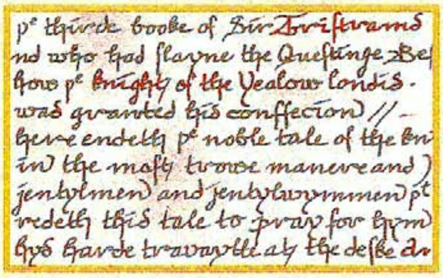
The Long and the Short of It

By Richard Frost

With Illustrations.



pͤ thirde booke of Sir Triſtrams
nd who had ſlayne the Queſtinge Be
how pͤ knighte of the Yealow londis .
was granted his conffecion // -
here endeth pͤ noble tale of the kn
in the moſt trewe manere and)
jentylmen and jentylwymmen pͭ
redeth this tale to pray for hym
hys harde travaylle at the deſke ar

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Part One.

RICHARD FROST

Poems and Essays—1.

One day there was a knight riding through a big forest. His name was Sir David of the Copperfields. Suddenly another knight appeared. So Sir David greeted him and asked, “I say, if a man kills a fellow-creature, does that make him a bad person?” “I don’t know,” said the other knight, and he chopped Sir David’s head off. Then he rode on, to see if he could find the answer. It must be somewhere.

So It Was With Us.

Once I was rich, once I was poor. Neither was of my own doing, and if I tell you who I am, you'll instantly grasp what I mean. You will say, "Ah . . . ." Because you know my name.

I am John Holland.

I was born in the previous century, into a previous life that welcomed me with the soft lap of luxury. I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, engraved with the same pattern of curly letters as the teething ring and christening mug that followed. I was a little prince in the land of plenty and, as my father kept telling me, one day I would be king. All through my childhood, and for a long time thereafter, the word "want" was only used to express a wish or command, its darker shades of meaning remaining wholly unknown to me. There were no shades—merely sun.

It had not always been so in our family. My grandfather had lived the humble, varicose life of a grocer, as had generations of Hollands before him. His son, however, having no zest for the counter and determined to climb above its low horizon, went off the trodden path at an early age in search for pastures greener. Always an eye for a profitable plan, he swiftly saw that, instead of lending credit to customers who were either loath or unable to settle their accounts, it would be far more fruitful to have credit given to *him*; and so, only shortly after reaching adulthood, he launched the Holland Insurance and Investment Bank.

He could not have chosen a more propitious time. It was the age of railway mania, of the rising power of industry, and the first explorations of Africa. It was the era of bright prospects and golden opportunity, of which many members of the British public hoped to catch more than just a glint. With the Holland Bank offering a speedy route towards such good fortune, the funds soon came pouring in. As it turned out, my father had tapped into a vast and wide reserve, which he steadily converted to a sea of new wealth. Money made money, heaps of it, tons of it, my father's clients growing fat and smug, and his own vault in his own bank flanked by ever bigger brothers.

The silver spoon became a whole service; and by the time my story begins, the Holland flag had come to fly so high that we had reached the very limit of our original class. In fact, we were well on our way to joining the top layer of society, consorting with people who only took exercise for reasons of pleasure or health rather than folk who sweated their brow to gain an income. From dissenters, a tradition in our family, we had become C of E. A country manor had been commissioned when I was nine, which was drawn up in the respectable classical style and boasted enough rooms to keep an army of servants constantly on the go. During the season, there was the house in Belgravia, opulently decorated, and so well stocked with the best port and cigars that old money was only too willing to mingle with the big City weights that came to my mother's copious dinners.

Triumph followed upon triumph. By the 1860s, the fountain of wealth spouted so freely that my father retired from business, visiting his deputy bank manager only once a month to make sure that the money was still making money of its own accord. On the day she turned twenty-one, Cecilia, my eldest sister, announced her engagement to Sir Chester Redlock, an illustrious Scottish baronet who was related to a real duke. This had lain so far beyond even my parents' expectations, though the match had tentatively been encouraged, that my mother kept exclaiming, "Who ever would've thought that we . . . "—never finishing her sentence, because the sheer awe at the family's immense and intense progress would hit her anew. My younger sister's comments were less favourable, and concerned mostly Sir Chester's somewhat silly name; yet less than a year after Cecilia became a lady, Theresa came up trumps with a baron (an impoverished baron, but a baron), who had declared that his heart would break if Theresa did not accept it as hers.

As to myself, I, too, had experienced nothing in my young life but growth and promotion. Being primarily interested in the cerebral side of existence, my successes were perhaps of a less public and more personal nature. I did not go to the best school in the country, but certainly to one that was renowned (where I was the top student for nearly a decade), after which I went on and up to university (the best this time), to come down again with a First. As I did not consider the instruction I had enjoyed at Oxford comprehensive enough, I subsequently spent a year reading English literature, once more with most excellent results. There followed a stint on the Continent, during which, I have to confess, I spent more time reading books about the unfamiliar surroundings than actually leaving my hotel room, but which no doubt served to expand my horizons even further.

Having returned from my travels, I settled in London, intending to lead a life of leisure and letters, only to be interrupted in a few years' time by a short course on how to keep the wheel of fortune spinning. Hardly had I placed my first article—on the French vogue for naturalist prose—with one of the leading periodicals of the day, when yet another family victory came to my ears: my father had been asked to stand for Parliament. As reported to me by Theresa, once again our mother had cried, "Who ever would've thought . . . ?" Still, there had sounded less surprise in her voice than before, for she as well (and about time, Theresa said, now that we would reach what surely must be the absolute high-point) had grown accustomed to the idea of the Holland House winning it all.

But, as hindsight invariably teaches one, the high-point is always the point where decline sets in. And so it was with us.

The End.

