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The American

by Henry James

CHAPTER I

On a brilliant day in May, in the year 1868, a gentleman was reclining at his ease on the great circular divan which at that period occupied the centre of the Salon Carre, in the Museum of the Louvre.

This commodious ottoman has since been removed, to the extreme regret of all weak-kneed lovers of the fine arts, but the gentleman in question had taken serene possession of its softest spot, and, with his head thrown back and his legs outstretched, was staring at Murillo's beautiful moon-borne Madonna in profound enjoyment of his posture.

He had removed his hat, and flung down beside him a little red guide-book and an opera-glass. The day was warm; he was heated with walking, and he repeatedly passed his handkerchief over his forehead, with a somewhat wearied gesture. And yet he was evidently not a man to whom fatigue was familiar; long, lean, and muscular, he suggested the sort of vigor that is commonly known as "toughness."

But his exertions on this particular day had been of an unwonted sort,

and he had performed great physical feats which left him less jaded than his tranquil stroll through the Louvre. He had looked out all the pictures to which an asterisk was affixed in those formidable pages of fine print in his Badeker; his attention had been strained and his eyes dazzled, and he had sat down with an aesthetic headache. He had looked, moreover, not only at all the pictures, but at all the copies that were going forward around them, in the hands of those innumerable young women in irreproachable toilets who devote themselves, in France, to the propagation of masterpieces, and if the truth must be told, he had often admired the copy much more than the original. His physiognomy would have sufficiently indicated that he was a shrewd and capable fellow, and in truth he had often sat up all night over a bristling bundle of accounts, and heard the cock crow without a yawn. But Raphael and Titian and Rubens were a new kind of arithmetic, and they inspired our friend, for the first time in his life, with a vague self-mistrust.

An observer with anything of an eye for national types would have had no difficulty in determining the local origin of this undeveloped connoisseur, and indeed such an observer might have felt a certain humorous relish of the almost ideal completeness with which he filled out the national mould. The gentleman on the divan was a powerful specimen of an American.

But he was not only a fine American; he was in the first place, physically, a fine man. He appeared to possess that kind of health and strength which, when found in perfection, are the most impressive-- the physical capital which the owner does nothing to "keep up."

If he was a muscular Christian, it was quite without knowing it.

If it was necessary to walk to a remote spot, he walked, but he had never known himself to "exercise." He had no theory with regard to cold bathing or the use of Indian clubs; he was neither an oarsman, a rifleman, nor a fencer--he had never had time for these amusements--and he was quite unaware that the saddle is recommended for certain forms of indigestion.

He was by inclination a temperate man; but he had supped the night before his visit to the Louvre at the Cafe Anglais-- some one had told him it was an experience not to be omitted-- and he had slept none the less the sleep of the just.

His usual attitude and carriage were of a rather relaxed and lounging kind, but when under a special inspiration, he straightened himself, he looked like a grenadier on parade.

He never smoked. He had been assured--such things are said-- that cigars were excellent for the health, and he was quite capable of believing it; but he knew as little about tobacco as about homeopathy. He had a very well-formed head, with a shapely, symmetrical balance of the frontal and the occipital development,

and a good deal of straight, rather dry brown hair.

His complexion was brown, and his nose had a bold well-marked arch.

His eye was of a clear, cold gray, and save for a rather

abundant mustache he was clean-shaved. He had the flat jaw

and sinewy neck which are frequent in the American type;

but the traces of national origin are a matter of expression even

more than of feature, and it was in this respect that our friend's

countenance was supremely eloquent. The discriminating observer

we have been supposing might, however, perfectly have measured

its expressiveness, and yet have been at a loss to describe it.

It had that typical vagueness which is not vacuity,

that blankness which is not simplicity, that look of being

committed to nothing in particular, of standing in an attitude

of general hospitality to the chances of life, of being very much

at one's own disposal so characteristic of many American faces.

It was our friend's eye that chiefly told his story; an eye

in which innocence and experience were singularly blended.

It was full of contradictory suggestions, and though it

was by no means the glowing orb of a hero of romance,

you could find in it almost anything you looked for.

Frigid and yet friendly, frank yet cautious, shrewd yet credulous,

positive yet skeptical, confident yet shy, extremely intelligent

and extremely good-humored, there was something vaguely defiant in

its concessions, and something profoundly reassuring in its reserve.

The cut of this gentleman's mustache, with the two premature wrinkles in the cheek above it, and the fashion of his garments, in which an exposed shirt-front and a cerulean cravat played perhaps an obtrusive part, completed the conditions of his identity.

