

Marie Corelli
Complete Works
(Illustrated):
The Sorrows of Satan, The Secret
Power, A Romance of Two Worlds,
The Soul of Lilith, Vendetta and
other

The Novels

A Romance of Two Worlds

PROLOGUE.

We live in an age of universal inquiry, ergo of universal scepticism. The prophecies of the poet, the dreams of the philosopher and scientist, are being daily realized — things formerly considered mere fairy-tales have become facts — yet, in spite of the marvels of learning and science that are hourly accomplished among us, the attitude of mankind is one of disbelief. “There is no God!” cries one theorist; “or if there be one, *I* can obtain no proof of His existence!” “There is no Creator!” exclaims another. “The Universe is simply a rushing together of atoms.” “There can be no

immortality,” asserts a third. “We are but dust, and to dust we shall return.” “What is called by idealists the SOUL,” argues another, “is simply the vital principle composed of heat and air, which escapes from the body at death, and mingles again with its native element. A candle when lit emits flame; blow out the light, the flame vanishes — where? Would it not be madness to assert the flame immortal? Yet the soul, or vital principle of human existence, is no more than the flame of a candle.”

If you propound to these theorists the eternal question WHY? — why is the world in existence? why is there a universe? why do we live? why do we think and plan? why do we perish at the last? — their grandiose reply is, “Because of the Law of Universal Necessity.” They cannot explain this mysterious Law to themselves, nor can they probe deep enough to find the answer to a still more tremendous WHY — namely, WHY, is there a Law of Universal Necessity? — but they are satisfied with the result of their reasonings, if not wholly, yet in part, and seldom try to search beyond that great vague vast Necessity, lest their finite brains should reel into madness worse than death. Recognizing, therefore, that in this cultivated age a wall of scepticism and cynicism is gradually being built up by intellectual thinkers of every nation against all that treats of the Supernatural and Unseen, I am aware that my narration of the events I have recently experienced will be read with incredulity. At a time when the great empire of the

Christian Religion is being assailed, or politely ignored by governments and public speakers and teachers, I realize to the fullest extent how daring is any attempt to prove, even by a plain history of strange occurrences happening to one's self, the actual existence of the Supernatural around us; and the absolute certainty of a future state of being, after the passage through that brief soul-torpor in which the body perishes, known to us as Death.

In the present narration, which I have purposely called a "romance," I do not expect to be believed, as I can only relate what I myself have experienced. I know that men and women of to-day must have proofs, or what they are willing to accept as proofs, before they will credit anything that purports to be of a spiritual tendency; — something startling — some miracle of a stupendous nature, such as according to prophecy they are all unfit to receive. Few will admit the subtle influence and incontestable, though mysterious, authority exercised upon their lives by higher intelligences than their own — intelligences unseen, unknown, but felt. Yes! felt by the most careless, the most cynical; in the uncomfortable prescience of danger, the inner forebodings of guilt — the moral and mental torture endured by those who fight a protracted battle to gain the hardly-won victory in themselves of right over wrong — in the thousand and one sudden appeals made without warning to that compass of a man's life,

Conscience — and in those brilliant and startling impulses of generosity, bravery, and self-sacrifice which carry us on, heedless of consequences, to the performance of great and noble deeds, whose fame makes the whole world one resounding echo of glory — deeds that we wonder at ourselves even in the performance of them — acts of heroism in which mere life goes for nothing, and the Soul for a brief space is pre-eminent, obeying blindly the guiding influence of a something akin to itself, yet higher in the realms of Thought.

There are no proofs as to why such things should be; but that they are, is indubitable. The miracles enacted now are silent ones, and are worked in the heart and mind of man alone. Unbelief is nearly supreme in the world to-day. Were an angel to descend from heaven in the middle of a great square, the crowd would think he had got himself up on pulleys and wires, and would try to discover his apparatus. Were he, in wrath, to cast destruction upon them, and with fire blazing from his wings, slay a thousand of them with the mere shaking of a pinion, those who were left alive would either say that a tremendous dynamite explosion had occurred, or that the square was built on an extinct volcano which had suddenly broken out into frightful activity. Anything rather than believe in angels — the nineteenth century protests against the possibility of their existence. It sees no miracle — it pooh-poohs the very enthusiasm that

might work them.

“Give a positive sign,” it says; “prove clearly that what you say is true, and I, in spite of my Progress and Atom Theory, will believe.” The answer to such a request was spoken eighteen hundred years and more ago. “A faithless and perverse generation asketh for a sign, and no sign shall be given unto them.”

