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*Transformation
and Other Stories*

Transformation

*Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
With a woeful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale –
And then it set me free.*

*Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns –
And till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns.*

COLERIDGE'S ANCIENT MARINER

I HAVE HEARD IT SAID THAT, when any strange, supernatural and necromantic adventure has occurred to a human being, that being, however desirous he may be to conceal the same, feels at certain periods torn up as it were by an intellectual earthquake and is forced to bare the inner depths of his spirit to another. I am a witness of the truth of this. I have dearly sworn to myself never to reveal to human ears the horrors to which I once, in excess of fiendly pride, delivered myself over. The holy man who heard my confession and reconciled me to the Church is dead. None knows that once...

Why should it not be thus? Why tell a tale of impious tempting of Providence and soul-subduing humiliation? Why? Answer me, ye who are wise in the secrets of human nature! I only know that so it is, and in spite of strong resolve – of a pride that too much masters me – of shame, and even of fear, so to render myself odious to my species, I must speak.

Genoa! My birthplace – proud city! looking upon the blue waves of the Mediterranean Sea – dost thou remember me in my boyhood, when thy cliffs and promontories, thy bright sky and gay vineyards were my world? Happy time! When to the young heart the narrow-bounded universe – which leaves, by its very limitation, free scope to the imagination – enchains our physical energies and, sole period in our lives, innocence and enjoyment are united. Yet, who can look back to childhood and not remember its sorrows and its harrowing fears? I was born with the most imperious, haughty, tameless spirit with which ever mortal was gifted. I quailed before my father only; and he, generous and noble but capricious and tyrannical, at once fostered and checked the wild impetuosity of my

character, making obedience necessary, but inspiring no respect for the motives which guided his commands. To be a man – free, independent or, in better words, insolent and domineering – was the hope and prayer of my rebel heart.

My father had one friend, a wealthy Genoese noble who, in a political tumult, was suddenly sentenced to banishment, and his property confiscated. The Marchese Torella went into exile alone. Like my father, he was a widower: he had one child, the almost infant Juliet, who was left under my father's guardianship. I should certainly have been an unkind master to the lovely girl, but that I was forced by my position to become her protector. A variety of childish incidents all tended to one point – to make Juliet see in me a rock of refuge – I, in her, one who must perish through the soft sensibility of her nature too rudely visited, but for my guardian care. We grew up together. The opening rose in May was not more sweet than this dear girl. An irradiation of beauty was spread over her face. Her form, her step, her voice – my heart weeps even now to think of all of relying, gentle, loving and pure

that was enshrined in that celestial tenement. When I was eleven and Juliet eight years of age, a cousin of mine, much older than either – he seemed to us a man – took great notice of my playmate; he called her his bride, and asked her to marry him. She refused, and he insisted, drawing her unwillingly towards him. With the countenance and emotions of a maniac I threw myself on him – I strove to draw his sword – I clung to his neck with the ferocious resolve to strangle him: he was obliged to call for assistance to disengage himself from me. On that night I led Juliet to the chapel of our house: I made her touch the sacred relics – I harrowed her child's heart and profaned her child's lips with an oath that she would be mine, and mine only.

Well, those days passed away. Torella returned in a few years and became wealthier and more prosperous than ever. When I was seventeen my father died; he had been magnificent to prodigality; Torella rejoiced that my minority would afford an opportunity for repairing my fortunes. Juliet and I had been affianced beside my father's deathbed – Torella was to be a second parent to me.

