

(42) CHAPTER 3 cont.

PERSISTENT SNOWFALL caused the horses to drag their load slowly and heavily along the familiar road through Egham, until the wind made a sudden shift to the northwest. A fresh gale cleared the air around us, the dense vapors lifted from the horizon, and the massy dome of clouds, like the columned temple of the Philistines, fell to the south as if toppled by Samson. Night's clear empyrean was disclosed, and the little stars, immeasurably distant in their crystalline fields, showered their small rays on the glittering snow. Even the weary horses were cheered, and moved on with new strength.

At Bishopsgate we entered Windsor's silent forest. Our road wound towards, then joined, the Long Walk. At its end rose our destination. Admirable emblem of endurance, nearly as ancient as the rock on which it stands, former abode of kings and queens: I looked with a reverence much mixed with tearful affection at the Castle; for it was here I'd found asylum to enjoy my long lease of love with the perishable, unmatchable treasure of dust now lying cold across my lap. Now indeed, as one sad

association followed the next, I could have yielded to all the softness of my nature, and wept, and cried for sympathy from her beloved trees, or from the herds of deer who'd fed from her own hands as she passed among them on her fairy feet.

Adrian had long since ordered the removal of the Long Walk and Castle entrance gates. We rode straight across the snowy quadrangle inside, down through the gateway below the feudal tower, and into the Lower Ward. Beneath the tall stone perpendiculars of St. George's Chapel we halted. One door stood open; I entered first to place my lantern and by its light, returning, I carried Idris up the aisle with tender caution. On either side, above the stalls, the ancient Knights of the Garter banners—her family's foremost among them—still displayed their vain emblazonry. Farewell to England's glory and heraldry! With a slight feeling of wonder at how humankind could have ever been interested in such things, I laid her softly down on the altar carpet and bent over the lifeless corpse of my beloved. Looking on her dead bare face, the features already contracted by rigor, I felt as if all the visible universe had grown as soulless, inane, and comfortless as that clay-cold image beneath me. For a moment I was gripped by an intolerable sense of struggle with the world's basic principles and laws; I detested them. Yet the serenity that lingered on my dead love's face, recalled me to a more soothing tone of mind. I was here for a purpose, with a duty to fulfill. As for lamenting her—how could I, when I so envied Idris her happy state of permanent insensibility?

Nothing had changed since my previous visit to the royal vault. In those unceremonious days, the heavy paving stones they'd removed from the entrance for our Alfred's interment had gone unreplaced, and still lay off to one side, a lantern sitting on top where I'd left it. By this second light I descended the steps and followed a turning passage to the large chamber whose walls, behind locked grates, held the coffins of the Windsor line. My little boy's small coffin sat dwarfed on the room's gigantic central plinth. With hasty, trembling hands I constructed a bier beside it of the furs and Indian shawls I'd carried down. Then I bore my lost one to her last bed in this damp abode of death, decently composing her limbs and covering them with a mantle, veiling all except her face, which remained lovely and placid. She appeared to rest like one over-wearied, her beauteous eyes steeped in sweet slumber. Yet not so—she was dead! How intensely I longed to lie down beside her and gaze till I was gathered to the same repose.

But death doesn't come at the bidding of the miserable. My blood had never flowed with such an even current, my limbs had never felt so quick with life since my recent recovery. If I wanted to die, I must choose to. Inside this chamber of mortality, what could be more natural than to take my place beside the lost hope of my life, and give in to famine? Yet even as I looked at Idris, her features' sisterly resemblance to Adrian's brought my thoughts back again to the living, to this dear friend, and to Clara and Evelyn, sixty miles off in Rochester, waiting anxiously for our return.

Then I heard a noise, upstairs in the far chapel—footsteps and clicks combined unmistakably, echoed by the vaulted roof, borne to me through hollow passages—a bicycle being pushed. What sort of ghoul haunted these precincts? I raced up the steps into the dusky chapel and saw a cyclist, small and elderly, advancing towards the altar alongside one of continental manufacture’s top flyweight frames. Notable too were the elite winter cycling outfit, in black, and the tottering step; maybe the bicycle was even being used for support. Hearing me, the intruder looked up. The lamp I held illuminated my own figure, and the moonbeams struggling through the high altar window fell upon the other’s face. Wrinkled gauntness, piercing eyes, commanding brow: I recognized the Ex-Queen, Countess of Windsor.

