

(15) CHAPTER 8 cont.

OUTWARDLY, Raymond's troubled and disturbing state yielded, by degrees, to sullen animosity. People accustomed to his suavity and benevolence of manner were startled to be met with anger, derision, bitterness. He transacted public business with distaste, and hastened from it to a solitude which was at once bane and relief. Mounting the same fiery horse he'd ridden to victory in Greece, he sought fatigue in deadening exercise.

His full recovery of himself was slow. But he emerged at last, as if from a fog of poison vapors. His thoughts were clear and calm. He was struck by how much time had elapsed since he'd acted through any impulse other than madness. A month had gone by—a month without sight of Evadne. Her power, so secondary to his heart's enduring emotions, had greatly decayed. He was no longer her slave, no longer her lover. He'd never see Evadne again; returning to Perdita completely, he'd once more deserve her confidence.

Yet even as he decided this, Raymond's imagination showed him the Greek girl's miserable abode; one which, from noble and lofty principles, she had refused to exchange for one of

greater luxury. What a contrast to the splendor of her situation and appearance when they'd first met! To her life at Istanbul, one of riches and magnificence, he compared her present penury, her daily toil, her forlorn state, her faded famine-struck cheek. Compassion swelled his breast. No, he would see her, and he'd devise some plan for restoring her to society and the enjoyment of her rank—after which, as a matter of course, they'd separate.

Dimly Raymond recalled how during this long month, he'd avoided Perdita, flying from her as from the stings of his own conscience. But he was awake now; all would be remedied, and future devotion erase the memory of this single blot on the serenity of their lives. He became cheerful, as he resolved this. All at once he remembered: today was October 19th, the anniversary of his election as Protector. This very evening, he and Perdita were to attend the annual festival event in his honor; a good omen of an auspicious future, he thought. First, briefly, he'd look in on Evadne—he owed her some account, some compensation for his long and unexplained absence—and then, to Perdita, to the forgotten world, to the duties of society, the splendor of rank, the enjoyment of power.

He set off. Autumn was far advanced and dreary. A chill late afternoon wind howled and tore from the trees what leaves remained them; perfumed with decayed vegetation, the city's air was hostile to cheerfulness or hope. Raymond's spirits, just exulting from his latest pledge, were in decline before he reached the wretched streets of Evadne's neighborhood. There

his heart smote him for the whole course of his conduct towards the luckless Greek. First, ever agreeing to let her remain in such degradation; then their short wild dream; and finally leaving her to drear solitude, anxious conjecture, and, most bitter—disappointed hope. He must be still awaited. What had she done for a month, how had she endured his absence and neglect?

Light grew dim in these narrow streets. Though the well-known door stood ajar, the staircase was shrouded in perfect night. Raymond groped his way up, he entered the garret, he found Evadne stretched speechless, almost lifeless on her wretched bed.

He called for the people of the house, but could learn nothing from them, except that they knew nothing. Her story was plain to him, plain and distinct as the remorse and horror that darted their fangs into him. When she found herself forsaken by him, she'd lost the heart to work at her designs and support herself as usual; pride forbade her to contact him; at last she'd welcomed kind starvation to provide her with this sinless solitary death. No creature came near her, as her strength failed.

And Perdita—how had she passed that month?

After the terrible scene in his office, she'd expected her former life with Raymond to resume, all those affectionate habits that were the delight of her life, along with their natural freedom of communication. But it didn't happen. Raymond transacted the business of each day apart from her. He went out without telling her where. Perdita loved so greatly and so far

with such happy returns, that her keen disappointment came as a painful torment. There was neither submission, patience, nor self-abandonment in my sister's grief; she fought with it, struggled beneath it, rendered every pang more sharp by resistance. Again and again the idea recurred, that he loved another. She did him justice; she believed that he felt a tender affection for her. But give a paltry prize to someone who's counted on the winnings from the year's richest lottery, and watch it disappoint worse than a dud ticket. Raymond's love was an indivisible treasure. Of its sum total, no arithmetic could calculate its price; but take away the smallest portion, name its parts and separate them into degrees and sections, and like the magician's coin, it turned from gold to trash. There is a meaning in the eye of love, a cadence in its voice, an irradiation in its smile; its spirit is elemental, its essence singular, its divinity a unit. The very heart and soul of Raymond and Perdita had mingled, two mountain brooks joined in their descent to flow murmuring and sparkling over shining pebbles, beside starry flowers; but let one rivulet desert its course, or be dammed up by some obstruction, and the other shrinks to a trickle down its altered banks. All month long, Perdita sensed the failing of the tide that fed her life.

As for the cause of this change, she located it squarely in her husband's exaltation to the office of Protector. A variety of feelings had urged her, as the annual event's organizer-in-chief, to bring double magnificence to this year's festival; yet on October 19th, as she arrayed herself for the evening gala, she

was wondering why she took such pains to put on a sumptuous anniversary celebration of the day her sufferings started.

