

CHAPTER I

HE—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters. It was the colour of an old football, and more or less the shape of one, save for the sunken cheeks and a strand or two of coarse, dry hair, like the hair on a cocoanut. Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa; and now it swung, gently, perpetually, in the breeze which never ceased blowing through the attic rooms of the gigantic house of the lord who had slain him.

Orlando's fathers had ridden in fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by strange rivers, and they had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters. So too would Orlando, he vowed. But since he was sixteen only, and too young to ride with them in Africa or France, he would steal away from his mother and the peacocks in the garden and go to his attic room and there lunge and plunge and slice the air with his blade. Sometimes he cut the cord

EN: 2, 3, 4, 8, 8-II, 15, 22.I, 22.2 TA: 20

ORLANDO

so that the skull bumped on the floor and he had to string it up again, fastening it with some chivalry almost out of reach so that his enemy grinned at him through shrunk, black lips triumphantly. The skull
 5 swung to and fro, for the house, at the top of which he lived, was so vast that there seemed trapped in it the wind itself, blowing this way, blowing that way, winter and summer. The green arras with the hunters on it moved perpetually. His fathers had been noble since
 10 they had been at all. They came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads. Were not the bars of darkness in the room, and the yellow pools which chequered the floor, made by the sun falling through the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the window?
 15 Orlando stood now in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard. When he put his hand on the window-sill to push the window open, it was instantly coloured red, blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing. Thus, those who like symbols, and have a turn for the
 20 deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself. A
 25 more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory,
 30 from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is

EN: 4, 7, 9, II, I4, I6, 27 TA: 5, 6, 7, 3I.I, 3I.2 TN: 3I

ORLANDO

the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career. The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short, tense flight; the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head. But, alas, that these catalogues of youthful beauty cannot end without mentioning forehead and eyes. Alas, that people are seldom born devoid of all three; for directly we glance at Orlando standing by the window, we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples. Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, thus do we rhapsodise. Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore. Sights disturbed him, like that of his mother, a very beautiful lady in green walking out to feed the peacocks with Twitchett, her maid, behind her; sights exalted him—the birds and the trees; and made him in love with death—the evening sky, the homing rooks; and so, mounting up the spiral stairway into his brain—which was a roomy one—all these sights, and the garden sounds too, the hammer beating, the wood chopping, began that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer

EN: 18, 24, 26

ORLANDO

detests. But to continue—Orlando slowly drew in his head, sat down at the table, and, with the half-conscious air of one doing what they do every day of their lives at this hour, took out a writing book labelled
 5 “Æthelbert: A Tragedy in Five Acts”, and dipped an old stained goose quill in the ink.

Soon he had covered ten pages and more with poetry. He was fluent, evidently, but he was abstract. Vice, Crime, Misery were the personages of his drama;
 10 there were Kings and Queens of impossible territories; horrid plots confounded them; noble sentiments suffused them; there was never a word said as he himself would have said it, but all was turned with a fluency and sweetness which, considering his age—he was not
 15 yet seventeen—and that the sixteenth century had still some years of its course to run, were remarkable enough. At last, however, he came to a halt. He was describing, as all young poets are for ever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he
 20 looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course, he could write no more. Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem
 25 to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces. The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre. Moreover, nature has tricks of her own. Once look out of a window at bees among flowers, at a yawning
 30 dog, at the sun setting, once think “how many more suns shall I see set”, etc. etc. (the thought is too well

EN: 5, 26.1, 26.2 TA: 5.1, 5.2, 16, 28, 31

ORLANDO

known to be worth writing out) and one drops the pen, takes one's cloak, strides out of the room, and catches one's foot on a painted chest as one does so. For Orlando was a trifle clumsy.

