

AN AMERICAN GIRL AT COURT

As Told by Herself

[UNDER THE LITERARY CHAPERONAGE OF MRS. L. B. WALFORD]



LAST the great day had come! I, the daughter of a republic, was to be presented to Her Majesty, the Queen of England and Empress of India! It would be ridiculous to say my heart didn't beat; it did; it just thumped, and banged, and seemed to keep saying to me: "Remember, young woman, that

you represent a great and glorious country, and that in bowing before this woman it is your pleasure, not because she represents a great monarchy, but to you she symbolizes the finest type of womanhood, as wife, mother, and queen.

FOR weeks before I had thought of my dress, my train, my courtesy, my bouquet, and all the important belongings that go to make a woman look as she should on as great a day as this. I laughed to myself when I remembered that one of my sisters had written and suggested that a long-trained dinner dress that I possessed might be "made to do." "Made to do," indeed! A court costume must be just so; its length is three yards and a half—that is, that much of it must lie on the floor—and if it's one inch shorter or longer, the Lord Chamberlain can do something to you. I don't know exactly what it is; probably put you in the Tower. The presentation dress is always white; the material, satin, silk, brocade, or velvet, as one prefers, the petticoat, which is, after all, nothing more or less than an ordinary ball dress, being quite separate from it, for the train usually falls from the shoulders or the waist. I had rehearsed in it before the looking-glass until it had dawned on me that there was nothing in the world in the way of dress like a court train as far as being a terrible burden is concerned; happily it is only down for a few seconds, during the actual ceremony, and the rest of the time is carried about over one's arm. Gloves, fan, those most important belongings, the feathers, and the long tulle veil were lying beside my gown, and the whole thing looked like a fluffy, filmy something that seemed to have fallen down from the clouds and to have belonged to the fairies. The most important thing in the house, next to me, is a full-length mirror, and although I have practiced and practiced, I still go before it and make that awkward "bob" which is demanded by the English Court, and which is about as ugly as it very well can be. It must be very deep, and accompanying it must be a quick motion of the hand, whereby the royal hand that is before me is raised very, very gently, and my lips are bent to meet it.

A GREAT many girls have gone to dancing masters to learn just what they should do, but my chaperone insists that the girls who have shown the most ease and dignity are those who have been taught what to do by either relatives or friends. She has also told me that neither the Queen, nor any of the rest of the court, have much patience with very slowly-performed reverences, because they suggest either the parvenu or the rustic. I draw myself up with an immense amount of pride as I think of my being mistaken for a parvenu; I, who had an ancestor who signed the Declaration of Independence. For a minute I am almost tempted to let the royal family know that I did not care for an introduction to them, but then I thought it was one of those things in a lifetime that were events, and so I must go through the experience.

Before I start out I have to remember a few things. I am to take hold of the Queen's hand, I am only to touch it gently, and I am not to really press my lips upon it. Then after that I must remember to make the ten or twelve reverences to the line of princesses and princes at the Queen's left hand. I am not at all troubled about that; it's the bowing before the great, grand woman that makes my heart throb, and that causes me to almost pray to do what is right. I say to myself, "Patty, keep thinking of the goodness of the woman, and next to that of the credit you must be to your country." I do keep thinking of this until it's time for the hairdresser to come. He was engaged weeks ago, and he can't be kept waiting a moment. He is here, and I am just ready. With quick fingers he arranges my hair the pretty, soft way they are wearing it, and places the three feathers in the received way, so they stand up almost straight and are distinctly visible from the front; certainly they are not becoming. I remember the story about Mrs. Langtry, who at her presentation arranged her feathers in a becoming way rather than the approved manner, and had to go back and re-arrange them. I have a tiny face, and it does seem like such a lot overtopping it, however, but they must be seen. It is the "regulation," and I must submit like all the rest. Then my veil is arranged and my bouquet comes. It is of white lilac, lilies, azaleas and roses. My chaperone, being married, is gowned much more magnificently than I am, for "regulation" permits her to wear any form of rich material, and of any color, so her bouquet is of violets and amber orchids, to match her dress. But I—well, I must confess that I do look like the proverbial lily—I am all white, and though my chaperone has the advantage of many colors, I feel perfectly satisfied with my own immaculate looking gown. And that does give one such a supreme satisfaction! One could meet the king of the Cannibal Isles.

NOW I stand up ready to depart. The children in the house and all the maid-servants are collected to see me, and everybody says "Oh," and "Ah," and walks around me as if I were a doll on exhibition, and, indeed, I feel like one. One romantic maid gives a sigh and says, "I think as how I will go over to Ameriky, marry a rich young man there, and come over here and be interjuced to the Queen." Bless her heart! You see even the servants in England realize the advantage of being an American. Off we go to the photographer's, and before I am pictured in all my finery I have a cup of tea and a bit of something to eat, because I shall have no opportunity to get anything to eat during the day. I try to look natural, but only succeed in appearing magnificent.

