

**A TERRIBLE
TEMPTATION: A STORY
OF TO-DAY, PP. 1-167**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649465347

A Terrible Temptation: A Story of to-Day, pp. 1-167 by Charles Reade

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

CHARLES READE

**A TERRIBLE
TEMPTATION: A STORY
OF TO-DAY, PP. 1-167**

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

A Story of Co-Day.

BY

CHARLES READE,

AUTHOR OF "FOUL PLAY," "GRIFFITH GAUNT," "PUT YOURSELF IN HIS PLACE."



BOSTON:
JAMES R. OSGOOD AND COMPANY,
LATE TICKNOR & FIELDS, AND FIELDS, OSGOOD, & CO.
1871.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1877,
BY JAMES R. OSGOOD & CO.,
in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.

UNIVERSITY PRESS: WELCH BIGLOW & Co.,
CAMBRIDGE.

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

THE morning-room of a large house in Portman Square, London.

A gentleman in the prime of life stood with his elbow on the broad mantel-piece, and made himself agreeable to a young lady, seated a little way off, playing at work.

To the car, he was only conversing; but his eyes dwelt on her with loving admiration all the time. Her posture was favorable to this furtive inspection, for she leaned her fair head over her work, with a pretty, modest, demure air, that seemed to say, "I suspect I am being admired: I will not look to see; I might have to check it."

The gentleman's features were ordinary, except his brow, — that had power in it, — but he had the beauty of color; his sunburnt features glowed with health, and his eye was bright. On the whole rather good-looking when he smiled, but ugly when he frowned; for his frown was a scowl, and betrayed a remarkable power of hating.

Miss Arabella Bruce was a beauty. She had glorious masses of dark red hair, and a dazzling white neck to set it off; large dove-like eyes, and a blooming oval face, which would have been classical if her lips had been thin and finely chiselled; but here came in her Anglo-Saxon breed, and spared society a Minerva by giving her two full and rosy lips. They made a smallish mouth at rest, but parted ever so wide when they smiled, and ravished the beholder with long even rows of dazzling white teeth.

Her figure was tall and rather slim, but not at all commanding. There are people whose very bodies express character; and this tall, supple, graceful frame of Bella Bruce breathed womanly subservience; so did her gestures; she would take up or put down her own scissors half timidly, and look round before threading her needle, as if to see whether any soul objected. Her favorite word was "May I?" with a stress on the "May," and she used it where most girls would say, "I will," or nothing, and do it.

Mr. Richard Bassett was in love with her,

and also conscious that her fifteen thousand pounds would be a fine addition to his present income, which was small, though his distant expectations great. As he had known her but one month, and she seemed rather amiable than inflammable, he had the prudence to proceed by degrees; and that is why, though his eyes gloated on her, he merely regaled her with the gossip of the day, not worth recording here. But, when he had actually taken his hat to go, Bella Bruce put him a question that had been on her mind the whole time; for which reason she had reserved it to the very last moment.

"Is Sir Charles Bassett in town?" said she, mighty carelessly, but bending a little lower over her embroidery.

"Don't know," said Richard Bassett, with such a sudden brevity and asperity, that Miss Bruce looked up and opened her lovely eyes. Mr. Richard Bassett replied to this mute inquiry, "We don't speak." Then after a pause, "He has robbed me of my inheritance."

"O Mr. Bassett!"

"Yes, Miss Bruce, the Bassett and Huttoncombe estates were mine by right of birth. My father was the eldest son, and they were entailed on him. But Sir Charles's father persuaded my old dotting grandfather to cut off the entail, and settle the estates on him and his heirs; and so they robbed me of every acre they could. Luckily my little estate of Highmore was settled on my mother and her issue too tight for the villains to undo."

These harsh expressions, applied to his own kin, and the abruptness and heat they were uttered with, surprised and repelled his gentle listener. She shrank a little away from him. He observed it. She replied not to his words, but to her own thought.

"But after all it does seem hard." She added, with a little fervor, "But it was not poor Sir Charles's doing after all."

"He is content to reap the benefit," said Richard Bassett, sternly.

