

## **Chapter LVII - The History Of A Self-Tormentor**

I have the misfortune of not being a fool. From a very early age I have detected what those about me thought they hid from me. If I could have been habitually imposed upon, instead of habitually discerning the truth, I might have lived as smoothly as most fools do.

My childhood was passed with a grandmother; that is to say, with a lady who represented that relative to me, and who took that title on herself. She had no claim to it, but I - being to that extent a little fool - had no suspicion of her. She had some children of her own family in her house, and some children of other people. All girls; ten in number, including me. We all lived together and were educated together.

I must have been about twelve years old when I began to see how determinedly those girls patronised me. I was told I was an orphan. There was no other orphan among us; and I perceived (here was the first disadvantage of not being a fool) that they conciliated me in an insolent pity, and in a sense of superiority. I did not set this down as a discovery, rashly. I tried them often. I could hardly make them quarrel with me. When I succeeded with any of them, they were sure to come after an hour or two, and begin a reconciliation. I tried them over and over again, and I never knew them wait for me to begin. They were always forgiving me, in their vanity and condescension. Little images of grown people!

One of them was my chosen friend. I loved that stupid mite in a passionate way that she could no more deserve than I can remember without feeling ashamed of, though I was but a child. She had what they called an amiable temper, an affectionate temper. She could distribute, and did distribute pretty looks and smiles to every one among them. I believe there was not a soul in the place, except myself, who knew that she did it purposely to wound and gall me!

Nevertheless, I so loved that unworthy girl that my life was made stormy by my fondness for her. I was constantly lectured and disgraced for what was called 'trying her;' in other words charging her with her little perfidy and throwing her into tears by showing her that I read her heart. However, I loved her faithfully; and one time I went home with her for the holidays.

She was worse at home than she had been at school. She had a crowd of cousins and acquaintances, and we had dances at her house, and went out to dances at other houses, and, both at home and out, she tormented my love beyond endurance. Her plan was, to make them all fond of her - and so drive me wild with jealousy. To be familiar and endearing with them all - and so make me mad with envying them. When we were left alone in our bedroom at night, I would reproach

her with my perfect knowledge of her baseness; and then she would cry and cry and say I was cruel, and then I would hold her in my arms till morning: loving her as much as ever, and often feeling as if, rather than suffer so, I could so hold her in my arms and plunge to the bottom of a river - where I would still hold her after we were both dead.

It came to an end, and I was relieved. In the family there was an aunt who was not fond of me. I doubt if any of the family liked me much; but I never wanted them to like me, being altogether bound up in the one girl. The aunt was a young woman, and she had a serious way with her eyes of watching me. She was an audacious woman, and openly looked compassionately at me. After one of the nights that I have spoken of, I came down into a greenhouse before breakfast. Charlotte (the name of my false young friend) had gone down before me, and I heard this aunt speaking to her about me as I entered. I stopped where I was, among the leaves, and listened.

The aunt said, 'Charlotte, Miss Wade is wearing you to death, and this must not continue.' I repeat the very words I heard.

Now, what did she answer? Did she say, 'It is I who am wearing her to death, I who am keeping her on a rack and am the executioner, yet she tells me every night that she loves me devotedly, though she knows what I make her undergo?' No; my first memorable experience was true to what I knew her to be, and to all my experience. She began sobbing and weeping (to secure the aunt's sympathy to herself), and said, 'Dear aunt, she has an unhappy temper; other girls at school, besides I, try hard to make it better; we all try hard.'

Upon that the aunt fondled her, as if she had said something noble instead of despicable and false, and kept up the infamous pretence by replying, 'But there are reasonable limits, my dear love, to everything, and I see that this poor miserable girl causes you more constant and useless distress than even so good an effort justifies.'

The poor miserable girl came out of her concealment, as you may be prepared to hear, and said, 'Send me home.' I never said another word to either of them, or to any of them, but 'Send me home, or I will walk home alone, night and day!' When I got home, I told my supposed grandmother that, unless I was sent away to finish my education somewhere else before that girl came back, or before any one of them came back, I would burn my sight away by throwing myself into the fire, rather than I would endure to look at their plotting faces.

