MARGOT ASQUITH

MY IMPRESSIONS OF AMERICA

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Asquith M.

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Содержание

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I: ABOARD THE CARMANIA

I.
ABOARD THE *CARMANIA*
MARGOT NOT A NATURAL TOURIST; LACKS CURIOSITY – HEADLINES IN LONDON COMPARED WITH HEADLINES IN NEW YORK – AMERICAN WOMEN WORLDLY – AMERICAN MEN THE GENUINE ARTICLE

I MOTORED to Southampton on Saturday, the 21st of January, this year, and after saying good-bye to my husband and my son, retired to my berth on the *Carmania*. I am a bad traveller, and had been laid up with a sort of influenza until the day before I left London.

Kindly press people tempted me to confide in them on the ship. They asked me if I would be back in time for Princess Mary's wedding; where I was going when I arrived in America, and if I looked forward to my trip. I sometimes wonder what questions I would put if I were obliged to interview a traveller. I would ask with reluctance where they were going, but never what they had seen, because I know I could not listen to their answers. Everyone knows what you are likely to see if you go for any length of time to London, Rome, Athens or the United States; and is there a person living whose impressions you would care to hear either upon the Coliseum, Niagara Falls, or any other of the great works of art or of nature? On such subjects the remarks of the cleverest and stupidest are equally inadequate and the superb vocabulary of a Ruskin will probably not be more illuminating than what the school-boy writes in the Visitors' Book at Niagara, "Uncle and all very much pleased."

I am inclined to think it is a mild form of vanity that makes a certain type of rich person travel every year. I have heard these say that for all the interest we who are left behind take in what they have seen and heard, they might as well have remained at Brighton. Nevertheless, the world is full of tourists; and there are a number of people who like to pick up pieces of unimportant information without effort. The foolish majority of these read the *Daily Mail*; the political, the *Manchester Guardian*; the Liberals, the *Westminster Gazette*; the intellectual, the *New Statesman*; and to pass the time on Sundays there are always the long columns of the *Observer* or for the credulous, the "Secret History of the Week."

After glancing at the leading articles, the City man turns to "Round the Markets: Home Railways firm. The Chilian Scrip reacted to 1¼ premium and Norway sixes give way to ninety-five." They then read: "By the Silver Sea, the Sunny South, or Glowing East"; ponder over lists of those who are going to Egypt, America, or the Riviera; and end by learning that the site of the old General Post Office was in St. Martins-le-Grand.

In America it is rather different. On the front page of one of the most important papers you read:

"Kardos has hopes of father's aid," "Men faint in public and lose $153,000," "Death note writer caught in Capital," "Losses of women duped by Lindsay," "Iceland cabinet falls," "Tokio diet in uproar over snake on floor," "Saddle horse from Firestone, Harding's favourite mount," and short

notices on Ireland, Paris and London; you are encouraged to turn to page 6, column five or column 8, page 5 and finish with "Dazzling display of Princess Mary's lingerie."

It is difficult to say why most travellers are uninteresting. I do not think it is because they have been to wonderful places, but because the average man has not the power to assimilate or interpret what he has seen; and they enlarge on their own sensations with such a lack of humour and proportion, that you feel as if they were not only rebuffing you, but claiming part of the credit of the master works themselves. When told at a party that you ought to meet Mr. So-and-So, as he has just come back from the Far East, Southwest, or North Pole, you cling to the nearest door post, and make your escape while the hero is being traced in the crowd. I like what I have thought out for myself better than what I discover; and conclusions arrived at after careful reflection are more enlarging than what is pointed out to you by inquisitive spectators.

I am not a natural tourist, and Napoleon's shaving soap will never interest me as much as the smallest light upon his mind or character. There is a difference between curiosity and interest, and I regret to say I am not curious.

I have come to the United States for the first time, not in a missionary spirit or to study anything or anybody, but to see my daughter and to enjoy myself.

In a rash moment, however, I promised to write my impressions of the United States and Canada, and this may give rise to false hopes.

