THE BAD TIMES

CHAPTER I

THE month of August in the year 1800 saw the last act of the drama played out. Irishmen enacted the part of statesmen, strutted and mouthed with the best of that kind of man, for eighteen years. Then William Pitt, deeming that the play grew wearisome, or fearing perhaps that the actors might take themselves too seriously, rang the curtain down. Few men were well satisfied with the management of the last act. Lord Castlereagh and Mr. Secretary Cooke may perhaps have slept comfortably for a little while. They deserved to sleep, for they had worked hard and watched anxiously. It is not very easy to purchase the votes of proud gentlemen, and intrigue is nervous work when at any moment a blundering fool may say too much, or disaster follow swiftly on dealings with some unexpectedly honest man. No doubt there were others also who breathed freely and were content; the men without consciences, the hungry seekers after place and pension. These, with promises of posts and pensions safe under their pillows, slept and had visions of a bright future; as maidens, in simpler days than ours, used to dream on scraps of bridecake.

But most men were neither happy nor comfortable. Even the promise of some well-endowed deanery for a younger brother, even a brand new blazoned patent of nobility, even golden coins jingling abundantly in breeches pockets, will not

always quiet the uncomfortable murmurings of outraged honour. For these men who took the promises and titles and gold in exchange for their votes were gentlemen, or had been gentlemen before they smirched their honour with bribes. Men who have lived, spoken, thought as gentlemen for years, do not feel comfortable just at first as knaves. It takes time to grow accustomed to a wholly new outlook upon life. Still, gold, if there is enough of it, and a title which obliterates an old honourable name, will do much to soothe the vagaries of ill-regulated consciences. Less enviable were those who gave their votes and then went home with an uneasy sense of having been fooled. They had listened to very terrifying talk about blazing homesteads and murdered men, about United Irishmen who plotted, and ideas imported from France, the land of the guillotine, which threatened property and life. It had certainly seemed at one time as if a union with England offered security, the only possible security for them and their class. These timid men, immensely dreading new and incomprehensible forces, had given their votes and got nothing in exchange for them. It had seemed the only thing to do. But afterwards they were not quite certain of their own wisdom. Questions pressed to be answered. Might not they, the gentlemen of Ireland, have themselves led Ireland, saved Ireland? They had surrendered Ireland because they feared Ireland. But was not England also a power to be feared? They had been great men, the rulers of a nation. Had they sunk into the positions of squireens in a contemptible province? And had they made sure of their own safety? How long would England consider herself bound by the articles of that treaty of union? They were not very happy, these gentlemen who had been fooled into voting for Lord Castlereagh's bill.

But besides all these, besides the men who had

been bribed or fooled, there were others. There were those who had opposed the union to the last, who were not to be bought or hoodwinked or bullied. These men went riding home from Dublin, northwards, southwards, westwards, with black anger in their hearts. They were beaten men, beaten, so they believed, by the allied forces of knaves and fools. They rode alone, refusing even each other's company. They sat alone in the parlours of inns, drank good wine morosely, cursed the impertinent who dared to speak to them. They reached their homes, fair houses built by lakesides or amid wooded hills, mansions reared in the bogland, and castles rendered indefensible now by a generation which required light and comfort. There for the most part they sulked helplessly until they learned to satisfy souls which had once known greatness, with the care of horses and dogs and with much drinking of smuggled claret and whisky-punch.

Not one of all of them went home in bitterer rage than Stephen Butler of Dhulough. He rode with his arm in a sling, for a bullet from the pistol of one of Castlereagh's bravoes had gone ripping among the muscles of it one morning in the Phœnix Park. Mr. Secretary Cook had hinted to him of a title in exchange for his vote and influence; or money, if he preferred money, plenty of money, for Stephen Butler of Dhulough was a strong man, worth paying a good price for. But Stephen Butler was not to be bought. They had fêted and flattered him. Men with great names and high places drank with him; fine ladies smiled on him, praised him, would have kissed him very likely had he shown any disposition for kissing. But at last they all became sick of the sneer on his face, and found themselves no nearer getting a promise of his vote. They had tried to frighten him with tales of Wexford rebels and French landings and United

Irishmen. But Stephen Butler laughed in their faces.

"I'd rather trust my country," he said, "to the worst rebel that ever shouldered pike, than hand it over to Englishmen. By God, if there must be foreigners in Ireland, let them be French, not English!"

