

ON THE DEATH OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

BY STELLA; AUTHOR OF "SAPHO," "THE PEARL OF POLAND," "RECORDS OF THE HEART," ETC.

I.

I was in Florence. The Del Popolo
Was brought to me the twenty-ninth of June.
In sixty-one—a sombre afternoon.
It had one column draped in weeds of woe:
I ran mine eyes along the lines, and lo!
My vision struck against the following.
So hard, it set my heart to quivering.
And through my bosom swung it to and fro,
Like funeral bell. This morn. just as aglow,
Aurora flung apart the gates of day.
Elizabeth Browning passed away
Into the world where all pure spirits go.
To Casa Guida, then, with solemn tread,
I went, and sat me down beside the honored dead.

II.

It was the room where she was wont to write:
There was the table—there the pen and ink—
And paper—things with authorship we link—
Looking as if in use but yesternight.
And only put aside for needful rest:
Upon the snowy couch whereon she'd lain
In life, composing many a lofty strain.
Her thin hands folded on her silent breast.
And faded lids meekly closed, she calmly slept
Like one that hath laid down to rise again.
I gazed upon that face, so marked with pain.
That pale, attenuated form, and wept.
And thanked our Father who had taken her home
To that blessed world where pain could never come.

III.

How calm her sleep! How silent and profound!
How pale that thought-worn brow! How thin that cheek!
I looked on her as if the dead could speak,
And tell me how she had that morn been crowned
To Heaven, and the angels gathered round
With hallelujahs loud to welcome her
Happy arrival in her native sphere:
But through those still lips came no breath nor sound.
The lava thoughts, that erst with rocket bound,
Rushed worldward down the nerve-electric chain.
Lay now all frozen up in the big brain,
Powerless further mystery to expand,
And low reclined that form of speechless clay,
A worn-out sheath the soul hath thrown away.

IV.

At four o'clock P. M., the thirtieth.
The English Cemetery, just outside
La Porta Pinta, flung its portal wide
To make room for the sable car of death.
The funeral cortege with a solemn tread,
Moved up the cypress aisle, and gathered round
An open grave made deep in Tuscan ground,
And in it laid with reverent hands the dead:
Inclining forward—holding in their breath,
And scanning well her couch of last repose,
They threw to her the myrtle and the rose,
Soft blue-eyed pansies, and a laurel wreath:
Dear parting gifts: then, turning, did not weep,
But sighed, O God! give thy beloved sleep!

—N. Y. House Journal.

THE SPECTRAL MONK.

The legend I am about to relate is of a weird, wild character. It treats of the children of different houses. Sir Gilbert Hemworth and Olivia Jousliffe, both natives of the town of Peterborough, were left orphans some two centuries ago, and placed in the care of the same person.

When they were each of them about fourteen years of age, they fell into very different hands. The principles they imbibed from their preceptors appeared to be altogether of an opposite nature, and to a considerable extent they were separated by a wide gulf, as far as thought and principle were concerned.

An ancient ecclesiastic belonging to the Monastery of St. Peter superintended the education of the fair Olivia, who was greatly attached to her native city. Sir Gilbert Hemworth, before he had arrived at manhood's estate, went abroad, and studied under several Continental professors.

As a natural consequence, the minds of those two young persons were formed in a different mould; but though separated from each other, their friendship remained unalterable, and they continued to regard each other with sincere and unfeigned affection. Indeed, the ties which bound them together could not be snapped asunder.

The Baronet was the last scion of a long and honourable line, and Olivia Jousliffe was also of gentle birth. She had, moreover, a more than ordinary share of beauty, was thoughtful and devout, and greatly beloved by all who came within her influence.

During the Baronet's residence abroad, a number of letters were exchanged between him and the companion of his earlier years. These epistles were couched in language expressive of the warmest feelings of friendship, but contained no positive declaration of love. They were such as a fond brother might write to a favourite sister.

When, however, the Baronet returned to his native town, and beheld the many graces of Olivia, he told the oft-repeated tale of love.

Olivia Jousliffe listened to his earnest appeal, to which, however, she made no immediate reply. For a brief space of time, she stood silent and reflective.

"How is this, Olivia?" inquired the Baronet. "Has any rival appeared on the scene during my absence? If so, candidly avow it!"

"You are mistaken," returned the lady, in a quiet, gentle manner.

"Then why this hesitation?"

