

James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*

Picked up by a travelling bachelor, 1824.



ARRIVING IN NEW YORK HARBOUR. 1824. *Manners of Young American Women; Their Interaction with Bachelors.*

And now a little incident occurred, which, as it manifests a marked difference in the manners, and perhaps in the characters of those who inhabit this republic, and the possessors of our own Europe, I shall take the liberty to introduce.



I have already mentioned a fair creature as being among our passengers. She is of that age when, in our eyes, the sex is most alluring, because we know it to be the most innocent. I do not think her years can much exceed seventeen. Happily, your Belgic temperament is too mercurial to require a tincture of romance to give interest to a simple picture, in which delicacy, feminine beauty, and the most commendable ingenuousness, were admirably mingled. Neither am I, albeit, past the time of day-dreams, and wakeful nights, so utterly insensible to the attractions of such a being, as to have passed three weeks in her society, without experiencing some portion of that manly interest in her welfare, which, I fear, it has been my evil fortune to have felt for too many of the syrens in general, to permit a sufficient concentration of the sentiment, in favour of any one in particular. I had certainly not forgotten, during the passage, to manifest a proper spirit of homage to the loveliness of the sex, in the person of this young American ; nor do I think that my manner failed to express a prudent and saving degree of the admiration that was excited by her gentle, natural, and nymph-like deportment, no less than by her spirited and intelligent discourse. In short--but you were not born in Rotterdam, nor reared upon the Zuy der Zee, to need a madrigal on such a topic. The whole affair passed on the ocean, and, as a nautical man, you will not fail to comprehend it. Notwithstanding I had made every effort to appeal, what you know I really am, sufficiently amiable, during the voyage, and, notwithstanding Cadwallader had not given himself any particular trouble on the subject at all, it was not to be denied that there was a marked distinction in the reception of our respective civilities, and that always in his favour. I confess that, for a long time, I was disposed (in the entire absence of all better reasons) to ascribe this preference to an illiberal national prejudice. Still it was only by comparison that I had the smallest rational grounds of complaint. But a peculiarly odious quality attaches itself to comparisons of this nature. There is a good deal of the Caesar in my composition, as respects the sex; unless I could be first with the Houries, I believe I should be willing to abandon Paradise itself, in order to seek pro-eminence in some humbler sphere. I fear this ambitious temperament has been our bane, and has condemned us to the heartless and unsocial life we lead! Our fair fellow passenger was

under the care of an aged and invalid grandfather, who had been passing, a few years in Italy, in pursuit of health. Now, it is not easy to imagine a more cuttingly polite communication, than that which this vigilant old guardian permitted between me and his youthful charge. If I approached, her joyous, natural, and enticing (I will not, because a little piqued, dally the truth, Baron,) merriment was instantly changed into the cold and regulated smiles of artificial breeding. Nature seemed banished at my footstep: and yet it was the artlessness and irresistible attractions of those fascinations, which so peculiarly denote the influence of the mighty dame, that were constantly tempting me to obtrude my withering presence on her enjoyments. With Cadwallader, every thing was reversed. In his society, she laughed without ceasing; chatted, disputed, was natural and happy. To all this intercourse, the lynx-eyed grandfather paid not the smallest attention. He merely seemed pleased that his child had found an agreeable, and an instructive companion; while, on the contrary, there existed so much of attractiveness in our respective systems, that it was impossible for me to approach the person of the daughter, without producing a corresponding proximity on the part of the parent.

Something nettled by a circumstance that, to one who is sensible he is not as interesting as formerly, really began to grow a little personal, I took occasion to joke Cadwallader on his superior happiness, and to felicitate myself on the probability, that I might yet enjoy the honour of officiating, in my character of a confirmed celibate, at his nuptials. He heard me without surprise, and answered me without emotion. "I thought the circumstance could not long escape one so quick-sighted," he said. "You think I am better received than yourself? The fact is indisputable and, as the motive exists in customs that distinguish us, in a greater or less degree, from every other people, I will endeavour to account for it. In no other country, is the same freedom of intercourse between the unmarried of the two sexes, permitted, as in America. In no other Christian country, is there more restraint imposed on the communications between the married: in this particular, we reverse the usages of all other civilized nations. The why, and the wherefore, shall be pointed out to you, in proper time; but the present case requires its own explanation. Surprising, and possibly suspicious, as may seem to you the easy intercourse I hold with my young countrywoman, there is nothing in it beyond what you will see every day in our society. The father permits it, because *I am his countryman*, and he is watchful of you, because you are not! Men of my time of life, are not considered particularly dangerous to the affections of young ladies of seventeen, for unequal matches are of exceedingly rare occurrence among us. And, if I were what I have been," he added, smiling, "I do not know that the case would be materially altered. In every thing but year, the grandfather of the fair Isabel, knows that I am the equal of his charge. It would be quite in the ordinary course of things, that a marriage should grow out of this communication. Ninety-nine, in one hundred of our family connections, are formed very much in this manner. Taste and inclination, rather guided, than controlled, by the prudence of older heads, form most of our matches; and just as much freedom as comports with that prudence, and a vast deal more than you probably deem safe, is allowed between the young of the two sexes. We, who ought to, and who do know best, think otherwise. Women are, literally, our better halves. Their frailty is to be ascribed to the seductions of man. In a community like ours, where almost every man has some healthful and absorbing occupation, there is neither leisure, nor inclination, to devote

