

Marie Corelli

The Sorrows
of Satan

Lingua

I

Do you know what it is to be poor? Not poor with the arrogant poverty complained of by certain people who have five or six thousand a year to live upon, and who yet swear they can hardly manage to make both ends meet, but really poor,—downright, cruelly, hideously poor, with a poverty that is graceless, sordid and miserable? Poverty that compels you to dress in your one suit of clothes till it is worn threadbare,—that denies you clean linen on account of the ruinous charges of washerwomen,—that robs you of your own self-respect, and causes you to slink along the streets vaguely abashed, instead of walking erect among your fellow-men in independent ease,—this is the sort of poverty I mean. This is the grinding curse that keeps down noble aspiration under a load of ignoble care; this is the moral cancer that eats into the heart of an otherwise well-intentioned human creature and makes him envious and malignant, and inclined to the use of dynamite. When he sees the fat idle woman of society passing by in her luxurious carriage, lolling back lazily, her face mottled with the purple and red signs of superfluous eating,—when he observes the brainless and sensual man of fashion smoking and dawdling away the hours in the Park, as if all the world and its millions of honest hard workers were created solely for the casual diversion of the so-called ‘upper’ classes,—then the good blood in him turns to gall, and his suffering spirit rises in fierce rebellion, crying out—“Why in God’s name, should this injustice be? Why should a worthless loungeur have his pockets full of gold by mere chance and heritage, while I, toiling wearily from morn till midnight, can scarce afford myself a satisfying meal?”

Why indeed! Why should the wicked flourish like a green bay-tree? I have often thought about it. Now however I believe I could help to solve the problem out of my own personal experience. But ... such an experience! Who will credit it? Who will believe that anything so strange and terrific ever chanced to the lot of a mortal man? No one. Yet it is true;—truer than much so-called truth. Moreover I know that many men are living through many such incidents as have occurred to me, under precisely the same influence, conscious perhaps at times, that they are in the tangles of sin, but too weak of will to break the net in which they have become voluntarily imprisoned. Will they be taught, I wonder, the lesson I have learned? In the same bitter school, under the same formidable taskmaster? Will they realize as I have been forced to do,—aye, to the very fibres of my intellectual perception,—the vast, individual, active Mind, which behind all matter, works unceasingly, though silently, a very eternal and positive God? If so, then dark problems will become clear to them, and what seems injustice in the world will prove pure equity! But I do not write with any hope of either persuading or enlightening my fellow-men. I know their obstinacy too well;—I can gauge it by my own. My proud belief in myself was, at one time, not to be outdone by any human unit on the face of the globe. And I am aware that others are in similar case. I merely intend to relate the various incidents of my career in due order exactly as they happened,—leaving to more confident heads the business of propounding and answering the riddles of human existence as best they may.

During a certain bitter winter, long remembered for its arctic severity, when a great wave of intense cold spread freezing influences not alone over the happy isles of Britain, but throughout all Europe, I, Geoffrey Tempest, was alone in London and well-nigh starving. Now a starving man seldom gets the sympathy he merits,—so few can be persuaded to believe in him. Worthy folks who have just fed to repletion are the most incredulous,

some of them being even moved to smile when told of existing hungry people, much as if these were occasional jests invented for after-dinner amusement. Or, with that irritating vagueness of attention which characterizes fashionable folk to such an extent that when asking a question they neither wait for the answer nor understand it when given, the well-dined groups, hearing of some one starved to death, will idly murmur 'How dreadful!' and at once turn to the discussion of the latest 'fad' for killing time, ere it takes to killing them with sheer *ennui*. The pronounced fact of being hungry sounds coarse and common, and is not a topic for polite society, which always eats more than sufficient for its needs. At the period I am speaking of however, I, who have since been one of the most envied of men, knew the cruel meaning of the word hunger, too well,—the gnawing pain, the sick faintness, the deadly stupor, the insatiable animal craving for mere food, all of which sensations are frightful enough to those who are, unhappily, daily inured to them, but which when they afflict one who has been tenderly reared and brought up to consider himself a 'gentleman,'—God save the mark! are perhaps still more painful to bear. And I felt that I had not deserved to suffer the wretchedness in which I found myself. I had worked hard. From the time my father died, leaving me to discover that every penny of the fortune I imagined he possessed was due to swarming creditors, and that nothing of all our house and estate was left to me except a jewelled miniature of my mother who had lost her own life in giving me birth,—from that time I say, I had put my shoulder to the wheel and toiled late and early. I had turned my University education to the only use for which it or I seemed fitted,—literature. I had sought for employment on almost every journal in London,—refused by many, taken on trial by some, but getting steady pay from none. Whoever seeks to live by brain and pen alone is, at the beginning of such a career, treated as a sort of social pariah. Nobody wants him,—everybody despises him. His efforts are derided, his manuscripts are flung back to

