

Letters to Women in Love

The Spoiled, the Adored, the Irrepressible American Girl

By MRS JOHN VAN VORST.

THE few letters which follow are not love-letters, but they treat of love. Love-letters, as a matter of fact, are interesting only for the person to whom they are addressed. But letters to people in love—are they not addressed more or less to the world at large? The very oldest woman I ever knew, a Frenchwoman, said once to me:—

"No woman would begin her existence over again, no matter how sorry she might be to leave this world. The truth is, to live is to suffer. But," and here she drew very close to me, "there is one thing I regret." My eye questioned here. "What do you regret?" And she answered in a whisper: "Love."

To Miss Beatrice Thayer, Fifth Avenue, New York.
My dear Beatrice:

You are not very much of a letter-writer, I know. I have heard from you not more than a dozen times in the last few years since you left school. I must attribute the long epistles you used to send me from Farmington to the fact that it was the fashion among the girls in the graduating class to have "lots of correspondents." You were rather dattered, I don't doubt, at my scantiness. But you know how fond I was of your dear mother, and that, ever since her death, I have looked upon you as a sister in a measure. I can't realize that you are twenty-seven. For me you will always remain a child. Indifferent you doubtless are to this being "looked upon as a child," but when you grow older it will seem very sweet to you. In any case I take the liberty of occupying myself about you, quite as though you had turned to me for protection.

Well, then, in the first place—for this is the reason of my present letter—you can imagine my surprise on receiving from Reginald Wells a long, long letter—all about you!

You know my special fondness for Reggie. He is one of my favourites, one of the old-fashioned sort who still have a little time now and then for their friends of long standing. Reggie never comes over to see his uncle in Washington without stopping off at Baltimore to lunch or dine and have a good talk with me. I never remember very much what we have talked about, but I do keep a most charming recollection of his grace and good looks, of his spontaneous frankness, his boyish air, his explicable courtesy, his reverence, and his youth, with all the power that the qualities I name can give to a man. Reggie is twenty-seven I know, yet I had never thought much about him from a sentimental point of view, except to reflect that all girls must be in love with him, and that he would sure day be sure to marry, when all of a sudden came this letter about you, showing that he is deep in an adventure of the heart, and that for him, as for the rest of us, the course of true love does not and never has, run smooth.

I can't send you the letter—that would be quite fair to Reginald—but I must tell you in a measure what he says, and find out from you how you feel on the subject.

Reginald Wells loves you. Of course, this you knew.

His affection is not the commonplace sentiment of any young man who is attractive for any young girl who is pretty. He is attractive and you are pretty—that he really appreciates you. He speaks of you in the most beautiful way—of your character, the power you have for bringing out the very best there is in a man. He admires you, and he is not surprised that you should

care nothing for him. You have so much charm and magnetism that you could win anyone you wanted to. He does not find it astonishing that he should not appeal to you, with his hum-drum existence. He has very little time, when his work is done, to devote to artistic, literary and intellectual pursuits. These he must forewear so long as his income, fair as it is, has not placed him among the real men of leisure.

Yet, though Reggie continues to affirm that you don't care for him, he suggests in a number of little ways that perhaps you may.

He says, for instance, that he doesn't think there's any other man you do love. He tells me you have often asked him to come down with your father to Long Island from Friday to Monday in the summer. And he also tells me that he and Mr. Thayer are the best of friends.

But I jump from one thing to another without giving you the details as Reggie gave them, and as you are going to answer them in your letter to me.

When he first met you, on his Class Day, he knew that he could never care for anybody else. You had come up to Cambridge with the sister and mother of his roommate. As soon as he saw you together he was jealous, horribly jealous. He imagined that the man who had shared his quarters with him for two years had been hiding a love affair—since he had never mentioned your name—and was now to announce his engagement. The announcement, however, did not come, and Reggie says that at the beginning you seemed glad to have him so attentive to you; you encouraged him, and he was the happiest man in the world.

You let him send you flowers and books. He hadn't the slightest idea you were a flirt—indeed, he doesn't think so now. Only all of a sudden you seemed to change. He couldn't talk with you as he had. You were dippant, you laughed at the things he said seriously, and took seriously the things he meant you to laugh at. He grew constrained, and could not even make up his mind to ask you whether anything had happened. He tried to believe it was his imagination, that you would, from one day to the other, go back again to your old manner with him. Not that you were really disagreeable to him. On contrary, you were perfectly friendly, and indeed, when he came down to the country you went about with him more freely than you had. It was simply, he realized, as he analyzed his feelings, that you could never have for him the sort of sentiment he had for you.

And Reginald does not want you as a friend! What shall he do? His dream which, like an inflexible bubble, once reflected the world on the lovely colours of its wounded sides, has been brusquely reduced to the little lamp spot that astonished us so as children. "What shall he do?"

I must answer him, but I don't want to write before hearing from you.

"You don't want Reggie to suffer, but you can't make him happy." Is that it?

You can't be in-charge of what he describes. It must be disagreeable for you, too, this sort of constraint that has come into your relation with each other.

You are not, surely, among the class of girls who delight in being absolute mistress of every situation and who would rather that others suffer than to feel anything themselves.

