

ST. ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY, WIDOW.

[Her life compiled by Cæsarius, monk of Heisterbach, is lost. Theodoric of Thuringia, a Dominican (who seems to be the famous Theodoric of Apoc. 30, in 1289, author of the life of St. Dominic), wrote that of St. Elizabeth, in eight books, extant in Canisius. (Lect. Antiq. t. v.) Lambecius (t. ii. Bibl. Vind.) published an additional fragment, with several pieces relative to her canonization. Her life by James Montanus of Spire, published by Sedulius, abridged by D'Andilly, &c., is taken from the work of Theodoric. The letter of the holy priest, Conrad of Marburg, the saint's confessor, to Pope Gregory IX., soon after her death, bears authentic testimony to her heroic virtues. Conrad's letter is published in an Appendix to the Byzantine Historians, printed at Venice, in 1723. It is accompanied with the authentic relation of miracles examined before Sifrid, Archbishop of Mentz, Reymund, the Cistercian abbot of Eberbac, and Master or Doctor Conrad, preacher of the word of God, by commission of the holy see, who jointly sent the relation to the pope. See also St. Bonaventure, Serm. de St. Elizabetha, t. v.]

A. D. 1231.

ELIZABETH, daughter to Alexander II., the valiant and religious King of Hungary, and his queen, Gertrude, daughter to the Duke of Carinthia, was born in Hungary, in 1207. Herman, Landgrave of Thuringia and Hesse, had a son born about the same time, and named Lewis. This prince obtained, by ambassadors, a promise from the King of Hungary that his daughter should be given in marriage to his new-born son; and, to secure the effect of this engagement, at the landgrave's request, the princess, at four years of age, was sent to his court, and there brought up under the care of a virtuous lady. Five years after, Herman died, and Lewis became landgrave. Elizabeth, from her cradle, was so happily prevented with the love of God, that no room for creatures could be found in her heart; and though surrounded, and, as it were, besieged by worldly pleasures in their most engaging shapes, she had no relish for them, prayed with an astonishing recollection, and seemed scarce to know any other use of money than to give it to the poor; for her father allowed her, till her marriage was solemnized, a competent yearly revenue for maintaining a court suitable to her rank. This child of heaven,

in her very recreations, studied to practise frequent humiliations and self-denials; and stole often to the chapel, and there knelt down and said a short prayer before every altar, bowing her body reverently, or, if nobody was there, prostrating herself upon the ground. If she found the doors of the chapel in the palace shut, not to lose her labour, she knelt down at the threshold, and always put up her petition to the throne of God. Her devotion she indulged with more liberty in her private closet. She was very devout to her angel guardian and the saints, particularly St. John the Evangelist. She was educated with Agnes, sister to the young landgrave, and upon their first appearing together at church, they were dressed alike, and wore coronets set with jewels. At their entering the house of God, Sophia, the landgrave's mother, observing our saint take off her coronet, asked why she did so: to which the princess replied, that she could not bear to appear with jewels on her head, where she saw that of Jesus Christ crowned with thorns. Agnes and her mother, who were strangers to such kind of sentiments, and fond of what Elizabeth trampled upon, conceived an aversion for the young princess, and said, that since she seemed to have so little relish for a court, a convent would be the properest place for her. The courtiers carried their reflections much further, and did all in their power to bring the saint into contempt; saying, that neither her fortune nor her person was such as the landgrave had a right to expect, that he had no inclination for her, and that she would either be sent back to Hungary, or married to some nobleman in the country. These taunts and trials were more severe and continual, as the landgrave, Herman, dying when Elizabeth was only nine years old, the government fell into the hands of his widow, in the name of her son, till he should be of age. These persecutions and injuries were, to the saint, occasions of the greatest spiritual advantages: for by them

she daily learned a more perfect contempt of all earthly things, to which the heavenly lover exhorts his spouse, saying: "Hearken, daughter, forget thy people." She learned also the evangelical hatred of herself, and crucifixion of self-love; by which she was enabled to say with the apostles, "Behold we have left all things." In this entire disengagement of her heart, she learned to take up her cross and follow Christ, by the exercise of meekness, humility, patience, and charity toward unjust persecutors; and to cleave to God by the closest union of her soul to him, by resignation, love, and prayer, contemning herself and esteeming the vanity of the world as filth and dung.