Then one of Castlereagh's convivial gladiators, a man who could shatter wine-glass stems with pistol bullets, a trickster who could pierce the pips on a nine of diamonds at twenty paces and not waste a shot, found occasion to insult Stephen Butler in a public place. There was a meeting in the early morning. The man of showy tricks shot less straight than usual, but there was a bad hour for Stephen Butler afterwards with a surgeon, and then two or three weeks of inactivity. Stephen shot so straight that it was not worth while to set a surgeon poking for the bullet in the man's brain. Later on Stephen Butler appeared pale-faced in the Parliament house and gave his votes more savagely than ever.

When it was all over he rode west, down to the seaboard of Connacht, where he lived. Travelling was slow then even if a man had a good horse under him, and it was only on the evening of the third day that Stephen Butler rode into Athlone and gave his horse to the ostler of the inn. In the parlour sat a young man, fresh-complexioned, dandified, smiling to himself in immense good humour. He rose and greeted Stephen Butler with outstretched hand and words of welcome. Stephen put his uninjured arm behind his back and stared.

"Come," said the young man; "you know me, Mr. Butler. Damn it! don't pretend not to know your nearest neighbour."

"I knew a gentleman once," said Stephen, "by the name of De Lancy. I don't know the scoundrel who sold his country for the sake of hearing men call him Lord Daintree."

The young man flushed crimson.

"My God, sir, you shall answer for this!"

"Be careful," said Stephen with a sneer; "I can shoot with my left hand."

He called the landlord and demanded a private sitting-room.

"I have no taste," he said, "for the company I find in your parlour. I shall sup alone."

Next day he started early and rode hard. For the rest of the journey he kept ahead of his neighbour and saw him no more. Late one evening he arrived at the borders of his own property and rode into the village of Cuslough. The people, his own people, turned out to meet him. They lighted a fire at the entrance of the village and cheered him as he rode up. He was a hard man, but they loved him for his justice and his courage. They clung to him, these ignorant peasant people, as one who understood them, spoke their language, knew their ways and stood between them and worse harm than his own stern rulership inflicted. So they cheered him, little knowing or understanding what he had done or why he came home from Dublin with hard anger in his face. But he did not heed them. Not a word of greeting came from his lips, or a glance of recognition from his eyes. He spurred his tired horse past the blazing turf, past the pitiful cabins of the village, on to the lonely mountain road beyond.

He rode three miles or more, but slowly, for the road was very rough. Beyond him lay the sea, a desolate waste of dark water. He smelt the breath of it, and heard it rushing against the rocks. The road bent sharply to the left, skirted the shore, climbed a hill, and then below him lay Dhulough village. Again there were crowds gathered in the streets and great fires lit. Again Stephen rode silent through the cheering people. This time he nodded recognition once. Two men, stewards on his estate, stood together in the firelight. They had arrayed themselves in their old

volunteer uniforms, worn twenty years before, and had their muskets in their hands. On them Stephen smiled grimly. Then he rode on to the great gates of Dhulough demesne. He went slowly through the scanty dwarfed trees; passed the dark lake from which the house and village took their names, and came again upon dwarfed trees and beyond them the house.

He reined up his horse and sat for a while motionless. Beyond the house lay the sea, faintly lit now by the newly risen moon, as yet only in its first quarter. There were patches of bright white here and there where the Atlantic rollers broke sullenly over some half-submerged rock. A mile from the shore lay the little Ilaun an Anama, Island of Souls, a blacker mass upon the dark surface of the water. His eyes moved from the sea to the shore. He saw his house, long, low, black, roofed with heavy, flag-like slates, its walls on the sea side sheeted with the same dark slates. Through the windows shone many lights, the chimneys smoked, the door stood wide to welcome him. He let his horse move on again.

A crowd of servants—men in tarnished liveries, slatternly maidservants, barefooted and short-petticoated—stood to meet him. Eager hands seized the horse's head while the master dismounted. A chorus of shouted welcomes greeted him. There was pattering and trampling of feet, naked and shod, across the hall, that fires might be piled yet higher and candles snuffed afresh in honour of the master's home-coming.

A young woman stepped forward, smirking, curtsying. She held a boy by the hand, Antony Butler, Stephen's son. The child hung back, clinging to the woman's skirts. He had the gentle, timid eyes of his mother, beautiful Una Bourke, who had died when the boy was born. And Stephen Butler had seen little of him since. Sheila Dogherty had him to nurse. He learned to love his foster-mother and stood in awe of his father.

