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CONTENTS

LETTERS FROM AMERICA

To the British Reader

Getting Away from it All

The Immigrant Strain

My First Indian

Roughing It

What's the Matter with America?

Some of our Best Citizens

A Long Island Duck

Damon Runyon's America

Joe Louis

A Big Shot

Washington, D.C.

New York, New York

The Seasons:

Winter – and Florida

Spring – Backdrop for History

Spring – The Ninth of April

American Summer

The Fall of New England

Siren Sounds

Will Rogers

The Case of the November Sun-tan

Moving a Home

A Baby is Missing

Margaret and Missouri

Copyrighted material

The Big Brain
A Bell for Father Serra
Six Typical Americans
No Sympathy for Apathy
It's a Democracy, Isn't It?
Letter to an Intending Immigrant

TALK ABOUT AMERICA

Prologue
1. Politics and the Human Animal
I. Institutions
2. The Cranberry Caper
3. The Father
4. A Tiny Claim to Fame
5. A Town Meeting
6. Beizbol
7. The Summer Bachelor
8. The Iceman Goeth
II. Problems and Stereotypes
9. The European's America
10. The Generation Problem: The Twenties
11. The Well-Dressed American, Man!
12. The American Neurosis: Instant Health
13. LBJ
14. Wanted: An American Profile
15. The World Gone to Pot?
III. People and Places
16. Give California Back to the British
17. HLM: RIP
18. The Road to Churchill Downs

Copyrighted material

19. The Colonel of the Plains
20. Alcatraz
21. General Marshall
22. The Submariners
23. The Palm Beach Story
24. Glenn in Orbit
25. Our Father Which Art in Heaven
26. A Lonely Man
27. A Ruined Woman
28. Robert Frost
29. The Non-Assassination of John F. Kennedy
IV. Politics
30. The Business of America?
31. The Invisible Rulers
32. The Frontiersman
Topic A:
33. Topic A: 1954 – The Court and the Negro
34. Topic A: 1963 – The Deep South
35. Topic A: 1965 – Watts
V. The View from the West
36. The Western Myth
37. John Mclaren'S Folly
38. The New Californian
39. California: A Foretaste of Tomorrow
40. A Bad Night in Los Angeles
41. Epilogue: Vietnam

THE AMERICANS

Telling One Country About Another (2 March 1969)
Making a Home of a House (26 January 1969)

Copyrighted material

Pegler (29 June 1969)

Liable to Get Your Head Broke (7 September 1969)

'Eternal Vigilance' – By Whom? (19 October 1969)

Massacre: An Act of War (30 November 1969)

La Fayette Si, Pompidou No! (1 March 1970)

Now Here is the Nightly News (7 June 1970)

Final Health Warning (9 January 1971)

Judgement Day's A-Comin' (13 February 1971)

The Last of the Romanoffs (11 September 1971)

The Acheson Plan (16 October 1971)

A 'Frontal Attack' on Cancer (10 February 1972)

The Charm of China (26 February 1972)

Angela Davis v. the Establishment (1 April 1972)

Watergate: Act One (16 September 1972)

Justice Holmes and the Doffed Bikini (7 October 1972)

Give Thanks, For What? (25 November 1972)

A Reactionary at Six P.M. (10 February 1973)

Watergate: Act Two (12 May 1973)

Intermission: The Agnew Wake (19 October 1973)

Watergate: Act Three (9 November 1973)

The Duke (31 May 1974)

Earl Warren (12 July 1974)

Watergate: Act Four and Epilogue (7 August 1974 and 6 May 1977)

Workers, Arise! Shout 'Fore!' (27 December 1974)

The Benefits of Clergy (4 April 1975)

The End of the Affair (11 April 1975)

The President Goes Up to the Mountain (13 August 1975)

Pacific Overtures (16 January 1976)

Haight-Ashbury Drying Out (16 April 1976)

I'm All Right, Jack (21 May 1976)

Copyrighted material

No Cabinet Officers Need Apply (24 December 1976)
Christmas in Vermont (31 December 1976)
The Obscenity Business (18 February 1977)
The No–Food Plan for Longevity (20 May 1977)
The Money Game (1 July 1977)
Mr Olmsted's Park (8 July 1977)
The Retiring Kind (9 September 1977)
Two for the Road (23 December 1977)
A Picture on the Wall (13 January 1978)
The Spy that Came Down in the Cold (10 February 1978)
A 'Proper' Wedding (5 May 1978)
Please Die Before Noon (19 May 1978)
The Hawk and the Gorilla (2 June 1978)
A Letter from Long Island (18 August 1978)
The Letter from Long Island (4 August 1970)
The Presidential Ear (8 December 1978)
A Piece of Paper (20 April 1979)
In the Meantime (6 May 1979)

About the Author

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1946–1951

ALISTAIR COOKE

NEW YORK TIMES–BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Letters from America

1946–1951

Copyrighted material

CONTENTS

To the British Reader

Getting Away From It All

The Immigrant Strain

My First Indian

Roughing It

What's the Matter with America?

Some of Our Best Citizens

A Long Island Duck

Damon Runyon's America

Joe Louis

A Big Shot

Washington, D.C.

New York, New York

The Seasons:

Winter – and Florida

Spring – Backdrop for History

Spring – The Ninth of April

American Summer

The Fall of New England

Siren Sounds

Will Rogers

The Case of the November Sun-tan

Moving a Home

A Baby is Missing

Margaret and Missouri

The Big Brain

A Bell for Father Serra

Copyrighted material

Six Typical Americans

No Sympathy for Apathy

It’s a Democracy, Isn’t It?

Letter to an Intending Immigrant

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TO THE BRITISH READER

Some months after the war was over the B.B.C. asked me to go to London and discuss the sort of broadcasting I might do in what was then called the peace. I had been talking about America to Britain since 1934 and from America to Britain since three years after that. My one-man band met the same fate as everybody else's in the autumn of 1939. And through the war years I doubled in brass and learned to play the solemn trombone of a political commentator. Politics will undoubtedly bedevil us all till the day we die, but when General MacArthur stood on the deck of the *Missouri* and said in his resounding baritone, 'These proceedings are closed', I took him at his word and, like most other people, yearned to get back to the important things in life. Even the prospect of early annihilation should not keep us from making the most of our days on this unhappy planet. In the best of times, our days are numbered, anyway. And it would be a crime against Nature for any generation to take the world crisis so solemnly that it puts off enjoying those things for which we were presumably designed in the first place, and which the gravest statesman and the hoarsest politicians hope to make available to all men in the end: I mean the opportunity to do good work, to fall in love, to enjoy friends, to sit under trees, to read, to hit a ball and bounce the baby.

The suspicion that these things are what most men and women everywhere want led me to suggest, in London in 1946, that Britons might be more honestly enticed into an interest in America and Americans by hearing about their way of life and their tastes in these fundamental things than by suffering instruction in the procedures of the American Senate and the subtleties of the corn-hog ratio. Mr Lindsay Wellington, then director of the Home Service, responded so promptly to this that he suggested I forget politics altogether and accept an assignment to talk about anything and everything in America that interested me. To do this for a large and very mixed audience, ranging from shrewd bishops to honest carpenters, was a challenge to explain in the simplest and most vivid terms the passions, the manners, the flavour of another nation's way of life. It was a formidable assignment, for though a man might make sense of his travels in his own way for his own friends, broadcasting demands of him, if he respects the medium at all, that, as the old Greek had it, he 'think like a wise man and talk in the language of the people'. I don't know whether this has ever been done, except at various times by minstrels, the greatest religious teachers and comedians of genius.

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But out of this bold ambition grew a series of weekly talks to Britain which I called Letters from America. They were commissioned in March 1946 for a tentative run of thirteen weeks; and by the grace of the B.B.C., the receptiveness of the British listener, and the stubborn endurance of the pound sterling, they still at this writing go on. After a year or two the number of listeners asking for copies of scripts began to strain the mimeographing resources of the B.B.C.'s New York office. Some people took so kindly to them that they urged me to put them out as a book. This has the same effect on a broadcaster as a nomination for the Presidency of the United States on a first-class cement manufacturer. The thing is patently absurd except to his cronies, but the idea first flatters, then haunts him, and he ends by feeling be must accept a sacred duty to save the Republic.

Publishers began to massage me and lonely widows to cajole me until it seemed churlish to resist. There was, however, a more honest flattery that gave me pause. A good many of the letters I have had from listeners to this series were from people who can hardly put pen to paper. Their taste seemed to coincide with my own: they had got pleasure from talks which I felt had managed to convey some human experience in a language most people can understand. These successes averaged about one in five, but they are not necessarily the ones that look best in print. But by the time the series had run to two hundred there appeared to be a good handful that would survive the translation into black and white. Accordingly, the pieces that follow were selected by this test. They were chosen on no other principle, though I have tried to include pieces about the things that first puzzle the visiting European, so that the book can be taken as a painless introduction to living in the United States. I have naturally succumbed to the pieces that produced the heaviest fan mail. And though I can find no justification for including a piece of reporting that is no practical help to anybody but a kidnapper, the mail was enormous after the talk I have here called 'A Baby is Missing'.

I have given some sort of grammatical shape to sentences that ended nowhere, as sentences do in life. And where I failed to say something tricky in a simple way, I have made so bold as to use words I would never use before a microphone, but which should not stump the small sophisticated race known as book-readers. Otherwise, except for a little trimming and polishing, these pieces appear here as they were broadcast. In their original form, a few of them were printed in the *Listener*. I ought to mention that the last anecdote, about the San Diego tattooist, in the piece called 'Six Typical Americans', had to be discreetly bowdlerized for the strong, silent family which is presumed to be the backbone of the radio audience. The reader, however, is not bound to finish that essay, especially after this warning. I merely wish to note for the record that the anecdote is here set down for the first time in all its naked truth.

