

(36) CHAPTER 9 cont.

ADRIAN brought all his considerable diplomatic skills first to forging peace, and then to providing for the invaders' multitudes. London could not support them. Some Irish we sent back to their own island, the rest were marched to various parts of the southern counties, to be quartered in deserted towns. Over the coming winter, we reinforced our northern border to defend against another migrant surge. Meanwhile, their deputy Lord Protector had a new plan for England's people. By now, the living were scattered everywhere across the country, many existing alone, or in the most sadly shrunken households. He wanted to congregate what was left in designated population centers; for he was convinced that only through the benevolent and social virtues could the remnant of our race hope for any safety, much less survival.

Our family's Tower sojourn allowed Adrian and Idris to meet after nearly a year. Occupied in fulfilling the laborious and painful tasks of high office, he'd encountered every species of human misery; always, he could do less than he wished; he saw that his aid was of little avail. Yet his purpose of soul, his energy

and ardent resolution, shielded the brother from sorrow; the very excess of his sensitivity made him that much more capable a pilot for a storm-tossed land; while the potency of his virtue endowed him with health and strength. His sister hardly recognized the fragile being, whose form it seemed a summer breeze could bend, in the energetic man before her. He appeared born again.

It was different with Idris. Though never complaining, she wept involuntarily. She'd grown thin and pale, her voice was broken and low. Fear possessed her heart. Just as she strove always to hide this fear from me, Idris tried to throw a veil over the change which she knew her beloved brother must observe in her. At last, in a burst of irrepressible grief as they sat alone, she gave vent to her apprehensions and sorrow. I already knew what she must have said when, much later, Adrian told me—I knew it all. The ceaseless, insatiable, corrosive care, a sleepless expectation of evil that gnawed her soul like the vulture did Prometheus; under the influence of this eternal plague-induced excitement, and of the interminable struggles she endured to combat and conceal its effects on her, she felt herself being consumed by her own over-accelerated metabolism. Sleep wasn't sleep, when nightmare trampled the frail control she kept upon waking thoughts evermore transformed into rest-destroying terrors. Worst of all, her state permitted no hope of improvement, no natural alleviation, unless the grave should quickly receive its destined prey, and she be permitted to die, before she experienced a thousand living deaths in the loss of

those she loved.

Being in London added to her disquiet, certainly. The plague's ravages were far more visible there than back at home. Great swathes of the city seemed to have returned almost to nature, with streets so grass-grown they looked like thick, frozen lawns. On every side were boarded-up houses, parks overrun with weeds, empty storefronts, lonely intersections. The busiest parts of town felt the most silent and vacant, especially now that all idea of coming to London for pleasure had passed away, along with all London's nightlife. Yet in the midst of desolation, Adrian had preserved order and the law. Secular institutions thus survived certain divine ones—for while a Covenant to preserve our species was broken, human property continued sacred. A melancholy state of things; and though crime rates were kept low, the situation struck the heart as a wretched mockery that Idris felt in full.

She and I had been trying to track down the unworldly Merrival, whose frequent visits to us at Windsor had stopped abruptly; we'd had no word of him, and at this time when no more than a hairsbreadth divided the living from the dead, we'd naturally feared that our friend had become another unrecorded statistic. Being now in London, we'd called at his house, to offer any help we could to his surviving family, but no Merrivals at all remained in residence. The place had been used to quarter Irish migrants since after the quelled invasion; we saw expensive astronomical instruments set up as laundry racks, and a celestial chart, dense with abstruse calculations, papering a

broken windowpane. The neighbors were uninformative, but from a passing clinic nurse we learned that plague had taken the whole family, except for Merrival himself, who'd "lost his mind," she said, and lived on the streets these days.

It seemed no inquiry could bring us closer to his whereabouts. I encountered him almost by chance. I'd gone to find out whether he'd been spotted near his old home, as the nurse had said he sometimes was. The November afternoon darkened early on my ride there, and I reached Merrival's address amid pattering rain and melancholy wind. Just then, I saw him—or rather his semblance, attenuated and wild—pass me, and sit down on the front doorstep. Wind battered at the grey locks on his temples, the rain drenched his uncovered head, he sat hiding his face in his withered hands. I pressed his shoulder to get his attention, but he didn't move. "Merrival," I said. "Merrival, it's been a long time since we've seen you—here, come with me—Lady Idris wants very much to see you—you won't refuse a request from her, will you? Come—come along with me. We'll bring you home to Windsor with us."

