

ROYAL REGIMENT

GILBERT FRANKAU

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ROYAL
REGIMENT

*A Novel of
Contemporary
Behaviours*

BY GILBERT FRANKAU

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First Edition

*To my comrades, dead and living, of
the 24th Divisional Artillery, B.E.F.,
this peacetime tale of the Regiment
in which we had the honour to serve.*

CHAPTER ONE

§ 1

The “senior officer present” rose from his seat at the top table of the Royal Artillery Mess, Woolwich, and said:

“Gentlemen, I give you the health of our new King, Edward the Eighth”.

As they, too, rose, the middle-aged man next to Major Rockingham exchanged his customary “God bless him” for a furtive “Gosh!”

Because to him—as to nearly all the other officers at those three mahogany tables—it seemed little less than sacrilege that anyone should dare, in this place of all places, thus to alter the immemorial wording of the loyal toast.

But Thomas Rockingham, lifting his glass to his lips, remembered that “The Hawk”—otherwise Colonel Sir Guy Wethered—had always been a law unto himself.

Hawk Wethered—whom the “Blue List”, as it is known in the Regiment, further wrote down a baronet, a member of the Distinguished Service Order, a possessor of the Military Cross, a graduate of Staff College, and a qualified interpreter in Arabic, Italian and Urdu—stood on for a moment.

Except for that startling streak of silver which swept away the high forehead, his hair was still jet-black. Beaky of thin nose, fierce of dark eye, he wore a six-inch bar of miniatures at the lapel of the short red mess jacket with the blue cuffs. The open red waistcoat revealed two pearls of a peculiar pink lustre clipping the glossy shirtfront. The overalls were even tighter than regulations demanded.

“Queer devil, more like an actor than a soldier”, thought Rockingham, as those dark eyes flashed one keen glance in his direction.

Then, with characteristic gestures, the Hawk drained his glass, planked it on the mahogany, wiped his moustache with his napkin, and sat down.

“What did you think of that?” asked Rockingham’s neighbour, as they also seated themselves.

But Major Rockingham only smiled.

The smile transfigured a face which always seemed a little too resolute, a little too serious, in repose.

“Good man”, mused the other. “Known him since he left the Shop. Do I know him, though? Does anybody?” And, waiting to light a cigarette from the battered silver case in his waistcoat pocket, he fell to considering the face again.

The vestige of a smile lingered in the pale blue eyes, which were slightly prominent under brows of a colour midway between brown and red. To this Rockingham owed his nickname of “Rusty”. The thick hair of the head matched the eyebrows. The broad forehead betrayed intelligence. The full, ever so slightly sensuous lips under the clipped moustache looked as though they could keep any secret.

“Exceptional sort of chap”, continued the thoughts of Rockingham’s neighbour, as he regarded that chin, formidable despite the cleft in it, and the rugged contours of the cheeks.

Then one of the waiters who had helped to draw the narrow linen cloths offered a silver cigar box; and Rusty said, “Have one with me, won’t you?”; and once more the smile transfigured his features, making the other think, “There I go again. Letting my imagination run away with me. There never was a more typical gunner”, as he answered:

“Thanks, I don’t mind if I do”.

§ 2

Meanwhile the Hawk had refilled his glass from the decanter before him.

“Gave ’em all a shock”, he mused. “Do ’em good. Won’t do me any good, though. Not if the powers that be get to hear of it. Hidebound lot. Snooker me for my general-ship if they possibly can. Well, let ’em, if they want to be such fools. Thank the lord, I’ve plenty of money without my pension.

“And”—added the secret musings of Colonel Sir Guy Wethered—“a lovely young wife.”

For a second, his thoughts switched to his wife. For the fraction of a second, the lids snapped down over his fierce eyes as he let imagination visualise her. Then the eyes were wide open again, flashing more glances up and down and all about this high cream and gold room.

A long time—a hell of a long time—since he had first drunk port in this room. These walls had been dark red then; and those two pictures unpainted.

He could remember the hanging of both those pictures—Edward the Seventh, his youth’s idol; and George the Fifth, by Oswald Birley. A great man—though one hadn’t realised it at the outset—King George.

Thought diffused, as the senior major on his left—Dallingford of the Horse Gunners—spoke.

“Funeral go off all right?” he asked—there had never been much reverence

about Dallingford. "I rather gathered from this morning's paper that the staff work wasn't quite up to standard."

"The cheap press", ejaculated the Hawk, "is the curse of this country. If I had my way with some of 'em . . ."

He elaborated. The lieutenant-colonel of a Medium Brigade, seated on his right—Gilbert Murchison—broke in sombrely, "The old monarch did more for this country and the Empire than most people realise. I wish he hadn't gone".

"We've all got to go sooner or later." Dallingford spoke. "Edward P'll be just as good a man as his father, once he settles himself in the saddle."

"Let's hope so", said Murchison; and broke off, while the Hawk brooded, "I ought to stop this. But I won't. I'll lead 'em on a bit."

Aloud he said, lowering his voice, "You sound a bit doubtful?"

"I am—in a way." Murchison's voice was equally low. "I can't help wishing he were married."

"And you a woman-hater", put in Dallingford.

"A king isn't like an ordinary man. Besides——"

But there again Murchison broke off, and switched the conversation, not without a certain adroitness, to:

"By the way, I haven't congratulated you on your new appointment yet, sir. When do you take over?"

"Next week, I believe."

"I bet you're glad to be back from India. How's our friend the Fakir of Ipi?"

"We'd have had him scuppered, if the lord high panjandrum had only taken my advice. But he got the wind up. Not that I blame him. You know what our politicians are."

Hawk Wethered elaborated once more. Listening, Dallingford had a twenty-year-old memory of him, speaking other words at a brigade conference.

"I'm afraid I don't agree with you, sir", said the Hawk in that memory. "If the Huns really mean business, they'll be through our support line before you can say Lloyd George, and we'll be damn lucky if we manage to save Amiens, let alone that advanced section of mine."

Yet the Hawk had obeyed orders—he himself helping to limber up one gun of that needlessly exposed section, and to keep the other in action, over open sights, till the team was away . . .

"Ought to have got something better than a D.S.O. for that", mused Dallingford. "Ought to have been a brigadier then. Grand man to go tiger shooting with. Too much of a tiger himself though. Always used to be snapping and snarling and telling

everybody where they got off, generals included. Doesn't seem any tamer than he used to be either. Not mellowing well."

Presently, at a pause in the monologue, he managed to suggest, "How about making a move, sir? Some of these subalterns have quite a lot of evening work to do".

Colonel Sir Guy Wethered fished out his heavy gold watch.

"Serve 'em right", he said; but rose.

§ 3

Rusty Rockingham's nearest way to the door brought him past the Hawk, who said, reseating himself for a moment, disdainful of custom, to finish his third glass of port:

"Didn't see you in the anteroom before dinner. What are you doing up here? I thought you were commanding the Turban battery".

"I still am, sir. But they're mechanising us; and I'm doing a three weeks' course."

"Serve you right." The thin red lips grinned as they repeated their favourite phrase. "Long time since I was your captain in the old forty-eighth. Do you remember my giving you your nickname?"

The memory ("Mr. Rockingham, a little harness cleaning seems indicated. This surcingle buckle is as rusty as your hair.") amused them both. Discipline relaxed as Wethered pushed back his chair.

"You retaliated in kind", he went on. "Though I only found it out afterwards. You didn't know that, eh? 'Pounced on me like the hawk he is', was the phrase you used. And it's stuck to me ever since."

He took Rockingham's arm as they passed out, by the alcove where the statue of Armed Science stands and the band plays on guest nights; but relinquished it once they were in the hall.

From the music room at the top of the staircase came the thump of a piano.

"Our subalterns", quoted Hawk Wethered, "have quite a lot of evening work to do. Noisy young bastards. It's queer how soon one loses the habit of communal living. You realise I've committed matrimony since we last met."

"Didn't you receive the letter I wrote you, sir?"

"Now you come to mention it, I'm afraid I did. And your mother's. Believe I forgot to answer hers, too. Apologise for me when you see her. I was sent up to Waziristan a few days after the wedding. By the way, how is your mother?"

“Fairly well, I’m glad to say.”

A mess waiter, who happened to be coming out through it, held open the first door of the green-walled, picture-hung anterooms. They went in; and found two empty saddlebags by the fire.

“Drink?” asked the Hawk.

“Not for the moment.”

“I oughtn’t to either. Still, when one does happen to be removed from the wifely supervisions——”

He pressed the bell; ordered a double brandy and soda.

One or two other members of the mess drifted up to, drifted away from them as they continued to chat, aimlessly, the senior making most of the conversation; at a pause in which Rockingham’s eyes wandered to the portrait of a man he had known well in life.

“Your uncle, wasn’t he?” The Hawk had not missed that momentary lack of concentration.

“Great uncle.”

“He always reminds me of your father. Pity about that. How old would your father be if the Huns hadn’t scuppered him?”

“About seventy.”

“Still young enough to command a Corps.” The harsh voice rasped to sarcasm. “We’ll all be Methuselahs by the next show. Unless”, he fell silent for a second, “it’s accelerated.

“Take yourself.” The voice changed, became friendly once more. “If my memory’s right, you left the Shop in nineteen eleven. That means you’re well over forty, with twenty-five years’ service, four and a half of ’em active, behind you. If war were to break out tomorrow, what would be your command? Six eighteen-pounder bundooks, four of ’em nineteen-eighteen vintage, and about a hundred flannel-footed soldiers.

“And it isn’t as if you were a bonehead either”, continued the Hawk, burying his tight black moustache in his drink.

Rockingham smiled:

“Promotion is rather slow these days. But I’m no worse off than the others”.

“Very philosophical. By the way, I suppose you realise I’m your C.R.A.?”

They chatted on, aimlessly again, till both anterooms were almost empty.

“You’d better have a nightcap”, commanded Hawk Wethered; and pressed the bell for the second time.

“I’m not convinced in my own mind”, he said abruptly, “that the next war to end

war isn't going to be accelerated.”

The junior's face showed no trace of a smile.

“You don't really mean that, sir?”

“I'm not accustomed to saying things I don't mean.” Just for a moment, the Hawk was all the brigadier. He glared at the waiter, who fled after putting down the two glasses; and repeated himself, as though he were making some doubtful order absolutely clear.

“And I'm not talking without the book”, he went on. “I was through the Canal three weeks ago. Met an old Arab I used to know. In Port Said. Rather trust him than the newspaper wallahs. Don't you make any mistake about this fellow Mussolini. He's no more mad than I am—or than Kitchener was when we mopped up the Sudan. The Italianos are right on the job. Badoglio'll be in Addis before you can say League of Nations. A nice smack in the eye for us that'll be. And, in my opinion, it won't end there.”

“But Mussolini wouldn't tackle us?”

“Wouldn't he—if he saw half a chance of bringing it off, if he could coax Hitler to go in with him. Once a tiger starts man-eating, he doesn't stop until someone puts a rifle bullet between his eyes. I'm not sure we oughtn't to have done that right away. These twopenny-ha'penny sanctions. I ask you! Could we have played his game any better? He's got his whole nation behind him now. He's only to win this war—and they'll believe him when he tells 'em he can win the next.”

The Hawk crossed the long legs that ended in the spurred Wellingtons and lit himself a fat Turkish cigarette.

“You don't look as if you relished my prospect”, he went on. “I gather you'd rather wait for your promotion to lieutenant-colonel till it comes along in the usual way.”

“Well”—it had always been advisable, Rockingham remembered (and it was more than ever necessary now that he was one's own brigadier) not to rub the Hawk up the wrong way—“I'm not precisely keen on another war.”

“Neither am I”—Hawk Wethered laughed—“at the present moment. The civilian population is too rotten with pacifism for one thing. And for another, well”—again he laughed—“thanks to our precious government, we're not exactly ready. Rearmament's a joke so far. You agree with me there, I hope?”

They were on safe ground again. One only had to give the Hawk the word, and he would go on cursing “these lousy politicians who can't see an inch in front of their noses” till midnight.

§ 4

Colonel (temporary Brigadier) Sir Guy Wethered went on, at gunfire, till a quarter to twelve. The anterooms were quite empty by then; and Rusty Rockingham only kept awake by his sense of discipline.

The Hawk—it seemed to him—might be, was, a great soldier. Talking politics, however, he became the merest child.

“Don’t you understand, sir?” he wanted to say. “It isn’t the government’s fault, and it isn’t the newspapers’ fault, that we’re not properly armed. The people of this country hate the very idea of war. Besides, they don’t think there can be one. Neither do I, if it comes to that. I think you’re panicking.”

Yet it was so unlike this man to panic that he could not help being a little impressed.

“I don’t like our present situation any more than I liked it in ’fourteen”, the Hawk continued. “A damn sight less as a matter of fact. Our commitments weren’t as extensive then. We could rely on India. We hadn’t an independent Ireland to reckon with. We could put seven divisions in the field right away. And we did possess an adequate navy.

“Not that a navy’s as much use as it was”, he concluded. “What we want is an air force that’ll tonk the tails off ’em. Have we got one? Ask that young brother of yours if he’s still in it. You mark my words, Rusty. We’ll be caught napping one of these fine nights—and serve us right, too.

“Damn well right”, he repeated. Then words petered out of him; and something of his true age appeared in his face, in his movements, as he tossed his cigarette into the embers and rose to his full height.

“I seem to have been yapping rather a lot”, he grunted. “Result of the old atmosphere, I imagine. And possibly too much alcohol. At home, my drinks are apt to be rationed—and my military dissertations discouraged. Camilla”, he licked his lips on the word, as though savouring some rare fruit, “has me well disciplined.”

It seemed so strange to think of anyone, let alone a woman, disciplining the Hawk, that Rockingham could not quite prevent a smile.

“Fact!” The fierce eyes softened as they quizzed the smiler. “You must come and observe it for yourself. A weekend might be best. I’ll get her to write to you. I’m letting Lampson have my official quarters. The ancestral mansion’s not much more than an hour’s run from Aldershot. Camilla insisted on my redecorating most of it. Cost me a pretty penny. As an American girl, she’s naturally enterprising about bathrooms. And what she isn’t spending on the garden——”

He lit himself a final cigarette. They left the anteroom; passed to their bedrooms up the antler-hung stairs.