Woe befall that day instead, she thought, better woe, tears, and mourning betide the hour, that gave Raymond another hope than love, another wish than my devotion. And thrice joyful the moment when he shall be restored to me! Two years more in this palace. God knows, I put my trust in his vows, I do believe him—if I didn't, I wouldn't want him for myself again. But can we spend two more years like this, each day adding to our alienation, each act piling another stone onto the wall between us?

No, my Raymond, my only beloved, sole possession of Perdita! This night, this splendid assembly, these sumptuous apartments, this adornment of your tearful girl, are all united to celebrate—your abdication. Once, for me, you relinquished the prospect of a crown. That was in days of early love, when I could only hold out the hope, not the assurance of happiness. Now you have the experience of all that I can give: the heart's devotion, taintless love, and unhesitating subjection to you. You must choose, so she would tell him, between these and your protectorate. This, proud noble, is your last night in office! Perdita has bestowed on it everything magnificent and dazzling that your heart best loves—but from these gorgeous rooms, from this princely attendance, from power and elevation, you and I must return with tomorrow's sun to our home in the country; for I wouldn't put up with another week like this last one even if it guaranteed me an immortality of joy.

Devising these powerful arguments and resolutions left Perdita's heart exalted and her course very clear. She'd cast her fate on a throw of the dice. She felt secure of winning. Her cheek was flushed by the expectation of struggle; her eyes sparkled with her coming triumph; she rose like some queen of nations, and in the nobility of her bearing there seemed power enough to stop the wheel of destiny with a fingertip. She had never before looked so supremely lovely. Or so I must imagine. We, the Arcadian shepherds of the tale, had intended to be present; but Perdita, then suffering, had told us not to come this year. Better so, she thought now. It meant we'd be home at Windsor next morning to greet her and Raymond on their return to our dear circle, where they'd renew a course of life in which she had found entire felicity.

Her thoughts were absorbing and it was late when Perdita descended from her rooms and made her entrance at the festival event. Raymond who'd promised to grace the assembly was still awaited. She had no doubt he'd arrive very late. The wider the breach between them might appear at this crisis, the more secure she was of closing it forever. Thus the warmth and brilliance with which she set about entertaining her guests, and with heartfelt smiles excusing her tardy lord.

Evadne's crisis peaked a few hours before midnight. It was then, with his suspense and fear at their height, that Raymond once more remembered the festival Perdita was giving in his honor this night—now. In his honor, exactly when misery and death were painting his name with indelible disgrace; honor to

one whose crimes deserved a scaffold; this was the worst mockery. Still, Perdita would expect him. He called the landlady from the corner where she lurked and bade her take a note—he wrote one very hastily on a scrap of paper—and deliver it into the hands of the wife of the Lord Protector at their palace.

“Me?” The woman, who failed to recognize him, answered contemptuously. “Get in there? To see her? On festival night? That’s a laugh.”

Raymond pulled off his ring. “Here—take this to show them at the gates. You’ll get through. Now without delay, just go!” He got back on his knees by the bedside of his starved, almost lifeless lover, and returned to berating himself. If Evadne died, where could a recorded murderer be found whose cruelty in the act could stand comparison with his? What fiend more wanton in his mischief, what damned soul more worthy of perdition! But he was not reserved for this agony of self-reproach, only conjecture’s pangs. He’d sent for medical assistance. Hours would pass, spun by suspense into ages of dark autumnal night. Not before morning would the patient’s survival be sure enough to allow her removal into larger rooms nearby, where he’d hover concernedly about her pillow.

Her thoughts in confusion, Perdita clutched Raymond’s ring and followed her attendant out of the gala hall. The impoverished woman who’d shown it at the gates was claiming to have a note as well from the man who wore it. A fall from his horse, or some similar accident—this was what she was dreading

until the woman started to talk; then other fears awoke. The old gossip's vanity was raised by her commission, which, after all, she did not understand, since even now she had no suspicion that Evadne's visitor was Lord Raymond himself. From blind if not malignant cunning, she avoided any mention of Evadne's alarming state; but she was garrulous over the great frequency of Raymond's visits to her young widowed tenant. Her narrative combined innuendo with enough circumstantial detail to convince Perdita of a truth somewhat worse than actuality. Worst of all, his absence tonight, his message wholly unaccounted for—except by the old crone's disgraceful hints—appeared the deadliest insult. Again she looked at the ring in her hand: a small ruby, almost heart-shaped, a gift from her. "*Do not, I charge you, I entreat you, permit your guests to wonder at my absence.*" She looked at the handwriting, hurried but unmistakable, and repeated the words of the note in an undertone. The messenger's strange medley of truth and falsehood went on filling her ears. All at once Perdita burst out, "Please—go!" and the woman found herself dismissed.