much time to unworthy pursuits. I need not tell you that vice must be familiar, before it ceases to be odious. In Europe, a successful intrigue often gives *eclat*, even to an otherwise contemptible individual; in America, he must be a peculiarly fortunate man, who can withstand its odium. But the abuse of youth and innocence with us, is comparatively rare indeed. In consequence, suspicion slumbers: *voila tout*."

"But why this difference, then, between you and me?" I demanded. "Why does this Cerberus sleep only while you are nigh? I confess I looked for higher courtesy in a man who has travelled."

"It is precisely because he has travelled," my friend interrupted, a little dryly. "But you can console yourself with the expectation, that those of his countrymen, who have never quitted home, will be less vigilant, because less practised in foreign manners."

This introduction brings me to my incident. It was no sooner known that we were about to quit the ship, than a dozen longing faces gathered about us. Our example was followed by others, and one or two more boats from the land were engaged to transport the passengers into the bay, in order that they might witness the reception of La Fayette. I had observed a cloud of disappointment on the fair brow of the little Isabel, from the moment our intentions were known. The circumstance was mentioned to Cadwallader, who was not slow to detect its errand. After a little thought, he approached the grandfather, and made an offer of as many seats, in our own boat, as might be necessary for the accommodation of his party. It seems the health of the old man would not permit the risk. The offer was, therefore, politely declined. The cloud thickened on the brow of Isabel; but it vanished entirely when her aged grandfather proposed that she should accompany us, attended by a maid, and under the *especial protection* of my companion. In all this arrangement, singular as it appeared to my eastern vision, there was the utmost simplicity and confidence. It was evident, by the tremulous and hesitating assent of the young lady, that even the customs of the country were slightly invaded; but, then, the occasion was deemed sufficiently extraordinary to justify the innovation. "So much for the privileges of two score and five," whispered Cadwallader, after he had handed his charge into the boat. For myself, I admit I rejoiced in an omen that was so flattering to those personal pretensions which, in my own case, are getting to be a little weakened by time. Before closing this relation, of what I consider a distinctive custom, it is proper to add, that had not the parties been of the very highest class of society, even far less hesitation would have been manifested; and that the little reluctance exhibited by Isabel, was rather a tribute paid to that retiring delicacy which is thought to be so proper to her sex, than to the most remote suspicion of any positive impropriety. Had she been a young married woman, there would, probably, have been the same little struggle with timidity, and the same triumph of the curiosity of the sex. But the interest which our fair companion took in the approaching ceremony, deserves a better name. It was plain, by her sparkling eyes and flushed features, that a more worthy sentiment was at the bottom of her impulse--it was almost patriotism.



UPSTATE NEW YORK. 1824. *Literary Knowledge of American Women.*

I found an intelligence that surprised me at every turn, and which, in itself, gave the true character to the humanity of which I was the subject. I repeatedly found copies of your standard English authors, in retired dwellings where one would not expect to meet any production of a cast higher than an almanac, or a horn-book; nor were they read with that acquiescent criticism which gives a fashion to taste, and which makes a joke of Moliere better than a joke of any other man. Young women (with whom my situation, no less than my tastes, oftenest brought me into literary discussions) frequently surprised me with the extent of their acquaintance with, and the soundness of their opinions concerning the merits and morality of Pope and Addison, of Young and Tillotson, and even of Milton and Shakespeare. This may sound to you ridiculous, and certainly, if taken without a saving clause for the other acquirements of my female critics, it is liable to some exception; but I repeat I have often known professed blues acquit themselves with less credit than did several of my passing acquaintances at the tea-tables of different New-England inns.



