

## CHAPTER II

### FANTASIA IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE

"THERE's no gas," he said and pointed to the clear red glow in the east. He tore off his mask, for he hated to have his face concealed. He sniffed the pervading anti-gas with satisfaction. He echoed in a tone of wonder, "*Still* there is no gas."

She too emerged from her disfiguring visor. "But are we safe?" she asked.

"Trust me," he said.

The sky was full of the loud drone of engines, but no aircraft was visible. The evening was full of warm-tinted clouds, and the raiders and the fighting machines were no doubt dodging each other above that canopy. The distant air barrage made an undertone to the engine whir, as if an immense rubber ball were being bounced on an equally immense tin tray. The big Rolls-Royce had vanished. Its driver, perhaps, had taken it to some less conspicuous position and had not yet returned.

"I find something exhilarating in all this," said the Lord Paramount. "I do not see why I should not share the dangers of my people."

A few other intrepid spirits were walking along Whitehall, wearing gas masks of various patterns, and some merely with rags and handkerchiefs to

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their mouths. Many, like the Lord Paramount, had decided that the fear of gas was premature and either carried their masks in their hands or attempted no protection. Except for two old-fashioned water carts, there were no vehicles in sight. These water carts were busy spraying a heavy, slowly volatile liquid with a sweetish offensive odour that was understood to be an effective antidote to most forms of gas poisoning. It gave off a bluish low-lying mist that swirled and vanished as it diffused. A great deal of publicity had been given to the anti-gas supply after the East End panic. The supply of illuminating gas had been cut off now for some days, and the retorts and mains had been filled with an anti-gas of established efficacy which could be turned on when required from the normal burners. This had the same sweetish smell as the gas sprayed from the carts, and it had proved very reassuring to the public when raids occurred.

“Let us walk up Whitehall,” said the Lord Paramount. “I seem to remember an instruction that the car should shelter from observation under the Admiralty arch in case of a raid. We might go up there.”

She nodded.

“You are not nervous?” he asked.

“Beside you!” she glowed.

The car was not under the arch, and they went on into the Square. There seemed to be a lull in the unseen manœuvres overhead. Either the invaders had gone altogether or they were too high

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to be heard or they had silencers for their engines. The only explosions audible were the deep and distant firing of the guns of the outer aircraft zone.

"It is passing over," said the Lord Paramount. "They must have made off."

Then he remarked how many people were abroad and how tranquil was their bearing. There were numbers visible now. A moment ago they had seemed alone. Men and women were coming out from the station of the tube railway very much as they might have emerged after a shower of rain. There were newsvendors who apparently had never left the curb. "There is something about our English folk," he said, "magnificently calm. Something dogged. An obstinate resistance to excitement. They say little but they just carry on."

*But now the air was screaming!*

A moment of blank expectation.

In an instant the whole area was alive with bursting bombs. Four—or was it five?—deafening explosions and blinding flashes about them and above them followed one another in close succession, and the ordered pavement before them became like a crater in eruption.

Mr. Parham had seen very little of the more violent side of warfare. During the first World War a certifiable weakness of the heart and his natural aptitudes had made him more serviceable on the home front. And now, peeping out of the eyes of the Lord Paramount, he was astounded at the grotesque variety of injury to human beings

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of which explosions are capable. Accustomed to study warfare through patriotic war films, he had supposed that there was a distinctive dignity about death in battle, that for the most part heroes who were slain threw up their arms and fell forward in so seemly a way as to conceal anything that might otherwise be derogatory to themselves or painful to the spectator. But these people who were killed in the Square displayed no such delicacy; perhaps because they were untrained civilians; they were torn to bits, mixed indifferently with masonry, and thrown about like rags and footballs and splashes of red mud. An old match seller who had been squatting on the stone curb, an old woman in a black bonnet, leapt up high into the air towards the Lord Paramount, spread out as if she were going to fly over him like a witch, and then incredibly flew to fragments, all her boxes of matches radiating out as though a gigantic foot had kicked right through her body at them. Her bonnet swept his hat off, and a box of matches and some wet stuff hit him. It wasn't like any sort of decent event. It was pure nightmare—impure nightmare. It was an outrage on the ancient dignity of war.

And then he realized the column had been hit and was coming down. Almost solemnly it was coming down. It had been erect so long, and now, with a kind of rheumatic hesitation, it bent itself like a knee. It seemed to separate slowly into fragments. It seemed as though it were being lowered by invisible cords from the sky. There

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was even time to say things.

Never had Mrs. Pinchot seen him so magnificent.

He put an arm about her. He had meant to put his hand on her shoulder, but she was little and he embraced her head.

"Stay by me," he said. He had time to say, "Trust me and trust God. Death cannot touch me until my work is done."

Nelson turned over and fell stiffly and slantingly. He went, with the air of meeting an engagement, clean through the façade of the big insurance buildings on the Cockspur Street side of the Square. About the Master and his secretary the bursting pavement jumped again, as the great masses of the column hit it and leapt upon it and lay still. The Lord Paramount was flung a yard or so, and staggered and got to his feet and saw Mrs. Pinchot on all fours. Then she too was up and running towards him with love and consternation on her face.

"You are covered with blood!" she cried. "You are covered with blood."

"Not mine," he said and reeled towards the streaming ruins of a fountain basin, and was suddenly sick and sick and sick.

She washed his face with her handkerchief and guided him towards a plateau of still level pavement outside the Golden Cross Hotel.

"It was the weakness of Nelson," he said—for it was one of his standard remarks on such occasions.

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“Nelson!” he repeated, his thoughts going off at a tangent, and he stared up into the empty air. “Good God!”

Hardly twenty feet of the pedestal remained.

And then: “High time we made our way to these new headquarters of Gerson’s. I wonder where that car can be hiding. Where is that car? Ssh! Those must be bombs again, bursting somewhere on the south side. Don’t listen to them.”

He realized that a number of distraught and dishevelled people were looking at him curiously. They regarded him with critical expectation. They became suddenly quite numerous. Many of these faces were suspicious and disagreeable.

“I would gladly stay here and help with the wounded,” he said, “but my duty lies elsewhere.”

Men with Red Cross badges had appeared from nowhere and were searching among the wreckage. Injured people were beginning to crawl and groan.

“We must commandeer a car,” said the Lord Paramount. “Find some officers and commandeer a car. I must take you out of all this. We must get out of London to the headquarters as soon as possible. My place is there. We must find out where the car has gone. Gerson will know. We had better walk back to the War Office, perhaps, and start from there. Do not be afraid. Keep close to me. . . . Was that another bomb?”