The saint was in her fourteenth year when Lewis, the young landgrave, returned home, after a long absence, on account of his education. Address in martial exercises and other great accomplishments introduced the young prince into the world with a mighty reputation: but nothing was so remarkable in him as a sincere love of piety. The eminent virtue of Elizabeth gave him the highest esteem for her person. However, he seldom saw or spoke to her, even in public, and never in private, till the question was one day put to him, what his thoughts were with regard to marrying her, and he was told what rumours were spread in the court to her disadvantage. Hereat he expressed much displeasure, and said, that he prized her virtue above all the mountains of gold and rubies that the world could afford. Forthwith he sent her, by a nobleman, a glass, garnished with precious stones of inestimable value, with two crystals opening on each side; in the one of which was a looking-glass, on the other a figure of Christ crucified was most curiously wrought. And not long after he solemnized his marriage with her, and the ceremony was performed with the utmost pomp, and with extraordinary public rejoicings. The stream of public applause followed the favour of the

prince; the whole court expressed the most profound veneration for the saint, and all the clouds which had so long hung over her head were at once dispersed. Conrad of Marpurg, a most holy and learned priest, and an eloquent pathetic preacher, whose disinterestedness, and love of holy poverty, mortified life, and extraordinary devotion and spirit of prayer, rendered him a model to the clergy of that age, was the person whom she chose for her spiritual director, and to his advice she submitted herself in all things relating to her spiritual concerns. This holy and experienced guide, observing how deep root the seeds of virtue had taken in her soul, applied himself by cultivating them to conduct her to the summit of Christian perfection, and encouraged her in the path of mortification and penance, but was obliged often to moderate her corporal austerities by the precept of obedience. The landgrave also reposed an entire confidence in Conrad, and gave this holy man the privilege of disposing of all ecclesiastical benefices in the prince's gift. Elizabeth, with her pious husband's consent, often rose in the night to pray, and consecrated great part of her time to her devotions, insomuch that on Sundays and holidays she never allowed herself much leisure to dress herself. The rest of her time, which was not spent in prayer or reading, she devoted to works of charity, and to spinning or carding wool, in which she would only work very coarse wool for the use of the poor, or of the Franciscan friars. The mysteries of the life and sufferings of our Saviour were the subject of her most tender and daily meditation. Weighing of what importance prayer and mortification or penance are in a spiritual life, she studied to make her prayer virtually continual, by breaking forth into fervent acts of compunction and divine love amidst all her employments. The austerity of her life surpassed that of recluses. When she sat at table, next to the landgrave, to dissemble her abstinence

from flesh and savoury dishes, she used to deceive the attention of others by discoursing with the guests, or with the prince, carving for others, sending her maids upon errands, often changing her plates, and a thousand other artifices. Her meal frequently consisted only of bread and honey, or a dry crust, with a cup of the smallest wine, or the like; especially when she dined privately in her chamber, with two maids, who voluntarily followed her rules as to diet. She never ate but what came out of her own kitchen, that she might be sure nothing was mixed contrary to the severe rules she had laid down; and this kitchen she kept out of her own private purse, not to be the least charge to her husband. She was a great enemy to rich apparel, though in compliance to the landgrave, she on certain public occasions conformed in some degree to the fashions of the court. When ambassadors came from her father, the King of Hungary, her husband desired her not to appear in that homely apparel which she usually wore; but she prevailed upon him to suffer it; and God was pleased to give so extraordinary a gracefulness to her person, that the ambassadors were exceedingly struck at the comeliness and majesty of the appearance she made. In the absence of her husband she commonly wore only coarse cloth, not dyed, but in the natural colour of the wool, such as the poor people used. She strongly recommended to her maids of honour simplicity of dress, penance, and assiduous prayer, that several of them were warmed into an imitation of her virtues; but they could only follow her at a distance, for she seemed inimitable in her heroic practices, especially in her profound humility, with which she courted the most mortifying humiliations. In attending the poor and the sick, she cheerfully washed and cleansed the most filthy sores, and waited on those that were infected with the most loathsome diseases.

Her alms seemed at all times to have

no bounds; in which the good landgrave rejoiced exceedingly, and gave her full liberty. In 1225, Germany being severely visited by a famine, she exhausted the treasury, and distributed her whole crop of corn amongst those who felt the weight of that calamity heaviest. The landgrave was then in Apulia with the emperor; and at his return the officers of his household complained loudly to him of her profusion in favour of the poor. But the prince was so well assured of her piety and prudence, that without examining into the matter, he asked if she had alienated his dominions. They answered, "No." "As for her charities," said he, "they will entail upon us the divine blessings: and we shall not want so long as we suffer her to relieve the poor as she does." The castle of Marburg, the residence of the landgrave, was built on a steep rock, which the infirm and weak were not able to climb. The holy margrave, therefore, built an hospital at the foot of the rock for their reception and entertainment; where she often fed them with her own hands, made their beds, and attended them even in the heat of summer, when that place seemed insupportable to all those who were strangers to the sentiments of her generous and indefatigable charity. The helpless children, especially all orphans, were provided for at her expense. Elizabeth was the foundress of another hospital, in which twenty-eight persons were constantly relieved: she fed nine hundred daily at her own gate, besides an incredible number in the different parts of the dominions, so that the revenue in her hands was truly the patrimony of the distressed. But the saint's charity was tempered with discretion; and instead of encouraging in idleness such as were able to work, she employed them in a way suitable to their strength and capacity. Her husband, edified and charmed with her extraordinary piety, not only approved of all she did, but was himself an imitator of her charity, devotion, and

