SEEN AND UNSEEN

BY

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CHAPTER VII

LADY CAITHNESS AND AVENUE WAGRAM

HAVING spent the winter months of 1894 (from January to April) in Egypt, I was returning thence in the latter month with my friend Mrs Judge of Windsor. Our route was *via* Paris, and I had arranged to spend a week there in the same hotel as the young Swedish lady whom I first met in India, and who has been referred to more than once in this record.

She told me she had made the acquaintance that winter of the famous "Countess of Caithness and Duchesse de Pomar," and thinking it would interest me to meet this lady, she had asked for permission to introduce me to her.

As it turned out, Madame Brügel was unable to accompany me to the house, having several engagements for the afternoon, but she promised to "put in an appearance" later. So Mrs Judge and I drove off to the well-known mansion in the Avenue de Wagram, and were received very cordially by Lady Caithness.

I had once tried to read a very abstruse and mystic book by this lady, and had heard her spoken of as a more or less hopeless lunatic, "who imagined herself Mary Queen of Scots," and so forth.

Otherwise I went without prejudice, and being

accustomed to judge for myself in such matters, came to the conclusion that Lady Caithness was an extremely shrewd woman, with her head remarkably "well screwed on," as the saying is. As regards her claims to be Mary Queen of Scots, I never heard these from her own lips, although I saw her daily for a week, and we had many interesting talks.

She certainly *did* claim to be in very close relations with the ill-fated Queen of Scotland, but I do not know what views she may have held privately as to varied manifestations of the one spirit. I have heard Lord Monkswell propound an interesting theory, with Archdeacon Wilberforce in the chair, to the effect that as one short earth life gave small scope for spiritual experience and development, he thought it quite possible that the same spirit might have several bodily manifestations simultaneously, and that the judge and the criminal might conceivably be one and the same individual in two personalities!

It is possible that Lady Caithness may have had some such view, not theoretically (as was the case with Lord Monkswell), but as a matter of conviction, and apart from the limits of Time and Space involved in the conception of the latter.

I can only say that I never heard her speak of Mary Queen of Scots except as an entity, quite distinct from herself. But that she carried the "Marie" *culte* to great extremes is an undoubted fact. The hall and rooms on the ground floor of the Avenue Wagram House were arranged and furnished in close imitation of Holyrood Palace. I counted over fifty miniatures and other pictures of the

Scottish Queen in the Countess's beautiful bedroom alone, and later on shall have to speak more definitely of one life size and exquisitely painted portrait of the Queen.

But to return to this first reception.

I must confess that a somewhat inconveniently keen sense of humour found only too much nourishment on this occasion.

The Countess was magnificently dressed, as was usual with her, in priceless lace, falling over head and shoulders, and a beautiful tiara of various coloured jewels arranged over the lace. This was eccentric perhaps, considering the occasion, but not laughable. Lady Caithness, in addition to geniality, had enough quiet dignity to carry off the lace and jewels with success. I was chiefly amused by the attitude of adoring humility and flattering appreciation shown by the numerous ladies already assembled when we arrived. Only one man was present, and he was a priest. Later I learned to appreciate the friendliness of the Abbé Petit and to admire his intellectual courage and manliness.

For the moment, seeing him surrounded by these female worshippers, hanging upon his lips as he discoursed to us about new readings of old truths, one was irresistibly reminded of certain scenes in Molière's "*Femmes Savantes*."

A lively little American lady (married to an Italian count) plied him with numerous questions in fluent French, spoken with an atrocious accent. Finally, she wished to hear the Abbé's views upon *Melchisedech*! In the midst of other questions and answers, the kindly little man managed to turn

round to her with a cheery "*Ah, Madame la Comtesse! pour le Melchisedech—nous reviendrons tout de suite à Melchisedech!*" All the affairs of the religious universe were being wound up at a similar pace and in like fashion, and this final word of cheerful assurance would have proved absolutely disastrous to me had I not been sitting close to my friend and able to whisper to her: "*Please dig your nails into my wrist—hard.*" Any bodily pain was preferable to the hysterical laughter which had been so long suppressed and seemed now imminent.

But there was worse to come!

