

(33) INTRA-CHAPTER.

RIDING to visit Adrian one day that fall, I had a puncture and stopped to repair it outside a gay pub on the London road. The place was overflowing with uproarious patrons involved in a bellowed sing-along. Among them on the gravel outside, near the threshold, then the window, a small, silent, mournful-looking man hovered, trying to see inside. The sorry state of his clothes combined with his pronounced emaciation to tell of a steep fall into poverty. I watched him recoil from a sudden burst of song and merriment, then take a few steps as if determined to enter; but the barkeep, who must have seen him peeking, came out first. The poor creature gave a cry and rushed up to ask, "Is my husband here? Can I see George?"

"See George!" the other cried. "Sure you can, if they'll let you in the death house. Last night he came down with plague, so that's where we sent him."

"Ah!" With a cry, the unfortunate questioner staggered against the wall. "Were you really so cruel? Wait!" A confused shouting within had already sent the barkeep hurrying back to the bar; but a more compassionate witness stepped forward

with details: George had been taken ill, after a night of heavy dissipation; his boon companions, wasting no time, had sent him to St. Bartholomew's City Hospital. To this, his husband said a fervent thank you, then turned and tottered away in the direction of London.

My tire was quickly patched, and I soon overtook the poor man where he stood almost strengthless, leaning against a signpost, his head sunk on his bosom. He barely raised his eyes at my offer of help, until I added, "You want to get to St. B's, is that right?"

"I have to get there," he said. "If I don't die first."

The ride wasn't far, and I persuaded him onto my bicycle's safe passenger seat. He said little at first, but I was able to draw him out with a few more questions. There was a simple, natural earnestness about him that interested me in his fate, especially when he assured me that his husband was the best of men—or had been so, until loss of employment first threw him into bad company. "George couldn't bear to come home," he said, "only to see our business die. Our shop was like our own child to him, his own flesh and blood."

At St. Bartholomew's, I went along inside to help make sure he'd get to see his husband. The poor creature clung closer to me, as he saw with what heartless haste they rolled the dead from the wards, and caught a glimpse of where they stacked the corpses in a holding area behind a curtain. We made our way to the long, crowded ward on which our patient might be found, if

still alive, according to the check-in nurse. My companion, blind to the horrors about him, looked eagerly from bed to bed.

“George!”

There, in the furthest corner, a squalid, haggard creature, writhing under the torture of disease: he rushed towards him, he embraced him, blessing God for his preservation, with radiant smiles.

But to me, unprotected by such strange joy and enthusiasm, the scene inside the death house, truly called, was intolerably agonizing. The countryside offered no horrors like these: solitary wretches died in the open fields, a sole survivor might contend with famine in a vacant village; but the assembly room, the banquet hall of plague, was spread only in London. Though my mouth and nose were covered against the choking effluvia that filled the ward, my heart heaved with painful qualms as I stood among the plague-struck. Some lay screaming in pain, others laughing from an even worse delirium; some had weeping, despairing relations at their bedsides, while others, dying alone, called aloud, with thrilling tenderness or reproach, the names of absent friends; while the nurses went about their tasks expressionlessly, incarnate images of despair, indifference, and death.

I gave some money to my luckless companion, and arranged for his George's removal to a more private room. Then I rode away from St. B's as fast as I could. Imagination, that tormentor, was busy showing me pictures of my own loved ones, lying sick and helpless in a place like that, so meanly attended.

Adrian was already out by the time I arrived, and wasn't expected back for some hours. As it was a fine afternoon, I left my bicycle there and set out on a leisurely ramble around the depopulated town. Avoiding the frequent funeral processions, I followed my curiosity to observe the state of particular spots—painful wanderings among desolate, neglected landmarks. Amid the general silence and desertion, I met few people; all were woebegone, careworn, and depressed by fear.

Weary at length of empty streets and misery, I headed back towards the Protectoral Palace. Darkness had begun to fall; yet the sky above the buildings ahead grew continually brighter. My ears caught the first grinding, windblown sounds of uproar. Downtown had awoken.

No one but Adrian could have governed this night-time London, where fear of plague had united that most diverse of populations in a common public frenzy. Even he was obliged to yield on many points, and limit his efforts to keeping the license of the times within bounds. All the usual places of amusement stayed open; but for audiences he introduced measures and modifications designed to reduce overexcitement, and the misery that so often followed when quiet returned.

On stage, the deepest, direst tragedies were most popular. People's inner despair made them care less to see comedy played; and sales for those shows weren't helped by their reputation for halting mid-laugh—as one or other comedian, struck too hard by incongruity and personal wretchedness to go on, would burst from mimic merriment into sobs and tears; seized

with irresistible sympathy, the poor audience which spent the night weeping anyhow, wound up feeling cheated.

I wasn't in the mood to try deriving consolation from either kind of scene; buffoon laughter and fictitious tears, their garish and false varnish, held equally little appeal. The streets of the theatre district, festively a-blaze with colored lights, rang with enough discordant mirth to awaken and then mock all the heartfelt grief within me. Hilarious crowds on every side, were easily recognizable through the disguise: not revelers, but assembled mourners, every one.

