

## A SERPENT'S TOOTH.

It was Thursday, Lady Sewell's "At Home" day, and the drawing room in Queen's Gate Terrace was crowded. The chairs were all occupied by well-fed and well-dressed dowagers, whilst the girls and young men stood about, holding tea-cups in their hands, and exchanging small talk, under cover of the music. A notable tenor had just been singing his last composition, and now that he had finished, the tongues were let loose again, and a general clatter ensued. Lady Sewell herself, an animated brunette of perhaps five-and-thirty, was holding a little court all to herself. She was a handsome and intelligent woman, but there was something hard and cynical in the expression of her face, which outsiders were unable to account for. For, to all outward appearance, Lady Sewell enjoyed a most fortunate and enviable lot. Her husband, Sir Walter, was as good, perhaps, and even better, than the majority of husbands. She had sufficient money to gratify every whim—a large coterie of friends—and three of the most charming children in the world. They were clustered about her at the present moment, for she was a fond mother, and seldom let them out of her sight. Horace and Walter, two fine boys of five and seven years old, and Ella, pretty, graceful child of ten. They were all nice looking, and well-mannered, and affectionate, and more than one mother who regarded them voted Lady Sewell a most fortunate woman. Mrs. Russell, a new acquaintance, who had been brought to the "At Home" by old Lady Gribble, was especially enthusiastic in her admiration of them.

"Really, Lady Sewell, you make me quite envious," she exclaimed. "I have only one big boy of twelve, and I am afraid to let him enter my drawing room. He behaves like a bull in a china shop."

"Perhaps he has not been accustomed to be so much with you as my little ones have with me," returned Lady Sewell, smiling as she stroked the fair head of her daughter Ella. "They know that they cannot remain with me, unless they are good and quiet."

"And such pretty children, too, and so beautifully dressed," continued Mrs. Russell. "I have never seen any to equal them in manners or appearance, except some young friends of mine at Wooltown, in Devonshire—the Reverend John Archer's family—"

Lady Sewell became suddenly pale—the livid pallor of a dark complexion overspread her countenance, and she put Ella's clinging arms away from her.

"Do you know Wooltown?" she enquired, in a strange voice, of her new friend.

"Well. Do you know it also, Lady Sewell?"

"Oh, no?—not at all—that is, it is an immense distance from town. But I have heard of it."

"It is a lovely part of the country," said Mrs. Russell. "I have often been there. My cousin married General Fraser, who has a country seat in the village, and they and the Archers are the greatest friends."

"Yes, yes," replied Lady Sewell, abstractedly; and then, as other guests began to press around her, she added hastily, "Don't go yet, Mrs. Russell. I should like to speak to you again, when—when the crowd is less—"

Regardful of her hostess's request, the lady lingered on, until the room was almost empty, and old Lady Gribble had gone home in disgust, without her.

"You see, I am still here, in obedience to your wish," she observed, when, at last, Lady Sewell was free to attend to her.

"Thank you! I thought I should so much like to have a chat with you about Wooltown. I—I—*was* there once, in fact. Nurse! take the children away! This lady and I are going to my boudoir. This way, Mrs. Russell." And, preceding her guest upstairs, Lady Sewell led the way to a charming boudoir, fitted with every luxury.

"I daresay you think it very strange I should want to talk to you alone," she commenced, with the same nervous expression of countenance.

"Not at all, Lady Sewell! I am only too much honored"

"But I know—or I did know—some of the people in Wooltown, and I should like to hear it—if they are well."

"Did you know the Archers?"

"A little!—but it is some time ago"

"And the Frasers—my cousins?"

"No!—I don't think so," replied Lady Sewell, in the same painfully constrained and anxious manner. The conversation flagged. Mrs. Russell hardly knew how to proceed. At last her ladyship resumed, nervously tittering

"Are the Dacres still alive?"

"The doctor and his wife? O yes!"

"And Mrs. Jeffreys at—at—the Mill Farm?"

"Ah! poor old Mrs. Jeffreys!" ejaculated Mrs. Russell compassionately.

"Why *poor*?" cried her ladyship breathlessly

"You can hardly know her history, Lady Sewell, to ask that! It excited my pity more than anything I have ever heard."

"Why? Why? What has she done?"

"*She* has done nothing! It is what others have done to her. She was a wealthy and happy woman once, when her husband was alive, and her son and daughter were with her. But Mr. Jeffreys died, and her son went off to sea, and her daughter who should have been the prop of her old age, deserted the poor old woman in the most heartless manner—eloped, so I am told, with some gentleman, and has been too fine to notice her mother since. And now that she is poor and blind—"

"*Poor and blind*," repeated Lady Sewell. "Mrs. Jeffreys poor and blind?"

"Indeed, she is, Lady Sewell! She tried to carry on the farm business herself, but got cheated on every side, till she lost all her money. Then an illness came on, and blindness followed it, and she is helpless and in want. It is a cruel case. And the love she retains for her ungrateful daughter, too! To hear the poor old creature talk, you would think the hussy was an angel."

"Don't—don't!" cried Lady Sewell, impetuously, "I cannot bear it! Blind and alone, and in want! Oh! my heart will break!"

She cast herself headlong on the sofa, this proud, imperious beauty, who had been holding her fashionable court but an hour before, and burst into a flood of tears.

"Lady Sewell," cried Mrs. Russell, shocked and alarmed, "what have I done, or said, to upset you like this?"

"Nothing, nothing. It is no one's fault but my own. Sooner or later you will hear the truth. You may as well know it now. *Mrs. Jeffreys is my mother!*"

"Your mother! Impossible!"

"It is the fact. I am the daughter who deserted her. I was a proud, ambitious girl, ashamed of the farm and its humble surroundings, and always glad to get away from it, and visit amongst finer friends. On one of these visits I met Sir Walter, and he fell in love with me and proposed to me, before he knew my antecedents. When he did, he told me I must choose between my family and himself, and that if I loved him as he loved me, I would sacrifice the world for him. And I did. I sacrificed my poor old mother. God forgive me! I ran away with Sir Walter, and married him from my friend's house, and I have never seen Wooltown nor—nor—mother since."

Sobs choked her utterance. The happy and flattered Lady Sewell was crying as if her heart would break.

"I don't know why I should tell all this to you, a stranger," she gasped; "but I must speak now, or I shall die. Oh, tell me all you know! Is she ill, and feeble? Is she very sad?"

"I cannot deceive you, Lady Sewell. She is very feeble—very helpless—and she is very, *very* sad."

"She is fretting for me still—Oh, mother!"

"She speaks of you to every one she sees. I don't think you are a moment out of her thoughts. But I have never heard her mention you by name. She always calls you her Milly. But don't