

(51) CHAPTER 9.

WAIT a moment—have I arrived so near the end? Yes! It's all over now—a step or two over those new made graves and the wearisome way is done, my task accomplished. Can I streak my pages with words capacious enough for the grand conclusion?

And who will read them? Beware, tender offspring of the reborn world—beware, fair being, if human, if your heart is yet untamed by care, and your fresh features yet unplowed by time—beware, lest the cheerful current of your blood be checked, your golden locks turn grey, your sweet dimpling smiles be changed to fixed, harsh wrinkles! Don't expose these lines to daylight, lest day itself turn pale and die. Seek a cypress grove, whose moaning boughs will harmonize fittingly; seek some cave bored deep in earth's dark entrails, where the only light that penetrates, red and flickering, has had to struggle through a single fissure.

There is a painful confusion in my brain, which refuses to supply the succeeding events in any distinct sequence. Sometimes the irradiation of my friend's gentle smile comes before me, and methinks its light spans and fills eternity—then, again, I feel the gasping throes—

It was Adrian's wish that we detour to Venice on our way to Rome. The English always did find something peculiarly attractive in the idea of this wave-encircled city. None of us had ever seen it. So we found a boat and took it down the Po. The days were intolerably hot; we spent them docked in shade, asleep, and traveled through the night, when darkness made the bordering banks indistinct and our solitude less remarkable; when the wandering moon lit the waves our slicing prow divided, and the night wind filled our sails, and the sounds of murmuring stream, waving trees, and breeze-snapped canvas were all we had for view.

Clara, long overcome by excessive grief, had largely cast aside her timid, cold reserve, and received our attentions with grateful tenderness. While Adrian, his voice full of poetic fervor, discoursed on the glorious nations of the dead, or the beauteous earth, or the fate of humankind, she crept nearer to drink it all in with silent pleasure. We banished from our talk, and as much as possible from our thoughts, the knowledge of our desolation. And it would be incredible to a city-dweller, or anyone accustomed to a busy throng, how far we succeeded. Picture a prisoner cast into a dungeon cell and seeming pitch darkness; only one vent, more like a rift, barred and set high in the wall, admits a doubtful light—soon enough, the visual orb having assimilated the beam and adapted to its scantiness, the same prisoner finds the same cell lit like clear noonday. So we, a simple triad on an empty planet, were multiplied to each other till we became all in all. We stood like trees whose roots are

loosened by the wind, which support one another, leaning and clinging with heightened tenacity while the wintry storms howl. Thus we floated down the Po's expanding stream, sleeping when the cicadas sang, awake with the stars.

Where the Po delta met the Adriatic Sea at Po della Pila, we returned to our bicycles to take the coastal road north. That afternoon, September 6th, we reached the long bridge from the mainland; across waters glassy and blue where dolphins frolicked we rode towards the cupolas and towers of rose-hued Venice. The mouth of the Grand Canal was almost choked with wrecked and sunken watercraft; since Clara had enjoyed our sail more than she'd liked returning to her bicycle, we found a gondola in good enough repair to take us to the city's other end. Violated palazzos lined our route; the tide sloshed sullenly through broken doors, across drowned thresholds. Seaweed and monstrous decay blackened their marble facades, while salt ooze defaced the matchless works of art that adorned their interiors. Seagulls flew in and out of shattered windows at the Gritti Palace.

Rowing lightly along the edge of the Lagoon, we came to the Piazza San Marco, where we climbed the campanile to its highest platform and looked down on the sweeping, heart-sickening views of this hapless city. It was a relief to turn and face the sea, which, though it could become a grave, kept its surface free of monuments and ruins. Offshore from that appalling spectacle of human power at an end, triumphant Nature shone even more beautiful by contrast. The Lagoon's

radiant waters trembled while the sun made many-sided mirrors of its rippling waves; the sea's blue immensity, seen beyond the Lido, stretched far, unspiced by boat, so tranquil, so lovely, that it seemed to invite us to quit derelict land and seek refuge from sorrow and fear on its own placid expanses.

