

Part Seven.

RICHARD FROST

Poems and Essays—7.

Once upon a time, a great many years ago, there was a queendom named Yore. It was also called the motherland. Its monarch was a good queen, wise and brave and always just. Everyone was happy to be ruled by her, prospering as they had never prospered before. In a way, they felt they ruled themselves, and the whole wide world with it, where there were many colonies with ivory and spices, and also richly carved wood.

But all this happened in a crystal ball. And when I took the ball and shook it, the vision disappeared. "Surprise, surprise! It is snowing."

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“The whale, I see the whale!” Brandishing his toy sword, Tristram pushes up from the stirrups and rises high in the saddle.

Tristram is doing Moby-Dick. Ever since I have read him the story, we’ve had nothing but Moby-Dick: on Tuesday, Wednesday and now the Friday afternoon. Tristram’s mission, however, is not one of conquest and slaughter; on the contrary, he wants to save the whale. It is no use pointing out that, in the book, Moby-Dick did win the day: as Tristram told me with a clever glint in his eye, what it says in the book is only a story, and so it could have ended differently. In his view, the whale had but a narrow escape, which is why Tristram has sailed out to help him, galloping about on his pony that is his ship on the snow-covered lawn that is the sea. The sword is there to prick Captain Ahab in the belly for pestering animals, the Captain being played, with lots of good humour, by his own father, who has even agreed to put on a fake limp, because Tristram feels that, for him to make a convincing Ahab, he ought to have one leg less.

I always have to be Ishmael, so I can give a blow-by-blow account of what we did after we’re done: the best stories ever, Tristram alleges, no doubt because he features as the hero himself. I must say, I never like the prospect of ending up floating on a coffin, although most times we never reach this point, Ahab taking flight as soon as he catches sight of his mighty opponent, and hobbling off in the snow as fast as his leg can carry him. Having arrived at the shore, he goes over to Roz, who stands watching the game from the terrace. Sadly for Roz, Tristram never allows her at sea: too dangerous, he says; but she can be the lighthouse, if she wants—and so Roz is the lighthouse, warning me, if I do end up a castaway, of the perilous rocks and tree stumps on which my flimsy buoy might shatter. At this moment, though, she turns into a prison (“Seize him!” shouts Tristram. “Hand him over to the authorities!”) and, taking the Captain by the wrist, pronounces solemnly that, if he ever goes whaling again, he’ll be hanged for life (Tristram always insists upon this very phrase: “hanged for life”).

From my boat—which is still my boat, but soon to be captured and taken in tow by Tristram—I see how Roz giggles at the Captain’s reply. He grins back at her; and then, then his gaze moves aside and he grins at me. With a

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wave I reply; indeed, I am no longer jealous and can take their banter in good part. Because the Captain, he is no longer interested in Roz, not like that, not any more. I noticed it straight away on my return: how he is nice to her, very nice, but in a calmer sort of way, a subtler sort of way, without the feverish glitter that lit up his eyes before.

But the whale—I'm completely forgetting the whale. Well, it goes without saying that it is Cedric who plays the role of Moby-Dick: and what a weird and wonderful whale he is. When he surfaces, he spouts by throwing up handfuls of foamy snow into the air, wallowing in his fur coat, tossing and turning over the frozen lawn as if there is no such thing as cold. Quite a different whale, I observe with pleasure, from the one who burst out crying when he saw me enter the dining room on the day after Christmas and, in full view of the rest of the household, shed a sea of tears at my feet. Did I forgive him, did I still love him? Deaf to Lady Althane's protests at the spectacle he was making (Roz stood blinking at her friend's distress, and Mrs. Althane averted a disgusted face)—but the Captain was remarkably calm in his reaction, telling his mother-in-law, "The man is upset, ma'am. Hasn't slept in a week, y'know," and warning his brother, "Steady on, old chap, you don't wanna drench the bloody carpet." Still Cedric took no heed, whimpering he had only wanted to warn me, and sorry for being such a blubber, please to take no offence, but he'd been so afraid I'd left him forever—so, so afraid I wouldn't come back.

The only thing I could do: was take his hand to guide him up and away, and in the hall, alone together, say, "Hush, hush, dear. I am here."

I had almost not come back, at least not to resume my life at the Hall; in fact, I seriously intended to end it. Really, it is amazing what an effect a sack of money can have on a man's conscience, how it can provoke one to critical introspection—or it was just my glasses steaming over, I don't know. But the thing is, when I had left Uncle Joseph and boarded the train in Norwich, it suddenly struck me that my earlier reasoning had been all wrong. Now that the burden of supporting my mother and sister had been taken off my shoulders, there was room again for some grave doubts as to whether I should continue to work for Sir Sidney.

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As I polished my glasses dry, I began to see that, instead of what I'd told myself earlier, history wasn't at all a solid subject, whose intrinsic fabric would remain unaltered if one spun in a few bright yarns. Quite the reverse—and here I nodded to myself, knowing I was right—history only existed when one remembered it, *was* what one made of it, the living proof having long gone and died. I still thought Sir Sidney was a man of great intuition, and I concurred with his view that “spiralling around” was often needed to delineate the truth. I understood, too, that no-one would take his book seriously if he presented it as hunches and guesswork—but what if, I asked myself, people did take it seriously and the hunches he'd had turned out to be wrong? Even worse, what if other historians used it as a basis for their own research? Scholarship might go off at a completely wrong tangent, build up to a teetering tower that would topple over once the slippery foundations gave out.

