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THE GAMBLER'S WIFE.

By Charlotte Law.

Soon after the priest came, and I left her with him. I went up stairs: the rooms were cold and dreary, and quite empty; there was not even a chair or a stool to be seen: they were the very picture of desolation.

When she had finished her confession, the priest, Father Thomas, called me down. He said: 'She really seems very weak and ill, Sister Magdalene. I almost think I had better give her the last sacraments.'

'Does she wish it?'

'Yes; she is ready for Heaven. Sister, her portion has been the cross, and the bitterest cup that women can drink. I have known her for some years, and consider her one of my most saintly children.'

'Do you know anything of her history, Father Thomas?'

'No, not much, for she never complains. I know her life for the last few years has been a daily martyrdom, which she has borne with angelic patience, for she says she brought it all on herself.'

We entered the room together, and the same bright, sweet smile, that I had seen in the morning greeted us. I hastily prepared a little altar, and kneeling by her, assisted in that most beautiful and sublime service, the administration of the Extreme Unction. Nothing could exceed her fervent piety; and then it was ended—a look of holy calm and holy love rested upon her face, such as I knew betokened a spirit fitted for Heaven.

But she did not die; yet, contrary to our expectation, she lingered still. During the long nights and days that I watched beside her she told me her history; not altogether as I relate it to you now, but in broken fragments, told sometimes when the sunbeams streamed upon her pale, sweet face, and lit it with a kind of glory; and again when the midnight lamp glimmered feebly, or when the grey dawn appeared in the heavens, it seemed to be a relief to her, for during the whole course of her sad life she had never once complained; she knew all she said to me was in safe keeping. Faithfully and well I kept her secret while she lived; but now that the spring flowers are waving over her grave, I think it a duty to tell that sad history. It can harm none, and may be a lesson or a warning to young girls who trust more in their own wisdom than in the experience of those older and wiser than themselves.

I need not tell you, sister, where I was born. My home was a most happy one. I was an only child, and never did parents idolise a girl as mine did. My wishes were law before I could walk; I was absolute mistress of the house, and all in it. Fortunately for me, Nature had gifted me with a sweet temper and good disposition, so that I never presumed, or took advantage of my power. I had masters and governesses in abundance, and, at eighteen, prepared to make my 'debut' in the great world. Few girls ever had a brighter or fairer prospect of happiness. Being the only child, I was, of course, sole heiress to my father's wealth, which was very great. I had the happiest home, and the kindest parents in the world. I was young and, the world said, beautiful. I was without a care or thought. I remember,—ah me! how well I remember it now, and how often have I thought of it since!—one evening, it was a few days after Christmas, and I was in the drawing-room, mamma and papa were both out, and I read until it grew dark; then the thick curtains were drawn, the fire blazed brightly; no lamps were lit, for I would not have them. I loved that bright dreamy firelight, and was never tired of watching the fantastic shadows that the holly and ivy made upon the wall. It was a golden hour: I lay watching the fire and its shadows, and suddenly a verse in the poem I had been reading occurred to me. I did not remember the whole of it, only the last line,—

'For no perfect happiness can be found on earth.'

'It is false,' I thought; 'I am perfectly happy: I have no trouble, no care; life is so dear, so beautiful, so bright. The poet is wrong,—his words are untrue: I am a living contradiction of them; for I am perfectly happy.' Ah! and again, in the pride of my heart, I repeated the words aloud, 'I am perfectly happy.'

