

CHAPTER XX

ORDERS

Godfrey and his wife never went to Cornwall after all, for on Christmas Day the weather turned so bad and travelling was so difficult that they determined to stop where they were for a few days.

As for them the roof of this London hotel had become synonymous with that of the crystal dome of heaven, this did not matter in the least. There they sat in their hideous, over-gilded, private sitting-room, or, when the weather was clear enough, went for walks in the Park, and once to the South Kensington Museum, where they enjoyed themselves very thoroughly.

It was on the fourth morning after their marriage that the blow fell. Godfrey had waked early, and lay watching his wife at his side. The grey light from the uncurtained window, which they had opened to air the over-heated room, revealed her in outline but not in detail and made her fine face mysterious, framed as it was in her yellow hair. He watched it with a kind of rapture, till at length she sighed and stirred, then began to murmur in her sleep.

"My darling," she whispered, "oh! my darling, how have I lived without you? Well, that is over, since alive or dead we can never be parted more, not really--not really!"

Then she opened her grey eyes and stretched out her arms to receive him, and he was glad, for he seemed to be listening to that which he was not meant to hear.

A little later there came a knocking at the door, and a page boy's squeaky voice without said:

"Telegram for you, Sir."

Godfrey called to him to put it down, but Isobel turned pale and shivered.

"What can it be?" she said, clasping him. "No one knows our address."

"Oh, yes, they do," he answered. "You forget you telephoned to the Hall yesterday afternoon about the hospital business you had forgotten and gave our number, which would be quite enough."

"So I did, like a fool," she exclaimed, looking as though she were going to cry.

"Don't be frightened, dear," he said. "I dare say it is nothing. You see we have no one to lose."

"No, no, I feel sure it is a great deal and--we have each other. Read

it quickly and get the thing over."

So he rose and fetched the yellow envelope which reposed upon Isobel's boots outside the door. A glance showed him that it was marked "official," and then his heart, too, began to sink. Returning to the bed, he switched on the electric light and opened the envelope.

"There's enough of it," he said, drawing out three closely written sheets.

"Read, read it!" answered Isobel.

So he read. It was indeed a very long telegram, one of such as are commonly sent at the expense of the country, and it came from the War Office. The gist of it was that attempts had been made to communicate with him at an address he had given in Cornwall, but the messages had been returned, and finally inquiry at Hawk's Hall had given a clue. He was directed to report himself "early to-morrow" (the telegram had been sent off on the previous night) to take up an appointment which would be explained to him. There was, it added, no time to lose, as the ship was due to sail within twenty-four hours.

"There!" said Isobel, "I knew it was something of the sort. This," she added with a flash of inspiration, "is the result of the meddling of that old General Cubitte. You see it must be a distant appointment, or they would not talk about the ship being due to sail."

"I dare say," he answered as cheerfully as he could. "Such things are to be expected in these times, are they not?"

"Too bad!" she went on, "at any rate they might have let you have your leave."

Then they rose because they must and made pretence to eat some breakfast, after which they departed in one of Isobel's motors, which had been summoned by telephone from her London house, to the Department indicated in the telegram.

They need not have hurried, since the important person whom Godfrey must see did not arrive for a full hour, during all which time Isobel sat waiting in the motor. However, when he appeared he was very gracious.

"Oh! yes," he said, "you are Major Knight, and we have a mutual friend in old General Cubitte. In fact it was he who put an idea into our heads, for which, as I understand you are just married--a pretty hunt you gave us, by the way--perhaps you won't altogether bless him, since otherwise, as you are only just recovered from your wounds, I have no doubt we could have given you a month or two extra leave. However, I know you are very keen, for I've looked up your record, and private affairs must give way, mustn't they? Also, as it happens, Mrs. Knight need not be anxious, as we are not going to send you into any

particular danger; I dare say you won't see a shot fired.

