

Part Two.

RICHARD FROST

Poems and Essays—2.

Short.
It is a short word.
Shorter is longer,
strange enough.
Shorter is also longer than long.
And if you count the letters,
shortest is the longest of them all.

I find that funny.

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THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

On the day of the job interview, Lady Althane's parting shot had been hurtful to me, but, as I can now admit, she was right on the mark. And not only did I come to Sutton Hall with a pocket full of pride—pride, swollen the more for having been wounded anew—I also brought with me a big bag of prejudice. Perhaps my love for London had dazzled me so that every other place must seem bleak by comparison: for I still remember how, on my arrival, I lingered by the carriage for a moment, reluctant to enter the house and begin the slow, sleepy life that I expected to lead there.

But not so, not nearly so.

I think that, above all, I have to thank Tristram for making my time at Sutton Hall a good time, quick time, and right from the start. He had been described by his previous masters as "dull", but I can honestly say I never experienced a dull moment in his company. In fact, the only thing that was dull in those first few months was the world outside: as Tristram, who greatly missed the genial Italian climate, once put it, "There is no weather again today. Why's the sky so sad, Mr. Holland?" I told him it was simply winter and therefore still and pale, but inwardly I noted that conditions were much sadder in London. Even if the weather was bad, the sky could always be seen in the country. It might be cold outside, it might be grey, but never did I get a truly dull day.

My initial meetings with Tristram were less than a success, I'm afraid. Lady Althane had not exaggerated when she said that teaching him would be a challenge, just as Sir Sidney had been right that creative solutions might have to be sought. It had been decided that I would see Tristram in the mornings only, and give him homework for the rest of the day, which hours I was to spend with Sir Sidney in the library. However, when I entered the schoolroom on the morning we were to begin the education programme, I met with more than a little reluctance. Beautifully shaped as it was, the face that my pupil gave me, with its dark scowl and an obstinate pout, was one of the ugliest I had ever seen.

RICHARD FROST

As I put down my books on the table, determined to ignore the bad mood, he opened his mouth and declared,

"I've already had tutors, y'know. And it was no use."

"Maybe you needed me," I said. "Do sit down."

He didn't, but threw me a defiant look instead. "I have my pets."

"Hm." I adjusted my glasses. Then I thought I might as well humour him. "Can I see them?"

This was clearly unexpected, a confused stare crumpling up his brow. Suddenly, though, he broke into a grin and, beckoning for me to follow, he trotted off to the nursery. His nanny, who was busy tidying up, frowned when she saw us come in—but I signalled to her that it was all right, following Tristram as he hopped and hurdled over the jumble of jigsaws, tin toys and crayons that lay scattered about the room. When we had reached the opposite corner, I saw two cages standing neatly side-by-side, one with six white mice in it, and the other which was inhabited by a golden-brown, very lively guinea pig.

"This is Arthur," said Tristram, kneeling down in front of the guinea pig. "He's my favourite. See?" Opening the cage, he deftly lifted out the animal and held it up to me.

Well: in for a penny, in for a pound, I thought—and carefully I stroked the tiny head a few times, which action was rewarded by a contented murmur from Arthur and a nod of approval from his owner.

Considering the introduction dealt with, Tristram lowered Arthur into the sawdust again and squatted back on his haunches. "I used to have a dog as well," he spoke confidentially, "but my father killed it."

"He did what?"

"Ah yes." Tristram pressed his lips together and sighed. "It was in Italy. I let loose the mice, so they could run for a bit, but I forgot to close the door of the nursery. And then Judy, my dog, came in, and she ate the mice. My father said she was a bad dog, and he shot her."

Noticing my expression of horror, he quickly went on to explain,

"If the mice can't run, they grow very depressed, and maybe fat, and stiff in the legs. Really, it's no use having fat, stiff mice."

"That is certainly true," I replied, still a bit troubled (what kind of father would do such a thing?). Yet I did not want Tristram to sink too deeply into the bad memory—his face was clouding over—and also, I did want to

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

commence work. So as cheerily as I could, I suggested, "Well, just to make sure nothing unpleasant happens, we'll leave the mice safely in their cage, shall we? And if you wish, Arthur can sit in on the lessons. The mice can play with each other, but he's all alone."

However, if I had supposed that this concession to his more direct interests was the good start to which we would get off, I was wrong. In all truth, in the course of that first morning, I grew ever more desperate as to how to achieve just the tiny feat of getting him to sit and listen—for it seemed nigh impossible for him to stay still. He would be fidgeting on his chair, swinging his legs, wiggling his head, twisting his hair, and at times his pupils shot left-right-left so rapidly that it made me too dizzy to recall whatever it was I had been trying to explain to him.

Added to this total lack of concentration, I soon discovered the void where there should have been at least the rudiments of education. He had practically no knowledge of geography, history or science, and was downright hopeless at arithmetic, unable to do even straightforward, easy sums of addition. Languages were just as bad, either native or foreign. It may come as a shock to his present admirers, but in particular his written English was extremely poor, not to mention the difficulty he had in reading out to me a short piece of text. I could tell that he wanted to oblige, wished to, hoped to, but no matter how he tried, he simply could not focus.

In fact, the sole positive I found was that he picked up extremely fast on Latin, showing especially talent for its pronunciation, although at times he did revert to Italian, the only tongue with which he appeared to feel truly at ease. I drew the conclusion that he must have been left alone with his Italian governess a lot, and that the governess must have had very little education herself. No wonder Sir Sidney preferred his upbringing to be completed in England; because Tristram had been transferred here on his instigation. His parents, who had remained abroad, had probably been too careless to spot the problem. All I heard were stories about his father going hunting or fishing (he hardly ever mentioned his mother), yet even whilst still in Italy, he seldom seemed to have seen the man in the flesh.

