

CHAPTER XVIII

FRANCE--AND AFTER

Nothing so very remarkable happened to Godfrey during those ten years of his life in India, or at least only one or two things. Thus once he got into a scrape for which he was not really responsible, and got out of it again, as he imagined, without remark, until Isobel showed her common and rather painful intimacy with its details, of which she appeared to take a somewhat uncharitable view, at any rate so far as the lady was concerned.

The other matter was more serious, since it involved the loss of his greatest friend, Arthur Thorburn. Briefly, what happened was this. There was a frontier disturbance. Godfrey, who by now was a staff officer, had been sent to a far outpost held by Thorburn with a certain number of men, and there took command. A reconnaissance was necessary, and Thorburn went out for that purpose with over half of the available garrison of the post, having received written orders that he was not to engage the enemy unless he found himself absolutely surrounded. In the end Thorburn did engage the enemy with the result that practically he and his force were exterminated, but not before they had inflicted such a lesson on the said enemy that it sued for peace and has been great friends with the British power ever since.

First however a feeble attack was made on Godfrey's camp that he beat

off without the loss of a single man, exaggerated accounts of which were telegraphed home representing it as a "Rorke's Drift defence."

Godfrey was heartbroken; he had loved this man as a brother, more indeed than brothers often love. And now Thorburn, his only friend, was dead. The Darkness had taken him, that impenetrable, devouring darkness out of which we come and into which we go. Religion told him he should not grieve, that Thorburn doubtless was much better off whither he had gone than he could ever have been on earth, although it was true the same religion said that he might be much worse off, since thither his failings would have followed him. Dismissing the latter possibility, how could he be happy in a new world, Godfrey wondered, having left all he cared for behind him and without possibility of communication with them?

In short, all the old problems of which he had not thought much since Miss Ogilvy died, came back to Godfrey with added force and left him wretched. Nor was he consoled by the sequel of the affair of which he was bound to report the facts. The gallant man who was dead was blamed unjustly for what had happened, as perhaps he deserved who had not succeeded, since those who set their blind eye to the telescope as Nelson did must justify their action by success.

Godfrey, on the other hand, who had done little but defeat an attack made by exhausted and dispirited men, was praised to the skies and found himself figuring as a kind of hero in the English Press, which

after a long period of peace having lost all sense of proportion in such matters, was glad of anything that could be made to serve the purposes of sensation. Ultimately he was thanked by the Government of India, made a brevet-Major and decorated with the D.S.O., of all of which it may be said with truth that never were such honours received with less pleasure.

So much did he grieve over this unhappy business that his health was affected and being run down, in the end he took some sort of fever and was very ill indeed. When at length he recovered more or less he went before a Medical Board who ordered him promptly to England on six months' leave.

Most men would have rejoiced, but Godfrey did not. He had little wish to return to England, where, except Mrs. Parsons, there were none he desired to see, save one whom he was sworn not to see. This he could bear while they were thousands of miles apart, but to be in the same country with Isobel, in the same town perhaps, and forbidden to hear her voice or to touch her hand, how could he bear that? Still he had no choice in this matter, arranged by the hand of Fate, and went, reflecting that he would go to Lucerne and spent the time with the Pasteur. Perhaps even he would live in the beautiful house that Miss Ogilvy had left to him, or a corner of it, seeing that it was empty, for the tenants to whom it had been let had gone away.

So he started at the end of the first week in July, 1914.

When his ship reached Marseilles it was to find that the world was buzzing with strange rumours. There was talk of war in Europe. Russia was said to be mobilising; Germany was said to be mobilising; France was said to be mobilising; it was even rumoured that England might be drawn into some Titanic struggle of the nations. And yet no accurate information was obtainable. The English papers they saw were somewhat old and their reports vague in the extreme.

Much excited, like everyone else, Godfrey telegraphed to the India Office, asking leave to come home direct overland, which he could not do without permission since he was in command of a number of soldiers who were returning to England on furlough.

No answer came to his wire before his ship sailed, and therefore he was obliged to proceed by long sea. Still it had important consequences which at the moment he could not foresee. In the Bay the tidings that reached them by Marconigram were evidently so carefully censored that out of them they could make nothing, except that the Empire was filled with great doubt and anxiety, and that the world stood on the verge of such a war as had never been known in history.

At length they came to Southampton where the pilot-boat brought him a telegram ordering him to report himself without delay. Three hours later he was in London. At the India Office, where he was kept waiting a while, he was shown into the room of a prominent and harassed

official who had some papers in front of him.