him unread, and he is less cared for than the condemned murderer in gaol. The murderer is at least fed and clothed, — a worthy clergyman visits him, and his gaoler will occasionally condescend to play cards with him. But a man gifted with original thoughts and the power of expressing them, appears to be regarded by everyone in authority as much worse than the worst criminal, and all the ‘jacks-in-office’ unite to kick him to death if they can. I took both kicks and blows in sullen silence and lived on, — not for the love of life, but simply because I scorned the cowardice of self-destruction. I was young enough not to part with hope too easily; — the vague idea I had that my turn would come, — that the ever-circling wheel of Fortune would perchance lift me up some day as it now crushed me down, kept me just wearily capable of continuing existence, — though it was merely a continuance and no more. For about six months I got some reviewing work on a well-known literary journal. Thirty novels a week were sent to me to ‘criticise,’ — I made a habit of glancing hastily at about eight or ten of them, and writing one column of rattling abuse concerning these thus casually selected, — the remainder were never noticed at all. I found that this mode of action was considered ‘smart,’ and I managed for a time to please my editor who paid me the munificent sum of fifteen shillings for my weekly labour. But on one fatal occasion I happened to change my tactics and warmly praised a work which my own conscience told me was both original and excellent. The author of it happened to be an old enemy of the proprietor of the journal on which I was employed; — my eulogistic review of the hated individual, unfortunately for me, appeared, with the result that private spite outweighed public justice, and I was immediately dismissed.

After this I dragged on in a sufficiently miserable way, doing ‘hack work’ for the dailies, and living on promises that never became realities, till, as I have said, in the early January of the bitter winter alluded to, I found myself literally penniless and face to face with starvation, owing a month’s rent besides for the

poor lodging I occupied in a back street not far from the British Museum. I had been out all day trudging from one newspaper office to another, seeking for work and finding none. Every available post was filled. I had also tried, unsuccessfully, to dispose of a manuscript of my own,—a work of fiction which I knew had some merit, but which all the ‘readers’ in the publishing offices appeared to find exceptionally worthless. These ‘readers’ I learned, were most of them novelists themselves, who read other people’s productions in their spare moments and passed judgment on them. I have always failed to see the justice of this arrangement; to me it seems merely the way to foster mediocrities and suppress originality. Common sense points out the fact that the novelist ‘reader’ who has a place to maintain for himself in literature would naturally rather encourage work that is likely to prove ephemeral, than that which might possibly take a higher footing than his own. Be this as it may, and however good or bad the system, it was entirely prejudicial to me and my literary offspring. The last publisher I tried was a kindly man who looked at my shabby clothes and gaunt face with some commiseration.

“I’m sorry,” said he, “very sorry, but my readers are quite unanimous. From what I can learn, it seems to me you have been too earnest. And also, rather sarcastic in certain strictures against society. My dear fellow, that won’t do. Never blame society,—it buys books! Now if you could write a smart love-story, slightly *risqué*,—even a little more than *risqué* for that matter; that is the sort of thing that suits the present age.”

“Pardon me,” I interposed somewhat wearily—“but are you sure you judge the public taste correctly?”

He smiled a bland smile of indulgent amusement at what he no doubt considered my ignorance in putting such a query. “Of course I am sure,”—he replied—“It is my business to know the public taste as thoroughly as I know my own pocket. Understand me,—I don’t suggest that you should write a book on any positively indecent subject,—that can be safely left to the ‘New’

woman,”—and he laughed,—“but I assure you high-class fiction doesn’t sell. The critics don’t like it, to begin with. What goes down with them and with the public is a bit of sensational realism told in terse newspaper English. Literary English,—Addisonian English,—is a mistake.”

