

Intimate Diary of Margot Asquith

Why and How I Married the
Prime Minister of
Great Britain.



From a pencil sketch of Mrs. Asquith, about whom William Watson wrote "The Woman With the Serpent's Tongue."



Ellen Terry, whom Mrs. Asquith calls one of the only two theatrical stars she ever found really interesting.



M. H. Asquith
Margot Asquith
1895



Maud Allan, the American dancer who made "Salome" famous. Mrs. Asquith's friendship for her stirred London society and called forth a rebuke from Queen Alexandra.

I FIRST met my husband in 1891 at a dinner given by Peter Flower's brother, Cyril. I had never heard of him in my life, which gives some indication of how much time I was wasting on two worlds—I do not mean this and the next—but the sporting and dramatic. My dancing lessons had led me to the rehearsals both of the ballet and the drama; and for a short time I was at the feet of Ellen Terry and Irving—I say "short" advisedly, for then as now I found Bohemian society duller than any English watering-place.

Stage suppers are a life of hell! Everyone has a different conception of hell and few of us connect it with flames—even the idea of eternal punishment has long since gone out of fashion—but, with the exception of Irving and Coquelin, I have never met here or hereout of the stage in comedy or opera that was not ultimately dull, and collectively they are crushing.

(Editor's note: It seems strange that Mrs. Asquith does not mention Maud Allan, the sensational American stage dancer, her friendship for whom caused a flurry in British social circles. In fact, one of Miss Allan's performances at a dinner party, given by the wife of the premier, was said to have called forth a rebuke from Queen Alexandra.)

The dinner where I first met Herbert Asquith was in the house of commons, and I sat next to him. I was immensely impressed by his conversation and his clean Cromwellian face. He was different to all the others and, although abominably dressed, had so much personality that I made up my mind at once that here was a man who could help me, and would understand everything.

It never crossed my brain that he was married, nor would that have mattered. I had always been more anxious than Peter Flower should marry than myself, because he was 12 years older than I was, but mat-

rimony was not the purpose of either of our lives.

It was a glorious night and after dinner, when we all walked on the terrace, I was flattered to find my new friend by my side. Lord Battersea—our host—who adored my husband and had flamboyant manners, openly chafed me, and tried to separate us, but with our great tact and determination this frontal attack was resisted.

(Editor's note: Many of Mr. Asquith's friends were against the unconventional Margot Tennant, whose sensational career had made her the most talked of the most hated and the most loved woman in England.)

He and I retired to the darkest part of the terrace and, leaning over the parapet, we gazed into the river and talked till far into the night.

Our host and party—thinking that I had gone home and that Henry had returned to the house (of commons) when the division bell rang—had disappeared; and when we finished our conversation the terrace was deserted and the sky looked light.

We met a few days later dining with Sir Algernon West—a very dear and early friend of mine. After this we saw each other constantly. I found out from something he said that he was married and lived at Hampstead.

(Editor's note: Mrs. Asquith's friendship for Sir Algernon West did not deter her from testifying in favor of his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Horace West, in the famous case in which Mrs. West sued Sir Algernon for defaming her character by spreading stories of her extravagance. It was while testifying at this trial that Mrs. Asquith said, "extravagance is the best passport to high society.")

He told me afterwards that he was a shy man, and in some ways this is true of him even now; I am glad that I never observed it at the time, as shy people worried me. I liked mod-

esty—I pitied timidity—but I was bored with shyness.

I cannot truly say that the word shy described Henry; he was a little gauche in movement, and blushed when he was praised, but I have never seen him afraid of anyone, or disconcerted by any social dilemma. His unerring instinct into all sorts of people and affairs—quite apart from his intellectual temperament and learning—his incredible lack of vanity and freedom from self struck me at once; he made everyone talk well, which convinces people that they are not being flattered, but being clever.

(Editor's note: London society gossiped openly that Margot Tennant laughed at Asquith's first advances toward her.)

When I found that he was married, I asked him to bring his wife to dinner, which he did. Directly I saw her I said:

"I do hope, Mrs. Asquith, you have not minded your husband dining here without you, but I rather gathered Hampstead was too far away for him to get back to you from the house; I hope whenever it suits you and he is dining here that you will dine, too."

In making my profound and attaching friendship with the stranger of that house of commons dinner I had placed myself in a difficult position when Helen Asquith (the premier's first wife) died. To be a step-mother and a step-mother was unthinkable, but at the same time the moment had arrived in my life when a change—involving a great decision—had become inevitable. I had written to Peter Flower before we parted every day for nine years—with the exception of the months he had spent flying from his creditors in India—and I had prayed for him every night, but it had not brought more than happiness to both of us, and

when I deliberately said good-bye to him I shut down a page of my life which even if I had wanted to I could never have reopened.

