

(20) CHAPTER I.

LITTLE CLARA accompanied us to Greece. The poor child didn't quite understand what was going on. She'd heard where we were bound, and that she'd see her father; did this mean his name was allowed again in Perdita's presence? She prattled it tentatively. No more rebukes: her mother smiled and caressed her.

During this voyage, while on calm evenings on deck we watched the changeful sky and the glancing waves surround our conversation with light shows in every direction, I discovered the epochal change that Raymond's disasters had wrought in my sister's mind. Likewise to the glaciers when they melted, set loose from their frozen chains, old waters of love lately cold, cutting, repellent as ice, flowed again and gushed too fast through the regions of her soul; her spirits rose on floods of grateful exuberance. Disbelieving he was dead, she was certain Raymond was in danger, and the hope of assisting in his liberation, and the idea of soothing by tenderness the ills that he might have undergone, re-harmonized the jarring element that had lately returned to her being. Not as something hoped, but securely expected, the thought of seeing the lover she had

banished, the husband, friend, heart's companion from whom she had long been alienated, wrapped her senses in delight and her mind in placidity. It was beginning life again; it was leaving barren sands for an abode of fertile beauty; it was a harbor after a tempest, an opiate after sleepless nights, a happy waking from a terrible dream.

I was less sanguine than she as to the result of our voyage; and indeed, on landing at Athens we learned that Raymond's fate was still in doubt. The Turks had released no word of him. No man ever excited so strong an interest in the public mind. This had been apparent even among the phlegmatic English; but in Athens, where women taught their children to lisp his name when saying their thank-you prayers, his manly beauty, his courage, his devotion to their cause, had raised him in the popular regard nearly to the status of a god, one of their Olympian deities come down to defend his ancient soil. Naively almost as Perdita, the Athenians had expected their hero to return in triumph. Now, when they spoke of his probable death and certain captivity, tears streamed from their eyes—Athens was a city of mourning. Naturally, Lord Raymond's wife and child became objects of intense interest. The gates of their abode were besieged by the wives and mothers of Greece, all lamenting our English Raymond; through the windows came the sound of prayers breathed daylong for his restoration.

All these circumstances added to Perdita's growing dismay. From afar, she'd been able to imagine that when she set her foot on Grecian shores, all the news would turn good

instantaneously. Raymond would be freed, and her tender attentions would soon entirely obliterate even the memory of his misadventure. As facts stood, she began to fear the worst. Had she risked her soul's hope on a losing chance? I wasn't there to comfort her; my own exertions to find out what I could were unremitting. When Athens yielded no more answers, I traveled to join the army stationed at Kishan in Thrace. From there, closer to Istanbul, a combination of bribery, threats, and espionage soon discovered the secret: Raymond was alive, a prisoner in that city, suffering the most rigorous confinement and wanton cruelties. Now it was a matter of employing every bit of policy and all the funds we could, to redeem him from Turkish hands.

During the two long months these negotiations consumed, my sister suffered the most painful bouts of impatience, uncertainty, repentance, and sorrow. The very beauty of the Grecian climate, Athens in spring, added torture to her sensations. The incomparable loveliness of the flower-clad land—the genial sunshine and generous shade—the melody of the birds—the majesty of the woods—the splendor of the marble ruins—the clear pulsations of the night stars—the combination of all that was exciting and voluptuous in this transcendent land, by inspiring a quicker spirit of life and sensitivity inside and throughout her frame, only gave edge to her grief's poignancy. She counted each long hour, thinking every minute, *He is suffering*. She abstained from food, she lay on the bare earth and slept on the floor, and by such mimicry tried to commune

with his distant pain. I'd quoted the poet Byron at her once, and told her that someday she'd regret casting Raymond on the thorns of life. When disappointment had sullied his beauty, when a soldier's hardships had thickened and bent his manly form, and long loneliness made even triumph bitter to him—after all this waste that could have been avoided, I'd said, she would repent; and regret for the irreparable change *move*. . . *In hearts all rocky now, the late remorse of love.*

She remembered answering me scornfully back then. Now those storm clouds of her nature were nowhere to be seen. In Athens and its clear immortal light, she discovered where she'd gone wrong. And the stinging remorse of love pierced her heart.

