Queen Victoria's Remarkable John Brown

Her Majesty Smiles at Gossip

By E. E. P. TISDALL
(Reprinted by arrangement with the London Express.)

JUST when all the tongues in the land were wagging about John Brown, Punch, that inveterate leg-puller, put his wicked tongue in his cheek and mocked at the scandalmongers and their tittle-tattle.

In the July 7 issue in 1866 appeared:

COURT CIRCULAR

Balmoral, Tuesday.

Mr. John Brown walked on the slopes. He subsequently partook of a haggis.

In the evening Mr. John Brown was pleased to listen to a bagpipe.

Mr. John Brown retired early.

Admit that it was very impertinent and very daring to issue under the heading of "Court Circular" the doings of a ghillie raised to be an upper servant, but then Punch is Punch and was even more so in 1866 than in 1937. It may truly have been more a gibe at the gossip of the day which revolved around John Brown than an indication of any disrespectful feeling toward the queen.

The paragraph might have been forgotten after it had lived a week or two as a clubroom jest, but unfortunately it was not.

We cannot pretend to know if the queen saw Punch, or what she said if she did. But the story went the rounds that she did, and was greatly amused! The story also runs that John Brown saw that paragraph and exploded with rage.

He refused to dismiss it with a laugh, there was a regular row, and he made such a pother about it that he was threatened with dismissal from the royal service.

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The report of Brown's rage reached the ears of the correspondent of the John o' Groat's Journal, a Scot with a pawky sense of humor, who gleefully sent all the news northward in his "London Letter."

Then the Elgin Courant, which circulated in the Balmoral district, got hold of the story and dished it up with the sauce of John Brown's whisky drinking. The Courant (August, 1866) let itself go without restraint and published:

"THE GREAT COURT FAVORITE

"The London correspondent of the John o' Groat's Journal says:

"'I suppose all my readers have heard of the great court favorite, John Brown. His dismissal some weeks ago was generally talked about at the time, and I observe that the fact has now found its way into print, coupled with the suggestion of John Brown's probable restoration to power before long. The reason assigned for his dismissal is an inordinate indulgence in the national taste for whisky, and the restraining of that appetite is mentioned as a likely condition of his readmission to favor.

"'Far be it from me to question Mr. Brown's powers of suction. They may rival those of one of Dickens' characters, the elder Weller, I think, who would have made an uncommon good oyster if he'd been born in that sphere of life, and it is easy to suppose that a Highland ghillie who has achieved a practical realization of his compatriot's wish, "a Loch Lomond of whisky," will certain not be a teetotaler.'

"But Brown's fall has been more commonly ascribed to Mr. Punch than to any shortcoming of his own. A few weeks ago Punch gave us the following as a 'Court Circular':

"'*Balmoral, Tuesday.*

"'Mr. John Brown walked on the slopes. He subsequently partook of a haggis.

"'In the evening Mr. John Brown was pleased to listen to a bagpipe.

"'Mr. John Brown retired early.'

"These few lines gave rise to an immense deal of gossip, and in a few days we heard that Brown was discharged. It is said his insolence to every person he came in contact with about the court was latterly quite intolerable, and some friends of mine who were near Windsor fishing not long ago, who frequently saw the favorite, not then disgraced, gave me the benefit of a good deal of local gossip about the lusty ghillie. But I shall imitate Herodotus (perhaps I had better give him his usual title, the Father of History) and make an end of my story before I have rightly begun it. By the way, it is as well that the descendants of the same father did not implicitly follow his example, or what a mass of 'good things' would have been lost to the world!"

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The ball had started rolling.

It might be worth mentioning that John Brown was not dismissed and that the queen knew nothing of what had been said in the Scotch papers until long afterward.

The better papers had, of course, nothing to say, but the Tomahawk was anything but a great paper. In its issue of May, 1867, the Tomahawk published a satirical notice of Sir Edwin Landseer's painting of the queen on horseback, mocking at her widow's weeds by saying that "all is black which is not Brown."

Then in the following June the newspaper stated:

"In our first number we spoke of Sir Edwin Landseer's painting of the queen at Balmoral as a black picture of her majesty ('in which all is black which is not Brown'). It gave us quite a thrill of satisfaction to see that our old friend Punch has so far approved of our criticism as to reproduce it in the following form, apropos of a remark in the Saturday Review that the painting was of too black and mournful a hue. The mention of the ghillie should have reminded the Reviewer that the picture cannot be all black, as a part of it is Brown."

