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“One Whirl of Amusements”: Examining the Evolving Role of the Royal Mistress from Lillie Langtry to Alice Keppel

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In 1901, Henry James, the celebrated chronicler of European decadence and corruption, lamented the passing of Queen Victoria, whose reign propelled the British Empire to the height of its influence. James, however, expressed more sorrow over the ascension of Victoria’s heir, Albert Edward, whom he called that “arch vulgarian, Edward the Caresser,” than the death of the queen.¹ James fondly remembers the Queen—“She was always nice to us”—but has no kind words for her son, complaining that, “We grovel before fat Edward.”² Edward VII (1901-1910) fully earned the title “Caresser” that Henry James bestowed on him. Long before he ascended the throne, Edward’s gluttony, gambling, and extravagance were legendary. It was his frequent and scandalous affairs, however, that outraged the public, particularly the prudish queen. While Edward’s carousing is often considered the defining quality of the man who waited fifty-nine years to ascend the throne, those responsible for his reputation, his mistresses, are frequently overlooked. In particular, Edward’s first and last official royal mistresses are significant; both Lillie Langtry and Alice Keppel fully inhabited the role of royal mistress, but with far different results, each leaving a distinct mark, shifting the role of royal mistress from ornamental concubine to the position of surrogate wife.

In order to fully appreciate the nature of Lillie Langtry’s and Alice Keppel’s individual roles as royal mistress it is vital to understand the man who raised them to such heights of fame. Born November 9, 1841, the young heir, Albert Edward’s early years were spent in relentless attempts to educate the Prince of Wales according to his father, Albert’s, impossible standards. Boarding school was never considered by Victoria and Albert, as they feared the less than desired moral influence of other boys.³ As such, Edward, known as Bertie, spent a lonely childhood within

1 Theo Aronson, *The King in Love: Edward VII’s Mistresses: Lillie Langtry, Daisy Warwick, Alice Keppel and Others*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 209.

2 A.N. Wilson, *After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World*, (New York City NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 6.

3 Stanley Weintraub, *Edward the Caresser: The Playboy Prince who Became*

the constricting confines of parental protection. Despite his efforts, Albert could not mold his wayward son into an impeccably-educated and sober-minded heir. His tutors reported that he was obstinate and bad-tempered, often flying into rages and hurling whatever was at hand against the walls.⁴ Edward's carefully orchestrated education proved to be a disaster, forever distancing him from his intellectual father and his disapproving mother.

Despite The Royals' disapproval of their son's complete disregard for learning, and over-fondness for eating and foppish dress, it was his sexual initiation that would forever taint his character in their eyes.⁵ In the summer of 1861, nineteen-year-old Bertie attended a ten-week military training course near Dublin. It was Albert's hope that this experience would instill some much-needed discipline in his son's character. Bertie had always been interested in military life, most likely due to his love of uniforms, but his summer at Curragh Camp would exceed even his own expectations. It was glaringly apparent to Bertie's fellow officers that the prince had spent a sheltered childhood, and they resolved to introduce their young charge to the delights of sex. Bertie returned to his quarters one night to find Nellie Clifdon, an Irish prostitute, whom his friends had obligingly smuggled into camp.⁶ This process was repeated nightly, and Bertie became so fond of Nellie that he arranged for her to follow him to England when he left Curragh Camp to continue his studies at Cambridge.

The scandal eventually came to the attention of Bertie's parents, and Albert traveled to admonish his son, calling the affair, "The greatest pain I have ever felt in my life."⁷ Although Bertie was entirely remorseful in the face of his father's reproaches, the stain of national scandal proved to be too much for the overworked Prince Consort. Within weeks, Albert collapsed, after contracting typhoid fever, and died on December 14, 1861. Victoria blamed the shock of Bertie's sexual initiation for her husband's sudden death.⁸ She withdrew entirely from the public scene, and, for the first weeks of her widowhood could barely stand to the sight of her heir. She wrote to her daughter Vicky, "I never can or shall look at him without a shudder as you may imagine."⁹ The death of the Prince Consort would naturally have allowed Bertie opportunities to replace his father in several functions, but Victoria would not hear of it. She decided

King, (New York: The Free Press 2001), 10.

4 Ibid, 20.

5 Ibid, 101.

6 Anita Leslie, *The Marlborough House Set: An Intimate Account of the Scandalous, Romantic Escapades of Victorian England*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1973), 23-24.

7 Ibid, 24.

8 Ibid, 24.

9 Stanley Weintraub, 101.

that Bertie's weak character and moral laxity rendered her son unfit for any administrative responsibilities. These defects, she concluded, would best be curbed by marriage.

Despite his mother's good intentions, Bertie's marriage would prove to be a catastrophe. Perhaps if a candidate had been more carefully chosen, Bertie would not have spent the next 48 years spurning his dull wife for the company of other woman. A marriage had been arranged for Bertie prior to what the queen called, "That dreadful business at the Curragh."¹⁰ The candidate chosen to curb Bertie's wandering eyes was Princess Alexandra of Denmark, a shy, cold beauty, the antithesis of the women Bertie preferred. The queen was stubbornly clung to Albert's previous plans saying, "The marriage is the thing, and beloved Papa was most anxious for it."¹¹ Bertie and Alexandra, at the tender ages of 22 and 18, were married in March of 1864.

