

# Elen of Reigh

By the Ettrick Shepherd

Have you never heard of Elen of Reigh,  
The fairest flower of the north countmie?  
The maid that left all maidens behind  
In all that was lovely, sweet, and kind:  
As sweet as the breeze o'er beds of balm,  
As happy and gay as the gamesome lamb,  
As light as the feather that dances on high,  
As blithe as the lark in the breast of the sky,  
As modest as young rose that blossoms too soon,  
As mild as the breeze on a morning of June;  
Her voice was the music's softest key,  
And her form the comeliest symmetry.

But let bard describe her smile who can,  
For that is beyond the power of man;  
There never was pen that hand could frame,  
Nor tongue that falter'd at maiden's name,  
Could once a distant tint convey  
Of its lovely and benignant ray.  
You have seen the morning's folding vest  
Hang dense and pale upon the east,  
As if an angel's hand had strewn  
The dawning's couch with the eider down,  
And shrouded with a curtain gray  
The cradle of the infant day?  
And 'mid this orient dense and pale,  
Through one small window of the veil  
You have seen the sun's first radiant hue  
Lightening the dells and vales of dew,  
With smile that seem'd through glory's rim  
From dwellings of the cherubim;  
And you have thought, with holy awe,  
A lovelier sight you never saw,  
Scorning the heart who dared to doubt it;  
Alas! you little knew about it!  
At beauty's shrine you ne'er have knelt,  
Nor felt the flame that I have felt;  
Nor chanced the virgin smile to see  
Of beauty's model, Elen of Reigh!

When sunbeams on the river blaze,

You on its glory scarce can gaze;  
But when the moon's delirious beam,  
In giddy splendour woos the stream,  
Its mellow'd light is so refined,  
'Tis like a gleam of soul and mind;  
Its gentle ripple glittering by,  
Like twinkle of a maiden's eye;  
While all amazed at Heaven's steepness,  
You gaze into its liquid deepness,  
And see some beauties that excel  
Visions to dream of, not to tell—  
A downward soul of living hue,  
So mild, so modest, and so blue!

What am I raving of just now?  
Forsooth, I scarce can say to you  
A moonlight river beaming by,  
Or holy depth of virgin's eye;  
Unconscious bard! What perilous dreaming!  
Is nought on earth to thee beseeching,  
Will nothing serve, but beauteous women?—  
No, nothing else. But 'tis strange to me,  
If you never heard aught of Elen of Reigh.

But whenever you breathe the breeze of balm,  
Or smile at the frolics of the lamb,  
Or watch the stream by the light of the moon,  
Or weep for the rosebud that opes too soon,  
Or when any beauty of this creation  
Moves your delight or admiration,  
You then may tiny, whatever it be,  
That to compare with Elen of Reigh:  
But never presume that lovely creature  
Once to compare with aught in nature;  
For earth has neither form nor face  
Which heart can ween or eye can trace,  
That once comparison can stand  
With Elen the flower of fair Scotland.

'Tis said that angels are passing fair  
And lovely beings; I hope they are:  
But for all their beauty of form and wing,  
If lovelier than the maid I sing,  
They needs must be I cannot tell  
Something beyond all parallel;  
Something admitted, not believed,

Which heart of man hath ne'er conceived;  
But these are beings of mental bliss,  
Not things to love, and soothe, and kiss.  
There is something dear, say as we will,  
In winsome human nature still.

Elen of Reigh was the flower of our wild,  
Elen of Reigh was an only child,  
A motherless lamb, in childhood thrown  
On bounteous Nature, and her alone;  
But who can mould like that mighty dame  
The mind of fervour and mounting flame,  
The mind that beams with a glow intense  
For fair and virtuous excellence!  
Not one! though many a mighty name,  
High margin'd on the lists of fame,  
Has blazon'd hem ripe tuition high.  
The world has own'd it, and well may I!  
But most of all that night had she,  
The flower of our mountains, fair Elen of Reigh.

But human life is like a river  
Its brightness lasts not on for ever  
That dances from its native braes,  
As pure as maidhood's early days;  
But soon, with dank and sullen motion,  
It rolls into its funeral ocean,  
And those whose currents are the slightest,  
And shortest run, are aye the brightest:  
So is our life—its latest wave  
Rolls dark and solemn to the grave;  
And soon o'ercast was Lien's day,  
And changed, as must my sportive lay.

