THE FRIVOLITIES OF THE VICTORIANS

By Maurice Francis Egan

If one may look on books as really articles of mental food, and therefore to be made part of a menu, "Further Indiscretions by a Woman of No Importance" may be marked in the language of Soyer or Francatelli, "hors d'oeuvre très légers". It is slight enough, and it is a digression from the main business of life, which are the main qualities of a "hors d'oeuvre". To enjoy it thoroughly one must be at least middle-aged; one must have lived in the time when Du Maurier's frock coats, depicted in "Punch", set the fashion, when Mr. Mallock's "The New Republic" was a "best seller" in society, and when the question as to whether Mrs. Langtry did or did not drop a piece of ice between the neck and the collar of the Prince of Wales was eagerly argued—a time when there were "professional beauties", and when peers married ladies from the chorus as a matter of course. The "Woman of No Importance" is a type who loves the turf and horses, who forgets that her celebrities are rapidly becoming as extinct as the famous Dodo, who is all the more delightful for being so thoroughly old-fashioned

and not knowing it. The young may yawn, but the middle-aged will look through these pages to find out whether there is any corroboration of dear Lady Cardigan's whisper that John Brown was married to Queen Victoria. "If he wasn't", said dear Lady Cardigan, who had been barred from court, "he ought to have been."

About John Brown, a mere name to the present unhappy generation, the "Woman of No Importance" merely says, after this paragraph:

"I always thought the Queen a pathetic figure and so extraordinarily kind. Once when she heard I was in great sorrow she sent Lady Downs to see me to express her sympathy, and later commanded me to Windsor. . . . I so far forgot myself as to say, 'happiness unshared has no taste'; I think we both had to restrain our feeling or we should have fallen into each other's arms, for tears were in her eyes and voice as well as mine. . . . Many are still living who can remember her faithful servant-friend, John Brown, who seldom left her side. He was not a favorite with the rest of the Royal Family. . . . When she was traveling in Scotland, and was passing the shooting lodge of the Sutherlands, where they were at the time, she told John Brown, who as usual was sitting near her, that she wished to stop and call on the Sutherlands. They asked the Queen to get out of the carriage and have some tea, but she declined until John Brown leaned over and said, 'I would, if I were you. It will warm you up'." "No doubt", concludes the "Woman of No Importance" sagely, "he had one eye on his own 'innards', which were felling cold, as well as an eye on the comfort of the Queen."

This throws no light on the matter at all—Lady Cardigan, who had a vivid imagination, must have mistaken "attention" for "intention"! Queen Victoria on another occasion was "in her usual straw hat, with Cashmere shawl and elastic-sided boots". John Brown kept her waiting. Instead of "falling flat on his face" and begging pardon, he remarked, "Well, I must say you look very summery".

There is no proof here; a normal husband would have accused the Queen of having kept *him* waiting—Lady Cardigan is out of court!

The "Woman of No Importance" gives an unpleasant sketch of Bulwer-Lytton, which, if we may judge from other contemporary accounts, was altogether undeserved, as he was rather a dandy; if I remember accurately, Tennyson, in his one malicious poem, accuses him of painting and wearing stays. "He went about like a rag-and-bone man, his hair long and untidy, his face unshaven and dirty, his clothes tattered." Who can believe this of the author of "Pelham"? Lord Lytton is accused of having tried to decoy his wife into an insane asylum; like Thackeray's, "she was a pretty Irish girl", with a frightful temper, to say the least, bordering on madness. Those three great Victorian novelists, Thackeray, Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, were alike in their domestic misfortunes. Lady Lytton was not sustained by her son, the author of "Lucile", who seems to have taken his father's side.

Those days of the 'seventies and 'eighties were very interesting, and people took themselves as seriously as the "Woman of No Importance" takes them: the ladies of the world and the half-world in London, the famous "Skittles", who annoyed Lady Stamford in the hunting-field (the "Woman of No Importance" is a keen sportswoman) and whose innocent

looks were not exactly indicative of her character. Lady Stamford had been married from the ranks of the ladies whom "Skittles", then supported by a distinguished person, had known in her youth, and as Lord Stamford was master of the hounds, she saluted Lady Stamford as an old acquaintance of Cremorne. Lady Stamford, who was highly respected, objected to this, and the dove-eyed "Skittles" almost drove all the women from the field by her copious language. Lady Molesworth, who gave distinction to whomever she chose to invite to "Pencarron", had once sold oranges from a wheel-barrow, it seems, in Sloane Street. In those days London was a happy hunting-ground of the fair. Noblemen, who had owed all to a king's bar sinister, were not too scrupulous about the character of the ladies they married. There are some deservedly agreeable things of Queen Alexandra. Oscar Wilde, Lady de Bathe, Mrs. Cornwallis-West, the Duchess of Devonshire, and most of the social celebrities of Du Maurier's days have little pastels done of them; this is a book that may help us forget the seriousness of the present in the frivolities of the past.

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