

## IV

### MARRIAGE

MY first married years were spent in London in the full round of the life of a Victorian mother of that date, whose duties chiefly consisted in superintending household affairs and producing a baby, boy or girl as the case might be, at regular intervals, and to this rule I was no exception.

Few distracting events interrupted the calm tenure of this domestic life, which was intensified by the protracted illness of my husband. Small dinners to intimate friends, the acquaintance with interesting people whom one met at times in a limited society, who passed as "ships in the night," the delightful excursions to Hampton Court Palace, the home of my girlhood, where my mother had apartments at the time; visits to the theatres in the winter months and the expeditions on summer evenings to the exhibitions at the Olympia and elsewhere, were welcome interludes in a life consisting of but few changes; when week-end parties were not yet in vogue and would have been impossible to the mother of a numerous progeny, only expected to leave her home when accompanying her family on yearly visits to the seaside.

Many pleasant visits were paid during these years to my father-in-law's (Mr. J. W. Birch) lovely place, Rick-



mansworth Park, at that time unspoilt by the speculative builder and surrounded by the properties owned by Lord Esher, Lord Ebury and Lord Clarendon, all of whom were delightful neighbours, while Mr. W. S. Gilbert, also living in the vicinity, added to the charm of the society there by the wit and brilliancy of his conversational powers.

Again, in the large family house in Cavendish Square many pleasant evenings were spent. My father-in-law, whose great financial abilities led to his inclusion in the Bimetallism conference of the day, was at that time Governor of the Bank of England, and not only gathered around him his Bank colleagues, the Barings, the Goschens, the Gibbs, etc., and other talented people, but other celebrities in art, literature and politics, thus gratifying my taste in this direction. Yet at that day, the conversation on leading affairs of the time, and more especially politics, were reserved to be debated by the gentlemen when the ladies had left the dining-room.

The future Sir John Cowans, then a young officer of exceptional promise, was another great friend, whose vagaries in early days took the more harmless form of practical jokes, in which he greatly delighted. A great favourite with my three boys, their admiration of his wild performances, when visiting the Preparatory School of the elder son, were somewhat tempered with fear as to possible consequences, when he insisted on playing football down the passages and making apple-pie beds in the Matron's room !

Another friend of that period, of whom we saw a great deal, was Mr. G. D. Giles, R.A., the well-known painter of horses and battle pieces, who painted H.R.H. the Prince of Wales's horse, "Persimmon," the winner of the Derby in 1896. I felt much honoured at being asked by him



to represent the prominent lady in the "Winner of the Derby" of yet another year, though I could not fail to recognize the incongruity of choosing somebody who had no experience of equestrian exercise and who had never visited a race-course in her life !

The exhibitions at Olympia, etc., to which I have already alluded, were a favourite form of amusement, in the days when *souper dansants*, night clubs, cabaret shows, films and wireless were non-existent. To these entertainments young people were frequently invited who had already evinced partiality for each other's society, and the happy evenings spent together led in many cases to the final decision to share each other's destiny in life, though by some of the older and timid people acting as chaperones, the varied amusements there provided, more especially the water-shute and the giant racer, were hardly appreciated. I remember, how on my first experiment on the switchback, the joltings of the "seasick" up-and-down movements and the delighted noises of my neighbours, as each car surmounted the top, resulted in my insistence to descend from the car before the return journey, thus greatly incensing the Management, who foretold that I should have to spend the night in the grounds !

Still more enjoyable were the picnics on the river close to Hampton Court, in company with friends, and the dinners at the restaurants at Kingston, the delightful return journey by moonlight to the Palace and the good supper provided at my mother's hospitable board ! This form of entertainment was much appreciated by our acquaintances and friends—foreigners as well as English—the habits of the former causing us no little amusement. On one occasion, when a large basket of cherries was provided to regale the guests, on the train journey to Hampton Court, a young Spanish secretary, who had



joined our party, to our great consternation, swallowed all the stones of the cherries he had eaten, probably considering this a more polite manner of procedure than discharging them through the window of the railway carriage; the witty remark of a young lady present, who declared that she could hear the stones rattling inside him as he stepped down from the carriage on to the platform, increased our anxiety on his behalf!

A welcome break in the monotony of these few years was the visit to Homburg for my elder boy's health. How vividly I recall, even to this day, the wonderful new experiences of a Londoner who had never left England, beyond a short honeymoon tour—the delightful open-air life, with its picnics and excursions, and the charming scenery of the surroundings, all contrasting so strikingly with the dull stagnation of a life in South Kensington. My boy, now minister at Guatemala, at the age then of eight years, had a fine time of it at Homburg—admired and feasted with chocolates by all the pretty girls and receiving the sobriquet of “Mr. Birch of Homburg,” in consequence of his having given his name, when entering some game competition intended for the grown-ups, as “Mr. Birch”!

The Prince of Wales was there at that time, surrounded by a cheerful coterie, and few were the evenings when the concert given in the Gardens did not conclude with a special request from His Royal Highness for the favourite song of the day—“Two Lovely Black Eyes.” Many older folk will recollect the unhappy position it presents of a trimmer endeavouring to hunt with the Conservative hare and run with the Liberal hounds, who, after trying his luck with praising up the Conservative side and getting two black eyes for his trouble, adds:



## MARRIAGE

The next time I argued I thought it was best,  
To give the Conservative side a rest !  
The merits of Gladstone I freely expressed,  
When oh ! what a surprise !  
The man I had met was a Tory true !  
Nothing the Liberals right would do !  
And this was the end of my argument, too,  
Two Lovely Black Eyes !

with the obvious moral—never to betray your political feelings !

The state of my husband's health clouded the last years of my first married life, and we lived quietly just out of London until his death occurred in 1897.