Lettice Knollys, Countess of Leicester.*

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On Christmas Day in the year 1634 there died at Drayton Basset, near Tamworth, in the County of Stafford, at the great age of ninety-four, the "Excellent and Pious Lady Lettice Countesse of Leicester," and with that death was closed one of the most remarkable chapters in English history. Lettice Knollys was born at Rotherfield Greys in Oxfordshire, a few miles from Reading. Her father, Sir Francis Knollys, was Treasurer of the Household to Queen Elizabeth, a Knight of the Garter, a stern Protestant who had been in exile in Germany in the reign of Queen Mary, and a wise counsellor to his Queen. Her brother, William, who was born in 1546, had come to be a considerable person before the end of Elizabeth's reign. He had been knighted, had represented the County of Oxford in Parliament, was prominent among the carpet knights of the regal entourage, and exercised a national and local influence of some magnitude. Later he was successively Baron Knollys of Greys, Viscount Wallingford and Earl of Banbury. He was also High Steward of Reading. A younger brother, Francis, owned the Manor of Battle in Reading, was a member of the Long Parliament, and died at the great age of 99. The mother of Lettice was Catherine Carey, daughter of the eldest sister of Anne Boleyn. Lettice was therefore first cousin once removed to Elizabeth, who, when she ascended the throne, had neither father nor mother, brother nor sister, uncle nor aunt alive. More than one of these branches had been lopped off by the axe. The only individuals in existence more nearly related to the Queen than Lettice Knollys were Lettice's mother and that lady's brother, Henry Carey, soon after created Lord Hunsdon, who were full cousins by the mother's side; and the Countess of Lennox and Duchess of Suffolk, the daughters of her father's sisters, Margaret and Mary. So near a

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relationship to the reigning monarch could be, and was, both a source of affluence and a road to disaster.

In her early youth Lettice Knollys was no doubt nourished upon the tepid paternal faith; and notwithstanding sundry puzzling indications to the contrary, she clung to this faith to the end of her long life. References are not wanting in contemporary writings to show that the fatal gift of beauty had not been denied her, and we soon find her at court and amid that glittering throng surrounding Elizabeth at Whitehall, Greenwich and Windsor, "moving, doubtless, a foremost figure among the younger divinities of that heaven," and noting with interest, if not occasional alarm, the "states and stomachs of the Norrises and the Knowlls," who, according to old Fuller, were ever on the verge of personal strife. It was probably under such conditions that she met her first husband, Walter Devereux, Viscount Hereford, afterwards the first Earl of Essex of that name. Essex had succeeded his father as second Viscount Hereford in September, 1558, a few weeks before Elizabeth came to the throne. He was then a youth just entering his eighteenth year. Lettice and he were probably married between the years 1560 and 1565. In 1568, he was one of the noblemen commanded to be in readiness to render the necessary assistance in case an attempt was made to effect a forcible rescue of the captive Queen of Scots. There are hints that suspicion had already pointed its finger at him in connection with a project for bringing about a marriage between the Scots Queen and the Duke of Norfolk, which had just come to Elizabeth's knowledge and threw court and cabinet into consternation. Although he passionately denied any part in the plot, his royal mistress ordered him to his home in Wales, whither he retired. We hear no more of him till the end of the following year, when he assisted in breaking up the Northern Rebellion. About this time he appears to have been particularly friendly with the Earl of Leicester, and possibly through the latter's influence was raised to the peerage as the Earl of Essex. This was the zenith of his career. One of his biographers has this note: "Whether it was that some secret worm had already begun to gnaw at his domestic peace, or whatever it was that made him weary of home, very soon

after this he embarked in a project which was to transfer him to an altogether new scene. He proposed to the Queen to undertake at his own charge the pacification and reduction of a certain disturbed district in the north of Ireland, on condition of being put in possession of half the lands he should recover from the rebels." Fuller affirms that he was put upon this adventure by Leicester, who, he says, " loved the Earl's nearest relation (meaning his wife) better than he loved the Earl himself."[1]

The venture was a failure and Essex became financially embarrassed. He resigned his command in Ireland, but, curiously enough, made no attempt to rejoin his wife and family, after nearly two years' absence from them. Later he appears to have come to England, but returned to Ireland in the spring of 1576 with the comparatively insignificant title of Earl Marshall of Ireland. On the 22nd September he died. In 1584 there appeared from the blue a book called *Leicester's Commonwealth*,[2] one of the most fearless attacks ever made upon a living creature. This is what it contained about the death of the Earl of Essex: It was the contrivance and work of Leicester, who had been for some time engaged in a liaison with the Countess of Essex; the poison was prepared by an Italian surgeon, a cunning man, who had recently come over and attached himself to Leicester, and it was administered in a cup of wine at a merchant's house in Dublin; that the Countess was party to the crime. " And there was poisoned at the same time," the story proceeds, " and by the same cup, as given of courtesy by the Earl, one Mrs. Alice Draycot, a godly gentlewoman, whom the Earl affectioned much; who, departing thence towards her own house, which was eighteen miles off . . . . began to fall sick very grievously upon the way, and continued, with increase of pains, and excessive torments by vomitting, until she died."

