

(34) CHAPTER 8 cont.

FORTUNATELY I didn't have to visit London very often. While the city dwellers had little left but pastimes, back among the rural districts which our lofty castle overlooked, everyone not exempted by disease or recent sorrow still had work to occupy them. Native countryfolk, displaced Londoners, foreign migrants, many born to wealth: my days were largely taken up with urging them all to ignore the plague and pay attention to the crops. With listless strokes the hay would be scythed, but then no one show up to cart it. Sheep-shearers left the wool on the ground for the winds to scatter, rather than collect it to make clothing no one would need. Yet agricultural labor was found very salutary; the sun, the refreshing breezes, the sweet smell of the hay, the rustling leaves, the irrigation water softly gushing in its channels, would reawaken the spirit of life; agitated hearts found some repose, and the apprehensive something like happiness.

Strange to say, 2095 was not without its pleasures. Couples young and old who'd loved long and hopelessly, suddenly found every impediment removed, and wealth pour in from the death

of the very relatives (or spouses) who'd kept them apart. The very danger of the time drew them closer. Immediate peril urged them to seize the day; wildly, passionately, they set out to know each and every delight an existence together afforded—defying plague to try and destroy the life of love and happiness they still had time to create.

In this connection I think of Juliet, a wealthy girl from Windsor, whose heart had belonged to a schoolfellow of her brother's since they were children. He'd always spend part of the holidays at her family's mansion, where, from playmates, they grew into confidants of each other's little secrets, mutual aids and consolers in difficulty and sorrow. Love crept in almost painlessly; yet by the time each one's life felt completely bound up in the other's, they both knew it was hopeless. Her father the duke would never allow Juliet to marry someone without property. Indeed, he separated the couple—but not before they exchanged a lovers' vow; his, to gain rank and make himself worthy of the match; hers, to preserve her virgin heart, his treasure, until he returned to claim and possess it.

When plague arrived, this same duke was notorious for deriding the idea that proper care couldn't protect a man of his sort, with his family, on his own property. In expensive and cautious seclusion, he proved himself right—until this second summer, when the destroyer, at one fell stroke, overthrew his precautions, his safety, and his life. Most of the staff on hand fled on the first appearance of disease; those who stayed soon died; once word that plague was there got out, no neighbor or

anyone local would go near the mansion. Our poor friend saw father, mother, brothers, sisters, sicken and die, and no help ever came from outside. By a strange fatality, Juliet alone escaped; she to the last waited on her relatives, and smoothed the pillow of death, one by one, until the last blow to her father's house had been delivered.

Finally, the youthful survivor of her race, absorbed in wordless despair, Juliet sat alone among the dead. No living being was near to soothe her or take her away from this hideous company. A rare September night storm of whirlwind, thunder, and hail rattled round the house; in the gusty racket she heard ghastly harmonies, her family's dirge; then came heavy sheets of rain. She looked up from the floor. Someone was calling her: through the windy downpour a familiar voice had cut like diamond—but whose? Her name again: a voice she loved was calling—but all her loved ones were already present, they lay glaring on her with stony eyes. Was she going mad, or was she dying herself, that she could hear them? As another explanation flashed into her brain, she leapt up and ran to the window—a burst of lightning fulfilled her hope, when it showed Juliet her lover on the lawn beneath. Joy lent her strength to get downstairs and open the door to him; then she fainted in his arms.

Though she reproached herself a thousand times for reviving to happiness, instead of grief, the natural clinging of the human mind to life and joy was at full ebb in her young heart. She gave herself up to the enchantment: they were married; and in their radiant features I saw incarnate, for the last time, the spirit of

love, of rapturous sympathy, which once had been the life of the world.

