


Revealed by the Raid

by
Elizabeth York Miller

A black and white illustration showing a man in a suit and hat running out of a shop. The shop has a sign that says 'TOBACCONIST'. The man is carrying a bag and looking back over his shoulder. The shop is a small building with a door and a window.

IT was a promising moonlit twilight in late September, and Mr. Mellikas—whom recent experience justified in the act—decided to close his shop early and get back as quickly as possible to the great hotel where he now lived.

Every time he left the shop these evenings he experienced a faint wonder as to whether or not he would ever see it again. Something easily might happen to either of them, to the shop or to himself; but while he had the normal man's distaste for violent death or bodily mutilation, he was not concerned greatly with those issues. The abomination of loneliness was his real trouble.

He knew there were other lonely people in London, and all over the world as well; but such was his kind heart that instead of taking consolation from that fact, he added the burden of their desolation to his own.

Scarcely a day passed but some black-robed woman or a father with a mourning badge on his sleeve would enter the little shop in Ryder Street and say, "Good morning, Mellikas. I just

looked in to tell you not to send any more cigarettes to—" whoever it might be that had been receiving them. Usually they said very little more than that.

There were others who forgot to cancel their orders, and Mellikas would only learn what had happened when the neat packages began to come back from the front.

And each grief was a fresh stab in his heart, for many of those husbands and sons he had known personally. Mellikas was a character, and his customers loved him.

In the old days they would drift into the shop for a chat with the tobacconist, and Mrs. Mellikas would come down from the flat upstairs, where they had lived for twenty-five years, and make Turkish coffee. It was all very cheerful and cozy. During those happy years, Stanley, the English-born son, grew from babyhood to young manhood, taking a public-school scholarship, by the way, and at the time the war broke out was studying to become a civil engineer. A fine lad was Stanley.

The Greek father and mother were

immensely proud of their English son. They were fearful as well as proud when Stanley got his commission in the Royal Engineers; but they sent him forth—one of the first to volunteer—and old Mellikas packed the little tin boxes that went out to him with his own hands, as he did for the others, until the Battle of the Somme, after which they were needed no more. Six months later Mrs. Mellikas succumbed to a heart attack and followed her boy into the great unknown.

So Mellikas was left alone with the cat and his empty flat. The cat now lived in the shop; the flat was shut up, and Mellikas had a room in the big hotel across Piccadilly Circus. There he mingled with life in which he did not share; there he had companionship in the proximity of strangers! He sat down to dine with a thousand people—and he did not know one of them. Yet it was better, he thought, than being alone.

This evening he was impelled to get back quickly. It was the anniversary of his wife's birthday, and in the morning he had gone to Covent Garden and bought flowers which he took up to the dusty flat and put beside her photograph.

She would be fifty-four were she alive, while he himself had just turned forty-nine, but there had never appeared to be any discrepancy in their ages. She had been a birdlike little woman, with snapping black eyes and hair like a raven's wing, while Mellikas—old Mellikas, as he was called—was big and burly, with a grizzled close-cropped head and a bald spot on his crown. He had loved his wife dearly, and proved it by being true to her. In a way he missed her more than he did Stanley. The boy had been his pride and his ambition, but in the truest sense of the word his wife had been his companion. In all of the twenty-five years they had never been separated.

Outside, the twilight had become one vast irradiation of moon mist. London was like an

enchanted city, but it was an evil enchantment. That white moon which lovers used to swear by had lost many admirers, for now she was a treacherous lamp set in the skies to light the path of Gothas. Mellikas had sent the cashier and the three cigarette-makers home at five o'clock. It was now seven, and he had just finished tidying up the shop. The cat's saucer of milk was the last thing. She, poor creature, had nothing better to fortify her in these nights of storm and stress.

As he locked the shop door he could hear the hammer of the guns far away to the east. The "Take Cover" warning had been out for half an hour, and by now the streets were practically deserted. Empty taxicabs and motor-omnibuses stood drawn up at the curbs; a few belated pedestrians were hurrying toward the tube stations, and a police car, breaking all speed limits, came racketing down Piccadilly.

Mellikas had not far to go, and he did not hurry specially. For all of his many years in England, there clung to him the remnants of an Oriental fatalism. What is to be, will be. He rather despised the "foreigners," as he called them—many of his own and kindred races—who fled to the tubes for their lives at the first whisper of danger. Nevertheless, he walked fast enough to overtake a solitary woman who was crossing the circus, dragging a heavy dressing-bag. As he caught her up, the big gun near by started with a deafening roar. The woman screamed; Mellikas picked up the bag she had dropped and started off on a trot, advising her to follow him as fast as she could.

"It is only the guns; *our guns*," he said reassuringly, as they hurried along.

The skies were streaming fireworks as they pushed through the great revolving doors of the hotel into a deserted, glass-domed foyer.

"We will not stay here," said Mellikas. "Neither do we go into the basements. They will be stifling. It is quite safe one floor up in the corridors. I will fetch you a chair from my

room.”