“Don’t forget to apologise to your mother for me”, the Hawk said; and, as they parted, Rusty Rockingham again thought what a queer devil the man was.

But alone, peeling off mess jacket and waistcoat, he fell to thinking:

“Camilla! Unusual name. Reminds me of something. Something I’ve read? Possibly”.

The elusiveness of memory proved irritating; almost succeeded in keeping him awake.

CHAPTER TWO

§ 1

Rusty Rockingham's pale blue eyes twitched open as the depot trumpets sounded reveille, but he was fast asleep again when his servant knocked.

"Regular Passchendaele of a morning, sir", said Driver Noakes, a privileged person with a little waxed moustache, graying hair, five medal ribbons up and good conduct stripes massed on his khaki sleeve. "Mufti, sir?"

"No. I shan't be going up to London till tomorrow."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

"I rather imagined you might be."

Battery commander smiled. Servant grinned as he arranged the teatray on the chair by the bed.

"Not much about me old Rusty doesn't know", thought Driver Noakes, drawing back the thin curtains, taking tunic and breeches from the cupboard; then untreeing the old-fashioned fieldboots and laying the lifts beside them. "Not much I don't know about him either. Except what's in that box."

"That box", of scratched leather with a brass lock, stood on the table by the window. Noakes eyed it for a moment before he went to "see if I can pukker a bath for you, sir".

Meanwhile, his master's mind was again chasing the dim recollection of the previous night. There *was* something familiar about the name of Hawk Wethered's wife. It conjured up a memory. One associated it with . . .

But for the next twenty minutes routine claimed its victim; and not until he was lacing his fieldboots did Rockingham's mind formulate the surprising word, "Wheat".

"Association of ideas there?" he mused. "Get it sooner or later. As long as I don't dwell on the thing. Not that it matters one way or the other."

And over his customary poached egg and bacon, eaten in his customary silence, his brain concentrated on the more important issue of "my shell".

§ 2

Nine o'clock found Rusty Rockingham at the telephone. The voice at the other end of the wire said, "Good. Come along whenever you like. I'm on the scale drawings now. You were quite right. The gaine is the difficulty". Emerging from the

telephone cabinet he encountered the Hawk, conspicuous in gray homespun and a yellow hunting waistcoat, and gave him a disciplined, “Good morning, sir”.

Hawk Wethered returned the greeting.

“I’m just off”, he rasped; and, eyeing the other’s khaki, “You’re staying on, I gather. Why? I thought your course finished yesterday.”

Rockingham hesitated a second before he answered:

“I’ve got one or two things to clear up, sir”.

“See you in Aldershot, then.”

The Hawk pounced off, into the largest and most conspicuous of the cars parked before the pillared entrance. Rockingham put on a deliberate pipe; took cap, cane and gloves from their hook in the hall, and followed him. Outside, a fine rain fell; and the white mist, which had reminded Noakes of Passchendaele, clotted so thickly that one could only just perceive the outline of the two memorials across the gravelled asphalt of the parade ground.

The engine of his own car—a modest two-seater—was already running. By it, stood Noakes, who saluted.

“Got that box?”

“Inside, sir.”

“Right. Let’s be off.”

He took the wheel; switched on sidelights and fog lamp; crawled out, by the entrance to the theatre, on to the main road. Now, the Garrison Church loomed shadowy on their right. Two minutes later, still crawling, they emerged into Beresford Square.

“Shall I take the car home, sir?” asked Noakes, some quarter of an hour afterwards.

“Yes. I’ll be lunching here. Be back at five. I don’t expect you’ll have to wait long.”

But it was nearer seven o’clock than five before Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A., emerged, box in hand, from the Arsenal; and all that time he had not given one thought to the association of ideas between the name Camilla and the word “wheat”.

§ 3

Again that night Rockingham dined in the cream and gold room whose three mahogany tables the Regent ordered to be broadened, more than a century ago, because, “Damme, sir, I don’t object to my officers of artillery getting drunk like gentlemen, but I will not have my shins hacked even by a veteran of Waterloo”.

Murchison gave the toast that night; and gave it in the traditional manner, “Gentlemen, the King”.

“The Hawk’s lucky”, grumbled Murchison, “I’ll never get a substantive command. It’ll mean taking on a territorial brigade if I’m to qualify for my colonel’s pension.”

“Two hundred a year less pay and no allowances to speak of”, laughed Dallingford. “Who’d be a soldier in these times? Still, things may improve.”

“Why should they?” gloomed Murchison.

“Dunno. But I’ve a hunch they will. Our new monarch’s been a soldier himself. If anybody can do anything for us, he will. Good lad in my opinion. I remember one day—let me see, on the Somme, I think it was—no, earlier than that, some time in ’fifteen. Anyway, I was doing F.O.O. ^[1]; and he came toddling along the trenches with his bear leader. My O. P. ^[2] was being strafed occasionally. So I asked him to keep under cover. ‘I’d rather see you have a shot’, he said. ‘That’s to say if you’ve any ammunition to spare.’ So I loosed off a round of battery fire and knocked off a few sandbags for him. He stood up and watched. Went away as pleased as Punch he did—though old Gerry gave us back twelve for my four and jolly nearly cut him over.”

“Oh, I grant you he’s got the devil’s own pluck”, admitted Murchison; but there he broke off abruptly, and rose.

“How about a game of pills, Rusty?” asked Dallingford.

“Sorry.” Dallingford, had he been as observant as the Hawk, would have noticed the second’s hesitation. “I’ve some reading to do.”

And Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A., went straight upstairs to his room, where midnight found him still working.

“Not right yet”, he decided, locking away the sketches he had brought back from Ordnance. “Quite a problem. Wonder if we’ll have muzzle brakes on these new bundooks. Have to alter the tension of my creep spring if we do. Wish the panjandrums, as the Hawk calls ’em, would make up their minds about that.”

[1] Forward Observation Officer.

[2] Observation post.

Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A., dreamed a good deal that night, mainly about the new projectile for the new gun-howitzers, but every now and again of a girl called Mary Hawkins.

For there was one piece of paper which had nothing to do with gaires, or creep springs, or centrifugal bolts, or detonators, in that scratched leather box with the brass lock.

CHAPTER THREE

§ 1

“Driver I.C.”, grinned Noakes, wiping the beer drops from his waxed moustache with a brown silk handkerchief. “That’s all I’ve been promoted to. Stands for internal combustion, in case you don’t know it, Snowy.”

Bombardier Baker—an old acquaintance—with whom he was drinking, laughed:

“You always were a card. And a foxy one. No stripes for you. But you won’t find things so easy when you’re told to put your civvies on”.

“Won’t I? That’s all you know. Getting married then. Nice a bit of skirt as ever you saw. Youngish too. Not more’n thirty-five. Her dad runs a pub. Hoxton way. Be with her now by rights. I believe in keeping an eye on me own property, especially these times. But old Rusty, he kept me hanging about all day yesterday, and here we are still, with his kit packed and all. Have one with me?”

“Don’t mind if I do, being Saturday.”

In the meantime Noakes’ battery commander—after three more hours of work with his colleague at the Arsenal—was glad of a gin and It.

§ 2

Rusty Rockingham wore a plain blue suit, a stiff collar and a black necktie. He drank alone, standing by his great uncle’s picture; but his mind was still preoccupied with ballistic problems and he scarcely gave the picture a thought. It seemed unimportant too—though, on occasions, he could be pernickety about food—which meat dish, which vegetables he chose from the three heated steel serving tables before carrying them into the alcove room, and seating himself, again alone.

“Struck a snag with that shutter axis pin, now”, he brooded. “Damn.”

Presently a brace of young subalterns—they also carrying their own dishes according to the custom of the mess—joined him.

“Good morning, sir”, said one of them; and the other, who had not recognised him for a field officer in his mufti, repeated the formula.

He inquired their names, memorised them, and the two faces—one keen, a little gaunt, light of hair and blue of eye; the other, more intellectual perhaps, but slower of uptake, and bespectacled. Then he asked a few more questions, and smiled as he

drew the pair into conversation. For he was always a good mixer—with men.

The desultory talk cleared his brain of mechanics. A waiter brought cheese and biscuits. He finished eating, and went back—altogether unaware of the favourable impression he had left behind him—to the anteroom, where he glanced through *The Gunner* while he drank his coffee.

Outside, a winter sun was shining. He remembered Mary Hawkins; frowned; looked at his wristwatch; decided, “Mother won’t expect me till half-past four at the earliest”, and went for his hat.

The brass mortars in the outer hall always intrigued his imagination. Staring at them, he thought, “We’ve lengthened the range a bit since those days”. But this thought—he knew—was only a temporary refuge. Confound Mary. Why remember her? He and she were through with each other. Unless . . .

He strolled through the glass door into the open air. From under the great centre archway, over which the Union Jack flies and the Royal Arms are carved in browning stone, issued a knot of bandmen. The sight of their pre-war red and blue pleased him. He stood to watch while the bandmaster posed them on a wooden platform for the photographer.

On the railed green, beyond the parade ground, a football match had just begun. He crossed the asphalt; and watched for a while, thinking, “It oughtn’t to be so difficult to get men for the army. They have a jolly good time nowadays, and their pay’s double what it used to be”.

Not that the Royal Regiment found it as difficult to secure recruits as the infantry. Still . . .

Mixed with the cheers which had just greeted a fine save, a sentence of the Hawk’s recurred to him, “We were a handful against the continental armies when the last show started. We shan’t count as much as a pinch of snuff next time”.

“But there won’t be a next time”, he tried to reassure himself.

There might be though.

It took only one lunatic to put a match to a powder magazine.

And suddenly, on that last thought, Rusty Rockingham experienced the need for prayer.

Years now, since one had experienced that need with such urgency! One still prayed, of course. But only on Sundays, in the correct place, in church. And latterly one had not been quite so regular in one’s attendance at church, because most of one’s Sundays had been spent with Mary.

Well—he would have plenty of time for churchgoing now!

§ 3

Frowning once more, and in an unwonted confusion of mind, Rockingham turned his back on the game. The sun still shone, illuminating this familiar building—beautiful to a man who loved symmetry, with its long many-windowed façade only pierced, in the exact centre, by the great archway; and its two triangular cornices—this one holding the black and gold clock, that one holding the black and gold wind-indicator—to relieve the parallel lines of its roof.

At ground level, too, the architect of this building had designed for symmetry. The same number of low white pillars supported the various entrances, all set at regular intervals each from each.

“Pity we glassed the mess ones in”, he mused. “Pity they must have that electric sign over the entrance to the theatre.”

But again the musing was only a temporary refuge. Pray, he must.

He walked on, by the high square-topped stone which commemorates the two Dicksons (father who served in the Peninsular, son who won his Victoria Cross in the Crimea) and that bronze figure of a woman above whose head is written, “Honor to the Dutiful and Brave”.

There he stopped, wondering—as always—at the queer spelling of that word, “Honor”.

“Looks a bit American”, he caught himself thinking; and once more the name “Camilla” flashed itself across the screenboard of his brain.

Automatically, to this flash, ideas began to associate themselves. Long ago he had memorised a poem about a girl with that name.

“For some exam or other”, memory suggested. But by then he was approaching that old piece of artillery on whose muzzle his father had straddled him years before he went to the Shop, laughing:

“Never mind if he does make his clothes in a mess, Mabelle, my dear. Uncle Marmaduke’s orders are that he’s to be photographed on the Great Gun of Bhurtpoor”.

The eldest of Brigadier-General Humphrey Rockingham’s four sons, of whom the youngest lies near his father in the cemetery at Abbeville, could have drawn that age-greened gun blindfold. He knew every sinuous line of the tiger which forms its trail, of the elephant’s head which forms part of its cradle.

He knew the history of its capture, too; and better than any man living. Because his great-uncle Marmaduke had been one of those who marched with Lord Combermere from Agra, eleven years before Queen Victoria came to the throne.

“Marvellous old chap”, he fell to brooding. “Seventeen then—and he didn’t die till the Boer War was over. Ninety-four not out.”

He came right up to the gun. As his fingers touched the metal, he seemed to see his great-uncle’s very face, red rimmed of eye and enormous of moustache; to hear that sonorous voice, with never a crack in it, telling him:

“You should have seen the Sixteenth and Skinner’s Horse charge the Jats, my boy. War was something like war in my time . . . Brave fellows, those Jats. They didn’t hide behind a kopje and pot at one from a thousand yards. These Boers! I’d show ’em what’s what if I had the old battery out in South Africa. Maybe you’ll command the old battery one day, my boy. They still call us the Turbans, after that major of ours—be shot if I can remember his right name now—we always called him ‘Thunderbox’—who ran out and picked up one of the Jat turbans after the Sixteenth came back. Swore he’d wear it till we’d taken the place, too, did Thunderbox. Awful language that man used. Not fit for a young lad’s ears”.

And now that “young lad” was actually commanding the Turban battery. Queer!

§ 4

“Not like me to sentimentalise”, thought Rockingham, still fingering the green metal. “Bloodthirsty old devil, Uncle Marmaduke. Only left me his money on condition I got my commission in the Regiment. ‘War was something like war’ indeed! All very well for his generation. But nowadays . . . My God, supposing the Hawk’s right. Supposing they jump on us before we’re ready.”

And once again that extraordinary need for prayer gripped him, turning his eyes to the Garrison Church.

“Don’t expect they keep it open all day”, he caught himself thinking. “Never troubled to find out. Ugly kind of edifice anyway. No spire. And that belfry looks like an afterthought.”

But already his feet were moving him across the road.

He came, walking more slowly than his habit, to the brown stone porch under the centre oriel. The first door he tried resisted him; but the rusted ring of the next one turned easily. Doffing his soft hat, he passed in.

The whole place seemed deserted. He knew it well enough for the curious effect it makes on a newcomer—who might imagine himself in a converted mosque—not to affect him. His eyes went first to the flags and the banners that hang from the arched triforium, backed with red brick, railed in front with thin ironwork; then to the

gold mosaic memorials which edge that open gallery.

At once, he read his father's name.

His need for prayer was overwhelming now. But for a little longer he resisted it, staring up at the regularly painted patterns of the fretted wooden roof, and down from them, along the aisle, at the altarpiece of St. George spearing the dragon.

