

One

Miss Anna spent her early childhood in the house where her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ward, conducted their business. They were not rich, but they had very good connections. When Mr. Ward sold his establishment, in 1776 or thereabouts, he brought his wife and daughter to live in the cottage in which we are now gathered ⁱ.

Anna's adolescence flowed peacefully and happily by in this retreat, where "the mediocrity of gold"—as the poet has it—reigned supreme, sustaining that modest ease which is called good fortune.

During holidays especially, the cottage came to life. Then we would entertain Cornelia de Witt ⁱⁱ with her governess, Signora Letizia, and a blithe young man named Edward S. Barton, accompanied by his tutor Otto Goetzi.

Anna, Edward and Cornelia were bound together by a firm friendship. It was virtually taken for granted that Ned Barton would marry Anna when he came of age. I remember that Mrs. Ward had begun to embroider, ten years in advance, a superb pair of muslin curtains in which the monograms of Anna and Edward were interwoven—but man proposes and God disposes. It transpired that Ned Barton and our Anna loved one another only as brother and sister. I am sure that was true of Ned; perhaps there was a little something more in the dear heart of Anna, but William Radcliffe was nevertheless the happiest of husbands—Sir Walter Scott says so in his account of her life ⁱⁱⁱ.

The world being as it is, there can never have been such natural grace as Anna's. And what exuberance! Wherever she went, the room filled with smiles. Her only fault was an excessive timidity. Never judge authors by their works! It is not a hundred but a thousand times that I have been asked where she found the melancholy inspiration of her genius. You, at least, when you have heard me out, will never ask me that question again.

The month of September 1787 saw the last holiday shared by our three friends. William Radcliffe had already added a fourth to their number. He had asked for the hand of Miss Ward in July of that same year. Ned and Cornelia had been engaged during the previous winter; they were very much in love with one another and the life that was in prospect for them seemed to hold every promise of success.

On this occasion, Monsieur Goetzi did not accompany his maturing pupil, who was already sporting—honourably, of course—the uniform of the Royal Navy. For her part, Letizia had stayed in Holland, where she was serving as housekeeper to Count Tiberio, Cornelia's tutor. To illustrate how beautiful Cornelia was, one must have recourse to the eloquence of my poor Anna, who was later to immortalize the charms of her friend in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—Cornelia was the original on whom the character of Emily is based.

Oh, the memories! I was still a child, but I remember our long walks in the hills. Mr. Radcliffe had hardly a trace of romanesque precision; he was proper, well-dressed and polite to the fairer sex. Every time Ned and Cornelia lost themselves in the woods, William Radcliffe tried to strike up a conversation with Anna that was pleasant and tender, but she would immediately call out to me and turn the discussion towards literary topics. At her request, Mr. Radcliffe would recite passages from Greek and Latin poets. Although she could hardly understand their meaning, *She* was in love with their learned music—and sometimes, while the graduate of Oxford was declaiming Homer or Virgil, the soft gaze of our Anna would lose itself in the distance, where Midshipman Ned and the pale Cornelia were wandering, as if in a dream...

She would sigh then, and request Mr. Radcliffe to translate the text, word by word—which he did with a good grace, always happy to oblige ^{iv}.

The farewells were sad, that year. They all knew that they would not see one another again until both marriages had taken place: that of Mr. Radcliffe and Anna at this very place, and that of Ned and Cornelia in Rotterdam, where Count Tiberio made his home.

In response to a delicate and sentimental impulse, they had arranged that both marriages would take place on the same day, at the same hour: one in Holland; the other in England. By that means, in spite of the distance between them, a kind of communion would be established between the two happy events.

From the end of the vacation to the time of the double marriage, a very active correspondence was maintained. Cornelia's letters were filled with the purest joy. As for Ned, he was as amorous as a whole battalion of lovers. I did not see our Anna's replies, but she seemed to me to be a little sad.

At Christmas, the plans for the wedding were set in motion. Throughout the month of January 1787, there was no other matter of discussion but the *trousseau*. The great day had been fixed for the third of March.

