

(40) CHAPTER 2 concl.

IN THE MIDST of an icy, driving downpour, it came as the worst of news to hear that Idris had gone out to look for me and hadn't returned. The first fearful symptoms of plague were already gaining on me; if I ever wanted to see my love again, there was no time to lose. Without hesitation I returned to the street, mounted my bicycle and rode into the dark and rain. My child lay dead; the seeds of mortal disease had taken root in my bosom; I went to seek Idris, my adored, wandering all alone among the labyrinthine streets of a depopulated London while torrents gushed from heaven to bathe her dear head, her treasured limbs in numbing cold.

I stopped often, for a pounding, feverish headache made me imagine the sound of her voice in every gust that drenched me. Somewhere in Marylebone I heard a woman call out from a doorstep as I passed. Not Idris, though, so I kept pedaling—until in a flash of second sight, I realized there'd been two figures in that doorway, one thin, graceful, clinging to the stronger woman for support. Seconds later I was beside them, taking

Idris in my arms. I set her on my handlebars—in her state of total collapse she wasn't strong enough to ride behind—and bound my rain cloak round us both. The well known face of a good friend, much changed by grief, could at this moment of horror obtain from me no more than a passing glance of compassion for her recent widowhood. Juliet tightened a last strap for us and then stepped back out of the rain, as I started for home.

Dare I admit it? That was the last moment of my happiness; but I was happy. Idris would die: she must, for her heart was broken. I would die, for I must: I'd caught the plague. Earth was a scene of desolation; hope was madness; life had married death, the two were one; but as I rode along with Idris resting against me, sure that our lives were almost at a close, I reveled in the delight of possessing her once more. Again and again I stopped to kiss her and press her to my heart.

Arrived at Hyde Park, I carried Idris upstairs and helped get her out of her wet things; then I left her in Clara's care while I changed, returned a brief, reassuring reply to a worried message from Adrian, and asked of the household at large that my wife and I be left alone to rest. With the trembling caution of a miser visiting hoarded gold, I counted every moment and grudged each one not spent with Idris. I raced back to the chamber where the life of my life reposed. Just at the door, I paused and took a few seconds to assess my condition. Waves of shuddering nausea; head heavy, chest oppressed, legs watery: the symptoms of my disorder had been worsening fast. But I threw them off resolutely and met Idris with placid, even joyous looks.

She was lying on a couch. I locked the door behind me with care and went to sit beside her. We embraced, and our lips met in a kiss long drawn and breathless. . .

Would that moment had been my last!

“And Alfred?” My poor girl’s maternal feelings had awoken.

“Idris, we’ve been spared for each other, we’re together—don’t let any other idea intrude.” Understanding me, she bowed her head on my shoulder and wept. “I’m happy,” I continued. “Even on this fatal night, I declare myself happy beyond all description or conception. What more could we want, sweet one?”

She gave a start. “Why are you trembling like that, Lionel? And your eyes are so bloodshot!”

“I should tremble,” I replied, “happy as I am. Our child is dead, and further threats surround us—I should be trembling more! But, I’m happy, my own Idris, most happy.”

She caressed my face and said, “I understand you, my kind love. Like this, stricken as you are with sorrow at our loss, trembling and aghast, still you try so dearly to assuage my grief. I am not happy.” Tears flashed and fell from under downcast lids. “I’m unhappy, Lionel, because we’re inmates of a miserable prison and there is no joy for us. But the true love I bear you will render this and every other loss endurable.”

“We’ve been happy together, at least,” I said. “No misery to come can take our past from us, the happiness of years. We’ve been true to each other ever since my sweet princess-love came through the snow to the lowly cottage where I barely existed,

the penniless heir of a ruined man. Even now, with eternity before us, only one another's presence hereafter offers hope. Idris," my voice kept musing. "Do you think, when we die, we'll be divided?"

"*Die!*" She stared at me. "*When we die!* What do you mean? We never talk this way—what secret are you hiding from me in these dreadful words?"

"But, won't we all die, dearest?" I asked with a sad smile that failed to calm her.

"Gracious God! Are you ill, Lionel, that you speak of death? My only friend, heart of my heart—speak!"

"I don't think we have, any of us, long to live. So I ask you, Idris, when the curtain drops on this mortal scene, where do you think you and I will find ourselves?"

