

JOHN EDWARDS SINGS
**TILL DEATH
DO US PART**



Till Death Do Us Part

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CHAPTER I

THINKING the matter over afterwards, Dick Markham might have seen omens or portents in the summer thunderstorm, in the fortune-teller's tent, in the shooting-range, in half a dozen other things at that bazaar.

But the fact remains that he hardly even noticed the weather. He was much too happy.

Ahead, as he and Lesley turned in at the open gates with their stone pillars topped by the heraldic design of griffin and ash-tree, stretched the grounds of Ashe Hall. The smooth lawns were gaudy with booths and striped tents. For a background they had oak-trees, and the long, low, red-brick line of the Hall

It was a scene which, four or five years later, would come back to Dick Markham with a nostalgia like anguish. A lush, green, burning England; an England of white flannels and lazy afternoons; an England which, please God, we shall never lose for any nonsense about a better world. There it lay in opulence, a year or so before the beginning of Hitler's war, though 'opulent' was hardly a word that could be applied to the estate of George Converse, last

Baron Ashe. Yet Dick Markham, a tall young man with rather too much imagination, hardly looked at it,

Lesley said, 'We're horribly late, you know,' in the breathless, half-laughing voice of a girl who does not really care.

Both of them had been walking rather fast. Both of them now stopped short.

A gust of wind, cool against that hot afternoon, raked with sudden violence across the lawns. It caught at Lesley's hat, a picture-hat with a transparent floppy brim, and made her put up her hands quickly to it. The sky had grown as dark as twilight, with smoky slow-moving clouds.

'Look here!' Dick said. 'What time is it?'

'It must be past three, anyway.'

He nodded ahead, where the shadow of the storm gave everything a nightmarish and unreal quality like sunlight through smoked glass. Nothing stirred on the lawns. Tents and booths, touched to uneasy life by the wind, seemed deserted. 'But... where is everybody?'

'They're probably at the cricket match, Dick. We'd better hurry. Lady Ashe and Mrs Price will be *furious*.'

'Does that matter?'

'No,' smiled Lesley. 'Of course not.'

He looked at her - laughing and breathless, with her hands at the brim of her hat. He saw the desperate seriousness of her eyes, despite the smiling mouth. All her thoughts and emotions seemed concentrated in those eyes, brown eyes, telling him what she had told him last night.

He saw the unconscious grace of the raised arms, the white frock moulded against her body by that whipping wind. She was so infernally, disturbingly attractive that even the quiver of her mouth, the turn of her eyes, were recorded in his brain as though he saw her in a thousand different pictures.

It had never occurred to Dick Markham - outwardly at least a stickler for the conventions - that at the entrance' to Lord Ashe's sedate park, on the afternoon of a starched garden-party, with Lady Ashe's phantom eye upon them, he would put his arms round Lesley Grant and kiss her without particularly caring who might be looking on.

But this is what happened, with the wind sweeping across the park and the sky darkening still more. Their conversation (let nobody mock at it) was a trifle chaotic.

'Do you love me?'

'You know I do. Do you love *me*?'

Ever since last night these same words had been repeated, over and over, with no sense of repetition. On the contrary, it seemed each time a new discovery: an increasing dazzle to the wits at the realization. Dick Markham, with some vague recollection of their whereabouts, at length disengaged his arms and swore at the universe.

'I suppose,' he said, 'we've got to go to this damned cricket match?'

Lesley hesitated. The intense concentration of emotion faded out of her eyes, and she glanced at the sky.

'It's going to pour with rain in a minute,' she answered. ' I doubt if there'll be a cricket match. And...'

'And what?'

' I wanted to see the fortune-teller,' said Lesley.

Dick could not have said why he threw back his head and roared with laughter. It was partly her naive air, her utter seriousness; and partly that he would have roared at anything as a groping expression of how he felt.

