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INTRODUCTION TO COUNT DE MONTALEMBERT'S LIFE OF ST. ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY.

TRANSLATED FOR THE "TRUE WITNESS" BY MRS. SABLIER.

On the 19th of November, 1833, a traveller arrived at Marbourg, a city of Electoral Hesse, situated on the pleasant banks of the Lahn. He stopped there in order to study the Gothic Church which it contains, celebrated not only for its rare and perfect beauty, but also because it was the first in Germany wherein the gothic prevailed over the full arch, in the great revival of art in the thirteenth century. This basilic bears the name of St. Elizabeth, and it happened that the traveller in question arrived on the very day of her feast. In the church,—now Lutheran, like all the country around,—there was seen no mark of solemnity; only, in honor of the day, it was open, contrary to the practice of Protestants, and children were amusing themselves by jumping on the tomb-stones. The stranger passed along its vast nave all deserted and dismantled, yet still young in their lightness and elegance. He saw resting against a pillar the statue of a young woman in a widow's dress, her face calm and resigned, one hand holding the model of a church, and the other giving alms to an unhappy cripple; farther on, on bare and naked altars, from which no priestly hand ever wiped the dust, he carefully examined some ancient painting on wood, half effaced, and sculptures *in relief*, sadly mutilated, yet all profoundly impressed with the simple and tender charm of Christian art. In these representations, he distinguished a young woman in great trepidation, showing to a crowned warrior the skirt of her cloak filled with roses; in another place, that same knight, angrily drew the covering from his bed, and beheld Christ stretched on the cross; a little farther, the knight and the lady were reluctantly tearing themselves asunder after a fond embrace; then again was seen the young woman, fairer than ever, extended on her bed of death, surrounded by priests and weeping nuns; in the last place, bishops were taking up from a vault a coffin on which an Emperor was placing his crown. The traveller was told that these were incidents in the history of St. Elizabeth, one of the sovereigns of that country, who died just six hundred years ago, in that same city of Marbourg, and was buried in that same church. In the corner of an obscure sacristy, he was shewn the silver shrine richly sculptured, which had contained the relics of the Saint, down to the time when one of her descendants, having become a Protestant, tore them out and flung them to the winds. Under the stone canopy which formerly overhung the shrine, he saw that every step was deeply hollowed, and he was told that these were the traces of the innumerable pilgrims who came of old to pray at the shrine, but none within the last three hundred years. He knew that there were in that city some few of the faithful and a Catholic priest; but neither Mass nor any other visible commemoration of the Saint, to whom that day was consecrated.

The stranger kissed the stone hallowed by the knees of faithful generations, and resumed his solitary course; but he was ever after haunted by a sad, yet sweet remembrance of that forsaken Saint, whose forgotten festival, he had unwittingly come to celebrate. He set about studying her life; he successively ransacked those rich depositories of ancient literature which abound in Germany.* Charmed more and more every day by what he learned of her, that thought gradually became the guiding star of his wanderings. After having drawn all he could from books and chronicles, and consulted manuscripts the most neglected, he wished, after the example of the first historian of the Saint, to examine the places and popular traditions. He went, then, from city to city, from castle to castle, from church to church, seeking every where traces of her who has always been known in Catholic Germany, as *the dear Saint Elizabeth*. He tried in vain to visit her birth-place, Presburg, in farther Hungary; but he was, at least, able to make some stay at that famous castle of Wartbourg, whither she came a child, where her girlish days were spent, and where she married a husband as pious and as loving as herself; he could climb the rough paths by which she went on her errands of charity to her beloved friends; the poor; he followed her to Creuzburg, where she first became a mother; to the monastery of Reinhartsbrunn, where at twenty years of age she had to part with her beloved husband who went to die for the Holy Sepulchre; to Bamberg, where she found an asylum from the most cruel persecutions; to the holy mountain of Andechs, the cradle of her family, where she made an offering of her wedding robe when the cherished wife had become a homeless and exiled widow. At

Erfurth, he touched with his lips the glass which she left the humble nuns as a memento of her visit. Finally, he returned to Marbourg, where she consecrated the last days of her life to the most heroic works of charity, and where she died at twenty-four—to pray at her desecrated tomb, and to gather with difficulty some few traditions amongst a people who, with the faith of their fathers, have lost their devotion to their sweet patroness.

