

Part Four.

RICHARD FROST

Poems and Essays— 4.

The water babies, the water babies
Oh I wish I was one
They roll in the river, they swim in the sea
They bubble and paddle along.

The water babies, the water babies,
Their bellies so full and so round
They waggle and wiggle, they laugh and they giggle
I like their song and their sound.

The water babies, the water babies
And here they go with a swing
The wave of the water, the beat of the babies,
It has such a cheerful ring.

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THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Sir Sidney was having trouble handling knife and fork. His manual control had always been wobbly, but over the months the weak spells had grown much more severe, until his movements became stiff and clumsy, as if the muscles were somehow toughening up and he had to yank them into action. One evening in June, as he was trying to cut his beef, he just kept missing target, the knife slipping away time and again with a nasty screech over the plate. Finally, Charles leant over and did the cutting for him—only to see how his master failed to prick anything onto his fork.

Shoving his food away from him, Sir Sidney shook his head.

"This is no good," he muttered. "No. This is not good."

The next afternoon, work in the library was cancelled, and when I came down for dinner, Lady Althane alone stood awaiting me. "My husband excuses himself," she spoke with a taut face, "he will be eating upstairs." As she took my arm, she added, "It is to be a permanent arrangement."

We had our meal in an almost total, tense silence. When there were no guests, we usually sat in the small dining room, at the ancient round table of which Sir Sidney was so proud; and without a third party present, Lady Althane and I suddenly found ourselves facing each other. We both kept glancing at Sir Sidney's chair, and then corrected our gaze, directing it at the centre-piece, which was, in all truth, altogether ugly, and not at all deserving of the ample attention it received.

Lady Althane managed to retain her composure until after dessert, but the moment the servants had retreated, she looked up at me and cried, in a voice full of grief, "Oh, Mr. Holland, what *is* this disease? He used to be so full of life, so slim and handsome, so . . . so happy. He won't even allow me to stay with him!" Raising a shivering hand to her forehead, she moaned, "What is worse, I ask, seeing how he is spoon-fed or being sent away? I feel as if we're separated: we're apart already!" She was weeping now, she who was normally so firm and straight, sitting slumped over the empty table, clasping her napkin and pressing it to her mouth.

"Ma'am," I tried to soothe her, "sad as the situation may appear, I do assure you, his spirit is quite unbroken. Only yesterday we had a good laugh about King Bess."

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Her tear-stained face raised itself. "King Bess?"

"Queen Elizabeth. She's in the same chapter as Henry VIII."

"I see." She forced a smile: weak, watery, but a smile. Then she wiped her cheek and said, "I'm glad you are here, Mr. Holland: for my husband's sake, I am. He needs the intellectual challenge of his work. And he always tells me how much he enjoys your company." More wiping, some sniffing and then, thankfully, a deep breath. But all at once her eyes widened, and she exclaimed, "Good gracious me, what are we going to do on Fridays?"

What *were* we going to do indeed. Personally, I hoped that the Reverend would see sense and stay away. Personally, I hoped we'd never see him again.

The following Friday, however, it turned out to be business as usual, Sir Sidney having come down for the occasion. He did not eat, only asking for some wine—in a beaker, not one of the precious glasses the butler usually set out, of which he had broken three already. He never touched the beaker, though, probably for fear of spilling its contents, merely occupying the head of the table and making sure that conversation was maintained without any rows breaking out. Seeing him thus, sitting there like a Tantalus, reminded me of the goblet in his study. "Thys is the Holie Grayle. Thysse is a Joke." The thirst for more was what counted most, he always alleged; but what if that thirst could no longer be satisfied?

But no, we had not reached that point yet. There were ways and means: there was Charles. For some reason, perhaps because he did indeed value my company, Sir Sidney had decided that our evening custom of absinth and cigars must be upheld—and so I saw how Charles put the cup to his master's lips, meanwhile his other hand holding a smouldering cigar at close range, and how he never took his eyes off Sir Sidney's face, ever ready to administer the next sip, the next puff. And I wondered how it could be that someone so young should choose to serve an old, infirm man, and dress him, wash him, and now feed him as well. And someone so slender, how he could find the strength to haul the ever-heavier body in and out of bed, and move it all the way through the house. Just pushing the invalid chair over the thick carpets must be a back-breaking task.

As to my own duties, they were extended as well. A few days later Sir Sidney asked if I could go to church for him. He no longer had the energy, he said, and he didn't want Tristram to sit in the family pew alone. As he

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explained, "I can't ask my wife: it would violate her principles. Cedric will soon be here, but sadly, Justin won't allow him in church any longer. I do realise it's a big favour to ask, but as you're Tristram's daily guide already, I thought . . ."

