

(3) CHAPTER 2.

I LIVED far from the busy haunts of men. By the time it reached our mountain abode, any rumor of wars or political changes would be worn to a mere sound. But England had been the scene of momentous struggles during my boyhood. In the year 2073, the last of its kings, my father's friend, had abdicated in compliance with his subjects' will, and a republic was instituted. Large estates were secured to the dethroned monarch and his family; he received the title of Earl of Windsor, and Windsor Castle with its extensive land and natural surroundings made a part of his allotted wealth. He died soon after, leaving two children, a son and a daughter.

The Ex-Queen, former princess of the house of Austria, had long urged her husband to resist the changing times. Haughty and fearless, she cherished a love of power, and nursed a bitter contempt for the husband who'd lowered himself to surrender a kingdom. For her children's sake alone she accepted her new non-regal status as a member of the English republic. When she became a widow, she turned all her thoughts to how her son Adrian, second Earl of Windsor, could be raised to accomplish her ambitious ends, and grow up educated in the steady purpose of re-acquiring his lost crown. Adrian was now fifteen.

He was said to be a boy addicted to study, imbued beyond his years with learning and talent; rumor was he'd turned against his mother's views and taken up republican principles. No one knew for sure, for the haughty Countess had bred up Adrian in solitude, and kept him apart from the natural companions of his age and rank. Some unknown circumstance now induced her to send him from home, and we heard that he was about to visit Cumberland. The local air was rife with a thousand explanations for the Countess of Windsor's conduct, none true probably; but each day it became more certain that we should have the noble scion of the late regal house of England among us.

This family owned an estate at Ulswater. With the large park attached to the mansion and grounds I was well familiar through my poaching habits, the neglected state of the property having facilitated my incursions among its plentiful stock of game. When it was decided that the young Earl of Windsor should visit Cumberland, workmen arrived to put the house and grounds in order for his reception. The apartments were brought back to pristine splendor, and the park, cleared of overgrowth, its paths restored, was guarded with unusual care.

As if fascinated, I began to haunt the young Earl's destined abode. I watched the progress of the improvements, and stood by as various articles of luxury, brought from London, were unloaded from wagons and conveyed into the mansion. It was part of the Ex-Queen's plan to surround her son with princely magnificence. Rich carpets, silken hangings, ornaments of gold,

richly embossed metals, emblazoned furniture: nothing but what was regal in splendor should meet his eye. I looked on all this; I turned my gaze to my own mean situation. All my dormant recollections, my suspended sentiments of injury were roused. For whence sprung this difference, but from ingratitude, and falsehood? The prince's father had been derelict of all noble sympathy and generous feeling. Doubtless he, the son, whose blood received a mingling tide from his proud mother—he, the acknowledged focus of the kingdom's wealth and nobility, had been taught to repeat my father's name with disdain, and to scoff at my just claims to protection. So what was all this grandeur but the glare of infamy? Yet I envied him. His stud of beautiful horses, his arms of costly workmanship, the praise that attended him, the adoration, the ready servants, high place and high esteem—I considered them as having been forcibly wrenched from me, and envied them all with novel and tormenting bitterness.

To crown my vexation, Perdita, the visionary Perdita, seemed transported with excitement when she told me that the Earl of Windsor was about to arrive.

“And this pleases you?” I observed moodily.

“Yes, indeed, Lionel,” she replied. “I’m longing to see him. He’s the descendant of our kings, the first noble of the land. Everyone admires and loves him, and they say his rank is his least merit; that he is generous, brave, and affable.”

“You have learnt a pretty lesson, Perdita,” said I, “and repeat it so literally, that you forget all those actual proofs we have of

the Earl's virtues. His generosity is manifest in our plenty, his bravery in the protection he affords us, his affability in the notice he takes of us. His rank his least merit, you say? But all his virtues are derived from his station. Because he is rich, people call him generous; because he is powerful, brave; because he is well served, he is affable. Let them call him so, let all England believe it. We know him better. He is our enemy—our dastardly, arrogant enemy. If he had one particle of the virtues you say he does, he would do justly by us. His father injured our father—unassailable on his throne, daring to despise one who only stooped beneath himself, when he deigned to associate with the royal ingrate. We must be enemies, this Earl and I. He'll find that I can feel my injuries; he shall learn to dread my revenge!”

A few days later, he arrived. Even the most miserable cottage emptied, as every inhabitant, Perdita, too, went to swell the sea of folk that poured forth to meet and behold this idol of all hearts. I, driven half mad, as I met party after party of the country people descending the hills in their holiday best, escaped to the cloud-veiled heights. Here, the sterile rocks never cried, “Long live the Earl!” Night fell, accompanied by drizzling rain and cold, but I stayed where I was. I knew my home and every cottage like it would be ringing with Adrian's praises. As my limbs grew numb and chill, the discomfort fed my insane aversion; I almost reveled in it, since it seemed to justify my hatred for my unheeding adversary. Everything was his fault: for I confounded so entirely the idea of father and son, that I forgot

how the latter might be wholly unconscious of the king's neglect of us. Pounding my aching head with both hands, I cried, "He'll hear of this! I will be revenged! I won't suffer like a whipped spaniel! He's going to know, beggar and friendless as I am, that I won't put up with it!"