I am still glad I was with Thornton that evening. We were sitting by the fire in his lodgings, after a prolonged meeting with the literary society we had founded a few months earlier, called the Falcons of the Field. Our fellow-falcons had just left, and Thornton and I were enjoying a last glass of claret together whilst admiring the vista of the groundbreaking news which we would soon launch upon the world of culture. Inside it was quiet and warm; London lay curled up behind the window-panes—but still purring, always purring, an animal never quite asleep.

Thornton had been my best friend since boarding school, despite his being two years my senior, and a not insubstantial difference between us in social position. The second son of a solicitor, Thornton had had to earn his own bread since turning twenty. He had done well, working his way up from junior clerk to one of the main men at Shaw & Sweet, a large and distinguished publishing house. All through his seven-year career, he and I had kept in close contact, never tiring of our shared passion for everything to do with letters. Thornton hoped to grow into a prominent critic, whereas it was my ambition to become the leading novelist of the last quarter of the century—no more, and no less.

Recently Thornton had got a big step closer to his dream: his boss, Mr. Shaw, had offered him the position of editor of *The Good Review*, a new monthly which, contrary to the mishmash that was so popular in current journalism, focused solely on quality writing. If a writer was not worth reading, *The Good Review* would pass him by. If, however, your every word was a delight of intelligence and talent, the same *Review* was the first to bring the glad tidings to the nation-wide audience it had already attracted. This policy of exclusion of the undeserving of praise had been a huge success, so much so that an author would quiver at the thought of not finding favour in the sharp eyes of Thornton and his colleagues, and throw a lavish party when he saw his name in the journal's elegant print.

In a few weeks from now, a manifesto would be published in a special supplement to the *Review*, a manifesto written by Thornton and myself. In it, we expounded our views on the course that fiction would take in the coming decades. We expected great changes now that the big names were, one by one, dropping away. Dickens was dead, Thackeray had gone, Eliot was old and, although he was still bravely scribbling on, Trollope's fame was waning (rumour had it that he was preparing an autobiography: never a good sign). We grumbled at the legacy these grey heads had left us—and it was time, we felt, it was high time, for a new cohort to come to the fore. It was time for us, the Falcons of the Field.

"I'm telling you," said Thornton, as he took up the sheets of paper that were lying on the table between us, "they won't know what hit them." Stroking his beard, he let his eyes travel fondly over the text, nodding as he met with a particularly fitting phrase; nodding harder as the rhythm of the prose grabbed him; and here and there giving the occasional frown where a sentence or two weren't yet quite smooth enough.

Myself, I had no need to look, knowing as I did all the lines by heart. Those few remaining flaws could easily be ironed out, and the result would be a brilliant, wonderful, masterly plan. We had read our Pater, we had seen the writing on the wall. And we had gone that one crucial step further.

"Read it to me once more," I said. "Just for the sound of it."

Thornton smiled, and he raised the paper. And, as the familiar words came ringing through the room, I started nodding too.

"'Instead of ethical maxims, cohesion and embeddedness,'" Thornton read out, "'instead of teaching by example, by analysing the particulars of personal lives in illustration of moral growth and development . . . .'"

Instead of people to act as social exemplars, brought to us by a God-like, omniscient narrator with a benevolent but somewhat superior voice, we expected (we wished, wanted) the broad canvas to disappear, and the unrevised truth of individual inconsistency in an ever more fragmented society to be set at the centre. Instead of people seen from without, we wanted people seen from within. We wanted our subject to speak for himself ("Away with the author!" we said), in his own language, to convey to us his deepest core, whether it be amoral, immoral, or of the good and obedient kind. But preferably the erratic, the peculiar, the deviation from the straight and the narrow, the mad instead of the sane. As long as someone was human enough to be interesting, and unique enough to resist being reduced to a so-called "character". We did not want our readers to see the light, but to be shown the shadowy corners and innermost recesses of the mind: crooked, haunted, dark. Or, as Thornton presently declared,

"'No Condition of England, but personal consciousness. No public platitudes, but private pranks. Not the common experience we can all identify with, but the exception, the enigma, the question to which there seems no answer. We want to be left bewildered and bemused.'"

We foresaw new literary techniques as a result of this, different formats and prose styles to reflect the multifarious subject now in view. ("What forms are we talking about exactly?" we'd ask each other every time we came to this point; but we still weren't sure. Never mind: I would discover all this once I started writing my novels.)

In addition to the individual mind, to the warped workings of the psyche in all its naked detail, we wanted books to have more *bodies.* Rather than frown at the licentiousness of 18th-century works, one ought to object, we said, against the fiction of our own time, which was all moral soul, but disregarded the corporeal side of existence, which gave no warts, no smells, no smalls, except when illustrating an ethical and general point. "Away with admonishing prudes like Mudie," we said, "away with the restraining editor." "Death to decorum!" we cried. "Let us have all those physical doings that are now kept so carefully in the dark."

"Mind the gap," Thornton broke in.

I did: the move to the next level was still too abrupt. However, to resume: in consequence of the ongoing trend in democracy and the ensuing likelihood of dominance by the vulgar, inferior majority, we also feared a devaluation of culture—but, as this seemed rather a sad prospect, we predicted instead a breach between higher art and the commercial production of words of mere entertainment for the newly but poorly educated masses, who, in the short course of their primitive instruction, developed a taste for reading that nothing but the fodder of sensationalism and sentimentalism could satisfy. To finer minds, however, the New Fiction would offer its intellectual diamond, a form of art so precious, so pure, whose hard quality would outshine all that had gone before . . . . ("All except the genius of Shakespeare," we said. "And the Romantics," added Thornton, who was a particular fan of Wordsworth. After which he always began a plea for Jane Austen, that lacked in sound argumentation, but which was ardent enough for me to condone his request with a nod. Austen was in: she could always be dropped later.)

When at last he had finished reading, Thornton heaved a satisfied sigh.

