

JACQUES BONHOMME.

By MAX O'RELL, Author of "Jonathan and His Continent," "John Bull and His Island," "John Bull's Daughters," Etc.

V—THE FRENCH AT WORK.

Gallie Laboring Men and Their Peculiarities—The Patient Peasant—He Is for Peace and Not War—Shopkeepers of France—French Officials.

Things have greatly changed since that exact and most impartial observer La Bruyere drew the following picture of the French peasantry two hundred years ago: "You see," said he "certain wild animals, males and females, about the land, dark, livid, naked, and all burnt with the sun, bound to the soil, which they dig and stir with unflinching patience. They seem to articulate words, and when they stand up they show a human face, and, indeed, they are none other than men; at night they retire to their dens, where they feed on black bread, water and roots. They save other men the trouble of sowing, digging and reaping, and deserve not to lack of that bread which they have grown."

Today the French peasant lives in his own cottage, cultivates his own field, and demands nothing beyond peace and fine weather. No doubt this cottage of his would appear to an American tourist to be lacking of many comforts. It is carpetless, it is true, but it belongs to him, and that makes up for many drawbacks. He is contented and rich like the rest of us, not in the things which he possesses, but in those which he knows how to do without. He is peaceful, simple, sober and laborious. His ideal of life is the independence which is the fruit of labor and economy; he is satisfied with very little in the days of his strength, because the prospect of eating his own bread near the door of his own cottage when his strength is gone makes him happy. So he works steadily, unceasingly, with a wife who is a true help-mate. He is no fire eater, no dreamer of new worlds to conquer. The surging passions of great towns are horrible to him. He wants to be left alone, and cries for peace at the top of his voice.

So eager is he after this blessing that in 1881 his representatives in parliament met the first Ferry ministry by a majority of 355 to 68 on account of the expedition to Tunis, although that expedition had been highly successful from a military point of view. In 1889 the Freycinet ministry was defeated on the vote of credit which they asked to enable France to join with England in an armed intervention in Egypt. In 1885 the second Ferry ministry was upset by a majority of 306 to 149 on account of the Tonkin expedition. So much to show how aggressive the French nation is! The permanently aggressive nations are the nations where the people are oppressed and wretched. Militarism is not compatible with national prosperity and happiness. The prosperity of the common people, and the use they are learning to make of liberty, are the great factors which will tend to make France a nation more and more peaceful. The French peasant might well express a wish that the government should still improve his position; but he is quiet, and no government thinks of him particularly. If he were to make as much noise as the Paris workman, he might be listened to.

The real pretender in France is not the Comte de Paris or Prince Victor Napoleon; the real pretender is the Paris workman. If you speak to him of "the people," it is he, and he alone, whom he supposes you mean. The millions of quiet peasants, laborers and other rural toilers he totally ignores; he is the "sovereign people." The Parisian workman is not satisfied with the old cry: "What is the capitalist? Everything. What ought he to be? Nothing." His new cry is: "What is the workman? Nothing. What ought he to be? Everything." A member of the commission appointed by the late French parliament to inquire into the Paris workman's life, asked one of them to get up the budget of his family expenses. After describing minutely all the necessities, the workman put down: "For music halls, theatres, distractions—three hundred francs." And on the member of parliament suggesting that the last item might, perhaps, be reduced, the Paris workman indignantly retorted: "Do you think that we are going to live like brutes?"

The present host of deputies is all occupied with the question of employers and employed, granting one by one all the demands of the latter. Nobody seems concerned about the rural population, by far the most interesting of all. How is that? Simply because the peasants do not hold stormy meetings, do not speak of erecting barricades, and are quiet, peaceful, industrious, sober and law abiding people. The peasant has the sun, and if his harvest is destroyed by the frost, the hail or the drought, it is for him to make the best of it; while the Paris workman goes to the music halls, smokes cigars and talks politics. Suppose the country engages in war, the Paris workman assumes a uniform and sings war songs, but the peasant sees his land laid waste and his cottage burned down; and this is why you will understand that he feels it his duty to hate the Germans in a theoretical way, but hopes and trusts that he may not live to see the day when he or his sons may be called upon to avenge the disasters of the terrible year 1870.

A great prejudice imposed upon English speaking people on the subject of France, and one which I should very much like to destroy, is the belief in the importance of our Anarchists. This belief is kept alive by a few journalists, who love to fill their columns with the sayings and doings of French Anarchists. The Anarchists! Well, we keep the article as the English and Americans do, and they are about as important as their France, honest, economical, hard working, ignores them. They are no party.

no power, in the state. They are not represented in our parliament. I believe that the German Anarchists alone, of all the parties owning that generic name in Europe, have a true representation in the legislature.

If the French are industrious, they are not so in the same way as the English. The French never, or very seldom, allow themselves to be completely absorbed by business. They always set apart a certain portion of time to the amenities of life. They are as serious as you like at work, but in a moment they will exhibit any amount of good humor at play, and again will resume the harness as quickly as it was thrown off. If you go into a shop at dinner time—you may run the risk of receiving very little attention, or even none at all.

I remember once—it was at St. Malo, in the summer—I entered a hatter's shop at 1 o'clock in the afternoon. A well dressed, lady like girl came out of the back parlor and inquired what I wanted.