"Certainly, sir."

And so I came to see even more of the Reverend than before. Once a week I took my seat in the Althane pew, in the second row, between Tristram before me and the servants behind. And I could not but agree that, indeed, the Reverend was a great storyteller, sitting spellbound as he launched the beginning, guided us fluently through the middle, and always reached the very end I seemed to have been hoping for. And I fully understood, too, why Sir Sidney made me recount the entire tale afterwards, feeling glad when he spoke, "Thank you, John. I knew you were the man to do this for me. You really understand the art of narration."

Although I sometimes doubted whether I did.

Lady Althane and I may have had our moment of confidence, but it was a brief moment only, and dinner soon became the exact struggle I had foreseen. In that respect, it was a relief when Roz returned to the Hall for the summer. I had felt awkward enough after the debacle in May, but at least her presence prevented me having to listen to Lady Althane's recurrent speeches on the importance of being earnest in one's art: Roz just wasn't someone in whose company you held lectures like that.

I have already described how I had closed my heart against Roz, and she became less of herself under the censure. I have also spoken about her visit to my room, and what she said that night—and not even I was so cruel that it didn't pierce me to the core. "What have I done to him, why does he treat me so?" In her trance-like state, she must have been thinking of me, and the anguish which her words created in my breast made me realise that, despite the shutters I had drawn up, inside I was as vulnerable as ever.

The day after the ghost appeared was a Sunday, and walking with Roz and Tristram to church, I noticed how weary she looked, and how drawn. Yet I tried not to show my concern, fearing she might remember, that she might bare her soul again somehow, fearing, above all, the effect that such a breaking of the silence would have upon me. For the first time ever, I

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didn't enjoy the sermon, only staring at the nape of Roz's neck. And then I recalled what else she had said, which just kept niggling me. Surely she wasn't, did not have . . . ? I was certain she had never been married, and the Althanes would hardly receive her if . . . Still, it might explain why she loved being with Tristram so, why there being a child at the Hall formed such a powerful attraction. Though it did seem a bit . . . Surely not.

I had misgivings all the same, however, and there was no escaping the emotional turmoil that they caused. At night I could not get to sleep, part of my mind staying alert for any signs of Roz drawing near. I knew that, if she came back, I had to give her all the comfort I could: I would not be able to stop myself, no matter the bad history she might have. When at long last I did doze off, I tumbled into nightmares full of fear, full of night shirts, which took on the form of ghosts, children, and then turned into Roz. After a week I grew so tired, and felt so torn between hoping Roz would stay away and wishing she'd come after all, I almost prayed for her to dissolve into thin air altogether: it seemed the only way to regain my peace.

In the end, it was Cedric who brought relief. He had arrived a few weeks after Roz; and one day, as we sat playing chess together, he remarked, "Once I've defeated you, my dear fellow, you must let me comfort that poor aching head of yours. Those worries are doing your good looks no favours at all."

And I still don't know how, but five minutes later, when he had taken my queen and my king had nowhere left to go, he simply put a hand to my brow and with a swift, light movement swept the pain away.

"How did you do that?" I asked, astonished at the strange trick.

"Ah," uttered Cedric, his fat cheeks gleaming with pleasure, "who can say? In Cambridge, where I'm fabulously popular for curing hangovers, the theory goes that I was a druid in one of my previous lives. Thankfully, I have not lost the gift upon rebirth."

"No, seriously," I said. "How do you do that?"

"Perhaps it is not so much a question of how, but of what, and why. I just do it, darling: that's all I know."

"What about Sir Sidney? Have you tried with him?"

"Alas," Cedric replied with a sigh, "I cannot mend his body. The gods know I prayed for a miracle, but . . ." He paused, to resume, "Maybe my big brother can lend some aid. I don't know whether you've heard, but he's

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been summoned back from his travels abroad. My father is anxious to finish his book, and he wants Ralph to take over some of the public duties. The old man is still a justice of the peace—and let's face it, there's no way of him presiding at a meeting now."

I nodded. Sir Sidney was certainly making haste. Only yesterday he had given me a new time schedule, which specified at least two more chapters for the coming months than in the original planning.

"The upshot being," Cedric continued, "that as from next week, you, my sweet man, won't have to go to church any more, which means the two of us will be at liberty to spend the Good Lord's day practising sloth, gluttony and, who knows, lust." He sent me a wink, a tiny blink behind the monocle which, despite its playfulness, made me feel uncomfortably hot in the face.

