

Part Eight.

RICHARD FROST

Poems and Essays—8.

The dead are walking again
Walking in my mind
Searching for those memories
That, in life, they could not find

You think it's a ghost
But it is only you
You see it as white
While in fact it is blue

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THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

1st of June, 1925

And how I came out of the house. And how she was sitting on the grassy slope that bordered the gravel. And how she sat there, she who was normally so firm and straight, how she sat there all hunched over. And how I drew closer and saw the tire-tracks go down, down the slope and into the pond. And in the pond lay the wheeled chair, and Sir Sidney was beneath it, face-down in the water. And how she didn't move when I came to stand beside her, and she said, "I had my glasses off."

And so it was strange that the coroner's verdict was accidental drowning. And so it was strange he concluded Sir Sidney must have gone out and lost control over the chair and then drowned. For how could a man who was paralysed up to the neck and more have pushed the wheels to go out? How could a man with no control left, no control at all, then lose it? And so I concluded it was either murder or assisted suicide. And I knew the latter, for she never would have pushed him to go out if he had not asked her. And she had taken her glasses off.

And how we remained there, sitting and standing, staring, until Charles, suddenly he was there, screaming, "Master! Master!", his voice a black tear in the sky. And how I've never seen anyone run so fast, not even Tristram, and how someone so slight could be that strong, pulling out the heavy body, all soaked, all on his own, out of the water. And how he cried, all the while tearing the sky, until it shattered and came down, tumbled down, like all his tears, wet on the wet clothes and the wet, wet body. And how he never again would stand beside Sir Sidney, never behind him, making a four-shouldered, two-headed man.

A knight can drown in a puddle, because his harness is so heavy. If he drops from his horse, he can't get up again without any help. This means he'll choke in the mud.

And exactly so.

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Here we leave the scene of Sir Sidney's death, and we shall skip his funeral, to let our story resume on the day that I took place at the big desk to start finishing *The Rule of Kings*.

It had been strange, to see them standing side-by-side, Lady Althane and the Reverend, when they came to ask me to stay on at the Hall until the last three chapters had been completed and accepted by the publishers. Lady Althane would remain for a while herself, she said: there were also papers to sort out, and although Sir Sidney had demanded that I do this, she'd like to oversee the proceedings.

As she talked on, I noticed how the Reverend shuffled aside a little, as if he felt contaminated by her proximity. And he probably did. Charles and I had been asked to let the matter rest, but the Reverend seemed to have more than an inkling of what had really happened. At the funeral, when he had told us how God in His infinite mercy had decided to fold Sir Sidney into His bosom, I had heard the strain in his voice: the Reverend knew he was telling a lie. Apart from the present occasion, he had visited the Hall not once since Sir Sidney's death, and I was certain he would stay away as long as Lady Althane was still a resident. Yet here he was, conscientious as ever, anxious to honour his father's last wishes, standing right beside the woman who had done the same by letting Sir Sidney die.

I have to say, I did pity the Reverend, as I had found it hard playing the fool to Cedric. "But John," he kept saying, "surely you don't believe her? She pushed him! What else can have caused that chair to roll down? I'm sure it wasn't Charles, and as my father couldn't have done it himself, it must have been her." It more than bothered him: not because he shared his brother's misgivings—Cedric believed in a benevolent God, a whole host of them, and he was firmly convinced that Sir Sidney would enjoy their good company—but he did feel he'd been deprived of the chance to say goodbye.

"I'd best not mention it to Roz," he told me, "I'm sure she would have wanted to hold his hand once more." Only the next day he had left: for Cedric, too, had decided he needed some distance and time to himself.

So in the end it was just the Captain who accepted the official version without question. "Who would've thought, eh?" was his comment. "The old geezer finding the strength again all of a sudden. Althane blood, y'know: we never give up."

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12th of May, 1880

Yesterday Sir Ralph came into the library to announce that, after the summer holidays, Tristram will be sent to Rugby. He had asked his former headmaster about it, and the new Althane heir is welcome to join the club. If I could please bring Tristram up to par beforehand.

When I laid down my pen and threw a doubtful look at my new employer, he argued, "Now look here, old boy, I know you're all in favour of the personal touch and stuff, but I do think this pampering at home should be stopped. It's time they put some muscle on him."

Maybe it is. Tristram has slept in my room for over three weeks now: according to his doll, there are too many ghosts about. I'm not so certain, though, whether sending him to boarding school is the right answer. Or there again, it could be, for I can't see the doll being sent as well.

"Well," I replied at last, "we might work a bit harder on the arithmetic, but as to the rest, Tristram has made such enormous progress, I'm sure he'll come top of the class. He's really exceptionally clever."

"Right. As long as he doesn't grow too big an egg-head."

And so it is settled. Tristram will be sent to Rugby, where there'll be many sports and games, and he'll grow enough muscles to balance his egg-head.

"How's the book coming along?" inquired Sir Ralph.

"Reasonably well, I think."

"Any chance of you speeding it up a little? Sooner we're rid of the old bag, the better. She's getting on my nerves."

I'm sure Lady Althane would rather depart for her dower house herself: Sir Ralph gets as much on her nerves as she does on his. It is one of the reasons why I like Sir Ralph so much. And I simply adored him when he was shown the statue, which Lady Althane had intended for the garden. Clapping his forehead, he bellowed, "Good God, woman, are you insane? A misshapen lump like that? *That . . .*" He gestured furiously at the stone image of his father, so ruthlessly lifelike, so un-Lady-Althane-like in its careful depiction of everything which had gone wrong with Sir Sidney. "*That* should be thrown in the fucking pond! Christ almighty!"

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The knight of the realm has spoken the veto, and so the statue has been packed, ready for removal. However, Sir Ralph and I both know that Lady Althane won't leave until she is absolutely certain that Sir Sidney's name and fame are safe. She must keep a close eye on me.

As Sir Ralph left the library, he asked, "I say, how about some boxing later on? Been practising: guess I could beat you now."

"Sorry," I said, "but I don't think it would be appropriate."

He nodded, then sighed. "Bloody mourning period. If you ask me, we should be celebrating. At least he's out of his misery."

And that's another fact, I thought as I took my pen back up: even if the man misses out by a mile, he hits the nail right on the head.

