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Elizabeth Gaskell

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Sir Mark Crowley was the last baronet of his name, and it is now nearly a century since he died. Last year I visited the ruins of his great old Norman castle; and loitered in the village near, where I heard some of the particulars of the following tale from old inhabitants, who had heard them from their fathers; no further back.

We drove from our little sea−bathing place, in Sussex, to see the massive ruins of Crowley Castle, which is the show−excursion of Merton. We had to alight at a field gate: the road further on being too bad for the slightly−built carriage, or the poor tired Merton horse: and we walked for about a quarter of a mile through uneven ground, which had once been an Italian garden; and then we came to a bridge over a dry moat, and went over the groove of a portcullis that had once closed the massive entrance, into an empty space surrounded by thick walls, draperied with ivy, unroofed, and open to the sky. We could judge of the beautiful tracery that had been in the windows, by the remains of the stonework here and there; and an old man 'ever so old,' he called himself when we inquired his exact age who scrambled and stumbled out of some lair in the least devastated part of the ruins at our approach, and who established himself as our guide, showed us a scrap of glass yet lingering in what was the window of the great drawing−room not above seventy years ago. After he had done his duty, he hobbled with us to the neighbouring church, where the knightly Crowleys lie buried: some commemorated by ancient brasses, some by altar−tombs, some by fine Latin epitaphs, bestowing upon them every virtue under the sun. He had to take the church−key back to the adjoining parsonage at the entrance of the long straggling street which forms the village of Crowley. The castle and the church were on the summit of a hill, from which we could see the distant line of sea beyond the misty marshes. The village fell away from the church and parsonage, down the hill. The aspect of the place was little, if at all, changed, from its aspect in the year 1772.

But I must begin a little earlier. From one of the Latin epitaphs I learnt that Amelia Lady Crowley died in 1756, deeply regretted by her loving husband, Sir Mark. He never married again, though his wife had left him no heir to his name or his estate only a little tiny girl Theresa Crowley. This child would inherit her mother's fortune, and all that Sir Mark was free to leave; but this little was not much; the castle and all the lands going to his sister's son, Marmaduke, or as he was usually called Duke, Brownlow. Duke's parents were dead, and his uncle was his guardian, and his guardian's house was his home. The lad was some seven or eight years older than his cousin; and probably Sir Mark thought it not unlikely that his daughter and his heir might make a match. Theresa's mother had bad some foreign blood in her, and had been brought up in France not so far away but that its shores might be seen by any one who chose to take an easy day's ride from Crowley Castle for the purpose.

Lady Crowley had been a delicate elegant creature, but no great beauty, judging from all accounts; Sir Mark's family were famous for their good looks; Theresa, an unusually lucky child, inherited the outward graces of both her parents. A portrait which I saw of her, degraded to a station over the parlour chimney−piece in the village inn, showed me black hair, soft yet arch grey eyes with brows and lashes of the same tint as her hair, a full pretty poutinward graces of both her parents. A portrait which I saw of her, degraded to a station over the parlour chimney−piece in the village inn, showed me black hair, soft yet arch grey eyes with brows and lashes of the same tint as her hair, a full pretty pouting passionate mouth, and a round slender throat. She was a wilful little creature, and her father's indulgence made her more wayward. She had a nurse, too, a French bonne, whose mother had been about my lady from her youth, who had followed my lady to England, and who had died there. Victorine had been in attendance on the young Theresa from her earliest infancy, and almost took the place of a

parent in power and affection—in power, as to ordering and arranging almost what she liked, concerning the child's management—in love, because they speak to this day of the black year when virulent smallpox was rife in Crowley, and when, Sir Mark being far away on some diplomatic mission—in Vienna, I fancy—Victorine shut herself up with Miss Theresa when the child was taken ill with the disease, and nursed her night and day. She only succumbed to the dreadful illness when all danger to the child was over. Theresa came out of it with unblemished beauty; Victorine barely escaped with life, and was disfigured for life.

This disfigurement put a stop to much unfounded scandal which had been afloat respecting the French servant's great influence over Sir Mark. He was, in fact, an easy and indolent man, rarely excited to any vehemence of emotion, and who felt it to be a point of honour to carry out his dead wife's wish that Victorine should never leave Theresa, and that the management of the child should be confided to her. Only once had there been a struggle for power between Sir Mark and the bonne, and then she had won the victory. And no wonder, if the old butler's account were true; for he had gone into the room unawares, and had found Sir Mark and Victorine at high words; and he said that Victorine was white with rage, that her eyes were blazing with passionate fire, that her voice was low, and her words were few, but that, although she spoke in French, and he the butler only knew his native English, he would rather have been sworn at by a drunken grenadier with a sword in his hand, than have had those words of Victorine's addressed to him.

Even the choice of Theresa's masters was left to Victorine. A little reference was occasionally made to Madam Hawtrey, the parson's wife and a distant relation of Sir Mark's, but, seeing that, if Victorine chose so to order it, Madam Hawtrey's own little daughter Bessy would have been deprived of the advantages resulting from gratuitous companionship in all Theresa's lessons, she was careful how she opposed or made an enemy of Mademoiselle Victorine. Bessy was a gentle quiet child, and grew up to be a sensible sweet−tempered girl, with a very fair share of English beauty; fresh−complexion, brown−eyed round−faced, with a stiff though well−made figure, as different as possible from Theresa's slight lithe graceful form. Duke was a young man to these two maidens, while they to him were little more than children. Of course he admired his cousin Theresa the most—who would not?—but he was establishing his first principles of morality for himself, and her conduct towards Bessy sometimes jarred against his ideas of right. One day, after she had been tyrannizing over the self−contained and patient Bessy so as to make the latter cry—and both the amount of the tyranny and the crying were unusual circumstances, for Theresa was of a generous nature when not put out of the way—Duke spoke to his cousin:

'Theresa! You had no right to blame Bessy as you did. It was as much your fault as hers. You were as much bound to remember Mr Dawson's directions about the sums you were to do for him, as she was.'

The girl opened her great grey eyes in surprise. She to blame!

'What does Bessy come to the castle for, I wonder? They pay nothing—we pay all. The least she can do, is to remember for me what we are told. I shan't trouble myself with attending to Mr Dawson's directions; and if Bessy does not like to do so, she can stay away. She already knows enough to earn her bread as a maid: which I suppose is what she'll have to come to.'

The moment Theresa had said this, she could have bitten her tongue out for the meanness and rancour of the speech. She saw pain and disappointment clearly expressed on Duke's face; and, in another moment, her impulses would have carried her to the opposite extreme, and she would have spoken out her self−reproach. But Duke thought it his duty to remonstrate with her, and to read her a homily, which, however true and just, weakened the effect of the look of distress on his face. Her wits were called into play to refute his arguments; her head rather than her heart took the prominent part in the controversy; and it ended unsatisfactorily to both; he, going away with dismal though unspoken prognostics touching what she would become as a woman if she were so supercilious and unfeeling as a girl; she, the moment his back was turned, throwing herself on the floor and sobbing as if her heart would break. Victorine heard her darling's passionate sobs, and came in.

'What hast thou, my angel! Who has been vexing thee,—tell me, my cherished?'

She tried to raise the girl, but Theresa would not be raised; neither would she speak till she chose, in spite of Victorine's entreaties. When she chose, she lifted herself up, still sitting on the floor, and putting her tangled hair off her flushed tear−stained face, said:

'Never mind, it was only something Duke said; I don't care for it now.' And refusing Victorine's aid, she got up, and stood thoughtfully looking out of the window.

'That Duke!' exclaimed Victorine. 'What business has that Mr Duke to go vex my darling? He is not your husband yet, that he should scold you, or that you should mind what he says.'