When beauty is in its rosy prime,  
There is something sacred and sublime,  
To see all living worth combined  
In such a lovely being's mind;  
Each thing for which we would wish to live,  
Each grace, each virtue Heaven can give.  
Such being was Lien, if such can be;  
A faith unstain'd, a conscience free,  
Pure Christian love and charity,  
All breathed in such a holy strain,  
The hearts of men could not refrain  
From wonder at what they heard and saw;

Even greatest sinners stood in awe  
At seeing a form and soul unshadow'd  
A model for the walks of maidhood.

You will feel a trembling wish to know,  
If such a being could e'er forego  
Hem onward path of heavenly aim,  
To love a thing of mortal frame.  
Ah! never did heart in bosom dwell,  
That loved as warmly and as well,  
Or with such ligaments profound  
Was twined another's heart around;  
But blush not—dread not, I entreat,  
Nor tremble for a thing so sweet.

Not comely youth with downy chin,  
Nor manhood's goodliest form, could win  
One wistful look, or dew-drop sheen,  
From eye so heavenly and serene.  
Hence love, that with her life began,  
Was set on thing more pure than man—  
'Twas on a virgin of like mind,  
As pure, as gentle, as refined;  
They in one cradle slept when young—  
Were taught by the same blessed tongue;  
Aye smiled each other's face to see—  
Were nursed upon the self-same knee;  
And the first word each tongue could frame  
Was a loved playmate's cheering name.

Like two young poplars of the vale,  
Like two young twin roes of the dale,  
They grew; and life had no alloy,  
Their fairy path was all of joy.  
They danced, they sung, they play'd, they moved,  
And O how dearly as they loved!  
While in that love, with reverence due,  
Their God and their Redeemer too  
Were twined, which made it the sincerer,  
And still the holier and the dearer.

Each morning, when they woke from sleep,  
They kneel'd, and pray'd with reverence deep;  
Then raised their sightly forms so trim,  
And sung their little morning hymn.  
Then tripping joyfully and bland,

They to the school went hand in hand;  
Came home as blithesome and as bright,  
And slept in other's arms each night.

Sure in such sacred bonds to live,  
Nature has nothing more to give.  
So loved they on, and still more dear,  
From day to day, from year to year;  
And when their flexile forms began  
To take the mould so loved by man,  
They blush'd embraced each other less,  
And wept at their own loveliness,  
As if their bliss was overcast,  
And days of feelings pure were past.

But who can fathom or reprove  
The counsels of the God of love,  
Or stay the mighty hand of Him  
Who dwells between the cherubim?  
No man nor angel—All must be  
Submiss to his supreme decree.  
And so it hap'd that this fair maid,  
In all her virgin charms array'd,  
Just when upon the verge she stood  
Of bright and seemly womanhood,  
From this fair world was call'd away,  
In mildest and in gentlest way.  
Fain world indeed; but still akin  
To much of sorrow and of sin.

Poor Elen watch'd the parting strife  
Of her she loved far more than life;  
The placid smile that strove to tell  
To her beloved that all was well.  
O many a holy thing they said,  
And many a prayer together pray'd,  
And many a hymn, both morn and even,  
Was breathed upon the breeze of heaven,  
Which Hope, on wings of sacred love,  
Presented at the gates above.

The last words into ether melt,  
The last squeeze of the hand is felt,  
And the last breathings, long apart,  
Like aspirations of the heart,  
Told Elen that she now was left,

A thing of love and joy bereft—  
A sapling from its parent torn,  
A rose upon a widow'd thorn,  
A twin roe, or bewilder'd lamb,  
Reft both of sister and of dam  
How could she weather out the strife  
And sorrows of this mortal life!

The last rites of funereal gloom,  
The pageant henalds of the tomb,  
That more in form than feeling tell  
The sorrows of the last farewell,  
None all observed with decent came,  
And but one soul of grief was there.  
The virgin mould, so mild and meet,  
Is roll'd up in its winding sheet;  
Affection's yearnings form'd the nest,  
The dead rose rustles on the breast,  
The wrists are bound with bracelet bands,  
The pallid gloves are on the hands,  
And all the flowers the maid held dear  
Are strew'd within her gilded bier;  
A hundred sleeves with lawn are pale,  
A hundred crape waves in the gale,  
And in a motley mix'd array  
The funeral train winds down Glen-Reigh.  
Alack! how shortly thoughts were lasting  
Of the grave to which they all were hasting!

The grave is open; the mourners gaze  
On bones and skulls of former days;  
The pall's withdrawn in letters sheen,  
"Maria Gray Aged eighteen"  
Is read by all with heaving sighs,  
And ready hands to moisten'd eyes.  
Solemn and slow the bier is laid  
Into its deep and narrow bed,  
And the mould rattles o'er the dead!

