

# Impressions of America

I WISH I could tell you what America is like, for it is the greatest show in the world. But I cannot. I cannot even tell you what New York is like, for I sampled not one hundredth part of its contents. Yet I lived there for three months, and I ran about all day and most of the night, trying to get on terms with it. I have chased its personality all 'round the town. I've been all over Manhattan Island, the oblong of mud and sand into which are driven the deep, deep foundations of New York. I've been down to the Assyrian quarter by the harbor, where dark men in little shops sell cart wheel rounds of pastry that look like coils of blonde hair, so fine drawn are the threads of paste. I've been up to the Bronx, where along a road magniloquently called The Concourse (magniloquently but not extravagantly, for it is in fact magnificent) apartment houses rise to incredible heights in what would be Roman grandeur were it not for the innumerable fire-escapes that mar them as projecting teeth mar even the handsomest women. I've walked for hours along Riverside Drive, which wanders for mile after mile on the steep edge of the island, past crazy Rhenish castles built in the good old days when the American millionaire had the courage of his convictions and apartment houses of far more than Roman grandeur whose inhabitants must feel gorgeous but chilly, chilly beyond even the ministrations of steam heat, for the Hudson River that winds past is flecked with ice-floes half the winter through. I've been to the other edge of Manhattan, to the East River, that is as smutty as our Pool of London, that carries on her gray bosom islands that have a queer look of being not only between shores but between worlds; and that has on its banks the oddest patches of pretty little red brick houses with sash bow-windows and lawns guarded by lead Cupids and all that can be transported of our Chelsea air.

I have been to millionaires' houses which were like young mansions, and where the parties stretched into remote perspectives. I have been to a gypsy home on the East Side, a cellar with walls hung with gaily colored bunting, furnished only with an electric cooking stove, an extremely expensive gramophone, and two throne-like chairs upholstered in blue and silver brocade, on which grandfather and grandmother sat while the younger generation lay round on cushions on the floor, in the gypsy costumes into which they had changed after coming home from their work in the factory or garage or department store. I have been down to Chinatown, in Pell Street and Mott Street, and found the little yellow men cooking opium over braziers at the back of their shops. I have gone regularly on Sunday mornings to Harlem to sit in a church built to a Negro's plan by Negroes'

money, and heard the colored choir praise the Lord in sweet, humble, suffering songs that appeared to me more relevant to the Christian faith than any church music I have ever heard, even at St. Peter's in Rome. This, and much more, have I done.

I am giving, of course, no picture of any coherent New York life. But then it is not coherent; its essence is to be, all the time and every time, contradictory. For example, it is the most exciting city in the world to the eye, and it is also the most monotonous. There is but one end of the island which has escaped the curse of the rectangular layout of streets and that is right "down town" by the harbor, a district which has something of the look and charm of old Brighton or old Southend. Above its antique simplicities of low houses, crooked streets, and round greens there rise the sky-scrapers of Wall Street and the neighboring business centres. They are making an astonishing revelation of new beauty to the English eye. Before one has been in America one is apt to think of the skyscraper as the most prosaic form of architecture, and so it is in the smaller cities; the big buildings of a town in Illinois or Kansas look like magnified petrol-cans. But these New York sky-scrapers are different. They have, unexpectedly enough, a religious quality. They are more angular than pagan temples, more stolid than cathedrals, but there is no doubt that the men who built them believed themselves no less than the architects of the temples and the cathedrals to be housing some sacred ideals of life. For these are the homes of "big business," the financial and commercial interests which control America; and about "big business" the mass of Americans feel just such a glow of feeling as the old-fashioned English feel about their Army and their Navy. As well as this religious dignity of form the sky-scrapers have a magical beauty of material for they offer so large a surface to the reflection of light and shade that they cease to present the solid appearance of masonry and seem to be of a living substance like that of flowers. Seen from the bay they look like a cluster of lilies. It is perhaps of symbolic significance that these lily-like houses have so much steel in their composition that it affects the ships' compasses in the harbor.

