Epilogue.

Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-awaited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

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THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

* 1 *

Only a month after she had left Sutton Hall, Lady Althane's heart stopped beating. One minute she was still painting, and the next she lay in a heap on the floor. Always having rejected the possibility of a hereafter, her life was over for good—which perhaps it had been, in a way, ever since the day she had pushed her husband towards his death.

In 1884 her last, unfinished canvas was put on display, together with some of her other works, in a special exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in London. The collection created huge interest, pulling a crowd of over 2,000 visitors a day, although opinion on its quality was divided. Some thought the paintings resembled the clumsy, uncontrolled efforts of a child, and called them an insult to good taste and the high principles of art. Others, on the contrary, recognised a new aesthetics in her approach, and said that the rough blots of colour rendered a more natural, faithful image of the energies which shape the world than a realistic style would have done. Comparisons were made with Turner—but, as Turner was long gone, this seemed a bit old-fashioned, and so it was decided to label Lady Althane as a more experimental sister of the great French impressionists.

Poor Lady Althane: misunderstood till after the end.

But there again, she never wanted to be understood, did she?

Sir Ralph continued to live on and off at Sutton Hall—mostly off, as he never tired in his quest of exterminating the fauna of England, and spent most of his time galloping round the shires. Sadly enough, he *was* so stupid as to trade in the London property, having squandered nearly a million pounds on . . . what, we shall never know. Certain is, though, that he provided no relief for the farmers and labourers on his home estate when grain prices dropped to an all-time low; and also that, after he had used up the London money, he began selling off chunks of the land in Kent.

Being protected by a deed of entail, Sutton Hall Hill remained intact. After his father fell off his horse and broke his neck in 1892, Sir Tristram mounted the family throne, as the fortunate owner of one of the last pieces of good old rural England. The new baronet favoured the exotic, however.

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Although a better and kinder landlord than his father, he spent most of his time abroad, travelling the globe in search of materials for the exciting and wondrous adventure stories which have made him so famous.

As you all know, Tristram died in the Great War. He died a hero's death, they say—which he no doubt would have liked. Still I suspect that he may have wanted to fall on different foreign soil than the Belgian mud and that, instead of being blown to bits by a German shell, he should have preferred to perish in the hot breath of a Transylvanian dragon.

And how I wish that, instead of going out with his men, he would have stuck to his job at the desk.

We could not bury Tristram: there was nothing of Tristram left.

Yet the Reverend organised a memorial service in his nephew's honour, at which he spoke so beautifully, so tenderly, that even the church itself seemed to be moved. The walls were wet when we came out—though that might have been the rain. Later the sun broke through, I do remember that.

And I remember Roz.

How she cried.

The Reverend himself died a few years afterwards, having fallen ill with the same disease as one of the many patients whose bedsides he always so faithfully tended. Over 1,200 people gathered at his funeral.

Oh, let's not forget the wife: Sir Ralph's wife.

In 1888, the new Lady Althane contracted some mysterious malady. For two whole years, she lay ailing on her sofa, until one day she suddenly sat up straight, heaved a deep sigh, and gave up the ghost.

The body weighed only six stone.

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Cedric is still alive. What it was that forced him to leave England, I can only guess, but it must have been serious, for he has never risked a return. Or he simply feels too at home in Italy—because Cedric has flourished.

When I first went to visit him in Venice, I hardly recognised him. The monocle was gone, he was wearing regular clothes, and he had lost so much weight, he seemed but a miniature version of the Cedric I knew.

Seeing my questioning look as I got off the boat, he reported,

"Charles is ever so strict with me: he's taken me off alcohol completely. It is simply awful." He cast a wink over his shoulder at Charles, who stood smiling behind him. And then, when I handed over my suitcase, I could have sworn that the boy . . . . Or it was just my imagination, I don't know.

In the days that followed, I found to my relief that my dear friend had only changed in appearance: his heart was as big and warm as ever. One might even say that, even though there is less of Cedric now, there is more. Without the smoke-curtain of extravaganza, one can see his real self so much better. And he seems far more comfortable, so at ease.