After a week of trying, trying harder, and trying again, all in vain, I decided that this was a case in which custom must give way to necessity, and invention of a new method was needed. Besides the backlog, which was discouraging, and contributed in no way to Tristram's enjoyment of

RICHARD FROST

the lessons, he also had the problem of being over-active of body. Indeed, I resolved, teaching him would be useless if he did not get a chance to spend some of his surplus energy first. I could pray for him to sit still, but if I wanted us to move on, getting him off his feet might be a better idea.

On this reasoning, I opened the second Monday with a proposition.

"Tristram," I said, "I've been thinking. Scientific men have shown that the brain needs a great deal of oxygen to function properly. And one of the reasons why it could be that you sometimes have trouble paying attention, is that you don't have enough oxygen. It is stupid of me, not to realise this before, but where I first taught, all the boys walked to school. You don't have that. Therefore I think that, before we start our lessons, we should first go outside and see that we get your circulation going, so that you can take in plenty of oxygen."

Tristram remained silent for a few seconds, pondering these words—but he was nodding, definitely nodding. Then he looked up and said with a keen glint in his eye, "I like running."

"But that's wonderful!" I said. "Who knows, it might be just the solution we're looking for. That's settled then: we start the day with some running."

And this we did, or rather Tristram did. He insisted on running around the whole Hall (by my estimation, a distance of nearly a mile), and he insisted also that I time him on my pocket watch, to see how fast he was. And he *was* fast. Because Tristram . . . he went like the wind. He grew even faster as the weeks went by, making it two rounds, three (I drew the line there); and whilst sprinting along, he sooner seemed to gather speed than tire out, as the second hand of my watch never failed to confirm.

It was no doubt a different kind of training and discipline than Sir Sidney had in mind, yet one thing I knew: Tristram always felt a lot better after his morning run. He could still concentrate for a limited amount of time only, so I made sure never to spend more than fifteen minutes on one particular subject, knowing we could easily return to it later. Tristram was quick, he was bright, and once I had shown him the direction in which to go, the progress was almost immediately noticeable. If he felt restless again, he'd simply announce, "I think I need some oxygen, Mr. Holland." I was aware that he sometimes abused the new regimen, still I did not really mind, nearly always replying, "Very well, off you go." A second later, I'd hear him bounding down and up the stairs. At first I was afraid the other

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

household members would object against the noise—but there again, we were in the children’s wing, and the only one ever heard to complain was Nurse Jones, who kept insisting he, “Do not run, do not run in the house!”

Sadly for her, Headmaster Holland had given different instructions.

Around noon, I had some time to myself. Occasionally I stayed with Tristram, but most days I devoted the free window to rereading the works of George Eliot, whose literary biography I was still planning to write. At first I read only in the evenings, but finding Eliot even slower-going than the previous time I had ploughed through her novels, I decided to add the midday hour, taking my books into the conservatory and seating myself beside Sir Sidney’s septuagenarian mother. She was hardly disruptive to my studies, merely nodding when I came in and, having received a nod in return, continuing with her knitting. She was too deaf at any rate to make conversation a truly feasible option. If she wanted to hear anything, she had to raise a huge trumpet to her ear, which she seemed to find too much trouble and, as I now realise, I never actually saw her do. Indeed, it was almost as if the Aged Parent were no more than a somewhat fanciful piece of decoration. If I never mention her again, it is not because she died, or moved out, but simply because there’s nothing more to say about her.

The rest of the family were seldom to be seen, lunch not being a meal that was closely observed at the Hall. Lady Althane usually had a few morsels sent up to the summerhouse where she practised her art and, as a rule, I never encountered her before dinner. Sir Sidney went out at twelve for some “carriage exercise”, to clear his mind after the long morning he had spent reading background material for the chapter he was writing, and reviewing what we had done the day before.

As I had learned soon after my arrival, Sir Sidney’s infirmity was something far worse than mere rheumatism. Disagree with me as she did on nearly all other matters, Lady Althane trusted me where it concerned her husband, and she had told me how, some two years ago, Sir Sidney had first been struck by what she described as “progressive paralysis”. Starting with his feet going numb, the illness had subsequently spread through his legs, and been climbing steadily upwards ever since. Eminent medical men from all over the country had been consulted, and although one doctor had

RICHARD FROST

said he'd seen similar symptoms in a patient before, neither he nor his colleagues had been able to shed any light on what the problem was, what was its cause, or what might be a cure. Worst of all, no-one could offer a prognosis as to when and where it would all end.

It was evident, however, that Sir Sidney himself held out not much hope. He was so anxious to save what little movement there remained in his hands that he read with the aid of a bookstand, his valet standing by to turn the pages. The notes he made whilst reading were mental notes only; thankfully, he was blessed with an extremely good memory, remembering word for word nearly everything that had passed his gaze. As to the words he dictated to me, they were concise and to the point. Sir Sidney's book was important to him, and he was not going to jeopardise its completion by beating about the bush. Another time-saver he introduced was a reservoir pen for me, which contained its own ink. He said he thought I might like this new invention because it would allow me to keep my hands clean, but us working without the interruption of wetting and wiping had no doubt constituted the pen's main appeal to him.

Sir Sidney and I worked hard, but never long, as he grew easily tired. I soon developed a form of short-hand, only transcribing the full text in the hours before dinner, when Sir Sidney was resting. It was hardly ever that I felt unsure of my scribbling, and had to verify with him; sometimes he said he had meant things differently, but that I needn't change it back, because he liked my version better. I always retained both renderings, though, feeling we should decide upon such points later—realising, also, that my method differed in a number of important respects from his.

And perhaps I had better confess here that, in the beginning, I had some serious doubts about Sir Sidney's way of approaching his subject. Actually, the first time we worked together, we had some discord over it. The book that Sir Sidney was writing was to be entitled *The Rule of Kings*; in it, he meant to draw the psychological portraits of ten English monarchs, starting with King Alfred. I don't know exactly what I expected: certainly not a dry account of dates, battles and good deeds—I knew Sir Sidney better than that—all the same, my surprise was unpleasant when, on that first afternoon, I heard the sentence with which this splendid work of history was to be opened.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

We were settled in the library, Sir Sidney behind the desk, I at the writing table, my new pen in hand. The pen was quivering a little, full of eagerness and excitement. And Sir Sidney began.

