nothing. Collectively we are a wonderful people, but individually we do not accomplish as much as we should. Public extravagance has been copied into our living, and our public grievances are the result of our private follies.

I am an advocate of getting rid of boom values in men as well as in towns. The boom idea originated in the West, although it has lately been copied elsewhere and always to the disadvantage of those adopting the idea. Booms inevitably collapse, and we all know it; therefore there is no good excuse for investing in them. The wiser the man, the more likely he is to invest in a boom. I sometimes think that your wise man is more easily victimized than any other. I have passed through several booms, but I believe I never have known a fool to lose money by one. A friend of mine, a very wise man, once bought a piece of property of a fool during a boom, and he asked me if I thought a smart man like him was warranted in robbing a poor fool who did not know any better. The wise man worried a good deal about the transaction until the boom collapsed, and he has been busy during the past five years in paying out.

Every man who tells what the people ought to do, although he knows very well that they never will do it, is a boomer. Theorizing about men doing what nature never intended they should do is a favorite American weakness, and is more pronounced in the West than elsewhere. A promise will bring more in the Western market than in any other market in the world. Perhaps the reader has

noticed that men never do what the newspapers say they should do: nature is so often called bad habit; but we keep on scolding, although there is not the slightest hope that theory will ever supplant fact.

The great need of Western country towns is manufactories. The people themselves should establish them, though the theory is that "Eastern capital" should undertake the ventures. Many citizens of Western country towns have money they do not know what to do with; but they seldom invest it in the enterprises which they clamor for "Eastern capital" to engage in. These citizens with money often have investments in other communities, in spite of the fact that such investments never pay as well as would investments at home. I can account for this only by the theory held by most Western people that they will finally remove to larger places. No Western man seems to be satisfied with the community in which he lives; he likes the West, but seldom the town where he is located. He does not expect to end his life there (although he usually does), and as a result he neglects his interests. Experience proves that the successful men are those who make few changes. Although money seems to be made more easily in places away from home, there is no doubt that wherever you go there is about the same clamor over a dollar. Making money is a matter of industry and saving, seldom of location. In the town where I live we have a habit of threatening to remove to a larger town not far away, which we all believe appreciates its citizens. The people of that town threaten to go to Chicago, and I have heard that the people of Chicago threaten occasionally to go to New York unless taxes are reduced or times improve. But in New York the rule is reversed; there is an impression in that big town that the proper place in which to get your rights and make money fast is the West. We are all dissatisfied, and every one of us makes a mistake in not being more content and therefore more at liberty to give his affairs intelligent attention.

The people of Iowa, after clamoring thirty or forty years for "Eastern capital," have themselves successfully engaged in manufacturing; but Kansas and Nebraska are still indignant because their natural advantages are not recognized. The wonder is that the people of Kansas and Nebraska do not take advantage of their own manufacturing opportunities, and thus realize on their loyalty to the policy of protection. The quantity of agricultural machinery sold in the two last-named States is enormous; but none of it is manufactured at home, although there is not the slightest reason why it

should not be. American agricultural machinery is sold at lower prices in foreign countries than in Kansas and Nebraska, which means that the farmers of the West pay the manufacturers an unfair profit. But there is no protection for the people of Kansas and Nebraska, who buy protected articles and sell their wheat and beef and corn in the open markets of the world. No section of the country offers better opportunities for manufacturing and jobbing than Kansas and Nebraska. In the town where I live there is a jobbing house employing twenty-six travelling men. Fifteen years ago the proprietor was a struggling retail merchant, and his average profits since engaging in jobbing have amounted to twenty thousand dollars a year. Our towns are becoming of age, and our own people are investing in the enterprises to which they so long invited Eastern capital; and when managed carefully and intelligently, such enterprises never fail to yield a large return.

The free lands have nearly all been taken up, but the opportunities in the West are better than they ever were. The taking of free lands has always been a good deal of an experiment. The best time to go to a new country is after the pioneers have demonstrated what the country is good for. Farms on the frontier of Kansas were sold two years ago for almost nothing, although their owners had spent years in profitless experimenting to demonstrate the kind of crop best suited to the country. The man who bought a quarter section two years ago for four hundred dollars certainly did better than his homesteading neighbor who spent five years in acquiring his title. The last census shows that several frontier counties of Kansas lost in population from 1880 to 1890. This fact represents the weary experiment of the settlers, the mistakes of youth. I pretend to say that the man who locates in the West now will have a better prospect of success than he would have had ten years ago. But the best opportunities in the West are in communities twenty to thirty years old. It is not necessary to go beyond wood and water. In one county in Kansas there is not a running stream or a single tree of natural growth.

