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AMERICAN CLASSICS™

American Utopias

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The Communistic Societies of the United States
by

CHARLES NORDHOFF

Foreword and Afterword by
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FOREWORD

Contemporary readers often confuse Charles Nordhoff's name with that of his grandson, Charles Bernard Nordhoff, the author of the *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and with the son Walter Nordhoff, the California-born engineer, journalist, and rancher, who himself wrote a popular novel of ranch life, *The Journey of the Flame*, in the nineteen-thirties.

The “writing Nordhoffs” — as they have been called — were descended from one of the most important journalists and public commentators of the nineteenth century and the author of numerous political and social commentaries, including *The Communistic Societies of the United States* published in 1875.

Born in Prussia in 1830, Charles Nordhoff enjoyed a life and career that paralleled the course of American development for that century. His parents emigrated to the Michigan frontier, then moved in 1835 to the growing city of Cincinnati, where Charles became a printer before enlisting in the United States Navy in 1844. After circling the globe as a sailor, he left the service, became a journalist, and — like Charles Dana — used his experiences as the basis for a series of books beginning with *Man-of-War Life* (1855) and ending with *Stories of the Island World* (1857).

In 1857 Harper & Brothers hired him as an editor, and for the next forty years he wrote books and commentaries on American life. As managing editor of the New York *Evening Post*, he wrote *Secession is Rebellion*, *The Freedmen of South Carolina*, and *America for Free Working Men*. In 1871 he made visits to several utopian societies that would later result in his most famous work, *Communistic Societ-*

ies of the United States. He then spent some time in Southern California, where he fell in love with the climate and economic possibilities of the region and published the greatest piece of California promotional literature ever written, *California for Health, Wealth and Residence* (1872).

In 1874 he became the Washington correspondent for the New York *Herald* and remained in that important position till his retirement in 1891. During that long period he advised presidents, wrote critical assessments about the tariff (he was a Republican), and produced several books directed at the education of children in the principles of civic virtue. He remained an indefatigable traveler, visiting and writing about the Sandwich Islands and Oregon while maintaining his home base in New York. In 1889, he made a permanent move to San Diego, where he purchased a large ranch at Ensenada. He died in 1901 in San Francisco.

Notwithstanding this lifetime full of accomplishment, Nordhoff is still best known for his *Communitic Societies*, the first political and moral appreciation of the societies written in the United States. Published in 1875, when the author was at the top of his journalistic form, the book is a straightforward and contemporary look at some of the most intriguing social experiments ever undertaken in this country.

Before Nordhoff's study, there had been few comprehensive critiques of these utopian colonies. The first, William Dixon's *New America* (1867), had been the work of a British journalist who emphasized the sensational aspects of certain communities (Shakers, Oneida, Mormons). A later work, John Humphrey Noyes' *History of American Socialisms* (1870), had been written from the partisan position of a colony founder and leader. Nordhoff approached these American communities from his own partisan position as an advocate of "free labor" and American material success. What makes his account so unusual both for his own period and our own is the manner in which he placed such groups *within* the American tradition rather than in *opposition* to it.

For Nordhoff, one of the greatest threats to American democracy during the immediate post-Civil War years was the emergence of labor unions and the ideology of the "strike." In his introduction he makes his position eminently clear: ". . . the spirit of the Trade Unions and International Societies appears to me peculiarly mischievous and hateful, because they seek to eliminate from the thoughts of their adherents the hope or expectation of independence." These trade associations had "debased" their membership by introducing the spirit of selfishness and introduced "eternal enmity" between labor and capital. The ideology of free labor, of the artisan who becomes capitalist, of American success through work and moral conduct was threatened by these new political associations.

Paradoxically he turned toward communistic societies as a way of solving the "labor question." He saw them as models of economic success, of business enterprise, of character and thrift; they were embodiments of "Germanic" solidity and character, and he began his volume with a visit to Amana and in concluding tucks in a brief history of Anaheim, California, founded by Germans. In his concluding chapter, "A Comparative View of the Customs and Practices of the American Communes," he set out both his conclusions and convictions and in so doing made these associationists (the proper nineteenth-century term) sturdy pioneers, true Americans and not a bunch of fanatical socialists intent on wrecking the American dream. They sat on a high and holy hill, he thought, and there was much to learn from them: "But to be fairly judged, the communal life, as I have seen and tried to report it, must be compared with that of the mechanic and laborer in our cities, and of the farmer in the country; and when thus put in judgment, I do not hesitate to say that in many ways — and in almost all ways — a higher, and also a pleasanter life."