"You'll do all this," he said, with an almost jealous look at me, "in your very first novel. Any idea yet what it'll be about?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It'll come, I suppose. But first I want to do that book on Eliot. *A Literary Life*."

His beard flipped up and down in approval. "Very right. Demarcating the benchmark from which to depart. Will be a bore, though."

"Yes, I shall have to re-read some of her books. And not skip the dull bits this time."

"But when that's all finished, thén . . . ," said Thornton, pulling up his eyebrows in playful announcement.

I smiled, to confirm, "And thén."

Having raised our glasses at each other, we fell silent. And for a while we remained sitting so, content as before, and faces aglow, either from the fire before us, which was still burning, or from the fire within.

We both started when suddenly a loud knock was heard pounding on the door down below, followed by the shuffling sound of Thornton's landlady going to answer it. Half a minute later, the shuffling moved upstairs and after a much politer, softer tap, Mrs. Ruddle's face came peering through a chink into the room.

"Excuse me, sir, sirs," she lisped shyly, "but this was delivered for Mr. 'olland. They thought 'e was at 'is 'ouse, but there they said 'e was 'ere."

Immediately Thornton stood up and went over to relieve the fingers that, trembling visibly, held out a bluish rectangle. With a bow of the head, and an extra bow to me, Mrs. Ruddle retreated, and the door closed again.

Thornton's hand wasn't trembling, but his too-quick, encouraging smile as he passed me the telegram betrayed that he, too, had misgivings as to its contents—it arriving so late in the evening, and having tracked me down when, at my own apartments, it had been found that I was not in.

And he was right.

He was right.

"What does it say, John?" Thornton asked in an anxious voice when I did not speak, nor move, only stared at the paper.

But I was so shocked, I could hardly see what it said.

I knew what it spelled, though: it was the end.

Just the Same.

Only nine months after the Queen received her imperial jewel in the crown, the prospect of my coronation was rudely snatched away from me. Overnight, my world collapsed. Overnight the family fortune evaporated: the mountain of money we had been sitting on so comfortably inverted to a financial crater in the few hours that it took the news of my father's suicide to spread through the City.

As revealed in the days that followed, the firm, safe ground of insurance and investment on which the Holland Bank had always professed to stand had, in reality, been a spreading swamp of speculation and expenditure, soaking up funds far past depletion. Debts had created debts, and even bigger debts, the gap between fiction and fact finally growing so large that nearly four percent of all the bills, bonds and notes circulating in the national economy turned out to be worth no more than paper. The collapse of our bank caused the ruin of at least five international merchants, three shipping lines, two railway companies, and one of Fleet Street's principal agencies. The stock market was seriously affected, trade suffered, as did the cotton and clothes industry. One could say that the Holland enterprise had annihilated a small but not insignificant part of the British Empire.

And the trouble was, there was no-one to answer for it. My father had chosen the ultimate way out, our bank manager had fled the country, and I had not been made a partner yet—for which limit to liability I felt thankful. It was the only thing that made me thankful, because the torrent of outrage and insult, as was being spewed forth by our cherished free press, nearly knocked me cold. The papers had always been fond of my father, consistently misspelling his name as "Able Holland" in tribute to his rags-to-riches achievement. Nevertheless, they were quick to condemn him now, devising headlines such as "Shopkeeper's Son Caught with Hand in Till", and reporting on his self-inflicted death as "Dutch Courage". He was called a Merdle, a Melmotte, the Emperor with the New Clothes. "Too much Self-Help!", another rag shouted, followed by a vicious article on the Hollands in which the words "charlatan" and "parvenu" featured more than once.

Sadly, the denunciation of the family name did not confine itself to the public realm, but hit us equally hard, if not harder, in the private sphere. Theresa's engagement was broken off by means of a short note, in which her baron explained that, due to the lack of dowry, and certainly in view of the scandal, it was impossible for him to accept her as his bride. My mother lost the whole of her acquaintance, all of them, nobody even bothering to send their condolences, or inquire whether she was coping after disaster had come crashing down on her. The Falcons of the Field did not wish to meet me any more and, when Thornton pointed out that, in essence, I *was* the Falcons of the Field, they decided to call our fraternity to a hasty end. I was banned from my club, and stared at in the street. I received terrible letters, full of threats to torture or butcher me; once I was even assailed in the flesh. I was also asked to vacate my rooms, because the gentleman on the floor down below found my presence "a highly disturbing thought", which prevented him from enjoying his sleep. Perhaps he was afraid I would come stealing in the night, or that the promised bloody murder would drip its way through his ceiling.

I had to give my splendid apartments anyhow, in view of the towering rent. My father had never had the foresight (or the financial leeway) to settle any capital on members of his family, and the failure of the Holland Bank plunged us straight into a material void. Of course, there was no way our creditors could be satisfied, but what possessions we had were all confiscated, without any margin to allow for us survivors to continue our existence in some form of comfort. Flaunden House was sold off, coach and horses and all; Belgravia was placed out of bounds. Our silver, china, crystal, paintings, jewellery: everything was wrapped up and carried away. To my horror, I even saw the books go which my father had collected for my benefit in our extensive, expensive library.

My mother, sister and I ended up in a set of dingy rooms, smaller even than Thornton's, with no furniture to speak of, and owning barely more than the mourning clothes on our backs. My mother seemed strangely resigned to the situation, though she was, I think, simply too stunned to complain, going about with a dazed look as if someone had clubbed her over the head and she was still struggling to realise what had happened. Theresa, on the contrary, was downright livid, livid at the unfairness of it all. Like me, she felt betrayed by our father: by the image he had created of himself of the glorious Lord Bountiful, by the trust he had taken from us and then demolished, promising the earth and leaving us aground. Several times she yelled that he had deserved to die, but—again like me—rather would she have seen him live to confront the crisis fair and square.