"You are Major Knight?" said the official. "Well, here is your record before me and it is good, very good indeed. But I see that you are on sick leave. Are you too ill for service?"

"No," answered Godfrey, "the voyage has set me up. I feel as well as ever I did."

"That's fortunate," answered the official, "but there is a doctor on the premises, and to make sure he shall have a look at you. Go down and see him, if you will, and then come back here with his report," and he rang a bell and gave some orders.

Within half an hour Godfrey was back in the room with a clean bill of health. The official read the certificate and remarked that he was going to send him over to the War Office, where he would make an appointment for him by telephone.

"What for, Sir?" asked Godfrey. "You see I am only just off my ship and very ignorant of the news."

"The news is, Major Knight, that we shall be at war with Germany before we are twelve hours older," was the solemn answer. "Officers are wanted, and we are giving every good man from India on whom we can lay our hands. They won't put you on the Staff, because you have everything

to learn about European work, but I expect they will find you a billet in one of the expeditionary regiments. And now good-bye and good luck to you, for I have lots of men to see. By the way, I take it for granted that you volunteered for the job?"

"Of course," replied Godfrey simply, and went away to wander about the endless passages of the War Office till at length he discovered the man whom he must see.

A few tumultuous days went by, and he found himself upon a steamer crossing to France, attached to a famous English regiment.

The next month always remained in Godfrey's mind as a kind of nightmare in which he moved on plains stained the colour of blood, beneath a sky black with bellowing thunder and illumined occasionally by a blaze of splendour. It would be useless to attempt to set out the experience and adventures of the particular cavalry regiment to which he was attached as a major, since, notwithstanding their infinite variety, they were such as all shared whose glory it was to take part with what the Kaiser called the "contemptible little army" of England in the ineffable retreat from Mons, that retreat which saved France and Civilisation.

Godfrey played his part well, once or twice with heroism indeed, but what of that amid eighty thousand heroes? Back he staggered with the rest, exhausted, sleepless, fighting, fighting, fighting, his mind filled alternately with horror and with wonder, horror at the deeds to

which men can sink and the general scheme of things that makes them possible, wonder at the heights to which they can rise when lifted by the inspiration of a great ideal and a holy cause. Death, he reflected, could not after all mean so very much to man, seeing how bravely it was met every minute of the day and night, and that the aspect of it, often so terrible, did but encourage others in like fashion to smile and die. But oh! what did it all mean, and who ruled this universe with such a flaming, blood-stained sword?

Then at last came the turn of the tide when the hungry German wolf was obliged to abandon that Paris which already he thought between his jaws and, a few days after it, the charge, the one splendid, perfect charge that consoled Godfrey and those with him for all which they had suffered, lost and feared. He was in command of the regiment now, for those superior to him had been killed, and he directed and accompanied that charge. They thundered on to the mass of the Germans who were retreating with no time to entrench or set entanglements, a gentle slope in front, and hard, clear ground beneath their horses' feet. They cut through them, they trod them down, they drove them by scores and hundreds into the stream beyond, till those two battalions, or what remained of them, were but a tangled, drowning mob. It was finished; the English squadron turned to retreat as had been ordered.

Then of a sudden Godfrey felt a dull blow. For a few moments consciousness remained to him. He called out some command about the retirement; it came to his mind that thus it was well to die in the

moment of his little victory. After that--blackness!

When his sense returned to him he found himself lying in the curtained corner of a big room. At least he thought it was big because of the vast expanse of ceiling which he could see above the curtain rods and the sounds without, some of which seemed to come from a distance. There was a window, too, through which he caught sight of lawns and statues and formal trees. Just then the curtain was drawn, and there appeared a middle-aged woman dressed in white, looking very calm, very kind and very spotless, who started a little when she saw that his eyes were open and that his face was intelligent.

"Where am I?" he asked, and was puzzled to observe that the sound of his voice seemed feeble and far away.

"In the hospital at Versailles," she answered in a pleasant voice.

"Indeed!" he murmured. "It occurred to me that it might be Heaven or some place of the sort."

"If you looked through the curtain you wouldn't call it Heaven," she said with a sigh, adding, "No, Major, you were near to 'going west,' very near, but you never got to the gates of Heaven."

"I can't remember," he murmured again.

