

CHAPTER XLIII

“**Y**ES, Antony, another rung of the ladder, and I am glad for your sake. They talk a lot of nonsense about my long life devoted to the service of my country, but confound it, my boy, you know I have never served anyone but myself.”

“I know nothing of the sort,” answered Antony, “You are too hard on yourself, grandpater. You have been one of the finest fellows to me that anyone could desire.”

“Me, too,” said Diane of New Orleans. “Ever since you saw me on the table in New York. How damp was the table; they had upset the Kentucky whiskey, and I had no shoes.”

“Don’t talk of upsetting whiskey at it’s present price,” protested the Earl of Woden.

“The fact is you have been doing good things for everybody all your life,” declared Antony.

“Don’t make me laugh, Antony. If I laugh too heartily I might burst a blood-vessel at my time of life. . . . Ninety!—I remember my old uncle, over sixty years ago, suggesting I might live to be a hundred. Well, perhaps I shall. . . . I was a strong young fool in those days.”

“I am sure you were never a fool, but you must certainly have been strong,” said Antony, with a glance of admiration at his grandfather. The old man was four inches and more his superior in height. “One of these days I must see that little old shop where you started. I have never been in it.”

“Some day you shall—no, confound it, we’ll go to-night. I am too old to wait. I might go out like a cand—

like a *light* any time. Diane, tell them to get us a taxi. . . . They've taken all the cars for the war, you know, Antony."

"Nothing wrong with a taxi."

"Me, too," said Diane, "You make your little excursions too late, John, or we might have taken our Poppy, and have gone *en famille*."

"Better getting her beauty-sleep."

They sped through the darkened streets. In all directions searchlights pierced the London sky. Along Knightsbridge and Piccadilly they went, between the clubs and the Green Park. The night was calm.

"By the way, grandpater, you remember Tom, who helped me when I was wounded? I told you about him. I had a letter; he is coming back on leave next week."

"I must see him, Antony. He probably saved your life."

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder. I have asked him to call on us."

They were across the Circus now, and going down the Haymarket.

"What is his name?"

Boom-boom! Boom-boom!

"Another infernal air-raid!"

They raced up the Strand and stopped outside the quaint old shop of Brown & Woden's just as the crowds were rushing to the shelter of the tubes.

"Boom-boom!" The night was reverberating to the sound of the anti-aircraft guns.

"Better come inside and shelter until it is over, driver."

"Not me, sir. I sticks by the cab."

They left him at the wheel.

"It is not a nice time for a little excursion," said Diane, tremulously.

"Can't be helped; I am not a clairvoyant, and I could not foresee the raid," said John.

He fumbled for the light-switch, forgetful that during the raid the current would be cut off at the power-station.

"Confound; of course, the light's off."

"Perhaps we could get a candle?" began Antony.

John started. "Candle? Yes, there is one candle in the house. In the room at the top."

"Why is there always that candle?" asked Diane of New Orleans. "It is well known that candle in this little old shop in the Strand, but no one tells why. Every night year after year."

The sharp bark of the guns was very near. Far away, there came a deeper, more ominous sound which echoed down the deserted Strand.

"It is the bombs," Diane whispered, not waiting an answer to her question. "It is horrible to be in the dark, and hear the bombs."

"I'll get the candle," said John, abruptly. "Never mind why it is alight. You two stay here; I know the way."

He began to climb up the creaky wooden stairs.

"Is not John wonderful? At his age to go about and climb stairs, when others are in their beds? Is it not so, Antony?"

"Wonderful," said Antony, and it was indeed true. Time had chilled the blood in John's veins, the inexorable years had slowed the movements of that great frame, but he was still wonderful. His brain was still keen, his faculties alert.

The old house and shop were deserted now at nights. The managers and staff had gone.

He came into the old passage where had been his own and his uncle's rooms. He remembered that long ago night when his uncle had awakened, and looked out of his bedroom.

"*I am engaged in some experiments of a very interesting nature——*"

"I wonder what happened to Lizzie?" he thought. "Did she ever come back? With that candle? Six times? That's enough for any damned ghost. Seven would be too much."

Then, again, it came into his mind that the first time she must yet have been alive; still alive and caring for little Tom.

