CHAPTER CXVI

THE UNIFORMITY OF AMERICAN LIFE

To the pleasantness of American life there is one, and perhaps only one, serious drawback — its uniformity. Those who have been struck by the size of America, and by what they have heard of its restless excitement, may be surprised at the word. They would have guessed that an unquiet changefulness and turmoil were the disagreeables to be feared. But uniformity, which the European visitor begins to note when he has travelled for a month or two, is the feature of the country which Englishmen who have lived long there, and Americans who are familiar with Europe, most frequently revert to when asked to say what is the "crook in their lot."

It is felt in many ways. I will name a few.

It is felt in the aspects of nature. All the natural features of the United States are on a larger scale than those of Europe. The four chief mountain chains are each of them longer than the Alps.[1] Of the gigantic rivers and of those inland seas we call the Great Lakes one need not speak. The centre of the continent is occupied by a plain larger than the western half of Europe. In the Mississippi valley, from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Superior, there is nothing deserving to be called a hill, though, as one moves westward from the great river, long soft undulations in the boundless prairie begin to appear. Through vast stretches of country one finds the same physical character maintained with little change — the same strata, the same vegetation, a generally similar climate. From the point where you leave the Alleghanies at Pittsburg, until after crossing the Missouri, you approach the still untilled prairie of the West,

[1] The Alleghanies, continued in the Green and White Mountains, the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevada, continued in the Cascade Range, and the Coast Range which borders the Pacific.

a railway run of some thousand miles, there is a uniformity of landscape greater than could be found along any one hundred miles of railway run in Western Europe. Everywhere the same nearly flat country, over which you cannot see far, because you are little raised above it, the same fields and crops, the same rough wooden fences, the same thickets of the same bushes along the stream edges, with here and there a bit of old forest; the same solitary farmhouses and straggling wood-built villages. And when one has passed beyond the fields and farmhouses, there is an even more unvaried stretch of slightly rolling prairie, smooth and bare, till after five hundred miles the blue line of the Rocky Mountains rises upon the western horizon.

There are some extraordinary natural phenomena, such as Niagara, the Yellowstone Geysers, and the great cañon of the Colorado River, which Europe cannot equal. But taking the country as a whole, and remembering that it is a continent, it is not more rich in picturesque beauty than the much smaller western half of Europe. The long Alleghany range contains a good deal of pretty scenery and a few really romantic spots, but hardly anything so charming as the best bits of Scotland or Southern Ireland, or the English Lake country. The Rocky Mountains are pierced by some splendid gorges, such as the famous cañon of the Arkansas River above South Pueblo, and show some very grand prospects, such as that over the Great Salt Lake from the Mormon capital. But neither the Rocky Mountains, with their dependent ranges, nor the Sierra Nevada, can be compared for variety of grandeur and beauty with the Alps; for although each chain nearly equals the Alps in height, and covers a greater area, they have little snow, no glaciers,[1] and a singular uniformity of character. One finds, I think, less variety in the whole chain of the Rockies than in the comparatively short Pyrenees. There are, indeed, in the whole United States very few quite first-rate pieces of mountain scenery rivalling the best of the Old World. The most impressive are two or three of the deep valleys of the Sierra Nevada (of which the Yosemite is the best known), and the superb line of extinct volcanoes, bearing snow-fields and

[1] There are a few inconsiderable glaciers in the northernmost part of the Rocky Mountains, and a small one on Mount Shasta.

glaciers, which one sees, rising out of vast and sombre forests, from the banks of the Columbia River and the shores of Puget Sound.[1] So the Atlantic coast, though there are charming bits between Newport and the New Brunswick frontier, cannot vie with the coasts of Scotland, Ireland, or Norway; while southward from New York to Florida it is everywhere flat and often dreary. In the United States people take journeys proportionate to the size of the country. A family thinks nothing of going twelve hundred miles, from St. Louis to Cape May (near Philadelphia), for a seaside holiday. But even journeys of twelve hundred miles do not give an American so much change of scene and variety of surroundings as a Parisian has when he goes to Nice, or a Berliner to Berchtesgaden. The man who lives in the section of America which seems destined to contain the largest population, I mean the States on the Upper Mississippi, lives in the midst of a plain wider than the plains of Russia, and must travel hundreds of miles to escape from its monotony.

