CHAPTER II

ISOBEL KISSES GODFREY

On the whole Monk's Acre suited Mr. Knight fairly well. It is true that he did not like the Abbey, as it was still called, of which the associations and architectural beauty made no appeal to him, and thought often with affection of the lodging-house-like abode in which he had dwelt in his southern seaport town amid the Victorian surroundings that were suited to his Victorian nature. The glorious church, too, irritated him, partly because it was so glorious, and notwithstanding all that the Reformation had done to mar it, so suggestive of papistical practice and errors, and partly because the congregation was so scanty in that great expanse of nave and aisle, to say nothing of the chancel and sundry chapels, that they looked like a few wandering sheep left by themselves in a vast and almost emptied fold. Nor was this strange, seeing that the total population of the parish was but one hundred and forty-seven souls.

Of his squire and patron he saw but little. Occasionally Mr. Blake attended church and as lay-rector was accommodated in an ugly oak box in the chancel, where his big body and florid countenance reminded Godfrey of Farmer Johnson's prize polled ox in its stall. These state visits were not however very frequent and depended largely upon the guests who were staying for the week-end at the Hall. If Mr. Blake discovered that these gentlemen were religiously inclined, he went to

church. If otherwise, and this was more common, acting on his principle of being all things to all men, he stopped away.

Personally he did not bother his head about the matter which, in secret, he looked upon as one of the ramifications of the great edifice of British cant. The vast majority of people in his view went to church, not because they believed in anything or wished for instruction or spiritual consolation, but because it looked respectable, which was exactly why he did so himself. Even then nearly always he sat alone in the oak box, his visitors generally preferring to occupy the pew in the nave which was frequented by Lady Jane and Isobel.

Nor did the two often meet socially since their natures were antipathetic. In the bosom of his family Mr. Blake would refer to Mr. Knight as the "little parson rat," while in his bosom Mr. Knight would think of Mr. Blake as "that bull of Bashan." Further, after some troubles had arisen about a question of tithe, also about the upkeep of the chancel, Blake discovered that beneath his meek exterior the clergyman had a strong will and very clear ideas of the difference between right and wrong, in short, that he was not a man to be trifled with, and less still one of whom he could make a tool. Having ascertained these things he left him alone as much as possible.

Mr. Knight very soon became aware first that his income was insufficient to his needs, and secondly, especially now when his health was much improved, that after a busy and hard-working life, time at

Monk's Acre hung heavily upon his hands. The latter trouble to some extent he palliated by beginning the great work that he had planned ever since he became a deacon, for which his undoubted scholarship gave him certain qualifications. Its provisional title was, "Babylon Unveiled" (he would have liked to substitute "The Scarlet Woman" for Babylon) and its apparent object an elaborate attack upon the Roman Church, which in fact was but a cover for the real onslaught. With the Romans, although perhaps he did not know it himself, he had certain sympathies, for instance, in the matter of celibacy. Nor did he entirely disapprove of the monastic orders. Then he found nothing shocking in the tenets and methods of the Jesuits working for what they conceived to be a good end. The real targets of his animosity were his high-church brethren of the Church of England, wretches who, whilst retaining all the privileges of the Anglican Establishment, such as marriage, did not hesitate to adopt almost every error of Rome and to make use of her secret power over the souls of men by the practice of Confession and otherwise.

As this monumental treatise began in the times of the Early Fathers and was planned to fill ten volumes of at least a hundred thousand words apiece, no one will be surprised to learn that it never reached the stage of publication, or indeed, to be accurate, that it came to final stop somewhere about the time of Athanasius.

Realizing that the work was likely to equal that of Gibbon both in length and the years necessary to its completion; also that from it

could be expected no immediate pecuniary profits, Mr. Knight looked round to find some other way of occupying his leisure, and adding to his income. Although a reserved person, on a certain Sunday when he went to lunch at the Hall, in the absence of Mr. Blake who was spending the week-end somewhere else, he confided his difficulties to Lady Jane whom he felt to be sympathetic.

