

## (38) CHAPTER 2.

THE SPIRIT of emigration crept in among the few survivors who, congregating from various parts of England, met in and around London that fall. It existed as a breath, a wish, a far-off thought—until it reached Adrian. Fired by the idea, he instantly and enthusiastically started planning the remaining population's mass departure.

“Our immediate peril of death having passed with September's heat,” he said, “we have time to look ahead and think rationally about how we should pass the winter to come. And I can perceive no option more advantageous than this emigration scheme. If nothing else, it draws us away from the immediate scene of our woe; then, led through pleasant and picturesque countries, we may for a time be amused in our despair.”

He'd ridden out to us at Windsor, where the season's renewal of our short-term lease on life had even Idris lifting her head, as a lily after a storm, when a last sunbeam tinges its silver cup. However she liked this idea no better coming from her brother now than she'd liked it in February, when it came from

me. “But Adrian—to leave the country of our ancestors, the land made holy by their graves!”

“Yes!” he cried. “To leave England forever! To turn from its polluted fields and groves, and, placing the sea between us, to quit it, as shipwrecked sailors quit their rock when a ship rides by that might save them. Such is my plan.”

But I urged him to consider, as I had done, the real implications of what he proposed. Exiles before us, leaving their native soil voluntarily, for the sake of work or pleasure, remained a part of England, and England part of them. Though divided by thousands of miles from its shores, they heard the daily events of home, each of them knowing that they need only return to resume their place in society—indeed, those with families could surround themselves at once with the associations and habits of childhood. Not so with us, the present day’s remnant. “If we leave England, *in vagabond pursuit of dreadful safety*,” I said, quoting the old playwright John Ford’s phrase, “we leave none to represent us, none to repopulate our desert island. The name of England dies, when we’ve left her.”

He nodded, and replied, “Yet let us go! England is in her shroud—we can’t chain ourselves to a corpse. Let’s go. The world is our country now, and we’ll choose its most fertile spot for our new home. Shall we, in these echoing halls, under this wintry sky, sit with closed eyes and folded hands, awaiting death? Let us rather go out to meet it gallantly: or perhaps—for the entire planet, this fair gem in the solar system’s crown, surely can’t be plague-stricken—perhaps, in some secluded

nook, amidst eternal spring, and waving trees, and rippling streams, we may find Life. The world is vast, and England, though her fields and woods seem interminable, is small. Over on the Continent, at the close of a day's march over high mountains, through snowy valleys, we may happen upon Health. So, committing our loved ones to its charge, may we replant the human race, that uprooted tree, and leaving to posterity our tales of life before the plague, ourselves become the heroes and sages of the lost state of things.

“Hope beckons and sorrow urges us—the heart pounds with expectation. This eager desire for change must be an omen of success. O, come! Say farewell to the dead! Farewell to the tombs of those we loved—farewell to giant London and the placid Thames, to fair lakes and mountain districts, to birth-places of the wise and good—to Windsor Forest and its antique castle, farewell! Let them make themes for stories—we must live elsewhere.”

Though he dared not give words—not then—to all that was in his heart, we heard hints enough to understand: Adrian felt that the end of time was come. One by one, he knew, we'd dwindle into nothingness. Why await this sad consummation in our native country, when travelling would give us new goals and interests each day, and distract our thoughts from the finale's swift approach? And he believed that if we who still lived went to Italy, to sacred and eternal Rome, we might with greater patience submit to the same law which had laid her mighty towers low, might even lose our selfish grief in the sublime

aspect of her desolation.

So he despaired; yet what won us over to Adrian's party, heart and soul, was his appeal to our hopes. At those images of health and life for our children and their posterity, in some place to be found—we knew not where or when—but if never to be found, forever and ever to be sought—Idris smiled her consent. With a smile she agreed to leave her country, which she'd never left before, and abandon Windsor, her birthplace, its forest with its mighty trees, woodland paths, and green recesses where she'd played in childhood, and spent her happy youth; she'd leave without regret, for so she hoped to save her children's lives. They were her life, dearer than a spot consecrated to love, dearer than all else the earth contained.