Nordhoff was a reporter and went about his survey in a journalistic fashion; he visited numerous communities, interviewing leaders whenever possible. He had an acute eye for detail, for social nuance, and for social dynamics. His eye was essentially a sympathetic one, for he tried to see the best in such societies where others had seen

“fanaticism,” but he was also able to note their shortcomings (their lack of refined, cultivated, or elegant men and women) and their denial of possibilities. However, he did tend to accept the utopians at their word. For example, he overestimated the wealth of the Shakers, who were experiencing financial problems in the wake of the 1873 Panic, and he accepted the Oneidans’ statements about the roles of women in the workforce. (Despite their ideology of equality, women at Oneida worked within specific narrow spheres — usually domestic ones.)

There is something of Charles Dickens in Nordhoff’s writing, with its emphasis on data collecting and observation, something of Charles Dana’s adventuring into a foreign territory, and something of Horace Greeley with his admiration for social purpose and morality. Concerned about what he saw as the growing menaces represented by trade unions and foreign influences, Nordhoff put into *Communitistic Societies* his belief that these were still cities on the hill capable of inspiring emulation and awe. He saw in them an alternative system, an alternative morality, yet one thoroughly American in temper and tone. These groups (particularly the German ones) had both been molded by the American experience and had taken advantage of the conditions of American life to create a series of success stories that others might ponder and apply to their own condition. Many of these groups were like Charles Nordhoff himself, in that they had come to America to pioneer, had been daring at times but had always held true to morality and principles of free association and labor. And they had prospered.

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American Utopias

INTRODUCTION.

THOUGH it is probable that for a long time to come the mass of mankind in civilized countries will find it both necessary and advantageous to labor for wages, and to accept the condition of hired laborers (or, as it has absurdly become the fashion to say, employés), every thoughtful and kind-hearted person must regard with interest any device or plan which promises to enable at least the more intelligent, enterprising, and determined part of those who are not capitalists to become such, and to cease to labor for hire.

Nor can any one doubt the great importance, both to the security of the capitalists, and to the intelligence and happiness of the non-capitalists (if I may use so awkward a word), of increasing the number of avenues to independence for the latter. For the character and conduct of our own population in the United States show conclusively that nothing so stimulates intelligence in the poor, and at the same time nothing so well enables them to bear the inconveniences of their lot, as a reasonable prospect that with industry and economy they may raise themselves out of the condition of hired laborers into that of independent employers of their own labor. Take away entirely the grounds of such a hope, and a great mass of our poorer people would gradually sink into stupidity, and a blind discontent which education would only increase, until they became a danger to the state; for the greater their intelligence, the greater would be the dissatisfaction with their situation—just as we see that the dissemination of education among the

English agricultural laborers (by whom, of all classes in Christendom, independence is least to be hoped for), has lately aroused these sluggish beings to strikes and a struggle for a change in their condition.

Hitherto, in the United States, our cheap and fertile lands have acted as an important safety-valve for the enterprise and discontent of our non-capitalist population. Every hired workman knows that if he chooses to use economy and industry in his calling, he may without great or insurmountable difficulty establish himself in independence on the public lands; and, in fact, a large proportion of our most energetic and intelligent mechanics do constantly seek these lands, where with patient toil they master nature and adverse circumstances, often make fortunate and honorable careers, and at the worst leave their children in an improved condition of life. I do not doubt that the eagerness of some of our wisest public men for the acquisition of new territory has arisen from their conviction that this opening for the independence of laboring men was essential to the security of our future as a free and peaceful state. For, though not one in a hundred, or even one in a thousand of our poorer and so-called laboring class may choose to actually achieve independence by taking up and tilling a portion of the public lands, it is plain that the knowledge that any one may do so makes those who do not more contented with their lot, which they thus feel to be one of choice and not of compulsion.

