

(27) CHAPTER 4.

AFTER ALL the agitation and sorrow I'd endured in Greece, I viewed Windsor much as a storm-driven bird does the nest where it can finally fold its wings in tranquility. On my return, in the autumn of 2092, I felt sick with the hope and delight of seeing my loved ones again. My heart had been with them all along. In their presence, happiness, love, and peace walked the forest paths and tempered the atmosphere.

How unwise had the wanderers been, who'd deserted the shelter of home, entangled themselves in society's web, and entered on what worldly types called "life"—that labyrinth of evil, that scheme of mutual torture. To "live," in their sense, we must not only observe and learn, but also feel; we must not be mere spectators of action, we must act; we must not describe, but be subjects of description. Hilarity and joy, that lap the soul in ecstasy, must at times have possessed us; but deep sorrow must have sheltered in our bosoms, too. Fraud must have lain in wait for us; confidence tricksters must have deceived us; sickening doubt and false hope must have checkered our days. Who, knowing what "life" is, would pine for this feverish

species of existence?

“I have lived, Idris,” I told her. “I’ve known festivals, ambitions, victories. Now—I say shut the door on the world, and build the wall higher against its troubled scenes. Let’s live for each other and for happiness; let us seek peace in our own dear home, near the murmuring streams, the gracious waving trees, the beautiful landscapes and sublime pageantry of the skies. Let us leave ‘life,’ so that we may live.”

Idris, whose native sprightliness needed no excess encouragement, agreed to my resolution with a smile. Little would change for her, whose pride and blameless ambition was to make each and everyone around her glad. Mainly, besides our children, she was concerned with how to ease the strain on her brother’s fragile existence. In spite of her tender nursing, his health perceptibly declined. Walking, riding, the common occupations of life, overcame him: he felt no pain, but seemed to tremble all the time on the verge of annihilation. Yet, as he was still alive after having been like this for months, he didn’t inspire us with any immediate fear; and, though he talked familiarly about thoughts of death, he didn’t cease to exert himself to render others happy, or to cultivate his own astonishing powers of mind.

Winter passed away and spring, month by month, awakened life throughout nature. The forest was dressed in green; the young calves frisked on the new grass; the wind-winged shadows of light clouds sped over the green cornfields. The hermit cuckoo’s monotonous all-hail to the season used up its

last notes at sunset. While Venus, the evening star, pulsed in the warm sky, her minion the nightingale, bird of love, began to fill the woods with song; and the young green of the trees lay in gentle relief along the clear horizon.

We and our guests shared the delight of gazing down on this scene from the Castle terrace. But delight was awake in every heart that season, delight and exultation; for there was peace through all the world. The temple of Universal Mars was shut, and no one had died that year by another person's hand.

“Let this last only twelve months,” said Adrian, “and our world will become a Paradise. All the energies we've aimed at destroying our own species, can now be directed at its liberation and preservation. Humanity cannot repose—we must aspire. Now, finally, our restlessness will bring forth good instead of evil. The resource-rich countries of the global south will throw off the iron yoke of corruption and servitude; poverty will fade away, and sickness with it. Liberty and Peace, their forces united as never before—what lies beyond them to achieve for our lives and our planet?”

Ryland gave a short laugh. “Dreaming, forever dreaming, Windsor!” Raymond's old adversary was a candidate for the Protectorate at the next election. He went on, “Be assured that Earth is not, nor ever can be heaven, while the seeds of hell are native to her soil. When the climate has become equally temperate everywhere; when the environment breeds no disorders; when farmlands are no longer liable to blights and droughts—then sickness will cease. When human passions are

dead—then poverty will depart. When love is no longer the flip side of hate—then brotherhood and sisterhood will exist. We are very far from any of these states at present.”

“Not so far as you might suppose,” observed a little old astronomer, Merrival by name. “The poles precede slowly, but surely. In one hundred thousand years—”

“We shall all be underground,” said Ryland.

The astronomer was undaunted. “At that time, the pole of the earth will coincide with the pole of the ecliptic. A universal spring will result, and earth become a paradise.”