Another theme that lead to regular outbursts on her part was the fear of being trapped into spinsterhood. "How am I ever going to get married now?" she once screamed over dinner, banging her fist on the table so that the pork chops went flying. "Look at me, in this scarecrow outfit, which I have to wear for someone who isn't even worth the woe!" She gestured furiously at her black crepe frock. "And next year, my one—*one*!—regular dress will be out of fashion, and I can't afford anything new." To conclude in a bitter tone, "Oh, how Cecilia must be glad she escaped in time."

Theresa definitely had a point there. When I had begun to realise how wide the mire of misery was, I had appealed to Sir Chester for aid, but all I had received in return was a letter from Cecilia, which sent her polite commiseration, but not her compassion, stating quite coolly and quite clearly that she had no intention of entertaining further contact with us.

The shame of having such relatives was enough of a burden, thank you very much. And (p.s.) Sir Chester felt just the same.

Low Expectations.

It was one of those tantrums of Theresa's—which only got worse as time went by—that finally shook my mother awake, and made her decide to broach the subject of the future with me.

Sitting down one morning beside the chair where I sat scanning the papers for the latest abuse, she asked, "John, my dear, what can we do? We must do something: the money Joseph gave me has almost run out." Taking my hand and squeezing it, she added timidly, "What if we, Theresa and I, went to live in Norwich after all? Surely it would make things easier for you. And Joseph mentioned he could try and find a place . . . ."

I pulled my hand away. "I'm not going into trade. I'm sorry, mother, but we haven't sunk quite as low as that. You have done so once, and I've let you, but I don't want you to look to him for favours again."

Joseph—Uncle Joseph—was my father's younger brother, and a dealer in ironware. Shortly after the funeral, he had suggested taking in my mother and sister, on the plea that, since he and his wife were childless, it would give them some much-needed company.

Kindly meant as the offer might be, I had no intention of accepting it. To my mind, Uncle Joseph had always been but an inferior twig of the family tree, with the sparse foliage of 2,200 a year, as opposed to our flourishing branch (or so I had always believed) of 22,000. Granted, by comparison he was far better off now, yet the discrepancy in station and income of years gone by had nurtured an equally wide and, in my view, insurmountable difference in refinement. Besides operating a chain of stores in East Anglia, Uncle Joseph liked to try his hand at inventing kitchen utensils, and the number of times he had bored me with the story of his creation of the first British tin opener (according to himself, a vast improvement on its American forerunner) had never failed to demonstrate to me just how mundane a mind he had. I could not accept help from someone who raved about iron as if it were gold, and whose wife thought of a week to Weymouth as the high-point of the year. *They* might appreciate the company, but if we wished to avoid sinking even lower, it was exactly the company of humble folk such as they that should be avoided—at all cost.

I believe my mother understood when I listed these objections, although she did receive my refusal with what appeared to be dismay.

To cheer her spirits, I suggested, "Look, I thought that maybe I could make writing my profession instead of just pursuing it as an occupation. Thornton will help me. He may be one of the few friends I have left, but so far he's shown himself to be very loyal and sympathetic. Who knows, I might become a co-editor of his."

My mother nodded vaguely. "Yes, you were always good with words."

She said it—but to my regret, not in a tone that carried much conviction. And I was disagreeably surprised the next day to find Thornton averse to the plan as well. Only a month ago, *The Good Review* had published my analysis of the prose used in *Tom Sawyer*, a piece which had met with great acclaim. Now, however, he told me that his boss, who had also admired the article and inquired about its author, had been absolutely furious to hear that I was the man. Thornton had stressed it was quality that counted, and quality it had been, but Mr. Shaw was adamant: no works of mine would ever find their way into his magazines again. And if Thornton wanted to keep his job, he had better heed that prohibition.

"But, but it's not fair," I protested when Thornton had finished his account. "I mean, what have I ever done to offend *him*?"

Thornton shook his head. "Look John," he said, "four papers have gone bankrupt, and White's—as you know, White and Shaw are brothers-in-law—well, he's had to sell up. The publishing world are angry: you can hardly expect them to regard you with a kindly eye. I do know it's your father who caused all this trouble, even so . . . ." He paused. Then he lowered his chin and spoke in a solemn voice, "You have fallen into grave discredit, my friend, and the sooner you accept that, the better it'll be."

"Yes, but still," I sputtered, "I just don't see why I should be ostracised like that. Shaw likes my work, he always says so. *I* wasn't the one who took White to the cleaner's, so why should he wish to punish *me*?"

We were back at the beginning. And sure enough, Thornton began his explanation anew, the same one, but in more elaborate terms this time, stressing how tightly knit the London circle of intellectuals was (as it turned out, everybody was ever so close to everybody) and adding some shocking examples of people who had fallen into such penury that they were practically starving, making the rest of everybody mad with worry.

It got only truly unpleasant, though, when he placed his hands in his waist and ended his speech, in a tone and tempo as if addressing someone who was rather hard of hearing: “Let me give you some advice, old chap. If you really want to be a journalist, the only option is hack work, which I’m sure you’d rather avoid. As to a possible editing job, nobody worthwhile will take you on at present, if only to prevent their readers getting offended. Honestly, the way I see it, the best thing for you to do is leave London for a while—which will be cheaper living at any rate—and wait for the whole thing to blow over.”

This time I nearly exploded. “Leave London? And be removed from all the action? I’d die in the country, you know that. I’d be bored to death!”

Thornton ignored me. If anything, his face grew even grimmer and, like some Gradgrind, he started hammering home the facts as hard as he could.