NEW-ENGLAND. 1824. *On the Proper Occupations of Women in America.*

By the hand of fair Isabel, Waller, there is something noble and touching, in the universal and yet simple and unpretending homage with which these people treat the weaker sex. I am sure a woman here has only to respect herself in order to meet with universal deference. I now understand what Cadwallader meant when he said that America was the real Paradise of woman. The attention and manliness which he exhibited for the Abigail of the little Isabel, is common to the meanest man, at least in New-England. I traversed the country in harvest time, and scarcely recollect to have seen six females in the fields, and even they appeared there only on the emergency of some passing shower. When one considers the price which labour bears, this solitary fact is in itself pregnant with meaning. A little boy whom I conveyed with his father in my wagon a dozen miles, (for I neglected no opportunity to mix with the people,) laughed aloud as he pointed with his father and cried, "There is a woman at work among the men!" Had he seen her riding a warhorse *en militaire*, he could scarcely have been more amused. After all, what nobler or more convincing proof of high civilization can be given than this habitual respect of the strong for the weak? The condition of women in this country is solely owing to the elevation of its moral feeling. As she is never misplaced in society, her influence is only felt in the channels of ordinary and domestic life.

I have heard young and silly Europeans, whose vanity has probably been wounded in finding them selves objects of secondary interest, affect to ridicule the absorbed attention which the youthful American matron bestows on her family; and some have gone so far in my presence, as to assert that a lady of this country was no more than an upper servant in the house of her husband. They pay us of the eastern hemisphere but an indifferent compliment, when they assume that this beautiful devotion to the first, the highest, and

most lovely office of the sex, is peculiar to the women of station in America only. I have ever repelled the insinuation as becomes a man but, alas! what is the testimony of one who can point to no fireside, or household of his own, but the dreaming reverie of a heated brain? Imaginary or not, I think one might repose his affections on hundreds of the fair, artless creatures he meets with here, with an entire confidence that the world has not the first place in her thoughts. To me, woman appears to fill in America the very station for which she was designed by nature. In the lowest conditions of life she is treated with the tenderness and respect that is due to beings whom we believe to be the repositories of the better principles of our nature. Retired within the sacred precincts of her own abode, she is preserved from the destroying taint of excessive intercourse with the world. She makes no bargains beyond those which supply her own little personal wants, and her heart is not early corrupted by the harmful and unfeminine vice of selfishness; she is often the friend and adviser of her husband, but never his chapman. She must be sought in the haunts of her domestic privacy, and not amid the wranglings, deceptions, and heart-burnings of keen and sordid traffic. So true and general is this fact, that I have remarked a vast proportion of that class who frequent the markets, or vend trifles in the streets of this city, occupations that are not unsuited to the feebleness of the sex, are either foreigners, or females descended from certain insulated colonies of the Dutch, which still retain many of the habits of their ancestors amidst the improvements that are throwing them among the forgotten usages of another century.

The effect of this natural and inestimable division of employment, is in itself enough to produce an impression on the characters of a whole people. It leaves the heart and principles of woman untainted by the dire temptations of strife with her fellows. The husband can retire from his own sordid struggles with the world to seek consolation and correction from one who is placed beyond their influence. The first impressions of the child are drawn from the purest sources known to our nature; and the son, even long after he has been compelled to enter on the thorny track of the father, preserves the memorial of the pure and unalloyed lessons that he has received from the lips, and, what is far better, from the example of the mother. Though in every picture of life in which these bright colours are made, the strongest must be deadened by deep and painful shadows, I do firmly believe that the undeniable truth I have just written may be applied with as much, if not with more justice, to the condition and influence of the sex in New-England as in any portion of the globe. I saw every where the utmost possible care to preserve the females from undue or unwomanly employments. If there was a burthen, it was in the arms or on the shoulders of the man. Even labours that seem properly to belong to the household, were often performed by the latter; and I never heard the voice of the wife calling on the husband for assistance, that it was not answered by a ready, manly, and cheerful compliance. The neatness of the cottage, the farm-house, and the inn; the clean, tidy, healthful, and vigorous look of the children, united to attest the usefulness of this system. What renders all this more striking and more touching, is the circumstance that not only is labour in so great demand, but, contrary to the fact in all the rest of christendom, the women materially exceed the men in numbers. This seeming departure from what is almost an established law of nature is owing to the emigration westward. By the census of 1820, it appears, that in the six States of New-England there were rather more than thirteen females to every twelve males over the age of sixteen.



