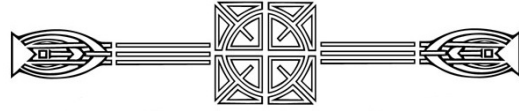


Tales of An English Garden

By Josephine Hymes



Graham Cottage at 150 Tiddington Road, Stratford-upon-Avon¹

Tale 2: Three Generations



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When Candy and her husband arrived in Stratford that summer, a letter from Richard Grandchester was already waiting for Mrs. Graham. As Candy had never received written communication from her father-in-law, she was more than happy to find him willing to correspond with her. It had only been a brief note with the contact information of a trusted physician she could consult. However, never one to be intimidated by the Grandchesters' impassive ways, the young woman had seized the opportunity to begin an epistolary relationship with the duke.

Terrence warned her that she should not expect that his father would take the time to write back with the same assiduity as her relatives and friends in America did. In fact, she could only get a reply written by his secretary instead of a real personal response. Despite this reserved forecast, not only had the duke written back directly, but he had also done it in the most amiable terms and in his own handwriting:

August 25th, 1925

Arundel Park,

Cheshire

Dearest Girl,

You should not worry about addressing this old man with the right protocol. I would like to think that if you write to me, you do it as my daughter and soon mother of my grandchild. So, I do not feel offended by your omission of some tiresome formalities that are unfamiliar to you. On the contrary, I find your manner of address both respectful and fresh. Please, feel free to keep our correspondence in the way you feel most comfortable.

I was pleased to know that you approve of Dr. Monroe. My own physician recommended him as a man of both skill and integrity. I would not have less than that for one of my own family. Since you possess more medical knowledge than I will ever have, I trust that you can be a better judge of Monroe's work. If you feel at ease with him, I can only congratulate myself on having been the means of your finding him.

It also pleases me greatly that you enjoyed your time in Carmelhill so much. Through the years, I have considered selling that property on

more than one occasion. However, something always got in the way, and I kept putting off listing the place. Now that I know that the property is so dear to you, I am happy that my plans were thwarted.

It should also go without saying that I feel glad that you replied to my letter so warmly. I would like to keep this channel of communication open with you and be informed of your health as well as that of my son and grandchild.

Being the perceptive person that I know you are, you surely have noticed that my relationship with my son is still at a delicate stage. I am aware that the many mistakes I've made cannot be erased overnight with just a few interviews and letters. So, it is obvious that my goal of repairing our deteriorated bond will require a great deal of effort and patience. In this endeavor, that I assure you is in my son's best interest, I would like to count with your assistance. If I were as arrogant and blind as I was in the past, I would perhaps hesitate to request guidance from someone who is so much younger than I am. However, life has taught me a few bitter lessons to understand that wisdom is not the exclusive lot of the elders, and it is certainly often a stranger to the powerful. On the other hand, as a man, I can easily see that my son's heart is in your hands. Moreover, while I find Terrence hard to read in many ways, it is clear to me that you are privy to his most inner thoughts. Therefore, I would like to appeal to you for advice in my dealings with him.

That being said, I would like to give you carte-blanche for you to offer me your opinion on the following: Do you think it would be wise for me to visit you sometime in September? Although last time you two came to London, Terrence and I spoke vaguely of such a visit, he has not issued an invitation so far, and I would not like to impose. Until I receive a response from you on this subject, I will not press the case before my son.

Faithfully,

Richard Grandchester

With such a reply coming from His Grace, Candy, who was already more than predisposed to foster familiar harmony, began one more of her conciliatory campaigns. It was by her suggestion that Terrence finally issued an invitation for his father, and it was under her influence that the duke had surprised his son by accepting a visit to a place so beneath his station. That Richard Grandchester had condescended to dwell for three nights under a Middle-Class roof, without his French cook was already astonishing. That he had disdained the company of his peers in the middle of the hunting season, preferring the company of his wayward son, was beyond Terrence's wildest dreams. Perhaps for this reason, the young man had relaxed a little bit more and even managed to enjoy his time with his father. Even more so, by the end of Lord N***'s visit, Terrence had confessed to his wife that he was not opposed to repeating the experience some time in the future. Candy was obviously delighted with the results.

However, even when a great deal had been accomplished, Candy knew that many edges were still left to smooth, and many new bridges had to be erected before the filial bond could be fully repaired. In fact, the impending birth of her first child could be the occasion for the building of a new bridge. Ironically, it could also be a cause for reopening old wounds. Candy was not so naïve to ignore that the child represented a great deal of things for the duke, the least important of which was the succession of the Dukedom. And that was not a small thing. Yes, Richard Grandchester was naturally eager to see a new heir of his line coming to the world, but that was just the surface. At a deeper level, Candy understood that the child could signify a new hope, a new opportunity to finally become something close to a father, and perhaps succeed where he had previously failed so shamefully. For that purpose, the gender of the child was irrelevant, and the succession inconsequential.

As good as Lord N***'s intentions towards his grandchild could be, Candy had observed that her husband was especially reserved on that score. At such a juncture, the child could bring him closer to his father, or represent the beginning of a new duel of wills between the two of them. The last thing Candy wanted for her family was that. Therefore, she openly addressed the subject with her father-in-law through a letter that was especially difficult to craft. She might not be much of a writer, in the most technical or artistic sense of the term, but she put her heart at the service of her pen in the following way:

Stratford-upon-Avon

October 3rd, 1925

Dear Sir,

I am really glad to know that your journey back to Arundel Park was pleasant and uneventful. I must thank you, again, for your visit. I know that you had to deprive yourself of some of your usual comforts during your stay, but I believe the sacrifice was not in vain. I assure you that a certain person you and I care about a great deal was really pleased with your company.

Our life here in Stratford continues at its usual pace. Terry's work in preparation for his new tour has intensified, and the baby keeps growing at great speed, but not as fast as I would like it. In fact, it is regarding this child that I would like to talk about in this letter.

I am aware, sir, that you are happy with the prospect of a grandchild. As the mother of the baby, of course, I am honored by your sincere regard for my child. However, perhaps you noticed that Terry seemed rather uncomfortable every time you brought up the topic of the child to your conversations with him. I must admit that at the beginning his attitude puzzled me a great deal. Terry is a naturally reserved man, and often, in his desire to protect me, keeps his worries to himself. Therefore, noticing his awkward behavior, I put myself to observe him more carefully, paying attention to the possible hidden meanings in his unfinished sentences and in his silence. Gathering hints from here and there, I think I have been able to decipher by now the cause of his discomfort. I believe my husband is afraid that in your enthusiasm for having a new heir in the family, you could, in the future, attempt to override his right to raise the child in the way that he dims best. I know well that you have no such intentions, but Terry tends to suspect the worst from others, often without evidence.

Furthermore, as a father yourself, you surely understand that this child means the world to Terry. I suppose that he is afraid of being torn between his love for the child and his growing fondness for you. I also imagine that the prospect of having to battle with you is not appealing to him,

especially now that he has realized that he could have a friend in you. As much as I would like to reassure Terry on this subject, I am afraid that he may take my words as mere wishful thinking. On occasions, he has playfully teased me for what he calls "my stubborn tendency to attribute kindness and good will where there is none". It is only you, sir, who can relieve him from this preoccupation. For this reason, I entreat you to talk to him on this subject as soon as you have the chance to see him again.

