

CHAPTER XLVII

"I BELIEVE I am going to make my century," said John.

"Of course you are, gran'pa; and why ever not?"

"Well, you see, Poppy, it isn't a thing of frequent occurrence; I remember my old Uncle William prophesying it years ago; so many years Poppy that men and women have been born and lived and grown old and died in the interval, and here am I still cumbering the earth."

"Not cumbering the earth, silly; why you are strong enough to hold me in your lap." Poppy kissed him, affectionately.

"It is not every old man of ninety-six who is able to do as much," said John, with a hint of pride, and indeed that was the truth. Even though Poppy was slight and dainty and elf-like as had been Angeline: being but five feet three.

"Some young man will soon be desirous of the privilege in my stead." John stroked her dark hair. "I am sure I shall not lack a successor."

"Harry wanted me to sit on his knee the other night," rather offhandedly.

"Damn him! And did you?"

"No; of course, I don't dislike Harry, and he is a sort of cousin, but——"

"That 'but' means a lot. I understand."

It was 1923. Events in matters national and international had moved at that feverish pace to which the post-war world had become accustomed. In Egypt, Allenby had shown, as long ago had been shown by the Iron Duke, what

a very bad statesman can be made from a very good soldier. Mr. Lloyd George had been "given the black spot." by the Carlton Club, though not before grievous harm had been wrought to our interests in Ireland and the East.

"The Aims are high ; to free Ireland from the Terror of the Gun-men."

John remembered that phrase in the recruiting pamphlets of the Auxiliaries and the "Black-and-Tans," and remembered too, as did many others, how peace had been sold to the same gun-men.

In Egypt, too, it seemed that we had saved her from the Turk to deliver her and ourselves to the untender mercies of self-determination.

Things were looking a *little* better now ; after the pound sterling had sunk to 13s. 4d., the value of the old English mark, it was climbing painfully upwards, whilst the German mark with gathering speed went towards extinction.

John could still laugh as he thought of the thousands of millions we were to make Germany pay, and that we had intended to hang the Kaiser—so we had said.

Well, the Kaiser was living peacefully in Holland and had taken unto himself a new wife and grown a grey beard. After spending much money to knock Germany off her feet, we had lent her more to put her on them again.

"Damn it, I am growing too old to understand politics," growled John. "I leave them to you, Poppy."

"I know lots," Poppy had said, proudly. "I've heard all about Dizzy and Gladstone——"

"Have you seen that nice statue to Gladstone in the Strand, Poppy? It only wants two words on it to make it complete—'Majuba'—'Gordon.' Of course, he is dead, so he has, therefore, become a great statesman. You know they will say fine things of me when I die, Poppy. My obituary columns are already in type, and I bribed a man on one of the big newspapers to let me see them. You would not believe how they flatter me?"

Poppy had kissed him, and that was eloquent of her opinion.

However, the world went on, and John offered no occasion for the appearance of obituary notices. Here he was at Woden, nearing the Christmas of 1923, and they were discussing Harry.

"I suppose you know by now, Poppy, what Harry wants?"

"Of course, gran'pa. He wants me."

"And you? Mind, I don't want to prejudice you. I daresay Harry has his good points; I have never observed any in him, but I daresay he has them. You must marry where you will. He is young; I have seen that he is well-to-do."

"That's nothing. Gran'pa, old thing, it's a man's character I shall think of, not his money. Harry is polite, deferential—American men always are, but——"

So it had returned to the "but" and John felt very satisfied.

"I'd rather stay here with you at Woden."

"What with an old man in a middle-aged house haunted by ghosts?"

"Oh, gran'pa, not really? Is it? How perfectly topping. Oh, I've always loved the idea of a house with ghosts. I never thought there were any at Woden. Do tell me what they are like and all about them?"

"Only ghosts of the past, dear—mere thoughts."

"Oh, I thought they would be dear little ghosts, which would rub their heads against my legs like soft cats."

"And very nice legs to rub against," John had said, looking admiringly at her perfect ankles, and the prettiness swelling to the popliteal curve.

"Yes, they are rather nice, aren't they, gran'pa. You know my ankles and feet are some of my best features, so why shouldn't I be proud of them? Isn't really vain, is it?"

"Of course, not. I always think girls should have pretty feet. All the ladies I loved, Angeline and others, had beautiful ones."

He thought again of Angeline, and how she had put one bare little pink foot out of bed that night he had cloped with her from Redehall; of Lucy, unshod, softly treading to his room to show him the lights in the Pennsylvanian wood—of Diane of New Orleans—

Poppy was speaking again. "If they are not as pretty as your hands you haven't much of a chance in these days of mixed bathing—"

"I have been sensuous to the core," said John to himself, "but it is good for a man late in life to be able to dream of such things as much wine and fair women."

He wondered to what lucky man would Poppy, his heiress, give her splendid self and beauty.

"Wake up, gran'pa; you are day-dreaming; I want you to tell me all about the ghosts."

"The ghosts? Only ghosts of old loves; my wife, Angeline—she lived at Woden, you know."

"I know; I saw an old photograph taken on the lawn. She was beautiful, but didn't they wear funny dresses?"

"Yes. Didn't notice them at the time, but they seem remarkable now, even to me. Then there was Lucy—she lived and died in America, but her ghost comes to see me sometimes."

"Lucy—wasn't that Aunt Delilah's mother?"

"Yes."

"I don't quite understand these relationships," said Poppy, perplexedly.

Perhaps she did understand a little. Though she had never known Lucy, she had known Diane of New Orleans, of whom she had loving recollections. Rumours cluster around great men, and John, first Earl of Woden, was a great man.

