# Elizabeth Sara Sheppard

Anonymous

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YOU ask from me some particulars of the valued life so recently closed. Miss Sheppard was my friend of many years; I was with her to the last hour of her existence; but this is not the time for other than a brief notice of her career, and I comply with your request by sending you a slight memorial, hardly full enough for publication.

Elizabeth Sara Sheppard, the authoress of "Charles Auchester," "Counterparts," etc., was born at Blackheath, in England. Her father was a clergyman of unusual scholastic attainments, and took high honors at St. John's College, Oxford. Mr. Sheppard, on the mother's side, could number Hebrew ancestors, and this was the pride of his second daughter, the subject of this notice. Her love for the whole Hebrew race amounted to a passion, which found its expression in the romance of "Charles Auchester."

Very early she displayed a most decided poetic predisposition, − − writing, when but ten years old, with surprising facility on every possible subject. No metre had any difficulties for her, and no theme seemed dull to her vivid intelligence, — her fancy being roused to action in a moment, by the barest hint given either by Nature or Art. Her first drama was written at this early age; it was called "Boadicea," and was composed immediately after she had been shown a field at Islington where this queen is said to have pitched her tent. Any one who asked was welcome to "some verses by 'Little Lizzie,'" written in her peculiar and fairy−like hand, (for when very young, her writing was remarkable for its extreme smallness and finish,) given with child−like simplicity, and artless ignorance of the worth of what she bestowed with a kiss and a smile.

Her poems were composed at once, with scarcely a correction. Her earlier ones, for the most part, were written at the corner of a large table, covered with the usual heaps of "after−lessons," in a school−room, where some twenty enfranchised girls were putting away copy−books, French grammars, etc., and getting out play−boxes and fancy−work, with the common amount of chatter and noise. Contrasted with such young persons, this child looked like a strange, unearthly creature, — her large, dark gray eye full of inspiration, and every movement of her frame and tone of her voice instinct with delicate energy.

At the same age she would extemporize for hours on the organ, after wreathing the candlesticks with garden−flowers which she had brought in her hand, — their scent, she would say, suggesting the wild, sweet fancies which her fingers seemed able to call forth on the shortest notice. Persons straying into the church, as they often did, attracted by the sound of music, would declare the performer to be an experienced masculine musician.

When but a year older, she was an excellent Latin scholar, and, to use her father's words, she might then have "gone in for honors at Oxford." French she spoke and wrote fluently, besides reading Goethe and Schiller with avidity, and translating as fast as she read, — Schiller having always the preference. At fourteen she began the study of Hebrew, of which language she was a worshipper, and could not at that early age even let Greek alone. Her wonderful power of seizing on the genius of a language, and becoming for the time a foreigner in spirit, was noticed by all her teachers; her ear was so delicate that no subtile inflection ever escaped her, nor any idiom.

And now she surprised her most intimate friend by the present of a prose story, sent to her, when absent, in chapters by the post. This was succeeded by many other tales, and finally by "Charles Auchester," − − which romance, as well as that of "Counterparts," was written in the few hours she could command after her teaching

was over: for in her mother's school she taught music the greater part of every day, — both theoretically and practically, — and also Latin.

Her health, always delicate, suffered wofully from this constant strain, and caused her to experience the most painful exhaustion, which, however, she never permitted to be an excuse for shirking an occupation naturally distasteful to her, — and doubly so, that through all the din of practice her thousand fancies clamored like caged birds eager for liberty.

The moment her hour of leisure came, she would hide herself with her best loved work in the quietest corner she could find; sometimes it was a little room in−doors, sometimes the summer− house, sometimes under a large mulberry−tree; and thus "Charles Auchester" and "Counterparts" were written, the former without one correction, — sheet after sheet, flung from her hand in the ardor of composition, being picked up and read by the friend who was in all her literary secrets. At last this same friend, finding she had no thought of publication, in a moment of playful daring, persuaded her to send the manuscript to Benjamin Disraeli, and he introduced it to his publishers. I quote from his letter to the author, which may not be out of place here: —

"No greater book will ever be written upon music, and it will one day be recognized as the imaginative classic of that divine art."