"King Alfred suffered from piles."

I lowered my pen. "Excuse me?"

"King Alfred suffered from piles," Sir Sidney repeated slowly. When I still did not begin writing, but continued to gape at him, he asked, "What seems to be the trouble, Mr. Holland?"

"Well, sir, er . . ." Then I blurted, "Are you sure about this?"

"Quite sure," said Sir Sidney. "Asser, Alfred's biographer, tells us so. As I was going to say next: when Alfred was in his late teens, he asked God to give him a disease. God granted his request with piles, but then Alfred realised he couldn't serve his country properly if he was incapable of riding a horse—which, of course, a prince of the realm must do—so he requested God take the piles away again. And lo and behold!, they vanished. Now, bearing in mind that men choose the past which serves their present needs, and that it is Asser who narrates this tale, not Alfred himself—and Asser isn't always reliable—I do think it's highly interesting, and could tell us a great deal about the king's character."

"But why wish for a disease?" I asked, despite myself intrigued.

"Well, that's precisely the point. Personally, I think it has to do with his awakening sexual feelings at that age. Instructive, don't you think?"

I stared at the page before me, still white, still innocent. Then I looked back at Sir Sidney, to avert my eyes again and gaze out of the window. I just caught a flash of Tristram on his pony, galloping along in the paddock at the bottom of the slope at the back of the garden.

"Look, Mr. Holland," Sir Sidney cut my tarrying short. "I don't have time for squeamishness. I intend to write the story that I think should be written, and it begins right where you seem to want to leave off."

"I, I'm sorry, sir," I faltered. "It is not my intention to criticise you, but still . . . it does seem a rather unfortunate way to begin a work on our greatest rulers."

"Oh, you're free to be critical, do not mistake my meaning. If I only wanted someone to push the pen for me, I would've hired a clerk. I hired you, Mr. Holland, amongst other reasons, because I esteem your intellect

RICHARD FROST

and analytical abilities. Still I'm afraid that, in this case, I must stick to my guns. No worries: Shaw will publish it—he cannot afford to refuse. So . . . ?”

“King Alfred suffered from piles,” I concluded.

It was the first sentence that I wrote for him. Thousands of others followed, stringing together to form the most unusual historiography I had ever seen. I had been right that Sir Sidney would not focus on the facts, but it was almost as if he weren't even interested in these: he found the indefinable, the inexplicable, far more intriguing. If he did use hard information, it was solely as a tool for his exploration of the psychology of power. Initially I thought that maybe the succession of kings would come together as a form of national biography, a formative history of our country, but this, too, turned out to be a false prospect. As the book progressed, a picture arose of ten sovereigns who had all been slightly mad—all except George III, who, Sir Sidney suspected, had merely had a physical condition, which had affected his entire body, including the brain. Of the rest, however, no-one appeared to have been sound of mind to begin with. The debauches of Charles II were described in dark detail; others were driven by theomania, megalomania; some were plain stupid. One thing was for certain: Sir Sidney would not bore his readers to death. If anything, he'd give them a heart attack.

Sir Sidney himself seemed to find it fairly amusing that I had bucked so fearfully at the very first hurdle. He liked to have a glass of wine with me after dinner, and one day—I believe it was in the second month—when we were sitting thus together, he said, “We're proceeding well with the book; I'm altogether satisfied. Who would've thought, eh? Ah, Mr. Holland, that look on your face when I told you about King Alfred: priceless, priceless.” Seeing me blush, he asked, “Don't you remember your own manifesto? ‘We want books to have more bodies! Death to decorum! Let us have all those physical doings that are now kept so carefully in the dark!’”

“Well, yes,” I admitted, a bit sheepish, “that *was* the idea. But it can be a bit confronting when it becomes black on white. And I think that, maybe, different rules apply to fiction than to historical accounts that centre on royal public figures.” I fell silent, suddenly realising that, at the time I had written the manifesto, I'd also been more sure of myself. For a second I hesitated, then I resumed, “Really, sir, I appreciate what you're doing in this book: it is clever, it's imaginative, and throws an entire new light on

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

what we know. Yet I do maintain that your audience might fail to grasp your meaning. You knock the back wall out of the display case. You turn gods into people. And you do leave a lot of room for doubt."

Raising his glass with a shaky hand (not because he felt unnerved by my comments, but because the hand itself was shaky), Sir Sidney replied,

"Believe me, I'm aware of being quite speculative at times. It's just" He took a sip, swallowed (with some difficulty, it seemed, as if the wine, fluid though it was, caught for a moment in his throat). ". . . I have always been more interested in questions than in answers. The whole idea that there *are* firm answers, at the end of some straight line of inquiry, seems a fallacy to me. In my view, knowledge sooner forms a spiral; and although we do move on, we keep circling round the truth, which, I often suspect, we'll never really touch." He laughed, apparently finding this image comical. "Who knows, maybe there's nothing there, like the eye of a cyclone. The meaning of life, Mr. Holland: room for doubt!"

"But if there really were nothing there, wouldn't that be rather sad?"

"Sad?" he echoed, genuinely amazed. "Not at all, my good man. It's great fun, spiralling around. One never gets bored with it." Carefully putting his glass down on the table, he proceeded, "But what about you, John? Any progress yet on the New Fiction front? Or do my grandson and I tire you out too much?"

"No, not in the least," I hastened to assure him, "there is plenty of time left. But since you ask, sir, I still intend to do that book on Eliot. It'll be a basis, as it were, from which to launch my own work."

"Ah, I see: studying again. Well, well, well." He appeared to lose interest here; for some reason, the Eliot critique did not appeal to him at all.

