

Chapter 25

Life out of Death

The sound of kicking, or knocking, grew louder every moment: and at last a door opened somewhere near us. "Did you say 'come in!' Sir?" my landlady asked timidly.

"Oh yes, come in!" I replied. "What's the matter?"

"A note has just been left for you, Sir, by the baker's boy. He said he was passing the Hall, and they asked him to come round and leave it here."

The note contained five words only. "Please come at once. Muriel."

A sudden terror seemed to chill my very heart. "The Earl is ill!" I said to myself. "Dying, perhaps!" And I hastily prepared to leave the house.

"No bad news, Sir, I hope?" my landlady said, as she saw me out. "The boy said as some one had arrived unexpectedly--"

"I hope that is it!" I said. But my feelings were those of fear rather than of hope: though, on entering the house, I was somewhat reassured by finding luggage lying in the entrance, bearing the initials "E. L."

"It's only Eric Lindon after all!" I thought, half relieved and half annoyed. "Surely she need not have sent for me for that!"

Lady Muriel met me in the passage. Her eyes were gleaming--but it was the excitement of joy, rather than of grief. "I have a surprise for you!" she whispered.

"You mean that Eric Lindon is here?" I said, vainly trying to disguise the involuntary bitterness of my tone. "The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage-tables," I could not help repeating to myself. How cruelly I was misjudging her!

"No, no!" she eagerly replied. "At least--Eric is here. But--" her voice quivered, "but there is another!"

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No need for further question. I eagerly followed her in. There on the bed, he lay--pale and worn--the mere shadow of his old self--my old friend come back again from the dead!

“Arthur!” I exclaimed. I could not say another word.

“Yes, back again, old boy!” he murmured, smiling as I grasped his hand. “He”, indicating Eric, who stood near, “saved my life--He brought me back. Next to God, we must thank him, Muriel, my wife!”

Silently I shook hands with Eric, and with the Earl: and with one consent we moved into the shaded side of the room, where we could talk without disturbing the invalid, who lay, silent and happy, holding his wife’s hand in his, and watching her with eyes that shone with the deep steady light of Love.

“He has been delirious till to-day,” Eric explained in a low voice: and even to-day he has been wandering more than once. But the sight of her has been new life to him.” And then he went on to tell us, in would-be careless tones --I knew how he hated any display of feeling--how he had insisted on going back to the plague-stricken town, to bring away a man whom the doctor had abandoned as dying, but who might, he fancied, recover if brought to the hospital: how he had seen nothing in the wasted features to remind him of Arthur, and only recognized him when he visited the hospital a month after: how the doctor had forbidden him to announce the discovery, saying that any shock to the over-taxed brain might kill him at once: how he had stayed on at the hospital, and nursed the sick man by night and day--all this with the studied indifference of one who is relating the commonplace acts of some chance acquaintance!

“And this was his rival!” I thought. “The man who had won from him the heart of the woman he loved!”

“The sun is setting,” said Lady Muriel, rising and leading the way to the open window. “Just look at the western sky! What lovely crimson tints! We shall have a glorious day to-morrow--” We had followed her across the room, and were standing in a little group, talking in low tones in the gathering gloom, when we were startled by the voice of the sick man, murmuring words too indistinct for the ear to catch.

“He is wandering again,” Lady Muriel whispered, and returned to the bedside. We drew a little nearer also: but no, this had none of the incoherence of delirium. “What reward shall I give unto the Lord”, the tremulous lips were saying, “for all the benefits that He hath

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done unto me? I will receive the cup of salvation, and call--and call--" but here the poor weakened memory failed, and the feeble voice died into silence.

His wife knelt down at the bedside, raised one of his arms, and drew it across her own, fondly kissing the thin white hand that lay so listlessly in her loving grasp. It seemed to me a good opportunity for stealing away without making her go through any form of parting: so, nodding to the Earl and Eric, I silently left the room. Eric followed me down the stairs, and out into the night.

"Is it Life or Death?" I asked him, as soon as we were far enough from the house for me to speak in ordinary tones.

"It is Life!" he replied with eager emphasis. "The doctors are quite agreed as to that. All he needs now, they say, is rest, and perfect quiet, and good nursing. He's quite sure to get rest and quiet, here: and, as for the nursing, why, I think it's just possible--" (he tried hard to make his trembling voice assume a playful tone) "he may even get fairly well nursed, in his present quarters!"

