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PEGGY O'MALLEY \*\*\*

# **Secret History Revealed by Lady Peggy O'Malley**

**By C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON**

**AUTHOR OF "The Lightning Conductor Discovers America," "A Soldier of the  
Legion," "Lady Betty Across the Water," Etc.**

**With Frontispiece in Colors By CLARENCE ROWE**

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*"As I kicked it away, one of the slippers flew off and seemed spitefully to follow the coat."*

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## CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I](#)  
[CHAPTER II](#)  
[CHAPTER III](#)  
[CHAPTER IV](#)  
[CHAPTER V](#)  
[CHAPTER VI](#)  
[CHAPTER VII](#)  
[CHAPTER VIII](#)  
[CHAPTER IX](#)  
[CHAPTER X](#)  
[CHAPTER XI](#)  
[CHAPTER XII](#)  
[CHAPTER XIII](#)  
[CHAPTER XIV](#)  
[CHAPTER XV](#)  
[CHAPTER XVI](#)

## CHAPTER I

If I didn't tell this, nobody else ever would; certainly not Diana, nor Major Vandyke—still less Eagle himself—I mean Captain Eagleston March; and they and I are the only ones who know, except a few such people as presidents and secretaries of war and generals, who never tell anything even under torture. Besides, there is the unofficial part. Without that, the drama would be like a play in three acts, with the first and third acts chopped off. The presidents and secretaries of war and generals know nothing about the unofficial part.

It's strange how the biggest things of life grow out of the tiniest ones. There *is* the old simile of the acorn and the oak, for instance. But oaks take a long time to grow, and everybody concerned in oak culture is calmly expecting them to do it. Imagine an acorn exploding to let out an oak huge enough to shadow the world!

If, two years ago, when I was sixteen, I hadn't wanted money to buy a white frock with roses on it, which I saw in Selfridge's window, a secret crisis between the United States and Mexico would have been avoided; and the career of a splendid soldier would not have been broken.

One month before I met the white dress, Diana and Father and I had come from home—that's Ballyconal—to see what good we could do with a season in London; good for Diana, I mean, and I put her before Father because he does so himself. Every one else he puts far, far behind, like the beasts following Noah into the Ark. Not that I'm sure, without looking them up, that they did follow Noah. But if it had been Father, he would have arranged it in that way, to escape seeing their ugly faces or smelling those who were not nice to smell.

I suppose I should have been left at Ballyconal, with nothing to do but study my beloved French and Spanish, my sole accomplishments; only Father had contrived to let the place, through the New York *Herald*, to an American family who, poor dears, snapped it up by cable from the description in the advertisement of "a wonderful XII Century Castle." Besides, Diana couldn't afford a maid. And that's why I was taken to America afterward. I can do hair beautifully. So, when one thinks back, Fate had begun to weave a web long before the making of that white dress. None of those tremendous things would have happened to change heaven knows how many lives, if I hadn't been born with the knack of a hairdresser, inherited perhaps from some bourgeoisie ancestress of mine on Mother's side.

When the American family found out what Ballyconal was really like, and the twelfth-century rats had crept out from the hinterland of the old wainscoting ("rich in ancient oak," the advertisement stated), to scamper over its faces by night, and door knobs had come off in its hands by day, or torn carpets had tripped it up and sprained its ankles, it said bad words about deceitful, stoney-broke Irish earls, and fled at the end of a fortnight, having paid for two months in advance at the rate of thirty-five guineas a week. Father had been sadly sure that the Americans would do that very thing, so he had counted on getting only the advance money and no more. This meant cheap lodgings for us, which spoiled Diana's chances from the start, as she told Father the minute she saw the house. It was in a fairly good neighbourhood, and the address looked fashionable on paper; but man, and especially girl, may not live on neighbourhood and paper alone, even if the latter can be peppered with coronets.

I don't know what curse or mildew collects on poor Irish earls, but it simply goes nowhere to be one in London; and then there was the handicap of Father's two quaint marriages. Diana's mother was a music-hall "artiste" (isn't that the word?) without any money except what she earned, and also—I heard a woman say once, when she thought Little Pitcher's ears were engaged elsewhere—without any "h's" except in the wrong places.

My mother, the poor darling, must have been just as unsuitable in her way. She was a French chocolate heiress, whom Father married to mend the family fortunes, when Diana was five; but some one shortly after sprang on the market a better chocolate than her people made, so she was a failure, too, and not even beautiful like Diana's mother. Luckily for her, she died when I was born; but neither she nor the "artiste" can have helped Father much, with the smart friends of his young days when he was one of the best-looking bachelors in town.

Diana was considered beautiful, but "the image of her mother," by those inconvenient creatures who run around the world remembering other people's pasts; and though she and Father were invited to lots of big crushes, they weren't asked to any of the charming intimate things which Diana says are the right background for a *débutante*. This went to Di's heart and Father's liver,

and made them both dreadfully hard to get on with. Cinderella wasn't in it with me, except that when they were beastly, I was beastly back again; a relief to which Cinderella probably didn't treat herself, being a fairy-story heroine, stuffed with virtues as a sultana cake is stuffed with plums.

The day I asked Father for the white frock with roses on it in Selfridge's window, he was so disagreeable that I went to my room and slammed the door and kicked a chair. It was true that I did not need the dress, because I never went anywhere and was only a flapper (it's almost more unpleasant to be called a flapper than a "mouth to feed"); still, the real pleasure of having a thing is when you don't need it, but just want it. The farther away from me that gown seemed to recede, the more I longed for it; and when Father told me not to nag or be a little idiot, I determined that somehow or other, by hook or crook, the frock should hang on my wall behind the chintz curtain which calls itself a wardrobe.

The morning of the refusal, Father and Di were starting off to be away all that day and night. They were asked to a ridiculous house party given by a rich, suburban Pickle family at Epsom for the Derby, and Di had been grumbling that it was exactly the sort of invitation they *would* get: for one night and the Derby, instead of Ascot. However, it was the time of the month for a moon, and quite decent young men had been enticed; so Di wasn't so very sorry for herself after all. Her nickname at home in Ireland, "Diana the Huntress," had been already imported, free of duty, to England, by a discarded flirtée; but I don't think she minded, it sounded so dashing, even if it was only grasping. She went off moderately happy; and I was left with twenty-four hours on my hands to decide by what hook, or what crook, I could possibly annex the dress which I felt had been born for me.

At last I thought of a way that might do. My poor little chocolate mother made a will the day before she died, when I was a week old, leaving everything she possessed to me. Of course her money was all gone, because she had been married for two years to Father, and Himself is a very expensive man. But he hadn't spent her jewels yet, nor her wedding veil, nor a few other pieces of lace. Since then he's wheedled most of the jewellery out of me, but the wedding veil I mean to keep always, and a Point d'Alençon scarf and some handkerchiefs he has probably forgotten. I had forgotten them, too, but when I was racking my brain how to get the Selfridge dress, the remembrance tumbled down off its dusty little shelf.

The legacies were at the bottom of my trunk, because it was simpler to bring them away from Ballyconal, than find a stowaway place that the American family wouldn't need for its belongings. The veil nothing would have induced me to part with; but the scarf was so old, I felt sure it must have come to my mother from a succession of chocolate or perhaps soap or sardine grandmamas, and I hadn't much sentiment about it. I had no precise idea what the lace ought to be worth, but I fancied Point d'Alençon must be valuable, and I thought I ought to get more than enough by selling it to buy the white dress, which cost seven guineas.

Taxying through Wardour Street with Di, I had often noticed an antique shop appropriately crusted with the grime of centuries, all but the polished window, where lace and china and bits of old silver were displayed. It seemed to me that a person intelligent enough to combine odds and ends with such fetching effect ought to be the man to appreciate my great—or great great-grandmother's scarf. I didn't run to taxis when alone, and would as soon have got into one of those appalling motor buses as leap on to the back of a mad elephant that had berserked out of the Zoo. Consequently, I had to walk. It was an untidy, badly dusted day, with a hot wind; and I realized, when I caught sight of myself in a convex mirror in the curiosity-shop window, that I looked rather like a small female edition of Strumpelpeter.

There was a bell on the door which, like a shrill, disparaging *leit motif*, announced me, and made me suddenly self-conscious. It hadn't occurred to me before that there was anything to be ashamed of or frightened about in my errand. I'd vaguely pictured the shopman as a dear old Dickensy thing who would take a fussy interest in me and my scarf, and who would, with a fatherly manner, press upon me a handful of sovereigns or a banknote. But as the bell jangled, one of the most repulsive men I ever saw looked toward the door. There was another man in the place, talking to the first creature, and he looked up, too. Not even the blindest bat, however, could have mistaken him for a shopkeeper, and his being there put not only a different complexion on the business, but on me. I felt mine turning bright pink, instead of the usual cream that accompanies the chocolate-coloured hair and eyes with which I advertise the industry of my French ancestors.

The shopman stared at me with a sulky look exactly like that of Nebuchadnezzar, our boar pig from Yorkshire, which took a prize for its nose or something. This person might have won a prize for his nose also, if an offer had been going for large ones. The rest of his face, olive green and fat, was in the perspective of this nose, just as the lesser proportions of his body, such as chest and legs, were in the perspective of his—waist. The shop was much smaller than I had expected from the window—a place you might have swung a cat in without giving it concussion of the brain, but not a lion; and the men—the fat proprietor and his long, lean customer, and two suits of deformed-looking armour, seemed almost to fill it. I've heard an actor talk about a theatre being so tiny he was "on the audience"; and these two were on theirs, the audience being me. I was so close to the fat one that I could see the crumbs on the folds of his waistcoat, like food stored on cupboard shelves. I took such a dislike to him that I felt inclined to bounce out as quickly as I had bounced in, but the door had banged mechanically behind me, as if to stop the bell at any cost. The shop smelt of moth powder, old leather, musty paper, and hair oil.

"Well, my little girl, what do you want?" inquired Nebuchadnezzar, with the kind of lisp that turns a rat into a yat.

Little girl, indeed! To be called a "little girl" by a thing like that, and asked what I wanted in that second-hand Hebrew tone, made me boil for half a second. Then, suddenly, I saw that it was funny, and I almost giggled as I imagined myself haughtily explaining that I had reached the age of sixteen, to say nothing of being the daughter of two or three hundred earls. I didn't care a tuppenny anything whether he mistook me for nine or ninety; but I did begin to feel that it wouldn't be pleasant unrolling my tissue-paper parcel and bargaining for money under the eyes and ears of the other man.

They were very nice eyes and ears. Already I'd had time to notice that; for even in these days, when men aren't supposed to be as indispensable to females as they were in Edwardian or Victorian and earlier ages, I don't think it's entirely obsolete for a girl to learn more about a man's looks in three seconds than she picks up about another woman's frock in two.

This man wasn't what most girls of sixteen would call young; but I am different from most girls because I've always had to be a sort of law unto myself, in order not to become a family footstool. I've had to make up my mind about everything or risk my brain degenerating into a bath sponge; and one of the things I made it up about early was that I didn't like boys or nuts. The customer in the curiosity shop, to whom the proprietor was showing perfect ducks of Chelsea lambs plastered against green Chelsea bushes, was, maybe, twenty-eight or thirty, a great age for a woman, but not so bad for a man; and I wished to goodness he would buy or not buy a lamb and go forth about other business. However, I couldn't indefinitely delay answering that question addressed to "little girl."

"I want to show you a point-lace scarf," I snapped. Nebuchadnezzar's understudy squeezed himself out from behind the counter, and lumbered a step or two nearer me, moving not straight ahead, but from side to side, as tables do for spiritualists.

"We don't mend lace here, if that's what you've come for, my child," he patronized me.

"It doesn't need to be mended," said I. "It's beautiful lace. It's to be sold."

"Oa—oh," he exploded with a cockney drawl, and a rude look coming into his eyes which he'd kept out while there was hope that the dusty, blown-about little thing might turn into a customer. "Well! Let's see! But I've got more old lace on hand now than I know what to do with."

As I unrolled layers of tissue paper which seemed to rustle loudly out of sheer spite, I was conscious that the customer had sauntered away as far as possible, and was gazing at some old prints on the wall which gave him an excuse to turn his back to us. I thought this sweetly tactful of him.

Nebuchadnezzar (over the shop he calls himself Franks, the sort of noncommittal name a Jacobs or Wolfstein likes to hide under) almost snatched the lace from my hands as I opened the package, shook out its folds, held it close to his eyes, pawed it, and sniffed. "Humph!" he grunted ungraciously. "Same old thing as usual. If I've got one of 'em, I've got a dozen. What did you expect to ask for it?"

"Ten pounds," I announced, as bold as one of those lions that could not be swung in his shop.

"Ten pounds!" I don't know whether the sound he made was meant for a snort or a laugh. "Ten grandmothers!"

"Yes," said I, flaring up as if he'd struck a match on me. "That's just it! Ten of my grandmothers have worn this scarf since it was made, and I want a pound for each of them."

There was a small funny noise behind me, like a stanchied giggle, and I glanced over my shoulder at the customer, but his back looked most calm and inoffensive.

"You'll have to take it out in wanting, I'm afraid, my girl," returned the shopkeeper. "I can offer you thirty bob, no more and no less. That's all the thing's worth to me."

I tried to pull the scarf out of his hands, but he didn't seem ready to give it up. "It's worth a great deal more to me," I said. "I'll carry it away somewhere else, where they *know* about old lace."

"My word! You're a pert young piece for your size!" remarked the horrible man; and though I could have boxed his ears (which stood out exactly like the handles on an urn), I felt my own tingle, because it was *true*, what he said: I was a pert young piece. Holding my own at home, and lots of other things in life (for sixteen years of life seem fearfully long if they're all you've got behind you), had made me pert, and I didn't love myself for it, any more than a porcupine can be really fond of his own quills. I couldn't bear, somehow, that the man with the nice eyes should be hearing me called a "pert piece," and thinking me one. Quite a smart repartee came into my head, but a heavy feeling in my heart kept me from putting it into words; and Nebuchadnezzar went grunting on: "I know as much about old lace as any man in this street, if not in town. That's why I don't offer more."

"Give me back my scarf, please," was my only answer, in quite a small voice.

Still he held on to the lace. "Look here, miss," said he in a changed tone, "how did you come to get hold of this bit of property, anyhow? Folks ain't in the habit of sending their children out to

dispose o' their valuables. How can I tell that you ain't nicked this off your mother or your aunt, or some other dame who doesn't know you're out? If I was doin' my dooty, I shouldn't wonder if I oughtn't to call in the police!"

"You horrid, horrid person," I flung at him. "You're trying to frighten me—to blackmail me—into selling you my lace for thirty shillings, when maybe it's worth twenty times that. But if any one calls the police, it will be me, to give you in charge for—for intimidation."

Almost before I had time to be proud of the word when I'd contrived to get it out, the customer had detached himself from the prints and intervened.

"I beg your pardon for interfering," he said (to me, not to Nebuchadnezzar), "but I can't help wondering"—and he smiled a perfectly disarming smile—"if you aren't rather young to be a business woman on your own account. Will you let me see the lace?"

Of course the shopkeeper gave it up to him instantly, shamefaced at realizing that his customer, instead of admiring his smart methods, was entering the lists against him.

While my champion (I felt sure somehow that he was my champion at heart) took the scarf in his hands, and began trying to look wise over it, I had about forty-nine seconds in which to look at him. Even at first glance I had thought him nice, but now I decided that he was the nicest man I had ever seen. Not the handsomest; I don't mean that, for our county in Ireland is celebrated for its handsome men, both high and low. Also I'd seen several Dreams since we came to London: but—well, just the *nicest*.

Because it was the middle of the season and he was in tweeds, I fancied that he didn't go in for being "smart." I'd learned enough already about London ways to understand as much as that. But all the same I thought that he had the air of a soldier. And he had such a contradictory sort of face that it interested me immensely, wondering what the contradictions meant.

He had taken off his hat when I came into the shop (I'd noticed that, and had been pleased), and now I saw that the upper part of his forehead was very white and the rest of his face very tanned, as if his complexion had slipped down. He had almost straw-coloured hair, which seemed lighter than it was because of his sunburned skin; and his eyebrows and the eyelashes (lowered while he gazed at my lace) were two or three shades darker. They were long, arched brows that gave a look of dreamy romance to the upper part of his face, but the lower part was extremely determined, perhaps even obstinate. It jumped into my head that a woman—even a fascinator like Diana—would never be able to make him change his mind about things, or do things he didn't wish to do. That was one of the contradictions, and the nose was another. It was rather a Roman sort of nose, and looked aggressive, as if it would be searching about for forlorn hopes to fight for; anyhow, as if it must fight at all costs. Then, contradicting the nose, was the mouth (for he was clean-shaven as all young men ought to be, and not leave too much to our imagination), a mouth somehow like a boy's, affectionate and kind and gay, though far from being weak. I didn't know what to make of him at all, and, of course, I liked him the better for that.

"I think this is mighty fine lace," he pronounced, when he had studied it long enough to show off as a connoisseur; and all of a sudden I realized that he was an American. Diana had collected two American friends who often invited her to the Savoy, and I'd heard them, and no one else, say "mighty fine." "Are you sure you want to get rid of it?"

I thought he was a dear to put it like that, as if I could have no real need for money, but had such a glut of lace scarves at home that I must rid myself of a few superfluous ones. As he spoke he was looking straight at me with the kind eyes I had noticed first of all—gray and yellow and brown mixed up together into hazel. I suppose it must have been some quality in that look which made me decide instantly to tell him everything. I'd have suffered the torture of the boot (anyhow, for a minute or two) before I would have explained myself to Nebuchadnezzar.

"I'm sure I do want to sell, if I can get as much as ten pounds for the thing," I answered. "Nothing less than seven guineas would be of any use to me. There's something which costs seven guineas—a thing I'm dying to buy. My mother left this scarf to me, as well as some other lace I wouldn't sell for the world. But it's quite mine and I can do as I like with it."

"Let me see! Ten pounds is fifty dollars, isn't it?" the man reflected out aloud.

"I don't know," I caught him up, "anything about American money or America."

He smiled at me again. Perhaps I had hoped he would.

"That's too bad! You ought to come over on our side and learn."

"I'd love to, especially to the parts where I could show off my French and Spanish. But I'm sure I shall never get the chance to cross the sea." I was three thousand miles from dreaming then of all the things that were to come out of this little affair of the scarf and the dress which had tempted me to put my lace on the market.

"Well," he went on, going back from me to my property. "I'll buy this pretty thing for ten pounds if you like to sell it to me; but honestly, I warn you that for all I know it may be worth a lot more."

"I'll be perfectly satisfied with ten pounds," I said. "But I don't wish you to buy just out of kindness, when I'm almost sure you don't really want to."



"But I do," he assured me. "I came into this place to carry out a commission for an aunt of mine in America. She wrote and asked me to find her something in a curiosity shop in England that she could give for a wedding present to a girl who's wild about antiques. An old friend of ours is going to take the parcel back with her when she sails to-morrow; smuggle it, maybe, but that's not my business. I thought of a miniature on ivory, but I haven't taken a big fancy to anything I've seen so far. I like your lace better, and it costs just the money my aunt told me to spend. So there you are."

"And there's the lace," I added, laughing. "It's yours. Thank you very much."

"It's for me to thank you," said he. "I'm awfully afraid I'm getting the best of the bargain, though. Wouldn't you rather go somewhere first and consult an expert?"

"No, indeed," said I. "Maybe the expert would tell us the lace was worth only five pounds, not ten. What I'm in a hurry to do is to dash to Selfridge's, and buy the dress I want before some beast of a girl gets it before me. Oh, horror! Maybe she's there already!"

"The worst of it is," said my new friend—I felt he was that—"I haven't got the ten pounds on me. I meant to have anything I might decide to buy sent home and paid for at my hotel."

"Can't I go with you to your hotel, and you give me the money there?" I wanted to know. "You see, I'm in such a hurry about the dress."

He glanced at me with a funny look in his eyes, and somehow I read what it meant. *He* hadn't called me a "little girl," and had behaved as respectfully as if I were a hundred; but I could see that he thought me about twelve or thirteen; and now he was saying to himself: "No harm carting a child like that about without a chaperon."

This was the first time I'd ever been glad that I had sacrificed myself for Di, and come to London in my old frocks up to the tops of my boots, and my hair hanging in two tails down to my waist. Of course, if any one were caddish or cattish enough to look her up in the book, it could be found out at a glance that Lady Diana O'Malley was twenty-three; but even if a person is a cad or a cat, he (or she) is often too lazy to go through the dull pages of Debrett or Burke; and besides, there is seldom one of the books handy. Therefore, Di had a sporting chance of being taken for eighteen, the sweet conventional age of a *débutante* on her presentation. Every one did know, however, that Father had married twice, and that there must be a difference of five or six years between Diana and the chocolate child. Accordingly, if I could be induced to look thirteen at most, it would be useful. As for me, I hadn't cared particularly. I knew I shouldn't get any grown-up fun in London, whether my hair were in a tail or a twist, or whether my dresses were short or long. Sometimes I had been sorry for beginning in that way, but now I saw that virtue was going to be rewarded.

"All right," said my friend. "Maybe it will be the best arrangement." And we left Nebuchadnezzar looking as the dog in the fable must have looked, when he snapped at the reflected bit of meat in the water and lost the bit in his mouth.

A taxi was passing, and stopped at the flourish of a cane. I jumped in before I could be helped. The man followed; and though I was looking forward only to a little fun, my very first adventure in London "on my own," the chauffeur was speeding us along a road that didn't stop at the Waldorf Hotel: it was a road which would carry us both on and on, toward a blazing bonfire of wild passion and romance.

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## CHAPTER II

The first thing we did when we were in the taxicab was to introduce ourselves to each other. I told him that I was Marguerite O'Malley, but that, as I wasn't a bit like a marguerite or even a common or garden daisy, I'd degenerated into Peggy. I didn't drag in anything about my family tree; it seemed unnecessary. He told me that he was Eagleston March, but that he had degenerated into "Eagle." I thought this nickname suited his aquiline nose, his brilliant eyes, and that eager, alert look he had of being alive in every nerve and fibre. He told me, too, that he was a captain in the American army, over in England for the first time on leave; but before he got so far, I knew very well who he was, for I'd read about him days ago in Father's *Times*.

"Why, you're the first American who's looped the loop at Hendon!" I cried out. "You invented some stability thing or other to put on a monoplane."

He laughed. "Some stability thing or other's a neat description. But you're right. I'm the American fellow that the loop has looped."

"Now I know," said I, "why you're not at the Derby to-day. Horses at their fastest must seem slow to a flying man."

"This time you're not right," he corrected me. "I'm not at the Derby because it isn't much fun seeing a race when you don't know anything about the horses, and haven't a pal to go with."

"But you must have lots of pals," I thought out aloud. "Every one adores the airmen."

"Do they? I haven't noticed it."

"Then you can't be conceited. Perhaps American men aren't. I never knew one before, except in business."

"Good heavens! So you really are a business woman, as well as a linguist, apparently. At what age did you begin?"

"What age do you take me for now?" I hedged.

"About twelve or thirteen, I suppose, though I'm no judge of girls' ages, whether they're little or big."

"I'm over twelve," I confessed, and went on hastily to change the dangerous subject. "But I really did have business with an American. It was in letters. My father made me write them, though they were signed with his name. He hates writing letters. I'm so thankful your name isn't Trowbridge. I hope you aren't related to any Trowbridges?"

"Not one. But why?"

"Oh, because, if you were, you might want to throw me to the wolves—I mean under the motor buses. We've done the Trowbridges of Chicago a fearful wrong. We let them our place in Ireland, while we came to London to enjoy ourselves."

He laughed aloud, that very nice, young laugh of his, which made me feel more at home with him than with people I'd known all my life. "You really are a quaint little woman," he said. "Now I come to think of it, I do know some people in Chicago named Trowbridge."

"Oh, well," said I, "if you must throw me out of anything, do it out of your monoplane. It would be so much more distinguished than out of a mere taxi. And at least, I should have flown first! For you would have to take me up before you could dash me down. And so my dream would have come true."

"Is it your dream to fly?" he asked, interested.

"Waking and sleeping," said I. "Ever since I was a tiny child, my very best dream has been that I was flying. Even to dream it asleep is perfectly wonderful and thrilling, worth being born for, just to feel. What must it be when you're actually awake?"

"You are an enthusiast," said Captain March. "You've got it in your blood. What a pity you're not a boy. You could be a 'flying man' yourself."

"Well, it's something to know one," said I. "Why, I'd give my hand—the left one—or anyhow, a finger of it—for just an hour in the air. A toe would be too cheap."

"I'd take you up like a shot, if your people would let you go," said he.

I gasped with joy. "Oh, *would* you?" I exclaimed. "Really and truly, I didn't mean to hint! But it would be heaven to go!"

"Not in my *Golden Eagle*," he laughed, "for I'd guarantee to bring you safe and sound back to earth again, this side of heaven. I can take up one passenger, though I haven't yet, since I came out here. I haven't met anybody, till now, I particularly cared to ask, and who would particularly have cared to go."

"And you *would* care to take me? How kind of you!"

"Kind to myself. I told you I hadn't any pals in England. You seem to be the stuff they're made of. You'd be a 'mascot,' I'm sure. But your people——"

"People? I haven't any. At least, a governess I once had said you couldn't call two, 'people.' They must be spoken of as 'persons.' I have only *persons* who belong to me—just Father and a grown-up sister—a half-sister. They like each other so much that they haven't room to care about me. If the *Golden Eagle* tipped me out, and smashed me as flat as a paper doll, they wouldn't shed a tear."

"Poor little child! But maybe you're mistaken. Maybe *you* are not conceited!"

"Yes, I am! That's why I notice when I'm not loved. Oh, *do* take me up. Take me up to-day! I'm all alone in the world. My 'persons' have gone to the Derby, and are staying all night at Epsom with a fat, rich family. I'm left to the mercy of the landlady in our lodgings. I'll even give up the dress at Selfridge's to go with you. That's more than sacrificing a toe!"

But he had stopped laughing. Instead he had turned quite grave. "I couldn't possibly do it," he said. "I'm awfully sorry to refuse. If you were older, you'd understand that it wouldn't be the right thing for a strange man and a 'foreigner,' to kidnap a little girl and fly off with her into space. Supposing I had an accident? I'm sure I shouldn't—but just supposing. I should never be able to forgive myself. Don't despair though. If you can manage to introduce me as a respectable sort of chap to your father, and he gives his permission——"

"But how did I get to know you?" I groaned. "I shall have to fib."

"No, you won't," he said quickly. "I refuse to be fibbed about. You must think of some other way."



"I'm afraid," I said dolefully, "you agree with that hateful curiosity man about me!"

"Agree with him? I don't understand."

"That I'm a pert minx or something. That's what he called me—or a pert piece. It's all the same thing. And I am it. I don't mind telling fibs. I've told lots."

"You poor little thing!" exclaimed Captain March in a pitying tone, but with the kind of pity the proudest person wouldn't resent, because it really came from his heart. "You seem to have had to fight your own battles. Maybe your mother died when you were very young?"

"When I was a week young," I said, and suddenly I felt myself choked up.

"That explains the telling of fibs, you see, and saying you don't mind—though I'm sure you do, when you stop to think of it; because the sort of girl who can be a good pal to a man just can't tell fibs, any more than the man can—if he's worth being a pal to."

Two boiling hot tears ran down my face, one on each cheek. I couldn't answer. I only looked up at him, feeling all eyes.

"What a beast I am!" he exclaimed. "I've made you cry!"

"It's I who am the beast," I managed to gasp out, because I saw he was badly distressed about me, and what he had done. "I'm crying because I'm a little beast. But I'd like not to be."

"You're not. You're a little soldier. Will you forgive me? I didn't mean to preach."

"You didn't preach. I expect you'd talk like that to a real soldier—one of those you're captain of. Well, I'll pretend I'm one of those soldiers, and that you're my captain."

As I spoke, the taxi was drawing up in front of his hotel; but I went straight on with my play, and gave him a military salute. "Thank you, Captain," said I, "for taking an interest. I shan't forget. No more fibs! I'll work for my corporal's stripe!"

"Good child!" he beamed on me, looking young and happy again. "I'll get you the stripe. I have it ready for you upstairs. I'll bring it down when I bring the money for the lace scarf. Would you rather wait in the taxi, or will you come into the ladies' parlour in the hotel?"

I thought "parlour" a lovely word, and very French, though I supposed it might be American, too. It was quite an adventure going into an hotel.

My captain (already I'd begun to think of him as that, since he'd called me a soldier) paid the chauffeur and led me to a big drawing-room where several women sat, so prettily dressed and so trim that they made me feel shabby in my brown holland frock and my blown-about hair. I wondered what he had meant by saying he would bring me a "corporal's stripe," and whether he had meant anything at all, except a passing joke. Somehow, I felt that he had had a definite idea, but I didn't dream it would be anything half so fascinating as it turned out.

He was not gone more than five or six minutes, and when he appeared again he drew up a chair in front of me, deliberately turning his back to the other occupants of the room, so that they could not see what was going on. Then he made me hold out my hands (I was ashamed of my untidy gloves) and receive in them ten golden sovereigns, which he counted as they dropped into my open palms.

"I hope you'll never regret bartering away your great-great-grandmother's beautiful lace for this pittance," said he. "And now for the corporal's stripe, if you're going to enlist in my regiment."

"I am," I cried. "I've enlisted in it already."

"Here, then," and he took from his coat pocket a little crumpled-up ball of something black and gold, evidently thrust in with haste. "This is one of the chevrons I wore on my sleeve when I was made corporal of cadets at West Point, eleven years ago this very month. You'll laugh, I guess, when I tell you why I brought the thing with me over here. I kept it, out of a sort of—of sentiment, or sentimentality maybe, because I was so dashed proud when I got it. I thought it marked an epoch in my life; that it was a token of success. Well, when I was coming over to your side of the water, to try out the *Golden Eagle* among all the English flyers, I was silly enough to think if she did any good, I'd stick this poor old stripe on her somewhere, for auld lang syne. Now I'd rather give it to you, little soldier."

I think it was at that minute I began to worship him. I worshipped him as a child worships, and as a woman worships, too; except that, perhaps, when a woman lets herself go with a flood of love for a man, she unconsciously expects some return. I'm sure I didn't expect anything. That would have been too ridiculous!

I felt rather guilty about depriving the *Golden Eagle* of her master's trophy, but after all, a girl is more appreciative than a monoplane; and besides, it would have hurt Captain March's feelings in that mood of his, if I'd refused. I had a conviction that a corporal's stripe, given as a reward and an incentive, would be to me a talisman. I decided that I'd keep it in a place where I could rush to look at it whenever I needed encouragement to go on being a soldier. If I wanted to sneak myself out of trouble with a fib, or be snappish to Father or cattish to Di, or say "damn," or bang a door in a rage, it seemed to me that I should only have to think of that little triangle of black cloth and gilt braid to be suddenly as good as gold, all the way through to my heart.

Maybe I showed some of these thoughts in my eyes when I thanked Captain March (Di says my eyes tell all my secrets), for he was nicer than ever, in the chivalrous, almost tender way some men have with girl-children. He said he was just as lonely as I was, or worse, because he hadn't a soul who belonged to him in England, and would it be quite proper and all right for an old soldier like him to invite a little girl like me to lunch?

Of course I said yes—yes, it would be entirely proper and perfectly splendid, though they might have forgotten to put anything of the sort into books of etiquette. By that time it was half-past twelve, only a few minutes left to dash to Selfridge's and rescue the dress (if it wasn't already lost) before luncheon, so Captain March offered to whisk me up to the shop in a taxi. He promised, if the gown were gone, that he'd help me choose another. But it wasn't gone; which showed that, as I'd felt in my bones, it really had been born for me.

"Why, it's a party dress, isn't it?" my captain innocently wanted to know. "And isn't it a bit too old for you?"

"I can have it made shorter," I said. "And if it is a little too old for me it doesn't matter, because I'm never invited to any parties. I shan't be for years, if ever. I shan't come out like my sister Di, I shall just slowly *leak* out, with nobody noticing. It isn't that I expect to *wear* this frock. It's the joy of having it which is so important."

"Girls begin to be queer evidently, even when they're children," said he. "But that doesn't make them less interesting. I know of an invitation to a party you *could* have, though, if you wanted it. The wife of our American ambassador is giving a ball to-morrow night. I know her a little. She'd be awfully pleased to send your people cards for the show, if I asked her. Or perhaps they've had cards already?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure they haven't. Are you going?"

"Yes, I've accepted."

"I know Diana would love it. I'll tell her about you—and about to-day, for she can't be cross with me if it ends in an invitation. And you'd be her *first* flying man."

Even as I spoke I had a misgiving. It came like a cramp in the heart. Di's nickname seemed to whisper itself in my ear: "Diana the Huntress—Diana the Huntress!" I didn't want her to shoot her arrow through this man's heart, because—well—*just because*. But they would have to meet if he were not to be lost to me, since he refused to be a partner in fibs. The idea seemed exactly the chance I had been looking for; and if the invitation came through me, provided I were included by the ambassadress, I didn't see how Di and Father could leave me out.

"All right, you shall have the card, I can promise that!" my captain said cheerily.

"But," I haggled, "will the ambassadress ask a—a little girl like me, who isn't out yet?"

"Of course she will. I'll see to that. Why shouldn't a little girl go for once? Here is one partner for her."

To dance in the white dress, with him! The thing must be too good to be true. Yet it really did seem as if it might come true.

He let me select the place for luncheon, and I chose the Zoo. He said I couldn't have chosen better. It wasn't a very grand meal, but it was the happiest I'd ever had. Captain March told me things about America, and aeroplanes, though very little about himself—except that he was stationed at a beautiful place in Arizona, called Fort Alvarado, close to the springs of the same name, where girls came and had "the time of their lives." Afterward we wandered about and made love to the Zoo animals, and at last saw them fed. When the lions and tigers had finished their glorious roaring, which seemed to bring the desert and the jungle near, it was almost five o'clock, so we had tea at the crescent-shaped tea house, in front of the Mappin Terraces. I lingered over my strawberries as long as I decently could, because, though I searched hard for it, there seemed to be no bored look on Captain March's face. When I did reluctantly say, "I suppose I'd better go home?" he actually had the air of being sorry.

"It's been the nicest day I ever lived in," I told him.

"I've enjoyed every minute of it, too," said he. "What a pity we can't polish it off with a dinner and the theatre. Look here, if you'd like it, Miss Peggy, I guess I can get that old lady I told you of, who's sailing to-morrow and will take the lace scarf, to go with us as chaperon. What do you say?"

What could I say? Being a child, it didn't matter showing the wildest delight. There are some advantages in being a child.

He took me home to our lodgings in Chapel Street (which cheaply gave us the address of Mayfair) and then I had to break it to him that I wasn't a Miss.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed, when I began with those words. "Children don't marry in your country at thirteen, do they?"

I explained that, because my father happened to be an earl, his daughters had a courtesy title; and when he looked a little shocked, as if he were wondering whether he had been indiscreet, I nodded toward the house, as our taxicab stopped before the insignificant green door. "You see by

where we live how unimportant we are!" I excused myself in such a pleading voice that he laughed. Then he flashed away to make arrangements for the evening—*our* evening!

The landlady had a telephone, and presently I got the message which Captain March had told me to expect. Mrs. Jewitt had consented to dine and go to the theatre. Would I like the Savoy, and to see "Milestones" afterward? And was I sure this business wouldn't get me into trouble tomorrow?

If it had sent me into penal servitude for life, I shouldn't have hesitated; but I replied that my sister would forgive me for the sake of the American Embassy ball. I knew Di could be counted on, in the exceptional circumstances, not to tell Father; but I didn't mention that detail to Captain March. I was afraid he might think the corporal's stripe had been ill-bestowed, but one must draw the straight line of truth somewhere!

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### CHAPTER III

Next morning when Di came back, I told her what was necessary to tell, and not a bit more. I explained how I had met Captain Eagleston March, and how we had spent the day and the heavenly evening. But first, I let her open the invitation which had just come by hand from the American Embassy (she opens all Father's letters, except those that have a repulsively private look), and when she began, "I wonder how on earth——," I was able to work my story in neatly, as an explanation.

Di listened to the end, without interrupting me once except by opening her eyes very wide, and now and then raising her eyebrows, or giving vent to expressive sighs. I saw that she was thinking hard as I went on, and I knew what she was thinking: about the need of forgiving me because of the new interest in life my naughtiness had brought her.

When I had finished up the tale with our dinner at the Savoy, and seeing "Milestones," and then on top of all, having supper with Mrs. Jewitt and Captain March at a terribly respectable but fascinating night club of which he had been made a member, Diana didn't scold. She said that Captain March being an officer and a flying man made all the difference, but she hoped I would not have put myself into such a position with any other sort of man, whether he mistook me for a child or not. Even as it was, she wouldn't dare tell Father the history of my day: but, as they had made several American acquaintances lately, she could easily account for the Embassy invitation.

"We'll go, of course, won't we?" I catechized her, knowing that her word with Father was pretty well law.

"Yes, we'll go," she answered. "I'll write an acceptance and send it by hand."

I was so enchanted at this that I dashed up to my room and began shortening the new dress. I had mentioned it vaguely to Di, but it was the one part of my story in which she took no interest. I saw how the keenness died out of her beautiful sea-blue eyes, and how her soul retired comfortably behind them, to think of something else, just as you see people walk away from windows through which they've been looking out, leaving them emptily blank. As she didn't care what little Peggy wore, little Peggy decided to give her a surprise at the last moment. Nothing much was said about the Embassy ball by Father or Di before me, on that day or the next, so I, too, kept my own counsel. I was afraid if I gabbled as I longed to do, Father might take it into his head that the child had better stop at home. All I heard was a little talk about the time to start, and whether a taxi should be ordered or a coupé. I thought there would be rather a squash in a coupé with Father, Diana, and me folded together in a sort of living sandwich; but I was so small, I could perhaps manage not to slide off the little flap seat with its back to the horses.

It was a coupé they finally decided on, and it was ordered for a quarter to ten. We had a short and early dinner, and as I did Diana's hair, it seemed to me that I had never seen her look prettier. I wondered whether Captain March would admire her very much, and I hoped for his own sake—I almost believed it was for his own sake!—that he wouldn't fall in love. As I thought this, I looked with a new kind of criticism at Di, to judge whether he were likely to be one of her victims.

Heaps of men had fallen in love with Di since I began to be old enough to notice such things. They had never been the right sort of men, from her point of view, for none of the lot had had a penny to bless himself with, or even a title worth the taking. But all of them had been worth flirting with; and after they had been dropped with more or less of a dull thud, I'm afraid some of them had suffered. I didn't wish Captain March to suffer, yet I couldn't help thinking that if I were a man I might be as silly as the rest and go down before Di.

She was then—and she is now—the most lovable looking thing that can be imagined. She doesn't appear to be cool and calculating, but warm-hearted and gentle and soft, far more so than most of the girls one meets, especially in London, where I think they have the air of being rather hard: ready to sacrifice everything and everybody for the sake of what they want to get or do.

If you were going to paint a picture of Ireland, typified by a beautiful girl, so that you might name your canvas "Dark Rosaleen," you would give the world to get Di for your model. She is tall, as a Diana ought to be, and slender though not thin. She gives the effect of fashionable slimness, yet

she is all lovely curves and roundnesses. She has a long white throat with a charming upturned chin that has a deep cleft in the middle. It's no exaggeration to say that her skin is as white as creamy milk; and on each cheek, just beneath the shadow under her eyes, is a faint pink stain, as if it had been tapped hard with a carnation, and a little of the colour had come off. Perhaps, if her face has a fault, the nose is too short and flat, but it gives her a sweetly young and innocent look, added to her eyes being set far apart. And the eyes are really glorious: very big and long, with deep shadows under them only partly cast by her thick black lashes. A man once wrote a Valentine verse to Di, in which he remarked that her eyes were "like sapphires gleaming blue where they had fallen among dark grasses"; and it wasn't a bad comparison. The man died of taking too much veronal a year after. Nobody said he had done it on purpose. But I wondered. He was very unhappy the day he said "Good-bye" to Ballyconal. I've never been able to forget his look.

Di's mouth is large, and a tiny bit greedy, but all the more fascinating for that, because it is so red and curved. Her forehead is rather high, really, but she makes it seem only a white line above her level eyebrows, because of the way she likes best to wear her crinkly dark hair: parted in the middle, pushed forward and down, and banded in place by a rope of hair from the back.

That night for the ball at the American Embassy she had it fastened with big, very green jade hairpins. From her little pink ears hung long loops of emeralds (heirlooms in our family, or they would have been sold long ago), and the gown she chose was the same shade of green: some very thin, soft stuff, with one of those new names dressmakers think of in their dreams. It was simply made, and not very expensive; but in it Di looked like a classic personification of Ireland at its loveliest, and I was sure that not the best-dressed girl in the room would be as exquisite as she. I told her this on an impulse, and she was pleased. Yet she sighed. Of course she couldn't help knowing, said she, that she wasn't bad looking. But Venus or Helen of Troy couldn't make a success, handicapped as she was.

"It might be different in some other country," she went on, more to herself than to me. "A country like America, where titles are more of a novelty, and everybody one meets doesn't remember all about one's poor mother."

"Now I must run and get ready, myself," said I, when I had established connection between Diana's most intricate hooks and eyes.

"Get ready? For what, dear?"

"Why, for the ball, of course!" The first chill of suspicion that I had been cast for the part of Cinderella crept through me, like a caterpillar walking inside my spine.

"But, my *child!*" Di exclaimed. "You couldn't have thought you were going? Officially you are a little girl. You don't exist, and if you did, you haven't a dress——"

"I have a dress. The one I bought with the money from the lace. I didn't say much, because I thought it would be fun to surprise you."

"Well, I'm awfully sorry, dear, that you've been counting on it. I never dreamed—you ought to have told me——"

"You said you'd accept for 'us.'"

"I meant Father and me. It never crossed my mind that you——Too bad! But anyhow, it's too late now. Father would never consent."

I might have retorted that she was the one person in the world who could make him consent to anything she wanted, but then, the truth was that she didn't want this thing. Diana had—and has—the manners of an angel; and strangers would think she was as easy to melt as sugar in the sun. But I, who have lived with her all the years of my life, know that the sugar is only on the surface. And I have learned what is underneath. Even then, I realized that Di had understood perfectly well from the first that I expected to go to the ball, and she had kept quiet in order to have no more than one short, sharp fuss at the end. While it was being borne in upon me that I was to stop at home, instead of going on arguing and "fishwifing" I shut up like a clam. I suppose it was a kind of obstinate pride, the sort of pride that makes condemned people not scream or throw themselves about on the way to execution. But when Father and Di had gone, I cried—oh, how I cried! There was a kind of wild pleasure in letting the sobs come, and feeling the hot tears spout out of my eyes. In any clash between us, Di always won, because she was "grown up," and I was a "little girl"; but the trick she had played on me this time roused my sense of its injustice, and with all my body and mind and soul I resolved to strengthen my soul against her. "Some day," I said to myself, letting the tears dry on my cheeks as I listened to a spirit of prophecy, "some day there'll be a battle for life or death between our characters, Di's and mine, and I'll save myself up to win *then*."

It seemed weak, as if I were a whipped child, to creep off to bed, yet I couldn't force myself to read, or do anything to turn my thoughts from the great injustice. At ten minutes to eleven I was making up my mind that, after all, sleep would be the best consolation, when our lodging-house landlady knocked.

We had the "drawing-room floor," up one flight of stairs from the street. Luckily I was still in the draw-dining-room—a fantastic apartment crowded with nouveau-art furniture all out of drawing, like daddy longlegs—when the woman tapped and peeped in. If I had gone upstairs to my own

top-floor room, I'm sure, being a prim person, she would have considered it improper to summon me down, and I should have missed a heavenly half hour.

"A gentleman has called, Miss, and could he come up for five minutes? The name is Captain March."

It was true! It was he! And he hadn't even met Diana yet. She had been dancing. But the hostess had introduced him to Father, and Captain March had worked round to the subject of me. When he heard that I was "too young for balls," he just slipped out, took a taxi, and made a dash to Chapel Street to tell me he was sorry. I was so grateful, I could have cried more than ever. It seemed to me one of the very nicest things a man ever did. He was in full-dress uniform, because an American officer is on his native heath when he's at his own Embassy; and I thought that he looked adorable in uniform.

He stayed half an hour instead of five minutes, and then said he must go back, and "do the right thing." The right thing, which he didn't particularly want to do, was to dance with the girls who weren't booked up to the eyes, and—to meet my sister. It was my first triumph to have a man—and such a man—put me in front of Diana. I was thrilled by it, though I ought to have had sense enough to know what would happen.

Eagle March (he told me that night to call him Eagle) did go back to the ball, and did meet Diana. I heard about it next morning when I took in her breakfast: how he had asked Father if he might be introduced, and Di had liked him so much that she found a dance to give him, although everything was engaged by the time he arrived; how an American girl who knew him at home said that he had a rich aunt who might leave him "a whole heap of money" some day (the aunt of the lace, I said to myself); and how Father had consented to take Diana and me to Hendon, to see Captain March's monoplane in its hangar.

"I managed that for you, dear, to make up for your disappointment last night, and because you're really a good, useful little flap of a flapper," Di finished. "Once we're at Hendon, I'm sure Father can be coaxed to let us go up for just a short flight, though he thinks now that nothing could induce him to. Captain March has promised that I shall be his first woman passenger. Never has he taken a woman with him yet."

I only gasped inaudibly, and bit a little piece off my heart. Of course I guessed then what must have happened; and when Eagle came that afternoon, I *knew*. I was for him a nice child still—a "good, useful little flapper," as Di said, and he was my friend as before; but Diana had lit up the world for him. He could hardly take his eyes off her. When she spoke, even at a distance, he heard every word, and nothing that any one else said.

"Why didn't you tell me your sister was such a wonderful beauty?" he mumbled as he was saying good-bye.

Old people, and even middle-aged people over twenty-five, must have forgotten how it can hurt when you are sixteen to be in love with some one who loves somebody else; for neither in books nor in real life do these worn-out persons ever take such a thing seriously. But I shall never cease to remember how it feels: like having to keep smiling while a bullet is probed for in your heart, not probed for only once, and finished for good, but prodded and poked at every minute of every hour, day after day, week after week, month after month. How can you tell whether or no it's going to be year after year as well, till all the red blood of your youth and hope has slowly been drained away?

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## CHAPTER IV

Neither Diana nor I had ever been at Hendon. Captain March sent a motor car for us, and I saw Father and Di were both impressed by this. They thought he must have money (as all proper Americans have, according to their idea) apart from his future expectations. What *I* thought was, that having fallen in love with Di, nothing but a motor car could be good enough for a goddess, and—hang the expense!

Di, who was invited sometimes for a spin in friends' automobiles, had a fetching motor get-up which, eked out with one of those horrific headpieces flying people wear, could be used for a short flight. I had nothing of the sort, but Di offered to lend me her lined coat. After all, she owed the expedition and the airman to me.

It was a hired car, but, in Father's opinion, a dashed decent one. It flashed us out past the Marble Arch, straight along the Edgware Road, to the Flying Ground, which, even two years ago, was the favourite resort of fashion, especially female fashion. I had often wondered what it might be like out there, and was rather disappointed to see only some large flat fields close to the highroad, with a long line of low, uninteresting sheds ranged side by side. It did seem as if airmen, who must be brimming like full cups with wine of romance and imagination, ought to have invented sightlier houses for their beloved machines. But the very thought that the ugly huts were hangars gave a thrill. Captain March was to meet us at Hendon, but we didn't see him at first. As we arrived, an aeroplane went up, and a monoplane was circling the enclosure, giving sudden dips at fearfully steep angles as it took the turns, righting itself like a lazy, long-tailed eagle with far-

spread wings as it came again into the straight. Captain March's hired chauffeur, who had been told exactly what to do, ran the car up a short road on the right, and stopped.

"That's the captain's hangar, my lord," said he to Father, pointing to a shed near which we had halted; and his arm hadn't time to drop before the man-made bird, which had been circling round, planed down and glided in at the wide-open door like a homing pigeon into a pigeon house.

It was beautifully managed, and so dramatic that it was like the climax of an act on the stage. Perhaps Captain March had been performing some feat before we came; anyhow, as he brought his monoplane to rest a lot of people standing about applauded him. In a minute he came almost running out of the shed straight toward us, in his leather clothes and leather helmet, with goggles pushed up to the top of his head. Instead of being proud of what he had done, whatever it was, he apologized abjectly for "being late," and I could see that Di was vain of her conquest. Lots of women were there, staring enviously at the pretty girl who knew a real, live airman—evidently, too, one of the popular ones; and Di loves to be envied. I'm afraid we all do, in the secret places of our hearts which we don't like to peer into, under the dust.

One thing about Di, which makes men adore her, is that she contrives to seem exquisitely sympathetic and enthusiastic without ever gushing. It's partly the shape of her eyes and the shortness of her upper lip, which combine together to give a lovely, rapt, brooding expression, that saves her the trouble of thinking up adjectives. With this look on, she appeals to all the love of romance and adventure in their hearts, I'm sure. They would do anything to win it for themselves. I would myself if I were a man, and didn't know her; so when Captain March took us into his hangar, and she turned on the look, I didn't blame him for forgetting the very existence of his small pal. It only made me sad.

