

CHAPTER XXI

LOVE ETERNAL

Godfrey awoke and looked about him. He was lying in a small room opposite to an open window that had thin gauze shutters which, as an old Indian, he knew at once were to keep out mosquitoes. Through this window he could see the mighty, towering shapes of the Pyramids, and reflected that after all there must have been some truth in those wonderful dreams. He lifted his hand; it was so thin that the strong sunlight shone through it. He touched his head and felt that it was wrapped in bandages, also that it seemed benumbed upon one side.

A little dark woman wearing a nurse's uniform, entered the room and he asked her where he was, as once before he had done in France and under very similar conditions. She stared and answered with an Irish accent:

"Where else but at Mena House Hospital. Don't the Pyramids tell you that?"

"I thought so," he replied. "How long have I been here?"

"Oh! two months, or more. I can't tell you, Colonel, unless I look at the books, with so many sick men coming and going. Shure! it's a pleasure to see you yourself again. We thought that perhaps you'd never wake up reasonably."

"Did you? I always knew that I should."

"And how did you know that?"

"Because someone whom I am very fond of, came and told me so."

She glanced at him sharply.

"Then it's myself that should be flattered," she answered, "or the night nurse, seeing that it is we who have cared for you with no visitors admitted except the doctors, and they didn't talk that way. Now, Colonel, just you drink this and have a nap, for you mustn't speak too much all at once. If you keep wagging your jaw you'll upset the bandages."

When he woke again it was night and now the full moon, such a moon as one sees in Egypt, shone upon the side of the Great Pyramid and made it silver. He could hear voices talking outside his door, one that of the Irish nurse which he recognised, and the other of a man, for although they spoke low, this sense of hearing seemed to be peculiarly acute to him.

"It is so, Major," said the nurse. "I tell you that except for a little matter about someone whom he thought had been visiting him, he is as reasonable as I am, and much more than you are, saving your presence."

"Well," answered the doctor, "as you speak the truth sometimes, Sister, I'm inclined to believe you, but all I have to say is that I could have staked my professional reputation that the poor chap would never get his wits again. He has had an awful blow and on the top of an old wound, too. After all these months, it's strange, very strange, and I hope it will continue."

"Well, of course, Major, there is the delusion about the lady."

"Lady! How do you know it was a lady? Just like a woman making up a romance out of nothing. Yes, there's the delusion, which is bad. Keep his mind off it as much as possible, and tell him some of your own in your best brogue. I'll come and examine him to-morrow morning."

Then the voices died away and Godfrey almost laughed because they had talked of his "delusion," when he knew so well that it was none. Isobel had been with him. Yes, although he could neither hear nor see her, Isobel was with him now for he felt her presence. And yet how could this be if he was in Egypt and she was in England? So wondering, he fell asleep again.

By degrees as he gathered strength, Godfrey learned all the story of what had happened to him, or rather so much of it as those in charge of the hospital knew. It appeared, according to Sister Elizabeth, as his nurse was named, that when he was struck down in the church, "somewhere

in Africa" as she said vaguely, the guards whom he had with him, rushed in, firing on the native murderers who fled away except those who were killed.

Believing that, with the missionary, they had murdered the King's Officer, a great man, they fled fast and far into German East Africa and were no more seen. The Chief, Jaga, who had escaped, caused him to be carried out of the burning church to the missionary's house, and sent runners to the nearest magistracy many miles away, where there was a doctor. So there he lay in the house. A native servant who once acted as a hospital orderly, had washed his wounds and bound them up. One of these, that on the head, was caused by a kerry or some blunt instrument, and the other was a spear-stab in the lung. Also from time to time this servant poured milk down his throat.

At length the doctor came with an armed escort and, greatly daring, performed some operation which relieved the pressure on the brain and saved his life. In that house he lay for a month or more and then, in a semi-comatose condition, was carried by slow stages in a litter back to Mombasa. Here he lay another month or so and as his mind showed no signs of returning, was at length put on board a ship and brought to Egypt.

Meanwhile, as Godfrey learned afterwards, he was believed to have been murdered with the missionary, and a report to that effect was sent to England, which, in the general muddle that prevailed at the beginning

of the war, had never been corrected. For he remembered it was not until he was carried to Mombasa, nearly two months after he was hurt, that he reached any place where there was a telegraph. By this time also, those at Mombasa had plenty of fresh casualties to report, and indeed were not aware, or had forgotten what exact story had been sent home concerning Godfrey who could not speak for himself. So it came about through a series of mischances, that at home he was believed to be dead as happened to many other men in the course of the great war.