"I must consult with Father Rankley."

"And who may he be?"

"The good monk who has been to me the kindest of preceptors—and, indeed, I may say, a father to the poor orphan whom you address!"

"Well, dearest, as you wish. But the good Father Rankley has but little to do with your mundane affairs, I presume?"

"Indeed, but he has. I consult him on all matters concerning myself."

"By my faith, but it appears to me you put greater trust in him than you do in me! I shall be jealous, Olivia!" he added, with a smile.

"He is wiser than either of us," she murmured.

Upon this, her lover made a mock reverence, and said, quickly, "Who is the holy father?"

"He is a brother of the Monastery of St. Peter."

"Well, as you wish it, consult him, and give me an answer at your earliest convenience. It is out of his power, I should hope, to separate two fond hearts."

"He will not desire to do so."

"I hope not."

"I am sure not!"

"Ah, that is well; and so a truce to this for the present. How beautiful you have grown, my dearest Olivia!" exclaimed the enraptured young man.

She smiled, but made no reply to this observation.

A few hours later, Olivia Jousliffe paid a visit to Father Rankley, to whom she made known the offer she had received from the Baronet.

A long conversation followed between the priest and his communicant, the result of which was the former's consent to the match.

In the course of a few months, the fair Olivia gave her hand to Sir Gilbert Hemworth.

Her change of condition, however, had no power to alter her friendship for Rankley, who paid frequent visits to the wedded pair. The monk was a grave, thoughtful man, very learned, a profound philosopher, and, to a certain extent, might be considered gloomy and sombre; but he bore an irrefragable character, and was much beloved by the brethren of St. Peter. Nevertheless, Sir Gilbert felt a certain amount of restraint when in his presence, and it might be an undefined foreshadowing of ill which he strove in vain to shake off; the reason for this he could not quite comprehend. The monk always received a hearty welcome both from the master and mistress of the establishment; but it cannot be concealed, however, that the former invariably felt relieved when the ecclesiastic took his departure.

Time sped on. The Baronet and his lady left Peterborough to pay a short visit to the metropolis. One morning, when his lady came down to breakfast, the Baronet remarked that her countenance was unusually pale, and bore evident marks of confusion.

He inquired anxiously after her health. She assured him that she was perfectly well. He repeated his inquiries, and begged to know if anything had disordered her. She replied no, she was as well as usual.

Still he did not appear satisfied.

"Something ails you, Olivia," he muttered; "something's amiss. Have you met with any accident? Tell me at once, dearest."

"Indeed, I have not! Nothing is the matter; be satisfied."

"But you have a thick black ribbon round your wrist! Surely, there must be some reason for this."

"Let me conjure you, Sir Gilbert, never to inquire the cause for my wearing this ribbon. You will never more see me without it. If it concerned you as a husband to know it, I would not for a moment conceal it from you. I never in my life denied you a request; but of this I must entreat you to forgive my refusal, and never to inquire further on this painful subject."

The poor Baronet was sorely puzzled, but chose to put the best face possible on the matter.

"Well, my lady," said he smiling, "since you so earnestly desire it, I will inquire no further."

The conversation ended when Lady Olivia inquired of the servant if any letter had arrived.

She was answered in the negative.

In a few moments, she rang the bell for the servant, and made the same inquiry, and received a similar answer.

"Do you expect a letter?" said the Baronet.

"Indeed, I do!" she returned, quickly. "I expect to hear that Father Rankley is dead. He died last Tuesday at three o'clock!"

"Upon my word, Olivia, you do surprise me!" exclaimed her husband. "I never in my life deemed you superstitious, but you must have had some dream which has alarmed you!"

The servant now entered, and delivered a letter, which was sealed with black wax.

"It is as I expected," said Lady Olivia. "He is dead!"

"Let us peruse its contents before we come to any hasty conclusion," said her husband, opening the letter.

It came from the Prior of St. Peter's Monastery who announced the death of the good Father Rankley, who breathed his last at three o'clock on the preceding Tuesday.

"I knew it," murmured Lady Hemworth; "felt assured of it. Both the hour and the day accord with the warning!"

"My dear lady, do compose yourself!" ejaculated the astonished Baronet. "Put no faith in omens or warnings. This is the merest accident—a strange coincidence, nothing more."

"I will not dispute the point. Be it as you say."

"But, for your own sake, you must not give way to fancies of this nature."