I went among young women next, and I found them no better. Fair words and fair pretences; but I penetrated below those assertions of themselves and depreciations of me, and they were no better. Before I

left them, I learned that I had no grandmother and no recognised relation. I carried the light of that information both into my past and into my future. It showed me many new occasions on which people triumphed over me, when they made a pretence of treating me with consideration, or doing me a service.

A man of business had a small property in trust for me. I was to be a governess; I became a governess; and went into the family of a poor nobleman, where there were two daughters - little children, but the parents wished them to grow up, if possible, under one instructress. The mother was young and pretty. From the first, she made a show of behaving to me with great delicacy. I kept my resentment to myself; but I knew very well that it was her way of petting the knowledge that she was my Mistress, and might have behaved differently to her servant if it had been her fancy.

I say I did not resent it, nor did I; but I showed her, by not gratifying her, that I understood her. When she pressed me to take wine, I took water. If there happened to be anything choice at table, she always sent it to me: but I always declined it, and ate of the rejected dishes. These disappointments of her patronage were a sharp retort, and made me feel independent.

I liked the children. They were timid, but on the whole disposed to attach themselves to me. There was a nurse, however, in the house, a rosy-faced woman always making an obtrusive pretence of being gay and good-humoured, who had nursed them both, and who had secured their affections before I saw them. I could almost have settled down to my fate but for this woman. Her artful devices for keeping herself before the children in constant competition with me, might have blinded many in my place; but I saw through them from the first. On the pretext of arranging my rooms and waiting on me and taking care of my wardrobe (all of which she did busily), she was never absent. The most crafty of her many subtleties was her feint of seeking to make the children fonder of me. She would lead them to me and coax them to me. 'Come to good Miss Wade, come to dear Miss Wade, come to pretty Miss Wade. She loves you very much. Miss Wade is a clever lady, who has read heaps of books, and can tell you far better and more interesting stories than I know. Come and hear Miss Wade!' How could I engage their attentions, when my heart was burning against these ignorant designs? How could I wonder, when I saw their innocent faces shrinking away, and their arms twining round her neck, instead of mine? Then she would look up at me, shaking their curls from her face, and say, 'They'll come round soon, Miss Wade; they're very simple and loving, ma'am; don't be at all cast down about it, ma'am' - exulting over me!

There was another thing the woman did. At times, when she saw that she had safely plunged me into a black despondent brooding by these means, she would call the attention of the children to it, and would show them the difference between herself and me. 'Hush! Poor Miss Wade is not well. Don't make a noise, my dears, her head aches. Come and comfort her. Come and ask her if she is better; come and ask her to lie down. I hope you have nothing on your mind, ma'am. Don't take on, ma'am, and be sorry!'

It became intolerable. Her ladyship, my Mistress, coming in one day when I was alone, and at the height of feeling that I could support it no longer, I told her I must go. I could not bear the presence of that woman Dawes.

'Miss Wade! Poor Dawes is devoted to you; would do anything for you!'

I knew beforehand she would say so; I was quite prepared for it; I only answered, it was not for me to contradict my Mistress; I must go.

'I hope, Miss Wade,' she returned, instantly assuming the tone of superiority she had always so thinly concealed, 'that nothing I have ever said or done since we have been together, has justified your use of that disagreeable word, 'Mistress.' It must have been wholly inadvertent on my part. Pray tell me what it is.'

I replied that I had no complaint to make, either of my Mistress or to my Mistress; but I must go.

She hesitated a moment, and then sat down beside me, and laid her hand on mine. As if that honour would obliterate any remembrance!

'Miss Wade, I fear you are unhappy, through causes over which I have no influence.'

I smiled, thinking of the experience the word awakened, and said, 'I have an unhappy temper, I suppose.' 'I did not say that.'

'It is an easy way of accounting for anything,' said I.

'It may be; but I did not say so. What I wish to approach is something very different. My husband and I have exchanged some remarks upon the subject, when we have observed with pain that you have not been easy with us.'

'Easy? Oh! You are such great people, my lady,' said I.