It was just then that he became aware of the woman, her back towards him, her head bowed in her hands.

The sight of that kneeling figure made him self conscious. He felt as though he were trespassing on this woman's privacy. But in a moment or so she rose and came by him. He saw that she was of middle age and that her eyes were still wet.

Presently he found himself standing in the pew she had occupied, looking down on the flat stone, on the words, "Mons—Aisne—Marne—Ypres. In sacred memory of our Fallen".

In another moment or so, he too was on his knees.

CHAPTER FOUR

§ 1

The man who let himself out of the Garrison Church, Woolwich, on that first Saturday afternoon of February, nineteen hundred and thirty-six, could not remember the actual words of his prayer. He only knew that it had been long and fervent; and that the personal Deity in whom he had never ceased to believe was now giving him the answer out of his own finite mind.

“Praying’s good discipline”, said Rockingham’s mind. “It keeps one from getting above oneself. But God can’t be there to help slackers just for the asking. And if any nation ever asked for another great war, we have. So if we get it, and we’re not prepared for it, why blame Him?”

To which his mind added, for no reason he could imagine, “A nice beginning for a new reign”.

Men were still at their football on the green. Cheers carried to him where he stood under bare trees. A little car went by. In its back seat, a couple embraced. The next car had its radio playing.

“Panicker”, he chided himself. “Letting the Hawk’s croaking get on your nerves. Besides, there’s never a war—not a European one anyway—till the wheat’s in the ear.”

But did hawks croak? And who had written that poem about wheat and Camilla?

Gosh! He’d got it. Virgil. Coningsby’s translation. The book was kicking about somewhere or other. Probably at his mother’s. He could have a hunt for it, make certain this very afternoon.

§ 2

Noakes, who should have been on duty by the car, was just commenting, “That outside left of yours is no blinkin’ Bastin’”, to a chance acquaintance, when he heard a motor horn blow a long blast followed by a short one, then three more long ones, then a short one and a long.

“That’s my B.C. spellin’ me ruddy name out in Morse”, he explained. “Habit of his. Thinks it’s funny.”

But he was across the asphalt at the double before Rusty Rockingham sounded

the three dots of the final “s”.

“Sorry, sir”, said Driver (I.C.) Noakes, saluting. “Thought I saw you going for a walk, sir.”

“Didn’t I tell you to keep an eye on that despatch case of mine?”

“Yes, sir. In the dickey, sir. Locked up, sir.”

“All right. Jump in.”

It was Rockingham’s habit to take the most direct way between two points. He did so now, driving with his speedometer needle at an exact thirty straight through Woolwich town, past the Greenwich Hospital, and the Naval College where his brother William had served as a cadet, and the Observatory, till he came to the Marquis of Granby.

At that public house he turned right.

“Not very chatty this afternoon”, decided Noakes. “Something on his mind I should say.”

But for once that astute psychologist was wrong, because temporarily Rockingham’s mind—this also being a habit—had concentrated on the job in hand.

The horseman in him disliked and resented motorcars, which he drove only for convenience and with a peculiar dread of some fatal accident. Secretly this dread shamed him—being almost his sole complex. He would have to master it—he decided as he swung the wheel hard over and trod on his brake pedal to avoid hitting a peculiarly moronic cyclist—now that the battery was being mechanised.

All the same he experienced a positive relief when they came under the railway and safely across Westminster Bridge.

§ 3

It was almost dark by the time Rockingham pulled up exactly opposite the black door of his mother’s house off Smith Square. Noakes climbed out and rang. Kept waiting, he rattled the knocker—a highly polished, elaborately chased affair of old metalwork.

“Fanny’ll give him hades for that”, decided Rockingham, also dismounting. And Fanny did.

She appeared in the doorway, scarcely changed since his earliest recollection of her—a thickset old woman with a grim, obstinate face, beady of eye behind steel spectacles, a mob cap crowning her screwed-back hair.

“As though I’d nothing else to do but run up and downstairs”, she grumbled. But when Noakes would have carried the kitbag for her, she took it from him, snapping,

“No, thank you. The less of your dirty boots I have on my carpets, the better”.

“Orders, sir?” asked Noakes then.

Smiling at Fanny, whose antics always amused him, and gripping his precious box, Rockingham said, “Take the car to the usual garage. I shan’t be needing it, or you, till Monday morning”.

“Thank you, sir. What time, sir?”

“Seven-thirty, sharp, please.”

“Gorblimey”, thought Noakes, saluting and clambering to the wheel. “All the way from Hoxton too.”

“Good-for-nothing scallywag”, grumbled Fanny, closing the door as he drove off. “Your mother’s in the drawing room. I’ve just taken the tea up. Give me that box and I’ll take it up to your room for you. She’s got to go out again afterwards. Some meeting or other. So you’d best hurry.”

Fanny’s orders were not to be disobeyed. Rusty Rockingham went ahead of her, up out of the narrow hall, overcrowded with furniture like the rest of the house, to the first floor. One of the Baxter prints hung a little awry on the dark wallpaper of the landing. Automatically, he stopped to straighten it before entering the room.

His mother sat in her favourite high-backed William and Mary chair by the fireplace over which hung the glass case that held his great-uncle Marmaduke’s sword, medals and decorations. Similar relics and the scrolls of his father and her youngest, the Honourable Mabelle Rockingham kept in a vitrine between the windows, which were draped with curtains of old French silk on gilt poles.

Picking his way through the curiosity shop of little tables, every one littered with bricabrac, he bent to kiss her on both cheeks, still fairly smooth, though the last decade had sagged their muscles.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Getting lamer, Tom.” Her eyes, a somewhat darker blue than his own, glanced at the stick which lay by her chair. “Doctor Lucius says he can’t do anything for my hip—and that I ought to take to spectacles. He’s a fool, in my opinion. Tea?”

“Thanks.”

She filled a Sèvres cup, holding the Georgian silver pot in a steady right hand, large enough of finger to carry off the three heavy rings she always wore.

“Help yourself to a crumpet before they’re cold.

“I have to go out”, went on Mrs. Rockingham, as her eldest son took a plate and helped himself from the dish on the Dutch tiles of the hearth.

“So Fanny has just informed me.”

“To a meeting of the Anti-divorce League. There’s more talk about making

divorces easier. As though they weren't easy enough already."

"Always the little die-hard, eh, mother? There wouldn't be any divorces if you had your way."

"Not for people who marry in church." She stuck out a chin almost the duplicate of his own. "Except on one ground. I see no reason why an adulterous wife should not be put away by her husband."

"And an adulterous husband?" Her son's smile—it seemed to Mrs. Rockingham—was the exact duplicate of his dead father's.

"Even there, I think the law has gone too far. All this talk about the equality of the sexes is stuff and nonsense. It only makes for unhappiness. A wife's duty is to produce children, and look after her home."

The voice, like the sentiments it pronounced, was of an older day, well-modulated, deep in the throat, confident. But how far their mother really believed in her public pronouncements, none of her three sons ever quite knew.

"William and that Frances of his are coming to dinner", she went on. "Geoffrey isn't quite sure. But he thinks he can manage it. More tea?"

"Please. If Geoffrey does turn up we shall be the complete family party."

They talked family till Big Ben struck five. One of the gilt clocks chimed in as the Honourable Mabelle Rockingham's faithful retainer reappeared at the doorway carrying her seven-year-old mink and her new hat, to say, "It's time you were off. I've just telephoned for a cab for you".

Rusty helped his mother into her cloak, always a difficult task for the short Fanny. He accompanied her downstairs. Watching her hobble across the pavement and haul herself up into the taxi, he thought: "What energy. So many interests. No wonder she never feels lonely. And the only person in the world she's ever been afraid of is this one".

The only person of whom his mother had ever been afraid said, closing the front door again:

"I'll put the telephone through to the drawing room in case Mr. Geoffrey rings up. You'd best stay there until I've unpacked for you. But I've the wine to put on the ice first".

CHAPTER FIVE

§ 1

Since her eldest son's visit his mother had "invested"—one of her favourite words—in a new radio. This, he examined expertly, while Fanny made off with the teatray, before tuning in to various Continental stations, the last of which boomed through the atmospherics, "*Il nemico continua ritirarsi. I nostri truppi, con slancio formidabile . . .*"

His knowledge of Italian, though limited, allowed him to understand the gist of the war bulletin.

"So the Hawk's right", he thought. "This chap Badoglio has them on the run."

The soldier in him could not restrain admiration. Abyssinia—even the rough maps in the newspapers served to explain—must be hellish fighting country. Transport problems alone were enough to drive a staff demented.

Dirty work, though, after inviting them to join the League!

He switched off Rome and on to Regional. The popular tune pleased him. His head nodded as he beat time to it with a hand more the artist's than the soldier's. "Wish I understood more about music", he thought. Then, realising that he had forgotten to give his mother the Hawk's message, he frowned.

Presently, with the volume control turned low, he picked up the book his mother had been reading. The sentimental opening twitched his lips to the semblance of a smile.

"Not quite the dragon she likes to pretend herself", he thought next. But the telephone bell jerked him to his feet before he had skimmed more than a page or so; and, anticipating Geoffrey's voice, he heard Mary's:

"Can I speak to Major Rockingham, please?"

"Speaking", he said; and the one word conveyed his surprise.

"You weren't expecting me to ring up?" went on the slow tones at the other end of the wire.

"Well, no, I wasn't. How did you know I was here?"

"I just guessed it. Tom, you're not vexed with me?"

"Of course not. Why should I be?"

"I—I was afraid I might have hurt you. Your letter——"

She broke off. For a second, memories of their last meeting overwhelmed him. ("What's the use, my dear?" she had said. "You've your profession, I've mine. And

we're more in love with them than we are with each other.")

"I'm sorry if it offended you, Mary."

"It didn't. I'm not that sort of woman. We've never been on those sort of terms. Only—it sounded rather final."

She broke off again. He had a quick vision of her at her writing table, one hand holding the instrument to her ear, the other resting on the type keys. Strong hands, Mary's. Steady eyes. A tall, dark woman. Would have looked her best on a horse.

"What else could I have written?" he persisted. "You were fairly definite yourself, if you remember."

"I don't remember that I excluded"—she paused for the split of a second—"friendship."

He was conscious of an impulse to be brutally direct; but his innate chivalry compromised.

"I'm afraid I was rather busy when I wrote. I didn't mean——"

"Didn't you?" she interrupted. "I wonder. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps we had gone a little too far for . . . Plato. But that was your fault. I'm quite human, you know. Even if I do prefer working in Fleet Street all day and writing novels in my spare time to . . . the domesticities. By the way, are you doing anything particular this evening?"

"I'm afraid so. Mother's giving a family dinner party."

"All three Services in dutiful attendance." Mary laughed. "How awful. Do you play the God Save on the gramophone? What about tomorrow? I shall be home the whole afternoon."

"I'm afraid that's a little bit awkward, too. You see——"

"My dear"—Mary's laugh changed its note—"I see perfectly. That happens to be one of my troubles."

And she hung up without another word.

§ 2

The telephone rang again while Rockingham was still considering the recent conversation.

"Hallo", said the next voice. "Is that our gallant gunner? Good. Tell the old lady I can manage dinner all right. And if you can wheedle it out of Fanny, let's have a bottle of the nineteen-six. I've been ten days on the East Coast. It's simply frozen the guts out of me."

His brother Geoffrey hung up after another sentence or so.

He went to the door. Fanny happened to be in the hall. He called down his order. She called back:

“There’s only three bottles left”.

“All the same, we’ll have one, Fanny.”

He returned to the drawing room. The radio was still playing. The book he had begun to read still lay open face downward where he had left it on the seat of his mother’s chair.

“No use dwelling on things”, he brooded.

Yet his mind would not quite dismiss the vision of Mary Hawkins—or the implication of her last words.

“You’ve never set yourself up as a Galahad”, his mind suggested. “She made it pretty obvious. And it isn’t as though she were a young girl.”

The suggestion displeased, but continued to nag. Why shouldn’t he call Mary back? A man must go to a woman. And he had offered to marry her.

Restless, and still undecided, he turned off the radio, closed the book. The clock chimed again.

“Only land me in a mess”, he brooded, as he made up the fire; set the cut-steel guard in front of it, and went upstairs to the one spare room.

§ 3

Fanny had unpacked. His dinner clothes lay on the narrow bed, still covered with the patchwork quilt which Rockingham could remember since his public-school days. The box stood on the bedside table. He unlocked it; took out Mary’s letter, and read:

“I can’t stand children. They always fidget me. Is there any other reason for committing matrimony? Besides, my novels don’t even earn what I believe used to be known as pin money. They’re too satirical. If I gave up my newspaper job, which I happen to like, I should be just a kept woman. And if there’s one place in which I should loathe to be kept, it’s cantonments, as I believe you call them”.

In this room, too, a coal fire was burning. Three steps—and he had stooped to it. Flames licked at the large, mannish handwriting on the thick white paper.

“No use ringing her up again”, he decided. “Let it die a natural death. Better that way.”

All the same, regret tinged the decision; and although he took the scale drawing of his shell from the box and spread it out over his dinner clothes, turning on the light by the bed so as to study it more closely, the mechanical side of his imagination refused to work.

Unless he were a Galahad—thought the eldest of the three brothers Rockingham—a man couldn't live without a woman. Hence—if one believed in credal religion—marriage. But supposing one never encountered a woman one really wanted to marry? Supposing one's imagination demanded—and always had demanded, ever since adolescence began to clarify one's feelings—two supreme gifts, passion and companionship, from the imaginary wife?

Or was one now old enough to exclude passion? Hardly. Of the two, it would be easier to exclude the companionship. Other men could give one that.

The conclusion proved infinitely disturbing. All of a sudden, memory painted a long-ago scene.

In that scene, two young men, himself and another, rode side by side, where the last of a summer sunset gleamed over the Aldershot heather.

"My idea", that other was saying, "is that a soldier ought not to marry. He oughtn't to have anything to do with women at all."

"Good lord, why?"

His own voice continued:

"I didn't know you were as religious as all that, Cowley".

