

## NOTABLE WOMEN IN ENGLISH SOCIETY.

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IN TWO PAPERS.—PAPER THE FIRST.

In ordinary intercourse in society every titled lady up to a Marchioness is addressed in the same manner—simply "Lady So-and-so." The highest rank of all, Duchess, alone receives her title in conversation. But combined with this there is such clinging to the shades of rank that not merely would each "Lady" insist on having her particular place in the hierarchy—Baron's wife, Viscountess, Countess and Marchioness—carefully observed in any case where rank could be exhibited; but in the case of those of equal rank the right of precedence is followed to the point of allowing to go first the one whose title is of the elder "creation."

This was amusingly brought home to me at one of the functions attended by the Queen in the first Jubilee celebration ten years ago. At that time, when she was only nearly seventy, the Queen went about a good deal; in this last Jubilee, at nearly eighty, she was seen only in her one formal appearance. So the little incident that I am about to give occurred, be it understood, in 1897. I was standing talking to the Dowager Marchioness of Londonderry, when her daughter-in-law, the present Marchioness, approached. The younger Lady Londonderry was at the time the Vice-Queen of Ireland and accordingly had the cares on her hands of arranging the order in which the Irish ladies present should approach Royalty. She was in great anxiety. "Can you tell me," she asked her mother, "which is the elder creation, Downshire or Drogheda? Lady Downshire and Lady Drogheda are both here, and I cannot remember which goes first." The Dowager lady hunted through her memories with all the care that the important point deserved. Ultimately, as neither of them was sure, it was settled that it was unfortunately necessary to go and ask the ladies themselves. "They will know," said the elder Marchioness—and, sure enough, they did! I had the curiosity on my return home to search the volume with which old Major Pendennis urged Pen to make himself so familiar—the British Peerage—and I found that Drogheda was created a Marquis in 1791, while Downshire dated from 1789.

Precedence is strictly observed in every case where one person can go in front of another. Thus, at the State Concerts there are separate rows for ladies of different degrees of rank, and one of the hardships of a widowed peeress marrying again is that she forfeits her right to a seat on "the Duchesses' bench" or whatever her place may have been in her first husband's life. This loss of rank occurs, though the first husband's title continues to be used; a widowed peeress re-marrying a peer of lower rank continues to be called by the name of the dead husband, but this is a matter of courtesy not admitted as giving precedence. Thus, the lady once known as Mrs. Hammersley of New York and next as the Duchess of Marlborough is now the wife of Lord William Beresford, and as such is no longer allowed a seat on "the Duchesses' bench" at Court; nevertheless, she is never called Lady William Beresford, but still Lily, Duchess of Marlborough—her Christian name being used to distinguish her from the wife of the present Duke, her

step-son. This continuance of the verbal rank that has really been resigned and that cannot be claimed at any ceremonial is another illustration of the observation made above—how the fine courtesy of society covers over and ignores in daily intercourse the varying degrees that are yet essentially clung to so very tenaciously.

A quite undue influence is given by the possession of a title, and a lady with "a handle to her name" is sure of being easily recognized as supreme in whatever circle she pleases to mix, where titles are not every-day matters. In "societies" or associated efforts for public objects, as well as in private intercourse, a title is all-powerful, with little regard to the talent or wisdom of its owner; her wishes, her opinions on other workers, her utterances, even unsupported by any pretence of reason, will receive the most submissive attention. The result is often mischievous in the extreme: good fellow-workers are discarded, wrong lines of action are supported, individuals are favored or ignored at the bidding of "Lady So-and-So" and she is put in evidence on occasions when her essential betters are available but are ignored. But then, on the other hand, infinite possibilities of good are thus opened to the women of the aristocracy, and the majority of them avail themselves, to a greater or less extent, of those opportunities. If our aristocratic leaders do not generally widen and enlarge the minds of those around them, they at any rate encourage organized charities, patronize elementary education or feed the aged and aid the sick. There are few women at the head of society who altogether ignore the obligations that their fortunate and prominent position lays upon them to do something themselves for the less prosperous and also to lead the rich middle classes on to spend some of their money for good objects. They know well enough that their patronage will bring into charitable work the money and exertions of many whose motive is not a pure one

but merely a snobbish desire to "get to know her ladyship"; and they very rightly exploit this unworthy motive for the benefit of the efforts in which they are interested.

As regards their "own" villages—the folks living on the land surrounding the aristocratic abodes, the ladies' husbands' estates—public opinion expects them to do a good deal for the more needy of these working people. It is only right that they should be held responsible for a moderate degree of well-being amongst the poor and decrepit, since they have often, as sole owners of the soil, absolute control over the village. Unsanitary cottages, overcrowded and ill-ventilated, are tolerated by public opinion still; but that there should be no charity ready for the emergencies of life, for sickness, accident and old age, would cast discredit on the lord and lady of the manor. They can, if they wish, meet this to some extent by refusing to allow building on their land. In one case known to me the tyrannical Earl not only refuses to allow "his" village to grow beyond the exact size that he judges will supply him with an abundance of labour for his estate, with the necessary shops, forge and so on—so that the poor people who want to marry have to wait



LILY, DUCHESS OF MARLBOROUGH.