"I thought I'd better take the *Golden Eagle* up for a short run, and test her before you came, to see that she was all right," he was still apologizing. "Then she behaved so well, I got going, and stayed up longer than I meant. But I saw the car stop, so I hurried down."

"I should think you did 'hurry down!'" laughed Diana. "The way you aimed at your hangar from far up in the sky, and shot in, was like a marksman aiming at the bull's-eye on a target, and getting it. What do you call 'testing' your monoplane? What had you been doing to make all those people applaud?"

"Oh, only a little upside-down flying," said Captain March, as he might have said "only a little breathing exercise." "You see, I make stability tests. That's what I'm *for*. And with my appliances, being upside down's no more to me than it is to a fly when he walks on the ceiling."

Di's eyes said, "You hero! you splendid, modest hero!"—said it so plainly that the hero faintly blushed, though it was hard to trace a blush on his face, burnt red-brown by sun and wind. My eyes said nothing at all, but if they had recited a whole page of Shakespeare's sonnets he would have been none the wiser.

He led us into the hangar, where two fascinatingly smudged mechanics were in attendance on the magic bird; and he remembered to be nice and respectful to Father. Explanations of the mechanism were ostensibly addressed to our parent, but in reality all the eloquence was for Di, whose eyes poured forth appreciative intelligence as stars pour forth rays. Captain March couldn't be expected to know, poor fellow, that Di, if obliged to choose between two deadly dull evils, would rather hear a cook tell how to boil potatoes than listen to any mechanical talk. However, it wasn't really needful to listen, if one's eyes were well trained; and Di was having the "time of her life" in meeting an airman.

Even I could see that this monoplane, fitted with Captain March's inventions, was a different looking creature from the other bird machines which were shooting up into the air, or darting back into their dens, all around us. The *Golden Eagle's* quiet, graceful wings, instead of being in a straight line with each other, were set at an obtuse angle one from another; and on the end of each were odd little extra triangular tips, hinged to the main wings. I longed to pour out questions, for the "why" of things, especially mechanical things, has interested me ever since I was old enough to pick a doll to pieces, to see what made its eyes open and shut. But Di was asking idiotic questions in the sweetest way, and Captain March was laughing and delighted. It pleased him a great deal more that she should want to know precisely why he had named his monoplane the *Golden Eagle* than if Father or I had catechized him with the trained intelligence of a scientist.

"I've been unoriginal enough, I'm afraid, to name my big baby after myself," he said, "my nickname being Eagle. The golden eagle, you know, is our national bird."

"So her hangar is 'The Eagle's Nest,'" said Di. "That's awfully nice. But why not name her instead the *Winged Victory*?"

"Wouldn't it be rather conceited?"

"Not after what she's already done, and shown that she can do. It's conceited of me to suggest it, though, for—for the *Winged Victory* is a sort of a nickname of *mine* since a fancy dress ball at the beginning of the season."

"It suits you exactly," said Captain March. "If Lord Ballyconal will let you be my first lady passenger, and if, after she's given you a run, you think her worthy, she shall be renamed the

*Winged Victory*, provided you'll baptize her."

"Oh, Bally, dear, you will let me go, won't you?" Di pleaded, using her pet name for Father, which he likes because it sounds young and unparental. Then catching a bleak gleam in my eyes, she hastily added: "And afterward Peggy, if Captain March will take her up."

Father hesitated, but the newspapers and people at the Embassy ball who knew all about Eagle March had spoken so highly of the machine, that it seemed an insult to a famous airman's skill to refuse. The two mechanics wheeled the monoplane out of the shed, and Captain March explained how easy and safe he could make things for a passenger. Lots of men had been up with him, but he had never asked a woman. "Only a short flight, I'll take her," he almost pleaded. "I can give her a helmet. Perhaps you'd rather go first yourself, though, and see what it's like."

Father may not have had a particularly good time on earth, but anyhow, he preferred it to atmospheric effects. He said that he had no head for heights, but if Di and Peggy wanted to go, and Captain March was kind enough to take them—er—up, a tiny way into the—er—air, he supposed that in these days he ought not to offer any objections.

Captain March had the spare helmet ready (it looked so new and smart, I felt sure he had bought it for the occasion), and nothing stood between Diana the Huntress and her quarry—nothing except her own changing mood. I think it was the look of the helmet which gave her that sinking feeling of irrevocability which seems to sever you, as with a sword, from all the dear little safe things that have made up your life in the past. She glanced from the helmet which the airman held toward her to the monoplane spread-eagling on the ground. I saw her big eyes dilate as they fixed themselves anxiously on the passenger's perch, to which the honoured guest must climb, above the conductor's seat, crawling through the wire stays, or whatever you call them, which were like a spider's web inviting a fly. Diana turned pale. Even her lips were white. The shadows under her eyes darkened as if she were ill.

"You're—you're sure it's safe?" she faltered.

"Safe as a house. Safer than a *jerry*-built house," Captain March assured her cheerfully. "Look at these!" and he pointed out again all the features of his invention that made the automatic stability of the machine. "But if you—"

"Oh! I'm not afraid," quavered Di, her eyes roving in an agonized way over the crowd collecting to see the lovely girl taken up into the sky by the brave airman. "It isn't that. Only—it won't make me seasick, will it?"

"I've never had a passenger seasick," said Eagle.

"And—you won't turn upside down, will you?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, then, I—I'll go."

On with the condemned cap!—I mean the leather helmet. Diana's paling beauty was blotted out. Wrapped in her fur-lined cloak, she was trembling all over. Her hands, which she held confidently out for the thick mittens Captain March had got for her, shook like the last leaves on a frozen tree.

"Think you're fit for it, Di?" Father asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed!" came hissing through the helmet. But I felt it was only the tonic of other women's envy which was keeping her up. I was envying her, too.

Captain March helped Di scramble into her perch. His hand was steady and strong. All his life and skill and manhood were for her. She was tenderly yet firmly strapped into place, and told how she was to hold on, and not to be afraid. There would be some noise, but she mustn't mind; and there was the little apparatus Captain March had invented, by which a passenger could communicate with the conductor. It was something like the bulb you squeeze in a motor car when you want the chauffeur to turn right or left or stop.

"Press once if you're sick of it, and want to come down," said Eagle. "Twice if you want to go higher. There's a whistle close to my ear, so sharp it cuts through the motor noise."

My heart beat almost as fast as if I were in the monoplane myself when Eagle was ready to start, looking like a twentieth-century, leather-masked Apollo starting out to drive his sun chariot up to the zenith and down the other side. The motor purred, and the propeller began to revolve. Diana, tense as a stretched violin string, was hanging on already, like grim death. The two mechanics held the tail of the impatient giant bird, and when Eagle raised one hand, they let go. For perhaps fifty yards the *Golden Eagle* ran lightly over the turf on her bicycle wheels; then her master tilted the planes, and his namesake soared upward from the ground into the air.

As she went, through the noise she made I heard a shriek from the passenger. Diana's pride, which denied cowardice in the joy of being envied, was forgotten in the primitive emotion of fear. What my sister did I could not see, as the monoplane mounted so quickly; but almost at once I realized that she must have signalled her wish to descend, for the *Eagle* ceased to soar, dropped, and began gently gliding down. A moment later the great winged form was landing once more close to its own shed.



Father rushed to the rescue of his darling, and Captain March—out of his seat in a second—was unfastening the straps and anxiously extricating Diana from the passenger's perch. I couldn't help feeling ashamed before all the people—scornful or sympathetic, who were looking on—that my sister had shown herself a coward; but I was sorry for her, too. She had quite collapsed, and lay in Father's arms as Captain March unfastened her helmet. I wasn't mean enough to think of rejoicing because, in taking my place away, she had been tried and found wanting. Instead, I found myself really afraid that Captain March might despise the poor girl for the timidity which humiliated him as well as her. But I need not have worried. Pulling off the helmet in that clumsy way a man has with any sort of headgear, the wheel of braided hair Diana wore, wound over each ear in the Eastern fashion that came from "Kismet," was loosened, and a thick plait with an engaging wave at the end fell down on either side of her face. Standing, but supported in Father's arms, her head lay on his shoulder, her eyes closed, long curling lashes resting on marble cheeks. I had never seen her half so beautiful, and Captain March gazed at her as if he would gladly give his life for a reassuring smile.

"Shall I fetch a doctor?" he asked miserably. "There's sure to be one, somewhere around."

Before Father could answer, Di opened her eyes, and Captain March got the smile without paying the price.

"I—I'm all right," she breathed. "So sorry! I wasn't afraid, you know. It was my *heart*. It seemed to stop."

"Of course you weren't afraid," Eagle encouraged her. "I can never forgive myself for making you suffer."

Diana's smile graciously forgave the brutal fellow for his blundering, and she extricated herself from Father's arms, the colour slowly stealing back to her lips and cheeks. She shook her head a little, and the two braids, stuck full of tiny tortoise-shell hairpins, tumbled over her breast. Captain March nearly ate her up with his eyes, and then, through their windows, his soul might be seen worshipping, and begging the goddess's pardon on its knees.

"She's not strong," Father apologized. "It's my fault for letting her go up; I ought to have remembered her heart."

It's a great asset, a weak heart, for a person who has just made an exhibition of cowardice. Like charity, it covers a multitude of sins. I'd never before heard of Di's heart being weak; and at home, if there were a ball anywhere within twenty miles, she could always dance at it till morning. However, I was glad she'd thought of her heart in time, and saved the situation. It was an accommodating heart, for it came up smiling, when the petting Di got had satisfied her that she wasn't to be blamed for the fiasco.

"I think flying must be a wonderful experience for any one whose heart is quite right," she consoled Captain March. "It's a pity, for the credit of the family, you didn't take Peggy up first."

"I suppose she won't feel like going, after what has happened to you?" said he, remembering my existence.

"Oh, I do feel like it, more than ever," I exclaimed, "that is, if you don't mind risking another of us."

"I don't think we'd better trouble Captain March again," Father cut in. "He wouldn't like a second failure."

"He won't have one," I said. "My heart is as strong as a Gnome motor. Do let me go. It will give Di time to rest."

Whether that argument decided Father, or whether he really did hope I might reestablish the family credit for courage, I don't know; anyway, he made no further objections. The fur-lined cloak, helmet, and mittens were handed over to me. I crawled through the spider's web to the tiny throne vacated by its late queen, and was strapped in as Di had been. Not one qualm did I feel as I looked down over Eagle's leather-clad shoulder at the various instruments fixed on to what in an aeroplane corresponds, I suppose, to the dashboard of an earth-bound automobile: the revolution gauge, which Eagle had explained to us; the watch; the map to roll up on a frame, like a blind; the compass, the height indicator. I felt secure and happy in the thought that my courage would at least make my captain respect me. He had shown us how his invention enabled the monoplane to balance itself in meeting every gust of wind, or falling into an "air pocket," without any effort from the conductor. That assurance hadn't been enough for Di, Winged Victory, Goddess, and Huntress, but it was enough for humble Peggy. Besides, in the mood which had swept over me like a blinding flame of white fire, I didn't care what happened, provided it happened to Eagle March and me together. I should have liked him to aim straight for the sun, and never to come down again.

The last thing I said before we started was, "Go as high, please, as you would if you were alone. If I press the bulb, it will be twice, to fly higher."

Then came the starting of the motor, the wheeled run, and the leap into air. As we took wing, I could have sung for joy. I was so gloriously excited, I was hardly conscious of the noise of the engine. That helmeted head and the firm leather-clad shoulders beneath me seemed the head and shoulders of a god.

We circled over the enclosure. The *Golden Eagle* hadn't risen very high yet, but I had a queer feeling of being no longer related to any one on earth. I was with my champion, a creature of another sphere. Intoxicated with joy, I pressed the bulb twice. I could not hear the shrill whistle, but the driver evidently heard, for in obedience we shot up—up—up! The height indicator showed that we had reached the height of five hundred feet. I pressed the bulb again twice over. Eagle began to steer the monoplane in immense circles. I felt I could almost see our corkscrew-track in the air, like twisted threads of gold on blue. The hangars in the fields of Hendon were toy sheds on a green-painted tray. Even the aerodrome was no more than a big rat trap. London spread itself out beneath us, a vast dark patch, like a fallen cloud. A shaft of sunlight set a golden dome on fire. It must have been St. Paul's. For the third time I gave the signal to mount. For the third time Eagle obeyed. I wondered if he liked me a little for sharing the confidence he had in his machine.

A few white clouds floated lazily beneath us, like snowy birds of an intolerable brightness and titanic size. Then they joined together in a glittering flock, and lost the semblance of birds. The mass became a sparkling silver sea, with here and there a dark gulf in it like a whirlpool. The air grew biting cold. I felt it press on me through the fur-lined coat Di had lent, like blocks of solid ice. But the strange sensation only exhilarated me the more. "I'm not a coward, I'm not a coward. I'm brave!" The words sang themselves in my head to the accompanying roar of the motor.

It was a glorious, dependable roar, but suddenly, in the midst of a spiral movement, I noticed a change in the sound. A gurgle—a choking stammer. A spray of petrol dashed across my goggles.

"Now—what?" The question asked itself in my soul. But there was no fear with it, only an awed realization that this might be the end of things, as I had known them, in a very little world low down and far away. "What does it matter?" the answer came. But Eagle had turned round in his seat, and was handing me a spanner. Now he was motioning to me. If he spoke, I couldn't hear a word. Yet I understood from the gestures of one mittened hand what he hoped I might be able to do. Somehow, even then, the driving force of thought in my brain was to please him, to show him that he hadn't relied on me in vain, rather than to save us both from threatening danger, though danger I saw there must be. I was determined that the corporal should not fail the captain.

The thing I had to do, as I seized the situation, was to turn the spanner on a loosened nut in the petrol pipe, to which Eagle pointed. Reaching up with my right hand, I steadied myself with the left, and touched something hot, horribly hot. There was an involuntary flinch of the nerves as the heat burned through the thick mittens I wore and scorched my fingers, but I didn't scream, I'm glad to say, or let go the spanner. I screwed and screwed at the union, with the nasty smell of burnt wool, and perhaps flesh, in my nostrils. Then there came the glorious sensation of success as the song of the motor took up its old refrain again. No more choking and spluttering, and it was I who had cured it.

I gave a little sob of thanksgiving, because I hadn't failed; and a voice seemed to whisper far, far down under the renewed song of the engine, "What if this is a prophecy? What if, after Diana has left him in the lurch, it should be given to *you* to atone—to help or save him in some danger?"

The little voice was so strong, so clear, that I thrilled all over. What it said seemed to become part of an experience which I could never forget.

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## CHAPTER V

In the remaining six weeks of his leave, Eagle March made himself very popular in England. He secured a record for altitude, and flew upside down longer than any one else had at that time, two years ago, which is a whole age in the aeroplane world. He did other quaint tricks, too, that nobody had thought of or accomplished then, such as walking on a wing of the monoplane when she was in the air; and all the prettiest and smartest women in London were proud to meet him. He was invited everywhere, and people who pretended to know said that peeresses, married and unmarried, made violent love to Captain March. Naturally a girl like Di was enchanted to lead him about, tied to what would have been her apron strings if she'd been frumpish enough to wear such things. When it began to be said that Eagle March found excuses not to accept invitations unless Lord Ballyconal and Lady Di O'Malley might be expected to turn up, Father and Diana were asked by a great many hostesses who wouldn't have thought of them except as bait. Di realized this, even if Father were too proud or too conceited to do so, and she used Eagle in every way, for all he was worth. She liked him, too, better than she'd ever liked any man, perhaps, except her first love—the handsomest Irish boy you ever saw, whom she couldn't think of marrying because he'd no family and no money. But she was only seventeen then and Jerry Taylor was a mere subaltern. He died in India of enteric when Di was eighteen; and before Captain March came on the scene she had liked and flirted with at least a dozen others.

Besides, Eagle March was a very different "proposition," as they say in his country, from poor Jerry Taylor. There was no reason why she shouldn't think of marrying him if he wanted her, and he did want her desperately. A moderately intelligent bat could have seen that he was dying for my lovely sister. Anyhow, *she* saw it, and I saw that she saw it, and that she was troubled as to which way to make up her mind. She didn't want to lose her golden eagle, with his brilliant plumage of fame and popularity, and the future fortune from his aunt. On the other hand,

through Eagle, Di had met a number of desirable men, some moneyed, some titled; and she was a girl who would rather marry a rich nobody of the country she had known, than fly with a hero to a land she knew not. I used to notice in her soft, thoughtful eyes the "wait and see" policy.

As the time drew near for Eagle to go back to his regiment on the other side of the world, things grew exciting. I felt electricity in the atmosphere, though Diana didn't confide in me, and I had no idea what she meant to do. I couldn't bear to think of Eagle having to suffer, as he must suffer if she threw him over, for already I knew enough of him to know that, quiet as he was, he had very deep and sensitive feelings. I am too young, even now, after all I have lived through in the last year or two, to set myself up as a judge of character; yet I couldn't then help forming my own opinion of all those who came near me. I seemed to see under Eagle March's simple, half-humorous, calmly deliberate manner, flashes of inner fire. I thought his character was not really simple at all, but very complex. I don't mean in a deceitful way, far indeed from that; but I believed there was much in him which he did not yet know himself, about himself. I fancied that the Southern blood he had in his veins from one side of his family had made him high-strung and passionate, as well as daring, quick to think, and quick to act; and that his study was to hold this side of his nature in check. I felt sure that he was generous even to a fault, yet I was certain that, if driven to desperation, there might be a cruel streak which would make him a dangerous enemy unless some tide of love broke down the barrier of hardness in his soul. He was not hard at that time, however, and I didn't want my sister to be the one to make him so.

For this reason, I sometimes wished that she would marry him, and give him as much happiness as she had it in her to give. And yet, apart from my own feelings (they didn't count, for his losing Di would not give him to me), I couldn't believe that having her would really be for his happiness in the end. The two hadn't one idea or taste in common. But all I could do was to hope that, whatever happened, it would be for *his* best; because, you see, knowing him, and having that chevron of black and gold as a "reward of valour," had made me a nicer, less selfish girl than I had been before we met. Because I loved a soldier, I wanted to be a soldier, too! Hardly anything of the pert minx remained in me, I used to think sometimes, and comparatively little of the pig or cat. This was fortunate, because, when toward the last he confided in me, everything bad that was left in my composition longed to turn and rend Diana.

The way he did this made it all the harder for me not to desert the colours. He told me that ever since the day when I had been "such a little trump in the air, and maybe saved both our lives," I'd been more to him than any other female thing, except, of course, my sister. Something in Diana's weakness had appealed to him as much as my strength; and he loved her with a different love from the affection he gave me. I was his little sister, his brave little friend, and because I was so dear to him, he dared to ask me what chance he had with Diana. Did I think she tried to keep him from telling her what he felt, because she didn't care and wanted to save him pain, or was there just a possibility that she was only shy?

I could have given a bitter laugh to both questions, because the truthful, straight-out answer to one and the other was the same: "No!" Di loved to get proposals, and counted them up as if they were scalps, or those horrid little soft, boneless masks which head hunters collect. The only trouble was, that among the lot, she had never had one scalp worth the wearing, for a real live beauty, who needed only a bit of luck to be at the top of the world. As for her shyness, it was all in the tricks she played with her eyelashes and the way she curved her upper lip.

But I didn't laugh. I merely said I wasn't sure how Diana felt, as she never talked to me about such things. And I got for answer, spoken reflectively: "I suppose not. You're too much of a child."

He knew by this time that I was sixteen, instead of thirteen as he had thought at first; but what you're not much interested in makes little impression on your mind if you're a man and in love. For him I was a child, a nice sympathetic child. And such affection as he gave me, I lived upon, as if it had been the washings from a cup of the elixir of life.

For his sake, I studied Di more closely than ever, after that day, and soon I understood what she was driving at. She wanted to have her cake and eat it, too. And she got it. Any girl can manage this, if she is clever enough; and Di, though she isn't bookish or intellectual, is very, very clever in the way women have been clever since they emerged from cave life.

She succeeded in keeping back a real proposal which she would have had to answer with a "yes" or "no"; but she hinted to Captain March that, if she could have just a little more time to think about it, with the glamour of his presence gone, she would probably realize that she couldn't be happy without him. Of course it would be a blow for poor, dear Bally if she married out of Ireland or England, but still—but still—only give her time to read her heart.

Eagle told me something of the scene between them, and of course, I saw exactly what Di was up to: but I caged all the wild cats in me, and said I was glad, if *he* were happy. Yes, indeed, I'd take care of Di for him, and write him how she looked and what she did, and use all my influence to make Father escort us both over to America as soon as possible. Di, it seemed, had also agreed to use her influence in bringing this result about. I couldn't tell at the time whether she had thrown the promise as a sop to keep Eagle quiet, or whether she really thought that she would like to go. All I knew was that, if she did use her influence—and Father could get hold of enough money—the thing was as good as done.

Eagle took his departure; and we, and lots of his new friends, went to Euston to see him off for Liverpool, Di, no doubt, secretly thinking that sort of public "good-bye" safer than a private one.

As for our going to America, the scheme hung by a thread, as I guessed soon after Eagle's back was turned. A bird in the hand is always worth at least two in the bush, and Di's hand was ready. If the right bird could be palmed before the season's end, it would mean that nothing of Di except her wedding cards would sail across the sea. But as it turned out, home birds were wary, and we crept back to Ireland in time for the horse show with Diana empty handed, and Father with pockets cleaned out. It was then that Di seriously set her thoughts upon the new world—new worlds, it is said, being easier to conquer than old ones.

Father had two or three acquaintances in the diplomatic service at Washington. He hoped to squeeze invitations out of them; for in a country entirely populated by monotonous Misters and Mrs-es, with nothing more decorative than a colonel or a general or a judge, even a poor Irish earl isn't to be sneezed at. Di needn't be handicapped by every one remembering that her mother would have described herself as a "music 'all h'artist"; and several Americans living in New York had asked us to their houses.

At first it wasn't proposed to take me if the family went, and the thought of going through again what I had endured when seeing Di and Eagle March together, kept me from raising my voice in persuasion. It would be heartwearing to be left behind, never to know what was happening except from an occasional letter; but to be on the spot and see for myself would be heartbreaking. I wasn't quite sure which would be worse, so I left the decision to Fate; and as I said before, it was my Frenchified genius for doing hair which settled the matter. Di discussed it with Father frankly before me, and argued that not only was I cleverer than the average maid, but actually cheaper. "Besides," she finished, "Peggy dear would like to go, and she's not a bad little thing. Who knows but she might pick up something over there for herself?"

"A picker up of unconsidered trifles!" the scotched, not killed minx in me couldn't resist quoting, at the suggestion that I was welcome to Di's leavings if I could bag them. But neither Father nor Di was paying the slightest attention.

By superhuman efforts in borrowing, and perhaps begging (I wouldn't "put it past him"), and selling the portrait of our best-looking, worst-behaved ancestor, Father scraped up enough money to take us to America and have a little over for travelling expenses there. Further than that he did not look, for we should be living board free most of the time; and besides, something was almost sure to turn up. In December we sailed on a slow, cheap ship; and once on the other side, lived for six weeks, like the lord and ladies we were, upon friends Di had carefully collected, as if they were rare foreign stamps or postcards, in London during the past season. Most of these she had met through Eagle. She had a gorgeous time, and even I came in for plenty of fun; because it seems that a girl in America ceases to "flap" while she is still quite young. I was strictly reduced by my elders to "just sixteen," although my seventeenth birthday was upon me; but there were men in New York not above talking or tangoing with a girl of sixteen, and my hair, though only looped up flapper fashion, with a ribbon, was actually admired. I saw it in the newspapers—not the hair, but the admiration.

Never were people so hospitable as those kind ones in New York, and never were houses more beautiful or more luxurious than theirs. I had never seen anything quite like them at home: but it wasn't the luxury that stirred in my heart a wondering love for America. I began to feel it from the very moment when our cheap liner brought us into the harbour, and the Statue of Liberty (about which Eagle had told me) was suddenly unveiled to my eyes from behind a curtain of silver mist. The thrill warmed my blood, and I had the sensation of being at home, as if I were coming to stay with kinsfolk; a dim but deep conviction, that I *belonged*; that there was a place for me.

We were doing something from morning till night—or rather till the next morning; and the air was like a tonic to keep us up to the work of play. Luncheons and dinners and dances were given for Di, and she was written and talked about as the "Beautiful Lady Diana O'Malley"; but, though she had proposals, nothing better offered than Captain March, whose rich aunt, Mrs. Cabot, lived in New York, and proved to be the genuine article. Consequently, we turned our attention to Washington. Washington also turned its attention to us, and made itself agreeable to Father and Diana. Place and people were both fascinating; and we had five weeks more of dinners and dances, without the result we all knew in our secret souls we had come to get. The men who wanted Di, she didn't want, and vice versa. So at length we came to the last item marked on our programme: a visit to the fashionable Alvarado Springs, close to Fort Alvarado, in Arizona, where Captain March was stationed.

It was the end of March when we arrived at Alvarado, and the newspapers were thickly sprinkled with the name of the Mexican President Huerta, printed in big, black letters. A few weeks ago the name would have meant nothing to me, but I hadn't lived in vain in Washington for more than a month. If the name of a Mexican president or general who had done anything conspicuous during the past six years had been suddenly flung at my head (as in the children's game where they shout "Beast, Bird, Fish!" and you answer before the count of three), I could have told who he was, and whether the conspicuous deed had been good or bad.

At Alvarado we had thought to be past invitation zone, and Father had been fearfully hoarding his resources at the expense of his friends, to hold out against high charges at a big hotel. There was said to be a very big one indeed, at the Springs, with bills to match; but at the eleventh hour one of Father's devoted band of rich widows (the widows thoughtfully provided for him by deceased financiers) took a furnished cottage there and asked us to visit her. She was an unusually nice widow, whose husband had made a fortune through inventing gollywogs with different eyes from other gollywogs. The strain had given him a weak heart, and he had died. The widow's name was

Mrs. Main, and Di shamelessly christened her the "Main Chance." She certainly *was* ours!

Mrs. Main, whom we'd met in New York, dashed off to Alvarado Springs a fortnight ahead of us, in time to get acquainted through letters of introduction with the highest-up officers at Fort Alvarado, and the wives of those who had any; also to put the furnished "cottage," as she called it (there must have been fifteen or twenty rooms), in order; and the night we arrived, after our long but utterly fascinating journey, she gave a dinner in honour of Father and Diana.

I had been tremendously interested in the whole trip from Washington to Arizona, and with the first glimpse I had of the romantic Springs I felt a thrilling sensation that it was a place where things were bound to happen. The hotel, as all who have heard of Alvarado must know, stands in the midst of a young forest, overlooking a canon that for colour is like a vast cup full of rainbows, and beyond the forest to the left is the garrison. From the higher stories of the hotel you can see the red roofs of the officers' quarters, and farther away the barracks and the big, bare drill ground, but from the wide verandas no houses are anywhere visible, except the colony of cottages built in Spanish fashion like the hotel itself, each having its own little garden with a flowery hedge. From the glorified cottage Mrs. Main had taken we could walk up to a dance at the hotel in five minutes.

I think Eagle would have liked to meet us at the railway station, but Di had plenty of excuses for not allowing that. He had met Mrs. Main, however, and in the afternoon he called. Father was out prospering round the little town, and visiting the smart club at which he had been put up as an honorary member. Di and our hostess (she made us call her Kitty, a sprightly name to which she struggled to live up to) were in the garden when Eagle came, but I happened to be in the drawing-room with a book, so I had about five minutes alone with him before Mrs. Main's black butler found the others.

I hadn't tried, as a well-regulated young girl would no doubt have tried, to "get over" being in love with Captain March. I had just simply said to myself that the kind of unhappiness which loving him made me suffer was better than any little wretched pretence at half-baked happiness I could hope for by putting him out of my mind. So I had basked in the painful luxury of thinking about him constantly, and dreaming dreams of how I might serve or sacrifice myself for him, and win his passionate gratitude. Consequently, when I raised my eyes from the Spanish novel I wanted to translate, and saw Eagle March come in at the door, I loved him a thousand times more than ever. I don't know if an unprejudiced person would call him actually handsome; but I thought there couldn't be on earth a man worth comparing with that brown-faced soldier.

He was glad to meet his "dear little pal" again, because of what he could get out of her about his loved one. He did hold back his eagerness long enough to rattle off, "Why, Peggy, you're growing up! By Jove, you're almost a woman, aren't you? and a pretty one, too—though you've kept your impish look, I'm glad to see!" But that was only the preface. As soon as he decently could, he turned the conversation to Diana. How was she? As beautiful as ever? Though of course she was! Did she ever speak of him? He'd passed sleepless nights after reading newspaper paragraphs which reported her on the eve of an engagement with this man or that—disgustingly rich, overfed brutes. Was there a grain of truth in any of the reports? No? Thank heaven! Well, then, perhaps there was a sporting chance for him after all!

"But, just like my luck," he went on, half laughing, "there's a chap here who's as formidable as any of them. A regular twelve-and-a-half-inch gun, latest make and improvements; his name's Vandyke; only a major; all the same he's got a pot of money. There's hardly a man in the army as rich as he is, if there's one. Soldiering means only fun for him. Most of us here are like me; or if they don't come from generations of soldiers as I do, they're in the service for a career. Vandyke will probably resign if he gets bored. He's dining at this house to-night. Notice him, and tell me what you think of him afterward, will you?"

"You're coming, too, aren't you?" I asked. "Mrs. Main—Kitty—said you were, and I was so glad."

"I should say I was coming!" he exclaimed. "Catch me giving Vandyke a clear field at the start, if he *is* my superior officer! You see, Vandyke—"

But on the name, as if it were her cue, Diana floated in, and Mrs. Main steamed in with her, through one of the long windows which opened on to the veranda. After that I ceased to exist.

Di wore white that night for the dinner party. A good deal of what Father was saving in hotel bills he put into clothes for her. It was a new dress, and sparkled all over like a moonlit lily crusted with dew. I had a fancy to put on the frock with roses on it, which I'd bought at Selfridge's so many months ago, with the money paid me by Eagle for my mother's lace. The dress was still alive, and on active service (though the roses began to look somewhat sat upon); and Eagle had never seen me in it. Not that he would notice me now! But I had a queer feeling of sentiment about the gown, and often I had told myself that never, never would I throw it away. I should have had a much queerer feeling if I'd known all that was yet to come of my first meeting with Eagle March in the Wardour Street curiosity shop.

Kitty Main had explained that it wasn't to be a big, tiresome dinner on our first night: merely a few people she thought dear Lord Ballyconal and Lady Di would like to meet, and "who would love to know them—little Peggy, too, of course!"—with a belated gasp of politeness for me.

There would be, besides ourselves, only Mr. and Mrs. Tony Dalziel of New York; their pretty daughter, Millicent, just out; their son, Lieutenant Dalziel—"Tony," too; Major Vandyke; and

Captain March, who was already our friend.

The gossips did suggest, Kitty had gone on to hint, that Millicent Dalziel was rather throwing herself at Captain March's head (if an heiress could be said to throw herself at the head of a poor man); but of course, Milly wouldn't have a look in now, if dear Lady Di had any attention to spare for Eagleston March. Di, however, was to be taken in to dinner by Major Vandyke, and Millicent Dalziel by Captain March. It wasn't probable that Milly would give him much chance for talk with Lady Di, although he was to sit beside her. "Good little Peggy" would have young Tony, so nice for both of them! and dear Lord Ballyconal would be placed between his hostess and Mrs. Dalziel.

I ought to have had eyes only for my special prey, Lieutenant Dalziel; but whether I pleased or bored him seemed so comparatively unimportant, that before the guests began to arrive, I found my faculties preparing to concentrate elsewhere. Di hadn't mentioned the name of Major Vandyke while I did her hair, or melted and poured her into the sparkly frock, but I felt her consciousness of him in the air; and when his name was announced at the door of the "cottage" drawing-room, my heart gave a jump as if it wanted to peer over the high wall of the future.

He came before any of the others, so I had time to make a quick black-and-white study of him in my brain. I say black and white, because you would always think of Sidney Vandyke in black and white. An artist sketching him on the cover of a magazine would need no other colour to express the man, except—if he had it handy—a dash of red for the full lips under the black moustache.

"Major Vandyke!" the soft, drawling voice of Kitty's negro butler proclaimed him; and that was when my heart knocked its alarm. Kitty Main generally described people in superlatives, so I hadn't been excited when she remarked that Major Vandyke was the "best-looking man in the army." But this time, she seemed not to have exaggerated. There couldn't be a handsomer man in any army or out of it, and a horrid, sly little voice whispered to me: "What a splendid-looking couple he and Di would make!"

I was standing far in the background, at a window opposite the door, while the others were grouped together more in the foreground; and what I saw was a very tall man (so tall that he could dwarf Eagle March's five foot ten almost to insignificance), six foot two, perhaps, and—not stout yet, but showing signs that one day he might become so. I noticed that he held himself magnificently, his broad shoulders thrown back, his head up; and that he walked with a slight swagger, more like a cavalryman than an officer in the artillery. Perhaps it was the electric light which made his skin look as white as Diana's, without a touch of the tan that darkened Eagle March's fairer complexion; but the white was of a different quality, somehow, from Diana's. Hers is pearl white; his had the thick, untranslucent look which pale Jewish faces have. I didn't know then that Sidney Vandyke was of Hebrew blood, but afterward I heard that his mother had Spanish Jews for ancestors on one side, and that with her came most of the family money. He was in full dress uniform, which became him splendidly; and I had a glimpse of a rather large face, drawn with square, straight lines that gave it a relentless look; square white forehead; straight black brows; straight, short nose; large, squarely opened dark eyes, brilliant and self-confident; straight black moustache; thick, square red lips; square chin, and a full neck set on square shoulders. After that first glimpse I saw only the profile, for in meeting Kitty Main and being introduced to Di and Father, Major Vandyke had to turn half away from me. Even a profile, however, tells something; and when Major Vandyke began to talk to Di, bending down a little, I could see that he admired her very much, or else wanted to convey this impression to her mind.

Next came Eagle March, very slim and boyish in shape and size compared to Major Vandyke, though he can't be more than six years younger; and hardly had he time to greet his hostess and look wistfully at Di, when the Dalziels arrived, a party of four. I thought that the father and mother (a dear little, merry, round-faced couple, curiously like each other and like Billiken) looked too young and irresponsible to be parents of anything grown up; but perhaps they had married when they were almost children, for Lieutenant Dalziel, who was inches taller than his father, had the happy air of being twenty two or three, and Mrs. Main had said that the girl was "just out." Young Tony—nut-brown eyes, skin, and hair, clean shaven, smiling, with teeth white and even as kernels of American corn—was a glorified edition of his Billiken father. Miss Dalziel—Milly—was not a bit like any of the others, who had all been cut from the same pattern and painted with the same paint. She was even slimmer and smaller than I am; very fair, with a few freckles, and lots of blue veins at her temples. She had an obstinate pink button of a mouth; dimples, which she made come and go every minute by working the muscles of her cheeks; bright, fluffy red hair done high on her head, floating eyes of gray green, and blackened brows and lashes which, I suppose, had started life in red. She gave an effect of prettiness and of thinking herself prettier than she was, an opinion in which her dress-maker had backed her up.

Tony Dalziel was jolly, and said so many quaint things in priceless slang that he kept me laughing; but I had eyes if not ears only for Di and Major Vandyke. "Say, he's rushing your sister, isn't he? Making a direct frontal attack—what?" remarked my neighbour, so it must have been conspicuous. One could see Major Vandyke consciously absorbing Diana, throwing over her head a veil of his own magnetism, as if to hide her in it from other men, and make her forget their existence.

As for Di, she behaved perfectly, if she wished to fascinate and tantalize a flirt, such as Sidney Vandyke was said to be. She let herself seem to fall under his spell, and then suddenly slipped gently away, turning to Captain March who sat at her other side. She would talk to him in a friendly, intimate way, in a low voice, with little happy outbursts of laughter over their reminiscences of a year ago; then, half apologetically, she would turn back to Vandyke again,

raising and letting fall her eyelashes in a way entirely her own, which, somehow, gives the effect of a blush. It was Victorian, or Edwardian at latest, but much more useful than any substitute girls have invented since. That night began the battle which was to have so strange a finish.

I don't know if Major Vandyke was serious at first. Perhaps he wanted no more than a good flirtation with a pretty girl, one of the prettiest he had ever seen, and desperately loved by a brother officer. You see, he had probably heard already from Kitty Main, who told everything she knew and a great deal she didn't know, that Captain March was in love with Di, just as we heard from the same source that Major Vandyke was jealous of his junior because of flying exploits and honours. I think, though, that from the moment they met, Di never meant to let the man go free. She saw that he was flirting, and was angry that he should dare. This put her on her mettle; and Diana on her mettle was and ever will be formidable, because of her cleverness, which never lets the mettle show. She determined that Sidney Vandyke should fall in love—over ears and eyes in love—and he did. But she wasn't satisfied even with that. She couldn't bear to have Eagle March escape, and perhaps be snapped up by Milly Dalziel, who was sitting on the bank of the fishpond with her hook baited. Oh, it must have been an amusing little comedy for outsiders to watch; and I was an outsider in a way; but it didn't amuse me. I was sick at heart, and cross with Tony Dalziel, who wouldn't leave me alone or give me time to think things over.

This sort of maneuvering lasted for three weeks; then a bombshell fell in our midst. Two batteries of the —th Artillery were ordered immediately to El Paso, on the Mexican border, where a raid was apparently threatened. Major Vandyke and Captain March and Lieutenant Dalziel were all to go.

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## CHAPTER VI

There was desolation at Alvarado Springs, in the hotel, and in the super-cottages. People—when I say people, I mean women—didn't come to Alvarado to drink the celebrated waters, or to admire the wonderful scenery. They came to play with the officers, and now the bravest and best (looking) were to be snatched from them. What had happened, or what might happen, was a mystery to mere civilians; but it was whispered about that possibly there might be real fighting at El Paso. There must have been, everybody said, something serious under the rumours of a threatened attack from across the Rio Grande, otherwise government would not be sending troops to reinforce the large garrison at Fort Bliss, or be offering to take women and children away from the river towns, in armoured trains if desired. Cavalry and infantry were moving south from other army posts, we heard, to guard the concentration camp of Mexican refugee prisoners at El Paso, and to beat back a rabble of invaders if need came.

The order reached Alvarado late in the afternoon, and the batteries were to leave by train at four o'clock the next morning. As it happened, Kitty Main, Father, Di, and I were all invited to a dance that evening at the house of an officer and his wife, Captain and Mrs. Kilburn; but when the news about the batteries going away began to flash from cottage to cottage we expected the party to be given up. Di looked rather blank when Mrs. Main flung the tidings at her, for Sidney Vandyke hadn't proposed yet. If the dance were abandoned, he might be too busy getting his men ready to see her before he left; and heaven alone knew when the batteries would come back. There might be fighting; there might at worst even be war with Mexico; and whatever happened, we couldn't stay on indefinitely at Alvarado. Kitty Main had taken the cottage and asked us to visit her only for six weeks. Besides, Alvarado would be desolate without our best friends and possible lovers.

I could see these thoughts developing and following on one another's heels in Diana's mind. But in my head there was nothing concrete enough to call a "thought." Feelings seemed to have raced upstairs from heart to brain, and driven ideas out of the house. They ran wildly round and round, saying to each other, "What if I never see him again? What if he should be killed?" But while we were in this state, Mrs. Kilburn telephoned to Kitty Main that she had decided to have her dance in spite of all. Her husband was not among those ordered away, and the officers who were going had arranged to spare time to look in for three or four dances in any case. Some of them might be very early, some very late, but there would be plenty of other men to go round; and Mrs. Kilburn suggested that we might "keep things up" long enough to see the soldiers off at dawn, before motoring back to the Springs, if that would interest Lady Diana and Lady Peggy O'Malley.

There was only one answer to this, and when we went over to Fort Alvarado for the dance we put on warmer cloaks than we should have worn ordinarily.

Mrs. Kilburn had brought her husband money; and as she loved gayety she had somehow got permission to build on to the captain's quarters a ballroom surrounded on three sides by a wide veranda. Consequently, a dance at the Kilburns' was worth going to always, and particularly on this moonlight night of April when the whole fort was humming with excitement. The officers who were ordered away had their hands full of work, yet the young ones managed to get off duty if only for a few minutes, long enough to snatch a dance or two with the girls they liked best, or to "sit out" with them on the veranda, where there were colonies of chairs, and garden seats, and hammocks.

Tony Dalziel was one of those who came early to the Kilburns'. He had asked me beforehand for six dances, and I had given him three. When he appeared it was just in time for the first, a two-



step. The second would follow directly after, and the third I knew already, from a note sent me in haste, he would have to miss.

"Do you care for this?" he asked, out of breath with his hurry to dress and sprint over from the far-off line of bachelors' quarters. "If you don't, will you come outside and see the moon rise? It's going to be a great sight."

There is no poetry in a two-step, and if there were it would have been lost in hopping up and down with Tony, so I chose the moon. I thought the moon a perfectly safe object to gaze at with such a jolly young man, who made jokes at everything in the heavens or upon the earth; and unsuspectingly I went with him to a nook on the veranda screened off with tall plants from an adjacent hammock. It was a nook intended for two and no more. There were a great many nooks of that sort on Mrs. Kilburn's veranda. She specialized in flirtation architecture.

"Tell me about everything, please," I cheerfully began. "We haven't very long, have we?"

"That's the worst of it," said Tony, "and that's why I must be careful to tell you only the important things. There's just one that really interests me."

"What's that?" I asked eagerly. "I hope not that you expect fighting?"

"No such luck, I'm afraid. But I'm not worrying about that now. What I want to tell you is this." And to my stupefaction he shot a proposal at my head as if it came out of a field gun. I knew he liked me, and liked to be with me, but I couldn't associate the idea of anything so serious as marriage with Tony Dalziel. I gasped and said he couldn't mean it, but he assured me that he did, and a dictionary full of other assurances besides.

Perhaps, if I had not seen Eagle March and fallen in love with him once and forever, I might have thought twice before saying "No" to Tony, if only for the pride of being engaged sooner than Di, and when I wasn't yet eighteen. Tony Dalziel was what all women call "such a dear!" and, besides, he had—or would have—plenty of money, a consideration in our family. I could imagine what a rage Father would be in with me if he knew what I was doing at that moment, calmly refusing a heaven-sent opportunity. But Eagle March, though he was not for me, made all the difference, and put my heart into a convent where it was now undergoing its novitiate. I let the opportunity slip, and told Tony how sorry I was to hurt him. But he wasn't inclined to take that for an answer. He wanted to know if I wouldn't "leave it open," in case anything happened to make me change my mind. I warned him that, so far as I could see, I would never change it; but if an "optimist will op"—as Tony remarked—what can you do? You can't prevent his opping, and rather than hear an irrevocable word he bade me good-bye while I protested. This was in the midst of what should have been his second dance, and I didn't feel equal to going indoors again directly after that scene, even to tango. I asked Tony to leave me where I was, to gather up my wits, and when he had darted away I sat quite still for a few minutes. I had no engagement until the time for my one dance with Eagle March should come; and as Tony hadn't given me much chance for gazing at the "great sight" he had brought me out to see, I tried to cool my brain with moonlight. But I had forgotten all about the hammock on the other side of the flower screen. I remembered it only when I heard footsteps, and a creaking of chairs as some one—or rather some two—sat down.

"Good gracious!" I said to myself. "Now what shall I do?" For as the pair came to a halt they went on with their conversation, which had evidently reached a critical point. I recognized the man's voice, and as it was that of Eagle March, I knew as well as if I had already seen her that the girl must be Diana. I knew also that she would never forgive me if I popped out at this moment, like the wrong figure on a barometer. Nothing on earth would make her believe that I hadn't been "spying"; for though Di didn't realize how much and in what way I cared for Eagle, she often teased me about being jealous because my great "chum" had forsaken me for her. If at any time she could call him away from me by a glance or a smile, it amused her to do so; and she would believe I was "revenging" myself, in the best way I could, on this their last night.

I had half jumped up from the low seat which Tony had shared with me; but on second thoughts I sat down again.

"She won't let him say much," I thought, "so there'll be nothing to overhear. Anyhow, I can stop my ears, if worst comes to worst." But before I had time to resolve on this precaution, I heard Eagle say, "If it wasn't for the money, I shouldn't feel I had the right——"

The rest was silence, for I kept my resolution and refused to catch another syllable; yet those words had set me thinking hard. If Eagle were telling Di that he was now certain to come in for his aunt's fortune, she might look upon him as a bird in the hand, whereas a notorious flirt like Major Vandyke might be worth no more than two in the bush with the saltcellar empty.

I struggled to find consolation by reminding myself that, if Di did marry Eagle, she might make him happy, provided there were enough money for everything she wanted, and if he were willing to cut the army for her sake and live mostly in England. She wasn't an ill-natured or sharp-tongued girl when things went as she wished, I reflected, and if he were content to sacrifice his career for love of her, they might get on very well together. But—what *desolating* words to use in connection with Eagle March—"get on well together!" He wasn't one to be satisfied with mere contentment, where he had hoped for rapture.

I sat with my ears stopped, until suddenly the two began speaking in a much louder tone; and a

third voice, that of a man, joined the conversation. Then I decided that I might come back to life again; and as I let my tired arms drop, I became aware that the newcomer was Sidney Vandyke. He was telling Di that this was his dance, and that he had been looking for her everywhere.

"I heard Kilburn mention that the Old Man had sent for you, March, and I know they're on your scent," he announced.

"In that case, I may not see you again, Lady Diana," Eagle said.

"Peggy and I are going with Mrs. Kilburn and a lot of others to wave to you for good luck, when you start," answered Di, rather nervously, I thought.

"I'm glad. We shall have a last glimpse of you all," replied Eagle. "But I'm afraid I shan't get a word with you then. So I'll bid you good-bye now!"

He spoke in quite a matter-of-fact way; but I, who knew every tone of his voice, guessed what it covered; and I could almost feel the pressure of his hand as it clasped Di's, with Major Vandyke mercilessly looking on. I wondered whether she had been cruel or kind.

In a moment he was gone; and with a stab of pain I realized that, if the colonel had sent for him, he must miss out his dance with me. Would he even remember it? Would he scribble me a line of farewell? I longed to run out and catch him before he went, if only for a word, but I dared not dash past Di, and give her the shock of learning that I had been within three yards of her all the time. Again I was trapped, unless Di and Major Vandyke should go indoors to dance; but no sooner was Eagle March out of earshot than Vandyke asked Di to stay.

"Of course we've known all along that we might get marching orders," he said, and there was no harm in my hearing that. "It's a surprise only to those outside. The adjutant has been fussing over stores and ammunition, and target practice has been a confounded bore. All the same, at the end the move's been sprung on us, just when we'd forgotten to expect it. I feel as if I'd wasted a lot of precious time one way or another, but it isn't too late yet, Lady Di, if you—"

I stopped up my ears again so effectively that I heard no more, and a few minutes later was flabbergasted when Diana and he suddenly broke upon me from behind the screen of plants.

My first thought was that Di had suspected my presence there, and had wanted to pounce; but she gave a jump and a cry of surprise as she saw me sitting bolt upright on the bench, with my fingers stuffed into my ears.

"Good *gracious*, Peg!" she gasped. "How long have you been here?"

"Ever since before *you* came," I answered. I might have put it differently by telling tales, and so serving Eagle March's cause, perhaps; but no matter how thoroughly I disapproved of her, I couldn't give my own sister away. "I didn't like to come out, you see, for fear you mightn't like it; but I haven't heard anything you've said, if *that* interests you to know."

"I don't care whether you've heard or not," said Di, trying to speak playfully, but unable to keep sharpness out of her tone. "Major Vandyke thought this was a nicer seat than the hammock to rest in, so he brought me to it. Of course, we'd no idea any one was—was *hiding* here!"

"Well, there won't be any one, now I'm free to move," I snapped. "I'm only too thankful to have a chance to get back to the ballroom. You've made me miss a dance."

"*We've* made you? I like that!" gurgled Di. But I waited for no more. I skipped away toward the nearest long window without looking round, and was just in time to meet my partner in search of me, the partner after Eagle March, and a brother officer of his. "Our dance," said he, "and here's something March asked me to hand you. He's been called away."

The "something" was a leaf torn out of a notebook and neatly folded into a cocked hat. It was rather appropriate that Eagle's good-bye to me should come in this form, because I had given him the notebook for a birthday present only the week before. I'd saved up my pennies to get a good one, and have his initials in silver fastened on to the khaki-coloured morocco cover. The paper of the book itself and the refills were also khaki coloured to match the cover, with lines in very faint blue. I had wanted my little gift to be as distinctive as possible, and had taken a great deal of pains to choose a notebook different from all others, little dreaming what was fated to hang on the difference.

Quietly but carefully I undid the paper cocked hat and read the few pencilled words: "So disappointed, dear little friend, not to have my dance with you, but I'm called back to work. Congratulate me. *I've got almost the promise I wanted.* The next best thing, anyhow. Farewell for a while. Write to me to El Paso like the good girl you are. I shall look for you at the train tomorrow morning early, though we may not have a chance to speak. Yours ever, E. M."

