

SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE

August



1931

VOL. XC

NUMBER 2

THIS SUBTLE LAND

By STRUTHERS BURT

Writers about America are accustomed to represent it as a land of dull uniformity—vast monotony of landscape, mass production, standardized population. Struthers Burt repudiates this view, and in this article reveals a land of extraordinary and subtle variety in people and landscape—a land which is developing a consciousness of its own separate identity and an appreciation of its own authentic character. And this view is supported elsewhere in this number by a group of narratives from American life selected in SCRIBNER's contest to which people of many sorts from every section of the country have contributed.

THE old-fashioned, provincial American idea, still prevalent among the less informed, was that size in itself was a virtue. Undoubtedly this arose to some extent from the uneasy feeling that whatever else we might lack, at least we had size. Undoubtedly also it arose to some extent from the smallness of our unbeloved mother country, England, as compared to the generous slice of a continent that belonged to us. But the instinctive feeling that largeness is good represents a certain stage in civilization, what might be called the epic stage. If you have enough land and there are numerous, and increasing, members of your tribe, then you are a fine tribe. Quantity is the *summum bonum*.

As civilization spreads throughout a nation, from the top down, and from

the centre out, quantity, which the intelligent of that nation have always known to be an absurd criterion, is seen by a growing number to be an absurd criterion, but, for the most part, this growing number falls into the opposite error. Quantity, in itself, becomes a vice, scarcity in itself becomes a virtue, and the real object of the investigation, quality, is as much overlooked as ever.

A minimum of thought will enable any one to perceive why most present-day American criticism is what it is. With the exception of a few non-Aryan citizens, such as the Chinese and the Negro, hardly any of whom are critics, most of us mentally are still European, even if a number of us have been away from Europe for two hundred and fifty years. It is a pity that the Chinese and Negroes are not critics, for they have in

their blood certain memories of size and numbers which would permit them to understand the United States better than most. Furthermore, one must bear in mind the critical mood. It is seldom a synthetic mood and is inclined to refer back constantly to well-known standards. Somerset Maugham, in speaking of this critical mood in Henry James, remarks that Henry James "turned his back on one of the great events of the world's history, the rise of the United States, in order to report tittle-tattle at tea parties in English country houses."

It is safe to assume, therefore, that the average critic is unable to understand anything so large as either the roughness or the subtlety of the United States.

The European is trained to think in small units. He cannot help himself. He is born to small units. He is used to ducking in and out of frontiers and getting from one country to another in a few hours. Therefore, just as he is inclined to mistake apparent surface sameness for simplicity, and that simplicity for subsurface dullness, so he mistakes apparent surface differences for individualism and color. He is not alone in this. The half-cultivated American agrees with him. There is nothing so romantic to the half-cultivated as some one saying "Good morning" in a language only partially understood.

The European is inclined to forget that individualism and color are found in a man's mind and not in his clothes or his language. It is the way he wears those clothes and uses that language which counts. I should like to wager that the average American cowboy wears a standardized Stetson and speaks the language common to the United States with considerably more originality than the average European peasant wears his native costume and speaks the language which belongs to him.

At all events, it must be increasingly

obvious to every one that the time has arrived when, most definitely, this country needs a body of real criticism, written by men who, to begin with, appreciate the magnitude and difficulty of their job, and who, to end with, will avoid catch-phrases and actually study, long and bewildering as the task is, their subject. For example, if you say Americans do not love the soil, what are you going to do with the millions of Americans who live on the soil, and the increasing number of Americans who are going back to it the moment they have enough money to do so? If you say Americans—and it is often said—have no love of the leisure of gardens, what are you going to do with the gardens of Virginia, Charleston, New England, the Middle West, New York, Pennsylvania, all over the place, from sea to sea. If you say America is overcrowded, as Count Keyserling says, what are you going to do with the fact that, outside of a few congested centres, it is still one of the loneliest and most sparsely settled countries in the world? If you say that Americans go in for divorce, what are you going to do with the millions of happily married American couples? If you say American women are selfish, what are you going to do with myriad unselfish American women? If you say America is mechanistic, how do you account for the growing interest in all the arts, the increasing number of young Americans who are entering the arts, and the emergence, every year more apparent to the observer, of America as a great—perhaps the greatest—of the artistic nations? In short, how are you going to reconcile the Rocky Mountains and the sand barrens of Cape Hatteras?