In my sad life of poverty and toil, I have often thought with bitterness of that hour, when my girlish spirit revelled and rejoiced in the bliss that ended so soon. I have often in the dark dreary night, seen that picture,—the luxurious room, the glowing fire, the dreamy light, the shadows of the holly and the ivy, and my own voice has sounded mockingly in my ear. Ah! God has, indeed, His own ways of bringing us to

Him. I was a Catholic then, and was what people call, very good. I never missed prayers or Mass; I went to confession once or twice every month, but there my religion ended; yet I knew no better. I had never tasted that bitter and most mysterious cup called human suffering, which in some measure consecrates and ennobles life. I had never thought of these words of our dear Lord, 'Unless a man takes up his cross and follows me, he is not worthy of me.' I had never borne the cross,—its weight was unknown to me; alas! it has since bent me, in the prime of my youth, to the ground. Blessed be God for it. The time came at last for my entrance into the great world, that looked so fair and bright. I longed for it, and thought happiness was there if anywhere. My mother gave a grand ball; all the 'elite' of our acquaintance were invited, and the party promised to be one of the best of the season. What an anxious discussion there was about my dress! 'No jewels,' my father said. 'Anne must wear nothing but flowers.' Dear, kind father! I have often remembered how fondly and proudly he kissed me that night, as he stood arranging the rosebuds in my hair. The rooms were one blaze of light. I was dazzled by the perfumes, the waving feathers, the rich dresses, and gleaming jewels. In half an hour I was at home amongst it all. I was introduced to several gentlemen, none of whom particularly interested me. After a few dances, I felt tired, and sat down by my mother's side, almost inclined to moralise upon the gay scene before me. Just then some one came up, and introduced me to a Mr. Leyton. He immediately asked me to dance. I consented. I thought my mother looked rather anxious, but I was pleased and interested. I dwelt upon this, sister, and perhaps tire you; but every event, nay, every word of that night, is engraved upon my memory. It was the happiest and yet most fatal of my life. Mr. Leyton, or Charlie, as his friends familiarly called him, was just the kind of man to attract and please a young and inexperienced girl. He was handsome, lively, good humored, clever, and a most accomplished scholar. Our dance finished; he led me round the room in search of my mother. She was not to be found.

'Etiquette, I suppose, Miss Sumner, will prevent my asking you to give me the next dance, but you look tired; will you rest?' I consented, and we sat and watched the gay quadrille then forming. Sister Magdalene, you must remember I had not been educated as most girls are. I had never read a novel; the only poem I had seen was 'Paradise Lost.' I knew nothing of what people call love. It seemed to me more pleasant to sit there, and talk to Mr. Leyton than to dance or anything else. I did not know why. When he left me the dancing seemed spiritless, and all its gaiety gone. I wondered why the music sounded so dull and heavy. And when he came back in one moment all grew bright again. When my mother, uneasy it would seem at our long 'tete-a-tete,' joined us and said something about my looking pale and tired, he bowed and said, 'Good night.' It seemed to me that all the light went out at once. I did not analyse the feeling of happiness that made sunshine in my heart. Nothing was farther from my thoughts than love. At breakfast the following morning my father said, 'Well, Lady Anne,—that was his favorite name, for me,—which of all your numerous partners did you like best?' I answered unhesitatingly, 'Mr. Leyton, papa, very much better than the others.' I almost fancied a shadow crossed my father's kind face for an instant; then he said, 'Ah, yes, I know him; he is a fine young fellow, but I have heard he is rather too fond of play.'

'I am sure he is a good Catholic, papa, for he told me he had ridden twenty miles to hear Mass for more than five years.'

'Well, well, Lady Anne, never mind, reports may be wrong this time.'

The next day I saw him, but why need I linger? He contrived every opportunity of meeting me, until our acquaintance became remarkable. My father said to me one day, 'Lady Anne, should you like a journey to Paris?'

'Oh, yes, above all things, papa.'

'I am going to-morrow on urgent business; pack up your boxes, and you and mamma shall go with me.'

A sudden recollection of an engagement I had made with a party of young friends crossed me, and I said, 'Papa, had I not better write to Miss Leshe to say that I am going to Paris?'

'No,' he replied hastily. 'I do not wish you to say to any one where we are going; remember that, I was surprised at his abrupt answer.'

It occurred to me then that I should not see Mr. Leyton again. I had books and music of his that I wished to return; but something, I knew not what, prevented me from asking or speaking to my father about him.