'I am unfortunate in using a word which may convey a meaning - and evidently does - quite opposite to my intention.' (She had not expected

my reply, and it shamed her.) 'I only mean, not happy with us. It is a difficult topic to enter on; but, from one young woman to another, perhaps - in short, we have been apprehensive that you may allow some family circumstances of which no one can be more innocent than yourself, to prey upon your spirits. If so, let us entreat you not to make them a cause of grief. My husband himself, as is well known, formerly had a very dear sister who was not in law his sister, but who was universally beloved and respected .

I saw directly that they had taken me in for the sake of the dead woman, whoever she was, and to have that boast of me and advantage of me; I saw, in the nurse's knowledge of it, an encouragement to goad me as she had done; and I saw, in the children's shrinking away, a vague impression, that I was not like other people. I left that house that night.

After one or two short and very similar experiences, which are not to the present purpose, I entered another family where I had but one pupil: a girl of fifteen, who was the only daughter. The parents here were elderly people: people of station, and rich. A nephew whom they had brought up was a frequent visitor at the house, among many other visitors; and he began to pay me attention.

I was resolute in repulsing him; for I had determined when I went there, that no one should pity me or condescend to me. But he wrote me a letter. It led to our being engaged to be married.

He was a year younger than I, and young-looking even when that allowance was made. He was on absence from India, where he had a post that was soon to grow into a very good one. In six months we were to be married, and were to go to India. I was to stay in the house, and was to be married from the house. Nobody objected to any part of the plan.

I cannot avoid saying he admired me; but, if I could, I would. Vanity has nothing to do with the declaration, for his admiration worried me. He took no pains to hide it; and caused me to feel among the rich people as if he had bought me for my looks, and made a show of his purchase to justify himself. They appraised me in their own minds, I saw, and were curious to ascertain what my full value was. I resolved that they should not know. I was immovable and silent before them; and would have suffered any one of them to kill me sooner than I would have laid myself out to bespeak their approval.

He told me I did not do myself justice. I told him I did, and it was because I did and meant to do so to the last, that I would not stoop to propitiate any of them. He was concerned and even shocked, when I added that I wished he would not parade his attachment before them;

but he said he would sacrifice even the honest impulses of his affection to my peace.

Under that pretence he began to retort upon me. By the hour together, he would keep at a distance from me, talking to any one rather than to me. I have sat alone and unnoticed, half an evening, while he conversed with his young cousin, my pupil. I have seen all the while, in people's eyes, that they thought the two looked nearer on an equality than he and I. I have sat, divining their thoughts, until I have felt that his young appearance made me ridiculous, and have raged against myself for ever loving him.

For I did love him once. Undeserving as he was, and little as he thought of all these agonies that it cost me - agonies which should have made him wholly and gratefully mine to his life's end - I loved him. I bore with his cousin's praising him to my face, and with her pretending to think that it pleased me, but full well knowing that it rankled in my breast; for his sake. While I have sat in his presence recalling all my slights and wrongs, and deliberating whether I should not fly from the house at once and never see him again - I have loved him.

His aunt (my Mistress you will please to remember) deliberately, wilfully, added to my trials and vexations. It was her delight to expatiate on the style in which we were to live in India, and on the establishment we should keep, and the company we should entertain when he got his advancement. My pride rose against this barefaced way of pointing out the contrast my married life was to present to my then dependent and inferior position. I suppressed my indignation; but I showed her that her intention was not lost upon me, and I repaid her annoyance by affecting humility. What she described would surely be a great deal too much honour for me, I would tell her. I was afraid I might not be able to support so great a change. Think of a mere governess, her daughter's governess, coming to that high distinction! It made her uneasy, and made them all uneasy, when I answered in this way. They knew that I fully understood her.

It was at the time when my troubles were at their highest, and when I was most incensed against my lover for his ingratitude in caring as little as he did for the innumerable distresses and mortifications I underwent on his account, that your dear friend, Mr Gowan, appeared at the house. He had been intimate there for a long time, but had been abroad. He understood the state of things at a glance, and he understood me.