The tom-toms and the black and white descriptions of the post-war period were probably necessary, they accomplished a great and needed task—at least, they stirred the blood and sharpened the

eyes—but the necessity for them is over. You can attract a man's attention by exaggeration, but it is qualification that finally convinces him. This country has suddenly become self-conscious, and discriminating, far more so than its critics. It will take a wise critic from now on to impress it to any great extent.

Perhaps the first thing we must learn to do is to define the United States in their own terms. The United States are facts; you just can't argue them away or dismiss them in a few well-chosen sentences, or brush them aside by hatred or contempt. They are implacable phenomena, whatever else you may say about them. And perhaps the next thing we must learn to do, or rather, relearn, is to regard the United States, and speak of them, as they once regarded and spoke of themselves—a condition which has not changed, as the acute observer of the present-day American drama well knows.

II

One should never speak of the United States as it, she or her. That is a bad habit and a psychological, historical and geographical mistake. If you have to use a pronoun, you should always use these, or they.

Let us see; and this is only one instance out of forty-eight. On the 10th of April, 1606, James the First of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, Defender of the Faith, set somewhat vaguely, but with royal generosity, the limits of Virginia. To the London Company he granted the right to colonize the eastern seaboard of the North American continent from latitude 34° to latitude 41°, this territory to run west two hundred miles. In 1609, His Majesty, becoming even more vague and generous, granted a new charter enlarging these boundaries. Virginia was to be all the

land two hundred miles north and two hundred miles south of Point Comfort, and west and northwest from sea to sea.

No king could have been more definite in his indefinite fashion, or have fixed more solemnly the limits within which for all time certain people were to be called Virginians. Back of this solemnity was the Great Seal of England. Had the inhabitants of the middle section of the North American Continent abided by James the First's decision, Virginia to-day would have been Kentucky, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Northern California, West Virginia, and the southern parts of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Nebraska. But the inhabitants of the middle section of the North American Continent did not want to abide by James the First's decision. They wanted to be something else.

Very early in her history, Virginia claimed that both Maryland and Pennsylvania had stolen part of her land, which was rather putting the cart before the horse, because what had really happened was that certain frontiersmen up in the northwest section of Virginia wanted to be Marylanders or Pennsylvanians, instead of Virginians, but these losses were more than compensated for a hundred years later, in 1776, by the formal addition of what is now the State of Kentucky to Fincastle County, Virginia. Fincastle County, already large, became larger. Kentucky has 40,598 square miles, although even at that, it ranks in this respect only thirty-sixth among the States and is, for instance, less than half the size of the State of Wyoming, which consists of 97,914 square miles. Just why any one should ever have thought that the lean, hard, bitter Long-Knives who crossed the mountains and cleared the eastern ranges and the great central limestone plateau of Kentucky of trees and Indi-

ans, would have been content to be under the domination of the urbane planters of the Virginia littoral, or even the fairly gentle farmers of the Virginia hinterland, is a puzzle. In 1792, Kentucky, with frontier insolence, asserted it was no part or parcel of Virginia and set itself up as a separate State.

Kentucky became a State with a trace of the acrid frontier blood in it, and so it remains to-day, although later, in its central portion, it developed an aristocracy as urbane as that of Virginia itself, and as gay, if a trifle more reckless. Virginia and most of the other original thirteen States, save perhaps up at the tip of New England, never had this smoky, acrid frontier quality. In their western counties, perhaps, but not as a whole. They were settled in a period when gentlemen, or solid merchants, or religious fugitives expected to live as gentlemen, or solid merchants, or religious fugitives, wherever they were. They were settled as Englishmen settle a land, not as, later on, Americans settled America. Here, just as in nature, and for very natural yet subtle reasons, were the elements of a nation shaping themselves, with all their self-perpetuating differences within a common whole.

Kentucky separated itself from Virginia in 1792, but this was nothing compared to the truncation that occurred in 1861. In that year forty counties of the sovereign Commonwealth of Virginia, commonwealth, mind you, not a mere State, and there are only four commonwealths in this country—Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Virginia—although just exactly what that means I have never been able to discover, met in convention at Wheeling, then Virginia, now West Virginia, and declared their part of the State separate forever. For two hundred and fifty-five years that country had been Virginia, now it was no longer Virginia. These

deserting sons of Virginia celebrated their desertion by sending 32,000 troops to the Northern Army. In short, it was a rebellion within a rebellion. But one famous West Virginian escaped to remain always a Virginian, and that was "Stonewall" Jackson.

Once again a divorce had happened. What the king had joined together, let no one put asunder. But it had been put asunder, and the only wonder is that the divorce had not happened before. Between the Virginians to the east of the mountains and the Virginians over the mountains, there had never been much but mutual contempt. They were different breeds, their environment was different, they were forced to meet different problems.

