

Notes on Jonathan's Daughters.

BY MAX O'RELL.



IN an article on "The Typical American," which appeared in *The North American Review* (May, 1890), I ventured to hazard the opinion that the typical American does not exist, as yet: that the American gentleman differs not at all from a gentleman of any other country, and that no citizen of the Great Republic can be pointed out as typical, although in the ordinary American are to be found two traits which are very characteristic of him, and of other dwellers in new countries, viz., childishness and inquisitiveness.

But, although I failed to find a typical American man, I am very strongly of opinion that the American lady is typical. Good society is apt to mould all who frequent it into one pretty even shape, and it is all the more astonishing, therefore, to find the American lady with such a separate individuality.

Of the ordinary American woman I am not in a position to speak. In my wanderings through the United States I made acquaintance with all sorts and conditions of men; but, coming to the petticoated portion of the community, I had practically no opportunity of studying any but ladies.

The American lady, in my eyes, is a distinct type; her charm is distinct from the charm of any European lady, and is certainly equal in extent to any. Two traits struck me very forcibly in her, and to the first of these I think she owes a great part of her success. They are, naturalness, or utter absence of affectation, and—shall I say it?—a lurking contempt for man. Not a militant contempt, not a loud contempt, but a quiet, queenly, benevolent contempt. I talk about her owing her success to the first of these; but who shall say whether her triumphant progress has not been greatly due to the second?

I have often tried to explain to myself this gentle contempt of American ladies for the male sex; for, contrasting it with the devotion, the lovely devotion of Jonathan to his womankind, it is a curious enigma. Have I found the solution at last? Does it begin at school? In American schools, boys and girls, from the age of five, follow the same path to learning, and side by side on the same benches. Moreover, the girls prove themselves thoroughly capable of keeping pace with the boys. Is it not possible that the girls, as they watched the performances of the boys in the study, have learnt to say: "Is that all?" while the young lords of creation, as they looked on at what "those girls" can do, have been fain to exclaim: "Who would have thought it?" And does not this explain the two attitudes: the great respect of men for women, and the mild contempt of women for men?

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When I was in New York, and had time to saunter about, I would go up Broadway, and wait until a car, well crammed with people, came along. Then I would jump on board, and stand near the door. Whenever a man wanted to get out, he would say to me, "Please," or "Excuse me," or just touch me lightly to warn me that I stood in his way. But the ladies! Oh, the ladies! Why, it was simply lovely. They would just push me away with the tips of their fingers, and turn up such disgusted and haughty noses! You would have imagined it was a heap of dirty rubbish in their way.

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Just as one of the hardest ways of earning a living is to be a middle-class English wife, so one of the loveliest sinecures in the world is to be an American lady. A small, sometimes no, family to bring up; very often no house to keep; three months' holiday in Europe; a devoted, hardworking husband ever ready to pet her, worship her, and supply the wherewith; an education that enables her to enjoy all the intellectual pleasures of life; a charming naturalness of manner; a freedom from conventionality; a bold picturesqueness of speech; a native

brilliancy ; all combine to make her a distinct type, and the queen of her sex.

When a Frenchman and a Frenchwoman converse together, they can seldom forget that one is a man and the other a woman. It does not prove that a Frenchwoman must necessarily be, and is, affected in her relations with men ; but it explains why she does not feel, as the American woman does, that a man and a woman can enjoy a *tête-à-tête* free from all those commonplace flatteries, compliments, and platitudes that badly understood gallantry suggests. Many

American ladies have made me forget, by the easiness of their manner, and the charm and naturalness of their conversation, that I was speaking with women, and with lovely ones too. This I could never have forgotten in the company of French ladies.

On account of this feeling, and perhaps also of the difference which exists between the education received by a man and that received by a woman in France, the conversation will always be on some light topics, literary, artistic, dramatic, social, or other. Indeed, it would be most unbecoming for a man

to start a very serious subject of conversation with a French lady to whom he had just been introduced. He would be taken for a pedant or a man of bad breeding.