Then, finding he was making a sorry impression, he tried to get away from the sub-

ject; I say tried, for till a man can double like a hare he will never get away from his hobby. "Excuse me," said he, "I ought never to speak about it. Let us talk of something else. You cannot enter into my feelings, — it makes my blood boil. O Miss Bruce! you can't conceive what a disinherited man feels, — and I live at the very door; his old trees, that ought to be mine, fling their shadows over my little flower-beds; the sixty chimneys of Huntercombe Hall look down on my cottage; his acres of lawn run up to my little garden, and nothing but a ha-ha between us."

"It is hard," said Miss Bruce, composedly; not that she entered into a hardship of this vulgar sort, but it was her nature to soothe and please people.

"Hard!" cried Richard Bassett, encouraged by even this faint sympathy; "it would be unendurable but for one thing; I shall have my own some day."

"I am glad of that," said the lady; "but how?"

"By outliving the wrongful heir."

Miss Bruce turned pale. She had little experience of men's passions. "O Mr. Bassett!" said she, — and there was something pure and holy in the look of sorrow and alarm she cast on the presumptuous speaker, — "pray do not cherish such thoughts. They will do you harm. And remember life and death are not in our hands. Besides —"

"Well?"

"Sir Charles might —"

"Well?"

"Might he not — marry — and have children?" This with more hesitation and a deeper blush than appeared absolutely necessary.

"O, there's no fear of that. Property ill-gotten never descends. Charles is a worn-out rake. He was fast at Eton, — fast at Oxford, — fast in London. Why, he looks ten years older than me, and he is three years younger. He had a fit two years ago. Besides, he is not a marrying man. Bassett and Huntercombe will be mine. And, O Miss Bruce, if ever they are mine —"

"Sir Charles Bassett!" trumpeted a servant at the door; and then waited, prudently, to know whether his young lady, whom he had caught blushing so red with one gentleman, would be at home to another.

"Wait a moment," said Miss Bruce to him. Then, discreetly ignoring what Bassett had said last, and lowering her voice almost to a whisper, she said, hurriedly, "You should not blame him for the faults of others. There — I have not been long acquainted with either, and am little entitled to inter— But it is such a pity you are not friends!

He is very good, I assure you, and very nice: let me reconcile you two. *May I?*"

This well-meant petition was uttered very sweetly, and indeed — if I may be permitted — in a way to dissolve a bear.

But this was not a bear, nor anything else that is placable; it was a man with a hobby-grievance; so he replied in character.

"That is impossible, so long as he keeps me out of my own." He had the grace, however, to add, half sullenly, "Excuse me: I feel I have been too vehement."

Miss Bruce, thus repelled, answered, rather coldly, "O, never mind *that*; it was very natural. I am at home then," said she to the servant.

Mr. Bassett took the hint, but turned at the door, and said, with no little agitation, "I was not aware he visits you. One word — don't let his ill-gotten acres make you quite forget the disinherited one." And so he left her, with an imploring look.

She felt red with all this, so she slipped out at another door, to cool her cheeks and imprison a stray curl for Sir Charles.

He strolled into the empty room, with the easy, languid air of fashion. His features were well cut, and had some nobility; but his sickly complexion, and the lines under his eyes, told a tale of dissipation. He appeared ten years older than he was, and thoroughly *blow*.

Yet, when Miss Bruce entered the room with a smile and a little blush, he brightened up and looked handsome, and greeted her with momentary warmth.

After the usual inquiries, she asked him if he had met anybody?

"Where?"

"Here; just now."

"No."

"What, nobody at all?"

"Only my sulky cousin; I don't call him anybody," drawled Sir Charles, who was now relapsing into his normal condition of semi-apathy.

"O," said Miss Bruce, gayly, "you must expect him to be a little cross. It is not so very nice to be disinherited, let me tell you."

"And who has disinherited the fellow?"

"I forget; but you disinherited him amongst you. Never mind; it can't be helped now. When did you come back to town? I did n't see you at Lady d'Arcy's ball, did I?"

"You did not, unfortunately for me; but you would if I had known you were to be there. But about Richard: he may tell you what he likes, but he was not disinherited; he was bought out. The fact is his father was uncommonly fast. My grandfather paid his debts again and again; but at last the old gentleman found he was dealing with the Jews for his reversion. Then there

was an awful row. It ended in my grandfather outbidding the Jews. He bought the reversion of his estate from his own son for a large sum of money (he had to raise it by mortgages) — then they cut off the entail between them, and he entailed the mortgaged estate on his other son, and his grandson (that was me), and on my heir-at-law. Richard's father squandered his thirty thousand pounds before he died; my father husbanded the estates, got into Parliament, and they put a tail to his name."