Like the original Kentuckians, the Virginians over the mountains were mostly Scotch-Irish, who had begun to push down from Pennsylvania around 1732 along the backbone of the Appalachian Range, followed by some placid, not-to-be-denied Pennsylvania Germans, plodding along like intent crows behind men sowing grain. The Scotch-Irish were a dour, cantankerous, individualistic, rawboned, silently imaginative people, and so they are to-day whether you find them in Pittsburgh, Wheeling, or the Pacific Sea Islands. They pushed down all along the mountains of the South; through Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia, into Alabama, touching Kentucky and Tennessee to the east; driving an alien wedge straight through a hostile country. South Carolina was barely touched because South Carolina's western frontier ends abruptly, and that is one reason, out of many, why, during the Civil War, South Carolina was so whole-heartedly Confederate.

If Virginia can be called "the mother of presidents," Pennsylvania can be called "the mother of dissension." For some odd reason, rebels are constantly being

born in Pennsylvania, although they seldom remain there.

These mountaineers were not Southerners and never became Southerners. They were mountaineers. In their Scotch-Irish blood had been mountains for generations. Mist on a hill was more to them than all the fat valleys in the world. To-day they are Republicans, Unionists and believers in the devil; they make corn whiskey, and if they can't make it any other place, they make it in a church, which is also a Scotch-Irish trick. Furthermore, they still speak Elizabethan English. They had no slaves, their small mountain farms did not need them. Nowadays in western North Carolina you will see comparatively few Negroes. Even in central North Carolina, as soon as a hill appears, Negroes disappear. Just a few years ago—this may still be true, so far as I know—there were counties in western North Carolina which were dangerous for a Negro to enter. The Negro was the symbol of all the mountaineers hated; the symbol of their neighbors to the east. These neighbors were mostly of English descent, that is to say, they were in Virginia, with a small admixture of Huguenot and German Palatinate blood, and along the seacoast especially, and also in the rich central valleys, they were slave-owners. Even admitting a thirty per cent, or larger, discount in the glittering ante-bellum tradition that has come down to us, these people were lordly, aristocratic and leisurely.

To these same Scotch-Irish, or pure Scotch, the expansion of the American frontier was largely due. Only the Scotch-Irish and the pure Scotch were able to meet the Indian on his own terms; indeed, often they taught the Indian a trick or two. When General St. Clair of the British army raided central New York during the Revolution, the American government had to offer

a special reward for "blue-eyed Indians" because the Tory Scotch stripped and painted themselves in order the more artistically and comfortably to take scalps.

During the Civil War, North Carolina, one of the most loath of the Southern States to secede, when it did secede sent more troops to the Southern army than its fire-eating neighbor South Carolina, and more troops to the Northern army than Rhode Island. And it was North Carolina which broke the backbone of the Confederacy after three years of magnificent fighting. The North Carolinians decided that it was "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight" and deserted by regiments, going up into the sympathetic mountains, where they told their former comrades to "come and get them." A great deal of all this was due to the fact that North Carolina was largely, and still is, a Scotch-Irish or pure Scotch State; Scotch-Irish in the mountains, pure Scotch in the centre and elsewhere, save for a narrow strip of big, slave-owning plantations along Albemarle Sound and further south at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. The Scotch, as always, were sturdy, individualistic crofters, that is to say, small farmers. The last battle ever fought with claymores was fought on North Carolina soil between opposing Scotchmen during the War of the Revolution. Flora MacDonald's house—the Flora of Bonnie Prince Charlie—is still standing where she lived for a number of years after Culloden, and on the golf course near the North Carolinian town of Southern Pines there is a little hill where early in the eighteenth century Scotch Presbyterians and Scotch Highlander Catholics fought a pretty, Scotch fight.

And yet we speak of the South as "the South," and the West as "the West," and the North as "the North," and the

East as "the East," just as for many years the West Virginians spoke of themselves as Virginians.

There is nothing more odd, or more colorful, than to trace the way in which our States have become States and remained States, fiercely and persistently.

To the connoisseur of American history and the American present it is amazing the manner in which State boundary lines, often in the beginning arbitrary and even adventitious, and becoming more arbitrary as we moved westward to the newer States, have produced forty-eight separate principalities, different in their traditions, in their attitudes toward the present, in their plans for the future, in the characters of their inhabitants, and even in the way these inhabitants speak the language common to the country. What, for instance, save you be the ordinary and therefore careless traveller, could be more different than the States of North Carolina and South Carolina, than the States of Arizona and New Mexico, Wyoming and Idaho, California and Oregon? I commend the investigation to those interested. Once having been surveyed, a State begins to function like the human body, that is, from the heart out, and the heart of a State, concentrated in its capital, is composed of the varying interests of that State, acted upon by the character of the citizens of the State who, in their turn, as is the case with all men, have been conditioned by the particular blood that is in them and by the scenery in which they live.