“You’re no longer part of the action, John.” (Fact.) “This isn’t some bad dream from which you’ll wake up in the morning, but it is real. I’m telling you, you’d better keep a low profile for a bit.” (And that was another Fact.) “Also, you seriously have to think of a way of earning an income.” (Stick to Facts, Sir!) “Have you ever considered becoming a schoolmaster? It would provide you with a steady, honest salary, which is exactly what you and your family need. They are *your* responsibility now.” (Nothing but Facts.) “Think about it,” he repeated. “Teaching might be well suitable.”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“With your education . . . ,” he began—but I angrily interrupted him:

“That’s not it, at all. That’s not what I mean at all.”

I left him in a complete huff, furious with the superior attitude he had adopted towards me.

But he was right, of course—of course he was right. And so, a week later, I sat writing my first job application. Yet another week later, I repeated the exercise, my old boarding school having turned me down for the assistant headmastership I had hoped to acquire (if there must be a salary, I reasoned, at least let it be a good salary). The stated ground for rejection, that the pupils’ parents might object to my forming part of the staff, was also given by the next school, and the next, and again by the next. Getting desperate, I crawled ever further down the tutorial ladder, until I came to a halt at the low rung of a day grammar school for boys, which was willing to take me on for the miserly sum of 100 a year.

I should have been glad, I suppose, but in actual Fact I was not. In actual Fact, I hated my job, every minute and moment of it. I hated propagating the same system of mindless cramming I had loathed so myself as a child, the endless parsing, copying and translating of classical texts which the ambitious parents insisted upon in imitation of the more prestigious schools, when their offspring would have derived far greater benefit from a modern, German style of teaching. My only triumph was that the school stood in London, although I had to admit, London seemed less likeable these days. Instead of a sign that I was set at the centre, its hustle bustling right around me, the soot on the stairs rather looked like spoors of the wolf that came prowling at our door, always growling, always howling louder.

For I was poor. I was so poor, I couldn’t even support my own family. I pretended not to know that Uncle Joseph still gave my mother money, pretended I could manage, and sold off my last personal items of value—going without cuff-links, without a cane, without a watch—and still it wasn’t enough. Young as I was, I felt I was growing old; and slowly, ever more surely, a stupor of gloom crept over me. Thornton had suggested I bide my time by writing in the evenings, yet the high style I had once been so eager to discover, would not come. If I did write anything, all I could think of was the Fact that there was no money in the New Fiction, a Fact that had rendered it dignity before, but which now formed a barrier—until, in the eleventh month, I decided to give it up altogether.

Never had I had such low expectations.

The Hub of the Wheel.

It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home. There must be stubborn denial in the thing, and the punishment may be just and well-deserved, but that it is miserable, I can testify.

Home these days was an unpleasant place to me, not least because of my sister's temper. Theresa was the main reason why I never invited Thornton over, but always sought his company in the more relaxed atmosphere of his own rooms. There, I could flee the oppressiveness of constantly threatening thunder, the sight of my mother's silent tears, the sheer despondency that seemed to spread to our very four corners.

I needed Thornton, who was the only link left with my life of the past. Good friend that he was, he never tired of listening to my complaints. Good friend that he was, he not once mentioned his own disappointment that the glowing ambitions of our manifesto, which had remained unpublished, had had to be put on ice—but he bestowed all his pity on me. Braving my indignation, he kept urging me to think of my family and seek the cheaper countryside, instead of clinging to a city that had become like Coventry to me. And, in my second winter of purgatory, he made it possible for me to finally follow his advice in a manner that felt not like defeat.

It was a Monday evening, and when I arrived at his chambers for our usual meeting, he greeted me with his beard pulled into a wide grin, a grin that I had not seen in a long time; for even though Thornton was patient with me, my sombre moods made me not his favourite visitor. Directing me to the best chair by the fire, where a decanter of wine and two glasses stood sparkling, he seated himself opposite—after which he steepled his fingers together and regarded me for a few seconds with an oddly eager gleam in his eye. Then, suddenly releasing his hands, he asked,

"Remember that cultural do at Sir Sidney's country house to which I was invited last weekend?"

I nodded.

"Well," said Thornton, "I am back."

I nodded again, hoping I did so in a way that expressed congratulatory interest, although, in all honest truth, I felt my stomach turn sour.

Thornton's working relationship with the famous Sir Sidney Althane was something for which I had long envied him. Their paths had first crossed three years ago, when Mr. Shaw had asked Thornton to supervise the publication of *The Book of Medieval Romance*, an anthology based on Sir Sidney's own collection of old manuscripts, which had contained, amongst others, a marvellous, newly discovered story thought to belong to Malory's King Arthur sequence. Later Thornton had edited two more books, albeit on totally different topics—because, besides being renowned for the quality of his writings, Sir Sidney also possessed an exceptionally broad range of talents.

To the present generation, who may not be so familiar with Sir Sidney and his work, I cannot stress enough what a tower of learning he was in our time. These days he is less well-known than other 19th-century men of letters, such as, for instance, Ruskin or Carlyle, but without a doubt, he was the most prolific and creative of them all. He was one of the last generalists, a gentleman-scholar in the true, traditional sense of the word—a veritable *homo multarum literarum*: widely read, widely cultivated, publishing on a range of subjects such as only few men command. (And even fewer men ever will again. Indeed, there are no sages left any more, or if they do exist, they can seldom see further than the end of their desk.)

Sir Sidney's rather obscure reputation today certainly has to do with the difficulty of placing him into any neat, convenient category. Carlyle was first and foremost an historian, but Sir Sidney also studied fields such as philology, anthropology, and he actively concerned himself with natural philosophy, of which his articles on mental disease are but one example. Still I think that, ultimately, it was his unconventional methods which turned against him, and makes modern authors wary of quoting his works. He differed from most other scholars in that one hardly ever knew what he really thought, or which perspective he would take next. He was not afraid of contradicting himself, always questioning what he had done or said before. He was prepared to consider various interpretations of the same phenomenon and, given certain assumptions, agree with them all. Where others sought for assurance, he would hazard a conjecture; if everyone said no, he would ask, "But what if it's yes?"