The result of these protracted researches, of those pious pilgrimages, is contained in this book.

Often, when wandering through our plastered-up cities, or our rural districts, despoiled of their ancient ornaments, and fast losing all traces of ancestral life, the sight of a ruin which has escaped the spoilers,—of a statue lying in the grass,—an arched door-way,—a staved rosace, will arouse the imagination; the mind is struck, as well as the eye; our curiosity is excited, we ask ourselves what part did that fragment play in the whole; we unconsciously fall into contemplation: by degrees, the entire fabric arises before our mental vision, and when the work of interior re-construction is completed, we behold the abbey, the Church, the Cathedral towering aloft in all its majestic beauty; we see the sweep of its vaulted roof, and mingle in the crowd of its faithful people, amid the symbolic pomp and ineffable harmony of ancient worship.

Thus it is that the writer of this book, having travelled long in foreign countries, and pondered much on past ages, has picked up this fragment, which he offers to those who have the same faith and the same sympathies as himself, to aid them in re-constructing in their mind the sublime edifice of the Catholic ages.

Thanks to the many invaluable monuments of the life of St. Elizabeth, which are found in the great historical collections of Germany as well as in the manuscripts of its libraries; thanks to the numerous and minute details transmitted to us by biographers; some of them contemporaries of St. Elizabeth, and others, attracted by the charm which her character and her destiny are so well calculated to exercise over every Catholic mind; thanks to this singular combination of auspicious circumstances, we are able to effect a double purpose in writing this life. While closely adhering to the fundamental idea of such a work, *viz. to give the life of a Saint, a legend of the ages of Faith*, we may also hope to furnish a faithful picture of the manners and customs of society at a period when the empire of the Church and of chivalry was at its height. It has long been felt that even the purely profane history of an age so important for the destinies of mankind, might gain much in depth, and in accuracy from particular researches on the object of the most fervent faith and dearest affections of the men of those times. We may venture to say that, in the history of the middle ages, there are few biographies so well adapted to carry out that view, as the history of St. Elizabeth.

On the other hand, before we say more of this Saint, and the ideas which she represents, it seems to us that we should give a sketch of the state of Christianity at the time in which she lived, for her life would be totally inexplicable to those who neither knew nor could appreciate her age. Not only is it that her destiny, her family, and her name are connected, more or less, with a host of the events of those times, but that her character is so analogous to what the world then saw on a grander scale, that it becomes indispensably necessary for the reader to recall, as he goes along, the principal features of the social state wherein her name holds such a distinguished place. We must, therefore, be allowed to turn aside for a moment, before commencing the life of St. Elizabeth, in order to depict her contemporaries and her times.

St. Elizabeth was born in 1207, and died in 1231, so that her brief career occurs during that first half of the thirteenth century, which is, perhaps, of all other periods, the most important, the most complete and the most resplendent, in the history of Catholic society. It would be, it seems to us, difficult to find, in the glorious annals of the Church, a time when her influence over the world and over mankind in all its developments, was more vast, more prolific, more uncontested. Never, perhaps, had the spouse of Christ reigned with such absolute dominion over the mind and heart of nations; she saw all the ancient elements, against which she had so long struggled, at length subdued and prostrate at her feet; the entire West bowed with respectful love under her holy law. In the long struggle which she had had to sustain, even from her divine origin, against the passions and repugnances of fallen humanity, never had she more successfully fought, nor more vigorously pinioned down her enemies. It is true, her victory was far from being only to fight, and expects to triumph only in heaven; but certain it is that then, more than at any other moment of that protracted warfare, the

lore of her children, their boundless devotion, their numbers and their daily increasing courage, the Saints whom she every day saw coming to light amongst them, gave to that immortal mother strength and consolation, of which she has since been but too cruelly deprived.