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Most of these pieces were written at the end of a week's work without my knowing, as I faced the typewriter, what I was going to talk about. But they were all written in freedom and in pleasure. They were then taken and read aloud to the reigning captain of the B.B.C.'s New York garrison. These gentlemen tolerated my briefs in the natives' behalf with singular good nature and revolted rarely, and then only in the most gentlemanly way, against what they thought revolting. They were fine specimens of their race, and I have no doubt their occasional revulsions saved me from offending a large part of the population of the British Isles. I should like to pay my respects in particular to Norman Luker and Henry Straker, and to two able *gauleiters* (recruited respectively from New Jersey and Georgia) who performed the same service: Annette Ebsen and Sam Slate.

For the rest, this book belongs to the people who sponsored it: the brave, tolerant and courteous people of Britain, who after ten years of austerity and four of being poor relations could yet choose to sit down on Friday evenings and want to understand the foibles of the rich uncle across the seas.

A.C.

Nassau Point, Long Island
Summer, 1951

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GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

The real end of the American year is not the thirty-first of December, but the old festival of Labour Day. It is the day when the summer is put away, the swimming-trunks squeezed for the last time, the ash-trays in country cottages filled with mouse-seed and rat-paste, the storm-doors hammered into place, the lock turned for the last time on your private world of sun and sand and picnics and the pride of growing children. Labour Day brings you back to the world of schools and offices, to sniffling colds and insurance policies, to taxes and radio commentators, to dark nights and the dark horizon of politics.

We sat around for the last time in our cottage at the end of Long Island. We had brought in the furniture from off the porch and the rusty barbecue grill we haven't used in four years but always put out in the sun at the beginning of summer as a symbol of our pioneer instincts. We had phoned the electric company to turn off the current. Called the phone company to disconnect same. Left a note for the garbage-man, same for the milkman. What else has to be done? Defrost and clean the refrigerator. Draw the curtains across the windows on the east and west sides. Sprinkle moth-flakes on the rugs. Try to hide a smelly fishing-rod in a dark closet, and fail – your wife coming at you saying, 'Could this be bait?' It is. It is a poor, dried-up piece of squid that was chewed on by a whole school of porgies and sucked dry.

We sit around finishing a last bite. The baby is snoring placidly in a house reeking of camphor and good old mouse-paste. We bury and burn the last load of garbage. We pack the car while we wait for the baby to wake. Some of the grasses on the dunes have started to turn the fall colours. So children who normally treat them as considerately as bulldozers now develop a collector's passion for bayberry and pine branches and feather-grass. Somebody sees a gramophone record worn so grey you'd think it had been played with a poker. It is 'Good Night, Irene', and it too is suddenly an object of tenderness. We finally leave, with the rear end of the borrowed station-wagon looking like an army camouflage squad, bushes and plants and a bedstead growing out of each side of 'Good Night, Irene'. We are on our way.

We stop and say good-bye to Mrs Horton, who sells eggs and collects antiques and whose family has farmed the same plot since 1649 – not so hot, perhaps, to a European, but impressive to us. We wish a good winter to the Ryskos, who sell groceries; to Grathwohl, the builder and sometime carpenter; to the Doroski

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brothers, who run a gas and service station; to Josie Wanowski, the little bent old toothless Polish woman who has taken in washing these many years and for many of them kept a crippled husband, and who raised four astonishingly handsome children, two straight beautiful girls with shining teeth, who might be movie starlets but are in fact a nurse and a schoolteacher; two boys, one in college, one ex-army air forces.

It is much the same as any other leave-taking in the fall. But there is an ominous note or two. The bank manager is off to Riverhead: there is a meeting of the new civil defence evacuation committee – a committee, that is, to plan the evacuation of doomed New Yorkers to the potato-fields of Long Island. A young man who came out of the Navy four years ago, who chose to be a potato-farmer the year of the big drought and went into debt for two thousand dollars, is not around any more. His troubles were all scattered by a letter one morning from the President of the United States, beginning – 'Greetings!' – a cordial invitation to come back into the service, or else. Eddie, the boy who drives the grocer's delivery truck, says 'Well, I'd better say good-bye', in a strange shy way. He too has had his call.

These little things give you a shock, and you wonder about them on the way up to the city. Everything looks like the familiar fall, the maples turning, a milky stream of smoke from burning leaves curling up into a blue, bottomless sky. But as the swift twilight comes on we are at the end of the parkway, past La Guardia Field, over the Triboro Bridge, and there are the vertical city and the plunging spires: New York again, splendid as ever in the autumn light. Not quite the same, though. We curve round and down off the bridge and pass a billboard advertising a new de luxe apartment-building somewhere. The big sign has stars against the features it is specially proud of: thermostat heat control in each flat; all-electric kitchen, with deep freeze, laundry and dish-washing machines, and garbage-disposal unit; air-conditioned units available in summer; two bathrooms for every four rooms. The last item, the last star, says: 'Adequate sub-basement atomic bombshelter'. One of the children reads it aloud, and it makes a pompous sound, so that the baby claps her hands and chortles like a wise old man. And we all laugh.

Back in the city, people with copper tans who ought to be congratulating themselves on being able in the first place to get away from the New York summer, began in recent years to find themselves fingering the real-estate sections of the Sunday papers and peering through advertisements for 'desirable country houses'. Why should lucky and comfortable people be so fretful and restless for more idleness? It was not idleness such people sought but a more dreadful thing: safety. Lately the phrase 'getting away from it all' has taken on a sadder and more furtive meaning in the minds of parents who live in industrial cities. It needs no winks or meaningful glances to arouse a fear that everybody

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feels and a few talk openly about. It is the padding fear of the atom bomb.

I heard of a man who lives in Washington who had quit his job, fallen back on his savings, bought a little place deep in the hills of Arkansas and gone off there to farm with his wife and five children. Far off in the Black Hills of South Dakota, some pessimist as thoughtful as Noah has bought a mountain cave and invited prudent couples – one male, one female – to abandon their regular lives and batten down underground at an annual cost of two thousand five hundred dollars per person, all found. This may appear to be the furthest pole of lunacy. But during the San Francisco organizing conference of the United Nations, the citizens of the Black Hills, bidding for a lasting fame as the chosen headquarters of the United Nations, challenged the delegations with maps (Dakotas projection) to find a spot anywhere in the United States more swiftly accessible by air to Moscow, Cairo, Tokyo or London. Maybe this pessimist was acting from the same melancholy discovery.

Then in the late nineteen-forties businessmen caught the epidemic. Businessmen, I should say, who have factories in the East, in the ring of cities round the southern rim of the Great Lakes, or out on the Coast. An aircraft company in Bridgeport, Connecticut, announced it had decided to move bag and baggage to Dallas, Texas. Now, this is quite an undertaking. The company worked on a million and a half square feet. Its factory cost ten million dollars. It employed about ten thousand people. The company invited its skilled workers to go with it. As an American migration, this one would not be without its epic and humorous side. Bridgeport is a typical New England industrial city, except for the untypical fact that it has a socialist government. Its workers are mostly of Italian and Czech, Hungarian and Polish stock. They are used to cold winters and New England ways. It would be quite a sight to see them in West Texas, mimicking the Texas accent, being baffled by the Mexican foods, wondering when the hot dry winds of spring and the steaming misery of summer would ever end in – as the song says – 'that Texas town that never seen ice or snow'. For a few excitable weeks, the unskilled men had a happy time joshing their superior brothers who had signed up to go. They bandied around the nicknames Sagebrush, and Tex, and 'Hi, there, Dallas!' Jokers appeared in ten-gallon hats and called a work-gang 'you-all'. But however gay the workers felt, the company's announcement caused a nasty jolt to other defence industries along the East Coast Any company that would make a move as dramatic and costly as that must, they figured, have 'heard something'. The Defense Department was rattled by telephone inquiries verging between anxiety and hysteria. The callers were told in as non-committal a way as possible that there was no 'immediate' plan to go underground, to move industrial cities, to decentralize the basic industries that surround the Great Lakes. It was made officially plain that the Bridgeport company had made up its own mind and the

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National Security Resources Board had given its nod. The company's work had to do with testing jet-planes, and the directors had decided that the congested seaboard was a poor place to accommodate, without an expensive new airport, the special and alarming habits of jets. The Texas central plain is – if Texans will pardon the expression – flatter than Kansas. It seemed just right But many industries, big and little, leaped to the conclusion which they dread and which – by the peculiar chemistry of deep fear – they half-hope to have fulfilled.

The telling point about the Bridgeport story is, I think, the current emotional disposition to believe the worst. The atomic age offers us the raw material of a civilization larger, more efficient and more humane than any that has gone before. But this promise and this challenge are lost sight of in the energy that goes and must go into making weapons of war. This energy has the real excuse that never before in history have free men faced the threat of a tyranny so large, so merciless and so painstaking as that with which the Soviet Union confronts us. Dangling between these two unique worlds – a world of unequalled slavery and a world of incomparable riches – we build the storm-cellars and hope for the best.

Most men find the problems of political power insoluble and tend to despair before a world that has shrunk in scale and enlarged in complexity, so that the knowledge of how it behaves seems more and more to be open only to the specialist. There never was a time, except perhaps in the fearful pestilences of the Middle Ages, when men hungered more for a decent private life, and when they are tempted to match in their joys the intensity of the sorrows all around them. I believe that this impulse, far from being an escape, is the only right way of asserting that human dignity which gives sense to the phrase 'an appetite for life'. What reasonable hope can an ordinary man have for himself and his family? Must we oscillate like crocodiles between panic and apathy? What more adult way is there of coming to terms with the alternatives of the atomic age?