He answered in a hollow voice, "Bring me home? Why deceive a helpless old man, why talk hypocritically to someone half-crazed? Windsor is not my home. I've found my true home, the home that our so-called Creator has prepared for me. But do not tempt me to speak! My words would terrify you." I was amazed at the bitter scorn in his tone as he continued: "For in a universe of cowards, I alone dare use my mind to think—among the graveyards—among the victims of a

merciless tyranny, I dare reproach the Supreme Evil. How can He punish me? Let Him bare his arm and transfix me with lightning, like a real god.” And the old man laughed. Then he rose to his feet, and I followed him through the rain.

A lost mind, the nurse had called it; yet in reality, poor Merrival was possessed only by the delirium of excessive grief. This very old man, accustomed to looking at prospects of mathematically sound, million-year futures—this visionary who’d overlooked starvation in the wasted forms of his wife and children, and never seen the horrible sights and sounds that surrounded him in plague-time, insensible to any care for self-preservation—this astronomer, apparently dead to life on earth, and existing only in the motion of the spheres—after all, he loved his family. It wasn’t just that his absence of mind and almost infantile naïveté made him utterly dependent on them; nor that through long habit, they’d become a vital part of himself; his affection for them was undemonstrative, even unapparent, but intense. It wasn’t till one of them died that he perceived their danger; one by one the rest were carried off by pestilence; and finally his wife, his helpmate and supporter, more necessary to him than his own body, the kind companion whose voice always spoke peace to him, closed her eyes in death. Merrival felt the system of universal nature which he had so long studied and adored, shift and slide from underneath his feet, and he stood among the dead, and lifted his voice in curses; harrowing maledictions, bloody with an old man’s broken-heartedness, that even a trained professional had

misinterpreted as frenzy.

We came to a churchyard. Not far from the gate, he threw himself on the wet earth. "Here they are," he cried, "beautiful creatures—breathing, speaking, loving creatures. She who by day and night cherished the worn-out lover of her youth—they, parts of my flesh, my children—here they are: call them, scream their names all night long; they won't answer!" He clung to the little heaps that marked the graves. "I ask but one thing, Verney. I do not fear His hell, for I have it here; I do not desire His heaven—no! Only let me die and be laid beside them; let me but only, when I lie dead, feel my flesh as it molds, mingle with theirs. Promise!" He raised himself painfully, and seized my arm. "Promise to bury me with them."

I promised readily, but added, "On one condition: return with us to Windsor."

"To Windsor!" he shrieked. "Never! From this place I'll never go. My bones, my flesh, I myself, are already buried here, and what you see of me is nothing but corrupted clay." He stroked the mud that covered him. "I will lie here, and cling here, till rain and winter ruin and dissolve me—I will be made one in substance with them below."

In a few words I must conclude this tragedy. Though Idris, her brother and I undertook to watch over him, our sadder task was soon fulfilled; age, grief, exposure to the worsening elements, all united to hush Merrival's sorrows, and bring repose to a heart whose beats were agony. He died embracing the sod that would be piled above his breast, when he was

placed among the beings whom he regretted with such wild despair.

Sorrier than ever to be in London after this event, Idris insisted we return home. She had the children's safety in mind as well, she said. In a carriage Adrian supplied, we left for Windsor a day or two later. It was a melancholy thing to go back to this place so dear to our hearts, a scene of such uncommon former happiness, to be on the spot to mark the extinction of our species. Deep, ineradicable footsteps of disease could be traced everywhere across the cherished landscape. Its soil fertile as ever; yet agricultural conditions had so far changed, that there'd been no late plantings: too few hands to sow the seeds. The time for such autumnal labors was now gone, and winter had set in with sudden and unusual severity. A cycle of frosts and thaws ended in floods; many roads were already impassable before the first heavy snowfalls of December. The horse team powered us through an arctic scenery. House roofs peeped from white massy cloaks; broken-windowed vacation cottages and stately mansions, equally deserted, no pathways shoveled to their doors. I thought of Adrian's parting words; we'd been talking about what was to come in 2096. He predicted, "Next summer will decide the fate of the human race. I won't stop doing everything I can until then; but if plague comes back, the fight must end, so we can begin choosing our graves."