I envied them. My ties in the world had grown too many with the years; I could never imbibe those singular feelings again—optimism, delight, a sense of invulnerability. Above all, the anxious mother, my own beloved, drooping Idris, claimed my thoughts and earnest care. Though I could neither quiet nor reproach her ceaseless, unsleeping anxiety for our family's lives, I exerted myself to distract her attention, and kept her from looking too closely at the truth of things. Disease, misery, and death approached steadily. Day after day, some news arrived that seemed to transcend in horror all that had gone before. Wretched beings came to us from everywhere, crawling sometimes, in search of help and shelter; the Castle's population decreased daily, even so; the survivors huddled together in fear, trying to guess who'd be next to go, watching each other's faces for telltale signs. All this I minimized and concealed whatever I could, trying to keep Idris from being too affected by it. As for my own courage, I found it survived even despair: I might be vanquished, but I would not yield.

One day, September 9th, seemed devoted to every disaster, every harrowing incident.

Early that morning, I learned that a grandmother of one of the Castle's staff had arrived in the night, unexpectedly, with a badly bruised wrist and maybe worse. I hurried to pay my respects and learn her condition. This old woman had reached her hundredth year; her skin shriveled, her form bent and lost in

extreme decrepitude, she still continued in existence, outliving many younger and stronger; she must have begun to feel as if she'd live forever. Almost everyone else in her village, I knew, was already dead of plague. She was able to tell me what had brought her to us.

When the plague reached her neighborhood, she hid from it. Clinging, with the dastard feeling of the aged, to the remnant of her spent life, she barred her door, locked her windows, refused to communicate with anyone. She'd wander out at night to get something to eat, happy to find the village deserted, because it meant she was in no danger from the plague. As the earth became more desolate, her difficulty trying to feed herself increased. At first, her son, who lived nearby, had humored her by placing supplies where she'd find them; at last he died. But even threatened by starvation, her fear of plague was paramount, and her greatest care was to avoid her fellow creatures.

She grew weaker each day, and each day she had further to go to find sustenance. Finally, prowling about one night, far from home, she happened on a bakery. The door was open and the shelves were stocked; no one was around. She gorged herself on bread and pastry, piled all she could into sacks, hurried towards home, and promptly lost her way. The night was windless, hot, and cloudy; her load became too heavy for her; and one by one she threw away her loaves, still trying to get along, hobbling more and more lamely, at last too weak to go on. Crawling a little way into a cornfield by the road, she fell fast asleep.

Sounds awoke her in darkness. The tall stalks above her head were rustling. Then, almost beside her ear, came a low, human moan. She wanted to jump up and run but her stiff centenarian joints refused to obey. The rustling grew and she heard a sigh, heaved from the sufferer's heart. Then a smothered voice breathed out, "Water—water!" Shaking with fear, the old woman managed to sit upright. Close, very close, lay a half-naked figure, just discernible in the gloom. She heard it moan and cry again for water. Her old teeth chattered, her knees knocked together, she tried to move away—but only managed to attract the attention of her unknown companion. With convulsive violence, her hand was seized; the grasp felt like iron, the fingers like the keen teeth of an animal trap. "Finally! You're here!" came the cry—but these were last words, and a last exertion. The joints relaxed, the biting clutch was broken; a low, final moan marked the moment of death. Morning broke, and the old woman saw the corpse, marked with the fatal disease, lying next to her. She felt struck by the plague.

And now, believing herself infected, she no longer dreaded the company of other people. With all the speed her aged frame could muster, she'd come straight to her granddaughter, at Windsor Castle, there to lament and die. Even as she finished relating these events, the horrible symptoms of plague overtook her. Still she clung to life, and bewailed her bad luck between hideous groans.

The swift advance of the disease suggested, what proved to

be the fact, that she could not survive many hours. While I was directing the necessary care to be taken of her, Clara entered, trembling and pale; alarmed, I asked what was wrong. She started to cry, and threw herself into my arms weeping.

“Uncle, dearest uncle, don’t hate me forever! I have to tell you—you have to know, that Elvis, poor little Elvis!”

Sobs choked the rest. The fear of so mighty a calamity as the loss of our adored cherub froze the current of my blood; but the remembrance of his mother restored my presence of mind. I followed Clara back to my darling’s little bed. He had a high fever; but for all my fondness and fears, I detected no symptoms of the plague. He wasn’t yet three years old, and his illness appeared only one of those attacks common to infancy.

