

PEGGY EATON'S ORDEAL.

The name of Mrs. John H. Eaton, or Peggy Eaton, as she has been more commonly called, has come down to us through history. There are but few persons of any reading who have not heard something of her. She is remembered chiefly for the merciless war waged upon her by her own sex in the early days of Jackson's administration, and as having been, in popular belief, the cause of the disruption of Jackson's first Cabinet. There are but few at this day who know the real ground of this hostility to Mrs. Eaton, the manner in which it was exhibited or the extent to which it was carried. To properly understand these things it is necessary to know something of Mrs. Eaton herself and of the peculiar characteristics of Washington select society as it then existed.

Mrs. Eaton was the daughter of an Irishman named O'Neale, who had for many years kept an inn in Washington on the present site of the Metropolitan hotel. Gay, lively, vivacious, and of uncommon beauty, she had a quick wit and a sharp tongue. Her early associations at her father's hostelry were not calculated to refine her nature, too add grace to her manner, or to improve her tastes. She had, however, a kind heart, was the pet of the household, and a general favorite with her father's guests. She had, when but little more than a child, married a man named Timberlake, who was a purser in the navy. He was a hard drinker, and in a drunken fit at sea had taken his own life, leaving his own accounts with the government in hopeless confusion and his family destitute.

Jackson, immediately after his first election, offered to Maj. John H. Eaton, then a senator from Tennessee, the position of Secretary of War. Eaton was a widower. His deceased wife had been the niece of Mrs. Jackson. He had shown marked attention to Mrs. Timberlake after she had become a widow. He boarded at her father's hotel, which had always been the home of Mrs. Timberlake, and report said that his attentions to her before her husband's death had been such as to occasion remark. But these attentions did not appear to have been more than to escort her occasionally to and from the capitol. Other members had done this without causing scandal.

Before accepting Jackson's offer Eaton wrote to him, saying, that as a Cabinet officer, he would be expected to maintain an establishment and asking his advice as to the propriety of his offering himself in marriage to the widow Timberlake. Jackson, who had known

Mrs. Timberlake from her early childhood, advised him to marry the lady, and the marriage came off in January, 1829.

This marriage did not occasion any special comment at the time. But in a few months, after Eaton had become Secretary of War, assaults were openly made, and they were kept up without abatement, and with increasing virulence, until her husband, with the other members of the cabinet, resigned.

Washington upper society was then exceedingly exclusive. Its female leaders were then chiefly from the old families of Virginia and Maryland, and were the types of an aristocracy the last remnants of which were swept away by the downfall of the rebellion. The spirit of caste ruled strangely among them. They could not bring themselves to recognize as their equals any who could not boast of an ancestry in which was mingled some of the blood of the old nobility.

In the interval between her marriage with Eaton and his appointment at the head of the war department Mrs. Eaton was for the first time brought into social contact with the upper circle at parties, dinners and receptions. She was treated by them with cool and distant civility. She made no effort to cross the barrier which their manner plainly implied lay between them and her. When, however, her husband became a cabinet minister she reached a position that placed her above them. Stung at the thought that they would now be compelled to yield social precedence to one whom everybody knew was nothing but the daughter of a country Irish tavern keeper, so far below them in birth and breeding, these proud, haughty dames resolved to make her life unendurable in her new position. She was a giddy, thoughtless young woman, whose education was imperfect, who had been given no previous training of the elevated station to which she had suddenly raised, and who, they said, brought into the parlors the manners of the kitchen. She had in her early girlhood been called Peggy, but this name was dropped as she grew older. To give a keener edge to their contempt they spoke of her as "Peg Eaton," the name by which she is known to posterity.

(to be continued.)

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