Each day, each hour increased my sense of wrong. If I saw the Earl at a distance, riding a beautiful horse, my blood boiled with rage. The air I breathed seemed poisoned by his presence; his praises, which I heard everywhere, were so many adder's stings to my bruised heart. I panted for the relief of doing some misdeed that should rouse him to a sense of my hatred. For his greatest offense was that he should cause me such intolerable sensations, yet appear to be unaware that I was alive to feel them.

It soon became known that Adrian took great delight in his park and preserves. He never hunted, but spent hours watching the tribes of lovely and almost tame animals with which the woods were stocked, and had ordered them put under even greater care than usual. Here I recognized my chance to offend him. My few remaining comrades all shrank from the peril, though they were the most determined and lawless of the crew, when I proposed a poaching raid on the young Earl's estate; so I was left to achieve my revenge alone. When I wasn't caught at first, I increased in daring. My footsteps on the dewy grass, the torn boughs and marks of slaughter I left, at length betrayed me to the gamekeepers. They kept better watch; I was taken and sent to prison.

I entered those gloomy walls in a fit of triumphant ecstasy. "He feels me now," I cried, "and he will again—and again!" I passed one day's confinement; that evening I was freed, as I was told, by order of the Earl himself. This news cast me down from my pinnacle. *He despises me*, I thought. Never mind: he'd learn that I despised him, too, and held in equal contempt his punishments and his clemency. On the second night after my release, I was again taken by the gamekeepers—again imprisoned, and again released. The very next night, I made a third expedition.

A late-setting moon, and the extreme caution I'd been obliged to use, put me behind time. With near dread, I perceived signs of dawn while I was still inside the forbidden park. I crept along through its fern banks on my hands and knees, seeking deeper shadows, while birds awoke with unwelcome song above my head, and the fresh morning wind, playing among the boughs, made me hear footfalls all around. My heart raced as I reached the fence and readied for the leap that would take me to the other side. Just then, two keepers sprang out—an ambush.

The gamekeepers were more enraged than their lord by my obstinacy. They'd received orders that if they took me again, I should be brought directly to the Earl, whose lenience so far made them expect an outcome which they considered ill befitting my crime. The head among them had resolved to satisfy his own resentment before he made me over to the higher powers. The pair who'd surprised me knocked me down,

and one delivered me a few severe blows with a whip. I leapt up, armed with my knife, and managed to inflict a deep, wide wound in his hand. Our three voices, loud with rage, pain, bitterness and fury, echoed through the dell; morning broke more and more, its celestial beauty unsuited to our brute and noisy contest. In the midst of our struggle, the wounded man exclaimed, "The Earl!" At this I broke away from my persecutors and, panting from the effort, stood with my back to a tree, resolved to defend myself to the last. My garments were torn and stained like my hands with the blood of the man I'd wounded. In one hand I grasped some dead birds—my hard-earned prey—the other held the dripping knife. My hair was matted; my face was filthy and smeared with more blood. Tall and muscular though my form, my whole appearance was haggard and squalid. I must have looked like, for I was, the merest ruffian that ever trod the earth.

At the name of the Earl, all the indignant blood that warmed my heart had rushed into my cheeks. I'd never seen him before, and was expecting a haughty, assuming youth who'd show—if he even deigned to speak to me—all the arrogance of superiority. I was ready with a reproach calculated to sting his very heart. He approached; and what I saw blew aside, with gentle western breath, my cloudy wrath. A tall, slim, fair boy, his face somewhat overflowing with sensibility and refinement, stood before me; the morning sunbeams tinged with gold his silken hair, and spread light and glory over his beaming countenance.

“What is this?” he cried. The men eagerly began to excuse themselves; he put them aside, saying, “Two of you at once against a mere lad—for shame!” He came up to me and spoke. “Verney—Lionel Verney, do we meet thus for the first time? We were born to be friends to each other. Ill fortune has divided us, but will you not acknowledge the hereditary bond of friendship which I trust will unite us from now on?”

As he spoke, his frank eyes seemed to read my very soul: and my heart, my savage revengeful heart, felt the influence of sweet benignity sink upon it. His thrilling voice, like sweetest melody, awoke a mute echo within me that stirred to its depths the life-blood in my frame. I wanted to reply, to acknowledge his goodness, accept his offer of friendship; but words, fitting words, failed the rough mountaineer. I would have held out my hand, but there was too much blood on it. Adrian took pity on my hesitation.

“Come with me,” he said. “I have so much to say to you; come home with me—but, you know who I am?”

“Yes,” I exclaimed, “I know you now, and I believe that you will pardon my mistakes—my crime.”

Adrian smiled gently; and after giving his orders to the gamekeepers, he came up and put his arm in mine. Together we walked to the mansion.

