

## (18) CHAPTER 9 cont.

A BORN leader, Raymond had all the ambition and talent of a successful hero; but he was neither calculating nor determined enough to become one. Other elements in his character intervened. He was obstinate, but not firm; benevolence itself at first contact, harsh and reckless if provoked. Above all, he was remorseless and unyielding in the pursuit of any object of desire, however lawless. Love of pleasure, of beauty, of luxury, were prominent in him, conquering the conqueror; obsessed with some acquisition, he'd forget all else and lay aside the toil of weeks for the sake of a stronger pull's indulgence. These were the impulses he'd been obeying in his decision to marry my sister; when they'd egged him on again, he wound up Evadne Zaimi's lover. He had now lost both women, and had nothing to console him: neither the self-congratulatory sense of personal nobility which marital constancy inspires; nor the voluptuous sense of abandonment to a forbidden but intoxicating passion. His heart was exhausted by recent events; his enjoyment of life was destroyed by Perdita's resentment piled on top of Evadne's flight. The former's inflexibility set the final touch upon the annihilation of his hopes. The idea of reunion was futile, since

he couldn't get her to change; so he gave up and sought only to reconcile himself to the present state of things. He made a vow against love and its attendant struggles, failures, remorse. Mere sensual enjoyment was the only thing he pursued now, seeking in it a remedy for what his passions had done to him.

Debasement of character is the certain result of such choices. It might have been less immediately obvious in his case, had Raymond continued to apply himself to fulfilling his duties as Protector. But, extreme in all things and lost to the moment, he gave up everything to go pleasure-chasing. The council chamber was deserted; the execution of his plans for the public benefit were forgotten; the crowds which attended on him and those he employed on his various projects were disappointed to find themselves likewise neglected. Private festivity, and even libertinism, became the order of the day.

Perdita beheld with alarm the increasing disorder, the incongruous intimacies, the lack of reflection or foresight. At one point she believed she could stem the tide, and induce Raymond to hear reason. Vain hope! The moment of her influence was past. He listened with haughtiness and replied disdainfully; she might in fact have succeeded in awakening his conscience, but the sole effect was that he sought an opiate for its pangs in oblivious riot. So, with the energy natural to her, Perdita endeavored as his wife to fill his place. She could do much; but in the end, no woman could make up for the increasing negligence of a Protector who, as if seized with a paroxysm of insanity, trampled on all ceremony, all order, all

duty, and gave himself up to licentiousness.

Reports of these strange proceedings reached Windsor, of course. In the midst of one of our debates over what could be done to restore our friend to himself and his country, Perdita suddenly arrived from town. Questioned, she supplied details about the progress of the mournful change; she'd come today, she said, to entreat Adrian and myself to go up to London, where we must endeavor to stop the evil from increasing any further.

"Tell him," her voice rose, "tell Lord Raymond that my presence shall no longer annoy him. That he need not plunge into destructive dissipations for the sake of disgusting me and causing me to fly from nearness with him. This purpose is now accomplished; he will never see me anymore. But let me—this is the last thing I'll ask of him—only let me, in the renewed praises of his countrymen and the prosperity of England, find the choice of my youth justified."

During our ride up to town, Adrian and I discussed and argued about Raymond's conduct. Both of us perceived a falling off from the hopes of permanent excellence on his part that his rise had convinced us to entertain. My friend and I had been educated in one school, or rather I was his pupil in the opinion, that steady adherence to principle was the only road to honor; and a ceaseless observance of the laws of general utility, the only conscientious aim of human ambition. We differed, though, in our views of the present case. Resentment on my sister's behalf adding sting to my censure, I reprobated

Raymond's conduct in severe terms. Adrian was more benign, more considerate. Yes, he admitted, the principles that I'd laid down were the best; but he denied that they were the only ones. I should remember my New Testament, he told me, and quoted John's gospel: *There are many mansions in my father's house*. He insisted that the modes of becoming good or great, varied as much as people's dispositions—of which, as they said of the leaves of the forest, no two were alike.