I still go to see them regularly, at least once every two years, and I'm pleased to say they are growing happily old together, Cedric living the easy life of the ex-pat, and Charles in his professional capacity of faithful servant to a beloved master. Or in the private capacity of . . . .

But, as I said, that may be my imagination.

Roz has stayed with us too.

In the years following the terrible day of my terrible marriage proposal, I became a more than avid reader of the society pages, every now and again encountering her name or sometimes even a photograph. Once there was a picture of her and her husband, and honesty bids me to say that Roz looked altogether radiant beside him. The goatee was gone, I noticed.

The couple never became a family, which, as I heard from Cedric, caused Roz to suffer so at one point that she started sleep-wandering again. The crisis passed, however, when she became godmother to the daughter of the Viscount's niece; and after the first, there followed a whole string of god-children, no less than eighteen, who were only too willing to visit the lovely playground Roz had purpose-built in the gardens of Mersea House.

As all eighteen agreed: Auntie Rosalind was the best.

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* 2 *

When I left Sutton Hall, all those years ago, a bit older than when I first arrived, and also slightly wiser, I was carrying *The Knight of the Yellow Lands* in my suitcase.

I just hadn't been able to part with it. And I can still recall it happening, there, in the library, on that sad, sad afternoon: how my hand moved forward to feed the sacrifice to the flames, and I suddenly felt a tugging reflex in my arm, pulling the pages back, restoring them to safety.

Cedric tried to take them from me; but now my grip grew tighter, refusing to let go, then clasping the precious package closely to my chest.

The Reverend gazed at me with concern as I sat there. Cedric grew silent beside me—finally, giving up, he moved back as well.

And they let me have it.

As a thank-you, they said.

Of course, I had to swear I'd never show the manuscript to others and, with one exception, I have always stuck to that promise, keeping Sir Sidney's masterpiece away and out of sight, locked in a special drawer at the bottom of my big bookcase. No-one knew of the treasure: none of my friends, none of the servants, nor the young secretary I employed when my work grew busier, and who turned out to be as ardent a lover of ancient literature as myself. No-one, no-one knew—no, not even my wife.

Ah yes: my wife. Well, best to get it over and done with, I guess.

Stella was one of the elegant young women who had stood simpering at me over my uncle's coffin. I proposed to her only a month after coming to Norwich (which was a mistake), and she accepted right away (which was another mistake), drawn as she was by the mountain of money that was

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now mine and, as she confessed to me on our wedding night, feeling quite bowled over by my dazzling good looks.

She soon grew dissatisfied with me, however, when, in the sixth month of playing the captain of commerce, I decided to pack our bags and try and make a literary career for myself in London. Back in Norfolk, she'd been the apple of her parents' eye, the belle of every ball, the envy of all the other elegant young women who had wanted to marry me too. In the new place, though, she suddenly found herself just another fish in an already crowded social pond—and her cherished hope of being presented to the Queen . . . . Let me just say that the publication of *The Rule of Kings*, which did not go down well at the Palace, put paid to that.

Her other, often-voiced protest was that I made but a dull husband, only poring over letters all day, smudging my fingers so with ink that I looked like some clerk, and never taking her out to dos or dinners unless it was to meet with other bookworms. If I had hoped that motherhood would provide her with a source of contentment, I was wrong: whereas, myself, I could not stop marvelling at the two wonderful creatures we'd produced, and spent at least half the afternoon in their refreshing company, Stella never took a liking to neither daughter nor son. They had tortured her during childbirth, she said; they had nigh ruined her figure; and she couldn't stand the noise of us playing tennis in the garden, preventing her as it did from enjoying her beauty sleep.

After five years of feeling miserable in the capital, of feeling angry with our children and frustrated with me, she asked whether I'd mind terribly if she went back to Norwich to move in again with her parents. I'm afraid I cared so little for her (never had done, and knew I never would), that I merely replied, "So it'll be just me and the children, then. Fine."

And so, swiftly and for me quite painlessly, the marriage was over and done with.

*

As I hinted above, my career got off to a rather shaky start: for *The Rule of Kings* did sell, but it did not sell well. Most people simply could not get past that first sentence—and if there's one tip I can give to aspiring authors, it is never to start one's opus with a paragraph on piles.