Finally, regarding your request to be informed as soon as I feel that my time has come, I promise you I will make sure to contact you even before I leave for the hospital. I appreciate your interest in being with me at such a time. However, I am afraid that if you choose to come to Stratford for the occasion, you will find out that I will have an additional guest staying with me during those days. You see, sir, even though Terrence will not be in Stratford for the birth of the child, I will not be all alone. Ms. Baker will be with me from the beginning of November. She has leased a house near ours, but she will be spending a great deal of time in our home, especially while Terry is touring. This, of course, does not mean that I would not welcome your visit, but I will leave the decision of what is best to do in this case to your discretion. Apart from that, I am thrilled with the prospect of having the two grandparents of my child by my side at the time of this birth. Being an orphan, I won't be able to contribute with a set of grandparents for my children. My adoptive father will be more like an uncle, as he is like an older brother to me. For that reason, it is a comfort to know that the baby will at least enjoy the presence of the only set of grandparents that he or she will ever have.

Looking forward to hearing from you I remain as always,

Yours faithfully,

Candice W. Grandchester

“It’s a box of my husband’s favorite tea blend,” explained the young woman, seeing that the man was not registering her meaning, “he usually dislikes the tea they serve in the trains; so, you will be in his good graces if you take this with you. . . and remember, always lemon, not cream,” concluded the woman with a smile.

“Goodness, thank you, Mrs. Graham,” replied Justin, “I truly appreciate your help, madam.”

“Not at all, Mr. McNichols,” said the young wife, “I wish I could do more to ease your load, but as you can see, my condition will not allow me to travel with him this time, I’m afraid,” she elaborated, as she rested her right hand on top her belly, which showed a rather advanced pregnancy.

“You should not worry for your husband, madam,” replied the man with a shy smile, “I’ll do my best to take care of him. I’m only sorry that we will be away when you are so close to your time.”

“Oh well,” responded Mrs. Graham rolling her eyes playfully, “as much as I wish that my husband could be with me for the birth of our child, I have dismissed such a scheme since we knew the schedule of this tour. But do not worry on my account, Mr. McNichols, you see, uh. . . a friend of the family, Miss Baker, will be arriving tomorrow, to stay with me when the time comes, and I’ll always have Mrs. Leveridge with me as well,” she concluded, referring to her new housekeeper.

“I’m certain you’ll be in capable hands, yet I wish I could be of more help,” the man said sincerely. There was something in that petite young woman that inspired him sympathy and trust, although he had known her but for a few weeks.

“Oh, but there is something you can do to help,” said Mrs. Graham with a spark in her light green eyes, and for a moment McNichols thought that there was something like mischief in her expression.

“Tell me, madam.”

“Well, you see, Mr. McNichols,” began the young woman lowering her head, as if about to pass a confidence, “my husband has been trying to quit smoking for the past months, and so far, he has been successful, but I’m afraid that the stress of the tour, and his being away when I am about to give birth, may be conducive to his feeling weaker, you know. After all, they say old habits die hard.”

“And you want me to take care that he is not provided with occasions to fall into the habit once again, isn’t it?” asked McNichols.

“I see that we understand each other pretty, well, Mr. McNichols,” responded Mrs. Graham with a smile that showed her dimples, “I’m certain we’ll make a wonderful team, you and I.”

“I’ll be honored, madam,” replied Justin, happy to be regarded as an ally.

The front door then opened wide, and the decided steps of the very man who had been occupying McNichols’ thoughts entered the room. The young wife turned her head and right in front of the new secretary, her face lit up when her eyes met Terrence’s.

“Of course, but I don’t see what is there for me to say, madam Freckles. It seems you have already figured out what needs to be packed,” he said jokingly, while standing right behind Candy’s frame, “I’m sure I can trust in your good taste.”

“Can you be serious?” she insisted, doing her best to refrain from laughing. He had begun toying with her blond ringlets, just on the spot of her neck where she was most ticklish. “I also included a dinner jacket, just in case any semi-formal commitment arises, and a dress coat for the London dinner,” she went on, doing her best to ignore his fondling.

“My little monkey seems to forget that I don’t intend to attend that insipid dinner,” Terrence retorted, still in a playful mode.

“Terry, you know very well you cannot do that!” Candy scolded him, trying to turn towards him to look him in the eye. However, as he had already gathered his arms around her belly, reducing her mobility, she resigned herself to assessing his irk expression on the swing mirror over her vanity.

“If you’re not going with me, I don’t think I’ll be able to survive the first five minutes of that dreadful party!” he said sheepishly.

“My love, I wish I could go with you, but . . .”

“I know, I know,” he interjected, muffling his voice on the top of her head, “I should not be going away on this tour, in the first place. You and the child need me here.”

Candy’s mouth tweaked in a sad smile, but regaining composure in a second, the young woman continued:

“Terry, we have gone over this before. This is your first tour with The New Shakespeare Company as a regular; you simply cannot miss this Season. If something bad happened . . .”

“I would never forgive myself for it,” he interrupted her, his voice getting a tone or two below his normal pitch.

“I was going to say that if any problem comes in the way, your mother will be with me to help me sort things out. Please, Terry, stop fussing about my pregnancy and promise me you’ll do your best to face your commitments with the Company. After the Season you can always take some time off and be with us full-time.”

The young man knew well that reason assisted his wife, but his heart still resisted to hear it.

“And your commitments include this dinner party,” Candy went on. “You understand that the event is being held in honor of the Company and that Mr. Bridges-Adams needs to gather funds for the

Festival³. Don't you?" she asked, finally managing to disentangle herself from Terry's grip, to see him right in the eye.

"I hate it when you're right, Freckles," he sighed in annoyance, "but the mere thought of seeing the Earl of C*** makes me loath to oblige William."

"Goodness gracious, Terry, surely the man is not such a bore as you depict him."

"Even worse! He is one of my father's best and oldest friends. They met in their youth, while they were at Trinity College⁴. He saw me many times during my childhood and adolescence. I'm sure he will recognize me at first glance . . . and after that, there will be no end to the rumors. Tabloids gossip is already bad enough as it is right now."

"Rumors?" She chuckled while raising her eyebrows, "This time you must accept that there's a lot of truth in those so-called rumors, Terry. This is England! You cannot live here, be in friendly terms with your father, and still expect that people ignore who you are."

Terrence did not respond to his wife's argument. He only gave a little grimace of disgust, while falling heavily on the Maurice Dufrene's chaise lounge near the fireplace. The young woman moved to the back of the chaise, softly placing one hand on the man's left shoulder, while using the other to caress his hair.

"I like to think that I'm just a self-made man, Freckles," he still resisted.

"And you are, my love, but you're also your father's son. Even if the world ignored it, you'd still be Richard Grandchester's child and everything that is attached to it. Denying it will only hurt your father, and you know it. I don't think you want to do that."

"I suppose I don't," Terrence conceded, gradually giving in to the slow massage that his wife was applying on his temples.