For instance, after the publication of *The Knight of the Yellow Lands*, people had begun studying Malory all over again, to see how a third book of Sir Tristram would have fitted into the Arthurian sequence. Some poor souls were devoting years of their lives to rummaging through whatever ancient texts they could find to unearth the mysterious source from which the Althane version of the Questing Beast adventure might have come. Still others were in pursuit of the knight Sir Olyver, whose obscure origins and absence from all other stories known to man presented a puzzle that just refused to be solved. Debate was hot, speculation rife, and confusion abound. One could say that, by following his own credo of conjecture, Sir Sidney had triggered a wholly new line of research into medieval literature: a garden path that was bound to reach a dead end, leaving a heap of frustrated scholars along the route.

And what if (what if) they did reach that dead end and I, as the literary heir, as co-author of *The Rule of Kings*, as Sir Sidney's partner-in-crime: what if I were asked to explain why everything proved so inexplicable? And what if (what if) they heard the obvious answer that, both with *The Knight* and *The Kings*, Sir Sidney had merely posed a question, had merely asked: what if? The reputation I would have built up by that time would be damaged beyond repair; I'd be declassified as a swindler, a cheat, as a fake. For the second time in my life, the bubble would burst—and it would burst the moment some Nosey Parker caught the scent of something fishy.

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Putting my glasses back on my nose, I sighed to myself. I reasoned with myself: I ought to be principled, do what was right. Still, what about Roz? What had I to recommend me, apart from my handsome features, an excellent dress sense and a thus far untried literary talent? And how on earth, without the pull of a heavy-weight like Sir Sidney, could I ever convert this talent into cash? (But maybe, if I worked hard, really hard, and Thornton gave me another chance . . .) On the other hand, as it occurred to me, there was the question of whether I'd ever feel comfortable with Sir Sidney again. After my own father, he had been revealed to me as another Magwitch, and although I wouldn't go as far as Pip as to express loathing for the benefactor who had made me a gentleman again, I felt betrayed, I felt betrayed all the same. Indeed, I concluded, if Sir Sidney had any decency, he'd release me from my obligations. His working life was nearly over, but I still stood at the beginning, and it was important, especially in view of the past, that my name would not be tarnished anew. (Still, what about Roz? But maybe, if I worked hard . . . I sighed again.)

This was in Norfolk. Having arrived at Liverpool Street, I thought: why not get off now? Why go back at all? Why not stay here in London, and have plenty more opportunity to see Roz? (Well, not right now, but she'd soon be back from the Hall.) Why not go back to school, cram those little boys' heads with dry facts, not give a fig, and try and write my masterpiece in the evenings? (Or the Dickens book: it was bound to sell, surely it would sell. If necessary, I'd use a pseudonym.)

However, after some deliberation, I continued my journey anyhow, deeming it appropriate that I should hand in my notice in person. I sighed and sighed all the way to Kent—until the train drew up in Tunbridge, and I saw the Reverend waiting for me on the platform.

He had to speak to me, he said: urgently. Inviting me into the donkey cart that he used for driving round the parish, he announced that we'd first go to the rectory; he needed to convey his message in private. A moment later, I was sitting beside him, bemused, feeling somewhat silly as well in the humble vehicle—and whenever I shot a glance to my right, I met with his unsmiling face.

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At the rectory, he led me into his study, a chilly room that looked like a mausoleum for the tortured, emaciated Christ whose full-length picture hung on the wall. He sat down behind the desk; I was appointed a wooden chair. Although I had no idea what I could have done wrong, I was sure it was something terrible, his expression was so solemn and stern. Heretic that I was, I really feared for a moment God had told him about the bacchanal in Cambridge, or that, some way or other, he had heard about my girl. The headmaster of my old school flashed up in my mind, the time I'd been called on the carpet for shredding up my Latin verse book, which I had considered a better pastime than copying its tedious contents.

At first he did not speak, only sitting bolt upright and maintaining his hard stare. His silence was explained when, after a minute or two, his wife entered the room carrying a pewter tray. She poured us some tea, which was cold and tasted bitter, and offered me a small biscuit, which was stale. Oh yes, I thought, as she inclined her mousy head at her husband and he pressed his lips together by way of a thank-you, what a happy couple do they make. The church was still against divorce, but I really felt that, in the present case, it ought to permit an exception. Alas for the Reverend and his wife, they could never divorce themselves, which seemed a prerequisite if ever a state of bliss was to be attained.

It was only when our dowdy waitress had left again that the Reverend opened his mouth. I noticed immediately that he sounded different than usual, yet at the time I could not quite pinpoint in what way. Now I know it was his habitual smugness which was lacking; although, as always when not on the pulpit, he was very straightforward, and very direct.

Having inquired how my week had been—had I really visited Miss Munro in London? Well, as long as the family held no objections (he looked particularly grim here, as if he himself never would have condoned the frivolity of a personal visit)—he placed his hand on a big book that was lying on the desk, drew it towards him, and began,

“Mr. Holland, I'm afraid I have some very bad news. You must not let this distress you, but in the past week my father has grown significantly worse.” He paused, patting the book, or no: renewing contact with it, and I realised that the book must be the Bible. Then he let his hand rest on the worn cover and stated, “The facial muscles are getting affected.”

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"I see." Or rather I knew, already. For I had observed it myself of late: how Sir Sidney's speech often took on a slurred quality, as if he were slightly drowsy, or drunk. Also, the pauses between the sentences he dictated to me were growing ever longer, so long that half the time I didn't have to use short-hand any more, but could copy him to the letter.

"Please do not be shocked when you see him," the Reverend continued. "It looks as if . . . as if his face is sliding down. I'm sorry, but I can't think of any other way to put it."

