

(43) CHAPTER 4.

THE WELL KNOWN road to Datchet oppressed me with a painful sense of déjà vu—hadn't I been here before, on an identical mission, pulled by tired horses, a grieving mother beside me, uncertainties ahead? Everything was familiar in the gray light before dawn. I knew every fence and gate; I'd been inside each cottage; habit guided my hands on the reins at each turn of the road. Though I couldn't see it, I recognized the shallow brook that brawled in springtime by its ice-bound murmur. All these objects were as well known to me as the cold hearth of my deserted home, and every moss-grown wall and plot of orchard ground, alike as twin lambs are to each other in a stranger's eye, yet to mine bore differences, distinctions. . . even names, like the one its somewhat fanciful appearance inspired the children to bestow upon a particular hollow old elm. Their Falstaff still stood at the Little Park's edge, listing, dim light showing through its shattered trunk. So did England remain, though England was dead—it was the ghost of merry England I beheld when I pictured its last generations, sporting in security and ease across the fresh untrodden snow of a winter's morn.

“This land.” My companion’s voice surprised me. “She could never leave.”

“You mean Idris,” I said, watching her profile as the Countess nodded.

“It was her birthright. Her duty. Her heart would never permit her to go.”

“We never went abroad, not once. Something always prevented it.”

“Even as a child this happened. She became ill every time we planned a voyage.”

Such conversation possessed medicinal properties. I was determined to try and soothe the venerable penitent through any remorseful feelings that might turn into new forms of bitterness; her willingness to talk promised well. My own mind, as my thoughts emerged from hours of numbness and began to grasp at explanations for the fatal tragedy in which I found my life engulfed, was likewise eased. Not only her wish to see our boy in his tomb, but also those native ties too strong for anyone, even Idris herself, to sever—here all along may have lain her motivation in rushing us away to Datchet as she’d done.

We reached the hotel before dawn. In the past, whether noisy with Saturday night revelers or spanking clean and neat again for Sunday brunch, the place had borne testimony to the labors and orderly habits of Lucy Clayton and her staff. This day the snow was high against the front door. The Countess looked around, inhaling proudly. Of the cyclists sent to follow her, no sign: we’d arrived first. The coach yard towards which I

directed the horses was at the rear of the property, more sheltered from wind and drifts. I frowned to see the windows uniformly lightless; but there was a faint odor of chimney smoke about. At last I detected a ray of light struggling through the closed drapes at a terrace window, where we found a French door left unlatched.

Lucy Clayton we found amid the luggage and sheet-draped couches that the couriers of her letter had described; two spent logs smoldered in the big lobby fireplace at which she sat staring; between the fingers of one hand she held a threaded needle. On the table beside her, a lamp revealed the traces and the toll of care and watching on Lucy's attractive face. The eyes were vacant, the attitude desponding, the momentary effect picturesque—until the fearful reality struck me. Beneath that sheet closest beside her, a figure lay stretched. Her mother was dead, and Lucy, apart from all the world, deserted and alone, must have been watching beside the corpse this whole dreary night. She seemed unaware of our entrance.

“Lucy Clayton!” the Countess said, and drew a scream from the lone inland survivor of a dead nation; but she recognized us, and recovered herself with the quick exercise of self-control habitual to her, rising to her feet to make a quick bow. “Did you not expect us?” the older woman continued sharply.

“Your Ladyship! You are very good,” replied Lucy, “to have come yourself; I can never thank you sufficiently; but it is too late.”

“Too late!” I cried, in a strangled voice kept low by the

presence of the dead. “What are you talking about? It’s not too late to take you from this deserted place, at your own request, and conduct you—” But here my own loss, just briefly forgotten, overwhelmed and made me turn away; unable to speak for the grief that choked me, I crossed the lobby, threw open a window and looked out at that cold, ghastly, misshapen night’s last waning. It left a chill white earth behind. Did the spirit of sweet Idris already sail along the moon-frozen crystal air? No, no, a more genial atmosphere, a lovelier habitation was surely hers!

I turned from my meditations at a word from the Countess. “You are much in need of sleep, my son,” she said. In truth I welcomed this opening to exit the scene of Lucy’s grief. Her expression of resigned despair, of complete misery and its patient endurance, was far more touching than any of the insane ravings or wild gesticulations of untamed sorrow. We ‘d come upon her sewing the mother’s shroud: my heart sickened at such a detail of woe, more painful to the masculine spirit than deadliest struggle or throes of unutterable but transient agony; it was a thing only a female could endure.

So it remained for the Countess of Windsor to engage the mourner in talk, and to turn her thoughts in the direction of the road awaiting us that day. According to Lucy, her mother must have caught sight of the letter to Idris, or else overheard some scrap of conversation between the two cyclists; in any case, she’d become aware of her own and her daughter’s appalling situation. Her aged frame could not sustain the anxiety and horror brought on by this discovery. Concealing her knowledge

from Lucy, she brooded over it through sleepless nights till fever and delirium (swift forerunners of death) disclosed the secret. Her life, which had long been hovering on the brink, yielded to the united effects of misery and sickness; that same morning she had died.