An Englishwoman, the very type of the characteristic British spinster, turned round, and addressed M. l'Abbé in laboured and extremely British French (I must leave the accent to be imagined and supplied by my reader):

"Mais, Monsieur l'Abbé! c'est le Protestantisme que vous nous enseignez la."

He turned round upon her in his wrath:

"Mais, Madame—ou MADEMOISELLE." (No print can convey the utter scorn and contempt of this last word.)

The rest of the sentence was lost to us in the loud laugh of the genial, good-tempered woman: "*Moi*, Mademoiselle! J'ai été mariée vingt ans et j'ai six enfants!"

The whole scene was too funny for words, and, with the exception of this good lady, all present took themselves as seriously as a University don!

It was a real relief when the solemnity of the reception broke up and we were ushered into the adjoining dining-room for an excellent tea. Here

I came upon my Swedish friend, who had only just arrived, and "missed all the fun." She told me there was to be a *séance* held in the house next day, and that she had been asking the Countess if I might not be present. "*It might amuse you, Kat!*" was her irreverent way of putting it. "*Unfortunately, there seems to be some difficulty about it.*"

At this moment Lady Caithness came up, and cordially expressed her regrets that she could not accede to Madame Brügel's suggestion.

"Had you been staying until next week, Miss Bates, I would gladly have arranged for it, but to-morrow is a very special occasion. As a matter of fact, I have promised M. Petit that no one shall be present except himself and me, and the two female mediums, of course. On Wednesday we are to have a crowded meeting here—all the well-known people in Paris will come—and M. l'Abbé will read his paper explaining that he can no longer blind his eyes to the new light breaking upon the world through scientific discovery, etc., but that he remains a loyal son of the Church, if the Church will allow him to do so. It is, of course, a very trying and anxious ordeal; for many priests will be present, also a cardinal and one or more of our bishops. So the *séance* to-morrow will be specially devoted to receiving last instructions for the paper he is about to read, and some words, we trust, of encouragement and hope."

Of course, I hastened to assure Lady Caithness of my full comprehension of her point, and added that I was only sorry she should have been asked to alter her arrangements on my account.

"But you will join us on Wednesday at the meeting, I trust? It will be held at three P.M., in a large room on the ground floor, which is arranged for such gatherings. I shall expect you then, so we will not say good-bye."

This was heaping coals of fire on my head; for so observant a woman as Lady Caithness must have noticed my difficulty in keeping a grave face earlier in the afternoon!

Now comes a curious point. As we left the house Madame Brügel in expressing disappointment about the next evening, added: "And yet somehow I think you will go after all."

"Yes," I said involuntarily. "I believe I *shall* go, but I cannot think how it will come about; nothing could be more decided than what we have just heard, and I cannot possibly put off my journey to England the end of this week."

I think we were both a little disappointed when no letter arrived by the morning's post. "Local letters often come by second post," urged my friend, who was very keen upon her presentiment.

A long morning at the Louvre prevented my reaching home till one P.M., when the *déjeuner à la fourchette* was half way through its course. No letter on my plate! So Madame Brügel and I agreed that the wish must have been father to the thought with both of us, and put the matter out of our heads once for all.

At two-thirty P.M., however, a *dépêche* letter arrived for me.

Lady Caithness wrote to *beg that I would make a point of being with her that evening by nine p.m.* "You

will think this very inconsistent with what I told you yesterday," she wrote, "but I said only what was the exact truth, as matters then stood. It is the Queen herself who has communicated with me this morning, and *insists* upon your being present this evening. The Abbé and I can only bow to this decision. I need not tell you how pleased I shall be personally to greet you this evening."

I was again shown into the spacious bedroom of the Countess, where she "received" in general, quite after the manner of the French kings in the days of the old monarchy.

Her bed was quite a State bed too, with its beautiful silk furnishings and heavy velvet hangings. On the wall behind this, was a very valuable fresco painting, representing Jacob's ladder, with the angels ascending and descending, executed by a famous modern artist.