"I wonder where he went at the last?—No, she couldn't have been a ghost if she were alive. Unless—do spirits wander in their sleep? She might have been thinking: worrying. . . . What nonsense is this? There is nothing, I believe."

There was a light shining faintly under the loor of her old room; as he entered he thought he heard a laugh, but the room was quite empty. Rather cold, but quite empty.

No longer did the candle, though lighted night by night, shine over the leads. Now it had to be obscured by a thick red blind.

"Night after night for all these years! When it started there were no tubes, no motors, no telephones—and now——" In the silence the Earl of Woden could hear the drone of aero-engines: the German 'planes were over London.

He stretched out his old hand to take it—what was that? There was the heavy patter of falling shrapnel on the roof, but what—a loud whistle downwards through the air, swelling second by second—there was a thunderous crash; he felt himself flung violently into the corner—the candle fell and went out——

He came to himself, rather stupidly; in his ears the noise of the motor fire-engines tearing down the Strand. The wall had gone, and he looked out on to the open sky; little shrapnel stars were still bursting far away; the drone of the aero-engines was fainter now. Somewhere near him there was a flickering of the red light of fire——

Surely this was Chicago, and he must hurry up and rescue Lucy——? No, no; that was years ago now and Lucy had long been dust—— His head s.vam. The floor of the room lay at an odd angle.

And then he noticed the letter: a dusty letter, an old, unopened letter close beside him——

“Mr. John,

“I wont come back after what I becom, but please take Tom. His mother being such as youve made me is no life for him, and he is your son. I dussent see Mr. Brown now bein a street woman so fetch Tom from Skinners, Red Lion Court wi:hin this week, after which they turn me out. If you do not come, perhaps I will and God help you. I see my candle.

“LIZZIE.”

The date was “September 1st, 1847.” John gazed at the faded ink in the sprawling characters. How had this come here? Why had it never reached him?

Had she returned by night and left it in her old room? Had one of the two young men assistants placed it where it might be found? Into what crevice had it slipped, lying hidden and forgotten all these seventy years until the coming of the German bombers?

Of course! This was 1917, and he was in London. For a moment he had thought—what was the good of these questions? The request had never been known, never been answered. He considered the menace in the last few words.

Well, it was too late now: his time was nearly done, and it was much too late. All had gone save himself.

There was the noise of a crowd and shouting in the street outside. He was shaken, but uninjured. He pulled himself together and, leaving the letter where it fell, went through the swaying door.

Towards the other side, right over the shop, was a chaos of wreckage and flickering fire. There were the hissing and the white plumes of rising steam as the firemen's hoses played below.

Yes, the stairs were still intact. Rather rickety, but

still intact. Uninjured, his brain clearing now, John remembered that below were Antony and Diane.

They had waited while he had gone to fetch the candle.

And when he came into the wreckage of the shop, there were still Antony and Diane of New Orleans, but they did not speak when he called, and never would again——

“Will Lord Redehall and Mademoiselle Diane be returning to-night, my lord?”

“No.”

“Miss Poppy has been awake and has been asking for them, my lord.”

“I’ll go up to her.”

“I have never seen him look older or more tired,” said the butler to himself.

Poppy was sitting up in bed. John looked at her short, dark hair and her blue eyes. How like—how very like she was to Angeline; to the little girl he had carried through Vienna so very long ago!

“Where’s daddy and Diane?”

“They—they’ve gone away for a bit, Poppy.” He dropped, rather heavily, on to the chair at her bedside. There was a quaver in his voice, which he strove to control. The marquess who had said so had been right: his sort “never goes to pieces.”

He would tell her the terrible news in the morning, as gently as may be. He hardly realised it himself yet.

“My dear, you should be asleep.”

“Gran’pa, I had such a funny dream—so real! The girl——”

“I think I know. Did she carry a candle?”

“Why, gran’pa, you’ve had *my* dream! How funny!”

“We are such stuff as dreams—— Poppy, would you like me to wait with you until you fall asleep?”

“Please—and I haven’t said my prayers. I’ll say them now——”

The sweet little voice prattled on; John listened in silence. "God bless daddy an' gran'pa, an' Diane for evern'ever, Amen."

Long hours after she had fallen asleep he sat there, holding her little hand, until the sky was crimson in the dawn——