

THE STORY OF ELIZABETH.

BY MISS THACKERAY.

Daughter of the great English Novelist.

CHAPTER I.

This is the story of a foolish woman, who, through her own folly, learned wisdom at last; whose troubles—they were not very great, they might have made the happiness of some less eager spirit—were more than she knew how to bear. The lesson of life was a hard lesson to her. She would not learn, she revolted against the wholesome doctrine. And while she was crying out that she would not learn, and turning away and railing and complaining against her fate; days, hours, fate, went on their course. And they passed unmoved; and it was she who gave way, she who was altered, she who was touched and torn by her own complaints and regrets.

Elizabeth had great soft eyes and pretty yellow hair, and a sweet flitting smile, which came out like sun-light over her face, and lit up yowms and mine, and any other it might chance to fall upon. She used to smile at herself in the glass, as many a girl has done before her; she used to dance about the room, and think, 'Come life, come life, mine is going to be a happy one. Here I am awaiting, and I was made handsome to be admired, and to be loved, and to be hated by a few, and worshiped by a few, and envied by all. I am handsomer than Lætitia a thousand times. I am glad I have no money as she has, and that I shall be loved for myself, for my 'beaux yeux.' One person turns pale when they look at him. 'Tra la la, tra la la!' and she danced along the room singing. There was no carpet, only a smooth polished floor. Three tall windows looked out into a busy Paris street paved with stones, over which carriages, and cabs, and hand-trucks were jolting. There was a clock, and artificial flowers in china vases on the chimney, a red velvet sofa, a sort of 'etagere' with ornaments, and a great double-door wide open, through which you could see a dining-room, also bare, polished, with a round table and an oil-cloth cover, and a white china stove, and some wax-work fruit on the side-board, and a maid in a white cap at work in the window.

Presently there came a ring at the bell. Elizabeth stopped short in her dance, and the maid rose, put down her work, and went to open the door; and then a voice, which made Elizabeth smile and look handsomer than ever, asked if Mrs. and Miss Gilmour were at home?

Elizabeth stood listening, with her fair head a little bent, while the maid said, 'No, sare,' and then Miss Gilmour flushed up quite angrily in the inner room, and would have run out. She hesitated only for a minute, and then it was too late; the door was shut, and Clementine sat down again to her work.

'Clementine, how dare you say I was not at home?' cried Elizabeth, suddenly standing before her.

'Madame desired me to let no one in in her absence,' said Clementine, primly. 'I only obeyed my orders. There is the gentleman's card.'

'Sir John Dampier' was on the card, and then, in pencil, 'I hope you will be at home in Chester street next week. Can I be your 'avant-courier' in any way? I cross to-night.'

Elizabeth smiled again, shrugged her shoulders and said to herself, 'Next week; I can afford to wait better than he can, perhaps. Poor man! After all, 'il y en a bien d'autres;' and she went to the window, and, by leaning out, she just caught a glimpse of the Madeleine and of Sir John Dampier walking away; and then presently she saw her mother on the opposite side of the street, passing the stall of the old apple-woman, turning in under the archway of the house.

Elizabeth's mother was like her daughter, only she had black eyes and black hair, and where her daughter was wayward and yielding, the elder woman was wayward and determined. They did not care much for one another, these two. They had not lived together all their lives, or learnt to love one another, as a matter of course; they were too much alike, too much of an age: Elizabeth was eighteen, and her mother thirty-six. If Elizabeth looked twenty, the mother looked thirty, and she was as vain, as foolish, as fond of admiration as her daughter. Mrs. Gilmour did not own it to herself, but she had been used to it all her life—to be first, to be much made of; and here was a little girl who had sprung up somehow, and learnt of herself to be charming—more charming than she had ever been in her best days; and now that they had slid away,

those best days, the elder woman had a dull, unconscious discontent in her heart. People whom she had known, and who had admired her but a year or two ago, seemed to neglect her now and to pass her by, in order to pay a certain homage to her daughter's youth and brilliance: John Dampier, among others, whom she had known as a boy, when she was a young woman. Good mothers, tender-hearted women, brighten again and grow young over their children's happiness and success. Caroline Gilmour suddenly became old somehow, when she first witnessed her daughter's triumphs, and she felt that the wrinkles were growing under her wistful eyes, and that the color was fading from her cheeks, and she gasped a little sigh and thought, 'Ah! how I suffer! What is it? what can have come to me?' As time passed on, the widow's brows grew darker, her lips set ominously. One day she suddenly declared that she was weary of London and London ways, and that she should go abroad; and Elizabeth, who liked everything that was change, that was more life and more experience—she had not taken into account that there was any other than the experience of pleasure in store for her—Elizabeth clapped her hands and cried, 'Yes, yes, mamma; I am quite tired of London and all this excitement. Let us go to Paris for the winter, and lead a quiet life.'

'Paris is just the place to go to for quiet,' said Mrs. Gilmour, who was smoothing her shining locks in the glass, and looking intently into her own dark, gloomy eyes.

