

# Things "Américain" in France

**T**O EMERSON AMERICA was another name for opportunity; but to the Frenchman "*Américain* may signify probity or deceit, bombast or ability. It may imply a friendly compliment or be legitimate cause for a libel suit." So writes John Montague in *The Stars and Stripes*, published in Paris as "the official newspaper of the second A. E. F." The article might have puzzled or served, as the case may have been, members of that large returning army, who during their earlier sojourn on French soil had no time for philological research. We are not to imagine that the terms for things supposed to be American are souvenirs of that war-time sojourn. Rather are they the result of the recurrent tourist invasion, and their variety and contradictoriness are such that, as Mr. Montague asserts, "in the one case you give cordial thanks to the man who uses the term 'Américain' concerning you; in another, you direct a smacking knock-out blow toward his nose. It all depends on the nuance." Here are some examples:

"**COUP DE POING AMÉRICAIN:** A blow with the closed fist in which knucklers (or a piece of iron) have been concealed. Supposed to have originated with the bandit gangs of New York.

"**HOMARD À L'AMÉRICAIN:** The American method of preparing lobster. Here, indeed, is one good thing that came out of America—if it did! At least, all the restaurant menus of Paris say so.

"**ELEVER À L'AMÉRICAIN:** To rear young women in the American fashion; to give them ample liberty, have confidence in their capacities to protect themselves; allow them to attend the theater, take walks, etc., with a male companion, minus the vexatious supervision of a chaperon.

"**ŒILLADE AMÉRICAIN:** Making amorous eyes at the fair sex in vulgar fashion. Why this custom, certainly limited to no nationality, should be described as American, nobody knows. But, so it is—in France. The expression has been in the dictionary for half a century.

"What a curious collection of contrasts! *Américain* is used to define as dissimilar things as a confidence game and a manner of fixing your teeth. (*Américain artistique dentaire*: from the Paris telephone book!). It may denote a system of business organization or a manner of getting married.

"**RASE À L'AMÉRICAIN:** Shaved in the American fashion; minus mustache.

"**ONCLE D'AMÉRIQUE:** Literally, an uncle from America; in the theater: a very rich uncle who arrives at the critical moment of the drama to pay the debts of his nephew and send everybody home happy. In life: an uncle, forgotten for years, who dies and unexpectedly leaves a big fortune to his heirs.

"**GROG AMÉRICAIN:** A cold-weather drink, effective for killing colds, consisting of rum, lemon juice, sugar, and hot water. It is often served at a **BAR AMÉRICAIN**, of which there are thousands in Paris. They consist frequently of mere 'holes in the wall,' where a bartender is busy serving drinks to thirsty Americans and others, who sit on high stools or lean against the bar.

"**GLACAGE AMÉRICAIN:** A manner of starching shirts, cuffs, and collars which supposedly originated in America. Also **DRY-CLEANING AMÉRICAIN:** a barbarism, which makes the French purists foam with fury, requiring no definition.

"Diverse Americans provoke contradictory epithets. Intrepid Charles Lindbergh and his epoch-making flight typify *audace américaine*, but Phineas T. Barnum, that master of self-glorification, evokes visions of *bluff à l'américaine*, which is supposed to be our great national trait. Irving Berlin is representative of *jazz américain*, while Henry Ford is the symbol of *industrie américaine*—'Taylorization,' large-scale production, high wages,

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and superlative emphasis upon machinery. Cardinal Gibbons is hailed as the apostle of *américanisme* (absolute separation of Church and State), while *Hawkeye*, James Fenimore Cooper's character with the penetrating eyes, inspired *œil américain*. For nothing, say the French, escapes from the keen, piercing glance of the 'American eye.' And so the dissimilarities continue:

"UN SHAKE-HAND AMERICAIN: A cordial, energetic manner of shaking hands. Used by Abel Hermant in 'Les Transatlantiques' in which he satirizes an American family traveling abroad.

"GOUT AMERICAIN: American taste as applied to champagne. Practically equivalent to 'extra dry.'

"GENRE AMERICAIN: In the American manner, particularly as regards business methods. Progressive; efficient; daring; wide-awake; practical; industrious. Example: the boy who works his way through college; the man who literally is architect of his own fortune.

