

(45) CHAPTER 5.

AMIDST all our plans and efforts to quit our wintry native latitude for the luxuries and delights of a southern climate, we'd never fixed on any precise spot as the endpoint of our wanderings. A vague picture of perpetual springtime, of fragrant groves and sparkling streams, floated in our collective imagination to entice us on. Versailles saw an inclement mid-winter, yet our diminished numbers could be fed and clothed on what our foraging parties found in the locale, while the palace afforded ample accommodation for what some began to call our colony.

Strictly speaking, it was true. Like any colony, we'd been formed overseas and had come to sink our common roots in a new land. But essentials were missing. Where was the bustle and industry characteristic of young colonies? Where were the structures thrown together out of rude materials until bigger, better dwellings could be built? Where were the newly marked fields—the first plantings—the eager curiosity to discover unknown species and herbs—the long treks for the sake of exploring the country? Our habitations were palaces. We found our food ready-to-hand. There was no need for us to labor or

investigate, no restless desire to get on—and no enthusiasm, either, for debating the question of where to go next.

If we'd had any assurance that our present numbers were safe, if our thoughts on the subject could have been enlivened by some hope, it would have been otherwise. Beyond our next destination lay issues more momentous to be discussed and decided. At some period to come, the stores of grain and preserved meat and many manufactured products we relied on for food would run out; the existing herds and flocks would die out or run wild. So what should we eat then? What mode of life should we adopt in general? Our future plans ought to have taken careful account of such questions, productive hours could have been spent in council. But we dared not look forward. As isolated cases of that virulent Continental plague thinned our ranks week by week, summer and mass death approached.

Enough meetings were held and a plan emerged: To stay where we were until spring, then head to Switzerland and pass the hot months in its icy valleys. As for destinations further south—Italy, Persia, Egypt—they could wait until the autumn, assuming any of us lived that long.

Surrounded by splendid rooms, mirrored corridors and landscaped views designed as the setting for acmes of sensual delight, we last mortals grew heartsick in the mere presence of any amusement. Occasional outbursts of untamed hilarity among the younger set might take the form of dance or song—until they'd suddenly break off, checked by a mournful look or agonizing sigh from one or other friend prevented by sorrows

and losses from mingling in the festivity. Their elders could be more determined; yet if laughter sometimes echoed through its halls, that palace was vacant of joy. For my part, whenever I happened to witness such attempts at entertainment, they only increased my sense of woe. In the midst of the pleasure-hunting through I'd close my eyes and see before me the shadowy tomb where Idris lay among the dead, mouldering with them in hushed repose; when my awareness returned to the present hour at Versailles, the sights and sounds of other people's cheerful pastimes would sting like an affront.

So much for life in public—though I remained conscientious about my obligations to the general welfare. The hours most dear to me were the peaceful, private ones I managed to spend at home with my children. Elvis was only five years old; his joyous heart was incapable of sorrow, and he enlivened our wing of the Grand Trianon with innocent mirth.

Children I said, for the tenderest emotions of paternity bound me to my niece Clara. She was then fourteen, a restless, moody time of girlhood—yet she went clothed in a calm that was born of sorrow and sustained by deep insight into what went on around her. That impatience for maturity and its privileges, which almost defined the youthful state for us, had been subdued in her by early experience. Though serious she was not sad; the remembrance of her father whom she idolized, and respect for me and Adrian, had implanted a high sense of duty in her young heart. Otherwise her heart was a fountain overflowing with the love she poured almost equally into

eneration of her parents' memory and attention to her living relatives; all else she could spare went to religion. No faith was ever so entire, no hope so fervent, no charity so pure, as that of early youth. And Clara, all love, all tenderness and trust, who from infancy had been storm-tossed upon the seas of passion and misfortune, and now perceived an apparent divinity at work in all of it, in everything—Clara had concluded that her best hope was to make herself acceptable to the power she worshipped. But of this she almost never talked: religion was her heart's hidden law, one she concealed with a child's fierce reserve, and cherished the more because it was secret.

Her neglected daughter's dead lips had delivered a lesson to the Countess of Windsor. Shaken, past sixty, from her lifelong dream of power, rank and grandeur, she was seized with the conviction that love was the one good thing in life, and virtue the only distinction that could ennoble or enrich it. In this regard she was a completely new woman; yet the fiery violence of her former character showed up unchanged as she devoted herself to obtaining the affection of her remaining family, her son first of all. Though he observed a due respect, Adrian had been deeply alienated from his mother for years; the mixed memories of her coldness, his own madness, and their combined disappointments were sometimes enough to make her presence acutely painful to him. The Countess saw this, yet the obstacles made her all the more determined to win his love. Humbling herself to wait, she endured the chill between them until Adrian, servant of love, prince of tender courtesy, opened

the gates of his heart and let her in. From that time forth he gave her nothing but warm, grateful tributes of filial affection; well-merited, for the Ex-Queen's understanding, courage, and presence of mind became powerful allies in his difficult task of ruling the tumultuous crowd. Truthfully, control often swung by a single hair.