Casting my eyes down, I said, "So, unlike your own heretic self, the Reverend considers his elder brother suitable for joining the congregation."

"Is that so surprising?"

"Well, it's just . . . Your father once called him a rascal."

Cedric considered this for a moment. "That just about sums Ralph up," he then decided. "In a nutshell, to a T, and very, very spot-on."

And thus it was that Ralph the rascal appeared on the scene, Sir Ralph-to-be, a true Hotspur of a man. Having left the army years ago, he still styled himself Captain, his big moustache stressing just how military he felt. He was quite dashing in appearance at any rate, with a wild mane of hair, fierce eyes and a body that seemed geared to only one thing, which was action. Tristram had often told me how the crown prince of Althane liked to raid and plunder the animal kingdom and, regrettably for Tristram, he was right: from the moment he bounded in on his hard boots, the Captain talked of nothing but hunting. As he boasted over dinner, he was famous for doing away with English pheasants, Indian elephants, Italian peasants, and now felt ready to clear the family grounds of every fox cub that had had the dubious fortune of being born.

His words were more than just a threat; and within a fortnight of his arrival, Sutton Hall had turned from a quiet country retreat into a hive of activity. Either one opened the curtains to see a herd of red-clad centaurs scraping the gravel in front of the house, or the Captain was galloping off

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to draw the woods on some neighbouring estate. He really reminded me of some of the characters in *The Knight of the Yellow Lands*, he was so eager for blood and battle. In the same spirit, once the run had been run, he returned to the fatherly court to hold all manner of entertainment for ladies and gents. Suddenly the medieval banqueting hall was in full use, a whirl of guests enjoying the spoils of the day, after which they went on to make merry at music and games. The hunt was the glue that bonded the county together, the Captain claimed, and viewing the boisterous party, one tended to agree, although perhaps the glue was better described as alcohol, which was absorbed in impressive, nigh excessive amounts.

Above all the hubbub, one could hear the Captain himself, whose bark was as loud as that of the hounds he liked to ride to. What was worse, he used this booming voice to make the clumsiest, if not rude, remarks. I don't think he ever meant to offend people, but as a rule, if you saw someone flinch or cringe, you knew that the Captain was near. Only Sir Sidney was immune to his brusque conduct; the rest of us, however, were constantly thrown off our guard. Lady Althane once slapped him in the face, Roz either blushed or fled, Cedric reacted with hysterical laughter, and the Reverend turned his back. As to myself, it is no exaggeration to say that sometimes I had to clench my teeth so hard, I could actually hear them crack. Sadly, the Captain did not notice the aversive effect he had on others, his concentration span being extremely short: by the time you had found your retort, he had already moved to the next victim.

To illustrate just how boorish he was, the first words that he ever barked at me were the following: "So you're Holland. Heard about your father. Topped himself, didn't he? Well, who can blame him. Must be a nuisance, to lose so much money. Foreigner, of course. Lack of stamina."

"Mr. Holland is English, Ralph," interposed Cedric, who was standing beside me. "And so was his father."

The Captain threw me a baffled look. "Huh? I thought The name, y'see. Oh, no matter; nuisance all the same." Pounding me on the shoulder (quite hard: so hard I nearly toppled over), he bawled, "Never mind, Holland. Plenty more money to be had. But hold on to it next time."

And that was his way of making my acquaintance. As Sir Sidney said, Ralph had been born in the year the telegraph was invented, and he was a prime example of how people were shaped by the times.

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However, the strange thing was that, in all his blunt stupidity, the Captain did rather seem to like me—unlike his wife, who

Ah yes, his wife. I haven't mentioned her so far, mainly because I can't make up my mind as to how to describe her. The trouble is, the picture I would paint now contrasts greatly with the way I saw her then, almost as much as Dorian Gray diverged from Dorian Gray. I could give both views, of course, but

She was called Eleonora and she was flawless. She was tall and slender, with very dark, straight hair, and a very pale, handsome face, which never laughed and never frowned, so that it remained as smooth as the stately, even step with which she glided through the house. She was very prim and carefully trimmed, so prim and trim indeed that, in the unfortunate event of her being seized by the one of the fainting fits to which she claimed to be so prone, she would, in all probability, not *fall* into the swoon, but endure it standing up, being supported in completing this remarkable feat by her neatly fitted corsets, impeccably starched blouse, and stiffly pleated skirts. For the same reason of being trussed up so tightly, she could seldom eat more than a morsel of fish or chicken, and even this was likely to bring on a headache or sudden lack of breath.