She became rather silent. Women look and always have

looked at such matters differently to men, and Poppy, for all that she was but sixteen and very modern, in its sweetest sense, was still a woman.

John saw her expression, and led on the conversation.

"Then the^{le} were my sons. Billy never came to Wodep, but Leslie lived there, and another Harry."

"It is difficult to place people when they will persist in having the same name," said Poppy. "What happened to this Uncle Harry I never saw."

"He—died. He was killed in the Boer War," John said, gravely, remembering that night on Gun Hill.

"A soldier? That was rather splendid of him."

John did not answer. He was gazing through the window at the December sun red over the distant, leafless woods.

"Go on, gran'pa."

"Then there was Tim and your father, and—I think that's all, Poppy. Plenty of ghosts for an old man, but then I have had such a long life."

"I like to hear about it; you have had an awfully interesting life, gran'pa. That time in Vienna, when you met your Angeline, and when you fought at Gettysburg and Ladysmith, and how you made your business grow and grow year after year."

"I sometimes think that money, and one thing more, were all I lived for, Poppy. Well, they are all names and memories now—old names."

"I think names are frightfully interesting, don't you?"

"The one I am most interested in is 'Poppy,'" he said, smiling.

"It is a pretty name, and I am jolly grateful to the person who thought of it. Girls are called such pretty things. I love Phyllis now; I think that's a ripping name; if you hadn't called me Poppy, I should like to have been a Phyllis."

"Would you?"

"Yes, rather," said Poppy. "It would suit me. Now

some people don't suit what they are called ; Aunt Delilah, now."

"That she certainly does not, but she suited her nomenclature even less thirty years ago."

"I don't think she suits her what-do-you-call-it much now. She tries to be fast, but I know the things she does herself would shock her in others. I believe she thinks fastness makes her young ; she is always disapproving of what I do."

"Damn her cheek."

"She has a cheek sometimes ; very frosty. I hate people who try to make me feel a kid. Gran'pa, isn't it horrid when people say things which make you look like a spare tyre ?"

"Very trying, I should imagine, Poppy."

"She wants to be taken for years younger than she is, and so she does the most outrageous things. When she thinks she sees them in others—myself, for instance—she is horrified."

"Burns said something about seeing ourselves as others see us—I can't reproduce the dialect. But you never do do outrageous things, puss ?"

"Of course not," said Poppy, "but she is pleased to think I do. . . . I like to hear you call me 'puss,' gran'pa."

"I used to call Angeline that."

"You must have been a frightfully nice husband. I hope I get as good a one."

"I hope so too. Plenty of time yet," John said, laughing.

"Don't worry about me, gran'pa ; I shall make no mistakes," Poppy assured him, "e'er in time or the man."

Somehow she seemed to John more grown up than her sixteen years ; Angeline had been sixteen that day he had found her in the wood at Redehall ; yet Angeline had seemed younger. He remembered how against his own inclinations he had been forced to recognise the justice

of Mr. Leslie's suggestion that she was too young for marriage. There had been mysteries of sex to Angeline; he was quite sure that there was none to Poppy, though he had never interrogated, covertly or overtly.

Yes, for all her self-assurance and modernity, Poppy was in some ways more of a child than those of similar age he had known in his youth. He felt the modern girl to be delightful, but very perplexing.

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a cigarette case.

"Me, too," said Poppy.

"You are too young—but, there, I suppose I cannot indict you on that count, for I am too old." He offered the case.

"I am so glad you have told me about the ghosts; I shall like this dear old place all the more now."

"It isn't very old, Poppy, and has ghosts, who appear to me only—all save one," he added, in an undertone, as he thought of the girl with the candle.

Her quick ears had caught what he had said.

"Oh! Which one is that?"

"Nothing, Poppy, but the spirit of a great mistake. As you go down, will you tell Wallington to bring me some of the 1909 port?"

She nodded and went down to the kitchen, for there the cook was making Christmas puddings, and she desired to be present at that time-honoured ritual. She left John alone with his thoughts.

"I shall never tell her about that ghost—now there is no house, and no candle, I think it will not come again—"

It was hours later when Poppy came into the great library to bid him good-night. She was in pyjamas and a red dressing-gown and her little white feet in black satin slippers.

"Time all good people were in bed—that means you, too, gran'pa."

"Jove, Poppy, you are growing beautiful!"

"I do look rather nice in pyjamas, don't I? Perhaps you think that girls ought to wear nighties?"

He remembered Angeline and "*the best in Vienna*"—
"*it is so charming and ravishing that I think papa will not allow me to wear it.*"

Then, again, Lucy had asked him how he had liked her "nightie"—that night, far off in time now, when they had been in the cottage in the Pennsylvanian wood.

Now here was he, vastly old, and Poppy, his great-grandchild, saying how nice she looked in pyjamas, coloured like the heart of a flame.

"You have converted me, Poppy; no nightgown could suit you better."

"You dear, old thing. I hope my husband-to-be will think as much."

"And now to bed, as Mr. Pepys said."

"But not 'slightly foxed,' gran'pa, I hope. May I have the teeniest bit of the 1900 port, and risk it before I go?"

"Why certainly, puss, and good luck to you getting upstairs. Good port never did anyone any harm yet."

"In that case, I'll have a little more. I have the rippingest flash-lamp to light me to bed."

"Look." She shot a beam into the darkest corner.

"The girl with the flash-lamp, eh?" John said, a little grimly. "It is an improvement upon a candle—most certainly an improvement upon a candle, even as my Poppy is an improvement upon a cold ghost."