In February, a letter arrived from Holland which threw the household into turmoil. The dowager Countess of Montefalcone, *née* de Witt, had died in Dalmatia. Cornelia, her sole heiress, suddenly found herself in possession of an enormous fortune.

The letter was from Ned, who seemed disturbed and rather saddened by this occurrence.

Although the missive was very short, it found space to record the singular fact that Count Tiberio, by virtue of the bountiful inheritance of the dowager of Montefalcone, now found himself the immediate heir of his own pupil.

After this letter, no further news was received from Holland until the end of February. There was nothing particularly surprising in that: bad weather held sway over the Channel and the wind, which blew incessantly from the west, made the crossing difficult. Today's steampackets make a mockery of the stiffest wind but in those days weeks could pass without any word arriving from the continent.

Every morning, as was his habit, the excellent Mr. Ward would look up at the weathervane atop the cottage and say: "As soon as that cock turns around, we'll get a whole ream of letters all at once!"

The first two days of March also passed without news. The wedding was to take place the following day; the house was full of activity and noise.

An hour after dinner, as evening approached, the wedding-gown was delivered—and almost at the same instant, the bell at the gate rang. The joyous voice of Mr. Ward was heard proclaiming from the staircase: "I said as much the day before yesterday: the cock has turned around! Here's the postman, bearing a whole armful of letters!"

Truth to tell, the arrival of the letters was rather inconvenient, given that the house was in such turmoil. The packet's contents were abundant and the dates of the postmarks very various. There was only time to open the most recent, in order to ascertain that our friends in Rotterdam were well, before everyone went back to work.

Under pressure of time, Anna was the prisoner of the couturiers who had brought her dress. I carried a batch of envelopes up to her myself, consisting of five letters—three from Cornelia and two from Ned Barton. At her request, I opened the one which seemed to be the latest, and went immediately to the foot of the fourth page.

"All is well," I said, after having scanned several lines.

"God be praised!" cried our Anna.

"Now, my angel," exclaimed the dressmaker, "little Jebb must show us a clean pair of heels—you're getting in our way, dear treasure."

She smiled at me to ameliorate the harshness of the instruction that chased me away. She was like a martyr assailed by four harpies with mouths full of pins, who were securing her within her shrine of white muslin. I put the packet of letters on the side-table and I left.

I should call your attention at this point to an important item: it is at this precise moment that I cease to speak as an actual eye-witness. From now on, it is to Anne Radcliffe herself that you are listening, for it was from her own lips that I had the rest of the story. I only saw her again after the events had taken place.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when the dressmaker and her assistants left the house, carrying the wedding-gown away one last time in order to make the final alterations

When she was left alone, our Anna felt so utterly exhausted by the commotion of the day that she lacked the strength to come down to the parlor where her father, mother and fiancé were waiting. She offered herself the excuse that she had to give proper attention to the letters from Rotterdam, but sleep claimed her before she had reached the end of the first paragraph of a joyous letter bearing the signature Edward S. Barton.

Our Anna's sleep was feverish and filled with dreams. She saw a little church, framed in an unusual style, set in a pleasant countryside filled with trees and plants that did not grow in England. There were blankets of corn in the fields and the cattle had hides colored like turtle-doves. Beside the church was a cemetery whose tombs were all white. There were two among them that seemed to be identical, from each of which—a simple but touching motif one often encounters in English cemeteries—*an arm extended, sculpted in a substance whiter than marble*. The two arms stretched towards one another, so that their hands clasped.

She did not understand, in her dream, why the sight of those two sepulchres made her shiver and weep bitterly. *She* wanted to read the inscriptions engraved on the marble headstones, but it was impossible to do that. The letters became jumbled and fled before her gaze.

At ten o'clock, when the noise of the returning dressmakers woke her up, *She* was still in tears. *She* had slept for three hours but the weight of a terrible unhappiness lay upon her mind.

"I shall not ask why you have such red eyes, Miss Ward," the dressmaker said to her. "Young girls about to be married always weep, and I suppose they are entitled. Try the dress on."