Theresa listened and gained a new idea; but she gave no outward sign of attention, or of her now hearing for the first time how that she was supposed to be intended for her cousin's wife. She made no reply to Victorine's caresses and speeches; one might almost say she shook her off. As soon as she was left to herself, she took her hat, and going out alone, as she was wont, in the pleasure−grounds, she went down the terrace steps, crossed the bowling−green, and opened a little wicket−gate which led into the garden of the parsonage. There, were Bessy and her mother, gathering fruit. It was Bessy whom Theresa sought; for there was something in Madam Hawtrey's silky manner that was always rather repugnant to her. However, she was not going to shrink from her resolution because Madam Hawtrey was there. So she went up to the startled Bessy, and said to her, as if she were reciting a prepared speech: 'Bessy, I behaved very crossly to you; I had no business to have spoken to you as I did.'—'Will you forgive me?' was the predetermined end of this confession; but somehow, when it came to that, she could not say it with Madam Hawtrey standing by, ready to smile and to curtsey as soon as she could catch Theresa's eye. There was no need to ask forgiveness though; for Bessy had put down her half filled basket, and came softly up to Theresa, stealing her brown soil−stained little hand into the young lady's soft white one, and looking up at her with loving brown eyes.

'I am so sorry, but I think it was the sums on page 108. I have been looking and looking, and I am almost sure.'

Her exculpatory tone caught her mother's ear, although her words did not.

'I am sure, Miss Theresa, Bessy is so grateful for the privileges of learning with you! It is such an advantage to her! I often tell her, "Take pattern by Miss Theresa, and do as she does, and try and speak as she does, and there'll not be a parson's daughter in all Sussex to compare with you." Don't I, Bessy?'

Theresa shrugged her shoulders—a trick she had caught from Victorine—and, turning to Bessy, asked her what she was going to do with those gooseberries she was gathering? And as Theresa spoke, she lazily picked the ripest out of the basket, and ate them.

'They are for a pudding,' said Bessy. 'As soon as we have gathered enough, I am going in to make it.'

'I'll come and help you,' said Theresa, eagerly. 'I should so like to make a pudding. Our Monsieur Antoine never makes gooseberry puddings.'

Duke came past the parsonage an hour or so afterwards: and, looking in by chance through the open casement windows of the kitchen, saw Theresa pinned up in a bib and apron, her arms all over flour, flourishing a rolling−pin, and laughing and chattering with Bessy similarly attired. Duke had spent his morning ostensibly in fishing; but in reality in weighing in his own mind what he could do or say to soften the obdurate heart of his cousin. And here it was, all inexplicably right, as if by some enchanter's wand!

The only conclusion Duke could come to was the same that many a wise (and foolish) man had come to before his day:

'Well! Women are past my comprehension, that's all!'

When all this took place, Theresa was about fifteen; Bessy was perhaps six months older; Duke was just leaving Oxford. His uncle, Sir Mark, was excessively fond of him; yes! and proud, too, for he had distinguished himself at college, and every one spoke well of him. And he, for his part, loved Sir Mark, and, unspoiled by the fame and reputation he had gained at Christ Church, paid respectful deference to Sir Mark's opinions.

As Theresa grew older, her father supposed that he played his cards well in singing Duke's praises on every possible occasion. She tossed her head, and said nothing. Thanks to Victorine's revelations, she understood the tendency of her father's speeches. She intended to make her own choice of a husband when the time came; and it might be Duke, or it might be some one else. When Duke did not lecture or prose, but was sitting his horse so splendidly at the meet, before the huntsman gave the blast, 'Found;' when Duke was holding his own in discourse with other men; when Duke gave her a short sharp word of command on any occasion; then she decided that she would marry him, and no one else. But when he found fault, or stumbled about awkwardly in a minuet, or talked moralities against duelling, then she was sure that Duke should never be her husband. She wondered if he knew about it; if any one had told him, as Victorine had told her; if her father had revealed his thoughts and wishes to his nephew, as plainly as he had done to his daughter? This last query made her cheeks burn; and, on days when the suspicion had been brought by any chance prominently before her mind, she was especially rude and disagreeable to Duke.

He was to go abroad on the grand tour of Europe, to which young men of fortune usually devoted three years. He was to have a tutor, because all young men of his rank had tutors; else he was quite wise enough, and steady enough, to have done without one, and probably knew a good deal more about what was best to be observed in the countries they were going to visit, than Mr Roberts, his appointed bear−leader. He was to come back full of historical and political knowledge, speaking French and Italian like a native, and having a smattering of barbarous German, and he was to enter the House as a county member, if possible—as a borough member at the worst; and was to make a great success; and then, as every one understood, he was to marry his cousin Theresa.

He spoke to her father about it, before starting on his travels. It was after dinner in Crowley Castle. Sir Mark and Duke sat alone, each pensive at the thought of the coming parting.

'Theresa is but young,' said Duke, breaking into speech after a long silence, 'but if you have no objection, uncle, I should like to speak to her before I leave England, about my—my hopes.'

Sir Mark played with his glass, poured out some more wine, drank it off at a draught, and then replied:

'No, Duke, no. Leave her in peace with me. I have looked forward to having her for my companion through these three years; they'll soon pass away' (to age, but not to youth), 'and I should like to have her undivided heart till you come back. No, Duke! Three years will soon pass away, and then we'll have a royal wedding.'

Duke sighed, but said no more. The next day was the last. He wanted Theresa to go with him to take leave of the Hawtreys at the Parsonage, and of the villagers; but she was wilful, and would not. He remembered, years afterwards, how Bessy's gentle peaceful manner had struck him as contrasted with Theresa's, on that last day. Both girls regretted his departure. He had been so uniformly gentle and thoughtful in his behaviour to Bessy, that, without any idea of love, she felt him to be her pattern of noble chivalrous manhood; the only person, except her father, who was steadily kind to her. She admired his sentiments, she esteemed his principles, she considered his long evolvement of his ideas as the truest eloquence. He had lent her books, he had directed her studies; all the advice and information which Theresa had rejected had fallen to Bessy's lot, and she had received it thankfully.

Theresa burst into a passion of tears as soon as Duke and his suite were out of sight. She had refused the farewell kiss her father had told her to give him, but had waved her white handkerchief out of the great drawing−room window (that very window in which the old guide showed me the small piece of glass still lingering). But Duke had ridden away with slack rein and downcast head, without looking back.

His absence was a great blank in Sir Mark's life. He had never sought London much as a place of residence; in former days he had been suspected of favouring the Stuarts; but nothing could be proved against him, and he had subsided into a very tolerably faithful subject of King George the Third. Still, a cold shoulder having been turned to him by the court party at one time, he had become prepossessed against the English capital. On the contrary, his wife's predilections and his own tendencies had always made Paris a very agreeable place of residence to him. To Paris he at length resorted again, when the blank in his life oppressed him; and from Paris, about two years after Duke's departure, he returned after a short absence from home, and suddenly announced to his daughter and the household that he had taken an apartment in the Rue Louis le Grand for the coming winter, to which there was to be an immediate removal of his daughter, Victorine, and certain other personal attendants and servants.

Nothing could exceed Theresa's mad joy at this unexpected news. She sprang upon her father's neck, and kissed him till she was tired—whatever he was. She ran to Victorine, and told her to guess what 'heavenly bliss' was going to befall them, dancing round the middle−aged woman until she, in her spoilt impatience, was becoming angry, when, kissing her, she told her, and ran off to the Parsonage, and thence to the church, bursting in upon morning prayers—for it was All Saints' Day, although she had forgotten it—and filliping a scrap of paper on which she had hastily written, 'We are going to Paris for the winter—all of us,' rolled into a ball, from the castle pew to that of the parson. She saw Bessy redden as she caught it, put it into her pocket unread, and, after an apologetic glance at the curtained seat in which Theresa was, go on with her meek responses. Theresa went out by the private door in a momentary fit of passion. 'Stupid cold−blooded creature!' she said to herself. But that afternoon Bessy came to the castle, so sorry—and so losing her own sorrow in sympathy with her friend's gladness, that Theresa took her into favour again. The girls parted with promises of correspondence, and with some regret: the greatest on Bessy's side. Some grand promises of Paris fashion, and presents of dress, Theresa made in her patronizing way; but Bessy did not seem to care much for them—which was fortunate, for they were never fulfilled.

