

THE KING CONGRATULATES

By W. M. LETTS

MRS. CARDINGTON awoke. Her first impression was morning light, and her second nurse's white cap. Then she knew that it was a wonderful day and that she had achieved something, but she could not think what it was. She felt confused: not sure even what was herself and what was not. She needed someone to reassure her, to remind her quietly who she was and why she felt that today was so wonderful.

Then among the light things round her she concentrated her mind on nurse's cap, so winged and 'starched; under the cap was a pink, cheerful face. The face bent and kissed her. It was cool and the two hands turning her sheet back smelt nicely of soap.

"Dear Mrs. Cardington! I'm the first to congratulate you. This is the great day! You remember, don't you, that it's your birthday to-day? You're a hundred. We're all so excited about you. Isn't it wonderful to have lived for a century?"

Mrs. Cardington's face crumpled. She wanted to cry. Anything affectionate made her want to cry. She echoed "Wonderful", in a tearful voice. Nurse saw the tears and became practical at once.

"But we have to keep you quiet and let it be a nice day for you. Here is your tea, that will make you feel quite bright. Now, just this little piece of bread and butter."

There was a knock at the door. Nurse went to it and peeped out. Her starched apron, her high heels made a pleasant little stir. Mrs. Cardington felt interested; she was wide awake now and eager for the day to bring its attentions.

"This is Kitty, Mrs. Cardington; your new housemaid—you remember? She's asking if she may just congratulate you. Only a minute, Kitty."

A young girl in blue came shyly to the bedside and stood by the curtains at the head. She was pretty and blushing. The

old woman liked pretty girls, she liked them more than old people. She found the old depressing. She smiled at Kitty and held out her hand.

"Be a good girl and you'll be my age some day."

Kitty thought: "Lor! I hope not. Fancy being all so old and crumpled, with little eyes staring out from red lids!" She told it all mentally to Jim, her young man.

"My best wishes, ma'am", she murmured and grew pinker and prettier. Then she rattled the hot water can and went out.

The next to come to the door was the old lady's daughter, Eleanor Cardington. Eleanor was in the seventies. For some years she had seemed much older than her mother. It had taxed all her rather anæmic forces of mind and body to keep the old lady as "wonderful" as everyone said she was. It had needed constant thought and patience and rather hard work, and Eleanor had felt tired all the time.

"Your mother is so wonderful!"

It was the never-failing comment, and Eleanor had always given it a smile and a "Yes, isn't she?" Since she was eighty Mrs. Cardington had taken a pride in her age and resolved to live to be a hundred. When she thought how old she was she felt that Eleanor ought to be young and brisk and amusing. When Eleanor was sixty she was "quite a young woman" and had no business to be so rheumatic and tired and a little deaf withal. The weary acquiescence of her daughter annoyed the old lady. Of course, Mrs. Cardington took the lead in her own home. She had for long had people brought to her sofa, and there in black satin and lace and pearls she had sparkled. "Wonderful!"—they had all said to her. But she was annoyed that Eleanor invariably said "Yes, mama", in a lifeless voice and never kindled an echoed "Wonderful!" when the visitors had gone.

Now here was Eleanor in that ugly dark red dressing-gown, with her grey hair so straight and screwed into a little knot above her neck.

"Well, dear mama; a happy day to you."

Eleanor bent and kissed her in the usual, dutiful, undevoted way.

"How did she sleep?" Eleanor asked the nurse.

Mrs. Cardington hated to be talked about as if she were a lay-figure.

"We had a very good night, thanks, Miss Cardington, and this will be a great day if we just keep it quietly up here. I know Dr. Munsey will be here to congratulate his patient, and the Rector, I suppose, and of course, the family—the great granddaughter."

"Yes, I shall see whom I choose, Eleanor", the old lady said, peevishly. "You can keep the others downstairs. But I want to know who comes. You so often forget"

"Very well, mama! Just as you like, but you must have a quiet morning."

She trailed her flannel draperies through the door, and her mother lay with a little frown on her face.

Again there was a knock, but it was followed immediately by a brisk figure, a woman with white hair and a young face. She was dressed in a pretty homespun. Her day seemed already well begun and well-enjoyed. Nurse smiled her welcome.

"Ah! here's Lady Netley."

