

The Convert

By J. D. Beresford

For the first time in his life, Henry Wolverton had been seriously upset.

His had been an orderly life. Even when he was at Shrews-bury, he had escaped bullying and other disturbances. He had been marked out as a future scholar who would be a credit to the school; and his calm air of reserve had also protected him. He might be classed as a 'swat,' but he was not the kind of swat who gets singled out for bullying. He was no good at games, but he had a handsome, dignified presence, and he was never known to put on side.

At Oxford he passed from triumph to triumph. After he got his fellowship at Balliol, he married a girl-graduate from Lady Margaret Hall, and they worked happily together on his research. He was writing in many volumes, the *Economic History of the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*; and at twenty-nine he was already an authority. His wife died rather incidentally when they had been married three years, but that had not seriously interfered with his life work.

Nor did the war, although it was a terrible nuisance, have any considerable effect upon him. He undertook work of "national importance" in Whitehall, and when he returned home in the afternoon to the house he had taken at the corner of Bedford Square, he found that he could still put in four or five valuable hours' work on his history. And if he wanted extra time for research in the British Museum library, he could always get leave. Everyone in his department recognized the fact that he was an exceptional man, and that the work he was engaged upon would be a lasting monument to English scholarship.

By comparison, the war itself was almost an ephemeral thing.

Since the signing of the armistice, he had settled down to make up for lost time. He had his whole future planned. He hoped to finish his immediate task by the time he was sixty-five, but he foresaw that there would still be other work for him to do. He would, for example, almost certainly find it necessary by then to make revision in his earlier volumes.

It was no trifle that had upset him on this particular day. But even the fact that the English revolution had at last broken into the flame of civil war would not have disturbed him so seriously, if he had not conclusively proved in the course of the past five weeks that the revolution was impossible. Throughout the welter of the national strike disturbances, editors of any importance from the editor of the Times downwards had begged him for articles. Although he had specialized upon a study of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he was regarded as the first authority on the entire history of the English people. And in his articles, he had proved conclusively from his vast knowledge of precedents and tradition, that the temper of the English people would never seek the arbitrament of an armed revolution.

He was still convinced of that, although, so far as he could judge, the revolution had already begun.

He had been startled in the middle of his best hours of the day, by what he had at first imagined to be the back-firing of a rapidly driven motor-bicycle. He went to the window, opened it wide (he always kept it closed when he was working, to shut out the noise of the traffic), and listened with an anxious attention. He had a peculiar and unprecedented feeling of nervousness. He felt, for no assignable reason, as if someone had discovered a bad anachronism in his book. And then he was reluctantly driven to the conclusion that, indeed, some mistake had been committed, although he could not admit that it was his own. For the motor-bicycle continued to back-fire in

short, spasmodic bursts, while it remained stationary; and he could no longer avoid the inference that it was as a matter of fact a machine gun, no further away than Oxford Street. He could, also, hear dim and terrible shouting, and more faintly, occasional cries of dismay, of anger, or of fear.

The Square was completely deserted, but when he saw a scattered rout of people flying north, up Bloomsbury Street, he closed the window and began to pace up and down his well-fitted writing room, sanctified now, by the five years' work he had done there.

What so annoyed and disturbed him was that some officious, political fool should have upset his scholarly deductions from the vast precedents of history. He would not admit for one moment that he had been mistaken; his chain of reasoning was unassailable. But, so he inferred, some blundering, malicious idiot had made a gross error in the conduct of the negotiations that, no longer ago than yesterday, had promised so hopefully. The result of that error was incalculable. There could be no doubt that the rioters had been fired upon, and so given a sound cause, and what would perhaps be more effective still, a rallying cry, to the great mass of unemployed workers. And the army could not be depended upon. The more loyal part of it was in Germany enforcing the peace terms. It was just possible in the circumstances that there might be something very like an armed revolution, despite the fact that his arguments had been so indubitably sound and right. Henry Wolverton was exceedingly annoyed and upset.

His troubles did not end there. Just as he had succeeded, by a masterly effort of concentration, in putting away the thought of this stupid anomaly and returning to his work, his housekeeper came and tapped at his door—a thing she had been explicitly forbidden to do, at that time of day, in any circumstances whatever.