That evening I was sitting in the conservatory, hidden by the large leaves of an American

plant, when I heard my father enter the drawing-room, and say to mamma, 'She bore it very well. I have great hopes now, she is so young and so inexperienced, that I do not believe she knows how much she cares for him. A change of scene and new ideas will soon make her forget this idle fancy, if indeed it be one.'

'God grant it,' said my mother, with a sigh. 'I never thought or dreamt that their words referred to me. I wondered for a few moments who was to be filled with new ideas in order to make her forget old ones, and then forgot the whole affair until a future day brought it back with a bitter recollection.'

'Though I was so anxious to visit that city of the beautiful, Paris, yet my heart ached wearily on leaving England. I am sure, quite sure, that I did not know then that I loved Mr. Leyton, but there was a void in my life when away from him that nothing could fill up. I never analyzed it, and never knew what caused it. We went to a very nice hotel, near the Madeleine, and were soon immersed in the gaieties and beauties of Paris. One morning (often times since I have wished that morning's sunbeams had found me dead), we went out early to visit the Louvre. We walked through the long splendid galleries, until I was quite tired, and could go no farther.'

'Stay here and rest, Lady Anne,' said my father, pointing to a pretty seat, covered with crimson velvet, and standing in the recess of a window, that overlooked the bridge and busy streets. I was enchanted. My mother and father walked on and left me. I was so engrossed in watching the picturesque scene outside, that I forgot the interior, and some one laid his hand upon my arm, and said, 'Miss Sumner, this is the third time I have spoken. What can you be thinking of so intently?' Before I could recall myself, I turned round hastily and looked. It was Mr. Leyton who stood before me. I was too surprised to be able to speak, but I listened in bewilderment.

'How cruel of you. Miss Sumner, forgive me. I cannot talk common place trivialities now. How unkind of you to leave without telling me where you were going. Did you think there was any spot on earth so hidden or so distant but that I could find you? Do you not know I love you, Anne?'

'Ah, there it was; it flashed across me with an electrical light, that seemed to lay bare the innermost depths of my heart. I loved him too. I cannot remember what my answer was; but he found out my secret, and seemed to like my silence better than words.'

'After some time,' he said, 'Anne, why have you come to Paris? It is a very sudden thing. I wonder I was able to trace you at all.'

'I cannot tell; papa had business, and wished us to be with him.'

'I fear, Anne, that he only wished to take you away from me.'

'Impossible!' I replied. 'Why should he? He knows you are a Catholic.'

'I am afraid he has heard things said of me that are not true; but see, here he comes.'

'I went to meet him with a beaming face and a light heart. Charles followed me. I said, 'Papa, here is Mr. Leyton; he has soon found us out in Paris.'

'No doubt my eyes and face told my secret there, too; for my mother turned pale, and my father looked almost as though he had received a sudden blow. They were too well bred to show the least signs of what they must have felt. He went home to dine with us, and on his way told my dear father why he had followed us, and asked for an answer.'

'I cannot give you one at present. I must talk to Anne first. You know my only objection to you, Mr. Leyton. I will be quite honest with you. You are perhaps more than the equal of my child in birth and fortune; but I have heard you are addicted to a pursuit that I detest, and that is gambling. Knowing what I know, and loving my child as I do—for she is my darling and only one—I would rather far see her die than become that most wretched of all women, a gambler's wife.'

'You are severe, and scarcely just,' replied my husband; 'it is true—I own it with remorse—that I allowed myself to be led away by my companions, and more than once I have been a great loser by my own folly. Still, I entreat you to believe, Mr. Sumner, that gaming is not, thank God, a confirmed habit with me.'