Our little town of Windsor, in which many survivors from the neighboring counties were already assembled, wore a sad appearance. Its streets were blocked up with snow, and the few

people to be seen outdoors were shivering, frozen by the prevalent north-east wind of this most uncongenial winter. The altered state of society turned such an accident of nature into a source of real misery and hardship, whose escape must become the focus of all our exertions. It's true that we had sufficient stockpiles of food and all the necessities of life, more than enough to supply the wants of the diminished population; but a great deal of labor was required to arrange these, as it were, raw materials. Families formerly devoted to exalted callings and refined pursuits, accomplished, rich, blooming, young, brought care-fraught hearts to huddle and bicker in their diminished numbers over meager fires, all grown selfish and groveling. Depressed by sickness, and fearful of the future, they suffered in a world without conveniences, cleaning staff, specialists, stores. Regardless of ignorance, inaptitude, or preference for repose, hands unused to household duties must perform them, and knead the bread, and even undertake the butcher's office. Poor and rich were now equal—or rather the poor were superior, since they brought alacrity and experience to the same tasks that wore out the luxurious, humiliated the proud, and disgusted all whose minds, bent on intellectual improvement, held it their dearest privilege to be exempt from attending to mere animal needs.

But goodness and love found ways to emerge from every change. We witnessed sights made for the admirers of the human race to enjoy—acts of self-sacrificial devotion, simultaneously graceful and heroic; to behold them felt like

being back in ancient times, amid the patriarchal modes of kinship, friendship, duty. Former young notables of the land worked as servants to their parents or weaker siblings. With amiable cheerfulness, they went to the river to break the ice and draw water; they assembled on foraging expeditions; axes in hand, they went into the woods for fuel. Then the simple and affectionate welcome upon their return—the clean hearth and bright fire—the supper ready, cooked by beloved hands—gratitude for the provision for tomorrow’s meal: strange enjoyments for the high-born English, yet now their sole, hard-earned, and dearly prized luxuries.

For graceful submission to circumstances, innate noble humility, and the ingenious fancy to adorn acts of goodness with romantic coloring, no one surpassed our own Clara. She saw my despondency, saw Idris bent beneath aching cares. She made it her full-time employment to save us from trouble, taking on any labor, and managing to spread ease and even elegance over the Castle’s altered mode of life. We still had some attendants spared by disease, and warmly attached to us. But Clara regarded their services jealously; she wanted to be Idris’s sole handmaid, and sole minister to her little cousins’ wants. Nothing gave her so much pleasure as our employing her in this way; she went beyond our desires, earnest, diligent, and unwearied. To adapt an old poem:

*Clara was ready ere we called her name,
And though we called another, Clara came.*

I had returned to Windsor with a mission; for we were to be among Adrian's first designated population centers. Having taken on myself the guardianship of the district, I wouldn't desert it while a single inhabitant survived. My resolve was intact, but in common with many people at the time, my reserves of energy were stubbornly low. Perhaps, after the past summer's stupendous excitement, the enforced calm of winter made it doubly irksome to rise to the demands of daily toil. I can speak for myself: lack of enthusiasm had never been my failing. In a vigorous middle age, before the plague, while the earth and time preserved their monotonous courses, I'd dwelt with perpetual and lively wonder on the antique laws of each, engrossed in histories, passionate in my love of family, and like the antique peasant I so resembled, investing nature—the uplands, glades, and streams—with divine attributes. Strange, with the world rushing along an eccentric, untried path, that I should feel this spirit fade. I struggled with despondency and weariness, a choking, fog-like depression. Last year's fervor to grasp at life was missing, and over the aching pangs induced by the distresses of the times, a certain numbness was falling. The utter uselessness of even my most successful efforts to improve conditions, meant I could take no pleasure in them. Despairing, I longed to return to my old occupations, but of what use, what good were they? Reading was futile—to write, vanity indeed. Where lately had stretched a world-wide gallery for the display of dignified exploits, one vast theatre for a magnificent drama,

the earth now showed a vacant space, an empty stage. For neither actor nor spectator was there any longer aught to say or hear.

I spent part of each day paying visits in the town of Windsor, and when the weather permitted, I was glad to ride further out and have some time to muse in solitude. Thus often, pushing my mountain bike with occasional difficulty through the narrow snow-blocked town, I crossed the bridge and passed through Eton. No youthful congregation of gallant-hearted youngsters thronged around its gates and doors; sad silence pervaded both classrooms and playgrounds. I met troops of horses, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep that wandered at will, finding food and shelter in haystacks and vacant cottages. Up a hill on a path cut through snow banks, I rode to a favorite overlook. But the view I loved, of gentle uplands and picturesque dales, with fields of waving corn, stands of stately trees, and the meandering Thames, was entirely unrecognizable. One sheet of white covered all—and I reflected bitterly, that the heart of almost every inhabitant was cold and motionless as the winter-clothed scene itself.