Evening started to fall. As the sun set in calm majesty behind the misty summits of the Apennines, its golden and roseate hues tinged the mountains of the Adriatic's opposite shore with the last glories of the day. "Beyond that land across there," said Adrian, pointing south, "is Greece."

"Greece!" The word struck a responsive chord in Clara. "Don't you two remember? You promised to take me back to Greece so I could see my parents' tomb. Why not now? Why go to Rome? What would we do at Rome? What if it's like this, like Venice? Think—there are so many boats down there, we could launch one and steer right for those mountains."

"Very dangerous," I objected. "And realize, those mountains are in Albania, still a considerable distance from Athens, across savage, uncultivated, almost impassable country."

Adrian said, "Not true at all!" He was delighted with Clara's proposal. The season was favorable for sailing, he said. The currents and the northwest wind would combine to send us across the gulf to the Albanian coast where, in some abandoned port, we might find one of those light skiffs so well adapted to the navigation of the Greek peninsula's waters. Run it down to Patras and the Gulf of Corinth, where the public canal should let us prolong our sail as far as Piraeus on the other side, which

meant Athens; thus could we reach our goal with virtually no overland travel and minimal fatigue.

This appeared to me wild talk; but the sea, glowing with a thousand purple hues, looked so brilliant and safe, and my beloved companions were so earnest, so determined, that, when Adrian said, “Well, though it’s not exactly what you wish, consent anyhow, to please me”—I could no longer refuse. The vessel we selected when we reached the ground again seemed ideally suited to our enterprise. We bent the sails and put the rigging in order. That night we reposed in one of the city’s thousand heritage hotels. We’d sail at dawn.

Our moods were cheerful as we shared the work of paddling and steering across the shallow lagoon, and, when out at sea, unfurling our sails to catch the favorable breeze. The laughing morning air filled the canvas while sunlight bathed earth, sky, and ocean. The placid waves divided to receive our keel and playfully kissed the sleek sides of our little craft, murmuring a welcome; when land receded, the level blue expanse, mirror of an azure empyrean, afforded us smooth conduct. As tranquil and balmy were the air and waters, so were our minds steeped in quiet.

*Farewell to desolate towns—to fields with their
miscegenation of corn and weeds—to ever multiplying relics of
our lost species! Dry land is a grave compared to the unstained
deep. Its high crags and stately mountains are only cemetery
monuments; its trees, the plumes of a state funeral hearse; its
brooks and rivers run brackish with tears for the departed.*

Ocean, we commit ourselves to you—just as old Noah and his kin floated above the drowned world, let us be saved, as we betake ourselves to your never-ending flood.

Adrian sat at the helm, Clara and I attended to the rigging. We ran before a breeze right aft over the untroubled deep. At noon the wind died away to puffs that only just permitted us to hold our course. As lazy, fair-weather sailors, careless of the coming hour, we talked gaily of our coasting voyage and of arriving at Athens. We thought we'd make our permanent home on one of the Aegean isles, probably among the Cyclades; on Mykonos or Santorini, amidst myrtle groves and perpetual spring, fanned by the wholesome sea breezes, we'd live long years in beatific union. Was there such a thing as death in the world?

The sun passed its zenith and slid lingeringly down heaven's stainless floor. Lying in the boat, my face turned up to the blue sky, I thought I saw a few white, marbled streaks, so slight, so immaterial, surely they must be mere imagination. But a sudden fear stung me as I continued to gaze; jumping up, I ran to the prow. A cool headwind ruffled my hair—a dark line of ripples had appeared in the east and was gaining rapidly on us—I had to shout my breathless warning to Adrian over the flapping of the canvas as the adverse wind struck it—our boat lurched—swift as speech, the web of the storm thickened above us. Now, to our horror, we learned that there were neither life jackets nor preserver rings on board. We'd forgotten them.

