

Part Three.

RICHARD FROST

Poems and Essays—3.

Mr. Holland read Wordsworth to me yesterday. Wordsworth is a suitable name, because he was a famous poet. Which means his words are worth a lot. Wordsworth said that the child is father to the man. We discussed what this might mean. Wordsworth could have said woman instead of man. But then it would have been mother: the child is mother to the woman.

Anyway, it means that children are the adults of the future. Like seeds. A seed is small but it can contain a whole tree. And the leaves, and what fruits or nuts there will be. Provided you water the seed properly.

You can also trim the tree to give it a different shape. But Wordsworth would not have liked that. He loved nature, and the Lake District, where he went with his sister Dorothy. Still, our gardener prunes the trees every year, or else they would all grow wild. And the branches might slap you in the face when you come by on your pony.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

About myself.

Maybe it is time I gave a small sketch of myself. I have never been good at descriptions; for instance, we are about a quarter into the book, and I still haven't mentioned the oak sheen of Sir Sidney's hair (well, I have now), or given an impression of the handsome grounds that swept round the Hall. I try to pay attention to detail, I do, but somehow in practice I tend to go instead for what people did and said. A bit strange, actually, seeing that, at the time of which I'm writing, appearances were very important to me. I was proud of the way I looked—and, as portraits show, rightly so.

I am sleek with youth, I am strikingly beautiful. My features are regular, intelligent and fine. I wear my hair short, and my face is clean-shaven, with only two sharply-carved whiskers to stress the strong curve of my jaw. My mouth is firm yet subtle; my almond eyes shine bright. My nose is straight, so straight: it is the perfect nose. Quality clothes complete the picture.

Before the fall from financial paradise, I was considered one of the most eligible bachelors in England and, I flatter myself, that was not just because of the money. Although it does help, money, it does add that extra glow. As the girl I sometimes visited in London used to say, "Money looks so good on you, John. You look so good in money."

Yet even without money, I was truly handsome. I really was.

I fall in Love.

People had told me that I would like Roz—but I didn't. I loved her. I loved her the moment I saw her, intensely, immensely, body and soul. I did not realise it then, realised it only later, but I can see it now, so clearly: it was love at first sight, head over heels, madly, deeply indeed.

She arrived, earlier than expected, a fortnight before Easter. She first arrived in the schoolroom, where I was teaching Tristram to conjugate German verbs. I don't recall whether she knocked or not, but suddenly she was there, and Tristram had sprung off his chair, rushed over and clasped

RICHARD FROST

his arms around her waist. Burying his face in the folds of her dress, as if to breathe her in, he subsequently threw his head back so that his hair fanned out, and he exclaimed, "Roz!"

I had never seen Tristram so happy. And I had never seen someone so deserving of jubilation. In the whirl, my initial impression of her was just that of a rather full-figured blonde girl, although I immediately noticed the bright blue eyes, which were brimming over with zest and with joy. As we introduced ourselves, I also found there was a disarming frankness in her manner. She spoke with an eager sort of voice, quickly, fluently, her face lit up all the while by a sweet and engaging smile. At times, that smile took on an almost mischievous quality, as if she were a child that had done something funny or naughty, the thought of which made her lips curl.

Within five minutes, I felt totally at my ease with her. I did not even mind when Tristram yelled, his voice shrill with excitement,

"Mr. Holland is going to read *The Water Babies* to me. Would you like to sit in, Roz? Mr. Holland's a great narrator!"

"Oh, can I? I so love stories." Looking at me, Roz confessed, "I'm not much of a reader myself, I'm afraid: to tell you the truth, I only ever look at the pictures. But my father often reads to me. He does all the voices."

And so I pushed the verbs aside and did all the voices. I still believe it was my best performance ever, yet even if I had made a right mess of it, I'm sure Roz would not have minded, not least because of Tristram, who was still all aglow and kept nodding at her as if to say that, for certain, this must be the best time she had ever had.

In the afternoon, I was also pleased to see, through the library window, that Roz had decided to spend her first day at the Hall entirely with Tristram, walking hand in hand with him towards the stables for his riding lesson. And the next morning, she turned up for running practice as well. So early in the year, so early in the day, it was still chilly, and apparently she'd had to hurry, coming out onto the lawn with a flushed face and not wearing any shawl or coat. When I offered her my scarf, she refused, saying that more clothes would only slow her down.

"Look," I said, "you're not seriously going to do this, are you? Tristram will be more than happy if you just watch him do his big trick."

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

"No, no," she replied, "I promised. Although I'm a bit worried that I forgot to bring my running boots. I searched my entire trunk, but they weren't there."

She should have brought them: when I raised my watch and gave the word go, it was only ten seconds before she tripped and fell over, bouncing headlong on the grass. Tristram had sprinted off so fast, he did not even notice, zooming round the corner of the east wing at top speed, fully intent on impressing Roz by breaking all his previous records. As for myself, after glancing over my shoulder to see if there were people around, I reached out to help her up.

She was in stitches, in fits, completely out of breath. "These . . . skirts," she hiccupped, her cheeks red with merriment. "They're a . . . death trap." Still panting, she let herself be pulled into sitting position. Then she squinted up at me and spoke, in a mock-serious tone, "Every man should wear a skirt, Mr. Holland. It would put an instant end to all wars."

"I'm terribly sorry about this," I said as she scrambled upright again.

"Oh, do not be, please." Brushing herself down, she assured me, "The grass is so soft and fresh this time of year. It really was a delightful encounter with the spring."

And perhaps that was what made Roz so remarkable: she had a unique talent for enjoying herself. As I would discover in the weeks to come, not only was she a handicapped runner, she was also a wobbly horsewoman, a sloppy painter, a poor pianist, and she constantly got stuck with her needlework, needing one of the maids to disentangle the thread again. Roz, however, did not care: to her, mistakes were merely cause for hilarity, and when she once again ended up reducing a sonata to a tune, she only burst out laughing at the many fingers and thumbs she seemed to be growing. We all laughed at it—if anything, her clumsiness was endearing.