Were I now to assert that a sign had been given to ME — to me, as one out of the thousands who demand it — such daring assurance on my part would meet with the most strenuous opposition from all who peruse the following pages; each person who reads having his own ideas on all subjects, and naturally considering them to be the best if not the only ideas worth anything. Therefore I wish it to be plainly understood that in this book I personally advocate no new theory of either religion or philosophy; nor do I hold myself answerable for the opinions expressed by any of my characters. My aim throughout is to let facts speak for themselves. If they seem strange, unreal, even impossible, I can only say that the things of the invisible world must always appear so to those whose thoughts and desires are centred on this life only.

CHAPTER I.

AN ARTIST'S STUDIO.

In the winter of 188-, I was afflicted by a series of

nervous ailments, brought on by overwork and overworry. Chief among these was a protracted and terrible insomnia, accompanied by the utmost depression of spirits and anxiety of mind. I became filled with the gloomiest anticipations of evil; and my system was strung up by slow degrees to such a high tension of physical and mental excitement, that the quietest and most soothing of friendly voices had no other effect upon me than to jar and irritate. Work was impossible; music, my one passion, intolerable; books became wearisome to my sight; and even a short walk in the open air brought with it such lassitude and exhaustion, that I soon grew to dislike the very thought of moving out of doors. In such a condition of health, medical aid became necessary; and a skilful and amiable physician, Dr. R ———, of great repute in nervous ailments, attended me for many weeks, with but slight success. He was not to blame, poor man, for his failure to effect a cure. He had only one way of treatment, and he applied it to all his patients with more or less happy results. Some died, some recovered; it was a lottery on which my medical friend staked his reputation, and won. The patients who died were never heard of more — those who recovered sang the praises of their physician everywhere, and sent him gifts of silver plate and hampers of wine, to testify their gratitude. His popularity was very great; his skill considered marvellous; and his inability to do ME any good arose, I must perforce imagine, out of some defect

or hidden obstinacy in my constitution, which was to him a new experience, and for which he was unprepared. Poor Dr. R —— ! How many bottles of your tastily prepared and expensive medicines have I not swallowed, in blind confidence and blinder ignorance of the offences I thus committed against all the principles of that Nature within me, which, if left to itself, always heroically struggles to recover its own proper balance and effect its own cure; but which, if subjected to the experimental tests of various poisons or drugs, often loses strength in the unnatural contest and sinks exhausted, perhaps never to rise with actual vigour again. Baffled in his attempts to remedy my ailments, Dr. R —— at last resorted to the usual plan adopted by all physicians when their medicines have no power. He recommended change of air and scene, and urged my leaving London, then dark with the fogs of a dreary winter, for the gaiety and sunshine and roses of the Riviera. The idea was not unpleasant to me, and I determined to take the advice proffered. Hearing of my intention, some American friends of mine, Colonel Everard and his charming young wife, decided to accompany me, sharing with me the expenses of the journey and hotel accommodation. We left London all together on a damp foggy evening, when the cold was so intense that it seemed to bite the flesh like the sharp teeth of an animal, and after two days' rapid journey, during which I felt my spirits gradually rising, and my gloomy forebodings vanishing

slowly one by one, we arrived at Cannes, and put up at the Hotel de L —— . It was a lovely place, and most beautifully situated; the garden was a perfect wilderness of roses in full bloom, and an avenue of orange-trees beginning to flower cast a delicate fragrance on the warm delicious air.

Mrs. Everard was delighted.

“If you do not recover your health here,” she said half laughingly to me on the second morning after our arrival, “I am afraid your case is hopeless. What sunshine! What a balmy wind! It is enough to make a cripple cast away his crutches and forget he was ever lame. Don’t you think so?”

I smiled in answer, but inwardly I sighed. Beautiful as the scenery, the air, and the general surroundings were, I could not disguise from myself that the temporary exhilaration of my feelings, caused by the novelty and excitement of my journey to Cannes, was slowly but surely passing away. The terrible apathy, against which I had fought for so many months, was again creeping over me with its cruel and resistless force. I did my best to struggle against it; I walked, I rode, I laughed and chatted with Mrs. Everard and her husband, and forced myself into sociability with some of the visitors at the hotel, who were disposed to show us friendly attention. I summoned all my stock of will-power to beat back the insidious physical and mental misery that threatened to sap the very spring of my life;