The dress was tried on. It fitted well, and they left her alone again. *She* bathed her eyes. The couturier's words had brought back the impression of her dream. Her gaze happened to fall upon the letters from Rotterdam which she had almost forgotten, and a loud gasp escaped her bosom.

It was as if she could suddenly read the names inscribed on the marble of the two identical tombs: Cornelia! Edward!

She opened an envelope at random. Her over-anxious eyes saw nothing at first but black dots dancing on the white sheet. When she was finally able to read, she was quickly reassured. The letter had been written on the thirteenth of February by Cornelia, who was happily making plans for the next holiday. By that time, the will of the dowager countess would have been sorted out. Cornelia intended to come to the cottage, not to stay there as she normally did but to collect the whole family and convey them to Castle Montefalcone, in the Dinaric Alps beyond Ragusa^v. She had a huge estate there, with marble and alabaster quarries. She was beside herself with joy. Ned had fallen in love with a poor girl, but now she was suddenly able to make him a rich landowner...

"What would I have given him?" our Anna thought, as she folded the letter. "It is better this way—and William is a worthy soul, after all."

Because she had already slept for three hours, she no longer felt tired. She settled down in a comfortable armchair and resolved to read the rest of her correspondence through to the end.

The happiness of her dear Cornelia delighted her, and you will understand that although a few sighs disturbed the muslin of her bodice, they were not provoked by envy. Anna envious—what blasphemy! No, but it is certainly true that Corny dwelt a little too much upon her new riches, her finery—and, above all, on the ardor of the attentions lavished upon her by the enraptured Ned. Entire pages sang like psalms, and vaulting over the psalms of Miss Corny came the dithyrambs of Edward Barton. Joy! Love! Love! Joy! It became monotonous. You have a nice

saying in France: If you are rich enough, eat dinner twice! Perhaps our Anna thought: "They should be married twice, since they love one another so much."

She began to take a certain pride in comparing the moderation of her own proper affection with the delirium of Cornelia. Then, when she had become philosophical, thoroughly imbued with the kind of sagacity with which Christians regard pagans, she began to tell herself that an excess of happiness could easily be transformed into its opposite. Such is human existence: action and reaction. Whosoever wins will lose—and beyond every horizon there are clouds on their way to screen the brightest sun.

As soon as this thought was formed in our Anna's head, it established itself with a remarkable authority. It struck a chord there. She began to dread, in advance, the miseries which could so easily succeed that deluge of felicities, in the near or distant future. Dear Ned! Poor Corny! Sorrow is so cruel when it follows joy! I believe that our Anna shed a few tears after having discovered the serpent lurking beneath the roses of the voluminous correspondence—because it was there, in the letters; oh yes, it was there!

I said there were five, and that was no lie, but they were separated within like those Chinese boxes that are nested one within another, to the continuing astonishment of little children. Cornelia's letters contained Ned Barton's interjections, while his permitted hers to spring forth within, and our Anna read on and on. She was on tenterhooks. It seemed to her that she might have been reading forever—and at the very moment when the philosophical idea came to her—the idea that well-educated people render as "The Tarpeian rock is very close to the Capitol"—a corresponding change overcame the letters.

A cloud, distant as yet, appeared in the blue sky. She saw it grow, advance, darken, concealing in its skirts... but we must not get ahead of ourselves. The thunderstorm will break soon enough.

I don't know if you are like me, but every time within this incomparable story that *She* employs that formula, whose inventor she was—*we must not get ahead of ourselves*—my flesh crept.

Little by little, the correspondence of the two lovers of Rotterdam changed its character.

As chance would have it, Anna had opened the oldest letters first. The cloud rose above the horizon when she opened the earlier of the last two envelopes.

It began as a letter from Ned; the song had descended into a lower key. So far, Count Tiberio, that paragon of tutors, had never been mentioned by Ned's pen without a gesture of indulgence, kindness or generosity. This time, the not-very-august name arrived bare of any adjective. Even more disturbing, Ned had not much to say about love.

