IV

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

THE few years just before Roosevelt became President may fairly be looked upon as closing one period and beginning another in the history of the United States. It may be best to hazard here some crude and hasty remarks upon the course of the nation's development up till then. They will not be concerned with the romantic or tragic element in American history, that long-drawn struggle for making good the Union and for extirpating slavery, which affords a marked sequence of events and in which the work of strong personalities for good or evil is peculiarly easy to trace. This had reached its memorable climax while Roosevelt was a little boy.

Side by side with it, or rather blending with it and determining the course of the struggle, there had proceeded a movement displaying itself at first in the adventures of rugged and frugal pioneers, and culminating in the colossal performances of financier princes, sometimes invincibly unscrupulous, sometimes gigantically munificent, or, sometimes, both. In its earlier stages it is called the Winning of the West; its concluding stage was

the fashioning of a huge, amorphous dominion into an economic organism, richer far than any before it. Its pioneers belong to the past; so may, possibly before long, its princes. A great multitude of plain people, reasonably prosperous but not enchained by material prosperity, established over a wide region which the barrier of the Allegheny Mountains may be said to veil from many eyes in Europe and, perhaps, even some in the Eastern States, is its most enduring and truly distinguished result.

The immense size of the United States has always had an influence on its character, in many ways which a little imagination will suggest; perhaps the drawback which it was bound to impose upon some kinds of progress and on the growth of an alert and well-informed public opinion (such as England, which in some ways might appear a less educated country, may be credited with) is not sufficiently allowed for by Americans who are impatient with their own land. One great effect of that size, together with the remarkable natural wealth of the inland stretches remote from the Atlantic, is apparent from what has just been said. America was, well within living memory, a new country in a peculiar sense. As a political entity it is of course older than many other sovereign states, far older

than the French Republic, the late German Empire, or the Kingdom of Italy. In social respects a State like New Zealand, though settled only in our fathers' days, may by now have set up anew every essential element in the life of the country from which it was derived. Indeed, individually considered, Boston, Baltimore, Charleston, and a hundred other cities or communities in the United States are older than so great an English city as Birmingham; they look older, and are at least as redolent of a matured and mellow civilization. But in the life of the whole nation, powerful as is and always must be the influence of that old America and of traditions as deeply rooted in it as in England itself, an influence not less strong was exercised, from the time of the Revolution onward, by the growing population of a newly settled area along a frontier ever advancing toward the west.

The quick rise of a thoroughly democratic government in America was due less to principles taught in France, or to the germination in new soil of ideas long dormant in England, than to the facts of actual life in this new community. John Adams's dream of implanting an aristocratic element in the Republic was futile, and even Hamilton's passion for strong government could take little hold on

the public mind, when a growing and vigorous section of the people lived under conditions which made equality not a theory but a fact, bred in them an intense self-reliance, and, at first, gave them no prospect of getting much help from state authority even if they had desired it. Such conditions retained their influence in every part of the inland country long after its originally wild character had given place to civilization. They were the foundation of a democratic system which in the main justified the pride with which it was spoken of. Doubtless these same conditions also helped the growth of practices and methods ill adapted to keep democracy clean and vigorous later. People for whom government has few things of importance to do may easily grow content that it should be "a poor thing but their own." Far more important than the mistakes and vicious practices which the fathers of the West helped to fasten upon their country, and which loom so large in the merely political history of America, was the ordinary life of the great sound social democracy which they created.

The stage of actual pioneer life, of course, passed quickly enough in each successively settled district; nor is it to be imagined that later settlement, in the days of great railways and when the more

rugged and thickly wooded regions of the nearer West had been won, bore much resemblance to that of earlier days; or even that the development by capitalistic enterprise of cattle-farming in a still further West produced quite similar conditions. The better, or even the average, pioneer farmer required great qualities, but the West attracted some who were almost as shiftless as they were rough; and, as many English families know, a goodly selection of the scapegraces least wanted in their own homes have always adorned any kind of frontier life for a while. Conflict with savage enemies developed a strain of cruelty and treachery unsparingly dealt with in Roosevelt's historical pages, and the strain may not be quite worn out; yet, as in the somewhat comparable case of English sea-adventure, the nobler characteristics evoked have left a deeper mark in the nation's history. A pioneer population, as distinguished from staider settlers who follow in its wake, tends in part to extinguish itself, in part to form in a little while the best element in a more ordered society.