“In a hundred thousand—why should any of us,” Ryland had begun contemptuously, when I looked up from the evening news in my hand.

“Here’s something strange,” I said. “It seems that a large contingent of Greeks, relying on the supposition that winter had purified the air, recently worked up the courage to enter Istanbul with the idea of rebuilding it from the ruins. But they say the curse of God is on the place, for everyone who ventured within the city walls has come down with the plague—which is now spreading in Thrace and Macedonia. For fear of a spike in infections during the coming hot season, Thessaly has shut its borders and imposed a strict quarantine.”

So we returned from the prospect of paradise, shimmering in a very close or very distant yet-to-come, to the present time’s immediate pain and misery. We talked of how the pestilence had ravaged the entire world last year, and how dreadful must be the consequences of a second wave. We discussed the best

means of preventing infection, and of preserving health and normal activity in a large city at a time of pandemic—London, for instance. Merrival, growing more and more distant from the conversation’s practical tone, drew nearer Idris, to whom he carefully explained how the joy he took in picturing the paradise to come was ever-clouded by the knowledge that, in a certain period of time after that first hundred thousand years, an earthly hell or purgatory would occur, when the ecliptic and equator would be at right angles.

My own thoughts also strayed, only to the recent past. The others talked of Thrace and Macedonia as they might of a lunar territory, unknown, indistinct, of no interest to them. I had trod the soil. The faces of many of its inhabitants were familiar to me; in their towns, plains, hills and valleys, I’d known some of the best times of my life on our eastward march the year before. Romantic villages, cottages, more elegant abodes, inhabited alike by the lovely and the good, rose before my mind’s eye; with each one came the haunting question: *Is the plague there too?* That same invincible monster, which hovered over and devoured Istanbul—alas, that fiend more cruel than tornado or tempest, less tame than fire, was unchained in Greece, that beautiful country. I could not reflect without extreme pain on the desolation this evil would cause there.

Our terrace party began to break up. “We’re all dreaming anyhow,” Ryland said. “It makes about as much sense to discuss the probability of a visitation of the plague in a well-run metropolitan area like ours, as to calculate how many centuries

must elapse before we can grow pineapples on the open slopes of Hampstead Heath.”

He returned to town, and an election that was agitating the country’s political state more than usual. Should he be chosen as the new Protector, as the eternal populist Ryland was expected to raise, for its first debate before parliament, the question of abolishing hereditary rank and other feudal relics. The topic was so incendiary that it hadn’t even been referenced during the present session. Yet this very silence was loaded—overloaded—a sign of the deep weight attached to the question, to which was added both parties’ fear of risking an ill-timed attack, and the certainty of a furious fight sometime ahead.

But although the phantom walls of old St. Stephen’s echoed nothing of the voice which filled each heart, the newspapers teemed with nothing else; and no matter how remote its beginnings, every private conversation in company soon verged towards this central point. Voices would be lowered, chairs drawn closer. The aristocrats, as they built on their minority base across the kingdom, could be seen appealing to prejudices and old attachments without number; also to perennially fresh hopes and expectations, held by thousands, of someday gaining peerages. And they’d raised that reliable scarecrow, the specter of all that was sordid, mechanical, and base in America and the other commercial republics.

“Shame on the country,” Ryland was heard to say, “that lays so much stress on words and frippery—when it’s a question of nothing—of repainted carriage-panels, and new embroidery

designs for footmen's coats."

Could England really do without her lordly trappings, and be content with the democratic U.S. of A. style? But more—were the pride of ancestry, the patrician spirit, the gentle courtesies and refined pursuits, the splendid attributes of rank, to be erased throughout society? No, we were told, this would never be the case; for we were by nature a poetical people, a nation easily duped by words, ready to dress a cloud in splendor, and bestow honor on the dust. This spirit we could never lose—indeed, we were assured that when the words British Citizen became the sole patent of nobility, we should all be noble; when none felt others their superior in rank, then courtesy and refinement would become our common birthright. Let not England be so far disgraced, as to have it imagined that it could ever be without people—nature's true nobility—who show what they are in their face and bearing, who are from their cradles elevated above the rest, because they are better than the rest. Among an independent, generous, and well-educated populace, in a country where the imagination rules, there need be no fear that we should lack a perpetual succession of the high-born and lordly.