Sir Mark had an idea in his head of perfecting Theresa's accomplishments and manners by Parisian masters

and Parisian society. English residents in Venice, Florence, Rome, wrote to their friends at home about Duke. They spoke of him as of what we should, at the present day, call a 'rising young man.' His praises ran so high, that Sir Mark began to fear lest his handsome nephew, f ted by princes, courted by ambassadors, made love to by lovely Italian ladies, might find Theresa too country−bred for his taste.

Thus had come about, the engaging of the splendid apartment in the Rue Louis le Grand. The street itself is narrow, and now−a−days we are apt to think the situation close; but in those days it was the height of fashion; for, the great arbiter of fashion, the Duc de Richelieu, lived there, and, to inhabit an apartment in that street, was in itself a mark of bon ton. Victorine seemed almost crazy with delight when they took possession of their new abode. 'This dear Paris! This lovely France! And now I see my young lady, my darling, my angel, in a room suited to her beauty and her rank: such as my lady her mother would have planned for her, if she had lived.' Any allusion to her dead mother always touched Theresa to the quick. She was in her bed, under the blue silk curtains of an alcove, when Victorine said this,—being too much fatigued after her journey to respond to Victorine's rhapsodies; but now she put our her little hand and gave Victorine's a pressure of gratitude and pleasure. Next day she wandered about the rooms and admired their splendour almost to Victorine's content. Her father, Sir Mark, found a handsome carriage and horses for his darling's use; and also found that not less necessary article—a married lady of rank who would take his girl under her wing. When all these preliminary arrangements were made, who so wildly happy as Theresa! Her carriage was of the newest fashion, fit to vie with any on the Cours de la Reine, the then fashionable drive. The box at the Grand Op ra, and at the Fran ais, which she shared with Madame la Duchesse de G., was the centre of observation; Victorine was in her best humour, Theresa's credit at her dressmaker's was unlimited, her indulgent father was charmed with all she did and said. She had masters, it is true; but, to a rich and beautiful young lady, masters were wonderfully complaisant, and with them as with all the world, she did what she pleased. Of Parisian society, she had enough and more than enough. The duchess went everywhere, and Theresa went too. So did a certain Count de la Grange: some relation or connection of the duchess: handsome, with a south of France handsomeness: with delicate features, marred by an oversoftness of expression, from which (so men said) the tiger was occasionally seen to peep forth. But, for elegance of dress and demeanour he had not his fellow in Paris—which of course meant, not in the world.

Sir Mark heard rumours of this man's conduct, which were not pleasing to him; but when he accompanied his daughter into society, the count was only as deferential as it became a gentleman to be to so much beauty and grace, When Theresa was taken out by the duchess to the opera, to balls, to petits soupers, without her father, then the count was more than deferential; he was adoring. It was a little intoxicating for a girl brought up in the solitude of an English village, to have so many worshippers at her feet all at once, in the great gay city; and the inbred coquetry of her nature came out, adding to her outward grace, if taking away from the purity and dignity of her character. It was Victorine's delight to send her darling out arrayed for conquest; her hair delicately powdered, and scented with mar chale; her little 'mouches' put on with skill; the tiny half−moon patch, to lengthen the already almond−shaped eye; the minute star to give the effect of a dimple at the corner of her scarlet lips; the silver gauze looped up over the petticoat of blue brocade, distended over a hoop, much as gowns are worn in our days; the coral ornaments of her silver dress, matching with the tint of the high heels to her shoes. And, at night, Victorine was never tired of listening and questioning; of triumphing in Theresa's triumphs; of invariably reminding her that she was bound to marry the absent cousin, and return to the half−feudal state of the old castle in Sussex.

Still, even now, if Duke had returned from Italy, all might have gone well; but when Sir Mark, alarmed by the various proposals he received for Theresa's hand from needy French noblemen, and by the admiration she was exciting everywhere, wrote to Duke, and urged him to join them in Paris on his return from his travels, Duke answered that three months were yet unexpired of the time allotted for the grand tour; and that he was anxious to avail himself of that interval to see something of Spain. Sir Mark read this letter aloud to Theresa, with many expressions of annoyance as he read. Theresa merely said, 'Of course, Duke does what he likes,' and turned away to see some new lace brought for her inspection. She heard her father sigh over a re−perusal of Duke's letter, and she set her teeth in the anger she would not show in acts or words. That day the Count de Grange met with gentler treatment from her than he had done for many days—than he had done since her father's letter to Duke had been sent off to Genoa. As ill fortune would have it, Sir Mark had occasion to return to England at this time, and he, guileless himself, consigned Theresa and her maid Victorine, and her man Felix, to the care of the duchess for

three weeks. They were to reside at the Hotel de G. during this time. The duchess welcomed them in her most caressing manner, and showed Theresa the suite of rooms, with the little private staircase, appropriated to her use.

The Count de Grange was an habitual visitor at the house of his cousin the duchess, who was a gay Parisian, absorbed in her life of giddy dissipation. The count found means of influencing Victorine in his favour; not by money; so coarse a bribe would have had no power over her; but by many presents, accompanied with sentimental letters, breathing devotion to her charge, and extremest appreciation of the faithful friend whom Theresa looked upon as a mother, and whom for this reason he, the count, revered and loved. Intermixed, were wily allusions to his great possessions in Provence, and to his ancient lineage:—the one mortgaged, the other disgraced. Victorine, whose right hand had forgotten its cunning in the length of her dreary vegetation at Crowley Castle, was deceived, and became a vehement advocate of the dissolute Adonis of the Paris saloons, in his suit to her darling. When Sir Mark came back, he was dismayed and shocked beyond measure by finding the count and Theresa at his feet, entreating him to forgive their stolen marriage—a marriage which, though incomplete as to its legal forms, was yet too complete to be otherwise than sanctioned by Theresa's nearest friends. The duchess accused her cousin of perfidy and treason. Sir Mark said nothing. But his health failed from that time, and he sank into an old querulous grey−haired man.

There was some ado, I know not what, between Sir Mark and the count regarding the control and disposition of the fortune which Theresa inherited from her mother. The count gained the victory, owing to the different nature of the French laws from the English; and this made Sir Mark abjure the country and the city he had loved so long. Henceforward, he swore, his foot should never touch French soil; if Theresa liked to come and see him at Crowley Castle, she should be as welcome as a daughter of the house ought to be, and ever should be; but her husband should never enter the gates of the house in Sir Mark's lifetime.

For some months he was out of humour with Duke, because of his tardy return from his tour and his delay in joining them in Paris: through which, so Sir Mark fancied, Theresa's marriage had been brought about. But—when Duke came home, depressed in spirits and submissive to his uncle, even under unjust blame—Sir Mark restored him to favour in the course of a summer's day, and henceforth added another injury to the debtor side of the count's reckoning.

Duke never told his uncle of the woeful ill−report he had heard of the count in Paris, where he had found all the better part of the French nobility pitying the lovely English heiress who had been entrapped into a marriage with one of the most disreputable of their order, a gambler and a reprobate. He could not leave Paris without seeing Theresa, whom he believed to be as yet unacquainted with his arrival in the city, so he went to call upon her one evening. She was sitting alone, splendidly dressed, ravishingly beautiful; she made a step forward to meet him, hardly heeding the announcement of his name; for she had recognized a man's tread, and fancied it was her husband, coming to accompany her to some grand reception. Duke saw the quick change from hope to disappointment on her mobile face, and she spoke out at once her reason. 'Adolphe promised to come and fetch me; the princess receives to−night. I hardly expected a visit from you, cousin Duke,' recovering herself into a pretty proud reserve. 'It is a fortnight, I think, since I heard you were in Paris. I had given up all expectation of the honour of a visit from you!'

Duke felt that, as she had heard of his being there, it would be awkward to make excuses which both she and he must know to be false, or explanations the very truth of which would be offensive to the loving, trusting, deceived wife. So, he turned the conversation to his travels, his heart aching for her all the time, as he noticed her wandering attention when she heard any passing sound. Ten, eleven, twelve o'clock; he would not leave her. He thought his presence was a comfort and a pleasure to her. But when one o'clock struck, she said some unexpected business must have detained her husband, and she was glad of it, as she had all along felt too much tired to go out: and besides, the happy consequence of her husband's detention had been that long talk with Duke.