We soon descended to the ground floor, and passing through the large lecture-room, of which Lady Caithness had spoken, and which had sufficient gilt and cane chairs to seat a large audience; we stepped down some marble stairs into a small but exquisitely appointed room. It was a sort of chapel, in fact, built "by the Queen's instructions," and used for all purposes and occasions of direct communication with her. A general impression remains with me of rare woods and exquisite marbles, and the walls were hung with framed tapestries representing various scenes in the Queen's life.

To me the most striking and beautiful thing in the room was a full-length, life-sized portrait of Mary herself, so arranged that a hidden lamp threw

its soft light on the features; whilst the hanging velvet curtains of deep crimson on either side concealed the frame of the picture, and conveyed the illusion that a living woman was standing there ready to receive her guests.

I have never seen anything more perfect than the way in which this impression was conveyed, without a jarring note of sensational effect.

The two French women mediums were already in the room, and I am bound to say they did not attract me pleasantly nor impress me very favourably. They were mother and daughter, and "Harpy" was written large over either countenance. Doubtless they were very good mediums, in spite of this fact. They *must* have been so, unless one supposes that Lady Caithness and the Abbé Petit were themselves abnormally strong sensitives; in which case one would have thought this extraneous help would have been unnecessary.

We sat down at a fairly large wooden table, polished, but without covering of any kind, and having only one solid support to it, coming from the centre, passing down as a single wooden pillar, and spreading out in the usual fashion at the bottom. I had noted this on first entering the room.

The two women sat together on my right-hand side. On my left was the Abbé, and the Countess sat exactly opposite to me, with a printed alphabet pasted on to a card, and a long pencil as pointer.

This made up the party. At a side table, placed some distance away, sat a pleasant young French lady, who was writing automatically all the time;

a secretary to the Countess, I believe. This young lady had no possible connection with the table.

The *séance* began with a few words of prayer from the Abbé for light and guidance.

The process was as follows :—First, the Countess and then I took the printed alphabet, and pointed silently and at a fair pace to the letters, going on from one to the other without pause. At the letter needed the table did not rise, but gave a sound more like a bang than a rap. I have never heard anything *quite* so loud and definite in my long investigation. The sound seemed to come from *within the wood*, as in ordinary "raps," when these are genuine, but it was far louder and more rapid and decided than the usual *séance* rap. There was no hesitation, no gathering up of force. Any amount of vitality was evidently present, and the intelligence, from whatever source, was unerring. The Countess and I were the only two persons who held the alphabet and pointed, and when *she* held it the mediums could not have seen the letters from their position at the table with regard to hers. Yet the letters were banged out (I can use no other expression) with absolute accuracy, and at a pace which, quick to start with, became more and more rapid as we wearied of the monotonous task and handed the alphabet to each other in turn.

When the name of GOD or of OUR LORD came, only the first letter was indicated, and then the table swayed slowly to and fro in a very reverent and characteristic way for a few seconds ; after which we began the alphabet again for the next word.

When these loud bangs came I could trace the

reverberation in the wood, and it seemed to me practically impossible that the Harpies could be producing them by any unlawful methods, whilst sitting in full light and with immovable faces, the daughter writing down the letters as quickly as these were indicated.

One did not feel quite comfortable about making investigations in a private house without being invited to do so.

Again, if the women were tricking, and I caught them at it, there was always the chance of a disagreeable scene with people of their class.

On the other hand, it was losing a great opportunity, to refrain, as a mere matter of courtesy. Also I comforted myself by thinking that if anyone needed to feel ashamed it would be the ones who cheated, and not the detective.

So I pushed my chair a little nearer to the table, and the next time the Countess took the alphabet from me and the bangs were in full swing, I put my foot cautiously but very effectually *entirely round the one leg of the table, moving it also up and down freely*. Not a vestige of another foot, nor even of the flimsiest particle of dress or other obstruction! I could positively and distinctly hear the reverberation of the loud bangs on the wood, *between me and the centre of the table*, whilst my own leg and foot were firmly embracing the single wooden pillar upon which the latter stood. So the Harpies were justified, so far as this one phenomenon was concerned. The letters written down so rapidly by the daughter on large sheets of paper presented an apparently hopeless jumble, but when the sitting was over at the

last, the Abbé and I were able to make out the words and sentences without great difficulty (he being accustomed to the task), and we then found a long, coherent, and at anyrate perfectly sensible, message addressed to him, and referring to the points of his coming discourse. This had to be proved upon its own merits, and without prejudice, arising from the fact that St Paul's name was given as the author. It was quite as helpful as some of the Apostle's letters, with the advantage of being up to date as regarded the question in hand. After all, the Abbé was about to embark upon an enterprise requiring much courage and great tact, in the forlorn hope that the walls of narrow Orthodoxy and Priestcraft might fall down before the trumpets of advancing Knowledge and Light.