"Of course you can't, so don't try, for you see you got it in the head, a bit of shell; and a nice operation, or rather operations, they had over you. If it wasn't for that clever surgeon--but there, never mind."

"Shall I recover?"

"Of course you will. We have had no doubt about that for the last week; you have been here nearly three, you know; only, you see, we thought you might be blind, something to do with the nerves of the eyes. But it appears that isn't so. Now be quiet, for I can't stop talking to you with two dying just outside, and another whom I hope to save."

"One thing, Nurse--about the war. Have the Germans got Paris?"

"That's a silly question, Major, which makes me think you ain't so right as I believed. If those brutes had Paris do you think you would be at Versailles? Or, at any rate, that I should? Don't you bother about the war. It's all right, or as right as it is likely to be for many a long day."

Then she went.

A week later Godfrey was allowed to get out of bed and was even carried to sit in the autumn sunshine among other shattered men. Now he learned

all there was to know; that the German rush had been stayed, that they had been headed off from Calais, and that the armies were entrenching opposite to each other and preparing for the winter, the Allied cause having been saved, as it were, by a miracle, at any rate for the while. He was still very weak, with great pain in his head, and could not read at all, which grieved him.

So the time went by, till at last he was told that he was to be sent to England, as his bed was wanted and he could recover there as well as in France. Two days later he started in a hospital train and suffered much upon the journey, although it was broken for a night at Boulogne. Still he came safely to London, and was taken to a central hospital where next day several doctors held a consultation over him. When it was over they asked him if he had friends in London and wished to stay there. He replied that he had no friends except an old nurse at Hampstead, if she were still there, and that he did not like London. Then there was talk among them, and the word Torquay was mentioned. The head doctor seemed to agree, but as he was leaving, changed his mind.

"Too long a journey," he said, "it would knock him up. Give me that list. Here, this place will do; quite close and got up regardless, I am told, for she's very rich. That's what he wants--comfort and first-class food," and with a nod to Godfrey, who was listening in an idle fashion, quite indifferent as to his destination, he was gone.

Next day they carried him off in an ambulance through the crowded

Strand, and presently he found himself at Liverpool Street, where he was put into an invalid carriage. He asked the orderly where he was going, but the man did not seem to know, or had forgotten the name. So troubling no more about it he took a dose of medicine as he had been ordered, and presently went to sleep, as no doubt it was intended that he should do. When he woke up again it was to find himself being lifted from another ambulance into a house which was very dark, perhaps because of the lighting orders, for now night had fallen. He was carried in a chair up some stairs into a very nice bedroom, and there put to bed by two men. They went away, leaving him alone.

Something puzzled him about the place; at first he could not think what it was. Then he knew. The smell of it was familiar to him. He did not recognise the room, but the smell he did seem to recognise, though being weak and shaken he could not connect it with any particular house or locality. Now there were voices in the passage, and he knew that he must be dreaming, for the only one that he could really hear sounded exactly like to that of old Mrs. Parsons. He smiled at the thought and shut his eyes. The voice that was like to that of Mrs. Parsons died away, saying as it went:

"No, I haven't got the names, but I dare say they are downstairs. I'll go and look."

The door opened and he heard someone enter, a woman this time by her tread. He did not see, both because his eyes were still almost closed

and for the reason that the electric light was heavily shaded. So he just lay there, wondering quite vaguely where he was and who the woman might be. She came near to the bed and looked down at him, for he heard her dress rustle as she bent. Then he became aware of a very strange sensation. He felt as though something were flowing from that woman to him, some strange and concentrated power of thought which was changing into a kind of agony of joy. The woman above him began to breathe quickly, in sighs as it were, and he knew that she was stirred; he knew that she was wondering.

"I cannot see his face, I cannot see his face!" she whispered in a strained, unnatural tone. Then with some swift movement she lifted the shade that was over the lamp. He, too, turned his head and opened his eyes.

Oh, God! there over him leant Isobel, clad in a nurse's robes--yes, Isobel--unless he were mad.

Next moment he knew that he was not mad, for she said one word, only one, but it was enough.

"Godfrey!"

"Isobel!" he gasped. "Is it you?"

She made no answer, at least in words. Only she bent down and kissed

him on the lips.

"You mustn't do that," he whispered. "Remember--our promise?"

"I remember," she answered. "Am I likely to forget? It was that you would never see me nor come into this house while my father lived. Well, he died a month ago." Then a doubt struck her, and she added swiftly: "Didn't you want to come here?"