He did not see her again after this polite dismissal, nor did he see her husband at all. Whether through ill chance, or carefully disguised purpose, it did so happen that he called several times, he wrote several notes requesting an appointment when he might come with the certainty of finding the count and countess at home, in order to wish them farewell before setting out for England. All in vain. But he said nothing to Sir Mark of all this. He only tried to fill up the blank in the old man's life. He went between Sir Mark and the tenants to whom he was unwilling to show himself unaccompanied by the beautiful daughter, who had so often been his companion in his walks and rides, before that ill−omened winter in Paris. He was thankful to have the power of returning the long

kindness his uncle had shown him in childhood; thankful to be of use to him in his desertion; thankful to atone in some measure for his neglect of his uncle's wish that he should have made a hasty return to Paris.

But it was a little dull after the long excitement of travel, after associating with all that was most cultivated and seeing all that was most famous, in Europe, to be shut up in that vast magnificent dreary old castle, with Sir Mark for a perpetual companion—Sir Mark, and no other. The parsonage was near at hand, and occasionally Mr Hawtrey came in to visit his parishioner in his trouble. But Sir Mark kept the clergyman at bay; he knew that his brother in age, his brother in circumstances (for had not Mr Hawtrey an only child and she a daughter?), was sympathizing with him in his sorrow, and he was too proud to bear it; indeed, sometimes he was so rude to his old neighbour, that Duke would go next morning to the parsonage, to soothe the smart.

And so—and so—gradually, imperceptibly, at last his heart was drawn to Bessy. Her mother angled and angled skilfully; at first scarcely daring to hope; then remembering her own descent from the same stock as Duke, she drew herself up, and set to work with fresh skill and vigour. To be sure, it was a dangerous game for a mother to play; for her daughter's happiness was staked on her success. How could simple country−bred Bessy help being attracted to the courtly handsome man, travelled and accomplished, good and gentle, whom she saw every day, and who treated her with the kind familiarity of a brother; while he was not a brother, but in some measure a disappointed man, as everybody knew? Bessy was a daisy of an English maiden; pure good to the heart's core and most hidden thought; sensible in all her accustomed daily ways, yet not so much without imagination as not to desire something beyond the narrow range of knowledge and experience in which her days had hitherto been passed. Add to this her pretty figure, a bright healthy complexion, lovely teeth, and quite enough of beauty in her other features to have rendered her the belle of a country town, if her lot had been cast in such a place; and it is not to be wondered at, that, after she had been secretly in love with Duke with all her heart for nearly a year, almost worshipping him, he should discover that, of all the women he had ever known—except perhaps the lost Theresa—Bessy Hawtrey had it in her power to make him the happiest of men.

Sir Mark grumbled a little; but now−a−days he grumbled at everything, poor disappointed, all but childless, old man! As to the vicar he stood astonished and almost dismayed. 'Have you thought enough about it, Mr Duke?' the parson asked. 'Young men are apt to do things in a hurry, that they repent at leisure. Bessy is a good girl, a good girl, God bless her: but she has not been brought up as your wife should have been: at least as folks will say your wife should have been. Though I may say for her she has a very pretty sprinkling of mathematics. I taught her myself, Mr Duke.'

'May I go and ask her myself? I only want your permission,' urged Duke.

'Ay, go! But perhaps you'd better ask Madam first. She will like to be told everything as soon as me.'

But Duke did not care for Madam. He rushed through the open door of the parsonage, into the homely sitting−rooms, and softly called for Bessy. When she came, he took her by the hand and led her forth into the field−path at the back of the orchard, and there he won his bride to the full content of both their hearts.

All this time the inhabitants of Crowley Castle and the quiet people of the neighbouring village of Crowley, heard but little of 'The Countess,' as it was their fashion to call her. Sir Mark had his letters from her, it is true, and he read them over and over again, and moaned over them, and sighed, and put them carefully away in a bundle. But they were like arrows of pain to him. None knew their contents; none, even knowing them, would have dreamed, any more than he did, for all his moans and sighs, of the utter wretchedness of the writer. Love had long since vanished from the habitation of that pair; a habitation, not a home, even in its brightest days. Love had gone out of the window, long before poverty had come in at the door: yet that grim visitant who never tarries in tracking a disreputable gambler, had now arrived. The count lost the last remnants of his character as a man who played honourably, and thenceforth—that being pretty nearly the only sin which banished men from good society in those days—he had to play where and how he could. Theresa's money went as her poor angry father had foretold. By−and−by, and without her consent, her jewel−box was rifled; the diamonds round the locket holding her mother's picture were wrenched and picked out by no careful hand. Victorine found Theresa crying over the poor relics; − crying at last, without disguise, as if her heart would break.

'Oh, mamma! mamma! mamma!' she sobbed out, holding up the smashed and disfigured miniature as an explanation of her grief. She was sitting on the floor, on which she had thrown herself in the first discovery of the theft. Victorine sat down by her, taking her head upon her breast, and soothing her. She did not ask who had done it; she asked Theresa no question which the latter would have shrunk from answering; she knew all in that hour,

without the count's name having passed the lips of either of them. And from that time she watched him as a tiger watches his prey.

When the letters came from England, the three letters from Sir Mark and the affianced bride and bridegroom, announcing the approaching marriage of Duke and Bessy, Theresa took them straight to Victorine. Theresa's lips were tightened, her pale cheeks were paler. She waited for Victorine to speak. Not a word did the Frenchwoman utter; but she smoothed the letters one over the other, and tore them in two, throwing the pieces on the ground, and stamping on them.

'Oh, Victorine!' cried Theresa, dismayed at passion that went so far beyond her own, 'I never expected it—I never thought of it—but, perhaps, it was but natural.'

'It was not natural; it was infamous! To have loved you once, and not to wait for chances, but to take up with that mean poor girl at the parsonage. Pah! and her letter! Sir Mark is of my mind though, I can see. I am sorry I tore up his letter. He feels, he knows, that Mr Duke Brownlow ought to have waited, waited, waited. Some one waited fourteen years, did he not? The count will not live for ever.'

Theresa did not see the face of wicked meaning as those last words were spoken.

Another year rolled heavily on its course of wretchedness to Theresa. That same revolution of time brought increase of peace and joy to the English couple, striving humbly, striving well, to do their duty as children to the unhappy and deserted Sir Mark. They had their reward in the birth of a little girl. Yet, close on the heels of this birth, followed a great sorrow. The good parson died, after a short sudden illness. Then came the customary trouble after the death of a clergyman. The widow had to leave the parsonage, the home of a lifetime, and seek a new resting−place for her declining years.

Fortunately for all parties, the new vicar was a bachelor; no other than the tutor who had accompanied Duke on his grand tour; and it was made a condition that he should allow the widow of his predecessor to remain at the parsonage as his housekeeper. Bessy would fain have had her mother at the castle, and this course would have been infinitely preferred by Madam Hawtrey, who, indeed, suggested the wish to her daughter. But Sir Mark was obstinately against it; nor did he spare his caustic remarks on Madam Hawtrey, even before her own daughter. He had never quite forgiven Duke's marriage, although he was personally exceedingly fond of Bessy. He referred this marriage, in some part, and perhaps to no greater extent than was true, to madam's good management in throwing the young people together; and he was explicit in the expression of his opinion.