He ignored the first knock, and then she knocked again, more loudly.

He frowned, and bade her come in. She was stupid, like most women, and would probably continue to pester him until was admitted.

She came in trembling with agitation.

“Oh! I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir, coming now, against all orders,” she said; “but William has just come in—it's his evening off you know, sir—and he says there's been firin' in Oxford Circus, and people killed, and—”

“I inferred that,” Henry Wolverton interrupted her calmly. “I heard the machine guns. You had better tell William not to go out again.”

“Oh! sir, but he says we're none of us safe,” the housekeeper wailed, on the verge of hysterics. “He says there'll be looting and Heaven only knows what, and us so near Oxford Street.”

“I do not anticipate any effects of that kind, to-night, Mrs. Perry,” Wolverton replied frigidly. “And, by the way, I should be glad if you could let me have dinner half an hour earlier, this evening. After these annoying disturbances, I may not be able to settle down again until I have dined, and I shall work longer afterwards to make up for lost time. Can you arrange that?”

“Yes, sir,” gasped Mrs. Perry. “Then, you don't believe, sir—”

“I do not,” Wolverton returned with the dignity of the assured. “You may lock the outer doors, if it gives you any sense of security. I shall expect dinner in half an hour from now.”

Mrs. Perry returned to the kitchen greatly comforted by her master's magnificent confidence. She told William that things were not so bad as he was afraid of! And William in his turn derived a sense of security from the knowledge that he was living in the house of Henry Wolverton.

Nevertheless, they locked and bolted all the doors with a fine attention to detail.

Henry Wolverton worked rather intermittently after dinner that night. He was not disturbed by any noises from without. London was quieter than he had ever known it. He could hear no sound of traffic either along Bloomsbury Street or Tottenham Court Road. No paper boys came. No one

passed his window. He could not even hear the sound of the policeman on his beat. But he found the absence of noise on this occasion more disturbing than the presence of it would have been. He found himself hailed out of his profoundest efforts of attention by his consciousness of this abiding, deathly silence. He would discover himself, sitting idly, listening to the stillness of the night.

A little after twelve o'clock, he got up and went to the front door. And after he had somewhat impatiently unlocked it, drawn back the bottom bolt and the top bolt, released the night latch, and undone the chain, he opened the door and stood on the top step, looking out over the darkness of the Square. After a moment or two, he realized with a little shock of dismay why the Square looked unfamiliar to him. The street lamps had not been lighted. Only a clear and brilliant moon in its second quarter, brooded over the unprecedented silence; weakly illuminating the apparently deserted city.

The thin scream of fear that suddenly pierced the stillness, came with an effect of audacious irreverence.

Henry Wolverton stiffened and a cold thrill of apprehension ran down his spine.

The scream was succeeded by a faint, eager patter of hurrying feet; and then more distantly, by the brutal intrusion of hoarse shouts, and the clutter of heavy boots vehemently running.

Wolverton did not move. Until now fear had never entered his life and he had the courage of a man who has never faced a real danger.

The lighter footsteps were approaching very rapidly, coming up Bloomsbury Street; and the sound of them seemed suddenly to lift and acquire precision as a figure came round the corner and turned swiftly into the Square. Wolverton could see then that the runner was a young woman in a light dress.

He would have let her pass without trying to attract her attention. He was watching the whole incident with the detached and careful interest of the historian. But the young woman, herself, had evidently seen the beacon of his open door before she actually reached it, and had settled upon her course of action. She came straight up the steps without an instant's hesitation, pushed Henry Wolverton back into the hall, and closed the door with the intent and silent urgency of a conspirator.

He made not attempt to speak, and the young woman crouched in silence behind the door, until they had heard the clutter of heavy footsteps pass by and hurry on, up the Square. The men were not shouting now, but even through the heavy door. Wolverton could hear them gasping and panting as they ran. The sound of it made him think of the hoarse panting of great dogs.