Behold us now in our frail bark, hemmed in by hungry,

roaring waves, buffeted by high wind. The sun goes down red, the dark sea is strewn with foam, our craft rises and falls in the waves' yawning furrows. In the inky east two vast clouds collide; lightning leaps forth, and the hoarse thunder mutters. Again, in the south, the clouds reply, and another forked stream of fire shows us the appalling piles of thunderheads that seem to meet and be obliterated by the heaving waves. Great God! And we alone—we three—alone—alone—sole dwellers on the sea and on the earth, we three must perish!

The vast universe, its myriad worlds—the plains of boundless land behind us, the whole shoreless sea around us—contracted to my view. They, and all they contained, shrank to a single point: just our tossing vessel with its freight of glorious humanity.

Despair convulsed Adrian's face, still beaming with love. I saw him set his teeth, heard him murmur, "Yet they shall be saved!" Clara, visited by an human pang, pale and trembling, crept near him. He looked on her with an encouraging smile. "Do you fear, sweet girl? O, do not fear, we'll soon be on shore!"

The darkness prevented me from seeing the expression on her face; but her voice as she replied was clear and sweet. "Why should I fear? Unless mighty destiny—or the ruler of destiny—permits it, neither sea nor storm can harm us. And my worst fear is nowhere to be found, the fear I've had of surviving either one of you. If we die now, one death will clasp us undivided."

We took in all our sails save for a jib and changed our course, as soon as we safely could, to run with the wind for the Italian

shore. It was so dark, the white crests of the murderous surges were hardly discernable, except during the brief lightning-made high noons that showed us all our danger before restoring us to double night. On the boat we were silent save for when Adrian would make an encouraging observation. The craft obeyed his rudder miraculously well and ran along on the tops of the waves, as if the angry sea were somehow trying to lift her endangered child out of harm.

I watched our course from the prow. All at once I heard the waters roar with redoubled fury: the sound of breakers. We were certainly near a shore. "About there!" I cried, just as a thick bolt of lightning almost directly overhead showed us the waves pounding past huge rocks to reach the level sands—we were close enough to glimpse some stunted, oozy beds of reeds being inundated at the high water mark. Again darkness; and we drew in our breath with the same relief as people before us might have felt during volcanic eruptions, with the sky raining down red-hot debris, at the moment when some vast fragment cratered the ground directly in front of them. What to do we didn't know—breakers here, there, everywhere, encompassed us—they roared, and dashed, and flung their hateful spray in our faces. With considerable difficulty and danger we managed at length to alter our course and pull off from shore. I urged my companions to prepare for shipwreck by binding themselves to an oar or spar which might suffice to float them. My niece was only an intermediate-level swimmer; Adrian could swim, but had always been prevented by bodily weakness from taking any

pleasure in the exercise or becoming even as expert as Clara. I was myself an excellent swimmer, and enjoyed few things more than swimming in an angry sea; I loved to feel the waves wrap me and strive to overpower me, while I, lord of myself, moved this way or that as I pleased. But what could even the strongest swimmer oppose to the overpowering violence of such a storm at sea?

My efforts to prepare my companions were rendered nearly futile, as the roaring breakers made it impossible for them to hear me. The continual waves poured their excess upon us, obliging me to put all my strength into bailing the water out of our boat as fast as it came in. Meanwhile darkness hemmed us round, relieved only by the lightning; once or twice we saw thunderbolts, fiery red, fall into the sea. Vast spouts stooped from the clouds to churn the wild swells which rose to meet them; then the fierce gale bore the rack onwards and all was lost in the chaotic mingling of sky and ocean. Our gunwales had been torn away, our single sail had been shredded and carried off by the wind. We'd cut away our mast and lightened the boat of all she contained. Clara knelt down to help me empty water from the hold. As she turned her eyes to look at the fresh lightning, I could tell by that momentary gleam: resignation had conquered every fear. We, all people, had a power given us in any worst extremity, which propped up our otherwise feeble, timid minds and enabled us to endure the most savage tortures with a stillness of soul which in hours of happiness we could not have imagined. A calm, more dreadful in truth than the

tempest, allayed the wild beating of my heart; a calm like that of the gambler, the suicide, the murderer, when the last card was about to be played—while the poison was nearing the lips—as the death-blow was about to be landed.

