

NOTES OF VANITY FAIR.

Paul Bourget is writing a series of sketches under the title "Outre Mere" on American society, that are occasioning much comment. Below are extracts from his last article:

I have taken a great number of notes during these past months, after my first ones, about that American society of which I had obtained such a complete and at once striking impression at Newport. I have seen it again in many of its phases, at Boston, at Chicago, in New York and again at Washington. These notes, jotted down from day to day, and which are, like the studies of a painter, destined to be amalgamated later on in some definite picture, I have turned over several times with the idea of classing and of resuming them in a few neat formulæ. But I have found in that synthesis a difficulty—a difficulty which arises less from the abundance of the notes than from the work of transformation which has taken place in my mind during this long voyage and its multiple experiences. Just as those words, the "United States," today call forth for me millions of concrete and distinct images, instead of seeming, as they did on my arrival, a great mass of confused and undetermined ideas, so those other words, "American society," have ceased to express to me that unique thing which I had judged it to be at Newport.

There is no "society" in America like there is in France or as there is in England.

In the United States, as many towns as many societies, and as none of those towns has managed to assume a domination of fashion like Paris exercises over our provinces it results that there are all sorts of centres of social life, each of which would merit a monograph.

Certain novelists who study local customs are working at it, among whom I may cite Mr. Chatfield Taylor, to whom we already owe such curious sketches of fashionable Chicago life; and even the common language bears witness to those differences of social habits, with the natural exaggeration of proverbial sayings. How many times have they not repeated to me during my journey:—

"At Boston the people ask you what you know; at New York, how much money are you worth; at Philadelphia, who are your parents!"

Those epigrammatic bywords are not exactly correct. It seemed to me, in New York, for example, that the painters, the sculptors, the writers and the theatrical artists were certain of a reception just as cordial as that of the ancient and learned Puritan citadel, the "Hub" of Massachusetts. It is none the less evident that the intensity of culture is more general and more violent in Boston, the frenzy of luxury stronger in New York; that in Chicago there is more imitation and more uncertainty in the research of that which is proper.

I have seen in the theatre of the latter town ladies in the act of going behind the scenes to salute an actor at the instigation of one of the gentleman accompanying them. Then as a person from Boston refused to join in the incursion behind the scenes, they sat down again with that look in their eyes expressive of the thought:—

"So that is not the right thing!"

They long for Washington:—"What beautiful place to stay in," said one of them to me; "the men are not busy, like here; they are in politics or something of that kind and they have plenty of time for afternoon teas. * * * This abundance of time to spare for afternoon teas truly gives to the city on the Potomac the physiognomy of a Dresden or a Weimar. In driving through its streets bordered with small private houses, without any trace of business or commerce, one might fancy oneself in some strasse of a German capital, and that easy suppleness of social life forms a singular contrast with the overlaid condition in other towns. I imagine that 'Frisco—as the deprecators of the west insist on calling San Francisco—must also have its very distinctly worldly coterie, very special, very distinct, very original; also St Louis the same, and above all New

Orleans.

The result is that after a while the traveller scarcely finds again that first impression of a unity, which nevertheless is also true, for those societies are but varieties of a species and as groups within groups. In any case they have a common feature which it is impossible to mistake, and which the most superficial just as the most profound have observed; the two weeks' tourist the same as a Bryce or a Claudio Jeannot. All those social lives, different as they may be, are uniquely, absolutely the work of woman. It is for the woman and by the women that those "societies" exist; in fact, to understand them in their birth and in their development it is the American woman that you must first understand and consider. A difficult task in all countries, and more so still when it concerns creatures complete and complex, each one of whom has a separate will, a little universe of ideas, sentiments and ambitions. At all risks, here are a few reflections and once again a few sketches chosen among two hundred others as the most representative.

A character turns up over and over again; it is that of a farmer of the West, a rough personage, bitter and loyal, who chews, who drinks, who uses a terrible slang, but who is capable, when a woman is in question, of the most romantic deeds of honor. Nowhere else have I found that hero better represented than at Boston in a comedy entitled "Mizzoura," and by an actor of the name of Goodwin. This man, half cowboy, half Don Quixote, saved the life of one of his rivals, who was on the point of being lynched by a furious crowd. With his mocking and strained face, his cheek swollen with tobacco, his jets of saliva shot out afar, the dissolute tone of the voice, the hat thrown back, and a sort of automatic fixity, the comedian appeared as the actual incarnation of the black-guard, sentimental and honest; and there was for me, a simple stranger, a wonderful contrast between the applause of the public with which it appreciated his generosity and the ease with which the same public accepted the idea of the lynching. Both one and the other thing is in the habits of the people.

It is from all sorts of similar influences that the particular creation of the American woman has arisen. Those are the roots through which the frivolous and capricious independence of a millionaire's daughter plunges afar into the sources of national life. There is in the disconcerting relations between the American man and woman a still deeper reason, at least according to my opinion, and that quite a physiological one. But when the laws which regulate the relations of the sexes the one toward the other are in question, we must always come back to physiology.

If the Orientals, for example, have reduced their womankind to a terrible condition of slavery and of degradation, it is because they have loved them with the most violent sensuality, and because there is in all sensuality a foundation of hate, for there is hidden in it a bestial jealousy. Further, if we leave in the Latin world more liberty to the woman and do not accept without revolt the idea of independence and their personal initiative, it is because we experience through all sorts of refinements a little of that which the Oriental feels. The sensuality and the despotism of jealousy are at the bottom of it. If the Englishman on the contrary leaves the English woman more liberty, it is because the climate, the race, the religion have diminished the ardor of the temperament. The sera juvenum Venus of Tacitus is as true of the young men of Oxford as it was of the young Germans of the first century. All those who have studied the young American agree that in this respect he is the same as the young Englishman and colder still. It is enough to consider the conditions under which the country was made to understand that it must logically be so.

A small fact is strangely significant. There is not at all in the United States an entirely nude statue. Quite recently the people of Boston have refused to accept for the facade of the new library two children by the great sculptor, Saint Gaudens, because they were without clothes. The municipality of Chicago forced another artist

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