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*Transformation
and Other Stories*

Mary Shelley



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*Transformation
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Transformation

*Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
With a woeful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale –
And then it set me free.*

*Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns –
And till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns.*

COLERIDGE'S ANCIENT MARINER

I HAVE HEARD IT SAID THAT, when any strange, supernatural and necromantic adventure has occurred to a human being, that being, however desirous he may be to conceal the same, feels at certain periods torn up as it were by an intellectual earthquake and is forced to bare the inner depths of his spirit to another. I am a witness of the truth of this. I have dearly sworn to myself never to reveal to human ears the horrors to which I once, in excess of fiendly pride, delivered myself over. The holy man who heard my confession and reconciled me to the Church is dead. None knows that once...

Why should it not be thus? Why tell a tale of impious tempting of Providence and soul-subduing humiliation? Why? Answer me, ye who are wise in the secrets of human nature! I only know that so it is, and in spite of strong resolve – of a pride that too much masters me – of shame, and even of fear, so to render myself odious to my species, I must speak.

Genoa! My birthplace – proud city! looking upon the blue waves of the Mediterranean Sea – dost thou remember me in my boyhood, when thy cliffs and promontories, thy bright sky and gay vineyards were my world? Happy time! When to the young heart the narrow-bounded universe – which leaves, by its very limitation, free scope to the imagination – enchains our physical energies and, sole period in our lives, innocence and enjoyment are united. Yet, who can look back to childhood and not remember its sorrows and its harrowing fears? I was born with the most imperious, haughty, tameless spirit with which ever mortal was gifted. I quailed before my father only; and he, generous and noble but capricious and tyrannical, at once fostered and checked the wild impetuosity of my

character, making obedience necessary, but inspiring no respect for the motives which guided his commands. To be a man – free, independent or, in better words, insolent and domineering – was the hope and prayer of my rebel heart.

My father had one friend, a wealthy Genoese noble who, in a political tumult, was suddenly sentenced to banishment, and his property confiscated. The Marchese Torella went into exile alone. Like my father, he was a widower: he had one child, the almost infant Juliet, who was left under my father's guardianship. I should certainly have been an unkind master to the lovely girl, but that I was forced by my position to become her protector. A variety of childish incidents all tended to one point – to make Juliet see in me a rock of refuge – I, in her, one who must perish through the soft sensibility of her nature too rudely visited, but for my guardian care. We grew up together. The opening rose in May was not more sweet than this dear girl. An irradiation of beauty was spread over her face. Her form, her step, her voice – my heart weeps even now to think of all of relying, gentle, loving and pure

that was enshrined in that celestial tenement. When I was eleven and Juliet eight years of age, a cousin of mine, much older than either – he seemed to us a man – took great notice of my playmate; he called her his bride, and asked her to marry him. She refused, and he insisted, drawing her unwillingly towards him. With the countenance and emotions of a maniac I threw myself on him – I strove to draw his sword – I clung to his neck with the ferocious resolve to strangle him: he was obliged to call for assistance to disengage himself from me. On that night I led Juliet to the chapel of our house: I made her touch the sacred relics – I harrowed her child’s heart and profaned her child’s lips with an oath that she would be mine, and mine only.

Well, those days passed away. Torella returned in a few years and became wealthier and more prosperous than ever. When I was seventeen my father died; he had been magnificent to prodigality; Torella rejoiced that my minority would afford an opportunity for repairing my fortunes. Juliet and I had been affianced beside my father’s deathbed – Torella was to be a second parent to me.

I desired to see the world, and I was indulged. I went to Florence, to Rome, to Naples; thence I passed to Toulon, and at length reached what had long been the bourne of my wishes: Paris. There was wild work in Paris then. The poor king, Charles VI, now sane, now mad, now a monarch, now an abject slave, was the very mockery of humanity.* The Queen, the Dauphin, the Duke of Burgundy, alternately friends and foes – now meeting in prodigal feasts, now shedding blood in rivalry – were blind to the miserable state of their country and the dangers that impended over it, and gave themselves wholly up to dissolute enjoyment or savage strife. My character still followed me. I was arrogant and self-willed; I loved display, and, above all, I threw all control far from me. Who could control me in Paris? My young friends were eager to foster passions which furnished them with pleasures. I was deemed handsome – I was master of every knightly accomplishment. I was disconnected with any political party. I grew a favourite with all; my presumption and arrogance were pardoned in one so young; I became a spoilt child. Who could control me? Not the letters

and advice of Torella. Only strong necessity visiting me in the abhorred shape of an empty purse. But there were means to refill this void. Acre after acre, estate after estate, I sold. My dress, my jewels, my horses and their caparisons were almost unrivalled in gorgeous Paris, while the lands of my inheritance passed into possession of others.