He was the first person I had ever seen in my life who had understood me. He was not in the house three times before I knew that he accompanied every movement of my mind. In his coldly easy way with

all of them, and with me, and with the whole subject, I saw it clearly. In his light protestations of admiration of my future husband, in his enthusiasm regarding our engagement and our prospects, in his hopeful congratulations on our future wealth and his despondent references to his own poverty - all equally hollow, and jesting, and full of mockery - I saw it clearly. He made me feel more and more resentful, and more and more contemptible, by always presenting to me everything that surrounded me with some new hateful light upon it, while he pretended to exhibit it in its best aspect for my admiration and his own. He was like the dressed-up Death in the Dutch series; whatever figure he took upon his arm, whether it was youth or age, beauty or ugliness, whether he danced with it, sang with it, played with it, or prayed with it, he made it ghastly.

You will understand, then, that when your dear friend complimented me, he really condoled with me; that when he soothed me under my vexations, he laid bare every smarting wound I had; that when he declared my 'faithful swain' to be 'the most loving young fellow in the world, with the tenderest heart that ever beat,' he touched my old misgiving that I was made ridiculous. These were not great services, you may say. They were acceptable to me, because they echoed my own mind, and confirmed my own knowledge. I soon began to like the society of your dear friend better than any other.

When I perceived (which I did, almost as soon) that jealousy was growing out of this, I liked this society still better. Had I not been subject to jealousy, and were the endurances to be all mine? No. Let him know what it was! I was delighted that he should know it; I was delighted that he should feel keenly, and I hoped he did.

More than that. He was tame in comparison with Mr Gowan, who knew how to address me on equal terms, and how to anatomise the wretched people around us.

This went on, until the aunt, my Mistress, took it upon herself to speak to me. It was scarcely worth alluding to; she knew I meant nothing; but she suggested from herself, knowing it was only necessary to suggest, that it might be better if I were a little less companionable with Mr Gowan.

I asked her how she could answer for what I meant? She could always answer, she replied, for my meaning nothing wrong. I thanked her, but said I would prefer to answer for myself and to myself. Her other servants would probably be grateful for good characters, but I wanted none.

Other conversation followed, and induced me to ask her how she knew that it was only necessary for her to make a suggestion to me, to

have it obeyed? Did she presume on my birth, or on my hire? I was not bought, body and soul. She seemed to think that her distinguished nephew had gone into a slave-market and purchased a wife.

It would probably have come, sooner or later, to the end to which it did come, but she brought it to its issue at once. She told me, with assumed commiseration, that I had an unhappy temper. On this repetition of the old wicked injury, I withheld no longer, but exposed to her all I had known of her and seen in her, and all I had undergone within myself since I had occupied the despicable position of being engaged to her nephew. I told her that Mr Gowan was the only relief I had had in my degradation; that I had borne it too long, and that I shook it off too late; but that I would see none of them more. And I never did. Your dear friend followed me to my retreat, and was very droll on the severance of the connection; though he was sorry, too, for the excellent people (in their way the best he had ever met), and deplored the necessity of breaking mere house-flies on the wheel. He protested before long, and far more truly than I then supposed, that he was not worth acceptance by a woman of such endowments, and such power of character; but - well, well! -

Your dear friend amused me and amused himself as long as it suited his inclinations; and then reminded me that we were both people of the world, that we both understood mankind, that we both knew there was no such thing as romance, that we were both prepared for going different ways to seek our fortunes like people of sense, and that we both foresaw that whenever we encountered one another again we should meet as the best friends on earth. So he said, and I did not contradict him.

It was not very long before I found that he was courting his present wife, and that she had been taken away to be out of his reach. I hated her then, quite as much as I hate her now; and naturally, therefore, could desire nothing better than that she should marry him. But I was restlessly curious to look at her - so curious that I felt it to be one of the few sources of entertainment left to me. I travelled a little: travelled until I found myself in her society, and in yours. Your dear friend, I think, was not known to you then, and had not given you any of those signal marks of his friendship which he has bestowed upon you.

In that company I found a girl, in various circumstances of whose position there was a singular likeness to my own, and in whose character I was interested and pleased to see much of the rising against swollen patronage and selfishness, calling themselves kindness, protection, benevolence, and other fine names, which I have described as inherent in my nature. I often heard it said, too, that she



had 'an unhappy temper.' Well understanding what was meant by the convenient phrase, and wanting a companion with a knowledge of what I knew, I thought I would try to release the girl from her bondage and sense of injustice. I have no occasion to relate that I succeeded.

We have been together ever since, sharing my small means.