Mrs. Cardington opened her eyes and held out shrivelled, wincey-clad arms.

"Violet, darling!"

"Dear Granny! You look splendid, all the better for being a hundred. We're all as proud as proud can be. The village was all talking about you last night when I was in the post office. 'Our great old lady,' they call you."

Again the old face crumpled up with emotion, so the speaker, clasping the claw-like hand in her own, spoke in a matter-of-fact voice at once.

"Yes, everyone is proud of you. I'll come back after I've had breakfast and read you the letters and tell you who calls. No one shall bother you. You are queen of the day, to see or not to see. I fancy there'll be one very special telegram. Now we must let nurse settle you comfortably and put your flowers about, but not too many. You don't like too many scented flowers, I know."

"No, no. And the child?"

Mrs. Cardington struggled for a name.

"My Primrose, you mean? She'll be here soon. She's

coming over in her car. She's nineteen now, granny. Such a grown-up girl she is. I fear she'll be marrying next. Now, dear, I must run downstairs. The house is quite bustled about you. I believe I hear the telephone."

The old lady submitted herself to all the ministrations which made her look more like the Mrs. Cardington who had so long held sway at the Cedars. Her cap, her Shetland shawl, her handkerchief. She was complete at last, and then she fell asleep again till beef tea time. She was drowsy through the morning, and vague about herself and that curious world of bedroom round her. Sometimes it was a confusing place and she did not think it was her room at all. At other times she thought that strange people peered and whispered about her.

It was not till the afternoon that she felt more herself.

"I want Violet . . . Lady Netley", she said.

Her day attendant went out obediently. Mrs. Cardington looked at the white ceiling. "Lady Netley", she repeated. It had given her vast pleasure when this little title had come to her grand-daughter. Hubert Netley, an excellent and reliable civil servant, had been given his K.C.B., and the joy of it still came to the grandmother. It was a sign of success, of her own success. She had a grand-daughter with a title who went to court, even as she in her young days had gone to Queen Victoria's court. Ah! there she was. Violet always seemed to bring life with her. She was like a fresh June wind

"Now, granny dear", she said cheerfully, "I'll read you a few of the telegrams. The royal one came while you were asleep. Isn't it fun to think that our dear king and queen are rejoicing, too, that Mrs. Cardington has made her century? Oh! and I had a reporter here yesterday. I gave him a very nice photograph of your portrait. I told him all the things you've told us in old days . . . yes, about the young Queen Victoria, how you saw her go to Parliament, and about Prince Albert . . . and how you sat next to Disraeli at the opera, and how you contradicted Mr. Gladstone. Yes, and about Tennyson reading his poems and grandad going to sleep. I got in all the stories. He just hung on my words. He'll make a lovely article now".

"That's right, dear," the old lady chuckled; "your aunt . . . she never could. Eleanor has no life in her, no romance, no

imagination. It's strange, you are so much more like me. I was all life and spirit—your grandfather was quiet. For a man it was all right ; he was content to admire me. Where is it . . . the . . . you know ?”

“ The royal telegram ? There ! You shall hold it. Keep it under your pillow. It will be a family heirloom.”

A discreet tap and a maid's head to follow it.

“ Dr. Munsey downstairs, madam.”

“ Show him up, Susan.”

A heavy footfall on the stairs and a burly white-haired man came into the room.

He had an impression of green-shaded light, of vases of daffodils and primroses. How strange to come from the singing, windy gladness of late March into this guarded shrine of extreme old age. He had helped to keep the life in this little mummy on the bed. He rejected his own work. Why did he keep alive what nature would stifle ?

“ Splendid ! Splendid ! ” he said, and he had the old hands in his own. “ So you've really done it ? You've made your century, and here you are laughing at us foolish elderly folk. We've not *your* stamina. I'm an old man already, older than you are.”

Mrs. Cardington seemed to sparkle for a moment under the kindly eyes, then she grew tired.

“ Ah ! I'm very old . . . too old, perhaps.”

“ But you live on, my dear lady. You have your olive branches. One of them flashed up to the door just now in a very smart sports car. The typical modern girl, eh, Lady Netley ? She's yours, I know. Grand these girls are ; no clothes to speak of and all health and energy. It's a great family day for you all. No, I won't stay. No tea, thanks ; no, I don't take it. A glass of champagne ? But you mustn't tempt me. I've my round of cases. There's a lot of influenza in these March days.”