The newlywed heirs, after their honeymoon returned to enjoy the freedom that marriage promised. Bertie, no longer hampered by tutors and official watchdogs, continued to be denied any administrative responsibilities. Suddenly endowed with an income, Bertie lost no time in enjoying himself to the fullest. The royal couple took up residence in Marlborough House, which would witness of many a raucous evening over the next forty years. Bertie and Alix began to organize their own social circle consisting of other bored and high-spirited young aristocrats. The young couple, according to the queen, enjoyed themselves far too excessively. She tartly informed her son, "If you ever become King, you will find all these friends *most* inconvenient and you will have to break with them all."¹² The exploits of the "fast" Marlborough House Set soon became notorious. According to Anita Leslie, whose grandmother, Leonie Leslie and great aunt, Jennie Churchill, were first-hand observers of the Marlborough House Set:

After all the years of restraint, this glamorous young pair [Bertie and Alix] proved perfect social leaders. They would set the tone not only for England but for Europe. . . . Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, would personally dictate the code of social behaviour for the next fifty years, and it would be unique in history.¹³

Bertie's influence in the social arena was especially felt in the all-encompassing spheres of dress and decorum. The very rituals for dinner parties shifted dramatically due to the foibles of Bertie and his set. Bertie conducted his social interactions precisely the way he preferred, losing

10 Anita Leslie, 25.

11 Ibid, 25.

12 Keith Middlemas, *The Life and Times of Edward VII*, (Garden City, NY:Doubleday and Company, 1972), 69.

13 Anita Leslie, 28.

no time instituting the guidelines that would come to characterize the Edwardian dinner party. “The innovations and changes the Prince introduced sprang entirely from his own preferences. He liked to be comfortable and he hated being bored. He insisted on pretty women and entertaining men.”¹⁴ This requirement proved to be too much for the Princess of Wales. In spite of Alexandra’s regal beauty, she failed to capture Bertie’s interest. Quiet and withdrawn, she became increasingly reclusive. While his wife endured pregnancy after pregnancy, Bertie continued to engage in the activities that would define him to later generations: gluttony, gambling, and, especially, love-making.

Edward’s many affairs were conducted against the landscape of Victorian middle class morality. Victoria’s reign is often remembered as an age that demanded adherence to a strict and regulated moral code. This code especially emphasized sexual abstinence before marriage and strict expectations for sexual fidelity within wedlock.¹⁵ Also included were the spheres of gender and sexuality, though the Victorians would make little distinction between the two. During most of the 19th century, the roles of men and women were separated by a system of rigid demarcations, allowing men greater professional, educational, political, and, especially, sexual freedom. Women, however, were confined to the protection of the home, destined to be wives, mothers, socialites, and jealously guarded ornaments. Refusal to adhere to this system resulted only in social ostracism and ruin.¹⁶ It was against the backdrop of this rigid system that Lillie Langtry and Alice Keppel entertained the Prince of Wales and later the King of Britain.

Edward’s multitude of mistresses and lovers was a diverse lot. Among his collection of conquests were English aristocrats, French noblewomen, American heiresses, and leading ladies of the stage. Despite the striking commonalities of appearance, personality, and background Lillie Langtry and Alice Keppel shared, during their respective reigns as royal mistress each employed dramatically different approaches to the role. Mistresses were nothing new to royal history, but Victoria and Albert set a precedent for the morality of a British monarch, maintaining strict fidelity throughout their marriage. Thus, Edward halted the temporary standards of morality created by his parents, renewing the extra-marital traditions of his great uncles. Simultaneously, Langtry and Keppel redefined the role of royal mistress. One reverted to the age-old function, becoming yet another highly popular ornament, lauded for her defiance of social expectations. The other, eighteen years later, would expand that role to include the unprecedented duties of surrogate wife,

14 Virginia Cowles, *Edward VII and His Circle*, (London: Hamilton, 1956),133.

15 James Laver, *Manners and Morals in the Age of Optimism 1848-1914*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1967), 38.

16 Ibid, 34.

friend, lover, maternal figure, and political advisor.

Langtry was a glittering addition to Edward's life, her position purely decorative. She was lovely, witty, daring, and ambitious. It is just these qualities that defined her as a mere ornament, not considered an equal at any time during her affair with the Prince of Wales. It was not Langtry's sparkling personality that first captured Edward's attention, merely her beauty. Lillie was wildly popular long before her relationship with Edward. A shy Jersey native, Langtry became an overnight success. Shortly after arriving in London, the newly-married Mrs. Edward Langtry encountered Lord Ranelagh and his daughters, acquaintances from Jersey, and was promptly invited to several afternoon parties. Langtry maintains, "Our meeting with Lord Ranelagh completely changed the current of my life."¹⁷ At one such social gathering at the home of Lady Seabright, she encountered the man who would launch her to the attention of the public: Sir John Everett Millais. Langtry remembers: I wore a very simple black, square-cut gown . . . with no jewels – I had none – or ornaments of any kind. Very meekly I glided into the drawing room . . . and then retired shyly to a chair in a remote corner, feeling very unsmart and countrified. Fancy my surprise when I immediately became the centre of attention, and, after a few moments, I found that quite half the people in the room were bent on making my acquaintance.¹⁸