Nothing could be less suggestive of the wilderness or of savagery now than the wide agricultural regions once called the West, though considerable hardship and isolation remain. Yet what has been said of the equality, the sense of freedom,

and the indifference to Government, of those Westerners who shocked and prevailed over the more conservative founders of the Republic, long remained hardly less true of their descendants or successors in the Middle West. Few settle as farmers in a newly opened country except self-reliant and adaptable men of considerable though orderly energy. The policy of Government from the first, wisely no doubt, was to encourage the growth of population by almost gratuitous grants of land in equal amounts. The ordinary Western farm is one hundred and sixty acres, or a quarter of one of the square-mile sections, bordered by mud roads, into which a great part of the United States is mapped. In the central regions of the Mississippi basin, the fertility of the land is so extraordinary that it could be cropped with the same crop for a generation, before manure became necessary or even useful; with the consequence that a good start could be made with the little capital which could easily be borrowed. Thus those ideals of a highly individualist society, which fascinated European economists and political philosophers in the middle of the nineteenth century, were fulfilled in an extraordinary degree in the process by which the still predominant section of the present American Commonwealth has been built up.

The social problems, which the industrial development and the preceding agricultural development of England brought quickly in their train, had for long no existence for the bulk of America. Of the few things which Western settlers demanded and got from public authority one, however, demands mention. An effective system of elementary education was quickly set up everywhere; and if in some respects the vision of its promoters may seem limited, yet amid these wholesome conditions the simple accomplishment of reading meant, to characters of which Lincoln's is the preëminent example, the power of teaching themselves what no teacher can impart. In one last and supreme respect the temper of the pioneer continues to this day to affect all America. Most families had come from far and adapted themselves to new conditions and tried their hands on new tasks, or remembered how their predecessors and saw how their neighbors had done so. The spirit of such enterprise was an heirloom in the most contented and well-established homes.

This process of land settlement was long drawn out in America, and long continued to have a far greater importance than mercantile or mining developments or the manufacturing ventures which, till a recent time, lived in some real fear of dumping

from England. But in its later stages it drew after it the growth of a strangely contrasting phenomenon, capitalist enterprise — meaning, of course, such enterprise as cannot start at all without much accumulated money behind it — of unexampled magnitude and audacity. In the first place, of course, agricultural growth involved that enormous amount of railway construction which had proceeded far enough by 1870, or soon after, to make America the chief source of food supplies to our country, and Europe the great market of Western farmers till the growth of American manufactures should provide them with a great market nearer home. The early era of great railway construction in England produced some now forgotten scandals. The era when competing enterprise in America was rushing along, with less supervision of its financial operations than exists in the case of our railways here, covering the West with a network of parallel or interlacing tracks, is a subject on which an Englishman, who happens to have received his portion of his father's goods in American railway investments, should not be encouraged to speak at large. It must, however, be said that railway rates excited as keen an interest there as here, were not there at first thought a proper subject for government regulation, have tended to be

low, but have caused bitterness owing to favors given to one trader over another; that the exceedingly difficult question of the relative public advantages of competition and combination had become a burning one by the end of the last century, while public policy was still more hostile to combination than with us; above all, that operations concerned with railways became in the years after the Civil War the source of many large and some gigantic private fortunes. The country had reached by then a stage at which the development of its resources could proceed with great rapidity, if the ambition of able private undertakers applied itself to the task. The construction and management of railways, and therewith the management or manipulation of their finances, offered not of course the only but for some years the most conspicuous field for great adventurers, attracting to it no small share of the outstanding ability of the country.

Of the railwaymen of mark many no doubt were people of high constructive talent, employed with great benefit to the public; some were visionary optimists such as become dishonest when in difficulties; not a few were notable thieves in a country which had not developed its thief-catching machinery to any high degree of efficiency. Anyway the great convulsion and the heroic efforts of the

Civil War were followed by a period in which America corporately was fast becoming the richest nation of the earth, and its average inhabitants were becoming more prosperous than those of any other land; but its leading inhabitants in its own eyes and those of the world were men of abnormal wealth. That wealth compelled attention by its sudden growth, its disproportion to the ordinary rewards of good service, and the difficulty of its scarcely fortunate possessors in enjoying it. It excited disgust through the knowledge that it was often ill-gotten. For a while it might cause in a great number of Americans a keener sense than ever that the world is a place to get rich in, and a duller sense than ever that not all methods that succeed are admirable. But a widespread and deep reaction in men's minds must follow, and by the close of the nineteenth century it was ready to show itself in many ways.