A State settled in the beginning mostly by Scotchmen will never be like a State settled in the beginning mostly by Englishmen, or Irishmen, or Germans or Swedes. With all the quick communication and highways in the world, and any number of overlapping mutual interests, Minnesota will never be like Wisconsin, Maine will never be like

Rhode Island, Delaware like Maryland, Iowa like Nebraska, Kansas like Missouri. Kansas was deliberately settled for political reasons with fanatics from New England and the South. Well, look at Kansas. A mountain State cannot be like a plains State. Men are greatly made by the horizon which confronts them daily.

The citizens of a great city, which spreads out into suburbs and adjacent small towns like a destroying fungus, are likely to lose sight of this individualism of the States. To them the country is likely to seem rather drearily the same as their city. Also, even if they travel, and most of them don't, they keep to trunk highways, and so the country remains to them drearily the same as their city. The error is in their mental eyesight, not the country. The country is not like their city.

Upper New Jersey is like New York City, and so is western Connecticut; that is because New York, like all great cities, spreads out like a fungus, but most of Connecticut and most of New Jersey aren't in the least like New York City. Southern New Jersey is one of the loneliest sections of the United States. And even New York State is not in the least like New York City, although both Mayor Walker and an Adirondack guide are New Yorkers. And even if western Connecticut and upper New Jersey are like New York City, isn't New York City itself a fairly individualistic place with strong characteristics? Tell some New Yorker it isn't, and see what happens.

One does not, perhaps, go as far as an enthusiastic friend of mine who claims that the States are so different that even at night in a motor-car you can instantly tell a State line by the smells—trees and other things—on one side of it and the smells on the other. I think my friend's nostrils are helped decidedly by the dif-

ferences in paving that exist between the various States, but the more one sees of this country, the more one is impressed by the fundamental and not-to-be-changed localized variety of its people. Neither highways nor motor-cars nor any amount of surface standardization will ever change this variety. The reports of surface standardization have been greatly exaggerated, anyhow, and its peak has now been passed. Different towns and States are beginning to realize the value and pleasure of being themselves. Even in government the concentration of power in federal hands, which began under Roosevelt, is waning before the growing alarm and restlessness of the States and their people. There is every sign that before long we will be again somewhere near to what nature and the founders of this country intended us to be. This concentration of government in federal hands was for a while a good thing, it made us nationally self-conscious and a great nation; it broke down sectionalism and ignorance; in short, it created that nation known as America, building up a new common interest; but it did not make the United States "it," "she" or "her." They have remained "they," and now they want to be they once more, this time for good. Our official title, if you remember, is The United States of America. If you wish to generalize, say, America; if you wish to be discriminating, and therefore more closely approach the truth, say the United States.

Not very long ago the literature of the United States was in the hands of the folk-lorists; people who claimed a section of the country as their own and wrote books about it. We had the New England School, the Southern School, the Far-Southern School, the Middle-Western School, the Far-Western School, the California School, the Tennessee Mountain School, and so on,

even the Indianapolis and New Orleans Schools. This literature flourished and was perhaps the first authentically American writing that had ever been done. It had its faults, but it also had its virtues, and it was no more egregiously wrong than what might be called the low-tide malarial school which followed, or the hearty-guffawing-at-the-moron school, from which we are now just recovering.

There has never been to my knowledge a cowboy, and I've known lots of them, quite like *The Virginian*, so pure, so lovely, and so noble, to paraphrase the old German song; but nonetheless the book, "*The Virginian*," captured a dusty, sun-shot Far-Western humor, the incredible exhilaration and glamour of distant snow peaks, that is the Far-West and will always be. I don't suppose there was ever a Southerner just like Colonel Carter of Cartersville, but Colonel Carter gave us a hint of magnolia-scented creek bottoms at night in the spring and of old houses covered with yellow jasmine, that was America and still is America.