But Idris must not see him in this state. The fever was violent, the torpor complete; his heavy half-closed lids, his burning cheeks were enough, without the greater fear of pestilence, to awaken alarm. Though she was only twelve years old, Clara was so prudent and careful that I knew I could entrust his care to her; my task, meanwhile, would be to prevent Idris from noticing their absence. I administered all the appropriate remedies, hoping they’d work fast, and left my sweet niece to watch beside the sickbed, with instructions to come get me right away if she noticed any change.

To my relief, I found Idris with her admirer, Merrival. The astronomer’s view of humanity was too telescopic for him to notice its present distress, and he lived in the midst of the pandemic quite unconscious of its existence. This poor man,

immensely learned, had the mental competence of a guileless, unforeseeing child. A request to Adrian, for the use of the Castle's private observatory to track certain planetary motions, had introduced him to our clan at Windsor some years back. Despite his renown, it was plain he lived in utter poverty. Indeed, as often as he, his pale wife and their numerous offspring reached the point of starvation, Merrival—never conscious of hunger—observed nothing wrong. His astronomical theories absorbed him; the walls of the family's inadequate rooms were kept bare for his scrawled calculations; a hard-earned fee, or a coat, he'd trade for a book without thought or remorse; he neither heard his children cry, nor recognized the emaciation of the form in bed beside him. His wife was one of those wondrous beings, to be found only among women, whose affections could not be diminished by misfortune. Her mind divided between boundless admiration for her husband, and tender anxiety for her children, she waited on him, worked for them, and never complained, though care rendered her life one long drawn-out, melancholy dream.

Adrian's patronage relieved these distresses for good. The astronomer often thanked us for the books we lent him, and for the use of our instruments, but never spoke of his spacious new home (among other improvements). According to his wife, he hadn't noticed any difference—only remarking about his new private study, that the children were barely in the room anymore; and to her infinite surprise he complained of this unaccustomed quiet.

He'd come now to announce to us (to Idris, really) the completion of his Essay on the Pericyclical Motions of the Earth's Axis, which, he explained, dealt with "the precession of the equinoctial points," and the consequent state of humanity six thousand years hence. A description of the unknown, unimaginable creatures who'd hold our vanished species' leading place by then, might have been of more genuine interest; but we never had the heart to say so to the poor old man, nor to tell him that there were no publishers or readers left. At the moment I came in, he was pointing out a passage to Idris, to ask what she thought of his position—then answered himself without a pause. She couldn't refrain from a smile, which I was glad to see, for it meant she had no idea of our baby's danger. I shuddered to think what would happen if she discovered the truth. Joining the conversation, I did my best to prolong her gentle amusement at the contrast between our present month-by-month views of the future, and Merrival's confident projections of human life at home in eternity.

Too late, I noticed Clara beckon me from the doorway; glimpsing motion in a mirror, Idris had already turned and seen her, and her grief-stricken face. To spring up—to suspect evil—to perceive that, since Alfred was in the room, her youngest darling faced the danger—to speed, to fly across the castle halls and chambers to his room, was the work of a moment. She beheld her Elvis lying fever-stricken and motionless.

Anguish flooded her. Leaving me and Clara to do the nurse's part, Idris sat by the bed, glazed eyes fixed on her babe, holding

one little burning hand; so she passed the many hours to follow in this unvaried agony. She could not accept my assurances that Elvis wasn't sick with plague; desperate fear deprived her of judgment and reflection; her whole body shook with terror at every slight convulsion of his features; if he moved, she dreaded a crisis; if he lay still, she saw death in his torpor. One mournful panic followed the next.

The poor little thing's fever increased near sundown. The sensation was dreary, to say the least, with which one looked forward to passing the long hours of night beside a sickbed—especially if the patient was an infant, who could not explain its pain, and whose flickering life resembled the “candle in the wind” of the old popular song. Watchers kept casting eager glances towards the eastern view; angry impatience would suck them down further like quicksand with each sight of unbroken dark. The walls and creaky rafters would stir, a slight wail rise from an invisible insect or two: desolation. That night Clara, finally overcome by weariness, lay curled up asleep at the foot of her cousin's bed. Afraid to speak to Idris, who kept her immovable seat, with the child's hand in hers, I paced—I watched the stars from the balcony—I went back to my child—I hovered—I felt his little pulse—I drew near his mother—again I paced away.