The man who had been Cowley said:

"It isn't a question of religion with me. It's entirely a question of my efficiency as a soldier. After all, Rusty, fighting's our job. Let's say this war people are always talking about starts tomorrow. Do you imagine that the married men, or the engaged men, will want to fight? And one must *want* to fight. One can't do anything really well unless one's absolutely single-hearted. I'm not an R.C., but I do think the Romans are right about one thing, the celibacy of the clergy. What I feel is that a soldier should live like a priest".

The scene vanished; but the memory remained.

Curious chap, Cowley. A bit mad on that one subject. He'd practised what he preached, though. Might have been at the top of the tree by now.

"Brigade major while I was still only acting captain", mused Rockingham. "Pity that five-nine got him. Remember bringing him back to H.Q. in the mess cart. Remember how it rained while we were burying him."

Then he remembered Mary's comment when he had told her something of Cowley, "I'm glad you don't think the same way about women. Or do you? I often

wonder”.

“Only wish I could”, he decided. “Might simplify things.”

Pictures of Mary Hawkins, words she had used, continued to haunt him while he dressed. A pleasant companionship, theirs. But did he really want to . . . spend tomorrow afternoon with her?

Could she give him . . . the same gift as Gail?

CHAPTER SIX

§ 1

Rusty Rockingham had locked away his drawings, and finished dressing. But that old obsession still haunted his mind.

Three years now—since his affair with Gail. But the loss of her—the puritanical folly of his renunciation—still hurt.

Tonight, again, his nostrils seemed to give him back that heady perfume. Almost he could feel the cling of Gail Vanduser's lips, and her hands—so white, so tiny, with their blood-red nails and their dimpled knuckles—locked round his neck. Such lovely hands. Such lovely hair—the true auburn, darkling in the night time, radiant in the dawn.

That last dawn! Before she went back to America.

Why the hell had he let her go back to America? Why hadn't he married her? Only because . . .

Her words, too, echoed down the galleries of recollection. She was singing the song of the moment, "What is love—but the kisses we give and take?" She was saying, "I guess that's true, honey. That's all there is to it". But there was so much more to it—from his point of view anyway.

He needed satisfaction for his mind as well as for his body. Mary had given one; Gail the other. But could any woman provide both?

"None that I've ever met", he decided. "So I suppose I'll have to die a bachelor."

And on that—equanimity returning—he made his way down the narrow stairs past the door of his mother's room.

§ 2

The door of Mrs. Rockingham's bedroom stood ajar. "Come and talk to me, Tom", she called. "The others won't be here for half an hour yet. And there's nothing in the papers. There never is on Saturday."

She was brushing her stubborn gray bob.

"How did the meeting go off?" asked her eldest son.

"They all blathered too much. Especially the Canon. That man's too fond of his publicity in my opinion. Give me one of my cigarettes. They're in that majolica box

on the what-not.”

Her bowdlerisation of the indicated bedside equipment amused Rockingham. Perceiving this, his mother grinned, “Fanny doesn’t like me to call it by its right name”.

She pulled the few hairs from her comb, and dropped them into the paper basket by her oak dressing table. He passed her the cigarettes; jerked at his watchchain, extracted the curved gold box which had been his father’s from one waistcoat pocket; struck a match on its worn edge.

“I’ve a message for you”, he said, while she was lighting up. “From Colonel Wethered.”

Told the Hawk’s message, she reflected a moment before pronouncing judgment.

“He’s not the sort of man I’d care to marry myself. I wonder why he left it so long. You say she’s an American. What age?”

“Young, I believe.”

“Sex on his part, one gathers.”

“Really, mother——”

Mrs. Rockingham grinned again.

“You needn’t play the pukka sahib with me”, she continued, blowing a puff of smoke through her thick nostrils. “When a man of Wethered’s age marries a young woman he rarely has any other motive. He’s very well off, of course. Presumably that was her motive. What class of American, do you think? Somebody like your friend, Mrs. Vanduser?”

Her sarcasm, coming directly on top of his memories, stung. This, too, she perceived—from his silence, from the sudden tensing of his jaw muscles.

“Still sensitive”, she told herself. “That was a narrow squeak. I don’t know what I’d have done if he’d made that dancing demirep one of the family.”

Aloud she said, “Talking of marriage, it’s high time *you* settled down”.

“I haven’t found the right girl yet.”

“They’re much of a muchness after the first year. Plenty of nice ones about. You can afford to pick and choose. *Your* wife won’t need to have money of her own. Not that I’ve anything against Frances. She suits William perfectly. He never did like women with any intelligence.”

She grinned for the third time; put down her cigarette, which she left to smoulder; clasped the diamonds round her long neck; asked him for her stick; told him to put the lights out, and stumped down to the drawing room, where he found her with her back to the fire.

“Did Geoffrey have anything to say for himself?” she asked.

“Only that it hadn’t been too warm on the East Coast, and that he’d like a bottle of the nineteen-six to warm him. I gathered from Fanny that you’re almost out of it.”

“The hock’s getting low, too. I don’t think I shall order any more hock. The Germans are up to their tricks again. White burgundy’s every bit as good. I’m not at all sure I don’t prefer it.”

“Didn’t Bismarck say patriotism stopped at the palate?”

“I don’t care what he said. In my opinion this man, Hitler, isn’t up to any good. I’m not going to let him have my money. Guns instead of butter indeed. It serves us right for not having occupied Berlin.”

Fanny, entering with decanter and glasses, put an end to the die-hard monologue. Rockingham’s mother settled herself in her favourite chair.

“That fool Lucius”, she said, “has forbidden me to touch sherry. So we’re having madeira. There’s plenty of that still left, thank goodness. Your father always overbought if I wasn’t there to stop him. I wonder whether that’s William or Geoffrey.”

“William”, she decided several moments later. “That wife of his always insists on powdering her nose again before she’ll come upstairs.”

§ 3

The young woman who entered to Mrs. Rockingham’s last words was large and placid, brown of hair and a slightly paler brown of eye. She came across the room, in a not-too-fashionable evening dress whose metallic blue did little justice to her fine skin, without haste, and gave her mother-in-law a cool kiss.

“I’m afraid we’re a little early”, she said. “Are you better?”

“I wasn’t aware that I’d been ill.”

“But you told William you were sending for the doctor. Hallo, Tom?”

“Hallo, Frances. How are the kids?”

“Little devils.” Her husband answered. “They’re just old enough to begin quarrelling. I had to read James the riot act yesterday.”

He, too, kissed his mother. Then he poured himself a glass of the madeira; holding which he took up his habitual stance with his back to the fire.

“Good stuff, this”, he pronounced, savouring the wine between lips a trifle thinner than Rusty’s; and his eyes, which were of a slightly darker blue, twinkled as he went on, “Well, did you pass in carburetters, old man? Or is the Selection Board about to debag you?”

“I’m hoping they’ll keep me on, sir.” The fact that William’s naval rank of captain entitled him to a salute from his elder brother was one of the family jokes. “And how are all my lords at the Admiralty?”

They chaffed on while their mother compared them, not to her eldest’s advantage. “William still looks a boy”, she thought. “Though there are only a couple of years between them. And he looks taller, though actually they’re the same height. That’s because he holds himself so well. A good figure, my William’s. He takes trouble about his clothes, too. Always did keep his hair tidy.”

William’s hair was almost black, brushed straight away from the forehead without a parting. He had the Rockingham chin, but without the dimple. This he dry-shaved, thoughtfully, with a long masculine hand, to Rusty’s, “Joking apart, I suppose you’re pretty busy these days”.

But before the senior service could make up its mind to answer so direct a question, Wing Commander Geoffrey Rockingham of the Royal Air Force had landed into the room, embraced both the women, and was declaiming, “Fanny gave me a dirty look. She gave me her most dirty look. What have I done this time?”

“You’re nearly three minutes late for one thing”, said his mother. And, almost instantaneously, the “head of the household”, as Geoffrey had nicknamed her, was announcing:

“Dinner is served”.

§ 4

Geoffrey Rockingham’s group captain once said that he walked like a cat. There was something catlike about his head, too—and a hint of the feline in his hazel eyes. Brown-haired, pale-checked, moustacheless, shorter and slimmer than either of his brothers, he wore a soft shirt and collar with his double-breasted dinner jacket, a red carnation at its left lapel.

“Did you see the funeral, mother?” he asked, as he gave her an arm down the stairs.

“Yes. William got me a seat.”

“I thought you’d go. You’re always so keen on processions.”

“Really, Geoffrey——”

“I saw it at the local flick. Must have been rather a fine sight. I’m glad I wasn’t on duty, though. Funerals always give me the shivers. We had one of our own this week. Nice young fellow. But if they will pull the wrong string——”

He broke off. They reached the hall. The Honourable Mabelle Rockingham

limped through the door of the little panelled dining room to her seat at the oval mahogany, set with just a little too much silver.

“She never will have a flower in the house”, thought William’s Frances. “She’s funny that way. She’s funny in lots of ways. And she thinks I’m a perfect fool.

“Bless her”, added Frances, for it had not been her own mother but her mother-in-law who comforted her through those two long days, those two interminable nights, before James was born, with his father at sea.

“I should have screamed the nursing home down if she hadn’t been there”, continued her thoughts. “Pain makes me sick. It was much easier with Julian, thank goodness. I believe we could afford another. It would be so nice to have a little girl. I must talk to William again. After all, it’s my money.”

Meanwhile Geoffrey was chaffing, “Why so serious? Cheer up. They’ll be sending the captain to sea again next year. Then you’ll be in undisputed command of the nursery”.

“He doesn’t interfere as much as all that”, said Frances; and William twinkled at her, “You wait till those brats are a bit older, young woman. If they don’t behave themselves then I’ll leather the jackets off them.”

“O William, you wouldn’t.”

“The fish”, interpolated Geoffrey, “rose well to that one. I should cast again if I were you.”

William, however, with a quiet, “Only pulling your leg, dear”, desisted; and, considering him and his wife after Fanny had whisked away the plates of the second course, Rusty felt suddenly envious.

“Made for each other”, he realised in a sudden flash of intuition. “Though she is a bit of a fish.”

But then William’s one obsession was his job.

“Always has been”, continued his elder brother’s thoughts. “Happy sort of chap. So’s Geoffrey. Usually that way myself. Wonder if I’ve got a touch of liver.”

His mother’s voice broke in on the reverie.

“I was telling Tom just before dinner that he really ought to get married.”

“As long as you don’t make me take a wife to my bosom”, said Geoffrey; and banter continued until Fanny, carrying it as gingerly as though it were a bomb, brought in the cob-webbed bottle, the damp cloth and the tongs.

“Staying to assist us, mother?” asked William then.

“I shall pay for it tomorrow if I do.”

“We’ll let you off church parade.” Her eldest spoke.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” Mrs. Rockingham’s eyes turned to her daughter-

in-law. “What do you say, my dear? I feel it’s our duty not to leave them at once. It’ll be so bad for their livers if they consume it all. Besides, I haven’t drunk King Edward’s health yet.”

“And you with one son in each of his fighting services”, laughed Geoffrey, moving to the fire.

CHAPTER SEVEN

§ 1

Geoffrey Rockingham drew out and examined the glowing tongs; applied them to the neck of the bottle, and cracked it in the wet cloth. “Neat job”, he preened himself as he filled the five glasses. “The future rear-admiral will now speak his piece.”

“The King”, said William, without rising; and took an appreciative sip of the good wine.

The others followed the navy’s example and drank seated. But despite its apparent casualness—or so it seemed to the eldest brother—the little ceremony had not left his mother unmoved. Her eyes were sombre. She was thinking—he knew—of his father and of Arthur, who had been killed on the same day. Frances also—he remembered—had lost her father in the war.

“I’m sure he’ll make a grand king.” It was she who spoke next. “Because he’s been such a wonderful Prince of Wales.”

“I feel that too.” Her husband followed. “He’s so jolly human. When I was in *Renown* with him——”

“Must we hear that story again?” asked Geoffrey.

They spatting for a sentence or so; then the flying man, serious again, said:

“He ought to do civil aviation a spot of good. It needs propaganda. But I wouldn’t take on Mouse’s job for a fortune. Would you, Tom? Nice schemozzle there’d be if he crashed with the monarch”.

“What a ghastly idea.” The port was loosening Frances’ tongue. “You do think of the most dreadful things, Geoffrey. I don’t feel he ought to fly. At any rate until after the coronation. I simply insist on being taken to that, William. How soon will it be?”

“Not for at least a year. So you needn’t start to panic yet awhile. They might give me a big ship by then. Grand if they do. I hate office work.”

“A lot you have to grumble about, William”, interrupted their mother. “Or Geoffrey either. You ought both to be in the Regiment. How long will you have to wait for your brigade, Tom?”

“Another two years at the very least.”

“Scandalous, I call it. The army isn’t a career any more. If you’d have taken that engineering job you were offered when the war finished you might have been making

your fortune.”

“At any rate he wasn’t axed”, said William. “Like all those poor devils in our service.”

“I always think that was a damn shame.” The eldest Rockingham refilled his glass.

“We could do with some of ’em back today”, reflected William.

The youngest Rockingham laughed, “Anybody who serves his country must expect to get it in the neck sooner or later. That’s all part of the jolly fun. Here’s to the civilian population. Heaven bless ’em, and protect ’em. Because I’m blowed if we can. Not with the kind of crates we’re given. If I were you I should sell this house and move into the country, mother. There won’t be much food going in London once they start dropping thermite eggs on the docks. A fat lot of good Bill’s big ship’ll be when that happens. And I don’t see Tom getting his guns across the Channel either”.

“If that’s the spirit of the R.A.F.—” began William.

“Spirit be sugared. It’s no use putting your blind eye to that particular telescope, Horatio. And you can tell all the captains in the King’s Navee so with my compliments. You’re whacked. You’re out of date. You’re a bunch of armourplated anachronisms.”

“I don’t know what anachronisms are.” Frances spoke. “But I’m quite sure William’s not one. And if you’re going to talk war, I’d rather go upstairs.”

She looked imploringly at her mother-in-law; but it was not until a quarter of an hour later that Mabelle Rockingham ordered:

“Don’t be too long, you three. I think I’ll tell Fanny she can go to bed”.

“As though she ever waited for that”, laughed Geoffrey, opening the door.