Meanwhile, however, the growth of means of communication had made possible a more startling development of capitalism. It is commonly associated with the name "trusts," but its essence is the replacement of moderate-sized industrial concerns by very large concerns, each with a tendency to swallow up or amalgamate with its business rivals, sometimes a tendency also to acquire and

direct the businesses which supply its raw material and the businesses which distribute its products. Such concerns, of course, demand the services of many gifted subordinates, but they are generally the creation of one man of great and imaginative daring. The building-up of a big business in a special line is of course one thing; the absorption of rivals and the bidding for monopoly is another; but they tend to be combined. There is absorbing interest in the economic study of the conditions which in different countries and at different times are favorable to a big business or set the limit to its growth. Where do the economies derivable from great size end, and where do the unwieldiness and slackness of the overgrown organism begin?

The line must be drawn differently under different conditions, but in more than one respect the conditions of America specially favored gigantic growth. One of these was the facility for marketing (the first essential to big business) afforded by the existence of great multitudes of customers, all easily accessible by railway, all accustomed to ordering goods from far, and with requirements and tastes which in many ways were remarkably uniform. Thus the close similarity of all the farms along hundreds of miles of railway made possible a great "combine" in the agricultural-implements trade.

Beginning soon after 1880, great businesses and great combinations aiming at monopoly came more and more to astonish and alarm America. The advantage or disadvantage of these great organizations to the public who buy from them is a more difficult question than it might be thought. No big business could establish itself except by offering sound goods cheap at the outset. Even if it obtained a monopoly, there would be a point beyond which the raising of prices would mean a loss through the shrinking of custom; and actual monopoly can rarely be reached and still more rarely kept secure. Thus it is questioned whether the purchasing public has ever quite lost the advantage which a very great industrial concern has begun by offering it. So in some degree the enmity which instinct and the tradition of the Common Law aroused against the monopolist or would-be monopolist may have been mistaken.

Essentially it was not far wrong. The experiment, whether a real private monopoly in some necessary commodity would be a great calamity, is one which no sane people would have wished to try out, especially as behind the big industrialists in different lines there began to loom the figures of the great financiers who might imaginably come to control them all. The world is not likely to

come entirely into the ownership of a handful of magnates, but it sometimes comes near enough. And the ambition of the man who chooses to be immensely rich must often if not always be of a more or less maniacal kind. Then too, in this process of wealth-getting, it is not only the great industrialist who has given obvious value for what wealth he gets — like Carnegie, the sincere author of the saying that "a man who dies very rich dies disgraced" — who waxes fat. The financier who engineered a combination of a hundred companies might realize possibly more than the total original worth of those companies, by putting upon the market, in the form of shares in a new company, the estimated additional value created by the fact of their combination. Further, apart from the doubtful loss or gain which might result to the consumer from monopoly, there was the unquestionable social loss arising from the quick extinction of a number of smaller ventures. And the process of their extinction was often brutal and base. Sale at a great temporary loss next door to the little business which was to be ruined; every form of malign ingenuity to hamper a rival; corruption of his employees; even, in certain recorded instances, the actual subornation of crime, were the agencies freely used. So it came to pass that in an America

once prone to worship the rich, connection even with the administration of Mr. Rockefeller's stupendous and most wisely directed charities became in the popular mind a disqualification for any kind of elective office.

The growth of industry went along with the admission, during many years, of vast swarms of immigrants, drawn no longer as the earlier (largely agricultural) immigration had been from the Northern countries of Europe, but mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe, aggregated in large masses in mining districts and large towns, and apt to preserve for long their own language and national ways. Hence comes the problem of assimilating an alien population, which evokes and justifies passionate insistence (such as that of Roosevelt) upon "Americanism." Hence too labor questions, such as European countries had known earlier, arose in somewhat acute forms and began to agitate relatively excitable and politically uneducated newcomers. Native opinion and that of the earlier comers from England, Ireland, and Germany was not very sympathetic to what we call the cause of Labor.

