

ACT ONE

As the audience enters the theater, they are confronted by a set in darkness - in darkness, except for AN OPAQUE LIGHT emanating from the back of the stage. The LIGHT begins to grow... and grow... and grow... slowly lighting Upstage and revealing the ACTORS sitting in the semicircle of chairs. THEY are facing another figure - a MAN - standing tall behind the Pulpit. HIS name is GEORGE WHITEFIELD. HE looks at the ACTORS before HIM and then at us, as if God surveying all the world - and then juts HIS finger aggressively out at us in celestial condemnation.

WHITEFIELD

(Grandly, mightily - truly an orator.)
You out there... I see you now! What's more, I am not the only one! God shines His holy light upon the world to reveal us to Him with unclothed truth! You cannot hide in the darkness of your trappings, be they the cloak of a king or the bed sheets of a whore - for God's light slices through all like the sabre of the righteous! It slices through your clothes - your flesh - your bones - and exposes the soul within, where whores and kings are one, if their hearts beat the same! Aye, 'tis that deafening cacophony of sin you hear that sounds in your ear from the depths of the womb and commands that you march like a lemming to damnation. You sit there in this great house - nay, in your cushioned seats - and you think yourself better than the filthiest wretch who begs in the street... and yet in Him the light of God shows an apostle in heart that shall wave to you on your way to damnation. You cannot climb to God on a pile of gold - and should you try, you will be condemned to fall... fall, like a stone, into the depths of Hell!

By now, the ACTORS facing WHITEFIELD have begun flailing THEIR arms about and shouting invectives.

ACTORS

Enough with him!
Get him down!
Fake... fraud!
(etc.)

As OPPROBRIUM RISES, we notice one of the ACTORS has not joined in the fray. Instead, SHE has risen from HER seat,

as if entranced by an idea. SHE stares thoughtfully and steadily at WHITEFIELD, impervious to the clamor.

The woman before us is SELINA HASTINGS, COUNTESS OF HUNTINGDON. She is about 40, standing tall like a marble tower - just as straight, just as indomitable, just as elegant. While HER clothes are aristocratic and lacily soft, we sense they are all a façade, perhaps even mocking in their daintiness. The WOMAN they cover is anything but as meek.

Slowly, the LIGHTS fade Upstage and smother the OPPOBRIUM.

DOWNSTAGE: THE PARLOR OF THE COUNTESS OF HUNTINGDON'S HOUSE IN CHELSEA, LONDON - THE PRESENT (1751). A few chairs and tables are present.

The COUNTESS walks Downstage and enters the LIGHT. SHE is followed by TWO ACTORS above - both dressed in appropriate fineries - both nobles of the highest rank - who have similarly arisen from THEIR seats. One is PHILIP STANHOPE, 4th EARL of CHESTERFIELD - urbane, witty, intellectual, and clever, though far too much for HIS own good. Another is HENRY ST. JOHN, VISCOUNT BOLINGBROKE - vane, mighty, dreadfully loud, although not quite as rough around the edges as HE appears. Both are a vibrant middle age, bursting with drive. Both are painfully aware of THEIR greatness.

BOLINGBROKE

Rather good sermon, Countess... nice and short.

COUNTESS

I do see you stayed awake this time, my Lord Bolingbroke.

BOLINGBROKE

I did, too - through most of it, at any rate. It doesn't take long for all these damn priests to sound the same. It's either God or Jesus or some prophet-or-other you can't pronounce. It's damn near enough to make your ears ring. Still, this fellow here did all right... for a Welshman, anyway.

(To CHESTERFIELD.)

Who was the one last week? Matheson? Matherson?

COUNTESS

Maverson.

BOLINGBROKE

Boring! What did he preach from?

COUNTESS

The Book of Jebediah, as I recall.

BOLINGBROKE

My God, there's a whole book of it?

CHESTERFIELD

Indeed, Henry, at times, the tedium you feel might well be in the material.

COUNTESS

Why, my Lord Chesterfield, you speak as one who believes in no God at all.

CHESTERFIELD

(Not viciously, wittily - overly eloquent to impress and mortify.)

