

THE STORY OF ELIZABETH.

BY MISS THACKERAY.

Daughter of the great English Novelist.

CONTINUED.

'She would not come,' said Tournour; she is at home with my sister, Madame Jacob; or rather by herself, for my sister went away a day or two ago.'

'Tournour, you do not do wisely to leave that girl alone; she is not to be trusted,' said the other suddenly remembering all his former doubts. And so, when Tournour asked what he meant, he told him what he had seen. The mere suspicion so far, forgotten his teaching, his wishes, his firm convictions, sinned so outrageously! Ah, it was too much; it was impossible, it was unpardonable. He fired up, and in an agitated voice said that it could not be; that he knew her to be incapable of such horrible conduct and then seizing his hat, he rushed downstairs and called a carriage which happened to be passing by.

'Where are you going?' asked Boulot, who had followed him somewhat alarmed.

'I am going home, to see that she is there. Safe in her room, and sheltered under her parents' roof, I humbly pray. Far away from the snares, and dangers, and temptations of the world.'

Alas! poor Elly was not at home, peacefully resting or reading by the lamplight. Francoise, to be sure, told them she was in bed, and Tournour went hopefully to her door and knocked—

'Elly,' he cried, 'mon enfant! c'est-à-dire, ma fille? Repandez, Elizabeth!' and he shook the door in his agitation.

Old Francoise was standing by, holding the candle; Boulot was leaning against the wall. But there came no answer. The silence struck a chill. Tournour's face was very pale, his lips were drawn, and his eyes gleamed as he raised his head. He went away for a minute, and came back with a little tool; it did not take long to force back the lock—the door flew open, and there was an empty room all in disorder! In silence truly, but emptiness is not peace always, silence is not tranquillity; a horrible dread and terror came over poor Tournour; Francoise's hand, holding the light, began to tremble guiltily. Boulot dreadfully shocked—

'My poor friend! my poor friend!' he began.

Tournour put his hand to his head—

'How has this come to pass—am I to blame?' said he. 'Oh! unhappy girl, what has she done?—how has she brought this disgrace upon us?' and he fell on his knees by the bedside, and buried his head in the clothes—kneeling there praying for Elly where she had so often knelt and poured out all her sad heart.

Elly at that minute—sitting in the little box, wondering, delighted, thrilling with interest, with pleasure—did not guess what a strange scene was taking place in her room at home; she did not guess think of what trouble, what grief, she was causing to others and to herself, poor child, most of all. Only a few minutes more—all the music would cease abruptly for her; all the lights go out; all the sweetness turn to gall and to bitterness. Nearer and nearer comes the sad hour, the cruel awakening; dream on still for a few happy minutes, poor Elly!—nearer and nearer come these two angry men, in their black, sombre clothes—nearer and nearer the cruel spoken word which will chill, crush, and destroy. Elizabeth's dream lasted a little longer, and then she awoke at last.

It was on the evening of the Monday after, that Miss Dampier arrived in Paris, with her bonnet-box, her knitting, her carpet-bag. She drove to Meurice's, and hired a room, and then she asked the servants there who knew him whether Sir John Dampier was still staying in the house. They said he had left the place some time before, but that he had called twice that day to ask if she had arrived. And then Miss Dampier, who always liked to make herself comfortable and at home, went up to her room, had the window opened, light brought, and ordered some tea. She was sitting at the table in her cap in her comfortable black gown, with her knitting her writing-desk, her books, all set

out about the room. She was pouring out tea for herself, and looking as much at home as if she had lived there for months, when the door opened and her nephew walked in. She was delighted to see him.

'My dear Jack, how good of you to come,' said the old lady, looking up at him, and holding out her hand. 'But you don't look well. You have been sitting up late and racketing. Will you have some tea to refresh you? I will treat you to any thing you like.'

'Ah! don't make jokes,' said Dampier. 'I am very unhappy. Look here, I have got into the most horrible scrape; and not myself only.' And the room shook, and the tea-table rattled, as he went pacing up and down the room with heavy footsteps. 'I want to behave like a gentleman, and I wake up one morning and find myself a scoundrel. Do you see?'

'Tell me about it, my dear,' said Miss Dampier, quietly.

And then John burst out and told all his story, confounding himself, and stamping, flinging himself about into one chair after another. 'I meant no harm,' he said. 'I wanted to give her a little pleasure, and this is the end. I think I have broken her heart, and those pasteurs have murdered her by this time. They won't let me see her; Tournour almost ordered me out of the house. Aunt Jean, do say something; do have an opinion.'

'I wish your cousin was here,' said Miss Dampier; 'he is the parson of the family; and bound to give us all good advice; let me write to him, Jack. I have a certain reliance on Will's good sense.'

'I won't have Will interfering with my affairs,' cried the other testily. 'And you—you will not help me, I see.'

'I will go and see Elizabeth,' said Miss Dampier, 'to-night, if you like. I am very sorry for her, and for you too, John. What more can I say? Come again in an hour, and I will tell you what I think.'