I believe industry, economy, and good conduct bring better rewards in Western country towns than in any other communities in the world. There is nothing to which a citizen of such a town may not aspire, providing he practises the virtues named. There is a social equality in Western country towns that prevails nowhere else, and the daughters of the blacksmith are quite as prominent as the daughters of the banker, providing they behave as well, which they are likely to do,

as they all grow up together and are educated in the same schools. The only social test in the West is good conduct. I once lived in a town where it was always said, after a big party, that the line was drawn only at color. The women are more democratic than the men in inviting "the neighbors" when a party is given. Western women always call on their neighbors, and when a man gives a party, the appearance of the husbands of his wife's friends is sometimes startling. Love of society seems to be a natural attribute with a woman, but it is an acquirement with the men. It is dangerous to give a party in a small Western town unless the invitations are general; those not invited will not like it and will find opportunity to "get even."

The social outcasts of the West are the husbands. There is an impression in the virtuous West that when a man gets married he should be content with his wife's society and long for no amusement beyond playing with the children. Young men are petted until they are spoiled, and married women have their afternoon parties; but a married man is only expected to come home promptly at meal-times and carefully wipe his feet, if muddy, on the door-mat. The Western married man has no standing in society except by his wife's side. The men who "run" the towns are seldom seen at the parties which are managed by their unmarried clerks. In the old courtly days a man and wife had a social individuality; but when a man attends a social gathering in the West, he is expected to seat himself beside his wife and behave as well as he can, to the end that people may understand that he is not only fond of the worthy woman at home, but in company as well. If a married man should attend a Western social affair without his wife, he would be very apt to be approached by a married woman, who would ask him in an audible whisper, "Where is your wife?" and there would be a certain something in the woman's tone indicating that he ought to be ashamed of himself for being there under such circumstances. I once knew a gay young husband to exhibit a paper, signed by his wife, to the effect that he was at the party alone with her knowledge and consent.

The men who have made the West and who are interesting have no social side in the strictest sense. Western society is made up of young people, who are always more or less uninteresting except from the standpoint of good looks. A middle-aged man who attends a social affair in the West is looked upon as an oddity, so firmly rooted is the impression that as soon as a man marries he ought to retire from everything except business. Very few Western men possess

any of the social graces, although they are noted for shrewdness in business and politics. Our idea of society is that it is an institution for bringing about marriages; after the marriages take place the contracting parties are expected to retire. In very good society in the West—I mean gatherings of people that would be creditable anywhere in point of appearance and conduct—you will find girls who work as clerks, and many of them reigning favorites, in opposition to the idle daughters of rich parents. This is the exception, however, rather than the rule.

Dr. Hyde has been vigorously attacked for his article on "Impending Paganism in New England" in the June FORUM by the preachers of the West, who are unanimously of the opinion that he is in need of conversion. The great foes of religion in the West are indifference on the part of the people and intolerance on the part of the preachers. In their private capacities, some of our preachers are disposed to accept the logic of events, but in their pulpits they preach the old doctrines which have brought about the prevailing religious indifference. There are few seceders among the Western preachers; secession seems to come from the East, and religion there no doubt feels the effect of it; but in the West, in order to be religious you must be pious, a word which almost carries a reproach with it.

When I was a boy, I remember, the people discussed religion a good deal, but I have not heard a religious discussion in years. Even the infidels here have ceased talking about the subject. It is a favorite saying in the West, "I long ago quit discussing religion." Thirty or forty years ago preachers were regarded with respect, and they led in most affairs, but now there is something in the air very much resembling contempt for them. I do not say this should be the case; I only express the opinion that it is the case. I think it is due to the intolerance of the preachers themselves. The Western churches are supported by the women, as Dr. Hyde says is the case in New England. Their financial condition is growing worse every year, and concessions are made to the few men who belong to them that are very damaging to the churches. I know one member who gets drunk and attends the festivals, but as he is good about paying he is not turned out.

The women who support the churches in the West are known as *pro-bono-publico* women. I do not believe they are very popular, or that women ever are popular who bother the men for subscriptions, however worthy the cause represented. The activity of women in church

work is possibly a bad thing; it has a tendency to keep the men away. Give a man an idea that his wife is making an effort to save herself and is leaving him out, and he will invent a new plan of salvation. When a man comes home and finds his wife away doing church work to the neglect of his interests, he finds another argument against religion and forms another prejudice against the Church. If I were a woman I would not go to church without my husband; not from foolish sentiment, but because of a conviction that the best church work demanded such a course. A man is sentimental before he is pious, and his sentimentality is always stronger than his piety.

