

My Impressions of America

By COUNT ILYA TOLSTOY

IN the course of my lecture tour throughout the United States I have met many interviewers. Ninety-nine per cent. of them asked me, as a first question, "What do you think of America?"

Now that I have spent five consecutive months in this country, and have seen California and the whole breadth of the land between there and New York, I may perhaps risk a few general observations on my impressions. I beg my readers not to be offended if any of my remarks are not altogether flattering. They should credit me with genuine gratitude for their welcome, and believe that my thoughts are imbued with the deepest sympathy for the people of this great democracy.

When we tried to give a reasonable answer, I found that both my brother and I were misquoted. I receive letters which criticize my replies. These replies may be misunderstood because of the difficulty to find in English the exact shade of words. That is why I wish to take this opportunity to speak at leisure and clearly. We are all agreed that constructive criticism is always worth while, and that it is the only one permissible between friends. I can therefore trust that my remarks will be taken in the same spirit that I am making them.

I am speaking of the country as a whole, trying to take in at one glance the chief characteristics of the nation, to take in both the qualities and the faults. I am also speaking as a Russian who belongs to a nation that is very old in comparison with the United States of America, but very young in democratic life.

In order to gain a better hearing, I shall begin with the qualities. The first thing that strikes a Russian observer in the United States is the activity of the people. This activity is often due to the urgent desire to make a living. I mean not only

the need to earn the necessities of life, but also the veneration which is felt here for money. That has made of America one of the most productive nations of the world. The technic and the ease with which the people make use of its power are truly astounding. The impression made on the foreigner is that there are no insurmountable obstacles. They will build with equal facility edifices of sixty stories, railroad bridges in places where the very idea of building a bridge seems impossible, electric railroads, automobiles of different makes by the hundred thousand, and all types of machinery, from the smallest in size to the most huge. This development of industrial machinery, together with the great wealth of the land and the vast natural resources, tend to enlarge the external life of the country toward incalculable limits.

But we should not forget that all these natural gifts, and a high standard of living or civilization, are not the aims of life. They are only arms in the hands of man. It is not enough to be armed. One should know why one takes up the arms. To amass millions is not enough; we should know why we do it. Money is an arm that sometimes proves more dangerous than high explosives. Frankly, does a man gather millions in order to spoil his child with toys, each of which costs more than a whole family needs to live on for many years?

Arms should only be intrusted to hands that can wield them, and that can wield them to a good effect; otherwise the strength and power thereof will be turned back on those who hold them. They act like a boomerang. In this consists America's greatest peril.

Roughly speaking, I may say that the level of the cultural development of the American people does not correspond to

the height of the lofty buildings that I have admired here.

I can well praise the number of schools which America possesses. I can praise the elementary schools, the high schools, and the universities. All these institutions are large, broad, well established, richly endowed. The Government and private persons rival one another in their constant attention to these means of education. This combination of institutions tends to bring the standard of instruction to a good average. In the whole land there are few Americans who lack elementary education. But—

Here I begin to fear that I am offending some of my friends; yet I promised myself to speak my mind in all candor. This average education of which I spoke, and as shown by the quality and the sum of information gathered by students, is very low. This is a fact the people should know; they should be told the truth. A young man who leaves the high school must know that he is only then ready to begin his education. One who leaves the university should realize that there are in the world many other universities where the standard of science is much higher.

One of the advantages of industry is to bring out in large quantities standardized products. Millions of pieces are turned out all on the same pattern. I have an impression that America standardizes not only her industrial output, but also the school training of her young men and girls. They are all educated in the same way. All are molded exactly alike; all are trained on the same model.

Now, individuality is the wealth of forms with which we are endowed at birth. Individuality is like the innumerable rays that emanate from the splendor of God. Therefore this individuality is the most precious treasure of mankind.

I am not referring to America alone,—the life of the whole world levels men down to a common pattern,—but in America the result is more apparent than anywhere else. That is the most striking impression I am carrying back with me to Russia. I cannot say that there are no

exceptions; there are many of them. But a man must be gifted with a very strong personality in order to avoid this disastrous common leveling which prevails here, and is unavoidably linked with the standardization of life.