Far be it for that to be the impression, Countess. I believe in God no less than any other Englishman - which is most sincerely. Someone has to keep the lower classes in order. I dare say armies are too expensive and despotism too dangerous, at least for men of property. The meek, indeed, shall inherit the earth - and the ploughshare and the sheep... and blessed be they in their contentment with none other.

COUNTESS

I do hope, my Lord Bolingbroke, that my preachers have made a greater impression on you than they have Lord Chesterfield.

BOLINGBROKE

I suppose so. I have seen no improvement in him.

COUNTESS

What of you, my lord? I trust you now at least believe in God.

BOLINGBROKE

Whenever have I not?! Why, I think He's a splendid idea.

CHESTERFIELD

Indeed, yes - but can He vote?

COUNTESS

He can, my lord - and in the greatest constituency of them all.

CHESTERFIELD

The very first rotten borough.

COUNTESS

And also, my lord, the last.

CHESTERFIELD

Either way, with God on our side, as well as the Prince of Wales - though not necessarily in that order - we should be able to effect a change in government this upcoming election and deal the King's party a decisive blow. I trust your ladyship has done her part to encourage the Prince in our cause.

COUNTESS

My Lord Chesterfield, there is nary a moment when I do not talk and nary a moment when the Prince does not listen. It is, however, hard to sustain any level of enthusiasm when, to appease our more timid friends, you bypass my recommendation and appoint a man like Mr. Seabury as Bishop of Lincoln.

CHESTERFIELD

Oh, Countess, I find Seabury aptly suited for the role. His wife, after all, is a descendant of John of Gaunt.

COUNTESS

Ah, yes, and here I thought belief in God was the key criteria.

A man in HIS 30's - HOWELL HARRIS - enters from the side of the stage. HE wears the simple black attire of a mendicant preacher and a rather nondescript look. Indeed, the man, while pleasant, is placidity defined, agreeable to a fault and as dainty as the lace that the COUNTESS wears. This daintiness is complimented by a sing-songy, charming Welsh accent which somehow makes HIM seem more like a poet than a preacher.

COUNTESS

Ah, Mr. Harris - I am so glad you joined us.

HARRIS

I do hope my words provided some sense of grace.

COUNTESS

My Lord Bolingbroke was complimenting you most generously.

BOLINGBROKE, who was starting to doze, perks up and grunts in reply.

COUNTESS

(To BOLINGBROKE and CHESTERFIELD.)

I discovered Mr. Harris in Wales when I paid a visit after my dear husband died. He gave me great comfort at the time, and

COUNTESS (CONT)

still so now. Universal truth is gloriously consistent. I do recommend it.

CHESTERFIELD

And I, Countess, recommend a grand tour in France for your son.

COUNTESS

Well, now, our talk has leapt from Eden to Sodom without passing a single pasture in-between.

CHESTERFIELD

It would be good for him to see the world - as, dare I say, your late husband would have agreed.

COUNTESS

Indeed, my lord - and yet my husband and I did not quite agree on matters of the soul.

FRANCIS

Oh, mother - listen to Lord Chesterfield... please!

The COUNTESS turns in surprise to find that HER son has entered - twenty-year-old FRANCIS - brimming with energy and foolishness. Indeed, the two qualities seem in an endless race for first place. HE bounces into the room like a frisky rabbit.

CHESTERFIELD

Come, Countess - there is so much to see in France.

COUNTESS

Yes - much of which should stay behind locked doors.

CHESTERFIELD

(Discretely to HER.)

Now, now, Countess, a grand tour is a necessity for any man of station in our society. Besides, it's good to exorcise any devilishness out of the system early. Better now is it than when your son comes of age later this year and takes up his inheritance. I promise, in your honor, to take good care of him in France - and may even see my way to heeding your advice for the next episcopal appointment.

COUNTESS

(Cautiously.)

If not for the fact that my husband sorely wanted this experience for Francis, I would say "no" - but since he did...

FRANCIS

(Overjoyed.)

Oh, mother - thank you!