"I will strive not to do so, my dear husband," she answered sadly. "I am much more contented than I have been for some time past. Death is inevitable!"

After a period of some months, Lady Hemworth gave birth to a son. She had before been the mother of two daughters only.

The last happy event was recorded by a peal of bells in the old town of Peterborough.

The Baronet did not live more than three years after the birth of his son and heir.

After his decease, Lady Olivia went but little from home, but remained in seclusion for a considerable time. She visited no family but that of the Hebdoms, who were intimate friends of her late husband. With them she passed a few hours; the rest of her time was entirely devoted to solitude.

Mr. Hebdom's family consisted of himself, his wife, and one son, who, at the Baronet's death, was quite a youth. To this son, however, she was afterwards married in the space of a few years, notwithstanding the disparity of their ages, and the manifest imprudence of such a connection, so unequal in every respect.

The event justified the expectations of everyone. Lady Olivia was treated by her young husband with neglect and cruelty, and the whole of his conduct evinced him the most abandoned libertine, utterly destitute of every principle of virtue.

To this, her second husband, Lady Olivia brought a daughter. Afterwards, such was his conduct, that she insisted on a separation. They parted for several years, when so great was the contrition he expressed for his former conduct, that, won over by his promises and supplications, she was induced once more to reside with him, and in course of time presented him with a second daughter.

On the anniversary of her birthday, Lady Olivia invited a few friends. One person, who presented himself by her particular request, was the Prior of the monastery, whom she had known from infancy, when he was clergyman of the parish. She told him that she felt perfectly well, saying, at the same time, that it was her natal day—"For," said she, "I am forty-six to-day."

"No, my lady," answered the Prior; "you are mistaken. Your mother and myself had several disputes concerning your age, and I have at length discovered that I am right. I have search the documents, and found that you are forty-five to-day."

"You have signed my death-warrant!" said she. "I have not much longer to live. I must therefore entreat you to hear a communication I have to make. Will you listen to it?"

The Prior bowed reverently.

"You are no stranger to the deep and enduring friendship which existed between myself and Father Rankley. We made a solemn promise to each other that whichever should die first, if permitted, should appear to the survivor on special occasions. The good Father, after death, kept his word. One night, when my husband, Sir Gilbert, and myself were in bed, I awoke, and discovered Father Rankley sitting by my bed-side. I screamed out, and endeavoured, but in vain, to wake my husband.

"For heavens sake, Father," said I, 'by what means and for what purpose come you at this time of night?'

"Have you forgotten our promise?" said he. "I died last Tuesday at three o'clock. I am permitted to appear to you, and am suffered to inform you that you will have a son, who it is decreed shall marry the daughter of Vincent McVaugh. Not many years after his birth, your present husband will die, and you will marry again, and to a man by whose ill-treatment you will be rendered miserable. You will bring him two daughters. You will die in the forty-fifth year of your age, in less than two months after the birth of the second daughter."

"Mercy on me!" I exclaimed, 'cannot I prevent this?'

"Undoubtedly you can," retorted he. 'You are a free agent, and may avoid it all by resisting every temptation to a second marriage.'

"But you were heedless of the warning, my lady," observed the Prior; "had not strength of mind to resist temptation."

"I had not, and must abide by the consequences."

"Your story is a strange one; it borders upon the supernatural; but I am bound to accept it as truth."

"Its truth cannot for a moment be doubted. I did give birth to a son; whether the boy is destined to wed a daughter of Vincent McVaugh can only be determined in the future."

"Proceed with your narrative," said the Prior.

"What followed?"

"You shall hear. I said to my midnight visitant, 'Are you happy?'

"He smiled."

"But how," said I, 'when morning comes, shall I be conscious that your appearance thus to me has been real, and not the phantom of my own imagination?'

"Will not the news of my death," said he, 'be sufficient to convince you?'

"No," I answered. 'I might have had such a dream, and that dream might have accidentally come to pass. I wish to have much stronger proof of its reality.'

"You shall," he said.

"Then, waving his hand, the bed-curtains, which were of crimson velvet, were instantly drawn through a large iron hoop, by which the tester of the bed, which was of an oval form, was suspended.

"In that," said he, 'you cannot be mistaken. No mortal could have performed this.'

"That is true enough," I replied. 'But, deepening, we are often possessed of greater strength than when awake; and then when awake I could not have done it, asleep I might. I shall still doubt.'