"Look here, Major, you have been a Staff officer, haven't you, and it is reported of you that you always got on extremely well with natives, and especially in some semi-political billets which you have held when you had to negotiate with their chiefs. Well, to cut it short, a man of the kind is wanted in East Africa, coming out direct from home with military authority. He will have to keep in touch with the big chiefs in our own territory and arrange for them to supply men for working or fighting, etc., and if possible, open negotiations with those in German territory and win them over to us. Further, as you know, there are an enormous number of Indians settled in East Africa, with whom you would be particularly qualified to deal. We should look to you to make the most of these in any way required. You see, the appointment is a special one, and if the work be well done, as I have no doubt it will be, I am almost sure," he added significantly, "that the results to the officer concerned will be special also.

"Now, I don't ask you if you decline the appointment, because we are certain in time of war you will not do so, and I think that's all, except that you will be accredited ostensibly to the staff of the General in command in East Africa, and also receive private instructions, of which the General and the local Governments will have copies. Now, do you understand everything, especially that your powers will be very wide and that you will have to act largely on your own discretion?"

"I think so, Sir," said Godfrey, concealing the complete confusion of his mind as well as he was able. "At any rate, I shall pick things up as I go along."

"Yes, that's the right spirit--pick things up as you go on, as we are all doing in this war. I have to pick 'em up, I can tell you. And now I won't keep you any longer, for, you see, you'll have to hustle. I believe a special boat for East Africa with stores, etc., sails to-morrow morning, so you'll have to take the last train to Southampton. An officer will meet you at Waterloo with your instructions, and if he misses you, will go on down to the boat. Also, you will have details of your pay and allowances, which will be liberal, though I am told you are not likely to want money in future. So good-bye and good luck to you. You must report officially through the General or the local Governors, but you will also be able to write privately to us. Indeed, please remember that we shall expect you to do so."

So Godfrey went, but as he neared the door the big man called after him:

"By the way, I forgot to congratulate you. No, no, I don't mean on your marriage, but on your promotion. You've been informed, haven't you? Well, it will be gazetted to-morrow or in a day or two, and letters will be sent to you with the other papers."

"What promotion?" asked Godfrey.

"Oh! to be a colonel, of course. You did very well out there in France, you know, and it is thought advisable that the officer undertaking this special work should have a colonel's rank, just to begin with.

Good-bye."

So Godfrey went, and said vaguely to the waiting Isobel:

"I'm afraid, dear, that I shall have to ask you to help me to do some shopping. I think there are some stores near here. We had better drive to them."

"Tell me everything," said Isobel.

So he told her, and when he had finished she said slowly:

"It is bad enough, but I suppose it might be worse. Will they let me go with you to Southampton?"

"I expect so," he answered. "At any rate, we will try it on. I think it is an ordinary train, and you have a right to take a ticket."

Then they shopped, all day they shopped, with the result, since money can do much, that when they reached Waterloo his baggage containing everything needful, or at least nearly everything, was already waiting

for him. So was the messenger with the promised papers, including a formal communication notifying to him that he was now a lieutenant-colonel.

"And to think that they have painted 'Major' on those tin cases!" said Isobel regretfully, for no objection had been raised to her accompanying Godfrey, with whom she was seated in a reserved carriage.

They reached Southampton about midnight, and on Godfrey presenting himself and asking when the boat sailed he was informed that this was uncertain, but probably within the next week. Then remembering all he had gone through that day, he swore as a man will, but Isobel rejoiced inwardly, oh! how she rejoiced, though all she said was that it would give him time to complete his shopping.

Save for the advancing shadow of separation and a constant stream of telegrams and telephone messages to and from his chiefs in London, which occupied many of the hours, these were very happy days, especially as in the end they spread themselves out to the original limit of his leave.

"At least we have not been cheated," said Isobel when at last they stood together on the deck of the ship, waiting for the second bell to ring, "and others are worse off. I believe those two poor people," and she pointed to a young officer and his child-like bride, "were only married yesterday."

The scene on the ship was dreary, for many were going in her to the various theatres of war, Egypt, Africa, and other places, and sad, oh! sad were the good-byes upon that bitter winter afternoon. Some of the women cried, especially those of the humbler class. But Isobel would not cry. She remained quite calm to the last, arranging a few flowers and unpacking a travelling bag in Godfrey's cabin, for as a colonel he had one to himself.