I folded up the note and tucked it into the neck of my dress. Then I danced. And all the rest of the evening I danced. Yet I thought only of one thing: the half-veiled confidence Eagle had given me. Apparently Di had said something calculated to send him away happy. But Major Vandyke had looked far from sad when he walked into the ballroom with Di, after their *tête-à-tête* on the veranda in my deserted nook. I felt something was wrong, and determined to have it out with Diana the minute I could get her alone. My chance came sooner than I expected, for just before supper she tore her frock and wanted me to run up with her to the dressing-room and mend it. "A maid will make an awful mess of the thing," she said, "but you'll know what to do, and it'll take

only a few minutes."

We had the dressing-room to ourselves, for Mrs. Kilburn's French maid, who was in charge, had slipped away, probably for a sly peep at the dancing. When I had Di at my mercy, holding her by a trail of gold fringe, I opened fire.

"Are you engaged to Eagle March?" I flashed out.

"Certainly not," Di flashed back. "What makes you think such a thing? You said you didn't hear ——" In haste she cut her sentence short, realizing how she had given herself away. She would have gone on quickly, but I broke in.

"You ask what makes me think such a thing when I told you that I didn't hear a word of your talk. Which shows that if I *had* heard, I *might* have thought of it. Well, I did not hear, but, all the same, I think."

"You needn't, then," she assured me. "If I'm engaged to any one, it is to Sidney Vandyke. But I tell you as much as that, only to prove there's nothing between me and Captain March. It's in strict confidence, and you must be sure and keep the secret, Peg, till I'm ready to have it come out. Nothing's to be said until this Mexican bother is over. Can you make the fringe look right?"

"Yes, if you give me time," I answered. "But, Di, I won't have you playing tricks with Eagle March. I simply won't stand it!"

"It's horrid of you to suggest that I would do such a thing," Diana protested virtuously.

"Pooh!" said I, secure in my knowledge that she dared not move. "I know you pretty well, Di, and although you can be quite a darling when you like, you'd do anything—*anything whatever*, that was for your own interests, no matter how much it hurt others. You'd better tell me the truth, because I'm sure to find out; and if you mean to hurt or deceive Eagle March I'll stop you from doing it, I don't care how much it may cost me or you, or any one else but him."

"If ever there was a thorough little *pig*, it's you, Peggy," said Di.

"Thorough pigs seem to run in our family," I ruthlessly retorted. "But they're intelligent animals, and this one has rooted up something already. I believe you've practically promised to marry *both* these men, and persuaded them to keep the secret, so you can have time to decide which one will be the better to take, in the end."

"You make me out a perfect wretch," Di moaned piteously, peering over her shoulder to see how the repairs were getting on.

"So you are! A beautiful one, but a wretch. You like them both, Eagle and Major Vandyke. You like Eagle because he's so popular and such a hero as an airman; and you like Major Vandyke because he's awfully good looking and awfully rich and an awful flirt. You were worried to death for fear he wouldn't propose, and I'd have known to-night, from the change in your face, even if you hadn't told me, that he had spoken at last. But Eagle spoke, too, and you sent him away happy. I know that; though the only other thing I do know for certain, is that you think now he's sure to get his aunt's money."

"It's not such a tremendous lot, anyhow," Di gave herself away again. "He won't have more than two or three hundred thousand dollars at the most. If only it were *pounds*! Every one says Sidney Vandyke has a million. He's one of the few very rich men in the American army."

"But he can't fly, and he can't invent things, and he'll never be the man in any career that Eagle will," I reminded her. "You know this as well as I do. That's why you're waiting. Don't you think you'd better explain your true state of mind to me, if you don't want me to work against you?"

"You're a cat as well as a pig, you little horror!"

"What a museum combination! Don't twitch, or the fringe will go crooked. Is Eagle's rich aunt likely to die?"

"Well, yes, she is," Diana admitted. "She's very old, you know. She's had a third stroke of paralysis. If Eagle could have got leave he would have gone to her, but that was out of the question as things are."

"Did he tell you about her, or was it some one else who gave you the news?"

"It was some one else, of course. Naturally I wanted to make sure, so I—sympathized with him on his aunt's illness. He had only just heard about it, himself. He's always been fond of her, and he said he couldn't have had the heart to come to a dance, if it hadn't been his last night, and the only way to see me before he left for Texas. But he told me that Mrs. Cabot's death would make him comparatively a rich man. Those were the words he used. I don't think he's sure how much he'll get. It was from Kitty I heard what Mrs. Cabot is likely to leave."

"And as 'likely' isn't the same as 'certain,' you're hanging fire till she's dead," I explained Diana to herself.

"You make me out heaps worse than I am," she reproached me. "If I haven't given an absolutely definite answer to Eagle March or Sidney Vandyke, it's—it's—because of this expedition they're both going on. They may get some chance to distinguish themselves. You're such a practical little

person that you can't realize the romantic sort of feeling I have about such things. If I marry a man who isn't of my own country, I should like him to be a great hero, whom every one would read about and admire. I've told each of them to work, and do his best for my sake."

"There'll probably be no opportunity for anything heroic in such an expedition as this," said I, living up to the reputation—ill-deserved—for practicality, which Di wished to thrust on me in contrast with herself.

"That's what they both said," she agreed, "but one never knows."

"And so you get a story-book-heroine excuse to wait!"

"Little viper!"

"The cat-pig-viper won't sting unless you force it to," I guaranteed. "There! Your dress is all right again."

"You could have finished five minutes ago, if you hadn't been determined to lecture me. Thanks, all the same. You have your uses, though they're not always sweet, like those of adversity."

We went our separate ways with the men who were waiting to take us in to supper; and we didn't come together again till the dance was over, and every one but the party specially asked to stay had gone home. We heard the bugles sounding reveille; then presently the beat of drums and the rumble of the field guns going to the station. When Captain Kilburn announced that the entrainment was well under way, we started in his big limousine, shivering a little in evening cloaks flung on hastily over low-necked dresses. We waited till the platform was clear of the great mass of khaki-clad young men, and then timidly appeared, to stare through the dusk of early morning in search of friends. Ours wasn't the only party engaged in that business. Others were there; and swathed figures of girls and women, in rich-coloured cloaks over pale-tinted ball gowns, glimmered in the dawn like a row of tall flowers crowding along the edge of a garden path. My eyes were trying to find Eagle March when Tony Dalziel spoke by my shoulder, and made me jump. "I've just a minute," he said when I turned. "I want to ask you if you'll forget you turned me down last night, and be friends again. I will if you will. *Will* you?"

"Yes," I returned gladly, shaking hands. "I'm so glad you've realized that you were silly to feel about me like that. Why you or any man *should*, I can't think!"

"Can't you? That's because you haven't seen yourself, or heard yourself, and don't know what a quaint, darling sort of girl you are. But never mind. Let it go at that. We'll be friends. And promise, if my mother and Milly ask you to do something for them, you will."

"Anything I possibly can," I warmly answered. "Good-bye! Good luck!"

He was off. I meant to follow him with my eyes and wave to him when he looked out of his window in the train. But before he appeared again, I caught sight of Eagle March on a car platform, and forgot Tony, just as Eagle had forgotten me. Behind Eagle's slight figure towered massively Major Vandyke's splendid bulk; and as I waved my handkerchief to Eagle, while the train slid slowly out, I was vaguely aware of Diana's outstretched arm and a butterfly flutter of something white and small. Eagle's eyes went past me to her, though his smile was for me also; and Di was able deftly to kill her two birds with one stone, at the last. Her farewell look and gesture did equally well for both, yet each could take it wholly to himself.

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## CHAPTER VII

The next night I had a dreadful dream about Eagle March. Somehow or other, he had been condemned to death by Major Vandyke (who had unbecomingly turned into a judge) and Eagle was to be executed unless I could arrive in time to save him, armed with a reprieve or pardon—I didn't quite know which—that I had got from Washington. I waked up crying out, because a hand had been stretched forth through darkness to clutch my shoulder, and prevent me from getting to El Paso until too late. Even then, when I was wide awake, the dream had been so horribly vivid that I couldn't persuade myself it wasn't true. I had always laughed at superstitious people who believed in dreams, yet I couldn't clear my mind of this one, or keep from asking myself in a panic, "What if it's a warning?" It seemed that after all such things might mysteriously be.

Alvarado Springs was as dull as a convent after the officers we liked best had gone from the fort, and Kitty proposed subletting her cottage to an invalid who, for a wonder, had really come to the place for nothing but to take the cure. This rare creature was distressed by the noises of the hotel, and was willing to pay more than Kitty had paid, for the remaining few weeks of Mrs. Main's tenancy. Our hostess was enchanted with the idea, clapped her fat, dimpled hands like a little girl, and proposed to "blow" the money (this was slang she had delightedly picked up from Father) on a motor tour to California. She had no car of her own, but she could hire one, with a chauffeur we had often taken for short runs, and at Los Angeles, Riverside, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, and other places, she had friends who would shower invitations. The trip would take from two to six weeks, according to our own desire. Then, when we were tired of motoring and country-house visiting, the car would be sent home, and we could have the fun of going East together by the "Limited," which, Kitty said, was one of the most wonderful trains in the world.

This was the proposal, and it suited Father and Di very well. Each had a reason for wishing to prolong the tour in America, if it could be done "on the cheap." Di, of course, wanted to see Major Vandyke or Captain March—whichever she decided to take in the end—and settle her affairs definitely before going home to prepare for the wedding. As to Father, I began to ask myself about this time if he seriously thought of making our "Main Chance" a countess, and counting her dollars into his own pockets. In any case; travelling luxuriously in a land where poor Irish earls weighed as well in the balance as a rich English variety, was better than vegetating at Ballyconal or economizing in London; so he smiled upon the plan, and I was the one obstacle. The only comfortable car that Mrs. Main could get at short notice, was ideal for five, counting a chauffeur and a maid, but close quarters for six. I couldn't be put permanently with the chauffeur; and, besides, Kitty's looks were of the sort that depend upon a maid. "Dear little Peggy must just squeeze in somehow," was her verdict, although Di would temporarily have done without my services rather than be cramped, if I could have been disposed of elsewhere. She and Father put their heads together, and I had begun to feel in my bones that an invitation for me from Mrs. Kilburn was to be hinted at, when Mrs. Dalziel came to the rescue.

Her husband had gone back to New York long ago, and she and Milly had been wondering ever since Tony's orders came, whether it might be feasible to follow him to El Paso, and "see what was doing there." He had now wired that all the women of the neighbourhood had refused to leave the men; that the "scare" was dying down; that it looked as if the imported troops would have nothing more exciting to do than guard the concentration camp; and there was a gorgeous hotel in the town, full of rich Spanish refugees, men who were celebrities, and women who were beauties. Mrs. Dalziel had accordingly decided to venture; and Milly would enjoy the trip immensely, if Father would let me go with them as their guest. The eyes of my family lighted at this hope of liberation, and I suddenly understood what Tony's last words to me had meant. This was *his* plan; but I wanted so violently to go to El Paso and was so violently wanted to go by Father and Di, that I didn't stop to debate whether or no it was right to say yes. I simply said it, and—hang the consequences!

Di bade me an affectionate farewell, with a plaintive reminder that a girl not likely to be proposed to every day might do worse than Tony Dalziel. I, in turn, reminded her that any knavish juggling with Captain March's faith would be dealt with severely by me; and so we parted, she to go her way to California *en automobile*, I to go mine to Texas by Santa Fé trains.

I was grateful to Mrs. Dalziel and Milly for taking me, though I couldn't help seeing that it was not for my *beaux yeux* they had asked me to be their guest. I was a handle, or cat's-paw; but I preferred the part of usefulness to my hostesses to being carted about by them as an expensive luxury. Mrs. Dalziel really wanted me for Tony, who had never been denied anything short of the moon that he cried for. Milly wanted people to think that she wanted me for Tony, in order to have an invincible, ironproof excuse for the rush to El Paso, which her friends of the cat tribe might attribute to a different motive. She had been rather depressed at Alvarado, but began to bubble over with wild spirits the moment we were off for El Paso. She said that this would be the great adventure of our lives, and she was only sorry all danger along the border was over, as we shouldn't get the chance to show how brave we were.

It was an interesting journey, every stage of it; and at Las Cruces and after, we began to realize how close we were to old Mexico. Only the river ran between us and that mysterious, ancient land, as far removed in thought from the United States as though it were an annex of Egypt. Here and there, too, the Rio Grande (which I'd thought of geographically as a vast stream, wide as a lake) was a mere water serpent, writhing in its shallow bed of mud. This, we heard our fellow passengers say, explained the late danger of a raid. It would be as "easy as falling off a log" for a party of ill-advised Mexicans to make a dash across the river, and already there had been small private expeditions of cattle stealers. Staring out of the windows at little adobe villages, their huddled houses turned from brown to cubes of gold by the afternoon sun, we listened to all sorts of disquieting gossip. According to the travellers, who talked loudly to each other across the car, the "scare" was suddenly on again. Some more Federals had escaped the Constitutionalist soldiers, and got into Del Rio, where they had been protected by American soldiers, and there had been some shooting from one side of the river to the other. Carranza was threatening reprisals; no one seemed to know what Villa's attitude would be. A few American women who had little children had decided after all to go north. At Las Cruces and El Paso you could no longer buy a Browning, or arms of any kind. All had been snapped up. Las Cruces men, remembering that the militia was composed of Mexicans, had begun giving their wives lessons in target practice. At El Paso there was the peril of the Mexican population to be faced in case of attack from across the river; to say nothing of the thousand Mexicans employed in the smelting works down on the flats, and the five thousand refugees in the concentration camp, if they should mutiny and get out of control.

Poor Mrs. Dalziel drooped more and more piteously as this ball of gossip was tossed from one side of the car to the other, and Milly's ever white face grew so pale that her freckles stood out conspicuously. She ceased to exclaim with excitement over the cowboys galloping along the road on the United States side of the river, or to count the automobiles and the great alfalfa barns near small stations where black-veiled Mexican women waved sad farewells to weedy, olive-faced youths, perhaps going to the "war."

"Of course, we're not afraid for *ourselves*," said Mrs. Dalziel. "We—we should want to be near Tony, whatever happened. It's of you we're thinking, Peggy. I don't know if we ought to have brought you to such a place. And I do wish Tony's father were with us, anyhow."

The nearer we came to El Paso, the more foreign and Mexican the country seemed, with its wild purple mountains billowing along the sunset sky of red and gold; its queer, Moorish-looking groups of brown huts, and its dark-skinned men in sombreros or huge straw hats with steeple crowns. It was quite a relief to draw into El Paso station where everything was suddenly modern and American, and comfortably normal again.

Tony had got off duty to come and meet us; and after the first "how-do-you-dos," his mother began bombarding him with questions. What had happened? What was likely to happen? Wouldn't it have been better to telegraph us not to come?

She and Milly both had the air of eagerly hoping that he might after all be able to sweep away their fears with a word or a laugh; but for once, Tony kept as solemn a face as the conformation of his benevolent Billiken features permitted.

"There's nothing at all to worry about, if you don't get silly and panicky," said he. "I did think of telegraphing, not because there's any real danger, but because I was afraid that when you got down here, if things hadn't cleared up, the newspaper 'extras' and the way they talk at the hotels might give you the jumps. I couldn't have wired till after you'd started, though, because there was nothing doing before that, worth a telegram. I thought it would scare you blue if you got a message delivered to you in the train saying better not come, or words to that effect; so it seemed best to let things rip. Now you're on the spot, you just keep your hair on, and don't believe anything you read or hear; then you'll be all right."

"My hair doesn't come off, dearest," objected Mrs. Dalziel mildly, which made us laugh; and that did everybody good.

"I bet Lady Peggy isn't afraid worth a cent," Tony remarked.

"Rather not!" said I. "I wouldn't go away—no, not if you set *mice* at me! Even if Mrs. Dalziel and Milly went, I'd stay on and volunteer as a nurse. I can do first aid, and I don't mind the sight of blood if there isn't too much; though, of course, it would be better if it were a peaceful green or blue instead of that terrifying red."

Tony took us in a taxi to the Paso del Norte, a big hotel good enough for New York or London; and even in that short spin through the streets, we saw the newspaper "extras" being hawked about by yelling boys who waved the papers to show off their huge scarlet headlines. The marble entrance hall of the hotel was crowded with people who had just bought these extras, and were reading aloud tit-bits of "scare" news to each other, or discussing the situation in groups. Some looked very Spanish, and Tony said they were refugees, from the heart of Mexico; but the women seemed to have had plenty of time to sort out and pack their prettiest clothes before they fled.

That night Eagle March was asked to dine with us at the hotel. He sat between Mrs. Dalziel and Milly, and more than once I caught his eyes resting on me thoughtfully, almost wistfully. I wondered if there were something that he was particularly anxious to say, but Milly kept him occupied even after dinner was over and we were having coffee in the hall. I was resigning myself to the idea that we shouldn't be given time for a word together, when out of the crowd appeared Major Vandyke. He was with friends, but escaped, and crossed the hall to shake hands with us. I noticed what stiff, grudging nods he and Eagle gave each other, just enough of a nod not to be a cut. Something disagreeable had evidently happened between them since they left us at Fort Alvarado; for in those days, no matter how they felt, they always kept up the pretence of being good enough friends.

When Major Vandyke had been civil to me and asked after my "people," he began telling Mrs. Dalziel and Milly things about the state of affairs in El Paso. "You may have come in for a small adventure, after all," said he. "We've had to warn the occupants of some of the tallest buildings in town that they may be called on to clear out at five minutes' notice, if we have trouble, for their houses would be in range of gunfire from both sides. But you'll be all right here at the hotel, whatever happens. We're strong enough to protect you."

He laughed, and I saw that he enjoyed teasing timid little Mrs. Dalziel. I thought that haughty "we," constantly coming in, was characteristic of the man, and judging by the odd expression which just flickered lightly across Eagle's face, he was thinking the same thing. Tony joined boyishly in the conversation, to reassure his mother and Milly, and Eagle promptly seized the moment for a word with me.

"Any message?" he asked in a low voice. I shook my head.

"Oh, well," he said, "I'm mighty glad to see you, anyhow, little girl. Lucky Tony! I'm rather jealous of him, you know. I'd got sort of in the habit of thinking I had the only claim."

I felt myself go scarlet. What a good thing one doesn't blush all colours of the rainbow!—for I had the sensation of a prism. "Tony Dalziel may be lucky," I stammered. "I hope he is. But his luck has nothing to do with me. Neither has he—except as a friend. That's quite understood between us."

"Oh, is it?" smiled Eagle. "I'm a selfish beast to be glad, but I am. I was feeling quite low in my mind and 'out of it' at dinner."

So the wistful looks had been for me! It seemed too good to be true, even to have so much place in Eagle's heart that he didn't want to lose me.

When Milly turned to him, as she did almost instantly, for consolation after Major Vandyke's teasing, Eagle told her, while I listened, how very little, in his opinion, there was for any one to fear. It was true, of course, that the troops had come to El Paso for a purpose. Every one thought it had been served by frightening out of a certain faction of Mexicans such vague, secret hopes as they might foolishly have cherished. Now to be sure, the "scare act" was being read again, but the big field guns pointing across the river were in any case powerful enough to keep the peace. Captain March wanted to know if we would care to visit the camps next day. If so, he would help Dalziel arrange the visit. This suggestion saved Milly the trouble of hinting for it, and she was happy; but her happiness was destined to be short-lived. It was destroyed in the night by a band of vicious microbes with which she had been fighting a silent battle during the long journey to El Paso. They won, and kept her in bed with a pink nose and eyes overflowing with grief and influenza.

I nobly offered to stay with her, but Mrs. Dalziel had a son as well as a daughter. She said we must go and take a look at Tony's tent, if we did nothing else; and perhaps it would have ended in our doing not much more if it hadn't been for Eagle.

El Paso was one of the most deliciously exciting places in America just then, and there were many things which I wanted far more to see than Tony Dalziel's tent. There was the town itself, with its broad streets and tall buildings (which made me shiver with the wildly absurd thought of their being smashed by silly rebel guns from across the river); its shady avenues of alluring bungalows, and its parks—all so gay and peaceful in the warm spring sunshine that the very suggestion of war within a thousand miles seemed fantastic melodrama, despite the shouting newspaper boys with a fearsome "extra" coming out every fifteen minutes. There was new Fort Bliss, the cavalry post, and old Fort Bliss, famous, they told me, as long ago as the days of Indian warfare. There was the concentration camp where five thousand Mexicans were guarded by soldiers, and there were the camps of the reinforcing troops, artillery, cavalry, and infantry. I wanted to miss nothing, but when we had motored to old Fort Bliss down by the river and the smelting works, and seen the faded houses in temporary occupation of visiting officers; when we had spun out to new Fort Bliss to admire the smart quarters and barracks, and when we had trailed about a little in "Tony's camp," Mrs. Dalziel was tired. The sun was very hot, and she thought she ought to go home to poor Milly. Captain March, however, was certain that what I ought to do was to see his tent before deserting camp. He had something there which he particularly wished to show me. Tony volunteered to take his mother back to our hired automobile, waiting near the Zoo, and to return for me. I hoped that he might be away a long time, and looked forward to my few minutes alone with Eagle as to a taste of paradise, having no idea that those moments would be long enough to decide the fate of two men.

The camp was a neat, khaki-coloured town of canvas houses, big and little, seemingly countless rows of them, set in rough grass, and sandy earth of the same yellow brown as the tents. How the officers and men knew their narrow lanes and low-browed dwellings apart, I could not imagine, for they all bore the most remarkable family resemblance to one another in shape and feature, except those which boasted mosquito-net draperies to keep out the flies.

Among these more luxurious soldier houses was Eagle's. His tent, prepared for the day, consisted of a canvas wall with a wide-open space all around, between it and the roof; and the whole internal economy was ingenuously open to public gaze. Not that it mattered, for everything was as neat as a model doll's house: the narrow bed, the pathetically meagre toilet arrangements, the one chair, the small trunk which was the sole wardrobe, and the ridiculous shaving mirror stuck up on a pole, above a miniature arsenal.

"I should think you'd cut yourself to pieces," said I, giggling impolitely as I stood on tiptoe, and peered into my own eyes in the tiny looking-glass. "There isn't room to see more than half a feature at a time. I've always been glad I wasn't a man, for two reasons: because I'd hate to have to shave, or to marry a woman. Both are horrid necessities."

"That depends on the razor—and the woman," laughed Eagle. "But as a matter of fact, I value that six-inch square of glass more than any of my other possessions. It's the thing I expressly wanted to show you. Stand back a minute, Lady Vanity, and you'll see why."

I stood back. Eagle did something to the plain dark frame of the mirror, which had a gold rim inside. Then he pulled out the glass from the bottom, and there instead, framed in black and gold, was a photograph of Diana—a lovely photograph: just a head, lips faintly smiling, eyes gazing straight at you and saying in plain eye language, "I love you dearly."

I had never seen the photograph before, and seeing it now gave me a strange frightened feeling, as if I had found out something about Diana which I wasn't supposed to know. It was such an *intimate* portrait, intended to be revealing, yet really concealing! I felt it was wicked of those beautiful eyes to say what they did not mean, or, perhaps, did not know how to mean; and for my critical stare, behind that "I love you," calculation hid, like the cold glint deep down in the jewel eyes of a Persian cat, when she doesn't want a mouse to guess that she knows it is there.

"Now you can understand why I'm glad to be a man," said Eagle, "in spite of—no, *because* of—well, anyway one of the two 'necessities' you think so 'horrid,' my child. What glory to be chosen out of all the rest who love her by such a woman! And I hope she *is* going to choose me. I don't believe she's the kind of girl to have a photograph like that taken expressly for a man, if she didn't feel a little of what the picture seems to say she feels, do you?"



I suppose men's ignorance of what she is at heart is a Providence-given suit of chain armour for every woman. But I wasn't myself sure enough yet of what Di might decide to do, to try and disturb Eagle's happy confidence in her. So, instead of answering his questions, I asked him one: "*Did* she have that photograph taken expressly for you?"

"Yes," Eagle answered triumphantly. "I don't think she'd mind my repeating to her own sister that she told me so, or that there's only this one copy, and she gave orders to have the negative destroyed."

He had hardly got these words out of his mouth when we heard footsteps, and Major Vandyke stopped suddenly in front of the doorway. In an instant, Eagle had unhooked the frame from the pole, and holding the face of the portrait toward his breast, quietly slipped the mirror into its place again, as, with *sang-froid* apparently unruffled, he called out: "Hullo, Vandyke! Have you come to see Lady Peggy or me?"

"I didn't know Lady Peggy was here. I was only passing by, on my way to the colonel's," explained Vandyke. "But seeing her, I thought I might be allowed to stop and say 'how do you do?'"

He spoke rather brusquely, but it was impossible to tell from his tone whether it covered anger or expressed only the coolness which had grown up between him and Captain March. As I shook hands with Major Vandyke, I was asking myself anxiously if he could have seen the photograph in passing? If not—and it did seem as if Eagle's head and mine ought to have hidden it from him—our tell-tale words would have meant nothing to his intelligence, even if he had overheard them as he came. If, however, he had snatched a glimpse of Diana's face, and at the same time caught what Eagle said, I was afraid there might be trouble. Provided it were only for Di, I didn't much care, because she thoroughly deserved to have trouble, and it would give her a lesson; but something warned my instinct that the consequences might spread and spread until others suffered, as a ring forever widens in smooth water when the tiniest pebble is thrown.

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## CHAPTER VIII

We were still skirmishing on the outskirts of conversation—What did I think of a soldier's out-of-door quarters? Why hadn't any one yet shown me the great sight, the concentration camp? when Tony Dalziel came hurrying up, to take me back to his mother and the motor. His arrival seemed to bring relief from strain. It was like a brisk breeze blowing away the brooding clouds that stifle the atmosphere before a thunderstorm. I dreaded to go and leave those two men together; but when Major Vandyke suggested walking with us to the car, and asking Mrs. Dalziel about Milly, my heart felt lighter. We stopped only long enough with Eagle to arrange a visit to the concentration camp for next morning, if Milly were better, and then Vandyke, Tony, and I started off.

For the first two or three minutes the major walked along in silence; but when we were well out of sight of Eagle March's tent he interrupted some sentence of Tony's ruthlessly. I don't think he was even aware that the other was speaking.

"See here, Tony, old man, will you do me a favour?" he asked in his nicest manner. "There's a book in my tent I promised to give Lady Peggy, to read aloud to Miss Dalziel—a jolly good story! I forgot to bring it out when I came, and I don't want to go back now if I can help it, because a party of bores are being shown round in that direction, awful people I've escaped from. You don't know them, so they can't hurt you. Will you, like a dear chap, cut off and grab the book? It's on the table; you can't miss it; purple cover."

Tony obligingly "cut," and I waited, breathless, for what was to come, knowing now without being told that Sidney Vandyke had seen the photograph. He had not promised me a book, nor mentioned one.

I had only a few seconds to wait. "Is it true that your sister gave March the picture he has in his tent?" he demanded, rather than asked.

I gasped, doubtful whether it would be wise to bring things to a crisis, or better to try and keep them simmering. But an instant's reflection told me that to shilly-shally with the man in this mood would make what was already bad far worse. "Yes, she gave it to him, of course," I replied. "I think you must have overheard him say so."

I really didn't mean to put emphasis on the offending word, but Major Vandyke suspected it. Perhaps the cap fitted!

"I wasn't eavesdropping," he said. "I happened to hear. That's a very different thing from overhearing. And I have a right to ask you as Diana's sister, Diana herself not being on the spot, to give me an explanation, as I'm sure she would if she were here. Because I have the duplicate of that photo. She told me she'd had it taken for me, and the negative destroyed. I considered it sacred. I would have shown it to nobody."

"I am nobody," said I, "nobody except Captain March's friend, to whom he tells things he wouldn't tell to others. He had the best of reasons to believe I was in Diana's confidence, as well as his. And as for the photograph, it's as sacred to him as it could be to you, Major Vandyke. You might

realize that from the clever way he has thought of to hide it; and no person who wasn't absolutely *prying* could have recognized it in passing by his tent. He knew that very well, or he wouldn't have uncovered the picture for even a second."

"If you were a man, you wouldn't dare say such a thing as that to me, Lady Peggy."

"Oh, yes, I would," I retorted, "if I were nearly as big as you. I'm Captain March's friend, not yours; and I'm not a bit afraid to be your enemy if you are his."

"You are more loyal to your friend than to your own flesh and blood," he flung at me. "If you say your sister did give that photograph to March, you make her out a liar. But I won't believe it of her. I prefer to believe it of March instead."

"'Liar' is a strong word," I temporized. "I was always taught that it was very rude, too. You're a flirt, Major Vandyke! Every one says that of you, and I believe you're proud of it. So you ought to have some sympathy with a fellow flirt, like Di. If any one must be blamed, of course it's she, not Captain March. He has as much right to accept a photograph from a girl as you have. But you needn't be too angry with Di, if she made you believe that you were the only one, when she was doing the same thing with Captain March. Probably she didn't 'lie' to either of you in so many words."

"It's not necessary for you to defend Lady Diana to me, I assure you," returned Major Vandyke. "Whatever she may have done, I'm ready to forgive her, if she's willing to stand by me. But I won't have March swaggering around and boasting that she gives him special favours."

"If I were a man *you* wouldn't dare say *that!*" I burst out. "When you talk about 'boasting,' or 'swaggering,' you must be judging him by yourself, for you are always doing both, he never. I believe Di likes him better than she does you, because he's a sort of popular hero with his flying, and you have nothing except your flirting and your fortune to recommend you to a girl."

If only I hadn't lost my head and thrown that taunt at him! I suppose I shall never know how much difference, or how little, this mistake of mine made. The instant the words were out I would have given anything to recall them. But it was too late. To apologize, or try to explain, would only do more harm. I ventured one sidelong glance at Major Vandyke's face after I had shot that bolt; and I quivered all over as I saw how the blood streamed darkly up to his forehead and swelled the veins at his temples. If I hadn't been afraid of him for Eagle, whose superior officer he was, I might have pitied him for the pain I had inflicted, under which he could keep silence only by biting his lip. I knew he was hating me violently, but I didn't care a rap. All I cared for just then was that he was hating Eagle March, and counting on paying him out in some way—I couldn't guess what.

"I must warn Eagle," I said to myself; and I could almost have kissed Tony, I was so glad to see him when he came back with the purple-covered book which nobody wanted.

Major Vandyke walked on with us to the motor, as if nothing had happened, but he was very silent, letting Tony and me talk undisturbed. It was only after he had spoken in a dry, mechanical way to Mrs. Dalziel, and the car was about to start, that I caught his eyes. There was a look in them as cold and deadly—or I imagined it—as deliberate murder.

I couldn't wait until next day to see Eagle and tell him—I hardly knew what, but *something*, to put him on his guard. He had said that he was engaged to lunch with a man named Donaldson at the Hotel Weldon, and it occurred to me that I might reach him there by telephone. At a little before one o'clock, I called up the hotel, and inquired if Captain March had arrived, to keep an appointment with Mr. Donaldson. The answer was "yes"; and when I had given my name, I was asked to hold the line for a few minutes, until Captain March should come to the telephone.

As I sat with the receiver at my ear, waiting, somebody began to talk in weird Spanish—or "Mex," as I'd heard it nicknamed in El Paso. The telephone and I had never been intimate friends at home, and I'd practically made its acquaintance since coming to America, so I scarcely realized why or how I was hearing that voice. "Is it some one trying to call to me?" I wondered stupidly. "Who knows here, except Eagle, that I speak Spanish?" Then, gradually, it dawned on me that I had "tapped" a conversation going on between persons with whom I had nothing to do. Their chatter could have no interest for me, even if it were excusable to listen, but I didn't drop the receiver lest I should miss Captain March, having been instructed to hold the line till he came. I couldn't help being vaguely pleased, too, that I had picked up enough Spanish in my home studies to understand what was being said. But suddenly my silly conceit was turned into horror. I was overhearing (that word which Major Vandyke had resented!) a plot between a pair of Mexican servants to poison the American families who employed them.

Two women were talking to each other, rapidly, earnestly, in tones of such agitation as they hurried on, that only for the first instant could I fancy a practical joke was being played. "You got the stuff safely? Yes? Then it has gone round among those who will do the work. Only a few have refused to come in. Those who eat will not die, but all will be sick. Then the men cannot fight our men if they come across the river. It is a very good plan to let us women help in our way. Yet, above everything, there must be no mistake! It is for the noon meal on Thursday, but only if we are sure of an attack for that night. We should be lost if we acted too soon. I am the one to pass the word. I am telling one after another to wait until it comes from me, by telephone or in some other way."

The words were rattled off so fast that I could catch no more than half, but I had seized enough to fill up the spaces for myself when the voices were cut off into silence, and Eagle March called, "Hello! Is that you, Peggy?"

"Yes," I said. "I had something important to say to you, but I've heard the most horrid talk going on over the telephone. I'm afraid it may mean a real danger for El Paso. I daren't tell you about it on the wire. Do let me see you! I must! Can you possibly take a taxi and rush over here now, or shall I go to you? I'll do that if you can't come to me."

"I'll come to you, of course," answered Eagle. "I'll excuse myself to Donaldson, and be with you in five minutes."

"Good; in the hall," I said. "I'll run down now and wait for you."

Mrs. Dalziel and I were to lunch in Milly's room, to keep her company and tell her all the news; but the meal wasn't due yet for half an hour, so there was plenty of time before my hostess should come knocking at the door. I had just found a quiet place in the corner of the big marble hall, and annexed a sofa for two, when I saw Eagle walk in. He was looking for me. I beckoned, and he came to me with long strides. It would be hard to tell why, but never had I loved him so well as at that moment. I did not see how I was going to bear a whole, long life without having him in it.

When he had sat down by my side, I told him quickly what I had overheard, and how. The moment he had got the pith of the story he jumped up, looking preoccupied and anxious. "I must go at once," he said, "before the girls at the telephone exchange have time to forget the numbers of those who've called and been called up in the last twenty minutes or so. We may be able to catch the ringleader in that way, and get from her the names of every one in the plot—if it's a genuine plot; and I agree with you that it looks rather like it. Peggy, your fad for studying languages and your quick wits may have saved El Paso from something at the least unpleasant."

"Oh, I hope so!" I cried. "And the women talked about some 'attack!' Don't forget that."

"No fear!" he almost laughed. "Now I must go. You may be asked some questions later on. I hope you won't much mind."

I shook my head. "What does it matter? But, oh, Eagle! I cannot let you go until I've told you what I rang you up for. Major Vandyke saw Di's picture, and heard what we said. And he's furious, because it seems she gave him a photograph—something like yours. I don't quite know what he thinks, but he's more angry with you than with her, and I believe he'll try to get even with you in someway. Look out for him!"

"I will!" This time he laughed outright. "And I don't think he will be able to frighten me into giving up Diana—if she'll have me. Good-bye, dear, and thank you for everything, with all my heart. You're my good angel!"

"How I wish I could be!" I sighed. But he heard neither sigh nor words. He had hurried away and into his waiting taxi.

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## CHAPTER IX

Unluckily, nothing could be proved through the telephone people, though there was certain circumstantial evidence against one or two Mexican women, as I heard through Eagle March. But American families who employed Mexicans were privately informed of the existence of a possible plot against them, and consequently a number of Mexican servants in El Paso were thrown out of employment at an hour's notice. The authorities did all they could to keep any report out of the papers, but, of course, did not succeed, and the "extras" had choice tit-bits of sensation for that afternoon. The mysterious threat of an impending raid was enlarged upon, too, and to calm the public, as well as impress "the other side of the river," it was decided to have a great parade of troops through the town. A day was settled upon to be called "Army Day"; but meanwhile, precautions were taken to guard against any "surprise coup," such as had been carried out across the Rio Grande at Juarez by a few Constitutionals against Federals, one night some months before.

The crowds who had been out to stare at the concentration camp, peopled with dark-faced thousands of men, women, and children, trailed in procession as near as they were allowed to approach the field guns placed on a bare, brown eminence whence their long noses pointed grimly across the river. There were six of these guns the day I saw them, all guns of Captain March's battery; but owing to their alignment, and the position of El Paso's few skyscrapers between this hill and the river, only four of the guns would threaten destruction to any buildings in the town, in case the artillery had to be brought into action.

The other two could be fired in the unlikely event of a disturbance, it was believed, without danger to American property. I heard this, with lots of other exciting details of the preparations going on, from Tony Dalziel, who thought—whether rightly or wrongly—that he could chat to me on the one great subject of interest without indiscretion. He told me among other things, that if fire had to be opened on Juarez, just across the river, he understood from talk he heard that

these two comparatively innocuous guns would alone be used at first. If the damage they did on the opposite side were enough to force the enemy to capitulate in haste, the other four guns would remain silent, and El Paso intact. But, said Tony (and his fellow officers said the same), in spite of the persistent rumour of a raid, it was almost certain now that there would be no trouble. It was whispered that because Americans had given sanctuary to Federal troops in flight, and for other reasons not so widely known, General Carranza had wanted to organize an attack on the United States frontier across the Rio Grande, temptingly shrunken by a long drought; but it was reported at the same time that General Villa had forcibly opposed the suggestion, and it was very improbable that any serious attempt would be made to carry it out.

It was Tuesday when I gave the alarm of the poison plot, and Thursday was the day gossip suggested for a raid. Nevertheless, the people were no longer nervous. They felt a joyful confidence in the troops who had been sent to reinforce the garrison at Fort Bliss, and even the most bloodcurdling newspaper headlines had at length lost much of their gruesomeness.

By this time Milly Dalziel was as well as ever once more, and using her regained health to make a "dead set" at Eagle March. (I shouldn't tell this of her, if what she did later hadn't influenced events in a strange, dramatic way.) She couldn't let Eagle alone; and she showed her feelings so plainly—as a very rich girl sometimes thinks she may do with a comparatively poor man—that even Eagle himself, despite his lack of self-conceit and his preoccupation with thoughts of Di, couldn't help understanding. He kept out of Milly's way as often as he could, but she attributed this retirement to the calls of duty; and at last began to behave so foolishly that for her own sake he gently snubbed her.

Poor Milly Dalziel had not her pretty, bright red hair for nothing. Her impulsive emotions, which she concealed badly, and her fiery temper were its natural accompaniments. When it burst upon her that Eagle March did not admire her as she admired him, and thought it best she should realize this once for all, she suffered a wild reaction of feeling. From being slavishly, ridiculously in love, she flew to the other extreme; and after an embarrassing little scene, in which Eagle firmly avoided her, she broke out to me in hysterical abuse of him. He was rude; he was "no gentleman"; and she didn't see how I could make a friend of such an ungracious brute. The one thing he could do was to fly, and she only wished he *would* fly—far away, and never be seen again.

I was too sorry for the girl to resent as I ought to have resented her childish but mean abuse. I knew, only too well, how much it hurt to be in love with Eagle March, and not to have him care an American red cent in return. I let Milly talk for a while, and then tried to soothe her down, saying that she would feel differently about everything next day. This was the signal for the girl to turn on me, which she did so ferociously that I began to fear I must find an excuse to cut my visit short. I wanted to stay; I had very little money for travelling, and I was sure Father would send funds with reluctance, especially as he no doubt hoped that Tony and I would after all come together. With Di and me both safely disposed of to rich husbands, he would be free to marry Kitty Main, or do anything he pleased. With this thought in my mind, the situation looked rather desperate, and that night—Thursday night—I was lying awake to wonder what I could do, when suddenly the night silence which falls on lively El Paso after twelve was broken with the noise of a tremendous explosion.

The huge bulk of the hotel quivered, as if struck with a Titan's hammer, and it must have been the same with every other building in town. I jumped out of bed mechanically, not knowing what I did. Only my body acted. For an instant my brain was dazed—connection cut off. The first thing I really knew, I found myself standing at the open window clinging to the curtains. "What is it? What is it?" I was stammering out aloud. And before I could get any answer from within, again came the same appalling sound. With that, as if a second shock could restore the senses stolen by the one preceding, I guessed that what I had heard must be gunfire on the hill.

"The raid has come, then, after all!" I thought, with awe rather than fear; and thousands of other people must have been thinking the same thought at the same moment.

It was a clear, starry night, the sky glittering like a blue, spangled robe that scintillates with the motion of a dancer, and the electric lamps of the city below lighting the streets as brightly as if the moon were up. When I first reached the high window and stared down from it, I had the impression that those streets were empty, but immediately after the second shot and its reverberating echo, dark figures began swarming out. Heads appeared in every visible window of the hotel. Electricity was switched on in darkened rooms, and women showed themselves in their nightgowns, with hair streaming over their shoulders, or hair lamentably absent, careless whether they were seen or not. I heard screaming and shouting, and then all such small sounds were swallowed up in another roar—the third.

My thoughts flew to Eagle. If there were a raid he would be in danger. He might be killed, and I should never see him again. I didn't think at the minute what might happen to the rest of us. Nothing and no one seemed to matter except Eagle. Still only half conscious of what I did, unable to decide what might be best to do, I dropped on my knees to pray that Eagle might be safe. But I had only just begun to stammer out my appeal when there came a sharp tapping at the door. "Let us in—let us in!" Milly's voice cried, and Mrs. Dalziel quaveringly repeated the same words.

I shot back the bolt, and the two in their nightgowns almost fell into the room. Milly, crying, seized me in her arms and begged me to forgive her for all her unkindness to me. We should probably be dead in a few minutes or hours, and she wanted to die at peace. As she faltered on,

Mrs. Dalziel sobbed that Tony would be killed, and their fears made me brave. I was suddenly convinced that there had been no raid and said so. "I'm sure there's nothing to be afraid of," I insisted stoically. "Remember, we've heard only three cannon shots, or sounds like shots. There'd be constant firing if there had been a Mexican surprise. And there *couldn't* have been a 'surprise' after all the warnings we had. Anyhow, a handful of Mexicans wouldn't dare, with all those troops and guns on the spot."

"But what can have happened if it isn't an attack?" wailed Mrs. Dalziel. "If only my son were here!"

"Did the shots come from our side of the river, or the other?" Milly asked, speaking more to herself than to me, for one was as ignorant on the subject as the other. "I couldn't tell for sure, could you?"

"No," I said. "I hadn't thought of the other side. I just took it for granted it was our own guns firing for some reason or other."

"But *what* reason?" persisted Milly. "Why should they fire three shots in the dead of the night, and then stop?"

"Perhaps it's maneuvers, or a firing drill, or something," I hazarded weakly, feeling all the time that it was nothing of the sort.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Dalziel and Milly both agreed, looking a little relieved by my silly supposition.

"Shall we hurry up and dress ourselves and go downstairs?" I suggested. "See what a lot of people are in the streets. The whole town's surprised out of its wits, and wild to know what's happened. Why shouldn't we know, too?"

"Oh, yes, let's go down," cried Milly. "By this time Thérèse is certain to be in mother's room, in hysterics and nothing else! We'll make her stop and drape herself in a blanket and dress us."

"Thank goodness I can dress myself, and in five minutes," I said. They went hesitatingly out, forgetting to close my door, and before I could do so myself I heard Thérèse's voice across the hall.

I didn't stop to put up my hair, but let it hang down my back; I didn't even tie my shoes, or fasten more than three hooks of my easiest blouse: one at the top, one in the middle, and one at the waist. Consequently, I was ready before the Dalziels, but waited for them outside the door of their suite, almost dazedly watching people—men and women, half clothed—dashing out of their rooms toward the stairs and elevators. Some of these were jabbering to each other, but nobody seemed to know what had happened. They were merely wondering, as we were; and in the big hall, where some of the lights had been switched on, we could glean no further details. Several of the hotel employés had arrived on the scene, more or less dressed, and they did what they could to calm their guests. Presently one of the managers appeared, and he strongly advised every one to remain in the hotel. If any trouble were afoot, it would be safer indoors than out, and news might be expected soon. He had already sent a trustworthy messenger, he explained, to inquire of the police and the answer would be more reliable than mere wild gossip picked up in the street, among the crowd.

Some of the older men, and all the women, took the manager's advice, though a good many young men disregarded it, and went off foraging for news. Those of us who remained in the house, however, didn't think of meekly returning to our rooms. We herded together in the hall of the hotel, in a fever of expectation, strangers hobnobbing like old acquaintances and exchanging opinions on the mysterious alarm. The time of waiting seemed long; but we three had not been below more than twenty minutes, perhaps, when people who had been out began to stream back with tidings of a sort for their families. No two men had quite the same story to tell. One had heard that a band of *Apaches* from a low quarter of the town had organized a scare to stir up the military. Another had been told on good authority that the Mexicans had fired guns from across the river and injured one of the tall buildings in El Paso, nobody knew which. A third assured everybody that our guns had been fired, but charged only with blank, to frighten the Mexicans, at the moment when they hoped to give us a surprise. By and by, the messenger dispatched by the manager came back; but he had little new light to throw on the situation, except to assure every one on the authority of the police that there had been no raid, and there was no danger of any kind for the town. Accordingly, the best thing for its inhabitants to do would be to go to bed again.

Very few, however, seemed inclined to take this advice. Mrs. Dalziel might have done so had Milly and I consented; but I had an idea that Tony would come to the hotel, if possible, sooner or later, expecting us to be anxious. I was right, for in an hour, or not much more, while we all sat munching sandwiches, hastily provided, the familiar plump figure in khaki stalked into the hall. Milly and I both sprang up, and Tony directed himself toward us; but before he came near enough to speak, I knew that something really terrible had happened. Whether he meant to tell us the truth or not was another question. The jolly, round-faced boy seemed to have lost the characteristics I associated most closely with him; and when a youth with comical features of the Billiken type is suddenly fitted with a tragic mask, the effect is somehow more alarming than any look of distress on a serious face.

He tried to grin, as his mother greeted him like one returning from the dead. "Why, mater," he

said, "any one'd think to see and hear you that I'd been blown to smithereens, and this was my ghost. You'll laugh, I guess, when I tell you what really happened. I got leave to make a dash and put you out of your misery." When he had gone so far, he stopped, and swallowed. He looked sick, and all the more so because of the Billiken grin which he was afraid to let drop. His eyes wandered from his mother to me, and I saw pain in them. I felt for the first time that little Tony was a grown-up man.

"Well—well?" Milly urged him sharply. "Why don't you tell us?"

"I'm a bit out of breath," her brother excused himself. "I hiked over here pretty fast—borrowed a bicycle. Give me a second to get my wind back, sis."

But this was more than Milly could do. "Weren't you with the guns to-night?" she asked. "You said you were going to be."

"Did I say that? Well, I was. But—but the row you all heard had nothing to do with the *guns*, you know. At least, nothing directly. It was—the ammunition; an accident, you see. One of our chaps dropped a lighted match, and it set fire to part of our train of ammunition. Three shells burst, but—but nobody was hurt—except—"

"Except who?" Milly had to break in before Tony could go on. I said nothing at all. I only looked at him. But after that first glance he kept his eyes away from me, I believed purposely.

"Except an orderly of—one of the officers, and—oh, very slightly indeed—March. He's hardly hurt at all, but—you mustn't be surprised if you don't see him around for the next few days."

The blood rushed up to Milly's pale face, but she pressed her lips together almost viciously, and forced herself not to speak. Her green-gray eyes flashed out one distress signal, then seemed to shut it off deliberately and coldly.

"Captain March!" exclaimed kind Mrs. Dalziel, with real distress. "Oh, I'm so sorry that he should be hurt!"

"So are we all," Tony responded; and voice and face would have told me, if I hadn't guessed before, that he was either keeping back something of grave importance, or else carefully lying.

"Will he really be all right again in a few days?" the dear little lady went on.

"Er—perhaps not all right, but—nothing to worry about," said Tony, with lumbering cheerfulness. "He's in no danger of death, anyhow, that's one good thing."

"What about Major Vandyke?" I heard myself say; and even as the question came, I wondered why I should have thought of it in that connection. But somehow it would out, and only my subconscious self, far down in mysterious depths, knew the reason.

"Oh, Major Vandyke! Why, as it happens, he went over to the other side of the river in his motor car—on business."

A flame of suspicion in me was lit by that match.

"To *Mexico*!" I exclaimed. "But I was told only this very day, by Captain March, that no officer or soldier was allowed to cross the river on any pretext whatever."

"That was—is—so, in an ordinary way," Tony admitted, swallowing heavily again. "But you see that fearful row on the hill where the guns are might—must have set a hornet's nest buzzing over there. The chaps were likely to think we were potting at *them*—out of a clear sky, and—er—they might have begun potting back at us in a minute or two, in their excitement. So, to save the situation, Vandyke scooted across with only his orderly—who's his chauffeur, too—in his own car with some sort of white flag rigged up in a jiffy. I expect he'll get a lot of credit for that dash when the story—I mean the facts, are out."

"It *was* a brave thing to do!" cried Mrs. Dalziel, always delighted to praise any one. "He must have risked his life."

"Yes," said Tony, "no doubt of that. The Mexican bridge sentries might have fired on him in spite of the white flag. They—they did fire, I believe. But Vandyke's all right, anyhow."

"You speak as if some one wasn't." I heard myself talking, though I seemed not to have spoken the words deliberately.

"Only the orderly, poor chap. He was driving the car. I guess the sentries saw him before they saw the white flag."

"They shot him?"