"Which also reminds me . . ." Candy added. "You know, as soon as your mother gets here tomorrow, I will have to discuss with her about her irrational insistence in hiding who she is to you."

This was Terrence's turn to nod his head in disapproval of Candy's plans.

"That is something I would like to witness, Mrs. Busybody. I have already had that conversation with the lady more than once. I even proposed her to give a press conference to reveal the whole issue in a proper way once and for all, but she always opposed to the idea."

"I'm not talking about going public in a press conference, Terry. "This is not New York, after all," Candy said with a smile, "I'm only concerned about our baby. I don't want our children having to

³The Stratford-on-Avon Festival that William Bridges-Adams directed for over one decade. It represented the main activity of the Company extending over two seasons, one in Spring and one in Fall.

⁴One of schools of the University of Cambridge.

When the Grandchesters had first settled in the place, the house was decorated in the colonial style, with pastel-colored wallpaper in the bedrooms and maple furniture. However, as soon as the new dwellers had time to turn the house into their home, a mixture of Tudor antiques and Art Deco accents replaced the less sophisticated pieces that the landlord had provided. The walls in the second level were freed from the flowery wallpaper, allowing the wood panels and tanned stucco to shine in their own right.

When Eleanor Baker arrived in Stratford in the first week of November, she found that some of these changes were in the making. The master bedroom had already been remodeled and the carpenters were working on the final touches in the nursery. Candice thought that there was still plenty of time to finish each detail of the nursery's decoration with the help of her mother-in-law. Concurrently, the grandmother-to-be was glad to join Mrs. Graham in the happy preparations.

Both women had leisurely sat around a cup of tea to discuss the nursery decor during the third evening of Eleanor's visit. It was then, while casually talking about the fashionable colors for the baby's room that Candy had unexpectedly addressed a most delicate issue:

"Eleanor, I'm afraid there is something I would like to discuss with you that is more important than choosing Nile green or soft peach," the young woman suddenly said, reaching for her mother in law's hand.

"And what would that be, my girl?"

Candy lowered her eyes, still unsecure of how Terrence's mother would receive her words.

"Perhaps I'm troubling myself with things that may not be of immediate concern now . . . but still, I can't help it," Candy began. Eleanor understood then that her daughter was about to disclose a serious matter. So, she instinctively set aside the color catalogue she had been browsing.

"I know that you have always insisted on keeping your relationship with Terry in secret," Candy finally began, ". . .and I respect that . . ."

"But?" cued Eleanor now suddenly preoccupied by the direction the conversation had taken.

"I'm worried about how we are going to handle your relationship with the baby, Eleanor. I want to honor your desires, but I wouldn't like to lie to this child when he or she starts asking questions . . . I . . ."

Eleanor sighed heavily when she realized what exactly Candy was trying to say. In a reflex movement, the woman began to play with her dark burgundy sleeve cuffs.

"I understand what you mean, Candy," Eleanor finally replied with her expression turning thoughtful, "I gave some thought to the matter during my trip, but . . . to be honest with you . . . I have not yet decided what is best to do."

“Isn’t telling the truth the best option, Eleanor?” Candy blurted in her usual frank manner, “This child ought to know who you are . . . I mean, Terry’s children should have the right to address you without having to hide their connection with you from the rest of the world. Don’t you agree? Terry thinks that you resist to the fact because you still feel too young to fit in the role of a granny, but I am sure that you are not as vain as that.”

Eleanor nodded; a sad smile appearing on her lips.

“I wish that only my vanity was at stake, Candy, but I have other reasons, reasons that are not only mine to disclose.”

Candy paused a second, wondering what exactly Eleanor was referring to. Nevertheless, respecting Eleanor’s silence, she hurried to add:

“And I won’t force you into a confidence that you are not ready to make, Eleanor, but it wouldn’t be fair for this baby to see you just as a family friend, or, even worse, to burden the child with the weight of a family secret. You know well how such a thing hurt Terry when he was little.”

“And what exactly do you suggest?” asked Eleanor suddenly horrified by Candy’s allusion to Terry’s troubled childhood.

“I don’t know exactly,” Candy hesitated, “I had thought . . . that perhaps . . . we could take one worry at a time . . . I mean, let’s begin by letting the baby know you as his or her grandmother from the start. Of course, that would imply that we will have to trust in our housekeeper but I think she is a discrete lady.”

“And then what, Candy? When this child and any other you and Terry can have in the future get old enough to go to school? What will they say about their family to their friends and teachers?”

“They will tell them that their mother is an orphan who was adopted by an honest man, and their father is the son of a talented and independent woman. I will teach them to see those facts with pride, no matter what others may think.”

“Dear Candy,” Eleanor feebly replied, lowering her eyelids, “You know children can be cruel, don’t you?”

Candy’s lips pursed into a knowing smile.

“I had my good share of cruelty from snobbish tongues at school, Eleanor. Surely, I, like any mother, will try to protect my children as much as I can . . . yet I know well it is impossible to shield them from all sorts of dangers and pain. Instead of that, I’ll give them enough love at home, so they don’t really care about the attacks of prejudiced minds when they come,” Candy spoke with such vehement tone that made Eleanor’s heart skip a beat.

“Oh Candy! It doesn’t cease to amaze me how well suited you are for my son! . . . I see your point, but again, the decision is not entirely mine. But I can promise you right now that I will consider

the warm memories of the previous summer. He stayed in that dreamy state for some time until he heard Candy's voice calling him.

"Terry," Candy's hushed voice called him in the darkness.

"I'm coming, Freckles, I was just stirring the fire," he responded, guessing his wife was calling him to get back into bed.

He then stood up from his place at the hearth, and slowly walked towards the large four-posted bed they shared. To his surprise, his wife was sitting at the side of the bed, her face suddenly pale.

"Are you all right, Candy?" he asked, worried.

"Well, Terry . . . I think . . . I think it's time," she replied with a soft pant.

"What are you talking about?" the young man inquired, his mind unable to register Candy's meaning.

"I believe the baby is coming tonight, Terry."

The blood drained from Terrence's face immediately.

"But it is not time yet! Are . . . are you sure of this?"

"I've been having contractions since earlier this evening, Terry . . .," she paused as if having difficulty to talk, "I . . . I thought it was a false alarm . . .but . . . I've been monitoring the contractions ever since, and they are becoming more and more frequent. I have no doubt now that this child is coming very soon!"

Terrence had heard stories about premature babies and the slight chances they had of surviving. His heart came to a halt at the thought. He knew he had to keep his composure now that Candy needed him, but too many emotions began to pile in his chest, threatening to explode any time. So, despite his being aware that he had to move fast, his mind and body were paralyzed.

"Terry!" Candy screamed, feeling a new contraction, stronger and more painful than the prior ones, "call your mother and get the car!"

He then stood up, and nervously began to dress as fast as he could.

"Don't . . . don't worry, Candy . . . we're going to get through this . . . we're going to have this baby . . . and everything is going to be all right," he mumbled unconvinced, as his fingers struggled to button his shirt up.

"Terry . . . please . . .," his wife responded with almost an angry tone. "It is I who is having the pain; I am who is having this baby . . . now get your mother, PLEASE!"