and in some of these efforts I partially succeeded. But it was at night that the terrors of my condition manifested themselves. Then sleep forsook my eyes; a dull throbbing weight of pain encircled my head like a crown of thorns; nervous terrors shook me from head to foot; fragments of my own musical compositions hummed in my ears with wearying persistence — fragments that always left me in a state of distressed conjecture; for I never could remember how they ended, and I puzzled myself vainly over crotchets and quavers that never would consent to arrange themselves in any sort of finale. So the days went on; for Colonel Everard and his wife, those days were full of merriment, sight-seeing, and enjoyment. For me, though outwardly I appeared to share in the universal gaiety, they were laden with increasing despair and wretchedness; for I began to lose hope of ever recovering my once buoyant health and strength, and, what was even worse, I seemed to have utterly parted with all working ability. I was young, and up to within a few months life had stretched brightly before me, with the prospect of a brilliant career. And now what was I? A wretched invalid — a burden to myself and to others — a broken spar flung with other fragments of ship wrecked lives on the great ocean of Time, there to be whirled away and forgotten. But a rescue was approaching; a rescue sudden and marvellous, of which, in my wildest fancies, I had never dreamed.

Staying in the same hotel with us was a young Italian artist, Raffaello Cellini by name. His pictures were beginning to attract a great deal of notice, both in Paris and Rome: not only for their faultless drawing, but for their wonderfully exquisite colouring. So deep and warm and rich were the hues he transferred to his canvases, that others of his art, less fortunate in the management of the palette, declared he must have invented some foreign compound whereby he was enabled to deepen and brighten his colours for the time being; but that the effect was only temporary, and that his pictures, exposed to the air for some eight or ten years, would fade away rapidly, leaving only the traces of an indistinct blur. Others, more generous, congratulated him on having discovered the secrets of the old masters. In short, he was admired, condemned, envied, and flattered, all in a breath; while he himself, being of a singularly serene and unruffled disposition, worked away incessantly, caring little or nothing for the world's praise or blame.

Cellini had a pretty suite of rooms in the Hotel de L ———, and my friends Colonel and Mrs. Everard fraternized with him very warmly. He was by no means slow to respond to their overtures of friendship, and so it happened that his studio became a sort of lounge for us, where we would meet to have tea, to chat, to look at the pictures, or to discuss our plans for future enjoyment. These visits to Cellini's studio, strange to say, had a

remarkably soothing and calming effect upon my suffering nerves. The lofty and elegant room, furnished with that “admired disorder” and mixed luxuriousness peculiar to artists, with its heavily drooping velvet curtains, its glimpses of white marble busts and broken columns, its flash and fragrance of flowers that bloomed in a tiny conservatory opening out from the studio and leading to the garden, where a fountain bubbled melodiously — all this pleased me and gave me a curious, yet most welcome, sense of absolute rest. Cellini himself had a fascination for me, for exactly the same reason. As an example of this, I remember escaping from Mrs. Everard on one occasion, and hurrying to the most secluded part of the garden, in order to walk up and down alone in an endeavour to calm an attack of nervous agitation which had suddenly seized me. While thus pacing about in feverish restlessness, I saw Cellini approaching, his head bent as if in thought, and his hands clasped behind his back. As he drew near me, he raised his eyes — they were clear and darkly brilliant — he regarded me steadfastly with a kindly smile. Then lifting his hat with the graceful reverence peculiar to an Italian, he passed on, saying no word. But the effect of his momentary presence upon me was remarkable — it was ELECTRIC. I was no longer agitated. Calmed, soothed and almost happy, I returned to Mrs. Everard, and entered into her plans for the day with so much alacrity that she was surprised and

delighted.

“If you go on like this,” she said, “you will be perfectly well in a month.”

I was utterly unable to account for the remedial influence Raffaello Cellini’s presence had upon me; but such as it was I could not but be grateful for the respite it gave me from nervous suffering, and my now daily visits to the artist’s studio were a pleasure and a privilege not to be foregone. Moreover, I was never tired of looking at his pictures. His subjects were all original, and some of them were very weird and fantastic. One large picture particularly attracted me. It was entitled “Lords of our Life and Death.” Surrounded by rolling masses of cloud, some silver-crested, some shot through with red flame, was depicted the World, as a globe half in light, half in shade. Poised above it was a great Angel, upon whose calm and noble face rested a mingled expression of deep sorrow, yearning pity, and infinite regret. Tears seemed to glitter on the drooping lashes of this sweet yet stern Spirit; and in his strong right hand he held a drawn sword — the sword of destruction — pointed forever downwards to the fated globe at his feet. Beneath this Angel and the world he dominated was darkness — utter illimitable darkness. But above him the clouds were torn asunder, and through a transparent veil of light golden mist, a face of surpassing beauty was seen — a face on which youth, health, hope, love, and ecstatic joy all shone with ineffable radiance. It was the personification

of Life — not life as we know it, brief and full of care — but Life Immortal and Love Triumphant. Often and often I found myself standing before this masterpiece of Cellini's genius, gazing at it, not only with admiration, but with a sense of actual comfort. One afternoon, while resting in my favourite low chair opposite the picture, I roused myself from a reverie, and turning to the artist, who was showing some water-colour sketches to Mrs. Everard, I said abruptly:

“Did you imagine that face of the Angel of Life, Signor Cellini, or had you a model to copy from?”

