

MARY BRADDON

THE INFIDEL: A STORY
OF THE GREAT REVIVAL

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of the Great Revival**

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Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	9
CHAPTER III.	14
CHAPTER IV.	19
CHAPTER V.	26
CHAPTER VI.	33
CHAPTER VII.	40
CHAPTER VIII.	44
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	52

The Infidel: A Story of the Great Revival

CHAPTER I. GRUB-STREET SCRIBBLERS

Father and daughter worked together at the trade of letters in the days when George the Second was king and Grub Street was a reality. For them literature was indeed a trade, since William Thornton wrote only what the booksellers wanted, and adjusted the supply to the demand. No sudden inspirations, no freaks of a vagabond fancy ever distracted him from the question of bread and cheese; so many sides of letter-paper to produce so many pounds. He wrote everything. He contributed verse as well as prose to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and had been the winner of one of those prizes which the liberal Mr. Cave offered for the best poem sent to him. Nothing came amiss to his facile pen. In politics he was strong – on either side. He could write for or against any measure, and had condemned and applauded the same politicians in fiery articles above different aliases, anticipating by the vehemence of his phrases the coming guineas. He wrote history or natural history for the instruction of youth, not so well as Goldsmith, but with a glib directness that served. He wrote philosophy for the sick-bed of old age, and romance to feed the dreams of lovers. He stole from the French, the Spaniards, the Italians, and turned Latin epigrams into English jests. He burnt incense before any altar, and had written much that was base and unworthy when the fancy of the town set that way, and a ribald pen was at a premium. He had written for the theatres with fair success, and his manuscript sermons at a crown apiece found a ready market.

Yes, Mr. Thornton wrote sermons – he, the unfrocked priest, the audacious infidel, who believed in nothing better than this earth upon which he and his kindred worms were crawling; nothing to come after the tolling bell, no recompense for sorrows here, no reunion with the beloved dead – only the sexton and the spade, and the forgotten grave.

It was eighteen years since his young wife had died and left him with an infant daughter – this very Antonia, his stay and comfort now, his indefatigable helper, his Mercury, tripping with light foot between his lodgings and the booksellers or the newspaper offices, to carry his copy, or to sue for a guinea or two in advance for work to be done.

When his wife died he was curate-in-charge of a remote Lincolnshire parish, not twenty miles from that watery region at the mouth of the Humber, that Epworth which John Wesley's renown had glorified. Here in this lonely place, after two years of widowhood, a great trouble had fallen upon him. He always recurred to it with the air of a martyr, and pitied himself profoundly, as one more sinned against than sinning.

A farmer's daughter, a strapping wench of eighteen, had induced him to elope with her. This Adam ever described Eve as the initiator of his fall.

They went to London together, meaning to sail for Jersey in a trading smack, which left the docks for that fertile island twice in a month. The damsel was of years of discretion, and the elopement was no felony; but it happened awkwardly for the parson that she carried her father's cash-box with her, containing some two hundred pounds, upon which Mr. Thornton was to start a dairy farm. They were hotly pursued by the infuriated father, and were arrested in London as they were stepping on board the Jersey smack, and Thornton was caught with the cash on his person.

He swore he believed it to be the girl's money; and she swore she had earned it in her father's dairy – that, for saving, 'twas she had saved every penny of it. This plea lightened the sentence, but did not acquit either prisoner. The girl was sent to Bridewell for a year, and the parson was sentenced to

five years' imprisonment; but by the advocacy of powerful friends, and by the help of a fine manner, an unctuous piety, and general good conduct, was restored to the world at the end of the second year – a happy escape in an age when the gifted Dr. Dodd died for a single slip of the pen, and when the pettiest petty larceny meant hanging.

Having bored himself to death by an assumed sanctimony for two years, Thornton came out of the house of bondage a rank atheist, a scoffer at all things holy, a scorner of all men who called themselves Christians. To him they seemed as contemptible as he had felt himself in his hypocrisy. Did any of them believe? Yes, the imbeciles and hysterical women, the ignorant masses who fifty years ago had believed in witchcraft and the ubiquitous devil as implicitly as they now believed in Justification by Faith and the New Birth. But that men of brains – an intellectual giant like Sam Johnson, for instance – could kneel in dusty city churches Sunday after Sunday and search the Scriptures for the promise of life immortal! Pah! What could Voltaire, the enlightened, think of such a time-serving hypocrisy, except that the thing paid?

"It pays, sir," said Thornton, when he and his little knot of friends discussed the great dictionary-maker in a tavern parlour which they called "The Portico," and which they fondly hoped to make as famous as the Scribbler's Club, which Swift founded, and where he and Oxford and Bolingbroke, Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot talked grandly of abstract things. The talk in "The Portico" was ever of persons, and mostly scandalous, the gangrene of envy devouring the minds of men whose lives had been failures.

The wife of Thornton's advocate, who was well off and childless, had taken compassion on the sinner's three-year-old daughter, and had carried the little Antonia to her cottage at Windsor, where the child was well cared for by the old housekeeper who had charge of the barrister's rural retreat. It was a cottage *orné* in a spacious garden adjoining Windsor Forest, and to-day, in her twentieth year, Antonia looked back upon that lost paradise with a fond longing. She had often urged her father to take her to see the kind friend whose bright young face she sometimes saw in her dreams, the very colour of whose gowns she remembered; but he always put her off with an excuse. The advocate had risen to distinction; he and his wife were fine people now, and Mr. Thornton would not exhibit his shabby gentility in any such company. He had been grateful for so beneficent a service at the time of his captivity, and had expatiated upon his thankfulness on three sides of letter-paper, blotted with real tears; but his virtues were impulses rather than qualities of the mind, and he had soon forgotten how much he owed the K.C.'s tender-hearted wife. Providence had been good to her, as to the mother of Samuel, and she had sons and daughters of her own now.

Antonia knew that her father had been in prison. He was too self-compassionate to refrain from bewailing past sufferings, and too lazy-brained to originate and sustain any plausible fiction to account for those two years in which his child had not seen his face. But he had been consistently reticent as to the offence which he had expiated, and Antonia supposed it to be of a political nature – some Jacobite plot in which he had got himself entangled.

From her sixth year to her seventeenth she had been her father's companion, at first his charge – and rather an onerous one, as it seemed to the hack-scribbler – a charge to be shared with, and finally shunted on to the shoulders of, any good-natured landlady who, in her own parlance, took to the child.

Thornton was so far considerate of parental duty that, having found an honest and kindly matron in Rupert Buildings, St. Martin's Lane, he left off shifting his tent, and established himself for life, as he told her, on her second floor, and confided the little girl almost wholly to her charge. She had one daughter five years older than Antonia, who was at school all day, leaving the basement of the house silent and empty of youthful company, and Mrs. Potter welcomed the lovely little face as a sunny presence in her dull parlour. She taught Antonia – shortened to Tonia – her letters, and taught her to dust the poor little cups and ornaments of willow-pattern Worcester china, and to keep the hearth trimly swept, and rub the brass fender – taught her all manner of little services which the child loved to perform. She was what people called an old-fashioned child; for, having never lived with other

children, she had no loud boisterous ways, and her voice was never shrill and ear-piercing. All she had learnt or observed had been the ways of grown-up people. From the time she was ten years old she was able to be of use to her father. She had gone on errands in the immediate neighbourhood for Mrs. Potter. Thornton sent her further afield to carry copy to a printer, or a letter to a bookseller, with many instructions as to how to ask her way at every turn, and to be careful in crossing the street. Mrs. Potter shuddered at these journeys to Fleet Street or St. Paul's Churchyard, and it seemed a wonder to her that the child came back alive, but she stood in too much awe of her lodger's learning and importance to question his conduct; and when Antonia entered her teens she had all the discretion of a woman, and was able to take care of her father, and to copy his hurried scrawl in her own neat penmanship, when he had written against time in a kind of shorthand of his own, with contractions which Antonia soon mastered. The education of his daughter was the one duty that Thornton had never shirked. Hack-scribbler as he was, he loved books for their own sake, and he loved imparting knowledge to a child whose quick appreciation lightened the task and made it a relaxation. He gave her of his best, thinking that he did her a service in teaching her to despise the beliefs that so many of her fellow-creatures cherished, ranking the Christian religion with every hideous superstition of the dark ages, as only a little better than the delusions of man-eating savages in an unexplored Africa, or the devil-dancers and fakirs of Hindostan.

This man was, perhaps, a natural product of that dark age which went before the Great Revival – the age when not to be a Deist and a scoffer was to be out of the fashion. He had been an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, taking up that trade as he took up the trade of letters, for bread and cheese. The younger son of a well-born Yorkshire squire, he had been a profligate and a spendthrift at Oxford, but was clever enough to get a degree, and to scrape through his ordination. As he had never troubled himself about spiritual questions, and knew no more theology than sufficed to satisfy an indulgent bishop, he had hardly considered the depth of his hypocrisy when he tendered himself as a shepherd of souls. He had a fluent pen, and could write a telling sermon, when it was worth his while; but original eloquence was wasted upon his bovine flock in Lincolnshire, and he generally read them any old printed sermon that came to hand among the rubbish heap of his bookshelves. He migrated from one curacy to another, and from one farmhouse to another, drinking with the farmers, hunting with the squires; diversified this dull round with a year or two on the Continent as bear-leader to a wealthy merchant's son and heir; brought home an Italian wife, and while she lived was tolerably constant and tolerably sober. That brief span of wedded life, with a woman he fondly loved, made the one stage in his life-journey to which he might have looked back without self-reproach.

He was delighted with his daughter's quick intellect and growing love for books. She began to help him almost as soon as she could write, and now in her twentieth year father and daughter seemed upon an intellectual level.

"Nature has been generous to her," he told his chums at "The Portico." "She has her mother's beauty and my brains."

"Let's hope she'll never have your swallow for gin-punch, Bill," was the retort, that being the favourite form of refreshment in "The Portico" room at the Red Lion.

"Nay, she inherits sobriety also from her mother, whose diet was as temperate as a wood-nymph's."

His eyes grew dim as he thought of the wife long dead – the confiding girl he had carried from her home among the vineyards and gardens of the sunny hillside above Bellagio to the dismal Lincolnshire parsonage, between grey marsh and sluggish river. He had brought her to dreariness and penury, and to a climate that killed her. Nothing but gin-punch could ever drown those sorrowful memories; so 'twas no wonder Thornton took more than his share of the bowl. His companions were his juniors for the most part, and his inferiors in education. He was the Socrates of this vulgar Academy, and his disciples looked up to him.

The shabby second floor in Rupert Buildings was Antonia's only idea of home. Her own eerie was on the floor above – a roomy garret, with a casement window in the sloping roof, a window that seemed to command all London, for she could see Westminster Abbey, and the Houses of Parliament, and across the river to the more rustic-looking streets and lanes on the southern shore. She loved her garret for the sake of that window, which had a broad stone sill where she kept her garden of stocks and pansies, pinks and cowslips, maintained with the help of an occasional shilling from her father.

The sitting-room was furnished with things that had once been good, for Mrs. Potter was one of those many hermits in the great city who had seen better days. She was above the common order of landladies, and kept her house as clean as a house in Rupert Buildings could be kept. Tidiness was out of the question in any room inhabited by William Thornton, whose books and papers accumulated upon every available table or ledge, and were never to be moved on pain of his severe displeasure. It was only by much coaxing that his daughter could secure the privilege of a writing-table to herself. He declared that the destruction of a single printer's proof might be his ruin, or even the ruin of the newspaper for which it was intended.

Such as her home was, Antonia was content with it. Such as her life was, she bore it patiently, unsustained by any hope of a happier life in a world to come – unsustained by the conviction that by her industry and cheerfulness she was pleasing God.

She knew that there were homes in which life looked brighter than it could in Rupert Buildings. She walked with her father in the evening streets sometimes, when his empty pockets and his score at the Red Lion forbade the pleasures of "The Portico." She knew the aspect of houses in Pall Mall and St. James's Square, in Arlington Street and Piccadilly; heard the sound of fiddles and French horns through open windows, light music and light laughter; caught glimpses of inner splendours through hall doors; saw coaches and chairs setting down gay company, a street crowded with link-boys and running footmen. She knew that in this London, within a quarter of a mile of her garret, there was a life to which she must ever remain a stranger – a life of luxury and pleasure, led by the high-born and the wealthy.

Sometimes when her father was in a sentimental mood he would tell her of his grandfather's magnificence at the family seat near York; would paint the glories of a country house with an acre and a half of roof, the stacks of silver plate, and a perpetual flow of visitors, gargantuan hunt breakfasts, hunters and coach-horses without number. He exceeded the limits of actual fact, perhaps, in these reminiscences. The magnificence had all vanished away, the land was sold, the plate was melted, not one of the immemorial oaks was left to show where the park had been; but Tonia was never tired of hearing of those prosperous years, and was glad to think she came of people who were magnates in the land.

CHAPTER II.

MISS LESTER, OF THE PATENT THEATRES

Besides Mrs. Potter, to whom she was warmly attached, Antonia had one friend, an actress at Drury Lane, who had acted in Mr. Thornton's comedy of *How to please her*, and who had made his daughter's acquaintance at the wings while his play was in progress. Patty Lester was, perhaps, hardly the kind of person a careful father would have chosen for his youthful daughter's bosom friend, for Patty was of the world worldly, and had somewhat lax notions of morality, though there was nothing to be said against her personally. No nobleman's name had ever been bracketed with hers in the newspapers, nor had her character suffered from any intrigue with a brother actor. But she gave herself no airs of superiority over her less virtuous sisters, nor was she averse to the frivolous attentions and the trifling gifts of those ancient beaux and juvenile macaronis who fluttered at the side-scenes and got in the way of the stage-carpenters.

Thornton had not reared his daughter in Arcadian ignorance of evil, and he had no fear of her being influenced by Miss Lester's easy views of conduct.

"The girl is as honest as any woman in England, but she is not a lady," he told Antonia, "and I don't want you to imitate her. But she has a warm heart, and is always good company, so I see no objection to your taking a dish of tea with her at her lodgings once in a way."

This "once in a way" came to be once or twice a week, for Miss Lester's parlour was all that Antonia knew of gaiety, and was a relief from the monotony of literary toil. Dearly as she loved to assist her father's labours, there came an hour in the day when the aching hand dropped on the manuscript or the tired eyes swam above the closely printed page; and then it was pleasant to put on her hat and run to the Piazza, where Patty was mostly to be found at home between the morning's rehearsal and the night's performance. Her lodgings were on a second floor overlooking the movement and gaiety of Covent Garden, where the noise of the waggons bringing asparagus from Mortlake and strawberries from Isleworth used to sound in her dreams, hours before the indolent actress opened her eyes upon the world of reality.

She was at home this windy March afternoon, squatting on the hearthrug toasting muffins, when Miss Thornton knocked at her door.

"Come in, if you're Tonia," she cried. "Stay out if you're an odious man."

"I doubt you expect some odious man," said Tonia, as she entered, "or you wouldn't say that."

"I never know when not to expect 'em, child. There are three or four of my devoted admirers audacious enough to think themselves always welcome to drop in for a dish of tea; indeed, one of 'em has a claim to my civility, for he is in the India trade, and keeps me in gunpowder and bohea. But 'tis only old General Granger I expect this afternoon – him that gave me my silver canister," added Patty, who never troubled about grammar.

"I would rather be without the canister than plagued by that old man's company," said Tonia.

"Oh, you are hard to please – unless 'tis some scholar with his mouth full of book talk! I find the General vastly entertaining. Sure he knows everybody in London, and everything that is doing or going to be done. He keeps me *aw courrong*," concluded Patty, whose French was on a par with her English.

She rose from the hearth, with her muffin smoking at the end of a long tin toasting-fork. Her parlour was full of incongruities – silver tea-canister, china cups and saucers glorified by sprawling red and blue dragons, an old mahogany tea-board and pewter spoons, a blue satin *négligé* hanging over the back of a chair, an open powder-box on the side table. The furniture was fine but shabby – the sort of fine shabbiness that satisfied the landlady's clients, who were mostly from the two patent

theatres. The house had a renown for being comfortable and easy to live in – no nonsense about early hours or quiet habits.

"Prythee make the tea while I butter the muffins," said Patty. "The kettle is on the boil. But take your hat off before you set about it. Ah, what glorious hair!" she said, as Antonia threw off the poor little gipsy hat; "and to think that mine is fiery red!"

"Nay, 'tis but a bright auburn. I heard your old General call it a trap for sunbeams. 'Tis far prettier than this inky black stuff of mine."

Antonia wore no powder, and the wavy masses of her hair were bound into a scarlet snood that set off their raven gloss. Her complexion was of a marble whiteness, with no more carnation than served to show she was a woman and not a statue. Her eyes, by some freak of heredity, were not black, like her mother's – whom she resembled in every other feature – but of a sapphire blue, the blue of Irish eyes, luminous yet soft, changeful, capricious, capable of dazzling joyousness, of profoundest melancholy. Brown-eyed, auburn-headed Patty looked at her young friend with an admiration which would have been envious had she been capable of ill-nature.