“And I am also a mistake I think,” I said with a forced smile—“At any rate if what you say be true, I must lay down the pen and try another trade. I am old-fashioned enough to consider Literature as the highest of all professions, and I would rather not join in with those who voluntarily degrade it.”

He gave me a quick side-glance of mingled incredulity and depreciation.

“Well, well!” he finally observed—“you are a little quixotic. That will wear off. Will you come on to my club and dine with me?”

I refused this invitation promptly. I knew the man saw and recognised my wretched plight,—and pride—false pride if you will—rose up to my rescue. I bade him a hurried good-day, and started back to my lodging, carrying my rejected manuscript with me. Arrived there, my landlady met me as I was about to ascend the stairs, and asked me whether I would ‘kindly settle accounts’ the next day. She spoke civilly enough, poor soul, and not without a certain compassionate hesitation in her manner. Her evident pity for me galled my spirit as much as the publisher’s offer of a dinner had wounded my pride,—and with a perfectly audacious air of certainty I at once promised her the money at the time she herself appointed, though I had not the least idea where or how I should get the required sum. Once past her, and shut in my own room, I flung my useless manuscript on the floor and myself into a chair, and—swore. It refreshed me to swear, and it seemed natural,—for though temporarily weakened by lack of food, I was not yet so weak as to shed tears,—and a fierce formidable oath was to me the same sort of physical relief which I imagine a fit of weeping may be to an excitable woman. Just as I could

not shed tears, so was I incapable of apostrophizing God in my despair. To speak frankly, I did not believe in any God—*then*. I was to myself an all-sufficing mortal, scorning the time-worn superstitions of so-called religion. Of course I had been brought up in the Christian faith; but that creed had become worse than useless to me since I had intellectually realized the utter inefficiency of Christian ministers to deal with difficult life-problems. Spiritually I was adrift in chaos,—mentally I was hindered both in thought and achievement,—bodily, I was reduced to want. My case was desperate,—I myself was desperate. It was a moment when if ever good and evil angels play a game of chance for a man's soul, they were surely throwing the dice on the last wager for mine. And yet, with it all, I felt I had done my best. I was driven into a corner by my fellow-men who grudged me space to live in, but I had fought against it. I had worked honestly and patiently;—all to no purpose. I knew of rogues who gained plenty of money; and of knaves who were amassing large fortunes. Their prosperity appeared to prove that honesty after all was *not* the best policy. What should I do then? How should I begin the jesuitical business of committing evil that good, personal good, might come of it? So I thought, dully, if such stray half-stupefied fancies as I was capable of, deserved the name of thought.

The night was bitter cold. My hands were numbed, and I tried to warm them at the oil-lamp my landlady was good enough to still allow me the use of, in spite of delayed cash-payments. As I did so, I noticed three letters on the table,—one in a long blue envelope suggestive of either a summons or a returned manuscript,—one bearing the Melbourne postmark, and the third a thick square missive coroneted in red and gold at the back. I turned over all three indifferently, and selecting the one from Australia, balanced it in my hand a moment before opening it. I knew from whom it came, and idly wondered what news it brought me. Some months previously I had written a detailed account of my increasing debts and difficulties to an old college chum, who

finding England too narrow for his ambition had gone out to the wider New world on a speculative quest of gold mining. He was getting on well, so I understood, and had secured a fairly substantial position; and I had therefore ventured to ask him point-blank for the loan of fifty pounds. Here, no doubt, was his reply, and I hesitated before breaking the seal.

“Of course it will be a refusal,” I said half-aloud, — “However kindly a friend may otherwise be, he soon turns crusty if asked to lend money. He will express many regrets, accuse trade and the general bad times and hope I will soon ‘tide over.’ I know the sort of thing. Well, —after all, why should I expect him to be different to other men? I’ve no claim on him beyond the memory of a few sentimental arm-in-arm days at Oxford.”