(Editor's note: In a later installment Mrs. Asquith describes in full her friendship with Peter Flower, for whom she entertained an extremely deep affection.)

Rumored Marriage Frowned On. When Henry told me he cared for me, that unstilled inner voice which we all of us hear more or less indistinctly told me that I should be untrue to myself and quite unworthy of life if, when such a man came knocking at the door, I did not fling it wide open.

The rumor that we were engaged to be married caused perturbation amounting to consternation in certain circles. Both Lord Roseberry and Lord Randolph Churchill, without impugning me in any way, deplored the marriage, nor were they by any means alone in thinking such a union might ruin the life of a promising politician.

(Editor's note: She was once reported engaged to marry Lord Roseberry.)

Some of my own friends from another point of view were equally apprehensive: to start my new life charged with a ready-made family of children brought up very differently to myself, with a man who played no games and cared for no sport, in London instead of the country, with no money except what he could make at the bar, was, they thought, taking too many risks.

My Melton friends said it was a terrible waste that I was not marrying a sporting man and told me afterwards that they nearly signed a round robin to beg me never to give up hunting.

(Editor's note: Melton is one of the fashionable Hunt Clubs of Eng-

land. On one occasion, bored by the monotony of a conventional affair there, Mrs. Asquith, then Margot Tennant, started the staid dowagers who were present by giving an impromptu skirt dance which highly pleased the younger set, but over which London society professed to be deeply shocked.

I was much more afraid of spoiling my husband's life than my own. I had never seen any of his children except little Violet when I became engaged; and he only took me to see them once before we were married. He never spoke of them except one day, when, after my asking him if he thought they would hate me and cataloguing my grave imperfections and my moderate qualifications for the part, he stopped me and said that his eldest son Raymond was remarkably clever and would be devoted to me. He added thoughtfully:

"I think, and hope he is ambitious."

This was quite a new idea to me: we had always been told what a wicked thing ambition was, but we were a fighting family of high spirits and hot temper as well as exceedingly competitive, so we had acquiesced without conforming. This remark profoundly impressed me and I pondered it in my heart. I do not think it turned out to be a true prophecy, but Raymond Asquith had such unusual and amazing intellectual gifts that no one could have convicted him of lack of ambition.

To win without work, to score without effort, and to amaze and delight without premeditation is given to few.

(Editor's note: Despite this disavowal of ambition, Margot Tennant as a very young girl declared repeatedly that she would marry a man who with her help would become prime minister of Great Britain.)

Disapproving of long engagements I hurried on my marriage all I could, first to avoid the month of May, and next to escape the cataracts of advice by which my friends thought to secure both my husband's and my own matrimonial bliss.

One night after our engagement

we were dining with Sir Henry and Lady Campbell-Bannerman, (Campbell-Bannerman was once prime minister.) While the women were talking and the men drinking, dear old Mrs. Gladstone and other elderly ladies and political wives took me on as to the duties of the spouse of a possible prime minister; they were so severe that at the end of it I did not feel at all sure that I should be doing the proper thing by sleeping with him.

When Mr. Gladstone came into the drawing room I felt depressed and, clinging to his arm, I switched him off in a corner and said I feared the ladies took me for a jockey or a ballet d'opéra, as I had been adjured to give up dancing, riding and acting, etc. He patted my hand, said he knew no one better fitted to be the wife of a great politician than myself and ended by saying that, while I was entitled to discard exaggeration in rebuke, it was a great mistake not to take criticism wisely and in a spirit which might turn it to good account.

I have often thought of this when I see how brittle and egotistical people are at the smallest disapprobation. There is no greater test of size than the way people take criticism; but, judging stature by this standard, most people are dwarfs.

My engagement caused a sensation in the east end of London as well as the west. The following was posted to me by an anonymous well-wisher: "At the meeting of the 'unemployed' held on Tower Hill yesterday afternoon, John E. Williams, the organizer appointed the social democratic federation, said that on the previous day they had gone through the west end squares and had let the 'loafers' living there know that they were alive."

On the previous evening he had seen an announcement which at first sight he had thought it read: "Mr. Asquith going to be murdered." However, it turned out that Mr. Asquith was going to be married, and he accordingly proposed that the unemployed, following the example of the people in the west end, should forward the right honorable gentleman a congratulatory message.

"He moved—That this mass meeting of the unemployed held on Tower Hill, hearing that Mr. Asquith is about to enter the holy bonds of matrimony, and knowing he has no sympathy for the unemployed, and that he has lately used his position in the house of commons to insult the unemployed, trusts that his partner will be one of the worst tarts it is possible for a man to have, and that his family troubles will compel him to resign from political life, for which he is so unfit."

The reading of the resolution was followed by loud laughter and cheers. Mr. Crouch (National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives) seconded the motion, which was supported by a number of other speakers and adopted.

