

THE STORY OF ELIZABETH.

BY MISS THACKERAY,

[Daughter of the Great English Novelist.]

CONTINUED.

Anthony was away—she was glad. After the first shock the girl took her heart and courage, and set herself to practise the good resolutions she had made when she was away. It was not so hard as she had fancied to be a little less ill-tempered and discontented, because you see she had always behaved so very badly before. But it was not so easy to lead the cheerful, devoted life she had pictured to herself.—Her mother was very kind, very indifferent, very unhappy, Elizabeth feared. She was ill too, and out of health, but she bore great suffering with wonderful patience and constancy. Tournour looked haggard and worn. Had he begun to discover that he could not understand his wife, that he had not married the woman he thought he knew so well, but some quite different person? Ill-temper, discontent, he could have endured and dealt with, but a terrible mistrust and doubt had come into his heart, he did not know how or when, and had nearly broken it.

A gloom seemed hanging over this sad house; a sort of hopeless dreariness. Do you remember how cheerful and contented Caroline had been at first? By degrees she began to get a little tired now and then—a little weary. All these things grew just a little insipid and distasteful. Do you know that torture to which some poor slaves have been subjected? I believe it is only a drop of water falling at regular intervals upon their heads. At first they scarcely heed it, and talk and laugh; then they become silent; and still the drop falls and drips; and then they moan and beg for mercy, and still it falls; and then scream out with horror, and cry out for death, for this is more than they can bear—but still it goes on falling. I have read this somewhere, and it seems to me that this applies to Caroline Tournour, and to the terrible life which had begun for her.

Her health failed, and she daily lost strength and interest in the things by which she was surrounded; then they became wearisome. Her tired frame was not equal to the constant exertions she had imposed upon herself: from being wearisome, they grew hateful to her; and, one by one, she gave them up. Then the terrible sameness of a life in which her heart was no longer set, seemed to crush her down day by day; a life never lived from high and honorable motives, but for mean and despicable ends; a life lofty and noble to those who, with great hearts and good courage, knew how to look beyond it, and not to care for the things of the world, but dull and terrible beyond expression to a woman whose whole soul was set amidst the thorns and thistles, and who had only rushed by chance into this narrow path blindfold with passion and despair.

Now she has torn the bandage off her eyes; now she is struggling to get out of it, and beating against the thorns, and wearily trying to trace back her steps. Elly used to cry out in her childish way. Caroline, who is a woman, is silent, and utters not one word of complaint; only her cheeks fall away and her eyes glare out of great black rings.

Elly came home bloning and well, and was shocked and frightened at first to see the change which had come over her mother. She did not ask the reason of it, but as we all do sometimes, accepted without much speculation the course of events. Things come about so naturally that people are often in the midst of strangest histories without having once thought so, or wondered that it should be. Very soon all the gloomy house, though she did not know it, seemed brightened and cheered by her coming home. Even Mme. Jacob relented a little when she heard Tou-Tou and Lou-Lou's shouts of laughter one day coming through the open window.—The three girls were at work in the garden. I do not know that they were doing much good except to themselves. It was a keen, clear, brilliant winter morning, and the sun out of doors put out the smouldering fires within.

The little girls were laughing and working with all their hearts, Elly was laughing too, and tearing up dried old plants, and heaping broken flower-pots together. Almost happy, almost contented, almost good. . . . And there is many a worse state of mind than this. She was sighing as she laughed, for she was thinking of herself, pacing round and round the neglected garden once not so long ago; then she thought of the church on the hill-top, then of Will Dampier, and then of John, and then she came upon a long wriggling worm, and she jumped away and forgot to be sentimental. Besides working in the garden, she set to teaching the children in her mother's school. What this girl turned her hand to she always did well and thoroughly. She even went to visit some of the sick people, and though she never took kindly to these exercises, the children liked to say their lessons to her, and the sick people were glad when she came in. She was very popular with them all; perhaps the reason was, that she did not do these things from a sense of duty, and did not look upon the poor and the sick, as so many of us do, as a selfish means for self-advancement; she went to them because it was more convenient for her to go than for anybody else—she only thought of their needs, grumbled at the trouble she was taking, and it never occurred to her that this unconsciousness was as good as a good conscience.

