



## The New Zealand Graphic

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THE student of light literature must often be struck by the vagaries of fashion in novels. If the changes are not quite so frequent in books as in dress, they are none the less decided, not one iota more reasonable, and often every whit as objectionable and devoid of taste or beauty as the most outrageous 'mode' in Paris feminine frippery. The secret as to what person regulates the manner of garment with which society shall adorn itself is a dark and dreadful one. It is said that dressmakers do it, but we are loathe to believe a respectable section of society capable of such awful crimes as those perpetrated by the inventors of dress fashions. With books, however, it is different. Do novelists form public taste, or do the public form the novelists? In the first instance the novel-writer, no doubt, leads, but it is a question whether he is not afterward lifted off his feet by the crowd at his heels, and carried by them where they will. An unknown genius writes a historical novel. There have been no books of that description for some time perhaps, and the story is well told. Fame and fortune are the result for the genius. His or her book is proclaimed the success of the season, and within a month or so historical novels by all sorts and conditions of men are as plentiful as blackberries. Not only will every aspirant to three volume novel fame attempt the new style, but old and staid novelists will deliberately leave their own especial paths and follow the new lead with all the pertinacious stupidity characteristic of the traditional sheep.

Elna Lyall's success gave a spurt to what may be termed the superficial agnostic series, and Robert Elsmere and John Ward, Preacher, went a shade deeper into semi-theological questions, and were followed by a deluge of works on the same lines. It was impossible to pick up a number of a magazine, a yellow back, nay scarce even a shilling shocker—without finding the hero an agnostic, whose conversion to Christianity was effected by pages of vapid chatter and feeble platitudes on questions of miracles and other threshed-out and weary theological topics. The hypnotic heroine has just run herself to a standstill, having seduced and ruined some of the best novel-writers of the day, and now the realistic or deodorized Zolaesque style appears to be claiming the most honoured writers of English fiction for its own.

The nude is not yet the fashion in literature as it is in art. It would perhaps be healthier for us all if it were. Zola is tabooed of the average reader. The French writer strips vice naked, and shame forbids us to look. English realism is far more dangerous, because infinitely more insidious. The man on whose table Zola is found is shunned, but the sweetest innocent of seventeen may study the fashionable novel of the day which invariably hinges on seduction and skilful declination of the animal passions in modern society. Zola's nude figure is passed by with averted head, or at worst sidelong looks, but the prolonged study of the suggestive, half-draped model is altogether praiseworthy. Mrs Humphrey Ward is just now the lioness of society and the literary world. Her book is given columns of praise, yet what is the story but that of two young people who fail to resist their animal passions. Both stray from the paths of virtue, and the man, as usual, gets off easiest. The struggles against temptation, and all study of the rising of the passion in both, of its repression and the final collapse, are full of detail, and this same detail is put in with a hardihood that is the reverse of edifying. 'Still,' say the lovers of the modern style, '*honi soit qui mal y pense*.' (Only an unwholesome mind would see anything wrong, 'and besides, it's so true.' But this would apply equally well to Zola. He claims only to draw from Nature of a low type, but still Nature, and he writes, too, so he says, with the cleanest of intentions.

There will probably be a reaction before long, but at present the novel that can be left about on a colonial drawing room table must be searched for with a lantern. Our girls are not trained to the English standpoint yet, and are apt to ask awkward questions. Your society miss in the Old Country has a full knowledge of good and evil—she can't very well help it—and though she is perhaps every bit as pure-minded as her colonial cousin, she will yet read and discuss subjects all unspeakable in this part of the world.



DAILED UP AND PUMPED BY THE 'GRAPHIC' EDITOR.