Sprung by his wife's scream, Terrence suddenly recovered control over his body movement, grabbed his overcoat and came out of the bedroom. When Candy found herself alone, her eyes darted to the

right end of the room. She needed to get dressed too, but the distance from the bed to the closet seemed too large in her present state. She feared that her water would break any time if she strained herself. So, she decided to remain seated until her mother-in-law arrived. Then, reminding herself of the many times she had assisted women in labor, she started to take her own advice and concentrated in her breathing.

As her mind focused on the movement of her lungs pumping air in and out her body, her excited state began to subside. The last contraction had been hard, but according to her calculation she would have at least ten minutes of rest before a new one came.

A bit more focused, the young woman suddenly remembered there was something that she needed to do before going to the hospital. She looked at her dressing table, where she had kept her old wooden box with all her correspondence and clippings. Right on top of her most recent letters, there was one that was calling her to act, and to do it fast. With the swift speed at which memories and thoughts can travel in one's mind, Candy revisited the events of the last few months that related to her father-in-law.

The young woman suspected that her words, no matter how she had tried to choose them carefully, might have made an impact on the gentleman, because it took him more than usual to reply, but replied he had by the end of two weeks. Surprisingly, not only he had responded with the promise of talking to Terrence as Candy had suggested, but also confirmed his desire to be in Stratford for the birth of his grandchild. However, of course, he had kindly declined Candy's invitation to stay at her home again, for *it might be more comfortable* for Candy and *her guest* to have the house just to themselves. He would only stay during the day to make sure his daughter-in-law was all right, meet the child, and travel to London in the evening. That was more than enough for Candy to feel grateful.

In fact, Candy could do nothing but revel in the little victory she had won. Nevertheless, now that she knew that the baby was on the way to this world, she wanted to keep her promise to the duke and call him before leaving for the hospital. Unfortunately, her desk seemed so far away from the bed where she was sitting. If she wanted to make that call, she needed to get His Grace's last letter from her wooden box. He had sent her a series of phone numbers in which she could contact him at any time. Why on Earth hadn't she minded learning by heart any of those numbers? Could she walk towards the vanity table? She raised her hand to search for the support of the bed's solid headboard with the intention of getting up.

"Don't you dare to get up alone, young lady," said the sweet but firm voice of her mother-in-law entering the bedroom at that very instant, "I'll help you to get dressed and grab your overnight bag for you."

"Eleanor!" said Candy, startled, "I was uh, I needed . . . this is . . . where's Terry?" mumbled the young woman wondering how she was ever going to call the duke if Terrence was around.

“Don’t you worry, Candy, Terry went to start the car and get it out of the garage for us. He’ll be here in no time to take you downstairs,” responded Eleanor taking the anxiety reflected in Candy’s face as a natural consequence of her being about to give birth.

“Oh well,” Candy interjected, uncertain if she should reveal her plans to her mother-in-law, “I wanted to uh . . . get something from my dressing table,” she finally said.

“Can I get it for you? What is it?”

“A letter, inside that wooden box . . . it should be right on top of the pile.”

With fast reflexes, Eleanor moved towards Candy’s vanity table. The said box, which was rather old, and a bit worn down, rested on top of the vanity. Eleanor opened the lid, and her eyes almost went out of their orbs when they saw the letter Candy was referring to. The envelope had been sealed with a family crest that she knew very well.

“This is . . . a letter from Richard!” Eleanor blurted, giving away her surprise, but after the initial shock had passed, she managed to recover her usual composure within a second. “I . . . I didn’t know you maintain correspondence with him!” She added in a more collected tone handing the infamous letter to Candy.

“Uh, yes, just recently . . . I just want to call him, to let him know that the baby is coming,” Candy explained.

“At this time! But it’s past midnight, Candy!”

“I know, Eleanor, but if I don’t do it now, I doubt Terry will take care of that . . . and the duke was very interested in being here for the birth, you see . . . I promised him I would let him . . .”

Candy couldn’t finish the sentence. Her knuckles went white as she tightened her grip on one of the bed’s posts. Although the young woman did not scream, just by looking at her frowning brows, Eleanor understood that Candy was having a new contraction.

“Goodness, girl! Breath in . . . come on . . . breath out now . . . Terry’s coming in a second or two,” the older woman said in a soothing tone as she held Candy in her arms, sitting with her at the edge of the bed. The young blonde concentrated again in her breathing and after a couple of minutes that seemed like hours, the pain began to subside, “Are you Ok now?” Eleanor inquired.

“It’s passing.”

“How often are you having the contractions?”

“Often enough, Eleanor, the baby will be arriving at some point this day, I’m sure . . . but I must call,” insisted Candy taking the letter from Eleanor’s hand.

Eleanor observed quietly as Candy dialed the numbers. Internally, she wondered what the duchess would think if she found out that her husband was receiving a call from an unknown woman during

the wee hours of the morning. A thousand questions piled in her head in a confusing tangle. After a few seconds of tension, her feminine nature won over her dignity, and she dared to ask.

“Where is Richard now? At Arundel Park?” Eleanor said, unable to hold her curiosity.

“No, he’s in Town,” replied Candy while waiting on the line. “He said that he had some business to deal with these days and he also wanted to see Terry, since he’s going to be in London this week, you see. I’m calling at his secretary’s home first.”

Nobody answered the phone on the other side of the line, although Candy tried three times.

“Nobody is picking up the phone in Mr. Perkins’ home. . . I’ll try another number, then. . . . Ouch!” Candy instinctively took her free hand to her belly. It seemed that another contraction was on the way.

“Candy, let me help you get ready to go to the hospital first, sweetheart. We’ll do this really quick. Where’s your overnight bag?” Eleanor proposed, seeing the need to speed things up.

“In that closet, but I haven’t finished packing . . . I was not expecting the baby so soon,” explained Candy, while Eleanor was on her way to the closet. “You can grab the first dress you find . . . and my coat,” suggested the young woman while dialing a different number this time, but with the same bad luck, “Goodness, nobody is taking the call downstairs in N*** House. Mr. Daniels must be a heavy sleeper,” Candy muttered while biting her lower lip.

Eleanor came back with the necessary garments. With expert hands, she helped her daughter in law to dispose of her night gown and get dressed. While they were still at that, they both could hear Terrence’s decisive steps climbing the stairs.

“Eleanor . . . Terry’s coming” Candy began trying to think as quickly as she could, “. . . Eleanor, I know this may be too much to ask, but . . . could you stay behind to call his father?”

Candy could not see Eleanor’s countenance because she was right behind her, helping her to put on her overcoat. If she had been facing Terrence’s mother, she could have noticed how all the colors drained from the actress’ cheeks in a second.

“This last number in the list is the one in his chambers,” whispered Candy handing the paper to her mother-in-law, “We can tell Terry that you’ll stay behind to prepare the overnight bag, which, by the way, I would also appreciate if you finished packing for me.”

“Are you ready?” Terrence’s voice erupted in the room at that moment.

“Sure, Candy. I’ll take care of that,” responded Eleanor without looking at her son, while she swiftly tugged the letter in the pocket of her night robe.”

