

The Balance of Trade in Impressions

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FOR some years past a rising tide of lecturers and literary men from England has washed upon the shores of our North American continent. The purpose of each one of them is to make a new discovery of America. They come over to us traveling in great simplicity, and they return in the ducal suite of the *Aquitania*. They carry away with them their impressions of America, and when they reach England they sell them. This export of impressions has now been going on so long that the balance of trade in impressions is all disturbed. There is no doubt that the Americans and Canadians have been too generous in this matter of giving away impressions. We emit them with the careless ease of a glowworm, and like the glowworm ask for nothing in return.

But this irregular and one-sided traffic has now assumed such great proportions that we are compelled to ask whether it is right to allow these people to carry away from us impressions of the very highest commercial value without giving us any pecuniary compensation whatever. British lecturers have been known to land in New York, pass the customs, drive uptown in a closed taxi, and then forward to England *from the closed taxi itself* ten dollars' worth of impressions of American national character. I have myself seen an English literary man — the biggest, I be-

lieve: he had at least the appearance of it — sit in the corridor of a fashionable New York hotel and look gloomily into his hat, and then *from his very hat* produce an estimate of the genius of America at twenty cents a word. The nice question as to whose twenty cents that was never seems to have occurred to him.

I am not writing in the faintest spirit of jealousy. I quite admit the extraordinary ability that is involved in this peculiar susceptibility to impressions. I have estimated that some of these English visitors have been able to receive impressions at the rate of four to the second; in fact, they seem to get them every time they see twenty cents. But without jealousy or complaint, I do feel that somehow these impressions are inadequate and fail to depict us as we really are.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Here are some of the impressions of New York, gathered from visitors' discoveries of America and reproduced not perhaps word for word but as closely as I can remember them. "New York," writes one, "nestling at the foot of the Hudson, gave me an impression of coziness, of tiny graciousness: in short, of weeness." But compare this — "New York," according to another discoverer of America, "gave me an impression of size, of vastness; there seemed to be a

bigness about it not found in smaller places." A third visitor writes, "New York struck me as hard, cruel, almost inhuman." This, I think, was because his taxi driver had charged him three dollars. "The first thing that struck me in New York," writes another, "was the Statue of Liberty." But, after all, that was only natural: it was the first thing that could reach him . . .

In the course of time a very considerable public feeling was aroused in the United States and Canada over this state of affairs. The lack of reciprocity in it seemed unfair. It was felt (or at least I felt) that the time had come when someone ought to go over and take some impressions off England. The choice of such a person (my choice) fell upon myself. By an arrangement with the Geographical Society of America, acting in conjunction with the Royal Geographical Society of England (to both of whom I communicated my proposal), I went at my own expense.

It is scarcely feasible to give here full details in regard to my outfit and equipment, though I hope to do so in a later and more extended account of my expedition. Suffice it to say that my outfit, which was modeled on the equipment of English lecturers in America, included a complete suit of clothes, a dress shirt for lecturing in, a fountain pen, and a silk hat. The dress shirt, I may say for the benefit of other travelers, proved invaluable. The silk hat, however, is no longer used in England except perhaps for scrambling eggs in.

I pass over the details of my pleasant voyage from New York to Liverpool. During the last fifty years so many travelers have made the voyage across the Atlantic that it is now impossible to obtain any impressions from the ocean of the slightest commercial value. My readers will recall the fact that Washington Irving, as far back as a century ago, chronicled the pleasure that one felt during an Atlantic voyage in idle

daydreams while lying prone upon the bowsprit and watching the dolphins leaping in the crystalline foam. Since his time so many gifted writers have attempted to do the same thing that on the large Atlantic liners the bowsprit has been removed, or at any rate a notice put up: "Authors are requested not to lie prostrate on the bowsprit." But even without this advantage, three or four generations of writers have chronicled with great minuteness their sensations during the transit. I need only say that my sensations were just as good as theirs. I will content myself with chronicling the fact that during the voyage we passed two dolphins, one whale and one iceberg (none of them moving very fast at the time), and that on the fourth day out the sea was so rough that the captain said that in forty years he had never seen such weather. One of the steerage passengers, we were told, was actually washed over board: I think it was over board that he was washed, but it may have been on board the ship itself.