It was this open mind and refusal to settle for clear-cut conclusions for which I had always admired him. And I was not alone in my regard, for despite the name he had of being quirky and an eccentric, Sir Sidney's prestige in the world of culture and science used to be high. The intellectual weekends he organised at Sutton Hall every other month were attended by an eclectic mix of authors, artists, musicians, philosophers, politicians, legal specialists, medical scientists and, to some of the other visitors' chagrin, even people who worked as planners or engineers. As the coming man in literary criticism, Thornton had received an invitation as well: and here he was—back—obviously dying to tell me all that he had heard and seen.

"So, how was it?" I asked at last.

"Interesting," said Thornton. "Loads of big names. I shook hands with Huxley. I spoke to Tennyson. And, of course, to Sir Sidney himself, who's a highly amiable man, very knowledgeable, full of good humour too. It got truly interesting only on Sunday after breakfast, though, when he offered me a job."

Hard as I tried, there was no hiding or denying the jealousy now. And certainly Thornton saw it—but before I could . . . apologise?, he continued,

"And I refused." Leaning back in his chair, he nodded at me, apparently terribly pleased with himself. "You see, it's just that I'm doing really well at the publisher's now, and I don't want to leave. In fact, I think that, in a few years or so, the prospect might very well arise of my becoming a partner. Moreover . . . ." He shifted forward on his seat. "I knew someone who was in far greater need of a job. In a word, I recommend you, my dear friend. And I am proud to say, you've already been invited for an interview."

Not allowing for a response, he proceeded to explain. I was so stunned, I could hardly take it all in, Thornton's gabbled speech not being much of a help either. But the way I understood it, Sir Sidney needed an amanuensis for the next book he was planning to publish. A few years ago, he had fallen ill with some form of rheumatism (Thornton was a bit vague here), and holding a pen for any prolonged period of time had become too painful—which was why he had decided to hire someone to do the writing for him. The other task I would have (there was more) was that of teaching Sir Sidney's grandson, an eight-year-old boy, who had spent most of his life abroad and, consequently, was not yet of the right educational level to be sent to an English boarding school. With my training and experience, Thornton said, the requested upgrading would be a piece of cake. (He literally said that: "a piece of cake.")

However, convinced of my coming success as Thornton might be, I had great difficulty actually believing him. By now I had grown so used to the drain of double, double toil and trouble, that the prospect of the cup so easily filling up again seemed almost too fantastic to be true. And me being me, I pounced on the first catch I could see.

"I'd be acting the governess," I said.

"You'd be Sir Sidney's personal secretary," Thornton corrected me. "And you needn't be afraid he just wants a scribe, for when I mentioned that review I smuggled into the magazine last year—you know, of his biography of Swift?—he said he found your comments truly edifying. And, and . . . ." At this point, he grasped my hands, pumping them up and down in celebration. Seeing me frown, he let go again; yet he did not give up, rattling on, "Just think of it, John! You'll be there when his next book takes shape. You'll witness every second of the process, you'll be taking down his very thoughts. Also, you can participate in the weekends: with Sir Sidney's patronage, people cannot but treat you with respect. And before you start about your loathing of everything rural, he said he'll need you, too, to travel to London from time to time, to consult things in the British Library, or take his work to the publishers, which he prefers not to send by post. You'll be meeting *me*, John, in a private as well as a professional capacity." Nodding at me once more, he concluded,

"It'll be your spoke back to the hub of the wheel."

Pride Comes After a Fall.

Loftily as I had bounced up and down in the carriage that had collected me from Tunbridge Wells station, as low a position in the world I occupied now. I was seated in the library of Sutton Hall, in the only easy chair it contained. A few yards before me, Sir Sidney was ensconced in a wheeled chair, his valet standing right behind him, as if I were meeting with a four-shouldered, two-headed man. Lady Althane was seated at their side, drawn up very high against a very straight and firm wooden back.

I still had trouble matching the face I was seeing with the photographic images that had lodged into my memory in the past, and which now persistently came to the fore, demanding an explanation. Despite the chair, whose large wheels raised its legs at least two inches from the floor, Sir Sidney seemed to have become not just broader in stature, but also shorter. He looked a lot older too: the vigorous man in his fifties had somehow frozen up into a premature, rigid old age. His reputation for wit and fluency came out when he spoke, though, his blue eyes full of quick spirit and his voice undulating through the room in a warm, sonorous sound.

Nevertheless, the contrast with what I had expected remained unsettling. So close to him, his wife seemed at least a whole generation removed. Her flowing Liberty dress only added to the difference, as did the unruly shock of hair, from which several strands came freely tumbling down without any attempt being made to put them back under control. The laissez-care exterior hid a strong, if not critical mind, however, as I had found on my arrival. Being an invalid, Sir Sidney had, of course, not got up when the butler guided me in, but neither had she, merely deigning to incline her head and, with a short flourish of her hand, indicating the seat I was to take. Having seen me sink down almost to the floor, she had raised a critical eyebrow at me—and not spoken one word of greeting.

That eyebrow had been threatening me ever since, which I did not like, so I concentrated on Sir Sidney. We had dealt with the introductions: the inquiries about the journey, the talk about the weather. We were now coming to the point. Or rather Sir Sidney was, for I felt too much in awe of him to do anything other than wait.

Sir Sidney was coming to my qualifications.

“I must thank you for your kind words in the review of my Swift book,” he began. “Yes, I remember it well. ‘Terse phraseology and translucent syntax,’ you said—and I could tell you weren’t even joking.” He flashed me a wink. “Y’see, some people thought my mental capacities had fallen into decline. Indeed, half the English dictionary was thought to have gone missing. Just think what a gap in knowledge that would’ve left.”