At any other time, the arrival of the plague in Athens would have excited society's highest interest and compassion—especially with the British diplomatic corps and hundreds of other people returning from Athens to London. Now the news was almost passed over, lost in the general engagement with the coming controversy. But I, keeping far from the salons and

drawing rooms, gathered every report and read each one with anguish. Questions of rank and right dwindled to insignificance in my eyes, when I knew that Raymond's beloved Athenians, the free and noble people of the divinest town in Greece, were falling like ripe corn before the merciless sickle of the adversary. Combing reports of the deaths of only sons, and of wives and husbands most devoted; of friend losing friend, and young mothers mourning their first-born—a merciless rending of ties twisted with the heart's fibers—I could put faces to many names, people I knew and esteemed, people I loved, among the sufferers.

Athens, the city, sounded harder to recognize. Its pleasant places were deserted, its temples and palaces converted into tombs, its sublime and far-reaching energies forced to converge on one point: protection against the innumerable arrows of the plague, which finally overwhelmed them. Friends and fellow soldiers of Raymond's and mine, families that had welcomed Perdita to Greece, admirers who'd helped lament her loss, the builders of the tomb she shared, all alike were swept away, gone to dwell with that ill-fated couple in the formless beyond.

The plague at Athens showed the contagion's spread towards Europe from Asia and the southern hemisphere, where scenes of havoc and death continued to be acted on a scale of fearful magnitude. This year's visitation had also struck North America, where the epidemic's spread showed an unprecedented virulence. The devastation wasn't confined to the populous areas, but spread to rural ones; the hunter died in the

woods, the farmer among plantings, and the angler knee-deep in local streams. The merchant and investor classes, in whose view the present year would see the plague die out, continued to thrive on hopes of improvement. Governments waited to get back on the road to prosperity. But the inhabitants of the stricken countries were driven to despair, or to a resignation which, arising from fanaticism, assumed the same bleak character.

A strange story reached us. No one would have believed it, if there hadn't been a multitude of witnesses, in various quarters—Asia, the Caucasus and Middle East, much of Africa—all attesting to the identical facts. On June 21st, an hour before noon, another sun rose in the west. Comparable in size to the regular sun, but completely dark, the beams it cast were shadows. This black sun, as people called it, ascended the western sky with unusual speed. An hour brought it to the same meridian where our sun, the day star, was hanging—and where the strange sun eclipsed it entirely. Sudden and total darkness; the stars came out and supplied their ineffectual glimmerings as fear took hold in country after country down below. Daylight soon returned where it belonged, as the dim orb continued its transit in a lingering descent of the eastern heaven. But now its lightless rays crossed the other's brilliant ones and deadened or distorted them, so that the shadows of things assumed strange and ghastly shapes. Wild animals took fright and fled in stampedes; birds, strong-winged eagles, suddenly blinded, fell onto marketplaces, while great numbers of owls and bats

showed themselves in the premature dusk.

Among human populations, the dread and confusion were even greater. When the black sun finally sank beneath the horizon, sending a last shot of shadowy beams high into the otherwise radiant air, panic ruled multitudes. The mosques and temples were full; so were graveyards, as people hastened to their dead relatives' tombs with offerings and propitiations. The plague was forgotten in this new terror spread by a freak celestial event. As the dead bodies multiplied in the streets of Isfahan, Beijing, Delhi, people walked with gazes fixed on the ominous sky, disregarding corpses at their feet. Where there were churches, Christian maidens in white, with shining veils, formed long processions and filled the air with hymns. Then a wailing cry would burst from the lips of some poor mourner in the crowd, and the congregation, raising their eyes, would fancy they could see fantastic wings sweep the air as angels hovered, looking down and lamenting the disasters about to befall humankind.