' Mrs Price says he's awfully good,' the girl assured him quickly. 'That's why I've been so curious. She says he can tell you absolutely everything about yourself.'

' But you know that already, don't you ?'

' *Couldn't* we see the fortune-teller ?'

A faint stir of thunder muttered from the east Taking Lesley's arm firmly, he led her at a rapid pace up the gravel drive towards the clutter of stalls on the lawn. No effort had been made to arrange the booths in regular or even in systematic order. From the coconut-shy to the so-called 'pond' where you fished for bottles, the proprietor of each exhibit had placed it according to his or her artistic taste. And there could be no mistaking the fortune-teller's tent

It stood apart from the others, nearer to Ashe Hall. In shape the tent was like an overgrown telephone-box, though flaring out at the bottom and peaked at the top. Its dingy canvas had vertical stripes of white and red. Over the tent-flap hung a neat sign which read,

'THE GREAT SWAMI,

PALMIST AND

CRYSTAL-GAZER:

SEES ALL,

KNOWS ALL',

together with a big cardboard chart of a human hand pierced by explanatory arrows.

The sky had now grown so dark that Dick could discern a light inside the fortune-teller's lair, which must have been hot to suffocation all afternoon. A heavier gust of wind ran among the tents, thrumming and rattling at canvas, and making the tents sway up like half-inflated balloons. The sign of the human hand was agitated, grotesquely as though it were beckoning to them or waving them away. And a voice said: 'Hoy!'.

Major Horace Price, behind the 'counter' of the miniature shooting-gallery, had made a trumpet of his hands and was addressing them in a parade-ground voice. Most of the other stalls were deserted, their proprietors having; evidently gone off to the cricket match. Major Price doughtily remained. Catching their attention, he ducked under the counter and hurried towards them.

' I imagine - he's heard ?' asked Lesley.

'I expect everybody's heard' said Dick, conscious at once of acute embarrassment and bursting pride. 'You don't mind?'

' Mind!' cried Lesley.' *Mind?*'

' My dear chap!' said the major, clutching his tweed cap more firmly to his head and skidding a little on the smooth grass.' My dear girl! I've been looking everywhere for you all afternoon' So has my wife! Is this true ?'

Dick tried to look casual, though he could manage to look no more casual than a wind-whipped tent. ' ' Is what true, major?'

'This marriage!' emphasized Major Price, in almost a tone of agony. He pointed at them. 'Are you going to get married?'

'Yes. It's true enough.'

'My dear chap!' said the major.

He lowered his voice to a solemnity more suited to a funeral than to a wedding. Major Price had, on great occasions, a sentimentality which could be acutely embarrassing. He reached out and wrung the hand of each in turn.

'I'm delighted!' he declared, with an honest sympathy which warmed Dick Markham's heart. 'It couldn't be more suitable! Couldn't! I think so, and so does my wife When's it to be?'

'We haven't quite decided yet,' said Dick. 'Sorry to be so late for the garden-party. But we were...'

'Occupied!' said the major. 'Occupied! I know! Say nothing more about it!'

Though not strictly entitled to be called major, since he had never been a Regular Army man and only gained this rank in the last war, the term so suited Horace Price that he was addressed by no other.

Actually he was a solicitor, and a shrewd one. The village of Six Ashes, to say nothing of half the countryside round, came to snarl itself in litigations at his office in the High Street. But his bearing, his thick-set figure, his cropped sandy moustache, speckled round-jowled face and light blue eye, no less than a knowledge exhaustive and sometimes exhausting about all things military or sporting, made him Major Price even to magistrates.

He stood beaming on them now, teetering back and forth on his heels, and rubbing his hands together.

'We must celebrate this, you know,' he announced. 'Everybody'll want to congratulate you. My wife, and Lady Ashe, and Mrs Middlesworth, and everybody! In the meantime...'

'In the meantime,' suggested Lesley, 'hadn't we better get to shelter?'

Major Price blinked at her.

·Shelter?'