I pass over also the incidents of my landing in Liverpool, except perhaps to comment upon the extraordinary behavior of the English customs officials. Without wishing in any way to disturb international relations, one cannot help noticing the rough and inquisitorial methods of the English customs men as compared with the gentle and affectionate ways of the American officials at New York. The two trunks that I brought with me were dragged brutally into an open shed, the strap of one of them was rudely unbuckled, while the lid of the other was actually lifted at least four inches. The trunks were then roughly scrawled with chalk, the lids slammed to, and that was all. Not one of the officials seemed to care to look at my things or to have the politeness to pretend to want to. I had arranged my dress suit and my pajamas so as to make as effective a display as possible: a

New York customs officer would have been delighted with it. Here they simply passed it over. "Do open this trunk," I asked one of the officials, "and see my pajamas." "I don't think it is necessary, sir," the man answered. There was a coldness about it that cut me to the quick.

But bad as is the conduct of the English customs men, the immigration officials are even worse. I could not help being struck by the dreadful carelessness with which people are admitted into England. There are, it is true, a group of officials said to be in charge of immigration, but they know nothing of the discriminating care exercised on the other side of the Atlantic.

"Do you want to know," I asked one of them, "whether I am a polygamist?"

"No, sir," he said very quietly.

"Would you like me to tell you whether I am fundamentally opposed to any and every system of government?"

The man seemed mystified. "No, sir," he said. "I don't know that I would."

"Don't you care?" I asked.

"Well, not particularly, sir," he answered.

I was determined to arouse him from his lethargy.

"Let me tell you, then," I said, "that I am an anarchistic polygamist, that I am opposed to all forms of government, that I object to any kind of revealed religion, that I regard the state and property and marriage as the mere tyranny of the bourgeoisie, and that I want to see class hatred carried to the point where it forces everyone into brotherly love. Now, do I get in?"

The official looked puzzled for a minute. "You are not Irish, are you, sir?" he said.

"No."

"Then I think you can come in all right," he answered.

The journey from Liverpool to London, like all other English journeys, is short. This is due to the fact that Eng-

land is a small country: it contains only 50,000 square miles, whereas the United States, as everyone knows, contains three and a half billion. I mentioned this fact to an English fellow passenger on the train, together with a provisional estimate of the American corn crop for 1922: but he only drew his rug about his knees . . . and sank into a state resembling death. I contented myself with jotting down an impression of incivility and paid no further attention to my fellow traveler other than to read the labels on his luggage and to peruse the headings of his newspaper by peeping over his shoulder.

It was my first experience of traveling with a fellow passenger in a compartment of an English train, and I admit now that I was as yet ignorant of the proper method of conduct. Later on I became fully conversant with the rule of travel as understood in England. I should have known, of course, that I must on no account speak to the man. But I should have let down the window a little bit in such a way as to make a strong draft on his ear. Had this failed to break down his reserve I should have placed a heavy valise in the rack over his head so balanced that it might fall on him at any moment. Failing this again, I could have blown rings of smoke at him or stepped on his feet under the pretence of looking out of the window. Under the English rule as long as he bears this in silence you are not supposed to know him. In fact, he is not supposed to be there. You and he each presume the other to be a mere piece of empty space. But let him once be driven to say, "Oh, I beg your pardon, I wonder if you would mind my closing the window," and he is lost. After that you are entitled to tell him anything about the corn crop that you care to.

But in the present case I knew nothing of this, and after three hours of charming silence I found myself in London.

Before setting down my impressions of the great English metropolis — a phrase which I have thought out as a designation for London — I think it proper to offer an initial apology. I find that I receive impressions with great difficulty and have nothing of that easy facility in picking them up which is shown by British writers on America. I remember Hugh Walpole telling me that he could hardly walk down Broadway without getting at least three dollars' worth and on Fifth Avenue five dollars' worth; and I recollect that St. John Ervine came up to my house in Montreal, drank a cup of tea, borrowed some tobacco, and got away with sixty dollars' worth of impressions of Canadian life and character.

For this kind of thing I have only a despairing admiration. I can get an impression if I am given time and can think about it beforehand. But it requires thought . . .

London, the name of which is already known to millions of readers of this book, is beautifully situated on the river Thames, which here sweeps in a wide curve with much the same breadth and majesty as the St. Jo River at South Bend, Indiana. London, like South Bend itself, is a city of clean streets and admirable sidewalks, and has an excellent water supply. One is at once struck by the number of excellent and well appointed motorcars that one sees on every hand, the neatness of the shops, and the cleanliness and cheerfulness of the faces of the people. In short, as an English visitor said of Peterborough, Ontario, there is a distinct note of optimism in the air. I forget who it was who said this, but at any rate I have been in Peterborough myself and I have seen it.