Vaguely—very vaguely—he hinted that the inheritance of the dowager countess might possibly cause trouble. Count Tiberio's demeanor had changed. Monsieur Goetzi, who was passing through Rotterdam, had insinuated peculiar things...

There followed a letter from Corny, who was evidently suffering from "nerves." She called Letizia Pallanti "that person." Yesterday's angel, that "perfect creature" Letizia! Why? It was unexplained—but between the irritated lines of the missive, our Anna's perspicacity divined one utterly shocking thing: Letizia, neglectful not merely of universal morality but even of the most common decency, had entered into a relationship with Count Tiberio which it would be superfluous to describe.

As for Monsieur Goetzi—this was a more recent letter—what part was he playing? He spoke very ill of Count Tiberio, saying that his scandalous conduct had thrown his affairs into chaos, and he passed entire mornings and afternoons locked in Count Tiberio's office! He was present at all the orgies (the very word written in the letter) and when "that creature" Letizia emerged sporting diamonds, Monsieur Goetzi would play up to her like a cavalier!

Think of the lateness of the hour! It was already long past the time when *She* had heard the chimes of midnight but she felt not the slightest need of sleep. Our Anna was consumed by a

fervent desire to know what it was that had taken root in her good heart. She read on and on. A strange wedding-eve!

As the reading proceeded, the vague menace became distinct. Happiness and security induced boredom, but as the cloud gathered on the distant horizon, her interest reawakened.

As the first thunderclap sounded, *She* leapt suddenly from her armchair. A note of Ned's spoke of "delay"—and it was the marriage that was delayed!

The explanation was given by the statement that the inheritance was a splendid thing, but a little complicated, and that it was necessary to go to the place...

Why did the two not get married beforehand?

That was exactly the question that poor Ned posed.

She unfolded page after page, finding medium-sized leaves within the larger ones and smaller ones within the medium-sized. She read on and on. The most recent envelope had already been opened, when Mr. Ward had extracted from it the reassuring letter that had occasioned his cries of joy.

But do you know what that brave man had read? And I too, in my turn—for I had been similarly deceived.

We had read, here and there, two or three fragments of paragraphs in which the word "happiness" had been repeated one more time—but, alas, it was to express the regret of happiness lost!

"At the moment when all was smiles," poor Ned wrote, indeed, "when the future presented itself to us in the brightest colors: happiness, wealth, love..."

Mr. Ward had not inquired any further, and nor had I. But the sentence went on:

"...the storm burst. Yes, at that very moment; we were struck by lightning and cast down; we are lost!"

Lost! Imagine our Anna's state of mind.

Unhappily, there was no exaggeration in that fateful word! A note added by the unfortunate Cornelia read: "Torn from my bed in the middle of the night. Monsieur Goetzi seizes my hand at the foot of the stair and says: 'Courage! You have a friend!' Should I believe him? I am dragged away... The night is horrible and the tempest drowns my pleas to be sensible..."

She let go of the paper and fell to her knees.

"Oh Lord of All," she cried, between sobs, "why do you permit such heinous crimes? Where are you now, Cornelia? Where are you, my dearest friend?"

Other women usually faint in similar situations, but *She* was superior to the rest of her sex. Without abandoning her prayerful posture, she seized the letters again and continued to read through her tears. Ned seemed to respond to the last question which had sprung to our Anna's mind.

"Monsieur Goetzi had warned me," he wrote, in a few scarcely-legible lines, "but I did not want to believe him. What part is that man playing? This morning, I found Count Tiberio's house deserted. In the street the neighbors had gathered, crying: 'They have taken flight like thieves! The bankruptcy will be enormous!' 'You're wide of the mark,' replied Monsieur Goetzi, who had sprung forth as if from the ground. 'There will be no bankruptcy, and Count Tiberio will pay everyone, for he will marry the heir to the immense Montefalcone fortune!'"

