

The Bride of Modern Italy

By Mary Shelley

My heart is fixt
This is the sixt.—Elia

On a serene winter morning two young ladies, Clorinda and Teresa, walked up and down the garden of the convent of St. S—, at Rome. If my reader has never seen a convent, or if he has only seen the better kind, let him dismiss from his mind all he may have heard or imagined of such abodes, or he can never transport himself into the garden of St. S—. He must figure it to himself as bounded by a long, low, straggling, white washed, weather-stained building, with grated windows, the lower ones glassless. It is a kitchen garden, but the refuse of the summer stock alone remained, except a few cabbages, which perfumed the air with their rank exhalations. The walks were neglected, yet not overgrown, but strewed with broken earthen-ware, ashes, cabbage-stalks, orange-peel, bones, and all that marks the vicinity of a much frequented, but disorderly mansion. The beds were intersected by these paths, and the whole was surrounded by a high wall. This common scene was, however, unlike what it would have been in this country. You saw the decayed and straggling boughs of the passion-flower against the walls of the convent; here and there a geranium, its luxuriant foliage starred by scarlet flowers, grew unharmed by frost among the cabbages; the lemon plants had been removed to shelter, but orange trees were nailed against the wall, the golden fruit peeping out from amidst the dark leaves; the wall itself was variegated by a thousand rich hues; and thick and pointed aloes grew beneath it. Under the highest wall, opposite the back door of the convent, a corner of ground was enclosed; this was the burial place of the nuns; and in the path that led from the door to this enclosure Clorinda and Teresa walked up and down.

“He will never come!” exclaimed Clorinda.

“I fear the dinner bell will ring and interrupt us, if he does come,” observed Teresa.

“Some cruel obstacle doubtless prevents him,” continued Clorinda, sighing—“and I have prayed to St. Giacomo, and vowed to give him the best flowers and a candle a foot long next Easter.”

Teresa smiled: “I remember,” she said, “that at Christmas you fulfilled such a vow to San Francesco,—was not that for the sake of Cieco Magni? for you change your saint as your lover changes name;—tell me, sweet Clorinda, how many saints have been benefited by your piety?”

Clorinda looked angry, and then sorrowful; the large drops gathered in her dark eyes: “You are unkind to taunt me thus, Teresina;—when did I love truly until now? believe me, never; and if heaven bestows Giacomo upon me—oh! that is his bell!—naughty Teresa, you will cause me to meet him with tears in my eyes.

Away they ran to the parlour of the convent, and were joined there by an old woman purblind and nearly deaf, who was to be present at the visit of Giacomo de’ Tolomei, the brother of Teresa. He kissed the hands of the young ladies, and then they commenced a conversation, which, by the lowness of their tones, and an occasional intermixture of French, was quite incomprehensible to their Argus, who was busily employed in knitting a large green worsted shawl.

“Well?”—said Clorinda, in a tone of inquiry.

“Well, dear Clorinda, I have executed our design, though I hope little from it. I have written a proposal of marriage; if you approve of it, I will send it to your parents. Here it is.”

“What is that paper?” cried the Argus.

Teresa bawled in her ear: “Only the history of the late miracle performed at Asisa” (Italians, male or female, are not great patronizers of truth), “look at it, dear Eusta.” (Eusta could not read.) “I will read it to you by and bye.” Eusta went on with her knitting.

The two girls looking over one another, read the proposal of marriage, which Giacomo de’ Tolomei made to the parents of Clorinda Saviani. The paper was divided into two columns, one headed: “The Proposal,”—the other “Observations to be made thereon”—and this latter column was left blank. The proposal itself was divided into several heads and numbered. It premised that a noble family of Sienna wishing to ally themselves to the family of the Saviani of Rome, in the persons of their eldest son and Glorinda, they presented the following considerations to the heads of that house first, that the young man was well-made, good-looking, healthy, studiously inclined, and of irreproachable morals. The circumstances of his fortune were then detailed, and the claims of dowry: it concluded by saying, that if the parents of Clorinda approved of the terms proposed, the young people might be introduced to each other, and if mutually pleased at their interview, the nuptials might be celebrated in the course of a few months. When Clorinda had finished reading, the tears that had gathered in her eyes fell drop after drop upon the paper.—“Wherefore do you weep?” asked Giacomo, “why do you distress me thus?”