It may or may not have been St Paul who stood by the Abbé with words of encouragement that night; but I, for one, find no difficulty in thinking it conceivable that the great Apostle should take a keen interest in the evolution of the planet upon which he once lived.

The charming young lady delivered up her script also. It was interesting and well written, but the only paragraph which remains in my memory was an excellent analysis of the initial difference between Christianity and Theosophy.

The Abbé kindly copied it out for me next day, but I must quote from memory.

"Christianity is a stretching down of the Divinity to Man.

"Theosophy is the attempt of Man, by his own efforts, to reach the Divine."

This seems to me both terse and true.

We had sat from nine P.M. till one A.M., and I think we were all relieved when an adjournment for supper was suggested by Lady Caithness.

Her son, the Duc de Pomar, joined us for *this* part of the evening, and was introduced to me. My enjoyment of the excellent fare, after so many hours of exhaustion, was only tempered by an unfortunate and violent quarrel between the mother and daughter mediums, on the score of the age of the latter! The mother declared her daughter was forty-five; the daughter said: "Not a day over thirty-five," and intimated that she surely might be supposed to know her own age! The mother, however, murmured provokingly: "*Moi, je sais mieux que ça*"; and so the wrangle went on, until I made a diversion by taking leave of my hostess and promising to be present at the lecture the "following afternoon," which, by the way, had become "this afternoon" by the time I left the Hotel Wagram.

When I entered the house once more, it was to be shown into the large lecture-room previously described, which was already three parts full, and very shortly entirely so.

Lady Caithness had kindly reserved a front seat for me, so I could see and hear without difficulty. On the raised platform stood my friend the Abbé looking very grave and rather nervous. A cardinal, two bishops, and some half-dozen priests were seated close to him, and very shortly the lecture, which was, I think, extempore, began.

The Abbé was so manifestly in dead earnest and without any suspicion of *pose*, that one could not

fail to be deeply impressed by the scene. It needed all the help of a sincere purpose and a brave heart, to stand up amongst those of his own cloth, and, in face of a partially indifferent and partially unfriendly audience, to declare boldly "the faith that was in him"—a faith that burned all the more brightly and warmly from the fact that it was being purged of the superstitions which must always become the accretions of every form of religion; the clinging refuse of weed and shell, which from time to time must be scraped off the bottom of the grand old ship if it is to convey us safely from port to harbour.

The Cardinal sat twirling his big seal ring, with a look of cynical amusement on his face, or so it seemed to me.

As the Abbé proceeded to mention the advances made in science and the necessity for a restatement of old truths, which should bring them into line with other truths of the nineteenth century, proving the essential unity of *all truth*, and breaking down the fallacy that the vital part of religion and the vital part of science have anything to fear from one another, the Cardinal's face was a study to me.

"Yes, of course, we know all that, you and I, but what is the use of making this fuss about it? We belong to a system, and this system has worked very well for centuries past, and will work very well for centuries to come if fools don't attempt to upset the coach by restatements and readjustments, as they are called. The people *don't want restatements*; they want a dead certainty, and that is just what we give them."

All this I seemed to read in his clever, cynical

countenance, in direct opposition to the thrilling sentences of the Abbé Petit as he leant forward and said, with uplifted finger and prophetic intensity:

"*La lumière est venue, mes frères—et si vous ne la suivez pas—vous serez laissés seuls dans vos églises.*"

It is impossible to exaggerate the affectionate solemnity of this appeal to his brother priests. The tragic note was relieved later by an amused smile which rippled round the audience. This puzzled me until a kind French lady sitting next to me explained that the audience were amused by the "*très chers frères*" (dearly beloved brethren), with which the Abbé addressed them in this rather unorthodox lecture. It was evidently looked upon as a curious bit of "professional survival."