"Counterparts" and other tales soon followed. And about the same date she presented, anonymously, a volume of stories to the young daughter of Mr. John Hullah, of "Part Music" celebrity. They were in manuscript printing, (if such a term may be used,) written by her own hand, and remarkable for their curious beauty. The heading of each story was picked out in black and gold. The stories are named "Adelaide's Dream," "Little Wonder, or, The Children's Fairy," "The Bird of Paradise," "Spromkari," (from a Scandinavian legend,) "The First Concert," "The Concert in the Hollow Tree," "Uncle, or, Which is the Prettiest?" "Little Ernest," "The Nautilus Voyage." These stories are illustrated, and have a lovely dedication to the little lady for whom they were written.

The author had attended the "Upper Singing−Schools" for the sake of more musical experience. Yet she then sang at sight perfectly, with any number of voices. She has left three published songs, dedicated to the Marchioness of Hastings, and a large number of manuscript poems.

Her character was in perfect keeping with the high tone of her books. Noble, generous, and self−forgetting, tender and most faithful in friendship, burning with indignation at injustice shown to another, longing to find virtues instead of digging for faults,− −her greatest suffering arose from pained surprise, when persons proved themselves less noble than she had deemed them.

Her rich imagination and slender purse were open to all beggars, but for herself she asked nothing, and was constantly a willing sufferer from her own inability to toady a patron or to make a good bargain with a publisher.

She felt most warmly for her friends in America, whose comprehension of her views, and honest, open appreciation of her books, inspired her with an ardent desire to write for them a romance in her very best manner. She had sketched two, and, doubtful which to proceed with first, contemplated sending both to an American friend for his decision; but constant suffering stayed her hand.

In the early spring she grew weaker day by day, and died on the 18th of March, at Brixton, in England, at the age of thirty− two.

Those who loved either her person or her works will find her place forever empty.

Among her manuscript papers I found this sketch, which has a peculiar significance now that the writer has passed away. It has never been printed.

## A NICHE IN THE HEART

I HAD been wandering, almost all day, in the cathedral of a town at some distance from London. I had sketched its carved pulpit, one or two cherub faces looking down from its columns, some of its best reliefs, and its oldest monument. It was evening, and I could no longer see to draw, though pencillings of light still fell on the pavement through the larger windows, whose colors were softened like those of the lunar rainbow; and still the edges of the stalls were gilded with the last gleams of sunset, though the seats were filled already with those phantoms which twilight seems to create in such a place. The monuments looked calmer and less formal than when daylight bared all their defects of design or finish; they seemed now worthy of their position beneath the vaulted roof, and even adjuncts themselves to the harmony of the architecture. One among them, noticeable in the daytime for its refined workmanship, now gleamed out fresher and whiter than the rest, as was natural, for it had been placed there but a little while; but it had besides more expression, in its very simplicity, than such−like mementos of stone or marble usually contain. This was the memento of a husband's regret, and, as such, touching, however vain: a delicate form drooping on a bier, at whose head stood an angel, with an infant in his arms, which he raised to heaven with an air of triumph; while at the foot of the death−bed a figure knelt, in all the relaxed abandonment of woe. Marvellously, and out of small means, the chisel had conveyed this impression; for the kneeling figure was mantled from head to foot, and had its face hidden in the folds of the drapery which skirted the bier, — veiled, like the face of the tortured father in the old tragic tale.

While I gazed, I insensibly approached the still group; and while musing what manner of grief it might be, which could solace by perpetuating its mere image, I observed two other persons, whose entrance I had not been aware of, but whose attention was evidently directed to what had attracted mine. They were a lady and a gentleman, and the latter seemed actually supporting the former, who leaned heavily upon his arm, as it appeared from her manner of carriage, so weakly and wearily she stood. Her form was extremely slight, and the outline of her countenance sharp from attenuation, and in that uncertain light, or rather shade, she looked almost as pale as the carved faces before us. The gentleman, who was of a stately height, bent over her with an anxious air, while she gazed fixedly upon the monument. Her silence seemed to oppress him, for after a minute or two he asked her whether it was not very beautiful. "You know," she answered, in one of those low voices that are more impressive than the loudest, "You know I always suspect those memorials. I would rather have a niche in the heart."

They passed on, and left me standing there. I know not whether the fragile speaker has earned the monument she desired, whether those feeble footsteps have found their repose, — "a quiet conscience in a quiet breast," — but her words struck me, and I have often thought of them since.