I should like to have the wisdom and the knowledge to suggest something at once practical and noble. But all I can think of is an incident from the American past that comes nearer to home every day and seems to me as sensible as anything written since Hiroshima.

The time was the 19th of May, 1780. The place was Hartford, Connecticut. The day has gone down in New England history as a terrible foretaste of Judgement Day. For at noon the skies turned from blue to grey and by mid-afternoon had blackened over so densely that, in that religious age, men fell on their knees and begged a final blessing before the end came. The Connecticut House of Representatives was in session. And as some men fell down and others clamoured for an immediate adjournment, the Speaker of the House, one Colonel Davenport, came to his feet. He silenced them and said these words: 'The Day of Judgement is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it

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is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish, therefore, that candles may be brought.'

Ladies and gentlemen, let candles be brought.

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THE IMMIGRANT STRAIN

An item came over the news-tape the other day about somebody who wanted to organize a National Hobby Club. There is nothing earthshaking in this, but it opens up a field of speculation about Britons and Americans that I should like to graze around in. I saw this item and thought at once about an Englishman I know here, an old, old friend who – to be coldblooded about it – has a value in this country over and above his value as a character and a good friend. I am, after all, a professional student of a rare species of goldfish – the goldfish being, you will guess, the American people. If you are a goldfish, or if you swim with them long enough, it is impossible to say what are the characteristics of goldfish. But if somebody drops a mackerel into the goldfish bowl, you can see at once all sorts of things that goldfish have and the other things they lack. That is why I am grateful to this English friend, just for being himself and for being around. He forms a stimulating point of comparison. He is a British government official in New York, and though I knew him for many years before he was sent here, I have lately learned many things about him I never knew and about Americans – the race he is at present moving among. For instance, when he comes into a room, one thought always strikes me, and I can say it two ways. I can say, 'Goodness, how short his coat is' or 'Goodness, how long everybody else's is'.

Now, in character – never mind his politics – he is conservative. He is an able and conscientious government official. He likes people and he likes to get through the day and attack in the evening his beloved hobbies, of which he has several. This characteristic alone would make him, in England, a typical civil servant. Here it makes him an oddity. He is a lepidopterist, an expert on moths. And when he was stationed in the Middle East he threw off what I believe to be an authoritative paper on the moths of Iran. Americans meeting him see his black Homburg and his tight coat and his rumply collar, and hear his voice; and they know his type at once. They think they do. But they don't know it at all. If you feel baffled and alarmed at the prospect of differentiating one American type from another, you can take heart. You have more hope of success than Americans, who shuffle through every stereotype of every foreign culture as confidently as they handle the family's pack of cards. Americans are not particularly good at sensing the real elements of another people's culture. It helps them to approach foreigners with carefree warmth and an animated lack of misgiving. It also makes them, on the whole, poor administrators on foreign soil. They find it almost impossible to

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believe that poorer peoples, far from the Statue of Liberty, should not want in their heart of hearts to become Americans. If it should happen that America, in its new period of world power, comes to do what every other world power has done: if Americans should have to govern large numbers of foreigners, you must expect that Americans will be well hated before they are admired for themselves.

So Americans when they meet this Englishman for the first time at once file away the reflection that though he seems amiable enough, he is rigid, unimaginative, a little pompous, a regular Somerset Maugham colonial type. Then the telephone rings – as it did one night – and it turns out that someone wants to know who sang the vocal in that early Red Nichols record of 'Lazy River'. The Americans present were appalled and relieved to hear my friend give out reams of information on these matters. 'No,' he said to another query, 'I think you'll find that record is a blue label, and it's backed by 'Beale Street Blues', with Goodman and Teagarden ... What? no, no, the cornet is Jack's brother, Charlie – that's right, Charlie Teagarden. Not at all, so long.'

He is also, you gather, a jazz fan. And according to the late great Otis Ferguson he knew more about the history of recorded American jazz than most Americans alive, and wrote knowingly about it when he was in college, years before American intellectuals began to write jazz reviews in the middle thirties. I doubt if the Foreign Office know about this. I doubt if they care, because he is an Englishman, and eccentricity is therefore the most normal thing about him. By merely being around he makes you notice how comparatively rare with Americans is an orderly set of hobbies; and how even rarer is the quality from which hobbies spring – namely, eccentricity. Active Americans do many things. And in different parts of the country they do routinely things that other parts of the country have never heard about. But by and large they do what other people, what their neighbours, do. There is a good reason for this, and you will be glad to hear we don't have to go back to the Indians for it.

Hobbies, I suggest, are essentially a tribal habit and appear most in a homogeneous nation. English boys in school sit beside other boys who are called Adams and Smith and Rendall and Barnes and Gibbs. They do not have to use up much of their competitive energy showing who is more English than another. A nation which says, 'It isn't done', is much more settled as a community than one which says, 'It's un-American'. Only thirty years ago Theodore Roosevelt made a campaign of urging immigrant Americans to forget their roots, to cease being 'hyphenated Americans'. But there are still in America two generations, the sons and grandsons of immigrants, who are trying to outlive the oddity of their family's ways. For it is a stigma for an American to talk with a foreign accent rather than with an American accent. This is snobbery, of course, but the people who instantly recognize it as such are enviably free from the problem. If it is snobbery, even in

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this land, it is a real humiliation: it is not the urge of insecure people to be different from others; it is the more pressing urge to be the same, and it is acutely felt among people who are insecure just because they *are* different. In very many American cities where there are large populations of immigrants, this is what happens: The son is, let us say, an Italian. As a boy he is brought up with a mixture of American and Italian habits. He plays baseball, but the big meal of the week is ravioli, and he is allowed little gulps of red wine. (If he is a Pole, he is dolled up once a year and marched in the parade on Pulaski Day.) Then he goes to school. There he mixes with boys called Taylor and Smith and also with other boys called Schenck and Costello and O'Dwyer and Koshuski. He begins to find in time that ravioli is a mild joke at school.

Of course there are millions of Americans who eat ravioli who are not Italian-Americans, but they are untouched by the kind of problem I am discussing. Ravioli is an American dish by now. And that is another thing. The boy notices that just so much as his own habits and speech were instilled by his parents, by so much does he tend not to fit in. By so much he runs the risk of being a joke; which is no joke to a child. And then, at about the age of twelve, an awful thing happens. It is happening all over America all the time, and produces recrimination and heartbreak to the folks still left who came originally from the old country – from Poland or Italy or Czechoslovakia or Russia or Germany or wherever – and who will never master the American language. The boy notices that they speak with an accent. He never knew this before. But now it crowds in on him. Now he starts his own rebellion. And that is serious enough to many fine parents so that in scores, perhaps hundreds, of American cities the schools run night classes for parents, in the English language, to help them keep the affection and respect of their sons and daughters, or grandsons and granddaughters. It is a great theme in American life, and it cannot be dismissed by superficial horror or irritated appeals to decent feeling. In time, of course, masses of such sons and daughters outlive the threat of seeming different. And then, but only then, can they begin to cherish some of their oddity, especially in the way of food and festivals. Their strangeness becomes a grace note to the solid tune of their Americanism. But by that time they are sure of themselves and so able to look on their parents again – God help them – with affection.

So you see how sure of your standing with your companions you have to be to start, in boyhood, cooking up interests that will set you apart from your fellows. It will be no surprise now, I think, to hear from my Englishman that nearly all the members of his natural history club in New York were older men with Anglo-Saxon names – families that have been here for a hundred years or more, that have never felt anything but American. They start with the great advantage of being already something that the Poles and the Germans and the Czechs and the

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Italians have to get to be the hard way.

You may wonder how an Englishman, and an English accent, fit into all this. Well, Englishmen who live here, no matter how long – first-generation Englishmen – are a special case. They may hope to be mistaken for Bostonians (but not by Bostonians). Yet if they affect any more Americanism than that which has grown into their characters, they do themselves much hurt, and both the country they came from and the country they adopted. There are Irish-Americans and Czech-Americans and Polish-Americans and German-Americans and Swedish-Americans and Italian-Americans and Greek-Americans. But there are only 'Englishmen in America'. They are always apart and always at once more foreign and more familiar.

And an English accent is by now just another foreign sound. There was a time when an English accent would take an Englishman into homes on the East Coast socially more elevated than the home he left behind him. Such Englishmen were secretly delighted to discover this while believing they were only being taken at their true worth. But the hosts knew better. This social observation was a favourite theme of American writers, New Englanders especially, in the early nineteenth century. Washington Irving once boiled over about a certain kind of British traveller: 'While Englishmen of philosophical spirit and cultivated minds have been sent from England to penetrate the deserts and to study the manners and customs of barbarous nations, it has been left to the broken-down tradesman, the scheming adventurer, the wandering mechanic, the Manchester and Birmingham agent, to be her oracles respecting America.' You can still run into the type. Or you could say more accurately that this attitude is one part of most Englishmen's character that is aroused by a visit to America. But the day is long past when Americans imitated English habits in order to be fashionable. There is, however, one peculiar hangover from that period. It is the convention of speaking English on the American stage. Unlike the British and the Germans, the Americans seem never to have worked out a type of stage speech true to the reality of the life around them. Except in comedies. In most historical American plays, and plays of polite life, the characters talk a form of British English. If you chide Americans about this and say, correctly, that these people in real life would not talk at all like that, they say: 'Well, of course not; they're actors, aren't they?' I always feel in London that no matter how trivial the play, the characters being played would talk more or less that way in life. In this country it is understood as a convention, having nothing to do with social honesty, that actors should adopt an unreal mid-Atlantic lingo known, with a straight face, as Stage Standard. You may have noticed that even in American movies most American historical characters and members of Congress talk a form of British, while what are called 'character parts' talk American.

