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ONE WOMAN:

Being the Second Part
of a Romance of Sussex

BY

ALFRED OLLIVANT

Après a'voir souffert il faut souffrir encore

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

DANNY
OWD BOB
BOY WOODBURN
THE GENTLEMAN
THE ROYAL ROAD
THE BROWN MARE
THE NEXT STEP
THE TAMING OF JOHN BLUNT
TWO MEN

TO
MY COUNTRY

CONTENTS

XL VICTORY AND REVENGE

THE COMFORTER

THE CARRIER'S CART

An old-fashioned carrier's cart, such as you may still meet on the roads of Sussex, tilted, one-horsed, and moving at the leisurely pace of a bye-gone age, turned East at the Turnpike, and made slowly along the Lewes-Beachbourne road under the northern scarp of the Downs one evening of autumn in 1908. In it, at the back of the driver, were a young man and a young woman, the only passengers, ensconced among hen-coops, flitches of bacon, and baskets of greens.

They sat hand-in-hand.

The woman was a noble creature, about her the majestic tranquillity of a great three-decker that comes to rest in sunset waters after its Trafalgar. The man, but for a certain wistfulness about his eyes which betokened undue sensibility, was not remarkable. Till he spoke you would have said he was a gentleman--that is to say if your eyes confined their scrutiny to his face and refused to see his hands, his boots, his clothes. When he spoke you would have recognised at once that he was Sussex of the soil as, surely, was the woman beside him; though the speech of both was faintly marred with the all-pervading cockney accent of those who have passed beyond the village-green into the larger world of the England of to-day.

Both ca-a-ad musically enough; but less by far than the little carrier, whose round back blocked the view of the road, and the twitching ears of old mare Jenny. For nearly fifty years, man and boy, Isaac Woolgar had travelled twice a day, six days a week, the road on which he was travelling now. He had seen the long-horns--those "black runts" so familiar to old-world Sussex--give place to horses in the plough upon the hill; the horses in their turn supplanted on the road by motors; and men using the legs God had given them to trundle wheels instead of walk. Undisturbed, he plodded on his way, accompanied always by the wires lifted on tall black poles, crowned with tiers of tiny porcelain chimney-pots unknown in his youth, which had linked Lewes with Beachbourne these forty years; and he would so plod until he died. The _Star_ on the hill in Old Town, Beachbourne, marked one end of his day's journey; and the equally ancient _Lamb_, at Aldwoldston, black-timbered and gabled too, marked the other. He had never been further "oop country," as he called it, than Heathfield. Lewes was the utmost term of his wanderings West, Beau-nez East; while the sea at Newhaven had bounded him on the South. Within this tiny quadrilateral, which just about determined also the wanderings of an old dog-fox in Abbot's Wood, he had passed his life; and nothing now would ever induce him to pass the bounds he had allotted himself.

To the man and woman in the cart old Mus. Woolgar had been a familiar figure from childhood. The little girl skipping by the market-cross in Aldwoldston would stop to watch him start; the little boy would wait at Billing's Corner on the top of the hill to see him come along the New Road past Motcombe at the end of his journey. Long before either had been aware of the other's existence the old carrier had served as an invisible link between them.

Now the two were married.

Ruth Boam had become Mrs. Ernie Caspar that afternoon in the cathedral-church of Aldwoldston, on the mound among the ash-trees above Parsons' Tye and the long donkey-backed clergy-house that dates from the fourteenth century.

It had been a very quiet wedding. The father and mother of the bride had stumped across from Frogs' Hall, at the foot of the village, Ruth accompanying them, her little daughter in her arms. For the rest, Dr. and Mrs. Trupp had come over from Beachbourne with Mr. Pigott and his wife in the chocolate-bodied car driven by the bridegroom's brother.

Alf had not entered the church to see Ernie married. He had mouched sullenly down to the river instead, and stood there during the service, his back to the church, looking across the Brooks to old Wind-hover's dun and shaven flank with eyes that did not see, and ears that refused to hear.

After the ceremony the car-party returned to Beachbourne by way of the sea--climbing High-'nd-over, to drop down into Sea-ford, and home by Birling Gap and Beau-nez. From the almost violent gesture with which Alf had set his engines in motion and drawn out of the lane under the pollarded willows of Parson's Tye, he at least had been glad to turn his back on the scene.

Ruth and her husband had returned to Frogs' Hall with the old folk.

Later, as the sun began to lower behind Black Cap into the valley of the Ouse, they went up River Lane and picked up the carrier's cart by the market-cross.

For the moment they were leaving little Alice with her grandmother while they settled into the Moot, Old Town, where Ernie had found a cottage close to his work, not a quarter of a mile from the home of his father and mother in Rectory Walk.

The carrier's cart moved slowly on under the telegraph wires on which the martins were already gathering: for it was September. Now and then Ernie raised the flap that made a little window in the side of the tilt, and looked out at the accompanying Downs, mysterious in the evening.

"They're still there," he announced comfortably, "and like to be yet a bit, I reckon."

"They move much same pace as us doos, seems to me," said Ruth.

"We should get there afoor them yet though," answered Ernie.

"Afoor the Day of Judgment we might, if so be we doosn't die o breathlessness first," the woman replied.

"You'd like a car to yourself you would," chaffed Ernie. "And Alf drivin you."

Ruth turned in her lips.

They moved leisurely forward, leaving Folkington clustered about its village-green upon the right, passing the tea-gardens at Wannock, and up the long pull to Willingdon, standing among old gardens and pleasant fig-trees. Once through the village the woods of Hampden Park green-bosomed upon the left, blocked out the marshes and the splendid vision of Pevensey Bay. Now the road emerged from the shelter of hedges and elm-trees and flowed with a noble billowy motion between seas of corn that washed the foot of the Downs and swept over Rodmill to the outposts of Beachbourne. Between the road and the Downs stood Motcombe, islanded in the ruddy sea, amongst its elms and low piggeries. Behind the farm, at the very foot of the hill, was Huntsman's Lodge where once, when both were boys, Alf had betrayed his brother on the occasion of the looting of the walnut-tree.

Ern pointed out the spot to his bride and told the tale. Ruth listened with grim understanding.

"That's Alf," she said.

"Mr. Pigott lived there that time o day," Ern continued. "One of the five Manors of Beachbourne, used to be--I've heard dad say. Belonged to the Salwyns of Friston Place over the hill--the clergy-folk. The farm's where the Manor-house used to be; and the annual sheep-fair was held in a field outside from William the Conqueror till a few years back."

He pointed to one of a little row of villas on the left which looked over the allotment gardens to the Downs.

"That's where Mr. Pigott lives now. My school-master he were that time o day."

"Who's Mr. Pigott?" Ruth asked.

Ernie rootled her with a friendly elbow.

"My guv'nor, stoopid! Manager of the Southdown Transport Company. Him that was at the wedding--with the beard. Settin along o Mrs. Trupp."

"Oh, Mr. _Pigott_!" answered Ruth. Now that the strain of the last two years was over at last, she brimmed over with a demure naughtiness.

"Well, why couldn't you say so, then? You _are_ funny, men are."

The cart climbed the steep hill to Billing's Corner and Ernie looked down the familiar road to the Rectory and even caught a peep of the back of his old home. Then they turned down Church Street with its old-world fragrance of lavender and yesterday.

On the left the parish-church, long-backed and massive-towered upon the Kneb, brooded over the centuries it had seen come and go.

"Dad says the whole history of Beachbourne's centred there," said Ernie in awed voice. "Steeped in it, he says."

Ernie, who had been leaning forward to peep at the Archdeacon posed in the entrance of St. Michael's, now dropped back suddenly, nudging his companion.

A lean woman with white hair and wrathful black eyebrows, her complexion still delicate as a girl's, was coming up the hill.

"Mother," whispered Ernie.

It was Ruth's turn to raise the flap and peer forth stealthily at the figure passing so close and so unconsciously on the pavement.

So that was the woman who had opposed her marriage with such malevolent persistency!

Ruth observed her enemy with more curiosity than hostility, and received a passing impression of a fierce unhappy face.

"She don't favour you no-ways," she said, as she relapsed into a corner. "Where's dad though?"

Ernie shook his head.

"He's never with her," he said. "I ca-a-n't call to mind as ever I've seen them out together, not the pair of them."

"I'd ha liked him to have been at the wedding," murmured Ruth a thought discontentedly.

"And he'd ha liked it too, I'll lay," Ernie answered. "Only she'd never have let him."

The cart stopped; and the two passengers descended at the old _Star_ opposite the Manor-house, which bore the plate of Mr. William Trupp, the famous surgeon.

On the Manor-house steps a tall somewhat cadaverous man was standing. He was so simply dressed as almost to be shabby; and his straw hat, tilted on the back of his head, disclosed a singularly fine forehead. There was something arresting about the man and his attitude: a delicious mixture of mischievous alertness and philosophical

detachment. He might have been a mediæval scholar waiting at the door of his master; or a penitent seeking absolution; or, not least, a youth about to perpetrate a run-away knock.

Ernie across the road watched him with eyes in which affection and amusement mingled. Then the door opened, and the scholar-penitent-youth was being greeted with glee by Bess Trupp.

Ernie turned to his wife.

"My old Colonel," he said confidentially. "What I was in India with. Best Colonel the Hammer-men ever had--and that's saying something."

"Colonel Lewknor, aren't it?" asked Ruth.

"That's him," said Ernie keenly. "Do you knaw him?"

"He was over at Auston last summer," answered Ruth, "lecturin we got to fight Germany or something. I went, but I didn't pay no heed to him. No account talk, I call that."

Together they dropped down Borough Lane and turned to the left along the Moot where dwelt the workers of Old Town--a few in flint cottages set in gardens, rank with currant bushes, a record of the days, not so long ago, when corn flowed down both sides of Water Lane, making a lake of gold between the village on the hill and the Sea-houses by the Wish; and most in the new streets of little red houses that looked up, pathetically aware of their commonness, to the calm dignity of the old church upon the Kneb above.

At one of these latter Ernie stopped and made believe to fumble with a key. Ruth, who had not seen her new home, was thrilling quietly, as she had been throughout the journey, though determined not to betray her emotion to her mate.

The door opened and they entered.

A charming voice from the kitchen greeted them.

"Ah, there you are--punctual to the minute!"

A woman, silver-haired and gracious, turned from deft busy-ness at the range.

"Oh, Mrs. Trupp!" cried Ruth, looking about her.

The table was laid already, and gay with flowers; the fire lit, the kettle on the boil, the supper ready.

"It is kind," said Ruth. "Was this you and Miss Bess?"

"Perhaps we had a hand in it," laughed the other. "She couldn't be here, as she's got a meeting of her Boy Scouts. But she sent her best wishes. Now I hand over the key to the master; and my responsibilities

are over!" And she was gone with the delicious ripple of laughter Ernie had loved from babyhood.

Ruth was now thirsting to explore her new home, but Ernie insisted on supping first. This he did with malicious deliberation. When at length he was satisfied they went upstairs together, he leading the way.

"This is our room!" he said with ill-disguised complacency, stepping aside.

The bridal chamber was swept and garnished. In it were more flowers, bowls of them; and the furniture simple, solid, and very good, was of a character rarely found in houses of that class.

Ernie enjoyed the obvious pleasure of his bride as she touched and glanced and dipped like some large bird flitting gracefully from piece to piece.

Then she paused solemnly and looked about her.

"Reckon it must ha cost a tidy penny," she said.

"It did," Ernie answered.

She cocked a soft brown eye at him.

"Could you afford it, Ernie?"

"I could not," said Ernie, standing grimly and with folded arms.

At the moment her eyes fell on a card tied to the bed-post on which was written: _From Mr., Mrs. and Miss Trupp_. Ruth's eyes caressed the bed, and her fingers stroked the smooth wood.

"It's like them," she said. "None o your cheap trash."

"Ah," answered Ernie. "Trust them. They're just all right, they are."

Before the looking-glass on the chest of drawers Ruth now took off her hat.

She was perhaps too simple, too natural, too near to earth to be shy at this the supreme moment of a woman's life. At least she was too wary to show it.

"Rich folks they have two little beds laid alongside, these days," she said, speaking from her experience as a maid. "I wouldn't think it was right myself. Only you mustn't judge others." She added in her slow way, as she patted her hair--"I wouldn't feel prarperly married like only in a prarper two-bed."

Ernie drew down the blind.

Then he marched upon his bride deliberately and with remorseless eyes.

Suddenly she turned and met him with a swift and lovely smile, dropping her mask, and discovering herself to him in the surprising radiance of a moon that reveals its beauty after long obscurity. She laid her hands upon his shoulders in utter surrender. He gathered her gradually in his arms; and closing his eyes, dwelt on her lips with the slow and greedy passion of a bee, absorbed in absorption, and drinking deep in the cloistered seclusion of a fox-glove bell,

"You're prarperly married all right," he said. "And you ca-a-n't get out of it--not no-ways."

PART I

DEEPENING DUSK

CHAPTER I

THE HOSTEL

Dr. Trupp of Beachbourne, as he was generally known--Mr. Trupp, to give him his correct title--was a genuinely great man.

His father had been a book-seller in Torquay; and he himself never lost the greater qualities of the class from which he sprang. He was very simple and very shrewd. Science had not blunted the fine intuitions which his brusque manner half concealed. Moreover, he trusted those intuitions perhaps unconsciously as do few men of his profession; and they rarely played him false. In early manhood his integrity, his sound common sense, and practical idealism had won for him the love of a singularly noble girl who might have married one of the best of her inevitably artificial class. Later in life indeed Evelyn Trupp often would amuse her father and annoy her mother by affirming that she was far prouder of being the wife of Mr. Trupp of Beachbourne than of having been Miss Moray of Pole. And she had good cause. For her husband was no longer the country doctor at whom the county families had sniffed. He was "Trupp of Beachbourne," whose fame had spread, quietly it is true, from Sussex, through England to the outer world. And if there was some difference of opinion as to whether Mr. Trupp had made Beachbourne, or Beachbourne had made him, there was no question that the growth of the town, and its deserved popularity as a health-resort was coincident with his residence there.

At least the event justified the young surgeon's courage and originality in the choice of a site for his life-long campaign. Indeed had he stayed in London it is certain that he would never have achieved the work he was able to consummate in the town girdled by the southern hills and washed by Northern Seas. And that work was no mean contribution to the welfare of the race. Mr. Trupp was a pioneer in the organized attack on perhaps the deadliest and most pertinacious

enemy that threatens the supremacy of Man--the tubercle bacillus. And his choice of a _point-d'appui_ from which to conduct his offensive was no small factor in his success.

He was, moreover, one of the men who in the last years of the nineteenth century and the earlier years of this set himself to stem the tide of luxury which in his judgment was softening the spines of the younger generation. And the helpful buffets which gave him his name, and were responsible at least for some of his triumphs, were not the outcome of spasms of irritability but of a deliberate philosophy.

For Mr. Trupp, despite his kind heart, never forgot that Man with all his aspirations after heaven had but yesterday ceased to be an animal and still stood on the edge of the slough from which he had just emerged, up to his hocks in mud, the slime yet trickling from his shaggy sides.

"Don't give him sympathy," he would sometimes say to an astonished father. "What he wants is the Big Stick ... Stop his allowance. He'll soon get well. Necessity's the best doctor.... Take her mother away from her. The mothers make half the invalids.... Let her get up early in the morning and take the kitchen-maid tea in bed. _She's_ a useful citizen at all events."

He saw his country, so he believed, sinking into a dropsical coma before his eyes, just for want of somebody to kick it awake; and the sight made him sick and fearful.

Often riding with his daughter of evenings after the day's work he would pause a moment beside the flag-staff on Beau-nez and look North East across the waste of sea dull or shining at his feet.

"Can you hear him growling, Bess?" he asked his companion once.

"Who?"

"The Brute."

Bess knew her father's ogre, and the common talk.

"Is Germany the Brute?" she asked.

Her father shook his head.

"One of them," he answered. "Wherever Man is there the Brute is--keep that in mind when you're married, my dear. And he's always sleeping after a gorge or ravenous before one. Our Brute's asleep now he's got his belly full. Theirs"--nodding across the water--"is prowling for his prey."

To Mr. Pigott he confided his belief that there was only one thing that could save England.

"What's that?" asked the old school-master.

"A bloody war," replied Mr. Trupp.

Many other men were saying the same thing, but few of his intellectual calibre, and none of his radical views.

His own part in staying the rot that in his belief threatened to corrupt the country he loved with such a deep if critical love, was clear enough. It was the business of him and his colleagues to give the nation the health that made for character, just as it was that of the school-master to give them the character that made for health. And he tackled his side of national education with a will: the Sun, the Sea, the Air being the assistants in whom he trusted.

His old idea, cherished through a life-time, of an open-air hostel, where he could have under his immediate supervision children without their mothers, and wives without their husbands, sought always more urgently for expression as the years slipped by. It was not, however, till the twentieth century was well upon its way, that all the conditions necessary for the safe launching of his project were fulfilled.

His chance came when Colonel Lewknor and his wife crossed his path on retirement from the Sendee.

Rachel Lewknor took up the old surgeon's plan with the fierce yet wary courage of her race.

Here was her chance, heaven-sent. Thus and thus would she fulfil her cherished dream and make the money to send her grandson, Toby, to Eton like his father and grandfather before him.

Like most soldiers, she and the Colonel were poor. All through their working lives any money they might have saved against old age they had invested in the education of their boy; stinting themselves in order to send young Jock to his father's school and afterwards to start him in his father's regiment. On retirement therefore they had little but a pittance of a pension on which to live. The question of how to raise the capital to buy the site and build the hostel was therefore the most urgent of the earlier difficulties that beset Mrs. Lewknor.

Mr. Trupp said frankly that he could lend the money and would do so at a pinch; but he made it clear that he would rather not. He, too, was starting his boy Joe in the Hammer-men, and like all civilians of those days had an exaggerated idea of the expenses of an officer in the Army. Moreover, he had determined that when the time and the man came Bess should marry where she liked; and the question of money should not stand in her way.

Happily Mrs. Lewknor's problem solved itself as by miracle.

Alf Caspar, who had his garage in the Goffs at the foot of Old Town

and, in spite of the continued protests of Mrs. Trupp and Bess, still drove for Mr. Trupp (the old surgeon refusing steadfastly to keep a car of his own), had from the start evinced an almost prurient interest in the conception of the hostel. In the very earliest days when Mr. Trupp and Mrs. Lewknor talked it over as they drove through Paradise, the beech-hangar between old Town and Meads, to visit the prospective site in Cow Gap, he would sit at his wheel manipulating his engine to ensure the maximum of silent running, his head screwed round and big left ear reaching back to lick up what was passing between the two occupants of the body of the car.

Later, when it had actually been decided to embark upon the scheme, he said to Mr. Trupp one day in his brightest manner:

"Should be a paying proposition, sir, with you behind it."

The old surgeon eyed his chaffeur through his pince-nez shrewdly.

"If you like to put £3,000 or so into it, Alfred, you wouldn't do yourself any harm," he said.

Alf sheathed his eyes in that swift bird-like way of his, and tittered.

"Three thousand pounds!" he said. "Me!" ....

A few days later when Mr. Trupp called at the Colonel's tiny villa in Meads. Mrs. Lewknor ran out to him, eager as a girl.

She had received from Messrs. Morgan and Evans, the solicitors in Terminus Road, an offer of the sum required on behalf of a client on the security of a first mortgage.

"It's a miracle!" she cried, her eyes sparkling like jewels.

"Or a ramp!" said the Colonel from behind. "D'you know anything about the firm, Trupp?"

"I've known and employed em ever since I've been here," replied the old surgeon. "They're as old as Beachbourne and a bit older. A Lewes firm really, and they still have an office there. But as the balance of power shifted East they shifted with it."

"They don't say who their client is," commented the Colonel.

"I'll ask em," the other answered.

That afternoon he drove down to Terminus Road, and leaving Alf in the car outside, entered the office.

He and Mr. Morgan were old friends who might truly be accounted among the founders of modern Beachbourne.

"Who's your client?" asked Mr. Trupp, gruff and grinning. "Out with it!"

Mr. Morgan shook his smooth grey head, humour and mystery lurking about his mouth and in his eyes.

"Wishes to remain anonymous," he said. "We're empowered to act on his behalf."

He strolled to the window and peeped out, tilting on his toes to overlook the screen which obscured the lower half of it.

What he saw seemed to amuse him, and his amusement seemed to re-act in its turn on Mr. Trupp.

"Is he a solid man?" asked the surgeon.

"As a rock," came the voice from the window.

The other seemed satisfied; the contract forthwith was signed; and Mrs. Lewknor bought her site.

Cow Gap was an ideal spot for the hostel.

It is carved out of the flank of Beau-nez; the gorse-covered hill encircling it in huge green rampart that shelters it from the prevailing Sou-West gales. Embedded in the majestic bluff that terminates the long line of the South Downs and juts out into the sea in the semblance of a lion asleep, head on his paws, it opens a broad green face to the sea and rising sun. The cliff here is very low, and the chalk-strewn beach, easy of access from above, is seldom outraged by skirmishers from the great army peopling the sands along the front towards the Redoubt and the far Crumbles. A spur of the hill shuts it off from the aristocratic quarter of the town, known as Meads, which covers with gardened villas the East-ward foot-hills of Beau-nez and ceases abruptly at the bottom of the Duke's Drive that sweeps up the Head in graceful curves.

In this secluded coombe, that welcomes the sun at dawn, at dusk holds the lingering shadows, and is flecked all day with the wings of passing sea-birds, after many months of delay and obstructions victoriously overcome, Mrs. Lewknor began to build her house of bricks and mortar in the spring of the year Ruth and Ernie Caspar set out together to construct the future in a more enduring medium.

The house, long and low, with balconies broad as streets, and windows everywhere to catch the light, rose layer by layer out of the turf on the edge of the cliff. All the summer and on into the autumn it was a-building. A white house with a red roof, plain yet picturesque, it might have been a coastguard station and was not. Partaking of the character of the cliffs on which it stood and the green Downs in which it was enclosed, it seemed a fitting tenant of the great coombe in which, apart from a pair of goal-posts under the steep of the hill at the back, it was the only evidence of the neighbourhood of Man.

Mr. Trupp watched the gradual realisation of the dream of a lifetime with the absorbed content of a child who observes the erection of a house of wooden bricks. And he was not alone.

When at the end of the day's work Alf now drove his employer, as he often did, to Cow Gap to study progress, he, too, would descend and poke and pry amid skeleton walls and crude dank passages with sharp eyes and sharper whispered questions to labourers, foreman, and even the architect. Never a Sunday passed but found him bustling across the golf-links before church, to ascend ladders, walk along precarious scaffoldings, and march with proprietory air and incredible swagger along the terraces of the newly laid-out gardens that patched with brown the green quilt of the coombe.

Once, on such a Sunday visit, he climbed the hill at the back to obtain a bird's-eye view of the building. Amid spurting whin-chats and shining gossamers, he climbed in the brilliant autumn morning till he had almost reached the crest. He was lost to the world and the beauty lavished all about him; his eyes shuttered to the whispered suggestions of the infinite; his heart closed to the revealing loveliness of Earth, round-limbed and bare, as he revolved in the dark prison-house of self the treadmill of his insect projects. The sidesman of St. Michael's, spruce, scented, oiled, in fancy waistcoat, with boots of glace kid, and waxed moustache, moving laboriously between sky and sea, was civilised man at the height of his imperfection and vain-glorious in his fatuous artificiality.

Suddenly a bare head and collarless stark neck blurted up out of a deep gorse-clump before him.

"Who goes there?" came a challenge, deep and formidable, as the roar of some jungle lord disturbed in his covert.

Alf collapsed as a soap-bubble, blown from a clay pipe and brilliant in the sunshine, bursts at the impact of an elemental prickle. He fled down the hill incontinently.

The man who had barked, shoulder-deep in gorse, his eyes still flashing, turned to the woman squandered beneath him in luxurious splendour. Native of the earth on which she lay, and kin to it as some long-limbed hind of the forest, she regarded him with amused content. The sudden battle-call of her male roused what there was of primitive in her, soothed, and flattered her womanhood. Comfortably she fell back upon the sense of security it called up, delighting behind half-drawn lids in the surprising ferocity of her man. That roar of his, startling the silence like a trumpet-note, had spoken to her deeps. Swiftly, and perhaps for the first time, she recognised what the man above her stood for in her life, and why one with whom she did not pretend to be in love so completely satisfied her most urgent present need. He was a break-water behind which she lay with furled sails after a hazardous voyage over uncharted deeps. Outside was still the roar and batter of seas. The sound of guns booming overhead as she lay, stripped of her canvas, and rocking pleasantly in the inner waters, did not alarm, rather indeed lulled, her to sleep: for they

spoke to her of protection at last.

"Who was it, Ernie?" she murmured, raising a lazy head from the hands on which they were pillowed, the dark hair strewn about her like wind-slashed rain.

The man turned, outraged still and bristling.

"Alf!" he snorted. "Just bob me head over the hawth at him. That was enough--_quite_ enough! I knaw the colour of Alf's liver."

He stood above her with his air of a fighting male.

She had never seen him like that before; and she regarded him critically and with approval.

"Ern," she called quietly, with a chuckle, deep and secret as the gurgle of water pouring from a long-throated jug; and with a faint movement of her hips she made room for him in the sand beside her.

CHAPTER II

COW GAP

Honeymoons are not for the class that does the world's dirty work; but joy can be seized by the simple of heart even in the conditions we impose upon the poor.

Ernie Caspar after his marriage with Ruth Boam settled down with his bride in Old Town to enjoy the fruits of victory.

The young couple had been lucky to find a cottage in the Moot; for even in those days accommodation for the working-class was as hard to find in Beachbourne as elsewhere. The cottage, too, was appropriately situated for them in every way. It was close to the yard of the Southdown Transport Company, where Ernie's work lay; and at the bottom of Borough Lane, at the top of which was the Manor-house, where lived Mr. and Mrs. Trupp, who had seen Ruth through her trouble, and had befriended Ernie from his boyhood.

"D'you remember that first time ever we rode up to Old Town together tarp o the bus?" asked Ernie of his bride, one evening as they passed the great doctor's house on the way to Beau-nez.

"Hap I do," Ruth answered, amused at her lover's intense seriousness.

"And do _you_ remember what I said to you?" insistently.

"Ne'er a word," answered Ruth, casual and teasing--"only it was no-account talk. That's all I remember."

"I pointed you out Mr. Trupp's house," Ernie continued solemnly, "and I says to you--_He brought me into the world_, I says. _That's what he done_."

The old roguish black-bird look, which after her winter of despair had been creeping slowly back to Ruth's face in this new spring, gleamed sedately now.

"I mind me now," she said. "Leastwise I don't remember what you said, but I remembers what I answered."

"What did you answer then?" asked Ernie, suspiciously.

"_He done well_, was what I says," answered the young woman gravely.

"He did," replied Ernie with exaggerated pomp. "And he done better to settle issalf at my door so I could be his friend if so be he ever gotten into trouble."

"One thing I knaw," said Ruth, serious in her turn now. "They're the two best friends e'er a workin woman had."

"They are," Ernie agreed. "And she's my god-mother."

It was the fact in his life of which on the whole he was most proud and certainly the one for which he was least responsible. "And she aren't yours," he continued, puffed up and self-complacent. "And never will be." He added finally to curb her arrogance. "See she was dad's friend afore ever they married, eether of them."

Ruth checked her husband's snobbishness with a tap.

"You _are_ grand," she said.

Close to the cottage of the young couple was the lovely old Motcombe garden, public now, pierced by the bourne from which the town derives its name. The garden with its ancient dove-cot, ivy-crowned, its splendid weeping ashes, its ruined walls, compact of native flint and chalk, the skeletons of afore-time barns and byres, stands between the old parsonage house and older parish-church that crowns the Kneb above and, with its massive tower, its squat shingled spire peculiar to Sussex, set four-square to the winds of time, seems lost in a mist of memories.

Beyond the church, a few hundred yards further up the hill, at the back of Billing's Corner in Rectory Walk, Ernie's parents still dwelt.

Anne Caspar did not visit Ruth. Indeed, she ignored the presence of her daughter-in-law; but those steel-blue eyes of hers sought out and recognized in a hard flash the majestic peasant girl who now haunted Church Street at shopping hours as the woman who had married her son. Ernie's mother was in fact one of those who make it a point of duty, as well as a pleasure, never to forgive. She had neither pardoned Ruth for daring to be her daughter-in-law, nor forgotten her sin. And both

offences were immeasurably accentuated by Ruth's crime in establishing herself in the Moot.

"Settlin on my door-step," she said. "Brassy slut!"

"Just like her," her second son answered; and added with stealthy malice, "Dad visits em. I seen im."

Alf, for all his acuteness, had never learned the simple lesson that his mother would not tolerate the slightest criticism of her old man.

"And why shouldn't he?" she asked sharply. "Isn't Ern his own flesh-and-blood? _He's_ got a heart, dad has, if some as ought to ave aven't."

"No reason at all," answered Alf, looking down his nose. "Why shouldn't he be thick in with her--and with her child for the matter of that? I see him walkin in the Moot the other day near the Quaker meeting-house hand-in-hand with little Alice. Pretty as a Bible picture it struck me."

Anne Caspar stared stonily.

"Who's little Alice?" she asked.

"Her love-child," answered Alf. "Like your grand-child as you might say--only illegit o course."

His mother breathed heavily.

"Is Ern the father?" she asked at last in a sour flat voice.

"Not him!" jeered Alf. "She's a rich man's cast-off, Ruth is. Made it worth Ern's while. That's where it was. See, cash is cash in this world."

Anne laid back her ears as she rummaged among her memories,

"I thought you told me," she began slowly, "as Ern--"

"Never!" cried Alf. "Ern had nothin to do with it, who-ever had."

"Who was the father?" asked Anne, not above a little feminine curiosity.

Alf shook his head cunningly.

"Ah," he said, "now you're askin!" and added after a moment's pause:--

"She was all-the-world's wench one time o day, your daughter was. That's all I can tell you."

Anne stirred a saucepan thoughtfully. She did not believe Alf: for she knew that Ernie was far too much his father's son to be bought disgracefully, and she remembered suddenly a suggestion that Mr. Pigott

had lately thrown out to the effect that Alf himself had not been altogether proof against the seductions of this seductive young woman his brother had won. It struck her now that there might be something in the story after all, unlikely as it seemed: for she remarked that Alf always pursued his sister-in-law with the covert rancour and vindictiveness of the mean spirit which has met defeat.

But however doubtful she might be in her own heart of Alf's tale, the essential facts about Ruth were not in dispute: her daughter-in-law was the mother of an illegitimate child and had settled down with that child not a quarter of a mile away. Everybody knew the story, especially of course the neighbours she would least wish to know it--the Archdeacon and Lady Augusta in the Rectory across the way. For over thirty years Anne had lived in her solid little blue-slated house, the ampelopsis running over its good red face, the tobacco plants sweet on summer evenings in the border round the neat and tidy lawn, holding her nose high, too high her enemies averred, and priding herself above all women on her respectability--and now!

No wonder Ernie, bringing home his bride and his disgrace, infuriated her.

"Shamin me afore em all!" she muttered time and again with sullen wrath to the pots and pans she banged about on the range.

She never saw the offender now except on Sundays when he came up to visit his father, which he did as regularly as in the days before his marriage. The ritual of these visits was always the same. Ernie would come in at the front-door; she would give him a surly nod from the kitchen; he would say quietly--"Hullo, mum!" and turn off into the study where his dad was awaiting him.

The two, Anne remarked with acrimony, grew always nearer and--what annoyed her most--talked always less. Edward Caspar was an old man now, in body if not in years; and on the occasion of Ernie's visits father and son rarely strolled out to take the sun on the hill at the back or lounge in the elusive shade of Paradise as in former days. They were content instead to sit together in the austere little study looking out on to the trees of the Rectory, Lely's famous _Cavalier_, the first Lord Ravensrood, glancing down from the otherwise bare walls with wistful yet ironic eyes on his two remote descendants enjoying each other beneath in a suspicious communion of silence.

Thus Anne always found the pair when she brought them their tea; and the mysterious intimacy between the two was all the more marked because of her husband's almost comical unawareness of his second son. The genuine resentment Anne experienced in the matter of Edward's unvarying attitude towards his two sons she visited, regardless of justice, upon Alf.

"Might not be a son to your father the way you go on!" she said censoriously.

"And what about him," cried Alf, not without reason. "Might not be a

father to your son, seems to me."

It would, however, have taken more than Anne Caspar's passionate indignation at the action of Ernie and his bride in establishing themselves in the Moot to cloud the lives of the newly-married couple. Ern was now twenty-eight, and Ruth four years younger. They had the present, which they enjoyed; they did not worry about the future; and the past inevitably buries itself in time.

"We're young yet, as Mr. Trupp says," remarked Ernie. "We've got it all afore us. Life's not so bad for all they say. I got you: and you got me; and the rest don't matter."

They were lying on Beau-nez in the dusk above Cow Gap, listening to the long-drawn swish of the sea, going and coming with the tranquil rhythm that soothes the spirit of man, restless in Time, with rumours of forgotten Eternity.

"And we both got little Alice," murmured Ruth, eyes resting on his with affectionate confidence, sure of his love for her and the child that was not his.

"Keep me cosy, Ern," whispered the luxurious creature with a delicious mixture of entreaty and authority snuggling up against him. She was lying, her face lifted flower-wise to the moon that hung above her bubble-like and benignant, her eyes closed, her lips tilted to tempt the pollen-bearing bee, while about them the lovely laughter brimmed and dimpled.

"I'll keep you cosy, my beauty," replied Ernie, with the busy seriousness of the male intent on love. "I'll give you plenty beside little Alice to think of afore I'm done with you. I'll learn _you_. Don't you worrit. I know what _you_ want."

"What then?" asked Ruth, deep and satisfied.

"Why, basketfuls o babies--armfuls of em, like cowslips till you're fairly smothered, and spill em over the field because you can't hold em all."

Perhaps he was right. Certainly after the battle and conflict of the last two years Ruth felt spiritually lazy. She browsed and drowsed, content that Ernie for the time being should master her. It was good for him, too, she saw, so long as he would do it, correcting his natural tendency to slackness; and she had little doubt that she could assume authority at will in the future, should it prove necessary. Meanwhile that spirit of adventure which lurked in her; distinguished her from her class; and had already once led her into danger and catastrophe, was lulled to sleep for the moment.

The hill at the back of Cow Gap is steep, and towards the crest the gorse grows thick and very high. In the heart of this covert, dense enough to satisfy the most jealous lovers, Ernie had made a safe

retreat. He had cut away the resisting gorse with a bill-hook, rooted up the stumps, stripped the turf and made a sleeping-place of sand brought up from the shore. In a rabbit-hole hard by, he hid a spirit-lamp and sundry stores of tea and biscuits; while Mrs. Trupp routed out from her coach-house an immense old carriage umbrella dating from Pole days which, when unfurled, served to turn a shower.

Ruth and Ernie called their hiding-place the Ambush; for in it they could harbour, seeing all things, yet themselves unseen. And there, through that brilliant autumn, they would pass their week-ends, watching Under-cliff, as the hostel was called, rising up out of the saucer of the coombe beneath them. They would leave little Alice with a neighbour, and lock up the cottage in the Moot, which Ruth was swiftly transfiguring into a home. On Saturday evenings, after a hard afternoon's work, stripping, papering, painting, making the old new and the dull bright, the pair would walk up Church Street, turn to the left at Billing's Corner, and dropping down Love Lane by the Rectory, cross the golf links and mount the hill by the rabbit-walk that leads above Paradise, past the dew-pond, on to the broad-strewn back of Beau-nez. Up there, surrounded by the dimming waters and billowing land, they would wait till the Head was deserted by all save a tethered goat and watchful coastguard; till in the solitude and silence the stars whispered, and the darkening turf, grateful for the falling dew, responded sweetly to their pressing feet. Then the young couple, taking hands, would leave the crest and find their way with beating hearts along the track that led through the covert to their couching-place, where none would disturb them except maybe a hunting stoat; and only the moon would peep at them under the shaggy eyebrow of the gorse as they rejoiced in their youth, their love, their life.

And then at dawn when the sun glanced warily over the brim of the sea and none was yet astir save the kestrel hovering in the wind; and the pair of badgers--who with the amazing tenacity of their kind still tenanted the burrows of their ancestors within a quarter of a mile of the tents and tabernacles of man--rooted and sported clumsily on the dewy hillside beneath; they would rise and slip bare-foot down the hill, past the hostel, on to the deserted beach, there to become one with the living waters, misty and lapping, as at night they had entered into communion with earth and sky and the little creaking creatures of the dark.

"This is life," Ernie said on one such Sabbath dawn, sinking into the waters with deep content. "Wouldn't old dad just love this?"

"If it were like this all the time!" Ruth answered a thought wistfully as she floated with paddling hands, sea and sky, as it was in the beginning, enveloping her. "Like music in church. Just the peace that passeth understanding, as my Miss Caryll'd say."

"Ah," said Ernie, speaking with the profound sagacity that not seldom marks the words of the foolish. "Might be bad for us. If there was nothing to fight we'd all be like to go to sleep. That's what Mr. Trupp says."

"Some of us might," said Ruth, the girl slyly peeping forth from her covering womanhood.

"Look at Germany!" continued the wise man, surging closer. "Look at what the Colonel said the other night at the Institute. We're the rabbits; and Germany's the python, the Colonel says."

"That for Germany!" answered Ruth, splashing the water with the flat of her hand in the direction of the rising sun.

"And she's all the while a-creepin--a-creepin--closer acrarst the sea," said Ernie, edging nearer--"for to SWALLOW US UP!" And with a rush he engulfed her young body in his arms.

CHAPTER III

THE WATCHMAN ON THE HEAD

On one of the last days of that brilliant October, just before the grey curtain of rains descended to blot out autumn fields and twinkling waters, Colonel Lewknor and his wife moved into the hostel.

On that first evening Mrs. Lewknor came down the broad stair-case in "review order," as she called it, to celebrate the consummation of the first stage of her project, and found her husband standing at the sea-ward window of the hall, a Mestophelian figure, holding back the curtain and peeping out. Quietly she came and stood beside him, about her shoulders the scarlet cape a Rajput Princess had given her after Lord Curzon's durbar.

The house, which was the solitary building in the great coombe, stood back some hundred yards from the cliff along which the coast-guard's path to Beau-nez showed up white-dotted in the darkness. The Colonel was staring out over the misty and muffled waters, mumbling to himself, as was his way.

"We shall get a nice view from here, anyway," he said with his satyr-like chuckle.

She laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Of what?" she asked.

"The landing," he replied.

She rippled off into a delicious titter. After thirty years of married life her Jocko was still for Rachel Lewknor the most entertaining of men.

"You and Mr. Trupp!" she said. "A pair of you!" For the two men had drawn singularly close since the Colonel on retirement had established

himself in Meads.

The old soldier in truth came as something of a revelation to the great surgeon, who delighted in the other's philosophical mind, his freedom from the conventional limitations and prejudices of the officer-caste, his wide reading and ironical humour.

On his evening ride one day about this time Mr. Trupp and Bess came upon the Colonel halted at the flag-staff on the top of the Head, and gazing out over the wide-spread waters with solemn eyes, as though watching for a tidal wave to sweep up out of the East and overwhelm his country. Mr. Trupp knew that the old soldier was often at that spot in that attitude at that hour, a sentinel on guard at the uttermost end of the uttermost peninsula that jutted out into the Channel; and he knew why.

"Well, is it coming?" the doctor growled, half serious, half chaffing.

The Colonel, standing with his hat off, his fine forehead and cadaverous face thrusting up into the blue, answered with quiet conviction.

"It's coming all right."

"It's been coming all my time," answered the other sardonically. "If it don't come soon I shall miss it. In the seventies it was Russia. Any fool, who wasn't a criminal or a traitor or both, could see that a clash was inevitable. Two great races expanding at incredible speed in Asia, etc., etc. Then in the nineties it was France. Any man in his right mind could see it. It was mathematically demonstrable. Two great races expanding in Africa, etc., etc.... And now it's Germany..." He coughed and ended gruffly, "Well, you may be right this time."

"We were right about William the Conqueror," said the Colonel urbanely. "He came."

"But that was some time ago, my daughter tells me," replied Mr. Trupp. "And you've been wrong every time since."

Bess giggled; and the Colonel adjusted his field-glasses with delicate precision.

"If you say it's going to rain and keep on saying it long enough you'll probably prove right in the end," he remarked. "It's dogged as does it in the realm of speculation as elsewhere in my experience."

The old surgeon and his daughter turned their backs on the flagstaff and the solitary watchman beside it, and jogged towards the sunset red-strewn behind the white bluff of the Seven Sisters Newhaven-way.

Two figures topped the brow of Warren Hill in front and came swiftly over the short turf towards them. It was Saturday: Ruth and Ernie were on their way to their secret covert above Cow Gap as usual.

"About your last week-end up here before the weather breaks, I should say," chaffed the old surgeon as he passed them.

Ernie laughed a little nervously.

"Yes, sir. Just what I were a-sayin to Ruth," he answered. He had thought his secret known to none.

"Well, I hope the police won't catch you," remarked the other with a grin as he rode on.

"Never!--not unless someone was to give us away, sir!" said Ruth demurely, as she looked across the sea under lowered brows.

Bess called back reassuringly over her shoulder:

"You're all right, Ruth. I'll square Mr. Trupp."

The riders struck Duke's Drive and dropped down into Meads.

"How happy Ernie looks now!" said Bess. "It's delightful to see him."

"Yes," replied her father--"too happy. He's going to sleep again--just what I told you. And when he's well away in the land of dreams _IT_'ll pounce on him once more."

That evening over his coffee Mr. Trupp returned to the subject, which was a favourite with him.

"I always knew how it would be," he said with gloomy complacency.

"Of course," answered Mrs. Trupp, glancing mischievously at Bess.

"Makes him too comfortable," the wise man continued. "Fatal mistake. What he wants is an occasional flick with the whip to keep him up to the mark. We all do."

It was not, indeed, in Ruth's nature to use the whip or inspire the fear which few of us as yet are able to do without. And at present she did not bother much. For at first her beauty and spiritual power were quite enough to hold Ernie. He found in her the comfort and the stay the tree finds in the earth it is rooted in. She was the element in which he lived and moved and had his being. She satisfied his body and his spirit as the sea satisfies the fish which dwells in it. She steadied him and that was what he needed.

The marriage, indeed, proved as successful as are most. That is to say it was not a failure, in that both the contracting parties were on the whole the happier for it. Certainly Ern was: for there was no doubt that he was in love with Ruth, nor that his love was real and enduring.

Ruth on her side was fond of Ern, and grateful to him, if only because of little Alice; although her feeling was more that of the mother for

the child than of the woman for her mate. She was full of pity for him and occasionally unuttered resentment. That was inevitable because Ern was weak. She had continually to prop him up, though she would rather have let him do the propping. And perhaps for her own growth it was good that she must give support rather than receive it.

In a way she was not the ideal wife for Ern: her strength was her weakness. She appeared almost too big of soul and tranquil of spirit. But there was another side of her, largely undeveloped, that had as yet only revealed itself in gleams, or rather, to be exact, in one lurid flash of lightning which had thrown her firmament into ghastly and twittering relief. Her quiet was the hushed and crouching quiet of the young lilac in winter, lying secretly in wait for the touch of April sun, to leap forth from its covert in an amazing ecstasy of colour, fragrance, loveliness and power.

For the time being Ruth was glad to lie up, as a tigress in whelp, after long hunting, is content to harbour in the green darkness, drinking in draughts of refreshing through sleep, while her mate prowls out at dusk to find meat. But that would not last for ever. Her life must be full and brimming over or her insatiable vitality and that all-devouring spirit of hers, reaching out like a creeper to embrace the world, might find outlet in mischief, innocent enough in the intention, and yet, as experience had already proved, catastrophic in its consequences.

In her secret deeps, indeed, Ruth was one to whom danger was the breath of life, although she was still unaware of it: an explorer and pioneer, gay and gallant, sailing her skiff over virgin oceans, reckless of the sunken reefs that might at any moment rip the bottom out of her frail craft. The outward sedateness of the Sussex peasant was liable at any moment to sudden overthrow, as some chance spark caused the southern blood in her veins to leap and frolic into flame; and that Castilian hidalgo, her remote ancestor, who lurked behind the arras of the centuries, called her away from the timid herd to some dear and desperate enterprise of romance.

Mrs. Trupp alone was aware of this buccaneer quality hidden in the young woman's heart and undiscovered of the world. Ruth's Miss Caryll had told her friend of it long ago when the girl was in her service at the Dower-house, Aldwoldston.

"It's the Spaniard in her," Miss Caryll had said.

And when at the time of her distress Ruth had told her story to the wife of the great surgeon who had succoured her, Mrs. Trupp, keen-eyed for all her gentleness, had more than once detected the flash of a sword in the murk of the tragedy.

The girl had dared--and been defeated. She would dare again--until she found her conqueror: thus Mrs. Trupp envisaged the position.

Was Ernie that man?

CHAPTER IV

ALF

Then a child lifted its tiny sail on the far horizon. Its rippling approach across the flood-tides absorbed Ruth and helped Ernie: for he had in him much of his father's mysticism, and was one of those men who go through life rubbing their eyes as the angels start up from the dusty road, and they see miracles on every side where others only find the prosaic permutations and combinations of mud. And this particular miracle, taking place so deliberately beneath his roof, a miracle of which he was the unconscious agent, inspired and awed him.

"Makes you sweat to think of it," he said to a mate in the yard.

"By then you've had half-a-dozen and got to keep em, you'll sweat less," retorted his friend, who had been married several years.

Mr. Trupp looked after Ruth.

Great man as he was now, he still attended faithfully those humble families who had supported him when first he had established himself in Old Town thirty years before, young, unknown, his presence fiercely resented by the older practitioners.

When Ruth's time came, Ernie sat in the kitchen, shaken to the soul, and listening to the feet in the room above.

It was a dirty night, howling, dark and slashed with rain. Outside in the little dim street that ran below the Kneb on which loomed the shadowy bulk of the parish-church, solid against the cloud-drift, stood the doctor's car.

Once Ernie went to the rain-sluiced window and saw Alf with his collar turned up crouching behind the wheel.

Ernie went out into the flapping night.

"Ere, Alf!" he said hoarsely. "We can't go on like this. Tain't in nature. After all, we're brothers."

The two had not spoken since the one had possessed the woman the other had desired.

Alf now showed himself curiously complacent.

"I am a Christian all right," he confided to his brother; and added with the naïve self-satisfaction of the megalomaniac, as he shook hands: "I wish there was more like me, I do reelly."

"Come in, then," said Ern, who was not listening. "I can't abear to

see you out here such a night as this and all."

Alf came in.

The two brothers sat over the fire in the kitchen, Alf uplifted, his gaitered legs crossed. He looked about him brightly with that curious proprietory air of his.

"You've a decent little crib here, Ern, I see," he said.

"None so bad," Ernie answered briefly.

"Done it up nice too," the other continued. "Did your landlord do that now?"

"No; me and Ruth atween us."

"Ah, he'll raise your rent against you."

"Like em," said Ern. "They're all the same."

Somebody moved overhead.

Ern, stirred to his deeps, rose and stood, leaning his forehead on the mantel-piece, his ears aloft.

"This is a bad job, Ern," said Alf--"a shockin bad job."

"It's killin me," Ern answered with the delicious egoism of the male at such moments.

There was a lengthy silence. Then Alf spoke again--casually this time.

"She never said nothin to you about no letter, did she?"

"It's burned," replied Ernie curtly.

Alf glanced at his brother sharply. Then, satisfied that the other was in fact telling the truth, he resumed his study of the fire.

"Not as there was anythink in it there shouldn't have been," he said complacently. "You can ask anyone." He was silent for a time. Then he continued confidentially, leaning forward a little--"When you see her tell her I'm safe. May be that'll ease her a bit."

Ernie came to himself and glowered.

"What ye mean?" he asked.

Alf cocked his chin, knowing and mysteriously.

"Ah," he said. "You just tell her what I tell you--_Alf won't let on; Alf's safe_. Just that. You'll see."

There was a stir and a movement in the room above: then the howl of a woman in travail.

Ern was panting. Silence succeeded the storm. Then a tiny miaowing from the room above came down to them.

Alf started to his feet.

"What's that?" he cried.

"My child," answered Ernie deeply, lifting a blind face to the ceiling.

Alf was afraid of many things; but most of all he feared children, and was brutal to them consequently, less from cruelty, as the unimaginative conceived, than in self-defence. And the younger the child the more he feared it. The presence in the house of this tiny creature, emerging suddenly into the world from the darkness of the Beyond with its mute and mysterious message, terrified him.

"Here! I'm off!" he said. "This ain't the place for me," and he left the house precipitately.

Mrs. Trupp of course went to visit the young mother. Ruth in bed, nursing her babe, met her with a smile that was radiant yet wistful.

"It's that different to last time," she said, and nodded at little Alice playing with her beads at the foot of the bed. "See, she'd no one--only her mother ... and you ... and Mr. Trupp. They were all against her--poor lamb!--as if it was fault of her'n." She gasped, choking back a sob.--"This'n's got em all on her side."

"That's all over now, Ruth," said Mrs. Trupp gently.

"I pray so, with all my heart I do," answered Ruth. "You never knaw. Seems to me some things are never over--not in this world anyways."

She blinked back tears, drew her hand across her eyes, and flashed up bravely.

"Silly, ain't it?" she laughed. "Only times it all come back so--what we went through, she and me. And not through any fault of mine--only foolishness like."

Ruth was one of those women who are a standing vindication of our civilisation and a challenge to all who indict it. She was up and about in an incredibly short time, the firmer in body and soul for her adventure.

One morning Alf came round quietly to see her. She was at the wash-tub, busy and bare-armed; and met him with eyes that were neither fearful nor defiant.

"I'm not a-goin to hurt you, Ruth," he began caressingly, with a

characteristic lift of his chin. "I only come to say it's all right. You got nothink against me now and I'll forget all I know about you. A bargain's a bargain. And now you've done your bit I'll do mine."

The announcement, so generous in its intention, did not seem to make the expected impression.

"I am a gentleman," continued Alf, leaning against the door-post. "Always ave been. It's in me blood, see? Can't help meself like even if I was to wish to." He started off on a favourite theme of his. "Lord Ravensrood--him that made that speech on the Territorials the other night in the House of Lords, he's my second cousin. I daresay if enough was to die I'd be Lord Ravensrood meself. Often whiles I remember that. I'm not like the rest of them. I got blue blood running through me veins, as Reverend Spink says. You can tell that by the look of me. I'm not the one to take advantage."

Ruth, up to her elbows in soap-suds, lifted her face.

"I'm not afraid o you, Alf," she said quite simply. "Now I got my Ern."

The announcement annoyed Alf. He rolled his head resentfully.

"No one as does right has anythink to fear from me," he said harshly. "It's only wrong-doers I'm a terror to. Don't you believe what they tell you. So long as you keep yourself accordin and don't interfere with nobody, nobody won't interfere with you, my gurl."

Ruth mocked him daintily.

"I'm not your girl," she said, soaping her beautifully moulded arms. "I'm Ern's girl, and proud of it." Her lovely eyes engaged his, teasing and tempting. "That's our room above--his and mine. It's cosy."

"Ah," said Alf, smouldering. "I'd like to see it."

"You can't do that," answered Ruth gravely. "Besides, there's nothing to see only the double-bed Mrs. Trupp gave us and the curtains to close it at night and that, so that no one shan't peep at what they should'nt."

The touch of southern blood, wild and adventurous, which revealed itself in her swarthy colouring and black hair, stung her on to darings demure as they were provocative. Alf, sour of eye, changed the subject.

"Yes, it's a nice little bit of a crib," he said, glancing round. "What might be your rent?"

"More'n it ought to be," answered Ruth.

"That's a pity," said Alf. "What's Ern's money now?"

"I shan't tell you."

Alf thrust his huge head forward with an evil grin.