I hesitated, not knowing whether to respond to his roguish look with a smile or maybe uttering a tut-tut at the folly of others. It was good that I hesitated, for Lady Althane, whose eyebrow was still up, decided to put in,

“My husband had to be very concise, because of his illness.”

“Alas,” confirmed Sir Sidney, “my body won’t obey me any more. But hopefully, Mr. Holland, with your aid, I can be as long-winded as I like. Who knows, I might even be so successful as to bore some of my readers to death. We’ll just have to make sure the book gets to the right enemies.” He paused, then added in a mutter, “It’ll be the last one anyway.”

I am sure that, on hearing these words, the valet clutched the invalid chair: his knuckles turned visibly white. But Sir Sidney could not feel or see this, and he breezily continued, “Mr. Thornton also showed me another piece you wrote. On the future of literary fiction?”

“Oh, that,” I uttered. “That . . . . It was a joint effort, actually.”

“Was it? He said it was mostly your work. I found it interesting, you know, very much so. It’ll be nice to have a promising young man like yourself around. I only describe the world as it is: you are anxious to change it. Ah yes, the good old days, when one’s view was still bright enough to see the gold at the end of the rainbow . . . . Well, well, well . . . .“

His own remark seemed to plunge him into deep thought, or perhaps some melancholy reminiscences of his more glorious past self, and a silence fell that lasted for more than ten long seconds. I would later discover that such sudden lapses from the conversation only meant that he had hit upon an interesting idea, which he might use in his research; unaware of this at the time, however, I tried to distract him by remarking,

“About that review you just mentioned, sir, you’d better not reveal that it was me, and not Mr. Thornton, who wrote the piece, or else he’ll get into trouble with his superiors.”

Sir Sidney looked up, on the instant wide awake again.

“Yes, I know,” he said, “your friend hinted as much. Well, I promise I won’t betray you, Mr. Holland, but all the same, I do think I’ll have a word with Shaw. Really, they should stop being so childish.”

Beside him, the eyebrow rose once more, quite sharply this time. And to my shock, horror, and later resentment, Lady Althane stated in a measured voice, “People have been ruined, my dear.”

“Certainly, certainly,” Sir Sidney replied, as calmly as if she had only made some neutral, innocent comment. “Still, it’s no use throwing new talent down the drain. Bit biblical as well, don’t you think?” Considering the subject closed, he turned again to the papers on his lap, to see what else Thornton had said about me. Lady Althane did not respond, but the eyebrow stayed firmly in place, and her handsome face fixed itself on me, her handsome eyes staring all the way down her handsome nose.

Feeling definitely small now, I let my gaze wander through the library. It looked a lot more pleasant than Lady Althane. In fact, it was positively beaming at me. Shelf after splendid shelf of books, all bound in quality leather of Sir Sidney’s personal library colour, which was burgundy with gold lettering. The biggest smile came from the special cabinet that was set in the far corner, away from direct daylight. Behind the iron grid, behind the glass doors, I saw many drawers, and an enticing row of tattered volumes; a number of ornaments and an instrument that looked like a hygrometer occupied the middle shelf. This must be the place where the famous collection of ancient manuscripts was kept. The treasure chest.

"You read both classics and history at Oxford?" asked Sir Sidney.

I blinked. "Yes. I did, yes."

"The history will come in handy—and a First, too. Literature next . . . . Your sheet of reference also states you studied in Germany for a while." He pursed his lips. "You certainly did a lot of studying, Mr. Holland."

"As well as some teaching."

"Ah yes." He turned to his wife, with an odd, jerky movement of the head, that made his cheeks, flabby as they had become since I last saw his picture, shudder in a rather eerie manner. "About the boy," he said.

"About the boy," confirmed Lady Althane. For the first time showing any willingness to interact with me, she straightened her neck and spoke, "I must warn you, sir, that the task awaiting you is no easy one. To tell you the truth, we have gone through two tutors already. Until a year ago, my husband's grandson lived in Italy, where, I am sad to say, no sustained effort was made to instil any love of learning in him. In other words . . . ."

"The boy must be trained and taught discipline," Sir Sidney filled in. "We don't want him dead, but he's a bit too much of a live wire now."

"A means must be found for teaching young Tristram," Lady Althane finished her sentence. "He does not fit in too tight a mould."

Sir Sidney grinned, to all appearances greatly pleased at her correction.

"As you notice, Mr. Holland," he confided to me, "my wife and I agree, but differ. And when I say that the child must be rooted first in his native soil before we send him away again to some school . . . ."

"I concur," Lady Althane smoothly took over, "that we do not think it wise to subject him, at the present sensitive age, to another change of environment so soon after his having arrived with us." Here, she actually smiled, moving a hand towards her husband's and pressing it tenderly.

Perhaps it was this small sign of there also being a soft side to her; perhaps it was the wordings she had used in reference to my future charge, but when she proceeded to inquire after my views on education, I felt that—I suddenly knew that—my preferred ideal might well be hers. And so

I explained that I believed more in gaining insight than in mere rote learning, that rather than simply feeding knowledge into a young mind, I valued developing its ability to see connections and draw inferences from the material it was offered. Also, I said, it was important to allow for differences in tastes and abilities: not every child was the same. Indeed, I often thought that education ought to be a joint effort of pupil and teacher, and required creative skills as much as reproductive ones.

"Oh, you shall have to be creative, I promise you that," was Sir Sidney's reaction. "I dare say, you'll need all the creativity you have in store."

Lady Althane, on the contrary, was nodding—and not at her husband's words, but at me. To my slight surprise, the valet started nodding too, to be subsequently joined by Sir Sidney. Apparently, Lady Althane's good opinion was an opinion worth having in the Sutton Hall household.

As it turned out, however, her good opinion once won was not won forever. Us having agreed on contents, we soon moved on to more formal details, such as salary (I was to start with 300 a year, more than I had hoped), time off (a generous amount again), and additional tasks that I would have (in London, London, London!).