Then the second bell rang, and to the ears upon which its strident clamour fell the trump of doom could not have been more awful.

"Good-bye, my darling," she said, "good-bye, and remember what I have told you, that near or far, living or dead, we can never really be apart again, for ours is the Love Eternal given to us in the Beginning."

"Yes," he answered briefly, "I know that it is so and--enduring for ever! God bless us both as He sees best."

The ship cast off, and Isobel stood in the evening light watching from the quay till Godfrey vanished and the vessel which bore him was swallowed up in the shadows. Then she went back to the hotel and, throwing herself upon that widowed bed, kissed the place where his head had lain, and wept, ah! how she wept, for her joy-days were done and her heart was breaking in her.

After this Isobel took a night train back to town and, returning to Hawk's Hall, threw herself with the energy that was remarkable in her, into the management of her hospital and many another work and charity connected with the war. For it was only in work that she could forget herself and her aching loneliness.

Godfrey had a comfortable and a prosperous voyage, since it was almost before the days of submarines, at any rate so far as passenger steamers were concerned, and they saw no enemy ships. Therefore, within little more than a month he landed on the hot shores of Mombasa, and could cable to Isobel that he was safe and well and receive her loving answer.

His next business was to report himself in the proper quarter, which he did. Those over him seemed quite bewildered as to what he had come for or what he was to do, and could only suggest that he should travel to Nairobi and Uganda and put himself in touch with the civil authorities. This he did also and, as a result, formulated a certain scheme of action, to which his military superiors assented, intimating that he might do as he liked, so long as he did not interfere with them.

What happened to him may be very briefly described. In the end he started to visit a great chief on the borders of German East Africa, but in British territory, a man whose loyalty was rumoured to be doubtful. This chief, Jaga by name, was a professed Christian, and at

his town there lived a missionary of the name of Tafelett, who had built a church there and was said to have much influence over him. So with the Reverend Mr. Tafelett Godfrey communicated by runners, saying that he was coming to visit him. Accordingly he started with a guard of native troops, a coloured interpreter and some servants, but without any white companion, since the attack on German territory was beginning and no one could be spared to go with him upon a diplomatic mission.

The journey was long and arduous, involving many days of marching across the East African veld and through its forests, where game of all sorts was extraordinarily plentiful, and at night they were surrounded by lions. At length, however, with the exception of one man who remained with the lions, they arrived safely at the town of Jaga and were met by Mr. Tafelett, who took Godfrey into his house, a neat thatched building with a wide verandah that stood by the church, which was a kind of whitewashed shed, also thatched.

Mr. Tafelett proved to be a clergyman of good birth and standing, one of those earnest, saint-like souls who follow literally the scriptural injunction and abandon all to advance the cause of their Master in the dark places of the earth. A tall, thin, nervous-looking man of not much over thirty years of age; one, too, possessed of considerable private means, he had some five years before given up a good living in England in order to obey what he considered to be his "call." Being sent to this outlying post, he found it in a condition of the most complete savagery, and worked as few have done. He built the church with native

labour, furnishing it beautifully inside, mostly at his own expense. He learned the local languages, he started a school, he combated the witch-doctors and medicine-men.

Finally he met with his reward in the conversion of the young chief Jaga, which was followed by that of a considerable portion of his people.

But here came the trouble. The bulk of the tribe, which was large and powerful, did not share their chief's views. For instance, his uncle, Alulu, the head rain-maker and witch-doctor, differed from them very emphatically. He was shrewd enough to see that the triumph of Christianity meant his destruction, also the abandonment of all their ancient customs. He harangued the tribe in secret, asking them if they wished to bring upon themselves the vengeance of their ancestral and other spirits and to go through their days as the possessors of only one miserable wife, questions to which they answered that emphatically they did not. So the tribe was rent in two, and by far the smaller half clung to Jaga, to whom the dim, turbulent heathen thousands beneath his rule rendered but a lip service.