So Miss Dampier was as good as her word and set off on her pilgrimage, and drove along the lighted streets, and then past the cab-stand and the hospital to the house with the shuttered windows. Her own heart was very sad as she got out of the carriage and rang at the bell. But looking up by chance she just saw a gleam of light which came from one of the upper windows and played upon the wall. She took this as a good omen, and said to herself that all would be well.—Do you believe in omens?—The light came from a room where Elly was laying asleep, and dreaming gently,—calm, satisfied, happy, for once heedless of the troubles, and turmoils, and anxieties of the waking people all round about her. She looked very pale, her hands were loosely clasped, the light was in the window, flickering; and meanwhile, beneath the window, in the street, Miss Dampier stood waiting under the stars. She did not know that Elly saw her in her dim dreams, and somehow fancied that she was near.

The door opened at last. How black the courtyard looked behind it! 'What do you want?' said Clementine, in a hiss. 'Who is it?'

'I want to know how Miss Gilmour is?' said Miss Dampier, quite humbly, 'and to see Monsieur or Madame Tournour.'

'Vous êtes Madame Dampierre,' said Clementine. 'Madame est occupée. Elle ne reçoit pas.'

'When will she be disengaged?' said the old lady.

'Ma foi!' said Clementine, shrugging her shoulders, 'that I cannot tell you. She has desired me to say that she does not wish to see any body.' And the door was shut with a bang. Elly woke up startled from her sleep and old Francoise, happened to come into the room, carried the candle away.

Miss Dampier went home very sad and alarmed, she scarcely knew why. She wrote a tender little letter to Elly next day. It was:—

'DEAR CHILD.—You must let me come and see you. We are very unhappy, John and I, to think that his imprudence has caused you so much trouble. He does not know how to beg you to forgive him—you and M. Tournour and your mother. He should have known better; he has been unpardonably thoughtless, but he is nearly broken-hearted about it. He has been engaged to Lætitia for three or four months, and you know how long she has loved him. Dearest Elly you must let me come and see you, and perhaps one day you may be trusted to the care of an old woman, and you will come home with me for a time, and brighten my lonely little house. Your affectionate old friend.

JEAN DAMPIER.'

But to this there came no answer. Miss Dampier went again and could not get in. She wrote to Mme. Tournour, who sent back the letter unopened. John Dampier walked about pale and haggard and remorseful.

One evening he and his aunt were dining in the public room of the hotel, and talking over this affair, when the waiter came and told them that a gentleman wanted to speak to Miss Dampier, and the old lady got up, and went out of the room. She came back in an instant, looking very agitated. 'John!' she said—'oh, John!' and then began to cry. She could not speak for a minute, while he quite frightened for his part, hastily went to the door. A tall young man was standing there, wrapped in a loose coat, who looked into his face and said—

'Are you Sir John Dampier? My sister Elizabeth would like to see you again. I have come for you.'

'Your sister Elizabeth!' said Dampier, looking surprised.

The other man's face changed as he spoke again. 'I am Anthony Tournour; I have come to fetch you, because it is her wish, and she is dying, we fear.'

The two men stood looking at one another for one horrible moment, then Dampier slowly turned his face around to the wall. In that one instant, all that cruel weight which had almost crushed poor Elly to death came and fell upon his broad shoulders, better able, in truth, to bear it than she had ever been.

He looked up at last. 'Have I done this?' said he to Tournour, in a sort of hoarse whisper. 'I meant for the best.'

'I don't know what you have done,' said the other, very sadly, 'Life and death are not in your hands or mine. Let us pray that our mistakes may be forgiven us. Are you ready now?'

Elly's visions had come to an end. The hour seemed to be very near when she should awake from the dream of life. Dim figures of her mother, her step-father, of old Francoise, came and stood by her bedside. But how far-off they appeared; how distant their voices sounded. Old Francoise came into her room the morning after Elly had been brought home, with some message from Tournour, desiring her to come down stairs and speak to him: he had been laying awake all night, thinking what he should say to her, praying for her, imploring grace, so that he should be allowed to touch the rebellious spirit, to point out all its errors, to bring it to light. And, meanwhile, Elly, the rebellious spirit, sat by her bedside in a sort of bewildered misery. She scarcely told herself why she was so unhappy. She wondered a little that there was agony so great to be endured; she had never conceived its existence before. Was he gone forever—was it Lætitia whom he cared for? 'You know that I belong to Lætitia,' he had said. How could it be? All heaven and earth would cry out against it. Lætitia's—Lætitia, who cared so little, who was so pale, and so cold, and so indifferent? How could he speak such cruel words? Oh, shame shame! that she should be so made to suffer. 'A poor little thing like me,' said Elly, 'lonely and friendless and heart-broken.' The pang was so sharp that it seemed to her like physical pain, and she moaned, and winced, and shivered under it—was it she herself or another person that was here in the darkness? She was cold, too, and yet burning with thirst; she groped her way to the jug, and poured out a little water, and drank with eager gulps. Then she began to take off her damp clothes but it tired her, and she forgot to go on; she dropped her cloak upon the floor and flung herself upon the bed with a passionate outcry. Her mouth was dry and parched, her throat was burning, her hands were burning too. In the darkness she seemed to see his face, and Lætitia's glaring at her, and she turned sick and giddy at the sight; presently not theirs only, but a hundred others—Tournour's, Boulot's, Faust's and Mephistophiles—crowding upon her, and glaring furiously. She fell into a short, uneasy sleep once, and woke up with a moan as the hospital clock struck three. The moon was shining into her room, ineffably gray, chill, and silent, and as she woke, a horror, a terror came over her—her heart scarcely beat; she seemed to be sinking and dying away. She thought with a thrill, that her last hour was come; the terror seemed to bear down upon her nearer and closer and irresistible—and then she must have fallen back senseless upon her bed. And so when Francoise came with a message in the morning, which was intended to frighten the rebellious spirit into submission, she found it gone, safe, far away from reproach, from angry chiding, and the poor little body lying lifeless, burnt with fierce fever, and racked with dull pain. All day Elly was scarcely sensible, lying in a