For it wasn't only Tristram who gained from Roz's presence: the rest of the family, too, softened in her cheerful light. Lady Althane talked more and groused less, whereas Sir Sidney, who had been a bit poorly of late, seemed to grow younger by the day. He particularly liked it that Roz had such a hearty appetite, and that she was not bashful about showing it. She ate beef with gusto, potatoes by the plate. If she threatened to run out of food, he immediately ordered the butler to go and get some more, telling Roz, "You've been very active today, my dear child. I'm sure you need it."

RICHARD FROST

In fact, the only one who did not take pleasure in Roz's pretty face and bubbly personality was the Reverend, who, on Friday, sat eying her with an expression hovering between censure and disgust. I could tell that he was doing his very best to stay polite, but every now and again, for instance, if Roz guffawed at some joke I made, his eyes shot angrily towards his father, clearly demanding an end be put to all this frivolity. Sir Sidney always ignored him, though, except on that time when . . .

Come to think of it, it *did* strike me there being some other, graver problem. It was on the second Friday of Roz's stay, and somehow the Reverend seemed even more hostile towards her than the week before. At a certain point (I believe it was something she said, though I'm not quite certain), he resolutely shoved his plate away from him, sat up straight and drew a deep breath, as if he had decided that the moment had come for him to spit his ire out. And I can still remember: how Sir Sidney, who was seated beside him, raised a shuddery hand and laid it on his son's arm, and let it lie there—and how the Reverend gasped and then clasped his lips together again. And I swear I could see his chin tremble as he was being held thus by his father, his eyes a-blink, and his Adam's apple convulsing wildly in his throat.

I am certain that Lady Althane saw it, too; but instead of steering the conversation to some neutral subject, she launched a long speech about her new charity project. As she informed us, she aimed to make higher education accessible to women via exclusive scholarships. Indeed, she said, the often-heard claim that females weren't intellectual enough to have the vote, and therefore would not use the privilege wisely, could perhaps be removed by training them to become just as versed in the art of rational thinking as men. And as she droned on and on, making quite a sermon of it, the Reverend's face crumpled up even more, until it carried such a black frown that everyone stopped listening and stared at the cloth in a silence that contrasted painfully with the unrelenting political discourse.

It was only later, much later, that I understood why Lady Althane had rattled on so, and what had gone through the Reverend's mind. Back then, however, I was simply relieved that he dined at the Hall only once a week; it was hard to breathe freely with the Bad Conscience casting his shadow over the table, and I feared that it might affect Roz's spirits.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Thankfully, the rest of our days were wholly Reverend-free. They were more free at any rate: Sir Sidney now regularly took an afternoon off, to have tea in the garden with Roz or take her out in the barouche. On Saturdays he liked to watch us play tennis together (which Roz wasn't very skilled at either, but Tristram doubled up with her, zigzagging over the court with a fervour that more than made up for the lack of force in his backhand). Still, enjoyable as free afternoons and games on Saturday were, I cherished my working days most, when I had Roz nearly two hours to myself. Contrary to the rest of the household, she did take lunch, which I discovered one day when I came into the conservatory with my Eliots, and saw that Sir Sidney's mother wasn't there. Unable to concentrate without the dowager sitting by, I went in search of her, to find her in the small dining room, with Roz as her table companion. The hearing trumpet lay in her lap, idle, but to everything Roz did or said she reacted with a happy cackle, and a smile I'd never seen on her wizened face before.

All in all, the three of us had a very pleasant meal, and time, which had a tendency to slow down around noon, just seemed to fly by. Later, when I was sitting with Sir Sidney in the library, my mind kept going back to it, and what else I could have said, and how nice it would be to see Roz again at dinner. To be quite frank, I developed into a bit of a window-watcher, thirsty as I was for another glimpse of Roz's shapely form and her springy step. On Sunday, I even woke up hoping that she would give the Reverend a miss and stay home from church. When, around nine, I began my usual Sunday walk, and Roz waved and went the other way, I felt a surge of regret pass through my chest. It seemed such a waste, going without her for an entire half-day.

The following week, though, I was more lucky. Tristram had asked if he and Roz could visit the travelling circus that had come to the village and, permission having been granted, I offered my services as a chaperone. Being from the Hall, we were given special seats, set apart from the rest of the audience, and I remember thinking what a nice little family we made. I did not see much of the circus acts (Tristram would describe them to me in a special essay later), riveted as I was by Roz's face, so close beside me. I saw the flames of the fire-eater in her eyes, the clowns in the dimple on her cheek. As she gazed with open mouth at the tightrope, I'm afraid I almost reached out, to feel if her lips were really as soft as they appeared.

RICHARD FROST

It was so good to be with Roz. And it was so easy. Like her aunt, she was a free spirit; but unlike Lady Althane, she never became forced, always remaining artless and pure. She was far from being an intellectual, but this, too, only made it refreshing, relaxed. I could chat with her for hours. I wish I could say what it all was we chatted about, but I honestly do not remember. It was no doubt a lot of nonsense, and no doubt I talked a lot about myself, about the small things, trivial things, things I never even thought to mention to others. Perhaps I should have asked more questions, should have kept the wider frame in mind, for somehow we omitted exactly those details which, as it later turned out, were most important. At the time, I only heard that she was twenty-three and lived alone with her parents in London—and it seemed enough. The rest didn't seem to matter: just being with her did.

I do remember one conversation we had, though. I think it was in the second week she was there; and we had decided to take an after-lunch stroll in the orchard, so as to savour the sweet scent of the apple blossom. Roz was never very particular about her appearance, but on this sunny day she had chosen her dress with care: a fine muslin with a pattern of pink roses, which rippled in the wind as she walked along. She appeared to ripple along herself, her curls dancing up and down to the rhythm of her pace, and her feet moving with a swishing sound through the grass.

As we sat down on one of the rustic benches that the gardeners had built of scrap branches, Roz heaved a satisfied sigh and spoke,

"I've been coming here for a few years now, and every time I love it more. Perhaps that's why the food tastes so well: it's the fresh air. Don't you agree, Mr. Holland, that one can only truly breathe in the country?"

