

(7) CHAPTER IV/I cont.

I FELT as if, from an orderly and systematic world, I'd plunged into chaos, obscure, contrary, unintelligible. That Raymond should marry Idris seemed more intolerable than ever; yet even through my passion, a giant from its birth, strange, wild, and impracticable, I could perceive Perdita's misery. How should I act? How could I help her? She hadn't confided in me. I could demand no explanation from Raymond without risking the betrayal of what was perhaps her most treasured secret. Could I get the truth from her tomorrow? My reflections were multiplying, when Lord Raymond returned. He asked for my sister, and I delivered her message. After musing on it for a moment, he asked me if I were about to return to London—if so, would I accompany him?

I consented. He was full of thought, and remained silent during a considerable part of our ride. At length he said, "I must apologize for my abstraction. The truth is, Ryland's motion comes on tonight, and I'm considering my reply." Ryland was the leader of the populist party, a hard-headed man, and in his way eloquent; the bill he was poised to offer made it treason to attempt to change the present state of the English government

and the standing laws of the republic. This attack was directed against Raymond and his machinations for the restoration of the monarchy.

Raymond asked me if I'd accompany him to the House that evening. With my inquiries to make, I excused myself. "Don't worry," said my companion, "I can free your time for you. The plan I think was to spend it asking after the Earl of Windsor. I can tell you at once: he's in Scotland, at the Duke of Athol's seat at Dunkeld. At the onset of his disorder he began traveling about from place to place; but once he got to Dunkeld, he refused to leave. We've made arrangements with the Duke for his continuing there—in romantic seclusion."

I was hurt by the careless tone with which he conveyed this intelligence, and replied coldly, thanking him, that I would make use of it. He nodded.

"Yes, you shall, Verney—but first, come witness, I beseech you, the triumph I'm about to achieve tonight in the House. If I can call it triumph, when I fear it means my defeat. But what can I do? My dearest hopes appear to be on the verge of fulfillment. The Ex-Queen gives me Idris; Adrian is totally unfitted for the earldom of Windsor, and that paltry earldom in my hands becomes a kingdom. By the reigning God it's true! The Countess can never forget that she has been a queen, and she hates the thought of leaving her children a diminished inheritance; her power and my wit will rebuild the throne, and this brow will be clasped by a kingly diadem. I can do this—I can marry Idris."

He stopped abruptly. His face darkened and twitched, as passion drove one expression after another across it. I asked, "Does Lady Idris love you?"

"What a question!" replied he laughing. "She will of course, as I shall her, when we are married."

"You begin late," said I, ironically. "Marriage is usually considered the grave, and not the cradle of love. So you are about to love her, but do not already?"

"Don't cross-examine me, Lionel; I will do my duty by her, I assure you. Love! I must steel my heart against love, expel it from its bastion, barricade it out—shut off its fountains and let my desire for a passionate love dry up and die of thirst—I mean, the love I'm trying to handle, not the one I can, with ease. Idris is a gentle, pretty, sweet little girl; it's impossible not to have an affection for her, and I have a very sincere one; only do not speak of love—love, the tyrant and the tyrant-slayer; the hungry fire, the untameable beast, the fanged snake—no—no—I will have nothing to do with that love." He bent his keen eyes upon me. "Tell me, Lionel, do you consent that I should marry this young lady?"

My uncontrollable heart swelled in my bosom. I replied in a calm voice—but how far from calm were my thoughts—"Never! I can never consent that Lady Idris should be united to one who does not love her."

"Because you love her yourself."

"Your Lordship might have withheld that taunt. I do not—dare not love her."

“At least,” he continued haughtily, “she does not love you. I wouldn’t even marry a reigning sovereign if I weren’t sure that her heart was free. But, O, Lionel! A kingdom! What a word of might. I love those gentle sounds and styles of royalty. Weren’t the mightiest men of the olden times kings? Alexander was a king; Solomon, the wisest of men, was a king; Napoleon was a king; Caesar died trying to become one, and puritan Cromwell, the king-killer, aspired to regality. The scepter of England that Adrian’s father yielded up was already broken; but I will raise, restore and exalt it again, above all others.

