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MISCELLANEOUS

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Mrs. Asquith

Margot Asquith, an autobiography, in two volumes.
 New York: G. H. Doran Co.

MRS. ASQUITH'S life has coincided with the rise of popular journalism, and no one knows better than she the amount of curiosity that exists about her particular world. She has written her autobiography with this curiosity—or the more ravenous elements of it—peculiarly in mind. There are several things to be criticized about her autobiography, and even about her far-famed "natural directness," but it is only fair to say that she lives up to certain journalistic expectations. Few of the privileged classes have come to the public monkey-house with a larger peanut-bag of personalia.

Her range of England is not defined when she is called the wife of Herbert Asquith, the ex-prime minister. Her father, Sir Charles Tennant, had, we are told, genius. He also had money, which has its own trifling importance. He was a forceful and positive Victorian business man of the type that was then termed Radical in politics. Gladstone knew him well, and one of his daughters married Gladstone's nephew while another married Lord Ribblesdale. Mrs. Asquith's marriage, we are given to understand, was a step down in the world—a bit of pioneer work only pos-

sible to a woman of heroic mould. (Asquith was a widower, had a growing family of mute middle-class children, and lived at Hampstead. But he was in the Cabinet at the time, a dark horse that only needed to be properly groomed.) The Tennant home was a huge retroactively historical castle of the "Scottish baronial" or Sears Roebuck type in a county for which the father was an M. P., Peeblesshire. It was on the wild, wild moors, thirty miles from Edinburgh. In London he had a big house with some good mezzotints, silver and china. He was very proud of his eight children, and "was fond of a few people—Mark Napier, Ribblesdale, Lord Haldane, Mr. Heseltine, Lord Rosebery and Arthur Balfour." His children had verve. They loved Scotland and the breakneck excitements and breathless adventures of racing and climbing that afterwards become fox-hunting and lion-taming in all its branches. "I remember nothing unhappy in my glorious youth except the violence of our family quarrels. Reckless waves of high and low spirits," explosions about games, love, clothes and religion.

It is characteristic of Mrs. Asquith that she lets nothing tell itself. Hence we learn that when the children played games they had as umpires Bret Harte, Laurence Oliphant, "Arthur Balfour, George Curzon, George Wyndham, Lionel Tennyson, Harry Cust and Doll Liddell." And as her story goes on it contains for conspicuousness a myriad of well-known names. Hers was a set that did not include the chillier Tories, the saponaceous Liberals, the Fabian intellectuals, the literary or theatrical. And yet, in this retrospect, it includes pretty nearly everything. One day the Prince of Wales is telling "Margot" how original she is. Another day Fred Archer is giving her the winner. She chaffs the Duke of Beaufort and is allowed to wear a blue habit and a pot hat when she hunts with his hounds. She sits hard on Lady Londonderry who tries to patronize her about a book by John Addington Symonds—John Addington Symonds, her own pet friend and author, whom she has just left on an Alp. One day Lord Rosebery is pouting absurdly because she failed to deny she was engaged to him. Another day Arthur Balfour delicately flicks away the suggestion that she has annexed him. "No, that is not so. I rather think of having a career of my own." Baron Hirsch, a man of fabulous gold, is seen leaning across a table in a private room at the Café Anglais offering her his un-kissed Lucien. "He is shy and I want him to make a good marriage." Coquelin, Jowett, Gladstone, Tennyson, Dilke, the Duke of Devonshire, the Duchess of Manchester, "my beloved friend Gilbert Murray," "my beloved friend Lady Desborough," "my beloved Mary" Lady Wemyss, John Morley, Lord Middleton—these are only a few of the personages who do their turn in the Margot revue. And with most of them, as we can well believe her, she begins as something of a siren. She ends, at any rate, as a siren whistle.