When the flurry of that passing had dwindled again into silence, the young woman got up, locked and bolted the door and faced Henry Wolverton under the light of the hall lamp.

"So, that's all right," she said, with a little laugh of exultation.

"Do I understand—?" Wolverton began.

"Probably, I should imagine," she interrupted him. "The scum's let loose—the hooligans; the Apaches. After the fighting comes pillage and rapine." She frowned slightly as she added, "I suppose rapine has got to do with rape?"

"It is not used specifically in that sense, now," Wolverton replied. "But it had that meaning, earlier."

"Oh, thanks! Well that was what I meant," the young woman said. "Do you mind if I come in and sit down? Is that your room? I'm a bit blown."

Wolverton stood aside for her to enter the sacred places of his writing-room.

She nodded by way of thanks, as she passed him, went in, looked round the room and then having thrown herself with a sigh of relief into his reading chair, proceeded to take off her hat.

“Jolly room,” she remarked pleasantly, as her deft fingers twitched and patted at her hair. “You a writer?”

“My name is Henry Wolverton,” he informed her with a modest dignity.

“What?” she exclaimed, sitting bolt upright and staring at him eagerly. “Henry Wolverton, the historian?”

He nodded gravely.

“Oh, Lord!” she said, and went on, “Well, I was wrong about one thing. I said you must be a dried up little mummy of a man, all beard and spectacles. And you’re not a bit like that. In fact you’re quite unusually goodlooking.”

The faintest adumbration of a flush tinged Wolverton’s white forehead. “My name appears to be known to you,” he remarked, ignoring the compliment.

“Obviously,” his visitor retorted. “Pretty well known to everyone, I should imagine, just now.”

“May I ask why?” he put in.

“Well, considering that you’re the man who’s responsible for the revolution, I suppose you’re more famous at the present moment than any man in Great Britain,” she said. “Though you’re not exactly popular with either side, to-night, I should think,” she added thoughtfully.

Henry Wolverton made a little noise in his throat that sounded like an asthmatic cough. With him that noise did duty for a laugh. “I’m afraid I don’t follow you,” he said.

“Do you mean that you don’t admit your own responsibility for the revolution?” she asked.

“I cannot see that I am even remotely connected with it,” he replied.

The young woman pursed her lovely mouth, and clasped her hands round her knee. After a reflective pause she remarked with apparent inconsequence, “My name is Susan Jeffery; but I don’t suppose that conveys anything to you.”

“I believe I saw the name on a committee list of the ‘League Youth,’ ” Wolverton said.

“Lord, what a memory he has,” commented Susan Jeffery in a soft voice.

“But I must plead ignorance of the general scope of your activities,” he continued,

“But you know something about our league?” she put in.

“Something,” he admitted.

“Such as our policy of percolation?”

“I understand that your endeavour is to be represented in every imaginable grade of society.”

“Precisely. From royalty down to the criminal and the gutter-snipe,” Susan confirmed. “We have only one qualification for membership; we admit no one over twenty-five.”

“And have you many members, now?” Wolverton inquired politely.

“Nine thousand, eight hundred and forty-three,” Susan replied. “We admitted a hundred and seven new members after our grand meeting tonight, including a royal prince and two hooligans.”

Henry Wolverton nodded his head encouragingly. “Most satisfactory,” he murmured.

Susan dropped her knee and sat up.

“I’m telling you this,” she said in a firm voice, “for your own good. We discussed you at our meeting, and it was resolved unanimously that you were largely responsible for the revolution that broke out to-day, and will end God knows where or when.”

Wolverton made his noise again—Susan had not yet recognized it as a laugh. “I must confess that I don’t quite follow your train of reasoning,” he said.

“You don’t *look* like a fool, either,” Susan commented, frankly. “I suppose that’s just your one blind spot. Most of us have one.”

“Perhaps you would explain,” Wolverton suggested.

“It’s so bally obvious,” Susan replied. “You’ve been writing articles for the last six weeks—they’ve appeared all over the shop—rubbing it in about the English temper. It wouldn’t have mattered if it had been anybody else, but people believe you. All sorts of people. We know that, through the activities of the league, because we’re represented everywhere. Well, what has been the effect of those articles? One side, the side in power, has believed you and decided on your authority not to give way. The other side, the workers, has believed you, too, and they’re so annoyed to think that you are right that they’ve determined to prove you’re wrong.”