TRANSFORMATION

I desired to see the world, and I was indulged. I went to Florence, to Rome, to Naples; thence I passed to Toulon, and at length reached what had long been the bourne of my wishes: Paris. There was wild work in Paris then. The poor king, Charles VI, now sane, now mad, now a monarch, now an abject slave, was the very mockery of humanity.* The Queen, the Dauphin, the Duke of Burgundy, alternately friends and foes – now meeting in prodigal feasts, now shedding blood in rivalry – were blind to the miserable state of their country and the dangers that impended over it, and gave themselves wholly up to dissolute enjoyment or savage strife. My character still followed me. I was arrogant and self-willed; I loved display, and, above all, I threw all control far from me. Who could control me in Paris? My young friends were eager to foster passions which furnished them with pleasures. I was deemed handsome – I was master of every knightly accomplishment. I was disconnected with any political party. I grew a favourite with all; my presumption and arrogance were pardoned in one so young; I became a spoilt child. Who could control me? Not the letters

and advice of Torella. Only strong necessity visiting me in the abhorred shape of an empty purse. But there were means to refill this void. Acre after acre, estate after estate, I sold. My dress, my jewels, my horses and their caparisons were almost unrivalled in gorgeous Paris, while the lands of my inheritance passed into possession of others.

The Duke of Orléans was waylaid and murdered by the Duke of Burgundy. Fear and terror possessed all Paris. The Dauphin and the Queen shut themselves up; every pleasure was suspended. I grew weary of this state of things, and my heart yearned for my boyhood's haunts. I was nearly a beggar, yet still I would go there, claim my bride and rebuild my fortunes. A few happy ventures as a merchant would make me rich again. Nevertheless, I would not return in humble guise. My last act was to dispose of my remaining estate near Albaro* for half its worth, for ready money. Then I dispatched all kinds of artificers, arras, furniture of regal splendour, to fit up the last relic of my inheritance, my palace in Genoa. I lingered a little longer yet, ashamed at the part of the prodigal returned, which I

feared I should play. I sent my horses. One matchless Spanish jennet I dispatched to my promised bride: its caparisons flamed with jewels and cloth of gold. In every part I caused to be entwined the initials of Juliet and her Guido. My present found favour in hers and in her father's eyes.

Still, to return a proclaimed spendthrift, the mark of impertinent wonder, perhaps of scorn, and to encounter singly the reproaches or taunts of my fellow citizens, was no alluring prospect. As a shield between me and censure, I invited some few of the most reckless of my comrades to accompany me: thus I went armed against the world, hiding a rankling feeling, half fear and half penitence, by bravado and an insolent display of satisfied vanity.

I arrived in Genoa. I trod the pavement of my ancestral palace. My proud step was no interpreter of my heart, for I deeply felt that, though surrounded by every luxury, I was a beggar. The first step I took in claiming Juliet must widely declare me such. I read contempt or pity in the looks of all. I fancied, so apt is conscience to imagine what it deserves, that rich and poor, young

and old, all regarded me with derision. Torella came not near me. No wonder that my second father should expect a son's deference from me in waiting first on him. But, galled and stung by a sense of my follies and demerit, I strove to throw the blame on others. We kept nightly orgies in Palazzo Carega. To sleepless, riotous nights followed listless, supine mornings. At the Ave Maria* we showed our dainty persons in the streets, scoffing at the sober citizens, casting insolent glances on the shrinking women. Juliet was not among them – no, no – if she had been there, shame would have driven me away, if love had not brought me to her feet.

I grew tired of this. Suddenly I paid the Marchese a visit. He was at his villa, one among the many which deck the suburb of San Pietro d'Arena. It was the month of May – the blossoms of the fruit trees were fading among thick, green foliage; the vines were shooting forth; the ground strewn with the fallen olive blooms; the firefly was in the myrtle hedge; heaven and earth wore a mantle of surpassing beauty. Torella welcomed me kindly, though seriously, and even his shade of displeasure soon wore away. Some resemblance to my

father – some look and tone of youthful ingenuousness, lurking still in spite of my misdeeds – softened the good old man’s heart. He sent for his daughter – he presented me to her as her betrothed. The chamber became hallowed by a holy light as she entered. Hers was that cherub look – those large, soft eyes, full dimpled cheeks and mouth of infantine sweetness that expresses the rare union of happiness and love. Admiration first possessed me. “She is mine!” was the second proud emotion, and my lips curled with haughty triumph. I had not been the *enfant gâté** of the beauties of France not to have learnt the art of pleasing the soft heart of woman. If towards men I was overbearing, the deference I paid to them was the more in contrast. I commenced my courtship by the display of a thousand gallantries to Juliet – who, vowed to me from infancy, had never admitted the devotion of others, and who, though accustomed to expressions of admiration, was uninitiated in the language of lovers.