Hours passed like this—hours which might have scuffed old age into the face of beardless youth and grizzled the silky hair of infancy—hours, while the chaotic uproar continued, while each new gust transcended in dreadful fury the one before; and our craft hung on the breaking wave, then rushed into the cold valley below where it trembled and spun between watery cliffs which seemed about to meet and close around us. For a moment the gale paused. Ocean sank down to comparative silence—it was a breathless interval. The wind seemed to gather itself, like a practiced hurdler before the spring; now with a terrific roar it rushed over the sea, and the waves struck our stern. “The rudder’s gone!” cried Adrian.

“We’re gone,” came Clara’s voice. “Save yourselves—O save yourselves!” More lightning showed me the poor girl half sunk in the water at the bottom of the boat, until Adrian caught her up and kept her in his arms. Rudderless, we rushed prow-first into the vast billows piled up ahead; the first in line broke upon and filled the tiny craft. One scream I heard, one cry I gave before I found myself in the water, darkness all around. Lightning flashed: the keel of our upset boat was nearby. I clung to it with my fingernails while using each new flash to try and discover any sign of my companions. I thought I saw Adrian not too far away, his arms around an oar; I sprang from my hold and

dashed aside the waters with an energy beyond my human strength, as I strove to reach and lay hold of him. No one was there now.

As that hope failed, instinctive love of life reanimated me, along with feelings of contention, as if a hostile will had challenged mine to combat. Determined to reach the shore, I breasted the surges and flung them from me—they might have been the fangs and claws of a lion about to rip open my bosom. When I had been beaten down by one wave, I rose on another. Bitter pride curled my lip.

With every flash I saw the coastline: it was near, yet the progress I made was small. Each receding wave carried me back towards ocean's far abysses. At one moment I felt my foot touch the sand, and then again I was in deep water. Strength drained from my arms, my breath began to fail under the influence of the strangling waters. A thousand wild and delirious thoughts crossed my mind. My chief feeling, as well as I can recall now, was a wish for relief. How sweet it would be to lay my head on the quiet earth, where the surges would no longer strike my weakened frame, nor the sound of waters ring in my ears. Out of longing to attain this repose—not to save my life—I made a last effort. The shelving shore suddenly offered a footing. Before the breakers could throw me down I managed to get my arms around a point of rock and cling, which earned me a moment's respite; and then, on the waves' next ebb, I rushed forward—gained the dry sands—and fell down senseless.

When, with a sickening feeling, I unclosed my eyes, the first great change was that the light of morning met them. Grey dawn dappled the cloud cover as it sped off in squadrons, leaving vast lakes of pure ether visible at intervals. A fountain of light streamed in from the east, across the Adriatic waves, changing the greys to roseate hues; then sky and sea were flooded with aerial gold.

A kind of fainting stupor still held me; my senses were alive, but memory was extinct. The blessed respite was short.

Scattered, the fierceness

Of knowledge comes flocking down again—

as Williams, the American poet of Paterson wrote. At the first realization I would have started up, but my limbs refused to obey me, the muscles had lost all power. I still believed that I might find one of my beloved companions cast like me, half alive, on the beach; and I strove in every way to restore my frame to the use of its animal functions so that I might begin to look. I wrung the brine from my hair. The rays of the risen sun soon visited me with genial warmth. The first moment I was able, I ran to the water's edge, calling the beloved names. Ocean drank in and absorbed my feeble voice, replying with a low, pitiless roar.

During the restoration of my bodily powers, my mind became in some degree aware of the universe of misery henceforth to be its dwelling. I climbed a dead tree: only flat sands bounded by scrub pine forest, and the sea clipped round by the horizon. In vain I kept looking further up and down the beach; I

found the mast we'd thrown overboard, some tangled cordage, remnants of a sail, nothing else from our wreck. Sometimes I stood still and wrung my hands. I accused earth and sky—the universal machine and the Almighty power that misdirected it. I threw myself on the ground. Then the sighing wind, mimicking a human cry, roused me to false, bitter hope. Assuredly, if any little dinghy or canoe had been there to find, I would have paddled back out to sea; I'd have searched until I discovered the dear remains of my lost ones; clinging round them, I'd have shared their grave.