It is Millais whose acquaintance was responsible not only for Langtry's rapid rise to public awareness, but also for her life-long sobriquet: the Jersey Lily. Millais, also a Jersey native, escorted Langtry to dinner and, as she remembers, "His compelling personality made me readily consent that he should be the first painter to reproduce on canvas, what he called, the 'classic features' of his countrywoman. And so ended my first night in London society."¹⁹ This ordinary gathering dramatically altered Lillie Langtry's life. In her memoirs, she recalls the flood of invitations from complete strangers that descended on her house the following day. "A complete transformation seemed to have taken place in my life overnight. It was quite staggering, and thenceforward visitors and invitations continued to pour in daily."²⁰ This instant upgrade in Langtry's social status was due entirely to her reputation as a beauty. The timid young woman at Lady Seabright's dinner party displayed none of the quick wit and sense of fun that would later captivate friends and audiences. Not only was London society bent on making the acquaintance of the lovely Mrs. Langtry, but the leading artists of the day flocked to capitalize

17 Lillie Langtry, *The Days I Knew*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925), 37.

18 Ibid, 37-38.

19 Ibid, 39.

20 Idem.

on the public demand for mass reproduction of her face on canvas.

Langtry's serendipitous introduction to John Everett Millais at Lady Seabright's resulted in an almost immediate sitting. Thrilled to have her "classic features" captured by such a famous artist, Langtry was disappointed by his approach. "I was surprised, and certainly disappointed, to find that it was his intention to paint me in my plain black gown . . . I had hoped to be draped in classic robes or sumptuous mediaeval garments."²¹ The result was *The Jersey Lily*, in which Millais depicted Langtry standing, dressed simply and holding a small lily native to the island of Jersey. The portrait won her instant notoriety, partially due to the reputation of the artist, but mainly because of the simple grace and beauty of the model. Langtry remembers, "'The Jersey Lily' was duly exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art, hung in a favoured place, and created so much interest that it had to be roped around to preserve the portrait from injury by a crowd which constantly surged around it."²² Shortly after the completion of the *The Jersey Lily*, hasty copies were being sold by London street vendors to satisfy the appetites of the ever-insatiable, admiring public. Millais's portrait of Langtry instantly propelled her to fame. She quickly became known as the little country girl with one black dress. She was painted by Edward J. Poynter later that year as well as George Frederick Watts, who adopted Millais's method and painted Langtry in her black dress and a straw bonnet.²³ It is obvious that her popularity was as much due to the simplicity and innocence that she radiated with the aid of her shrewd painters, as much as her striking appearance.

It was no small coincidence that Langtry's meteoric rise to prominence coincided with another historic development: the advent of photography. "Already in 1837, the invention of Nicephore Niepce, taken up by Daguerre, made it possible to dispense with lithography and other means of reproduction and to offer the public a picture taken from life."²⁴ Although photography had been in use for decades, by 1878, the year of Langtry's introduction into London society, it had shifted its direction. Rather than merely being used to document important events or to capture formal portraits, this newest form of media began to circulate photographs of what were called Professional Beauties. The P.B.s were usually noblewomen who allowed pictures of themselves in various poses to be sold to the general public. Langtry clearly recalls the phenomenon: Photography was now making great strides, and pictures of well-known people had begun to be exhibited for sale . . . They [The P.B.s] were portrayed in every imaginable pose. Anything the ingenuity of the camera-

21 Ibid, 51.

22 Ibid, 53.

23 Ibid, 55.

24 Laver James, 61.

man could devise to produce an original or startling effect was utilised with more or less happy results. Some smothered in furs to brave photographic snowstorms; some sat in swings; some lolled dreamily hammocks; others carried huge bunches of flowers . . . and one was actually reproduced gazing at a dead fish!²⁵

Thus photography made its debut as the most effective tool for contributing to the continuing cultural discourse that media had yet introduced. The P.B.s and their pictures are significant for several reasons. One of the most obvious is the sudden circulation of real rather than contrived representations of the female body. These representations depicted women in any number of poses, ranging from coy to seductive, usually in shots of the entire body. What formerly was considered scandalous and crass was now the object of a nationwide craze, demanded by a public long restricted from anything hinting of scandal. The photographs of the P.B.s represented to the public the average well-to-do woman, who was admired solely for her beauty and daring, and rather than receiving ostracism for her brashness, was applauded and adored.²⁶ Hence the subliminal messages promoted by these photographs were instrumental in creating more accepting and even approving middle class attitudes towards morality. Thus the seemingly insignificant photographs of costumed women became a transmitter via media of cultural values previously not allowed by conservative publications.

Also, these photographs allowed the middle class a glimpse into the decadent and privileged world of the nobility that had previously been distant and aloof. The vast majority of the Professional Beauties were aristocrats. Langtry names several of the most memorable Beauties, who included well-known noblewomen, such as Lady Dudley, Mrs Cornwallis-West, the Duchess of Leinster, the Duchess of Rutland, and the American Minnie Stevens.²⁷ The likenesses of the P.B.s were equally popular among the upper and middle classes, and sought after by members of both sexes. The P.B.s created a more personable and approachable nobility. With the aid of photography, now members of the greatest families in Britain could be identified as ordinary faces.²⁸ As their faces and figures came under greater scrutiny, so did their personal lives, including their cavalier attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Almost imperceptibly, middle class Victorian values, that had for so long defined the nation, began shifting to mirror those of their new role models. Rather than wishing to imitate the formal and prudish queen, much of the middle class was preoccupied with following the scandalous actions of their monarch-to-be and his circle of pleasure-seeking friends. With the

25 Lillie Langtry, 42, 47.

26 Ibid, 42-48

27 Ibid, 47-49.

28 Ibid, 44-50.

advent of photography, much more than pictures of captivating women was being circulated to the public. The values of the upper classes, and especially Edward, began to filter down to the masses, altering forever the Victorian cultural constructions of gender, sexuality, and class division in the ever onward march of cultural discourse.