Wasn't she the cause of his going to Greece in the first place—and thus the cause of his dangers—and his imprisonment? She pictured the anguish of his solitary confinement; she knew how much he hated being alone. But she hadn't cared, she'd left him that way. She was haunted by how often she'd heard him declare that solitude was to him the greatest of all evils, and how death itself felt more full of fear and pain when he pictured to himself a lonely grave. "My best girl" (she could actually quote him) "relieves me from these fantasies. United to her, cherished in her dear heart, never again shall I know the misery of finding myself alone. Even if I die before you, my Perdita, treasure up my ashes till yours may mingle with mine. It is a foolish sentiment for one who is not a materialist, yet, methinks, even in the grave, that dark cell, I may feel that my inanimate dust mingles with yours, and thus have a

companion in decay.” Not long ago, in her resentful mood, she could think of these words with nothing but acrimony and satirical disdain. Here in her softened hour, their recollection took sleep from her eyes, and all hope of rest from her uneasy mind.

Finally, we obtained a promise of Raymond’s release. The Turks had put him through enough to look upon his recovery as impossible. Threatened with reprisals by Britain should he perish while in their hands, they delivered him up as a dying man, willingly making over to us the rites of burial.

He came by sea from Istanbul to Athens. The harbor tower fielded constant inquiries with every new sail that was spotted—until the first of May, when the gallant frigate bore in sight on a favorable wind, freighted with a treasure greater than the wealth of empires. Before the vessel even cast anchor, the news had spread across Athens, and the whole city started to pour out through the Piraeus Gate, down the roads, through the vineyards and olive woods and plantations of fig trees, down towards the harbor to see their hero rowed ashore. Along the way, the noisy joy of the populace in their brightest dress collided with the tumult of carriages and horses and contingents of soldiers; the waving of gaudy banners, and bands playing martial music, added to the high excitement of the scene; while all around us, reposing in solemn majesty and sunlight, stood the relics of ancient time. To our right the Acropolis rose high, that severe spectatress of a thousand changes, of ancient glory, Turkish slavery, and the recent restoration of dear-bought liberty.

Strewn thick around, adorned by climbing vegetation, lay marble tombs and cenotaphs; and the mighty dead who hovered over their monuments, beheld in our numbers and enthusiasm a renewal of the epic scenes they'd known.

I attended Perdita and Clara's closed carriage on horseback. When we reached the harbor, the entire beach as far as it stretched was covered by a seething multitude that advanced and receded in unison, urged by those behind towards the sea, only to be rushed backward as the heavy waves with sullen roars burst close to those in front. The frigate, wary of approaching nearer in this windy season, had cast anchor by now. Raising my spyglass, I could discern a boat being lowered and a rope ladder unfurled. With a pang, I saw that Raymond was unable to descend the vessel's side; wrapped in cloaks, he was let down in a chair and laid at the bottom of the tender boat.

I dismounted and immediately engaged some sailors who were tied up nearby to take me into their skiff. I heard swift footsteps on the rocky sand, then Perdita seized my arm. "Take me with you!" she cried. She was trembling and pale; Clara clung to her. I told her no: the sea was too rough, and he'd land soon anyhow—didn't she see the tender? But she was already climbing into the skiff, and the sailors assisting Clara to follow. The cheers began, and a loud hurrah echoed from the crowd as we pulled out of the inner harbor.

