

Memoir of
Letitia Elizabeth Landon

(With a Portrait)
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L. P. Landon

MEMOIR OF LETITIA ELIZABETH LANDON.

BY A CORRESPONDENT.

(With a Portrait.)

IN a delicious little history, which is rendered more delicious by the assumption forced upon us, that it is the real history of her own childhood,* Miss Landon frankly informs us that she was "not a pretty child." Now this candour will not appear at all surprising, if we reflect that the lady, when making the confession, perfectly well knew what all the world is aware of—to wit, the change that invariably takes place between childhood and maturity, whereby the pretty become plain and the plain pretty—on the principle which fate or fortune so frequently illustrates in daily life, of "win first, lose last." It might be superfluous to warn those who knew her of her want of prettiness in childhood; but, as far as the public are concerned, it was a wise acknowledgment, for they have been indulged with very few opportunities of seeing a portrait of their poetical favourite. The truth is, she has been writing incessantly since she first began to write; and sitting for one's picture is very like sitting still and doing nothing—which by no means suits her genius and temperament.

Miss Landon is the first and greatest, if not the only example, of the achievement of an enduring and universal fame, in the character of an Initialist. All literary England was ringing with her music and her praises before her name had transpired at all. Stanzas had been inserted, and books published, ere then, without a name; and great was the renown which at that very time Sir Walter Scott was anonymously winning; but nobody had successfully initialized, until L. E. L. arose—nobody had dreamt of spelling fame in three letters that expressed no meaning at all. Yet they became known almost at once. How immediately they fixed themselves in the memory, and how deeply they took root!—even while their unnamed owner was but a mere contributor to a literary journal, without the questionable distinction of having produced a single volume of verses. It was as impossible, after a very little while, to mistake the initials L. E. L. for any other three letters in the alphabet, as to confound the name of Byron with that of Campbell, or Moore's with Wordsworth's. The *Improvisatrice* had not finished her first song, when public feeling perhaps, rather than public opinion, ushered the youthful singer into the presence of the chosen poets of the time, assured by the very truth of the emotions which her strains awakened, that the development of her fine faculty would establish the claim to a seat among the elect; and thenceforth, the magic three, the "L.S.D." of the world of matter of fact, have not been better known than the "L. E. L." of the world of poetry.

The youthful dreamers of that day, who, startled by the rapidity as well as the richness of the song, and charmed by the linked sweetness that was not merely long-drawn-out, but seemed to have no end, were

* See the lately published volume called "Traits and Trials."

half inclined to imagine that "L. E. L." might be, in some unknown tongue, the name of sylph or naiad—that the fair poet's inkstand was a lily, her ink dew, and her pen the wing-feather of a real phœnix—these youthful devotees have seen their graceful and gallant fancies dissipated one by one, and were long ago convinced, even before the first portrait appeared, that there was an actual mortal lady in the case, and that L. E. L. really meant Letitia Elizabeth Landon! But beyond that they knew very little, nor can we tell them much more. What we have heard we will relate.

The family, whose name is now identified with so much that is poetical in our literature, has a singularly green and flourishing testimonial of its age and respectability, still visible in the church of Jedstone Delamere, in Hertfordshire. There, at this day, round the tomb of one of the Landons, may be seen a growth of hazels—fresh and luxuriant as any in the open air, and sacred as those of Wordsworth, which by his heedless and eager hand

" Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being —"

and made him feel that there is "a spirit in the woods." This scene of green and beautiful repose is in strong contrast with the active and, in the end, unprosperous life of Miss Landon's father, who was a partner in the well-known army-agency house in Pall-mall—the interest in which had previously been possessed by Mr. Adair. The good fortune of this gentleman did not, unluckily, descend to Mr. Landon, whose sole treasure at his death consisted in that of which he and the world were alike ignorant, the gift of genius which nature had conferred upon his daughter. Of this father, thus "blessed unaware," and unconscious of the glory of his fortune amidst its seeming ruin, there is a trait recorded by which he may be pleasantly remembered. We find it in an incident related in the "History of a Child," to which we have above alluded. Little L. E. L. was excessively fond of a favourite dog of her father's, and the dog was just as fond of repairing at a certain hour to a certain spot, to wait the return of its master. Rather than part company with her pet, the child went with him one day, and waited too. When she heard the sound of the horse's hoofs, she was half inclined to run away; but her stay was rewarded, for her father took her in his arms, and kissed her as he said, "So you have been waiting for me!" and then, hand in hand, both walked very happily across the park.