They heard with childish glee of our removal. Yes, we might go to Athens, I told Clara when she asked, and watched her face become radiant with pleasure at the thought of seeing her parents' tomb, and the scenes of her father's glory—images whose recollection had filled her mind since infancy with high, restless, over-serious thoughts. Our boys' first concern was for Alfred's dog, and a pet eagle, almost blind with age; these humble beings were dear friends, who'd travel with us. But no such catalogue of favorites could be made without grief over how much we must leave behind. A treasured rose tree, a marble vase beautifully carved: these must come, too, Alfred and Elvis insisted. Tears rushed into their mother's eyes as they began exclaiming over other cherished and familiar objects. What a pity, they said, that we couldn't take the castle and the

forest, the deer and the birds along with us. I rebuked them gently, fondly.

“We’ve already lost treasures far more precious than these; and what we desert here is nothing compared to the treasures we seek to preserve—your lives. Let’s not for a single moment forget that goal. Let’s focus on our hope, and we’ll soon stop regretting trifles.”

Seeing the children quickly return to their delightful prospects of future amusement, I left them to go in search of Idris, who’d disappeared. I found her below the castle, in the little park to which she’d escaped, there to hide her weakness and indulge her tears in solitude. Her recent smiles erased, she clung to an old oak, pressing its rough trunk with her roseate lips, unable to suppress her tearful sobs and broken cries; with surpassing grief I beheld this loved one of my heart, so lost in sorrow! I drew her towards me; and, as she felt my kisses on her eyelids, as she felt my arms embrace her, she revived enough to speak.

“You’re very kind not to reproach me, Lionel. I weep, and a bitter pang of intolerable sorrow tears my heart. And yet I am happy. While mothers lament their children, and wives lose their husbands, you and my children are left to me. Yes, I am happy, most happy, that I can weep like this over imaginary sorrows, and that the loss—the slight loss—of my adored country hasn’t been annihilated in some mightier misery. Take me where you will; where you and my children are, there shall be Windsor, and every country will be England to me. Let these

tears flow not for myself, happy and ungrateful as I am, but for the dead world—for our lost country—I'll cry for all of the love, and life, and joy, now choked with dusty death.”

She words came quickly, as if spoken to convince herself. Turning her eyes from the trees and forest paths she loved, Idris hid her face against my chest, and we—yes, my masculine firmness dissolved—together we wept consolatory tears. Then, calm, if not almost cheerful, we returned to the castle.

Not long afterwards, having persuaded her that we should go up to London to make our final preparations for departure, I stood with Idris as she took her farewell view of Windsor. For the last time we gazed from the terrace at the countryside spread below. The last rays of sun set alight October's autumnal tints among the dark masses of the woods. Uncultivated fields and smokeless cottages lay in shadow; the Thames wound through the wide plain, past Eton's venerable, empty walls raised in dark relief. Only the cawing of innumerable rooks, speeding in columns or thick wedges towards their nests in the Home Park, disturbed the evening silence. Nature was the same, I observed, as when she'd been the kind mother of the human race; now, childless and forlorn, her fertility mocked us; her loveliness masked deformity. Why should the breeze gently stir the trees, and humanity feel not its refreshment? Why did dark night adorn herself with stars, without human eyes to see? Why are there fruits, or flowers, or streams, when people aren't here to enjoy them?

I turned to Idris beside me, her dear hand locked in mine,

and saw her face radiant with a smile. “The sun is alone,” she answered, “but we aren’t. A strange star, my Lionel, ruled our birth. Though sadly and with dismay we may look upon humanity’s annihilation, we remain here for each other. Did I ever in the wide world seek anyone but you? And since you still exist, why should I complain? You and nature are still true to me. Beneath the shades of night, and through the day whose glare shows up our solitude, you’ll still be at my side, and even Windsor won’t be missed.”