No, there can be no complaint against the skyscraper. It makes the two great streets of New York, Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue, rank high among the wonders of the world. Fifth Avenue begins down town in Washington Square which has a quaint Bloomsbury touch about it, and a little brother of the Marble Arch called the Washington Arch. Among these homely English associations it starts modestly enough with old-fashioned stone houses, rather like the Earls Court houses. But with every hundred yards the child grows taller and

taller, and less like anything that England ever imagined. It becomes in its midmost and finest phase, a chasm between cliffs that rise up and up into the high inspired sunshine. At the base of the mountains of masonry walk crowds of people who are exhilarated as if they breathed high mountain air; for the atmosphere of New York, which is so full of electricity that you may give yourself a shock if you draw your hand along the brass rail of your bed, runs like wine in its people's veins. The end of Fifth Avenue, where it runs alongside Central Park, is of a less democratic splendor. The prancing crowds wear thin, and the greenery is faced by a white cliff, now high, now low, of millionaires' houses and apartment houses, that makes our own Park Lane seem a dowdy little business.

Park Avenue, which runs parallel to Fifth Avenue, excels it in magnificent excess of topless towers. It is a very wide street with a strip of rock running down the middle of it, and on each side an even more astonishing range of sky-scrappers rising to fantasies of form as wild as mountain peaks. For many of them are recently built apartment houses, and they have had to conform to what is known as the Zoning Law which in order to prevent the streets of New York from becoming sunless canyons decrees that every building shall diminish its girth by so many feet when it attains certain heights. It starts on ground-level a solid fortress; after more stories than most English buildings have in their final achievement it has to fall back from its parapets and continue less massively from its own roof thereafter, at increasingly frequent intervals, it has to fall back and rise again in some slenderer form. This problem of diminution sets the architect a problem which he has solved very frequently with the most poetic invention. In Lexington Avenue, just beside Park Avenue, there is a vast apartment house that rears its dark masses like the Pyramids; I think there can have been no such fine mystery making with piles of old stone since Egypt. In Forty-second Street, which is something like our Oxford Street, there is an office building which with a perfect simplicity of form, with nothing but deep groovings of its walls, and clean cut spires, contrives to give the emotion of a Gothic cathedral. In Fifth Avenue there is another whose high gables and weather-cock give it the jolliest Nuremberg Hans-Christian-Anderson look. And Madison Avenue, which is not one of New York's most successful streets, for it is too narrow, and its spirit is for some reason a little grey and discouraged, is nevertheless one of the sights of the world by reason of a certain building which story by story is shaped by an increasingly rich and strange fancy till on its heights it is transformed to an Arabian Night's palace of domes and minarets. There is certainly no unity, no homogeneousness about New York architecture; but if there were that would be a fault, for it would make it inappropriate to the city which of all capitals in the world is the most hetero-

geneous. It is the largest Irish city in the world, and the largest Jewish, and there is no people in the world that have not sent it a sizeable contingent. That its buildings should derive from the dreams of different peoples is therefore very suitable; and that liberty of derivation seems to have brought real inspiration to their buildings. On its architecture alone America can claim to be one of the greatest artistic nations of the world.

Nevertheless though New York can dazzle the eye with richness it can fatigue it with monotony. For such a really wealthy city there are surprisingly few fine streets. There is Fifth Avenue, there is Park Avenue, there are the streets facing Central Park; there is Riverside Drive; there is the not wholly satisfactory Madison Avenue; there is Fifty-seventh Street, the very disappointing equivalent of Dover Street, where the smartest dressmakers are; and that is practically all. Broadway is wonderful when it is using the night as backcloth for its dazzling pageant of electric signs, when fountains of white light and peacocks swishing tails of colored fire put out the strongest stars. But by day it is a rather dingier Strand and Fleet Street without St. Clement Dane's or St. Paul's Cathedral. Nearly all the lesser streets than these, even in the prosperous residential districts, are tedious to the European eye. Such space-eating things as gardens are forbidden on this narrow island, so there is nothing that corresponds to our St. John's Wood and Campden Hill, and though the architects do their best to put enough character into the homes to make up for the lack of gardens, it is difficult for any street to achieve character as a whole because of this ghastly system of drawing parallel lines from north to south and intersecting them with other parallel lines drawn from east to west. It is dull work walking among parallelograms. And it must be admitted too that many of the streets are not only monotonous but mean. A surprising deal of New York is like the drearier parts of Camden Town. Some of the main avenues are indescribably gloomy, for they are lined with squalid little shops and made dark and noisy by the elevated railway which runs above the roadway on gaunt iron pillars, and the streets that cross them, as they run towards the "down town" region, are sordid rows of high grim tenements hideous with rickety fire-escapes. The surface of the road is amazing for such a city. I know many forms of real work that are less exhausting than sitting in a taxi that is rodeoing its way across unfashionable New York. Indeed, if one were to judge New York by her exterior one might think her the poorest instead of the richest of capitals.

