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MEMOIRS OF EMINENT ENGLISHWOMEN

VOLUME 3

LOUISA STUART COSTELLO



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Memoirs of Eminent Englishwomen

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Sir G. Kneller. pinx.

J. Cooke. sculp.

ELIZABETH CROMWELL,

afterwards M^{rs} Claypole.

MEMOIRS
OF
EMINENT ENGLISHWOMEN.

BY
LOUISA STUART COSTELLO,

AUTHOR OF

"SPECIMENS OF THE EARLY POETRY OF FRANCE," "A SUMMER AMONGST THE BOCAGES
AND THE VINES," "A PILGRIMAGE TO AUVERGNE," "THE QUEEN MOTHER,"
ETC. ETC. ETC.

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MEMOIRS

OF

EMINENT ENGLISHWOMEN.

ANASTASIA VENETIA STANLEY, LADY DIGBY.

THIS beautiful heroine of her celebrated husband's devotion, was a very remarkable personage at her time, and is so intimately connected with Sir Kenelm, his pursuits and adventures,—strange and *picturesque* as they were,—that she has always excited considerable interest. Her beauty, and the admiration it created; her want of proper education, and unprotected state, exposed her to the attacks of envy and ill-nature, and her character has suffered, perhaps unmerited, censure. The history of her life is altogether a love-tale, which her husband has himself related in the inflated language of the time.

Sir Kenelm Digby was the son of the unfortunate and imprudent Sir Everard, who expiated

his crime of conspiracy on the scaffold, together with others concerned in the gunpowder plot. This sad event occurred when his son was an infant of three years of age. Although his mother was a rigid Catholic, yet she submitted—probably in order to save the confiscation of his estates—to his being educated as a Protestant, waiting, doubtless, until the time should come, when, by her influence, she should induce him to embrace the belief of his forefathers—an event which duly happened.

Venetia, the “ lode-star ” of this eccentric genius, was one of the daughters of Sir Edward Stanley, of Tonge Castle, in Shropshire, Knight of the Bath, grandson of the Earl of Derby. She was born in 1600 ; her mother was Lucy, daughter and co-heiress of Thomas Percy, seventh Earl of Northumberland, and she had the misfortune to lose her when only a few months old.

Sir Kenelm boasts that his Venetia, or, as he called her, “ Stelliana,” was “ born of parents that, in the antiquity and lustre of their houses, and in the goods of fortune, were inferior to none in the land ; that some of her ancestors had exalted and pulled down kings of England ; and that their successors still have right to wear a regal crown upon their princely temples ; ”—an allusion to the sovereignty of the Isle of Man, then possessed by the Earls of Derby.

Sir Edward Stanley, on the death of his wife,

was so much afflicted, that he resolved to retire from the world for the rest of his life, though he does not seem to have exhibited any particular affection for her when she lived. He committed his infant daughter to the care of one of his relations, who lived in the country, at Enston Abbey, in Oxfordshire, near the seat of Lady Digby, at Gothurst. The children thus became acquainted, and the flame sprung up in infancy which was to increase with years.

About the time of the marriage of the Princess Elizabeth to the Count Palatine, Venetia was taken by her father to his own house, and, being shortly afterwards summoned to Court to attend the festivities, it does not seem that his philosophy, or his grief, prevented him from hastening to make one of the gay circle that surrounded the throne. His daughter, radiant with youth, and a beauty of the most dazzling splendour, accompanied him. Proud of the treasure he possessed, the vain father lost no opportunity of exhibiting her everywhere; and wished "the world to see that fame was nothing too lavish in setting out her perfections."

In London "her beauty and *discretion* did soon draw the eyes and thoughts of all men to admiration," says her partial biographer; and a certain nobleman of the Court carried his passion to the length of stealing her away from her guardians, hearing she would be withdrawn from his gaze, and that of all her adorers, to be once more buried

in a country retreat. So constant was her mind at the age of thirteen that she slighted every expression of love for the sake of her attachment to Sir Kenelm, as he was himself assured of, although the envious world did not give her credit for prudence so much beyond her years.

Sir Kenelm's own description of his lady-love is so characteristic, that he must be allowed to tell his own tale, in the manner which places her in such a light as to confute the assertions of her detractors.

"It is evident," he says, speaking of the attachment of himself and Venetia, in the curious narrative of his "Private Memoirs," "that their own election had the least part in the beginning of it; for before they had the freedom of that, or of judging, this fire was kindled, it grew with them, and the first word that they could speak, being yet in the nurse's arms, was *love*. * * * This strong knot of affection being tied in tender years, before any mutual obligations could help to confirm it, could not be torn asunder by long absence, the austerity of parents, other pretenders, *false rumours*, and other great difficulties and oppositions that come to blast the budding blossoms of an infant love, that hath since brought forth so fair flowers and so mature fruit. Certainly the stars were, at the least, the first movers, who, having ordained that from the affection of these two the world might

learn how to love, did link together sundry remote causes to make them all concur in this one effect."

The poetical and philosophical biographer of his fair wife is always eloquent on this favourite theme ; and, certainly, if he who was chiefly concerned is to be believed, his Venetia was a model of perfection in every particular.

