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A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF "OLD BESS OF HARDWICK."

THE following is a brief sketch of the career of that worldly-wise woman, ELIZABETH, COUNTESS OF SHREWSBURY, who is commonly called "Old Bess of Hardwick." Her character is not one to be admired or imitated, for she was avaricious and disregarded of the feelings of others in the highest degree. But while condemning her vices, it must not be forgotten that her energy and indomitable perseverance were such as would have been striking even in a man, and which in her age commanded respect; but in our time if any man has by his fireside an affectionate wife who has no higher aim than to make life happy, let him cherish her as life's most precious treasure, and be thankful that she does not resemble "Bess of Hardwick:"—

Elizabeth Hardwick was the daughter of John Hardwick, Esquire, of Hardwick, a man of no mean standing in Derbyshire. Her family was ancient and her fortune large, but Elizabeth, being prudent, no sooner came to a marriageable age than she thought of making it larger still; and while she was little more than a girl, with that intent married a Mr. Barlow, who was much her senior, and was moreover in a declining state of health. Mr. Barlow made a devoted lover notwithstanding; and in token of his sincerity and the depth of his affection, executed a will in which he bequeathed the whole of his property and vast estates to her. A short time after their marriage, he died, and left his wife a childless widow, with a magnificent fortune.

Having thus got a fair start in the world, Mrs. Barlow cast her eyes abroad to find a suitable husband to share her possessions with her. Sir William Cavendish presented himself, and the young widow seems really to have fallen in love with him. His lands were broad, his fortune large, and his title old. Sir William also appears to have been devotedly fond of his young wife, and to have humoured her every whim. One of her fancies was a mania for building, and when Sir William Cavendish began to erect Chatsworth—a mansion which has been famous for its magnificence ever since her day—the superintendence of the structure was left to her. Building after building was reared by her orders, until it became a popular saying that "Bess of Hardwick would never die, so long as she continued to build." Sir William lived happily with his wife for many years, and six children were the fruits of their union,* but during all his lifetime the building of Chatsworth went on, and when he died the mansion was as yet unfinished.

By the death of her husband Lady Cavendish was once more free. Although the mother of six children, her beauty was unimpaired, and fortune again favouring her, Sir William St. Lo, of Tormarton, in Gloucester, threw himself at her feet. Sir William was captain of Queen Elizabeth's guard, and grand butler of England; he was, moreover, an old man, and very rich. The crafty widow did not, however, accept him at once, for there was an objection to the marriage which needed first to be removed. Sir William was already the father of a family, and the widow's terms were that he should disinherit them and settle all his possessions upon herself. This he agreed to do, and the marriage then took place. Before long, however, Sir

William St. Lo was "gathered to his fathers," and Bessie Hardwick was a third time a widow, but not for long, for, in an evil moment for him, George, Earl of Shrewsbury, became her suitor. The hour was one of great triumph to the plotting widow: the Queen's favourite, the most trusted subject in England, was at her feet; but, like a conqueror flushed with victory, she did not at once listen to his prayers. She had truly loved Sir William Cavendish, and her great object in life was to raise the children of Sir William Cavendish to eminence; she therefore arranged that before she would accept the coronet, the earl should give his consent to her eldest son espousing his daughter; and also, that her youngest daughter, Mary, should become the wife of his son and heir, Gilbert. This being agreed to, Lady St. Lo became the Countess of Shrewsbury.

Soon after his marriage the troubles of the earl began. For a little while he lived in peace and happiness with his wife; but by-and-bye jealousies and petty disagreements arose, which broadened as time passed away; and in a very short time after he had led Lady St. Lo to the altar, Mary, Queen of Scots, accepted the proffered hospitality of Elizabeth, and found herself not a guest, but a prisoner. The Earl of Shrewsbury being master of the situation, and desiring to win the favour of his royal mistress, undertook the invidious task of being the unfortunate Queen's jailor. At first, the newly-made countess swelled with pride to think that she, Elizabeth Hardwick, should have a queen in keeping, but as she looked at her fair captive, as she compared her beauty with her own fading charms, and as she considered how that beauty had won the hearts of all with whom the unfortunate queen had been brought into contact, jealousy crept into her heart, and she watched her husband's movements with jealous eyes. She determined, however, to keep on friendly terms with her captive, lest the favour of Elizabeth should wane and a day come, when, after all, Mary would sit upon a throne. In the year 1574 she even went so far as to marry one of her daughters to the Earl of Lennox, the brother of Darnley (the husband of Mary, and who perished by the house in which he resided being blown up with gunpowder). Queen Elizabeth was greatly incensed at this marriage, and the Earl, in his defence, as may readily be imagined, was under the necessity of apologizing to her and expressing his entire ignorance of the matter. As years flew by the miseries of the earl's thankless office increased. He was compelled to keep up an expensive establishment as befitted his royal prisoner, and for this Elizabeth paid him very inadequately, and latterly not at all. His liberty was much restricted by attending to the duties of his responsible office. His wife's jealousy had increased to such a pitch that murmured discontent had changed to open reviling. His own family sided with their stepmother and shared her suspicions. And even Mary distrusted her guardian. At length death released him from his miseries, and in the month of November, 1590, Elizabeth Hardwick was once more and for the fourth time a widow.

The remainder of her life was spent in forwarding the interests of her grand-daughter Arabella Stuart, the daughter of Lord Lennox, and whose romantic and melancholy history has excited so much pity. Her whole heart was set upon this girl, and her chance of inheriting a throne quickened the Dowager Countess of Shrewsbury's pulse, and added a zest to her declining years. It was well that she did not live to see this same Arabella Stuart, her much-loved grand-daughter, die a raving maniac after four years' weary confinement in the Tower of London. For seventeen years after the Earl of Shrewsbury died his widow survived him, and during all that time she assiduously devoted herself to her building hobby. Mansion after mansion was raised, many of which remain to this day, and are proudly pointed to as specimens of what our ancestors could do. But at last, in the winter of 1609 a severe frost set in, and the builders could no longer work. The buildings were brought to a standstill, the spell was broken, and "Old Bess of Hardwick" in the 87th year of her age, passed away from a world which had been singularly kind to her.

*Through these children "Old Bess of Hardwick" became the ancestress of more than one noble and distinguished family. Her eldest son died childless; the second, William, became the first Earl of Devonshire; the third, Charles, was the ancestor of the Dukes of Newcastle. Her eldest daughter, Frances, married Sir Henry Pierrepont, ancestor of the Dukes of Kingston; Elizabeth, the second daughter, married Charles Stuart, Duke of Lennox (brother of Lord Darnley, the ill-fated husband of Mary, Queen of Scots), who became the father of that unfortunate victim of state policy, Lady Arabella Stuart. Mary, the third daughter, married Gilbert, the eldest son of the fourth husband of "Old Bess," and arrived at the same dignity as her mother, namely, the Countess of Shrewsbury.