After he came to himself at the Mena House Hospital, Godfrey inquired whether there were not some letters for him, but none could be found. He had arranged with the only person likely to write to him, namely Isobel, to do so through the War Office, and evidently that plan had not succeeded, for her letters had gone astray. The truth was, of course, that some had been lost and after definite news of his death was received, the rest had not been forwarded. Now he bethought him that he would cable home to Isobel to tell her that he was recovering, though somehow he imagined that she would know this already through the authorities. With great difficulty, for the hurt to his side made it hard for him to use his arm, he wrote the telegram and gave it to Sister Elizabeth to send, remarking that he would pay the cost as soon as he could draw some money.

"That won't matter," she replied as she took the cable. Then with an

odd look at him she went away as though to arrange for its despatch.

After she had gone, two orderlies helped Godfrey downstairs to sit on the broad verandah of the hospital. Here still stood many of the little tables which used to serve for pleasant tea-parties when the building was an hotel in the days before the war. On these lay some old English newspapers. Godfrey picked up one of them with his left hand, and began to read idly enough. Almost the first paragraph that his eye fell on was headed:

"Heroic Death of a V.A.D. Commandant."

Something made him read on quickly, and this was what he saw:

"At the inquest on the late Mrs. Knight, the wife of Colonel Knight who was reported murdered by natives in East Africa some little time ago, some interesting evidence was given. It appeared from the testimony of Mrs. Parsons, a nurse in the Hawk's Hall Hospital, that when warning was given of the approach of Zeppelins during last week's raid on the Eastern Counties and London, the patients in the upper rooms of the hospital were removed to its lower floors. Finding that one young man, a private in the Suffolk Regiment who has lost both his feet, had been overlooked, Mrs. Knight, followed by Mrs. Parsons, went upstairs to help him down. When Mrs. Parsons, whom she outran, reached the door of the ward there was a great explosion, apparently on the roof. She

waited till the dust had cleared off and groped her way down the ward with the help of an electric torch. Reaching Private Thompson's bed, she saw lying on it Mrs. Knight who had been killed by the fallen masonry. Private Thompson, who was unhurt beneath the body, said that when the bricks began to come down Mrs. Knight called to him to lie still and threw herself on him to protect him. Then something heavy, he believed the stone coping of a chimney, fell on her back and she uttered one word, he thought it was a name, and was silent. Mrs. Knight, who was the only child of the late Sir John Blake, Bart., the well-known shipowner, is said to have been one of the richest women in England. She married the late Colonel Knight some months ago, immediately before he was sent to East Africa. Under the provisions of her will the cremated remains of Mrs. Knight will be interred in the chancel of the Abbey Church at Monk's Acre."

Godfrey read this awful paragraph twice and looked at the date of the paper. It was nearly two months old.

"So she was dead when she came to me. Oh! now I understand," he muttered to himself, and then, had not a passing native servant caught him, he would have fallen to the ground. It was one of the ten thousand minor tragedies of the world war, that is all.

Three months later, still very crippled and coughing badly, because of the injury to his lung, he reported himself in London, and once more

saw the Under-Secretary who had sent him out to East Africa. There he sat in the same room, at the same desk, looking precisely the same.

"I am sorry, Sir, that my mission has failed through circumstances beyond my control. I can only add that I did my best," he said briefly.

"I know," answered the official; "it was no fault of yours if those black brutes tried to murder you. Everything goes wrong in that cursed East Africa. Now go home and get yourself fit again, my dear fellow," he went on very kindly, adding, "Your services will not be overlooked."

"I have no home, and I shall never be fit again," replied Godfrey, and left the room.

"I forgot," thought the Under-Secretary. "His wife was killed in a Zeppelin raid. Odd that she should have been taken and he left."

Then, with a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders he turned to his business.

Godfrey went to the little house at Hampstead where he used to live while he was studying as a lad, for here Mrs. Parsons was waiting for him. Then for the first time he gave way and they wept in each other's arms.

"We were too happy, Nurse," he said.