other virtues: insomuch that he is deservedly styled by historians the Pious Landgrave. He had by her three children, Herman, Sophia, who was afterwards married to the Duke of Brabant, and Gertrude, who became a nun, and died abbess of Aldenburg. Purely upon motives of religion the landgrave took the cross to accompany the Emperor Frederic Barbarossa, in the holy war, to Palestine. The separation of this pious and loving couple was a great trial, though moderated by the heroic spirit of religion with which both were animated. The landgrave joined the emperor in the kingdom of Naples; but as he was going to embark, fell ill of a malignant fever at Otranto, and having received the last sacraments at the hands of the patriarch of Jerusalem, expired in great sentiments of piety, on the 11th of September, 1227. Many miracles are related to have been wrought by him, in the history of Thuringia, and in that of the crusades.¹ Elizabeth, who at his departure had put on the dress of a widow, upon hearing this melancholy news, wept bitterly, and said, "If my husband be dead, I promise to die henceforth to myself, and to the world with all its vanities." God himself was pleased to complete this her sacrifice by a train of other afflictions into which she fell, being a sensible instance of the instability of human things, in which nothing is more constant than an unsteadiness of fortune: the life of man being a perpetual scene of interludes, and virtue being his only support, a check to pride in prosperity, and a solid comfort in adversity.

Envy, jealousy, and rancour, all broke loose at once against the virtuous landgravine, which during her husband's life, for the great love and respect which he bore her, had been raked up and covered over as fire under the ashes. As pretences are never wanting to cloak ambition, envy, and other passions which never dare show themselves barefaced, it was alleged,

(1) Hist. des Croisades, lib. x. p. 310, t. ii.

that the saint had squandered away the public revenue upon the poor; that the infant Herman, being unfit for the government of the state, it ought to be given to one who was able to defend and even extend the dominions of the landgraviate; and that therefore Henry, younger brother to the late landgrave, ought to be advanced to the principality. The mob being soothed by the fine speeches of certain powerful factious men, Henry got possession, and turned Elizabeth out of the castle, without furniture, provision, or necessaries for the support of nature, and all persons in the town were forbid to let her any lodgings. The princess bore this unjust treatment with a patience far transcending the power of nature, showing nothing in her gestures which was not as composed as if she had been in the greatest tranquillity possible. And rejoicing in her heart to see herself so ill-treated, she went down the castle-hill to the town, placing her whole confidence in God, and with her damsels and maids went into a common inn, or, as others say, a poor woman's cottage, where she remained till midnight, when the bell ringing to matins at the church of the Franciscan friars, she went thither, and desired the good fathers to sing a *Te Deum* with solemnity, to give God thanks for his mercies to her in visiting her with afflictions. Though she sent about the next day, and used all her endeavours to procure some kind of lodging in the town, no one durst afford her any, for fear of the usurper and his associates. She stayed the whole day in the church of the friars, and at evening had the additional affliction to see her three children, whom their barbarous uncle had sent out of the castle, coming down the hill. She received them in the church porch, with undaunted fortitude, but could not refrain from tenderly weeping to see the innocent babes so insensible of their condition as to smile upon her, rejoicing that they had recovered their mother. Reduced to the lowest ebb, she applied to a priest for re-

lief, who received her into his little house, where she had but one straight poor chamber for herself, her maids, and children. Her enemies soon forced her from thence, so that with thanks to those who had given her and hers some kind of shelter from the severities of a very sharp winter season, she returned to the inn or cottage.