And he wasn't going to lend me any assistance with it either. Sir Sidney was personally acquainted with Miss Evans and, as I had heard, she was one of the guests who'd been invited to the cultural gathering he was organising in the last weekend of February. On the Monday before the big event was to take place, though, I received a nasty blow, when Sir Sidney announced that he needed me to go to the British Library to research some documents on Edward the Confessor, and collect the books he had ordered with his London supplier, which were too precious to be entrusted to Royal Mail. He also, quite specifically, told me that I was welcome to take a few days extra off, in case I wished to visit my mother and sister.

RICHARD FROST

I nodded, and nodded, but found it hard to do so with some semblance of gratitude. For the fact of the matter was, I wasn't glad at the unexpected leave—far from it. I did not wish to visit my mother and sister: I wanted to talk to George Eliot. I wanted to talk to all the others, seeing that half the country's intellectual elite would be there. In short, I wanted to stay.

However, I knew I could not refuse Sir Sidney's request, and so, on Thursday afternoon, I packed my bag and left. In the end, all I saw of the elite was the illustrious personage of the Duke of Omnium, ready to board the train that had just delivered me to London Bridge.

Of course, I went straight to Thornton, who, the Lord be praised, had been too busy at the publisher's to attend the meeting at Sutton Hall.

"What does he mean, sending me away like that?" I burst loose when I had unbuttoned and explained why I was in London. "Is he ashamed of me or something?" Throwing down my coat, I stomped into the room.

"Nice to see you, John," said Thornton. "Do sit down. Cigarette?"

"Please, I need one. You can't imagine what I . . ."

"Your family are well," he cut me short. "It's still hard, making ends meet, but they seem to've settled in nicely."

"Good, good. Give them my regards." I took the vesta case he held out to me. "Really, Robert, you must understand what a setback this is. I mean, finally an opportunity to talk to Eliot—and I've so many questions to ask, 'cause to be honest, I fail to see why . . . Never mind: I guess I sometimes don't like that weighty tone of her prose. But just when I can . . ."

"It is doubtful whether she'll actually be there, y'know," Thornton broke in again. "Lewes is in poor health, and I don't think she'll want to leave him by himself. Rumour has it that he's dying."

"Oh?" I lowered the vesta case. "I didn't know. Still, it's the principle that counts, isn't it? Here is a wonderful chance . . ."

Once more he interrupted me, and quite sharply this time.

"Look, John, has it not occurred to you that Sir Sidney really does need new material, and he thought he might as well let you go and get it now, since he cannot work with you this weekend anyway? Do light up, there's a good fellow."

"Huh? You think it went like that?"

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

"The plain obvious can be true sometimes. Also, I think Sir Sidney is doing his very best for you. When Shaw returned from Kent last week, he told me that he was intrigued to hear where your literary interests lay. 'A promising new author', he called you."

"Oh, come off it! He's sooner scared of me. He ran into me in the corridor, and all he did was hum and haw. 'Sorry. Sorry.' And then he shot straight back into the library. As if I was contagious, or some mugger."

"Well, maybe he was a bit jittery because Sir Sidney had just told him off: I must be badly mistaken if he wasn't reprimanded some way or other. Surely you can see that it's difficult for a one-track mind like Shaw's to veer round from confirmed hatred to cordiality? Now light up, John."

I snapped open the vesta case and pulled out a match.

"So you do think Sir Sidney spoke out in favour of me?"

"What else can've made Shaw change his mind?"

"I don't know. You, perhaps?"

"That didn't work before, and it wouldn't have worked now."

"You have a point there." I put the cigarette to my lips.

And then it hit me.

"I bet it was Lady Althane who wanted me out of the way."

"John, now really . . ."

"I'm telling you: the woman can't stand me! She contradicts me on . . . on everything! Oh yes, of course it was her. Let's keep the pauper out of sight. We wouldn't wish our important guests to get upset, would we?" Finally lighting my cigarette, I decided, "It was Lady Althane."

Looking back, I can see how unfair I was, in particular towards Thornton, who once more had to bear the brunt of my frustration. Yet I do maintain that I had every reason to be so suspicious of Lady Althane. There were moments when she seemed impossible to me, impossible—and to be frank, I still think that I was right. As free a soul and averse to all dogma as she professed to be, she was truly one of the most arrogant, prejudiced persons I had ever met. Before I'd even come to Sutton Hall, she had made up her mind against me, and she kept it made up, resolutely refusing to appreciate me for anything but the services that I rendered to her family.

RICHARD FROST

The first open conflict I had with her was over her art. Lady Althane's art was important to her: besides politics and charity, it was all that she did. If she wasn't painting, she was hacking away with hammer and chisel in a nearby church, where she took lessons with the local stonemason. The hard labour she performed there seemed somehow altogether fitting, for if one thing could be said of Lady Althane, it was that she *worked*. To her, art was no pretty pastime, to be taken up in moments of leisure and laid down again at will—it was her calling, her destiny, her job.

This ruling passion, or obsession, shone through in nearly every aspect of her. Whereas Sir Sidney tended to be still, and was always neatly dressed, his wife was all movement and disarray. Her hair was constantly flying wild, and her preferred article of dress was a coarse, wide apron, thick enough to absorb the tons of paint and dust in which she liked to immerse herself. Only towards evening did she change into more regular clothes, yet the loosely draped gowns that she favoured, too, had a tendency to flutter round her voluptuous frame without ever settling into a permanent shape. Her nails were seldom clean, and more than once she appeared at dinner with the smudges of oil still on her face.

If this wasn't unconventional enough, the way in which she painted was downright bizarre. She was severely short-sighted, probably due to the enormous amount of reading she did in the evenings, and for some reason she'd got it into her head that the vague view with which the myopic mortal must do was the one she wished to convey in her art. When painting, she would regularly take off her glasses, stare hard at what she saw, put the glasses on again, to subsequently fill the canvas with the hazy outlines and blobs of colour I, myself, knew so well from waking up. The world in a blur: a universe of strange deformity, in which some objects were far bigger than in reality, whilst others were entirely absent, because they were too small to be discerned with the uncorrected eye.