I did agree, fully. I felt rather startled at it myself and, in a strange reflex, immediately began a panicky plea for London.

However, Roz was quick to interrupt me. "Think of the dust, Mr. Holland, the noise. Here it is so much more . . ." She gave a vague flourish of the hand, yet that vague flourish said it all. Here it was so much more.

"But perhaps you miss being close to the bookstores," she continued. "Sir Sidney told me how eager you always are to visit the shops."

At first I did not respond, only reflecting how amazing it was that, even here, in the April sun, and with her golden hair, she had this soft, silvery

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

shine about her, like the moon at night. It was something liquid in her skin, her eyes, as if you saw light shimmering off a body of water. Or silk.

Then her words suddenly got through to me and, hastily shaking myself awake, I replied, "Indeed, Miss Munro, I'm not so sure whether it is really that necessary to be in London. I can order whatever publications I want, and they always deliver them straight to the Hall. Besides, reading isn't all there is in life. Personally, I prefer the orchard."

Again I surprised myself: for it was true. *The Mill on the Floss* had been lying in my room for over ten days now, a closed book.

It was genuinely strange, I thought, so strange for me. But when I looked at Roz, I saw that she had broken into a smile, and a happy spark shot through me. Shifting a little closer on the bench, I asked,

"What else has Sir Sidney told you about me?"

"Well," answered Roz, "he believes you'll be a famous author one day, which is not surprising, as you're so very learned and clever." Biting her lip, she added as an afterthought, "Although he does say that you let yourself be too distracted."

As it transpired, I wasn't the only one who was thought to be distracted. It was barely two hours later that Lady Althane complained to me about Roz's lack of progress in the painting lessons, saying in an exasperated tone, "Honestly, I don't know why I bother. Rosalind could do some very nice work, if only her mind wouldn't always wander. Or maybe it isn't the mind that is at fault, for her heart doesn't seem to be in it either. And as we all know, the first impulse to art should come from the heart, not from the head." Placing her hands in her waist, she scowled at me and spoke, "Do take note, Mr. Holland."

"Me?" I asked, full of innocent surprise. "But I don't practise art."

"Exactly," said Lady Althane.

I had no intention to enter into another art discussion with her (she would only slap me about the ears with more of her many mottos). Still, I did tell myself to take heed of the warning that had sounded in her voice: one bone of contention with Lady Althane surely was enough.

Yet only the next day, I'd forgotten all about the wagging finger again. It was just so good to be with Roz. And it was so easy.

RICHARD FROST

I answer a Letter.

Dear John,

I have just come back from St. Albans. Your family are in good health, although the new life still takes a lot of adjusting. And, as one would expect, they are anxious to see you. Perhaps it would be an idea if you went to visit them some day soon, so that you can catch up with them, and see for yourself how industrious they are in decorating their little parlour. At any rate, do be a good fellow and write them a letter. I can tell them how you are, but of course it would be far more satisfying if the news came from the horse's own mouth.

Here in London, things are moving as usual. Zola's latest . . .

Robert,

Yes, I've read the essay, and thought it was really fascinating. I don't have much time at the moment, so I'll answer you properly later: the last word on naturalism hasn't been said yet! Best wishes, John. P.S. Give my love to my mother and Theresa, will you, old chap? I know they always enjoy seeing you.

I am taken for a Ride.

In my first week at Sutton Hall, Sir Sidney had given me a short description of his family. About his sons, he had said, "The eldest is a rascal, the second is a bore, and the youngest is a fool. You'll enjoy meeting them all." Now I had not enjoyed meeting the Reverend, and when I met the third son, who arrived from Cambridge a few days before Easter, I doubted very much whether he was a person whose company I would appreciate.

As I entered the room where we always gathered before dinner, it really seemed for a moment as if someone had rolled in a giant painted egg: I had never seen a body so fat, and so flamboyantly dressed. Hearing my footstep, the egg spun round, to reveal a young man with a nest of carefully pomaded curls atop a round, shiny face, which looked even rounder and shinier for the monocle that was clasped between his eyebrow

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

and cheek. The glass was obviously for decoration, because the instant he saw me, the young man threw it off and, slapping his podgy hands together, he shrieked, "Good Lord! Good Lord!"

There was something about this exclamation that did not at all agree with me—and my misgivings were confirmed when he continued,

"They told me my father's new secretary was an exceedingly bright brain, and ever so polished in his writing style, but no-one informed me of his being the lucky owner of such a divine exterior. How do you do, lovely sir? So very enchanted to meet you, so very enchanted indeed."

Roz, who was standing beside him, tittered, probably at the perplexed look with which I received his speech. Apart from the rather inappropriate compliment, I think it was his diction that startled me so: he talked as if he were having not one but at least three plums in his mouth, almost all of his vowels coming out as "ah". ("Sah vahry enchanted to maht yah.")

I did not get any chance to respond, though—having grasped my fingers (in all of his), Mr. Althane turned to Roz and spoke,

"You were absolutely right, my darling: he's the finest exemplary of the male sex one could wish for. The finest we shall ever see, I dare say."

"Cedric!" she hissed. But then, to my annoyance, she burst out in a loud giggle, her hands to her mouth and her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Really, the pair of them made me feel exceedingly stupid and, on the excuse that I'd forgotten my cigarettes, I fled to my room. Sitting down on the bed, I reflected that this family was rapidly becoming the most bizarre collection of characters one could possibly imagine. Or maybe it was a Cambridge thing: they sometimes said it was a village full of eccentrics; and Cedric Althane, I decided, must be the village idiot.

Much as I tried in the days that followed, I had a hard time overcoming my revulsion of Sir Sidney's youngest son. It was the act which grated most on my nerves. Tristram openly laughed at it, and said his uncle was just a bit crazy, but I couldn't take it so lightly—and for the life of me, I failed to see why anyone would want to behave like that. It was everything about him, everything. Not only was he effete and affected, he was also an aesthete, a decadent, a dandy: the works. He loved all things Japanese, exalted the ethos of Hellenism, worshipped the fleshly verse of Swinburne, believed wholly in "ahrt for ahrt's sahke" and, to the Reverend's vexation, flirted with Catholicism, spiritualism, mesmerism, and what have you.