The abbess of Kitzingen, in the diocess of Wurtzburg, our saint's aunt, sister to her mother, hearing of her misfortunes, invited her to her monastery, and being extremely moved at the sight of her desolate condition and poverty, advised her to repair to her uncle, the Bishop of Bamberg, a man of great power, charity, and prudence. The bishop received her with many tears, which compassion drew from his eyes, and from those of all the clergy that were with him; and provided for her a commodious house near his palace. His first views were, as she was young and beautiful, to endeavour to look out for a suitable party, that, marrying some powerful prince, she might strengthen her interest, and that of her family, by a new alliance, which might enable her to recover her right; but such projects she entirely put a stop to, declaring it was her fixed resolution to devote herself to the divine service in a state of perpetual chastity. In the mean time the body of her late husband, which had been buried at Otranto, was taken up, and the flesh being entirely consumed, the bones were put into a rich chest, and carried into Germany. The hearse was attended by a great many princes and dukes, and by counts, barons, and knights without number, marching in martial order, with ensigns folded up, the mournful sound of drums, all covered with black, and other warlike instruments in like manner. Where some of these princes left the corpse to return home, the nobility of each country through which it passed took their place; and every night it was lodged in some church or monas-

tery, where masses and dirges were said, and gifts offered. When the funeral pomp approached Bamberg, the bishop went out with the clergy and monks in procession, to meet it, having left the nobility and knights with the disconsolate pious margravine. At the sight of the hearse her grief was inexpressible; yet, whilst there was not a dry eye in the church, she showed by restraining her sorrow how great a command she had of her passions. Yet, when the chest was opened, her tears burst forth against her will. But, recollecting herself in God, she gave thanks to his Divine Majesty for having so disposed of her honoured husband, as to take him into his eternal tabernacles, so seasonably for himself, though to her severe trial. The corpse remained several days at Bamberg, during which the funeral rites were continued with the utmost solemnity, and it was then conducted with great state into Thuringia. The princess entreated the barons and knights that attended it to use their interest with her brother-in-law to do her justice, not blaming him for the treatment she had received, but imputing it to evil counsellors. Fired with indignation at the indignities she had received, they engaged to neglect no means of restoring her to her right; so that it was necessary for her to moderate their resentment, and to beg they would only use humble remonstrances. This they did, reproaching Henry for having brought so foul a blot and dishonour upon his house, and having violated all laws divine, civil, and natural, and broke the strongest ties of humanity. They conjured him by God, who beholds all things, and asked him what point in a weak woman, full of peace and piety, could offend him; and what innocent princely babes, who were his own blood, could have done, the tenderness of whose years made them very unfit to suffer such injuries. Ambition strangely steals the heart to all sentiments of justice, charity,

or humanity. Yet these remonstrances, made by the chief barons of the principality, softened the heart of Henry, and he promised them to restore to Elizabeth her dower and all the rights of her widowhood, and even to put the government of the dominions into her hands. This last she voluntarily chose to renounce, provided it was reserved for her son. Hereupon she was conducted back to the castle out of which she had been expelled, and from that time Henry began to treat her as princess, and obsequiously executed whatever she intimated to be her pleasure. Yet her persecutions were often renewed till her death.

The devout priest Conrad had attended her in great part of her travels, and returned to Marburg, which was his usual residence. Elizabeth, loathing the grandeur and dreading the distractions of the world, with his advice, bound herself by a vow which she made in his presence, in the church of the Franciscans, to observe the third rule of St. Francis, and secretly put on a little habit under her clothes. Her confessor relates that, laying her hands on the altar in the church of the friars minors, she by vow renounced the pomps of the world; she was going to add the vow of poverty, but he stopped her, saying she was obliged, in order to discharge many obligations of her late husband, and what she owed to the poor, to keep in her own hands the disposal of her revenues. Her dower she converted to the use of the poor; and as her director, Conrad, in whom she reposed an entire confidence, was obliged to live in the town of Marburg, when she quitted her palace she made that which was on the boundary of her husband's dominions, her place of residence, living first in a little cottage near the town, whilst a house was building for her, in which she spent the last three years of her life in the most fervent practices of devotion, charity, and penance. In her speech she was so reserved and modest, that if she

affirmed or denied any thing, her words seemed to imply a fear of some mistake. Conrad, having observed that her attachment to her two principal maids, Isentrude and Guta, seemed too strong, and an impediment to her spiritual progress, proposed to her to dismiss them; and, without making any reply, she instantly obeyed him, though the sacrifice cost mutual tears. The saint, by spinning coarse wool, earned her own maintenance, and, with her maids, dressed her own victuals, which were chiefly herbs, bread, and water. Whilst her hands were busy, in her heart she conversed with God. The King of Hungary, her father, earnestly invited her to his court; but she preferred a state of humiliation and suffering. She chose by preference to do every kind of service in attending the most loathsome lepers among the poor. Spiritual and corporal works of mercy occupied her even to her last moments, and by her moving exhortations many obstinate sinners were converted to God. It seemed, indeed, impossible for any thing to resist the eminent spirit of prayer with which she was endowed. In prayer she found her comfort and her strength in her mortal pilgrimage, and was favoured in it with frequent raptures and heavenly communications. Her confessor, Conrad, assures us, that when she returned from secret prayer, her countenance often seemed to dart forth rays of light from the divine conversation. Being forewarned by God of her approaching passage to eternity, which she mentioned to her confessor four days before she fell ill, as he assures us, she redoubled her fervour, by her last will made Christ her heir in his poor, made a general confession of her whole life on the twelfth day, survived yet four days, received the last sacraments, and, to her last breath, ceased not to pray, or to discourse in the most pathetic manner on the mysteries of the sacred life and sufferings of our Redeemer, and on his coming to judge us. The day of her