I nodded, unable to come up with a suitable reply, and my silence seemed to please him, probably because he took it for composure. Leaning back a little, he proceeded, "Now I do not think it was a contributory cause, but another unlucky event has taken place this week. When he arrived here for Christmas, my brother, Mr. Althane—whom I understand you've also seen during your vacation—told Sir Sidney something about you which rather upset him." He fell silent, allowing for my response; when it did not come, he said, "It concerns a certain story my father once translated."

"So I heard."

Now he frowned: a bit too much composure. Still, what could I say? I didn't know what exactly Cedric had told him—well, yes, that I'd been furious to hear that *The Knight of the Yellow Lands* was a forgery. Still, what was I to say? That it didn't matter? That, after the initial anger had ebbed away, that actually, if one thought of it, it was a brilliant practical joke? That, hey, I didn't give a damn whose work it was, as long as it was fun?

Maybe I should not have cursed, if only silently, for all at once the Reverend let go of the Bible. Shoving it aside, his fingers moved briefly to his dog collar; he stroked his chin.

And then something very strange happened. For the first time since I had known the Reverend, I saw a soft glow enter his eyes (and it was quite unsettling to see how benign, how kind, how mild it made him look), and he spoke in a soothing voice, "Believe me, Mr. Holland, it was never my father's intention to pull the wool over your eyes. He just thought that perhaps you weren't ready yet for certain things. And as a novelist, surely you can imagine . . ."

He broke off, no doubt because he himself could not at all imagine what a novelist would. The benevolent gaze remained, however, almost as if he

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were inviting me to express all the sadness I felt on the subject, all the confusion and anger, the disappointment and the fear.

“What I’m trying to say, John—may I call you John?—the book that my father is writing means a lot to him. It is the last one he’ll ever produce, and without your aid, he most certainly won’t be able to finish it. I do realise it’s an enormous favour to ask, but . . . Can we still count on your assistance? If he can just give you the outline; he is fully confident that you can do the actual narrative yourself. He has such faith in you, John.”

Once more I nodded—and then, as if an invisible hand did it for me, as if it gently pushed me over, I bowed my head.

And it was such a relief. To be frank, I was glad of the excuse I’d been given, for who was I to refuse the last wish of a dying man? The Reverend seemed to have absolved me: of what, I did not know precisely, but I do remember how I suddenly saw that what was wrong, could, after all, be right. The final book would be the first with my name on the cover, but it would have been an act of charity, of compassion towards my co-author rather than a means of promoting myself.

So I said, “Certainly. Whatever makes Sir Sidney happy.”

When I left the rectory, I asked,

“How long do you suppose your father has left?”

“God will decide, Mr. Holland.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Reverend, but I think the disease will.”

“Of course.” He handed over my suitcase. “You’re still welcome in our church, though, if only because you like to listen to the stories.” Seeing my startled look, he explained, “Tristram told me. Believe me, I always do my very best to make the sermons enjoyable.” He gave me a quick smile. The act of smiling did not appear to agree with him, however, because just as quickly his face fell again, and he muttered sourly, “Indeed, sometimes I think that the Church would be lost without it.”

As he went back inside—the scrawny and stooped shoulders, the tired, heavy tread—I thought of what Cedric had once said, “Dear, dear, dear: what a weight to carry.”

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I did not see Sir Sidney until the next day, when around noon I was called into the library. What immediately struck me as I seated myself opposite the big desk was how Sir Sidney seemed to have shrunk in size, being slumped down as if it was the chair rather than himself that was doing the sitting. His valet, though, was standing four-square behind him, if possible drawn up even taller than usual.

There was first a moment of awkwardness: somehow I felt embarrassed and could not look Sir Sidney in the eye. Maybe, too, I was afraid of what I would see. The Reverend had spoken of a serious set-back, and part of me feared that, when I raised my gaze, the old man's face would turn out to have vanished altogether.

Thankfully, Sir Sidney decided to break the silence for me. In a friendly tone—although sounding also somewhat unsteady—he spoke,

“Merry Christmas, John.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I trust you had a good holiday.”

“The Christmas goose was trussed, sir, and we ate it whole.”

He laughed; and only now did I dare peep up, to meet with a feeble, lopsided grin, but also two very familiar twinkling eyes. Charles was smiling as well—relieved, I thought, the tension in his body visibly diminished. However, he immediately sprang back to attention when Sir Sidney cricked a nod at some papers that were lying on the desk and said,

“Maybe this'll cheer you up. Consider it your Christmas present. Cedric suggested it, and I found it a rather blessed idea.”

Leaving his position behind the wheeled chair, Charles moved round and shoved the papers over to me: and a second later, I was holding the manuscript of *The Knight of the Yellow Lands*.

Sir Sidney gave me ample time to look through the pages and . . . marvel. For certain, if it had been a genuine document, my thrill could not have been greater. Of course I was no expert, but I'd seen many medieval manuscripts in my time, and what I was looking at now seemed impossible to distinguish from the real thing. When I asked how he had made the paper look so old, he explained that he'd taken spare leafs of vellum from the volumes in his collection, or sometimes used the back of an Anglo-Saxon poem or riddle. He had mixed his inks according to ancient recipes, and sharpened a good old-fashioned quill for the calligraphy at which,

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before he fell ill, he'd always been such a dab hand. As I saw, he had even made the occasional mistake, or roughly scratched off a word or two, scribbling their replacement in the same space as the error, in the exact frugal manner as the old monks used to do.

"Well?" he asked when I had finished the last page and reverently lowered it onto the rest of the pile.

"It's a work of genius," I said. "A true piece of art."

"Thank you. There are many more, if you're interested."

I turned to look at the glass bookcase. "Surely not all of them, sir?"