Lord Acton wrote in a letter to Mrs. Drew, "One touch of ill nature makes the whole world kin," and I must make an effort not to disappoint my thoughtful critics. I have been accused of failing to appreciate the society of brilliant American women whether in Italy, Paris or London; but it could be added with truth that brilliance, while stimulating most people, has always exhausted me. I prefer the clumsiest thought to the most finished phrase, and am so slow, that the mildest complication may make me miss the point. "General and prolonged laughter" is a faculty I have never been able to acquire, and sudden explosions over anything I have said usually convince me that I had better have held my tongue.

To an outsider who has only known European Americans, the most noticeable thing about American women is their freedom from native soil. They are equally well equipped whether their nationality is transferred from Russia to Rome, Vienna, Roumania or Paris. No blank cheque could be more adequately filled in, and I never cease wondering what can be the secret of their perfect social mechanism.

Beautiful to look at and elegantly dressed, with an open mind upon whatever topic is discussed, adaptable, available, rich and good-humoured, the American woman as I know her is the last word in worldiness and fashion. In my own country she is not only a popular, but a privileged person, and having started by being what is called "natural," she becomes more and more so every day.

The husbands of these ladies, when not of needy foreign aristocracy, are usually divorced, discharged or disposed of in some way or other; and, even if they are of the same nationality, are quite unlike the American man as I have known him.

He is seldom fashionable and never leisured; he has a passion for learning all that there is to be known, and holds vigorous views upon most things. If a little copious in narrative, he is never mechanical, but an absolutely genuine article; spontaneous, friendly, hospitable and keen. He appears to treat his women folk with the patience and indulgence you extend to spoilt children, never attempting to discuss matters, either literary or political, with them, and is agreeably surprised if you show an interest in Wall Street or the White House.

I am jotting down these preliminary impressions, any one of which may – and probably will – have to be revised during the course of my travels.

II: ARRIVAL IN NEW YORK
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REPORTERS LACKING IN AWE – SPLENDOURS OF HOTEL LIFE – FIRST LECTURE A FAILURE AS RESULT OF SEA-SICKNESS – THRILLED BY NEW YORK'S ARCHITECTURE

AFTER an abominable voyage during which the ship rolled and rocked, groaned and shuddered, and the sea did precisely what it liked with us, we arrived a day and a half late, and surrounded by press-men I feather-stitched on to American soil.

If the reporters are a little lacking in awe, they make up for it by the intelligent interest they take in everything connected with one; and after being asked what I thought of "flappers" and what Mr. Lloyd George thought of me, I was allowed to go to the Ambassador Hotel. I could not have been greeted with more courtesy had I arrived at Windsor Castle, nor have I ever stayed in a better hotel.

My son-in-law Prince Bibesco, my daughter Elizabeth, and my cousin Miss Tennant (whose brother is Sir Auckland Geddes's private secretary), showed me the airy bedrooms and beautiful bathrooms which the manager of the hotel had chosen for us. I sat down completely exhausted when suddenly the door opened and my sitting room was flooded with male and female reporters. Having been seasick and without solid food for a week, the carpet and ceiling were still nodding at me, and I regret to confess that I said nothing very striking; but they were welcoming and friendly; and after a somewhat dislocated conversation I staggered off to bed.

I was introduced the next day by my cicerone, Mr. Lee Keedick, to the New Amsterdam Theatre, where scouts were placed in distant galleries to try my voice. I had no difficulty in making myself heard, but I felt terribly ill and more than inadequate as I made my first appearance at 3.30 in the well filled theatre. Dr. Murray Butler introduced me in a courteous speech and explained that after such an unusually rough crossing I would be obliged to sit down throughout the performance, which I much regretted.

I opened with a spirited account of an Irish horse dealer, which, I could see at a glance, interested nobody. Whether I was speaking Irish or English, it might have been Walloon for all the audience cared. My heart faded, my voice sank, and I knew that many could not hear; some were not listening, and my friends were watching me with apprehension, charity and cheers. More dead than alive I was relieved when an enterprising lady shouted from the gallery:

"You've got my money for nothing – Good-bye, I've had enough of you!"

This informal greeting stirred the kindness of my listeners to a protest, and as soon as I could, I changed to other subjects. With the fall of the curtain many old friends came on to the stage, and presenting me with roses, assured me that I had won the hearts of my audience, after which I left the theatre.