4th of June, 1925

"You'll know what to make of it," Sir Sidney had told me. But to be frank, in those first few days I hardly did know what to make of it. The notes he had given me for the final chapters were a complete chaos, a mere jumble of ideas, and every time I went through them, trying to arrive at some sort of coherence, sweat came breaking out. I jotted down a few lines, glad I had done so when Lady Althane came in to ask how I was getting on (at least the scribbled pages lying before me created the appearance of my getting on), yet the moment she'd left, I tore the whole lot up and started anew.

I kept writing and rewriting the same sentences, making no progress at all, until, in the second week, I remembered something else Sir Sidney had said. "Keep asking questions. Forget about the answers: always search for the right question." Now he hadn't meant that answers were irrelevant, but simply that questions kept one moving—and maybe, I thought, this was where I had gone wrong. In my panic of finding myself suddenly on my own, I'd been aiming to present a solid, closed case, while in fact the whole point of the exercise was to open doors and see what lay beyond. It was like trying to get from A to B without walking the path in between and, also, without acknowledging that different directions and destinations might present themselves. Maybe B was just a point on the way to C: as I had learned during my time with Sir Sidney, conclusions were seldom definite—or if they were definite, it only meant that the road ran dead.

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Once I had realised this, things went much better. Surprising, really, how one can get the creative juices flowing by allowing for the unknown, what prospects open up if one takes the explorative approach instead of just seeking confirmation; and for me, it worked like a treat. Naturally, I *was* seeking confirmation in the sense that I hoped to find the line of argument Sir Sidney had intended to follow, but somehow it seemed far easier to do so in the liberty of conjecture. Every time I thought: but suppose if . . . , I went in search of something to verify my intuition, which often led me to the books and papers in Sir Sidney's collection. If I found what I'd been looking for, I concluded I had asked the right question. Soon, too, the notes began to make more sense, falling neatly into place along the route I was tracing out, although I did allow for the occasional detour, knowing that Sir Sidney might have made such a rerouting himself.

I have to admit, I only dared to be so bold and free because it had been firmly agreed with the publishers that the ideas expressed in the text would be ascribed wholly to Sir Sidney. All the same, I did suffer a small crisis of confidence when, towards the end of June, I received word from Shaw that he'd withdrawn from the project. Fortunately Thornton took over as editor, and when he received my letter about whether Shaw thought my work wouldn't be good enough, he more or less managed to reassure me.

"Believe me, old chap: nothing to do with you, or that business with your father. Shaw was dubious about the book all along (too modern), and he did not think it was kind towards Sir Sidney to say he wanted out. You just keep going. Based on what I have seen so far (last two chapters were by your hand too, were they not?), I have every faith in a happy ending."

As to the doubts that remained (I strongly suspected that Shaw hadn't told Thornton where the real problem lay), I pressed them away, telling myself I was doing it for Sir Sidney. I had promised, I had sworn—and since I was stuck with it anyway, I might as well enjoy the experience.

I was not only doing it for Sir Sidney, though. Lately I had found myself thinking a lot about Roz. In her letter, she had said that the Hall would be but bleak without Sir Sidney; to my mind, however, the one who was really missing was Roz. Sometimes, when I sat looking out of the window, I recalled the many happy days I'd seen her frisking around the lawn with Tristram, or the cheerful way in which she used to trot off on her pony. Indeed, my objections to her individual behaviour seemed narrow-minded

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now, false: for it was exactly her spontaneity, the zest of her, the open joy she took in all that life had to offer which made Roz so special. It was a talent for play I myself seemed to lack, and the more I saw this, the more convinced I became that . . . we'd be great together.

In entertaining such thoughts, it helped, of course, that I was sitting in a beautiful gentleman's library, at a beautifully polished oak desk. It helped as well that Charles regularly dropped in to inquire whether I needed anything in the way of refreshments, sir—as it did wonders for my self-esteem that I was regarded by the entire family as the man who could recover the Holy Grail. Above all, it helped that I had received Sir Sidney's blessing: he'd more or less requested I ask Roz to marry me.

What did not help was that I still had no money to speak of, and until *The Rule of Kings* was published (and unless it became a success), I wouldn't stand any real chance of earning my repute. It did not help either that I had yet to get round Lady Althane. I needed her approval, also for that other little plan I had in mind. Excepting the Reverend, I thought there'd be no objections from the brothers to my becoming a relation of theirs, but Lady Althane was a different package altogether; and even if she did value me as her husband's ghost-writer, I was sure that she despised all the rest of me. But maybe, I kept telling myself, if I worked hard, and made the book a really good book, and she realised I had put in so much effort out of admiration and love for Sir Sidney . . .

Lady Althane had asked to read the first chapter I finished before it was sent off to Thornton; and I cannot express my relief when, after two hours of tense waiting, she came to see me in the library and pronounced,

"Well, Mr. Holland, it seems you have a creative bent after all."

I felt myself blush. "Thank you, ma'am."

"What did Mr. Althane say?"

"He appeared to be pleased."

Or rather Cedric had been full of praise. In his letter, he had exclaimed,

"Brilliant, my darling! I loved the extravaganza of George IV: it was as if you were talking about me. Marvellous job, very skilled indeed. Keep going!"

And so, encouraged from all sides, I kept going.

That is, until the Althane papers put a spanner in the works.

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30th of June, 1880

Well, the bubble has burst. Honestly, I don't know any more what is real and what is not. And the way she said it, so lightly, so offhand It was only when I pointed out the damage it might do that she started to take the matter seriously. What are these people like, I ask, that they don't see what is bloody obvious to everyone else?

I shall have to inform Thornton, although personally I can't think of any way of salvaging the situation. We'll all be ruined. Ruined.

7th of June, 1925

Rightly supposing that Sir Ralph would neither appreciate nor utilise the wealth of information which the Sutton Hall library contained (unless it was by selling off some of the more precious pieces to settle the many debts he seemed to be constantly sprinting into), Sir Sidney had ordered in his will for the collection to be broken up. Cedric had inherited no less than one third of all books and manuscripts, which included a First Folio of Shakespeare; Lady Althane got the volumes on art and the long row of first editions of her late husband's works, whilst the Reverend received some fine old copies of the Bible. I was an heir as well: in my room upstairs, a special portfolio held five beautifully crafted medieval romances which, assuming they were originals, must be worth a small fortune. In theory I was a rich man now, weren't it that I knew I would never part with these masterpieces, if only out of respect for the wizened bard from whose inspiration they had sprung.