"Oh no: just a little extra here and there." Seeing me sigh—with relief, regret?—he said, "People must be entertained, John."

It was all the excuse that he gave. Still, odd as it may seem, I felt it was enough.

Less than merry as my Christmas had been, I had a very happy New Year, in particular with Roz. We spent as much time together as we could, fast friends again, and if part of my mind still doubted whether I would ever prove worthy of her, Roz's warm smile and encouraging manner were often enough to chase such worries away. When, halfway through January, she and Cedric left the Hall, we had an almost cheerful parting, the three of us full of plans of all the wonderful things we'd do when they returned in the spring. For sure, as I waved the carriage goodbye, I only felt eager to compose my very first letter to Lacy's in London.

I was lucky as well, of course, in that the Captain would stay on for the time being, which prevented my having to dine alone with Lady Althane. More than once I wished that Cedric hadn't made such a public show of his fear: never my biggest fan, Lady Althane liked me even less for having considered abandoning her husband in the hour of greatest need, and there were moments when I thought she positively hated me. I shouldn't blame her, I suppose: I may look upon her as a crabby dragon, in whose vicinity I stood in constant danger of getting scorched, but I also knew that she loved Sir Sidney as much as he did her. Without a doubt, these were hard times for her; she was losing her husband, and she was losing him fast.

Having said this, sometimes I had trouble understanding her. If a subject was much on Lady Althane's mind, she tended to convert it into art,

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and I believe it was towards the end of January that Sir Sidney told me she had begun carving a stone statue of him. "I must be the stillest sitter she's ever had," he commented. "I said she'd only need send me to a taxidermist in a few months' time to get her statue, but she didn't seem to find it amusing." I did not find it amusing either; to be frank, I found his joke rather cruel. Yet it also seemed cruel of Lady Althane to want to immortalise Sir Sidney in the present sad state. If she must erect a monument in her husband's memory, I felt, she'd better show him as he had been at the height of his powers, instead of a man collapsed.

It has to be conceded, though, that when one looked at Sir Sidney, with his strangely frozen features, in which there was ever less life visible, it was hard not to think of stone. Tristram, to whom I had explained about evolution, one day mentioned how his doll had told him that grandfather was turning into a fossil. "And when he dies," Tristram said, "we'll put him in the ground, and long after everyone who was present at the funeral has gone to Heaven themselves, they'll dig him up again—in a million, a million years from now. And they will study his brain."

"His brain?"

Tristram nodded. "Yes, because that's his best bit. And so they'll try and investigate how much evolution God has done in the meantime. Of course, we'll never know for certain, 'cause it's unclear what the future situation will be, but I really suspect grandfather could be the missing link."

Inwardly I shook my head: apparently my story about how some people believed in evolution whilst others alleged that God had created the world in a finished state hadn't been clear enough, and he'd got the two different theories mixed up. Even so, Tristram was right about the brain being the best bit, and he was also right that it would live on long after the rest of Sir Sidney had given out.

As it happened, the rest of Sir Sidney was giving out at an alarming rate. In February a new phase of decline set in, and he began having problems swallowing, which Charles tried to solve by putting him on a diet of fluids. His breathing became laboured as well; when he spoke, you could see how much effort it cost him just to draw the air past his vocal chords. And you could see just how much it frustrated him. Indeed, it must have been torture to Sir Sidney: here he was, his mind alert and active as ever, keen to speak that mind one last time, but also less and less able to express himself.

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Once, as we sat working together, I actually caught him peering at his own reflection in the glass bookcase to check if his lips were moving properly; he knew that his articulation often failed, and he must be hardly intelligible to me. Charles, who also spotted it, immediately stepped in, telling Sir Sidney he was so accustomed to his master's voice that he could "translate" whatever didn't come out right. Fortunately, I soon grew used to the faltering diction myself, and seldom needed to ask for a repeat. For courtesy's sake, from this point onwards in my story, I shall not give any more literal renderings of Sir Sidney's speech. Suffice it to say that he often sounded as if he had drunk a bucket of laudanum.

What gaps there remained I had to fill in myself. *The Knight of the Yellow Lands* was mine now and, to an increasing extent, so became *The Kings*. One of the sentences I never failed to understand, because I heard it ever more frequently, was: "You'll know what to make of it", which was Sir Sidney's way of saying that, as long as I stuck to the main points, he entrusted the actual writing to me. I worked hard: to my own surprise, the sentences just came flowing from my pen, as if they had lain contained in the ink and it only needed the act of pushing the nib over the paper to find them complete. Oddly enough, sometimes I didn't even know at first what exactly I meant; however, when I read the text back to Sir Sidney, he often approved, showing me how just a few extra words could make the message clear. My phraseology was different from his, but Sir Sidney only found this positive—I had to find my own voice, he said. We agreed with Shaw to explain in the foreword about the two separate styles, although the credit for the book's contents would go entirely to Sir Sidney.

I am still grateful that Sir Sidney retained the impression he was doing the telling through me; he had such a lot to tell, and I didn't want him to feel redundant. This urgency to say the many things there were left to say also made itself felt on the personal level, although here, more often than not, the attempts at communication failed. His mother, who suddenly found herself less of an invalid than her son, showed herself prepared to raise the hearing trumpet to his mouth, but she always ended up shaking her grey head, not gaining a clue as to what he was trying to explain to her. With the Captain, things fared no better. "Sorry, old sport," he'd reply with a befuddled look on his face, "but I just don't seem to get it." Shortly

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afterwards, Sir Sidney gave up on his son—I don't think he ever spoke to him again.