Driving home, I opened all the taxi windows and was struck with the architectural beauties of the streets. With the exception of Munich I have never seen a modern town comparable to New York. The colour of the stone and lightness of the air would put vitality into a corpse; and in spite of a haunting recollection that the lady in the gallery had had enough of me, I returned to the Ambassador happy though exhausted.

My daughter took me in the evening to a wonderful party given by Miss Mabel Gerry. We wore our best clothes, but our taxi driver did not seem satisfied, and before turning in to the magnificent

court-yard, he stopped, opened the door, and enquired rather sceptically if this was where we were expected; concealing our mortification we urged him to drive on.

There was something for every taste at Miss Gerry's beautiful house. I started by sitting next to my dear old friend Mr. Harry White, and a brilliant stranger Mr. Thomas Ridgeway; went on to play bridge, listened to a fluent pianist, and finished by dancing unknown steps to a wonderful band.

I am enunciating a platitude when I say the Americans are the finest dancers in the world.

III: BOSTON AND WORCESTER
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BOSTON AND WORCESTER
DISCOMFORT OF TRAVEL IN AMERICA – STAGE FRIGHT IN BOSTON – BOSTONIANS INTELLIGENT AND COURTEOUS – JOHN SARGENT'S FRESCOES IN THE MUSEUM

ON the 2nd of February, next morning, my friend and secretary Mr. Horton, myself and maid arrived in Boston City after a comfortable journey in a private compartment given to us by the courtesy of our guard. I do not wish to say anything disagreeable, but except for the beauty of the railway stations, the travelling arrangements in America are far inferior to ours. Sitting erect on revolving chairs in public, is a trial not lessened by an atmosphere in which you could force pineapples. We were greeted upon our arrival by reporters and cameras. It distresses me to stand blinking at the sun; as not being a beauty, I know that my nose will always be more of a limb than a feature, and trying to look pleasant results in my teeth coming out like tombstones in the morning papers.

Left to ourselves, we went to examine the Symphony Hall, where I was to speak that night. Arriving on the stage, I stood appalled. Feeling like a midge upon a dreadnought, I looked at the largest hall I have ever seen, except the one in London erected to the sacred memory of good Prince Albert.

"This is a practical joke of the worst kind!" I exclaimed to the gentlemen in attendance, "and not for a million dollars would I insult the Boston people by making myself ridiculous here to-night. I have not been in prison, or divorced; nor have I been to the North or South Pole, or climbed mountains and Matterhorns; I have nothing wonderful to tell about, and instead of one woman shouting, 'Give me back my money – I've had enough of you,' the whole audience will rise to their feet. This is not a hall, it's a railway tunnel! I cannot see the end of it: it's made for engines or aeroplanes"; and I trembled with rage and apprehension.

"It's a concert hall, madam, built for oratorios," they replied, pointing to a vast organ decorating the wall behind me.

"No doubt drums, trumpets, or opera singers could make themselves heard, but a shrimp of a female standing alone here would make the gods laugh, and nothing will induce me to speak!"

"But, dear madam, all Boston is coming to hear you."

Mr. Horton put his arm through mine, saying soothingly, "You are tired; let us go back to the hotel."

Visibly distressed, the gentlemen of the hall assured me that men of meagre voice had lectured many times and been perfectly heard; and as I walked away I saw through the corner of my eyes that my angelic secretary was nodding to assure them that I would keep my contract.

Alone in the taxi I burst into tears, asking what I had done to be so punished; I said that the front rows would be deafened, the centre bewildered, and the balconies indignant. He assured me I had a beautiful voice, an interesting personality and a plucky nature, etc., and that I must certainly go through with it as every seat had been sold.

I dressed with streaming eyes and a scarlet nose, and in snow and silence we drove to the Symphony Hall. The platform and auditorium were crowded, and blind with fear, I walked on to the front of the stage. My chairman, Mr. Arthur Hill (Corporation Counsel of the City of Boston), in introducing me spoke with the greatest ease, and I observed that every word he said was heard; but

it was obvious from the perfection of his speech that he had addressed a thousand audiences before and this was only my second public appearance.