With the demand for beauties to be photographed, it is not surprising that Langtry was soon requested as a model, her reputation as Millais's "Jersey Lily" preceding her. Thus she popularity, though perhaps initiated by the paintbrushes of Millais and Poynter, was elevated to its zenith by her career as a Professional Beauty. Langtry boasted, "The photographers, one and all, besought me to sit." Ironically, she recalls her own impressions of the stylish rage long before she joined their ranks: I had occasionally stood and studied photographs of the recognised beauty, Lady Dudley, which had found their way into the little stationer's shop of St. Heliers in my quiet Island, and I sometimes wondered what it must be like to be such a great and fashionable beauty.²⁹

Langtry was quickly added to the myriad of Beauties, but her photographs induced a fascination not only with her face, but also her personal life. Soon, her photographs were being mass distributed, and the widespread likenesses brought some financial contribution to the modest income of the Langtry household.³⁰ Despite this welcome relief, she did not hesitate to complain about the accompanying annoyances of fame: "They [the pictures] made the public so familiar with my features that wherever I went – to theatres, picture-galleries, shops – I was actually mobbed. Thus the photographs gave fresh stimulus to a condition which I had unconsciously created."³¹ With the aid of photography, Langtry's face was seen in shops all over London and those unfortunate enough to resemble her were chased through the streets.³² Langtry recalls London's sudden mass hysteria in her memoir: "It was very embarrassing, and it had come about so suddenly that I was bewildered."³³ The extent of her influence is evident from the reports that even sedate dowagers clambered onto chairs at balls to catch a glimpse of Mrs Langtry.³⁴ The craze for Langtry's likeness was not limited to the general public and the nobility; it even infiltrated the royal family. Long before Bertie met the charming Jersey Lily, his brother, Prince Leopold was an admirer. Langtry records that the prince was a frequent guest in artists' studios when she was being sketched. One finished portrait of Langtry's profile surrounded by faint lilies was hung by the admiring prince over his bed

29 Ibid, 45.

30 Theo Aronson, 47.

31 Lillie Langtry, 42.

32 Ibid, 43-44.

33 Ibid, 43.

34 Theo Aronson, 45.

in Buckingham Palace. The sketch retained its prominent location until one day the disapproving queen disposed of it, climbing on a chair to remove the offending portrait herself.³⁵ Langtry's charm and wit, however, were not fully displayed until her affair with the Prince of Wales. Her photographs soon found their way into the Paris press, and the readers of American newspapers soon became as familiar as the British public with her features. Within a year of her discovery at Lady Seabright's party, she had become the most successful of all the Professional Beauties in London.

Not only were Langtry portraits and photographs demanded and adored, her dress and manners were subjected to intense scrutiny and meticulously imitated. An unparalleled example of her ability to influence fashion is the Lily Torque. Langtry, ever the adventurer, one day dismissed the acceptable millinery and wound her head with a swath of velvet and crowned it with a feather. Overnight it became a fashion craze, and by morning no milliner's shop in London dared to open without The Langtry Torque proudly displayed in its windows.³⁶ The Langtry Torque was quickly followed by the Langtry shoes.³⁷ The flamboyant headdress would eventually adorn the Jersey Lily Knot, a hair arrangement modeled after Langtry's own loose style.³⁸ The daring, pink gown she donned for the Ascot races instantly became the new favorite and that shade of pink in high demand. This fanaticism became routine and expected from the hysteria that Langtry dubbed, "A craze which was one of the silliest that ever attacked Englishwomen."³⁹ From the intense hysteria and mobs of admirers, it is easy to understand how Bertie's interest in the public's new darling could not help but to be piqued. Thus it is undoubtedly Langtry's reputation as a great beauty, spread far and wide with the aid of the Royal Academy's finest students and many clever photographers, which first prompted the Prince of Wales to request an introduction to the woman whom Millais claimed had no equal.⁴⁰

In addition to Langtry's famous beauty, Bertie was captivated by her spirit and wit. She is recorded to have mischievously dropped ice down the back of her dignified royal lover, which distinctly cooled his affection. Langtry denied the story, but several eyewitnesses recorded it, and soon the tale was repeated all over London.⁴¹ Although Bertie enjoyed her high jinks and bursts of spontaneity, he was a strict observer of protocol and deplored bad manners. Langtry's vivacity and good sense

35 Lillie Langtry, 58.

36 Noel B.Gerson, *Because I Loved Him: The Life and Loves of Lillie Langtry*, (New York City, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1971), 40.