Sir Charles delivered this version of the facts with a languid composure that contrasted deliciously with Richard's heat in telling the story his way (to be sure, Sir Charles had got *Huntercombe* and *Bassett*, and it is easier to be philosophical on the right side of the boundary hedge), and wound up with a sort of corollary: "Dick Bassett suffers by his father's vices, and I profit by mine's virtues. Where's the injustice?"

"Nowhere, and the sooner you are reconciled the better."

Sir Charles demurred. "O, I don't want to quarrel with the fellow; but he is a regular thorn in my side, with his little trumpety estate, all in broken patches. He shoots my pheasants in the unfairest way." Here the landed proprietor showed real irritation, but only for a moment. He concluded calmly: "The fact is, he is not quite a gentleman. Fancy his coming and wailing to you about our family affairs, and then telling you a falsehood!"

"No, no; he did not mean. It was his way of looking at things. You can afford to forgive him."

"Yes, but not if he sets you against me."

"But he cannot do that. The more any one was to speak against you, the more I — of course."

This admission fired Sir Charles; he drew nearer, and, thanks to his cousin's interference, spoke the language of love more warmly and directly than he had ever done before.

The lady blushed and defended herself feebly. Sir Charles grew warmer, and at last elicited from her a timid but tender avowal that made him supremely happy.

When he left her, this brief ecstasy was succeeded by regrets on account of the years he had wasted in follies and intrigues.

He smoked five cigars, and pondered the difference between the pure creature who now honored him with her virgin affections, and beauties of a different character who had played their parts in his luxurious life.

After profound deliberation, he sent for his solicitor. They lighted the inevitable cigars, and the following observations struggled feebly out along with the smoke: —

"Mr. Oldfield, I'm going to be married."

"Glad to hear it, Sir Charles." (Vision

of settlements.) "It is high time you were." (Puff — puff.)

"Wait your advice and assistance first."

"Certainly."

"Must put down my pony-carriage now, you know."

"A very proper retrenchment; but you can do that without my assistance."

"There would be sure to be a row if I did. I dare say there will be as it is. At any rate, I want to do the thing like a gentleman."

"Send 'em to Tattersal's." (Puff.)

"And the girl that drives them in the park, and draws all the duchesses and countesses at her tail, — am I to send her to Tattersal's?" (Puff.)

"O, it is *her* you want to put down then?"

"Why, of course."

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

SIR CHARLES and Mr. Oldfield settled that lady's retiring pension; and Mr. Oldfield took the memoranda home, with instructions to prepare a draft deed for Miss Somerset's approval.

Meantime Sir Charles visited Miss Bruce every day. Her affections for him grew visibly; for being engaged gave her the courage to love.

Mr. Bassett called pretty often; but one day he met Sir Charles on the stairs and scowled.

That scowl cost him dear, for Sir Charles thereupon represented to Bella that a man with a grievance is a bore to the very eye, and asked her to receive no more visits from his scowling cousin. The lady smiled and said with soft complacency, "I obey."

Sir Charles's gallantry was shocked. "No, don't say 'obey.' It is a little favor I ventured to ask."

"It is like you to ask what you have a right to command. I shall be out to him in future, and to every one who is disagreeable to you. What, does 'obey' frighten you from my lips? To me it is the sweetest in the language. O, please let me 'obey' you! *May I?*"

Upon this, as vanity is seldom out of call, Sir Charles swelled like turkey-cock, and loftily consented to indulge Bella Bruce's strange propensity.

From that hour she was never at home to Mr. Bassett.

He began to suspect; and one day, after he had been kept out with the loud, stolid "Not at home" of practised mendacity, he watched, and saw Sir Charles admitted.

He divined it all in a moment, and turned to wormwood. What! was he to be robbed of the lady he loved — and her fifteen thousand pounds — by the very man who had

robbed him of his ancestral fields? He dwelt on the double grievance till it nearly frenzied him. But he could do nothing; it was his fate. His only hope was that Sir Charles, the arrant flirt, would desert this beauty after a time, as he had the others.