I stood up with my knees knocking together as I looked at the sea of expectant faces below me.

Heaven forefend that I should repeat what I said, but for one hour and twenty minutes I did the best I could; beginning with my pleasure at being in America, I continued with stories of my native land, and ended with an account of Windsor Castle and the Disarmament Conference.

No president or prime minister could have had a more intelligent, friendly, courteous and responsive audience than the people of Boston. Aching from my ankles to my temples, I bowed to their repeated cheers as, humble and happy, I retired from the stage.

Enthusiastic hearers pressed into the green room where I had sunk into a chair as immovable as the mangle. Mr. Horton, who had sat among the statues on the sky line, assured me he had heard every syllable. Eager reporters began to ask what I thought of Boston, but dumb and exhausted I bundled into my cloak. Crowds of men and women were waiting in the street, and as I motored away I gathered I had been a success.

The next day Lieutenant Governor Alvin Fuller and his wife – who were among those who had congratulated me in the green room the night before – gave us lunch and took us in their motor to the two great Boston sights: the Public Library and the Fine Arts Museum.

The Library is a magnificent building, founded in 1852, containing over two million volumes, half of which are lent out for daily use at home. The architects of the building were McKim, Mead, & White of New York, but most of the design was the work of Charles Follen McKim. The mural decorations were painted by Puvis de Chavannes, Edwin Austin Abbey, and John Singer Sargent. As my time was limited I concentrated on the works of my friend Mr. Sargent.

It would be as impossible as it would be pretentious to attempt to describe the beauty of the Sargent Hall. It represents thirty years of thought and labour, and has a majesty of design, glory of drawing, and originality of conception unequalled by anything in Europe.

The "Hand-Maid of the Lord" on the east wall, holding the Divine Child in her arms, and "Our Lady of Sorrows," which faces it, fill your heart with wonder and your eyes with tears.

In the first, the Blessed Virgin is rising from a throne with her baby in her arms. You realise in looking at this Child that He is the Mighty God and Everlasting Father; and the expression on the face of the Virgin – more than of any other Madonna that I have ever seen – convinces you that she was not only the Mother of the Counsellor upon whose shoulders the Government would fall, but the Mother of the Prince of Peace.

The Virgin in "Our Lady of Sorrows" stands upon the crescent moon behind a row of lighted candles raised in relief of white, gold and silver. Her little face with wide-set eyes looks down upon you from an elaborate silver crown set against a radiant halo of fine and illusive design, and her two beautiful hands clasp to her heart the shining swords that typify the Seven Sorrows. The dignity of her pose, the submission and pathos of her haunting eyes waken you to a new sense of the majesty of pain. I felt, as I looked up, that I was sharing a common gratitude that such subjects should have captured the genius of the greatest living artist.

We went on from the Library to the Museum, where the decorations of the dome of the rotunda, to say nothing of the exterior of the buildings, are magnificent. Here Mr. John Sargent has surpassed himself.

I have heard critics, for want of something better to say, express the opinion that he is a finer painter than artist. If they have any doubt upon the subject, let them go to Boston, and if teachable, they will learn there that Sargent is not only a rare artist, but a poet and an architect.

Before leaving Boston City I received a call from Mrs. Bancroft, an old lady of eighty, with whom I made friends. She was extremely clever, and when she said I had both grace and genius I thought her an excellent judge! She told me I looked tired, and when we said good-bye, she gave me a bunch of wonderful flowers.

We motored from Boston to Worcester in the Fullers' car, and dined with Mr. and Mrs. Charles M. Thayer, and after an excellent dinner in good company, I delivered a lecture in the private house of Mr. and Mrs. Washburn, at which there were no reporters. Having implored my fellow guests at dinner to interrupt me in the drawing room – as I had never addressed this kind of party before – we opened a sort of debate which I thoroughly enjoyed. I doubt if any English audience, unless of old friends, would have asked such clever and amusing questions, and I knew as I answered back, by the feeling of life and laughter, that it had been a success, and went to bed without remembering the New York lady who had had enough of me.