(Editor's note: Notwithstanding this humorous assault on Asquith, who was their home secretary, Margot Tennant was greatly loved by working girls of the east end, among whom she had done a great deal of work.)

In spite of the anxiety of my friends and relatives we were married on the 10th of May, 1894. Our register was signed by four prime ministers, Mr. Gladstone, Lord Roseberry, Arthur Balfour and my husband. We spent the first part of our honeymoon at Melton Park, lent us by Sir John and Lady Horner, and the second at Clonsilla court.

I had a wonderful wedding. It was less common in those days for crowds to collect in the street than it is to-

day. The first marriage I ever saw which collected huge crowds was Lady Crewe's. From Grosvenor square to St. George's, Hanover square, in a short distance, but from our front door to the church the pavements were blocked.

An old nurse of my sister Charlotte's, Jerusha Taylor, who nursed me after my wedding, told me that a gentleman outside St. George's had said to her, "I will give you £10 for that ticket of yours"; as she refused he said, "I will give you anything you like to ask! I must see Margot Tennant married." I asked her what sort of a man he was. She answered, "Oh! he was a real gentleman, ma'am! I know a gentleman when I see him; he had a gardenia in his buttonhole, but he didn't get my ticket!"

I do not know which of us was considered the most courageous in our marriage, my husband or myself. In every one of my letters of congratulations there was a note of warning; so doubt step-relationships are not natural, and should not be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, but reverently, discreetly and soberly.

Gladstone and Lord Morley wrote me these letters on my engagement:

May 5, 1894.
"You have a great and noble work to perform. It is a work far beyond human strength. May the strength which is more than human be abundantly granted you. Ever yours,
"W. E. G."

I remember, on receiving it, saying to my beloved friend Con Manners: "Gladstone thinks my fitness to be Henry's wife should be prayed for like the clergy. 'Almighty and Everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels.'"

John Morley wrote this:

"55, Elm Park Gardens, South Kensington, S. W. March 7, 1894.

"My dear Miss Margot:

"Now that the whirl of congratulations must be ceasing, here are mine, the latest but not the least warm of them all. You are going to marry one of the finest men in all the world, with a great store of sterling gifts, both of head and heart, and with a life before him of the highest interest, importance and power. Such a man is a companion that any woman might envy you. I dare say you know this without my telling you. On the other part, I will not add myself to those importunate who—as I understand you to report—wish you 'to improve.' I very respectfully wish nothing of the sort. Few qualities are better worth leaving as they are, than vivacity, wit, freshness of mind, gaiety and pluck. Pray, keep them all. Don't improve by an atom."

"Circumstances may have a lesson or two to teach you, but 'tis only the dull who don't learn, and I have no fear but that such a pair have happy years in front of them."

"You ask for my blessing, and you have it. Be sure that I wish you as unclouded a life as can be the lot of woman, and I hope you will always let me count myself your friend. I possess some aphorisms on the married state—but they will keep. I only let them out as occasion comes."

"Always yours sincerely,

"JOHN MORLEY."

(Editor's note: John Morley was secretary for Ireland under Gladstone. He was in Asquith's cabinet when the war broke out and resigned because of his pacifist principles. He was called Honest John, which Mrs. Asquith says, was a poor name for him.)

There was one letter I kept in front of me when I felt discouraged by the others on my engagement. As the

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The Woman With the Serpent's Tongue

BY WILLIAM WATSON

She is not old, she is not young,
The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue,
The haggard cheek, the hungering eye,
The poisoned words that wildly fly,
The famished face, the feered hand—
Who slights the worthiest in the land,
Sneers at the just, contemns the brave,
And blackens goodness in its grave.

In truthful numbers be she sung,
The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue;
Concerning whom, Fame hints at things
Told but in shrugs and whisperings;
Ambitious from her natal hour,
And scheming all her life for power;
With little left of seemly pride;

With venomous fangs she cannot hide;
Who half makes love to you today,
Tomorrow gives her guest away,
Burnt up within by that strange soul
She cannot slave or yet control;
Malignant hipp'd, unkind, unweet;
Past all example indiscreet;
Hectic, and always overstrung—
The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue.

To think that such as she can mar
Names that among the noblest are!
That hands like hers can touch the springs
That move who knows what men and things?
That on her will their fates have hung—
The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue.

STATEMENT BY MR. WATSON

"The Woman With the Serpent's Tongue" is a composite photograph of Mrs. Asquith and her step-daughter, Violet. The poem is a portrait of the physical characteristics of Mrs. Asquith. The latter is the voice of the family and rules them all. Violet is the real official voice speaking with authority. She it is who

"Slights the worthiest in the land,
Sneers at the just, contemns the brave,
And blackens goodness in its grave."

(Signed) WILLIAM WATSON.