Any circumstance, as the exhaustion of these lands, which should materially impair this opportunity for independence, would be, I believe, a serious calamity to our country; and the spirit of the Trades-Unions and International Societies appears to me peculiarly mischievous and hateful, because they seek to eliminate from the thoughts of their adherents the hope or expectation of independence. The member of a Trades-Union is taught to regard himself, and to act toward society, as a

hireling for life; and these societies are united, not as men seeking a way to exchange dependence for independence, but as hirelings, determined to remain such, and only demanding better conditions of their masters. If it were possible to infuse with this spirit all or the greater part of the non-capitalist class in the United States, this would, I believe, be one of the gravest calamities which could befall us as a nation; for it would degrade the mass of our voters, and make free government here very difficult, if it did not entirely change the form of our government, and expose us to lasting disorders and attacks upon property.

We see already that in whatever part of our country the Trades-Union leaders have succeeded in imposing themselves upon mining or manufacturing operatives, the results are—the corruption of our politics, a lowering of the standard of intelligence and independence among the laborers, and an unreasoning and unreasonable discontent, which, in its extreme development, despises right, and seeks only changes degrading to its own class, at the cost of injury and loss to the general public.

The Trades-Unions and International Clubs have become a formidable power in the United States and Great Britain, but so far it is a power almost entirely for evil. They have been able to disorganize labor, and to alarm capital. They have succeeded, in a comparatively few cases, in temporarily increasing the wages and in diminishing the hours of labor in certain branches of industry—a benefit so limited, both as to duration and amount, that it can not justly be said to have inured to the general advantage of the non-capitalist class. On the other hand, they have debased the character and lowered the moral tone of their membership by the narrow and cold-blooded selfishness of their spirit and doctrines, and have thus done an incalculable harm to society; and, moreover, they have, by alarming capital, lessened the wages fund, seriously checked

enterprise, and thus decreased the general prosperity of their own class. For it is plain that to no one in society is the abundance of capital and its free and secure use in all kinds of enterprises so vitally important as to the laborer for wages—to the Trades-Unionist.

To assert necessary and eternal enmity between labor and capital would seem to be the extreme of folly in men who have predetermined to remain laborers for wages all their lives, and who therefore mean to be peculiarly dependent on capital. Nor are the Unions wiser or more reasonable toward their fellow-laborers; for each Union aims, by limiting the number of apprentices a master may take, and by other equally selfish regulations, to protect its own members against competition, forgetting apparently that if you prevent men from becoming bricklayers, a greater number must seek to become carpenters; and that thus, by its exclusive policy, a Union only plays what Western gamblers call a "cut-throat game" with the general laboring population. For if the system of Unions were perfect, and each were able to enforce its policy of exclusion, a great mass of poor creatures, driven from every desirable employment, would be forced to crowd into the lowest and least paid. I do not know where one could find so much ignorance, contempt for established principles, and cold-blooded selfishness, as among the Trades-Unions and International Societies of the United States and Great Britain—unless one should go to France. While they retain their present spirit, they might well take as their motto the brutal and stupid saying of a French writer, that "Mankind are engaged in a war for bread, in which every man's hand is at his brother's throat." Directly, they offer a prize to incapacity and robbery, compelling their ablest members to do no more than the least able, and spoiling the aggregate wealth of society by burdensome regulations restricting labor. Logically, to the Trades-Union leaders the Chicago or Boston fire seemed a more beneficial

event than the invention of the steam-engine; for plenty seems to them a curse, and scarcity the greatest blessing.*

* Lest I should to some readers appear to use too strong language, I append here a few passages from a recent English work, Mr. Thornton's book "On Labor," where he gives an account of some of the regulations of English Trades-Unions:

"A journeyman is not permitted to teach his own son his own trade, nor, if the lad managed to learn the trade by stealth, would he be permitted to practice it. A master, desiring out of charity to take as apprentice one of the eight destitute orphans of a widowed mother, has been told by his men that if he did they would strike. A bricklayer's assistant who by looking on has learned to lay bricks as well as his principal, is generally doomed, nevertheless, to continue a laborer for life. He will never rise to the rank of a bricklayer, if those who have already attained that dignity can help it."