For a few days all went well. Torella never alluded to my extravagance; he treated me as a favourite son. But the time came, as we discussed the preliminaries

to my union with his daughter, when this fair face of things should be overcast. A contract had been drawn up in my father's lifetime. I had rendered this, in fact, void, by having squandered the whole of the wealth which was to have been shared by Juliet and myself. Torella, in consequence, chose to consider this bond as cancelled and proposed another, in which, though the wealth he bestowed was immeasurably increased, there were so many restrictions as to the mode of spending it that I, who saw independence only in free career being given to my own imperious will, taunted him as taking advantage of my situation and refused utterly to subscribe to his conditions. The old man mildly strove to recall me to reason. Roused pride became the tyrant of my thought; I listened with indignation – I repelled him with disdain.

“Juliet, thou art mine! Did we not interchange vows in our innocent childhood? Are we not one in the sight of God? And shall thy cold-hearted, cold-blooded father divide us? Be generous, my love, be just; take not away a gift, last treasure of thy Guido – retract not thy vows – let us defy the world and, setting at nought

the calculations of age, find in our mutual affection a refuge from every ill.”

Fiend I must have been, with such sophistry to endeavour to poison that sanctuary of holy thought and tender love. Juliet shrank from me affrighted. Her father was the best and kindest of men, and she strove to show me how, in obeying him, every good would follow. He would receive my tardy submission with warm affection, and generous pardon would follow my repentance. Profitless words for a young and gentle daughter to use to a man accustomed to make his will law, and to feel in his own heart a despot so terrible and stern that he could yield obedience to nought save his own imperious desires! My resentment grew with resistance; my wild companions were ready to add fuel to the flame. We laid a plan to carry off Juliet. At first it appeared to be crowned with success. Midway, on our return, we were overtaken by the agonized father and his attendants. A conflict ensued. Before the city guard came to decide the victory in favour of our antagonists, two of Torella's servitors were dangerously wounded.

This portion of my history weighs most heavily with me. Changed man as I am, I abhor myself in the recollection. May none who hear this tale ever have felt as I. A horse driven to fury by a rider armed with barbed spurs was not more a slave than I to the violent tyranny of my temper. A fiend possessed my soul, irritating it to madness. I felt the voice of conscience within me, but if I yielded to it for a brief interval it was only to be a moment after torn, as by a whirlwind, away – borne along on the stream of desperate rage – the plaything of the storms engendered by pride. I was imprisoned and, at the instance of Torella, set free. Again I returned to carry off both him and his child to France – which hapless country, then preyed on by freebooters and gangs of lawless soldiery, offered a grateful refuge to a criminal like me. Our plots were discovered. I was sentenced to banishment, and as my debts were already enormous, my remaining property was put in the hands of commissioners for their payment. Torella again offered his mediation, requiring only my promise not to renew my abortive attempts on himself and his daughter. I spurned his offers, and fancied that I triumphed when

I was thrust out from Genoa, a solitary and penniless exile. My companions were gone: they had been dismissed from the city some weeks before, and were already in France. I was alone – friendless – with no sword at my side nor ducat in my purse.

I wandered along the seashore, a whirlwind of passion possessing and tearing my soul. It was as if a live coal had been set burning in my breast. At first I meditated on what *I should do*. I would join a band of freebooters. Revenge! The word seemed balm to me. I hugged it – caressed it – till, like a serpent, it stung me. Then again I would abjure and despise Genoa, that little corner of the world. I would return to Paris, where so many of my friends swarmed – where my services would be eagerly accepted – where I would carve out fortune with my sword and might, through success, make my paltry birthplace and the false Torella rue the day when they drove me, a new Coriolanus,* from her walls. I would return to Paris – thus, on foot – a beggar – and present myself in my poverty to those I had formerly entertained sumptuously. There was gall in the mere thought of it.