One letter remained; a scrap of paper on which Ned had painfully scribbled: "Last evening, Monsieur Goetzi came to my house. He seemed to sympathize with my distress. He has told me that my beloved Cornelia, abducted by her infamous tutor, is on her way to Castle Montefalcone in Dalmatia. He advised me to hasten in pursuit. A saddled horse was ready and waiting outside my door. I set forth, although my strength was near-exhausted. No sooner was I out of town than I was surrounded and attacked by four men with their faces obscured by masks. Nevertheless, by the light of the moon and through the holes in one of the masks, I believe I recognized that green light which shines in the eyes of Monsieur Goetzi. Is it possible? A man who has been my teacher! They left me for dead on the highway. I lay there until morning, losing blood from

twenty wounds. At daybreak, villagers who were carrying their produce to market took me up and carried me to a nearby inn, which bears the sign *Ale and Amity*. May God reward them! Not that I value my life, but Cornelia has no one but me to defend her. My bed is good. My room is large. It is decorated with prints displaying the battles of Admiral Ruyter. The curtains have floral designs. The innkeeper seems harmless, but he resembles Monsieur Goetzi from behind. *He has no face*, which produces a peculiar effect. He is accompanied everywhere by an enormous dog which has, by contrast, a human figure. In the wall directly in front of my bed, eight feet above the ground or thereabouts, is a round-shaped opening like those which give access to stove-pipes. In the darkness above the hole I can distinguish something green: eyes which watch me incessantly... I am, God be praised, quite composed. A doctor has been summoned from Rotterdam to look after me. He and his pipe must outweigh three Englishmen. There is a hint of green in his eyes. Do you happen to know whether Monsieur Goetzi ever had a brother...?

“A little boy five or six years old came into my room rolling a hoop. He demanded of me in an impertinent manner: ‘Are you the dead man?’—and he threw a folded paper on to my coverlet. It was a letter from Cornelia... I scarcely had time to hide the paper. A bald woman came in, followed by the dog which now seems to look at me with the eyes of Monsieur Goetzi. It never barks. The innkeeper has a parrot that he carries everywhere on his shoulder and which says incessantly: ‘Have you dined, Ducat?’ The green eyes transfix me from the depths of the black hole. The child laughs heartily in the courtyard, crying: ‘I have seen the dead man!’ Around me, everything is green. Anna, my dear Anna, help...!”

ⁱ The Ward family actually left London in 1772 and moved to Bath, where Ann might well have encountered Sophia and Harriet Lee.

ⁱⁱ William Radcliffe’s obituary, quoted by Scott, says: “[Ann] was descended from a near relative of the De Witts of Holland. In some family papers which I have seen, it is stated that a De Witt, of the family of John and Cornelius, came to England... bringing with him a daughter, Amelia, then an infant.” The Christian name Cornelia is presumably derived from Cornelius, although one of the characters in *A Sicilian Romance* is a nun named Cornelia.

ⁱⁱⁱ This careful insinuation that the Radcliffes’ marriage was not a happy one is utterly gratuitous. Féval surely cannot have known William Radcliffe, although William was, like him, a man trained in law who gave up that vocation to follow another career (as editor of the *English Chronicle*). Perhaps Féval regretted that Scott’s memoir remained stubbornly silent regarding the motives of her writing save for the obituary-derived claim that William had encouraged her to begin it when she became bored because his editorial duties so often kept him late at the office. Féval was, of course, far too much of a gentleman to speculate that William might have been so intensely jealous of his wife’s literary success that she had to abandon her career to soothe his wounded vanity, and that her detailed pen-portraits of domineering male villains might have drawn inspiration from the well of personal feeling. Even modern critics who would like to establish Ann as a proto-feminist have balked at any such suggestion, although Robert Miles, in *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (1995) does call attention to the unusual fact that the first signature placed on *The Romance of the Forest* was plain “Ann Radcliffe”, to which an indication of marital status was only added in later editions. Féval presumably did not know this, nor could he have known that asthma is a stress-related (and sometimes stress-induced) condition.

^{iv} This detail is also derived, via Scott, from William’s obituary, although the insinuation that Ann’s interest in William’s translations was occasionally deflected to more inherently-interesting subjects is entirely Féval’s.

^v The name Ragusa was then attached by Western Europeans to the city which is now Dubrovnik in Croatia.