We have approached him, perhaps, at a not especially favorable moment; he is by no means sitting for his portrait. But listless as he lounges there, rather baffled on the aesthetic question, and guilty of the damning fault (as we have lately discovered it to be) of confounding the merit of the artist with that of his work (for he admires the squinting Madonna of the young lady with the boyish coiffure, because he thinks the young lady herself uncommonly taking), he is a sufficiently promising acquaintance. Decision, salubrity, jocosity, prosperity, seem to hover within his call; he is evidently a practical man, but the idea in his case, has undefined and mysterious boundaries, which invite the imagination to bestir itself on his behalf.

As the little copyist proceeded with her work, she sent every now and then a responsive glance toward her admirer. The cultivation of the fine arts appeared to necessitate, to her mind, a great deal of byplay, a great standing off with folded arms and head drooping from side to side, stroking of a dimpled chin with a dimpled hand, sighing and frowning

and patting of the foot, fumbling in disordered tresses for wandering hair-pins. These performances were accompanied by a restless glance, which lingered longer than elsewhere upon the gentleman we have described.

At last he rose abruptly, put on his hat, and approached the young lady.

He placed himself before her picture and looked at it for some moments, during which she pretended to be quite unconscious of his inspection.

Then, addressing her with the single word which constituted the strength of his French vocabulary, and holding up one finger in a manner which appeared to him to illuminate his meaning, "Combien?" he abruptly demanded.

The artist stared a moment, gave a little pout, shrugged her shoulders, put down her palette and brushes, and stood rubbing her hands.

"How much?" said our friend, in English. "Combien?"

"Monsieur wishes to buy it?" asked the young lady in French.

"Very pretty, splendide. Combien?" repeated the American.

"It pleases monsieur, my little picture? It's a very beautiful subject," said the young lady.

"The Madonna, yes; I am not a Catholic, but I want to buy it. Combien?"

Write it here." And he took a pencil from his pocket and showed her the fly-leaf of his guide-book. She stood looking at him and scratching her chin with the pencil. "Is it not for sale?" he asked.

And as she still stood reflecting, and looking at him with an eye which, in spite of her desire to treat this avidity of patronage as a very old story, betrayed an almost touching incredulity, he was afraid he had offended her.

She simply trying to look indifferent, and wondering how far she might go.

"I haven't made a mistake--pas insulte, no?" her interlocutor continued.

"Don't you understand a little English?"

The young lady's aptitude for playing a part at short notice was remarkable. She fixed him with her conscious, perceptive eye and asked him if he spoke no French. Then, "Donnez!" she said briefly, and took the open guide-book. In the upper corner of the fly-leaf she traced a number, in a minute and extremely neat hand.

Then she handed back the book and took up her palette again.

Our friend read the number: "2,000 francs."

He said nothing for a time, but stood looking at the picture, while the copyist began actively to dabble with her paint.

"For a copy, isn't that a good deal?" he asked at last.

"Pas beaucoup?"

The young lady raised her eyes from her palette, scanned him from head to foot, and alighted with admirable sagacity upon exactly the right answer.

"Yes, it's a good deal. But my copy has remarkable qualities, it is worth nothing less."

The gentleman in whom we are interested understood no French, but I have said he was intelligent, and here is a good chance to prove it.

He apprehended, by a natural instinct, the meaning of the young woman's phrase, and it gratified him to think that she was so honest. Beauty, talent, virtue; she combined everything!

"But you must finish it," he said. "FINISH, you know;"

and he pointed to the unpainted hand of the figure.

"Oh, it shall be finished in perfection; in the perfection of perfections!"

cried mademoiselle; and to confirm her promise, she deposited a rosy blotch in the middle of the Madonna's cheek.

But the American frowned. "Ah, too red, too red!" he rejoined.

"Her complexion," pointing to the Murillo, "is--more delicate."

"Delicate? Oh, it shall be delicate, monsieur; delicate as Sevres biscuit.

I am going to tone that down; I know all the secrets of my art.

And where will you allow us to send it to you? Your address?"

"My address? Oh yes!" And the gentleman drew a card from his pocket-book and wrote something upon it. Then hesitating a moment he said, "If I don't like it when it it's finished, you know, I shall not be obliged to take it."

The young lady seemed as good a guesser as himself.

"Oh, I am very sure that monsieur is not capricious," she said with a roguish smile.

"Capricious?" And at this monsieur began to laugh.

"Oh no, I'm not capricious. I am very faithful.

I am very constant. Comprenez?"

"Monsieur is constant; I understand perfectly. It's a rare virtue.

To recompense you, you shall have your picture on the first possible day; next week--as soon as it is dry. I will take the card of monsieur."

And she took it and read his name: "Christopher Newman."

Then she tried to repeat it aloud, and laughed at her bad accent.

"Your English names are so droll!"