We arrived in London at about eleven at night. Stopping by Parliament just in case Raymond had deigned to convene the session, we found the chamber full, save for the Protector's empty chair. An austere discontent emanated from the party leaders awaiting him; we marked a no less ominous whispering and busy tattle among the underlings. We hastened to the palace of the Protectorate. There we found Raymond in his dining room with six companions: bottles and various pipes were being passed around merrily, and had made considerable inroads on the general understanding. The guest who sat nearest Raymond was telling a story which convulsed the other five with laughter.

Only Raymond refrained. While he entered into the spirit of the hour, his natural dignity never forsook him. He was gay, playful, fascinating—but never did he overstep the modesty of nature, or the respect due to himself, in his wildest sallies. Yet I own, that considering the task which Raymond had taken on himself as Protector of England, and the cares to which it behooved him to attend, I was exceedingly provoked to observe

these jovial if not drunken spirits, and the worthless types on whom his time was wasted. I stood watching the scene, while Adrian stepped forward; no doubt he aimed to restore order in the assembly by the example of his own sobriety. Raymond, gave a cry of delight at seeing him.

“My dear Adrian, you must join the party!” Nodding at the invitation, Adrian took a seat.

This action provoked me. Indignant that he should sit at the same table with Raymond’s companions—men and women of abandoned character, of no character, the refuse of high-bred luxury, the disgrace of their country—I cried, “Let me entreat you, Adrian, not to comply like this. Rather join with me in trying to get Lord Raymond away from this scene, and restoring him to more appropriate society.”

“My good fellow,” said Raymond, “this is neither the time nor place for a moral lecture. Take my word for it: my amusements and society are not so bad as you imagine. We’re not hypocrites or fools. And we adore our country and its culture. *Tell me, Malvolio, dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?*” The guests, recognizing Shakespeare, raised applause.

I turned angrily away and went to look at the contemporary artworks on the nearest wall. Though celebrated, they appeared terrible to me. At length I heard Adrian call me back. “You, Verney,” he said, “Are very cynical. Sit down. Or if you won’t, perhaps, as you’re not a frequent visitor, Lord Raymond will humor your wish to see him in action at Parliament, and take us

there now.” Raymond glanced keenly at him, then turned from that benign and gentle expression to my own glowering demeanor, which he observed with scorn. “Please,” Adrian continued. “I’ve promised you would, Raymond—don’t let me down. Come with us.”

The other made an uneasy movement, no more, then said, “I won’t!”

The party had been breaking up around us. The guests had risen to look at the artworks, then strolled into the other apartments; some had talked of billiards; one by one they’d vanished. Fuming mad at the loss of his night’s entertainment, Raymond sprang up from the table and began to stride up and down the long room.

“This is infinitely ridiculous!” he cried, gesticulating. “Two schoolboys could not conduct themselves more unreasonably.” I stood to face him while Adrian, who’d finally risen, leaned against a wall. We didn’t understand, Raymond told us. “This is all part of the system—an elaborate form of tyranny to which I will never submit—never! Because I am Protector of England, am I to be the only slave in the realm? My privacy invaded, my actions censured, my friends insulted? I’ve had enough, I say! Be you witnesses,” and he took the insignia of office from his breast, and threw it on the table. Pearls, diamond, gold: “I renounce my office, I abdicate my power—assume it who will!”

“Let the one assume it,” Adrian answered him, “who can rightly claim to be your superior. There’s no one in England with the adequate presumption. Know yourself, Raymond, and

your sense of well-being will return. Three months ago, for the people of this country, you were our Protector in every way. Your hours were devoted to our benefit. Your ambition was to obtain the people's kudos. You built up and decorated our towns, gave us useful establishments, gifted the soil with abundant fertility. The powerful and unjust cowered at the steps of your law courts, and the poor and oppressed rose like night-folded flowers under the morning sunshine of your protection.