"How confoundedly handsome you are to-day!" she exclaimed; "and in that gown too! I think the shabbier your clothes are the lovelier you look. You'll be cutting me out with my old General."

"Your General has seen me a dozen times, and thinks no more of me than if I were a plaster image."

"Because you never open your lips before company, except to say yes or no, like a long-headed witness in the box. I wonder you don't go on the stage, Tonia. If you were ever so stupid at the trade your looks would get you a hearing and a salary."

"Am I really handsome?" Tonia asked, with calm wonder.

She had been somewhat troubled of late by the too florid compliments of booksellers and their assistants, whom she saw on her father's business; but she concluded it was their way of affecting gallantry with every woman under fifty. She had a temper that repelled disagreeable attentions, and kept the boldest admirer at arm's length.

"Handsome? You are the beautifullest creature I ever saw, and I would chop ten years off my old age to be as handsome, though most folks calls me a pretty woman," added Patty, bridling a little, and pursing up a cherry mouth.

She was a pink-and-white girl, with a complexion like new milk, and cheeks like cabbage-roses. She had a supple waist, plump shoulders, and a neat foot and ankle, and was a capable actress in all secondary characters. She couldn't carry a great playhouse on her shoulders, or make a dull play seem inspired, as Mrs. Pritchard could; or take the town by storm as Juliet, like Miss Bellamy.

"Well, I doubt my looks will never win me a fortune; but I hope I may earn money from the booksellers before long, as father does."

"Sure 'tis a drudging life – and you'd be happier in the theatre."

"Not I, Patty. I should be miserable away from my books, and not to be my own mistress. I work hard, and tramp to the city sometimes when my feet are weary of the stones; but father and I are free creatures, and our evenings are our own."

"Precious dull evenings," said Patty, with her elbows on the table and her face beaming at her friend. "Have a bit more muffin. I wonder you're not *awnweed* to death."

"I do feel a little *triste* sometimes, when the wind howls in the chimney, and every one in the house but me is in bed, and I have been alone all the evening."

"Which you are always."

"Father has to go to his club to hear the news. And 'tis his only recreation. But though I love my books, and to sit with my feet on the fender and read Shakespeare, I should love just once in a way to see what people are like; the women I see through their open windows on summer nights – such handsome faces, such flashing jewels, and with snowy feathers nodding over their powdered heads – "

"You should see them at Ranelagh. Why does not your father take you to Ranelagh? He could get a ticket from one of the fine gentlemen whose speeches he writes. I saw him talking to Lord Kilrush in the wings t'other night."

"Who is Lord Kilrush?"

"One of the finest gentlemen in town, and a favourite with all the women, though he is nearer fifty than forty."

"An old man?"

"*You* would call him so," said Patty, with a sigh, conscious of her nine and twenty years. "He'd give your father a ticket for Ranelagh, I'll warrant."

Tonia looked down at her brown stuff gown, and laughed the laugh of scorn.

"Ranelagh, in this gown!" she said.

"You should wear one of mine."

"Good dear, 'twould not reach my ankles!"

"I grant there's overmuch of you. Little David called you the Anakim Venus when he caught sight of you at the side scenes. 'Who's that magnificent giantess?' he asked."

"The people of Lilliput took Captain Gulliver for a giant, and the Brobdignagians thought him a dwarf. 'Tis a question of comparison," replied Tonia, huffed at the manager's criticism.

"Nay, don't be vexed, child. 'Tis a feather in your cap for Garrick to give you a second thought. Well, if Ranelagh won't suit, there is Mrs. Mandalay's dancing-room. She has a ball twice a week in the season, and a masquerade once a fortnight. You can borrow a domino from the costumier in the Piazza for the outlay of half a dozen shillings."

"Do the women of fashion go to Mrs. Mandalay's?"

"All the town goes there."

"Then I'll beg my father to take me. I am helping him with his new comedy, and I want to see what modish people are like – off the stage."

"Not half so witty as they are on it. Is there a part for me in the new play?"

Patty would have asked that question of Shakespeare's ghost had he returned to earth to write a new Hamlet. It was her only idea in association with the drama.

"Indeed, Patty, there is an impudent romp of quality you would act to perfection."

"I love a romp," cried Patty, clapping her hands. "Give me a pinafore and a pair of scarlet shoes, and I am on fire with genius. I hope David will bring out your dad's play, and that 'twill run a month."

"If it did he would give me a silk gown, and I might see Ranelagh."

"He is not a bad father, is he, Tonia?"

"Bad! There was never a kinder father."

"But he lets you work hard."

"I love the work next best to him that sets me to it."

"And he has been your only schoolmaster, and you are clever enough to frighten a simpleton like me."

"Nay, Patty, you are the cleverest, for you can do things – act, sing, dance. Mine is only book-learning; but such as it is, I owe it all to my father."

"I hate books. 'Twas as much as I could do to learn to read. But there's one matter in which your father has been unkind to you."

"No, no – in nothing."

"Yes," said Patty, shaking her head solemnly, "he has brought you up an atheist, never to go to church, not even on Christmas Day; and to read Voltaire" – with a shudder.

"Do you go to church, Patty? 'Tis handy enough to your lodgings."

"Oh, I am too tired of a Sunday morning, after acting six nights in a week; for if Bellamy and Pritchard are out of the bill and going out a-visiting, and strutting and grimacing in fine company, there's always a part for a scrub like me; and if I'm not in the play I'm in the burletta."

"And do you think you're any wickeder for not going to church twice every Sunday?"

"I always go at Christmas and at Easter," protested Patty, "and I feel myself a better woman for going. You've been brought up to hate religion."

"No, Patty, only to hate the fuss that's made about it, and the cruelties men have done to each other, ever since the world began, in its name."

"I wouldn't read Voltaire if I was you," said Patty. "The General told me 'twas an impious, indecent book."

"Voltaire is the author of more than forty books, Patty."

"Oh, is it an author? I thought 'twas the name of a novel, like 'Tom Jones,' only more impudent."

There came a knock at the door, and this time Patty knew it was her old General.

"Stop out, Beast!" she cried. "There's nobody at home to an old fool!" upon which courteous greeting the ancient warrior entered smiling.

"Was there ever such a witty puss?" he exclaimed. "I kiss Mrs. Grimalkin's velvet paw. Pray how many mice has Minette crunched since breakfast?"

His favourite jest was to attribute feline attributes to Patty, whose appreciation of his humour rose or fell in unison with his generosity. A pair of white gloves worked with silver thread, or a handsome ribbon for her hair secured her laughter and applause.

To-day Patty's keen glance showed her that the General was empty-handed. He had not brought her so much as a violet posy. He saluted Antonia with his stateliest bow, blinking at her curiously, but too short-sighted to be aware of her beauty in the dim light of the parlour, where evening shadows were creeping over the panelled walls.

Patty set the kettle on the fire and washed out the little china teapot, while she talked to her ancient admirer. He liked to watch her kitten-like movements, her trim sprightly ways, to take a cup of weak tea from her hand, and to tell her his news of the town, which was mostly wrong, but which she always believed. She thought him a foolish old person, but the pink of fashion. His talk was a diluted edition of the news we read in Walpole's letters – talk of St. James's and Leicester House, of the old king and his grandson, newly created Prince of Wales, of the widowed princess and Lord Bute, of a score of patrician belles whose histories were more or less scandalous, and of those two young women from Dublin, the penniless Gunnings, whose beauty had set the town in a blaze – sisters so equal in perfection that no two people were of a mind as to which was the handsomer.

Tonia had met the General often, and knew his capacity for being interesting. She rose and bade her friend good-bye.

"Nay, child, 'tis ill manners to leave me directly I have company. The General and I have no secrets."

"My Minette is a cautious puss, and will never confess to the singing-birds she has killed," said the dodderer.

Tonia protested that her father would be at home and wanting her. She saluted the soldier with her stateliest curtsy, and departed with the resolute *aplomb* of a duchess.

"Your friend's grand manners go ill with her shabby gown," said the General. "With her fine figure she should do well on the stage."

"There is too much of her, General. She is too tall by a head for an actress. 'Tis delicate little women look best behind the lamps."

Thornton was fond of his daughter, and had never said an unkind word to her; but he had no scruples about letting her work for him, having a fixed idea that youth has an inexhaustible fund of health and strength upon which age can never overdraw. He was proud of her mental powers, and believed that to help a hack-scribbler with his multifarious contributions to magazines and newspapers was the finest education possible for her. If they went to the playhouse together 'twas she who wrote a critique on the players next morning, while her father slept. Dramatic criticism in those days was but

scurvily treated by the Press, and Tonia was apt to expatiate beyond the limits allowed by an editor, and was mortified to see her opinions reduced to the baldest comment.

She talked to her father of Mrs. Mandalay's dancing-rooms. He knew there was such a place, but doubted whether 'twas a reputable resort. He promised to make inquiries, and thus delayed matters, without the unkindness of a refusal. Tonia was helping him with a comedy for Drury Lane – indeed, was writing the whole play, his part of the work consisting chiefly in running his pen across Tonia's scenes, and bidding her write them again in accord with his suggestions, which she did with equal meekness and facility. He grew a little lazier every day as he discovered his daughter's talent, and encouraged her to labour for him. He praised himself for having taught her Spanish, so that she had the best comedies in the world, as he thought, at her fingers' ends.

It was for the sake of the comedy Tonia urged her desire to see the *beau monde*.

"'Tis dreadful to write about people of fashion when one has never seen any," she said.

"Nay, child, there's no society in Europe will provide you better models than you'll find in yonder duodecimos," her father would say, pointing to Congreve and Farquhar. "Mrs. Millamant is a finer lady than any duchess in London."

"Mrs. Millamant is half a century old, and says things that would make people hate her if she was alive now."

"Faith, we are getting vastly genteel; and I suppose by-and-by we shall have plays as decently dull as Sam Richardson's novels, without a joke or an oath from start to finish," protested Thornton.

It was more than a month after Tonia's first appeal that her father came home to dinner one afternoon in high spirits, and clapped a couple of tickets on the tablecloth by his daughter's plate.

"Look there, slut!" he cried. "I seized my first chance of obliging you. There is a masked ball at Mrs. Mandalay's to-night, and I waited upon my old friend Lord Kilrush on purpose to ask him for tickets; and now you have only to run to the costumier's and borrow a domino and a mask, and see that there are no holes in your stockings."

"I always mend my stockings before the holes come," Antonia said reproachfully.

"You are an indefatigable wench! Come, there's a guinea for you; perhaps you can squeeze a pair of court shoes out of it, as well as the hire of the domino."

"You are a dear, dear, dearest dad! I'll ask Patty to go to the costumier's with me. She will get me a good pennyworth."

CHAPTER III.

AT MRS. MANDALAY'S ROOMS

Mrs. Mandalay's rooms were crowded, for Mrs. Mandalay's patrons included all the varieties of London society – the noble, the rich, the clever, the dull, the openly vicious, the moderately virtuous, the audaciously disreputable, masked and unmasked; the outsiders who came from curiosity; the initiated who came from habit; dissolute youth, frivolous old age, men and boys who came because they thought this, and only this, was life: to rub shoulders with a motley mob, to move in an atmosphere of ribald jokes and foolish laughter, air charged with the electricity of potential bloodshed, since at any moment the ribald jest might lead to the insensate challenge; to drink deep of adulterated wines, fired with the alcohol that inspires evil passions and kills thought. These were the diversions that men and women sought at Mrs. Mandalay's; and it was into this witch's cauldron that William Thornton plunged his daughter, reckless of whom she met or what she saw and heard, for it was an axiom in his blighting philosophy that the more a young woman knew of the world she lived in, the more likely she was to steer a safe course between its shoals and quicksands.

Antonia looked with amazement upon the tawdry spectacle – dominos, diamonds, splendour, and shabbiness, impudent faces plastered with white and red, beauty still fresh and young, boys still at the University, old men fitter for the hospital than for the drawing-room. Was *this* the dazzling scene she had longed for sometimes in the toilsome evenings, when her tired hand sank on the foolscap page, and in the pause of the squeaking quill she heard the clock ticking on the stairs and the cinders crumbling in the grate? She had longed for lighted rooms and joyous company, for the concerts, and dances, and dinners, and suppers she read about in the *Daily Journal*; but the scenes her imagination had conjured up were as different from this as paradise from pandemonium.

Dancing was difficult in such a crowd, but there was a country dance going on to the music of an orchestra of fiddles and French horns, stationed in a gallery over one end of the room. The music was a *pot-pourri* of favourite melodies in the "Beggar's Opera," and the strongly marked tunes beat upon Antonia's brain as she and her father stood against the wall near the entrance doors, watching the crowd.

A master of the ceremonies came to ask her if she would dance. Her father answered for her, somewhat curtly. No, the young lady had only looked in to see what Mrs. Mandalay's rooms were like.

"Mrs. Mandalay's rooms are too good to be made a show for country cousins," the man answered impudently, after a flying glance at Thornton's threadbare suit; "and Miss has too pretty a figure under her domino to shirk a dance."

"Be good enough to leave us to ourselves, sir. Our tickets have been paid for; and we have a right to consume this polluted atmosphere without having to suffer impertinence."

"Oh, if you come to that, sir, I carry a sword, and will swallow no insult from a beggarly parson; and there are plenty of handsome women pining for partners."

He edged off as he spoke, and was safe amongst the crowd before he finished his sentence.

"Let's go home, sir," said Antonia. "I never could have pictured such an odious place."

"'Tis one of the most fashionable assemblies in London, child."

"Then I wonder at the taste of Londoners. Pray, sir, let's go home. I should never have teased you to bring me here had I known 'twas like this; but you have at least cured me of the desire to come again – or to visit any place that resembles this."

"You are pettish and over-fastidious. I came here for your amusement, and you may stay here for mine. I can't waste coach hire because you are capricious. I must have something for my money. Do you stay here quietly, while I circulate and find a friend or two."

"Oh, father, don't leave me among this rabble! I shall die of disgust if any one speaks to me – like that vulgar wretch just now."

"Tush, Tonia, there are no women-eaters here; and you have brains enough to know how to answer any impudent jackanapes in London."

He was gone before she could say anything more. She had hated to be there even with her father at her side. It was agony to stand there alone, fanning herself with the trumpery Spanish fan that had been sent her with the domino. She was not shy as other women are on their first appearance in an assembly. She had been trained to despise her fellow-creatures, and had an inborn pride that would have supported her anywhere. But the scene gave her a feeling of loathing that she had never known before. The people seemed to her of an unknown race. Their features, their air exhaled wickedness. "The sons of Belial, flown with insolence and wine." She hated herself for being there, hated her father for bringing her there.

They had come very late, when the assembly was at its worst, or at its best, according to one's point of view. The modish people, who vowed they detested the rooms, and only looked in to see who was there, were elbowing their way among fat citizens and their wives from Dowgate, and rich merchants from Clapham Common; while the more striking figures in the crowd belonged obviously to the purlieu of Covent Garden and the paved courts near Long Acre.

Tonia watched them till, in spite of her aversion, she began to grow interested in the masks and the faces. The faces told their own story; but the masks had a more piquant attraction, suggesting mystery. She began to notice couples who were obviously lovers, and to imagine a romance here and there. Her eyes passed over the disreputable painted faces, and fixed on the young and beautiful, secure in pride of birth, the assurance of superiority. She caught furtive glances, the lingering clasp of hands, the smile that promised, the whisper that pleaded. Romance and mystery enough here to fill more volumes than Richardson had published. And then among the people who came in late, talked loud, and did not dance, there were such satins and brocades, velvet and lace, feathers and jewels, as neither the theatres nor her dreams had ever shown her. She was woman enough to look at these with pleasure, in spite of her masculine education.

She had forgotten how long she had been standing there when her father came back, smelling of brandy, and accompanied by a man whom she had been watching some minutes before, one of the late arrivals, who looked young at a distance, but old, or at best middle-aged, when he came near her. She had seen him surrounded by a bevy of women, who hung about him with an eager appreciation which would have been an excuse for vanity in a Solomon.

The new-comer's suit of mouse-coloured velvet was plainer than anybody else's, but his air and figure would have given distinction to a beggar's rags, and there needed not the star and ribbon half hidden under the lapel of his coat to tell her that he was a personage.

"My friend and patron, Lord Kilrush, desires to make your acquaintance, Antonia," her father said with his grand air.

She had heard of Lord Kilrush, an Irish peer, with an immense territory on the Shannon and on the Atlantic which he never visited; a man of supreme distinction in a world where the cut of a coat and the pedigree of a horse count for more than any moral attributes. While he had all the dignity of a large landowner, the bulk of his fortune was derived from his mother, who was the only child of an East Indian factor, "rich with the spoil of plundered provinces."

Antonia had been watching the modish women's manoeuvres long enough to be able to sink to the exact depth and rise with the assured grace of a fashionable curtsy. The perfect lips under the light lace of her mask relaxed in a grave smile, parting just enough to show the glitter of pearly teeth between two lines of carmine. Her flashing eyes and lovely mouth gave Kilrush assurance of beauty. It would have taken the nose of a Socrates, or a complexion pitted with the smallpox, to mar the effect of such eyes and such lips.