The Western man is more sentimental than his brother in the East. When he engages in a new enterprise he expects his fellow-citizens to "appreciate" him, and he particularly desires that the newspapers mention him in connection with the words "energetic" and "pushing." When he has "trouble" he expects the neighbors to take notice of it; and after the funeral he is apt to publish a card of thanks. I have never lived in a Western community where the people were not surprisingly good to each other in affliction. Every Western man who has trouble loves his neighbors afterward, if he did not before. The people are equally prompt to relieve the distress of poverty. For many years I have published a newspaper, and every winter I make it a rule to print notices of distress, which the people never fail to relieve. Reporters are always hearing of such cases through the poor-commissioner, and a case of distress mentioned in the evening is pretty sure to be relieved the next day. In the East all such matters are regarded from the cold, matter-of-fact standpoint of an old man, but in the West with the enthusiasm of youth. The typical Eastern man who removes to the West is so exclusive that people imagine he is proud, but he is simply true to the habits of a lifetime. Every Western man who visits in the East is shocked when he cannot find out who lives across the street. When a man builds a house in the West his neighbors give him the benefit of their advice, but in the East I have heard that such matters are left to the architect.

In the West, also, every man takes an interest in the public welfare. If he finds a bunch of Canada thistles he gives notice of the fact to the local newspaper, which suggests that they be cut down. I have never heard, however, of any one turning out to cut these weeds, nor have I ever seen a patch, though I have often heard of the Canada thistle threatening the agricultural interests of the country. Knowledge of these dangerous weeds seems to be confined to those persons

who are so fortunate as to have lived in the East and who are always telling us how much better things were done where they came from. Although they frequently hear that the Canada thistle is preparing to cover the face of the earth and wipe out corn and wheat, I do not believe Western people know the weed when they see it.

Once when I was travelling through Iowa I stopped at a town where an election was in progress. The manner in which the men yelled and carried banners and badges seemed to me to be the funniest thing I had ever seen. The enthusiasm of the people over a few minor offices seemed to me to be the enthusiasm of crazy people, and I watched the proceedings with a great deal of interest until I suddenly remembered that we did exactly the same thing at home. When a friend of ours runs for office we all turn out to help him, and there is a very ridiculous time until the contest is decided. While the campaign is in progress we all say it is high time really good men were called to office, and that the best citizens should turn out to support such a candidate; but after the election is over we privately confess that the good man elected is a disappointment, for no office-holder can possibly carry out the reforms his friends promise. It is a favorite theory in the West that the best citizens neglect the primaries. Perhaps they do as a rule, but I have noticed that when the best citizens of the first ward turn out because of the unfitness of a candidate, the best citizens of the second ward decide in favor of the man opposed in the first. The best citizens seem to make quite as many mistakes in politics as the other class. My own opinion is that it is impossible to avoid mistakes if you engage in politics.

A certain thoroughfare leading to the town in which I live is known as the "Doniphan Road," and for fifteen years I have heard that it is in such bad condition that trade is driven to rival towns. In my capacity as editor I think I have referred to the condition of the Doniphan Road as a burning shame at least a thousand times, always at the request of indignant citizens and never caring much about the matter myself. At last a number of men raised a considerable amount of money by private subscription and went to work to improve the Doniphan Road. There was a good deal of rejoicing because the road was to be improved and the trade of the town thereby increased; and the men who were doing the work went about with such an injured air, because they were not appreciated, that finally some resolutions were passed and printed. Three or four months after the work had been completed, a man called at my office and filed complaint against

the condition of the Doniphan Road! I was very much surprised, and called his attention to the fact that the road had lately been fixed. "Fixed!" he said scornfully. "The road was all right until some crazy men from town came out and ruined it!"

This incident illustrates one of the great weaknesses of the West. Except by bridging, Western roads have never been improved a particle. Every citizen is supposed to pay a road tax every year or work two days. In the country the tax is always paid in work; and all the farmers do is to scour their ploughs along the roads and arrange for the election of a road-overseer who is not so particular. If a little ploughing and scraping is done according to a plan, it is washed out by the next rain. In bad weather our roads are simply disgraceful, but they are no more disgraceful than the system by which we attempt to improve them. Every Western man is ashamed of the country roads, but the trouble is he is ashamed without taking intelligent steps to improve them.