"The house is so big," he complained. "Mrs. Parsons" (Godfrey's old nurse and his housekeeper) "and one girl cannot even keep it clean. It was most foolish of my predecessor in the living to restore that old refectory and all the southern dormitories upon which I am told he spent no less than £1,500 of his own money, never reflecting on the expense which his successors must incur merely to keep them in order, since being once there they are liable for charges for dilapidations. It would have been better, after permission obtained, to let them go to ruin."

"No doubt, but they are very beautiful, are they not?" remarked Lady Jane feebly.

"Beauty is a luxury and, I may add, a snare. It is a mistaken love of beauty and pomp, baits that the Evil One well knows how to use, which have led so large a section of our Church astray," he replied sipping at his tumbler of water.

A silence followed, for Lady Jane, who from early and tender

associations loved high-church practices, did not know what to answer. It was broken by Isobel who had been listening to the conversation in her acute way, and now said in her clear, strong voice:

"Why don't you keep a school, Mr. Knight? There's lots of room for it in the Abbey."

"A school!" he said. "A school! I never thought of that. No, it is ridiculous. Still, pupils perhaps. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings, &c. Well, it is time for me to be going. I will think the matter over after church."

Mr. Knight did think the matter over and after consultation with his housekeeper, Mrs. Parsons, an advertisement appeared in The Times and The Spectator inviting parents and guardians to entrust two or three lads to the advertiser's care to receive preliminary education, together with his own son. It proved fruitful, and after an exchange of the "highest references," two little boys appeared at Monk's Acre, both of them rather delicate in health. This was shortly before the crisis arose as to the future teaching of Isobel, when the last governess, wishing her "a better spirit," had bidden her a frigid farewell and shaken the dust of Hawk's Hall off her feet.

One day Isobel was sent with a note to the Abbey House. She rang the bell but no one came, for Mr. Knight was out walking with his pupils and Mrs. Parsons and the parlour-maid were elsewhere. Tired of waiting,

she wandered round the grey old building in the hope of finding someone to whom she could deliver the letter, and came to the refectory which had a separate entrance. The door was open and she peeped in. At first, after the brilliant sunlight without, she saw nothing except the great emptiness of the place with its splendid oak roof on the repair of which the late incumbent had spent so much, since as is common in monkish buildings, the windows were high and narrow. Presently, however, she perceived a little figure seated in the shadow at the end of the long oaken refectory table, that at which the monks had eaten, which still remained where it had stood for hundreds of years, one of the fixtures of the house, and knew it for that of Godfrey, Mr. Knight's son. Gliding towards him quietly she saw that he was asleep and stopped to study him.

He was a beautiful boy, pale just now for he had recovered but recently from some childish illness. His hair was dark and curling, dark, too, were his eyes, though these she could not see, and the lashes over them, while his hands were long and fine. He looked most lonely and pathetic, there in the big oak chair that had so often accommodated the portly forms of departed abbots, and her warm heart went out towards him. Of course Isobel knew him, but not very well, for he was a shy lad and her father had never encouraged intimacy between the Abbey House and the Hall.

Somehow she had the idea that he was unhappy, for indeed he looked so even in his sleep, though perhaps this was to be accounted for by a

paper of unfinished sums before him. Sympathy welled up in Isobel, who remembered the oppressions of the last governess--her of the inkpot. Sympathy, yes, and more than sympathy, for of a sudden she felt as she had never felt before. She loved the little lad as though he were her brother. A strange affinity for him came home to her, although she did not define it thus; it was as if she knew that her spirit was intimate with his, yes, and always had been and always would be intimate.

This subtle knowledge went through Isobel like fire and shook her. She turned pale, her nostrils expanded, her large eyes opened and she sighed. She did more indeed. Drawn by some over-mastering impulse she drew near to Godfrey and kissed him gently on the forehead, then glided back again frightened and ashamed at her own act.

Now he woke up; she felt his dark eyes looking at her. Then he spoke in a slow, puzzled voice, saying:

"I have had such a funny dream. I dreamed that a spirit came and kissed me. I did not see it, but I think it must have been my mother's."