A final beneficiary, but by no means the least, was the British Library, to which Sir Sidney had decided to donate a true treasure trove of ancient documents that might be of interest to other scholars. Shortly after the reading of the will, the family solicitor had handed me a list of the papers which were to be sent to London, with the request I sort them out and prepare them for dispatch. And so, towards the end of June, finally, at last, the open sesame was spoken and the glass bookcase stood gaping as I set about putting Sir Sidney's glorious gifts in the right order.

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Lady Althane had promised to oversee the proceedings; and so she did, watching me like a hawk as if she suspected my fingers to be sticky underneath the cover of the silk gloves with which Charles had provided me. I tried to ignore her, but it was hard, all the more since I'd formed the resolution to remove certain items, and I feared I'd never be able to do this with her keeping me under such close observation. Even if I did manage to stash something away, there was still the problem of the list, which, I was sure, she had read from top to bottom and back again.

In the event, I need not have troubled myself, for I soon found that my hope of separating the wheat from the chaff proved in vain. Seeing me take up one of the saints' lives (text no. 5, which seemed in perfect order), Lady Althane all at once remarked, "He so loved writing that story."

I felt my heart skip a beat. And another. Please no.

"You don't mean to say this is a fake?"

"Oh, it is genuine enough," she replied with a shrug. "Only it was produced five years ago, instead of five hundred."

"But, but," I sputtered, "it's illuminated and all!"

She threw me a cool look. "My husband was a true artist, Mr. Holland. He had many hidden talents."

Or, I thought, he had a wife who'd been prepared to lend a hand; surely Sir Sidney had not made these wonderful miniatures himself?

Lowering the sheets of sheepskin (it really seemed impossible to believe: she, with her blurry art, with her atheist principles, painting these detailed, such technically accomplished Christian symbols, the interlaced images of the Saviour's birth, and his resurrection Oh my dear God, I suddenly noticed, the second evangelist has horns), I felt how all the uncertainty that, in the past two months, I had so firmly locked away, and subsequently forgotten in the pleasure of writing, came flooding back. To prevent immediate disaster, I'd been concentrating on the papers for the British Library, but, as it now again occurred to me, what about *The Rule of Kings*? All those books and articles I had used for reference: how many were of Sir Sidney's own making? What had been made up?

For a moment I simply could not speak: I felt foolish, furious, ready to throw in the towel and leave her to clear up the mess herself. Just the way she stood there, looking down on me impatiently, as if she'd merely hired me to do some dusting and resented my protests at the dirty state that the

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room was in. And I think I *would* have walked out, hadn't it been for my acute awareness of the promise I'd made to Sir Sidney. I had committed myself, I had sworn. Moreover (damn it!), I still needed Lady Althane. I needed her for Roz, for myself—and for that other plan I had in mind.

"Ma'am," I uttered at last, in as respectful a tone as I could manage, "we cannot send these papers to London. Sir Sidney used some of them for his own research, and other scholars are bound to go and take a look the instant they become available. What if people see they're forgeries?"

Lady Althane didn't budge. "You couldn't tell the difference."

"An expert graphologist might, though," I maintained. "And even if they do stand up to scrutiny now, who's to say inspection techniques won't improve in the future? With *The Rule of Kings* as well: I really have the feeling Mr. Shaw pulled out because he'd grown suspicious. I know for a fact that he questions the veracity of the De Vries letters."

"The De Vries letters?"

"It's some source we used. No-one's ever heard of De Vries, he's a total unknown, but Sir Sidney had these letters in his private collection . . ."

Here she interrupted me, snapping, "I don't know whether you realise, Mr. Holland, but my husband only made texts which he thought should have existed, or might have existed. And no doubt he wrote those letters—if what you surmise is indeed true—to substantiate some point."

"I know that, ma'am," I replied soothingly, "and I do think Sir Sidney *had* a point. Still, others may condemn him for using false evidence. Believe me, if they ever find out, your husband's reputation will be destroyed. No-one will take his work seriously any more."

It wasn't until I said this that she uncrossed her arms and sat down on the chair opposite, which, ironically enough, was the very same seat I had always occupied when working with Sir Sidney. For the first time looking me in the eye, she asked, "So what do you suggest?"

I heaved a sigh. What did I suggest? I had not the slightest. That was why I felt so trapped: there was no fucking way out any more.

"Maybe I should rewrite the whole book, I don't know," I finally offered. "Look for other sources, which *are* reliable. Verifiable."

"If my husband could not find them, I am sure you won't manage either."

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She glanced aside, distracted by the sight of her daughter-in-law, who came striding majestically past the window. Lady Althane herself had caused a small local scandal by refusing to don mourning wear, on the grounds that Sir Sidney hated black (which was true: his suits had always been blue, never black), but her successor seemed more than determined to do her noble duty. Only a day after Sir Sidney's demise, the brand-new Lady had ordered an entire wardrobe, of the richest crape, the deepest velvet, the costliest jet, to express the intense grief she might have felt over the loss sustained. What I myself found most tragic, though, was that, try as she might, she'd never outclass the woman sitting before me, who had, after all, three handles to her name. We all still tended to regard Dowager Althane, the Dowager Burgess-Stuart, Lady Corthorpe-Tudor-Howe as *the* Lady Althane; and I felt that, as long as she was here, she would remain the undisputed mistress of Sutton Hall.

"What on earth does she think she's doing?" Lady Althane asked as the thin shadow glided round to make her way back again.

"It's a habit of hers," I said. "She walks past at least twice a day."

"Is that so? It's all about appearances with her, isn't it?"

"Well, she seems to be very proud of her new frocks."

Lady Althane furrowed her brow. "Don't be naïve, Mr. Holland," she said testily. "It's not *her* appearance I'm talking about."

Turning away from the window, her gaze came to rest again on the pile of papers on the desk. I had taken the gloves off; and my hands were sticky indeed, clammy as they had grown with sweat.

"Ma'am," I tried once more, "you do see the problem, don't you?"

When she kept stubbornly silent, only continuing to stare at the manuscripts (So much work, such exquisite decorations. The amount of gold-leaf alone: the money it must have cost!), I suggested, "Look, can I just talk it over with Mr. Thornton? I'll be visiting him next week."