“Thank you!” said Candy to her mother-in-law and then turned to her husband, “I’m ready Terry, but your mother will stay here to prepare my overnight bag. Could you come to pick her up later?”

was with a child. Perhaps having a grandchild at an age when she still felt herself attractive would have hurt her pride if she had been a little bit vainer, but that type of vanity was not her weakness. On the contrary, she had been happier than a lark! Without even a second thought, she had cancelled all her professional commitments and rushed to England with her head full of sweet expectations regarding the baby. However, it was precisely this innocent unborn child who was undermining all the certainties she had painfully erected to make sense of her own life.

Eleanor sighed once again. Her hand was now holding the auricular with a tight grip, her resolution hanging from a very fine thread.

“Indeed, Wilde was right,” she thought, for even one of the happiest events of her life, the birth of her first grandchild, was throwing her in a twirl of undesired emotions . . . and she suspected that this was only the beginning or a string of similar challenges.

With uncertain fingers she dialed the third number in the list that Candy had given to her. Although Candy had already called the downstairs phone system at Saint James’ Square, Eleanor decided to give it a new try. When the phone began ringing at the other side of the line, Eleanor stood still, hoping that an unknown servant would pick up the phone once and for all.

“There’s no reason to fret,” the actress told herself, while twisting the phone cord nervously, “I just have to leave a message . . . that’s all.”

Unfortunately, the phone kept ringing for a long while without any reply. Irritated, the woman hung up the auricular, her anxiety mounting even more. She darted her eyes towards the clock on the night table. It was 2 in the morning. Perhaps the servant in charge was too deep in sleep to answer.

Eleanor’s blue eyes ran down to the last number on the list. Next to the number, penned in a handwriting Eleanor knew too well, there was a note in brackets that simply said:

(My chambers).

Eleanor rolled her eyes in exasperation. That was the last straw! If someone had told her just the night before that she would be calling Richard Grandchester’s private chambers the following evening, she would have taken it as a poor taste joke.

“This is not happening,” she told herself, nodding in disbelief.

She had not heard Richard’s voice since Terrence was five years of age. The few times they had communicated after their final break-up in Scotland had been only through letters. Even when the duke had been in New York the previous year to see his son, his path had not crossed with hers. Eleanor was glad that it had been so . . . but now she was supposed to dial his number and wake him up at such an hour.

“What if he is not sleeping alone? What if it is *her* who picks up the phone?” At that last thought, she nodded in disbelief. She doubted that Richard and the duchess still sustained marital

relationships when the matter of procreation was not on the table anymore. That, of course, did not mean that the duke's bed was empty all the time. However, whoever was with him was not likely to pick up the phone in his chambers. Wasn't it so? . . . the mere idea was half sickening, half strangely humorous. But, if something so bizarre happened, what was she to do?

Suddenly, Eleanor saw the face of her aunt Gladys, who had a sort of wicked sense of humor, smiling mischievously at her predicament.

"What are you supposed to do, silly girl?" Aunt Gladys seemed to tell her with her bright blue eyes, "You're not a lass anymore, Eleanor, just pick up the phone and deliver the message; it's as simple as that!"

Eleanor cleared a lock of hair that had fallen on her forehead and the image of the long-gone Gladys disappeared from her mind.

"All right," she said to herself, "if *His Grace* has an argument with his current paramour tonight, it'll be all on account of the good news . . . after all, if we didn't care for proprieties twenty-nine years ago . . . we're not going to start being missy now. Are we?"

And with that final thrust of resolve, Eleanor dialed the dreaded number and waited for the ring once . . . twice . . . thrice.

"Umm?" A deep voice mumbled after the typical click of the phone announced that the call had been taken, "Who's this?"

Eleanor took a couple of seconds to gain composure before she could finally reply:

"Richard," she said with a voice that her histrionic powers rendered much more secure than she truly felt, "This is Eleanor."

Two or three seconds of disconcerting silence ensued. At the other side of the line, Richard Grandchester feared that he was having one of his recurrent dreams.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this ungodly hour, Richard," Eleanor went on, "I'm calling on Terry's behalf, this is, of his wife."

Then reality poured over the duke's still half-asleep head.

"Candy?" he asked.

"Yes, Richard. She is in labor."

Pull by an invisible string; Richard sat on his bed, pushing away the heavy covers.

"In labor? But wasn't she due by the beginning of December?"

The trip to the hospital was fast since the town was small and the roads lonely. However, Terrence could hardly remember the details. His mind had just registered Candy's right hand slowly clutching the car upholstery from time to time. He understood she was in pain just by the look of her whitened knuckles and it drove him mad.

Of course, he knew that labor pain was to be taken as a normal thing. Yet it was not until he saw it appear on his wife's face, even if masked by her self-control, that the realization of what a woman has to go through to give birth truly hit his mind. Then, something akin to helplessness started to form within him. Nevertheless, aware that his wife depended on him to get to the hospital, he managed to keep his cool all the way.

Unfortunately for the young man, when they finally arrived in their destination and the nurses had taken Candy away from him, his fears slapped him with full force. He stood motionless in the middle of the corridor, looking at the closed doors that led to the obstetrics ward, as if trapped in a whirl of bad memories. Unable to stop his thoughts, a flood of images of hospital halls, voices of people in pain, and cold nights in the waiting room came back to him from the dark alleys of his past. The seemingly unending chain of days and nights spent next to Susannah's sick bed came back as if conjured by the smell of antiseptic pervading the atmosphere. But this time it had been Candy, his always healthy and cheerful wife, who had been taken in a wheelchair, as if she had been an invalid . . . how could that be?

"Sir?" a female voice called him for the third time.

Terrence finally turned his head to see the nurse that was by his side.

"Yes?" he replied barely acknowledging her presence.

"Could you fill in this form for me?" The woman requested giving him a series of registration papers and a pen, which Terrence absentmindedly took in his hands.

Fighting his feelings to focus on the task, the young man managed to return to the front desk counter and filled in the documents. When he finally turned the papers back to the nurse, she took the time to check if all the information had been properly entered. Instinctively, the nurse frowned when she saw the name he had written on top.

"Grandchester?" she asked the actor whom she had fully recognized since the beginning.

Understanding why the woman was puzzled, Terrence gave her an arch look under his raised eyebrow.

"Graham is only my middle name. Grandchester is the true surname," he explained and immediately turned his back to the woman. Instead of lingering to see her reaction, he started moving away in search of a solitary spot to sort out his agitated thoughts.

It took him just a few seconds to find his way to the hospital's waiting room, where he sat down, in an attempt to regain his sanity. With a tired gesture he rested his head on the wall behind his seat and closed his eyes. Inwardly, he repeated to himself that there was no reason to be so apprehensive.

"She's not ill; she's just having a baby," he silently recited. "There's nothing to fear . . ."

However, no matter how hard he tried to stabilize his mind, a second voice from within reminded him that women also die in labor, especially if the child comes before time. The sole idea sent his heart into a wild race once again. His fingers began to nervously tap the chair's armrest, frustrated at his inability to regain control over his emotions.

"How come she's the one having all the pain, and it's me here fretting in panic?" he told himself, losing his patience with his own fears.