This was not the first murder with which Leicester had been charged by the *vox populi*. Robert Dudley, as he was originally called, was the fifth of the eight sons of John Dudley, Earl of

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1 " *Worthies.*"

2 In the original edition styled " *The Copy of a Letter written by a Master of Arts at Cambridge, etc.*"

Warwick, and finally Duke of Northumberland, whose father, Edmund Dudley, the notorious minister of Henry VII, was beheaded on Tower Hill in 1510, and who himself underwent the same fate on the same spot in 1553, as did his sixth son, the Lord Guildford Dudley, in February following, immediately before his wife, the hapless Lady Jane Grey, was led out to her doom on the green within the Tower. It would require many pages from the history of England to give even a sketch of Leicester's career; he concerns us here only as the second husband of Lettice Knollys. We may therefore briefly say that he does not come out of the death of Amy Robsart, his first wife, with an unblemished reputation; and that his later *affaire* with Lady Sheffield is among the unsavoury annals of the age; that his bid for the throne of England, if contemporary writers do not lie, came very near to success; and that his wooing of the Countess of Essex was provocative of no little scandal. With an obscurity which may very well have been intentional, Shakespeare appears to have added his quota to the mysteries which surround the life of Lettice Knollys and Leicester. The reference in question occurs in Oberon's vision in the "*Midsummer Night's Dream.*":

"That very time I saw (but thou could'st not),
Flying between the cold Moon and the Earth,
Cupid all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair Vestal thronèd by the West;
And loosed a love-shaft madly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the watery Moon;
And the imperial Votaress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white; now purple with Love's wound:
And maidens call it Love in Idleness."

Upon this passage critics have indulged in protracted speculations which have left the mystery, if there be one, exactly where it was. Halpin contends that Cupid is Leicester; that the Moon

and the Vestal typify Elizabeth; that the Earth is the Lady Sheffield and "the little western flower" Lettice Knollys, or, as she was then, the Countess of Essex.[3] Halpin also is of opinion that the expression "now purple with Love's wound" carries an allusion to the poisoning of Essex. But the lines, as one author remarks, appear to suggest an innocent, if unfortunate, passion, whereas if Halpin be correct, Shakespeare asks our sympathy for a woman steeped in guilt. It is, of course, possible that the poet was not among those who believed that Lettice was a party to her husband's death; and the envenomed points in "*Leicester's Commonwealth*" do not carry the assurance their author intended. Even the marriage of Lettice to Leicester is obscure, but it seems certain that there were two ceremonies in consequence of the insistence of Sir Francis Knollys, who was well aware of the inconstancy of Leicester, that the union should not take place unless the marriage were performed in his own presence, with some witnesses by, and a public notary. These conditions were fully complied with on the 21st September, 1578, at Wanstead, and Lettice became the accepted wife of the Queen's favourite. The storm which broke when Elizabeth heard the news is history. Almost within a year Leicester began to discern signs of his loss of royal favour. In November, 1579, we find him writing a letter to Burghley, in which he complains: "I have lost both youth and liberty and all my fortune reposed in her."[4] From his marriage with Lettice, with whatsoever object, or under whatsoever compulsion, he never made his escape. It is even said that he came to take kindly to the matrimonial yoke, and grew uxorious in his later days.

It is not possible, within the compass of this article, to give details of Leicester's career subsequent to his marriage with Lettice; but it may be said that, with the obstinacy and inconsistency for which Elizabeth is renowed, he was periodically elevated and depressed by the award of honours and the denial of liberty. When an army was raised in contemplation of the

3 An Essay "*Oberon's Vision, in the Midsummer-Night's Dream, illustrated by a comparison with Lylie's Endymion.*" Printed for the Shakespeare Society, 1843.