To the modern reader, my comments must sound like the sad confusion of a philistine, but I do wish to stress that, some forty-five years ago, approaches to art like Lady Althane's were highly unusual. Realism was still the norm, in narrative scenes that were meant to illustrate situation or character. It was what I'd been taught to like, and although I often felt dissatisfied with it, as I felt dissatisfied with the adopted modes in literature, it had always been my standard of what was accomplished and

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

proper. And, much as I might recognise the images Lady Althane created from my own experience as a short-sighted man, I was simply unequipped to interpret them: they only gave me the feeling I needed new glasses. She once mentioned Turner, and for a moment it all seemed to make sense, yet barely a second later, the insight was gone.

Unfortunately, Lady Althane showed herself unwilling to explain why she—who could paint perfectly well to the life, as the portrait of Sir Sidney that hung in the main drawing room demonstrated—should pursue such an eccentric course; and any of my attempts at getting to grips with her strange artwork only met with contempt. Every time I raised the subject, she instantly reacted by lashing out at me with her sharp tongue, in a manner that was more than unfriendly, if not outright hostile.

One evening our discussion on the matter even ended in a row. I should have known better, of course, after the several confrontations we'd had before, but I thought I had finally figured out the fuzzy paintings and, over dinner, mentioned the impressionist exhibition I had seen in Paris a few years ago. For an answer, Lady Althane nearly punched me in the face.

"Oh truly, Mr. Holland," she snapped, "for the last time: my work is not intended to be understood. Why do you keep going on about this?"

"I'm only trying to appreciate the spirit of your creations," I said. "Surely you must have some idea of what constitutes a good painting?"

She put down her knife and fork, to state in a superior tone,

"Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach. I like to think that I can, and therefore I do what I do. That's really all I have to say about it."

"Still I think that . . ."

But she wouldn't listen. "You think too much, young man: you're always seeking for ideas. And in my experience, ideas merely get in the way. Look at the Pre-Raphaelites, with their polished symbolism and crowding of detail. There's nothing honest in those works, nothing direct."

"So you do have an idea of what constitutes a good painting," I rejoined.

Her eyes flashed angrily. "I know what I don't like. I'm telling you, it is time you gave this whole issue a rest. You're being far too critical."

"That sounds like a critique," I bit back at her.

At this point, Sir Sidney decided to intervene, and said he had an idea that he was reaching the critical threshold of a headache. Lady Althane

RICHARD FROST

immediately obliged with silence; nevertheless, she couldn't resist throwing me a defiant look, as if she had won the day.

It was only later, alone in my room, that I found my retort. Who was critical, if not she? Just uttering a comment was wrong in her eyes, and yet she dismissed a group of well-esteemed painters in one short sentence. Besides, wasn't her attitude a bit snobbish? Art had to shout, she said, but surely it was easier to shout from the rooftops than when one had to make a living on the ground floor. Indeed, I thought, the real benefit of belonging to the upper classes lay in their security, and therefore the liberty to deviate from the rules. Here at Sutton Hall, people acted as if all standards could simply be thrown to the winds, but it was exactly because there was no doubt as to their rank and station that they could afford to do so.

Meanwhile, my social anxiety was only getting worse, and Lady Althane showed herself ever ready to rub salt into the wound. Once, when Sir Sidney mentioned that the neighbours had bought new furniture, she commented, "How very middle-class." And, to me: "I do apologise, Mr. Holland"—to stress that, yes, she did place me firmly in that category.

How could I defend myself, what could I say? I could hardly start about my sisters having been presented at Court, how I had dined with barons, earls, and once had even passed the potatoes to a duke. It would just sound childish, weak or—worse—make me seem still more of a failure, for there was no denying the lowly position in the world that I occupied now.

Yet it hurt, it grated, it chafed my very skin. I let her taunts affect me so, there were times that I truly dreaded the evening. The only day of the week I woke up without any fear of being derided was the Friday: because, lucky for me, Lady Althane had another enemy. It was Sir Sidney's second son, and every Friday, he and his wife came over for dinner.

It may come as a surprise after what I have just told, but as regards Justin, or the Reverend Althane, as he was properly called, I whole-heartedly and unreservedly agreed with his stepmother. We both loathed him, full-stop.

I had taken a dislike to the Reverend right from the start. He was a dour, sallow-complexioned man, and as Low Church as a church could get to being a dungeon. He was so solemn, in fact, and so ready to point out the depravity of everything a person could possibly do that, after having borne

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

his gloomy presence twice, I decided to christen him BC, which stood for Bad Conscience. His wife I labelled the Grave, because she hardly ever opened her mouth if it wasn't to relieve her fork of the tiny bites of food which she allowed herself. They also had a son, Peter, who occasionally came to play with Tristram, Tristram doing all the playing and Peter looking on with a pale and puckered face. (And of Peter I can say for sure that he won't feature in the rest of this story: after the day that Tristram got fed up with pedal-carting round his troubled cousin, and decided to try a different game—threw a ball at Peter, got no response and, assuming Peter hadn't realised he was meant to catch the ball, threw it a second time, now hitting him on the nose—Peter turned on his heel and never came to play with Tristram again. He was gladly missed.)

But about the Friday dinners. Lady Althane was a staunch atheist, and here is where things went wrong. Out of respect for Sir Sidney, she usually kept silent in the company of the Reverend, unusually silent; however, every two weeks or so (inevitable, one might say, with a priest present), the subject of religion would crop up in conversation, and Lady Althane's fiery temper flared up to blazing heights. In all truth, I sometimes suspected the Reverend of purposely provoking her, although I cannot say he ever won the argument, Lady Althane invariably having the last, strong word.

For an example, in the fourth month I was at the Hall Or no, that cannot be right, because it would mean that Roz was there, and no doubt she would have brought relief with one of her bubbly giggles—she just couldn't take disputes like that seriously. So it must have been earlier

Never mind, it's not important. As I was going to tell: during one of those tedious Friday dinners, the Reverend asked Lady Althane if she were willing to contribute some needlework to the mission basket.

And Lady Althane erupted, on the instant, at once.

"Do I look like a woman who spends her time making embroidery?" she snarled at the Reverend.

