

A Case for Lombroso

Frank Norris

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This story is to be about young Stayne and a girl named Cresencia Hromada, and it harks back to that fable of Aesop's about the two jars. You remember that fable of Aesop's about these jars. They were superlatively beautiful jars, and they were floating in a cistern. They made the discovery that so long as they kept apart they were safe the moment they should come together they would break and fill and sink. Haec fabula docet and all the rest.

Young Stayne, when I knew him, before the time of this tale, was as fine a young fellow as you could find between two oceans. He was just out of Harvard, where he had obtained "Deturs" and very particular and especial credits. He had been one of the speakers in the Yale debate, had been vice president of the "Pudding," and had even been taken on by the "Porcellian" in his senior year. You others who have been at Harvard will know just what all this means. Stayne was a "torrowbred" to his very boots. No man in San Francisco had more friends than he. He was not liked in the sense that a merely "popular" man is liked he was liked because of his genuineness and his fine male strength and honesty and courage. Furthermore, he was well-looking, but that's a detail.

Cresencia Hromada (as you may have very shrewdly suspected from her name) was Spanish, and belonged to that branch of the Hromadas whose original grant from the Spanish government was large enough to make three or four counties when the Gringoes dispossessed them. She was a rare one, was Cresencia fair as Viking, with that fairness that is the mark of the oldest and purest Spanish blood known to the college of Heralds. It dates back to the time of the Ostrogoths, and beside it the Castellians are mushroom interlopers of yesterday. Miss Hromada's dominant characteristic was her pride. She was proud of her name, proud of her family, proud of her beauty (which was a marvel), proud of her exclusiveness, proud even of her pride itself. Otherwise, she was blessed or cursed (whichever you will) with a temperament as delicately poised and as sensitive as goldsmith's scales, nerves as tightly stretched and as responsive as the strings of a Stradivarius. The odours of certain flowers giddied her, she could see eight colours in the rainbow, a musical discord made her head ache upon the instant, and she could feel the spots on a playing card with her finger tips. I suppose this almost hysterical sensitiveness was morbid and unnatural. She had come of a family of unmixed blood, whose stock had never been replenished or strengthened by an alien cross. Her race was almost exhausted, its vitality low, and its temperament refined to the evaporation point. To-day Cresencia might have been called a degenerate.

One day, when she was about twenty-one or twenty-two, she heard Stayne's name for the first time. Someone was telling someone else a story in which Stayne had shone with particular brilliancy, had done a thing especially generous, had sacrificed himself and concealed the fact. A little after Miss Hromada heard his name again, and heard it coupled with extravagant praise. Next she saw a picture of him, and his face pleased her. He was pointed out to her on the deck of a yacht, and it pleased her all the more. After this a mutual friend, who knew them both, told her that Stayne was in love with her and spent his nights in devising ways and means to meet her. Then at last they met.

Cresencia came away from that meeting in a state of mystic exaltation, such as we are told sometimes comes upon nuns before the Stations of the Cross. As for young Stayne, he filled himself a pipe in our room and said to me:

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"Ever met that Miss Hromada? Stunning girl and clever as they make 'em. I'm going to work it to get a bid to their place during the tournamant."

He got his bid right enough about a month later, but in the meanwhile Things had happened. A very proud girl, such as Cresencia, rarely falls in love with any man, but when she does it is with a proud disregard of reticence and restraint that is splendid to see. Cresencia was too proud even to try to conceal her affection for young Stayne. In ten days she had all San Francisco, from Pacific Heights to Russian Hill, talking. On the eleventh San Francisco had them engaged. Next came the tournament and the house party at the Hromadas' place that was to last a week.

Over his pipe in our room Stayne said to me:

"Got my bid all right. I tell you what, she's a corking fine girl, old man, and no mistake. You don't know her very well, do you?"

By that sign I knew that, however Miss Hromada might feel toward Stayne, Stayne would never be in love with her, for a man is not in love with a girl about whom he will speak to another man. Said I:

"Don't go to that house party. Believe me, no good will come of it."

He looked at me a moment over his pipe, and I saw he understood.

"Wouldn't you go?" says he.

"Suppose it was you sister!"

He winced at that and then added:

"But you know I'm not so sure about myself."

"Come now," I answered. "Seriously, now, aren't you sure about yourself?"

He hesitated and then laughed a bit.

"Yes, I guess I am. But about Miss Hromada is it as bad as all that? and mustn't I go?"

"It's quite as bad," I told him. "Everyone sees it but you. Decidedly, I would not go to that house party."

"Well, maybe you're right," he said; "I'll think it over."

He thought it over and went. It was a bad business from the beginning. I was not at the party, but it was easy enough, Heaven knows, to hear what went forward. San Francisco gossip is not discreetly whispered over the teacups it is shouted through megaphones, in public places. At the house party Cresencia calmly appropriated young Stayne with superb, almost imperial, nonchalance. Stayne played his part in the one-sided game, and, once having made the mistake of going to the house party, he was not much to blame up to a certain point. When a girl threw herself into his arms he was not the man to keep his hands in his pockets. Who would have been? But at the end of a week Cresencia's passion for him had become a veritable fury. The red-hot, degenerate Spanish blood of her sang in her veins, and her high-strung nerves crisped and recoiled upon themselves like the ends of broken violin strings. She used to sit in her room so a girl told me at night, after a dance or dinner, rolling her head to and fro upon her folded arms, or biting at the bare flesh of them, in a very excess of passion. Stayne had flirted with girls aplenty before this time, and had gone through the mill like any other city-bred man, and usually could

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hold his own with the best of them. Cresencia, however, was outside this experience. A girl who would catch her breath at the touch of his hand upon her bare wrist, or go suddenly pale at his unexpected entrance, troubled him not a little.