But one afternoon, in the smoking-room of his club, a gentleman said to him, "So your cousin Charles is engaged to the Yorkshire beauty, Bell Bruce."

"He is flirting with her, I believe," said Richard.

"No, no," said the other; "they are engaged. I know it for a fact. They are to be married next month."

Mr. Richard Bassett digested this fresh pill in moody silence, while the gentlemen of the club discussed the engagement with easy levity. They soon passed to a topic of wider interest; viz. who was to succeed Sir Charles with La Somerset. Bassett began to listen attentively, and learned for the first time Sir Charles Bassett's connection with that lady, and also that she was a woman of a daring nature and furious temper. At first he was merely surprised; but soon hatred and jealousy whispered in his ear that with these materials it must be possible to wound those who had wounded him.

Mr. Marsh, a young gentleman with a rousing chin, and a mustache between hay and straw, had taken great care to let them all know he was acquainted with Miss Somerset; so Richard got Marsh alone, and sounded him. Could he call upon the lady, without ceremony?

"You won't get in; her street door is jolly well guarded, I can tell you."

"I am very curious to see her in her own house."

"So are a good many fellows."

"Could you not give me an introduction?"

Marsh shook his head sapiently for a considerable time, and with all this shaking, as it appeared, out fell words of wisdom. "Don't see it. I'm awfully spoony on her myself; and, you know, when a fellow introduces another fellow, that fellow always cuts the other fellow out." Then, descending from the words of the wise and their dark sayings, to a petty but pertinent fact, he added, "Besides, I'm only let in myself about once in five times."

"She gives herself wonderful airs, it seems," said Bassett, rather bitterly.

Marsh fired up. "So would any woman that was as beautiful, and as witty, and as much run after as she is. Why, she is a leader of fashion! Look at all the ladies following her round the park. They used to drive on the north side of the Serpentine. She just held up her finger, and now they have cut the Serpentine, and followed her to the south drive."

"O, indeed!" said Bassett. "Ah! then this is a great lady; a poor country squire must not venture into her august presence." He turned savagely on his heel, and Marsh went and roared sickly mirth at his expense.

By this means the matter soon came to the ears of old Mr. Woodgate, the father of that club, and a genial gossip. He got hold of Bassett, in the dinner-room, and examined him. "So you want an introduction to La Somerset, and Marsh refuses,—Marsh, hitherto celebrated for his weak head rather than his hard heart?"

Richard Bassett nodded rather sullenly; he had not bargained for this rapid publicity.

The venerable chief resumed: "We all consider Marsh's conduct unclabblable, and a thing to be combined against. Wanted—an Anti-dog-in-the-manger League. I'll introduce you to the Somerset."

"What! do you visit her?" asked Bassett, in some astonishment.

The old gentleman held up his hands in droll disclaimer, and chuckled merrily, "No, no; I enjoy from the shore the disasters of my youthful friends,—that sacred pleasure is left me. Do you see that elegant creature with the little auburn beard and mustache, waiting sweetly for his dinner? He lunched the Somerset."

"Lunched her?"

"Yes; but for him she might have wasted her time, breaking hearts and slapping faces, in some country village. He it was set her devastating society; and, with his aid, she shall devastate you. Vandeleur, will you join Bassett and me?"

Mr. Vandeleur, with ready grace, said he should be delighted, and they dined together accordingly.

Mr. Vandeleur, six feet high, lank, but graceful as a panther, and the pink of politeness, was, beneath his varnish, one of the wildest young men in London,—gambler, horse-racer, libertine, what not? but in society charming, and his manners singularly elegant and winning. He never obtruded his vices in good company; in fact, you might dine with him all your life and not detect him; the young serpent was torpid in wine; but he came out, a bit at a time, in the sunshine of Cigar.

After a brisk conversation on current topics, the venerable chief told him plainly they were both curious to know the history of Miss Somerset, and he must tell it them.

"O, with pleasure," said the obiding youth. "Let us go into the smoking-room."

"Let—me—see. I picked her up by the sea-side. She promised well at first. We put her on my chestnut mare, and she showed lots of courage, so she soon learned to ride; but she kicked, even down there."

"Kicked?—whom?"