She most certainly did not, with her arty garb, the tousled cloud of hair, and her stained and calloused hands. I am sure the Reverend saw her point, but over his face there only flickered glee—just a hint of it—and he pursued, "It *is* for a good cause."

RICHARD FROST

“No, it isn’t. If I’m to believe the articles my husband has written on the subject, the peoples in Africa already have religion. And all you propose to do is disillusion them, and place them under yet another illusion.”

The Reverend smiled, in the smug manner I so intensely hated, and which always made Lady Althane see even redder. Then he declared in an unctuous tone, “We are talking about bringing the true faith, ma’am. Surely you agree that the Christian ethic cannot be compared with the primitive belief systems to which the savages presently adhere?”

Surely she did *not* agree. “What’s more primitive,” she grouched, “people worshipping a totem pole or a wooden cross with a corpse nailed to it?”

At these blasphemous words, even the Reverend was struck dumb, turning visibly white. His wife, in a dramatic gesture, clutched her chest, as if it were Beelzebub herself who had spoken. And I, as well, felt that this time Lady Althane had gone too far—way out of line. Nervously I glanced at Sir Sidney, hoping that he could somehow rescue the situation.

He kept us for a second in suspense, but certain enough, calm enough, he spoke. “You know Lady Althane doesn’t agree with you on this matter,” he told his son, “so why bring it up?” To his wife, he said, “No doubt the boy means well. Let’s not make a fuss about it.”

Regrettably, though, the Reverend meant well with me too. The moment he had regained his self-righteous composure, his sharp eyes fixed on me, and he spoke, “I haven’t seen you in our church yet, Mr. Holland. You are more than welcome to join us.”

“Er . . .” I felt the sweat prick on the nape of my neck. But just at that moment I heard the butler come in and, turning round, I exclaimed happily, “Ah: pudding!”

It was a silly, clumsy escape, I admit, and later Sir Sidney could not stop making fun of it. The next evening, when we were sitting together enjoying our cigars, he remarked with a wink, “Pudding is your saviour, eh? At last the truth has come out: Mr. Holland believes in the afters!”

I smiled. “Well, you do have an excellent cook. But seriously, sir, I am an agnostic. I just thought your son might not be pleased.”

“Neither would my wife,” said Sir Sidney. “She calls it the coward’s choice. In her view, people should have the courage of their convictions, which, clearly, presupposes them having convictions.” He paused, puffing at his Havana, to resume, “Myself, I sometimes think that God is not a

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

human construct, as Margaret alleges, but rather that he was created by the Devil, to sow dissent amongst us poor mortals.”

“Still, you do believe in God, sir, don’t you?”

“Oh well.” He shrugged. “It is what I’ve been brought up with and, to be honest, it’s hard to give up the hope of Heaven when one is ill.” Again he paused, reflecting for a moment; then he uttered in a serious tone, “I can see that, with Justin, his belief urges him to do good. He is trustworthy, you know, and very conscientious. The dying always ask for him.”

This was true, as I knew from the times the Reverend had been called away from dinner. He always stood up without complaint, instantly ready to obey the summons. He did seem to work hard at any rate, as did his wife. They had set up a charity school together, and were busy organising funds for a new infirmary, where the poor could be treated for free.

But there was more.

“Of course,” Sir Sidney remarked as he tapped off some ashes, “I also enjoy going to church. My son may not be very entertaining at the dinner table, yet he preaches beautifully. He can do it only from the pulpit, but he does so, so gloriously. Ah yes, how I enjoy a good story.”

It must be true that the Reverend was a talented story-teller, because I had never heard Tristram complain about going to church, and I had often wondered how he could sit through two entire services without blowing his top with pent-up energy.

Like his grandfather, Tristram loved stories and, as I’d soon discovered in the schoolroom, stories provided one of the main keys to teaching him. As optimistic as he felt about the new languages of French and Latin, initially Tristram had displayed only aversion to reading and writing English, probably because he had been told by his previous masters that, no matter his spoken fluency, he was a total failure when it came to communicating the native tongue on paper. He did take pleasure, though, in hearing stories being read out—and I used this appetite for narrative to win him over to some independent reading.

The approach I took was to start a piece of text and, having reached a point of true suspense, tell him to finish the rest himself in the afternoon. To my own amazement, the new assignment was an instant and huge

RICHARD FROST

success. Really, it was almost as if I had waved a magic wand, turning Tristram in a flash from a teacher's worst nightmare into a veritable dream. Often he even read much further than the five pages I'd set as a minimum, or he opened a book of his own accord. In a word, he became addicted, insatiable, always craving for more.

He particularly liked the world of fancy, such as in the fairytales of Andersen, and I struck real gold when I introduced *The Boy's King Arthur*, a special edition of Malory's which had recently been published. Needless to say, of the knights Sir Tristram de Lyonesse was his absolute favourite; other cherished heroes were Sir Lancelot and Gawain. He also had a soft spot for the exotic figure of the Saracen Palomides, so I added the text of *The Knight of the Yellow Lands*, the romance that Sir Sidney had recovered from his private collection of ancient manuscripts, and which told about the great feats Sir Palomides had accomplished. Whilst going through the Arthurian cycle, I wove in short lessons on medieval history, which ranged from explaining where the game of chess came from, to telling Tristram about English kings (including Alfred, but without the piles) and the Norman conquest.

Half the battle having been won in this manner, in the second month I added the homework of composition, asking him to write an essay about what we had discussed in class, or to create a story of his own. It could be three sentences or thirty, I did not care, as long as it was articulate and showed a certain line of thought. Often it was amusing to see what, to Tristram, had been the highlight of the day. One of his first essays read, "*A knight can drown in a puddle, because his harness is so heavy. If he drops from his horse, he can't get up again without any help. This means he'll choke in the mud.*" At other times, when he felt more inspired, he tried his hand at a short tale or poem, always showing impressive originality and also (surprisingly enough) a knack for semantic play. He was worried at first that his poems did not rhyme, but I told him, "That's perfectly fine. Shakespeare seldom rhymed, and he was the greatest poet ever."