The next day, and the next, and the next, child and dog were in attendance; kisses and caresses were bestowed, and were no doubt an exceeding great reward to both; but little L. E. L. was luckier far one day, for her father, on approaching the gate, held up to her eager and delighted eyes—eyes that had been accustomed to read almost in the cradle—four volumes bound in russia, and adorned with many pictures. These were—the "Arabian Nights!" "The delight of reading those enchanted pages," says L. E. L., "I must even to this day rank as the most delicious excitement of my life." And then she adds, (being very much mistaken)—"I shall never have courage to read them again—they would mark too decidedly, too bitterly, the change in myself." Now with respect to this change—without recurring again to the con-

fession of a want of beauty in childhood!—we unhesitatingly venture to assert that it is all for the better, if L. E. L. would but ask herself in what it consists; and as to not reading the “Arabian Nights,” why she ought not, by the same rule, to look again on the primroses and violets that so charmed her childish mind—or on a beautiful pointer, or the blue sky, or anything that formed part of the paradise of her infancy.

The first scene of that paradise was Hans-place, Chelsea, where she was born, and where she resided during several years of her life;—which, by the way, she ought not to have done, as that too must have marked the bitterness of the change—had there been more than imaginary bitterness in it. Much of her earlier time was passed under the guardianship of her grandmother. Is it not of L. E. L. we have heard it related, that, upon seeing a little girl of her own age crying, and finding that the cause of grief was the death of a grandmother, she turned anxiously to the servant and said—“I’ve got two grandmamas; shall I have to cry for them both?” If this be true, there was a tendency when a child to economise in the article of sorrow, which subsequent indulgencies and habits of gloomy reflection are provokingly contrasted with: So far we are bound to admit the distressing change, without allowing that it ought to be distressing; and can only wish that L. E. L., whenever she sits down to verse or prose, would commune with her own mind, with the view of ascertaining how little misery will do for the occasion—how few may be the tears absolutely required for any given calamity in life that is natural and inevitable. What sighs people might save if they chose! to the immense improvement of their own sympathies, and the incalculable advantage of the unhappy people they mourn for!

It was at an early age that Miss Landon became an inmate of the school of the Misses Lance in Hans-place, and with those ladies she continued to reside until recently, when they gave up their establishment. The house has been a temple for tuition ever since it was built, and can boast of other gifted scholars, as well as its latest and most gifted. It claims Mary Russel Mitford as one who was educated within its walls. Lady Caroline Lamb was also there for a time.

As to the period when L. E. L. first began to write poetry, we can only pretend to fix it with any tolerable certainty by saying, that it did not occur till after she was ascertained to have been born. Perhaps we shall be most correct in dating it as near the time of birth as may be practicable. We shall not state positively that she improvised before she could speak; but it is certain that she composed verses before she could write them. There was a certain epic poem of the infant L. E. L.’s, which became the subject of an express condition—energetically insisted upon by her brother—that she was not *always* to recite it when they went to play in the garden! Her first wild snatches of song and fragments of romance that appeared in the “Literary Gazette” were written at a very early age; so early as to be incredible, if the performances of Cowley, Pope, and others, when mere children, had left us any room for doubt, or much for wonder, on the score of precocity. She sprang almost from the nurse’s arms into those of Fame, and had won the undying wreath before she knew that it was anything