§ 2

A short silence followed the women’s departure. Then, abruptly, William’s voice took on a new note.

“I agree with a good deal you’ve been saying, Geoffrey”, he began. “But not with all of it. And there’s one thing I can tell you. Only you must both keep it under your hats, please. We really are going to rearm. What the army and the air-force programmes are I don’t know. But as far as the navy’s concerned——”

He gave details, before continuing:

“About time, too. I don’t get the wind up as easily as some people. But once or twice in these last three months—well, it’s been touch and go”.

“The Mediterranean of course”, said Rusty, remembering the Hawk’s revelations.

“Yes.” William brooded a moment, his brows creasing. “It’s lucky the Turks don’t relish that Italian garrison just off Cappadocia. It’s lucky old man Musso isn’t the fool some people like to think him. If he hadn’t been a realist, he might have thought he’d got us by the short hairs. Then the balloon would have gone up with a vengeance. And we shouldn’t have been too ready for it either.”

He gave more details.

“Are you as short of ammunition as that?” asked Rusty.

“Speaking unofficially—we’ve just about enough for one fleet action. And the army’s even worse off than we are. I suppose you know what’s supposed to have happened when the chap who’s in command on the Libyan border indented for anti-tank guns?”

His eldest brother’s answer set Geoffrey’s hazel eyes staring.

“You don’t really mean that, Tom?”

“I do. But it’s no use blaming the War Office. Or the Arsenal. They can’t make bricks without straw—otherwise money.”

“We’re a fine bloody Empire!” said Geoffrey.

“No use crying over spilt milk.” William laughed, a trifle bitterly. “We’ve been trying to show the world an example for the last seventeen years. All the continental nations have done is to put their fingers to their noses. I can’t say I blame them either. How should we like being schoolmarsed all the time? And if we knew that the schoolmistress was too mean to buy herself a new cane, we’d put our fingers to our noses, too. Don’t you agree, Tom?”

“Up to a point. But I think we had to try.”

“I’m with you there.” Again William took up the tale; again the youngest Rockingham kept silence. “But we’ve done our damndest, and it hasn’t come off. God knows I don’t want another war. If only because of Frances and the brats. Nor do you, unless you’ve turned into a militarist all of a sudden. And neither does Geoffrey, though he loves yapping about it. Our jobs are to prevent war, not to make it. But unless we’re given the money to do our jobs, the civilian population will certainly be for it. And who’ll get the blame?”

“His Majesty’s Army, His Majesty’s Navy and His Majesty’s Air Force.” Geoffrey spoke again, mock-serious as he helped himself to the last of the port. “So here’s hoping they put our pay up under this new scheme you’ve been telling us about.”

“Never mind about our pay”—occasionally William grew a trifle sententious on

good liquor—"as long as they give us the men and the equipment."

"Especially the equipment", said Tom; and he smiled to himself—for that was the effect good liquor always had on him as he added:

"Unless my hearing's at fault that was mother's stick thumping on the floor. We'd better be going upstairs now. Like three good little boys."

§ 3

The "three good little boys" were in no mood for bridge. But Mabelle Rockingham insisted; and midnight struck before William and Frances gave Geoffrey a lift home.

"Nine and ninepence, Tom", said his mother then. "Quite a good win for me. You play better than any of us. But you never seem to hold a card. There's rather a nice service in the Abbey tomorrow. We'll go there."

She lit herself a last cigarette and hauled herself upstairs to bed. Alone, her eldest son put on a pipe with his final whiskey and soda.

"Drinking rather a lot tonight", he thought; and immediately his mind brought up the Hawk's, "Possibly too much alcohol. At home my drinks are apt to be rationed—and my military dissertations discouraged. Camilla has me well disciplined."

Then his thoughts changed their line. Did even Hawk Wethered really want another war?

The mere question angered him. William's view of the fighting man's job was correct. Armies, navies, air forces—if they were to be justified at all—could only be justified on the one ground, "Defence".

"In the present state of civilisation", he concluded, "men like William and Geoffrey and myself are the only real pacifists."

The conclusion, however, satisfied neither the Christian in him nor his sense of values. If present-day civilisation were so precarious that it depended on force for its preservation, had humanity made any real progress since the Crucifixion? Apparently not. Would other nations disarm because we rearmed? Not very likely. Give bullies arms—and eventually they itched to use them. Eventually, unless the bullies saw reason, there must be another great war. The only question was: how soon?

His pipe had gone out by then, and not a dreg remained in his glass. Automatically he rose from his chair; put the guard in front of the fire, and switched the lights off before he went up to his own room. But there, too, his mind continued active.

More than once in these past three years, with Gail gone back to America, he

had been a little bored with soldiering. But with another great war—as it seemed tonight—inevitable, surely this job of being a soldier was worthwhile.

At least, one had a mission in the world. And the mission alone should suffice.

So perhaps Cowley had been saner than one imagined. Perhaps a soldier should live like a priest.

“Nonsense”, he tried to tell himself. But the sudden onrush of Cowley’s face as he had seen it for the last time—a cold mask grinning toothily by candlelight—stopped consecutive thought dead.

Wondering if he really had drunk too much, he began to undress. Catching a glimpse of his own face in the mirror on the dressing table, he saw himself as a man past his prime.

On that, a vast depression—never before experienced—gripped the pit of his stomach.

“A few more years”, he thought, “and you’ll have to retire. The mission—such as it is—will be finished. What price your priesthood then?”

His cold pipe lay on the dressing table. For comfort, he picked it up, put it in his mouth, biting hard on the vulcanite with his square teeth.

Blast this attack of depression. He wouldn’t give way to it.

But with that he caught another glimpse of himself, and simultaneously imagination began to paint a picture—of this same Thomas Rockingham, grown a little paunchy, grown a little pompous, dropping into his club every morning at the same time, reading the papers there, lunching there, haunting the smoking room or the billiard room or the card room there, like the other “old colonels”, the other “old bachelors”, while William . . .

Lucky devil, William. With his two children. With his wife. Damn it all, why had one never been able to find oneself a wife? Mother was quite right. High time one got married! No sense in being so pernickety. Passion and companionship indeed. Mary Hawkins to you, Gail Vanduser to you, Thomas Rockingham. What the hell do you think you’re looking for? The ideal woman? At your age . . .

Yet the Hawk—queer how one’s thoughts could never quite get away from the man—had not married till he was over fifty.

“So there’s still hope for me”, he decided with a touch of humour. “Dunno what I’m in such a state about. Must be a touch of liver.”

§ 4

Moderately calm again, Rockingham took the pipe from between his teeth; and

knocked out the dottle on the bar of the grate.

Each side of the fireplace rose high narrow bookshelves.

As he straightened himself, the title of one particular book caught his eye.

“Knew it was kicking about somewhere or other”, he thought. “Wonder if I can find that quotation.”

The well-thumbed volume, bound in red and gold, seemed to drop open of its own volition at the half-remembered passage:

“A virgin in the fight she stands,
Or winged wings in speed outvies.
Nay, she might fly o’er fields of grain,
Nor crush in flight the tapering wheat
Or skim the surface of the main,
Nor let the billows touch her feet”.

Virgil’s Camilla!

Hawk Wethered’s Camilla—one imagined—would be rather different. Some busy, hardboiled blond. With an American twang to set one’s teeth on edge and a spray of orchids as long as your arm trailing from her shoulder.

The Hawk always had liked a rough ride. What did one remember him rasping, years ago now?

“Women or horses, the fun’s breaking ’em in. Bit and bridoon for me. The harder they pull at the start, the better they go at the finish.”

Something of a bounder, the Hawk. “I give you the health of our new King”, indeed. Had the man no respect for tradition? Could any woman “discipline” him?

“Shan’t believe it till I’ve seen it”, thought Rusty Rockingham just before he fell asleep.

But that night—and this also was new to experience—a confusion of dreams haunted him; and waking he remembered the words of another poet:

“White hands cling to the tightened rein,
Slipping the spur from the booted heel,
Tenderest voices cry, Turn again,
Red lips tarnish the scabbarded steel . . .”

Fanny, questioned when she brought his tea, said:

“Your mother doesn’t believe in any of those patent medicines. I’ll get you her Epsom Salts”.

CHAPTER EIGHT

§ 1

At seven-thirty to the second on the Monday morning Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A., once more in khaki with the regulation mourning band round his sleeve, said goodbye to Fanny and took the wheel from Noakes.

A peaceful Sunday had brought his mental processes back to normal. What thoughts he could spare from the strain of driving were exclusively with his battery. Once they were beyond Hammersmith Broadway and on to the Great West Road, he voiced them to the man at his side.

“We’ll be sending the horses away today.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The other dragons should be there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You don’t seem particularly interested.”

“To tell you the truth, sir; I’m not feeling up to much this morning.”

“Not turned you down, has she?”

“No, sir.”

“Then cheer up.”

Both chuckled. Rockingham drove on in silence till they were past the railway gates at Sunningdale.

“Young Gilchrist,” said Noakes then; “he won’t have much to do if you’re only keeping one charger, sir.”

“I shall be keeping both, for the present. They’re still allowed forage. Have you had your breakfast?”

“I managed to get a snack, sir.”

“Good. So did I.”

They relapsed into silence again. Yet each remained pleasantly aware of the other’s companionship—the sharp edge of class distinction blunted by twenty years of mutual memories and the bond of the Royal Regiment, which is stronger than most.

§ 2

Some miles farther on, where the turnpike bifurcates, Rockingham swung

sharply to his left. There was still no sun visible through the leafless branches which edged the side road. But the gray morning held no threat of fog.

They came through the trees to commonland, past barracks, a garage and a few shops to the foot of a hill. There they turned left. Another two hundred yards brought them—past the blue flag with the number and the R.A. crest, by the sentry and the guardroom—home.

It struck Rusty Rockingham—braking, telling Noakes, “Take my things along to my quarter; then give the old bus a wash; she needs it”—that any man who thought of this place as “home” must have a peculiar mentality.

For barer, bleakier, uglier, one could hardly find.

Low tin sheds—the original red of their paintwork almost black with age—housing the guns and the horses, brigade office and the four battery offices, bordered this great oblong of pale brown gravel on all four sides. Here, beyond the tin roofs, showed a few leafless treetops; there, through a gap, the raw new brick of the men’s quarters and messrooms.

Yet this place—and similar places—held more of one’s heart than . . .

“Than any woman”, he thought suddenly; and because that thought, also, seemed to imply a peculiar mentality, it absorbed him for a moment, as he watched the accustomed scene—a shed door opening, a gun being run out, men leading horses from the stables.

Then he forgot himself as his dog Patrick, with one woof of joy, came leaping across the gravel; lay fawning and slavering at his feet.

“It didn’t take you long to find out I was back, old boy”, he smiled; and stooped, and patted the airedale’s rough head. “Quarters!” he went on; and Patrick, with a sulky look in his eyes, rose; stalked back to Noakes.

Meanwhile another man in khaki had stepped out of another car at the edge of the gravel; and Patrick’s master stiffened to attention, his right hand at the salute.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Morning, Rockingham.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Lampson—“Wily Wilbraham” to his intimates—returned the salute casually, the greeting with a stiff-lipped smile.

“You have that dog of yours well trained, I observe”, he went on. “Wish I could say the same for my daughter. She drives like a perfect fool. Nearly had us in the ditch twice.”

He called to his daughter, who was just reversing away from them, “Don’t play any tricks on the way home, Janice”. She called back, “O.K., Colonel!”, and a non-commissioned officer with two stripes, who happened to be passing, could not quite

restrain a grin as his right hand, also, went to his cap peak.

“Cause and effect,” remarked the observant brigade commander, stroking his neat gray moustache. “You don’t seem able to discipline your bombardiers quite as well as you discipline your dog, Rockingham. He is one of yours, isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir. Boardman. About the best signaller I’ve got. He rather fancies himself as a humorist.”

“So one perceives.”

Wily Wilbraham, after a few more words, stalked off to brigade office.

“Don’t really like him”, mused his senior major. “Not human enough. I oughtn’t to have volunteered that information about Boardman. It may mean trouble when I want to put him up to lance-sergeant.”

So thinking, he in his turn was saluted—by his second in command.

§ 3

Captain Patterson of the Turban battery—who wore the blue and red ribbon of a Distinguished Conduct Medal won at Le Cateau as well as the white and violet of a Military Cross awarded three years later—had never ventured to call the idol of his boyish hero-worship “Rusty”. But latterly they had become “Tom” and “Wilfrid” to each other. And that sufficed.

“I’m glad you turned up so early”, said Patterson. “We’ve had a spot of trouble over the weekend . . . Godden.”

“Damn! What’s he been up to? Godden’s about the best young N.C.O. we’ve got, Wilfrid.”

“Don’t I know it. But it doesn’t look as though we’ll be able to keep him.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s like this . . .”

Patterson glanced over his shoulder to make sure he was not overheard. On the far side of the gunpark, the battery commander could hear Sergeant-Major Cartwright shouting, “Horse parties, Number!”

“Go on”, he said; and the other spoke, low-voiced, for the best part of three minutes.

Listening in silence, watching the play of emotion on this face—usually so stolid, and still as typical of the mounted services as though it had been modelled from some old-fashioned recruiting poster—Rockingham frowned.

“How far’s it gone?” he asked at the end of the story.

“The usual distance, I should imagine, though Cartwright says they both deny it.”

“Any gossip?”

“Cartwright says, ‘No’. But he’s always a bit of an optimist. Godden’s asked to see you. If we have to transfer him just when we’re mechanising it’ll be the very devil.”

“Quite. But do you imagine anything I can say will have the slightest effect? You know what the troops are when there’s a woman in the case.”

“Don’t I, just. There’s nothing like a married woman to play merry hell with a good soldier.”

The words rekindled recollection. Almost thus, Cowley might have spoken.

“He really is one of the fellows we can least afford to spare”, went on Patterson.

“We can’t afford to spare any of ’em these days”, thought Rockingham; and again the Hawk’s “We shan’t count as much as a pinch of snuff next time”, troubled his mind.

“Time we were getting on parade”, he said stiffly.

They set off across the gravel.

“It’s funny to think of the battery without its bays”, said Patterson, as they approached the horses. “Makes one feel quite sentimental.”