"Why?" asked Isobel.

"Because no one else ever cared enough for me to kiss me, except Mrs. Parsons, and she has given it up now that the other boys are here."

"Does not your father kiss you?" she asked.

"Yes, once a week, on Sunday evening when I go to bed. Because I don't count that."

"No, I understand," said Isobel, thinking of her own father, then added hastily, "it must be sad not to have a mother."

"It is," he answered, "especially when one is ill as I have been, and must lie so long in bed with pains in the head. You know I had an abscess in the ear and it hurt very much."

"I didn't know. We heard you were ill and mother wanted to come to see you. Father wouldn't let her. He thought it might be measles and he is afraid of catching things."

"Yes," replied Godfrey without surprise. "It wasn't measles, but if it had been you might have caught them, so of course he was right to be careful."

"Oh! he wasn't thinking of me or Mummy, he was thinking of himself," blurted out Isobel with the candour of youth.

"Big, strong men don't catch measles," said Godfrey in mild astonishment.

"He says they do, and that they are very dangerous when you are grown

up. Why are you alone here, and what are you working at?"

"My father has kept me in as a punishment because I did my sums wrong. The other boys have gone out bird-nesting, but I have to stop here until I get them right. I don't know when that will be," he added with a sigh, "as I hate rule of three and can't do it."

"Rule of three," said Isobel, "I'm quite good at it. You see I like figures. My father says it is the family business instinct. Here, let me try. Move to the other side of that big chair, there's plenty of room for two, and show it to me."

He obeyed with alacrity and soon the brown head and the fair one were bent together over the scrawled sheet. Isobel, who had really a budding talent for mathematics, worked out the sum, or rather the sums, without difficulty and then, with guile acquired under the governess régime, made him copy them and destroyed all traces of her own handiwork.

"Are you as stupid at everything as you are at sums?" she asked when he had finished, rising from the chair and seating herself on the edge of the table.

"What a rude thing to ask! Of course not," he replied indignantly. "I am very good at Latin and history, which I like. But you see father doesn't care much for them. He was a Wrangler, you know."

"A Wrangler! How dreadful. I suppose that is why he argues so much in his sermons. I hate history. It's full of dates and the names of kings who were all bad. I can't make out why people put up with kings," she added reflectively.

"Because they ought to, 'God bless our gracious Queen,' you know."

"Well, God may bless her but I don't see why I should as she never did anything for me, though Father does hope she will make him something one day. I'd like to be a Republican with a President as they have in America."

"You must be what father calls a wicked Radical," said Godfrey staring at her, "one of those people who want to disestablish the Church."

"I daresay," she replied, nodding her head. "That is if you mean making clergymen work like other people, instead of spying and gossiping and playing games as they do about here."

Godfrey did not pursue the argument, but remarked immorally:

"It's a pity you don't come to our class, for then I could do your history papers and you could do my sums."

She started, but all she said was:

"This would be a good place to learn history. Now I must be going. Don't forget to give the note. I shall have to say that I waited a long while before I found anyone. Goodbye, Godfrey."

"Goodbye, Isobel," he answered, but she was gone.

"I hope he did dream that it was his mother who kissed him," Isobel reflected to herself, for now the full enormity of her performance came home to her. Young as she was, a mere child with no knowledge of the great animating forces of life and of the mysteries behind them, she wondered why she had done this thing; what it was that forced her to do it. For she knew well that something had forced her, something outside of herself, as she understood herself. It was as though another entity that was in her and yet not herself had taken possession of her and made her act as uninfluenced, she never would have acted. Thus she pondered in her calm fashion, then, being able to make nothing of the business, shrugged her shoulders and let it go by. After all it mattered nothing since Godfrey had dreamed that the ghost of his mother had visited him and would not suspect her of being that ghost, and she was certain that never would she do such a thing again. The trouble was that she had done it once and that the deed signified some change in her which her childish mind could not understand.