It is one of the paradoxes of the paradoxical city that she looks poor just because she is so rich. America has got her wealth through the development of private enterprise. She has not like us had a long childhood during which we had to obey the state as a child obeys its mother, if we were to keep

our nation together against the perils of civil war and invasion, and during which we therefore became partially socialized in our outlook. Her pioneers, of course, passed through such a phase, but their descendants are out-numbered by later-comers, and their traditions have little effect on the social mind as a whole. Modern America requires more than anything else the multiplication and consolidation of her industries. The mass of American citizens has no experience and little knowledge of any state of affairs but one in which a citizen best serves the public interest by promoting his private interests. They are therefore individualist to a degree that astonishes the European. One of the results of this is that they really grudge spending much money and attention on anything that is for the public use. There is, for example, nothing in Central Park like the Flower Walk in Kensington Gardens or the parterre round the Achilles Statue in Hyde Park. It is a perfectly good park; it is indeed very beautiful, with its crags and bricks and lakes; I know nothing more lovely than to cross it on a winter's evening, when the lamp posts spill yellow circles on the blue-white snow, and the stars shine dimly from the black mirror of the frozen waters, and the sky-scrapers stand round like vast honeycombs of light. But there is no effort to make the place a good show, to make it a work of art. The American simply could not feel the pride in a public place that makes this sort of thing worth doing.

That it is not due to slackness or want of preference for fine and orderly things, but simply and solely to individualism is proven when one passes from the New York exterior to the New York interior. Amazing contrast! I do not believe that since the world began there have ever been such spotless, shining homes as these, so clean, so comfortable, so full of beautiful and wisely chosen things. Tidy they are to a degree that shames the English housewife. Partly this is due to the strange fact that though servants are much scarcer than they are in England, and demand from double to five times the wages, they do far more work. A house with two servants in America is better kept both as regards the service of meals and the orderliness of the rooms than a house with five in England. The parquet floors are glass-smooth; the curtains are invariably crisp as if they had come that day from the cleaning; the silver and the crystal on the table is brilliant as if it was the sole care of a superbutler, and the linen is fairy-fine; the bedrooms are as decorative and as apparently undisturbed by use as stage bedrooms; and the bathrooms . . . One needs a special style of the Apocalyptic to describe the American bathroom. In extreme cases it turns into a young Turkish bath. I am describing now a middle-class house or apartment, but the working class home as it is seen in the modern tenement and apartment houses has at least the same ideals. Its principal room is probably

rather larger than a hat-box, but the plumbing and fittings are sure to be admirable. To the returned traveler the average English home seems a horrid cave.

And it ought to be noticed that this house is not maintained in its perfection like the French home by any policy of immolation of the female on the altar of domesticity and exclusion of the stranger. The American woman is far less tied to her home than the Englishwoman. She will be out of her house at eleven, not to do the shopping, but to hear some lecture on current affairs or foreign policy; she will stay out all day till half an hour before dinner, and then preside over a dinner party that looks as if she must have spent all day concentrating on its perfection. And her home is constantly flooded by the high tides of her hospitality. She loves to fill it with guests and give them a "gay party." And her hospitality is real. It is not merely a desire for social display, it is a genuine and beautiful desire to give happiness on one's hearth. Strangers who meet one in the train and know nothing of one save that she is a foreigner traveling in a strange land entertain her as lavishly as hostesses who are under the delusion that she is a celebrity. There is one curious difference between American and English hospitality. In England one would suspect that people did not like one if they habitually asked one to parties of over a dozen people; one would think it was a sign that they did not desire any more intimate acquaintance. But an American hostess considers that she is insulting a guest if she does not ask hordes of people to meet her. More than once in New York I have met some one with whom I got on very well, and have subsequently been elated to receive an invitation to tea; and on the day named have set out in my second best hat in the hope of spending an hour in quiet conversation; but have found when I got there that I was "guest of honor" at a tea-party to which over fifty people had been invited. The result is that New York, paradoxical in this as in everything else, is at once the most hospitable of cities, and one of the hardest places in the world to get to know people. There is in the atmosphere a restlessness, a swirling vivacity, which makes the people of New York find pleasure in movement rather than in concentration. When the more stolid Britisher goes to one of these parties she is apt to feel like some one standing on the shore of a lake while a flock of beautiful birds wheel crying around her. The American women, who always look very swift and graceful in motion, because of the slenderness of their wrists and ankles, dart up to one and deliver shrill, sharp, surprising comments, often flattering opinions of one's appearance, which are, if one is honest, much more delightful than embarrassing. If they think you have beautiful eyes, or that you dress well, they will say so; and they will dart away, while others dart up to take their place. This goes on and on, hour after hour, and yet the women never get haggard with



