VICTORIA CROSS [Annie Sophie Cory]

(1 October **1868**–2 August **1952**)

From the mid-1890s Victoria Cross was a household name, the very prolific author behind that pseudonym being characterized as "the woman whose novels were read behind locked doors" and who was "poisoning the purity of British homes." Victoria Cross first rose to prominence in 1895 as the author of a shocking short story "Theodora: A Fragment" and the novel *The Woman Who Didn't*, the latter presumed to be a direct response to Grant Allen's notorious bestseller *The Woman Who Did* (1895), which was about a "New Woman" who declines marriage on principle and has a daughter out of wedlock. Cross's heroine, in contrast to Allen's as well as her own "Theodora," is willing to live by traditional concepts of feminine behavior, maintaining marital fidelity even though she doesn't love her husband. Over her forty-year career, almost all of Victoria Cross's novels and her few short stories contain more or less the same basic elements—an unconventional woman, the bewildered and bewitched man, erotic events in exotic settings, and a celebration of sexual passion as life's primary good. But far from advocating permissiveness, her works promote romantic love as the fusion of physical attraction and mental stimulation, the combining of physical desire with spiritual affection.

Victoria Cross (miniature by May B. Lee)

Biographical information on Victoria Cross—who also wrote under the pseudonyms Victoria Cross(e), Vivian Cory Griffin and V.C. Griffin—is scarce, partly because she lived apart from public life and generally abroad after the 1890s. Perhaps out of shyness or a consciousness of the discrepancy between her sedate and demur personal demeanor and her fictional voice, she was unusually reclusive for a nineties writer, not being known personally by either her contemporary writers (whose work she claimed not to have read) or the critics, and she chose rarely to dine or otherwise go out in public. Even her name has been enigmatic: almost all sources give her "true" name as Vivian Cory, although she was also listed—on some publishing contracts and on the copyright pages of several volumes—as Vivian (or Vivien) Cory Griffin or V. C. Griffin. But, in fact, as proven by birth and school records (as well as her will and surviving relatives), her actual name was Annie Sophie Cory. Through all the muddle, however, she always insisted that every one of her published writings bear the name Victoria Cross. She appears to have chosen her literary pen name as a complicated joke, quipping that she expected to cross Queen Victoria, or make Queen Victoria cross, through her sexual candor, and she deserved the Victoria Cross for such valor (daring). Her name identified her as both a hero, displaying courage and enterprise, and an outlaw, violating conventions of manners and morals.

What we do know is that Annie Sophie Cory—a. k. a. Victoria Cross—was born in Rawalpindi, Punjab, India, to Elizabeth Fanny Griffin Cory and Arthur Cory, who served

as a major in the Bengal Staff Corps, a colonel in the Army of Karachi, and joint editor of the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore. Both parents, although they married and lived much of their lives in India, were born in England, retained strong ties to England, and eventually died there. Annie, who was the youngest of three sisters, was educated primarily in England, but she spent most of her early life in India with her parents and sisters. All three sisters pursued literary lives. The eldest (Isabel Edith) edited the *Sind Gazette* in Karachi for many years; the middle daughter (Adela Florence Cory [Nicolson], known to the family as "Violet") became the acclaimed writer and lyricist "Laurence Hope." Like much of Cross's fiction, Hope's poetry explored female desire and sexuality within the colonial context. In 1888, at 19, Annie Cory passed the London University matriculation examination; in 1890 she passed the Intermediate Arts examination, although she was not attached to a college and appears not to have proceeded to a degree. Certainly her most important family tie was to Heneage Mackenzie Griffin, her mother's younger brother, who had made a fortune in silver mines and real estate in the United States and with whom Cross traveled extensively and lived—in France, Italy, Switzerland, or the United States—for much of her adult life, until his death in 1939 (he left his considerable fortune to her). Although she never married, she often referred to herself as Vivian Cory Griffin, possibly to identify herself with her mother instead of her father but almost certainly to ally herself with her uncle for business and legal reasons (he regularly witnessed her book contracts, 14 between 1906 and 1936). Although she was described by acquaintance Sewell Stokes as "doll-like," she was known to be hard and sometimes fiercely calculating in her business dealings, sometimes going to great lengths to win her terms, among which was a stipulation in her contracts that "there shall be no alteration of any nature whatsoever in the text of the author's work." After her uncle's death, she apparently fell in love with Leonard Bradford, an American consul in Marseilles, and transferred large sums of money to him. She eventually retired to Monte Carlo to live among women friends and died at the Clinica Capitanio in Milan, Italy, in 1952. In a final act of eccentricity, she left her entire estate to Paolo Tosi, a Milanese diamond dealer.

