

## (6) CHAPTER IV/I.

THE NEXT DAY Lord Raymond called at Perdita's cottage, on his way to Windsor Castle. My sister's blush and her sparkling eyes half revealed her secret to me. He was perfectly self-possessed, his complexion colorless. After a courteous greeting, he seemed immediately to enter into our feelings and become one with us. I scanned his features, which varied as he spoke, yet were beautiful in every change. The usual expression of his eyes was soft, though at times he could make them glare with ferocity; his smile was pleasing, though disdain too often curled his lips—lips which to female eyes were the very throne of beauty and love. His voice, low and pleasant, often startled you by a sharp discordant note, which showed that its usual tone was rather the work of study than nature. Thus full of contradictions—sociable yet haughty, gentle yet fierce, tender then negligent—he by some strange art found easy entrance to the admiration and affection of women; now caressing and now tyrannizing over them according to his mood, but always a despot.

At the present time Raymond evidently wished to appear amiable. Wit, hilarity, and deep observation were mingled in his

talk, turning every sentence he uttered into a flash of light. Watching him with Perdita, I tried to keep in mind everything I'd heard to his disadvantage. But all appeared so harmless, and all was so fascinating, that I soon forgot everything except the pleasure of his society.

Under the idea of initiating me into the scene of English politics and society, of which I was soon to become a part, he narrated a number of anecdotes, and sketched many characters; his discourse, rich and varied, flowed on, pervading all my senses with pleasure. But for one thing he would have been completely triumphant. When he mentioned Adrian, he spoke with that disparagement that the worldly wise always attached to enthusiasm. I stopped him:

“Permit me to remark that I am devotedly attached to the Earl of Windsor; he is my best friend and benefactor. I reverence his goodness, I accord with his opinions, and bitterly lament his present, and I trust temporary, illness. I cannot hear him mentioned, unless in terms of respect and affection.”

Raymond replied; but there was nothing conciliatory in his reply. “Everyone,” he said, “dreams about something—love, honor, pleasure. You dream of friendship, and devote yourself to a maniac; well, if that be your vocation, doubtless you are right to follow it.” Then some reflection seemed to sting him, and the spasm of pain that for a moment convulsed his face, checked my indignation along with his derision. “Happy are dreamers,” he continued, “as long as they’re not awakened. I wish could dream! But I live by broad, garish daylight, in the

dazzling glare of reality. Even the ghost of friendship is gone. And love—" He broke off; nor could I guess whether the disdain that curled his lip was directed against the passion, or against himself for being its slave.

My conversations with Lord Raymond often ran this way. But we became close, and each day afforded new occasion to admire the powerful and versatile talents which, together with his eloquence (graceful and witty) and his wealth (now immense), caused him to be at the same time the most feared, loved, and hated man in England.

I had entered public life. My father's name claimed interest, if not respect. When added to my long connection with Adrian, and the Austrian ambassador's known favor, and now my intimacy with Lord Raymond, it gave me easy access to the fashionable and political circles of England. At first sight, we appeared to be on the eve of civil war. Each party was violent, acrimonious, unyielding. Parliament was divided by three factions—aristocrats, democratic popular reformers, and royalists. The last had nearly died out after Adrian's defection to the republican ideal became widely known. Then Lord Raymond stepped forward as a royalist partisan, and they revived with redoubled force. Some were royalists from prejudice and ancient affection for the House of Windsor; many were moderates who lived in equal fear of the popular party's capricious tyranny and aristocrats' unbending despotism. Ranged under Raymond, the royalist faction was growing every day. Between the other two, the aristocrats built their hopes on

their own outsized share of wealth and influence; the reformers on the force of the majority—the people. The debates in government were violent, but the committee meetings were worse. Assembled in knots at closer quarters to arrange their measures, politicians bandied opprobrious epithets and slung vows of resistance to the death. Such strife spilled over into the populace, whose gatherings disturbed the quiet order of the country. Except in war, how could all this end?

Then, just as the really destructive flames were ready to break forth, I saw them shrink back. Another crisis had passed. Because no one had an army, and no one wanted any violence—save of speech—and all maintained the cordial politeness and even friendship between the hostile leaders when they met in private society. I watched events ever more closely.

My sister was my chief solace and delight, and my spirits always rose at the thought of seeing her. Perdita's conversation was full of pointed remark and discernment. In her pleasant rooms, their alcoves redolent with the sweetest fresh flowers, adorned by antique vases and magnificent casts, and hung with brilliant art—skillful copies she'd painted herself of the best works by Raphael, Correggio, Claude—I fancied myself in a fairy retreat untainted by and inaccessible to the noisy, flashy worlds of politics or fashion.

In my hours with Perdita, I could not but perceive that she loved Raymond; methought also that he regarded my fair sister with admiration and tenderness. Yet I knew that he planned to

marry the presumptive heiress of the Earldom of Windsor, and had keen expectations of the advantages he'd gain thereby. It seemed certain. All the Ex-Queen's friends were his friends; not a week passed that he didn't hold consultations with her at Windsor.

I had never seen Adrian's sister. I'd heard that she was lovely, amiable, fascinating. Yet any discussion concerning her union with Lord Raymond was real agony to me. Given Adrian's withdrawal from active life, this beautiful Idris had probably fallen victim to her mother's ambitious schemes; in my friend's place, I ought to come forward and protect her from undue influence, guard her from unhappiness, and secure to her the freedom of choice that is the right of every human being. Yet how? She'd be bound to reject my interference—that of a stranger, an object of indifference or contempt to her. Far better to avoid her, avoid self-exposure and scorn. Something else held me back, though. An indefinable presentiment that for better or for worse, our meeting would change things; as often happened when people had such feelings, fearing the change, I shunned the event, and avoided this high-born damsel.