He stood up from his seat and walked in circles along the empty room a few times. Although he was doing his best to avoid the dreaded "What if she . . .", the gloomiest possibilities played over and over in his head. He longed for a cigarette, but knowing well that resorting to nicotine at that moment would only increase the hold of his addiction, he decided against the strategy. So, he simply kept walking in circles for about half an hour, until he remembered that his mother was still waiting for him at his home. Happy to find something useful in which he could employ his time, he took the coat he had left on the nearby chair and walked decidedly towards the exit.

When he returned home, his mother was already waiting in the parlor. A cup of tea was keeping her good company, and she suggested he sit down with her and drink some before going back to the hospital. Terrence looked at his mother as if appalled by her offer.

"Don't look at me that way, Terry," the woman said collectedly, "It is your wife who is busy having the baby, you may as well calm down a bit and get something in that empty stomach of yours. I'm sure Candy would suggest the same if she were here. After all, by the frequency of Candy's contractions, I imagine she might still take some time before we can actually meet the baby."

Seeing that reason was on his mother's side, the young man sat down next to her without saying a word. He let the woman serve him a couple of toasts and a generous amount of the strongest tea, even if he was not really hungry. Strong emotions usually made him lose his appetite, but he understood that this could be the only breakfast he was going to have that day.

As he was drinking, or rather gulping the tea down his throat, he vaguely observed his mother attire. She was wearing a Schiaparelli's dark purple velvet suit with black embroidery on the lapel and cuffs that made a dramatic contrast with her pale hair and blue eyes. Not a crease on her skirt, not a stray hair was there to ruin the perfect harmony of her appearance. "How did she manage to be so composed in such a moment?" Terrence wondered. What is more, it was incredible that in less than two hours she had had time to dress up so meticulously and do her hair as if she were going to

“How do you do, Eleanor?” the deep voice of Lord N*** formally greeted her in his impossibly composed Received Pronunciation.

“Pretty good,” she replied with a gracious nod, looking straight to her interlocutor’s light gray eyes with a nonchalant air, “considering that I have been up since midnight.”

“You look quite fresh for one who did not sleep well, if I may say,” rejoined His Grace, taking off his felt Homburg as he nodded too as a matter of greeting. Since the lady did not show intentions of extending her hand, he understood that neither a handshake nor a kiss on her hand was welcomed.

“Thank you,” continued Eleanor in the same civil but distant tone. “I’m amazed at how fast you got here. I trust you had a good journey.”

“As good as one can have on such occasions . . .” the duke responded as he rested his two hands on the silver handle of his walking cane, “seeing you here, I suppose that there is no news yet.”

“You’re right,” the actress responded, wondering if he was waiting for her to invite him to sit down next to her. He could wait all day long, she thought, for she had no intentions of giving him such courtesy.

“Don’t you think it has taken quite a while, by now?” The duke went on, discreetly sweeping with his eyes the elegant figure of his former lover. He thought she looked regal in that dark velvet dress.

“Nothing extraordinary, I suppose. Candy began having pains around eleven last night. That was about eight hours ago; so, I guess we’ll be seeing Dr. Monroe very soon.”

The duke raised his left brow, while internally assessing the lady’s words, and her cold tone.

“You speak quite matter-of-factly. I take that you don’t see any chance for complications,” he added.

“Not at all! She was a bit ahead of time, but just for a couple of weeks or so. It’s nothing a healthy, young woman like her cannot bear.”

“Good!” The man exclaimed, wondering if Eleanor would oppose to his company while they both waited for the arrival of the expected news, “And where is Terrence?” he suddenly asked, realizing that his son was not around.

“He should be in the cafeteria, wherever that may be. He’s been quite restless.”

“That is not surprising. In moments like this a man does not really know what to do of himself.”

“Really?” The woman asked a bit amused with the sudden display of masculine solidarity implied in the duke’s words. “Perhaps you are more qualified to offer Terry some sort of support right now. I declare myself incapable of dealing with his present foul mood.”

“I can see he was getting right under your skin,” Lord N*** hinted with a lopsided smile, happy to discover that he was not the only parent to struggle with Terrence’s moody ways.

“Tell me about it,” Eleanor told him rolling her eyes, “Anyway, you really should try to talk to *your* son, Richard.”

“All right, I’ll go find him then,” he said taking her rather direct hint, but before he actually turned his back to exit the waiting room, he addressed her once again adding: “It’s nice seeing you again, Eleanor.”

As a reply, the woman only nodded and perfunctorily half-smiled for just a fraction of a second before lowering her eyes to continue reading. Understanding that such was his cue to exit, the duke turned on his heels to search for his son.

In the hall, John Samuels stood up from his seat when he saw his employer coming out of the waiting room. A brief sign from his lordship’s hand made him understand that his services were still not required. So, Samuels sat down again, lowering his head. This gesture did not allow him to perceive the brief sigh that the duke let escape as he paused for a fleeting second.

He was glad that his first encounter with Eleanor was over. The four long hours of dusty road that he had travelled had not been enough to prepare him for the moment. Even if his mind had long toyed with the possibility of meeting her once again, even if his daughter-in-law had warned him of her imminent visit . . . nothing could really make him feel sufficiently confident to face her. How could he? After all that had happened between them, no matter how many years had passed, he would always feel disarmed under that blue gaze. And now, as never before, those blue eyes that had once seen him with adoration were loaded with indifference that almost bordered on disdain.

“It is all as it should be,” he thought, as the clinking of his walking cane resonated with his every step, “When I was young, my pride and anger saved me from sinking in remorse . . . but now I know better. I must pay the toll for my mistakes. To be honest, she has plenty of reasons to despise me . . . and yet I had hoped for less coldness. What a fool I can be!”

The duke stopped when he finally saw the entrance of the hospital’s café. Sat at a solitary table with his back turned to the door, Terrence could not perceive the presence of his father until his voice called him, almost startling him.

“Terrence?” Richard said, lowering his voice, slightly conscious of the presence of another patron on the opposite side of the room.

“Father! . . . How come?” Terrence mumbled in surprise, unknowingly calling Richard “father” for the first time in many years. The duke’s heart swelled in silent joy.

“I received a message from Candy,” His Grace replied as he sat near his son.

For a brief second, a furtive sign of surprise sparked in Terrence's eyes, but was soon replaced by a light of recognition.

"I see . . . that is so much like her," he responded without questioning when and how such a message had reached the duke. Instead, he lowered his head, his eyes lost on the surface of the cold cup of tea in front of him.

"Your girl is an angel," commented the duke slowly extracting his gold cigarette case from his pocket.

"I know . . ." Terrence assented while he pursed his lips in a nervous gesture.

Lord N*** then remembered that, as a child, no matter how sad or angry Terrence could be, he would very seldom burst into tears. Instead, he would only purse his lips, and very likely clench his teeth to judge by a visible tension in his jaws.

"Son, she will be all right." The duke said as he opened his cigarette case in front of the young man who refused the offer.

"It's just . . . I don't know what I would do if . . ." Terrence stopped, not daring to finish his sentence.

"Don't let your mind go on that road, Terrence," Richard warned him while he realized, at a deeper level, to what extent his son's heart was seized by a debilitating passion.

"It's been hours . . . and she was not due yet!" Terrence said huskily, his voice almost breaking.

