

CHAPTER XXXIII

“**W**HO is the girl, Billy? Don't blush, my son. I know you have one. When a young man of nineteen pays such attention to his personal appearance, rushes off in the evening and runs up a bill at my florist's, I know what is in the wind.”

“I am sorry about the florist's bill, dad, but I shall pay that out of my allowance.”

“No, you will not, my son. You can take that as a present from me. What's her name?”

“Lucy.”

John started. He was back in the old days again. It was seven years now since his Lucy had gone in the great fire in Chicago, and here was his grown-up son in love himself with another Lucy.

“I once knew—but never mind that. Tell me all about her.” John smiled kindly upon him. His second son was a great favourite with him; this son who was to succeed to his businesses, the pride of his heart, and carry on the family traditions.

“I think you will like her, dad. She is poor, but she is a lady.”

“I am sure she is, Billy.”

Then it all came out. How she was a governess at a friend's house, and that her father lived in Brixton. How he was some sort of a clerk, and what a struggle they had, and that Lucy was fearful that Sir John Woden would not approve of his son being in love with her because she was so poor.

"I don't care a damn for that, Billy, if she is a lady. I have been poor myself, as you, my son, will never be. The money part of it will be all right; you can leave that to me. You are rather young for marriage, though."

"We expected to wait, anyway, until I am of age."

John nodded. "That will still be young, but I think you know your own mind. More than your elder brother ever will."

"Leslie has a girl too."

"Has he? I am pleased to hear it. He may acquire some sense yet."

"I think you are a bit hard on Leslie, dad, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I never mind you speaking your own thoughts, Billy. I do not necessarily want you to echo mine. Go on."

"Leslie says his grandfather was a clergyman, so he does not see why you should object to his being in the same calling."

"That is so, but my father starved for it, and Leslie would do the same had I not made money in that commerce he despises. I never thought my son would become a professional Christian—sorry, Billy, I didn't mean to wound you." He had observed a look of pain upon the lad's face, for Billy by no means shared his sire's atheistical opinions. "Never mind Leslie. Bring your Lucy here to dinner one night. What about next Wednesday?"

"I say, that is splendid. Thank you. Will you tell mother?"

For, like most boys, he was shy of confidences in such matters, never knowing that the astute Angeline, with the uncanniness of feminine intuition, was already aware that some such affair was *en tapis*.

John was quite pleased at the course of events. It kept Billy out of mischief. His sons had led more sheltered lives than he; were less able to cope with the ravages of the pleasures of London, licit and illicit. He knew that in these

ways he had had strength in his youth more than they possessed, even as he towered above them in stature, for none of his sons was so tall as he.

Good women kept young men out of mischief, i. not out of expense. So Lucy came to dinner and was welcomed. She was pretty, shy, quiet and respectable. John was quite interested in the latter quality; save his wife and Lucy of Pennsylvania, he had had little to do with respectable women, and those two had saving graces. He hoped this new Lucy might have the same for his son's sake, and rather thought she would.

The summer of 1878 whiled away its golden days. Strolls in the gardens, trips down to the country, always back most decorously at nightfall—so did Billy and the new Lucy pass their days.

Then came September.

"I say, dad. Lucy and I are going down the river tomorrow on one of the steamers. Couldn't you and mother come as well?"

John laughed and shook his head. "Not on one of those small boats. Why, she will be packed to suffocation. We're too old."

Billy grinned. "I have never seen a man so big as you, and no one could hurt mother when you were near. Come with us on the *Princess Alice*."

"Another time, my boy. I see too much of humanity in the mass to desire to spend a day in it's pressing society. Go and study life, take care of yourself, and don't be back too late."

It was a lovely September evening. Wallington, the butler, tapped at the door of the library and coughed decorously as he entered. He seemed to find some little difficulty in broaching his subject.

"I beg your pardon, Sir John, but is the—ah, young

lady upstairs a guest of the house? If you desire me to have a room ready——”

“I have not the least idea what you are talking about, Wallington. Have you been drinking? What lady? There is no guest staying in this house, as you are perfectly well aware.”

“Then, sir, it is as I feared, and she is an intruder. I hardly liked to take the liberty of making the suggestion in case of error.”

“If there is any unauthorised person in this house you had better have her put out. Who is she and what does she want?”

“She did not answer, sir, when I ventured to speak to her, and it was dusk in the upper landing, so that I could not see her face. She was dressed in white and carried a candle—almost ghostlike, if I may say so, Sir John.”

A great silence fell in the library. It was very still in the September dusk—

“That will be all, Wallington. If you find her, turn her out.” The butler bowed and left the room.

“Again?” said John Woden, as he paced up and down. “Again? What does this mean?”

Concertinas played as the *Princess Alice* came up the river, happy voices joined in unison of song. Some were dancing on the decks with heavy boots, to and fro, in and out, with all the abandon of the Cockney holiday-maker.

Billy and Lucy leaned over the rail as the ship approached Woolwich, watching the people in the streets. It had been a noisy, bustling day on a small steamer with packed humanity on her decks, but they had enjoyed it thoroughly. It was so novel; to Lucy just a little bit “daring,” to Billy something quite out of the ordinary ways of Prince’s Gate. Now they were on their way home—

“Presently, dearest,” he said, turning to Lucy. “Presently——”

A vast shape loomed out of the gathering dusk and the thickening mist. Before the *Princess Alice* could alter her course, the *Bywell Castle* had struck her.

The concertinas and the singing stopped. Nearly a thousand human beings went mad with fear. The decks of the sinking steamer were clogged with a fighting, panic-stricken crowd. Hundreds jumped or were thrust over the rails to drown.

Billy felt Lucy torn from his grasp. He fought his way back to her, punching frenziedly, madly as the others. But she had gone down; she was trampled under foot; and even as he reached her, startled at the blood on her white face, the *Princess Alice* sank in the Thames, and he felt himself sucked below the waters. Perhaps he could have saved himself, but the body of the unconscious girl weighed him down—

A quarter of an hour later the stretch of water had become a vast graveyard.

They brought the news to John, and he and Angelina waited until far into the night. Dawn was breaking as, with set lips, he carried her, sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, to her room and ever so gently, as long, long ago, undressed her and put her to bed. Her cheeks were stained with tears. Very tenderly he put his lips to hers.

He looked through the window at the eastern sky, paling to the sunrise. . . . Then he thought again of the little ghost upstairs.