With a hollow voice she asked, “Where is the princess?” I pointed to the torn-up floor. The vault was too distant for the rays of the small glimmering lamp I’d left behind to be discernible; she walked to the spot and gazed down into the palpable darkness. “Your light,” she said. I handed it over and watched her dip it above the precipitous steps, as if calculating how to manage them. Instinctively I made a silent offer of my assistance. She motioned me away with a scornful look, then pointed downwards—a living statue, a study in hate and human, passionate strife—to say, “There at least I may have her undisturbed.”

She walked deliberately down, while I, overcome, miserable beyond words, or tears, or groans, threw myself onto the paving

stones. Idris was before me, all I could see: her stiffening form, her death-struck countenance hushed in eternal repose underground. That was to me the end of all! Just the day before, I'd been picturing what adventures lay ahead for us and our friends and trying to make plans for our future—now I'd leapt the interval. Here at the limit and the utmost edge of life, any future was behind me.

Thus wrapped in gloom, enclosed, walled up, vaulted over by the omnipotent present, I was startled by the sound of footsteps. I'd utterly forgotten my angry visitant, whose tall form was ascending from the royal vault in a glow of lantern light. At the top she paused and looked around as if for something she wanted; I wondered what, until, perceiving me on the floor quite close to her, she stooped and placed her wrinkled hand on my arm. Her voice, so harsh before, trembled with tenderness.

“Lionel Verney, my son!”

The way my angel's mother spoke my name raised me to my knees; with more respect than I'd ever felt for this disdainful lady before, I bowed my head and kissed her shriveled hand. She was trembling violently. At once I rose and supported her across the chancel to the steps of the Sovereign's Stall. She leaned back against the wooden carvings; having suffered herself to be led, she kept hold of my hand. Moonbeams variously tinted by the painted glass fell on her glistening eyes, her wet cheeks. Instinctively defending a long-cherished dignity, she dashed them away; yet they fell fast. Through multicolored tears, the Ex-Queen began to explain:

“She is so beautiful and placid, even in death. Animosity never clouded that serene brow. And how did I treat her? All these years, wounding her gentle heart with savage coldness, feeling for her no compassion and refusing hers for me. Could I hope for her forgiveness, even now? How little use in asking—how worthless all talk of repentance to the dead! Had I during her life even one time consulted her gentle wishes, and curbed my savage nature to make her happy, I would not be crying so.”

As she continued, I learned for the first time of the extraordinary circumstances which had led to this night’s strange meeting of ours at St. George’s Chapel. After their bitter parting in Rochester, the idea that she and Idris would never meet again, this premonition had weighed on the Countess’s mind, haunting her perpetually. A thousand times she resolved to ride after us, only to be stopped by the angry conceit that enslaved her. Proud of heart as she was, her touring pillow stayed damp from overnight tears, while daytime found her weak and dull and helpless to control her nervous anxiety. The hours may have come as some relief when she gave in to the other feeling that consumed her. This was a boundless hatred of me, the son-in-law and single obstacle to the fulfillment of her dearest wish, that of being present to care for Idris in her last moments.

Their first morning at the Dover encampment, she asked Adrian to walk with her, mother and son. On the beach promenade the wind off the Channel was unexpectedly warm for the time of year, and gusty; inland were storms. The weather

spurred the pair to shed their studied mutual reserve and share their secret fears that Idris might not come back to them alive. Indeed, the Countess told her son, this dreaded event was a certainty. Just then her eyes were fixed on a tomblike hollow among the cliffs up ahead—with perfect clarity, she could see Idris pacing slowly towards this cave, through thin air. She had on one of her simple white shift dresses and wore her golden hair loose; only a thin veil covered her from head to foot: a living floating pillar of dim translucent mist, with a posture less docile than dejected, submissive to a commanding power, she entered and was lost in the dark recesses of the chalk.

The Ex-Queen wasn't subject to visionary moods. She lived in the world of reality; yet what she'd just seen, though it resembled a figment, had been too real to doubt. From that moment she couldn't rest, it was worth her whole existence to see her daughter one last time; despite knowing it was too late, she must spare no effort to reach us. Within half an hour she'd left for the hotel in Datchet where she knew Idris and I were headed. Adrian, alarmed, sent a small crew of cyclists to follow his mother's precipitate hundred-mile track; with her long expertise in wintry conditions, she'd outpaced them by hours when night, then snow, began to fall over southeast London—the same quickening storm that found our party on the Western Road. Her projected route had changed; for the previous hours of strenuous thought had convinced her that Idris, if she still lived, would never consent to pass so close to Windsor and not visit her boy in his tomb, she'd insist on saying farewell. . .and

after that, what life could be left in her? So reasoning, her mother was bound for the Castle. Cycling into the vicious, icy teeth of the storm, taking wrong turns more than once, her progress felt snail-like.

