

A Lesson on Sensibility

By Charles Brockden Brown

Archibald was a youth of very lively parts. His sensibility had become diseased by an assiduous study of those Romancers and Poets, who make love the basis of their fictions. He had scarcely grown up, when he contracted a passion for a woman, whose chief merit consisted in her beauty. A new object quickly succeeded: Though he loved for a time with every appearance of ardour, it was perceived that his affections were easily transferred to a new object, and easily dissolved by absence. Love however, was his element: He could not exist without it. To sigh, to muse, to frame elegies, was the business of his life. Provided there was some object to receive his amorous devoirs, it seemed nearly indifferent what the real qualifications of the object were.

His friends prevailed upon him to put himself under the care of a merchant in Ireland. His situation required that he should qualify himself for some profession. That of a merchant was chosen by him as liable to fewest objections. After some time, however, he was brought back to his friends a maniac. A phrenzy at first furious and terrible, subsided into a melancholy, harmless to others, but invincibly silent and motionless, with scarcely a change of attitude; without opening his lips except to converse on his own misfortunes or the events that caused his despair. He has remained for some years, an example of the fatal effects of addicting the undisciplined mind to books, in which Nature is so fantastically and egregiously belied. These were the circumstances that produced an effect so mournful.

He had scarcely been settled in his new abode at Corke, when he became enamoured of the daughter of a family more distinguished for their pride of birth, than their wealth. The Butlers claimed an alliance with the House of Ormond. There was honour in this descent, which, in the opinion of those who partook of it, survived, and was almost a counterbalance to the disasters that follow an attainder.

The daughter was carefully instructed in that creed which her parents valued so highly; but whether the inconveniences, the formality, and restraint to which this prejudice subjected her; or whether the books which she had an opportunity of consulting, and which, when they are admitted into any plan of education, always possess the largest portion of influence, exhibited human nature in its true colours, her sentiments were of a cast wholly opposite to those that actuated her kindred.

Her love of simplicity and independence appeared to gain new strength from contemplating the pomp and indolence that encumbered her steps. These qualities, however, were not suspected to exist, till the occasion presented itself, that called them into action. She was first seen by Archibald, in a shop where they accidentally met.

On the subjects of gracefulness and beauty, the youth was the most ardent of critics. He fancied himself profoundly skilled in the language of features and looks. Among the numerous attempts that he had made to interpret this language, some had luckily succeeded. On these as on so many demonstrative deductions, had he built his theory; and the aid of certain German writers had enabled him to give it an air of completeness and consistency. On this occasion he instantly formed his conclusions. He had the imagination and hand of a painter. By means of these he supplied himself with a portrait of the lady. He collected all the information respecting her which the stately reserve and unsocial habits of the family admitted. In brooding over what is imperfectly known and seldom seen, enthusiasm is apt to be awakened. No wonder, in such a

fancy as that of Archibald, this image should at length be idolized, and his passion, fostered by incessant meditation, should break out into the utmost extravagances. In a rational mind the difficulties that attended this pursuit would have induced him to relinquish it: In Archibald those difficulties, which were all but insuperable, had no other effect than to stimulate his ardour.

For some time he had full employment in contriving and executing expedients for obtaining the great object of his wishes. His memory was fraught with the wiles and stratagems of lovers; such as have afforded a theme to the poets of all ages: But his own fertile inventions, contemplating the circumstances peculiar to his situation, enabled him to surpass them all in subtlety and perseverance.

The efforts of a strenuous mind constitute sometimes a pleasing, but always an instructive spectacle. Instances of a powerful understanding laying out its strength upon trivial or base purposes, are by far too common in the world. They cannot be considered without regret, nor, I may add, without benefit. The misery which misguided endeavours produce, is no less real, than the happiness which would reward a different application of them; but there is pleasure in reflecting that the time may come when our faculties will not be able to vary from a true direction, and the errors of the present race, by the magnitude and extent of their effects, enable us, in some degree, to appreciate the good which may be hoped from a different condition of society.