On the rare days that her frail health permitted, and she was not laid up like the invalid she was, she showed the grace to give us a taste of her many accomplishments, playing perfect piano music, and singing such perfectly proper parlour songs that one wondered how one had ever endured the passionate, stormy renderings of Chopin that Lady Althane always let hear. Sometimes she did a stitch or two of her perfectly neat needle-work, or she made perfectly shaped wax flowers, to be put under a perfectly clear glass bell. Like their creator, these products were purely decorative, all decorum, all décor. Cedric, who claimed to "trahly adahre the enchahnting Ahleonahra", could not stop raving about the fine artificial beauty that had come our way, although he did once say to me, "But where is her soul, I wonder? I cannot find it, my dear, I cannot feel it."

Back then, though, I did not care about lack of soul: I only saw the ideal. Sensitive to appearances as I tended to be, it was face value that counted, how Mrs. Althane radiated high birth, wealth, a lot of inherited wealth, and a textbook female education. And if there'd been any leniency in my heart towards Roz after her visit to my room, one look at the future Lady of the

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Hall destroyed it completely. Roz was the moon, but Mrs. Althane shone like the sun itself. The fact that she only treated me with disdain did not lessen the high regard in which I held her; if anything, her scorching gaze fostered it further. The more she looked down on me, the more I looked up to her, and the more I looked up to her, the lower sunk Roz. In all shameful truth, I was glad to have my head turned: I still hoped not to love Roz, and the new standard set by Mrs. Althane made it seem more right, more reasonable that I should feel that way.

I believe it was my middle-class background and the taint of money, money made and money lost, to which Mrs. Althane objected so—and much as it hurt my pride, I, for the first time since the downfall, saw the point. It made me almost embarrassed that the Captain, who recognised in me the public school boy, tended to treat me as he would any other old fellow. As he once remarked during High Tea, a chum of his in India had been to Marlborough as well, to which he added in a hopeful voice,

“Apparently, you weren’t only brainy, but quite a sportsman too. Any chance of you joining us on Tuesday? Just a drag hunt, mind, but . . .”

“My dear,” his wife cut in sharply, “Mr. Holland is here to assist your father with his literary efforts. I truly do not suppose . . .”

“Yeah, yeah.” The Captain turned to me again. “Sorry, Holland. Keep forgetting you’re one of the staff.”

But now Lady Althane found fault, lowering her sandwich and stating in a measured voice, “I should like to point out, sir, that we prefer to regard Mr. Holland as our guest.”

Getting befuddled, the Captain shook his head. “Damn it, woman, that’s exactly why I asked . . .” Nudging me, he whispered, “Females, eh? Just don’t think straight. So you will, won’t, be coming, or will you, maybe, not?” At my affirmative reply (no, indeed: I would not attend), he went on, “But you’ll be there tomorrow, I gather. About time Tristram learned to shoot. Jungle out there, y’know. A man must be able to handle his gun.”

The news that Tristram would be getting shooting lessons came as an unpleasant shock to me—and also, even more so, to Tristram himself. That evening, not even bothering to tell me there were ghosts about, he stepped straight into my room, having rushed down the little turret in the children’s wing the second he had heard me come up.

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"What can I do, Mr. Holland?" he cried, his eyes wide with anxiety. "I don't want to kill animals!"

"Hey, hey." I sat down and pulled his shaking frame onto my lap. "It'll be just target practice, nothing serious. You won't have to kill anything."

"But we'll be using real bullets, father said so himself. And now I think there'll be rabbits in the garden, and Judy's always running around, and sometimes Arthur escapes from his cage: he was sitting on the grass last time. What if I miss target and the bullet flies off, and, and . . ." Too upset to continue, he pressed a fist to his lips, as if just spelling out disaster could make it a fact.

"Look," I suggested, "couldn't you ask your mama to talk to him? Maybe, if she explains how you feel . . ."

As if stung, Tristram sprang to his feet. "My mama!" he exclaimed with a scornful toss of the head. "Ma'am-ma! She hates me—and I hate her. She's not even my real mother."

I frowned. "How do you mean?"

"It is true, I heard them whispering about it. We must avoid a scandal, they said, and it was because of my father and someone else, but I couldn't catch the name. I know it was a girl, though, for they kept saying 'she' and: oh, it was such a hussy. Also, she called me a bastard—twice. So a few weeks later Auntie Margaret came to take me to England, but the two of them stayed behind in Italy. I guess she didn't want me around any more."

"Your mother didn't?"