“No more stable pickets anyway”, smiled Rockingham; but in him, also, was more of sentiment than he cared to admit.

The other three batteries had already mechanised. Dragons roared, the acrid fumes from their exhausts offending one’s nostrils. Here stood one’s own four dragons, silent. Close by, the horse parties awaited the battery commander’s order to move off.

“Kid” Masters, Rockingham’s only subaltern—whom his men had nicknamed Belinda Blue-Eyes, and who, according to the only senior lieutenant in the brigade, was “A bit too Journey’s End for my taste, though thank the lord he doesn’t shoot his mouth off like some of ’em”—clicked the heels of his regulation three-buckled fieldboots.

“All ready, sir”, he said.

“Good. I’ll just have a look round. Anything for me to sign?”

“The papers”—Patterson spoke in his parade voice—“have been dealt with, sir.”

“Good”, repeated Rockingham. But sentiment had him again as he walked up and down the line of horses, inspecting them for the last time.

The Turban battery’s bays! Exactly seventy of them in these three parties. So proud he’d been of them. He knew each by name, each by number, every single one’s place in gun team or wagon team.

These drivers, too, had been proud of their horses. Good lads. Ought one to make them a little speech?

But the only speech that came to one's lips was, "They may as well go off now, Sergeant-Major"; and immediately Cartwright was bawling:

"Horse parties! Prepare to mount".

§ 4

"That Arborfield lot won't come to any harm", Rusty Rockingham caught himself thinking as he watched the first forty of his bays, destined for "Remounts", file away, led horse and ridden, across brigade square.

But the fate of his next twenty horses troubled his imagination a little, though Patterson said, "They ought to fetch nice prices at auction"; and he watched thoughtfully till the rear pair, "Blinkers" and "Boss-shot", wheelers of number two gun, turned their croups on him.

The "knacker party", also, he watched, till all of them were away, hoping that they might be killed, decently and humanely, in England, not shipped alive, maybe without fodder, maybe without water, to Belgium or Holland . . .

The thought enraged him.

Ten of one's own bays. Ten of the Turban battery's bays. Going away. Going abroad. To be butchered. Butchered cruelly, clumsily, in a foreign shambles to make a few pounds of illegal profit for some cheating civilian, ready to shout with the rest of his kind, "No more war!"

CHAPTER NINE

§ 1

His unwonted access of rage began to pass, leaving the commander of the Turban battery slightly ashamed.

“Ass”, he chided himself. “They won’t come to any harm. Past their work anyway. And as far as ‘No more war’ goes, you’re all for it. So why curse civilians?”

Yet in that last moment before his mind cooled he could not help realising, as once or twice in wartime, the gulf between the mind of the average civilian and his own.

The sun had come out while his horses were filing away. Kid Masters had gone off with the signallers. One of the guns not kept in “soap and oil” during the winter was being manhandled from its shed.

“This detachment’s come on since you’ve been away”, said Patterson, still standing beside him. “You watch.”

Drill on the gun began to the old, “Tell off”, to the old, “Without dragropes, prepare to advance”.

Round a nearby dragon, half tank, half wagonette, clustered some dozen eager youngsters in their brown boiler suits. They climbed in over the green steel sides and sat at attention. A voice began: “The two caterpillars are driven by the engine. Here it is. But they’re not driven direct. You have a gear box. Just the same as you do in a motorcar”.

“Godden”, said Patterson, “really has the knack of interesting them.”

“Sounds like it. By the way, why haven’t you got the turbans on ’em?”

“I thought I’d better ask the colonel’s permission first.”

“That’s not necessary. We’ve the right to have it on all our vehicles.”

“Very well. I’ll get it done. The usual yellow, of course. What size do you think we ought to have them?”

“About double the size they are on the guns, I should say. Have some transfers made at once. Any orders about housing these contraptions?”

“They’re to stand in the open until we get double doors for the sheds.”

“When’ll that be?”

“They’re promised for next week”, laughed Patterson.

Rockingham laughed back, “Then if we get ’em before we finish individual

training, we shall be lucky. How about our petrol pump?"

"It's being put in this afternoon."

"Good. How about the battery staff dragon?"

"She's in number three shed. I had her out with the signallers yesterday afternoon."

"Run all right?"

"So-so. The fitters are on her now."

"I'd better have a squint."

As they entered the shed, one of the fitters started the engine of the staff dragon. The noise was deafening, till Rockingham signalled "Stop".

"Take her outside", he ordered. "You chaps'll poison yourselves if you're not careful."

"Very good, sir."

The fitter climbed to the driving seat.

"Make that a standing order, will you, Wilfrid", said the battery commander as the tank engine fired again, and the caterpillars clanked over, and the squat dark-green vehicle nosed its way past his own Austin through the door.

§ 2

The sun still shone as Rockingham walked towards the Turban battery's office—slowly and alone, his mind busy with the story Patterson had just imparted to him in the shed. Bombardier Calvert, his clerk, seated in the outer office, sprang to attention almost before he had opened the door. He gave Calvert his usual, "Morning. Let me see anything that's urgent right away, please"; passed to the inner office; sat down, keeping his cap on, at the plain tidy desk.

His cane was still in his hand. He tapped it on his boot—always a sign of annoyance—before dropping it on the bare floor.

A blasted nuisance, this business with Godden. The sort of thing one simply loathed tackling. If the young fool must have a woman, why pick on one in the married quarters? Should one see the fellow before lunch or afterwards?

"The sooner the better", he decided, as Calvert came in with his tray of papers, and the new "history sheets", the new "log books" for the dragons.

"Captain Patterson thought you'd like to see that we'd started them correctly, sir", said the battery clerk. "There is a special order about that from brigade."

He handed over the copy of Lampson's order, "Log books and history sheets. The attention of all battery commanders is called to A.O. 7078, Book-keeping for

mechanised units, Royal Artillery”, and several other papers, one of which made Rockingham smile:

“I hope we made that very clear in our battery orders, Calvert”.

“Oh yes, sir.” The fresh-faced, clean-shaven youth with the white lanyard looped round his shoulder could not restrain an answering grin, as he quoted Patterson’s: “On no account whatsoever must Government petrol be used for the filling of automatic lighters. N.C.O.s or men requiring inflammable liquid for this purpose can purchase it in small sealed containers from the canteen”.

“How much mileage are they allowing us?” went on the battery commander, the smile still lingering round the corners of his mouth. But, given his answer, he frowned.

Some economies, most economies, were necessary. But how the hell could one train men to drive dragons on sixteen miles of running weekly?

“Leave the rest of this junk with me”, he said next. “Any defaulters?”

“No, sir.”

“Good.”

“But the sergeant-major would like to see you after parade, sir.”

“All right. Let me know as soon as he’s here.”

“Very good, sir.”

Calvert went out, closing the door. Alone, Rockingham applied himself to those papers which are the curse of a regimental officer’s life.

“Brigade could take over half these jobs”, he thought, as he tossed the last form back into the tray, and took pipe, tobacco pouch and matches from his tunic pocket. “And eventually they’ll have to. Mechanisation’s bound to mean centralisation.”

His pipe lit, his thoughts returned to Godden. Solely to distract them, he picked up his copy of “Dragons Light Marks I., Ia and II. Instruction Book”.

The booklet, photolithoed from typescript, was dated “1933”. According to Woolwich, their dragons would be replaced by six-wheeled tractors before this year was out.

“Muddling along”, he decided. “As usual. Why train men on vehicles they’ll never use?”

§ 3

Battery-Sergeant-Major Leonard Cartwright, a bulky man, a “Contemptible”, like Patterson and Noakes, married, with five children, said, “Thank you, sir”, and seated himself heavily on the one other chair in the battery office.

Lance-Sergeant Godden—said Sergeant-Major Cartwright—was outside. He’d

best tell his own story. A bad business. Promising young man like that, too. Messing about with another sergeant's wife. Divorce indeed. As though divorce were as easy as kiss your hand. No arguing with either of them either. His own wife had been to see her on the Sunday. Bold as brass, the hussy. Showed one what people were coming to nowadays. In his opinion, the films had a lot to answer for. And the newspapers too if it came to that.

Rockingham heard the monologue out. Cartwright's version of the affair only elaborated Patterson's—and seemed equally obscure on the two main points. Questioned on the first of these, "But how do you come to know so much about it, Sergeant-Major?" Cartwright blew out his cheeks before answering:

"He came to me for advice, sir. I'm by way of being a relative of his".

Questioned on the second point, he hung in the wind and took counsel with his prominent moustache.

"I'd rather not name any names", he said at last "If he likes to, it's another matter."

"Am I to gather from that"—the battery commander, also, had hesitated an appreciable second before speaking—"that the—er—husband is still in ignorance?"

"He's on one of them special courses, sir. Due back next week. She says she's going to tell him then . . . There's, there's one child, sir."

"That's bad."

"Shall I send him in, sir?"

"Please."

Cartwright, whom Rockingham had known since he was a trumpeter, hauled himself to his feet; saluted, and went out. A moment later, another figure stood to attention before the desk.

Lance-Sergeant Godden's figure was all the soldier's, athletic without being overmuscled, long of leg and narrow in the hips. The cap, the shining black boots, added inches to his five foot ten.

"I gather you want to see me on a private matter", began Rockingham; and the face under the cap peak set, as the clean-shaven lips answered: "Yes, sir. If you please".

Godden's face—it had seemed to Rockingham since he first saw the man—might have been modelled by some ancient Greek sculptor. The eyes were gray-blue; the hair very nearly pure gold. His speech, despite an indefinable trace of West Country accent, betrayed a good education. With a war on, he would certainly have been recommended for a commission. But as a peace soldier he was more than three years beyond the age limit, rising twenty-seven.

“Pity”, thought the battery commander. Aloud he said, unsmiling, “Go on”.

Godden, still at attention, hesitated.

“It’s a little difficult to explain, sir.”

“Sit down. And try.”

The sergeant, with a grace completely lacking in Cartwright, obeyed the order.

“If I could talk this out as man to man, sir . . .” he began, after a few seconds’ more hesitancy; then, “My eight years will be up in May, sir. I’ve always done my duty. I’d like well enough to re-engage. Only——”

And there he stopped dead—rather astutely it seemed to Rockingham, who said, “I’m very glad to know that, Godden. But that isn’t all you want to talk to me about, is it?”

“No, sir.”

“Go on, then. Though I may as well tell you I’ve heard a good deal already.”

“I know that, sir. I asked Uncle Leo . . . the Sergeant-Major, I mean—to tell you. Or rather I asked him to tell Captain Patterson, not realising you’d be back quite so soon, sir.”

Feet on the gravel outside disturbed them both. Patterson’s face glanced in through the window; disappeared.

“We haven’t done anything wrong”, said Godden suddenly. “But we’ll have to, if she’s to get free of him. That’s the law, sir. It doesn’t seem fair somehow or other.”

And after that words poured from him, while Rockingham listened, thinking, “And one kids oneself one knows these chaps, that they’re one’s own men!”

§ 4

The flow of George Godden’s words stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Sucking his cold pipe, Rockingham brooded for a moment. A common enough story, except for the single circumstance. Only—could one believe that part of the story? A man in love was not apt to be so . . . scrupulous. He and Gail now . . .

Memory of Gail brought a faint flush to his cheeks.

“Angry?” Godden asked himself. “I don’t see why he should be. His class is always having divorces.”

Aloud he said, “I don’t think there’s anything more I can tell you, sir. Not for the present anyway.”

“Naming no names”, thought the battery commander. “Like his uncle. Decent of him. Easy enough to find out, though. Only got to stroll over to brigade office. Can’t be many sergeants on special courses.” And he brooded on for a moment before

asking:

“You’ve quite made up your minds? Both of you?”

“Yes, sir.” But the lids flickered, just once, over those steady gray-blue eyes.

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes, sir.” Again a flicker of the eyelids betrayed uncertainty. “Only——”

“Only—what?”

Godden hesitated. Rockingham saw that the fingers of his right hand were working.

“Go on”, he prompted. “We’re talking as man to man, you know.”

“Well, sir”—speech came at last—“we’re not quite certain about him, sir. Supposing he cuts up rough and refuses to divorce her. The . . . the lawyer I went to said he’d be within his rights if he did that, and that if she ran away he could keep the baby. Do you think he’s right, sir? The lawyer, I mean. It doesn’t seem quite fair—to us. After all, it’s her baby. She’s always done everything for it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about the law, Godden.”

“No, sir. Of course not, sir.” And silence had them again while trumpets outside sounded “Stables”.

Willy nilly, then, Rockingham smiled; and after a second or so, Godden had to smile too.

“It does seem funny, sir”, he ventured, “now that we’ve sent our horses away. Perhaps I ought to be getting back to my . . . my machines, sir.”

“No. Wait.” And once more silence held them, while—once more—the Hawk’s prognostications troubled Rockingham’s mind.

A good soldier this. He’d be needed—if it came to a war.

“There’s one point you haven’t either of you considered”, he began. “It’s all very well to say you want to re-engage, Godden. But supposing the C.O. refuses to sign your form? He could, you know—if there was any scandal. At least I think so. Let’s see what King’s Regulations have to say about that, shall we?”

The book lay close to his hand. Playing for time, he opened it at the index. The other watched him, thinking, “That wouldn’t be fair either. It’s none of their business what I do with my private life. Why shouldn’t Edie and I be happy?”

Yet would one be quite happy? Out of the regiment? Away from all one’s pals?

The questions—asked for the first time—troubled the essentially simple mind of George Godden. His cheeks, too, flushed as he remembered something he had said to Edie, only yesterday evening.

“There’s bound to be a bit of a fuss”, he had said. “But once I’m transferred to another brigade, it’ll soon blow over. Warrant officer, class one—that’s what I’ve

always meant to be. And that's what I'm going to be before I'm finished."

But supposing the C.O. wouldn't sign his form?

His battery commander was speaking again.

"Yes", he heard. "That's quite right. But of course I'll do my best for you. Your work as a soldier has always been good. Your certificates will be all in your favour. Still, there is the question of . . . character. And, Godden——"

"Yes, sir."

"Take the advice of a man a good deal older than yourself. Don't rush your fences. Don't put in your form till you've absolutely made up your mind about . . . the other thing."