fatigue, just as the men who are with them never seem to want to stop dancing.

This, as all other manifestations of the vitality which is the essence of New York's personality, is entrancing. It is a real and splendid thing. Its uniqueness you will realize when you consider the astonishing fact of the New York dance halls. There are, counting big and little, counting infamous cellars where the chief furniture is moonshine whiskey and palaces of shining floors and marvelous music and cabaret shows, over six hundred of them. They are crammed with people who dance till one, two, three, even four in the morning. Now remember practically all American men go to work and many of the richest women, and that office hours begin an hour to an hour and a half earlier than in England. At some of these dancing halls, and those among the largest and pleasantest, there are only people who are obviously under the necessity of holding down jobs with the carefulness of the thoroughly subordinate. They do not wear evening dress. They will certainly have to be punctual in the morning. Yet they dance to all hours. You will find this vitality among all classes and all races; among the Jews and Central Europeans and Slavs who live by night, after they have done a hard day's work, a complete Continental life such as in their

native countries they would live in the daytime; among the Negroes, who live the most intensely active social life in their suburb of Harlem and who also have to do that only after they have satisfied their exigent employers. And it is a vitality that does not expend itself on pleasure alone. It stretches up its hand and throws effortlessly to the stars these stone buildings that the human mind has not had the vision to conceive nor the power to build until New York stimulated mankind with its magic. It turns the common things of life to unimaginable beauty. Among the loveliest things I have ever seen in my life, comparable to the pillars of the Mosque at Cordova, are certain low towers that are built at intervals all down Fifth Avenue to show the green and red signals that control the traffic. They are cunningly built after a design which would never have occurred to the modern European mind, but which have a strange look of old Rome. They look like the ritual torches of the Republic, symbols of the sacred fire of nationalistic passion. Such things American vitality is always doing. There is no knowing what it will do in the future. I have registered a vow that for the rest of my life I will visit New York at least once every five years.

REBECCA WEST.

## The Dawes Plan and the Peace of Europe

**I**N the discussions of the Dawes plan on this side of the Atlantic, the one factor most entitled to consideration seems to have been the factor most overlooked. This is the point that administration of the plan in accordance with the concept of its framers constitutes a standing threat to the peace of Europe. Without desiring to be sensational, one is driven by the logic of the facts. It is true that we enter an area of non-exact forces; we deal with men and their endurance and motives; but men, like steel, have a breaking point, which, though not capable of precise ascertainment, nevertheless can be gauged within limits. Industry and politics alike have to take account of this breaking point.

The plan contemplates placing the Allied governments virtually in the position of capital creditors of German industry with certain management rights. This is achieved by imposing mortgages upon German industrial property in favor of the reparations account replacing, in substance, the pre-war private mortgages, bonds and obligations, which were wiped out by demonetizing the mark; and by giving the plan agent discretionary powers in assessment of German internal taxes. The return by way of reve-

nue from both of these sources depends on maintaining an efficiency and production power at least equal to that now existing; this in turn requires maintenance of the industrial structure on the present lines. Granted that the present structure were soundly built and humanly satisfactory, the concept would have much to justify it. The facts warrant no such assumption.

Labor stability on the one hand, and capital organization on the other represent the two major factors in industrial production. Both are needed to produce; where, as in Germany, the production must meet bitter foreign competition, notably from England, the highest effectiveness of both must be assured. German industry has been meeting that competition for the past two or three years with such apparent ease that it was perhaps natural for the Dawes plan framers to assume that the efficiency making this possible would continue. In fact, however, the competition was apparent rather than real. The period of inflation made it possible for German industry to produce and compete, not by superior effectiveness and organization, but by dissipating its capital; exchange conditions made it possible to sell