On one occasion when I quitted London to visit the cottage by Windsor Forest, my sister was not alone; nor could I fail to recognize her companion. It was Idris, the till now unseen object of my slightly mad idolatry.

In what fitting terms of wonder and delight, in what choice expression and soft flow of language, can I usher in the loveliest, wisest, best? How in mere words convey the halo of glory that

surrounded her, the thousand graces that waited tirelessly on her? The first thing that struck you on beholding that charming countenance was its perfect goodness and frankness; candor sat upon her brow, simplicity in her eyes, heavenly kindness in her smile. Her figure was tall, slim, graceful; her gait, goddess-like, was as that of a winged angel; and her voice resembled the low, subdued tenor of a flute. It is easiest perhaps to describe by contrast. Wordsworth compared a beloved woman to both a flower and a star; but his lines always described to me two contrasting characters:

*A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye,  
Fair as a star when only one  
Is shining in the sky.*

Such a violet was my sister, sweet Perdita, reconciled to solitude, reserved and timid even where she loved; trembling to entrust herself to the very air, cowering from observation, yet betrayed by her excellences; and repaying with a thousand graces the labor of those who sought her in her lonely by-way. Fearless, open-hearted Idris was that fair star, set in single splendor in the diadem of balmy evening; ready to enlighten and delight the subject world, shielded from every taint by her unimagined distance from all that was not, like herself, akin to heaven.

I found this vision of beauty seated in an alcove, wrapped in earnest conversation with my sister. Perdita, seeing me, rose

and took my hand, and told her companion, "He's here—our wish is granted! This is Lionel, my brother."

Idris stood at the same time. Her eyes were a celestial blue. With peculiar grace she said, "You hardly need an introduction. We have a picture, highly valued by my father, which declares at once who you are. Yes, a Verney. I hope you'll acknowledge this tie—and as my brother's friend, I feel that I may trust you." Tears filmed her eyes and her voice trembled as she continued: "Dear friends, please don't think it strange that now, when I'm visiting you for the first time, I confide in you completely and then ask your assistance. You're the only ones I dare speak to—both of you so good—and as my brother's friends, you must be mine—oh, what can I say? If you refuse to help me, I am lost indeed!"

Neither Perdita nor I could answer a word. Idris gazed upward, while wonder held us mute, and cried, "My brother! Beloved, ill-fated Adrian! How speak of your misfortunes? My friends, doubtless you've both heard the current tale. Perhaps you've even believed the slander—but he is not mad! Were an angel from the foot of God's throne to assert it, never, never would I believe it. He is wronged, betrayed, imprisoned—save him! Verney, you must do this; seek him out in whatever part of the island they've hidden him; find Adrian, rescue him from his persecutors, restore him to himself, to me—on the wide earth I have none to love but only him!"

This earnest appeal, so sweetly and passionately expressed, filled me with wonder and sympathy; and, when Idris added,

with thrilling voice and look, “Do you consent to undertake this enterprise?” I vowed, with energy and truth, to devote myself in life and death to Adrian’s restoration and welfare.

At once we began laying out the plan I must pursue. We were strategizing over the fastest way to determine Adrian’s whereabouts, when Lord Raymond entered the room without knocking. I saw Perdita tremble and grow deadly pale, and Idris’s cheeks glow with the purest blushes. He must have been astonished at our conclave, and considerably disturbed by it I should have thought; but nothing of this showed. He saluted my companions, and addressed me with a cordial greeting. Idris appeared suspended for a moment. Then, in the sweetest tones, she said, “Lord Raymond, I confide in your goodness and honor.”

Smiling haughtily, he tipped his head. “Do you indeed confide, Lady Idris?”

She studied him, and then answered with dignity. “As you please. It is certainly best not to compromise oneself by any concealment.”

“Pardon me,” he replied, “if I have offended. Whether you trust me or not, rely on my doing my utmost to further your wishes, whatever they may be.”

Smiling her thanks, Idris stood up to take leave. Lord Raymond asked permission to accompany her to Windsor Castle; she consented, and they quitted the cottage together. My sister and I were left—truly like two fools, who fancied they’d obtained a golden treasure, till daylight showed it to be

painted lead—two silly, luckless flies, caught in a glistening spider’s web that we mistook for sunbeams. I leaned by the window and watched those two glorious creatures, till they disappeared in the forest-glades; and then I turned. Perdita had not moved. Her eyes fixed on the ground, her cheeks pale, her very lips white, motionless and rigid, every feature stamped by woe, she sat. Alarmed, I went to take her hand; but she shudderingly withdrew it, and strove to collect herself. I entreated her to speak to me.

“Not now,” she replied, rising to go. “And don’t you speak either, my dear Lionel. There is nothing you can say, for you know nothing. I’ll see you tomorrow; in the meantime, adieu!” She paused at the door, leaning there as if the havoc in her mind made her need the support; and added, in a faltering voice, “Lord Raymond will probably return. Please tell him that he must excuse me today. I am not well. I’ll see him tomorrow if he wishes it. You’d better return to London with him; you can start making those inquiries about Adrian. Visit me again tomorrow, before you leave to go find him.” I agreed to everything. “Till then, farewell,” she concluded with a heavy sigh.

---

Thank you for reading this chapter of

Mary Shelley's The Last Man, Revised and Edited for  
Modern Readers by Liz Mackie  
and Presented by [Nostalgistudio](#).

Download, print, and share as widely as you like.

Return to [thelastman.blog](#)