“And every moment,” she said, “still I accused you, and heaped on your head the fiery ashes of my burning impatience. When you pointed at that ghastly hole, her last abode, for all my agonizing pain at that moment, the abhorrence I felt towards you was beyond all expression. You, triumphant Verney—if not for you, she could not have died without me—you I hated. But then I saw her, and anger, and hate, and injustice died at her bier. In its place came remorse (great God, that I should feel it!) which must last so long as my powers of memory and feeling endure.”

There is a magic power in resemblance. Having lived so long together, it was natural that Idris and her mother shared many gestures and patterns of speech. They were unlike in person: the one’s dark hair, deep-set black eyes, and prominent features made an entire contrast with her daughter’s soft, blonde, blue-eyed type. Yet illness had lately taken the fullness from my poor girl’s face, and in the inflexible shape of the bone beneath—the brow, the oval chin—her mother could be seen. Now Idris was dead, her instrument smashed to pieces, and dissolving to dusty nothingness. Though my mind had already formed hopes of an eternity that restored her to my embrace, the painful conscious knowledge that I’d lost her remained. But here, in these similarities, was solace. Seeing Idris in her mother touched a

thrilling chord whose sacred harmony I felt in my heart's dearest recess. Strangely moved, kneeling beside this spectral image, I trembled.

Poor, mistaken Countess! Before, in rare tender moods, she'd let herself believe that long years of severity could be repaid someday with a word or glance of reconciliation; she'd imagined how joyfully Idris would greet this development. Time having run out for the exercise of such power, she fell at once upon the thorny truth of things. Neither smiles nor caresses could reach or influence the happiness of the woman who lay in the vault beneath us now. With this realization came the remembrance of soft replies to bitter speeches, of gentle looks repaying angry ones. Then she perceived the falsehood, paltriness, and futility of her cherished dreams of birth and power; in truth, love and life were our only genuine rulers. All this overpowering knowledge rose like a great tide and flooded her soul with stormy and bewildering confusion—and the fierce tossing of these tumultuous waves, it fell to my lot to allay.

I spoke to her of her daughter, and how happy she'd been; how happy that life in which all her many virtues had found scope, and her numerous excellences been properly esteemed. The idol of my heart's dear worship, the height of feminine perfection—I praised Idris in what became an ardent funeral eulogy, feeling my heart's burden start to lift as my words overflowed. I brought Adrian into the picture, alongside little Elvis and Clara: we both had duties, the Countess and I, with regard to these beings most precious to Idris. The best way, I

declared, for a melancholy and repentant mother to expiate unkindness towards the dead, must be through redoubled love of the survivors.

So consoling her, my own sorrows were assuaged; my sincerity won her entire conviction. She turned to me, this hard, inflexible, persecuting woman, with a mild expression on her face, the first I'd ever seen there. "If our beloved angel is watching us now," the Ex-Queen said, "it will delight her to see that I finally do you justice. You were worthy of her; and from my heart I am glad that you won her away from me. Pardon, my son, the many wrongs I've done you; forget my bitter words and unkind treatment—take me in hand, and govern me as you will."

The air in the chapel was paler: night was lifting. It was time to be on the road. I agreed with my companion, that we should replace the pavement over the vault. We drew near. "One last look?" I asked.

"I cannot," she replied, "and, I beg you, refrain. We need not torture ourselves by gazing on the soulless body of one whose living spirit is buried in our hearts, and whose loveliness is so deeply carved there, that sleeping or waking she must always be present to us."

For a few moments, we bent our heads and kept a solemn silence. Consecrating my future life to the preservation of Idris's dear memory, I vowed to serve her brother and her child till death. The Ex-Queen could not suppress a last convulsive sob as, with an ease that surprised me, I dragged the stones over the entrance of the tomb and closed the gulph that contained the

life of my life. Then, pushing the bicycle slowly between us, we left the chapel. I felt, as I stepped into the open air, as if I were leaving a happy haven for a dreary wilderness, a tortuous path, a bitter, joyless, hopeless pilgrimage.

Thank you for reading this chapter of
Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Revised and Edited for
Modern Readers by Liz Mackie
and Presented by [Nostalgistudio](#).

Download, print, and share as widely as you like.

Return to [thelastman.blog](#).