Oppressed, distracted by painful emotions, I rambled on. Suddenly I found myself outside Drury Lane Theatre. The play was Macbeth, led by the finest actor of the age, who had the power, it was said, to make an audience forget everything but the sound of his voice. Such a medicine I yearned for, so I went in, though the show was half over. Shakespeare's centuries-long popularity was more dominant than ever at this dread period; he was the wizard to rule our hearts and govern our imaginations, and the house was quite full. With the fourth act about to start, I had a few moments to study my fellow playgoers; every corner of society was represented among these aisles, women and men drawn in common to seek a few hours' respite from the hells awaiting them elsewhere. No less than the play's first audiences, they sought to escape into this wild but heartily familiar tale of ancient Britain's tangles with the supernatural, and above all, be entertained.

The curtain rose on the witches in a pitch dark hollow set among forbidding rocks, where a thick stage mist floated and a single light, fiery red, pulsed beneath the central cauldron; we heard the grim ingredients of the magic charm, but instead of three decrepit old hags bent over an old pot, we saw a gigantic trio of shadowy, unearthly beings. The entrance of Hecate and the introduction of music in harmony with all witch-like fancies, took us out of our own world entirely. Set free of reproof from reason or the heart, returned to a state before fear, our imaginations simply reveled. And Macbeth, when he entered, far from destroying the illusion, seemed to share our feelings and join us in our enchantment; so that as the displays of magic and prophecy proceeded, we sympathized in his wonder and his daring, and gave ourselves up with our whole souls to the power of the scenic effects. It was too long since my mind had been on any pleasing flights of fancy, and I felt the beneficial result right away, a sense of renewal.

After the incantation scene, the action of the play retained, for a space, its effect of abstract, emblematic power; it took a while to remember that Malcolm and Macduff weren't visions but mere human beings, acted upon by such simple passions as warmed our own breasts. By and by, however, our absorption in their story was complete. '*Stands Scotland where it did?*' A shudder, as from a shared electric shock, ran through the house, when Ross exclaimed, in answer:

*Alas, poor country;
Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave: where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile*

The speech was like a bell that tolled our lives away; each word struck. But fearing to look around at one another, we focused our attention on the stage—as if there alone our eyes were safe.

*Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy: the dead man's knell
Is there scarce asked for who; and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken.*

The actor playing Ross seemed aware of being on dangerous ground by now. Beginning his announcement to Macduff, about the slaughter of his family, he trembled, stammering, with twisted features, fixed-eyed stares—really afraid to speak the lines and face the outburst of our grief, not Macduff's. But falling out of character only made him more effective. Terrified ourselves, we gasped and winced along with him, craning our necks to read every look on his anguished face. At last Macduff, regardless of the high wrought sympathy and tension in the house before him, cried out and asked:

*All my pretty ones?
Did you say all?—O hell kite! All?
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?*

A pang of wild grief wrenched every heart, despair burst past every lip—mine, too—a great outcry echoing the Scotsman's. I'd entered into the universal feeling—been absorbed by the terrors told by Ross. Now I was a witness to how nature overpowered art, like a dam-burst flood might sweep away a decorative public fountain in its path.

As if escaping from a hell of torture, I rushed out of the theater to find fresh air, quiet, calm; but the street outside offered none of them. Longing, how much!, to be back in the country, amid the dear soothing of maternal Nature, instead I felt my wounded heart stung by the sights, sounds, and smells of London debauched. Roars of heartless merriment from open pub doors, drunkards reeling by, appalling salutations from degraded beings: but then, to how many souls had the name of home become a mockery, something to escape in forgetfulness? So George had fallen.

I set off at a run for a darker part of town, pushing my speed until I finally stopped for breath near Westminster Abbey. The deep, swelling tones of its pipe organ attracted me inside. With a quiet awe that felt soothing, I entered the lighted chancel and listened. A solemn religious chant began, heralding peace and

hope to the unhappy. The notes, freighted with prayers, echoed through the dim aisles, and the soul's bleeding wounds were staunched by heavenly balm. It seemed to me, that in spite of the world's misery that I deplored, and could not understand; in spite of London's empty sidewalks, and England's corpse-strewn fields; in spite of all the variety of agonizing emotions I'd experienced that day—just then, calmed by the music, and by the sight of many other human creatures offering up prayers and submission with me, I thought the Creator looked down in compassion, and promised relief in reply to our melodious pleas. A sentiment approaching happiness did follow the total resignation of one's being to the guardianship of the world's ruler.

Alas! When the last note faded, the elevated spirit sank again to earth. Suddenly one of the choristers died. She was lifted from her desk, the vaults below were hastily opened, and she was consigned therein with a few muttered prayers. I went outside again.

Vain for me, these scenes in London showed, to seat myself in a theatre aisle, or beneath lofty vaulted arches echoing with praise-song. In the open air alone I'd find relief. Among Nature's beauteous works, her Creator's benevolence grew clear again, and I could once more trust that the same divinity who built up the mountains, planted the forests, and poured out the rivers, would erect another state for lost humankind, where we might awaken again to our affections, our happiness, and our faith.

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