COUNTESS

I reserve the right to change my mind.

FRANCIS

Now, my lord, if you can just convince mother to let my sister stay at court...

COUNTESS

Oh, my - I feel like Vienna besieged by the infidel, and I will have none of it.

CHESTERFIELD

What of your sister?

FRANCIS

Mother has insisted she leave the Princess Royal's service.

CHESTERFIELD

But why, Countess?

FRANCIS

Because they play cards on Sundays!

CHESTERFIELD

Your daughter could be useful eyes and ears for us at court.

COUNTESS

Thank you, my Lord Chesterfield, but not quite everything on Earth comes back to the political. What is right is right and what is wrong is wrong - and it is wrong to gamble on Sundays, especially when God put six other days in the week. My daughter is a grown woman, but, should she continue, her allowance will be forfeited. I will not pay to have anyone in my family attend court so they can desecrate a holy day.

CHESTERFIELD

Ah, well, with those words of wisdom, Countess, we must depart.

(To BOLINGBROKE.)

Are you ready, Henry?

BOLINGBROKE

(Again asleep, again awaking.)

What? What?

CHESTERFIELD

We must go. Parliament meets in a few hours.

BOLINGBROKE

Damn the lot! All of them - uncouth bastards!

COUNTESS

My next prayer soiree is two Thursdays hence. I do hope you will attend.

CHESTERFIELD

Have we ever not been present?

COUNTESS

(Charmingly - but the point is made.)
In attendance, my lord... no.

CHESTERFIELD understands and smiles back. HE and BOLINGBROKE exit and return to the semicircle of chairs. FRANCIS, still beaming, smiles a "thank you" at the COUNTESS and runs up also to the chairs.

COUNTESS

(To HARRIS.)
Did things fair well with the Duchess of Buckingham?

HARRIS glumly removes a folded letter from HIS pocket.

HARRIS

Before I could even start to preach, she gave me this.

The COUNTESS nods exhaustedly to HARRIS: "please read it."

HARRIS

(Reading the letter.)
I thank your ladyship for the information and people you continue to send my way concerning the way of these evangelicals and their adherents. Their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should...

(Stopping self-consciously - but going forth.)
...should relish sentiments that bring such disrepute and shame to your rank and reputation.

Stung, the COUNTESS doesn't say a word, instead just staring off into space. HARRIS watches HER intently for a reaction. Suddenly, as if someone pressed HER "On" button, the COUNTESS comes alive again with semi-fake cheer and holds out HER hand for the letter. HARRIS hands HER the letter and SHE elegantly - if that's even possible - tears it in two.

COUNTESS

Put her on the list. We'll try again next year.

HARRIS

As you've said for many others. You have great tenacity.

COUNTESS

A woman must, Mr. Harris. It's our only substitute for sitting in Parliament.

HARRIS

I would urge caution in prodding my Lord Chesterfield.

COUNTESS

I appreciate your care, Mr. Harris, but it is unneeded. My Lord Chesterfield and his ilk tolerate me because they must, as I must tolerate them. They depend on my money and friendship with the Prince of Wales to merit them influence and I depend on them to give Christ Jesus a foothold in the halls of power. It's a race to the finish for both of us. If my Lord Chesterfield and his party gain power fully and in stride, they have no further need of me. If Jesus wins over princely souls at court in a great flourish of inspiration, I have no need for them. The only outrage is how much I have tolerated my Lord Chesterfield using my connections without appropriate reward, piling on excuse after excuse. We are facing the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army is at our back. It is time to embrace the reckless, as faith often dictates... with God's help, and yours.

HARRIS

I will, of course, oblige you.

COUNTESS

Dear Mr. Harris, you always do.

COUNTESS picks up a letter from a nearby table and hands it to HARRIS. The LIGHTS slowly fall. The COUNTESS and HARRIS return to the semicircle of seats.

DOWNSTAGE: THE SEASIDE OF DEAL IN KENT
- THE PRESENT (1751). The CRASHING SOUNDS of WAVES sound distantly. The SOUND of SEAGULLS in the sky rises and rises cacophonously.

