

STORY BEHIND GREAT LOVERS OF YESTERDAY

Love of Marlborough and Sarah

PROBABLY unique in the history of great men and women is the love story of John Churchill and Sarah Jennings. Great men when they love have a perhaps self-protective faculty for picking out colourless, foolish, or at best unimportant objects for their devotion. They serve as picture hooks on which greatness hangs its creative dreams and all that is required of them is that they should not let the dreams fall into disillusionment. On the occasions when two dynamic and self-sufficient temperaments come together—such as Antony and Cleopatra—the results are usually disastrous.

But John Churchill was the greatest general of his time—and perhaps of all time. At least he fought and won a series of the world's greatest battles, he inaugurated a new system of warfare, and he was never defeated. And he loved Sarah Jennings, whose headstrong, brilliant personality ruled Queen Anne herself and so, for a time, the whole English Court. By all the rules of psychology Sarah and John should have destroyed each other. Actually they were lovers from the day of their marriage to the day of his death. They were often unhappy, they were often perilously near the rocks, both in their political and private lives. As Sarah grew older her difficult and often outrageous temper was a constant threat to their unity. But Marlborough, overburdened with military cares and harassed by Court intrigues, never wavered in his ardent yet patient devotion. She remained, to the end, the mainspring of his life and genius.

John Churchill came to the disolute Court of Charles II, a poor young man, of good family and few prospects. But he was handsome, brilliant and overweeningly ambitious. Indeed by his detractors—and he had many—he was considered a cold and calculating "climber." On the other hand, the age in which he lived was not remarkable for morals of any sort, and if the accusation is true it makes it the more significant that in the teeth of his own interests and of parental authority he refused to marry the unattractive heiress allotted to him and chose the dowerless and, at that time, un-influential Sarah.

They met, as lovers should in ro-

mantic stories, at a Court Ball; (the lovely and vivacious Sarah was then seventeen years old). They fell in love at first sight—or at least from the moment they met there was no other man or woman in the world for them. True to the romantic pattern their courtship was a stormy and bitter one. Everything was against them, and it has been said that Marlborough, who



A. R. Wylie (pictured above) is Australian born of Scots parentage, but came to England when she was three, and for the past ten years has been an international commuter between England, Russia and the United States. She was nineteen when her first story was bought and printed. Since then she has done fifteen novels and over a hundred short stories and special articles. One of her novels, "A Feather in Her Hat" is groundwork for a new talking picture. Recently she has been doing a series of Russian articles for the "Saturday Evening Post" (New York).

had iron nerves and a relentless courage, showed during that period of uncertainty an almost panic-stricken terror of losing the woman for whom he felt himself destined. In a series of most touching and passionate love letters, which are quoted in his descendant's biography (Winston Churchill's "Marlborough: His Life and Times") he surrenders, as he never surrendered to an enemy on the field, "to the fan of a chit of seventeen." At last, thanks to the warm-hearted Mary of Modena, the future Queen, they were married secretly, no one knows exactly when or where. But it was a marriage that was to last through the reigns of Charles II, James II, William and

Written by
I. A. R. WYLIE

Mary, and Queen Anne. It was to withstand intrigues and the civil and foreign wars of one of the most tumultuous periods of English history. Sarah lived to see her husband in the Tower, accused of high treason and in danger of his life; she was to endure long separations from him whilst at the head of the Grand Alliance he held Europe against the armies of the resplendent Louis; she was to risk the shipwreck of their relations by her own temper. But somehow, and splendidly, they weathered through.

Certainly her temper "was of the devil." There is an authentic story of how one day, infuriated by some quarrel she had had with Marlborough, she cut off her long and beautiful hair, knowing how much he admired it, and that this was a sure way to punish him. To make certain of her effect she laid the braids in an ante-room where he would be sure to see them. But her consternation was complete when he passed them "cool enough to infuriate a saint" and from first to last took not the slightest notice of the drastic change in her appearance. But the braids mysteriously disappeared! Years after his death she discovered them, locked away among his treasures, and whenever she told the story, as she did sometimes to her closest friends, she broke down and wept. (Incidentally, there is a charming portrait of her, painted by Sir Godfrey Kneller, which shows her just after the hair-cutting episode and very woebegone.)

Sarah's part in Marlborough's life was not merely romantic. Hers was too vigorous a personality to play a passive part, and her tremendous friendship with Queen Anne, who adored and feared her (they had loved each other as children), gave Sarah a powerful influence at Court. She exerted it to the utmost and sometimes, as was inevitable, disastrously. But whatever she did was done in passionate devotion to her husband's interests and with all the force and energy of her brilliant temperament. It is not surprising

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