Reassured by my forthright tone, she fell to considering her answer. "Ever since the plague appeared," she said at last, "like everyone, I've thought a great deal about death. For years now, I've asked myself whether the humanity lost to this life may have been carried or reborn to some other one, and what it might be like there. Dwelling hour after hour on the mystery of a future state, I strove to form a rational conclusion. Think: if indeed, as I believe, we can expect to cast aside the shadow in which we've spent our lives walking, and step forth into the unclouded sunshine of knowledge and love—then how is Death anything more than a scarecrow, if we're to be revived with the same companions, the same affections, our hopes intact to reach their fulfillment, only our fears left with our bodies in the

grave? Alas! the same instinct behind my certainty that I shall not wholly die, makes me refuse to believe that I shall live wholly as I do now. Yet, Lionel, never, never, can I love any but you; through eternity I must desire your society. No, I don't believe that death will tear the two of us asunder; I don't believe the Ruler of the world, who knows my innocence of harm to anyone, would really permit it."

"Your remarks are like you, dear love," replied I. "Gentle and good; let's cherish this belief, and dismiss our anxiety. But, sweet, there's no sin, if that same God made our nature, when we yield to what's ordained through its promptings. We are designed to love life and cling to it; we must love the living smile, the sympathetic touch, the voice peculiarly thrilling to our mortal mechanism. Let's not become so secure about the life hereafter that we neglect the present. This present moment, short as it is, represents one part of eternity—the most precious part, since it's all we have and ours alone. You, Idris, the hope of my eternity, are my present joy. So let me look at you! Reading love in your dear eyes, I drink intoxicating pleasure."

In some alarm at my vehemence, Idris returned my gaze—and saw what? My reddened eyes were hot, I felt them starting from my head; every artery beat, methought, audibly, every muscle throbbed, each nerve sent its signal. Her look of wild fear told me that the time for secrecy was past. "Yes, it's true, I'm sick. And this is all the medicine I need." I put my arm around her waist. "So it is, mine own beloved: the last hour of many happy ones. We can no longer shun an inevitable destiny.

I can't live long—but, again and again, I say, this moment is ours!”

Idris had already taken in my situation. She felt the burn of fever on the palm she pressed above my heart. “One moment,” she murmured almost inaudibly, with lips gone white. “Only one moment.” Her features convulsed and paler than marble, she slipped from the couch and knelt there, hiding her face in her hands. While there was hope, the agony had been unendurable; that was all over now; her feelings became solemn and calm. I listened, as she prayed for the strength to fulfill her duty and watch over me until the end. Suppressing every sigh, every sign of grief, like one of those martyrs in history books who submit, fearless, mute, and uncomplaining, to the instruments of torture, so Idris rose to her feet, and entered upon the endurance of torments of which the rack and the breaking wheel are but faint and metaphysical symbols.

As for me—I'd confessed; and at the moment of knowing that Idris shared my knowledge of our real situation, I was transformed. Every tension relaxed its grip on me. The perturbed and passion-tossed waves of thought subsided and left me rocking on a heavy metronomic swell, limitless and unchanging, till it should break on the remote shore towards which I rapidly advanced. . .

Idris made me lie down on the couch, and drew a low ottoman near at my entreaty. Sitting close to my pillow, she pressed my burning hands between her cold palms and yielded to my feverish restlessness. She let me talk, and talked to me, on

strange subjects—strange, that is, between a pair of lovers so consciously capturing their last earthly glimpses of what had been, for each, an only love.

We talked of times past; of our courtship's heights; of Raymond, Perdita, and Evadne. We speculated on what might arise in this deserted planet's future; surely, if even two or three were saved, it might be slowly re-peopled. We talked of the world to be found beyond the tomb, and of our more certain faith that other spirits, other minds, other perceptive beings, so far invisible to us, must populate this beautiful and imperishable universe with their own forms of thought and love.

We talked, I don't know how long. But in the morning I awoke from a painful heavy sleep to find Idris, very pale, sharing my pillow. The large orbs of her watch-wearied eyes had prised the lids apart to show the deep blue lights beneath; the slight murmurs issuing from her parted lips told that, even while asleep, she suffered.

Yet her form was still the temple of a residing deity; those eyes remained the windows of her soul; all grace, love, and intelligence still sat enthroned within that lovely bosom. Once she was dead, where would this mind, the dearer half of my mind, be? And those fair proportions lifeless, deserted, defaced—I pictured a wasteland of sand-choked ruins when I thought of it.

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