

(25) CHAPTER 3 cont.

THE PROJECT was speedily accomplished under my direction; and the agreement I struck that turned over the finishing and guardianship of Raymond's tomb to the church heads at Athens, left us free to sail for England. There was a steamship that could take us at the end of October. I'd had bad news from home and by now my very soul was sick with yearning to rejoin my Idris and our surviving babes. I knew it would be a more painful departure for my sister—painful for me, as well, should I appear to be dragging her from the last scene that spoke of her lost one; but to linger here was useless, I told her. In reply, Perdita asked me to come with her to Raymond's tomb.

It was late afternoon when we reached the spot, which I hadn't visited in some days. I'd seen the path up to it enlarged, the rock steps hewn that made the way to the tomb platform less circuitous. New to me were the foundations someone had dug off to the left side of the platform, or extending from it, in a recess overshadowed by the straggling branches of a wild fig tree. Already framed, with rafters—I guessed some enterprising

church faction had hurried to plant a guest cottage in the ravine. A good investment, I reflected, as I stood on the unfinished threshold to admire the view beyond the hero's tomb. Slanting sunlight traced shadow lines along the plow-marked valley, and dyed trees, rocks, waves with beauteous arrays of changeful color. I gazed with rapture on the graces of earth and ocean. In years to come, this spot would be the cynosure of Greece: Perdita was right, I said.

“Yes,” she agreed. “And wasn't I right, despite everything, to have Raymond brought here? In a place like this, death loses half its terror, and even the dust possesses a sacred beauty—a Grecian beauty. Lionel, he sleeps there. That's Raymond's grave, he whom in my youth I first loved; whom my heart stayed with, in days of separation and anger; to whom I am now joined forever. Never—listen to me carefully—never will I leave this spot. His spirit's here with what remains of him; though crumbling and mute, the widowed earth clasps nothing more precious to her sorrowing bosom. The rocks, the myrtle leaves, the honeybees among the thyme, are all tied to him; the light here, the sunset purpling the hills, the sky and mountains, sea and valley, are imbued with the presence of his spirit. I will live and die here!

“You go home to England, Lionel. Return to sweet Idris and dearest Adrian; return, and take my orphan girl into your house as your own child. Look on me as dead. Truly, if death be a mere change of state, I am dead. This, where I am, is another world from the one I inhabited lately. The present is now your

home, not mine. Here I hold communion only with what has been, and what is yet to come. Go back to England, and leave me alone where I can stand to drag out the miserable days still left to me.”

I sat in silence through the shower of tears that closed her sad harangue. Though I'd expected some extravagant, fanciful proposition, I still needed several moments to collect my thoughts after hearing this one. “You cherish dreary ideas, my dear sister,” I finally said. “Nor is it any wonder that your better reason should still be influenced by grief—and by sublime beauty. Even I am in love with this last home of Raymond's. Nevertheless, we must quit it.”

“I expected this!” she cried. “I knew you'd treat me as a mad, foolish girl. But don't deceive yourself, Lionel. This cottage is being built by my orders; and here I shall remain, until the hour arrives when I may share Raymond's happier dwelling-place.”

“My dearest girl!”

“Enough! What's so strange about my plan, anyhow? I might have deceived you; I might have talked of remaining here only a few months; in your anxiety to reach Windsor you'd have left me, and without reproach or contention, I might have done exactly as I wanted. But I scorned to lie; or no—rather, in my wretchedness it was my only consolation to pour out my heart to you, my brother, my only friend. And you dispute with me, your poor, misery-stricken sister?”

“You know how willful I am. Take my girl with you; wean her from sorrowful sights and thoughts; let childish fun revisit

her heart, let her eyes light up again, as they never could were she near me. It's really far better for all of you, that you should never see me again. For myself, I will not seek death—not, that is, voluntarily, not while I can command myself; and I can, here. But drag me from this country and watch my power of self control vanish. I can't answer for any violence my agony might drive me to commit.”

“You clothe your meaning, Perdita,” I replied, “in powerful words, yet that meaning is selfish and unworthy of you. How often have I heard you agree that the only solution to the riddle of life is to improve ourselves, and find ways to contribute to the happiness of others? And now, in the very prime of life, you desert your principles, you shut yourself up in useless solitude. Will you think of Raymond less at Windsor? Will you commune less with his spirit, while you watch over and cultivate the rare excellence of his child? You have been sadly visited; nor do I wonder that you should feel driven to harbor bitter and unreasonable ideas. But a home of love awaits you in England. Your brother will be there—my affection, and the company of Raymond's friends, are bound to be of more solace than these dreary ideas. We will make it our first care, our dearest task, to add to your happiness.”