The chief source of disturbance was the impostor-prophet. He and his followers continued to reside at Paris, but they sent Versailles a constant stream of missionaries whose claims kept us apprised of the man's intentions. If we'd considered him capable of sincere belief or genuine benevolence, we'd have opened immediate talks and tried with our best arguments to soften and humanize his views; but he was only driven by ambition. Now it appeared that to rule over these last stragglers from death's herds was no longer enough for him. He'd begun telling his followers that their escape from the plague, their children's salvation, and the rise of a new human race from their seed, depended on their making him the object of their faith; he desired their worship. He'd gone so far as to calculate that when, from these crushed remains, a new race should spring up, he might be remembered as its father—if not as a deity, some composite of Jupiter the conqueror, Serapis the lawgiver, and Vishnu the preserver. Greedily imbibed in Paris by his followers, whose overweening credulity made them eager to seek converts to the same beliefs, these doctrines seldom failed to lure a few desperate individuals away from our ranks into his, and the palace was in a constant ferment because of it.

Strange, but true: from time immemorial, philanthropists, ardent in their desire to do good, patient, reasonable and gentle, who sought to persuade through truth alone, held less influence over the popular mind than did those grasping, selfish men and women who'd stop at nothing—adopt any means, awake any passion, spread any lie—for the advancement of their cause. The contrast was infinitely greater, and the contest that much more uneven, now that the one had few hopes to hold forth, and no cure for the fears he himself was the first to acknowledge; while the other could bring harrowing visions and transcendent hopes into play, then pretend something like godhood, and so rule.

How to reclaim any individual's allegiance from such bonds of fraud, was a frequent subject of Adrian's meditations and discourse. "We must consider," he said, "the miserable state to which we'll be consigning these deluded people when we move on towards Switzerland this spring. Our fellow Britons, fallen into the hands of a dangerous charlatan, left behind to die in torment, the groaning victims of superstition and unrelenting tyranny—can we allow this? Further—can we afford this? With our numbers already dropping, is it not imperative that we start winning some of these poor lost sheep to our own side?" He formed many plans for the purpose, but was given no chance to enact one as the work of maintaining order at Versailles kept him fully employed.

Besides, the preacher was as cautious as he was cruel, inflexible in his authority, and violent in his hatred of outsiders.

The missionaries he sent us were brainwashed and organized so as to preclude the possibility of “contamination” by our attempts to reason with them. His 300 or so followers lived under the strictest control, virtual prisoners at the Hôtel Ritz. More than half were women, with about fifty children of all ages and no more than eighty men. The lower classes, including criminal elements, were overrepresented; the exceptions consisted of a few high-born females, who, panic-struck and tamed by sorrow, were in his thrall.

Among these was one whom I resolved to save, a friend from happier days. Idris had loved her, and her excellent nature made it peculiarly lamentable that she should be sacrificed by this merciless cannibal of souls. One of the spies sent by Adrian into the prophet’s lair had listed her as an inmate of his inner circle. I’d seen her last on a rain-swept street in London, a woman bereft but still young, lovely, and enthusiastic, whose very goodness would make her an easier mark. There are some beings, whom Fate seems to select as targets for limitless wrath that pours down; women and men whom it bathes even to the lips in misery. Such a one was the ill-starred Juliet. I’ve mentioned her before. The sole survivor of a ducal house near Windsor swept by plague, left surrounded by the corpses of her family; her Romeo came and rescued her from that place of death; living proof of love’s transcendent power, they wed. Then plague killed her young husband—so much I knew, when she saved the life of my Idris from that freezing storm.

Adrian’s informant, who’d learned the rest, told how her

beloved's death drove the bride insane with grief. Madness killed the pain; but soon, the birth of their child recalled her to the cruel reality of things. While her reason was mostly restored, deep melancholy and angry impatience continued to distort her judgment; she let herself slip into solitude and penury, and would not disclose her distress to friend or stranger. That blessed, tragic night of November 20th, when my love lay fainting in a dark deserted street before Juliet happened by, marked the young mother's first contact with her fellow creatures in weeks. Aware of the plan for universal emigration, she had resolved to remain behind with her child, and alone in wide London to live or die, as her fate might decree, so long as it was near her husband's grave. Idris had fallen near their foreclosed townhouse where Juliet had been hiding. The permanent losses and immediate dangers that were about to overwhelm us, and Idris's subsequent sharp decline, caused us to forget our hapless friend. She was more affected; our encounter revived the forgotten comforts found only in speech, touch, fellowship. Afterwards, a slight illness of her infant, proved to her that she was still bound to humanity by an indestructible tie; to preserve this little creature's life must be the object of her being.