On reaching the Hall, or rather shortly afterwards, she saw her father who was waiting for the carriage in which to go to the station to meet some particularly important week-end guest. He asked if she had brought

any answer to his note to Mr. Knight, and she told him that she had left it in the schoolroom, as she called the refectory, because he was out.

"I hope he will get it," grumbled Mr. Blake. "One of my friends who is coming down to-night thinks he understands architecture and I want the parson to show him over the Abbey House. Indeed that's why he has come, for you see he is an American who thinks a lot of such old things."

"Well, it is beautiful, isn't it, Father?" she said. "Even I felt that it would be easy to learn in that big old room with a roof like that of a church."

An idea struck him.

"Would you like to go to school there, Isobel?"

"I think so, Father, as I must go to school somewhere and I hate those horrible governesses."

"Well," he replied, "you couldn't throw inkpots at the holy Knight, as you did at Miss Hook. Lord! what a rage she was in," he added with a chuckle. "I had to pay her £5 for a new dress. But it was better to do that than to risk a County Court action."

Then the carriage came and he departed.

The upshot of it all was that Isobel became another of Mr. Knight's pupils. When Mr. Blake suggested the arrangement to his wife, she raised certain objections, among them that associating with these little lads might make a tomboy of the girl, adding that she had been taught with children of her own sex. He retorted in his rough marital fashion, that if it made something different of Isobel to what she, the mother, was, he would be glad. Indeed, as usual, Lady Jane's opposition settled the matter.

Now for the next few years of Isobel's life there is little to be told. Mr. Knight was an able man and a good teacher, and being a clever girl she learned a great deal from him, especially in the way of mathematics, for which, as has been said, she had a natural leaning.

Indeed very soon she outstripped Godfrey and the other lads in this and sundry other branches of study, sitting at a table by herself on what once had been the dais of the old hall. In the intervals of lessons, however, it was their custom to take walks together and then it was that she always found herself at the side of Godfrey. Indeed they became inseparable, at any rate in mind. A strange and most uncommon intimacy existed between these young creatures, almost might it have

been called a friendship of the spirit. Yet, and this was the curious part of it, they were dissimilar in almost everything that goes to make up a human being. Even in childhood there was scarcely a subject on which they thought alike, scarcely a point upon which they would not argue.

Godfrey was fond of poetry; it bored Isobel. His tendencies were towards religion though of a very different type from that preached and practised by his father; hers were anti-religious. In fact she would have been inclined to endorse the saying of that other schoolgirl who defined faith as "the art of believing those things which we know to be untrue," while to him on the other hand they were profoundly true, though often enough not in the way that they are generally accepted. Had he possessed any powers of definition at that age, probably he would have described our accepted beliefs as shadows of the Truth, distorted and fantastically shaped, like those thrown by changeful, ragged clouds behind which the eternal sun is shining, shadows that vary in length and character according to the hour and weather of the mortal day.

Isobel for her part took little heed of shadows. Her clear, scientific stamp of mind searched for ascertainable facts, and on these she built up her philosophy of life and of the death that ends it. Of course all such contradictions may often be found in a single mind which believes at one time and rejects at another and sees two, or twenty sides of everything with a painful and bewildering clearness.

Such a character is apt to end in profound dissatisfaction with the self from which it cannot be free. Much more then would one have imagined that these two must have been dissatisfied with each other and sought the opportunities of escape which were open to them. But it was not so in the least. They argued and contradicted until they had nothing more to say, and then lapsed into long periods of weary but good-natured silence. In a sense each completed each by the addition of its opposite, as the darkness completes the light, thus making the round of the perfect day.

As yet this deep affection and remarkable oneness showed no signs of the end to which obviously it was drifting. That kiss which the girl had given to the boy was pure sisterly, or one might almost say, motherly, and indeed this quality inspired their relationship for much longer than might have been expected. So much was this so that no one connected with them on either side ever had the slightest suspicion that they cared for each other in any way except as friends and fellow pupils.

