

(8) CHAPTER IV/II.

WAS THERE ever such a feeling as love at first sight? And if yes, what made it different from love based on long observation and slow growth? Thought not always so permanent, its effects while they lasted could be just as violent and intense.

We walked the pathless mazes of society, vacant of joy; suddenly we held this clue, leading us through that labyrinth to paradise. Our nature dim, formless, an unlit match asleep until the fire attained it: then Love—light—this life of life. At no moment then or in time to come did I feel the same as I had before. In the deepest fountain of my heart the pulses were stirred; and like a cloak, around, above, beneath, clinging Memory enwrapped me. The spirit of Idris hovered in the air I breathed; her eyes were constantly bent on mine; her remembered smile blinded my faint gaze, and caused me to walk as if through dark and vacant space—but my steps were slowed by a new and brilliant light, too novel, too dazzling for my human senses. On every leaf, on every atom, I saw imprinted the talisman of my existence: SHE LIVES! SHE IS! With no time yet to analyze, much less leash, a tameless passion, I had but

this one idea, one feeling, one thing I knew. It was my life!

But the die was cast—Raymond would marry Idris. The merry marriage bells rang in my ears; I heard the nation's cheers greet this wedding. With the swiftness of an eagle in flight, the poor but ambitious noble had risen to regal supremacy, and won Idris's love. Yet, not so! She did not love him; she had called me her friend; she had smiled on me; to me she had entrusted her heart's dearest hope, Adrian's welfare. This thought kept arriving to cheer me before being swept away by my busy thoughts.

The debate had ended at three in the morning. My soul in tumult, I sped, directionless, through London's streets. Truly, I was mad that night, when the love which I have called a giant from its birth, wrestled with despair! Day, hateful to me, dawned; I retreated to my lodgings—I threw myself on a bed—I slept—was it sleep? Thought was still alive—love and despair kept up their struggle, and I writhed with unendurable pain. I awoke half stupefied, unable to place the cause of the heavy oppression I could feel lying upon me. I had to enter, as it were, the council chamber of my brain, and question the various ministers of thought therein assembled. Too soon I remembered all; too soon my limbs quivered beneath the tormenting power; soon, too soon, I knew myself a slave!

Suddenly, unannounced, Lord Raymond entered my room. He came in gaily, singing the Tyrolese song of liberty; noticed me with a gracious nod, and threw himself on a sofa. Just opposite stood a copy of the Apollo Belvedere. After one or two trivial remarks, to which I replied sullenly, he burst out, all

smiles, and pointed at the wall.

“I’ve been said to resemble him! My face, that is. Here’s an idea: Apollo’s head on my new coinage—to stand as an omen to all dutiful subjects of my future success. I must contact the Vatican Museums for their permission.”

His playful self-mockery passed all of a sudden and left his features troubled. In that shrill tone peculiar to himself, he cried, “I fought a good battle last night; higher conquest, the plains of Greece never saw me achieve. Now I am the first man in the state, topic of every popular ballad, the object of old women’s mumbled devotions. What are you thinking about it all? Verney, a man who imagines he can read the human soul, as your native lake reads each crevice and fold of its surrounding hills—say what you think of me. King-to-be? Angel or devil, which do you think?”

Irrked to my depths by his ironical tone and his insolence, I replied with bitterness: “There is a spirit, neither angel or devil, damned to limbo merely.” I saw his cheeks become pale, and his lips whiten and quiver; his anger served but to feed mine, and I answered his glare with a determined look. Suddenly his eyes were withdrawn, cast down; a tear, I thought, wetted the dark lashes. I was softened, and with involuntary emotion added, “Not that you are such, my dear lord.”

His agitation silenced us both for a few moments. “Yes,” he said at length, rising and biting his lip, as he strove to curb his passion. “I am such! You don’t know me, Verney; neither you, nor our audience last night, nor anyone in the whole of England

knows anything about me. I stand here, it would seem, an elected king; this hand is about to grasp a scepter; these brows feel in each nerve the coming crown. I appear to have strength, power, victory; to stand as the foremost column which supports the dome; and I am—a reed! I have ambition which attains its aim; my nightly dreams are realized, my waking hopes fulfilled; a kingdom awaits my acceptance, my enemies are overthrown. But here,” and he struck his heart with violence, “here is the rebel, here the stumbling block! This overruling heart, which I could drain of its living blood and yet while one fluttering pulsation remained, I would be its slave.”