37 Lillie Langtry, 43.

38 Noel B.Gerson, 40.

39 Lillie Langtry, 48.

40 Theo Aronson, 44.

41 *Ibid.*, 47.

of fun, at first entertained the king, who had spent so much of his life surrounded by dour and disapproving authority figures, but eventually, it became a source of annoyance to him.⁴²

Ultimately, it was Langtry's high spirits and lack of restraint that ended the affair. In early 1880, Langtry began a simultaneous relationship with Louis, Prince of Battenberg which would culminate before the year was out.⁴³ This in itself was not enough for Edward to abandon her. But the combined forces of the Prince of Battenberg and Sarah Bernhardt proved too much for Langtry. Sarah Bernhardt, a famous actress and predecessor of the "vamp," managed to entertain Edward as his mistress was enjoying the attention of her new lover. Ultimately Bertie, who for all his defiance of Victorian morality was a strict observer of protocol, grew tired of Langtry's unpredictable actions. Aside from the embarrassing ice incident, she once served tea to the prince and, in full view of his wife and daughters, pressed her lips to the rim of the cup before handing it to Edward. The prince, highly indignant, immediately set it down, demanded another one and strode away without speaking another word to her.⁴⁴ What sealed Langtry's fate, however, was her pregnancy. It was obvious to the public that Edward Langtry's frequent "fishing trips" prevented him from being responsible for his wife's expanding waistline. Her extravagance and recklessness had caught up to her. "The Prince of Wales was losing interest in her; society was beginning to cold-shoulder her; she was five months pregnant by Prince Louis who had deserted her; even her husband had all but disappeared."⁴⁵ Langtry retreated to Jersey and never returned to the same glorified and adored position she had held in London. Her removal to provincial Jersey was the subject of much discussion. "Mr and Mrs Langtry have given up their London residence, and for the present Mrs Langtry remains in Jersey," the *New York Times* remarked, and continued by asking the question on everyone's lips: "Is beauty deposed, or has beauty abdicated?"⁴⁶ Langtry, although temporarily deposed, would return, yet not as the adored Professional Beauty. She returned as a working woman and gained a following nearly as devoted to her as before, though the shine of innocence had been tarnished. Langtry, not surprisingly, took to the stage, and would take London and eventually America by storm with her humor and beauty. The woman who claimed in an 1889 interview with the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "Oh, my tastes always accommodate themselves to surrounding circumstances. I can live happily in the greatest luxury or with perfect plainness" would never be forced

42 Idem.

43 Ibid, 90.

44 Ibid, 87.

45 Ibid, 91.

46 Idem.

to because of her ingenuity and the sheer force of her personality.⁴⁷ Despite her wild popularity as the mistress of the Prince of Wales, Langtry was not an original. Her beauty was arresting, her personality amusing and unique, but she was neither innovative nor compelling in her role as the heir's mistress. Those qualities would be left to her successor, Alice Keppel, who through her discretion would manage to avoid the scandal that Langtry seemed to attract, and hold Edward's attention and admiration for the final years of his life. Langtry is now remembered as an actress and a great personality. The qualities that first captured the fickle attention of the Prince of Wales are also those that ensured her downfall.⁴⁸

In sharp contrast to the short-lived, high-profile romance between the Prince of Wales and his amusing and beautiful trinket, is the relationship between Bertie and Keppel. The distance between Edward's affair with Langtry and his relationship with Keppel spanned eighteen years. In those 18 years, the prince had paid court to many women, but none like Keppel. When the Prince met the twenty-nine year old Mrs George Keppel in 1898, he was 57 years old, and his interest in Mrs Keppel is a fascinating indication of his age.⁴⁹ His mother ailing, Bertie was suddenly facing the responsibilities he had spent his entire existence waiting for. Keppel was unlike any woman he had previously been attracted to. She was beautiful, to be sure. Edward would have demanded no less of any of his lovers. She most likely was the only mistress Edward ever took who had affection for him equal to his for her.⁵⁰ In short, she was his first and only mature, romantic relationship. Keppel combined the roles of wife, mother, friend, lover, and political advisor to create an entirely new type of royal mistress. There was a partnership in which Edward acknowledged her equality with him. Edward's desire to share the final twelve years of his life with Keppel is a testament, not only to her discretion and astute capabilities, but also to Edward's affection and dependence on her.

Perhaps most fascinating about Edward's affair with Keppel, are the strides he took to create a replacement family with her assuming the position of surrogate wife. Although Edward had traveled with nearly all his mistresses, he had not involved himself with their families and not always excluded his wife and various other friends. Edward's relationship with Keppel is significant as she was not only married but had two daughters at the time of her affair with the prince. His children grown

47 "Lillie Langtry," in *The Norton Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Sylvester (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996),

97.

48 Theo Aronson, 87.

49 Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Edward VII's Last Loves: Alice Keppel and Agnes Keyser*, (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1998), 61.