“This proposal will never be accepted. You have asked twelve thousand crowns in dowry; my parents will not give more than six.”

“And yet,” replied Giacomo, “I have named a sum to which I am convinced my father will never agree; he will require twenty thousand at least; even if your parents accede I shall have to win his consent; but if prayers and tears can move him, I will not be chary of either.”

The bell rang for dinner, old Eusta arose, and Giacomo retired. Dinner!—what dainty feast of convent-like confectionaries does the reader picture?—Let him see, in truth, a long, brick-paved floor, with long deal tables, and benches ditto; the tables covered with not white cloths; cellars of black salt; bottles of sour wine, and small loaves of bitter bread. Then came the minestra, consisting (for it was fast day) of what we call macaroni, water, oil, and cheese; then a few vegetables swimming in oil; a concluding dish of eggs fried with garlic, and the repast of one of the most highborn and loveliest girls in Rome was finished. Clorinda Saviani was indeed handsome, and all her fine features expressed the *bisogna d’amare* which ruled her heart. She was just eighteen, and had been five years in this convent, waiting until her father should find a husband of noble birth, who would be content with a slender dowry. During this time she had formed several attachments for various youths, who, under different pretexts, had visited the convent. She had written letters, prayed and wept, and then yielding to insurmountable difficulties she had changed her idol, though she had never ceased to love. The fastidious English must not be disgusted with this picture. It is, perhaps, only a coarse representation of what takes place at every ball-room with us. And if it went beyond;—the nature of the Catholic religion, which crushes the innate conscience by giving a false one in its room; the system of artifice and heartlessness that subsists in a convent; the widely spread maxim in Italy, that dishonour attaches itself to the discovered not the concealed fault—all this forms the excuse why with a tender heart and much native talent, there was neither constancy in Clorinda’s love, nor dignity in her conduct.

After their repast the friends retired to Clorinda's cell; a small, though high room, floored with brick, miserably furnished, and neither clean nor orderly. A prie-dieu was beside the little bed with a crucifix over it, together with two or three prints (like our penny children's prints) of saints, among which St. Giacomo appeared with the freshest and cleanest face; beside these was a glass (resembling a bird's drinking vessel) containing holy water, rather the worse for long standing; in a closet, with the door a-jar, among tattered books and female apparel, hung a glass-case enclosing a waxen Gesu Bambino, and some flowers, gathered for this holy dedication and drooping for want of light, were placed beneath him; some mignonette, basil, and heliotrope, weeds o'ergrown, flowered in a wooden trough at the window; a broken looking glass; a leaden ink stand—such was Clorinda's boudoir.

"I despair," she exclaimed—"I see no end to my evils—and but one road open flight"—"Which would ruin my brother."—"How?—he is of another state."—"And your honour?"—"Honour in this dungeon!—O, let me breathe the fresh air of heaven; let me no longer see this prison room; these high walls and all the circumstances of my convent life, and I care not for the rest." "But how? You may get people into the convent—but to get out yourself is a different affair." "I have many plans:—if this proposal of your brother fail, as it will, I will disclose them to him."

A lay sister now came in to ask the young ladies if they would take coffee with the Superior. They found her alone; a little, squat, snuff-taking old woman; she was in high ill-humour: "Body of Bacchus!" she began, "you introduce strange laws in St. S—!—This coffee is detestable—Your brother, Teresina, is here every day—I detest coffee without rum—Clorinda sees him, and it begins to be talked of—when he comes to-morrow, you only must receive him, and request him to discontinue his visits."