We of the West have been clamoring for liberty so long that at last we have too much of it; it is one of our most serious faults that we have confounded political liberty with social license. Our young people are allowed dangerous liberties in their intercourse with one another if the motive is believed to be marriage. Engagements are lightly entered into, and an engagement is accepted as a pretext for liberties that may be dangerous and never fail to be damaging. It is the rule in the West for a young man to call on his affianced in the evening, and remain alone with her as long as he can make himself agreeable; very often he remains until long after midnight. The members of the girl's family regard it as a politeness to leave the pair to themselves; and not only the family, but the community, grants a certain license to engaged persons that would be shocking under other circumstances. This license is so generally recognized that once, when I was visiting in a very good family in Omaha, the oldest daughter appeared at the breakfast-table and told as a funny incident that while sitting on her lover's knee the night before, one of the female servants entered the parlor unexpectedly and caught her at it. The incident caused hearty laughter, though I remember that the girl's father was not present. The engagement was finally broken off. Not long ago a society young man called on a young woman in my neighborhood, and when the mother entered the parlor the young man intimated that her presence there was an impertinence.

All this is excused on the favorite American theory that we are

free and able to take care of ourselves. We do not believe that young men can take care of themselves in the presence of temptation and persuasion, but we seem to believe that young women can; therefore our parlors are too often loafing-places for men who use all their arts against the best interests of women and society. We have forgotten that nine-tenths of the unfortunate women of this country have been ruined by men to whom they were engaged to be married, and that a series of engagements under our system inevitably trains a woman downward. In no community in this country is a woman who has been engaged three or four times as highly esteemed as one who has had no such experience. This alone is a sufficient reason why the custom is a bad one; and if we may judge from the kissing jokes in the newspapers, the custom of too much license between engaged persons is not confined to the West. It seems to be an American privilege.

Every engagement of marriage that comes to nothing is a libel on the sacred name of love: it makes every one of us think less of that which lies in our hearts next to hope. An old love affair that comes to nothing injures humanity as a backslider injures the Church. The French carry their system too far one way; we carry ours too far the other. In nearly every newspaper or magazine article written by a woman you will find a sly thrust at the folly I am pointing out. George Eliot pointed it out as a great danger, in the statement that the happiest women are those who have no history. George Eliot meant what I mean: that every woman who has had a lover other than her husband has a history that will cause her trouble. Every mature woman knows that this is true; even a girl says less of her second engagement than of her first. Nature tells her that there is something wrong about it. The proportion of marriages in the West is gradually growing smaller. The notion that there is a scarcity of marriageable women in the West is a mistake. I live five hundred miles west of Chicago, and in my town there are certainly five women willing to marry to one man willing to marry. What is the matter? My opinion is that the men refuse to forgive the follies society says they must forgive. Their own experience has disgusted them with our system of marriages. The men are to blame, of course, but men would willingly be to blame for very much more than they are.

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THE SCANDINAVIANS IN THE NORTHWEST.

EVERY class of immigrants must be judged by its manifest ability to become American speedily, willingly, and thoroughly, in all that that term implies. The more generations there are of ignorance, superstition, thriftlessness, and political passivity stretching out behind him, the more undesirable from every point of view the immigrant becomes. On the other hand, the immigrant whose homeland shows a minimum percentage of illiteracy, whose life has been saturated with ideas of thrift and small economies, who holds himself the slave of neither priest, landlord, nor king, and whose history, past and passing, is a story of sturdy struggling for independence—such an immigrant should find welcome and encouragement instead of barriers to his coming.

While agitating for much-needed additional restriction upon undesirable immigration, we should not forget the obligation we owe the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who in the last forty years have surged across our land, settled in the great West, and brought prosperity to themselves and the state. But not this alone. They are no longer pilgrims and strangers. They are not simply in the better country: they are of it and of its people. It is to the immigrants of this class, and especially to the Scandinavian immigrants from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, that the Northwest is largely indebted for its marvellous development.

While in most of the Eastern States a Norwegian or a Swede is a curiosity, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas have about seven hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants of Scandinavian birth. To this should be added those of the second generation, enumerated as native born, which should raise their numbers nearly to a million. The story of the coming of this great host of peaceful conquerors of prairie and forest, by the side of which the early Teutonic migrations were but small marauding picnics, is an uneventful, but not an unimportant chapter in our history. The first company of Scandinavian immigrants reached New York from Norway in 1825, and made a settlement near Rochester, N. Y. A few hundreds