Contrary to my expectations and contrary to all our transatlantic precedents, I was *not* met at the depot by one of the leading citizens, himself a member of the Municipal Council, driving his own

motorcar. He did *not* tuck a fur rug about my knees, present me with a really excellent cigar, and proceed to drive me about the town so as to show me the leading points of interest, the municipal reservoir, the gas works, and the municipal abattoir. In fact he was not there. But I attribute his absence not to any lack of hospitality but merely to a certain reserve in the English character. They are as yet unused to the arrival of lecturers. When they get to be more accustomed to their coming, they will learn to take them straight to the municipal abattoir just as we do.

For lack of better guidance, therefore, I had to form my impressions of London by myself. In the mere physical sense there is much to attract the eye. The city is able to boast of many handsome public buildings and offices which compare favorably with anything on the other side of the Atlantic. On the bank of the Thames itself rises the power house of the Westminster Electric Supply Corporation, a handsome modern edifice in the later Japanese style. Close by are the commodious premises of the Imperial Tobacco Company, while at no great distance the Chelsea Gas Works add a striking feature of rotundity . . . Passing eastward toward the heart of the city, one notes on the left hand the imposing pile of St. Paul's, an enormous church with a round dome on the top, suggesting strongly the first Church of Christ (Scientist) on Euclid Avenue, Cleveland. But the English churches not being labeled, the visitor is often at a loss to distinguish them.

A little further on one finds oneself in the heart of financial London . . . This particular part of London is connected with the existence of that strange and mysterious thing called "the City." I am still unable to decide whether the City is a person, or a place, or a thing. But as a form of being I give it credit for being the most emotional, the most

volatile, the most peculiar creature in the world. You read in the morning paper that the City is "deeply depressed." At noon it is reported that the City is "buoyant" and by four o'clock that the City is "wildly excited."

I have tried in vain to find the causes of these peculiar changes of feeling. The ostensible reasons, as given in the newspaper, are so trivial as to be hardly worthy of belief. For example, here is the kind of news that comes out from the City. "The news that a *modus vivendi* has been signed between the Sultan of Kowfat and the Shriek-ul-Islam has caused a sudden buoyancy in the City. Steel rails which had been depressed all morning reacted immediately while American mules rose up sharply to par." . . . "Despatches from Bombay say that the Shah of Persia yesterday handed a golden slipper to the Grand Vizier Feebli Pasha as a sign that he might go and chase himself: the news was at once followed by a drop in oil, and a rapid attempt to liquidate everything that is fluid . . ."

But these mysteries of the City I do not pretend to explain. I have passed through the place dozens of times and never noticed anything particular in the way of depression or buoyancy, or falling oil, or rising rails. But no doubt it is there . . .

No description of London would be complete without a reference, however brief, to the singular salubrity and charm of the London climate. This is seen at its best during the autumn and winter months. The climate of London and indeed of England generally is due to the influence of the Gulf Stream. The way it works is thus: The Gulf Stream, as it nears the shores of the British Isles and feels the propinquity

of Ireland, rises into the air, turns into soup, and comes down on London. At times the soup is thin and is in fact little more than a mist: at other times it has the consistency of a thick Potage St. Germain. London people are a little sensitive on the point and flatter their atmosphere by calling it a fog: but it is not: it is soup. The notion that no sunlight ever gets through and that in the London winter people never see *the sun* is of course a ridiculous error, circulated no doubt by the jealousy of foreign nations. I have myself seen the sun plainly visible in London, without the aid of glasses, on a November day in broad daylight; and again one night about four o'clock in the afternoon I saw the sun distinctly appear through the clouds. The whole subject of daylight in the London winter is, however, one which belongs rather to the technique of astronomy than to a book of description. In practice daylight is but little used. Electric lights are burned all the time in all houses, buildings, railway stations, and clubs. This practice which is now universally observed is called Daylight Saving.

But the distinction between day and night during the London winter is still quite obvious to anyone of an observant mind. It is indicated by various signs such as the striking of clocks, the tolling of bells, the closing of saloons, and the raising of taxi rates. It is much less easy to distinguish the technical approach of night in the other cities of England that lie outside the confines, physical and intellectual, of London and live in a continuous gloom. In such places as the great manufacturing cities, Buggingham-under-Smoke, or Gloomsbury-on-Ooze, night may be said to be perpetual.