"What do you mean," said Stephen, "by bringing the boy here to-night? I'll send for him when I want him. Take him home at once."

Then he turned to the gaping crowd of servants who stood round—

"And get you back to your kitchens and your kennels, all of you, but Red Michael. Let him set candles and meat and wine in the library. I want none of you near me."

Next morning Stephen Butler was early astir. He dressed himself carefully, beautifully, as we might say, who belong to a generation in which gentlemen have lost the sense of beauty in their clothes. Then he dispatched a groom on horseback to the Rectory.

"Bid Mr. Moneypenny come up here to me," he said; "and bid him come at once."

Mr. Moneypenny obeyed the summons. Most people, priests, parsons, gentlemen, or farmers, who lived within ten miles of Dhulough were accustomed to obey Stephen Butler when he laid commands upon them. Mr. Moneypenny would have obeyed a lesser man than the patron of his living. He was no haughty ecclesiastic, and took little delight in stories of bishops like Ambrose and Basil and Thomas à Becket, who asserted the dignity of their office against the laity. He girt up his rusty cassock, mounted his pony, and as soon as might be stood bowing before Stephen Butler in the hall of Dhulough House.

"To-morrow," said Stephen, "is Sunday, I think."

"It is," said the parson. "It surely is, the blessed sabbath, the day of rest, the eighth Sunday after Trinity. The gospel for the day——"

"I wish," said Stephen Butler, "to receive the sacrament. Is this the usual Sunday for the administration?"

Mr. Moneypenny gave a start of surprise.

Not for many years, not since his wife died, had Stephen Butler received the sacrament. This abstention had been a source of grief to the pastor. Yet he had not dared to remonstrate with one whom he held so greatly in awe.

"It is not the regular Sunday," he said. No, it is not Sacrament Sunday. I have been accustomed to administer to all such as should be religiously——" He stopped. Stephen Butler's face might have made a bolder man hesitate in his speech. "But, of course, if your honour wishes——"

"I do wish. And I wish to receive it alone. Mark me. I will not have your wife or that hulking son of yours, if he's at home from college, kneeling beside me. Tell them that. You will also look you out the silver candlesticks my mother gave to the church, and the silver cross, and you will place them on the altar. I will have the candles lighted. I know that since you have been rector here these things have been removed. I did not interfere with you. It was your affair, not mine, what ornaments stood in the church. But I wish them replaced to-day."

"But," said the parson, "but—a cross and lighted candles. These things savour of popery. I cannot—my conscience——"

Perhaps the strongest emotion in Mr. Moneypenny's mind, the thing which came nearest to being a principle, was his dislike of popery. In defence of the purity of the Protestant faith and the Protestant worship he would have faced, courageously enough, several dangers and a good deal of unpleasantness. But he would not, indeed he could not, face the anger of Stephen Butler.

"But doubtless the occasion is exceptional. It is an evil time in which our lot is cast. All shall be as your honour wishes."

It was but a scanty congregation which usually assembled for worship in the little grey church

which stood in a corner of Stephen Butler's demesne. The master himself, when he was not in Dublin busy with his Parliamentary duties, sat in a great square pew under the pulpit, curtained close from vulgar eyes. Opposite him was Mrs. Moneypenny, fat and motherly, with her children. Behind, dotted here and there in ones and twos, were the few who belonged by birth and descent to the reformed church; and a few more, looked on dubiously by Protestants and Papists alike, who, for one reason or another, had conformed during the period of the penal laws. A vague rumour of strange doings brought all of them to the church on the Sunday after Stephen Butler's return home. There came also—for in those days religious distinctions were less emphasised than they are now—several of the better class of Roman Catholics. They were curious to know what was to be done or said.

The morning service dragged itself out to its close. Mr. Moneypenny cut short a sermon on Naaman the Syrian. He promised seven points of doctrine and practice. He gave no more than three, because he was ill at ease and doubtful about what would happen when the time of the celebration came. Stephen Butler sat unseen behind his curtains. But all knew of his presence by the sound of his voice in the responses.

At last the moment arrived. The prayer of consecration was said. The kneeling minister himself received the sacrament. Then, standing with the paten in his hand, he faced the congregation and waited. Behind him the two great candles burned, and their light shone on the white cloth and glittered from the silver cross. From the window above the altar fell a beam of sunlight. The motes in it danced across the oaken chancel rails and slanted down to the grey pavement of the aisle.