The old woman started. Anything that seemed to threaten that little flickering flame of her life terrified her.

“ Influenza ”, she exclaimed. “ I nearly died of it once. I'm very prone to it, you know that, doctor.”

“ But my dear Mrs. Cardington, you're my first visit this afternoon. No germs, really. You're perfectly safe in this

beautiful room. Nothing bad *can* reach you. Isn't that so, Lady Netley? Well, I'm seventy, but I must go and do my day's work. Good-bye, bless you! I'm proud of my patient."

The room relapsed into quiet again. Violet Netley read letters holding the old woman's hand in hers. She saw that she had induced sleep, and she sat there thoughtfully, listening to a thrush in the blossom-gay garden outside. How young and careless the world was, how little it heeded old age.

She looked up gravely when an elderly clergyman came into the room. The door was open and he came quietly. He had a bunch of forced lily of the valley in his hand. The flowers were the spirit of youth in their green and white. Lady Netley caught back a rueful sigh. Her grandmother had always hated lily of the valley. It had been banished from the house. She had said that the scent was oppressive and odious. But one could not tell the giver. He had bought them at a price for he had no greenhouse.

Mrs. Cardington opened her eyes at him.

"Rector . . . you? For me? Thank you . . . you are all so good."

He stood by her bed. He read her a psalm; he knelt and prayed for her. Then again he was just her old neighbour, asking the news. The royal telegram—might he see it?

"How we should miss our royal family!" he exclaimed. "Aren't they the country's own typical family at all stages? They belong to us, we to them. It is beautiful. We share their grief and joys. They share ours. I feel that Mrs. Cardington is a queen herself to-day."

The old woman smiled at him. She liked such talk. He realized that she was wonderful. She clasped his hand, she murmured "My dear", as he said good-bye.

And then a fair, sleek head came round the open door, and a voice whispered "Mother!"

Lady Netley looked up at her.

"Come in, Primrose. Granny, here is my Primrose, your great-grandchild, you know. She's driven over to greet you."

A thin girl, a flower of a girl came in. She was fair-haired and dressed in green. She was modern in her flat-breasted

slimness, her boyish length of limb. She kissed the old woman with a cool light kiss.

"Well, granny, aren't you wonderful? Everyone is talking of my marvellous great-grandmother."

She rested herself carelessly on the bed. Her grey, dispassionate eyes rested on the old lady whose face was lighted by love and pride.

"My pretty one! I think you're grown. But you're too thin, darling. Look at her little hands, Violet."

The two women laughed.

"I'll come back, granny, before dinner. Mother, are you coming down to tea?"

"No, dear, send up tea for granny and me. We'll have it here quietly."

The girl went to the door and signed to her mother to follow.

Outside in the passage she whispered: "Is Duncan to see her? He can stay for dinner, can't he?" Are you going to tell her that I'm engaged to him?"

"I'll tell her presently; one excitement must last some hours. Yes, Duncan can stay to dinner, but hardly see granny."

"Didn't she know some of his people? I'm sure I've heard of some Hope-Harrington connection? She'll remember if you say the name to her—Duncan thinks the families knew each other in old days. Isn't it funny our renewing an old tie? Perhaps she'll be a great-great-grandmother yet if we decide to have a child. We haven't discussed that yet."

"Really?" Her mother smiled at her quizzically.

"There, child! I must go back, she's calling. Run down and have tea with the others."

Primrose came back quickly. She caught her mother's hand.

"Oh! but it's dreadful to be so old!" she exclaimed.

"What has she *done*? Has she anything to show for her century? Did she ever live or love or feel what I feel about Duncan? It frightens me, mother. She's like an old, old tortoise in bed. I'm terrified. I'd rather be burnt alive than live to be like that."

Violet smiled at her.

"I'm nearly half her age", she said, "and one needn't be frightened. There's something that never grows old. It's there

in granny—something that will spring out one day and burst into leaf and flower. I know now that one's self never really gets old. Don't be frightened, Primrose."