Then came the war, and Alulu and his great following saw their opportunity. Why should they not be rid of Jaga and the Christian teacher with his new-fangled notions? If it could be done in no other way, why should they not move across the border which was close by, into German territory? The Germans, at any rate, would not bother them

about such matters; under their rule they might live as their forefathers had done from the beginning, and have as many wives as they chose without being called all sorts of ugly names.

This was the position when Godfrey arrived. His coming made a great sensation. He was reported to be a very big lord indeed, as big, or bigger than the King's governor himself. Alulu put it about that he had come to make a soldier of every fit man and to enslave the women and the elders to work on the roads or in dragging guns. The place seethed with secret ferment.

Mr. Tafelett knew something of all this through Jaga, who was genuinely frightened, and communicated it to Godfrey. In the result a meeting of all the headmen was held, which was attended by thousands of the people. Godfrey spoke through his interpreter, saying that in this great war the King of England required their help, and generally set out the objects of his mission, remarks that were received in respectful silence. Then Alulu spoke, devoting himself chiefly to an attack upon the Christian faith and on the interference of the white teacher with their customs, that, he observed, had resulted in their ancestral spirits cursing them with the worst drought they had experienced for years, which in the circumstances he, Alulu, could and would do nothing to alleviate. How could they fight and work for the Great King when their stomachs were pinched with hunger owing to the witchcraft and magical rites which the white teacher celebrated in the church?

"How, indeed?" shouted the heathen section, although in fact their season had been very good; while the Christians, feeling themselves in a minority, were silent.

Then the Chief, Jaga, spoke. He traversed all the arguments of Alulu, whom he denounced in no measured terms, saying that he was plotting against him. Finally he came down heavily on the side of the British, remarking that he knew who were the would-be traitors and that they should suffer in due course.

"It has been whispered in my ears," he concluded, "that there is a plot afoot against my friend, the white Teacher, who has done us all so much good. It has even been whispered that there are those," here he looked hard at Alulu, "who have declared that it would be well to kill this great white Lord who is our guest," and he pointed to Godfrey with his little chief's staff, "so that he may not return to tell who are the true traitors among the people of Jaga. I say to you who have thought such things, that this Lord is the greatest of all lords, and as well might you lay hands on our father, the mighty King of England himself, as upon this his friend and counsellor. If a drop of his blood is shed, then surely the King's armies will come, and we shall die, every one of us, the innocent and the guilty together. For terrible will be the vengeance of the King."

This outburst made a great impression, for all the multitude cried:

"It is so! We know that it is so," and Alulu interposed that he would as soon think of murdering his own mother (who, Mr. Tafelett whispered to Godfrey, had been dead these many years) as of touching a hair of the great white chief's head. On the contrary, it was their desire to do everything that he ordered them. But concerning the matter of the new custom of having one wife only, etc.

This brought Mr. Tafelett to his feet, for on monogamy he was especially strong, and the meeting ended on a theological discussion which nearly resulted in blows between the factions. Finally it was adjourned for a week, when it was arranged that an answer should be given to Godfrey's demands.

Three nights later an answer was given and one of a terrible sort.

Shortly after sundown Godfrey was sitting in the missionary's house writing a report. Mr. Tafelett, it being Sunday, was holding an evening service in the church, at which Jaga and most of the Christians were present. Suddenly a tumult arose, and the air was rent with savage shouts and shrieks. Godfrey sprang up and snatched his revolver just as some of his servants arrived and announced that the people in the church were being killed. Acting on his first impulse, he ran to the place, calling to his guard to follow him, which they did so tardily that he entered it alone. Here a sight of horror met his eyes.

The building was full of dead and dying people. By the altar, dressed in his savage witch-doctor's gear, stood Alulu, a lamp in his hand, with which evidently he had been firing the church, for tongues of flame ran up the walls. On the altar itself was something that had a white cloth thrown over it, as do the sacred vessels. Catching sight of Godfrey, with a yell the brute tore away the napkin, revealing the severed head of Mr. Tafelett, whose surplice-draped body Godfrey now distinguished lying in the shadows on one side of the altar!

"Here is the white medicine-man's magic wine," he screamed, pointing to the blood that ran down the broidered frontal. "Come, drink! come, drink!"