WHITEFIELD'S VOICE

Attack, seagulls! Attack those stewers of hate!

VARIOUS VOICES

You, sir, are a scoundrel!
 Go back to America!
 Get back on the ship!

With that, the fierce figure of GEORGE WHITEFIELD rushes in from one side of the stage. HE wears a beaten coat that looks quite the worse for wear. Finally, we have a moment to look at the man we so briefly saw before. HE is about 40 - although HE looks much older - clearly on the way to gaining a lot of weight. HIS overall appearance is mighty, yet disheveled, resembling an unmade bed. HE is, in truth, a rather ugly, plain-looking man - and yet the soul within bursts with an animalistic, raging energy that sweeps up all around HIM like a tornado. Right now, HE seems to be channeling this fury in HIS every step, pounding, pounding, pounding the ground with HIS feet, as HE crosses the stage, carrying a large trunk.

After a good, sturdy stride, WHITEFIELD angrily throws HIS trunk on the ground - BANG! The brutal force is so great that the trunk bursts open and some clothes tumble out. WHITEFIELD curses under HIS breath and bends down to throw the clothes into the trunk again. As HE does so, HE stops and freezes, HIS eyes catching something. HE reaches between some remaining pieces of clothing and picks up an old, small, much-used book - a copy of Charles Gildon's "Life of Thomas Betterton." WHITEFIELD looks at it fondly for a moment - and remembers.

UPSTAGE: THE OLD BELL INN IN GLOUCESTER
- FLASHBACK (1730).

A YOUNG MAN is standing behind the Pulpit - the young George Whitefield, whom we shall call simply "GEORGE." He wears drab, unkempt attire and is clearly far from wealthy. There is an indeterminate melancholia about HIM, as if HIS smile is incapable of stretching too wide, because some challenges in life tug it back again. The young man nevertheless maintains a certain charm and optimism about HIS person that is peculiarly reserved for youth.

SOUNDS of REVELRY rise from the interior of the inn. Young GEORGE reaches from under the Pulpit (now turned into a bar) and brings some goblets of wine down on it. The SOUND of A DOOR OPENING is heard. GEORGE looks up and out at one of the MALE ACTORS sitting in the chairs facing HIM. We don't know which ACTOR it is (it doesn't matter, as HE is only silhouetted in the light), but GEORGE is overjoyed to SEE him. The voice of a man named "Malcolm" is broadcasted in the theater.

GEORGE

(Talking to "Malcolm.")
Hello, Mr. Malcolm! You're back!

MALCOLM'S VOICE

Why not, George? I told you I would be.

GEORGE

I know that, Mr. Malcolm, - but, well, many people say many things and they don't come to anything.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

How's your mother, George?

GEORGE

(Starting to say something else, then catching HIMSELF.)
Well, she's... she's well.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

Your father, too, I hope.

GEORGE

(Pointedly.)
My stepfather. He's just the same.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

That's surely good.

GEORGE

(Noticeably changing the subject.)
Are you in town for a play, Mr. Malcolm?

MALCOLM'S VOICE

I am, George - though we got but a small crowd last year with "King Lear", so we're not staying long. It's a rotten audience you have here in Gloucester. You have to break out of here, if you want to become an actor. Do you still have that "Life of Thomas Betterton" that I gave you?

GEORGE reaches under the Pulpit and removes a more pristine version of the book in the older man's trunk.

GEORGE

I think I read it almost every night.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

Well, all you need to know of acting is right there.

GEORGE

(Extending it towards the ACTOR.)

Yes, sir, but... I'd rather you take the book back and give it to another.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

I thought you wanted to be an actor.

GEORGE

I do, Mr. Malcolm - truly - but I can't.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

Nonsense, George - just finish up at school and then...

GEORGE

(Shyly, wishing HE hadn't mentioned it.)

Oh, I'm... I'm not at school anymore.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

Yes, but... I thought you enjoyed it so much.

GEORGE

(We don't quite believe this nonchalance.)