So the day passed. Each moment contained eternity, though when hour after hour had gone by, I wondered at how speedily time flew. Yet even now I had not drunk the bitter potion to the dregs; I was not yet persuaded of my loss; I did not yet feel in every pulsation, in every nerve, in every thought, that I remained alone of my race—that I was the LAST MAN.

The day clouded over and a drizzling rain set in at sunset. Even the eternal skies weep, I thought. Was there any shame then, that mortal me should spend myself in tears? Human beings in the ancient fables could be dissolved away through weeping, and transformed into ever-gushing fountains. Ah! that it were so! Then my destiny would bring me close to Adrian and Clara's watery death.

Grief is a fantastic creature. It weaves a web on which to fatten the history of its woe from every form and change around; it incorporates all living nature into itself; it finds sustenance in every object.

Grief, as light, fills all things and like light gives them its own colors.

When my wandering search had taken me some distance from the spot on which I'd been cast, I came to one of those watchtowers which line the Italian shore at regular distances. I went in, glad of shelter, glad to find a work of human hands after gazing so long on nature's drear barrenness. A rough winding staircase led me up to the guard-room. Fate was kind: no harrowing vestige remained of its former inhabitants. The sight of an open crate containing some stale, half-moldy biscuit, awakened an appetite of which I'd been completely unaware till now. Thirst, violent and parching, the result of the seawater I'd swallowed, tormented me, too; so did the exhaustion of my frame. Kind Nature designs the remedy of such wants to give pleasurable sensations, so that I—even I!—was refreshed and calmed as I ate of this sorry fare, and drank a little of the sour wine left abandoned in a half-filled flask. The bed, not to be disdained by a victim of shipwreck, consisted of a few planks laid across two iron trestles, with a heap of dried corn husks for mattress. I stretched out upon it. The earthy smell of the Indian corn was balm to my nostrils after the hateful odor of seaweed. I forgot my state of loneliness. I neither looked backward nor forward; my senses were hushed to repose; I fell asleep and dreamed of dear inland scenes—fields and hay-makers—a shepherd whistling to his dog, the sheep driven to fold—sights and sounds peculiar to my boyhood's mountain life, which I had long forgotten.

I awoke in a painful agony from nightmare: Ocean, breaking its bounds, had come to carry away the fixed continent and deep rooted mountains, together with the streams I loved, the woods, the flocks—it raged around, keeping up that continual and dreadful roar which had accompanied the last wreck of surviving humanity. As my waking senses returned, the bare walls of the guard room closed round me. Rain pattered against the single window.

How dreadful it is to emerge from the oblivion of slumber, and be greeted good morning by the mute wailing of one's own hapless heart—from the land of deceptive dreams, to return to the heavy knowledge of unchanged and inalterable disaster! Thus was it with me now—and forever. The sting of other griefs might be blunted by time; even mine yielded occasionally during the day to some pleasure inspired by the imagination or the senses. But I never take my first look at the morning light without my fingers pressed tight against my bursting heart, my soul deluged with the interminable flood of hopeless misery. That morning I awoke for the first time in the dead world—I awoke alone—and the sea's dull dirge, still audible above the rain, recalled me to thoughts of the wretch I'd become. Low, almost crooning, the sound came like a reproach, a scoff—like the sting of the soul's remorse. I gasped: the veins and muscles of my throat were swelling, suffocating me. I put my fingers in my ears, I buried my head in an armful of husks: I would have dived to the planet's core to escape that hideous moan.

But I had work to do. Again I walked the detested beach—

again, far and wide, I looked in vain—again I raised unanswered cries, cupping my hands to my mouth, trying to amplify the only voice that could ever again force the mute air to carry syllables of human thought.