Poor Theresa! Every day she more and more bitterly rued her ill−starred marriage. Often and often she cried to herself, when she was alone in the dead of the night, 'I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it!' But again in the daylight her pride would help her to keep her woe to herself. She could not bear the gaze of pitying eyes; she could not bear even Victorine's fierce sympathy. She might have gone home like a poor prodigal to her father, if Duke and Bessy had not, as she imagined, reigned triumphant in her place, both in her father's heart and in her father's home. And all this while, that father almost hated the tender attentions which were rendered to him by those who were not his Theresa, his only child, for whose presence he yearned and longed in silent misery. Then again (to return to Theresa), her husband had his fits of kindness towards her. If he had been very fortunate in play, if he had heard other men admire her, he would come back for a few moments to his loyalty, and would lure back the poor tortured heart, only to crush it afresh. One day—after a short time of easy temper, caresses, and levity—she found out something, I know not what, in his life, which stung her to the quick. Her sharp wits and sharper tongue spoke out most cutting insults; at first he smiled, as if rather amused to see how she was ransacking her brain to find stabbing speeches; but at length she touched some sore; he scarcely lost the mocking smile upon his face, but his eyes flashed lurid fire, and his heavy closed hand fell on her white shoulder with a terrible blow!

She stood up, facing him, tearless, deadly white. 'The poor old man at home!' was all she said, trembling, shivering all over, but with her eyes fixed on his coward face. He shrank from her look, laughed aloud to hide whatever feeling might be hidden in his bosom, and left the room. She only said again, 'The poor old man—the poor old deserted, desolate man!' and felt about blindly for a chair.

She had not sat down a minute though, before she started up and rang her bell. It was Victorine's office to answer it; but Theresa looked almost surprised to see her. 'You!—I wanted the others—I want them all! They shall all see how their master treats his wife! Look here!' she pushed the gauze neckerchief from her shoulder—the mark was there red and swollen. 'Bid them all come here—Victorine, Amad e, Jean, Ad le, all—I

will be justified by their testimony, whatever I do!' Then she fell to shaking and crying.

Victorine said nothing, but went to a certain cupboard where she kept medicines and drugs of which she alone knew the properties, and there she mixed a draught, which she made her mistress take. Whatever its nature was, it was soothing. Theresa leaned back in her chair, still sobbing heavily from time to time, until at last she dropped into a kind of doze. Then Victorine softly lifted the neckerchief, which had fallen into its place, and looked at the mark. She did not speak; but her whole face was a fearful threat. After she had looked her fill, she smiled a deadly smile. And then she touched the soft bruised flesh with her lips, much as though Theresa were the child she had been twenty years ago. Soft as the touch was Theresa shivered, and started and half awoke. 'Are they come?' she murmured; 'Amad e, Jean, Ad le?' but without waiting for an answer she fell asleep again.

Victorine went quietly back to the cupboard where she kept her drugs, and stayed there, mixing something noiselessly. When she had done what she wanted, she returned to her mistress's bedroom, and looked at her, still sleeping. Then she began to arrange the room. No blue silk curtains and silver mirrors, now, as in the Rue Louis le Grand. A washed−out faded Indian chintz, and an old battered toilette service of japan−ware; the disorderly signs of the count's late presence; an emptied flask of liqueur.

All the time Victorine arranged this room she kept saying to herself, 'At last! At last!' Theresa slept through the daylight, slept late into the evening, leaning back where she had fallen in her chair. She was so motionless that Victorine appeared alarmed. Once or twice she felt her pulse, and gazed earnestly into the tear−stained face. Once, she very carefully lifted one of the eyelids, and holding a lighted taper near, peered into the eye. Apparently satisfied, she went out and ordered a basin of broth to be ready when she asked for it. Again she sat in deep silence; nothing stirred in the closed chamber; but in the street the carriages began to roll, and the footmen and torch−bearers to cry aloud their masters' names and titles, to show what carriage in that narrow street below, was entitled to precedence. A carriage stopped at the hotel of which they occupied the third floor. Then the bell of their apartment rang loudly—rang violently. Victorine went out to see what it was that might disturb her darling—as she called Theresa to herself—her sleeping lady as she spoke of her to her servants.

She met those servants bringing in their master, the count, dead. Dead with a swordwound received in some infamous struggle. Victorine stood and looked at him. 'Better so,' she muttered. 'Better so. But, monseigneur, you shall take this with you, whithersoever your wicked soul is fleeing.' And she struck him a stroke on his shoulder, just where Theresa's bruise was. It was as light a stroke as well could be; but this irreverence to the dead called forth indignation even from the hardened bearers of the body. Little recked Victorine. She turned her back on the corpse, went to her cupboard, took out the mixture she bad made with so much care, poured it out upon the bare wooden floor, and smeared it about with her foot.

A fortnight later, when no news had come from Theresa for many weeks, a poor chaise was seen from the castle windows lumbering slowly up the carriage road to the gate. No one thought much of it; perhaps it was some friend of the housekeeper's; perhaps it was some humble relation of Mrs Duke's (for many such had found out their cousin since her marriage). No one noticed the shabby carriage much, until the hall−porter was startled by the sound of the great bell pealing, and, on opening wide the hall−doors, saw standing before him the Mademoiselle Victorine of old days—thinner, sallower, in mourning. In the carriage sat Theresa, in the deep widow's weeds of those days. She looked out of the carriage−window wistfully, in beyond Joseph, the hall−porter.

'My father!' she cried eagerly, before Victorine could speak. 'Is Sir Mark—well?' ('alive' was her first thought, but she dared not give the word utterance.)

'Call Mr. Duke!' said Joseph, speaking to some one unseen. Then he came forward. 'God bless you, Miss! God bless you! And this day of all days! Sir Mark is well—leastways he's sadly changed. Where's Mr Duke? Call him! My young lady's fainting!'

And this was Theresa's return home. None ever knew how much she had suffered since she had left home. If any one had known, Victorine would never have stood there dressed in that mourning. She put it on, sorely against her will, for the purpose of upholding the lying fiction of Theresa's having been a happy prosperous marriage. She was always indignant if any of the old servants fell back into the once familiar appellation of Miss Theresa. 'The countess,' she would say, in lofty rebuke.

What passed between Theresa and her father at that first interview no one ever knew. Whether she told him anything of her married life, or whether she only soothed the tears he shed on seeing her again, by sweet repetition of tender words and caresses—such as are the sugared pabulum of age as well as of infancy—no one

ever knew. Neither Duke nor his wife ever heard her allude to the time she had passed in Paris, except in the most cursory and superficial manner. Sir Mark was anxious to show her that all was forgiven, and would fain have displaced Bessy from her place as lady of the castle, and made Theresa take the headship of the house, and sit at table where the mistress ought to be. And Bessy would have given up her onerous dignities without a word; for Duke was always more jealous for his wife's position than she herself was, but Theresa declined to assume any such place in the household, saying, in the languid way which now seemed habitual to her, that English house−keeping, and all the domestic arrangements of an English country house were cumbrous and wearisome to her; that if Bessy would continue to act as she had done hitherto, and would so forestall what must be her natural duties at some future period, she, Theresa, should be infinitely obliged.

Bessy consented, and in everything tried to remember what Theresa liked, and how affairs were ordered in the old Theresa days. She wished the servants to feel that 'the countess' had equal rights with herself in the management of the house. But she, to whom the housekeeper takes her accounts—she in whose hands the power of conferring favours and privileges remains de facto—will always be held by servants as the mistress; and Theresa's claims soon sank into the background. At first, she was too broken—spirited, too languid, to care for anything but quiet rest in her father's companionship. They sat sometimes for hours hand in hand; or they sauntered out on the terraces, hardly speaking, but happy; because they were once more together, and once more on loving terms. Theresa grew strong during this time of gentle brooding peace. The pinched pale face of anxiety lined with traces of suffering, relaxed into the soft oval; the light came into the eyes, the colour came into the cheeks.

But, in the autumn after Theresa's return, Sir Mark died; it had been a gradual decline of strength, and his last moments were passed in her arms. Her new misfortune threw her back into the wan worn creature she had been when she first came home, a widow, to Crowley Castle; she shut herself up in her rooms, and allowed no one to come near her but Victorine. Neither Duke nor Bessy was admitted into the darkened rooms, which she had hung with black cloth in solemn funereal state.

Victorine's life since her return to the castle had been anything but peaceable. New powers had arisen in the housekeeper's room. Madam Brownlow had her maid, far more exacting than Madam Brownlow herself; and a new housekeeper reigned in the place of her who was formerly but an echo of Victorine's opinions. Victorine's own temper, too, was not improved by her four years abroad, and there was a general disposition among the servants to resist all her assumption of authority. She felt her powerlessness after a struggle or two, but treasured up her vengeance. If she had lost power over the household, however, there was no diminution of her influence over her mistress. It was her device at last that lured the countess out of her gloomy seclusion.

