

Queen Victoria's Remarkable John Brown

Crown Heir Resents His Influence

● Previous instalments of this story have told how John Brown, gruff Highland ghillie, rose from his humble post to chief attendant and confidant of Queen Victoria, how he ordered the queen about and was openly disrespectful to her ministers, and how the campaign against him in the newspapers, which followed whisperings of scandal, was stilled by his heroism when he knocked a pistol from the hand of a man who threatened the queen. In this instalment the author tells how foreign powers decorated Brown and how he became a person well worth standing in with.

By E. E. P. TISDALL

(Reprinted by arrangement with the London Express.)

AS THE YEARS passed on those who were closely connected with the queen grew more convinced that to Queen Victoria's mind John Brown had some special connection with Prince Albert, the most stiff, formal, and courteous of men.

When the queen was worried over any difficult question she would look almost pleadingly at the bust of the prince consort and then let her gaze wander toward Brown before coming to a decision. The movement may have been automatic and she may not have been conscious of it, but the idea that Brown exerted some influence over her grew until the royal family themselves began to believe it. It is said that the prince of Wales openly resented it.

John Brown became a person worth standing well with. The highest officers in the land began to recognize that it paid them to speak to him courteously, and Lord Beaconsfield (Benjamin Disraeli, British prime minister) was careful from time to time to send kindly messages to Mr. Brown in his letters to the queen.

Never does Brown seem to have made any effort to curb the bluntness of his tongue, although as a highly intelligent man he can hardly have failed to sense its effect on cultured people around him or its power to wound innocent and gentle persons. Perhaps, resenting the slanderous world around him, he pursued his mannerism with bitter determination.

When the news of the tragic death of Louis Napoleon, prince imperial of France, who accompanied the British army in the campaign against the Zulus in 1879, was first conveyed to the queen, it was John Brown who broke it to her in quite matter-of-fact tones. Later in the day, when the queen was in tears over the news, Brown roused her in typically gruff manner in front of her ladies and several officials.

"It's little use greetin' [weeping]," he exclaimed. "What was a young Frenchy daeing, onyway, fighting against niggers for us?"

Brown was never ashamed to tell people that he was born in a "but and ben," as the Scots people call a room-and-kitchen house. In 1880 the queen contemplated for a while adding a new wing to Balmoral castle and



Queen Victoria with her husband, the prince consort, and their nine children.

mentioned this to Brown, who caustically answered:

"Well, I think it would be a needless expense. After a', we can only eat or sleep in yin [one] room at a time!"

The queen dropped the new wing project.

When the great volunteer review in Edinburgh took place the following year the rain fell in torrents. Despite that the queen sat in an open carriage and watched 40,000 volunteers march past in the famous demonstration against the rebelling Transvaal Boers. Over her head Brown held a large umbrella, but so heavy was the rain it gave way. Brown promptly sent a footman with orders to commandeer all the biggest and strongest umbrellas he could see. At least a dozen titled men and women were thus left exposed to the rain while Brown used their umbrellas in relays over the queen!

Brown in his rôle of the faithful watchdog of the queen figured in an especially humorous incident on the day of the brilliant marriage of Prince Leopold, the queen's youngest son, to Princess Helena of Waldeck in April, 1882, at Windsor. He espied a suspicious looking man walking furtively along a corridor not far from the queen's apartments. Brown seized him at once by the scruff of the neck and marched him off to the servants' hall after sending for the detective inspector on duty. The man turned out to be a German prince—one of the guests—who had lost his way in the castle. Brown gave him such a fright that he departed without attending the ceremony in St. George's chapel.

Not unnaturally many stories of John Brown and the queen come from the Highlands, where they spent so much of their time. These are told by the children of the people who were present on the occasion and may be heard

in many small cottages around Balmoral.

The queen's fondness for visiting cottagers at Balmoral—especially when christenings, weddings, or funerals were being held—is well known, and on these occasions she usually partook of the customary whisky. At one particular christening, however, she declined the proffered glass of whisky. Brown, who was present, then said loudly:

"Ye better tak' it, for ye have a bit o' cauld [cold]."