Her words returned to me later, as we were leaving. I’d chosen nighttime for our journey to London, when the change and desolation outside might be less obvious. With bicycles packed behind, our only surviving servant drove us in a carriage, first down the steep hill, then onto the Long Walk’s dusky expanse. At times like these, minute circumstances assume gigantic proportions; the very swinging open of the white gate that admitted us into the forest, struck me as hugely significant: this everyday act would never occur again! The moon’s setting crescent glittered through the branches overhead; a troop of deer we scared fled bounding away among the forest shades. I turned and looked back at the castle, whose heavy outline lay in a dark mass against the sky. Its windows glistened in the moonlight. The road bent, the castle vanished; the trees near us waved a solemn dirge with the midnight breeze. Idris leaned back against the seat. Her two hands pressed mine, her countenance was placid; as before, she seemed to lose the sense of what she now left, in the memory of what she still possessed.

I, too, though my thoughts were sad and solemn, felt that I carried with me those dearest to me: I quitted what I loved, not what loved me. After all, neither the castle battlements nor these long familiar trees heard the parting sound of our carriage wheels with regret. I was pleased, after a long separation, to rejoin Adrian, never again to part. And, while I felt Idris to be near, and heard the regular breathing of our two boys, sleeping quietly, I couldn't be unhappy. But Clara was greatly moved. With streaming eyes, trying to suppress her sobs, she leaned from the window to catch every last glimpse of her native Windsor.

In the Adrian who welcomed us on our arrival, no trace of sorrowing despair remained; from his look of health, his smile, his animated tones, you couldn't guess that he was about to lead the English nation's shrunken remnant out of their native country, into the tenantless realms of the south—there to die, one by one, till the LAST MAN should remain in a voiceless, empty world.

Impatient for our departure, he'd advanced far in his preparations. All obeyed the Lord Protector of dying England; all looked up to him. His wisdom guided all. Useless to transport many things, he judged, for we should find abundant provision in every town across the Channel. There would be bicycles or horse and carriage transport enough for everyone. Moving the luckless crowd, who relied wholly on him, Adrian's care was like its soul. His wish was to prevent the need for labor; to bestow a festive appearance on this funeral train.

Our numbers so far amounted to not quite two thousand persons. Each day witnessed fresh arrivals to London and its suburbs; and small parties had been dispatched to various parts of England in search of stragglers. Though anxious to leave England before winter set in, not until we'd assured ourselves against the possibility of leaving behind a single human being would we actually depart. The plan was for everyone to assemble at one place on the 20th of November. Supervisors and captains had been assigned to various roles. I would be joining the fifty person council assisting Adrian more closely, chosen without regard to station in life, save that given by reputations for benevolence and prudence.

We repaired as usual to our Hyde Park house. Not far away, the aged Countess of Windsor was residing with her son in the Protectoral Palace. Would the childishness of old age have mingled with unforgotten pride, to make this high-born dame still so inveterate against me? So Idris worried as now, for the first time for many years, she and her mother met. Age and care had furrowed the older woman's cheeks and bent her form; but she remained bright-eyed, her manners—authoritative—unchanged. She received her daughter coldly but displayed more feeling as she enfolded her grandsons in her arms. It was our nature, to wish to pass along our values and beliefs to posterity through our offspring. Perhaps, having failed in this design with regard to her own children, the Countess hoped to find the next generation more tractable.

Idris offered a vivid account of what happened in reply to her

first, tentative, deliberately casual mention of my name. Shaken by a convulsive gesture of anger, in a voice trembling with hate, her mother responded immediately:

“I am of little worth in this world, where the young are so impatient to push the old off the scene. But, Idris, if you do not wish to see your mother drop dead at your feet, never mention that person’s name to me again. All else I can bear. I have resigned myself to the destruction of every hope I cherished for this family—but it is too much to require that I should love the instrument made by fate to be the most murderous means of my destruction.”

A strange speech, delivered as it was on that empty stage, where each might have played his part without impediment from the other. But the haughty Ex-Queen thought as Shakespeare’s Octavius Cæsar, of his Cleopatra’s Antony,

*We could not stall together  
In the whole world.*

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