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The Riddle of America

by

Orlando Gibbons (New York)

I have lived in America for nearly twenty years, I have traveled through many States and spoken to people of all social classes and races. But every time my European friends ask me, «How are things in the USA? Is «our life» different from that in Europe? Is it easy to find friendship and love?», I find myself stuck for an answer. Finally, I will say something like: «Well, it will take time and effort to disentangle some of the problems but if you have a little patience . . .»

First, the obvious. The visitor from Europe usually stays in New York, with an occasional side trip to California, Florida or to one of the big Mid-Western cities. (Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh). Now New York, on the one hand reveals many typically American idiosyncrasies, but, on the other hand, it is a most atypical place. Like a magnet, New York attracts a certain type of young man. Here, the unsure young man from the «hinterland» finds—or hopes to find—the opportunity to become a painter, musician, actor, writer, Television director. Here, the same young man hopes to discover himself, to free himself from the deadly supervision of his small hometown. So, there gather in this stony desert of eight million souls, the real artists and the «phony» ones, the really gifted ones and those who think they are. There appears the young fellow who was the best tenor in the church of Podunk, South Dakota (inh.: 4000), and discovers after a year of heartbreaking disappointments, that there are waiting in the musical agencies a great number of excellent tenors, each unemployed, each determined to become a star.

During this first year, however, our young stranger comes to realize that it is rather easy to find love, or at least a reasonable substitute, among the stone fortresses of Manhattan. If he is able to break through his innate Puritanism (we'll speak about this later), if he is halfway attractive, he'll find a friend, and, for the first time in life, he might feel that he is free . . .

Perhaps, this is not so easy any more. Perhaps, it has changed as all of America has changed during the last four years. Because an atmosphere of fear has permeated the big cities. It started with McCarthy, it has made difficult things more difficult, and it shows no signs of abating. This atmosphere has also corroded the particularly charming American qualities of hospitality and generosity. In the old days, «one of the boys», when giving a party allowed his friends to bring some of their friends along. Today, you want to know your guests quite thoroughly. This, I hasten to add, is not quite true of smaller towns, not even of all big towns. It depends on the particular State, its laws, its police.

But in New York, many have destroyed their address books, many have stopped going out. Of course, there exist here, as everywhere in the world, devoted couples who have lived together for years, who never go anywhere except to carefully screened private parties to meet other «old» couples. But, to be truthful, these people constitute a minority. —

Today, if you give a party, you take great care in picking your friends, and you are even more careful if you meet a stranger. Since most State laws are as outdated as the Puritan, 18th-century mind which fashioned them, any encounter with the authorities is bound to be disastrous. And, lately, some Police commissioners have started to encourage the generally despised technique of using stool pigeons, that is employing young policemen, disguised to utmost perfection, who lead, or rather mislead, their victims into committing «punishable acts». It would take a really good psychiatrist to analyze the mental state of these policemen who will make love to a man and then arrest him.

If our young artist from the hinterlands has learned his lessons, he will, however, detect the detectives; he'll keep a weary eye on the handsome young fellow in army pants and tie-less, open sports shirt who, in a crowded bar, tells him all about his personal troubles. Most likely, he will also have encountered by now that typically American phenomenon: the bisexual who leads two separate lives. In this respect, New York is like any other American town. Many young men marry young, when they are around twenty-two. Then, after they have reached thirty, they discover that they also can «have fun» with their own kind. For many, this leads to frustrations, alcoholism, nervous breakdowns. Others, however, manage quite well. Whether their wives «know,» is difficult to say. I have been to many of these homes, and strangely enough, some of these marriages were successful. In Anglo-Saxon fashion, the wife knows without knowing; one must always remember one Puritan-American speciality: as long as something is not verbalized, it does not exist.

Often, the wife is a rather frigid type. Once she has a child, she can get along without much sex. One could even say, she married her husband because with one part of her mind she knew that he would look for love and/or sex somewhere else. And so we find a pretty huge secret society of bisexuals—this is true of any place in the USA, large or small. This half-homosexual, half-bisexual society is not organized; but once you have become a «member» of this underworld, you might be able to lead a life as happy (or unhappy) as in any European town.

Now this seems to contradict the many stories my European friends tell about the USA. The stories usually go like this: our visitor, arriving late at a small town in, let's say, Oklahoma, strolls into the next bar for a drink. Soon, a friendly, rangy «American» type draws him into conversation, appears intrigued by our friend's accent and manners. One drink leads to another and finally, to the European's amazement, the American turns out to be alright, even more, quite affectionate. Our European leaves Oklahoma (or Kansas or Texas or Louisiana), convinced that «all Americans are like this».

What our friend from the Old World doesn't take into account is this: Numerous American males have never outgrown the infantile stage of sex development. Their «éducation érotique» has been incomplete. It has stopped, so to speak, at the age of fifteen. Their sexuality therefore, is often amorphous. The object of love itself is not so important. Many things can arouse them, it depends to a large extent on the mood and the moment. Long before Kinsey, specialists knew that precisely

those males of the lower classes who pride themselves on their masculinity, are inclined to have sex with anything or anybody, if they are in need, if the opportunity is given and if they are not watched by their «gang». And here we must go back to our beginning, to what to me at least seems one of the keys of America: its undying Puritanism.

If you consider all sex sinful, if you put harsh punishment on any sexual activity, if at the same time, you elevate womanhood into something sacred. you burden the entire realm of sex with an enormous weight of guilt. In the USA, there have taken place several displacements. Firstly, the sexual interest has become directed very much toward what is known as the female «secondary characteristics». The «breast cult» has amazed even unsophisticated European observers. Secondly, while American civilization floods the male with stimuli to arouse his desires, it delivers few outlets to satisfy them. Advertisements, books, films, women's clothes, are designed to provide «sex interest», yet essentially they are a «tease». This is a technique to arouse a man's wishes, while at the same time withholding all means of satisfaction. Strangely enough, the lower classes have evolved a much easier code of behavior than the educated ones. Less conscious of their own drives, they can indulge in practices which, as long as they are not verbalized, simply do not exist for them. The college-educated young man usually can not escape the facts of his own life. Very often he knows he can not «have what he wants», or that what he wants is not the norm.

However, odd as it may sound, even among the educated young men we find many whose sex urges are amorphous, who manage to stay blind to their own mentality. And so the typically new world-pattern emerges in which an affair between males is simply not looked upon as sex but called «fun» — if it is given a name at all. To return to our fictitious story of the European visiting Oklahoma — as far as the young Oklahoman is concerned, nothing has happened. The next morning he goes to work with a hazy memory (soon drowned), that he had had too much to drink. —

One last detail to round out our picture. Quite a number of American males are late in «coming out». Again and again, I've met quite intelligent men who, with a tinge of regret, admitted that they had their first satisfactory sexual experience when they were about twenty-six. The true homosexual, fighting desperately against becoming an outcast, might even take longer. Contrary to European preconceptions, the average American soldier and sailor is not a hell-bound daredevil, but a sexually infantile, often generally insecure person. And there exist many American men who have never had any truly satisfying erotic experience. They are too inhibited, too filled with guilt. Perhaps, in a later article, we can discuss the problem from another angle: the fear, deeply ingrained in Americans, of being outsiders. It is this fear, always dormant in American society, which the McCarthy witch hunt of the last years has amplified to such preposterous and tragic dimensions.