

(39) CHAPTER 2 cont.

OUR LAST English weather had been temperate; soft rains fell at night, and by day the wintry sun shone out. Our departure was set for November 25th. All those now gathered in London would move forward in separate parties, taking different routes to unite at last at Paris. Adrian and his division—some 500 persons, including our family—would sail by way of Dover and Calais.

On the evening of the 20th, Adrian and I rode for the last time through the streets of London. They were grass-grown, deserted, the sidewalks covered in weeds and piles of filth. The doors of empty mansions creaked back and forth on their big hinges. Voiceless bell towers and church steeples pierced the smokeless air: the churches were open, but no prayer was offered at their altars; mildew and damp had already defaced the carvings and ornaments; birds, and domestic animals, now homeless, had built nests and made their lairs in consecrated spots. The ponderous, blackened stone mass of St. Paul's with its high dome looked not like a temple, but a tomb. *Here Lies*

England, I thought, should have been engraved across the portico.

My mind was preoccupied with Idris. We'd now been in London about six weeks. Day by day, during that time, I'd watched her health decline. Not eating, not sleeping, her body wasting away: her heart was broken. To be near her children—or to sit by me, drinking deep the dear persuasion that I remained to her—was all she cared to do. Gone was the forced vivacity, along with those displays of cheerful affection, the springy gait, the light-hearted tone she'd kept up for so long. I could not disguise from myself, nor could she conceal, her life-consuming sorrow. A change of scene, as Adrian said, and reviving hopes, might restore her. All I feared was that plague would catch her first, but so far she was untouched by that menace. Fatigued after a day full of packing and other preparations, she'd been resting when I left.

Her brother and I pedaled on through the city, speaking little. All was abandoned, but nowhere in ruins—and this medley of trim, undamaged, valuable real estate ran in discordant contrast to the lonely silence of the streets. No human step was heard, no human form discerned. We saw animals aplenty: troops of dogs; now and then a horse without bridle or saddle; an wide-shouldered ox lowed at us from the narrow doorway of a feed store.

Night closed in and it began to rain. We'd come as far east as the Minorities without seeing anyone and were about to return to Hyde Park, when a voice, a human voice, attracted our atten-

tion. Nothing could have been stranger, or sadder, to hear in that uncanny silence: a child's voice, singing some merry, silly song, laughing now and then; talking—to no one; for we heard no reply as we followed the sound to its source. This proved to be a magnificent private house, the upper rooms brilliantly illuminated as if for a party. The street door stood open. Leaving our bicycles in the darkened high-roofed hall, we followed the ringing voice up a swoop of marble stairs and to a door; it opened on a long brightly-lit suite of splendid rooms containing two inhabitants.

One, the songstress, a laughing little girl about ten years old, we saw dancing wildly, almost in the paws of the other, a large boisterous Newfoundland dog that kept jumping on her. She was dressed to grotesque effect in a nonsensically mismatched assortment of women's undergarments and intimate apparel. Almost toppled to the floor by her gigantic companion, she raised and shook a scolding finger—then, with another laugh, she on the plush carpet to play with him. The dog perceived us in the doorway first and jumped up with a loud bark. The child turned: we could see her face lose its gaiety and assume a sullen expression; she leapt to her feet and slunk back, apparently meditating an escape. I walked up and took her hand. She didn't resist, but with a stern unchildlike frown, so different from her former hilarity, she stood still, her eyes fixed on the ground.

I spoke gently. "What are you doing here? Who are you?" A trembling fit shook her but she was silent. "My poor child," asked Adrian, "are you alone?" There was a winning softness in

his voice that went to the young stranger's heart; she looked at him, then snatched her hand from mine and threw herself into his arms. Clinging round his neck, her unfrozen tears flowing, "Save me! save me!" she cried

"I will save you," he replied. "There's nothing to be afraid of—not this man certainly, he's my friend and will do you no harm. Are you alone?"

"No, I've got Lion with me."

"And your father and mother?"

"I never had those, I'm a social care child. Everybody's gone, they've been gone for days and days. But if they come back and find out I left the property without permission, they'll beat me so hard!"

These few words told her story: an orphan, taken on pretended charity, ill-treated, reviled. Her oppressors had died. Ignorant of everything, she found herself alone. A long time had to pass before she gained the courage to venture out from her solitude; after that, her childish vivacity governed her: she and her playful brute companion enjoyed a long holiday, the girl fearing nothing but the return of her protectors' harsh voices and cruel treatment.

