

CHAPTER XLV

“GRANDPA, old thing, I don't want to go to school.”

“Poppy, neither did I when I was your age.”

“And did you?”

“I did. You see my father had a swishy cane——”

“But you wouldn't cane *me*?” exclaimed Poppy aghast.

Old John smiled; he said nothing, but his smile as he stroked her short, dark hair was reassuring.

“I would not hurt a hair of your head.”

It was 1919, a year of rising prices and falling exchanges, of fierce gambling in industrial shares, and ominous rumblings in the underworld. There were Victory Balls and railway strikes; taxation such as Britain had never known. Out East, Dyer had struck at sedition as years before Eyre had done in Jamaica; and again the wolf-pack safe at home were in full cry.

Not so safe at home as in the far gone time of 1865, for there was the growing menace of the underworld, incited by promises to make the country “a land fit for heroes to live in.”

“A land fit for Neros to live in,” said old John, smiling grimly, though sad at heart, for he would have seen England safe before he died, and just then to his eyes she seemed very unsafe indeed.

He was ninety-two, a little feebler now, but his eyes had not grown dim, nor had his brain dulled with the passing of the years.

Nearly all the life he had known had now passed; Angeline and her sons, Lucy and young Tim, now but recently Diane and Antony. All gone, save Poppy.

In America was still Delilah, Lucy's daughter, but of her he had seen nothing for very many years. Diane of New Orleans had always written his letters for him, and now that she was no more, he rarely wrote and rarely heard from Delilah.

"Poppy, do you know that when I go you will be Countess of Woden, and Viscountess Redehall?"

"Doesn't it sound grand? But, dear, I don't want you to go. I'd rather be plain Poppy."

"Never plain Poppy, I think," he said, looking into her blue eyes. "But Poppy you must go to school, and learn things? What would they say if the Countess of Woden could not spell and add up 2 and 2 and make them 5?"

"Add up 2 and 2 and make—grandpa, you're pulling my leg. I know better than that now. . . All right, dear old thing, I'll go to school, but I *know* I'll cry into my pillow every night until the holidays, and get awful colds."

"Not you. Keep a stiff upper lip, no matter how blue you feel, and you'll pull through in the end."

So Poppy went to school and did but water her pillow with her tears the first three nights, after which she took heart of grace and top place in her form.

It was 1920 when Delilah came over without warning from America. John had always allowed his only daughter plenty of money, but knowing she was fifty-five, and supposing she was of a sedate temperament, considered her a fixture in the United States. He did not care very much; he had hoped for another little daughter of Lucy's sweetness and purity, only to find one with the Bethel, Vermont, element most firmly pronounced.

"I had one splendid son—Billy, and he was drowned in the Thames. I had two splendid grandsons; one died in

one war and the second in another. The Atlantic claimed my first-born, and with my own hands I killed Harry on Gun Hill."

Leslie—well, perhaps he had been a bit hard on Leslie, but that was all past and gone now. Leslie had worshipped his God where his father had worshipped Mammon; they had misunderstood.

Then there was Harry, the one who had died at his own hands; no one had ever known that save those two only.

"I did my duty, but sometimes duty is devilish hard," John sighed. Well, he was getting very old now, and it was not of much use to bother about the past; the sands were running out. There was only Poppy left to hold his titles and his estates and the millions he had amassed; only Poppy, and Delilah in America,

"I must leave a good bit to Lucy's daughter. She is none too young herself."

"Odd how the years pass; they tick away without a man knowing it." Well, he had not done so badly; he had begun with thirty-three pounds and ended with an earldom and a bank balance running into millions. Then there had been the women in his life—Angeline, Lucy, Diane of New Orleans—perhaps he ought to add Lizzie.

"Damn it, no; she began as an experiment and ended as a ghost. Well, there's no candle now and no house either, so perhaps she will keep quiet at last. I am too old to be bothered with these confounded ghosts."

He nearly always lived at Woden now, and it was there, on a summer evening in 1920, that Delilah found him.

"Mrs. Todhunter, my lord."

"Never heard of her. Who the devil is she?"

Wallington—the son of the old Wallington—blinked at his master.

"I understand the lady is your lordship's daughter."

"Have you been drinking, Wallington?"

"No, my lord."

"Well, show her in and let me have a look at her."

"I wonder," thought John, reflectively, "if it can be Delilah? To my knowledge she is the only daughter I have."

Over twenty-eight years had passed since he had last seen her; he expected someone in the customary habiliments of the outwardly devotional.

He was unprepared for the oversmart lady who confronted him. Short hair and skirts; more than a suspicion of cosmetics—could this be Delilah? When he had last seen her she had been a girl of twenty-eight; now she was a woman of fifty-six. That girl had been of a puritanical caste; this other showed no such indication.

"Well, popper, are you pleased to see me?"

"So it is Delilah! I remember that squeak in your voice."

"I reckon that's a nice thing to say, seeing me for the first time for thirty years," she exclaimed indignantly.

