

## THE LADIES OF LLANGOLLEN.



O the picturesque little town of Llangollen, by the Dee side, in the year 1779, came two charming Irish ladies who proposed to spend their days in the seclusion of the lovely vale.

Lady Eleanor Charlotte Butler, the older of the two, was about forty years of age, fresh, vigorous, and handsome, when she wearied of the world, and especially of matrimonial offers, and longed for a quiet residence apart from the conventionalities of the town. Just then she chanced to meet a beautiful girl who had recently been introduced to the fashionable society of Dublin, and the two soon became inseparable friends. The Hon. Sara Ponsonby listened with eager interest to her friend's romantic plan for a life of seclusion; and as one of Lady Eleanor's suitors was particularly urged upon her attention at this time, the ladies decided to take matters in their own hands. They ran away in undignified haste; but as they had neglected to take a sufficient supply of money, they readily yielded to the entreaties of pursuing relatives, and returned.

A few weeks later, so the story goes, a lady of fine presence, accompanied by a maid-servant and a tall, handsome footman in top-boots and livery, took the boat at Dublin for Holyhead; and when well on their way the footman was metamorphosed into a handsome girl, none other than the Hon. Sara Ponsonby. Mary Carryl, a faithful servant, herself a notable character, shared their flight. After some deliberation they selected a beautiful site in Llangollen, in North Wales, and built a cottage, which remains to-day as much an object of interest to readers and travelers as it has ever been since it was chosen and named «a place of sweet and blessed retirement» by the Ladies of the Vale.

Both ladies were highly connected, particularly Lady Eleanor, who was nearly related to that Duke of Ormonde who commanded the forces of Charles I in Ireland; and she was fond of recounting, in her quiet home, the stirring deeds of her illustrious kinsfolk. The attachment of the pair was ardent and strong, and their literary tastes were similar. They desired only to be allowed to live and

read and study in each other's society; and after a family council of relatives had met and recognized the uselessness of further opposition, a comfortable annuity was settled upon them, and they were left to follow the dictates of their own fancy.

The ladies were of unusually fine appearance. Lady Eleanor, the stronger-minded of the two, is described as being small, brisk, plump, with a round, fair face and glowing health, when they first came to Llangollen; while her friend was tall and fair, with a graceful, elegant figure, a beautiful face, and sweet womanly features. They adopted a costume at once comfortable, serviceable, and at the time becoming, from which they never varied. Each wore a heavy dark-blue riding-habit with stiffly starched neckcloth, a gentleman's hat and boots, and a profusion of rings and brooches. On special occasions Lady Eleanor wore somewhat conspicuous ornaments—the cordon of the Order of St. Louis and a golden lily almost of natural size, presents from the Bourbon family.

The villa which they erected at Plas Newydd was unlike any known architectural construction, and the plan of it must have originated in the brains of the owners. The present-day visitor irreverently compares it to an enormous handsomely carved wardrobe. The low, two-storied front is inclosed by an oaken palisade, while doors and windows are richly ornamented with carvings of religious, historical, and mythological figures in picturesque confusion. Abraham, Venus, Julius Cæsar, and the apostles keep friendly company in the decorations of Plas Newydd. Rich carvings ornament also the interior of the house. There are only four rooms, small and comfortable: «the kitchen as elegant in its way,» writes a visitor, «as the lightsome little dining-room,» which contrasted well with the gloomy but superior grace of the library just beyond. This library, which was decorated in the Gothic style, had painted-glass windows, and was lighted by a curious sort of prismatic lantern of cut glass of various colors, in which were inclosed two lamps and their reflectors. This occupied the elliptical arch of the doorway, and, when lighted, resembled a small but brilliant volcano. A large Æolian harp was



placed in one window. Books by the best authors of all lands, portraits of friends, and rare and curious articles of bric-à-brac from all parts of the world, brought or sent to them by their many visitors, were the ornaments of the little library.