"I'm telling you: she's *not* my mother! She's like a stick insect and never moves, and she's far too tall. And now I don't want to talk about it, *basta!*" Then, clasping my lapels, he asked, suddenly all sweetness again, "Can you cuddle me a bit more, Mr. Holland? I'm still a little a-tremble inside."

To be frank, so was I. Tristram soon calmed down and dreamed happily away beside me, his child's breath a wonderful, clean sound, but I found it hard to find sleep. I had followed Sir Sidney's advice and begun re-reading Dickens, and one of the themes I had noted down as overworked and overdone were the many orphans and missing parents that featured in his novels. "Unrealistic", I had written: and now, here, there seemed to be a case in point. It might, of course, be just another of Tristram's fantasies, to escape the unpleasant fact that Mrs. Althane did not like him. Despite my admiration for her, I had noticed how cold she was with him, always

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calling him “the child”, as if he were a type, not a person. Still, I would not put it past the Captain to make some innocent girl pregnant and then force his wife to put up with it. And maybe . . .

My heart skipped a beat. Yet there was no stopping the brain wave I was having: for maybe, the two of them being so close . . . Why, Tristram had said it himself, that time he got her letter—and he and Roz *were* alike, I had often thought so. The same zest for play, the love of nature, the way they giggled when you made a joke . . . Even the lips seemed similar, their eyes, down to the very shape of the chin. Or did they? Really?

Turning over, I sighed, trying to suppress the nausea that came heaving through my stomach. Best not to think of it, better not to know. After all, it was no business of mine, and the less that was said about the matter, the sooner it would dwindle to silence. It was bad enough that Tristram had told me half a truth; finding out the rest would only upset me more.

However, resolved as I may be not to speculate, the next day my suspicions grew even worse. It all began so well, Tristram and I having decided to ask the boy whom the gardeners employed as a scarecrow if he could come over to make the rifle range animal-free. For good measure, Tristram himself joined in the clean-up, shooing and booing about the cardboard human figure which the Captain had set up for a target until he was absolutely sure there was no risk whatsoever of killing anything.

The Captain, who regarded the whole show with a furrowed brow, soon got enough of it, shouting over, “Stop flapping your arms about, sir! Come and take your weapon!” He held up a small shotgun.

But by now the boys were having too much fun playing birds. With a long-drawn-out squeal, Tristram set in another flying circle, swooping up and down as if he were a swallow surfing the summer thermal.

“Oh well,” muttered the Captain as he put down the gun again, “at least he’s warming up. Not that it’s necessary, with this bloody hot weather. Sweated like a pig last night.” He opened the second case he’d brought, to reveal a set of brightly shining revolvers. “We can do a competition of our own, you and I,” he said to me. “As long as we don’t hit Tristram: he’s the only heir.” Taking out the ammunition for the repeater, he added in a low voice, “And will stay so, I reckon.”

For a moment his face seemed mournful, a mood I had not seen him in before. And it was almost as if he were talking to himself now, mumbling

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in a sombre tone, "I doubt whether she has a child in her. Such a wasteland inside. Yes, I got myself a doll, and it is damn fucking dull." His voice died away. But then his features brightened and, clicking the gun shut, he winked at me and said, "Thank God for the roses, right, Holland?"

I blushed. The Captain, with his thick skin, did not notice, though; and he carelessly continued, "So what d'you think of our little Miss Munro? Appetising, eh? Good chest on her, too. I'm telling you, in a low neck . . ."

I was turning crimson. I could feel it, I could feel it burning, and it wasn't the heat. "I really don't think that's the way to talk about a lady," I snapped. "It is . . ."

Highly inappropriate, I wanted to say—but he just, he just didn't listen, he didn't hear. "Oh, come on, man, she's no lady. Too fast by far. I've . . ."

I swear, if it hadn't been for Tristram joining us at that moment, I would have punched his filthy mouth shut. But Tristram did join us, and so I only stood seething, steaming, smouldering—and not because of the heat—while the Captain, still wholly oblivious of the insult and injury he had caused, explained to his son the principles of combat.

"Make sure you always aim for the head or the heart. Vital spots, y'see. We don't want the enemy to limp away and be patched up again by his fellow-hoodlums: we want him dead. Blow his rotten brains out."

"Or his heart," said Tristram.

"That's my boy. Now, you hold your gun like this, up against your shoulder, and place your feet firmly on the ground." The Captain assumed a valiant stance for an example. "You take aim . . ." He squinted hard. "Also, I find it helps to remind yourself of what you're defending." And all at once, he cocked the gun and bellowed, "The Queen!"

Tristram jumped as the bullet hit target.

"The Empire!"

Tristram jumped again.

"Britannia rules!"