You are too young for stoicism. Then what is your attitude?

Above all, don't be provoked with Reggie for writing to me, and don't be vexed with me for telling you of it.

From here I can see your desk—not a bit the sort which is conducive to letter-writing. There are always pictures and flowers, and copies of magazines, and kodaks, and open boxes of candy, and paper-covered novels piled upon it (with strict injunctions to the housemaid "not to touch anything").

Somewhere underneath all these frivolous and half-sentimental upper strata there is a silver-cornered blotter, a massive ink-stand and an elaborate pen (rusty, no doubt).

Please, dear, do a little house-cleaning. Get down as far as the pen-and-ink-stand and let me hear from you.

II.

To the same:

I was delighted with the rapidity of your answer.

And the fierce indignation with which you respond—how indicative it was! You are young, pretty, charming, cultivated. What more natural than that you should be loved, and fall in love yourself? Yet the mere indirect suggestion of such a thing brings an outburst.

"Love Reginald! You've always been very fond of him, but there's never been any question of love!"

Fortunately your letter doesn't end here. You do make a few concessions.

He has never asked you to marry him, in the first place. In the second place, you have never told him that you didn't like him. In the third place, he must be rather dull not to understand that you couldn't see as much of him as you do if he were—or ever could be—more to you than a friend.

In other words what you mean is that you are perfectly willing Reginald Wells should be your devoted slave, you are perfectly willing that he should think of you, be with you, dream about you to the exclusion of all else. In return you deign to see as much of him as you can without being bored. You would be indignant if he were less attentive to you, or more attentive to some other girl. To speak frankly, you care for Reggie just enough not to want anyone else to have him! This promises charmingly for his future happiness!

And really I am no better off than I was before. I am half-inclined to telegraph Reggie that he is wasting his time, and that he might better taram his thoughts aside from the stony-hearted Beatrice!

III.

To the same:

Last night the maid brought me your telegram. "Don't write R. until hearing from me." I spent the evening in agreeable speculation as to how soon I should be able to congratulate Reggie on his engagement. I blessed you for having come to your senses. Not at all!

This morning the post brings your letter. Reggie had been away for several days, and you waited until you could see him before quite making up your mind as to what you really think. Not that you spoke to him of his confession to me; that would have been dismal. But you sought while you were with him—I know you—to analyse your feelings now that you are sure he cares for you.

This certainty with regard to his sentiments had two distinct effects upon you. You were more self-confident, you were more indifferent. You had an added sense which came from the assurance of his love, and this same assurance took from the charm of conquest a piquancy it had hitherto possessed. Am I right?

There is nothing more abiding in life than this moment which precedes the

declaration of a man. . . . I was going to say a man with whom you are falling in love. How you would have resented that if I had said it!

As soon as a man has actually announced his adoration then conscience is called into play and you must take a decision. But during the interim you live in the atmosphere of irresponsibility. You disregard all conventional codes of conduct; and you are as dippant, as reckless, as pathetic, as emotional, as you like—not fearful of consequences because you know the present situation cannot last; and heedless of opinion because you know you are adored.

Well, after an hour with him you thought you could be happy with him, perhaps, but you don't believe that you would be unhappy without him.

You don't absolutely declare that you will never marry him. If he really loves you, he must wait. It won't hurt him to wait, since he seems to think you are worth waiting for.

Finally, as far as I can make out, the sum of your remarks is about this: you hate the idea of an engagement. You can imagine marrying, but you can't imagine being engaged.

I am not going to write to Reginald at all. I have nothing to say to him. It is with you that I shall continue my correspondence.

IV.

To the same:

Your effusive epistle in defence of the American girl has reached me. America, you say, has created a new variety of female; the unmarried woman who is not an old maid. Every other country arranges society in such a way that wives alone hold any sway. With us the lion's share, in the distribution of social rights, has been given to girls. America is as proud of her "surplus" of young girls each year as she is of her reapers, or her harvest of golden wheat. All this is true, I admit, but I don't see in it, as you do, advantages only.

There is not another land, to be sure, which has its "Surplus Girl." If you run through half-by any one of the Gibson albums you see that the history of American society, sentimental, dramatic, economic, intellectual, is written in the American girl.

How can they resist so much attention?

The truth is they don't. Between the ages of twenty and twenty-five they have no other object in life but to "have a good time."

Everybody encourages them. It seems as though the whole country rejoiced to think that it possessed a true aristocracy as a reward for the gigantic effort it is sustaining—an aristocracy which enjoys leisure and luxury, which is guided by no other rule than its own pleasure. Truly the aristocracy of the aristocracy is the American girl.

But the titlers of the land are not a bit jealous and envious like some classes that are oppressed. There is not a hard, overworked father in America who doesn't feel keen, secret pride at "the way his girls do things."

And the "girls"—the princesses or queens they might better be called—of this privileged group have the same nonchalant idea as other aristocrats regarding their duty toward society in general. Delightful as the process may be of never doing anything that bores one, and of living to have a good time, there may be certain short-comings in the results of such conduct.

What are these results? When the "Surplus Girl" has been "paid attention" by any quantity of men, and for a number of years, it grows very difficult for her to determine on any one