"Pray allow me to escort you through the rooms, and to get you a cup of chocolate, madam," he said, offering his arm. "Your father tells me that 'tis your first visit to this notorious scene. Mrs. Mandalay's chocolate is as famous as her company, and of a better quality – for it is innocent of base mixtures."

"Go with his lordship, Tonia," said her father, answering her questioning look; "you must be sick to death of standing here."

"Oh, I have amused myself somehow," she said. "It is like a comedy at the theatres – I can read stories in the people's faces."

She took Kilrush's arm with an easy air that astonished him.

"Then you like the Mandalay room?" he said, as he made a path through the crowd, people giving way to him almost as if to a royal personage.

He was known here as he was known in all pleasure places for a leader and a master spirit. It suited him to live in a country where he had no political influence. He had never been known to interest himself about any serious question in life. Early in his career, when his wife ran away with his bosom friend, his only comment was that she always came to the breakfast-table with a slovenly head, and it was best for both that they should part. He ran his rapier through his friend's left lung early one morning in the fields behind Montague House; but he told his intimates that it was not because he hated the scoundrel who had relieved him of an incubus, but because it would have been ungentle to let him live.

He conducted Antonia through the suite of rooms that comprised "Mrs. Mandalay's." There were two or three little side-rooms where people sat in corners and talked confidentially, as they do in such places to this day. The confidences may have been a shade more audacious then, an incipient intrigue more daringly conducted, but it was the same and the same – a married woman who despised her husband; a married man who detested his wife; a young lady of fashion playing high stakes for a coronet, and baulked or ruined at the game. Antonia glanced from one group to the other as if she knew all about them. To be a student of Voltaire is not to think too well of one's fellow-creatures. She had read Fielding too, and knew that women were fools and men reprobates. She had wept over Richardson's *Clarissa*, and knew that there had once been a virtuous woman, or that a dry-as-dust printer's elderly imagination had conceived such a creature.

One room was set apart for light refreshments, coffee and chocolate, negus and cakes; and here Kilrush found a little table in a corner, and seated her at it. The crowd in this room was so dense that it created a solitude. They were walled in by brocaded sacques and the backs of velvet coats, and could talk to each other without fear of being overheard. This was so much pleasanter than standing against a wall staring at strange faces that Antonia began to think she liked Mrs. Mandalay's. She took off her mask, unconscious that an adept in coquetry would have maintained the mystery of her loveliness a little longer. Kilrush was content to worship her for the perfection of her mouth, the half-seen beauty of her eyes. She flung off the little velvet *loup*, and gave him the effulgence of her face, with an unconsciousness of power that dazzled him more than her beauty.

"I was nearly suffocated," she said.

He was silent in a transport of admiration. Her face had an exotic charm. It was too brilliant for native growth. The South glowed in the lustre of her eyes and in the sheen of her raven hair. He had seen such faces in Italy. The towers and cupolas, the church bells, the market women's parti-coloured stalls, the lounging boatmen and clear white light of the *Isola Bella* came back to him as he looked at her. He had spent an autumn in the Borromean Palaces, a visitor to the lord of those delicious isles, and he had seen faces like hers, and had worshipped them, in the heyday of youth, when he was on his grand tour. He remembered having heard that Thornton had married a lovely Italian girl, whom he had stolen from her home in Lombardy, while he was travelling as bear-leader to an India merchant's son.

Antonia sipped her chocolate with a composure that startled him. Women – except the most experienced – were apt to be fluttered by his lightest attentions; yet this girl, who had never seen him till to-night, accepted his homage with a supreme unconcern, or indeed seemed unconscious of it. Her innocent assurance amused him. No rustic lass serving at an inn had ever received his compliments without a blush, for he had an air of always meaning more than he said.

"Your father told me he had reared you in seclusion, madam," he said, "and I take it this is your first glimpse of our gay world."

"My first and last," she replied. "I do not love your gay world. I did wrong to tease my father to bring me here. I imagined a scene so different."

"Tell me what your fancy depicted."

"Larger rooms, fewer people, more space and air – a *fête champêtre* by Watteau within doors; dancers who danced for love of dancing, and who were all young, not old wrinkled men and fat women; not painted grimacing faces, and an atmosphere cloudy with hair-powder."

"But is not this better than to sit in your lodgings and mope over books?"

"I never mope over books; they are my friends and companions."

"What, in the bloom of youth, when you should be dancing every night, gadding from one pleasure to another all day long? Books are the friends of old age. I shall take to books myself when I grow old."

Tonia's dark brows elevated themselves unconsciously, and her eyes expressed wonder. Was he not old enough already for books and retirement? The man of seven and forty saw the look and interpreted it.

"She knows I am old enough to be her father," he thought, "and that is the reason of her *sang froid*. Women of the world know that mine is the dangerous age – the age when a man who can love loves desperately, when concentration of purpose takes the place of youthful energy."

They sat in silence for a few minutes while she finished her chocolate, and while he summed up the situation. Then she rose hastily.

"I have been keeping you from your friends," she said.

"Oh, I have no friends here."

"Why, everybody was becking and bowing to you."

"I am on becking and bowing terms with everybody; but most of us hate each other. Let me get you some more chocolate."

"No, thank you. I must go back to my father."

They had not far to go. Thornton was at a table on the other side of the room, drinking punch with one of his patrons in the book trade, a junior partner who was frivolous enough to look in at Mrs. Mandalay's.

"Miss Thornton is so unkind as to flee at our solemnities," said Kilrush, "and swears she will never come here again."

"I told her she was a fool to wish to come," answered Thornton. "Your lordship has been uncommonly civil to take care of her. What the devil should a Grub Street hack's daughter do here? She has never had a dancing-lesson in her life."

"She ought to begin to-morrow. Serise would glory in such a pupil. Give her but the knack of a minuet, and she would show young peeresses how to move like queens, or like a swan gliding on the current."

"Oh, pray, my lord, don't flatter her. She has not the art to *riposter*, and she may think you mean what you say."

Kilrush went with them to the street, where his chairmen were waiting to carry him to St. James's Square, or to whatever gambling-house he might prefer to the solitude of his ancestral mansion. He wanted to send Antonia home in his chair, but Thornton declined the favour laughingly.

"Your chairmen would leave your service to-morrow if you sent them to such a shabby neighbourhood," he said, taking his daughter on his arm. "We shall find a hackney coach on the stand."

CHAPTER IV. A MORNING CALL

Tonia worked at the comedy, but did not find her idea of a woman of *ton* greatly enlarged by the women she had seen at Mrs. Mandalay's. Indeed, she began to think that her father was right, and that Mrs. Millamant – whose coarseness of speech disgusted her – was her best model. Yet, disappointing as that tawdry assembly had been, she felt as if she had gained something by her brief encounter with Lord Kilrush, and her pen seemed firmer when she tried to give life and meaning to the leading character in her play, the *rôle* intended for Garrick. She had begun by making him young and foolish. She remodelled the character, and made him older and wiser, and tried to give him the grand air; evolving from her inner consciousness the personality which her brief vision of Kilrush had suggested. Her ardent imagination made much out of little.

Of the man himself she scarcely thought, and would hardly have recognized his person had they met in the street. But the ideal man she endowed with every fascinating quality, every attracting grace.

Her father noted the improvement in her work.

"Why, this fourth act is the best we have done yet," he said, "and I think 'twas a wise stroke of mine to make our hero older – "

"Oh, father, 'twas my notion, you'll remember."

"You shall claim all the invention for your share, if you like, slut, so long as we concoct a piece that will satisfy Garrick, who grows more and more finical as he gets richer and more fooled by the town. The part will suit him all the better now we've struck a deeper note. He can't wish to play schoolboys all his life."

It was three weeks after the masquerade when there came a rap at the parlour door one morning, and the maid-servant announced Lord Kilrush.

Thornton was lying on a sofa in shirt-sleeves and slippers, smoking a long clay pipe, the picture of a self-indulgent sloven – that might have come straight from Hogarth. Tonia was writing at a table by an open window, the June sunshine gleaming in her ebon hair. Her father had been dictating and suggesting, objecting and approving, as she read her dialogue.

The visit was startling, for though Thornton was on easy terms with his lordship, who had known him at the University, and had patronized and employed him in his decadence, Kilrush had never crossed his threshold till to-day. Had he come immediately after the meeting at Mrs. Mandalay's, Antonia's father might have suspected evil; but Thornton had flung that event into the rag-bag of old memories, and had no thought of connecting his patron's visit with his daughter's attractiveness. He was about as incapable of thought and memory as a thinking animal can be, having lived for the past fourteen years in the immediate present, conscious only of good days and bad days, the luck or the ill-luck of the hour, without hope in the days that were coming, or remorse for the days that were gone.

Kilrush knew the man to the marrow of his bones, and although he had been profoundly impressed by Antonia's unlikeness to other women, he had waited a month before seeking to improve her acquaintance, and thus hoped to throw the paternal Argus off his guard.

Tonia laid down her pen, rose straight and tall as a June lily, and made his lordship her queenly curtsy, blushing a lovely crimson at the thought of the liberties that rapid quill had taken with his character.

"He is not half so handsome as my Dorifleur!" she thought; "but he has the grand air that no words can express. Poor little Garrick! What a genius he must be, and what heels he must wear, if he is to represent such a man!"

Kilrush returned the curtsy with a bow as lofty, and then bent over the ink-stained fingers and kissed them, as if they had been saintly digits in a crystal *reliquaire*.

"Does Miss Thornton concoct plays, as well as her gifted parent?" he inquired, with the smile that was so exquisitely gracious, yet not without the faintest hint of mockery.

"The jade has twice her father's genius," said Thornton, who had risen from the sofa and laid his pipe upon the hob of the wide iron grate, where a jug of wall-flowers filled the place of a winter fire. "Or, perhaps I should say, twice her father's memory, for she has a repertory of Spanish and Italian plays to choose from when her Pegasus halts."

"Nay, father, I am not a thief," protested Tonia.

Kilrush glanced at the hack-scribbler, remembering that awkward adventure with the farmer's cash-box which had brought so worthy a gentleman to the treadmill, and which might have acquainted him with Jack Ketch. He glanced from father to daughter, and decided that Antonia was unacquainted with that scandalous episode in her parent's clerical career.

After that one startled blush and conscious smile, the cause whereof he knew not, she was as unconcerned in his lordship's company to-day as she had been at Mrs. Mandalay's. She gave him no *minauderies*, no downcast eyelids or shy glances; but sat looking at him with a pleased interest while he talked of the day's news with her father, and answered him frankly and brightly when he discussed her own literary work.

"You are very young to write plays," he said.

"I wrote plays when I was five years younger," she answered, laughing, "and gave them to Betty to light the fires."

"And your father warmed his legs before the dramatic pyre, and never knew 'twas the flame of genius?"

"She was a fool to burn her trash," said Thornton. "I might have made a volume of it – 'Tragedies and Comedies, by a young lady of fifteen.'"

"I'll warrant Shakespeare burnt a stack of balderdash before he wrote *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, poor stuff as it is," said Kilrush.

"Is your lordship so very sure 'tis poor stuff?" asked Tonia.

"If it wasn't, don't you think Garrick would have produced it? He loves Shakespeare – a vastly respectable poet whose plays he can act without paying for them. Be sure you let me know when your comedy is to be produced, madam, for I should die of vexation not to be present at the first performance."

"Alas! there is a great gulf between a written play and an acted one," sighed Tonia. "Mr. Garrick may not like it. But 'tis more my father's play than mine, my lord. He finds the ideas, and I provide the words."

"She has a spontaneous eloquence that takes my breath away. But for the machinery, the fabric of the piece, the arrangement of the scenes, the method, the taste, the scope of the characters, and their action upon one another, I confess myself the author," Thornton said, in his grandiloquent way, having assumed his company manner, a style of conversation which he kept for persons of quality.

"I doubt Miss Thornton is fonder of study than of pleasure, or I should have seen her at Mrs. Mandalay's again –"

"I hate the place," interjected Tonia; "and if women of fashion are all like the painted wretches I saw there –"

"They all paint – white lead is the rule and a clean-washed face the exception," said Kilrush; "but 'twould not be fair to judge the *beau monde* by the herd you saw t'other night. Mrs. Mandalay's is an *olla podrida* of good and bad company. Your father must initiate you in the pleasures of Ranelagh."

"I have had enough of such pleasures. I had a curiosity – like Fatima's – to see a world that was hid from me. But for pleasure I prefer the fireside, and a novel by Richardson. If he would but give us a new *Clarissa*!"

"You admire *Clarissa*?"

"I adore, I revere her!"

"A pious simpleton who stood in the way of her own happiness. Why, in the name of all that's reasonable, did she refuse to marry Lovelace, when he was willing?"

Tonia flashed an indignant look at him.

"If she could have stooped to marry him she would have proved herself at heart a wanton!" she said, with an outspoken force that startled Kilrush.

Hitherto he had met only two kinds of women – the strictly virtuous, who affected an Arcadian innocence and whose talk was insupportably dull, and the women whose easy morals allowed the widest scope for conversation; but here was a girl of undoubted modesty, who was not afraid to argue upon a hazardous theme.

"You admire Clarissa for her piety, perhaps?" he said. "That is what our fine ladies pretend to appreciate, though they are most of them heathens."

"I admire her for her self-respect," answered Tonia. "That is her highest quality. When was there ever a temper so meek, joined with such fortitude, such heroic resolve?"

"She was a proud, self-willed minx," said Kilrush, entranced with the vivid expression of her face, with the fire in her speech.

"'Twas a woman's pride in her womanhood, a woman fighting against her arch enemy – "

"The man who loved her?"

"The man she loved. 'Twas that made the struggle desperate. She knew she loved him."

"If she had been kinder, now, and had let love conquer?" insinuated Kilrush.

"She would not have been Clarissa; she would not have been the long-suffering angel, the martyr in virtue's cause."

"Prythee, my lord, do not laugh at my daughter's high-flown sentiments," said Thornton. "I have done my best to educate her reason; but while there are romancers like Samuel Richardson to instil folly 'tis difficult to rear a sensible woman."

"That warmth of sentiment is more delightful than all your cold reason, Thornton; but I compliment you on the education which has made this young lady to tower above her sex."

"Oh, my lord, do not laugh at me. I have just learnt enough to know that I am ignorant," said Tonia, with her grand air – grand because so careless, as of one who is alike indifferent to the effect of her words and the opinion of those with whom she converses.

Kilrush prolonged his visit into a second hour, during which the conversation flitted from books to people, from romance to politics, and never hung fire. He took leave reluctantly, apologizing for having stayed so long, and gave no hint of repeating his visit, nor was asked to do so. But he meant to come again and again, having as he thought established himself upon a footing of intimacy. A Grub-Street hack could have no strait-laced ideas – a man who had been in jail for something very like larceny, and who had educated his young daughter as a free-thinker.

"She finds my conversation an agreeable relief after a ten years' *tête-à-tête* with Thornton," he told himself, as he picked his way through the filth of Green Street to Leicester Fields. "But 'tis easy to see she thinks I have passed the age of loving, and is as much at home with me as if I were her grandfather. Yet 'twas a beautiful red that flushed her cheek when I entered the room. Well, if she is pleased to converse with me 'tis something; and I must school myself to taste a platonic attachment. A Lovelace of seven and forty! How she would jeer at the notion!"

Lord Kilrush waited a fortnight before repeating his visit, and again called at an hour when Thornton was likely to be at home; but his third visit, which followed within a week of the second, happened late in the afternoon, when he found Antonia alone, but in no wise discomposed at the prospect of a *tête-à-tête*. She enjoyed his conversation with as frank and easy a manner as if she had been a young man, and his equal in station; and he was careful to avoid one word or look which might have disturbed her serenity. It was unflattering, perhaps, to be treated so easily, accepted so frankly as a friend of mature years; but it afforded him the privilege of a companionship that was fast becoming a necessity of his existence. The days that he spent away from Rupert Buildings were dull

and barren. His hours with Antonia had an unfailing charm. He forgot even twinges of gout, and the burden of time – that dread of old age and death which so often troubled his luxurious solitude.

She grew more enchanting as she became more familiar. She treated him with as cordial a friendship as if he had been her uncle. She would talk to him with her elbows on the table, and her long tapering fingers pushing back those masses of glossy hair which the ribbon could scarcely hold in place. Stray curls would fall over the broad white brow, and she had a way of tossing those random ringlets from her eyes that he could have sworn to among a thousand women.

He told her all that was worth telling of the world in which he lived and had lived. He had been a soldier till his thirtieth year; had travelled much and far; had lived in Paris among the encyclopedists, and had entertained Voltaire at his house in London. He had seen every dramatic troupe worth seeing in France, Italy, and Spain; had dabbled in necromancy, and associated with savants in every science, at home and abroad.

All his experiences interested Antonia. She had a way of entering into the ideas of another which he had never met with in any except the highest grade of women.

"Your kindness makes me an egotist," he said. "You ought to be the mistress of a political *salon*. Faith, I can picture our party politicians pouring their griefs and hatreds into your ear, cheered by your sympathy, inspired by your wit. But I doubt you must find this prosing of mine plaguey tiresome."