Once on a frosty day, driven by restless unsatisfying reflections, I rode out to a little wood not far from Salt Hill, and stopped beside a stand of elms, where a bubbling spring flowed and prattled invisibly beneath ice sheets and drifted snow. This spot had a peculiar charm for me. Adrian's favorite resort back when, needing to escape his mother's stately bondage, he'd come to sit on a ledge of rock below the spring and read some

beloved book, or simply muse, speculations beyond his years, on morals or metaphysics; back when a distant future was a given in such questions; the place was secluded, and he often said that his happiest boyhood hours had been spent there. Gripped by a melancholy foreboding that I'd never see it again, I set about trying to classify and memorize each tree, along with every winding of the ice-bound streamlet, every stump and irregularity of ground, that I might better call up its idea in absence.

Before my eyes, a robin red-breast dropped heavily from a branch onto an ice patch: not dead but dying, clearly. A hawk appeared in the air; sudden fear seized the little creature; it exerted its last strength, throwing itself on its back, raising its talons in impotent defense against its powerful enemy. Stepping forward, I took the robin up and placed it inside my jacket. Warmed by my body heat, fed with a few crumbs from a biscuit, by degrees it revived; its warm fluttering heart beat against my chest. I don't know why I stop to detail this trifling incident—but the scene is still before me: the birds, the brook, the ice; the leafless trees with their fantastical draperies of hoar frost; snow-clad fields forming distant expanses seen in glimpses between some beech trees' silvered trunks; the low clouded sky, the drear cold, the unbroken silence—while close in my bosom, my feathered nursling lay warm, and safe, speaking its content with a light chirp. Painful reflections thronged, stirring my brain with wild commotion:

All earth is cold and death-like as the snowy fields, and

misery-stricken the life-tide of its inhabitants. Why should I oppose the avalanche of destruction that sweeps us away? Why steel my nerves and renew my wearied efforts each day—ah, why? So that my firm courage and cheerful exertions might shelter the dear mate, whom I chose in the spring of my life; though the throbbings of my heart be replete with pain, though my hopes for the future are moribund, as long as your dear head, my gentlest love, can repose in peace on that heart, and while you derive from its fostering care, any comfort and hope, my struggles shall not cease, and I will not call myself altogether vanquished.

Some weeks later, I walked in Windsor forest with my family, one of those lovely February days whose barrenness could be forgotten, in its natural beauty. The deer were turning up the snow in search of hidden grass; the white was made intensely dazzling by the sun's unseasonable show of genial power. Leafless branches spread the intricate traceries of delicate seaweed against an azure sky, while the naked trees trunks reared up like columns in a vast, labyrinthine temple. It was impossible not to receive pleasure from the sight of these things. The children, freed from too long indoors, bounded before us like spaniels, chasing the deer, rousing pheasants and partridges from their coverts. As we walked, Idris leant on my arm, smiling: her sadness had yielded to the moment's enjoyment.

All at once, I seemed to wake up. As if it were a heavy blanket, I cast off the clinging sloth of the past months. Earth

had a new appearance, and my view of the future was suddenly crystal clear. I gave a cry.

“What is it, dear?”

“Idris,” I told her, “we’re too far north!”

She frowned. “You think Dorset would be any better?”

“I think the Continent would be better,” I said. “Look at our gloomy winter life here—our sordid cares—our menial labors. This northern country is no place for a falling population. When *Homo sapiens* were few, it wasn’t here they came—they couldn’t have covered the globe with offspring if they had. We need to seek some natural Paradise, some garden of the world, where our simple wants can be easily supplied. For the associations, social pleasures and culture we lose here, the enjoyment of a delicious climate will compensate. If we survive this coming summer, I won’t spend next winter in England—nor will any of us.”

Still Idris frowned. I heard the question she didn’t voice. Would we, any of us, survive the coming summer? As often before, I had the feeling of being chained to a runaway carriage. Our fate was completely out of our control. We could no longer choose what to do or leave undone. A mightier, inhuman power was here to destroy our plans, or demand the work we avoided.

One thing was for sure. To count upon another winter would be madness. This was our last. Our future prospects stretched through the summer to come, and no further; there, instead of more road to travel, lay a yawning gulph into which we must, and would, fall. Humanity’s last blessing had been

snatched from us, our comfort was dead: for we could no longer hope. Could the hopelessly mad hope? Could a wretch, led to the death chamber, feeling the straps tighten, hope? Could a sailor shipwrecked in the Atlantic, exhausted from swimming, who heard the distinctive splash of a shark's fin dividing the waves between them, hope? Such hope as theirs, we had!

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