Well, mother, you see, she needed some help with the inn. I wasn't getting much out of school anyway. This inn will be mine one day and, when it is, I'll run that. I mean, I miss all the thinking - but there's not much money in thinking... or acting.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

(Sensing HIS pain and changing the subject.)

That's surely true - and innkeeping makes a good, honest living - unlike acting... acting and preaching! My mother always warned me never to do any of them. Either way, you're trying to get people to believe in something that isn't real.

GEORGE

Isn't it real, Mr. Malcolm?

MALCOLM'S VOICE

God or acting?

GEORGE

Both.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

No, George - no matter how well you play 'em.

GEORGE

I don't believe that, Mr. Malcolm - but then I don't think you do either... not really. I think you're just saying that to make me feel better, but I know the truth. I see you up there on the stage and I watch you sweep the hearts of everyone in that audience up there with you. I tell you that's as good as real can ever be, because it's real here...

(Pointing to HIS heart.)

...and if something isn't real here, it never is.

MALCOLM'S VOICE

Too much belief can make you naive, George.

GEORGE

(Reciting from memory.)

"Now God be praised, that to believing souls, gives light in darkness and comfort in despair."

MALCOLM'S VOICE

Ecclesiastes?

GEORGE

"Henry VI, Part One."

At this, WHITEFIELD suddenly perks up Downstage and changes HIS visage. Now, HE is standing tall and staring out at us. HIS face is angry and fierce, glaring at us, yelling at us, but talking to GEORGE.

WHITEFIELD'S VOICE

(Terribly boisterous.)

George! George!

GEORGE

(To "Malcolm" - "shhhh.")

It's my stepfather.

WHITEFIELD has become CAPEL LONGDON - GEORGE's stepfather. HIS hair is swirled, HIS face sweaty, HIS eyes are wild. It's clear HE has been drinking profusely and, in fact, barely manages to form coherent words. WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON) squints, finding it hard to see anything through all the drink.

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

(To "Malcolm.")
You... who are you?

MALCOLM'S VOICE

I'm Malcolm Tunney, sir - an actor.

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

In that case, sir, perhaps you could teach my son to act - act, rather than talk. I don't mean any of your low-life type of actin' either, but real actin'. There are floors to clean and beds to make and I don't right see him cleanin' or makin' any of 'em and I damn sure ain't interested in hearing more complaints about 'em more from another damn guest.

(To GEORGE, growling fiercely.)
You trying to shut this place here down?

GEORGE

No, sir.

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

Yeah, that's what you're trying at, I see!

GEORGE

No, sir.

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

Shuttin' us down, thinkin' you'll get back to school!

GEORGE

No, sir!

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

Well now, I'll show you a school, and the lesson starts with this...!

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON) makes to smack GEORGE with HIS back hand. The MALE ACTOR to whom GEORGE was talking raises HIS own hand, as if stopping the blow. WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON) glares back.

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

Get out of my way!

MALCOLM'S VOICE

There's really no need.

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

There damn sure is! There's a need for you to get the hell out! This here is my inn and you ain't welcome!

GEORGE

(Lashing out.)
It's mother's inn!

WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON)

That's where you're wrong, little bastard. This inn is all mine. Everything of your mother's is...

(Extending a long, threatening finger at us - really "George".)
...includin' you.

A terrifying pause descends, hanging pendulously in the air. WHITEFIELD (CAPEL LONGDON), drowning in HIS drunkenness, starts to laugh - at what, we don't know - but the sound is crude and maniacal. In that moment, we can tell that WHITEFIELD awakes from HIS memories with a jolt and stops laughing, leaving Capel Longdon behind HIM. Upstage, GEORGE is left in a silence of thoughts.

GEORGE

(Lifelessly, HIS emotions drained.)
It's like I said, Mr. Malcolm, about what's real and what isn't. You can't trust anything of the world, so we all must look beyond. The world says that man there is my stepfather. Ask anyone and that's what they'd say he is. Ask the law and the law would say it, too - except... not here...

(Pointing at HIS heart.)
...and that makes him nothing.