One has only to regard the extraordinary political differences which spring up between the States every four years to have some sense of their different textures. Why is Pennsylvania so corrupt and contented; why is New York, despite its corruption, a fairly gallant and imaginative State? Why is Montana wet and its western neighbor, Idaho, dry? Why is Wisconsin advanced and Illinois reactionary? Why is Maryland honest and governed largely by fine men with traditions; Virginia, too; while Indiana, until recently, was governed by the Ku-Klux-Klan? Why did Alabama permit Senator Heflin for so long, and South Carolina, Cole Blease? Cole Blease and Heflin sat in the same chamber as Bingham and Walcott of Connecticut, and Bruce and Tydings of Maryland, and

Kendrick of Wyoming, and Gerry of Rhode Island, and Wadsworth of New York, and Norris of Nebraska, to mention only a few of the upright and courageous men who represent us, or have represented us.

Turning to the most taciturn of our States, not for nothing are Vermont's principal industries the quarrying of granite and marble. A Vermont delegate to the last Republican National Convention told me that the only people who knew exactly what our ex-President meant when he said he "didn't choose to run," were the members of his own tiny delegation. They had known from the beginning. That was Vermont's way of saying no. Even the other New Englanders were confused. Vermont possesses the devastating silences and the dislike of direct statement of its famous son. There is the Vermont story of the tourist who stopped his car to ask a resident the name of the next town only to be met with the reply, "What business is that of ours?" and the equally famous Maine story of the Downeaster who was fishing by an open drawbridge when he saw the local blind man approaching. "By gum!" he said to himself, "if somebody doesn't tell that fellow the bridge is open, he'll fall in." A little while later he said again, to himself, "By gum! if somebody doesn't tell that fellow the bridge is open, he'll fall in." There was a longer pause, and then he nodded and said—for the third time to himself, "By gum! He has fallen in."

These things are not fairy stories, they are the folk-lore of a country, and folk-lore is like the humus that builds itself up in a forest. There is always the surface of new and drifting leaves, and grass, and twigs, but underneath is the accumulation of years turned into the soil itself, and some of the new and drifting leaves will become part of that soil

as well. Countries underneath do not change greatly. The Vermonter is still taciturn, while, in New Mexico, wailing and beating themselves at Easter-time, are flagellants, the only ones in the world. It is not wise to think because so many people wear President suspenders that they are all Republicans. There are just as many magnolias as ever in the South, new cowboys are being born every day in the Far-West, and Vermont still quarries granite.

The United States are, in truth, a great bundle of different-colored skeins, held together, but loosely and absent-mindedly, by a city called Washington. A city that is less like America than any city on the continent. New York is far more typical of certain American aspects. And yet Washington, in a strange way, is America epitomized; a certain leisureliness in haste; a certain determination to bring order out of the initial inevitable disorder of a great sprawling land, most of which has only recently been settled; a certain desire to combine those apparently incompatible desires—cohesiveness and a fierce individualism. We elect our senators to make laws for the whole land, but punish them if for a moment they forget the States from which they come. To end with, Washington is the slowly evolving national dream of beauty, a dream which many think we do not possess, but which we know is, in reality, the impelling motive of our lives, much as we may scoff at it in public or even pretend to ourselves it is no part of us.

In their new-found sophistication, the actual meaning of which word most of them apparently do not yet know, our intellectuals and their admirers, discovering . . . bless their simple souls . . . that size in itself is not a virtue, have done harm to and misinterpreted perhaps the most essential tradition of American life. One cannot altogether

blame them, for this tradition, during the periods when mere size was considered a virtue, inflated itself with a perfection that was almost as foolish as the present lack of belief. And yet, without this tradition the American is not his essential self, and certainly without taking this tradition into consideration you cannot even begin to understand the American.

III

Probably nothing in the American national consciousness has been of more importance than our sense of the frontier, nor has there been any other strain of tradition that has so shaped our character both for good and for ill. To our sense of the frontier is due both our initiative and our lawlessness, our kindness and our sudden outbursts of cruelty. At the back of the mind of practically every American of any long standing, whether the thought ever reach consciousness or not, is this sense of the frontier; as history—that is to say, as a fact, as an epic, as a saga; and the sense of the frontier as a present refuge. For such is the size of this country, and such our present mood, that the frontier, which we all thought was vanishing, will probably here and there throughout the continent be preserved forever. We are now taking steps not to lose our frontier. As a matter of fact, conditions are such that the frontier, spotted but in large areas, would have remained anyhow. Nature has taught us a good deal and the day of exploitation is almost over.