"Yes, unfortunately they did." Tony's voice broke a little, and that struck me as odd; for he could not have had any personal interest, it seemed, in Major Vandyke's chauffeur-orderly.

"I hope they didn't kill the poor fellow?" purred Mrs. Dalziel.

"I don't think he's dead yet, mater, but I'm afraid he's past speaking. They got him in the lungs."

"Major Vandyke's come back, then," I said.

"Oh, yes, he was back in less than an hour, after a parley over there, explaining everything and making the Constitutionals understand we weren't meaning them any harm. I didn't get leave to see you till just after he had brought his car and his wounded orderly over to this side again. And now, if your minds are calmed down, I'll be off. I've told you no secrets. Everything I've said the papers will repeat to-morrow. But all the same, please don't talk to any one about this business. Promise, mater, and Milly. And I guess I don't need to ask you, Lady Peggy. Now, good-bye. I'll see you as early as I can in the morning."

He kissed his mother, patted Milly on the arm, and gave my hand such a shake that I should have writhed if I had worn any rings. For once, instead of lingering, he had the air of being glad to escape from us, but on an impulse I followed him to the door and called him back just as he had reached the threshold.

"Tony!" I began. He turned with a start, and stopped. I had often been invited, but had never before consented, to call him Tony.

"I want to ask you something before you go," I said.

He gave me a queer, apprehensive look. "Please don't!"

"Then I'll tell you something, instead. There isn't one word of truth in your story about what happened. You've been making it all up."

"That's where you're mistaken," he contradicted me. "I haven't made it up."

"If not, somebody made it up for you, and you've been ordered to put the story round. This is what people are to believe, the version that the papers will be given. But it's no use giving it to me. I don't believe it. So there!"

"It's all I've got to say, and even you won't get a different word out of me," he said despairingly. "You always did have a wonderful imagination, Lady Peggy, but whatever you may think, for God's sake don't blab to any one else, unless to me; and I'd rather you wouldn't even to me. I tell you, I'm pretty near all in."

I let him go, but I made up my mind that I would not be put off with the story which papers and public were to get. I would know the truth, and exactly what had happened to Eagle March.

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## CHAPTER X

It was just as Tony had said it would be: the newspapers next day repeated his story. Very few clear details were given. The articles with their spread-eagle headlines concerned themselves more—for a wonder—with effect than cause. They told at length and dramatically how El Paso had been aroused in the dead of night by bomblike explosions which, many had taken for granted, came from the guns on the hill, repelling or revenging a raid from the other side. They told how the public had behaved, and described the relief felt when it had been definitely learned on good authority that the alarm was due to an accident with some ammunition. But about the accident itself there was what struck me as a singular reticence, considering the wild conjectures newspapers did not hesitate to print on other subjects. Their *pièce de résistance* was the magnificent courage and presence of mind displayed by Major Sidney Vandyke of the —th Artillery, whose battery had been concerned in the incident.

I sent for all the El Paso papers, which were brought to me before I was up, very early in the morning; and I sat in bed studying, in one after the other of them, the version of last night's strange affair. Somehow, the general praise of Sidney Vandyke's exploit annoyed me intensely, as one is annoyed when an undeserving person is ignorantly lauded to the skies. I know that on the face of things I had no right to say that he was "undeserving," in this case; but that instinctive rebellion in me against Tony's story last night cried out against it now. "There's something queer under it all," I kept telling myself. "I must find out what it is, and I *must* know about Eagle."

Concerning Captain March, the papers had very little to say. They understood that he had been on the spot when the explosion had occurred, and that he had received slight injuries which would prevent him from carrying on his military duties for some time to come. All their attention was bestowed upon Major Vandyke, who had made himself the hero of what was called "El Paso's Big Night." Owing to the indisposition of the colonel, who had been struck down in the morning by a touch of the sun, Major Vandyke was temporarily in command. His private automobile, which had followed him from Alvarado to El Paso, had brought him from new Fort Bliss to old Fort Bliss on official business: and he was on his way back when, hearing sounds which resembled gunfire, he had stopped his chauffeur on the instant, and dashed on fast up the artillery hill, near which he happened to be. Fearing that the Mexicans—already restless, owing to the attitude of the United States at Vera Cruz and other places, and to the arrival of reinforcements along the Rio Grande—might misunderstand, and work some mad, irreparable mischief, Major Vandyke and his orderly had made a dash across the river. In spite of the white flag used to protect the car and its occupants, the sentinels on guard upon the Mexican side had fired at the sight of men in uniform, and the orderly had been shot. Otherwise, the errand so bravely undertaken had been crowned with success. The Mexicans, thinking they had been fired at, were about to discharge their own field guns, placed in a position of offence, in answer to the

menace of the United States. Had Major Vandyke been five minutes later with his diplomatic intervention the word would have been given to fire, and one or more of El Paso's finest buildings might have been destroyed, perhaps with loss of life terrible to think of even now when the danger was past.

The next thing I did, having absorbed all the news I could get from the papers, was to write a letter to Eagle. I told him that I heard he had been hurt, and begged him to send me a line—or a word if he couldn't write—to say how he really was. I inquired if he were in hospital, and if it would be possible for me to see him. When I had finished, I rang and asked for a trustworthy messenger. By and by, a servant of the hotel arrived to do my errand, and I told him as clearly as I could what I wanted. He must go to the big camp near Fort Bliss and inquire for Captain March. I couldn't say whether the officer would be in his own tent or elsewhere, but, anyhow, he must be found. If he were too ill to answer even by word of mouth, the messenger mustn't come back until at least he had learned something about Captain March's condition.

"I'll pay you very well," I said, trying to give the effect of a budding female millionaire.

As soon as the man had gone, I bathed and dressed quickly, in order to be ready if he brought back word that I might be allowed to see Eagle. I didn't care whether I had breakfast or not; but time dragged on, and nothing happened. For the sake of making dull moments pass, I rang for coffee and a roll. It was early still, and Mrs. Dalziel and Milly were doubtless trying to make up for their disturbed night by taking an extra rest.

The tray appeared, and I ate and drank what the choking in my throat would let me swallow, but there was no sign yet of the messenger. I calculated how long it ought to take him to reach the camp on the bicycle he had mentioned; how long to do the errand; how long to return; and still there was nearly an hour unaccounted for. I was so restless and miserable that I could have shrieked. I walked up and down the little white-and-green room as if it were a cage, but soon all my strength had gone from me. I sat on the window seat, staring out as I had stared in the night, hoping now to catch sight of a man on a bicycle.

At last, when I had begun to feel shut in, and only half alive, like the Lady of Shalott, as though nothing could ever happen in my life again, I jumped up at the sound of a knock on the door. It was the messenger. My heart bounded when he took from his pocket a letter, but only to fall at seeing a hotel envelope with my own handwriting on it.

"I'm sorry, miss," the man said, "but I couldn't get to Captain March. I went everywhere and tried asking a lot of folks, but couldn't find out nothing. They wouldn't let me into the camp, even, much less to the gentleman's tent, so I can't tell you whether he's there or not. I did my best, but the army's different from civil life. When they say 'no' they mean 'no' and there ain't no goin' around it, or they prods you with one of them bayonets."

"Surely you haven't come back without any news?" I cried. "You must have heard *something!*"

"Not a thing at the camp, except what I've just told you, miss," the messenger persisted. "I hung around, and whenever I seen some chap going in, if I could get him to speak I asked questions till they begun to take me for one of them newspaper guys. It was only when I seen the stunt was no good I chucked it and come back with your letter. There's just one thing I did hear, but not in camp. 'Twas outside the hotel, as I stopped my wheel. I met an old soldier from the Fort I'd been acquainted with a good long time—fact is, he's engaged to my sister. I asked him if he'd heard about Captain March being wounded. And he said—only I don't know as I ought to tell you what he said——"

"Tell me—every word," I panted.

"Well, then, if it's *every* word you want, miss, he said it was all damn nonsense about March being wounded, that something big was up, and he's under arrest."

Under arrest! The words struck like bullets. Just for a second everything swam before my eyes, and I was afraid that I was going to do the most idiotic thing a woman can do—faint. You see, I had had no sleep and wasn't quite at my best. But I pulled myself together, and in my ears my voice sounded only a little sharp, as I asked the messenger if his soldier friend had given him any further information.

"Not he! Shut up tight as a clam," was the answer. "I don't believe he knowed anything else."

There was nothing more to be got from that quarter, so I paid the man and let him go. Then I tried to think how I could hope to probe to the bottom of the mystery, since mystery there certainly was. It seemed to me that, since I wasn't able to reach Eagle by letter, my one chance lay in Tony. His manner, and the admissions he had inadvertently dropped last night, had told me that he had some knowledge of the truth, which was to be hidden from the public. He had refused to be pumped, and I respected him for his refusal; but I wasn't the public. Whatever the secret might be, I would keep it. All I wanted to do was to help Captain March if he could be helped; for I was sure all through to my soul that, if he had been arrested, it was through some terrible mistake or cruel injustice. It was wicked of me, perhaps, deliberately to make a tool of poor Tony's love for me, but I tried to justify myself in deciding to do so by saying that no harm could come to him through it, or evil to any one.

"I'll wheedle the truth out of Tony," I thought again.



I dared not write and beg him to come and see me, for after our parting last night he would suspect what I wanted and have time to steel himself against me before we met. Nor could I go to the camp and try to find him there, for I—a young girl—wouldn't be admitted alone even if I were desperate enough to think of attempting such a wild adventure. If I persuaded Mrs. Dalziel to take me, and we had the luck to see Tony, I shouldn't have a moment with him alone, whereas the process of "wheedling" might take many minutes.

The only thing to do was to wait, and that was the hardest task ever given me. I shall not forget that day even if I live to be an old woman; and looking back on it now over the months which have passed since—months which seem longer than all the rest of my life put together—I believe that my very character took on some change in those hours, as metal is changed if you throw it on to the fire. I felt for the first time that I was a woman, with all the childishness burnt out of me; and I was glad, for I might have to do battle with those who were older and wiser than I.

Mrs. Dalziel and Milly didn't appear till noon; but meanwhile I went down and talked to a great many people in the hotel, people whom I didn't know. After the excitement of the night, everybody chattered and exchanged impressions with everybody else, without stopping to think or care whether they had been introduced to each other. A few of the men had a vague idea that something was being "hushed up," but none could guess what it was, and nobody knew anything about Captain March. Naturally I didn't tell what I had been told: that he was under arrest. I trusted with all my heart that no one else had heard, or would hear, the story. And I prayed that it might not be true. To Milly I would not speak of him at all; for though she had apologized for yesterday, and "made friends" with me again, I knew that there was a cruel streak in her which would rejoice revengefully now, in any trouble that fell on Eagle. She would feel that it was a direct punishment sent by Fate for his indifference to her, and the way in which (for her own good) she had forced him to show it.

We had been engaged for a short motor run with Tony in the afternoon, but I was more disappointed than surprised when he sent a hurried note to his mother saying that there was so much business to do he couldn't get off. He might not even be able to dine. We were not to wait, but he would turn up in time for dinner at seven-thirty if he could. In any case, he would come in for a while later.

I had an evening dress Di had given me after she had tired of it, which I had altered for myself, and Tony particularly liked it. I put it on for dinner that night. Tony did manage to come, bearing an offering—flowers for all three of us. I saw that he noticed the frock, and with a little meaning smile at him, I tucked one of his roses down into the neck. He flushed up at that, poor boy, all over his nice Billiken face, and I felt like every cat in Christendom rolled into one. But it was the first move in my game. I hoped that after so much encouragement, he would make some excuse after dinner to get me to himself.

Scarcely a word was said during the meal concerning Captain March. Mrs. Dalziel inquired about him; Tony with his mouth full answered indistinctly and hurriedly that he was "getting along all right"—as well as anybody could expect; and Milly viperishly turned the subject to Major Vandyke's exploit.

"He'll be a greater popular hero now than Captain March ever was," she remarked with an elaborately impersonal air. "The first thing we know, Peggy, we shall hear that Lady Di is engaged to him; don't you think? She adores heroes. She once told me so."

"What a romance that would be!" beamed nice Mrs. Dalziel, who never saw under the surface of anything. But I was grateful to her for breaking in, and saving me the necessity of an answer to Milly's questions. If I had replied truthfully, I should have had to say that it was exactly what I *did* think. Whatever the secret of the night might turn out to be, I felt sure that Sidney Vandyke had made a desperate bid to win Diana away from Eagle March. And with pangs of sharp remorse I remembered those angry words of mine which had perhaps spurred him to the effort.

Neither Mrs. Dalziel nor Milly appeared to have any suspicions that the origin of the night alarm was not precisely what the newspapers reported; that simplified things for Tony, as far as they were concerned; and I was careful not to fling at him a single embarrassing question. As dinner went on he lost the worried look he had brought with him, a look that was a misfit for his merry personality. He glanced often with a rather pathetic wistfulness at me, which I read very easily and shamefacedly; and at last he broke out with information concerning a torchlight procession that would set forth from one of the parks of El Paso. Of course I knew what this remark was leading up to! He'd heard people say, he went on, that there was going to be quite a good impromptu show, celebrating the end of the "scare"; for it was generally felt that Major Vandyke's diplomatic dash had cleared the air of danger; and if there had ever been any real peril it was past now, once and for all. Would we like to go out and see the sight?

Promptly Milly answered for her mother and herself. They would not like to go out and see the sight. If there was anything worth the trouble of looking at, probably it could be seen from the hotel windows.

"But what about *you*, Lady Peggy?" Tony asked.

"I'd love to go with you," I answered.

I put on a long cloak, the one I had worn to see "our" battery off at Fort Alvarado railway station, and Tony and I sallied forth together. It was not till we were safely in the street that he told me

we were early for the procession. "Never mind," said I. "It's lovely to be out in the blue night. We'll just stroll through quiet streets, where there won't be a crowd to bother us, until it's time to go and gaze at the torches."

"There's a nice little sort of park," he suggested, "not too far away. How would you like to walk there?"

I said I would like it, and as our "little sort of" park wasn't the park whence the procession would start, we had it practically to ourselves. We found an empty seat and sat down side by side like a Tommy Atkins and his "girl" in Kensington Gardens.

The first thing that Tony did when we were anchored together there was to propose again, after an apology. I let him get it over, and then played the next pawn in my game.

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## CHAPTER XI

"Tony dear," I said softly, when he had finished, "I like you better than any man I know, except one; and that one thinks of me as his good little sister, so you needn't be afraid of *his* interference. But—there's something that *does* interfere!"

"What is it?" he eagerly wanted to know.

"It is—that you don't really love me."

He stared at me through the deepening dusk. "Don't love you? Good Lord, Lady Peggy, I'm a fool about you! Any dough-head can see that."

"Ah, but I'm not a dough-head. I know you don't love me. You proved that last night."

"For the life of me, I can't think what you mean. I I told you I'd try to be your friend, but you knew what that meant! Don't keep me in suspense."

"You've hurt my feelings dreadfully. I've been brooding over it all day."

"I—hurt your feelings? Why, you ought to know I wouldn't for the world——"

"But you did. You refused to trust me. There can be no love without trust."

"I'd trust you with my life. I can't to save myself guess what you're driving at——" He stopped suddenly. My meaning had dawned on him in that instant.

"Now you've guessed, haven't you?" I asked, when for a few seconds, which I counted with heartbeats, he had sat tensely silent.

"Maybe I have. But see here, Peggy, you aren't holding that against me, are you? It wouldn't be fair. I'd trust you with anything of my own; but when it comes to other people's business—official business——"

"Did you ever hear the lines, 'Trust me not at all, or all in all?'" I continued to torture him. "It was Tennyson who made Vivien say those words to Merlin. She was deceiving him, and meant to ruin him when she'd wormed out his secret; for that reason, it isn't a very appropriate quotation. But, otherwise, it's particularly so. If you trusted me for yourself, you'd trust me for others, too. It's the same thing—or else it's nothing. I'm not like Vivien. I don't mean to deceive you, or ruin you, or anything horrid. And I couldn't if I would!"

"You don't need to tell me that," said Tony, very miserable, and making me miserable as well. "I know you're true blue—the truest and bluest—but there are some things I've got no right to do, even for you, Peggy. I'd cut my tongue out to please you, I do believe I would, but to use it in a dishonourable way for your sake is dif——"

"There! I *told* you you didn't love me!" I reproached him. "You accuse me now of wanting you to do something dishonourable. I don't want you to! I can't see that it would be dishonourable to put me out of suspense about a dear friend like Captain March, a man who's in love with my sister, and wants to marry her, as you surely know. But that settles everything between us, of course. To be perfectly honest with you, Tony, I must say that I'm not certain, even if you did what I have asked, that I'd be able to do what *you* ask—love you, except as a friend. I've said before that I couldn't. But I might have changed my mind in future, for all I know, if——"

"If!" echoed Tony. "That's a darned cruel way to put it!" And he looked so much like the nicest Billiken ever seen on earth that I really did love him, though not quite in the way he wanted.

"No doubt I am cruel as well as dishonourable," I replied frigidly. "So now you can easily stop loving me, can't you?"

"No, I can't," he said. "See here, Peggy, what can I say or do to make things right? I think you're the kindest and dearest and most honourable girl whoever lived, and I——"

"Prove it then!" I cried. And I laid my hands on his.

"How? What can I do?"

"Tell me the whole truth about what happened last night. Oh—I'm not trying to bribe you! I don't promise if you do tell, that I'll love you, or marry you, or anything important of that sort. All I promise is to be so grateful, so glad, that—who knows how I may feel to you afterward? And anyhow, I'll let you kiss me, this very night—on my cheek."

"You will? Yet—you say you're not bribing me! You couldn't offer me a much bigger bribe. Why, Peggy, I'd be happy just to die—after getting a kiss from you—even on your cheek!" and he laughed at himself forlornly.

"You're a dear boy, Tony," I said, crushed with remorse. "The kiss won't be a bribe, either. It will be a token of—of—I hardly know what. But partly of gratitude, the deepest gratitude, if you can trust me enough to believe I'll be true."

"I do believe that, indeed I do believe it, forever. And—and—by Jove! I *will* tell you," he broke out, with a kind of breathless gasp. "You're too strong for me, Peggy. You've *got* me! But after all, there's no such great harm in telling, now. It's different from last night. Then I didn't know—nobody knew, I suppose—what the upshot of certain things might be. As it's turned out, some of the story will have to be known. Not all—but the part you want to know most."

"Tell me that," I pleaded.

"You swear you'll never breathe anything I say to you?"

"I swear I never will, until you give me leave."

"Well, then, those three explosions you heard last night weren't explosions at all. *They were shots from our field guns.* But I'll tell you what happened exactly—both sides of the story."

"Both sides? How is it there are two?"

"Well, there's March's side, and——"

"And—what other one?"

"And Major Vandyke's side."

"I knew it!" I cried out sharply. "I knew that man would try to ruin Eagle. I should like to shoot him with one of those very guns."

"Peggy, you mustn't talk like that," Tony warned me. "If you do, I can't go on."

"Forgive me," I said, and let him hold my hand, happy for a moment in the belief that he was soothing me.

"You know—you've heard, I guess, that Vandyke was in command last night, because the colonel had a touch of the sun? But that isn't the right way to begin my story. I'm hanged if I know how to begin it! We were up there on the hill with the guns, on guard; I mean I was, and the men. And March came along, and strolled off again a little way with his field glasses. Maybe thirty or forty yards distant, he was. I wasn't noticing anything—felt rather sleepy, and was trying all I knew to keep awake. I was in charge of the guns, you see. I guess I was thinking about you. I generally am. Anyhow, the first thing I knew, March hurried back. He seemed queer and excited, and stood still a minute as if he was struck all of a heap. Then to my amazement he rapped out an order to load and fire number one and number two guns, aiming at a spot just beyond the bridge. But before we'd had time to do more than gasp—I and the gunners—he changed his order, and commanded us to fire blank. Lord, that was a relief—though even blank would be bad enough for the lot of us if it turned out that March had gone suddenly mad. You fire blank for a salute, you know: but Mexico wasn't likely to take it as a compliment! Luckily we'd some rounds of blank, served out to us in case we might need to send a scare and not a peppering across the river. There was nothing for it but to obey orders, though I couldn't help thinking about 'The Charge of the Light Brigade,' when every one knew that some one had blundered. March shouted out, 'Go slow!' And you bet we did go slow! It seemed as if he must be off his head—or somebody else was—for so far as we could tell—and it was a fairly clear night—there wasn't a sign of trouble on the other side of the river.

"We'd only fired the three shots, when Major Vandyke pounced on us, ordered us to stop, and wanted to know what the devil and all his angels March was up to. 'Carrying out *your* orders,' said March. 'That's a da——' but what's the use of repeating to you, Peggy, what they said to each other? The principal thing is, Vandyke denied having given any order to fire, and cursed March for all he was worth. Said he might be the cause of bringing us and Mexico to grips over the incident. Then he dashed off in his automobile, which was waiting for him under the hill (he'd been in it, you know, or he couldn't have got to the spot so soon); you must have read that in the papers; and so much of their story was true. Whatever you may think of Vandyke, Peggy, that was *man's* size work! He took his life in his hands, the way the Mexicans must have been buzzing in their wasp's nest over there, after the hot water we'd thrown on it."

"It was the sort of thing he'd love to do," I said implacably. "The theatrical thing. He must have known, too, that the man driving the car was the one in greater danger. But *he* didn't drive!"

"He never does drive. He didn't just funk it at that one time; it's his habit. I've always heard him say he hated to drive a car. Too lazy! Anyhow, there was the very dickens to pay. Before leaving the hill for his dash across the river he'd told March to consider himself under arrest——"

"How dared he?" I fiercely wanted to know. "That wasn't his business."

"Oh, yes it was! He's March's superior officer. Besides any officer has the right, if—but I won't worry your head with military rules and regulations! What you want to know is, how this affects Captain March, don't you?"

"Yes, that's the great thing to me," I admitted. "Tony, will it ruin him?"

"It's early days to say as much as that, yet. It all depends on the result of the court-martial."

"Will he be court-martialled?"

"Of course. There's nothing else for it. It's a question which of those two men can establish his case, and a court-martial will have to decide between them. But, I'm afraid, Peggy, it will go against March. The circumstances were so very queer, and Vandyke's denial of giving any order at all is so strong. Besides, it would be such a mad, improbable thing for him to give such an order, as there was no danger of attack. He'd have no motive."

"He would have a motive," I broke in. "I can prove that. Will they let a woman bear witness for a prisoner in a military court-martial?"

"I suppose your evidence could be taken, if they were certain it had an important bearing on the case. But I don't see how that could have, Peggy. This isn't women's business, it's men's."

"And devils," I finished for him. "We won't argue now whether my evidence could be important or not. Tell me both sides of the story you were speaking of, first Captain March's, then Major Vandyke's."

"Well, March says that while he was strolling about, at a short distance from the guns, looking through his field glasses at a fire he could see on the other side of the river, he saw a chap in khaki hurry up the hill, wheeling a bicycle. As soon as the fellow came near enough to make out his features, March says he recognized Vandyke's orderly, a man who's been the major's soldier servant for a good length of time. This orderly, according to March, brought a verbal order from Vandyke as acting colonel, to begin firing number one and number two guns, and keep them in action until further notice, aiming at a spot just beyond one of the bridges on the Mexican side. March said he was so astounded at getting such an order, he thought there must be some awful mistake, and before obeying he wanted to have it on paper. So he took the risk of any danger from delay in case the order was really all right, and scribbled a few lines to Vandyke on a leaf torn out of his notebook——"

"A leaf torn out of his notebook!" I couldn't help echoing. "Perhaps it was the one I gave him."

"Shouldn't wonder!" Tony went on, stolidly. "He says he repeated in writing the command he'd just received, and begged Vandyke, if it was correct, to confirm him in the same way. The messenger dashed off, leaving March wondering like thunder what it all meant: whether there was some fearful mistake, or whether there was a big crisis, and no time for written orders. He could see, of course, that it might be possible, and that Vandyke had ordered only those two guns to be fired just to scare the Mexicans off from playing any trick they were at. The spot he was to aim at suggested that explanation, for not much harm ought to be done with a few shots directed that way. Not much of what you might call '*material* harm' I mean. But there was no end to the harm such an incident could do, if there'd been nothing to provoke it. You see the situation as March says he saw it, don't you?"

"Yes, I see. But what happened after that?"

"According to March, the orderly was back again in next to no time. March had stopped where he was, waiting for him, as he didn't want to give the snap away to me and the men till the last minute. And he was hoping against hope, till he got the return message. It was verbal again, in spite of his written request, and mighty peremptory, ordering him to obey without any more nonsense. That's March's story. Not seeing a way to get out of it, yet realizing the awful consequences should there be anything wrong, March was going to pass on the order to load and fire when he suddenly thought he'd compromise by firing blank only. You see he was in an awful fix anyway, had to make an instant decision, and did what he thought best at the moment, though in giving that order to fire blank he was already disobeying the orders of his superior officer. Vandyke's version is that he never sent any orders whatever. That his orderly was with him in his car, and had never left it for a minute. That March must have been deceived by some trick of resemblance—a sort of 'Captain of Kopenick' (if you know that story); getting off a hoax on him, a deadly hoax, meant to upset the whole situation between the United States and Mexico. He says March ought to have known better than to obey a verbal order when the thing was so serious, and that he was something worse than an ass to mistake a stranger for Johnson, the orderly, whose face March knew almost as well as his own. There's where Vandyke scores an extra point against March. It would be very unusual to send a verbal order."

"That's why Eagle doubted it," I argued breathlessly. "*Could* he have refused to obey the acting colonel, when the order was repeated?"

"That's the question. It's too big for me," Tony said with a sigh. "It's for the court-martial to settle. There are no witnesses who can be of much use on either side, so far as I can see. Johnson was wounded in the lungs last night, you know, crossing the bridge in Vandyke's car, and never so much as squeaked again. He's dead now, so Vandyke has to depend on his own word alone;

but everybody who knows about the business seems to think that probabilities are with him. His story is that he knew nothing of what was going on till he heard the guns at work. Luckily he was near by in his car, as you've heard a dozen times, and dashed up to the rescue."

"What about the message Eagle wrote in his notebook?"

"There's only his own word to prove it was ever written. Naturally there's no trace of it."

"But you," I persisted, "you and your men who were in charge of the guns; can't any of you bear witness for Captain March—that you saw Major Vandyke's orderly?"

"Unfortunately for March, no, not a man Jack of us," said Tony. "If he'd been close to us at the time, we must have seen and recognized anybody who came and spoke to him. But I told you he'd strolled off. It wasn't our business to watch him, and nobody was watching. A man on foot wheeling a bicycle doesn't make much noise; and a khaki uniform is just about the colour of the ground, on that yellow hill. There was no moon, only stars, which means no black shadow. I shall be called on as a witness for the defence, of course, worse luck—but I'm afraid I can't say anything to help March. I wish to the Lord I could! I'm dashed if it isn't the other way round. If I'm not mighty careful, I may do him harm instead of good."

"You'd *like* to do him good, wouldn't you?" I pleaded.

"You bet your life I would, Peggy. March is just about the finest chap I ever met, and most people think the same of him. But what can I do?"

"I can't see," I said, "but I may, when things grow clearer. They *must* grow clearer! You for one believe Eagle's word, don't you, Tony? You believe it was Major Vandyke's orderly who came to him?"

As I asked this question, I stared through the twilight into Tony's face, trying to read it even as he tried not to let it be read. He looked wretchedly uneasy, and rather obstinate. "I can't say I'm sure of that," he replied. "I'm sure some one came to him, and I'm sure March *thought* it was Vandyke's orderly. That's as far as I can go."

"Even when I've told you that I know there's a motive for Major Vandyke's wanting to injure him, ruin him in his career if he can?"

"You seem to think Vandyke's a regular sort of villain out of melodrama," said Tony, with an uncomfortable laugh. "I guess you don't know men very well yet, Peggy—except in novels and plays—when it comes down to bedrock. They're not much like that in real life, as far as I've ever seen. They never go round plotting to ruin other chaps' careers, even when they don't happen to get along very well with 'em."

"*You're* not so very old. You haven't had much more experience of life than I have," I taunted him.

Tony laughed. "Haven't I? That's all you know. You're a child, a little baby-child, compared to me. I may be young, but anyhow, I'm a man, and I've lived among men since I left West Point two years ago—even if you don't count cadets as men. Vandyke's no angel, and he and March have been doing a bit of the cat-and-dog act in a quiet way lately. But it's pretty far-fetched to accuse Vandyke of hatching up a plot to wipe March off the map, especially when it meant risking his own life and sacrificing his orderly, who was devoted to him—a fellow he valued a whole lot——"

"Ah!" I broke in. "So the orderly was 'devoted to him!' I wonder if the court-martial will remember that fact for what it's worth?"

"For what it's worth, yes. I guess it can be trusted to do just that. But what there is will be likely to tell in Vandyke's favour, I guess, not against him. Johnson had good reasons for being devoted to the major. The chap got consumption, and was in a bad way—would have had to say good-bye to an army life—if Vandyke hadn't paid for his cure in one of the best sanatoria in America, and used influence to keep his job open for him, too. Nothing very black in that record, eh?"

"Major Vandyke's the kind of person to pay high for anything he really wants himself," I said. "He must have badly wanted this Johnson man for something or other."

"Johnson was born a sort of gentleman, but hadn't the art of getting along in life, although he was pretty near being a genius at mathematics as well as mechanics, and could do stunts in several languages, like you. No shame to Vandyke to make use of the man's gifts. He must have been jolly useful—too useful to waste."

"It won't make me love you better, Tony," I remarked with deliberate injustice (for there are moods when any girl must feel a horrid satisfaction in being unjust), "if you go on praising Major Vandyke to the skies. Does it matter why the orderly was devoted to him, or he to the orderly? The thing of importance is the tie between them. The more devoted the man was, the more willing he would be to go to any lengths for Major Vandyke."

"Oh, if you want to put it that way," Tony hedged. "But it's a girl's notion, like the motive you attribute to Vandyke."

"How do you know what motive I mean?" I shot at him. "I haven't told you!"

"I may be an ass, but I'm not a *silly* ass," quoted Tony. "I've guessed."

"What have you guessed?"

"Oh, about Vandyke and March both being in love with Lady Diana. All the owlst owls are on to that. First time Vandyke was ever caught for keeps, the fellows say. But it would only do harm to March to bring anything of that sort up in this business, to say nothing of the bad taste, and how mad he'd be, and the unpleasantness for Lady Diana and—and all your family."

"It wouldn't be agreeable, I know," I admitted. "But anything to save Eagle, no matter how we sacrifice ourselves."

"I don't somehow hear Lady Di echoing that, though I agree with you. Only there's more in the thing than you seem to see, because you keep your eyes fixed on one spot. If Lady Diana's engaged to Major Vandyke, then he'd have no incentive to strike at another man who was gone on her. It would be the other way round. The chap who had lost her would be the one, if any, to be up to melodramatic stunts. It might be said about March that he risked trouble for himself, for the pleasure of having a smack at Vandyke; putting the blame on him for a mad order to fire off guns at the good little Mexicans, for instance, do you see?"

I did see, and seeing, suffered a sharp stab of disappointment. Tony had taken my one weapon out of my hands. He was right. I had been wrong, while thinking myself cleverer than he. "There must be some other way of clearing Eagle," I said desperately.

"I hope so, with my whole heart; although I've always had a sneaking admiration for Vandyke, too. He's such a dashed fine-looking chap, a credit to the army, and all that. To clear March—really clear him, without leaving a stain of carelessness even—means to ruin Vandyke. For March can't be made white as snow without Vandyke being proved a liar, and—by Jove, yes, a traitor to his country!"

"That's what he must be proved," I said.

"It'll be a tough proposition. As I see it, there's no proof."

"It must be found."

"That's easy to say. But if there's any, it ought to be found by the court."

"When will the trial come on?" I asked.

"In a few days. I don't know yet just when."

"In the meantime, Eagle is under arrest?"

"Yes. It's sickening."

"Aren't his friends—I mean among the officers—indignant?"

"They're mighty sorry, all broken up, and don't know what to think. But, of course, Major Vandyke's got a good many friends, too. As for the Fort Bliss officers, they're so wild about the whole business that I'm afraid they're a bit prejudiced against March—those of them who don't know him personally. You see, there was an awful row on the hill after the firing—but I didn't mean to tell you about that—"

"Why not, as I know the rest? I suppose some of them arrived—"

"I should say they did arrive! That's too slow a word. The noise shot 'em out of their blessed beds—those of 'em who had gone to bed—and brought the others out of any old place they happened to be in: club, hotel, friends' houses. The first thing we knew, we had the General Commanding on us. They know *some* language, those grand old Johnnies! Poor March! He was up against it, I can tell you. His worst enemy would have been sorry for him."

"Fiends! What did they do?" I gasped.

"It wasn't so much what they did as what they said. But I shan't give you details, Peggy, so don't try and worm 'em out of me. It'll only waste our valuable time. March was under arrest—that's enough. I suppose he ought to be grateful that it's been 'judged expedient'—that's the phrase—never to let the story in its full enormity leak out. Vandyke was so smart at apologies and explanations in that Mexican dash of his last night, and the part he played appealed such a lot to the chaps over there, who're nothing if they're not sensational, that it's hoped the incident won't have any serious international results at all. The great thing is to keep the business forever from the public on both sides of the Rio Grande. Luckily most people had the willies so badly after the first shot that they couldn't swear what sort of noise they *had* heard. It's a hard job, too, for an amateur to tell what direction a sound comes from, when his eyes haven't helped his ears. If Vandyke hadn't put a stop to any danger of return shots, the fat would have been in the fire for us. Thanks to him, that story of an explosion among the ammunition could pass muster. As for March's alleged 'wound,' that tale's to get him out of his social engagements, without stirring up talk. But it won't be believed in for long. The court-martial findings can be kept secret, but not the fact of its taking place. It's to be put round that March was accused of gross carelessness, and causing the 'accident' that occurred. So now you see, Peggy, your keeping dark about what I've told you to-night is all for March's good. If he's found guilty—"

"What then?" I breathed. "What will be the sentence?"

"Why, as the affair has to be hushed up forever he can't be 'chucked.' He'll probably be 'given permission to resign.' And then he will resign. And nobody outside will ever know why. Those inside will think he's jolly well in luck to be let down so easy considering all ... what?"

"I didn't speak," I whispered.

"Why, Peggy, you're crying!"

I couldn't answer. I only bent down my head lest he should see my face.

"I felt from the first I oughtn't to have told you," growled Tony. "Now I'm sure. Don't take it so hard, dear. Something may turn up we can't think of, and March get off scot free. Who knows? Anyhow, he's nothing but your friend. And your sister isn't likely to marry him now. I shouldn't be surprised if she's engaged to Vandyke already."

"It wasn't settled between them," I said, swallowing my tears. "Only I thought she liked Eagle better, and that if he'd plenty of money—but it's all over. No hope since this thing has happened!"

"Would you like to have her marry March?" Tony wanted to know.

"I'm—not sure! But it will be too dreadful if she marries Major Vandyke after what he has done. Why do you say you 'shouldn't wonder' if they're engaged already? And a little while ago, too, you said 'if Lady Di is engaged to Vandyke.' Di can't have heard yet that there's any reason why—why the most disloyal coward should drop Eagle March."

"There are such things as telegrams. And the big California papers must have got hold of the story printed in El Paso this morning. They're sure to have correspondents here. I bet Lady Di had Vandyke as a hero served up to her with her coffee at breakfast to-day. Wouldn't she wire and congratulate him? Wouldn't he wire back to her, and strike while the iron was hot, to get her promise? That's what I'd do if I were in his place."

"I never thought——" I began; but no more words would come. I felt broken. It seemed to me that I could look ahead and see the whole future.

I let my hand lie in Tony's, and he stroked it gently, not speaking or trying to make me speak. Silence was the only balm just then, if balm there was, and a loud burst of music not far off struck on my brain like the blow of a hammer.

We had forgotten all about the torchlight procession which we had come out to see. But—by and by—Tony did not forget his kiss.

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## CHAPTER XII

If I could, without betraying Tony, I should have written to Eagle that night, telling him just a hundredth part of what I thought and felt. But I was bound by my word to "keep dark" what I had heard, even from Eagle himself, unless some day Tony set me free to speak. I must seem to know and believe what the public knew and believed, no more. But I did write cautiously, saying how grieved I was if he suffered, how I should think of him every hour, and how I wished that some way might be arranged for me to see him by and by. Could it be managed? I asked. And I posted the letter before I went to bed, tired to the heart and more miserable than I had ever been in my life.

The next morning, before I was out of my room, a telegram was brought to the door. It was from Di, and said, "Am engaged to Major Vandyke. He will probably call and tell you the news himself, but thought I should like you to know first from me. Please be nice to him for my sake. I am very happy. What a hero he is! Write me all about what happened."

This was a long, expensive message to lavish on me; but Diana's days of economy were over, and this was the first sign of the change.

I boiled with anger against her, and should have liked to send some of my emotions over the telegraph wire, but that would have been a childish way to strike. Besides, I knew in my heart that I was a little unjust. Di had treated Eagle shamefully, there was no doubt of that. But there was one thing in her favour: she was not conscious of betraying Eagle March in the hour of danger, for she knew about him only what the papers said: that he had been wounded in an accident. It was Major Vandyke's great exploit which had weighed down the scales in his favour, or influenced Diana, anyhow, to throw Eagle over definitely, and announce her engagement to the "hero." I telegraphed back, "Don't make it public till you've heard from me. You may change your mind." I followed the wire with a letter, in which I assured Di that Major Vandyke had committed a crime against Eagle March. Perhaps it would be found out, and then she would be very sorry that she had promised to marry such a man. I dared not hope much from my protest, however; so, two days later, I wasn't surprised to hear that Di was disgusted as well as hurt by my "wicked prejudice against Sidney." "You never liked him," she said, "but I didn't think you would go so far as to accuse him of crimes. If it weren't so silly, it would be horrible. As it is, I can't help laughing; but all the same, be careful what you say to other people. If you speak against Sidney to strangers, you can't do him any harm, but you will do yourself a great deal, and Captain March, too. Sidney has written me a long letter telling me the whole history of that

Thursday night. It has just come. Of course, I can repeat to *nobody* what he wrote. It was strictly confidential, though I suppose the truth is bound to leak out, more or less, in future. Judging from your hints, I suppose you, too, have heard something—probably from Tony Dalziel (whom I hope, by the way, you are treating better than you did, as you're never likely to get another such chance). Naturally you believe the other side. But after the court-martial there won't be any 'other side.'"

There was just one consolation in the next few days: a letter that came to me from Eagle. He said not a word that any one mightn't have read, and told me nothing about himself, except that he was "getting along very well" and I mustn't spend a sad minute over him. But he added: "Your thought of me, and your unfailing friendship, are more to me than I can express. I feel that nothing can rob me of them, and now and always they will be for me like a comforting fire, at which I can warm myself when days are cold and dark. I count on you, my little Peggy girl, and I know I shan't count in vain, even though I have to say that it's impossible for us to meet now, or for some time to come. Write to me when you feel like it. I shall be more than glad of your letters."

If I had written when I felt like it, I should seldom have had a pen out of my hand; yet it was hard to write. There was so little I dared, so much I wished, to say. And I couldn't mention Diana. I wondered whether she had broken to him in a letter the news of her engagement, or whether she had left it for him to discover by accident. I felt that he ought to be told, but I couldn't bear to be the one to deal the blow, so I hedged when I wrote to him next, asking, "Have you heard from D... lately?"

He answered the question briefly by the next post "Yes, I heard from her on Saturday." That was all. No comment, no word as to his feelings. But he had let me see how he loved her. He could not help knowing that I would understand what losing her meant to him—and losing her to Major Vandyke, at such a time and in such a way. Looking back at events, I calculated that the blow had fallen on Eagle before he answered my letter, and this gave a more pathetic meaning to the lines which I intended always to keep.

Except for the knowledge that, powerless as I was, he valued me, there was no brightness in my days. Major Vandyke did have the effrontery to come and see me, as Di had thought he would, and I had thought he wouldn't. He took me at a disadvantage by walking up to me in the hall of the hotel, where I stood reading a note from Tony. Warned by a flash of my eyes as I looked up at the sound of his voice, saying, "How do you do?" he went on hastily: "Don't let's have a scene, please, for Diana's sake, if not for your own. I know how you feel, so you needn't go to the length of telling me, or even cutting me, before people. If I hadn't been sure you were too much of a little lady to make yourself conspicuous in public, in spite of your feelings, I shouldn't have risked surprising you like this. I was pretty sure if I didn't catch you unawares you would refuse to see me. So I had to take some risk, for I particularly want to speak to you."

"I don't share your desire," I said stiffly. "You were perfectly right in thinking I shouldn't have seen you if you had given me the chance to refuse. It's like you, not to have given it. But you're right, too, when you take it for granted that I won't make a scene. If it could do the the slightest good, though, to any one concerned, I would!"

He smiled, a pale, unpleasant smile. "No doubt. You'd be capable of anything. Here's the situation: I'm going to marry your sister, and though you've tried your best to stop me, you can't."

"I wonder any man, even you, should want Diana after the way she's behaved," I said sullenly.

"Thanks for that expressive 'even.' Your weapons are pretty sharp, little lady! But you're a child, and you're Diana's sister, so I bear no malice. I'm the sort of man, it happens, who doesn't stop to bother much about the way a very beautiful girl 'behaves' to another fellow. I love Diana, and I'd take her across that other fellow's dead body if she'd just stabbed him."

"She has stabbed Captain March, though not mortally, I hope," said I. "But she has behaved as badly to you as to him, in a way."

"You mean the affair of the photograph, I suppose," Major Vandyke remarked calmly. "She has explained that. Not that I asked her to. All I did was to put into a letter the story of that little scene in which you were mixed up in March's tent. She answered voluntarily that March must have bribed the photographer to sell him a copy, though the man had been given strict instructions to print only one—for me. March had begged her for a picture, when he heard from Mrs. Main that she'd been sitting for that fellow, who's supposed to be a great artist; and Di put him off in some laughing way. I was pretty certain, when I noticed there was no signature on the portrait March had, that he'd not got the photograph from Diana herself. No doubt he thought all fair in love or war."

"You judge him by yourself," I said. "But never mind! I shan't ask you not to believe Di, but to believe your own common sense. Think—or pretend to think what you like."

"I shall," he assured me; "that's a great principle of mine! As a general rule it makes for happiness and success. But we're getting away from my object in speaking to you, when I know you're wishing me in kingdom come."

"Not there," said I. He laughed out aloud, and anybody looking at us might have imagined us the best of friends.



"What a little devil you are! Where did you inherit it from?"

"From French chocolate, perhaps," said I. "What is it you want with me, Major Vandyke? Tell me, and get it over."

"I want to know exactly what it is in me that you dislike so much?"

"Only everything."

"That's a large order, and not very explicit. Would you have disliked me if I hadn't interfered with—a—er—a person more to your taste; in other words, with Captain Eagleston March?"

"Oh, of course, if you hadn't been jealous of him, I might have thought better of your *character*. But then, you wouldn't have been you."

"D'you know," drawled Major Vandyke, "I've a sort of idea that it was Captain March who was jealous of me!"

"It isn't *in* him to be jealous, in the way you mean. But you've asked why I dislike you, and you interrupted me before I could finish. 'Dislike' is a very small word for what I feel. I loathe you, because you've done your best to ruin him. There are some things I *know*. Partly, I blame myself because of what I said to you about Di in camp. Perhaps—just perhaps—you mightn't have done what you have done if I'd held my tongue. That's why, if I've had a hand in pulling Eagle March down, I'd cut it off, and the other one, too, if I could have a hand in lifting him up."

"Sounds complicated—and Irish!" sneered Vandyke. "In your country a man is presumed to be innocent until he's proved guilty; yet you accuse me of guilt on no proof whatever. Evidently you've wormed things out of Tony Dalziel, and drawn your own conclusions to suit yourself. So like a woman! But my conscience is clear as crystal. Personal feeling has had nothing to do with my actions. Every man will give me credit for that. I'm sorry for March. He's either insane with jealousy, or he's allowed himself to be tricked. Privately, not publicly, of course, I'm inclined to believe in the former theory; and I think most people would agree with me if they knew all the circumstances——"

"As you put them!"

"Let's go back to my object in inflicting myself upon you to-night, Lady Peggy. Eagleston March is the god of your idolatry. Let's take that for granted. He's bound to suffer. He brought it on himself, whatever you—a child—may think to the contrary. Do you want to make him suffer more or less?"

"Is it necessary to answer?" I asked.

"Hardly. But I have to impress upon you that it's partly in those hands of yours, which you would 'cut off' for him. The full immensity of his guilt need never come out. It's not intended that it should come out. Still, if you are going to treat me like the dirt under your feet—the man who will soon be your sister's husband—and kick up a scandal, I shan't lie still. I'm not a saint. If you mean to fight against me with Diana, or anybody else, or even set people talking by your behaviour, by Jove! I'll hit back. I shan't take much trouble to do my part in keeping the secret."

"You're bound to keep it, aren't you?" I suggested. "Government doesn't want it to come out."

"That's the attitude at present. But when relations have been definitely and permanently smoothed over between the United States and Mexico, it won't so much matter except for March himself. In any case, I shan't let the cat out of the bag. I'm not such a blunderer! But I tell you frankly, I can influence others to keep the secret after the time limit's up—or I can refrain from using influence. Which shall it be? Is it peace or war between us?"

I stopped to think for a moment, and then I answered, "It's an armed truce."

We have all heard quite a lot about the mouse who saved a lion. But it was only one mouse out of a world crammed full of mice. I never heard, in the whole history of mice, since those which Cain and Abel maybe had for pets, of another mouse capable of saving any animal whatever, even itself. Still, there remains that one heroic and intelligent mouse. When Sidney Vandyke had left me to "think things over," I envied it with passion, feeling that I was not even of the mouse tribe. I felt more like a fly, if you can imagine a fly cursed with a human heart, who loves an eagle that has been shot in the wing and caged, and the cage set down on the seashore when the night tide is coming in. What could such a fly do but cling sadly to the cage and buzz and let the great rush of water drown it with the eagle? Even that fly seemed more fortunate than I was, as I pictured it to myself. For it was privileged to rest on the eagle's cage. I could not be near my wounded eagle!

Five days after that awful Thursday night a letter from Di told me that her engagement had "changed all her plans." "Sidney" was very impatient, and wanted to be married soon. The moment his work was over at El Paso he would get long leave, and possibly he might make up his mind to resign from the army. That was what she wanted him to do; and when she had him with her, she knew that she could persuade him, for he wasn't really "very keen" on soldiering, and she *must* live in England, at least half the year round. This part was for the future to decide; but in any case there would be the long leave. It would give time for the wedding and the honeymoon. She had set her heart on being married at St. George's, for it was the "historic" thing to do. And there was the trousseau. Kitty Main *insisted* on giving it to her for a wedding present;

which was rather a weight off one's mind, as America had cost something in spite of everybody's being so hospitable and good. Kitty would go to Paris with her, and help to choose the things, which would be nicer than having just a sum down, and going alone. So they—Di and Kitty and Father—had all decided to cut out the rest of the visits arranged and "make for home." California had been great fun, and Di wished she might stop longer, but one couldn't have one's cake and eat it, too. Being married was her cake. This was her mistake. As I have said before, she had always had both.

Major Vandyke's "work in El Paso" was to bear witness against Eagle March in the court-martial which would come on almost at once. And I was to go away without hearing the verdict or seeing Eagle after all was over.

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Di had written to Mrs. Dalziel, too, it appeared, and Milly was only too glad of an excuse to escape from the the place where Captain March's society had been the first and only attraction for her.

"Now that Tony's time is so dreadfully taken up," she said to her mother, "he can't give us any fun, or have any fun with us himself, so we might as well go away. *Let's*, dear! Let's clear out tomorrow, and take Peggy to meet Lady Di and the others at Albuquerque, where we can get into the 'Limited' and join them."

"I don't know what Tony will say!" wavered Mrs. Dalziel, who was finding El Paso rather hot in those days, for plump people. She looked at me. So did Milly. Then Milly laughed. "No good pretending we've got cotton wool over our eyes," she exclaimed. "Can't you make up your mind to take my poor, dear little brother, Peggy, and put him out of his misery?"

"Tony and I understand each other already," I said.

"Do you? Oh, I'm *so* glad, so pleased," they both cried together. And I had to explain in a violent hurry, before I had been caressed under false pretences, that there are understandings *and* understandings. Tony's and mine was the kind of understanding which left us both perfectly free; the kind of understanding where you didn't make up your mind, but just waited to see whether it made itself up.

"Isn't there anything between you and the poor boy, then?" implored the boy's mother.

"Only—a kiss," I said. "One—on a cheek. My cheek."

"Well, that's something," she sighed. "At least, it was when I was a girl."

It was not much to me, though it might have been to a better regulated flapper. I couldn't dwell on such trifles as kisses. I thought only of the coming court-martial.

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## CHAPTER XIII

The "understanding" remained *in statu quo* (whatever that means; the expression was his) between Tony and me, when Mrs. Dalziel and Milly and I turned our backs on El Paso. We had a night at Albuquerque, which made me homesick for past days, because the hotel where we stopped had the name of Alvarado. I hadn't known that I was happy at the Springs, but in looking back it seemed as though I must have been without a care.