The real bulk of the country remained on the whole agricultural; talented and enterprising youth from it was drawn increasingly into towns but

readily found employment in trade and in the positions of foremen and the like, and was seldom attracted to the exercise of high manual skill. The tending of machinery found handy and generally docile human instruments in the newcomers. Their wages were good, judged by their own old standards extremely good. But rank abuses grew up in many places in a country where both the Federal constitution and the slow awakening of the general public to coming needs kept factory and sanitary law very backward. Great American employers seldom fall into the mistake of supposing that low wages are in themselves an economy; nor American workmen into that of favoring restriction of output. But the cleavage of sympathies between employers and manufacturing or mining wage-earners was somewhat marked and harsh. Strikes were apt to take a violent even a murderous form, such as they had only had in England in a small area and for a short time just before 1870; and strike-breaking could be pretty violent too. The earlier Labor Unions roused antagonism by great mistakes; and, while there was much to make the possible insurrection of labor peculiarly menacing, public opinion had not and has not yet met the idea of labor combination in so tolerant and friendly a spirit as here. Incidentally it may be remarked that

the efforts of any Trade Union to force all workers in its trade into its ranks, though acquiesced in here, have excited much displeasure among Americans, including Roosevelt.

The South remained in a temper not yet wholly reconciled and did not yet take its full part in the nation's life; and the riddle of the Negro remained and remains unsolved. That larger view of the relations of North and South and of white and black, which Lincoln possessed, might not have enabled even him to produce great results quickly; but the power had passed with his death to men who, with the pathetic exception of Andrew Johnson, his drunken and undignified successor in office, were totally destitute of his vision.

It may be largely for this reason that the tone of national politics had become for almost a generation depressed. But a very great war, for all its possible glory and nobility of prevalent motive, seems generally to be followed by a period of moral depression, through which the high aspirations which it may have kindled must struggle hard to survive. The physical and spiritual flower of young manhood in the nation concerned has always been in some measure extirpated, while the pacifist and the profiteer remain and flourish. More important still, the high enthusiasms which such a war stirred

up do not easily find their appointed outlet in the vaguer and more perplexing problems of returning peace; so that in many they are quenched. All the time mediocre natures have been driven by public anxiety to a keener zest for vulgar pleasures. Anyhow the Civil War was no exception to the common rule in this: that the period immediately following it was not felt to be one of general moral uplifting. Coming as it did moreover upon public departments little trained to cope with such matters, and coinciding as it did in its later stages with a great growth of trade, the Civil War contributed something, by scandals connected with war contracts, to the magnification of dishonesty in business.

In spite of occasional acute depression, the time that followed was one of brilliant business growth which must in any case have brought temptations. The political party to which the triumph of the Union seemed to give a title to long unshaken power could long bank upon its past record of usefulness. It was in the main also the party of the solid business interests, and the progress of the country seemed mainly to depend upon assuring the prosperity of those interests. A certain flatness of political tone was perhaps inevitable. Without assuming for a moment that the prominent persons of the time were in the main at all unworthy per-

sons, an outsider may note the fact that to the outside world the surface aspect of American life, at this time of great progress in wealth, was in some respects slightly gaudy and in others decidedly dingy, and may conjecture that this was far more acutely felt in America, though undoubtedly a change for the better, in matters to which allusion has been made, had become manifest some time before the end of the century. American intellect, outside business affairs, added to the general aspect of depression, prone as it became to a self-conscious and over elaborate culture with no root in the soil of common life, and tempted as were some of its votaries to the not very noble desire to be English rather than American.

Such or in some degree such — for I would repeat how fully conscious I am of the crudeness and probable inaccuracy as well as the fragmentary nature of this survey — had been the period which was beginning to pass when high authority and leadership came to Roosevelt — to a man conversant and sympathetic in a rare degree with the many different sections of his country, alive to its latent greatness and its actual shortcomings, qualified to play a man's part (not a superman's) in the manifold kinds of progress upon which the hearts of thousands besides himself were set.