He was careful to avoid meeting anyone. There was Stubbs, the gardener, coming along the path. He hid behind a tree till he had passed. He let himself out at a little gate in the garden wall. He skirted all stables, kennels, breweries, carpenters' shops, wash-houses, places where they make tallow candles, kill oxen, forge horse-shoes, stitch jerkins—for the house was a town ringing with men at work at their various crafts—and gained the ferny path leading uphill through the park unseen. There is perhaps a kinship among qualities; one draws another along with it; and the biographer should here call attention to the fact that this clumsiness is often mated with a love of solitude. Having stumbled over a chest, Orlando naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone.

So, after a long silence, "I am alone", he breathed at last, opening his lips for the first time in this record. He had walked very quickly uphill through ferns and hawthorn bushes, startling deer and wild birds, to a place crowned by a single oak tree. It was very high, so high indeed that nineteen English counties could be seen beneath; and on clear days thirty or perhaps forty, if the weather was very fine. Sometimes one could see the English Channel, wave reiterating upon wave. Rivers could be seen and pleasure boats gliding on them; and galleons setting out to sea;

EN: 4, 6, 12, 18, 24, 25, 29 TA: 6, 9, 27.1, 27.2 TN: 6, 9

ORLANDO

and armadas with puffs of smoke from which came the dull thud of cannon firing; and forts on the coast; and castles among the meadows; and here a watch tower; and there a fortress; and again some vast mansion like that of Orlando's father, massed like a town in the valley circled by walls. To the east there were the spires of London and the smoke of the city; and perhaps on the very sky line, when the wind was in the right quarter, the craggy top and serrated edges of Snowdon herself showed mountainous among the clouds. For a moment Orlando stood counting, gazing, recognising. That was his father's house; that his uncle's. His aunt owned those three great turrets among the trees there. The heath was theirs and the forest; the pheasant and the deer, the fox, the badger, and the butterfly.

He sighed profoundly, and flung himself—there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word—on the earth at the foot of the oak tree. He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be; or, for image followed image, it was the back of a great horse that he was riding, or the deck of a tumbling ship—it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt the need of something which he could attach his floating heart to; the heart that tugged at his side; the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales every evening about this time when he walked out. To the oak tree he tied it and as he lay there, gradually the flutter in and about him stilled itself;

EN: 5, 6, 10 TA: 10

ORLANDO

the little leaves hung, the deer stopped; the pale
 summer clouds stayed; his limbs grew heavy on the
 ground; and he lay so still that by degrees the deer
 stepped nearer and the rooks wheeled round him
 and the swallows dipped and circled and the dragon- 5
 flies shot past, as if all the fertility and amorous
 activity of a summer's evening were woven web-like
 about his body.

After an hour or so—the sun was rapidly sinking,
 the white clouds had turned red, the hills were violet, 10
 the woods purple, the valleys black—a trumpet
 sounded. Orlando leapt to his feet. The shrill
 sound came from the valley. It came from a dark
 spot down there; a spot compact and mapped out; a
 maze; a town, yet girt about with walls; it came 15
 from the heart of his own great house in the valley,
 which, dark before, even as he looked and the single
 trumpet duplicated and reduplicated itself with other
 shriller sounds, lost its darkness and became pierced
 with lights. Some were small hurrying lights, as if 20
 servants dashed along corridors to answer summonses;
 others were high and lustrous lights, as if they burnt
 in empty banqueting-halls made ready to receive guests
 who had not come; and others dipped and waved and
 sank and rose, as if held in the hands of troops of 25
 serving men, bending, kneeling, rising, receiving,
 guarding, and escorting with all dignity indoors a
 great Princess alighting from her chariot. Coaches
 turned and wheeled in the courtyard. Horses tossed
 their plumes. The Queen had come. 30

Orlando looked no more. He dashed downhill.

EN: 8, 30 TA: 1, 5, 9 TN: 5

ORLANDO

He let himself in at a wicket gate. He tore up the winding staircase. He reached his room. He tossed his stockings to one side of the room, his jerkin to the other. He dipped his head. He scoured his hands. He pared his finger nails. With no more than six inches of looking-glass and a pair of old candles to help him, he had thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias in less than ten minutes by the stable clock. He was ready. He was flushed. He was excited. But he was terribly late.