The grounds of Plas Newydd were delightfully laid out with rural walks and bridges, rose hedges, fountains, temples, grottos, and a tiny but complete glen with a brook running through it. The rarest and finest fruit-trees and choice flowers were a passion with the ladies, and no weeds were permitted to grow in their small domain. A commonplace cow lived somewhere, and there were a dove-cote, a house for robins, and a quaint circular dairy in which a curious churn produced a pat

consequence, and ordered the best editions of French, English, and Italian books, which they had put into the finest of bindings, and treasured in their lattice-guarded bookcases. Lady Eleanor had been educated in a foreign convent, and shared with Miss Ponsonby a great fondness for French and Italian authors. Much time was given to drawing, painting, and embroidering.

Correspondence with distinguished people in various parts of Great Britain and the Continent formed a large portion of the daily interest of the ladies; and with commendable thrift they usually had on hand a package of envelops waiting to be franked by the first visitor who had the franking privilege at his disposal. The store-closets at Plas Newydd were filled with the familiar, agreeable letters which were a distinguishing feature of the literature of those days. The Marquis of Londonderry writes from Paris to express his admiration for the retreat in the vale; declares that should he be exiled from his country, he would certainly rebuild Dinas Bran's old castle and become their neighbor; and adds the startling intelligence that the king and queen have fled from Paris, no one knows whither. Edmund Burke writes of his delightful remembrance of the ladies' hospitality in the «elegant retirement of Llangollen.» Viscount Bolingbroke acknowledges hospitalities, and begs leave to present a few plants which he had not observed in the Plas Newydd grounds. The wife of Sir Humphry Davy tells of her friend Miss Edgeworth; of the approaching visit of Mme. de Staël, who will, she fears, find «our English opinions in trifles opposite to the full enjoyment of society»; and of Lord Byron, who talks of Greece «with the feelings of a poet, and the intentions of a wanderer,» and who is to be introduced to Miss Edgeworth at a quiet breakfast. The Hon. George Canning announces that his daughter is soon to visit Llangollen, and reminds the ladies of their kind offer to send him a specimen of Llangollen mutton, adding: «My address is Foreign Office for mutton as well as for letters.» The Earl of Darnley presents a sonnet in honor of the gentle recluses; and Southey, from Keswick, acknowledges recent hospitalities by the gift of a new poem. There are several familiar notes from the Duke of Wellington, who first visited Llangollen as a boy with his grandmother, Lady Dungannon, and who gained his knowledge of Spanish from a prayer-book in that language given him by the Llangollen ladies, which he studied during a tedious voyage. The duke's



FROM AN OLD PRINT.

LADY ELEANOR BUTLER AND THE HONORABLE  
SARA PONSONBY.

of butter every morning for the breakfast of the ladies. Lady Eleanor had charge of the estate, superintending, and often assisting in the affairs of the garden, while Miss Ponsonby looked after the house.

The daily life of the ladies was one of such originality, freedom from the ordinary cares of humanity, and indifference to fashion and conventionalities, that they soon became better known than if they had remained in society. They took long walks and drives in the country; and retained a lively interest in all the affairs of the great world, received many newspapers and letters, remembered all the births, deaths, and marriages in families of





FROM AN OLD PRINT.

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mother was a frequent correspondent, and several of her letters appear directed to «Miss Butler, Llangollen, Salop Post, Oswestry Bag,» in which she describes at length her various attacks of toothache, and tells of Arthur's<sup>1</sup> wonderful good fortune in securing an appointment as aide-de-camp to Lord Buckingham, at ten shillings a day. She has to get the future hero of Waterloo ready for his departure, and says that he is really «a very charming young man,» and «wonderfully lucky.»

«Every person of consequence traveling

<sup>1</sup> The Duke of Wellington.

in Wales takes letters to the Ladies of the Vale,» says a writer of the day. Among these was Miss Anne Seward, whose poetical works were edited by Sir Walter Scott, and from whose voluminous correspondence we glean some interesting facts about the daily life at Plas Newydd. It is of interest to recall that this same accomplished Miss Seward was the author of that «Monody on the Death of André» to which General Washington felt constrained to make an explanatory reply.