CASTLE GARDEN, NEW YORK. 1824. *Ball honoring La Fayette; Dowries; Fashion of American Women; Deportment of Married Women; Manners of Young American Girls; Courtship.*

In this manner we passed through the crowd, until we had gained the terrace. Here we paused, to take a more deliberate view of what I will not term an assemblage, for its adjuncts and peculiar features strictly entitle it to be called a prospect. The vast extent of the *salle* lent an air of magic to the whole scene. Slight, delicate beings, seemed to be floating beneath us at a distance that reduced their forms to the imaginary size of fairies; while the low, softened music aided in the deception. I never witnessed a similar effect at any other fete. Even the glimpses that were here and there caught of the gloomy recesses, in which artillery had formerly frowned, assisted in lending the spectacle a character of its own. The side curtains of the canopy were raised for the admission of air, and one had only to turn his eyes from the dazzling fairy scene within, to look out upon the broad, placid, star-lit bay, which washed the foot of the fortress. I lingered on this spot near an hour, experiencing, an unsocial delight that may seem to savour of the humour of our fraternity, especially when one remembers the numberless temptations to descend which were flitting like beings of the air before my eyes. But a crowd of sensations and reflections oppressed me.

Again and again I asked myself the question, if I what I saw were true, and if I really were standing on the continent of Columbus. Could those fair, graceful creatures be the daughters and wives of the mechanics and tradesmen of a provincial town in North America? Perhaps, dear Bethizy, it was assailing me in my weakest part; but I do not remember, before or since, ever to have been so alive to the injustice of our superficial and vague notions of this country, as while I stood gazing down on some two or three thousand of its daughters, who were not only attending but actually adorning such a scene as this. Most of them certainly would have been abashed, perhaps *gauche*, if transported into one of our highly artificial coteries; but, believe me, the lost laboured refinement of Europe might have learned, in this identical, motley, republican assemblage, that there is a secret charm in nature, which it may be sometimes dangerous to attempt to supersede. It has always appeared to me, that manner in a woman bears a strict analogy to dress. A degree of simple, appropriate embellishment serves alike to adorn the graces of person and of demeanour; but the moment a certain line is passed in either, the individual becomes auxiliary to the addition, instead of the addition lending, as it should, a grace to the individual. It is very possible, that, if one woman wears diamonds, another must do the same thing, until a saloon shall be filled with the contents of a jeweller's shop; but, after all, this is rather a contest between bright stones than bright eyes. What man has not looked a thousand times, even at beauty, with indifference, when it has been smothered by such an unnatural alliance; but what man has ever met beauty in its native attractions, without feeling her power influencing his inmost soul? I speak with no dissembled experience when I answer--None!

I think the females of the secondary classes in this country dress more, and those of the upper, less, than the corresponding castes in Europe. The Americans are not an economical people, in one sense, though instances of dissolute prodigality are exceedingly rare among them. A young woman of the middling classes, for instance, seldom gives much of her thoughts towards the accumulation of a little dowry; for the question of what a wife will bring to the common stock is agitated much less frequently here than in countries more sophisticated. My companion assures me it is almost unprecedented for a lover to venture on any inquiries concerning the fortune of his fair one, even in any class. Those equivocal admirers, who find Cupid none the less attractive for having his dart gilded, are obliged to make their demonstrations with singular art and caution, for an American lady would be very apt to distrust the affection that saw her charms through the medium of an estate. Indeed he mentioned one or two instances in which the gentleman had endeavoured to stipulate in advance for the dowries of their brides, and which had not only created a great deal of scandal in the coteries, but which had invariably been the means of defeating the matches, the father, or the daughter, finding, in each case, something particularly offensive in the proposition. A lady of reputed fortune is a little more certain of matrimony than her less lucky rival, though popular opinion must be the gage of her possessions until the lover can claim a husband's rights ; unless indeed the amorous swain should possess, as sometimes happens, secret and more authentic sources of information. From all that I can learn, nothing is more common, however, than for young men of great expectations to connect themselves with females, commonly of their own condition in life, who are pennyless; or, on the other hand, for ladies to give their persons with one or two hundred thousand dollars, to men, who have nothing better to recommend them than education and morals. But this is digressing from my immediate subject.