She readily consented to go with Adrian, who soon had her better dressed and installed in his safe passenger seat. With Lion ambling comfortably alongside, we rode away—back to our loved ones. Back through scenes of alien sorrows, a ride through solitude which struck our eyes and not our hearts. While we imagined all the change and suffering that had come

upon these streets once thronged with people, now tenanted only by animals—while we rode through the death of the world, and hugged ourselves in the remembrance of what we still possessed—it was all the word to us—all this passing time—in the meanwhile—

Idris had finally closed her eyes for a few minutes. Seated nearby, Clara was reading a story to the two boys when she perceived a sudden change in Alfred's appearance. His heavy lids veiled our eldest darling's eyes, an unnatural color burnt in his cheeks, his breath came short. Clara glanced at the mother and saw Idris stir in her sleep at the narration's pause. "Go on!" Elvis urged eagerly, unaware. She started to read again, raising her eyes to look now at Alfred, now at Idris; her voice shaking, she read on till she saw the child about to fall. Starting forward with a cry, she caught him; but Idris sat up, roused. She looked on her son. She saw death stealing across his features; she laid him on a bed, she held drink to his parched lips.

Yet he might be saved. If I were there, Idris thought, he might be saved. Perhaps, like the time before, it wasn't the plague. Without me to tell her, what could she do? Stay and watch him die! Why had I chosen that moment to be absent, and where?

"Look after him, Clara," she burst out. She had to find me. "I'll come right back."

Every room of our house at that moment was occupied by people, future companions of our journey, who'd taken up a temporary residence with us. All anyone could tell her was that

I'd gone out with Adrian. Entreating them to try and find me, she returned to her child; he was plunged in a frightful state of torpor. Again she rushed downstairs. She threw open the front door: all was dark, deserted, splashed with rain. The weather had turned with a vengeance. Idris shivered in a blast of piercing cold and then lost all self-possession. She ran into the street and called my name! Only a howling wind replied. Panic gave wings to her feet; she darted forward to seek me, she knew not where; putting all her thoughts, all her energy, all her being into speed alone, most misdirected speed, she neither felt, nor feared, nor paused, but ran right on.

The strength in her legs failed her so suddenly that she had no time to break the fall and landed heavily on the pavement, injuring herself. She lay stunned for a time. When, despite the pain, she got up and started to walk, she was shedding fountains of tears, stumbling every few steps, no idea of direction—only now and then she called to me in a feeble voice; but I was cruel and unkind, she cried heart-piercingly. There was no one to feel or reply: even the city's wandering animals had been driven by the night's inclemency to seek the human habitations they'd usurped. Thin dress drenched with rain, wet hair clinging round her neck, Idris tottered through the dark streets until she tripped on something and fell down again. This time she couldn't get up, she barely tried. Huddling on the ground, she resigned herself to the fury of the elements and her own heart's bitter grief. She breathed an earnest prayer to die speedily, for there was no relief but death. So resigned, she ceased to lament for

her dying child but shed kindly, bitter tears over the grief in store for me. While she lay in tears, life almost suspended, she felt a warm, soft hand on her forehead, and heard notes of tender compassion in the gentle voice that asked, “May I help you, my dear lady?”

The presence—the existence—of another human being, sympathetic and kind, galvanized Idris, who sat up, clasped the woman’s hands, and begged her through fresh tears to go and find me, and bid me hasten to my dying child, to save him, for the love of heaven, to save him!

Most providentially, the woman endeavoring to help Idris to her feet was our friend Juliet from Windsor, lately married daughter of the late proud duke. She led my darling under shelter, but soon recognized the urgency of getting her home to Hyde Park—where perhaps I’d already returned, or our child revived. Idris agreed and they set off; leaning on her friend’s arm, sharing her cloak, she tried to walk at a steady pace but irresistible faintness made her pause again and again.

By this time, after a parting hastened by the worsening storm, Adrian had turned in at the Protectoral Palace with our little charge—the great dog still loped alongside them—and I was pedaling for home. Soon from the top of the road I spotted an assemblage of persons around our doorstep in whose gestures I instinctively read some heavy change, some new misfortune. Approaching with swift alarm, afraid to ask a single question, I did a running dismount and let the machine clatter down against the curb. The crowd saw me, knew me, and in

awful silence divided to make way for me. A groan came from somewhere in the house; and for the second time that night I found myself following a voice—only this time I rushed upstairs without further reflection. Another groan, behind a door I thrust open, my momentum carrying me into a darkened room: where immediately a pernicious smell assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms which made their way to my very heart. At the same time I felt my leg clasped by someone groaning on the floor. I looked down to see a half-naked Black man, his body writhing under the agony of disease. He had me in a convulsive grip; with mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, slipped, and fell on top of the sufferer, who wound both his naked festering arms around me. His face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment of aching nausea I was overcome by plague, my head was bowed. Reflection returning all at once, I sprang up, threw the wretch from me, and darted up the staircase to my family's chamber. A dim light showed me Alfred on a couch. A trembling Clara, paler than whitest snow, had raised his body with one arm and held a cup of water to the lips. I saw full well that no spark of life existed in that ruined form. His features were rigid, his eyes glazed, his head had fallen back. I took him from her, I laid him softly down, kissed his cold little mouth. Then: "Clara, where is Idris?" I asked in a whisper. She answered likewise; whispers so vain when the whole world lacked cannon fire loud enough to reach Alfred in his immaterial abode.

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