

(17) CHAPTER 9.

AT WINDSOR, in our retirement, we remained long in ignorance of my sister's misfortune. Soon after the festival she'd sent for her child, and then seemed to have forgotten us. Adrian visited and observed a change, but neither its extent nor cause were clear. Suave Raymond was occasionally abrupt and had moments of haughtiness which startled his gentle friend; the Protector's brow was not exactly clouded, but his lips wore a disdainful set, and his voice was harsh. Perdita had grown thin and pale. She was all kindness and attention to her lord; but she was silent, and beyond words sad; her eyes were often tear-filled. But was she in despair? Or was this resignation? Clara was always with her, and she seemed most at ease when she could sit in an obscure corner, holding her daughter's hand. Still, the couple continued to live under the same roof and make public appearances together. Unable to guess at the truth, a concerned Adrian entreated them to visit us at Windsor.

It was May before they did. Full spring had decked the forest with leaves and its paths with a thousand flowers. With only a day's notice, Perdita made an early-morning arrival; she had the child along but Raymond had been detained by business—he'd

follow soon, she said. After what Adrian had told us, I was surprised to find my sister in the highest spirits. True, she'd grown thin, even a bit hollow-eyed; though tinged by a bright glow, her cheeks had sunk. In delight to see us, I watched her caress our children; she praised their growth and improvement; she wanted the children all around us. A reunion for them, as Clara got to meet her old playmate Alfred again; a cause for celebration, Perdita called it, to be marked by all kinds of childish games in which she joined with whole-hearted hilarity. Her laughter was contagious. Watching us amuse ourselves on the Castle terrace, no one could have pictured a happier, less care-worn party.

At the height of the gaiety, little Clara looked at Perdita all aglow and said, "This is so much better, Mamma, than being in that dismal London, where you cry so much and never laugh like now."

"Quiet, now, silly baby," was the reply. "And remember the rule we agreed on—anyone who mentions London gets sent to Coventry for an hour." The little girl, who hated being left out of anything, giggled at her mother's old-time threat but said no more.

Arriving soon afterwards, Raymond refrained from joining the fun as he would have done usually. He was insistent to converse, instead, with Adrian and myself apart, and by degrees we followed him, leaving Idris and Perdita behind with the children. Raymond talked of his new buildings; of his plan for an establishment for the better education of the poor; as usual

Adrian and he started to argue, and the time slipped away unnoticed. Only towards evening did the whole party assemble again—for music, Perdita insisted now. We must have a night of Mozart. She wanted, she said, to give us a specimen of her new accomplishment; for she'd been applying herself to music lessons in London, singing especially. (Though her voice lacked power, it had developed a great deal of sweetness.) She bade us limit the program to light-hearted melodies; and we combed our scores of Mozart's operas for his most exhilarating airs.

More than any other, Mozart's music possessed the transcendent attribute of appearing to come from the heart; you entered into the passions he expressed, and were transported with grief, joy, anger, or confusion, as he, our soul's master, had chosen to inspire. That night at Windsor, the spirit of hilarity was kept up for some time; but, at length, Perdita slipped away from the piano. Raymond had just joined in the trio of Don Giovanni's "Taci ingiusto core." Idris sang next, at the harp, "Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro," that passionate and sorrowful lament by the Marriage of Figaro's deserted Countess over the ruin of her marriage to the faithless Almaviva. Tender sorrow's very soul was breathed forth in this aria, which had reached its final pathetic appeal when a stifled sob attracted our attention to my sister, who hastened from the music room at our notice.

I followed. Though she seemed to want to shun me, I was persistent. All at once, with a sob, she threw herself against me to cry on my shoulder. "His voice—his voice!" came through her weeping.

Later, I understood. Raymond's silken baritone, softening the seducer's arch entreaties into tenderness, had been the same voice, the same tone, the self-same words she'd used to receive as his homage of love to her—yet it was homage no longer; and this irony penetrated her with regret and despair.