The thirteenth century is the more remarkable, on this point, in as much as the close of the twelfth was far from being auspicious. In fact, the echo of St. Bernard's voice, which seems to have wholly filled that age, had grown feeble towards its end, and with it failed the exterior force of the Catholic thought. The disastrous battle of Tiberiad, the loss of the true Cross, and the taking of Jerusalem by Saladin, (1187), had shown the West overcome by the East, on the sacred soil which the Crusades had redeemed. The debauchery and tyranny of Henry II of England, the murder of St. Thomas a Becket, the captivity of Richard *Cœur de Lion*, the violence exercised by Phillip Augustus towards his wife Ingerburge, the atrocious cruelties of the Emperor Henry VII in Sicily, all these triumphs of brute force indicated, but too plainly, a certain diminution of Catholic strength; whilst the progress of the Waldensian and Albigensian heresies, with the universal complaints of the relaxation of the Clergy and the religious orders, disclosed a dangerous evil in the very bosom of the Church. But a glorious reaction was soon to set in. In the last years of that century, (1193), the chair of St. Peter was ascended by a man in the prime of life, who, under the name of Innocent III, was to struggle with invincible courage against the enemies of justice, and the Church, and to give to the world perhaps the most accomplished model of a Sovereign Pontiff, the type, by excellence, of the vicar of God. As this grand figure stands out in bold relief from all that age which he himself inaugurated, we must be allowed to give a sketch of his character. Gracious and benign in his manners, endowed with uncommon personal beauty, warm and confident in his friendships, liberal to excess in his aims and in his foundations—an eloquent and persuasive orator—a learned and ascetic writer—a poet even, as we see by his fine prose—*Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, and the *Stabat Mater*—that sublime elegy composed by him—a great and profound juriconsult as it beheld the supreme judge of Christendom to be—the zealous protector of science and of Christian literature—a stern disciplinarian, vigorously enforcing the laws and the discipline of the Church—he had every quality that might make his memory illustrious, had he been charged with the government of the Church at a calm and settled period, or if that government had then been confined to the exclusive care of spiritual things. But another mission was reserved for him. Before he ascended the sacerdotal throne, he had understood, and even published in his works, the end and destiny of the supreme Pontificate, not only for the salvation of souls and the preservation of Catholic truth, but for the good government of Christian society. Nevertheless, feeling no confidence in himself, scarcely is he elected when he earnestly demands of all the Priests of the Catholic world their special prayers that God might enlighten and fortify him; God heard that universal prayer, and gave him strength to prosecute and to accomplish the great work of St. Gregory VII. In his youth, whilst studying in the University of Paris, he had made a pilgrimage to Canterbury, to the tomb of St. Thomas the Martyr, and it is easy to imagine what inspiration there was for him in those sacred relics, and what a fervent zeal he conceived for the freedom of the Church, whose victorious champion he afterwards was. But whilst he was defending that supreme liberty, the constitution of Europe at that time conferred upon him the glorious function of watching, at the same time, over all the interests of nations, the maintenance of their rights, and the fulfilment of all their duties. He was, during his whole reign of 18 years, at the very height of that gigantic mission. Though incessantly menaced and opposed by his own subjects, the turbulent people of Rome, he presided over the Church and the Christian world, with immovable tranquility, with ceaseless and minute attention, keeping his eye on every part as a father and a judge. From Ireland to Sicily, from Portugal to Armenia, no law of the Church is transgressed but he takes it up, no injury is inflicted on the weak but he demands reparation, no legitimate security is assailed, but he protects it. For him, all Christendom is but one majestic unity, but one single kingdom, undivided by boundary-lines, and without any distinction of races; of which he is, without, the intrepid defender, and within, the impartial and incorruptible judge. To shield it against its external enemies, he arouses the failing ardor of the Crusades; he shows himself inflamed beyond all men, with that holy desire to battle for the cross, which St. Gregory VII had first