There is always something which seems less than the intention in a monument to heroism or to goodness, the patriot of the country, or the missionary of civilization. Every one feels that the graves of War, the many in the one, where link is welded to link in the chain of glory, are more sublime, more sacred, than the exceptional mausoleum. Every one has been struck with repugnant melancholy in the city church−yard, where tomb presses against tomb, and multitude in death destroys identity, saving where the little greatness of wealth or rank may provide itself a separate railing or an overtopping urn. Even in the more suggestive solitude of the country, one cannot but contrast the few hillocks here and there carefully weeded, and their trained and tended rose− bushes, with the many more neglected and sunken, whose distained stones the brier−tangle half conceals, and whose forget−me− nots have long since died for want of water. One may even muse unprofitably (despite the moralist) in our picturesque cemeteries, and as unprofitably in those abroad, with their crowds of crosses and monotony of immortal wreaths. In fact, whether on grounds philosophical or religious, it is not good to brood on mortality for itself alone; better rather to recall the living past, and in the living present prepare for the perfect future.

None die to be forgotten who deserve to be remembered. Even the fame for which some are ardent to sacrifice their lives, enjoyed early at that crisis of existence we call success, will in most cases change the desire for renown into a necessity, and stimulate the mind to the lowest motive but one, ambition, — possibly, to emulation, the lowest of all. Fame is valuable simply as the test of excellence; and there is a certain kind of popularity,

sudden alike in its rise and subsidency, which deserves not the other and lasting name, for it fails to soothe that intellectual conscience which a great writer has declared to exist equally with the moral conscience. After all, it is a question whether fame is as precious to the celebrated during their lifetime as it is to those who love them, or who are attached to them by interest.

There are persons who die and are forgotten, when their exit from the stage of human affairs is a source of advantage to their survivors. Witness those possessed of large fortunes, which they have it in their power to bequeath, and over whose dwellings of mortality vigilant relations hover like the carrion−fowl above the dying battle−steed. I remember a good story to this effect, in which a lady and gentleman took a grateful vow to pic−nic annually, on the anniversary of his death, at the tomb of a relation who had greatly enriched them. They did so, actually, once; succeeding years saw them no more at the solemn tryst.

Even as to those who have excelled in art, or portrayed in language the imaginative side of life, it may be that their works abide and they not be recognized in them, that their words may be echoed in many tongues while the writer is put out of the question almost as entirely as he who carved the first hieroglyph on the archaic stone. It will ever be found, whether in works or words, that what touches the heart rather than what strikes the fancy, what draws the tear rather than excites the smile, will embalm the memory of the man of genius. But of all post−humous distinctions the noblest is that awarded to the philanthropist; even the meed of the man of science, which consists in the complete working of some great discovery skilfully applied, falls short of the reward of those who have contributed their utmost to the physical improvement and social elevation of man, — from the munificent endowment whose benefits increase and multiply in each succeeding generation, to the smallest seed of charity scattered by the frailest hand, as sure as the strong to gather together at the harvest its countless sheaves. To fill a niche in a heart, or a niche in each of a thousand hearts, — either a holier place than that of the poet, who lives in the imagination he renders restless, or that of the hero, who renders the mind more restless still for his suggestion of the glory which may surround a name, a glory rather to be dreaded than desired, — too often, in such cases, must evil be done or tolerated that good may be brought forth.

Then there is consolation for those not gifted either with worldly means or powers of mind or healthful daring. Some will ever remember and regret the man or woman who carries true feeling into the affairs of life, important or minute: gentle courtesies, heart−warm words, delicate regards, — as surely part of consummate charity as the drop is a portion of the deep whose fountains it helps to fill. Precious, too, is self−denial, not austerely invoked from conscience by the voice of duty, but welling from the heart as a natural and necessary return for all it owes to a Power it cannot reward. It has been said, that, to be respected in old age, one should be kind to little children all one's life. May we not, therefore, show just such helpful tenderness to the childlike or appealing weakness of every person with whom we have to do? — for few hearts, alas! have not a weak string. Then no burden shall be left to the last hour, except that of mortality, of which time itself relieves us kindly, — nor shall we have an account to settle with the future to which it consigns the faithful.