"No, no, no," she cried eagerly. "I want to know what the world is like. It is pleasant to listen to one who has seen all the places and people I long to see."

"You will see them with your own young eyes, perhaps, some day," he said, smiling at her.

She shook her head despondently, and waved the suggestion away as impossible.

One day in an expansive mood she consented to read an act of the comedy, now finished, and waiting only Thornton's final touches, and that spicing of the comic episodes on which he prided himself, and against which his daughter vainly protested.

"My father urges that we have to please three distinct audiences, and that scenes which delight people of good breeding are *caviare* to the pit, while the gallery wants even coarser fare, and must have some foolery dragged in here and there to put them in good humour. I'll not read you the gallery pages."

He listened as if to inspiration. He easily recognized her own work as opposed to her father's, the womanly sentiment of her heroine's speeches, her hero's lofty views of life. He ventured a suggestion or two at that first reading, and finding her pleased with his hints, he insisted on hearing the whole play, and began seriously to help her, and so breathed into her dialogue that air of the *beau monde* which enhances the charm of contemporary comedy. This collaboration, so delightful to him, so interesting to her, brought them nearer to each other than all their talk had done. He became the partner of her ideas, the sharer of her hopes. He taught her all that her father had left untaught – the mystery of modish manners, the laws of that society which calls itself good, and how and when to break them.

"For the parvenu 'tis a code of iron; for the fine gentleman there is nothing more pliable," he told her. "I have seen Chesterfield do things that would make a vulgarian shudder, yet with such benign grace that no one was offended."

Thornton was with them sometimes, and they sat on the play in committee. He, who professed to be the chief author, found himself overruled by the other two. They objected to most of his jokes as vulgar or stale. They would admit no hackneyed turns of speech. The comedy was to be a picture of life in high places.

"Begad, my lord, you'll make it too fine for the town, and 'twill be played to empty benches," remonstrated Thornton.

"Nothing is ever too fine for the town," answered Kilrush. "Do you think the folks in the gallery want their own humdrum lives reflected on the stage, or to look on at banquets of whelks

and twopenny porter? The mob love splendour, Mr. Thornton, and when they have not Bajazet or Richard, they like to see the finest fine gentlemen and ladies that a playwright can conceive."

Thornton gave way gracefully. He knew his lordship's influence at the theatres, and he had told Garrick that Kilrush had written a third of the play, but would not have his name mentioned.

"'Tis no better for that," said the manager, but in his heart liked the patrician flavour, and on reading *The Man of Mind* owned 'twas the best thing Thornton had written, and promised to produce it shortly.

By this time Kilrush and Antonia seemed old friends, and she looked back and thought how dull her life must have been before she knew him. He was the only man friend she had ever had except her father. She found his company ever so much more interesting than Patty Lester's, so that it was only for friendship's sake she ever went to the parlour over the piazza, or bade Patty to a dish of tea in Rupert Buildings. Patty opened her great brown eyes to their widest when she heard of Kilrush's visits.

"You jeer at my ancient admirers," she said, "and now you have got one with a vengeance!"

"He is no admirer – only an old friend of my father's who likes to sit and talk with me."

"Is that all? He must be very fond of you to sit in a second floor parlour. He is one of the finest gentlemen in town, and the richest. My General told me all about him."

"I thought that Irish peers were seldom rich," Tonia said carelessly, not feeling the faintest interest in her friend's fortune or position.

"This one is; and he is something more than an Irish landowner. His mother was an East India merchant's only child, and one of the richest heiresses in England. Those Indian merchants are rank thieves, the General says – thieves and slave-traders, and they used to bring home mountains of gold. But that was fifty years ago, in the good old times."

"Poor souls!" said Tonia, thinking of the slaves. "What a cruel world it is!"

It grieved her to think that her friend's wealth had so base a source. She questioned her father on their next meal together.

"Is it true that Lord Kilrush's grandfather was a slave-trader?" she asked.

"S'death, child, what put such trash in your head? Miss Lavenew was the daughter of a Calcutta merchant who dealt with the native princes in gold and gems, and who owned a tenth share of the richest diamond mine in the East. 'Tis the West Indian merchants who sometimes take a turn at the black trade, rather than let their ships lie in harbour till they ground on their own beef-bones."

It was a relief to know that her friend's fortune was unstained by blood.

"I do not think he would exist under the burden of such a heritage," she said to herself, meditating upon the question in the long summer afternoons, while she sat with open windows, trying not to hear street cries, as she bent over an Eastern story by Voltaire, which she was translating for one of the magazines.

Kilrush came in before her task was finished, but she laid her pen aside gladly, and rose to take his hat and stick from him with her dutiful daughterly air, just as she did for her father.

"Nay, I will not have you wait upon me, when 'tis I should serve you on my knees, as queens are served," he said.

It was seven o'clock, and he had come from a Jacobite dinner in Golden Square – a dinner at which the champagne and Burgundy had gone round freely before it came to drinking the king's health across a bowl of water. There was an unusual brightness in his eyes, and a faint flush upon cheeks that were more often pale.

"I did not expect to see your lordship to-day," Tonia said, repelled by his manner, so unlike the sober politeness to which he had accustomed her. "I thought you were going to Tunbridge Wells."

"My coach was at the door at ten o'clock this morning, the postillions in their saddles, when I sent them all to the devil. I found 'twas impossible to leave this stifling town."

"A return of your gout?" she asked, looking at him wonderingly.

"No, madam, 'twas not my gout, as you call it, though I never owned to more than a transient twinge. 'Twas a disease more deadly, a malady more killing."

He made a step towards her, wanting to clasp her to his breast in the recklessness of a long suppressed passion, but drew back at the sound of a step on the stair.

She looked at him still with the same open wonder. She could scarcely believe that this was Kilrush, the friend she admired and revered. Her father came in while she stood silent, perplexed, and distressed at the transformation.

Kilrush flung himself into an armchair with a muttered oath. Then looking up, he caught the expression of Tonia's face, and it sobered him. He had been talking wildly; had offended her, his divinity, the woman to win whom was the fixed purpose of his mind – to win her at his own price, which was a base one. He had been tactful hitherto, had gained her friendship, and in one unlucky moment he had dropped the mask, and it might be that she would trust him no more.

"Too soon, too soon," he told himself. "I have made her like me. I must make her love me before I play the lover."

He let Thornton talk while he sat in a gloomy silence. It wounded him to the quick to discover that she still thought of him as an elderly man, whose most dreaded misfortune was a fit of the gout. 'Twas to sober age she had given her confidence.

Thornton had been with Garrick, and had come home radiant. The play was to be put in rehearsal next week, with a magnificent cast.

"But I fear your lordship is indisposed," he said, when Kilrush failed to congratulate him on his good fortune.

"My lordship suffers from a disease common to men who are growing old. I am sick of this petty life of ours, and all it holds."

"I am sorry to hear you talk like one of the Oxford Methodists," said Thornton. "It is their trick to disparage a world they have not the spirit or the fortune to enjoy."

"They have their solatium in the kingdom of saints," said Kilrush. "I dare not flatter myself with the hope of an Elysium where I shall again be young and handsome, and capable of winning the woman I love."

"Nor do you fear any place of torment where the pleasing indiscretions of a stormy youth are to be purged with fire," retorted Thornton, gaily.

"No, I am like you – and Miss Thornton – I stake my all upon the only life I know and believe in."

He glanced at Tonia to see how the materialist's barren creed sat on her bright youth. She gave a thoughtful sigh, and her eyes looked dreamily out to the summer clouds sailing over Wren's tall steeple. She was thinking that if she could have accepted Mrs. Potter's creed, and believed in a shining city above the clouds and the stars, it would have been sweet to hope for reunion with the mother whose face she could not remember, but whose sweetness and beauty her father loved to praise, even now after nineteen years of widowhood.

"Your lordship is out of spirits," said Thornton. "Tonia shall give us a dish of tea."

"No, I will not be so troublesome. I am out of health and out of humour. Miss Thornton was right, I dare swear, when she suggested the gout – my gout – an old man's chronic malady. I have been dining with a crew of boisterous asses who won't believe the Stuarts are beaten, in spite of the foolish heads that are blackening on Temple Bar. *J'ai le vin mauvais*, and am best at home."

He kissed Antonia's hand, that cold hand which had never thrilled at his touch, nodded good-bye to Thornton, and hurried away.

"Kilrush is not himself to-day," said Thornton.

"I'm afraid he has been taking too much wine," said Antonia. "He had the strangest manner, and said the strangest things."

"What things?"

"Oh, a kind of wild nonsense that meant nothing."

She was not accustomed to see any one under the influence of liquor. Her father was, by long habit, proof against all effects of the nightly punch-bowl, and however late he came from "The Portico," he had always his reasoning powers, and legs steady enough to carry him up two flights of stairs without stumbling.

CHAPTER V. A SERIOUS FAMILY

Lord Kilrush posted to Tunbridge Wells the day after the Jacobite dinner, and found a herd of fine people he knew parading the Pantiles, or sauntering on the common, among Jews and Germans, pinmakers' wives from Smock Alley, and rural squires with red-cheeked daughters. He drank the waters, and nearly died of *ennui*. He would have liked the place better if it had been a solitude. Wit no longer aroused him, not even George Selwyn's; beauty had ceased to charm, except in one face, and that was two and thirty miles away. That chronic weariness which he knew for the worst symptom of advancing years increased with every hour of fashionable rusticity. The air at the Wells was delicious, the inn was comfortable, his physician swore that the treatment was improving his health. He left the place at an hour's notice, to the disgust of his body-servant, and posted back to town. He preferred the gloom of his great silent house in St. James's Square, where he lived a hermit's life in his library when London was empty. In years gone by he had spent the summer and autumn in a round of country visits, diversified with excursions to châteaux in the environs of Paris, and a winter at Florence or Rome, everywhere admired and in request. Scarce a season had passed without rumours of his impending marriage with some famous beauty, or still more famous fortune. But for the last five or six years he had wearied of society, and had restricted his company to a few chosen friends, men of his own age, with whom he could rail at the follies of the new generation – men who had known Bolingbroke in his day of power, and had entertained Voltaire at their country seats in the year '29.

Were Tonia's violet eyes the lodestars that drew him back to town? He was singing softly to himself as he walked up Shooter's Hill, being ever merciful to the brute creation, and loving horses and dogs better than he loved men.

"Thine eyes are lodestars and thy breath sweet air," he sang, twirling his clouded cane; and the thought that he would soon see those lovely eyes made him gay. But his first visit was not to Rupert Buildings. He knew that he had shocked and disgusted Antonia, and that he must give her time to recover her old confidence. It had been but an impetuous movement, a waft of passionate feeling, when he stretched out his arms towards her, yearning to clasp her to his breast; but her fine instinct had told her that this was the lover and not the friend. He must give her time to think she had mistaken him. He must play the comedy of indifference.

He ordered his favourite hack on the day after his return from the Wells, and rode by Westminster Bridge, only opened in the previous autumn, to Clapham, past Kennington Common, where poor Jemmy Dawson had suffered for his share in the rebellion of '45, by pleasant rustic roads where the perfume of roses exhaled from prosperous citizens' gardens, surrounding honest, square-built brick houses, not to be confounded with the villa, which then meant a demi-mansion on a classic model, secluded in umbrageous grounds, and not a flimsy bay-windowed packing-case in a row of similar packing-cases.

Clapham was then more rustic than Haslemere is now, and the common was the Elysian Fields of wealthy city merchants and some persons of higher quality. The shrubberied drive into which Kilrush rode was kept with an exquisite propriety, and those few flowering shrubs that bloom in September were unfolding their petals under an almost smokeless sky. He dismounted before a handsome house more than half a century old, built before the Revolution, a solid, red-brick house with long narrow windows, and a handsome cornice, pediment, and cupola masking the shining black tiles of the low roof. A shell-shaped canopy, richly carved, and supported by cherubic brackets, sheltered the tall doorway. The open door offered a vista of garden beyond the hall, and Kilrush walked straight through to the lawn, while his groom led the horses to the stable yard, a spacious quadrangle screened by intervening shrubberies.

A middle-aged woman of commanding figure was seated at a table under the spreading branches of a plane with a young man, who rose hurriedly, and went to meet the visitor. The lady was Mrs. Stobart, the widow of a Bristol ship-owner, and the young man was her only son, late of a famous dragoon regiment. Both were dressed with a gloomy severity that set his lordship's teeth on edge, but both had a certain air of distinction not to be effaced by their plain attire.

"This is very kind of your lordship," said George Stobart, as they shook hands. "My mother told me you were at Tunbridge Wells. She saw your name in the *Gazette*."

"Your mother was right, George; but the inanity of the place wore me out in a week, and I left before I had given the waters a chance of killing or curing me!"

He kissed Mrs. Stobart's black mitten, and dropped into a chair at her side, after vouchsafing a distant nod to a young woman who sat at a pace or two from the table, sewing the seam of a coarse linen shirt, with her head discreetly bent. She raised a pair of mild brown eyes, and blushed rosy red as she acknowledged his lordship's haughty greeting, and he noticed that Stobart went over to speak to her before he resumed his seat.

There were some dishes of fruit on the table, Mrs. Stobart's work-basket and several books – the kind of books Kilrush loathed, pamphlets in grey paper covers, sermons in grey boards, the literature of that Great Revival which had spread a wave of piety over the United Kingdom, from John o' Groat's to the Land's End, and across the Irish Channel from the Liffey to the Shannon.

Mrs. Stobart was his first cousin, the daughter of his father's elder sister and of Sir Michael MacMahon, an Irish judge. Good looks ran in the blood of the Delafields, and only two years ago Kilrush had been proud of his cousin, who until that date was a distinguished figure in the fashionable assemblies of London and Bath, and whose aquiline features and fine person were set off by powder and diamonds, and the floral brocades and flowing sacques which "that hateful woman," Madame de Pompadour, whom everybody of *ton* abused and imitated, had brought into fashion. The existence of such women is, of course, a disgrace to civilization; but while their wicked reign lasts, persons of quality must copy their clothes.

Two years ago George Stobart had been one of the most promising soldiers in His Majesty's army, a man who loved his profession, who had distinguished himself as a subaltern at Fontenoy, and was marked by his seniors for promotion. He had been also one of the best-dressed and best-mannered young men in London society, and at the Bath and the Wells a star of the first magnitude.

What was he now? Kilrush shuddered as he marked the change.

"A sanctimonious prig," thought his lordship; "a creature of moods and hallucinations, who might be expected at any hour to turn lay preacher, and jog from Surrey to Cornwall on one of his superannuated chargers, bawling the blasphemous familiarities of the new school to the mob on rural commons, escaping by the skin of his teeth from the savages of the manufacturing districts, casting in his itinerant lot with Whitefield and the Wesleys."

To Kilrush such a transformation meant little short of lunacy. He was indignant at his kinsman's decadence; and when he gave a curt and almost uncivil nod to the poor dependent, bending over her plain needlework yonder betwixt sun and shade, it was because he suspected that pretty piece of lowborn pink-and-white to have some part in the change that had been wrought so suddenly.

Two years ago, at an evening service in John Wesley's chapel at the Old Foundry, George Stobart had been "convinced of sin." Swift as the descent of the dove over the waters of the Jordan had been the awakening of his conscience from the long sleep of boyhood and youth. In that awful moment the depth of his iniquity had been opened to him, and he had discovered the hollowness of a life without God in the world. He had looked along the backward path of years, and had seen himself a child, drowsily enduring the familiar liturgy, sleeping through the hated sermon; a lad at Eton, making a jest of holy things, scorning any assumption of religion in his schoolfellows, insolent to his masters, arrogant and uncharitable, shirking everything that did not minister to his own pleasures or

his own aims, studious only in the pursuit of selfish ambitions, dreaming of future greatness to be won amidst the carnage of battles as ruthless, as unnecessary, as Malplaquet.

And following those early years of self-love and impiety there had come a season of darker sins, of the sins which prosperous youth calls pleasure, sins that had sat so lightly on the slumbering conscience, but which filled the awakened soul with horror.

His first impulse after that spiritual regeneration was to sell out of the army. This was the one tangible and irrevocable sacrifice that lay in his power. The more he loved a soldier's career, the more ardently he had aspired to military renown, the more obvious was the duty of renunciation. The treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle had but just been concluded, and the troubles in America had not begun, so there seemed no chance of his regiment being sent on active service, but his conduct seemed not the less extraordinary to his commanding officer.

"Do you do this to please your mother?" he asked.

"No, sir; I do it to please Christ."

The colonel rapped his forehead significantly as Stobart left the room.

"Another victim of the Oxford Methodists," he said. "If they are allowed to go on, England will be peopled with hare-brained enthusiasts, and we shall have neither soldiers nor sailors."

Mrs. Stobart was furious with her son for his abandonment of a career in which she had expected him to win distinction. For some months after his "call" she had refused to speak to him, and had left him to his solitary meditations in his own rooms at Stobart Lodge. In this gloomy period they had met only at meals, and it had vexed her to see that her son took no wine, and refused all the daintier dishes upon the table, all those ragouts and salmis that adorned the board in sumptuous covered dishes of Georgian silver, and which were the pride of cook and dinner-giver.