Then the cartoons began. There was one showing a vacant throne over which the discarded royal robes were thrown. Under this was the caption, "Where is Britannia?"

In August a cartoon entitled "A Brown Study" showed John Brown leaning thoughtfully on the empty throne, holding his pipe in his hand, while the British lion looked pleadingly at him. Then, more daring still, a fortnight after came "Pictures in the Fire," showing an Indian chief gazing into the fire and seeing among other things "The Mystery of the Season," John Brown leaning against the empty throne.

The Tomahawk issued its final number in June, 1870, and passed into the limbo of forgotten things unmourned. But in its wake several papers appeared (of a sort that would not be tolerated now) which kept up the John Brown stories.

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Whether the queen saw these pictures and articles or not we do not know. Probably not, but she knew of their existence. The effect of this on the national mind was to stir up a protest against Brown being in attendance on the queen during the Hyde Park review in June, 1867.

The whole nation was roused on this occasion about the presence of the taciturn ghillie, who stood on the royal rumble. News came that serious disturbances threatened in London.

Apprehensions about the position of the throne were felt in certain high quarters. The queen, furiously indignant, was shaken, but stood immovable. She wrote to Lord Charles Fitzroy:

". . . Lord Charles Fitzroy having always been so kind to the queen in all that concerns her convenience and comfort, and having only lately informed her that the duke of Beaufort so completely understood her wishes and entered her feelings respecting her faithful Brown, and having also told her last year that several people quite understood his going as an upper servant with her carriage, and he (Lord Charles) thinking there should be no difference in London to the country, and moreover, having taken him everywhere with her for two years on public as well as private occasions, she is much astonished and shocked at the attempt being made by some people to prevent her faithful servant going with her to the review in Hyde Park, thereby making the poor, nervous, shaken queen, who is so accustomed to his watchful care and intelligence, terribly nervous and uncomfortable.

"Whatever can be done the queen does not know on this occasion, or what it all means she does not know; but she would be very glad if Lord Charles could come down tomorrow morning any time *before* lunch, that she may have some conversation with him on this subject, not so much with a view as to what can be done on this occasion, but as to what can be done for the future to prevent her being teased and plagued with the interference of others, and moreover to make it *completely understood at once and for all that her upper Highland servant* (whether it be Brown or another, in case he should be ill, replaces him) belong to her outdoor attendants on state as well as on private occasions.

"The queen will not be dictated to or *made* to *alter* what she has found to answer for her comfort, and looks to her gentlemen and especially to her equerries setting this right for the future, *whatever* may be done on this single occasion. If when Lord Charles arrives he would *first* go to Countess Blücher he will hear from her what has passed."

A month later, from Osborne, Victoria again wrote to Lord Charles on the burning question:

". . . the queen cannot conclude this letter without telling Lord Charles that Sir Thomas Biddulph told the queen only a few days ago—when she spoke to him about 'the state of London,' which had been described to her as so dreadful—that he thought it greatly exaggerated, and that Inspector May of the police, who had taken great pains to inquire, and who knew more about the feelings of the people than any one, had given it as his decided opinion that not only nothing would have occurred of an unpleasant nature (such as a scuffle with Mr. Beales and his party on the occasion of the review in Hyde Park, which was foretold), but that he was convinced that nothing whatever of any unpleasant nature would have occurred! Sir Robert Mayne said the same, and Sir Thomas said he entirely believed this.

"This completely corroborates all Lord Charles not only heard but said from the first, and what the queen always felt sure of. While it is satisfactory to hear this, it is the more provoking that the queen should have been so deeply annoyed (it will be very long before she forgets all the worry and uneasy sensations it caused her), and that she should have been weak enough to let Lord D. [Derby] understand she would listen to the 'alarm.'

"Sir Thomas considers it to have been a 'mere panic.' And the queen must say she is much shocked that Lord D. could have listened to what must have been merely the result of ill-natured gossip in the higher classes, caused by the dissatisfaction at not forcing the queen out and probably seizing hold of those wicked and idle lies about poor, good Brown which appeared in the Scotch provincial papers last year, which no one noticed or knew till long after, and which probably have been fished up to serve the malevolent purposes of ill-disposed persons.