"I want a straw hat, mademoiselle," I said.

"Oh, that's very awkward just now!" "Is it?"

"Well, you see," she said, "my brother is at dinner; and after a pause of a few seconds she added: "Would you mind calling again in an hour's time?"

"Not at all," I replied: "I shall be delighted to do so."

I was not only amused, but struck with admiration for the independence of that worthy hatter. After a few years' residence in England, a little scene of that description was a great treat.

An hour later I called again. The young girl made her second appearance.

"My brother waited for you for quite ten minutes," she said to me; "he has gone to the cafe with a friend now."

"I am sorry for that," I said. "When can I see him?"

"If you step across to the cafe, I am sure he will be happy to come back and attend to you."

I thanked the young lady, went to the cafe, and introduced myself to the hatter, who was enjoying a cup of coffee and having a game of dominoes with a friend. He asked me to allow him to finish the game, which, of course, I was only too glad to do, and we returned to the shop together.

Another time, I happened to be in a little Norman town.

Having broken the glass of my watch I inquired who was the best watchmaker in the place. It was a M. Perrin. I was told.

I made for M. Perrin's shop. The shop was closed, and the shutters up. Outside was stuck a card, on which I read:

"M. and Mme. Perrin are out of town. They will be back on Tuesday."

It was Saturday. M. and Mme. Perrin were enjoying a holiday.

I admired their independence, and waited till they returned to have my watch repaired.

Nobody wants to know the time in Normandy, and for three days I did as my happy compatriots.

In business the Frenchman is probity itself, as a rule, and his punctuality would almost make an Englishman smile. He may rather hamper his commerce by attention to trifles, but when he sells you something you may take it for granted it is what he represents it, for he is jealous of his good name as a tradesman or manufacturer, and likes to hear compliments of his goods. He likes the money made out of them, of course, but that is not an absorbing point with him. He is satisfied when he has made a modest fortune, and moves on to make room for another man. So that he has enough to give his never very numerous children a sound education and a good start in life, and procure the modest comforts of life, he is content.

And this is how in France you see the good things of this world more equally divided than in England. There are few colossal fortunes; but in the provincial towns pauperism is not known as an institution, which makes up for it. I do not hesitate to affirm that not only does the small French bourgeois not covet wealth, but that he is almost afraid of it. He prefers comfort to luxury. He considers \$1,500 a year a very snug income. When his government securities assure him this sum, he knocks off work and prepares to make himself happy and comfortable for the rest of his life.

You may well imagine how amusing it is to hear sometimes that the good fellow has the reputation of being unmanageable and revolutionary.

He is so easily manageable that every time we have a new ministry he says to his neighbor:

"I see M. So-and-So is made prime minister; do you know who he is?"

"Not I," answers the neighbor: "I had never heard his name before."

And both seemed to be concerned about the new ministry about as much as I am concerned about the ministerial crisis in the Sandwich Islands. He is so easily manageable that for peace' sake he will endure things that would rouse an Englishman to rebellion. He has the good fortune to live under a government that looks after him and sees to all his little wants, which makes and sells him fireproof cigars, matches that have "struck"—that is to say, which obstinately refuse to strike—and that keeps his public accounts and carries them to the fourth decimal, a luxury which costs him a good fourth of his revenue in personnel and red tape, but which saves the treasury at least half a crown per annum.

The centimes column is guaranteed exact by every government clerk in France, and thus it is that Frenchmen get consoled for the little errors which occasionally occur in the column of the omnibus conductor, who takes him under his protection, demands his fare with an air of command, and sets him down at his destination as if he were a parcel. Whatever his government is, he is constantly complaining of it; but the dear man ought to know that nations have the governments they deserve. He generally

accuses his administration of doing too much for him. Well, he is quite right, but he does not attempt to do anything himself. As a clever writer on French manners said, "He is taken charge of, bag and baggage, by the government on his travels, and carefully looked after in his domicile as if he were a child." The man clothed in government uniform assumes that arrogant, not-to-be-questioned air which would send an Englishman into fits.

When the English appoint a new government official, it is another servant that you add to your household. When we French appoint a new government official, it is a new master that we give to ourselves to snub us or to bully us.

I have an interesting illustration of this:

Two young chemists (one English, the other French) were in partnership in Paris, and one day made up their minds to start afresh in Egypt. Each wrote to his consul in Cairo. The Englishman's letter ran thus:

"DEAR SIR—I am about to open business as a chemist in Cairo. Will you be good enough to tell me what are my chances of success in Egypt, and what formalities, if any, I should have to comply with before entering upon the undertaking?"

Yours truly, "JOHN."

By return post he received a most polite letter containing all the detailed information he wanted.

The young Frenchman wrote:

"MONSIEUR LE CONSUL GENERAL—I am desirous of setting up as a chemist in Cairo. Dare I hope that you will spare a few minutes of your valuable time to give me such information and advice as you may consider likely to be of use to me? With many apologies for intruding upon you, I have the honor to be, Monsieur le consul general, with greatest respect, your most obedient and humble servant. JACQUES."

This letter was written four years ago. The dear fellow is still waiting for that consul's reply. Of course, his English friend is now established in Cairo, comfortable and prosperous, doing a roaring trade in pills with the new proteges of her Britannic majesty.

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