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Englishmen can hardly be blamed if they assume that Americans share their sneaking belief that no American can be distinguished and yet sound American at the same time. It has given some otherwise shrewd English dramatic critics the idea that really educated Americans talk like Englishmen. The fact is that educated Southerners, New Yorkers, Chicagoans or New Englanders could never be mistaken for Britons. And there is something wrong if they could be mistaken for each other. It is a fairly safe rule that if in life you meet an American who sounds English, he is either a transplanted Englishman, or one of those homeless Americans forlornly bearing up under the 'advantages' of an education in Europe. Or he is a phoney. The American dramatic critic, Mr George Jean Nathan, was not intending to be facetious, but merely expressing a perennial American puzzle, when he wrote: 'After thirty years of theatregoing, I still can't make up my mind whether actors talk and behave like Englishmen or whether Englishmen talk and behave like actors.'

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MY FIRST INDIAN

I have been reading the part of the late James Agate's *Ego* which has to do with his one and only visit to America. I know that Mr Agate was the kind of man so much in love with his own tastes in life that no two people will ever agree about him. But he was not a pallid man and he was not a hypocrite. What he liked he gloated over and so provoked rounds of applause in some readers and nausea in others. His section on America contains one completely objective statement, and like most objective remarks about nations it is a confession of what is most subjective in the onlooker. He notes that while sitting through an American stage farce he thought it was wonderful, but not in the way, and in the places, that the American audience thought it was wonderful. And he makes the honest comment: 'I feel I don't know these people any better than I know the Chinese. I felt painfully English throughout the entire farce.' I need hardly say that James Agate was the last man to be pained about *being* English, but here he hits off in a line the pathos that descends at some time on every traveller in a foreign country, however long or well he has come to know it: the sudden recognition that it is you, not they, who are foreign.

I agree with Mr Agate all the more because I was uprooted young, and laughed at this farce where the rest of the audience laughed, and am now so alien in London that I am baffled by British farces. In this instance, Mr Agate might have been writing about Abyssinia. But he had been honest for a moment about his bewilderment, and that is better – and more useful to later travellers – than the stubborn pretence of the visiting intelligentsia that intelligence is applied to much the same things in all countries, and that if you are bright enough you will be just as much at home with the humour of France or Britain or America. We have been having since the war ended a spate or rush of intellectuals, French and English mostly. I have read most of their subsequent books and articles and I can only say that any simple traveller who feels America will puzzle him has nothing to worry about. Nobody can be more comically stupid than a highbrow author professionally coming to grips with the 'truth' or the 'essence' of America. To get the feel of it takes long practice, a steady resistance to theories (other people's theories, that is); and when you have been here many years you will find that you still make elementary mistakes. Let me cheer you with an awful example from my own stumbling education.

About seventeen years ago I went to see my first Indian, what I then called a Red

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Indian. Like all comparatively recent visitors, I knew exactly where you looked for an Indian. Skyscrapers were in New York, waterfalls were at Niagara (nobody had ever told me there were a half-dozen as lofty in a single view over the Yosemite valley), fine buildings were in Washington, the countryside was called New England, and Indians were at Santa Fe.

I knew that Indians were at Santa Fe, because I had read D. H. Lawrence, who wrote powerful books about the Indian view of life. And he had gone to live in Santa Fe because he found there the particular escape he sought from the world he detested, the world of his own white skin. And he gave himself up to the Indian world, which – as I understood it – was a primitive, elemental sort of life in which people put their feet on the ground in a more down-to-earth way and in which men acted only on impulses that came from the pit of their stomach. As a young man who had been bowled over by Lawrence's writing, it was all very brooding and vital, far removed from the world I had known (and, being young, belittled) – of city streets, and working men, and seashores, and fishing from piers, and then college libraries, playing-fields, theatres, and people who wore summer dresses and business suits (the clods).

I took the Santa Fe train from Los Angeles and discovered, as everybody does, that it doesn't stop at Santa Fe. There is no station there. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway doesn't in fact touch Santa Fe, which if it were an English institution would be the reason it was so called. I got out at Albuquerque and took a bus sixty-odd miles north east to Santa Fe, accompanied by two nuns and a Yale undergraduate who complained all the way that it was time that the British built some modern railway stations. The landscape was everything Lawrence had said it was. The evening was coming on and weird ramparts of cloud, of a gun-metal colour, cast forbidding shadows across the desert and the red mountains. There had been a shower of rain, quickly over, and up from the sage and the greasewood came that unique smell – a compound of peat and roses – that fixes forever in your memory the place where you first knew it. Nothing could be more satisfying to a romantic young man bred in cities than the semi-desert landscape that covers so much of the West. It is as empty as the horizon and gleams with splendid melancholy lights and haunting shapes. It is, as Balzac said in a famous short story, God with man left out. It was just the proper background to my reveries about the Indian. I knew before I'd seen him that the Indian was just what Lawrence had ordered. I got to Santa Fe and looked up the man who represented the government's Bureau of Indian Affairs. He was a small sallow man from Louisiana with rimless glasses and pop-eyes veined like the marbles we used to call 'bloods'.

Next morning we set off north in the direction of Taos, where Lawrence had lived. I was tense as a high C. But Mr Brown, the government man, seemed calm

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enough and I was horrified when he turned west on a dirt road at a sign pointing to something called Los Alamos. I would have been horrified for other reasons a dozen years later, for this was indeed the desert place where the first atomic bomb was exploded. These days its crater lies there outside a streamlined and well-guarded town of busy people making more atom bombs. Then and now Los Alamos gets up in the morning to the sunrise coming over the red peaks of a mountain range that lies to the east, and which bears the awful name of the Sangre de Cristo – the Blood of Christ range. But we were not going to Los Alamos. There was nothing there to see then. We were headed just short of it, to an Indian pueblo, which is what they call their little villages. The land was bared in a blinding light. Last night's brooding mountains were now as solid as crocodiles, red and purple crocodiles lying sullen in the heat. We came to the pueblo, a little cluster of mud houses shoulder high, and in the clearing that faced them were great half-spheres also made of mud, like huge beehives or, say, summer igloos. These were the Indian cooking-ovens.

We sought out the high priest, for he is the man who rules over the village. And I felt my pulse begin to thump. Here was I, a slim and possibly weedy-looking fugitive from the decadent life of cities. I too, like the white-skinned tourist villains in Lawrence, had come here not on the good steaming flesh of a horse but on the sweaty leather of an automobile. I had on a collar and tie. There was nothing I could do but tread a little more firmly 'deep from the ball of the foot into the earth', as Lawrence recommends, 'towards the earth's red centre, where these men belong'. The priest lived in one of these mud huts and had to bend low to come out of it. He was a big, copper-coloured man in blue jeans. He had long black hair knotted behind his neck. He had kindly black eyes and a face pitted and scarred like the Grand Canyon, where no doubt he was born. He asked us into his house, and I was proud to notice that whereas Mr Brown floated in upright from the sun into the darkness, I too had to stoop down and straighten up again inside. Inside was one room, the whole house. It had no furniture except a pallet against one wall. As we got used to the cool darkness I was curious to make out a pile of clothes up against another wall and shocked in time to see it turn into a woman. It was the priest's wife. She stayed squatting and smiled at us. Across the ceiling was strung diagonally a sagging double rope, which supported a hammock of dirty old clothes in which slept a baby. We admired the baby. The high priest bobbed. Then his grin vanished and he looked hard at the government agent.

'You brought them?' he asked in a deep, expectant voice.

'Sure thing,' said the Southerner and went out to the car and brought back three baseball bats, a catcher's glove and pads. The high priest gurgled over them and ran his big hand around a bat.

'Fine, fine,' he said, 'now everything okay.'

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The Southerner said there'd be more if 'the boys' needed them. As we turned to leave, I noticed that one wall was entirely covered with what at first I had taken to be native art. Through the shadow odd dabs of colour had glowed, green and red and purple. I couldn't make out the form or sense of the mural. But I was impressed with it. Now high up in the middle of the wall I could recognize a tinted photograph of a painting of the Virgin Mary. It was a rotogravure supplement from a Los Angeles newspaper. The rest of the wall was covered with a row of colour photographs, torn from magazines, of automobiles. They were all of the same make of car. It was the priest's favourite make, and as he saw me squinting at them, he turned and, starting at the left-hand side with the designs of the early nineteen-hundreds, he trailed his finger across the whole mural, approving the brighter and flashier models with the ecstasy of a museum curator showing off his prize Egyptian pottery.

'Well,' said the Southerner, 'don't worry. You'll make it yet.'

The high priest laughed loud and bared his teeth. He beckoned us out and round behind his house. Standing there like a Roman emperor surveying the African desert was a vast open car, done in a blinding purple finish.

'What d'ya know!' yelled the Southerner, 'you *did* make it. Why, that's fine, just fine.'

We shook hands all round. The priest was bulging with pride. The Southerner shook his head enviously and we sauntered off. 'Great stuff,' he said, 'take it easy.'

'You take it easy, Mr Brown,' said the high priest.

We thanked him and waved good-bye.

