

# WE ALARM AND AMUSE M. CAPEK

Author of "R. U. R." Trembles to See Our Ideals of Speed and Quantity Imposed on Europe, Where Art Is Still Leisurely and Where to Live Is More Important Than to Succeed

Recently Karel Capek, the Czech playwright, who became known to us largely through his "R. U. R."—a play depicting a machine civilization and its dire consequences—spoke out vigorously against the "Americanization of Europe." The New York Times asked him to set out the reasons that led him to make the attack. He has done so in the following article.

By KAREL CAPEK

TO a prominent American I expressed my doubts about the ideals of Americanism: I do not know how it came to your ears, but now you ask me to repeat my objections to your American readers.

Imagine that I do so, and that having done so I decide to see for myself whether that which I have assumed to be true is really the truth. Can you guarantee to me that on landing on American soil I shall not be quartered in punishment by four Ford cars? Or that I shall not be hanged upon a sixty-four-story gibbet 230 meters high, built of steel and cement in twenty-seven and a half minutes? Let the responsibility fall upon you—and now I begin.

## Knowledge of America

Of course, I have never been in America; instead I have read with great diligence heaps of articles on America, all written by Europeans, for nobody can be so frantically enthusiastic over the New World as a European who has spent a couple of months there without being run over by a motor car. Old Americans whom I meet in Europe speak of America with far greater skepticism, usually, than these newly baked Yankees, who are prouder that they have ceased to be greenhorns than that they were born with a human soul.

It seems to me that American ideals are far more dangerous for us Europeans than for born Americans. I do not ask whether American ideals are good for America, but whether they are good for Europe. My question is whether Europe should Americanize herself, as many people imagine she should.

There are people who wish that America would one day civilize old Europe as Europe once civilized the old empire of the Aztecs. I admit that this prospect terrifies me as the cultural ideals of the European conquerors terrified the old Aztecs, and in my

Aztec tongue I utter a war cry against this endangering of our European reservation.

Perhaps I should start with cultural ideals, but permit me to begin with something more simple, namely, bricks and the bricklayer's job.

I built myself a little house, small, yellow

and white, like a hard-boiled egg; you have no notion how complicated such a thing is in Europe. Before my house was finished, we went through a strike of bricklayers, carpenter, cabinetmakers, parquet layers and tilers; the building of the house proceeded as a two-year social struggle.

As long as the work went on at all, the workmen had enough time between the laying of two bricks to chat a little, to drink beer, to expectorate and to scratch their backs. For two years I went to see how my house was growing. It was a piece of my personal history; my relation to the house grew into an endless intimacy.

In the course of these two years I learned a great many details about the labor and the life of bricklayers, cabinetmakers, canteen keepers and other bearded, serious and joking men. All this is walled in between the bricks and the beams of my house, and you can understand that after so many difficulties I cling to it with a certain wild patriotism and that I would not exchange it for any other.