The LIGHTS fall on GEORGE and the Pulpit, bringing us back to Deal. WHITEFIELD blinks up and out at us, the "Betterton" book firmly in HIS land. HARRIS has emerged from the shadows of the stage with a weak smile.

WHITEFIELD

Harris! Is that you?

HARRIS

At least what God has left to linger.

WHITEFIELD

Linger, aye - and just as well here. I trust yours are the holiest feet today to set upon these dunes, such is the state of the local notables. The seagulls themselves are politer - and they do but shit on me!

HARRIS

Thus are the great so often tormented.

WHITEFIELD

Amen - and thus do I feast upon all fury.

HARRIS

(Can't help but glance at WHITEFIELD's growing stomach.)
Indeed, yes. You look well, my friend.

VARIOUS VOICES

Damn him!
Get him off!
Go back to America!

WHITEFIELD gestures most indelicately
in the direction of the VOICES.

WHITEFIELD

Ah, those blackguards in the crowd - toadies of the Bishop! They come to torment me like the accusers of Christ. Why, the greater they try to tear me down, the grander will I rise! If they shut the door in my face, then so will I preach to the sheep until the sheep themselves know salvation.

HARRIS

I pray the orphanage in America is well.

WHITEFIELD

Ah, it is bled dry of funds, or else I would not have returned! How I weep to see my little ones, wanting of clothes. For them, I owe one thousand pounds! The twelve hundred I took with me is gone, swept up to the Heavens in the service of Christ - as are the linen and the plate - and yet the trustees, they dare to demand of me an audit... an audit! Why, what sinner calls an audit thus for monies spent on Christ?!

HARRIS

Well, I would venture that...

WHITEFIELD

(Blathering on and on.)

Ah, those moneychangers tried to smite me, but like Jesus did I turn them out! I told the lot I would leave if 'ere they acted and take the orphans with me... and soon God spoke sense into their venal hearts. Yet, still, I am plagued by creditors knocking like the woodpeckers of Hell upon my door. I have had no choice but to sell the furniture of my house in London to defer their devilish beaks!

HARRIS

Yes, indeed. It was spare when last I visited Elizabeth.

WHITEFIELD

For her sake, I did not sell the bed.

HARRIS removes a letter from HIS pocket and hands it to WHITEFIELD. WHITEFIELD curiously takes the letter and reads in silence. A slow look of amazement - even incredulity - comes over HIS face. HE looks up at HARRIS, astonished.

HARRIS

She is a great woman, Whitefield - a true benefactor. I have worked with her for many years now. I have never found her wanting in faith or charity - or funds. Far from it. She is like a grand fountain, showering patronage on the faithful... if, that is, your mouth be open to receive it.

WHITEFIELD is uncharacteristically silent.

HARRIS

You are unsure how to respond?

WHITEFIELD

(A little too confidently, betraying some hidden fear.)
No, of course not! I am simply thinking of how to wear this gem God has placed in my lap. Perhaps, Harris, I have found clothes for my little orphans after all!

HARRIS

And a chair or two for Elizabeth.

WHITEFIELD

And some peace thus for myself.

HARRIS

(Simply - as if reminding HIM.)
And Elizabeth.

WHITEFIELD nods slowly, again in deep thought, as the LIGHTS fall. WHITEFIELD and HARRIS remain Downstage.

DOWNSTAGE: THE PARLOR OF THE COUNTESS
OF HUNTINGDON'S HOUSE IN CHELSEA,
LONDON - THE PRESENT (1751).

The COUNTESS is sitting in a chair, studying a bound manuscript. A quill and ink tub are nestled on a nearby table. A pause ensues - and then the COUNTESS takes the quill and circles something on the document. Another pause - and then SHE takes the quill and crosses something out rather vigorously.

Meanwhile, HARRIS enters the light with WHITEFIELD behind HIM. THEY stop and contemplate the solitary COUNTESS. WHITEFIELD is marvelously contented and bright with a salesman's fire.

WHITEFIELD

She seems a quiet, studious sort... for a woman.

HARRIS

Studious, most certainly - but, of books, the very least. I would suggest you tread gently and...