And that, unfortunately, is the flaw in all of Mrs. Asquith's performance. She tells some extremely amusing stories. She gives a most telling—and cutting—sketch of Curzon. She does help one to understand a number of public men. She narrates with great vividness and full sentiment the death of her sister Laura, her own hunting accidents, her love affair with Peter Flower and her interview with his mistress, her fist-fight among factory-girls in Whitechapel, her detention by a wild woman-prisoner in a cell in Wormwood Scrubbs. But from all these stories, of which herself is so often the warm-blooded heroine, there is hopelessly absent the clear note of disinterestedness. She is no more occupied with her own affairs than, say, Marie Bashkirtseff, to whom John Addington Symonds compares

her. But in the Russian girl one is constantly and delightfully aware of a fundamental candor which spares least of all the assumption that she is fundamentally candid. Mrs. Asquith has self-inspection but it is serious, not comedic, self-inspection. It is the prize-fighter's inventory of his points. The decency of scepticism is totally lacking in her appraisals. She is capable, to a limited extent, of putting her own value on persons and things. She has a small degree—very small—of independence. But she is never capable of permitting the reader to form his own values, and on a hundred occasions she insists in the typical fashionable manner upon dictating the right appreciation. Take this anecdote about one of her sisters. "She had wonderful grace and less vanity than any one that ever lived, and her social courage was a perpetual joy. I heard her say to the late Lord Rothschild, one night at a dinner party: 'And do you still believe the Messiah is coming, Lord Natty?' Is there a trace of wit in this remark? Or 'social courage' as distinguished from social sabotage? I simply doubt Mrs. Asquith's capacity for judging her sister's wonderful grace, lack of vanity, etc., of which she is so aboundingly confident. What she possesses is that curse of all human intercourse, an aggressiveness that immediately establishes a protectorate over one's neighbor's likes and dislikes. This is what she calls natural directness and what I should venture to call natural insolence.

But this impurity of taste, this bright insensitiveness, is not confined to the noisy over-emphasis which is so many fashionable women's version of vitality. It comes out in her trite characterization of a person like Coquelin. Coquelin was the vogue and therefore: "Coquelin—the finest actor of Molière that ever lived—was performing in London at the time and promised he would not only coach me in my part but lend his whole company for our performance. He gave me twelve lessons and I worked hard for him. He was intensely particular; and I was more nervous over these lessons than I ever felt riding over high timber." She points Coquelin's friendly letter returning an expensive present her father made her send him. Marie Bashkirtseff also met Coquelin, who performed at a soirée for her family. "The elder Coquelin came yesterday to inspect the rooms, and to consult with us respecting the pieces. G—was present, and he disgusted me with the airs he gave himself of being a connoisseur—a little more and he would have taken it upon himself to advise Coquelin, who is very agreeable, by the way, a very good fellow, who does not make you feel, the moment you speak to him, that sort of embarrassment which so many people experience in the presence of any one of note." Here you have a really perceptive person to whom Coquelin is not merely "the finest actor of Molière that ever lived" but an actual presence to be felt and judged for himself, disinterestedly. And that disinterestedness has value when Marie says next day, "The two Coquelins were superb." When she says it I defer.

Mrs Asquith has never this spiritual pellucidity. She is, for example, by way of being religious. But with her, as with so many persons of the privileged class, religion is part of conspicuous emotional waste, and must no more be invaded by criticism than fashionable clothes or grand opera. With Marie Bashkirtseff, on the other hand, conventional religion was an acute personal problem. She struggled with it like a long man trying to cover himself with a short blanket—a blanket that either covered his intellect and left his instincts to shiver, or warmed his instincts and exposed his intellect. Had she lived, she would not have given the impression that she had progressed from

a ring to a rattle, a rattle to a doll and a doll to a crucifix.

Not that Mrs. Asquith supposes herself to lack perception and that tiresome "sense of humor." But to measure her sense of humor one may take this story of her brother-in-law Alfred Lyttleton, whose boisterousness she did not like. Lyttleton was "a manly and winning personality," a Happy Warrior, a man of "unquestioning obedience to the will of God" with "moral right-mindedness of a high order." Well, "to him most foreigners were frogs. In Edward Lyttleton's admirable monograph of his brother, you will read that one day, when Alfred was in the train, sucking an orange, 'a small, grubby Italian, leaning on his walking-stick, smoking a cheroot at the station,' was looked upon, not only by Alfred but by his biographer, as an 'irresistible challenge to fling the juicy, but substantial, fragment full at the unsuspecting foreigner's cheek.' At this we are told that 'Alfred collapsed into noble convulsions of laughter.' I quote this incident, as it illustrates the difference between the Tennant and the Lyttleton sense of humor. Their laughter was a tornado or convulsion to which they succumbed . . ." That, for Mrs. Asquith, is the point of the story. Her imagination does not seem to alight on the grubby Italian's end of the story or the cadishness that afflicted him. She is only interested in the Lyttleton's noble convulsions.