A sigh escaped me in spite of myself, and a mist blurred my sight for the moment. Again I saw the grey towers of peaceful Magdalen, and the fair green trees shading the walks in and around the dear old University town where we, —I and the man whose letter I now held in my hand, —strolled about together as happy youths, fancying that we were young geniuses born to regenerate the world. We were both fond of classics, —we were brimful of Homer and the thoughts and maxims of all the immortal Greeks and Latins, —and I verily believe, in those imaginative days, we thought we had in us such stuff as heroes are made of. But our entrance into the social arena soon robbed us of our sublime conceit, —we were common working units, no more, —the grind and prose of daily life put Homer into the background, and we soon discovered that society was more interested in the latest unsavoury scandal than in the tragedies of Sophocles or the wisdom of Plato. Well! it was no doubt extremely foolish of us to dream that we might help to regenerate a world in which both Plato and Christ appear to have failed, —yet the most hardened cynic will scarcely deny that it is pleasant to look back to the days of his youth if he can think that at least then, if only once in his life, he had noble impulses.

The lamp burned badly, and I had to re-trim it before I could settle down to read my friend's letter. Next door someone was playing a violin, and playing it well. Tenderly and yet with a certain amount of *brio* the notes came dancing from the bow, and I listened, vaguely pleased. Being faint with hunger I was somewhat in a listless state bordering on stupor,—and the penetrating sweetness of the music appealing to the sensuous and æsthetic part of me, drowned for the moment mere animal craving.

“There you go!” I murmured, apostrophizing the unseen musician,—“practising away on that friendly fiddle of yours,—no doubt for a mere pittance which barely keeps you alive. Possibly you are some poor wretch in a cheap orchestra,—or you might even be a street-player and be able to live in this neighbourhood of the *élite* starving,—you can have no hope whatever of being the ‘fashion’ and making your bow before Royalty,—or if you have that hope, it is wildly misplaced. Play on, my friend, play on!—the sounds you make are very agreeable, and seem to imply that you are happy. I wonder if you are?—or if, like me, you are going rapidly to the devil!”

The music grew softer and more plaintive, and was now accompanied by the rattle of hailstones against the window-panes. A gusty wind whistled under the door and roared down the chimney,—a wind cold as the grasp of death and searching as a probing knife. I shivered,—and bending close over the smoky lamp, prepared to read my Australian news. As I opened the envelope, a bill for fifty pounds, payable to me at a well-known London banker's, fell out upon the table. My heart gave a quick bound of mingled relief and gratitude.

“Why Jack, old fellow, I wronged you!” I exclaimed,—“Your heart is in the right place after all.”

And profoundly touched by my friend's ready generosity, I eagerly perused his letter. It was not very long, and had evidently been written off in haste.

Dear Geoff,

I'm sorry to hear you are down on your luck; it shows what a crop of fools are still flourishing in London, when a man of your capability cannot gain his proper place in the world of letters, and be fittingly acknowledged. I believe it's all a question of wire-pulling, and money is the only thing that will pull the wires. Here's the fifty you ask for and welcome,—don't hurry about paying it back. I am doing you a good turn this year by sending you a friend,—a real friend, mind you!—no sham. He brings you a letter of introduction from me, and between ourselves, old man, you cannot do better than put yourself and your literary affairs entirely in his hands. He knows everybody, and is up to all the dodges of editorial management and newspaper cliques. He is a great philanthropist besides,—and seems particularly fond of the society of the clergy. Rather a queer taste you will say, but his reason for such preference is, as he has explained to me quite frankly, that he is so enormously wealthy that he does not quite know what to do with his money, and the reverend gentlemen of the church are generally ready to show him how to spend some of it. He is always glad to know of some quarter where his money and influence (he is very influential) may be useful to others. He has helped me out of a very serious hobble, and I owe him a big debt of gratitude. I've told him all about you,—what a smart fellow you are, and what a lot dear old Alma Mater thought of you, and he has promised to give you a lift up. He can do anything he likes; very naturally, seeing that the whole world of morals, civilization and the rest is subservient to the power of money,—and *his* stock of cash appears to be limitless. *Use him*; he is willing and ready to be used,—and write and let me know how you get on. Don't bother about the fifty till you feel you have tided over the storm.

Ever yours
"Boffles".