She pursed her lips. "Hm. Can he be trusted, do you think?"

"Wholly, ma'am—fully."

In fact, I wholly trusted Thornton to want to kill me.

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I have just reread the above and, in hindsight, it almost seems as if it was intentional. She knew what was wrong, she knew I was right, but for some reason she wanted *me* to raise the issue. As it was for me to decide Of course, why else did she want to be present? Why give the game away?

The way it went, however, all she had to do was nod. Yes, Mr. Holland, if you think it's such a big deal, as you're such a stickler for realism and reality: well, do as you must. *I don't care.*

But she did care, oh yes she did. Far more than she cared to admit.

10th of June, 1925

I've never seen anyone so shocked as Thornton when I told him about the Althane papers. First he turned white as a sheet; then he clutched his beard and bellowed, "But we sell fifty copies of Sir Sidney's works a day. A day!"

"Keep your hair on," I said, for he seemed about to pull his beard off.

But Thornton did not hear. "Christ Almighty, what am I going to do? It'll be the end of you, of me, of the whole ruddy publishing house!"

"And keep your voice down. Shaw's looking through the glass already."

This helped: casting a furtive look over his shoulder, he quickly dropped his hands and lowered his voice to a whisper. His despair only appeared to rise, however; his eyes wide as a scared child's, he leaned over and hissed,

"Say it isn't true, John. Please say it isn't."

I clasped my lips together. Then I blinked regretfully and spoke,

"I'm sorry, Robert, but a lot of *The Rule of Kings* isn't quite true."

Thornton sank, he sank—and it was lucky he had jumped up from his chair in the first place, otherwise he would have sunk to the floor. As it was, he just reached the edge of his seat, at which spot he slumped, sagged, he drooped, until he seemed a very depression of a man.

I must say, bad as I felt about my own predicament, which had grown even worse by owning up, I did feel sorry for having brought him down so low; and to distract him, I asked, "How are my mother and Theresa?"

He threw me a startled look. "Huh? Well: they are well. We're engaged."

"Really?" I said with a smile. "That's good news. Congratulations!"

"Thank you. The wedding will be in December. Which reminds me: will you give her away?"

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"Sure, with pleasure. More than happy to."

Sitting back, I smiled some more. I nodded a bit—probably a bit too much, because all of a sudden Thornton straightened up and asked,

"Now tell me, tell me honestly, how many suspect texts have you two used for the book? For perhaps if we . . ."

"Well, that's where the trouble lies," I broke in. "Sir Sidney was such a good counterfeiter, you just can't see. The fakes look as spic and span, or as aptly worn and torn, as the real article. For instance, his copy of Magna Carta, which we used in the chapter on John and Richard? According to Charles, it's a reproduction. I never even knew."

"Oh, but that doesn't matter," Thornton said, momentarily relieved. "There are at least three other copies around. No-one will mind a fourth."

"Except that Sir Sidney changed a few sentences."

"What?" He frowned. "Why would he want to do that? He must've known people would notice."

"Maybe that's precisely what he aimed for, to make researchers take a closer look, also at the other copies, so as to demonstrate that copies are never true copies. Most medieval scribes added highly personal touches to what they wrote out, you know; he may've wanted to illustrate that. Or it was to suggest that Magna Carta is just a piece of prose, invented by the barons to pretend that they'd subdued the King. I remember we discussed this once. They could have forced John to affix his seal, or used an imitation—and once this was done, the Great Charter was a fact."

Thornton shook his head. "Surely you don't believe any of this?" he asked in an incredulous voice.

"I don't know. John did try to get the Pope to annul the document. And if Sir Sidney's copy isn't an original, why would the others be?"

And . . . yes, I had lost him again. Shaking his head harder and harder, almost as if to deny I'd ever appeared here today to start about forgeries which were copies of forgeries, practically trying to shake me out of the normally so reassuring reality of his office, Thornton said I'd better come and see him at his place in the evening; he needed to think things over.

Six hours later, as we were sitting side-by-side in front of the fire, a glass of wine in our hands, he seemed to have calmed down somewhat, although rather pensive, and also tense. Knowing Thornton as well as I did, I sensed a piece of bad news coming on. And, knowing him as I did, I realised it

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would probably involve taking the honest and honourable course, which, in all certainty, would lead to my professional disgrace, his own, and that of Sir Sidney. Thornton, I felt, was about to proclaim the end.

And indeed he was, though not quite in the way I had envisaged.

Staring at the flames in the grate, he began, "The trouble is, I still like the book. And I feel that, at times, it does hit the mark."

"It definitely does." I said no more. Best to concur.

Thornton nodded, his eyes still on the fire. "There's only one solution I can think of," he murmured ponderingly, "but it is rather drastic." Suddenly he turned to face me and, with the air of someone who has reached a decision, he put down his glass and declared, "Cotton."

For a few seconds there was absolute silence in the room.

Then I brought out, "No. Never."

"Yes," said Thornton. "And as soon as possible."

I exhaled a shivery sigh. "She won't allow it, Robert, I'm sure she won't. She did some of the illustrations herself."

"Ah! Good." He stood up and took the poker to start stirring the coals. "You tell her: if she doesn't agree, I'll drag her straight to court." Prodding the poker into the fire, very firmly this time, he repeated, "Cotton."

13th of June, 1925

Robert Cotton (1571-1631) was an antiquary who had a great passion for old books and documents. The vast library that he built up in his lifetime, which included the famous *Lindisfarne Gospels* and two copies of Magna Carta, is said to be the most important and comprehensive collection of manuscripts ever assembled by a private person in Britain. A favourite with James I, Cotton was knighted in 1603, though his later anti-monarchist writings led to his downfall. Towards the end of his life, he was charged with treason, and his beloved library confiscated by the king.

After the Restoration, the library was returned to the Cotton family; however, cumbersome and expensive to maintain as the enormous amount of paper was, in 1700 Cotton's grandson gave the whole lot to the nation, in the hope that it would lay the foundation for a "British Library". Not knowing what to do with it either, the government decided to store the

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unwanted present on the first floor of Ashburnham House in Little Dean's Yard, Westminster, where also the printed books and manuscripts known as the Royal Library were kept.