When we turn from the aspects of nature to the cities of men, the uniformity is even more remarkable. With eight or nine exceptions to be mentioned presently, American cities differ from one another only herein, that some of them are built more with brick than with wood, and others more with wood than with brick. In all else they are alike, both great and small. In all the same wide streets, crossing at right angles, ill-paved, but planted along the sidewalks with maple-trees whose autumnal scarlet surpasses the brilliance of any European foliage.[2] In all the same shops, arranged on the

[1] I have been obliged by want of space to omit the chapters which were intended to describe the scenery of the United States and conjecture its probable future influence on the character of the people.

Nothing is further from my mind than to attempt to disparage the scenery of the Great West, which contains, from the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific, many very striking and impressive points. I only say that they are less beautiful than the Alps, just as the mountains of Asia Minor, even when equal or superior in height, are less beautiful, and largely for the same reason. They are much drier, and have therefore fewer streams and less variety and wealth of vegetation, the upper zone of the Sierra Nevada excepted; and the Rockies, as they run north and south, present less of a contrast between their two sides than do the northern and southern declivities of the Alps or the Caucasus.

[2] In the newer cities one set of parallel streets is named by numbers, the others, which cross them at right angles, are in some instances, as in New York, called avenues, and so numbered. In Washington the avenues are called after States, and of the two sets of streets (which the avenues cross obliquely), one is called by numbers, the other by the letters of the alphabet.

same plan, the same Chinese laundries, with Li Kow visible through the window, the same ice-cream stores, the same large hotels with seedy men hovering about in the cheerless entrance-hall, the same street cars passing to and fro with passengers clinging to the door-step, the same locomotives ringing their great bells as they clank slowly down the middle of the street. I admit that in external aspect there is a sad monotony in the larger towns of England also. Compare English cities with Italian cities, and most of the former seem like one another, incapable of being, so to speak, individualized as you individualize a man with a definite character and aspect unlike that of other men. Take the Lancashire towns, for instance, large and prosperous places. You cannot individualize Bolton or Wigan, Oldham or Bury, except by trying to remember that Bury is slightly less rough than Oldham, and Wigan a thought more grimy than Bolton. But in Italy every city has its character, its memories, its life and achievements wrought into the pillars of its churches and the towers that stand along its ramparts. Siena is not like Perugia, nor Perugia like Orvieto; Ravenna, Rimini, Pesaro, Fano, Ancona, Osimo, standing along the same coast within seventy miles of one another, have each of them a character, a sentiment, what one may call an idiosyncrasy, which comes vividly back to us at the mention of its name. Now, what English towns are to Italian, that American towns are to English. They are in some ways pleasanter; they are cleaner, there is less poverty, less squalor, less darkness. But their monotony haunts one like a nightmare. Even the irksomeness of finding the streets named by numbers becomes insufferable. It is doubtless convenient to know by the number how far up the city the particular street is. But you cannot give any sort of character to Twenty-ninth Street, for the name refuses to lend itself to any association. There is something wearisomely hard and bare in such a system.

I return joyfully to the exceptions. Boston has a character of her own, with her beautiful Common, her smooth environing waters, her Beacon Hill crowned by the gilded dome of the