RICHARD FROST

Worst of all, he turned out to be close friends with Roz, being always there at lunch. Roz tried not to insult me again and keep a straight face, but often the tension got too much for her, and I was treated to more outbursts of giggling, Mr. Althane gaily joining in. There was something very upsetting about hearing a grown man giggle. I found it most unnatural.

He had his good points, of course—of course. On Easter Monday, he played the cello for us, and I had to admit that I'd seldom heard anyone express Schubert with such feeling and delicacy. He also revealed himself to be an exceptionally sharp chess player. But even though I savoured the intellectual challenge of the games that we played together, I never truly got to enjoy them; for the second Mr. Althane looked up from the board, the act was put on again. I shall not repeat any of the innuendoes that he made, but in particular his satodist leanings made me feel highly uncomfortable, all the more because he directed his deviant energies so forcefully towards me.

And then, just when I thought I might as well stop trying and simply hate the sight of him, I discovered that, if more than a little queer, Cedric Althane actually was a very nice boy.

It was on the day we went riding together. Mr. Althane had asked me several times to go riding with him, but I had always declined, making the plea that I was behind with my Eliot project, and needed all my spare hours for reading. I knew that Roz would not be coming along on a riding trip: she still didn't trust herself to the height of a horse, preferring to go pony-trotting with Tristram. One afternoon, though, Sir Sidney had told me, "For God's sake, John, humour the lad: I'm getting fed up with his sulks. He won't do you any harm, you know. He couldn't hurt a fly unless he happened to sit on it."

And so I had given in. And so, on Saturday after tea, I rode off, with no-one but my horse to rescue me from Mr. Althane's scary company. At first I was too tense to do anything other than lean to the left, so as to create a bit more distance to his enormous bulk as it was puffing and sweating along beside me; but after a mile or so, it suddenly struck me that Mr. Althane was strangely quiet. As I now realised, he had been rather quiet ever since his visit to the rectory the previous evening. He had gone away complaining in a theatrical tone about having to munch "cahld potahtahs" at his brother's frugal table, but on his return he'd had nothing to report

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

than: "Justin always was the wisest of us all. Dear, dear, dear, what a weight to carry."

It was only when we were crossing the wood (I still haven't described the lovely grounds that encircled the Hall, but there was a wood), that he finally opened conversation, telling me about Cambridge, where he read jurisprudence and history, and how he loved student life. After his trips in the next year, he would move to London to start for the Bar.

"And then," he concluded, "the real work begins. I'm sure I shall be an absolute disaster in the courtroom: people will only laugh at me. On the other hand, it could well be the case that I'll become a roaring success. My audience might be deeply grateful for the amusement."

Ignoring these last remarks, I replied, "Yes, Miss Munro told me you'd be coming to London. She said she's looking forward to it."

"Ah, the poor girl: she often feels lonely in the city. She was born and bred there, but it is not her natural habitat."

I nodded. "Indeed it is not. Tristram asked me to read *The Knight of the Yellow Lands* to her, and one of her comments was that it must have been wonderful to be a knight, because it allowed one to roam around freely in the wilderness all day." When he did not respond, I glanced aside and asked, "Are you familiar at all with the story of *The Yellow Lands*?"

"Oh, I know it," said Mr. Althane, "I know it well. A superbly inventive piece of prose. One cannot but admire the skill." He paused, to continue in a low voice, "My father mentioned that you asked to see the manuscript."

"I did, yes."

"Hm. He also told me that you were quite insistent."

"Was I?" I asked, a bit puzzled. "I, I don't think I pressed him *that* hard. At any event, he explained about the document being too delicate—which I can fully understand. When I was in Dublin a few years ago, I went to see *The Book of Kells*; and I only saw one page, in such a dark room that it was virtually impossible to make out the words. Only the images were visible."

"Is that so?" He cast me a pondering look, as if he were weighing my words in his mind. But then his features relaxed, and he said with a smile, "One day you'll see it, Mr. Holland, you will see it all. Or I might show you. It's just a matter of trust, you know. Do not mistake my meaning: my father esteems you highly, and he has every faith in you, but I don't think he is ready yet to share his secret treasures with you."

RICHARD FROST

I frowned. The tone was reasonable enough, airy enough, but . . . Was that a hint of suspicion I had caught? Why this talk about trust? And what was so strange anyway about wanting to see an old manuscript?

The opportunity for pursuing the subject had already passed, however, because at that moment we reached the edge of the hill that formed such a proud throne to Sutton Hall. Drawing rein, Mr. Althane suggested,

“Let’s relieve my unlucky horse of all this excess baggage, shall we? We can go and sit for a while on that bench over there. The spot does provide an exquisite view of the surrounding country.”

It most certainly did. We had come to the side of the village, Tunbridge Wells lying to the back of the hill, and a more idyllic picture of good old rural England, with its rolling hills and grassy vales, must be very hard to find. Scotney Castle was situated right in front of us and, if you let your eyes wander far enough, you could even see the sea.

Mr. Althane pointed out other landmarks to me, adorning each with its own story of people and past. And as he chatted on, it struck me once again how different, how much more sincere, he seemed from the days before, and I wondered what his brother had done to crack the veneer. The accent had vanished, the hand-flapping was gone, he did not once roll his eyes: just calmly sitting there, delivering the lore of the land. Indeed, I observed, it was almost as if I were listening to Sir Sidney narrating *The Rule of Kings*.

The son also turned out to resemble Sir Sidney in forthrightness. Having finished his book of tales, he shifted round on the bench so as to face me, and asked, “How do you cope, Mr. Holland, after the loss of your father? I was extremely sorry to hear what happened to you.”