He found a better audience in Tristram. Unlike Mrs. Althane, who avoided Sir Sidney like the plague, Tristram was not scared off by his grandfather's infirmity. The idea of fossilisation seemed to have reassured him: the brain would remain, so all would not be lost. What was lost in the course of their dialogue, Tristram filled in of his own accord, recounting faithfully, and with great imaginative thinking, what Sir Sidney had been meaning to tell him. Sadly for Sir Sidney, he could no longer nod to indicate that Tristram had got it right, but I do know he enjoyed his grandson's company. He often asked if Tristram could come down to play, and always showed himself willing to listen to the many versions of Moby-Dick that Tristram had invented by now, one of which had Arthur the guinea pig and Judy the dog riding the whale.

As to the adult conversation, apart from Charles, who never left his master's side, it became confined to Lady Althane, the Reverend and me. I heard about the time Sir Sidney had read his first Dickens, and how he had loved Sam Weller; I heard about his joy when the second Lady Althane had agreed to marry him. I also received some urgent advice ("Keep asking questions, John. Forget about finding answers: always search for the right question"), and witnessed his tears of regret that he'd once slapped Cedric so hard that the little boy had toppled over and got concussed on the floor. The Reverend, who came to see his father every other day, heard similar tales, or worse. A confessor to his own parent, the weight he had to carry grew heavier and heavier: his tread became even slower, the stoop in his shoulders a downright arch.

Such a lot to tell and, as there might be no tomorrow, Sir Sidney told us now. And one of the revelations he made caused me a great shock.

I was to take down a letter, a letter to Roz. Needless to say, I always wrote Sir Sidney's business correspondence for him; occasionally, when Lady Althane was too busy, I did the personal letters as well. Those to Roz were my favourites, as they were always very free and easy, and full of fun.

This letter, however, was not funny. Writing it took us four long hours and, apart from the beginning, they were four long hours of agony.

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My dear Rosalind,

You must be amazed to get word from me again so soon after my last letter, but I have something important to tell you. Of course I could let it wait until your next visit, but quite frankly, I am not sure whether, by that time, I shall still be able to talk to you: my speech is leaving me fast, and I feel I have to act now. If I am entirely honest, I am also afraid of the effect that my message shall have on you, which is why I prefer to deliver it in this less direct manner.

I shall start by telling you something about myself. When I was young, I was very different from the staid old man that you know now. To tell you the truth, I was a bit of a wild boy, always after a quick thrill, and gambling and drinking more than was good for me. I was also very fond of women. Please do not be offended if I speak plainly, my dear, but I think you are old enough to know the ways of the world; and believe me, my story won't make any sense if I don't call a spade a spade, and myself the rogue that I was in those days.

When I had reached the age of three-and-twenty, it was decided by my relatives that I ought to get married. I thought that perhaps family life would dispel my restlessness. However, as I rapidly learned, it only ignited in my breast a new longing to break free from the bonds in which I felt I had been caught. My wife and I were not as well-suited as I had hoped: we did not share any intellectual interests, and from the point of view of intimacy, there was no spark at all. Indeed, marriage turned out to be very lame and tame, and I began to spend ever longer hours at my books, or partying with my friends in London. As regards my physical appetites too, I sought solace elsewhere, being unfaithful to my wife more times than I care to recall.

I think it was in the seventh year of my marriage that a new maid came to be employed in the kitchens of Sutton Hall. The moment I saw this girl, who was called Laura, I felt irresistibly drawn to her. Whenever I saw her walk with her basket towards the vegetable garden to collect the ingredients for luncheon or dinner, all I could do was lay down my pen and admire the smooth, dancing step with which she moved over the path. She was such an apparition, Rosalind: so healthy and fresh, sweet as the morning sun. Soon I was walking down the path as well. I helped Laura to draw the carrots and offered to carry her basket.

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Later still, I persuaded her to let me wrap my arm around her waist and kiss her cheek. And after that . . . you can guess the rest.

I do remember feeling surprised when, some five months after our little liaison had begun, Laura suddenly handed in her notice and vanished from life at the Hall. Selfish that I was, I felt rather sorry for myself for having to miss her pleasant company; still I thought no more of it, except that maybe she had found a better position with some other family. That I should have thought more of it, far more of it, was revealed to me a week later, when I received an unexpected visit from a certain Lady Burgess-Stuart (indeed: your aunt, who had then just married her first husband, and whom, up till that point, I had never met). In a high tone, this lady demanded an interview with me.

When I had guided the baroness into the library, she . . . Let me just say that she bawled me right out for having landed an innocent girl in the most serious trouble. An ardent philanthropist, Lady Burgess-Stuart sponsored many charities; amongst others, she had set up a project that helped destitute women get back on their feet. One of her protégées had a daughter, Laura, whom my lady had also taken under her wing. She had fed the girl and clothed her, provided her with a basic education and, finding that Laura had no taste for further learning, she had personally recommended her as an obedient, hard-working girl to the housekeeper of Sutton Hall. But now, thanks to my irresponsible behaviour, this wonderful plan to make Laura independent had all come to grief. Who did I think I was, she flung at me, to ruin a young life that was just about to begin? And, more to the point, how did I propose to remedy the situation?

I tried to wriggle out of answering this question by remarking that maybe the girl had not been all that innocent, but Lady Burgess-Stuart cut me short, snapping she had expected such talk. As she told me, the only reason why Laura had not refused my advances was her fear of losing her job, and thereby disappointing the benefactress who had taken such trouble to set her onto the right course. I was told a lot of other things as well, about men, how they abused their positions, and it was always the female left holding the baby—but the basic message remained the same: I had misbehaved myself, and I must pay for it.

