

The Astonishing Lady Astor



BACK IN 'OLD VIRGINIA'
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By JOHN DICKINSON SHERMAN
THE astonishing Lady Astor! "Astonishing" is right. She is astonishing in herself. She is more astonishing in her career and positions. And she is still more astonishing by reason of her recent visit to her native land.

While this clever and vivacious lady member of the British parliament was flitting about the land where she was born, enlightening our ignorance, preaching Anglo-American "hands across the sea" and telling us we must join the League of Nations to be saved, we pretended we were being kidded by an expert. We were content to get enjoyment out of it—and let it go at that. Now that this pleasing lady Britisher has returned to the land of her adoption and conquest we are just beginning to realize how astonishing was her visit.

In consequence American statesmen, in and out of congress, are using the astonishing Lady Astor as an object lesson. And debate in congress over the League of Nations and naturalization legislation is enlivened by many a reference to Nancy, Lady Astor, born Langhorne in 1879 at Mirador, Greenwood, Virginia, U. S. A.

Take, for instance, the Shortridge naturalization bill providing for the registration and education and Americanizing of immigrants. One of the features of this bill is that it permits an American woman marrying a foreigner to retain her American citizenship. The idea is to equalize before the law the position of the American man and the American woman in this respect.

Secretary of Labor Davis "points with pride" to this bill.

Opponents of the bill "view with alarm" the citizenship provision. What's more, they point a finger at Lady Astor as a horrible example of what happens when an American woman marries a foreigner.

American women, the latter contend, sentimentally adopt the land of their husbands when they marry abroad. Certainly this is the case with Lady Astor. She admits it, at least to the extent of fifty-fifty. As a matter of fact, it is evident that she is woefully English.

Lady Astor is probably at this moment the most talked about woman in the world. Here are some of the many reasons:

She was born an American citizen and is now the wife of a viscount in the British peerage, a naturalized Englishman who was born in New York City of American parents and is immensely wealthy.

She is sure of immortality for she will go down to history as the first woman to take a seat in the British parliament, where as a member of the house of commons she practically outranks her husband, a member of the house of lords.

As a member of the house of commons she has introduced a bill to repeal the "law of coercion," which dates back to 712 A. D., which assumes that a woman is obliged to do whatever her husband directs and which just now is a topic of discussion all over England.

Moreover, Lady Astor finds time for family duties. A misguided and uninformed opponent at a political meeting undertook to heckle her—as they say in "dear ol' England, y' know"—by yelling: "Why don't you



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stay home and raise some children?"

"I've six already," replied Lady Nancy, "and I haven't quit yet."

Add to these things the incidents of her American tour—her warm reception, her clever addresses, her call upon congress, her visit to Mirador, her smart sayings, her faultless playing of her British role, and her successful missionary work!

Is it any wonder that Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt—who is pretty well known herself—introduced her at the Baltimore Pan-American Conference of Women as the "best-known woman in the world"?

And isn't she the astonishing Lady Astor?

And Lady Astor, with the intelligence of the well-born American woman, realizes how astonishing she is. She put it this way in one of her public addresses:

"I am not a person but a symbol—a sort of connecting link between the English-speaking people, a frail link perhaps, but a link that is stronger than it looks. It is a strange thing that England's first woman member of parliament should have come from England's first colony. I doubt if the first English woman to land in Virginia was less expected on these shores than the first Virginia woman to land in the house of commons was expected on that floor."

The story of Lady Astor reads like a fairy tale.

When she and Lord Astor married in 1906 she was the widow of Robert Gould Shaw. He was the oldest son of William Waldorf Astor, who was born in New York City in 1848, became a naturalized British subject in 1899 and was then engaged in spending many of his inherited millions in a frantic effort to secure a British title.

The world was startled when it was announced that the American expatriate, struggling for social recognition in England, had consented to the match. Of course everybody knows of the conquest of England by the American heiress. But here was "Young Astor" marrying an American widow, twenty-seven years of age and penniless in comparison with the Astor millions!

It was as if a fairy godmother had waved a magic wand. But this was only the beginning. The fairy godmother went right on waving her magic wand in behalf of "Young Astor's" wife.

In 1916 William Waldorf Astor was

created a peer. A year later his rank was raised from that of baron to viscount. In 1919 he died. Succession to the title threw "Young Astor" out of the house of commons into the house of lords. With the fall from power of Asquith—the principal obstacle to votes for women—came the extension of the suffrage, just in the nick of time for Lady Astor.

"I'm here because the women have the vote," said Lady Astor at the Baltimore conference. "Think what a disaster for the world if I had been hidden in a two-room cottage instead of the house of commons," she added with a laugh of mockery.

Now, as to this "first woman in parliament" business—again the magic wand of the fairy godmother is much in evidence. In the "Coupon" election of November, 1918, there were at least four important women candidates for the commons. Three of these were: Mrs. Despard, a sister of Lord French who had spent her life relieving the English poor; Mary Macarthur, leader of trade unionism for women; the redoubtable Christabel Pankhurst of militant suffrage fame. All of these women got a large vote and two of them nearly secured election.

The fourth was a lady of Irish blood, a Gore-Booth by family and by marriage the Countess Markievicz. The countess was elected. She thus beat the viscountess to it by 12 months. But the countess was Sinn Fein and refused to take her seat in parliament. A year later Lady Astor was elected—and did take her seat.

Lady Astor's "coercion law bill" is a story in itself. Briefly, it's this: The English are horse-race enthusiasts. Even King George has his racing stable and probably would give his crown to win the Epsom Derby. And everybody plays the races. The Peels—Capt. Owen Peel, twenty-eight, member of a historic English family, war veteran, and Violet Margaret Florence Jardine Peel, his young and beautiful wife, daughter of Sir Robert and Lady Jardine—got the winner of a race by telephone, back-dated a lot of betting telegrams to several bookmakers and "won" \$15,000. Some of the bookmakers paid the Peels \$11,000; the others charged fraud. Relatives of the Peels repaid the \$11,000, but the government, which runs the telegraph, prosecuted the Peels. Captain Peel was convicted and sent to prison for a year. His wife was shown to be equally guilty, having participated actively in the fraud. Nevertheless, Mr. Justice Darling instructed the jury to find Mrs. Peel not guilty and she was set at liberty.

The court ruled in accordance with the "law of coercion," which dates back to King Ina of the West Saxons, who reigned in 712; King Canute, 300 years later, enacted a similar law. This law presumes the wife to be the property of her husband and subject to his commands.

The Peel case shook England in two ways. The Peels committed the unpardonable sin in English society—cheating at cards or betting.

But that shock was mild compared to that suffered by the women when they learned that—though citizens and voters—they were still in the eyes of the law the property of their husbands and incapable of independent action. There was an outburst of protest which still continues in the press, on the platform and in social gatherings. There is "a quiver of feminine indignation" from Land's End to the Border.

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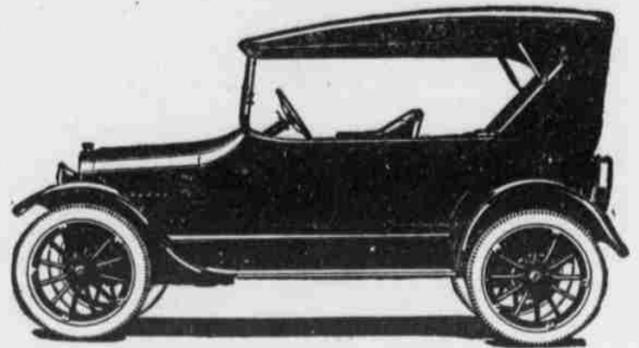
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