Milly and her mother bought wonderful Indian curios and gorgeous Mexican opals and silver spoons set with turquoises at Albuquerque, and Milly was almost feverishly gay; but I guessed that at heart, if she had an organ worth the name, she was nearly as wretched as I. For she had failed; and she had let the venom of her spite poison her nature, trying to tell herself that she rejoiced because of Eagle's misfortunes, and that it was very good, as things turned out, to be free of him and his fate. No one can really be happy with such poison in the veins, and there can't possibly be deep-down, soul-satisfying enjoyment from revelling in another's misfortunes. Underneath my fury, when Milly said little veiled, spiteful things about Captain March, was pity for her, the kind of pity you have for an irritable invalid who snaps.

When Father and Mrs. Main and Diana (Di in great beauty) came to Albuquerque on the "Limited," and we three took up our quarters in staterooms on board, Milly Dalziel and Di struck up a great friendship, almost as if they were new acquaintances who had just been introduced and fallen in love with each other's unexpectedly charming qualities. This was quite funny, because Milly had found it hard work to be civil to Di at Alvarado Springs, and Di had been rather contemptuously amused at Milly's badly disguised jealousy. Now, with Eagle March eliminated from the scheme of life for both of them, each discovered that the other was a delightful creature.

Milly accounted to me for her change of mind by exclaiming: "I do think Lady Di has got heaps prettier since she went to California, don't you? And she's just as sweet as she's pretty. Perhaps it's being engaged to the man she loves that has made the difference. And no wonder, with such a gorgeous lover as Major Vandyke! He's something to be proud of—even for a beauty and a 'swell'

like your sister."

Di accounted for the change in *her* mind by saying to me: "I don't know what you've done to that Dalziel girl, Peggy, but you seem to have made her all over. She used to be a thorough-paced cat. Now she's quite a darling, and if you're ever sensible enough to marry Tony, I shall love to have such a fascinating sister-in-law. I've asked her to be one of my bridesmaids."

I suppose changing your mind often is a good, clean thing for your soul, just as changing your clothes is for your body.

We had a few hours to flash round Chicago in a motor car, seeing pretty, young-looking parks, and a great lake like the sea with wonderful buildings along its shore, and a sky like a painting by Turner. I was bitterly disappointed not to get the telegram Tony had promised to send, addressed to the Blackstone Hotel, where it had been arranged beforehand that we should lunch and dine. The court-martial was to have been held on the eighth day after Eagle March's arrest, the day before our arrival in Chicago, and meanwhile I had lived only for the telegram. My impatience to know the worst—or best—had been like a flame in my blood and brain. When it was time to take the fast train to New York in the evening, and no telegram had come, it seemed as if that flame gave a devouring leap, and then went out, leaving my body a burnt-up shell.

The next morning we were in New York, where Mr. Dalziel met his wife and Milly. I hoped that he might have read some news of El Paso in the morning papers, and that he would spring it upon us in the railway station where we paused, being charming and affectionate to each other, and making plans to meet again before our party sailed. I couldn't have questioned him to save my life, any more than I could have cried out in fearful nightmares which I remembered, when the earth was about to swallow me up, or a mountain fall on to my head. Surely, I thought, if there were news about the court-martial it would be interesting enough to the Dalziel family for the man to mention it, if only because Tony was to be a witness in the case! But the affair might have been more remote from us all than a destructive tidal wave in China, judging by Mr. Dalziel's oblivion of it. He and Father talked about our luck in grabbing cabins at short notice on the *Mauretania*; his wife and Mrs. Main discussed getting seats for that night at D'Annunzio's great moving-picture play, which had come on at a theatre in New York; his daughter and Diana chatted about the earliest date when Milly could persuade her mother to sail for England. I longed to scream at them, "Oh, you hard, unfeeling *wretches!*" But instead I stood outwardly patient, a good, well-behaved young girl with a little mincing smile on my face. Only the smile was frozen so hard you could have knocked it off with a hammer.

We were going to Kitty Main's flat, which she called her "apartment," and the Dalziels were going to their house, but it was not to be a regular parting. We were to dine with them (somehow the idea was borne in upon me that dear Mrs. Dalziel wanted naughty, shilly-shallying Peggy to see what lovely surroundings might be hers as Tony's wife); all of us were to lunch next day at Delmonico's, as Kitty's guests; the Dalziels were to motor us over to Long Island for a glimpse of their country place there; and they were to see us off on the *Mauretania*. But that would not be until five days had passed. Meanwhile, there would be time for telegrams and even letters from El Paso.

At last, after all the noisy planning of things to do, the two parties contrived to tear themselves from one another, and we got away from the wonderful station in Mrs. Main's motor car, which had come to meet us—a most impressive motor car which needed only a coronet or at worst a crest, on its door. Perhaps, however, judging from present signs, that lack might be supplied later.

Her "apartment" was in a marvellously ornate sky-scraper; a huge brown block like a plum cake for a Titan tea party, which would have made Buckingham Palace or any other royal residence in Europe look a toy. It was in the highest story, according to Kitty the most desirable, because you had all the air there and none of the noise; just like living on a mountain, with a lift to the top. I wondered what she would think of poor old Ballyconal, when she came to see it!

The first thing I did was to wire my temporary address to Tony, and hate myself because I hadn't done it before. Until I met Father and Di I didn't know where we were to stay in New York, for everything had been settled through letters and telegrams, with as little useful information as possible. If I had remembered in Chicago that Tony had no idea where I would be in New York, there need have been no more delay in my getting the news. But something seemed to be strangely wrong at his end of the line, for even when there had been time for him to get my telegram and send another, no answer came. Nothing arrived for Di, either; but apparently she was expecting no wire. She must have had some human curiosity, if not anxiety, to know the fate of a man who had been as much to her as Eagle March had been; but she was thinking of his trial, I suppose, entirely from Sidney Vandyke's point of view, and she had no uneasiness as to the result for Sidney. As for the papers, though I quite cleverly managed to find other things than football news, I could discover nothing about the court-martial on Captain March. I had to tell myself that perhaps they didn't put such affairs in newspapers, for I was too ignorant to think of trying to hunt up the army and navy official journals.

We had been three days in New York in great heat, which Kitty took pains to tell us was most unseasonable, when one morning a thunderstorm accompanied by terrific wind came up, preventing us from going out as we had intended. Kitty's floor at the top of the building, with its steel supports, actually gave the effect of swaying in the blast like an overgrown spear of wheat, a phenomenon Kitty took as a matter of course. So we Britishers had to do the same, no matter

how we felt, to show that we were as brave as Americans. In the midst of the storm the postman's ring sounded reassuringly, as if to say that we were not cut off from earth; and a calm maid, used to hanging on insectlike by her antennæ to the top grain on the wheat stalk, quietly presented a silver tray with letters to her mistress.

"One for dear Diana," Kitty announced, picking up a large purple-sealed and monogrammed envelope, such as Sidney Vandyke had made peculiarly his own. And I had only time for a heartbeat before she added, "Two for little Peggy!"

I never much relished being patronized as "little Peggy" by my would-be stepmother, but she might safely have called me anything from a pterodactyl to a hippopotamus just then. I had caught a glimpse of the uppermost envelope of the two as she doled the letters out. In a flash I knew that Eagle March had written to me.

Just to save the scarlet flag my cheeks flung out from Father's stare, I pretended great interest in the other envelope. It had been addressed to me by Tony.

"My letter is from Sidney. I thought I should have one from him to-day," said Di, with the brazen boldness of the legitimately engaged girl who has a right to expose her feelings. "Now he'll tell me, perhaps, when he will be able to get leave and follow us."

She proceeded to tear open the envelope in the ruthless violating way of which I could never be guilty except with a soulless circular. A letter from a lover, or a friend, full of thoughts and touched by a dear hand, is too sacred for such usage. Fearing from Di's expression that she would be capable of reading aloud choice selections from Major Vandyke's version of events, I simply couldn't stay to risk hearing them. I jumped up and fled with my two prizes.

Locked safely in my room, delicately I cut the edge of Eagle's envelope. I was on the point of drawing out the letter, which appeared to be meagrely thin, when something within me seemed to faint. Reading what he had to say, I should know in a very few words, I was sure, the fate to which he looked forward. There would be no working up, no preamble, to prepare my mind. I wasn't strong enough to bear it. I should have to take Tony's letter first, like a dose of sal volatile.

"Dear, dear Peggy," my benevolent Billiken addressed me, and as I read, the thunder rolled like the far-away drums of Fort Alvarado or El Paso. "This is my first real letter to you, for I don't count notes; and I wish it could be a better one. I'm afraid you must be pretty mad about not getting a telegram at Chicago, or anyhow at Mrs. Main's, when you'd taken all the trouble to wire me your address. But it was intimated to all of us concerned that we weren't to telegraph news about *you know what* to our families or friends, and that we were even to be discreet about our letters. I've been so indiscreet with you on that subject already, on a never-to-be-forgotten night, however, that the latter bit of fatherly instruction doesn't hold good in my case. Only, before telling you what I have to tell, I'll just take the liberty of reminding you once again of your promise to keep mum till Gabriel's trumpet sounds—or till I take off the embargo (is that the way to spell it, I wonder, and what exactly does it mean?). As matters look at present, one thing is liable to happen about the same time as the other. Well, now I'm going to tell you news of the court-martial as best I can. I'm no great shakes at telling things, you know. Vandyke was 'seedy' (as you say in your truly British fashion) the day appointed for the trial, and as he was the principal witness it had to be put off for twenty-four hours. You'd have thought it would be March, if anybody, who was on the sick list, wouldn't you? But he was all right in health. I don't know what was the matter with Vandyke, except that I happened to hear our old Doc say he had a temperature way up in C. Maybe it was stage fright. I felt like that myself—queer all over when the time came, as a fellow does when he's just going to be seasick.

"The court-martial was what you call a 'field-general court-martial,' which can be convened when forces are on active service, as of course we are now (though we've had nothing very active to do, except on a certain night none of us will forget, and on Army Day when we all marched and sweated to give the populace an impressive show). A field general court-martial can try cases just as grave as a general court-martial can, and its proceedings are conducted with more secrecy. It consists of not less than three officers, none of them under the rank of captain, but the president of the court may be a general officer, a colonel, or lieutenant-colonel. In this case, which was considered very important, both on account of March's fine record and the necessary secrecy that had to be maintained, we had the general commanding the Fort for president, and the other two officers of the court were a colonel and a major. I don't think you met either of them when you were here, so their names wouldn't interest you.

"The courtroom was just a plain ordinary room in the barracks at Fort Bliss; but there wasn't a map or copy of 'rules and regulations' hanging on the yellowish white walls that I can't see now, whenever I shut my eyes. I guess they were all photographed on my 'mental retina,' as the writing folks say. The three officers were in full uniform, to do honour to the case, and of course there wasn't a man present dressed in 'cits.' All were army chaps, even to the headquarters clerk who took notes of the proceedings, the orderly who kept the door, and the witnesses. There weren't many of those. I was one of the principal witnesses and you've heard from me before how little I had to say.

"March, who as prisoner had to be formally conducted in by an officer, had a seat on the left of the judges' table, and his friend, Major Dell, sat beside him. If you could have been a fly on that beastly wall, looking down at your hero, I guess you'd have been proud of the way he held himself. If he'd been brought there to receive a medal of honour instead of to be tried for a big,

insane sort of offence calculated to bring about international complications he couldn't have had a prouder bearing. And he wasn't even pale. He looked just brown and calm and natural. I had to confess to when you asked me a point-blank question that night in the park, that I was all muddled up in my mind about his conduct in ordering the gunfire. I didn't know whether he'd gone off his chump, or been fooled, or what. But I can tell you one thing: I felt proud of him as a man and as my superior officer when I saw the way he bore himself for his trial. I don't know now the rights of the matter any more than I did then, in spite of the court's findings; but something tells me—as girls say—that March *wasn't to blame*. There's a black mystery in this, and I don't see how it's ever going to be cleared up, as things are. But to go back to the court-martial.

"March was accused by the prosecutor of having fired without orders three charges from field guns into a country living at peace with the United States, to the detriment of its inhabitants and property, and to the imminent peril of disturbing international relations. He could have objected legally to any of the judges and stated his objections. But he didn't object to them, nor to the shorthand-writer, whom he had a right to throw out if he could show reasons for thinking that the man was likely to be partial in his notes of the proceedings.

"Of course, I as a mere witness wasn't present all the time; but I know what took place, because I've heard some of it from different quarters. I know that when 'the court had been duly sworn, the accused was arraigned,' which means that the president read out the charges against March, and asked him whether he pleaded guilty or not guilty. Can't you just hear March answering steadily in that pleasant, quiet voice of his: 'Not guilty!' The next thing to follow was the prosecutor's address, outlining the case against the prisoner, and mentioning the witnesses he meant to summon. Then he called the evidence for the prosecution, and that's where, as I've heard from other witnesses, those present got their first big surprise.

"Naturally there'd been no end of whispering among those in the know before the court met; and it was discussed whether or not March would bring into his defence the state of feeling between Vandyke and himself. Some thought he would be justified in doing so, and quixotic not to, as the bad blood between them, and the cause of it (I hope you don't mind my saying this?) was already a sort of open secret. Others argued that if the ill-feeling were once lugged in, the name of the lady concerned and other details would certainly be dragged into the case through inquiries which would have to be made; and that March wasn't the man to run such a risk even if it were likely to do him any good. The surprise of the court came when Vandyke accused March of giving the order for firing the guns without authority, but deliberately putting the responsibility on him—Vandyke—with the object of ruining him. Did you ever know the like of that?

"From one way of looking at the thing, it was a jolly smart way for Vandyke to turn the tables, because it would take all the wind out of March's sails, in case he meant to accuse Vandyke of the same intention toward him. I don't suppose there ever was such a queer case between officers as this one; both men highly placed and popular in the service and society.

"I believe March brought out his notebook in evidence (the khaki-coloured one with his monogram on it in silver, which I'd often seen, and which you say you gave him) to show the newly torn-out leaf; and his friend, Major Dell, who was his classmate at West Point (you've seen him here; fine-looking cavalry chap), suggested that the page underneath should be examined with a magnifying glass for the impression of writing on the missing page with a blunt pencil which had borne heavily on the paper. No words could be definitely made out, even with the magnifier, and even if they could have been, I'm afraid that wouldn't have made much difference in the case. March had had the notebook in his possession after the gunfiring, you see, and could easily have written what he liked and then torn out the leaf.

"Vandyke's orderly being dead, there was no evidence as to the part he had played for either side; but I suppose he would have been a witness for the prosecution, so his disappearance off the scene was perhaps a good thing for March. I was called for the defence, but nothing I had to say was of any good. I felt that; and being keen to serve March's interest if I could with truth, put such a strain on me to be careful of each word that you could have knocked me down with a feather after I was released. When my evidence was read over (they always do that to every witness before he leaves the court) it seemed to me I'd given the most rotten answers every time; but I couldn't have made them any better if I'd tried to explain them away, or amend them as I should have had the right to do; so I let them go as they were.

"March cross-examined me himself, about the distance he was from the guns when the orderly was supposed to come up; and the darkness of the night; and the nature of the ground for muffling the sound of footsteps. He didn't seem a bit disgusted or hurt with me because I could not do better for his case. He had a real friendly look in his eyes whenever they met mine; and I tell you, Peggy, I could have blubbed like a kid when I thought of it later, after I knew what the verdict was.

"Once I saw him cross glances with Vandyke, and if you won't think I'm getting sentimental on top of all the rest, I'll tell you I thought March's look was like a sword. Vandyke was yellow and bloodshot as if he'd had a bilious attack, and perhaps bile had been the trouble when he went on sick report and the case had to be delayed for him.

"The findings were considered in closed court. And now you must take this one bit of comfort to yourself, Peggy, in your trouble about your friend Captain March: things might have gone a lot harder for him than they did in such a serious case. Vandyke's accusation against him was mighty bad, and there was some evidence to support it. March didn't seem to use such weapons as he

had to hit back with, quite as smartly as he might have done, though that was, no doubt, in his determination to keep your sister's name from coming into the affair. He did defend himself to the extent of saying he'd tried to save the situation by firing blank instead of shell; but that didn't help him much, for the whole point of the accusation against him was that he had had no right to fire at all. None of his witnesses could help him any more than I could, whereas Vandyke had several who took their oath to seeing him in the auto with his orderly, leaving old Fort Bliss at much about the time when March said Johnson came to him with the second verbal order. March could have been sentenced to imprisonment or chucked out of the army if the court had believed in his giving the order to fire the guns on his own responsibility out of sheer madness, or spite against Vandyke. As it was, they accepted the theory that he had been hoaxed by some one unknown, purporting to be the orderly of Major Vandyke, then acting as colonel. Owing to the comparative darkness of the night (luckily there wasn't a moon, only stars) it would have been possible for a nervous, jumpy man to mistake the identity of a person masquerading as another person. Now *you* know, and *I* know, and everybody who knows him knows March is the last fellow in the world to get nerves or jumps in any circumstances whatever. All the same, giving him credit for them on a night when a Mexican raid on the town had been predicted offered the court an excuse to let the accused down lightly. He was sentenced merely to 'severe censure for rashness and carelessness,' etc., etc. In sequence to this our Old Man—the colonel, I mean—has had to advise March to resign. That's part of the programme. And equally it is part of the programme that March should take the advice.

"Now, dear, I've told you the story as well or as badly as I can. Anyhow, you know as much as I do, and that is a good deal more than you ought to know, or others are likely to know. If you hear anything further, it will be from March himself.

"When the Mexican bees have settled down in their hive again, and we're back at Fort Alvarado, I'm going to have a good try for a month's leave or longer, so as to cross the blue with the mater and sis. Of course, entirely with the object of looking after them, and perhaps getting an invitation to Lady Di's wedding, and not a bit for the sake of seeing you or jogging your memory about a certain decision! Yours till the end of beyond, Billiken."

For a while, after I had read this long letter through, to the accompaniment of thunder, lightning, and rain, I sat with the four closely written sheets of paper in my hand, not thinking, only feeling. I could not console myself with "the one bit of comfort" which Tony waved under my eyes. Eagle March was a born soldier. He cared more for his career than for his life, and it had been taken from him. Though the world was not to know what he was accused of doing, all the world would know that he had left the army because his country no longer needed his services. And he owed this to his love for my sister! This was what Diana and I had brought upon the bravest and best man we should ever meet.

"What will he do? What will become of him?" I asked myself miserably; and the rain beating on the window seemed to give a desolating answer. But there was still the letter I had waited to read until I learned the best or worst from Tony. Perhaps that would tell me what I wished to know!

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## CHAPTER XIV

Eagle March's letter was characteristic. Though he must have felt as if he stood alone, at the jumping-off place of the world, he had more to say about me than of himself.

He had read in the El Paso papers that I was going to sail for England, and all the first part of his letter was concerned with "bon voyage." It was only in the last paragraph that he mentioned his own affairs. "You'll have heard already," he said, "of what has happened to me. I've had a blow, but I'm not going to lie down under it. There must be work for me somewhere, and when I've found it you'll hear from me again. Not until then though, for I'm rather hard hit, and might be inclined to grumble. But I shall think of you constantly, and I don't believe if I wrote a volume I could make you understand how much the thought will help. I shall wear it like armour."

Not a word of Diana. But I read between the lines. He was "rather hard hit." Just when he was facing an attack from the front she had stabbed him in the back. In one way, the letter was a bitter disappointment, for I had longed to be told Eagle's plans; yet in the hint that I should hear again when he had "found work," there was a thrill like that which comes with martial music. I was far from guessing then what that work would be, and how quickly and surprisingly he would find it; but vaguely I felt that there was only one kind of work worth Eagle March's while: soldier work.

Because I mustn't expect to hear, that did not prevent my writing from the ship. "This isn't 'good-bye,'" I said. "Always I'll be looking forward to great things for you. And (you may laugh, but I'm in earnest) I shall live in the hope of 'righting' you in the world's eyes. The day may come. I believe it will—the best day of my life."

When the *Mauretania* passed "Liberty" I sent back a last message by the statue to Eagle. "Till the day!" I said. But it was a pang to see the last of her. I went down to my stateroom and cried—oh! how I cried!

As if to flaunt the glorious difference between this summer and last, Father took a furnished

house in Norfolk Street, Hyde Park, which was to let with the owner's servants. It was very rich looking, though the elaborate decorations reminded me of houses in moving-picture plays. Father was able to splurge, on Di's prospects; and probably Kitty Main contributed to the expense, for she and her maid came to stay with us. We began to be expensively gay; and I believe if any duke or earl who tangoed with Diana had offered himself for the dance of life, she would have thrown over Sidney Vandyke at the eleventh hour. But no one exciting showed signs of entangling himself permanently, and so, when Major Vandyke wired that the situation in Mexico permitted him to ask for leave, Di's engagement was announced in the *Morning Post*.

Soon after this, Sidney arrived with cartloads of luggage, which seemed to detach him from America forever. He had got long leave and intended to resign from the army at the end of it. He took up his quarters at the Savoy Hotel, but he was at our house morning, noon, and night; and though everybody who saw him for the first time said how handsome he was, it struck me from the minute we met that he had changed for the worse. He looked older and stouter, and black and white would no longer express him in a picture. A suffusion of red for the face, as well as for the lips under the black moustache, would have been needed. I wondered if he were drinking; and though, when he lunched or dined with us he was always careful (except with champagne, which he loved as a child loves sweets), he might be less cautious when out of Diana's sight.

At first I could hardly bear to sit down at the same table with Sidney Vandyke; but as time went on, I found an impish pleasure in watching him, in staring openly, as a baby stares. I had the satisfaction of feeling that he was disturbed by my gaze, and that he knew, even when not looking, that my eyes were on him. Sometimes in the midst of talk he would break down and forget what he had meant to say next. I affected him with a kind of aphasia, erasing the words he wanted from his brain. But otherwise my tactics were changed. I was no longer rude to my future brother-in-law. I wished to study him, and I didn't object to his knowing that I studied him.

A silent battle was being fought between us under a smooth surface of civility, and Sidney might easily have complained to Diana that my owl stare was "getting on his nerves," even though he could have brought no other complaint. If he had spoken to her she would have made some excuse to scratch me off her list of bridesmaids. I hoped she would, and save me trouble! But perhaps Sidney felt that I was yearning for him to "squeal," and resolved not to please me. In any case, nobody not in the secret of our hearts could have guessed that anything was wrong. And I had to play at spraining my ankle in order to escape being one of the eight.

It was well to be civil in word and deed, and "bide my time," but to be in at the death, and marry my sister to a man who'd stolen her from Eagle March and ruined him, was a different thing. I drew the line at that.

It's quite simple for a girl vowed to the conscientious life and no fibs to wrench her ankle, if she'll wear high heels. All she has to do when walking in the street is to look out for banana peel; or an apple paring may do at a pinch. She launches herself upon it, with a skating movement. Her foot turns, and the deed is done. She can in this way produce a "strain," if not a "sprain"; and only doctors know the difference. The difficult part comes in remembering to limp. I was so fearful of forgetting in some moment of excitement, that I took to wearing shoes which were not mates. They were actually incompatible. One had a Louis Quinze heel and the other had none at all; but my dresses by this time were so "grown up" and long that nobody noticed. Besides, though refusing to see a doctor, I stopped in bed for days, and hypnotically impressed the idea of a sprain on every one.

Those who didn't know why I wouldn't for the world be bridesmaid to Diana sat by my bedside and sympathized, among others Mrs. Dalziel and Milly, who had followed us in time to have all the season's fun in London before the wedding. Tony hoped to get leave and arrive for "the great day." Afterward he and his mother and sister planned a motor tour through Belgium, and Luxemburg, and France, before the time when Tony must rejoin his regiment. I had a sneaking idea that they meant me to go, too; but at that moment—before other things had happened—I told myself that I would do nothing of the kind. I was homesick for Ireland and Ballyconal.

The date of Di's wedding wasn't definitely settled until after Sidney came. Then it was fixed for the ninth of July, and the bride and bridegroom were to have four weeks' motoring in the north of England. When the honeymoon was officially over they were to make country-house visits in Scotland for the shooting season. Sidney Vandyke boasted of being a crack shot, and Diana hoped to be proud of her American husband among British sportsmen.

Meanwhile they had some time before the wedding in which to find a town house, and choose furniture and things so that they might be "at home" in the autumn. I think Di really loved Sidney the day he consented to buy a house—a very expensive though small house—in Park Lane. She had set her heart upon Park Lane; for, you see, there was always something rootedly Victorian about Di; such as being convinced that Park Lane was the Mount Olympus of London, and that you couldn't be properly married except at St. George's. She was, and is, up-to-date only on the surface, in such details as clothes and hats, and tango, and the latest slang. Probably Di had never been so happy as in gathering together materials for her future frame; and if Sidney was chagrined because Father didn't offer to lend for the honeymoon our ancestral castle (to which he and Di had frequently alluded in America) he kept his feelings to himself. He would have been twice as much chagrined by the castle could he have seen it before Kitty Main got in her deadly work. The Trowbridges of Chicago would have rejoiced to tell him what it was really like.

I don't quite know why it is the fashion for brides to shut themselves up and not "go out" for days

before the wedding; but perhaps they are supposed to pass their close time in prayer and maiden meditation, thanking heaven for what it has provided, and dwelling on the responsibilities of the future. Di spent her days in being fitted for frocks (goodness knew who would pay for them, unless Sidney, on ceasing to be a bridegroom and turning into a husband), receiving wedding presents, having photographs taken, and giving discreet interviews to journalists. She told the male ones what a heroic person Major Vandyke was; and to the female ones she showed her dresses. There wasn't an illustrated daily or weekly paper in London that didn't produce a picture of Sidney in uniform, looking dashing, and Di looking down, all modesty and eyelashes.

The last night she went out to anything big before the wedding was to a dinner at the Russian embassy; and though nothing which seemed to us sensationally interesting happened that night, something was led up to later. It came through Milly Dalziel, for whom Father and Di had contrived to get an invitation. She met Captain Count Stefan Stefanovitch, the military attaché of the Russian Embassy.

There is something irresistible to some natures about a Russian count; and to Russian counts about American heiresses, particularly those with red hair. When the two had seen each other three times they were engaged, subject to the consent of the count's father. Everybody in that family was a count or countess, a delicious prospect for Milly when she wished to talk of her Russian relatives. Stefan was to stay and see Milly in her bridesmaid's dress; then he was going to make a dash for Petrograd (we called it St. Petersburg then!) armed with her photograph and substantial accounts of her father's bank balance, returning as soon as the consent was insured. There seemed to be something almost feudally old-fashioned about Russians, Milly thought, for a mere wire to *her* father had been considered adequate. But then, Tony Senior wasn't a count or a "vitch," or anything exciting like that.

It was after this dinner that I began to prowl for banana peel. I hadn't wanted to be premature; still, it was necessary to give some other girl time to get a bridesmaid's dress. Just then the only thing in London that anybody cared about was the Russian opera and ballet, and it occurred to Di that it would be original to clothe her eight attendant maidens in Léon Bakst designs. Most of the girls were pale blondes, whom she had chosen because they would form an effective contrast to herself; but they were very brave about the Bakst effects. The measure of their fingers had been taken, and they were expecting presents of rings beautiful enough to console them for worse disasters. Besides, Sidney had brought over from America a Captain Beatty to be his best man. He was rather rich and very good-looking.

During all this time of our new popularity I had heard nothing of Eagle March, except that he had turned his back on his native land after resigning from the army, and that various "ugly stories" were in circulation. It was even said that he had been bribed by Mexico with immense sums of money to betray his country. It was Tony who wrote me this, in answer to a question. But he knew no more than this gossip, not even when he arrived in London the day before Diana's wedding.

"For all I can tell," he said, when he had congratulated me on my limp, "March may have offered himself and his aeroplane to the Viceroy of India or the Sultan of Turkey or even the Emperor of Japan. There's only one thing certain about him: he'll have to be a soldier somewhere—somehow!"

"Blessed is the bride the sun shines on," they say, but the sun did not shine on Diana. The ninth of July dawned gray and blustering, with a queer rasping chill in the air like an autumn day slipped back in the calendar. I hated the thought of seeing Di married to Sidney Vandyke. It seemed like aiding and abetting the enemy, but unless I had another accident at the last minute, such as falling downstairs, I could see no way of stopping at home without a row.

What would Eagle want me to do? I asked myself. It was almost as if I could hear his voice saying, "Don't hurt Diana on such a day by stopping away from her wedding."

I decided to be there; and it was arranged for me to sit with Kitty Main, Mrs. Dalziel, and Tony. I didn't mind this, because Tony couldn't very well propose in church with "The voice that breathed o'er Eden" resounding to the roof.

The wedding was fixed for two o'clock at St. George's, Hanover Square; and if any were left in London who didn't know the hour and all other details, it must have been because they didn't read the halfpenny papers. It had even been announced that one of the bridegroom's many magnificent presents to the bride would be a high-powered Grayles-Grice car, in which Lady Diana Vandyke would drive from the church with her husband to the house of her father, for the wedding reception, and go on for the honeymoon tour afterward. This paragraph was truer than some of the others, but the day before the wedding the car hadn't yet been delivered by the makers. A frantic telegram from Sidney brought the assurance that he might count without fail on its arriving by ten o'clock next day at latest. The firm regretted deeply the unforeseen delay which had occurred owing to a strike, but the automobile had been shipped. Still Sidney and Diana were anxious.

Kitty and Mrs. Dalziel and Tony and I started rather late, for Kitty had superintended the bride's dressing. The other two came for us in a motor car, but Mrs. Dalziel had to stop for a look at Di. As for me, I'm not sure how I felt about my sister. She was so lovely in her lace and silver brocade gown, and her cap-veil, that my eyes clung to her, yet it was hateful that her beauty should be for Sidney Vandyke. My thoughts flew to Eagle, wherever he might be—at the other



end of the world, perhaps—and I wondered if he knew what was happening in London.

Our places at church were at the front, in one of the pews reserved for the bride's relatives and intimate friends, so our being late didn't matter. But already the back part of the church was full, and the air heavy with the perfumes women wore, and the fragrance of roses and lilies which made the decorations. As we went in, a sense of suffocation gripped me. I felt as if I could easily faint, and I realized that the long strain on my nerves had begun to tell. I had a queer impression that I was only a body, and that my soul was far away looking for some one it could not find. I was glad when we were settled in our seats, but still the odour of the flowers oppressed me. I fancied that the brooding gloom of the day would end in a thunderstorm.

People were whispering and rustling in their seats, wondering if it were not almost the time for the bride music to begin. I had a jumpy sensation that somebody behind me must be staring, and strongly willing me to look round. Always I have been sensitive to that kind of influence, and often, too, I've tried to make others feel it. I kept turning my head, but could see no one who seemed to be taking an undue interest in me. Presently, however, I caught Tony's eyes, which fixed themselves on mine in an owlish stare.

"What makes you keep on twisting round like that?" he inquired in a stage whisper. "Are you looking for any one in particular?"

"No—o," I said, "but I have a funny sort of feeling as if some one were looking for me!"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Tony, and repressed himself at a glare from his mother. "I wonder if it's possible——" He stopped, and began carefully to smooth his silk hat which was poised on his knee.

"If what's possible?" I wanted to know, bending my head near to his, regardless of somebody's plume which grazed my eye.

"Oh—er, nothing much. Only just a silly idea of mine."

"Tell me, and let me judge whether it's silly or not. You're rousing my curiosity." And all the while I tingled with that almost irresistible desire to turn my head again. It was as if I were missing something very important.

"I'd rather not now," said Tony. "I'll tell you afterward."

Before I had time to wheedle the mystery out of him (as I felt confident I could) the "Wedding March" from Lohengrin struck up. Of course, Diana *would* have that! It went with St. George's and the rest of it: the "historic" thing.

She came up the aisle, her hand on Father's arm.

"Oh, doesn't he look *handsome*?" murmured Kitty Main.

"He?" I murmured back.

"Lord Ballyconal. But dear Diana is wonderful, of course."

Her wondrousness was largely a tribute to Kitty, who had given the bride everything she had on, everything that was packed away in her trunks at home, or laid out ready to go away in.

It all passed off exactly like any other wedding on a grand scale, except that Tony, sitting by my side, drew a long breath when the bishop who was marrying Diana to Sidney Vandyke finished the conventional pause following "or else forever after hold his peace." I flashed another glance at Tony but he was looking more like an imperturbable Billiken than he had ever looked.

And so Di was married, and people whispered what a beautiful bride, and how good-looking the American bridegroom was, while she and Sidney were in the vestry signing their names in the book. Then, down the aisle they came, Di radiant, Major Vandyke flushed and brilliant eyed. "He looks as if he had just fought a successful engagement," I heard an American man in the pew behind say to his wife. Well, that was exactly what he had done. But whether according to the rules of war or not was another question. We let the crowd pour out of the church before us, and followed at leisure, I feeling more depressed than I should at a funeral. Automobiles and carriages were dashing up to the pavement to take people away, and dashing off again after an instant's pause, while throngs of the uninvited and curious pressed close on either side of the red carpet. Rain was falling, but the lookers-on appeared to care little. The people seemed more excited than usual at a wedding, we thought, especially after the passing of the bride; and Tony and I looked at each other questioningly with raised eyebrows as we caught a word here and there.

"Might 'ave been a tragedy!" "Pretty close call, that was." "If it hadn't been for that feller they'd both have been dead corpses now!" remarked the uninvited.

"What can have happened?" we asked each other, and I made Tony speak to the policeman who had shut us into our car.

"Bride's carriage, sir; but it was soon all right in the end," was the only answer we got, as the signal was given for our motor to move off and the next to come up.

"The bride's carriage!" Then the new automobile hadn't come, and there had been an accident at

the church door.

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## CHAPTER XV

We dashed home to get news of Diana, and it was a relief to find everything decorous and apparently serene at the house. We were informed by a band of footmen, hired with powder and pomatum inclusive, for the occasion, that the bride had arrived safely. There was no stare of consternation or half-hidden horror on any face. But in the flower-decked drawing-room, with its effective marble pillars (Di and Father had taken the house on the strength of that drawing-room, so well designed for a wedding reception), the bride and bridegroom had not yet stationed themselves to smile and be congratulated, although guests had begun to arrive. Father, however, was there, at his best and reassuring everybody. Diana had been a "little upset by the fright, don't you know, and Vandyke was looking after her"; but it was nothing—nothing at all. She would be down presently.

"What is it, Father? What did happen?" I found a chance to whisper; but to my surprise he gave me for answer only a frown which seemed inexplicably to say, "Whatever it is, *you'd* better not ask! Don't pretend innocence, it doesn't suit you."

"Do find out something from somebody," I said hastily to Tony, and ran upstairs in search of Kitty Main, who, having deserted us to return home with Father, was nevertheless not to be found in the drawing-room. She was sure to know everything, I thought, and delighted to talk. But the first person I met was Sidney Vandyke in the act of closing Diana's door and coming out into the hall. Seeing me, a set and gloomy expression, most unsuitable to a bridegroom, changed to a look of actual fury. If I had been a small tame dog which had unexpectedly sprung up to bite him, he could not have glared more venomously.

Since he had come to London we had met almost every day, and when necessary I had been as dully polite as a book on etiquette. But only when necessary. At other times I had effaced myself; now, though I was keen for news of Di, I didn't care to get it from him, especially after that look. Never since the episode of the photograph in camp at El Paso had I of my own free will begun a conversation with Major Vandyke, and it was now my intention to wait until he was out of the way before going to Kitty or Diana. But when I would quietly have slid past the bridegroom in the corridor, he stopped me.

"You've always been the enemy," he said in a tone of repressed rage, subdued to reach my ears only, "but I did think you fought fair. I didn't expect you to hit me in the back—and strike your sister, too, on her wedding day. You're a cruel and cowardly little enemy, after all. And let me tell you this: neither of us will forgive you as long as we live."

I stared at him in amazement. "I don't know what you mean!"

"I shouldn't lie on top of the rest, if I were you," he sneered. "I forbid you to go to Di. She's borne enough. A little more, and she'd not be able to face those people downstairs."

"I tell you again, and I don't lie, because Eagle March himself taught me to speak the truth," I said, "that I've no idea what you're driving at. I have done nothing, except live. I don't know what's happened. I want to know."

"You shan't have the satisfaction of hearing anything from me!" Sidney flung the words at my head. Then he turned on his heel, and opened Diana's door again without knocking. I think he would have shut it in my face; but Kitty Main was ready to come out, and must have had her hand on the knob when it was snatched from her fingers.

"Oh, Major!" she exclaimed. "I was hurrying to call you back. Di thinks she's strong enough to go down now."

The door remained open, and I saw Di sitting on a sofa just opposite, with an empty champagne glass in her hand. Her white face and white figure in her wedding dress stood out like a wonderfully painted portrait against the fashionable black chintz wall-covering of the bedroom. Seeing her husband, she stood up and came forward, setting the wineglass on the table as she passed. "I'm all right now," she said, and then caught sight of me.

"Oh, cruel!" she reproached me. "Was it *he* who asked you not to tell, or was it your own thought?"

"He?" I echoed. "You all talk in riddles. You accuse me of something, and won't explain what it is."

"You *must* know!" Di exclaimed. "But I can't talk about it now, or I shall break down again. Thanks for the champagne, Sid. You were right; it did me good. Now we'll go."

She brushed past me in the corridor, her head turned away; and as I stared stupidly after her and Major Vandyke, suddenly my eyes fell on a small but conspicuous spot of red that marred the lustre of Di's silver train. It looked like a drop of blood.

When the two had gone, I pounced upon Mrs. Main. "For pity's sake, explain the mystery!"

"Oh, it was dreadful for a few minutes," she said. "There was nearly the most *awful* accident. Of course you came out too late to see. But—you *do know who was in the church?*—at least, I suppose he must have been there."

I started as if she had boxed my ears, for without telling, I knew all she meant. I remembered the odd feeling I had had of some one trying to call me, as if in a dream; and how I had looked behind me in vain. Tony, too, had been very strange. He had begun to say something and had stopped in haste. He had promised to explain later, but coming home I had forgotten to ask him. There had been the excitement about the supposed accident to Diana, and my thoughts had clung to that.

Now I realized that there was only *one person* who might have been at St. George's with my secret connivance, whose presence there Sidney Vandyke would furiously resent: Eagle March.

Kitty was looking at me curiously, almost appealingly, and I was vexed with myself for blushing. "I do not know," I answered steadily. "I might guess—but almost surely I should guess wrong. Tell me who, in all that crowd, it was worth Sidney's while to make this fuss about."

"Well," said Kitty, who being far from brave is easily abashed, "I'm not sure he *was* inside the church, but anyhow he was *outside*, because I saw him the instant before he seized the horses' heads. And then——"

"Seized the horses' heads? But who—who?"

"Captain March. Of course it was he who saved Diana and Major Vandyke. At least I think he deserves so much credit, and Di would think it, too, if she were left to herself. But Major Vandyke says the whole thing was arranged; that it was Captain March who planned—to—to——"

"He's sure to say something horrible. But begin at the beginning!"

"I can't now, dear," said Kitty nervously. "Di and Sidney will be so cross if I stay up here talking to you. I really must go down; but you're sure to hear everything."

I didn't insist, for I could not keep her against her will; and besides, it would be better to have the story from some one who could tell things more clearly. Down I flew to find Tony, whom I could trust to have commandeered some news for me by this time. Already the drawing-room was crammed with perfumed people and too fragrant flowers, and a babel of chatter. I should have had to knock fat old ladies and thin old gentlemen about like ninepins to sort out from among bonneted and bald pates the inconspicuous brown head I sought, and my search was checked constantly by well-meaning creatures who pined to tell me how pretty the wedding had been, or how much I had grown since they saw me last. Now and then, however, I picked up a wisp of information.

"What a close shave there was of a tragedy! But all's well that ends well," said Lady O'Harrel, a distant cousin of ours who had ignored the connection until it advertised itself in Norfolk Street and Park Lane. "Who was the man who seized the horses' heads when they bolted? I didn't see him myself, but I heard some one say he looked like a gentleman."

I answered as if I had the whole affair at my fingers' ends: "It was Captain March of the American army, the flying man who used to be so popular here last summer."

"Dear me!" breathed Lady O'Harrel, who had two sons of her own in the British army. "*Fancy!* Why, I heard Gerald speaking of him only the other day. He heard that Captain March had been cashiered for something or other so *dreadful* it couldn't be spoken of. The story's going the rounds of London now. I'm not sure Gerald didn't get it from your brother-in-law the night he asked Major Vandyke to dine at the Rag. How strange Captain March should have been the one to save them!"

"He was not cashiered," I passionately protested. "He did nothing dreadful. It was——" I stopped myself on the verge of saying that it was Sidney Vandyke himself who deserved to bear the shame he would thrust on another. But there are some things you cannot do! One of these is to inform a guest at your sister's wedding that the bridegroom is a villain. I had to choke back my rage against Sidney at its hottest, like Vesuvius swallowing its own lava, and resolve to fight the battle of Eagle March only on the lines of *noblesse oblige*—the lines on which he would choose to fight, no matter what the provocative.

At last I unearthed Tony, talking to the prettiest bridesmaid. But because she was the prettiest, and other men were glad to snap her up, I disentangled Tony with ease. "I've been dying for you!" I said.

"I don't flatter myself too much on that," he replied. "It's my story you want. Well, I've been busy putting things together, and I guess it's only the two ends of the jig-saw that are missing now. I warn you, Peggy, I don't know how Eagle March got into church, or where from, or what became of him at the end."

"Perhaps I shall hear from him," I said; yet I spoke mechanically and with little hope. I felt that the time Eagle had fixed for our meeting was not yet.

"Perhaps you will," echoed Tony. "He may want to explain, when he knows *you* know he was there, why he turned up at Lady Di's wedding: that it wasn't just vulgar curiosity, or the wish to give her a start that made him do it."

"He wouldn't need to explain to you, or me, or any one who knew him," I answered. "That goes without saying. Whatever his reason was, it was good. But are you sure he was in the church?"

"Well, you remember when I asked why you kept turning your head, and you told me it was because you felt some one 'looking for you?'"

"Yes! And you said 'By Jove! I wonder if it's possible——' Then you shut up like an oyster."

"I thought it wouldn't do to go further, then, and excite you for nothing, maybe. I did promise to tell you afterward, but coming here we had the accident to talk about, and you forgot——"

"Never mind excuses. Tell me now. Had you seen him?"

"I wasn't quite sure—thought I might have made a mistake. Away back near the door as we came in I caught sight of a chap who reminded me of March. But I never saw him before in London togs, you know, and it was dark in the church, with all that rain coming down outside. I couldn't tell for certain, it seemed so dashed improbable that he should be there. Even if he was in London, he wouldn't have been likely to get a card——"

"A card, indeed! Do you think any one with eyes in his head would ask Eagle March to show a *card*?"

"Well, anyhow," Tony defended himself, "why should he want to poke his nose in there? I judged him by the way *I* should feel, supposing it was you being spliced to some other fellow. I'd sooner be at the North or South Pole than have to watch it done, unless I could bounce out with an impediment why you shouldn't lawfully be joined together."

"I can think of reasons why a man might—might steel himself to see a woman he'd loved married to another man," I said; though in truth, I couldn't see distinctly, and I wondered if the day would come when the mystery of Eagle's presence at Diana's wedding would clear itself up. There was just one thing I could count on, though! It would never be from my trying to find out, but only when, and if, Eagle wished me to know. Meanwhile, I trusted him as always, and hardly needed to be told that the man in the back seat at St. George's hadn't flaunted himself in a conspicuous position.

"He was wedged in between two women's hats," Tony went on. "I'd never have spotted him, if I hadn't been rubber-necking at the crowd, sort of counting scalps. That's not done by brides and grooms in our class of life, so March might have felt as safe as a hermit crab, as far as giving the willies to Lady Di or Vandyke was concerned. But just when I was rubbering, he happened to shove his head forward between hats to squint at you."

"Oh, Tony!" I couldn't help breaking in. "He was looking at *me*?"

"That's the way it struck me. But the ladies with the hats were after the same thing, so they closed their ranks in front of March's nose, and swamped him. That's why I didn't get the chance to make sure whether it was he or his double. I rubbered some more, to see, but there was only a massed formation of hats where the face had been. There's nothing like hatpins to drive a man to the wall."

I shivered a little with the same electric thrill which had passed through me in church. What a soulless thing I had been not to know, despite a barrier of a hundred hats, by instinct whose eyes had called mine. But Tony was going mildly on.

"That's all, about the church," he said. "March must have been one of the first to get out, or he wouldn't have been on the stage in time for the next act. Sounds like a kind of melodrama now, doesn't it? Act one, scene one, inside St. George's, Hanover Square; the wedding. Scene two, outside the church door. Only, in a melodrama, the bridegroom would be the hero, and the other fellow the villain. There's no villain in this play."

"Oh, *isn't* there?" I sneered. "We won't argue the question, though. I suppose the new motor car didn't come after all, as I hear things about runaway horses."

"Then you have heard already? What's the good of my repeating——"

"No—no! I've heard scarcely anything. I depended on you. I was sure you wouldn't fail me."

That encouraged Tony, and soon I knew what he knew. He had been pumping Captain Beatty, and had learned from him how, before leaving the Savoy for St. George's, Sidney had received a wire from his chauffeur. It said that the Grayles-Grice had safely arrived by a later train than promised, but that something was wrong with the motor. Better not depend on the car for church, though it would be pretty sure to be all right to go away in after the reception. This was a blow to Sidney, because he had grown quite superstitious on the subject of reaching the house from St. George's. He had told Captain Beatty about repeated dreams of a bomb startling a pair of horses. And a Bond Street clairvoyant had seen in her crystal a picture of him and a woman in white driving away from a church in a black-draped hearse. Captain Beatty had mentioned casually to Tony that Vandyke used to have as good nerves as the next man, but that he'd got "jumpy" lately, and Beatty wondered whether it was like that with all fellows who were going to be married.

The only thing to do had been to order a motor or carriage to come to St. George's for the bride and bridegroom. Di, appealed to by telephone, preferred a carriage. A smart-looking one had

been sent accordingly, but the horses were fresh and had begun to dance impatiently even before Diana and Sidney came out of the church. The thin little coachman had difficulty in holding them in when it thundered. By the time Di and her husband appeared, the pair were prancing on their hind legs, and the crowd on the pavement waiting for the bridal couple were pushing nervously back, out of the way of threatening hoofs. Di had hesitated for an instant, but the coachman had assured Major Vandyke that the horses were only "playing a bit," and were as gentle as lambs. They'd come down to business the minute they were allowed to start. So Sidney had put Diana into the carriage and was in the act of getting in himself, when a man on a motor cycle suddenly tore round the corner into Hanover Square with the noise of ten thousand demons. That was the "limit" for the horses, said Tony. They bolted, with Di shrieking and trying to pull her husband into the brougham, Sidney clinging ignominiously to the door, and to a strap inside.

The policeman and another man or two ran forward, but the screaming of Diana and dozens of women on the pavement frightened the creatures more and more. The coachman lost control; the policeman was kicked, and stumbled back; the others couldn't get to the horses, which were bolting across the street; and in another minute the bridegroom would certainly have been flung down, if a man just out of church hadn't made a dash to the rescue. The next thing any one knew, he was hanging on to the animals' heads like grim death, and bringing them down from their hind feet on to all fours again. He was dragged a few yards before a couple of policemen could get to his side; but meanwhile, as he clung to the horses, like a brake on their speed, the brougham steadied itself, Sidney contrived to crawl inside and bang the door shut, for his own protection and Di's. It all happened in a minute; and as the hatless man held on to the horses' heads, Captain Beatty in great astonishment recognized him as Captain March. It was Eagle who stopped the horses; but as the two policemen sprang to his aid, and staggering back he let go his hold, he must have been kicked by one of the beasts. What Captain Beatty did see was Eagle's forehead streaming with blood, and when the rescuer had hurried away, insisting that the wound was of no importance, the bride was helped out of the carriage by the bridegroom and into a closed motor car which some one hastily offered. In the street where it had all happened was a stain of blood, Captain March's no doubt; but in the excitement of changing the bride from one vehicle to the other he had time to vanish as completely as if he'd wrapped himself in an invisible cloak.

"Just as well, too, considering who he was, and who he's saved," Tony finished ungrammatically. "It would have been mighty awkward for all parties if he'd fallen down in a faint, and Lord Ballyconal out of gratitude had had to put him up here, where the wedding party's going on. Or even if he'd been all right, but coralled by the crowd, the bride would have been called upon to address him as 'my preserver'—what? Can't you see Vandyke obliged to shower blessings on March for saving both their lives?"

"And yet, how awful that he should go without a word of thanks—go wounded and bleeding!" The thought made me choke.

"I guess March is a bit like a sick cat that way," said Tony dryly. "He'd rather crawl off and get well alone than be bothered by sympathy, even yours, my child. That's like him. And like him to save the very man who's spoilt his life. But blest if I can see that being there in church was like him, no matter what you say! Anyhow, it was a blamed good thing for every one concerned that he just dropped from heaven like manna in the nick of time, and then was absorbed back into clouds again, blood and all."

"Diana's dress must have been baptized in that blood," I muttered, for my own benefit, but Tony caught me up. "Gee *whiz!* did she get her gown spattered with it?"