And so Tristram moved on, easily, speedily, in leaps and in bounds.

Sir Sidney was patient enough to allow me ample time to get accustomed to my task as a tutor, but halfway through March, he decided that the

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

moment had come for a first gauging of the state of affairs, remarking over dinner, "Judging by the speed with which he dashes past the library window every morning, my grandson is turning into a great athlete. What about his mental progress, Mr. Holland?"

"Well, sir," I answered, "I am pleased to say that Tristram has exceeded all expectations. There's still a backlog, of course, but nothing that, in my view, cannot be remedied. I really have high hopes for him."

"Oh, that *is* good news," exclaimed Lady Althane, full of relief.

Sir Sidney was more sceptical, though, telling me,

"Very well, I shall test him myself this evening."

Evidently (but not unexpectedly), the test went to satisfaction, for the next afternoon, when I entered the library, I was greeted with the words:

"My congratulations to you, Master Holland. As Tristram himself reported yesterday, his brain has grown tremendously. Yes, those were his very words; and I could not but agree. My wife and I are much beholden to you, sir, much beholden indeed."

I was so gratified by this praise (not least because it was extended in unison with Lady Althane) that I only nodded and smiled, and nodded, and smiled—even forgetting to protest that, obviously, naturally, it was all Tristram's doing, and I had merely assisted him in the doing.

Meanwhile Sir Sidney continued, "You also seem to have sparked off in our young student a true taste for adventure. He wants to become an explorer, like Gulliver, and a travel writer. Sadly, I had to inform him that travelling through time, as he was planning to do, may not be possible for quite a while yet. But there is always history, of course. Who knows, maybe he'll become my heir not only in chapter, but also in verse."

I smiled some more. And nodded. Smiled again.

And suddenly I saw that here, this, was the perfect moment.

"Since you mention history, sir," I said, "I thought that maybe we could show Tristram the manuscript of *The Knight of the Yellow Lands*. He so loves that story, and he might like to see what such old documents look like. I told him about scribes and how they made illuminations and"

At this point, I had wandered off far enough to reach the display cabinet in the corner. Longingly, I gazed at the fortified glass doors, praying that they would now finally open. I so wanted to see those sheets of vellum, yellowed and curled, the patient handwriting, the intricate decorations, all

RICHARD FROST

of the days when fiction still came in the form of romance, to be marvelled at, to wonder at, and wasn't yet geared at reproducing what one saw and heard every day in everyday life.

To my regret, however, Sir Sidney replied, "I'm sorry, John, but I don't like to expose my precious papers to the light. That text is fragile enough as it is. As you know, it's the only extant version; and for Tristram to fumble it with his quick fingers . . . It is safely stored, and I prefer to keep it safe."

"But it is in there, sir, is it not?"

"No: it is safely stored somewhere else. You're welcome to have a look at my first editions, though. I have a rare copy of *Tom Jones*." He gave a nod at Charles, his valet, who stepped forward and, with a special key from a special waistcoat pocket, opened the doors for me.

I have to say, the books were a genuine delight, yet part of me kept wondering where, if not here, the antique codices were filed, for *Tom Jones* was not what I had hoped to see and to hold. Somehow I found the knick-knacks on the middle shelf more intriguing, amongst which some 17th-century scientific instruments, that were so cleverly designed, one could not even guess what purpose they might have served.

"What's this, sir?" I took up a silver goblet.

"Look at the inscription."

Pushing my glasses higher up my nose, I peered more closely. And I read: "*Thys is the Holie Grayle.*"

Puzzled, I turned the goblet round in my hands, to see that there was another line engraved on the back: "*Thysse is a Joke.*"

"A friend gave it to me," Sir Sidney explained. "Dear me, how relieved I was when I read that second sentence. For a moment I really thought that the great quest had come to an end." He grinned. Then he suggested, "I just thought: what if we, you and I, made Tristram a treasure map? I'm sure I have some good old parchment lying about somewhere. We could give him a quest, an imaginary country to explore. Do you think he'd like that?"

I put the goblet down. "Like it? He'd be thrilled!"

And thus it happened that, a few minutes later, I was sitting at Sir Sidney's desk, with some good old parchment and inks from the special cabinet, producing a piece of the realm of fancy. Sir Sidney gave me a sample chart of medieval lettering, to make the map look truly ancient and, again on his instructions, I drew some writhing snakes to signify danger,

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

demarcated the dragon's den and, also, the hole that the white rabbit had jumped into (I had read Carroll's story of Alice to Tristram, and he'd been speculating about the entry into Wonderland ever since). As a final touch, we burnt part of the map in a strategic place, with an arrow to indicate that there, right at the scorch mark, the hidden treasure should be sought.

The following morning, when I gave Tristram the map, he was over the moon. He did realise it was a fake; yet that didn't stop him from dreaming the very next night about the secret land the map depicted, and roaming over its hills and through its valleys long enough to get a first glimpse of the treasure. An inspired essay about the treasure being cursed followed. Afterwards he wrote a separate piece on the dragon, which, according to Tristram, you could only beat by means of mind power, or with a large rainbow, to be placed as a vault of imprisonment over its fiery head.

Still, entertaining as the yarns which Tristram spun could be (and I do believe it was around this time that he first began creating in his mind the faraway world about which, at a later age, he wrote such colourful stories), there were moments when his imagination seemed to run a bit too far. Necessity is said to be the mother of invention, and sometimes it was almost as if Tristram could only express certain feelings or fears he harboured in the form of fantasy, such as, for instance, with the doll, which started in or around the same week.

I don't think I have mentioned the doll before, but Tristram had one in his room, perched on a swinging chair that was suspended from the ceiling. The doll used to belong to Lady Althane, who had played with it herself as a child, and when Tristram had come to Sutton Hall, he had asked if he could have her: being a boy, he had never been given a doll, and he'd really like to have one. Rosalind, as he baptised his baby, was a lovely creature, with a pretty, pearly face, long golden curls, and sky-blue eyes. After Arthur the guinea pig, she was Tristram's most darling possession: he always said that, if she had been alive, she would have been a princess.