The reality of things began to dawn upon my mind, bringing despair in its train. For several months I had been a prisoner: the evils of my dungeon had whipped my soul to madness, but they had subdued my corporeal frame. I was weak and wan. Torella had used a thousand artifices to administer to my comfort; I had detected and scorned them all – and I reaped the harvest of my obduracy. What was to be done? Should I crouch before my foe and sue for forgiveness? Die rather ten thousand deaths! Never should they obtain that victory! Hate – I swore eternal hate! Hate from whom? To whom? From a wandering outcast to a mighty noble. I and my feelings were nothing to them: already had they forgotten one so unworthy. And Juliet! Her angel face and sylph-like form gleamed among the clouds of my despair with vain beauty, for I had lost her – the glory and flower of the world! Another will call her his! That smile of paradise will bless another!

Even now my heart fails within me when I recur to this rout of grim-visaged ideas. Now subdued almost to tears, now raving in my agony, still I wandered along the rocky shore, which grew at each step wilder and

more desolate. Hanging rocks and hoar precipices overlooked the tideless ocean; black caverns yawned; and forever, among the sea-worn recesses, murmured and dashed the unfruitful waters. Now my way was almost barred by an abrupt promontory, now rendered nearly impracticable by fragments fallen from the cliff. Evening was at hand when, seaward, arose, as if on the waving of a wizard's wand, a murky web of clouds, blotting the late azure sky and darkening and disturbing the till now placid deep. The clouds had strange, fantastic shapes, and they changed and mingled, and seemed to be driven about by a mighty spell. The waves raised their white crests; the thunder first muttered, then roared from across the waste of waters, which took a deep purple dye, flecked with foam. The spot where I stood looked, on one side, to the widespread ocean; on the other, it was barred by a rugged promontory. Round this cape suddenly came, driven by the wind, a vessel. In vain the mariners tried to force a path for her to the open sea — the gale drove her on the rocks. It will perish! All on board will perish! Would I were among them! And

to my young heart the idea of death came for the first time blended with that of joy. It was an awful sight to behold that vessel struggling with her fate. Hardly could I discern the sailors, but I heard them. It was soon all over! A rock, just covered by the tossing waves and so unperceived, lay in wait for its prey. A crash of thunder broke over my head at the moment that, with a frightful shock, the skiff dashed upon her unseen enemy. In a brief space of time she went to pieces. There I stood in safety, and there were my fellow creatures, battling, how hopelessly, with annihilation. Methought I saw them struggling – too truly did I hear their shrieks, conquering the barking surges in their shrill agony. The dark breakers threw hither and thither the fragments of the wreck: soon it disappeared. I had been fascinated to gaze till the end; at last I sank on my knees – I covered my face with my hands – I again looked up: something was floating on the billows towards the shore. It neared and neared. Was that a human form? It grew more distinct, and at last a mighty wave, lifting the whole freight, lodged it upon a rock. A human being bestriding a sea chest!

A human being! Yet was it one? Surely never such had existed before – a misshapen dwarf, with squinting eyes, distorted features and body deformed, till it became a horror to behold. My blood, lately warming towards a fellow being so snatched from a watery tomb, froze in my heart. The dwarf got off his chest; he tossed his straight, straggling hair from his odious visage:

“By St Beelzebub!” he exclaimed. “I have been well bested.” He looked round and saw me. “Oh, by the Fiend! Here is another ally of the Mighty One. To what saint did you offer prayers, friend – if not to mine? Yet I remember you not on board.”

I shrank from the monster and his blasphemy. Again he questioned me, and I muttered some inaudible reply. He continued:

“Your voice is drowned by this dissonant roar. What a noise the big ocean makes! Schoolboys bursting from their prison are not louder than these waves set free to play. They disturb me. I will no more of their ill-timed brawling. Silence, hoary one! Winds, avaunt! To your homes! Clouds, fly to the antipodes, and leave our heaven clear!”