His question came as a complete jolt to me; no-one at Sutton Hall had ever asked me openly about my history before. And my first, immediate reaction was one of defence, hurling back at him,

“You have lost your mother. What’s the difference?”

He kept looking at me, seemingly unperturbed by my bitter tone. Then he said in a soft voice, “I hope you’ll excuse me for persisting, good man, but I honestly think that, in your case, it was much worse. It must be hard, seeing one’s whole existence collapse like that.”

I did not reply, determined to keep the dirty linen private, upon which he steered his gaze back at the view, the monocle scintillating in the sun.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

And for at least a minute we remained sitting thus: I stubbornly lock-jawed, he staring in the distance, glittering, flickering with his third eye.

Until he suddenly spoke again. "I do apologise if I have offended you, my dear fellow. Also, I must confess that the motive for my inquiry was partly a selfish one. It is just that I'm so afraid of losing my own father. Every time I come home—and I make sure to come home quite often now—he seems significantly more infirm. It does scare me, terribly."

"What makes you so sure you'll lose him?"

"The disease affects his muscles. The heart is a muscle."

And only now I saw that it wasn't just the monocle, but also tears that glittered, flowing freely down his cheeks. In response, my own eyes misted over, for I, too, loved the old man, loved him dearly. Still, sad as I may feel at the prospect of a world without Sir Sidney, I wasn't as good a crier as Mr. Althane. Whereas he poured a river, I only blinked a drop away; while he shook and shuddered, I merely trembled. Blinking and trembling, the way I had done on the night I received that fateful telegram.

Beside me, the weeping fit eased off, as gradually, as fluently as it had begun. The last tear having been shed, Mr. Althane took out a big lace handkerchief and blew his nose. "I'm a very emotional man, Mr. Holland," he admitted, "pray, do not take exception. Or maybe I am just being silly." Hauling himself to his feet, he remarked, "I fear it is getting rather late. If we don't go back now, Roz is bound to send a search party. I promised her we wouldn't go too far."

And so we mounted again and left, away from the edge, through the wood, over the fields, across the park, and back to the Hall.

When we had delivered our horses to the stables, Mr. Althane asked,

"Could I please take your arm, sweet man? I do confess, I still feel a little weak."

"Er . . ." But it seemed rude to refuse. "Very well, I don't see why not."

And so he returned to his former self. Hardly had we linked up, when he fluttered his eyelashes at me and drawled, "Ah cahnnaht but agrah with Rosalahnd: yahr bjahty, Mahster Hahlland, is ahtogahther mahving. It quahte brahngs the tahrs to one's ahyes."

RICHARD FROST

I make a Mistake.

Roz had given Tristram a dog—and it was a dog with a sting in its tail.

I was so displeased at what I heard that, for the first time in five trouble-free months, I called Tristram on the carpet, asking him in a stern voice,

“Roz says Judy was hit by a train last year, and that she lies buried in the copse near the summerhouse. Why did you tell me your father shot her?”

Tristram did not reply, only giving me a pout.

“Tristram?”

Now he was gazing at the floor. Then he offered,

“Well, it could’ve happened. My father’s always killing animals.”

“But he didn’t kill your dog.”

“You believed me, though.”

“Just because somebody believes something, that doesn’t mean it is a fact. You shouldn’t tell lies, Tristram.”

“It was just a story,” he maintained. “And you believed it.”

“It was not just a story. You told me something about your real life, and it wasn’t true. I ought to give you lines, you know.”

Tristram wiggled his head and screwed up his eyes, considering this.

“But you’d still be mad at me,” he finally concluded. “And you’re not mad when I tell you a story. You always like my essays.”

“A story is a story, and a lie is a lie! You know very well what I mean.”

Awkward, difficult as our little talk had been, I told myself that I had made my point—although later I wasn’t so sure whether I should have made it so angrily. From the day Roz had lowered the new Judy into his arms, Tristram had been playing with her non-stop: introducing her to his guinea pig, doing catch-the-ball practice, and brushing her coat till she shone like a chestnut. After my reprimand, however, he just occasionally took her in his lap, looking at her a bit worriedly, to subsequently look at me, as if he feared I objected to the very idea of a dog.

There was only one way of making up with him, I knew: and so, for four nights in a row, I lay waiting in bed for the doll to speak and tell Tristram to go rescue Mr. Holland from the ghosts. It was only on the fifth night that I was lucky. Shortly after the clock on the mantelpiece had struck twelve, the door of my room opened to a chink and his small figure glided in.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

For a second he wavered, then he stole towards the bed and whispered, "I'm sorry about the dog story, Mr. Holland, but I still think it could have happened. And you believed me." Wrinkling his forehead, he added in a troubled voice, "To be honest, I think I believed it as well."

"Yes, I gathered as much," I said. "Now please hop in: I am cold."

We were friends again. And yet . . . something about the whole affair kept nagging me, for it still seemed odd he should fabricate a falsehood like that, and then later mistake his own fiction for reality.

The next day, during our midday walk, I talked it over with Roz. My walks with Roz had been resumed ever since I first went riding with Mr. Althane. The two of them seemed to have struck some sort of bargain: Mr. Althane now regularly went into the woods with me, whereas Roz was my daily guide in the garden. Myself, I was more than happy with the arrangement. The prospect of having Roz all to myself for an hour made the giggling fits during luncheon far more bearable; and it was always a pleasure to witness the transformation of Mr. Althane into Cedric, son of Sidney, the moment that he mounted his horse.

As expected, Tristram being such a favourite with her, when I told Roz the story of how Judy was not really killed, she defended him for all she was worth. "For instance," said she, "Lady Althane is not my real aunt. My parents are only distant relations of hers, but somehow, over the years, we came to call each other aunt and niece. I mean, that's similar, isn't it?"

"Not entirely," I replied. "What you do is just a matter of convenience, whereas Tristram accused his father of a cruelty he did not commit. And the strange thing is, somehow he still feels he was telling the truth."