Rosalind wasn't entirely dead either, though—at least not to Tristram.

One evening . . . Yes, it must have been towards the end of March; and I had just climbed into bed to settle down for a final stint of Eliot (*Silas Marner*, if I remember rightly), when I was startled to hear the door of my room open and see a small white figure glide in. And even though I have never believed in the supernatural, I do recall how, just for a tiny instant, I

RICHARD FROST

actually thought I was being visited by some phantom creature—when all at once my eyes clicked into focus, and I realised that it was Tristram in his night shirt, who had by now come to a halt beside the hearth.

For a few seconds he just stood there, shivering in the thin shirt, patiently waiting for me to overcome my amazement at this unexpected apparition. Then, deciding it was taking too long, he declared,

“It’s not magic. I came down through the little turret.”

“Right,” said I.

The candle on the chair beside my bed flickered in the draught that was coming from the door, causing his features to light up briefly, after which they just as abruptly plunged back into the shadows. The eerie outline of a shuddering, bare-footed night shirt remained.

Stepping a little closer, Tristram suddenly showed his face again.

“I just came to tell you,” he whispered, “that the doll has spoken.”

“Spoken?” I echoed breathlessly.

Tristram pressed his lips together and nodded gravely.

“She said that there may be ghosts out tonight, and I thought I’d warn you. Grandfather and Auntie Margaret share the same room, but you are all alone.” Stealing towards the foot of the bed, he asked with a searching glance, “Are you afraid of ghosts, Mr. Holland?”

Now it may seem stupid, but it was only at that moment, as he lay a cautious hand on the bedclothes, that I gathered the real purpose of his errand. Sitting up straight and adjusting my glasses, I answered,

“To tell you the truth, Tristram, I confess I am a little, yes. But, er . . .” I pretended to hesitate. Then I asked, “I say, old chap, couldn’t you keep me company? For if you go back upstairs. I’ll be on my own again. You can sleep here, if you like.”

A smile gathered round his lips and, giving a quick shrug to affect indifference, he hopped onto the bed. “Very well. I don’t mind.”

It was endearing, the way he snuggled up beside me and wriggled his toes under the sheets until he had reached a comfortable position.

“It is nice and cosy,” he remarked, only a small tuft of hair remaining visible.

“Yes, it is,” I said, “I have a great hot-water bottle.”

“I often get cold here. Italy was much warmer.”

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

And maybe this was why there were ghosts tonight, I reflected. It must have been hard for him, making the transition to a country where everything was so different, including the climate. Sir Sidney and Lady Althane were always kind to Tristram, and mindful of his welfare, still he was bound to feel lonely at times, away from his parents, with no siblings, and only Nurse Jones and me to keep him company. On the other hand, straight to boarding school would have been harder—myself, I remembered the first year as a hell-hole of being flogged and fagged. No running around either: I'd had to become a small adult overnight.

"Tristram?" It just occurred to me. "What about Nurse Jones?"

"Oh, she's fine," he said nonchalantly. "She thinks ghosts are nonsense."

The doll, however, did not. At least once a week, she'd tell Tristram to sneak down the turret, and protect Mr. Holland from the scary spirits that were floating about the Hall at night. It was our little secret, and we never told a soul. We just didn't want to face the ghosts alone.

Early in April, I learnt where the doll's name came from.

It was the first true day of spring, a soft sun kissing the trees outside and coaxing the buds into view. In an ever drowsier schoolroom, Tristram and I were doing sums (still his major weakness, and his least favourite subject), when suddenly a short knock sounded, and Lady Althane came in.

"My apologies for intruding, Mr. Holland," she spoke, with the new courteousness that had rung through her voice ever since Sir Sidney had given his positive evaluation of me, "but I have a note here for Tristram. It was enclosed in a letter addressed to myself, and I only just took the trouble of opening it, so . . . Would you mind if I gave it to Tristram now? Or had you rather I waited until the end of the lessons?"

"No, not at all." Tristram never received any letters, not even from his parents, and I'd be the last to deny him the pleasure.

In the event, I did not need to give my permission, as Tristram had already trotted over and taken the note from Lady Althane. Beaming at me over his shoulder, he cried, "It's from Roz! I know it is."

"It is indeed," Lady Althane said with a smile. "Thank you most kindly, Mr. Holland." Giving me a short nod, she withdrew.

RICHARD FROST

Tristram was still clasping the note to his chest, in the ecstatic manner that bad painters would have us believe that people pose *after* they've seen the news and found it to be thoroughly wonderful.

"Shall I read it to you?" he asked, his eyes sparkling eagerly.

"Don't you want to read it for yourself first?"

"No, no. Oh, you'll like her, Mr. Holland, so much. She's . . . She's the best." And, unfolding the sheet of paper, he started to declaim, in the fullest confidence that, on hearing what Roz had to say, I would agree that, for sure, she *was* the best: "*My dearest Tristram. I shall be with you soon. Perhaps we can run together: I am really looking forward to it. I hope that you are well. A big kiss for yourself and a warm cuddle for Arthur. Lots of love, Roz.*"

Having finished reading, Tristram nodded approvingly at the text.

"Roz is like me," he stated. "She likes running too. But I always beat her."

Roz, short for Rosalind Munro, was also like Lady Althane: as I heard soon afterwards, she was Lady Althane's niece. She was to come for a few weeks to Sutton Hall, with the intention of taking painting lessons with her aunt. This was all I heard about the visit, because everyone seemed content with only telling me that I would like Miss Munro, Lady Althane even adding, in uncharacteristic affability, that it would nice for me as well, to have someone young about the house.

Apparently, there would be no hiding the pauper this time. Apparently, Miss Munro would like me back. But before that, as I was told once more, now by Sir Sidney, I would certainly like Rosalind.

I would like her.

Oh yes, I would.