I laughed as I read the absurd signature, though my eyes were dim with something like tears. 'Boffles' was the nickname given to my friend by several of our college companions, and neither he nor I knew how it first arose. But no one except the dons ever addressed him by his proper name, which was John Carrington, — he was simply 'Boffles,' and Boffles he remained even now for all those who had been his intimates. I refolded and put by his letter and the draft for the fifty pounds, and with a passing vague wonder as to what manner of man the 'philanthropist' might be who had more money than he knew what to do with, I turned to the consideration of my other two correspondents, relieved to feel that now, whatever happened, I could settle up arrears with my landlady the next day as I had promised. Moreover I could order some supper, and have a fire lit to cheer my chilly room. Before attending to these creature comforts however, I opened the long blue envelope that looked so like a threat of legal proceedings, and unfolding the paper within, stared at it amazedly. What was it all about? The written characters danced before my eyes, — puzzled and bewildered, I found myself reading the thing over and over again without any clear comprehension of it. Presently a glimmer of meaning flashed upon me, startling my senses like an electric shock, ... no—no—!—impossible! Fortune never could be so mad as this!—never so wildly capricious and grotesque of humour! It was some senseless hoax that was being practised upon me, ... and yet, ... if it were a joke, it was a very elaborate and remarkable one! Weighted with the majesty of the law too! ... Upon my word and by all the fantastical freakish destinies that govern human affairs, the news seemed actually positive and genuine!

II

Steadying my thoughts with an effort, I read every word of the document over again deliberately, and the stupefaction of my wonder increased. Was I going mad, or sickening for a fever? Or could this startling, this stupendous piece of information be really true? Because,—if indeed it were true, ... good heavens!—I turned giddy to think of it,—and it was only by sheer force of will that I kept myself from swooning with the agitation of such sudden surprise and ecstasy. If it were true—why then the world was mine!—I was king instead of beggar;—I was everything I chose to be! The letter,—the amazing letter, bore the printed name of a noted firm of London solicitors, and stated in measured and precise terms that a distant relative of my father's, of whom I had scarcely heard, except remotely now and then during my boyhood, had died suddenly in South America, leaving me his sole heir.

“The real and personal estate now amounting to something over Five Millions of Pounds Sterling, we should esteem it a favour if you could make it convenient to call upon us any day this week in order that we may go through the necessary formalities together. The larger bulk of the cash is lodged in the Bank of England, and a considerable amount is placed in French government securities. We should prefer going into further details with you personally rather than by letter. Trusting you will call on us without delay, we are, Sir, yours obediently....”

Five Millions! I, the starving literary hack,—the friendless, hopeless, almost reckless hunter of low newspaper dens,—I, the

possessor of “over Five Millions of Pounds Sterling”! I tried to grasp the astounding fact,—for fact it evidently was,—but could not. It seemed to me a wild delusion, born of the dizzy vagueness which lack of food engendered in my brain. I stared round the room;—the mean miserable furniture,—the fireless grate,—the dirty lamp,—the low truckle bedstead,—the evidences of penury and want on every side;—and then,—then the overwhelming contrast between the poverty that environed me and the news I had just received, struck me as the wildest, most ridiculous incongruity I had ever heard of or imagined,—and I gave vent to a shout of laughter.

“Was there ever such a caprice of mad Fortune!” I cried aloud—“Who would have imagined it! Good God! I! I, of all men in the world to be suddenly chosen out for this luck! By Heaven!—If it is all true, I’ll make society spin round like a top on my hand before I am many months older!”

And I laughed loudly again; laughed just as I had previously sworn, simply by way of relief to my feelings. Some one laughed in answer,—a laugh that seemed to echo mine. I checked myself abruptly, somewhat startled, and listened. Rain poured outside, and the wind shrieked like a petulant shrew,—the violinist next door was practising a brilliant roulade up and down his instrument,—but there were no other sounds than these. Yet I could have sworn I heard a man’s deep-chested laughter close behind me where I stood.

“It must have been my fancy;” I murmured, turning the flame of the lamp up higher in order to obtain more light in the room—“I am nervous I suppose,—no wonder! Poor Boffles!—good old chap!” I continued, remembering my friend’s draft for fifty pounds, which had seemed such a godsend a few minutes since—“What a surprise is in store for you! You shall have your loan back as promptly as you sent it, with an extra fifty added by way of interest for your generosity. And as for the new Mæcenas you are sending to help me over my difficulties,—well, he may be