State House, and Bunker Hill, bearing the monument of the famous fight. New York, besides a magnificent position, has in the grandeur of the buildings and the tremendous rush of men and vehicles along the streets as much the air of a great capital as London itself. Chicago, with her enormous size and the splendid warehouses that line her endless thoroughfares, now covered by a dense smoke pall, leaves a strong though not wholly agreeable impression. Richmond has a quaint old-world look which dwells in the memory; few cities have a sea front equal in beauty to the lake front of Cleveland. Washington, with its wide and beautifully graded avenues, and the glittering white of the stately Capitol, has become within the last twenty years a singularly handsome city. Charleston has the air of an English town of last century, though lapped in a far richer vegetation, and with the shining softness of summer seas spread out before it. And New Orleans — or rather the Creole quarter of New Orleans, for the rest of the city is commonplace — is delicious, suggesting old France and Spain, yet a France and Spain strangely transmuted in this new clime. I have seen nothing in America more picturesque than the Rue Royale, with its houses of all heights, often built round a courtyard, where a magnolia or an orange-tree stands in the middle, and wooden external staircases lead up to wooden galleries, the house fronts painted of all colours, and carrying double rows of balconies decorated with pretty ironwork, the whole standing languid and still in the warm soft air, and touched with the subtle fragrance of decay. Here in New Orleans the streets and public buildings, and specially the old City Hall, with the arms of Spain still upon it, speak of history. One feels, in stepping across Canal Street from the Creole quarter to the business parts of the town, that one steps from an old nationality to a new one, that this city must have had vicissitudes, that it represents something, and that something one of the great events of history, the surrender of the northern half of the New World by the Romano-Celtic races to the Teutonic. Quebec, and to a less degree Montreal, fifteen hundred miles away, tell the same tale; Santa Fé in New Mexico repeats it.

It is the absence in nearly all the American cities of anything that speaks of the past that makes their external aspect so unsuggestive. In pacing their busy streets and admiring their handsome city halls and churches, one's heart sinks at the feeling that nothing historically interesting ever has happened here, perhaps ever will happen. In many an English town, however ugly with its smoke and its new suburbs, one sees at least an ancient church, one can discover some fragments of a castle or a city wall. Even Wigan and Northampton have ancient churches, though Northampton lately allowed the North-western Railway to destroy the last traces of the castle where Henry II. issued his Assize. But in America hardly any public building is associated with anything more interesting than a big party convention; and, nowadays, even the big conventions are held in temporary structures, whose materials are sold when the politicians have dispersed. Nowhere, perhaps, does this sense of the absolute novelty of all things strike one so strongly as in San Francisco. Few cities in the world can vie with her either in the beauty or in the natural advantages of her situation; indeed, there are only three places in Europe — Constantinople, Corinth, and Gibraltar — that combine an equally perfect landscape with what may be called an equally imperial position. Before you there is the magnificent bay, with its far-stretching arms and rocky isles, and beyond it the faint line of the Sierra Nevada, cutting the clear air like mother-of-pearl; behind there is the roll of the ocean; to the left, the majestic gateway between mountains through which ships bear in commerce from the farthest shores of the Pacific; to the right, valleys rich with corn and wine, sweeping away to the southern horizon. The city itself is full of bold hills, rising steeply from the deep water. The air is keen, dry, and bright, like the air of Greece, and the waters not less blue. Perhaps it is this air and light, recalling the cities of the Mediterranean, that make one involuntarily look up to the top of these hills for the feudal castle, or the ruins of the Acropolis, which one thinks must crown them. I found myself so looking all the time I remained in the city. But on none of these heights is there anything more interesting, anything more vocal to the student of the past, than the sumptuous villas of the magnates of the Central Pacific Railway, who have chosen a hill-top to display their wealth to the city, but have erected houses like all other houses, only larger. San

Francisco has had a good deal of history in her fifty years of life; but this history does not, like that of Greece or Italy, write itself in stone, or even in wood.

Of the uniformity of political institutions over the whole United States I have spoken already. Everywhere the same system of State governments, everywhere the same municipal governments, and almost uniformly bad or good in proportion to the greater or smaller population of the city; the same party machinery organized on the same methods, "run" by the same wirepullers and "workers." In rural local government there are some diversities in the names, areas, and functions of the different bodies, yet differences slight in comparison with the points of likeness. The schools are practically identical in organization, in the subjects taught, in the methods of teaching, though the administration of them is as completely decentralized as can be imagined, even the State commissioner having no right to do more than suggest or report. So it is with the charitable institutions, with the libraries, the lecture-courses, the public amusements. All these are more abundant and better of their kind in the richer and more cultivated parts of the country, generally better in the North Atlantic than in the inland States, and in the West than in the South. But they are the same in type everywhere. It is the same with social habits and usages. There are still some differences between the South and the North; and in the Eastern cities the upper class is more Europeanized in its code of etiquette and its ways of daily life. But even these variations tend to disappear. Eastern customs begin to permeate the West, beginning with the richer families; the South is more like the North than it was before the war. Travel where you will, you feel that what you have found in one place that you will find in another. The thing which hath been, will be: you can no more escape from it than you can quit the land to live in the sea.