But not forever, I added silently, thinking of what Sir Sidney always said when people were raving about how we English were the Romans of the modern world: "Empires, they are built and then they collapse."

And as it turned out, there were other beliefs that proved false. During the lesson, Tristram did remarkably well, managing to hit the target twice (hand and foot). He only lost concentration when, halfway through the

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second round of shots, suddenly Judy came running towards us, barking loudly, the leash with which Tristram had tied her to the bedpost upstairs flapping triumphantly behind her. Instantly throwing down the gun and putting his hands in the air, Tristram yelled, "Father, father, don't shoot her! Wait till we're gone!" And, quick as a flash, he grabbed Judy's leash and sprinted off with her towards the house.

"Of course I won't shoot the damned bitch," the Captain grouched after his receding shape, "as if I would." Then he looked at me and clarified, "Wasn't very pleasant for him, y'know. Had to finish it: stark raving mad. She'd killed the mice already and was about to attack Tristram."

"When was this?"

"In Italy, hasn't he told you? It went completely berserk. Couldn't risk it, not with Tristram. As I said, he's the only heir."

I nodded to myself. Of course. There had been two dogs: one in Italy, but another one in England. And the "bad" dog Tristram had told me such a horror story about had, in reality, been a "mad" dog. Like Mrs Althane was not a mother, and little Miss Munro But no. I wouldn't think of that, I wouldn't want to know.

Just for the record, the Captain and I did have our competition. The Captain was very pleased with me: I was an excellent shot, he said. I decided to go for the head, and hit it five times in a row, making a neat dome, like a disgruntled mouth, in the bottom half of the skull.

The Captain himself aimed for the heart. He fired six times, right at the centre—and left only one hole.

"Too fast", the Captain had said of Roz. Literal-minded as he was, he might have been referring to her skills as Tristram's running partner, or the speed with which she leapt up when Sir Sidney's mother said she wanted her blanket. I knew this was unlikely, however; and alerted by his innuendo, in the ensuing days I kept a cautious eye on Roz. I soon saw (or was I seeing things?) how the strain she had shown of late was beginning to ease off, how ever more often her dimples deepened in laughter and a sparkle lit up her eyes, more often than not in response to a joke or a wink of the Captain's.

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The sweltering hot days of late August were accompanied by sweltering hot nights, so close and muggy that, in the evening, I kept moving from the house to the garden and back again, vainly trying to find some cool comfort. And on one of those evenings, as I was standing out on the terrace, cursing the sultry air, cursing the heavy scent of the roses that clung to the outside wall, knowing I shouldn't make my headache worse by smoking, but smoking anyway, if only in protest, I saw, all at once, from the corner of my eye, the outline of two people on the lawn below.

I saw the Captain and I saw Roz. She was standing with her back to me, but in the moonlight I could see him, I could see his face quite clearly: the glittering eyes, the glittering teeth whenever he smiled. He was doing an atypical lot of talking—urgent, it seemed—meanwhile Roz holding a hand to mouth, the way she sometimes did when stifling a giggle. When at last she dropped the hand . . . Really, it was as if he pounced, his whole body shooting forward, and just as quick was he to take her hand and squeeze it, their shapes melting together; and I, my heart pounding, praying the heads would stay apart, that it was a trick of the light, not wrong but all right, then flinging away my cigarette to flee indoors, thinking: a knight he may be, but how knightly was he?

Please no. Not him. Not him if not me.

The next day it started to rain. And it kept raining: cats and dogs pouring, gushing, bucketing down. The Captain's friends being just as averse as the wildlife to getting their coats soaked, all hunting—and consequently, all Friday-to-Monday entertainment—was cancelled, to the Captain's extreme annoyance. To *my* extreme annoyance, he tried to bide the time by stalking ever closer to Roz. Sometimes I did not know whether my having to work during the day was a blessing or a curse: it felt like torture to see him chasing such narrow circles around her, yet at the same time I'd rather stay and keep watch, to make sure that he did not cross the line.

The only moments I felt grateful that Sir Sidney needed me was just after dinner, when I could skip port and cigars with the two brothers (or all three of them, if it was a Friday), and went upstairs to join their father in his room. Although no longer partaking of the family meals, Sir Sidney, too, upheld the custom of drinking and smoking for a last course, and he

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liked me to sit with him—I was still the only one allowed to see how his drinking and smoking was done. The after-dinner hour also formed an opportunity to reflect upon *The Rule of Kings*, and sometimes we had long discussions on method, I stressing the importance of the facts, while Sir Sidney maintained it was all just a matter of drawing figures.