By short cuts known to him, he made his way now through the vast congeries of rooms and staircases to the banqueting-hall, five acres distant on the other side of the house. But half-way there, in the back quarters where the servants lived, he stopped. The door of Mrs. Stewkley's sitting-room stood open—she was gone, doubtless, with all her keys to wait upon her mistress. But there, sitting at the servant's dinner table with a tankard beside him and paper in front of him, sat a rather fat, rather shabby man, whose ruff was a thought dirty, and whose clothes were of hodden brown. He held a pen in his hand, but he was not writing. He seemed in the act of rolling some thought up and down, to and fro in his mind till it gathered shape or momentum to his liking. His eyes, globed and clouded like some green stone of curious texture, were fixed. He did not see Orlando. For all his hurry, Orlando stopped dead. Was this a poet? Was he writing poetry? "Tell

EN: 9, 15, 18, 22, 24 TA: 20

ORLANDO

me”, he wanted to say, “everything in the whole world”—for he had the wildest, most absurd, extravagant ideas about poets and poetry—but how speak to a man who does not see you? who sees ogres, satyrs, perhaps the depths of the sea instead? So Orlando stood gazing while the man turned his pen in his fingers, this way and that way; and gazed and mused; and then, very quickly, wrote half-a-dozen lines and looked up. Whereupon Orlando, overcome with shyness, darted off and reached the banquetting-hall only just in time to sink upon his knees and, hanging his head in confusion, to offer a bowl of rose water to the great Queen herself.

Such was his shyness that he saw no more of her than her ringed hand in water; but it was enough. It was a memorable hand; a thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or sceptre; a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand; a commanding hand too; a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; a hand, he guessed, attached to an old body that smelt like a cupboard in which furs are kept in camphor; which body was yet caparisoned in all sorts of brocades and gems; and held itself very upright though perhaps in pain from sciatica; and never flinched though strung together by a thousand fears; and the Queen’s eyes were light yellow. All this he felt as the great rings flashed in the water and then something pressed his hair—which, perhaps, accounts for his seeing nothing more likely to be of use to a historian. And in truth, his mind was such a welter of opposites—of the night and the blazing

EN: I5 TA: I8, 26 TN: I3

ORLANDO

candles, of the shabby poet and the great Queen, of
 silt fields and the clatter of serving men—that he
 could see nothing; or only a hand.

By the same showing, the Queen herself can have
 5 seen only a head. But if it is possible from a hand to
 deduce a body, informed with all the attributes of a
 great Queen, her crabbedness, courage, frailty, and
 terror, surely a head can be as fertile, looked down
 upon from a chair of state by a lady whose eyes
 10 were always, if the waxworks at the Abbey are to be
 trusted, wide open. The long, curled hair, the dark
 head bent so reverently, so innocently before her,
 implied a pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman
 has ever stood upright upon; and violet eyes; and
 15 a heart of gold; and loyalty and manly charm—all
 qualities which the old woman loved the more the
 more they failed her. For she was growing old and
 worn and bent before her time. The sound of cannon
 was always in her ears. She saw always the glistening
 20 poison drop and the long stiletto. As she sat at table
 she listened; she heard the guns in the Channel; she
 dreaded—was that a curse, was that a whisper? Inno-
 cence, simplicity, were all the more dear to her for
 the dark background she set them against. And it
 25 was that same night, so tradition has it, when Orlando
 was sound asleep, that she made over formally,
 putting her hand and seal finally to the parchment,
 the gift of the great monastic house that had been
 the Archbishop's and then the King's to Orlando's
 30 father.

Orlando slept all night in ignorance. He had

EN: 8, 10, 13, 20, 21, 30 TA: 7, 8, 16, 22, 31