The woman continued to follow him. So far she had said nothing. He did not even know what she looked like; but when they were in the long, dim corridor on the floor above, and he had brought an easy chair and a rug for her knees, he realized that, she was, without exaggeration, the most superlatively beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. And it was not the first time he had seen her, either. She was beautiful in a haunting way, so that when he went once more into his room to bring brandy, he was obliged to stop at the door and turn to look at her again.

She smiled at him faintly, with a little lifting of the upper lip and a gleam of deep melancholy in her big brown eyes. She was not very young. There were streaks of gray in her dark hair, and olive shadows about the melancholy eyes which hinted of experience. Yet with that clear, transparent skin and small, perfect profile, she had the look of eternal youth.

“I am giving you a lot of trouble,” she said, when he brought the brandy and poured out a small quantity for her to drink.

“Not in the least, madam. It was lucky I happened to overtake you. Are you frightened now?”

“A little.” she replied with a shiver for the roar outside. “Oh, I hate it! I hate the whole thing—the war—everything! It makes such cowards of us.”

“It makes brave men and women, too.” said the tobacconist, with his kindly sad smile.

“You don’t know; you don’t know what I mean,” she replied impetuously. “Life will never be the same for me again.”

He did not make the obvious retort. For scarcely anybody in the world would life be the same again. He thought of his boy sleeping somewhere out in France, and of the loving companion he had lost; he thought of the flowers he had put on the dusty mantel-shelf beside her faded photograph, and of the cat

locked in the empty shop. If a bomb should fall close and scatter his wares, the poor old cat would sneeze herself to death.

There came a lull in the firing, and Mellikas took closer stock of the woman he had rescued. To begin with, he would say decidedly that she was a lady, for he was old-fashioned enough to make use of the term; a great lady, perhaps, who had suffered and did not know how to bear it, although in his experience most of them bore it so well.

And he knew her face. Its beauty was unforgettable. She had been in his shop; ordered cigarettes for some one. Ah, he remembered now. It was when his wife lay dying and he hadn’t given much thought to the customers. She had been one of those who came to cancel an order for cigarettes.

But she wasn’t in mourning. His quick eyes took that in. A wine-colored toque sat upon her shining hair, and there was vivid embroidery on the blouse that showed underneath her fur-lined coat. Her hands sparkled with rings—one of them a wedding band—and the elegant dressing-bag he had carried gave the finishing touch that convinced him of her station in life. She was a woman who had been looked after with tenderest care. He wondered in what way the war had touched her life so vitally. If she had lost one she loved she had ceased to mourn him.

The lull did not last for long. In about ten minutes the crash of the guns began again. Mellikas, with the permission of his guest, lit one of his own cigarettes and paced the corridor restlessly. The woman sat huddled in her chair, shivering with cold in spite of her fur coat and the warm rug. Scattered along the corridor were various groups; some joking, some reassuring each other in whispers, some tense and silent. In spite of the noise outside, it seemed singularly quiet, and the air was cool, although acridly scented with explosives.

"Will you give me a cigarette, please?" the woman asked presently.

Mellikas apologized and tendered her his case. Somehow she did not look to him like a woman who smoked.

She held the cigarette in her fingers, studying it for an instant, disregarding the match he had lighted.

"It's a 'Mellikas'—how curious! My husband would never touch any other brand. He always smoked 'Mellikas' until—"

She broke off abruptly and put the cigarette to her lips, puffing in a violent, amateurish way.

"Heavens, those guns! Or are they bombs? It must be terrible out in France. I've been in the country—down in Hampshire—and I'm going back again to-morrow morning. Oh, my God, I can't bear it!"

"They are not so bad, now," Mellikas said reassuringly. She was a woman, and he did not mind her being a coward. A man he would have despised. But he had misunderstood her.

"I didn't mean this raid," she said quietly. "I just can't bear life. My own life, I mean. This cigarette is a reminder—a hateful one—of all I've lost. My husband was so fond of them. I suppose you are devoted to them, too."

The praise was sweet to Mellikas. He took a great pride in his business. His cigarettes were made of honest, undoctored tobacco, skilfully blended by a master hand to suit the most exacting taste. Why should he deny himself?

"I thank you, madam," he said modestly. "I am Alcibiades Mellikas, as it happens. I make these cigarettes, myself."

She looked up at him sharply.

"Why, yes. I went in to tell you not to send any more. I thought your face was familiar."

"I remember you, too, madam. But at the time you came I was in great trouble. My dear wife was dying, and I forgot your name; I forgot many things at that time. You have my deep sympathy, madam, in the loss of your husband."

"In the loss of my husband?" she echoed.

"Oh, you misunderstood me. My husband is not dead. He is quite well, now. Well enough, indeed, to leave the hospital. To-morrow there is to be an investiture. They have given him the V. C. That is what I came up for. In all that long time—it was six months ago—I have not seen him.

"And then I got to the hospital and the sister tried to prepare me; although in a way I already knew. That was this evening. But I couldn't face it. I rushed out and got a taxicab and meant to go straight back to the country, but when the 'Take Cover' alarm sounded, the driver refused to take me any further. That was how I happened to be wandering about. It's so late, now, I think I'll try and get a room here for the night. Isn't the raid over? The guns have stopped again."