"Want, Isobel! What else have I wanted for ten years? But I didn't know; my coming here was just an accident."

"Are there such things as accidents?" she queried. "Was it an accident when twenty years ago I found you sleeping in the schoolroom at the Abbey and kissed you on the forehead, or when I found you sleeping a few minutes ago twenty whole years later--?" and she paused.

"And kissed me--not upon the forehead," said Godfrey reflective, adding, "I never knew about that first kiss. Thank you for it."

"Not upon the forehead," she repeated after him, colouring a little. "You see I have faith and take a great deal for granted. If I should be mistaken----"

"Oh! don't trouble about that," he broke in, "because you know it couldn't be. Ten years, or ten thousand, and it would make no

difference."

"I wonder," she mused, "oh! how I wonder. Do you think it possible that we shall be living ten thousand years hence?"

"Quite," he answered with cheerful assurance, "much more possible than that I should be living to-day. What's ten thousand years? It's quite a hundred thousand since I saw you."

"Don't laugh at me," she exclaimed.

"Why not, dear, when there's nothing in the whole world at which I wouldn't laugh at just now? although I would rather look at you. Also I wasn't laughing, I was loving, and when one is loving very much, the truth comes out."

"Then you really think it true--about the ten thousand years, I mean?"

"Of course, dear," he answered, and this time his voice was serious enough. "Did we not tell each other yonder in the Abbey that ours was the love eternal?"

"Yes, but words cannot make eternity."

"No, but thoughts and the will behind them can, for we reap what we sow."

"Why do you say that?" she asked quickly.

"I can't tell you, except because I know that it is so. We come to strange conclusions out yonder, where only death seems to be true and all the rest a dream. What we call the real and the unreal get mixed."

A kind of wave of happiness passed through her, so obvious that it was visible to the watching Godfrey.

"If you believe it I dare say that it is so, for you always had what they call vision, had you not?" Then without waiting for an answer, she went on, "What nonsense we are talking. Don't you understand, Godfrey, that I am quite old?"

"Yes," he answered, "getting on; six months younger than I am, I think."

"Oh! it's different with a man. Another dozen years and I'm finished."

"Possibly, except for that eternity before you."

"Also," she continued, "I am even----"

"Even more beautiful than you were ten years ago, at any rate to me," he broke in.

"You foolish Godfrey," she murmured, and moved a little away from him.

Just then the door opened, and Mrs. Parsons, looking very odd in a nurse's dress with the cap awry upon her grey hair, entered, carrying a bit of paper.

"The hunt I had!" she began; "that silly, new-fangled kind of a girl-clerk having stuck the paper away under the letter O--for officers, you know, Miss--in some fancy box of hers, and then gone off to tea. Here are the names, but I can't see without my specs."

At this point something in the attitude of the two struck her, something that her instincts told her was uncommon, and she stood irresolute. Isobel stepped to her as though to take the list, and, bending down, whispered into her ear.

"What?" said Mrs. Parsons. "Surely I didn't understand; you know I'm getting deaf as well as blind. Say the name again."

Isobel obeyed, still in a whisper.

"Him!" exclaimed the old woman, "him! Our Godfrey, and you've been and let on who you were--you who call yourself a nursing Commandant? Why, I dare say you'll be the death of him. Out you go, Miss, anyway; I'll take charge of this case for the present," and as it seemed to Godfrey, watching from the far corner, literally she bundled Isobel

from the room.

Then she shut and locked the door. Coming to the bedside she knelt down rather stiffly, looked at him for a while to make sure, and kissed him, not once, but many times.

"So you have come back, my dear," she said, "and only half dead. Well, we won't have no young woman pushing between you and me just at present, Commandant or not. Time enough for love-making when you are stronger. Oh! and I never thought to see you again. There must be a good God somewhere after all, although He did make them Germans."

Then again she fell to kissing and blessing him, her hot tears dropping on his face and upsetting him ten times as much as Isobel had done.

Since in this topsy-turvy world often things work by contraries, oddly enough no harm came to Godfrey from these fierce excitements. Indeed he slept better than he had done since he found his mind again, and awoke, still weak of course, but without any temperature or pains in his head.

Now it was that there began the most blissful period of all his life.

Isobel, when she had recovered her balance, made him understand that he was a patient, and that exciting talk or acts must be avoided. He on his part fell in with her wishes, and indeed was well content to do so.