"Some Unions divide the country round them into districts, and will not permit the products of the trades controlled by them to be used except within the district in which they have been fabricated. . . . At Manchester this combination is particularly effective, preventing any bricks made beyond a radius of four miles from entering the city. To enforce the exclusion, paid agents are employed; every cart of bricks coming toward Manchester is watched, and if the contents be found to have come from without the prescribed boundary the bricklayers at once refuse to work. . . . The vagaries of the Lancashire brickmakers are fairly paralleled by the masons of the same county. Stone, when freshly quarried, is softer, and can be more easily cut than later: men habitually employed about any particular quarry better understand the working of its particular stone than men from a distance; there is great economy, too, in transporting stone dressed instead of in rough blocks. The Yorkshire masons, however, will not allow Yorkshire stone to be brought into their district if worked on more than one side. All the rest of the working, the edging and jointing, they insist on doing themselves, though they thereby add thirty-five per cent. to its price. . . . A Bradford contractor, requiring for a staircase some steps of hard delf-stone, a material which Bradford masons so much dislike that they often refuse employment rather than undertake it, got the steps worked at the quarry. But when they arrived ready for setting, his masons insisted on their being worked over again, at an expense of from 5s. to 10s. per step. A master-mason at Ashton obtained some stone ready polished from a quarry near Macclesfield. His men, however, in obedience to the rules of their club, refused to fix it until the polished part had been defaced and they had polished it again by hand, though not so well as at first. . . . In one or two of the northern counties, the associated plasterers and associated plasterers' laborers have come to an understanding, according to which the latter are to abstain from all plasterers' work except simple whitewashing; and the plasterers in return are to do nothing except pure plasterers' work, that the laborers would like to do for them, insomuch that if a plasterer wants laths or plaster to go on with, he must not go and fetch them himself, but must send a laborer for them. In consequence of this agreement, a Mr. Booth, of Bolton, having sent one of his plasterers to bed and point a dozen windows, had to place a laborer with him during the whole of the four days he was engaged on the job, though any body could have brought him all

Any organization which teaches its adherents to accept as inevitable for themselves and for the mass of a nation the condition of hirelings, and to conduct their lives on that premise, is not only wrong, but an injury to the community. Mr. Mill wisely says on this point, in his chapter on "The Future of the Laboring Classes:" "There can be little doubt that the *status* of hired laborers will gradually tend to confine itself to the description of work-people whose low moral qualities render them unfit for any thing more independent; and that the relation of masters and work-people will be gradually superseded by partnership in one of two forms: in some cases, association of the laborers with the capitalist; in others, and perhaps finally in all, association of laborers among themselves." I imagine that the change he speaks of will be very slow and gradual; but it is important that all doors shall be left open for it, and Trades-Unions would close every door.

Professor Cairnes, in his recent contribution to Political Economy, goes further even than Mr. Mill, and argues that a change of this nature is inevitable. He remarks: "The modifications which occur in the distribution of capital among its several departments, as nations advance, are by no means fortuitous, but follow on the whole a well-defined course, and move toward a determinate goal. In effect, what we find is a constant growth of the national capital, accompanied with a nearly equally constant decline in the proportion of this capital which goes to support productive labor. . . . Though the fund for the remuneration of mere labor, whether skilled or unskilled, must, so long as industry is progressive, ever bear a

he required in half a day. . . . At Liverpool, a bricklayer's laborer may legally carry as many as twelve bricks at a time. Elsewhere ten is the greatest number allowed. But at Leeds 'any brother in the Union professing to carry more than the common number, which is eight bricks, shall be fined 1s.;' and any brother 'knowing the same without giving the earliest information thereof to the committee of management shall be fined the same.' . . . During the building of the Manchester Law Courts, the bricklayers' laborers struck because they were desired to wheel bricks instead of carrying them on their shoulders."

constantly diminishing proportion alike to the growing wealth and growing capital, there is nothing in the nature of things which restricts the laboring population to this fund for their support. In return, indeed, for their mere labor, it is to this that they must look for their sole reward; but *they may help production otherwise than by their labor: they may save, and thus become themselves the owners of capital;* and profits may thus be brought to aid the wages-fund."*

Aside from systematized emigration to unsettled or thinly peopled regions, which the Trades-Unions of Europe ought to organize on a great scale, but which they have entirely neglected, the other outlets for the mass of dissatisfied hand-laborers lie through co-operative or communistic efforts. Co-operative societies flourish in England and Germany. We have had a number of them in this country also, but their success has not been marked; and I have found it impossible to get statistical returns even of their numbers. If the Trades-Unions had used a tenth of the money they have wasted in futile efforts to shorten hours of labor and excite their members to hatred, indolence, and waste, in making public the statistics and the possibilities of co-operation, they would have achieved some positive good.

