

Chapter 37

The manor-house of Ferndean was a building of considerable antiquity, moderate size, and no architectural pretensions, deep buried in a wood. I had heard of it before. Mr. Rochester often spoke of it, and sometimes went there. His father had purchased the estate for the sake of the game covers. He would have let the house, but could find no tenant, in consequence of its ineligible and insalubrious site. Ferndean then remained uninhabited and unfurnished, with the exception of some two or three rooms fitted up for the accommodation of the squire when he went there in the season to shoot.

To this house I came just ere dark on an evening marked by the characteristics of sad sky, cold gale, and continued small penetrating rain. The last mile I performed on foot, having dismissed the chaise and driver with the double remuneration I had promised. Even when within a very short distance of the manor-house, you could see nothing of it, so thick and dark grew the timber of the gloomy wood about it. Iron gates between granite pillars showed me where to enter, and passing through them, I found myself at once in the twilight of close-ranked trees. There was a grass-grown track descending the forest aisle between hoar and knotty shafts and under branched arches. I followed it, expecting soon to reach the dwelling; but it stretched on and on, it would far and farther: no sign of habitation or grounds was visible.

I thought I had taken a wrong direction and lost my way. The darkness of natural as well as of sylvan dusk gathered over me. I looked round in search of another road. There was none: all was interwoven stem, columnar trunk, dense summer foliage — no opening anywhere.

I proceeded: at last my way opened, the trees thinned a little; presently I beheld a railing, then the house — scarce, by this dim light, distinguishable from the trees; so dank and green were its decaying walls. Entering a portal, fastened only by a latch, I stood amidst a space of enclosed ground, from which the wood swept away in a semicircle. There were no flowers, no garden-beds; only a broad gravel-walk girdling a grass-plat, and this set in the heavy frame of the forest. The house presented two pointed gables in its front; the windows were latticed and narrow: the front door was narrow too, one step led up to it. The whole looked, as the host of the Rochester Arms had said, “quite a desolate spot.” It was as still as a church on a week-day: the pattering rain on the forest leaves was the only sound audible in its vicinage.

“Can there be life here?” I asked.

Yes, life of some kind there was; for I heard a movement — that narrow front-door was unclosing, and some shape was about to issue from the grange.

It opened slowly: a figure came out into the twilight and stood on the step; a man without a hat: he stretched forth his hand as if to feel whether it rained.

Dusk as it was, I had recognised him — it was my master, Edward Fairfax Rochester, and no other.

I stayed my step, almost my breath, and stood to watch him — to examine him, myself unseen, and alas! to him invisible. It was a sudden meeting, and one in which rapture was kept well in check by pain. I had no difficulty in restraining my voice from exclamation, my step from hasty advance.

His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever: his port was still erect, his hair was still raven black; nor were his features altered or sunk: not in one year's space, by any sorrow, could his athletic strength be quelled or his vigorous prime blighted. But in his countenance I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding — that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson.

And, reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity? — if you do, you little know me. A soft hope blest with my sorrow that soon I should dare to drop a kiss on that brow of rock, and on those lips so sternly sealed beneath it: but not yet. I would not accost him yet.

He descended the one step, and advanced slowly and gropingly towards the grass-plat. Where was his daring stride now? Then he paused, as if he knew not which way to turn. He lifted his hand and opened his eyelids;

gazed blank, and with a straining effort, on the sky, and toward the amphitheatre of trees: one saw that all to him was void darkness. He stretched his right hand (the left arm, the mutilated one, he kept hidden in his bosom); he seemed to wish by touch to gain an idea of what lay around him: he met but vacancy still; for the trees were some yards off where he stood. He relinquished the endeavour, folded his arms, and stood quiet and mute in the rain, now falling fast on his uncovered head. At this moment John approached him from some quarter.

“Will you take my arm, sir?” he said; “there is a heavy shower coming on: had you not better go in?”

“Let me alone,” was the answer.

John withdrew without having observed me. Mr. Rochester now tried to walk about: vainly, — all was too uncertain. He groped his way back to the house, and, re-entering it, closed the door.

I now drew near and knocked: John’s wife opened for me. “Mary,” I said, “how are you?”

She started as if she had seen a ghost: I calmed her. To her hurried “Is it really you, miss, come at this late hour to this lonely place?” I answered by taking her hand; and then I followed her into the kitchen, where John now sat by a good fire. I explained to them, in few words, that I had heard all which had happened since I left Thornfield, and that I was come to see Mr. Rochester. I asked John to go down to the turn-pike-

house, where I had dismissed the chaise, and bring my trunk, which I had left there: and then, while I removed my bonnet and shawl, I questioned Mary as to whether I could be accommodated at the Manor House for the night; and finding that arrangements to that effect, though difficult, would not be impossible, I informed her I should stay. Just at this moment the parlour-bell rang.