Godfrey ran forward up the church, his pistol in his hand. When he reached the chancel he stopped and fired at the mouthing, bedizened devil who was dancing hideously in front of the altar. The heavy service-revolver bullet struck him in some mortal place, for he leapt into the air, grabbed at the altar cloth and fell to the ground. There he lay still, covered by the cloth, with the massive brass crucifix resting face downwards on his breast and the murdered man's head lying at his side--as though it were looking at him.

This was the last sight that Godfrey saw for many a day, for just then a spear pierced his breast, also something struck him on the temple. A curious recollection rose in his mind of the head of a mummy after the Pasteur had broken it off, rolling along the floor in the flat at

Lucerne. Then he thought he heard Madame Riennes laughing, after which he remembered no more; it might have been a thousand years, or it might have been a minute, for he had passed into a state that takes no reck of time.

Godfrey began to dream. He dreamed that he was travelling; that he was in a house, and then, a long while afterwards, that he was making a journey by sea.

Another vacuum of nothingness and he dreamed again, this time very vividly. Now his dream was that he had come to Egypt and was stretched on a bed in a room, through the windows of which he could see the Pyramids quite close at hand. More, he seemed to become acquainted with all their history. He saw them in the building; multitudes of brown men dragging huge blocks of stone up a slope of sand. He saw them finished one by one, and all the ceremonies of the worship with which they were connected. Dead Pharaohs were laid to rest there beneath his eyes, living Pharaohs prayed within their chapels and made oblation to the spirits of those who had gone before them, while ever the white-robed, shaven priests chanted in his ears.

Then all passed, and he saw them mighty as ever, but deserted, standing there in the desert, the monuments of a forgotten greatness, till at length a new people came and stripped off their marble coverings.

These things he remembered afterwards, but there were many more that he forgot.

Again Godfrey dreamed, a strange and beautiful dream which went on from day to day. It was that he was very ill and that Isobel had come to nurse him. She came quite suddenly and at first seemed a little frightened and disturbed, but afterwards very happy indeed. This went on for a while, till suddenly there struck him a sense of something terrible that had happened, of an upheaval of conditions, of a wrenching asunder of ties, of change utter and profound.

Then while he mourned because she was not there, Isobel came again, but different. The difference was indefinable, but it was undoubted. Her appearance seemed to have changed somewhat, and in the intervals between her comings he could never remember how she had been clothed, except for two things which she always seemed to wear, the little ring with the turquoise hearts, though oddly enough, not her wedding ring, and the string of small pearls which he had given her when they were married, and knew again by the clasp, that was fashioned in a lover's knot of gold. Her voice, too, seemed changed, or rather he did not hear her voice, since it appeared to speak within him, in his consciousness, not without to his ears. She told him all sorts of strange things, about a wonderful land in which they would live together, and the home that she was making ready for him, and the trees and flowers growing around it, that were unlike any of which Godfrey had ever heard. Also

she said that there were many other matters whereof she would wish to speak to him, only she might not.

Finally there came a vivid dream in which she told him that soon he would wake up to the world again for a little while (she seemed to lay emphasis on this "little while") and, if he could not find her in it, that he must not grieve at all, since although their case seemed sad, it was much better than he could conceive. In his dream she made him promise that he would not grieve, and he did so, wondering. At this she smiled, looking more beautiful than ever he could have conceived her to be. Then she spoke these words, always, as it appeared, within him, printing them, as it were, upon his mind:

"Now you are about to wake up and I must leave you for a while. But this I promise you, my most dear, my beloved, my own, that before you fall asleep again for the last time, you shall see me once more, for that is allowed to me. Indeed it shall be I who will soothe you to sleep and I who will receive you when you awake again. Also in the space between, although you do not see me, you will always feel me near, and I shall be with you. So swear to me once more that you will not grieve."

Then in his vision Godfrey swore, and she appeared to lean over him and whisper words into his ear that, although they impressed themselves upon his brain as the others had done, had no meaning for him, since they were in some language which he did not understand.

Only he knew that they conveyed a blessing to him, and not that of Isobel alone!