He spoke with a broken voice, then bowed his head, and, hiding his face in his hands, wept. I was still smarting from my own disappointment; yet this brought me to the point of terror. I couldn't speak. Having thrown himself on the couch, Raymond remained silent and motionless, save that a strong internal conflict kept his features changeful. At last he rose, and said in his usual tone of voice, “The time flies, Verney. I've got to go—but don't let me forget my main errand here. Will you accompany me to Windsor tomorrow? There will be nothing dishonorable for you involved, and as this is probably the last service, or disservice, you can do me, will you say yes?”

He held out his hand with almost a bashful air. Swiftly I thought, *Yes, I will witness the last scene of the drama.* Besides, his manner conquered me. With affection towards him filling my heart again, I bade him command me. He laughed. “Aye, that I will—that's my cue now. Be with me tomorrow morning

by seven; be secret and faithful; and you shall be groom of the stole ere long.”

So saying, he hastened away, vaulted onto his horse, and with a gesture as if he gave me his hand to kiss from my window, bade me another laughing adieu. Left to myself, I spent the next several hours striving with painful intensity to figure out Raymond’s motives and predict the events of the coming day. In the end, my head ached with thought, the nerves teeming from overwork; I clasped my burning brow, as if a fevered hand could medicine its pain. On the following day, I was punctual to the appointed hour. I found Lord Raymond waiting for me. We got into his carriage, and proceeded towards Windsor. I had told myself to show no outward sign of my internal agitation.

“What a mistake Ryland made,” said Raymond, “when he thought to overpower me the other night. He spoke well, very well; such an harangue would have succeeded better addressed to me singly, than to those fools and knaves assembled yonder. Had I been alone, I’d have listened to him and tried to hear reason; but when he tried to vanquish me on my own territory, with my own weapons, he put me on my mettle, and the outcome might have been expected.”

I smiled incredulously, and replied, “I’m of Ryland’s way of thinking. I’d be happy to repeat all his arguments; let’s see how far you’ll be induced by them, to change the royal for the patriotic style.”

“The repetition would be useless,” said Raymond. “I remember them; and I’ve come up with many arguments of my

own, on the same side, which are even more persuasive.”

He didn't explain himself, nor did I remark on his reply. Our silence endured for some miles. Countryside with open fields, shady wood, parks, had begun to present pleasant objects to our view, which soon gave rise to conversation. Raymond said, “The philosophers who call the human being a microcosm of nature, find some correspondence inside the mind for every bit of this” (he gestured at trees, grasses, sky) “this machinery visibly at work around us. Their theory has been a frequent source of amusement to me; and many an idle hour have I spent, exercising my ingenuity in identifying so-called resemblances.”

His gaze at the passing view grew more distant, as he continued, “What a sea is the tide of passion, whose fountains are in our own nature! Our virtues are the quicksands, which show themselves at calm low water; but let the waves rise and the winds come up, and the poor devil whose hope was in their solidity, finds them sink from underfoot. The fashions of the world, its laws, educations and pursuits, are winds to drive our wills, like clouds, all one way; but let a thunderstorm in the shape of love, hate, or ambition blow up, and the rack goes backward—our progress is stemmed by the triumph of the opposing air.”

“Yet,” replied I, “nature is essentially passive. We human beings possess an active principle, capable of mastering and ruling fortune—or at least of tacking against the gale, until beating it somehow.”

“Your distinction is specious,” said my companion. “Active? Did we form ourselves, then? Choose our dispositions? Our powers? I find myself, for one, to be like a stringed instrument. Here are all the chords and stops—but I have no power to turn the pegs, or pitch my thoughts to a higher or lower key.”

“Other people,” I observed, “may be better musicians.”

“I talk not of others, but myself,” Raymond said, “and I am as fair an example to go by as another. I cannot set my heart to a particular tune, or perform voluntary changes on my will. We are born; we choose neither our parents, nor our station; we are educated by others, or by the world’s circumstance, and this cultivation, mingling with our innate disposition, is the soil in which our desires, passions, and motives grow.”

“There’s a great deal of truth in what you say,” said I, “and yet no one ever acts upon your theory. Who, in the midst of choosing, ever says, Thus I choose, because I had no choice? Don’t we all, on the contrary, experience an inner freedom of will, which, though you may call it fallacious, still actuates our decisions?”

“Exactly,” replied Raymond. “Here’s another link in the unbreakable chain. Tell me, were I now to commit an act which would annihilate my hopes, sweep the royal robes from my shoulders, and leave me in a set of ordinary clothes for life—would this, think you, be an act of free will on my part?”

