

UNKNOWN WIVES OF WELL-KNOWN MEN

*XXI—MADAME ALEXANDRE DUMAS

By LUCY H. HOOPER



HERE is probably no literary man in France, whether dramatist, critic, or poet, whose influence in the world of Parisian literature and art is as widespread and as fully recognized as is that of the younger Dumas. He is now somewhat over sixty years of age. His first great success in his career, "La Dame aux Camellias," produced at the Vaudeville, after delays and trials which came near driving the young author out of his senses, dates from 1852. Since that time he has known nothing but triumphs in his professional life.

He was already famous when he first made the acquaintance of the brilliant and beautiful woman who afterward became his wife. She was a Swede by origin, of an ancient and noble family, and her maiden name was Knoring. She was born in St. Petersburg, and her childhood and her girlhood were passed in that city. She was still very young when an alliance was formed for her with the head and representative of the Narishkine family, a race closely allied to the Imperial house of Russia, whose



MADAME DUMAS

founder long enjoyed the favor of the Empress Catherine the Great, and was created by her Viceroy of Poland. That sovereign desired to confer upon him the title of prince, but Narishkine refused the proffered honor after the style of the well-known motto of the de Rohans: "Its king I cannot be; a prince I will not condescend to be! I am a Rohan." But the descendants of the haughty Viceroy are generally called princes by courtesy.

The young Princess Narishkine soon became known throughout the Russian empire as one of the loveliest women in Europe. Her neck and shoulders were of statuesque perfection, her complexion dazzlingly fair, and her eyes, of that greenish-blue color which is so peculiar and so rare, were not only remarkable in coloring, but were large and brilliant, and singularly expressive. Her magnificent golden hair was one of the noted elements of her beauty. She joined to her personal charms those of a brilliant intellect, varied accomplishments and great force of character. Moreover, she was one of the most elegant of the noble ladies that adorned the Russian court—a great lady in the fullest acceptance of that oft-abused term.

Notwithstanding this remarkable combination of attractive qualities, the young Princess failed to find the happiness she deserved, in her early married life. Prince Narishkine soon wearied of a wife who was intellectually so much his superior, and, as he was addicted to excessive brandy drinking, active unkindness speedily followed upon passive neglect. It is said that "Ouida" drew from him the character of "Prince Zouroff," in her novel of "Moths," while his charming wife was the original of the "Princess Vera," in the same work. It is certain that in this instance the fiction and the facts bear a close resemblance to each other.

But, more fortunate than the heroine of that powerful tale, the Princess Narishkine was still young when she was left a widow with one child, a little daughter. She was living in Paris at the time of her husband's death. He left his affairs in such confusion that the inheritance of his daughter was in danger of being seriously compromised. The Princess returned to Russia, took the management of

the involved estates into her own hands, and succeeded in evolving order out of chaos, and in rescuing the imperiled fortune.

Her mission thus accomplished, she returned to Paris, and at the expiration of her period of mourning she became the wife of the most gifted French dramatist of the present generation. It is impossible to imagine a union that might be in all respects more congenial. Alexandre Dumas is not only a writer of wonderful power and originality, but he is in private life and in society one of the most charming of men. He is declared to be the most brilliant conversationalist of Paris. His verdict concerning a book, a play, or a public performer, is considered as final. He is an art connoisseur of remarkable intelligence and profundity, and in all his fine qualities, and in his tastes and pursuits as well, he has found an intelligent and appreciative companion in his wife.

This is especially the case in his work as a dramatist. Madame Alexandre Dumas always took a deep interest in dramatic art, and was, during the days of her first marriage, an amateur actress of considerable talent. We have a glimpse of her in her youth as one of the performers in private theatricals at the palace in Venice, which was the home of the Duchess de Berry (the mother of the Count de Chambord) during the later years of the exile of that Princess from France. By her very decided success the future Madame Dumas gave proof of a taste and a talent that pre-eminently fitted her for a union with the author of the most sparkling dramatic works of the present day. She appeared, for instance, at one of these soirees in the character of "Madame de Bree," a young widow, in a comedieta by Messrs. Labiche and Melesville, called "Attenuating Circumstances." Among the spectators that evening were numbered twenty-seven personages belonging to the royal or imperial families of Europe. The Duchess de Berry had caused an actual theater, capable of seating three hundred persons, to be constructed in her Venetian home, the Vendramini Palace, and gave therein a series of amateur performances of which the brilliant Russian was the acknowledged star. She was personally a great favorite with the Duchess, that ill-starred Princess who was intended by fate to become the Queen of France, and who would certainly have fulfilled her destiny had it not pleased Providence to make of the last of the Bourbon kings of France (Charles X) an absolute fool. Madame de Narishkine was then not quite twenty years of age, and was in the full bloom of her dazzling beauty.

