

Enlargement

By J. D. Beresford

When he heard the first signal, warning the people of London to take cover, his spirit revolted.

He began to picture with a sick disgust the scene of his coming confinement in the dirty basement. Mrs. Gibson, his landlady, would welcome him with the air of forced cheerfulness he knew so well. She would make the same remarks about the noise of the guns. She would say again: "Well, there's one thing, it drowns the noise of the bombs—if they've reely got here this time." Then Maunders from the first floor would say that you could always pick out the sound of the aerial torpedoes; and explain, elaborately, why Mrs. Graham from the second floor would say that she'd rather enjoy it, if it weren't for the children. And her eldest little prig of a boy would say, "I'm not afraid, mumma," and expect everyone to praise his courage. Mrs. Gibson would praise him, of course. She would say: "There, now, I declare he's the bravest of anyone." She was obliged to do it. She would never be able to get new lodgers this winter. And when that preliminary talk was done with, they would all begin again on the endlessly tedious topic of reprisals; and keep it up until a pause in the barrage set them on to spasmodic ejaculations of wonder whether "they" had been driven off or gone, or been shot down, or. . . .

No; definitely, he would not stand it. He could better endure the simultaneous explosion of every gun in London than three hours of that conversation. Moreover, he could not face the horrible drip, drip, from the scullery sink. On the night of the last raid he had been very near the sink. And the thought of that steady plop. . . . plop. . . . of water into the gally-pot Mrs. Gibson kept under the tap for some idiotic reason, was as the thought of an inferno such as could not have been conceived by Dante, nor organised by the Higher German Command,

Nerves? He shrugged his shoulders. In a sense, no doubt.

Suspense, dread, a long exasperation of waiting had filled every commonplace experience—more particularly that dreadful dripping of the cold water tap—with all kinds of horrible associations. But if it was "nerves," it was not nervousness, not fear of being killed, nothing in the least like panic. He was quite willing to face the possible danger of the open streets. But he could not and would not face Mrs. Gibson and the scullery sink.

No; he must escape—a fugitive from protection. Men had fled from strange things, but had they ever fled from a stranger thing than refuge? He must go secretly. If Mrs. Gibson heard him she would stop him, begin an immense, unendurable argument. She could not afford to risk the loss of a lodger this winter. She would bring Maunders and Mrs. Graham to join her in persuasion and protest. Freedom was hard to win in London, in such times as these.

He crept down the long three flights of stairs like some wary criminal feeling his cautious way to liberty. But once he had, with infinite deliberation, slipped back the ailing latch of the front door, he lifted his head and squared his shoulders with a great gasp of relief. He could have wept tears of exultation. He was filled with a deep thankfulness for this boon of his enlargement.

There was no sound of guns as yet; nor any sweep of searchlights tormenting the wide gloom of the sky. It was a wonderful, calm night; a little misty on the ground; but, above, the moon was serene and bright as a new guinea.

He had no hesitation as to his direction. He desired the greatest possible expansion of outlook; and turned his face at once towards the river. On the Embankment he would be able to see a wide

arc of the sky. He had a sense of setting about a prohibited adventure, full of the most daring and delicious excitements. His one dread was that he might be interfered with, stopped, sent home.

The cycling policemen looked at him, he thought, with peculiar suspicion. They gruffly shouted at him to take cover, with a curt note of warning, as if he were breaking the law by indulging himself in this escapade. He tried to avoid notice by slinking into the shadows. That cold, inimical moonlight made everything so conspicuous.

Except for the policemen, the streets were vividly empty. He could feel the spirit of London crouched in expectancy. Behind every darkened window men, women, and children waited and longed for the relief of the first gun. And while they waited they chattered and smiled. And all their laughter and conversation was like these streets, vividly empty; their spirits had taken cover.

He alone was free, exempt, rejoicing in his liberty. . .

The ground mist was thicker on the Embankment; and for a moment he was confused by the loom of a strange obelisk that had a curiously remote, exotic air in the midst of this familiar London. Then he recognised the outline as that of Cleopatra's Needle, and went close up to the alien monument of another age and stared up at it in the proclamatory moonlight. He wondered if any magic lingered in those cryptic inscriptions? If they might not have endowed the very granite with curious, occult powers. He was still staring at the solemn portent of the obelisk when the barrage opened with unusual suddenness. . . .

