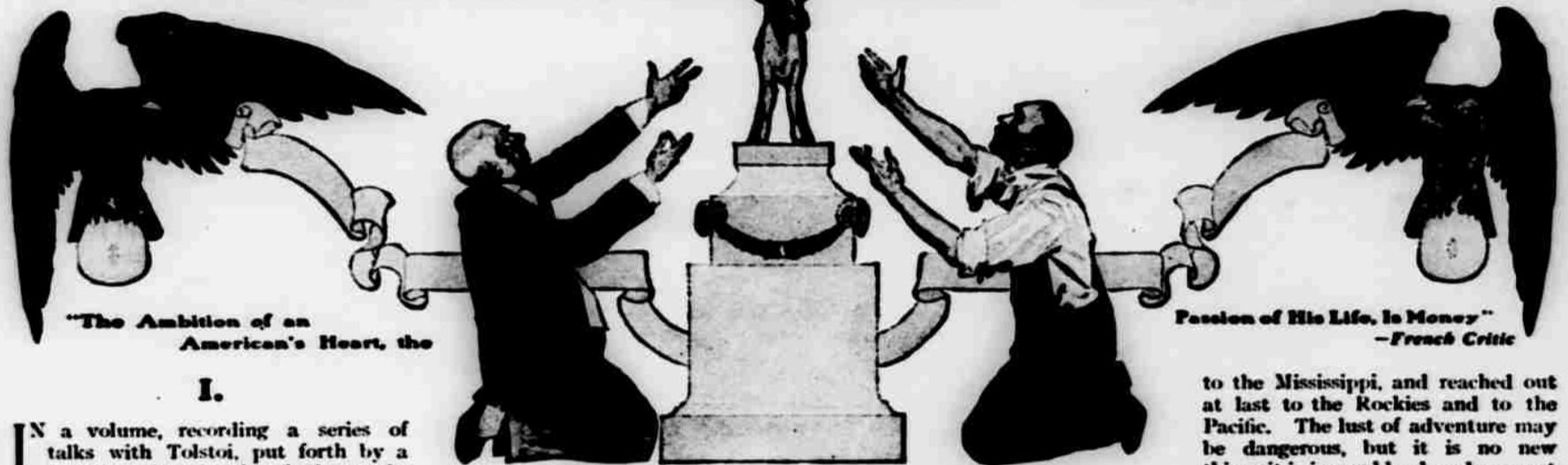


# AMERICAN CHARACTER

## A Frenchman Contends That We Are the Farthest Removed From Perfection



### I.

IN a volume, recording a series of talks with Tolstoi, put forth by a French writer in the final months of 1904, we are told that the Russian novelist thought the Doukhobors had attained to a perfected life, in that they are simple, free from envy, wrath and ambition, detesting violence, refraining from theft and murder, and seeking ever to do good. Then the Parisian interviewer asked which of the peoples of the world seemed most remote from the perfection to which the Doukhobors had elevated themselves; and when Tolstoi returned that he had given no thought to this question, the French correspondent suggested that we Americans deserved to be held up to scorn as the least worthy of the nations.

The tolerant Tolstoi asked his visitor why he thought so ill of us; and the journalist of Paris then put forth the opinion that the Americans are "a people terribly practical, avid of pleasure, systematically hostile to all idealism. The ambition of an American's heart, the passion of his life, is money; and it is rather a delight in the conquest and possession of money than in the use of it. The Americans ignore the arts; they despise disinterested beauty. And now, moreover, they are imperialists. They could have remained peaceful without danger to their national existence; but they had to have a fleet and an army. They set out after Spain, and attacked her; and now they begin to defy Europe. Is there not something scandalous in this revelation of the conquering appetite in a new people with no hereditary predisposition toward war?"

It is to the credit of the French correspondent that, after setting down this fervid arraignment, he was honest enough to record Tolstoi's dissent. But although he dissented, the great Russian expressed no surprise at the virulence of this diatribe. No doubt it voiced an opinion familiarized to him of late by many a newspaper of France and of Germany. Fortunately for us, it is not entirely true that foreign nations are a contemporaneous posterity.

Yet the opinion of foreigners, even when most at fault, must have its value for us, as a useful corrective of conceit. We ought to be proud of our country; but we need not be vain about it. Indeed, it would be difficult for the most devoted of us to find any satisfaction in the figure of the typical American which apparently exists in the mind of most Europeans, and which seems to be a composite photograph of the backwoodsman of Cooper, the negro of Mrs. Stowe and the Mississippi River-folk of Mark Twain, modified perhaps by more vivid memories of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Surely this is a strange monster; and we need not wonder that foreigners feel toward it as Voltaire felt toward the prophet Habakkuk—whom he declared to be "capable of anything."