So the years went by till the pair were seventeen, young man and young woman, though still called boy and girl. They were good-looking in their respective ways though yet unformed; tall and straight, too, both of them, but singularly dissimilar in appearance as well as in mind.

Godfrey was dark, pale and thoughtful-faced. Isobel was fair, vivacious, open-natured, amusing, and given to saying the first thing that came to her tongue. She had few reservations; her thoughts might be read in her large grey eyes before they were heard from her lips, which generally was not long afterwards. Also she was very able. She read and understood the papers and followed all the movements of the day with a lively interest, especially if these had to do with national affairs or with women and their status.

Business, too, came naturally to her, so much so that her father would consult her about his undertakings, that is, about those of them which were absolutely above board and beyond suspicion of sharp dealing. The others he was far too wise to bring within her ken, knowing exactly what he would have heard from her upon the subject. And yet notwithstanding all his care she suspected him, by instinct, not by knowledge. For his part he was proud of her and would listen with pleasure when, still a mere child, she engaged his guests boldly in argument, for instance a bishop or a dean on theology, or a statesman on current politics. Already he had formed great plans for her future; she was to marry a peer who took an active part in things, or at any rate a leading politician, and to become a power in the land. But of this, too, wisely he said nothing to Isobel, for the time had not yet come.

During these years things had prospered exceedingly with John Blake who was now a very rich man with ships owned, or partly owned by him on

every sea. On several occasions he had been asked to stand for Parliament and declined the honour. He knew himself to be no speaker, and was sure also that he could not attend both to the affairs of the country and to those of his ever-spreading business. So he took another course and began to support the Conservative Party, which he selected as the safest, by means of large subscriptions.

He did more, he bought a baronetcy, for only thus can the transaction be described. When a General Election was drawing near, one evening after dinner at Hawk's Hall he had a purely business conversation with a political Whip who, perhaps not without motive, had been complaining to him of the depleted state of the Party Chest.

"Well," said Mr. Blake, "you know that my principles are yours and that I should like to help your, or rather our cause. Money is tight with me just now and the outlook is very bad in my trade, but I'm a man who always backs his fancy; in short, would £15,000 be of use?"

The Whip intimated that it would be of the greatest use.

"Of course," continued Mr. Blake, "I presume that the usual acknowledgment would follow?"

"What acknowledgment?" asked the Whip sipping his port wearily, for such negotiations were no new thing to him. "I mean, how do you spell it?"

"With a P," said Mr. Blake boldly, acting on his usual principle of asking for more than he hoped to get.

The Whip contemplated him through his eyeglass with a mild and interested stare.

"Out of the question, my dear fellow," he said. "That box is full and locked, and there's a long outside list waiting as well. Perhaps you mean with a K. You know money isn't everything, as some of you gentlemen seem to think, and if it were, you would have said fifty instead of fifteen."

"K be damned!" replied Mr. Blake. "I'm not a mayor or an actor-manager. Let's say B, that stands for Beginning as well as Baronet; also it comes before P, doesn't it?"

"Well, let's see. You haven't a son, have you? Then perhaps it might be managed," replied the Whip with gentle but pointed insolence, for Mr. Blake annoyed him. "I'll make inquiries, and now, shall we join the ladies? I want to continue my conversation with your daughter about the corruption which some enemy, taking advantage of her innocence, has persuaded her exists in the Conservative Party. She is a clever young lady and makes out a good case against us, though I am sure I do not know whence she got her information. Not from you, I suppose, Sir John--I beg your pardon, Mr. Blake."

So the matter was settled, as both of them knew it would be when they left the room. The cash found its way into some nebulous account that nobody could have identified with any party, and in the Dissolution Honours, John Blake, Esq., J.P., was transformed into Sir John Blake, Bart.; information that left tens of thousands of the students of the list mildly marvelling why. As the same wonder struck them regarding the vast majority of the names which appeared therein, this, however, did not matter. They presumed, good, easy souls, that John Blake, Esq., J.P., and the rest were patriots who for long years had been working for the good of their country, and that what they had done in secret had been discovered in high places and was now proclaimed from the housetops.