"It was not long," he exclaims, "before I was satisfied that, in this life, a man may enjoy so much happiness as, without anxiety or desire of having anything besides what he possesseth, he may, with a quiet and peaceable soul, rest with full measure of content and bliss, that I know not whether it be short of it in anything but the security of continuance. It was the perfect friendship and noble love of two generous persons that seemed to be born in this age, by ordinance of Heaven, to teach the world anew—what it hath long forgotten—the mystery of loving with honour and constancy between a man and a woman, both of them in the vigour of their youth, and both blessed by nature with eminent endowments, as well of the mind as of the body.

"There are so many and so different circumstances requisite to form a perfect example in this kind, that it is no wonder though many ages produce not one complete in all points."

The "high and transcendant operations of the celestial bodies," according to his theory, brought

about such an example of human enjoyment by uniting him to the beautiful daughter of Stanley. His account of their early attraction to each other is comic in its pompous seriousness.

“These children, the very first time they caught sight of each other, grew so fond of one another’s company, that all that saw them said, assuredly something above their tender capacity breathed this sweet affection into their hearts. They would mingle serious kisses among their innocent sports; and, whereas other children of like age did delight in fond plays and light toys, these two would spend the day in looking upon each other’s face, and in accompanying these looks *with gentle sighs*, which seemed to portend that much sorrow was laid up for their more understanding years; and if, at any time, they happened to use such recreations as were suitable to their age, they demeaned themselves therein so prettily and so affectionately, that one would have said Love was grown a child again, and took delight to play with them. And, when the time of parting came, they would take their leaves with such abundance of tears and sighs, as made it evident that so deep a sorrow could not be born and nursed in children’s breasts without a nobler cause than the usual fondness of others.”

Unkind Fate, however,

“Stept in between and bade them part.”

Sir Kenelm’s mother opposed their love; and the

adoring infants were separated, in the hope that they would forget this early *penchant*. Sir Kenelm relates the strange circumstances of Venetia's abduction, as having happened at a time when he had been absent from her for four years; an argument which her treacherous attendant makes use of to induce her to give him up, and look with eyes of greater favour on the nobleman, whose name remains a secret, who had gained her as his advocate. It seems an extraordinary piece of boldness in a lover, to have ventured to carry off and with no honourable intentions, a young lady of such high rank as Venetia, and to keep her for some days at his country-house, from whence she is described as at length escaping by means of tying her sheets together, and lowering herself from a window; after which, she had to climb a garden wall, and, having descended from that dangerous position,—

“Finding herself at liberty in the park, she directed her course one certain way, until she came to the pales, which, with difficulty, she climbed over, and then she wandered about large fields and *horrid woods*, without meeting with any highway or sign of habitation. * * * At length she sat down to take some rest, when a *hungry wolf* came rushing out of a wood that was close by, and, perceiving her by the increasing twilight, *ran at her with open mouth*, whom, as soon as she saw, fear made her run away; but to little purpose, for he had soon

overtaken her, and, having got her down, would have made *her* his prey that was worthy to sway the empire of the world!"

Where there are such *wolves*, or *loup-garoux*, there are, however, generally knights-errant ready to rescue distressed damsels, and such an one now appeared, who, "seeing the tragical spectacle," called his dogs about him, drew his cutlass, blew his horn—for he was a hunter—and, in fine, killed the ferocious animal, who assuredly had no business there, after the expulsion for centuries of his race from Britain, and bore the fainting lady to the house of a relation of her own, who resided near. This fortunate accident is the means of the lovers meeting again, as Sir Kenelm recounts; nor does he spare his reader a single circumstance of their secret assignations, *billet-doux* in gloves, vows of constancy, and mournful laments. His mother, however, having another match in view for him, he resolved to avoid it by obtaining her consent to travel for a few years, which he did after having exchanged tokens of affection with Venetia.

"He presented her with a diamond ring which he used to wear, entreating her, whensoever she did cast her eyes upon it, to conceive that it told her in his behalf, that his heart would prove as hard as that stone in the admittance of any other affection: and that his to her should be as void of end as that circular figure was: and she desired him

to wear for her sake a lock of her hair, the splendour of which can be expressed by no earthly thing; but it seemed as though a stream of the sun's beams had been gathered together and converted into a solid substance."

Sir Kenelm visited Paris, and resided some time at Angers. The details he gives of the conduct of Marie de Medici place her conduct in a very suspicious light: he does not conceal the attachment she did not scruple to avow for him; but his love for his absent Venetia makes him treat the imprudent Queen with all the contempt that Don Quixote himself could have shown when solicited to abandon his faith to the fair Dulcinea. He was at Angers* at the time of the annihilation of the Queen's party at the battle of Pont de Cé, in August, 1620; and records that, having incurred the Queen's enmity, in consequence of his indifference, he thought to escape her pursuit or her vengeance, by allowing it to be believed that he was killed, in the *mélée*, by the King's troops.

He did not anticipate the consequences of this somewhat singular step, which caused great sorrow and confusion in the mind of his Venetia, whose ears the report soon reached: while the letters which *he says* he wrote to her from Florence, to

* The scene of the narrative related by Sir Kenelm, is supposed to be in Greece; London is in his story called Corinth; King James, the King of Moria; the *wolf* was, therefore, perhaps, another name for *dog*.