Almost the only creature Victorine cared for, besides Theresa, was the little Mary Brownlow. What there was of softness in her woman's nature, seemed to come out towards children; though, if the child had been a boy instead of a girl, it is probable that Victorine might not have taken it into her good graces. As it was, the French nurse and the English child were capital friends; and when Victorine sent Mary into the countess's room, and bade her not be afraid, but ask the lady in her infantine babble to come out and see Mary's snow−man, she knew that the little one, for her sake, would put her small hand into Theresa's, and thus plead with more success, because with less purpose, than any one else had been able to plead. Out came Theresa, colourless and sad, holding Mary by the hand. They went, unobserved as they thought, to the great gallery−window, and looked out into the court−yard; then Theresa returned to her rooms. But the ice was broken, and before the winter was over, Theresa fell into her old ways, and sometimes smiled, and sometimes even laughed, until chance visitors again spoke of her rare beauty and her courtly grace.

It was noticeable that Theresa revived first out of her lassitude to an interest in all Duke's pursuits. She grew weary of Bessy's small cares and domestic talk—now about the servants, now about her mother and the parsonage, now about the parish. She questioned Duke about his travels, and could enter into his appreciation and judgement of foreign nations; she perceived the latent powers of his mind; she became impatient of their remaining dormant in country seclusion. She had spoken of leaving Crowley Castle, and of finding some other home, soon after her father's death; but both Duke and Bessy had urged her to stay with them, Bessy saying, in the pure innocence of her heart, how glad she was that, in the probably increasing cares of her nursery, Duke would have a companion so much to his mind.

About a year after Sir Mark's death, the member for Sussex died, and Theresa set herself to stir up Duke to

assume his place. With some difficulty (for Bessy was passive: perhaps even opposed to the scheme in her quiet way), Theresa succeeded, and Duke was elected. She was vexed at Bessy's torpor, as she called it, in the whole affair; vexed as she now often was with Bessy's sluggish interest in all things beyond her immediate ken. Once, when Theresa tried to make Bessy perceive how Duke might shine and rise in his new sphere, Bessy burst into tears, and said, 'You speak as if his presence here were nothing, and his fame in London everything. I cannot help fearing that he will leave off caring for all the quiet ways in which we have been so happy ever since we were married.'

'But when he is here,' replied Theresa, 'and when he wants to talk to you of politics, of foreign news, of great public interests, you drag him down to your level of woman's cares.'

'Do I?' said Bessy. 'Do I drag him down? I wish I was cleverer; but you know, Theresa, I was never clever in anything but housewifery.'

Theresa was touched for a moment by this humility.

'Yet, Bessy, you have a great deal of judgement, if you will but exercise it. Try and take an interest in all he cares for, as well as making him try and take an interest in home affairs.'

But, somehow, this kind of conversation too often ended in dissatisfaction on both sides; and the servants gathered, from induction rather than from words, that the two ladies were not on the most cordial terms;. however friendly they might wish to be, and might strive to appear. Madam Hawtrey, too, allowed her jealousy of Theresa to deepen into dislike. She was jealous because, in some unreasonable way, she had taken it into her head that Theresa's presence at the castle was the reason why she was not urged to take up her abode there on Sir Mark's death: as if there were not rooms and suites of rooms enough to lodge a wilderness of dowagers in the building, if the owner so wished. But Duke had certain ideas pretty strongly fixed in his mind; and one was a repugnance to his mother−in−law's constant company. But he greatly increased her income as soon as he had it in his power, and left it entirely to herself how she should spend it.

Having now the means of travelling about, Madam Hawtrey betook herself pretty frequently to such watering−places as were in vogue at that day, or went to pay visits at the houses of those friends who occasionally came lumbering up in shabby vehicles to visit their cousin Bessy at the castle. Theresa cared little for Madam Hawtrey's coldness; perhaps, indeed, never perceived it. She gave up striving with Bessy, too; it was hopeless to try to make her an intellectual ambitious companion to her husband. He had spoken in the House; he had written a pamphlet that made much noise; the minister of the day had sought him out, and was trying to attach him to the government. Theresa, with her Parisian experience of the way in which women influenced politics, would have given anything for the Brownlows to have taken a house in London. She longed to see the great politicians, to find herself in the thick of the struggle for place and power, the brilliant centre of all that was worth hearing and seeing in the kingdom. There had been some talk of this same London house; but Bessy had pleaded against it earnestly while Theresa sat by in indignant silence, until she could bear the discussion no longer; going off to her own sitting−room, where Victorine was at work. Here her pent−up words found vent—not addressed to her servant, but not restrained before her:

'I cannot bear it—to see him cramped in by her narrow mind, to hear her weak selfish arguments, urged because she feels she would be out of place beside him. And Duke is hampered with this woman: he whose powers are unknown even to himself, or he .would put her feeble nature on one side, and seek his higher atmosphere, How he would shine! How he does shine! Good Heaven! To think—'

And here she sank into silence, watched by Victorine's furtive eyes.

Duke had excelled all he had previously done by some great burst of eloquence, and the country rang with his words. He was to come down to Crowley Castle for a parliamentary recess, which occurred almost immediately after this. Theresa calculated the hours of each part of the complicated journey, and could have told to five minutes when he might be expected; but the baby was ill and absorbed all Bessy's attention. She was in the nursery by the cradle in which the child slept, when her husband came riding up to the castle gate. But Theresa was at the gate; her hair all out of powder, and blowing away into dishevelled curls, as the hood of her cloak fell back; her lips parted with a breathless welcome. her eyes shining out love and pride. Duke was but mortal. All London chanted his rising fame. and here in his home Theresa seemed to be the only person who appreciated him.

The servants clustered in the great hall; for it was now some length of time since he had been at home. Victorine was there, with some headgear for her lady; and when, in reply to his inquiry for his wife, the grave

butler asserted that she was with young master, who was, they feared, very seriously ill, Victorine said, with the familiarity of an old servant, and as if to assuage Duke's anxiety: 'Madam fancies the child is ill, because she can think of nothing but him, and perpetual watching has made her nervous.' The child, however, was really ill; and after a brief greeting to her husband, Bessy returned to her nursery, leaving Theresa to question, to hear, to sympathize. That night she gave way to another burst of disparaging remarks on poor motherly homely Bessy, and that night Victorine thought she read a deeper secret in Theresa's heart.

The child was scarcely ever out of its mother's arms; but the illness became worse, and it was nigh unto death. Some cream had been set aside for the little wailing creature, and Victorine had unwittingly used it for the making of a cosmetic for her mistress. When the servant in charge of it reproved her, a quarrel began as to their respective mistress's right to give orders in the household. Before the dispute ended, pretty strong things had been said on both sides.

The child died. The heir was lifeless; the servants were in whispering dismay, and bustling discussion of their mourning; Duke felt the vanity of fame, as compared to a baby's life. Theresa was full of sympathy, but dared not express it to him; so tender was her heart becoming. Victorine regretted the death in her own way. Bessy lay speechless, and tearless; not caring for loving voices, nor for gentle touches; taking neither food nor drink; neither sleeping nor weeping. 'Send for her mother,' the doctor said; for Madam Hawtrey was away on her visits, and the letters telling her of her grandchild's illness had not reached her in the slow−delaying cross−country posts of those days. So she was sent for; by a man riding express, as a quicker and surer means than the post.