“When you go in,” said I, “tell your master that a person wishes to speak to him, but do not give my name.”

“I don’t think he will see you,” she answered; “he refuses everybody.”

When she returned, I inquired what he had said. “You are to send in your name and your business,” she replied. She then proceeded to fill a glass with water, and place it on a tray, together with candles.

“Is that what he rang for?” I asked.

“Yes: he always has candles brought in at dark, though he is blind.”

“Give the tray to me; I will carry it in.”

I took it from her hand: she pointed me out the parlour door. The tray shook as I held it; the water spilt from the glass; my heart struck my ribs loud and fast. Mary opened the door for me, and shut it behind me.

This parlour looked gloomy: a neglected handful of fire burnt low in the grate; and, leaning over it, with his head supported against the high, old-fashioned mantelpiece, appeared the blind tenant of the room. His old dog, Pilot, lay on one side, removed out of the way, and coiled up as if afraid of being inadvertently trodden upon. Pilot pricked up his ears when I came in: then he jumped up with a yelp and a whine, and bounded towards me: he almost knocked the tray from my hands. I set it on the table; then patted him, and said softly, "Lie down!" Mr. Rochester turned mechanically to SEE what the commotion was: but as he SAW nothing, he returned and sighed.

"Give me the water, Mary," he said.

I approached him with the now only half-filled glass; Pilot followed me, still excited.

"What is the matter?" he inquired.

"Down, Pilot!" I again said. He checked the water on its way to his lips, and seemed to listen: he drank, and put the glass down. "This is you, Mary, is it not?"

"Mary is in the kitchen," I answered.

He put out his hand with a quick gesture, but not seeing where I stood, he did not touch me. "Who is this? Who is this?" he demanded, trying, as it seemed, to SEE with those sightless eyes — unavailing and distressing attempt! "Answer me — speak again!" he ordered, imperiously and aloud.

“Will you have a little more water, sir? I spilt half of what was in the glass,” I said.

“WHO is it? WHAT is it? Who speaks?”

“Pilot knows me, and John and Mary know I am here. I came only this evening,” I answered.

“Great God! — what delusion has come over me? What sweet madness has seized me?”

“No delusion — no madness: your mind, sir, is too strong for delusion, your health too sound for frenzy.”

“And where is the speaker? Is it only a voice? Oh! I CANNOT see, but I must feel, or my heart will stop and my brain burst. Whatever — whoever you are — be perceptible to the touch or I cannot live!”

He groped; I arrested his wandering hand, and prisoned it in both mine.

“Her very fingers!” he cried; “her small, slight fingers! If so there must be more of her.”

The muscular hand broke from my custody; my arm was seized, my shoulder — neck — waist — I was entwined and gathered to him.

“Is it Jane? WHAT is it? This is her shape — this is her size — “

“And this her voice,” I added. “She is all here: her heart, too. God bless you, sir! I am glad to be so near you again.”

“Jane Eyre! — Jane Eyre,” was all he said.

“My dear master,” I answered, “I am Jane Eyre: I have found you out — I am come back to you.”

“In truth? — in the flesh? My living Jane?”

“You touch me, sir, — you hold me, and fast enough: I am not cold like a corpse, nor vacant like air, am I?”

“My living darling! These are certainly her limbs, and these her features; but I cannot be so blest, after all my misery. It is a dream; such dreams as I have had at night when I have clasped her once more to my heart, as I do now; and kissed her, as thus — and felt that she loved me, and trusted that she would not leave me.”

“Which I never will, sir, from this day.”

“Never will, says the vision? But I always woke and found it an empty mockery; and I was desolate and abandoned — my life dark, lonely, hopeless — my soul athirst and forbidden to drink — my heart famished and never to be fed. Gentle, soft dream, nestling in my arms now, you will fly, too, as your sisters have all fled before you: but kiss me before you go — embrace me, Jane.”

“There, sir — and there!”

I pressed my lips to his once brilliant and now rayless eyes — I swept his hair from his brow, and kissed that too. He suddenly seemed to arouse himself: the conviction of the reality of all this seized him.

“It is you — is it, Jane? You are come back to me then?”

“I am.”

“And you do not lie dead in some ditch under some stream? And you are not a pining outcast amongst strangers?”

“No, sir! I am an independent woman now.”

“Independent! What do you mean, Jane?”

“My uncle in Madeira is dead, and he left me five thousand pounds.”