THERE is no doubt the predicament was an awkward one. The Frisco mail boat Monowai already berthed at the wharf, Max O'Rell on board, and the GRAPHIC interview fiend *non est*. To miss the opportunity, to have nothing in the GRAPHIC of so eminent a man, so capital a raconteur, so genial a humorist, it was not to be borne. The paste pot and scissors were impatiently put aside, and jamming his hat on his furrowed forehead, the editor slid out to do the job himself. Half-way up the wharf he met a well-built, rather portly, and decidedly nautical-looking gentleman, evidently a stranger from the curious way he looked about him. He was for all the world like some genial amateur sailor, some opulent steam yacht proprietor, and yet, as the man in the play says, those eyes, that mouth, those *pinces nez*, that nose, and above all that smile—yes, it must be the great man himself. Yet impossible; this bluff sailor in officer's peaked cap, pea-jacket and pants of aquatic serge, the great Max, the inimitable Blonet! It seemed absurd, and yet the likeness to the photographs was unmistakable. 'Assume a virtue if you have it not,' quoth the editor, and squaring up to the nautical gentleman, asked with reportorial cheek, 'Are you Mr Max O'Rell—I mean M. Paul Blonet?' Next minute it was all over. A couple of flourishes of the hat, a semi-naval salute from 'Captain' O'Rell to follow, and the introduction was complete.

Then the talking began. He is the most unfrenchiefied Frenchman you could possibly imagine. He speaks English with a very pronounced Yankee intonation, and with the veriest *soupeon* of French accent. Yet he is a true Frenchman in genial courtesy, intense in the celerity of his observations and judgments, and his keen sense of humour. He smiles with his eyes more than with his mouth, though that is continually twitching, and he seems to have a difficulty in restraining himself from saying a whole host of good things. They are, however, his capital, and must be carefully treasured. His thirst for knowledge is intense, and his questions always pertinent.

'Yes,' he rattled away, 'we have had a charming trip, perfect weather, a captain who is courtesy and amiability itself—delightful—charming. A regular yachting tour it has been. I have, too, my ladies with me—my wife and my daughter, and of course they have made it more pleasant, and he fairly beamed through his eye-glasses. 'What splendid fish were those Isaw as I came up the wharf! Schnapper? A conical name, but doubtless good to eat. Perhaps they will give us some for dinner. What did you say was the name of this street? Queen street? Oh, yes, New Zealand is loyal then! Now why can't the Yankees take an example from your roads?'

'Yankees take example from our roads?'

'Yes, this street is well paved, well kept. The streets in America, especially in Chicago, are fearful. Quagmires, bogs, ploughed fields—awful! I was once invited to dine with some citizens in Chicago. The roads were impassable; the boats were in despair. We could not get to the dinner, for we were all to go together. "What shall we do with our roads?" asked one. "O'Rell here says they are worse than English ploughed fields." Nobody had an answer, so at last I said, "Well, gentlemen, everything in America 'licks creation.' The best thing, the only thing you can do with your wretched roads is to boast of them. They are certainly the worst in creation." I escaped with my life.'

The story loses much in the retelling. Recounted by the effervescent gentleman himself it was irresistible.

'Ab, here,' he continued, 'is the type of British old maid. They are ubiquitous. One sees them everywhere. We have her on board. She writes letters—reams and reams of letters—about her impressions, and keeps a diary the size of a ledger. By the way, I want some cash—some English cash. Where can I get it?'

'Have you letters to any of our bankers?'

'No, but I have what is better—money itself. I want to change some mighty dollars into the coin of this country—English money. Ah, there is my company's office' (the man has the eye of a hawk), and he had slipped into the Union Company's office before we could say Jack Robinson.

'We,' that is to say the GRAPHIC, mounted guard. Presently rushed round the corner the interview fiend from the evening paper.

'Have you seen Max O'Rell?' he asked, excitedly. 'I have to interview him, and he has left the boat.'

'Young man,' observed the editor, 'Max O'Rell is mine. I have him here safely caught.'

The reporter's eyes glittered angrily through his spectacles. The editor took pity. 'I will share him with you; you shall have a bit.'