He looked at me and smiled.

“It is a moderately good portrait of an existing original,” he said.

“A woman's face then, I suppose? How very beautiful she must be!”

“Actual beauty is sexless,” he replied, and was silent. The expression of his face had become abstracted and dreamy, and he turned over the sketches for Mrs. Everard with an air which showed his thoughts to be far away from his occupation.

“And the Death Angel?” I went on. “Had you a model for that also?”

This time a look of relief, almost of gladness, passed over his features.

“No indeed,” he answered with ready frankness; “that is entirely my own creation.”

I was about to compliment him on the grandeur

and force of his poetical fancy, when he stopped me by a slight gesture of his hand.

“If you really admire the picture,” he said, “pray do not say so. If it is in truth a work of art, let it speak to you as art only, and spare the poor workman who has called it into existence the shame of having to confess that it is not above human praise. The only true criticism of high art is silence — silence as grand as heaven itself.”

He spoke with energy, and his dark eyes flashed. Amy (Mrs. Everard) looked at him curiously.

“Say now!” she exclaimed, with a ringing laugh, “aren’t you a little bit eccentric, signor? You talk like a long-haired prophet! I never met an artist before who couldn’t stand praise; it is generally a matter of wonder to me to notice how much of that intoxicating sweet they can swallow without reeling. But you’re an exception, I must admit. I congratulate you!”

Cellini bowed gaily in response to the half-friendly, half-mocking curtsy she gave him, and, turning to me again, said:

“I have a favour to ask of you, mademoiselle. Will you sit to me for your portrait?”

“I!” I exclaimed, with astonishment. “Signor Cellini, I cannot imagine why you should wish so to waste your valuable time. There is nothing in my poor physiognomy worthy of your briefest attention.”

“You must pardon me, mademoiselle,” he replied gravely, “if I presume to differ from you. I am

exceedingly anxious to transfer your features to my canvas. I am aware that you are not in strong health, and that your face has not that roundness and colour formerly habitual to it. But I am not an admirer of the milkmaid type of beauty. Everywhere I seek for intelligence, for thought, for inward refinement — in short, mademoiselle, you have the face of one whom the inner soul consumes, and, as such, may I plead again with you to give me a little of your spare time? **YOU WILL NOT REGRET IT, I ASSURE YOU.**”

These last words were uttered in a lower tone and with singular impressiveness. I rose from my seat and looked at him steadily; he returned me glance for glance, A strange thrill ran through me, followed by that inexplicable sensation of absolute calm that I had before experienced. I smiled — I could, not help smiling.

“I will come to-morrow,” I said.

“A thousand thanks, mademoiselle! Can you be here at noon?”

I looked inquiringly at Amy, who clapped her hands with delighted enthusiasm.

“Of course! Any time you like, signor. We will arrange our excursions so that they shall not interfere with the sittings. It will be most interesting to watch the picture growing day by day. What will you call it, signor? By some fancy title?”

“It will depend on its appearance when completed,” he replied, as he threw open the doors of the

studio and bowed us out with his usual ceremonious politeness.

“Au revoir, madame! A demain, mademoiselle!” and the violet velvet curtains of the portiere fell softly behind us as we made our exit.

“Is there not something strange about that young man?” said Mrs. Everard, as we walked through the long gallery of the Hotel de L — back to our own rooms. “Something fiendish or angelic, or a little of both qualities mixed up?”

“I think he is what people term PECULIAR, when they fail to understand the poetical vagaries of genius,” I replied. “He is certainly very uncommon.”

“Well!” continued my friend meditatively, as she contemplated her pretty mignonne face and graceful figure in a long mirror placed attractively in a corner of the hall through which we were passing; “all I can say is that I wouldn’t let him paint MY portrait if he were to ask ever so! I should be scared to death. I wonder you, being so nervous, were not afraid of him.”

“I thought you liked him,” I said.

“So I do. So does my husband. He’s awfully handsome and clever, and all that — but his conversation! There now, my dear, you must own he is slightly QUEER. Why, who but a lunatic would say that the only criticism of art is silence? Isn’t that utter rubbish?”

“The only TRUE criticism,” I corrected her gently.