But while co-operative efforts have generally failed in the United States, we have here a number of successful Communistic Societies, pursuing agriculture and different branches of manufacturing, and I have thought it useful to examine these, to see if their experience offers any useful hints toward the solution of the labor question. Hitherto very little, indeed almost nothing definite and precise, has been made known concerning these societies; and Communism remains loudly but very vaguely spoken of, by friends as well as enemies, and is commonly a word either of terror or of contempt in the public prints.

* "Some Leading Principles of Political Economy newly expounded." By J. E. Cairnes, M.A. New York, Harper & Brothers.

In the following pages will be found, accordingly, an account of the COMMUNISTIC SOCIETIES now existing in the United States, made from personal visit and careful examination; and including for each its social customs and expedients; its practical and business methods; its system of government; the industries it pursues; its religious creed and practices; as well as its present numbers and condition, and its history.

It appears to me an important fact that these societies, composed for the most part of men originally farmers or mechanics—people of very limited means and education—have yet succeeded in accumulating considerable wealth, and at any rate a satisfactory provision for their own old age and disability, and for the education of their children or successors. In every case they have developed among their membership very remarkable business ability, considering their original station in life; they have found among themselves leaders wise enough to rule, and skill sufficient to enable them to establish and carry on, not merely agricultural operations, but also manufactures, and to conduct successfully complicated business affairs.

Some of these societies have existed fifty, some twenty-five, and some for nearly eighty years. All began with small means; and some are now very wealthy.

Moreover, while some of these communes are still living under the guidance of their founders, others, equally successful, have continued to prosper for many years after the death of their original leaders. Some are celibate; but others inculcate, or at least permit marriage. Some gather their members into a common or "unitary" dwelling; but others, with no less success, maintain the family relation and the separate household.

It seemed to me that the conditions of success vary sufficiently among these societies to make their histories at least interesting, and perhaps important. I was curious, too, to ascertain if their success depended upon obscure conditions, not gener-

ally attainable, as extraordinary ability in a leader; or undesirable, as religious fanaticism or an unnatural relation of the sexes; or whether it might not appear that the conditions absolutely necessary to success were only such as any company of carefully selected and reasonably determined men and women might hope to command.

I desired also to discover how the successful Communists had met and overcome the difficulties of idleness, selfishness, and unthrift in individuals, which are commonly believed to make Communism impossible, and which are well summed up in the following passage in Mr. Mill's chapter on Communism:

"The objection ordinarily made to a system of community of property and equal distribution of the produce, that each person would be incessantly occupied in evading his fair share of the work, points, undoubtedly, to a real difficulty. But those who urge this objection forget to how great an extent the same difficulty exists under the system on which nine tenths of the business of society is now conducted. The objection supposes that honest and efficient labor is only to be had from those who are themselves individually to reap the benefit of their own exertions. But how small a part of all the labor performed in England, from the lowest paid to the highest, is done by persons working for their own benefit. From the Irish reaper or hodman to the chief justice or the minister of state, nearly all the work of society is remunerated by day wages or fixed salaries. A factory operative has less personal interest in his work than a member of a Communist association, since he is not, like him, working for a partnership of which he is himself a member. It will no doubt be said that, though the laborers themselves have not, in most cases, a personal interest in their work, they are watched and superintended, and their labor directed, and the mental part of the labor performed, by persons who have. Even this, however, is far from being universally the fact. In all public, and many of the largest and most successful private undertakings, not only the labors of detail, but the control and superintendence are intrusted to salaried officers. And though the 'master's eye,' when the master is vigilant and intelligent, is of proverbial value, it must be remembered that in a Socialist farm or manufactory, each laborer would be under the eye, not of one master, but of the whole