"But how can I, sir? Unless I know whether I'm to be re-engaged."

The sheer simplicity of the man made Rockingham stare.

"I'd rather you spoke to the colonel right away, sir", Godden went on. "We'd both know where we stood then. In a way, I suppose, it'd be easier if I didn't re-engage. Still——"

"You'd rather not leave the regiment?"

"I should just hate to do that." For the first time since the man had entered the room no "sir" punctuated his heartfelt phrases. "Father was a gunner. And grandfather, too. Grandfather died of enteric in South Africa, and father was killed in France, just before the Armistice. But it's not only because of them that I want to go on serving. It's because . . ."

For the last time, he hesitated; then, without any prompting, he continued:

"As far as I can see—and Uncle Leo agrees with me—there's bound to be another European war before we're very much older, and I shouldn't like having to rejoin as a reservist".

Two minutes after which, with a final, "Then you will speak to the colonel, sir? Thank you very much indeed, sir", a lance-sergeant of gunners whose face might have been modelled by Phidias had clicked heels, had saluted, and was gone.

CHAPTER TEN

§ 1

For several minutes after Godden's departure, Rusty Rockingham sat on at his desk. The whole interview, seen in retrospect, was perturbing. Godden had nothing to gain, everything to lose, by rushing his fences. Why had one promised to put his case before Lampson immediately?

Most perturbing of all, however, seemed that last, "There's bound to be another European war before we're very much older".

Queer, that barrack-room gossip should agree with Hawk Wethered! Who'd be mad enough to start a war nowadays? Italy—her hands full in Abyssinia? Germany? Surely she'd had enough of it for at least another generation?

Yet even William had not excluded the possibility. What had he said? "Unless we're given the money to do our jobs, the civilian population will certainly be for it".

The government must know something, too. Otherwise, they would not be in such a hurry to rearm.

Only—were they hurrying fast enough?

War. With a quarter of a million less men in the services than there had been in nineteen fourteen.

War. With London a wide open target for hostile aircraft.

Hell!

§ 2

Bombardier Calvert had gone to his dinner; the huge oblong of the gunpark held never a human figure—only the dark-green shapes of the dragons—when the commander of the Turban battery emerged from his office and made his way slowly towards the tin buildings of the mess.

He frowned as he went. These last days—except for the brief Sabbath interval—had been altogether perturbing. One's imagination seemed out of hand—and every molehill a mountain. Physically, too, one didn't feel quite up to the mark—probably for lack of exercise.

"Have a good gallop this afternoon", he decided. "Blow away the cobwebs."

Yet the prescience of another European war harassed him, as he dropped cap and cane on the side table of the anteroom, and told the young waiter in the striped

jacket and the dark blue trousers to bring his customary gin and It.

Except for two young subalterns of the other brigade the low-ceilinged room with the narrow windows was empty. He took a newspaper from the centre table; and seated himself on the club fender.

“High hopes for the new reign”, he read. “Edward the Eighth, Soldier and Social Reformer.”

“Good picture of him, isn’t it?” said a voice over his shoulder; and he looked up to see Cyril Headworth, Lampson’s adjutant.

His thoughts came back to Godden.

A bit of luck, this. Headworth, recently married, very seldom lunched in mess.

“Missis away”, he explained, accepting a drink. “Won’t be back till this evening. We’ve been spending the weekend with the Wethereds. If it hadn’t been for Wily Wilbraham—bless the man, he doesn’t half chastise me with scorpions—I’d be there now. Impressing our new C.R.A. with my fine soldierly qualities. Have you met his wife yet?”

“No.”

“Believe me, she’s a fizzer. And he’s in the most tremendous form. Preaching death to all politicians—and bloody war on all dictators.”

“I know. I had some of that at Woolwich. He spent a night there.”

“Not for preference I’ll be bound.” And the dark-haired Headworth winked a blue eye whose silky girlish lashes completely belied his character. For no man ever rode harder—either to hounds or between the flags.

“Have another?” he asked, tossing down his sherry; and, for once, Rockingham took a second drink before lunch, to which they helped themselves, as at Woolwich, from a heated serving table.

“This room’s like a blasted ice house”, grumbled Cyril Headworth as they carried in their dishes and sat down. “And the food’s no better than it used to be. Why don’t you follow my example and take a wife to your bosom?”

Ralph Lyttelton, major of their howitzer battery, already at his Stilton, chipped in with a sarcastic:

“Marriage doesn’t seem to have made you any fonder of fresh air, Headworth. Go on. Tell the waiters to close all the windows. It’ll be just like old times, then”.

“Scarlet nipples to you, sir”, retorted the adjutant, explaining, “He’s having all his oil holes painted red, so that his troops know exactly where to ply the nozzle”.

Rockingham smiled. Riley, captain of the other brigade’s howitzer battery, seated beside Lyttelton, said:

“This mess hut and our quarters are a bally disgrace. I think I shall ask for a

transfer to the ranks. They have got running water anyway”.

“Luxury-loving blighter, isn’t he, Rusty?” Lyttelton spoke again.

“I think I will have the windows shut if nobody objects”, pronounced Headworth; and, having given his order without waiting for their approval, went on:

“One presumes unmarried officers must ‘live in’, as they used to say about shop girls. Messes would soon disintegrate otherwise. But it seems a bit archaic. If a fellow can afford to take digs outside—say when he reaches the rank of field officer—why shouldn’t he?”

“Bolshevik”, laughed Lyttelton. “Have you no respect for the great traditions of the British Army?”

“British Army—or Land Soldiers’ Transport Board?” asked Headworth, who had taken the loss of the horses harder than most.

The four seniors chaffed on—the handful of subalterns at the other end of the table listening appreciatively. Presently Lyttelton and Riley rose and went out.

“Port?” asked Headworth then.

“No, thanks. I never take it till the evening. By the way, there’s something I’ve got to put up to the colonel. Is he coming back this afternoon?”

“Is he not? The way W.W. chases the clock’s tail has to be seen to be believed . . . And if there’s one thing I’m really fond of, it’s ten minutes’ shut eye after my coffee.”

They found coffee in the anteroom; drank it standing.

“If I were you”, said Headworth, “I should catch W.W. on the hop.”

“That was rather what I’d planned to do. I want to get a ride in this afternoon if I can manage it.”

“Right. Let’s buzz off.”

§ 3

A few paces brought Rockingham and Headworth to brigade office. As they were about to enter, a dragon, its old-fashioned high-wheeled solid-tyred gun and limber hooked in behind, came clanking by.

“Do you see that contraption doing twenty miles an hour across a country?” scoffed the adjutant. “It’ll shake the blinking bundook to bits at ten. And what price the dial sights? We’re leaving them at home for the present.”

Rockingham smiled—Headworth knew perfectly well that the new Mark Five R. guns were to have sprung carriages and pneumatic tyres.

“Why don’t you ask for a transfer to the Tins?” he asked.

“They’ll be mechanising them next. This stink makes me want to vomit. Come on in.”

They went in, and stood by the fireplace.

“What do you want to see the old man about?” inquired Headworth. Having been given a rough outline of the case, he tapped his glossy boots with his plaited cane.

“I can’t see W.W. standing for that”, he said after a considerable pause. “He’s all for purity these days. But the chances are he’ll ride you off, and say he’ll talk to the C.R.A. about it. Between you and me and the gatepost, our policy from now onwards is going to be, ‘Don’t ruffle the Hawk’s feathers. Keep him informed about everything.’”

“And not a bad policy either”, concluded Lieutenant-Colonel Wilbraham Lampson’s adjutant, turning his head to glance at the clock.

Two minutes more—and the colonel, driving himself this time, parked his car on the gravel, and came striding up the two wooden steps.

“Rockingham wants to speak to you, sir”, said Headworth; and withdrew to the outer room.

Lampson took off his cap, revealing hair as gray as his moustache. He sat down at his desk.

“Well?” he asked; and again Rusty Rockingham thought how little he really liked this man, with his veiled eyes and his general air of, “I’m out for myself and don’t you forget it”.

He looked at the “ballroom decorations” on the left breast of Lampson’s tunic before he spoke, picking his words carefully, stressing Godden’s efficiency, and the good report made on him by “Experimental Battery”. But his words, he knew, were having little effect.

“I don’t see how I can be expected to deal with a hypothetical case”, pronounced Lampson when he had finished. “The way I see it, this fellow’s trying to hold a pistol to our heads. You say he refused to tell you the woman’s name.”

“I didn’t ask him, sir.”

“Well, we’ll soon find out. Rogers!”

The shout brought the brigade clerk to the door.

“I want the list of N.C.O.s on courses”, ordered Lampson.

“Which of these men are married?” he asked, with the paper before him.

“Only Sergeant Botley, sir.”

Alone with Rockingham again, the colonel just bared his teeth in the smile which went so well with his nickname.

“That’s that”, he said. “Botley, one gathers, will not have a very pleasant homecoming. But that’s his trouble, and Godden’s. As far as I’m concerned—though I’ll put the matter up to the C.R.A. if you wish me to—I don’t feel myself called upon to make any decision for the present. Why should I? Would you, if you were in my position?”

Rockingham knew better than to answer the rhetorical question, and Lampson bared his teeth again as he concluded:

“What it really boils down to is that the fellow says, ‘I’ll apply to re-engage on the understanding that I’m allowed to do what I like with Botley’s wife. But if there’s going to be any trouble about my having the woman, then the army can’t have me.’ Don’t you agree that’s tantamount to putting a pistol at our heads, Rockingham?”

To this last question Lampson’s silence demanded an answer; and the commander of the Turban battery gave it.

“I can’t feel Godden intended us to take his request in that way, sir. It’s only natural that he should wish to know where he stands.”

Wily Wilbraham bared his slightly discoloured teeth for the third time.

“Quite”, he said. “So do I. And presumably I shall—when Botley returns to duty. Till then, I propose to suspend judgment.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll tell Godden that.”

“Do. And you might tell him something else—that there are still a few people left, even in this country, who do not regard adultery with much favour. I happen to be one of them. I trust I make myself clear. Is there anything else you wish to consult me about, Rockingham?”

“No, sir.”

Flushing with annoyance, O.C. Turban battery saluted; and went out.

§ 4

The fresh air—the brigade’s colonel and its adjutant had this in common, both preferred closed windows in winter-time—cooled Rockingham’s cheeks. But temper still seethed in him, though most of it was now directed against himself.

One had been a fool to approach Lampson. From a service point of view, the position he had taken up was impregnable. Morally, too, he had right on his side.

If only Godden weren’t such a good chap. If only one weren’t so sorry for him. One must tell him the truth, though, obvious from the last words spoken by Lampson. That he couldn’t go on in the army unless he gave up this woman.

Poor devil! He really wanted to re-engage. He, too, felt that soldiering was his

mission. “Nothing like a married woman to play merry hell with a good soldier.” How right Patterson was. How right Cowley had been . . .

Queer, that one should be leaning to Cowley’s ideas again. A fanatic if ever there’d been one. Soldiers living like priests, indeed. One’s favourite poet had known better. “A man must go to a woman, which women don’t understand.” And it was he who had sung, “White hands cling to the tightened rein”.

A pity Kipling should be dead. And King George. They had stood for something, those two . . .

Damnation, there one’s mind went again, switching about like a crazy gun.

Still angry with himself, Rockingham arrived at officers’ stables. There he found Noakes, at gossip with his groom Gilchrist, who was soaping a new girth, and his dog.

“There are some letters in your quarter, sir”, said Noakes. “Shall I fetch them?”

“No. They can wait. You might saddle up the mare, Gilchrist. Put the hunting bridle on her, will you?”

Rosalie whickered as she was led out. She nuzzled at Rockingham’s tunic pocket for the sugar which he had forgotten. Gilchrist produced a piece of carrot. Patrick, obedient on his haunches, watched wise-eyed while his master mounted; waited for the word of command; followed at the mare’s heels—along the cinder track that led away from barracks, and on to the common.

Low clouds veiled the sun as Rusty Rockingham’s long legs pressed the bay to a canter. By the time he pulled up, a fine rain had begun to fall. He tightened the girth a hole; trotted on till he reached his favourite gallop—half a mile of smooth turf between gorse-clad hillocks.

There he pulled up again to watch the dragon which had excited Headworth’s derision. The vehicle, now hooded against the rain, its gun swaying behind, crawled to the skyline. Above, black under gray clouds, nine aeroplanes droned in formation.

Looking from earth to sky, from sky to earth, the commander of the Turban battery thought, “We used to say that war wasn’t a gentleman’s game any more, last time. What’ll it be like, next?” And, again, the prescience of another Armageddon impending haunted him. Till the stretch gallop blew it away.

“Can’t dwell on this business with Godden”, he decided as he rode back to barracks. “Must see him this evening, before he’s had time to burn his boats.”

§ 5

Godden, however—Bombardier Calvert informed his battery commander, when

he drew rein at the door of his office—had “obtained a special pass from Captain Patterson” and would not be back “till reveille”. So Rusty Rockingham—Gilchrist appearing—handed over the mare and went to his quarter.

The two rooms—once Noakes had taken away the muddy boots and the dripping Patrick—seemed a trifle more cosy than usual. Changing into slacks and his old shooting coat, he decided to have tea sent over and do a couple of hours’ work on his shell.

Then he remembered his letters, still lying unopened on the table.

Four of the six envelopes obviously contained circulars; the fifth some dividend warrants he had asked his bank to send him. The sixth, wallet-shaped, was addressed in an unknown handwriting which might be either a man’s or a woman’s.

“Wonder who this is from?” he thought, as he slit the flap with his ivory paperknife.

Then he read:

“Dear Major Rockingham,

My husband and I will be so glad if you can spend next weekend with us”.

Directions for finding the house, and the words, “My husband will be hunting on Saturday and I have to go out to lunch. But I shall be home by three o’clock, so come as soon after that as you like”, followed. The signature was, “Camilla Wethered”.

“Brigadier’s orders”, said the humour in Rockingham.

Nevertheless, as his pen traced that first, “Dear Lady Wethered”, the poet Coningsby’s words re-echoed in his mind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

§ 1

Rusty Rockingham's week at Steepdown had been a routine one except for the complication of Godden; and another "slight brush with W.W.", who had questioned the battery's right to have its turban sign painted on the new dragons.

