

THE CHEVALIER D'EON.

One of the curious minor characters of history is the Chevalier d'Eon, whose full name was Charles Genevieve Louis Auguste Andre Timothee d'Eon de Beaumont. What gave him most notoriety was the doubt which existed regarding his sex; as, at different periods, he wore sometimes the dress of one sex, sometimes that of the other; and, during the later portion of his life, declared himself to be a woman, though being very masculine in appearance. He was a native of Burgundy, born in 1728, and by occupation an advocate. He attracted the notice of those in power by his political writings, and at the age of 27 was sent by Louis XV. on diplomatic errands to Russia and to Austria.

After giving proofs of great bravery in the French army, he was made Secretary of Legation, and afterwards Ambassador to the English Court. He did not long retain this important position; and the story of his life is one of alternations of prosperity and misfortune, as were the lives of most French courtiers of the last century. It is believed that he assumed feminine attire in order better to serve Louis XV. as secret agent. At the age of 65 he was residing in London, wearing, generally, woman's apparel, and giving lessons in fencing, in which accomplishment he was perfect.

Miss Anna Seward gave this lively account of him in the year 1791, which we find copied in the Recollections of Mr. Samuel Breck:

This is the period of inconceivable characters, as well as of unexpected and prodigious events. Mademoiselle le Chevalier d'Eon exhibiting for two shillings admittance her skill in the art of attack and defense with the single rapier! Melancholy reverse of human destiny! What a humiliation for the Aide-de-Camp of Marshal Broglie!—for the Ambassador during five years from the Court of France to that of Russia!—for the Envoy to ours, and the principal planner and negotiator of the Peace of 1762. In the German war she lived five years in camp and tented fields, amidst the pride, the pomp and circumstance, of high trust and glorious contest. In the American war she was in five battles, four against Gen. Elliot, and received six wounds; and all this before her sex was discovered! I learned from herself that a destiny so astonishing was not originally the result of voluntary choice. Her parents bred her as a boy, to avoid losing an estate entailed on the heir male. She seems to have a noble, independent, as well as intrepid mind, and the muscular strength and activity of her large frame are wonderful. She fences in the French uniform, and then appears an athletic, venerable, graceful man. In the female garb, as might be expected, she is awkwardly though not vulgarly masculine. In three days she was to have sailed for France, by the order of the late unfortunate monarch, to have resumed the male dress, and to have taken military command as General, when the massacre at the Tuilleries and imprisonment of the King lamentably frustrated that design, and probably dropped an eternal curtain over her career of glory.

It is evident that Miss Seward, like most others, was deceived by this brave, versatile, and strange impostor. The records of that time state that the Chevalier passed his last days in great want, and that, at his death on the 21st of May, 1810, the examination of his remains by a surgeon settled the question of his sex, and his lack of right to wear female apparel. His writings were published at Amsterdam in 1775, with the title "Lolair du Chevalier d'Eon."