

Extract from

“None Stood Taller The Final Year”

We walked away from St Thomas’ and towards Westminster Bridge. With Big Ben always in our view, we walked towards the Houses of Parliament. I paused on the bridge to look at London, my home town, which had never looked finer in the morning sunshine.

For those who chose to see it, there was bomb damage everywhere, but for me London looked magnificent. The Thames flowed beneath our feet, as it always did. The glittering ribbon of water extended upstream to where Lambeth Bridge spanned its banks. The sun shone down on the Palace of Westminster and it had never looked finer, Big Ben standing there as defiant as ever. A red London tram trundled across the bridge in the other direction, while two army lorries drove past us. The guard in the sentry box gestured to the army drivers. People walked in both directions over the bridge enjoying the sunshine. I just stood smiling at what for me was the most magnificent sight in the world.

“What are you so happy about?” asked Edward.

“This is what we’re fighting for, Edward. We’ve taken everything Hitler has thrown at us, we didn’t surrender, London carries on as it always has. Look at it, look at these people, isn’t it wonderful?”

“You’re right, it is. I shouldn’t take it for granted.”

“No, you shouldn’t. Don’t you feel proud, Edward? I do, this is my city, I’m a part of it, and it will always be a part of me. People are giving their lives to keep London standing like this, I’m so proud to be a Londoner.”

“I am proud, Lily, I’m proud of you.”

“Me, why are you proud of me?”

“I shall never forget what Winston said that day at Middlebourne. Do you remember, you had just told him in no uncertain terms that Hitler made a terrible mistake if he thought he could break the will of the British people. He reacted strongly; do you remember, he said ‘Hitler has unleashed a mighty spirit, I can see it sitting here before me now.’ Winston was quite right, Lily, you are a mighty spirit.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“It’s a statement of fact, Lily.”

“Not the way you’re saying it, it sounds more like a compliment!”

His face lit up with the most beautiful expression. He reached out and held my hands as we stood looking at each other. I didn’t know what to say, I don’t think he did either. Still holding my hands he drew me closer, I’m quite sure his intention was to kiss me. The look in his eyes was unmistakable, in that moment there were only three words he was desperate to say. But those words always come with a commitment, and when that realisation dawned, I could see the sadness writ large across his face. I felt his anguish as if it was my own, and I shared the burden of his sadness in equal measure. Ours was truly a love that must not mention its name.

“So, it was a compliment! I *told* you it was,” I said light-heartedly, trying to lift the mood.

“There is not a compliment I could pay you which could do you justice. You burst with pride when you talk about London, I burst with pride when I talk about you, Lily.”

He might not have said in words that he loved me, but in his own way, he had gone as far as his five hundred years of tradition would allow. I realised more than ever that Edward was a

deeply emotional man. His wonderfully expressive eyes left him with little option but to wear his heart on his sleeve. Somehow his towering intellect and strength of character could coexist with his warm heart, combining to make him the very exceptional man that he is. It took me quite a time to respond.

“I’ll never receive a greater compliment, will I? I don’t know what to say, Edward, I’m overwhelmed. That was a lovely thing to say and made all the more lovely because I know what lies behind those words, thank you.”

“Perhaps we should continue towards our appointment.”

“You’re right, Edward, but I’m taking this moment with me. Do you ever have the feeling that a moment is so precious, you’ll never forget it?”

“I do, and I shall never forget the sight of you standing on Westminster Bridge bursting with pride!”

Neither of us has ever forgotten that day. Edward did so much more than cross over the river, he crossed something much wider than the Thames. He took another giant stride across the social divide which stood between us. We were like two sticks dropped from the bridge, each swept away by the swirling current, but always together.

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