My dear little Elizabeth! I am glad that at last she is behaving pretty well. Tournour strokes her head sometimes, and holds out his kind hand to her when she comes into his room. His eyes follow her fondly as if he were her father. One day she told him about William Dampier. He sighed as he heard the story. It was all ordained for the best, he said to himself. But he would have been glad to know her happy, and he patted her cheek and went again into his study.

Miss Dampier's letters were Elly's best treasures: how eagerly she took them from Clementine's hands, how she tore them open and read them, once, twice, thrice. No novels interest people so much as their own—a story in which you have ever so little a part to enact, thrills and excites, and amuses to the very last. You don't skip the reflections, the descriptions do not weary. I can fancy Elly sitting in a heap on the floor, and spelling out Miss Dampier's; Tou-Tou and Lou-Lou looking on with respectful wonder.

But suddenly the letters seemed to her to change. They became short and reserved: they were not interesting any more. Looked for so anxiously, they only brought disap-

pointment when they came, and no word of the people about whom she longed to hear, no mention of their doings. Even Lady Dampier's name would have been welcome. But there was nothing. It was in vain she read and re-read so eagerly longing and thirsting for news.

Things were best as they were, she told herself a hundred times; and so, though poor Elly sighed and wearily, and though her heart sank, she did not speak to any one of her trouble: it was a wholesome one, she told herself, one that must be surmounted and overcome by patience. Sometimes her work seemed almost greater than her strength, and then she would go upstairs and cry a little bit, and pity herself, and sop up all her tears, and then run round and round the garden once or twice, and come back with bright eyes and glowing cheeks, to chatter with Françoise, to look after mother and Stephen Tournour, to scold the pupils and make jokes at them, to romp with the little girls.

One day she found her letter waiting on the hall-table, and tore it open with a trembling hope. Aunt Jean described the weather, the pig-sty, made valuable remarks on the news contained in the daily papers, signed herself, ever her affectionate old friend. And that was all. Was not that enough? Elly asked herself, with such a sigh. She was reading it over in the doorway of the salle-a-manger, bonneted and cloaked, with all the remains of the mid-day meal congealing and disordered on the table.

'Es-tu prete, Elizabeth?' said Tou-Tou, coming in with a little basket—there were no stones in it this time. 'Tiens, voila ce que ma tante envoic a cette pauvre Madame Jones.'

Madame Jones was only Mrs. Jones, only an old woman dying in a melancholy room hard by—in a melancholy room in a deserted street, where there were few houses but long walls, where the mould was feeding, and yellow placards were pasted and defaced and flapped in shreds, and where Elly, picking her little steps over the stones, saw blades of grass growing between them. There was a *chantier*—a great wood yard—on one side; and then a dark doorway leading into a black and filthy court, out of which a gutter would come with evil smells, flowing murkily into the street; in the distance, two figures passing; a child in a nightcap thumping a doll upon a curbstone; a dog snuffing at a heap: at the end of the street, the placarded backs of tall houses built upon a rising ground; a man in a blouse wheeling a truck, and singing out dismally; and meanwhile, good old Mrs. Jones was dying close at hand, under this black and crumbling doorway, in a room opening with cracked glass doors upon the yard.

She was lying alone upon her bed; the nurse she had sent to her was gossiping with the porter in his lodge. Kindly and dimly her eyes opened and smiled somehow at the girl, out of the faded bed, out of a mystery of pain, grief, and solitude.