The queen duly obeyed!

During one of her long drives



Queen Victoria, from the original engraving by Chappell.

in the Highlands the queen ordered her carriage to stop in the village of Fetter Cairn, and Brown was sent to a cottage near by for a glass of milk.

When he returned a small crowd of curious villagers was standing around the closed carriage. Laying down the milk and brandishing his knotty fists, Brown chased them away like a flock of sheep.

"Be off there! Away wid ye!" he bellowed fiercely. "Can ye no' let an auld wummin alane, ye daft fules?"

His action and language effectively disposed of the rumor that had flown around that the queen had arrived.

During the seventies the queen paid visits to Germany, the Italian lakes, the French Riviera, and Menton, but this was no break for Brown. He still had the same duties to perform; he was still always at hand.

If John Brown was a man secretly looked at askance by people in his own land, he was admired abroad as the ideal retainer "sans peur et sans reproche."

His devotion to duty so filled the French government with admiration that they made special arrangements to insure that Monsieur Brown enjoyed all the little comforts that officials can supply on such visits if they so wish. The king of Greece met Brown and marveled so greatly that a servant could be so splendid an example that he decorated him; nor was he the only one who did. But Brown openly took the greatest pleasure in the gold and silver medals presented to him by the queen.

If Brown had become accepted at court and feared if not respected, yet it was clear to a man of any perception that there was no love for him among the officials with whom he came chiefly in contact. It was very noticeable that he became gruffer and more churlish to every one as time went on, and his remarks sometimes sounded as if they were intended to bite deep. It was no secret that he had developed into a heavy whisky drinker.

Whatever the court and the world at large may have chosen to think of John Brown, he was a favorite among servants, who, when all is said and done, are pretty shrewd judges of their fellow men. Years after John

Brown died, Arthur Patchell Martin in his book "The Queen in the Isle of Wight" reports old William Jackman (who had worked on the Osborne estate for sixty-five years) saying: "Remember John Brown? Aye, that I do; and a very good fellow he was, too. Sometimes when I was a-mowin' the lawn—it used to take me fourteen days to go right over all of 'em—anywhere near the house, if he seed me he'd put his hand up in the air an' call, 'Hi, Jackman!' and then he'd say when I come up, 'Don't you stay thirsty out in the sun an' heat; you just go up in the hall and say I sent you in for a good draught.' Ah, the servants lost a good friend when John Brown died! You've seen the granite chair what the queen put up in memory of him in that side walk just before ye come to the house, haven't ye? Well, it was put in that particular spot because Mr. Brown used to walk up and down there reading his letters from home. I don't rightly recollect the inscription on the seat. I know there's when he was born and when he died, and I think it goes something like this: 'To the truest and most faithful friend and servant that any monarch ever had'; something like that. But the granite what it is made out of was brought all the way from Scotland. Yes, I always liked John Brown. He was a bit hasty and outspoken, but always just and kind he was. Yes. Fine voice he had, an' a very fine looking man he was in his kilt."

Brown's kindness was not only extended to the servants in the royal employment but to those who accompanied their masters on visits to the queen.

Brown would often ask them to his room—and these visits were regarded as a mark of special favor, although invitations were not scarce—and there, over whisky and tobacco, they relaxed and spent long nights discussing "cabbages and kings."

This kindness on Brown's part seems always to disappear directly he got among the "better people." Lord Robblesdale in his "Impressions and Memoirs" records a rare event—John Brown in festive mood, or rather what passed with him for festiveness—when he wrote of:

"... A servants' ball to which the ladies and gentlemen of the household were invited and which her majesty herself attended. Mr. John Brown acted as master of ceremonies in the evening tartan of the Stuarts. The queen, a terpsichore of the first order in her younger days—at least so Mr. Strachey tells us—followed the evolutions of the dancers with a benevolent but critical eye. Deference was paid to the Highland character and preference of the mistress of the household. We had what seemed to me incessant reels, Highland

Officials of Note Seek His Favor

schottisches, and a complicated and sustained measure called 'The Flowers of Edinburgh.' Even with proficiency this dance requires constant attention, if not actual presence of mind, to be in the right place at the right moment; anyhow, more than I possessed in the mazy labyrinth. I was suddenly impelled almost into the queen's lap with a push in the back and a 'Where are you coming to?' It was Mr. John Brown exercising his legitimate office as m. c.

