

JONATHAN AND HIS CONTINENT.

BY MAX O'RELL AND JACK ALLYN.

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Paul Bloest (Max O'Rell) is a remarkably clever Frenchman, who has devoted his talents mostly to satirizing the Anglo-Saxon race. He has become widely known as the author of "JOHN BULL AND HIS ISLAND," "JOHN BULL, JR.," etc. This book is his latest production, the material for it being gathered during his recent visit to America.

CHAPTER I.

The population of America is sixty millions—mostly white. If the earth is small, America is large, and the Americans are immense! You, sixty million—All alive and kicking! From east to west, American stretches over a breadth of more than 5,000 miles. Here it is to put some readers on their guard, in case an American should one day put to them one of his favorite questions: "Where is the center of America?" I myself imagined that, starting from New York and pushing westward, one would reach the extremity of America on arriving at San Francisco. Not so, and here Jonathan has you. He knows you are going to answer wrongly, and if you want to please him, you must let yourself be caught in this little trap, because it will give him such satisfaction to see you right. At San Francisco, it appears you are not quite half way, and the center of America is really in the Pacific ocean. Jonathan more than doubled the width of his continent in 1897, when for the sum of \$7,000,000 he purchased Alaska of the Russians.

In America, everything is on an immense scale. The just pride of the citizens of the Young Republic is by the grandeur of its rivers, mountains, deserts, prairie, its suspension bridges, its huge cities, etc. Jonathan passes his life in admiration of all that is American. He cannot get over it. I have been through part of the country, and I cannot get over it either. I am out of breath, turned top-sy-turvy. It is pure conjuring, it is Robert Houdin over again—occasionally perhaps Robert Macaire too—but let us not anticipate. Give me time to recover my breath, and set my ideas in order. These Americans are so ready to begin with me, I can tell you that to begin with, my ideas are all jostling in my poor old European brain. There is no longer anything impossible, and the fairy tales are child's play compared to what one may see every day. Everything is prodigious, done by steam, by electricity; it is dazzling, and I no longer wonder that the Americans only use their adjectives in the superlative.

Now, as I advance, here is a letter that I received from an American, in the month of May, 1887, and which finally decided me to go and see America. It is dated from Boston: "DEAR SIR—I was on the point of taking the boat at 12 o'clock, to go and have a talk with you about an idea which occurred to me yesterday; but as I have already been across three times, and in a month or six weeks shall have to set out for St. Petersburg and Japan, I am, if possible, of arranging the matter of my visit to you. I have not time to say more than that I am, as ever, your devoted servant, and that I am, as ever, your devoted servant, and that I am, as ever, your devoted servant."

"Good heaven!" I exclaimed, "this is a man I must make the acquaintance of; I must go and see Jonathan at home one of these days." And as soon as circumstances allowed, I packed my trunk, took a cabin on board one of the "White Star" liners, and set out to see Jonathan and his continent.

CHAPTER II.

When a man of average intelligence returns home after having made a voyage to a foreign land, he cannot help having formed a certain number of impressions, and he has a right to communicate them to his friends. They are, but impressions, notes taken by the voyager, and, if there is an error committed by any one, it is by the critic or the reader, who either of those looks for a perfect picture of the manners and institutions of the people the author has visited, instead of simple impressions of a voyager. Certainly, if there is a country in the world that it would be impossible to judge in six months, that country is America, and the author who, in such a little space of time, allowed himself to fall into the error of sitting in judgment upon her would write himself down an ass. To form a really exact idea of America one would need to live twenty years in the country, nay, to be an American, for I may add that, in my opinion, the best books that exist upon the different countries of the world have been written by natives of those countries. Never has an author written of the English like Thackeray; never have the Scotch been painted with such fidelity as by Ramsay; and to describe Tartaria it needed not only a Frenchman but a Provencal, almost a Tarasconian.