The case of Archibald afforded a signal example of a powerful but misdirected capacity. I shall not mention the various contrivances which his ruling passion suggested to him. It is sufficient to say that after a due period of industry, and hope, and suspense, a good correspondence was established between him and the lady. She was sufficiently aware of the prejudices of her friends; but the rectitude of her own mind did not allow her to foresee all the effects of their prejudices: She could never apprehend the benefits of a clandestine connection: She rejected disguise, without a moment's hesitation: She discoursed without scruple, on those tokens and suggestions which Archibald, like an hovering genius, laid in her way without allowing her to distinguish the agent: She spoke with the same unreserve when the true agent was discovered.

The family were of course alarmed. The sincerity of the lady's attachment, and the energy of her principles, were quickly put to the test. Their remonstrances and arguments, though urged with all the advantages of numbers, age, and authority, availed nothing. They taught her neither to disguise nor relinquish her principles. She naturally imagined that this was a question on which no one had a right to decide but herself.

Archibald had sprung from obscurity and indigence. The last defect was of slight importance in the apprehension of the Butlers. An objection on this ground alone had never been made. A noble descent would have expiated every fault, but that of baseness and profligacy. Without this requisite no merit would suffice. That which was of greatest moment in the eyes of her friends, was of least, or rather was of no moment at all in those of the lady. She vindicated her choice with simplicity and mildness, and not with the zeal of one, the gratification of whose wishes depends on the success of her arguments in inspiring conviction; but with the collectedness of one who is merely desirous of evincing the propriety of a step that is inevitable. She did not suffer debate and opposition to ruffle her temper, or destroy her tranquility.

Her parents finding arguments ineffectual, deemed themselves justified, in order to obviate an evil of such magnitude, in resorting to force. All intercourse between the lovers was prohibited. She was condemned to a rigorous confinement. Her constancy, however, was not to be shaken: She reserved herself for better times: She yielded to personal restraints, because it was in vain to resist them; but she retained the freedom of her mind. She was insensible to menaces and

persuasions; denied every parental claim, and the obligations of filial duty. She could by no means be induced to part with the independence of a reasonable being.

The behaviour of Archibald was, in many respects, a contrast to that of the lady. They with equal clearness perceived the injustice of those pretensions of her family; with equal strenuousness they refused to be controlled by them; but, while the latter displayed all the calmness of fortitude, the former was tormented by impatience and resentment.

The friends of Archibald endeavoured to persuade him to make a voyage to the West Indies. There being no room to hope for a change in the determinations of the lady's family, this expedient was chosen as most likely to dissolve a connection which, while it lasted, could only be productive of mutual distress. But it could hardly be expected that Archibald would admit the reasonableness of such ideas, or be induced by such arguments, to embrace this proposal. Many endeavours were made to vanquish the reluctance which he entertained for this scheme. None of them succeeded, till at length, the lady herself became its advocate.

She was fully acquainted with the character of her lover. His absence appeared to her to be desirable, as furnishing a useful trial to his constancy, as well as allowing scope to her own exertions to remove those obstacles to their union, which the prejudices of her family created. When every conceivable expedient has failed, time, alone, may work the most happy revolutions. She was not inclined to despair of the efficacy of perseverance and sincerity, in any cause. Here indeed they had hitherto been tried in vain; but great and unexpected changes in the temper and views of those around her might take place in the lapse of a year: meanwhile the presence of her lover tended only to exasperate their evil passions, and retard the event which they both so much desired. Influenced by these considerations she exerted herself to overcome his aversion to this voyage, and after many delays and struggles on his part, she at length effected her end.

The scheme, however plausible, proved unfortunate. The family after exhausting the obvious expedients, resorted to more atrocious ones. The longer we pursue a favourite end, the more enamoured we become of it, and the less scrupulous we are about the means that we use. The strictness of our morality relaxes while we mistake the instigations of passion for the enlargement of knowledge. I shall not dwell on the progress of their minds from a state in which, that which they finally embraced with eagerness, would have been rejected with horror. A plan was devised of deceiving the lady into an opinion that her lover was false; that he had made his address to a lady in the island to which he had gone, and was on the point of marriage.