"Yes," she answered, "love like hers wasn't for this world, and more than once she said to me that she never expected to see you again in the flesh, though I thought she meant it was you who would go, as might have been expected. Stop, I have something for you."

Going to a desk she produced from it a ring, that with the turquoise hearts; also a canvas-covered book.

"That's her diary," she said, "she used to write in it every day."

That night Godfrey read many beautiful and sacred things in this diary. From it he learned that the shock of his supposed death had caused Isobel to miscarry and made her ill for some time, though underneath the entries about her illness and the false news of his death she had written:

"He is not dead. I know that he is not dead."

Afterwards there were some curious sentences in which she spoke joyfully of having seen him in her sleep, ill, but living and going to recover, "at any rate for a while," she had added.

On the very day of her death she had made this curious note:

"I feel as though Godfrey and I were about to be separated for a while, and yet that this separation will really bring us closer together. I am strangely happy. Great vistas seem to open to my soul and down them I walk with Godfrey for ever and a day, and over them broods the Love of God in which are embodied and expressed all other loves. Oh! how wrong and foolish was I, who for so many years rejected that Love, which yet will not be turned away and in mercy gave me sight and wisdom and with these Godfrey, from whose soul my soul can never more be parted. For as I told you, my darling, ours is the Love Eternal. Remember it always, Godfrey, if ever your eyes should see these words upon the earth. Afterwards there will be no need for memory."

So the diary ended.

They invalided Godfrey out of the service and because of his lung trouble, he went to the house that Miss Ogilvy had left him in Lucerne, taking Mrs. Parsons with him. There too he found the Pasteur, grown an old man but otherwise much the same as ever, and him also he brought to live in the Villa Ogilvy.

The winter went on and Godfrey grew, not better, but worse, till at last he knew that he was dying, and rejoiced to die. One evening a letter was brought to him. It was from Madame Riennes, written in a shaky hand, and ran thus:

"I am going to pass to the World of Speerits, and so are you, my Godfrey, for I know all about you and everything that has happened. The plum is eaten, but the stone--ah! it is growing already, and soon you will be sitting with another under that beautiful Tree of Life of which I told you in the English church. And I, where shall I be sitting? Ah! I do not know, but there is this difference between us that whereas I am afraid, you have no cause for fear. You, you rejoice, yes, and shall rejoice--for though sometimes I hate you I must tell it. Yet I am sorry if I have harmed you, and should you be able, I pray you, say a good word in the World of Speerits for your sinful old godmamma Riennes. So fare you well, who thinking that you have lost, have gained all. It is I, I who have lost. Again farewell, and bid that old Pasteur to pray for me, which he, who is good, will do, although I was his enemy and cursed him."

"See that she lacks for nothing till the end, and comfort her if you can," said Godfrey to the Pasteur.

That night a shape of glory seemed to stand by Godfrey's bed and to

whisper wonderful things into his ears. He saw it, ah, clearly, and knew that informing its changeful loveliness was all which had been Isobel upon the earth.

"Fear nothing," he thought it said, "for I am with you and others greater than I. Know, Godfrey, that everything has a meaning and that all joy must be won through pain. Our lives seem to have been short and sad, but these are not the real life, they are but its black and ugly door, whereof the threshold must be watered with our tears and the locks turned by the winds of Faith and Prayer. Do not be afraid then of the blackness of the passage, for beyond it shines the immortal light in that land where there is understanding and all forgiveness. Therefore be glad, Godfrey, for the night of sorrows is at an end and the dawn breaks of peace that passes understanding."

Godfrey woke and spoke to the old Pasteur who was watching by his bed while Mrs. Parsons wept at its foot.

"Did you see anything?" he asked.

"No, my son," he answered, "but I felt something. It was as though an angel stood at my side."

Then Godfrey told him all his vision, and much else besides, of which

before he had never spoken to living man.

"It well may be, my son," answered the Pasteur, "since to those who have suffered greatly, the good God gives the great reward. He Who endured pain can understand our pains, and He Who redeemed sin can understand and be gentle to our sins, for His is the true Love Eternal. So go forward with faith and gladness, and in the joy of that new world and of the lost which is found again, think sometimes of the old Pasteur who hopes soon to join you there."

Then he shrove and blessed him.

After this Godfrey slept awhile to wake elsewhere in the Land of that Love Eternal which the soul of Isobel foreknew.