Clorinda's tears mingled with her coffee—"The old witch!" she said, when they had retired, "she is fishing for a present."—"And must have one; what shall Giacomo brine her?"—"Let him send some rum. Did you not see the faces she made over her coffee? yet she is too niggardly to buy it herself." A note was hastily dispatched to Giacomo by Teresa, to inform him of the necessary oblation. He came the next day well provided; for the waiter of a neighbouring inn accompanied him bearing six bottles of what bore the name of *Bomme*. Teresa was called and dispatched to solicit the presence of the Superior. She came; Giacomo took off his hat: "Signora," said he, "it is winter time, and I bring you a wintry gift.—Will you favour me by accepting this rum?"—"Signor, you are too courteous"—"The courtesy is yours, Signora, in honouring me by receiving my present. I hope that you will find it good."—He uncorked a bottle; Teresa ran for a glass; Giacomo filled it, and the Superior emptied it. Clorinda at the same moment tripped into the room. She started with a natural air, and after saluting Giacomo was going away, but he detained her, and they all sat down together, until the Superior was called away to give out bread for supper, and the three young people remained together.

The girls turned to Giacomo with inquiring looks: his were sorrowful. "My proposal has not been received. Your parents replied that they have proposed you to some one, and cannot break off the treaty."—"And thus I am to be sacrificed!" cried Clorinda, casting up her beautiful eyes.—"Will you consent?" said Giacomo reproachfully.—"What means have I? I have talked of flight" (Giacomo's countenance fell); "and that, although difficult, is not impossible."—"How?"—"Why, my cell adjoins that of the Superior. She is fond of sweet things; on the next holiday I will —make some cakes for her, filled with sugar and a little opium. I can then steal away the keys, make an impression on wax (I have a large piece ready), and you can easily get them counterfeited."—"You would engage my brother in a dangerous enterprize," said Teresa.—

“My dear, dear Clorinda, my sweet friend,” said Giacomo, “you are ignorant of the world’s ways. I would sacrifice my life for you; but you would thus lose your honour, I should be imprisoned, and you would be sent to some dreary convent among the mountains, till forced to marry some boor who would render you miserable for life.”—“What is to be done then?” asked Clorinda, discontentedly.—“It requires thought. Something must something shall, be done; do you be faithful to me, and refuse your parents offer, and I do not despair. In the mean time I will set out for Sienna to-morrow and see my father.”

Giacomo had formed an intimacy with a young English artist residing at Rome, and he left the cares of his love in the hands of this gentleman, while he by short days’ journeys, and with a heavy heart, proceeded towards Sienna. The following day brought a letter of five pages, in a nearly illegible hand, to be delivered to Clorinda. Our Englishman had been a year in Rome, but he had never yet been within a convent. As he passed the prison-like building of St. S—, and measured with his eye the lofty walls of its garden, he had peopled it with nuns of all ages, states, and dispositions;—the solemn and demure, the ambitious, the bigoted, and those who, repenting of their vows, wetted their pallet with their midnight tears, and then, prostrate on the damp marble before the crucifix, prayed God to pardon them for being human. And then he thought of the novices fearful as brides, but not so hopeful; and of the boarders who dreamt of the world outside, as we of Paradise beyond the grave. He pictured echoing corridors, painted windows, the impenetrable grate, the religious cloister, and the garden, that most immaculate of asylums, with grassy walks, majestic trees, and veiled forms flitting under their shade. Well, thought he, I am now in for it; and if I do not lose my heart, I shall at least gain some excellent hints for my picture of the Profession of Eloisa.

He crossed the outer hall, rang at the bell, and the old tottering portress came towards the door. He asked for “the Signora Teresa de’ Tolomei.” He was shown into the parlour—a vaulted room, the floor bricked, the furniture mean, without fire or chimney, though the cold east wind covered the ground with hoar frost. In a few minutes the two friends tripped into the room, followed by Eusta, who, instead of her knitting, carried a fire-pot filled with wood ashes, over which she held her withered hands and her blue nose, frost bitten. The girls were somewhat startled on seeing the stranger, who advanced, and announcing himself as Signor Marcott Alleyn, a friend of time brother of Teresa, delivered a little packet, together with a note which bade his sister confide implicitly in the Englishman.