'The Dampiers are going to Paris,' Elizabeth went on; 'Lady Dampier and Sir John, and old Miss Dampier and Lætitia. He was saying how he wished you would go. We could have such fun! Do go, dear, pretty mamma!'

As Elizabeth spoke, Mrs. Gilmour's dark eyes brightened, and suddenly her hard face melted; and, still looking at herself in the glass, she said, 'We will go if you wish it, Elly. I thought you had had enough of balls.'

But the end of the Paris winter came, and even then Elly had not had enough: not enough admiration, not enough happiness, not enough new dresses, not enough of herself, not enough time to suffice her eager, longing desires, not enough delights to fill up the swift flying days. I cannot tell you—she could not have told you herself—what she wanted, what perfection of happiness, what wonderful thing. She danced, she wore beautiful dresses, she flirted, she chattered nonsense and sentiment, she listened to music; her pretty little head was in a whirl. John Dampier followed her from place to place; and so, indeed, did one or two others. Though she was in love with them all, I believe she would have married this Dampier if he had asked, but he never did. He saw that she did not really care for him; opportunity did not befriended him. His mother was against it; and then, her mother was there, looking at him with her dark, reproachful eyes—those eyes which had once fascinated and then repelled him, and that he mistrusted so and almost hated now.—And this is the secret of my story; but for this, it would never have been written. He hated, and she did not hate, poor woman! It would have been better, a thousand times, for herself and for her daughter, had she done so. Ah! what cruel perversion was it, that the best of all good gifts should have turned to trouble, to jealousy and wicked rancor; that this sacred power of faithful devotion, by which she might have saved herself and ennobled a mean and earthly spirit, should have turned to a curse instead of a blessing!

There was a placid, pretty niece of Lady Dampier, called Lætitia, who had been long destined for Sir John. Lætitia and Elizabeth had been at school together for a good many dreary years, and were very old friends. Elizabeth all her life used to triumph over her friend, and to bewilder her with her careless, gleeful ways, and yet win her over to her own side, for she was irresistible, and she knew it. Perhaps it was because she knew it so well that she was so confident and so charming. Lætitia, although she was sincerely fond of her cousin, used to wonder that her aunt could be against such a wife for her son.

'She is a sort of princess,' the girl used to say; 'and John ought to have a beautiful wife for the credit of the family.'

'Your fifty thousand pounds would go a great deal further to promote the credit of the family, my dear,' said old Miss Dampier, who was a fat, plain-spoken, kindly old lady. 'I like the girl, though my sister-in-law does not; and I hope that some day she will find a very good husband. I confess that I had rather it were not John.'

And so one day John was informed by his mother, who was getting alarmed, that she was going home, and that she could not think of crossing without him. And Dampier, who was careful, as men are mostly, and wanted to think about his decision, and who was anxious to do the very best for himself in every respect—as is the way with just, and good, and respectable gentlemen—was not at all loth to obey her summons.

Here was Lætitia, who was very fond of him—there was no doubt of that—with a house in the country and money at her bankers'; there was a wayward, charming, beautiful girl, who didn't care for him very much, who had little or no money, but whom he certainly cared for. He talked it all over dispassionately with his aunt—so dispassionately that the old woman got angry.

'You are a model young man, John. It quite affects me, and makes me forget my years, to see the admirable way in which you young people conduct yourselves. You have got such well-regulated hearts, it's quite a marvel. You are quite right; Tishy has got fifty thousand pounds, which will all go into your pocket, and respectable connections, who will come to you: wedding, and Elly Gilmour has not a penny except what her mother will leave her—a mother with a bad temper, and who is sure to marry again; and though the girl is the prettiest young creature I ever set eyes on, and though you care for her as you never cared for any other woman before, men don't marry wives for such absurd reasons as that. You are quite right to have nothing to do with her; and I respect you for your noble self-denial.' And the old lady began to knit away at a great long red comforter she had always on hand for her other nephew the clergyman.

'But, my dear aunt Jean, what is it you want me to do?' cried John.

'Drop one, knit two together,' said the old lady, cliquetting her needles.

She really wanted John to marry his cousin, but she was a spinster still and sentimental; and she could not help being sorry for pretty Elizabeth; and now she was afraid that she had said too much, for her nephew frowned, put his hands into his pockets, and walked out of the room.

He walked down stairs, and out of the door into the Rue Royale, the street where they were lodging; then he strolled across the Place de la Concorde, and in at the gates of the Tuileries, where the soldiers were pacing, and so along the broad path, to where he heard a sound of music, and saw a glitter of people. Tum te tum, bom, bom, bom, went the military music; twittering busy little birds were chirping up in the branches; buds were bursting; colors glimmering; tinted sun-shine flooding the garden, and the music, and the people; old gentlemen were reading newspapers on the benches; children are playing at hide-and-seek behind the statues; nurses gossiping, and nodding their white caps, and dandling their white babies; and there on chairs, listening to the music, the mammams were sitting in grand bonnets and parasols, working, and gossiping too; and ladies and gentlemen went walking up and down before them. All the windows of the Tuileries were ablaze with the sun; the terraces were beginning to gleam with crocuses and spring flowers.