Meanwhile, the nurses, exhausted by their watching, found the care of little Mary by day, quite enough. Madam's maid sat up with Bessy for a night or two; Duke striding in from time to time through the dark hours to look at the white motionless face, which would have seemed like the face of one dead, but for the long−quivering sighs that came up from the overladen heart. The doctor tried his drugs, in vain, and then he tried again. This night, Victorine at her own earnest request, sat up instead of the maid. As usual, towards midnight, Duke came stealing in with shaded light. 'Hush!' said Victorine, her finger on her lips. 'She sleeps at last.' Morning dawned faint and pale, and still she slept. The doctor came, and stole in on tip−toe, rejoicing in the effect of his drugs. They all stood round the bed; Duke, Theresa, Victorine. Suddenly the doctor—a strange change upon him, a strange fear in his face—felt the patient's pulse, put his ear to her open lips, called for a glass—a feather. The mirror was not dimmed, the delicate fibres stirred not. Bessy was dead.

I pass rapidly over many months. Theresa was again overwhelmed with grief, or rather, I should say, remorse; for now that Bessy was gone, and buried out of sight, all her innocent virtues, all her feminine homeliness, came vividly into Theresa's mind—not as wearisome, but as admirable, qualities of which she had been too blind to perceive the value. Bessy had been her own old companion too, in the happy days of childhood,, and of innocence. Theresa rather shunned than sought Duke's company now. She remained at the castle, it is true, and Madam Hawtrey, as Theresa's only condition of continuing where she was, came to live under the same roof. Duke felt his wife's death deeply, but reasonably, as became his character. He was perplexed by Theresa's bursts of grief, knowing, as he dimly did, that she and Bessy had not lived together in perfect harmony. But he was much in London now; a rising statesman; and when, in autumn, he spent some time at the castle, he was full of admiration for the strangely patient way in which Theresa behaved towards the old lady. It seemed to Duke that in his absence Madam Hawtrey had assumed absolute power in his household, and that the high−spirited Theresa submitted to her fantasies with even more docility than her own daughter would have done. Towards Mary, Theresa was always kind and indulgent.

Another autumn came; and before it went, old ties were renewed, and Theresa was pledged to become her cousin's wife.

There were two people strongly affected by this news when it was promulgated; one—and this was natural under the circumstances—was Madam Hawtrey; who chose to resent the marriage as a deep personal offence to herself as well as to her daughter's memory, and who sternly rejecting all Theresa's entreaties, and Duke's invitation to continue her residence at the castle, went off into lodgings in the village. The other person strongly affected by the news, was Victorine.

From being a dry active energetic middle−aged woman, she now, at the time of Theresa's engagement, sank into the passive languor of advanced life. It seemed as if she felt no more need of effort, or strain, or exertion. She sought solitude; liked nothing better than to sit in her room adjoining Theresa's dressing−room, sometimes sunk in

a reverie, sometimes employed on an intricate piece of knitting with almost spasmodic activity. But wherever Theresa went, thither would Victorine go. Theresa had imagined that her old nurse would prefer being left at the castle, in the soothing tranquillity of the country, to accompanying her and her husband to the house in Grosvenor−square, which they had taken for the parliamentary season. But the mere offer of a choice seemed to irritate Victorine inexpressibly. She looked upon the proposal as a sign that Theresa considered her as superannuated—that her nursling was weary of her, and wished to supplant her services by those of a younger maid. It seemed impossible to dislodge this idea when it had once entered into her head, and it led to frequent bursts of temper, in which she violently upbraided Theresa for her ingratitude towards so faithful a follower.

One day, Victorine went a little further in her expressions than usual, and Theresa, usually so forbearing towards her, turned at last. 'Really, Victorine!' she said, 'this is misery to both of us. You say you never feel so wicked as when I am near you; that my ingratitude is such as would be disowned by fiends; what can I, what must I do? You say you are never so unhappy as when you are near me; must we, then, part? Would that be for your happiness?'

'And is that what it has come to!' exclaimed Victorine. 'In my country they reckon a building secure against wind and storm and all the ravages of time, if the first mortar used has been tempered with human blood. But not even our joint secret, though it was tempered well with blood, can hold our lives together! How much less all the care, all the love, that I lavished upon you in the days of my youth and strength!'

Theresa came close to the chair in which Victorine was seated. She took hold of her hand and held it fast in her own. 'Speak, Victorine,' said she, hoarsely, 'and tell me what you mean. What is our joint secret? And what do you mean by its being a secret of blood? Speak out. I will know.'

'As if you do not know!' replied Victorine, harshly. 'You don't remember my visits to Bianconi, the Italian chemist in the Marais, long ago?' She looked into Theresa's face, to see if her words had suggested any deeper meaning than met the ear. No; Theresa's look was stern, but free and innocent.

'You told me you went there to learn the composition of certain unguents, and cosmetics, and domestic medicines.'

'Ay, and paid high for my knowledge, too,' said Victorine, with a low chuckle. 'I learned more than you have mentioned, my lady countess. I learnt the secret nature of many drugs—to speak plainly, I learnt the art of poisoning. And,' suddenly standing up, 'it was for your sake I learnt it. For your service—you—who would fain cast me off in my old age. For you!'

Theresa blanched to a deadly white. But she tried to move neither feature nor limb, nor to avert her eyes for one moment from the eyes that defied her. 'For my service, Victorine?'

'Yes! The quieting draught was all ready for your husband, when they brought him home dead.'

'Thank God his death does not lie at your door!'

'Thank God?' mocked Victorine. 'The wish for his death does lie at your door; and the intent to rid you of him does lie at my door. And I am not ashamed of it. Not I! It was not for myself I would have done it, but because you suffered so. He had struck you, whom I had nursed on my breast.'

'Oh, Victorine!' said Theresa, with a shudder. 'Those days are past. Do not let us recall them. I was so wicked because I was so miserable; and now I am so happy, so inexpressibly happy, that—do let me try to make you happy too!'

'You ought to try,' said Victorine, not yet pacified; 'can't you see how the incomplete action once stopped by Fate, was tried again, and with success; and how you are now reaping the benefit of my sin, if sin it was?'

'Victorine! I do not know what you mean!' But some terror must have come over her, she so trembled and so shivered.

'Do you not indeed? Madame Brownlow, the country girl from Crowley Parsonage, needed sleep, and would fain forget the little child's death that was pressing on her brain. I helped the doctor to his end. She sleeps now, and she has met her baby before this, if priests' tales are true. And you, my beauty, my queen, you reign in her stead! Don't treat the poor Victorine as if she were mad, and speaking in her madness. I have heard of tricks like that being played, when the crime was done, and the criminal of use no longer.'

That evening, Duke was surprised by his wife's entreaty and petition that she might leave him, and return with Victorine and her other personal servants to the seclusion of Crowley Castle. She, the great London toast, the powerful enchantress of society, and most of all, the darling wife and true companion, with this sudden fancy for

this complete retirement, and for leaving her husband when he was first fully entering into the comprehension of all that a wife might be! Was it ill health? Only last night she had been in dazzling beauty, in brilliant spirits; this morning only, she had been so merry and tender. But Theresa denied that she was in any way indisposed; and seemed suddenly so unwilling to speak of herself, and so much depressed, that Duke saw nothing for it but to grant her wish and let her go. He missed her terribly. No more pleasant t te−ˆ −t te breakfasts, enlivened by her sense and wit, and cheered by her pretty caressing ways. No gentle secretary now, to sit by his side through long long hours, never weary. When he went into society, he no longer found his appearance watched and waited for by the loveliest woman there. When he came home from the House at night, there was no one to take an interest in his speeches, to be indignant at all that annoyed him, and charmed and proud of all the admiration he had won. He longed for the time to come when he would be able to go down for a day or two to see his wife; for her letters appeared to him dull and flat after her bright companionship. No wonder that her letters came out of a heavy heart, knowing what she knew.

She scarcely dared to go near Victorine, whose moods were becoming as variable as though she were indeed the mad woman she had tauntingly defied Theresa to call her. At times she was miserable because Theresa looked so ill, and seemed so deeply unhappy. At other times she was jealous because she fancied Theresa shrank from her and avoided her. So, wearing her life out with passion, Victorine's health grew daily worse and worse during that summer.