The conversation became animated. No bashfulness intruded to prevent Clorinda from discoursing eloquently of her passion, especially when she observed the deep interest which her account excited. Alleyn was a man of infinitely pleasing manners; he had a soft tone of voice and eyes full of expression. Italian ladies are not accustomed to the English system of gallantry; since in that country either downright love is made, or the most distant coldness preserved between the sexes. Alleyn’s compassion was excited in various ways. He heard that Clorinda had been imprisoned in that convent for five years; he saw the desolate garden, he felt the bitter cold, which was unalleviated by any thing except fire-pots; he had a glance at the blank corridors and squalid cells, and he saw in the victim an elegance of manners and a delicate sensitiveness that ill accorded with such dreary privations. Several visits ensued, and Alleyn became a favourite in the convent. He was only seventeen; his spirits were high; he diverted the friends, brought presents of rum and confectionary to the nuns, kissed some of the least ugly, made covert game of the Superior, and established himself with greater freedom in this seclusion in a week than Giacomo had done in a year. At first he sympathised with Clorinda, now he did more—he amused her. If she wept for the absence of Giacomo, he made her laugh at some story told *apropos*, which

diverted her. If she complained of the petty tyranny of the nuns, he laid some plot of droll revenge, which she executed. He introduced a system of English jokes and hoaxes, at which the poor Italians were perfectly aghast, and to which no experience prevented their becoming victims; so utterly unable were they to comprehend the meaning of such machinations; and then, when their loud voices pealed through the arched passages in wonder and anger, they were appeased by soft words and well-timed gifts.

But this sunshine could not last for ever. Clorinda was at first more happy and gay than she had ever been. She in vain endeavoured to lament the absence of her lover. Alleyn prevented every emotion except gaiety from finding a place in her heart. She looked forward with delight for the hour of his visit, and the merriment that he excited left its traces on the rest of the day. Her step was light; and the cold of her cheerless cell was unfelt, since it had been adorned with caricatures of the Superior and nuns; their tyranny was either laid asleep or revenged, and Giacomo was, alas! forgotten. Her love-breathing letters lost their fire, and the writing them became an irksome task; her sighs were changed into smiles—but suddenly these again vanished, and Clorinda became more pensive and sad than ever. She avoided Teresa, and passed most of her time in lonely walks up and down the straight paths of the garden. She was fretful if Alleyn did not come; when he was announced, she would blush, sit silent in his presence, and, if any of his sallies provoked her laughter, it was quickly quenched by her tears. Her devotions even lost their accustomed warmth; Alleyn had no tutelar saint; no Marcott had ever been honoured with canonization, nor had any of the bones found in the catacombs been baptized with that transalpine name. “Marry, this is miching Mallecho; it means mischief,”—the brief mischief of inconstancy, new love, and all the evils attendant on such a change. Alleyn did not suspect this turn in the tide, till, left tête-à-tête one morning, some slight attentions on his part painted her cheeks with blushes; the confession was not far behind, he heard with mingled surprise and delight, and one kiss sealed their infidelity to the absent Giacomo just as Teresa and Eusta entered.

Alleyn was only seventeen. At that age men look on women as living Edens which they dare not imagine they can ever enjoy; they love, and dream not of being loved; they seek, and their wildest fancies do not picture themselves as sought: so it was small wonder that the heart of Alleyn beat with exultation, that his step was light and his eyes sparkling as he left the convent on that day. His visits were now more frequent; Teresa was confined to her room by illness, and the lovers (though that sacred name is prophaned by such an application) were left together unwatched. Clorinda’s thoughts turned wholly upon escape, and Alleyn heedlessly fostered such thoughts, until one day she said: “If I quit the convent this night, will you be under the walls to receive me?”—“My sweet Clorinda, are you serious?”—“Alas! no, I cannot. But in a few nights I trust that I shall be able to execute my project. Look, here is wax with an impression of the keys of the convent; you must get others made from it. The sisters shall sleep well that night, and before morning we will be far on our journey towards your happy country. Fear not; my disguise is ready—all will go well.”