Victoria Cross c. early 20th C.

Victoria Cross's landmark short story "Theodora," which fellow author and *Yellow Book* editor Henry Harland called a work of "genius," incited much controversy. B. A. Crackanthorpe, in "Sex in Modern Literature" (*Nineteenth Century*, April 1895), labeled "Theodora" part of the second-rate literature of the "charnel-house school," finding "revolting . . . that it should be possible for a girl to project herself into the mood of a man at one of his baser moments, faithfully identifying herself with the sequence of his sensation." Janet E. Hogarth, criticizing the "sex mania" of nineties women writers in a piece on "Literary Degenerates" (*Fortnightly Review*, April 1895), singled out Cross particularly: "Few people are without the germs of possible diseases; but are the confused and morbid imaginings, which the sane hide deep within their breast, to be offered to the world at large as the discovery of a privileged few?" On the other hand, more sympathetic

readers appreciated her daring, the journal *Woman* calling the story "a brilliant and penetrating study"; the *Daily Chronicle* praised her "brutal" style and proclaimed that she "sees the essentials of human motive and passion," albeit "in an almost disquieting manner." Perhaps most humorously, Oscar Wilde, who once fantasized mischievously of mating the staid Mrs. Humphrey Ward with the wild poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, opined that "if one could only marry Thomas Hardy to Victoria Cross, he [Hardy] might have gained some inkling of real passion with which to animate his little keepsake pictures of starched ladies." Much of "Theodora" appears in Cross's later novel *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* (1903), in which she reveals it her mission to write a "lasting protest against all egoism, all love of love for the sake of pleasure to the lover, instead of the all-glorious and selfless love which desires only the well-being of the loved one." After her sensational debut with "Theodora" and *The Woman Who Did*, Cross published *Paula* (1896), another sensation, *A Girl of the Klondike* (1899), and some 24 more novels and short-story collections, many of which critics found shocking in their frankness about female sexuality—among them *Anna Lombard* (1901), the story of a woman who persuades her husband to let her continue a premarital affair; *Life of My Heart* (1905), about a woman who is outcast by her father for running away with a native Indian and which reached an astonishing 19th edition in its first year; *Life's Shop-Window* (1907), one of her greatest successes; *The Greater Law* (aka *Hilda Against the World*) (1914), in which the heroine fosters the intellectual and sexual awakening of a resident in an insane asylum. *Five Nights* (1908) was adapted into a movie in 1915; although technically approved by the British Board of Film Censors, it was judged indecent by some local authorities and banned in several major cities including London and Brighton. *The Beating Heart* (1924) is another collection of short stories, several of which show her concern for animal welfare and support of the antivivisection movement. Her last novel *Martha Brown, M.P.: A Girl of Tomorrow* (1935) is a utopian fantasy set in 13th-century England, in which women are the dominant sex. Most of Victoria Cross's novels, like her short story "Theodora," employ a male narrator, but the same basic theme—the spiritual survival of true passion in the face of obstacles, both internal and external—appears again and again. So ubiquitous was Cross's racy reputation that Katherine Mansfield, in her story "The Tiredness of Rosabel" (1908), portrays—without explanation—a young woman's fantasies being fueled merely from seeing the book cover of Cross's *Anna Lombard* (1901); apparently, no explanation was needed.

Despite (or perhaps because) of the fact that reviewers typically decried Victoria Cross's excessive attention to sexuality, comparing her to Thomas Hardy, Émile Zola, and D. H. Lawrence, her books sold well in England, the United States, and elsewhere from the 1890s through the 1920s, and several were translated into French, Italian, and Norwegian. Although she continued writing until 1937, and lived until 1952, she was already seen as old-fashioned by the mid-1920s, her popularity declining as her portrayals of passion were thought to be less shocking to modern sensibilities and her glimpses of international settings less exotic.