"The facility with which the fabrics of every country in the world are obtained, the absence of care on the subject of the future, and the inherent elevation of the character which is a natural consequence of education, and a consciousness of equal rights, cause all the secondary classes of this country to assume more of the exterior of the higher, than it is common to see with us. The exceptions must be sought among the very poorest and most depressed members of the community. The men, who are nowhere so apt at imitation as the other sex, are commonly content with garments that shall denote the comfort and ease of their several conditions in life, but the females are remarkable for a more aspiring ambition. Even in the country, though rusticity and a more awkward exterior were as usual to be seen, I looked in vain for those marked and peculiar characteristics of dress and air, that we meet in every part of Europe. In one instance do I remember to have seen any number either of men or women, whose habiliments conveyed my idea of provincial costume. The exception was among the inhabitants of a little Dutch village, in plain view of this city, who are said to retain no small portion of the prejudices and ignorance of the seventeenth century, and whom the merry author of the burlesque history of New-York [Washington Irving] accuses of believing they are still subject to the power of the United Provinces. As respects the whole of New-England, I saw some attempt at imitating the fashion of the day, in even the humblest individual, though the essay was frequently made on a material no more promising than the homely product of a household manufacture. In the towns, the efforts were, of course, far more

successful, and I should cite the union of individuality of air with conformance to custom as a distinguishing feature of the women of the lower classes here. You will understand me better if I venture on that dangerous experiment, a comparison. A *grisette* of Paris, for instance, has a particularly smart and conventional air, though her attire is as different as possible from that of an *elegante*. But the carriage, the demeanour, and the expressions of one Parisian *grisette*, is as much like those of another as well can be. Now the fashion of the attire, and not unfrequently the material of the dress of an American girl of a similar class, differs from that of the lady only in quality, and perhaps a little in the air in which it is worn. As you ascend in the scale of society, the distinctions, always excepting those delicate shades which can only be acquired by constant association in the best company, become less obvious, until it requires the tact of breeding to trace them at all. As I stood regarding the mixed assembly before me, I had the best possible illustration of the truth of what I will not call the levelling, for elevating is a far better word, effects of the state of society, which has been engendered by the institutions and the great abundance of this country. Of some three thousand females present, not a sixth of the whole number, perhaps, belonged to those classes that, in Europe, are thought to have any claims to compose the elite of society. And yet so far as air, attire, grace, or even deportment, were concerned, it must have been a sickly and narrow taste indeed that could have taken exceptions. Although so far removed from what we are accustomed to consider the world, the Americans, in general, have far less of what is called, in English, the manner of the shop about them, than their kinsmen of England. These peculiar features are becoming every day less striking every where; but Cadwallader tells me they never existed in America at all. Few men are so completely limited to one profession, or trade, as not to possess a great many just and accurate ideas on other subjects; and though it may be a consequence that excellence is more rare in particular pursuits, it is certain that, in manner and in general intelligence, the nation is greatly a gainer. The effect of this elevation of character (I persist in the term) was abundantly conspicuous at the castle garden fete. Both men and women deputed themselves, and to all appearances looked quite as well as a far more select *reunion* in Europe. The distinguishing feature of American female manners is nature. The fair creatures are extremely graceful if left to exhibit their blandishments in their own way; but it is very evident, that a highly artificial manner in those with whom they associate, produces a blighting influence on the ease of even the most polished among them. They appear to me to shrink sensitively from professions and an exaggeration that form no part of their own politeness; and between ourselves, if they are wise, they will retain the unequalled advantage they now possess in carrying refinement no further than it can be supported by simplicity and truth. They are decidedly handsome: a union of beauty in feature and form, being, I think, more common than in any part of Europe north of the Adriatic. In general they are delicate; a certain feminine air, tone of voice, size and grace being remarkably frequent. In the northern, eastern and middle states, which contain much more than half the whole population of the country, the women are fair; though brunettes are not unfrequent, and just as blondes are admired in France, they are much esteemed here, especially, as is often the case, if the hair and eyes happen to correspond. Indeed it is difficult to imagine any creature more attractive than an American beauty between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. There is something in the bloom, delicacy, and innocence of one of these young things, that reminds you of the conceptions which poets and painters have taken of the angels. I think