On the way back – for I was sad to see that at the turn on to the main highway we went south again to Santa Fe instead of north to Taos – I thought it was time to bring up D. H. Lawrence. The Southerner looked straight ahead with a glazed sort of interest and seemed not to catch on. I wondered if there was a shrine to Lawrence up at Taos and he frowned a little. We drove on around little mesas and across great plateaus.

'Wait a minute,' he suddenly said, 'you wouldn't be talkin' about Lorenzo, would you – the painter?'

I remembered that Lawrence did paint and that he had at sometime or other called himself Lorenzo. I said yes, I thought that was the man, though in England he was known best for his writing. I mentioned his essays about this part of the world, *Mornings in Mexico*, several of which were not about Mexico but New Mexico.

The Southerner sat intently at the wheel. 'No foolin'?' he said. There was a pause. 'A thin, red-headed fella with a beard, right?'

'That's the man,' I said.

'Well, now, I mean,' said the Southerner tolerantly. 'I reckon he had his livin' to

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make same as anybody else. That stuff he wrote, that sort of took care o' the butcher and baker. I mean you don't blame that fella, what's his name, for writin' about the Mediterranean. You know, spies and Mata Haris and all that sort o' theng.'

It was my turn to pick the missing author and in time I guessed right. E. Phillips Oppenheim was the name.

'That's the fella,' said the Southerner. 'Well, I reckon Lorenzo musta done the same kind o' theng with the Indians. If it paid fo' his supper, more power to him.'

There was, you can imagine, a terrific silence.

'Did you see where the President wants the gov'ment to start puttin' out some guidebooks about this country?' Mr Brown asked. But I saw only poor, great Lawrence thrashing in his grave.

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ROUGHING IT

A hundred years ago the first ship sailed out of New York bound for San Francisco and the American River, where, according to the reports that had drifted East, you lowered a pan into a sluggish stream, shook it several times and sifted out a fortune in gold. By ship round the Horn was only one way, the most tedious and the safest. You could go by way of Panama and Nicaragua and run the risk of malaria or yellow fever. You could sail down to Mexico and face a shorter journey across its width through almost trackless desert and the chance of epidemics and slaughter by bandits.

Most people in the East who for one reason or another felt the urge to Go West decided to go the overland way. Today it is impossible to experience the human ordeal of that great migration, one of the last epics of purely human function before the Industrial Revolution transformed our lives. These people, in New England, and New York and Maryland and Ohio, sat down and planned to walk nearly two thousand miles from St Joseph, Missouri, or Independence, where the locomotive and the steamboat ended and the Middle Ages began. Independence was a more thriving place a century ago than it is today, because it was the outfitting centre for the Forty-Niners. From there you were on your own. You went by mule and drove your wagons and cattle along with you for the remaining eighteen hundred miles. You used a route map drawn by somebody who had once made it and survived. You depended very much, too much, on the hearsay of these people to know where the water-holes were and where you could take a short cut through the mountains.

There was no archetype of the Forty-Niner. They were of every human kind. But early on they learned that they had better travel in packs and most of them elected what they called a captain and two lieutenants. A quartermaster was chosen to look after the provisions. They may sound very martial in a noticeably non-military nation. But they knew, the later companies at any rate, that there were certain unavoidable hazards: flash floods, the rotting of their food, Indians, disease, and the constant challenge to their discipline and courage of reducing the weight of their pack – their implements, even their food supply – when the route was too much for their animals, who set the pace. They figured correctly that no group of human beings, however individually noble, would be likely to stay noble in the desperation of thirst, or spontaneously organize themselves in the event of attack. By the time they started the long journey from Missouri, most of them had

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formed themselves into companies and agreed on written or unwritten laws. Many of them spent weeks in the East before they left, drawing up written constitutions. Some of these were abided by all the way to California. Others were torn up in anger, stuffed down the captain's throat, or buried with a dead cow.

Most of them through the late spring of '49 took far too many provisions. It was said that the summer companies had the routes laid out for them by trails of abandoned stoves, pillows, beds, pots and kettles, crowbars, drills, ploughs, harness, trunks, bellows and dishpans. These, they found, were luxuries to a pioneer. And the word got across the continent that what you needed was one wagon to carry the supplies for every five persons, a mule apiece, rifles and shotguns, a rubber knapsack, an oilcloth cap, two pairs of boots, eight shirts, an overcoat, one pair of drawers, three blankets, a hundred and fifty pounds of flour, twenty-five pounds of bacon, fifteen pounds of coffee, twenty-five of sugar, some baking powder, salt and pepper.

That's as far as I want to go in describing the famous journeys across the plains. But I suspect that any American who started out today, fitted out just this way, and got to California, even if he stuck to the countless concrete highways that slam across hundreds of thousands of miles north and south and east and west – such a man would become some sort of national hero or crank. He would be paced by the newsreel boys, met at intervals by the advertising salesmen of whoever's flour and bacon he was carrying, he would be greeted by the Mayor of San Francisco, he would in the end be flown to Washington and shown in all the papers shaking the President's hand in the White House.

Nothing persists more in the fancy of Europeans, and in the superstitious pride of Americans themselves, than the conviction that Americans are tough and rough and ready, scornful of the European niceties and primmer ways of travel. The last thirty years have turned this belief into unmitigated legend.

One of the most precious books to American book collectors is a copy of Baedeker's *United States* for, I believe, 1906. In the conscientious Baedeker way, it warns the comparatively domesticated European of the coarse pleasures and inconveniences he will have to settle for if he decides to take a holiday in the United States. It is always Baedeker's consolation, however, to the intending tourist that no matter how constant the public spitting, how hard the beds, how ankle-deep the roads and primitive the hotels away from the big cities, the traveller who has any pioneering spirit in him will never regret his courageous visit to the United States because nowhere else will he see the singing colour of the New England fall, the blossom of the South in spring, the grandeur of the Yosemite, the Yellowstone, etc., etc. This guidebook is greatly sought after precisely because today it reads like such a gorgeous joke. If you changed the place-names and made them European, an American could read it with a straight

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face, since it would record most of his grouches about travelling in Europe today. The application of American technical genius to the mechanics of living has not merely turned the tables on Baedeker, it has turned the American, however reckless or self-reliant his individual character, into the world's most urbanized, most petted traveller.

Mr Richard Neuberger, who lives in the Far West, in Portland, Oregon, has taken up this theme in a magazine piece. He was in Alaska during the war having, as he puts it, 'the sort of experience we had read about eagerly as boys, in the tales of James Fenimore Cooper, Jack London, and Zane Grey'. And, he adds, 'we hated it ... we talked nostalgically of percale sheets and fluffy towels, or breakfast in bed and tiled bathrooms'. They complained – in Alaska, this is – about 'draughty privies and the lack of dry-cleaning facilities'. Mr Neuberger concludes that 'with a few bold exceptions, we Americans have come to regard the steam-heated hotel and the internal combustion engine as indispensable to any foray in the open'. Nowadays, more millions than ever before (the latest published count was 29,608,318) visit the American National Parks. But according to the Department of the Interior fewer and fewer people each year attempt the two-day hikes, or even drive up the highest peaks, or, having looked at the Grand Canyon, will undertake the day-long mule journey down to the overnight camp at the bottom. It is very hard to say how Americans would compare with other peoples in this new-found lassitude. Driving around most of the National Parks is pretty strenuous in itself. If you could put Yosemite and Yellowstone together, you would have something about the area of Wales whose geography is a combination of Switzerland, Persia and the Day of Judgement. But even so, these parks were lovingly created two generations ago by men who chopped through thousands of feet of lumber, who rode into them on a horse, who discovered the sublime with an axe, a botanist's kit, a piece of bacon, a tent and a stout heart. Now through all of them, even over the hair-raising pass into Tuolumne Meadows on top of the Yosemite, American engineers have built incomparable cement highways, blasted through prehistoric rock, encircling mountains where no other race would dream of cutting out a dirt road.

This suggests a cheerful contradiction. That even if the traveller *is* a sissy sitting over an internal combustion engine, the heroes who in his behalf comb cement to the smoothness of toothpaste under the desert sun, and build his highways through the Rockies and Sierras: they are Americans too. And this leads us into a famous cliché. I hope I can then lead us out of it. (I have nothing against clichés. Most of them are true, though you have to live through the denial of them to know it.) It is the assumption that the Americans have grown soft and unable to fend for themselves, that their enslaving gadgets, through which they flip their way so expertly, are crutches or props to living, essential to a people sinking

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contentedly into a decadence that out-Romans the Romans.

I'm sorry to report that the Americans' devotion to urban comfort, their ingenuity with gadgets, even their reliance on them, proves no such thing. In my own experience, the Americans who are most devoted to convertible automobiles and glass-enclosed showers made no complaint on this score when they ripped up Japanese jungles for airfields or waded ashore at Okinawa. The women I know who can whip up a delicious meal in ten minutes with the skilled aid of pressure cookers, bean slicers, electric beaters and deep-frozen vegetables are also the ones who can make the best meal the slow way with none of these things. And the most skilful fisherman I know is a man who can charm a trout with his fingernail, but prefers to have a compact tackle-box along, which contains exquisite scales the size of your thumb and a leader cutter which is a little circle of plastic moulds that exudes fine wire and cuts it in one motion.

Most Americans, even rich ones, were brought up in a culture that never expected somebody else to do the rough work. Most boys in college who can afford good cars can also take them apart and put them together again. This may all be changing. Still, I doubt that a devotion to gadgets is a reflection in the American character of a terrified dependence on them. They are loved for themselves, for the humorous felicity with which they dispose of elementary labour. A Texan I know, whom I would never like to meet in anger whether the choice of weapons was a jet-propelled torpedo or the back of the raw hand, put it neatly once when he said to me, 'I'll ride fifty miles on a horse for the fun of it, but out of necessity I drive.' One of the irritating troubles about Americans, in violation of the best advice of the best English divines, is that they just don't believe that whatever is uncomfortable is good for the character.