IV: UNRESPONSIVE PHILADELPHIA

IV.
UNRESPONSIVE PHILADELPHIA
SERMON ON LIFE AS A TRAINING SCHOOL – MARGOT'S ENGLISH NOT UNDERSTOOD IN PHILADELPHIA – MRS. CORNELIUS VANDERBILT'S BAL POUDRÉ – PRAISE FROM HEYWOOD BROUN

ON Sunday, the 15th of February, Mr. and Mrs. Harry White took me to St. Bartholomew's, a modern church of great beauty. Dr. Parkes, a man of authority and eloquence, preached from the fourth chapter of Galatians, verse 6:

"And because ye are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts."

I did not need to be a Scotch woman to listen to the sermon that he preached. He said that we were fellow students graduating from a great university, joined in the son-ship of Christ, and that we should cultivate a spiritual fellowship with man, since the highest personality could never develop by itself. That our names were entered at our baptism; we received our first diplomas at our confirmation; and the object and mission of the Church was to guide or coach us for the various tests that life would demand from us; and that we should always do what we could to help one another.

As I listened to the rector, knowing how easy I had found it in life to love and care for other people, I wondered how many things I had left undone, and what examination I could pass if suddenly called upon to compete. Haunted from early youth by the transitoriness and pathos of life, I was aware that it was not enough to say, "I am doing no harm," I ought to be testing myself daily, and asking what I was really achieving.

My attention having strayed from the sermon, I was glad to have it recalled by hearing Dr. Parkes say that most people preferred the jazz, the vaudeville, or the movies to the Church.

He said that he would step down for a moment into the pews and ask the pulpit why the services were conventional, monotonous and uninspiring; why the clergy gave unsuitable moral advice, warning the congregation of dangers to which they were not exposed; expressing opinions on politics which they did not share; and convincing them at the end of a tedious service that under no circumstances would they go oftener to church than they could possibly help.

"I will now return to the pulpit," he said; and I listened with close attention.

It was true, the Church was often dull; but the attitude of the congregation was wrong. They ought not to depend upon perpetual entertainment. People went to church for various reasons. Some from habit, some to set a good example, and a few with a yearning hope that they might hear something to heal their tortured minds; something to reassure them that since Jesus wept, He could not be far from those who mourned. Few men were orators, and what filled the churches were the sermons. People would tell you the service was enough, but it obviously was not; or the churches would be crowded every Sunday.

"I have no doubt," he continued, "that I could entertain you for a time; so could the choir and the fine organ, but I feel this would be wrong; it would be taking away from the meaning of the service, and the spiritual fellowship of man. Everyone ought to go to church, as otherwise the churches would cease to exist, and the most irreligious of men could hardly desire this. One day some young prophet or great disciple of Christ might come among us and find no place from where he could speak to the people, and no assemblage that he could address."

I went back to the hotel profoundly impressed by what I had heard and not in the humour to be interviewed by a Philadelphian reporter who was waiting to see me; but I found Mr. V. Hostetter both understanding and intelligent.

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The next day I went to Philadelphia. The unresponsiveness of my large audience was more than made up for by the kindness of my chairman, Mr. George Gibbs, the hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ridgeway, and the friendliness of the reporters. I doubt if my English was understood, in spite of being informed that I could be heard plainly from the gallery. Except at my first lecture – when I could not stand – I have had no difficulty in making myself heard.

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On my return to New York, after dining in bed, I joined my daughter at a *bal poudré* given by Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, a clever New York hostess who thinks nothing of entertaining a hundred and fifty people at lunch, tea or dinner.

One of the noticeable differences between fashion in England and America, is that what might appear to the uninitiated as an almost exaggerated display of hospitality, is as *chic* here as it might be thought over-done in London. American hostesses are also very particular as to precedence: who sits next to whom, or goes in first, second or third. I must confess to being remiss in these ways, and when an American lady at one of these dinners asked me if I minded my daughter, Elizabeth Bibesco, going in or out – I forget which it was – in front of me, I imagined she was joking. I disconcerted a reporter when he asked me if I knew all the British aristocracy, by saying that alas! I did not, but that my maid did.