“The devil it will!” thought Alleyn, as he quitted St. S—, and carefully placing the waxen impression he had received against a sunny wall, he paced up the Corso,—“and the devil take me if ever I go within those walls again! I have sown a pretty crop, but I am not mad enough to reap it; and, as the fates will have it, here is Tolomei returned to tax me with my false proceedings. I wish all convents and women—.”

Tolomei now accosted him. They walked together towards the Coliseum, talking of indifferent things. They climbed to the highest part of the ruin, and then, seated amid leafy shrubs and

fragrant violets and wall flowers, looking over the desert lanes and violated Forum of Rome, Giacomo asked—"What news of Clorinda?" Alleyn wished himself hanged, and, with a look that almost indicated that his wish was about to be fulfilled, replied briefly to his friend's questions, and then began a string himself, that he might escape his keen, lover-like looks—more painful than his words. Giacomo's hopes were nearly dead. His father was inexorable; and he had learnt, besides, that the person selected by her parents as a husband for Clorinda had arrived in Rome, and this accomplished his misery. He shed abundance of tears as he related this, and ended by declaring that if he still found Clorinda faithful and affectionate, the contrariety of his destiny would urge him to some desperate measure. They separated at length, having appointed to go together to St. S— on the following day.

Alleyn broke this appointment. He sent an excuse to Giacomo, who accordingly went alone. In the evening he received a note from Clorinda. She lamented his absence; declared her utter aversion for Giacomo; bewailed her hard fate, and having acquainted him that she was to spend the following day with her parents, entreated him to call on the succeeding one. Alleyn passed the intermediate time at Tivoli, that he might avoid his injured friend, and at the appointed hour went to the convent. Teresa and Clorinda were together; they both looked disturbed and angry; when Alleyn appeared, Teresa arose, and casting a disdainful look on the conscious pair, left the parlour. Clorinda burst into tears. "Oh, my beloved friend," she cried, "I have gone through heart-breaking scenes since I last saw you. This cruel Teresa is continually upbraiding me, and Giacomo's silent looks of grief are a still greater reproach. Yet I am innocent. This heart has escaped from my control; its overwhelming sensations defy all the efforts of my reason, and I passionately love without hope, almost without a return—nor is this all." She then related, that during her visit of the day before, she had been introduced to the person on whom her parents had resolved to bestow her. "At first," she continued, "I was ignorant of the design on foot, and saw him with indifference. Presently my mother took me aside; she began with a torrent of reproaches; told me that all my artifices were discovered, and then showed me a letter of mine to Giacomo which had been intercepted by that artful monster the Superior, and concluded by telling me that I must agree instantly to marry the personage to whom I had been introduced. 'Not that you shall be forced,' she said; 'beware therefore of spreading that report; but your conduct necessitates the strongest measures. If you refuse this match, which is in every way suitable to you, you must prepare to be sent to a convent of Carthusian Nuns at Benevento, where if you do not take the veil, you will be strictly guarded, and your plots, letters, and lovers, will be of no avail.' Without permitting me to reply, this cruel mother led me back to the drawing room; this personage, whose name is Romani, came near me, and presently took an opportunity of asking whether I agreed to the arrangement of my parents. What could I say? I gave an ungracious assent, and they consider the matter settled. His estate is near Spoleto, and he is gone to prepare for my reception. The writings are drawing up; the time will soon arrive when I shall change my cage and be miserable for life. You alone, Alleyn, you, generous and brave Englishman, can aid me; take me hence; bear me away to freedom and love, and let me not be sacrificed to this unknown bridegroom, whose person I hardly know, and the idea of whom fills my heart with despair." Alleyn replied as he best might, with expressions of real sorrow, but of small consolation, and the inexorable dinner-bell rang and separated them just as he concluded his reply.