Last of all we come to man himself — to man and to woman, not less important than man. The ideas of men and women, their fundamental beliefs and their superficial tastes, their methods of thinking and their fashions of talking, are what most concern their fellow-men; and if there be variety and freshness in these, the uniformity of nature and the monotony

of cities signify but little. If I observe that in these respects also the similarity of type over the country is surprising, I shall be asked whether I am not making the old mistake of the man who fancied all Chinese were like one another, because, noticing the dress and the pigtail, he did not notice minor differences of feature. A scholar is apt to think that all business men write the same hand, and a business man thinks the same of all scholars. Perhaps Americans think all Englishmen alike. And I may also be asked with whom I am comparing the Americans. With Europe as a whole? If so, is it not absurd to expect that the differences between different sections in one people should be as marked as those between different peoples? The United States are larger than Europe, but Europe has many races and many languages, among whom contrasts far broader must be expected than between one people, even if it stretches over a continent.

It is most clearly not with Europe, but with each of the leading European peoples that we must compare the people of America. So comparing them with the peoples of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, one discovers more varieties between individuals in these European peoples than one finds in America. Scotchmen and Irishmen are more unlike Englishmen, the native of Normandy more unlike the native of Provence, the Pomeranian more unlike the Wurtemberger, the Piedmontese more unlike the Neapolitan, the Basque more unlike the Andalusian, than the American from any part of the country is to the American from any other. Differences of course there are between the human type as developed in different regions of the country, — differences moral and intellectual as well as physical. You can generally tell a Southerner by his look as well as by his speech, and the South, as a whole, has a character of its own, propagated from the older Atlantic to the newer Western States. A native of Maine will probably differ from a native of Kentucky, a Georgian from an Oregonian. But these differences strike even an American observer much as the difference between a Yorkshireman and a Warwickshire man strikes the English, and is slighter than the contrast between a middle-class southern Englishman and a middle-class Scotchman, slighter than the differences between a peasant from Northumberland and a peasant

from Dorsetshire. Or, to take another way of putting it: If at some great gathering of a political party from all parts of the United Kingdom you were to go round and talk to, say, one hundred, taken at random, of the persons present, you would be struck by more diversity between the notions and tastes and mental habits of the individuals comprising that one hundred than if you tried the same experiment with a hundred Americans of similar education and position, similarly gathered in a convention from every State in the Union.

I do not in the least mean that people are more commonplace in America than in England, or that the Americans are less ideal than the English. Neither of these statements would be true. On the contrary, the average American is more alive to new ideas, more easily touched through his imagination or his emotions, than the average Englishman or Frenchman. He has a keen sense of humour, and an unquenchable faith in the future. I mean only that the native-born Americans appear to vary less, in fundamentals, from what may be called the dominant American type than Englishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, or Italians do from any type which could be taken as the dominant type in any of those nations. Or, to put the same thing differently, it is rather more difficult to take any assemblage of attributes in any of these European countries and call it the national type than it is to do the like in the United States.

These are not given as the impressions of a traveller. Such impressions, being necessarily hasty, and founded on a comparatively narrow observation, would deserve little confidence. They sum up the conclusions of Europeans long resident in America, and familiar with different parts of the country. They are, I think, admitted by the most acute Americans themselves. I have often heard the latter dilate on what seems to them the one crowning merit of life in Europe — the variety it affords, the opportunities it gives of easy and complete changes of scene and environment. The pleasure which an American finds in crossing the Atlantic, a pleasure more intense than any which the European enjoys, is that of passing from a land of happy monotony into regions where everything is redolent with memories of the past, and derives from the past no less than from the present a wealth and a subtle complexity of interest which no new country can possess.