Nothing could have been prettier than the Vanderbilt ball. I look forward to seeing the house of my kind hosts under more normal conditions, but I could see at a glance that it is not only full of rare and valuable objects, but is really striking. The reception rooms, concert hall, and ballrooms were crowded with fashion and beauty. I gazed about to see if I could find anyone I knew. My eye fell upon my daughter Elizabeth, who in her black velvet Aubrey Beardsley dress was among the prettiest women in the room.

After trying unsuccessfully to detain my beloved friend Colonel House – who hates parties – I caught sight of Mr. Balfour looking young and happy. In spite of the admiring throng by whom he was surrounded I skirmished through, and, taking him by the arm, engaged him in private conversation. Being incapable of flattery, I told him with what extraordinary ability he had represented Great Britain at the Washington Conference; how glad we all were that he had been selected; and how enchanted I was to see him. With the dazzling charm that never deserts him he asked me searching questions as to how my lectures were progressing, and implored me not to tire myself.

I answered that I was always over-tired, but said with truth that neither he nor I would ever grow old.

No one can say that Mr. Balfour does not care for power and politics, but a certain detachment has prevented him from growing old, and by what means I cannot discover, he never appears to be bored in society; it is this, I think, that keeps him young.

I know something about youth, as the Tennants are a race apart; not because we are specially clever, learned, famous, or amusing, but because we have no age. I have been told by gypsies, palmists, phrenologists and other swindlers many senseless and incompatible things, but upon two matters they all agreed. They said I would always be young enough to make love and inspire it, and that I was unmercenary and of a kindly disposition.

In these ways I resemble my father. Sleepless, irritable, impatient, and interested, he could skip and dance at the age of sixty better than most young men in their teens, and his last beautiful daughter was born when he was eighty. This is not entirely physical: it comes no doubt from vitality, but it is also a mixture of moral and intellectual temperament, and, above all things, the power to admire, without which Wordsworth says we cannot live.

After talking to Mr. Balfour, my host Mr. Vanderbilt – a man of character, who cares little for entertainments – showed me his bedroom and his library.

The morning after the ball I contracted a chill which filled me with despair. Having to lecture that afternoon (my fifth in America and second in New York), it was vital to remove the unfortunate impression that sitting down and reading about horses had created upon my first appearance. Unless my secretary cuts out and pins upon my letters press criticisms of myself, I do not look at them, and I had hardly been aware of the severity with which I had been taken to task the day after my first lecture. People are too strong and busy in New York City to notice if you are ill or not; they have paid their dollars and are not likely to listen to what bores them; they wanted a little local gossip about my husband, Mr. Lloyd George, or Princess Mary's trousseau. I did not mind the abuse as I am press-proof, but I did not want to disappoint my manager, Mr. Lee Keedick, a competent, kind man, quite unmercenary, and interested in his client's success, as much from an artistic as a business point of view; or my secretary, Mr. Horton, with whom I have contracted a lasting friendship.

Knowing that I had to speak not only that afternoon but the next night at Brooklyn, I reassured them by saying that in spite of my chill I was going to stand, walk about and amuse the audience by stories of Gladstone, Tennyson, Kitchener, politics, duels and drink. I did not add that I was so nervous that I would have to hold my head up high as, if I dropped it, I would certainly collapse.

My dear friend, Mr. Paul Cravath, in introducing me, made an admirable speech and was more than helpful and encouraging.

I wish I could remember and write down what my chairmen say of me or of my husband, but I am far too anxious to listen, and a cannon ball going off would not prevent me from struggling to remember my speech, in spite of knowing that "Ladies and Gentlemen" will be as far as my memory will take me.

When I stood up, after bowing with challenging languor, I spoke in a slow and deliberate manner which seemed as if it came from another person. I never looked at my notes until the end of the lecture, and after I sat down the audience was enthusiastic. My son-in-law, Prince Bibesco, a man of acute and artistic observation, congratulated me warmly, and speechless with exhaustion I went to bed.

The next morning my chairman sent me the following review out of the *World*: "It Seems to Me," by Heywood Broun.