"I'll tell you," he said. "It's twenty-four, and that's the limit. Pigott won't raise him no more. I know Pigott." He gloated over his victim. "Yes, old Ern makes in the week what I'd make in a day if I was to do nothink only loll against the wall with me mouth open to catch the interest on me money that'd roll into it. And I'm makin all the time: for God's give me brains and I'm usin em. I'm not a-going to drive for somebody else all my life. I'm the comin man in this town--you ask my bankers. There's plenty doin _you_ don't know nothin of, and more to come. And I'm at the back of it!--I'm the man what makes things move--that's what I am!" He swelled like a little bull-frog. "I'm a gentleman--that's Alf." He shot his face forward and wagged a finger at her. "And that's just the difference between Ern and me. I'm in the position to live on me own money and never do a hand's turn for it: while Ern has to sweat for his handful of coppers. And _then_ it ain't enough to keep his wife from the wash-tub. I'd like to see _my_ wife at that!--Now then!" He folded his arms and struck an attitude.

Ruth soused and wrung and rinsed quite unmoved.

"That aren't the only difference, Alf," she said soothingly. "See, Ern's got me. That makes up to him a lot, he says. He says he don't care nothing so long as he's got me to issalf, he says.... Strawberries and cream and plenty of em, he calls me when he's got the curtains draw'd up there, and me a-settin on his knee."

Alf retreated, burning and baffled. She came to the door drying her arms, and pursued her victim with eyes in which the lightning played with laughter; as fastidious and dainty in her cruelty as a cat sporting with a mouse.

A little way down the street he paused and turned. Then he came back a pace or two stealthily. His face was mottled and he was tilting his chin, mysterious and confidential.

"Never hear e'er a word from the Captain?" he asked, in a hushed voice.

Ruth flashed a terrible white and her bosom surged.

"I do times," continued the tormentor, and bustled on his way with a malignant chuckle.

CHAPTER V

THE CREEPING DEATH

One evening at the club, Mr. Trupp asked the Colonel what had happened to Captain Royal.

"He went through the Staff College, and now he's at the War Office, I believe," the other answered curtly.

"Ever hear from him?" asked Mr. Trupp, warily.

"No," said the Colonel. "He's not a friend of mine." And to save himself and an old brother-officer for whom he had neither liking nor respect, he changed the conversation to the theme that haunted him.

Mr. Trupp might chaff the Colonel about his _idée fixe_, but he, too, like most men of his class, had the fear of Germany constantly before his eyes and liked nothing better than to discuss the familiar topic with his friend over a cigar.

"Well, how are we getting on?" he asked encouragingly.

"Not so bad," the Colonel answered through the smoke. "Haldane's sent for Haig from India."

"Who's Haig?" puffed the other.

"Haig's a soldier who was at Oxford," the Colonel answered. "You didn't know there was such a variety, did you?"

"Never mind about Oxford," grunted the great surgeon. "Oxford turns out as many asses as any other institution so far as I can see. Does he know his job? That's the point."

"As well as you can expect a soldier to know it," replied the other, still in the ironic vein. "Sound but slow's his reputation. He and Haldane are the strongest combination there's been at the War Office in my time." He added more seriously--"They ought to get a move on between 'em, if anybody can."

"In time?" asked Mr. Trupp.

The Colonel, in spite of the recurrent waves of despair, which inundated him, was at heart an unrepentant optimist.

"I don't see why not," he said. "Bobs says Germany can't strike till the Kiel Canal's open for battleships. That won't be till 1912 or so."

The old doctor moved into the card-room with a cough.

"Gives you time to get on with your job, too, Colonel," he said. "I wish you well. Good-night."

The Colonel was retired now; but his brain was as active as ever, his heart as big, if his body was no longer so sure an instrument as it once had been. And Lord Roberts, when he asked his old comrade in arms to undertake work which he did not hesitate to describe as vital to the Empire, knew that the man to whom he was appealing possessed _in excelsis_ the quality which has always made the British Army the

nursery of spirits who put the good of the Service before their own advancement. The little old hero, like all great soldiers, had his favourite regiments, the result of association and experience; and it was well known that the Hammer-men stood at the top of the list. Fifty years before the date of this story they had sweated with him on the Ridge before Delhi; under his eyes had stormed the Kashmir Gate; with him had watched Nicholson die. Twenty years later they had gone up the Kurrum with the young Major-General, and made with him the famous march from Kabul to Kandahar. Another twenty years and they were making the pace for the old Field Marshal in the great trek from Paardeberg to Bloemfontein. He knew most of the officers, some of them intimately. And on hearing that Jocko Lewknor had settled down at Beachbourne wrote at once and asked him to become Secretary of the local branch of the National Service League, which existed to establish in England universal military training on the lines of Switzerland's Militia.

The Colonel made one of his rare trips to London and lunched at the Rag with the leader who had been his hero ever since as a lad he had gone up the Peiwar Khotal with the First Hammer-men at the order of Bahadur Bobs.

The Field Marshal opened the Colonel's eyes to the danger threatening the Empire.

"The one thing in our favour is this," he said, as they parted at the hall-door. "We've yet time."

The Colonel, inspired with new life, returned to Beachbourne and told his wife. She listened with vivid interest.

"You've got your work cut out, my Jocko," she said. "And I shan't be able to help you much."

"No," replied the Colonel. "You must stick to the hostel. I'll plough my own furrow."

Forthwith he set to work with the quiet tenacity peculiar to him. From the start he made surprising headway, perhaps because he was so unlike the orthodox product of the barrack-square; and like his leader he eschewed the party politics he had always loathed.

When he took up the work of the League he found it one of the many non-party organisations, run solely by the Conservatives quartered in Meads and Old Town, because, to do them justice, nobody else would lend a hand. Liberalism, camped in mid-town about Terminus Road, was sullenly suspicious; Labour, at the East-end, openly hostile. The opposition of Liberalism, the Colonel soon discovered, centred round the leader of Nonconformity in the town, Mr. Geddes, the powerful Presbyterian minister at St. Andrew's; the resistance of Labour, inchoate as yet and ineffective as the Labour Party from which it sprang, was far more difficult to tackle as being more vague and imponderable.

In those days, always with the same end in view, the Colonel spent much

time in the East-end, winding his way into the heart of Industrial Democracy. He sloughed some old prejudices and learnt some new truths, especially the one most difficult for a man of his age and tradition to imbibe--that he knew almost nothing of modern England. Often on Sundays he would walk across from Meads to Sea-gate and spend his afternoon wandering in the Recreation Ground, gathering impressions on the day that Labour tries to become articulate.

On one such Sunday afternoon he came on a large old gentleman in gold spectacles, fair linen, and roomy tailcoat, meandering on the edge of a dirty and tattered crowd who were eddying about a platform. The old gentleman seemed strangely out of place and delightfully unconscious of it; wandering about, large, benevolent and undisturbed, like a moon in a stormy sky.

"Well, Mr. Caspar," said the Colonel quietly. "What do you make of it all?"

The large soft man turned his mild gaze of a cow in calf on the lean tall one at his side. It was clear he had no notion who the speaker was; or that they had been at Trinity together forty years before.

"To me it's extraordinarily inspiring," he said with an earnestness that was almost ridiculous. "I feel the surge of the spirit beating behind the bars down here as I do nowhere else.... It fills me with an immense hope."

The Colonel, standing by the other like a stick beside a sack, sighed.

"They fill _me_ with a fathomless despair," he said gently. "One wants to help them, but they won't let you."

The other shook a slow head.

"I don't look at it like that," he replied. "I go to them for help."

The Colonel made a little moue.

"D'you get it?" he asked

"I do," Mr. Caspar replied with startling conviction.

The Colonel moved sorrowfully upon his way. He was becoming a man of one idea--Germany....

A few nights later, after supper, he strolled up Beau-nez under a harvest-moon spreading silvery wings moth-like over earth and sea. He was full of his own thoughts, and and for once heavy, almost down-hearted, as he took up his familiar post of vigil beside the flagstaff on the Head and looked out over the shining waters. The Liberals were moving at last, it seemed. The great cry for Dreadnoughts, more Dreadnoughts,

_We want eight!

had gone up to the ears of Government from millions of middle-class homes; but the Working Man still slept.

Would nothing rouse him to the Terror that stalked by night across those quiet waters? ... The Working Man, who would have to bear the brunt of it when the trouble came.... The Working Man...?

The Head was deserted save for the familiar goat tethered outside the coast-guard station. The moon beamed down benignantly on the silver-sabled land, broad-bosomed about him, and the waters stirring far beneath him with a rustle like wind in corn. Then he heard a movement at his back, and turned to see behind him, shabby, collarless, sheepish, the very Working Man of whom he had been thinking.

The Colonel regarded the mystic figure, gigantic in the moonlight, a type rather than an individual, with an interest that was half compassionate and half satirical.

Yes. That was the feller! That was the chap who would take it in the neck! That man with the silly smile--God help him!

"_Come to look for it?_" he said to the shadow, half to himself--"_wiser than your kind?_"

"_Look for what, sir?_"

"_The Creeping Death that's stealing across the sea to swallow you and yours._"

The shadow sidled towards him.

"Is that you, sir?" a voice said. "I thought it were."

The Colonel emerged from his dream.

"What, Caspar!" he replied. "What are you doing up here at this time of night?"

"Just come up for a look round before turning in, me and my wife, sir," the other answered. "Ruth," he called, "it's the Colonel."

A young woman with an orange scarf about her hair issued from the shadow of the coast-guard station and came forward slowly.

"I've heard a lot about you from Ern, sir," she said in a deep voice that hummed like a top in the silvery silence. "When you commanded his battalion in India and all."

The Colonel, standing in the dusk, listened with a deep content as to familiar music, the player unseen; and was aware that his senses were stirred by a beauty felt rather than seen..... Then he dropped down the hill to the hostel twinkling solitary in the coombe beneath.

"Your friend Caspar's married," he told his wife on joining her in the loggia. The little lady scoffed.

"Married!" she cried. "He's been married nearly a year. They spent their honeymoon on the hill at the back last autumn. I could see them from my room."

"Why ever didn't you tell me?" asked the Colonel. "I'd have run em in for vagrancy."

"No, you wouldn't," answered Mrs. Lewknor.

"Why not?"

"Because, my Jocko, she's a peasant Madonna. You couldn't stand up against her. No man could."

"A powerful great creature from what I could see of her," the Colonel admitted. "A bit of a handful for Master Ernie, I should guess."

Mrs. Lewknor's fine face became firm. She thought she scented a challenge in the words and dropped her eyes to her work to hide the flash in them.

"Ernie'll hold her," she said. "He could hold any woman. He's a gentleman like his father before him."

He reached a long arm across to her as he sat and raised her fingers to his lips.

Years ago a bird had flashed across the vision of his wife, coming and going, in and out of the darkness, like the sparrow of the Saxon tale; but this had been no sparrow, rather a bird of Paradise. The Colonel knew that; and he knew that the fowler who had loosed the jewel-like bird was that baggy old gentleman who lived across the golf links in the little house that overlooked the Rectory. He knew and understood: for years ago the same bird had flashed with radiant wings across the chamber of his life too, swiftly coming, swiftly going.

CHAPTER VI

THE COLONEL LEARNS A SECRET

If the Colonel in his missionary efforts for the National Service League made little impression on the masses in the East-end, he was astonishingly successful with such labour as existed in Old Town; which in political consciousness lagged fifty years behind its tumultuous neighbour on the edge of the Levels, and retained far into this century much of the atmosphere of a country village. There the Church was still a power politically, and the workers disorganised. The Brewery

in the Moot and the Southdown Transport Company were the sole employers of labour in the bulk; and Mr. Pigott the only stubborn opponent of the programme of the League.

Archdeacon Willcocks backed the Colonel with whole-hearted ferocity, and lent him the services of the Reverend Spink, who, flattered at working with a Colonel D.S.O., showed himself keen and capable, and proposed to run the Old Town branch of the League in conjunction with the Church of England's Men's Society.

"I've got a first-rate secretary as a start," he told the Colonel importantly.

"Who's that?"

"Caspar."

"Ernest Caspar!" cried the Colonel. "The old Hammer-man!"

"No, his brother. Twice the man. Alfred--Mr. Trupp's chauffeur."

A few days later, when leaving the curate's lodgings, the Colonel ran up against Ernie in Church Street.

"Your brother's joined us," he said. "Are you going to?"

Ernie's charming face became sullen at once.

"I would, sir," he said. "Only for that."

"Only for what?"

"Alf."

"You won't join because your brother has!" grinned the Colonel.

Ernie rolled a sheepish head.

"It's my wife, sir," he muttered. "See, he persecutes her somethink shameful."

Next afternoon the Colonel was crossing Saffrons Croft on his way to the Manor-house for tea, when a majestic young woman, a baby in her arms, sauntering under the elms watching the cricket, smiled at him suddenly.

He stopped, uncertain of her identity.

"I'm Mrs. Caspar, sir," she explained. "We met you the other night on the Head--Ern and me."

"Oh, I know all about you!" replied the Colonel, glancing at the baby who lifted to the sky a face like a sleeping rose. "My word!--she's a bonny un."

"She grows, sir," replied Ruth, cooing and contented. "We gets her all the air we can. So we come here with the children for a blow of the coolth most in general Saraday afternoons. More air than in the Moot."

"Where's Caspar?" asked the Colonel.

"Yonder under the ellums, sir, along with a friend. Come about the classes or something I did hear."

"The class-war?" asked the Colonel grimly.

"No, sir," answered Ruth. "Classes for learning you learning, I allow. Man from the North, I yeard say. Talks funny--foreign talk I call it."

Just then the Colonel's glance fell on a child, slim as a daisy stalk, and with the healthy pallor of a wood-anemone, hiding behind Ruth's skirt and peeping at the stranger with fearless blue eyes that seemed somehow strangely familiar.

"And what's your name, little Miss Hide-away?" he asked, delighted.

"Little Alice," the child replied, bold and delicate as a robin.

The fact that the child was obviously some four years old while Ernie had not been married half that time did not occur to the Colonel as strange. He glanced at the young mother, noble in outline, and in her black and red beauty of the South so unlike the child.

"She doesn't take after her mother and father," he said, with the reckless indiscretion of his sex.

Then he saw his mistake. Ruth has run up signals of distress. Ernie, who had now joined them, as always at his best in an emergency, came quickly to the rescue.

"Favours her grandmother, sir, I say," he remarked.

"Like my boy," commented the Colonel, recovering himself. "I don't think anybody'd have taken our Jock for his father's son when he joined us at Pindi in 1904--eh, Caspar?"

The two old Hammer-men chatted over days in India. Then the Colonel went on up the hill, the eyes of the child still haunting him.

The Manor-house party were having tea on the lawn, under the laburnum, looking over the sunk fence on to Saffrons Croft beyond, when the Colonel joined them. Mrs. Lewknor was already there; and young Stanley Bessemere, the Conservative candidate for Beachbourne East. He and Bess were watching a little group of people gathered about a man who was standing on a bench in Saffrons Croft haranguing.

"Lend me your bird-glasses, Miss Trupp," said her companion eagerly.

He stood up, a fine figure of a man, perfectly tailored,

"Yes," he said. "I thought so. It's my friend."

"Who's that?" asked the Colonel.

"Our bright particular local star of Socialism," the other answered. "The very latest thing from Ruskin College. I thought he confined himself to the East-end, but I'm glad to find he gives you Old Towners a turn now and then, Miss Trupp. And I hope he won't forget you up at Meads, Colonel."

"What's his name?" asked Bess, amused.

"Burt," replied the other. "He comes from the North--and he's welcome to go back there to-morrow so far as I'm concerned."

"You're from the North yourself, Mr. Bessemere," Mrs. Trupp reminded him.

"I am," replied the young man, "and proud of it. But for political purposes, I prefer the South. That's why I'm a candidate for Beachbourne East."

A few minutes later he took his departure. The Colonel watched him go with a sardonic grin. Philosopher though he might be, he was not above certain of the prejudices common to his profession, and possessed in an almost exaggerated degree the Army view of all politicians as the enemies of Man at large and of the Services in particular.

Bess was still observing through her glasses the little group about the man on the bench.

"There's Ruth!" she cried--"and Ernie!"

"Listening to the orator?" asked the Colonel, joining her.

"Not Ruth!" answered Bess with splendid scorn. "No orators for her, thank you!--She's listening to the baby. Ernie can listen to him."

The Colonel took the glasses and saw Ruth and Ernie detach themselves from the knot of people and come slowly up the hill making for Borough Lane.

"That really is a magnificent young woman of Caspar's," he said to his host.

"She's one in a million," replied the old surgeon.

"William's always been in love with her," said his wife.

"All the men are," added Mrs. Lewknor, with a provocative little nod at her husband.

"Where did he pick up his pearl?" asked the Colonel. "I love that droning accent of hers. It's like the music of a rookery."

"She can ca-a-a away with the best of them when she likes," chuckled Bess. "You should hear her over the baby!"

"An Aldwolston girl," said Mrs. Trupp. "She's Sussex to the core--with that Spanish strain so many of them have." She added with extreme deliberation,--"She was at the Hohenzollern for a bit one time o day, as we say in these parts."

Mrs. Lewknor coloured faintly and looked at her feet. Next to her Jocko and his Jock the regiment was the most sacred object in her world. But the harm was done. The secret she had guarded so long even from her husband was out. The word Hohenzollern had, she saw, unlocked the door of the mystery for him.

Instantly the Colonel recalled Captain Royal's stay at the hotel on the Crumbles a few years before ... Ernie Caspar's service there ... the clash of the two men on the steps of the house where he was now having tea ... Royal's sudden flight, and the rumours that had reached him of the reasons for it.

The eyes which had looked at him a few minutes since in Saffrons Croft from beneath the fair brow of little Alice were the eyes of his old adjutant.

Then Mr. Trupp's voice broke in upon his reverie.

"Ah," said the old surgeon, "I see you know."

"And I'm glad you should," remarked Mrs. Trupp with the almost vindictive emphasis that at times characterised this so gentle woman.

"Everybody does, mother," Bess interjected quietly...

As the Colonel and his wife walked home across the golf links he turned to her.

"Did you know that, Rachel?" he inquired.

She looked straight in front of her as she walked.

"I did, my Jocko ... Mrs. Trupp told me."

The Colonel mused.

"What a change!--from Royal to Caspar!" he said.

She glanced up at him.

"You don't understand, Jocko," she said quietly. "Ruth was never Royal's mistress. She was a maid on the Third Floor at the Hohenzollern when he was there. He simply raped her and bolted."

The Colonel shrugged.

"Like the cad," he said.

They walked on awhile. Then the Colonel said more to himself than to his companion,

"I wonder if she's satisfied?"

The little lady at his side made a grimace that suggested--"Is any woman?"

But all she said was,

"She's a good woman."

"She's come a cropper once," replied the Colonel.

"She was tripped," retorted the other almost tartly. "She didn't fall."

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN FROM THE NORTH

A few days later, on a Saturday afternoon, the Colonel was sitting in the loggia of the hostel looking out over the sea when he saw two men coming down the shoulder of Beau-nez along the coast-guard path.

The tall man in black with flying coat-tails he recognised at once. It was Mr. Geddes, the one outstanding minister of the Gospel in Beachbourne: a scholar, yet in touch with his own times, eloquent and broad, with a more than local reputation as a Liberal leader. His companion was a sturdy fellow in a cap, with curly black hair and a merry eye.

The Colonel, who never missed a chance, went out to waylay the pair. Mr. Geddes introduced his friend--Mr. Burt, who'd come down recently from Mather and Platt's in the North to act as foreman fitter at Hewson and Clarke's in the East-end.

The Colonel reached out a bony hand, which the other gripped fiercely.

"I know you're both conspirators," he said with a wary smile. "What troubles are you hatching for me now?"

Mr. Geddes laughed, and the engineer, surly a little from shyness and self-conscious as a school-boy, grinned.

"Mr. Burt and I are both keen on education," said the minister. "He's been telling me of Tawney's tutorial class at Rochdale. We're hatching

a branch of the W.E.A. down here. That's our only conspiracy."

"What's the W.E.A.?" asked the Colonel, always keen.

"It's the Democratic wing of the National Service League," the engineer answered in broad Lancashire--"Workers' Education Association."

The Colonel nodded.

"He's getting at me!" he said. "I'm always being shot at. Will you both come in to tea and talk?--I should like you to meet my wife, Burt. She'll take you on. She's a red-hot Tory and a bonnie fighter."

But Mr. Geddes had a committee, and--"A must get on with the Revolution," said Burt gravely.

"What Revolution's that?" asked the Colonel.

"The Revolution that begun in 1906--and that's been going on ever since; and will go on till we're through!" He said the last words with a kind of ferocity; and then burst into a sudden jovial roar as he saw the humour of his own ultra-seriousness.

Mrs. Lewknor, who had been watching the interview from the loggia, called to her husband as he returned to the house.

"Who was that man with Mr. Geddes?" she asked.

"Stanley Bessemere's friend," the Colonel answered. "A red Revolutionary from Lancasheer--on the bubble; and a capital good fellow too, I should say."

That evening the Colonel rang up Mr. Geddes to ask about the engineer.

"He's the new type of intellectual artizan," the minister informed him. "The russet-coated captain who knows what he's fighting for and loves what he knows. Unless I'm mistaken he's going to play a considerable part in our East-end politics down here." He gave the other the engineer's address, adding with characteristic breadth,

"It might be worth your while to follow him up perhaps, Colonel."

Joe Burt lodged in the East-end off Pevensey Road in the heart of the new and ever-growing industrial quarter of Seagate, which was gradually transforming a rather suburban little town of villas with a fishing-station attached into a manufacturing city, oppressed with all the thronging problems of our century. There the Colonel visited his new friend. Burt was the first man of his type the old soldier, who had done most of his service in India, had met. The engineer himself, and even more the room in which he lived, with its obvious air of culture, was an eye-opener to the Colonel.

There was an old sideboard, beautifully kept, and on it a copper kettle and spirit lamp; a good carpet, decent curtains. On the walls were

Millais's _Knight Errant_, Greiffenhagen's _Man with a Scythe_, and Clausen's _Girl at the Gate_. But it was the books on a long deal plank that most amazed the old soldier; not so much the number of them but the quality. He stood in front of them and read their titles with grunts.

Alfred Marshall's _Principles of Economics_ lolled up against the Webbs' _Industrial Democracy_; Bradley's lectures on the tragedies of Shakespeare hobnobbed with Gilbert Murray's translations from Euripides. Few of the standard books on Economics and Industrial History, English or American, were missing. And the work of the modern creators in imaginative literature, Wells, Shaw, Arnold Bennett were mixed with _Alton Locke_, _Daniel Deronda_, _Sybil_, and the essays of Samuel Butler and Edward Carpenter.

"You're not married then?" said the Colonel, throwing a glance round the well-appointed room.

"Yes, A am though," the engineer answered, his black-brown eyes twinkling. "A'm married to Democracy. She's ma first loov and like to be ma last."

"What you doing down South?" asked the Colonel, tossing one leg over the other as he sat down to smoke.

"Coom to make trouble," replied the other.

"Good for you!" said the Colonel. "Hotting things up for our friend Stan. Well, he wants it. All the politicians do."

His first visit to Seagate Lane was by no means his last: for the engineer's courage, his integrity, his aggressive tactics, delighted and amused the scholarly old soldier; but when he came to tackle his man seriously on the business of the National Service League he found he could not move him an inch from the position he invariably took up: The Army would be used by the Government in the only war that matters--the Industrial war; and therefore the Army must not be strengthened.

"If the Army was used for the only purpose it ought to be used for--defence--A'd be with you. So'd the boolk of the workers. But it's not. They use it to croosh strikes!" And he brought his fist down on the table with a characteristic thump. "That's to croosh us!--For the strike's our only weapon, Colonel."

The power, the earnestness, even the savagery he displayed, amazed the other. Here was a reality, an elemental force of which he had scarcely been aware. This was Democracy incarnate. And whatever else he might think he could not but admire the sincerity and strength of it. But he always brought his opponent back to what was for him the only issue.

"Germany!" he said.

"That's blooff!" replied the other. "They'll get the machine-guns for

use against Germany, and when they've got em they'll use them against us. That's the capitalists' game.--Then there's the officers."

"What about em?" said the Colonel cheerfully. "They're harmless enough, poor devils."

"Tories to a man. Coom from the capitalist class."

"What if they do?"

"The Army does what the capitalist officer tells it. And he knows where his interest lies aw reet."

"Well, of course you know the British officer better than I do, Burt," replied the Colonel, nettled for once.

His opponent was grimly pleased to have drawn blood.

"In the next few years if things go as they look like goin we shall see," was his comment. "Wait till we get a Labour Government in power!"

The Colonel knocked out his pipe.

"Well, Burt, I'll say this," he remarked. "If we could get half the passion into our cause you do into yours, we should do."

"We're fighting a reality, Colonel," the other answered. "You're fighting a shadow, that's the difference."

"I hope to God it may prove so!" said the Colonel, as they shook hands.

The two men thoroughly enjoyed their spars. And the battle was well matched: for the soldier of the Old Army and the soldier of the New were both scholars, well-read, logical, and fair-minded.

On one of his visits the Colonel found Ernie Caspar in the engineer's room standing before the book-shelf, handling the books. Ernie showed himself a little shame-faced in the presence of his old Commanding Officer.

"How do they compare to your father's, Caspar?" asked the Colonel, innocently unaware of the other's _mauvaise honte_ and the cause of it.

"Dad's got ne'er a book now, sir," Ernie answered gruffly. "Only just the Bible, and Wordsworth, and Troward's Lectures. Not as he'd ever anythink like this--only Carpenter. See, dad's not an economist. More of a philosopher and poet like."

"I wish they were mine," said the Colonel, turning over Zimmeni's _Greek Commonwealth_.

"They're all right if so be you can afford em," answered Ernie shortly, almost sourly.

"Books are better'n beer, Ernie," said Joe Burt, a thought maliciously; and added with the little touch of priggishness that is rarely absent from those who have acquired knowledge comparatively late in life--"They're the bread of life and source of power."

"Maybe," retorted Ernie with a snort; "but they aren't the equal of wife and children, I'll lay."

He left the room surlily.

Burt grinned at the Colonel.

"Ern's one o the much-married uns," he said.

"D'you know his wife?" the Colonel asked.

Joe shook his bull-head.

"Nay," he said. "And don't wish to."

"She's a fine woman all the same," replied the Colonel.

"Happen so," the other answered. "All the more reason a should avoid her. They canna thole me, the women canna. And A don't blame em."

"Why can't they thole you?" asked the Colonel curiously.

"Most Labour leaders rise to power at the expense of their wives," the other explained. "They go on; but the wives stay where they are--at the wash-tub. The women see that; and they don't like it. And they're right."

"What's the remedy?"

"There's nobbut one." Joe now not seldom honoured the Colonel by relapsing into dialect when addressing him. "And that's for the Labour leader to remain unmarried. They're the priests of Democracy--or should be."

"You'll never make a Labour leader out of Caspar," said the Colonel genially. "I've tried to make an N.C.O. of him before now and failed."

"A'm none so sure," Joe said, and added with genuine concern: "He's on the wobble. Might go up; might go down. Anything might happen to yon lad now. He's just the age. But he's one o ma best pupils--if he'll nobbut work."

"Ah," said the Colonel with interest. "So he's joined your class at St. Andrew's Hall, has he?"

"Yes," replied the other. "Mr. Chislehurst brought him along--the new curate in Old Town. D'ye know him?"

"He's my cousin," replied the Colonel. "I got him here. He'd been

overworking in Bermondsey--in connection with the Oxford Bermondsey Mission."

"Oh, he's one of _them_!" cried the other. "That accounts for it. A know _them_. They were at Oxford when A was at Ruskin. They're jannock,--and so yoong with it. They think they're going to convert the Church to Christianity!" He chuckled.

"In the course of history," remarked the Colonel, "many Churchmen have thought that. But the end of it's always been the same."

"What's that?" asked the engineer.

"That the Church has converted them."

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHERUB

The advent of Bobby Chislehurst to Old Town made a considerable difference to Bessie Trupp. She was not at all in love with him and he only pleasantly so with her; but as she told her friend the Colonel,

"He's the first curate we've ever had in Old Town you can be like that with."

"Like that is good," said the Colonel. "Give me my tables. Meet it is I write it down.--It says nothing and expresses everything."

Now if the clergy in Old Town with the exception of Bess's pet antipathy, the Reverend Spink, were honest men worthy of respect, as everybody admitted, they were also old-fashioned; and Bobby Chislehurst was a new and disturbing element in their midst. Shy and unassuming though he was, the views of the Cherub, as the Colonel called his cousin, when they became known, created something of a mild sensation in the citadel which had been held for Conservatism against all comers by the Archdeacon and his lady for nearly forty years.

Even Mr. Pigott was shocked.

"He's a Socialist!" he confided to Mr. Trupp at the Bowling Green Committee.

The old Nonconformist had passed the happiest hours of a militant life in battle with the Church as represented by his neighbour, the Archdeacon, but of late it had been borne in upon him with increasing urgency that the time might come when Church and Chapel would have to join forces and present a common front against the hosts of Socialism which he feared more than ever he had done the Tory legions.

But if the Church was going Socialist! ...

And Mr. Chislehurst said it was...

The new curate and Bess Trupp had much in common, especially Boy Scouts, their youth and the outstanding characteristic of their generation--a passionate interest and sympathy for their poorer neighbours. Both spent laborious and happy hours in the Moot, listening a great deal, learning much, even helping a little. Bess, who had known most of the dwellers in the hollow under the Kneb all her life, had of course her favourites whom she commended to the special care of Bobby on his arrival; and first of these were the young Caspars.

She told him of Edward Caspar, her mother's old friend, scholar, dreamer, gentleman, with the blood of the Beauregards in his veins, who had married the daughter of an Ealing tobacconist, and lived in Rectory Walk; of Anne Caspar, the harsh and devoted tyrant; of the two sons of this inharmonious couple, and the antagonism between them from childhood; of Alf's victory and Ernie's enlistment in the Army; his sojourn in India and return to Old Town some years since; and she gave him a brief outline of Ruth's history, not mentioning Royal's name but referring once or twice through set teeth to "that little beast."

"Who's that?" asked the Cherub.

"Ernie's brother," she answered. "Alfred, who drives for dad."

"Not the sidesman?"

"Yes."

Bobby looked surprised.

"Mr. Spink," Bess explained darkly. "He got him there."

Apart from Bess's recommendation, Mr. Chislehurst's contact with Ruth was soon established through little Alice, who attended Sunday School. Ruth, moreover, called herself a church-woman, and was sedately proud of it, though the Church had no apparent influence upon her life, and though she never attended services.

On the latter point, the Cherub, when he had rooted himself firmly in her regard, remonstrated.

"See, I ca-a-n't, sir," said Ruth simply.

"Why not?" asked Bobby.

"_He's_ always there," Ruth answered enigmatically.

Bobby was puzzled and she saw it.

"Alf," she explained. "See, he wanted me same as Ernie. Only not to marry me. Just for his fun like and then throw you over. That's Alf, that is. There's the difference atween the two brothers." She

regarded the young man before her with the lovely solicitude of the mother initiating a sensitive son into the cruelties of a world of which she has already had tragic experience. "Men are like that, sir--some men." She added with tender delicacy, "Only you wouldn't know it, not yet."

The Cherub might be innocent, but no man has lived and worked in the back-streets of Bermondsey without learning some strange and ugly truths about life and human nature.

"He's not worrying you now?" he asked anxiously.

"Nothing to talk on," answered Ruth. "He wants me still, I allow. Only he won't get me--not yet a bit anyways." She seemed quite casual about the danger that threatened her, Bobby noticed; even, he thought, quietly enjoying it.

That evening, when the Cherub touched on the point to his colleague, Mr. Spink turned in his india-rubber lips.

"It's an honour to be abused by a woman like that," he said. "She's a bad character--bad."

"She's not that, I swear!" cried Bobby warmly. "She may have exaggerated, or made a mistake, but bad she's not."

"I believe I've been in the parish longer than you have, Chislehurst," retorted the other crisply. "And presumably I know something about the people in it."

"You've not been in as long as Miss Trupp," retorted Bobby. "She's been here all her life."

Mr. Spink puffed at his cigar with uplifted chin and smiled.

"How's it getting on?" he asked.

"Pah!" muttered Bobby--"Cad!" and went out, rather white.

That was not the end of the matter, however.

A few days later Joe Burt and Bobby had paused for a word at the _Star_ corner when Mr. Spink and Alf Caspar came down Church Street together.

"Birds of a feather," said Alf loudly, nudging his companion, just as they passed the standing couple.

"That's not very courteous, Caspar," called Bobby quietly after him.

Mr. Spink walked on with a smirk; but Alf came back with hardly dissimulated truculence.

"Sorry you've been spreading this about me, Mr. Chislehurst," he said, his sour eyes blinking.

"What?" asked the Cherub, astonished.

"Dirt," Alf retorted. "And I know where you got it from too."

"I haven't," cried Bobby with boyish indignation. "What d'you mean?"

"I know you have though," retorted Alf. "So it's no good denying it."
He was about to move on with a sneer when Joe Burt struck in.

"That's a foonny way to talk," he said.

"_Foonny_ it may be," mocked Alf. "One thing I'll lay: it's not so
foonny as your lingo."

The engineer shouldered a pace nearer.

"Throw a sneer, do you?"

"Ah," said Alf, secure in the presence of the clergyman. "I know all
about _you_."

"Coom to that," retorted the Northerner, "I know a little about you.
One o Stan's pups, aren't you?"

Bobby moved on and Alf at once followed suit.

"You keep down in the East-end, my lad!" he called over his shoulder.
"We don't want none of it in Old Town. Nor we won't have it, neether."

Joe stood four-square at the cross-roads, bristling like a dog.

"Called yourself a Socialist when yo were down, didn't you?" he
shouted. "And then turned Church and State when yo began to make. I
know your sort!"

He dropped down Borough Lane, hackles still up, on the way to meet
Ernie by appointment in the Moot.

At the corner he waited, one eye on Ern's cottage, which he did not
approach. Then Ruth's face peeped round her door, amused and
malicious, to catch his dark head bobbing back into covert as he saw
her. The two played _I spy_ thus most evenings to the amusement of one
of them at least.

"He's there," she told Ernie in the kitchen--"Waitin at the
corner.--Keeps a safe distance, don't he?--What's he feared on?"

"You," answered Ernie, and rose.

Ruth snorted. The reluctance to meet her of this man with the growing
reputation as a fighter amused and provoked her. Sometimes she chaffed
with Ernie about it; but a ripple of resentment ran always across her
laughter.

Ern now excused his friend.

"He's all for his politics," he said. "No time for women."

"Hap, he'll learn yet," answered Ruth with a fierce little nod of her head.

CHAPTER IX

THE SHADOW OF ROYAL

That evening Alf called at Bobby's lodgings and apologised frankly.

"I know I said what I shouldn't, sir," he admitted. "But it fairly tortured me to see you along of a chap like that Burt."

"He's all right," said Bobby coldly.

Alf smiled that sickly smile of his.

"Ah, you're innocent, Mr. Chislehurst," he said. "Only wish I knew as little as you do."

Alf in fact was moving on and up again in his career; walking warily in consequence, and determined to do nothing that should endanger his position with the powers that be. This was the motive that inspired his apology to Mr. Chislehurst and caused him likewise to make approaches to his old schoolmaster, Mr. Pigott.

The old Nonconformist met the advances of his erstwhile pupil with genial brutality.

"What's up now, Alf?" he asked. "Spreading the treacle to catch the flies. Mind ye don't catch an hornet instead then!"

The remark may have been made in innocence, but Alf looked sharply at the speaker and retired in some disorder. His new stir of secret busyness was in fact bringing him into contact with unusual company, as Mrs. Trupp discovered by accident. One evening she had occasion to telephone on behalf of her husband to the garage. A voice that seemed familiar replied.

"Who's that?" she asked.

The answer came back, sharp as an echo,

"_Who's that?_"

"I'm Mrs. Trupp. I want to speak to Alfred Caspar."

Then the voice muttered and Alfred took the receiver.

Later Mrs. Trupp told her husband of the incident.

"I'm _certain_ it was Captain Royal," she said with emphasis.

The old surgeon expressed no surprise.

"I daresay," he said. "Alf's raising money for some business scheme. He told me so."

Now if Alf's attempts on Ruth in the days between the birth of the child and her marriage to Ernie were known to Mrs. Trupp, the connection of the little motor-engineer and Royal was only suspected by her. A chance word of Ruth's had put her on guard; and that was all. Now with the swift natural intuition for the ways of evil-doers, which the innocent woman, once roused, so often reveals as by miracle, she flashed to a conclusion.

"Alf's blackmailing him!" she said positively.

"I shouldn't be surprised," her husband answered calmly.

His wife put her hand upon his shoulder.

"How _can_ you employ a man like that, William?" she said, grave and grieved.

It was an old point of dispute between them. Now he took her hand and stroked it.

"My dear," he said, "when a bacteriologist has had a unique specimen under the microscope for years he's not going to abandon it for a scruple."

A few days later Mrs. Trupp was walking down Borough Lane past the _Star_ when she saw Alf and Ruth cross each other on the pavement fifty yards in front. Neither stopped, but Alf shot a sidelong word in the woman's ear as he slid by serpent-wise. Ruth marched on with a toss of her head, and Mrs. Trupp noted the furtive look in the eyes of her husband's chaffeur as he met her glance and passed, touching his cap.

Mindful of her conversation with her husband, she followed Ruth home and boarded her instantly.

"Ruth," she asked, "I want to know something. You must tell me for your own good. Alfred's got no hold over you?"

Ruth drew in her breath with the sound, almost a hiss, of a sword snatched from its scabbard. Then slowly she relaxed.

"He's not got the sway over me not now," she said in a still voice, with lowered eyes. "Only thing he's the only one outside who knaws Captain Royal's the father of little Alice."

Mrs. Trupp eyed her under level brows.

"Oh, he does know that?" she said.

Ruth was pale.

"Yes, 'M," she said. "See Alf used to drive him that summer at the Hohenzollern."

Mrs. Trupp was not entirely satisfied.

"I don't see how Alfred can hold his knowledge over you," she remarked.

"Not over me," answered Ruth, raising her eyes. "Over him."

"Over who?"

"Captain Royal," said Ruth; and added slowly--"And I'd be sorry for anyone Alf got into his clutches--let alone her father."

Her dark eyes smouldered; her colour returned to her, swarthy and glowing; a gleam of teeth revealed itself between faintly parted lips.

Mrs. Trupp not for the first time was aware of a secret love of battle and danger in this young Englishwoman whose staid veins carried the wild blood of some remote ancestress who had danced in the orange groves of Seville, watched the Mediterranean blue flecked with the sails of Barbary corsairs, and followed with passionate eyes the darings and devilries of her matador in the ring among the bulls of Andalusia.

Mrs. Trupp returned home, unquiet at heart, and with a sense that somehow she had been baffled. She knew Ruth well enough now to understand how that young woman had fallen a prey to Royal. It was not the element of class that had been her undoing, certainly not the factor of money: it was the soldier in the man who had seized the girl's imagination. And Mrs. Trupp, daughter herself of a line of famous soldiers, recognised that Royal with all his faults, was a soldier, fine as a steel-blade, keen, thorough, searching. It was the hardness and sparkle and frost-like quality of this man with a soul like a sword which had set dancing the girl's hot Spanish blood. Royal was a warrior; and to that fact Ruth owned her downfall.

Was Ernie a warrior too?

Not for the first time she asked herself the question as she turned out of the Moot into Borough Lane. And at the moment the man of whom she was thinking emerged from the yard of the Transport Company, dusty, draggled, negligent as always, and smiling at her with kind eyes--too kind, she sometimes thought.

As she crossed the road to the Manor-house Joe Burt passed her and gave his cap a surly hitch by way of salute. Mrs. Trupp responded

pleasantly. Her husband, she knew, respected the engineer. She herself had once heard him speak and had admired the fire and fearlessness in him. Moreover, genuine aristocrat that she was, she followed with sympathy his lonely battle against the hosts of Toryism in the East-end, none the less because she was herself a Conservative by tradition and temperament.

That man was a warrior to be sure....

That evening the old surgeon dropped his paper and looked over his pince-nez at his wife and daughter.

"My dears," he said, "I've some good news for you."

"I know," replied Bess, scornfully. "Your Lloyd George is coming down in January to speak on his iniquitous Budget. I knew that, thank you!"

"Better even than that," her father answered. "Alfred Caspar's leaving me of his own accord."

The girl tossed her skein of coloured silk to the ceiling with a splendid gesture.

"Chuck-_her_-up!" she cried. "Do you hear, mother?"

"I do," answered Mrs. Trupp severely. "Better late than never."

"And I'm losing the best chauffeur in East Sussex," Mr. Trupp continued.

Alf, indeed, who had paddled his little canoe for so long and so successfully on the Beachbourne mill-pond, was now about to launch a larger vessel on the ocean of the world in obedience to the urge of that ambition which, apart from a solitary lapse, had been the consuming passion of his life. Unlike most men, however, who, as they become increasingly absorbed in their own affairs, tend to drop outside interests, he persisted loyally in old-time activities. Whether it was that his insatiable desire for power forbade him to abandon any position, however modest, which afforded him scope; or that he felt it more necessary than ever now, in the interests of his expanding career, to maintain and if possible improve his relations with the Church and State which exercised so potent a control in the sphere in which he proposed to operate; or that the genuinely honest workman in him refused to abandon a job to which he had once put his hand, it is the fact that he continued diligent in his office at St. Michael's, and manifested even increased zeal in his labours for the National Service League.

Alf, indeed, so distinguished himself by his services to the League that at the annual meeting at the Town Hall, he received public commendation both from the Archdeacon and the Colonel, who announced that "the admirable and indefatigable secretary of our Old Town branch, Mr. Alfred Caspar, has agreed to become District Convener."

That meeting was a red-letter day in the history of the Beachbourne

National Service League, for at it the Colonel disclosed that Lord Roberts was coming down to speak.

CHAPTER X

BOBS

The old Field-Marshal, wise and anxious as a great doctor, was sitting now at the bedside of the patient that was his country. His finger was on her pulse, his eye on the hourglass, the sands of which were running out; and he was listening always for the padding feet of that Visitor whose knock on the door he expected momentarily.

After South Africa he had sheathed at last the sword which had not rested in its scabbard for fifty years; and from that moment his eyes were everywhere, watching, guiding, cherishing the movement to which he had given birth.

He followed the activities and successes of Colonel Lewknor on the South Coast with a close attention of which the old Hammer-man knew nothing; and to show his appreciation of the Colonel's labours, he volunteered to come down to Beachbourne and address a meeting.

The offer was greedily accepted.

Mrs. Lewknor, who, now that the hostel was in full swing, was more free to interest herself in her husband's concerns, flung herself into the project with enthusiasm. And the Colonel went to work with tact and resolution. On one point he was determined: this should not be a Conservative demonstration, run by the Tories of Old Town and Meads. Mr. Glynde, a local squire, the member for Beachbourne West, might be trusted to behave himself. But young Stanley Bessemere, who, as the Colonel truly said, was for thrusting his toe into the crack of every door, would need watching--he and his cohorts of lady-workers.

The Committee took the Town Hall for the occasion, and arranged for the meeting to be at eight in the evening so that Labour might attend if it would.

The Colonel journeyed down to the East-end to ask Joe Burt to take an official part in the reception; but the engineer refused, to the Colonel's chagrin.

"A shall coom though," said Joe.

"And bring your mates along," urged the Colonel. "The old gentleman's worth seeing at all events. Mr. Geddes is coming."

"I was going to soop with Ernie Caspar and his missus," replied the engineer, looking a little foolish. "And we were coomin along together afterwards."

"Ah," laughed the Colonel, as he went out. "She's beat you!--I knew she would. Back the woman!"

Joe grinned in the door.

"Yes," he said. "Best get it over. That's my notion of it."

Bobs was still the most popular of Englishmen, if no longer the figure of romance he had been in the eyes of the British public for a few minutes during the South African war. His name drew; and the Town Hall was pleasantly full without being packed. Many came to see the old hero who cared little for his subject. Amongst these was Ruth Caspar who at Ernie's request for once had left her babes to the care of a friend. She stood at the back of the hall with her husband amongst her kind. Mrs. Trupp, passing, invited her to come forward; but Ruth had spied Alf at the platform end, a steward with a pink rosette, very smart, and deep in secret counsel with the Reverend Spink. Joe Burt, with critical bright eye everywhere, supported the wall next to her. The Colonel, hurrying by, threw a friendly glance at him.

"Ah," he said, "so you've found each other."

"Yes, sir," replied Ruth mischievously. "He's faced me at last, Mr. Burt has."

"And none the worse for it, I hope," said the Colonel.

"That's not for me to say, sir," answered Ruth, who was in gay mood.

Joe changed the subject awkwardly.

"A see young Bessemere's takin a prominent part in the proceedings," he said, nodding towards the platform. "He's two oughts above nothing, that young mon."

"Yes, young ass," replied the Colonel cheerfully. "Now if you'd come on the Committee as I asked you, you'd be there to keep him in his place. You play into the hands of your enemy!"

Then Bobby Chislehurst stopped for a word with Ruth and Ernie and their friend.

"Coom, Mr. Chislehurst!" chaffed the engineer. "A'm surprised to see _you_ here. A thought you was a Pacifist."

"So I am," replied the other cheerily. "That's why I've come. I want to hear both sides."

Joe shook his bullet-head gravely.

"There's nobbut two sides in life," he said. "Right and Wrong. Which side is the Church on?"

Then the little Field-Marshal came on to the platform with the swift and resolute walk of the old Horse-gunner. He was nearly eighty now, but his figure was that of a youth, neat, slight, alert. Ruth remarked with interest that the hero was bow-legged, which she did not intend her children to be. For the rest, his kindly face of a Roman-nosed thoroughbred in training, his deep wrinkles, and close-cropped white hair, delighted her.

The great soldier proved no orator; but his earnestness more than compensated for his lack of eloquence.

After the meeting he came down into the body of the hall and held an informal reception. The Colonel introduced Mr. Geddes, and left the two together while he edged his way down to Joe Burt.

"Well, what d'you think of him?" he asked.

The engineer, his hands glued to the wall behind him, rocked to and fro.

"A like him better than his opinions," he grinned.

"You come along and have a word with him," urged the Colonel.

Joe shook a wary head.

"He's busy with Church and State," he said, nodding down the hall. "He don't need Labour."

Then Ruth chimed in almost shrilly for once.

"There's young Alf shook hands with him!"

"Always shovin of issalf!" muttered Ernie sourly. "He and Reverend Spink."

The old Field-Marshal was now coming slowly down the hall with a word here and a handshake there. Church and State, as Joe had truly said, were pressing him. Mrs. Trupp, indeed, and Mrs. Lewknor were fighting a heavy rearguard action against the Archdeacon and Stanley Bessemere and his cohorts, to cover the old soldier's retirement.

As the column drifted past Ernie and Ruth the Colonel stopped.

"An old Hammer-man, sir," he said. "And the mother of future Hammer-men."

Lord Roberts shook hands with Ruth, and turned to Ernie.

"What battalion?" he asked in his high-pitched voice.

"First, sir," answered Ernie, rigid at attention, in a voice Ruth had never heard before.

"Ah," said the old Field-Marshal. "They were with me in the march to Kandahar. Never shall I forget them!" He ran his eye shrewdly over the other. "Are you keeping fit?"

"Pretty fair, considering, sir," answered Ernie, relaxing suddenly as he had braced.

"Well, you'll be wanted soon," said Bobs, and passed on. "How these men run to seed, directly they leave the service, Lewknor!" he remarked to the Colonel on the stairs. "Now I daresay that fellow was a smart upstanding man when he was with you."

Ernie, thrilled at his adventure, went out into the cool night with Ruth, quietly amused at his excitement, beside him.

"Didn't 'alf look, Alf didn't, when he talked to you!" chuckled Ruth.

That was the main impression she had derived from the meeting, that and Lord Roberts's ears and the way they were stuck on to his head; but Ernie's mind was still in tumult.

"Where's Joe then?" he cried suddenly, and turned to see his pal still standing somewhat forlorn on the steps of the Town Hall.

He whistled and beckoned furiously.

"Come on, Joe!" he called. "Just down to the Wish and have a look at the sea."

But the engineer shook his head and turned slowly away down Grove Road.

"Nay, A know when A'm not wanted," he called. "Yoong lovers like to be alone."

"Sauce!" said Ruth, marching on with a little smile.

Ernie rejoined her.

"What d'you think of him?" he asked keenly.

"O, I liked him," said Ruth, cool and a trifle mischievous. "He's like a little bird--so alife like. And that tag of white beard to his chin like a billy-goat!--I did just want to pluck it!" She tittered and then recollected herself.

"I didn't mean Lord Roberts, fat-ead," retorted Ernie. "I meant Joe."

"O, that chap!" answered Ruth casually. "I didn't pay much heed to him. There's a lot o nature to him, I should reckon. Most in general there is--them black chaps, bull-built, wi curly tops to em."

She drifted back to Lord Roberts and the meeting.

"Only all that about war!--I don't like that. Don't seem right, not to my mind. There's a plenty enough troubles seems to me without them a-shoving great wars on top o you all for love."

Ernie felt that the occasion demanded a lecture and that he was pointed out as the man to give it. The chance, moreover, might not recur; and he must therefore make the most of it. He had this feeling less often perhaps than most men, and for that reason when he had it he had it strong. At the moment he was profoundly aware of the immense superiority of his sex; the political sagacity of Man; his power of taking statesmanlike views denied apparently to Woman.

"And what if Germany attacks us!" he asked censoriously. "Take it laying down, I suppose!--Spread yourself on the beach and let em tread on you as they land, so they don't wet their feet!"

"Germany won't interfere with you if you don't interfere with her, I reckon," Ruth answered calmly. "It's just the same as neighbours in the street. You're friends or un-friends, accordin as you like."

"What about Mrs. Ticehurst?" cried Ernie, feeling victory was his for once. "You didn't interfere with her, did you? Yet she tip the dust bin a-top o little Alice over the back-wall--to show she loved you, I suppose."

Ruth tilted a knowing chin.

"She aren't a neighbour, Mrs. Ticehurst aren't--not prarperly."

They were relapsing into broad Sussex as they always would when chaffing.

"What are she then?"

"She's a cat, sure-ly."

The night air, the thronged and brilliant sky, the rare change, the little bit of holiday, inspired and stimulated her. The Martha of much busyness had given place to the girl again. Immersed in the splendid darkness, she was in a delicious mood, cool, provocative, ironical; as Ernie had known her in that brief April of her life before Captain Royal had thrown a shadow across her path.

He threaded his arm through hers. Together they climbed the little Wish hill on the sea-front. From the top, by the old martello tower, they looked across the sea, white beneath the moon. Ernie's mood of high statesmanship had passed already.

"I don't see this Creeping Death they talk on," he said discontentedly.

"Ah," Ruth answered, sagacious in her turn. "Hap it's there though."

Ernie turned on her.

"I thart you just said..."

"No, I didn't then," she answered with magnificent unconcern. "All I say is--War and that, what's it got to do wi' we?"

As they came off the hill they met Colonel and Mrs. Lewknor crossing Madeira Walk on their way home.

"Where's your friend?" asked the Colonel.

"Gone back to his books and learning, sir, I reckon," replied Ruth. "He don't want us."

"Ah, you scared him, Mrs. Caspar," chaffed the Colonel.

"Scared him back to his revolution," commented Mrs. Lewknor.

Ruth laughed that deep silvery bell-like laughter of hers that seemed to make the night vibrate.

"He'd take some scaring, I reckon, that chap would," she said.

CHAPTER XI

THE RUSSET-COATED CAPTAIN

Joe Burt had been born at Rochdale of a mother whose favourite saying was:

"With a rocking-chair and a piece o celery a Lancasheer lass is aw reet."