The Duke of Orléans was waylaid and murdered by the Duke of Burgundy. Fear and terror possessed all Paris. The Dauphin and the Queen shut themselves up; every pleasure was suspended. I grew weary of this state of things, and my heart yearned for my boyhood's haunts. I was nearly a beggar, yet still I would go there, claim my bride and rebuild my fortunes. A few happy ventures as a merchant would make me rich again. Nevertheless, I would not return in humble guise. My last act was to dispose of my remaining estate near Albaro* for half its worth, for ready money. Then I dispatched all kinds of artificers, arras, furniture of regal splendour, to fit up the last relic of my inheritance, my palace in Genoa. I lingered a little longer yet, ashamed at the part of the prodigal returned, which I

feared I should play. I sent my horses. One matchless Spanish jennet I dispatched to my promised bride: its caparisons flamed with jewels and cloth of gold. In every part I caused to be entwined the initials of Juliet and her Guido. My present found favour in hers and in her father's eyes.

Still, to return a proclaimed spendthrift, the mark of impertinent wonder, perhaps of scorn, and to encounter singly the reproaches or taunts of my fellow citizens, was no alluring prospect. As a shield between me and censure, I invited some few of the most reckless of my comrades to accompany me: thus I went armed against the world, hiding a rankling feeling, half fear and half penitence, by bravado and an insolent display of satisfied vanity.

I arrived in Genoa. I trod the pavement of my ancestral palace. My proud step was no interpreter of my heart, for I deeply felt that, though surrounded by every luxury, I was a beggar. The first step I took in claiming Juliet must widely declare me such. I read contempt or pity in the looks of all. I fancied, so apt is conscience to imagine what it deserves, that rich and poor, young

and old, all regarded me with derision. Torella came not near me. No wonder that my second father should expect a son's deference from me in waiting first on him. But, galled and stung by a sense of my follies and demerit, I strove to throw the blame on others. We kept nightly orgies in Palazzo Carega. To sleepless, riotous nights followed listless, supine mornings. At the Ave Maria* we showed our dainty persons in the streets, scoffing at the sober citizens, casting insolent glances on the shrinking women. Juliet was not among them – no, no – if she had been there, shame would have driven me away, if love had not brought me to her feet.

I grew tired of this. Suddenly I paid the Marchese a visit. He was at his villa, one among the many which deck the suburb of San Pietro d'Arena. It was the month of May – the blossoms of the fruit trees were fading among thick, green foliage; the vines were shooting forth; the ground strewn with the fallen olive blooms; the firefly was in the myrtle hedge; heaven and earth wore a mantle of surpassing beauty. Torella welcomed me kindly, though seriously, and even his shade of displeasure soon wore away. Some resemblance to my

father – some look and tone of youthful ingenuousness, lurking still in spite of my misdeeds – softened the good old man's heart. He sent for his daughter – he presented me to her as her betrothed. The chamber became hallowed by a holy light as she entered. Hers was that cherub look – those large, soft eyes, full dimpled cheeks and mouth of infantine sweetness that expresses the rare union of happiness and love. Admiration first possessed me. "She is mine!" was the second proud emotion, and my lips curled with haughty triumph. I had not been the *enfant gâté* of the beauties of France not to have learnt the art of pleasing the soft heart of woman. If towards men I was overbearing, the deference I paid to them was the more in contrast. I commenced my courtship by the display of a thousand gallantries to Juliet – who, vowed to me from infancy, had never admitted the devotion of others, and who, though accustomed to expressions of admiration, was uninitiated in the language of lovers.

For a few days all went well. Torella never alluded to my extravagance; he treated me as a favourite son. But the time came, as we discussed the preliminaries