Lucy wouldn't think of leaving at first. She was one of those people whose imaginations and sensibilities had always been entirely absorbed by the narrow circle immediately in view; people who'd cling to their restricted, often harmful realities with double tenacity from not being able to comprehend anything beyond. Thus Lucy, alone in a dead world, wished to fulfill the demands of custom and give her mother a traditional English country burial. This must not be, the Countess told her. No, the mother's shrouded body could not be kept in the hotel meat freezer to await a ground thaw; no burial could be. Going on to communicate our own recent loss, the Countess painted this as an inducement, giving Lucy to understand that she must come with us for the sake of the orphan children whom Idris's death had deprived of a mother's care. Lucy Clayton never resisted the call of a duty, so she yielded.

Meanwhile, upstairs, I'd sought repose from my various struggles and impatient regrets. For awhile the events of the day floated like a parade of disasters through my brain, until sleep bathed it in forgetfulness. When I awoke a few hours later, it seemed as if I'd slept for years. My companions had not shared my oblivion. Lucy's eyes remained swollen from weeping. The Countess looked haggard and wan. Her firm spirit had not

found relief in tears, and she suffered all the more from her agonizing memories and regrets; yet she remained tirelessly active. The riders sent on her trail had arrived at last, and under her command the wagon was being loaded with such valuable supplies of food and drink as the hotel still offered. We used the rest of the firewood stores to build a funeral pyre for Lucy's mother on her favorite terrace patio; the kind dead woman was eulogized by her former monarch.

At noon, while the fair weather lasted, we departed, with gray smoke still ascending in a thick vertical line at our backs. Lucy rode inside the wagon or up on the driver's box; the rest took turns driving, cycling or resting within as we returned to the Dover road with speed. Along the way we gathered fresh horses, finding them either in the warm stables they sought by training, or else where they stood shivering in the bleak fields, ready to surrender their liberty in exchange for some handfuls of corn.

Our party, especially after my reunion with the children at Rochester, was a melancholy one; each was possessed by regret for what was remediless; even Elvis was downcast, his innate infant gaiety shadowed by his mother's absence. The future's uncertainty would assail our thoughts with insistent waves of fantasy and expectation that alternately soothed and frightened us. I myself shuddered to realize that in another day or two we might have crossed the Channel and begun that hopeless, interminable, sad wandering, which but a short time before I'd regarded as the only remedy to our situation's sorrows.

The roaring of a wintry sea announced our approach to Dover when we were still miles inland. Uneasily, we told each other that such sonic phenomena weren't unusual for the season; hadn't we heard such blasts a thousand times before, when we'd seen the wind drive flocks of fleece-crowned waves against that barren coast? But another day's journey brought us to the thunderous show of truth: Dover was flooded. We saw houses ripped from their foundations twirling in its surge-filled streets; hardly less disturbed were the human beings we found assembled at the cliff edge, and with whom we stopped to watch the salt sea's ravings.

During the Ex-Queen's last walk beside it, the Channel had been serene and glassy; the twinkling of its ripples in the sunbeams had cast an added radiance through the clear blue frosty air. At that time, Adrian had already inspected two steamboats which were moored in the harbor; along with this placid appearance of Nature, their evident fitness for our voyage had been hailed as a good omen. The day of his mother's departure, calm still reigned past sunset. But in the dead of night, the emigrants who'd lodged in the town were awakened by cries of alarm—shrieks of warning to wake up or be drowned! People rushed outside, half-dressed, into a tremendous rain-storm, with frightful winds and fusillades of hail, to see what was happening—and discovered the tide already risen past every mark known to history and half the town submerged.

They headed for the cliffs and the safety of higher ground; but the views from the cliff edge drew them. In the darkness,

the thunderous waters below stretched unbrokenly white, only the crests of waves showing, as a roaring wind drove the sea at full force before it. The tumult continued at daylight. At ebb tide the town was exposed; hours later, the floodtide rose even higher than it had the first night. Giant ships long abandoned were whirled from their anchorage and driven towards shore. The vessels in the harbor, including Adrian's two steamships, were flung up on land as if they were seaweed; the surging breakers battered them to pieces. All this waterlogged ruin was dashed and jammed against the cliffs—which now began to give way in places. An already frightened crowd saw vast fragments of the earth they could have been standing on disappear with a crash into the deep.