The same evening Alleyn received a note from her. "My horror of this marriage," she wrote, increases in proportion as the period of its accomplishment approaches. I hear to-day that my parents have already given my *corrèdo* to Romani, which he is to expend in jewels and dresses

for me, and thus my fate is nearly sealed. I shall be banished from Rome and my friends; I shall live with a stranger—I must be miserable. Giacomo is better than this. But as an union with him is impossible, and you refuse to aid me, and to liberate one whom you say you love, listen to a plan I have formed; some years ago I was addressed by one, who at that time gained my heart, and whom I still regard with tenderness. The smallness of my dowry caused his father to break off time treaty; this father is now dead. Go to this gentleman—find out whether he still loves me. Married to him, I should be united to one whose merits I know—I should live at Rome, and there would be some alleviation to my cruel fate. At least come to-morrow to the convent, and endeavour to console your miserable friend.”

Alleyn, as may easily be supposed, did not pay the required visit to the quondam lover of Clorinda. Perhaps she expected this; for the same night she wrote to him herself. Her letter was long and eloquent. Its expressions seemed to proceed from the over-flowings of a passionate and loving heart. She referred to Alleyn as a common friend, and urged expedition in every measure that was to be pursued. This letter was intercepted and carried to her parents. On the following day Alleyn received a despairing note, entreating him not to attempt to come to the convent. “Alas!” she wrote, “how truly miserable I am! What a fate! I suffer, and am the cause of a thousand griefs to others. Oh heaven! I were better dead; then I should cease to lament, or at least to occasion wretchedness to others. Now I am hated by others, and even by myself—Oh, my incomparable friend! Angel of my heart! Can I be the cause of misery even to you? See Giacomo, my beloved friend; tell him how deeply I pity him, but counsel him in my name to desist from all further pursuit. He must permit me to obey my parents, and they will never consent. My sole aim now is to escape from this prison.”

Another and another letter came; and she most earnestly begged him not to the convent. Thus nearly a month passed, when one morning early Alleyn was surprised by a visit from the Superior of the convent of St. S—. The old lady seemed very full of matter. She drank the rosoglio presented to her, took snuff, and opened her budget. She talked of the trouble she had ever had with poor Clorinda; inveighed against Giacomo; during her long discourse she praised her own sagacity, the tender affection of Clorinda’s parents, and related how she had always opposed the entrance of young men into the convent and their free communication with Clorinda, except his own; but that his politeness and known integrity had in this particular caused her to relax her discipline; and she concluded by inviting him to visit the convent whenever it should be agreeable to him. She then took her leave.

Alleyn was much disturbed. He wished not to go to St. S—; he knew that he ought not to see Clorinda again. He resolved not to go out at all, and sat thinking of her beauty, love, and unaffected manners, until he resolved to walk that he might get rid of such thoughts. He hurried down the Corso, and before he was aware found himself before the door of the convent of St. S . He paused, again he moved, and entered the outer hall—his hand was on the bell, when the door opened and Giacomo came out. Seeing Alleyn, he threw himself into his arms, shedding a torrent of tears. This exordium startled our Englishman; the conclusion was soon told: Clorinda had married Romani the day before, and on the same evening had quitted Rome for Spoleto.

This news sobered Alleyn at once; he shuddered almost to think of the folly he had been about to commit, feeling as one who is stayed by a friendly hand when about to place his foot beyond the brink of a high precipice. They turned from the convent door. “And yet,” said Alleyn as he walked on, “are you secure of the truth of your account? The Superior called on me yesterday and invited me to visit St. S—. Why should she do this if Clorinda were gone? I have half a mind to go and fathom this mystery.”

“Ay, go by all means,” replied Giacomo bitterly, “you will be welcome; fill your pockets with sugar plums; dose the old lady with rosoglio, and kiss the gentle nuns, the youngest of whom bears the weight of sixty years under the fillet on her brow. They miss your good cheer, and who knows, Clorinda gone, what other nets they may weave to secure so valuable a prize. True, you are an Englishman and a heretic; words which, interpreted into pure Tuscan, mean an untired prodigal, and one, pardon me, whose conscience will no more stickle at violating yon sanctuary than at eating flesh on Fridays. Go by all means, and make the best of your good fortune among these Houris.”

“Rather say, take post horses for Spoleto, friend Giacomo. And yet neither—it is all vanity and vexation of spirit. I will go paint my Profession of Eloisa.”