"The platform manner of Margot Asquith fills us with envy. We wish we could talk as she does, casually leaning against a table. We must confess to a limitless admiration for her technique. No visiting English author in many seasons has seemed to us so entirely at home as was Mrs. Asquith yesterday afternoon on the stage of the New Amsterdam Theatre. Her utterance is crisp and clear, she is never under the necessity of digging in her heels and shouting. As her point approaches she swings into it, facing the audience square and standing straight. We admired her versatility of delivery. There ought to be many clients eager to be tutored by Mrs. Asquith in the art of public speaking."

If I could have met Mr. Broun that day my gratitude might have made me feel well, but I had a temperature and my daughter having contracted influenza, we were kept in bed and a trained nurse was sent to us by Dr. Eglee.

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On the eighth I spoke in Brooklyn, where, wrapped up in blankets, I was accompanied in the motor by my doctor. I remained in bed until the 12th, when I made my last appearance in New York. By then I had become quite fashionable, and largely thanks to Mr. Heywood Broun, I received over eighty letters a day, flowers, music, books, and poems. My daughter Elizabeth's illness took away all my joy, and had it not been for her husband and my cousin, Nan Tennant, illness and exhaustion would have tempted me to break my contract.

V: THE WHITE HOUSE AND WASHINGTON

V.
THE WHITE HOUSE AND WASHINGTON
PRESIDENT HARDING EASY TO TALK TO – MARGOT EXPLAINS ENGLISH POLITICS – CHATS WITH WOODROW WILSON – IMPRESSED BY AMBASSADOR JUSSERAND

I arrived at Washington on the 13th alone and spoke the same afternoon.

A Washington audience does not deafen you with applause, but Mr. Thomas Hard, my chairman, was so appreciative that he seemed to set the fashion to laugh and cheer and all went well.

On the following morning I went by appointment at 10.30 to see President Harding. After driving to several wrong doors at the White House I was shown into an ante-room full of press-men talking and smoking round an open fire. The President's secretary was extremely courteous, and I was not kept waiting. Ushered into Mr. Harding's fine circular room we shook hands and sat down. A large black and tan Airedale terrier sniffed round my skirts, and was ordered to sit in a chair by his master. President Harding has a large bold head with well-cut features and an honest, fearless address. He is tall, perfectly simple, and extraordinarily easy and pleasant to talk to. He told me he also had lectured and gave me an account of how lecturing had first started in America. There was a sort of club or society which began round Lake Chautauqua and spread all over the country. It was the only way that either pleasure or information could reach distant and dreary little towns inhabited by thousands of men and women who had neither the fortune or opportunity to meet famous people. While he was telling me this I looked at the big writing table in front of him. I noticed a faded photograph of an extremely pretty, refined, middle-aged woman, and a framed engraving of George Washington; on the top of a book case I observed an interesting print of Abraham Lincoln. A fire in an open grate and large windows looking out upon a garden with trees completed the room.

Our talk was interrupted by a secretary asking the President to speak on the telephone, and he left me after a courteous apology.

On his return he found me looking at the photograph on his table, and informed me that it was his mother. We spoke of Arthur Balfour and I told him how pleased my husband and all of us in England were that he had been able to go to Washington; that his quick mind, fine intellectual manners, and lack of insularity gave him an unrivalled understanding. The President responded with genuine warmth.

"I am very glad," he said, "that he attended our Conference. As you are aware, Mrs. Asquith, he was known and liked here before the Conference, and I can only say that he has added two hundred per cent to his former popularity by the patience, tact, straightforwardness and ability he showed throughout our proceedings."

He talked to me about the political situation in England, and asked when I thought there would be a general election. I told him that the Coalition Liberals were the ambitious, paying guests in a Conservative Palace (or words to that effect); that in their recent attempt to force a general election they had tried to purchase the Palace, but that to their surprise and annoyance Sir George Younger – the keeper of the Tory purse, and manager of their party – had, with a courage undreamt of by his flock, put a veto upon this; and in a polite and public letter given the Coalition Liberals notice to quit. This independent action upset the influential Downing Street press, entertained the Free Liberals, and bewildered the docile Conservatives. The latter having no Prime Minister of their own, are not

only deeply indebted to Mr. Lloyd George for all he has done for them, but are committed to his leadership by the mutual bargain of the Kaiser-coupon election.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.