Sadly, however, Ashburnham House lived up to its name. In 1731 a fire broke out, which ate up at least 100 volumes of the Cotton library, whilst another 100 were ruined by the water used to put the fire out. Adding to disaster, most of the documents that were damaged or destroyed stemmed from the early medieval period, amongst which the heroic poem *Beowulf*, the original copy of *The Battle of Maldon*, and the oldest exemplary of *Burghal Hidage*, a unique document describing the towns of Anglo-Saxon England and the provisions made for their defence.

Scholars have been speculating on the contents of the lost manuscripts ever since. We'll never know what exactly they said: whether they were similar to the transcripts such as are available, or perhaps deviated in significant ways. Strictly speaking, we do not even really know for certain these texts actually existed—and if they did, whether they were true or they were false.

So this was Thornton's—rather brilliant—idea: we would do a Cotton. I'd light a fire in the library of Sutton Hall, and burn all the documents in Sir Sidney's collection whose authenticity we doubted. As Thornton said, the only way to make a forgery real is by ensuring that no-one can ever reveal it to be a forgery. Better throw it in the fire than to the wolves. Let them howl: they'll be howling for the moon. Oh no, ladies and gentlemen, there is no such thing as certainty. There is only room for doubt.

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Obviously, it wasn't for me to decide that Sir Sidney's creations should go: I needed Lady Althane's permission and also, I felt, that of the sons. The Reverend only nodded when I explained to him about the plan; and after my urgent letter of appeal, Cedric decided to overcome his aversion to his stepmother and attend the "cremation", as he put it. As to Sir Ralph . . .

Just picture the scene: I am knelt by the hearth, Cedric and the Reverend at my side. Charles is standing behind us, crying. We have pushed in all the

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manuscripts that he and Lady Althane have pointed out—Lady Althane has left, by the way: she doesn't want to be part of it any more. For all these masterpieces to go, some with age-old poems on their backs, this labour of love, her husband's beautifully executed calligraphy, her own intricate artwork You're a novelist, she told me, how would you feel if people started tearing up your stories?

However, she knew it was in vain. I am not a novelist yet; and it is either Sir Sidney's reputation or his stories.

She has chosen the former.

The Reverend keeps silent as the flames lick and tug at the vellum. He has a pained expression on his face and if ever a man seemed broken, it is him. He loved his father, he loved him so much, and now he sees him burn.

Cedric and I are discussing what else should go. The problem is, especially the best, the rare exemplars seem suspect: too good to be true. They could be originals, but we can't say for sure. And the Anglo-Saxon riddles, was Sir Sidney really so well-versed, such a genius that he could create clever new material in the old language, whereas others spend months just translating one simple page into modern English?

We do not know.

And we'll never know, because Cedric and I both feel that the safest course is to throw all of it in—and what nightmares I shall have about this later, to think that I may have destroyed some invaluable antiques.

I shall have nightmares, too, about the texts we turn out to have missed. For sure, Sir Sidney was a genius after all, leaving me to ask and ask,
"What if?"

All at once Sir Ralph enters the library. Rubbing his hands, he remarks,

"Well, it does make for a roaring fire. Getting nice and snug in here."

We all stare.

"Yeah, right," Sir Ralph says with a little cough, "keep up the good work. Actually, got some demolition to do myself. Vegetable garden is full of rabbits. Bloody vermin, fornicating all over the place."

We are still staring when the door closes behind him.

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Turning my attention again to the hearth, I throw in the last sheet and sit back. I feel so tired; I am worn out. I wish I were like Charles, and could cry. My eyes are stinging, but it is only with the smoke.

Then Cedric asks me, "*The Knight of the Yellow Lands*: where is it?"

Oh, they are here now, the tears. And I can't hold them back.

"My father used it in his *Book of Medieval Romance*, dearest," Cedric says in a soft voice. "We really cannot . . ."

Indeed we cannot.

So here endeth the noble tale of the Knyght of the Yolowe Laundis . . .

Of course, we made sure the fire was reported in all the major newspapers. "A national disaster", the *Times* proclaimed. And one clever journalist told the public, "It does put one in mind of what happened once to the Cotton library. Robert Cotton (1571-1631) was an antiquary who had a great passion for old books and documents . . ."

10th of August, 1880

Tristram is back from his vacation. He has told me about Roz.

We'd been hoping for Roz to come to the Hall, but last month Tristram received a letter from her, saying she would spend the summer with some acquaintances in Suffolk. If I was disappointed, Tristram was heart-broken. He missed her: so much, that in the end it was decided he should go and see her. I thought that perhaps I'd be appointed as an escort, but the book is taking up too much time. And so I've been waiting for three whole weeks for Tristram to come back and tell me all about her.

"She was very beautiful," he said. "She had her hair in a bun."

"A bun?"

"Yeah. She looked like a real lady. But I called her a bunny." He smiled mischievously. "And when we went running together, it all came loose again. We missed your time-keeping, though. I thought I was better than ever, but I can't say for sure. Also I stumbled once, so maybe it was just my imagination. Still it seemed really, really fast. As if I was flying."

And that was all. Roz wears her hair in a bun.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

23rd of August, 1880

Rugby is looming large. Last night Tristram came to my room, near to tears. He told me how Roz had promised to visit him at the new school; but apparently, this wasn't enough reassurance, for in the same breath he asked, "Couldn't you come with me, Mr. Holland? I know that if you were there, I wouldn't mind so much. What if they have ghosts? There'll be no-one to turn to. They always say it's nonsense."

Children's fears: they are so tangible, so true.

"I'm sorry, tiger," I replied, "but I really can't. I don't have a job there."

"But I'll be lonely," he persisted. "I have to leave the animals behind as well."

"You'll be seeing them during the holidays, won't you?"

"Judy needs cuddling and brushing every day, Mr. Holland."

"Well, then I must cuddle and brush her for you. At least an hour."

Not enough, not near enough. His eyes suddenly widening in fright, he whispered, "Or Arthur might die when I'm away. I'd miss the funeral."

Children's fears. And the lame solutions that grown-ups offer.

Pulling him close, pressing my cheek against his, I remarked,

"Don't you forget, school has its advantages as well. There'll be lots of boys to play with. And you'll do games. It's a big plus that you're such a fast runner. I'm sure you'll be very popular."