Old Mellikas shivered. Throughout the woman's long speech he had gained little impression of what she said—she had spoken so rapidly—but he sensed a tragedy within a tragedy that seemed to curdle his blood.

"Your husband is not dead, madam? Have you not, therefore, everything for which to be thankful? Yet you spoke as though you had lost him. Would you rather he had died than—"

The spoiled beautiful face regarded him searchingly.

"You have lost your wife, Mr. Mellikas. Ask yourself if it would not be better so than that she should live, blind and so cruelly mutilated that you could not bear to look at her even?"

Mellikas threw down his cigarette and stamped upon it.

"I cannot imagine such a thing; such cruelty, such cowardice, such a lack of love on the part of any human being. It is you, madam, with your beautiful face, who are mutilated; it is you who are too hideous to meet the sight of God or man. It is you who are blind to the radiance of the human soul. You must forgive me. You have shocked me beyond control. I am a plain-speaking man, and I always say what I think.

Any of my customers will tell you that"

She jumped to her feet, letting the rug slip from her lap.

"How dare you speak to me like that? You; a common man like you—"

"I am, indeed, a common man," Mellikas agreed.

"You accuse me of cowardice, of cruelty!"

"There is no other name for it," he insisted.

"You insinuate that I don't care for my husband—"

"You care very much for yourself, madam."

"It is just physical fear. I can't bring myself to face it. My people don't think I ought. Even my husband, he's been putting off having me come until, well, until it couldn't be put off any longer if I was ever to come to him at all."

"Quite so," said Mellikas stolidly. "I think you are right. The raid is over. I hear the bugles."

The woman picked up her bag and started off down the corridor without another word. He did not venture to follow her immediately. After all, what was she and her cruelty to him? Their lives had touched for an hour or two, and she had shown him something which he did not like to think any woman possessed—an entire lack of pity. Could there be other women like her? If so. God help the maimed and broken men who were coming back to them.

Mellikas carried the easy chair and rug into his bedroom, and then went downstairs. The foyer was filling, the lights had been turned up; people were coming in, telling of their experience with what seemed a sort of fearful delight.

The old tobacconist's heart was heavy, for although he tried to forget the woman with no pity except for herself, he could not dismiss her completely from his mind. Whatever had happened over London tonight, no tragedy could equal hers, he felt sure.

The worm of selfishness would burrow into

her smooth soft cheeks and dim the luster of her eyes as surely as shell or bullet had destroyed her husband for her. In the end she must suffer more than the maimed, blinded man whose king to-morrow would invest him with the order of the Victoria Cross.

Mellikas could not forgive her. He wandered out through the revolving doors to survey the night from the portico, and there, unexpectedly, he found her again hysterically demanding a taxicab. The porter had no cabs.

"I must go to Curzon Street," she was saying shrilly. "I have to go at once. Don't you understand? It is a matter of—life or death. Yes, it is exactly that!"

"I am sorry, madam, but you can see for yourself," said the porter. "There are no cabs."

"Then I must walk. Take my bag inside, please."

She thrust her dressing-bag into his hands and darted across the street. Mellikas was without his hat, but he followed her.

At the corner he caught her up.

"Madam, it is not exactly safe. Will you allow me to go with you?"

She started, drew aside, then laughed in a piteous way.

"Oh, it is you. Mr. Mellikas: Yes, please come with me. I was very rude to you—but you helped me. I am not really a coward; not so wicked as you think; not so hideous. I couldn't bear to be hideous; to be thought so by anybody. Am I walking too fast?"

Indeed, Mellikas kept pace with her with difficulty. His work tied him down so that he did not get nearly enough exercise.

"Yes, I want you to come," she talked on. "I want you to see that I am not a coward. It was his fault, a little. He spoiled me so. He would never let me face anything. I wanted to take up nursing, but he wouldn't let me. He said the sights would be too ugly. He insisted that I should keep apart from the war. He didn't know, of course, that this would be likely to

happen.”

Mellikas walked silently along beside her through the empty streets. In spite of the repulsion he had felt for her it was pleasant to be with some one who needed his company. It made the loneliness less desperate. And he felt vaguely the sense of something pleasant that must be going to happen.

An ambulance passed them “manned” by V. A. D. women, and bearing inside its load of shattered humanity.

“There, but for the grace of God, goes Alcibiades Mellikas,” muttered the tobacconist under his breath.

On the steps of the private hospital stood one of the sisters, her eyes anxiously searching the empty street.

“Oh, here you are, safe and sound!” she

exclaimed. “The colonel is almost beside himself with worry. You said you might come back—so I told him you were probably detained by the raid.”

“I was,” the woman said quietly.

She pushed by and went straight to a door on the ground floor which she opened quickly. The sister followed with an apprehensive expression, but halted on the threshold.

Old Mellikas stood in the hall for a moment. He heard a clear voice ring out bravely.

“I was detained by the raid, Bob dearest! I came as soon as I could. Oh, my dear, how well and strong you are looking!”

The nurse closed the door, and Mellikas, the lonely, turned back into the misty, moon-ridden night.