Sir Sidney concluded by saying he expected me to dine with the family.

And, all of a sudden, the eyebrow was up again.

"My husband insists on it," Lady Althane declared.

"Right," said I.

But she wasn't finished yet. "I just wished to inquire," she stated, "since we often entertain important guests, whether an advancement on your salary might be agreeable to you, in case you need to purchase evening dress or any other new clothes."

I was so taken aback by this remark, my mouth almost fell open. For it was not agreeable, not in the least. In fact, it was as disagreeable as it could get. She couldn't have made me feel more like a pauper, than by letting me know that my best coat, which I had blackened so carefully the day before, was not good enough for her, was too ragged, too shabby, too worn. And really, there was no need to do this to me. Clothes may make the man, but, as I had always thought, it was the moral ethics instilled by upbringing and education that made the gentleman, and I was one such gentleman, always had been, always would be—despite the setback in my life, a setback that had been no fault of mine. Surely Sir Sidney would not have asked me to share the table if he hadn't recognised this quality in me?

To my own shame, though, I did not act the gentleman in the way I declined her offer: biting back that an advancement was not necessary in any way, in a tone that was neither courteous nor thankful. She cast her eyes down, and mumbled something to Sir Sidney, but sadly, too, it was no apology that found its way to my ears as well—oh no. All the way back to the station, all the way back to London, back to my humble home, I could hear those words echo through my mind, could hear them getting stronger, getting louder rather than ebb away.

"Pride comes after a fall."

"Pride comes after a fall."

Going Back in Time.

I had bought a first-class ticket. I was not sure whether a footman would await me in Tunbridge Wells, but if there were, I preferred him to see me alight the train in style. It was best that the servants realised straight away I was a personal employee of Sir Sidney's rather than one of the regular staff: it would prevent confusion and embarrassment later. For similar reasons, I had taken great care with my personal appearance, making sure that everything was tip-top, ship-shape, and in spotless order. With the aid of a loan from Thornton, I had bought back my cane, my cuff-links, my watch. My old coat had been turned, and a new one was in the making, which I would collect as soon as opportunity allowed, although the tailor had said that he was willing to deliver it, together with the shirts and suits I had ordered, directly to Sutton Hall.

At Sevenoaks station, a few more passengers came in, their cheeks red and raw with the cold. Somehow the frost seemed more severe in the country. It was one of the objections Theresa had raised against the cottage in St. Albans which Thornton had helped me find for her and my mother; the complaints about the danger of draught had been many. She had also expressed great fears that they might not be able to afford enough coal to make the place tolerably comfortable, especially now that I had forbidden, absolutely forbidden, my mother ever to accept money from Uncle Joseph again. Thankfully, though, with Thornton present, who had pointed out the cheery aspect of the house, who had promised to come and visit regularly, and expressed his great faith that Theresa would only blossom in the healthy air, her protests had soon dwindled. As I had realised, I need not have been so afraid before of inviting Thornton over: Theresa really was remarkably docile with him.

The train started moving again, puffing through the Weald at an ever slower pace. The goal of my journey drawing near, I rehearsed once more in my mind the details with which Burke's *Peerage* and Thornton had provided me. Sir Sidney Oswald Randolph Althane, Bart, married to the second Lady Althane, christened Margaret Imogen, who was also the Dowager Burgess-Stuart, née Lady Corthorpe-Tudor-Howe. Sir Sidney's first wife, who had died eight years ago, had not been very notable as a person; according to Thornton, people only ever referred to her as that "poor soul, struck down in her prime", without anyone caring to recall what she had looked like or what she had been like. The Lady Althane I had met, on the other hand, was said to be "quite something". She patronised (matronised) a number of innovative charity projects, was passionate about women's politics, and had a creative bent, assigning so much value to her art that she left the running of the household entirely to the staff. There were also three sons, all from the first marriage, the eldest of whom had been a captain in the Guards, then served a stint in India, and now lived in Italy—he was the father of Tristram, my pupil. The second son was a vicar, who held the local living, and the youngest was still at Cambridge, hoping to go on to become a barrister.

Sutton Hall, the family seat, presented a less straightforward picture. In contrast to my father's country manor, which had been perfectly erect, perfectly symmetrical, and perfectly new, Sir Sidney's abode was more of a rambling place, holding midway between a house and a castle. First built in the 12th century, on the site of an iron-age ring fort and part of an old Roman wall, it had been regularly added onto over time; with the result that the original medieval hall was now adorned with an Elizabethan wing, a Jacobean tower, a baroque set of cornices, a neo-classical porch and even an extension in the currently fashionable Gothic style. Still, erratic a construction as it may be, I felt it was a home worthy of Sir Sidney’s long and noble lineage, and impressive, too, in that it commanded over 30,000 acres of land, which, as a quick calculation told, meant an income that allowed for at least five servants to each resident.

And yet.

Right and proper as it all seemed, and glad as I was to be joining the gentry again, when the train at last drew up in Tunbridge Wells, a sudden spasm came shooting through my stomach. From this point onwards, it would be horsepower only, London lying definitely behind and out of sight. I had taken out three subscriptions to publications which I supposed Sir Sidney did not read, so that I wouldn’t feel too cut off from modern culture, but now that the big moment had arrived, I feared that it might not be enough. I strongly suspected that Sutton Hall wasn’t even on the main, knowing as I did that here, in Tory territory, where the backbone of good old rural England still held firm, the upper classes refused to stoop so low as to avail themselves of a cheap and popular commodity as gas. I would be dining by candlelight, I’d read my magazines by a lamp filled with oil. As I climbed down the steps of the train, the coachman stood already waiting on the platform, and it was almost as if his traditional livery were saying that, sure and for certain, I was going back in time.