'But my father was very grave over it; he knew the almost irresistible force of this violent and destructive passion; he knew that it would require the greatest self control and self-denial to relinquish a pursuit that has unhappily so great a fascination for its victims, and he did not see promise of that control or denial in the handsome, lively, witty, Charley Leyton. I need not say much more, sister; you can foresee the rest. I soon became wrapped up in the new and beautiful life opening to me. My father exacted one promise; and it was that Mr. Leyton should say

no more for one year either to himself or to me, and be planned—poor father—to watch him closely during that time. It passed. Mr. Leyton gave every sign of a thorough resolution not to fall again into his old error; and during that year, as I came to know him more, I decided in my own heart to pass my life with him, let my future be what it might. So, when the year was ended, and he spoke again, my father had no just cause of refusal, but left me to decide. Ah me! sister, how thoughtless, how selfish, young girls sometimes are. Who can love them with a truer or a dearer love than the mother whose life has been spent in caring for them, or the father who has toiled night and day for them? And does this same gentle mother or kind father offer a remonstrance on the all-important subject of marriage, how ill is their advice received. Children so often fancy they are wiser than their parents. To all good advice that the experience of age can prompt, they have only one reply—'It may be so with others, but it will be different with me.' They do not or cannot realize the truth that they can ever be unhappy or miserable as others are. And so it was me. I listened incredulously to all that was said, perfectly sure that those things would never happen to me, and almost smiling at the idea of Charley Leyton ever becoming a morose and determined gambler. So it was arranged we were to be married on our return to England.

'My father tried once more to save me. He sent for me one evening a week before my marriage. I was struck by his agitated air.'

'Anne darling,' he said, 'I wish to speak to you once more before it is too late. I wish you to consider what you are about to do. I have no fault to find with Mr. Leyton; but, oh Annie! I have a presentiment I cannot explain—a kind of fear that I am sure is prophetic, God implants it in the hearts of parents. I am sure you will not be happy. I fear that in after years Mr. Leyton may be tempted again, as he has been before, and then what will become of you, my darling? Tell me, could you give up all thoughts of him, and find happiness elsewhere? To please me, Annie, could you not?'

'Never, papa. Let my portion be happiness or misery. I accept it, and will never break my promise. And forgive me if I say this looks more like prejudice than reason.'

'These were the first disrespectful words I ever said to my kind, dear father. I have repented of them since. Ah, word by word his warning came true, and, in my deepest humiliation, when my head was bowed to the very dust, then I drank of that bitter cup that so few women taste and live. I remembered it, and owned that my punishment was just. His words would come back to me in the dreary night, haunting me, and ringing in my ear like reproachful cries. We were married, and left home for a visit to Switzerland. I have now in my heart the picture of my dear father, as he stood upon the carriage-step, with his kind smile somewhat saddened, and his cheery voice crying,—

'Good bye, Lady Anne. Bring us good news home, my darling; and may God bless you.'

'Alas! I never saw him again: before I reached home he was dead. Thank God, who took him away before he saw his darling child reduced to the lowest depths of human woe.'

'My mother continued to live alone, and for four years I was one of the happiest of wives. My husband was exemplary in his conduct.—Our home was a little paradise. We never missed morning mass, and went regularly to confession and communion. We were spoken of as the happiest household known. Ah, the time was then, when, in the security of my happiness, I smiled at the fear and warnings that had clouded the first year of my new life. And oh, sister, sometimes since, when my heart and soul have been weary and faint, and it seemed to me that I could not bear my burden for another day and live, then I have wished that I had died in those happy years, and had never known the misery and want that the dark after time brought me. But nay, no! not now that I am dying, and have eternity before me. I bless and thank my father in Heaven that He has allowed me to live and suffer thus. Were it His most holy will, I would gladly live my sad life over again; for I learnt this all-important truth, that sufferings patiently borne for God's sake on earth win for us most glorious crowns in Heaven.'

'And then at last, sister, when I had toiled for those four happy years amongst the roses of life, it pleased God to take me through the narrow path that the feet of the saints have trodden.'

'One evening my husband did not return home until rather late. I, unsuspecting of all evil, waited for him until I heard the chimes of the church clock playing midnight. Then he came. It struck me that his greeting was hurried and cold, and he seemed to avoid looking at me as though he were ashamed.

