

THE AMERICAN MAN.

One of our prettiest Duchesses enquired the other day of a distinguished traveller whether there was really such a thing as an American man, explaining, as the reason for her question, that, though she knew many fascinating American women, she had never come across any fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, husbands, cousins, or, indeed, male relatives of any kind whatsoever.

The exact answer the Duchess received is not worth recording, as it took the depressing form of useful and accurate information ; but there can be no doubt that the subject is an extremely interesting one, pointing, as it does, to the curious fact that, as far as society is concerned, the American invasion has been purely female in character. With the exception of the United States Minister, always a welcome personage wherever he goes, and an occasional lion from Boston or the Far West, no American man has any social existence in London. His women-folk, with their wonderful dresses, and still more wonderful dialogue, shine in our *salons*, and delight our dinner-parties ; our guardsmen are taken captive by their brilliant complexions, and our beauties made jealous by their clever wit ; but the poor American man remains permanently in the background, and never rises beyond the level of the tourist. Now and then he makes an appearance in the Row, looking a somewhat strange figure in his long frock coat of glossy black cloth, and his sensible soft-felt hat ; but his favourite haunt is the Strand, and the American Exchange his idea of heaven. When he is not lounging in a rocking-chair with a cigar, he is loafing through the streets with a carpet bag, gravely taking stock of our products, and trying to understand Europe through the medium of the shop windows. He is M. Renan's *l'homme sensuel moyen*, Mr. Arnold's middle-class Philistine. The telephone is his test of civilisation, and his wildest dreams of Utopia do not rise beyond elevated railways and electric bells.

His chief pleasure is to get hold of some unsuspecting stranger, or some sympathetic countryman, and then to indulge in the national game of "matching." With a *naivete* and a nonchalance that are absolutely charming, he will gravely compare St. James' Palace to the grand central depot at Chicago, or Westminster Abbey to the Falls of Niagara. Bulk is his canon of beauty, and size his standard of excellence. To him the greatness of a country consists in the number of square miles that it contains ; and he is never tired of telling the waiters at his hotel that the state of Texas is larger than France and Germany put together.

Yet, on the whole, he is happier in London than anywhere else in Europe. Here he can always make a few acquaintances, and, as a rule, can speak the language. Abroad, he is terribly at sea. He knows no one, and understands nothing, and wanders about in a melancholy manner, treating the Old World as if it were a Broadway store, and each city a counter for the sampling of shoddy goods. For him Art has no marvel, and Beauty no meaning, and the Past no message. He thinks that civilisation began with the introduction of steam, and looks with contempt upon all centuries that had no hot-water apparatuses in their houses. The ruin and decay of Time has no pathos in his eyes. He turns away from Ravenna, because the grass grows in her streets, and can see no loveliness in Verona, because there is rust on her balconies. His one desire is to get the whole of Europe into thorough repair. He is severe on the modern Romans for not covering the Colosseum with a glass roof, and utilising the building as a warehouse for dry goods. In a word, he is the Don Quixote of common sense, for he is so utilitarian that he is absolutely unpractical. As a *compagnon de voyage* he is not desirable, for he always looks *deplace*, and feels depressed. Indeed, he would die of weariness if he were not in constant telegraphic communication with Wall Street ; and the only thing that can console him for having wasted a day in a picture-gallery is a copy of

the New York Herald or the Boston Times. Finally, having looked at everything, and seen nothing, he returns to his native land.

There he is delightful. For the strange thing about American civilisation is, that the women are most charming when they are away from their own country, the men most charming when they are at home.

At home, the American man is the best of companions, as he is the most hospitable of hosts. The young men are especially pleasant, with their bright, handsome eyes, their unwearying energy, their amusing shrewdness. They seem to get a hold on life much earlier than we do. At an age when we are still boys at Eton, or lads at Oxford, they are practising some important profession, making money in some intricate business. Real experience comes to them so much sooner than it does to us, that they are never awkward, never shy, and never say foolish things, except when they ask one how the Hudson River compares with the Rhine, or whether Brooklyn Bridge is not really more impressive than the dome of St. Paul's. Their education is quite different from ours. They know men much better than they know books, and life interests them more than literature. They have no time to study anything but the stock markets, no leisure to read anything but newspapers. Indeed, it is only the women in America who have any leisure at all ; and, as a necessary result of this curious state of things, there is no doubt but that, within a century from now, the whole culture of the New World will be in petticoats. Yet, though these cute young speculators may not have culture, in the sense in which we use it, as the knowledge of the best that has been thought and said in the world, they are by no means dull. There is no such thing as a stupid American. Many Americans are horrid, vulgar, intrusive, and impertinent, just as many English people are also ; but stupidity is not one of the national vices. Indeed, in America there is no opening for a fool. They expect

brains even from a boot-black, and get them.

