CHAPTER II

STEPHEN BUTLER lived out his threescore years and ten, a grim, fierce man to the last, a rebel in heart, embittered because he found no opportunity of offering effectual resistance to the power he hated. The years brought, besides a sense of his impotence, a great disappointment to him. He understood that he would leave behind him a son little likely to live in the spirit of the oath sworn for him. Perhaps Antony Butler inherited too much of his mother's gentle sweetness. Perhaps the cowed submissiveness of the Celtic peasants came to him with his foster-mother's milk and the companionship of her children. Perhaps old Stephen's masterful spirit crushed his from the start. It became more and more plain that he was not a son after his father's heart.

"I'd rather see you fox-hunting and drinking whisky; I'd rather see you plunging the estate and then rack-renting the tenants; I'd rather see you gambling and wenching in London like the rest of them, than—good God! that I must die here and leave a sentimental fool behind me."

So he used to speak, and the young man only sighed for answer. He had no taste for hard riding and hard drinking; none for the card table and the brothel. He liked to roam by the seashore or inland over the brown bogs. He liked to listen to the old tales the peasants told him, and to paint. He painted the sea, calm in the early summer when men and girls waded into it to gather wrack; painted it when the round rollers from the Atlantic rushed against the shore, and broke themselves, white and

furious, on the rocks of Ilaun an Anama, the Island of Souls, which stood sentry a mile from the land. He painted the little lake behind the house when the foliage of the stunted trees was reflected in it, when grey mists hung over it, and brown, curled leaves floated crisp on its surface, and when the winter frost held it and all but the ocean itself stiff and still.

"I'd die and be damned contentedly," said old Stephen, "if only I had a man for a son! If you had a man's vices to-day you might have a man's virtues to-morrow."

The outbreaks against Antony became more frequent towards the end. Gout tortured the old man, flying here and there through his body, and when the pain came he raged against every one and everything. Antony bowed to the storm. He had not a man's vices. There was no use pretending to his father that he had. He preferred the old Celtic fairy tales, the myths and legends, the curious religious poems, the dreamy love songs—preferred them, he could not understand why, to wine and cards. He loved the sea and the dark lake, the fringing trees on the demesne side of it, the bogland and bare fields beyond it. He did not love the reckless joviality of the men who galloped on horseback, who drank and quarrelled in their cups, who fought each other, who worked themselves into a fervour of excitement at election times. He supposed that what his father said was true. He had not a man's vices. He did not think it likely that he would ever have what his father regarded as the virtues of a man. He was not, properly speaking, a man at all.

At last old Stephen died. Antony Butler was free to live as he liked, and there was no tongue left in the world that had a right to scourge him. At first his love of painting claimed him. He went abroad; studied here under one master, there under another. He learned to criticise and

to admire. He came to understand what was good in his art and what was bad. He also got to know that he himself would never be an artist. It was not in him to do great work. He wandered through Europe, seeing everything, buying and sending home to Dhulough picture after picture until the packing-cases stood in piles in the halls and lumber rooms of the old house.

He was never really happy. The feeling of his own incompetence haunted him. His father had reckoned him less than a man, judging him from the standpoint of a fierce old political fighter. He was less than a man too among the artists and men of letters whom he knew. They had powers of expression and passions to express. He was, he saw himself very clearly, a dabbling amateur, a dilettante, a rich man with money to spend on a rich man's fancies in art. He was not of their brotherhood, though they tolerated him. And he was always troubled with a vague, uneasy homesickness. With Italian skies over him his heart went back to Dhulough. In exchange for all the pictures he sent home two kept coming to him from home; a picture of dark lake water, and another of Ilaun an Anama, the solitary Island of Souls, with the ocean tearing at its shores.

Yet he thought of home, of Dhulough, of Ireland, with a kind of dread. It seemed to him that there his father still ruled. Once at home his father's contempt would crush him again. His father's will would dominate him. The terrible old oath would claim him and force him into ways he hated to imagine. The words of it kept coming back to him.

