

CHAPTER XXX

“JOHN, I’m real glad to see you. Do you think I’ve gone old after all these years?”

“Not you, Lucy. You are still the same dear, pretty girl who came to my bedroom to show me the little lights in the woods beyond the garden.”

“I’m thirty, John. Doesn’t it sound old?”

“And don’t you look young? Lucy, Lucy, I want to see you let down your hair and be pagan, like the old days.”

“Meaning without my clothes. Well, we mustn’t tell auntie. After all she was raised in Bethel, Vermont, even if she hates the place like the Cities of the Plain. . . . Dear, I’m terribly glad I haven’t grown fat, but I hope you won’t think I’ve fallen in too much, either.”

“I am sure you are as lovely as ever. You are just as nice to kiss.”

“And you are just as romantic, Mr. Englishman. When your people do unbend, John, they beat the world. . . . And now you are *Sir John Woden*? Doesn’t it sound grand? I reckon auntie put on frills when I told her I got a friend a British nobleman.”

“Not a nobleman, Lucy.”

“Well, a baronet.”

“Not even that, though it may come.”

“Well, I don’t think you will get that into auntie’s head. To her you are a nobleman. . . . John, I hated leaving my p’il place in Pennsylvania, but I had to for Delilah.”

“Couldn’t you have taught her yourself for a bit?”

“Me? I don’t know anything. I’m just a fond mama, and she is the cutest kid.”

"She is certainly that," said John, with as much enthusiasm as he could muster.

At seven, little Delilah bade fair to belie her name. She wore spectacles, which was not her fault, doubtless being jointly that of some ancestor with weak eyes and Mendelian inheritance. She had an air of precocity which was all her own.

"This is your uncle, 'Lilah," said her mother, proudly. It had been agreed that this was a convenient fiction.

"I guess I don't like Englishmen, mama."

"Dear, you mustn't say that. He fought in our war."

"Auntie says he was a reb. They got beat."

That was a sore point with Lucy's aunt. She was prepared to condone much in Sir John Woden, whom she persisted in regarding as a British nobleman, but the fact that he had been a Confederate soldier displeased her, even if they had "got beat," as she expressed it.

It was the end of September, the finish of a dry, arid season. All the summer long the forest fires had blazed in the adjacent States of Michigan and Wisconsin. The wooden houses of Chicago, the very wooden sidewalks were dry as a mummy's bones.

However, that was a minor point to Chicago. She was prosperous and, if dry, her citizens most certainly were not, it being long years before the aridity of Prohibition descended upon the United States, even as the plagues upon Egypt of old.

John was quartered very comfortably in Michigan Avenue. The proprietor of the hotel was at constant pains to assure John that as a free American citizen he took no stock in titles. He was at equally constant pains to anticipate his every want and use him as a free advertisement, so John was quite satisfied. He did not mind being an advertisement if he were comfortable.

Lucy's aunt lived not very far away. It was regrettable to John that he could not stay with Lucy, but the fact had

to be recognised that they were not on the Pennsylvanian hills with the solitude of the eternal woods.

"Dear, I want to be with you. I want to give myself to you, day and night. But we mustn't spoil 'Lilah's chances, and if stories got about—well——"

"Quite right, Lucy."

But they loved each other, and there were moments—blessed moments—when they were all in all to each other again.

"I think you look lovelier than ever, Lucy."

"Aren't you just the finest flatterer I ever saw, John? I'm sure I've got sort of pale, and not quite so curved here—and here——"

"Just the same, Lucy."

"Isn't it a pity we can't look out of our windows and see the little lights in the wood, John? Say, do you remember my roses? Do you remember how I hauled you on to my mat and bathed your head? Do you recollect all that?"

"I remember it all, rosebud."

"You *are* a lover. Weren't you pleased when you heard I was a mama?"

"It was fine to hear that, Lucy."

She became a little serious. "John, I went down to Bull Run one time. You remember my Harry? . . . I was unhappy one night. I wondered what he would think, if he knew. You see, my Harry was raised in Bethel, Vermont, and I hadn't gone pagan then. He might not understand. So I went down, and found the l'il cross quite near that river, and it was lonely. I knelt down there and I thought about it, and my mind talked about it all and I told him I was lonely too. I reckon there must have been *something* of my Harry—something of his mind or soul—left way down by Bull Run. All of a sudden, I felt it was quite all right. He understood."

"Lucy, I am sure he would understand."

"You don't believe much, John, so you've told me, and what I believe I don't know, unless it is the old gods and the things in the wood. 'Twasn't easy talking to Harry's soul, he being a Baptist when he went down thar', and me being a heathen. But it was all right. Something happened to make him understand. I left quite happy."

