

II

THE LETTERS OF MRS. JAMES G. BLAINE*

One might reasonably expect to gather a good deal of semi-political and personal reminiscence from two volumes of letters written by the wife of Blaine of Maine. Every one is well aware that she entered heartily, not to say at times acrimoniously, into his public life, and that there were also times when her personal enmities affected her husband's political action. But here are letters covering a period from 1869 to 1889—twenty long and eventful years—and practically devoid of anything that is worth remembering. The three great crises of Mr. Blaine's career came respectively in 1880, when he nearly won the Republican nomination from Grant; in 1884, when he was defeated by Mr. Cleveland; and at last, in 1889, when he became President Harrison's Secretary of State.

With regard to these three critical periods, Mrs. Blaine has practically nothing at all to tell in her letters. There are pages and pages which relate to what she wore or what she had for breakfast, and of her general interest in her children, but we do not get anything that will add to our knowledge of her distinguished husband, or of the exciting events through which he passed. Thus, there is given only one letter written in 1884, and but a very small collection of notes written at the beginning of the Harrison administration. Then the correspondence comes to an untimely end. We may give an example or two of the general nature of what is actually printed in these volumes. Take the following (vol. i., pp. 12, 13):

* Letters of Mrs. James G. Blaine. Edited by Harriet S. Blaine Beale. 2 vols. New York: Duffield and Company.

Father goes to Boston to-morrow. Am sorry to lose him even for a few days, but his errand is an important one and he must go. He will visit you at Andover before he returns. I would send you a basket of goodies, but he takes the eastern road. How did you like the buttons I sent you for your birthday? We are having the house painted. Quite an improvement it will be, too.

There are many pages of this sort of thing. Let us quote another specimen (vol. ii., p. 112). Mrs. Blaine had just given a dinner:

My table was very handsome and the courses many and good. And as many of my guests were from boarding-houses, ample justice was done Mary's good cooking. Here are the courses, for I am too stupid to write anything sensible to-night: Oysters on shell, mock turtle soup, broiled chicken and fried potatoes, sweet breads and peas, asparagus, Roman punch, partridge and salad, ices, charlottes, jellies, fruits, coffee and tea.

If these were exceptional passages, one might read them with a certain interest, as showing how the Blaine family used to entertain. But, unfortunately, the passages are not exceptional, save that Mrs. Blaine seldom had quite so elaborate a spread as the one just noted. But why on earth should a book be issued in two volumes to inform us, for instance, that the Blaine family had liver and bacon for breakfast in November, 1876! And it is practically all like this. There are countless allusions to Mr. Blaine, but they do not give us any information about him. He flits through the pages like a shadow, hovering around the domestic occupations of his wife, which were not essentially different from the domestic occupations of several million other wives.

Just a few half-spiteful touches relieve the monotony if one has the patience to seek for them. Thus, when President Arthur succeeded to office, and cut short Mr. Blaine's rather dubious Chilean policy, Mrs. Blaine sets down a word or two, which after all betray merely her own state of mind. Thus she says of Mr. Arthur:

You remember, don't you, about Arthur's two passions, as . . . discussed at Sam Ward's

dinner in New York? New coats being one, he having then already ordered twenty-five from his tailor since the new year came in; the other, seeming to do things while never putting his mind or his hands near them.

And the following on Mr. Arthur's intellectual attainments:

If you remember the description of Arthur as given by Mr. Hurlburt of the *World* at Sam Ward's dinner, . . . you have a very correct idea of him. I do not think he knows anything. He can quote a verse of poetry, or a page from Dickens and Thackeray, but these are only leaves springing from a root out of dry ground. His vital forces are not fed, and very soon he has given out his all. I hardly know whether we are on terms with him.

Later on, Mrs. Blaine criticises Mrs. Cleveland for leaving the inauguration ball in 1889 at too early an hour; and there are indications here and there that from the very beginning of President Harrison's administration, the Blaines and Mr. Harrison did not get on. Harrison refused to make Walker Blaine ("Jacky," his mother calls him) Assistant Secretary of State. Mrs. Blaine thereupon remarks:

Your father did not care to make a fight about it, so he quietly put him in as law adviser. . . . All first propositions are rejected. It is a most uncomfortable twist in the make-up of a man.

If Mrs. Beale, who edited these letters, had cut them down to one small volume of about a hundred pages, neither the world nor the publishers of the book would have suffered any loss. The foot-notes are carelessly written, as, for instance, when Mr. Allan Thorndike Rice's name is continually misspelled. Quotations from Appleton's *Encyclopædia of American Biography* are interspersed throughout the text. Possibly the most interesting thing in the book is its revelation of the fact that although Mr. Blaine stayed for quite a while in Italy, he never learned more than two Italian words—*piano* and *presto*. After this, Mrs. Blaine's criticism on President Arthur seems decidedly uncalled for.

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