“But, in that case, I was right,” Wolverton put in with his first sign of excitement.

“You were, until you put your opinion on record,” Susan corrected him. “You see,” she explained, “it’s like knowing the future. You can only know it for certain about other people as long as you keep it to yourself. If you tell a man that next Friday he’ll walk under a ladder in Fleet Street, and that a brick will drop on his head and kill him, he’ll keep out of Fleet Street next Friday, if he believes you.”

“I admit the instance,” Wolverton murmured.

“Well, it’s just the same ill your case. The workers have been saying, ‘Here’s that chap Wolverton convincing everybody that there’ll be no revolution, that we’ll have to give in, in the end, and make terms. And all the politicians, and the owners and the middle classes believe him, and they’ll stick it out to the last minute, because they’re sure we have got the “English temper” and won’t fight. Well, we’ll jolly well prove that Mr. Wolverton is wrong for once.’ You see,” Susan concluded with a graceful gesture. “Our league knows these things. And it comes to this: if you want your prophecies to come off, you must keep them to yourself until after the event. Hasn’t your study of history taught you that much?”

Henry Wolverton leaned forward in his chair and covered face with his hands.

“I’m sorry if I’ve upset you,” Susan said gently. “I’m sure you’re a very nice man, really.”

Wolverton groaned. “I’m finally discredited,” he muttered.

“Oh, no!” Susan comforted him. “Not in your own line. Remember the motto of our League: ‘These things are hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes.’ No man, however clever he is, can be expected to know everything.”

Henry Wolverton lifted his head.

“I shall never write again,” he said, in the tone of one who takes the great renunciation; and he looked at Susan a trifle nervously, as if he feared this immense announcement might be a little too much for her.

“Just as well,” she replied soothingly. “In any case we’ve pretty well scrapped history now. It was never any practical use except as a reference for precedents; and now we’re chucking precedents down the sink as fast as we can. We’re all going to begin again presently—when the fighting is over—on a new basis.”

Henry Wolverton jumped to his feet and began to pace up and down the room.

“It’s sure to be a wrench at first, of course,” Susan consoled him. “These things always are. But if I can help you in any way—”

He turned on her with the first sign of emotional passion he had ever displayed.

“You!” he said fiercely. “Don’t you realize that you’ve destroyed my whole life’s work; that you’ve robbed me in ten minutes of every happiness and satisfaction I’ve ever had. Good God, if

I'd known, I'd have slammed the door in your face, just now. I would have delivered you over to the scum of London to do what they would with you."

Susan blushed. "I don't think that's a very nice thing to say," she remarked, gently. "But perhaps it's just as well for you to blow off steam a bit. It does help when you've had a real facer. And honestly, you know, although I'm very sorry in a way, I do think it's all for your good that I came in tonight; because you would have been bound to find it out for yourself sooner or later."

Henry Wolverton stared at her, and his look of anger slowly gave place to one of bewilderment.

"But what am I to do?" he asked. "I've always worked for ten hours a day. I can't live without work of some kind, and now. . . ."

Susan got up and came across the room to him, with an expression of bright and eager helpfulness.

"Oh! look here, we'll find a use for you," she said, laying her hand on his arm. "You're too old to join the league, of course—"

"I'm thirty-seven," he interpolated.

"It's quite young, really," she comforted him. "I'm twenty-three. But what I was going to say was that we are founding a reference committee of experts of all kinds to advise the league. The members of that committee will have no voice in our decisions, you understand; they'll be simply advisory. And it would be absolutely splendid to have you as chairman. I shall get no end of prestige from the league for having found you. Her face shone with the joy of the successful discoverer.

"I understand you to suggest," Henry Wolverton commented dryly, "that I should devote the rest of my life, and the—er—fruits of my scholarship, to instructing young men and women under twenty-five years of age in the lessons of history; always with the distinct understanding that they are in no way pledged to apply my advice in the prosecution of their own policy?"