For a while he wanted nothing more than just to lie there and watch her moving in and out of his room, with his food or flowers, or whatever it might be, for a burst of bad weather prevented him from going out of

doors. Then, as he strengthened she began to talk to him (which Mrs. Parsons did long before that event), telling him all that for years he had longed to know; no, not all, but some things. Among other matters she described to him the details of her father's end, which occurred in a very characteristic fashion.

"You see, dear," she said, "as he grew older his passion for money-making increased more and more; why, I am sure I cannot say, seeing that Heaven knows he had enough."

"Yes," said Godfrey, "I suppose you are a very rich woman."

She nodded, saying: "So rich that I don't know how rich, for really I haven't troubled even to read all the figures, and as yet they are not complete. Moreover, I believe that soon I shall be much richer. I'll tell you why presently. The odd thing is, too, that my father died intestate, so I get every farthing. I believe he meant to make a will with some rather peculiar provisions that perhaps you can guess. But this will was never made."

"Why not?" asked Godfrey.

"Because he died first, that's all. It was this way. He, or rather his firm, which is only another name for him, for he owned three-fourths of the capital, got some tremendous shipping contract with the Government arising out of the war, that secures an enormous profit to them; how

much I can't tell you, but hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pounds. He had been very anxious about this contract, for his terms were so stiff that the officials who manage such affairs hesitated about signing them. At last one day after a long and I gather, stormy interview with I don't know whom, in the course of which some rather strong language seems to have been used, the contract was signed and delivered to the firm. My father came home to this house with a copy of it in his pocket. He was very triumphant, for he looked at the matter solely from a business point of view, not at all from that of the country. Also he was very tired, for he had aged much during the last few years, and suffered occasionally from heart attacks. To keep himself up he drank a great deal of wine at dinner, first champagne and then the best part of a bottle of port. This made him talkative, and he kept me sitting there to listen to him while he boasted, poor man, of how he had 'walked round' the officials who thought themselves so clever, but never saw some trap which he had set for them."

"And what did you do?" asked Godfrey.

"You know very well what I did. I grew angry, I could not help it, and told him I thought it was shameful to make money wrongfully out of the country at such a time, especially when he did not want it at all. Then he was furious and answered that he did want it, to support the peerage which he was going to get. He said also," she added slowly, "that I was 'an ignorant, interfering vixen,' yes, that is what he called me, a vixen, who had always been a disappointment to him and thwarted his

plans. 'However,' he went on, 'as you think so little of my hard-earned money, I'll take care that you don't have more of it than I can help. I am not going to leave it to be wasted on silly charities by a sour old maid, for that's what you are, since you can't get hold of your precious parson's son, who I hope will be sent to the war and killed. I'll see the lawyers to-morrow, and make a will, which I hope you'll find pleasant reading one day.'

"I answered that he might make what will he liked, and left the room, though he tried to stop me.

"About half an hour later I saw the butler running about the garden where I was, looking for me in the gloom, and heard him calling: 'Come to Sir John, miss. Come to Sir John!'

"I went in and there was my father fallen forward on the dining-room table, with blood coming from his lips, though I believe this was caused by a crushed wineglass. His pocket-book was open beneath him, in which he had been writing figures of his estate, and, I think, headings for the will he meant to make, but these I could not read since the faint pencilling was blotted out with blood. He was quite dead from some kind of a stroke followed by heart failure, as the doctors said."

"Is that all the pleasant story?" asked Godfrey.

"Yes, except that there being no will I inherited everything, or shall

do so. I tried to get that contract cancelled, but could not; first, because having once made it the Government would not consent, since to do so would have been a reflection on those concerned, and secondly, for the reason that the other partners in the shipping business objected. So we shall have to give it back in some other way."

Godfrey looked at her, and said:

"You meant to say that you will have to give it back."

"I don't know what I meant," she answered, colouring; "but having said we, I think I will be like the Government and stick to it. That is, unless you object very much, my dear."

"Object! I object!" and taking the hand that was nearest to him, he covered it with kisses. As he did so he noted that for the first time she wore the little ring with turquoise hearts upon her third finger, the ring that so many years before he had bought at Lucerne, the ring that through Mrs. Parsons he had sent her in the pill-box on the evening of their separation.

This was the only form of engagement that ever passed between them, the truth being that from the moment he entered the place it was all taken for granted, not only by themselves, but by everyone in the house, including the wounded. With this development of an intelligent instinct, it is possible that Mrs. Parsons had something to do.