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WRITING AND LIVING

THE MERRY WIVES OF WESTMINSTER.
By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes. Macmillan and Co., Ltd.

THE title of this book makes on at least one reader an impression of triviality which is belied by its always graceful and sometimes glittering contents. Anecdotal it is, but hardly comic; and most of the wives of Westminster who glide through its pages are grave rather than merry, and their sedate London lives are never turned upside down, like those of the ladies of Windsor, by an eruption of Falstaffian farce.

This is the third of an autobiographical series. Mrs. Belloc Lowndes was fortunate in her connections and friendships. The sister of Hilaire Belloc, married to a man on *The Times*, she lived in Westminster among writers and politicians during that fateful 20 years preceding the first World War when the true nature of western civilisation was at last beginning to show itself. These were years of insouciant optimism for most people, but not for Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, armed by her French upbringing with an incurable suspicion of Germany, as she perambulated, insatiably gregarious, in and out of the houses where the great Liberal leaders, who could never be induced to share her forebodings, were to be met. The fine character of such men as Grey and Asquith was in some ways a misfortune for their country. (Perhaps this is what Chesterton was thinking of when he wrote, after bewailing the fate of the men who died for England, this bitter stanza—

The men who rule in England,
In stately conclave met,
Alas! alas! for England,
They have no graves as yet).

Mrs. Belloc Lowndes gives an interesting account of Lord Haldane, a widely misunderstood statesman.

A busy journalist as well as a novelist, Mrs. Belloc Lowndes was a working writer who still had enough nervous energy to run a home, bring up a family, and keep in the closest personal contact with the worlds of letters and politics. When she describes her delightful houses in Westminster, we think of them as ideal retreats from the hurry and scurry of the world which are so inimical to most authors' peace of mind. But there we reckon without her social talents, which must have been prodigious.

Her first social duty was to her fellow-writers; them she met as often as she could. There was no jealousy in her character, and she was ever generous in her appreciation of the work of others. There were few of the major figures in contemporary literature who were not known to her fairly intimately. She has fresh stories to tell of Maurice Hewlett, of Arnold Bennett, and of Henry James. In talking of Sir James Barrie she mentions incidentally his friendship with Sir Bernard Freyberg. She shows the explorer Stanley in a new light, and though her stories are usually without malice, "Elizabeth" (Countess von Arnim) is handled a little roughly, especially in that conversation which

"Elizabeth" begins "I know you don't think I am a nice woman, Marie, and I have often wondered why, as everyone else thinks I am a very nice woman."

Although she is deeply concerned with the art of writing, there is surprisingly little counsel that Mrs. Belloc Lowndes can offer to young players, but she does let slip that in her experience those who write at night die young, while those who write in the morning live to be old. Unfortunately, she names no names, so we cannot compare the quality of the work of the writers who, by design or inadvertence, shortened or lengthened their own lives by their choice of working hours. Trollope, we know, wrote in the morning. I have a feeling that Emily Brontë would write at night.

The Merry Wives of Westminster is full of good things and odd things—for instance, the astounding information that King George V always refused to learn German. The book is full, too, of a mellow benignity. Mrs. Belloc Lowndes has enjoyed her life and we enjoy it with her in retrospect. I must confess that I thought that there were rather a lot of people who were each her "dearest friends," but this is literally the way the writer thinks of them. Although she warms to her friends, Mrs. Belloc Lowndes does not view them by any means uncritically. Her sturdy impartiality extends to her husband, who, she records rather sadly, "was one of those human beings who care for very few people." Mrs. Belloc Lowndes was able to hold in affection a bewildering number of people at once, an affection evidently returned.

A WOOLGATHERING GOOD COMPANION

BRIGHT DAY. By J. B. Priestley, William Heinemann, Ltd.

THIS novel, by the device of recollection in late middle age, bridges two worlds. The insistent memories of Gregory Dawson, a successful but soured film script-writer, take him back all the way to a Yorkshire wool-broking town in the years of innocence preceding 1914. The society in that town, warm, human, without frills, cultured in everything save externals, is what our society would be like if we let it follow its natural bent, nearer anyway to a New Zealand atmosphere than are most English social groups. Mr. Priestley, as befits his original, is an expert at making his characters talk dialect. There is a business intrigue going on in a wool-broking firm. There is a lonely boy admiring the vitality and compactness of a brilliant family, and their almost uniformly charming and talented friends; an excess of virtue here perhaps, but we soon see otherwise. There is an ageing man lamenting the frustrations of the artist, whether actor or writer, in the modern film industry.

It is a little difficult to determine what Mr. Priestley intends the real theme of the book to be. If it is the contrast between what Gregory Dawson thought were the characters of the Alingtons and what they were really like, he

Dear Matron,

I think I have always wanted to be a nurse. When I was quite a little girl I used to play Hospitals with my dolls and as I look back I realise there has always been the feeling that one day I would like to be a real Nurse. So now, when your need is so great, I've decided to make the change.

It's not that I'm unhappy in the good job I have at present, it's just that — but you'll understand me Matron I'm sure, even if I can't express it properly. It's just that my present job doesn't fully satisfy me. I believe nursing will. I'll feel I'm doing something worthwhile — something that's worth the very best I can give. Please Matron, when may I come and talk it over with you?

Yours Sincerely,
Mary Jones

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