You know your aunt only too well, my dear; when she talks like that, there is no arguing with her. Also, as the baroness fumed on at me, I became ever

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more impressed with her blazing eyes. Margaret is a remarkably handsome woman now, but when she was young, a single glimpse of her was enough to send a man weak at the knees. And, after ten minutes of being reprimanded as I had never been reprimanded before, I found myself hopelessly in love with her—so I just stood nodding meekly, saying yes to all that she demanded of me. Perhaps mollified by my obedience, she showed some clemency by suggesting we put the child that was to be born up for adoption: she mentioned some relations of hers, who were willing to foster a baby. In my turn, I was to pay for Laura's upkeep until another job had been found. I would also be responsible for the cost of raising our child: every penny of it, and every pound.

As it happened, the foster parents never accepted my payments, being well-off themselves, and eager to make the new baby fully their own. To Margaret's mind, however, this generosity on their part in no way released me from my obligations. The glorious day when I finally married her, she told me that she would love and cherish me forever, but I still must make amends to my illegitimate child. The girl may be comfortable now, but she would not inherit the family business, it being entailed by the male line, which would one day make a lucky nephew very rich, but leave the daughter with nothing but a dowry. In the end, we agreed that, when the child came of age, she would be invited to the Hall, so that she could meet with her natural father. In addition, I would make provisions for her in my will. This we did, and this I have done. My girl now knows me, and when I die, she will be a beneficiary equal to her younger brothers.

As you must have gathered by now, sweet Rosalind, the child who features in the story above, it is you. Maybe I should be ashamed when I say I have no regrets about what happened, but the truth is, my dear, that I have become too fond of you to feel anything other than joy at your existence. I know this is egotistical: I know it has often caused you pain not to know who your real mother and father were. I also know that this letter comes too late, for both of us. I do hope, however, fervently so, that you will not hate me for what you have just read. Please believe me when I say that I love you from the innermost, purest core of my heart.

Sidney Althane

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I now knew why the Captain had been so distraught when I ran into him in London: he had just heard from the solicitor why certain changes had been made to his father's will. The solicitor hadn't been aware, of course, but he had more or less told the Captain that he'd been lusting after his own half-sister. The news must have reached Cedric around the same time, and it had delighted him so that he nearly blabbed to me in Cambridge. The Reverend, as I realised, must have known all along: his dislike of Roz, his anger at the ball. Last but not least, there was Lady Althane, one of whose reasons for despising me was no doubt my infatuation with her husband's daughter. The pauper, who had hoped to win a princess.

As it appeared, everyone knew—everyone except Roz. Sir Sidney had asked me to go to London and place the letter personally into her hands; and when I was shown once more by the eminently respectable butler into that huge drawing room, both foster parents seemed downright nervous at the sight of me. Noticing the seal on the envelope, Mrs. Munro's eyes widened in fear; Mr. Munro uttered his anxiety in a cough. Roz herself seemed only pleased at my surprise visit, although I think she did suspect something serious was up when I said that I'd been instructed to wait for an answer.

Because I didn't want to stay in the family home and hear the bombshell explode, I went out for a walk through Kensington Gardens, following the Serpentine up and down at a frenzied pace and, when I got fed up with avoiding the many happy couples who were strolling down the same route, tracing aimless circles around the Round Pond. Someone had hacked a hole in the ice for the ducks but, like me, the birds kept close to the edge, probably because the water was too cold. I tried not to think of what might be going on at Lacy's; but when the building came into view for the tenth time, its top floor towering over the dome of the Albert Hall, I told myself that the moment had come. She had read his confession: she knew.

With leaden feet, I went back; with a heavy heart, I went up; and when Roz, who stood waiting for me in the vestibule, immediately rushed over, I just hung my head and held out my hand, not even comprehending at first that she had no letter for me to carry back to Sir Sidney.

In the event, all I got was the whispered message:

"Tell him I love him. I love him so much."

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I looked up: the strain on her face, her eyes all swollen—yet she had never looked prettier, beautiful: she was so beautiful. And I almost said it: “But you are beautiful. Of course”; when all at once she leapt back and exclaimed, “No, wait! Don’t go! Wait for me!” Gathering her skirts, she dashed off, leaving me standing alone on the doormat. A few minutes later, the butler appeared, to enquire what time my train left; and would I be so kind as to take a seat in the small drawing room?

The small drawing room turned out to be bigger than the whole of the cottage in which my mother and sister had spent such a miserable year. I sat twiddling my thumbs for over half an hour, trying not to think of the words she must be penning down (she loved him, so much; and they needn’t worry, she didn’t love me, not that much), when at last the butler returned and announced that Miss Munro was ready. If we left now, we could still catch the train.

These are painful memories. That hateful, fateful day.

When I think back to it, all I remember is me staring down at the floor, first of the carriage and then of the train. Roz was still too upset to notice my strange behaviour: I believe she was in a shock. Not a person to hold back her feelings, she gave them their natural expression, then crying, then smiling—talking incessantly, about Sir Sidney, herself, even food prices, and the view from the train window. What I do recall very clearly is her scent, which reminded me of freshly-mown grass and, also, the way her trembling body pressed into mine every time the train took a curve.

I was still gazing at the hem of her travelling cloak when she asked,

“Has he told you what happened to my mother?”

“She passed away, I’m afraid.”

“I see.” She started fumbling the buttons of her cloak. She was hardly conscious of it; and I’m sure she was not at all conscious that suddenly her hand moved over and clasped mine. “We’ll get through this,” she said.

However, I didn’t know whether she was referring to her foster parents, to Sir Sidney and herself, or us.

