

TABLEAU VIVANT

'...a living portrayal by actors or models, posed to look like a painting or sculpture.'

Saturday 15 August 1896

Regal Lodge, Kentford, Suffolk

Dear Diary,

This morning, I received a letter from Patsy Cornwallis-West, informing me that Millais the painter had died on Thursday. Today I reminisced about the times spent in his company and how exciting London was. My decision to mourn Millais was of course at the detriment of tending to my racehorses. I have previously commended several accounts to these pages of those past "society days" but feel it appropriate to summarise for a final record.

I became formally acquainted with Millais on Sunday 29 April 1877. Unknowingly to Millais, I had in fact first made his acquaintance not in London, but in Southampton the previous year, at an exhibition of his work. Falsely, both him and I were believed to originate from Jersey but no matter – we can leave that one to genealogists. The London event was a social gathering held at the residence of Sir John and Lady Sebright in Knightsbridge. This was the occasion of my first interaction with London society.

At the time of our formal meeting, I was in mourning for my late brother who had died in a riding accident. An artist called Frank Miles commented on my dress – I wore black rather than an elaborate Victorian white evening gown; but the truth concerning my dress is that I had little allowance afforded to me by my husband, Ned, so there was little chance of dressing to the required standard. My personal mourning presented the perfect, though sad, foil. Frank Miles was an acquaintance of the writer and poet, Oscar Wilde, and it was Oscar who formally introduced me to Millais.

'My dearest Lillie, may I introduce you to the esteemed artist of our day, John Everett Millais no less. Of course, you two may already know of each other having come across the channel from Jersey?'

'Mrs. Langtry, it is an honour. I am at your service,' said the blushing artist.

'I know of your work Mr. Millais. It is classical and yet, mythological. A wonderful combination of genres.'

'I commend you on your knowledge of art, Mrs. Langtry. May I speak with reverence and say how delightful your natural beauty outshines all in the room and plays on one's artistic senses. Perhaps you would agree to sitting for a composition or two?'

I soon became Mr. Millais's muse; and in turn, with Frank's sketches of me being sold in vast quantities across London, gained the attention of a certain Prince of Wales, dearest Bertie. Millais's *A Jersey Lily* was exhibited the following summer at the Royal Academy; and London was simply agog. I thus received an independent income from the sales of prints and the odd advertising campaign (I was featured on posters for Pears Soap), so was able to fully enter London Society and be seen in all the right places – riding in Rotten Row; attending Ascot races; Royal Garden Parties; Windsor et al. And of course, many social parties – Mrs. Asquith labelled us ladies of the Prince of Wales as "Professional Beauties."

As you are aware, dear diary, I found a true love I had been searching for. This was with Bertie's cousin Prince Louis of Battenburg; and Jeanne-Marie was born from our association. The love Louis and I felt for each other was not unrequited; but Bertie was furious with me and sent Louis away. I had to return to London society for fear of ruin and had to make amends. I called upon Oscar Wilde and Frank Miles to assist in my desperate quest, and it was through them that Millais came up with the wonderful suggestion to stage a tableau vivant, in the presence of the Prince of Wales. Millais chose his *Effie Deans*, a painting I had sat for in 1877. *Effie Deans* is based on a scene in Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian* where an outlaw meets a peasant girl, Effie, in a Scottish Glen. It was a perfect choice. The staging for the tableau vivant, was a society evening held at a residence in the Cromwell Road.

'It is the innocence of a chance meeting; of freedom; of no required enhancement of beauty beyond the natural form of nature itself,' pronounced Millais proudly as the Prince led the applause for the tableau vivant. I was forgiven and returned to favour, and the Prince became Bertie to me once more.

'Do you realise what you have achieved Millais?' said Oscar excitedly to the artist. 'Our Jersey Lily is in bloom once more.'

Oscar was right, and it is Millais I must thank here, for returning me to my rightful place in society. Without Millais, all would have been lost.



John Everett Millais, *Effie Deans*, 1877, Oil on canvas, Dimensions unknown. Private Collection.