Once, kneeling to hear mass said at an altar in the cathedral at Amiens, he was swept away by a wave of religious emotion. He felt as he bowed before the Host that Christ Jesus was beside him, around him, within him. The sense of his own pitiful failure, of his lack of all the

virtues and powers which made men great, seemed only to intensify the delightful love of the One Who embraced him. Then suddenly came a cold horror. It was not that he doubted the reality of the miracle the priest had wrought in bringing the actual Christ close to him. That he was a Protestant by baptism and education did not cause him to deny the Presence on the altar. But he knew that Christ, present there for all the others, was not for him. With his own lips he had prayed—prayed before another altar—"May Christ withdraw His mercy from me."

After that day his homesickness troubled him more and more. He thought often of the men he knew at home; not the men of his own class, the riding, drinking, swaggering gentry, but of the old men who cowered by the cabin firesides in winter time, the young men and women who toiled in the fields and the fishing boats. He remembered their tales and songs, the crooning of their pipes, and the wailing of their fiddles. It seemed to him that if he were at home among them he might be at rest. He might accept his own failure and lie, unresisting, under his own curse. They also were a people who had failed. They had fallen under the domination of wills stronger than their own. They were his father's people as he was his father's son. Old Stephen Butler had been their master.

Once travelling through a part of Spain little frequented by strangers, he was indebted for a night's hospitality to a priest. It surprised and interested him to learn that his host's name was O'Neill. After supper, apologizing for his curiosity, he asked how it was that a man with a name so plainly Irish came to be ministering as a priest to Spanish people.

"I am the last of my race," said the priest. "We were, I believe, great people in our own country once. For you have rightly guessed that I am Irish by descent. My ancestor, the

first of us who came to Spain, fought in Ireland on the losing side in the Jacobite wars. Like many another gentleman he found himself in the end a landless exile. He had little better fortune here. He fought; but while others won fame and fortune, he got neither. He bred his sons to be soldiers like himself. It was the only trade that suited men like them. Some of them were killed, some disappeared; one, my grandfather, married, and in his turn had sons who grew to be soldiers. We have fought, we O'Neills, in every quarrel Spain has had for the last century and a half. Every one of us was a soldier except me. I am the last. I suppose the race is decayed. I am, as you see," he glanced round him with a slight smile, "a poor priest in a very shabby cassock." Antony Butler confessed that he too was an Irishman.

"Ah," said the priest, "and a gentleman. You belong to that new aristocracy which succeeded ours. You were mere foreigners when my people left Ireland. But you call yourself Irish now. Is that so?"

"Yes. We are Irish now, whatever we were once."

"It is strange. You came from England and took the land for yours. Behold the hand of God! The land you took has taken you and made you hers. I hope you will be more dutiful children to her than we were. We left her under the heel of her foe. I understand that she is under the heel worse than ever now. What are you doing? Have you also run away from her?"

The priest talked far into the night, and the next day begged Antony Butler to stay with him for a week or more.

"I have," he said, "books here about Ireland, and newspapers. I am interested in the country and its destiny, although I do not suppose that I shall ever see it. I should like to

talk with you and hear you tell me about the people."

"But I can tell you nothing. I have been out of Ireland for many years, for more years than I care to count."

"Ah! And yet Ireland must be a good country to be in just now. There seems to be an awakening, a renewal of life, a spring time. I think there are men in Ireland now who are thinking great things and feeling nobly."

He brought out from the cupboard in the corner of his room a little bundle of newspapers.

"Look at these," he said. "I cannot read out to you what is in these papers. My knowledge of English is not good enough to give you the swing of the verses or the fall of the prose sentences. You shall read them out to me."

Antony Butler took the papers. They were the earliest numbers of the *Nation*. He read and then re-read aloud first the poems, then the essays and prose articles. The priest listened, now and then explaining as well as he could the situations with which the articles dealt.

"Did I not tell you," said Father O'Neill, "that there was an awakening?"

Antony Butler read all the papers the priest had. He was immensely attracted by the teaching of the Young Ireland party. Their ideal of a united Ireland, of the blending of antagonistic factions, of Orange and Green, into a mighty nationalism, fascinated him. The rhetorical poetry stirred his blood. He realised the nobility of the ideals of Thomas Davis, and the unselfish devotion of his friends. It seemed to him that in such company he might catch the spirit of the oath his father had sworn for him; that it would no longer be a terrible thing oppressing life, but might become an inspiration; that he might live for it.