delicacy of air and appearance at that age, though perhaps scarcely more enchanting than what one sees in England, is even more common here than in the mother country, especially when it is recollected how many more faces necessarily pass before the eye in a given time in the latter nation than in this. It is often said that the women of this climate fade earlier than in the northern countries of Europe, and I confess I was, at first, inclined to believe the opinion true. That it is not true to the extent that is commonly supposed, I am, however, convinced by the reasoning of Cadwallader, if indeed it be true at all. Perhaps a great majority of the females marry before the age of twenty, and it is not an uncommon thing to see them mothers at sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen. Almost every American mother nurses her own infant. It is far more common to find them mothers of eight, or of ten children, at fifty, than mothers of two or three. Now the human form is not completely developed in the northern moiety of this Union, earlier than in France, or in England. These early marriages, which are the fruits of abundance, have an obvious tendency to impair the powers of the female, and to produce a premature decay. In addition to this cause, which is far more general than you may be disposed to believe, there is something in the customs of the country which may have a tendency, not only to assist the ravages of time, but to prevent the desire to conceal them. There is no doubt that the animal, as well as the moral man, is far less artificial here than in Europe. There is thought to be something deceptive in the use of the ordinary means of aiding nature, which offends the simple manners of the nation. Even so common an ornament as rouge is denied, and no woman dares confess that she uses it. There is something so particularly soft and delicate in the colour of the young females one sees in the streets here, that at first I was inclined to give them credit for the art with which they applied the tints; but Cadwallader gravely assured me I was wrong; He had no doubt that certain individuals did, in secret, adopt the use of rouge; but within the whole circuit of his acquaintance he could not name one whom he suspected of the practice. Indeed, several gentlemen have gone so far as to assure me that when a woman rouged, it is considered in this country, as *prima facie* testimony that her character is frail. It should also be remembered, that when an American girl marries, she no longer entertains the desire to interest any but her husband. There is perhaps something in the security of matrimony that is not very propitious to female blandishments, and one ought to express no surprise that the wife who is content with the affections of her husband, should grow a little indifferent to the admiration of the rest of the world. One rarely sees married women foremost in the gay scenes. They attend, as observant and influencing members of society, but not as the principal actors. It is thought that the amusements of the world are more appropriate to the young, who are neither burthened nor sobered with matrimonial duties, and who possess an inherent right to look about them in the morning of life in quest of the partner who is to be their companion to its close. And yet I could name, among my acquaintances here, a dozen of the youngest-looking mothers of large and grown-up families that I remember ever to have seen

The freedom of intercourse which is admitted between the young of the two sexes in America, and which undeniably is admitted with impunity, is to me, who have so long been kept sighing in the distance, perfectly amazing. I have met with self-sufficient critics from our side of the Atlantic, who believe, or affect to believe, that this intercourse cannot always be so innocent as is pretended. When questioned as to the grounds of their

doubts, they have uniformly been founded on the impression that what could not exist with impunity with us, cannot exist with impunity here. They might just as well pretend, in opposition to the known fact, that a republican form of government cannot exist in America because it could not well exist in Turkey as the Ottoman empire is now constituted. That the confidence of parents is sometimes abused in America, is probably just as true as it is that their watchfulness is sometimes deceived in Europe; but the intelligence, the high spirit, and the sensitiveness of the American (who must necessarily be a party to any transgressions of the sort) on the subject of female reputation, is in itself sufficient proof that the custom is attended with no general inconvenience. The readiness of the American gentleman to appeal to arms in defense of his wounded pride is too well known to be disputed. The duels of this country are not only more frequent, but they are infinitely more fatal than those of any other nation. We will hereafter consider the cause, and discuss their manner. But no reasonable man can suppose that a sagacious nation, which is so sensitive on the point of honour, would stupidly allow their sisters and daughters to be debauched, when their own personal experience must apprise them of the danger to which they are exposed. The evil would necessarily correct itself. The chief reason why the present customs can exist without abuse, is no doubt owing to the fact that there is no army, nor any class of idlers, to waste their time in dissolute amusements. Something is also due to the deep moral feeling which pervades the community, and which influences the exhibition of vice in a thousand different ways. But having said so much on the subject, you may expect me to name the extent to which this freedom of intercourse extends. Under the direction of my friend Cadwallader, I shall endeavour to acquit myself of the obligation.