"In addition to this the queen has heard from a friend, who is acquainted with some of the most influential people connected with the press, that they all treat this 'talk' about this and about the queen's unpopularity as complete 'shameful rubbish,' not to be listened to for a moment, and that the queen was just as popular and would be just as well received as ever!

"The queen believes, however, that good will come out of it all—just as has so often been the case before with far more serious and alarming, although equally unfounded, 'cries.' The queen will quietly and formally continue to do what she thinks and knows to be right, though it will leave a painful and bitter feeling in her heart toward many, not easily to be eradicated."

Queen Victoria was not the sort of woman who would submit to any kind of pressure, nor would she be frightened into dispensing with Brown solely on public occasions. Certainly it must be admitted that the two letters of Queen Victoria quoted have rather an amazing content.

In reading them one has before him all the clews to a great human riddle, for as she wrote the grim, determined, lonely little middle-aged queen was thinking deeply—seemingly a woman at bay—about the man she intended to keep at her side.

Yet nobody today can read the truth behind those letters—whether they express the petulance of a haughty, obstinate, self-centered woman in poor health, or a deeper sentiment; nor is it likely that the persons to whom the letters were written were any wiser.

Rumor even said that the queen was married to him, and there were many who believed this unfounded and impossible story.

At the other extreme there were those who said Brown *must* have some secret and extraordinary power over the queen, because he smoked in her presence! Brown did smoke, but never near the queen.

Queen Victoria hated tobacco smoke to such an extent that any one who wished to smoke could only do so in the smoking room, and not in any other part of the castle. But even there it was only permitted within bounds, and Lord Charles Fitzroy, who as master of the household had a task that must have called for all the tact and diplomacy possible, received a letter on this subject from the queen to ask him to see that the smoking room was closed at midnight.

"This," so the letter ran, "was her original intention, as well as that 11 o'clock should be the time for leaving the drawing room; but she hears that smoking goes on till very late, a thing which in her house she does not intend to allow. The servants (she has heard) feel these late hours very much (and they are not wrong), and she must say that it is a bad thing for them, and a bad example, especially in these days.

"Perhaps Lord Charles will draw up a short memorandum to be handed over by one equerry to the other gentlemen who succeed him. Lord Charles would perhaps simply mention it to Prince ——, without giving it as a direct order, that the queen felt it necessary for the sake of the servants, who were kept up so late and who had to be up so early in the morning, to direct that the smoking room should be closed and the lights put out by 12 o'clock, not later.

"Lord Charles will no doubt agree with the queen, and he will see that it is done quite quietly, but effectually; some one coming to remind the prince and gentlemen that the hour has come when the lights must be put out. If Lord Charles wishes to speak to her about it she could easily see him tomorrow morning."

During the queen's stay at Balmoral in the autumn of 1868 much comment was aroused in the neighborhood by the absence for a whole week of Brown from the queen's outdoor retinue. It was given out that he was suffering from a chill. Soon it was being whispered that the prince of Wales (Edward VII.) and one or two of his friends had hired a brawny boxer from Aberdeen to pick a quarrel with Brown in order to give him a thrashing. The plot duly materialized and Brown was badly hammered in spite of his great strength and agility. Whether the story was true or not, it is believed at Deeside to this day, and a man who swore he witnessed the fight died only a year or two ago.

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There was no forgiveness for smoking or keeping late hours in the queen's household, but in the course of time Brown's pipe became as celebrated as Mr. Baldwin's (the former prime minister) is now, and he, Brown, kept a sort of open house in his room for his cronies, smoking, drinking, and talking until the "wee sma' hours."

But this was always done privately, and, it should be added, Brown never gave extra work to the servants, with whom he was most popular.

There is an engraving of the queen, dated 1868, showing her seated on her pony. All her youthful loveliness has gone. She is portrayed in a curiously dowdy hat, a little, tight-fitting coat, and a most voluminous and formless skirt. At the pony's head is John Brown in his Highland costume. Together they present a typical picture of solid, uninspiring, unemotional Victorian respectability.

Some have said that Queen Victoria asked for nothing more in John Brown than unvarnished truth, absolute obedience, unswerving fidelity—three virtues hard to find. She certainly did find these in John Brown.

NEXT WEEK: An Assassin.

"A Brown Study," one of the cartoons which inflamed the British people against John Brown.

