

The Lady Mordaunt Scandal



Scandal! Everyone has always loved a scandal. How the public takes vicarious pleasure in revelations of immorality or illegal skulduggery. How eagerly it loves to show outrage or anger. The more titillating the detail or higher the ‘mighty’ exposed as ‘fallen’ are, the better. But times and social mores change. Yesterday’s disgrace may be today’s norm. Like divorce. Once socially unacceptable¹, now commonplace. Yet sex has always been hot news.

Ancient scandalmongering was slow to burn, needing salacious scribes, gossips in market places or itinerant balladeers. From the late Middle Ages Gutenberg’s printing genius expedited shocking or shaming news before the modern world-wide-web’s capability for

scattering naughtiness instantly across the globe. Yet back in 1870s Britain, there was one very British Scandal which spread like wildfire and was manipulated and given 'spin' by the powerful. Intimate letters from the Prince of Wales even appeared in the New York Times. Widowed Queen Victoria had withdrawn from public life. Republican sympathies were rising. Society was especially ripe for Royal scandal. And Bertie, Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII, was asking for trouble. Cue the beautiful Harriet Mordaunt, nee Moncrieffe.

Bertie had known Harriet from childhood. Her father, Sir Thomas Moncrieffe of that ilk, was famed for informal parties at his stately Perthshire home loved by Bertie, far from Victoria's stiff Court. Harriet was the fourth of eight daughters renowned for their beauty. In 1866, at eighteen, she married thirty-year-old Sir Charles Mordaunt, 10th Baronet and MP for South Warwick and set up home in his sumptuous 72-bedroom Walton Hall designed by St Pancras architect, Gilbert Scott. They appeared initially happy and were part of the elite 'Marlborough Set' which included Albert, Prince of Wales, his wife Princess Alexandra of Denmark, Sir Randolph Churchill and the Rothschilds. But within three years the marriage had exploded into a national scandal.

Perhaps things might have been different if it had not been a bad year for salmon fishing in Norway. Sir Charles returned early from his 1868 hunting and fishing holiday to hear gossip from his servants² about his wife dining late with male guests – 'alone.' And her being seen alighting from a carriage carrying Viscount Cole, Earl of Enniskillen – 'alone.' Perhaps too, the scandal would have been avoided if little Violet had not been born with sticky eyes. And had not appeared on 28th February 1869: nine months previously, Charles was in Norway. Harriet was said to have panicked on seeing her child's infected eyes. Fearing it was syphilis and hearing rumours Lord Cole had VD, she blurted to her husband that she had lain with Viscount Cole. And Sir Frederick Johnstone. And his friend, the Prince of Wales. Much

reported in the press³ was her admission that her adultery was 'often and in open day...' Perhaps daytime sex appeared particularly salacious to Victorian sensibilities.

Sir Charles was incensed, believing Violet was not his child despite Harriet's father bringing famous Scottish Obstetrician Sir James Simpson to testify the child was undersized and premature. The child's eyesight was restored, but Charles was not assuaged. Breaking into Harriet's locked writing desk, he found letters from the Prince of Wales. He had previously ejected Bertie from Walton Hall after returning home unexpectedly to witness his wife showing off to the Prince. Charles had punished her flamboyant carriage-driving display with prancing white ponies by forcing her to witness him shooting the animals on the lawn. Now he vowed to divorce her.

In those days divorce was uncommon¹. Aristocrats such as Bertie and Charles usually took up with mistresses once they had sired the 'heir and spare' with their wives. Marriages were often of convenience to consolidate property, money or lineages. Victorian women doubtless also had affairs but were expected to appear as docile and virtuous. Victorian Law and Society was entirely chauvinistic. Men could divorce easily on proof a wife's adultery, increasingly utilising photographic evidence. Incredulous images lodged in divorce courts include fully-clothed men atop beds, occasionally in top hats¹. Yet it was 1857 before women could initiate divorce, and then only for abandonment or severe physical damage. Endless diaries and biographers of the day show that from Royalty down through society, adultery was rife, though divorce rare. Bertie, a serial philanderer, had never been challenged. However, in April 1969 Sir Charles Mordaunt petitioned for divorce citing his wife's lovers including the Prince. The Royal Court was in turmoil, Victoria incandescent. Newspapers and periodicals from the gentleman's *Pall Mall Gazette* to the sensational *Illustrated Police News* had a field day.