"MARIAGE A L'AMERICAINE: A marriage in which the bride brings no dot with her. Many a Romeo goes elsewhere to wed when his prospective father-in-law tells him: 'You can have her hand and heart, and I give you both my benediction. But, remember! it will be a *mariage à l'américaine*.' But Romeo, being practical and cynical and French, remarks: 'No, thank you! I will seek another Juliet.' In certain provinces, this phrase also signifies a speedy marriage, accomplished with the minimum of formalities; an elopement.

"Used alone, *américain* may evoke contradictory concepts. It may denote a Canadian or a Peruvian, altho in 90 per cent. of the instances it refers to citizens of the United States. A popular one-act play, quite seriously, places the Ohio River in Ecuador! In the Midi of France, *américain* is used to describe a Frenchman who lived in the United States but returned to his native heath, usually with a fortune. *Américaine* is also the name given to a phaeton, a type of four-wheeled carriage, used in France from 1840 to 1860. On the Avenue de l'Opéra, there is a big electric sign which reads: 'Americans! visit Spain! This is a duty you owe to yourself and to your race.' Inevitably, this does not refer to citizens of the United States. Maybe the advertiser wanted to save money since the prefix *Hispano*—would have meant more electric lights and more current!"

The most derogatory use of the adjective is said to be when it is coupled with the word *vol* (stealth). "*Vol à l'américaine* is a confidence game; stealth accomplished by deceit; a swindling operation in which advantage is taken of the confidence reposed by the victim in the thief." The inventors and users of the term evidently believe that the first *vol à l'américaine* was perpetrated in America, tho Mr. Montague finds Jacob's theft of Esau's birthright a sufficiently good case in point. He turns to Larousse, the author of the French Dictionary:

"*Vol à l'américaine* is susceptible of numerous modifications, but the primary object is always to prevail upon the victim to exchange his pocketbook for another, apparently containing more cash than his own. The principal thief, who often assumes the characteristics of an American (hence, the name of the operation), is aided by an accomplice known, in slang, as the 'gardener.' He tells his chosen victim that he has just arrived in Paris, that he is unacquainted with the city, and would like to have the victim serve as guide, also act as guardian for his valuables. In fact, he gives his pocketbook filled with money—counterfeit notes or blank paper, it should be noted—to his victim, but asks the latter, as a mark of good faith to yield his pocketbook which, of course, contains real money. After the exchange has been made, the swindler disappears. Too much sympathy, however, should not be given to the victim, for he often enters into the operation with a secret desire to benefit thereby."

Since Larousse prepared this definition some decades ago, we are told, this swindling trick has had numerous variants.

"Hardly a week passes but what the American newspapers in Paris announce that some compatriot has been victimized. A favorite device is the following: the swindler narrates that he has fallen heir to a colossal fortune. In fact, he is now on his way to Rome to contribute part of his wealth to papal charities. But, being a philanthropist has its difficulties! How can you be sure that the recipients of your charity are genuinely deserving?"

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Does Mr. Prospective Victim know of any charities which he can sincerely recommend? Certainly, he does. He is only too anxious to aid his new-found friend in distributing his new-found wealth. At this time, the principal thief asks, ‘How do I know that you are trustworthy? How can I be sure of your honesty?’ The accomplice, who has been present all the while, immediately proves his honesty by saying, ‘Here’s my pocketbook. It contains ten thousand francs. What will you give in exchange?’ He is given another bill-fold which actually contains real money. The victim, not to be outdone, remarks, ‘I don’t have any great sum, but here’s \$500.’ So, he accepts another pocketbook, apparently well-filled. The three ‘friends’ separate. They decide to meet for dinner. But, they never meet. The victim kept the engagement and while waiting for the others, he examined the new pocketbook. He opens it. Horrors! it is filled with waste paper or Confederate notes or something equally valueless.

“And this, says the official French dictionary, is *vol à l’américaine*. Consequently, if somebody happens to call you a *voleur à l’américaine*, your first duty is to punch him in the nose.

“In conclusion, it may be asked: to what extent is the adjective *américain* justified in the foregoing expressions? Somebody has said, nations can be judged by the epithets which they provoke. If this be so, then France’s judgment of America’s odd, crazy-quilt of contrasts, some of them deserved, some of them not, but each typifying a fraction of the heterogeneous, elemental mass of human beings who compose our country.”