

MRS. BARBAULD.

DURING the closing decades of the last century and the first quarter of the present there was a group of remarkable women who exerted a certain influence upon the literature of their time ; women who, by their exemplary lives and the purity of their writings, if not by the force of their genius, deserve to be rescued from the oblivion into which their memories are rapidly falling. I allude to Hannah More, Joanna Baillie, and Mrs. Barbauld, names that are only dimly suggestive to the modern reader.

Yet there is something refreshing, in these days of feverish excitement and literary over-activity, in looking back upon those calm, leisurely, old-world lives to which authorship was a pleasing recreation, not a jading task. It is like leaving the clamour and bustle of London for some quiet country nook, and lying down upon the grass and looking upward at the dancing leaves flecking the bright blue sky, and dreaming of the past. In the present paper I propose to tell the story of the last-named of the group—Mrs. Barbauld.

Ann Letitia Aikin was born at Kibworth Harcourt, a village of Leicestershire, on the 20th of June, 1743, and was the eldest child and only daughter of John Aikin, Presbyterian minister and schoolmaster. Without sisters, or companions of her own age and sex, brought up in the strictest seclusion and according to the austere code of manners affected by the Dissenters at that period, her childhood was a gloomy one. Reading was her chief amusement. Her father's library was small, but it contained some of the masterpieces of literature, and to the usual curriculum of study she added Latin, and even something of Greek.

In the isolation of this out-of-the-world Midland village, knowing no other pleasure than she found in books—her only friend her brother John, who was by three years her junior—the girl passed the first fifteen years of her life. Just at that time her father was appointed classical tutor to a somewhat famous Dissenting academy at Warrington, which numbered amongst its masters such men as Dr. Priestly and Dr. Enfield.

A new and more cheerful life opened to our young heroine in her new home ; she made acquaintances among the ladies of the neighbourhood, and became a member of pleasant circles, to which her beauty and talent rendered her a welcome addition. Writing of this period, Lucy Aikin, in her memoir of her aunt, says :

“The fifteen succeeding years passed by her at Warrington comprehended, probably, the happiest, as well as the most brilliant portion of her existence. She was at this time possessed of great beauty, distinct traces of which she retained to the latest period of life. Her

person was slender, her complexion exquisitely fair, with the bloom of perfect health ; her features were regular and elegant, and her dark blue eyes beamed with the light of wit and fancy." The tutors and the elder pupils of the seminary, together with some residents of educated taste, formed quite a little literary coterie—such as were by no means uncommon in the provincial towns during the last century, before railroads had centralised the whole intellectual life of the kingdom within a few miles' radius of Charing Cross.

In 1771 her brother John came to settle in Warrington, and it was by his persuasion that she made her first literary venture, in the shape of a volume of poems, written at different periods, which appeared in 1773. So great was the success of this undertaking that, in the same year, she joined him in bringing out another volume, which bore the title of "Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse, by J. and L. Aikin." It was received as favourably as its predecessor had been, and attracted the attention of some of the most famous literati of the day: even of Dr. Johnson, who pronounced that in her essay "On Romance" she had given the best imitation of his own style that had yet appeared, since she had succeeded in "imitating the sentiment as well as the diction."

In 1774, when she was in her thirty-first year, Miss Aikin became Mrs. Barbauld. Mr. Rochemont Barbauld was of French descent. His grandfather was a Huguenot, who had been driven from France at the revocation of the Edict of Nantes ; his father was a clergyman of the Church of England, and Rochemont was intended for the same calling, but strangely enough was sent to the Dissenting college at Warrington for his education. And here, probably, the bright eyes and fascinating manners of Anna Letitia did as much as conscientious conviction to bring him over to the Presbyterian faith. Without fortune, and having voluntarily deprived himself of such advancement as his father's position might have obtained for him, the young man's prospects were too uncertain to warrant his taking a wife, and the lovers had to wait patiently for the consummation of their happiness until he was called to undertake the charge of a congregation at Palgrave, near Diss, in Suffolk.

To be the minister of a Dissenting chapel in a small country village was no very brilliant opening, and would scarcely have given the young couple the means of living ; so they determined to open a boarding-school. The literary fame which the lady had won in her maiden days was no doubt a great assistance to such an undertaking, the success of which at once placed them in a comfortable position. Two or three of their pupils afterwards became men of mark, notably Chief Justice Denman, and William Taylor, of Norwich, who, by his excellent translations of Goethe's "Iphigenia," and Bürger's ballad of "Leonore," was the first pioneer of German literature in this country.