“Can you wonder that we are all aghast and mourn when so much appears to have changed? But, come, this fit of spleen is already passed. Resume your functions. Your partisans will hail you; your enemies be silenced; your public and your friends will show you their love, honor, and duty once again. Master yourself, Raymond, and make the world your subject.”

“No doubt excellent advice—for someone else,” Raymond answered moodily. “Take it yourself, why don't you. Already the first peer of the land, why not its sovereign? You, Adrian, the good, the wise, the just, might rule all hearts. But I perceive, too soon for my own happiness, too late for England's good, that I undertook a task to which I am unequal. I cannot rule myself. My passions master me; my smallest impulse is my tyrant. You think that I renounce the Protectorate—and I have renounced it—in a fit of spleen? By the God that lives, I swear never to take up that bauble again—never again to burden myself with the weight of care and misery it signifies.

“Know myself? Once, in the heyday of youth, in the pride of boyish folly, I desired to be a king. A crown came within my

grasp. I knew myself when I renounced it. I renounced it to gain—who cares? I've lost that as well. For too many months I have submitted to this mock majesty—this solemn farce. I am its dupe and joker no longer. I will be free.”

But he was proclaiming no longer; drained of its excessive character, his voice was now dead serious. “I have lost,” he continued, “that which adorned and dignified my life; that which linked me to other men. Determined to believe the worst of my character, Perdita has renounced me. Again I am a solitary man; and I will become again, as in my early years, a wanderer, a soldier of fortune.

“My friends—for Verney, I feel you're my friend—please don't try to change my mind. This palace, this masquerade as one of the world's great ones: what I did to get here, I did more for your sister's sake than my own. Just as when we used to put on skits and masquerades outdoors, beneath the branches of your beloved forest, here in London I led Perdita behind the scenes of grandeur and acted a nice little high leader's part with her before the world. It was my explicit intention to vary the monotony of her life with a short segment of magnificence and power. This was to be the splash of color on the substance and canvas of our existence, an otherwise pure expanse of mutual affection, mutual confidence.

“But we must live, always, and not act our lives. Pursuing the shadow, I lost the reality—now I renounce both.

“Adrian, I'm about to return to Greece, to become a soldier again, perhaps a conqueror. Will you join me? You'll behold

new scenes; see a new people; witness the mighty struggle that's taking place there between civilization and barbarism; become part of, even direct, the movement of a young and vigorous population seeking liberty and order. Come with me. I've been expecting you since Perdita left, and I've prepared everything with your company in mind. We can leave at any moment. Will you come with me?"

"I will," replied Adrian. "Immediately, you mean?"

"Tomorrow, if you prefer."

"Reflect!" I cried.

"Why? On what?" asked Raymond. "My dear fellow, I've done nothing but reflect on this step all summer; and rest assured, Adrian has condensed a lifetime of reflection into his reply. Don't talk of reflection! I'll never reflect again, I swear; this is my first happy moment in ages. I must go, Lionel—the Gods will it; and I must. Don't make an effort to deprive me of my companion—Windsor, the outcast's friend.

"One word more concerning unkind, unjust Perdita. There was a time in spring, when I sought chances to rekindle the flame of your sister's love for me. I found it more cold within her than an abandoned campfire in winter, spent embers crowned by a pyramid of snow. If anything, I only succeeded in making the situation worse than before. Still, I believe that time—and absence—may restore her to me. Remember, I love her still. My dearest hope is for her to be mine again. I know, though she does not, how false a picture she's formed of reality. Don't disillusion her too quickly, let it happen by degrees. Hand her a

mirror in which she may know herself, and give her time to learn to use it. When she's adept enough, she'll wonder at her present mistake, and hasten to restore to me what is rightfully mine: her forgiveness—her kind thoughts—her love.”

---

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](#).