I am sure that he will be. And if games don't work, he can always offer to shoot one of the teachers. That should do the trick.

20th of June, 1925

Come to think of it, I don't believe Tristram ever did ask me to come with him; somehow I have the feeling I made that up. A month later, when he finally left for school, all his concern was for the animals. Having given me detailed instructions for the amount of cuddling and brushing to be done (Arthur at least half an hour, with slow strokes, starting behind the ears; Judy a bit less long, but more on the side, and not so hard near the tail), he

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gave me a quick kiss and jumped into the carriage. I waved and waved, but Tristram never looked back.

No, that's not fair; it sounds too bitter. Actually, he wrote to me every fortnight, venting his frustration with the new teachers, who made him recite the same facts over and over again ("without your brain doing any work, Mr. Holland, just your lips moving"), and asking my opinion on the adventure stories he by now wrote on a regular basis. It would remain a habit of his, even at a later age, when he began publishing his novels and found an eager and enthusiastic audience. I was always the first to read his latest—always.

Back then, though, it just seemed so final. The old life at the Hall was nearing its end, I felt: everyone was leaving, some of them for good. Sir Sidney was gone, Tristram away, then Cedric, and Charles . . . Also, with more free time on my hands, I found it hard not to worry about Roz. She didn't write, and I didn't dare write to her. No-one ever mentioned her to me, and I was afraid to ask. She could be dead, for all I knew. (Although that no doubt would have been mentioned. "Have you heard? Rosalind has died. Well, no marrying her now, or it should be a match made in Heaven. You'll just have to wait till you die too.")

As autumn slithered into winter, I was starting to feel so lonely, I even regretted it when I'd finished the last chapter of *The Rule of Kings* and Lady Althane, having approved of the results, decided to pack her bags at last and go. We'd had yet another row—the biggest confrontation so far—but oddly enough, after she had left, I suddenly found that I missed her.

The last few weeks I spent either in the study, putting the final touches to the book, or playing billiards and drinking claret with Sir Ralph. Indeed, Sir Ralph grew so fond of my company that, when he saw me off in December, the tears rose to his eyes.

"Well, cheerio, old boy," he said hoarsely, slapping me once more on the shoulder (and with all the shoulder-slapping he had done lately, I'd grown a lot tougher, not even flinching when his hand came crashing down). "If you ever feel like a bit of hunting, or ransacking the library again, just let me know. Tell you what: I'll throw a good old-fashioned ball in the spring. You can be my guest of honour."

"I am grateful."

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

And so I was. For even though I knew the ball would probably never be thrown, I appreciated his idea of me as a guest of honour. That had been very pleasant with Sir Ralph: he had always treated me like an equal.

*

But I'm running ahead of things; it is necessary for me to go back. I still have to relate what happened to Cedric, and Charles, and why.

To be honest, I don't think I shall ever really know why: Cedric refused to tell me. I heard things, of course, but apparently people either thought it was too terrible to say out loud, or they knew I was friends with him, and tactfully refrained from revealing the truth.

Anyway, halfway through October I got this letter. And I was so happy when Charles laid it on the desk, over the moon, for the address on the envelope was written in Roz's hand. Her hand!

As it turned out, the whole letter was in Roz's hand.

But these were not her words.

"Darling,— I am sad to announce that I must leave my beloved England. There are certain rules that may not be broken, and I seem to have broken them all. At present I am staying with our mutual friend: she is very good to me and has promised to see me off in Dover tomorrow. I love you. I love you. Cedric"

The next morning I was in Dover.

I was in a panic. I was so afraid I'd miss him, so afraid.

And then I ran into Roz.

She seemed almost shocked to see me. Yet she did not allow herself time to recover, just pushing me in the back and gasping, "Cabin 5a on the second deck. They leave in half an hour. Now go!"

They?

Charles had travelled one train ahead of me.

So Cedric wouldn't be alone in Italy.

RICHARD FROST

When I stepped back onto the quay, Roz was gone. And it seemed to me as if the gulls were crying, or they were laughing, cackling with malicious glee, mocking me, a grating roar which only ceased when that low note of sadness set in, its melancholy, withdrawing wail, of the boat retreating, and bleating, taking Cedric away from me, away, forever there to stay.

21st of October, 1880

I kissed him. He wanted it so badly, I couldn't resist him.

1st of August, 1925

Let's move a bit forward now. Cedric has gone, but Lady Althane is still at the Hall. And I receive another letter. Also, a telegram.

The telegram was from my mother, and told me that Uncle Joseph had died: please come to funeral Monday, stop, all in shock, stop, final stop. The accompanying letter from the solicitor requested that I, as the main heir, be present at the reading of the will. *As the main heir . . .*

It may sound callous, and it probably is, but I have seldom been more elated than when I heard of Uncle Joseph's demise. As I strode through the garden towards Lady Althane's studio, I was already computing the numbers in my mind: the chain of stores, nine in all, with a turnover of . . . My mother and aunt to maintain, but Theresa would soon be gone, thank God; and it was a fine town-house, very fine indeed: if that was part of the inheritance, I would live in style, at least twelve staff at my beck and call. Certainly, sir; you're welcome, sir; as you wish, as you command. Perhaps a second home in the country, just for her . . . We'd be so happy.

"Ma'am," I spoke, "I'm afraid I have some very bad news. My uncle has passed away and I must leave for Norfolk immediately." In an afterthought I appended, "If it's agreeable to you, ma'am, that I should take a week off."

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A bit baffled by my abrupt entry, Lady Althane lowered the brush she'd been holding and peered at me through her spectacles. "Goodness me," she uttered in a concerned tone, "that *is* bad news. What did he die of?"

"Huh? He was old. Yes, that was probably it: old age."

"I see." She nodded pensively. "Well of course you have my permission. Do send my condolences to your family."

"Thank you, ma'am." Giving her a short bow, I made for the door.

And I'm still not sure how she knew, probably some of my excitement had rung through, or it was my ten-foot-tall posture—for I remember how high and how mighty I felt, not a pauper any more—but I'd only just taken hold of the doorknob when all at once her voice sounded behind me,

"She's engaged."

I froze. Everything inside me stopped: my heart, my breath, all motion, all movement gone—and so I stood stricken, as if she had cast some spell and turned me into stone. Yet in the very same second, so many thoughts, such feelings; but still frozen, still holding the doorknob; and then squeezing out in a strange, strangulated squeak: "What?"