At the end of the first week Stayne saw that the Certain Point had been reached, and invented an excuse to leave. Miss Hromada invented a better one for his staying. And he stayed. Up to this Certain Point, as well, Cresencia had been grandly unsuspecting of Stayne, assuming, as a matter of course, that he was in love with her. After the first week she was less sure of him, and her uncertainty only made her cling to him more desperately. The smash came one evening, as smashes generally come, when people least expect them, and when they are all unprepared for the crisis. Feeling, as he afterward told me, like a kicked puppy, Stayne told Cresencia the truth blundered it out blurted it out, like a schoolboy. She must have been superb then. She was a born and bred Hromada, for that moment, at any rate. She rose slowly to her full six feet, her hands rigid at her side, and without a gesture or movement spoke to him for five minutes in a low, calm voice, while Stayne (he told me himself) cowered there before her, counting the ticking of the clock, and following, with shifty eyes, the pattern in the carpet at his feet.

"Now you had better go," she said at length.

Stayne groped toward the door, wondering how soon he could draw a full breath, and if he could ever look at himself in the glass again without blushing. By the time his shaking hand closed on the knob, the daughter of an hundred Hromadas had lapsed back into the young girl of degenerate blood and jangled nerves and untamed passions. A scene really terrible followed.

"What is it! What is it!" Cresencia would exclaim, as she held him about the neck. "It isn't love, this feeling I have for you! What is it? What is the matter with me? It isn't love, and yet there is something something here here I don't know! Am I losing my senses? Why is it that I have got to love you whether I will or no? It isn't love is it a disease? Is it a kind of insanity? Oh, what is it that has happened to me these last weeks?"

In the face of such hysteria Stayne lost his hold upon himself as well said he did love her after all said so while he wondered at himself said it, half believing it was true. In the confusion of his ideas it was impossible for him to tell truth from falsehood. He became almost as incoherent as Cresencia herself. Fancy the scene, if you can both of them excited beyond all control, talking wildly into each other's faces, neither of them heeding what was said by the other, and all the while clasped in an embrace like that of wrestlers! There in the darkness of that drawing room, in the isolation of that country house, the two jars, floating helplessly in ungovernable currents, crashed together. That of the finest clay shattered and sank at once the other, of coarser fibre, settled slower to its ruin.

In a month's time Stayne was sickened unto death of Cresencia was cloyed and satiated with her. At first he had been too honest to pretend for her an affection he did not feel, but already the fine edge of this honesty had been blunted. If he now wished to break with her it was because it fatigued and bored him beyond words to keep up appearances. Once more he fought his way brutally out of the mesh in which he had become entangled, wrote a ten-line letter to Cresencia, which he believed would be final, and for a week felt like an honest man for the first time in three months.

But the thing was not to be. Miss Hromada's pride did not come to her aid this time even momentarily. She had been degrading far more rapidly than he. Though she rolled upon her bed, hurting herself with the nails of her hands, in unspeakable humiliation, she could not let Stayne go. And this was the same girl whose pride and self-respect had hitherto been her strongest traits. She managed to see Stayne three and four times each week. She came to his office, contrived to meet him on his way to lunch, managed to be invited to the same places even began to take strange, perverted pleasure in forcing herself upon his company and in submitting to his brutalities.

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For the thing could not fail but have its effect upon Stayne. He suddenly discovered that nothing literally and quite truly nothing he could do would offend Cresencia. He realized that she would take anything from him that she would not, or rather, that she could not, resent any insult, however gross. And the knowledge made the man a brute. Remember, this was not all at once. I am talking now about things that took a year or more to evolve. After he had clearly seen that Miss Hromada would submit to anything at his hands, Stayne began to enjoy her society. By this time Stayne had developed into rather much of a villain. It became for him a pleasure a morbid, unnatural, evil pleasure for him to hurt and humiliate her. He hurt her while he sickened at the thought of his own baseness, and she submitted to it while she loathed herself for her own degradation. They were a strange couple.

Stayne would even torture her before other women and girls would make her play waltzes while he danced with some fancied rival would make appointments with her and come to the place with another girl, and tell her he had made other arrangements. He would smoke while she was by, and blow the smoke in her eyes. I have even seen him put his feet into the lap of her dinner gown, she, the while, trying to carry it off as a joke.

And she took all this and would go home and lie awake all night and fancy she was killing Stayne with her nails and teeth, till she shook all over and saw red things between her and the opposite wall.

The end of this story ought to be a suicide, or at least a murder, but that was the devil of it. The two people lived lived out the wretched farce–tragedy to which there was no end. Had they never met, Miss Hromada and young Stayne would yet have been as fine specimens of womanhood and manhood as you could wish to know. Once having met, they ruined each other. The effect of these different characters upon one another was something well–nigh impossible to reduce to language. A Shakespeare could have handled it a Zola might have worked it out I dare not go further with it. For all I know the horror may still be alive. Stayne's name has long since been erased from the rolls of his club. Miss Hromada is thoroughly *déclassée*, and only last month figured in the law courts as the principal figure in a miserable and thoroughly disreputable scandal.

Stayne goes to see her four nights in the week.

San Francisco Wave, April 11, 1897.