"Has the doctor come out to talk to you?" His Grace asked behind the first smoke puff of his cigarette.

"No . . . not a single bloody word!" Terrence replied with visible exasperation.

"Then it means that things are evolving as they should. Otherwise, the physician would have come to discuss the situation with you," explained the duke with his usual phlegmatic tone.

"How do you know?" Terrence asked, beginning to feel irritated by his father's calm demeanor.

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, I have been in your shoes before."

"Did . . . her Grace ever have complications?" The young man questioned with a sardonic tweak in his lips when referring to his stepmother.

"Once . . . but my previous allusion was not with respect to Beatrix's children. When they were born, I must be honest, I could hardly experience anything remotely close to your present predicament," the duke admitted with disdainful tone, "You know very well they are not my children. I was talking about your birth. You certainly made a rather dramatic entrance into this world and scared the dickens out of me."

“My mother has never mentioned anything about that,” Terrence replied, surprised by his father’s revelations.

The duke’s mouth tweaked in lopsided smile for only a fraction of a second.

“Perhaps it was because she was rather too busy at that very moment to consider the circumstances. It was back in the old days; so, you were born at home. This is, in the house in New Jersey where your mother and I lived back then.”

“Didn’t you believe in hospitals?” The young man asked slightly relaxing the eyebrows he had been unconsciously frowning.

“Before this child who’s being born right now, no Grandchester was ever born in a hospital,” Lord N*** explained, “But even if I didn’t have to take your mother to the doctor, I needed to make the doctor come to the house, and that was the rub.”

Terrence looked at his father questioningly.

“Well, it happened that you chose the foulest, stormiest night to make your entrance to this world . . . and,” the older man paused, reorganizing his memories of that occasion, “. . . and the telephone lines were not working because of the thunderstorm.”

“So, your driver had to go to New York to get the doctor,” Terrence said unemotionally.

“Not really,” The duke responded with a rare smile, “Because of the secrecy that I had foolishly imposed on us, I had made the mistake of keeping the house almost un-staffed. We just had a live-in housekeeper and a footman that only worked from 8 to 5.”

“You mean you didn’t have a driver?” The actor questioned him in disbelief.

“Well, I was young and foolish,” Lord N*** admitted shrinking his shoulders, “The rest of my staff was divided between the Long Island cottage where Beatrix was lodged and my townhouse in Manhattan, drivers included. In the New Jersey’s house, I kept a carriage that the footman would usually ride if your mother required it, and I moved on horseback whenever I needed to go to Manhattan. I thought that having a telephone installed, which was sort of a novelty in those days, we would have access to call the doctor if necessary. Of course, I didn’t consider that phones can fail during a storm. So, when your mother told me that you were coming, we were alone with the housekeeper, and using the carriage was a very bad idea considering it had been raining for hours. Hence, I had to ride to New York to get the doctor.”

“In the rain?” Terrence asked frowning, as if he simply couldn’t picture his dignified father riding under a thunderstorm.

The duke only assented to respond to his son’s question and then continued after butting his cigarette on the ashtray that the waiter had brought at his request.

“It was certainly not my favorite ride. At times, I thought it would take me forever to get to the doctor’s place in Manhattan, but I finally got there. To my dismay, not only did the stupid man take his time to get ready, but he also insisted on bringing his carriage. Of course, we had hardly ridden a few miles when the blooming heavy thing got stuck in the mud, just as I imagined it would. At the end, we had to leave the carriage on the road and continue the journey on horseback.”

“I imagine . . . had I been in your place, I could have murdered that man just right there and then,” Terrence ventured a smile imagining the picture of his young father swearing under the rain.

“Believe me, I would have done it myself, if your mother’s life and your own had not been in that preposterous man’s hands . . . Ironically, that was the easiest part of the feat.”

“Could things have gotten worse?”

“Well, son, while I was riding or pushing the doctor to gallop faster, I had something in which I could employ my time and energy. Once we got to the house, I had to spend the rest of the night hearing your mother screaming without being able to do a thing to help her. That almost drove me to the point of madness!”

“How do people do this?” Terrence wondered almost rhetorically, crushing one of his hands with the other.

“I suppose a man just has to find the way to bear his own feelings of impotence. In reality, the true bravery act falls on the ladies’ court in cases such as this.”

“. . . and ours is all the blame . . .”

“I know what you mean, son; but, in reality, there is none to be blamed here.”

Terrence gave a brief, suffocated chuckle of disbelief at his father’s words.

The duke sighed, beginning to lose his patience at his son’s stubborn despondency.

“I wish you could one day see yourself with your wife’s eyes, son,” the man said nodding.

“What do you mean?”

Seeing that he had regained his son’s attention, Richard Grandchester left his cigar on the ashtray before he continued.

“When that young lady looks at you,” he began, the tone of his voice suddenly softening, “often when you’re not even aware, one can easily read on her face how she dotes on you, as if you were the most wonderful creature on earth . . . By George, one only must observe the way she is always fussing about you, searching for the most minimal opportunity to please you. . . do you think that a woman so madly in love can regret having given herself to the object of her affection? Do you think she’s having second thoughts about bearing your child just because of the pain?”

Terrence silently nodded his head as a way of reply.

“So, there’s no blame to be placed anywhere,” the duke insisted, “Pain and danger are part of life just as much as pleasure and joy. We have to take and even embrace them all as they knock at our door. Very soon you’ll find out that both extremes of the continuum often touch our hearts in a contingent manner. When you see your family for the first time, you’ll soon forget about your present distress, and the following second you’ll feel the burden of the new responsibility resting upon your shoulders as you never have felt it before . . . But that will be all right.”

Terrence did not say a word, but his eyes eloquently told his father that he appreciated his words.

“And speaking of responsibility,” Lord N*** continued, daring to brush the pending subject, “I have no intentions of taking attributions that do not correspond to my rightful role of a grandfather.”

Terrence blinked, looking at his father as if he hadn’t understood his words. Richard Grandchester read his son’s confusion and explained.

“I mean that this child will be yours only. I cannot lie that I wish I were now in your place, having the opportunity to start all over, trying once again my luck at parenthood . . . but life seldom gives us second chances. I’m fully aware this is not my turn to enjoy such an opportunity. So, do not fear that I will try to interfere with the decisions you need to make about your children’s education and care.”

The young man was stunned by the deep sincerity in his father’s voice. However, his mistrust in the duke was so deeply rooted that he still resisted believing his ears.

“I appreciate your words,” Terrence said out of politeness, “yet how could I be sure that you will honor them. I’m not a fool, sir; I know very well what is on stake for the Grandchester family.”

“Then you surely know that, if you disdain your birthright when the time comes, you only need to disclose that you’re not Beatrix’ son. If you do that, neither you nor this child could never become my heirs . . .”

“Unless I die before you, sir,” Terrence interrupted, his tone growing in insolence.

“This is not a Greek tragedy, Terrence. Not even a bad father, as I have been, would consider such a possibility as a solution! That was not my point here!”

“Then, what was your point?” The young man questioned, confusingly feeling half guilty for his sidetracking remark and half amused for his succeeding at exasperating his father.