“Once again,” she sighed at length, “once again on your friendly breast, my beloved brother, the lost Perdita pours forth her sorrows. But I can't talk about them. Let it be enough for you to know that I'm miserable—and that the painted veil of life is torn, that I sit for ever shrouded in darkness and gloom, that grief is my sister, everlasting lamentation my mate!”

Of course I did not question her. Instead I held and endeavored to console her, though I could offer nothing but assurances of my deepest affection and intensest wish that things should get better for her. “Loving words!” she cried. “They sound in my ear like a piece of favorite music I'd somehow forgotten. They are vain, I know; how very vain in their attempt to soothe or comfort me. Dearest Lionel, you cannot guess what I've suffered during these past months. I remember reading about mourners in ancient days, who clothed themselves in sackcloth, scattered dust upon their heads, ate their bread mingled with ashes, and went to live on bleak mountain tops the better to cry creaseless reproaches on heaven and earth for their misfortunes. Compared to me, they lived in luxury! Day to day contriving new extravagances of sorrow, reveling in the paraphernalia of woe, equipped with every appurtenance of despair—I can only envy grief like that. I,

alas, must conceal the wretchedness consuming me. I must weave a veil of dazzling falsehood to hide my grief from vulgar eyes; I must smooth my brow, and paint my lips in deceitful smiles—even in solitude I dare not think how lost I am, lest I become insane and rave.”

“My dear sister—”

“O, Lionel, I wrote Raymond a letter. It was—the best thing I ever wrote.” Now Perdita dug through her bag and produced a much-handled envelope. “His reply,” she said. “Read it.” I extracted the single page inside. Raymond's answer was brief.

Notwithstanding your bitter letter, for bitter I must call it, you are the chief person in my estimation, and it is your happiness that I would principally consult. Do that which seems best to you: and if you can receive gratification from one mode of life in preference to another, do not let me be any obstacle. I foresee that the plan which you mark out in your letter will not endure long; but you are mistress of yourself, and it is my sincere wish to contribute as far as you will permit me to your happiness.

Still in no state to rejoin the others, my sister let me persuade her outdoors for an evening drive around the park. Under the dark trees, as we rode, I got the story from her. Talking about her unhappiness would lighten the burden, I thought; nor did I doubt we'd find her a remedy, if there were one to be found. As I listened to Perdita, it grew harder to feel hopeful on either count. Raymond had dealt her a death-blow, she said. Nothing

he could do now, not even by his best intentions, could change that. She wouldn't be the one to leave, but he was right—they must part soon.

“Cleopatra looking for an ornament,” she said, through sobs, “might as well have worn the vinegar with her pearl dissolved in it, as I could be content with the love Raymond's able to offer me.”

I was sorry to recognize these tear-storms and asperities of character; with other signs, they showed me that under the force of a mortal blow to her emotions, Perdita had in some degree regressed. That concentrated, self-lacerating hermit's pride of hers, dormant while her wedded bliss lasted, was awake, and with its adder's sting pierced a heart already sickened by humiliation; if another had won Raymond from her, then all she'd possessed of worth was gone. Even her maternal tenderness borrowed half its force from the delight she found in tracing his features and expressions across Clara's development.

But I didn't see their case as such a hopeless one as Perdita did. No: the wound could be healed; and, if they stayed together, it would be. She heard my soothing attempts in this line with impatience, finally interrupting: “Do you think that any of your arguments are new to me? Or that my own burning wishes and intense anguish have not suggested them all a thousand times, with far more eagerness and subtlety than you can put into them? Lionel, you cannot understand what woman's love is.