It must have been only when I stopped writing to Roz that she realised something was wrong. I got two letters from her, both full of longing to see me again at Easter, but when she finally arrived at the Hall, she had a

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troubled look about her. Having sought the privacy of my company twice, and not gained any response apart from the merest politeness, she began to shy away from me. Actually, the only times we really saw each other was in the morning, for the tradition of running with Tristram was still upheld. Somehow, though, the battle for breaking the sound-barrier seemed silly now, juvenile, and we both knew we were only doing it for Tristram. When he came panting proudly towards us, Judy barking at her master's thrilling run, we spoke—always to the child, to the dog—but the moment child and dog were out of sight, we fell silent again.

I played cards with the Captain; I played chess with Cedric. On Sunday evening, we all assembled to listen to some music. Lady Althane seldom performed before an audience, but Mrs. Althane showed herself willing to play the grand piano, going about it as in as cool and perfect a manner as ever. Afterwards Cedric took up the cello. Miserable as he felt about his father's nearing demise, he made the instrument moan in lament, the bow tugging heavily at the strings. Halfway through the second piece, I spotted from the corner of my eye how Roz, who was sitting beside me, had started to cry: big tears were gliding down her cheek like so many silvery pearls. It hurt me to see her in such sorrow, yet when she glanced aside, as if to seek my support, I immediately corrected my gaze and stared straight ahead. Roz must have noticed; the recital being over, she hastened out of the room, with a fugitive air as if she had done something wrong.

God, I was callous—I was so stupid. It never occurred to me that Roz, who knew by now how socially sensitive I was, thought that my objection lay in her being the offspring of a kitchen maid. Even more stupid, it also never occurred to me that Sir Sidney had sent me on purpose as bearer of the news. For he had realised that, if Roz did find it good news, it was also bad news, and she would need someone she trusted to console her. But I, I was so self-absorbed, it never occurred to me to commiserate with Roz.

And I should have done, I should have known.

Dear Mr. Holland,

It is very foggy here in London, the sky is glum and almost yellow. Somehow that always makes me think of the time you and I went up to the Heath and saw

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how ugly things were down below. I really enjoyed myself that day, thank you once more for taking me out. Now I shall have to wait again till Easter. It will be good to see all the familiar faces, and perhaps we can go for a walk together and enjoy the blossom in the orchard, just as we did last year.

I still feel a bit shaken about Sir Sidney. Indeed, I am so glad you brought the letter to me, and it did not come by post. I could not have made the journey to Kent alone, being in such a flurry. It was as if everything inside me was whirling around. My parents and I once went for a holiday on the coast, and on the second evening there was a storm, with the sea beating against the promenade. Well, when I read Sir Sidney's letter it felt exactly like that. As if the path I had been following so leisurely yesterday had suddenly turned into a wild stream. I am not expressing myself very well, I am afraid, but I remember that, when I got the letter, it mad me think of the storm, and how terribly high the waves were then.

Fortunately, your presence helped me through. I first thought I would just send a note, but when I saw the way you looked at me I realised it was not enough, and I must tell Sir Sidney in person that I was not angry in any way. And you were so good to me on the train, just to let me rattle on. When you took my hand, it really gave me strength, and I knew I would be able to cope.

However, as I said, it is confusing, and sad as well. I am glad that Sir Sidney is my real father, he is one of the kindest men I know, so tender-hearted, and full of good humour. But I shall have to lose him again soon. Too soon! I can hardly bear the thought that, in a few months from now, he may not be there any more. Do you not think, Mr. Holland, that the Hall will be but bleak without him? I know I should not say this, because Lady Althane is nice also, but I have never had such warm feelings for her as I do for Sir Sidney. I would miss my aunt, but I shall miss Sir Sidney with pain in my heart.

Still, it helps to know that you are with him. I picture you sitting together in the library, and how your glasses keep sliding off your nose, the way they always do when you are thinking too hard. And even when Sir Sidney stumbles, you smooth the words out for him on paper, and make it right. I hope you do not mind, but I showed the letter you sent me in February to my father (my foster father, I mean). He said he had never seen such a beautiful hand. It is foolish, maybe, but I felt quite pleased at that.

But I am starting to ramble. Please forgive me for taking up so much of your time, I know you are busy, but writing is just a way for me of keeping contact with Sutton Hall. I must stop anyway, for I have yet to write to

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Tristram. He sends me such wonderful stories! He used to pen down just a few words, but thanks to you, he is become quite an author. As he says himself, Mr. Holland is the best teacher.

*With lots of love,
Rosalind Munro.*

A girl who signed off with “lots of love”, simply because she meant it. The truth of her, the artlessness, the courage of a letter that I blindly put aside, only feeling sorry for myself, not even bothering to reply. All I can say in my defence is that I was too damaged by what had happened in the past to be natural and open any longer—if I ever had been natural and open.

Or maybe I was too young. I was not old and wise enough to take her by the hand and say, ‘Miss Munro: Rosalind: Roz. In the past twelve months, I have grown very fond of you, and I believe that you are fond of me. Now I have nothing to offer you in the way of financial security, and I don’t know how your family, all of them, would react to someone of my social position, but maybe, if we disregard money and background’

But I did not think like that. In fact, all I could think of was the money and background. I was no longer a banker’s son, I felt—it really seemed ages ago—but just the humble grandson of a grocer. And Roz, she was a baronet’s daughter. She belonged to the upper classes now.

To my mind, as I was then, this meant that all was lost.

And so I gave up.

*

Easter is over.

The Captain and his wife have left to enjoy the London season: Mrs. Althane could no longer bear the “bad atmosphere” at the Hall.