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WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH AMERICA?

'The natives of England,' wrote an Italian ambassador to London about four and a half centuries ago, 'whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say that he looks like an Englishman, and that it is a great pity he should not be an Englishman.' In England this remark has been quoted to prove the lamentable decline of Roman susceptibilities, since a thousand years earlier the observant Gregory the Great, looking for the first time on a shipment of Britons, had made the shrewder remark: 'Not Angles but angels.' This old reassurance drifted into my mind the other night when I heard over the radio an American senator, speaking from those cavernous lungs which the Almighty reserved for American senators, trumpet: 'I am an American – who is there in the whole wide world that does not envy the name?' Being in a defensive mood, I was reminded in turn of a Chinese general I met here in an army camp during the war. He had just been given a heart-warming account of the economic potential of China. He made a grateful little bow, and as the American general's arm went around his shoulder he remarked: 'Automobiles and cola drinks very good for Americans. But please, we should like remain Chinese.'

We were going into all this the other evening, a small group of about forty Americans who meet once a week to straighten the world out before the world goes to pot. The introductory speakers were two foreign newspapermen, a Hungarian and myself. We had been extended an endearing American invitation to come and say what was an American and, if we liked, to say what was wrong with America. It had been about fifteen years since I'd played this game, and I fumbled the better-known gambits. But the Hungarian had been here less than a year and was as impatient as a school chess champion.

He was a smooth, trenchant man in his early forties. In that room, where the amiable American bodies loped and leaned on chairs and tables, he was a very European figure. The creases of his double-breasted coat were horizontal, tugging at the unyielding buttons. He never unbuttoned that coat, as he faced an audience which, on a very hot night, was coatless. He had spent a lot of private time, he said, trying to find the word to define the dominant American character trait. He soon made it clear he had been pondering on a high ethical level, for he told us he wanted to find an equivalent for the three words which the Spanish philosopher Salvador de Madariaga had chosen to signify the dominant characteristics of the French, the Spanish and the English. These were: for the French – *droit*, which it

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appears is an untranslatable but enviable combination of justice, right, order and clarity. For the Spanish – 'honour', which we were given to understand was familiar enough but a passion with the Spanish people. For the English, need I say, 'fair play'. What, then, was the word for the Americans?

Everybody was deadly still. There was an audible purr from one end of the room, from two or three of the younger men who evidently join 'groups' in the expectation of hearing invited guests say the right things. I noticed a florid man near me, however, who flicked the ash off his cigar and gave me an ominous, ironical look that seemed to say, 'Well, boys, you asked him here.'

It will not surprise you, perhaps, to hear that the Hungarian had found the word. Somebody hinted later that he had known it before he ever took the boat across the Atlantic. The word was 'salesmanship'. His theory was that industrial genius is nothing in itself. Nor, it seemed, was there anything peculiarly American about a vast population of eager though slightly sceptical customers. It is the lifeline between them that counts. And that is the salesman. The product must connect with the buyer.

Elementary, maybe. But notice the snide American element in this familiar process. Where, he asked (and it must have been a rhetorical question, because he knew the answer all right), is the weakest link in the chain of supply and demand? Everybody waited politely and then let out an exploding gasp when he pronounced the word: 'the idiot'. The what? we hissed and muttered. 'The idiot,' he said sternly. 'The intelligent man,' he explained, 'knows things the idiot does not know. But the idiot does not know some things the intelligent man does know. Therefore the idiot is the one who must be won over. At this point, the American system has to call on a body of shock troops who represent to American civilization what the Jesuits are to the Roman Catholic Church and the S S men were to the Nazis: the advertising men.'

There was a lovely bray of laughter, which horrified the Hungarian. 'You should not laugh at this,' he scolded. 'If you cried, that would be good.' Somebody motioned to show they were laughing with him, that he had a shrewd point, that no offence was meant, go ahead. But it did no good. The Hungarian had a theory, neat and sharp as a knife. And one could only wonder what, in his chagrin, he expected his audience to do about it. Most of us who get angry at another country do so in the absurd hope that the natives will squirm and hang their heads, confess and promise to reform. It is a childish mechanism, and the foreigner is always disappointed. An American doctor said to me afterwards that expatriates in any country always have to keep up a pet peeve against the system they find themselves in, to justify their inability or unwillingness to compete in that system. It is just possible that this was the wisest sentence of the evening, though it was spoken long after the meeting had broken up.

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The Hungarian's main point was conceded in theory, and in courtesy. It was then demolished. An art director with an advertising company said sure, his aim was to sell his product, or his employer's product, but his layouts and designs were not aimed at the idiot. The daily zest of his work, he said, looking steadily at the table, was to paint striking and charming designs which would set up an unconscious preference for his product in just such wary and civilized people as the Hungarian. The man next to him said all business was a form of public relations and he thought it was a waste of character and talent if you didn't try to humanize it in every way possible. Another said he didn't get the implication that there was something shameful about selling things and that the Hungarian was gravely mistaken if he thought Americans were solemnly obsessed by it. 'I'd say,' this man concluded, 'it was more of a game and a matching of wits.' One melancholy man, whose leisure tastes ran to modern music and ballet, remarked: 'All the best cracks I ever heard about advertising were made by advertising men. But it doesn't make them throw up their jobs.'

All this was engrossing and good-tempered. But the meeting almost broke up in insurrection when I was called on to think aloud about the comparative significance of cricket and baseball. That afternoon I had been watching a baseball game between the New York Yankees and the Cleveland Indians. Early in the third inning a Yankee batter sent a high-fly ball soaring off, as we hoped, beyond the long white pole that marks the area between a foul and a home run. The umpire at first base whizzed around and craned his neck. The ball fell somewhere, and the spectators, being on the Yankees' home ground, roared their acceptance of the fact, which nobody had certified, that it was a homer. Then the umpire pointed this side of the pole and called a foul. He was right enough, but the crowd bellowed in pain and rage. So did the Yankee standing at first base. So did the batter. They both strode over to the umpire and spat out torrents of abuse. He cringed for a split second. Then his neck stiffened and he roared back at them. They squared their elbows back to demonstrate a merely technical respect for his person, but all the while they were shoving him along with their chests and he stumbled back under the rain of insult and calumny. The crowd loved this and egged on the three of them. When it was seen that the umpire and the players had taken over the crowd's indignation, the crisis dribbled away into waves of boos, laughter and rippling chuckles. It was a foul.

I mentioned this to our sweating group and wondered, possibly with too much coyness, why in a cricket game the first such word out of a batsman would have caused his captain to send him off the field. Somebody remembered that a marine in the south-west Pacific, very likely prompted by a newspaperman, had said that one reason the Americans were fighting the war was for the right to bawl out the umpire. This was too much for another Englishman present, who said that if an

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English marine could have been got to express himself in a printable form about the common cause he 'might have said' he was fighting to have the rules respected. It was a glum moment. It appeared we had profoundly different ideas about elementary behaviour. What I was really trying to suggest, from the hideous bottom of my resentment at this baseball uproar, was that Americans were not very ethical about games. The other Englishman sensed the spot I was in and came in smartly to assure the company that cricket was a rather special case. The rules of soccer, now, are set up to be obeyed, but English soccer-players often express themselves, as he put it, 'very violently indeed'. (You mean, threw in the Hungarian, they go 'Hmmm!'?) At this point, we were in an untenable position. We were trying to prove the improvable, namely that the British are very ethical but very virile at the same time. Our Hungarian magnanimously came to the rescue by harping again on his own more flexible theme. The Yankees, he thought, were simply using high-pressure salesmanship on the umpire. 'Salesmanship,' he snapped, 'leading to homicide.'

The evening ended triumphantly when a big swarthy man with large eyes and the bluest chin I have ever seen said in a tired way, 'Speaking as a Russian Jew, my good American blood boils.'

We all laughed with great relief and then, in the most patient and friendly way, he made several points that were received with general grunts of approval. He lit up just the difference, in a national attitude towards a game, that a proud Englishman might never understand and yet spend his life deploring. Every baseball player, he said, knows the umpire's word is law. But he's going to make the most of disputing it first. And the crowd expects a frequent show of indignation. Everybody knows it won't change the result. But it's a good show while it lasts and is included in the price of admission. One of the minor therapies of baseball, it seems, is to provide for the letting off of instinctive steam – or the national yen for anarchy. It has, he pronounced, very little to do with ethics.

There was one man present who was utterly and genuinely baffled by the news of an Englishman's strict fidelity to the umpire's little finger. The idea of a captain's ordering a player from the field because he had blasted the umpire to kingdom come struck him as extraordinarily prim and solemn.

'You mean,' he turned to me, 'they just wouldn't do it?'

'They just wouldn't do it,' I assured him down my nose.

'Tell me,' he asked, brightening, and the wrinkles vanished from his forehead, 'cricketers must be full of neuroses, right?'

It was getting very late.

'Right,' I said.

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SOME OF OUR BEST CITIZENS

Willie Howard was one of those little, wistful men who – like Chaplin, and Grock and the old George Formby – came to great fame by keeping up the preposterous pretence of playing the shrewd, debonair hero when it was obvious to everybody looking on that this was the last part Nature ever meant them to play. Willie Howard was sixty-two when he died, and, since he started his career at the age of fourteen, he spanned in his lifetime the rise and fall of the empire of vaudeville. His was not so much an old-time talent as a talent which expected an old-fashioned enjoyment of it. There is a difference, a contrast which is wholly, I think, to our discredit.