“In days of happiness I’ve often repeated to myself, with a grateful heart and exulting spirit, the story of all that Raymond sacrificed for me. I was a poor, uneducated, solitary mountain girl, raised from nothingness by him. Along with the first luxuries of my life, he gave me an illustrious name and noble station; the world’s respect came to me reflected from his glory: all this joined to his own undying love, inspired me with sensations towards him, akin to those with which we regard the Giver of life. I gave him love only. I devoted myself to him: imperfect creature that I was, I took myself to task, that I might become worthy of him. I watched over my hasty temper, subdued my burning impatience of character, curbed my self-involvement, educated myself to the best perfection I could attain, all for his happiness’s sake. I took no merit to myself for this. He deserved it all—all labor, all devotion, all sacrifice. I would have toiled up a perpendicular Alp, to pluck a flower that would please him. At one time, I was ready to quit you all, my only family and beloved and gifted companions—we were near to going abroad, I to live alone with him, for him. I couldn’t do otherwise, even if I’d wished; he was the better half of my soul, to which the other half was a perpetual slave. All he owed me was one return: Fidelity. I earned that; I deserved it. Because I was poor, and come from the mountains, does he think I wanted a great name and high station all along? He can take them back; without his love they are nothing to me. Their only merit in my eyes was that they were part of him.”

Certain they were bound to separate, she acknowledged

herself too big a coward to take the decisive step and end their imperfect companionship. "Our masquerade of union is strangely dear to me. Painful, I allow, and destructive, and impracticable. Living with Raymond keeps up a perpetual fever in my veins; I have a case of blood poisoning from my own fretted-at wound. Yet I must cling to it. I'll be thankful if it kills me soon, which it might." Thus passionately Perdita ran on.

Raymond had remained with Adrian and Idris back inside. Naturally frank, he was encouraged by our prolonged absence to seek relief from the constraint of months, by an unreserved confidence. He told his two friends of the situation in which he'd found Evadne. Her name could not be concealed, even for Adrian's sake, and her former lover heard with the most acute agitation the history of her sufferings. Idris had shared Perdita's ill opinion of the Greek; but Raymond's account softened and interested her. Evadne's constancy, fortitude, even her ill-fated and ill-regulated love, inspired admiration and pity; especially the way she'd preferred suffering and death (as he'd discovered on October 19th) to what would have been in her own eyes a degrading application for her lover's pity and assistance. Her subsequent conduct did not diminish this interest. They wondered where she might have gone.

Now Raymond spoke of what he called an incurable evil: his marriage. He lamented Perdita's harshness, her coldness. He loved her still, he declared, and had been ready not long since with the humility of a penitent, and the duty of a vassal, to surrender himself to her, give up his very soul to her control; to

become her pupil, her slave, her bondsman. She had rejected these advances. The time for such exuberant submission, along with the love that drove it, had passed. Still, everything he did was meant to promote her peace of mind—exertions, sadly, he appeared to make in vain. If she were to continue like this, so inflexible, they must part. What indeed could he reply to her complaints, to her griefs which she jealously marshaled and guarded, keeping out all thought of remedy? The frustrations and inconveniences of this senseless mode of married life were maddening to him. Yet he wouldn't propose separation. He was haunted by the fear of thereby causing either Perdita's death, or little Clara's; how, he couldn't say. But to take decisive action without knowing the next way forward, was to risk their ruin.

After a few hours, Raymond took his leave. Perdita and I still hadn't returned, but he didn't want to meet her in front of us, knowing all that had and must have been said. Perdita, in her turn, wanted to follow him to London with Clara. Idris tried to persuade her to remain—to at least stay the night. My poor sister looked at her fearfully. *Raymond must have talked to her; was this, keeping her at Windsor, his idea? Was this the beginning of their final separation?* As I've said, certain defects of her character had been revived by her dilemma. She declined Idris's invitation with suspicious looks; she embraced me, as if she were about to be deprived of my affection, too, calling me her more-than-brother, her only friend, her last hope. "Don't you stop loving me!" she cried, and with a heightened, panicked air, departed for London, the scene and cause of all her misery.

The weeks that followed convinced her that she had not yet touched the bottom of the abyss into which she'd been plunged. Every day her unhappiness took a new shape; every day some unexpected event seemed to bring to a stop, then only lead onward, her private train of calamities.

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