Stephen Butler unclasped the door of his pew and stalked forward, leading the child Antony

by the hand. No one else in the church stirred. Then, motioning the boy to kneel on the pavement where the sunlight fell, Stephen himself knelt, grim, upright, defiant before the altar rails.

"The body of our Lord Jesus Christ——"

Stephen Butler, with head bowed at last, received it in his outstretched hand. Then with a solemn, slow gesture he crossed himself. Mr. Moneypenny trembled with mingled terror and indignation. This was popery, unashamed and horrible, rearing its head in the very sanctuary itself. Nevertheless, with the fear of Stephen Butler heavy on his soul, he dared not protest.

"The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ——"

Again the outstretched hands and the bowed head. Again, deliberately, the sign of the cross. Then when chalice and paten were laid on the altar Stephen Butler rose. He opened the gate of the chancel and approached the altar. He motioned Mr. Moneypenny aside, and took one in each hand the chalice and the paten wherein lay the remains of the consecrated species. Holding them high above his head and still facing the altar he said slowly—

"Standing in the presence of God, and holding by Christ the Saviour of the world, I swear that never while life lasts will I yield obedience to laws made for this realm in England, except in so far as such laws are forced upon me by power which I cannot resist; that never while life lasts will I pay loyalty to any government other than that proper, under its own constitution, to this kingdom of Ireland. That I shall resist to the utmost of my power, wherever resistance is possible, the tyranny of foreigners imposed by fraud and perjury on this my native land. May Christ withdraw His mercy from me, and may God the Father put black blight upon my soul, on the day when I am false to this my oath."

There was silence. Then Stephen Butler laid down the chalice and the paten. He turned, and for the first time the people saw his face. It was white and terrible.

"Bear witness," he said, "every one of you."

He walked to where the child Antony still knelt in the sunlight. Stooping over him, he took him by the hand and raised him up. He led the boy, dazed and terrified, up to the altar. He took the two small soft hands and laid them on the chalice and the paten, covering them with his own and holding them tight. Then he spoke again.

"Eight years ago, standing by the font, I took in the name of this child certain solemn vows. None doubted or gainsaid my right. Now again in his name, until he be old enough to take this promise on himself, I swear with him and for him. Antony Butler, say after me the words I say. 'Standing in the presence of God, and holding by Christ the Saviour of the world——'"

Wonderfully clearly through the deep silence of the church came the treble of the child's voice repeating—

"Standing in the presence of God, and holding by Christ the Saviour of the world."

"I swear."

"I swear."

Sentence by sentence the oath was repeated till Stephen Butler had said the last words. Then, before the child responded to them, the parson, who had stood cowering against the wall, started forward. He fell upon his knees and stretched up his hands.

"I entreat you!" he cried. "I beg, I pray of you. Do not lay the curse on the child's soul. Oh, my God! This is the unforgivable sin; this is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost!"

Stephen Butler cast one glance at him. The man seemed to wither under the contempt of it. He shrank into himself, and fell forwards till his

forehead touched the ground. There he lay huddled, with his white surplice tangled ridiculously round his limbs. The stern man's voice went on again—

"May Christ withdraw His mercy from me, and may God the Father put black blight on my soul on the day when I am false to this my oath."

The boy's voice followed, uttering clause by clause. At last it was over. The little hands, crushed against the silver vessels, were released. Stephen Butler, followed by his son, returned to his square pew. Poor plump Mr. Moneypenny rose to his feet. His trembling hands covered the consecrated elements with a white napkin.

"Consecrated, desecrated," he muttered. "This was blasphemy, the sin for which there is no forgiveness."

But no one heard him or heeded him. Nor did the people pay more attention to the prayers which followed. There was an audible sigh of relief when the blessing was said, the blessing which sounded strangely, though no one there had the wit and curiosity to note its strangeness. What had the Peace of God which passeth all understanding to do with the oath sworn before the altar, or with the man who swore it, or with the child dragged that day into the strife between the stronger nation and the weaker, the strife which has lasted without truce from that time until this?

Stephen Butler left the church alone. Alone he walked through the great gates and among the stunted trees. He stood alone for a while beside the dark lake. Then he went home, shut himself alone into his library, and wrote carefully an account of the oath he had sworn, and how he laid it also on his son. On the outside of the paper he wrote these words:—

"For my son, Antony Butler. And I charge him to bind his children after him as I have bound him."