"He just has a very vivid imagination," Roz persisted. "I have it, too, sometimes: that I dream something, and it all seems so life-like that, later, I can't remember whether it actually happened or not. As if I was asleep and awake at the same time." Grabbing my arm, she urged me, "Oh, do forgive him, Mr. Holland, please. Tristram is not a bad child. You know he isn't!"

"No, no," I assured her, a bit startled by her vehemence—it almost seemed to hurt her to hear Tristram being criticised. "For certain, I have forgiven him already. He's a wonderful boy, I swear. The best."

A grateful smile lit up her face and, as always, it was as if the moon came beaming through the clouds. If we had lived in a different age, at a

RICHARD FROST

different place, I would have forgotten all about Tristram and his fables, and I would have kissed her, right on the spot. Life would have been good.

But sadly, regrettably, this was not to be. For the same age, the same place—the way we lived then—had conditioned me to such pride and prejudice that only the next day I fell out with Roz herself. It was

Really, I now wish I hadn't started to write this book from a first-person perspective. It is all very well when you can show yourself in an amiable light, and nothing can be a more effective mode to apply: it is charming to write about your trials when you anticipate the reader's sympathetic tears or the smile as he learns how you became happy again ever after; but it's not so nice when you have to exhibit yourself as a plain damned snob.

Anyway, what happened was the following.

We, Roz and I, were in the walled garden, where, thanks to the glorious spring, the first roses could already be admired. I cut a flower for her with my pocket-knife and she wove it into her hair, so deftly: a rose beside Roz.

She insisted I should have a flower as well, a pink one. And as she threaded the stem through my button-hole, she remarked, "I do like your neck-kerchief, Mr. Holland. We have similar ones in our shop."

I froze. "Shop?"

"Yes, we are renowned for our silks. That's silk, is it not? Now there." Her head aslant, she took a step back to admire her handiwork. "It looks quite distinguished," she said, full of satisfaction. "It really suits you."

"You have a shop?"

My voice sounded strange. It was very sharp, and very shrill.

Roz did not notice, though, simply answering, "Clothes, mostly. My aunt said your uncle is in trade as well. Or is it foreign trade?"

"My father was a banker."

"So I heard." She bit her lip. But then she decided upon an encouraging nod and, raising her eyebrows at me, she asked, "And your uncle?"

"Iron. I never see him. My father was one of the richest men in England. Our country house was bigger even than Sutton Hall."

And, after this gabbled account, I turned and stalked away.

A shop girl. No wonder they'd let me so near her; no wonder I could just walk out with her without a maid or anyone for a chaperone. No wonder she had no maid to begin with, but must rely on the right hand of her so-called aunt when a dress needed mending. No wonder, no wonder the

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

greedy eating habits, the lack of polish, the sheer coarseness of her. I had taken it for spontaneity, designated her as a natural creature, an original spirit—all the romantic images of Wordsworth and his brethren (“Bloody Wordsworth, Thornton!” I shouted inwardly. “We’ll never shake off that soppy nonsense again. It has distorted our whole perception of the world!”)—the romantic ideas I had harboured about her, while all along she had just been a badly-bred lower-middle-class wench.

I was so upset about the discovery I’d made that, upon waking the next morning, for the first five minutes I could not prise my jaws apart, clenched as they were in anger. And the rest of me, all the rest of me, closed up as well. In short (and I had better be brief about this; it pains me so to think back to it, pains me for Roz, for myself, for us), I started avoiding her, creating as much distance as I could between my own distinguished self and the common girl I had so falsely believed to be a princess. Once more, I used Eliot as an excuse, locking myself in my room at noon and staring for hours at the first page of *The Mill on the Floss*.

People noticed. I tried to act normal, and I believe I succeeded in keeping up a minimum of polite pretence, but people noticed all the same. Tristram asked if I was still mad about the dog. Sir Sidney told me I should ease off on the studies; I was getting too serious, he said. Lady Althane did not comment, but she was probably laughing up her sleeve, full of derision for the pauper who had let himself be tricked into falling for a pauper. Cedric, getting closest to the truth, inquired what Roz had done to insult me so; he said she suffered terribly from the sudden cooling of our friendship, and had cried her heart out on his shoulder the evening before. I did not answer, merely telling him it was important that I concentrate on my work. Mentally I noted that a true lady would have hidden her feelings, and not blubbered all over the flowery jacket of her Bohemian fake cousin. A true lady never would have seduced me to form an attachment to her in the first place. A true lady wasn’t a flirt.

After two more attempts at appeasement, Cedric did not push the matter any further, afraid as he was of antagonising me. Departing for Cambridge a week later, he asked if he could write to me: he sincerely valued my acquaintance, he said, and wished to extend it beyond his visits to the Hall. He soon fell into the habit of sending me long, soulful letters, of which I would now say they were love letters, although he appeared to

RICHARD FROST

transfer most of his passion onto Roz: every now and again a sentence about her sensitive nature and need for companionship crept in. I always ignored these pleas, though. I cherished Cedric for his intelligence and for his warmth, but I was not prepared to discuss Roz with him. She had lost her credit with me, full-stop.

When, halfway through May, Roz left the Hall as well (because, she said, her mother could not spare her any longer), I told myself I wasn't at all sorry to see her go. Indeed, I resolved, I was far better off without her.

But I was wrong.

So wrong.

I receive some Advice.

"Make yourself comfortable, John," Sir Sidney said. "I am going to lecture you. On behalf of my wife."

Oh God, I thought as I clutched the arms of my chair, she's complained about my infatuation with Roz. But it is over, it is over, I silently defended myself. I had seen that it could not be, that she wasn't for me.

"Wh-what have I done?" I stammered.

"Nothing," replied Sir Sidney. "And that's where the problem lies."

He paused, waiting for his valet to move round the desk and position himself behind the wheeled chair. For some reason, when Sir Sidney had serious matters to discuss—with his estate manager, his publisher, or now with me—he preferred to do it in the four-shouldered, two-headed form.