My sister seated herself in the prow, careless of the spray that broke over her, deaf, sightless to all, except the little speck, just visible on the top of the waves, that we were approaching

with all the speed six rowers could give. The sounds of exulting music followed us. I looked back: the eager crowds on the beach, the groups of soldiers in their orderly and picturesque dress, the flags being waved and stirred by breezes, eastern dress, eastern flags, eastern breezes; the sight of temple-crowned rock, sun glittering off the white marble of the buildings set in bright relief against a wedge of far-lofting mountains; the roar of the sea in my ears, the splash of oar blades, and dash of spray, all steeped my soul in a delirium, unfelt, unimagined in the common course of common life. Trembling, I lowered the spyglass. But our approach was so rapid, that soon we could make out the occupants of Raymond's boat quite clearly. Its dark sides grew big, and the splash of its oars became audible. Now I saw the languid form of my friend, rising into sight at our approach.

Perdita was panting with emotion as our rowers pulled alongside. With a huge effort, she mustered her all her strength and the last of her firmness. She stepped from one boat to the other. Then, with a shriek, she sprang towards Raymond and knelt at his side. Gluing her lips to the hand she'd seized, her face shrouded by her long hair, she gave herself up to tears.

I watched awestruck, mute. Was this man really Perdita's beloved? Sunken cheeks, hollow eyes; pale and gaunt, he could barely sit up. Then, as he looked at the poor girl sobbing beside him, he smiled at her—no, he smiled *on* her, that was the difference. As when a ray of sunshine strikes a dark valley, the way it illuminates what had been shadowed there, this smile

had welcomed the protectorate; with this same smile he'd betrothed himself to Perdita. Seeing his smile play on the altered countenance, made me feel in my heart's core that this was Raymond.

He stretched out his other hand to me; I saw the trace of manacles on his bared wrist. I heard my sister's sobs, and thought, how fortunate were people who could weep, and with passionate caresses disburden the oppression of their own feelings. I was one of those people who held back out of shame and habitual restraint, but would have given worlds to have acted as boyhood days—strained him to my breast, pressed his hand to my lips, wept over him. Even now my swelling heart choked me. Without my being able to stop them, big rebellious tears gathered in my eyes; I turned aside, and they dropped in the sea—they came fast and faster. Yet I could hardly be ashamed, for the tough-featured sailors were plainly not unmoved. Raymond's eyes alone were dry. He lay in that blessed calm which convalescence always induces; secure in his liberty, reunited with her whom he adored, he basked in tranquil enjoyment.

At length my sister subdued her burst of passion and looked round for Clara. The child, frightened, not recognizing her father, and neglected by us, had crept to the other end of the skiff. We coaxed and helped her across and Perdita, finally able to speak, presented her to Raymond, saying "Beloved, embrace our child!"

But the little girl held back; until her father said, "Come,

sweet one—don't you know me?" She knew his voice, and threw herself into his arms.

Perceiving Raymond's weakness, I feared the press of the crowd on our landing. But the Athenians were awed, as I had been, at his changed appearance. The music died away, the shouts went silent. Where the soldiers had cleared a space we found a carriage drawn up: Perdita and Clara followed after Raymond was placed inside, and an escort closed round its wheels. A hollow murmur, not unlike the roaring of the nearby waves, went through the multitude, which fell back as our party advanced. Lest the noisy joy they'd come to share should injure him, the onlookers satisfied themselves with bending in a low salaam as he passed unseen. The carriage went slowly up the Piraeus road, past antique temple and heroic tomb, and rolled beneath the craggy rock of the citadel. The sound of the waves was left behind; that of the multitude continued at intervals, suppressed and hoarse; otherwise, though tapestry and banners decorated every house-front, church, and public building in the city, though soldiers in uniform lined the streets whose inhabitants were assembled by the thousand to cheer him, the same solemn silence prevailed. The soldiery presented arms, and the banners were lowered—though many a white hand waved a streamer. Curious eyes sought in vain to discern the hero in the vehicle, which, closed and surrounded by guards on horseback, drew him to the palace allotted for his abode.

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