"I give myself a useless trouble in looking at the bill of fare every morning," Mrs. Stobart said angrily, as the side dishes were removed untasted, breaking in upon a melancholy silence that had lasted from the soup to the game. "God knows I need little for myself; but you used to appreciate a good dinner."

"I have learnt to appreciate higher things, madam."

"I might as well order a leg of mutton and a suet pudding every day in the week."

"Indeed, my dear mother, I desire nothing better."

"With a cook at forty guineas a year!"

"Dismiss her, and let the kitchen wench dress our simple meals."

"And make myself a laughing-stock to my friends."

"To your idle acquaintances only – friends esteem us for deeper reasons. Ah, madam, if you would but hearken to the voices I hear, court the friends I love, you would scorn the worldling's life as I scorn it. To the heir of a boundless estate in the Kingdom of Heaven 'tis idle to waste thought and toil upon a trumpery speck of earth."

"Oh, those Oxford Methodists! You have caught their jargon. I am a good Churchwoman, George, and I hate cant."

"You are a good woman, madam. But what is it to be a good Churchwoman? To attend a morning service once a week in a church where there is neither charity nor enthusiasm, upon whose dull decorum the hungry and the naked dare not intrude – a service that takes no cognizance of sinners, save in a formula that the lips repeat while the heart remains dead; to eat a cold dinner on the Sabbath in order that your servants may join in the same heartless mockery of worship; to listen to the barren dogma of a preacher whose life you know for evil, and whose intellect you despise."

Mother and son had many such conversations – oases in a desert of sullen silence – before Mrs. Stobart's conversion; but that conversion came at last, partly by the preaching of John Wesley, whom her son worshipped, and partly by the influence of Lady Huntingdon and other ladies of birth and fortune, whose example appealed to the fashionable Maria Stobart as no meaner example could have done. She began to think less scornfully of the Great Revival when she found her equals in

rank among the most ardent followers of Whitefield and the Wesleys: and within a year of her son's awakening she, too, became convinced of sin, the firstfruits of which conversion were shown by the dismissal of her forty-guinea cook, her second footman, the third stable servant, and the sale of a fine pair of carriage-horses. She had even contemplated dispensing with her own maid, but was prevented by a sense of her patrician incapability of getting into her clothes or out of them without help. She made, perhaps, a still greater sacrifice by changing her dressmaker from a Parisienne in St. James's to a woman at Kennington, who worked for the Quaker families on Denmark Hill.

After about ten minutes' conversation with this lady, of whose mental capacity he had but a poor opinion, Lord Kilrush invited her son to a turn in the fruit garden – a garden planned fifty years before, and maintained in all the perfection of espaliered walks and herbacious borders, masking the spacious area devoted to celery, asparagus, and the homelier vegetables. High brick walls, heavily buttressed, surmounted this garden on three sides, the fourth side being divided from lawn and parterre by a ten-foot yew hedge. At the further end, making a central point in the distance, there was a handsome red-brick orangery, flanked on either side by a hothouse, while at one angle of the wall an octagonal summer-house of two stories overlooked the whole, and afforded an extensive view of the open country across the river, from Notting Hill to Harrow. Established wealth and comfort could hardly find a better indication than in this delightful garden.

"Upon my soul," cried Kilrush, "you have a little paradise in this *rus in urbe*! Come, George, I am glad to see you look so well in health, and I hope soon to be gratified by seeing you make an end of your crazy life, and return to a world you were created to serve and adorn. If the army will not please you, there is the political arena open to every young man of means and talent. I should like to see your name rank with the Townsends and the Pelhams before I die."

"I have no taste for politics, sir; and for my crazy life, sure it lasted seven and twenty years, and came to a happy ending two years ago."

"Nine and twenty! Faith, George, that's too old for foolery. John Wesley was a lad at college, and Whitefield was scarce out of his teens when he gave himself up to these pious hallucinations; and they were both penniless youths who must needs begin their journey without scrip or sack. But you, a man of fortune, a soldier, one of the young heroes of Fontenoy, that you could be caught by the rhapsodies that carry away a London mob of shop-boys and servant-wenchies, or a throng of semi-savage coal-miners at Kingswood, in that contagion of enthusiasm to which crowds are subject – that *you* could turn Methodist! Pah, it makes me sick to think of your folly!"

"Perhaps some day your lordship will come over and help us. After my mother's conversion there is no heart so stubborn that I should despair of its being changed."

"Your mother is a fool! Well, I don't want to quarrel with you, so we'll argue no further. After all, in a young man these follies are but passing clouds. Had you not taken so serious a step as to leave the army I should scarcely have vexed myself on your account. By the way, who is that seamstress person I saw sitting on the lawn, and whom I have seen here before to-day?"

His eyes were on George's face, and the conscious flush he expected to see passed over the young man's cheek and brow as he spoke.

"She is a girl whose conscience was awakened in the same hour that saw my redemption; she is my twin-sister in Christ."

"That I can understand," said Kilrush, with the air of humouring a madman, "but why the devil do I find her established here?"

"She is the daughter of a journeyman printer, her mother a drunkard and her father an atheist. Her home was a hell upon earth. Her case had been brought before Mr. Wesley, who was touched by her unaffected piety. I heard her history from his lips, and made it my duty to rescue her from her vile associations."

"How came you by the knowledge of your spiritual twinship?"

"She was seated near me in the meeting-house, and I was the witness of her agitation, of the Pentecostal flame that set her spirit on fire; I saw her fall from the bench, with her forehead bent almost to the floor on which she knelt. Her whole frame was convulsed with sobs which she strove with all her might to restrain. I tried to raise her from the ground, but her ice-cold hand repulsed mine, and the kneeling figure was as rigid as if it had been marble."

"A cataleptic seizure, perhaps. Your Brotherhood of the Foundery has much to answer for."

"It has many to answer for," George retorted indignantly – "thousands of souls rescued from Satan."

"Had that meek-looking young woman been one of his votaries? If so, I wonder your mother consented to harbour her. It is one thing to entertain angels unawares, but knowingly to receive devils – "

"Scoff as you will, sir, but do not slander a virtuous girl because she happens to be of low birth."

"If she was not a sinner, why this convulsion of remorse for sin? I cannot conceive the need of self-humiliation in youth that has never gone astray."

"Does your lordship think it is enough to have lived what the world calls a moral life, never to have been caught in the toils of vice? The fall from virtue is a terrible thing; but there is a state of sin more deadly than Mary Magdalen's. There is the sin of the infidel who denies Christ; there is the sin of the ignorant and the unthinking, who has lived aloof from God. It was to the conviction of such a state that Lucy Foreman was awakened that night."

"Did you enter into conversation with her after the – the remarkable experience?" asked Kilrush, with a cynical devilry lighting his dark grey eyes as he watched his young kinsman's face.

It was a fine frank face, with well-cut features and eyes of the same dark grey as his lordship's, a face that had well become the dragoon's Roman headgear, and which had a certain poetical air to-day with the unpowdered brown hair thrown carelessly back from the broad forehead.

"No, it was not till long after that night that I introduced myself to her. It was not till after my mother's conversion that I could hope to win her friendship for this recruit of Christ. I had heard Lucy's story in the mean-time, and I knew that she was worthy of all that our friendship could do for her."

"And you persuaded your mother to take her into her service?"

"She is not a servant," George said quickly.

"What else?"

"She is useful to my mother – works with her needle, attends to the aviary, and to the flowers in the drawing-room – "

"All that sounds like a servant."

"We do not treat her as a servant."

"Does she sit at table with you?"

"No. She has her meals in the housekeeper's room. It is my mother's arrangement, not mine."

"You would have her at the same table with the granddaughter of the seventeenth Baron Kilrush?"

"I have ceased to consider petty distinctions. To me the premier duke is of no more importance than Lucy Foreman's infidel father – a soul to be saved or lost."

"George," said Kilrush, gravely, "let me tell you, as your kinsman and friend, that you are in danger of making a confounded mess of your life."

"I don't follow you."

"Oh yes, you do. You know very well what I mean. You have played the fool badly enough already, by selling your commission. But there are lower depths of folly. When a man begins to talk as you do, and to hanker after some pretty bit of plebeian pink-and-white, one knows which way he is drifting."

He paused, expecting an answer, but George walked beside him in a moody silence.

"There is one mistake which neither fate nor the world ever forgives in a man," pursued Kilrush, "and that is an ignoble marriage; it is an error whose consequences stick to him for the whole course of his life, and he can no more shake off the indirect disadvantages of the act than he can shake off his lowborn wife and her lowborn kin. I will go further, George, and say that if you make such a marriage I will never forgive you, never see your face again."

"Your lordship's threats are premature. I have not asked your permission to marry, and I have not given you the slightest ground for supposing that I contemplate marriage."

"Oh yes, you have. That young woman yonder is ground enough for my apprehension. You would not have intruded her upon your home if you were not *épris*. Take a friendly counsel from a man of the world, George, and remember that although my title dies with me, my fortune is at my disposal, and that you are my natural heir."

"Oh, sir, that would be the very last consideration to influence me."

"Sure I know you are stubborn and hot-headed, or you would not have abandoned a soldier's career without affording me the chance to dissuade you. I came here to-day on purpose to give you this warning. 'Twas my duty, and I have done it."

He gave a sigh of relief, as if he had flung off a troublesome burden.

As they turned to go back to the lawn, Lucy Foreman came to meet them – a slim figure of medium height, a pretty mouth and a *nez retroussé*, reddish brown hair with a ripple in it, the pink and white of youth in her complexion; but her feet and ankles, her hands and her ears, the "points," to which the connoisseur's eye looked, had a certain coarseness.

"Not even a casual strain of blue blood here," thought Kilrush; "but 'tis true I have seen duchesses as coarsely moulded."

She had come at her mistress's order to invite them to a dish of tea on the lawn. Kilrush assented, though it was but five o'clock, and he had not dined. They walked by the damsel's side to the table under the plane, where the tea-board was set ready. Having given expression to his opinion, his lordship was not disinclined to become better acquainted with this Helen of the slums, so that he might better estimate his cousin's peril. She resumed her distant chair and her needlework, as Kilrush and George sat down to tea, and was not invited to share that elegant refreshment. The young man's vexed glance in her direction would have been enough to betray his *penchant* for the humble companion.

Mrs. Stobart forgot herself so far as to question her cousin about some of the fine people whose society she had renounced.

"Though I no longer go to their houses I have not ceased to see them," she said. "We meet at Lady Huntingdon's. Lady Chesterfield and Lady Coventry are really converts; but I fear most of my former friends resort to that admirable woman's assemblies out of curiosity rather than from a searching for the truth."

"Her *protégé*, Whitefield, has had as rapid a success as Garrick or Barry," said Kilrush. "He is a powerful orator of a theatrical type, and not to have heard him preach is to be out of the fashion. I myself stood in the blazing sun at Moorfields to hear him, when he first began to be cried up; but having heard him I am satisfied. The show was a fine show, but once is enough."

"There are but too many of your stamp, Kilrush. Some good seed must ever fall on stony places; yet the harvest has been rich enough to reward those who toil in the vineyard – rich in promise of a day when there shall be no more railing and no more doubt."

"And when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and Frederick and Maria Theresa shall love each other like brother and sister, and France shall be satisfied with less than half the earth," said Kilrush, lightly. "You have a pretty little maid yonder," he added in a lower voice, when George had withdrawn from the tea-table, and seemed absorbed in a book.

"She is not my maid, she is a brand snatched from the burning. I am keeping her till I can place her in some household where she will be safe herself, and a well-spring of refreshing grace for those with whom she lives."

"And in the mean time, don't you think there may be a certain danger for your son in such close proximity with a pretty girl – of that tender age?"

"My son! Danger for my son in the society of a journeyman's daughter – a girl who can but just read and write? My good Kilrush, I am astounded that you could entertain such a thought."

"I'm glad you consider my apprehensions groundless," said his lordship, stifling a yawn as he rose to take leave. "Poor silly woman," he thought. "Well, I have done my duty. But it would have been wiser to omit that hint to the mother. If she should plague her son about his *penchant*, ten to one 'twill make matters worse. An affair of that kind thrives on opposition."

CHAPTER VI.

A WOMAN WHO COULD SAY NO

Lord Kilrush allowed nearly a month to elapse before he reappeared in Rupert Buildings. He had absented himself in the hope that Antonia would miss his company; and her bright smile of welcome told him that his policy had been wise. She had, indeed, forgotten the sudden gust of passion that had scared her by a suggestion of strangeness in the friend she had trusted. She had been very busy since that evening. Her father's play was in rehearsal, and while Thornton spent his days at Drury Lane and his nights at "The Portico," she had to do most of his magazine work, chiefly translations of essays or tales by Voltaire or Diderot, and even to elaborate such scraps of news as he brought her for the *St. James's*, *Lloyd's*, or the *Evening Post*, all which papers opened their columns to gossip about the town.

"What the devil has become of Kilrush?" Thornton had ejaculated several times. "He used to bring me the last intelligence from White's and the Cocoa Tree."

He had called more than once in St. James's Square during the interval, but had not succeeded in seeing his friend and patron. And now Kilrush reappeared, with as easy a friendliness as if there had been no break in his visits. He brought a posy of late roses for Antonia, the only offering he ever made her whom he would fain have covered with jewels richer than stud the thrones of Indian Emperors.

"'Tis very long since we have seen your lordship," Tonia said, as he seated himself on the opposite side of the Pembroke table that was spread with her papers and books. "If my father had not called at your house and been told that you were in fairly good health we should have feared you were ill, since we know we have done nothing to offend you."

Her sweet simplicity of speech, the directness of her lovely gaze smote him to the heart. Still – still she trusted him, still treated him as if he had been a benevolent uncle, while his heart beat high with a passion that it was a struggle to hide. Yet he was not without hope, for in her confiding sweetness he saw signs of a growing regard.

"And was I indeed so happy as to be missed by you?"

"We missed you much – you have been so kind to my father, bringing him the news of the town; and you have been still kinder to me in helping me with your criticism of our comedy."

"'Twas a privilege to advise so intelligent an author. I have been much occupied since I saw you last, and concerned about a cousin of mine who is in a bad way."

"I hope he is not ill of the fever that has been so common of late."

"No, 'tis not a bodily sickness. His fever is the Methodist rant. He has taken the new religion."

"Poor man!" said Tonia, with good-humoured scorn.

She had heard none of the new preachers; but all she had been told, or had read about them, appealed to her sense of the ridiculous. She had been so imbued with the contempt for all religious observances, that she could feel nothing but a wondering pity for people whose thoughts and lives could be influenced by a two-hours' sermon in the open air. To this young votary of pure reason the enthusiasm of crowds seemed a fanatical possession tending towards a cell in Bedlam.

"Unhappily, the disease is complicated by another fever, for the fellow is in love with a simpering piece of prettiness that he and his mother have picked out of a Moorfields' gutter; and my apprehension is that this disciple of Evangelical humility will forget that he is a gentleman and marry a housemaid."

"Would you be very angry with him?"

"Yes, Miss Thornton; and he would feel the consequences of my anger to his dying day – for, so far as my fortune goes, I should leave him a beggar."

"Has he no fortune of his own?"

"I believe he has a pittance – a something in the funds left him by an uncle on his father's side. But his mother's estate is at her own disposal; she is a handsome woman still, and may cheat him by a second marriage."

"Do you think it so great a crime for a gentleman to marry his inferior?"

"Oh, I have old-fashioned notions, perhaps. I think a man of good family should marry in his own rank, if he can't marry above it. He should never have to apologize for his wife, or for her kindred. 'Tis a foolish Irish pride that we Delafields have cherished; but up to this present hour there is not a label upon our family tree that I am ashamed to recall."

"I think my father told me that your lordship's wife was a duke's daughter."

"My wife was a – "

He had started to his feet at Tonia's speech, in angry agitation. He had never been able to forgive the wife who had disgraced him, or to think of her with common charity, though he had carried off his mortification with a well-acted indifference, and though it was ten years since that frail offender had come to the end of her wandering in a cemetery outside the walls of Florence.

"Miss Thornton, for God's sake let us talk of pleasant things, not of wives or husbands. Marriage is the gate of hell."

"Sure, my lord, there must be happy marriages."

"Enough to serve as baits to hook fools. I grant you there are marriages that seem happy – nay, I will say that are happy – but 'tis not the less a fact that to chain a man and woman to each other for life is the way to make them the deadliest enemies. The marriage bond was invented to keep estates together, not to bind hearts."

Tonia listened with a thoughtful air, but gave no sign of assent.

"Surely you must agree with me," he continued – "you who have been taught to take a philosophical view of life."

"I have never applied my philosophy to the subject; but my comedy ends with a happy marriage. I should be sorry to think that 'twas like a fairy tale, and that there are no lovers as noble as Dorifleur, no women as happy as Rosalia."

"It is a fairy tale, dear madam; 'tis the unlikeness to life that charms us. We go to the play on purpose to be deluded by pictures of impossible felicity – men of never-to-be-shaken valour, women of incorruptible virtue, shadows that please us in a three-hours' dream, and which have no parallels in flesh and blood."