At eight, she had entered the mill, doffing. Joe had entered the same mill at about the same age, doffing too. He worked bare-footed in the ring-room in the days when overlookers and jobbers carried straps and used them.

When he was fifteen his mother died, and his father married again.

"Thoo can fend for self," his step-mother told him straightway, with the fine directness of the North.

Joe packed his worldly possessions in a chequered handkerchief, especially his greatest treasure--a sixpenny book bought off a second-hand bookstall at infinite cost to the buyer and called _The Hundred Best Thoughts_. Then he crossed the common at night, falling into a ditch on the way, to find the lodging-house woman who was to be his mother for the next ten years drinking her Friday pint o beer. He was earning six shillings a week at the time in a bicycle-shop. Later he entered a big engineering firm and, picking up knowledge as he went along, was a first-class fitter when he was through his time.

Those were the days when George Barnes was Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and leading the great engineers' strike of the early nineties. Labour was still under the heel of Capital, but squealing freely. Socialism, apart from a few thinkers, was the gospel of noisy and innocuous cranks; and advanced working-men still called themselves Radicals.

Young Joe woke up sooner than most to the fact that he was the slave of an environment that was slowly throttling him because it denied him opportunity to be himself--which is to say to grow. He discarded chapel for ever on finding that his step-mother was a regular worshipper at Little Bethel, and held in high esteem amongst the congregation. He read Robert Blatchford in the _Clarion_, went to hear Keir Hardie, who with Joey Arch was dodging in and out of Parliament during those years, heralds of the advancing storm, and took some part in founding the local branch of the newly-formed Independent Labour Party. When his meditative spirit tired of the furious ragings of the Labour Movement of those early days, he would retire to the Friends' Meeting-house on the hill and ruminate there over the plain tablet set in the turf which marks appropriately the resting place of the greatest of modern Quakers.

The eyes of the intelligent young fitter were opening fast now; and the death of the head of his firm completed the process and gave him sight.

"Started from nothing. Left £200,000. Bequeathed each of his servants £2 for every year of service; but nothing for us as had made the money."

Joe was now a leading man in the local A.S.E. His Society recognised his work and sent him in the early years of our century to Ruskin College, Oxford. The enemies of that institution are in the habit of saying that it spoils good mechanics to make bad Labour leaders. The original aim of the College was to take men from the pit, the mill, the shop, pour into them light and learning in the rich atmosphere of the most ancient of our Universities, and then return them whence they came to act amongst their fellows as lamps in the darkness and living witnesses of the redeeming power of education. The ideal, noble in itself, appealed to the public; but like many such ideals, it foundered on the invincible rock of human nature. The miners, weavers, and engineers, who were the students, after their year amid the towers and courts of Oxford, showed little desire to return whence they came. Rather they made their newly-acquired power an instrument to enable them to evade the suffocating conditions under which they were born; and who shall blame them? They became officials in Labour Bureaux, Trade Union leaders, Secretaries of Clubs, and sometimes the hangers-on of the wealthy supporters of the Movement.

Burt was a shining exception to the rule. At the end of his academic year he returned to the very bench in the very shop he had left a year before, with enlarged vision, ordered mind, increased conviction; determined from that position to act as Apostle to the Gentiles of the Old Gospel in its new form.

He was the not uncommon type of intellectual artisan of that day who held as the first article of his creed that no working-man ought to marry under the economic conditions that then prevailed; and that if Nature and circumstance forced him to take a wife that he was not morally justified in having children. This attitude involving as it inevitably must a levy on the only capital that is of enduring value to a country--its Youth--was thrust upon thoughtful workers, as Joe was never tired of pointing out, by the patriotic class, who refused their employees the leisure, the security, the material standards of life necessary to modern man for his full development.

Joe practised what he preached, and was himself unmarried. Apart, indeed, from an occasional fugitive physical connection as a youth with some passing girl, he had never fairly encountered a woman; never sought a woman; never, certainly, heard the call that refuses to be denied, spirit calling to spirit, flesh to flesh, was never even aware of his own deep need. Women for him were still a weakness to be avoided. They were the necessaries of the feeble, an encumbrance to the strong. That was his view, the view of the crude boy. And he believed himself lucky to be numbered among the uncalled for he was in fact a sober fanatic, living as selflessly for his creed as ever did those first preachers of unscientific Socialism, the Apostles and Martyrs of the first centuries of our era. Even in the shop he had his little class of students, pouring the milk of the word into their ears as he set their machines, and the missionary spirit drove him always on to fresh enterprise.

The Movement, as he always called it, was well ablaze by the second decade of the century in the Midlands and the North, but in the South it still only smouldered. And when Hewson and Clarke started their aeroplane department at Beachbourne, and began to build machines for the Government, Joe Burt, a first-rate mechanic, leapt at the chance offered him by the firm and crossed the Thames with his books, his brains, his big heart, to carry the Gospel of Redemption by Revolution to the men of Sussex as centuries before, his spiritual ancestor, St. Wilfrid, he too coming from the North, had done. In that strange land with its smooth-bosomed hills, its shining sea, its ca-a-ing speech, he found everything politically as he had expected. And yet it was in the despised South that he discovered the woman who was to rouse in him the fierce hunger of which till then he had been unaware except as an occasional crude physical need.

As on Saturday or Sunday afternoons at the time the revelation was coming to him he roamed alone, moody and unmated, the rogue-man, amid the round-breasted hills he often paused to mark their resemblance to the woman who was rousing in his deeps new and terrible forces of which he had previously been unaware. In her majestic strength, her laughing tranquillity, even in her moods, grave or gay, the spirit mischievously playing hide-and-seek behind the smooth appearance, she was very much the daughter of the hills amid which she had been bred.

Ruth was as yet deliciously unaware of her danger. She was, indeed, unaware of any danger save that which haunts the down-sitting and up-rising of every working woman throughout the world--the abiding

spectre of insecurity.

She liked this big man, surly and self-conscious, and encouraged his visits. Not seldom as she moved amid her cups and saucers in the back-ground of the kitchen, she would turn eye or ear to the powerful stranger with the rough eloquence sucking his pipe by the fire and holding forth to Ernie on his favourite theme. It flattered her that he who notoriously disliked women should care to come and sit in her kitchen, lifting an occasional wary eyelid as he talked to look at her. And when she caught his glance he would scowl like a boy detected playing truant.

"I shan't hurt you then, Mr. Burt," she assured him with the caressing tenderness that is mockery.

His chin sunk on his chest.

"A'm none that sure," he growled.

Ernie winked at Ruth.

"Call him Joe," he suggested. "Then hap he'll be less frit."

"Wilta?" asked Ruth, daintily mimicking the accent of her guest.

"Thoo's mockin a lad," muttered Joe, delighted and relapsing into broader Lancashire.

"Nay, ma lad," retorted Ruth. "A dursena. A'm far ower scared."

CHAPTER XII

RUTH WAKES

Apart from such occasional sallies Ruth paid little attention to her husband's friend or, indeed, to anything outside her home. Now that she had dropped her anchor in the quiet waters of love sheltered by law, and had her recovered self-respect to buttress her against the batterings of a wayward world, she was snug, even perhaps a little selfish with the self-absorption of the woman who is wrapped up in that extension of herself which is her home, her children, and the man who has given them her.

After her stormy flight she had settled down in her nest, and seldom peeped over at the cat prowling beneath or at anybody, indeed, but the cock-bird bringing back a grub for supper; and him she peeped for pretty often. She was busy too with the unending busyness of the woman who is her own cook, housekeeper, parlourmaid, nurse and laundress. And happily for her she had the qualities that life demands of the woman who bears the world's burden--a magnificent physique to endure the wear and tear of it all, the invaluable capacity of getting on well

with her neighbours, method in her house, tact with her husband, a way with her children.

And there was no doubt that on the whole she was happy. The reaction from the _sturm-und-drang_ period before her marriage was passing but had not yet wholly passed. Her spirit still slept after the hurricane. Naturally a little indolent, and living freely and fully, if without passion, her nature flowed pleasantly through rich pastures along the channels grooved in earth by the age-long travail of the spirit.

Jenny and little Ned followed Susie, just a year between each child. Ernie loved his children, especially always the last for the time being; but the element of wonder had vanished and with it much of the impetus that had kept him steady for so long.

"How is it now?" asked his mate, on hearing of the birth of the boy.

"O, it's all right," answered Ernie, wagging his head. "Only it ain't quite the same like. You gets used to it, as the sayin is."

"And you'll get use-ter to it afore you're through, you'll see," his friend answered, not without a touch of triumphant bitterness. He liked others to suffer what he had suffered himself.

As little by little the romance of wife and children began to lose its glamour, and the economic pressure steadily increased, the old weakness began at times to re-assert itself in Ernie. He haunted the _Star_ over much. Joe Burt chaffed him.

"Hitch your wagon to a star by all means, Ern," he said. "But not that one."

Mr. Pigott too cautioned him once or twice, alike as friend and employer.

"Family man now, you know, Ernie," he said.

The sinner was always disarming in his obviously sincere penitence.

"I knaw I've unbuttoned a bit of late, sir," he admitted. "I'll brace up. I will and I can."

And at the critical moment the fates, which seemed as fond of Ernie as was everybody else, helped him.

Susie, his first-born, caught pneumonia. The shock stimulated Ernie; as shock always did. The steel that was in him gleamed instantly through the rust.

"Say, we shan't lose her!" he asked Mr. Trupp in staccato voice.

Mr. Trupp knew Ernie, knew his weakness, knew human nature.

"Can't say," he muttered. "Might not."

Ern went to the window and looked out on the square tower of the old church on the Kneb above him. His eyes were bright and his uncollared neck seemed strangely long and thin.

"She's got to live," he muttered defiantly.

The doctor nodded grimly.

The Brute had pounced on Ernie sleeping and was shaking him as a dog shakes a rat. Mr. Trupp, who had no intention of losing Susie, was by no means sorry.

"If it's got to be, it's got to be," said Ruth, busy with poultices. "Only it won't be if I can help it."

She was calm and strong as Ernie was fiercely resentful. That angered Ernie, who was seeking someone to punish in his pain.

When Mr. Trupp had left he turned on Ruth.

"You take it cool enough!" he said with a rare sneer.

She looked at him, surprised.

"Well, where's the sense in wearin yourself into a fret?" answered Ruth. "That doosn't help any as I can see."

"Ah, I knaw!" he said. "You needn't tell me."

She put down the poultice and regarded him with eyes in which there was a thought of challenge.

"What d'you knaw, Ern?"

There was something formidable about her very quiet.

"What I do, then," he said, and turned his back on her. "If it was somebody else, we should soon see."

She came to him, put her hand on his shoulder, and turned him so that she could read his face. He did not look at her.

She turned slowly away, drawing in her breath as one who rouses reluctantly from sleep.

"That's it, is it?" she said wearily. "I thart it'd come to that some day."

Just then little Alice danced in from the street, delicate, pale sprite, with anemone-like health and beauty.

"Daddy-paddy!" she said, smiling up at him, as she twined her fingers into his.

He bent and kissed her with unusual tenderness.

"Pray for our little Sue, Lal," he muttered.

The child looked up at him with fearless eyes of forget-me-not blue.

"I be," she said.

He gave her a hand, and they went out together into Motcombe Garden: for they were the best of friends.

Ruth was left. In her heart she had always known that this would come: he would turn on her some day. And she did not blame him: she was too magnanimous. Men were like that, men were. They couldn't help theirsalves. Any one of them but Ernie would have thrown her past up at her long before. She was more grateful for his past forbearance than resentful at his present vindictiveness. Now that the blow, so long hovering above her in the dimness of sab-consciousness, had fallen she felt the pain of it, dulled indeed by the fact that she was already suffering profoundly on Susie's account. But the impact braced her; and it was better so. There was no life without suffering and struggle. If you faced that fact with your eyes open, never luxuriating in the selfishness of make-believe, compelling your teeth to meet on the granite realities of life, then there would be no dreadful shock as you fell out of your warm bed and rosy dreams into an icy pool.

Ruth went back to her hum-drum toil. She had been dreaming. Now she must awake. It was Ernie who had roused her from that dangerous lethargy with a brutal slash across the face; and she was not ungrateful to him.

When he returned an hour later with little Alice she was unusually tender to him, though her eyes were rainwashed. He on his side was clearly ashamed and stiff accordingly. He said nothing; instead he was surly in self-defence.

To make amends he sat up with the child that night and the next.

"Shall you save her, sir?" asked the scare-crow on the third morning.

"I shan't," replied the doctor. "Her mother may."

Next day when Mr. Trupp came he grunted the grunt, so familiar to his patients, that meant all was well.

When the corner was turned Ern did not apologise to Ruth, though he longed to do so; nor did she ask it of him. To save himself without undergoing the humiliation of penance, and to satisfy that most easily appeased of human faculties, his conscience, he resorted to a trick ancient as Man: he went to chapel.

Mr. Pigott who had stood in that door at that hour in that frock-coat

for forty years past, to greet alike the sinner and the saved, welcomed the lost sheep, who had not entered the fold for months.

"I know what this means," he said, shaking hands. "You needn't tell me. I congratulate you. Go in and give thanks."

Ern bustled in.

"I shall come regular now, sir," he said. "I've had my lesson. You can count on me."

"Ah," said Mr. Pigott, and said no more.

Next Sunday indeed he waited grimly and in vain for the prodigal.

"Soon eased off," he muttered, as he closed the door at last. "One with a very sandy soil."

The Manager of the Southdown Transport Company went home that evening to the little house on the Lewes Road in unaccomodating mood.

"_His_ trousers are coming down all right," he told his wife. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again. Once you let go o God----"

"God lets go o you," interposed Mrs. Pigott. "Tit for tat."

CHAPTER XIII

NIGHTMARE

A few days later on his way back to the Manor-house from visiting his little patient in the Moot, the old surgeon met Mr. Pigott, who stopped to make enquiries.

"She'll do now," said Mr. Trupp.

"And that fellow?"

"Who?"

"Her father."

Mr. Trupp looked at the windy sky, torn to shreds and tatters by the Sou-west wind above the tower of the parish-church.

"He wanted the Big Stick and he got it," he said. "If it came down on his shoulders once a week regularly for a year he'd be a man. Steady pressure is what a fellow like that needs. And steady pressure is just what you don't get in a disorganised society such as ours."

The old Nonconformist held up a protesting hand.

"You'd better go to Germany straight off!" he cried. "That's the only place _you'd_ be happy in."

Mr. Trupp grinned.

"No need," he said, "Germany's coming here. Ask the Colonel!"

"Ah!" scolded the other. "You and your Colonels! You go and hear Norman Angell on the _Great Illusion_ at the Town Hall on Friday. You go and hear a sensible man talk sense. That'll do you a bit of good. Mr. Geddes is going to take the chair."

The old surgeon turned on his way, grinning still.

"The Colonel's squared Mr. Geddes," he said. "He's all right now."

What Mr. Trupp told Mr. Pigott, more it is true in chaff than in earnest, was partially true at least. Liberalism was giving way beneath the Colonel's calculated assault. After Lord Roberts's visit to Beachbourne the enemy dropped into the lines of the besiegers sometimes in single spies and sometimes in battalions. Only Mr. Pigott held out stubbornly, and that less perhaps from conviction than from a sense of personal grievance against the Colonel. For three solid years the pugnacious old Nonconformist had been trying to fix a quarrel on the man he wished to make his enemy; but his adversary had eluded battle with grace and agility. That in itself happily afforded a good and unforgiveable cause of offence.

"They won't fight, these soldiers!" he grumbled to his wife.

"They leave that to you pacifists," replied the lady, brightly.

"Pack o poltroons!" scolded the old warrior. "One can respect the Archdeacon at least because he has the courage of his opinions. But this chap!"

Yet if Liberalism as a whole was finding grace at last, Labour in the East-end remained obdurate, as only a mollusc can; and Labour was gaining power for all men to see.

In the general elections of 1910, indeed, the two Conservative candidates, Stanley Bessemere, East, and Mr. Glynde, West, romped home. The Colonel was neither surprised nor deceived by the results of the elections. He knew now that in modern England in the towns at all events, among the rising generation, there were few Conservative working men--though there were millions who might and in fact did vote for Conservative candidates; and not many Radicals--apart from a leaven of sturdy middle-aged survivors of the Gladstonian age. The workers as a whole, it was clear, as they grew in class-consciousness, were swinging slow as a huge tide, and almost as unconscious, towards the left. But they were not articulate; they were not consistent; they changed their labels as they changed their clothes, and as yet they steadfastly refused to call themselves Socialists. Indeed, in spite of

the local Conservative victory, the outstanding political feature of the moment, apart from the always growing insurgency of Woman, was the advance of Labour, as the Colonel and many other thoughtful observers noted. He began, moreover, to see that behind the froth, the foam, and arrant nonsense of the extreme section of the movement, there was gathering a solid body of political philosophy. The masses were becoming organised--an army, no longer a rabble; with staff, regimental officers, plan of campaign, and an always growing discipline. And, whether you agreed with it or not, there was no denying that the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission was a political portent.

When Joe Burt came up to Undercliff, as he sometimes did, to smoke and chat with the Colonel, Mrs. Lewknor, a whole-hearted Tory, would attack him on the tyranny of Trade Unions with magnificent fury.

She made no impression on the engineer, stubborn as herself.

"War is war; and discipline is discipline. And in war it's the best disciplined Army that wins. A should have thought a soldier'd have realised that much. And this isna one o your _little_ wars, mind ye! This is the Greatest War that ever was or will be. And we workers are fighting for our lives."

"Discipline is one thing and tyranny is quite another!" cried Mrs. Lewknor, with flashing eyes.

The Colonel, who delighted in these pitched battles, sat and sucked his pipe on the fringe of the hub-bub; only now and then turning the cooling hose of his irony on the combatants.

"It is," he said in his detached way. "Discipline is pressure you exert on somebody else. And tyranny is pressure exerted by somebody else upon you."

And it was well he was present to introduce the leaven of humour into the dough of controversy, for Mrs. Lewknor found the engineer a maddening opponent. He was so cool, so logical, and above all so _dam_ provocative, as the little lady remarked with a snap of her still perfect teeth. He gave no quarter and asked none.

"I don't like him," she said with immense firmness to the Colonel after one of these encounters, standing in characteristic attitude, her skirt a little lifted, and one foot daintily poised on the fender-rail. "I don't trust him one inch."

"He is a bit mad-doggy," the other said, entwining his long legs. "But he is genuine."

Then two significant incidents cast the shadow of coming events on the screen of Time.

In July, 1911, Germany sent the _Panther_ to Agadir. There ensued a sudden first-class political crisis; and a panic on every Stock Exchange in Europe.

Even Ernie was moved. This man who, in spite of Joe Burt's teaching, took as yet little more account of political happenings than does the field-mouse of the manoeuvres of the reaping machine that will shortly destroy its home, crossed the golf links one evening and walked through Meads to find out what the Colonel thought.

"What's it going to be, sir?" he asked.

The other refused to commit himself.

"Might be anything," he said. "Looks a bit funny."

"Think the reservists will be called up?"

The old soldier evinced a curious restrained keenness as of a restive horse desiring to charge a fence and yet uncertain of what it will find on the far side. The Colonel, appraising him with the shrewd eyes of the man used to judging men, was satisfied.

"I shouldn't be surprised," was all he would say.

The old Hammer-man walked away along the cliff in the direction of Meads, and dropped down on to the golf links to go home by the ha-ha outside the Duke's Lodge. Then he swung away under the elms of Compton Place Road and turned into Saffrons Croft, where Ruth and the children were to have met him. He looked about for them in vain. The cricketers were there as always, the idlers strolling from group to group, but no Ruth. Ernie who had been looking forward to a quiet half-hour's play with little Alice and Susie on the turf in the shade of the elms before bed-time felt himself thwarted and resentful. Ruth as a rule was reliable; but of late, ever since his unkindness to her at the time of Susie's illness, three weeks since, he had marked a change in her, subtle perhaps but real. True she denied him nothing; but unlike herself, she gave without generosity, coldly and as a duty.

Nursing his grievance, he dropped down the steep hill under the Manor-house wall, past the Greys, into Church Street.

At the _Star_ a little group was gossiping, heads together. As he crossed the road they turned and looked at him with curiosity and in silence. Then a mate of his in the Transport Company called across,

"Sorry to hear this, Ern."

Ernie, thinking the man referred to the probabilities that he would be called back to the Army, and proud of his momentary fortuitous importance, shouted back with an air of appropriate nonchalance,

"That's all right, Guy. I wouldn't mind a spell with the old regiment again--that I wouldn't."

At the foot of Borough Lane he met Alf bustling along. His brother did not pause, but gave Ernie a searching look as he passed and said,

"Watch it, Ern!"

Ern experienced a strange qualm as he approached his home. The door was open; nobody was about; there was not a sound in the house--neither the accustomed chirp of the children, nor the voice and movements of their mother.

The nightmare terrors that are wont to seize the sensitive at such times, especially if their conscience is haunted, laid hold of him. The emptiness, the silence appalled him. Death, so it seemed to his imaginative mind, reigned where the life and warmth and pleasant human busyness the woman and her children create had formerly been. Ever since that dark moment when he had let loose those foul and treacherous words, he had been uneasy in his mind; and yet, though usually the humblest of men, some stubborn imp of pride had possessed him and refused to allow him to express the contrition he genuinely felt. Perhaps the very magnitude of his offence had prevented him from making just amends.

Ruth on her side had said nothing; but she had felt profoundly the wound he had inflicted on her heart. So much her silence and unusual reserve had told him. Had he gone too far? Had her resentment been deeper than he had divined? Had he by his stupid brutality in a moment of animal panic and animal pain snapped the light chain that bound him to this woman he loved so dearly and knew so little? And none was more conscious than he how fragile was that chain. Ruth had never been immersed in love for him: she had never pretended to be. He knew that. She had been an affectionate and most loyal friend; and that was all.

On the threshold of his home he paused and stared down with the frightened snort of a horse suddenly aware of an abyss gaping at his feet.

For the first time in his married life the instant sense of his insecurity, always present in his subconsciousness, leapt into the light of day.

He gathered himself and marched upstairs as a man marches up the steps of the scaffold to pay the merited punishment for his crimes.

Then he heard a little noise. The door of the back room where the children, all but the baby, slept, was open. He peeped in. Susie was there, and Jenny with her. Hope returned to him. They were sitting up in bed still in outdoor clothes. Then he noticed that the baby's cot which stood of wont in the front room beside the big bed was here too. His sudden relief changed to anguish. He saw it all: _his_ children, the three of them, packed away together like fledgelings in a nest--for him to mother; and the mother-bird herself and _her_ child flown!

And he had brought his punishment on to his own head!

Susie waved a rag-doll at him and giggled.

"Neddy seeps with Susie!" she cried. "Susie nurse him! Mummy's gone

with man!"

Brutally Ernie burst into the bedroom.

Two people stood beside the bed--his wife and a man; one on either side of it.

The man was Joe Burt; the woman Ruth.

On the bed between them lay little Alice, wan as a lily, her eyes closed apparently in death.

As he entered Joe raised a hushing finger.

"It's all right, Ern. She isna dead," said the engineer, comfortably.

Ruth, who was the colour of the child on the bed, had turned to him and now wreathed her arms about him.

"O Ern!" she cried in choking voice. "I _am_ that glad you've come."

For a moment she hung on him, dependent as he had never known her.

Then the child stirred, opened her eyes, saw Ernie at the foot of the bed, and smiled.

"Daddy," came her sweet little voice.

Her eyes fell on Joe; her lovely brow crumpled and she wailed,

"Don't want man."

"That's me," said Joe gently, and stole towards the door on tip-toe. Ern followed him out.

Mr. Trupp met them on the stairs.

At the outer door Joe gave a whispered account of what had happened. He had been crossing Saffrons Croft on the way up to see Ernie, when he had noticed Ruth and the children under the elms. Little Alice had seen him and come rushing through the players towards her friend. A cricket-ball had struck her on the forehead; and he had carried her home like a dead thing. Outside the cottage they had met Alf, and Ruth had asked him to go for Mr. Trupp.

Ernie ran back upstairs.

The old surgeon, bending over the child, gave him a reassuring glance.

"The child's all right," he said. "See to the mother!" and nodded to Ruth, who was holding on to the mantel-piece.

She was swaying. Ern gathered her to him. The whole of her weight seemed on him. His eyes hung on her face, pale beneath its dark crown

as once, and only once, he had seen it before--that time she lay on the bed in Royal's dressing-room on the dawn of her undoing.

"Ruth," he called quietly.

Slowly she returned to life, opening her eyes, and drawing her hand across them.

"Is that you, Ern?" she sighed. "O, that's right. I come all over funny like. Silly! I'm all right now."

Ernie lowered her into a chair.

She sat a moment, gathering herself. Then she looked up at him--and remembered. She had been caught. Fear came over her, and she began to tremble.

He bent and kissed her.

"I'm sorry I said that, Ruth," he whispered in her ear.

A lovely light welled up into her eyes. At that moment she was nearer loving him than she had ever been. Regardless of Mr. Trupp's presence, she put a hand on either of his shoulders, and regarded him steadfastly, a baffling look on her face.

"Dear Ern!" she said. "Only I'd liefer you didn't say it again. See, it _do_ hurt from you."

CHAPTER XIV

SHADOWS

Ern was not called up after all.

The trap-door through which men had peered aghast into the fires of hell, closed suddenly as it had opened. Only the clang of the stokers working in the darkness under the earth could still be heard day and night at their infernal busyness by any who paused and laid ear to the ground.

England and the world breathed again.

"Touch and go," said Mr. Trupp, who felt like a man coming to the surface after a deep plunge.

"Dress rehearsal," said the Colonel.

"It'll never be so near again!" Mr. Pigott announced pontifically to his wife. "Never!"

"Thank you," replied that lady. "May we take it from you?"

When it was over the Colonel found that the walls of Jericho had fallen: the Liberal Citadel had been stormed. Mr. Geddes took the chair at a meeting at St. Andrew's Hall to discuss the programme of the League.

"It looks as if you were right after all," the tall minister said to the Colonel gravely.

"Pray heaven I'm not," the other answered in like tones.

The second significant incident of this time, which occurred during a lull before the final flare-up of the long-drawn Agadir crisis, had less happy results from the point of view of the old soldier.

In August, suddenly and without warning, the railway-men came out. The Colonel had been up to London for the night on the business of the League, and next morning had walked into Victoria Street Station to find it in possession of the soldiers: men in khaki in full marching order, rifle, bayonet, and bandolier; sentries everywhere; and on the platform a Union official in a blue badge urging the guard to come out.

The guard, a heavy-shouldered middle-aged fellow, was stubbornly lumping along the platform on flat feet, swinging his lantern.

"I've got a heart," he kept on reiterating. "I've got a wife and children to think of."

"So've I," replied the official, dogging him. "It's because I am thinking of them that I'm out."

"Silly 'aound!" said a bystander

"No, he ain't then!" retorted a second.

"Yes, he is!" chipped in a third. "Makin trouble for isself and everybody else all round. Calls isself the workers' friend!--Hadgitator, I call him!"

All the way down to Beachbourne in the train the Colonel marked pickets guarding bridges; a cavalry patrol with lances flashing from the green covert of a country lane; a battery on the march; armies on the move.

Joe Burt's right, he reflected, it's war.

"I never thought to see the like of that in England," said a fellow-traveller, eyes glued to the window.

"Makes you think," the Colonel admitted.

Arrived home he found there was a call for special constables. That evening he went to the police station to sign on, and found many of the leading citizens of Beachbourne there on like errand. Bobby

Chislehurst, his open young face clouded for once, and disturbed, was pressing the point of view of the railway-men on Stanley Bessemere, who was listening with the amused indifference of the man who knows.

"I'm afraid there is no doubt about it," the politician was saying, shaking the sagacious head of the embryo statesmen. "They're taking advantage of the international situation to try to better themselves."

"But they say it's the Government and the directors who are taking advantage of it to try and put them off--as they've been doing for years!" cried Bobby, finely indignant.

"I believe I know what I am talking about," replied the other, unmoved from the rock of his superiority. "I don't mind telling you that the European situation is still most precarious. The men know that, and they're trying to squeeze the Government. I should like to think it wasn't so."

Then the Archdeacon's voice loudly uplifted overwhelmed all others.

"O, for an hour of the Kaiser!--He'd deal with em. The one man left in Europe--now my poor Emperah's gone. Lloyd George ... Bowing the knee to Baal ... Traitors to their country ... Want a lesson ... What can you expect?" He mouthed away grandiloquently in detached sentences to the air in general; and nobody paid any attention to him.

Near by, Mr. Pigott, red and ruffled, was asking what the Army had to do with it?--who wanted the soldiers?--why not leave it to the civilians?--with a provocative glance at the Colonel.

Then there was a noise of marching in the street, and a body of working-men drew up outside the door.

"Who are those fellows?" asked the Archdeacon loudly.

"Workers from the East-end, old cock," shouted one of them as offensively through the door. "Come to sign on as Specials! And just as good a right here as you have...."

The leader of the men in the street broke away from them and shouldered into the yard, battle in his eye.

It was Joe Burt, who, as the Colonel had once remarked, was sometimes a wise statesman, and sometimes a foaming demagogue. To-day he was the latter at his worst.

"What did I tell yo?" he said to the Colonel roughly. "Bringin oop the Army against us. Royal Engineers driving trains and all! It's a disgrace."

The Colonel reasoned with him.

"But, my dear fellow, you can't have one section of the community holding up the country."

"Can't have it!" surly and savage. "Yo've had five hundred dud plutocrats in the House of Lords holding up the people for years past. Did ye shout then? If they use direct action in their own interests why make a rout when 500,000 railway men come out for a living wage?--And _then_ you coom to the workers and ask them to strengthen the Army the Government'll use against them!--A wonder yo've the face!" He turned away, shaking.

Just then happily there was a diversion. The yard-door, which a policeman had shut, burst open; and a baggy old gentleman lumbered through it with the scared look of a bear lost in a busy thoroughfare and much the motions of one.

Holding on to his coat-tails like a keeper came Ruth. She was panting, and a little dishevelled; in her arms was her baby, and her hat was a-wry.

"He would come!" she said, almost in tears. "There was no stoppin him. So I had just to come along too."

Joe, aware that he had gone too far, and glad of the interruption, stepped up to Ruth and took the baby from her arms. The distressed woman gave him a look of gratitude and began to pat and preen her hair.

At this moment Ernie burst into the yard. He was more alert than usual, and threw a swift, almost hostile, glance about him. Then he saw Ruth busy tidying herself, and relaxed.

"Caught him playing truant, didn't you, in Saffrons Croft?" he said. "The park-keeper tell me."

Ruth was recovering rapidly.

"Yes," she laughed. "I told him it was nothing to do with him--strikes and riots and bloodshed!--Such an idea!"

A baby began to wail; and Ernie turned to see Joe with little Ned in his arms.

"Hallo! Joe!" he chaffed. "_My_ baby, I think."

He took his own child amid laughter, Joe surrendering it reluctantly.

Just then Edward Caspar appeared in the door of the office. He looked at them over his spectacles and said quietly, as if to himself.

"It's Law as well. We must never forget that."

The Colonel turned to Ernie.

"What's he mean?" he asked low.--"Law as well."

Ernie, dandling the baby, drew away into a corner where he would be out

of earshot of the Archdeacon.

"It's a line of poetry, sir," he explained in hushed voice--

"_O, Love that art remorseless Law,
So beautiful, so terrible._"

"Go on!" said the Colonel, keenly. "Go on!--I like that."

But Ernie only wagged a sheepish head.

"That's all," he said reluctantly. "It never got beyond them two lines." He added with a shy twinkle--"That's dad, that is."

A chocolate-bodied car stopped in the street opposite.

Out of it stepped Mr. Trupp.

In it the Colonel saw a lean woman with eyes the blue of steel, fierce black brows, and snow-white hair.

She was peering hungrily out.

"It's mother come after dad," Ernie explained. "In Mr. Trupp's car. That's my brother driving."

The old surgeon, crossing the yard, now met the run-agate emerging from the office and took him kindly by the arm.

"No, no, Mr. Caspar," he scolded soothingly. "They don't want old fellows like you and me to do the bludgeon business. Our sons'll do all that's necessary in that line."

He packed the elderly truant away in the car.

Mr. Caspar sat beside his wife, his hands folded on the handle of his umbrella, looking as determined as he knew how.

Mrs. Caspar tucked a rug about his knees.

Ernie, who had followed his father out to the car, and exchanged a word with his brother sitting stiff as an idol, behind his wheel, now returned to the yard, grinning.

"Well!" said Joe.

Ernie rolled his head.

"Asked Alf if _he_ was goin to sign on?" he grinned.

"Is he?" asked the Colonel ingenuously.

Ernie laughed harshly.

"Not Alf!" he said. "He's a true Christian, Alf is, when there's scrapping on the tape..."

At the club a few days later, when the trouble had blown over, the Colonel asked Mr. Trupp if Ernie was ill.

"He seemed so slack," he said, with a genuine concern.

"So he is," growled the old surgeon. "He wants the Lash--that's all."

"Different from his brother," mused the Colonel--"that chauffeur feller of yours. He's keen enough from what I can see."

Mr. Trupp puffed at his cigar.

"Alf's ambitious," he said. "That's his spur. Starting in a big way on his own now. Sussex is going to blossom out into Caspar's Garages, he tells me. I'm going to put money in the company. Some men draw money. Alf's one."

CHAPTER XV

THE LANDLORD

Alf's great scheme indeed was prospering.

Thwarted by the Woman, and driven back upon himself, he had taken up the career of action at the point where he had left it to pursue an adventure that had brought him no profit and incredible bitterness.

Fortune had favoured him.

Just at the moment Ruth had baffled him, another enemy of his, the Red Cross Garage Syndicate, which in the early days of his career had throttled him, came to grief.

Alf saw his chance, and flung himself into the new project with such characteristic energy as to drown the bitterness of sex-defeat. He had no difficulty in raising the necessary capital for the little Syndicate he proposed to start. Some he possessed himself; his bank was quite prepared to give him accommodation up to a point; and there was a third source he tapped with glee. That source was Captain Royal. Alf was in a position to squeeze the Captain; and he was not the man to forego an advantage, however acquired.

Royal put a fifth of his patrimony into the venture, and was by no means displeased to do so. Thereby he became the principal shareholder in the concern, with a predominant voice in its affairs. That gave him the leverage against Alf, which, with the instinct of a commander, he had seen to be necessary for the security of his future directly that

young man showed a blackmailing tendency. Moreover Royal was not blind to the consideration that the new Syndicate, under able management, bid fair to be a singularly profitable investment.

Backed then by Royal and his bank, Alf bought up certain of the garages of the defaulting company at knockout prices. Thereafter, if he still coveted Ruth, he was far too occupied to worry her; while she on her side, purged by the busyness and natural intercourse of married life of all the disabling morbidities that had their roots in a sense of outlawry and the forced restraint put upon a roused and powerful temperament, had completely lost her fear of him.

Ruth, surely, was changing rapidly now. At times in family life she assumed the reins not because she wished to, but because she must; and on occasion she even took the whip from the socket.

Ernie had, indeed, climbed a mountain peak and with unbelievable effort and tenacity won to the summit, which was herself. But then, instead of marching on to the assault of the peak which always lies beyond, he had sat down, stupidly content; with the inevitable consequence that he tended to slither down the mountain-side and lose all he had gained in growth and character by his hard achievement.

The pair had been married four years now; and Ruth knew that her house was built on sand. That comfortable sense of security which had accompanied the first years of her married life, affording her incalculable relief after the hazards which had preceded them, had long passed. Dangers, less desperate perhaps in the appearance than in the days of her darkness, but none the less real, were careering up from the horizon over a murky sea like breakers, roaring and with wrathful manes, to overwhelm her. In particular the threat that haunts through life the working-woman of all lands and every race beset her increasingly. Her man was always skirting now the bottomless pit of unemployment. One slip and he might be over the edge, hurtling heavily down into nothingness, and dragging with him her and the unconscious babes.

The home, always poor, began to manifest the characteristics of its tenants, as homes will. When the young man came for the rent on Monday mornings, Ruth would open just a crack so that he might not see inside, herself peeping out of her door, wary as a woodland creature. Apart from Joe Burt, whom she did not count, there was indeed only one visitor whom Ruth now received gladly; and that was Mr. Edward Caspar, whose blindness she could depend upon.

There had grown up almost from the first a curious intimacy between the dreamy old gentleman, fastidious, scholarly, refined, and the young peasant woman whom destiny had made the mother of his grandchildren. Nothing stood between them, not even the barrier of class. They understood each other as do the children of Truth, even though the language they speak is not the same.

The old man was particularly devoted to little Alice.

"She's like a water-sprite," he said,--"so fine and delicate."

"She's different from Ernie's," answered Ruth simply. "I reck'n it was the suffering when I was carrying her."

"She's a Botticelli," mused the old man. "The others are Michael Angelos."

Ruth had no notion what he meant--that often happened; but she knew he meant something kind.

"I'd ha said Sue was more the bottled cherry kind, myself," she answered gently.

Her visitor came regularly every Tuesday morning on the way to the Quaker meeting-house, shuffling down Borough Lane past the _Star_, his coat-tails floating behind him, his gold spectacles on his nose, with something of the absorbed and humming laziness of a great bee. Ruth would hear the familiar knock at the door and open. The old man would sit in the kitchen for an hour by the latest baby's cot, saying nothing, the child playing with his little finger or listening to the ticking of the gold watch held to its ear.

After he was gone Ruth would always find a new shilling on the dresser. When she first told Ernie about the shilling, he was surly and ashamed.

"It's his tobacco money," he said gruffly. "You mustn't keep it."

Next Tuesday she dutifully handed the coin back to the giver,

"I don't like to take it, sir," she said.

The old man was the grandfather of her children, but she gave him always, and quite naturally, the title of respect.

He took it from her and laid it back on the dresser with the other he had brought. Then he put his hand on her arm, and looked at her affectionately through dim spectacles.

"You go to the other extreme," he said. "_You're_ too kind."

After that she kept the money and she was glad of it too, for she was falling behind with her rent now.

Then one Monday morning, the rent-collector making his weekly call, little brown book in hand, gave her a shock.

He was a sprightly youth, cocky and curly, known among his intimates as Chirpy; and with a jealously cherished reputation for a way with the ladies.

"Say, this is my last visit," he announced sentimentally, as he made his entry in the book, and poised his pencil behind his ear. "We can't part like this, can we?--you and me, after all these years. Too cold

like." He drew the back of his hand significantly across his mouth.

Ruth brushed his impertinence aside with the friendly insouciance which endeared her to young men.

"Got the sack for sauce, then?" she asked.

Chirpy shook his head ruefully.

"Mr. Goldmann's sold the house."

"Over our heads!" cried Ruth, aghast.

She hated change, for change spelt the unknown, which in its turn meant danger.

"Seems so," the youth replied. "No fault o mine, I do assure you." He returned to his point. "Anythink for Albert?"

Ruth was thoroughly alarmed. Even in those days cottages in Old Town were hard to come by.

"Who's our new landlord?" she asked.

"Mr. Caspar, I heard say in the office."

Ruth felt instant relief.

"Mr. Edward Caspar?--O, _that's_ all right."

"No; Alf--of the Garridges. Him they call All-for-isself Alfie!"

Ruth caught her breath.

"Thank you," she said, and closed the door swiftly.

The youth was left titupping on the door-step, his nose against the panel like a seeking spaniel.

Within, Ruth put her hand to her heart to stay its tumult. She was thankful Ernie was not there to witness her emotion, for she felt like a rabbit in the burrow, the stoat hard on its heels. All her old terrors revived....

The new landlord soon paid his first visit, and Ruth was ready for him.

"You want to see round?" she asked, with the almost aggressive briskness of the woman who feels herself threatened.

"Yes, as your landlord I got the right of entry." He made the announcement portentously like an emperor dictating terms to a conquered people.

Ruth showed him dutifully round. He paid no attention to his property:

his eyes were all for her; she did not look at him.

Then they went upstairs where it was dark.

There was a closed door on the left. Alf thrust it open without asking leave; but Ruth barred his passage with an arm across the door.

"What's that?" he asked, prying.

"Our room. You can't go in there. That's where my children was born."

Alf tilted his chin at her knowingly.

"All but little Alice," he reminded her. His eyes glittered in the dark. "Does _he_ stand you anything for her?" he continued confidentially. "Should do--a gentleman. Now if you could get an affiliation order against him that'd be worth five or six bob a week to you. And that's money to a woman in your position--pay me my rent and all too. Only pity is," he ended, thoughtfully, "can't be done. You and me know that if Ern don't."

Ruth broke fiercely away.

Leisurely he followed her down the stairs with loud feet. He was greatly at his ease. His hat, which he had never taken off, was on the back of his big head. He was sucking a dirty pencil, and studying his rent-book, as he entered the kitchen.

"You're a bit behind, I see," casually.

"Only two weeks," as coldly.

"As yet."

He swaggered to the door with a peculiar roll of his shoulders.

"If you was to wish to wipe it off at any time you've only got to say the word. I might oblige."

He stood with his back to her, looking out of the door, and humming.

She was over against the range.

"What's that?" she panted.

Standing on the threshold he turned and leered back at her out of half-closed eyes.

She sneered magnificently.

"Ah, I knaw you," she said.

"What's it all about?" he answered, cleaning his nails. "Only a little bit of accommodation. No thin out o the way."

"Thank you. I knaw your accommodation," she answered deeply.

"Well," he retorted, picking his teeth. "There's no harm in it.
What's the fuss about?"

"I'll tell Mr. Trupp," Ruth answered. "That's all."

Alf turned full face to her, jeering.

"What's old Trupp to me, then?" he cried. "I done with him. I done
with em all. I'm me own master, I am--Alfred Caspar, Hesquire, of
Caspar's Garridges, Company promoter. Handlin me thousands as you
handle coppers."

He folded his arms, thrust out a leg, and looked the part majestically
without a snigger. It was clear he was extraordinarily impressive to
himself.

Ruth relaxed slowly, deliciously, like an ice-pack touched by the
laughing kiss of spring.

She eyed her enemy with the amused indifference of some big-boned
thoroughbred mare courted by an amorous pony.

"You're mad," she said. "That's the only why I don't slosh the
sauce-pan over you. But I shall tell Ern all the same. And he'll tell
em all."

"And who's goin to believe Ern?" jeered her tormentor. "'Old Town
Toper,' they call him. Fairly sodden."

"Not to say Archdeacon Willcocks and Mr. Chislehurst," continued Ruth,
calmly.

Alf shot his finger at her like a crook in a melodrama, looking along
it as it might have been a pistol and loving his pose.

"And would they believe _you_ against me? Do you attend mass? Are you
a sidesman?"

"I was confirmed Church afore ever you was," retorted Ruth with spirit.
"I've as good a right to the sacraments, as you have then. And I'll
take to em again if I'm druv to it--that I will!"

Something about this declaration tickled Alf. The emperor was
forgotten in the naughty urchin.

"So long, then!" he tittered. "Appy au-revoir! Thank-ye for a
pleasant chat. This day week you can look forward to. I'll collect me
rent meself because I know you'd like me to."

He turned, and as he was going out ran into a man who was entering.

"Now then!" said a surly voice. "Who are you? O, it's _you_, is it?--I know all about you."

"What you know o me?" asked Alf, aggressively.

"Why, what a beauty you are."

The two men eyed each other truculently. Then Joe barged through the door. The entrance cleared, Alf went out, but as he passed on the pavement outside he beat a rat-tan on the window with insolent knuckles.

Joe leaped back to the door and scowled down the road at the back of the little chauffeur retreating at the trot. Alf excelled physically in only one activity: he could run.

The engineer returned to the kitchen, savage and smouldering. Ruth, amused at the encounter, met him with kind eyes. There was in this man the quality of the ferocious male she loved. He marched up to her, his head low between his shoulders like a bull about to charge.

"Is yon lil snot after you?" he growled, almost menacing.

She regarded him with astonishment, amused and yet defensive.

"_You're_ not my husband, Mr. Burt," she cried. "_You've_ no grievance whoever has."

The engineer retreated heavily.

"Hapen not," he answered, surly and with averted eyes. "A coom next though."

She looked up, saw his face, and trembled faintly.

He prowled to the door without a word, without a look.

"Won't you stop for Ern?" she asked.

"Nay," he said, and went out.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GRANDMOTHER

Ruth and her mother-in-law frequently met in the steep and curling streets of Old Town as they went about their business. They knew and tacitly ignored each other. But Ernie's children were not to be ignored. They knocked eternally at their granny's heart. When of summer evenings their mother took her little brood to Saffrons Croft and sat with them beneath the elms, her latest baby in her arms, the others clouding her feet like giant daisies, Anne Caspar, limping by on

flat feet with her string bag, would be wrung to the soul.

She hungered for her grand-children, longed to feel their limbs, and see their bodies, to hold them in her lap, to bathe them, win their smiles, and hear their prattle.

Pride, which she mistook for principle, stood between her and happiness.

Ruth knew all that was passing in the elder woman's heart, and felt for the other a profound and disturbing sympathy. She had the best of it; and she knew that Anne Caspar, for all her pharisaic air of superiority, knew it too. Ruth had learnt from Mrs. Trupp something of the elder woman's story. Anne Caspar too, it seemed, had loved out of her sphere; but she, unlike Ruth, had achieved her man. Had she been happy? That depended on whether she had brought happiness to her husband--Ruth never doubted that. And Ruth knew that she had not; and knew that Anne Caspar knew that she had not.

Moreover, all that Ernie told her about his mother interested her curiously: the elder woman's pride, her loneliness, her passion for her old man.

"Alf's mother over again," Ern told Ruth, "with all her qualities only one--but it's the one that matters. He's a worker same as she is. He means to get on, same as she done. There's just this difference atween em: Alf can't love; Mother can--though it's only one." ...

A week after his first visit Alf appeared again on Ruth's door-step.

Ruth opened to him with so bright a smile that he was for once taken completely by surprise. He had expected resistance and come armed to meet it.

"Come in, won't you?" she said.

Then he understood. She had thought better of her foolishness.

"That's it, is it?" he said, licking his lips. "That's a good gurl."

"Yes," said Ruth. "Very pleased to see you, I'm sure." She was smarter than usual too, he noticed--to grace the occasion no doubt. And the plain brown dress, the hue of autumn leaves, with the tiny white frill at the collar, revealed the noble lines of her still youthful figure.

The conqueror, breathing hard, entered the kitchen, to be greeted by a cultivated voice from the corner.

"Well, Alfred," it said.

Alf, whose eyes had been on the floor, glanced up with a start.

His father was sitting beside the cradle, beaming mildly on him through gold spectacles.

"Hullo, dad," said Alf, surlily. This large ineffectual father of his had from childhood awed him. There was a mystery about even his mildness, his inefficiency, which Alf had never understood and therefore feared. "I didn't expect to find you here."

It seemed to Alf that the bottle-imp was twinkling in the old man's eyes. Alf remembered well the advent of that imp to the blue haunts he had never quitted since. That was during the years of Ern's absence in India. Now it struck him suddenly that his father, so seeming-innocent, so remote from the world, was in the joke against him.

A glance at Ruth, malicious and amused, confirmed his suspicion.

"I'm glad you come and visit your sister sometimes, Alfred," said the old man gently.

"Yes," purred Ruth, "he comes reg'lar, Alf do now--once a week. And all in the way of friendship as the savin is. See, he's our landlord now."

"That's nice," continued the old man with the dewy innocence of a babe. "Then he can let you off your rent if you get behind."

"So he could," commented Ruth, "if only he was to think of it. Do you hear your dad, Alf?"

She paid the week's rent into his hand, coin by coin, before his father's eyes. Then he turned and slouched out.

"Good-night, Alf," Ruth said, almost affectionately. "It 'as been nice seein you and all."

Determined to enjoy her triumph to the full, she followed him to the door. In the street he turned to meet her mocking glance, in which the cruelty gleamed like a half-sheathed sword. His own eyes were impudent and familiar as they engaged hers.

"Say, Ruth, what's he after?" he asked, cautiously, in lowered voice.

"Who?"

"That feller I caught you with the other night--when Ern wasn't there. Black-ugly. What's he after?"

"Same as you, hap."

He sniggered feebly.

"What's that?"

"Me."

She stood before him; a peak armoured through the ages in eternal ice

and challenging splendidly in the sun.

He hoiked and spat and turned away.

"Brassy is it?" he said. "One thing, my lass, you been in trouble once, mind. I saved you then. But I mightn't be able to a second time."

Behind Ruth's shoulder a dim face, bearded and spectacled, peered at him with the mild remorselessness of the moon.

"Alfred," said a voice, dreadful in its gentle austerity.

When the old man said good-bye to Ruth ten minutes later he kissed her for the first time.

She smiled up at him gallantly.

"It's all right, dad," she said, consolingly. "I'm not afraid o _him_ whatever else."

It was the first time she had called him dad, and even now she did it unconsciously.

Edward Caspar ambled home.

He did not attempt to conceal from his wife where he went on Tuesday mornings. Indeed, as he soared on mysterious wings, he seemed to have lost all fear of the woman who had tyrannised over him for his own good so long. Time, the unfailing arbitrator, had adjusted the balance between the two. And sometimes it seemed to Mrs. Trupp, observing quietly as she had done for thirty years, that in the continuous unconscious struggle that persists inevitably between every pair from the first mating till death, the victory in this case would be to the man intangible as air.

That morning, as Edward entered the house, his wife was standing in the kitchen before the range.

Anne Caspar was white-haired now. Her limbs had lost much of their comeliness, her motions their grace. She was sharp-boned and gaunt of body as she had always been of mind--not unlike a rusty sword.

As the front-door opened, and the well-trained man sedulously wiped his boots upon the mat, she looked up over her spectacles, dropping her chin, grim and sardonic.

"I know where you been, dad," she taunted.

He stayed at the study-door, like a great pawing bear.

Then he answered suddenly and with a smile.

"I've been in heaven."

She slammed the door of the range; smiling, cruel, the school-girl who teases.

"I know where your tobacco money goes, old dad," she continued.

His mind was far too big and vague and mooning often to be able to encounter successfully the darts his wife occasionally shot into his large carcase.

"He's a beautiful boy," was all he now made answer, as he disappeared.

Whether the wound he dealt was deliberately given in self-defence, or unconsciously because he had the power over her, his words stung Anne Caspar to the quick.

She turned white, and sat down in the lonely kitchen her wrung old hands twisted in her lap, hugging her wound.

Then she recovered enough to take reprisals.

"Alf's their landlord, now," she cried after him, the snakes in her eyes darting dreadful laughter.

Edward Caspar turned in the door.

"Anne," he said, "I wish you to pay Ruth's rent in future out of the money my father left you."

The voice was mild but there was a note of authority, firm if faint, running through it.

Anne rose grimly to her feet, thin as a stiletto, and almost as formidable.

"That woman!"

He nodded at her down the passage.

"My daughter."

Anne turned full face.

"D'you know she's had a love-child?" she shrilled, discordant as a squeaking wheel.

The old gentleman, fumbling at the door of his study, dropped his bearded chin, and beamed at the angry woman, moonwise over his spectacles.

"Why shouldn't she?" he asked.

There was something crisp, almost curt, in the interrogation.

"But she's not respectable!"

Again he dropped his chin and seemed to gape blankly.

"Why should she be?" he asked.

She heard the key turn, and knew that she was locked out for the night.

Later she crept in list-slippers to the door and knocked with the slow and solemn knuckles of fate, a calculated pause between each knock.

"Alf's going up, Ern's going down," she said, nodding with grim relish. "_Good_-night, old dad."

Next evening Joe called at the cottage, to fetch Ernie for the class. He arrived as he sometimes had done of late, a little before Ernie was due home from the yard. At this hour the little ones had already been put to bed; and Ruth would be alone with Alice, between whom and the engineer there had sprung up a singular intimacy ever since the evening on which he had carried her home like a dead thing in his arms from Saffrons Croft.

Ruth had not seen him since his clash with Alfred in the door; and he had obviously avoided her.

Now she thrilled faintly. Was he in love with her?--she was not sure.

