



# Adventures of an American Girl in Victorian London (Victorian London Ebooks Book 11)

*Elizabeth L. Banks*

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[original title: 'Campaigns of Curiosity : Journalistic Adventures of an American Girl in London']

Elizabeth L. Banks (1870–1938) was an ambitious young American journalist (born in New Jersey, raised in Wisconsin) who worked as a typist and reporter in Baltimore, then took the unlikely post of secretary to the American Ambassador in Peru, before coming to London to seek her fortune. She achieved her goal admirably in 1894 with a form of 'stunt journalism' that had first been practised by James Greenwood, who dressed in rags and presented himself as a 'casual' pauper to the parish authorities, writing up his experience in his sensational article 'A Night in a Workhouse'. Banks, very much a late nineteenth-century 'New Woman', likewise decided to go 'undercover' amongst the poor — first as a servant, then in several other positions, masquerading as a crossing sweeper, laundress and, at the opposite end of the social spectrum, pretending to be an heiress, to see how easy it might be to buy one's way into the aristocratic upper echelons of London 'Society'. Banks's ploy was successful and the resulting articles became the talk of the capital — and guaranteed her a future career in journalism. Her own autobiography records the words of the *Pall Mall Gazette* ... 'Her strange, wild and curious adventures are the common theme of conversation in thousands of English homes ...' and, although Banks's subterfuge may not seem 'wild' to modern readers, it remains striking. It was the impersonation of a servant which caused the greatest furore, not least the fear that the upstart young American was promoting a very un-British egalitarian agenda, one sympathetic to the complaints of servants against mistresses, undermining the normal healthy relations between the classes. In fact, the book provides a rather too convenient comparison of two households — the first where the employer exploits and over-works her staff, the second where the cook and maids have the whip-hand over an overly timid and caring mistress. Banks herself, however, had no great political agenda. She confesses frankly in her autobiography that 'I did it for "copy" ... to earn my living'.

Such was the interest in Banks's work, that the press sought out the employers who were fooled by the artful reporter. 'Mrs. Allison' (not her real name) was interviewed by the populist *Pick Me Up* magazine and declared herself 'completely hoodwinked'. She claimed, however, that she only employed Miss Banks because of the pathetic story she told at interview about her penury, and that — contrary to the impression in the book — the cleanliness of her household suffered a good deal due to the reporter's ignorance. Mrs. Allison recounts how she knew there was trouble when her other maid informed her, 'Ma'am, the new housemaid's sweeping the stairs with a bonnet whisk!' In short, according to Mrs. Allison, her American employee 'did not hesitate to declare herself as competent and reliable, although she entered every house under false pretences without being able to sew on a button, darn a stocking, or scrub a floor'.

Banks's success was so great because her deception played on the existing fears of the middle- and upper-classes about servants, i.e. that, when members of the family were not present, staff were incompetent and/or deceptive — traitors beneath one's own roof — even if this only amounted to taking unwarranted 'perquisites' from household groceries, or seeing male 'followers'. Whether Miss Banks provides us with a completely truthful account or 'journalistic gingerbread' (to quote the rather unsympathetic *Pick Me Up*) I must leave it to the reader to judge — regardless, the book remains a fascinating read.

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