It was a mystery indeed, which Elizabeth, standing beside it, could not understand, though she herself had lain so lately and so resignedly upon a couch of sickness. Age, abandonment, seventy years of life—how many of grief and trouble? As she looked at the dying, indifferent face, she saw that they were almost ended. And in the midst of her pity and shrinking compassion, Elly thought to herself that she would change all with the sick woman, at that minute, to have endured, to have surmounted so much.

She sat with her till the dim twilight came through the dirty and patched panes of the windows. Even as she waited there her thoughts went wandering, and she was trying to picture to herself faces and scenes that she could not see. She knew that the shadows were creeping around about those whom she loved, as quietly as they were rising here in this sordid room. It was their evening as it was hers; and then she said to herself that they who made up so large a part of her life must, perforce, think of her sometimes: she was part of their lives, even though they should utterly neglect and forget and abandon her; even though they should never meet again from this day; though she should never hear their names so much as mentioned; though their paths should separate for ever. For a time they had travelled the same road—ah! she was thankful even for so much; and she unconsciously pressed the wasted hand she was holding; and her heart thrilled with tender, unselfish gladness as the feeble fingers tried to clasp hers, and the faltering whisper tried to bless.

She came home sad and tired from her sick woman's bedside, thinking of the last kind gleam of the eyes as she left the room. She went straight up-stairs and took off her shabby dress, and found another, and poured out water and bathed her face. Her heart was beating, her hands trembling. She was remembering and regretting; she was despairing and longing, and yet resigned, as she had learnt to be of late. She leant against the wall for a moment, before she went down; she was dressed in the blue dress, with her favorite little locket hanging round her neck. She put her hand tiredly to her head; and as she stood, as she used to stand when she was a child, in a sort of dream, and almost out of the world. And as she was waiting a knock came at the door. It was Clementine who knocked, and who said, in the sing-song way in which French women speak—'Mademoiselle, voila pour vous.'

It was too dark to see anything, except that it was another familiar-looking letter. Elly made up her mind not to be disappointed any more, and went down-stairs leisurely to the study, where she knew she would find Tournour's lamp alight. And she crossed the hall and turned the handle of the door, and opened it and went in.

The lamp with its green shade on the table, lit up one part of the room, but in the duskiness, standing by the stove and talking eagerly, were two people whom she could not distinguish very plainly. One of them was Tournour, who looked round and came to meet her, and took her by the hand.

Suddenly her heart began to beat so that her breath was taken away. What was this? Who was this? What chance had she come upon? Such mad hopes as hers, were they ever fulfilled? Was this moment, so sudden, so unlooked for, the one for which she had despaired and longed; for which she had waited and lived through an eternity of grief? Was it John Dampier into whose hand Tournour put hers? Was she still asleep and dreaming of one of those terrible dreams, from which, ah me! she must awake? In this dream she heard the Pasteur saying, 'Il a bien des

choses a vous dire, Elizabeth,' and then he seemed to go away and leave them. In this dream, bewildered and trembling, with a desperate effort, she pulled away her hand and said, 'What does it mean? Where is Tishy? Why do you come, John? Why don't you leave me in peace?' And then it was a dream no longer, but a truth and a reality, when John began to speak in his familiar way, and she heard his voice, and saw him before her, and—yes, it was he; and he said, 'Tishy and I have had a quarrel, Elly. We are nothing to one another any more, and so I have come to you—to—tell you that I have behaved like a fool all this time? And he turned very red as he spoke, and then he was silent, and then he took both her hands and spoke again: 'Tell me, dear,' he said, looking up into her sweet eyes,—'Elly, tell me, would you—won't you—be content with a fool for a husband?' And Elizabeth (Gilmour only answered, 'Oh, John, John!' and burst into a great flood of happy tears; tears which fell raining peace and calm after this long drought and misery; tears which made him sad, and yet happier than he had ever dreamt or imagined; tears which quieted her, soothed her, and healed all her troubles.

Before John went away that night, Elly read Miss Dampier's letter, which explained his explanations. The old lady wrote in a state of incoherent excitement. It was some speech of Will's which had brought the whole thing about.