It must be allowed that Jonathan has good reason to mistrust his critics. Most books on America have been written by Englishmen. Now the English are a very peculiar people, who can the least easily get rid of their prejudices in speaking of America. They are obliged to admit that the Americans have made their way pretty well since they have been their own masters; but John Bull has always a rankling remembrance, when he looks at America, of the day that the Americans sent him about his business, and his look seems to say to Jonathan: "Yes, you, you have not done at all badly—for you, but just think what the country would have been by this time if it had remained in my hands." The Englishman, on his side, has no antipathy whatever to the Americans. For that matter the Englishman has no antipathy for any one. He despises, but he does not hate, a fact which is irritating to the last degree to the objects of his attention. When a man feels that he has some worth, he likes to be loved or hated; to be treated with indifference is galling. John Bull looks on the American as a parvenu, and smiles with incredulity when you say that American society is not only brilliant and witty, but quite as polished as the best European society.

If this haughty disdain which exasperates Americans. Jonathan has forgotten that the English were once his oppressors; he forgives them for the war of 1812; without forgetting it, he forgives them for having, during the civil war, sided with the slave owners; but he cannot forgive an Englishman for coming to his dinner table in a tweed suit. A nation, scarcely more than a hundred years old, and composed of many widely different elements, cannot, in the nature of things, possess very marked characteristics.

There are Americans in plenty, but the American does not yet exist. The inhabitant of the northeast states, the Yankee, differs as much from the western man and the southerner as the Englishman differs from the German or the Spaniard. For example, call a Yankee "an ad," and he will get out of the room, remarking: "You say, sir, but that proves nothing." Call a Pennsylvanian man "an ad" and he will get out of temper and knock you down. Call a real westerner "an ad" and he will get out his revolver and shoot you dead on the spot. Should a minister indulge in unorthodox theories in the pulpit, the eastern man will content himself with shaking his head, and going to another church to perform his duties; the Southerner, the Southerner will only give a violent polemic; the newspaper of the locality. The Kansas man will wait for the minister at the church door and give him a sound thrashing.

On board the steamer we had five Americans who passed the eight days of the voyage in playing pool. The smoking room rang from morning to night with the clack that they uttered every time they laid a card on the table. They were so intent with their hands that they hardly used the same twice in an hour. Their stock seemed insatiable. On Sunday after breakfast a young lady sat down to the piano, and began playing hymns. What happened then? Our five poker players gathered round the lady and, for two hours, sang psalms and holy hymns to the edification of the other occupants of the saloon.

I was dumfounded. In France we have men who swear, and men who sing hymns. The Anglo-Saxon race alone can furnish men who do both with equal gusto. In what other country than America could such an anecdote as the following be told? It is the most typically American anecdote I heard in the United States. It came from Mr. Channey Dopey, it is said. But, for that matter, even a good story goes round the world of the states. It is put down to Mr. Dopey, Mark Twain, or the late Artemus Ward.

A new minister had been appointed in a little Kentucky town. No sooner had he taken possession of his cure than he set about ornamenting the church with stained glass windows of gorgeous hues. This proceeding aroused the suspicions of several parsons, who imagined that their new pastor was inclined to head them to Rome. A meeting was called, and it was decided to send a deputation to the minister to ask him to explain his conduct, and beg him to have the offending windows removed.

The head of the deputation was an old man of Presbyterian proclivities, whose austerity was well known in the town. He opened fire by addressing the reverend gentleman thus: "We have waited upon you, sir, to beg that you will remove those painted windows from our church as soon as possible. We are simple folk, God's light is good enough for us, and all we want to have it shut out by all those images." The worthy man had prepared a fine harangue, and was going to give the minister the benefit of it all; but the latter, losing patience, thus interrupted him: "Excuse me, you seem to be talking high ground; who are you, may I ask?"

"Who am I?" repeated the good old spokesman. "I'm a meek and humble follower of Jesus, that's what I am, and, —d—n you, who are you?" Without traveling very far, without even quitting the eastern coast of America, you will see a complete difference in the spirit of towns that are almost neighbors. In New York, for instance—I am not speaking now of the literary society, of which I shall speak later—in New York, it is your money that will open all doors to you; in Boston, it is your learning; in Philadelphia and Virginia, it is your gentility. Therefore, if you wish to be a success, parade your dollars in New York, your talents in Boston, and your ancestors in Philadelphia and Richmond.