I call it our “discussions”, yet I have to add that, more often than not, the conversation took on the form of confessions and revelations made by Sir Sidney. I was late to realise this, too late, and it is hindsight alone that allows me to say he was assembling some sort of testament. No doubt he meant to explain certain things to me, and prepare me for what was to come; although sadly, probably for fear of losing my sympathy, he went about it in such a circumspect way—more often stopping than starting, it seems—that I never really gathered his aim. Looking back, I can see exactly what he was trying to tell me, and I still regret that he did not simply speak out instead of leaving it at vague hints; for if I had known, I would, and I wouldn’t have Or, of course, I might have done exactly the same.

One such conversation, which in retrospect was far more intentional than it appeared at the time, I remember quite well. We were talking about the rain, the rain that caused the Captain such boredom, but which gave Sir Sidney a great deal of worry: after the prolonged drought of the summer and then three weeks of deluge, it was almost certain that the harvest would fail. “Thank God for the London property,” Sir Sidney kept saying—for apart from a local landholder, he was also a distant landlord, deriving at least one third of his income from the real estate in the City that his father had had the foresight to acquire over forty years ago.

“And a safeguard for all the rainy days to come,” Sir Sidney said. “I could be wrong, but if you ask me, agriculture is on the decline for certain and for good. With the London rents, which I’m sure will only go up in the future, Ralph won’t have to eat into the estate. He likes to live expensively, you know.” He paused, wrenching his head aside to take a puff at the cigar that Charles was holding up. Then he exhaled slowly and added in a reflective voice, “Indeed, it is remarkable how much Ralph resembles me when I was young.”

“Really, sir?” I could hardly imagine this. The way it seemed to me, the Captain was a complete philistine: I doubted he had ever finished a book in

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his life. Sir Sidney, on the contrary, had published his first essay (on the silver fork novels of the late twenties) when he was only nineteen.

However, Sir Sidney was nodding. "Oh yes. Had the same moustache, made the same mistakes. Ralph and I are the living proof that history does repeat itself. I wasn't very conscientious either when I was young and, well, that's why . . ." He interrupted himself, frowned, as if hesitant to speak further. But then his brow cleared again, and he resumed, "Justin takes after his mother. Just as dull, and just as decent."

"And Cedric?"

"Ah, there you've got me." He laughed. "Let us just say that Cedric is unique. A bit too riotous at times, but gentle as a woman at heart. Maybe that's why he gets along so well with Rosalind. She misses having a sister to share her secrets with, you see. Cedric forms the perfect substitute."

I pursed my lips. In my view, they shared too many secrets: I always knew that, when I told Cedric something, Roz would be the first to hear. It made confiding in Cedric difficult, as well as dangerously attractive. More than once in the past few weeks, I had found myself on the point of asking if perhaps he knew who . . .

Dismissing these thoughts from my mind, I told Sir Sidney,

"Personally, I think Cedric resembles you a lot, or at least part of him does. As I've discovered during our rides together, he has the same talent for historical narrative, as well as an acute ear for language."

"But he lacks the dedication, John, he's far too fickle. I am sure he can produce a fine tale when he's trying to woo you, but he'll never sit down at the desk to labour at his letters. No, seen from that respect, there's only one literary heir I have in mind, and that is you. Every time I read back what we have done so far, I feel more grateful for having chosen you as my associate. And I do enjoy your style."

"Surely you mean your own style, sir. I am merely taking things down."

Sir Sidney screwed up his eyes. "A bit more than that, I should think."

And this (in hindsight) was really strange: at that moment, Charles, who was preparing the absinth, suddenly stopped stirring and straightened up, giving me such a hard stare that (in hindsight) it seems really strange that I didn't find his behaviour any stranger than just slightly peculiar.

And Sir Sidney spoke, "One day you'll see what I mean; you will see it all. I only hope you'll look upon my work with a kindly eye."

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The echo: there was an echo in there. However, I had no time to try and recollect when I'd heard those words before, because Sir Sidney had already launched the next subject, that of *my* work. He told me how pleased he was that, instead of me staying stuck in Eliot, he now saw me reading a different Dickens every week. He also liked the comments I had jotted down, for instance, my observation that Dickens seemed to either idealise women or satirise them, with no middle-ground of reasonable doubt in between.

He'd already written to Shaw, Sir Sidney said, who had shown himself very favourably inclined towards the project. Perhaps Shaw would even come to the ball: he and I might like to exchange some thoughts together.

"What ball?" I asked, getting confused.