“The truth is that the destiny of our house is in your hands,” the duke responded, forcing himself to recover his collectedness, “So, even if you don’t believe in my promise, you can still rest assured that it is you who has the reins of the situation, not me.”

“Is my father truly speaking to me in such terms?” Terrence wondered inwardly, dumbfounded at the duke’s unexpected sincere words.

“You should not fear my interference, son. If my good will does not keep my possessiveness in check, then my lack of power to persuade you of saving our house from its downfall will keep me humbled.”

“Let me get this straight, sir. You’re saying that, even if I decide to raise my children in ways that you don’t approve, you will not try to interfere?”

“I know that I’m acting out of character here,” the duke admitted, “See it this way, Terrence. A whole decade of estrangement between the two of us taught me that attempting to impose my will upon yours is counterproductive. . . . I” here the duke’s voice faltered for a brief instant but gathering courage he finally finished saying in a lower tone: “I have learned to value your friendship more than honor and lineage. So . . . I will keep my word . . . son.”

The young man was going to open his mouth to reply when the square figure of Dr. Monroe appeared at the entrance.

“Mr. Graham,” the physician called in a rather tired voice to which sound the young man stood up brusquely.

Monroe gave a brief look at the distinguished older man who had remained seated, but more professional than curious about the stranger’s identity, he only acknowledged his presence with a nod. Then, the corpulent doctor addressed the young man immediately, seeing his anxiety evident in his every feature.

“I think congratulations are in order, sir,” the physician said with a quick smile appearing on his pale face, “you have a healthy boy of 7.5 pounds.”

“My wife . . . ?” was the first thing Terrence could utter once his throat allowed him to articulate a sound.

“Oh, she’s as good as any healthy lady can be given the circumstances,” Monroe replied naturally, “The delivery was a bit longer than usual, but your wife is a sturdy sort of girl for one so petite.”

“I must see her . . . and the baby,” said Terrence releasing the breath he was unconsciously holding . . . his voice sounding more like a brazen command.

“Oh, yes, sure you will, sir . . . but the nurses are now helping them to get refreshed, we must give them a few minutes to finish the task. In the meantime, there are a few bureaucratic details I should discuss with you to issue the birth certificate,” Monroe responded in his usual placid manner.

“Of course,” replied the young man doing his best to master his emotions in front of the doctor.

Candy's let her head fall heavily over the bed, exhausted by the exertion of the last few hours. She was indeed a mess, and she was pretty aware of it, for she had seen many new mothers right after childbirth and none of them, even the most elegant Annie, had ever looked pretty at such a moment. However, as she held her son in her arms for the first time, she felt indeed such an unparalleled joy, that she couldn't care less about her appearance.

She moved a bit to the right, and it seemed that her whole body was sore.

"God, having this baby really hurt an incredible lot," she thought, laughing inwardly at her own sorrowful physical state, as she kissed Richard's head for the first time. Then, feeling on her lips the warmth of that new life, the young woman told herself that she would gladly take all that pain again, if necessary. After all, she trusted her body could be repaired soon.

"But for the time being," she thought, *"I think I could use an aspirin"*, but a second later, remembering that she had planned on nursing her child, she resigned herself to bearing her headache and her soreness. She guessed that this was not going to be the only headache that she would have to take for the sake of her son⁷. For, you see, against destiny, against her own mistakes, against the world, and all odds, she was now the mother of Terrence's child, and she was up to facing the task with all the might of her young, brave heart.

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When he finally entered the room, the young woman lying on the bed seemed to have fallen asleep. Terrence approached the bed, and in an impulse kneeled down, resting his arms on the mattress. His eyes anxiously inspected the dormant face of his wife.

"Why is she looking so pale?" he first thought, a pang of panic sweeping across his chest. Then, with almost trembling fingers, he brushed Candy's cheek that was indeed white as alabaster because of the significant loss of blood she had suffered. However, when his skin touched hers, he could feel again her usual warmth, if only a degree or two lower than usual. She was inhaling and exhaling normally. . . She was alive . . . Terrence released a breath he had been holding for God knows how long.

Candice's short locks had been refreshed by the nurse that had taken care of her after the delivery, but when Terrence caressed them, he could perceive that they were slightly wet, as if she had been sweating. No doubt her effort had been strenuous. As he timidly stroked her forehead, her eyebrow slightly arched in a reflex movement and her chest raised with a subtle sigh. The next second his eyes met hers, and he noticed that Candy's irises had turned light green, like polished jade stones.

"Terry!" she said with a tired voice.

⁷ In 1925 the only non-opioid painkiller in the market was aspirin but consumption is not recommended during lactation unless consumed in a very small dose as in today's baby-aspirin form.

He felt as though his tongue were glued to his palate. What could he say in such a moment? His feelings were way too intense and shockingly contrasting to be put into words, and asking cursory questions about how she was feeling seemed totally out of place. It was painfully obvious that the young woman was exhausted and battered after the effort.

“Goodness, Terry,” she said with a faint smile, as she reached to brush that usual bang that always fell out of place over his forehead, “you look as though you didn’t sleep well, sweetheart.”

Terrence chuckled at the irony. She was there lying on a hospital bed after hours of labor, and all she cared about was his having missed a night of sleep. That was his sweet, selfless Candy!

“Surely, you didn’t expect me to go home and sleep peacefully while you were giving birth to our son”, he finally responded holding her hand and taking it to his lips.

“Oh, yes!” She replied with a bright smile that for a second made him forget how pale she was, “We do have a son! How do you like being a dad, Terry?”

He wanted to say so much, but his chest was numb from the multitude of emotions he had experienced during the previous hours.

“I . . . I don’t know,” he mumbled, “I have not even had the chance to meet him yet. The nurse told me she would bring him in soon.”

“If that is the case, I must sit up. Could you help me?” she asked naturally.

Terrence stood up from his kneeling position and helped her to change her posture. While doing it, he noticed that her brow creased a bit for a second.

“Are you sure you can sit like this?” he asked, visibly uneasy with any sign of discomfort that could be read on her face.

“Of course, I know what I’m doing!” She replied, smiling at her husband’s overprotectiveness.

It was then that the nurse entered the room with the baby carefully wrapped in a blanket.

From that moment on, Terrence could hardly utter a word. It was as if the surrounding reality had vanished, and his soul had taken leave from his body. All he could see for some suspended minutes that he couldn’t count was the image of his wife holding their son.

Understanding his feelings, for she was experiencing equally intense emotions, Candy extended her free hand inviting him to sit next to her. He followed her lead in a trance, while the nurse eclipsed herself leaving the room without making noise.

As if the baby understood that both of his parents were intently looking at him, he opened his eyes and immediately locked them with those of his father. The young woman observed how a new hue appeared on Terrence’s eyes, one that she had never seen before. Other than that, the young man was still nonplused by the emotion to translate them into coherent phrases. However, even in the

invaded his heart in that instant. If the decisions made so many years before had been different, the present moment could have been one of absolute, untainted joy. As things stood, the duke had to accept that what was lost was indeed lost forever, but amidst that loss, the tiny child in Eleanor's arms represented the dawn of new possibilities. He was glad that life had allowed him the opportunity to witness this day despite the gloomy prognoses he had received. He could count his blessings.