"Kicked all round; I mean showed temper. And, when she got to London, and had ridden a few times in the park and swallowed flattery, there was no holding her. I stood her cheek for a good while, but at last I told the servants they must not turn her out, but they could keep her out. They sided with me, for once; she had ridden over them as well. The first time she went out, they bolted the doors, and handed her boxes up the area steps."

"How did she take that?"

"Easier than we expected. She said, 'Lucky for you beggars that I'm a lady, or I'd break every d—d window in the house.'"

This caused a laugh. It subsided. The historian resumed.

"Next day she cooled and wrote a letter."

"To you?"

"No, to my groom. Would you like to see it? It is a curiosity."

He sent one of the club waiters for his servant, and his servant for his desk; and produced the letter.

"There!" said Vandeleur; "she looks like a queen, and steps like an empress, and this is how she writes:—"

"DEAR JORGE.—*I have got the sack, an' prays your born merr. dear jorje he always promise me the gray oas, which now an oas is life an death to me. If you Texas to ust him to lend me the gray he would n't refuse you.* Yours respectfully,
RHODA SOMERSET."

When the letter, and the handwriting, which unfortunately I cannot reproduce, had been duly studied and approved, Vandeleur continued:—

"Now, you know, she had her good points after all. If any creature was ill, she'd sit up all night and nurse them; and she used to go to church on Sundays, and come back with the sting out of her; only then she would preach to a fellow and bore him. She is awfully fond of preaching. Her dream is to jump on a first-rate hunter, and ride across country, and preach the villages. So, when George came grinning to me with the letter, I told him to buy a new side-saddle for the gray, and take her the lot, with my compliments. I had noticed a slight spavin in his near fore-leg. She rode him that very day in the park, all alone, and made such a sensation that next day my gray was standing in Lord Hailey's stables. But she rode Hailey, like my gray, with a long spur, and he could n't stand it. None of 'em could, except Sir Charles Bassett, and he does n't play fair—never goes near her."

"And that gives him an unfair advantage over his fascinating predecessors?" inquired the senior, slyly.

"Of course it does," said Vandeleur, stout-

ly. "You ask a girl to dine at Richmond once a month, and keep out of her way all the rest of the time, and give her lots of money—she will never quarrel with you."

"Profit by this information, young man," said old Woodgate, severely: "it comes too late for me. In my day there existed no sure method of pleasing the fair. But now that is invented along with everything else. Richmond and—absence: equivalent to 'Richmond and victory!' Now, Bassett, we have heard the truth from the fountain-head; and it is rather serious; she swears, she kicks, she preaches. Do you still desire an introduction? As for me, my manly spirit is beginning to quake at Vandeleur's revelations, and some lines of Scott recur to my Gothic memory:—

*'From the shaded tiger rend his prey,
Beh the fell lesson's blighting way,
But shun that lovely snare!'*

Bassett replied, gravely, that he had no such motive as Mr. Woodgate gave him credit for, but still desired the introduction.

"With pleasure," said Vandeleur; "but it will be no use to you. She hates me like poison: says I have no heart. That is what all ill-tempered women say."

Notwithstanding his misgivings, the obliging youth called for writing materials, and produced the following epistle:—

"DUAN MISS SOMERSET.—*Mr. Richard Bassett, a cousin of Sir Charles, wishes very much to be introduced to you, and has begged me to assist in an object so laudable. I should hardly venture to present myself, and therefore shall feel surprised as well as flattered if you will receive Mr. Bassett on my introduction, and my assurance that he is a respectable country gentleman, and bears no resemblance in character to*

*Yours faithfully,
ARTHUR VANDELEUR."*

Next day Bassett called at Miss Somerset's house in May Fair, and delivered his introduction.

He was admitted after a short delay, and entered the lady's boudoir. It was Luxury's nest. The walls were rose-colored satin, padded and puckered; the voluminous curtains were pale satin, with floods and billows of real lace; the chairs embroidered, the tables all buhl and ormolu, and the sofas felt like little seas. The lady herself, in a delightful peignoir, sat nestled cosily in a sort of ottoman with arms. Her finely formed hand, clogged with brilliants, was just conveying brandy and soda-water to a very handsome mouth, when Richard Bassett entered.

She raised herself superbly, but without leaving her seat, and just looked at a chair, in a way that seemed to say, "I permit you to sit down"; and that done, she carried the glass to her lips with the same admirable firmness of hand she showed in driving.