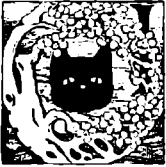


## Saint Elizabeth.

BY ANNA B. PATTEN.



It was a steady downpour of rain, such as taxed the resources even of our merry house party, that sent me to seek amusement in the portrait gallery at Redfern Hall. From the time of my arrival, a week before, I had loved to stroll there daily, speculating over the probable history of those knights in armor and beruffled dames of the past. My special favorite, however, was the portrait of a lovely young girl kneeling before her *prie dieu*, telling her rosary. She was not strictly beautiful, but her face wore such a sweetly pensive expression, with so rapt and tender a look in the eyes, that she seemed to lack only the halo to become a saint.

It was before this picture that I stood, absorbed in admiration, when the housekeeper passed through, on her way to her quarters. I took the opportunity of gratifying my curiosity.

"That picture? Oh, that is Saint Elizabeth," she announced, in reply to my inquiry. "Poor thing!" brushing her apron across her eyes, "it's a sad story — the tragedy of the house, you know."

I did not know, but was so anxious to learn that Mrs. Fairbanks was finally prevailed upon to return with her sewing and relate the history of my favorite portrait. "And a long story it is," she precluded, as we settled ourselves in a cozy alcove where we could be free from interruptions, yet within sight of Saint Elizabeth at her devotions. "A long story, though her life was short enough, poor dear! There's very few people as knows of it but me. My mother was housekeeper at the time, and she told me all the facts of the case. It was kept pretty quiet while Master Gilbert was alive. He was powerful proud, and he thought it a blot on the scutcheon — that's what he called it. He would have put it out of sight — the picture, I mean — only it has such a

saint look that I believe he was superstitious about meddling with it. When he died the property went to a distant relative—the present master. He never takes any interest in such things—I doubt if he knows there ever was such a person; so I don't see anything to hinder me telling you the particulars."

After a brief silence, during which Mrs. Fairbanks dropped her work and gazed pensively at the Madonna-like face, as if questioning whether she should divulge its hallowed history, she continued:—

"It was in Master's Rupert's time. He was a queer piece, I should judge, from what mother said,—a sort of mixture. His mother was a Spaniard, and he got his quick temper from that side of the house, but he was cold and self-contained on the surface, like all the Redferns; so, you see, when he did give way to his anger, it was something fearful. Mother said that at such times everybody got out of the way who could possibly do so. Still he was flattered and made much of, for he was rich and titled, and the young ladies they smiled on him, and their mammas entertained him, but it was all of no use. He cared nothing for any of them. He just buried himself in the library with his books, or up in the studio with his pictures, for he was a fine artist and could have made a fortune with his brush if he had a minded to, which only goes to prove that the Bible tells the truth when it says, 'To him that hath shall be given.'" Mrs. Fairbanks paused to take breath after this bit of scriptural philosophy.

"So you see, after awhile the gentry folks they sort of gave him up. They all came to the conclusion that there never would be a mistress at the Hall, but, bless me, they made a mistake! One summer Master Rupert flew off on a sketching trip—he was always doing that way, starting off without a moment's notice, and expecting his things to be all packed up and ready. Well, he met her by accident, in some out-of-the-way place in the mountains, and it was all up with him. He made up his mind to marry her on the spot. Every one wondered afterward at his choice. To be sure she had a lovely face, but then she was only a slim bit of a girl, with shy, shrinking ways; not at all the grand lady you'd think he'd have picked out for the mistress of this great house.

"As for the girl, poor little thing, living there in the wilds, she

had nothing to say in the matter except her "yes" at the altar. It was all fixed up between Sir Rupert and her mother; she simply obeyed her mother now, as she had done every hour of her life. It probably never occurred to her that she could do anything else.

"Ah, but it was a gala day, they say, when the master brought his wife home! The bells were rung, bonfires were built, and flower-girls strewed blossoms in their path. She seemed awed by all the splendor, and a little frightened at being the center of so much attention. She shrank closer to her husband and glanced up at him timidly, but, instead of cheering her by a sweet word of encouragement, he just spoke stern like to her, as if to remind her of her duty. Oh, yes, he was fond of her; you could see that by the way his eyes followed her from place to place, but, like all the Redferns, he didn't believe in showing it. No matter how much you might lay yourself out to please them, you never got any thanks, though if the work was done poorly you were sure to hear of it.

"Well, there were gay goings-on for a time. The house was full of guests, and my lady was made much of, and some of her timidity was beginning to wear away; but now it was the master's turn to grow uneasy. It almost seemed as if he was jealous of every look and smile she gave another. You see he knew he hadn't touched her heart, and he feared to have it awakened. All at once he stopped inviting friends to the Hall; he shut her up like a bird in a gilded cage, and gloated over her all to himself, in his cruel, selfish way. He loved to dress her up in jewels and fine clothes and pose her for different pictures — that is one of them that you admire so much. He had the walls of his studio hung with all sorts of studies of her, and he never cared to sit anywhere else.

"Then he took up his books again, and she must always be near by, curled up like a mouse in one of the lounging-chairs, ready to do his bidding. She yielded to him, as she had yielded to her mother, without a word of complaint. Only once she rebelled; that was when he scoffed at her devotion to her religion. Then she turned on him with a look in her eyes that told him he had gone too far. Perhaps he came to the conclusion that religion was not the worst rival a man could have; that, on the contrary,

it was more than likely to keep a woman out of mischief. Anyway, it was plain enough to see, my mother said, that the poor, starved little creature must have some outlet for her pent-up affection, so she poured out her soul in devotion at the sacred shrine of the Virgin Mary. Perhaps she found there the mother love she had never known.