The visit to Father O'Neill, the reading in the little Spanish presbytery, and the long talks

affected Antony Butler. For another year he led his wandering life, but there grew in him a desire to return to Ireland which in the end became irresistible. He reached Dublin in time to see Thomas Davis before he died. He began, timidly and with great self-distrust, to take some part in the work which Davis' friends and associates carried on. He became acquainted with the leaders of the party, understood and admired their policy.

Then the famine came—the sudden, inexplicable blight of the food crop of the people. Men and women starved. Antony Butler, horror-struck and pitiful, hurried back to the west. He found his own property smitten as all Ireland was smitten. He spent the money he had in buying food. He sold the pictures he had sent home. He slaughtered his own cattle; he borrowed money, mortgaging his property at impossible rates of interest to unwilling lenders. Still the blight lay on the land. Year followed year, and things got worse instead of better. Men and women grew too weak, too hopeless to struggle against the fate that seemed inevitable. They lapsed into hopeless lethargy, and died in noisome cabins among festering corpses or shrinking from horrors at home, like dogs in ditches by the roadsides. Men like Antony Butler, their money spent, their credit gone, raged impotently against the monstrous iniquity which, under the name of science, permitted shiploads of food to leave the land while the men who grew it starved. Futile schemes of relief were worked with desperate energy, effecting little. Futile schemes of charity were carried out by well-meaning, helpless people. Cowardly men fled from the sight of suffering. Selfish men grew rich, plundering the corpse of Ireland. Brutalised men drink themselves into stupid forgetfulness. The peasants still starved.

Then amid the worst of his misery and despair

there came a ray of light into Antony Butler's life. Foolish philanthropists roamed about the land. He shunned them when they came his way. But there came also down to stricken Connacht a man from the north, with money in his pocket and a wise human heart in his breast. Micah Ramsden had gathered a fortune in a grocer's shop in Belfast. He was a Quaker, and went meekly through the world in his broad-brimmed hat and smooth broadcloth, a quaint figure. His conversation was "yea" and "nay," and "thou" and "thee." But he was full of the spirit of the Master Whom he served. He realised his savings, left his shop in charge of his daughter, and went forth to the worst parts of the famine-stricken land. He sought no praise from men, and got no credit for what he did. His name is forgotten now, and no one tells the story of his work. In the end the famine fever seized him as it seized many another man and he died, a serene, quiet man, without fear or passion.

Antony Butler was with him at the end and went north, travelling through a desolate land to carry the news of her father's death to Priscilla Ramsden. He found her, a woman of calm ways and a brave heart, behind the counter of the shop in Belfast. She talked quietly of the father she had lost. She spoke no word, gave apparently no thought to the fortune which ought to have been hers, the money that had been poured forth in the vain struggle against misery. Two months after he first met her Antony Butler asked her to be his wife. At the end of a year she married him and went to her new home. The famine and the fever were over then. The awful exodus of the people began. Antony watched them go with sickening despair. He saw cottages fall to ruin for want of inhabitants, harvested land turned to lonely cattle ranches, a pleasant countryside deserted by its people. His

spirit was broken by the failure of his hopes. His health was undermined by the horrors of the famine and the fever. After three years of married life he died, leaving his wife with one boy, a Stephen Butler, and the task of saving, if possible, some part of the Butler estates.

She faced the situation, as she had accepted the news of her father's death, calmly. A Quaker kinsman came to her from the north. Together they went through the tangled record of Antony Butler's affairs. They sold an outlying part of the property, the land which lay east of the village of Cuslough. A Dublin pawnbroker, one David Snell, bought it at a ridiculously low price. His money stayed the threatenings of the most clamorous creditors. Mrs. Butler went to the north, and rented a little cottage near Hollywood, on the shore of Belfast Lough. She saw clearly that she could not afford to live in Dhulough House, but she believed that she might save the remainder of the property for her son.

CHAPTER III

PRISCILLA BUTLER proved herself a wise woman. She followed the advice of her relatives in all that concerned the management of her son's estate. She could have done nothing better. Old Timothy Davidson, her uncle, was a godly man, but in all that concerned money, the getting or the keeping of it, he was shrewd and keen. He had given the world proof of his qualities. No linen merchant in the north was better spoken of, or bore a higher reputation for probity. Few had acquired and secured more comfortable fortunes. John Tennant, Priscilla's cousin, stood behind the counter of his shop and sold drapery. His goods were