What a pitiable, forlorn, disconsolate being I was! One look at me would have told the tale of my despair. My hair was matted and wild, my limbs soiled with salt ooze. Most of my garments I'd lost or discarded in my struggles at sea, so the rain drenched the set of thin summer underclothes I'd retained. My feet were bare and the spiky clumps of reeds and broken shells made them bleed. I kept hurrying to and fro—now peering out, momentarily deceived, at some distant rock—now with flashing eyes reproaching the murderous ocean for its unutterable cruelty.

With time I compared myself to that monarch of the solitudes, Robinson Crusoe. We'd both been thrown overboard and washed up companionless—the novel's hero on the shore of a desolate island, I on that of a desolate world. I was rich in the so-called goods of life. If I turned my steps from this nearly barren scene and entered any of a million different cities, I should find their wealth stored up for my accommodation—clothes, food, books; I could take my pick of dwellings beyond the reach of wealth and royalty in former times. Robinson Crusoe was obliged to toil in the acquirement of every necessity and bit of shelter. I had my choice of climate, latitude, season; he was trapped on a tropical island with small recourse from its heats and storms. Viewing the question like this, who wouldn't

have preferred the sybaritic existence I could muster, the philosophic leisure, and ample intellectual resources, to his castaway's life of labor and peril? Yet he was far happier than I, for he could hope—and not in vain. A proper ship arrives at last; he goes back to country, home, and kindred, for whom his ordeal becomes a fireside tale. I could never relate the story of my adversity to anyone. I had no hope. Robinson Crusoe on his lonely island always knew that when the sun shone on him, it shone too on thousands upon thousands of other people living on the shores of the same ocean. But of all creatures beneath sun and moon, I alone bore human features; I alone could express thought in words; and, when I slept, nobody else beheld the day or night. He was transported with terror at the sight of a human foot print. I would have knelt down and worshipped one. A cruel and vengeful Turk, a merciless cannibal—or worse than either, an uncouth, brute, remorseless veteran in the vices of civilization, would have been to me a beloved companion, a treasure dearly prized. Any stranger's nature would be kin to mine; their form cast in the same mould; human blood would flow in their veins; a human sympathy must link us forever.

It cannot be that I shall never behold a fellow human being again!—never! —never!—not if I wait years! Tell me, my soul—shall I wake, and speak to no one, pass the interminable hours alone in the world, a solitary point surrounded by vacuum? Will day follow day endlessly thus? No! no! A God rules the world, after all, not a poisoner. So away! let me fly from the ocean-grave, let me leave behind this barren spot, inaccessible by its

sheer desolation; let me tread once again the paved town streets, step over the thresholds of shops and dwellings, and no doubt these thoughts will prove to have been only a horrible vision—a maddening but passing dream.

A guard had left a bicycle behind. The next day I entered the nearest city, Ravenna. I saw many living creatures, many oxen, horses, dogs, but no living people. I entered a marble palace, vacant save for the bats and the owls nestled in the tapestry upstairs. I stepped softly, not to awaken the town; I rebuked a dog that by yelping disturbed the sacred stillness.

In part of my mind, I refused to believe that all was as it seemed. The world was not dead, but I'd gone mad—or else I was laboring under a spell which let me see everything else in the world except for its human inhabitants; they were pursuing their ordinary lives, but somehow I was deaf and blind to them; every house had occupants, but I couldn't touch them or feel their touch, I couldn't perceive them. If it had been possible to delude myself into fully believing this, I'd have been far more contented. But my brain, tenaciously rational, refused to lend itself to such fantasies; and though I tried not to, I knew—I knew—that I, the offspring of a man and woman, one among many during most of my life, now remained the sole survivor of my species.

The sun sank behind the western hills; while yet a ray of light remained, I continued to pace the lonely streets. I had no appetite, though I was faint and weary, and hadn't eaten since the evening before. Eventually darkness sent every living

creature but me to the bosom of its mate. It was my solace, to blunt my mental agony by embracing personal hardship: of the thousand beds around, I wouldn't seek the luxury of one. I lay down on the pavement; as once before, a cold marble step served me for a pillow. Midnight came; and then, though not before, did my wearied lids shut out the sight of the twinkling stars and their reflections on the stones. Thus I passed the second night of my desolation.

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