“Well, the master let her practise her whim undisturbed, so long as it did not interfere with his pleasure. The unused chapel was opened, and she spent hours at her *aves* and *paters*, and many a day in penitential fasting. A priest came over from the adjoining diocese to hear her confession, though what misdemeanors such a saint from heaven could have to lay bare the Lord alone knew. That was how she happened to get the name of Saint Elizabeth — not in any trifling sense, mind you — there wasn't one of the servants, from the butler to the scullery maid, but would have laid down for her to walk over them.

“Things went on in this same dull, prosy way until about Christmas time. With the coming of the cold winter season, Father Chapelle, who was getting along in years, found the journey too much to undertake, with all his parish duties, and sent one of the priests in his place. Mother said that young priest was a picture, with a voice to melt the heart of the most hardened sinner. He came into that gloomy house like a burst of sunshine, and not one of them all but felt better for his coming. As for Lady Elizabeth, she got so she leaned on him for comfort and advice at all times; he was her tower of defense in all her doubts and perplexities.

“It was some light gossip in the village that first started the rumor flying. How any one could have connected a thought of evil with such as they God alone knows, but there are some weak bodies as will soil their lips with any idle tale, and ill news travels fast. The only fear was that it might get to the master's ears, and he *that* unreasonable. He had taken no notice of the change, or, if he did, one priest was the same as another to him; but no one could help seeing the improvement in my lady. She had lost that listless look, and her whole manner was brighter and more hopeful. She tried now, in her timid, childish way, to minister to his happiness, using a thousand little feminine devices to

arouse his attention. She did not make much progress, for once let a man get settled in a groove of selfishness and it is hard to root him out of it; but he used to watch her in a puzzled way, as if trying to find an explanation for the change.

“One day the crash came! Late in the afternoon the master dashed into the courtyard at a furious pace, his horse’s sides flecked with foam. He threw the reins to the groom, who came hurriedly out to answer the summons.

“‘Send Hawkins to me!’ was his order, as he strode into the house. Hawkins lost no time in following, you may be sure. He found his master pacing up and down the room with that feverish glare in his eyes that boded no good to the object of his wrath.

“‘Where is your mistress? Send her to me!’ he thundered.

“‘She is in the chapel, my lord. Her orders were that she was not to be disturbed. Father Dominic comes directly.’

“It would not do, miss, for me to repeat the master’s reply,” interpolated Mrs. Fairbanks, with a pious droop of her eyelids. “At any rate, it was something terrible, and Hawkins shook in his shoes while it went on; but in the midst of it the master stopped short as if struck with a sudden thought. ‘Ah, I have it, just the thing!’ he shouted, and he rushed out into the hall toward the chapel, Hawkins following, for he feared for his mistress’ safety. What was his horror to see his master walk into the sacristy, take down Father Dominic’s robe, and proceed to fling it on over his shoulders, drawing the cowl carefully over his face! Hawkins stood like a log. He knew now what Master Rupert was about to do, before he saw him glide softly into the confessional where my lady knelt, waiting to open her innermost thoughts to his jealous scrutiny.”

“But what a terrible position for Hawkins, Mrs. Fairbanks! What did he do?”

“Terrible doesn’t begin to express it! My mother used to say that Hawkins was never the same man from that day. You see, he was in a tight place; he dared not reveal himself to his master in his present state of excitement, nor could he betray the scandal to any other member of the household. All he could do was to pace up and down the anteroom, wondering what was going on

in that secret place behind the drawn curtains. Suddenly he heard the door open softly and, looking up, he saw Father Dominic himself walk into the sacristy, glance in astonishment at the empty hook, and then walk swiftly toward the confessional.

"It was a minute before Hawkins could pull himself together. He had not once thought of this probable outcome of the tragedy. With terror of the coming revelation, he sprang forward to intercept him, but he was too late. Father Dominic lifted the curtain, and my lady, glancing up, startled by the interruption, saw his face. She sprang to her feet, staring dazedly from one quiet figure to the other. She drew her hand across her forehead in a bewildered way, then suddenly darted forward and tore the cowl from the other's face. When she saw what it revealed she gave a shriek of horror, and sank down at his feet!"

"Not dead!" I exclaimed, quite overcome by this startling development.

"Yes, stone dead! She never breathed again. It was her heart, the doctor said, and true enough, hadn't she had enough to break a heart of granite?"

"Oh, please go on, Mrs. Fairbanks. What happened next?"

The housekeeper shook her head mournfully.

"There isn't much more to tell. Hawkins said as how he held his breath as the two men faced each other, both so white and stern. His master's eyes had lost their wild glare, they had a look of agony as they met those of the priest, and his hands had been clenched so fiercely that they had left the marks of the nails in his palms. He caught the priest fiercely by the arm. 'Is it true,' he whispered hoarsely, 'what she confessed here at my feet, that she was trying to make me care for her—I that worshiped her—night and morning she prayed for this—it was the hope of her life?' The priest bowed his head solemnly.

"'Too true, dear saint! Sometimes she was almost disheartened by your coldness toward her, but she never quite despaired.'

"The master fell back as if he had been struck a blow.

"'My God! and I had to sit silent, for fear of revealing myself, and now it is too late! Strike me, priest, where I stand, a blasphemous hound. Do you hear? You will not? Your sacred calling forbids it, eh? But it would not have spared you from

my hand. I came here to kill you, and now I have slain her, the innocent lamb! A life for a life, your Bible says,— and before the priest could prevent him, he drew a pistol from his pocket and shot himself through the heart.”

In the silence that followed the somber close of the housekeeper's story, I turned once more to the portrait of Saint Elizabeth, wondering whether she had at last found compensation for her short life's tragedy. A pale sunbeam that broke through the clouds just then touched the bowed girlish head as with the halo omitted by the painter; that was my question's only answer.