Lady Jane was inclined to share this view. She knew that a great deal of her husband's money went into mysterious channels of which she was unable to trace the ends, and concluded in her Victorian-wife kind of fashion, or at any rate hoped, that it was spent in alleviating the distress of the "Submerged Tenth" which at that time was much in evidence. Hence no doubt the gracious recognition that had come to him. John Blake himself, who paid over the cash, naturally had no such delusions, and unfortunately in that moment of exultation, when he contemplated his own name adorning the lists in every newspaper, let out the truth at breakfast at which Isobel was his sole companion. For by this time Lady Jane had grown too delicate to come down early.

"Well, you've got a baronet for a father now, my girl"--to be accurate he called it a "bart."--he said puffing himself out like a great toad before the fire, as he threw down the Daily News in which his name was icily ignored in a spiteful leaderette about the Honours List, upon the top of The Times, The Standard, and The Morning Post.

"Oh!" said Isobel in an interested voice and paused.

"It's wonderful what money can do," went on her father, who was inclined for a discussion, and saw no other way of opening up the subject. "Certain qualifications of which it does not become me to speak, and a good subscription to the Party funds, and there you are with Bart. instead of Esq. after your name and Sir before it. I wonder when I shall get the Patent? You know baronets do not receive the accolade."

"Don't they?" commented Isobel. "Well, that saves the Queen some trouble of which she must be glad as she does not get the subscription. I know all about the accolade," she added; "for Godfrey has told me. Only the other day he was showing me in the Abbey Church where the warriors who were to receive it, knelt all night before the altar. But they didn't give subscriptions, they prayed and afterwards took a cold bath."

"Times are changed," he answered.

"Yes, of course. I can't see you kneeling all night with a white robe on, Father, in prayer before an altar. But tell me, would they have made you a baronet if you hadn't given the subscription?"

Sir John chuckled till his great form shook--he had grown very stout of late years.

"I think you are sharp enough to answer that question for yourself. I have observed, Isobel, that you know as much of the world as most young girls of your age."

"So you bought the thing," she exclaimed with a flash of her grey eyes. "I thought that honours were given because they were earned."

"Did you?" said Sir John, chuckling again. "Well, now you know better. Look here, Isobel, don't be a fool. Honours, or most of them, like other things, are for those who can pay for them in this way or that. Nobody bothers how they come so long as they do come. Now, listen. Unfortunately, as a girl, you can't inherit this title. But it doesn't matter much, since it will be easy for you to get one for yourself."

Isobel turned red and uttered an exclamation, but enjoining silence on her with a wave of his fat hand, her father went on:

"I haven't done so badly, my dear, considering my chances. I don't mind telling you that I am a rich man now, indeed a very rich man as things

go, and I shall be much richer, for nothing pays like ships, especially if you man them with foreign crews. Also I am a Bart," and he pointed to the pile of newspapers on the floor, "and if my Party gets in again, before long I shall be a Lord, which would make you an Honourable. Anyway, my girl, although you ain't exactly a beauty," here he considered her with a critical eye, "you'll make a fine figure of a woman and with your money, you should be able to get any husband you like. What's more," and he banged his fist upon the table, "I expect you to do it; that's your part of the family business. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Father, that you expect me to get any husband I like. Well, I'll promise that."

"I think you ought to come into the office, you are so smart," replied Sir John with sarcasm. "But don't you try it on me, for I'm smarter. You know very well that I mean any husband I like, when I say 'any husband you like.' Now do you understand?"

"Yes," replied Isobel icily. "I understand that you want to buy me a husband as you have bought a title. Well, titles and husbands are alike in one thing; once taken you can never be rid of them day or night. So I'll say at once, to save trouble afterwards, that I would rather earn my living as a farm girl, and as for your money, Father, you can do what you wish with it."

Then looking him straight in the eyes, she turned and left the room.

"An odd child!" thought Sir John to himself as he stared after her. "Anyway, she has got spirit and no doubt will come all right in time when she learns what's what."