It was not his rank—after all I’ve said, surely it will not be suspected that it was Adrian’s rank that, from the first, left my heart subdued and laid my entire spirit prostrate before him. I wasn’t the only one who felt this way. His sensibility and

courtesy fascinated everybody; while his vivacity, intelligence, and active spirit of benevolence, completed the conquest. Even at fifteen, he was deeply read and imbued with the spirit of high philosophy, which gave a tone of irresistible persuasion to his every word; like an inspired musician, he could strike with unerring skill the “lyre of mind” to produce divine harmonies. In person, he appeared not quite of this world. His slight frame was too small for the soul that dwelt within; he was all mind. In Othello’s words, “Man but a rush against” his breast, and you’d conquer his strength; but the might of his smile would have tamed a hungry lion, or caused a legion of armed men to lay their weapons at his feet.

I spent the day with him. He never mentioned the past, at first, nor indeed any personal matters; instead he talked of general subjects, wishing probably to gain my confidence, and give me time to gather my scattered wits. We sat in his library. The room was decorated with the busts of many old Greek sages. He described their characters, and told me of the power they’d acquired over the minds of men through the sheer force of love and wisdom alone. As he spoke, I felt all my boasted pride and strength being subdued by the honeyed accents of this blue-eyed boy. To the trim and fenced domain of civilization, which had looked so inaccessible from my wild jungle, he opened the gate for me; I stepped inside, and felt, as I entered, that I trod my native soil.

“I have something to tell you,” he said towards evening, “and much, too much, to explain about the past. Maybe you can

help. Do you remember your father? Though I never had the happiness of seeing him, his name is one of my earliest recollections. For me he's always been the male ideal of all that's gallant, amiable, fascinating. His great wit was matched by the overflowing goodness of his heart, which he poured in such full measure on his friends as to leave, alas!, too little for himself." Encouraged by this encomium, I told what I remembered of my parent. In answer, Adrian told me what had happened to cause the neglect of my father's testamentary letter.

When his father, then King of England, had felt his situation becoming more perilous, his options fewer, his line of conduct more embarrassed, again and again he wished for his early friend, who could at once have shielded him against the impetuous anger of his queen and served as a mediator with the parliament. After the fatal night of loss at the gaming-table, when he quitted London, the King received no news of my father; by the time he tried to find him, too many years had passed, every trace was lost. With fonder regret than ever, the King, soon the Ex-King, clung to his memory; and charged his son, if ever he should meet this valued friend, to bestow every help and reward, and to assure the old favorite that their attachment survived separation and silence.

A short time before Adrian's visit to Cumberland, the heir of the nobleman to whom my father had confided his last appeal to his royal master, put this letter, its seal unbroken, into the young Earl's hands. It had been found tossed among a mass of

old papers, accident alone brought it to light. As soon as he began reading, Adrian recognized the living spirit of genius and wit he'd heard so much about. He also discovered the name of the spot to which my father had retreated and where he died, leaving children. Ever since his arrival at Ulswater he'd been making inquiries about us; learning that we still lived here, he'd been arranging a variety of plans for our benefit, preliminary to meeting us.

The way he talked about my father was gratifying to my vanity; the delicate way he veiled his benevolence to me behind the filial oath he told of was soothing to my pride. Unusual respect, admiration, love: other feelings, less ambiguous than pride, were provoked by his disarming manner. All his words and looks were generous, open, warm. Before I knew it, he had touched my rocky heart with his magic power, and the stream of affection gushed forth, imperishable and pure. In the evening we parted. He reached to shake hands. "We'll meet again; come back tomorrow," he said. I clasped that kind hand; I tried to answer; a fervent "God bless you!" was all my ignorance could manage, and I darted away, oppressed by my new emotions.

I could not rest. I sought the hills; a west wind swept them, and the stars glittered above. I ran on and on, carelessly, trying to wear out the struggling spirit within me along with my body. "This," I thought, "is power! Not to be strong of limb, hard of heart, ferocious, daring; but kind. Compassionate. Soft." Stopping short, I put my hands together and with the fervor of a

new convert cried, “Adrian! Adrian, I am going to become wise and good too!” and then quite overcome, I wept aloud.

After this gust of passion, when I’d begun to feel more composed, I lay on the ground and let my thoughts go where they liked. My former life passed before me; fold by fold the many errors of my heart unwound and showed me to have been brutish, savage, worthless. I was without remorse, though; for I’d been born again—my soul threw off the burden of past sin for a new career in innocence and love. Nothing harsh or rough remained to jar with the soft feelings this day had inspired; I was a child lisping its prayers after its mother. My plastic soul had been remolded by a master hand, which I neither wanted to nor was able to resist.

This was the beginning of my friendship with Adrian—and the most fortunate day of my life. I now began to be human. I was admitted within that sacred boundary which divides the intellectual and moral nature of our species from that of animals. My best feelings were called into play as I sought to respond to his generosity, wisdom, and simple friendliness.

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