It is this deficiency in civil imagination—the ability to put oneself in another person's place—which makes for what looks like hardness in the book. We have many examples of deft repartee, but how many of deft rapport? "Margy, would you rather marry me or break your leg?" "Break both, Sir William." She scores, and tells, many times. But she offers no analysis when she confesses, "I have never succeeded in making any one the least different from what they are and, in my efforts to do so, have lost every female friend that I ever had (with the exception of four)." And her lack of analysis is shown above everything in that comment on her costume at the ball: "one or two incidents might have enlightened me had I been more aware of myself." To have been more aware of others would have served as well, or perhaps better, and have had less the air of rare unconsciousness.

For this business of being a fine, free spirit, an uninhibited personality, does require a sense as to other people—other people's rights—which Mrs. Asquith lacks. And she even lacks it for herself in those passages where she invades her own privacy. "In connection with what I have quoted out of my diary here it is not inappropriate to add that I lost my babies in three out of my five confinements. These poignant and secret griefs have no place on the high-road of life; but, just as Henry and I will stand sometimes side by side near those little graves unseen by strangers, so he and I in unobserved moments will touch with one heart an un forgotten sorrow." "Secret" griefs, "unseen by strangers," "unobserved moments"—all to be had for tuppence an installment in the Sunday paper.

But what has she to say about England? She was the wife of a premier. She knew Gladstone, Salisbury, Balfour, Rosebery, Campbell-Bannerman, Lloyd George and hosts of lesser celebrities. She picked coming men as a child picks winners. (She picked Asquith.) And she lived through those changes that took place in England between 1880 and 1910 of which Mr. R. H. Gretton has so fairly said, "They concerned political ideas, social habits, and commercial methods, religious outlook and material equipment, education and the housekeeper's supplies, keeping of holidays and furnishing of houses, philosophical speculation and the pursuits of a clerk's Saturday afternoons." Real

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as they were, those changes go unnoticed in the autobiography. Lord Rosebery never said anything in public to match his words to her father, "Your girl has beautiful eyes."

No, she meets an issue like woman suffrage with folklore about womanhood. "Life in the House is neither healthy, useful nor appropriate for a woman; and the functions of a mother and a member of Parliament are not compatible." Not in the same place, certainly; but these are inadequate reasons for "my husband and I" to give against suffrage. Her experience with the convict at Wormwood Scrubs—a woman in prison for life for abortion—shows, however, her inability to go beyond the surface. This woman asked Mrs. Asquith as wife of the Home Secretary to look into her case. "But she was a professional abortionist of the most hopeless type." That ended it. In a country where "religion" means expensive divorce, expensive divorce means—among other things—professional abortion. But to Mrs. Asquith these were not realities. Her role, as Henry James and John Morley try to make us see, was to be a Madame de Sévigné, a Saint Simon, something of the world where there are souls.

Aud yet I subscribe myself a grateful reader of Mrs. Asquith's autobiography. I had a few lingering doubts as to the great social tradition of English politics, the Saturday-to-Monday refreshment of tired statesmen by untiring hostesses, the comradeship of aristocrats and political thinkers and souls. But this lengthy public dilatation of Mrs. Asquith's heart has settled for me the old notion that woman ever could have, much less ever had, a suitable place behind the throne. Behind the throne of man, as Mrs. Asquith exhibits it, there may always be a place for women of the pillowing variety, women who really like to stand waiting with the sponge and the smelling-salts and the towels. But for an aggressive personality like Mrs. Asquith, genuine child of "a man whose vitality, irritability, energy and impressionability amounted to genius," this false role of subordination has turned her from a beaver into something smaller and less pleasant, and exposed her to the perceptive as a pest. Had she been an educated woman, and disciplined, and yet subordinate, could she have turned her life to advantage? I suppose so, as any man might. But being a woman born into a society where her game was to be charming, and where she had no chance to be seriously educated, we find her at the age of fifty-six publishing idiocies that Marie Bashkirtseff was too sophisticated to utter at fourteen, and never once attaining Marie Bashkirtseff's noble realization that "if this book is not the *exact*, the *absolute*, the *strict* truth, it has no *raison d'être*."