A discarded paper bag, blown on that vast wind, sailed past overhead. The oak-trees round Ashe Hall were distorted, and the flapping of loose canvas now resembled a hurricane of cracking flags.

'The storm's going to break,' said Dick. 'I hope these tents are pegged down securely. They'll be all over the next county if they're not'

'Oh, they'll be all right,' the major assured him. 'And the storm doesn't matter now. This show's nearly over.'

' Has business been good at your stall ?'

'Business,' said the major, 'has been excellent.' Impressed enthusiasm lightened his pale-blue eyes. 'Some of these people, you know, turned out to be devilish good shots. Cynthia Drew, for instance -'

Major Price stopped abruptly. His colour came up abruptly too, as though he had made a diplomatic error. Dick hoped with a sort of weary anger that they weren't going to start throwing Cynthia Drew in his teeth again.

'Lesley,' he said loudly, 'is very anxious to see this famous fortune-teller. That is, if he's still at his post. And, if you'll excuse us, I think we'd better hurry along.'

' Oh, no, you don't!' said the major with decision.

'Don't what?'

Major Price reached out and took Lesley firmly by the wrist.

'See the fortune-teller, by all means. He's still there. But first of all,' grinned the major, 'you're going to patronize my show.'

'Guns ?' cried Lesley.

'Absolutely!' said the major.

'No! Please! I'd rather not!'

Dick turned round. The urgency of Lesley's voice surprised him. But Major Price, with a massive and smothering benevolence, paid no attention.

As a drop of rain stung Dick's forehead, the major impelled both of them towards the miniature shooting-range. This was a narrow shed with wooden walls and a canvas roof, backed by a black-painted sheet of steel. Half a dozen small cardboard targets, run on pulleys so that they could be drawn back to the counter after you fired, were suspended against this back wall.

Ducking under the counter, Major Price touched a switch. A small electric light, on an ingenious arrangement of dry-cell batteries, glowed out over each target. On the counter lay a large collection of light rifles, chiefly .22's, which the major had been borrowing all over Six Ashes.

'You're first, young lady!' he said, and pointed sternly to a well-filled money bowl on the table. 'Six shots for half a crown. I know it's an outrageous price, but this is a charity do. Try it!'

'Honestly,' said Lesley, 'I'd rather not!'

'Nonsense!' said the major, picking up a small rifle and running his hand lovingly along the top.' Now here's a neat little model: Winchester 61 hammerless. Very suitable for polishing off your husband after marriage.' He

chuckled uproariously.' Try it!'

Dick, who had put half a crown into the money bowl and was turning to urge her as well, stopped short.

Lesley Grant's eyes were shining with an expression he could not quite read: except that there was pleading in it, and fear too. She had removed her picture hat; her rich brown hair, worn in a long bob that curled outwards at the shoulders, was a little more ruffled by the wind. She had never been prettier than at that moment of intensity. She looked about eighteen years old, in contrast to the twenty-eight she admitted.

' I know it's silly,' she said breathlessly. Her slim fingers crushed the picture hat. 'But I'm frightened of guns. Anything to do with death, or the thought of death...!'

Major Price's sandy eyebrows went up.

'Damme, young woman,' he expostulated, 'we're not really asking you to kill anybody. Just take the rifle and blaze away at one of those targets. Try it!'

' Look here,' said Dick, ' if she'd rather not do it...'

Evidently with the idea of being a sport, Lesley fastened her teeth in her lower lip and took the rifle from Major Price. First she tried holding it at arm's length, and saw that this would not do. She looked round, hesitating; then she put her cheek to the stock and fired blindly.

The lash of the rifle-shot, less a report than a spitting noise, was drowned out by thunder. No bullet-pock appeared on the target. And the thunder seemed to complete Lesley's demoralization. She put down the rifle quietly enough on the counter. But Dick saw with sudden consternation that her body was trembling, and that she was almost crying.