Scarcely has a foreigner set foot in the United States before they ask him what he thinks of the country. Nine persons out of every ten you speak to put these three questions to you: (1) "How long have you been over?" (2) "How long have you been over?" (3) "How do you like our country?" There are even some who push curiosity further, and do not wait until you have arrived to ask for your opinion on America. I had only just embarked on board the Germanic, at Liverpool, when the purser handed me a letter from New York. I opened it and read: "Dear Sir—Could you, during your voyage, write me an article on the United States? I should be happy to have your preconceived notions of America and the Americans, so as to publish them in my journal as soon as you arrive."

An Englishman or a Frenchman will never ask you what you think of England or France. The Frenchman does not doubt that his country is beyond comparison. If he enters into the subject at all, it is to congratulate the stranger upon coming to visit it. The Englishman is perfectly persuaded that his England is the first country in the world and that everybody admits it, and the idea of asking an outsider for his opinion of it would never enter his head. He would think it so ridiculous, so amusing, so grotesque, that any one should tell him England was not at the head of all nations, that he would pity the person, and the matter would go no further.

CHAPTER IV. The American man are generally thin. Their faces glow with intelligence and energy, and in this mainly consists their handsomeness. The features are bony, the forehead straight, the nose sharp and often pitted looking in its thickness. At times one seems to see the bones coming out of the Indian type, the temples indented, the cheek bones prominent, the eyes small, keen and deep set.

As for the women, I do not hesitate to say that in the east, in New York especially, they might perfectly well be taken for French women. It is the same type, the same gait, the same vivacity, the same petulance, the same amplitude of proportions.

CHAPTER V. Jonathan admits all that glitters, even that which is not gold. In his eyes the measure of a thing answers for its quality, and the characteristics that succeed in superior to the merit that vegetation. The dollar is not only the unit of the monetary system; it is also the unit of the moral system; which day left upon me. Horrible! A populace composed of the offerings of all nations, the dirtiest, roughest one can imagine. Hardly this frightful squalor, Fifth Avenue, with its palaces full of the riches of the earth. It is the eternal story of large cities.

As in London, hundreds of churches and taverns called beer saloons, it is the same in the Anglo-Saxon world, where I see here the reader the impression which that day left upon me. Horrible! A populace composed of the offerings of all nations, the dirtiest, roughest one can imagine. Hardly this frightful squalor, Fifth Avenue, with its palaces full of the riches of the earth. It is the eternal story of large cities.

CHAPTER VI. Man has been perpetuated to expiate the transgression of his first parent by hard labor. Jonathan is a proof of it. He honors, he tells, and the sweat of his brow crystallizes in the arms and neck of his beloved womanhood in the form of diamonds. To the American woman the diamond is not an object of luxury, it is an object of prime necessity. An English old maid would do without her tea before an American woman would go without diamonds.

If good style consists in not doing what the vulgar do, good style in America ought to consist in wearing no diamonds unless democracy should demand this sign of equality. When you see diamonds in the ears of shop girls and factory girls, they are sham goods bought with well earned money, or real ones bought with badly earned money. Love of money, innate in the American, is not enough in itself to explain the luxury that man lavishes on her in the United States. America is not the only country where man is devoted to woman and ready to satisfy all her caprices. The Frenchman is as keenly alive to her influence as the American, if not more.

CHAPTER VII. The large cities do not constitute the real America. To gain a correct idea of the country one must go and see those hundreds—I had almost said those thousands—of flourishing little towns which spring up day by day that immense continent. It is no use looking in New York for monuments in the sense which we attach to the word in Europe. There are massive buildings, a few handsome churches, but nothing which arrests your gaze. The houses in the best part of the city are built of brown stone in the English style. In the populous quarters many are of red brick, with green shutters on the outside.

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CHAPTER IX. Money or celebrity may allow you to enter this charmed circle, society more refined, more affable, more hospitable, more witty or more brilliant. I should like just here to indulge in a string of adjectives after the fashion of Mme. de Sevigne. One of the consequences of the position which woman takes in the United States is, that in good American drawing rooms conversation is never dull.

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