● *The first three instalments of this story told of the rise of John Brown, gruff Highlander, to the position of chief attendant to Queen Victoria in the loneliness that followed the death of her prince consort. Brown accompanied the queen on all her drives and waited upon her at all times. He treated the highest courtiers with disdain and ordered the royal children about. Scandalous stories about the queen and her favorite companion began to circulate. In this instalment the author describes the violent press campaign against Brown and the queen's reaction.*

The queen had much more freedom at Balmoral than she had in London. In the former she could obtain the seclusion which permitted her to be gay and care-free. She could visit the natives, comfort the sick, and make friends with farmers and servants.

My loss will cause sad pain.

Court Circular.

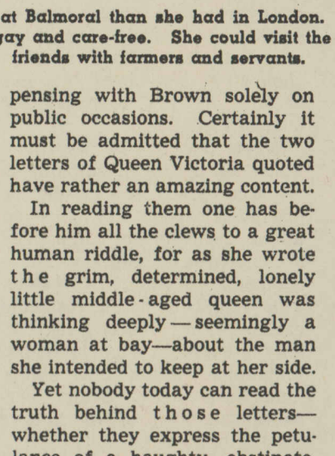
Balmoral, Tuesday.

MR. JOHN BROWN walked on the Slopes. He subsequently partook of a haggis.

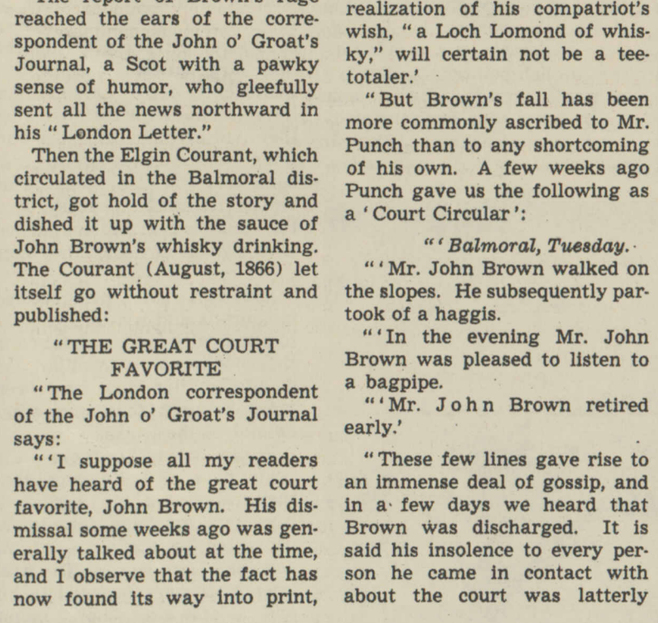
In the evening MR. JOHN BROWN was pleased to listen to a bag-pipe.

MR. JOHN BROWN retired early.

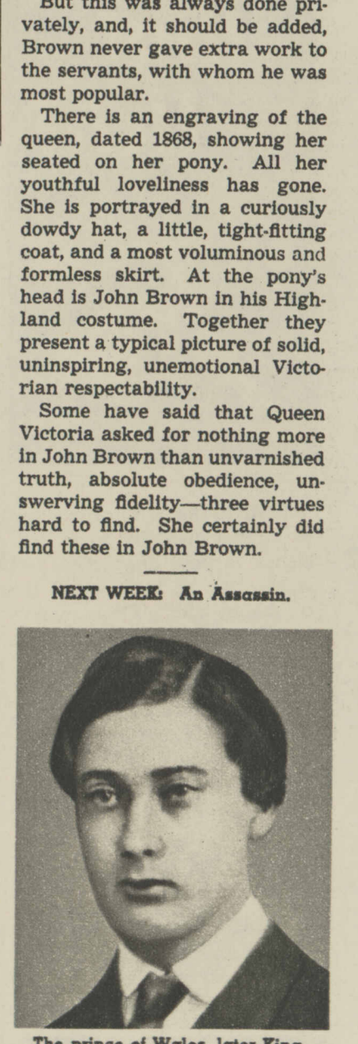
Reproduction of item in Punch which mocked the scandalmongers and their tittle-tattle.



(International photo.)
Queen Victoria.



Another of the cartoons bearing upon the queen and John Brown which appeared in the British press.



The prince of Wales, later King Edward VII.