happy death was the 19th of November, in 1231, in the twenty-fourth year of her age. Her venerable body was deposited in a chapel near the hospital which she had founded. Many sick persons were restored to health at her tomb; an account of which miracles Siffrid, Archbishop of Mentz, sent to Rome, having first caused them to be authenticated by a juridical examination, before himself and others. Pope Gregory IX., after a long and mature discussion, performed the ceremony of her canonization on Whit-Sunday, in 1235, four years after her death. Siffrid, upon news hereof, appointed a day for the translation of her relics, which he performed at Marburg, in 1236. The Emperor Frederic II. would be present, took up the first stone of the saint's grave, and gave and placed on the shrine with his own hands a rich crown of gold. St. Elizabeth's son, Herman, then landgrave, and his two sisters, Sophia and Gertrude, assisted at this august ceremony; also the archbishops of Cologne and Bremen, and an incredible number of other princes, prelates, and people, so that the number is said to have amounted to above two hundred thousand persons. The relics were enshrined in a rich vermilion case, and placed upon the altar in the church of the hospital. A Cistercian monk affirmed upon oath that, a little before this translation, praying at the tomb of the saint, he was cured of a palpitation of the heart and grievous melancholy, with which he had been grievously troubled for forty years, and had in vain sought remedies from physicians and every other means. Many instances are mentioned by Montanus, and by the Archbishop of Mentz, and the confessor Conrad, of persons afflicted with palsies, and other inveterate diseases, who recovered their health at her tomb, or by invoking her intercession; as, of a boy blind from his birth, by the mother's invocation of St. Elizabeth at her sepulchre, applying some of the dust

to his eyes, upon which a skin, which covered each eye, burst, and he saw, as several witnesses declared upon oath, and Master Conrad saw the eyes thus healed; of a boy three years old, dead, cold, and stiff a whole night, raised to life the next morning by a pious grandmother praying to God through the intercession of St. Elizabeth; with a vow of an alms to her hospital, and of dedicating the child to the divine service; attested in every circumstance by the depositions of the mother, father, grandmother, uncle, and others, recorded by Conrad; of a boy dead and stiff for many hours, just going to be carried to burial, raised by the invocation of St. Elizabeth; of a youth drowned, restored to life by the like prayer; of a boy drawn out of a well, dead, black, &c., and a child still-born, brought to life; others cured of palsies, falling-sickness, fevers, madness, lameness, blindness, the bloody flux, &c., in the authentic relation. A portion of her relics is kept in the Church of the Carmelites, at Brussels; another in the magnificent Chapel of La Roche-Guyon, upon the Seine, and a considerable part in a precious shrine is in the electoral treasury of Hanover.¹ Some persons of the third Order of St. Francis having raised that institute into a religious Order long after the death of our saint (without prejudice to the secular state of this Order, which is still embraced by many who live in the world), the religious women of this Order chose her for their patroness, and are sometimes called the nuns of St. Elizabeth.

Perfection consists not essentially in mortification, but in charity; and he is most perfect who is most united to God by love. But humility and self-denial remove the impediments to this love, by retrenching the inordinate appetites and evil inclinations which wed the heart to crea-

(1) See *Thesaurus Reliquiarum Electoris Brunswico Luueburgensis*. Hanoviz, 1718.

tures. The affections must be untied by mortification, and the heart set at liberty by an entire disengagement from the slavery of the senses, and all irregular affections. Then will a soul, by the assistance of grace, easily raise her affections to God, and adhere purely to him; and his holy love will take possession of them. A stone cannot fall down to its centre so long as the lets which hold it up are not taken away. So neither can a soul attain to the pure love of God, whilst the strings of earthly attachments hold her down. Hence the maxims of the gospel, and the example of the saints, strongly inculcate the necessity of dying to ourselves by humility, meekness, patience, self-denial, and obedience. Nor does any thing so much advance this interior crucifixion of the old man as the patient suffering of afflictions.