I sometimes think that it is I who perhaps err, and that I may be on the wrong path, while America is right. It may be that the cause lies in the fact that I belong to another race, imbued with another culture. The outlook on life is altogether different in America and in Russia. The pulse of external life does not run so fast in my country. Therefore man has more time to ponder at leisure over the more vital points of human life. Again, if his mind does not work in the same channels as those of his fellow-men, he survives, nevertheless, and can pursue his own life. Here he would perish, buried under the mass of average thought. That is why, in Russia, we can remain original and enjoy our own point of view. Our outlook, our tastes, may differ. The originality of our Eastern race springs out, forces itself upon the world in our art, our music, our monuments, our literature. Thus is mankind benefited.

I do not want to speak without advancing proofs. In my country, as in the other parts of Europe, nobody need have any difficulty in finding book-stores in small towns or in large cities. Here one can find a cigar-store, a drug-store, all kinds of shops where luxuries can be purchased, but the seeking of a book-shop is often a very hard quest. Even in New York it is hard to find a real book-store where the attendants know their authors and can help one select the books that one needs on any subject. There are *some*, but none too many. They can be counted on the fingers of one's hands. In smaller cities the task of finding books is a hopeless one. There are a few stores where books are sold; but what books? Novels mostly, the average ephemeral romance; magazines with too many ill-conceived articles containing little upbuilding criticism of public life, much ill-digested information; and newspapers which afford little of in-

tellectual value, being mostly mediums of advertising. American literature is yet poor. The good magazines are few when compared with European reviews. The inheritance of mankind, the universal literature, is hardly known here. There are translations in sets, richly bound, but cheaply produced, and too often done by hack writers who do not even understand what they translate. They are bad translations, as a rule, but costly. Poor people are not able to buy them.

Even in Russia, in the country which Americans think uncivilized, we have translations of all the world's great writers. These editions are appropriate to the means of the people. They can be bought for prices from one to five cents. It is the same in England. The result is that the people read only newspapers and magazines. In Russia, for the same price, we can build a library of great books. The best works of Pushkin, Dickens, Shakspeare, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Tolstoy, Heine, Victor Hugo, and countless others are at the disposal of the poorest.

These are the two different paths on which the two nations proceed in the building up of their culture. The future will show which gives the happier results. True freedom means the freedom of the soul, liberty of conscience, the liberty of forming independent opinion—a liberty which is built not upon laws, but upon the foundations of life itself. It is not an outward freedom; it is an inner prerogative. Again I can make a comparison with Russia. There, even under the late autocratic régime, I felt freer than here in my inner life. In Russia I had to face only the question whether an act was allowed by the police or not, but I could speak my mind aloud without any diffidence about my neighbor's own views. Here this is not the case. In America public opinion can cause more suffering to a man than the most arbitrary police. The most dangerous thing in America is to go against the tide of public opinion. Whatever a man's social position, he must swim with the current or inevitably perish. Try, for instance, to speak against the

women's movement. Nothing will bring a swifter retribution than public opposition to this stormy movement. I have no wish to do it myself. I would leave beforehand to women all fields of activity they may care to enter. If a woman desires to show her great talent as a writer, I am prepared to hand over my fountain-pen to her with much pleasure. Let her write; I am only too willing to retire. Does she want to become an artist? Here are my paints and brushes. Does she want to shine in science? I am in favor of having every door in the whole wide world open to her—museums, hospitals, libraries, or laboratories. Politics, jurisprudence, let them take it all, if they feel themselves able to tread those paths.