Theresa's only comfort seemed to be little Mary's society. She seemed as though she could not lavish love enough upon the motherless child, who repaid Theresa's affection with all the pretty demonstrativeness of her age. She would carry the little three−year−old maiden in her arms when she went to see Victorine, or would have Mary playing about in her dressing−room, if the old Frenchwoman, for some jealous freak, would come and arrange her lady's hair with her trembling hands. To avoid giving offence to Victorine, Theresa engaged no other maid; to shun over−much or over−frank conversation with Victorine, she always had little Mary with her when there was a chance of the French waiting−maid coming in. For, the presence of the child was a holy restraint even on Victorine's tongue; she would sometimes check her fierce temper, to caress the little creature playing at her knees; and would only dart a covert bitter sting at Theresa under the guise of a warning against ingratitude, to Mary.

Theresa drooped and drooped in this dreadful life. She sought out Madam Hawtrey, and prayed her to come on a long visit to the castle. She was lonely, she said, asking for madam's company as a favour to herself. Madam Hawtrey was difficult to persuade; but the more she resisted, the more Theresa entreated; and, when once madam was at the castle, her own daughter had never been so dutiful, so humble a slave to her slightest fancy as was the proud Theresa now.

Yet, for all this, the lady of the castle drooped and drooped, and when Duke came down to see his darling he was in utter dismay at her looks. Yet she said she was well enough, only tired. If she had anything more upon her mind, she refused him her confidence. He watched her narrowly, trying to forestall her smallest desires. He saw her tender affection for Mary, and thought he had never seen so lovely and tender a mother to another woman's child. He wondered at her patience with Madam Hawtrey, remembering how often his own stock had been exhausted by his mother−in−law, and how the brilliant Theresa had formerly scouted and flouted at the vicar's wife. With all this renewed sense of his darling's virtues and charms, the idea of losing her was too terrible to bear.

He would listen to no pleas, to no objections. Before he returned to town, where his presence was a political necessity, he sought the best medical advice that could be had in the neighbourhood. The doctors came; they could make but little out of Theresa, if her vehement assertion were true that she had nothing on her mind. Nothing.

'Humour him at least, my dear lady!' said the doctor, who had known Theresa from her infancy, but who, living at the distant county town, was only called in on the Olympian occasions of great state illnesses. 'Humour your husband, and perhaps do yourself some good too, by consenting to his desire that you should have change of air. Brighthelmstone is a quiet village by the sea−side. Consent, like a gracious lady, to go there for a few weeks.'

So, Theresa, worn out with opposition, consented, and Duke made all the arrangements for taking her, and little Mary, and the necessary suite of servants, to Brighton, as we call it now. He resolved in his own mind that Theresa's personal attendant should be some woman young enough to watch and wait upon her mistress, and not

Victorine, to whom Theresa was in reality a servant. But of this plan, neither Theresa nor Victorine knew anything until the former was in the carriage with her husband some miles distant from the castle. Then he, a little exultant in the good management by which he supposed he had spared his wife the pain and trouble of decision, told her that Victorine was left behind, and that a new accomplished London maid would await her at her journey's end.

Theresa only exclaimed, '0! What will Victorine say?' and covered her face, and sat shivering and speechless.

What Victorine did say, when she found out the trick, as she esteemed it, that had been played upon her, was too terrible to repeat. She lashed herself up into an ungoverned passion; ark then became so really and seriously ill that the servants went to fetch Madam Hawtrey in terror and dismay. But when that lady came, Victorine shut her eyes, and refused to look at her. 'She has got her daughter in her hand! I will not look!' Shaking all the time she uttered these awe−stricken words, as if she were in an ague−fit. 'Bring the countess back to me. Let her face the dead woman standing there, I will not do it. They wanted her to sleep—and so did the countess, that she might step into her lawful place. Theresa, Theresa, where are you? You tempted me. What I did, I did in your service. And you have gone away, and left me alone with the dead woman! It was the same drug as the doctor gave, after all—only he gave little, and I gave much. My lady the countess spent her money well, when she sent me to the old Italian to learn his trade' Lotions for the complexion, and a discriminating use of poisonous drugs. I discriminated, and Theresa profited; and now she is his wife, and has left me here alone with the dead woman. Theresa, Theresa, come back and save me from the dead woman!'

Madam Hawtrey stood by, horror−stricken. 'Fetch the vicar,' said she, under her breath, to a servant.

'The village doctor is coming,' said some one near. 'How she raves! Is it delirium?'

'It is no delirium,' said Bessy's mother. 'Would to Heaven it were!'

Theresa had a happy day with her husband at Brighthelmstone before he set off on his return to London. She watched him riding away, his servant following with his portmanteau. Often and often did Duke look back at the figure of his wife, waving her handkerchief, till a turn of the road hid her from his sight. He had to pass through a little village not ten miles from his home, and there a servant, with his letters and further luggage, was to await him. There he found a mysterious, imperative note, requiring his immediate presence at Crowley Castle. Something in the awe−stricken face of the servant from the castle, led Duke to question him. But all he could say was, that Victorine lay dying, and that Madam Hawtrey had said that after that letter the master was sure to return, and so would need no luggage. Something lurked behind, evidently. Duke rode home at speed. The vicar was looking out for him. 'My dear boy,' said he, relapsing into the old relations of tutor and pupil, 'prepare yourself.'

'What for?' said Duke, abruptly: for the being told to prepare himself, without being told for what, irritated him in his present mood. 'Victorine is dead?'

'No! She says she will not die until she has seen you, and got you to forgive her, if Madam Hawtrey will not. But first read this: it is a terrible confession, made by her before me, a magistrate, believing herself to be on the point of death!'

Duke read the paper—containing little more in point of detail than I have already given—the horrible words taken down in the short−hand in which the vicar used to write his mild prosy sermons: his pupil knew the character of old. Duke read it twice. Then he said: 'She is raving, poor creature!' But for all that, his heart's blood ran cold, and he would fain not have faced the woman, but would rather have remained in doubt to his dying day.

He went up the stairs three steps at a time, and then turned and faced the vicar, with a look like the stern calmness of death. 'I wish to see her alone.' He turned out all the watching women, and then he went to the bedside where Victorine sat, half propped up with pillows, watching all his doings and his looks, with her hollow awful eyes. 'Now, Victorine, I will read this paper aloud to you. Perhaps your mind has been wandering; but you understand me now?' A feeble murmur of assent met his listening ear. 'If any statement in this paper be not true, make me a sign. Hold up your hand—for God's sake hold up your hand. And if you can do it with truth in this, your hour of dying, Lord have mercy upon you; but if you cannot hold up your hand, then Lord have mercy upon me!'

He read the paper slowly; clause by clause he read the paper. No sign; no uplifted hand. At the end she spoke, and he bent his head to listen. 'The Countess—Theresa you know—she who has left me to die alone—she'—then mortal strength failed, and Duke was left alone in the chamber of death.

He stayed in the chamber many minutes, quite still. Then he left the room, and said to the first domestic he

could find, 'The woman is dead. See that she is attended to.' But he went to the vicar, and had a long long talk with him. He sent a confidential servant for little Mary—on some pretext, hardly careful, or plausible enough; but his mood was desperate, and he seemed to forget almost everything but Bessy, his first wife, his innocent girlish bride.

Theresa could ill spare her little darling, and was perplexed by the summons; but an explanation of it was to come in a day or two. It came.

'Victorine is dead; I need say no more. She could not carry her awful secret into the next world, but told all. I can think of nothing but my poor Bessy, delivered over to the cruelty of such a woman. And you, Theresa, I leave you to your conscience, for you have slept in my bosom. Henceforward I am a stranger to you. By the time you receive this, I, and my child, and that poor murdered girl's mother, will have left England. What will be our next step I know not. My agent will do for you what you need.'

Theresa sprang up and rang her bell with mad haste. 'Get me a horse!' she cried, 'and bid William be ready to ride with me for his life—for my life—along the coast, to Dover!'

They rode and they galloped through the night, scarcely staying to bait their horses. But when they came to Dover, they looked out to sea upon the white sails that bore Duke and his child away. Theresa was too late, and it broke her heart. She lies buried in Dover churchyard. After long years Duke returned to England; but his place in parliament knew him no more, and his daughter's husband sold Crowley Castle to a stranger.