To the American the conquest of his frontier is what the epics of the heroes were to the Greeks, the tales of the founders to the Romans, Charlemagne and Roland and Bayard to the French, Alfred and the Black Prince and Elizabeth to the English. These things represent

an epitome of the national character, and this epitome is a comfort in times of stress and a balance wheel of pride in moments of discouragement. And it is well that the image be not too seriously impaired. When a nation finds all its history absurd and belittling, then the nation itself has become little. Particularly—and this is more important than anything else—it was through the frontier that the American achieved his predominant characteristic, the imperturbable belief that everything is possible. It is the figure of the frontiersman that preserves this belief in his mind, even if he has never in all his life, to his knowledge, given a thought to the frontiersman.

Possibly (as the European claims, although Europe has a strange way of contradicting itself, as in the case of Fascism and Communism, and the new-party ideas of the English idealists), this belief is a childish one and will disappear with greater maturity, but if it does, then the world will have lost another ultimate hope. The belief that man can eventually really conquer his environment, politically, socially and materially, is the one actual benefit Columbus conferred upon humanity by discovering the western continents. When it goes, if it does, and one must hope bitterly that it will not, then all Columbus will have done will have been to have discovered another Europe. What distinguishes the American from the European, and, until recently, before the personnel of our immigration began to fall off, the European who came to America from the European who stayed at home, is this belief that man is largely master of his fate.

Certainly one of the most important social problems to-day in the United States, if not the most important social problem, is whether the old American idea of the frontier will be able to con-

quer and absorb the mass of undigested immigration in our larger cities; people with utterly alien loyalties, treasons, virtues and vices. No two figures are more dissimilar than those of the ancient badman of the frontier and the present-day gunman of the cities. And certainly the closing of the era of free land has had a most marked effect on American life.

To those who, like myself, have seen the frontier, and there are thousands of Americans who have done so, although few of them seem to live in New York, the attitude of the critics and historians is amusing. Whatever else may be said of it, the frontier was, and still is, where it exists, filled with gusto and glamour; and a sense of gusto and glamour, even if it is only of the past, would not harm present-day America. Life without some gusto and glamour is a dull affair. Untrue as are the more romantic pictures of the West, they are no more untrue than are the dreary chained-to-the-soil books with which, recently, we have been deluged. Perhaps they are less untrue, for they give us at least some sense of youth, strength and high-heartedness. The frontier was a land of quick laughter and quick delight, and this, despite all the horror, the sordidness, the long stretches of blinding toil, the failures and the unmarked graves. If to-day a man wishes for deep rib-racking laughter, based on the cosmic humor of things; also if he wishes for deep, almost perilous delight, of dawns, dusks, mountains, rivers and things in general, the only places I know where he can get these are in certain remote sections of our Far-West. It is obvious that, for the most part, the men and women who followed the frontier were adventurous, and they found themselves in an environment unalterably adventurous and dramatic. It is still dramatic and adventurous—the air, the scenery, the physical features. It is amazing how few Ameri-

cans realize these facts. Even the birds of prey who followed in the wake of the trapper, the teamster, the railwayman and the cattleman, were adventurous. The frontier harlot was an adventurous harlot, and the frontier gambler an adventurous gambler. Both had that little spark of glamour and gusto that prevented them from dying in the gutter near to lamp-posts and sewers.

We should regard our pioneers as the English regard their Drakes, their Hawkinses and their Raleighs. Our period of frontier expansion was our Elizabethan period; it was drunken, lecherous, gusty, high-hearted, mirthful and, when it had to be, quiet, deadly and far-seeing. In the beginning even Kansas was drunken and lecherous. Drink and lusty women have been part of every frontier. It is only when mortgages come in that the missionaries get much hold.

Here is an epic rôle of figures that cannot be denied, and many of these figures still persist, and from time to time, as in the case of the forester and the national-park ranger, they are added to: trapper, immigrant, soldier, prospector, cattleman, sheepman, homesteader, forester, ranger. Of these only the original type of trapper, the immigrant, the soldier, and—to a great extent—the homesteader, have disappeared. Trappers, however, there are still aplenty and prospectors, too, and the latter will now again come to the fore as wages fall and the dollar rises. There are few Western rivers in which a man cannot pan at least a dollar and a half a day. Imagine, too, this vast territory as it was and as great sections of it are to-day. Imagine James Bridger or Christopher Carson standing on the summit of the Continental Divide, and all around them for hundreds of miles great forested mountain ranges coming toward them like immense, crashing breakers. And yet, for all this sense of sound, an utter silence under

the high blue sky. Not a whisper except perhaps a small wind in the firs.

Or imagine endless deserts, or plains with the blue mountains in the distance.