It has seemed advisable to quote here what the Parisian journalist said of us, not because he himself is a person of consequence—indeed, he is so obscure that there is no need even to mention his name—but because he had shown the courage to attempt what Burke had declared to be impossible: to draw an indictment against a whole nation. It would be easy to retort on him in kind, for unfortunately—and to the grief of all her friends—France has laid herself open to accusations as

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sweeping and as violent. It would be easy to dismiss the man himself as one whose outlook on the world was so narrow that it seemed to be little more than what he could get through a chance slit in the wall of his own self-sufficiency. It would be easy to answer him in either of these fashions; but what is easy is rarely worth while, and it is wiser to weigh what he said and to see if we cannot find our profit in it.

Sifting the essential charges from out the mass of his malevolent accusations, we find this Frenchman believing that we Americans are narrow and grasping, selfish and arrogant. He alleges, first, that we care chiefly for making money; second, that we are hostile to art and to all forms of beauty; and third, that we are devoid of ideals. These three allegations may well be considered in turn, one by one, beginning with the accusation that we are mere money-makers.

Now, in so far as this Frenchman's belief is only an exaggeration of the saying of Napoleon's that the English were a nation of shopkeepers, we need not wince, for the Emperor of the French found to his cost that these English shopkeepers had a stout stomach for fighting. Nor need we regret that we can keep shop profitably in these days when the doors of the bankers' vaults are the real gates of the Temple of Janus, war being impossible until they open. There is no reason for alarm or for apology so long as our shopkeeping does not cramp our muscle or curb our spirit, for, as Bacon told us long ago, "walled towns, stored arsenals and armories, goodly races of horse, chariots of war, elephants, ordnance, artillery and the like, all this is but a sheep in a lion's skin, except the breed and disposition of the people be stout and warlike."

Even the hostile French traveler did not accuse us of any flabbiness of fiber; indeed, he declaimed especially against our "conquering appetite," which seemed to him scandalous "in a new people with no hereditary predisposition toward war." But here he fell into a common blunder; the United States may be a new nation—although as a fact its national flag is now older than the tricolor of France, the union-jack of Great Britain and the standards of those new-comers among the nations, Italy and Germany—the United States may be a new nation, but the people here have had as many ancestors as the population of any other country.

The people here, moreover, have "a hereditary predisposition toward war," or at least toward adventure, since they are, every man of them, descended from some European more venturesome than his fellows, readier to risk the perils of the Western ocean and bolder to front the unknown dangers of an unknown land. The warlike temper, the aggressiveness, the imperialistic sentiment—these are in us no new development of unexpected ambition; and they ought not to surprise anyone familiar with the way in which our forefathers grasped this Atlantic Coast first, then thrust themselves across the Alleghenies, spread abroad

to the Mississippi, and reached out at last to the Rockies and to the Pacific. The lust of adventure may be dangerous, but it is no new thing; it is in our blood, and we must reckon with it.

Perhaps it is because "the breed and disposition of the people" is "stout and warlike" that our shopkeeping has been successful enough to awaken envious admiration among other nations whose energy may have been relaxed of late. After all, the arts of war and the arts of peace are not so unlike; and in either a triumph can be won only by an imagination bold enough to foresee and to divine what is hidden from the weakling. We are a trading community, after all and above all, even if we come of fighting stock. We are a trading community, just as Athens was, and Venice and Florence. And like the men of these earlier commonwealths, the men of the United States are trying to make money. They are striving to make money not solely to amass riches, but partly because the possessing of money is the outward and visible sign of success, because it is the most obvious measure of accomplishment.

In his talk with Tolstoi our French critic revealed an unexpected insight when he asserted that the passion of American life was not so much the possession or the use of money as a delight in the conquest of it. Many an American man of affairs would admit without hesitation that he would rather make half a million dollars than inherit a million. It is the process he enjoys, rather than the result; it is the tough tussle in the open market which gives him the keenest pleasure, and not the idle contemplation of wealth safely stored away. He girds himself for battle and fights for his own hand; he is the son and the grandson of the stalwart adventurers who came from the old world to face the chances of the new. This is why he is unwilling to retire as men are wont to do in Europe when their fortunes are made. Merely to have money does not greatly delight him, although he would regret not having it; but what does delight him unceasingly is the fun of making it.

The money itself often he does not know what to do with; and he can find no more selfish use for it than to give it away. He seems to recognize that his making it was in some measure due to the unconscious assistance of the community as a whole, and he feels it his duty to do something for the people among whom he lives. It must be noted that the people themselves also expect this from him; they expect him to pay his footing sooner or later. As a result of this pressure of public opinion and of his own lack of interest in money itself, he gives freely. In time he comes to find pleasure in this as well; and he applies his business sagacity to his benefactions. Indeed, we can discover nothing more characteristic of modern American life than this pouring out of private wealth for public service. There is no parallel to it to be seen now in any country of the old world; and not even in Athens in its noblest days was there a larger-handed lavishness of the individual for the benefit of the community.

In no country of the old world again is the mere prestige of wealth less powerful than it is here. This, of course, the foreigner fails to perceive; he does not discover that it is not the man who happens