"Droll?" said Mr. Newman, laughing too. "Did you ever hear of Christopher Columbus?"

"Bien sur! He invented America; a very great man.

And is he your patron?"

"My patron?"

"Your patron-saint, in the calendar."

"Oh, exactly; my parents named me for him."

"Monsieur is American?"

"Don't you see it?" monsieur inquired.

"And you mean to carry my little picture away over there?"

and she explained her phrase with a gesture.

"Oh, I mean to buy a great many pictures--beaucoup, beaucoup,"

said Christopher Newman.

"The honor is not less for me," the young lady answered,

"for I am sure monsieur has a great deal of taste."

"But you must give me your card," Newman said; "your card, you know."

The young lady looked severe for an instant, and then said,

"My father will wait upon you."

But this time Mr. Newman's powers of divination were at fault.

"Your card, your address," he simply repeated.

"My address?" said mademoiselle. Then with a little shrug,

"Happily for you, you are an American! It is the first time I ever gave my card to a gentleman." And, taking from her pocket

a rather greasy porte-monnaie, she extracted from it a small glazed visiting card, and presented the latter to her patron.

It was neatly inscribed in pencil, with a great many flourishes,

"Mlle. Noemie Nioche." But Mr. Newman, unlike his companion, read the name with perfect gravity; all French names to him were equally droll.

"And precisely, here is my father, who has come to escort me home," said Mademoiselle Noemie. "He speaks English. He will arrange with you."

And she turned to welcome a little old gentleman who came shuffling up, peering over his spectacles at Newman.

M. Nioche wore a glossy wig, of an unnatural color which overhung his little meek, white, vacant face, and left it hardly more expressive than the unfeatured block upon which these articles are displayed in the barber's window. He was an exquisite image of shabby gentility. His scant ill-made coat, desperately brushed, his darned gloves, his highly polished boots, his rusty, shapely hat, told the story of a person who had "had losses" and who clung to the spirit of nice habits even though the letter had been hopelessly effaced. Among other things M. Nioche had lost courage. Adversity had not only ruined him, it had frightened him, and he was evidently going through his remnant of life on tiptoe, for fear of waking up the hostile fates. If this strange gentleman was saying anything improper to his daughter, M. Nioche would entreat him huskily, as a particular favor, to forbear; but he would admit at the same time that he was very presumptuous to ask for particular favors.

"Monsieur has bought my picture," said Mademoiselle Noemie.

"When it's finished you'll carry it to him in a cab."

"In a cab!" cried M. Nioche; and he stared, in a bewildered way, as if he had seen the sun rising at midnight.

"Are you the young lady's father?" said Newman.

"I think she said you speak English."

"Speak English--yes," said the old man slowly rubbing his hands.

"I will bring it in a cab."

"Say something, then," cried his daughter. "Thank him a little--
not too much."

"A little, my daughter, a little?" said M. Nioche perplexed.

"How much?"

"Two thousand!" said Mademoiselle Noemie. "Don't make a fuss
or he'll take back his word."

"Two thousand!" cried the old man, and he began to fumble
for his snuff-box. He looked at Newman from head to foot;
he looked at his daughter and then at the picture.

"Take care you don't spoil it!" he cried almost sublimely.

"We must go home," said Mademoiselle Noemie. "This is a good day's work.
Take care how you carry it!" And she began to put up her utensils.

"How can I thank you?" said M. Nioche. "My English does not suffice."

"I wish I spoke French as well," said Newman, good-naturedly. "Your daughter is very clever."

"Oh, sir!" and M. Nioche looked over his spectacles with tearful eyes and nodded several times with a world of sadness.

"She has had an education--tres-superieure! Nothing was spared.

Lessons in pastel at ten francs the lesson, lessons in oil at twelve francs. I didn't look at the francs then.

She's an artiste, ah!"

"Do I understand you to say that you have had reverses?" asked Newman.

"Reverses? Oh, sir, misfortunes--terrible."

"Unsuccessful in business, eh?"

"Very unsuccessful, sir."

"Oh, never fear, you'll get on your legs again," said Newman cheerily.

The old man drooped his head on one side and looked at him with an expression of pain, as if this were an unfeeling jest.

"What does he say?" demanded Mademoiselle Noemie.

M. Nioche took a pinch of snuff. "He says I will make my fortune again."

"Perhaps he will help you. And what else?"

"He says thou art very clever."

"It is very possible. You believe it yourself, my father?"

"Believe it, my daughter? With this evidence!"

And the old man turned afresh, with a staring, wondering homage,
to the audacious daub on the easel.

"Ask him, then. if he would not like to learn French."

"To learn French?"

"To take lessons."

"To take lessons, my daughter? From thee?"