He entered without speaking and took his seat as always before the fire, broad-spread and slightly huddled in his overcoat, chin on chest, staring into the fire.

Ruth, busy baking, her arms up to the elbow in dough, made her decision swiftly. She would meet him, face him, fight him.

"Well, Joe," she said, not looking at him.

It was the first time she had called him that.

He peeped up at her, only his eyes moving, small, black-brown, and burning like a bear's.

"That's better," he muttered.

She flashed up at him. Innocence and cunning, the schoolboy and the brute, Pan and Silenus fought, leered, and frolicked in his face.

Ruth dropped her gaze and kneaded very deliberately.

Yes ... it was so ... Now she would help him; and she could hold him. She would transmute his passion into friendship. She would bridle her bull, ride him, tame him. It was dangerous, and she loved danger. It was sport; and she loved sport. It was an adventure after the heart of a daring woman. He was a fine man, too, and fierce, warrior and

orator; worth conquering and subduing to her will. His quality of a fighting male called to her. She felt the challenge and answered it with singing blood.

That laughing hidalgo who in Elizabethan days had landed from his galleon in the darks at the Haven to bring terror and romance to some Sussex maid; that Spaniard who lurked obscurely in her blood, gave her her swarthy colouring, her indolent magnificence and surprising quality, was stirring uneasily within her once again.

She lifted her eyes from the froth of yeast and looked across at him, accepting battle--if he meant battle. And he did: there was no doubt of that. He sat there, hunched, silent, breathing heavily. Then little Alice slipped down from the kitchen table on which she had been sitting at her mother's side, danced across to her friend, and climbed up on his knee. Ruth took her arms out of the bowl, white to the elbow with flour, came across to the pair, firm-faced, and deliberately removed the child.

Joe rose and went out. In the outer door he stumbled on a man half-hidden on the threshold.

"That you, Joe?" said Ernie quietly. "There he is! Alf--on the spy. See his head bob--there! At the bottom of Borough Lane--It's her he's after."

Joe peeped over his friend's shoulder, his bullet head thrust out like a dog who scents an enemy.

"That sort; is he?" he muttered. "I'll after him!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE CHALLENGE

Joe Burt had that passion for saving souls which is the hall-mark of the missionary in every age. Had he been a child of the previous generation he would have become a minister in some humble denomination and done his fighting from the pulpit, Bible in hand, amid the pot-banks of a Black Country township or the grimy streets of a struggling mining village in the North. As it was he appealed to the mass from the platform, and, a true fisher of men, flung his net about the individual in the class-room and at conferences.

Always seeking fresh fields to conquer, he had established a political footing now even in Tory Old Town. He had opened a discussion at the Institute, and actually given an address to the local Church of England's Men's Society on Robert Owen and early English Socialists; and he owed his triumph in the main to Bobby Chislehurst.

It is not without a pang that we part from the most cherished of our

prejudices, and as Joe launched out into an always larger life it had come to him as something of a shock to find amongst the younger clergy some who preserved an attitude of firm and honest neutrality in the great battle to which he had pledged his life, and even a few, here and there, who took their stand on the side of the revolutionaries of the Spirit.

And such a one was Bobby.

Because of that, the young curate, who was up and down all day amid the humble dwellers in the Moot, innocent and happy as a child, was forgiven his solitary sin. For Bobby was a Scout-master, unashamed; and Joe Burt, like most of his battle-fellows of that date looked askance on the Boy-Scout Movement as one of the many props of militarist Toryism none the less effective because it was unavowed.

The Cherub, bold, almost blatant in sin, passed his happiest hours in a rakish sombrero, shorts, and a shirt bedizened with badges, tramping the Downs at the head of the Old Town Troop of devoted Boy-Scouts, lighting forbidden fires in the gorse, arguing with outraged farmers, camping in secluded coombes above the sea.

Up there on the hill, between sky and sea, Joe Burt, he too with his little flock of acolytes from the East-end, would sometimes meet the young shepherd on Saturday afternoons, trudging along, in his hand a pole in place of a crook.

"I forgive you Mr. Chislehurst, because I know you don't know what you're doing," he once said, gravely. "You're like the Israelite--without guile."

"The greatest of men have their little failings," giggled the sinner.

The two men, besides their political sympathies, had another point in common: they meant to save Ernie from himself. But Joe was no longer single-eyed. He saw now in Ernie two men--a potential recruit of value for the cause of Labour, and the man who possessed the woman he loved.

In the troubled heart of the engineer there began to be a confused conflict between the fisher of men and the covetous rival. Ernie was entirely unconscious of the tumult in the bosom of his friend of which he was the innocent cause. Not so Ruth.

She was rousing slowly now like a hind from her lair in the bracken, and sniffing the air at the approach of the antlered stranger. As he drew always nearer with stops and starts and dainty tread, and she became increasingly aware of his savage presence, his fierce intentions, she withdrew instinctively for protection towards her rightful lord. He grazed on the hill-side blind to his danger, blind to hers, blind to the presence of his enemy. Ernie's indeed was that innocence, that simplicity, which rouses in the heart of primitive woman not respect but pity; and in the rose-bud of pity, unless it be virgin white, lurks always the canker of contempt and the worm of cruelty.

Sometimes of evenings, as Ernie dozed before the fire in characteristic negligé, collarless, tie-less, somnolent as the cat, she watched him with growing resentment, comparing him to that Other, so much the master of himself and his little world.

"You _are_ slack," she said once, more to herself than him.

"I got a right to be, I reck'n, a'ter my day's work," he answered sleepily.

"Joe's not like that," she answered, wetting her thread. "He's spry, he is. Doos a long day's work too--and earns big money, Joe do. Brings home more'n twice as much what you do Saraday--and no wife nor children neether."

Ernie looked up and blinked. For a moment she hoped and feared she had stung him to eruption. Then he nodded off again. That was what annoyed Ruth. He would not flare. He was like his father. But qualities a woman admires in an old man she may despise in her lover. As she retired upon him she felt him giving way behind her. She was seeking support and finding emptiness.

And as that Other, shaggy-maned and mighty, stole towards her with his air of a conqueror, trampling the heather under-foot, the inadequacy of her own mate forced itself upon her notice always more.

Ruth, now thirty, was in the full bloom of her passionate womanhood; drawing with her far-flung fragrance the pollen-bearing bee and drawn to him. The girl who had been seized and overthrown by a passing brigand was a woman now who looked life in the face with steadfast eyes and meant to have her share of the fruits of it. The old Christian doctrines of patience, resignation, abnegation of the right to a full life, made no appeal to her. Richly dowered herself, she would not brook a starved existence. She who was empty yearned for fulness. After her catastrophe, itself the consequence of daring, Ern had come into her life and given her what she had needed most just then--rest, security, above all children. On that score she was satisfied now; and perhaps for that very reason her spirit was all the more a-thirst for adventure in other fields. She was one of those women who demand everything of life and are satisfied with nothing less. Like many such her heart was full of children but her arms were empty. For her fulfilment she needed children and mate. Some women were content with one, some with the other. Great woman that she was, nothing less than both could satisfy her demands; and her emptiness irked her increasingly.

Ruth's in fact was the problem of the unconquered woman--a problem at least as common among married women who have sought absorption and found only dissatisfaction as amongst the unmarried. Royal had seized her imagination for a moment; to Ernie she had submitted. But that complete immersion in a man and his work which is for a full woman love, she had never experienced, and longed to experience. After five years of marriage Ernie was still outside her, an accretion, a

circumstance, a part of her environment, necessary perhaps as her clothes, but little more: for there was no purpose in his life.

And then just at the moment her lack was making itself most felt, the Man had come--a real man too, with a work; a pioneer, marching a-head, axe in hand, hewing a path-way through the Forest, and calling to her with ever increasing insistency to come out to him and aid him in his enterprise.

But always as she fingered in her dreams the bolts of the gate that, once opened, would leave her face to face with the importunate adventurer, there came swarming about her, unloosing her fingers as they closed upon the bolts, the children. And as one or other of them stirred or called out in sleep in the room above her, she would start, wake, and shake herself. Yet even the pull of the children was not entirely in one direction. There were four of them now; and they were growing, while Ernie's wages were standing still. That was one of the insistent factors of the situation. Were they too to be starved?

Often in her dim kitchen she asked herself that question. For if in her dreams she was always the mate of a man, she was in fact, and before all things, the mother of children. Who then was to save them and her?--Ernie? who was now little more than a shadow, an irritating shadow, wavering in the background of her life? If so, God help them all....

One evening she was in the little back-yard taking down the washing, when she heard a man enter the kitchen. She paid no heed. If it was Joe he could wait; if it was Ernie she needn't bother. Then she heard a second man enter, and instantly a male voice, harsh with challenge.

She went in hastily. There was nobody in the kitchen; but Ern was standing at the outer door. His back was to her, but she detected instantly in the hunch of his shoulders a rare combativeness.

"You know me," he was growling to somebody outside. "None of it now!"

He turned slowly, a dark look in his face which did not lighten when he saw her.

"Who was it, Ern?" she asked.

"Alf," he answered curtly.

That night as he sat opposite her she observed him warily as she worked and put to herself an astonishing question: Was there another Ernie?--an Ernie asleep she had not succeeded in rousing? Was the instrument sound and the fault in her, the player?

A chance phrase of Mrs. Trupp's now recurred to her.

"There's so much in Ernie--if you can only get it out."

The man opposite rose slowly, came slowly to her, bent slowly and

kissed her.

"I ask your pardon if I was rough with you this evening, Ruth," he said. "But Alf!--he fairly maddens me. I feel to him as you shouldn't feel to any human being, let alone your own brother. You know what he's after?" he continued.

She stirred and coloured, as she lifted her eyes to his, dark with an unusual tenderness.

"Reckon so, Ern," she said.

He stood before the fire, for once almost handsome in his vehemence.

"Layin his smutty hands on you!" he said.

That little scene, with its suggestion of passion suppressed, steadied Ruth.... And it was time. That Other was always drawing nearer. And as she felt his approach, the savage power of him, his fierce virility, and was conscious of the reality of the danger, she resolved to meet it and fend it off. He should save Ernie instead of destroying her. And the way was clear. If this new intellectual life, the seeds of which the engineer had been sowing so patiently for so long in the unkempt garden of Ernie's spirit became a reality for him, a part of himself, growing in such strength as to strangle the weeds of carelessness, he was saved--so much Ruth saw.

"Once he was set alight to, all his rubbish'd go up in a flare, and he'd burn bright as aflame," she told the engineer once seizing her chance; and ended on the soft note of the turtle-dove--"There's just one could set him ablaze--and only one. And that's you, Joe."

At the moment Joe was sitting before the fire in characteristic attitude, hands deep in his pockets, legs stretched out, the toes of his solid boots in the air.

For a moment he did not answer. It was as though he had not heard. Then he turned that slow, bull-like glare of his full on her.

"A'm to save him that he may enjoy you--that's it, is it?" he said. "A'm to work ma own ruin."

It was the first time he had openly declared himself. Now that it had come she felt, like many another woman in such case, a sudden instant revulsion. Her dreams blew away like mist at the discharge of cannon. She was left with a sense of shock as one who has fallen from a height. At the moment of impact she was ironing, and glad of it. Baring her teeth unconsciously she pressed hard down on the iron with a little hiss.

"You've no call to talk to me like that, Joe. It's not right."

Deliberately he rose and turned his back.

"A don't know much," he growled in his chest, "but A do know that then."

Her heart thumped against her ribs.

"I thart you were straight, Joe," she said.

He warmed his hands at the blaze; and she knew he was grinning, and the nature of the grin.

"A thought so maself till A found A wasn't," he answered. "No man knows what's in him till he's tried--that's ma notion of it. Then he'll have a good few surprises, same as A've done. A man's a very funny thing when he's along of a woman he loves--that's ma experience."

Ruth trembled, and her hand swept to and fro with the graceful motions of a circling eagle over the child's frock she was ironing.

"You make me feel real mean," she said.

He kept a sturdy back to her.

"Then A make you feel just same gate as A feel maself."

There was a pause.

"You ought to marry, Joe--a man like you with all that nature in you."

"Never--only if so be A can get the woman A want."

She said with a gulp,

"And I thart you was Ern's friend!"

He looked up at the ceiling.

"So A am--trying to be."

There was another silence. Then the woman spoke again, this time with the hushed curiosity of a child.

"Are all men like that?"

"The main of em, A reck'n."

Her hand swooped rhythmically; and there was the gentle accompanying thud of the iron taking the table and circling smoothly about its work.

"My Ern isn't."

"Your Ern's got what he wants--and what A want too."

Boots brushing themselves on the mat outside made themselves heard. Then the door opened.

Joe did not turn.

"Coom in, Ern," he said. "Just right. Keep t' peace atween us. She and me gettin across each other as usual."

CHAPTER XVIII

A SKIRMISH

A few days later Ernie came home immediately after work instead of repairing to the _Star_. As he entered the room Ruth saw there was something up. He was sober--terribly so.

"I done it, Ruth, old lass," he said.

She knew at once.

"Got the sack?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I've no one to blame only meself," he said, disarming her, as he disarmed everyone by his Christian quality.

Ruth did not reproach him: that was not her way. Nor did she sit down and cry: she had expected the catastrophe too long. She took the boy from the cradle and opened her bodice.

"You shan't suffer anyways," she said, half to herself, half to the child, and stared out of the window, babe at breast, rocking gently and with tapping foot.

Ern slouched out; and Ruth was left alone, to face as best she could the spectre that haunts through life the path of the immense majority of the human race. She had watched its slinking approach for years. Now with a patter of hushed feet, dreadful in the fury of its assault, it was on her. Remorseless in attack as in pursuit it was hounding her and hers slowly down a dreary slope to a lingering death, of body and spirit alike, in that hungry morass, the name of which is Unemployment.

Two days later when Joe entered the cottage he found Ruth for once sitting, listless. All the children were in bed, even little Alice.
He saw at once why. There was no fire, though it was January.

"Where's Ern, then?" he asked.

"Lookin for work," Ruth answered.

Joe stared, aghast.

"Is he out?" he asked.

Ruth rose and turned her shoulder to him.

"Yes. They've stood him off. And I don't blame em."

"What for?" Joe was genuinely concerned.

"He didn't say. Bad time, I reckon. Only don't tell anyone, Joe, for dear's sake, else they'll stop my credit at the shop--and I'll be done."

Her eyes filled and she bit her lip.

"Four of em," she said. "And nothing a week to do it on--let alone the rent" ...

She might hush it up; but the news spread.

Alf, with his ears of a lynx, was one of the first to hear. For a moment he hovered in a dreadful state of trepidation. It was a year and a half since he had stalked his white heifer, bent on a kill, only to be scared away by the presence of that mysterious old man he had found at her side in the heart of the covert. But his lust was by no means dead because it had been for the time suppressed. Ruth had baffled him; and Alf had not forgotten it. Ern possessed a beautiful woman he longed for; and Alf had not forgiven him.

Perhaps because he had beaten down his desire for so long, it now rushed out ravening from its lair, and drove all else before it. Throwing caution to the winds, he came stealing along like a stoat upon the trail, licking his lips, wary yet swift. First he made sure that Ernie was out, looking for a job of work. Then he came down the street.

Ruth met her enemy blithely and with taunting eyes. In battle she found a certain relief from the burthen of her distress. And here she knew was no question of pity or consideration.

"Monday's your morning, isn't it?" she said. "Come along then, will you, Alf? And you'll see what I got for you."

Alf shook a sorrowful head, studying his rent-book.

"It can't go on," he said in the highly moral tone he loved to adopt. "It ain't right." He raised a pained face and looked away. "Of course if you was to wish to wipe it off and start clean----"

Ruth was cold and smiling. She handled Alf always with the caressing contempt with which a cat handles a mouse.

"Little bit of accommodation," she said. "No thank you, Alf. I shouldn't feel that'd help me to start clean."

"See Ern's down and out," continued the tempter in his hushed and confidential voice. "Nobody won't give him a job."

Ruth trembled slightly, though she was smiling still and self-contained.

"You'll see to that now you're on high, won't you?" she said--"for my children's sake."

"It'd be doin Ern a good turn, too," Alf went on in the same low monotone.

"Brotherly," said Ruth. "But he mightn't see it that way."

"He wouldn't mind," continued Alf gently. "See he's all for Joe Burt and the classes now. Says you're keeping him back. Nothin but a burthen to him, he says. _Her and her brats_, as he said last night at the Institute. _Don't give a chap a chance_." Alf wagged his head. "Course he shouldn't ha said it. I know that. Told him so at the time afore them all. _Tain't right_--I told him straight--_your own wife and all_."

"My Ern didn't say that, Alf," Ruth answered simply.

His eyes came seeking hers furtively, and were gone instantly on meeting them.

"Then you won't do him a good turn?"

Ruth's fine eyes flashed and danced, irony, laughter, scorn, all crossing swords in their brown deeps. There were aspects of Alf that genuinely amused her.

"Would you like to talk it over with him?" she asked.

"And supposing I have?"

"He'll be back in a moment," she said, sweet and bright. "I'll ask him."

Alf was silent, fumbling with his watch-chain. Then he began again in the same hushed voice, and with the same averted face.

"And there's another thing between us." His eyes were shut, and he was weaving to and fro like a snake in the love-dance. "Sorry you're trying to make bad blood between me and my old dad," he said. "Very sorry, Ruth."

"I aren't," Ruth answered swiftly. "You was always un-friends from the cradle, you and dad. See he don't think you're right." She added a little stab of her own--"No one does. That's why they keep you on as sidesman, Mr. Chislehurst says. Charity-like. They're sorry for you. So'm I."

The words touched Alf's vital spot--the conceit that was the most obvious symptom of his insanity. His face changed, but his voice remained as before, stealthy and insinuating. He came a little closer, and his eyes caressed her figure covetously.

"You see I wouldn't annoy me, not too far, not if I was you, Ruth. You can go too far even with a saint upon the cross."

Ruth put out the tip of her tongue daintily.

"Crook upon the cross, don't you mean, Alf?"

He brushed the irrelevancy aside, shooting his head across to hers. His face was ugly now, and glistening. With deliberate insolence he flicked a thumb and finger under her nose.

"And I do know what I do know, and what nobody else don't know only you and me and the Captin, my tuppenny tartlet."

She was still and white, formidable in her very dumbness. He proceeded with quiet stealth.

"See that letter I wrote you used to hold over against me before you married--that's destroyed now. And a good job, too, for it might have meant trouble for Alfured. But it's gone! I _know_ that then. Ern told me. He's a drunkard, old Ern is; but he's not a liar. I will say that for my brother; I will stick up for him if it was ever so; I will fight old Ern's battles for him."

"As you're doin now," said Ruth.

Alf grinned.

"And the short of it all is just this, Ruthie," he continued, and reaching forth a hand, tapped her upon the shoulder--"I got you, and you ain't got me. And I can squeeze the heart out of that great bosom o yours"--he opened and clenched his hand in pantomine--"if I don't get my way any time I like. So just you think it over! Think o your children if you won't think of nothing else!"

Outside in the road he ran into Joe, who gripped him.

"What you come after?" asked the engineer ferociously.

"After my rent," answered Alf, shouting from fear. Joe looked dangerous, but loosed his hold.

"How much?" he asked, taking a bag from his pocket.

"Sixteen shilling. You can see for yourself."

Obliging with the obligingness of the man who is scared to death, Alf produced his book. Joe, lowering still, examined it. Then he paid the money into the other's hand. That done he escorted Alf policemanwise to the bottom of Borough Lane.

"If A find you mouchin round here again A'll break your bloody little back across ma knee," he told the other, shouldering over him. "A mean

it, sitha!"

Alf withdrew up the hill towards the _Star_. At a safe distance he paused and called back confidentially, his face white and sneering,

"Quite the yard-dog, eh? Bought her, ain't yer?"

Joe returned to the cottage and entered.

At the head of the stairs a lovely little figure in a white gown that enfolded her hugely like a cloud, making billows about the woolly red slippers which had been Bess Trupp's Christmas gift, smiled at him.

"Uncle Joe," little Alice chirped, "please tell Mum I are ready."

He ran up the stairs, gathered her in his arms, and bore her back to bed in the room where Susie and Jenny already slept.

"Hush!" she whispered, laying a tiny finger on his lips--"The little ones!"

He tucked her up and kissed her.

"You're the proper little mother, aren't you?" he whispered.

In the kitchen he found Ruth, a row of tin-tacks studding her lips, soling Alice's boots. The glint of steel between her lips, and the inward curl of her lips, gave her a touch of unusual grimness.

"Always at it," he said.

"Yes," she answered between muffled lips. "Got to be. Snob this time. Only the soles are rotten. It's like puttin nails into wet brown paper."

She was suffering terribly--he felt it; and suppressed accordingly. But if her furnaces were damped down, he could hear the flames roaring behind closed doors; and her passion, which typified for him the sufferings of those innocent millions to the redemption of whom he had consecrated his life, moved him profoundly.

He flung the bag on the table before her almost savagely. It jingled as it fell and squatted there, dowdy, and lackadaisical as a dumpling in a swoon.

Ruth eyed it, her lips still steel-studded.

"How much?" she mumbled.

"Ten pound," he answered.

"That's not what I mean."

"What _do_ you mean, then?"

"What's the price?"

He glared at her; then thumped the table with a great fist.

"Nothin then!" he shouted. "What doest' take me for?"

She munched her tin-tacks sardonically, regarding him.

How sturdy he was, with his close curly black hair, and on his face the set and resolute look of the man approaching middle-age, who knows that he wants and how to win it!

"A man, Joe."

He snorted sullenly.

"Better'n a no-man any road," he sneered.

The words stung her. All the immense and tender motherliness of her nature rose up like a wave that curls in roaring majesty to a fall. She swept the tin-tacks from her mouth and met him, flashing and glorious.

"See here, Joe!" she cried, deep-voiced as a bloodhound. "Ne'er a word against my Ern! I won't have it."

"_Your_ Ern!"

She was white and heaving.

"Yes, my Ern! He's down and out, and you take advantage to come up here behind his back and insult him--and me. You're the one to call anudder man a no-man, aren't you?" Taking the bag of money she tossed it at him with a flinging scorn that was magnificent.

"Take your filth away--and yourself with it!"

He went, humbled and ashamed.

She watched him go--this sanguine, well-conditioned man, with his good boots, his sensible clothes, his air of solid prosperity.

Then she sat down, spent. Her savagery had been largely defensive. Like the brave soldier she was she had attacked to hide the weakness of her guard. She was sick at heart; worn out. These men ... first Alf, then Joe ... This champing boar, foam in the corner of his lips ... that red-eyed weasel squealing on the trail....

An hour later Ern came home.

She knew at once from the wan look of him that he had been tramping all day on an empty stomach. That, with all his faults, was Ern. So long as there was a crumb in the cupboard she and the children should share

it: he would tighten his belt. Even now he just sat down, an obviously beaten man, and did not ask for a bite. What she had she put before him; and it was not much.

"Any luck, Ern?" she asked with a touch of tenderness.

Sullenly he shook his head.

"Walked my bloody legs off on an empty belly, and got a mouthful of insults at the end of it," he muttered. "That's all I got. That's all they give the working man in Old England. Joe's right. Sink the country! Blast the bloody Empire! That's all it's good for!"

It was the first time he had ever used bad language in her presence. That gradual demoralisation which unemployment, however caused, and its consequences brings inevitably in its train was already showing its corrupt fruits. The tragedy of it moved her.

"Joe's been up," she said after a bit.

"I met him," he answered. He was warmer after his meal, less sullen, and drew up his chair from habit before the fireless range. "He wants me to go North--to his folk. Says his brother-in-law can find me a job. Runs a motor-transport business in Oldham."

Her back was to him at the moment.

"Does he?" she asked quietly. "What about me and my children?"

"That's what I says to him."

"What did he say?"

"Said he'd look after you and them."

Ruth was still as a mouse awaiting the cat's pounce.

"And what did you say to that?"

"Told him to go to hell."

Ruth stirred again and resumed her quiet busyness.

"Alf's been up again," she told him. "Messin round."

CHAPTER XIX

PITCHED BATTLE

Mrs. Trubb happened on Ernie's mother next day in Church Street. The surgeon's wife, whenever she met Mrs. Edward Caspar, acted always

deliberately on the assumption, which she knew to be unfounded, that relations between Ruth and her mother-in-law were normal.

"It's a nuisance this about Ernie," she now said. "Such a worry for Ruth."

The hard woman with the snow-white hair and fierce black eye-brows made a little sardonic moue.

"She's all right," she answered. "You needn't worry for her. There's a chap payin her rent."

Mrs. Trupp changed colour.

"I don't believe it," she said sharply.

"You mayn't believe it," retorted the other sourly. "It's true all the same. Alf's her landlord. He told me."

Mrs. Trupp, greatly perturbed, reported the matter to her husband. He tackled Alf, who at the moment was driving for his old employer again in the absence of the regular chauffeur.

Alf admitted readily enough that the charge against his sister-in-law was true.

"That's it, sir," he said. "It's that chap Burt. And he don't do what he done for nothin, I'll lay; a chap like that don't."

He produced his book from his pocket, and held it out for the other to see, half turning away with becoming modesty.

"I don't like it, sir--me own sister-in-law. And I've said so to Reverend Spink. Makes talk, as they say. Still it's no concern of mine."

Mrs. Trupp, on hearing her husband's report, went down at once to see Ruth and point out the extraordinary unwisdom of her action.

Ruth met her, fierce and formidable as Mrs. Trupp had never known her.

"It's a lie," she said, deep and savage as a tigress.

"It may be," Mrs. Trupp admitted. "But Alfred did show Mr. Trupp his book. And the rent had been paid down to last Monday. I think you should ask Mr. Burt."

That evening when Joe came up Ruth straightway tackled him.

She was so cold, so terrible, that the engineer was frightened, and lied.

"Not as I'd ha blamed you if you had," said Ruth relaxing ever so little. "It's not your fault I'm put to it and shamed afore em all."

The bitterness of the position in which Ern had placed her was eating her heart away. That noon for the first time she had taken the three elder children to the public dinner for necessitous children at the school. Anne Caspar who had been there helping to serve had smirked.

When Joe saw that the weight of her anger was turned against Ernie and not him, he admitted his fault.

"A may ha done wrong," he said. "But A acted for the best. Didn't want to see you in young Alf's clutches."

"You bide here," Ruth said, "and keep house along o little Alice. I'll be back in a minute."

Hatless and just as she was, she marched up to the Manor-house.

"You were right, 'M," she told Mrs. Trupp. "It were Joe. He just tell me. Only I didn't knaw nothin of it."

"It'll never do for you to be in his debt, Ruth," said the lady.

"No," Ruth admitted sullenly.

Mrs. Trupp went to her escritoire and took out sixteen shillings. Ruth took it.

"Thank-you," was all she said, and she said that coldly. Then she returned home with the money and paid Joe.

An hour later Ernie came in.

Ruth was standing at the table waiting him, cold, tall, and inexorable.

"Anything?" she asked.

Surly in self-defence, he shook his head and sat down.

She gave him not so much as a crumb of sympathy.

"No good settin down," she told him. "You ain't done yet. You'll take that clock down to Goldmann's after dark, and you'll get sixteen shillings for it. If he won't give you that for it, you'll pop your own great coat."

Ernie stared at her. He was uncertain whether to show fight or not.

"Dad's clock?--what he give me when I married?"

"Yes. Dad's clock."

She regarded him with eyes in which resentment flamed sullenly.

"Can I feed six on the shilling a week he gives me--rent and all?"

Ernie went out and brought back the money. She took it without a word, and wrapping it up in a little bit of paper, left it at the Manor-house.

Mrs. Trupp, who was holding a council with Bess and Bobby Chislehurst, unwrapped the packet and showed the money.

"She's put something up the spout," said the sage Bobby.

The three talked the situation over. There was only one thing to be done. Somebody must go round to Mr. Pigott and intercede for Ernie. Bobby was selected.

"You'll get him round if anybody can," Bess told her colleague encouragingly.

Bobby, shaking a dubious head, went. Mr. Pigott, like everybody else in Old Town, was devoted to the young curate; but he presented a firm face now to the other's entreaties.

"Every chance I've given him." he said, and scolded and growled as he paced to and fro in the little room looking across Victoria Drive on to the allotments. "He's a lost soul, is Ernie Caspar. That's my view, if you care for it."

Bobby retreated, not without hope, and bustled round to Ruth.

"You must go and see him!" he rapped out almost imperiously--"yourself--this evening--after work--at 6.30--to the minute." He would be praying at that hour.

Ruth, who was fighting for her life now, went.

Mr. Pigott, at the window, saw her coming.

"Here she comes," he murmured. "O dear me! You women, you know, you're the curse of my life. I'd be a good and happy man only for you."

Mrs Pigott was giggling at his elbow.

"She'll get round you, all right, my son," she said. "She'll roll you up in two ticks till you're just a little round ball of nothing in particular, and then gulp you down."

"She won't!" the other answered truculently. "You don't know me!" And he swaggered masterfully away to meet the foe.

Mrs. Pigott proved, of course, right.

Ruth's simplicity and beauty were altogether too much for the susceptible old man. He put up no real fight at all; but after a little bluff and bounce surrendered unconditionally with a good many loud words to salve his conscience and cover his defeat.

"It's only postponing the evil day, I'm afraid," he said; but he agreed to take the sinner back at a lower wage to do a more menial job--if he'd come.

"He'll come, sir," said Ruth. "He's humble. I will say that for Ern."

"Send him to me," said the old schoolmaster threateningly. "I'll dress him down. What he wants is to get religion."

"He's got religion, sir," answered simple Ruth. "Only where it is it's no good to him."

That evening, when Ern entered, heavy once again with defeat, she told him the news. At the moment she was standing at the sink washing up, and did not even turn to face him. He made as though to approach her and then halted. Something about her back forbade him.

"It shan't happen again, Ruth," he said.

She met him remorseless as a rock of granite.

"No, not till next time," she answered.

He stood a moment eyeing her back hungrily. Then he went out.

He was hardly gone when his father lumbered into the kitchen. The old gentleman's eyes fell at once on the clock-deserted mantel-piece.

"Gone to be mended," he said to himself, and took out of his waistcoat pocket the huge old gold watch with a coat of arms on the back, beloved of the children, that had itself some fifteen years before made a romantic pilgrimage to Mr. Goldmann's in Sea-gate. Then he bustled to the cupboard where was the box containing a hammer and a few tools. He put a nail in the wall, hammered his thumb, sucked it with a good deal of slobber, but got the nail in at last.

"Without any help too," he said to himself, not without a touch of complacency as he hung the watch on it. Ruth watched him with wistful affection. Pleased with himself and his action, as is only the man who rarely uses his hands, he stood back and admired his work.

"There!" he said. "Didn't know I was a handy man, did you? It'll keep you going anyway till the clock comes back."

He left more hurriedly than usual, and when he was gone Ruth found two shillings on the mantel-piece.

The old man's kindness and her own sense of humiliation were too much for Ruth. She went out into the back-yard; and there Joe found her, standing like a school-girl, her hands behind her, looking up at the church-tower.

Quietly he came to her and peeped round at her face, which was crumpled and furrowed, the tears pouring down.

"I'd as lief give up all together for all the good it is," she gulped between her sobs.

He put out his hand to gather her. She turned on him, her eyes smouldering and sullen beneath the water-floods.

"Ah, you, would you?" she snarled.

As she faced him he saw that the brooch she usually wore at her throat was gone, and her neck, round and full, was exposed.

She saw the direction of his eyes.

"Yes," she said, "that's gone too. I'll be lucky soon if I'm left the clothes I stand up in."

He put out a sturdy finger and stroked her bare throat. She struck it aside with ferocity.

"What _do_ you want then?" he asked.

"You know what I want," she answered huskily.

"What's that?"

"A man--to make a home and keep the children."

"Well, here's one a-waitin."

She flung him off and moved heavily into the kitchen.

Just then there was a tap at the window. It was little Alice calling for her mother to come and tuck her up.

CHAPTER XX

THE VANQUISHED

When Colonel and Mrs. Lewknor called at the Manor-house a few days later, Mrs. Trupp told them what had happened.

"Burt paid her rent?" queried the Colonel.

"Without her knowledge," said Mrs. Trupp.

The Colonel shrugged.

"I'm afraid our friend Ernie's a poor creature," he said. "Wishy-washy! That's about the long and short of it."

"And yet he's got it in him!" commented Mrs. Trupp.

"That's what I say," remarked Mrs. Lewknor with a touch of aggressiveness. The little lady, with the fine loyalty that was her characteristic, never forgot whose son Ernie was, nor her first meeting with him years before in hospital at Jubbulpur. "He's got plenty in him; but she don't dig it out."

"He got a good fright though, this time," said Bess. "It may steady him."

Mr. Trupp shot forth one of his short epigrams, solid and chunky as a blow from a hammer.

"Men won't till they must," he said. "It's Must has been the making of Man. He'll try when he's got to, and not a moment before."

Ten minutes later Colonel and Mrs. Lewknor were walking down Church Street towards the station. Just in front of them a woman and two men were marching a-breast. The woman was flanked by her comrades.

"What a contrast those two men make," remarked the Colonel. "That feller Burt's like a bull!"

"Too like," retorted Mrs. Lewknor sharply. "Give me the fellow who's like a gentleman."

The Colonel shook his head.

"Flame burns too feebly."

"But it burns pure," snapped the little lady.

Both parties had reached the foot of the hill at the Goffs when the woman in front swerved. It was the motion of the bird in flight suddenly aware of a man with a gun. She passed through the stile and fled swiftly across Saffrons Croft. The men with her, evidently taken by surprise, followed.

Only the Colonel saw what had happened.

A tall man, coming from the station, had turned into Alf's garage.

"Royal," he said low to his companion.

Captain Royal had come down to Beachbourne to see Alf Caspar, who wanted more capital for his Syndicate which was prospering amazingly. Alf, indeed, now that he had established his garages in every important centre in East Sussex, was starting a Road-touring Syndicate to exploit for visitors the hidden treasures of a country-side amazingly rich in historic memories for men of Anglo-Saxon blood. The Syndicate was to begin operations with a flourish on the Easter Bank Holiday, if the necessary licence could be obtained from the Watch Committee; and Alf

anticipated little real trouble in that matter.

Mrs. Trupp and her daughter, who had never forgiven Alf for being Alf, watched the growing prosperity of the Syndicate and its promoter with undisguised annoyance.

"It beats me," said Bess, "why people back the little beast. Everybody knows all about him."

Next day as they rode down the valley towards Birling Gap, Mr. Trupp expounded to his daughter the secret of Alf's success.

"When you're as old as I am, my dear, and have had as long an experience as I have of this slip-shod world, you'll know that people will forgive almost anything to a man who gets things done and is reliable. Alf drove me for nearly ten years tens of thousands of miles; and I never knew him to have a break-down on the road. Why?--because he took trouble."

Alf, indeed, with all his amazing deficiencies, mental and moral, was a supremely honest workman. He never scamped a job, and was never satisfied with anything but the best. He was gloriously work-proud. A hard master, he was hardest on himself, as all the men in his yard knew. One and all they disliked him; one and all they respected him--because he could beat them at their own job. His work was his solitary passion, and he was an artist at it. Here he was not even petty. Good work, and a good workman, found in him their most wholehearted supporter.

"That's a job!" he'd say to a mechanic. "I congratulate you."

"You should know, Mr. Caspar," the man would answer, pleased and purring. For Alf's reputation as the best motor-engineer in East Sussex was well-established and well-earned. And because he was efficient and thorough the success of his Syndicate was never in doubt.

Alf was on the way now, in truth, to becoming a rich man. Yet he lived simply enough above his original garage in the Goffs at the foot of Old Town. And from that eyrie, busy though he was, he still made time to watch with interest and pleasure his brother's trousers coming down and indeed to lend a helping hand in the process: for he worked secretly on his mother, who regarded Ernie when he came to Rectory Walk to take his father out with eyes of increasing displeasure; for her eldest son was shabby and seedy almost now as in the days when he had been out of work after leaving the Hohenzollern. The word failure was stamped upon him in letters few could mis-read. And Anne Caspar had for all those who fail, with one exception, that profound sense of exasperation and disgust which finds its outlet in the contemptuous pity that is for modern man the camouflaged expression of the cruelty inherent in his animal nature. It seemed that all the love in her--and there was love in her as surely there is in us all--was exhausted on her own old man. For the rest her attitude towards the fallen in the arena was always _Thumbs down_--with perhaps an added zest of rancour and resentment because of the one she spared.

"She has brought you low," she commented one evening to Ernie in that pseudo-mystical voice, as of one talking in her sleep, from the covert of which some women hope to shoot their poisoned arrows with impunity. This time, however, she was not to escape just punishment.

Ernie flared.

"Who says she has then?"

Anne Caspar had struck a spark of reality out of the moss-covered flint; and now--as had happened at rare intervals throughout his life--Ernie made his mother suddenly afraid.

"Everyone," she said, lamely, trying vainly to cover her retreat.

"Ah," said Ernie, nodding. "I knaw who, and I'll let him knaw it too."

"Best be cautious," replied his mother with a smirk. "He's your landlord now. And you're behind."

Ernie rose.

"He may be my landlord," he cried. "But I'm the daddy o he yet."

Sullenly he returned to the house that was now for him no home: for the woman who had made it home was punishing not without just cause the man who had betrayed it.

Ruth was standing now like a rock in the tide-way, the passions of men beating about her, her children clinging to her, the grey sky of circumstance enfolding her.

She had sought adventure and had found it. Battle now was hers; but it was battle stripped of all romance. Danger beset her; but it was wholly sordid. The battle was for bread--to feed her household; and soap--to keep her home and children clean. The danger was lest all the creeping diseases and hideous disabilities contingent upon penury, unknown even by name except in their grossest form to the millions whose lot it is to face and fight them day in, day out, should sap the powers of resistance of her and hers, and throw them on the scrap-heap at the mercy of Man, the merciless.

Tragic was her dilemma. To Ruth her home was everything because it meant the environment in which she must grow the souls and bodies of her children. And her home was threatened. That was the position, stark and terrible, which stared her in the eyes by day and night. The man provided her by the law had proved a No-man, as Joe called it. He was a danger to the home of which he should have been the support. And while her own man had failed her, another, a true man as she believed, was offering to take upon his strong and capable shoulders the burthen Ernie was letting fall.

Ruth agonised and well she might. For Joe was pressing in upon her, overpowering her, hammering at her gate with always fiercer insistence. Should she surrender?--should she open the gate of a citadel of which the garrison was starved and the ammunition all but spent?--should she fight on?

Through the muffled confusion and darkness of her mind, above the tumult of cries old and new besetting her, came always the still small voice, heard through the hubbub by reason of its very quiet, that said--Fight. Inherently spiritual as she was, Ruth gave ear to it, putting forth the whole of her strength to meet the enemy, who was too much her friend, and overthrow him.

Yet she could not forget that she owed her position to Ernie, since at every hour of every day she was being pricked by the ubiquitous pin of poverty. Fighting now with her back to the wall, for her home and children, and stern because of it, she did not spare him. When Ernie called her hard, as he was never tired of doing, she answered simply,

"I got to be."

"No need to bully a chap so then," Ernie complained. "A'ter all I am a human being though I may be your husband."

"You're not the only one I got to think of," replied Ruth remorselessly. "And it's no good talking. I shan't forgive you till you've won back the position you lost when he sack you. Half a dollar a week makes just the difference between can and can't to me. See, I can't goo to the wash-tub now as I could to make up one time o day when I'd only the one. So I must look to you. And if I look in vain you got to hear about it. I mean it, Ernie," she continued. "I'm fairly up against it. There's no gettin round me this time. And if you won't think o me, you might think o the children. It's they who suffer."

She had touched the spot this time.

"Steady with it then!" cried Ernie angrily. "Don't I think o you and the children?"

"Not as you should," answered Ruth calmly. "Not by no means. We should come first. Four of them now--and twenty-two bob to keep em on. Tain't in reason."

She faced him with calm and resolute eyes.

"And it mustn't happen again, Ern," she said. "See, it's too much. Nobody's fault but your own."

Ernie went out in sullen mood, and for the first time since the smash turned into the _Star_. He had not been there many minutes when a navvy, clouded with liquor, leaned over and inquired friendly how his barstards were.

Ern set down his mug.

"What's this then?" he asked, very still.

The fellow leaned forward, leering, a great hand plaistered on either knee.

"Don't you know what a bloody barstard is?" he asked. He was too drunk to be afraid; too drunk to be accountable. Ernie dealt with him as a doctor deals with a refractory invalid--patiently.

"Who's been sayin it?" he asked.

"Your own blood-brother--Alf."

Ernie tossed off his half-pint, rose, and went out.

He walked fast down the hill to the Goffs. People marked him as he passed, and the look upon his face: he did not see them.

Alf was in his garage, talking to a man. The man wore a burberry and a jaeger hat, with a hackle stuck in the riband. There was something jaunty and sword-like about him. Ern, as he drew rapidly closer, recognised him. It was Captain Royal. The conjunction of the two men at that moment turned his heart to steel.

He was walking; but he seemed to himself to be sliding over the earth towards his enemies, swift and stealthy as a hunting panther. As he went he clutched his fists and knew that they were damp and very cold.

When Ernie was within a hundred yards of him Royal, all unconscious of the presence of his enemy, swung out of the garage and walked off in his rapid, resolute way.

Alf went slowly up the steps into his office.

He was grinning to himself.

"'Alf a mo then!" said Ernie quietly, hard on his heels. "Just a word with you, Alf."

Alf turned, saw his brother crossing the yard, marked the danger-flare on his face, remembered it of old, and bolted incontinently, without shame, locking the house door behind him.

Ern hammered on the door.

Alf peeped out of an upper window, upset a jug of water over his brother, and in his panic fury flung the jug after it. It broke on Ernie's head and crashed to pieces on the step.

Ernie, gasping, and bleeding from the head, staggered back into the road, half-stunned. Then he began to tear off his sopping clothes and throw them down into the dust at his feet. His voice was quiet as his face, smeared with blood, was moved.

"You've got to ave it!" he called up to his brother. "May as well come and ave it now as wait for it."

There had been a big football match on the Saffrons, and the crowd were just flocking away, in mood for a lark. The drenched and bleeding man stripping in the road, the broken crockery on the door-step, the white-faced fellow at the window, promised just the sensation they sought. Joyfully they gathered to see. Here was just the right finale pleasant Saturday afternoon.

"I'm your landlord!" screamed Alf. "Remember that! I'll make you pay for this!"

"Will you?" answered Ernie, truculent and cool. "Then I'll have my money's worth first."

This heroic sentiment was loudly applauded by the crowd, who felt an added sympathy for Ern now they knew he was attacking his landlord, one of a class loathed by all good men.

Just then Joe Burt emerged from the crowd and took the tumultuous figure of Ernie in his arms.

"Coom, then!" he said. "This'll never do for a Labour Leader. This isna the Highway you should be trampin along."

The crowd protested. It was an exhilarating scene--better than the pictures, some opined. And here was a blighter, who talked funny talk, interfering.

"Just like these hem furriners," said an old man. "Ca-a-n't let well a-be."

Then, happily, or unhappily, the police, who exist to spoil the people's fun, appeared on the scene.

They made a little blue knot round Ernie, who stood in the midst of them, stripped and dripping, with something of the forlorn look of a shorn ewe that has just been dipped.

Alf, secure now in the presence of the officers of the law, descended from his window and came down the steps of his house towards the growing crowd. A tall man joined him. The pair forced their way through the press to the police.

"I'm Captain Royal," said the tall man, coldly. "I saw what happened."

Joe turned on the new-comer. His clothes, his class, a touch of insolence about his tone and bearing, roused all the combative instincts of the engineer.

"You wasn't standin by then!" he said ferociously. "You only just come up. A saw you."

The other ignored him, drawing a card from an elegant case.

"Here's my card," he said to the police. "If you want my evidence you'll know where to find me."

Joe boiled over.

"That's the gentleman of England touch!" he sneered. "Swear away a workin man's life for the price of half a pint, they would!"

"Ah! I know him!" muttered Ernie, white still, and trembling.

"Enough of it now," growled a big policeman, making notes in his pocket-book.

Just then the crowd parted and a woman came through. A shawl was wrapped about her head and face. Only her eyes were seen, dark under dark hair.

A moment she stood surrounded by the four men who had desired or possessed her. Then she put her hand on the shirt-sleeve of her husband.

"Ern," she said, and turned away.

He followed her submissively through the crowd, slipping his shirt over his head.

Swiftly the woman walked away up the hill. Her scarecrow, his trousers sopping and sagging about his boots, trudged behind.

The crowd looked after them in silence. Then Joe broke away and followed at a distance.

Ruth looked back and saw him.

"Let us be, Joe," she called.

Joe turned away. His eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER XXI

THUNDER

The two brothers had to appear before the Bench on Monday. As it chanced Mr. Pigott, Colonel Lewknor and Mr. Trupp were the only magistrates present.

Ernie, who appeared with his head bandaged, admitted his mistake.

"Went to pass the time o day with my brother," he said. "And all he done was to lean out of the window and crash the crockery down on the roof o me head. Did upset me a bit, I admit."

"He meant murder all right," was Alf's testimony, sullenly given. "He knows that."

Joe corroborated Ernie's statement.

He had been in the Saffrons on Saturday afternoon and had seen Ernie coming down the hill from Old Town. Having a message to give him he had started to meet him. Ernie had gone up the steps of his brother's house; and as he did so, Alf had leaned out of the upper window and thrown a jug down on his brother.

Alf's solicitor cross-examined the engineer at some length.

"What were you doing on the Saffrons?"

"Watching the football."

"You were watching the football; and yet you saw Caspar coming down Church Street?"

"I did."

"I suggest that you did nothing of the sort; and that you only appeared on the scene at the last moment."

"Well," retorted Joe, good-humouredly. "A don't blame you for that. It's what you're paid to suggest."

A witness who was to have given evidence for Alf did not appear; and the Bench agreed without retiring. Neither of the brothers had been up before the magistrates before and both were let off with a caution, Ernie having to pay costs.

"_Your_ tongue's altogether too long, Alfred Caspar," said Mr. Pigott, the Chairman, and added--quite unjudicially--"always was. And _you're_ altogether too free with your fists, Ernest Caspar."

Ernie left the court rejoicing; for he knew he had escaped lightly. Outside he waited to thank his friend for his support.

"Comin up along?" he coaxed.

"Nay, ma lad," retorted the engineer with the touch of brutality which not seldom now marked his intercourse with the other. "You must face the missus alone. Reck'n A've done enough for one morning."

Ern went off down Saffrons Road in the direction of Old Town, crest-fallen as is the man whose little cocoon of self-defensive humbug has suddenly been cleft by a steel blade.

Joe marched away down Grove Road. Alf caught him up. The little chauffeur was smiling that curds-and-whey smile of his.

"Say, Burt!--you aren't half a liar, are you?" he whispered.

Joe grinned genially.

"The Church can't have it all to herself," he said. "Leave a few of the lies to the laity."

Ern trudged back from the Town Hall, across Saffrons Croft, to the Moot, in unenviable mood; for he was afraid, and he had cause.

Ruth was who standing in the door came stalking to meet him, holding little Alice by the hand.

Ern slouched up with that admixture of bluff, lordly insouciance, and aggrieved innocence that is the honoured defence of dog and man alike on such occasions.

"You've done us," she said almost vengefully.

"What are I done then?" asked the accused, feigning abrupt indignation.

Ruth dismissed the child, and turned on Ernie.

"Got us turn into the street--me and my babies," she answered, splendidly indignant. "A chap's been round arter the house, while you was up before the beaks settlin whether you were for Lewes Gaol or not. Says Alf's let it him a week from Saraday, and we got to go. I wouldn't let him in."

"Ah," said Ernie stubbornly, "don't you worry. Alf's got to give us notice first. And he daren't do that."

Ruth was not to be appeased.

"Why daren't he, then?" she asked.

"I'll tell you for why," answered Ernie. "He's goin up before the Watch Committee come Thursday to get his licence for his blessed Touring Syndicate. We've friends on that Committee, good friends--Mr. Pigott, and the Colonel, not to say Mr. Geddes; and Alf knaws it. He ain't goin to do anythink to annoy them just now. Knaws too much, Alf do."

Ruth was not convinced.

"We got no friends," she said sullenly. "We shall lose em all over this. O course we shall, and I don't blame em. A fair disgrace on both of you, I call it. You're lucky not to have to do a stretch. And as to Alf, they've sack him from sidesman over it, and he'll never forgive us."

They were walking slowly back to the cottage, the man hang-dog, the woman cold.

Outside the door she paused.

"All I know is this," she said. "If you're out again through your own fault I'm done with it, and I'll tell you straight what I shall do, Ern."

She was very quiet.

"What then?"

"I shall leave you with your children and go away with mine." She stood with heaving bosom, immensely moved. "I ca-a'nt keep the lot. But I can keep one. And you know which one that'll be."

Ernie, the colour of dew, went indoors without a word.

The rumour that Alf had been dismissed from his position as sidesman at St. Michael's, owing to the incident in the Goffs, was not entirely true, but there was something in it.

The Archdeacon had his faults, but there was no more zealous guardian of the fair fame of the Church and all things appertaining to her.

Alf's appearance before the magistrates was discussed at the weekly conference of the staff at the Rectory.

Both Mr. Spink and Bobby Chislehurst were present. The former stoutly defended his protégé, and the Archdeacon heard him out. Then he turned to Bobby.

"What d'you say, Chislehurst?" he asked.

Bobby, in fact, could say little.

Ernie had no scruples whatever in suggesting what was untrue to the magistrates, who when on the Bench at all events were officials, and to be treated accordingly, but he would never lie to a man who had won his heart. He had, therefore, in answer to the Cherub's request given an unvarnished account of what had occurred. Bobby now repeated it reluctantly, but without modification.

"Exactly," said Mr. Spink. "There's not a tittle of evidence that Alfred really did say what he's accused of saying. And he denies it, point-blank."

"I think I'd better see him," said the Archdeacon.

Alf came, sore and sulking.

Mottled and sour of eye, he stood before the Archdeacon who flicked the

lid of his snuff-box, and asked whether he had indeed made the remark attributed to him.

"I never said nothing of the sort," answered Alf warmly, almost rudely. "Is it likely? me own sister-in-law and all! See here!" He produced his rent-book. "I'm her landlord. She's months behind. See for yourself! Any other man only me'd have turned her out weeks ago. But, of course, she takes advantage. She would. She's that sort. I never said a word against her."

"And there is plenty you could say," chimed in Mr. Spink, who had escorted his friend.

"Maybe there is," muttered Alf.

The Archdeacon made a grimace. In the matter of sex indeed if in no other, he was and always had been a genuine aristocrat--sensitive, refined, fastidious.

"Two of them get soaking together in the _Star_," continued Alf. "Then they start telling each other dirty stories and quarrellin. Ern believes it all and comes and makes a fuss. Mr. Pigott's chairman on the Bench. Course he lays it all on me--Mr. Pigott would. Ern can't do no wrong in his eyes--never could. Won't listen to reason and blames me along of him--because I'm a Churchman. See, he's never forgiven me leaving the Chapel, Mr. Pigott hasn't; and that's the whole story."

It was a good card to play; and it did its work.

"It's a cleah case to my mind of more sinned against than sinning," said the Archdeacon with a genuinely kind smile. "You had bad luck, Caspar--but a good friend." He shook hands with both young men. "I wish you well and offer you my sympathy. I think you should go and have a word of explanation with our friend, Mr. Pigott, though."

"Yes, sir," said Alf. "I'm goin now. I couldn't let it rest there."

Alf went straight on to interview the erring chairman in the little villa in Victoria Drive.

The latter, summing up his old pupil with shrewd blue eye in which there was a hint of battle, refused to discuss the case or his judgment.

"What's done is done," he said. "The law's the law and there's no goin back on it. You were lucky to get off so light; that's my notion of it."

Alf stood before him, hang-dog and resentful.