I cannot describe the rapturous relief with which I turned from political brawls in London, and the disorders of distant countries, to the peace of my own dear home, that select abode of goodness, love, and every sacred communal sympathy. Had I never left Windsor, these emotions wouldn't have been so intense; but the deplorable changes I'd experienced in Greece, those periods of anxiety and sorrow, loss and fear, magnified my attachment to the domestic circle left to me. Here, I let no such miseries intrude. Secluded in our beloved forest, we lived

tranquilly.

Idris, the most affectionate wife, sister and friend, was a tender and loving mother. The feeling was not with her as with many, a demanding pastime; it was a passion. We'd had three children; one, the second oldest, died while I was in Greece. For Idris, this event had splashed grief and fear across a triumphant and rapturous emotional landscape. Before, her motherhood had beamed upon the little beings, sprung from herself, heirs of her transient life, with lives of their own to come; afterwards, maternity meant a perpetual state of dread that the pitiless destroyer might snatch her remaining darlings, her gems, as it had snatched their brother. She was miserable if she had to be away from them at all. Their slightest illness sent her into throes of terror. Fortunately, she had small cause for fear. Our firstborn, Alfred, was a robust little fellow with radiant features, soft eyes, and a gentle though independent disposition. Elvis, our youngest, was still an infant; but his downy cheeks were sprinkled with the roses of health, and his tireless vivacity filled our halls with innocent laughter.

Having survived the troubling state of mute misery in which she'd returned to her Windsor cousins, Clara had grown dear to all. She displayed so many fine qualities in such perfect balance—intelligence and candor, taste and tolerance, transcendent beauty and endearing simplicity—that she hung like a pearl in our midst, a treasure of wonder and excellence.

At the start of the winter term, our Alfred, now nine years old, entered school at Eton, very happily. We'd lived so long in

the neighborhood of the school that its population of young folks was well known to us. Many of them had been Alfred's playmates before they became fellow students. Here, swelling these youthful throngs, were the future governors of England; these Etonians, and others like them, were the beings who'd be tapped to run the vast machine of society when their turn arrived. Signs flashed through of the men and women to come, the future landowners, politicians, generals, stage actors. For Alfred, his school life, the rigors of study and games, developed the best parts of his character—perseverance, well-governed firmness, generosity. By his talents and virtues, he distinguished himself always.

What deep and sacred emotions are excited in a father's breast, when he first realizes that his love for his child is not a mere instinct, but worthily bestowed on someone worth knowing! At this point in their lives, when an animal's love for its offspring ends, the human parent's true affection starts. The younger mind develops, and moral propensities reveal themselves in time as worthy of our hope. There's much they still don't know; and we have our anxieties about their weakness; but we begin to respect the future adult—whom we also start trying to impress as we might some social equal. Indeed, though, what could be more important than to have our children's good opinion? For this reason, our honor must be spotless in all our transactions with them, the integrity of our relations untainted; so that, should fate and circumstance finally separate us, love and honor for their parents, as a comfort in sorrow, an aegis in danger, a consolation

in hardship, will remain with our children on life's rough path.

Willingly I step aside for you, dear Alfred! Advance, offspring of tender love, child of our hopes; advance a soldier on the road I've pioneered! I'll make way for you. Look—I've already put aside the carelessness of childhood, youth's unlined brow and springy gait, for you to wear. Advance, and take all I lose, including the graces of maturity. Time shall rob the fire from my eyes and the agility from my limbs; eager expectation and passionate love, the better part of life, stolen from me, shall be showered in double portion on your dear head. Advance! Take these gifts, you and your comrades. Please remember not to disgrace your benefactors. May your progress be uninterrupted and secure; born during the spring-tide of human hopes, may you stand at the head of a summer to which no winter may succeed!

So philosophically could we watch the individual pass away, even our own individual self; for the species would remain. Human life, as Edmund Burke put it in his reflections on the French Revolution, was “the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts—wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom—the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on—through perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression.”

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](#).