

EPISODE XV.

AN ALMOST EXIT .

The resignation of my appointment of course necessitated re-orientation of my way of life. My Mother felt that we should be as free as possible; so we decided to give up my flat. It was a cosy home by now to which I had given much thought, and this decision was a sad one. I moved into a hotel nearby where I furnished my room with my own furniture; I decided on Cairo so as to remain centrally placed for possible future efforts. Mother, moved into a pleasant pension, in the more select setting of Zamalek; but being a sensible little Lady, less sentimental about personal surroundings, she did not encumber herself with furniture. It was on the whole a rather depressive period of readjustment. I occupied my time writing verses, some of which were published from time to time. The war went on; raids developed; and one I specially remember. At about midnight came the ghoulsh crying of the air raid siren. From my window, which looked across to the Turf Club and buildings of Soliman Pasha streets, I saw the sudden blank darkness enclose the city as all the lights went out. Within the building where I lived, I could hear the scuffling of feet, as everyone descended the several staircases to the so-called raid-shelter. For a while the city was quite silent, but I shall never forget, for it was one of those oddly wierd incidents which though slight yet impress themselves upon the memory, how in the dark silent street outside a woman suddenly broke out into wild shrieks of hysterical laughter. There was no other sound at all; only the stark horror of shrill laughter. Then suddenly the guns boomed out and the raiders arrived in *force*. I really felt quite relieved.

The next major incident in my life was in fact almost my exit from it.

On Tuesday 3rd September 1940, I had been one evening to see my Mother at Zamalek. We had a somewhat sad discussion about recent events which could not but produce in us again a sense of shock which at moments was bitter and depressing.

Soon after the following episode, in fact as soon as I was able to write, and with the impressions still vividly upon me, I wrote as follows of the accident which was now to cause for me a spell of several months in hospital.

"I stumbled at that last small step of the half-dozen at the entrance of the block of flats I had just left, and cursed it for its trickiness in varying in depth from its brothers of the same flight, a trap to the unwary even in the day time, and still more so when one emerged to the gloom of the "black-out" from the lighted interior of the building. I had jarred my ankle uncomfortably, but the sharp twinge was not unwelcome as a counter to the less definite but more subtle distress which was jarring my mind. Along the dark and quiet side road I proceeded to the junction where the tramway passes over Boulac Bridge. Here the main road was noisier, but no less dark. The tram to Cairo was just approaching, a mere dim and rumbling shape, and not the bright vehicle of the days of peace which always seemed to gleam and chatter gaily as it went. I must cross quickly and the intervening road space seems clear; - only the blue pin points of shaded car headlights approaching seemingly still at an ample distance. I had miscalculated, or perhaps I was a little dazed with depressing thoughts; anyhow as I was about to step upon the curb of the tram halt, my whole being seemed suddenly blasted and devastated by an instant of excruciating shock. Thoughts flashed into activity; - I am being run over by a car; - how extraordinary - is it going to hurt? - Am I being killed? Up my body hurtled into the air; a crashing breathless impact with the ground;

stifling moments of pressure upon my chest and stomach; then thunderous throbbings and roarings somewhere deep in my inner consciousness..... What is that very odd noise? Not at all a seemly noise, it must be the machinery of the car; perhaps it is the brakes squeaking; I must open my eyes and see. No it is myself making that noise; I can't breathe; it is my own throat making that noise because the breath won't come. Someone is holding my head; now I can see quite clearly. I can understand everything, but still I can't breathe. And nothing seems to matter except getting my breath. Someone has recognised me and they are mentioning my Mother's address, but they have got it wrong, so I must get my voice heard; and at last I do. I see two British soldiers who look at me and then disappear. Suddenly my Mother arrived; so that's alright. The next thing I know, I am in hospital; and more faces as my consciousness becomes clearer under the painful process of being extracted from my clothes. There is a long confused delay until a doctor arrives during which the pain, especially in my chest, becomes more insistent so that each breath is an agonising struggle. The doctor arrives and I manage to tell him that I must know my condition so as to arrange plans. After a consultation outside my room, the doctor comes back. Kindly and quietly, he tells me that I am unlikely to live more than 48 hours; so I asked to see a certain Senior Official of our Embassy. He arrives very soon and receives my instructions; he readily gives me assurances - which in fact time was to prove to be of little sincerity. Then my Mother gentle and quiet as always at any time of crisis comes to me again. There are long hours of pain but a gracious nursing sister is kindness itself and seems a positive angel of patience and skill."

The doctor's estimate of my further presence in this world of ours was not quite correct, and I did not die after all, but for over four months I did remain in hospital.

It was eventually proved, largely by the resourcefulness of an Egyptian policeman, and an Egyptian civilian witness that I had been knocked down by a British Army car which was racing a second army car. It is regrettable to have to recall that these two men of my own race had knowingly left me lying injured in the road; and strangely enough the British authorities themselves were far from helpful in investigating the affair; But eventually irrefutable outside evidence was produced. It was not proved which of the two British drivers actually knocked me down, but I did not press that aspect having no wish to do either of them serious personal harm. The main thing for me was that in the end it was proved to be a British Military vehicle which had injured me, and so my very considerable hospital expenses were eventually refunded to me by G.H.Q.

I recovered and the normal course of life was resumed.