“Ah! this is practical — this is real!” he cried: “I should never dream that. Besides, there is that peculiar voice of hers, so animating and piquant, as well as soft: it cheers my withered heart; it puts life into it. — What, Janet! Are you an independent woman? A rich woman?”

“If you won’t let me live with you, I can build a house of my own close up to your door, and you may come and sit in my parlour when you want company of an evening.”

“But as you are rich, Jane, you have now, no doubt, friends who will look after you, and not suffer you to devote yourself to a blind lameter like me?”

“I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress.”

“And you will stay with me?”

“Certainly — unless you object. I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion — to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to look so melancholy, my dear master; you shall not be left desolate, so long as I live.”

He replied not: he seemed serious — abstracted; he sighed; he half-opened his lips as if to speak: he closed them again. I felt a little embarrassed. Perhaps I had too rashly over-leaped conventionalities; and he, like St. John, saw impropriety in my inconsiderateness. I had indeed made my proposal from the idea that he wished and would ask me to be his wife: an expectation, not the less certain because unexpressed, had buoyed me up, that he would claim me at once as his own. But no hint to that effect escaping him and his countenance becoming more overcast, I suddenly remembered that I might have been all wrong, and was perhaps playing the fool unwittingly; and I began gently to withdraw myself from his arms — but he eagerly snatched me closer.

“No — no — Jane; you must not go. No — I have touched you, heard you, felt the comfort of your presence — the sweetness of your consolation: I cannot give up these joys. I have little left in myself — I must have you. The world may laugh — may call me absurd, selfish — but it does not signify. My very soul demands you: it will be satisfied, or it will take deadly vengeance on its frame.”

“Well, sir, I will stay with you: I have said so.”

“Yes — but you understand one thing by staying with me; and I understand another. You, perhaps, could make up your mind to be about my hand and chair — to wait on me as a kind little nurse (for you have an affectionate heart and a generous spirit, which prompt you to make sacrifices for those you pity), and that ought to suffice for me no doubt. I suppose I should now entertain none but fatherly feelings for you: do you think so? Come — tell me.”

“I will think what you like, sir: I am content to be only your nurse, if you think it better.”

“But you cannot always be my nurse, Janet: you are young — you must marry one day.”

“I don’t care about being married.”

“You should care, Janet: if I were what I once was, I would try to make you care — but — a sightless block!”

He relapsed again into gloom. I, on the contrary, became more cheerful, and took fresh courage: these last words gave me an insight as to where the difficulty lay; and as it was no difficulty with me, I felt quite relieved from my previous embarrassment. I resumed a livelier vein of conversation.

“It is time some one undertook to rehumanise you,” said I, parting his thick and long uncut locks; “for I see you are being metamorphosed into a lion, or something of that sort. You have a ‘faux air’ of

Nebuchadnezzar in the fields about you, that is certain: your hair reminds me of eagles' feathers; whether your nails are grown like birds' claws or not, I have not yet noticed."

"On this arm, I have neither hand nor nails," he said, drawing the mutilated limb from his breast, and showing it to me. "It is a mere stump — a ghastly sight! Don't you think so, Jane?"

"It is a pity to see it; and a pity to see your eyes — and the scar of fire on your forehead: and the worst of it is, one is in danger of loving you too well for all this; and making too much of you."

"I thought you would be revolted, Jane, when you saw my arm, and my cicatrised visage."

"Did you? Don't tell me so — lest I should say something disparaging to your judgment. Now, let me leave you an instant, to make a better fire, and have the hearth swept up. Can you tell when there is a good fire?"

"Yes; with the right eye I see a glow — a ruddy haze."

"And you see the candles?"

"Very dimly — each is a luminous cloud."

"Can you see me?"

"No, my fairy: but I am only too thankful to hear and feel you."

“When do you take supper?”

“I never take supper.”

“But you shall have some to-night. I am hungry: so are you, I daresay, only you forget.”

Summoning Mary, I soon had the room in more cheerful order: I prepared him, likewise, a comfortable repast. My spirits were excited, and with pleasure and ease I talked to him during supper, and for a long time after. There was no harassing restraint, no repressing of glee and vivacity with him; for with him I was at perfect ease, because I knew I suited him; all I said or did seemed either to console or revive him. Delightful consciousness! It brought to life and light my whole nature: in his presence I thoroughly lived; and he lived in mine. Blind as he was, smiles played over his face, joy dawned on his forehead: his lineaments softened and warmed.