Susan did not miss the implications of his tone. "My dear man," she said, "whatever is the good of scholarship, if it isn't to advise the young? Surely you haven't been studying history all these years just in order to swap opinions with all the other old fogies?"

Henry Wolverton turned his back on her and walked over to the window. After a short pause he faced her again and said "You have a remarkable power of statement, Miss Jeffery. I must admit that I have never before considered the precise use, in the pragmatism sense, to which I might apply my—er—scholarship; and I am ready to grant that your point is a good one. Where your otherwise admirable logic seems to however, is in the admission that though I might turn my knowledge to good effect by advising youth, I may be wasting my effort since youth will probably not be guided by my teaching."

"I don't know much about logic," replied Susan, "but I should have thought it must be pretty evident to you, to-day of all days, that if we were going to be guided only by the lessons of history, our league would be a back-number in a week. Isn't it possible for you to get it into your head that isn't everything?"

She put her last question with the appealing gesture of a mother addressing a refractory and rather stupid child.

"How is history going to get us out of the mess you've landed us in, for example?" she continued, as Henry Wolverton made no attempt to answer her. "How is history, alone, going to help us presently to start everything afresh on a new basis. You must know, yourself that it's no

good trying to get back to the old way of doing things. That could only mean, by your own showing, that we should just be preparing the way for all this to happen again.”

Henry Wolverton threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

“But if I admit that you’re right,” he said, “I have to face the conclusion that I’ve wasted my whole life.”

“Well, in a way, I’m afraid you have, rather,” Susan admitted. “It’s a great pity, for instance, about this revolution of yours. It means such a lot of blood and disorder; and people do get so out of hand when there’s fighting going on. Now if the owners and the middle-classes hadn’t been so cocksure, and had given way, we could have started in on our new methods of government without any bother.”

Sue paused a moment, before she added,

“We’ve got it all worked out, you know, but, of course, I can’t tell you anything about it, yet.”

“I am, in fact, what you would call a back-number,” Henry Wolverton said.

Susan puckered her forehead. “I think there’s still a hope for you,” she remarked.

“After all these years?” he asked.

“If you’d let me take you in hand for a bit,” she said. “You seem willing to learn.”

“But you have surely more important work to do? You couldn’t spare time to teach me?” he suggested.

“I think I might work it in,” she said reflectively. “I’d take you about with me and show you things—real things, you know. What’s chiefly wrong with you is that you’ve spent all your time over your old books.”

“You suggest that I ought to study life in—in action?” Henry Wolverton inquired.

“Rather,” Susan agreed. “You ought to come to one of our meetings.”

She stopped abruptly, and her hand went up to her mouth with a gesture of dismay.

“Oh! Great Scott!” she ejaculated; “that reminds me, I was going on to another frightfully important meeting when those hooligans started chasing me; and that and our talk put it right out of my head.”

“At what time was this important meeting to be held?” Henry Wolverton asked, looking at his watch.

“One o’clock,” she told him.

“You still have ten minutes,” he said.

Susan shuddered. “I daren’t go out again alone,” she confessed. “I simply daren’t. I’d—I’d sooner stay here all night with you.”

“I shall be delighted to come with you,” Henry Wolverton said.

“You!” Susan exclaimed. “But don’t you understand the risk? The mob’s loose. What good would you be against three or four chunky hooligans?”

Henry Wolverton squared his shoulders. He was a tall, finely-built man, and his face had the cool assurance of one who has never known fear.

“I am not afraid of hooligans,” he said.

Susan gazed at him with frank admiration.

“You know you’re a perfect topper in some ways,” she complimented him.

He bowed gravely. “If I might be admitted to this meeting of yours, he said; “it would perhaps afford me an opportunity begin my education.”

“If you’re sure you’re not afraid,” Susan replied, picking her hat.

“I’m not in the least afraid,” he said. “Will you take my arm?”

At the open door they paused a moment, looking out into the darkness; listening to the profound silence of the empty night—creative youth and patient scholarship, hand-in-hand, facing the immense void of the unforetrollable future.