A great deal of literature exists ^{2,4} citing conspiracy theories regarding events thereafter. Harriet's father declared her insane which meant, in Victorian times, she could not be divorced for adultery as she was not responsible for her actions. Commitment of troublesome family females (rarely males) to asylums was fairly commonplace. Harriet had little say in the matter: no words of her testimony are on record. She had no representation in court, only her father's lawyers pressing for a lunacy verdict supported by Dr Thomas Tuke and the Prince of Wales's physician, Sir William Gull diagnosing 'puerperal mania.' Press reports relished her depiction as the 'madwoman in the attic': bingeing, starving, howling, crawling and eating carpets. Her husband maintained she was faking madness. Did she agree to embrace madness as the only way to prevent family disgrace since divorce would affect her remaining sisters' marriage prospects? Biographers are divided ². Was she mad? Or did she become mad after detention? Or become demented from syphilis? The latter seems unlikely: like Cole, she lived to ripe old age, outliving her vengeful spouse. External clandestine pressures may well have been exerted on Lord Penzance presiding in the Divorce Court. Princess Alexandra's diary⁵ alludes to political intervention from Prime Minister Gladstone and Court intrigue designed to silence Harriet. Victoria wrote disapprovingly to one daughter of Bertie's 'fast' lifestyle but made no public comment. The Establishment closed ranks.

Crowds besieged the Divorce Court. A riot broke out amongst those seeking access to the public gallery for the Hearing. Police were called in. The Prince of Wales gave evidence ⁸, taking seven minutes to deny adultery. Harriet was not present, but she was declared insane and Charles denied his divorce.

Harriet was airbrushed out of society. She spent thirty-six years locked in a series of private asylums where records, in line with contemporary custom, refer to her only by initials: HSM. Her 'insane' listing was after a time changed to 'feeble-minded.' It seems odd today that

insanity was socially more acceptable for women than divorce. Odder still that no reference was made in court of her husband's known infidelity. Surprisingly it was 1967 before English law changed and they won the right to divorce for adultery.

Charles continued petitioning the House of Lords and Courts. Eventually in 1875 he got his divorce, citing Lord Cole as Violet's father. He did not contest this, rumour suggesting under Palace duress². Charles soon re-married: a sixteen-year-old vicar's daughter whose son he made his heir. Though supporting Harriet and her daughter financially, he never acknowledged Violet. Nonetheless, she married well, becoming the 5th Marquess of Bath.

The case continued to reverberate for years with many features prescient of modern scandals. Charles profited from a book on the Court Case⁷ detailing the Prince's letters to Harriet, also leaked to the Birmingham Post and the New York Times. Charlotte Rothschild's memoirs⁹ made much reference to the Mordaunts. 'Nobody talks of anything but the Mordaunt Case which is disgusting.' She adds a joke at Harriet's expense: 'What's the difference between Sir Charles Mordaunt and his wife? Sir C went to Norway to fish salmon and Lady M stayed at home to catch Wales.'

Rosa Lewis⁵, known as the 'Duchess of Duke Street' and owner of the Marlborough set's favourite Cavendish Hotel, later questioned why Sir Charles went so public about his wife's adultery when so many turned a blind eye. Standing before Violet's portrait at Longleat, she said, 'If only certain people had not written letters and 'the dirty tyke had observed basic decencies and accepted his wife's adultery it would have been better all round- no letters, no lawyers and kiss my baby's bottom!' Certainly it would have been better for Harriet.

Times change. Social mores change. People remain the same. More than one Prince of Wales has had a mistress, but at least in the Twenty-first century divorce is considered less of a scandal than being committed to an asylum for decades.

References:

- 1 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/olympic-britain/housing-and-home-life/split-pairs>
- 2 Hamilton, Elizabeth, 1969, 'The Warwickshire Scandal'
- 3 Pall Mall, Gazette 1st March, 1875, 'Report of the Mordaunt Case'
- 4 Ridley, A, 2012, 'Bertie, A Life of Edward VII'
- 5 Battiscombe, Georgina, 1969, 'Queen Alexandra'
- 6 Masters, Anthony 1986, 'Rosa Lewis: An Exceptional Edwardian'
- 7 Mordaunt, Charles, 1875, The Lady Mordaunt Divorce Case
- 8 Illustrated Police News, No. 316. March 5, 1870. 37 x 23 cm
- 9 Weintraub, S, 2003, 'Charlotte and Lionel: A Rothschild Love Story'

The Wife



Lady Harriet Mordaunt nee Moncrieffe 1848-1906

The Husband



Sir Charles Mordaunt. 10th Bt 1836-97

The Lovers (*Cartoons from Pall Mall Gazette, 1870*)



The Prince of Wales, Edward VII
1841-1910



Sir Freddy Johnstone, 8th Bt
1841-1913



Visct Lowry Cole, 4th Earl of
Enniskillen, 1845-1924