For a time he was crushed and overwhelmed by the pressure of that intimidating fury of sound. He cowered and winced like a naked soul exposed to the intimate vengeance of God. He was as beaten and battered by the personal threat of those cumulative explosions as if every gun sought him and him alone as the objective of its awful wrath.

But, by degrees, he began to grow accustomed even to that world-rocking pandemonium. He became aware of the undertones that laced the dominant roar and thunder of artillery. He could trace, he believed, beside the shriek of shell, the humming whirr of an aeroplane he could not see. And once something whizzed past him with a high singing hiss that ended abruptly with a sharp clip. He guessed that a fragment of shrapnell had buried itself in one of the plane-trees.

Yet the real danger of that warning did not terrify him as had the enormous onslaught of noise from the barrage. At the next intermission of the deafening bombardment he stood up, rested his hand on the plinth of the obelisk, and stared, wondering and unafraid, into the great arc of the sky. He could see no aeroplanes. . . . The stillness was so profound that he could hear with a grateful distinctness the soft clucking ripple of the rising flood.

Presently he dropped his regard for the heavens to the plain objective of deserted London. The mist had almost dispersed in some places, had thickened in others—churned and driven, perhaps, by the vast pressure of the sound waves. Across the road he could see the impending cliff of great buildings, pale and tall in the moonlight. At his feet the plane-trees threw trembling, skeleton shadows. All the town waited in suspense to know whether or not the bombardment would presently be renewed.

He had a presentiment that it was all over. He felt the quick exaltation and vigour of one who has suffered and escaped danger. But when he looked up the Embankment and saw what he took to be the silhouettes of three towering trams emerging with furtive silence from the mist, he was aware of a faint sense of disappointment. Nothing was left to him but to return to the common dreariness of life.

He took a step towards the trams that were advancing with such a stately, such a hushed and ponderous deliberation. . .

Trams. . .

He held his breath, staring and gaping, and then backed nervously against the pedestal of the great Egyptian monument.

Had the shock of that awful bombardment broken his nerve? Was he mad? Bewitched by some ancient magic? Or was it, perhaps, that in one swift inappreciable moment he had been instantly killed by a fragment of shrapnel, and that, now, his emerging spirit could, even as it watched these familiar surroundings, peer back deep into the hidden mysteries of time?

He pressed himself shivering and fascinated, against the hard, insistent reality of cold granite; but still in single file these three colossal shapes advanced, solemn and majestic, rocking magnificently with a slow and powerful gravity.

They were almost abreast of him now, sombre and stolid—three vast, prehistoric, unattended Elephants, imperturbably exploring the silences of this dead and lonely city.

They passed, and left him weak and trembling, but indescribably happy.

Two minutes later, a blind and insensible policeman, following the very path of those magical evocations of the thought of ancient Egypt, rode carelessly by, bearing the banal message that all was clear.

But the adventurer walked home in a dream of ecstasy. Whatever the future might hold for him, he had pierced the veil of the commonplace. He had seen and heard on the Thames Embankment that sacred, mystical procession of the Elephants.

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He looked at Mrs. Gibson with something of contempt when she brought him his breakfast next morning. He could not respond to her chatter concerning the foolish detail of last night's raid. She, poor woman, was afraid that she might, in some unknown way, have offended him. Her last effort was meant as an aimable diversion. One never knew whether people weren't more scared than they chose to admit.

"There's one amusin' bit," she said, laying his morning paper on the table, "as I just glanced at while I was waitin' for the water to boil. It's in Hincidents of the Raid. It seems as three performin' elephunts gain' 'ome from the 'Ippodrome or somewhere got loose—their keeper done a bolt, I suppose, when the guns began—and got walkin' off by theirselves all down the Embankment. They must 'a been a comic sight, poor things. Terrified they was, no doubt. . . ."

Now, why should God explain his miracles through the mouth of a Mrs. Gibson?