As John Dampier was walking along, scarcely noting all this, he heard his name softly called, and turning round he saw two ladies sitting under a budding horse-chestnut tree. One of them he thought looked like a fresh spring flower, herself smiling pleasantly, all dressed in crisp light gray, with a white bonnet, and a quantity of bright yellow hair.—She held out a little gray hand and said,

'Wont you come and talk to us? Mamma and I are tired of listening to music.—We want to hear somebody talk.'

And then mamma, who was Mrs. Gilmour, held out a straw-colored hand, and said, 'Do you think sensible people have nothing better to do than to listen to your chatter, Elly? Here is your particular friend, M. de Vaux, coming to us. You can talk to him?'

Elizabeth looked up quickly at her mother, they glanced at Dampier, then greeted M. de Vaux as pleasantly almost as she had greeted him.

'I am afraid I cannot stay now,' said Sir John to Elizabeth. 'I have several things to do. Do you know that we are going away immediately.'

Mrs. Gilmour's black eyes seemed to flash into his face as he spoke. He felt them, though he was looking at Elizabeth, and could not help turning away with an impatient movement of dislike.

'Going away! Oh, how sorry I am,' said Elly. 'But, mamma, I forgot—you

said we were going home, too, in a few days; so I don't mind so much. You will come and say good-bye, won't you?' Elizabeth went on, while M. de Vaux, who had been waiting to be spoken to, turned away rather provoked, and made some remark to Mrs. Gilmour. And then Elizabeth, seeing her opportunity, and looking up, frank, fair, and smiling, said quickly, 'To-morrow at three, mind—and give my love to Lætitia,' she went on, much more deliberately, 'and my best love to Miss Dampier; and oh, dear! why does one ever have to say good-bye to one's friends? Are you sure you are all really going?'

'Alas!' said Dampier, looking down at the kind young face with strange emotion and tenderness, and holding out his hand.—He had not meant it as good-bye yet, but so Elly and her mother understood it.

'Good-bye, Sir John; we shall meet again in London,' said Mrs. Gilmour.

'Good-bye,' said Elly, wistfully raising her sweet eyes. And this was the last time he ever saw her thus.

As he walked away, he carried with him a bright picture of the woman he loved, looking at him kindly, bappy, surrounded with sunshine and budding green leaves, smiling and holding out her hand; and so he saw her in his dreams sometimes; and so she would appear to him now and then in the course of his life; so he sometimes sees her now, in spring-time, generally when the trees are coming out, and some little chirp of a sparrow or some little glistening green bud conjures up all these old by-gone days again.

Mrs. Gilmour did not sleep very sound all that night. While Elizabeth lay dreaming in her dark room, her mother, with wild falling black hair, and wrapped in a long red dressing-gown, was wandering restlessly up and down, or flinging herself on the bed or the sofa, and trying at her bed-side desperately to sleep, or falling on her knees with clasped outstretched hands. Was she asking for her own happiness at the expense of poor Elly's? I don't like to think so—it seems so cruel, so wicked, so unnatural. But remember, here was a passionate selfish woman, who for long years had had one dream, one idea; who knew that she loved this man twenty times—twenty years—more than did Elizabeth, who was but a little child when this mad fancy began.

'She does not care for him a bit,' the poor wretch said to herself over and over again. 'He likes her, and he would marry her if—I chose to give him the chance.—She will be as happy with anybody else. I could not bear this—it would kill me. I never suffered such horrible torture in all my life. He hates me. It is hopeless; and I—I do not know whether I hate him or I love him most. How dare she tell him to come to-morrow, when she knew I would be out. She shall not see him. We will neither of us see him again; never—oh! never. But I shall suffer, and she will forget. Oh! if I could forget! And then she would fall down on her knees again; and because she prayed, she blinded herself to her own wrong-doings, and thought that heaven was on her side.'

And so the night went on. John Dampier was haunted with strange dreams, and saw Caroline Gilmour more than once coming and going in a red gown, and talking to him, though he could not understand what she was saying; sometimes she was in his house at Guildford; sometimes in Paris; sometimes sitting with Elly up in a chestnut tree, and chattering like a monkey; sometimes gliding down interminable rooms and opening door after door. He disliked her worse than ever when he awoke in the morning.—Is this strange? It would have seemed to me stranger had it not been so. We are not blocks of wax and putty with glass eyes, like the people at Madame Tussaud's; we have souls, and we feel and we guess at more than we see round about us, and we influence one another for good or for evil from the moment we come into the world. Let us be humbly thankful if the day comes for us to leave it before we have done any great harm to those who live their lives alongside with ours.

And so the next morning Caroline asked her daughter if she would come with her to M. le Pasteur Tournour's at two. 'I am sure you would be the better for listening to a good man's exhortation,' said Mrs. Gilmour.

'I don't want to go, mamma. I hate exhortations,' said Elizabeth, pettishly; 'and you know how ill it made me last Tuesday. How can you like it—such dreary, sleepy talk. It gave me the most dreadful headache.'

'Poor child,' said Mrs. Gilmour, 'perhaps the day may come when you will find