"He'll kill me one of these days," he muttered. "Little better than a bloody murderer."

There was a moment's pause, marked by a snort from Mr. Pigott.

Then the jolly, cosy man, with his trim white beard and neat little paunch, rose and opened the window with some ostentation.

"First time that word's ever crossed my threshold," he said. "And I've lived in this house ten year come Michaelmas." He turned with dignity on the offender. "Is that what they teach you in the Church of England, then, Alfred Caspar?" he asked. "It wasn't what we taught you in the Wesleyan Chapel in which you was bred. Never heard the like of it for language in all me life--never!" Before everything else in life Mr. Pigott was a strong chapel-man; and in his judgment Ern's weakness was as nothing to Alf's apostasy.

Alf looked foolish and deprecatory.

"I didn't mean in it the swearin way," he said--"not as Ernest would have meant it. I never been in the Army meself. I only meant he'll be the end o me one of these days. Good as said he would in the _Star_ Saturday."

Mr. Pigott turned away to hide the twinkle in his eye. He knew Alf well, and his weakness.

"He don't like you, I do believe," he admitted. "And he's a very funny fellow, Ern, when his hackle's up."

Alf's eyes blinked as they held the floor.

"And now," he said, "I suppose the Watch Committee'll not grant my licence for the Road-Touring Syndicate when it comes up afore em on Thursday. And I'll be a ruined man."

"I shouldn't be surprised," answered Mr. Pigott, who was an alderman and a great man on the Town Council.

Alf was furious. He was so furious, indeed, that he did a thing he had not done for years: he took his trouble to his mother.

"It's a regular plot," he said, "that's what it is. To get my licence stopped and ruin me. Raised the money; ordered the buses; engaged the staff and all. And then they spring this on me!--It ain't Ernie. I will say that for him. I know who's at the bottom of it."

"Who then?" asked his mother, faintly interested.

"Her Ern keeps."

Mrs. Caspar roused instantly.

"Isn't she married to him then?" she cried, peering over her spectacles.

"Is she?" sneered Alf. "That's all."

He leaned forward, his ugly face dreadful with a sneer.

"Do you know where she'd be if everyone had his rights?"

"Where then?"

"Lewes Gaol."

His message delivered, he sat back with a nod to watch its effect.

"And she would be there too," continued Alf, "only for me."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Caspar asked.

"I mean," answered Alf, "as I keep her out of prison by keepin me mouth shut." He dropped his voice. "And that ain't all. She's at it again ... Her home's a knockin-shop.... All the young men.... The police ought to interfere.... I shall tell the Archdeacon.... A kept woman.... That chap Burt.... That's how Ern makes good.... She makes the money he spends at the _Star_.... And your grand-children brought up in that atmosphere!" He struck the table. "But I'm her landlord all the same; and I'll make her know it yet."

Anne Caspar was genuinely disturbed not for the sake of Ruth, but for that of the children.

"You could never turn her out!" she said--"not your own sister-in-law and four children! Look so bad and all--and you a sidesman too."

Alf snorted.

"Ah, couldn't I?" he said. "You never know what a man can do till he tries."

That evening the Colonel and Mrs. Lewknor walked over to the Manor-house to discuss Ern's latest misadventure. They found Mr. Pigott there clearly on the same errand; but the old Nonconformist rose to go with faintly exaggerated dignity on seeing his would-be enemy.

"There's only one thing'll save him now," he announced in his most dogmatic style.

"What's that?" asked Mrs. Trupp.

"H'a h'earthquake," the other answered.

When the Colonel and his wife left the Manor-house half-an-hour later there were three people walking abreast down the hill before them, just as there had been on a previous occasion. Now, as then, the centre of the three was Ruth. Now, as then, on her left was Joe. But on her right instead of Ern was little Alice.

The Colonel pointed to the three.

"I'll back Caspar all the way," said Mrs. Lewknor firmly.

"Myself," replied the Colonel shrewdly, "I'll back the winner."

Then he paused to read a placard which gave the latest news of the Ulster campaign.

PART II

TROUBLED DAWN

CHAPTER XXII

THE BETRAYAL

The Ulster Campaign was moving forward now with something of the shabby and theatrical pomp of a travelling circus parading the outskirts of a sea-side town before a performance. A dromedary with an elongated upper lip, draped in the dirty trappings of a pseudo-Oriental satrap, led the procession, savage and sulking. Behind the dromedary came the mouldy elephant, the mangy bear, the fat woman exposing herself in tights on a gilt-edged Roman chariot, the sham cow-boys with gaudy cummerbunds, and Cockney accents, on untamed bronchos hired from the local livery stables, the horse that was alleged to have won the Derby in a by-gone century, etc. And the spectators gaped on the pavement, uncertain whether to jeer or to applaud.

As the Campaign rolled on its way, the wiser Conservatives shook their heads, openly maintaining that the whole business was a direct abnegation of everything for which their party had stood in history, while the Liberals became increasingly restive: Mr. Geddes, uneasy at the inaction of the Government, Mr. Geddes truculent to meet the truculence of the enemy. The only man who openly rejoiced was Joe Burt.

"The Tory Reds have lit such a candle by God's grace in England as'll never be put out," he said to Ernie.

The engineer had always now a newspaper cutting in his waistcoat pocket, and a quotation pat upon his lips.

"They're all shots for the locker in the only war that matters," he told the Colonel. "And they'll all coom in handy one day. A paste em into a lil book nights: _Tips for Traitors; an ammunition magazine_, A call it."

For him Sir Edward Carson's famous confession of faith, _I despise the Will of the People_--words Joe had inscribed as motto on the cover of his ammunition magazine--gave the key to the whole movement. And he never met the Colonel now but he discharged a broadside into the

helpless body of his victim.

It was not, however, till early in 1914, just when his pursuit of Ruth was at the hottest, that he woke to the fact that the Tories were tampering with the Army. That maddened Joe.

"If this goes on A shall go back to ma first love," he told Ruth with a characteristic touch of impudence.

"And a good job too," she answered tartly. "I don't want you."

"And you can go back to your Ernie," continued the engineer, glad to have got a rise.

"I shan't go back to him," retorted Ruth, "because I never left him."

The statement was not wholly true: for if Ruth had not left Ernie, since the affair of the Goffs she had according to her promise turned her back on him. When on the first opportunity that offered she had announced his fate to the offender, he had blinked, refused to understand, argued, insisted, coaxed--to no purpose.

"You got to be a man afoor I marry you again," she told him coldly. "I'm no'hun of a no-man's woman."

Ernie at first refused to accept defeat. He became eloquent about his rights.

"They're nothing to my wrongs," Ruth answered briefly; and turned a deaf ear to all his pleas.

Thereafter Ernie found himself glad to escape the home haunted by the woman he still loved, who tantalised and thwarted him. That was why when Joe girded on his armour afresh and went forth to fight the old enemy in the new disguise, Ernie accompanied him.

The pair haunted Unionist meetings, Ernie quiescent, the other aggressive to rowdiness. Young Stanley Bessemere, who had returned from Ireland (where he now spent all his leisure caracoling on a war-horse at the distinguished tail of the caracoling Captain Smith) to address a series of gatherings in his constituency in justification of the Ulster movement, and his own share in it, was the favoured target for his darts. Joe followed him round from the East-end to Meads, and from Meads to Old Town, and even pursued him into the country. He acquired a well-earned reputation as a heckler, and was starred as dangerous by the Tory bloods. Mark that man! the word went round.

Joe knew it, and was only provoked to increased aggressiveness.

"Go on, ma lad!" he would roar from the back of the hall. "Yon's the road to revolution aw reet!"

There came a climax at a meeting in the Institute, Old Town. Joe at question time had proved himself unusually bland and provocative. The

stewards had tried to put him out; and there had been a rough and tumble in the course of which somebody had hit the engineer a crack on the head from behind with the handle of a motor-car. Joe dropped; and Ernie stood over him in the ensuing scuffle. The news that there was trouble drew a little crowd. Ruth, on her evening marketings in Church Street, looked in. She found Joe sitting up against the wall, dazed; and Ernie kneeling beside him and having words with Stanley Bessemere, who was strolling towards the door.

"Brought his troubles on his own head," said the young member casually.

"Hit a man from behind!" retorted Ernie, quiet but rather white. "English, ain't it?"

"It was your own brother, then!" volunteered an onlooker.

Joe rallied, rubbed his head, looked up, saw Ruth and reassured her.

"A'm maself," he said.

He rose unsteadily on Ernie's arm.

"He must come home along of us," said Ruth.

"Of course he must then," Ernie answered with the asperity of the thwarted male.

The night-air revived the wounded man. Arrived at the cottage he sat in the kitchen, still a little stupid, but amused with his adventure.

"They'd ha kicked me in stoomach when A was down only for you, Ern," he said. "That's the Gentlemen of England's notion of politics, that is."

"You'd ha done the same by them, Joe, if you'd the chance," answered Ern.

The other grinned.

"A would that, by Guy--and all for loov," he admitted.

Ruth brought him a hot drink. He sipped it, one eye still on his saviour.

"I owe this to you, Ern. Here's to you!"

"Come to that, Joe, I owe you something," Ernie answered.

"What's that then?" Joe sat as a man with a stiff neck, screwing up his eye at the other.

Ern nodded significantly at Ruth's back.

"Why that little bit o tiddley you done for me afore the beaks," he whispered.

"That's nowt," answered Joe sturdily. "What was it Saul said to Jonathan--_If a feller can't tiddle it a liddel bit for his pal, what the hell use is he?_--Book o Judges."

Ruth in the background watched the two men. It was as though she were weighing them in the balance. There was a touch of masterful tenderness about Ern's handling of his damaged friend that surprised and pleased her.

Joe made an effort to get up.

"A'd best be shiftin," he said.

"Never!" cried Ern, authoritatively. "You'll bide the night along o us. She'll make you a bed on the couch here."

"Nay," said Ruth. "You'll sleep in the bed along o Ernie."

Joe eyed her.

"Where'll you sleep then?" he asked.

"In the spare room," Ruth answered, winking at Ernie.

There was no spare room; but she made up a shake-down for herself on the settle in the kitchen. Ernie, after packing away the visitor upstairs, came down to help her. It also gave him an opportunity to ventilate his grievance.

"One thing. It won't make much difference to me," he said.

"Your own fault," Ruth answered remorselessly. "And you aren't the only one, though I know you think you are. Men do ... We'd be out in the street now, the lot of us, only for Joe telling lies for you."

Next morning she took her visitor breakfast in bed and kept him there till Mr. Trupp had come, who told Joe he must not return to work for a week.

The engineer got up that afternoon and was sitting in the kitchen still rather shaky, when Alf, who had not fulfilled his threat and given Ruth notice, called for the rent.

Ruth greeted him with unusual friendliness.

"Come in, won't you?" she said--"while I get the money."

Alf, who in some respects was simple almost as Ernie, entered the trap to find Joe, huddled in a chair and glowering murder at him. He tried to withdraw, but Ruth stood between him and the door, twice his size, and with glittering eyes.

"There's a friend of yours," she said. "Saw him last night, at the

meeting, didn't you?--I thart you'd be glad to meet him."

Alf quaked.

"Been in the wars then?" he said shakily.

"What d'you know about it?" rumbled Joe.

"I don't know nothin," answered Alf sharply, almost shrilly.

Just then little Alice entered. Alf took advantage of her entrance to establish his line of retreat. Once set in the door with a clear run for the open his courage returned to him.

"And what may be your name?" he asked the child with deliberate insolence.

"Alice Caspar," she answered, staring wide-eyed.

Alf sneered.

"That it ain't--I know," he said, and went out without his rent, and laughing horribly.

Little Alice ran out again.

"What's he mean?" asked Joe.

Ruth regarded him with wary curiosity.

"Didn't Ern never tell you then?" she asked.

"Never!" said Joe.

Ruth was thoughtful. That was nice of Ern--like Ern--the gentleman in him coming out.

That night she softened to him. He noticed it in a flash and approached her--only to be repulsed abruptly.

"No," she said. "I don't care about you no more. You've lost me. That's where it is."

"O, I beg pardon," answered Ernie, quivering. "I thart we was married."

"So we was one time o day, I believe," Ruth answered. "And might be again yet. Who knaws?"

He stood over her as she composed herself for the night on the settle.

"How long's that Joe going to stop in my house?" he asked.

"Just as long as I like," she answered coolly.

Next day when Joe came in for tea he found Ruth sitting in the kitchen, nursing little Alice, who was crying her heart out on her mother's shoulder.

"They've been tormenting her at school," Ruth explained. "It's Alf."

"I'll lay it is," muttered Joe. "Ern and me, we'll just go round when he comes back from work."

Ruth looked frightened.

"Don't tell Ern for all's sake, Joe!" she whispered.

"Why not then?"

"He'd kill Alf."

Joe's face betrayed his scepticism.

"Ah, you don't knaw Ern, when he's mad," Ruth warned him.

An hour later Ernie came home. He was still, suppressed, as often now. There was nobody in the kitchen but Ruth.

"Where's your Joe, then?" he asked.

"He's left," Ruth answered.

Ernie relaxed ever so little.

"He might ha stopped to say good-bye," he muttered.

Ruth rose.

"I got something to tell you, Ern," she said.

He turned on her abruptly.

"It's little Alice. They've been getting at her at school--_that!_--you knaw."

Ernie was breathing hard.

"Who split?"

"Alf. He told Mrs. Ticehurst--I see him; and she told the lot."

Ern went out slowly, and slowly up the stairs in the dark to the children's room.

A little voice called--"Daddy!"

"I'm comin, sweet-heart," he answered tenderly.

He felt his way to the child's bed, knelt beside it, and struck a match. A tear like a star twinkled on her cheek. She put out her little arms to him and clasped him round the neck.

"Daddy, you _are_ my daddy, aren't you?" she sobbed, her heart breaking in her voice.

He laid his cheek against hers. Both were wet.

"Of course I am," he answered, the water floods sounding in his throat. "I'm your daddy; and you're my darling. And if we got nobody else we got each other, ain't we?"

Ruth, in the dark at the foot of the stairs, heard, gave a great gulp, and crept back to the kitchen.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COLONEL FACES DEFEAT

The Colonel, who throughout his life while making a great show of radical opinions in the mess for the benefit of his brother-officers had always voted quietly for the Conservative party on the ground that they made upon the whole less of a hash of Imperial affairs than their Liberal opponents was profoundly troubled by the proceedings in Ulster.

"The beggars are undermining the _morale_ of Ireland," he told Mr. Trupp. "And only those who've been quartered there know what that means."

"If you said they were undermining the foundations of Society I'd agree," the other answered. "Geddes says they've poisoned the wells of civilisation, and he's about right."

The Presbyterian minister, indeed, usually so sane and moderate, had been roused to unusual vehemence by the general strike against the law engineered by the Conservative leaders.

"It's a reckless gamble in anarchy with the country's destiny at stake," he said.

"And financed by German Jews," added Joe Burt.

As the Campaign developed and the success of the Unionists in tampering with the Army became always more apparent, the criticisms of the two men intensified. They hung like wolves upon the flank of the Colonel, pertinacious in pursuit, remorseless in attack.

"You can't get away from the fact that the whole Campaign is built on the power of the Unionists to corrupt the officers of the Army," said the minister. "Without that the whole thing collapses."

"And so far," chimed in Joe, "A must say it looks as if they were building on a sure foundation."

The Colonel, outwardly gay, was inwardly miserable that his beloved Service should be dragged in the mud.

"What can you say to them?" he groaned to Mr. Trupp.

"Why," said the old surgeon brusquely, "tell em to tell their own rotten Government to govern or get out. Let em hang half a dozen politicians for treason, and shoot the same number of soldiers for sedition--and the thing's done."

And the bitterness of it was that it looked increasingly as if the critics were right.

The Colonel came home one night from a rare visit to London in black despair.

"The British officer never grows up," he complained to his wife. "He's a perfect baby." His long legs writhed themselves into knots, as he sucked at his pipe. "Do you remember that charming little feller Cherry Dugdale, who commanded the Borderers at Umballa?"

"The shikari?--rather."

"He's joined the Ulster Volunteers as a private."

Mrs. Lewknor chuckled. She was a Covenanter sans phrase, fierce almost as the Archdeacon and delighting in the embarrassments of the Government.

"Just like him," she said. "Little duck!"

Then came the crash.

The Commander-in-Chief in Ireland sent for General Gough, commanding the 3rd Cavalry Brigade at the Curragh, and asked him what his action would be in the event of the Government giving him and his Brigade the alternative of serving against Ulster or resigning. Gough forthwith called a conference of his officers, and seventy out of seventy-five signified their intention to resign.

"We would rather not shoot Irishmen," they said.

On the evening after the news came through the Colonel was walking down Terminus Road when he heard a provocative voice behind him.

"What about it, Colonel?"

He turned to find Joe Burt at his heels.

"What about what?" asked the Colonel.

"This mutiny of the officers at the Curragh."

The Colonel affected a gaiety he by no means felt.

"Well, what's your view?"

Joe was enthusiastic.

"Why, it's the finest example of Direct Action ever seen in this coontry. And it's been given by the Army officers!--That's what gets me."

"What's Direct Action?" asked the Colonel. The phrase in those days was unknown outside industrial circles.

"A strike, and especially a strike for political purposes," answered Joe. "General Gough and his officers have struck to prevent Home Rule being placed on the Statute Book. What if a Trade Union had tried to hold up the coontry same road? It's what A've always said," the engineer continued, joyously aggressive. "The officers of the British Army aren't to be trusted except when their own party's in power."

The Colonel walked on to the club.

There he found young Stanley Bessemere, just back from Ireland, sitting in a halo of cigar-smoke, the hero of an amused and admiring circle, recording his latest military exploits.

"We've got the swine beat," he was saying confidently between puffs. "The Army won't fight. And the Government can do nothing."

The Colonel turned a vengeful eye upon him.

"Young man," he said, "are you aware that Labour's watching you? Labour's learning from you?"

"Labour be damned!" retorted the other with jovial brutality. "We'll deal with Labour all right when we've got this lot of traitors out of office."

"Traitors!" called Mr. Trupp, harshly from his chair. "You talk of traitors!--you Tories!--I voted for you at the last General Election for the first time in my life on the sole ground of national defence. D'you think I or any self-respecting man would have done so if we'd known the jackanape tricks you'd be up to?"

The two elderly men retired in dudgeon to the card-room.

"There's only one thing the matter with Ireland," grumbled the old surgeon. "And its always been the same thing."

"What's that?" asked the Colonel.

"The English politician," replied the other--"Ireland's curse."

Hard on the heels of the Curragh affair came the landing of arms from Krupp's, with the connivance, if not with the secret co-operation of the German Government, at Larne under the cover of the rebel Army, mobilised for the purpose. The Government wept a few patient tears over the outrage and did nothing.

The Colonel was irritated; Mr. Trupp almost vituperative.

"Geddes may say what he likes," remarked the former. "But I can't acquit the Government. They're encouraging the beggars to play it up."

"Acquit them!" fulminated the old surgeon. "I'd impeach them on the spot. The law in abeyance! British ports seized under the guns of the British fleet! Gangs of terrorists patrolling the roads and openly boasting they'll assassinate any officer of the Crown who does his duty; and the Episcopalian Church blessing the lot! And the Government does nothing. It's a national disgrace!"

"It's all very well, Mr. Trupp," said Mr. Glynde, the senior member for the Borough, who was present. "But Ulster has a case, and we must consider it."

"Of course Ulster has a case," the other answered sharply. "Nobody but a fool denies it. I'm attacking the Government, not Ulster. Let them restore law and order in Ireland. That's their first job. When they've done that it'll be time enough to consider Ulster's grievances. Where's all this going to lead us?"

"Hell," said the Colonel gloomily.

He was, indeed, more miserable than he had ever been in his life.

Other old Service men he met, who loathed the Government, looked on with amused or spiteful complacency at the part the Army was playing in the huge conspiracy against the Crown. The Colonel saw nothing but the shame of it, its possible consequences, and effect on opinion, domestic, imperial and European.

He walked about as one in a maze: he could not understand.

Then Mr. Geddes came to see him.

The tall minister was very grave; and there was no question what he came about--the Army Conspiracy.

The Colonel looked out of the window and twisted his long legs as he heard the other out.

"Dear little Gough-y!" he murmured at the end. "The straightest thing that walks the earth."

He felt curiously helpless, as he had felt throughout the Campaign;

unable to meet his adversaries except by the evasion and casuistical tricks his spirit loathed.

Mr. Geddes rose.

"Well, Colonel," he said. "I see no alternative but to resign my membership of the League. It's perfectly clear that if your scheme goes through it must be run by officers at the War Office. And I'm afraid I must add that it seems equally clear now that it will be run for political purposes by men who put their party before their country."

The Colonel turned slowly round.

"You've very kindly lent us St. Andrew's Hall for a meeting of the League next Friday. Do you cancel that?" he asked.

"Certainly not, Colonel," answered the minister. "By all means hold your meeting. I shall be present, and I shall speak." ...

It was not a happy meeting at St. Andrew's Hall, but it was a crowded one: for the vultures had sniffed the battle from afar. The Liberals came in force, headed by Mr. Pigott; while Joe Burt led his wolves from the East-end. Ernie was there, very quiet now as always, with Ruth; and Bobby Chislehurst, seeing them, took his seat alongside.

Fighting with his back to the wall, and well aware of it, the Colonel was at his very best: witty, persuasive, reasonable. What the National Service League advocated was not aggression in any shape, but insurance.

He sat down amid considerable and well-earned applause.

Then Mr. Geddes rose.

He had joined the League after Agadir, he said, after much perturbation and questioning of spirit, because he had been reluctantly convinced at last that the German menace was a reality. Yet what was the position to-day? The Conservative Party, which had preached this menace for years, had been devoting the whole of its energies now for some time past to fomenting a civil war in Ireland. They had gone so far as to arm a huge force that was in open rebellion against the Crown with rifles and machine-guns from the very country which they affirmed was about to attack us. And more remarkable still certain Generals at the War Office--he wouldn't mention names--

"Why not?" shouted Mr. Pigott.

It was not expedient; but he had in his pocket a letter from Mr. Redmond giving the name of the General who was primarily responsible for the sedition among the officers of the Army--a very highly placed officer indeed.

"Shame!" cried someone.

He thought so too. And this General, who was in the somewhat anomalous

position of being both technical military adviser to the rebel army in Ulster and the trusted servant of the Government at the War Office, was a man who for years past, so he understood, had preached the doctrine that war with Germany was inevitable, and had been for many years largely responsible for the preparation of our forces against attack from that quarter. To suggest that this officer and his colleagues were traitors was downright silly. What, then, was the only deduction a reasonable man could draw? The minister paused: Why, that the German peril was not a reality.

The conclusion was greeted with a howl of triumph from the wolves at the back.

"Hear! hear!" roared Mr. Pigott.

Joe Burt had jumped up.

"A'll tell you the whole truth about the German Bogey!" he bawled. "It's a put-up game by the militarists to force conscription on the coontry for their own purposes. Now you've got it straight!"

As he sat down amid tumultuous applause at one end of the hall a figure on the platform bobbed up as it were automatically. It was Alf.

"Am I not right in thinking that the gentleman at the back of the hall is about to pay a visit to Germany?" he asked urbanely.

"Yes, you are!" shouted Joe. "And A wish all the workin-men in England were comin too. That'd put the lid on the nonsense pretty sharp."

Then ensued something of a scene; the hub-bub pierced by Alf's shrill scream,

"_Who's payin for your visit?_"

The Archdeacon, a most capable chairman, restored order; and Mr. Geddes concluded his speech on a note of quiet strength. When he finally sat down man after man got up and announced his intention of resigning his membership of the League.

Outside the hall the Colonel stood out of the moon in the shadow of one of those trees which make the streets of Beachbourne singular and lovely at all times of the year. His work of the last six years had been undone, and it was clear that he knew it.

Ruth, emerging from the hall, looked across at the forlorn old man standing like a dilapidated pillar amid the drift of the dissipating crowd. She had herself no understanding of the rights and wrongs of the controversy to which she had just listened; her sympathies were not enlisted by either side. Only the human element, and the clash of personalities which had made itself apparent at the meeting, had interested her. But she realised that the tall figure across the road was the vanquished in the conflict; and her heart went out to him.

"They aren't worth the worrit he takes over them," she said discontentedly. "Let them have their war if they want it, I says. And when they've got it let those join in as likes it, and those as don't stay out. That's what I say.... A nice man like that, too--so gentle with it.... Ought to be ashamed of emselves; some of em."

Then she saw Mr. Chislehurst cross the road to his cousin, and she was comforted.

"He'll walk home with him.--Come on, Ernie."

It was striking ten o'clock. Ruth, who was in a hurry to get back to her babes, left in the charge of a neighbour, walked a-head. Ernie, on the other hand, wished to saunter, enjoying the delicious freshness of the spring night.

"Steady on then!" he said. "That's the Archdeacon in front, and Mr. Trupp and all."

"I knaw that then," replied Ruth with the asperity she kept for Ernie alone.

"Well, you don't want to catch them up."

They entered Saffrons Croft, which lay black or silver-blanched before them, peopled now only with tall trees. The groups of elms, thickening with blossoms, gathered the stars to their bosoms, and laid their shadows like patterns along the smooth sward. Beyond the threadbare tapestry of trees rose the solid earth-work of the Downs, upholding the brilliant night, encircling them as in a cup, and keeping off the hostile world. Ernie felt their strength, their friendship, the immense and unfailing comfort of them. A great quiet was everywhere, brooding, blessed. The earth lay still as the happy dead, caressed by the moon. But behind the stillness the thrust and stir and aspiration of new life quickening in the darkness, seeking expression, made itself manifest. Ernie was deliciously aware of that secret urge. He opened his senses to the rumour of it, and filled his being with the breath of this mysterious renaissance.

He stopped and sniffed.

"It's coming," he said. "I can smell it."

"It's come more like," answered Ruth. "The lilacs are out in the Manor-garden, and the brown birds singing in the ellums fit to choke theirsalves."

They walked on slowly across the turf. The lights of the Manor-house twinkled at them friendly across the ha-ha. Ernie's heart, which had been hardening of late to meet Ruth's hardness, thawed at the touch of spring. The doors of his being opened and his love leapt forth in billows to surround her. The woman in front paused as if responding to that profound sub-conscious appeal. Ern did not hurry his pace; but

she stayed for him in a pool of darkness made by the elms. Quietly he came up alongside.

"Ruth," he began, shy and stealthy as a boy-lover.

She did not answer him, but the moon lay on her face, firm-set.

"Anything for me to-night?"

He came in upon her with a quiet movement as of wings. She elbowed him off fiercely.

"A-done!" she said. "You're not half-way through yet--nor near it."

He pleaded, coaxing.

"I am a man, Ruth."

She was adamant.

"It's just what you are not," she retorted. He knew she was breathing deep; he did not know how near to tears she was. "You was one time o day--and you might be yet.--You got to work your ticket, my lad."

He drew back.

She walked on swiftly now, passing out of Saffrons Croft into the road. He followed at some distance down the hill past the Greys to the _Star_ corner. A man standing there pointed. He turned round to see Joe pounding after him.

"The tickets and badges coom to-night," the engineer explained. "A meant to have given you yours, as A did Mr. Geddes, at the meeting. But you got away. Good night! Friday! Three o'clock sharp! Don't forget."

Ruth had turned and was coming swiftly back towards them.

"Ain't you coming along then, Joe?" she called after him.

"Not to-night, thank-you, Ruth. A got to square up afore we go."

"I am disappointed," said Ruth disconsolately, and turned away down Borough Lane.

Ernie came up beside her quietly.

"That night!" he said. "Almost a pity you didn't stay where you was in bed and let Joe take my place alongside you."

"Hap it's what I've thart myself times," Ruth answered sentimentally.

"Only thing," continued Ernie in that same strangely quiet voice, "Joe wouldn't do it. D'is no fault of his'n. He is a man Joe is; even if

so be you're no'hun of a woman."

The two turned into the house that once had been their home.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PILGRIMS

Spring comes to Beachbourne as it comes to no other city of earth, however fair; say those of her children who after long sojourning in other lands come home in the evenings of their days to sleep.

The many-treed town that lies between the swell of the hills and the foam and sparkle of the sea sluicing deliciously the roan length of Pevensey Bay unveils her rounded bosom in the dawn of the year to the kind clear gaze of heaven and of those who to-day pass and repass along its windy ways. Birds thrill and twitter in her streets. There earlier than elsewhere the arabis calls the bee, and the hedge-sparrow raises his thin sweet pipe to bid the hearts of men lift up: for winter is passed. Chestnut and laburnum unfold a myriad lovely bannerets on slopes peopled with gardens and gay with crocuses and the laughter of children. The elms in Saffrons Croft, the beeches in Paradise, stir in their sleep and wrap themselves about in dreamy raiment of mauve and emerald. The air is like white wine, the sky of diamonds; and the sea-winds come blowing over banks of tamarisk to purge and exhilarate.

On the afternoon of such a day of such a spring in May, 1914, at Beachbourne station a little group waited outside the barrier that led to the departure platform.

The group consisted of Joe Burt, Ernie, and Ruth.

Ruth was peeping through the bars on to the platform, at the far end of which was a solitary figure, waiting clearly, he too, for the Lewes train, and very smart in a new blue coat with a velvet collar.

"It's Alf," she whispered, keen and mischievous to Joe, "Ain't arf smart and all."

Joe peered with her.

"He's the proper little Fat," said the engineer. "I'll get Will Dyson draw a special cartoon of him for the _Leader_."

Ruth preened an imaginary moustache in mockery of her brother-in-law.

"I'm the Managing Director of Caspar's Touring Syndicate, I am, and don't you forget it!" she said with a smirk.

"Where's he off to now?"

"Brighton, I believe, with the Colonel. Some meeting of the League," replied Ernie dully.

Just then Mr. Geddes joined them, and the four moved on to the platform.

The train came in and Alf disappeared into it.

A few minutes later the Colonel passed the barrier. He marked the little group on the platform and at once approached them.

Something unusual about the men struck him at once. All three had about them the generally degagé air of those on holiday bent. The minister wore a cap instead of the habitual wide-awake; and carried a rucksack on his back. Joe swung a parcel by a string, and Ernie had an old kit-bag slung across his shoulder. Rucksack, parcel, and kit-bag were all distinguished by a red label. The Colonel stalked the party from the rear and with manifold contortions of a giraffe-like neck contrived to read on the labels printed in large black letters, ADULT SCHOOL PEACE PARTY. Then he speared the engineer under the fifth rib with the point of his stick.

"Well, what y'up to now?" he asked sepulchrally.

"Just off to Berlin, Colonel," cried the other with aggressive cheerfullness, "Mr. Geddes and I and this young gentleman"--thrusting the reluctant Ernie forward--"one o your soldiers, who knows better now."

The Colonel began to shake hands all round with elaborate solemnity.

"Returning to your spiritual home while there is yet time, Mr. Geddes," he said gravely. "Very wise, I think. You'll be happier there than in our militarist land, you pacifist gentlemen."

The minister, who was in the best of spirits, laughed. The two men had not met since the affair of St. Andrew's Hall: and each was relieved at the open and friendly attitude of the other.

"Cheer up, Colonel," he said. "It's only a ten-days' trip." They moved towards the train and Ernie got in.

Mr. Geddes was telling the Colonel something of the origin and aims of the Adult School Union in general and of the Peace Party in particular.

"How many of you are going?" asked the Colonel.

"Round about a hundred," his informant answered--"working men and women mostly, from every county in England. Most trades will be represented." They would be billeted in Hamburg and Berlin on people of their own class and their own ideals. And next year their visit would be returned in strength by their hosts of this year.

"Interesting," said the Colonel. "But may I ask one question?--What good do you think you'll do?"

"We hope it will do ourselves some good anyhow," Joe answered in fine fighting mood. "Get to know each other. Draw the two peoples together.

Nation to nation, land to land.

"Stand oop on the seat, Ernie, and sing em your little Red-Flag piece.--He sings that nice he do.--And I'll give you a bit of chocolate."

Ernie did not respond and the Colonel came to his rescue.

"Well, I wish you luck," he sighed. "I wish all well-meaning idealists luck. But the facts of life are hard; and the idealists usually break their teeth on them.--Now I must join my colleague."

He moved on, catching up Ruth who had prowled along the platform to see if Alf was tucked safely away. The Colonel had not seen his companion since her husband had been up before the Bench.

"Well, how's he getting on?" he asked; and turned shrewdly to Ruth. "Have you been doing him down at home?" Something suppressed about Ernie had struck him.

Ruth dropped her eyelids suddenly. For a moment she was silent. Then she flashed up at him swift brown eyes in which the lovely lights danced mischievously.

"See I've hung him on the nail," she murmured warily; and nodded her head with the fierce determination of a child. "And I shan't take him off yet a bit. He's got to learn, Ern has." She was in delicious mood, sportive, sprightly, as a young hunter mare turned out into May pastures after a hard season.

They had come to Alf's carriage. He had taken his seat in a corner and pretended not to see them. Ruth tapped sharply at the window just opposite his face.

"Hullo, Alf!" she called and fled.

The little chauffeur rose and followed her swift and retreating figure down the platform. Far down the train Joe who was leaning out of a window exchanged words with her as she came up.

"I don't like it, sir," Alf said, low. "Dirty business I call it. Somebody ought to interfere if pore old Ern won't."

Joe now looked along the train at him with a scowl.

"Ah, you!" came the engineer's scolding voice, loud yet low. "Dirty tyke! Drop it!"

"Well, between you she ought to be well looked after," muttered the

Colonel getting into the carriage.

A fortnight later the Colonel was being driven home by Alf from a meeting of the League at Battle. Mrs. Lewknor, whose hostel was thriving now, had stood him the drive and accompanied him. It was a perfect evening as they slid along over Willingdon Levels and entered the outskirts of the town. Opposite the Recreation Ground Alf slowed down and, slewing round, pointed.

On a platform a man, bareheaded beneath the sky, was addressing a larger crowd than usually gathered at that spot on Saturday evenings.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Lewknor.

"The German party back," answered Alf. "That's Burt speaking, and Mr. Geddes alongside him."

The engineer's voice, brazen from much bawling, and yet sounding strangely small and unreal under the immense arch of heaven, came to them across the open.

"We've ate with em; we've lived with em; we've talked with em; and we can speak for em. I tell you _there can't be war and there won't be war with such a people_. It'd be the crime of Cain. Brothers we are; and brothers we remain. And not all the politicians and profiteers and soldiers can make us other."

The Colonel and Mrs. Lewknor got down and joined the crowd. As they did so the engineer, who had finished his harangue, was moving a resolution: That this meeting believes in the Brotherhood of Man and wishes well to Germany.

"I second that," said the Colonel from the rear of the crowd.

Just then Alf, who had left his car and followed the Colonel, put a question.

"Did not Lord Roberts say in 1912 at Manchester that Germany would strike when her hour struck?"

The man on the platform was so furious that he did not even rise from his chair to reply.

"Yes he did!" he shouted. "And he'd no business to! Direct provocation it was."

"Will not Germany's hour have struck when the Kiel Canal is open to Dreadnoughts?" continued the inquisitor smoothly. "And is it not the fact that the Canal is to be opened for this purpose in the next few days?"

These questions were greeted with booings mingled with cheers.

Mr. Geddes was rising to reply when Joe Burt leapt to his feet, roused and roaring.

He said men had the choice between two masters--Fear or Faith?--Which were we for?--Were we the heirs of Eternity, the children of the Future, or the slaves and victims of the Past?

"For maself A've made ma choice. A'm not a Christian in the ordinary sense: A don't attend Church or Chapel, like soom folk. But A believe we're all members one of another, and that the one prayer which matters--if said from the heart of men who believe in it and work for it--is _Our Father_: the Father of Jew and Gentile, English and German. And ma recent visit to Germany has confirmed me in ma faith in the people, although A couldna say as much for their rulers. Look about you! What do you see?--The sons and daughters of God rotting away from tuberculosis in every slum in Christendom, and the money and labour that should go to redeeming them spent on altar-cloths and armaments. Altar-cloths and armaments! Do your rulers never turn their thoughts and eyes to Calvary? There are plenty of em in your midst and plenty to see on em if you want to."

The engineer sat down.

"Muck!" said Mrs. Lewknor in her husband's ear.

"I'm not sure," replied the Colonel who had listened attentively; but he didn't wholely like it. Joe had always been frothy; but of old beneath the froth there had been sound liquor. Now somehow the Colonel saw the froth but missed the liquor. To his subtle and critical mind it seemed that the speaker's fury was neither entirely simulated nor entirely real. Habit was as much the motive of it as passion. It seemed to him the expression of an emotion once entirely genuine and now only partly so. An alloy had corrupted the once pure metal. He saw as clearly as a woman that Joe was no longer living simply for one purpose. _Turgid_ his wife had once called the engineer. For the first time the Colonel realised the aptness of the epithet.

Then he noticed Ruth on the fringe of the crowd. He was surprised: for it was a long march from Old Town, and neither Ernie nor the children were with her.

"Come to be converted by the apostles of pacifism, Mrs. Caspar?" he chaffed.

"No, sir," answered Ruth simply, her eyes on the platform. "I just come along to hear Joe. That's why I come." Her face lighted suddenly, "There he is!" she cried.

The engineer had jumped down from the platform and was making straight for her. Ruth joined him; and the two went off together, rubbing shoulders.

The Colonel strolled back towards the car: he was thoughtful, even grave.

Mrs. Lewknor met him with a little smile.

"It's all right, Jocko," she told him. "She's only playing with the man."

The Colonel shook his head.

"She's put up the shutters, and said she's out--to her own husband. It's a dangerous game."

"Trust Ruth," replied the other. "She knows her man."

"Perhaps," retorted the Colonel. "Does she know herself?"

CHAPTER XXV

RED IN THE MORNING

Joe Burt's rhetoric might not affect the Colonel greatly; but the impressions of Mr. Geddes, conveyed to him quietly a few days later in friendly conversation, were a different matter.

The Presbyterian minister was a scholar, broad-minded, open, honest. He had moreover finished his education at Berlin University, and had, as the Colonel knew, ever since his student days maintained touch with his German friends. Mr. Geddes had come home convinced that Germany was not seeking a quarrel.

"Hamburg stands to lose by war," he told the Colonel, "And Hamburg knows it."

"What about Berlin?" the other asked.

"Berlin's militarist," the other admitted. "And Berlin's watching Ulster as a cat watches a mouse--you find that everywhere; professors, soldiers, men in the street, even my old host, Papa Schumacher, the carpenter, was agog about it.--Was Ulster in Shetland?--Was the Ulster Army black?--Would it attack England?--Well, our War Office must know all about the stir there. And that makes me increasingly confident that something's happened to eliminate whatever German menace there may ever have been."

"Exactly what Trupp was saying the other day," the Colonel commented. "Something's happened. You and I don't know what. You and I never do. Bonar Law and the rest of em wouldn't be working up a Civil War on this scale unless they were certain Germany was muzzled; and what's more the Government wouldn't let em. The politicians may be fools, but they aren't lunatics."

A few evenings after this talk as the Colonel sat after supper in the

loggia with his wife, overlooking the sea wandering white beneath the moon, he ruminated between puffs upon the political situation, domestic and international, with a growing sense of confidence at his heart. Indeed there was much to confirm his hopes.

The year had started with Lloyd George's famous pronouncement that the relations between Germany and England had never been brighter. Then again there was the point Trupp had made: the astonishing attitude of the Unionist leaders, and the still more astonishing tolerance of the Government. Lastly, and far more significant from the old soldier's point of view, there was the action of Mr. Geddes's mystery-man who was no mystery-man at all. Everybody on the outermost edge of affairs knew the name of the General in question. Every porter at the military clubs could tell you who he was. Asquith had never made any bones about it. Redmond and Dillon had named him to Mr. Geddes. Yet if anybody could gauge the military situation on the Continent it was surely the man who, as Mr. Geddes had truly pointed out, had specialized in co-ordinating our Expeditionary Force with the Armies of France in the case of an attack by Germany. There he was sitting at the War Office, as he had sat for years past, in touch with the English Cabinet, _lié_ with the French General Staff, his ear at the telephone listening to every rumour in every camp in Europe, and primed by a Secret Service so able that it had doped the public at home and every chancellery abroad to believe that it was the last word in official stupidity. This was the man who had thrown in his lot with the gang of speculating politicians who had embarked upon the campaign that had so undermined discipline in the commissioned ranks of the Army that for the first time in history a British Government could no longer trust its officers to do their duty without question.

Now no one could say this man was hot-headed; nobody could say he was a fool. Moreover he was a distinguished soldier and to call his patriotism in question was simply ridiculous, as even Geddes admitted.

The Colonel had throughout steadfastly refused to discuss with friend or foe the ethics of this officer's attitude, and its effect on the reputation of the Army. But of one thing he was certain. No man in that officer's position of trust and responsibility would gamble with the destinies of his country--a gamble that might involve hundreds and thousands of innocent lives. His action might be reprehensible--many people did not hesitate to describe it in plainer terms; but he would never have taken it in view of its inevitable reaction on military and political opinion on the Continent unless he had been certain that the German attack, which he of all men had preached for so long as inevitable, would not mature or would not mature as yet.

What then was the only possible inference?

"Something had happened."

The words his mind had been repeating uttered themselves aloud.

"What's that, my Jocko?" asked Mrs. Lewknor.

The Colonel stretched his long legs, took his pipe out of his mouth, and sighed.

"If nothing has happened by Christmas 1915 I shall resign the secretaryship of the League and return with joy to the garden and the history of the regiment." He rose in the brilliant dusk like a spectre. "Come on, my lass!" he said. "I would a plan unfold."

She took his arm and they strolled across the lawn past the hostel towards the solid darkness of the Downs which enfolded them.

The long white house stood still and solitary in the great coombe that brimmed with darkness and was crowned with multitudinous stars. Washed by the moon, and warm with a suggestion of human busyness, the hostel seemed to be stirring in a happy sleep, as though conscious of the good work it was doing.

Mrs. Lewknor paused to look at it, a sense of comfort at her heart.

The children's beds out on the balcony could be seen; and the nurses moving in the rooms behind. Groups of parents, down from London for the week-end, strolled the lawn. A few older patients still lounged in deck-chairs on the terrace, while from within the house came the sound of laughter and someone playing rag-time. The little lady regarded the work of her hands not without a just sense of satisfaction. The hostel was booming. It was well-established now and had long justified itself. She was doing good work and earning honest money. This year she would not only pay for the grandson's schooling, but she hoped at Christmas to make a start in reducing the mortgage.

"Well," she said, "what about it now, doubting Thomas?"

"Not so bad for a beginning," admitted the Colonel.

"Who's going to send Toby to Eton?" asked the lady, cruelly triumphant. "And how?"

"Why, I am," replied the Colonel brightly--"out of my pension of five bob a week minus income tax."

Hugging each other's arms, they climbed the bank to the vegetable garden, which six years before had been turned up by the plough from the turf which may have known the tread of Caesar's legionaries. The raw oblong which had then patched the green with a lovely mauve was already peopled with trees and bushes, and rank with green stuff. The Colonel paused and sniffed.

"Mrs. Simpkins coming on ... I long to be back among my cabbages ... I bet if I took these Orange Pippins in hand myself I'd win first prize at the East Sussex Show.... That duffer, old Lingfield--He's no good."

They turned off into the yard where Mrs. Lewknor was erecting a garage, now nearly finished. The Colonel paused and stared up at it.

"My dear," he said, "I've got an idea. We'll dig the Caspars out of that hole in Old Town and put them in the rooms above the garage. I'll take him on as gardener and odd-job man. He's a first-rate rough gardener. He was showing me and Bobby his allotment only the other day. And as you know, the solitary ambition of my old age has been to have an old Hammer-man about me."

"And mine for you, my Jocko," mused Mrs. Lewknor, far more wary than her impulsive husband. "There are only three rooms though, and she's got four children already and is still only thirty or so."

The Colonel rattled on, undismayed.

"He'll be half a mile from the nearest pub here," he said.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Lewknor--"and further from the clutches of that Burt man, who's twice as bad as any pub."

"Ha, ha!" jeered the Colonel. "So you're coming round to my way of thinking at last, are you?"

Next evening, the Colonel, eager always as a youth to consummate his purpose, bicycled with his wife through Paradise to Old Town.

At the corner opposite the Rectory they met Alf Caspar, who was clearly in high feather. The Colonel dismounted for a word with the convener of the League.

"Well, Caspar," he said. "So you've got your licence from the Watch Committee, I hear."

Alf purred.

"Yes, sir. All O.K.--down to the men that'll blow the horn to give em a bit o music."

"When do you start?"

"Bank Holiday, sir. I was just coming up to tell mother we were through. Last char-a-banc came this afternoon--smart as paint."

The Colonel and Mrs. Lewknor walked on towards Church Street. At Billing's Corner, waiting for the bus, was Edward Caspar. He was peering at a huge placard advertising expeditions by Caspar's Road-touring Syndicate, to start on August 3rd.

The Colonel, mischievous as a child, must cross the road to his old Trinity compeer.

"Your boy's getting on, Mr. Caspar," he observed quietly.

The old man made a clucking like a disturbed hen.

"Dreadful," he said. "Dreadful."

Mrs. Lewknor laid two fingers on his arm.

"Mr. Caspar," she said.

He glanced down at her like a startled elephant. Then he seemed to thrill as though a wind of the spirit was blowing through him. The roses of a forgotten youth bloomed for a moment in his mottled cheeks. An incredible delicacy and tenderness inspired the face of this flabby old man.

"Miss Solomons!" he said, and lifting her little hand kissed it.

The Colonel withdrew discreetly; and in a moment his wife joined him, the lights dancing in her eyes.

"Pretty stiff!" grinned the Colonel--"in the public street and all."

They turned down Borough Lane by the _Star_ and knocked Ruth up.

She was ironing and did not seem best pleased to see the visitors. Neither did Joe Burt, who was sitting by the fire with little Alice on his knees.

The little lady ignored the engineer.

"Where are the other children?" she asked Ruth pleasantly.

"Where they oughrer be," Joe answered--"in bed."

The Colonel came to the rescue.

"Is Caspar anywhere about?" he asked.

"He's on his allotment, I reck'n," Ruth answered coldly. "Mr. Burt joins him there most in general every evening."

"Yes," said Joe, "and was on the road now when A was interfered with." He kissed little Alice, put her down, and rose. "Good evening, Colonel." And he went out sullenly.

Mrs. Lewknor, aware that negotiations had not opened auspiciously, now broached her project. Ruth, steadily ironing, never lifted her eyes. She was clearly on the defensive, suspicious in her questions, evasive and noncommittal in her replies. The Colonel became impatient.

"Mrs. Caspar might accept our offer--to oblige," he said at last.

Ruth deliberately laid down her iron, and challenged him: she said nothing.

Mrs. Lewknor felt the tension.

"Well, think it over, will you?" she said to Ruth. "There's no hurry."

She went out and the Colonel followed.

"That man's the biggest humbug unhung even for a Labour man," snapped the little lady viciously. "Preaching the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and then this!"

"I'm not sure," replied the Colonel, "not sure. I think he's much the same as most of us--an honest man who's run off the rails."

They were bicycling slowly along Victoria Drive. On the far side of the allotments right under the wall of the Downs, blue in the evening, a solitary figure was digging.

"The out-cast," said the Colonel.

Mrs. Lewknor dismounted from her bicycle and began wheeling it along the unfenced earthen path between the gardens, towards the digger. Ernie barely looked up, barely answered her salutation, wiping the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand as he continued his labour. The lady retired along the way she had come.

"There's something Christ-like about the feller," said the Colonel quietly as they reached the road.

"Yes," the little lady answered. "Only he's brought his troubles on his own head."

The Colonel drew up in haste.

"Hullo," he said, and began to read a newspaper placard, for which class of literature he had a consuming passion.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE AVALANCHE MOVES

The placard, seen by the Colonel, announced the opening of a new scene in the Irish tragedy.

The King had summoned a Conference at Buckingham Palace in order if possible to find a solution of the difficulty. When the Conference met the King opened it in person and, speaking as a man weighed down by anxiety, told the members that for weeks he had watched with deep misgivings the trend of events in Ireland. "To-day the cry of Civil War is on the lips of the most responsible of my people," he said; and had added, so Mr. Trupp told the Colonel, in words not reported in the Press, that the European situation was so ominous as imperatively to demand a solution of our domestic differences in order that the nation might present a solid front to the world.

"And I bet he knows," ended the old surgeon, as he said good-bye on the steps of the Manor-house.

"I bet he does," replied the Colonel. "Thank God there's one man in the country who's above party politics." He climbed thoughtfully on to the top of the bus outside the _Star_, and, as it chanced, found himself sitting beside Ernie, who was deep in his paper and began to talk.

"They ain't got it all their own way, then," he said, grimly. "I see the Irish Guards turned out and lined the rails and cheered Redmond as he came down Birdcage Walk back from the Conference."

"I don't like it," replied the Colonel gloomily. "Rotten discipline. The Army has no politics."

"What about the officers at the Curragh?" asked Ernie almost aggressively. "They begun it. Give the men a chance too."

"Two wrong things don't make a right," retorted the Colonel sharply.

Ernie got down at the station without a word. Was it an accident the Colonel, sensitive as a girl, asked himself? was it a deliberate affront? What was the world coming to? That man an old Hammer-man! One of Bobby Bermondsey yahoos wouldn't treat him so!

Indeed the avalanche was now sliding gradually down the mountain-side, gathering way as it went, to overwhelm the smiling villages sleeping peacefully in the valley.

Next day oppressed by imminent catastrophe, the Colonel, climbing Beau-nez in the afternoon to take up his habitual post of vigil by the flag-staff, found Joe Burt and Mr. Geddes already there.

Both men, he marked, greeted him almost sombrely.

"It looks to me very serious," he said. "Austria means to go for Serbia, that's clear; and if she does Russia isn't going to stand by and see Serbia swallowed up. What d'you think, Mr. Geddes?"

The other answered him on that note of suppressed indignation which characterised increasingly his utterance when he touched on this often discussed subject.

"I think Colonel, what I've thought all along," he answered: "that if we're in the eve of a European eruption the attitude of the officers of the British Army is perfectly _inexplicable_."

He was firm almost to ferocity.

"Hear! hear!" growed Joe.

"But they don't know, poor beggars!" cried the Colonel, exasperated yet appealing. He felt as he had felt throughout the controversy that he

was fighting with his hands tied behind his back. "Do be just, Mr. Geddes. They are merely the playthings of the politicians. O, if you only knew the regimental officer as I know him! He's like that St. Bernard dog over there by the coast-guard station--the most foolish and faithful creature on God's earth. Smith pats him on the head and tells him he's a good dorg, and he'll straightway beg for the privilege of being allowed to die for Smith. What's a poor ignorant devil of a regimental officer quartered at Aldershot or the Curragh or Salisbury Plain likely to know of the European situation?"

The tall minister was not to be appeased.

"Ignorance seems to me a poor justification for insubordination in an Army officer," he said. "And even if one is to accept that excuse for the regimental officers, one can't for a man like the Director of Military Strategics, who is said to have specialised in war with Germany. Yet that is the man who has co-operated, to put it at the mildest, in arming a huge rebel force with guns from the very country he has always affirmed _we're bound to fight_. It's stabbing the Empire in the back, neither more nor less."

He was pale, almost dogmatic.

Then Joe barged in, surly and brutal.

"The whole truth is," he said, "that the officers of the British Army to-day don't know how to spell the word Duty. Havelock did. Gordon did. And all the world respected them accordingly. These men don't. They've put their party before their coontry as A've always said they would when the pinch came."

The Colonel was trembling slightly.

"If the test comes," he said, "we shall see."

"The test _has_ come," retorted the other savagely, "And we _have_ seen."

The Colonel walked swiftly away. In front of him half a mile from the flag-staff, he marked a man standing waist-deep in a clump of gorse. There was something so forlorn about the figure that the Colonel approached, only to find that it was Ernie, who on his side, seeing the other, quitted the ambush, and came slowly towards him. To the Colonel the action seemed a cry of distress. All his resentment at the incident on the bus melted away in a great compassion.