Life in America is in most ways pleasanter, easier, simpler than in Europe; it floats in a sense of happiness like that of a radiant summer morning. But life in any of the great European centres is capable of an intensity, a richness blended of many elements, which has not yet been reached in America. There are more problems in Europe calling for solution; there is more passion in the struggles that rage round them; the past more frequently kindles the present with a glow of imaginative light. In whichever country of Europe one dwells, one feels that the other countries are near, that the fortunes of their peoples are bound up with the fortunes of one's own, that ideas are shooting to and fro between them. The web of history woven day by day all over Europe is vast and of many colours: it is fateful to every European. But in America it is only the philosopher who can feel that it will ultimately be fateful to Americans also; to the ordinary man the Old World seems far off, severed by a dissociating ocean, its mighty burden with little meaning for him.

Those who have observed the uniformity I have been attempting to describe have commonly set it down, as Europeans do most American phenomena, to what they call Democracy. Democratic government has in reality not much to do with it, except in so far as such a government helps to induce that deference of individuals to the mass which strengthens a dominant type, whether of ideas, of institutions, or of manners. More must be ascribed to the equality of material conditions, still more general than in Europe, to the fact that nearly every one is engaged either in agriculture, or in commerce, or in some handicraft, to the extraordinary mobility of the population, which, in migrating from one part of the country to another, brings the characteristics of each part into the others, to the diffusion of education, to the cheapness of literature and universal habit of reading, which enable every one to know what every one else is thinking, but above all, to the newness of the country, and the fact that four-fifths of it have been made all at a stroke, and therefore all of a piece, as compared with the slow growth by which European countries have developed. Newness is the cause of uniformity, not merely in the external aspect of cities, villages, farmhouses, but in other things also, for the institutions and social habits

which belonged a century ago to a group of small communities on the Atlantic coast, have been suddenly extended over an immense area, each band of settlers naturally seeking to retain its customs, and to plant in the new soil shoots from which trees like those of the old home might spring up. The variety of European countries is due, not only to the fact that their race-elements have not yet become thoroughly commingled, but also that many old institutions have survived among the new ones; as in a city that grows but slowly, old buildings are not cleared away to make room for others more suited to modern commerce, but are allowed to stand, sometimes empty and unused, sometimes half adapted to new purposes. This scarcely happens in America. Doubtless many American institutions are old, and were old before they were carried across the Atlantic. But they have generally received a new dress, which, in adapting them to the needs of to-day, conceals their ancient character; and the form in which they have been diffused or reproduced in the different States of the Union is in all those States practically identical.

In each of the great European countries the diversity of primeval and mediæval times, when endless varieties of race, speech, and faith existed within the space of a few hundred miles, has been more or less preserved by segregative influences. In America a small race, of the same speech and faith, has spread itself out over a vast area, and has hitherto been strong enough to impose its own type, not only on the Dutch and other early settlers of the Middle States, but on the immigrant masses who began to arrive in the middle of this century.

There are now in America more Irish people, and children of Irish people, than there are in Ireland; while large tracts in the country and some of the cities are in speech rather German than American, so much so that public documents are issued in both tongues.[1] Yet neither the Celtic nor the Teutonic incomers have substantially affected the national character and habits, though the latter may be credited with much of the growing taste for music and the drama, as well

[1] In the presidential contest of 1892 "campaign documents" were published by the Democratic National Committee in German, French, Italian, Swedish, Norse, Polish, Dutch, Welsh, and Hebrew; and newspapers were distributed printed in Czech, Hungarian, and Spanish.

as with the progress of latitudinarianism in religion. Whether the host of immigrants who have recently arrived, and in particular, the backward races from Central Europe whom the last fifteen years have brought, will be as easily absorbed, and whether they will, in the process, injure the absorbing organism — these are questions which must remain unanswered for at least another generation. So far as our present data enable a prediction to be made, they point to the permanent predominence of the native type, though possibly with some slight modifications.