She joined the first division of migrants who went over to Paris, where she became an easy prey to the prophet from the Southern Cone. Love for her child made her cling eagerly, acutely fearful and credulous, to the merest straw held out to save it; and her nature, having yielded once before to the

narcotic powers of love, inclined her towards the leader of the elect—her new rescuer, she imagined. Beautiful as a goddess, with a voice of unrivalled sweetness, she went about in a blaze of enthusiasm for the man and his message, and was often at his side.

And I, remembering her providential rescue of my lost one, reproached myself for neglect and ingratitude, and felt impelled to leave no means untried, to recall her to her better self, and rescue her from the fangs of the hypocritical destroyer.

A full account of my stratagems, disappointments, and perseverance would be too tedious to record—at any rate I did at last succeed in penetrating the Hôtel Ritz. Eager to make my search brief, I roamed its common areas and corridors without success; when evening fell, I contrived to mingle unobserved with the congregation, which assembled in the downstairs ballroom to listen to their prophet's crafty and eloquent harangue. I saw Juliet near him, and watched her in a mirror. The shifting glare of madness was fearfully evident in the dark eyes she kept fixed on the man. The child in her arms was less than a year old, and its little shows of restiveness alone could distract her attention from the words of the sermon. When it was over, the congregation followed their master from the ballroom; only Juliet remained. Her babe had fallen asleep and she'd placed it on a cushioned chair; she sat on the floor beside, watching its tranquil slumber.

I approached quietly. "Juliet, dear friend—it's me—Lionel Verney." For a moment I saw her face light up with gladness.

“I’ve come to take you out of here, you and your child, away from this tyrant’s den of superstition and misery. Please, for your own good, and for the sake of one who loved you, our dear Lady Idris—come with me.”

But the poor fanatic had already relapsed into her delirium. “No—no—leave me alone—get away, you—!” she snarled and almost swore at me. But her gentle nature prevailed enough for her to continue: “Beware! Get out while you still can, Lionel—right now! It’s not safe: I get strange inspirations at times. I hear the Eternal One whisper things.” Her words began to come more hurriedly, in a tuneless voice. “He reveals his will to me. Any moment now, he may tell me that to save my child, you must be sacrificed; and so I’ll call for the bodyguards; and the one you call a tyrant, he’ll have them tear you limb from limb; and no matter how much Idris loved you, I won’t shed a single tear at your death,” she finished with a wild look. The baby woke up frightened and began to cry; I could see how each sob went to the ill-fated mother’s heart, even as she mingled her soothing endearments with harsh commands addressed to me: “Go now—leave us!” I stood there wondering: could I risk all? Tear her and her child by force from the murderer’s den, and trust to the healing balm of time, reason and affection? But the outcome wasn’t mine to dictate.

“Juliet! Olá, Juliet!”

I looked around at the familiar voice, heard other footsteps: the preacher was coming back for her, and he wasn’t alone. I turned to see Juliet, her child clasped in both arms, in the act of

disappearing through a service door. My foe and his bodyguards entered before I could follow.

Surrounded and taken prisoner, I was surprised, after those frantic warnings, to be left unharmed at first. “What brings one of sin’s favorite children to our asylum of the saved?” In this fashion was I questioned. My answers were simple and sincere. “His own mouth condemns him!” exclaimed the impostor finally. “He confesses his intent to seduce from the way of salvation our well-beloved sister in God. Take him away to the lock-up; tomorrow he dies. Brothers and sisters, we are called upon to make a tremendous and appalling example of this man, one that will frighten away his wicked companions.”

“Remember,” I said, “who I am; and know that I shall not die unavenged. Remember the Lord Protector, who retains legal authority over all of you—he knows I’m here; my blood will cry to him, and you and your miserable victims will long lament the tragedy you are about to act.”

My antagonist turned away and spoke to his guards. “You know your duty. Obey.” Now came rough handling as I was thrown to the ballroom floor, tied up, marched to the hotel’s former fitness center, and chained to a weight machine; there they left me, alone in the dark. So had ended my attempt to win a good woman away from a man of crime.