While we’d been talking, I’d noticed that we weren’t taking the ordinary road to Windsor, but instead one through Englefield Green, towards Bishopgate Heath. I began to

realize that Idris was not the object of our journey. I had indeed been brought to witness the scene that was to decide Raymond's fate—his fate, and Perdita's. Clearly, he was still vacillating all the way there, and irresolution marked his every gesture as we entered my sister's cottage. I had my eyes trained on him. If he kept hesitating, I was determined to intervene; I'd help Perdita to overcome herself, and teach her to disdain a love that wavered over someone's wish to wear a crown, when her own excellence and affection transcended the worth of any kingdom.

We found her among the flowers in her alcove; she was reading a newspaper report of the debate in parliament, which had apparently sunk her heart and doomed her to hopelessness. We were in time to hear a sigh. Her eyes circled with shadowy distress, her attitude spiritless; a cloud was on her beauty. The effect on Raymond was instantaneous. His eyes beamed with tenderness; remorse clothed his manners with earnestness and truth. He sat beside her; and, taking the paper from her hand, said, "Not a word more shall my sweet Perdita read of this contention of madmen and fools. I must not permit you to become acquainted with the extent of my delusion, lest you despise me; although, believe me, a wish to appear before you, not vanquished, but as a conqueror, inspired me during my wordy war."

Perdita's amazement blazed into joy; tenderness shone in her countenance; to see him was happiness. But bitter thoughts swooped in and bent her. Eyes fixed on the ground, she tried to

master the passion of tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

Raymond continued, "I won't act a part with you, dear girl, or let you think me other than what I am, weak and unworthy, more fit to excite your disdain than your love. Yet you do love me; I feel and know that you do, and thence I draw my most cherished hopes. If pride guided you, or even reason, you might well reject me. Do so; if your high heart, incapable of my infirmity of purpose, refuses to bend to the lowness of mine. Turn from me, if you will—if you can. If your whole soul does not urge you to forgive me—if your entire heart does not open wide its door to admit me to its very center—then forsake me, never speak to me again. I, though sinning against you almost beyond remission, I also am proud; there must be no reserve in your pardon—no drawback to the gift of your affection."

Perdita looked down, confused, yet pleased. A blush mantled her cheek. My presence embarrassed her; so that she dared neither turn to meet her lover's eye nor trust her voice to assure him of her affection; but her disconsolate air had been entirely replaced by one of deep-felt joy. Raymond, putting an arm around her waist, continued:

"I do not deny that I have balanced between you and the highest hope that mortal men can entertain; but I do so no longer. Take me—mould me to your will, possess my heart and soul to all eternity. If you refuse to contribute to my happiness, I quit England tonight, and will never set foot in it again." He turned. "Lionel, you hear: witness for me. Persuade your sister to forgive the injury I have done her; persuade her to be mine."

“There needs no persuasion,” said the blushing Perdita, “except your own dear promises, and my ready heart, which whispers to me that they are true.”

That same evening we all three walked together in the forest, and, with the talkativeness which happiness inspires, they told me the history of their romance. It was pleasant to see the haughty Raymond and reserved Perdita changed through happy love into prattling, playful children, both losing their characteristic dignity in the fullness of mutual contentment. A night or two ago Lord Raymond, with a brow of care, and a heart oppressed with thought, had bent all his energies to silence or persuade the legislators of England that a scepter was not too weighty for his hand, while visions of dominion, war, and triumph floated before him; now, frolicsome as a lively boy sporting under his mother's approving eye, the hopes of his ambition were complete, when he pressed Perdita's small fair hand to his lips; while she, radiant with delight, looked on the still pool, not truly admiring herself, but drinking in with rapture the reflection its surface made of herself and her lover—their first appearance as a couple.

I rambled away from them. If theirs was a rapture of assured sympathy, mine was one of restored hope. At length, I looked on the regal towers of Windsor. My thoughts (I was then twenty-one):

High is the wall and strong the barrier that separate me from my Star of Beauty. But not impassible. She will not be his. Spend a few more years in your native garden, sweet flower, till I by toil

and time acquire the right to deserve you and gather you to me. Don't despair—and don't give me cause to! What must I do now? First, find Idris's brother and restore him to her. Patience, gentleness, and untiring affection will cure Adrian, if he's mad as Raymond say he is. Energy and courage will rescue him if he's been unjustly imprisoned.

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