At six in the morning, I heard a gentle sigh from our patient. The fever-burn had faded from his cheeks, his pulse was regular; torpor had yielded to sleep. For a long time I dared not hope, but when all the signs were finally unmistakable, I

ventured to whisper to Idris, that the danger was past. It took a while longer to persuade her that I was telling the truth.

But neither his survival, nor the speedy convalescence of our child, could restore even the partial peace of mind she'd been able to enjoy before. Her fear had been too deep, too absorbing, too entire, to be replaced by any sense of security. She felt as if she'd awoken from her previous calm, like a passenger on a ship who dreams of being rocked in a cradle—too hard—and wakes up to find the vessel sinking. Before, her placidity had contained the pangs of fear that visited; now, she never enjoyed a single interval of hope. No smile from the heart ever beamed across her fair countenance—though sometimes she forced one. Then the tears would flow, and a gushing sea of grief close above the wrecks of past happiness.

Still while I was near her, she could not be in utter despair. Idris didn't seem to fear my death, or even picture its possibility. To my care she consigned the full freight of her anxieties; like a tiny wind-nipped fawn beside its mother doe's warm flank, she sheltered and reposed against my love. While I, not proudly as in days of joy, yet tenderly, and with glad consciousness of the comfort I afforded, drew my trembling girl close to my heart, and tried to shield her sensitive nature from every painful thought or rough circumstance.

One other incident marked the end of that summer. The Countess of Windsor, Ex-Queen of England, returned from Europe. Quitting the vacancy of Vienna, her preferred base, she'd delayed the inevitable at Hamburg for a time, but at last,

among the final waves of refugees, she came to London. Unable to tame her haughty mind to anything like submission, many weeks elapsed before she gave Adrian notice of her arrival. Though he hadn't heard from his mother in years, he welcomed her with grace and affection, ready to help heal the wounds of pride and sorrow. She responded coldly, and by her total apparent want of sympathy drove him off from further efforts.

Idris heard of the return with pleasure. Her own maternal feelings were so ardent, she imagined the Ex-Queen must now, in this wasteland world, have lost her pride and put aside her harshness. With precious grandchildren to introduce, she pictured a reunion full of delight on both sides. The first check to her elation came with a formal communiqué from the fallen majesty of England. It stated that Lionel Verney, Commoner, was “under no conditions to be intruded upon her presence.” She consented to forgive her daughter, and to acknowledge the offspring; larger concessions must not be expected. Idris, writing in return, declined a meeting in that case.

I was left infuriated by the Ex-Queen's message. Now that our dwindling race had lost all distinctions of rank, now that we felt a kindred, fraternal nature with all who bore the human genome, this angry, prideful remainder of times forever past and gone struck me as worse than foolish. Too much taken up by her own dreadful fears to be angry, Idris barely grieved the latest rupture, which she blamed on her mother's basic hard-heartedness. This wasn't altogether true. A domineering will

had only disguised itself as callous feeling. The slave of pride, disdainful to exhibit any token of the struggle she endured, the haughty lady fancied that she sacrificed her happiness to a higher and immutable principle.

False! All of it was false—all but our affections, and our natural sympathy with pleasure or pain. There was only one good and one evil in the world—Life, and Death. The pomp of rank, the presumptions of power, the privileges of wealth had vanished like morning mist. One living beggar, or a petty thief, was worth more than a thousand dead aristocrats, more—alas the day!—than the hecatombs of our dead heroes, patriots, men and women of genius. There was severe degradation in this, for humanity. Even vice and virtue had lost their attributes and meaning. Life—life!—the continuation of our animal mechanism—was the Alpha and Omega of the desires, the prayers, the prostrate ambition of the human race.

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