"She and me used to lay there week-ends when first we married," Ern said dreamily, nodding towards the gorse he had just left.

"And she and you will live _there_ for many happy years, I hope," replied the Colonel warmly, pointing towards the garage in the coombe beneath them.

Ernie regarded him inquiringly.

"What's that, sir?"

"Aren't you coming?"

"Where to?"

"My garage?"

Ernie did not understand and the Colonel explained.

"Didn't Mrs. Caspar tell you?"

"Ne'er a word," the other answered blankly.

The Colonel dropped down to Carlisle Road. There Mr. Trupp picked him up and drove him on to the club for tea. Fresh news from Ulster was just being ticked off on the tape. An hour or two before, a rebel unit, the East Belfast regiment of volunteers, some 5,000 strong, armed with Mausers imported from Germany, and dragging machine-guns warm from Krupp's, had marched through the streets of Belfast. The police had cleared the way for the insurgents; and soldiers of the King, officers and men, had looked on with amusement.

The Colonel turned away.

"Roll up the map of Empire!" he said. "We'd better send a deputation to Lajput Rai and the Indian Home Rulers and beg them to spare us a few baboos to govern us. Its an abdication of Government."

He went into the ante-room.

There was Stanley Bessemere back from Ulster once more. As usual he sat behind a huge cigar, retailing amidst roars of laughter to a sympathetic audience his exploits and those of his caracoling chief. The European situation had not overclouded him.

"There's going to be a Civil War and Smith and I are going to be in it. We shall walk through the Nationalists like so much paper. They've got no arms; and they've got no guts either." He laughed cheerily. "Bad men. Bad men."

The Colonel stood, an accusing figure in the door, and eyed the fair-haired giant with cold resentment.

"You know Kuhlmann from the German Embassy is over with your people in Belfast?" he asked.

The other waved an airy cigar.

"You can take it from me, my dear Colonel, that he's not," he answered.

"I'll take nothing of the sort from you," the Colonel answered acridly.

"He's there none the less because he's there incognito."

The young man winced; and the Colonel withdrew.

"Jove!" he said. "I'd just like to know how far these beggars have trafficked in treason with Germany."

"Not at all," replied Mr. Trupp. "They've humbugged emselves into believing they're 'running great risks in a great cause,' as they say--or doing the dirty to make a party score, as you and I'd put it. That's all."

The Colonel walked home, oppressed. After supper, as he sat with his wife in the loggia, he told her of Ruth's strange secretiveness in the matter of the garage.

"There she is!" said Mrs. Lewknor quietly nodding over her work. Ruth, indeed, was strolling slowly along the cliff from the direction of the Meads in the gorgeous evening. Opposite the hostel a track runs down to the beach beneath. At that point she paused as though waiting for somebody; and then disappeared from view.

Ten minutes later Mrs. Lewknor spoke again in the same hushed voice.

"Here's the other!"

The Colonel looked up. Joe was coming rapidly along the cliff from the direction of Beau-nez. He too disappeared down the way Ruth had already taken.

The Colonel removed his glasses.

"I shall give em a quarter of an hour to make emselves quite comfortable," he muttered "and then--"

"Spy," said Mrs. Lewknor.

A moment later, Anne, the parlour-maid, showed Mr. Alfred Caspar on to the loggia.

The face of the Manager of Caspar's Syndicate was very long. Alf, cherishing the simple faith that the Colonel because he had been a soldier must be in the secrets certainly of the War Office and possibly of the Government, had come to ask what he thought of the European situation.

The Colonel was not reassuring, but he refused to commit himself. Alf turned away almost sullenly.

"See, it matters to me," he said. "I start Bank Holiday. Don't want no wars interfering with my Syndicate."

"It matters to us all a bit," replied the Colonel.

Alf departed aggrieved, and obviously suggesting that the Colonel was to blame. He walked away with downward eyes. Suddenly the Colonel saw him pause, creep to the cliff-edge, and peep over. Then he came back to the hostel in a stealthy bustle.

"Go and look for yourself then, sir, if you don't believe me!" he cried in the tone of one rebuffing an unjust accusation. "You're a Magistrate. Police ought to stop it I say. Public 'arlotry I call it."

The Colonel's face became cold and very lofty. "No, Caspar. I don't do that sort of thing," he said.

Alf, muttering excuses, departed. The Colonel watched him walk along the dotted coast-guard track and disappear round the shoulder of the coombe. Then he rose and strolled out to meet Ernie who was approaching.

As he did so he heard voices from the beach beneath him and peeped over. Ruth, on her hands and knees amid the chalk boulders at the foot of the cliff, was smoothing the sand and spreading something on it.

A few yards away Joe was standing at the edge of the tide, which was almost high, flinging pebbles idly into the water. Some earth dislodged from the Colonel's feet and made a tiny land-slide. The woman on her hands and knees in the growing dusk beneath looked up and saw the man standing above her. She made no motion, kneeling there; facing him, fighting him, mocking him.

"Having a nice time together?" he asked genially.

"Just going to, thank-you kindly," Ruth replied and resumed her occupation of sweeping with her hands.

The Colonel turned to find Ernie standing beside him and burning his battle-flare.

"Lucky I see you coming, sir," he said, trembling still. "Else I might ha done him a mischief."

"Who?"

"Alf. Insultin her and me. Met him just along back there in Meads by the _Ship_."

"Go easy, Caspar," said the Colonel quietly. "I remember that left-handed punch of yours of old. It's a good punch too; but keep it for the enemies of your country."

Ernie was hugging a big biscuit-box under his arm.

"What you got there?" asked the other.

Ernie grinned a thought sheepishly.

"It's Joe's birthday," he said. "We are having a bit of a do under the cliff."

He hovered a moment as though about to impart a confidence to the other; and then disappeared down the little track to the beach beneath at the trot, his shoulders back, and heels digging in, carrying a slither of chalk with him.

"'Come into my parlour,' said the spider to the fly," muttered the Colonel as he turned into Undercliff. "Poor fly!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GROWING ROAR

The avalanche, once started, was moving fast now. The Irish Nationalists who had lost faith in the power of the Government and the will of the Army to protect them, had decided at last to arm in view of the default of the law that they might resist invasion from the North-East.

On the very day after the parade of insurrectionaries in Belfast a famous Irishman, soldier, sailor, statesman, man of letters, who in his young manhood had served throughout the long-drawn South African War the Empire which had refused liberty to his country alone of all her Colonies, and in the days to come, though now in his graying years, was to be the hero of one of the most desperate ventures of the Great War, ran the little _Asgarde_, her womb heavy with strange fruit, into Howth Harbour while the Sunday bells peeled across the quiet waters, calling to church.

The arms were landed and marched under Nationalist escort towards Dublin. The police and a company of King's Own Scottish Borderers met the party and blocked the way. After a parley the Nationalists dispersed and the soldiers marched back to Dublin through a hostile demonstration. Mobbed, pelted, provoked to the last degree, at Bachelor's Walk, on the quay, where owing to the threatening attitude of the crowd they had been halted, the men took the law into their own hands and fired without the order of their officer. Three people were killed.

The incident led to the first quarrel that had taken place between Ernie and Joe Burt in a friendship now of some years standing.

"Massacre by the military," said Joe. "That's what it is."

The old soldier in Ernie leapt to the alert.

"Well, what would you have had em do?" he cried hotly. "Lay down and let emselves be kicked to death?"

"If the soldiers want to shoot at all let em shoot the armed rebels," retorted Joe.

"Let em shoot the lot, I says," answered Ernie. "I'm sick of it. Ireland! Ireland! Ireland all the time. No one's no time to think of poor old England. Yet we've our troubles too, I reck'n."

Joe went out surlily without saying good-night. When he was gone, Ruth who had been listening, looked up at Ernie, a faint glow of amusement, interest, surprise, in her eyes.

"First time ever I knaw'd you and Joe get acrarst each other," she said.

Ernie, biting home on his pipe, did not meet her gaze.

"First," he said. "Not the last, may be."

She put down dish-cloth and dish, came to him, and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Let me look at you, Ern!"

His jaw was set, almost formidable: he did not speak.

"Kiss me, Ern," she said.

For a moment his eyes hovered on her face.

"D'you mean anything?" he asked.

"Not that," she answered and dropped her hand.

"Then to hell with you!" he cried with a kind of desperate savagery and thrust her brutally away. "Sporting with a man!"

He put on his cap and went out.

In a few minutes he was back. Paying no heed to her, he sat down at the kitchen-table and wrote a note, which he put on the mantel-piece.

"You can give this to Alf next time he comes round for the rent," he said.

"What is it?" asked Ruth.

"Notice," Ern answered. "We're going to shift to the Colonel's garage."

Ruth gave battle instantly.

"Who are?" she cried, facing him.

He met her like a hedge of bayonets.

"I am," he answered. "Me and my children."

The volley fired on Bachelor's Walk, as it echoed down the long valleys of the world, seemed to serve the purpose of Joshua's trumpet. Thereafter all the walls of civilisation began to crash down one after another with the roar of ruined firmaments.

Forty-eight hours later Austria declared war.

On Thursday Mr. Asquith, speaking in a crowded and quiet house, proposed the postponement of the Home Rule Bill.

Even the hotheads were sober now.

Stanley Bessemere discarded his uniform of an Ulster Volunteer in haste, and turned up at the club in chastened mood. He was blatant still, a little furtive, notably less truculent. The martial refrain _Smith and I_ had given place to the dulcet coo _We must all pull together_.

"Is he ashamed?" Mrs. Lewknor asked her husband, hushed herself, and perhaps a little guilty.

"My dear," the Colonel replied. "Shame is not a word known to your politician. He's thoroughly frightened. All the politicians are. There're bluffing for all they're worth."

On the Saturday morning the Colonel went to the club. The junior member for Beachbourne, who was there, and for once uncertain of himself, showed himself childishly anxious to forget and forgive.

"Now look here, Colonel!" he said, charming and bright. "If there's an almighty bust-up now, shall you _really_ blame it all on Ulster? Honest Injun!"

The Colonel met him with cold flippancy.

"Every little helps," he said. "A whisper'll start an avalanche, as any mountaineer could tell you."

He took up the _Nation_ of August 1st and began to read the editor's impassioned appeal to the country to stand out. The Colonel read the article twice over. There could be no question of the white-hot sincerity of the writer, and none that he voiced the sentiments of an immense and honest section of the country.

He put the paper down and walked home.

"If we don't go in," he said calmly to his wife at luncheon, "all I can say is, that I shall turn my back on England for ever and go and hide my head for the rest of my days on the borders of Thibet."

In those last days of peace good men and true agonised in their various ways. Few suffered more than the Colonel; none but his wife knew the

agony of his doubt.

Then Mr. Trupp telephoned to say that Germany had sent an ultimatum to Russia, and that France was mobilising. Mr. Cambon had interviewed the King. The Government was still wavering.

The Colonel's course was evident. The little organisation for which he was responsible must express itself, if only in the shrill sharp voice of a mosquito. A meeting of the League must be convened. Tingling with hope, doubt, fear, shame, he set off in the evening to interview Alfred Caspar. Swiftly he crossed the golf-links and turned into Saffrons Croft. There he paused.

It was one of those unforgettable evenings magnificently calm, which marked with triumphant irony the end of the world. The green park with its cluster of elms presented its usual appearance on a Saturday afternoon. The honest thump of the ball upon the bat, so dear to English hearts, resounded on every side: the following cry--Run it out! the groups of youths sprawling about the scorers, the lounging spectators. Not a rumour of the coming storm had touched those serene hearts. Close to him a bevy of women and children were playing a kind of rounders. The batter was a big young woman whom he recognised at once as Ruth.

One of the the fielders was little Alice scudding about the surface of green on thin black legs like a water-beetle on a pond. Then Ernie saw him and came sauntering towards him, a child clinging solemnly to one finger of each hand. There was an air of strain about the old Hammer-man, as of one waiting on the alert for a call, that distinguished him, so the Colonel thought, from the gay throng.

"What about it, sir?" he asked gravely.

"It's coming, Caspar," the Colonel answered. "That's my belief."

"And I shan't be sorry if it does," said Ernie with a quiet vindictiveness.

"Shall you go?" asked the Colonel. He knew the other's time as a reservist was up.

"Sha'n't I?" Ernie answered with something like a snort.

The Colonel was not deceived. It was not the patriot, not the old soldier, who had uttered that cry of distress: it was the human being, bruised and suffering, and anxious to vent his pain in violence on something or somebody, no matter much who.

"Yes, sir, I shall go, if it's only as cook in the Army Service Corps."

The Colonel shook his head.

"If it comes," he said, "every fighting man'll be wanted in his right place. Would you like to rejoin the old battalion at Aldershot, if I

can work it for you? Then you'd go out with the Expeditionary Force."

Ernie's eyes gleamed.

"Ah, just wouldn't I?" he said.

Just then there was a shout from the players. Ruth was out and retired. She came towards them, glowing, laughing, her fingers touching her hair to order. She was thirty now, but at that moment she did not look twenty-five. Then she saw the Colonel and deliberately turned away. Susie and Jenny pursued their mother.

The Colonel walked off through the groups of white-clad players towards Alf's garage in the Goffs. A tall man was standing at the gate on to Southfields Road, contemplating the English scene with austere gaze.

It was Royal--the man who would know.

"You think it's going to be all right?" asked the Colonel so keen as to forget his antipathy.

"Heaven only knows with this Government," the other replied. "I've just been on the telephone. Haldane's going back to the War Office, they say."

"Thank God for it!" cried the Colonel.

His companion shrugged.

"Henry Wilson's in touch with Maxse and the Conservative press," he said. "He's getting at the Opposition. There's to be a meeting at Lansdowne House to-night. H.W.'s going to ginger em."

The Colonel looked away.

"And what are you doing down here?" he asked.

"They sent me down to Newhaven last night--embarkation. I'm off in two minutes." He jerked his head towards a racing car standing outside the garage, white with dust. "Got to catch the 7 o'clock at Lewes, and be back at the War Office at 9 p.m. An all-night sitting, I expect."
That austere gaze of his returned to the playing-fields. "Little they know what they're in for," he said, as though to himself.

For the first time the Colonel found something admirable, almost comforting, in the hardness of his old adjutant. He followed the other's gaze and then said quietly, almost tenderly, as one breathing a secret in the ear of a dying man.

"That's the child, Royal--that one in the white frock and black legs running over by the elms. And that's her mother in the brown dress--the one waving. And there's her husband under the trees--that shabby feller."

Royal arched his fine eyebrows in faint surprise.

"Is she married?" he asked coolly.

"Yes," replied the Colonel. "The feller who seduced her wouldn't do the straight thing by her."

Again the eyebrows spoke, this time with an added touch of sarcasm, almost of insolence.

"How d'you know?"

The Colonel was roused.

"Well, did you?" he asked, with rare brutality.

Royal shrugged. Then he turned slow and sombre eyes on the other. There was no anger in them, no hostility.

"Perhaps I shall make it up to them now, Colonel," he said....

The Colonel crossed the road to the garage. There was a stir of busyness about two of the new motor char-a-bancs of the Touring Syndicate. Alf was moving amid it all in his shirt-sleeves, without collar or tie, his hands filthy. His moustache still waxed, and his hair parted down the middle and plastered, made an almost comic contrast to the rest of his appearance. But there was nothing comic about his expression. He looked like a dog sickening for rabies; ominous, surly, on the snarl. He did not seem to see the Colonel, who tackled him at once, however, about the need for summoning a meeting of the League.

"Summon it yourself then," said Alf. "I got something better to do than that. Such an idea! Coming botherin me just now. Start on Monday. Ruin starin me in the face. Who wants war? Might ha done it on purpose to do me down."

The Colonel climbed the hill to the Manor-house to sup with the Trupps.

Two hours later, as he left the house, Ernie Caspar turned the corner of Borough Lane, and came towards him, lost in dreams. The Colonel waited for him. There was about the old Hammer-man that quality of forlornness which the Colonel had noted in him so often of late. He took his place by the other's side. They walked down the hill together silently until they were clear of the houses, and Saffrons Croft lay broad-spread and fragrant upon their right.

In the growing dusk the spirits of the two men drew together. Then Ernie spoke.

"It's not Joe, sir," he said. "He's all right, Joe is."

The Colonel did not fence.

"Are you sure?" he asked with quiet emphasis.

"Certain sure," the other answered with astonishing vehemence. "It's Ruth. She won't give me ne'er a chance."

The Colonel touched him in the dusk.

"Bad luck," he muttered. "She'll come round."

It was an hour later and quite dark when he rounded the shoulder of Beau-nez and turned into the great coombe, lit only by the windows of his own house shining out against Beau-nez.

Walking briskly along the cliff, turning over eternally the question whether England would be true to herself, he was aware of somebody stumbling towards him, talking to himself, probably drunk. The Colonel drew aside off the chalk-blazed path to let the other pass.

"A don't know justly what to make on't," came a broad familiar accent.

"Why, it's fight or run away," replied the Colonel, briskly. "No two twos about it."

A sturdy figure loomed up alongside him.

"Then it's best run away, A reckon," answered the other, "afore worse comes on't. What d'you say, Colonel?"

The darkness drew the two men together with invisible bonds just as an hour before it had drawn the Colonel and Ernie.

"What is it, Burt?" asked the Colonel, gently.

He felt profoundly the need of this other human being standing over against him in the darkness, lonely, suffering, riven with conflicting desires.

Joe drew closer. He was sighing, a sigh that was almost a sob. Then he spoke in the hushed and urgent mutter of a schoolboy making a confession.

"It's this, Colonel--man to man. Hast ever been in love with a woman as you oughtn't to be?"

Not for the first time in these last months there was strong upon the Colonel the sense that here before him was an honest man struggling in the toils prepared for him by Nature--the Lion with no mouse to gnaw him free. Yet he was aware more strongly than ever before of that deep barrier of class which in this fundamental matter of sex makes itself more acutely felt than in any other. A man of quite unusual breadth of view, imagination, and sympathy, this was the one topic that some inner spirit of delicacy had always forbidden him to discuss except with his own kind. He was torn in two; and grateful to the kindly darkness that covered him. On the one hand were all the inhibitions imposed upon him

by both natural delicacy and artificial yet real class-restraint; on the other there was his desire to help a man he genuinely liked. Should he take the line of least resistance, the line of the snob and the coward? Was it really the fact that because this man was not a gentleman he could not lay bare before him an experience that might save him?

"Yes," he said at last with the emphasis of the man who is forcing himself.

There was a lengthy silence.

"Were you married?"

"No," abruptly. "Of course not."

"Was she?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"She wired me to come--in India--years ago."

"Did you go?"

"No--thank God." The honest man in him added: "I never got the wire."

Again there was a pause.

"Are you glad?"

"Yes."

"Had she children."

"No."

The engineer breathed deep.

"Ah," he said. "I'd ha gone."

"Then you'd have done wrong."

"Happen so," stubbornly. "I'd ha gone though--knowing what I know now."

"What's that?"

"What loov is."

The Colonel paused.

"She'd never have forgiven you," he said at last.

"What for?"

"For taking advantage of her hot fit."

The arrow shot in the dark had clearly gone home. The Colonel followed up his advantage.

"Is she in love with you?"

"She's never said so."

"But you think so?"

"Nay, A don't think so," the other answered with all the old violence. "A know it. A've nobbut to reach out ma hand to pluck the flower."

His egotism annoyed the Colonel.

"Seems to me," he said, "we shall all of us soon have something better to do than running round after each other's wives. Seen the evening paper?"

"Nay, nor the morning for that matter."

"And you a politician!"

"A'm two men--same as most: politician and lover. Now one's a-top; now t'other. It's a see-saw."

"And the lover's on top now?" said the Colonel.

"Yes," said the engineer, "and like to stay there too--blast him!" And he was gone in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OLD TOWN

Next day was Sunday.

The Colonel waited on the cliff for his paper, which brought the expected news. The die was cast. Germany had proclaimed martial law: she was already at war with Russia; France had mobilised.

"She's in it by now," he said to himself, as he walked across the golf-links towards Old Town.

The threat of danger was arousing in every individual a passionate need for communication, for re-assurance, for the warmth and comfort of the crowd. The herd, about to be attacked, was drawing together. Its out-posts were coming back at the trot, heads high, ears alert,

snorting the alarm. Even the rogue and outcast were seeking re-admission and finding it amid acclamation. The main body were packing in a square, heads to the danger, nostrils quivering, antlers ready. An enemy was a-foot just beyond the sky-line. He has not declared himself as yet. But the wind betrayed his presence; and the secret stir of the disturbed and fearful wilderness was evidence enough that the Flesh-eater was abroad.

The turf sprang deliciously beneath the Colonel's feet. His youth seemed to have returned to him. He felt curiously braced and high of heart. Once he paused to look about him. Beyond the huge smooth bowl of the links with its neat greens and the little boxes of sand, its pleasant club-house, its evidence of a smooth and leisurely civilisation, Paradise rippled at the touch of a light-foot breeze. The Downs shimmered radiantly, their blemishes hidden in the mists of morning. On his right, beyond the ha-ha, the Duke's Lodge stood back in quiet dignity amid its beeches, typical of the England that was about to fade away like a cinema picture at a touch.

A lark sang. The Colonel lifted his face to the speck poised and thrilling in the blue.

What a day to go to war on! was his thought.

At the deserted club-house he dropped down into Lovers' Lane and climbed up towards Old Town between high flint walls, ivy-covered.

As he emerged into Rectory Walk the Archdeacon was coming out of his gate. He was in his glory. His faded eyes glittered like those of an old duellist about to engage, and confident of his victim.

"I've been waiting this day for forty-five yeahs," he announced.

The Colonel was aware of the legend that in 1870 the Archdeacon, then a lad at Cambridge, had only been restrained from fighting for his hero, the Emperor of the French, by a brutal father.

"It certainly looks as if you might get back a bit of your own," he said wearily. The other's dreadful exaltation served only to depress him. "Russia going at em one side and France the other."

"And England!" cried the Archdeacon.

"You think we shall go in?"

To the Colonel's horror, the Archdeacon took him by the arm.

"Can you doubt it?" he cried, rolling his eyes to see the impression he was making on the grocer in the door of the little corner-shop. "Are we rotten to the heart?"

They were walking down Church Street now, arm-in-arm, in the middle of the road.

"The pity of it is," he cried in his staccato voice, "we've no Emperah to lead us to-day. Ah! there was a man!" He made a dramatic halt in mid-street. "_Thank Gahd for Carson--what!_" he whispered.

"And Smith," said the Colonel meekly. "Let us give thanks for Smith too--

_Great in counsel, great in war,
Foremost Captain of our time,
Rich in saving common sense,
And, as the greatest only are,
In his simplicity sublime._"

They had reached the door of the parish-church.

The Archdeacon entered; and the Colonel turned with relief to greet Bobby Chislehurst. The lad's open face was unusually grave.

"There are sure to be pacifist demonstrations in London to-morrow," he began, blurting out his confidences like a a school-boy. "It's my day off. I shall go."

"Don't," said the Colonel.

"I must," the other replied. "It's all I can do."

"Bobby," said the Colonel grimly. "This is my advice. If you go up to London at all wire to Billy to come and meet you. He may be able to get an hour off, though I expect they're pretty busy at Aldershot." Billy was Bobby's twin-brother and in the Service.

Bobby winced.

"Yes," he said, "if Billy goes, Billy won't come back. I know Billy."

A few yards down the street the Colonel met Alf Caspar in the stream of ascending church-goers.

The little sidesman was dapper as usual: he wore a fawn coloured waist-coat, his moustache was waxed, his hair well-oiled; but his face was almost comically a-wry. He looked like the villain in a picture play about to burst into tears. Directly he saw the Colonel he roused to new and hectic life, crossing to him, entirely forgetful of their meeting on the previous evening.

"Is it war, sir?" he asked feverishly and with flickering eyes.

"If we are ever to hold up our heads and look the world in the face again," the Colonel answered.

"But what's it got to do with us?" Alf almost screamed. "Let em fight it out among themselves if they want to, I says. Stand aside--that's our part. That's the manly part. And then when it's all over slip

in--"

"And collar the loot," suggested the Colonel.

"And arbitrate atween em. If we don't there'll be nobody to do it, only us. I don't say it'll be easy to make the sacrifice o standing aside when you want to help your friends, of course you do. But I say we ought to do it, and let em say what they like--if it's right and it is right. Take up the cross and face the shame--that's what I says. Where's the good o being Christians else, if you're going to throw it all overboard first time you're put to the test? We won't be the first, I says. What about the martyrs and them? Didn't they go through it? Not to talk o the expense! Can we afford it? Course we can't. Who could? Income tax at a shilling in the pound, and my petrol costing me another six-pence the can. And then ask us to sit down to a great war!"

He poured out his arguments as a volcano in eruption pours out lava.

The Colonel listened.

"You'd better give your views to your Rector, I think," he remarked.

Alf's face turned ugly.

"One thing," he said, with an ominously vicious nod, "if there is war I resign my position in the League--that's straight."

"O dear!" said the Colonel, and he turned into the Manor-house.

Bess opened to him herself.

"Joe come?" he asked, knowing she was expecting her brother for the week-end.

"No. A post-card instead. We don't quite know where he is."

The Colonel nodded.

"Leave stopped. Sure to be."

Then Mrs. Trupp came down the stairs. About her was the purged and hallowed air of one who faces death without fear and yet without self-deception as to the price that must be paid. The Colonel felt he was standing upon holy ground.

Mrs. Trupp handed him a post-card. The postmark was Dover. It ran:

All well. Very busy.

"I think it'll be all right, don't you?" said Mrs. Trupp, raising wistful eyes to his. The mother in her longed for him to say _No_: the patriot _Yes_.

"It must be," replied Bess, ferociously. "If it isn't Joe will chuck the Service. They all will. The pacifists can defend their own rotten country!"

The Colonel moved into the consulting-room, where Mr. Trupp was burrowing short-sightedly into his Sunday paper.

The old surgeon at least had no doubts.

"We shall fight all right," he said comfortably. "We must. And Must's the only man who matters in real life."

The Colonel felt immensely comforted.

"But what a position my poor old party'd have been in now if our leaders hadn't queered the pitch!" he remarked. "_We told you so_! _We told you so_! How we _could_ have rubbed it in."

"Thank God you can't," replied the other grimly. "No party's got the chuckle over another. So there's some hope that we may act as a country for once."

Outside the Manor-house the Colonel met Mr. Pigott in his frock-coat on the way to chapel. The two men had never spoken for years past except to spar. Now in the presence of the common fear they stopped, and then shook hands.

Mr. Pigott was a brave man, but there was no doubt he was shaken to the roots.

"My God, Colonel!" he muttered. "It's _awful_."

"It don't look too pleasant," the old soldier admitted.

"But we can't go in!" cried the old Nonconformist. "It's no affair of ours. Who _are_ the Serbs?"

"It's go in or go under, I'm afraid," the other answered. "That's the alternative."

He dropped down Borough Lane past the _Star_.

On the hill Edward Caspar ambling rapidly along with flying coat-tails caught him up.

"Well, Mr. Caspar, what do _you_ think about it?" asked the Colonel.

The old man emerged from his brown study and looked up with scared eyes through his gold spectacles. He did not recognise the questioner: he never did--but he answered eagerly, and with wonderful firmness.

"It's Love. It can't be anything else."

"I don't know. War seems to me a funny sort of Love," the Colonel

muttered.

"What's that?" asked the other.

"War," replied the Colonel. "There's a great European war on."

The old man, blind, puzzled, seeking, stopped dead.

"War?" he said. "What war's that?"

The Colonel explained.

"Austria's gone to war with Serbia. Russia's chimed in. Germany's having a go at Russia. And France is rushing to the rescue of her ally. Europe's ablaze from the Bay of Biscay to the Caucasus."

Edward Caspar blinked at the road as he absorbed the news. Then he gathered himself and went droning down the hill at increased speed with the erratic purposefulness of a great bumble-bee. There was something lofty, almost majestic about his bearing. In a moment he had increased in spiritual stature; and he was trying to straighten his rounded shoulders.

"It must work itself out," he said emphatically. "It's only an incident on the march. We mustn't lose our sense of proportion. We shall get there all the quicker in the end because of it."

"We shall if we go this pace," muttered the Colonel, pretending to pant as they turned into the Moot.

The Quaker meeting-house lay just in front of them, a group of staid figures at the door. On their left was a row of cottages at the foot of the Church-crowned Kneb. The door of one of them was open, and in it stood Ernie in his shirt-sleeves, towel in hand, scrubbing his head. A word passed between father and son; then the old man shuffled on his way.

Ernie turned in a flash to the Colonel, who saw at once that here the miracle of sudden conversion had been at work. This man who for months past had been growing always graver and more pre-occupied was suddenly gay. A spring had been released; and a spirit had been tossed into the air. He seemed on the bubble, like an eager horse tugging at its bridle.

Now he held up a warning finger and moved down the road till he was out of ear-shot of his own cottage.

"Have you worked it, sir?" he asked. His question had reference to his conversation with the Colonel in Saffrons Croft the evening before, and in his keenness he was oblivious of the fact that nothing could have been achieved in the few brief hours that had elapsed since their last meeting.

"I've written," replied the Colonel. "You'll be wanted. Every man who

can stand on his hind-legs will. That's what I came about: If you have to join up it'll punish your feet much less if you've done a bit of regular route-marching first. Now I'm game to come along every evening and march with you. Begin to-night. Five to ten miles steady'd soon tell. What about it?"

"I'm at it, sir!" cried Ernie. "Thank you kindly all the same. Started last night after we'd read the news. There's a little bunch of us in Old Town--old sweats. Marched to Friston, we did. One hour's marching; ten minutes halt. Auston to-night. We'll soon work into it."

"That's the style," said the Colonel. "Are the other men keen?"

Ernie grinned.

"Oh, they're for it, if it's got to be," he said.

"And Burt?--seen him?"

"No sir, not yet. But he's all right at heart, Joe is. I'm expectin him round every minute."

At the moment a thick-set man came swishing round the corner of Borough Lane on a bicycle. His shoulders were hunched, and he was pedalling furiously. The sweat shone on his face, which was red and set. It was clear that he had come far and fast. Seeing the two men in the road he flung off his bicycle and drew up beside them at a little pattering run.

Out here under the beat of the sun the Colonel hardly recognised in this solid fellow, dark with purpose, the wavering lover of the cliff last night. Was the change wrought in this man as by magic typical of a like change in the heart of the country? The thought flashed into the Colonel's mind and brought him relief.

The engineer, who was heaving, came straight to his point without a word, without a greeting.

"Philip Blackburn's coomin down on the rush to address a great Stop-the-war meeting at the Salvation Army Citadel this afternoon," he panted. "We must counter it. A'm racin round to warn the boys to roll up. You must be there, Colonel, and you, Ern, and all of you. It's all out this time, and no mistake."

The door behind the Colonel opened. He turned to find Ruth standing in the door, drying her hands.

Joe paid no heed, already sprawling over his bicycle as he pushed it off.

"What time?" she called after him.

"Two-thirty," he answered back, and was gone round the corner.

"Right," she yodled. "I'll be there."

CHAPTER XXIX

FOLLOW YOUR LEADER

Philip Blackburn's meeting had not been advertised, for it was only in the small hours of the morning that a motor-bicyclist scaring the hares and herons in the marshes, had brought the news from Labour Headquarters that P.B. was bearing the Fiery Cross to Beachbourne in the course of a whirlwind pilgrimage of the Southern Counties. But the hall was crammed.

Philip Blackburn was a sure draw at any time. A Labour M.P. and stalwart of the Independent Labour Party, it was often said that he was destined to be the Robespierre of the new movement. Certainly he was an incorruptible. A cripple from his youth, and a fanatic, with the face of a Savonarola, in the House and on the platform he asked no quarter and gave none.

Half an hour later the dusty Ford car which bore the fighting pacifist was signalled panting down Stone Cross hill over the Levels: a half-hour the audience passed singing _God save the People_ and _The Red Flag_.

A few minutes later he came limping on to the platform: a little man, of the black-coated proletariat obviously, with the face of a steel blade, keen and fine, and far-removed from the burly labour agitator, hoarse of voice, and raw of face, of a previous generation. His reception was impressively quiet. The man's personality, his courage, his errand, the occasion, awed even the most boisterous.

He looked dead-beat, admitted as much, and apologised for being late.

"You know where I come from (cheers) and where I'm bound for to-night. And you know what I've come about--_Is it Peace or War?_"

And he launched straightway into that famous _Follow-your-leader_ speech, the ghost of which in one form or another was to haunt the country, as the murdered albatross haunted the blood-guilty mariner, all through the war, and will haunt England for generations still after we are gone:--

The danger long-preached was on them at last. It must be faced and fought. They must take a leaf out of Carson's book. The Conservatives had shown the way: they must follow their leaders of the ruling class. They must dish the Government if it proposed to betray the country just as the Unionists had done--by persuading the Army not to fight. They must undermine the _morale_ of the private soldiers--just as the Tories had undermined that of the officers. They must have their agents in every barrack-room, their girls at every barrack-gate--just as the Tories had done. The men must apply the sternest "disciplinary

pressure" to scabs--just as the officers had done. They must stop recruiting--as Garvin and the Yellow Press had advocated. The famous doctrine of "optional obedience," newly introduced into the Army by Tory casuists, must be carried to its logical conclusion. And if the worst came to the worst they must follow their leaders of the ruling class, arm, and "fight the fighters. _Follow your leaders_--that is the word."

He spoke with cold and bitter passion in almost a complete hush--a white-hot flame of a man burning straight and still on the altar of a packed cathedral. Then he sank back into his chair, spent, his eyes closed, his face livid, his fine fingers twitching. He had achieved that rarest triumph of the orator: beaten his audience into silence.

The Colonel stood up against the wall at the back. Peering over intervening heads he saw Joe Burt sitting in front.

Then a voice at his ear, subdued and deep and vibrating, floated out on the hush as it were on silver wings.

"Now, Joe!" it said, like a courser urging on a greyhound.

There was a faint stir in the stillness: the eyes of the orator on the platform opened. A chair scraped; the woman beside the Colonel sighed. There was some sporadic cheering, and an undercurrent of groans.

Joe Burt rose to his feet slowly and with something of the solemn dignity of one rising from the dead. Everybody present knew him; nobody challenged his right to speak. A worker and a warrior, who had lived in the East-end for some years now, he had his following, and he had his enemies. The moderate men were for him, the extremists had long marked him down as suspect--in with the capitalists--too fond of the classy class. But they would hear him; for above all things he was that which the Englishman loves best in friend or enemy--a fighter.

Standing there, thick-set and formidable as a bull, he began the speech of his life.

"Two wrongs don't make a right. Because the officers have sold the pass, are the men to do the same?"

"Never!" came a shout from the back. It was Ernie's voice. The Colonel recognised it and thrilled.

"We all know," continued the speaker, "that the gentry have put their coontry after their party. It's for the People to show them the true road, and put Democracy before even their coontry."

"Hear! hear!" from Philip Blackburn.

The speaker was growing to his task, growing as it grew.

"This is a great spiritual issue. Are we to save our lives to lose them? or lose them to save them? The People are in the Valley of

Decision. God and the Devil are standing on a mountain-top on either side the way crying--_Who is on my side?_" His great voice went billowing through the hall, borne, it seemed, on some huge wind of the spirit. He was holding the audience, carrying them. The Colonel felt it: the man with the closed eyelids in the chair on the platform felt it too.

"Jaures, the beloved leader of our cause in France, has already made his choice--the first man to fall for Democracy. Shall he lie alone?"

It was a dramatic touch, and told.

"A have chosen ma part," the speaker went on more quietly. "A loov ma coontry; but there's something greater even than the fate of the coontry hanging in the balance now. Democracy's at stake!"

A roar of applause greeted the remark.

"It's the Emperors agin the People!"

This time the roar was pierced by a shrill scream,

"What about Russia?"

The booming voice over-rode the interruption as a hurricane over-rides a blade of grass that stands in its track.

"Look at little Serbia!--a handful of peasants standing up against a great militarist Empire. Look at Belgium!--the most peaceful nation on God's earth about to be over-run by the Kaiser's hordes. Look at France, the mother of Revolution, and the home of Democracy!--Could we forsake them now?"

"Never!" in a growing thunder.

"If so we forsook our own ideals, betrayed our past, turned our back on our future. Yea. The People must fight or perish."

"He's got em," sobbed Ruth, her handkerchief tight in her mouth. The Colonel could feel her trembling.

"The question to ma mind," continued the speaker, "is not whether we _should_ fight, but whether the officers of the Army--who have failed us once, mind!--_will_ fight."

The blow went home and hammered a few dissentients into silence.

"If not then we must find our own officers--roosset-coated captains who know what they're fighting for, and love what they know."

The words were lost in a hurricane of cheering.

"And ma last word to you," ended the speaker, drawing the back of his hand across his mouth, "is much that of the Great Apostle--_Stand and

Fight!_" He flung the words at his audience with a power and a conviction that were overwhelming.

A great bell was tolling in the Colonel's mind.

"That's a great man," he found himself murmuring.

"Aye, that's Joe," came the deep voice beside him.

The heat, the crush, the tumult of sound, his own intense emotion proved almost too much for the Colonel. He leaned against the wall with closed eyes, but there was joy in his heart.

"Done it," he muttered. "That was England speaking." Then somebody led him out into the fresh air.

"They're all right, sir," said a voice comfortably in his ear. "Joe done the trick. Grand he was."

Some of the Labour extremists recognised him as he lolled against the wall, hat over his eyes, recalled his work for the National Service League, and gathered round for the worry.

"That's him.--Militarist!--Brought the trouble on us! He won't pay.--Leaves that for us to do!--Drunk as a lord!--On the blood of the workers."

The Colonel heard the words, but paid no heed. They fell on his mind like rain-drops on a sea which absorbs them unconsciously as it sways and drifts listlessly to and fro.

Then another voice, familiar this time, and strangely fierce, clashed with those of his would-be persecutors.

"None of it now! Want one for yourself, do you? Stand back there! Give him a chance to breathe! Ought to be ashamed, some of you."

The Colonel opened his eyes to find Ernie standing over him.

"Ah, Caspar," he said faintly.

Then Ruth came swiftly out of the dissipating crowd towards them. She was flashing, glorious, with tumultuous bosom. Swept by her emotion she forgot for the moment the undeclared war that was raging between this lean old man and herself: she did not even notice his distress.

"He's such a battler, Joe is!" she cried.

All that was combative in the Colonel rose desperately to grip and fight the same qualities in her.

"He's not the only one," he said feebly, and musing with a vacuous smile on the strange medley of vast world-tragedy and tiny domestic drama sank slowly into unconsciousness, Ernie's arm about him, Ernie's

kind face anxious above him. "Watch it, Caspar!" he whispered. "Danger!"

He came round slowly to hear voices wrangling above him.

"I had to come to the meeting. I promised Joe," the woman was saying.

"What about the children?"

There was silence: then the man went on with a cold sneer.

"Little Alice, I suppose. Little Alice got to do it all these days."

"Little Alice is mine," the woman retorted. "If you're not satisfied with the way your--"

The Colonel sat up.

"For God's sake!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF THE WORLD

The next day was Bank Holiday; and such a holiday as no living man had known or would ever know again. Half the world had already tumbled into hell; and the other half was poised breathless on the brink, awaiting the finger-push that should send it too roaring down to death.

On that brilliant summer day nations crouched in the stubble like coveys of partridges beneath the shadow of some great hawk hovering far away in the blue.

A silence like a cloud enveloped England.

The tocsin was about to sound that was to call millions of rosy lads from their mothers, splendid youths from their girls, sober middle-aged men away from their accustomed place in church and chapel, from the office stool, from the warm companionable bed and the lovely music of children's voices, to strange destinies in unknown seas, on remote deserts, beside alien rivers; calling them in a voice that was not to be denied to lay their bones far from the village church-yard and the graves of innumerable ancestors, in rotting swamps, on sun-bleached mountains, with none to attend their obsequies save the nosing jackal and raw-necked vulture.

Early in the morning the Colonel walked across to Old Town to see Bobby Chislehurst, and put the curb on him if possible; for the _Daily Citizen_ had come out with a full-page appeal to lovers of peace to attend an anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar-square.

On his way the Colonel gleaned straws of news; and the gleaning was not hard. The most reserved were expansive; the most exclusive sociable. For the moment all barriers of class were down. By the time he had reached the _Star_ he was _au courant_ with all the happenings, local and general.

The Archdeacon who, when he put his snuff-box aside, and took the gloves off, could be really moving, had from his hill thundered a magnificent call to arms--"purely pagan, of course." Mr. Trupp, whom he met, told the Colonel, "but fine for all that." Mr. Geddes in the plain had answered back in an appeal which had moved many to tears on behalf of Him, Whose sad face on the Cross looks down on This after the passion of a thousand years.

The Fleet had gone to war-stations; the Territorials had been mobilised. Haldane had returned to the War Office.

As the Colonel dropped down the steep pitch to Church-street, under the chesnuts of the Manor-house garden, he met a couple of toddlers climbing the hill shepherded by an efficient little maiden of seven or eight, who smiled at him with familiar eyes.

"Hullo, little Alice," he said. "Where you off to so busily with your little flock?"

"Saffrons Croft for the day--me and my little ones," she answered, not without a touch of self-importance. "I got the dinner here. Dad and Mother's taking baby a drive on the bus to see Granny at Auston."

She turned and waved to her mother, who was standing at the top of Borough Lane with Ernie, amongst a little group opposite the _Star_, where was one of the char-a-bancs of the Touring Syndicate picking up passengers from the Moot.

The Colonel walked down the hill towards them. Ruth, seeing him approach, climbed to her place on the char-a-banc. Ernie handed little Ned to her, and then turned to meet the Colonel.

"Givin Alf the benefit," he said, with a grin. "Backin the family and baptizin the bus. Goin the long drive over the hill to Friston and Seaford; then up the valley to Auston. Dinner there. And home by Hailsham and Langney in the evening.--I wanted her to ask Joe. But she wouldn't. Fickle I call her."

The Colonel glanced up; but Ruth steadfastly refused to meet his eye.

"I suppose one wants the family to one-salf some-times, even a workin-woman doos," she muttered.

And the Colonel saw that Ern had made his remark to show that the tension between him and his wife, so marked yesterday, had eased.

"My wife's right," he thought. "Caspar is a gentleman. Blood _does_

tell."

Just then Alf came down the steps of the Manor-house opposite, looking smug and surly. He crossed the road to the char-a-banc and said a word to the driver.

Ruth leaned over, glad of the diversion.

"Ain't you comin along then, Alf?" she asked quietly.

"Caspar's my name," the Managing Director answered, never lifting his eyes to his tormentor.

The young woman bent down roguishly, disregarding Ern's warning glances.

"Not to your own sister, Alfie," she answered, demure and intimate.

They were mostly Old Town folk on the char-a-banc, many from the Moot; and they all tittered, even the driver.

Alf stood back in the road and said deliberately, searching with his eye the top of the bus.

"Where is he, then?"

Ern flashed round on him.

"Who?"

Alf sneered.

"You!--You're only her husband!" and decamped swiftly.

Ernie did not move. He stood with folded arms, rather white, following his retreating brother with his eyes. Then he said to the Colonel quietly,

"Yes, sir. That's Alf. Now you know."

"I'm beginning to," said the Colonel.

"And time too," came Ruth's voice cold and quivering.

In the cool of the evening the Colonel walked down Terminus Road.

Outside the office of Caspar's Road-Touring Syndicate Alf was standing, awaiting the return of his argosies. He was scanning the evening paper and still wore the injured and offended air of one who has a personal grievance against his Creator and means to get his own back some day.

"Any news, sir?" he asked.

The Colonel stopped.

"Germany sent Belgium an ultimatum last night demanding right of way. And the King of Belgium took the field this morning."

"Then he ought to be shot," snarled Alf. "Provoking of em on, I call it."

The Colonel walked on to the East-end, his eyes about him, and heart rising.

The country was facing the situation with dignity and composure.

The streets were thronged. Everywhere men and women gathered in knots and talked. There was no drunken-ness, no rioting, no Jingo manifestations--and that though it was August Bank Holiday. The gravity of the situation had sobered all men.

The Colonel passed on into Seagate to find the hero of Sunday afternoon's battle.

Joe Burt stood in his shirt-sleeves in the door of his lodgings with folded arms and cocked chin. His pipe was in his mouth and he was sucking at it fiercely with turned-in lips and inflated nostrils.

The engineer was clearly on the defensive; the Colonel saw it at once and knew why. On the main issue Joe had proved fatally, irretrievably wrong. But he had been "on the platform" now for twenty years. In other words he was a politician, and in the Colonel's view no politician ever admitted that he was wrong. To cover his retreat he would almost certainly resort to the correct tactical principle of a counter-offensive.

"That was a great speech of yours, Burt," the Colonel began.

The engineer sucked and puffed unmoved.

"We must fight," he said. "There's no two ways about it. The Emperors have asked for it; and they shall have it. No more crowned heads! We've had enoof o yon truck!"

In his elemental mood accent had coarsened, phrase become colloquial. He took his pipe from his mouth.

"Sitha!--this'll be a fight to a finish atween the Old Order and the New--atween what you stand for and what A do."

"And what do I stand for?" asked the Colonel.

"Imperialism--Capitalism--call it what you will. It's the domination of the workers by brute force."

The Colonel turned a quiet eye upon him.

"Is that fair?" he asked.

The engineer stuffed his pipe back into his mouth.

"Happen not of you. Of your class, yes." He felt he had been on dangerous ground and came off it. "_We_ shall fight because we must," he said. "What about you?"

He was making a direct offensive now, and turned full face to his adversary.

"Us?" asked the Colonel puzzled.

"Yes," retorted the other. "The officers of the Army?--shall you fight?"

The Colonel looked away.

Joe eyed him shrewdly.

"Last time you were asked to, you refused," he remarked. "Said you'd resign rather. One General said if there was war he'd fight against England. It was a piece in the _Daily Telegraph_. A've got it pasted in ma Ammunition Book. Coom in and see!"

The Colonel did not move.

"I think the officers will be there or thereabouts all right if the're wanted," he said.

Joe appeared slightly mollified.

"Well, you came out against the railway-men in 1911," he said. "A will say that for you. A wasn't sure you'd feel same gate when it coom to Emperors."

They strolled back together to Pevensey Road; and for the first time the Colonel actively disliked the man at his side. That wind of the spirit which had blown through the engineer yesterday purging him of his dross had passed on into the darkness. To-day he was both politically dishonest and sexually unclean.

In fact his life that had been rushing down the mountain like a spate with extraordinary speed and power, confined between narrow banks, just as it was emerging at the estuary into the sea had met suddenly the immense weight of the returning ocean-tide, advancing irresistible--to be swamped, diverted, turned back on itself. This man once so strong, of single purpose, and not to be deflected from it by any human power, was now spiritually for all his bluff a tumbling mass of worry and confusion and dirty yellow foam....

The pair had passed into the main thoroughfare.

"What about that woman?" asked the Colonel moodily.

Joe was chewing his pipe-stem.

"What woman'll that be?"

"Why the one you were talking about to me on Saturday night,--whether you should bolt with her or not."

Joe halted on the kerb-stone and regarded the traffic imperturbably.

"A know nowt o no such woman," he said.

The Colonel glanced at him. Just then he heard the sound of a horn and looking back saw one of the new motor-char-a-bancs of the Touring Syndicate returning crowded to the brim. A man stood on the step with a horn and tootled. Ernie sat in front with Ruth, the boy in her lap asleep against her breast. The Colonel marked the strength and tranquillity of her pose, her arms clasped around the sleeping child. Father, mother, and child were profoundly at peace; one with each other, so it seemed to him, one with life. Joe took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed with the stem.

"Yon's her," he said, with stunning impudence.

"I know that then," answered the Colonel. "Your own friend's wife."

Ernie who had seen Joe waved and winked and nudged Ruth. She could not or would not see. Joe waved back casually. Then he turned to the Colonel with a Silenus-like twinkle, his little black eyes of a bear glittering.

"He'll have to go now," he said, gurgling like an amused baby.

The Colonel looked him in the eyes. "Devil!" he said.

The engineer peeped up at him with something of the chuckle of the young cuckoo.

"Ah, don't you talk, Colonel! I'm not the only one."

"What you mean?" fiercely.

"What you told me Saturday night."

"I never betrayed my pal, whatever else."

"You would ha done," remorselessly. "Only you lost your nerve at the last moment. That's nothing to boast on."

The man's brazen cynicism revolted the Colonel.

"Ah, you don't know me," he muttered.

"A know maself," the other answered. "And that's the same."

The Colonel felt as feels a man who watches the casual immoralities of a big and jolly dog. Then he came to himself and broke away, firing a last shot over his shoulder.

"I suppose you'll wait till he has gone," he sneered.

"A doubt," the other answered, cool and impudent to the last.

The Colonel tramped home, sore at heart.

Opposite the Wish he stumbled on Mr. Trupp, who brought him up with a jerk.

"There's going to be a Coalition Government," the old surgeon told his friend. "Lloyd George and the pacifists are leaving the Cabinet; and Smith and Carson and Bonar Law coming in."

Just then Stanley Bessemere rushed by in a powerful car. He waved to the two men, neither of whom would see him.

"You know what he's after?" said Mr. Trupp.

"What?" asked the Colonel.

"Spreading it round that Haldane's holding up the Expeditionary Force."

The Colonel struck the ground.

"My God!" he cried. "Party politics even at this hour!"

The other shrugged.

"They've got to find a scape goat or take it in the neck themselves," he said.

The Colonel walked home in the twilight along the deserted brick-walk, under the tamarisk bank stirring gracefully in the evening breeze. At the extreme end of the bricks where a path climbs up a chalk-pit to Holywell he came on a tall dark solitary figure looking out over the sea.

It was Mr. Geddes.

The old soldier approached him quietly and touched his arm.

"Well, Mr. Geddes," he said gently. "What you thinking of?"

The tall man turned his fine face.

"I was thinking about a carpenter," he said.

"Of Nazareth?"

"No, of Berlin. Of Papa Schumacher and that boy Joseph, who was trying

so hard to be an English sport--and black-eyed Joanna and the old Mutter."

The Colonel swallowed.

"Let's shake hands, Geddes," he said.

"With all my heart, Colonel," the other answered.

Then the old soldier went up the slope laboriously, his hands upon his knees.

His wife was waiting him on the cliff, a little figure, distinguished even in the dusk, about her shoulders the scarlet cape that had been the gift of a Rajput Princess.

"I pray it will be all right," he said.

"I pray so," the little lady answered.

War meant ruin for her and the destruction of all her hopes for Toby.--And her own Jock!--but she never wavered.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE COLONEL

That night Sir Edward Grey made the historic speech, which swung the nation into line like one man, and launched Great Britain on the supreme adventure of her history.

The one bright spot in the situation is Ireland.

Redmond had followed in a speech which filled the Colonel's eyes with tears and his heart with gladness as he read it next morning, so generous it was, so chivalrous.

I say to the Government they may withdraw every one of their troops from Ireland. Ireland will be defended by her armed sons from invasion, and for that purpose Catholics in the South will join the Protestants in the North.

The Colonel paced to and fro on his lawns, the paper flapping in his hand.

Not even the spectacle of Carson, sulking in his tent, and answering never a word to his opponent's magnanimous appeal, could mar that vision splendid.

All day long the Colonel never left his garden, hovering round the telephone. Anything might happen at any moment.

Then news came through.

The Government had sent Germany an ultimatum. If she failed to give us an assurance before 11 p.m. that she would not violate the neutrality of Belgium, England would go to war.

The Colonel sighed his thankfulness.