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Of the few brave souls who managed to overcome their revulsion, and read the text from start to finish, only a handful appreciated its message, which number shrunk to just one critic (who called it a "majestic musing on monarchs' minds"; dear oh dear, is this the kind of support we want?) when the Queen herself, having been informed of the book's contents, felt it necessary to proclaim that she felt insulted on behalf of her forefathers (most of whom weren't even her forefathers, but never mind that). I believe there was also another problem with the book, about which more later, yet the upshot of its bad reception was that, having finally appeared in print, I had great trouble getting back into print.

Thornton urged me to have a go at the Dickens critique, which he was sure would create an interest. However, if I had learned anything from my experiences at the Hall, it was that one should never churn out material just because it might be of interest to *others*. I did not want to do Dickens, not really. I had enjoyed re-reading the novels (as Sir Sidney had said: never a dull moment), but as an artist, he just didn't grab me enough to spend at least a year analysing his works—and so in the end I told Thornton he'd better seek someone else for the project. My new financial freedom helped, of course, in making this decision and, after some deliberation, I proceeded instead with that other little plan I had in mind. Lady Althane had refused her permission when I had asked her, but Sir Ralph and I continued to be firm friends; in fact, he was more than forthcoming, giving me his full cooperation in writing a life of Sir Sidney of Sutton Hall.

Surprisingly enough, after the damp squib that had been *The Rule of Kings*, the biography—which was published by no-one less than Mr. Shaw himself—was a huge success. It was my only success, one might say, as the novels I starting writing afterwards found only a very limited and select audience. To most people, I am still "the biographer" and only those who have brows as high as to have no visible hairline will have heard of, or read, what I consider to be my real work. Because as it turned out, the prophesy Thornton and I made in our manifesto came true; and towards the end of the century, fiction had split for good into mass market produce and the more serious stuff. Indeed, in my estimation, to every 50 copies that Tristram sold in his lifetime (and continues to sell, for his stories are still exceedingly popular), I have sold about one-fifth.

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Oh, never mind—it doesn't matter. I have always taken pleasure in what I did and, in a small circle of literary connoisseurs, I do enjoy a good reputation. And although I wouldn't go so far as to say Lady Althane was right that art should not aim to be understood, I do agree with the old bat after all that the first impulse should come from the heart. Always.

*

There was one important element lacking from the vision Thornton and I had back in the 70s, though: we never foresaw modernism. We had plenty of ideas about literary content, and how the subject matter of the novel would change, but we were less clear on form and technique, unable as we were to imagine different designs from the ones with which we'd been brought up. We were not alone in this: most fin-de-siècle authors, no matter how innovative they were in other respects, kept following the traditional lines of the Victorian novel, and adhered to the realist style. To make a comparison, we were redecorating the house, bringing in new furniture, stripping off the floral wallpaper and slapping on fresh paint, but somehow it not once occurred to us to, say, break down a dividing wall, tear off the roof or simply go outside. We were never truly experimental.

The generation that came to the forefront in the new century made for a radical change. Really, literature has taken a turn unlike anything I ever expected. The liberty of these authors! Their ingenuity! Stream-of-consciousness, free-indirect style, ambiguous narrators, shifting frames . . . . A house without walls, how about that?

But we, we didn't even see it coming. Although I have to say, I doubt whether I would have had the courage (I can just see Lady Althane shaking her head here). And, in all honesty, I don't think I would have dared.

Lately it has been said of me that I am too strict about time.

Well, I don't know about that. All I know is that I used to be ahead of my time, but now I find myself behind.

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Still I do think that the modern developments are positive, as they might well lead to a revaluation of *The Rule of Kings*. In the biography (partly to pre-empt any future claims of forgery), I went out of my way to stress Sir Sidney's creative powers, the imagination and originality of him, the sheer force of intuitive energy which shines through on nearly every page that he wrote. I explained about the spiral of knowledge: how we will always keep circling round the truth, and people of highly contrasting opinions could still be referring to the same truth, just because they are viewing things from a different angle. Or how perhaps the truth isn't even there, but this does not mean disaster either, because in the spiral of knowledge there is always, always room for doubt.

