

CHAPTER L

“GRAN’PA, do you mind if I talk to you rather seriously?”

“No, Poppy, of course not. What is it?”

“What relation precisely is Harry to me?”

There was the vaguest little shake in her voice.

“Poppy, he is my grandson, and you are my great-granddaughter, so I suppose you are second cousins. A perfectly legal marriage if that is what you are thinking.”

“I wasn’t exactly thinking of that. I mean—his mother was poor, old Aunt Deilah. And her mother was—”

“My Lucy,” said old John, very gently. “My little Lucy who bound my wounds after Gettysburg. Lucy of the golden hair, the roses, the lights in the wood—I wonder if the cottage and the wood are still there?” He looked at Poppy rather oddly, guessing what was in her mind.

“But Angeline—my daddy’s grandma—she was your wife?”

“No man ever had a better wife,” said John. “And no man will.”

There was a little silence. John clasped her small hand.

“I know what you are thinking. Of course, I never married Lucy.”

“Then is Harry—illegitimate?”

“No, but his mother was.”

“Gran’pa, how could you? How could you?”

“Women were always my weakness, Poppy. I have been a strong man in my time; ask my old employes at Kedehall that. But, of course, you can’t, they are all dead. Jove, and I live on! . . . But Lucy—Poppy, it was high

summer, and we were alone and she had gone pagan since her Harry had gone down at Bull Run and they had made a hell for her in Vermont. Nothing mattered but love and life and nature and we two . . . I can hear her saying that, and Angeline was far away." He patted her hand again. "Wrong, I know, but my Lucy has been dust these fifty years and more, since all Chicago went in flames, and Angeline died that ghastly Easter Monday at Hampstead Heath when I was in New York, and then there was Diane until the German bombers came——"

"I wonder," said Poppy, and there were tears in her eyes, "why these things are? I should like to think that I was my husband's wife; not his pretty toy, his doll, to be kissed when I was near, and forgotten when I was afar. Gran'pa, I'm sorry—I am so sorry."

There was a suspicious moisture in John's own old eyes. "I know it was wrong, but—they have been dead so many years, and for my sins I live on. You must let me forget. There was a time when I could not forget; there was a girl with a candle."

Then he told her of the girl with the candle.

"That was retribution."

"Poppy, I do not know."

"And what became of Tom in the end?"

"Poppy, that again I do not know."

"I shall not marry Harry," she said, decisively.

"Not, I hope, because of his birth? He cannot help that, and we must be fair."

"No, I—well, I just don't know. I don't care for Harry very much, even as a relation, but even if I liked him immensely, I—I think I could never marry him—now I know."

"I think you are right, but I am sorry that influences you, Poppy. Sorry, because it makes me feel my wrongdoing."

She left him without speaking. Presently Harry entered.

John looked round quite kindly ; much more kindly than was his wont with Harry, who irritated and annoyed him. He was feeling culpable.

"Think I'll go back to the United States," said Harry, gloomily.

"Why, my boy ?"

"It's no good ; I've asked her time and again, and I reckon it's always no. I'll go back to the United States. Asked her again this afternoon, and there's something against me more'n ever ; I don't know what. You know how it is with girls. She leaves me guessing. Yes, I'll go back to the——"

John interrupted him, quite gently. "My boy, you do wisely. I do not think you are in love with Poppy ; if you were I should be sympathising with you in the cruellest disaster which can befall a man. Unrequited love is a terrible thing. But I think you are only fond of her ; I have seen more than you know. I believe you have but been carrying out a plan of your mother's concoction."

Harry started violently.

"I thought so," said John, and smiled grimly. "Never mind ; you became fond of her in a way, but only in a way, however you started. Go back to your own country ; I shall allow you more than enough to make you independent, and when I die—which cannot be long—you will find that my will is generous to you."

"I guess you're not half a bad old sort," said Harry, gratefully.

"Well, I feel—to-night more than ever, that I owe you a debt. If you are grateful, try and influence your country not to play the usurer. There is the matter of some monies owed us for many years by some of your sovereign States, which our Chancellors show a curious diffidence in collecting. I think you will obtain further information from the Corporation of Foreign Bondholders."

Harry made no comment as to the Corporation of Foreign

Bondholders. Like many other and older men, he was puzzled by John when he became quizzical.

"I am afraid," murmured John, "that when he is as old as I—if ever he becomes so—the Corporation of Foreign Bondholders will yet be pressing the American States for their just deb'ts."

By which he showed a cynicism which would have shocked the "blood-is-thicker-than-water" school and the English Speaking Union.

"Harry is going back to America," announced Poppy, a little later.

"I know. And you," he added, gently, "will sit on my knee and kiss me. Come, Poppy, I am an old, old man, and my sins are far behind me." She sat down gently and kissed him. "And yet I loved Angeline, and adored her when she played 'wood-syrups' at Redehall, and Lucy that night she came to show me the little lights in the wood, and Diane in a different way. I loved them all one way and another, and I fear I am a very unrepentant sinner."

Poppy sighed and kissed him again.