John kissed her affectionately.

"How is Angeline, your wife?"

"As dear to me as ever," said John, firmly.

Lucy sighed a little. After all, she was a woman, if a pagan, and she did not *quite* understand that. However, she let it pass; she was in John's arms, and she knew he loved her.

And so the days passed into October, and on the night of Sunday, October 9th, Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over a lantern in her stable and set all Chicago on fire.

So it was said, although the honour was strenuously denied by Mrs. O'Leary on behalf of the cow. It is, therefore, perhaps, a little uncertain, but what is quite certain is that before half-past ten on Monday night, over seventeen thousand buildings had gone up in flame and smoke.

From Lincoln Park to Taylor Street was one dreary waste; a ghastly satire on human endeavour.

It must have been about one on Monday morning when John, ever wakening to any unusual sound, stirred in his sleep.

There was the noise of many people running and shouting, and through the window, with its undrawn blind, he could see a great glow in the sky.

He sprang up on the instant and hurried on his clothes. Somewhere towards that glow was Lucy and his daughter. It was true that the conflagration might be many streets from their home, but he must know.

He went into Michigan Avenue to find a surging crowd. Already meeting the throng of curious sightseers were weeping refugees from the burned area, with what little

effects and belongings they had been able to save. It was plain that it was a great fire, by no means to be put out in a hurry, a menacing fire whose appetite was not satiated, and people in the quarters most nearly menaced were in flight.

"I guess it's down by Jefferson Street. . . . Some of these infernal, careless Irish, blast 'em." A passer-by was voluble.

John hurried on. It came into his mind, curiously enough, how, many years ago, he had carried a little girl through the streets of Vienna towards yet another fire.

Now Angeline was his wife, thousands of miles away in England, and the mother of his three sons, the first two already lusty schoolboys, and he was in search of Lucy and his daughter.

Again he turned a corner and came upon a house blazing to the skies as of old, but this time he was sick at heart, for his loved one might be within the inferno.

A weeping old woman was in the street. It was Lucy's aunt, and she was alone.

"Where are they?" John clutched her arm.

She pointed feebly towards the blazing house.

"How? Why?"

"It came so quick. It was in the next block. Watched it until we were tired. . . . I thought they were putting it out." The old woman sobbed. "'Lilah and Lucy were tired and went to bed. Woke and found the staircase all afire—I ran and called them, but they never came, and I found myself in the street—alone."

Most of her rambling statement had never been heard. Almost at the instant he asked his questions, John was springing for the house. The heat caught him like a blast from a furnace; the doorway was ablaze; that way there was no entrance. Near-by there was a rain-pipe; hand over hand John went up, his great weight causing it to creak dangerously. He knew that Lucy and his daughter

slept at the top of the house ; he would reach them somehow.

His hands scorched by the heat of the metal, he went through a broken window, and along a smoke-filled passage.

“ Lucy, Lucy.”

A cry came from her room as he burst the door. Mother and daughter were kneeling, clasped in each other's arms, Lucy endeavouring bravely to comfort the terrified child. The little apartment was insufferably hot. Already wisps of smoke were curling through the chinks in the wooden wall.

“ John, I knew you'd come for me.”

There was no time for endearments. John looked out of the window. Near-by was another rainpipe ; for another minute, perhaps, the way would be practicable. He turned to the bed and began twisting the sheets into *impromptu* ropes.

“ I shall have to climb down with you.”

“ Take her first.” Lucy held out the child.

John nodded. Willingly would he have taken Lucy, but the child could not be left alone in her terrified state. . . .

Down the pipe with the bound child on his shoulders, and then to the ground.

“ Run along to your Aunt, 'Lilah. I'll go back for your mama.”

The flames were almost licking the pipe as he ascended. There was a yell from the street.

“ Come back, you crazy fool.”

John hardly heard the man's voice. Before him was a vision of Lucy in her scanty nightgown, her little bare feet in slippers, waiting for him, waiting for rescue. . . .

The pipe creaked and gave. . . . The whole side of the wooden house seemed to vomit smoke and flame. John felt himself falling, and then oblivion. . . .

He came to himself, to find a man offering him water.

“ I reckon you had a narrow squeak. If you hadn't

fallen into a flower-bed you'd be a goner. I got you from the wreckage just in time."

Bruised, dazed, sick, but with unbroken bones, John staggered to his feet and gazed towards the mass of flame which had been Lucy's house.

"Lucy. Where is she? I left her in the house."

The man shrugged his shoulders.