

THE PRISONER OF AHLDEN.



Sophie Dorothea of Celle.

FAR away, in the middle of a vast plain in the north of Germany, there is a lonely village, and in this village there still stands a half-dismantled manor house known to history as the Castle of Ahlden. The village and the castle owe their title to fame to the fact that here was imprisoned for thirty-two years the hapless Queen Consort of the first of our Hanoverian kings, the beautiful Sophie Dorothea of Celle. She entered Ahlden a young and high-spirited woman under the delusion that her captivity would at most be temporary. Too late she discovered that her unrighteous judge and inexorable gaoler, George I., King of England, was determined, in defiance of all honour and mercy, to doom her to lifelong captivity, and for thirty long years and more she beat her wings against the bars of her cage in vain endeavour to escape, until at last, one grey November morning, the great deliverer Death came and the long martyrdom of her life was ended. Until this day the peasants of Ahlden tell of the tradition, handed down from their grandfathers, of the mysterious great lady of the castle driving furiously across the moorland surrounded by her guard of forty soldiers

with drawn swords, and the pilgrim to Ahlden is shown the window from which the poor Princess used to look out, hoping against hope for the deliverance that never came. And from this window, too, she is said to have waved to her son (afterwards George II. of England) when he tried to swim across the Aller and gain a few words with the mother whom he dearly loved. Surrounded by marshes and swamps, hemmed in by the river Aller on one side and the moat on the other, a more dreary spot than this lonely castle it would be impossible to imagine, and to the proud and beautiful woman who ate out her heart within its walls it must have been a veritable Castle of Despair.

For nearly two centuries a cloud of mystery has enshrouded the life of Sophie Dorothea: she has been the "veiled lady" of the House of Hanover. Undoubtedly her fate is a dark chapter in the history of that house. The main facts of her life may be briefly recounted here. She was the only daughter and heiress of the wealthy Duke of Celle by hismorganatic marriage with Eléonore d'Olbreuse, a beautiful and talented Frenchwoman. The Duke of Celle was the elder



THE LEINE SCHLOSS, HANOVER.

brother of the Elector Ernest Augustus of Hanover, who married Sophia daughter of the Queen of Bohemia and granddaughter of King James I. of England, and through her the succession of our present Royal Family came to the throne of England. The Electress Sophia hated the Duchess of Celle and her daughter with a deadly hatred, which was only concealed—not abandoned—when, from motives of State policy, her son Prince George Louis was married to his cousin, Sophie Dorothea.

At the time of her marriage the lovely heiress of Celle was only sixteen years of age. Her husband was a few years older, and known to be profligate, sullen, and cruel. The Princess was almost dragged to the altar by her father, for she viewed her husband with dislike and fear. Her forebodings were only too soon justified. Despite her beauty and the wealth she brought him,

George neglected and ill-treated his wife, and finally abandoned her for the society of his mistresses. Two children were born: the first, a son, afterwards became George II. of England; the second, a daughter, was Queen of Prussia and mother of Frederic the Great. Thus from Sophie Dorothea Queen Victoria and the German Emperor are directly descended. The birth of these children made no difference to the unhappy lot of the young Princess; the brutality of her husband, the dislike and contempt of her mother-in-law (the Electress Sophia), and the insolence of the Court mistresses made life at Hanover a misery to her.

At this juncture Count Königsmarck came upon the scene—a young Swedish nobleman, handsome, ardent, and of great wealth and ability. He had known Sophie Dorothea before her marriage, and, it was said, loved her from a child. Surrounded as she was



THE CASTLE OF CELLE.

by spies and enemies, neglected and abused and without a friend, the young Princess made a confidant of Count Königsmarck ; and though at first she treated him only as a friend, the friendship was dangerous, and destined to a fatal end. For Count Königsmarck, indignant at the treatment meted out to the Princess by the Court of Hanover, so far forgot his place as to avow his love for her, and she so far forgot her rank as to listen. When away on the wars he wrote to her most impassioned love-letters, and the Princess answered them in the same spirit ; and in these letters can be seen the growth of a love so great that in the end it swept everything before it.

At last, wearied of the cruelty of her husband, who made her suffer not only open insult, but personal violence, the Princess resolved to yield to the prayers of Count Königsmarck and fly with him. Everything was secretly arranged, and the night before the projected flight Count Königsmarck stole disguised into the palace at Hanover and visited the Princess in her apartments. His whereabouts were discovered by the Countess Platen, a mistress of the Elector, who was in love with Königsmarck and furiously jealous of the Princess. Armed with the sign-manual of the Elector and accompanied by three desperadoes, she lay in wait for Königsmarck in the corridor leading from the Princess's apartments, and when the Count came out the assassins fell upon him, killed him, and buried his body in a closet hard by. The spot where the murder took place is still pointed out in the Royal Palace at Hanover. A few days after, the Princess was hurried off to the Castle of Ahlden, and henceforth consigned to a living tomb. Since nothing could be definitely proved against her, she was divorced on the

ground that she refused to live with her husband (as, indeed, she did refuse), and every effort was made to hush up the murder of Königsmarck and keep the affair secret. The Princess was kept a close prisoner at Ahlden until her death in 1726, her husband appropriating her revenues and spending them on his mistresses. She maintained her innocence of actual guilt until her dying day.

The extraordinary precautions taken by the House of Hanover to maintain secrecy has resulted in much mystery and misrepresentation, and many so-called memoirs of Sophie Dorothea have been published which are either fraudulent or worthless. But the veil of mystery will at last be lifted, and the

true story of her life and her relations with Königsmarck will be told by Mr. W. H. Wilkins, author of "The Romance of Isabel Lady Burton." The result of his researches into the fate of the unhappy Sophie Dorothea are embodied in a book entitled "The Love of an Uncrowned Queen," which will be published shortly by Messrs. Hutchinson. In this book the dark cloud which has so long veiled this secret page in the history of the



COUNT KÖNIGSMARCK.

Royal House of Hanover will be lifted; the circumstances of the assassination of Königsmarck will be told from authentic and newly discovered documents ; the secret proceedings of the Divorce Court which condemned the Princess will be laid bare ; and the discovery of a box of old love-letters which passed between the Princess and Königsmarck will throw a vivid light on their ill-fated passion. These letters, which have long lain hid in the University library of Lund, in Sweden, will now be published in full for the first time, and bear eloquent witness of a true romance, unparalleled in history even by the loves of Mary Stuart.