"I'm sure of it!" I said. "Thank you so much for coming out to tell me!" And, thinking he had now said all he had come to say, I held out my hand to bid him good night. He grasped it warmly, and added, turning his face away as he spoke, "By the way, there is one other thing I wanted to say, I thought you'd like to know that--that I'm not--not in the mind I was in when last we met. It isn't--that I can accept Christian belief--at least, not yet. But all this came about so strangely. And she had prayed, you know. And I had prayed. And--and" his voice broke, and I could only just catch the concluding words, "there is a God that answers prayer! I know it for certain now." He wrung my hand once more, and left me suddenly. Never before had I seen him so deeply moved.

So, in the gathering twilight, I paced slowly homewards, in a tumultuous whirl of happy thoughts: my heart seemed full, and running over, with joy and thankfulness: all that I had so fervently longed for, and prayed for, seemed now to have come to pass. And, though I reproached myself, bitterly, for the unworthy suspicion I had for one moment harboured against the true-hearted Lady Muriel, I took comfort in knowing it had been but! a passing thought.

Not Bruno himself could have mounted the stairs with so buoyant a step, as I felt my way up in the dark, not pausing to strike a light in the entry, as I knew I had left the lamp burning in my sitting-room.

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But it was no common lamplight into which I now stepped, with a strange, new, dreamy sensation of some subtle witchery that had come over the place. Light, richer and more golden than any lamp could give, flooded the room, streaming in from a window I had somehow never noticed before, and lighting up a group of three shadowy figures, that grew momentarily more distinct--a grave old man in royal robes, leaning back in an easy chair, and two children, a girl and a boy, standing at his side.

"Have you the Jewel still, my child?" the old man was saying.

"Oh, yes!" Sylvie exclaimed with unusual eagerness.

"Do you think I'd ever lose it or forget it?" She undid the ribbon round her neck, as she spoke, and laid the Jewel in her father's hand.

Bruno looked at it admiringly. "What a lovely brightness!" he said. "It's just like a little red star! May I take it in my hand?"

Sylvie nodded: and Bruno carried it off to the window, and held it aloft against the sky, whose deepening blue was already spangled with stars. Soon he came running back in some excitement. "Sylvie! Look here!" he cried. "I can see right through it when I hold it up to the sky. And it isn't red a bit: it's, oh such a lovely blue! And the words are all different! Do look at it!"

Sylvie was quite excited, too, by this time; and the two children eagerly held up the Jewel to the light, and spelled out the legend between them, "ALL WILL LOVE SYLVIE."

"Why, this is the other Jewel!" cried Bruno. "Don't you remember, Sylvie? The one you didn't choose!"

Sylvie took it from him, with a puzzled look, and held it, now up to the light, now down. "It's blue, one way," she said softly to herself, "and it's red the other way! Why, I thought there were two of them--Father!" she suddenly exclaimed, laying the Jewel once more in his hand, "I do believe it was the same Jewel all the time!"

"Then you choosed it from itself," Bruno thoughtfully remarked. "Father, could Sylvie choose a thing from itself?"

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“Yes, my own one,” the old man replied to Sylvie, not noticing Bruno’s embarrassing question, “it was the same Jewel--but you chose quite right.” And he fastened the ribbon round her neck again.

“SYLVIE WILL LOVE ALL--ALL WILL LOVE SYLVIE.”

Bruno murmured, raising himself on tiptoe to kiss the “little red star”. “And, when you look at it, it’s red and fierce like the sun--and, when you look through it, it’s gentle and blue like the sky!”

“God’s own sky,” Sylvie said, dreamily.

“God’s own sky,” the little fellow repeated, as they stood, lovingly clinging together, and looking out into the night. “But oh, Sylvie, what makes the sky such a darling blue?”

Sylvie’s sweet lips shaped themselves to reply, but her voice sounded faint and very far away. The vision was fast slipping from my eager gaze: but it seemed to me, in that last bewildering moment, that not Sylvie but an angel was looking out through those trustful brown eyes, and that not Sylvie’s but an angel’s voice was whispering

“IT IS LOVE.”