Well, people must be entertained.

Roz is going too, as is Cedric. When he’s about to board the train, Cedric remarks, “Back to Queens’ for the very last term. If I can still get in.”

Oh my God, I think: he’s done it at last. He has fucked up.

But Cedric continues, “The door is simply too small, I say. Y’know, the little door in the big gate? I just can’t get through any more. The porter positively loathes me. He has to open the entire gate each time I arrive.”

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He embraces me—a short bumping of his belly to my body—and then, with a great deal of difficulty, he squeezes himself inside.

Roz sits biting her lip behind the glass. And I repeat to Cedric that we'll manage. The Reverend will let him know if things get any worse.

Although I don't believe things can get any worse. I really don't.

It's just Lady Althane and me now.

In her studio, where it must be freezing as the place lacks a fire, she is hacking away at the statue, her hands getting dirtier than ever.

I am hacking my way through the knotty tangle of Sir Sidney's utterances. We take a break when Tristram enters the library, carrying Arthur in his hands. Tristram knows that the only feeling grandfather has left is in the skin of his face and, lifting the animal carefully up, he moves the furry body over Sir Sidney's cheek. "Just feel how soft."

In the evening, Lady Althane and I have our dinner in silence. She hates me and I hate her. The only subject we can talk about without dispute is Sir Sidney, and how little time there might be left. On Friday the Reverend joins us, and he confirms that, yes, there might be only little time left.

There is also Charles, of course. But Charles is getting tired too, with dark rings under his eyes and looking thinner by the day.

Our four-shouldered, two-headed man is going down.

Finally Tristram hears the news. With a radiant face, he tells me that he was right after all about Roz and him being so alike: she may not be his mother, but she's certainly his aunt. I smile and smile, knowing that, for Tristram, congratulations are in order, but in my shoes, I can feel my toes curl.

And I do wonder what Tristram would say if I told him that, if I weren't so poor, and I weren't so low, I might have become his uncle.

Perhaps he would have rather liked it.

Suddenly she's in my room. I am already in my night-gown and suddenly she is there, tears streaming down her face.

"It wasn't good news."

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And this is so like Lady Althane: to be crying uncontrollably and still have that look of hatred in her eyes.

But she must tell someone. It wasn't good news. She has lied to me.

"The doctors said that soon he won't be able to breathe any more. He'll choke to death, Mr. Holland. I asked them to tell me the worst, but now I wish I'd never sought their opinion. Oh, what can I do? Help me, help me!"

And, still weeping, still hating me, maybe hating me even more for having felt the need to seek my comfort, she turns and leaves the room.

Only the next day I get another request, this time from Sir Sidney.

As I gather my papers together at the end of the afternoon, he suddenly says—and it comes out so loud, so clear, that Charles and I both start:

"Do try with Roz. Blease."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Thu f-f-frah."

He has become very weak, and very quiet. As the spring bursts into a chorus of bird song and the trees turn so luminously green that they seem to be made of gold, Sir Sidney sinks ever deeper into a depression.

I offer to relieve Charles and take the old master out for some air. At his request, I wheel the invalid chair all around the hill, all around the ring of the iron-age fort in which Sutton Hall so snugly sits. Luckily, it hasn't rained for some days: the ground is firm, the chair moving over the path obediently. All the same, it is hard work, pushing around all this dead weight. After half an hour I am sweating all over.

When we arrive at the spot where Cedric and I usually stop for a rest, I park the chair and sit down on the bench beside him. Good old rural England is lying at our feet, as gloriously unspoilt as when I first saw it. And I am glad there are hardly any roads in sight, for I remember what Sir Sidney once said about roads.

If you compare maps over time, he told me (and Sir Sidney has a lot of maps, very old ones amongst them, maps that aren't forged), you can see two things: one, how man has spread like a fungus over the globe, and two, how people and the houses they live in tend to follow the roads.

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He was especially sombre about the railways having come to Tunbridge, now some thirty years ago. Politicians talked about national cohesion, he said, but the railroad was the death-stab to the provinces. It had brought traffic, trade, and it would bring people. It would bring their houses.

"But surely, sir," I objected, "the country is sooner depopulating. It's the cities that are getting overcrowded."

"The country is depopulating at present, John. But mark my words: soon—and it'll be sooner than you think—the cities will explode into the countryside. They're rapidly infringing upon it as we speak. And Sutton Hall . . . it may become just a leisure site in an urban park." He paused, a pensive look in his eyes. Then he resumed, "All I can say is: thank God for the London property. It was at the edge of the city once, you know, those houses, and now they're right in the middle, the muddle of it. The rents have risen by three hundred percent in my lifetime alone. If Ralph is not so stupid as to sell off the London property, he can at least keep the estate intact. Put a gate round. Keep the city out."

Gazing at the beauty in front of us, so tranquil still, so fresh and healthy, sweet in the morning sun, I hope that the Captain won't be so stupid as to sell off the London property. However, when I glance aside, I see that Sir Sidney's eyes are misted over. He must be thinking the same as me.

I get up and, positioning myself behind the chair again, I ask,
"Shall we go back to the house now, sir?"

Later, as I come past the drawing room, I hear him cry out. He is wailing as I've never heard a man wail before, almost like an animal in pain. In the background, the murmur of Lady Althane's calming voice, or rather a voice that desperately tries to deny the panic rising inside her.

And he keeps repeating the same sentence over and over again.

"Omala, waddiya kah kishoe anima?"

As quietly as I can, I turn to walk upstairs. And it is only when I have already gone to bed, and am lying awake in the dark, that it hits me.

"Oh my love, what if I can't kiss you any more?"