But let me warn them that they will have to think less of dresses, dancing, and trivial amusements. Sometimes it does happen even in America that a woman will bear children. Young children must be brought up. They are apt to remind one of that necessity. They represent the future generation of humanity. It seems to me difficult to make these opposed activities fit in with one another.¹

But if any woman considers she has enough force, talent, and time to be successful in all those fields, they are hers so far as I am concerned. I would gladly change place, transform myself into one of those drones whom the bees turn out of the hive when they have served their purpose by the fecundation of their queen. It can be seen that I am not attacking feminism. I am prepared to grant women

¹ Count Tolstoy has obviously misunderstood the feminist movement in this country. In Russia the intellectual women, though a small class, have long since possessed a freedom of thought, a wide influence socially and politically, even a place in industry that has not needed the vote to establish. The count's implication that in America most women would be inclined to go in for politics at the expense of the future generation is not borne out by the facts. In this country women require the vote, which they are getting in one State after another, largely because public opinion accepts nothing without a familiar label, as the count himself points out, and the vote is the label that will authenticate and thereby release these mighty social forces which are needed to equilibrate our lopsided development. Such women as are inclined to follow politics as a profession may not be best fitted to be mothers, just as certain professions seem to unfit men to be satisfactory fathers.—THE EDITOR.

everything they seek or desire, including my admiration and my love.

But I was dealing with the subject of slavery before public opinion. That is one of the serious dangers of the United States. It is so serious that it darkens the very idea of liberty. The second yoke is the reign of King Dollar in this country. The slavery from which America suffers under this rule is no less serious. There is great danger that this country may become an oligarchy ruled by a few capitalists.

The same capitalism which I consider is endangering the liberty of the people contributes, of course, to the standardization of trade. This may be no evil in itself, but it contributes to the standardization of the lives of the people. The sameness, the lack of originality and local color throughout the land and from sea to sea, is truly striking. Not only do you find everywhere the same few brands of cigarettes, for instance; but you cannot find, or you can find only with great difficulty, the variety of brands that is obviously needed. Yet it is evident that all smokers do not like the same blend of tobacco.

There is only one type of hotel. When I enter my new room in almost any city of the United States, I can close my eyes and find everything exactly as it was in the room I occupied in the last town where I stayed. The bath, the bed, the windows, the telephone are all in the same corners. Every newspaper throughout the country is like unto the others in its shape, type, and general appearance. It contains the same telegrams. There may be advantages in this standardization of news, but I can see also a great danger in this molding of public opinion by capitalized news agencies. The leading articles are virtually the same.

Even in the political life I find America virtually divided into two main parties, Republicans and Democrats. They afford little scope for personal development. In Russia the number of political parties is almost inexhaustible. Socialists, for instance, are of at least five or six different

hues. Constitutionalists have four parties. The monarchists have no less. The revolutionists are also divided. Thus is originality preserved.

All this lack of individuality tends, I am sure, toward the destruction of the inner sense of beauty. It kills the joy of life, it hampers the artistic feeling of mankind.

As to the character of the American people, I wish to emphasize the fact that it has made a deep impression on me. Americans show excellent heart, great kindness, much courtesy, and amenity. Sometimes I wish they were less polite. I could bear without pain the same kind of criticism which I have attempted to make. It is the criticism of a friend, nay, of an admirer. I hope it is helpful criticism.

One of the happiest features which struck me here was the spirit of democracy. In America one does not meet that spirit of servility, of slavery, to which one is accustomed in Europe. I am not used to this equality. It was therefore most pleasant to me. I feel it to be a great creative force. There may be a little too much subjection to public opinion, but that is not a permanent feature. In Russia we had, before the Revolution, less freedom between persons, but more liberty in the face of public opinion. The reverse is the case here.

To sum up, I wish to add that I am leaving the United States with the best and kindest feeling for the American nation. I am more than grateful for the many acts of kindness bestowed upon me everywhere. I hope for myself and for my country that the best relations will prevail between Russia and America. Our two nations can derive only profit from mutual intercourse and friendship. America will help us to develop our enormous material resources, and this will be most beneficial to her also. Our economic field is open to you. Russia can perhaps contribute some of her latent spiritual greatness to the culture of America. Both together will be greatly benefited, and this entails the general progress of mankind.