community. In the extreme case of obstinate perseverance in not performing the due share of work, the community would have the same resources which society now has for compelling conformity to the necessary conditions of the association. Dismissal, the only remedy at present, is no remedy when any other laborer who may be engaged does no better than his predecessor: the power of dismissal only enables an employer to obtain from his workmen the customary amount of labor, but that customary labor may be of any degree of inefficiency. Even the laborer who loses his employment by idleness or negligence has nothing worse to suffer, in the most unfavorable case, than the discipline of a workhouse, and if the desire to avoid this be a sufficient motive in the one system, it would be sufficient in the other. I am not undervaluing the strength of the incitement given to labor when the whole or a large share of the benefit of extra exertion belongs to the laborer. But under the present system of industry this incitement, in the great majority of cases, does not exist. If communistic labor might be less vigorous than that of a peasant proprietor, or a workman laboring on his own account, it would probably be more energetic than that of a laborer for hire, who has no personal interest in the matter at all. The neglect by the uneducated classes of laborers for hire of the duties which they engage to perform is in the present state of society most flagrant. Now it is an admitted condition of the communist scheme that all shall be educated; and this being supposed, the duties of the members of the association would doubtless be as diligently performed as those of the generality of salaried officers in the middle or higher classes; who are not supposed to be necessarily unfaithful to their trust, because so long as they are not dismissed their pay is the same in however lax a manner their duty is fulfilled. Undoubtedly, as a general rule, remuneration by fixed salaries does not in any class of functionaries produce the maximum of zeal; and this is as much as can be reasonably alleged against communistic labor.

"That even this inferiority would necessarily exist is by no means so certain as is assumed by those who are little used to carry their minds beyond the state of things with which they are familiar. . . .

"Another of the objections to Communism is similar to that so often urged against poor-laws: that if every member of the community were assured of subsistence for himself and any number of children, on the sole condition of willingness to work, prudential restraint on the multiplication of mankind would be at an end, and population would start forward at a rate which would reduce the community through successive

stages of increasing discomfort to actual starvation. There would certainly be much ground for this apprehension if Communism provided no motives to restraint, equivalent to those which it would take away. But Communism is precisely the state of things in which opinion might be expected to declare itself with greatest intensity against this kind of selfish intemperance. Any augmentation of numbers which diminished the comfort or increased the toil of the mass would then cause (which now it does not) immediate and unmistakable inconvenience to every individual in the association—inconvenience which could not then be imputed to the avarice of employers or the unjust privileges of the rich. In such altered circumstances opinion could not fail to reprobate, and if reprobation did not suffice, to repress by penalties of some description, this or any other culpable self-indulgence at the expense of the community. The communistic scheme, instead of being peculiarly open to the objection drawn from danger of over-population, has the recommendation of tending in an especial degree to the prevention of that evil."

It will be seen in the following pages that means have been found to meet these and other difficulties; in one society even the prudential restraint upon marriage has been adopted.

Finally, I wished to see what the successful Communists had made of their lives; what was the effect of communal living upon the character of the individual man and woman; whether the life had broadened or narrowed them; and whether assured fortune and pecuniary independence had brought to them a desire for beauty of surroundings and broader intelligence: whether, in brief, the Communist had any where become something more than a comfortable and independent day-laborer, and aspired to something higher than a mere bread-and-butter existence.

To make my observations I was obliged to travel from Maine in the northeast to Kentucky in the south, and Oregon in the west. I have thought it best to give at first an impartial and not unfriendly account of each commune, or organized system of communes; and in several concluding chapters I have analyzed and compared their different customs and practices, and

attempted to state what, upon the facts presented, seem to be the conditions absolutely requisite to the successful conduct of a communistic society, and also what appear to be the influences, for good and evil, of such bodies upon their members and upon their neighbors.

I have added some particulars of the Swedish Commune which lately existed at Bishop Hill, in Illinois, but which, after a flourishing career of seven years, has now become extinct; and I did this to show, in a single example, what are the causes which work against harmony and success in such a society.

Also I have given some particulars concerning three examples of colonization, which, though they do not properly belong to my subject, are yet important, as showing what may be accomplished by co-operative efforts in agriculture, under prudent management.

It is, I suppose, hardly necessary to say that, while I have given an impartial and respectful account of the religious faith of each commune, I am not therefore to be supposed to hold with any of them. For instance, I thought it interesting to give some space to the very singular phenomena called "spiritual manifestations" among the Shakers; but I am not what is commonly called a "Spiritualist."