That Mrs. Barbauld found in her married life that perfect happiness

that all lovers anticipate and so few married people realise, is more than doubtful. Mr. Barbauld was of a singularly irritable and excitable temperament—an infirmity which increased with years and ultimately assumed the form of mania; and children, which she ardently desired, were not vouchsafed to them. But she was a brave, cheerful woman, thoroughly healthy in body and mind, who always looked on the bright side of life and never gave way to repinings. Her letters to her brother, during her residence at Palgrave, are full of this spirit, and give some pleasant glimpses of her life at that period. Here is an extract from one dated 1775.

“To prove to you that I am not lazy, I will tell you what I have been about. First, then, making up beds; secondly, scolding my maids, preparing for company; and lastly, drawing up and delivering lectures on geography. Give me joy of our success, for we shall have twenty-seven scholars before the vacation, and two more have bespoke places at Midsummer; so that we do not doubt of being soon full: nay, sir, I can assure you it is said in this country, that it will soon be a favour to be on Mr. Barbauld’s list:—you have no objection, I hope, to a little boasting.”

So great was the success of the school that after eleven years they had realised sufficient to give it up and start for a twelvemonth’s holiday travel upon the Continent.

Her brother was now married, and the father of several children, and out of his abundance of olive-branches she begged one to adopt for her own childless home. A boy was sent to her request, and it was for little Charles that she wrote the “Early Lessons,” which commenced quite a new era in juvenile literature. “Before Mrs. Trimmer and Mrs. Barbauld,” says Hannah More, “in my early youth, there was scarcely anything between ‘Cinderella’ and the *Spectator* for young persons.” “Early Lessons” has been one of the models upon which children’s books have been constructed ever since; and so great was its popularity that it was translated into French.

Soon after their return to England, in 1786, Mr. Barbauld was appointed minister to a small congregation at Hampstead, and they took a house in Church Row. A strange, old, quaint thoroughfare still is Church Row, much the same as it was then; ay, or when Sherlock and Arbuthnot were amongst its residents, with its tall, flat, brick houses, and shrub-embowered, ivy-mantled church, which give it all the air of a cathedral close. There is nothing picturesque in the spot, but there is a suggestiveness, a harmony in the homogeneous ugliness, a delicious repose, a grave air of ancient respectability that carries you back into the days when these buildings were new. At noonday its pavements are almost deserted, and the houses look silent and gloomy, as though some venerable relics of the last century, old gentlemen in breeches and silk stockings and buckled shoes, and brass-buttoned coats and tie-wigs, had taken refuge here, upon this

new Ararat, from the deluge of modernism that has swallowed up all the rest of their old world.

Strolling through the iron gates into the shaded grass-grown churchyard, with its old-fashioned lichen-stained tombstones, down its sloping sides into the bottom hollow, you might dream and meditate for an hour together undisturbed by an intruding presence, only by the sound of occasional passers-by on the pathway above wending their way to and from the lane to Frognal. But beyond the green leaves, stretching away through acres of fog and smoke and grey opaqueness, until its boundaries are lost against the Surrey hills, lie the turmoil and the densely thronged streets of London; and borne upon the wind like the surge of the far-off sea, soothing and lulling by its dull monotony, comes the roar of its restless life.

How often must Letitia Barbauld, and Joanna Baillie, who now repose there, and many many other frequenters of the quaint old village, have loitered in these breezy precincts and looked down with similar thoughts upon this same landscape. Hampstead was quite a country town in those days, and was removed from the metropolis by long stretches of open fields, by dusty country roads, which became such Sloughs of Despond in winter as to render personal communication with London extremely difficult at times. Hampstead had not yet attained its great literary era; the old Well Walk was not yet hallowed by the presence of Keats; the Vale of Health knew not yet the presence of pleasant, easy-going Leigh Hunt, who brought Shelley and Coleridge and Lamb to stroll with him over the breezy heath, and leave there the impress of their footsteps evermore, grafting on the loveliness of Nature the intellectual beauty of poetry; but it had its literary coterie, not to be compared with the group first-named, but still celebrated at this time, chief of which were the Baillie sisters, and to which our new-comer made a valuable addition.

It was during her residence here that she joined her brother in the composition of the once-famous children's book, "Evenings at Home;" only fourteen out of the ninety-nine pieces it contains, however, were the production of her pen. The ferment of the French Revolution infected even the quiet precincts of Church Row, and Mrs. Barbauld became an enthusiastic advocate of the popular cause, writing pamphlets and identifying herself with the extreme English party; which brought down upon her the wrath of Horace Walpole in two of his letters to the Misses Berry, in which he stigmatises her as "that virago, Barbauld."

