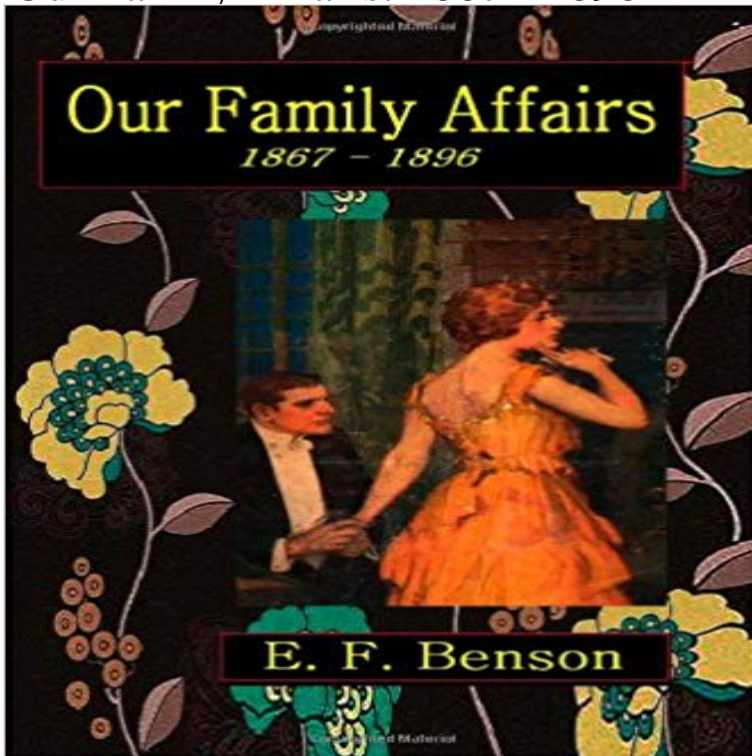


Our Family Affairs: 1867 - 1896



Not every family shows its characteristics so easily. Not every family has so acute an interpreter, indeed. But if the philosophy of the Benson family is not obvious, it is not for want of self-revelation on the part of its members; other family members have already given us glimpses into their family affairs, and now E. F. Benson contributes his impressions, in a large, pleasant volume, adorned with eight photographs. The impression left by his description of Dr. Benson is that of a forbidding, absorbed disciplinarian. As I got to know him, I, like the rest of us, also got to fear him. For many years we were none of us at our ease with him, as we always were with my mother, and it is tragic that it was so, for I know that he regarded us all with the tenderest love. He had no idea how blighting his displeasure was to small children, and for fear of incurring it we went delicately like Agag, attending so strictly to our behavior that all spontaneity withered. Nothing would have pleased him more, had we taken him into our confidence, but we feared his disapproval more than we were drawn into intimacy with him. It is an illustration of Herbert Spencers remark that the average child regards his parents as friend-enemies, either friendly or hostile, and for no obvious reason in either case. Whether such criticisms of ones father should be published is another matter. But the frankness with which Dr. Bensons character is analysed by his son makes these pages certainly a human document. His wife, on the other hand, is most attractive. The charm and force of her character are evident on every page. She was her childrens friend, played their games, managed their affairs, and even smoked in private, although her husband sternly discouraged tobacco. Her smoking was very occasional, but it is one of the human traits which endeared her to her boys, under fear of their father. She

contrived to be loyal to him, and at the same time to indulge the children wisely. Altogether, a winning figure. And the old nurse of the family deserves a place beside R. L. Stevensons nurse. The letters written to her by Mrs. Benson, after the death of Martin Benson, are only one of many proofs that Elizabeth Cooper was a treasure. She mingles in almost every memory that I have of those days, a loved and protecting presence. E. F. Bensons own career is outlined rapidly and candidly. He was not a clever boy; he failed more than once to win a scholarship at Eton, but when he went from Marlborough to Cambridge he specialized in archaeology, and went to Greece in connection with the British School of Archaeology. Duly, fiction was to claim him. He had written for his own amusement a draft of Dodo, and had actually sent it to Henry James for a critical verdict! Later on, it was sent to Lucas Malet, and finally published. Archaeology failing to provide a vocation, he applied for a post in the Education Office. But those in whose hands the appointment rested thought that the author of Dodo would be a very indifferent educator, in spite of testimonials from tutors. So into fiction E. F. Benson went.

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