"Only twenty-nine, Delilah; only twenty-nine. Please be accurate. Sit down; I am pleased to see you; at least, I suppose so. . . . Will you have something to drink?" he added hastily to cover up his last remark.

"Yes; you had better tell that butler of yours to mix some sort of a cocktail. . . . You ought to be pleased to see me; considering I am your daughter, you haven't seen much of me."

"A man cannot live in two continents at once."

"Seems as though he can run two families at once."

"A hit—a palpable hit, Delilah. I must say you have improved. By the way, you were announced as Mrs. Todhunter! So the pressure did become too much for the safety-valve?"

"I don't get you!"

"I mean, Delilah, that you would seem to have

contracted some sort of a marriage. Is the occurrence recent ? ”

“ Lord, no ; twenty years ago.”

“ I appear not to have been advised of the fact,” said John. “ I have a very good memory, even at my age.”

“ Arnold thought it wouldn’t interest you,” said Delilah, diffidently.

“ You mean he thought if I knew I might stop your allowance ? ” asked John, shrewdly, “ He must have been a fool—in more ways than one. I should have done nothing of the sort.”

“ I couldn’t know that, and you had the name for being a hard case. I didn’t want to take a chance,” confessed Delilah, frankly.

John chuckled. “ I liked your mother too well to cut you adrift—and I am liking you a little better than I did. I expected you to appear, if ever, in elastic-sided boots and rusty black, and here you are more or less fashionable and presentable. I shouldn’t use so much *rouge* though : I suppose you thought an old man of ninety-three would not observe ? ”

“ You see too much,” snapped Delilah.

“ Never mind ; I want to see Todhunter now ; have you brought him with you ? ”

“ He has been dead ten years.”

“ In that case I am glad you have not brought him with you. Did you have any offspring ? ”

“ I was forgetting. I left him by the car ” Delilah went over to the french windows, and called to someone outside.

“ Harry.”

“ I told him to wait,” she explained. “ My son.”

“ And he waited until called ? I should not have done. However, Delilah, I shall be glad to see him.”

Harry Todhunter was a young man of nineteen. He nodded casually to John.

"So your name is Harry? You never had a father who fell at Bull Run—no, of course you didn't—grandfather, perhaps?"

"Nope. Why?"

"I was wondering," said John, "whether you were about to surprise me with an infernal coincidence. It was merely a suggestion called into my mind by your name."

He fell silent for a moment, thinking of Lucy and the Harry who had fallen way down at Bull Run.

He was not best pleased by this Harry, his grandson. John was never one to exact respect from the young for age alone; such deference he had never given, and did not require. There was, however, a casualness and self-satisfaction in this Harry's manner, which nettled him.

"You can put us up, I suppose?" said Delilah, suddenly.

"What for? Clubs?" asked John.

"Lord, no; here in this house while we are in England."

"Yes, if you like."

"It's a fine place," observed Delilah, enviously, "Who'll have it after you?"

"Poppy, of course, you ghou! After me, be damned! I'm determined to make my century."

"I rather reckoned it ought to be mine," remarked Delilah, ignoring the uncomplimentary epithet, "I am your eldest daughter."

"I'll see you all right financially," growled John, "but Poppy will be Countess of Woden, and the estates will go with the title. Also the bulk of the money. You must understand that."

"I might have been the Countess of Woden after you, if you had married my mother," remarked Delilah.

"Don't be a damned fool: how could I have married your mother when I was married already? And don't keep on saying 'after' me. It's infernally bad taste, considering my age. I don't think the pressure becoming too

much for the safety-valve has done you as much good as I thought."

"How old is Poppy?" asked Delilah, with a side glance at her son. Deep thoughts were working in her mind.

"Thirteen."

Delilah made a mathematical calculation.

"I'd like to see her."

"So you shall. We'll have the car out to-morrow and run over to her school. It is her half-holiday."

It was quite late. John had gone to bed. On the upper landing, Delilah beckoned to Harry.

"You like this place?"

"Sure!"

"I rather think my father is worth 3 good many millions," said Delilah, complacently. "Now, when he dies—and that can't be long at his age—this place and all that is Poppy's. I want you to be nice to Poppy, when you see her, Harry. Time soon flies, and in another few years she'll be looking for a husband."

"I get you, mommer," observed Harry.

"She'll be a countess as well as some sort of a cousin which I can't work out. No reason why you shouldn't marry her!"

"Will that make me an earl?" asked Harry eagerly.

"No, I'm afraid not. These British titles don't go like that. No reason why the money shouldn't be on our side of the family and the Atlantic."

"I'll settle down here," said Harry, rather prematurely, "Be naturalised like Astor, and get a title. With a Countess for a wife, it should be a good boost at the start. Consider it settled."

"The girl has to grow up yet," his mother reminded him, "Be careful."

"I will that. My grandpopper is darned old," said Harry,

“but he struck me as a remarkably cute old bird. I’ll be careful.”

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“I wonder,” thought John, as he was falling asleep
“why those two have come over here? I am sure it is not
because of family affection.”

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