"A drop or two on her silver train. Poetic justice! The blood had been spilt for her."

"Dashed bad luck to get it on her wedding dress, though, I've heard superstitious folks say—but what rotten nonsense to talk like this to you! Of course, there's nothing in it."

"I'm not sure how Di would feel if she knew. But *I* feel as if a drop of Eagle March's blood would be like the blood of the prince in a fairy story I used to love. Just the faintest smear of it brought fortune for the heroine and all her family," I said. "Di doesn't know. I didn't tell what I saw. And would you believe this, Tony? My noble brother-in-law pretends to believe that Eagle got up the whole scene, like a plot in that melodrama you were talking about. I suppose he'd like Di to think that Eagle bribed the livery people to send nervous horses and a weak coachman, and that he hired a motor cyclist to swing round the corner on a cue at the right instant, in order that he himself might play the gallant hero. Rather elaborate! But that shows how a man judges another by what he would do in his place! Isn't it a proof that the El Paso affair was a plot—a plot Sidney accuses Eagle of revenging in this wild way?"

"That's quite a neat suggestion," said Tony, smiling an "indulge-the-poor-child" smile which made me want to box his ears—though not hard. "I don't think you need be afraid, though," he hurried on, to calm me. "Vandyke won't openly accuse March of anything more, I guess, unless in the bosom of his family where it won't do much harm. If he dealt out any 'plot' talk of that sort, he'd make himself a laughing-stock, and he wouldn't stand for that. He'll just try to forget the whole business, and help other folks to forget—cut it out."

"It will be better for him!" I said, as fiercely as a small dog growling in the kennel of a big one. "But Di and Sidney, too, both accuse *me* of being in the 'plot.' They say I knew Eagle was in England, and secretly invited him to the wedding. I haven't even heard from him since we came

back from America."

"Haven't you?" Tony's face brightened. "Well, I shall never cease wondering what brought March to the church, till I know—which may be never. Unless you tell me when you hear."

"If I hear!"

"I guess you're sure to sooner or later. He must know now that he was recognized. No use hiding his head in the sand! He'll want to explain why he—er—well, sort of intruded."

"No, he wouldn't need to explain," I reiterated. "What's the use of friendship, if it doesn't understand and take things for granted? And—if Eagle never writes, I shall know he doesn't want me to seek him. So I won't do that, even though he has been hurt for us, and maybe is suffering."

"You're a soldier," Tony complimented me. "March would be just the man to appreciate that if he could hear you now."

"I believe he would understand me as I understand him," I said. "Still it is hard not to know if he's badly hurt."

"By the way he shot through the crowd like a streak of greased lightning, I should say it wasn't fatal," Tony cheered me. "But if you'd like to have me do a bit of secret service work and 'phone to a few hotels or hospitals——"

I shook my head decidedly. "I know the hotel where he goes," I said. "I shan't send. I think if he were very badly wounded, he *would* let me know. He'd trust me to stand between him and—the others. Now—let's go and see Di cut her wedding cake. You can have a piece to dream on if you like."

"No good!" said Tony. "I always dream of you anyhow, when I dream at all—except when I eat welsh rabbit: then I dream of the devil." But he went with me like a lamb, and we spoke no more of Captain March.

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## CHAPTER XVI

I think if Sidney Vandyke had never taken the trouble actually to hate me, he exerted himself to that extent on his wedding day.

I kept my distance when the others gave the bride and bridegroom a send-off of waving hands and showering rice as they skimmed away in the Grayles-Grice car (ready at last); but I'd caught a wandering glance or two meanwhile from my new brother-in-law, and thanked my stars that Heaven hadn't made me some poor private soldier under his command. Di turned her cheek with the look of a martyred saint when I was supposed to kiss her good-bye; and altogether I fancied that I should not be urged to visit in Park Lane when the happy pair came back in the autumn. I intended to be at Ballyconal then; but a thousand things were fated to change my scheme and the schemes of all the other unsuspecting mice in England and Europe.

The first thing—oh, such a small thing compared to those that were to follow—which happened after Di's marriage was an announcement from Father. He had proposed to Mrs. Main, and she had been "good enough to accept him." That was his formal way of breaking the news to me, for we had been on official terms only for some days following the wedding; though to his darling Di he would probably have put it "Look here, girl, she's jumped at me! Hurrah! The luck of Ballyconal's come right side up again!" And Di would have congratulated dear old Bally, reminding him that third times were always successful.

Of course, whenever I stopped to think of it, I had told myself that this announcement was bound to come, and to come soon. But my head had been full as a hive of bees with other thoughts; and besides, I hadn't realized how I should feel the blow when it fell.

Vaguely, I'd taken it for granted that life would go on for me as before. I liked Kitty, and she didn't dislike me, though, of course, Di had been brilliantly her favourite. I had told myself that Kitty and Father would trot off somewhere and leave me free at Ballyconal to hibernate in some neglected corner, while the place was glorified into a stately British home for an American millionairess. Then (I had gone on dimly planning) they would return in state, and Kitty would be duly honoured by a picturesque welcome from the hastily cleaned up tenants. After that, nobody would take much notice of little Peggy. I should be tacitly permitted to play among my books, and the peasants I loved the best, for whose sake I had been trying to learn the art of nursing.

Father's way of telling his news, however, showed me the truth about myself. I didn't feel in the least related to him; and I decided to use the month before their return from the wedding journey in finding some other way of spending my life. I couldn't make a "crowd" in that "company" of two!

I was nice to Father and charming to Kitty, and all the time I was polishing my brain as if it were the genie's lamp, and summoning the genie to bring me inspiration. I couldn't be a governess on the strength of languages alone. Not knowing the multiplication table, having to do hasty sums on my fingers, and being ignorant of principal rivers, boundaries, and all dates except that of

Waterloo, was too big a handicap; and in sheer poverty of invention I seemed to be driven back to Billiken, that god of "things as they ought to be." Perhaps it was fate that I had been invited by Mrs. Dalziel to a "boy and girl" theatre party the very night when I had to congratulate Father, and wish wishes for Kitty which short of a miracle couldn't come true.

It was only two days after Di's wedding, but already that event seemed long ago. No news had come from Eagle, and he was referred to in London newspapers as "the modest stranger" who had disappeared after saving the lives of the bride and bridegroom, "leaving no trace except a little blood shed in their service." The dinner at the Savoy and the boy and girl party at the theatre afterward were given, no doubt, more in honour of "Milly's count" (who was starting for Petrograd next morning) than for me; but I was made to feel myself a guest of importance; and at the St. James I had Tony next to me. There had been no chance to pour out my news at dinner, but now it came and I seized it instantly. Tony was always nice and sympathetic to tell things to! He actually listened and seemed interested, which I've noticed that few people do except in their own affairs. But the next minute I was sorry I'd spoken, for he proposed again immediately. I might have known he would! "You see, your whole family's bound to marry Americans, so I might as well be the one for you," he said. "If you don't take me, Mrs. Main will produce a nephew of hers. I know him—poisonous blighter—and he'll be shoved down your throat, sure as fate. He's *some* homelier than me, if possible."

I laughed. "Dear Tony! You're much too good to be a refuge for the destitute."

"Depends on the destitute," said he. "I'd love to be a sort of asylum or young ladies' home for you. Do take me this time, and have done with it once and for all."

"It wouldn't be done with," I reminded him. "That's the worst of it."

"It might be the best of it, if I played my cards right. You know, Peggy, not very long ago as the bird of time flies, you said you liked me better than any other fellow. Has my stock gone down, or stands it where it did?"

"Where it did, or even a point or two higher," I assured him. "But, dear Tony, I'm afraid even *that* isn't high enough for—for marriage, and fearfully serious things like that, though lovely for a dance or the theatre. Besides, I didn't say *exactly* what you think I said."

"About liking me better than other men? Oh, I know you made one exception. 'Tisn't jolly likely I'd forget! But you said the One Exception didn't count. I haven't forgotten that either. He looked on you as his sister or his maiden aunt."

"Oh, *not* his maiden aunt!" I moaned. "I could bear anything but that. And—and I'm afraid, after all, he *does* count—just in my mind, you know, not in any other way. But he's there and I can't—can't put him out. I'm afraid I don't want to."

"Gee! That's a bad prospect for me," said Tony with a big sigh, luckily not audible over the orchestra which was loudly playing between acts "You made me love you, I didn't want to do it!" with variations. "But see here, Peggy, it's just the same with me about you. I can't put *you* out of my mind, and I don't mean to. There you are! What are we going to do about this? Your best man won't come and play in your backyard, and my best girl won't put her nose in mine. You'll always be my best girl, because you're the best girl there is. So here's an idea: suppose I don't ask to be best with you, and don't whine to be on the ground floor or anything conceited? Couldn't you spare me a third-story back bedroom in your heart's house? Just sort of lend it to me, you know. I'd promise to turn out if you couldn't get along with me as a boarder when you've given me a fair trial. Of course, though, dear, I don't want to nag at you if there's a grain of chance that the best man—the real tenant of the house—will ever come to his right senses!"

"His right senses!" I almost laughed. "Why, Tony, for him to like me—in *that* way—would be to lose them. You don't know who he is."

Tony was silent.

"Or—*do* you? Have you been guessing?"

"Mayn't have guessed right," grumbled Billiken evasively. And then I knew that he knew the poor little secret I had thought to keep.

"I think you have guessed right," I said. "Don't look as if you were afraid you'd hurt me. You haven't. I don't much mind your knowing. And that's the greatest compliment I could pay you. It's Eagle March, of course."

With that the orchestra stopped dead as if on purpose to eavesdrop, and I had made a present of the name to the whole audience. But luckily that was all I had given. Any girl may yell any man's name, just as any cat may look at any king. All the same my cheeks were hot throughout the next act, during which I pretended to be passionately absorbed in the play. The minute it was over and forced silence at an end, Tony boldly said, "I knew it must be March, all the time. Not that you showed it!" he hurried to add. "You're too good plucked an infant for that! And I'm sure he never twigged. Not he! He's not that kind. It was only because you saw a lot of him, that I thought so; and a girl who wouldn't fall head over ears in love with March, if he was always underfoot, wouldn't have wit enough to know which side her bread was buttered. See?"

I laughed again more than before, for Tony when he meant to be intensely serious was generally

funny. "Poor me!" I said. "There was no butter on my bread, nor any jam. I'm a fool to go on eating it bare and stale! Imagine a man who loved Di anticlimaxing over to me!"

"I can't imagine any man not beginning and ending with you," said Tony stoutly, and I shouldn't have been a human girl if his loyal admiration hadn't pleased me. "But I suppose you're a better judge of March than I am," he went on, "and so, if his name's not down on the programme, won't you write mine there—to be figurative again? Scribble it in pencil if you like, not in ink. Then you can easily rub it out if you get tired of seeing it always under your eyes."

"What do you mean?" I asked, really puzzled by his allegories.

"Why, be engaged to me on the instalment plan. Stop payment whenever you want to. Agreement to be drawn up that way. All these weeks you've been trying, according to promise, haven't you, to like me enough to be engaged? Now, instead, try *being* engaged, and see whether you can like me enough to strike a fast bargain by and by. You might come along to Belgium with mater and Milly and me—they're dying to have you. Milly wants to bore you talking about her Russian—and we'll see such a lot of each other, travelling, that you'll know your own mind by the time my leave's up. Think, if I could take you back to God's own country with me as my—no, I won't say the word. I see it shocks you."

"It does," I said. "And even if I did what you ask, which would be nice for me, but not fair to you, nothing would induce me to—to——"

"Marry?"

"Yes, so soon. I'm too—young. Unless I loved you perfectly. Then I'd marry you if I were *eight* instead of eighteen."

"I wouldn't marry you! Must draw the line somewhere. But if you really think it would be nice, why not do it? I think it's fair, and I'm the judge. Say yes, quick, before that darned orchestra stops again. You shan't be married till you like, even if I have to wait as long as Jacob did for Rachel. Not that I know how long that was. Say yes——"

"Yes, then!" I shouted over an appalling blast of instruments. And Tony squeezed my hand.

That is how I happened to start for Belgium with Mrs. Dalziel and Milly, the day after Father's quiet wedding with Kitty Main, and the day before Austria delivered her ultimatum to Serbia.

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## CHAPTER XVII

Not being politicians or war prophets, but only tourists, we didn't realize what a flame would sweep over Europe on the winds of fury from this one far-off fiery spark. Tony read us out the news at breakfast in a hotel at Bruges: "Austria's Ultimatum to Serbia"; whereupon we went on drinking our coffee and eating our crisp rolls as if nothing had happened.

"Dear me, what a pity!" sighed Mrs. Dalziel absently. She was thinking of our sight-seeing expedition for which we were already late. Milly remarked that somebody was always throwing an ultimatum at somebody else's head, and asked for jam. Tony said intelligently that it was just what he had expected, after the murder of the archduke and the duchess, and looked at his watch. As for me, it did shoot through my mind that Russia might have something to say if Serbia were attacked; and I thought that if I were Milly I should have a qualm of anxiety about my captain-count. But I didn't wish to worry her with such a remote suggestion, and our war conversation ended there. None of us bothered seriously with the papers for the next day or two. Sight-seeing in Belgium seemed to us the last thing on earth which could possibly connect itself with an ultimatum, or even a declaration of war on Serbia. We went from Bruges to Ghent, from Ghent to Antwerp, from Antwerp to Brussels, from Brussels to Namur, to Louvain, and Spa, and so at last arrived at Liège. The next item on our programme was a run into Luxemburg, which was to finish our trip; and in a few days more Tony was to leave us to catch his ship for home, as his holiday was over. He had been behaving so well that I minded being engaged less than I'd expected; and it was nice to be petted by Milly and Mrs. Dalziel and loaded with presents. It was the first time in my life that I had experienced anything of the sort, for I had always been the one who didn't matter, at home. Each place we visited seemed more beautiful than the last, and I was trying hard to say to myself, "This is happiness, or all you can expect to know. Make the most of it, and be a sensible Peggy!"

It was late on the night of Wednesday, July 29th, when we arrived at quaint old Liège; and though we knew that Austria had declared war, and that all the great powers were muttering thunderously, it didn't seem as if anything devastating would really happen. That was much too bad to be true, and everything seemed so peaceful and comfortable. Hotel keepers smiled and said that the war scare was sure to blow over as it had blown over time after time in the past. We met other people gayly touring like ourselves. They all appeared to be easy in their minds and free from care, so we followed their pleasant example; and the sun shone on us, and Belgium seemed the prettiest and most pacific of all countries, basking under a cloudless sky.

"Telegram for you, dear," Mrs. Dalziel said to Milly as she sorted the post handed to her by the man in the hotel bureau at Liège. Then she dealt out envelopes to Tony and me, and we were



rather sleepily busied with them when Milly gave a gasp. "Oh, Mamma, he's got to *fight!*" she squealed.

"He—who?" questioned Mrs. Dalziel dazedly in the midst of deciphering a closely written and crossed page of thin foreign paper.

"Stefan!" Milly choked on the name. "Oh, it's awful! His father has consented to his marrying me all right, but *of course* he'll go and—and be *killed* now, and I shall never see him again! I'm the unluckiest girl that ever lived. And just when I thought everything was going to be so splendid."

I heard her wailing as I finished my letter, which was from Di: the first she had written me. It had gone to Brussels and been forwarded from there to Liège. "Sidney and I are rushing back to London as fast as the car will take us," she wrote. "This war news is terrible. Any minute we may hear that England's mixed up in the business. There's no more fun motoring about the country in this suspense; and if there's war, all the house parties we were asked to in Scotland are sure to be given up. We want to be where we can have news every minute, and will hurry up the decorators so we can get into our house, even if things are at sixes and sevens there. From what I hear, everybody will be congregating in London to be in the heart of things. It makes me sick to think of all my *lovely* clothes! If there's war, nobody will be wearing *anything*. All the nicest men will be away at the front. Isn't it *sickening*? Luckily, Sidney won't have to fight, as America's not involved. But I don't want to go over there and have people at home calling me a *coward*, to sneak away from under the Zeppelins and things the Germans will be sending over. I want to do what everybody else does, though Heaven alone knows yet what that will be. I expect Bally and Kitty will come back from Harrogate, where poor dear Bally is celebrating his honeymoon by taking a strict cure, and I hear Kitty is doing mud baths to reduce her flesh. They wire that there isn't one waiter out of sixty left in their hotel—all were *Germans*; so you see what that means. And Kitty's maid had hysterics this morning because war's to be declared on her country, and because the hotel chambermaids are all turned into waitresses, and she had to make Bally's and Kitty's beds. One realizes that war will be horrible for *all classes*. Your life won't be safe on the Continent, you know, and you'd better persuade Mrs. D. to bring you back immediately. Though you've been so horrid to Sidney, he'll overlook it in this crisis, for my sake, when even Ulsterites and Nationalists are forgiving each other. Father and Kitty will have to stay with us when they arrive, as the Norfolk Street house is given up; and you must of course come, too. You can be our guest till you and Tony are married, if you don't want your engagement to last *too* long."

I hardly knew whether I most wanted to laugh or cry over that letter. All I did know was that nothing would induce me to stay with Diana and Sidney Vandyke. I would even rather be married, if worst came to worst; but though Tony and I were playing at being engaged, the thought of actually marrying him was like jumping over a precipice. I wasn't ready for the precipice yet, and must avoid it if I could.

I folded up the letter and kept its news and its suggestions to myself. I sympathized with Milly; and hoped that, after all, even if Russia and Austria and Serbia and Germany flew in each others' faces, it might be possible for England and France and Italy to keep the peace. Di was always inclined to exaggerate, and probably she was glad of any excuse by this time to put an end to a motoring *tête-à-tête* with Sidney.

I went to bed and tried to believe that I had had a bad dream, but next morning I was still dreaming it. The papers told us how the Stock Exchange in London had closed, which seemed like hearing that England had suddenly gone under the sea. Belgrade was being bombarded. The Germans as well as Russians were mobilizing furiously. King George had telegraphed to the Czar, but before his message had time to reach Petrograd, the Kaiser had declared war on Russia. Belgium had begun mobilizing too, and only just in time. Trains were wanted for the soldiers. Frightened tourists clamoured in vain to get away. Even those who had automobiles could hardly move along the roads, and many chauffeurs were called to their colours. Ours was French, and went off at a moment's notice, with just time for a polite "*Adieu, peut-être pour toujours.*" Tony hated everything mechanical except rifles and revolvers, and had never learned to drive a car; Belgian chauffeurs had something better to do than help travellers out of trouble; so there we were!

It seemed only another phase of the dream from which we could not wake, when glittering hordes of German cavalry, the Kaiser's beloved uhlans, were said to be clanking over the frontier to violate the neutrality of Belgium, and we heard that Great Britain had declared war on Germany. I would have given anything to be back in England then, not because I was afraid of what might happen in Belgium, but because my blood was hot with pride of my country, and I wanted to be there to see the spirit of the people rise. There was little time to think, however, for Liège was seething with excitement. Fugitives began to pour into the town, with children and bundles in queer little carts drawn by dogs. Soldiers bade their families good-bye in the streets, and marched or rode off in clouds of dust. Wounded men were brought from the frontier, and an annex of our old-fashioned, dormer-windowed hotel was hastily turned into a hospital. Red Cross nurses appeared from somewhere, and several women among the penned-up tourists volunteered to help. Mrs. Dalziel could do nothing, because she had collapsed with fear, and was sure that she was in for nervous prostration. Milly had her mother to care for; but I was free, and thanks to my work in Ballyconal, I knew something about first aid. Ever since I met Eagle and he had given me the old cadet chevron, which I carried with me everywhere, I had grown more and more keen on learning to do what I could for others, and war talk in Texas had prompted me to buy books on nursing.

I mentioned this as a personal recommendation; the real nurses smiled. But they accepted my services as a probationer, strong and willing, and glad to do what she was told, even to scrub floors with disinfectant fluid.

"You'll spoil your hands," said Milly.

I laughed.

Almost at once after this began the bombardment of the forts at Liège; and all day long and most of the night we were deafened with the boom of great guns across the river. It was a relief to be allowed to watch through the dark hours beside soldiers whose wounds were not serious enough to need expert care that I could not give. Even if I had been in bed I should not have slept. I felt as if my brain were part of the battlefield where armies marched and fought. My heartbeats were the drums. We grew used to the firing of cannon. It seemed a part of everyday life. It was hard to remember after the first that each "boom!" meant lives ended in violence. Perhaps if we had remembered we should have gone mad.

Suddenly, on the third day, just at dawn, came a new sound, a great whirring like a thousand racing automobiles, and then two loud explosions, one after the other, different from the roar of cannon or the shots from the field guns that night at El Paso. The whole building shook as if it must fall, and wounded men who had slept restlessly through the thunder from the forts waked with a wild start. My charge, a Belgian boy of nineteen whose arms had been amputated, shivered and then relapsed into stoical calm as the house ceased to shake. "Zeppelin," he said, in a quiet voice. "They have dropped bombs."

It seemed that two must have fallen and burst close by, the noise had been so ear-shattering. Up from the street below our windows came a clamour of voices, shrill and sharp, which cut through the constant whirr of the giant motor. Near the head of the bed was an open window, and mechanically, rather than of my own free will, I leaned far out, as some of the professional nurses were leaning from other windows.

"You might get a bomb on your head," said my soldier, in his tired voice. But I did not draw back. I was surprised to find that I was not afraid. It seemed just then ridiculous, puny, to care about one's self. I was awe-struck rather than terrified, realizing with a solemnity I had never known that the next minute might be the last on earth for all of us in that dimly lit room of narrow beds.

The sky was faintly gray with coming dawn. I looked up, up into the pale dome, seeking with my eyes the great bird of evil that had laid its eggs of death. There it was, immensely high above the black, shadowy roofs and steeples of the hill and plain; a sinister shape, like all the German sausages in the world rolled into one; and hanging from it cars full of men reduced to the size of beetles by that great height.

The thing was almost directly overhead as I looked up, and it seemed that if it dropped a parting bomb as it sailed our poor little hospital must be struck. Yet I continued to stare, fascinated. Life and death were twin brother and sister, equally terrible and splendid.

"I wish I could have seen Eagle just once again," I heard myself thinking, as one hears the ticking of a watch under a pillow. But I felt a strange, throbbing eagerness to know quickly the great secret of what comes next after this world, with its seeming muddle of injustice and disappointment, its joys and broken aspirations. "Why! it was like this with me when we had our accident in the *Golden Eagle!*" I thought. And even as the remembrance flitted ghostlike through my brain, I saw tearing through the sky, far above the big bulk of the Zeppelin, a monoplane etched in black against the light of dawn.

I could hardly believe that it was really there. It must be an image called up by memory of that long-past moment, some strange illusion of an exalted mind: but the image persisted. Like a hawk it swept along the sky, coming from a direction opposite to that of the Zeppelin, as if to swoop upon it from above. I thought I heard shots. The great dirigible turned and sailed faster. I felt as if I were all eyes and pounding heart. Could the sight be real, this duel in the sky? Perhaps others watched it with me—I do not know. It seemed that I was alone on earth gazing at the incredible battle.

The Zeppelin made off, away from the town toward the fortifications, but the monoplane kept above it, despite the shots which spattered futilely. Just as the dirigible passed over the bridge, which hadn't yet been blown up, looking enormous, for it hung lower now, the monoplane—tiny in comparison—dived full upon it. With an explosion of gas from the huge cigar-shaped balloon, the dirigible dropped earthward, its bird enemy seeming to fall with it.

I gave a cry and covered my eyes with both hands.

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I felt that I had been broken, crumpled up like a singed moth, burnt by the vivid flame of that awful sight. But arms caught me from behind, as I would have sunk to the floor with the roar of another explosion in my ears, each brick of the house quivering on another. A kind Belgian voice was soothing me: "*Pauvre enfant!*" and hands, strong, though womanly, would have pulled me away from the window to lay me down on some unoccupied bunk, if I had not struggled to keep my place. "No—no!" I stammered. "I'm not going to faint. I must see! I must see!" And shaking off the nurse's protecting arms, I stared out toward an open space away from the town, where a vast

mass of wreckage blazed, turning the gray dawn red.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

"*Quel héros!*" rapturously sobbed the Belgian nurse who held me. "It is he who has saved the lives of all our poor wounded ones, and our lives, too. Did you not see the monster over our heads? It had to turn just in the nick of time. An instant more, and there would have been a bomb for us. Thank heaven! And thank the hero sent by heaven!"

It was a deed, I thought, worthy of Eagle March himself. The air scout who had accomplished it was his soul brother no matter what country had given him birth.

"Is it certain, do you think, that all those men in the Zeppelin died there together?" I gasped.

"Every man of them, yes, it is certain."

"But he—the man of the monoplane? He fell with them?"

"He fell, yes, my child. But he fell free of the Zeppelin. He is not in that fire cauldron there. Didn't you see the end of what happened?"

"No!" I said. "For a second I covered my eyes."

"Oh, it was all in that second! We thought he was lost, sacrificed for us; and even now it is most likely that he is dead. We saw the Zeppelin drop away from under the monoplane. Then came the flare of light, with the gas exploding and catching fire. But just before that, the monoplane was poised in the air for an instant above the great falling shape. It seemed to—do you call it 'plane' down? All that happened was so quick and sudden, and the aeroplane came to earth so fast we could not be sure of her fate. But if she fell, she fell free of the Zeppelin. We shall soon hear. The other hospitals in town are full already, except our little one, which has still room for a few. If any are saved from either of the wrecks, they will be brought here, unless we have filled up our beds meanwhile with people hurt by the Zeppelin bombs."

By the mingled dawnlight and firelight we could see figures running to the fields where the wreck of the great dirigible and the heroic little monoplane had come down. But long before news arrived of the occupants' fate we heard that none of the townsfolk had been injured by the explosion of the only two bombs which the Zeppelin had been given time to drop. Three or four buildings had suffered more or less, but fortunately they were shops, and nobody had been sleeping there. One bomb had fallen near a hospital, and Tony Dalziel, hearing a rumour that the "Annex" (as ours was called) had been struck, came rushing from the hotel close by to find out what had been my fate. When he saw the steep-roofed building untouched, and with lighted windows, he was relieved, but ventured to ask for me, and I ran down to speak with him at the foot of the stairs for a moment.

"Peggy! I just can't stand for this!" he groaned, and the tragedy in his voice contrasted so quaintly with his comic appearance, bareheaded, hair ruffled, and costume sketchy, that I felt rising symptoms of hysteria, which had to be controlled. "I must get you and the mater and Milly into safety somehow. To-night is the limit. Mater's more dead than alive, and Mill isn't much better."

"Don't worry about me, anyhow," I said. "You see, I don't much *care* whether I'm dead or alive. That simplifies things a lot! I wouldn't go away now if I could."

"You *shall* go, the first chance there is," insisted Tony, with new authority. "And it may come soon. There are some high-up Belgian officers at the hotel to-night. They came in an automobile not so big as ours, and it's broken down. If they can't get it right by to-morrow, when they want to go back to Brussels, where they came from, I'll make 'em a present of our car for the rest of the war, if they'll take us with them. You see, it's a serious matter with me. Things are getting worse here, and my leave'll soon be up. You don't think I'd go, and let you stay shut up in Liège with bombs falling all round you and perhaps on you?"

"Look!" I said, forgetting to answer, as I peered out through the open street door. "Here come some men with a litter. They're bringing it this way. Oh, Tony, if it should be the man of the monoplane! They think in the hospital that he fell with his machine clear of the Zeppelin, and may be alive."

Ahead of the slowly borne litter ran a youth with a Red Cross band on his arm. Seeing my nurse's cap and apron, all the uniform I had, he began speaking breathlessly in Belgian French. Had we a bed? Our nurses had sent word yesterday that if two or three were needed, we could supply them. He hoped they hadn't filled up since, as here was an urgent case: the aviator who had attacked the Zeppelin, and destroyed it by plunging on to its balloon at the risk of almost certain death. But he was not dead, and might live if he could have prompt surgical attendance and nursing.

"Yes, we can take him in," I said. "Everything is ready, and I'll run ahead of you to warn the staff."

"Tell them," the Red Cross man called after me, as, forgetful of Tony, I turned to fly, "tell them we think it is the British or American Monsieur Mars who did us such service, bringing news to the forts from over the German frontier two days ago."

I dashed on without stopping to answer or look back, for the litter was arriving; and it was not till I repeated the name, as I gave in my hurried report, that the sound of it on my own lips made my heart jump. Monsieur Mars! Could it be.... The thought was too far-fetched.... I dared not harbour it.

My ward was on the top floor, where the least serious cases were treated, men who could be got upstairs without too much strain and suffering. On the ground floor one bed was free, as I knew, and it was into that ward I went to tell the news to the matron. Perhaps when my duty was done I did not hurry overmuch to return to my own less interesting post; and I was still in the principal ward when the canvas litter borne by four Red Cross men was carried in. Doctors and nurses pressed forward to meet it, and I flattened myself against the wall, sick with mingled fear and longing. Again I thought, *what if...*

The big room which a week ago had been the restaurant of our prosperous hotel annex was still lit by electric lamps fantastically unsuited to a hospital ward: chandeliers of sprawling gilt branches decorated with metallic imitations of mistletoe. The light of day outside was filtering in but dimly, yet it paled and made ghastly the yellowish glow of electricity. Even the doctors and nurses with their tired faces looked like ghosts, and the wounded soldiers in their narrow white cots seemed figures of dead men modelled in wax. Some of them opened their eyes, in deep violet hollows; others kept the lids down, caring for or conscious of nothing. The staff who received the litter, and the Red Cross men who brought it, spoke in low voices, but never in irritating whispers. The moving feet made only a faint pattering sound on the linoleum-covered floor, and the litter was set down noiselessly at the side of the one free bed in the ward. Near it stood a screen which only a few hours ago had hidden the death agony of a soldier. I looked at this and shuddered, thinking once again, "*What if it were he!*" and if the screen should be needed again for the same purpose.

Where I lurked, out of every one's way, yet close to the door, flat as a paper doll, against the wall which smelled of carbolic acid, nobody troubled about me. I was just one of the younger nurses, and none stopped to ask whether my place were there or upstairs in another ward.

"Oh God, if it be he, let him live!" I heard my soul praying.

Nurses leaned over the long dark form on the litter, whose face I could not see, because where I stood only the top of the head was visible, a head thickly covered with short ruffled hair, which might be blond or brown when the blood stains were washed off. The bending figures quickly, skilfully cut away the stained and blackened clothing, and when it was the surgeon's turn to examine and perhaps to operate, some one noticed the intruder. The head nurse came to me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "My child, it was you who brought us the word just now!" she said kindly, her eyes on my pallid face. "But you must go to your own duties. This is a great honour we have, to care for the hero who has saved us. It must be our turn to save him. Go tell the news in the upper wards, that we hope for the best, the very best. Say to the doctors that it is indeed Monsieur Mars. They will know the name. They will have heard of him, and what he did for Liège only the other day."

"I'll go, but *one* instant first, I implore you, nurse!" I pleaded. "I think—it may be—that Monsieur Mars is an old friend of mine. I beg you to let me have a glimpse of his face!"

She looked at me and hesitated; but my imploring eyes, which suddenly spouted tears, decided her kind heart in my favour. "One glance, then; but control yourself," she said. And taking me round the waist, she led me quickly across the room. "Mademoiselle, our young British assistant thinks she knows the patient," the matron announced. "Make way for her, an instant. Then she will go to her own ward."

Some one pushed me forward, at the same time holding me firmly lest I should collapse. One fleeting glance was vouchsafed me of a form covered with a sheet, and a blackened, blood-smearred face, with half-closed eyes whose whites showed under the lids, and on whose lips was some strange semblance of a happy smile. To those who did not know him well, or love him beyond all the world, that marred face might have been unrecognizable in its mask of dirt and blood. But nothing could disguise it from me. Monsieur Mars, the wounded hero of Liège, and Captain Eagle March, late of the American army, were one and the same.

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I didn't faint, but I don't remember anything else till I found myself sitting on a chair in my own ward. The nurses were having morning coffee. One of them gave me a cup. If I hadn't been a nurse myself, with patients to think of, I should have dropped it and burst out crying. But instead, I drank the coffee; and a moment later went back to the bedside of the man I had been tending before leave was granted me to see Tony.

"You look as if you'd met the ghost of some one you love," said the nurse who had been keeping my place.

But he was not a ghost. Not yet—not yet!

## CHAPTER XIX

Tidings of the new hero of Liège floated up to our ward within the hour. There was slight concussion of the brain; there were scalp wounds which had had to be stitched up; and there were many bruises; but the surgeons reported no bones broken, and complete recovery only a matter of days. Even the monoplane itself, we heard, was singularly little damaged. All this would have appeared miraculous, and the pious Belgians would have attributed it to direct intervention of the Blessed Virgin, had not the wrecked dirigible on examination told a silent story of the air scout's cleverness as well as his daring. Before swooping on the Zeppelin from above, he had apparently discharged bombs of his own on the balloon, which had burst before the monoplane dashed down on to it, and the great bulk had fallen away from under, without carrying the lighter machine to destruction. The theory which awaited corroboration from the aviator was that he had begun to plane down, despite some damage, and had actually fallen but a short distance, striking earth a hundred yards away from the wrecked dirigible.

Nobody talked about anything except the feat of the foreign air scout. The roar of the cannon from the fort had ceased to make us jump; and it was better to chat about Monsieur Mars than to murmur in each other's ears, "How long before *THEY* slip round the forts and get into the town?" I made up my mind that whatever happened, nothing should tear me from Liège while Eagle March was there. And when Tony sent up word begging to see me on important business, in imagination I was defending Eagle's hospital cot (naturally with him in it!) against a troop of uhlans. In that mood, Tony's arguments about my going away made as much impression as the chirp of a sparrow on a man stone deaf in both ears.

"Wild horses, much less wild uhlans, couldn't drag me out of this place," I said, feeling as brave and firm as a story-book heroine, though to Tony I may have seemed obstinate as a mule. "What do you take me for, boy? Go comfortably away in a motor car to safety indeed, while Eagle March is here, lying at death's door? Or if he isn't at death's door, it's only because the angels slammed it in his face."

"Eagle March! What are you talking about?" Tony wanted to know, looking dazed. I had forgotten that there was no reason why he should have guessed the hero's identity, and I dashed into explanations. "Don't tell people yet," I said, "because he mayn't want it talked about, but he's the 'Monsieur Mars' who's been helping Belgium since the very first day of war. Why, they say *he* gave the warning that the Germans would cross the frontier. Isn't it *like* him? And how silly of us not to guess, the minute we heard the name of 'Mars!'"

"It never entered my head, though I've heard it a dozen times before this last feat," said Tony. "People were talking about other stunts Mars had done. But I supposed he was some French Johnny. Are you sure you're right? Sure it's March, I mean? It does seem a little too strange to be true, that he should turn up—or rather come down—here, of all places!"

"Too strange *not* to be true," I quoted. "Strange things are the only things that happen in war, for a man like him—a man without a country. We might have known he would come to the rescue of Belgium! And I am sure I'm right, because I've seen him."

"Great Scott!" was all that Tony had to say for a minute. Then he went on in a changed and heavy tone: "I suppose you're nursing him?"

"No such luck!" I answered. "I'm not experienced enough. But I'm debating whether I might ask to see him, when he gets better, on the strength of old friendship. I don't think he'd mind my claiming acquaintance with 'Monsieur Mars.'"

"Mind? I guess not!" said Tony. "But how soon will he be better?"

"He'll be nearly well, they hope, in a few days."

"He'll have to be, by George, if he wants to get out of town with his monoplane before the Germans walk in. The Belgians are the heroes of Europe, but there aren't enough of 'em to hold out forever, and that's why you *must* go with us, Peggy, March or no March. He'd be the first one to tell you to clear out, if he had his wits about him."

"I dare say he would, but he hasn't got them yet," I replied calmly. "You don't really *expect* me to leave him, do you, Tony, after—after all I've confessed to you?"

"I expect you to see reason," Tony lamely persisted. "There's just one thing to do, and that is to scoot while there's a chance. If I were alone without the mater and Milly, I'd say let's hang on for a day or two longer and run the risk—though running it might make me overstay my leave. That would be nothing, though. I wouldn't think of myself in any way. But I can't let my mother and sister go without me to look after them as well as I'm able. I can't ask them to stop, and they wouldn't if I did, for they're wild to get away. Yet how can I let you stay here alone? March would be furious with you, if he came back to himself and found you hanging on."

I laughed. "He couldn't kill me!"

"The Germans could."

"In spite of the red cross, and my lovely cap and apron? Well, I'm not afraid. And Eagle will never

know that I stopped for his sake when I might have gone. I'm not sure I shouldn't have stayed in any case."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, if I'd had to use force. But you see what a position you put me in, Peggy. How can I, a chap you don't care a snap for at heart, hope to drag you away from the one who's got it all? And yet, what am I to do if you refuse to come?"

"Dear Tony," I said quietly, "I do care lots of snaps for you, more than I ever did, I think. But—oh, I *must* say it!—'snaps' is just the poor little word that's appropriate compared to what I feel for Eagle. All I have and am is for him, though he doesn't want it, and will never know, I hope, what a fool his 'little friend' is over him."

In silence Tony received the blow I had to strike. He stood with his head down for a minute, while I ached with pity for him and for myself—though I hated myself, too, because I was hurting him.

"You must go with Mrs. Dalziel and Milly," I said, when he didn't speak. "It's the only way. I shall be safe enough—as safe as the other nurses. Who knows," and I laughed uneasily to break the barrier of restraint, "but Eagle will take me away in his monoplane? That would be a splendid solution of the difficulty, wouldn't it?" I spoke only in jest, but Tony accepted the idea half seriously.

"Yes, that's exactly what *will* happen, I expect," he said. "You'll go off with him. Anyhow, I've lost you! I see that. You could never put up with me after this experience. That's true, isn't it, Peggy?"

The same thought, put in a less brutal way, had been heavy in my heart since my glimpse of Eagle lying unconscious on the litter. I knew then that I was married to my love for him and that any other marriage would be worse than illegal.

I hesitated how to answer, but perhaps my silence spoke as clearly as words. "Don't look as if you'd just lost your last friend, my poor child," Tony said, in his good, warm way. "You haven't lost me, you know, though I've lost you. And you needn't look so guilty, either, as if you'd murdered me and buried me under the leaves! I was always expecting this thing to come, though I didn't foresee the way of it. If ever I felt tempted to believe our engagement was getting to be the real thing, why, I said to myself, 'Wait till she sees March again before you begin to be cocksure, my man.' Well, now you've seen him. And I guess you've seen in the same minute that our experiment has failed."

"I'm—afraid that's true, Tony!" I sighed. "I can't help it! It wouldn't be fair to you for us to go on as we are. I shall have to break my word to you, if I'm to be faithful to myself."

"You won't be breaking any old word!" he said. "It was never an iron-clad promise. I teased you till you agreed to try how the thing would work. It's been my fault all through, and now I'll take my medicine. Our engagement was never insured against war risks, and when I get back my senses I'm going to be glad you saw March before it was too late. I—brought you two together, sort of inadvertently, as you might say, didn't I? But, honest Injun, Peggy, I'd do the thing over again, knowing all I know. I only wish—yes, before the Lord I *do* wish—that good may come of it to you both."

"You're an angel, Tony, a real angel!" I almost sobbed. "But you needn't think that anything will 'come of it' in the way you mean, because it won't. I don't delude myself. I don't even hope. All the same, I must be true—to my own heart. And I beg of you to forgive me because I didn't know it well enough before."

"There isn't any question of forgiveness," said he, with his head up, and his nice Billiken face very pink. "I bless you—bless you for all you've been or done to me. And I wouldn't forget or undo anything if I could, you can bet your life on that. I think I could bear the whole business like a man, if I could stay right here and see you through. But—there's mater and Milly to think of—and the regiment. And—and—oh, well, life's just one damn thing after another!"

Mrs. Dalziel and Milly came and pleaded with me after that, and tried to frighten me into going with them; but, as Milly burst out desperately at last, I was "as hard as nails." Tony had told them nothing, I found, about the failure of our experiment or the identity of Monsieur Mars. I well understood why, and was grateful—grateful for that and for many things; most of all for bringing me to Belgium, and neither grudging nor regretting what he had done. So, as a lover, Tony went out of my life; but as a friend, he never can go.

I had no time to cry or feel lonely, or tell myself what a beast I'd been, after the three had reluctantly left me to my fate; for when I went back on duty after the good-byes, it was to find that I had been sent for to hasten to the principal ward. Monsieur Mars was being delirious in English, and the doctors and nurses understood too little of the language to know whether he were merely babbling or pouring forth important information.

There Eagle lay in his narrow, white bed, clean and pale, with his head swathed in bandages, a very different man from the grimy, bloodstained vision that had flashed on me a few hours before. The merest stranger who had ever seen Captain March would have deserved no credit for recognizing him now.

The nurses waited eagerly for me to translate his mutterings; but he only mumbled again and again, "It's all over, all over!"

If I could guess at a sad hidden meaning for the words, it was one which need not be handed on to others; and I proved so broken a reed as a translator that I expected to receive marching orders, right-about face. Strange to say, however, though his eyes were half closed and he seemed to see nothing, know nothing that went on around him, after I had spoken in a low tone to his nurse Eagle stopped muttering. For a moment he appeared to listen, and then with a deep sigh as if of relief from pain or some heavy anxiety, the half-open eyelids closed. The slight frown which had drawn his brows together slowly faded away. He had the air of being at rest.

"One would almost fancy," said the head nurse, who had been watching the scene, speaking thoughtfully when she had beckoned me away from the bedside, "that this brave monsieur recognized your voice, Mademoiselle."

Then I took heart of grace and did what I had told Tony I meant to do. I said that I had met Monsieur Mars in England and America. I had recognized him at once when the Red Cross men brought him into the hospital, but I had said nothing of this at the time, because I had felt that it would be considered unimportant.

"On the contrary, Mademoiselle," answered that adorable woman, "it is of the *greatest* importance. This heroic monsieur has saved us from death. If there is anything, little or big, which we can do for him in return, how gladly will we do it! Your voice has soothed him in his unconsciousness. Who knows what your presence may do when consciousness comes back? Why, it would be like throwing away an elixir to waste you after this in the ward above. You are from now on promoted as assistant nurse to our hero."

She was a stout, plain person, with bulgy eyes and a pink end to her nose, but I saw her as the most beautiful woman the world has ever produced.

I took up my new duties at once, trying not to act as if the moon were my footstool. All the rest of the day and far into the night Eagle lay as if asleep, with occasional fits of restlessness which, somehow, I could always soothe; and this state, though it seemed alarming to me, was approved by the doctor. It was better, he said, that after concussion the brain should have for a while repose in unconsciousness. The symptom was not good when the patient talked rationally too soon. But if monsieur should waken and show signs of wishing to ask questions, he must be answered clearly and quietly, if possible by the Demoiselle Irlandaise who would best be able to understand and satisfy him.

The Demoiselle Irlandaise was advised by the matron to take her repose early in the night, in order to be ready for such an emergency as monsieur the doctor suggested. But the demoiselle felt no need of repose. Sleep seemed some strange and foreign thing. She sat through the night watching the hero of Liège; and though guns boomed and were answered, and the nurses occasionally discussed beneath their breath what would happen to us all when the Germans came, never in her life had that Demoiselle Irlandaise felt so happy and so useful.

She had the reward of her vigil toward dawn, four-and-twenty hours almost to the minute after the Zeppelin and its crew had been brought down. Suddenly Eagle opened his eyes and fixed them on the nurse. At first he stared as if dazed by what he saw; then came a flash of recognition which changed to incredulity.

"I'm—*dreaming* you!" he whispered huskily.

I bent over him with an invalid's cup of liquid food prepared for this emergency, kept hot in a vacuum flask. "No you're not dreaming me," I cheerfully replied as I made him drink. "It's Peggy, taking care of you. Now go to sleep again. I'll still be here when you wake up next time."

"But——" he went on, staring round the room; "where am I? The horse kicked me, I remember; only that seems so long ago! I thought—a lot of things had happened since then. I hoped—but I suppose it's all a dream about—about——"

"Being in Belgium?" I prompted him, seeing his sharp anxiety. "That's not a dream, but true. You're Monsieur Mars, the hero of Liège, because you brought down the Zeppelin and the men who came to drop bombs on us. We're all grateful to you, and praying that you may get well soon."

"Thank God that it *is* true!" he sighed. "I wanted to do something. I'd have been disappointed to wake up and find I'd only dreamed after all—to find that I was back in London. I was afraid for a minute it was the day of—but it's all right now. How is it that you're here? It seems——"

"Oh, I just happened to be travelling in Belgium with the Dalziels when the war broke out, and we got caught. They've gone now, but I stayed. The nurses let me help them a little. I do the best I can. I told them I'd met you at home. But every one here calls you 'Monsieur Mars.' They know no other name."

"Don't let them know any other. Don't let any one know."

"I won't. You needn't worry! Now, will you sleep, please?—or they may think I'm doing you more harm than good."

"You do me the greatest good. I'll sleep, yes. But first—tell me one thing more; about the *Golden Eagle*. I planed down part of the way, but the motor'd stopped working. The last I remember is when I began to fall."

"The *Eagle's* safe," I assured him. "Hardly hurt at all; and there's a Belgian flying man in Liège today, Simon Sorel, who knows you. His mechanic is working on the *Golden Eagle*. She'll be ready for you when you're ready for her."

"That will be soon. Good man, Sorel!" he said, and closed his eyes. "Little Peggy!" I heard him muttering later. But three minutes afterward he had dropped into a natural sleep.

"Magnifique!" was the Belgian doctor's verdict in his next round, when Eagle had waked again, and had been attended by a nurse wiser and more experienced than I. There was little that I was allowed to do for him, but that little was a joy worth being born for; and I could have died of happiness to see how, when he was awake and fully conscious, his eyes followed me when I moved about. But it was better to live than to die just then, and I did live with all my might. I lived in every nerve and vein for those two days while "Monsieur Mars" was my patient. After the first twenty-four hours he insisted that he was well enough to be changed into the ward above, and leave his bed on the ground floor to some one more seriously injured. On the second day he sat up in a reclining chair, and announced that twelve hours more would see him out of hospital. Doctors and nurses protested that he would throw himself back into a fever, and the consequences might be serious; but as at that very time the danger of the town being taken was imminent, arguments for prudence lost their force. Toward evening on the third day Eagle, with his head and one hand still in bandages, was limping about the field where the *Golden Eagle* had been repaired; and when he came back it was to say that he thought he might get off at midnight with dispatches for the king in Brussels. He calmly announced this intention to me as I handed him an innocent cup of broth, better suited to a confirmed invalid than to a recovered aeronaut. But he quietly accepted the cup; and I saw by the look in his eyes that I was to expect the first real talk we had had together.

"What about your going with me, Peggy?" he asked, as simply as if he were proposing a short pleasure jaunt in a motor car. "You know, I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't think it honestly the safest thing for you. With luck we can make the trip in less than an hour, by air. Heaven knows how long it would take you by earth; and there's no one here, anyhow, to help smuggle you away if I go and leave you behind. I can't bear to do it! Besides, from Brussels, there's a good chance of your getting out with refugees, if you don't wait too long. And you can do as much good work in London as in Liège. What do you say?"

I wished that it might take us many hours to get to Brussels instead of less than one. But I didn't put the wish into words. I said only, yes, I would go; and many thanks.

"Good! That's settled then," said he.

"I must tell our matron," I hesitated. "I *hope* she won't think me a coward!"

Eagle smiled almost as he used to smile ages ago in London, when first we were friends, and he still thought of me as a "little girl." "Few people would call it a cowardly act for a young woman to fly out of a beleaguered town in a battered aeroplane with a battered airman, and I don't think your matron will be one of them. She'll thank you for what you've done here, and bid you God-speed. But don't go yet to tell her. I have some things to say to you. You'll be my passenger and 'observer' when I start to-night, but we'll have no chance to talk; and in these times we must face the fact that we may never have another chance this side of heaven."

The words went through me like a bayonet, for I knew too well how deadly true they were. I didn't try to contradict him, or talk about "hoping for the best"; for prattle of that sort seemed too futile. I only said, "Let's take this chance, then. I've plenty of time—hours yet. Stretch yourself out in the *chaise longue* and rest while we talk. I'll sit here by you on the window seat."

No one was very ill in this upper ward, which was kept for convalescents. Some of the men had been given cigarettes to smoke. Some were having their supper. It was generally known that Monsieur Mars and the Demoiselle Irlandaise had been friends in England; and the news having run round the wards that Monsieur Mars had practically discharged himself as a patient, we were allowed to talk in peace. Not an errand was found for me, not a nurse looked—or allowed us to see that she looked—our way.

"I didn't mean to remind you of my existence, you know, Peggy, till I had something to say about myself worth saying," Eagle began, speaking lightly, yet with a nervousness he couldn't quite hide. "I told you that in my last letter. But Providence has stage-managed things differently."

"Yes. We didn't expect to act together in a continental theatre, did we?" I was deliberately flippant. "But I'm glad to be in this great play with you, even in one scene, and such a little part!"