After supper, he began to ask me many questions, of where I had been, what I had been doing, how I had found him out; but I gave him only very partial replies: it was too late to enter into particulars that night. Besides, I wished to touch no deep-thrilling chord — to open no fresh well of emotion in his heart: my sole present aim was to cheer him. Cheered, as I have said, he was: and yet but by fits. If a moment’s silence broke the conversation, he would turn restless, touch me, then say, “Jane.”

“You are altogether a human being, Jane? You are certain of that?”

“I conscientiously believe so, Mr. Rochester.”

“Yet how, on this dark and doleful evening, could you so suddenly rise on my lone hearth? I stretched my hand to take a glass of water from a hireling, and it was given me by you: I asked a question, expecting John’s wife to answer me, and your voice spoke at my ear.”

“Because I had come in, in Mary’s stead, with the tray.”

“And there is enchantment in the very hour I am now spending with you. Who can tell what a dark, dreary, hopeless life I have dragged on for months past? Doing nothing, expecting nothing; merging night in day; feeling but the sensation of cold when I let the fire go out, of hunger when I forgot to eat: and then a ceaseless sorrow, and, at times, a very delirium of desire to behold my Jane again. Yes: for her restoration I longed, far more than for that of my lost sight. How can it be that Jane is with me, and says she loves me? Will she not depart as suddenly as she came? To-morrow, I fear I shall find her no more.”

A commonplace, practical reply, out of the train of his own disturbed ideas, was, I was sure, the best and most reassuring for him in this frame of mind. I passed my finger over his eyebrows, and remarked that they were scorched, and that I would apply something which would make them grow as broad and black as ever.

“Where is the use of doing me good in any way, beneficent spirit, when, at some fatal moment, you will again desert me — passing like a shadow, whither and how to me unknown, and for me remaining afterwards undiscoverable?”

“Have you a pocket-comb about you, sir?”

“What for, Jane?”

“Just to comb out this shaggy black mane. I find you rather alarming, when I examine you close at hand: you talk of my being a fairy, but I am sure, you are more like a brownie.”

“Am I hideous, Jane?”

“Very, sir: you always were, you know.”

“Humph! The wickedness has not been taken out of you, wherever you have sojourned.”

“Yet I have been with good people; far better than you: a hundred times better people; possessed of ideas and views you never entertained in your life: quite more refined and exalted.”

“Who the deuce have you been with?”

“If you twist in that way you will make me pull the hair out of your head; and then I think you will cease to entertain doubts of my substantiality.”

“Who have you been with, Jane?”

“You shall not get it out of me to-night, sir; you must wait till to-morrow; to leave my tale half told, will, you know, be a sort of security that I shall appear at your breakfast table to finish it. By the bye, I must mind not to rise on your hearth with only a glass of water then: I must bring an egg at the least, to say nothing of fried ham.”

“You mocking changeling — fairy-born and human-bred! You make me feel as I have not felt these twelve months. If Saul could have had you for his David, the evil spirit would have been exorcised without the aid of the harp.”

“There, sir, you are redd up and made decent. Now I’ll leave you: I have been travelling these last three days, and I believe I am tired. Good night.”

“Just one word, Jane: were there only ladies in the house where you have been?”

I laughed and made my escape, still laughing as I ran upstairs. “A good idea!” I thought with glee. “I see I have the means of fretting him out of his melancholy for some time to come.”

Very early the next morning I heard him up and astir, wandering from one room to another. As soon as Mary came down I heard the question: “Is Miss Eyre here?” Then: “Which room did you put her into? Was it dry? Is she up? Go and ask if she wants anything; and when she will come down.”

I came down as soon as I thought there was a prospect of breakfast. Entering the room very softly, I had a view of him before he discovered my presence. It was mournful, indeed, to witness the subjugation of that vigorous spirit to a corporeal infirmity. He sat in his chair — still, but not at rest: expectant evidently; the lines of now habitual sadness marking his strong features. His countenance reminded one of a lamp quenched, waiting to be re-lit — and alas! it was not himself that could now kindle the lustre of animated expression: he was dependent on another for that office! I had meant to be gay and careless, but the powerlessness of the strong man touched my heart to the quick: still I accosted him with what vivacity I could.

“It is a bright, sunny morning, sir,” I said. “The rain is over and gone, and there is a tender shining after it: you shall have a walk soon.”

I had wakened the glow: his features beamed.

“Oh, you are indeed there, my skylark! Come to me. You are not gone: not vanished? I heard one of your kind an hour ago, singing high over the wood: but its song had no music for me, any more than the rising sun had rays. All the melody on earth is concentrated in my Jane’s tongue to my ear (I am glad it is not naturally a silent one): all the sunshine I can feel is in her presence.”

The water stood in my eyes to hear this avowal of his dependence; just as if a royal eagle, chained to a perch,

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