These idiocies and, one must say, vulgarities are not of themselves important. What does it matter how much this woman tells the gaping public about her flirtations, her self-estimates, her husband's prayers and her confinements? The thing that matters is to see a fund of human nature squandered in horrible heedlessness on the enormous trivialities of the privileged class.

F. H.

Revolutionary Reconstruction

Chaos and Order in Industry, by G. D. H. Cole. New York: The Frederick A. Stokes Company.

CAPITALISM, according to Mr. Cole's analysis, is already as good as dead. We are living in the state of chaos that naturally intervenes between the collapse of a superannuated scheme of industry and the emergence of a new scheme out of its ruins. It is not Mr. Cole's object

to hasten the break-up of the debris of capitalism, but to indicate the steps by which the succeeding order may be inaugurated, without the waste and universal misery that would inevitably attend an unplanned evolution. His book is an essay on reconstruction, but reconstruction in a far more fundamental sense than that which is usually given to the term. The Lloyd George government has been fertile in projects of reconstruction, but what these meant was the restoration of the pre-war condition of capitalist economics. Mr. Cole's project involves nothing less than a new order, built upon the motive of service in place of the motive of profit, and organized on democratic principles in place of the autocracy of the private employer or even of the state.

Since his present work is devoted mainly to the tactics of reconstruction, Mr. Cole does not present at length his reasons for believing that capitalism is dying. They are, however, outlined with sufficient clarity. Capitalism has worked by virtue of two motives, the desire for profit on the part of the employer, and fear of hunger and misery on the part of the laborer. So long as the motive of fear was powerful enough to compel the worker to give his full efforts, the industrial system was productive enough to supply a surplus above the worker's minimum of subsistence. That surplus afforded the employers the profit they required. But with the progress of labor organization and the education of the workers to the facts of the economic system, it has become more and more difficult to exact from the workers their full potential contribution. Limitations of output, ca'canny, strike upon strike, work remorselessly toward the curtailment of the surplus on which capitalism lives. And as the surplus grows insecure, credit, which is essentially the control of future surplus, perishes. All business becomes disorderly speculation. The object of every undertaking is to get whatever is to be had before the source of profit dries up altogether.

It is not practicable here to subject this theory of inevitable revolution to the criticism it deserves. So much must be admitted: labor, in the sense of productive power yielding a surplus above its own necessities of life, is at many points of the industrial system a wasting asset, just like the oil reserves of flowing wells. The willingness to work that was created in a precapitalistic system, where the relation between effort and its reward was immediate, may easily wear out under large scale industry. It is not difficult to prove historically that in old industrial regions this willingness to work has fallen away alarmingly. Whether it is possible to check this tendency toward "declining efficiency" while still preserving the essentials of the capitalistic system is a question which has seldom been raised by the orthodox economists. For the most part they have ignored altogether the possibility of a general deterioration of labor. But obviously, until a satisfactory solution of this problem has been found, and has been given general application, it must be admitted that capitalism is declining towards its fall. The problem of reconstruction must properly be conceived, as Mr. Cole conceives it, to be the substitution of new motives and new principles of organization for the old ones that no longer work satisfactorily.

Public ownership of the principal resources and machinery of production, with operation entrusted wholly to the working personnel, is the form of organization Mr. Cole forecasts for the future. The private owners are to be bought out, thereby retaining for a time their present claim to income, but losing once for all their right of control. Thus they are to be transformed into a class of rentiers, coupon clippers, which society may tolerate while it pleases.