Perdita shook her head. “If what you ask were possible, I'd be wrong to refuse you. But it's not a matter of choice. I can only live here. I'm a part of this scene; everything in it is a part of me. Dear brother, this is no sudden fancy. This is my life now. The knowledge that I am here, when I wake each morning, enables

me to endure the daylight; it mingles with my food, which would be poison to me otherwise; it walks and it sleeps with me. Here, alone, I may even stop repining, and begin to accept the way he was taken from me. I know he would rather have died such a death, which will be recorded in history to endless time, than have lived to old age unremarked, unhonored. As for myself, having been the chosen and beloved of his heart, I couldn't desire anything better than to stay here, in my prime, before age has time to tarnish the best feelings of my nature, and watch Raymond's tomb, and speedily rejoin him in his blessed repose.

"That's all, my dearest Lionel, there is to tell you. I stay here. If you want to remove me by force, fine; drag me away—I'll return; lock me up, jail me, I'll still escape and come back. Or would my brother rather see her lying on the floor of a madhouse, than allow his heart-broken Perdita to spend the rest of her life in a peace and place she's chosen for herself?"

I admit, I thought she was crazed and barely responsible for what she was saying. Grief had done this; so I imagined that it was my imperative duty to take her from scenes so forcibly reminiscent of her loss. Nor did I doubt that in the tranquility of our family circle at Windsor, she'd recover some degree of composure, and in the end, of happiness. My affection for Clara also set me against Perdita's fantasies. The child's mind and senses had already been too overloaded, her innocent light-heartedness too soon exchanged for deep and anxious thought. Her mother's strange and romantic scheme, as much as her

abandonment, might confirm and perpetuate the painful view of life which had already marked her prematurely.

Back at my rooms, I was handed a message from the steamship company. Accidental circumstances, it said, had hastened the departure I'd inquired about; if I wanted to sail, passage could be arranged immediately, but our party must come on board at five o'clock the next morning. I sent back a hasty consent, and as hastily formed a plan by which Perdita would have to come along. I believe that most people in my situation would have acted in the same manner. Yet this consideration does not—or rather did not, later—diminish the reproaches of my conscience. At the moment, I felt convinced that I was acting for the best, and that all I did was right and even necessary.

After supper, as we sat alone, I led Perdita to believe that she'd won my assent to her wild scheme. In her happiness she must have thanked her deceiving, deceitful brother a thousand times over. The night drew on. She talked, her spirits regaining an almost forgotten vivacity. Then I pretended to be alarmed by a feverish glow on her cheek and begged her to take a mild sleeping tablet. The one I produced was actually a strong opiate. She accepted it docilely from my hand; I watched her swallow it down. Falsehood and artifice are in themselves so hateful, that, though I still thought I did right, a feeling of shame and guilt stabbed me.

Sleep came fast, and she was unconscious when we carried her on board. The ship weighed anchor and found a favorable

wind; under full canvas, with the engine powering at full speed ahead, we were soon far out at sea.

I'd stationed an attendant to watch over Perdita and report to me. Upon waking, late in the day, my sister took a while longer to realize that her surroundings were new. Then she leapt up wildly from her couch and dashed to the cabin window. A blue and troubled sea sped past, with no sign of shore; the racing, cloud-racked sky; the creaking of the masts beneath their weight of sail; the ship's bells, the crew's unhurried footsteps—everything told her, she was far from land, far from Greece. She questioned the attendant, who told her we were headed to England.

“And my brother?”

“Is on deck, Madam.”

The poor victim turned back to her watery wasteland view and exclaimed, “Unkind! unkind!” Then, without further remark, she threw herself back on the couch, closed her eyes and lay motionless; if it weren't for the deep sighs that kept bursting from her, she might have been thought to be asleep.

As soon as I got word that she'd spoken, I brought Clara to her cabin and sent her in before me. I hoped the sight of that lovely innocent might inspire gentle and affectionate thoughts. But Perdita only looked at her child with a face full of woe, and didn't speak. She turned away at my entrance. I asked and finally demanded that she say something; she responded, “You don't know what you've done.”

Though sullenly, she'd spoken, which I read as a sign that

the struggle between her disappointment and her natural affections had begun; and I trusted that in a few days my sister would be reconciled to her fate.

Another attendant was to sleep with her and Clara in the cabin, but Perdita asked for the child to be put to bed somewhere else. Then, around midnight, she woke and sent the night attendant to see whether Clara was resting quietly—she'd had a bad dream and was worried, she said. The attendant obeyed, and left her alone.

I was back on deck, enjoying our swift progress. The breeze, which had flagged at sunset, was rising again. Our rate couldn't have been less than eight knots. I filled my ears with the rush of waters as they divided before the steady keel; the murmur of the full, motionless sails; the whistling of the wind among the shrouds; the engine's deep, regular throb. The sky had cleared but the constellations sought their accustomed mirror in vain; for the sea was in a gentle agitation, flashing whitecaps all around.

The sound of a heavy splash startled me. The sailors on watch rushed to the side rails. "*Overboard!*" rose the cry. The helmsman said whatever it was hadn't come from the deck, but been thrown from the aft cabin: my sister's. A call for the boat to be lowered was echoing outside as I rushed below to find her gone.