'Charley dear,' I asked, 'where have you stayed so late?'

'Only at Mr. Brunton's.'

'What made you stay so long—had you some music?'

'No,' he replied, turning from me, 'we had a game at cards.'

'Oh, the cold awful fear that seized me; that sent the blood from my face and drove it wildly round my heart; that stopped the warm breath upon my lips, and rooted me to the ground; the frightful shivering apprehension that seized me, and showed me in one moment, and at one glance, the dreary future! I lived a life in that short minute. When strength came to me again, I went up to him and laid my hands upon his arm. I looked up at him and said, 'Charley!' but he drew hastily away and said,

'Don't make a scene, Anne. Surely a man may touch a card without having a disturbance like this after it.'

'They were his first harsh words, and that is why I remember them so well. Day after day the shadow grew deeper and darker upon our once happy home. I cannot count the degrees by which my poor husband fell. Only this I can tell you, sister, that my true love for him has never altered. I have borne hunger, cold, misery—all, even blows and curses,—yet I have never reproached him, never, for the love of what he once was, and for the memory of his great kindness and love before the demon of play took hold of him and tore him from me.—Things grew worse and worse. At first he only passed the evenings in play; afterwards it was sometimes the whole night, and sometimes the whole day. He lost heavily. A curse almost seemed to be upon him, for he never touched a card without losing. And yet so insatiable is the passion, that the more he lost the more he played. He seemed as though he could never rest away from the gaming-table.'

CHAPTER III.

'The great blow came at last,—our house was sold. I parted with all my jewels except a few that my father had given me, horses, carriages, plate,—all was sold. My husband's debts were paid; and then we left the town and came to London, where he procured a situation in one of the counting-houses as overlooker of the accounts. It was a change for him, who had lived so differently, to be obliged to work; and it was a change for me, who had been brought up as an only child, and an heiress. Still I was happier than I had been for some time, for my husband was really touched and frightened at the wreck and ruin he had made. He solemnly promised never to touch a card again. Of the large fortune my father left me nothing now remained but a small income that was settled upon me, and that I had not yet touched. I knew also that my mother's jointure would be mine; so that poverty for a time did not afflict me. Again, for a time, there was a comparative calm; and then God sent me the one great blessing of my life—my darling little May. I almost forgot my other troubles and I clasped my little babe in my arms. Ah! better for her had she died there then; but no, God meant her to taste one bitter drop of the cup that was held to overflowing to her mother's lips. My husband almost idolised her, and nothing could exceed his remorse when he thought of the great wealth he squandered and lost. My calm happiness did not last long. Before May was six months old he had relapsed into the old habit. Sister, I tried everything to save him; prayers, tears, smiles, entreaties and warning; all useless. I might as well have tried to stop a foaming torrent or the beating of the waves. There came another heavy loss, and the last of my income went to meet it. And then, oh! then, sister, there came that which I fear would hide from you and from all for ever; but it must be told. My poor unhappy husband, penniless and without friends, defrauded his employers of a large sum of money, which he spent at the gaming-table. Some few days passed without my knowing it, and then he was apprehended. Oh! the shame, the disgrace, the agony of those days. My poor mother came to aid us. She sold her life annuity; I sold the few jewels I had kept, my dresses, linen, books, music, furniture,—all that I had. I stripped my house, and left its walls bare. Thus I raised enough to pay back all that my husband had—oh! must I say the word?—stolen. Yes, he came to that; he who was once so good; so kind, so generous, and full of good principle,—he now stood branded before the world as a thief and a felon. I stood and saw him there with his hands chained and his face paler than death; and stricken with a fearful agony. God help me! I sat there near him in court. I heard the evidence that proved him guilty; the pity of the judge, the pleading of the counsel against him, the eloquence of him who pleaded for him. I heard, as in a dream, when they spoke of his better days, of his once high position, his honorable name; then his temptation, and his