All day he quarter-decked up and down the loggia, Zeiss glasses in hand. His telescope he arranged on the tripod on the lawn, and with it swept earth and sky and sea. Towards evening he marked a bevy of men swing round the shoulder of the hill from Meads into the coombe. They were in mufti, and not in military formation; but they marched, he noted, and kept some sort of order, moving rhythmically, restrained as a pack of hounds on the way to the meet, and yet with riot in their hearts. He turned the telescope full on them, marked Ernie among them, and knew them forthwith for the Reservists from Old Town training for _IT_. A wave of emotion surged through him. He went down to the fence and stood there with folded arms, and high head, his sparse locks grey in the evening light, watching them go by. Then he saluted.

They saw the old soldier standing bare-headed at the fence, recognised him, and shouted a greeting.

"Good-evening, sir."

"That's the style!" he cried gruffly. "Getting down to it."

Then Ernie broke away and came across the grass to him at the double, grinning broadly, and gay as a boy.

"Yes, sir. Old Town Troop we call ourselves. Long march to-night. Through Birling Gap to the Haven and home over Windhover about midnight. What I stepped across to say, sir, was I'm thinkin Ruth'd better stay where she is for the time being--if it's all the same to you, sir; and not move to the garage."

"As you like," replied the Colonel. "Undercliff's the most exposed house in Beachbourne--that's certain. If there's trouble from the sea we shall catch it; or if their Zeppelins bomb the signalling station on the Head some of it may come our way."

Ernie looked shy.

"That little turn-up with Alf in the road yesterday, sir," he said confidentially. "I was glad you was there." He came forward stealthily. "See, I know what you thought, sir. It's not Joe after her. It's Alf--always has been; from before we married. Joe's all right."

The Colonel stared grimly over the sea.

"I think you're wrong," he said.

"Then I know I'm not, sir," Ernie flashed.

The Colonel returned to his watch.

That night he did not go to bed. Instead he sat up in his pyjamas in the corner-room that looked out over the sea, and on to Beau-nez. If we went in the news would be flashed at once to the coastguard on the Head; and the petty officer on duty up there had promised to signal it down to the house in the coombe beneath.

The Colonel watched and waited.

The window was open. It was a still and brilliant night. He could hear the fall, and swish, and drone of the sea, rhythmical and recurrent, at the foot of the cliff. From the crest of the hill behind the house came the occasional tinkle of the canister-bell of some old wether of the flock.

Then the silence was disturbed by a growing tumult in the darkness.

A squadron of destroyers was thrashing furiously round the Head, not a light showing, close inshore, too, only an occasional smudge of white in the darkness revealing their position and the feather of foam they bore along like a plume before them.

Out of the darkness they came at a speed incredible, and into the darkness they were gone once more like a flash.

The Colonel breathed again.

At least the Navy was ready, thanks to Churchill.

Was the Army?

He recalled a remark reported to him as having been made at a P.S.A. in the East-end some weeks since: that the Army no longer trusted its officers, and the country no longer trusted its Army. Could it be true?

His thoughts turned with passionate sympathy to Gough and the simple regimental officers who had been lured by politicians into the dreadful business of the Army Conspiracy. But that other feller!--that yappin chap at the War Office, who ought to have known better! ...

Away on the crest of Beau-nez, humping a huge black back against the brilliant darkness, someone was swinging a lantern--once, twice.

The Colonel flashed his electric torch in answer.

The gaunt figure at the window turned.

"Rachel," he said low, to the woman in the bed beneath him.

"Jocko," came the answering voice, quiet as his own.

"We're going in."

"Thank God."

In the darkness she reached up arms, white and trembling as a bride's, and drew him to her.

He kissed her eyelids and found them wet.

"I can't help it, Jocko," she sobbed. "Jock!"

Her boy was in India with the second battalion; but she knew very well that now the crash had come every battalion in the Service would be flung into the furnace.

The Colonel went back to the window and she came to his side. His arm crept about her, and she trembled in the curve of it. A mild but ghastly beam, as of the moon, fell on them standing at the window. A battleship was playing its searchlight full on them. The cold wan beam roamed along the hill-side callous and impersonal, exposing every bush and scar. It fell on the white bluff of Beau-nez and came creeping, like the fingers of a leper, along the cliff. Just opposite the hostel, at the spot where the path ran down to the beach, it stayed, pointing as it were, at a little pillar of solid blackness erect on the cliff edge.

The Colonel caught his breath with a gasp.

"Don't look!" he cried sharply and snatched his wife away. As he did so the pillar broke up in two component parts, as though dissolved by the white encircling flood of light.

A woman's stifled scream came through the open window.

"Joe!"

Then there was a slither of chalk as the pair stampeded down the path out of sight, and crashed into the beach beneath. The Colonel let down the blind with a rattle.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT

Ernie clattered into the kitchen at a busy trot, and stumbled upstairs without a word to his wife at the sink.

There was such an air of stir and secret purposefulness about him that Ruth followed him up to the bedroom. There she found him on his knees

in a litter of things, packing a bundle frantically.

A dish-cloth in her hand, she watched his efforts.

"Where away then?" she asked.

"Berlin this journey. Hand me them socks!"

Her eyes leapt. "Is it war?"

"That's it."

She sat down ghastly, wrapping her hands in her apron as if they had been mutilated and she wished to hide the stumps.

Men abuse the Army when they are in it and take their discharge at the earliest possible moment; but when the call comes they down tools with avidity, and leaving the mill, the mine, the shunting yard, and the shop, they troop back to the colours with the lyrical enthusiasm of those who have re-discovered youth on the threshhold of middle-age.

Ern, you may be sure, was no exception to the rule.

Packing and unpacking his bundle on his knees, he was busy, happy, important. But there was no such desperate hurry after all: for he did not join the crowds which thronged the recruiting stations in those first days: he waited for the Colonel to arrange matters so that he could join his old battalion at Aldershot direct.

Ruth watched him with deep and jealously guarded eyes in which wistfulness and other disturbing emotions met and mingled.

Once only she put to him the master question.

"What about us, Ern?"

He was standing at the time contemplating the patient and tormented bundle.

"Who?"

"Me and the children."

"There's one Above," said Ernie. "He'll see to you."

"He don't most in general not from what I've seen of it," answered Ruth. "What if He don't?"

There was a moment's pause. Then Ern dropped a word as a child may drop a stone in a well.

"Joe."

Ruth caught her breath.

In those days Ernie grew on her as a mountain looming out of the dawn-mist grows on the onlooker. Joe did not even come to see her; and she was glad. For all his virility and bull-like quality, now that the day of battle had come, Ern was proving spiritually the bigger man.

And his very absorbtion in the new venture appealed to Ruth even while it wounded. Ern had been "called" as surely as Clem Woolgar, the bricklayer's labourer, her neighbour in the Moot, who testified every Sunday afternoon in a scarlet jersey at the _Star_ corner to the clash of cymbals. Clem it was true, spoke of his call as Christ; to Ernie it went by the name of country. In Ruth's view the name might differ but the Thing was the same. A voice had come to Ern which had spoken to him as she had not, as the children had not. Because of it he was a new man--"converted," as Clem would say, prepared to forsake father and mother, and wife, and child, and follow, follow.

England was calling; and he seemed deaf to every other voice. She seemed to have gone clean out of his life; but the children had not--she noticed it with a pang of jealousy and a throb of hope. For each of the remaining nights after dark, he went round their cots. She was not to know anything about that, she could see, from the stealthy way in which he stole upstairs when her back was supposed to be turned. But the noises in the room overhead, the murmur of his voice, the shuffling of his feet as he got up from the bedsides betrayed his every action.

On the third night, as he rejoined her, she rose before him in the dusk, laying down her work.

"Anything for me too, Ern," she asked humbly--"the mother of em?"

"What d'you mean?" he asked almost fiercely.

"D'you want me, Ern?"

He turned his back on her with an indifference that hurt far more than any brutality, because it signified so plainly that he did not care.

"You're all right," he said enigmatically, and went out.

He could ask anything of her now, and she would give him all, how gladly! But he asked nothing.

In another way, too, he was torturing her. It was clear to her that he meant to do his duty by her and the children--to the last ounce; and nothing more. He cared for their material wants as he had never done before. All his spare moments he spent handying about the house, hammer in hand, nails in mouth, doing little jobs he had long promised to do and had forgotten; putting little Ned's mail-cart to rights, screwing on a handle, setting a loose slate. She followed him about with wistful eyes, holding the hammer, steadying the ladder, and receiving in return a few off-hand words of thanks. She did not want

words: she wanted him--himself.

Then news came through, and he was straightway full of mystery and bustle.

"Join at Aldershot to-morrow. Special train at two," he told Ruth in the confidential whisper beloved of working-men. "Don't say nothing to nobody." As though the news, if it reached the Kaiser, would profoundly affect the movements of the German armies.

That evening Ernie went up to the Manor-house to say good-bye.

Mrs. Trupp was far more to him than his god-mother: she was a friend known to him from babyhood, allied to him by a thousand intimate ties, and trusted as he trusted no one else on earth, not even his dad.

Now he unbosomed to her the one matter that was worrying him on his departure--that he should be leaving Ruth encumbered with debt.

Mrs. Trupp met him with steady eyes. It was her first duty, the first duty of every man, woman and child in the nation to see that the fighting-men went off in good heart.

"You needn't worry about Ruth," she said, quietly. "She'll have the country behind her. All the soldiers' wives will."

Ernie shook his head doubtfully.

"Ah, I don't hold much by the country," he said.

The lady's grave face, silver-crowned, twinkled into sudden mischievous life. She rippled off into the delicious laughter he loved so dearly.

"I know who's been talking to you!" she cried.

Ernie grinned sheepishly.

"Who then?"

"Mr. Burt."

Ernie admitted the charge.

"If you don't trust the country, will you trust Mr. Trupp and me?" the other continued.

Ernie rose with a sigh of relief.

"Thank you kindly, 'm," he said. "That's what I come after."

Ernie went on to Rectory Walk, to find that his mother too had joined the crucified. In the maelstrom of emotion that in those tragic hours was tossing nations and individuals this way and that, the hard woman

had been humbled at last. Stripped to the soul, she saw herself a twig hurled about in the sea of circumstance she could no more control than a toy-boat a-float on the Atlantic can order the tides. No longer an isolated atom hard and self-contained, she was one of a herd of bleating sheep being driven by a remorseless butcher to the slaughter-house. And the first question she put to him revealed the extent of the change that had been wrought in her.

"What about Ruth?" she asked.

It was the only occasion on which his mother had named his wife to Ern during his married life.

"She's all right, mother," Ernie replied. "She's plenty of friends."

"Mrs. Trupp," jealously. "Well, why don't ye say so? What about the children?"

"They'll just stay with their mother," answered Ernie.

"I could have em here if she was to want to go out to work," Anne said grudgingly; and must add, instigated by the devil who dogged her all her life--"Your children, of course."

Ernie answered quite simply:

"No, thank-you, mother," and continued with unconscious dignity--"They're all my children."

A gleam of cruelty shone in his mother's eyes.

"She's behind with her rent. You know that? And Alf's short. He says he's dropped thousands over his Syndicate. Ruined in his country's cause, Alf says."

"If he's dropped thousands a few shillings more or less won't help him," said Ernie curtly.

"And yet he'll want em," Anne pursued maliciously. "He was sayin so only last night. _Every penny_, he said."

"He may want," retorted Ernie. "He won't get."

His mother made a little grimace.

"If Alf wants a thing he usually gets it."

Ernie flashed white.

"Ah," he said. "We'll see what dad says."

It was a new move in the family game, and unexpected. Anne was completely taken a-back. She felt that Ernie was not playing fair. There had always been an unwritten family law, inscribed by the mother

on the minds of the two boys in suggestible infancy, that dad should be left outside all broils and controversies; that dad should be spared unpleasantness, and protected at any cost.

She was shocked, almost to pleading.

"You'd never tell him!"

"He's the very one I would tell then!" retorted Ernie, rejoicing in his newly-discovered vein of brutality.

"Only worry him," she coaxed.

"He ain't the only one," Ern answered. "I'm fairly up against it, too." Grinning quietly at his victory, he turned down the passage to the study.

His father was sitting in his favourite spot under the picture of his ancestor, watching the tree-tops blowing in the Rectory garden opposite. The familiar brown-paper-clad New Testament was on his knee.

Ernie marked at once that here was the one tranquil spirit he had met since the declaration of war. And this was not the calm of stagnation. Rather it was the intense quiet of the wheel which revolves so swiftly that it appears to be still.

He drew his chair beside his father's.

"What d'you make of it all, dad?" he asked gently.

The old man took his thumb out of his New Testament, and laid his hand upon his son's.

"_And behold there was a great earthquake,_" he quoted. "_For the Angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone from the door of the Tomb._"

Ernie nodded thoughtfully. For the first time perhaps the awful solemnity of the drama in which he was about to play his part came home to him in all its overwhelming power.

"Yes, dad," he said deeply. "Only I reck'n it took some rolling."

The old man gripped and kneaded the hand in his just as Ruth would do in moments of stress.

"True, Boy-lad," he answered. "But it had to be rolled away before the Lord could rise."

Ernie assented.

Hand-in-hand they sat together for some while. Then Ernie rose to go. In the silence and dusk father and son stood together on the very spot where fourteen years before they had said good-bye on Ernie's departure

for the Army. The Edward Caspar of those days was old now; and the boy of that date a matured man, scarred already by the wars of Time.

"It won't be easy rolling back the stone, Boy-lad," said the old man. "But they that are for us are more than they that are against us."

It was not often that Ernie misunderstood his father; but he did now.

"Yes," he said. "And they say the Italians are coming in too."

"The whole world must come in," replied the other, his cheeks rosying faintly with an enthusiasm which made him tremble. "And we must all push together." He made a motion with his hand--"English and Germans, Russians and Austrians, and roll it back, back, back! and topple it over into the abyss. And then the Dawn will break on the risen Lord."

Ernie went out into the passage. His mother in the kitchen was waiting for him. She looked almost forlorn, he noticed.

"Give me a kiss, Ern," she pleaded in sullen voice that quavered a little. "Don't let's part un-friends just now--you and me--After all, you're my first."

Ernie's eyes filled. He took her in his arms, this withered old woman, patted her on the back, kissed her white hair, her tired eyelids.

"There!" he said. "I should knaw you arter all these years, Mum. Always making yourself twice the terror you are--and not meaning it."

CHAPTER XXXIII

BEAU-NEZ

He returned to the Moot to find little Alice crying in the door. A pathetic little shrimp of a creature she looked, huddled against the door-post, her face hidden, her shoulders quivering, her back to the hostile world. Some children who had been mocking her drew away on Ernie's approach.

"What's up, Lal?" he asked tenderly, bending over her.

She would not look up.

"It's nothing, daddy," she sobbed and crept away up the street, like a wounded animal.

Ernie went in. Ruth was sitting alone in the kitchen forlorn and wistful as he had never known her. It was clear to him that the sorrow, whatever it might be, was shared by mother and daughter. He watched her quietly for a minute; then came to her.

"What is it, mother?" he asked with unusual gentleness.

His tone touched the spring of tears in her heart. She bit her lip.

"Its Alf," she said with gasps. "He's been settin em on to her again... He's spiteful because the war's spoilt his Syndicate... So he takes it out of her... They've been tormenting her... Only she wouldn't tell you because she wanted your last day to be happy."

Ern went out, found little Alice once again in the door, her pinafore still to her eyes, took her up in his arms and put her in her mother's lap.

"Love one another," he said huskily. "And don't forget me."

Then he went out again, burning his battle-flare.

In half an hour he was back with Joe Burt.

There was a strange hushed dignity about him as he entered the kitchen. He might have been a priest about to conduct a ceremony at the altar of the Most High. Joe lagged behind sullen and with downward eyes, twisting his cap. Somehow he looked strangely common beside his friend. Ruth, as she rose to meet the two men, was profoundly conscious of the contrast between them.

"Joe," said Ernie, still and solemn, "I bequeath Ruth to you..."

In a flash the woman seized the situation.

"--to have and to hold," she murmured quietly, her head down to stifle sobs and laughter.

Ernie with that love of ritual which characterises his class continued with the smile-less intensity of a child.

"Yes, to have and to hold ... her and her children ... for me ... till I return."

Joe was obviously staggered. His eyes roved the floor; his head weaved to and fro.

"Here, I didn't bargain for this," he muttered.

Ruth thrust out her hand almost sternly, as though to silence him. He took it grudgingly, and then Ern's.

"A suppose A'll do ma best," he said, and slouched out hasty as a schoolboy escaping from the schoolroom.

When he was gone Ruth laid both hands on Ernie's shoulders and looked at him her eyes dazzled with laughter and tears.

"You should never ha done it, Ern!" she said. "Never!"

"There was nothing for it only that," Ern answered sturdily. "It's a world of wolves. Somebody must see to you while I'm away."

She withdrew her hands and stood before him, defenceless now, humble, beautiful, appealing.

"Ern," she said with a little sob, "will you take me up along to the Ambush--our last night and all?"

He looked at her steadily. Then he caught her hand.

"All right, old lass," he said.

They had not visited their couching-place that summer and the romance of old and intimate association was on them both now as they came to the tryst in the scented dusk. The gorse, unpruned, had grown over the track that led to the heart of the covert. Ernie forced his way through, Ruth following him, anchored jealously to his hand. Behind her the bushes closed, blocking the way; and she was glad. Her eyes were on the shoulders of her man, wistful still but triumphant; and she found herself smiling secretly as she marked how bride-like she felt, how warm and shy and tremulous. In this great hour the tides of her ebbing youth had returned with power and the desert bloomed afresh. The world-catastrophe had wrought a miracle. Spring had quickened the stale summer air. Here at the parched noon was a hint of dawn, dew-drenched and lovely.

Waist-deep in the dark covert, the man and woman stood on the summit of the hill, under the sky, the sea spread like a dulled shield beneath them.

It was already nine o'clock; a perfect evening of that never-to-be-forgotten August. The sun had long gone down behind the Seven Sisters. In Paradise a nightjar was thrumming harshly. Below in the coombe the lights of Undercliff began to twinkle. On the Head Brangwyn-like figures were moving heavily. A night-shift was working there behind windy flares, screened by tarpaulins from enemy eyes at sea. Ernie knew what they were doing.

"They're building a battery to protect the new wireless station against aircraft attack," he told Ruth. "That dark thing in the road's a fire-engine to dowse the flares if a night attack's made."

Then above the noise of the navvies busy with pick and shovel, and the pleasant gargle of the night-jar, blended another sound. A hollow ominous rumbling like the voice of a great ghost laughing harshly in his grave came rolling across the sea out of the darkness.

"Guns," said Ernie. "They're at it in the Bight."

Ruth drew closer and took his arm. One finger was to her lips. She was a little bit afraid. He felt it, and pressed her arm.

From the distance, muffled by the shoulder of the hill, came the hammer-hammer that would endure all night of the emergency gangs, rushed down in special trains from the North, to run up a huge camp in the great coombe at the end of Rectory Walk where of old lambs had often roused Ernie as a lad on bleak March mornings by their forlorn music of spirits exiled and crying for home.

He stood and looked and listened.

"Who'd ever ha beleft it'd ha come to this when we first lay out here six years ago?" he mused.

"Or now for that matter," answered Ruth, her voice deep and hushed as the evening. "All so good and quiet as it looks."

She pulled him down into the darkness of the covert.

"D'is safer here, I reck'n," she said, and nuzzled up against him.

Ernie peeped though the gorse at the lights flickering on the Head.

"They ca-a-n't see us here," he said.

"And a good job, too, I reck'n," answered Ruth sedately, fingering her hair.

Ernie chuckled.

"Listen!" he said.

They sat close in their ambush, walled about with prickly darkness, roofed in by the living night.

Beneath them the sea came and went, rose and fell, rhythmical and somnolent, as it had done in the days when badger and wolf and bear roamed the hill, with none to contest their sovereignty but the hoary old sea-eagle from the cliffs; as it might still do when man had long passed away. Sounds ancient almost as the earth on which they lay, which had lulled them and millions of their forefathers to sleep, were crossed by others, new, man-made, discordant.

Down the road at the back of the covert, not a hundred yards away, came a sudden bustling phut-phut-phut.

"Despatch-rider," said Ernie, peering. "Light out and all. Rushin it to Birling Gap. There's a company of Territorials there, diggin emselves in behind barbed wire to guard the deep-sea cables."

"The Boy-Scouts were layin out all day on the road to Friston, Mr. Chislehurst told me," remarked Ruth. "They took the number of every motor and motor-bike on the road to Newhaven."

She unloosed her hair that fell about her like a torrent of darkness.

A huge beetle twanged by above them; and then in the covert close at hand there was a snuffling and grunting, so loud, so close, so portentous that Ruth, creature of the earth though she was, was startled and paused in her undoing.

"What-ever's that?" she asked, laying a hand on Ernie.

"Hedge-pig, I allow."

"Sounds like it might be a wild boar routin and snoutin and carryin on," she laughed.

Ruth reclined on the bed of sand. The calm blessedness of night embraced her; and the stars lay on her face. She lifted her lips to them, seeming to draw them down with each breath, and blow them away again, babe-like. A dreamy amazement still possessed her.

"Who'd ever ha beleft it?" she said quietly.

Then she turned her face to him and laughed.

"Ernie!" she called.

"Whose are you now?" he said fiercely in her ear.

She chuckled and gathered him to her bosom.

He sighed his content.

"That's better," he murmured. "Now, never no more of it!"

A great mate, Ruth was a still greater mother; and this living, pulsing creature in her arms was her child, her first-born cub.

In the stress and conflict of the last few years necessity had compelled her to discard the royal indolence that was her natural habit. The lioness in her, roused by conflict, had made her fierce and formidable in any battle. Six months ago she had fought Ernie--because he was weak; now she would shield him--because he was strong.

Jealously she pressed him to her.

"They shan't get you, my lad," she said between her teeth. "I'll see to that."

"I'm not afraid o them," answered Ernie drowsily. "I knaw the Germans. All you got to do is to say Shoo!--and goo with your arms and they're off like rabbits from the garden."

She thrust his head back till she saw it as a dim blob against the shining night; and looked up into his eyes, her own so close to his, so deep, so dear.

"You're my soldier," she murmured in his ear. "I always knew you was."

Then she drew his face down to hers, till their lips met.

"I got something to tell you, Ern."

Now she leaned over him. The moon shone on the smooth sweep of her shoulders, rounded and luminous.

"I only deceived you the once, Ern," she whispered, her voice murmuring like a stream that issued from the slowly-heaving ocean of her chest. "Afore we were married. He ne'er wrote me ne'er a letter."

"I knew that then," muttered Ernie, sleepily, his head beside her own.

"It was Madame," Ruth continued. "She come over in a car and told the tale."

Her confession made she waited; but in a moment his breathing told her that he had fallen off to sleep.

She stroked him rhythmically, just as she would her children when they were tired.

He was going back to the regiment--to Captain Royal--to the Unknown. She was not afraid for him--nor for herself--nor for the children. An immense peace had fallen on her.

Then all about her a murmur as of wings grew. There was a whispering patter as of rain upon the turf that ringed the covert; but no rain fell. Through the patter came the tinkle of a bell. An immense flock of sheep was rippling dimly like a flood over the parched turf to the dew-pond by the old wall on the brow. The whisper grew louder, as though the rain had turned to hail. The flock was crossing the road. Then there was almost a silence, and in the silence the leader ba-a-a-d. The flock had reached the waters of refreshing.

Ruth slept, strangely comforted.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE STATION

Next day Ernie was to join up.

After dinner he kissed Susie and Jenny, gave them each a penny, and despatched them to play. Hand in hand they stamped away to Motcombe Garden with clacking heels, roguish backward glances and merry tongues.

Then he asked Ruth to go into the backyard. Left alone with Alice he lifted her on to the kitchen-table, took her hands in his, and looked gravely into her eyes.

"I trust you to look after mother and the little ones when I'm gone, Lal," he said.

The little maid, swift and sympathetic as her mother, nodded at him, nibbling her handkerchief, her heart too full for words. Then she raised her crumpled face, that at the moment was so like her mother's, for a last kiss, and as she wreathed her arms round his neck she whispered,

"You are my daddy, aren't you, daddy?"

"Of course I am," he murmured, and lifted her down.

She ran away swiftly, not trusting herself to look back.

A moment later Ruth entered the kitchen, slowly and with downcast eyes. He was standing before the fire, awaiting her.

"Ruth," he said quietly. "I've tried to do well by your child; I'll ask you to do the same by mine."

She came to him and hung about his neck, riven with sobs, her head on his shoulder.

"O Ern!" she cried. "And is that your last word to me?"

She lifted anguished eyes to him and clung to him.

"I love them all just the same, only we been through so much together, she and me. That's where it is."

His arms were about her and he was stroking her.

"I knaw that then," he said, husky himself.

"See, they got you and each other and all the world," Ruth continued. "Little Alice got nobody only her mother."

"And me," said Ernie.

She steadied and drew her hand across rain-blurred eyes.

"Ern," she said, deeply. "I do thank you for all your lovin kindness to that child. I've never forgot that all through--whatever it seemed."

"She's mine just as well as yours," he answered, smiling and uncertain. "Always has been. Always will be."

She pressed her lips on his with a passion that amazed him.

Then he took the boy from the cot and rocked him. The tears poured down his face. This, then, was War!--All his light-heartedness, his detachment, had gone. He was a husband and a father torn brutally away

from the warmth and tenderness of the home that was so dear to him, to be tossed into the arena among wild beasts who not long since had been men just like himself, and would be men still but for the evil power of their masters to do by them as his masters had done by him. Then he put the child back and turned to say good-bye to Ruth.

The passionate wife of a few minutes since had changed now into the mother parting from her schoolboy. She took him to her heart and hugged him.

"You'll be back before you know," she told him, cooing, comforting, laughing through her tears. "They all say it'll be over soon, whatever else. A great war like this ca'an't go on. Too much of it, like."

"Please God, so," said Ernie. "It's going to be the beginning of a new life for me--for you--for all of us, as Joe says.... God keep you till we meet again."

Then he walked swiftly down the street with swimming eyes.

The neighbours, who were all fond of Ern, stood in their doors and watched him solemnly.

He was going into _IT_.

Like as not they would never see him again.

Many of the women had handkerchieves to their lips, as they watched, and over the handkerchieves their eyes showed awed. Some turned away, hands to their hearts. Others munched their aprons and wept. A mysterious rumour in the deeps of them warned them of the horror that had him and them and the world in its grip.

They could not understand, but they could feel.

And this working man with the uncertain mouth and blurred eyes--this man whose walk, whose speech, whose coal-grimed face, and the smell even of his tarry clothes, was so familiar to them--was the symbol of it all.

A big navvy came sheepishly out of the last house in the row and stopped him. It was the man who had insulted Ernie in the _Star_ six months before.

"I ask your pardon, Ern," he said. "I didn't mean what I said."

Ern shook hands. Years before the two had been at school together under Mr. Pigott.

"It wasn't you, Reube," he said. "I knaw who spread the dung you rolled in."

"I shan't be caught again," replied the other. "That's a sure thing."

Ern jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Keep an eye to her!" he whispered.

"You may lay to it," the big man answered.

At the corner a young girl of perhaps fifteen ran out suddenly, flung herself into his arms, kissed him, with blind face lifted to the sky, and was gone again.

At the bottom of Borough Lane a troop of Boy-Scouts in slouch hats, knickers, and with staves, drawn up in order, saluted. A tiny boy in his mother's arms blew him shy kisses. Just outside the yard of the Transport Company his mates, who had been waiting him, came out and shook him by the hand. Most were very quiet. As he passed on the man among them he disliked most called for three cheers. A ragged noise was raised behind him.

At the _Star_ corner a beery patriot, wearing the South African medals, mug to his lips, hailed him.

"Gor bless the Hammer-men!" he cried. "Gor bless the old ridgiment!" and tried to lure Ernie into the familiar bar-parlour.

"Not me, thank ye!" cried Ernie stoutly. "This ain't a beano, my boy! This is War!"

As he rounded the corner he glanced up at the sturdy old church with its tiny extinguisher spire, standing on the Kneb behind him, four-square to the centuries, the symbol of the rough and ready England which at that moment was passing away, with its glories and its shames, into the limbo of history.

At the station all that was most representative in Beachbourne had gathered to see the reservists off.

The Mayor was there in his chain of office; the Church Militant in the person of the Archdeacon; Mr. Glynde, the senior member for Beachbourne, middle-aged, swarthy, his hair already white, making a marked contrast to his junior colleague, the fair-haired young giant, talking to the Archdeacon.

The old gentleman looked ghastly; his face colourless save for the shadows of death which emphasised his pallor. Then he saw Bobby Chislehurst busy among the departing soldiers, and beckoned him austerely.

"I thought you were a pacifist, Chislehurst!" he said, his smile more kindly and less histrionic than usual.

"So I am, sir," answered Bobby, brightly. "But there are several of our men from the Moot going off. It's not their fault they've got to

go, poor beggars!"

"Their _fault_!" cried the Archdeacon. "It's their privilege." He added less harshly, "We must all stand by the country now, Chislehurst."

"Yes, sir," said Bobby. "I shan't give the show away," and he bustled off.

Then the Colonel stalked up.

"Well, Archdeacon, what d'you make of it all?" he asked, curious as a child to gather impressions.

The Archdeacon drew himself up.

"Just retribution," he answered in voice that seemed to march. "If a nation will go a-whoring after false gods in the wilderness what can you expect? Gahd does not forget."

The Colonel listened blankly, his long neck elongated like a questing schoolboy.

"What you mean?" he asked.

"Welsh Disestablishment Bill," the other answered curtly.

Mr. Trupp now entered the station, and the Colonel, who though quiet outwardly, was in a condition of intense spiritual exaltation that made him restless as dough in which the yeast is working, joined his pal. He had cause for his emotion. The Cabinet had stood. The country had closed its ranks in a way that was little short of a miracle. All men of all parties had rallied to the flag. In Dublin the Irish mob which had provoked the King's Own Scottish Borderers to bloody retaliation, had turned out and cheered the battalion as it marched down to the transports for embarkation.

"Well, we're roused at last," said the Colonel, as he looked round on that humming scene.

"Yes," answered Mr. Trupp. "It's taken a bash in the face to do it though."

"Should be interesting," commented the Colonel, hiding his emotion behind an air of detachment. "An undisciplined horde of men who believe themselves to be free against a disciplined mass of slaves."

Just then Mr. Pigott approached. The old Nonconformist had about him the air of a boy coming up to the desk to take his punishment. He was at once austere and chastened.

"Well, Colonel," he said. "You were right."

The Colonel took the other's hand warmly.

"Not a bit of it!" he cried. "That's the one blessed thing about the whole situation. _We've all been wrong_. I believed in the German menace--till a month or two ago. And then...."

"That's it," said Mr. Trupp. "We must all swing together, and a good job too. If there's any hanging done Carson and Bonar Law, Asquith and Haldane, Ramsay Macdonald and Snowden ought to grace the same gallows seems to me. And when we've hanged our leaders for letting us in we must hang ourselves for allowing them to let us in."

The old surgeon had turned an awkward corner with the gruff tact peculiar to him; and Mr. Pigott at least was grateful to him.

"You've heard Carson's committed suicide?" he said. "Shot himself this morning on St. Stephen's Green."

"Not a bit of it," replied the Colonel. "He's far too busy holding up recruiting in Ulster while he haggles for his terms, to do anything so patriotic."

"Besides why should he?" interposed a harsh and jeering voice. "Treason's all right if you're rich and powerful. Jim Larkin got six months a year ago for sedition and inciting to violence. What'll these chaps get for provoking the greatest war that ever was or will be? I'll tell ye, _Fat jobs_. Where'll they be at the end of the war? under the sod alongside the millions of innocent men who've had to pay the price of their mistakes? No fear! They'll be boolgin money, oozin smiles, fat with power, and big-bellied wi feedin on the carcases of better men."

It was Joe Burt who had come up with Mr. Geddes.

The Colonel, giving his shoulder to the engineer, turned to the tall minister, who was stiff, a little self-conscious, and very grave.

Possessed of a far deeper mind than Mr. Pigott, Mr. Geddes was still haunted by doubts. Were we wholly in the right?

The Colonel, intuitive as a girl, recognised the other's distress, and guessed the cause of it.

"Well, Mr. Geddes," he said gently. "Evil has triumphed for the moment at least."

"Yes," replied the other. "Liebknecht's shot, they say."

"All honour to him!" said the Colonel. "He was the one man of the lot who stood to his guns when the pinch came. All the rest of the Social Democrats stampeded at the first shot."

Joe Burt edged up again. Like Mr. Pigott he had made his decision irrevocably and far sooner than the old Nonconformist; but there was a vengeful background still to his thoughts. He refused to forget.

"I hear the Generals are in uproarious spirits," he said.

"One of them," answered the Colonel quietly.

"They won't pay the price," continued Joe. "They'll make--trust them. _There's_ the man they'll leave to take the punishment they've brought on the coontry." He nodded to Ernie who was busy with some mates extracting chocolates from a penny-in-the-slot-machine.

The Colonel's eye glittered. He had spied Stanley Bessemere doing, indeed over-doing, the hearty amongst the men by the barrier.

"After all it's nothing to what we owe our friend there and the politicians," he said brightly, and made towards his victim, with an almost mincing motion.

Since the declaration of war his solitary relief from intolerable anxieties had been baiting the junior member for the Borough. He left him no peace, hanging like a gadfly on his flank. At the club, in the street, on committees at the Town-hall there rose up to haunt the young man this inexorable spectre with the death's head, the courteous voice, and the glittering smile.

"Ah, Bessemere!" he said gently. "Here still!--I heard you had enlisted, you and Smith."

The other broke away and, seeing Ernie close by, shook hands with him. The move was unfortunately countered by Joe Burt.

"You've shook 'ands with Mr. Caspar five times since I've been here," he remarked tartly. "Can't you give somebody else a turn now?"

Just then, mercifully, Mr. Trupp rolled up, coughing.

Summer or winter made no difference to the great man's cold, which was always with him, and lovingly cherished; but he liked to mark the change between the two seasons by exchanging the long woollen muffler of winter for a silken wrapper in which he swaddled his neck in the summer months.

"Good luck, Ernie," he said in his brief way, his eyes shrewd and sweet behind his pince-nez.

"Keep an eye to Ruth, won't you, sir?" said Ernie in his most confidential manner.

"We'll do our best," replied the other hoarsely. "Here's Mr. Pigott. Quite a jingo these days."

"Who isn't?" the old school-master answered with an attempt at the familiar truculence. "Well, you look like it, Ern." He added almost with admiration. "Quite a changed man."

Then the Colonel joined the little group.

"Coming along sir?" asked Ernie keenly.

"No luck," replied the other gloomily. "Too old at sixty... What about that brother of yours?"

Ern's face darkened.

"Ah, I ain't seen him," he said.

"There he is by the bookstall," muttered Mr. Pigott. "Envying the men who are going to fight his battles! I know him."

Alf, indeed, who had clearly recovered from the first shock of war, was very much to the fore, modest, fervent, the unassuming patriot. Now he approached his brother with a mixture of wariness and manly frankness.

"Will you shake 'ands, Ernest?" he asked.

"I will _not_," said Ern. "It was you who done the dirty on our Lal."

"Never!" cried Alf and came a step closer. "I'll tell you who it were." He nodded stealthily in the direction of Joe. "That's the chap that's out to spoil your home. Wrecker I call him. I tell you what, Ern," he whispered. "I'll watch out against him for you while you are away so you don't suffer."

"I thank you," said Ern, unmoved.

Just then Joe came up, took him by the arm, and bustled him off to the departure platform.

"You'll be late else, ma lad," said the engineer.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN THE EVENING

The Archdeacon and his sidesman walked back to Old Town from the station together.

Mr. Trupp and Mr. Pigott followed behind.

"The Archdeacon lags a bit," said the former.

"Yes," answered the other. "And I don't wonder. This war'll be the end of him yet. You heard about last night?"

The veteran had sallied out at midnight with an electric torch and the Reverend Spink to deal with spies who had been signalling from the top

of the Downs.

Unhappily the stalker had himself been stalked by another patriot bent on the same errand. The two old gentlemen had arrested each other by the dew-pond on Warren Hill; and report had it that words and worse had passed between the two. In the small hours of the morning Anne Caspar, hearing voices, had risen and seen from her window the Archdeacon stalking down the road, dusty, draggled, his curate trotting with sullen barks at the heels of his chief. The Archdeacon had no prisoner, but he had lumbago, a scratch or two, and an indignant sense that his curate had proved both disloyal and inefficient. The two had parted at the Rectory gate wrathfully, the Reverend Spink offering his resignation.

Opposite his garage in the Golfs, Alf now said goodbye to his Rector, and crossed the road with an almost aggressively sprightly air. Mr. Trupp noticed it.

"What about him and his Touring Syndicate?" he asked.

"He's all right," answered Mr. Pigott. "Trust him for that. Artful isn't in it with Alf. Called his drivers together on the declaration of war, and made em a speech. Said he knew where they wanted to be--where he wanted to be himself: in the fighting line. He'd be the last to stand between them and their duty. He wouldn't keep them to their contract. The Motor Transport was crying for them--five bob a day and glory galore. All he could do was to say God bless you and wish he could go himself--only his responsibilities...."

Mr. Trupp grinned.

"Did they swallow it down?" he asked.

"Like best butter," said Mr. Pigott. "He's got the tongue. He twisted em. Parliament's the place for Alf."

"Ah!" committed the other. "We're only beginning. This war'll find us all out too before we're through." ...

Alf turned into his yard.

A little group of broken down old men were waiting him there.

"Who are you?" he asked fiercely. "What you want?"

"We've come on behalf of the cleaners, sir," said the spokesman, in the uncertain voice of the half-starved. "What about us?--The Army don't want us."

The group tittered a feeble deprecatory titter.

"H'every man for himself in these days!" cried Alf, brief and brisk. "I'm not the Charity Organisation Society."

The old man, a-quaver in voice and body, doddered forward, touching his hat. Undersized and shrunken through starvation during infancy, and brutal usage throughout his growing years, he was an example of the great principle we Christians have enforced and maintained throughout the centuries: that the world's hardest work should be done by the weakest. Tip, as he was called, had been a coal-porter till at fifty-five he dislocated his shoulder shifting loads too heavy for him. Thereafter he was partially disabled, a casualty of the Industrial War, and to be treated as such.

"Would you give us a week's money or notice, sir?" he said now in his shaking voice.

"Did I take you on by the week?" asked Alf ferociously.

"No, sir; by the day."

"Then what ye talking about?--Ain't I paid you up?"

"You paid us up, sir. Only we got to live."

"Very well then. There's the House at the top of the hill for such as you. Ain't that good enough? This is a Christian country, this is."

Alf was half-way up the steps to his office, and he pointed in the direction of the Work-house.

A curious tawny glow lit the old man's eyes. His lips closed over his gums.

"Bloody Bastille," he muttered.

Alf heard him and ran down the steps. He was still with the stillness of the born bully.

"None of that now," he said quietly. "No filthy language in my yard! And no loiterin eether!--Off you go or I send for the police. The country's got something better to think of than you and your likes, I reckon, just now."

He stood in the gate of the yard with the cold domineering air of the warder in charge of convicts.

The cleaners shambled away like a herd of mangy donkeys past work and turned out on waste land to die at their leisure.

They were broken men all, old and infirm, drawn from the dregs of that Reserve of Labour on which the capitalist system has been built. They belonged to no Union; they were incapable of organisation and therefore of defence against the predatory class ...

"We got no bloody country, men like us ain't."

"Nor no bloody Christ."

"The rich got Him too."

"Same as they got everythink else" ...

The last of them gone, Alf skipped up the steps into his office. He was not afraid of them, was not even depressed by their uncalled-for consideration of themselves.

Indeed he was extraordinarily uplifted.

His great scheme had, it is true, been brought low--through no omission on his part; but he had got out with a squeeze after a dreadful period of panic fury, and now experienced the lyrical exhilaration of the man who has escaped by his own exertions from sudden unexpected death.

He had unloaded his drivers on the Army; and sold his buses to the Government. The only big creditor was Captain Royal, and Alf could afford to laugh at him. Besides Captain Royal would be off to the war--and might not come back. Moreover, unless he was much mistaken, the war meant all manner of chances of which the man with his eyes open would take full advantage: world convulsions always did.

Meanwhile he had the garages on which he could rebuild his original edifice at any moment, add to it, alter it as opportunity offered. The war would not last for ever; but it would un-make businesses and devour men--some of them his rivals. While they were away at the Front he would be quietly, ceaselessly strengthening his position at home. And when peace came, as it must some day, he would be ready to reap where he had sown in enterprise and industry.

On his way up to Old Town that evening he met the Reverend Spink and asked him how long the Franco-Prussian war had lasted.

The curate still had the ruffled and resentful air of a fighting cockerel who has a grievance against the referee. Lady Augusta, indeed, had passed a busy morning smoothing his plumage and inducing him to withdraw his resignation. His meeting with Alf served as further balm to his wounded spirit; for above all else the Reverend Spink loved to be appealed to as a scholar.

Now he answered Alf with a learned frown,

"Six months. It began at the same date as this. They were in Paris by January."

"As long as that!" said Alf surprised. "Looks as if they'd be quicker this time!"

A thought struck him. He turned down Borough Lane, and went to call on Ruth.

She was at home, alone in the kitchen, her babes in bed. He did not enter, but stood in the door awhile before she was aware of him,

watching her with sugary and secretive smile.

Then he chirped.

She looked up, saw him; and the light faded out of her face.

"So Ern's gone to the wars," he said. "You'll be a bit lonely like o nights, the evenings drawing in and all. Say, I might drop in on you when I got the time. I'm not so busy, as I was. Likely I'll be goin back to drive for Mr. Trupp now."

She rose, formidable as a lioness at bay in the mouth of her cave.

"Out of it!" she ordered, and flung an imperious hand towards the door.

Alf fled incontinently.

A navvy, who had been watching him from a door opposite, shouldered heavily across the street to meet him. He was a very big man with a very small head, dressed in corduroys; of the type you still meet in the pages of Punch but seldom in real life. His hands were deep in his pockets, and he said quietly without so much as removing his pipe.

"Stow the bloody truck then!"

Alf paused, astonished. Then he thought the other must have mistaken his man in the dusk.

"Here! d'you know who you're talkin to?" he asked.

The navvy showed himself quite undisturbed.

"Oughter," he said, "seein you and me was dragg'd oop same school togedder along o Mr. Pigott back yarnderr. You're Alf Caspar, and I be Reuben Deadman. There's an old saying these paarts you may have heard--_When there isn't a Deadman in Lewes Gaol you may knaw the end o't world's at hand_. I've not been in maself, not yet. When I goos I'll goo for to swing--for you--for old times sake; let alone the dirty dish you done Old Tip and them this arternoon."

Alf walked up the hill, breathing heavily and with mottled face.

The bubble of his exaltation had burst. He felt a curious sinking away within him, as though he were walking on cold damp clouds which were letting him through.

The war was changing things already, and not to his liking.

Three weeks ago who'd have talked to the Managing Director of Caspar's Syndicate like that?

Brooding on his troubles, he ran into Joe Burt who was coming swiftly round the corner of Borough Lane, brooding too.

Alf darted nimbly back. Joe stood with lowered head, glaring at his enemy. Then he thought better of it and turned on his way.

Alf, standing in the middle of the road with jeering eyes, called after him furtively.

"Want her all to yourself, don't you?"

Joe marched on unheeding to the cottage Alf had just left.

Ruth must have been awaiting him: for he entered at once without knocking.

CHAPTER XXXVI

RUTH FACES THE STORM

That night as the Colonel sat on the loggia chewing his pipe, long after Mrs. Lewknor had retired, he was aware of a pillar of blackness, erect against the dull sea and star-lit sky, on the edge of the cliff, at the very spot where he had seen it on the night of the declaration of war.

Electric torch in hand, he stole out on the pair. Oblivious of all things save each other, they remained locked in each other's arms. He flashed the torch full in their faces.

"O, Joe!" came a familiar voice.

The Colonel was taken a-back.

"That you, Anne?" he muttered.

"Yes, sir," his parlour-maid answered. "Me and my Joe. He come up to say goodbye. Joining up to-morrow, he is."

The Colonel mumbled something about spies, and apologised.

"No harm done, sir," laughed Anne, quietly. "It's nothing to some of them. Turn their search-light full glare on you just when you don't want, and never a by-your-leave--same as they done war-night! _If that's war_, I says to Joe, _better ha done with it afore you begin_, I says."

The Colonel retired indoors, doubly humiliated: he had made a fool of himself before his own parlour-maid, and in his mind he had gravely wronged Ruth Caspar.

Next day he started off for Old Town to find out if there was any way by which he could make amends to his own conscience and, unknown to her, to the woman he had maligned.

She met him with kind eyes, a little wistful.

"We're all friends now, sir," she said, as she shook hands. "Got to be, I reckon."

If it is true, as is said to-day, that old men make wars and young men pay for them, it is also true that the mothers, wives, sisters, and sweethearts of the young men bear their share of the burthen.

Ruth was left with four children and a debt.

She faced the situation as hundreds of thousands of women up and down Europe in like case were doing at that moment--quiet, courageous, uncomplaining as an animal under the blows that Life, the inexplicable, rained upon her. One thought constantly recurred to her. In her first tragedy she had stood alone against the world. Now there were millions undergoing the same experience. And she derived from that thought comfort denied to others.

There were no complications about her economic situation.

That at least was very simple.

She owed several weeks' rent, had debts outstanding to the tune of several shillings--mostly boots for the children; and a little cash in coppers in hand.

Two nights after Ernie's departure, Alf came round for his back-rent. He came stealthily, Ruth noticed; and she knew why. Public opinion in the Moot, which might at any moment find explosive self-expression through the fists of Reuben Deadman, was against him. It was against all landlords. Ern moreover was still a hero in the eyes of the Moot and would remain so for several days yet; and Ruth received the consideration due to the wife of such.

Alf was dogged, with downcast eyes. There was no nonsense, no persiflage about him. He went straight to the point.

"I come for my money," he said.

Ruth rallied him maliciously.

"Money!" she cried, feigning surprise. "I thart it was accommodation you was a'ter."

"And I mean to have it," Alf continued sullenly.

"Even a landlord's got to live these times. I got to have it or you got to go. That's straight."

Ruth had her back to the wall.

"Ah, you must have that out with the Government," she said coolly.

"It's got nothing to do with me."

"Government!" cried Alf sharply. "What's the Government got to do with it."

"They're passin some law to protect the women and children of them that's joined up," Ruth answered.

"Who said so?"

"The Colonel."

"Anyway it's not passed yet."

"No," retorted Ruth. "So you'd best wait till it is. Make you look a bit funny like to turn me out, and put some one else in, and then have to turn them out and put me back again, say in a fortnight, and all out o your own pocket. Not to talk o the bit of feeling, and them and me taking damages off o you as like as not, I should say."

That evening Ruth went up to see Mr. Pigott.

The Manager said he would pay her half Ern's wages while the war lasted; and he paid her the first instalment then and there.

"Will the Government do anything for the women and children sir?" she asked.

Mr. Pigott shook his grizzled head.

As the years went by he had an always diminishing faith in the power and will of Governments to right wrongs.

"The old chapel's the thing," he would say.

Ruth put the same question to Mr. Trupp whom she met on her way home to the Moot.

"They will if they're made to," the doctor answered, and as he saw the young woman's face fall, he added more sympathetically, "They're trying to do something locally. I don't know what'll come of it. Keep in touch with Mrs. Trupp. She'll let you know. I believe there's to be a meeting at the Town Hall."

He rolled on, grumbling and grousing to himself. Call ourselves a civilised country, and leave the women and children to take their luck! Chaos--as usual! ... Chaos backed and justified by cant! ... Would cant organise Society? ... Would cant feed the women and children? ... Would cant take the place of Scientific Method? ...

Ruth went home with her eleven shillings and sixpence and an aching heart, to find that little Alice had already arranged her brood in their bibs around the tea-table, and was only waiting for mother to come and tilt the kettle which she might not touch.

The other fledgelings hammered noisily on the table with their spoons.

"My dears," she said, as she went round the table, kissing the rosy faces uplifted to hers.

"What is it, Mum?" asked little Alice, who had something of her mother's quick sympathy and power of intuition. "Is daddy shotted at the war?"

"Not yet, my pretty," her mother answered. "It's only nothing you can understand. Now help me get the tea."

Next day brought a lawyer's letter giving her notice to quit.

That evening Ruth took the letter up to the Manor-house.

The maid told her Mr. and Mrs. Trupp had just started off to a meeting at the Town Hall.

"Something to do with the women and children, I believe," she added. "Prince o Wales's Fund or something."

Ruth turned down the steps disconsolate.

Just then she saw Joe Burt getting off the motor-bus opposite the _Star_. She had not seen him since he had come up on the evening of Ern's departure to give her the latest news of her husband. Now he came striding towards her, blowing into her life with the vigour of Kingsley's wild Nor'-easter. At the moment the politician was on top--she noted it with thankful heart.

"Coom on, ma lass!" he said. "You're the very one I'm after. We want you. We want em all. You got to coom along o me to this meeting."

"But I aren't got my hat, Joe!" pleaded Ruth, amused yet deprecating.

The engineer would take no excuses.

"Your children are worth more'n your hat, I reck'n," he said. "Coom on!--Coom on!--No time to be lost!"

And in a moment she was walking briskly at his side down the hill up which he had just come.

The strength, the resolution, the certainty of her companion swept all her clouds away and renewed her faith.

She told him of the notice she had received.

"All the better," he said. "Another trump for us to play. Don't you worrit. The Labour Party in Parliament's disappointed all its supporters so far, but it's going to justify itself at last. One thing. They can't trample on us this time, the Fats canna. We're too

well organised."

They walked down the hill together.

At the stile opposite the Drill Hall where six months before she had rescued Ernie, drenched and dripping, from the police, they turned off into Saffrons Croft in the direction of the Town Hall.

Joe, as he trod the grass beneath his feet, became sombre, silent. The woman sweeping along at his side, her shawl about her head, felt his change of mood. The Other was coming to the top again--the One she feared. She was right. The Other it was who spoke surlily and growling, out of his deeps, like the voice of a yard-dog from his kennel.

"Well, what's it going to be?"

Her heart galloped but she met him gaily.

"What you mean, Joe?"

"You know what I mean," bearing down on her remorselessly.

She made a half halt.

"O Joe!"

"Aye, you may O Joe me! That wunna better it."

"And after what you promised him solemn that night and all."

He answered moodily.

"He forced me to it. Took advantage. Shouldn't ha done it. Springin it on me without a word. That's not the game."

Ruth turned on him.

"You're the one to talk, aren't you?" she said, flashing the corner of an eye at him. "Playing the game prarper, you are?"

He barged ahead, sullen as a bull and as obstinate.

"A don't know; and A don't care. A know what A want and A know A'm going to get it."

She met him light as a rapier thrust.

"I thart you was a man, Joe."

"Better'n a no-man anyway."

She stopped dead and faced him.

"Where's my no-man now then?" she cried. "And where are you?"

That time she had planted her dart home. He glared at her savage, sullen, and with lowered head.

"Thou doesna say A'm a coward?"

Slowly she answered,

"I'm none so sure.--Ern's my soldier, Ern is."

He gripped her arm.

"I'll go home," she said, curt as the cut of a whip.

He relaxed.

"Nay," he answered. "If we're to fight for your children yo mun help."

She threw off his arm with a gesture of easy dignity. Then they walked on again together down Saffrons Road towards the Town Hall.

CHAPTER XXXVII

MRS. LEWKNOR

The Town Hall was crowded.

The Mayor, who was in the chair, had spoken on behalf of the Prince of Wales's Fund and announced that subscriptions would be received by the Town Clerk.

Thereafter an indescribable orgie of patriotism had taken place. Red-necked men outbid fat women. The bids mounted; the bidders grew fiercer; the cheers waxed. And all the while a little group of Trade Unionists at the back of the hall kept up a dismal chaunt--

We don't want charity,
We won't have charity.

Then a little dapper figure in the blue of a chauffeur rose in the body of the hall.