You will readily understand that the usages of society must always be more or less tempered by the circles in which they are exhibited. Among these families which can claim to belong to the *elite*, the liberty allowed to unmarried females, I am inclined to think, is much the same as is practised among the upper classes in England, with this difference, that, as there is less danger of innovation on rank through fortune hunters and fashionable aspirants, so is there less jealousy of their approaches. A young American dances, chats, laughs, and is just as happy in the saloon, as she was a few years before in the nursery. It is expected that the young men would seek her out, sit next her, endeavour to amuse her, and, in short, to make themselves as agreeable as possible. By the memory of the repentant Benedict, Comte Jules, but this is a constant and sore temptation to one who has never before been placed in the jeopardy of such a contagious atmosphere! But it is necessary to understand the tone of conversation that is allowed, in order to estimate the dangers of this propinquity.

The language of gallantry is never tolerated. A married woman would conceive it an insult, and a girl would be exceedingly apt to laugh in her adorer's face. In order that it should be favourably received, It is necessary that the former should be prepared to forget her virtue, and to the latter, whether sincere or not, it is an absolute requisite that all adulation should at least wear the semblance of sincerity. But he who addresses an unmarried female in this language, whether it be of passion or only feigned, must expect to be exposed, and probably disgraced, unless he should be prepared to support his sincerity by an offer of his hand. I think I see you tremble at the magnitude of the penalty

! I do not mean to say that idle pleasantries, such as are mutually understood to be no more than pleasantries, are not sometimes tolerated; but an American female is exceedingly apt to assume a chilling gravity at the slightest trespass on what she believes, and between ourselves, rightly believes to be the dignity of her sex. Here, you will perceive, is a saving custom, and one, too, that it is exceedingly hazardous to infringe, which diminishes one half of the ordinary dangers of the free communication between the young of the two sexes. Without doubt, when the youth has once made his choice, he endeavours to secure an interest in the affections of the chosen fair, by all those nameless assiduities and secret sympathies, which, though they appear to have produced no visible fruits, cannot be unknown to one of your established susceptibility. These attractions lead to love; and love, in this country, nineteen times in twenty, leads to matrimony. But pure, heartfelt affection, rarely exhibits itself in the language of gallantry. The latter is no more than a mask, which pretenders assume and lay aside at pleasure; but when the heart is really touched, the tongue is at best but a miserable interpreter of its emotion; I have always ascribed our own forlorn condition to the inability of that mediating member to do justice to the strength of emotions that are seemingly as deep, as they are frequent.

There is another peculiarity in American manners that should be mentioned. You probably know that in England far more reserve is used, in conversation with a female, than in most, if not all of the nations of the continent. As, in all peculiar customs, each nation prefers its own usage; and while the English lady is shocked with the freedom with which the French lady converses of her personal feelings, ailments, &c., the latter turns the nicety of the former into ridicule. It would be an invidious office to pretend to decide between the tastes of such delicate disputants; but one manner of considering the subject is manifestly wrong. The great reserve of the English ladies has been termed a *mauvaise honte*, which is ascribed to their insular situation, and to their circumscribed intercourse with the rest of the world. And yet it may be well questions if the *paysanne* cannot successfully compete with the *elegante* in this species of refinement, or whether a *dame des halles* cannot rather more freely discuss her animal functions than a *dame de la cour*. This is a manner of disposing the question that will not abide the test of investigation, since it is clear that refinement makes us reserved, and not communicative, on all such topics. Fashion, it is true, may cause even coarseness to be sometimes tolerated, and, after all, it is no easy matter to decide where true refinement ends, or sickness of taste commences. Let all this be as it may, it is certain that the women of America, of all classes, are much more reserved and guarded in their discourse, at least in presence of our sex, than even the women of the country whence they derive their origin. Various opinions are entertained on the subject amongst themselves. The vast majority of the men like it, because they are used to no other custom. Many, who have got a taste of European usages, condemn it as over-fastidious; but my friend Cadwallader, who is not ignorant of life in both hemispheres, worships it, as constituting one of the distinctive and appropriate charms of the sex. He stoutly maintains, that the influence of woman is more felt and revered in American society than in any other; and he argues, with no little plausibility, that it is so because, while she rarely or never exceeds the natural duties of her station, she forgets none of those distinctive features of her sex and character, which, by constantly appealing to the generosity of man by admitting his physical weakness, give strength and durability to her moral ascendancy. I think, at all events, no intelligent

traveler can journey through this country without being struck by the singular air of decency and self-respect which belongs to all its women, and no honest foreigner can deny the kindness and respect they receive from the men.