'What did he say?' Elly asked, (looking up from the letter).

Sir John said, 'He asked me if I did not remember that church on the hill, at Boatstown? We were all out in the garden, by the old statue of the nymph; Tishy suddenly stopped and turned upon me, and cried out, when was I last at Boatstown? And then I was obliged to confess, and we had a disagreeable scene enough, and she appealed to William—gave me my conge, and I was not sorry, Elly.'

'But had you never told her about—?'
'It was from sheer honesty that I was silent,' said Sir John; 'a man who sincerely wishes to keep his word doesn't say, 'Madam, I like some one else, but I will marry you if you insist upon it; only the worst of it is, that we were both uncomfortable, and now I find she suspected me the whole time. She sent me a note in the evening. Look here—'

The note said—
'I have been thinking about what I said just now in the garden. I am more than ever decided that it is best we two should part. But I do not choose to say good-by to you in an angry spirit, and so this is to tell you that I forgive you all the injustice of your conduct towards me. Everybody seems to have been in a league to deceive me, and I have not found out one true friend among you all. How could you for one moment imagine that I should wish to marry a man who preferred another woman? You may have been influenced and worked upon; but for all that I should never be able to place confidence in you again, and I feel it is best and happiest for us both that all should be at an end between us.'

'You will not wonder that, though I try to forgive you, I cannot help feeling indignant at the way in which I have been used. I could never understand exactly what was going on in your mind. You were silent, you equivocated; and not you only, everybody seems to have been thinking of themselves, and never once for me. Even William, who professes to care for me still, only spoke by chance, and revealed the whole history. When he talked to you about Boatstown, some former suspicions of mine were confirmed, and by the most fortunate chance two people have been saved from a whole life-time of regret.'

'I will not trust myself to think of the way in which I should have been bartered had I only discovered the truth when it was too late. If I speak plainly, it is in justice to myself, and from no unkindness to you; for though I bid you farewell, I can still sincerely sign myself,

Yours affectionately, LÆTTIA.'

Elly read the letter, and gave it back to him, and sighed, and then went on with Miss Dampier's epistle.

For some time past, Jean Dampier wrote she had noticed a growing suspicion and estrangement between the engaged couple: John was brusque and morose at times, Tishy cross and defiant. He used to come over on his brown mare, and stop at the cottage gate, and ask about Elly, and then interrupt her before she could answer and change the talk. He used to give her messages to send, and then retract them. He was always philosophizing and discoursing about first affections. Lættia, too, used to come and ask about Elly.

Miss Dampier hoped that John himself would put an end to this false situation. She did not know how to write about either of them to Elly. Her perplexities had seemed unending.

'But I also never heard that you came to Boatstown,' Elly said.

'And yet I saw you there,' said John, 'standing at the end of the pier.' And then he went on to tell her a great deal more, and to confess all that he had thought while he was waiting for her.

Elly passed her hand across her eyes with the old familiar action.

'And you came to Boatstown, and you went away when you read Tishy's writing, and you had the heart to be angry with me?' she said.

'I was worried, and out of temper,' said John. 'I felt I was doing wrong when I ran away from Tishy. I blamed you because I was in a rage with myself. I can't bear to think of it. But I was punished, Elly. Were you ever jealous?' She laughed and nodded her head. 'I dare say not,' he went on; 'when I sailed away and saw you standing so confidentially with Will Dampier, I won't try and tell you what I suffered. I could bear to give you up—but to see you another man's wife—Elly, I know you never were jealous, or you would understand what I felt at that moment.'

When their *tele-a-tele* was over they went into the next room. All the family congratulated them, Madame Tournour among the rest; she was ill and tired that evening, and lying on the yellow Utrecht velvet sofa. But it was awkward for them and uncomfortable, and John went home early to his inn. As Elly went up to bed that night Françoise brought her one other piece of news—Madame Jones