4 Wright: *Original Letters*, 1838, II., 103-105.

Spanish invasion the Queen intended that Leicester should be made Her Majesty's Lieutenant-General for England and Ireland; but, deferring to the advice of Burleigh and Hatton, the letters patent were never executed. In disgust Leicester left the Court for Kenilworth, but broke his journey at a house he had at Cornbury in Oxfordshire. Here, under somewhat mysterious circumstances, he was taken suddenly ill and died. Once again rumour flew on the wings of the wind and the name of Lettice Knollys was on every tongue. Current gossip, at no time more venomous and widespread than in Elizabeth's day, immediately fastened upon her the guilt of Leicester's death by poison. It was remarked that Leicester died within seven or eight miles of Cumnor, the spot where Amy Robsart had met her death almost on the very day eight and twenty years before; and it was bruited abroad that it was but justice that the wife of his youth should be avenged by the wife of his age. But quickly as the venom did its work the Countess was not apprehended. She bore Leicester a son, who died when little more than three years old, and is buried near his father in the cathedral church of Warwick: "Here resteth the body of the noble imp, Robert Dudley, Baron of Denbigh . . . a child of great parentage, but of greater hope and towardness . . ." Within twelve months Lettice had doffed her widow's weeds and wedded a third husband, Christopher Blount, Gentleman of the Earl of Leicester's Horse, and with whom it was said at the time she was secretly in love while the Earl was living. The alliance is difficult to understand as one can find in it no evidence of material advantage or passion and subsequent events throw into relief a curious air of detachment whenever she is referring to her partner.

It is strange that until she married Blount we seem to get little knowledge of Lettice beyond the mere chronology of her external life. There is evidence that it was with the greatest possible difficulty, after her marriage to Leicester, that Elizabeth was induced to receive her and then only for a brief and solitary occasion. The reasons are obvious to students of the time who are familiar with the temper of the Queen in matters regarding the attractive females of the Court. But there are in

the British Museum certain letters of the Countess to her son, the young Earl of Essex, which, from their lack of intrigual declamation, were not considered of sufficient value to be incorporated in the biographia of the time. They do, however, give some hints of those finer qualities which many of her traducers have failed to notice. To most of the writers of the period the dark horrors of a Borgia-like personality are for ever doomed to surround this fair daughter of the Oxfordshire hills. And in this connection we may include an observation so late as 1933, where Lettice is referred to as " the she-wolf whom the Queen's darling (Leicester) seduced and secretly married."[5] But few figures of that age have escaped the bitter tongue of contemporary rivals, and that the subject of these notes was not wholly bad may perhaps be inferred from the following extracts from her letters to her son, to whom falsehood and dissimulation may at least have been considered unnecessary and uncalled-for. Here is one letter; it is dated in December, 1595. " Having so convenient a messenger as this, I may not omit, sweet Robin, to salute you with my heartiest affection. He (Blount) shall tell you how we do in these parts (Drayton Basset) and how fearfully we hearken after the Spaniards, whose malice God bless us all from. I hope your mistress (Elizabeth) makes of you as of her best servant, and chiefest hand to defend her against that wicked generation. My Friend (Blount) prepares his arms and himself in readiness to do you service when time is. And so the Almighty bless you, and send, if they (the Spaniards) dare come, you may be a scourge to them. I end with my dearest well-wishings, and remain your mother in faithfulest affection." In February, 1596, she upbraided " sweet Robin " for his neglect of her—" for I must have you bestow some time a few idle lines on your mother, to whom they are most welcome, and who may otherwise grow jealous that you love her not so well as she deserves, which blot I know you will take away. And as she hath made you the chief comfort of her life, so I doubt not of your noble nature, but that you will be careful to maintain it, with all childlike kindness. So, sweet Robin, praying the Almighty to bless you with all most honourable

5 " *Elizabeth : Queen of England,*" Milton Waldman, p. 83.

happy future, I end, remaining ever your mother infinitely loving you." Many other letters continued to flow to Robin, each containing a scrap of county news, a little advice, a tender chiding for neglect, a warning word or a maternal blessing. When confronted with the usual difficulties in Ireland (as his father had been) we find her inditing an epistle to her son in the course of which she says: " my sweet Robin, give me leave to put you in mind that the true valour in a great commander, thoroughly known, is as well shown, and to better purpose, in wise politic carriage and government, than it can possibly be in too much hazard in adventuring his own person; wherefore be wise as valiant." Of few great historical figures was this advice so much needed; in few was it so often disregarded.

Lettice's letters extend over a period of three or four years, from the latter part of 1595 to the spring of 1599. Some time before the earliest of them was written the Countess had lost her second son, Walter, whom Wotton calls "a diamond of the time"; he had been killed in 1591, in his twenty-second year, at the siege of Rouen, where Essex commanded a body of troops sent by Elizabeth to the assistance of Henry IV of France. Essex afterwards makes affectionate mention of him as his dear and only brother, the half-arch of his house. If, as is reported, Walter was his father's favourite, Robert (Robin) may from the first have been his mother's. Now, at any rate, he was become the idol of her heart. But before another year had come full circle he of whom she was so proud was destined in the flower of his age to perish on the scaffold; and quickly following, in the same dire conspiracy, her third husband. The troubles that ensued upon the return of Essex from Ireland may be read at length in larger chronicles, as may the details of that ill-conceived escapade of the 8th February, 1601, when, sword in hand, at the head of some hundreds of armed partisans, he endeavoured to induce the City of London to support him in an attack upon the Queen's palace. That was the end. The final move of his enemies was made in the early morn of that grey Ash Wednesday when he was but thirty-three years of age and the head of " sweet Robin " fell into the dust.