Another honored visitor at Plas Newydd was Mme. de Genlis, with Mlle. de Orléans and two companions. Mme. de Genlis had



been told by an Englishman that an example of pure and disinterested friendship was to be seen in a valley of North Wales, and the lively Frenchwoman procured letters of introduction and journeyed thither. She writes: «We were received with a grace, cordiality, and kindness of which it would be impossible for me to give an idea. . . . I could not turn my eyes away from these two ladies. . . . Both have the most engaging politeness and highly cultivated minds.» To her the place had an air of enchantment, and she went away, as did many another, envying the friends their happy, healthful life amid beautiful scenery, flowers, and trees, with intellectual pleasures, and the joys of a friendship in which the keenest critic could not detect a trace of weariness or interruption.

Courtesies were very properly withheld from curious visitors. Proper letters of introduction were the only defense against idle curiosity-seekers.

With the advance of years the ladies seem to have developed the eccentricities which would naturally follow their manner of living. They adopted dogs, cats, and parrots, and the little villa became a storehouse for all sorts of oddities.

In 1820, when Lady Eleanor was past eighty and her friend sixty-five, Charles Mathews, the celebrated actor, was playing at Oswestry, twelve miles from Llangollen, and the two ladies went to see him, having secured seats in one of the boxes. Their appearance so distracted the actor's attention that he continued his part with difficulty. «Though I had never seen them,» he says, «I instantaneously knew them. As they are seated, there is not one point to distinguish them from men—the dressing and powdering of the hair, their well-starched neckcloths, the upper part of their habits, which they always wear, even at a dinner party, and which are made precisely like men's coats. They looked exactly like two respectable superannuated old clergymen.» He accepted an invitation to visit the ladies at their cottage, and says that he longed to put Lady Eleanor in a glass case and take her away to show to his friends.

Five years later Sir Walter Scott and his son-in-law Lockhart paid a visit to Plas Newydd, and the latter gives a graphic description of the ladies as they then appeared.

In his «*Briefe eines Verstorbenen*,» Prince Pückler-Muskau writes of a charming visit which he paid to the two «noble, fashionable, and handsome ladies» who had decided to dwell as twin hermits; and gives a lively picture of the home and its mistresses.

Among their visitors the ladies also counted a certain Sir Alured, a handsome and interesting, but venerable man at this period. Here is a romance within a romance; for of this gallant gentleman it is said that one of the princesses fell desperately in love with him, and her father, poor old George III, sent the too fascinating young man away to India, where there was war at the time, and whence, therefore, there was some likelihood that he would not return. But at eighty he came back, still handsome and fascinating, and was received with distinguished favor by the new king, who made him a field-marshal. Of the princess and her affection nothing more is learned.

Sir Alured had long known Lady Eleanor,—indeed, for aught I know to the contrary, he may have been one of the five despairing swains mentioned in that lady's obituary,—and once a year, usually in October, he came down to Llangollen to pay his respects to the two ladies, to whom the visit was always an occasion of consequence.

The death of Lady Eleanor was a grievous blow to the old man. He came the year following, however, but was less gay than usual; and it is even said that he neglected to bestow the usual parting kiss on his fair entertainer. The Hon. Sara promptly reminded him of the oversight, for which he at once made atonement.

Mary Carryl, the faithful servant, had died in 1809, making the first change that had occurred in the inmates of the household.

Each of the friends wished a picture of the other, but neither was willing to sit for her portrait. By some stratagem of a friend pictures of the two together was secured when the ladies were unaware.

In June, 1829, at the age of ninety, Lady Eleanor passed away; and although her friends surrounded Miss Ponsonby with every possible kindness, she refused to be comforted. She was seldom seen except by her domestics, and survived in her loneliness only eighteen months.