Into the carriage again, and we approach the palace by the way of Marlborough House and the Long Walk, because that's a pleasanter way to go. The great bouquets on the breasts of the men on the box tell the public that we are going to a Drawing Room. A glimpse in the carriage and a sight of those hideous plumes might have announced this. When we get to the Long Walk there is a long, long time to wait, anything from an hour and a half to two hours, when we stand as still as mummies. There is nothing to do but look at the crowds who are staring at us. Suddenly the horses move one step; I have been too many balls at home not to know that the gates are open and that one carriage is unloading itself. My chaperone guesses what I think, and says, "You believe that the people are getting out of one carriage, don't you?"

"Certainly," answered I.

"Well," she said, "Buckingham Palace permits of six being drawn up before it."

A little longer and we are in front of a long, stone platform—at least it looks like that; a minute more we drop our wraps in the carriage, and alight on the doorsteps of Buckingham Palace. My chaperone, having much experience, goes ahead of me very quickly, and I delightedly trot behind. Up the broad staircase we go, and she whispers to me, "Get ready your presentation cards. One must be left with these men at the gallery." I have been systematic enough to hold my card in the same hand with my bouquet, and I drop it exactly as she does hers. Walking very quickly we come to the first room and select good seats among the rows of crimson and gold chairs arranged in a semicircle.

THE first thing that I notice is that there are very few men there. It appears that it is not the regulation thing, unless it is a bridegroom accompanying a bride, or a young soldier eager to exhibit himself in his gay uniform. A "Drawing Room" is essentially a woman's function. In the room beyond us I can see a smaller crowd beginning to collect, but a silken cord is drawn across the doorway between us. In a stage whisper I ask, "Who are they?" And my chaperone answers, "The people who have the entree, that is, the wives of officials, ambassadors and some very great people." Again I ask what the "entree" is, and I am told that the people whom I see in there very much at their ease, chatting, have the privilege of entering by a private door and of being presented to Her Majesty, or the princess holding the Drawing Room, before we are.

After awhile we are close to the silken cord; the people who were in the little room have made their reverences and gone. And soon we are part of a long procession that seems to end in a doorway far off to the right. Just now I am in front of a narrow passage leading to another doorway.

NOTICE that as each woman goes through here she turns her head; surely the Queen can't be there. I will know when my turn comes, I think, and I do. On the other side of that doorway the wall is lined with mirrors, and one wouldn't be a woman if she didn't take a last glance at herself before entering the room where the Queen of England stands.

Before I reach her I see her. I see that good, kind, sweet face that all America knows and honors, and it makes everybody else around her seem of little moment. I am a republican born and bred, but standing in the presence of Queen Victoria, brought face to face with her, I forget that, and I think that kingdoms may fall and rise, that republics may tumble to pieces, but that the great glory of a womanly woman will rule the world forever and forever. The pages let down my train, the Lord Chamberlain has taken my card, I dimly hear a voice say, "Miss Columbia for Presentation," then a small hand, once the most beautiful in the world, is raised and saluted; but I can't help it, my eyes will raise and I meet those of Victoria, Queen of England and Empress of India, and I am sure they tell her the reverence and honor I feel for her. Then I make the proper courtesies toward the line of princesses and princes at Her Majesty's left hand.

My train is quickly picked up and thrown over my arm, and the ordeal is over. Somebody tells me that I have done marvelously, and somebody who wishes to give me information, whispers that the Queen's pages attend to the trains, and that they are the sons of noblemen, who are given a holiday from school specially to attend the Drawing Room. Then I remember that I saw the beautiful Princess and how superb the Lord Chamberlain looked in his cloth of gold. Soon we are in the room where we wait for our carriage; friends are met and greeted; I gaze at the magnificent jewels and dresses, but never for a minute do I forget the kindly face of the great Queen, who has known sorrow and joy, and who, through it all, has been a royal woman.

MAYFAIR and Belgravia, Kensington and South Kensington, are all giving "Drawing Room" teas, and we go from one to the other to see the other women, and to give them a chance to look at us. Somebody tells me that my name will appear and my dress be described in to-morrow's "Presentation" list, and I intend to get as many copies as I can, mark them with blue pencil, and send them home. Because, republican though I am, a direct descendant from the Declaration of Independence, I shall always be more than proud to remember that sunny May day when the world looked bright and beautiful, and when I, with all love and respect, was presented to the Queen of England and kissed her hand within the walls of Buckingham Palace—she an English queen with her life all but before me, I, an American girl, with all my life done.