"Oh, haven't they told you? Ralph is organising a ball, in honour of Rosalind. He thinks it is high time she were introduced into county society." Seeing my face (which can't have looked very delighted at the news), he hastily added, "Of course, you'll be there as well—I insist. And I'm sure Rosalind, too, will appreciate your presence. You're very fond of her, aren't you, John?"

"Er" A bit panicky, I realised that I didn't know any more whether I was fond of Roz or not; also (even more panic), I had serious doubts as to whether she still retained any feelings of fondness for me. (What had I done, what had I said? How stupid could you get?)

But Sir Sidney concluded, "Good, good. I'm looking forward to it."

As it happened, Shaw declined the invitation to the ball, which was, after all, more of a family event, but a few days later he did come to Kent, to see Sir Sidney, and to see me. He spent almost an hour alone with Sir Sidney in the library, after which the butler came to the drawing room where I sat reading *Bleak House* and announced that Mr. Shaw was awaiting me in the Elizabethan court. Closing my book, I went outside, soon spotting Shaw's short, thin figure as it was pacing to and fro in the rectangular tapestry of knee-high box hedges, his hands behind his back and his face bent down, as if he were in deep contemplation of the gravel. Hearing the crunch of my step, he glanced up and wrinkled his brow; yet he quickly corrected himself, changing his expression into one of polite goodwill.

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"I thought we might as well avail of this brief spell of dry weather by savouring Sutton Hall's famous knot garden," he said as I joined him. "I'm a great fan of these historical designs. What about you, Mr. Holland?"

I hesitated. In all truth, I had never liked the geometrical formality of the Elizabethan court, which forced one to follow the established, set paths. Sir Sidney let it be preserved for its cultural value, but, as he himself had once said, it was altogether annoying one could only go through the labyrinth at right angles, without the possibility of cutting corners.

At long last I replied, "As they say, sir: it is easy on the eye."

"Exactly," said Shaw, in a tone as if I had passed some crucial test, "nice and easy indeed." He studied his feet for a moment. But then he looked up again and, squinting hard at me, he asked, "How do you feel, Mr. Holland, that *The Rule of Kings* is coming along? Personally, I did not at all recognise William of Orange in the chapter you gave me last month. I have always thought of William as a saviour of our nation from the Catholic threat. However, Sir Sidney rather portrays him as some terrorist."

"Of the Irish, you mean."

"Precisely. And I do understand that these private papers Sir Sidney has in his manuscript collection, of this Dutch official, this, this . . ."

"De Vries."

"This De Vries: I do understand they cast a different light, still it does seem a trifle unlucky to elaborate so on the matter of the Boyne, in particular in view of the present debate on Home Rule. Don't you agree?"

"Well, sir," I replied, "we only mean to illustrate that, if William really was so horrified by the way the English treated their Irish prisoners, it's a bit strange he did nothing to stop them. It is the king's motives which are of interest here. If you read De Vries's letters, the picture arises of a conqueror lamenting the effect of his actions, without ever doubting the cause."

"Of course, I appreciate that. Even so . . ." Shaw paused, considering how best to express himself. Rocking up and down on his soles a little, as if he was somehow hoping to bridge the gap in height between the two of us, he proceeded, "To my mind, the chapter makes rather knotty reading, without this beautiful garden's clear plan to show the reader how to get in and how to get out. One really doesn't know what to think."

"It's a spiral," I said. "Sir Sidney always calls it a spiral."

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“Ah, the old maxim: circling round the truth.” He let himself fall back on his feet. “I grant you, Mr. Thornton doesn’t agree with me on this point; he even said the puzzle may have been put there on purpose. Very modern, he called it. And my partner, Mr. Sweet . . . I’m afraid he likes everything Sir Sidney does.” Falling silent, he let his gaze travel once more over the square of squares around us—a bit wistfully, it seemed. Then, however, he flipped up his chin and spoke, “But about your own book, Mr. Holland.”

And so we moved on to me. Thankfully, this part of the interview went much easier, Shaw agreeing with nearly all my suggestions. He concluded by saying, “You may send us a written outline of the proposed work, if you wish. Although I have to warn you that we can only consider adding you to our fund after the publication of *The Rule of Kings*. Sir Sidney has requested your name appear on the cover as well; naturally, this will make it perfectly acceptable for us to continue with you as our client.”

“But that seems almost too much honour,” I protested. “Are you sure, sir, that he wants me to be named as the second author?”

The small man was quick to give me his answer. “I do fear Sir Sidney may be entirely justified in thinking he had to make this proposition. Would that it were otherwise, but the force of circumstance . . . You see? We have no choice, really.”