50 *Ibid*, 72.

and his wife increasingly secluded at Sandringham, Edward lost no time in developing the intimate family he had always lacked. Keppel's daughter, Sonia, recalls Edward's casual calls to the Keppel household: Sometimes King Edward . . . came to tea with Mamma On such occasions, he and I devised a fascinating game. With a fine disregard for the condition of his trouser, he would lend me his leg, on which I used to start two bits of bread and butter (butter side down) Then bets of a penny were made Sometimes he won, sometimes I did. Although the owner of a Derby winner, Kingy's enthusiasm seemed delightfully unaffected by the quality of his bets.⁵¹

Bertie's marked affection for Keppel's daughters reveals not only the difference in his affair with her but also the effects of age. Time had not dulled his appreciation of beautiful women or made him any less interested in gambling and gossip. Rather, the fact that he chose to invest himself in one woman and even her family for the last 12 years of his life speaks as much to his desire to create a more stable and comfortable environment as to Keppel's ability to hold his attention. Bertie left no record of his affection for her children, but their warm memories of him firmly establish his attachment. "In my life, Kingy filled the place of an accepted, kind, uncle, of whom I was much less in awe than I was of my Uncle Harry," Sonia Keppel states, "Kingy's advent had always meant fun to me."⁵² Not only did Bertie establish himself as some sort of benevolent father-figure to Sonia and Violet, her daughters, but the position that Keppel occupied was never disputed to be any other than that of a wife.

Unlike her predecessor, Lillie Langtry, few portraits or photographs of Keppel exist. This fact alone is a testament to her discretion. While likenesses of Langtry's face were being sold in every shop window in London in 1878, there was no such craze during Keppel's twelve year installment as mistress. There is, however, one photograph that reveals her desire to make a deliberate statement. Rather than carelessly flaunting her position, as Langtry had done 18 years earlier, Keppel was careful to craft a faultless image of herself as a loving wife and devoted mother. One particular photograph published on the September 1899 edition of *Country Life* perfectly captured the image that she was carefully molding. The photograph reveals Keppel seated next to a window with an infant Violet in her lap. The picture is one of laudable domesticity. Violet gazes trustingly up into her mother's lovely face, one arm wrapped around her neck, her chubby, bare legs protruding from under her frilly skirt. Keppel is bent toward towards her daughter as though whispering secrets to her. The entire scene projects an undeniable sense of devoted maternal love.⁵³

51 Sonia Keppel, *Edwardian Daughter*, (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1958), 23.

52 Ibid, 52.

53 Ibid, 49.

This photograph taken about the time Keppel began her affair with the king would have been intended to establish her as an upholder of traditional values as a decorous and attentive mother. However, upon closer inspection, it is evident that the scene was carefully contrived to send a specific message. Keppel's clothing in this photograph is telling. Her Worth gown, composed of yards of intricate lace and decorated with pearls, is no nursery playtime garb. "The intimacy is contrived. Such clothes were never meant for cuddling a child. She is about to put her down and pack her off with nanny."⁵⁴ This photograph was no family snapshot. It was created with deliberate purpose and that was to dispel any qualms as to Mrs Keppel's willingness to adhere to social mores. This is especially fascinating in light of the fact that George Keppel was questioned as Violet's father.⁵⁵ Her role as king's mistress could be overlooked, but her rejection of hearth and home would have been a far greater scandal.

The activity that established Keppel and her daughters as a second family to the aging king was their annual early spring holidays to Biarritz, France. Leaving behind their respective spouses, Edward and Alice escaped the pressures and responsibilities of London and were free to merely enjoy each other and her daughters. Those few short weeks every spring were the sole occasion when, "Alice Keppel was Queen."⁵⁶ It was in Biarritz that the king's health improved, being far removed from the smog of London, and he would revel in the French cuisine he so admired. Biarritz offered the simplicity and gaiety that Edward craved and while there he walked unrecognized and picnicked with Alice, Violet, and Sonia. Little Sonia remembers:

Kingy liked to think of these as impromptu parties. . . . Much of Kingy's enjoyment of these picnics was based on his supposed anonymity and, delightedly, he would respond to an assumed in his deep, unmistakable voice, unaware that most of the crown was playing up to him.⁵⁷

It was in Biarritz that the king amused himself with his make-believe family, and, ironically, it was in Biarritz he would catch the cold that would end his life.⁵⁸

Unlike any other of Edward's many lovers, Keppel involved herself in the political realm. Not naturally inclined to the dull business of politics, she involved herself solely in order to please Edward. Her influence in this sphere is not definitely established. However, Keppel's biographer, Raymond Lamont-Brown maintains, "Alice's dealings with

54 Ibid, 49.

55 Ibid, 48.

56 Theo Aronson, 227.

57 Sonia Keppel, 45-46.

58 Theo Aronson, 230-233.

the major political figures of the day warrant more than just a surface examination. Although it seems that she played no role in party politics. Her position in royal circles brought her much more than a political party could.”⁵⁹ Keppel’s influence was not highly visible; rather she employed her strengths—discretion, tact, and social savvy—behind the prestigious scenes her royal lover occupied. Her one obvious political contribution to the political arena is her role as a recognized Liberal hostess, acting as a go-between for Edward and noted Liberals. She put her skills as a gifted conversationalist and charming hostess to good use to advance Bertie’s causes. What impact she had cannot be determined, but it is obvious that Bertie relied heavily on Keppel and her advice. Lamont-Brown claims: He completely trusted Alice and through her . . . he could make his political opinions known. A message to Alice was enough to get a controversial subject casually dropped into conversation to gauge the effect, which was then reported back to the king. The fact that the king’s style began to be appreciated as effective was due in part to Alice’s expertise as a discreet messenger. Consequently Alice was privy to a wider range of secrets than she ever admitted.⁶⁰

Perhaps most significant was the calming influence Keppel exerted over her temperamental lover. Lamont-Brown remarks, “Sometimes her wit and diplomacy smoothed situations which would have caused her royal lover to explode with the irascibility for which he was famous.”⁶¹ Keppel was no fool, and as such, she utilized her gifts to advance a political agenda, not prompted by her own political interest or ambition, but merely out of regard for her lover.