“Don’t be surprised that I tell you where to find Adrian. Don’t suppose me wicked or foolish enough to found my kingdom on a fraud, especially one so easy to investigate as the Earl’s insanity. I’ve just come from him. Before deciding on my marriage with Idris, I wanted to see for myself again, and judge the probability that he might recover. He’s incurably mad.”

I gasped for breath.

“I will not burden you,” continued Raymond, “with the melancholy details. You’ll see him, and judge for yourself; though I fear this visit, useless to him, will be insufferably painful to you. Excellent and gentle as he is even in the downfall of his reason, seeing him this last time has weighed on my spirits ever since. I don’t worship him as you do, but I would give all my hopes of a crown and my right hand to boot, to see him restored to himself.” Raymond’s voice expressed the deepest compassion.

“You most unaccountable being,” I cried, “where will your actions take you, when you’re so lost in the maze of your own purposes?”

“Where indeed? To a crown, a golden gem-studded crown, I hope. Yet a busy devil never stops whispering to me, that I only chase a dunce’s cap—and that if I were wise, I’d trample on my chance at a crown and take in its place, something worth more than all the thrones of the east and the presidencies of the west put together.”

“And what is that?”

“If I make that choice, you’ll know; at present I dare not speak, nor even think of it.”

After a pause he turned to me, laughing. When his mirth wasn’t inspired by scorn, and genuine gaiety painted his features with a joyous expression, his beauty became supreme, divine. “Verney,” said he, “my first act when I become King of England, will be to unite with the Greeks, take Istanbul, restore its name, and from the new Byzantium subdue the whole of Asia. I intend to be a warrior, a conqueror; Napoleon’s name will be forgotten for mine. No one will visit his rocky grave when they have my majesty to adore, my achievements to exalt.”

I listened absorbedly. How could I not, to one who seemed to govern the whole earth in his grasping imagination, and who only quailed at the attempt to rule himself—when on his word and will depended not just my own happiness, but the fate of all who were dear to me? Perdita’s name wasn’t mentioned; yet love for her lay behind his vacillation of purpose, I was sure.

And who was so worthy of love as my noble-minded sister? Who deserved the hand of this self-exalted king more than she whose glance belonged to a queen of nations? She who loved him, as he did her; though disappointment quelled her passion, and ambition held his in strong combat.

We went together to the House that evening. A hum, as of ten thousand hives of swarming bees, stunned us as we entered the coffee-room. Knots of politicians stood about, all taking at once; we saw many anxious brows. The aristocrats' party, comprising England's richest and most influential citizens, appeared less agitated than the rest, for the question was to be debated without their interference. Raymond, whose plans and prospects all depended on the outcome, wore a carefree air. Nearest the fireplace, Ryland and his supporters had gathered. A man of obscure birth and immense wealth, inherited from his manufacturer father, Ryland had witnessed, as a young man, the king's abdication, and the amalgamation of the two houses of Lords and Commons; he'd sympathized with these popular developments—some called them encroachments—and had made it the business of his life to consolidate and increase them. Since then, however, the influence of the landed proprietors had grown; and at first Ryland wasn't sorry to observe Lord Raymond's machinations, which drew off many of his aristocratic opponents' partisans. But the thing was now going too far. The poorer nobility hailed the monarchy's return, as an event which would restore them to their power and rights, now lost. The half-extinct spirit of royalty roused itself in people's

minds; willing slaves and so-called subjects, they were ready to bend their necks to the yoke. Some proud and virtuous spirits still remained, the pillars of the state. But the word “republic” had grown stale to the vulgar ear; and many—we’d learn tonight whether it was a majority—pined for a royal family’s tinsel and show. Ryland was bent on resistance. Claiming that he’d been the one who’d allowed Raymond’s numbers to increase, he said the time for indulgence had passed. With one motion of his arm—he raised a copy of his bill—he’d sweep away the cobwebs that blinded the rest of the country.

Raymond’s entrance had been hailed by his friends almost with a shout. They gathered round him in the coffee-room, counted their numbers, and started tallying new and still undeclared votes. Then it was time for the leaders to take their seats in the House chamber, where the clamor of voices continued until Ryland rose to speak. Then the slightest whisper was audible. All eyes were fixed upon him as he stood—a man with a ponderous frame and a sonorous voice, whose manner, though not graceful, was impressive. I turned from his marked, iron countenance to Raymond’s face, veiled by a smile, betraying not a care; yet his lips quivered somewhat, and the muscles in his arm were starting through his coat sleeve at the convulsive strength with which he gripped the bench we sat on.