In America, men and women receive practically the same education, and this of course enlarges the circle of conversational topics between the sexes. I shall always remember a beautiful American girl, not more than twenty years of age, to whom I was once introduced in a New York drawing-room, as she was giving to a lady sitting next to her a most minute description of the latest bonnet invented in Paris, and

who, turning towards me, asked me point blank if I had read M. Ernest Renan's last book, "The History of the People of Israel." Well, I had not. I had to confess that I had not yet had time to read it. But she had, and she gave me, without the remotest touch of affectation or pedantry, a most interesting, detailed, and learned analysis of that remarkable book, almost in one breath with the description of the Paris bonnet. I related this incident in "Jonathan and his Continent." On reading it, some of my countrymen, critics and others, exclaimed : "We imagine the fair American

girl wore a pair of gold spectacles."

"No, my dear compatriots, nothing of the sort. No gold spectacles, no guy. It was a beautiful girl, dressed with the most exquisite taste and care, and most charming and womanly."

An American woman, however learned she may be, is a sound politician, and she knows that the best thing she can make of herself is a woman, and she remains a woman. She will always make herself as attractive as she possibly can, not to please men, to please herself. If in a French drawing-room I were to re-

mark to a lady how clever some woman in the room looked, she would probably closely examine that woman's dress to find out what I thought was wrong about it. It would probably be the same in England, but not in America.

A Frenchwoman will seldom be jealous of another woman's cleverness. She will far more readily forgive her this quality than beauty. "Oh ! how I should like to be a man !" once exclaimed a French lady in my presence. An American lady would probably have said to her : "My dear, you are ever so much better as you are !"



"THEY WOULD JUST PUSH ME AWAY."

Of all the ladies I have met, I have no hesitation in declaring that the American ones are the least affected. With them, I repeat it, I feel at ease as I do with no other women in the world.

With whom but an *Américaine* would the following little scene have been possible?

It was on a Friday afternoon in Boston, the reception-day of Mrs. X., an old friend of my wife and myself. I thought I would call upon her early in the afternoon, before the crowd of visitors had begun to arrive. Mrs. X. received me in the drawing-room, and we soon were talking on the one hundred and one topics that old friends have on their tongue tips. Presently the conversation fell on love and lovers. Mrs. X. drew her chair up a little nearer to the fire, put the toes of her little slippers on the fender-stool, and with a charmingly confidential, but perfectly natural, manner, said:—

"You are married, and love your wife; I am married, and love my husband; we are both artists, let's have our say out."

And we proceeded to have our say out.

But, lo! all at once I noticed about half an inch of the seam of her black silk bodice was unsewn. We men, when we see a lady with something awry in her toilette, how often do we long to say to her: "Excuse me, Madam, but perhaps you don't know that you have a hairpin sticking out two inches just behind your ear," or, "Pardon me, Miss, I'm a married man, there is something wrong just under your waist belt."

But we dare not say so. We are afraid we shall be told to mind our own business.

Now, I felt for Mrs. X., who was just going to receive a crowd of callers, with a little rent in one of her bodice seams, and tried to persuade myself to be brave, and tell her of it. Yet I hesitated. People take things so differently. The conversation went on unflinchingly. More than once I had started a little cough, and was on the point of—but my courage failed. The clock struck half-past four. I could not stand it any longer.

"Mrs. X.," said I, all in a breath, "you are married, and love your husband; I am married, and love my wife; we are both artists; there is a little bit of seam come unsewn just there by your left arm, run and get it sewn up!"

The peals of laughter that I heard going on upstairs while the damage was being repaired, proved to me that there was no resentment to be feared; but, on the contrary, that I had earned the gratitude of Mrs. X.

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Inquisitiveness, I have said, is a characteristic feature of American men; but I imagine that this feature is also to be found in the daughters of the Great Republic.

During my second visit to the States, it amused me to notice that the Americans to whom I had the pleasure of being introduced, refrained from asking me what I thought of America, but they invariably inquired if the impressions of my first visit were confirmed.

One afternoon, at an "At Home" in Boston, I met a lady from New York who asked me a most extraordinary question.

"I have read 'Jonathan and his Continent,'" she said to me. "I suppose that is a book of impressions written for pub-



"INQUISITIVENESS."

lication. But now, tell me *en confidence*, what do you think of us?"

"Is there anything in that book," I replied, "which can make you suppose that it is not the faithful expression of what I think of America and the Americans?"

"Well," she said, "it is so complimentary, taken altogether, that I must confess I had a lurking suspicion of your having purposely flattered us, and indulged our national weakness for hearing ourselves praised, so as to make sure of a warm reception for your book."