May one, then, expect that when novelty has worn off, and America counts her life by centuries instead of by decades, variety will develop itself, and such complexities, or diversities, or incongruities (whichever one is to call them) as European countries present, be deeper and more numerous?

As regards the outside of things, this seems unlikely. Many of the small towns of to-day will grow into large towns, a few of the large towns into great cities, but as they grow, they will not become less like one another. There will be larger theatres and hotels, more churches (in spite of secularist lecturers) and handsomer ones; but what is to make the theatres and churches of one city differ from those of another? Fashion and the immense facilities of intercourse tend to wear down even such diversities in the style of building or furnishing, or in modes of locomotion, or in amusements and forms of social intercourse, as now exist.

As regards ideas and the inner life of men, the question is a more difficult one. At present there are only two parts of the country where one looks to meet with the well-marked individualities I refer to. One of these is New England, where the spirit of Puritanism, expressed in new literary forms by Emerson and his associates, did produce a peculiar type of thinking and discoursing, which has now, however, almost died out; and where one still meets, especially among the cultivated classes, a larger number than elsewhere of persons who have thought and studied for themselves, and are unlike their fellows.[1] The other part of the country is the

[1] The old-fashioned Puritan farmer has, however, almost vanished from Massachusetts; when he went West, attracted by the greater richness of the soil, Irishmen came in his place.

Far West, where the wild life led by pioneers in exploration, or ranching, or gold-mining has produced a number of striking figures, men of extraordinary self-reliance, with a curious mixture of geniality and reckless hardihood, no less indifferent to their own lives than to the lives of others. Of preserving this latter type there is, alas, little hope; the swift march of civilization will have expunged it in thirty years more.

When one sees millions of people thinking the same thoughts and reading the same books, and perceives that as the multitude grows, its influence becomes always stronger, it is hard to imagine how new points of repulsion and contrast are to arise, new diversities of sentiment and doctrine to be developed. Nevertheless there is reason to believe that as the intellectual proficiency and speculative play of mind which are now confined to a comparatively small class become more generally diffused, as the pressure of effort towards material success is relaxed, as the number of men devoted to science, art, and learning increases, so will the dominance of what may be called the business mind decline, and with a richer variety of knowledge, tastes, and pursuits, there will come also a larger crop of marked individualities, and of divergent intellectual types.

Time will take away some of the monotony which comes from the absence of historical associations: for even if, as is to be hoped, there comes no war to make battlefields famous like those of thirty years ago, yet literature and the lives of famous men cannot but attach to many spots associations to which the blue of distance will at last give a romantic interest. No people could be more ready than are the Americans to cherish such associations. Their country has a short past, but they willingly revere and preserve all the memories the past has bequeathed to them.

CHAPTER CXVII

THE TEMPER OF THE WEST

Western America is one of the most interesting subjects of study the modern world has seen. There has been nothing in the past resembling its growth, and probably there will be nothing in the future. A vast territory, wonderfully rich in natural resources of many kinds; a temperate and healthy climate, fit for European labour; a soil generally, and in many places marvellously, fertile; in some regions mountains full of minerals, in others trackless forests where every tree is over two hundred feet high; and the whole of this virtually unoccupied territory thrown open to an energetic race, with all the appliances and contrivances of modern science at its command, — these are phenomena absolutely without precedent in history, and which cannot recur elsewhere, because our planet contains no such other favoured tract of country.

The Spaniards and Portuguese settled in tropical countries, which soon enervated them. They carried with them the poison of slavery; their colonists were separated, some by long land journeys, and all by still longer voyages from the centres of civilization. But the railway and the telegraph follow the Western American. The Greeks of the sixth and seventh centuries before Christ, who planted themselves all round the coasts of the Mediterranean, had always enemies, and often powerful enemies, to overcome before they could found even their trading-stations on the coast, much less occupy the lands of the interior. In Western America the presence of the Indians has done no more than give a touch of romance or a spice of danger to the exploration of some regions, such as Western Dakota and Arizona, while over the rest of the country the unhappy aborigines have slunk silently away, scarcely even complaining of the robbery of lands and the violation of