The first newspaper I saw that headlined Willie Howard's death made an unhappy coincidence of its choice of frontpage news. The main news was about one of the flare-ups between Britain and Israel. It must have suggested a melancholy connection to many thousands of New Yorkers. It set me thinking about the kind of comedian Willie Howard was. I will tantalize you no longer. Willie Howard's real name was not Willie Howard. It was Willie Levkowitz. And on the stage he made endless, insane play with telling about his relations, whom he regarded with a tolerant genealogical pride that was wonderfully silly on a man who stood about five feet three, whose body was no body but a dapper skeleton surmounted with a flowing cape, a big drooping bow tie, and any one of many black wigs that were meant to suggest an artistic temperament but suggested merely a clearance sale of floor-mops. 'My sister-in-law by husband once removed,' he would announce, stroking his moustache the way he thought diplomats stroke them. 'I have reference to Emmy Levkostein, née Levkowitz.'

It would have been absurd to say that Willie Howard did not enjoy making fun with Jewish names, and his New York audience of thirty years ago would have thought you slightly queer for bringing up the point He was a Jewish comedian, who told Jewish jokes and also played many bizarre characters who were uproarious just because he was totally unfitted to play their prototypes in real life. 'The President of Mexico' was one. And for this he put on a moustache as wide as the horns of a longhorn steer, a sombrero that rested on the lobster claw that was his nose, and several assorted rugs that slithered to the floor during his presidential address, when he would pretend to be pained by the audience's giggles and go on in his serene ambassadorial style as he kept picking up the rugs and delicately put them on wrong again.

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In speaking what he took to be Mexican-English, he would carefully and distinctly use Yiddish words and pause in alarm and bewilderment when the audience laughed. His most famous character was a French professor who gave language lessons. He would mince on – he had tiny hands and feet, and all his gestures were as delicate as Chaplin's, though he never seemed aware of it – he would come on, rap a huge cane for attention, wait till he got it and announce himself as Professor Pierre Ginsberg about to explain the peculiarities of what he called 'ze irrrrregulair vairbs'. He then spoke and taught a French that was no French at all, not a syllable of it, but sounded expert and idiomatic. He would rattle off a string of nonsense which ended with a bang on the word, pronounced in French, 'schlemihl'. Since in New York probably two-thirds of his audience were Jews – the Jews being great theatregoers – he was received with immediate warmth and understanding. I don't want to press the idea that his whole repertory depended on pronouncing foreign names in the accents of the Bronx. His most celebrated single act, which he'd been doing for thirty years, was the famous sextet from *Lucia*. Two queenly girls came on in evening gowns, led by three men in white tie and tails. They gathered together in an imposing concert group. The orchestra tuned up, and then Willie Howard came on in voluminous black trousers, a tail coat, a boiled shirt, but instead of a white evening tie, a long, long scarlet necktie. He joined the group and stood right next to one of the ladies, who was always chosen for her great height and her magnificent shape, or what we now call endowment You will guess the mischief afoot if I simply report that Willie Howard came up to her chest. The orchestra played an introduction, which Willie Howard approved with many a condescending nod and wispy tracery of his hand. Then they began.

The first shock was that they were all very competent singers, including Willie Howard, who had a high, piercing alto, like a choirboy in hysteria. He would sing away with them, giving much sincerity to his performance with his candid, eager eyes, his great nose cleaving the air in time. In the interests of dramatic expression his face would duck slightly to the left, when he would see, exactly over the arc of his nose, and exactly at eye level, a vaster palpitating arc. It was the shapeliness of the blonde up next to him. His voice faded away, his lips fell apart, his eyes were full of a childlike, unsmiling wonder. He would stare beseechingly at the audience to see if it were really true. He would shrug his shoulders slowly and tear off into high C. I saw him do this nearly twenty years ago, and I saw him do it a month or two before he died. I hope they will let him do it in Heaven, for it was a performance of the pure in heart.

What you couldn't help but notice, in this and all his turns, especially if you were new to New York, was the absolute confidence and delight of his audience in these goings-on. The audience for vaudeville in most big American cities when it

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was in its prime was an audience of Jews and Irish and Germans and, in the Midwest, of Swedes. They expected to go and see comedians who were not merely funny men but were known, and often billed, as Irish comedians, Swedish comedians, German and Jewish comedians. An old-time vaudeville show was a racial free-for-all. To a new immigrant it was a time to get together, all barriers down, and stew in the broth of each other's failings and oddities. Of course, to let that happen, and to welcome it, you have to start with the unspoken conviction that different countries have different and laughable peculiarities. Jews especially have a family time with Jewish humour. And during one of the darkest periods of the Second World War, I for one was cheered and given hope by seeing a wartime audience let down its hair and its ideology and bask in the caricatures of Willie Howard and the intensely Jewish humour of Lou Holtz, who can keep apart in many a funny story the separate accents of Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan's West Side.

Well, since the war there is less and less of this. Lou Holtz himself went on a radio programme and instantly got letters of protest calling him anti-Semitic. He put up a brave objection to this stupidity. But he and his kind can't win. There are more and more signs that we will no longer be allowed to admit in public the real and affectionate differences between one kind of American and another, outside the hearty regional stereotypes of the radio and the travel folders. A movie of *Oliver Twist* was banned in New York on the complaint that the portrayal of Fagin is anti-Semitic. A school board in Massachusetts has forbidden the reading of *The Merchant of Venice* in the public schools, because Shylock is represented 'in an unfavourable light', which is certainly the light Shakespeare meant to show him in. Little crass variations are creeping into old familiar songs, and these variations are becoming the official versions that have to be observed over the radio. The most pathetic I can recall offhand is a significant change in the lyrics of Jerome Kern's 'Old Man River'. In the play, you may remember, it was a Negro who sang:

> Niggers all work on the Mississippi,
> Niggers all work while the white folks play.

I don't know on what grounds this jingle has become unacceptable: whether it exaggerates a true but embarrassing fact, or whether it is, in the hypersensitive political climate of our day, a subversive (that is, a Communist) statement. Apparently, it is now indelicate even for a Negro to say – as he would say – 'Niggers'. So instead of 'Niggers all work on the Mississippi' it's now 'Folks all work on the Mississippi'. That leads to a little trouble in the next line. 'Niggers all work while the white folks play' has turned into 'Some folks work why-eyell some folks play'. Which, if you're going to get sociological about it, is a masterly bathos.

There are lots of other changes in the permissible lyrics of songs written in all

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innocence, often not more than twenty years ago. But many of these improvements are merely genteel. The ones that disturb me are the ones that have to do with different races, and ones which skimp the fact that Americans come from different countries and have different habits. Of course, it has been one of the great aims of the United States to turn strange peoples into Americans, but it can be argued that the American intention never was to deny the native characteristics but to modify them only so as to make it easier for everybody to live peaceably together in one big human family. It has been said that what is important in New York City is not the seething battleground of many races but the truce they observe.

The disappearance, then, of the Jewish comedian as such; the editing away of lines and thoughts in folk music that remind people of the special burdens of Negroes – these are defended as a move away from discrimination towards tolerance. But we seem to be using that word to blanket with good intentions problems that are far better uncovered and looked in the eye. To pretend that New York is not affected in its way of living, and in its opinion of foreign policy, by its two million Jews superficially looks like Christian charity but is in fact dangerous hypocrisy. It may well make us forget what we in New York owe to the Jews and to almost nobody else: the New York theatre, its music, the endowment of its fine libraries, the overwhelming Jewish contribution to psychiatry. It seems now as if we were moving into a period when the memory of what has recently been done to the Jews has made us want to overlook the fact that they are Jews at all. I suggest that this does them a disservice and in the long run will do great harm. When there is a gentleman's agreement not to bring up certain observed characteristics of a man or a nation, there follows from it the implication that those characteristics are necessarily unpleasant. If we scold children for making distinctions, we imply the guilty thought that the distinction is shocking. And I suspect that if we cannot, in politics and in our lighter moments, respect each other's differences; if we refuse to admit the peculiar good qualities of the Jews; we shall be in danger of forgetting the peculiar agonies they have suffered in our time and the special duty we owe them on that account.

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A LONG ISLAND DUCK

I don't believe I ever told you about the duck that saved two drowning people. It is not an unbearably alarming story. And, to be entirely frank, the duck didn't really save anybody. But it could have if it had wanted to.

To put it in its proper setting entails taking you down Long Island in the late summer, a routine I had always thought of as unspectacular until I had as a guest one time a friend from California. He looked across our shimmering bay and took on the wistful, hungry look that I get when I think of the long morning light on the scarlet canyons of Utah or the lupines carpeting the hills around San Francisco, which is his home. Home, we decided, is the place you take for granted. And as we sat tethered to the good earth only by a twenty-yard fringe of chigger grass on a high sand dune, and watched the blue bay frothing with little white caps from a south-west wind, I confessed to him that if this were in California or Oregon I would have written about it long ago.

