

THE LADY LORETTA AND HER SISTER

(by Rev H E B Arnold)

A copy made from the original MS by the author in the possession of Miss D Easty

(The above as in the original document - see end note)

Loretta was the thirteenth child of William III de Braose and the brave but unfortunate Matilda of Hay. Her early life was spent in the turbulent times of South Wales, with an occasional visit to Bramber Castle. She learnt her Psalter and Needlework in some religious house, but on her marriage to Robert Fitz-Parnel, Earl of Leicester, she entered the world at Hungerford by the gentle waters of the Kennett. Alas! after a brief married life, Robert (who had been with Richard I in the Holy Land) died without issue, leaving his young widow with ample means - equivalent to some £4000 a year of the present day.¹

The troublesome reign of King John 2 now broke upon her. Her brother Giles, Bishop of Hereford, carried her overseas. Her sister, Annora, a year older than herself and happily married to Hugh Mortimer, was imprisoned with him at Gloucester. All estates were confiscated. Her father died in Paris and was buried there by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, himself an exile at the time.

It must have been now that Loretta came under the influence of that great ecclesiastic, and first thought of devoting herself to a religious life. When King John was dead her properties were restored and, though she might have made a splendid second marriage, she gave up the world and her wealth, reserving only a fraction for herself. The Archbishop selected a little spot at Hackington, one short mile from Canterbury, and there she built a retreat and lived in solitude for at least forty five years as a professed and dedicated anchoress.

Let us glance at her home and surroundings. The inner room was private: the outer had a small window through which she could converse with privileged visitors. An elderly housekeeper presided over the domestic offices. A young maid did the rough work, and her man looked after the flowers and her bees, cut her wood and acted as messenger. She also had her father confessor to visit her. But her life was by no means one of rigid asceticism, for it included "everything that makes for a healthy and cheerful spirit, able to endure long and arduous service in the search for God."

Loretta was always ready to protect the needy and the oppresses. She had a steady influence with great people. And, when the first Franciscan Brothers passed through Canterbury to the Schools of Oxford, we read that she "nourished them in all things as a mother her sons." Thus she would hear of, and be influenced by, the life of St Francis of Assisi, a man of about her own age. Kings and Statesmen have been known to consult an anchoress, as did the great Simon de Montfort, 3 when he visited his great-aunt Loretta before the Battle of Evesham 4.

On one occasion only did she leave her retreat. Annora, the childless widow of Hugh Mortimer, had at a later date also devoted herself to the life of a recluse at Iffley on the river below Oxford. In 1241, when she lay dying, Loretta had permission to visit her. But she found Annora already unconscious; yet five times on that day the pale face was seen to smile in radiant ecstasy. The pious watcher surmised them to be the moments which her sister had devoted to a religious exercise called "The Five Joys of Mary", recently adopted by the followers of St. Bernard. After her death, Anorra came to her sister in a dream and told her that such had been her last meditations on earth. Unconscious of the earth she could still look heavenwards and pray. So Anorra slept in Christ.

We have some further account of her life. To Anorra, King Henry III 5 had assigned out of her property an annual income of about £100 a year of our money: also oaks for building her hermitage, wood for the hearth, wheat for her bread (the best) and an annual "robe". One frock a year! But it would be a very good one, for those ladies were fastidious in dress and always maintained their position and dignity. Apart from their devotions they fell to their needles, and to them we may attribute the beautiful altar frontals, and other

adornments of the sanctuary and the magnificent copes of the clergy, which at a later date the Puritans so ruthlessly destroyed, or cut up to adorn the backs of London's wives and daughters when the Lord Mayor gave a ball in the Mansion House.

Loretta returned to Hackington. She too was sometimes "hard up" for she was glad to receive from an old friend, the Countess of Eu, an annual gift of "2 qrs of wheat, 2 of barley (for her maid), 1 of oats and 2 sides of Bacon." At over eighty years of age, her long devotion came to an end and she too slept in Christ, on March 4th 1266. Her body was buried in S. Stephen's Church near to which her cell had been built. It seems to us a strange life but thus only in those days could many great ladies find rest and peace from the heaving world around them.

NOTE : The Glebe Cottages next to the Rectory at S. Stephen's Green are thought to be the site of the Retreat built by the Lady Loretta some time in the 12th century.

All the above is a true transcription from the copy made by "P.R.G." in 1971. The footnotes below are mine, added in 1997 when this copy was made.

- 1 The date of this statement is not known
- 2 (1167-1216, King of England from 1199)
- 3 Simon de Montfort 1208 - 1265
4. 1265 AD
- 5 Henry III (1207 - 1272)

Marten Rogers 1997