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The day ticked itself along between cup of tea and cup of soup, between soup and arrowroot. The room grew shadowy. Christina, her day attendant, was sitting in the chair by the fire. Mrs. Cardington resented Christina, so she pretended to be asleep. Then the blinds were drawn and the shaded lights turned on. She came back to recollection when her granddaughter stood beside her again. Violet was dressed in black and gold for dinner.

"We are having a festive dinner, gran dear, in your honour. How I wish you were with us."

"Who?" the old lady asked.

"Aunt Eleanor, of course, and the two uncles have just arrived and my Primrose, and a new possible relation, granny, young Duncan Hope-Harrington. The children have just got engaged. We think you knew the family long ago. Does the name recall them?"

"Hope-Harrington? Yes . . . no . . . I can't think. I'm tired . . . to-morrow. I don't want to remember."

The old voice grew confused and petulant. Violet Netley nodded at the attendant and went out softly. The woman stirred about the room settling this and that. She found the lilies of the valley and put them in a bowl, and the bowl on the little round table where the old lady's clock stood with her Bible and her letters and the royal telegram. Mrs. Cardington lay quite still. Sometimes she sank down, down into depths of confusion and dreams. The dim light folded her. She was sure of nothing. Who was she? What was this room? There was a scent, such a scent. It was more forceful than speech, more tangible than the touch of the people round her.

Violet Netley came in softly, looked at the still figure, lying with face turned towards the round table. She signed to Christina to go.

"Have your supper", she whispered. She wanted this dull, dutiful woman to have her share of the household's rejoicings

Violet sat down in the easy chair and looked into the fire.

Mrs. Cardington lay with her face towards the bowl of lilies of the valley. The room had grown warm and the scent came to her bed in waves of sweetness. That was it . . . the scent. It was all that scent. Someone had been standing by a bowl of lilies of the valley. She was terribly unhappy. A young man was talking. She must not cry. She must keep her face to the flowers. He was telling her that he was going to be married; just to please his family—that was what he said—and he spoke of a dream that he had to forbid. His voice was so cool and careless, and all the time the girl had been dying, dying, though life would not end. Who was the girl who was suffering so much, who must not cry, or speak out, who must stand sniffing at a lily, that cruel, terrible scent which meant death to her?

"She mustn't . . . she mustn't," the voice sobbed from the bed.

In a moment Violet was there, holding her hand, soothing her.

"What is it, granny dear? You had a nightmare. You're awake now."

"He's a cruel, horrible man. He's killing her."

"Yes, yes, dear. It's a nightmare. No one is hurt."

"Your little Primrose. She mustn't cry like that."

"But, my dear, she is very happy. I told you she has just got engaged to young Hope-Harrington."

"Ah! he's bad", the old voice was near a scream. "I won't have it. You must tell them. He's cruel. Don't you see how she's crying there by the lilies? Odious flowers! Throw them in the fire. I never could abide them. They're death. Your grandfather liked them. But I wouldn't grow them. Wicked, cruel flowers."

"Dear grandad. He was such a darling. Let's talk about him, granny dear. It'll comfort us both."

"Do you mean John . . . my husband?"

"Yes, and my grandfather. I always think of him as everything kind and good and steady."

She was stroking the old woman's hand.

"Granny, you'll love to meet him again."

"Yes . . . John, always so kind and good. I wonder if I aired his shirt for him. I never quite trust the maids. You might put it before my bedroom fire."

Violet Netley took up the bowl of lilies and put it outside the door. She came face to face with her daughter and the young man.

"Would Granny like to see Duncan?" the girl whispered. "Did you ask her about the Hope-Harringtons? Aunt Eleanor said she believed gran had known them once, but there was some row and granny never spoke of them, but she won't mind it at her age."

"It's too late now, dear; she's tired. It's been such a wonderful day for her. Leave her to her dreams."

In the shadowy room the old lady was staring into the vague lights and darkness of the room.

"You sent him away?" she asked fiercely; "he broke her heart. She was never the same. There she is crying her heart out by the fire. John, you must comfort her. It was those lilies . . . did you burn them?"

"They're gone, granny."

Refreshed with sleep, rustling, fresh, happy, came the nurse.

"Well, dear?" She was bending over her charge.

That brisk voice again restored things to their normal course.

"Such lovely flowers outside; what a wonderful day you've had! It's well to be you, Mrs. Cardington. Such a life, such memories. Now I must see the royal telegram."