"For my own part I am disinterested, for 'tis unlikely I shall ever marry."

"Do not. If you would be virtuous, remain free. It is the bond that makes the dishonour."

Antonia looked at him with a puzzled air, slow to follow his drift. He saw that he had gone too far, and was in danger of displeasing her.

"What curious creatures women are!" he thought. "Here is an avowed infidel who seems inexpressibly shocked because I decry the marriage ceremony. What formalists they are at best! If they are not in fear of the day of judgment they tremble at the notion of being ill-spoken of by their neighbours. I'll warrant this sweet girl is as anxious to keep her landlady's good opinion as George Whitefield is to go to heaven."

He talked to her of the comedy. It was to be acted on the following Monday.

"I have secured a side-box, and I count upon being honoured with the company of the joint authors," he said.

Tonia's eyes sparkled at the thought of her triumph. To have her words spoken by David Garrick – by the lovely Mrs. Pritchard – to sit unseen in the shadow of the curtained side-box, while her daydreams took form and substance in the light of the oil lamps!

"My father and I will be proud to have such good places," she said. "We usually sit at the back of the pit when Mr. Garrick is kind enough to give us a pass. Father has given me a silk gown from Hilditch's in the city, the first I have had."

"If you would suffer me to add a pearl necklace," cried Kilrush, thinking of a certain string of Oriental pearls which was almost an heirloom, and which he remembered on his mother's neck forty years ago. He had taken the red morocco case out of an iron coffer not long since, and had looked at the ornament, longing to clasp it round Tonia's throat. The hands that held the case trembled a little as he imagined the moment when he should fasten the diamond clasp on that exquisite neck.

"You are too generous, sir. I take gifts from no one but my father, except, indeed, the roses you are so kind as to bring me."

"Happy roses, to win acceptance where pearls are scorned! The necklace was my mother's, and has been wasting in darkness for near half a century. She died before I went to Eton. Would you but let me lend it to you – only to air the pearls."

"No, no, no; no borrowed finery! I should hate to play the daw in peacocks' feathers."

"You are a contradictory creature, madam; but you would have to be more cruel and more cutting than a north-east wind before I would quarrel with you."

His lordship's visits now became more frequent than at first; and Tonia received him with unvarying kindness, whether he found her alone or in her father's company. Her calm assurance was so strangely in advance of her years and position that he could but think she owed it to having mixed so little with her own sex, and thus having escaped all taint of self-consciousness or coquetry. She listened to his opinions with respect, but was not afraid to argue with him. She made no secret of her pleasure in his society, and owned to finding the afternoons or evenings vastly dull on which he did not appear.

"I should miss you still more if I had not my translating work," she said; "but that keeps me busy and amused."

"And you find that old dry-as-dust Voltaire amusing!"

"I never find him dry as dust. He is my father's favourite author."

The comedy was well received, and Thornton was made much of by Mr. Garrick and all the actors. No one was informed of Antonia's share in the work, or suspected that the handsome young woman in a yellow silk sacque had so much to do with the success of the evening. Patty Lester triumphed in her brief but effective *rôle* of a tomboy younger sister, an improvement on the conventional confidante, and was rapturously grateful to Mr. Thornton, and more than ever reproachful of Antonia for deserting her.

"You have taken an aversion to the Piazza," she said with an offended air.

"On my honour, no, Patty; but I have been so constantly occupied in helping my father."

"I shall scold him for making a slave of you."

"No, no, you must not. Be sure that I love you, even if I do not go to see you."

"But I am not sure. I cannot be sure. You have grown distant of late, and more of a fine lady than you was last year."

Antonia blushed, and promised to take tea with her friend next day. She was conscious of a certain distaste for Patty's company, but still more for Patty's casual visitors; but the chief influence had been Kilrush's urgent objections to the young actress's society.

"I aver nothing against the creature's morality," he said; "but she is a mercenary little devil, and encourages any coxcomb who will substantiate his flatteries with a present. I have watched her at the side-scenes with a swarm of such gadflies buzzing round her. On my soul, dear Miss Thornton, 'twould torture me to think of you the cynosure of Miss Lester's circle."

Tonia laughed off the warning, swore she was very fond of Patty, and would on no account desert her.

"I hope you do not think I can value fools above their merits when I have the privilege of knowing a man of sense like your lordship," she said, and the easy tone of her compliment chilled him, as all her friendly speeches did. Alas! would she ever cease to trust him as a friend, and begin to fear him as a lover?

"It is my age that makes my case hopeless," he thought, musing upon this love which had long since become the absorbing subject of his meditations. "If I had been twenty years younger how easily might I have won her, for 'tis so obvious she loves my company. She sparkles and revives at my coming, like a drooping flower at a sprinkle of summer rain. But, oh, how wide the difference between loving my company and loving me! Shall I ever bridge the abyss? Shall I ever see those glorious eyes droop under my gaze, that transcendent form agitated by a heart that passion sets beating?"

Again and again he found her alone among her books and manuscripts, for Thornton, being now flush of money, spent most of his time abroad. He sported a new suit, finer than any his daughter had ever seen him wear, and had an air of rakish gaiety that shocked her. The comedy seemed a gold mine, for he had always a guinea at command. He no longer allowed his daughter to fetch and carry between him and his employers. She must trapeze no more along the familiar Strand to Fleet Street. He employed a messenger for this vulgar drudgery. He urged her to buy herself new hats and gowns, and to put her toilet on a handsome footing.

"Sure, so lovely a girl ought to set off her beauty," he said.

"Dear sir, I would rather see you save your money against sickness or –"

She was going to say "old age," but checked herself, with a tender delicacy.

"Hang saving! I had never a miser's temper. Davy shall take our next play. You had best stick to Spanish, and find me a plot in De Vega or Moratin, and not plague yourself about scraping a guinea or two."

'Twas heavenly fine weather and more than a year since Kilrush and Antonia first met at Mrs. Mandalay's ball; and the close friendship between the *blasé* worldling and the inexperienced girl had become a paramount influence in the life of each. The hours Antonia spent in his lordship's company were the happiest she had ever known, and the days when he did not come had a grey dulness that was a new sensation. The sound of his step on the stair put her in good spirits, and she was all smiles when he entered the room.

"I swear you have the happiest disposition," he said one day; "your face radiates sunshine."

"Oh, but I have my dull hours."

"Indeed! And when be they?"

"When you are not here."

Her bright and fearless outlook as she said the words showed him how far she was from divining a passion that had grown and strengthened in every hour of their companionship.

They talked of every subject under the sun. He had travelled much, as travelling went in those days; had read much, and had learnt still more from intercourse with the brightest minds of the age. He showed her the better side of his nature, the man he might have been had he never abandoned himself to the vices that the world calls pleasures. They talked often about religion; and though he had cast in his lot with the Deists before he left Oxford, it shocked him to find a young and innocent woman lost to all sense of natural piety. Her father had trained her to scorn all creeds, and to rank the Christian faith no higher than the most revolting or the most imbecile superstitions of India or the South Seas. She had read Voltaire before she read the gospel; and that inexorable pen had cast a blight over the sacred pages, and infused the poison of a malignant satire into the fountain of living waters. Kilrush praised her independence of spirit, and exulted in the thought that a woman who believed in nothing had nothing to lose outside the region of material advantages, and, convinced of this, felt sure that he could make her life happy.

And thus, seeing himself secure of her liking, he flung the fatal die and declared his love.

They were alone together in the June afternoon, as they so often were. He had met Thornton at the entrance to the court, trudging off to Adelphi Terrace, to wait upon Mr. Garrick; so he thought himself secure of an hour's *tête-à-tête*. She welcomed him with unconcealed pleasure, pushed aside her papers, took the bunch of roses that he carried her with her prettiest curtsy, and then busied herself in arranging the nosegay in a willow-pattern Worcester bowl, while he laid down his hat and

cane, and took his accustomed seat by her writing-table. They were cabbage roses, and made a great mass of glowing pink above the dark blue of the bowl. She looked at them delightedly, handled them with delicate touch, fingers light as Titania's, and then stopped in the midst of her pleasant task, surprised at his silence.

"How pale your lordship looks! I hope you are not ill?"

He stretched out his hand and caught hers, wet and perfumed with the roses.

"Antonia, my love, my divinity, this comedy of friendship must end. Dear girl, do you not know that I adore you?"

She tried to draw her hand from his grasp, and looked at him with unutterable astonishment, but not in anger.

"You are surprised! Did you think that I could come here day after day, for a year – see you and hear you, be your friend and companion – and not love you? By Heaven, child, you must have thought me the dullest clay that ever held a human soul, if you could think so."

She looked at him still, mute and grave, deep blushes dyeing her cheeks, and her eyes darkly serious.

"Indeed, your lordship, I have never thought of you but as of a friend whose kindness honoured me beyond my deserts. Your rank, and the difference of our ages, prevented me from thinking of you as a suitor."

He started, and dropped her hand; and his face, which had flushed as he talked to her, grew pale again.

"Great God!" he thought, "she takes my avowal of love for an offer of marriage."

He would not have her deceived in his intentions for an instant. He had not always been fair and above-board in his dealings with women; but to this one he could not lie.

"Your suitor, in the vulgar sense of the word, I can never be, Antonia," he said gravely. "Twenty years ago, when my wife eloped with the friend I most trusted, and when I discovered that I had been a twelve-months' laughing-stock for the town – by one section supposed the complacent husband, by another the blind fool I really was – in that hateful hour I swore that I would never again give a woman the power of dishonouring my name. My heart might break from a jilt's ill-usage – but *that*, the name which belongs not to me only, but to all of my race who have borne it in the past or who will bear it in the future – that should be out of the power of woman's misconduct. And so to you whom I love with a passion more profound, more invincible than this heart ever felt for another since it began to beat, I cannot offer a legal tie; but I lay my adoring heart, my life, my fortune at your feet, and I swear to cleave to you and honour you with a constant and devoted affection which no husband upon this earth can surpass."

He tried to take her hand again, but she drew herself away from him with a superb gesture of mingled surprise and scorn.

"There was nothing further from my mind than that you could desire to marry me, except that you should wish to degrade me," she said in a voice graver than his own.

Her face was colourless, but she stood erect and firm, and had no look of swooning.

"Degrade you? Do you call it degradation to be the idol of my life, to be the beloved companion of a man who can lavish all this world knows of luxury and pleasure upon your lot, who will carry you to the fairest spots of earth, show you all that is noblest in art and nature, all that makes the bliss of intelligent beings, who will protect your interests by the most generous settlements ever made by a lover?"

"Oh, my lord, stop your inventory of temptation!" exclaimed Antonia. "The price you offer is extravagant, but I am not for sale. I thought you were my friend – indeed, for me you had become a dear and cherished friend. I was deceived, cruelly deceived! I shall know better another time when a man of your rank pretends to offer me the equality of friendship!"

There were tears in her eyes in spite of her courage, in which Roman virtue she far surpassed the average woman.

"Curse my rank!" he cried angrily. "It is myself I offer – myself and all that I hold of worldly advantages. What can my name matter to you – to you of all women, friendless and alone in the world, your existence unknown to more than some half-dozen people? *I* stand on a height where the arrows of ridicule fly thick and fast. Were I to marry a young woman – I who was deceived and deserted by a handsome wife before I was thirty – you cannot conceive what a storm of ridicule I should provoke, how Selwyn would coruscate with wit at my expense, and Horry Walpole scatter his contemptuous comments on my folly over half the continent of Europe. I suffered that kind of agony once – knew myself the target of all the wits and slanderers in London. I will not suffer it again!"

He was pacing the room, which was too small for the fever of his mind. To be refused without an instant's hesitation, as if he had tried to make a queen his mistress! To be scorned by Bill Thornton's daughter – Thornton, the old jail-bird whom he had helped to get out of prison – the fellow who had been sponging on him more or less for a score of years, most of all in this last year!

He looked back at his conquests of the past. How triumphant, how easy they were; and what trumpery victories they seemed, as he recalled them in the bitterness of his disappointment to-day.

Tonia stood by the open window, listening mechanically to the roll of wheels which rose and fell in the distance with a rhythmical monotony, like the sound of a summer sea. Kilrush stopped in his angry perambulation, saw her in tears, and flew to her side on the instant.

"My beloved girl, those tears inspire me with hope. If you were indifferent you would not weep."

"I weep for the death of our friendship," she answered sorrowfully.

"You should smile at the birth of our love. Great Heaven! what is there to stand between us and consummate bliss?"

"Your own resolve, my lord. You are determined to take no second wife; and I am determined to be no man's mistress. Be sure that in all our friendship I never thought of marriage, nor of courtship – I never angled for a noble husband. But when you profess yourself my lover, I must needs give you a plain answer."

"Tonia, surely your soul can rise above trivial prejudices! You who have boldly avowed your scorn of Churchmen and their creeds, who have neither hope of heaven nor fear of hell, can you think the tie between a man and woman who love as we do – yes, dearest, I protest you love me – can you believe that bond more sacred for being mumbled by a priest, or stronger for being scrawled in a parish register? By Heaven, I thought you had a spirit too lofty for vulgar superstitions!"

"There is one superstition I shall ever hold by – the belief that there are honest women in the world."

"Pshaw, child! Be but true to the man who adores you, and you will be the honestest of your sex. Fidelity to her lover is honour in woman; and she is the more virtuous who is constant without being bound. Nance Oldfield, the honestest woman I ever knew, never wore a wedding-ring."

"I think, sir," she began in a low and earnest voice that thrilled him, "there are two kinds of women – those who can suffer a life of shame, and those who cannot."

"Say rather, madam, that there are women with hearts and women without. You are of the latter species. Under the exquisite lines of the bosom I worship nature has placed a block of ice instead of a heart."

A street cry went wailing by like a dirge, "Strawberries, ripe strawberries. Who'll buy my strawberries?"

Kilrush wiped the cold dampness from his forehead, and resumed his pacing up and down, then stopped suddenly and surveyed the room, flinging up his hands in a passionate horror.

"Good God! that you should exist in such a hovel as this, while my great empty house waits for you, while my coach-and-six is ready to carry us on the road to an Italian paradise! There is a villa at Fiesole, on a hill above Florence. Oh, to have you there in the spring sunshine, among the

spring flowers, all my own, my sweet companion, *animæ dimidium meæ*, the dearer half of my soul. Antonia, if you are obstinate and reject me, you will drive me mad!"

He dropped into a chair, with his head averted from her, and hid his face in his hands. She saw his whole frame shaken by his sobs. She had never seen a man cry before, and the spectacle unnerved her. If she could have yielded – if that stubborn pride of womanhood, which was her armour against the tempter, could have given way, it would have been at the sight of his tears. For a moment her lot trembled in the balance. She longed to kneel at his feet, to promise him anything he could ask rather than to see his distress; but pride came to the rescue.

Choking with tears, she rushed to the door.

"Farewell, sir," she sobbed; "farewell for ever."

She ran downstairs to the bottom of the house, and to Mrs. Potter's parlour behind the kitchen, empty at this hour, where she threw herself upon the narrow horsehair sofa, and sobbed heart-brokenly. Yet even in the midst of her weeping she listened for the familiar step upon the stairs above, and for the opening and shutting of the street door. It was at least ten minutes before she heard Kilrush leave the house, and then his footfall was so heavy that it sounded like a stranger's.

CHAPTER VII. PRIDE CONQUERS LOVE

Except the awful, the inexorable blank that Death leaves in the heart of the mourner, there is no vacancy of mind more agonizing than that which follows the defeat of a lover and the sudden cessation of an adored companionship. To Kilrush the whole world seemed of one dull grey after he had lost Antonia. The town, the company of which he had long been weary, now became actually hateful, and his only desire was to rush to some remote spot of earth where the very fact of distance might help him to forget the woman he loved. A man of a softer nature would have yielded to his charmer's objections, and sacrificed his pride to his love; but with Kilrush, pride – long-cherished pride of race and name – and a certain stubborn power of will prevailed over inclination. He suffered, but was resolute. He told himself that Antonia was cold and calculating, and unworthy of a generous passion like his. She counted, perhaps, on conquering his resolve, and making him marry her; and he took a vindictive pleasure in the thought of her vexation as the days went by without bringing him to her feet.

"Farewell for ever," she had cried, yet had hoped, perhaps, to see him return to her to-morrow, like some small country squire, who thinks all England will be outraged if he marry beneath his rural importance, yet yields to an irresistible love for the miller's daughter or the village barmaid.

"I have lived through too many fevers to die of this one," Kilrush thought, and braced his nerves to go on living, though all the colour seemed washed out of his life.

While his heart was being lacerated by anger and regret, he was surprised by the appearance of his cousin, the *ci-devant* captain of Dragoons, of whose existence he had taken no account since his afternoon visit to Clapham. He was in his library, a large room at the back of the house, looking into a small garden shadowed by an old brick wall, and overlooked by the back windows of Pall Mall, which looked down into it as into a green well. The room was lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, and the favourite calf binding of those days made a monotone of sombre brown, suggestive of gloom, even on a summer day, when the scent of stocks and mignonette was blown in through the open windows.

Kilrush received his kinsman with cold civility.