Physically it is impossible for millions of Americans ever to see these things—for the majority of Americans, perhaps; but how any American can pretend to assay his country without at least imaginatively taking them into account, without imaginatively brooding upon them, is beyond me. To me they symbolize the sense of the frontier which is at the centre of the American character—that nostalgia for loneliness, which afflicts most of us, even the most crowded and socially inclined; that strange lift and passionate reception of loneliness with which most of us greet loneliness when we have the chance to see it; that feeling that beyond the horizon there is always something better. This sense of the frontier is in our blood. We are the children of those who felt it. How can we avoid it?

The motion pictures have taken to depicting James Bridger and his confrères as drunk, disorderly and stained with tobacco juice. Well, at least, they are allowed to retain gusto and glamour of a certain kind. James Bridger was a rough and ready sort of fellow, although, on the other hand, Kit Carson was quiet and deeply religious. Perhaps that's why we see so little of him in the motion pictures. But here is a story of Jim Bridger which is touching and throws further light on the frontier. At the age of forty, Bridger, being unable to read or write, heard that a man named Shakespeare had written great poetry. For many weeks he camped beside the Oregon Trail and questioned the emigrants. They assured him that the rumor was correct. Finally, he found one family which had a set of Shakespeare and were willing to sell it. Bridger purchased the set and then hired a boy at forty dollars

a month—an immense wage in those days—to read right through from the beginning to the end. There's a picture for you—a camp-fire and a boy reading Shakespeare to Jim Bridger. And it's an essentially American picture; the desire to read Shakespeare, the desire to sit by a camp-fire.

I remember my surprise while reading "The Ordeal of Mark Twain" by that extraordinarily fine critic, Van Wyck Brooks, to discover his hatred and fear of the frontier. And then I realized that here was a case of pathetic fallacy and that the critic was reading into the mind of the frontiersman what he himself would have felt. But the real frontiersman is a separate breed, and the glamour and gusto that he found, or finds, is not the gusto and glamour that would appeal, let us say, to a Whistler. Aldous Huxley, for example, would have hated Drake. Yet, nonetheless, had Whistler had more of the unconscious American sense of the frontier in him he would have been a greater painter, and certainly Aldous Huxley is no Shakespeare. Transmuted, this sense of the frontier, this delight in and curiosity about life, this almost childish preoccupation with life's horizons, is what makes great art. It made the Golden Period of the Greeks, the Renaissance and Elizabethan England.

IV

Equally silly, except for the amateur of history or as a mere exercise in virtuosity, and closely connected with the present deprecation of the frontier, is the present eagerness to black-wash the great. This, however, is not an American trick; it is taking place all over the world.

Undoubtedly hero-worship, of a nation, of a period, of a man, undiluted is an evil. The stature of perfection encourages despair. What makes us love Saint

Francis of Assisi is that to begin with he was so little of a saint. But that is different from attempting to give us the essential Saint Francis only in the terms of his riotous youth. It may be that I would prefer that George Washington in his old age had not liked to pinch young ladies in the church at Alexandria and it may be that I might prefer that Lincoln had not been something of a neurotic—as we all are—although to prefer these things would indicate that I was something of an absurd perfectionist. But what have these side lights of character to do with the quintessence of the men in question; the quintessence which is part of a national tradition and which makes that tradition fine or meagre? This quintessence is about all that the ordinary citizen has time to gather. And if the ordinary citizen is not a fool, he is aware that all people, no matter how great, are still human beings. Washington was certainly not pinching young women at Valley Forge, and Lincoln was not neurotic in his conduct of the Civil War. Nor was Hamilton any the less a great financier because he indulged in a scandalous affair with a married lady in Philadelphia.

Washington stands—or should stand—in the American consciousness for steadfastness; Hamilton for financial wisdom and a lucid patriotism; Lincoln for compassion. Even our most sophisticated would not be harmed by the admixture of some steadfastness, financial wisdom, lucid patriotism and compassion.

There is a letter in the possession of a Southern lady written her by a friend whose brother, a Confederate guerrilla, but only eighteen years old, had been captured and condemned to death. Lincoln granted her an interview, and in the letter is this sentence: "And when I saw him all fear went out of me." I think that is a thrilling sentence, consid-

ering that fear is the major evil of life. A man who can exorcise mortal fear by his mere presence, if only once, is among the great. Lincoln did it many times.