"No doubt," I ventured, "by writing a flattering book on any country, you would greatly increase your chance of a large sale in that country; but, on the other hand, you may write an abusive book on any country, and score a great success among that nation's neighbours. For my part, I have always gone my own quiet way, philosophising rather than opiniating, and when I write, it is not with the aim of pleasing any particular public. I note down what I see, say what I think, and people may read me or not, just as they please. But I think I may boast, however, that my pen is never bitter, and I do not care to

criticise unless I feel a certain amount of sympathy with the subject of my criticism. If I felt that I must honestly say hard things of people, I would always abstain altogether."

"Now," said my fair questioner, "how is it that you have so little to say about our Fifth Avenue folks? Is it because you have seen very little of them, or is it because you could only have said hard things of them?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "I saw a good deal of them, but what I saw showed me that to describe them would be only to describe polite society, as it exists in London and elsewhere. Society gossip is not in my line, boudoir and club smoking-room scandal has no charm for me. Fifth Avenue resembles too much Mayfair and Belgravia to make criticism of it worth attempting."

I knew this answer would have the effect of putting me into the lady's good graces at once, and I was not disappointed. She accorded to me her sweetest smile, as I bowed to her, to go and be introduced to another lady by the mistress of the house.

The next lady was a Bostonian. I had to explain to her why I had not spoken of



"MR. BLANK WAS ALSO VERY MUCH ALIVE."

Beacon Street people, using the same argument as in the case of Fifth Avenue society, and with the same success.

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At the same "At Home," I had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Blank, whom I had met many times in London and Paris.

She is one of the crowd of pretty and clever women whom America sends to brighten up European society, and who reappear both in London and Paris with the regularity of the swallows. You meet them

European society during every recurring season.

American women have such love for independence and freedom that their visits to Europe could not arouse suspicion, even in the most malicious. But, nevertheless, I was glad to have heard of Mr. Blank, because it is comfortable to have one's mind at rest on these subjects. Up to now, whenever I had been asked, as sometimes happened, though seldom: "Who is Mr. Blank, and where is he?" I had always answered: "Last puzzle out!"



"MONSIEUR AND MADAME."

everywhere, and conclude that they must be married, since they are styled Mrs., and not Miss. But whether they are wives, widows, or *divorcées*, you rarely think of inquiring, and you may enjoy their acquaintance, and even their friendship, for years, without knowing whether they have a living lord or not.

Mrs. Blank, as I say, is a most fascinating specimen of America's daughters, and that day in Boston I found that Mr. Blank was also very much alive, but the companions of his joys and sorrows were the telephone and the ticker; in fact, it is thanks to his devotion to these that the wife of his bosom is able to adorn

The freedom enjoyed by American women has enabled them to mould themselves in their own fashion. They do not copy any other women, they are original. I can recognise an American woman without hearing her speak. You have only to see her enter a room or a car, and you know her for Jonathan's daughter. Married or unmarried, her air is full of assurance, of a self-possession that never fails her. And when she looks at you, or talks to you, her eyes express the same calm consciousness of her worth.

Would you have a fair illustration of the respective positions of women in France, in England, and in America?

Go to a hotel, and watch the arrival of couples in the dining-rooms.

Now, don't go to the Louvre, the Grand Hôtel, or the Bristol, in Paris. Don't go to Claridge's, the Savoy, the Victoria, or the Métropole, in London. Don't go to Delmonico's in New York, or the Thorn-dyke in Boston, because in all these hotels, you will probably run the risk of seeing all behave alike. Go elsewhere, and, I say, watch.

In France, you will see Monsieur and Madame arrive together, walk abreast towards the table assigned to them, very often arm in arm, talking and smiling at each other—though married. Equal footing.

In England, you will see John Bull leading the way. He does not like to be seen eating in public, and thinks it very hard that he should not have the dining-room all

to himself. So he enters, with his hands in his pockets, looking askance at everybody right and left. Then, meek and demure, with her eyes cast down, follows Mrs. John Bull.

But in America! Oh, in America, behold, the dignified, nay, the majestic entry of Mrs. Jonathan, a perfect queen going towards her throne, bestowing a glance on her subjects right and left—and Jonathan behind!

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They say in France that Paris is the paradise of women. If so, there is a more blissful place than paradise; there is another word to invent to give an idea of the social position enjoyed by American ladies.

If I had to be born again, and I might choose my sex and my birthplace, I would shout at the top of my voice:

"Oh! make me an American woman!"