On the following day (Thursday) I was invited to lunch with Lady Caithness at two P.M., and being a punctual person, I arrived at that hour. The powdered footman announced that his mistress had not yet emerged from her bedroom, and showed me up into the dining-room adjoining, where I awaited her. In a few minutes I was joined here by the Abbé, who politely expressed his sorrow that he had not known of my arrival earlier.

As we sat chatting together, he told me a curious experience of his of the previous night, which will certainly "cause the enemy" to smile, if not "to blaspheme."

He said (of course, in French): "I was sitting last night in my room, which looks over the back of the house, and where I can hear no sounds from the Avenue, and I was talking to 'La Reine.' Sud-

denly '*Elle m'a frappé sur l'épaule*,' and then said she must leave me at once, in order to meet the Duchesse, who had just returned home. At that moment twelve o'clock struck from a neighbouring church, and I looked at my watch, and found it was indeed midnight. When Madame la Duchesse comes in, I am most anxious to find out whether she and the Duc were returning home at that hour. You will be my witness, madame, that I have told you of this occurrence before seeing the Duchesse."

I assured him that I would gladly testify to this; and in a few moments the Duc de Pomar arrived, and almost immediately after him, Lady Caithness emerged from her bedroom on the other side of the dining-room.

We sat down to luncheon, and I was much amused by the form of the Abbé's question later in the meal.

"*Madame la Duchesse! puis je vous demander sans indiscrétion, a quelle heure vous êtes revenue hier au soir?*"

Lady Caithness looked a little surprised, but answered readily enough: "Well, it must have been past midnight; I did not notice very specially."

"Not past midnight, mother," corrected the Duc de Pomar; "I heard a clock strike twelve just as we were driving through the Porte Cochère."

"*Bien, Madame, qu'est-ce-que je vous ai dit?*" demanded the Abbé, turning to me in triumph. He then repeated his story, and I was able to certify that he had already mentioned it to me on my arrival.

The following day I took my leave of Lady

Caithness, with a happy remembrance of her and her great kindness and hospitality to me during this pleasant week. She made me promise to let her know whenever I might happen to be passing through Paris. I wrote to her the next year, when about to make a short stay in Paris, on returning from Algeria, and received an answer from the Riviera. She had been wintering there, and had been packed and ready for the return to Paris, when an obstinate chill had upset all plans. She begged me to go to the Avenue Wagram when I arrived and find out the latest news of her, as the doctors might give leave for the journey at any moment.

Ten days later I *did* go to her house and interview the lady secretary (not the one I had seen), who was very grudging in her answers, and gave me the impression that she was accustomed to deal with persons who had some "axe to grind" by claiming acquaintance with the Countess.

I did not happen to have the letter in my pocket which authorised my visit, and should probably not have produced it in any case. So I turned away rather shortly, leaving my card, saying: "I must trouble you to forward this at once to Lady Caithness."

The moment the secretary saw my name, her manner entirely changed, and became as servile as it had been "cavalier."

"Miss Bates, I see? Oh, certainly, I shall communicate at once with her ladyship. I had no idea it was Miss Bates. Pray excuse me, so many come and ask for the Duchesse, and we have to be so very particular. But, of course, *you* must be the lady the

Duchesse is so very fond of. She has mentioned you often, and warned us to receive you with every courtesy."

And that is my last recollection of the kindly woman, who died a few months later. No, not absolutely my last recollection: visiting Scotland in 1896, I made a point of going to Holyrood Chapel for the express purpose of finding her grave.

The plain stone slab and simple inscription seemed at first a curious contrast to the gorgeous magnificence of her home and dress and surroundings. Yet I am inclined to think that they represented a side of her character which was quite as real as the other.

In like manner, no one who knew of her only as a "wild visionary" could have realised the shrewd, practical woman of business and of common-sense who shared the personality of Countess of Caithness and Duchesse de Pomar.

I remember that Mr Frederic Myers made the same remark to me after a visit he paid to her, just after my return to England, for the purpose of arranging matters with regard to her generous bequest to the Society for Psychical Research.