Not even in the splendour of his court uniform had George Stobart looked handsomer than to-day in his severely cut grey cloth coat and black silk waistcoat. There was a light in his eyes, a buoyant youthfulness in his aspect, which Kilrush observed with a pang of envy. Ah, had he been as young, Fate and Antonia might have been kinder.

George put down his hat, and took the chair his cousin indicated, chilled somewhat by so distant a greeting.

"I saw in *Lloyd's Evening Post* that your lordship intended starting for the Continent," he began, "and I thought it my duty to wait upon you before you left town."

"You are very good – and Lloyd is very impertinent – to take so much trouble about my movements. Yes, George, I am leaving England."

"Do you go far, sir?"

"Paris will be the first stage of my journey."

"And afterwards?"

"And afterwards? Kamschatka, perhaps, or – hell! I am fixed on nothing but to leave a town I loathe."

George looked inexpressibly shocked.

"I fear your lordship is out of health," he faltered.

"Fear nothing, hope nothing about me, sir; I am inclined to detest my fellow-men. If you take that for a symptom of sickness, why then I am indeed out of health."

"I am sorry I do not find you in happier spirits, sir, for I had a double motive in waiting on you."

"So have most men – in all they do. Well, sir?"

Kilrush threw himself back in his chair, and waited his cousin's communication with no more interest in his countenance or manner than if he were awaiting a petition from one of his footmen.

Nothing could be more marked than the contrast between the two men, though their features followed the same lines, and the hereditary mark of an ancient race was stamped indelibly on each. A life of passionate excitement, self-will, pride, had wasted the form and features of the elder, and made him look older than his actual years. Yet in those attenuated features there was such exquisite refinement, in that almost colourless complexion such a high-bred delicacy, that for most women the elder face would have been the more attractive. There was a pathetic appeal in the countenance of the man who had lived his life, who had emptied the cup of earthly joys, and for whom nothing remained but decay.

The young man's highest graces were his air of frankness and high courage, and his soldierly bearing, which three years among the Methodists had in no wise lessened. He had, indeed, in those years been still a soldier of the Church Militant, and had stood by John Wesley's side on more than one occasion when the missiles of a howling mob flew thick and fast around that hardy itinerant, and when riot threatened to end in murder.

"Well, sir, your second motive – your *arrière pensée*?" Kilrush exclaimed impatiently, the young man having taken up his hat again, and being engaged in smoothing the beaver with a hand that shook ever so slightly.

"You told me nearly a year ago, sir," he began, hardening himself for the encounter, "that you would never forgive me if I married my inferior – my inferior in the world's esteem, that is to say – an inferiority which I do not admit."

"Hang your admissions, sir! I perfectly remember what I said to you, and I hope you took warning by it, and that my aunt found another place for her housemaid."

"Your warning came too late. I had learnt to esteem Lucy Foreman at her just value. The housemaid, as your lordship is pleased to call her, is now my wife."

"Then, sir, since you know my ultimatum, what the devil brings you to this house?"

"I desired that you should hear what I have done from my lips, not from the public press."

"You are monstrous civil! Well, I am not going to waste angry words upon you, but your name will come out of my will before I sleep; and from to-day we are strangers. I can hold no intercourse with a man who disgraces his name by a beggarly marriage. By Heaven, sir, if I loved to distraction, if my happiness, my peace, my power to endure this wretched life, depended upon my winning the idol of my soul, I would not give my name to a woman of low birth or discreditable connections!"

He struck his clenched fist upon the table in front of him with a wild vehemence that took his cousin's breath away; then, recovering his composure, he asked coldly —

"Does your pious mother approve this folly, sir, and take your housemaid-wife to her heart?"

"My mother has shown a most unchristian temper. She has forbidden me her house, and swears to disinherit me. To have forfeited her affection will be ever my deep regret; but I can support the loss of her fortune."

"Indeed! Are you so vastly rich from other resources?"

"I have two hundred a year in India stock – my Uncle Matthew's bequest, and Lucy's good management promises to make this income enough for our home – a cottage near Richmond, where we have a garden and all the rustic things my Lucy loves."

"Having been reared in an alley near Moorfields! I wonder how long her love of the country will endure wet days and dark nights, and remoteness from shops and market? Oh, you are still in your honeymoon, sir, and your sky is all blue. You must wait a month or two before you will discover how much you are to be pitied, and that I was your true friend when I cautioned you against this

madness. Good day to you, Mr. Stobart, and be good enough to forget that we have ever called each other cousins."

George rose, and bowed his farewell. The porter was in the hall ready to open the door for him. He looked round the great gloomy hall with a contemptuous smile as he passed out.

"John Wesley's house at the Foundry is more cheerful than this," he thought.

Kilrush sat with his elbows on the table and his hands clasped above his head in a melancholy silence.

"Which is the madman, he or I?" he asked himself.

The preparation for his continental journey occupied Lord Kilrush for a fortnight, during which time he waited with a passionate longing for some sign of relenting from Antonia; and in all those empty days his mind was torn by the strife between inclination and a stubborn resolve.

There were moments in which he asked himself why he did not make this woman his wife; that unfrocked priest, that tippling bookseller's hack, his father-in-law? Did anything in this world matter to a man so much as the joy of this present life, his instant happiness? In the hideous uncertainty of fate, were it not best to snatch the hour's gladness?

"What if I married her, and she turned wanton after a year of bliss?" he mused. "At least I should have had my day."

But then there came the dark suspicion that she had played him as the angler plays his fish, that she flung the glittering fly across his enraptured gaze, intent on landing a coronet; that her womanly candour, her almost childlike simplicity, were all so much play-acting. What could he expect of truth and honour from Thornton's daughter?

"If she had given herself to me generously, unquestioningly, I might believe she loved me," he thought. "But if I married her I must for ever suspect myself her dupe, the victim of a schemer's ambition, the sport of an artful coquette, to be betrayed at the first assault of a younger lover."

No token of relenting came from Antonia; but towards the end of the second week Mr. Thornton called to inquire about his lordship's health, and, being informed that his lordship was about to leave England for a considerable time, pressed for an interview, and was admitted to his dressing-room.

"I am in despair at the prospect of your lordship's departure," he said, on being bidden to seat himself. "I know not how my daughter and I will endure our lives in the absence of so valued a friend."

"I do not apprehend that *you* will suffer much from wanting my company, Thornton, since you have been generally out-of-doors during my visits. And as for your daughter, her interest in an elderly proser's conversation must have been exhausted long ago."

"On my soul, no! She has delighted in your society – as how could she do otherwise? She has an intellect vastly superior to her age and sex, and she had suffered a famine of intellectual conversation. I know that she has already begun to feel the loss of your company, for she has been strangely dispirited for the last ten days, and that indefatigable pen of hers now moves without her usual gusto."

"If she is ill, or drooping, I beg you to send for my physician, Sir Richard Maningham, who will attend her on my account."

"No, no – 'tis no case for Æsculapius. She is out of spirits, but not ill. How far does your lordship design to extend your travels?"

"Oh, I have decided nothing. I shall stay at Fontainebleau till the cool season, and then go by easy stages to Italy. I may winter in Rome, and spend next spring in Florence."

"A year's absence! We shall sorely miss your lordship, and I am already too deeply in your debt to dare venture –"

"To ask me for a further loan," interrupted Kilrush. "We will have done with loans, and notes of hand" – Thornton turned pale – "I wish to help you. Above all, I want to prevent your making a slave of your daughter."

"A slave! My dear girl delights in literary work. She would be miserable if I refused her assistance."

"Well, be sure she does not drudge for you. I hate to think of her solitary hours mewed in your miserable second-floor parlour, when she ought to be enjoying the summer air in some rural garden, idle and without a care. I want to strike a bargain with you, Thornton."

"I am your lordship's obedient – "

"Instead of these petty loans which degrade you and disgust me, I am willing to give you a small income – say, a hundred pounds a quarter – "

"My dear lord, this is undreamed-of munificence."

"On condition that you remove with your daughter to some pretty cottage in a rural neighbourhood – Fulham, Barnes, Hampstead, any rustic spot within reach of your booksellers and editors – and also that you provide your daughter with a suitable attendant, a woman of unblemished character, to wait upon her and accompany her in her walks – in a word, sir, that being the father of the loveliest woman I ever met, you do not ignore your responsibilities, and neglect her."

"Oh, sir, is this meant for a reproach, because I have suffered Antonia to receive you alone? Sure, 'twas the knowledge of her virtue and of your noble character that justified my confidence."

"True, sir, but there may be occasions when you should exercise a paternal supervision. I shall instruct my lawyer as to the payment of this allowance, and I expect that you will study your daughter's convenience and happiness in all your future arrangements. Should I hear you are neglecting that duty, your income will stop, on the instant. I must beg, also, that you keep the source of your means a secret from Miss Thornton, who has a haughtier spirit than yours, and might dislike being obliged by a friend. And now, as I have a hundred things to do before I leave town, I must bid you good morning."

"I go, my lord, but not till I have kissed this generous hand."

"Pshaw!"

Kilrush snatched his hand away impatiently, rang for his valet, and dismissed his grateful friend with a curt nod.

He left St. James's Square next day after his morning chocolate, in his coach and six, bound for Dover, determined not to return till he had learnt the lesson of forgetfulness and indifference.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LOVE THAT FOLLOWS THE DEAD

On his return to Rupert Buildings, William Thornton walked on air. An income, an assured income of a hundred pounds a quarter, was indeed an improvement upon those casual loans which he had begged of his patron from time to time, with somewhat more of boldness since Kilrush had shown so marked a liking for his daughter's society. He was elated by his patron's generosity; yet across his pleasant meditations in the short distance between St. James's Square and St. Martin's Lane, there was time for his thoughts to take a wider range, and for something of a cloud to fall across his sunshine.

He was puzzled, he was even troubled, by his lordship's generosity. What were the relations between that liberal patron and Antonia? Till a fortnight ago his daughter's happy frankness had assured him that all was well: that she was the kind of girl who may be trusted to take care of herself without paternal interference. But there had been a marked change in her manner after Kilrush's last visit. She had been languid and silent. She looked unhappy, and had been absent-minded when she talked of their literary projects – an essay for *Cave* – a story for the *Monthly Review*, or the possibility of Garrick's favour for an after-piece from the Italian of Goldoni.

Antonia waited upon him when he came in, helped him to change his laced coat for an old one that he wore in the house, brought him his slippers, and proceeded to prepare his tea; but there was no welcoming smile.

"My dearest girl, there is something amiss," Thornton said, after he had watched her for some time, while they sat opposite to each other with the tea-tray between them. "My Tonia is no longer the happy girl I have known so long. What ails my love? I have been with your friend Kilrush. He leaves England to-morrow. Is it the loss of his company distresses you?"

"No, no! It is best that he should come here no more."

"Why, dearest?"

"Because we could never more be friends. I was very happy in his friendship. I knew not how happy till we parted."

"Why should such a friendship end? Why did you part?"

She burst into tears.

"I cannot – cannot – cannot tell you."

"Nay, love, you should have no secrets from your father – an indulgent father, if sometimes a neglectful one. When have I ever scared you by a harsh word?"

"No, no; but it is very hard to tell you that the man I esteemed was unworthy of my friendship – that he came here with the vilest design – that he waited till he had won my regard – and then – and then – swore that he loved me passionately, devotedly – and offered to make me – his mistress."

Thornton heard her with a countenance that indicated more of thought than of horror.

"It would have been no disgrace to him to make you his wife," he said, "but the Delafields have ever pretended to a pride in excess of their rank. He did ill to offer you his affection upon those terms; yet I'll swear his vows of love were sincere. I have but just left him, and I never saw more distress of mind than I saw in his face to-day. When I told him that you had been drooping, he implored me to call in his own physician, at his charge."

"Oh, pray, sir, do not tell me how he looked or what he said!" cried Tonia, with a passionate impatience, drying her tears as she spoke, which broke out afresh before she had done. "I doubt he thinks money can heal every wound. He offered to lavish his fortune upon me, and marvelled that I could prefer this shabby parlour to a handsome house and dishonour."

"He did very ill," said Thornton, in a soothing voice, as if he were consoling a child in some childish trouble; "yet, my dearest Tonia, did you but know the world as well as I do, you would know

that he made you what the world calls a handsome offer. To settle a fortune upon you – of course he would mean a *settlement*: anything else were unworthy of a thought – would be to give you the strongest pledge of his fidelity. Men who do not mean to be constant will not so engage their fortune. And if – if the foolish Delafield pride – that Irish pride, which counts a long line of ancestors as a sacred inheritance – stands in the way of marriage – I'll be hanged if I think you ought to have rejected him without the compliment of considering his offer and of consulting me."

"Father!"

She sprang up to her feet, and stood before him in all the dignity of her tall figure; and her face, with the tears streaming over it, was white with anger and contempt.

"My love, life is made up of compromises. Sure, I have tried to keep your mind clear of foolish prejudices; and, as a student of history, you must have seen the influences that govern the world. Beauty is one, and the most powerful, of those influences. Aspasia – Agnes Sorel – Madame de Pompadour. Need I multiply instances? But Beauty mewed up in a two-pair lodging is worthless to the possessor; while, with a fine establishment, a devoted protector, my dearest girl might command the highest company in the town."

"Father!" she cried again, with a voice that had a sharp ring of agony, "would you have had me say yes?"

"I would have had you consider your answer very seriously before you said no."

"You could have suffered your daughter to stoop to such humiliation; you would have had her listen to the proposal of a man who is free to marry any one he pleases – but will not marry *her*; who tells her in one breath that he loves her – and in the next that he will not make her his wife – oh, father, I did not think –"

"That I was a man of the world? My poor child, some of the greatest matches in England have begun with unfettered love; and be sure that, were your affection to consent to such a sacrifice, Kilrush would end by giving you his name."

"Pray, pray, sir, say no more – you are breaking my heart – I want to respect you still, if I can."

"Pshaw, child, after all we have read together! 'Tis a shock to hear such heroics! What is the true philosophy of life but to snatch all the comfort and happiness the hour offers? What is true morality but to do all the good we can to ourselves, and no harm to our neighbours? Will your fellow-creatures be any the better for your unkindness to Kilrush? With his fortune to deal with, you could do an infinitude of good."

"Oh, cease, I implore you!" she exclaimed distractedly. "If his tears could not conquer me, do you think your philosophy can shake my resolve?"

She left him, and took refuge in her garret, and sat staring blankly into space, heart-sick and disgusted with life. Her father! 'Twas the first time she had ever been ashamed of him. Her father to be the advocate of dishonour – to urge her to accept degradation! Her father, whom she had loved till this hour with a child's implicit belief in the wisdom and beneficence of a parent – was he no better than the wretches she had heard Patty talk about, the complacent husbands who flourished upon a wife's infidelity, the brothers who fawned upon a sister's protector? Was all the world made of the same base stuff; and did woman's virtue and man's honour live but in the dreams of genius?

She had accepted her father's dictum that religion and superstition were convertible terms. Her young mind had been steeped in the Voltairean philosophy before she was strong enough to form her own opinions or choose her own creed. She had read over and over again of the evil that religion had done in the world, and never of the good. Instead of the whole armour of righteousness, she had been shown the racks and thumb-screws of the Spanish Inquisition; and had been taught to associate the altar with the *auto da fé*. All she knew of piety was priestcraft; and though her heart melted with compassion for the martyrs of a mistaken belief, her mind scorned their credulity. But from her first hour of awakening reason she had never wavered in her ideas of right and wrong, honour and dishonour. As a child of twelve, newly entrusted with the expenditure of small sums, all her

little dealings with Mrs. Potter had shown a scrupulous honesty, a delicacy and consideration, which the good woman had seldom met with in adult lodgers. The books that had made her an infidel had held before her high ideals of honour. And those other books – the books she most loved – her Shakespeare, her Spenser – had taught her all that is noblest in man and woman.

She thought of Shakespeare's Isabella, who, not to save the life of a beloved brother, would stoop to sin. She recalled her instinctive contempt for Claudio, who, to buy that worthless life, would have sold his sister to shame.

"My father is like Claudio," she thought; and then with a sudden compunction, "No, no, he is not selfish – he is only mistaken. It was of me he thought – and that if Kilrush loved me, and I loved him, I might be happy."

Her tears flowed afresh. Never till Kilrush threw off the mask had she known what it was to look along the dull vista of life and see no star, to feel the days a burden, the future a blank. She missed him. Oh, how she missed him! Day after day in the parlour below she had sat looking at his empty chair, listening unawares for a footstep she was never likely to hear again. She recalled his conversation, his opinions, his criticism of her favourite books, their arguments, their almost quarrels about abstract things. His face haunted her: those exquisitely refined features upon which the only effect of age was an increased delicacy of line and colouring; the depth of thought in the dark grey eyes; the grave smile with its so swift transition from satire to a tender melancholy. Was there ever such a man? His elegance, his dignity, his manner of entering a room or leaving it, the grace of every gesture, so careless yet so unerring – every trait of character, every charm of person, which she was unconscious of having noticed in their almost daily association, seemed now to have been burnt into her brain and to be written there for ever.