After her second marriage the charming and courted belle retired, to a great extent, from the whirl and excitements of the gay world to devote herself to her husband, her children and her home. She was a great favorite with her famous father-in-law, and the author of "Monte Cristo" used to declare that if he needed a model for a fascinating society lady he would only have to describe his son's wife. Her second marriage was blessed with two daughters—Colette, now Madame Lipmann, and Jeannine, who was married rather more than a year ago to the Count d'Hauterive. Madame Lipmann has two little sons, in one or both of whom it is to be hoped that the hereditary genius of the Dumas family will be continued. Jeannine, who was named by her father after the heroine of one of his best known dramatic works, "The Ideas of Madame Aubray," in her abounding gaiety and high spirits, her wit and her untiring vivacity, reproduces many of the traits of her paternal grandfather, while Colette, in manners and disposition, greatly resembles her father. Neither of these young ladies have inherited any portion of their mother's loveliness.

The eldest daughter of Madame Dumas, M'le Olga de Narishkine, married soon after her introduction into society, the Marquis de Faltans. Some few years ago Madame de Faltans was attacked with measles of a malignant and dangerous type. The infection spread to her half sister, Madame Lipmann, and afterward to that lady's two little boys. Madame Dumas, who was devoted heart and soul to her children and her grandchildren, took upon herself the care of the invalids, and nursed and watched over them with untiring affection. From the anxiety and the exhausting fatigue of those long weeks she has never recovered. Her health was permanently shattered, and she no longer either receives visitors or goes out into society. She was present at the marriage of her youngest daughter, which took place at the family country-seat at Marly, but she was then visibly frail and suffering, and that was her last appearance before the gay world. She lives now in tranquil retirement in the handsome residence belonging to her husband, on the Avenue de Villiers, surrounded with every care and attention that conjugal affection and filial devotion can suggest. She passes her time in embroidering, in painting in water colors, and in perusing the best specimens of the literature of the day, for she is so accomplished a linguist that she can read and enjoy the writings of every prominent author in modern Europe. She has taken especial delight in reading the works of Ibsen and of Tolstoi in their original tongues. She has long projected the writing of a life of Alexandre Dumas, but her delicate health will not suffer her to undergo the fatigue of any prolonged effort of composition. In her youth she was an admirable musician; but she has relinquished, of late years, all exercise of that accomplishment.

Madame Alexandre Dumas is about sixty-seven years of age, being a few years the senior of her illustrious husband. Few of the great men of France have married as brilliantly, and happily as well, as did the younger Dumas. Beautiful, fascinating, gifted, possessing a large fortune, absolutely devoted to her husband and her children, the congenial companion of the great dramatist's life, the subject of our present sketch stands out on the pages of the literary and social history of France as one of the most noteworthy of the wives of that nation's celebrated men.

* In this series of pen-portraits of "Unknown Wives of Well-Known Men," commenced in the January, 1891, JOURNAL, the following, each accompanied with portrait, have been printed:

MRS. THOMAS A. EDISON	January 1891
MRS. P. T. BARNUM	February "
MRS. W. E. GLADSTONE	March "
MRS. T. DE WITT TALMAGE	April "
MRS. CHAUNCEY M. DEWEY	May "
LADY MACDONALD	June "
MRS. JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS	July "
LADY TENNYSON	August "
MRS. WILL CARLETON	September "
MRS. WILLIAM MCKINLEY	October "
MRS. MAX O'RELL	November "
THE PRINCESS BISMARCK	December "
MRS. JOHN W. SWAMAKER	January 1892
MRS. LELAND STANFORD	February "
MRS. CHARLES H. SPURGEON	March "
MRS. EUGENE FIELD	April "
MRS. JOHN J. INGALLS	May "
MADAME VICTORIE SARDOU	June "
MRS. EDWARD BELLAMY	July "
MRS. WILLIAM M. EVARTS	August "

Any of these back numbers can be had at 10 cents each by writing to the JOURNAL.