The geography of Long Island is very easy to describe. It is a flat fish lying north-east of New York City, parallel with the Connecticut shore. Its nose burrows into Manhattan and its tail is a hundred miles out to sea, divided into two forks or flukes as distinct as those on a tarpon or a Spanish mackerel. Between these flukes lies Peconic Bay. We don't think of it as a big island, or for that matter as a long one, because it is nowhere more than about fifteen or twenty miles wide, and a hundred and twenty miles is nothing very adventurous in a land where the motor car is the universal horse, and where – once Mr Robert Moses had bullied enough imitation squires into selling the fringe of their estates – a system of motor parkways was built which whisks you without a traffic light through the first forty-five miles. You start out from Manhattan and glide along the parkway and come out an hour later near a place called Westbury. To your left, towards the north shore, are impressive estates in the English manner, and Theodore Roosevelt's grave on Oyster Bay. A couple of miles south of the parkway is Walt Whitman's birthplace. It is a little shingled farmhouse that can be gone through any time between ten and six, but for the same reason that no New Yorkers ever seem to go up the Empire State building or the Statue of Liberty, I don't know anybody who summers on Long Island who has ever been to Whitman's old house. The same cannot be said about the Roosevelt Raceway, where there are trotting races every night. Anyway, these are places you read about in petrol-station maps and tourist guides. To anybody who loves the island they are merely arrows

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somewhere along a private journey signifying you are close by a favourite diner or seventy miles from your, from our, destination.

Very soon the island narrows in its middle, the fashionable estates thin out into potato and cauliflower farms, for that, as much as anything, is what Long Island lives by. Aside from the white cement beneath your wheels you will soon see the island much as it was seen by its first inhabitants, by the Algonquin and Peconic Indians, and then three hundred years ago by the few families from Suffolk who tried a winter in Connecticut, didn't like it very much and sailed across the Sound to land at Southold. Most of the names along the highway that runs down the backbone of the island are Indian and English names – Happauge and Nesconset, and Lake Ronkonkoma and Nissequogue, not far from King's Park, St James and Smithtown, where – as in a hundred places through New England – the grace of Sir Christopher Wren's signature has been written on wooden spires, on white churches slender as birches. You have another thirty miles or more to go before the island splits into its two flukes, one running south through the fashionable Hamptons to Montauk, an old whaling-station in the days of Moby Dick; and the north fork going thirty unfashionable miles through Polish country to Greenport, a fishing town settled by Yankees and Italians.

In this last stretch of the solid body of the island you go through nothing but farms, past roadside stands selling clams or corn, and then through scrub pine country so ragged after a long-forgotten forest fire that it looks like a piece of tundra that got shipped down by mistake from way north of Hudson's Bay. Along this stretch there used to be a sign saying, to Yaphank, to the place that was once unsentimentally known as the 'last stop' for Europe and the war to make the world safe for democracy. It was there that Irving Berlin wrote *I hate to get up in the morning*. In the Second World War it again became Camp Upton. And shortly after the war was over, the yellowing sign was taken away and they put up something very ominous: a sign saying, 'Right for Brookhaven National Laboratory'. It is a wide, paved road leading, it appears, nowhere through the aforementioned tundra to a high chimney on the horizon. This chimney was designed in its way to make the world even safer for democracy. But few chimneys can have started such a hullabaloo among the natives who live in sight of it. For Brookhaven is a national research laboratory for what are called atomic products. And the Italians, the Poles and the Yankees at the end of the island were smitten with an uncomfortable misgiving about what might happen to them and their issue if the radio-active wastes got airborne on a stiff south wind. The scientists put out reassurances that anything harmful to man or beast would thin out harmlessly long before it blew out of the top of the chimney. Just for goodwill, though, they built the chimney high. Some people have a hard time understanding atomic energy, and a tall chimney is an old-fashioned guarantee that what comes out high

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in the air will stay high.

By this time you are almost at Riverhead, and the moment we turn left to go up the north fork you can put your hand out and notice that the temperature has dropped from five to ten degrees. Peconic Bay is a fine thing to look at and fish in but it also is a cooling plant for the island's flukes. It cools off the warm winds and tempers the cold. Now you notice that the little white Colonial churches of the old English towns begin to alternate with heavy brown wooden churches that look as if they had a suspicious kinship with the Kremlin. This is the potato country, and it is farmed mostly by Poles. So that now you have the Anaskys living by the Hortons, the Ryskos selling groceries to the Glovers, in little villages that run in the Anglo-Indian sequence: Aquebogue, Jamesport, Laurel, Mattituck and Cutchogue. Cutchogue is our town, and we go through it and turn down a two-mile peninsula that drops like a finger into the middle of the bay. On the end of it are sand dunes and a high bluff. And on the end of that am I, about to tell anybody still with me about the duck. There may be some misunderstanding if you have come with me so far, for one thing you would surely notice near Riverhead is a big duck farm, with nothing in sight but little willows by a stream lapping a small snowscape which, as you look at it closely, turns into several thousand ducks. They are the glory of Long Island, and once they are dead and eaten there is no satisfaction any more in ordering duck in a restaurant anywhere else in the world. But the duck I have in mind was something else.

On this particular night in midsummer I drove home late and found my wife standing on the edge of the bluff looking through field-glasses out into the middle of the bay. We couldn't quite make out what it was. It could have been a small boat drifting on its side, or an abandoned raft. The thing that chilled our blood, though, was a small, probably improvised, white flag fluttering pitifully, no humans in sight. We tore back to the house and phoned the Coast Guard. Need I tell you that the Coast Guard, on the other shore, had barely heard of Peconic Bay, which is merely five miles wide and thirty miles long. They said they couldn't possibly come over from the South Shore and suggested we call another station at Center Moriches, a mere forty miles down the island. We phoned them, and an alert, Clark Gable guttural said, 'Yes, ma'am, we'll be right over.'

We waited miserably for three-quarters of an hour or more. We have a quick twilight and in the end we lost sight even of the white flag. Then from behind the dunes lights swung into the sky, there was a peeping and roaring of motors, and suddenly a whole cavalcade of cars and jeeps, and station wagons and camp followers came clattering along behind the man with the duck. A duck, I should explain for those who were not in the amphibious forces, is like nothing that ever was, before the last war, on land or sea. The current model is a monster automobile about the length of two American trucks; its superstructure is a

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gleaming lifeboat. We could hardly see the pin-head of the driver and two of his lieutenants bobbing up at the top. They were, you understand, at the end of the road. Ten feet in front of them was scrub pine and sand-dunes and then the dark waters of the bay. We waved frantic directions at them, told them it was round the other end of the point.

Before our chattering group could catch its breath, the duck chugged and roared and ran forward, crushed the scrub pine, keeled over the sand-bank, slithered along the soft sand, paused to disinflate its tyres and with a prouder roar went thundering out into the bay with its headlights raking the water. It sloshed up to the raft or boat or whatever like a Great Dane nosing around a Pekinese. It turned almost at once, plunged back to the shore, made the same split-second pause to reinflate its tyres, dredged through the sand again, roared up the bank and over the smothered pines, and paused growling at our feet.

It turned out to have been a marker-buoy for a yacht race the next day. The yacht club had evidently forgotten to report its location to the Coast Guard.

The captain, or the man from Mars, or whoever drove the duck, leaned over the looming top. A hard eye gleamed through the darkness. He was obviously a veteran of Okinawa, or a twenty-five-missions-over-Germany man. 'Who,' he shouted, 'reported this – accident?'

My wife sidled forward. She is, or was at that moment, just going into her teens.

'I did,' she said. 'I'm awful sorry.'

The airborne eyes melted and we saw a flash of teeth.

'That's okay,' the voice said. 'We've been sittin' around chewing our nails for weeks hopin' somebody'd let us try out this gadget. Some stuff, eh?' He grinned and the engine roared again. And it crashed off into the night, followed by the jeeps and the cars and the station wagons, and all their occupants, delirious and purged as little boys. Which, as everybody knows, Americans are.

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DAMON RUNYON'S AMERICA

When Damon Runyon died the papers were black with columns of sentimental farewell from all the New York sports-writers who possess an expanding waistline and a yearning to break with the daily grind of football and the horses and begin to write some profitable short stories on the Runyon model. He is already becoming sweetened into a legend, and it sometimes does take the death of a man who summed up an era or a fashion to make you feel how dead and done with that era is. But Runyon has a peculiar transatlantic interest, because the people who read him in London were not the people who read and admired him here. His English reputation, among highbrows especially, was one of those puzzles that are politely accepted as insoluble by the Americans who run into them. It produced the same sort of shock to cross the Channel and hear intense French intellectuals sneering at the talents of Jean Gabin and Louis Jouvet and wishing the serious French *cinéma* could achieve the *vitalisme* of Jimmy Cagney or 'this tenderness, cynical yet profound' of Humphrey Bogart.

Maybe you are both right. But let us for once go beyond politeness and look into the life and style of a man who, by some trick of understanding or misunderstanding, seemed to a whole generation of Britons to be the most typical American writer of his day: tricky, racy, pungent, slick, amoral. I'd better say at once that I never met an American, unless he was a Broadway nightclub owner, or a racing tout, who took that view of Runyon. And the only intriguing thing about him to many literate Americans was his great reputation in Britain.

Like so many other people who later become identified with the spirit of the place they write about, Runyon was not born there. In fact he was twenty-seven before he ever hit New York. He was born, by a funny coincidence, in Manhattan, but Manhattan, Kansas, which in 1884 must have had a population of several hundreds. Runyon's father was an itinerant printer in the Midwest and West. Runyon followed his father, and it took him through a pioneer's trail of Kansas towns, from Manhattan to Clay Center to Wellington, and finally to Pueblo, Colorado, a small town, not much more than a rundown Indian village, just near what is now the Mesa Verde National Park, where you can see the towns built in the sides of cliffs by Indians whose high civilization crumbled about nine centuries ago. It seems to this day a very unlikely place to set the imagination agog with the 'dolls' and 'characters' of Runyon's imagination.

Young Runyon at fourteen ran away to enlist in the Spanish–American war. He

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Cover design by Andy Ross

ISBN: 978-1-5040-5407-2

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New York, NY 10038
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