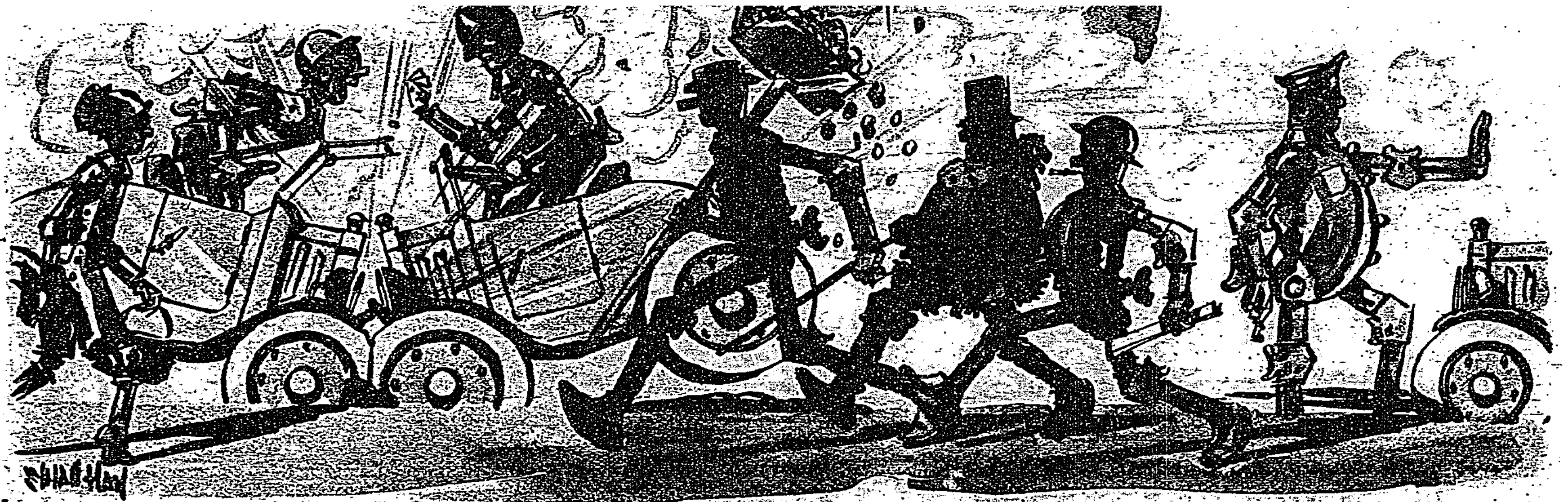
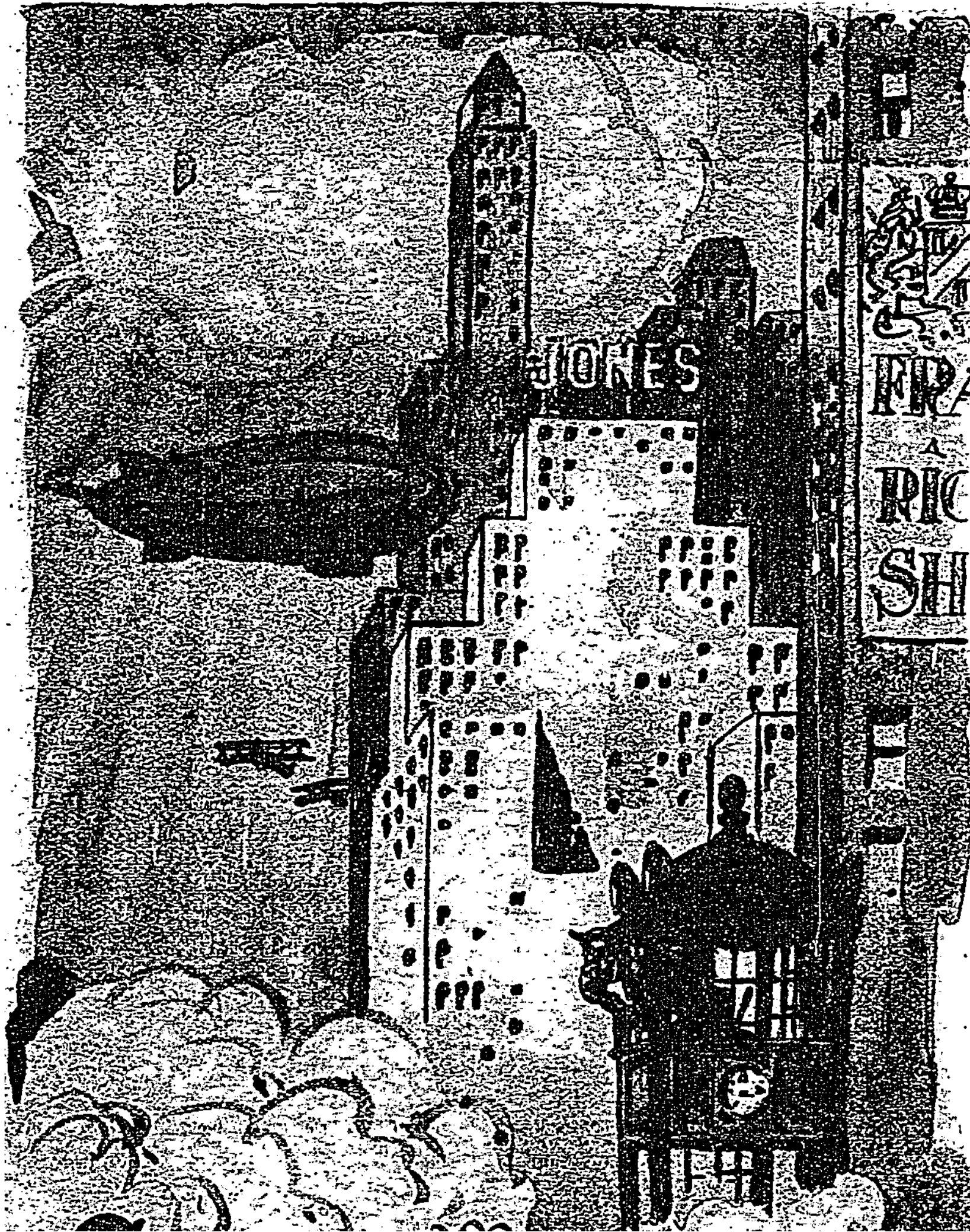
Now, you in America, you would perhaps build such a house in three days; you would come in your Ford cars with a finished steel construction, tighten some screws, pour several sacks of cement into it, jump into your Ford cars and drive away to build somewhere else. It would be far cheaper and quicker; it would have all the technical and economic advantages; but I have a feeling that I should be less at home in my house if it had grown up with such unnatural speed.

## Quality vs. Quantity

Do you remember how Homer describes the shield of Achilles? To describe how this shield was made, the blind poet needed a whole chant of the Iliad; you in America would cast and mold it in ten thousand pieces in a day. I admit that in this way it is possible to make shields cheaply and successfully, but the Iliad could not be made in this way. My little house, like the shield of Achilles, is not only a piece of work, but also, above all, a chapter of life. A chapter of a hard and gay life.