What sound like that can be conceived?  
That thunder to a soul bereaved!  
When crumbling bones grate on the bier  
Of all the bosom's core held dear;  
'Tis like a growl of hideous wrath  
The last derisive laugh of death  
Over his victim that lies under;

The heart's last bands then rent asunder,  
And no communion more to be  
Till Time melt in Eternity!

From that dread moment Elen's soul  
Seem'd to outfly its earthly goal;  
And her refined and subtile frame,  
Uplifted by unearthly flame,  
Seem'd soul alone—in likelihood,  
A spirit made of flesh and blood—  
A thing whose being and whose bliss  
Were bound to better world than this.

Her face, that with new lustre beam'd,  
Like features of a seraph seem'd;  
A meekness, mix'd with a degree  
Of fervid, wild sublimity,  
Mark'd all her actions and her moods.  
She sought the loneliest solitudes,  
By the dinghy dell or the silver spring,  
Her holy hymns of the dead to sing;  
For all her songs and language bland  
Wdre of a loved and heavenly hand  
A land of saints and angels fair,  
And of a late dear dweller there;  
But, watch'd full often, ears profane  
Once heard the following solemn strain:

#### Maria Gray. A Song

Who says that Maria Gray is dead,  
And that I in this world can see her never?  
Who says she is laid in her cold death-bed,  
The prey of the grave and of death for ever?  
Ah! they know little of my dear maid,  
Or kindness of her spirit's giver!  
For every night she is by my side,  
By the morning bower, or the moonlight river.

Maria was bonny when she was here,  
When flesh and blood was her mortal dwelling;  
Her smile was sweet, and her mind was clear,  
And her form all human forms excelling.  
But O! if they saw Maria now,  
With her looks of pathos and of feeling,  
They would see a cherub's radiant brow,

To ravish'd mortal eyes unveiling.

The rose is the fairest of earthly flowers  
It is all of beauty and of sweetness  
So my dear maid, in the heavenly bowers,  
Excels in beauty and in meetness.  
She has kiss'd my cheek, she has kemb'd my hair,  
And made a breast of heaven my pillow,  
And promised her God to take me there,  
Before the leaf falls from the willow.

Farewell, ye homes of living men!  
I have no relish for your pleasures—  
In the human face I nothing ken  
That with my spirit's yearning measures.  
I long for onward bliss to be,  
A day of joy, a brighter morrow;  
And from this bondage to be free—  
Farewell, thou world of sin and sorrow!

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O great was the wonder, and great was the dread,  
Of the friends of the living, and friends of the dead;  
For every evening and morning were seen  
Two maidens, where only one should have been!  
Still hand in hand they moved, and sung  
Their hymns, on the walks they trod when young;  
And one night some of the watcher train  
Were said to have heard this holy strain  
Wafted upon the trembling air.  
It was sung by one, although two were there:

#### Hymn Over A Dying Virgin

O Thou whom once thy redeeming love  
Brought'st down to earth from the throne above,  
Stretch forth thy cup of salvation free  
To a thirsty soul that longs for thee!

O Thou who left'st the realms of day,  
Whose blessed head in a manger lay,  
See her here prostrate before thy throne,  
Who trusts in thee, and in thee alone!  
O Thou, who once, as thy earthly nest,



Wast cradled on a virgin's breast,  
For the sake of one who held thee dear,  
Extend thy love to this virgin here!  
Thou Holy One, whose blood was spilt  
Upon the Cross, for human guilt,  
This humbled virgin's longings see,  
And take her soul in peace to thee!

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That very night the mysterious dame  
Not home to her father's dwelling came;  
Though her maidens sat in chill dismay,  
And watch'd, and call'd, till the break of day.  
But in the dawning, with fond regard,  
They sought the bower where the song was heard,  
And found her form stretch'd on the green,  
The loveliest corpse that ever was seen.  
She lay as in balmy sleep reposed,  
While her lips and eyes were sweetly closed,  
As if about to awake and speak;  
Eon a dimpling smile was on her cheek,  
And the pale rose theme had a gentle glow,  
Like the morning's tint on a wreath of snow.

All was so seemly and serene,  
As she lay composed upon the green,  
It was plain to all that no human aid,  
But an angel's hand, had the body laid;  
For from her form there seem'd to rise,  
The sweetest odours of Paradise.  
Around her temples and brow so fair,  
White roses were twined in her auburn hair;  
All bound with a birch and holly band,  
And the book of God was in her right hand.

Farewell, ye flow'rets of sainted fame,  
Ye sweetest maidens of mortal frame;  
A sacred love o'er your lives presided,  
And in your deaths you were not divided!  
O, blessed are they who bid adieu  
To this erring nature as pure as you!