These sights operated differently on different persons. The majority thought they were witnessing a judgment of God, sent to prevent or punish our emigration from our native land. However, a good many were doubly eager to quit this sceptered isle that had become their prison, and which appeared unable to withstand the onslaught of the giant waves. So things stood when we arrived at Dover. Thought fatigued by our journey, we were drawn to the crowd scene at the edge of the cliff; with the rest, we looked, listened, marveled, and added our own to the thousand conjectures being made. Gradually a cold dense fog narrowed the horizon to about a quarter mile; sky and sea were enveloped in equal obscurity. Still we loitered there a few hours before retiring to Dover Castle, whose roof now sheltered all who breathed English air.

Sleep restored some strength and courage to our worn-out frames and weakened spirits. And early the next morning, Adrian brought welcome news: the wind had changed. Though somewhat increasing the sea's fury, this northeast gale that stripped the sky bare of clouds had turned its mountainous waves a cheerful bright green color. Meanwhile the tide at ebb looked to have receded from the town for good. Our optimism grew steadily.

So did the crowd at the cliff edge; few of us were missing by late afternoon, as if some deep wish to read a promise in the sunset skies had drawn us there with one accord. We watched the mighty day star approach within a few degrees of the tempest-tossed horizon. Suddenly, a wonder! Three other suns, parhelia equally burning and brilliant, rushed from various quarters of the heavens and began to whirl around the real sun in a glare—to our dazzled eyes all four seemed joined in dance. The sea beneath them glowed like a furnace, like the sides of Vesuvius erupting with lava. Terrified whinnies reached us from the gated fields where our horses were grazing; further off, we heard the frightful yells as a herd of cattle, panic struck, light-blinded, smashing through fences, raced right over the brink of the cliff. The solar phenomenon didn't last too long: with great suddenness the three mock suns collided to make one, then plunged into the sea. Seconds later, from the spot where they'd disappeared came a gonging, deafening, awful watery sound.

Meanwhile the sun, freed of those strange satellites, continued its stately progress towards the western maritime

horizon. Could we trust our glare-struck eyes? As the sun dropped, we saw the surface of the sea rise to meet it—yes, the sea mounted higher and higher, and soon obscured the fiery orb—and still the wall of water kept climbing the horizon. There appeared to have been a breakdown in the motion of the Earth: the ancient laws no longer applied, we'd been turned adrift in an unknown region of space. No—for now voices shouted that those had been no mere sundogs, nor meteors, but globes of burning matter which had set fire to the planet and caused the English Channel, like a vast cauldron at our feet, to bubble up in tidal waves; obviously, Judgment Day had arrived, and we stood only a few moments away from beholding the awful countenance of the omnipotent judge. Those less given to visionary terrors, watching the waters advance, asked whether the cliff we stood on could resist this new assault. Only wasn't the giant wave far higher than our precipice—so high, indeed, might not our whole little island be deluged? Even as people fled in terror for their lives, they kept stopping now and then to look back at the spectacle.

With that solemn resignation which an unavoidable necessity instills, I stood where I was before the menace, the approach of utter destruction; a sublime sense of awe calmed my pounding heart. In the twilight that the drowned sun had left behind, the towering ocean's aspect grew more terrible by the moment. Cloud rack raced overhead as a fresh west wind blew up. And then, by slow degrees, as it advanced, the tidal wave assumed a milder appearance; the wind, or the Channel

currents, or some obstruction in the seabed checked its progress, and it subsided—but not without leaving the surface of the sea uniformly higher than ever before. So from fear of an immediate catastrophe, we moved to anxiety as to the near future's inundations. All night we watched the furious sea and the driving clouds, through whose openings the rare stars rushed impetuously; the elements warred with a thunder that made sleep impossible.

These conditions prevailed without ceasing for three days and nights. The stoutest hearts quailed before the savage enmity of nature. In vain we told ourselves that these extreme weather conditions were not entirely out of the ordinary, nothing that didn't fit somewhere into the natural order. Our disastrous and overwhelming destiny turned the best of us to cowards. Death had hunted us through the course of many, many months, all the way to the narrow strip of time on which we stood; narrow indeed, and buffeted by storms, our footpath overhanging the great sea of calamity—and eroding under our feet. It required something like superhuman energy to bear up against the menaces of destruction that everywhere surrounded us—especially when, even supplemented by the wagonload from the Datchet hotel, our provisions began to fail; and the first foraging parties reported little success in the nearer towns.

But on the fourth morning, the gale died away. Among the storm-ravaged trees, the last yellow leaves left on the topmost branches hung motionless. Seagulls sailed upon the calm bosom of a windless atmosphere, above a sea no longer furious;

the massive roaring breakers had made way for the usual long, sweeping swells that burst against the shoreline almost sullenly. Our optimism was back—reinforced by that day’s clear, golden sunset. The ships we’d counted on may have been lying in splinters, but to see the Channel turned tranquil enough for crossing gave us hope.

The waves were a radiant purple. We watched them from the cliff with pleasure, before noticing a novel sight: every now and then lost in the steep troughs between their peaks, a dark speck, an object—as it neared, visibly a boat—rode towards us.

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