In the fortnight that had passed since they had parted, she had tried in vain to occupy herself with the work which had hitherto interested her so much as to make industry only another name for amusement. Her adaptation of Goldoni's *Villeggiatura* lay on her table, the pages soiled by exposure, sentence after sentence obliterated. The facile pen had lost its readiness. She found herself translating the lively Italian with a dull precision; she, who of old had so deftly turned every phrase into idiomatic English – who had lent so much of herself to her author.

Often in these sorrowful days she had pushed aside her manuscript to scribble her recollections of Kilrush's conversation upon a stray sheet of foolscap. Often again, in those saddest moments of all, she had recalled his words of impassioned love – his tears; and her own tears had fallen thick and fast upon the disfigured page.

Well, it was ended, that friendship which had been so sweet; and she had discovered the bitter truth that friendship between man and woman, when the woman is young and beautiful, is impossible.

The days, weeks, months went by; and the name of Kilrush was no more spoken by Thornton or his daughter. It was as if no such being had ever had any part in their lives, any influence over their fate. Yet Thornton was studiously obedient to his patron's wishes all the time.

Good Mrs. Potter, who was getting elderly, had for some years past groaned under the burden of the house in Rupert Buildings, with the double, or sometimes treble set of lodgers, who were needful to make the business remunerative. Servant girls were troublesome, even when paid as much as six pounds per annum, with a pound extra for tea and sugar; lodgers were not always punctual with the weekly rent, and sometimes left in her debt. Thornton paid her a low rent for his second floor and garret; but he stayed from year's end to year's end; and she valued him above the finer people who came and went in her bettermost rooms. So when he told her that he was going to remove to a rural neighbourhood, she opened her heart to him, and declared, firstly, that she was sick of London, and London husseys – otherwise domestic servants; secondly, that she could not live without Antonia; thirdly, that she had long had it in her mind to remove her goods and chattels to a countrified suburb, such as Highgate or Edmonton, and that could she be secure of one permanent lodger she would do so without loss of time.

"Choose a genteel house to the south-west of London, somewhere between Wandsworth and Barnes, and my daughter and I will share it with you," said Thornton; and Mrs. Potter, who had no particular leaning to north or east, agreed.

After this came a pleasant period of house-hunting, in which Antonia was by-and-by induced to take a languid interest, going in a hackney coach with Mrs. Potter and her daughter Sophy, who had served an apprenticeship to a dressmaker, and was very doubtful how to dispose of her talent now she was out of her time. After several suburban drives, through suburbs that were all garden and meadow, they discovered an old half-timbered cottage at Putney, whose casement windows looked across the Thames to the church and episcopal palace and gardens of Fulham. To Antonia, who had hardly known what it was to leave London since those distant childish years in Windsor Forest, the white walled cottage and garden seemed a heaven upon earth. Surely it must be a blissful thing to live beside that broad reach of Thames, to see willows dipping and reeds waving in the mild autumn wind, and the red sailed barges drifting slowly down stream, and to hear the rooks in the great elms yonder in the bishop's gardens, their clamorous chatter softened by the intervening river. She went back to London enchanted with Rosemary Bank, as the roomy old cottage called itself, and told her father that she thought she could be happy there.

"Then Potter shall take the cottage to-morrow," cried Thornton, in a rapture of eagerness; "for I'll be hanged if you have looked anything but miserable for the last six weeks. Just as our luck had turned too, my – my circumstances improved – and – and Garrick promising to put our little Italian play on the stage, and to give me a benefit if it runs twenty nights."

Tonia sighed, remembering the melancholy thoughts interwoven with every line of that lively two-act burletta which she had squeezed out of Goldoni's five-act comedy. Everybody was pleased with the neat little after-piece, most of all Patty Lester, who was to play the soubrette, in a short chintz petticoat, and high red heels to her shoes.

The theatre seemed a source of boundless wealth, for on Mrs. Potter – who dropped in sometimes at tea-time for a gossip; or, coming on a business errand, was invited to sit down and talk – complaining that she did not know what to do with her dressmaking daughter, Thornton offered to engage Mrs. Sophy as Antonia's "woman."

"She will have to accept a modest honorarium," he said, with his grand air, "but she will be getting her hand in to go out as waiting-woman to a lady of quality; and my Tonia will treat her more as a friend than a servant."

Mrs. Potter snapped at the offer, though she did not know the meaning of the word "honorarium." She guessed that it meant either wages or a present, and to find that idle slut of hers an occupation, and yet have her under the maternal eye, was an unspeakable advantage.

Antonia protested that she wanted no waiting-maid, though she loved Sophy.

"Indeed, sir, you are not rich enough to make a fine lady of me," she said.

"Nature has made you a lady, my love; and you are too sensible ever to become fine. When we are living in the country – and I have to come to London, occasionally, to look after my business – you will need a companion whose time will be always at your service."

And so, with no more discussion, Sophia Potter was engaged, at a salary of ten pounds per annum, paid quarterly.

At Rosemary Bank the changing seasons passed in a calm monotony; and it seemed to Antonia, during the second year of her life in the cottage by the Thames, as if she had never lived anywhere else. The London lodging, the Strand and Fleet Street, Miss Lester's rooms in the Piazza, receded in the distance of half-forgotten things; for the years of youth are long, and the passing of a year makes a great gap in time.

The link between Tonia and London seemed as completely broken as if she were living in Yorkshire or in Cornwall. There was a London coach that started from the King's Head at the bottom of Putney High Street every morning, for the Golden Cross, hard by Rupert Buildings; and this coach

carried Mr. Thornton and his fortunes three or four times a week, and brought him home after dark. He had so much business that required his presence in the metropolis, and first and foremost the necessity of getting the latest news, which was always on tap at the Portico, where half a score of gutter wits and politicians settled the affairs of the nation, reviled Newcastle and the Pelhams, praised Pitt, canvassed the prospects of war in America or on the continent, and enlarged on the vices of the *beau monde*, every afternoon and evening.

Antonia accepted her father's absence as inevitable. Her own life was spent in a peaceful monotony. She had her books and her literary work for interest and occupation. She acquired some elementary knowledge of horticulture from an old man who came once a week to work in the garden; and, her love of flowers aiding her, she improved upon his instructions and became an expert in the delightful art. She and Sophy made the two-acre garden their pride. It was an old garden, and there was much of beauty ready to their hands; rustic arches overhung with roses and honeysuckle; espaliers of russet apples and jargonelle pears screening patches of useful vegetables; plots of old-established turf; long borders crowded with hardy perennials – a garden that had cost care and labour in days that were gone.

And then there was the river-bank between Putney and Kew, where Tonia found beauty and delight at all seasons; even in the long winter, when the snapping of thin ice rang through the still air as the barges moved slowly by, and the snow was piled in high ridges along the edge of the stream. Summer or winter, spring or autumn, Tonia loved that solitary shore, where the horses creeping along the towing-path were almost the only creatures that ever intruded on her privacy. She and Sophy were indefatigable pedestrians. They had indeed nothing else to do with themselves, Sophy told her mother, and must needs walk "to pass the time." Passing the time was the great problem in Sophia Potter's existence. To that end she waded through "Pamela" and "Clarissa," sitting in the garden, on sleepy summer afternoons. To that end she toiled at a piece of tambour work; and to that end she trudged, yawning dismally now and then, by Tonia's side from Putney to Barnes, from Barnes to Kew, while her young mistress's thoughts roamed in dreamland, following airy shadows, or sometimes perhaps following a distant traveller in cities and by lakes and mountains she knew not.

Often and often, in her peripatetic reveries, Antonia's fancies followed the image of Kilrush, whose continental wanderings were chronicled from time to time in *Lloyd's* or the *St. James's*. He was at Rome in the winter after their farewell; he was in Corsica in the following spring; he spent the summer at Aix in Savoy; moved to Montpellier in the late autumn; wintered at Florence. Tonia's thoughts followed him with a strange sadness, wherever he went. Youth cannot feed on regrets for ever, and the heartache of those first vacant days had been healed; but the thought that she might never see his face again hung like a cloud of sadness over the quiet of her life.

And now it was summer again, and the banks were all in flower, and the blue harebells trembled above the mossy hillocks on Barnes Common, and the long evenings were glorious with red and gold sunsets, and it was nearly two years since she had rushed from her lover's presence with a despairing farewell. Two years! Only two years! It seemed half a lifetime. Nothing was less likely than that they would ever meet again. Nothing, nothing, nothing! Yet there were daydreams, foolish dreams, in which she pictured his return – dreams that took their vividest colours on a lovely sunlit morning when the world seemed full of joy. He would appear before her suddenly at some turn of the river-bank. He would take her hand and seat himself by her side on such or such a fallen tree or rough rustic bench where she was wont to sit in her solitude. "I have come back," he would say, "come back to be your true friend, never more to wound you with words of love, but to be your friend always." The tears sprang to her eyes sometimes as imagination depicted that meeting. Surely he would come back! Could they, who had been such friends, be parted for ever?

But the quiet days went by, and her dream was not realized. No sign or token came to her from him who had been her friend, till one July evening, when she was startled by her father's unexpected return in a coach and four, which drove to the little garden gate with a rush and a clatter, as if those

steaming horses had been winged dragons and were going to carry off the cottage and its inmates in a cloud of smoke and fire. Tonia ran to the gate in a sudden panic. What could have happened? Was her father being carried home to her hurt in some street accident – or dead? It was so unlike his accustomed arrival, on the stroke of eleven, walking quietly home from the last coach, which left the Golden Cross at a quarter-past nine, was due at the King's Head at half-past ten, and rarely kept its time.

Her father alighted from the carriage, sound of limb, but with an agitated countenance; and then she noticed for the first time that the postillions wore the Kilrush livery, and that his lordship's coat of arms was on the door.

"My love – my Tonia," cried Thornton, breathlessly, "you are to come with me, this instant – alas! there is not a moment to spare. Bring her hat and cloak," he called out to Sophy, who had followed at her lady's heels, and stood open-mouthed, devouring the wonder-vision of coach and postillions. "Run, girl, run!"

Tonia stared at her father in amazement.

"What has happened?" she asked. "Where am I to go?"

"Kilrush has sent me for you, Tonia. That good man – Kilrush – my friend – my benefactor – he who has made our lives so happy. I shall lose the best friend I ever had. Your cloak" – snatching a light cloth mantle from the breathless Sophy and wrapping it round Tonia. "Your hat. Come, get into the coach. I can tell you the rest as we drive to town."

He helped her into the carriage and took his seat beside her. She was looking at him in a grave wonder. In his flurry and agitation he had let her into a secret which had been carefully guarded hitherto.

"Is it to Lord Kilrush we owe our quiet lives here? Has his lordship given you money?" she asked gravely.

"Oh, he has helped – he has helped me, when our means ran low – as any rich friend would help a poor one. There is nothing strange in that, child," her father explained, with a deprecating air.

"Kilrush!" she repeated, deeply wounded. "It was his kindness changed our lives! I thought we were earning all our comforts – you and I. Why are you taking me to him, sir? I don't understand."

"I am taking you to his death-bed, Tonia. His doctors give him only a few hours of life, and he wants to see you before he dies, to bid you farewell."

The tears were rolling down Thornton's cheeks, but Antonia's eyes were tearless. She sat with her face turned to the village street, staring at the little rustic shops, the quaint gables and projecting beams, the dormer casements gilded by the sunset, Fairfax House, with its stout red walls, and massive stone mullions, and a garden full of roses and pinks, that perfumed the warm air as they drove by. She looked at all those familiar things in a stupor of wonder and regret.

"You often talk wildly," she said presently, in a toneless voice. "Is he really so ill? Is there no hope?"

The horses had swung round a corner, and they were driving by a lane that led to Wandsworth, where it joined the London road. At the rate at which they were going they would be at Westminster Bridge in less than half an hour.

"Alas, child, I have it from his doctor. 'Tis a hopeless case – has been hopeless for the last six months. He has been in a consumption since the beginning of the winter, has been sent from place to place, fighting with his malady. He came to London two days ago, from Geneva, as fast as he could travel – a journey that has hastened his end, the physician told me. Came to put his affairs in order, and to see you," Thornton concluded, after a pause.

"To see me! Ah, what am I that he should care?" cried Tonia.

To know that he was dying was to know that she had never ceased to love him. But she did not analyze her feelings. All that she knew of herself was a dull despair – the sense of a loss that engulfed everything she had ever valued in this world.

"What am I that he should care?" she repeated forlornly.

"You are all in all to him. He implored me to bring you – with tears, Antonia – he, my benefactor, the one friend who never turned a deaf ear to my necessities," said Thornton, too unhappy to control his speech.

"Shall we be there soon?" Tonia asked by-and-by, in a voice broken by sobs.

"In a quarter of an hour at the latest. God grant it may not be too late."

No other word was spoken till the coach stopped at the solemn old doorway in St. James's Square, a door through which Mrs. Arabella Churchill had passed in her day of pride, when the house was hers, and that handsome young soldier, her brother Jack, was a frequent visitor there.

Night had not fallen yet, and there were lingering splashes of red sunset upon the westward-facing windows of the Square; but on this side all was shadow, and the feeble oil-lamps made dots of yellow light on the cold greyness, and enhanced the melancholy of a summer twilight.

The door was opened as Thornton and Antonia alighted. Her father led her past the hall porter, across the spacious marble-paved vestibule that looked like a vault in the dimness of a solitary lamp which a footman was lighting as they entered. Huge imperials, portmanteaux and packing-cases filled one side of the hall; the bulk of his lordship's personal luggage, which no one had found time to carry upstairs, and the cases containing the pictures, porcelain, curios, which he had collected in his wanderings from city to city, and in which his interest had ceased so soon as the thing was bought. He had come home too ill for any one to give heed to these treasures. There would be time to unpack them after the funeral – that inevitable ceremony which the household had begun to discuss already. Would the dying man desire to be laid with his ancestors in the family vault under Limerick Cathedral, within sound of the Shannon?

Antonia followed her father up the dusky staircase, their footfall noiseless on the soft depth of an Indian carpet, followed him into a dark little ante-room, where two men in sombre attire sat at a table talking together by the light of two wax candles in tall Corinthian candlesticks. One of these was his lordship's family lawyer, the other his apothecary.

"Are we too late?" asked Thornton, breathlessly, with rapid glances from the attorney to the doctor – glances which included a folded paper lying on the table beside a silver standish.

"No, no; his lordship may last out the night," answered the doctor. "Pray be seated, madam. If my patient is asleep, we will wait his awakening. He does not sleep long. If he is awake you shall see him. He desired that you should be taken to him without delay."

He opened the door of the inner room almost noiselessly and looked in. A voice asked, "Is she here?"

It was the voice Tonia knew of old, but weaker. Her heart beat passionately. She did not wait for the doctor, but brushed past him on the threshold, and was scarce conscious of crossing the width of a larger room than she had ever seen. She had no eyes for the gloomy magnificence of the room, the high windows draped with dark red velvet, the panelled walls, the lofty bed, with its carved columns and ostrich plumes; she knew nothing, saw nothing, till she was on her knees by the bed, and the dying man was holding her hands in his.

"Go into the next room, both of you," he said, whereupon his valet and an elderly woman in a linen gown and apron, a piece of respectable incompetence, the best sick-nurse that his wealth and station could command, silently retired.

"Will you stop with me to the end, Tonia?"

"Yes, yes! But you are not going to die. I will not believe them. You must not die!"

"Would you be sorry? Would it make any difference?"

"It would break my heart. I did not know that I loved you till you had gone away. I did not know how dearly till to-night."

"And if I was to mend and be my own man again, and was to ask you the same question again, would you give me the same answer?"

"Yes," she answered slowly; "but you would not be so cruel."

"No, Tonia, no, I am wiser now; for I have come to understand that there is one woman in the world who would not forfeit her honour for love or happiness. Ah, my dearest, here, here, on the brink of death, I know there is nothing on this earth that a man should set above the woman he loves – no paltry thought of rank or station, no cowardly dread that she may prove unfaithful, no fear of the world's derision. If I could have my life again I should know how to use it. But 'tis past, and the only love I can ask for now is the love that follows the dead."

He paused, exhausted by the effort of speech. He spoke very slowly, and his voice was low and hoarse, but she could hear every word. She had risen from her knees, to be nearer him, and was sitting on the side of the bed, holding him in her arms. In her heart of hearts she had realized that death was near, though her soul rebelled against the inevitable. She was conscious of the coming darkness, conscious that she was holding him on the edge of an open grave.

"Do not talk so much, you are tiring yourself," she said gently, wiping his forehead with a cambric handkerchief that had lain among the heaped-up pillows. The odour of orange flower that it exhaled was in her mind years afterwards, associated with that bed of death.

He lay resting, with his eyelids half closed, his head leaning against her shoulder, her arm supporting him.

"I never thought to taste such ineffable bliss," he murmured. "You have made death euthanasia."

He lapsed into a half-sleeping state, which lasted for some minutes, while she sat as still as marble. Then he opened his eyes suddenly, and looked at her in an agitated way.

"Tonia, will you marry me?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, if you bid me, by-and-by, when you are well," she answered, humouring a dying man's fancy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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