I couldn’t conceive that he would dare put me to death. Far from dreading the prospect, methought, even at the worst, even from the very scaffold, a man true to himself, courageous and determined, could fight his way through the herd of these

misguided maniacs. Yet probably he realized it too, and wouldn't risk a public execution. A private assassination would suit the prophet better. The path of his ambition had ever been devious and cruel. I was in his hands; how much easier to speak the word and have me die, unheard, unseen, in the obscurity of my makeshift dungeon; let me vanish, let the Hôtel Ritz become an object of fear. Adrian's vengeance might follow less surely if our companions were terrified out of attempting another incursion like mine.

How would it happen? Poison? I'd been given no food or water so far. Did he plan to steal upon me in my sleep? Or would I get the chance to contend to the last with my killers, knowing, even while I struggled, that I must be overcome? Two months ago, in a flickering vault, I'd considered quietly laying me down to die; now I shook at the approach of fate. To be murdered thus at the midnight hour by cold-blooded assassins, no friendly hand to close my eyes or receive my parting blessing—to die by violence drenched in hate and execration—ah, why, my angel love, when I'd already stepped inside the tomb, did you return me to life—why did you send me away when I'd be coming back again so soon, a mangled corpse!

It would take volumes to give words to the many thoughts which occupied me in endless succession. Hours passed—centuries—in complete silence, pitch darkness. My thirst and hunger grew. The air was dank, the mildewed carpet icy cold. I had until tomorrow to live. When would tomorrow come? Wasn't it already here?

A key turned in the door, the lock was unbolted. Hallway sounds reached me; a clock struck one. *My assassins*, I thought, this being no hour for a public execution. I drew myself up inside my bonds and chains; I collected my forces, I rallied my courage, I would not fall quietly. The door swung open; the single, slight-figured intruder carried a lamp and a long knife in one trembling hand. But recognition changed at once the temper of my mind—for it was Juliet who stood there, looking at me with a wistful countenance. In a moment, when she regained her self-possession, the warmth in her eyes gave way to the glittery shifting I'd noticed earlier. She said, "I've come to save you, Verney."

"And yourself!" I cried. "Dearest friend, let's both be saved if we can."

She knelt down beside me and found the keys to my chains on her ring. "*Shhh*—don't say a word." The knife took care of my binding cords. When my circulation was restored enough that I could stand, she tugged my arm. "Follow me!"

I obeyed instantly. On light feet we threaded a multitude of corridors and went up and down several flights of stairs; the last one brought us to the end of a long gallery. Set into the wall was a low door that Juliet bent to unlock. A rush of wind blew out the lamp, but in its place we had the blessed moonbeams, the open face of heaven, a set of cast iron steps leading down to a forgotten alleyway—and freedom. I climbed out and turned to help Juliet through the window, when she broke our silence.

"You're safe," she said. "God bless you—farewell!"

“Juliet!” I seized her reluctant hand. “Dear, misguided victim, aren’t you coming along? Haven’t you risked everything in helping me escape? And could you even think that I’d let you go back alone to suffer the effects of that scoundrel’s rage? Never!”

“Don’t fear for me,” the lovely girl replied. “And don’t imagine that you could be where you are now, without the leader’s consent. It is he that has saved you; he assigned me to lead you to these stairs.”

“But why?”

“Because I am best acquainted with your motives for coming here, and can best appreciate his mercy in permitting you to depart.”

“His mercy! Have you forgotten his record of cruel acts and criminal fraud? Juliet, the man dreads me alive as an enemy, and dead he fears my avengers. By setting me loose, he may save his own skin and maintain the esteem of his followers; but mercy is far from his heart.” Juliet’s hand still trembled in mine. With gentle violence, I began to draw her towards me through the portal, speaking all the time. “Dear friend, as I am free, so are you. Come with me now. Idris’s mother will welcome you, her noble brother will rejoice to receive you; you will find peace and love, and better hopes than the Hôtel Ritz has to offer. We can be at Versailles before dawn. Come, sweet Juliet; close the door behind you on this house of crime and hypocrisy; come live among good, loving people”

By now she was outside, standing next to me, listening and

yielding to my words, drawn to the thoughts they evoked, the recollections of past scenes of youth and happiness. Suddenly she raised her arms with a piercing shriek.

“My child, my child! He has my child, my darling girl, held hostage—no!”

She darted back inside and slammed and locked the door between us; I heard her footsteps hurry off. And so I left her in the imposter’s clutches, to remain a prisoner of his crimes and keep inhaling the pestilential atmosphere which his demoniac nature bred. Beyond the alleyway, a soft breeze swept my cheek, the gracious moon shone upon me, my path was free. Glad to have escaped, yet melancholy in my very joy, I retraced my steps to Versailles.

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