brighter than a pretty ornament to be worn in a ball-room. By the time she had found out its value, she seemed to have grown tired of it. To her active and unwearied mind, the contest for the prize was better than the possession of it. Quick and vivid sensation was a necessity in her nature; dreams, rhapsodies, reveries, were the natural offspring of her exciteable and imaginative temperament; these would make themselves heard, taking the expression of the moment, and she "lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came;" she wrote on, because she could not help it. But to what advantage—to what end? she probably asked. Was she to go on writing troubadours and golden violets all her days—apostrophising loves, memories, hopes, and fears, for ever and ever, in scattered songs and uncompleted stanzas, and running the chance of marring the first sweetness of the string, weakening her past music by the monotony of the note? Yet how stop, when the pen appeared the only safety-valve to keep sensation and longings after the visionary—the only link connecting her with the remote, which she desired, as an escape from the impending, which she dreaded! There seemed no help for it; like Pope, she "was born for nothing but to write;" and "write, write, write," forms, as she has herself remarked, the history of her life. Luckily, however, there were a few envious and evil-natured persons in the world, and some good speedily began to grow out of their jealousy, spleen, and detraction. L. E. L. had her enemies; what would the most invincible genius be without them? She was reviled, ridiculed—her poetry was called sing-song, her sentiment "namby-pamby." Nothing could have been better qualified to make her feel her strength, to enable her to put it forth, to win her from words to things, from dreams to realities. The positive experience of a hard contact with the actual, was startling and disagreeable; the chill of a sudden plunge into society, after a revel in ideal luxuries, was like the shock of a cold bath; but this was just what was wanted. Her thoughts found a deeper channel, and flowed still more freely; her observations took a wider range, and scanned the features of life as they presented themselves to her earnest gaze—not as she had imaged them in the pages of chivalry and romance, or shaped them for herself amidst the grotesque fancies of a dream. She discovered that her powers acquired elasticity, as the subjects on which they were exercised became more various; and that the world widened as she went on. Reality, in short, grew as familiar to her as Romance. She led Prose captive, as she had led Poetry. She became the author of "Francesca Carrara!" A page of praise could not have greater force than this little sentence to him who has read that noble work studiously and reflectingly. Nobody who had been familiar only with the casual and careless writings of L. E. L. could have given her credit for the searching and many-winding power which is evinced in various passages of that composition. The rich painting, the poetical description, the happy portraiture of manners, the reading and the knowledge, the grace and the tenderness, were to be expected—but the insight into motive, the penetration into the mysteries of character, the revealings of the inner world, the firm-handed dissection of the philosophy of life, ever curious in the speculations struck out, though often erring in the judgment, and always setting man's *worst* foot foremost—these are triumphs of her pen that few

could have anticipated. Nor, vivid as were the first streaks of light, had we at one time reason to hope for that steady and clear development of power which some of her later annual volumes of poetry evince. If we might be allowed, we would instance as especial evidences of an enlargement of thought, and a higher and more refined apprehension of the poetic, several of the "Subjects for Pictures" that have recently appeared in the "New Monthly." The reader's ear cannot have failed to catch up those new notes of music. They are strikingly beautiful, and undeniably original.

With the consciousness that she has scattered the seeds of many pleasures in the world, with a full sense of what ought by all to be enjoyed, and of the human capacity to enjoy, it is not a little annoying to see Miss Landon persevere in maliciously contrasting the actual with the ideal—in deprecating what is, for the mere sake of glorifying what is not. We wish we could see her ceasing to cultivate her want of faith in the world's virtue, since nobody has more charity for the world's vice. But good or evil, she must and will have her sharp and brilliant jest at the expense of the world; sincerity and hypocrisy fare alike, if there be a witty analogy in the way. Why will she persist in showing her love of the picturesque and her devotion to poetry, by dressing up Apollo in a mourning cloak, as though he were attending the remains of human Enthusiasm to the grave? It is all a mistake. Enthusiasm is yet alive, and is likely to live, and wears a sunnier aspect every year. Did not L. E. L. look fondly and delightedly upon his eager and glowing face the other day, when he was seen, early and late, cordially gathering up welcome votes in support of her brother as a candidate for the literary office which he is so worthy to fill? The history of the last few weeks should convince Miss Landon that active gratitude and generous enthusiasm are not among the absentee virtues whom we are obligingly invited to mourn for.

Having alluded to Mr. Landon's recent election, we may adduce two testimonies, called forth by the occasion, of the estimation in which his sister is held. We have reason to know that the expression of Sir Robert Peel was—"I am happy to mark my sense of Miss Landon's character and talents by voting for her brother;" while Mr. Hope, the son of the author of "Anastasius," observed—"It is gratifying to have the means occasionally of showing both the reverence we feel for genius, and the gratitude we owe to those who exercise it on our behalf." There is far more of this sentiment in the world than L. E. L. ever admits of in her writings; and it becomes more, the more we believe in it. We hope it may induce her to feel that there is a sunny side of life, and that she can at any time cross over to the dark one when she is tired of the light. It is never too late to despond, and wise people ought not to be in a hurry.

We conclude by recording a far more touching and graceful compliment, which was paid to our fair subject a short time ago. It was a tribute from America, sent from the far-off banks of the Ohio—a curious species of the hundred-leaved Michigan rose, accompanied by a prayer that L. E. L. would plant it on the grave of Mrs. Hemans.