WHITEFIELD

Gently!? Did Joshua tread gently as he marched to the Promised Land? No - and nor more shall I! As I know how to speak the eternal truths of God unto man, so can I muster some sugary sentiments to whisper unto woman.

HARRIS is about to insert another warning, but WHITEFIELD confidently strides to the COUNTESS. HARRIS follows HIM like a trained poodle. The COUNTESS spies WHITEFIELD approaching and puts the book on the table. SHE then takes a shawl and lays it on top of the book, covering the manuscript from view.

COUNTESS

My dear Mr. Whitefield.

WHITEFIELD

(Grandly - a hit put-on.)
Countess, it is a Heaven-sent honor!

COUNTESS

Well, I must say that's very flattering.

WHITEFIELD

No, no, it is my invitation here that flatters my soul more.

COUNTESS

Is that so?

WHITEFIELD

Why, yes, for I hear your wisdom flows like an endless stream.

COUNTESS

I appreciate that - and, of course, your many pleasantries - and yet, I confess, they are entirely unwarranted.

WHITEFIELD

Never, my lady, for, as I approached the doors of your house, I swear I heard the angels singing in joy.

COUNTESS

(Putting an end to this with gloriously polite finality.)
If they do, Mr. Whitefield, it must be because you brought them with you. I assure you, I'm most unremarkable. There are many other women in England with many other parlors. Even this house is merely a rest stop in our souls' eternity - and I, I at least hope to make your stay comfortable. No, no, it is far, far rarer a gift to be blessed with God's grace, as are you - and so the honor in this moment is all mine.

(Indicating a nearby chair - "shut up.")
Please sit.

WHITEFIELD nods, a little overcome by HER reply, and sits. HE seems to have met HIS match here.

COUNTESS

(To HARRIS.)
You have known each other for how long, Mr. Harris?

HARRIS

It will be exactly ten years this June.

WHITEFIELD

I was preaching in Wales at the time and...

COUNTESS

(Barging in - "no more speeches, I'm in control.")
Oh, now, Mr. Whitefield, I completely support preachers proselytizing in Wales - provided they use the accent. The language there is so lovely and musical. It gives quite a nice melody to God's words - as Mr. Harris demonstrates daily. He is one of my greater projects, you know.

(To HARRIS.)
I trust you don't mind my using the word "project," Mr. Harris.
(To WHITEFIELD.)
We are all projects of God, after all - rough and imperfect.

WHITEFIELD

(Hint, hint.)
Ah, yes, my lady, and I know you have done much to fund the word of God, such that...

COUNTESS

Oh, Mr. Whitefield, what a lovely and efficient transition to our meeting.

The COUNTESS looks at HARRIS expectantly. It is clear SHE expects HIM to leave. Rather disappointed, HE nods and returns to the semicircle of chairs. The COUNTESS smiles at WHITEFIELD and removes the shawl from

the table, exposing the bound book.
WHITEFIELD's face visibly crumbles.

WHITEFIELD

You have been reading my journal.

COUNTESS

Yes, that's right. It was published how many years ago?

WHITEFIELD

(Pointedly.)

Five, my lady - and without permission.

COUNTESS

Oh, yes - that would explain it.

WHITEFIELD stares at HER worryingly:
"It?" The COUNTESS calmly takes up the
book and proceeds to read from it.

COUNTESS

(Reading.)

"Woe, that anyone take the Archbishop for other than the fool
and flake that he is. Why, he knoweth more about Mohammed than
he does about Christ."

(Flipping to another page - and reading.)

"Thus, I spit on these lords and bishops - lackeys of Satan,
all. They triumph only in their race to ever greater
fornication."

(Looking up at HIM.)

My, my.

(Flipping to another page - and reading.)

"If God were less forgiving, they would long be perished from
this Earth - these lords and prelates of sin."

At that, the COUNTESS closes the book
and smiles at a rather uncomfortable
WHITEFIELD. HE then happens to notice
quite a few scribbles on the open book.