"Maybe the part seems little to you. It doesn't to me! You've helped me to get well twice as soon as I should have done among strangers. Heavens! But I was glad to see your little face! I'd have told you that first morning when I waked up what I'm going to tell you now, if you had let me then. Things were rather mixed in my brain. I thought I was in London, and you'd found me at a sort of nursing home I retired into for a couple of days to get patched up, after that—er—that little accident I had. I suppose you heard something of it at the time, though I don't think you were on the spot to see."

"Tony told me you were in church, and that it was you who stopped the horses when they started to run away," I said, without beating round the bush, for I thought he was bidding for my frankness on this sore subject.



"I hoped I might have passed unrecognized; but I feared that was too much to expect. I was tempted to break my resolution and write to you after all, explaining why I went to Lady Diana's wedding. But I stuck it out because—well, because it *was* a resolution. Silly maybe! all the same, I had it a good deal at heart to find a new place for myself in the world before I made a sign to any of my friends, even loyal Peggy. Besides, I had a safe sort of feeling you wouldn't misjudge me."

"I'm glad you felt that," I said. "Almost glad enough to be glad you didn't write. Though—I should have liked to hear."

"Well, I thought of you a lot, if I didn't write. And I couldn't help looking at you in church that day. I sent you wireless messages with my eyes once or twice, although I knew it would be best if you didn't get any of them."

"I believe I did get them. I seemed to know that some one was calling me."

"It wasn't a S. O. S. call!" Eagle smiled. "I found—well, I found that I wasn't in distress, or need of help. That's precisely why I went to St. George's, Peggy. I wanted to test myself. Did you think the reason might be that?"

"No! I thought of a dozen things it might be, but never that one!"

"It was the only motive that could have taken me there. I felt it gave me a right to go, even though—if people who knew how things had been saw me, they might—well, they might think me guilty of very bad taste. But I didn't mean to be seen. I wasn't asked to show a card. I walked in early and chose a place at the back of the church. I trusted to the crowd to hide me, and it did. Dalziel may have caught a glimpse of me between women's hats, but he couldn't have been sure if it hadn't been for that affair afterward. That was bad luck, in a way, although I was glad, if the accident had to happen, that I could be of use. However, it didn't affect the question of my being in church. And I must tell you about that. I didn't go to England for the purpose of making the experiment with myself. It was another reason which took me there. But being in England, I—tried it—tried it with success."

"You mean me to understand that—you *didn't care*?"

"Not exactly that! I'm not made of iron or marble. I didn't sit there in church without a qualm. But the feelings I had were not those I'd thought I must defend myself against. What I felt was—was no more and no less than a rage of hatred against that damned—forgive me, Peggy!—against that—"

"Damned villain, Sidney Vandyke," I fiercely finished the sentence as he had meant to end it.

"I can't pretend that that word wasn't the only one to express my feelings for him on his wedding day," Eagle admitted. "Not because he'd taken Diana from me, though. That's the strange part! I found it out while she was being married to Vandyke, and it was the thing I'd wanted to find out. In the relief, I ought to have forgiven him everything. But I didn't forgive. The ruin he'd wrought on my career overtopped everything else in my mind even at that minute. If some great power could have put me in Vandyke's place at the altar, and given Diana to me instead of to him, I would not have taken her—not even with her love. It seemed to me that what she would call her love wasn't worth the name of love, after—what had passed. It was only the memory of all I'd felt for her which hurt just then, so far as she was concerned. But for him—God, Peggy! to see him at the height of his hopes and ambitions made me mad to choke his life out! It does me good to confess this to you now, for you're the only one on earth to whom I'd speak."

"Yet, when you went out of church, you saved him from danger of death!" I said thoughtfully.

"That's just one of life's little ironies, isn't it?" Eagle laughed a low and bitter laugh. "It occurred to me afterward that I'd spoilt a good melodramatic plot. Hero secretly goes to church to see the woman who jilted him marry the villain to whom he owes his ruin. Villain is killed before his eyes on the way to the wedding reception. Big climax!"

"I think it was more dramatic," said I, "for the hero to save the villain's life."

"Too conventional. Obvious sort of thing!" sneered Eagle. "But I *am* conventional and obvious, I suppose. I did what I did simply because I couldn't help it, and I'd probably do it all over again. I'd have regretted it afterward, perhaps, if Di—if Lady Diana hadn't been in danger, too. I bear her no grudge."

"You're very noble," I said.

"It's not nobility. It's more like callousness. I freed myself from Lady Diana on her wedding day, or found that I was free. But if you could see into my soul when I think of Vandyke, you wouldn't call me 'noble.' I honestly pray for the day when I can remember him with indifference, and when I can say of what he did to me that good is born of evil. That's what I'm working for. But the time hasn't come yet. Maybe it will if I can manage to make myself of real use in this war. I've done nothing yet except a little scouting."

"Liège thinks differently, and so will all the world when it knows."

"I'm not working to reinstate myself in the world's eyes, but in my own—and most of all to help Belgium. There are things one does just for the thing itself. I have a fellow-feeling with a country

suffering unjustly. After what I've gone through myself, I seem to owe her allegiance, as to a friend who understands. The moment this war cloud began to gather, I thought it would burst over Belgium, and I crossed the frontier from France with the *Eagle*, to offer my services. I'm glad now I failed in the hope that brought me over from America to England. I wanted to join Shackleton's Polar expedition, but he had no need of me."

"So that was why you came to England?"

"Yes. I told you it wasn't for the sole purpose of testing my feelings at St. George's Church. Being in London—"

"I understand. But, oh, Eagle! To *think* you would have gone away for years without bidding me good-bye!"

"You don't quite understand yet or you wouldn't say that." His eyes were wistful. "I was disgraced—put beyond the pale, down and out, unless I could work my way up again out of the mud. Mentally, I was a sick man. Now I see clearer. I'm on my way to get well in spite of scars. Life or death will cure me soon. It doesn't much matter which!"

It mattered to me—mattered so much that I could not speak.

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A few hours later I had said good-bye to all my friends at the Liège hospital. Again I was a passenger of the *Golden Eagle*, flying through darkness as once I had flown through sunshine. Hidden by the night, we winged our way to Brussels safely and surely, and landed outside the town after forty minutes in the air—forty minutes which seemed to me worth as many years.

We came down in a farm field, safely but not silently, and waked the farmer, and his three sons not yet of soldier age. They ran out with rifles prepared for any emergency, but a few words of explanation warmed their hearts to welcome us.

I with my little bundle—my only luggage—was taken to the wife and mother, who exclaimed over me as if I had dropped from another planet, and gave me a bed for the rest of the night. One of the boys offered to guard the monoplane while Eagle went off on the bicycle of the other into town with dispatches from General Leman to the king.

In the morning "Monsieur Mars" came back with the news that a party of English ladies were starting for home in the care of a clergyman, and that he had asked if I might go with them. They had consented to take me, and I must be ready in twenty minutes. An automobile belonging to an officer would call for me at the farm. It came promptly, and in it Eagle and I had our last minutes alone together. We talked cheerfully; but I knew as well as he knew that the chances were ten to one against our ever meeting again on earth.

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## CHAPTER XX

I could not bear to go away to safety in England while Eagle stayed behind, daily risking his life. But he would not listen to my faltering hints that I should take up Red Cross work again in Brussels. "If you want to give me peace of mind, go," he said. So I argued no more, and smiled my best smile as we clasped hands for the last time. That was in the thronged railway station, where Eagle came to see me off and help our pilot parson steer his charges through the crowd. I was glad then that we had said our real good-bye alone.

It took us two days to get out of Belgium at that busy time of mobilization. We changed trains so often that we lost count, and frequently waited for hours at wayside places in pouring rain or broiling sun. We hadn't much to eat, but most of what we had we gave to refugees worse off than ourselves, or to tired, hungry soldiers. It was a hard, almost a terrible journey; but it gave me two friends, and carried me one stage farther on the strange road along which Fate was leading me blindfold.

The two friends were old maiden ladies, the sort of old maiden ladies Father and Di would have avoided like a pestilence if they had met them travelling on the Continent. They were twin sisters, exactly alike in figure and face. Their name was Splatckley; their looks were as repellent as their name; and their natures were angelic. They were tall and thin and sprawling, with corrugated iron foreheads, and grizzled hair which they crimped over it in little bunches. They had wistful, wondering brown eyes, like dogs' eyes (if you can imagine dogs wearing pince-nez!), the sort of noses manufactured by the gross to fit any face, and large stick-out teeth, which made you feel sure that no man would ever have kissed the poor ladies at any price. Their clothes and hats and shoes resembled French caricatures of British tourists, and they had a habit of talking together in a way to rasp the nerves. But to me they were adorable. All their lives they had lived in a country village, fussing happily over church work; but an uncle, who had made jam and lots of money, died, leaving everything to his nieces. Part of that "everything" was a large house in Fitzjohn's Avenue, Hampstead, in which, by the uncle's will, the Miss Splatckleys were obliged to live for nine months of the year. They had done their duty by it for the first nine months, and had then, with great excitement and some trepidation, started with a maid as old as themselves for

their first trip abroad. They had just conscientiously worked, by the aid of Baedeker, from France into Belgium when the war broke out; and the heart-rending sights they saw among refugees inspired them with a brilliant and benevolent scheme. It occurred to them that their big house could be turned into a home for Belgian refugees, and they resolved to offer a thousand pounds toward the expense of bringing penniless people over to England. They could have their largest bedrooms altered into beehives of cubicles for single women, and stick little families of mothers and children into the smaller rooms.

"Parkins will help," they said, as we whiled away dreary hours of waiting in discussing over and over again their plans. And so saying they smiled square-toothed, affectionate smiles at the old woman who had been in their service since they were all three young together.

"But we must have at least a couple of nurses to help the poor, distracted mothers with the children, and, of course, there must be a second cook and another housemaid to make things comfortable," they went on. "We must try and think of some nice young girl, too, among our friends, who would give up her time to work with us. We're too old to make a success alone."

Then they ran over a list of the girls they knew, in town and country, but were able to suggest no one whom they both—Jane and Emma—could agree upon as suitable. While these two angels were busily racking their brains, I sat with a great idea developing in mine. I suppose I must have looked intelligent and eager while this was happening, for Miss Jane was moved to inquire if, by chance, I knew of anybody who would do? "A girl who is kind, and willing, and bright and strong, and rich enough to give up all her time for nothing," explained the dear old lady. "It's a very difficult combination, I know. And, anyhow, your friends wouldn't care to bother perhaps with such a middle-class institution as ours will be. There'll be hundreds of charities organized by princesses and duchesses, smart affairs that will do good on a grander scale than we can, and maybe get a little fun out of it, too. But you *did* look as if you had something on your mind to help us out with; so you must excuse me if I asked."

"I know a girl who would like to help you," I said, "if you'd have her. She's willing and strong, though not at all kind, and perhaps not so very bright. She isn't rich, either, but poor as the churchiest mouse! Still, she'll gladly give up all her time if she may stay with you, because she has no home that she can properly call a home."

"We should *want* her to stay with us, of course!" they protested, both together, as usual. "But, if she isn't kind——"

"Perhaps she could learn to be kind! She would try hard," I said meekly. "Her name is Peggy O'Malley."

They thought I was joking at first; and when I'd made them understand that I was in dead earnest, they shook their heads and looked dubious, fearing it "wouldn't work."

"You see, my dear," Miss Emma explained, volubly assisted by Miss Jane, "you are the only earl's daughter, or indeed *any* member of the aristocracy—higher than a knight's family—we have ever met socially—if you can speak of this as 'socially'—being actually *thrown together*, in all senses of the word, whenever they're in too great a hurry to couple our train nicely, or when we fall out in a heap at some wayside place like this. We don't flatter ourselves that you'd be likely to select us for acquaintances if you were able to *choose* at this time; and you mightn't be pleased with our ways at home. We have kippers for breakfast sometimes, and always cold supper Sunday nights."

I assured them passionately that if Providence had made them both expressly for my taste, we couldn't be better suited to each other. As for being an "earl's daughter," said I, there was nothing in that except extra charges from dressmakers and hotels, and having things you had never done attributed to you in paragraphs of penny weeklies. Then I drew on all my funds of pathos, describing myself as unwanted and unloved. This did the trick! The twin angels took me to their hearts and promised me a place in their home and scheme. By the time we got on board the boat they had dropped my handle and were calling me "Peggy dear."

In London a crowd had come to the station expressly to welcome and cheer us returning wanderers. And London was not the same London we had left a few weeks ago. It was a city under a spell, a London of some strange dream, all the stranger because the only change was in the people. Later, it changed again, becoming almost gay and lively in outer appearance, but at this time the balance was not adjusted.

Soldiers and recruits were marching through the streets, which but for them and those who dazedly watched them were almost empty. Instead of the mad herds of motor omnibuses, which had gone charging up and down in "old days," a few moved sedately, with here an ancient horse bus unearthed from oblivion. Of the lively streams of taxis, blue and green and black and gray, the source seemed suddenly more than half to have dried up. Some melancholy four-wheelers and hansom had made bold to steal out, and were finding customers. Little boys were playing soldiers in the middle of Pall Mall, no longer a maelstrom. There was no din of traffic to drown the frog-like music of their sixpenny drums and penny trumpets. Looking into the doorways of the biggest shops one saw nobody but the attendants, waiting to serve customers who were not there and would not come. Outside the little shops the proprietors were frankly standing, to wonder sadly what had happened to them and to London, and what worse thing was likely to happen next? They talked in low voices to each other, trying to smile or read the latest war edition of some newspaper.

Most of the people who were in the streets seemed to have come there to look at the soldiers or to read the papers, which they did regardless of bumping into all the others who were doing the same thing. Nobody appeared to think of buying anything, though the shopkeepers had already pathetically changed the aspect of their windows to suit altered circumstances. Instead of displaying lovely dresses, they showed rolls of khaki cloth, or linen, cotton, or flannel for shirts, and gray army blankets. Shoemakers had bundled away their attractive paste-buckled slippers, and put forward conspicuously thick-soled brown boots to which they drew the attention of officers and soldiers. Chemists had hung printed cards, advising the public to "Keep up Their Strength in War Time" by taking So and So's Tonic Wine. But no one cared. No one bought. There was a dazed look on most of the faces. If those who read newspapers cannoned into each other, instead of glaring or swearing they smiled mildly, wistfully, and perhaps fell into conversation about the war. One felt able to guess what all the millions in London and even in all England and Europe were talking about and thinking about at any given moment; yet it was strange to us who had come from the hot red heart of the war to see no other sign of it except this dreamlike silence which hid the pain of parting from those loved best.

Nobody came to meet me at the station, because, not knowing when I should succeed in arriving, I had not tried to wire; nor would a message have been likely to reach its destination if I had. The Miss Splatcleys took me home with them, as if I had been an adopted child; and it was from the appropriate address of "The Haven" that I telegraphed Father and Diana: "Reached London safely with friends who have asked me to visit them. Writing explanations."

Miss Jane and Miss Emma prophesied that "his lordship" would put down his foot on our plans, but they did not know him. I did. Having received my promised explanations, he was more genial on paper than he often took the trouble to be for "only Peggy."

He wrote from Di's new house in Park Lane, a letter eminently fitted to be read aloud, and to impress with his graciousness the middle classes personified by estimable if vulgar females labelled Splatcleys. He had, it seemed, made inquiries about these ladies, and was in receipt of quite satisfactory references. I had his permission to visit them until further notice, and help in their good work, which he thoroughly approved in these early trying days when everybody was organizing something. Also, he was prepared to make me a small weekly allowance for personal expenses and charities. He enclosed a cheque for the first week. It was for two guineas.

Kitty added a postscript with a good many italics. She was *so* glad that I was safe after that terrible time when she and dear Ballyconal had been *so* worried about me, and would have been even *more* anxious if they had had any time to think of themselves. Of course, in the circumstances, she could *quite* understand that it would be awkward for me to accept Major Vandyke's hospitality, so perhaps things were best as they were, especially as I would be working for the good cause. But I *must* come and see them. Surely I could do that? And it would make talk if I did not. She was sure I would be interested in the sewing guild which Di had started. Everybody was starting a guild of some sort, but this was a very special one, consisting of the most *top-wave swells*. Not a woman on the list of workers whose name you couldn't find in Burke and Debrett!

Diana also wrote, not at all hurt that I hadn't accepted her invitation. Indeed, she seemed to have forgotten the episode, quite taking it for granted that I was disposed of with the Miss Splatcleys for some time to come. "Kitty and I will motor out to see you the first day we have a chance," she said, "if we can *find* Fitzjohn's Avenue. I never heard of it. But then, one doesn't hear of streets in Hampstead, I suppose, except in war, or crises like that, when we're all as democratic as saints. You might ask your friends for a subscription to buy shirt material for us to make up. I can get more workers than I need, but very little money, and we need a lot, especially as some of us have had no experience in sewing and we do waste rather a lot of material getting things wrong at first! Still, we are persevering, and you must come and see us at work cutting out and putting together garments for the wounded every afternoon in my drawing-room, where the decorations are all finished and immensely admired. We have tea, and I've engaged a palmist, who tells us what will happen to our friends at the front and how the war will end. She encourages us and keeps us up. Later we hope to get convalescent officers to tell us their experiences while we sew. Could you do any knitting for us? I remember you learnt from your nurse when you were a small child. I thought it so irritating of you, but it might come in useful now, if you remember the stitch. Some of us can crochet, but it seems that won't do for socks. A good many use worsted of a pretty colour which doesn't clash with their frocks; but as for me, I've thrown aside *all* vanity. Don't forget to ask the Miss Splatcleys for a cheque, as Bally says they're rich; and I do hope you haven't jilted poor Tony. He has gone, as of course you have heard, and the Dalziels don't know *anything*—I mean about you and T—I see them every day. Milly spoiled two shirts this afternoon, but her mother bought us some beautiful readymade ones instead, with tucked fronts."

Work was so real and so pressing with us at "The Haven" that I laughed at the picture of Diana's guild with its list of helpers from Debrett, its palmist, and its tea. Miss Jane and Miss Emma, however, said that it was my duty to go and see my family, as I was younger than they were, and it was not to be expected that they could get to me. The desired cheque I hadn't meant to mention, but in reading the funny part of the letter aloud one of Di's references to it fell out inadvertently, and the generous creatures caught it up. They were prepared to spend many hundreds of pounds in turning "The Haven" into a refuge, and in supporting the homeless Belgian women and children to whom they offered hospitality, but they couldn't allow my sister to ask in vain. I was given twenty guineas for the guild and told that I ought to take the cheque myself, for I would discover that "it was the busiest people who could always find time."

We were busy from six-thirty in the morning till ten-thirty at night, with indigestibly short intervals snatched for meals; but, as the two angels said, there was always time to do one more thing. On that principle I contrived to go to Diana's on one of her "afternoons," armed with the Splatchley cheque and my own knitting, strongly resolved not to drink any of Sidney Vandyke's tea or eat one of his horrid éclairs.

I was ushered into the house by two powdered footmen far too big for it. It is a small house for Park Lane, all up and down stairs; but the drawing-room is of good size; and when a bishop-like butler published my name at the door, I saw that the room was full of women, young, old, and middle-aged, seated at sewing-machines, or standing at long tables cutting out strange-looking shapes from hideous materials.

There were some quaint sights to be seen at "The Haven," rooms being partitioned off into cubicles; others being turned into dormitories, nurseries, or refectories for the refugees, who had already begun to arrive, before things were half ready to receive them. But Diana's smart new drawing-room in Park Lane presented a far more extraordinary study in contrasts than anything the middle-class "Haven" could show.

Improbable Louis-Seize furniture was pushed back against white and gold and silk-panelled walls. Gilt-legged tables and chairs were piled with rolls of bleached and unbleached cotton, feverishly pink flannelette, and scarlet flannel; or littered with cut-out parts of garments, some of which (judging from the confusion and clamour about them) had got badly mixed. On the garland-embroidered curtains of primrose yellow silk were pinned placards announcing patriotic meetings of women who wished to assist or form recruiting agencies; or appeals from the Red Cross Society or the Prince of Wales' Fund. Rugs had been rolled up, and the polished parquet floor was strewn with shirt buttons, reels of cotton, and torn papers of pins. Scissors hid among scraps of waste material, and on request were searched for by very young girls whose apparent business was to supply the sewing-machines with cut-out and basted-up garments, to fold and stack the finished things according to kind, and to knit wildly at intervals on immense stockings with singularly long feet which clearly could suit no one but Santa Claus.

As, according to my stepmother, all the ladies of the guild were "top-wave swells," I'd expected to find the fair brigade of volunteers exquisitely dressed in the latest Paris fashions of "before the war." But no! They had invented a still later fashion of their own. It was to be frumpish. The smart thing for the women of Great Britain was to have their hair done plainly, with an angelic effect of putting patriotism before vanity, and having no time to spend on self. No money, either, to judge from their frocks! Where they had raked up their old clothes, I can't imagine. There were skirts and blouses in that transformed drawing-room in which, a few weeks ago, their wearers would not have gone out to burn down a church or to be dragged to prison. Still, I must say that most of the wearers contrived to look very distinguished, even those at the sewing-machines, who had got tousled as children do over unaccustomed schoolroom tasks. No one had on any jewellery except Kitty, Mrs. Dalziel, and Milly, and one or two others who were also evidently Americans not required to sacrifice everything for Great Britain's sake. They, with their pretty dresses, their rings and earrings and strings of large, glistening pearls, were like gay flowers in a kitchen garden.

Kitty, fat and fashionable, and Di, slim and elaborately frumpish, came to meet me with pajama legs in their hands. They didn't trouble to take off their thimbles, and I thought they seemed far from being ashamed of the needle pricks on their fingers.

A few of the girls I knew already, and some of the older women. All had heard from Di or from the Dalziels that I had been doing a little amateur work as a nurse in Belgium, but no one—not even Di herself—expressed curiosity as to details. They had so much to think of that interested them more; and I was thankful for the self-absorption of Kitty and Di which saved me from awkward questions as to how I had contrived to get out of Liège. It was simply taken for granted by my family that, according to my own written account, I had made the journey home with thoroughly reputable refugees. I felt sure that Tony had not given his mother and sister any indiscreet information about "Monsieur Mars." Neither did he appear to have told them that our engagement was definitely broken off. Their unsuspecting friendliness made me feel guilty, and I decided that I ought sooner or later to let them know the truth.

That day at Di's, however, they gave me no chance to speak, even if I'd had strength of mind to snatch it. Tony was safely on his way to America, travelling in the steerage, having given up his cabin to as many ladies as it could hold. He was admiringly mentioned, and then dismissed as a subject of conversation in favour of others more exciting to his family and closer at hand. Milly, while sewing spasmodically on a weirdly shaped shirt which could only be got on or off by a weirdly shaped man, talked about Stefan and produced a letter from him, which she cherished inside her blouse. He had been wounded, seriously though not dangerously, in Poland, and invalidated home. It was not thought that he would be able to do any more fighting, and so when he was strong enough, he hoped to try and reach England in order that they might be married at once, if Milly would not mind taking an invalid for a husband. Apparently Milly did not mind in what condition she took her count provided she was sure of getting him. She was looking forward, if all went well, to becoming a Russian countess within a few weeks, for Stefan expected to arrive in a ship from Archangel along a sea route protected by the British navy. She had so little fear of anything going wrong that she was "encouraging dressmakers" by starting her trousseau, and had begun to study the Russian language as a surprise for her fiancé. Mrs. Dalziel talked about Stefan, too, and how she would help nurse him back to health in a suite at the

Savoy, when he and Milly were married. Meanwhile, mother and daughter were giving themselves up to good works, it seemed, whenever they had a minute to spare from their own affairs. Milly went three times a week to the Russian Embassy to sew for the Russians, and came twice a week to Diana's guild. Mrs. Dalziel had joined two committees got up by stranded Americans at the Savoy: one to supply money for moneyless millionaires, and the other to find clothes for clotheless millionairesses.

Whenever one of Diana's workers collapsed with fatigue, she was given tea or something to eat, and allowed an interval's repose in Di's boudoir, which had become the temporary consulting-room of Madame Mesmerre. The tame clairvoyant was expressly forbidden to foretell anything depressing; if she could not get visions of husbands, sons, and lovers coming safely home, it was distinctly understood with Diana (who paid by the afternoon) that she mustn't have any visions at all. This arrangement, however, was a family secret, which Kitty betrayed to me in confidence. Every one said that Madame Mesmerre was wonderful, but I didn't consult her.

I don't understand much about sewing or other really useful things of that sort, but I've picked up enough (thanks to helping my poor friends at Ballyconal) to know that men's shirts ought to have armholes bigger than those for little boys, and that they shouldn't be as short as bibs, or as long as surplices. Even this small amount of knowledge made me unexpectedly useful at the guild, where every member seemed to have her own original conception of what shape a shirt ought to be, and what it should be made of. Even my brief apprenticeship with the Miss Splatcleys, to whom most kinds of domestic work was as easy as breathing, made these fashionable women's desperate efforts at doing good seem pathetic. I agreed to return whenever I could, but no one would promise to come and see the "Haven Home for Belgian Refugees." They were all too busy working, by day; and at night it was a *duty* to go to a theatre or music hall, because the performance was given for the benefit of some fund, or else somebody sang a patriotic song to encourage recruiting.

We grew busier and busier at "The Haven" as the days went by. Refugees poured in. There was hardly time to be sad or anxious in the daytime; but at night always, always, my brain ceased to feel like a brain, and became a battlefield, as before in Belgium. The horror and anguish of war poured into my soul as water pours into a leaking ship. The most dreadful thoughts could be warded off in the busy hours of the day; but in the night stillness they found me without defence, and I surrendered.

Those were the hours when it seemed to me impossible that any of the men I knew, and above all, Eagle March, could ever escape from the slaughter alive. The Miss Splatcleys said that I looked pale and thin, with blue shadows under my eyes, and begged me not to work so hard. But I could have worked twice as hard without realizing that I was tired, if some one who knew the future, as no crystal-gazer can know it, had told me that Eagle would come out of the war unharmed.

Even when there was scarcely time for a decent meal, there was time to read the war news. All night long I existed for the moment in the morning when the two papers which the Miss Splatcleys took in should arrive, and I could bolt the big headlines and secretly search for the name of "Monsieur Mars." Then, whether I found it or not, the same suspense had to be lived through till the afternoon, when the evening editions came out; and after that again until the hour for the "Last War Extra."

Often the name of Mars started up to my eyes from the closely printed columns and set my heart beating and my blood flying to my head. No one seemed to have identified him as Captain March, not even the British or American war correspondents who occasionally reported his exploits. Or if they did, they respected his wish to keep it secret.

"Mars, the Belgian Air Scout," he was generally called, for few journalists appeared to know that he was a foreigner who had offered his services to the brave little country. Wonderful, almost miraculous, feats were attributed to him. Sometimes they were denied; but usually they proved to be true.

One morning I read that he had made a daring flight of two hundred miles over German territory, had dropped bombs on an ammunition train, had been fired on, and returned to his base "somewhere in Flanders" with the wings of his machine riddled by ninety-eight bullets. Again he and Sorel (who had been at Liège when we were there) went reconnoitring over the great German fortress of Metz, hoping to destroy the Zeppelin sheds. Quickly they were detected, although nearly three thousand feet above the forts. Up came shots from high-angle guns, splattering around them like spray from a fountain; but they persevered, making for the direction of the drill ground. Then suddenly Mars' motor ceased to work. It seemed that all was over for him, and the task left for Sorel to finish alone. But Mars, said the papers, resolved not to give his life away for nothing. Sweeping down in a bold volplane he launched his bomb, and had abandoned himself for lost when suddenly the motor started again; whereupon he darted off defiantly, following Simon Sorel, who had thrown his bomb also, and escaped.

If this had been all, I might have borne it somehow in my pride of Eagle. But there was always something more. I read of his monoplane being struck by a fragment of bursting shell over the enemy's lines, and his volplaning with a disabled engine, to drop into safety and a French stone quarry with important information to give concerning the disposition of German forces. When Paris was threatened and almost despairing, Mars flew over the sad city letting fall leaflets with the inspiring message, "Prenez courage, tout va bien." Over Brussels also he maneuvered, dropping his leaflets, and while angry German soldiers took aim at him and his monoplane he

"looped the loop" far above their noses. His cool remark after this exploit was said to have been: "These Germans do shoot badly!" He had more than one duel in the air with hostile war planes, having vowed with the Belgian airmen to ram all enemy aircraft whenever possible. There was a fearsome account to read, one morning, of his bringing down an aeroplane which had dropped bombs on the heads of French troops, helping out the wounded aviator and military observer, and then setting fire to their machine. In this adventure the *Golden Eagle* was injured, and another monoplane was lent the airman while his own was being put to rights. The "Elusive Mars," newspapers began to name him, because in the face of almost certain destruction he invariably escaped in the nick of time and within an inch of his life. At last, however, one October day of good news for the Allies, there was bad news for me. They had put it in big headlines on the most important page:

"Mars, the Belgian Airman, Caught at Last. While Reconnoitring His Machine is Disabled, and Falls in Enemy's Lines. He is Believed to be Wounded, and is Certainly a Prisoner."

I had no heart to rejoice in the tidings which made the rest of my world happy that day. And for many days afterward—days each one of which seemed a lifetime of suspense—there was no other news of Eagle March. I felt as if the future were a very long, dim corridor, in whose chill twilight I groped, my eyes straining toward the distance.

So a month dragged itself away, and then came news at last.

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## CHAPTER XXI

"Escape of the gallant Mars," were the words that seized my eyes as I opened the front door of "The Haven" to snatch the morning papers. Rain was pouring down, but I halted in the porch to read, oblivious of the rivulet that streamed over my hair. "Mars, the elusive" had been true to his name once more. It was an almost miraculous story, or would have seemed so in less stirring times than these, which are teaching us that brave men can do anything they set their minds to do. Mars, with a few English prisoners, and some Russians from General Rennenkampf's force captured in East Prussia, had been sent to work in the fields outside a little German town in Alsace. Several of these, among them Mars, had been wounded and in hospital together, but were turned out as cured the moment they were strong enough to wield a scythe. Led by Mars, a young Russian officer and a private in a Highland regiment had escaped from the gang of prisoners by crawling for a long distance through tall ranks of grain. They had hidden themselves among the stacks, and at night had continued their progress in the direction—they hoped—of the French frontier. Next morning they were given shelter by a farmer's wife whose sympathies were with France. She provided them with disguises, but they ventured to move only at night. At the end of four nights' travel they came upon French soldiers advancing into Alsace, and made themselves known, but not until they had been fired on as spies. Mars and the Russian had both been wounded, and were in a French field hospital at the time the newspaper account of their adventures went to press. Neither were badly hurt, but they were extremely weak from lack of food and loss of blood, to say nothing of old wounds scarcely healed when they had started on their dash for freedom. The Russian officer (said to be a nephew of Prince Sanzanow, Russia's ambassador to England) considered that he owed his life to the aviator; and it was believed that when the two were able to move they would be brought to a private convalescent home in London, financed by the Russian ambassadress and other great ladies.

I was so happy for the rest of the day that, as I could tell no one what was in my heart, I sang to myself, under my breath, "It's a long, long way to Tipperary." Eagle was alive and safe after all my black fears, and I felt sure that if he came to England I should meet him. He could not say now that he had done nothing "worth while." I thought, too, that he would see the time had come at last to let the world know that "Monsieur Mars" and Captain Eagleston March were one. I longed for the day of revelation. It seemed to me that it would be a great day. I could hardly wait for it to arrive; but a fortnight passed and the papers had no more to say of "Mars, the elusive."

Meanwhile, the world had been busily making history for its future generations, and momentous things had been happening to almost every one I knew, except myself and my own immediate circle. Since I had first met Milly at Diana's many weeks ago, and had been shown the letter from Stefan, he had actually arrived in England from Archangel, whence gossip said two hundred and fifty thousand other Russians had been mysteriously shipped to north Britain. Alas for romance! those Russian hordes were imaginary, but there was no doubt that Milly Dalziel's Russian had appeared in flesh and blood—though with only enough of either to keep body and soul together. They had been married a few days after Count Stefan Stefanovitch had arrived—a picturesque wedding performed with all formalities by a Russian priest, while the bridegroom lay propped up in bed, in that suite at the Savoy of which Mrs. Dalziel had talked, no guests present except the bride's mother and father (Tony Senior having obediently dashed across the ocean) and the Russian ambassador with his wife.

At the time I was not unselfish enough to interest myself profoundly in Milly's marriage, for my mind was filled with thoughts of Eagle March, and I could not forget how Milly, snubbed by him for her own good, had let her supposed love for Eagle turn into bitter spite. I didn't believe that a girl who had so lately cared for a man like Eagle March could really have been caught in a

rebound of heart by Stefan Stefanovitch. I had seen Stefan no more than once or twice, when he was military attaché at the Russian Embassy, but that was often enough for me to know some of his limitations. In looks and manner he compared poorly with Eagle, to my mind. I was inclined to think that without his counthood Milly would have had no use for him, or he for her without her money. This spoilt the romance of the affair in my eyes, and I had no premonition of what Milly's Russian relationships were soon to mean for me.

When she had been married a little more than a fortnight and before any further news had come out concerning the "Elusive Mars" and his companion, I was told one day by Miss Jane that I was called for at the telephone. I left a roomful of baby Belgians, for whom I was playing nursemaid, to run to the 'phone, and was stabbed with disappointment to hear Diana's voice. You see, every rap of the postman, every b-b-bur-r-r of the telephone bell, *might* mean the longed-for message from Eagle which always I hoped for, even expected!

"Hello, Peggy!" said Di. "I've got a piece of good news for you."

My heart gave a silly leap and then sat down again; because she would be the last person in the world to give me news of Eagle March.

"What is it?" I asked, without interest.

"Princess Sanzanow hasn't forgotten you, and sends you a special message."

(Princess Sanzanow is the wife of the Russian ambassador.)

"She's giving quite an informal dinner," Di went on, "getting it up almost on the spur of the moment, because the doctor says that Stefan is well enough to go out, and the affair is really for him and Milly. I don't think there'll be many there except ourselves, for the princess is asking every one verbally. That's why she sends you a message instead of a card. It is to say that she has always admired 'la petite Lady Peggy,' and now more than ever. I happened to tell her about your Liége experience, and your work for the Belgians. She particularly wants me to bring you to dinner with her and the prince to-morrow night. You'll come, of course?"

"Oh, I don't know if I can!" I hesitated. "There's so much to do here, and, anyhow, I haven't a frock. Miss Jane and Miss Emma bought me lots of nice things when they bought their own, for, of course, they lost their luggage, too. But we never so much as thought of evening dresses. I'd forgotten their existence!"

"But you *must* go," Di persisted. "The trunk you stored at Norfolk Street for Ballyconal has been brought here with Father's and Kitty's things. Celestine can take the measurements of some frock or other you've packed away there, and I'll go out and choose a pretty model gown, ready to wear, for a present to you. Shoes and gloves you can get yourself, I suppose? If you'll come here early to dress, Celestine can take tucks and change hooks in next to no time, if necessary. I accepted for you; and it will be horribly rude to the Princess if you refuse now, for no reason at all."

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I could have found or invented a reason, if I hadn't remembered in a sudden flash that Monsieur Mars' companion in flight was supposed to be a nephew of Prince Sanzanow. If I went to the Embassy I might hear news. I was willing to do almost anything for that hope, even to dressing at Sidney Vandyke's house, and continuing the armed truce in his automobile to our destination. But I drew the line at accepting a frock bought with his money.

"Why, yes, I'd forgotten the trunk I packed up with winter things for Ballyconal," I answered. "There's that white chiffon velvet gown, made over from yours, which I wore in New York last spring before the weather turned hot. Do you remember? It will do beautifully for to-morrow night. I'm sure it's as good as ever, so you needn't buy me anything; many thanks. And I'm so glad you spoke of the trunk. I'll have it brought up here afterward. It's small and won't take up much room. There are lots of things in it I can spare for our Belgian women."

"Very well, as you like," said Di. "That white velvet was quite nice, and will be all right if it is not full of beggar's creases. You can have the little trunk put on the luggage carrier of the car to-morrow night when we send you back to Fitzjohn's Avenue. It will save the trouble of getting Carter Paterson or some one else to call here for it. And that reminds me: one of the things I wanted to say to you was this: you were asking Bally if he had any old clothes to spare you for your Belgian women's husbands. Well, Kitty has found a few, but there are a whole heap of Sidney's things you can have if you want them. Masses of luggage have just arrived from America: boxes of books and rugs, and trunks full of clothing packed up and sent after him by his soldier-servant when Sid definitely decided to resign and live over here. All the clothes are a bit out of date now, or Sidney thinks so, and there are some army things he never wants to see any more. Anyhow, he has collected quantities of new clothes, and if you would like the American things for your men protégés, you're welcome to them."

It went against the grain with me to accept even this favour from the enemy; but I reflected hastily that I had no right to refuse what would do good to others. After all, it was nothing to me, and Sidney could not help realizing that, if he heard of the transaction. I thanked Di again, and said I should be glad of anything she had to give, as the destitution among the men of the Belgian refugees was as pitiful as among the women. "We shall be thankful to get the collection out of the



house," answered Diana. "Sid's man unpacked the boxes and, of course, was free to choose what he wanted for himself, but he's such a little monkey, none of the clothes would fit him. I remembered you and your poor people, which I *do* think was rather sweet of me, as I have such crowds of things to do every moment; so I told Sykes to spread the lot out in that empty room we haven't furnished yet, directly over mine. I mean to have it turned into a kind of 'den' for Sid, so the sooner we can sweep away the boxes and mess generally, the better. Suppose you look in after the dinner at the Embassy to-morrow night, and pick out what you fancy. Sykes can dump everything into an empty trunk for you, and it can be put with yours on the back of the Grayles-Grice for you to cart off to Hampstead."

I knew that if I wished to make sure of the booty, I had better take Di at her word, for as likely as not she would change her mind in a day or two, and offer the things to somebody else. I replied that I thought her plan a very good one, and I would carry it out exactly as she proposed.

The next evening I went early to Park Lane, in order to unearth the white velvet frock from the old trunk packed for Ireland, and dress myself in it when it was found. Talking to Kitty and Di delayed me for a few minutes, however, so that I had no time to waste when I ran up to the shuttered room where my little trunk, as well as Sidney's things from America, were in temporary storage. No one could be spared to help me, as Di's maid and Kitty's had already begun to lay out their mistresses' things for dinner. But I have been used all my life to looking after myself. I didn't in the least mind grubbing on my knees to unlock the box, finding the dress I wanted, and unwrapping it from layers of tissue paper. As I stood up to shake the frock, and examine anxiously as to its condition by the light of the electric lamp, which I had switched on for the purpose, I saw many suits of Sidney Vandyke's clothes neatly folded by Sykes, his valet, and piled on tables and boxes.

It was too late then to look at the things before dressing, but I cast an appraising glance in their direction, and my eyes lit upon what seemed to be a khaki uniform, bundled ignominiously between a suit of evening clothes and a crimson dressing-gown.

"Fancy his not having sentiment enough to keep his army things!" I thought scornfully. "But, of course, he was never a real soldier at heart, or he wouldn't have resigned, at his age, to be lazy and please Diana! How different from——" But I wouldn't let myself even *think* Eagle's name in that connection.

Fortunately I had packed away the white chiffon velvet with unusual care (for me), and there were few creases in the soft folds which wouldn't disappear eventually when I had put the frock on. As I dressed in a far corner of Di's room (well out of her way and that of her maid, Celestine, and managing my toilet operations as best I could with a small hand glass) my thoughts would fly back to that old khaki uniform upstairs. I wondered if it were one Sidney had worn in camp in Texas days when his jealous rage was piling up against Eagle. It seemed to me that there must be an evil influence hanging about those clothes of his; and I was still thinking this when Major Vandyke, Father, Diana, and Kitty and I were bunched together, a rather silent party, in Di's big, roomy town car, spinning from Park Lane to the Russian Embassy with Kitchener's "night lights" fanning long white arms across the sky of unnaturally darkened London.

As it was supposed to be a small, informal dinner, we arrived promptly on the hour; and when Princess Sanzanow—a beautiful, tall woman, with the mysterious, sad eyes of the Slav people—had greeted us, she said that four of her guests had still to arrive: Count and Countess Stefanovitch, and two others whose presence was to be the surprise of the evening. "I will tell you only *this*," she laughed, in her pretty English, when Di pretended to be wildly curious; "like Stefan they have both come back from the front, and they are the most exciting heroes! I won't dream of spoiling my great *coup* by letting you guess their names until they are announced; but this you shall know, dear Lady Diana: my two 'surprises' are to have the honour of taking you and our bride in to dinner. All the other women will be envying you both."

Di was pleased and interested. She realized that our hostess meant to pay her, as well as Milly, a great compliment; for those "other women" of whom the princess spoke were important socially, and charming in themselves. What she had called a "small, informal dinner" would be made up of twenty-two guests; and the informality would consist in the innovation of having small tables.

The princess introduced me to a very young youth, her son, who had been away at Eton when I had visited at the embassy before. He began at once to air his grievance of lacking a year of the age when a man can be allowed to serve his country; and I was sympathizing with him because he was not fighting when Milly and her husband were announced. She was looking prettier than I had ever seen her, with quite new airs and graces of a married woman and a countess; and Stefan, though extremely plain of face and insignificant of figure, was interesting because of his experiences, his limp, and his right arm in a black silk sling.

Milly seemed to think that she and her husband were the guests of the evening and apologized in a high voice for being late, but the princess reassured her.

"We have still two more to come. Our two surprises," and she was going on to excite Milly's curiosity as she had Diana's, when the magnificent Russian butler, who looked as if he had stepped from some medieval picture, cried aloud two names:

"Major Baron Skobeleff; Captain March."

## CHAPTER XXII

My blood so flew to my head that for a second or two I was giddy, and saw nothing through the rain of sparks which hung like a veil before my eyes. But in an instant I came to myself, wrenched back to a clear vision of things by sheer necessity to act. Somebody would have to do something, if the situation were not to ruin the princess's whole evening; and after all he had suffered, whatever happened, Eagle March must be saved from the pain of public humiliation. Yet who was to do anything? Who was to save him?

Only a few persons knew that to arrange a meeting between Sidney Vandyke, Diana, Milly, and Captain Eagleston March, was about as tactful as to invite the King of Belgium to dine with the German Kaiser. Only a few persons knew, and those most concerned were the very ones who would do least to shield Eagle's feelings.

The princess began gayly to explain that here was her great "surprise" at last: the two heroes of whose classic escape the whole world had heard. The "Elusive Mars," as he had been called, was in reality Captain March, who had refused to make use any longer of his *nom de guerre*. But in the midst of explanations, as she would gently have led Eagle toward Diana (oh, horror! she had evidently planned to send these two in to dinner together!), suddenly she realized that some freezing spell had turned her principal guests to figures of ice.

Eagle, struck with deadly pallor under the brown mask sun and wind had given him, stiffened involuntarily and held back. Sidney had gone crimson, and then yellow-white; Diana—with a shocked face drained of colour—looked ready to faint; while Milly, in all her new pride of importance, flung up her head and stared insultingly. This transformation had taken place with the announcement of the officers' names; and it took Prince and Princess Sanzanow no longer than is needed in the counting one—two—three to notice it. Living all their lives in an atmosphere of diplomacy as they did, even their great tact and presence of mind failed for a few dismal seconds to cope with the emergency, it being so utterly unforeseen, and such a blow to them that their cherished "surprise" should be not only a dead failure but a brutal catastrophe.

They must have realized in a flash that these people whom they had brought together were bitter enemies. They must, in a rush of emotion, have blamed themselves and each other for not finding out in time what perhaps they might have suspected or known without telling had they not been foreigners and comparative strangers in London society. As a matter of fact, they could not have known unless they had catechized Americans, which it would never have occurred to them to do; but no doubt the thought came to their minds, and they must have cursed their "inspiration" for that "pleasant surprise."

I saw Princess Sanzanow's eyes appeal in despair to her husband. But the situation was too complicated even for him to solve in a second, for the worst was yet to come. Thinking to compliment Di, and honour the man who had brought their nephew out of captivity, they had arranged that Captain March should take Lady Diana Vandyke in to dinner. The expression on her face and the stiffening of his muscles had shown this plan to be impossible, to say nothing of Major Vandyke's mad-bull glare. Now, at an instant's warning, there would have to be a general post, and changing of partners; and the most desperate difficulty of all must have lain in the princess's complete ignorance of the facts. She stood there among the company she had invited to meet each other as if blindfolded, not knowing which ones, or how many, were affected by the vendetta.

I saw and divined this between two heartbeats, for I was one of those who knew the undercurrents hidden from strangers; and in such moments one thinks quickly. Of all the guests, I was the least important, and the youngest except the Sanzanow boy; yet I felt that I was the only person present who could or would act in time. I made up my mind to risk seeming rude or shockingly bold. There was just one thing I could think of to do, and I did it.

Into the midst of that brief, freezing pause, I plunged. Almost running forward, I held out both hands to Eagle. "Oh, dear Princess!" I gasped. "We are the best and oldest friends, Captain March and I. We've known each other since—since I was a child; and we met in Belgium when he was 'Monsieur Mars.'"

Eagle grasped my hands so tightly that I should have had to cry out if I had worn rings, and Princess Sanzanow gave me such a look of touching gratitude that I was sure I had been lucky enough to do the right thing. "Oh, I am so glad!" she breathed. "Then, if you are great friends, you will want to go in to dinner together, and I must let you do so."

She had the air of having just been saved from drowning; and I was the straw which had thrust itself out in the nick of time for her to catch. Having accomplished my mission as a straw, I gave my attention wholly to Eagle, but though I tried not to notice, I was dimly conscious, all the same, of what was going on around me. I saw Major Skobeleff, the young Russian officer whose escape Eagle had aided—Prince Sanzanow's nephew—talking to Milly; and noticed that Stefan Stefanovitch had been given to Di as a substitute for Captain March. Somehow or other the princess juggled her guests about so that three minutes after the crash, when dinner was announced, all could "set to partners" without confusion. There was a French duchess—a refugee from Paris—present, whom the prince had to take in, and the princess had the duke. That arrangement couldn't be upset; and the only quite ridiculous effect of the whirlwind was to give young Prince Paul to a widow old enough to be his grandmother.

I had rushed into talk with Eagle before we stopped shaking hands; but he had not been able to answer the call of conventionality so soon; and it was not till after we were seated at table that he could control himself to speak. On his other side was Prince Paul's elderly dinner companion. On my other side was the new military attaché who had taken the count's place in the Embassy, a man past the soldiering age; and as he had Madame Pavlova to talk to, for him I did not exist. Eagle and I could speak to each other as if we were alone together in a forest haunted with far-off voices.

"What a fool I was to come here!" he said. "I ought to have known."

"Don't be sorry," I whispered. "Think how glad I am to see you. And there's no reason—no reason in the world—why you should wish to keep out of *their* way. You have nothing to be ashamed of—but very proud."

"I *am* glad to see you again," he answered. "Don't imagine I'm not! But I meant to see you, anyhow. I've known for weeks where you were. I made that kind old parson who piloted you home promise to wire to an address I gave, when you got safely back to England. And afterward he wrote to tell me what fine work you were doing. This is the first time I've been out anywhere except for an invalid crawl or two. It's only three days since we left the nursing home in Fitzroy Square, where Prince and Princess Sanzanow visited us several times. Skobelev is their nephew, you know. They asked us both to stay with them, and Skobelev is being moved here by his servant to-night; but I made an excuse not to come—said it would hurt the feelings of an old friend who had offered to lend me his chambers in Whitehall Court to finish getting well in. The Sanzanows wouldn't take a refusal for dinner this evening, though. It made no difference my telling them who I really am, March instead of Mars. I thought they were sure to know something of my story. They said, when I tried to cry off, that it was going to be a small dinner—just a few friends who would like to meet Skobelev and me, so I let myself be persuaded. This is the result!"

As we spoke together, the conversation around us murmured vaguely in my ears. I heard it without listening, as one can hear an undertone of murmuring sea beneath all other sounds. People were talking of the one inevitable subject, the war, with variations; the New Patriotism which has made the Tory Lion and the Liberal Lamb lie down together in peace, side by side, paying each other compliments; the good-girl tactics of the suffragettes; the surprising slump in murders and every sort of crime; possible raids of Zeppelins; and the amusingly persistent legend of Russians in France; the same things which were being discussed at that very moment, no doubt, in every household high and low, from one end of Great Britain to the other, but always new and ever interesting, yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow. I glanced at Di and Major Vandyke and Milly, to see how they were bearing themselves, and I was not pleased with what I saw.