"She's engaged. To the Viscount Goodfellow of Mersea Island."

"What?"

"Now really, Mr. Holland. Don't you read the society pages?"

I did not. Not any more, not since society had cast me out. And I was in pain now, in serious pain. So no stone after all, but the old flesh and blood, still alive; and she had put the knife in, ruthlessly twisting it deeper.

"They'll marry as soon as the mourning period is over. The offer was first made two years ago, but then you appeared on the scene. Although what she saw in you—apart from your handsome exterior, that is—I never comprehended. Thankfully, you provided the cure yourself." There was a pause. Then she resumed, "You were never a gentleman, Mr. Holland, just a snob. All air, hot air, and no substance. Oh, how I despised you for the way you treated her. And I would have intervened but for my husband. She was obviously fond of you, and he only wished for her happiness." Another pause. "Well, I'm glad to say that Rosalind saw sense at last."

The doorknob still in my hand—but I was facing her now, and I honestly couldn't say how the stupid thing ever came off; I guess I simply kept holding it as I whirled round, though I never heard so much as a crack or a

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snap; and it was solid ivory, would you believe it, broken clean away from the rose—and pointing that stupid, stupid knob at her, I bit back,

“No, she didn’t: she didn’t ‘see sense’. You kept her away from me! You kept me very, very busy, and you kept her away from me. You doubtless orchestrated the whole thing. Inviting the Viscount to the ball, and to . . . to whatever. Oh yes, it was you pulling the strings all along!”

I think it was the look of total disregard she gave me at this point that made me hurl the doorknob through the air. It landed on the canvas she’d been working on, bouncing off and then, with a disappointingly soft thud, it fell on the carpet. There was a red stain on it, I saw.

And I must have seen red myself, for there are gaps now, time speeding up, jumping, jerking ahead; and how I went from A to B, I shall never explain, but then, here I am going on about all those other things that bother me; I am standing quite close to her, I must have moved forward, almost leaning over, teeth set, and spitting into her face,

“I could report you, y’know: I could bring you to court. I could drag both your name and that of your husband all the way through the mud. You beware, lady, I could have you sent to prison!”

But—I’m telling you—she wasn’t in the least disconcerted. She shot straight back into normal time, or maybe she had stayed there all along. In fact, she had already taken up the brush again, and so she just sat there, regarding the blobbety-blob (a smear of green snot, it seemed to me, it was probably supposed to symbolise a wood, or lawn; oh sorry, symbolism is wrong)—just sitting there viewing the painting she had produced that morning with an approving eye. Her lips were moving, though; curiously enough, it felt as if she was still talking to my back, yet I was facing her, and could see those lips moving, very clearly I could.

“Do you think your allegations will be credited?” they murmured. “You were never there. The inquest didn’t show any irregularities . . . Just think, Mr. Holland, it would be your word against mine. Do you honestly suppose they’ll believe the accusations of a mere servant?”

“I’m not a servant any more, you bitch! I am independent now.”

No, I did not say that—and what a bad line. Instead I snarled at her,

“Charles will back me up. He knows it as well as I do.”

And there the lips got murmuring again, slowing me down, and down.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

“Ah yes, the faithful Charles: another servant. You seriously think he’d want to be disloyal to Sir Sidney, an employer to whom he was so devoted that he could not bear to stay at the Hall any longer when his service had come to an end? Not to mention the total unlikelihood our faithful Charles would want to create yet another scandal after what happened to his new master Cedric. Do you really expect so, Mr. Holland? Also—one shouldn’t forget—there’s your own reputation to consider. I wonder . . . why would anyone wish to expose himself as having willingly made use of counterfeit sources? Mr. Thornton has printed off one chapter in his magazine already. When was it? Ah yes, it was published only yesterday. So kind of him to put your name on it too. Just think, Mr. Holland, what a set-back it would be if the truth came out now, for let’s face it, your name doesn’t inspire confidence as it is. It takes a fraud to commit fraud, they’ll say, only to be expected. And poor old Sir Sidney: he never even knew. Is that what you want, Mr. Holland? Are you absolutely, a hundred percent sure?”

She was skating on thin ice, and she knew it. Nonetheless, she did skate through, to all appearances scornful of the danger, casually, fluently; and before I’d even thought of a suitable retort, she had reached safe ground.

In the end, all I could come up with was the childish remark,

“Well, I’m going to see her anyway, whether you like it or not. She can tell me herself if she thinks I’m not good enough.” As I struggled to open the door (that infernal knob: why did it have to come off?), I added, “Just for the record, I hate your paintings, every single one of them. It’s not art. It is very bad guesswork.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Holland. Have a safe journey.”

And so I was sent back up the garden path.

*

I ask you: was there ever a more boring name than Goodfellow of Mersea Island? I mean, *honestly*.

At least Holland’s a whole country.

3rd of September, 1925

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It was more money than I had ever dreamed of. Indeed, I never knew there was so much money in iron. To my added surprise, the first British tin opener had turned out such a success, the patent alone was worth its weight in gold. He'd been right to be proud of it, so right: from prosperous, it had made him positively rich.

And all that money, every penny, it would roll down to me.

This was about as far as my jubilation went, for the main prize was still to be won. Only five days after my arrival in Norwich, and my induction as the new local magnate, I left again for London. At the funeral, I had noticed how several elegant young women had thrown me covetous looks over the coffin, amongst them, a real Lady, but flattered as I would have been in the past, their simpering had only made me impatient to move on: it was Roz whom I needed, whom I desperately needed to see.

Never, never have I been more scared—not even when, a few years later, I got run over by a cab (but that's a different story, and in case you wonder: I survived, of course I did)—than when I finally stood facing Lacy's imposing edifice. The lift I was about to take would no doubt swish me up as smoothly as it had done in March, but I felt unsure of what fate would await me at the top: it could be Heaven, or an inverted, sky-high version of Hell. Every time I expected Hell, the Viscount's face flashed up in my mind, his goatee pointing at me triumphantly, the smile he always wore pulled into a smirk, the glow in his eyes revealing a reddish hue. The very next second, when I suddenly thought it would be Heaven, I saw Roz gliding towards me in the rose-strewn dress she had worn that time in the orchard, the flowing gold of her curls and, I swear to God, I could even see the soft white wings that adorned her back.