At all events, in that vast and subtle, and most difficult and complicated task, the proper evaluation of the United States and the building up of a rational school of criticism concerning them, which now confronts the American critic, and the American historian, and the ordinary intelligent citizen, one thing is certain, the American, a chastened and wiser and, at last, a fairly cosmopolitan creature, must once again regard himself as the most western of the Occidentals. Something apart spiritually, if not apart otherwise. He cannot remain a homunculus of Europe as he is to-day. He must turn his back on the Atlantic and—for good or ill—face the sunset. And, indeed, that is the essence of real cosmopolitanism and culture—a knowledge of all things and a bitter, critical, yet constructive pride in your own. Whether the American is aware of this task or not, and no matter how much he may wish to evade it, it is just around the corner.

But even when the American is well into this first great task of understanding his country, he will have another great task before him. Nor is this putting the cart before the horse. America is so large that it is necessary to understand it before you can love it—at least, love it intelligently.

It is more difficult to love a great land than a small one, and yet a man or a woman who has no love of land is but a half-creature. I do not mean patriotism as generally understood. For that I have the necessary contempt. I mean a quiet, abiding, clear-sighted passion for your own, through good or evil, with a full knowledge of faults or virtues, such as a wise, mature man has for a woman. At

the beginning of such a passion is the ability to regard America—the country—as a separate entity apart from whatever certain fools, or rascals, may, at the time, be doing to her. It is this feeling which reduces the supply and the power of fools. And when you have this feeling you would no more think of dishonoring or desecrating your country than you would think of throwing mud on the skirt of your wife. Part of this feeling consists in getting back to the naked body of the country, is compounded of a love of American sights, sounds, smells, and horizons, even if the last are nowadays too often littered with ugliness. But it is also through this feeling that this transitory ugliness will one day pass.

However, large as America is, it is possible to bring to her the same passion that we see bestowed upon smaller lands. America is one of the best “nuggeted” countries, to use a gold mining expression, in existence. Even if your mind is as yet not trained to abide any but small units, so varied is the pattern of the United States, both socially

and geographically, that somewhere you can find whatever you want that will please you, or content you, or delight you. And even if you are so situated that you cannot go to these places, you can at least admit that they exist. The Englishman chained to Birmingham doesn't deny Devonshire. But, if you are an American, you will be wiser if you try at once to understand as well the large stretches, social, geographical, and political, that lie between the American nuggets. To a modern mind trained in distance and masses, trained by the motor-car, by sound waves, and airplanes, many of these have their own rare beauty, while even with the most barren and ugly there is always an immense excitement to be discovered both in their present and in what may happen to them.

Love, as we all know, is provincial, while understanding and sympathy are universal. If the American will try to understand America, he will then be in a position to love clear-sightedly some part of that entirely different web of color, the United States.

“Life in the United States”—the narratives selected for publication from which the prize winners will be chosen in SCRIBNER'S \$1,500 contest—begins on page 133. This month the selections tell the story of a Kansas childhood; a Tennessee youngster who joined the Marines, went to naval prison and while there educated himself; an Oklahoma race riot; and a North Carolina hotel, which if it were somewhere in Europe would appear in the guide books, written by a travelling salesman. Next month—“He-Rain” (New Mexico), by Holger Cahill and “Red Cross and County Agent” (Kentucky), by Edmund Wilson. Others to come: “Diving for Abalones” (California), “Fragments from Alluvia” (Louisiana), “The Saga of Joe Magarac: Steelman” (Pennsylvania).

“Three Ghosts of America,” by André Maurois—the United States as seen through the eyes of the distinguished French writer—will be a leading feature in the September SCRIBNER'S. Articles to come: “The Civilization of American Cities,” by R. L. Duffus, “Standardized America vs. Romantic South Seas,” by Margaret Mead.



By Harriet Plimpton

Unseen

Six times split with the axe of childbirth
To satisfy a man
Who knew but one light only, the full moon of desire,
Now she was a gibe for boys, -
Waddling like a sow.
To her sons she was all things—
Food, warmth, desire to learn,
And the power and will to attain.
She taught them work was more than any tide
And how to be was to become.
She never failed when they had need,
Knowing the powers of each one to endure
And seeing that they stood that much alone,
Except for her expectancy of what they could become.
They did not disappoint her, nor themselves,
But taught and preached and cured
Till men called their name great.
Waddling here and there about her house,
She walked triumphant where they were.

Hardness

I HAVE seen them, men and women,
Standing the things they had to—
Cold, heat, the failure of sun and rain,
And the walls about those they loved,
I have seen them standing the things they had to,
And growing harder, like iron drawn from the forge.
I have seen how men turn from them
To those who are soft as April after the winds go down.
But I say to you who pass by them, seeking a fleece for yourselves,
Theirs is the way of trumpets ringing across the hills,
Theirs is the way of stars on glittering winter nights,
Theirs is the way of men who have lasted down to to-day.