With the speeding vessel brought arduously to a stop, another hour's search saw my poor Perdita brought on board. No care could revive her, no medicine cause her dear eyes to

open, or the blood to flow again through her still heart. Clenched in one hand we found a slip of paper; it read:

To Athens.

Intending her body to be found, she'd taken the precaution of tying a long shawl round her waist, and fastening the other end to the cabin window. But she'd drifted and been caught beneath the keel, out of sight, which delayed the recovery.

Thus the unlucky girl died a victim to my senseless rashness. Thus, so early, she left us for the company of the dead; to the animated scenes this cheerful earth afforded, and the society of loving friends, she really did prefer a share of Raymond's rocky grave. Thus at twenty-nine she died, having enjoyed the happiness of paradise for some few years, before suffering a reversal to which her impatient spirit and affectionate disposition could not submit. As I marked the calm that had settled on her dead face, I felt, in spite of the pangs of remorse, in spite of heart-rending regret, that it was better so—better to die than to drag through long, miserable years of repining and inconsolable grief.

I supposed I must turn back with my sister's body and fulfill her request, though how Clara was to fare meanwhile I couldn't imagine. But at our next port I met an old friend and warm partisan of Raymond's, a vice-admiral of the Greek fleet who was sailing for Athens in a matter of days. I committed the remains of my lost Perdita to his custodianship; he oversaw their transportation to Hymettus and their placement in the cell with Raymond's, beneath the pyramid. All was accomplished as I'd

specified. Perdita reposed beside her beloved, her name united to his in the new inscription on their tomb.

Slowly, haltingly, the realization came upon me: the beautiful couple was gone. Their names, blended eternally with the past, must be erased from every anticipation of the future. Raymond I'd always admired—his talents; his noble aspirations; his grand conceptions of the glory and majesty of his own ambition; his utter freedom from mean passions; his fortitude and daring. In Greece I'd learned to love him. His very waywardness, his wild surrender to his own superstitious side, made me doubly fond; he might be weak, but he was the opposite of all that was groveling and selfish. I missed him. And Perdita, dear being, my sole relation, lost through my own accursed self-will and conceit: from tender childhood through the varied paths of life, I'd marked her progress. She'd always been conspicuous for integrity, devotion, and true affection—some might have said, for all that constitutes the peculiar graces of the female character. Finally, still in her youthful prime, I saw her become the victim of too much loving, too constant an attachment to the perishable and lost. Her choice to cast off the pleasant world apparent to her senses for the unreality of the grave, had orphaned poor Clara. I concealed from this beloved child that her mother's death was voluntary, and did everything I could to introduce cheerfulness into her sorrowing spirit.

First, we bid farewell to the sea. Even of my own composure couldn't face the way its hateful unremitting splash kept recalling my sister's death to my ear, again and again. Its roar

was a dirge; the dark hulls of ships it tossed on its inconstant bosom, doubled as biers, death-conveyances for all who trusted to its treacherous smiles. So, farewell to the sea. . .

Hello to the sky! Come, my Clara, sit beside me in this aerial boat. Quickly and gently it cleaves the azure serene; it glides upon air currents with soft undulations. Should a storm shake its fragile mechanism, the green earth is below: we can descend, and take shelter. Here aloft, with swift-winged birds for our companions, we skim through the unresisting element, fleetly and fearlessly. The light boat neither heaves nor breasts crashing waves; the ether opens before the prow. The globe of shadow from the balloon that upholds us, gives shelter from the noonday sun. Behind lie the plains of Italy. Now the vast undulations of the wave-like Apennines are beneath us; fertility reposes in their many folds, and woods crown the summits—a garden of the world. Ahead, the Alpine peaks. When we emerge from their deep and brawling ravines, we'll be looking down on France

After an air journey of six days, we landed at Dieppe, furling the feathered wings, and closed the silken globe of our little vessel, which was soon grounded by heavy rain. So we took a steamship for the fairly short passage to Portsmouth.

A strange story was rife here. The previous month, a badly damaged ship had appeared offshore. Hull dried out and cracked, torn sails set in a careless, unseamanlike manner, the rigging tangled and broken: clearly, disaster had come before the storm that blew her towards land. Drifting near Portsmouth harbor, she got stranded among the sandbanks at the entrance.

A crowd of idlers followed the custom-house officers sent to visit the scene. One person from the ship had already climbed to shore, taken a few steps towards town, and fallen dead on the beach. Every sign pointed to a long-protracted misery. The whisper rose: *Plague*. No one dared board the vessel, and no one else emerged; though strange things were said to be seen at night, walking the deck, hanging around the masts. She soon went to pieces; I was shown where she'd been. A lot of timbers still tossed on the waves. The stranger's corpse had been buried deep in the sands; and no one could tell me anything more, except that the vessel—the *Fortunatas*—was American-built, and had sailed from Philadelphia, of which no tidings were afterwards received.

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