conceived, and which had animated all the Roman Pontiffs till Pius II died a Crusader. The heart of the Popes was then, as it were, the focus whence that holy zeal radiated over all the Christian nations; their eyes were ever open to the dangers by which Europe was surrounded: and whilst Innocent endeavored, every year, to send a Christian army against the victorious Saracens of the East, in the North he propagated the faith amongst the Slaves and Sarmatians, and in the West, urging upon the Spanish princes the necessity of concord amongst themselves, and a decisive effort against the Moors, he directed them on to their miraculous victories. He brought back to Catholic unity, by the mere force of persuasion, and the authority of his great character, the most remote kingdoms, such as Armenia and Bulgaria, which, though victorious over the Latin armies, hesitated not to bow to the decision of Innocent. To a lofty and indefatigable zeal for truth, he well knew how to join the highest toleration for individuals; he protected the Jews against the exactions of their princes and the blind fury of their fellow-citizens, regarding them as the living witnesses of Christian truth, imitating in that respect all his predecessors, without one exception. He even corresponded with Mahometan princes, for the promotion of peace and their salvation; while struggling with rare sagacity and unwearied assiduity against the numberless heresies which were then breaking out, menacing the foundations of order, social and moral, he never ceased to preach clemency and moderation to the exasperated and victorious Catholics, and even to the Bishops themselves. He long applies himself to bring about, by mildness and conciliation, the re-union of the Eastern and Western Churches; then, when the unexpected success of the fourth crusade, overthrowing the empire of Byzantium, had brought under his dominion that erring portion of the Christian world, and thus doubled his power, he recommends mildness towards the conquered church, and far from expressing a single sentiment of joy or pride on hearing of that conquest, he refuses to have any share in the glory and triumph of the victors; he rejects all their excuses, all their pious pretences, because in their undertaking, they had violated the laws of justice, and forgotten the Sepulchre of Christ! It is that for him religion and justice were all, and that with them he identified his life. His soul was inflamed with a passionate love of justice which no exception of persons, no obstacle, no check, could either diminish or restrain; counting defeat or success as nothing, when right was at stake—mild and merciful towards the vanquished and the feeble—stern and inflexible towards the proud and the mighty—every where and always the protector of the oppressed, of weakness and of equity against force, triumphant and unjust. Thus it was that he was seen resolutely defending the sanctity of the marriage tie, as the key-stone of society and of Christian life. No outraged wife ever implored his powerful intervention in vain. The world beheld him with admiration struggling for fifteen years against his friend and ally, Phillip Augustus, in defence of the rights of that hapless Ingerburge, who had come from remote Denmark to be the object of that monarch's contempt—deserted by all—shut up in prison without one friend in that foreign land, she was not forgotten by the Pontiff, who at length succeeded in releasing her on her husband's throne, amid the acclamations of the people, who exulted in the thought that there was, even in this world, equal justice for all.

It was in the same spirit that he watched, with paternal solicitude, over the fate of royal orphans, the lawful heirs of crowns, and that even in countries the most remote. We see that he knew how to maintain the rights and preserve the patrimony of the princes of Norway, of Holland, and of Armenia, (1199,) the Infantas of Portugal, the young king Ladislaus of Hungary, and even to the sons of the enemies of the Church, such as James of Arragon, whose father had been killed fighting for the heretics, and who, being himself the prisoner of the Catholic army, was liberated by order of Innocent; such, also, as Frederic II, sole heir of the imperial race of Hohenstaufen, the most formidable rival of the Holy See; but who, being left an orphan to the care of Innocent, is brought up, instructed, defended by him, and maintained in his patrimony with the affectionate devotion, not only of a guardian, but of a father. But still more admirable does he appear to us, when offering an asylum, near his throne, to the aged Raymond de Toulouse, the old and inveterate enemy of Catholicity, with his young son; when he himself pleads their cause against the Prelates and the victorious Crusaders; when after enriching the young prince with his wise and loving counsels—after seeking in vain to soften his conquerors, he assigned to him, notwithstanding their murmurs, the Earldom of Provence, in order that the innocent son of a guilty father might not be left without some inheritance. Less it, then, surprising that, at a period when faith was

* These researches have since been completed by others in various libraries of Italy and Flanders, especially in the Vatican and the Laurentian.

* See his Sermons and his treatises *De contemptu mundi*, and the *Seven Penitential Prayers*.