Whatever her political role, Keppel never alluded to it, and shied discreetly away from credit for any political victory. Her cunning prevented her from mentioning her involvement even to those closest to her and always denied that she had any knowledge of politics. Her attempts at modesty were foiled by Prime Minister Asquith and his wife. “In a letter to her, Asquith once thanked her for her ‘wise councils’” obviously intimating that Keppel held private political discussion with the most prominent politicians of the day.⁶² Most of all, Keppel disliked it when any mention of her political association to the king was made in public. Years later, when Margaret Asquith’s memoir was published in 1933, Keppel was irritated by her mention of the king’s dependence on her as a political advisor.⁶³ Despite her level of involvement, Keppel never used her position to advance her own interests or those of her favorites. She

59 Raymond Lamont-Brown, 116.

60 Ibid, 117.

61 Ibid, 2.

62 Ibid, 117.

63 Ibid, 118.

was renowned for her ability to persuade the king, and there would have been no barrier to her using her persuasive powers in the political sphere except for her own shrewd judgment that cautioned her to remain as politically invisible as possible. "Persuasion," recalls her daughter, Violet, "was Mama's strong suit. She could have persuaded Florence Nightingale to become a ballet dancer."⁶⁴ The Austro-Hungarian ambassador warmly recalls Keppel's prudent approach: "She never utilized her knowledge to her own advantage, or that of her friends . . . It would have been difficult to find any other lady who would have filled the part of friend to King Edward with the same loyalty and discretion."⁶⁵ This role of political confidante and go-between was not attempted by any of Edward's other mistresses, nor is it likely that he would ever have employed the capricious and sometimes reckless Langtry in the same capacities as he did Keppel. The qualities of wit, discretion, and cunning, which first attracted the Prince of Wales to the lovely Mrs Keppel, later made her politically indispensable to the King of England.

Not only did she inhabit the role of surrogate wife and political confidante, Keppel also took up the mantle of maternal figure in the life of the 57-year-old man she entertained. There is no record of Langtry ever displaying a maternal regard for her royal lover, but Keppel's biographies are rife with examples of her concern for the aging king. Her maternal attitude and comforting aura are qualities not actively displayed by Edward's other amours. These affirming and accepting characteristics displayed by Keppel were welcomed by a man who had not only never found them in his many affairs but who had also been deprived of affection and approval from his stern, disapproving mother.

Keppel's maternal inclinations were demonstrated on several occasions when she voiced her fear of assassination attempts on Edward's life. In particular she told the Marquise de Soveral she was concerned about the king's sojourns on the continent. An assassination attempt had been made in Brussels in April 1900, leaving a shaken but unharmed Edward, who worried that Keppel would hear of the incident and be anxious. When the couple ventured out in public, always incognito, she was tense and wary and would not relax until she had directed Bertie back to safety. The most amusing example of her constant paranoia over Edward's safety was when the couple was dining in Saint-Cloud, and Keppel spying a gentlemen in the restaurant who had what she called a "criminal face" became increasingly insistent that something be done to remove him. Keppel was nearly hysterical, until the head of the French police assured her that at every table sat several policemen to guard the king, one

64 Diana Souami, *Mrs Keppel and Her Daughter*, (St Martin's Press: New York, 1996), 69.

65 Raymond Lamont-Brown, 116.

of whom was the man with the criminal face.⁶⁶ Her anxiety for the king, though often a source of annoyance to him, speaks to her fierce protective nature and maternal concern for her lover.

Another prime example of Keppel's maternal feelings toward her lover is her frequent worries over his health. It was common knowledge that the king smoked far too much, suffered from constant coughing, frequently tripped, and was an incorrigible glutton. No one was more aware of these faults than his mistress. "Combined with her love for the Prince of Wales, Alice had deep maternal feelings toward him and as her love grew so did her worries about his health."⁶⁷ Although Keppel was renowned for her persuasive abilities, her attempts to separate the king from his smoking and massive meals were in vain. Her concerns are indicated in her letter to Marquis de Soveral shortly after Edward suffered from a slip and fall: "I want you to try and get the King to see a proper doctor about his knee . . . do what you can with your famous tact and, of course, don't tell anyone *I* wrote to you."⁶⁸

Keppel's directions for the king's health would be ignored until his death. In the winter of 1910, it became obvious that the king's health was declining. Edward suffered more than usual from his frequent coughing bouts. Keppel, always worried, attempted to persuade him to be away from the smog of London as often as he could, but he put up his usual resistance. The king contracted a severe cold, but refused to let it interfere with his social calendar. The king rejected advice to cancel his annual outing to Biarritz with Keppel. Once there, she wrote to the Marquis de Soveral, "The King's cold is so bad that he can't dine out, but he wants us all to dine with him . . . I am quite worried . . . and have sent for the nurse."⁶⁹ The king vacationed in Biarritz for nearly seven weeks, ignoring all protests about his health. After arriving in England, he was confined to Buckingham Palace and never left again. On May 6, the king lapsed into a coma and never awoke.⁷⁰