Sir Sidney was born in the same year and the same month as Queen Victoria—but not on the same day. And whereas Victoria has come to stand for everything that is stilted and constrained, Sir Sidney was a master at moving forward and stepping out of bounds. He was a prophet, a sage, a seer, and more advanced in his inquiries than many authors alive today. In the years to come, I am sure, people will see this: and they'll be amazed at this voice from the grave of the past, that speaks to them so directly, so clearly, as if its owner were standing beside them here and now. And, like me, they will see that, even though some of the things Sir Sidney alleged did not happen, or not exactly like that, they could have happened all the same. They could happen to any of us.

Or perhaps they already have.

I know it has happened to me. When I first bought this house, it was set on the edge of London. In a matter of years, however, of months even, London had overtaken me. These days, whichever way I turn, it lies directly before me. I have written too many books here to leave the place behind, but as Sir Sidney once predicted, the city has exploded and I'm right back in the middle, the muddle of it.

Shortly after my wife had left me, there were evenings, when the moon was bright and I stood gazing out of the bedroom window, frowning at the red brick that was being stacked all around, that Roz came back to haunt me. She would glide silently through the door, the ghost of her, her white

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gown virtually dissolved, almost naked, not there, but looking at me with an intensity that seemed to bore straight into my soul.

"What is it? What is it?"

And on one of those nights, I suddenly knew.

It is regret, that's what it is.

If only, if only . . . .

Or maybe I was too lonely. It certainly made me lonely to realise that Roz had probably never seen one sentence I had written, because my books didn't have any pictures. No pictures, I had told Thornton.

And so Roz didn't even know that every book I wrote was, in essence, a book about her.

I grow old, I grow old . . . . I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

However, I do not mind, not any more. Because I don't grow old alone.

* 3 *

When they were still small, my children's favourite pass-time was to fly their kites on the Heath. We usually went there on the Wednesday, when around two in the afternoon I'd push my papers aside, go up to the nursery and announce that it was time for some fresh air.

It was on one such afternoon, as we were walking up the slope of Parliament Hill, that a servant came running after us to ask would I step back to the path we had just left, because there was a lady wishing to speak to me. Telling the governess to stay with the children, I obliged, soon seeing the lady whom the servant had meant—and then, as she lifted her veil, beholding the soft, smiling face of Roz.

She shook my hand, and I offered my condolences on the loss of her husband, who had died some two years before. She could not reciprocate

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the commiseration, but the separation from my wife was public knowledge by now, and with some subtle remarks she hinted that she was aware of my situation, adding that she hoped all was well with me.

Then she asked if she could meet my children. Seeing the kites tumble and turn, Roz laughed out loud, which incited James, my son, to give the string an extra tug, so that his kite rolled round in the air. Beside him, Alice, my daughter, kept her hand steady, but occasionally a sudden gust of wind became too much for her, pulling her kite off course and onto a new path.

And for a while we remained standing thus, following the flight of the kites over our heads—one a-dance and one bracing itself—when all at once Roz began, "Mr. Holland, I hope you do not mind my asking, but I'm in London for a few weeks with my foster parents and . . . I wonder if you'd like to come and have tea with me. You see, there's hardly anyone to whom I can speak about Cedric, and as you're such a close friend . . . ."

She paused. Then, however, she nodded to herself and resumed,

"Also, I would be interested to hear about you. Cedric tells me things in his letters, and I have read your books . . . . Or rather my husband read them to me. He was a great fan."

"Was he?"

"Oh yes. He always used to say he had no choice in the matter. And I think I know what he meant." She fell silent again, biting her lip and twirling the handle of the umbrella she held for a walking-stick. But just as soon her features lit up again. "Or perhaps we can chat about old times. We are still friends, are we not?" Turning to face me, she asked, "Would you please, please call on me? I should enjoy it so very much."

Feeling suddenly shy, I averted my eyes and looked away into the distance. London, all of it, was lying at our feet. And I replied,

"Of course. I should be honoured."

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