Feeling Charles's tap on his arm to say that he was in place, Sir Sidney sat back and resumed, "Lady Althane is getting ever more annoyed that, apart from your work with Tristram and me, you don't do anything but walk around, day in-day out, with the same old Eliot novel that you clearly neither enjoy nor appreciate. Shortly after you arrived at the Hall, I showed Margaret your manifesto (of which I still suspect it is mainly your own brain-child, and not Mr. Thornton's), and she felt that, pompous and pedantic as your great plan for literature was (I am quoting my wife here, John, do not hit me), you had the makings of a true artist. Now, however,

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

after six months of patient waiting, she cannot stand it any longer how you keep postponing going about it and writing some glorious piece of prose with which to astonish us all. In short, she holds the opinion that . . . Hang on, what was it again?" He thought for a moment. But then he nodded to himself and pronounced, "'The boy uses his intellect as a harness, and I can't bloody stand it. Why the hell doesn't the idiot write?'"

He had finished. And I, I stared at him, totally agape. Getting no reassurance, only the questioning brow with which he had ended his speech, my gaze travelled higher. Despite his straight face, Charles seemed to have a twinkle in his eye—but whether it was a twinkle of amusement at the eccentricity of his employers, or ridicule of me, I could not decide.

At long last I managed to look back at Sir Sidney and squeeze out, "Well, sir, it is just that . . . I feel that, before venturing upon my own path, I have to establish myself as an author. And as I'm quite certain there's no money in the kind of fiction I would wish to write . . ."

"Money should be no object," Sir Sidney interrupted me.

"It is to me, sir. I, I'm sure you understand. Also, Mr. Thornton and I thought we should first define the point of departure. What went on before, as it were, so as to make clear why a change is needed."

"Hm. I know what my wife would say: 'Never mind the old school, just do what you want to do, 'cause you'll never know what you really want to do unless you start doing it.' Something along those lines . . . But I didn't think you would . . . Yes, it was only to be expected."

His gaze turned towards the window, and a long pause fell, during which Charles stood watching me, and I sat watching Sir Sidney.

However, if I imagined that the lecture had reached its final conclusion, I was mistaken, for suddenly Sir Sidney fixed his attention upon me again, and he launched a second chapter. He had obviously been waiting to tell me this for a long time—he simply gushed it out. And it all started with:

"A little tip. If you absolutely insist on writing a book about the previous generation, I suggest you drop Eliot, and do Dickens instead. Dickens is far more popular with the big audience and, I dare say, will remain so for quite a while yet. You want to make a name for yourself. Well, I guarantee that, if you produce a literary treatise of Dickens, and it's any good, you'll still be read in a hundred years from now."

"But, but . . .," I sputtered. Dickens? Dickens? Surely not.

RICHARD FROST

"But he's so vulgar."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Sir Sidney. "At least he's fun. I mean, with Eliot . . . Don't you think she can get a bit forced? She lacks ease somehow, as if the whole enterprise was one big struggle. Don't get me wrong, I think she's a great philosopher and an excellent mental analyst, and I honestly believe *Middlemarch* is one of the best novels ever written, but she also has this tendency to show off her knowledge too much. It detracts from her art, I find. Whereas Dickens, he was a creative artist through and through, someone who wrote almost purely from instinct. A rough talent, perhaps, but a formidable one. For let's be honest, without Dickens, a whole literary era never would've happened."

"But his characters, sir," I desperately tried to steer us back to clearer waters. "And his plots: all this melodrama. It is hardly realistic, is it?"

Sir Sidney pursed his lips. "Theatrical, I grant you, and a bit black-and-white, but in my view, he gets the grey in between far better than Eliot, who always painstakingly dissects all shades that might possibly exist. And are you sure it's plain realism you want? I thought you hated all that."

"Well, yes, of course, but . . ." Sweat was breaking out; and I had the unpleasant feeling that Charles could see every drop of it appear on my forehead. Meanwhile Sir Sidney breezily went on,

"Personally, I rather like the bold brush strokes that Dickens makes. Who has given us Trabb's boy? Don't you just love Trabb's boy?"

"Trabb's boy?" I echoed, getting more and more bewildered. The next second, though, it hit me: *Great Expectations*. The tailor's help who imitates Pip as he struts through the village in his gentleman's clothes.

I shook my head (away with Trabb's boy!). "I'm sorry, sir," I said, "but I still don't see why Dickens would be such a superior choice. I always think he was *too* popular. He wrote for the masses."

"People must be entertained, John—Dickens knew that. He wrote good books that appeal to a wide variety of people, especially the middle classes. And another thing, which so far hardly anyone has picked up on: he also saw that, these days, the urban landscape is what we relate to most. The country is rapidly becoming a thing of the past—sadly, but it is so. Dickens was unique in that he was one of the first to focus on the city."

The m-word. He had used the m-word and, if anything, it only made me more determined that, the moment I regained my foothold, I must dig my

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

toes in. Yet again Sir Sidney appeared to have foreseen my objections: not even allowing time for me to reply, he proceeded,

“Look, if you’re really so critical of Dickens, with your ideas about high art, isn’t that just all the more reason to choose him for your subject? Spit your comments out. Show us his weak points. Break him down completely for all I care. At least you’ll have a jolly good time preparing your work. You never get dull with Dickens.”

And this, at last, was the end-all of the lecture. Do Dickens and you won’t get dull.

As I still sat blinking with misery (the m-word!), Sir Sidney offered,

“I’ll help you out with Shaw. You see, I had hoped to introduce you to some of my literary acquaintances, but . . . well, the last weekend was the last, I’m afraid. It is getting too tiresome for me to entertain so many people, and . . . Let’s just say that I prefer it to amuse myself with what I like doing best, and I like it best when I’m working.”

The need to avoid tedium was apparently much on Sir Sidney’s mind, for it was only a few hours later, when we were in the smoking-room having a glass of absinth, that he returned to the theme. The absinth had been an idea of Cedric’s, who said it was all the rage in France, and that it might help relieve Sir Sidney’s symptoms. Myself, I wasn’t too sure of the green fairy’s healing properties, yet I always enjoyed the elegant ritual which Charles performed as he prepared the drink: burning the sugar that was needed to take away the bitter taste, setting the absinth on fire with the bubbling hot caramel that resulted, to subsequently extinguish the flames again with a splash of water. I never took more than one glass, having heard about the strange hallucinations that absinth could induce, but Sir Sidney was a man who could hold his liquor, and after the first glass he invariably told Charles to make him another. The second dose was the one he really wanted—and although I never felt he became intoxicated, I did notice it made him far more confidential with me than usual.