As for marriage, it is one of their most popular institutions. The American man marries early, and the American woman marries often ; and they get on extremely well together. From childhood, the husband has been brought up on the most elaborate fetch-and-carry system, and his reverence for the sex has a touch of compulsory chivalry about it ; while the wife exercises an absolute despotism, based upon female assertion, and tempered by womanly charm. On the whole, the great success of marriage in the States is due partly to the fact that no American man is ever idle, and partly to the fact that no American wife is considered responsible for the quality of her husband's dinners. In America, the horrors of domesticity are almost entirely unknown. There are no scenes over the soup, nor quarrels over the *entrees*, and as, by a clause inserted in every marriage settlement, the husband solemnly binds himself to use studs and not buttons for his shirts, one of the chief sources of disagreement in ordinary middle-class life is absolutely removed. The habit also of residing in hotels and boarding-houses does away with any necessity for those tedious *tetes-a-tetes* that are the dream of engaged couples, and the despair of married men. Vulgarising though a *table d'hote* may be, it is at least better than that eternal duologue about bills and babies to which Benedict and Beatrice so often sink, when the one has lost his wit, and the other her beauty. Even the American freedom of divorce, questionable though it undoubtedly is on many grounds, has at least the merit of bringing into marriage a new element of romantic uncertainty. When people are tied together for life they too often regard manners as a mere superfluity, and courtesy as a thing of no moment ; but where the bond can be easily broken, its very fragility makes its strength, and reminds the husband that he should always try to please, and the wife that she should never cease to be charming.

As a consequence of this liberty of action, or, it may be, in spite of it, scandals are extremely rare in America, and should one occur, so paramount in society is female influence, that it is the man who is never forgiven. America is the only country in the world where Don Juan is not appreciated, and where there is sympathy for Georges Dandin.

On the whole, then, the American man at home is a very worthy person. There is just one point in which he is disappointing. American humour is a mere travellers' tale. It has no real existence. Indeed, so far from being humorous, the male American is the most abnormally serious creature who ever existed. He talks of Europe as being old ; but it is he himself who has never been young. He knows nothing of the irresponsible light-heartedness of boyhood, of the graceful insouciance of animal spirits. He has always been prudent, always practical, and pays a heavy penalty for having committed no mistakes. It is only fair to admit that he can exaggerate ; but even his exaggeration has a rational basis. It is not founded on wit or fancy ; it does not spring from any poetic imagination ; it is simply an earnest attempt on the part of language to keep pace with the enormous size of the country. It is evident that where it takes one twenty-four hours to go across a single parish, and seven days' steady railway travelling to keep a dinner engagement in another State, the ordinary resources of human speech are quite inadequate to the strain put on them, and new linguistic forms have to be invented, new methods of description resorted to. But this is nothing more than the fatal influence of geography upon adjectives ; for naturally humorous the American man certainly is not. It is true that when we meet him in Europe his conversation keeps us in fits of laughter ; but this is merely because his ideas are so absolutely incongruous with European surroundings. Place him in his own environment, in the midst of the civilisation that he has made for himself, and the life that is the work of his own hands, and the very same

observations will fail even to excite a smile. They have sunk to the level of the commonplace truism, or the sensible remark ; and what seemed a paradox when we listened to it in London, becomes a platitude when we hear it in Milwaukee.

America has never quite forgiven Europe for having been discovered somewhat earlier in history than itself. Yet how immense are its obligations to us ! How enormous its debt ! To gain a reputation for humour, its men have to come to London ; to be famous for their toilettes, its women have to shop in Paris.

Yet, though the American man may not be humorous, he is certainly humane. He is keenly conscious of the fact that there is a great deal of human nature in man, and tries to be pleasant to every stranger who lands on his shores. He has a healthy freedom from all antiquated prejudices, regards introductions as a foolish relic of mediaeval etiquette, and makes every chance visitor feel that he is the favoured guest of a great nation. If the English girl ever met him, she would marry him ; and if she married him, she would be happy. For, though he may be rough in manner, and deficient in the picturesque insincerity of romance, yet he is invariably kind and thoughtful, and has succeeded in making his own country the Paradise of Women.

This, however, is perhaps the reason why, like Eve, the women are always so anxious to get out of it.