Her sagacity was equal to her fortitude; but the craft with which she had to contend was consummate. Suspicion had not put her on her guard against that degree of depravity, to whose machinations it was her lot to be exposed. She was deceived, and at the same moment she was forsaken by the fortitude which had hitherto accompanied her.

A young man, to whom none of the objections made against Archibald were incident, had applied for the lady's favour, previously to her acquaintance with the latter. He was well—born and opulent, young and elegant in his figure and deportment, and intimately allied to the family. He entitled himself to the friendship of Miss Butler, but could not gain her affections.

The family approved of this match; but, partly from a sense of justice, and partly from a persuasion that time and the lover's assiduities would ultimately prevail, allowed her to be governed in this respect by her own inclination. On the claims of Archibald, however, they altered their measures, and were no less anxious to prevail with her to discard Archibald than to accept his competitor. To neither proposal would she give any countenance; but whatever she should determine with respect to the former, she was irreconcilably averse to the latter. The belief of the inconstancy of Archibald seemed to have wrought a total revolution in her

sentiments; but her secret resolutions were widely different from those with which she allowed her family to flatter themselves, as the fruits of their schemes.

Misfortune had changed a being of no common excellence into one capable of harbouring the most dreadful purposes. Though it be the property of injustice to propagate itself, to make its subjects not only miserable, but vicious, it would not be easy to account for the change that now took place in the mind of this lady. That she should start out into no excesses of anger or grief on hearing of her lover's perfidy; that she should sustain this disappointment of her hopes, with unwavering magnanimity, was to be expected from the tenor of her former life, and the principles she had so steadily avowed; but it was not easy to comprehend how she could reconcile, at least so suddenly, her mind to an union with his rival.

These reflections did not hinder her family from eagerly profiting by this compliance, and making immediate preparations for the nuptials. The interval had passed without any thing to cloud their prospect. Every hour produced new tokens of the entire satisfaction with which the lady adopted her new measures. On the evening preceding the appointed day, she parted with her mother with every appearance of happiness and good humour. The morning arrived. She delayed her departure from her chamber beyond her customary hour. Her parent went thither to discover the reason and found her, not asleep, but dead.

Whether some sudden or unforeseen stroke had overtaken her; or, whether she was the author of her own death could never be certainly determined. On the whole the latter opinion was most probable.

It is remarkable that an event which the lady's parents had imposed upon their child, without believing it themselves, had really taken place. Absence had produced the usual effect upon the lover. He had seen a new object which had quickly supplanted the old. His ingenuity furnished an opiate to his conscience. He laid his heart at the feet of the new mistress; the present was accepted; she gave her own in return; and a distant day was assigned for ratifying the exchange: before it arrived, however, tidings reached him, by what means I shall not mention, of the fate of the Irish lady; of her voluntary death in consequence of the belief of his inconstancy. Of the groundlessness of this belief, and of the means by which it had been produced, he was wholly ignorant. As his inconstancy was real, he supposed she was apprized of no more than the truth.

The effect of this information may be easily conceived. He broke off his present connection, and immediately embarked for Europe. He arrived at Cork, and without delay procured an interview with the lady's family. His purpose was to obtain their assent to a proposal sufficiently singular—It was no other than that the vault, in which the body had been interred, should be opened, and himself permitted to take a last view of the corpse. He urged his demand with the energy of frenzy, and at length succeeded.

The solemn period of midnight was selected. The vault was opened in the presence of the desperate lover and some of the family of the deceased. They descended the stair-case: I shudder to describe the object that saluted their sight. They beheld the lady, not decently reposing in her coffin, and shrouded with a snow-white mantle, but,—naked, ghastly, stretched on the floor at the foot of the stair-case, with indubitable tokens of having died, a second time, a victim to terror and famine.

It is not to be wondered at, that a spectacle like this plunged the unhappy lover into a frenzy the most outrageous. He was torn from the spot and speedily delivered to the care of his friends.