"I'm only a workin chauffeur," he said, wagging his big head, "but I got a conscience, and I got a country. And I'm not ashamed of em eether. I can't do much bein only a worker as you might say. But I can do me bit. Put me down for fifty guineas, please, Mr. Town-clerk."

He sat down modestly amidst loud applause.

"Who's that?" whispered the Colonel on the platform.

"Trupp's chauffeur," the Archdeacon, who had a black patch over his eye, answered with a swagger--"my sidesman, Alfred Caspar. Not so bad for a working-man?" He cackled hilariously.

Then a voice from Lancashire, resonant and jarring, came burring across the hall.

"Mr. Chairman, are you aware that Alfred Caspar is turning his sister-in-law out of his house with four children."

Alf leapt to his feet.

"It's a lie!" he cried.

A big young woman sitting just in front of Joe rose on subdued wings. She was bare-headed, be-shawled, a dark Madonna of English village-life.

"Yes, you are, Alf," she said, and sat down quietly as she had risen.

There was a dramatic silence. Then the Archdeacon started to his feet and pointed with accusing claw like a witch-doctor smelling out a victim.

"I know that woman!" he cawed raucously.

A lady sitting in the front row just under the platform rose.

"So do I," she said.

It was Mrs. Trupp, and her voice, still and pure, fell on the heated air like a drop of delicious rain.

She sat down again.

The Archdeacon too had resumed his seat, very high and mighty; and Bobby Chislehurst was whispering in his ear from behind.

The Colonel had risen now, calm and courteous as always, in the suppressed excitement.

"Am I not right in thinking that Mrs. Caspar is the wife of an old Hammer-man who joined up at once on the declaration of war and is at this moment somewhere in France fighting our battles for us?"

The question was greeted with a storm of applause from the back of the hall.

"Good old Colonel!" some one called.

"Mr. Chairman, d'you mean to accept that man's cheque?" shouted Joe. "Yes or no?"

In the uproar that followed, Alf rose again, white and leering.

"I'd not have spoken if I'd known I was to be set upon like this afore em all for offering a bit of help to me country. As to my character and that, I believe I'm pretty well beknown for a patriot in Beachbourne."

"As to patriotism, old cock," called Joe, "didn't you sack your cleaners without notice on the declaration of war?"

"No, I didn't then!" shouted Alf with the exaggerated ferocity of the man who knows his only chance is to pose as righteously indignant.

The retort was greeted with a howl of _Tip_! There was a movement at the back of the hall; and suddenly an old man was lifted on the shoulders of the Trade Unionists there. Yellow, fang-less, creased, he looked, poised on high above the crowd against the white background of wall, something between a mummy and a monkey. As always he wore no tie; but he had donned a collar for the occasion, and this had sprung open and made two dingy ass-like ears on either side of his head.

"Did he sack you, Tip?" called Joe.

"Yes, he did," came the quivering old voice. "Turned us off at a day. Told us to go to the Bastille; and said he'd put the police on us."

The tremulous old voice made people turn their heads. They saw the strange figure lifted above them. Some tittered. The ripple of titters enraged the men at the back of the hall.

"See what you've made of him!" thundered Joe. "And then jeer! ... Shame!"

"Shame!" screamed a bitter man. "Do the Fats know shame?"

"Some of em do," said a quiet voice.

It was true too. Mrs. Trupp was looking pale and miserable in the front-row, so was the Colonel on the platform, Bobby Chislehurst and others. The titterers, indeed, howled into silence by the storm of indignation their action had aroused, wore themselves the accusing air of those who hope thereby to fix the blame for their mistake on others.

In the silence a baggy old gentleman rose in the body of the hall, slewed round with difficulty, and mooned above his spectacles at the strange idol seated on men's shoulders behind him.

"_And He was lifted up_," he said in a musing voice more to himself than to anybody else.

The phrase, audible to many, seemed to spread a silence about it as a stone dropped in a calm pond creates an ever-broadening ripple.

In the silence old Tip slid gently to the ground and was lost once more

amid the crowd of those who had raised him for a brief moment into fleeting eminence.

The meeting broke up.

Outside the hall stood Mr. Trupp's car, Alf at the wheel: for the old surgeon's regular chauffeur had been called up.

Mrs. Trupp, coming down the steps, went up to Ruth who was standing on the pavement.

"So glad you spoke up, Ruth," she said, and pressed her hand.

"Come on!" said Mr. Trupp. "We'll give you a lift home, Ruth."

Alf was looking green. The two women got in, and the old surgeon followed them. He was grinning, Mrs. Trupp quietly malicious, and Ruth amused. The people on the pavement and streaming out of the hall saw and were caught by the humour of the situation, as their eyes and comments showed.

Then Colonel Lewknor made his way to the car.

"Just a word, Mrs. Caspar!" he said. "Things are squaring up. Mrs. Lewknor's taking the women and children in hand. Could you come and see her one morning at Under-cliff?"

The hostel that Mrs. Lewknor had built upon the cliff boomed from the start. It was full to over-flowing, winter and summer; and Eton was in sight for Toby when war was declared.

Then things changed apace.

Beachbourne, for at least a thousand years before William the Norman landed at Pevensey on his great adventure, had been looked on as the likeliest spot for enemy invasion from the Continent. Frenzied parents therefore wired for their children to be sent inland at once; others wrote charming letters cancelling rooms taken weeks before. In ten days the house was empty; and on the eleventh the mortgagee intimated his intention to fore-close.

It was a staggering blow.

The Colonel, with that uncannie cat-like intuition of his she knew so well, prowled in, looked at her with kind eyes, as she sat in her little room the fatal letter in her hand, and went out again.

Throughout it had been her scheme, not his, her responsibility, her success; and now it was her failure.

Then Mr. Trupp was shown in, looking most unmilitary in his uniform of a Colonel of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

"It's all right," he said gruffly. "I know. Morgan and Evans rang me up and told me. Unprofessional perhaps, but these are funny times. I let you in. You built the hostel at my request. I shall take over the mortgage."

"I couldn't let you," answered the little lady.

"You won't be asked," replied the other. "I ought to have done it from the start; but it wasn't very convenient then. It's all right now."
The old man didn't say that the reason it was all right was because he was quietly convinced in his own mind that his boy Joe would need no provision now.

Just then the Colonel entered, looking self-conscious. He seemed to know all about it, as indeed he had every right to do, seeing that Mr. Trupp had informed him at length on the telephone half an hour before.

"You know who the mortgagee is?" he asked.

"Who?" said both at once.

The Colonel on tiptoe led them out into the hall, and showed them through a narrow window Alf sitting at his wheel, looking very funny.

"Our friend of the scene in the Town Hall yesterday," he whispered. "When I went to the bank yesterday to insure the house against bombardment, the clerk looked surprised and said--_You know it's already insured_. I said--_Who by_? He turned up a ledger and showed me the name."

Mr. Trupp got into his car, wrapping himself round with much circumstance.

"To Morgan and Evans," he said to Alf.

In the solicitors' office he produced his cheque-book.

"I've been seeing Mrs. Lewknor," he said. "I'll pay off your client now and take over the mortgage myself."

He wrote a cheque then and there, and made it out to Alfred Caspar, who was forthwith called in.

"I'm paying you off your mortgage, Alf," he said. "Give me a receipt, will you?"

Alf with the curious simplicity that often threw his cunning into relief signed the receipt quite unabashed and with evident relief.

"See, I need the money, sir," he said gravely, as he wiped the pen on his sleeve. "The Syndicate's let me in--O, you wouldn't believe! And I got to meet me creditors somehow."

"Well, you've got the money now," answered Mr. Trupp. "But I'm afraid

you've made an enemy. And that seems to me a bit of a pity just now."

"Colonel Lewknor?" snorted Alf. "I ain't afraid o him!"

"I don't know," said Mr. Trupp. "It's the day of the soldier."

That evening, after the day's work, Alf was summoned to his employer's study.

Mrs. Trupp was leaving it as he entered.

"I've been thinking things over, Alfred," said the old man. "There's no particular reason why you shouldn't drive for me for the present if you like--until you're wanted out there. But I shall want you to destroy this."

He handed his chauffeur Ruth's notice to quit.

Alf tore the paper up without demur.

"That's all right, sir," he said cheerfully. "That was a mistake. I understood the Army Service Corps was taking over my garage; and I should want a roof over my head to sleep under."

He went back to his car.

Another moment, and the door of the Manor-house opened. Ruth emerged briskly and gave him a bright nod.

"Can't stop now, Alf," she said. "I'm off to see Mrs. Lewknor. See you again later."

"That's right," Alf answered. "She's on the committee for seeing to the married women ain't she?--them and their _lawful_ children. Reverend Spink's on it too."

He stressed the epithet faintly.

A moment Ruth looked him austerely in the eyes. Then she turned up the hill with a nod. She understood. There was danger a-foot again.

The matter of the hostel settled, Mrs. Lewknor, before everything an Imperialist, and not of the too common platform kind, was free to serve. And she had not far to look for an opening.

The Mayor summoned a meeting in his parlour to consider the situation of the families of soldiers called to the colours.

Mrs. Lewknor was by common consent appointed honorary secretary of the Association formed; and was given by her committee a fairly free discretion to meet the immediate situation.

Nearly sixty, but still active as a cat, she set to work with a will.

Her sitting room at Undercliff she turned into an office. Her mornings she gave to interviewing applicants and her afternoons to visiting.

Ruth Caspar was one of the first to apply.

The little slight Jewish lady with her immense experience of life greeted the beautiful peasant woman who had never yet over-stepped the boundaries of Sussex with a brilliant smile.

"There's not much I want to know about you," she said. "We belong to the same regiment. Just one or two questions that I may fill up this form."

How many children had Mrs. Caspar.

"Three, 'M ... and a fourth."

Mrs. Lewknor waited.

"Little Alice," continued Ruth, downcast and pale beneath her swarthiness. "Before I were married."

Mrs. Lewknor wrote on apparently unconcerned.

She knew all about little Alice, had seen her once, and had recognised her at a glance as Royal's child, the child for which, with her passionate love for the regiment, she felt herself in part responsible. On the same occasion she had seen Ruth's other babies and their grandfather with them--that troubadour who forty years before had swept the harp of her life to sudden and elusive music.

"I think that'll be all right now, Ruth," she said with a re-assuring look. "I'm going to call you that now if I may. I'll come round and let you know directly I know myself."

Ruth retired with haunted eyes. She guessed rather than knew the forces that were gathering against her, and the strength of them.

Outside in the porch she met Lady Augusta with her mane of thick bobbed white hair and rosy face; and on the cliff, as she walked home, other ladies of the Committee and the Reverend Spink.

How hard they looked and how complacent! ...

Mrs. Lewknor put the case before her committee, telling them just as much as she thought it good for them to know.

There was of course the inevitable trouble about little Alice.

"We don't even know for certain that she is the child of the man the mother afterwards married," objected Lady Augusta Willcocks in her worst manner. "She mayn't be a soldier's child at all."

Mrs. Lewknor turned in her lips.

"Our business surely is to support the women and children while the men are away fighting our battles," she said.

"Need we form ourselves into a private enquiry office?" asked Mrs. Trupp quietly.

The old lady's eyes flashed. Mrs. Trupp of course didn't care. Mrs. Trupp never went to church. "Putting a premium on immorality!" she cried with bitter laughter--"as usual."

"We must look a little into character surely, Mrs. Lewknor," said a honied virgin from St. Michael's.

"I'll go bail for this woman's character," answered Mrs. Lewknor, flashing in her turn.

"I believe she _is_ more respectable than she used to be," said a dull spinster with a dogged eye.

"_Damn_ respectability," thought Mrs. Lewknor, but she said, "Are we to deprive this child of bread in the name of respectability? Whatever else she is she's a child of the Empire."

Then the Reverend Spink spoke. He and Lady Augusta Willcocks were there to represent the point of view of the Church.

He spoke quietly, his eyes down, and lips compressed, mock-meekly aware of the dramatic significance of his words.

"Perhaps I ought to tell the committee that the man this woman is now living with is not her husband."

The silence that greeted this announcement was all that the reverend gentleman could have desired. It was only broken by the loud triumphant cry of the Lady Augusta Willcocks.

"Then all _four_ children are illegitimate!"

"Oh, that _would_ be joyful!" cried Mrs. Lewknor with a little titter.

It was the great moment of the Reverend Spink's life.

"She married some yeahs ago," he continued, so well-pleased with the cumulative effect of the impression he was making, as even to venture an imitation of the Archdeacon's accent. "And her husband is still alive."

Mrs. Lewknor challenged swiftly.

"Where did she marry?" she asked, lest another question should be asked first: for the honour of the regiment was involved.

"At the Registrar's Office, Lewes."

"When?"

"September 14th, 1906."

The man had his story pat enough to be sure.

"Who told you?" asked Mrs. Lewknor aggressively.

Mr. Spink pursed his lips.

"I have it on reliable information."

"I know your authority, I think," said Mrs. Trupp quietly.

"Did you check it?" asked Mrs. Lewknor.

"It was unnecessary," replied the curate insolently. "I can trust my authority. But if you doubt me you can check it yourself."

"I shall of course," retorted the little lady.

Then the Chairman interposed.

"It looks like a case for the police," he said.

"Certainly," Lady Augusta rapped out.

"It's very serious," said the Chairman.

"For somebody," retorted Mrs. Lewknor.

By common consent the case was adjourned.

The Reverend Spink retired to Old Town.

The fierce hostility of Mrs. Lewknor, and the no less formidable resistance of Mrs. Trupp, made the curate uneasy.

After dark he went round to Alf Caspar's garage.

"You're sure of your facts?" he asked.

"Dead cert," said Alf. "Drove em there meself."

"And the date?"

"Marked it down at the time, sir.... I can show it you in me ledger. Always make a note of me engagements. You never know when it mayn't come in handy."

He went down to his office, followed by the curate, and was proceeding to take a bulky folio down from the shelf, when the telephone bell rang.

It was Mr. Trupp to say the car would be wanted at four to-morrow afternoon.

"Is it a long run, sir?" asked Alf.

"No," came the answer. "Lewes--Mrs. Trupp."

Alf determined to send a man and not drive himself.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SUSPENSE

Ruth walked home across the golf links, at her heart the agony of the beaten vixen who, crawling across a ploughed field still far from her earth, glances round to see a white wave of hounds breaking over the fence at her brush.

At Billing's Corner she nearly ran into her mother-in-law.

For the first time Anne paused deliberately to address her.

"That you, Mrs. Caspar?" she said, and looked away a sour smirk on her face. At the moment, beautiful old woman though she was, with her porcelain complexion of a girl, her snow-white hair, and broad-splashed dark brows, there was a suggestion of Alf about her--Ruth noticed it at once and was afraid.

"They're puttin away all the chance children the mothers can't support in there," the elder woman said casually, nodding at the blue roofs of the old cavalry barracks at the back of Rectory Walk that was now the Work-house. "To save expense, I suppose--the war or something. If you didn't want yours to go I might take my son's children off your hands. Then you could go out and char for her."

Ruth sickened.

"No, thank-you, Mrs. Caspar," she said.

Just then a nurse came by pushing a wicker spinal chair in which were a host of red-cloaked babies packed tight as fledgelings in a nest. Behind them trooped, two by two and with clattering heels, a score of elder children from the Work-house, all in the same straw hats, the same little capes. Ruth glanced at them as she had often done before. Those children, she remarked with ironic bitterness, were well-soaped, wonderfully so, well-groomed, well-fed, with short hogged hair, and stout boots; but she noted about them all, in spite of their apparent material prosperity, the air of spiritual discontent which is the hallmark, all the world over, of children who know nothing of a mother's jealous and discriminating care.

"The not-wanteds," said Anne. "They'll put yours along with them, I suppose."

Ruth shook. Then she lifted up her eyes and saw help coming. Old Mr. Caspar was bundling down the road towards her, crowding on all sail and waving his umbrella as though to tell her that he had seen her mute S.O.S.

Anne drew away.

"There's my husband," she said.

"Yes," answered Ruth, "that's dad," and walked away down Church Street, trembling still but faintly relieved that she had planted her pin in the heart of her enemy before disengaging.

She reached home and turned the key behind her. That vague enemy, named _They_, who haunts each one of us through life, was hard on her heels. She was in her earth at last; but _They_ could dig her out. Before now she had seen them do it on Windhover, with halloos, the men and women standing round with long-lashed cruel whips to prevent escape. She had seen them throw the wriggling vixen to the pack ... and the worry ... and the huntsman standing amid a foam of leaping hounds, screaming horribly and brandishing above his head a bloody rag that a few minutes since had been a warm and breathing creature. Horrible--but true ... That was the world. She knew it of old; and could almost have thanked that hard old woman with eyes the blue of steel who had just reminded her of what _They_ and life were compact.

Then she noted there was silence in the house.

What if in her absence _They_ had kidnapped her child--little Alice, born in agony of flesh and spirit, so different from those other babies, the heirs of ease and security; little Alice, the child for whom she had fought and suffered and endured alone. It was her They were after: Ruth never doubted that. She had seen it in Lady Augusta's eyes, as she passed her in the porch of the hostel; in the downward glances of those other members of the committee she had met upon the cliff; in the voice and bearing of her mother-in-law.

She rushed upstairs.

Alice, busiest of little mothers, had tucked the other three away in bed a little before their time because she wanted to do it all alone and without her mother's help. Now she was turning down her own bed. Her aim successfully achieved she was free to bestow on her mother a happy smile.

Ruth swept her up in her arms, and bore her away into her own room, devouring her with passionate eyes.

"You shall sleep along o me place o daddy," she said, and kissed her hungrily.

"What about Susie and Jenny, mum?" asked the child.

"We'll leave the door open so we can hear," answered Ruth, remarking even then the child's thoughtfulness. "See, daddy wants you to take care o mother."

Alice gave a quick nod of understanding.

Next morning Ruth refused to let her go to school with the others, would not let her leave the house.

"You'll stay along with me," she said, fierce for once.

At eleven o'clock there came a knock. Ruth hustled the child out into the backyard, shoved her into the coal-shed, turned the key on her, and locked the backdoor. Then she went very quietly not to the front-door but to the window, opening it a crack with the utmost stealth. Kneeling she listened. Whoever was at the door was very quiet, not a man. If it had been he would have spat by now, or sworn.

"Who is it? she asked.

"Mrs. Lewknor," came the reply.

Ruth opened. The little lady entered, and followed into the kitchen.

"Is it all right, 'M?" asked Ruth anxiously.

"It's going to be," replied the other, firm and confident. "You've got your marriage-certificate if we should want it?"

Ruth sighed her relief.

"O yes, 'M. I got my lines all right. They're in the tin box under the bed." She was running upstairs to fetch them when the other stayed her.

"There's just one thing," said Mrs. Lewknor gravely. "It would help Mrs. Trupp and me very much, if you could give us some sort of idea where you were on September 14th, 1906--if you can throw your mind back all that great way."

"I was with _him_!" Ruth answered in a flash. She was fighting for her best-beloved: everything must be sacrificed to save her--even Royal. "It was _the day_!" she panted. "It were the first time ever I was in a car--that's one why I remember: Alf drove us."

"D'you happen to remember at all where you went?" tentatively.

"All wheres," Ruth answered. "Hailsham--Heathfield. I hardly rithely knaws the names. We'd tea at Lewes--I remembers that."

Mrs. Lewknor raised her keen eyes.

"You don't remember where you had tea?"

Ruth shook her head, slowly.

"I can't justly remember where. See Lewes is such a tarrabul great city these days--nigh as big as Beachbourne, I reck'n. It was over the Registrar's for births and deaths and such like--I remember that along o the plate at the door."

Mrs. Lewknor rose, her fine eyes sparkling.

"That's splendid, Ruth!" she said. "All I wanted."

All that afternoon Ruth waited behind locked doors--she did not know what for; she only knew that _They_ were prowling about watching their chance. She had drawn the curtains across the windows though the sun was still high in the heaven, and sat in the darkness, longing for Ernie as she never would have believed she could have longed for him. Every now and then little Alice came in a tip-toe from the backyard to visit her. The child thought her mother had one of her rare head-aches, and was solicitous accordingly.

About three o'clock Ruth crept upstairs and peeped through her window. It was as she had thought. Alf was there, strolling up and down the pavement opposite, watching the house. Then he saw her, half-hidden though she was, crossed the street briskly and knocked.

She went down at once to give him battle.

He met her with his sly smile, insolently sure of himself.

"Police come yet?" he asked.

She banged the door in his face; and the bang brought her strange relief. With mocking knuckles he rapped on the window on to the street as he withdrew.

After that nobody came but the children back from school. Ruth packed them off to bed early. She wanted to be alone with little Alice.

In the kitchen she waited on in the dark.

Then she heard solid familiar feet tramping down the pavement towards her cottage. She knew whose feet they were, and knew their errand. The hour of decision had come. One way or the other it must be.

In the confusion and uncertainty only one thing was clear to her. There was a way--and a price to be paid; if she took it.

Joe knocked.

Ruth slipped to her knees. She did not pray consciously. Kneeling on the stone-slabs, her face uplifted in the darkness, her hands pale on

the Windsor chair before her, she opened wide the portals of her heart to the voice of the Spirit, if such voice there were.

And there was. It came to her from above in the silence and the dusk. Ruth knew it so well, that still small voice with the gurgle in it.

It was Susie laughing in her sleep.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE VALLEY OF DECISION

The answer she had sought had been given her. Comforted and strengthened she rose, went to the door and unlocked it. Joe had strolled a yard or two down the street. She did not call him, but retired to await him in the kitchen, leaving the door a-jar.

In a few minutes his feet approached slowly. She heard him brush his boots in the passage, and turn the key of the outer door behind him. Then he entered.

An immense change had been wrought in him since last they had met. The bull-moose of Saffrons Croft had given place to a man, humbled, solemn, quiet, the heir of ages of self-discipline and the amassed spiritual treasure of a world-old civilisation.

He stood afar off, with downward eyes. Then he held out both arms to her.

"Ruth, A've come to claim thee--or say good-bye."

She gripped the mantelpiece but did not answer. Her head was down, her eyes closed.

"Then it's goodbye, Joe," she said in a voice so small that she hardly recognised it herself.

He dropped his hands, darkening.

"And who'll keep thee and children now Ern's gone?"

A note of harshness had crept into his voice.

She murmured something about the Government.

He laughed at her hardly.

"The Government! What's Government ever done for the workers? _They_ make wars: the workers pay for em. That law's old as the capitalist system. What did Government do for women and children time o South Africa?--Left em to the mercy o God and the ruling class. If your

children are to trust for bread to the Government, heaven help em!"

Ruth knew that it was true. She remembered South Africa. In those days there had been a neighbour of theirs at Aldwoldston, the wife of a ploughman, a woman with six children, whose husband had been called up. Ruth had only been a girl then; but she remembered that woman, and that woman's children, and her home, and that woman's face.

"There's the ladies," she said feebly.

Joe jeered.

"You know the ladies. So do I. Might as lief look for help to the Church straight off."

"There's One Above."

"Aye, there's One Above. And He stays there too and don't fash Himself over them below--not over you and me and our class any road."

His tone that had been mocking became suddenly serious.

"Nay, there's nobbut one thing now atween you and them and Work-house."

She peeped, faintly inquisitive.

"What's that?"

"The arm of a Lancasheer lad."

There came into her eyes the tenderness tinged with irony of the woman amused at the eternal egoism of the male. He noted the change in her, thought she had relaxed, and came in upon her, instantly, appealing now--

"Coom and live with me, brother and sister, the lot of you ... A swear to thee a wunna touch thee."

She laughed at him, low and tender.

"Never do, Joe--never!" shaking her head and swallowing.

"Why not then?"

"There's far over much nature in us--two valiant great chaps like you and me be."

Then little Alice entered and went to Joe, who put a sheltering arm about her.

"Her and me and you!" he said huskily to Ruth. "Us three against the world! Laugh at em then!"

Ruth motioned to the child to go on up to bed. She went; and the two

striving creatures were left alone once more.

"Ern bequeathed thee to me."

"Aye, but he didn't rithely knaw you, and he didn't rithely knaw me eether."

He caught at the straw.

"Then you do loov me?"

She shook her head, and the tears from her long lashes starred her cheek.

"Nay, Joe: Ern's my man--always was and always will be."

He stood before her, firm on his feet, and solid as a rock, his fists clenched, his eyes on her, brilliant, dark, and kindly. She felt the thrill of him, his solidity, his sincerity, above all his strength, and thrilled to him again.

"A'm the mon for thee," he said.

She did not answer. In her ears was the roar of cataracts.

"Thoo dursena say me nay."

The words came from far off, from another world. Wavering like a flame in the wind, she heard but could make no reply.

"Thoo canna."

Then a voice spoke through her, a voice that was not hers, coming from far away over waste seas, a voice she had never heard before and did not recognise.

"I can--Lord Jesus helpin me."

At that the mists began to float away. She saw more clearly now. The worst perhaps was over.

"You want a mon with a purpose in his life."

Ah, how well he knew her!

"A mon who knows what he wants to do and means to do it.--And you must have it or dee. The bairns arena enough for a woman like you."

He was putting forth the whole of his huge strength to overwhelm her: she was aware of it and of her own weakness.

"A've got a purpose. You can help me fulfill it--none else, only you. Time was A thought A could go on alone. You learnt me better. A canna. God didna make mon that way--not _this_ mon any gate. Mon

needs Woman for his work. A need you."

Quietly she was gathering her forces.

"Ern's my man, Joe," she repeated. "I need him; and none other."

Baffled for the moment, her assailant paused in his assault.

"And has Ern got a purpose in his life?"

"He has now."

"What's that then?"

"What you said at the Citadel that Sunday--the war, and what it stands for."

"The war won't last for ever. What when that's over?"

"He'll come back a made man."

He regarded her with a kind of sardonic pity.

"He'll never coom back--never."

She lifted her eyes to his, steadfast and tender.

"Hap he'll not, Joe. If so be he doosn't, I shan't grudge him. A soldier in a soldier's grave. Liefer that than he should linger here now. He's such a battler, Ern is. That's why I love him."

He took the blows she dealt him, unflinching.

"You don't loov, Ern."

"I'm learning to."

His lips curled in scorn.

"You don't know what loov is. See here!--This is loov." He tapped his outspread palm, as often when lecturing.

"Ern's ma familiar friend--has been for years. He trusts me--look at what he did that last night. And sitha! A'm a mon men do trust. That's ma reputation--earned too. A never sold a pal yet, big or little. And now--A'll betray ma own mate behind his back; ma mate that's gone fightin ma battles in the cause for which A've lived twenty years; ma mate that trusts me--and all for the sake of loov." The great fellow was trembling himself now. "Am A a rotter?--You know A'm none. Am A a mon? You know A am. The measure o ma sin is the measure o ma loov. Judge for yourself."

He was battening down the furnace behind steel-doors; but she could hear the roar of the flames.

"That's loov. A'll lose all to win all; and A've more than most to lose. A'll lose ma life to save ma soul--and that's you. Are you for it?--Was a time A thought nowt o women: now A think o nought but the One Woman.... Now then!--Take it or leave it!--Choose your path!--Will you throw a loov like that away--the loov of a mon--for what?--A chap you don't trust, a chap you can't respect, a chap who's let you and the children down and will again, a chap you're never like to see again--a feeble feckless sot, and son of a sot--"

She put both hands to her ears. He wrenched them fiercely aside and held them. She stood before him, her hands imprisoned in his, her eyes shut, on her face the look of one awaiting the blows about to rain down in her defencelessness.

"I may ha doubted him once, Joe. But I knaw him better now. May he forgive me--and you too; all the wrong I done you both. I knaw him, and myself, better than I did a while back. And now he's won me, I'll never loose him, _never_."

She spoke with a passion which convinced even that stubborn lover.

He drew back, and she knew from the sound of his breathing that she had beaten him.

"Then you was playin wi me?"

He brooded over her, sullen and smouldering.

She put out her hands to him with something of the appeal of a child.

"Hap a while back when you called me so strong I _did_ answer you--more'n I should--not knawin you cared so much, Joe. And may be I thart if Ernie saw there was anudder man around hap it'd ginger him jealous and help us along. I was fighting for my home ... and my children ... and for him, Joe.... And when a woman's fighting..."

She broke off and gasped.

He met her remorselessly.

"Then yo've chosen ... It's goodbye."

She laid her hands upon his shoulders.

"But not like that.--Kiss me, Joe."

She lifted her face.

Slowly he dropped his hands upon her arms.

And as they stood thus, entwined, the window opened quickly from outside, the curtains parted, and a voice low at first and rising to a horrible scream shrilled,

"Caught em at it!--_Mr. Spink_.--Come and see for yourself then! _Mr. Spink_."

CHAPTER XL

VICTORY AND REVENGE

In the fury of his excitement Alf thrust his head and shoulders far into the room.

"Got you this time!" he screamed to Joe, his face distorted with hate. "_Mr. Spink!_" he cried to somebody who must have been near by.

The engineer made a grab at him and seized him by the head.

"Got _you_, ye mean!" he bellowed and jerked the other bodily into the room. "Ah, ye dirty spyin tyke!--I'll learn you!"

He heaved his enemy from his knees to his feet and closed with him. The struggle was that of a parrot in the clutch of a tiger.

Joe carried his enemy to the door and slung him out head first. Alf brought up with a bang against a big car which had just drawn up outside.

A little lady sat in it.

"Will you get out of my way, please?" she said coldly to the man sprawling on his hands and knees in the dust at her feet, as she proceeded to descend.

The prostrate man raised his eyes and blinked. The lady passed him by as she might have passed a dead puppy lying in the road.

Joe crossed the path and examined with a certain detached interest, the door of the car against which Alf's head had crashed.

"Why, yo've made quite a dent in your nice car," he said. "Pity." And he walked away down the street after Mr. Spink who was retiring discreetly round the corner.

Mrs. Lewknor entered the cottage.

Ruth was sitting in the kitchen, her hands in her lap, dazed.

The lady went over to her.

"It's all right, Ruth," she said gently in the other's ear.

Slowly Ruth recovered and poured the tale of the last twenty-four hours into the ear of her friend. It was the cruelty of her mother-in-law

more than anything else that troubled her: for it was to her significant of the attitude of the world.

"That's her!" she said. "And that's them!--and that's how it is!"

Mrs. Lewknor comforted her; but Ruth refused to be comforted.

"Ah, you don't know em," she said. "But I been through it, me and little Alice. See I'm alone again now Ernie's gone. And so they got me. And they know it and take advantage--and Mrs. Caspar, that sly and cruel, she leads em on."

"I think perhaps she's not as bad as she likes to make herself out," Mrs. Lewknor answered.

She opened her bag, took out a letter, and put it in Ruth's hand. It was from Anne Caspar, angular as the writer in phrase alike and penmanship, and in the pseudo-business vein of the daughter of the Ealing tobacconist.

Dear Madam,--If your Committee can help Mrs. Caspar in the Moot, board for herself and four children, I will pay rent of same.

_Yours faithfully,
Anne Caspar._

Later just as twilight began to fall Ruth went up to Rectory Walk. Anne was standing on the patch of lawn in front of the little house amid her tobacco plants, sweet-scented in the dusk, a shawl drawn tight about her gaunt shoulders.

Ruth halted on the path outside.

"I do thank you, Mrs. Caspar," she said, deep and quivering.

The elder woman did not look at her, did not invite her in. She tugged at the ends of her shawl and sniffed the evening with her peculiar smirk.

"Must have a roof over them, I suppose," she said. "Even in war-time."

The visit of Mrs. Trupp and Mrs. Lewknor to the Registrar at Lewes had proved entirely satisfactory. No marriage had taken place on the day in question, so examination disclosed. Mrs. Lewknor reported as much to her husband on her return home that evening.

The Colonel grinned the grin of an ogre about to take his evening meal of well-cooked children.

"We must twist Master Alf's tail," he said; "and not forget we owe him one ourselves."

At the next Committee meeting, which the Colonel attended, there was heavy fighting between the Army and the Church; and after it even graver trouble between Alf and the Reverend Spink.

"It's not only my reputation," cried the indignant curate. "It's the credit of the Church you've shaken."

"I know nothing only the facts," retorted Alf doggedly--"if they're any good to you. I drove them there meself--14th September, 1906, four o'clock of a Saturday afternoon and a bit foggy like. You can see it in the entry-book for yourself. They went into the Registrar's office single, and they walked out double, half-an-hour later. I see em myself, and you can't get away from the facts of your eyes, not even a clergyman can't."

Alf was additionally embittered because he felt that the curate had left him disgracefully in the lurch in the incident of the Moot. The Reverend Spink on his side--somewhat dubious in his heart of the part he had played on the fringe of that affair--felt that by taking the strong and righteous line now he was vindicating himself in his own eyes at least for any short-comings then.

"I shall report the whole thing to the Archdeacon," he said. "It's a scandal. He'll deal with you."

"Report it then!" snapped Alf. "If the Church don't want me, neether don't I want the Church."

The war was killing the Archdeacon, as Mr. Trupp had said it must.

The flames of his indomitable energy were devouring the old gentleman for all the world to see. He was going down to his grave, as he would have wished, to the roll of drums and roar of artillery.

Thus when the Reverend Spink went up to the Rectory to report on the delinquencies of the sidesman, he found his chief in bed and obviously spent.

The old gentleman made a pathetic figure attempting to maintain his dignity in a night-gown obviously too small for him, which served to emphasize his failing mortality.

His face was ghastly save for a faint dis-colouration about one eye; but he was playing his part royally still. His bitterest enemy must have admired his courage; his severest critic might have wept, so pitiful was the old man's make-believe.

On a table at his side were all the pathetic little properties that made the man. There was his snuff-box; there the filigree chain; a scent-bottle; a rosary; a missal. On his bed was the silver-mounted ebony cane; and beneath his pillow, artfully concealed to show, the butt-end of his pistol.

Over his head was the photograph of a man whom the curate recognised instantly as Sir Edward Carson; and beneath the photograph was an illuminated text which on closer scrutiny turned out to be the Solemn League and Covenant.

Facing the great Unionist Leader on the opposite wall was the Emperor of the French. The likeness between the two famous Imperialists was curiously marked; and they seemed aware of it, staring across the room at each other over the body of their prostrate admirer with intimacy, understanding, mutual admiration. Almost you expected them to wink at each other--a knowing wink.

Mr. Spink now told his chief the whole story as it affected Alf. Much of it the Archdeacon had already heard from his wife.

"I'd better see him," he now said grimly.

And the Archdeacon was not the only one who wanted to see Alf just then. That afternoon, just as he was starting out with the car, he was called up on the telephone.

The Director of Recruiting wished to see him at the Town Hall--to-morrow--11 a.m., sharp. The voice was peremptory and somehow familiar. Alf was perturbed. What was up now?

"Who is the Director of Recruiting here?" he asked Mr. Trupp a few minutes later.

"Colonel Lewknor," the old surgeon answered. "Just appointed. All you young men of military age come under him now."

Alf winced.

The Colonel's office was in the Town Hall, and one of the first men to come and sign on there was Joe Burt.

The Colonel, as he took in the engineer, saw at once that the hurricane which was devastating the world had wrought its will upon this man too. The Joe Burt he had originally known four years ago stood before him once again, surly, shy, and twinkling.

"Good luck to you," said the Colonel as they shook hands. "And try to be an honest man. You were meant to be, you know."

"A'm as honest as soom and honester than most, A reckon," the engineer answered dogged as a badgered schoolboy.

The Colonel essayed to look austere.

"You'd better go before you get into worse trouble," he said.

Joe went out, grinning.

"Ah, A'm not the only one," he mumbled.

Outside in the passage he met Alf, and paused amazed.

"You goin to enlist!" he roared. "Never!" and marched on, his laughter rollicking down the corridor like a huge wind.

Alf entered the Colonel's office delicately: he had reasons of his own to fear everything that wore khaki.

The Colonel sat at his desk like a death's head, a trail of faded medal-ribands running across his khaki chest.

He was thin, spectral, almost cadaverous. But his voice was gentle, as always; his manner as always, most courteous. Nothing could be more remote from the truculence of the Army manner of tradition.

He was the spider talking to the fly.

"I'm afraid this is a very serious matter, Mr. Caspar," he began; and it was a favourite opening of his. "It seems you've been taking away the character of the wife of a member of His Majesty's forces now in France..."

The interview lasted some time, and it was the Colonel who did the talking.

"And now I won't detain you further, Mr. Caspar," he said at the end. "My clerk in the next room will take all your particulars for our index card register, so that we needn't bother you again when conscription comes."

"Conscription!" cried Alf, changing colour.

"Yes," replied the Colonel. "There's been no public announcement yet. But there's no reason you shouldn't know it's coming. It's got to."

Alf went out as a man goes to execution. He returned to his now almost deserted garage to find there a note from the Archdeacon asking him to be good enough to call at the Rectory that afternoon.

Alf stood at the window and looked out with dull eyes. Now that the earth which three weeks since had felt so solid beneath his feet was crumbling away beneath him, he needed the backing of the Church more than ever; and for all his brave words to Mr. Spink, he was determined not to relinquish his position in it without a fight.

That afternoon he walked slowly up the hill to the Rectory.

Outside the white gate he stood in the road under the sycamore trees, gathering courage to make the plunge.

If was five o'clock.

A man got off the bus at Billing's Corner and came down the road towards him. Alf was aware of him, but did not at first see who he was.

"Not gone yet then?" said the man.

"No," Alf answered. "Got about as far as you--and that ain't very far."

"I'm on the way," answered Joe. "Going up to the camp in Summerdown now; and join up this evening."

"Ah," said Alf. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Swag on back, Joe tramped sturdily on towards the Downs.

Alf watched him. Then a gate clicked; and Edward Caspar came blundering down the road. Alf in his loneliness was drawn towards him.

"Good evening, father," he said.

The old gentleman blinked vaguely through his spectacles, and answered most courteously,

"Good evening, Mr. Er-um-ah!" and rolled on down the road.

So his own father didn't know him!

Overhead an aeroplane buzzed by. From the coombe came the eternal noise of the hammers as the great camp there took shape. Along Summerdown Road at the end of Rectory Walk a long convoy of Army Service Corps wagons with mule-teams trailed by. A big motor passed him. In it was Stanley Bessemere and three staff-officers with red bands round their caps. They were very pleased with themselves and their cigars. The member for Beachbourne West did not see his supporter. Then there sounded the tramp of martial feet. It was Saturday afternoon. The Old Town Company of Volunteers, middle-aged men for the most part, known to Alf from childhood, was marching by on the way to drill on the Downs. A fierce short man was in charge. Three rough chevrons had been sewn on to his sleeve to mark his rank as sergeant; and he wore a belt tightly buckled about his ample waist. All carried dummy rifles.

"Left-right, left-right," called the sergeant in the voice of a drill-instructor of the Guards. "Mark time in front! Forward! Dressing by your left!"

It was Mr. Pigott.

Alf's eyes followed the little party up the road. Then they fell on his home covered with ampelopsis just beginning to turn. His mother was at the window, looking at him. Whether it was that the glass distorted her face, or that his own vision was clouded, it seemed to Alf that she was mocking him. Then she drew down the blind as though to shut him out--his own mother.

Alf shivered.

A young woman coming from Billing's Corner crossed the road to him.

"Well, Alf," she said gaily, "you're getting em all against you!"

Alf raised his eyes to hers, and they were the eyes of the rabbit in the burrow with the stoat hard upon its heels.

"Yes," he said more to himself than her. "Reckon I'm done."

* * * * *

THE COMFORTER

Ruth passed down the lane towards the golf links, the laughter sparkling in her brown eyes.

She was merry, malicious, mischievously prim. Then suddenly, as at the shutting of a door, her mood changed. Something warm and large and tremulous surged up unbidden out of the ocean-deeps of her.

To her own amazement she found herself sorry for the forlorn little figure with the eyes haunting and haunted, she had left standing in the road outside the Rectory gate.

A sense of the dramatic vicissitudes of life caught her by the throat. Three weeks ago that little man had been conquering the world with a swagger, the master of circumstance, over-riding destiny, sweeping obstacles aside, a domineer, with all the attributes of his kind--brutal, blatant, sure of himself, indifferent to others, scornful of the humble. Now he stood there at the cross-roads like some old tramp of the world, uncertain which way to turn--a mouse tossed overboard in mid-Atlantic by the cook's boy, the sport of tides and breakers, swimming round and round with ghastly eyes in ever-shortening circle.

The tempest which had all the world in grip, which had snatched Ernie from her arms, and hurled him across the seas, which had set millions of men to killing and being killed, had caught this insignificant gnat too, flying with such a fuss and buzz of wings under ominous skies, and then swaggered on its great way indifferent to the tiny creature it had crushed.

Ruth crossed the links, almost deserted now, and walked along over the crisp smooth turf, her eyes on the township of yellow huts rising out of the green in the great coombe across Summerdown Road.

Then she was aware of Mr. Chislehurst coming swiftly towards her beside the ha-ha of the Duke's Lodge. He looked, Ruth noticed at once, less

harassed than he had done since the outbreak of war.

"I am glad I've met you, Mrs. Caspar," he began with the old boyish enthusiasm. "I'm off to-morrow and wasn't sure I should have time to come round and say goodbye to you and the babes."

Ruth stared.

"_You're_ never going out there, sir!"

"Only as military chaplain."

Ruth refused to believe.

"But I thart you was against war and all that."

"So I am," Bobby answered gravely. He looked away towards Paradise. "But I feel Our Lord is there, or nowhere--just now."

Ruth felt profoundly moved. The young man's words, his action, brought home to her with a sudden pang, as not even the departure of Ernie had done, the change that had rushed upon the world.

Ruth looked at the smooth young face before her, brown and goodly, with all the hope and promise of the future radiant in it.

A passionate desire to take the boy in her arms, to shield him, to cry--You _shan't!_ came over her. Then she gulped and said,

"Goodbye, sir," and moved on rapidly.

Passing through Meads, she turned the shoulder of the hill, and walked along the cliff, till she came to the long low house in the coombe.

It had a strangely deserted air, no spinal chairs and perambulators on the terrace, no nurses on the lawns, no beds on the balconies. All that busyness of quiet recreation which had been going on here for some years past had been brought to a sudden halt. Mrs. Lewknor came out to her and the two women sat a while on the terrace, talking. They had drawn very close in these few days, the regiment an ever-present bond between them. The husband of one was "out there" with the 1st battalion; the son of the other was racing home with the 2nd battalion in the Indian Contingent. Mrs. Lewknor felt a comfortable sense that once the two battalions were aligned on the West Front all would be well.

"Then let em all come!" the little lady said in her heart with almost vindictive glee.

As Ruth left she saw the Colonel in khaki, returning from his office. He came stalking along the cliff, his head on his left shoulder, looking seawards. There was about the gaunt old man that air of austere exaltation which had marked him from the moment of the outbreak

of war. In his ears, indeed, ever since that hour, there had sounded a steady note, deep and pulsing like the throb of an engine--the heart of England beating on, beating eternally, tireless, true, from generation to generation.

And for one brief moment he had doubted her--might God forgive him!

Ruth asked him how recruiting was going.

"Well," replied the Colonel. "They're flocking in--men of all ages, classes, and creeds. I shipped off Burt this morning; and he's forty. Wanted to join the Hammer-men or Manchesters with his friend Tawney; but I said _No: every man his own job_, and sent him off to the flying folk as air-mechanic. He's joining up at Newhaven to-night, and in a week he'll be out there."

Ruth asked if there was any news of the Expeditionary Force.

"They're landed all right," the Colonel replied. "We should soon hear more. Our battalion's with the Fourth Division. If you go up on the Head you can see the transports crossing from Newhaven with the stuff."

"Think it'll be all right, sir?" asked Ruth.

"If we can stop their first rush," the Colonel answered. "Every day tells. We can't be too thankful for Liége, though Namur's a nasty knock."

Ruth looked across the sea.

"I wish we could do something for em," she said wistfully.

"We can," answered the Colonel sharply, almost sternly.

The old soldier took off his cap and stood there bare-headed on the edge of the white cliff, the wisps of silver hair lifting in the evening breeze.

"May the God of our fathers be with them in the day of battle!" he prayed, and added with quiet assurance as he covered again--"He will too."

Then he asked the woman at his side if she had heard from her husband.

Ruth dropped her eyes, sudden and secretive as a child.

"Ern's all right, I reckon," she said casually.

In fact a letter from him on the eve of sailing lay unopened in her pocket. She was treasuring it jealously, as a child treasures a sweet, to devour it with due ritual at the appointed hour in the appropriate place.

Ten minutes later she was standing waist-deep in the gorse of the

Ambush looking about her.

Far away a silver-bellied air-ship was patrolling leisurely somewhere over the Rother Valley; and once she heard a loud explosion seawards and knew it for a mine.

Like a hind on the fell-side she stood up there, sniffing the wind. Behind her on the far horizon was a forest fire. She could smell it, see the glow of it, and the rumour of its coming was all a-round her: overhead the whistle and pipe of birds hard-driven, while under-foot the heather was alive with the stealthy migration of the under-world--adder and weasel, snake and hare, flying from the torment to come. But for her as yet the conflagration devouring the world was but an ominous red glare across the water. She breathed freely: for she had shaken off her immediate enemy--the Hunter.

Then she looked up and saw a man coming over the brow of Warren Hill towards her.

She dropped as though shot.

_He_ was at her heels again. Face down, flat on the earth, she lay panting in her form.

And as she crouched there, listening to the thumping of her own heart, she was aware of another sound that came rollicking down to her, born on the wind. The Hunter was laughing, that huge gusty laughter of his she knew so well. Had he tracked her down?

She heard his feet approaching on the turf. Was the earth trembling at the touch of them or was it the beating of her own heart that shook it?

Prone on the ground, spying through the roots of the gorse, she could see those feet--those solid familiar boots that had dangled so often before her fire; and the bottoms of the trousers, frayed at the edges and rather short, betraying the absence of a woman's care.

Was it her he was after?

No: he passed, still rollicking. He was not mocking her: he was tossing off his chest in cascades of giant laughter the seas that had so long threatened to overwhelm him, tossing them off into the blue in showers of spray.

I am free once more! that was what his laughter said.

She sat up: she knelt: warily she peeped over the green wall. His back was moving solidly away in the evening, his back with the swag on it. He reached the flag-staff and dropped away down into Hodcombe, that lies between Beau-nez and the Belle-tout light-house. She watched him till only his round dark head was visible. Then that too disappeared. She rose and filled her chest as the breeze slowly fills the sails of a ship that has long hovered uncertainly in stays.

He too was gone--into _IT_.

That Other was gone--like the rest--and the past with him.

How queer it all was! and how differently each man had met the huge tidal wave that had swept the whole world off its feet!

Joe, paddling in the muddy shallows, had been caught up, and was swimming easily now on the crest of it. Alf, snatched up unawares as he grubbed for bait upon the flats, had been tumbled over and over like a pebble, smashed down upon the remorseless beach, and drawn back with a sickening scream by the undersuck into the murderous riot of it. Last of all, Ern, asleep and snoring under the sunny sea-wall, had risen suddenly, girded on his strength, and waded out to meet it with rejoicing heart.

Dear Ern!

Sinking down into the harbourage of this deep and quiet covert where, under the stars, all his children, conceived in ecstasy, had come to her, she took out his letter, opened it, and began to read.

It was dated _In the train_, and began full of affection for her and the children.

"Now we made it up I don't mind what comes. I feel like it was a new beginning. There's a lot of married men joined up feel the very same. I feel uplifted like and that whatever comes nothing can ever come atween us no more really. Even when it was dark I felt that--that it wasn't _really real_ between us--only a shadow like that would surely pass away--as it has passed away--thank God for His great mercies."

There followed love and kisses to all the children and especially little Alice, underlined, and fraternal greetings to old Joe.

"We shall push em back where they belong all right, I expect. And if we don't I shall send for him to lend a shove. He's all right, old Joe is. There's not many of em I'd trust, but you can trust him. I knew that all along."

The letter finished,

"It's an end and a beginning, as old dad says. And whatever else _that's_ finished, and I don't care."

It was true too.

She folded the letter and slipped it in her bosom.

The second volume of her life had ended, and ended well. The sudden hand of destiny had reached forth to save her, to save the children, to save Ernie, to save Joe.

Had she ever wavered?--Who shall say?--Perhaps she could not say

herself.

She cast her mind back over her married life. Six years in September since she and Ern had ridden back to Old Town in Isaac Woolgar's cart. Six years of struggle, worry, and deep joy. She was thankful for them, thankful for the crowding babes, and most of all, she sometimes thought, thankful for Ernie ... His unfailing love and solicitude for little Alice! She could never be grateful enough to him for that. Dear Ern:--so affectionate, so always loveable. She regretted nothing, not even his weakness now. Because of his weakness strength had come to her, growth, and the consummation of deep unconscious desire.

Had she been too hard on him?--A great voice of comfort, the voice of Ernie, so it seemed to her, only swollen to gigantic proportions, till the sound of it was like the sound of the Sou-West wind billowing through the beach-tops in Paradise, surged up within her crying No.

Then she turned back to the first volume of her life, completed now so many years ago.

For the second time she had been left thus, man-less, a new life quickening within her. But what a difference between then and now! Then the fierce thief of her virginity had stolen away in the night, leaving her to meet the consequences, alone, an outcast, the hand of all men against her; and she recalled now with a shudder the afternoon on which she had gone forth to the Crumbles and there amid the jeers of the remorseless sea had faced the situation. Now it was true her accustomed mate had been snatched from her side; but the world was behind her. She was marching with the hosts, a mighty concourse, one of them, and uplifted on their songs.

She had nothing to fear, much to be thankful for. How calm she felt, how strong, how confident of herself, above all of Ernie! His punishment had made him and completed her own life. She had won her man and in winning him had won herself. And she would never lose him now. His pain, her pain, had been worth while. Smiles were in her eyes as she recalled the fuss that he had made--his struggles, his temper, his wiles of a naughty and thwarted child; and tears where she recalled the anguish of his time of purgation. And yet because of his suffering he had been strong when the day of battle came, and he would be strong. She had no doubt of that. And it was all over now.

Rising she stood up and looked about her, absorbing the down-land, familiar and beloved from childhood. The sky, grey now and mottled, drooped about her quietly with the soft wings of a mothering bird settling soft-breasted on her nest. The good green earth, firm beneath her feet, lifted her up into the quiet refuge of that welcoming bosom, lifted her to meet it like a wave gently swelling. So it had always been: so it always would be. This earth she knew and loved so well was not alien, it was not hostile; rather it was flesh of her flesh and soul of her soul. It gave her strength and comfort. Her bosom rose and fell in time, so it seemed to her, with the rise and fall of the breast of this virgin-mother, whose goodness she assimilated through heart and eyes and nostrils. She felt utterly at home. All sense of

separation, of dissent, had left her.

Absorbed she stood, and absorbing.

These woman-bodied hills, sparsely clad in rags of gorse that served only to enhance their loveliness, brought her solace and content as did nothing else. So it had always been: so it always would be. The beauty and wonder of them rolled in upon her in waves of sound-less music, sluicing over the sands of her life in foaming sheets of hyacinth, drowning the resentment, filling and fulfilling her with the grand harmony of life.

Sometimes down in the Moot, amid the worry, and the tumult, and the exasperations, she became empty, a discord, a desert. Then she would get away for an hour among the hills and her parched spirit found instant refreshment. She brimmed again. The quiet, the comfort, the deep abiding wonder of it all came back to her; even the words which she always associated with it--_I am the Resurrection and the Life_.

Since Ernie's departure the Comforter had come thus to her with renewed power; as if knowing her need and resolute to fortify her in the hour of her ordeal.

Standing there upon the brow, Ernie's letter lying like his hand upon her breast in the old dear way, she gazed across the waters, dimming in the dusk, and sent out her heart towards him, strong and pulsing as the sun's rays at dawn seen by some mountaineer from his native peak. She could shield him so that no evil thing could come nigh him. She had no fear for him and was amazed at her own triumphant faith.

Established on the rock herself, earth in earth, spirit in spirit, invincibly secure, she had him safe in her keeping, safe, aye safe as his child quickening in the warm and sheltered darkness of her womb.

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