In her memoir, *The Days I Knew*, Lillie Langtry made no mention of the king's death. She blithely describes her adventures in America, her soaring popularity, and her many stage appearances. However, she failed to mention the death of not only the King of England, but the man who had plucked the Jersey Lily from London society and put world recognition within the grasp of her beautiful hands. Alice Keppel, who, in accordance with her legendary discretion, left no memoirs or diaries of any kind, was devastated. Her reaction was so dramatic that it left an indelible impression in young Sonia's head: "We were told that Mamma

66 Ibid, 82-83.

67 Ibid, 72.

68 Ibid, 74.

69 Theo Aronson, 250.

70 Raymond Lamont-Brown, 129.

was in bed and, when we were escorted along to her room, Mrs James barred our way. We went up to her bed and she turned and looked at us blankly, and without recognition, and rather resentfully, as though we were unwelcome intruders.”⁷¹ This reaction terrified Sonia who took her troubles to her sympathetic father. When asked why the king’s death meant so much, George Keppel, the ever-gracious, cuckolded husband, answered, “Nothing will ever be quite the same again. Because Kingy was such a wonderful man.”⁷² Keppel’s attachment to the man who had been her lover for twelve years is demonstrated by her deep mourning, which resembled the loss of a long-time spouse rather than a lover. In November 1910, she abandoned London, the city where she had unofficially reigned as consort, for the solitude of the continent. She claimed it was for her daughters’ educations, though, in reality, it was to escape the sudden reversal of her life. She was simply the charming and beautiful Mrs Keppel once more.

Henry James, the dour American author who had mourned the passing of Queen Victoria, remained surprisingly silent on the subject of her son’s demise nine years later, neglecting to applaud the death of the man he had scornfully dubbed “Edward the Caresser.” In 1901, facing the end of the Victorian Age, James confided, “I mourn the safe and motherly old middle-class queen, who held the nation warm under the fold of her big, hideous, Scotch-plaid shawl . . . I fear her death much more than I should have expected; she was a sustaining symbol—the wild waters are upon us now.”⁷³ The “wild waters” he referred no doubt were the ascension of Edward and his policies of hedonism. While Henry James was among those who viewed Edward and his companions as nothing more than a society of reckless womanizers, Edward’s influence undeniably reached further than merely the boudoir.

The bulk of Edward VII’s influence lies not in his political success, administrative abilities, or his congenial relationship with Parliament. Rather his impact is felt in the arena of manners, mores, and cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. Although the pleasure-loving, carefree prince initially had no intention of dramatically altering these carefully defined cultural constructions, he was ultimately instrumental in paving the way for a more gradual blending of these roles, allowing the women he favored with his attention greater independence and sexual freedom in the arena of extra-marital relationships. Often dismissed as a failed husband and extravagant playboy prince, Edward was responsible for igniting a counter-cultural revolution that defied the social conventions of the day, earning him the enmity of the Queen and Parliament, yet winning the applause of later generations. When Queen Victoria

71 Sonia Keppel, 53.

72 Ibid, 54.

73 A N Wilson, 6.

lamented that her son “spends his life in one whirl of amusements,”⁷⁴ she had little idea that Edward’s impact would be so lasting.

Yet these subtle social and cultural shifts would have been impossible without the aid of Edward’s mistresses. Against the vast panorama of Edward VII’s romantic entanglements, Lillie Langtry and Alice Keppel stand apart from the multitude of lovely faces. The first and last mistresses of a king who would have many, Langtry and Keppel accomplished more than simply setting standards for fashion and gracing the canvases of renowned painters. These two women, during their respective reigns as Bertie’s companion, witnessed three decades (1878-1910) of dynamic change. Langtry’s meteoric rise to fame was aided by the advent of photography, allowing her to become an overnight celebrity and fashion icon. The same media explosion that permitted Lillie’s image to be sold on street corners, would two decades later allow casual photographs of Bertie and Alice vacationing together to be captured. The birth of photography as a major form of media also contributed to the subtle shift in perceptions of gender roles. The circulation of these photographs allowed a glimpse inside the world of sexually-aware and independent women, who neither denied nor flaunted the fact that they were the mistresses of the King of Britain.

The eighteen years separating the respective reigns of the two women also marked a distinct shift in the role of the royal mistress. From Lillie Langtry, who occupied the age-old position of lively and entertaining courtesan, to Alice Keppel who realized the potential of the royal mistress’s role outside the boudoir, both women left their unmistakable marks on Edward the Caresser’s life and reign. In addition to enhancing the personal life of the man who “Preferred men to books and women to either”, these two women paved the way for later royal mistresses to ascend to even greater heights.⁷⁵ In particular, Alice Keppel, who though she set a precedent for the influence of the royal mistress, was still clever enough to understand the limits of her role. Years later, upon hearing of Edward VIII’s decision to marry his mistress, Wallis Simpson, she tartly remarked, “Things were done better in my day.”⁷⁶ Lillie Langtry and Alice Keppel, though each implanted their unmistakable mark on the role of royal mistress, understood the limits of their role that needed to be stretched and the limits that would be fatal to stretch. This shrewd approach is what allowed Langtry and Keppel to remain so admired and beloved by a society who would later reject Wallis Simpson for her inability to respect the boundaries that her predecessors had clearly understood.

74 Keith Middlemas, 69.

75 Keith Middlemas, 75.

76 Raymond Lamont-Brown, 182.

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