About this time we get the following graphic sketch of the couple from the pen of Fanny Burney:—

"She is much altered, but not for the worse to me, though she is for herself; since the flight of her youth, which is evident, has also taken with it a great portion of an almost set smile, which had an

air of determined complacency and prepared acquiescence that seemed to result from a sweetness which never risked being off guard. I remember Mrs. Chapone's saying to me, after our interview, 'She is a very good young woman, as well as replete with talents; but why must one always smile so? It makes my poor jaws ache to look at her.'

She describes Mr. Barbauld as being "a very little, diminutive figure, but well bred and sensible."

In 1802, they removed from Hampstead to what was then another quaint suburb, but one which the iconoclastic hand of modern improvement has long since spoiled, Stoke Newington, Mr. Barbauld having been appointed minister to the chapel upon the Green. There resided her brother, Dr. Aikin. Sir Henry Holland tells us in his *Reminiscences* how he passed some time at his house, where he met his sister, and adds: "Mrs. Barbauld, who lived close to him, and his daughter Lucy Aikin, gave a certain literary repute to this tranquil village. I met at several parties at one or other of the houses, writers of repute of that day, now almost or wholly forgotten."

The terrible excesses into which the French Revolution degenerated were bitterly disappointing to Mrs. Barbauld as well as to all other true friends to liberty; and in one of her letters, dated 1802, there is the first wail of weariness her cheerful spirit has uttered. "My enthusiasm is all gone," she writes, "not for Buonaparte, for with regard to him I never had any, but for most things. I wish, then, by any process, electric, galvanic, or through any other medium, we might recover some of the fine feelings which age is so apt to blunt: it would be the true secret of growing young again."

In 1808 a terrible affliction, almost the first in her peculiarly tranquil life, fell upon her. Mr. Barbauld, whose strange aberrations had given her great uneasiness for some time past, was found drowned in the New River.

She continued to reside at Stoke Newington, in a house on the south side of Church Street, which is now a jeweller's shop, still actively engaged in literary pursuits. Soon after her husband's death she edited a collection of *British Novelists* in fifty volumes, to which she appended biographical and critical notices of each writer; she also edited a book of selections which was familiar enough to us thirty or forty years ago—"The Enfield Speaker." In Crabb Robinson's *Diary*, and in her own and Lucy Aikin's letters, we obtain several pleasant glimpses of her in her old age.

"Went to Mrs. Barbauld's," writes Crabb Robinson (1821): "she was in good spirits, but she is now the confirmed old lady. Independently of her fine understanding and literary reputation, she would be interesting. Her white locks, fair and unwrinkled skin, brilliant starched linen, and rich silk gown, make her a fit subject for a painter. Her conversation is lively, her remarks judicious and always pertinent."

But the end was coming fast, and it was almost time; one by one the friends of her youth and her maturity were dropping into the grave, and leaving her in all the sad desolation of an extreme old age. On March 9, 1825, death came and found her full of serene hope and quiet faith. She lies buried in the chapel on the Green.

Her niece pays a rare tribute to her memory when she says: "She passed through a long life without having dropped, it is believed, a single friendship, and without having drawn upon herself a single enmity which could properly be called personal."

As a writer Mrs. Barbauld's fame has almost passed away. Several of her poems have much merit; Wordsworth considered her one of the best poetesses this country had produced, and forgot his habitual egotism so far in her favour as to envy her having written the last verse of her poem called "Life." "I am not in the habit of envying people their good things," he would say, "but I wish I had written those lines." The stanza is as follows:

"Life! we've been long together,
Through pleasant and through cloudy weather:
'Tis hard to part when friends are dear,
Perhaps 'twill cost a sigh, a tear:
Then steal away, give little warning;
Choose thine own time;
Say not good night, but in some brighter clime
Bid me good morning."

But her poetry belongs to that artificial didactic school of the eighteenth century which is so antipathetic to the present age, and must remain in oblivion until the wheel of Time brings round again its fashion. Her prose style, however, is admirable, being modelled upon our best writers; both Macaulay and Mackintosh were warm in their praise of it. Commenting upon a charming little essay, entitled "Inconsistent Expectations," Crabb Robinson says: "I hold it to be one of the most exquisite morsels of English prose ever written. And it had the most salutary effect on me." She was by no means a voluminous writer; two moderately-sized octavos, if we except her children's books, suffice to contain her effusions in poetry and prose—the latter consisting entirely of short essays, after the manner of Addison and Johnson—and her political pamphlets. Besides the collected edition of the British Novelists, previously referred to, she edited an edition of Richardson's Letters, and wrote an excellent memoir of him.

H. BARTON BAKER.