sort of stupor. Francoise, with tender hands, undressed her and laid her within the sheets; Tournour came and stood by the poor child's bedside. He had brought a doctor, who was bending over her.

'It is a sort of nervous fever,' said the doctor, 'and I fear that there is some inward inflammation as well; she is very ill. This must have been impending for some time past.'

Tournour stood, with clasped hands and a heavy heart, watching the changes as they passed over the poor little face. Who was to blame in this? He had not spoken one word to her the night before. Was it grief? Was it repentance? Ah me! Elly was dumb now, and could not answer. All his wrath was turned against Dampier; for Elly he only felt the tenderest concern. But he was too unhappy just now to think of his anger. He went for Madame Tournour, who came back and set to work to nurse her daughter; but she was frightened and agitated, and seemed scarcely to know what she was about. On the morning of the second day, contrary to the doctor's expectations, Elly recovered her consciousness; on the third day she was better. And when Tournour came into the room, she said to him, with one of her old pretty, sad smiles, 'You are very angry with me, are you not? You think I ought not to have gone to the play with John Dampier?'

'Ah, my child,' said Tournour, with a long drawn, shivering sigh, 'I am too anxious to be angry.'

'Did he promise to marry you, Elly?' said Madame Tournour, who was sitting by her bed-side. She was looking so eagerly for an answer that she did not see her husband's look of reproach.

'How could he?' said Elly, simply. 'He is going to marry Lætitia.'

'Tell me, my child,' said Tournour, gently taking her hand, 'how often did you go with him?'

'Three times,' Elly answered, faintly. 'Once to the Bois, and once to the Louvre, and then that last time,' and she gasped for breath. Tournour did not answer, but bent down gently, and kissed her forehead.

It was on that very day that Dampier called. Elly seemed somehow to know that he was in the house. She got excited, and began to wander, and to call him by his name. Tournour heard her, and turned pale, and set his teeth as he went down to speak to Sir John. In the evening the girl was better, and Anthony arrived from the south. And I think it was on the fifth day that Elly told Anthony that she wanted to see Dampier once again.

'You can guess how it has been,' she said 'and I love him still, but not as I did. Anthony, is it not strange? Perhaps one is selfish when one is dying. But I want to see him—just once again. Every thing is so changed. I cannot understand why I have been so unhappy all this time. Anthony, I have wasted all my life; I have made nobody happy—not even you.'

'You have made me love you, and that has been my happiness,' said Anthony. 'I have been very unhappy, too; but I thank heaven for having known you, Elly.'

Elly thought she had but a little time left. What was there in the solemn nearness of death that had changed her so greatly? She had no terror: she was ready to lie down and go to sleep like a tired child in its mother's arms. Worldly! we call some folks worldly, and truly they have lived for to-day and cared for to-day; but for them as for us, the great to-morrow comes, and then they cease to be worldly—is it not so? Who shall say that such and such a life is wasted, purposeless? That such and such minds are narrow, are mean, are earthly? The day comes, dawning freshly and stillly, like any other day in all the year, when the secret of their life is ended, and the great sanctification of Death is theirs.

Boulot came to see Tournour, over whom he had great influence, and insisted upon being shown to Elizabeth's bedside. She put out her hand and said, 'How-d'ye-do, Monsieur Boulot?' very sweetly, but when he had talked to her for some little time she stopped him and said, 'You cannot know how near these things seem, and how much more great, and awful, and real they are, when you are lying here like me, and when you are standing by another person's sick-bed. No-body can speak of them to me as they themselves speak to me.' She said it so simply, with so little intention of offence, that Boulot stopped in the midst of his little sermon, and said farewell quite kindly and gently. And then, not long after he was gone, Anthony came back with the Dampiers.

TO BE CONTINUED.