"He hesitated for a moment; but observed,

presently, 'You have a pocket-book, in which I will write. You know my handwriting?'

"Yes," I replied; 'I do.'

"He wrote in pencil on one side the leaves.

"I was still dubious.

"Will nothing convince you?' he inquired, with something like sarcasm in his tone.

"Well, I hope I am not mistrustful to one who, when living, was the dearest friend I have ever known," I murmured. "Still, in the morning, I doubt, though awake I may not imitate your hand, asleep I might."

"You have strange fancies—are hard of belief. I must not touch you; it might injure you irreparably. It is not for spirits to touch mortal flesh."

"I am in no fear of any such contact," I ejaculated, hardly knowing what I was saying.

"You possess greater courage than I ever gave you credit for," he observed. "Hold out your hand."

"I obeyed. He touched my wrist; his hand was as cold as marble. In a moment every sense seemed to contract.

"Now," said he, 'while you live, let no mortal eye behold that wrist; to see it would be sacrilege.'

"Heaven protect and preserve me!" I ejaculated.

"I turned to him again. He was gone."

"During the time in which I had conversed with him my thoughts were perfectly calm and collected, but the moment he was gone I was filled with amazement. I endeavoured to wake my husband, but in vain—all my efforts were ineffectual.

"In this state of agitation and surprise I remained for some time, when a flood of tears came to my relief, and I dropped to sleep. In the morning, my husband, Sir Gilbert, arose as usual, without perceiving the state of the curtains. When I awoke, I found him gone."

"I arose, and having dressed myself, went into the gallery adjoining our apartments, and took from there a long braid, by the aid of which, though not without difficulty, I took down the curtains, as I imagined their extraordinary position might have excited wonder among the domestics of our establishment, and occasion inquiries I wished to avoid.

"I went to my bureau, locked up my pocket-book, and took out a piece of black ribbon, which I bound round my wrist. When I came down, my agitation was too visible to pass long unobserved by my husband. He at once marked my confusion, and inquired the cause."

"I instantly assured him that I was perfectly well, but informed him that the good Father Rankley was no more, and that he had died on the preceding Tuesday, at three o'clock; and, at the same time, entreated him to drop all inquiries about the black ribbon I had bound round my wrist."

"He kindly desisted from all further importunity, nor did he ever afterwards inquire the cause."

"He was a discreet man," observed the Prior. "He was; and confiding withal. In less than four years after the birth of my son, Sir Gilbert died in my arms."

"For a while, this melancholy event quite prostrated me, and I determined, as the only means by which to avoid the dreadful sequel to the prediction, to give up every pleasure, and to pass the remainder of my days in solitude. I wish I had continued to act in accordance with my first resolution, then I should have been spared the deep affliction that afterwards fell upon me; but few can endure to remain in a state of complete isolation. I grew melancholy, sighed for change of thought and action, and finally, tired of the life of a recluse, I commenced an intercourse with one family—and only one; nor could I then see the fatal consequences which afterwards resulted from it."

"It would have been wise to have entered a convent," said the Prior.

"Alas, yes! Would that I had become, at that hour of tribulation and trouble, a member of a holy sisterhood; but it was not to be! My destiny was but too clearly marked out. Little did I imagine that my friend's son, only then a mere youth, would prove the person fated to be my husband. Had I suspected this at the time, I should have changed my course of action, and studiously avoided the intimacy which I may say proved to be my bane. In a few years I ceased to regard the young man with indifference. I endeavoured by every possible means to conquer a passion, the fatal consequences of which, should I ever be weak enough to yield to its influence, I knew full well, and fondly imagined I should overcome its attraction, when the evening of the fatal day terminated my fortitude and plunged me in a moment down that abyss I had been so long meditating how to shun. He had been frequently solicited by his parents to permit him to join the army. For a long time they would not accede to his request, for they were dotingly fond of their only son, and had a natural dread of parting with him. At length, however, after repeated appeals, they were prevailed upon to give a reluctant consent. He came to bid me farewell upon the eve of his departure."

"The moment he entered the room he fell down on his knees, and poured forth a flood of eloquence. He told me he was miserable—did not care what became of him, and that I had driven him to despair."

"And you believed him?"

"Ah! Father, I have been indiscreet, foolish, weak, and unmindful of the warning I had received from one who was to me the best of counsellors. Do not say harsh things to me now. I