COUNTESS

Forgive me, Mr. Whitefield, for I have rather scribbled all over
your words. There are many things I have to confess - most of
them only fit for God to hear - but one thing I will freely
admit is that I'm rather obsessive. That is the cause of many
faults, but also of much joy - not the least of which is my
faith... in God and other things. I give you fair warning of
that before we proceed further. I should perhaps mention, too,
that I can be rather overwhelming. I suppose that part comes too
late to count as a warning. At any rate, it matters little, for
this meeting isn't really about me at all. It's about you...
what you can be and what you will be.

WHITEFIELD just stares back.

WHITEFIELD

(Uncommonly low key, without bluster.)
Why am I here, Countess?

COUNTESS

To be frank, Mr. Whitefield, I have made it my life's mission to bring souls to Christ Jesus. There are far too many lost and forgotten people in the world, for we take care of each other so very badly, and yet everyone deserves to find a home of hope and warmth and love. I know from personal experience that the safest home lies in the loving arms of Christ Jesus, not to envelope people in them by force, but rather to remind people that Christ's arms are always an option, especially for those who think the world has naught for them, save destitution and despair. We are all of us the keepers of our brothers, after all - and our brothers are everywhere in sight - and so, while some men give out farthings to beggars, so would I also give them salvation eternal and the peace that passeth all understanding... et cetera, et cetera.

WHITEFIELD, bewildered, makes to speak, but is swiftly interrupted.

COUNTESS

In my particular case, Mr. Whitefield, I fully confess there are quite a lot of farthings. Here I am, a widowed matron - my dear husband some years deceased, my children grown, or near to being so - living in a substantial house and sitting atop a substantial fortune... both of them, gathering dust, when there is so much need for saving in the human soul. I do not believe God gave me this fortune to adorn my shoulders with the latest fashion or to cut my garden bushes into peculiar shapes, but for a greater, holier purpose entirely - and I aim to fulfill that purpose... with your help, that is.

WHITEFIELD stares at HER like a gaping fish - utterly confounded.

COUNTESS

(Simply - not at all appalled by the idea.)
You expected money, perhaps?

WHITEFIELD

(A little too hastily.)
Oh, no! No, no, no... no.

COUNTESS

Oh, now, Mr. Whitefield, we just met. Please, let's not begin our partnership by breaking a commandment.

WHITEFIELD

Partnership?

COUNTESS

Yes, partnership. You are already a great preacher, but I alone can give you a great pulpit. I would like you to preach for me - here - to the fallen men of power and influence who frequent my soirees - "lords and prelates of sin," you might say. They all need God most desperately - and, more to the point, God needs them to work their influence and fill the Anglican Church with men who care for people more than princes. The church today drives away the wounded by portraying God as an angry judge, banging his gavel on our hands, when, in fact, He only wants to love us. Through influencing those with influence and putting the right men behind pulpits, high and low, we shall together spread the joy of knowing Christ throughout the land.

WHITEFIELD

(Rather horrified.)

You wish me to preach... to the nobility?

COUNTESS

Yes, that is correct. In return, you will receive a level of status that is denied you and, with that, the ability for your words to have greater weight generally with all the people of this kingdom. I will let you think on it, but the decision should be obvious. Now, I'm afraid I must end this meeting early, for I simply must finish reviewing your journal before we meet again. I have so many questions - and quite a few edits. I expect you back here at three o'clock in the afternoon next Thursday to discuss our partnership further. I trust that will work for you - and, should it not, I trust you will make it work anyway. I will ring my servant, James, to show you out.

WHITEFIELD

There is no need, my lady. I remember the way.

COUNTESS

Goodbye then, Mr. Whitefield. It was nice talking at you.

The COUNTESS smiles, grabs the journal, and proceeds to read it again. This only makes WHITEFIELD even less comfortable. HE nods and starts to walk out with a step far heavier than the one with which HE entered. The LIGHTS fall on the COUNTESS. WHITEFIELD soon comes center stage and stops. There is greater weight on HIS shoulders and a new uncertainty, if not pain, on HIS face that appear so alien to the blustery giant we have come to know.

WHITEFIELD

(To HIMSELF, with dread.)

Preach, she says... to the nobility!