Upstairs, I was shown in by the eminently respectably butler, and in the glare of his critical eye, I was glad I had delayed my visit by a day because my custom-made suit hadn't been ready yet. Thankfully, too, I had told the maid to polish my watch chain to a shine, and asked my uncle's valet to apply a touch of brilliantine to my hair. I only wished I'd had the sense not to don my new shoes, whose leather was still stiff, as a result of which I creaked rather loudly and painfully into the great drawing room.

There was London, all of it—such a clear, clear day—and there was Roz.

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It goes without saying that Roz wasn't wearing the dress of my dreams: like me, she was still in mourning wear. As she stepped away from the window, her silhouette taking on substance and colour, I saw how she had her hair pinned back, and wore no jewellery apart from the locket with Sir Sidney's picture which Cedric had given to her in May. Pale as her face shone over the dark purple of her frock, I found that the formal attire did suit her. She seemed less free and easy, but more grown-up somehow—and as always, she looked exceedingly beautiful.

Coming forward to proffer her hand, she said, in that disarming, frank manner of hers, "I hope it is me you came to see, Mr. Holland. My parents are not at home, I'm afraid."

I heaved a shrug. "That doesn't really matter."

Anyway, I thought, there was no point in speaking to the father first. He was hardly going to burst out singing hallelujah, was he?, having already promised his daughter to someone else. At any rate, asking Mr. Munro's permission was redundant. If Roz did change her mind, he'd be the last to refuse her wishes—I was quite certain of that.

I felt less certain about the best way to proceed. How should I begin?

"Would you like to smoke?" asked Roz.

"Oh, I couldn't smoke in here."

"It's all right. I can open the windows later. Please. And do sit down."

Lowering herself on the sofa, she threw me an encouraging smile.

I was grateful for the offer; however, when I tapped my pockets and found that my cigarettes weren't there, I was even more grateful, feeling suddenly dubious whether I could keep my hands steady enough to light up. Roz offered me a cigar from her father's box, but I refused, and I also shook my head at her suggestion we have some tea brought in: I would only end up dropping and breaking the precious porcelain.

And thus it was that, for a minute or so, we just sat gazing at each other, or rather Roz sat gazing at me, still with that encouraging smile on her lips, while I let my eyes range over the vast display of quality furniture, quality artwork, the quality silk of the quality curtains brushing the quality carpet on the quality floor. Getting dizzy, I fixed my attention instead on the bookcase with the Dickens collection: Dickens, about whom, in the turmoil of the past few months, I had utterly and completely forgotten. *Bleak House*

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was lying atop the other volumes, and I concluded that it must be still Roz's favourite novel. Her favourite picture, that had moved her so, the picture of her mother, of her father even, of the hope she had once had, which had been fulfilled, and which had been thwarted.

And all at once I knew exactly what to say, sitting up and declaring,

"Miss Munro, I'm here to tell you that I have come into an inheritance. Last week my uncle passed away: he had a thriving business, very lucrative, with a great deal of property, both in the private and the business sphere. Having been designated in his will as his immediate successor, my outlook has changed significantly; in fact, it has taken a drastic turn for the better. To illustrate, I've been told that I shall command an income of at least 5,000 pounds a year. As I am sure you'll understand, this opens the prospect of great comfort: no extravagant luxury perhaps, but great comfort. Naturally, there is my aunt and mother to consider, but I could find them a place of their own, although they're both of an easy disposition, peaceful ladies, and would never interfere. The abode in Norwich sits in a handsome street, quiet and altogether clean, but a second home in the country certainly lies within the realm of possibility, which could even become the first home, should that be in any way desirable. In short . . ."

In short, I was starting to sound like Mr. Guppy. Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse. Almost ridiculous in parts. Why this gabbled talk about my aunt and mother? And then I realised I was indeed quoting Mr. Guppy, was quoting him almost directly, literally, straight off the page.

I had left off the speech too early, though. Because I still hadn't asked her to marry me.

When I glanced up, I saw that Roz's smile had gone. She was biting her lip now. *O my child, my child*—and I had launched a Guppy at her. Poor Roz.

And poor me. Unable to stand the tension any longer, I shot forward on my seat and blurted, "Do break off the engagement, Miss Munro—you must. I'm telling you: it will only look silly. He's . . . He's too old."

Poor, poor us (I could just go on saying it). For no sooner had I finished speaking, than I saw how Roz's lips tightened. Her face stiffened. Then she tilted up her chin and spoke, "He likes me. He's always happy to see me."

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Her words came so unexpected, I just didn't grasp their meaning. I did not understand what an important comment it was to make, I really did not. And, casting it aside as the trifling remark I judged it to be, I—on reflex, one might say (oh, one might say a lot of things, for wasn't it exactly the primary, the basic impulse I'd been suppressing all along? Just to take her in my arms, to hold her, cherish her: wasn't that what lay before, beneath, wasn't that why I had come here in the first place?)—I reverted to the old wound, the old obsession, the chip I just couldn't brush off my shoulder, stating in a bitter voice, "And, of course, he has a title."

"Now you're insulting me." With a determined air, Roz rose from the sofa. She was shaking (with anger, I thought at the time—but now I'm not so sure). Then she gave a sniff (haughtily, I thought at the time—but now I'm not so sure), and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Holland, but I feel this interview has come to an end. I congratulate you on your good fortune, and wish you all the best for the future. Please be so kind as to leave the house."

And having finished speaking, she walked off.

Poor, stupid me. I can see now what a blundering idiot I was, what a dunce, what a fool. Because I never mentioned how much I cared for her. I didn't even think to say it, I never thought of telling her. So no Guppy after all, but Prufrock again, singing a love song without once hitting the note of love. Like the fool I was, all I could offer in the way of recommendation was the money. The money, the money; and then, when I found it didn't work, I started the dispute again about background.

And like the fool I was, when I got to the exit, for the very last time—I was painfully sure of that—I broke into a fit of tears, right in front of the eminently respectable butler.

"Handkerchief, sir?"

He must have savoured the moment. He must have felt that, by handing me that pristine piece of cloth, he was wiping the smudge of me off the lives of the Munro family. Finally.

So, dear reader, I did not marry her.

No.