My sister returned to the assembly. The hubbub was near its peak and no one had missed her yet. Gliding over to an empty corner of the room, she leaned there, out of sight against an ornamental column, and tried to recover herself. Every part of her was shaking. Nearby stood a carved vase full of flowers she'd arranged herself, that morning. They were rare and lovely plants; even in her devastation, the poor girl remained alive to their brilliant colors and starry shapes. Divine infoliations of the

spirit of beauty, which neither drooped nor mourned—the despair that clasped Perdita’s heart had no power to spread contagion over them! Why, she wondered, could she not be insensible like the flowers? No, they had the calm she’d lost forever.

“To my task!” she told herself, remembering Raymond’s note. “I obey; my guests shall not perceive reality—not his nor mine, anyhow. Though it kills me, as long as they’re here tonight, they shall behold the antipodes of what is real—for I will appear to live—while I am—dead.” It took all her self-command to prevent the self-pity that flooded her from issuing in tears. After a struggle of some minutes, she was able to rejoin the company.

From this point on, the night was pleasureless acting. In the part of a courteous hostess, she attended to all while shining personally as the focus of enjoyment and grace. The show must go on, though in her depths she sighed for loneliness, and would gladly have traded her crowded palace rooms for the dark heart of a forest, or a dreary, night-blanketed heath. But she became gay, brittle, extra-bright. With her spontaneity she’d lost her even-tempered ease. Her exhilaration of spirits was noted; and if a sharpness in her laugh, or an abruptness in her sallies, might have betrayed her secret to an attentive observer, the greatest number of her guests surrounded her applaudingly. She carried on, careful not to pause, lest her wrecked hopes find a way to raise their wailing voices from her misery-flooded soul, and make those who now echoed her

mirth, and provoked her repartees, shrink in fear from her convulsive despair. Her only consolation during the violence which she did herself, was to watch the motions of an illuminated clock and count down the time which must elapse before she could be alone.

Finally the rooms began to thin. She chided her guests on their early departures as, one by one, they left her. At length came the last handshake. "How cold and damp your hand is!" said her friend. "You're over-tired—please go straight to bed." Perdita smiled faintly in farewell, and stayed to watch the final carriage roll away. Then, as if pursued by an enemy—as if her feet had wings—she sped to her own rooms, where she dismissed her attendants, locked the doors behind them, and with a wild heave of limbs, threw herself to the floor; to keep from shrieking aloud, she bit her lips until they bled. She lay there a long while, prey to the vulture of despair. Despite trying not to think, she felt overrun by ideas; horrid as furies, cruel as vipers, they seemed to jostle and wound each other in their haste to work her up to madness.

At length she got to her feet, more composed, not less miserable, and made her way to her dressing room. She stood where she'd begun the night, before a large mirror. The light and graceful dress, the jewels that studded her hair and encircled her beautiful arms and neck, her small feet shod in satin, her profuse and glossy tresses, all these were identical to what she'd seen reflected earlier; against her present woebegone and troubled face, they seemed to make a gorgeous

frame for a painting of a shipwreck.

Not a calm flower—no, I'm the vase! A carved vase, she thought, brimful of despair's direst essence. Farewell, Perdita! Farewell, poor girl! You've seen yourself thus for the last time. No more luxury and wealth for you; in fact your poverty is so extreme, you could wind up envying a homeless beggar.

Perdita shook her head and turned away.

Truly—I am without a home! I live instead on an interminably wide and barren desert which brings forth neither fruit or flower; in the midst is a solitary rock, to which poor Perdita is chained.

She threw open her window, which overlooked the palace garden. Light and darkness were struggling together, and the eastern sky was streaked with gold and rosy rays. One star alone still trembled in the depths of the kindling atmosphere. The morning air blowing freshly over the dewy plants, rushed into the heated room.

Nothing lasts! thought Perdita. *All things go on, decay, and perish! The planet spins, the fires of heaven move in their accustomed paths, and the eyelids of day are opened. Birds and flowers, startled vegetation, fresh breezes awaken; at length the sun appears and starts its climb. Then comes noon, and then comes night again. Nothing lasts, except the misery in my bursting heart.*

Yes, all things go on and everything changes: what wonder, then, that love has gone and set? Why shouldn't the lord of my life have changed? The stars we call eternal wander all over the skies—if I look again where I looked an hour ago, the face of

heaven is completely altered. The silly moon and the inconstant planets dance a different routine every night; ruler of them all, the sun is always deserting its throne. Dominion's in the hands of night and winter, eclipse and death. Nature grows old, and shakes in her decaying limbs; creation falls bankrupt. O Perdita! How does it come as such a surprise, that the light of your life has been led to destruction?

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