Max came out, the reporter was produced, and the astute Frenchman immediately began to blarney. He praised the architecture of our streets. 'Everything in Yankee land is square,' he said. 'It's all on one pattern. The States, or counties as you would call them, are square, the towns are divided into squares, the houses are square—'

'And the men?' chipped in a wee small voice, and O'Rell gave one of his chuckles.

They are the quaintest chuckles. He begins to laugh with his eyes, and gradually it descends. His nose smiles distinctly—it does indeed—and then his mouth stops its perpetual twitching, and the mirthfullest, merriest, most mischievous and fun-loving smile takes its place, and you roar with laughter for sympathy. A most infectious smile!

It was strange how people recognised him. The chief of the police knew him at once. He walked right up to him and shook hands. At first the courteous Frenchman thought he recollected the jovial Inspector's face, but was not the least abashed when told he had never seen him before. 'I have enjoyed many a laugh at your books,' said the officer. O'Rell bowed. By the way, he never gesticulates; never attitudes; he does not talk with hands, shoulders, arms, as do many Gauls. He is the most self-contained Bohemian imaginable. Heaps of people introduced themselves. He took it all calmly, was courteous to all.

A visit to the Post Office afforded the distinguished visitor the opportunity of trying one of our colonial products. He bought several stamps for letters to be posted and vainly endeavoured to stick them on.

'What stamps?' he said. 'They won't stick. New Zealand must then be famous for stamps that won't stick.'

Then the questions the man asks—'What has happened since I left? The Anarchists busy? Oh, that's nothing—at least in Paris it is not. Gladstone still alive and kicking? Well, well (this with a resigned air). Earthquakes—Unemployed—same old things.'

'And how do you amuse yourselves here? A people fond of religious diversion, you say. Oh, yes, and what else? Yachting? Well, that's nice; and dancing? Delightful! Dancing, yachting, and—religious dissipation—charming—excellent,' and again he smiled.

It was distinctly unfair. Instead of letting himself be pumped O'Rell persisted in pumping. A leading question, however, brought him round.

'My tour? Well, I know nothing about it. I am a talking machine. I am going like any other machine to be delivered into the hands of Smythe (the much-travelled). He does what he likes with me. He will take me up and place me down from one platform to another. I am wound up for say an hour or an hour and a-half. I open my mouth and talk for that time, then I close it, and until next time my duty is done.'

'Do I expect to come to New Zealand? Most assuredly. I expect Smythe will bring me when the weather grows too hot in Australia. I shall be glad to come. It seems pleasant here.' Then he launched out into praise of things in general—climate, the harbour, everything. He knows how to flatter. He intersperses his praise with kindly criticism. The taste of the butter is cleverly disguised.

Another leading question put in with difficulty elicited another fact.

'I expect to be away about nine months from Paris. It may be longer. The contract is for nine months. If the business is exceptionally good there is a clause in the agreement by which the contract may be renewed. Shall I write a book? I think not, but then who knows. I shall scarcely be long enough, I fear. What do you say, that's nothing; men write books who come here, even for a fortnight! Ah, well, very good. I may. Why not? A man may write about an hour's impressions. I may find time, but as I have said, there is no saying.'

A pleasing incident took place on the way back to the boat. A young and bewilderingly pretty young Yankee lady with two escorts stopped Mr Blouet. 'Wall, I want to shake your hands good-bye ever so, though it's real sad and verry unpleasant,' said the girl.

'We,' the editor, withdrew from earshot, but presently, to the infinite delight of passers-by and in the very busiest part of Queen-street, the versatile Frenchman kissed and kissed most warmly and paternally the young lady, who blushed and looked ever so confused, but not ill-pleased all the same.

'The captain's privilege,' said O'Rell, as the walk was resumed.

Asking hosts more questions, glancing at photos, at Maoris, and at everything and anything, the steamer was again reached, and the editor took his leave as an interchange of hand-kissing intimated the presence of the wife and daughter of the most interesting person who has called at Maoriland for some time.