“Well, it’s all the same. How can there be any criticism at all in silence? According to his idea when we admire anything very much we ought to go round with long faces and gags on our mouths. That would be entirely ridiculous! And what was that dreadful thing he said to you?”

“I don’t quite understand you,” I answered; “I cannot remember his saying anything dreadful.”

“Oh, I have it now,” continued Amy with rapidity; “it was awful! He said you had the FACE OF ONE WHOM THE SOUL CONSUMES. You know that was most horribly mystical! And when he said it he looked — ghastly! What did he mean by it, I wonder?”

I made no answer; but I thought I knew. I changed the conversation as soon as possible, and my volatile American friend was soon absorbed in a discussion on dress and jewellery. That night was a blessed one for me; I was free from all suffering, and slept as calmly as a child, while in my dreams the face of Cellini’s “Angel of life” smiled at me, and seemed to suggest peace.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS POTION.

The next day, punctually at noon, according to my promise, I entered the studio. I was alone, for Amy, after some qualms of conscience respecting chaperonage, propriety, and Mrs. Grundy, had yielded to my entreaties

and gone for a drive with some friends. In spite of the fears she began to entertain concerning the Mephistophelian character of Raffaello Cellini, there was one thing of which both she and I felt morally certain: namely, that no truer or more honourable gentleman than he ever walked on the earth. Under his protection the loveliest and loneliest woman that ever lived would have been perfectly safe — as safe as though she were shut up, like the princess in the fairy-tale, in a brazen tower, of which only an undiscoverable serpent possessed the key. When I arrived, the rooms were deserted, save for the presence of a magnificent Newfoundland dog, who, as I entered, rose, and shaking his shaggy body, sat down before me and offered me his huge paw, wagging his tail in the most friendly manner all the while, I at once responded to his cordial greeting, and as I stroked his noble head, I wondered where the animal had come from; for though — we had visited Signor Cellini's studio every day, there had been no sign or mention of this stately, brown-eyed, four-footed companion. I seated myself, and the dog immediately lay down at my feet, every now and then looking up at me with an affectionate glance and a renewed wagging of his tail. Glancing round the well-known room, I noticed that the picture I admired so much was veiled by a curtain of Oriental stuff, in which were embroidered threads of gold mingled with silks of various brilliant hues. On the working easel was a large square canvas,

already prepared, as I supposed, for my features to be traced thereon. It was an exceedingly warm morning, and though the windows as well as the glass doors of the conservatory were wide open, I found the air of the studio very oppressive. I perceived on the table a finely-wrought decanter of Venetian glass, in which clear water sparkled temptingly. Rising from my chair, I took an antique silver goblet from the mantelpiece, filled it with the cool fluid, and was about to drink, when the cup was suddenly snatched from my hands, and the voice of Cellini, changed from its usual softness to a tone both imperious and commanding, startled me.

“Do not drink that,” he said; “you must not! You dare not! I forbid you!”

I looked up at him in mute astonishment. His face was very pale, and his large dark eyes shone with suppressed excitement. Slowly my self-possession returned to me, and I said calmly:

“YOU forbid me, signor? Surely you forget yourself. What harm have I done in helping myself to a simple glass of water in your studio? You are not usually so inhospitable.”

While I spoke his manner changed, the colour returned to his face, and his eyes softened — he smiled.

“Forgive me, mademoiselle, for my brusquerie. It is true I forgot myself for a moment. But you were in danger, and — —”

“In danger!” I exclaimed incredulously.

“Yes, mademoiselle. This,” and he held up the Venetian decanter to the light, “is not water simply. If you will observe it now with the sunshine beating full against it, I think you will perceive peculiarities in it that will assure you of my veracity.”

I looked as he bade me, and saw, to my surprise, that the fluid was never actually still for a second. A sort of internal bubbling seemed to work in its centre, and curious specks and lines of crimson and gold flashed through it from time to time.

“What is it?” I asked; adding with a half-smile, “Are you the possessor of a specimen of the far-famed Aqua Tofana?”

Cellini placed the decanter carefully on a shelf, and I noticed that he chose a particular spot for it, where the rays of the sun could fall perpendicularly upon the vessel containing it. Then turning to me, he replied:

“Aqua Tofana, mademoiselle, is a deadly poison, known to the ancients and also to many learned chemists of our day. It is a clear and colourless liquid, but it is absolutely still — as still as a stagnant pool. What I have just shown you is not poison, but quite the reverse. I will prove this to you at once.” And taking a tiny liqueur glass from a side table, he filled it with the strange fluid and drank it off, carefully replacing the stopper in the decanter.

“But, Signor Cellini,” I urged, “if it is so harmless, why did you forbid my tasting it? Why did you say there