On this particular evening, he made some revelations about marriage.

“My first wife was what they call a suitable match,” he began. “Pretty, docile, the right background . . . I well remember how pleased I was for having secured her. But dear, dear, how sleepy it all got after the first year. She was a good wife, without a doubt, but not very . . . No.

RICHARD FROST

“Margaret is altogether different. The first time we met, she was angry with me—furious. My oh my, I had never got such a scolding before; it completely knocked me over. Even as a young woman, she was very firm of purpose, y’see: highly political, knew her own mind. She had come into her inheritance at quite an early age, and had set up this charity for destitute women . . . I can still see it: how she stood before me, eyes ablaze, practically boxing my ears. And afterwards . . . I just couldn’t forget her.

“Later I heard how she’d lost her husband, and so, eight years ago, when I became a widower myself, I asked her to marry me. I tell you, it’s been worth the wait, for I’ve never had a sleepier day since. Of course, we have our differences, many so, still . . . The thing is: we’re physically and emotionally compatible. I know you’re not supposed to attach too much value to intimacy and all that—but, as I’ve found out, it *is* important to *me*. And everything, everything better than a wife who always agrees: it just leaves you groping.”

Putting down his glass, he looked me straight in the eye and stated, “Compatibility, John. And make sure you never get bored.”

I see a Ghost.

One would imagine that Roz’s absence led me to reconsider; however, it only strengthened me in my negative judgement of her. When she returned to Sutton Hall in the summer, I was almost relieved to find how plain and common she looked, how different from the rosy image I had built up before. I observed that she lacked height, had no grace of figure, being so plump, and was too careless in her dress, if not downright sloppy. When she giggled (she giggled less often now, far less, but I did not notice: I only noticed the giggles), I marked it down as a deviation from propriety; it ought to have been a decorous smile. When she went pony-riding with Tristram, I shook my head at the silly picture she made, sitting so low, her skirts practically trailing the ground—shaking my head even harder when she returned all grubby and smelly because Tristram had persuaded her that spattering through the mud was the most fun in the world.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Perhaps my constant and persistent condemnation of her was a bit too much of a protest, but I was anxious not to fall into the trap again, and even more anxious to keep my heart whole. In fact, I was so eager to dislike Roz that, on Friday evening, I sent the Reverend a sympathetic glance to signal that I saw where his objection lay: it was nigh insufferable, having someone so unrefined at table. Myself, I took great care to adhere to all standards, dressing meticulously, never raising my voice above conversation level, and pleasing and thanking whenever opportunity allowed. When I looked at Roz, I looked at her as if she were a member of a less-developed species, or a barbarian of some sort. In other words, I stopped taking her seriously.

The new paleness of her face was one of the few things of which I approved; in the spring, she had seemed far too red-cheeked. I was also pleased that, in the second week of her stay, she began to eat less, causing Sir Sidney a great deal of worry, yet to me, the tiny bites constituted a positive improvement in her manner. She also made small changes in her appearance, looking more neat, more decent—and this, as well, I greeted with an approbatory nod. The only constant in her behaviour was that she still spent as much time with Tristram as she could, and that, once with him, she threw all caution to the winds, romping about with the new Judy as boisterously as Tristram himself. Back in the house, though, her step became timid and quiet, her frock rustling about so modestly that one did hardly notice the disturbance.

Smug, stupid as I was, I only realised on the night when I saw the ghost that what I had taken to be a process of mending was actually one of festering damage. It was the 21st of July (the exact date is not important, perhaps, but I clearly recall it being the 21st); I was half asleep already, my glasses lying safely on the chair beside the bed. My candle had burnt down, and the only light in the room came from the moon, which had been so full and lovely that evening that I'd decided to leave the curtains open and bathe myself in her silvery pool. Resting contented on the fluffy pillow, I let myself drift off, gently bobbing up and away on the stream of images of what I had seen and done that day.

I was just about to glide into oblivion, when all of a sudden a creaking of the floorboards pulled me back to the surface again. Thinking it was Tristram, I raised myself up and, sleepily, drowsily, gazed over my shoulder.

RICHARD FROST

At first I thought I must be mistaken, and it was the myopic blur that distorted his night shirt to adult size, but then I realised that the head, the hair, was different too: not brown, but blonde, not short, but long. And the very next second I heard, bang into the silence, right into my bated breath, in a voice so loud, so otherworldly, so full of anguish and pain:

“What have I done to him, why does he treat me so? Oh, my child!”

It was Roz. She was standing by the hearth, beating her chest and, as I saw when I’d made a quick scramble for my glasses, her face awash with tears. In the bright moonlight, her white gown had virtually dissolved, and she appeared to stand there naked, every curve of her visible, writhing, twisting, every curve, as if her body was a set of bonds that she must break. When I spoke to her, when I called out her name, once, twice and over, she did not respond, only standing there, naked (I can’t forget just how naked she looked, how exposed, in need of . . . cover, comfort—I don’t know), her eyes wide, streaming, standing there wringing her hands and beating her breast as if in the greatest agony one could suffer.

“Oh, my child! My child!”

And then, all at once, as if someone, as if God himself had switched off the misery, she heaved a shivery sigh, and turned and walked away.

I followed her, over the landing, down the stairs, across the hall, through the second hall, up another set of stairs, another landing, round the corner, and on to her room, all the way and every step to her door. And as it closed behind her and, my heart still pounding, I made the return journey through the strange maze that was Sutton Hall, those words kept reverberating through my mind: reminding me of something, something long forgotten, but still there; dusty with neglect, but still there; far, far away; somewhere, someone . . .

But I could not grab hold of it, I could not say what it was.