With these restrictions, which cannot be infringed without violating the rules of received decorum, you will readily perceive that the free intercourse between the unmarried is at once deprived of half its danger. But the upper classes in this country are far from neglecting many necessary forms. As they have more to lose by matrimonial connexions than others, common prudence teaches them the value of a proper caution. Thus a young lady never goes in public without the eye of some experienced matron to watch her movements. She cannot appear at a play, ball, &c. &c. without a father, or a brother, at least it is thought far more delicate and proper that she should have a female guardian. She never rides nor walks --unless in the most public place, and then commonly with great reserve-- attended by a single man, unless indeed under circumstances of a peculiar nature. In short, she pursues that course which rigid delicacy would prescribe, without however betraying any marked distrust of the intentions of the other sex. These customs are relaxed a little as you descend in the scale of society; but it is evidently more because the friends of a girl with ten or twenty thousand dollars, or of a family in middle life, have less jealousy of motive than those of one who is, rich, or otherwise of a particularly desirable connexion.

I shall close this long and discursive epistle with one more distinctive custom, that may serve to give you an idea of the tone and simplicity of this society. There is something repugnant to the delicacy of American ideas in permitting a lady to come, in any manner in contact with the world. A woman of almost any rank above the labouring classes, is averse to expose herself to the usual collisions, bargainings &c. &c., of ordinary travelling. Thus, the first thing an American woman requires to commence a journey, is a suitable male escort; the very thing that with us would be exceptionable. Nothing is more common, for instance, when a husband or a brother hears that a respectable acquaintance is about to go in the same steam-boat, stage, or on the same route, as that in which his wife or sister intends to journey, than to request the former to become her protector. The request is rarely refused, and the trust is always considered flattering, and commonly sacred. Here you see that the very custom which in Europe would create scandal, is here resorted to, under favour of good morals and directness of thought, to avert it.

Cadwallader assures me that he was pained, and even shocked, at meeting well-bred women running about Europe attended only by a footman and a maid, and that for a long time he could not divest himself of the idea, that they were unfortunate in having lost all those male friends, whose natural duty it was to stand between their helplessness and the cold calculating selfishness of the world.



WASHINGTON. 1824. *Legal rights of the widow to the estate of her husband; Marriage and Divorce laws.*

The law of real property, in the United States, is a good deal the same as that of England. Entails are, however, destroyed every where, and the doctrine of descent has, in many of the States, been roughly handled. In New-York (I quote this State oftenest, as the most populous and the most important, though you are to understand that the laws of New-York are strictly applicable only to itself, while they are commonly founded on principles that are general) in New-York, the father is the next heir of a child who leaves no issue. This is a wise, a humane, and a natural departure from the dictum of the common law, and it does much good in a country like this. The next of kin inherit, after the father, in equal portions, without distinction of age or sex. The widow is entitled to one-third of the personal estate of the husband, and to the use of one-third of the real estate during life. The husband is owner of all the personals of the wife, and he is the tenant by the courtesy of her real estate, according to the provisions of the English common law. There is, however, a good deal of difference in the rights of husbands and wives in the different States. In some, the property of the woman is much more respected than in others.

The party in possession of property in fee, can devise it, without restriction, to whom he pleases. This is, I think, a wiser provision than the law of France, which renders natural descent, to a certain extent, unavoidable; but the law of France I take to be an enactment that is intended to do away with the custom of entails, which had gotten such deep root in Europe. Rich men, here, often give more to their sons than to their daughters; though it is very common for men of small fortunes to make the daughters independent at the expense of the sons. Of course, any irregularity or alienation of property from the descent (or ascent) prescribed by the law must be made by will.

Marriage is, of course, altogether a civil contract. Its forms are, however, more or less artificial, according to the policy of particular States. In some, bans are necessary; in others, evidence that would establish any other contract would establish that of marriage. As a breach of the marriage contract is always criminal, the law requires, in cases of indictments for bigamy, rather more positive testimony than would be required in those of inheritance and legitimacy. Thus, a child would be considered born in wedlock, in many States, under the reputation of matrimony, though a man would scarcely be punished for bigamy, without direct evidence of the two contracts. The policy of the different States, however, varies so much, to suit the particular conditions of society, that no general rule can be laid down. In portions of the country recently settled, it is the practice to make the contract before a justice of the peace, as in many parts of New-York; but then, a justice of peace has no more power to celebrate a marriage than any other man. It is thought that his testimony, as a public officer, is more imposing than that of a private individual, and these people always attach high importance to legal rank. People of any condition are always (unless in extraordinary exceptions) married by clergymen.