Ryland began by praising the present state of the British empire. He recalled his listeners’ memory to the miserable contentions which in the time of our fathers arose almost to civil war; then the abdication of the late king, and the foundation of

the republic. He described this republic; demonstrated how it privileged each individual in the state equally, so that any one of them could rise to consequence, even—for a span—to the highest office. Comparing the royalist with the republican spirit, he showed how the one tended to enslave the mind; while the other through its institutions could serve to raise even the lowliest among us to something great and good. England, in Ryland's telling, had become powerful, and its inhabitants valiant and wise, by means of the freedom they enjoyed. As he spoke, every heart swelled with pride, and every cheek glowed with delight to remember, that each one there was English, each one a supporter and contributor to the happy state of things so presented. Ryland's fervor increased—his eyes lit up—his voice grew passionate. One man, he said, was out to change all this, and return us to our days of impotence and contention—one man, who would dare to arrogate the honor which was due to all British citizens, and set his name and style above the name and style of his country.

Here I saw Raymond change color and direct his gaze at the ground. Other listeners turned to look at one another; but Ryland's voice went on filling their ears, the thunder of his denunciations influencing their senses. The very boldness of his language gave him weight; each of us knew he was speaking the truth—a truth we'd kept unacknowledged. Raymond's purposes had been stealthy, seductive; but this speech tore the mask from reality, to show the ensnarer as a hunted stag—even one at bay, as appeared from the look of him. Ryland ended by moving,

that any attempt to reestablish the monarchy should be declared treason, and anyone a traitor who should endeavor to change the present form of government. Loud cheers and acclamations followed.

After the motion had been seconded, Lord Raymond rose. His countenance bland, his voice softly melodious, his manner soothing, his grace and sweetness came like the mild breathing of a flute, after the loud, church organ-like voice of his adversary. He rose, he said, to speak in favor of the honorable member's motion—yes, in favor, if one slight amendment could be made. He was ready to go back to olden times, and commemorate the contests of our fathers, and the monarch's abdication. Nobly and greatly, he said, had the illustrious and last sovereign of England sacrificed himself to the apparent good of his country, and divested himself of a power which could only be maintained by the blood of his subjects. These same subjects, no longer subjects, but now his friends and equals, had in gratitude conferred certain favors and distinctions on him and his family—forever. An ample estate was allotted to them, and they took the first rank among the peers of Great Britain. Could it be right, Raymond asked, that an heir of this king should be charged and suffer the same punishment as any other pretender, if he attempted to regain what by ancient right and inheritance belonged to him? He did not say that he should favor such an attempt; but he did say that such an attempt would be understandable; and, if the aspirant did not go so far as to declare war, and erect a standard declaring his kingdom, the

fault ought to be regarded with an indulgent eye. With the amendment he proposed, the bill would exempt any person who claimed the sovereign power in right of the House of Windsor.

Nor did Raymond end there. Next he was drawing in vivid and glowing colors, the splendor of a kingdom, as opposed to the commercial spirit of republicanism. Under the English monarchy, he asserted, each individual was just as capable as now of attaining high rank and power—higher and nobler to be sure than a bartering, timorous commonwealth could afford. One title alone would be lost, as the king resumed the function of chief magistrate. As to which, Raymond asked, so what? Now, every three years brought a struggle for the seat. The nature of wealth and influence forcibly confined the list of candidates to a few rich ones; and an impartial observer might question whether the advantages of holding these elections outweighed the public harm caused by their wasteful contentiousness. And so on: I can't do justice to the flow of language and graceful turns of expression, the wit and easy raillery that gave vigor and influence to Raymond's speech. His manner, almost timid at first, became firm; his changeful face was lit up to superhuman brilliancy; his voice, various as music, was like that enchanting.

I won't record the debate that followed. Party speeches were delivered, which clothed the question in cant, and veiled its simple meaning in a woven wind of words. The motion was lost;

Ryland withdrew in rage and despair; and Raymond, gay and exulting, retired to dream of his future kingdom.

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