"After a good many Caledonians, Mr. Brown came to ask the queen, 'Now, what's your majesty for?' Mindful of her English subjects, the queen suggested a country dance. This didn't find favor. 'A country dance!' he repeated, turning angrily on his heel. However, we were told to select our partners for 'Sir Roger de Coverley.'"

We know that the royal ghillie was the only person allowed to address the queen without first being addressed by her, but that he did not hesitate to turn away from her "angrily on his heel" before a crowded room offers yet another example of the causes which went to create in the amazed public mind the riddle of John Brown.

One of the attractive qualities of Brown, and one for which everybody gives him credit, was his great love of his home and his own people, and hardly less for his old friends in Scotland.

One of his brothers, the youngest, Archie, was for some years Prince Leopold's valet and afterward a gentleman porter at Windsor castle; on the Balmoral estate two of his brothers were employed, so he was anything but cut off from his kin. But even at that his mail from Scotland was a big one and it was said that he would read and reread his letters and keep them for years.

His father reached the age of 82 before he died, and John, who had been regarded in his youth as the stay-at-home son, of not much promise, was an especial favorite of his. John Brown was a good son, a good brother, a good friend, and a good servant—and that cannot be said of many men.

One point which cannot be overlooked is that the example of ill discipline and laxness to the royal person had its effect on the body of palace servants. They dared not indulge in the liberties taken by John Brown, but inwardly their morale may have suffered, for drunkenness, pilfering, and insolence among the servants at Windsor became an open scandal. Yet the queen would never listen when the facts were brought to her ears. It is said that a drunken footman dropped a lighted lamp down the steps and imperiled the castle and so drew down the wrath of the master of the household, who sent in a long report to the queen. She read it and returned the report with two words written in the margin, "Poor man."

When Brown began to show



Lord Beaconsfield (Benjamin Disraeli), who sent kindly messages to John Brown in his letters to the queen.

obvious signs that he had become the slave of whisky drinking the queen was equally indifferent to the fact. The royal servant was a bad drinker, and whisky usually reduced him to tears. He was in his cups when the queen presented him with a set of onyx cuff links, and, receiving them, he burst into tears, sobbing, "This is too much, too much!"

Instead of dismissing him for a maudlin drinker, the story runs that she smiled at him and said to those around her, "Nothing can be too much for such a faithful and devoted friend."

One of the most curious things is that her majesty bestowed on John Brown the title of esquire. Why and for what reason he received the title next below a knight and given to the younger sons of noblemen remains an unsolved mystery.

More understandable was the gift of a house, Bhaillie-na-Chaille, near Balmoral. Both the prince consort and Queen Victoria were very generous with their gifts of houses to their faithful Highland servants, and Brown was not particularly favored except in this, that it really was an exceedingly nice house of generous size and good appointments. He never occupied it, as he never was free from service and attendance on the queen, but his eldest brother, William, lived in it.

There were many stories of Brown's marriage. Even in a little pamphlet issued just after his death, that gave briefly his life story, it was asserted that he was married a year before he died. But in truth he died a bachelor. Womanhood, except the queen to whom he rendered such grim allegiance, seems never to have had a place in his life.

He was evidently not "a lad for the lassies," for his favorite cousin, who had been his playmate in his youth, when teased into saying something about John Brown when young, would only admit, "He was as good as they average."

NEXT WEEK: John Brown's Death.



Balmoral castle, where the queen knew all the villagers and often visited them when christenings, weddings, or funerals were being held. It was at one of these gatherings that the queen declined the customary drink of whisky, but accepted it when Brown, who was present, said loudly: "Ye better tak' it, for ye have a bit o' cauld [cold]."



The queen, escorted by John Brown and a lady in waiting, in her pony cart at Osborne.