Till now things in Europe have moved slowly. It is possible that an American tailor makes three coats while our tailor makes one; it is possible that an American tailor earns three times as much as ours, but I ask whether he consumes a three-times larger portion of life, whether he is three times as much in love as our tailor, whether he whistles three times as many songs at his work, and whether he has three times as many children?

As I understand it, American efficiency is concerned with the increase of output and not with the (Continued on Page 23)



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increase of life. It is true that a man works in order to live; but it seems he lives also at the same moment that he works. It is possible to say that a European workman is a very inefficient working machine; but that is so because he is not a machine at all.

He is a bricklayer not only that he may lay bricks but also that he may chat about politics, or about yesterday, drink beer and celebrate blue Monday, and, on the whole, live a full bricklayer's life. I think he would scold severely the man who should try to prove to him that the highest purpose of a bricklayer is speed.

Speed! Rush! That is the new evangel called upon us from across the ocean. If you desire to be rich, increase your speed and efficiency. Cease unnecessary talking and resting and hurry up with your work. A man is not measured except by the index number of his efficiency. I do not know whether America is really living under the whip of this watchword, but this is the slogan which the Americanized Europeans offer to us as a program of progress and reconstruction in Europe.

## Speed and Quantity

The question is whether speed and quantity can really be taken as a measure of activity. There are things—and they can be found in abundance up to the present days in this old Europe—that are difficult to measure by units of labor. We cannot measure the thoughts of a philosopher by asking how many of them are produced in an hour. Art does not count the time necessary

for making a statue or writing a poem. On the contrary, man had to hurry very little when such things were produced.

Europe was in very little haste when she made her cathedrals and her philosophic systems. A man who wants to think out something does not hurry, watch in hand. He resembles more a man who is idle and wasting his time. I am afraid that your William James appeared to his surroundings somewhat of a procrastinator. I would wager that your Walt Whitman, while still alive, enjoyed the reputation of an idler, a loafer, when he was rambling about Brooklyn with his fluttering mane.

In old Europe we are astonished to note how little hurried those people were who left behind them great vestiges. Men who made revolutions did not have their time measured out. Some of the greatest activities of the human mind developed under unheard-of squandering of time. Europe wasted her time for many thousands of years; this is the source of her inexhaustibility and fertility.

I heard of a prominent American who had much to do in Europe. In trains he dictated letters to his secretary; in automobiles he held his conferences; his councils took place at dinner. We primitive Europeans usually eat at dinner, just as we listen during the playing of music; probably we waste our time in both instances, but certainly we do not waste our life.

We might speak of the broad-minded laziness that has enriched Europe with some of her highest values. A certain laziness is needed for the full appreciation of life. The man who is in much of a hurry certainly arrives at his goal, but only at the price of missing the thousands of things that he passes on his way.

The second watchword which the New America exports to poor Europe is the great word "Success." Start as a lift boy and become a steel or a cotton king! Think every day of how you can advance! Success is the aim and thought of life! It is really astounding how this watchword begins to demoralize Europe.

This old continent has a certain heroic tradition; here people have been living and dying for faith or for truth or for other somewhat irrational things, but never for success. The gods and the heroes are not folk who want "to get on." There are certain deeds and tasks to which success must be sacrificed beforehand.

It is one of the fortunes of Europe that Shakespeare did not meet with success and become a famous dock owner for instance; or that Beethoven was not a success and so did not develop into a manufacturer of cotton cloth. Balzac attempted in vain to become a rich man; the world can be called lucky that he did not succeed and did not get out of debt.

Foolish Europe found time to interest herself in thousands of things other than successes, and these things have survived, while all the successes, no matter how many there were in history, went to the devil. How many things would have been left undone if those who did them had been thinking of success!

## The Question of Success

If we should judge people according to their success, it would be shown that ninety out of a hundred have met rather with hard luck in life than with success, and scarcely one in a thousand would dare to say that he really had been successful in life. European morale, which has experienced this fact since the days of King Croesus, has assured us since time immemorial of different values of life than those of success. If I am not mistaken, it talks here and there of the futility of all success, inspiring us to look for values higher and more permanent.

The third watchword that menaces us is "Quantity." People from America bring to us a strange and fantastic belief that only the biggest is big enough. If a hotel is to be built, it must be the Biggest Hotel in the World. If something is to be worth seeing it must be the biggest of its kind. The Creator of the world, it seems, was not infected with this passion for bigness, for He did not create this earth as the biggest of all the celestial bodies.

The Creator of Europe made her small; moreover, He divided her into smaller parts, so that our hearts might rejoice not in bigness but in diversity. America corrupts us with her predilection for huge dimensions. Europe will lose herself as soon as she makes this fanaticism of dimension her own. Her measure is not quantity but quality. She is a beautiful Venus, not a Statue of Liberty.

But enough. I could still mention a dozen ideals which we European natives call American ideals—the twelfth of which would bear the name of "Dollar." This would open another chapter, and the space given to me is exhausted. I finish, therefore, with that with which people more far-sighted and more political than I would begin.