For the Countess here was a sudden tempest of sorrow under which she must have been bent low to the earth. In that lonely house at Drayton Basset, where she remained throughout the tragic weeks before her son came to the axe, sign and portent must have been busy in every rattle of the casements, every step on the stairs, every flurry of the leaves when night had fallen. And after the dread truth had reached her there soon followed, on pinions of speed, the lesser news of the execution of the 'Friend" (Blount) who, be it said, was not lacking a certain knightly bearing as he mounted the scaffold to make Lettice a widow for the third and last time. The story of Lettice's eldest daughter is as remarkable as that of her mother. The Earl of Essex, her father, on his death bed in Ireland, had expressed a wish that if God should so move their hearts his daughter might be married to his young friend, Philip Sydney, the hero of Zutphen. At this time Sydney was twenty-two; Penelope Devereux could hardly have been more than fifteen. But, as the chronicles of the time relate, the union was not to be. Penelope married Robert Rich, third Lord Rich, and Sydney was wedded to Frances, the daughter of Sir Francis Walsingham. But Sydney's passion for Penelope was certainly not extinguished after they were both wed; he has left for posterity a passionate avowal of his affection in a series of sonnets "Astrophel and Stella," a singularly beautiful and refined contribution to the literature of the age. Penelope was eventually to win a wider and sadder fame upon the details of which we need not enter. We must return to her mother.

Life cannot often have unrolled a panorama so full of tragedy. She had arrived at that peak of personal experience to which nothing but dissolution could now be added. As one writer has said—"The past, however, if it was beyond recall, was also without power to return; it could no more come back than it could be brought back; it had been borne and had done its worst; it was no longer matter of either dread or doubt; its demands, heavy and cruel as they had been, had all been paid; without her own consent and co-operation, its power to torture and lacerate was gone; it was become a mere phantom of the

memory; its black mass might be ever growing huger and blacker, but, if it were to expand till it covered the earth and smote the heavens, it could never reach the present hour; that, therefore, she continued to enjoy, with her usual philosophical equanimity."[6] And so it was that a year or two before her death she might have been seen walking the pleasant lanes of Drayton Basset and acknowledging with regal but kindly condescension the curtseys of the village children who shyly withdrew to the hedgerow as she passed. Her frame was attenuated, but still erect; her face had long lost the bloom of youth but not entirely the courtly elegance and liveliness that once had shone in royal courts. Death was not to find her till more than two and a half years after he had struck her still much younger brother William, who rode to hounds less than a year before he was gathered to his fathers at the age of eighty-five. The summons to Lettice came on the morning of Christmas Day, 1634, when she was in her ninety-fifth year. The trappings of woe were liberally invoked for one who came from such puissant stock. She had seen pass to the grave many whose names now stand on the topmost peaks of literary fame or head the scroll of personal valour; a mighty cavalcade unequalled in any period of English history. Perhaps Shakespeare has left her memory hidden in those lines of exquisite sweetness to which we have referred; and who at a time so distant as to-day can judge the truth or falsity of all that has been alleged against her? She lies in the cathedral church of Warwick near to Leicester, her second husband, and far from the pleasant scenes of her childhood in the misty Chiltern Hills. The long indifferent epitaph by her great-grandson, Gervas Clinton, may fitly end this brief notice of her career:

"Look into this vault and search it well
Much treasure in it lately fell.
We all are robbed, and all do say
Our wealth was carried this a way,
And, that the theft might ne'er be found,
'Tis buried closely under ground.

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6 Craik: "*The Romance of the Peerage*," I., 321.

Yet, if you gently stir the mould,
There all your loss you may behold;
There you may see that face, that hand,
Which once was fairest in the land:
She that in her younger years
Matched with two great English peers;
She that did supply the wars
With thunder, and the Court with stars;
She that in her youth had been
Darling to the Maiden Queen,
Till she was content to quit
Her favour for her favourite.
Whose gold thread when she saw spun
And the death of her brave son,
Thought it safest to retire,
From all care and vain desire,
To a private country cell;
Where she spent her days so well,
That to her the better sort
Came as to an holy court;
And the poor that liv-ed near
Dearth nor famine could not fear
Whilst she lived she liv-ed thus:
Till that God, displeased with us,
Suffered her at last to fall,
Not from him, but from us all.
And, because she took delight
Christ's poor members to invite,
He fully now requites her love,
And sends his angels from above,
That did to heaven her soul convey
To solemnize his own birthday."