The princess had distributed her guests at three small tables, and, of course, had separated Di and Sidney. I had to crane my head round a floral monoplane, which was our centrepiece, to catch sight of them at their separate tables; and even so, I had but a glimpse now and then of a profile. But the expression of those profiles, and the earnest, confidential way in which they turned toward their neighbours, convinced me that they were not talking war-talk. Milly faced me where I sat, and though the tables were lit by amber-shaded wax candles which gave an ivory effect to the women's complexions, the primrose light could not subdue Milly's colour. As a rule, she was rather pale, but to-night cheeks and ears were flushed deep rose colour. She looked excited and childishly angry, her greenish-gray eyes dilated and her lips pouting. Had she not been conscious of her new honours as a married woman and a countess, I don't think she would have dared display her feelings at a dinner-party of so much importance. Once or twice she stared with narrowed gaze across the room at Eagle March, then turned to one of her two companions in such a way as almost to advertise the fact that she was speaking of him. She would make little impression, I thought, on Major Skobelev if she tried to prejudice him against Eagle; but it might be different with the man on her other side, who knew nothing of Captain March save what she had to tell; and even Skobelev—though surely he would not believe evil of his comrade—could not help remembering. I could imagine Milly whispering: "What an awful *faux pas* for the princess to have brought Major Vandyke and Captain March together in her house, where they can't get away from one another for hours, without being rude to her and the prince! Why, the man was such an enemy of Major Vandyke's that he actually betrayed his country in the hope of ruining his superior officer. It's a long story, but I can tell it to you if you like. Captain March had to leave the United States army in the most dreadful disgrace!"

She looked so like a spiteful, green-eyed cat, that I seemed to hear the words hissed out; and as the man whose ear approached her lips was one of the famous gossips of London, I could imagine, too, how the story would spread and grow. Milly would certainly tell Prince and Princess Sanzanow, also, before she went home, what a dreadful thing they had done in asking "that notorious Captain March" to be their guest, and especially to meet Major and Lady Diana Vandyke. Sidney, too, if he could pile anything more on the injuries of the past, would be sure to do his best.

As I thought these thoughts my cheeks began to burn even more hotly than Milly's. I had been questioning Eagle about his adventures, and he had been answering in the laconic way most brave men have when teased to talk of themselves; but for a minute, keen though I was, I lost the thread of narrative I had begun eagerly drawing out. This was when I met Milly's eyes and flung a challenge from mine to hers. "Dare to hurt him with your lying tongue, and somehow, surely as you live, I'll make you repent. Don't dream that my affection for Tony can stand between you and me," was the warning I sent.

Silently we defied each other in the savage and primitive way which we female human things have merely modernized, not modified, since the days of Lilith up to the days of suffragettes. I was asking myself what punishment I could devise and inflict, if necessary, to fit Milly's crime, and how I—so small and powerless—could dig myself into a defensive trench between Eagle and Sidney Vandyke, when I realized that Eagle's eyes were studying my flushed face. They were sad eyes, yet there was a faint glint of laughter in them.

"You little fighter!" he said. "You never throw down the cudgels you've taken up in my defence."

"No, and never will!" I answered, defiance in my voice even for him, because my blood had been set on fire and the flame would not die down.

"You're very young!" he said, with a faint sigh. "So young that you haven't learnt not to hurl yourself against stone walls. Learn the lesson from me, child. Public opinion is a stone wall, the thickest and highest in the world. The tiny bubble of my reputation was wafted against it by an evil wind, and burst forever. If I was fool enough once to hope that I could mend it, I know now that I was mistaken. Broken bubbles are like Humpty Dumpty: they can't be put together again; and I don't mean to break my head in the place where the bubble burst, or let you break yours."

"We shan't break *our* heads," said I. "We'll break other people's wicked heads, that deserve to be broken; and they're aching hard already with sheer rage, because you've made a beautiful new bubble for yourself, ever so much bigger and brighter than the old one they tried to burst. Only *tried*, because they may find that it didn't smash when it seemed to! Then if the old bubble is saved, there'll be two, solid as crystal and brilliant as rainbows—*boomerang* bubbles—that will come blowing back to break the brutes who wanted to burst them!"

Captain March laughed out aloud, and I saw Sidney turn involuntarily with a slight, nervous start, as if he fancied that the laugh must be directed against him. "Irish Peggy, you're inimitable!" said Eagle. "Look out for your metaphors, or you'll be turning my bubble into a bull!"

"Hang metaphors!" I retorted. "I wish I *could* turn the bubble into a bull, not an Irish, but a wild one, and *set* it at two or three people. Perhaps I shall yet! And what has made you suddenly change your mind, Eagle? At Liège, in hospital, you told me how you hated Sidney Vandyke and felt as if you could choke his life out."

"I haven't changed my mind," he said. "I hate Vandyke now as I hated him then, more if possible. That's not Christian, but I can't help it, or else I don't try to help it; I'm not sure which. If by killing Vandyke I could get back what he took from me, I should do my best to kill him. But I am just cool enough, where he is concerned, to realize that I can't help myself by hurting him; rather the contrary. That's where we come to the stone wall. So I'm not going to smash what he has left of my head on the stones he piled up against me. To do that would be giving the enemy great satisfaction, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps!" I had to agree with a sigh.

"But if the circumstances ever change in my favour," Eagle went on, his pleasant face hardening into grimness, "and I can get revenge without putting myself in the wrong, God help Vandyke!"

"I hope He *won't* help him, when that time comes!" I exclaimed. "And I believe it will come. Something often tells me so—tells me that I——"

"That you—what?" Eagle prompted me as I broke off.

"That I shall have some hand in the—the retribution, whatever it may be. It's what I always pray for."

Eagle gazed straight at me, with eyes which had changed sadly since the day they first met mine in the Wardour Street shop. I had thought them full of romance and dreams then. Their look was harder and older now, the look of a man who has been down very near to the gates of hell, and by desperate fighting has battled his way up the heights again, but not so high as to forget the red glare that singed his eyeballs. My heart ached, because it seemed impossible that the peace of dreams and romance could ever come back. I was glad—glad, that Eagle's heart hadn't softened toward Sidney Vandyke, who was as bitterly his enemy to-night as ever; but I was sorrowful because the beautiful youth of a man's soul had been scorched in the furnace fire.

"I can't bear to think your friendship for me should harden or embitter you, Peggy," Eagle said. "Nothing is worth that! I oughtn't to talk to you as I've been talking now. I shan't again. Forgive me, and forget. Help *me* to forget! Forgetfulness is the best thing that can happen to me now. I realize that in my sensible moments. But it's hard to be sensible always."

How I wished I could help him even in so small and humble a fashion! At least, I could try to draw his thoughts away for the moment from the unhealed wound violently torn open. It was a temptation to dwell on it, to look at it and feed my anger; but on his wistful hint I threw the temptation off. Instead of returning to our interrupted talk of his adventures as I wished to do, I answered Eagle's questions about life at "The Haven," and told him pathetic or funny stories of our refugees. "I'm getting to be quite a weird combination of Red Cross nurse, nursery-governess, and nursemaid," I said. "I really ought to design some special sort of costume suited to my *métier*, but I've never had time to think one out yet! Meanwhile, I wear a badge which keeps up my courage, and gives me back my strength whenever I'm tired. You couldn't guess what it is!"

"The flag of the Allies?" he ventured.

"No. The chevron you gave me when you made me your corporal. Do you remember?"

I saw by his eyes that he was touched. A gleam of the old light flashed into them, and brightened his smile. "Do I remember?" he echoed. "Yes, I remember, Peggy, only too well. And I remember the day you flew with me from Hendon in the poor old *Golden Eagle*, heaven rest her ashes! The day when—when Lady Diana failed me, and your pluck and presence of mind saved us both from coming to grief. I remember lots of other things you've probably forgotten; and I use the memories for balm."

I had to look down suddenly to hide the tears that stung my eyelids. But I winked them away in an instant, and was bracing myself to make him laugh by mimicking the man who had introduced us: Nebuchadnezzar of Wardour Street.

When great hothouse peaches and amethyst bunches of grapes were brought by the footman, I knew that soon Princess Sanzanow would smile at the French duchess, and we should all troop away to leave the men. I was sure that Eagle would not join the ladies conventionally in the drawing-room, and I did not want that summons to mean a long good-bye. I asked hastily, therefore, if he would come and see me and the Miss Splatchleys and our Belgians at "The Haven," when he had grown a little stronger.

"I'm strong enough now," he said. "Write to-morrow to tell me when I may come, and let it be soon, for the minute I'm fit I shall go back to the front, of course."

"Of course," I repeated firmly, though my heart felt as if it had been squeezed by a mailed fist. "I will write the first thing in the morning, and send you a formal, written invitation from dear Miss Emma and Miss Jane."

"Do. My address is 21a Whitehall Court. You won't forget, will you?"

"No, I won't forget," I assured him, with a secret smile.

"Because I shall beg the princess as she passes to forgive me if I go without bidding her farewell in the drawing-room. Being a bit of a crock still gives me a good excuse, and—she'll understand and be glad to be rid of me."

Even as he spoke, the signal I'd been expecting was given by our hostess. We all rose, smiling at our neighbours, and the men stood while we women trailed to the door. I, being last of all the guests, saw the princess pause as Captain March took a step forward; and I knew that he was bidding her farewell.

Then I went on, and in the drawing-room found Di waiting to pounce, anger for me in her eyes, a smile for everybody else on her lips.

"How dared you!" she whispered. "How *dared* you treat that man as if he were your best friend!"

"Because he is," I answered bluntly.

"Then you're no friend of ours! Sidney and I will *never* forgive you for this night—trying to put us both in the wrong as you have!"

"It's an honour not to be forgiven for that," I flung back at her. "Now I'm going to tell the princess that I have to get back early to my Belgians, and I shall have a taxi called to take me away because, after this, I can't even accept from Sidney a lift in his motor."

"You must accept it," whispered Diana furiously, "if only to take the things we're giving you out of his house. It *is* his house, you know; and though you're my sister, I can't expect him to ask you into it again as a visitor, after your deliberate insult to us both to-night. Your being no more than a child has excused some things, but it can't excuse this; for you haven't acted like a child. You've acted like a malicious woman, and—I think we've reached the end."

"I think so, too," I replied. "Don't be afraid. I shan't trouble either of you after to-night. I'll not go in your motor, but I'll go to your house and fetch my trunk. As for the things you were giving to the refugees, I'll take them or not, as you like."

"I'd like to have the rubbish out of the way and see the last of it," said Diana; and looked as if she would gladly see the last of me.

I apologized prettily to the princess, explaining how early were the hours of "The Haven," and how much there was to do there. She forgave me with all her gracious charm, pressing my hand as if to show her gratitude for a certain incident which could not be mentioned in words; and five minutes later I was spinning alone in a taxi toward Park Lane.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

I had been offered the help of Celestine and Sidney's man to make up in parcels such clothes as I wished to take for our refugees and their menfolk; but now I determined to do all the work myself. The bored-looking footman who opened the house-door showed no surprise or interest on

seeing her Ladyship's sister arrive in advance of the rest. He listened respectfully but dully as I briefly explained my errand and told him that I should need no help until I rang for my trunk and other things to be carried downstairs. When I had made this clear, I ran up to the room above Diana's and shut myself in, meaning to make such haste with what I had to do as to escape with my booty, if possible, before Di and her husband came home.

I was trembling still with excitement which clouded my mind and kept me from thinking clearly; for I was furiously angry and desperately sad at the same time. I said to myself that I didn't care if I never saw Diana again; yet my heart was ready to break because we had come to the parting of the ways. To-night, I thought, I was definitely giving up my family, or my family were giving me up, it mattered very little which. My father had never cared for me, therefore I had not cared for him as most girls care for their fathers. Di had made use of me, but had never loved me, and I had "seen through" her ever since I was a tiny child. Lately we became almost as strangers; and yet the two had been the only ones near to me. Breaking with them was like a small figure in a group on a big canvas suddenly loosening itself and falling off its background, a mere lonely bit of paint.

"What will become of me?" I wondered. "I can never go back to Ballyconal now. Yet I can't spend the rest of my life with the Miss Splatchleys. What shall I do when I'm not wanted there any more?"

Tears began to drop slowly from my eyes, then to rain fast over the clothing I tried to sort. I knew it was silly to think of such things. There would be plenty of time by and by to arrange the future. But I could not concentrate my mind on the work in hand until, as I tossed the neatly folded clothes about with a kind of stupid aimlessness, I came once more upon Sidney Vandyke's khaki uniform.

"This I will not take, anyhow!" I decided. "It would be of no use, and I do believe it might carry a curse with it, because of the evil thoughts of the man who wore it last. I wish I could burn it up!"

That I could not do; but to show spite I wreaked such childish vengeance as I could by dashing the uniform on to the floor and proceeding to trample on the coat with my high-heeled white satin slippers.

As I kicked it away in loathing at last, one of the slippers flew off and seemed spitefully to follow the coat as if to deal one final insult. It turned a somersault on the way, as defiantly as the *Golden Eagle* had "looped the loop" over German heads at Brussels, and then plumped down on top of the fallen garment, landing with its pointed satin nose poked under the flap of a slightly gaping breast-pocket.

I slipped my silk-clad foot into the shoe where it lay, and pushing the point still further into the pocket, thus lifted the coat on my toe to give it another disgusting toss. As I did this it seemed that something crackled with the sound—or the feel, I could hardly tell which—of stiff paper. Then a very strange thing happened to me: suddenly I saw before my eyes, as clearly as though it were really there, the khaki-coloured notebook I had given Eagle—the notebook out of which he had torn a leaf with a message written on it for Major Vandyke.

I didn't know (I don't know now, and never shall) what painted this picture on my brain: whether it was the high, mysterious Power which had been leading me slowly but very surely to this minute, or whether it was nothing more than a mental association between a khaki coat worn by Eagle's enemy on that disastrous night and a faint crackle of paper jarring tensely on strung nerves. I know which I *like* to think; but in either case the effect was the same.

I saw the notebook. I saw Eagle hastily scrawling his appeal for a written order to fire the guns. I saw Major Vandyke wearing this coat, read the message, crumple up the paper, and then—then—the vision faded. But the question rang in my ears: what would he be likely to do with the paper? What should I have done had I been a man in his place? Would I have torn the message into bits and trusted to the wind to scatter it?...

No! If I meant to swear that no such document had ever reached me, I should have been afraid to leave bits of khaki-coloured, blue-lined paper lying about the ground. I should have crumpled the message deep down in the bottom of a pocket, and burnt it later, when I was safe in my own tent. Yes, that was what any man as quick-witted and unscrupulous as Sidney Vandyke would have been likely to do. He could not possibly have forgotten such a bit of evidence afterward, and left it in the pocket of his coat instead of destroying it; such things could happen only in the crudest melodramas, where the actors were mere puppets for uncritical and ignorant audiences to applaud. It was wildly absurd to dream that I might find any hidden treasure tucked away in a breast-pocket of Sidney Vandyke's cast-off uniform; and I did not for a moment believe it; yet the vision of the khaki-coloured paper had been so clear that I dared not resist the impulse it prompted.

I picked up the coat, holding it away from me gingerly, by the collar, as a small white cat might grip a large brown rat by the back of its neck. Then, also gingerly, I dipped my fingers into one pocket after another. All were empty: yet now quite distinctly I heard a crisp, delicate crackling of paper.

It was like searching for a ghost and seeing no sign, but catching a faint echo of invisible feet. Something was hidden there. I could not be mistaken. Perhaps the thing when found would not be worth finding; but a thousand times over, it was worth the pain of looking for.

I cleared a place on the large table which had been spread with contributions for the refugees, and laid the coat out flat. All over the two fronts I slowly, carefully, passed my fingers until, between the cloth and lining, far down on the left side near the edge of the coat, I touched the thing that crackled.

Whatever it was, this thing must have slipped down through a break in one of the pockets. I explored again, and discovered a small rip not more than two inches in length at the bottom of the inside breast-pocket. But the lost bit of paper could not be got at through this opening. The lining of the coat would have to be slit down before the hidden thing could be reached, and I pulled the pocket wrong side out, hoping with a quick jerk to tear it from the coat. More easily said than done! The material was expensively tough, and resisted my frantic tuggings, yet I wouldn't give up. I dared not go foraging downstairs for a pair of scissors; neither did I wish to ring for a servant to bring me them. I wanted desperately to be alone with this cast-off garment of Sidney Vandyke's—alone with any secret I might force it to yield up.

The coat seemed to resist every effort and trick of mine, as if it still served its old master and were stubbornly resolved to protect him against a stranger's prying; but at last a sharp jerk made a stitch give way. After that the rest was easy. I wrenched the pocket half out, and that once done I was able with both hands to tear the lining down nearly its whole length. Then I thrust my hand between it and the cloth, and touched a crumpled piece of paper.

I dreaded while I longed to look at what I had discovered: for I realized that in all human probability I was about to suffer a crushing disappointment. This lost scrap of paper might prove to be part of some torn, irrelevant letter of long ago; or it might be an American greenback, or a forgotten memorandum. As I withdrew my hand—the paper in it—involuntarily I shut my eyes, as if shrinking from a blow. But I scolded myself for cowardly weakness, and opened my eyes again to see a folded, refolded, and crumpled piece of khaki-coloured paper ruled with blue lines. Then I knew that, from the first faint crackling which I had felt rather than heard, I had been sure in my heart of finding this thing: sure that I had always been meant by Fate to find it.

With cold and shaking fingers I cautiously unfolded the paper without tearing it. Yes! It was a leaf torn from a notebook—the khaki notebook I had given Eagle. One page was blank. The other was almost covered with writing, scribbled with blue pencil, a pencil which must have been rather blunt, because the marking was heavy, though it showed signs of haste. No one familiar with Eagle March's hand could have failed to recognize it as his, rough and hurried as was the scrawl.

At the top of the page was jotted down the date of that unforgettable night at El Paso.

"Have just received by your orderly verbal command to fire nos. one and two guns, aiming beyond Mexican end of bridge. I beg if this is correct that you repeat order in writing.

"MARCH."

Here was the evidence which would have saved Eagle at his court-martial and proved Major Vandyke a liar and blackguard. He had, no doubt, crushed the incriminating paper into the deepest depths of his breast-pocket, perhaps covering it up with other things lest it should flutter away and betray him. There had been no time to destroy the paper at that moment, and so he had put off disposing of it until after his famous rush across the Rio Grande had been safely accomplished. When he returned and could get back to his own tent, his first thought must have been of the document whose existence he meant to deny. To empty his pocket and find the paper gone must have been a frightful blow, and Sidney could hardly have known a peaceful moment until after the court-martial, when all danger of the lost message coming to light seemed to be past forever.

No wonder (as Tony had written, describing the trial) that the accuser had been more worn and nerve-shattered than the accused. No wonder that, even when he arrived in England, Sidney Vandyke had looked changed and ill! No wonder he had taken to steadying his nerves with alcohol, and had not tried to conquer the habit!

By this time he must have ceased to dread the reappearance of the vanished document; but it had reappeared, and it was not too late to be of use. The small scrap of paper in my hand was big enough to give me all the power I had prayed for—the power to prove Captain March's innocence and Major Vandyke's guilt.

"Eagle said to-night that if the time ever came when he could take revenge without putting himself in the wrong, God help Vandyke!" I remembered. "We little thought how soon it would come. But it's here! It's here! The 'stone wall' has tumbled down, like the wall of Jericho, and it's Sidney Vandyke's head, not Eagle's, that will be broken."

I was almost out of my wits with joy. I danced a war-dance of triumph, swinging the khaki coat and waving the document over my head. Then, when a wild whirl had satisfied my wish to celebrate, I refolded the bit of paper, hung the coat over my arm, and dashed to the door. Downstairs I plunged, passed Diana's room, and had reached the head of the stairs leading to the ground floor when I actually bumped against Di coming up. If I had not stepped hastily back I should have thrown her downstairs. As it was, she caught at the banisters and barred the way against me.

The flashing glimpse I had caught of her face, before we almost telescoped like two trains running into one another, had shown it pale and depressed; but the surprise of our encounter brought light to her eyes and colour to her cheeks. Her look changed from mere startled annoyance to puzzled suspicion. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "One would have thought the house was on fire! Another instant and you'd have knocked me down. What is the matter with you, Peggy?"

"I'm in a hurry, that's all," I answered.

"What are you doing with Sidney's coat over your arm?" she catechized me sharply.

"Didn't you know it was among the 'rubbish' upstairs that you were so anxious to get rid of?" I retorted in the same tone.

"Yes, I knew that; but why do you career downstairs with it as if the sky were falling, and leave everything else? You *shall* tell me! I won't let you go till you do."

With the first words she had spoken after our collision, Di had mounted the top step, though still guarding the way down; and with her shrill threat she pushed me back from the stairhead by throwing herself against me and at the same time grasping the coat as if to snatch it off my arm.

Diana is much taller and stronger than I am. She could take the coat from me by force; and the thought darted through my head that without it to prove where and how the lost message had been found, the paper would lose half its value. My word, unsupported by proof, would not be enough against Major Vandyke, for it was known that I detested him, and was a sworn friend to Captain March. I must keep the coat at any cost to myself—or even to Diana.

Standing at bay, looking up at her white face of anger and suspicion, I felt very small and frail of body; but my soul gathered strength of battle. I clasped my bare arms over the coat and locked my fingers round my two elbows.

"This is mine," I said. "You gave it to me to do as I liked with. You've no right to take it away. I'm going to make a present of it to somebody who's been robbed of everything, and needs it."

This was the best explanation I could think of. But it was not good enough for Diana. She attempted to push me farther back, and I resisted, trying to wriggle myself free and elude her; but she was on the alert, and too quick as well as too strong for my trick to succeed.

"No, you shan't slip away like that, you little wild-cat!" she cried, beginning to pant slightly. In the white light of the electric candelabra, which made the corridor bright as day, I saw her beautiful bosom heave under its double rope of creamy pearls. All the charming softness which men loved was gone from her face. It looked hard and cruel.

Just as I meant to escape at any price, so she meant at any price to keep me. I guessed that she had come home alone, and let herself in with a latch-key, for apparently there were no servants about. That was fortunate for me; and fortunate that Father and Kitty, and above all Sidney, had gone on somewhere else from the Russian Embassy, for there would have been very little chance for me if I had had to run the gauntlet.

"You hate Sidney. I believe you hate me, too!" she went on when she had got her breath. "I don't trust anything you say or do. You've some horrid idea in your head. I read that in your face the instant I saw you here. You mean mischief. What's in your mind I don't know, but I *shall* know! You'd better tell me!"

"I've told you all I have to tell," I said. "If I'm a wild-cat, you're a tigress. What will the servants think if they come and see you like this?"

"I don't care what they think. And besides, they won't come. I've changed my mind about giving you that coat. I must ask Sidney first if he wants to keep it for any reason. I'll let you know to-morrow."

"To-morrow will be too late. I've to see my man to-night."

"Why are you taking him the coat, and not the rest of the suit?" she persisted.

"It's only the coat that will be of use to him." I had the answer ready.

Without warning she made another dive at the coat to catch me unawares. She failed and my hold tightened; but the sudden wrench twisted the thing partly wrong side out, to show the lining. The cry Diana gave, the horror that flashed in lightning from her eyes, told me what she had seen, what she must have guessed.

"My God, Peggy!" she gasped. "You believe *that* of him? You were seeking for—but you found nothing. Of course—of course you found nothing!"

"There's nothing there now," I said, trying not to let my voice tremble.

Diana's eyes searched mine. They were dilated. Her face, and even her lips—always coral red—were sickly pale. "What do you mean?" she asked in a low, choked voice. "Do you mean that you did find—oh! I see now—the whole disgraceful thing! You were taking this coat to Eagle March. You traitor! I thank God I came in time."

She seized me by both shoulders. Her white hands, with their rose-pink nails and little round



dimples at the finger roots, felt hard and remorseless as steel claws. She looked suddenly capable of anything. The thought struck on my heart like a hammer-stroke that she would stop at nothing to save Sidney's reputation. For the first time, I was afraid for myself. I was afraid she would be too strong for me. She would push me along the corridor and through the open door into her room. If I screamed she would tell the servants I had gone mad. She would get the coat away from me. She would find the paper, if she had to tear my clothes off to do it. Once inside the room, she would have all the advantage if she could turn the key and lock us in together. I, too, was in a mood to stop at nothing. I was fighting for the man I loved. She was fighting merely for a man with whom her fate was bound up; but in strength of body I was no match for her. It was only in a battle of wits that I might have a fair chance. But on the other side of her door it would be too late to use my brains.

"It's now or never!" I thought.

Clutching the coat for dear life with one hand, with the other I snatched at the pearls which were the "immediate jewels" of my sister's soul. I gave the double rope a sharp jerk, and with a snap the string yielded. Pearls spouted in all directions like a creamy spray, and with a cry, involuntarily Diana loosened her hold on me to save them. That was my chance! I ducked under her arms and dashed downstairs—like a streak of lightning. Before Diana had run halfway down I was at the door. For an instant I fumbled in an anguish of suspense at the catch. Then it yielded. I slammed the door in Di's face, and bare-shouldered as I was (I had taken off my wrap to do the packing) I ran like a rabbit after a taxi I saw at a little distance.

"Taxi, taxi!" I called. And though my lips were dry and my voice seemed to my own ears almost inaudible, as when one tries to scream in a nightmare, the man heard and stopped. Luckily the taxi was empty. If it had not been things might have ended differently; for as I scrambled in, panting, "Quick, number 21a Whitehall Court!" I saw, with one corner of my eye, that Diana stood in the doorway looking out.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

As the taxi sped away with me, the relief was so great that I lay back on the seat, limp and half fainting. I let myself rest there, revelling in safety after the strain of danger. Nothing could keep me now from Eagle, I told myself, and nothing could stand between him and his righteous revenge on Sidney Vandyke. If he were not at home when I got to Whitehall Court I would wait until he came, even if I had to sit in the taxi, within sight of his door, all night. But he *would* be at home! I felt that, when he left the Russian Embassy, he had been in no mood to go anywhere else, unless for a lonely walk; and, even so, he ought to have got back by this time. He had left before I had, and I must have arrived at Diana's an hour ago.

It was only when the taxi drew up in Whitehall Court that I remembered leaving my little gold bag—a present from Kitty—with my discarded cloak in Park Lane. All the money I had was in the bag. I could not pay the chauffeur; but, in any case, I meant to keep him till I learned whether or no Eagle were at home.

To my chagrin, the man looked dubious. "How long, Miss, will you want me to wait?" he inquired.

I explained that I could not tell yet. I must find out whether the friend I had come to see were in. If not I might need to keep the taxi a long time.

"Very sorry, Miss," the chauffeur replied, "but I have an appointment in a quarter of an hour from now in Downing Street with an official gentleman I serve pretty often. I was on the way there when you called me; but when you said 'Whitehall Court', I took you up because you seemed in a hurry and I thought there was plenty of time. I supposed you was going to stop here, it bein' rather late in the night for a young lady, but I can't possibly stay more'n five minutes longer. Tell you what I can do, I'll ask another feller to come along and wait for you."

There was no help for it. I had to confess that I was penniless, having forgotten my money. "But here's a bangle," I said, slipping my one bit of jewellery off my arm. "You can have this for security. If you'll give me your card I'll send the money to-morrow, and I'll trust you to send back the bangle."

I held it out to him: a thin band of gold with a four-leaved shamrock made of emeralds—a present from Tony, which he had implored me to keep in memory of our "friendship".

The chauffeur hesitated, evidently asking himself whether or no I might be trusted without the security. As he turned the bangle over in his hand, and the question in his mind, I heard quick steps coming along the dark street, and looking up, the taxi lights showed me Eagle March's face. He was far more surprised than I was, because it had already occurred to me that he might cool his brain with a solitary stroll in the night.

"Oh, Eagle!" I exclaimed, giving him hardly time to be sure of recognition. "How thankful I am that you appeared just at the right minute. I've come to see you about something *very* important, and I haven't a penny."

No doubt Eagle was astonished that I should be arriving alone, cloakless, at half-past eleven or

later to call upon him; but after the first look of amazement at sight of me, he concealed his feelings. For a second—no longer—he hesitated. Then he said, smiling, "I have plenty of pennies! Don't you think I'd better get into your taxi with you, and drive round for a few minutes rather than you should—have the trouble of coming into my place?"

"The driver has an engagement," I said. "And, anyhow, I *must* come in. It's really serious, Eagle."

He argued no more, though he looked somewhat troubled for my sake. I understood very well his state of mind. He paid and tipped the chauffeur, who handed back my bangle and darted off.

"Were you going to give the fellow that?" Eagle asked, nodding at the gold band. "Then it must indeed be serious. I once heard you say at El Paso that it was your most valued possession!"

"Fancy your remembering!" I said.

"I remember lots of things concerning you," he answered, as he guided me into the big, dignified building whose lights were lowered like most of London's illuminations in these Zeppelin-haunted times.

"Wish the bangle on for me," I said hastily, at the foot of the stairs, which we were to ascend rather than expose my uncovered shoulders to the scandalized eyes of the man in the lift.

"Would Dalziel approve?" he asked, smiling, as I thrust the bangle into his hand. "You showed it to me in Texas as a 'filopena present' from Tony."

"You remember that, too? This is the one thing I've kept to remind me of poor Tony."

"Poor Tony, indeed, if you've sent him about his business."

Eagle slipped the bangle over my hand, looking straight at me, as though wondering not only why I had come, but why I was so pale and strange.

"Wish that my errand here to-night may end in the greatest and most glorious success," I prompted him.

He held my wrist for a second or two, wishing silently. Then he dropped it rather abruptly, and we went upstairs to the first floor, where were the chambers lent to Eagle by his friend. I felt somehow that, by asking him for such a wish, I had impressed him with the real importance of my night visit.

He unlocked the door of the flat with a latch-key and almost pushed me in, as if fearing that I might be seen and perhaps recognized by some passing occupant of the house. Switching on the electricity, the vestibule was lit by a red-shaded light, cheerfully welcoming. Off it opened two or three rooms, and Eagle ushered me into a large oak-panelled study, lined with bookshelves and having long windows, which, when uncurtained, would look out on the Embankment. Now they were draped with crimson velvet, the sort of hangings that normal men with no female belongings invariably choose. By the door stood a tall folding screen, covered with red satin and oriental embroidery. There were bronzes and a few marble busts on top of the low bookshelves; on the oak panelling, here and there, hung a huge Chinese plate, here and there a sporting picture. With one glance I took in the whole interior, and saw that it was thoroughly masculine. In a large fireplace some logs of wood, evidently not long ago ignited, were crackling. Suddenly aware that I was very cold, I walked across the room and—shivering—held out my hands to the blaze. But I still kept the khaki coat hanging over my arm.

"Poor child, you look frozen!" said Eagle. "Why didn't you put on your coat?"

I laughed—a nervous, excited laugh. "*My* coat!" I echoed. "Look at it!"

So saying, I stretched out my arm to display the garment, and Eagle saw what it was.

"Khaki uniform!" he exclaimed. "From the U. S. A. By Jove! Is it Tony Dalziel's?"

"Indeed it is not," I returned. "I'm here to tell you about it. Oh, Eagle, what *should* I have done if you hadn't come home?"

"You oughtn't to be here, dear Peggy," he said. "And I'm not sure that I ought to have brought you in, but I've got into the habit of trusting you when you tell me that a thing's important."

"It *is* important," I cut him short. "So important I hardly know where to begin."

"Your wits are too quick for you to be in doubt long," Eagle flattered me, smiling; "and you must begin at once, dear child, because for the sake of all the conventionalities I can't let you make me a long call, good as it is to see you here. We are alone in the place now, so it's all right for the moment. The servant my friend Jim White lends me with the rooms doesn't stay at night. He lights the fire and puts everything shipshape, and then leaves me in peace till morning. But Jim himself, who is doing interpreter's work in France, has run back for the day on business. He is with some War Office chaps for the evening, but any time after twelve o'clock I expect him back to stay the night. You must be gone before then, so you see we have twenty minutes at most."

"Rome was saved in *one* minute, I've always heard," I said. "Eagle, this coat was Sidney Vandyke's. It's mine now, because Diana gave it to me, with a lot of other things they cared nothing about, for our Belgian men. They didn't know God was delivering them into my hands—and your hands. For I give this to you to do with as you will. It is the coat Major Vandyke wore

the night at El Paso when he was in temporary command. He wore it when his orderly, Johnson, brought him the message you wrote on a leaf out of your notebook—the message he swore never reached him."

As I spoke I held out the coat in both hands, with the inside toward Eagle, so that he could see for himself the hole I had made in the lining, and perhaps draw his own conclusions. I saw his eyes fix themselves on the long, tell-tale slit and the colour rush up to his forehead.

"Who tore that slit in the lining?" he asked sharply.

"I tore it to-night!"

"Peggy!... You found something?"

"Yes! It had slipped through a ripped place down between the cloth and the lining."

"Good God! *The message?*"

"The message! Here it is." And from the bosom of my low dress I pulled the folded bit of khaki-yellow paper, warm from my heart. He took it from me. Our fingers touched, and his were cold as ice.

I stood still while he opened the paper and read the words which were of as great importance in his life now as when he wrote them. They had power to make all the difference to him and to another man between honour and dishonour.

For a long minute he was silent and motionless, reading or thinking. Then he looked up abruptly, and his eyes blazed into mine.

"Peggy!" he said in a level, monotonous tone which I knew hid deep feeling. "Do you realize what this means to me?"

"Yes," I answered. "I realize fully. I've dreamed of a moment like this for you. I've lived for it, for weeks and months that seem like years."

"And that it should come to me from you!"

"I hoped—I prayed."

"Tell me what happened."

I told him, only leaving out the part about Diana, how she had come home and guessed the secret I had found and tried to rob me. To mention that, I thought, might seem as if I were trying to boast of what I had done. Then, when I had explained how I dashed out of the house, leaving everything but the coat, which would be invaluable as proof, I hurried on, lest he should ask questions I didn't wish to answer.

"What has become of the notebook?" I wanted to know. "I hope you've got it?"

"Better than that," Eagle said. "If I'd had it in my possession all this time I might have written this message whenever I chose, torn out the leaf, and pretended that it had been done on the night of the gunfiring. Luckily Dell, the friend who defended me in my trial, kept the book. It was produced at the court-martial in my defence, and the torn edge shown, with the marks on the next page made by pressing down heavily with a blunt pencil. Vague traces of words could be seen, but even with a magnifying glass they couldn't be read. There was no evidence that amounted to anything, but my friend kept the book. He said it might be of use some day. I had no such hope, but now—my God, Peggy, with that coat and your story, the case against Vandyke seems to me complete!"

"How thankful I am to hear you say that!" I almost sobbed, moved by his excitement to greater excitement of my own. "I felt it must be so; but I'm only a girl. I didn't *know*. I couldn't be sure. Oh, Eagle! You'll never understand what it is to me to think I've been able to help you, even a little. If it hadn't been for me the dreadful thing would never have happened. You'd still be just what you were before we met."

"You've not helped me a 'little'; you've given me new life," he said. "Some time I'll tell you, maybe, why I'd rather have the gift from you than any one else. But I can't understand what you mean by saying 'the thing would never have happened' if it hadn't been for you."

"If I hadn't wanted a new dress, and if I hadn't gone to Wardour Street to sell my lace and make money to buy the frock, we should never have known each other. You wouldn't have seen Diana; we shouldn't have gone to America, and if we hadn't gone to America, and met Major Vandyke, those guns would never have been fired, and heaps of official bother would have been saved. But far the best of all, *you* would have been as happy as ever!"

"You might as well blame yourself for being born," said Eagle; "and on my soul, I tell you, Peggy, that even without the new hope you've given me to-night, I wouldn't go back if I could choose, and be without my experience in Belgium, or—or without *you* in my life."

He held out his hands for mine, and I gave them to a grasp that hurt. Something he was about to say; but before he had time to speak there came a long shrill peal of the electric bell.

Eagle dropped my hands instantly. "By Jove! It must be Jim. He's forgotten his key! I don't want

him to see you, Peggy. He's a very good fellow, but a rattle-brain—tells everything he knows. Run behind that red screen, and when I've got him into his own room, which I'll do somehow in a few minutes, I'll take you to a taxi, and drive home with you if it can be managed."

I whisked behind the screen, peeping out to whisper: "Better hide the khaki coat if you don't want questions!"

Eagle took my advice, handing me the coat to keep for him as he passed on his way to the door. There was plenty of room to stand behind the screen without flattening myself against the wall. And without danger of being seen I could look through the interstices between the leaves of the screen into the brightly lighted room.

I heard Eagle's footsteps on the parquet floor of the vestibule. I heard the click of the latch as he opened the door. After that, instead of a loud, jolly greeting from his friend, there was dead silence for an instant. Then a woman's voice spoke in a low tone of intense and passionate eagerness. I had never heard it speak in that tone before. But with a shock of surprise and fear, I recognized the voice: it was Diana's.

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## CHAPTER XXV

My heart stood still. Thinking calmly, it seemed that Diana had no power to harm Eagle March. I had the coat which betrayed Sidney. Eagle had the written message, and his friend in America had the notebook out of which it had been torn. The chain of our evidence was complete. It could not be broken. Eagle had long ago seen through Diana and ceased to worship her. Surely she could do nothing with him now, no matter how shamefully she might humble herself. But I could not think calmly. And as I heard her sweet, imploring voice, begging to come in, as I realized that Eagle could not shut her out, a heavy presentiment of failure weighed upon me. I braced myself to be ready for anything that might happen, ready to spring from behind the screen and confront Diana if need came.

"If you ever cared for me, if you have any pity for an unhappy woman, let me in—let me speak to you," were the words I heard her say, in a voice like the wail of harp-strings. Its pathos would have been irresistible to any man, even if he had never loved her. Eagle March let Diana come in, though I heard him protesting that his friend Jim White might arrive at any moment.

"What does it matter?" she cried; and with the words she was at the study door. Through the leaves of the tall screen I saw her trail in, a figure of beauty in her white satin dress and sombre purple cloak, her dark hair wreathed with a fillet of emerald laurel leaves that gave her face the look of some tragic muse of long ago. "I know Jim White," she hurried on, "and he knows me well enough to be sure I'm here for nothing wrong! I'm not afraid of him. It's you I'm afraid of, Eagle!"

She stopped, and faced him. Unknowingly she faced me, too. Eagle's back was turned toward me, but I could see Diana's blue eyes gazing up at him. They were sad and beautiful beyond words. With a shiver of fear, I realized that no woman on earth could be lovelier than my sister. All womanhood, with its appeal to man, was in her great imploring eyes.

I was glad that Eagle did not answer. I hoped his silence might mean that her beauty had lost its magic for him, that he understood fully how she had come to beguile him, and that he meant to give her no opening.

"This is the first time I have seen you since—since that night at Alvarado when you bade me 'good-bye,'" she went on, letting her voice break into a half-stifled sob.

"You saw me at the Embassy," he answered, so coldly that, in her place, I should have been chilled with discouragement.

"I dared not look at you there," she confessed. "I was afraid of—myself. Oh, Eagle! I'm even more afraid of you now—more afraid than of myself!"

"Really, I am not so very formidable, Lady Diana," said Eagle, with cool scorn that showed in tone and manner. "But if I may ask—since you stand in such dread of me, why do you come to beard the lion in his den?"

"Because the lion is brave and kingly I have ventured. I *had* to come, Eagle. There was no other way. I found out your address from your Russian friend, Major Skobelev. He happened to mention it, asking me if I knew Jim White who'd lent the place to you. I didn't guess then how thankful I'd soon be to know where you lived. Oh, Eagle! Don't look at me so cruelly! I can't bear it. You hate me, but you mustn't judge. If you knew everything, you'd see that you'd done me a wrong."

"I should be sorry to think that," said Eagle, as formally as if he spoke to a stranger. "And you are mistaken if you really suppose I hate you. I have gone through a good deal lately, Lady Diana, and learned to see personal things in the right proportion. Let me assure you, my feelings toward you are not in the least malevolent."

"You mean you don't care for me any more? I ought to be glad, for your sake and mine, too. But I *did* love you, Eagle. I truly did, only—I was a coward. I was deceived, as other people were

deceived. And I had Father to think of as well as myself."

"Don't excuse yourself to me, I beg! All that is past and done with. You didn't come here I'm sure to—"

"Ah! If the past could be done with! It can't, and that is why I have come. I know Peggy has been with you. It's useless to tell me she has not."

"I've no intention of telling you a lie, Lady Diana."

Di broke down, and cried without any effort to restrain herself. She did not look quite her beautiful self when she cried, but she looked a hundred times more pathetic. "You won't believe me, I suppose," she sobbed, "but till to-night I never knew—knew that Sidney had deceived me. I believed what he told me to believe. It is an awful blow! I think—my heart is broken. But, oh, God, Eagle, if you ruin him before the world it will be my death!"

To my astonishment Eagle answered with a laugh—a laugh of exceeding bitterness.

"You seem to believe and disbelieve easily, Lady Diana Vandyke!" he said. "Once you believed in me. Then you ceased to believe in me and threw me over because another man—a richer man than I—told you and everybody else that I was a liar. You believed in him instead—on his mere word. You married him. May I ask if he has confessed to you, or do you take his guilt for granted as you took mine, on circumstantial evidence?"

"No, he has not confessed anything," Di answered. Yet there was something in her tone and confused, anxious manner that made me sure she was not telling the truth. The conviction swept over me that something had happened at the house in Park Lane since I slammed the front door and ran out. Diana might have thought twice before coming to grovel here to Eagle, unless she had been sure that I was not jumping to conclusions—sure that there could be no possible mistake about *what I had found in Sidney's coat*. Suddenly I knew as well as if she had put the story into words that Sidney had come home before she had made up her mind what to do; that she had told him about the coat, and that I had carried it off to Eagle March; that Sidney, knowing well what my discovery must have been, had broken down and sent Diana to Eagle, in the one last hope that her pleading might save him from his enemy's revenge.

"I haven't seen Sidney," she hurried on. "But—instinct tells me some things. I'm afraid—I know that his loving me so much made him cruel to you. Oh, don't look at me like that. You turn me to ice. It's true—'cruel' isn't a hard enough word for what he did. I don't try to excuse him. But he sinned for my sake. That softens my heart toward him. I'm human!"

"I'm not inhuman, I trust," said Eagle, "but it doesn't soften *my* heart toward him."

"I don't ask that," Diana wept. "All I ask is your forgiveness for me—that you soften your heart for me!"

"I forgive you freely, Lady Diana," Eagle answered, "for any injury you may have done me in the past, for I have lived it down. The injury Vandyke did me, I thought—till to-night—I could never live down. But thanks to the most loyal friend a man ever had I've been given my chance."

Diana flung up her head, and there were no tears in her eyes. "Peggy a loyal friend!" she cried. "She's a traitor to Father and me when she betrays Sidney. What right has she to be loyal to you at our expense? And it isn't loyalty, not what *you* mean by loyalty. She has always hated Sidney for your sake, and now she can calmly see him ruined, not because of any wish for justice, but simply because she's desperately, idiotically in love with you; because she'd do anything—no matter how cruel to others—in the hope of winning you for herself. Now you know the real truth about Peggy."

"I wish I could think it were the real truth," said Eagle very quietly and very slowly. "To have Peggy's love would be the best thing in the world. I've realized that for some time now—while I was under arrest before my court-martial and had plenty of time to think. That was the time it was borne in on me, Lady Diana, just how much difference there is between you and Peggy."

Diana stood speechless, staring at him.

I was afraid the two out there might hear my heartbeats, they sounded so loudly in my own ears.

"I realized how foolish I'd been, not to see that difference before," Eagle went on, still speaking with a deliberate distinctness, as if he were willing I should catch every word.

That he should be saying such things to Diana was so wonderful, so almost incredible, that I asked myself if he were saying them only to save my pride because Di had snatched my love for him out of hiding and trailed it in the dust at his feet. "I ought to have loved Peggy almost as much as I love her now, the very day we met first. I ought to have felt she was the *one* woman—the one thing in the world for me. But she looked such a child! It would have seemed like sacrilege to love her as a man loves a woman—that little sprite of a creature. And then I met you. You dazzled me, Lady Diana. That's the word for it. I think no other would fit. But I didn't know I was *only* dazzled, till you took the light away. As soon as the bright spots faded from before my eyes, as bright spots do at last when you've been staring at the sun, I saw things as they really were. I saw what my feeling for you was worth, and what my feeling for Peggy might grow to be. But I tried not to let it grow. I'd suffered enough. I was down and out, and if I wasn't worthy of you, still less was I worthy of Peggy. Besides, I thought she was engaged to Dalziel, and I wanted

to be glad for her. He's a good fellow. Then we were thrown together in Belgium, she and I; and if I hadn't loved her before, I should have begun to love her then, as a man loves just one girl in his life. Whatever I have done since—the few small things I have been able to do—have all been with the thought of her in my heart as a lodestar. So now you will understand, Lady Diana, how little impression you can make upon me by calling your sister a traitor."

"You say all this to hurt me!" Diana cried out. "But you did care for me once, Eagle. Do not forget that!"

"I forget nothing," he said. "But the time you speak of seems a long time ago, I care so much more for Peggy now. Just how much I care for her, I am going to prove to you in a moment."

For a second he paused, while Di waited, not knowing what to say; and it seemed as if I were waiting, too; my heart and breath stopped for his next words.

"If I had ever loved you as dearly as I once thought I did," he went on, sadness in his voice, "I suppose I could have refused you nothing when you came to me to-night. But—I don't defend myself—I only confess to the hardness in me; you haven't moved me at all. You were cruel as the grave to me. I could be cruel in return to you. That is, I could act as I thought right and be indifferent to the effect on you. Your husband did his best to ruin me. Virtually, he did ruin me. Even to-night he has lied again, the same old lie, to pull me down if he could from the miserable little height I've crawled up to, like a singed moth creeping out of the flame. Did you ever believe in his truth and my guilt—believe in the depths of your soul—if you have a soul? I doubt it! Anyhow, you helped his lies to-night, as often before; of that I have no doubt at all. I've no mercy for you in my heart, and none for Vandyke. I had none, even when I stopped the horses on your wedding day. I didn't do that from any softening of heart toward either of you. It was purely mechanical. I'd have done the same for a pair of thieves, I assure you. Nothing you could say to me for yourself, Lady Diana, would make me give up my revenge, or rather my justification, which—by his own fault—can't come to me without Vandyke's ruin. But something you have said about Peggy has made all the difference."

"About Peggy? What do you mean?" Di faltered.

"You said that she was a 'traitor to her people' for my sake. Now, because I love her, I can't let her be that. I won't profit by her loyalty to me—at your expense. And I won't have the world say in speaking of her, 'There's Lady Peggy O'Malley, who bore witness against her brother-in-law and ruined him.' For myself, I believe it wouldn't give me a qualm if Vandyke blew out his brains to-morrow, but you have made me realize that I couldn't bear it for *her* sake. Thank you for that, Lady Diana. Here is the paper which Peggy found inside the lining of your husband's coat, and brought to me. Because of Peggy and my love for her, take it and do with it as you choose."

Diana gave a little joyous shriek, but my cry of despair mingled with it. I pushed back the screen so that it tottered and fell with a crash, as I flew out in time to seize Eagle's hand with the paper in it.

"No!" I gasped. "Don't let me have lived for nothing, Eagle! I would gladly have given my life to get this bit of paper for you. I shall die of grief if I'm not to help you after all."

Holding the written message firmly in one hand, he laid the other over mine.

"You heard all I said?" he asked. "I am glad. I meant you to hear it in your sister's presence. Yet, though you heard, you speak of not *helping* me, Peggy? What she said isn't true, then? It isn't true that you love me?"

"It is true, and you know it only too well," I answered, hardly remembering that Diana listened, hanging anxiously on every word as on a verdict for life or death. "I worship you, Eagle; and that's why I don't care to live if you are not saved. The great chance has come, when we least expected it, and if you don't take it now it's in your hand——"

"It seems to me that my way of taking the great chance is after all the only way, if we are to be happy. Peggy, I find that I love you too much to take any other way. Can you love me as I am, love me enough to say: 'Do what is right for you?'"

"It is right for you to have justice!" I pleaded with him.

"I would rather have love."

"You can have both!"

"No. It doesn't seem so to me."

"Oh, you are obstinate—obstinate!"

"Perhaps! I'm afraid I always was. But I love you. I've suffered, and now I want to be happy and at peace. It isn't only for your sake. It's for mine as well. Great love is worthy of the only great revenge. Shall I burn the paper?"

"For God's sake, say yes, Peggy!" I heard Diana sob. But I hardly listened. If she said more, I did not hear it. I was looking at Eagle.

"Does silence give consent?" he asked. There was a new light in his eyes, brighter and clearer than the careless light of youth that was lost. I could not quench it. So I bowed my head and let

the khaki coat, which half unconsciously I had been holding all the time, drop to the floor. The glory of Eagle's smile repaid me. He took my hand in his, and leading me, walked to the fireplace. There he stooped, and without hesitation dropped the paper, which might have changed his whole life, into the flames.

"Good-bye to the past!" he cried. "Hail to the future! Peggy, such as it is, such as it can be for me now, will you share it?"

"You know!" I whispered.

He pressed my hand tightly, then turned to Diana.

"You had better go home to your husband," he said. "You can sleep in peace to-night, and all nights. Presently I shall take Peggy to Hampstead; but I want her to myself for a moment first."

Without a word to either of us, Diana obeyed, her head bent low. I suppose she could find nothing to say, since "Thank you" would be commonplace: and Di is never commonplace.

I heard Eagle open the door for her, and shut it behind the trailing white satin and purple brocade. Then he came back to me and held out his arms.

I had been in the sky with him before, but this was heaven.

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He is at the front now, and has been for a long time, but whatever may happen, neither life nor death can part our souls. The sacrifice he made was for my sake, and for the sake of love. So you see why, changing only our names, I have written this bit of secret history and told the truth about Eagle March and Monsieur Mars.

THE END

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