The latter point Lampson conceded—though not without "consulting the C.R.A.". For Godden, however—as a hint from Headworth, "I shouldn't bring that up again if I were you, sir", confirmed on the Tuesday morning—there was not likely to be any grace.

The man, already warned of this, had turned a little sulky. ("I shouldn't have any difficulty in making my living as a civilian, sir.") Discipline, nevertheless, still held.

Urged not to "rush his fences", he had finally agreed, "It seems rather hard luck, sir. But I'll do as you say, and not put in my form till we know what's going to happen".

Meanwhile Botley—reported sick from the depot—was still away.

"Good thing, too", decided Rockingham, changing khaki for mufti after a couple of hours in his office that Saturday morning; and—having told Noakes to bring the car round—he strolled over to the mess, where he read the papers, and helped Lyttelton with the *Times* crossword puzzle until lunch.

§ 2

The afternoon, for a wonder, had turned out fine. Thanks to that new polish of Noakes' discovering, one's old bus—standing there with her hood down—looked "almost posh".

"Don't get yourself gonged, Rusty", chaffed Lyttelton, who had cadged a lift as far as Aldershot, as they climbed in.

It was two o'clock by then. Alone, some thirty-five minutes later, the commander of the Turban battery pulled up and looked at his map.

The remembered directions seemed perfectly clear. A mile on, he must turn to his left. To make assurance doubly sure, he consulted the letter again; returned it to his pigskin pocketbook; and drove on slowly through the bright sunshine, his mind almost a blank.

The Hampshire side road proved narrow, steep and winding. At heart a

countryman, he rejoiced in its emptiness—and the smell of the good earth, the pines and the glistening hedgerows. Winter seemed almost over. The first snowdrops were out. Soon, it would be daffodil time. A fine county, this. A fine country, England. Worth fighting for again, if one had to. Worth dying for.

Not that one wanted to die.

All the same, if any of the family had to go west, better himself or Geoffrey than William . . .

Curious thought!

His mind went blank again. Rounding a corner, he had to brake for two lovers, strolling arm in arm.

“Lucky young devils”, he thought next—and again the thought seemed curious. Surely, at his age, a man could do without love?

His dashboard clock showed him that it was not yet three. He stopped again—picking his place carefully, drawing well in to the side of the road—to light a pipe.

The smoke brought comfort, retrospection—and a few daydreams.

He looked back across his twenty-five years in the Regiment. Good years, on the whole. He’d done well enough in the war—a Military Cross, a couple of mentions. Afterwards he’d “managed to scrape into Staff College”. Pity that promotion was so slow nowadays. He was just as capable of commanding a brigade as Lampson. Still, he’d have his brigade eventually. And his shell might “come to something”.

“There are worse lives than mine”, he concluded; and drove on once more, slowly, till he reached the crossroads indicated in the letter.

From there, another mile of main road and another turning brought him within sight of high iron lodge gates, swung back from worn stone pillars topped by griffins.

“Ger-falcons would be more appropriate”, he thought; and smiled to himself as he turned in.

§ 3

The drive to Hawk Wethered’s house was in course of repair. After three hundred yards it forked between high ragged rhododendrons. Braking dubiously, Rockingham swung to his left, and soon found himself confronted with an old notice board, on which he could hardly read the “Tradesmen Only”.

Anxious for somewhere to turn—driving in reverse always fidgeted him—he went on another fifty yards, and stopped, deciding, “Have to back her after all. Can’t get through this way”.

At that moment, he heard the first ping, the first thud of what imagination said must be a tennis ball. The two noises repeated, and continued to repeat themselves. They came from his immediate right, where a narrow path, newly gravelled, led between high shrubs.

After some fifteen seconds, the noises ceased. After some five more, they went on again. The sheer regularity of them fascinated him. Drawn from his seat, he dismounted and took the gravel path. A few paces—and he caught the glimpse of a white skirt, the flash of a racket. Another pace—and he could see the background of wooden wall with the black line net-high across it.

Manners demanded a return to the car. But curiosity, and his knowledge of the game—only a firstclass player could sustain that speed, that certainty of stroke—took him on another step.

The woman, or rather the girl, was absorbed in her practice. Oblivious to his presence, she had no eyes, no thoughts except for the rally she was sustaining.

He realised her a little below the average height, but extraordinarily graceful. Legs and arms were bare. Above the skirt, which tossed just short of her knees, she wore a sleeveless pullover of brightest scarlet. Although this gravelled half-court was completely in shadow, her cropped hair seemed to reflect the sun every time she stooped to sweep those perfect backhanders just above the black line.

Rockingham counted twenty of those backhanders, each hit exactly in the centre of a flat racket, before that exquisitely timed dropshot which ended the lone rally; before she turned—suddenly aware of him, but not in the least perturbed.

The face matched the figure—and the performance. It made an instant impression of youth, of health, of self-certainty. He noticed how proudly the head was carried; the faint flush that exercise had brought to the cheeks; the controlled breath of the athlete in training.

“You must be Major Rockingham”, she said. “Of course you missed your way to the house. Most people do. I ought to have put that in my letter. But I expected the new board would be up by today. It was promised.”

“I’m afraid I’m too early, Lady Wethered.”

“Oh, no. I said ‘three’.”

Her voice held no trace of any accent he recognised for American, only the faintest hint of a drawl. Taking the hand she offered—small, very beautifully shaped, yet almost as powerful as his own and with no varnish on the nails—he could not help asking himself, “How on earth did *she* come to marry the Hawk?”

Aloud he said, “Please don’t stop practising”.

“I must have had three quarters of an hour.” She smiled, a little gravely, hardly

opening very red, slightly full lips which owed nothing to artifice. “That’s quite enough.

“I didn’t go out to lunch after all”, she added; and it was then he realised that her eyes were almost the same colour as his brother Geoffrey’s, hazel under the high dark arches of the unplucked brows.

Simultaneously, he observed the “collier de Venus”—the sunk line of beauty which circled the base of the strong throat.

This, also, struck him as curiously familiar. For the split of a second, he wondered why.

“You don’t seem exactly in need of practice”, he hazarded. “Unless you’re already training for Wimbledon.”

Her lips smiled again, but the hazel eyes clouded.

“I used to be fairly adequate”, she admitted. “But that’s a long time ago. Let’s be getting up to the house, shall we?”

Over the back of a little iron chair at the edge of the half-court hung a shaggy snuff-coloured coat. Anticipating her movements, he held this up.

“Thank you”, she said, resting her racket against the chair, and turning her back to him.

“Haven’t you a muffler?” he asked.

“I never use them. I simply can’t bear anything round my neck.”

She tucked the racket under her right arm; dropped the one ball she had been using to join the other five in the string bag. Characteristically, she did not ask where he had left his car, merely led the way to it, and climbed in before he could assist her.

“Why—you left your engine running”, she chided. “And with petrol so expensive, too.”

Gail, he remembered—and that was the moment when he ceased to wonder, since Gail’s throat had been similarly circled, why the collier de Venus should strike him as familiar—would have used the word “gasoline”.

§ 4

There was none of that particular vanity which makes a certain type of man anxious to show off in front of a pretty woman about Rusty Rockingham. He backed the car, as was his habit, very slowly, glad to reach the fork without running his rear wheels off the gravel.

“Do you drive?” he asked, letting in first gear again.

She smiled, “You forget I’m an American. We learn to drive almost as soon as we learn to walk”.

He said, never realising how rare it was for him not to experience any selfconsciousness at his first meeting with a woman, “It’s so difficult to realise you are an American”.

She laughed at that, never realising how rare these last years had made the gift of laughter, “You can’t have met many. Did you expect me to say, ‘Vurry pleased to know you, Major?’”

“Something like that, I’m afraid.”

“And you’re honest enough to admit it?”

“Honest—but unwise perhaps.”

“On the contrary. I think honesty’s about the only quality really worth having. But then, I happen to have been born a southerner.”

She was laughing no longer, and her eyes had clouded again, as they drew up before the big gray stone house, which was of no particular period, and slightly forbidding, despite the fresh white painting round all its windows.

The front door matched the window frames. A middle-aged butler opened it to them before they had climbed the five long steps.

“Please have Major Rockingham’s bag taken to his room, and tell Graves to put his car away for him”, ordered Camilla.

She led the way through the outer hall into the inner, large and used as a living-room, though it looked more like a natural history museum—bristling everywhere with trophies—a rhino head, a lion’s head from Africa; a snow leopard’s head, cheetal horns, blackbuck and nilghai horns from India; the antlers of a Canadian elk.

From a tigerskin by the groined fireplace, in which a huge coalfire was burning, a silver-brindled Dane rose and made to lick her hand.

“Bad dog”, she chided. “You’ve been lying on that sofa again.”

She looked at the sofa. The dog made for the door. She called him back, saying: “He’ll keep you company. I must go and change. His name’s Tiny. Appropriate, don’t you think? *Lucus a non lucendo*”.

And with that, she went.

Alone—with Tiny dropping a heavy head to sniff at the turn-ups of his trousers—Rockingham asked himself, once again, “How on earth did *she* come to marry the Hawk?” For her use of a Latin quotation had set the seal on his surprise.

“Charming young woman”, he thought next. “Cultured young woman. And what a player.”

Momentarily, he speculated about her age. (Thirty she might be, but not a day

older.) Then—unaware of the effort necessary to change the current of his thoughts—he began to inspect the various trophies, each with its ivory label giving the date and place of the kill.

He had done a little big-game shooting himself—while the battery was in India. The best of sports—because it held more than a spice of danger. Pity one hadn't had more opportunities. A lucky devil, Hawk Wethered. In most ways. In every way . . .

But on that again—though still unaware of the effort it cost—Rockingham brought his mind back to his immediate surroundings. This room was a positive exhibition.

For all its museum-like ugliness, nevertheless, the place did not lack creature comforts. A big chair, with a table of periodicals beside it, tempted him. He sat down; picked up a month-old American magazine; looked at a picture or two; glanced at a paragraph or two. The dog couched itself at his feet. The coals sizzled pleasantly. He began to read with more care.

The first article, headed, "New York—and All That", puzzled him. He could hardly follow one of the personal allusions. But, turning on, he came to, "How about London?"; and the very subheading creased his forehead.

King George, when that article had been written, was still alive. There indecency, therefore, to ask, "Who's going to be the next Queen of England?"

Soon the slight crease was a scowling frown.

§ 5

Camilla Wethered, when she entered a few moments later, found her guest upright at the fireplace, clutching a "home magazine" she had not yet troubled to read.

He stared at her; and—for the split of a second—she saw anger in his blue eyes. Then she smiled; and the answering smile transfigured him.

"It's lucky you came", he said. "I believe I'd have burned this if you hadn't."

He showed her what he had been reading; put the periodical back in its place.

"One isn't used to that sort of thing", he went on.

"You should study our tabloids if you want to understand what gutter journalism's really capable of, Major Rockingham."

"You think I'm overloyal?"

"I should imagine you were a trifle—oversensitive."

Again, she smiled. But her eyes clouded once more as she rang for tea.

CHAPTER TWELVE

§ 1

Tea came, and the incident of the offending magazine—trivial in itself—soon passed from Rockingham's memory. Still completely unselfconscious, he found himself asking the easy questions. How did the Hawk's wife like England? ("Very much, thank you.") Had she been here before? ("Only on visits.") She must have had a lot of work getting this house in order. ("Why, yes. There's been a great deal to do, but then I like being busy.")

While he considered her last answer, she refilled his cup.

"I ought to have asked you if you wanted another before I did that", she said. "But my husband always takes two when he doesn't take three. And one so easily acquires habits."

"But you haven't been married as long as that, Lady Wethered."

"Why, no. Not two years yet. Have you known my husband long?"

"Since I was twenty."

"He's a remarkable person, isn't he?"

"Rather."

Talk languished for a while. He was aware that the beige housefrock, the silk shoes and stockings had altered her appearance. She looked a little older, less the tennis girl, more the woman of the world.

"I've no patience with people who don't eat", she said as she helped herself to a second slice of cake from the big silver dish. "I'm sure slimming's bad for the health. Not that I'm a crank about my health."

"You don't need to be", suggested Rockingham with another smile.

"That's true."

She cut more cake, and handed a slice down to the dog. He observed her wedding ring, the only piece of jewelry she wore. She observed—liking him for it—that he was no chatterbox.

"More, Tiny?"

The huge animal thumped an emphatic tail. Camilla gave him another piece of cake, and took a cigarette from the tin on the tray. Rockingham struck a match for her.

"Tell me", she asked with the first puff. "Do you like being a soldier?"

"Yes." He did not hesitate.

“You don’t find that, as a profession, it has many disadvantages for the intelligent?”

“No more than any other. Of course, it isn’t particularly exciting. At least in peacetime.”

“It certainly isn’t lucrative.”

“I don’t mind that. Money doesn’t interest me. I’ve enough for my needs.”

“You’re lucky,” said Camilla; and soon they were drifting—neither quite realising how easily speech came—into army talk.

“I’m so ignorant about the British army”, she said after a while. “When Guy told me he’d been appointed a C.R.A., I didn’t even know what he meant. You do love lettering things, don’t you? Talking of that, I found a paper when I came in. It was marked T.E.W.T. What is a Tewt when it’s at home—animal, vegetable or mineral?”

He explained, “A tactical exercise without troops. Presumably, therefore, vegetable”.

Camilla laughed—for the second time within the hour.

“Nice man”, she thought; and wrenched thought to a standstill. Then, surprisingly, she asked: “If you were married and had a son, would you want him to follow your own profession?”

“I think so”, said Rockingham after a pause.

“Why?” The direct question might have been a man’s.

“Tradition, I imagine. We’re what is known as a service family.”

“Are you a large family?”

He told her a little about Geoffrey, about William, about his parents.

“Your mother”, she said, when he had finished, “sounds slightly forbidding. But I believe I should like her. You see, I come of soldier stock myself.”

She stopped there; and he had a swift impression of reticence. Surprisingly again, it was as though she admitted, “But I’d rather not talk about my own family”.

Still silent, she rested one hand on the dog’s head.

After a moment, she took another cigarette. Again he struck a match for her. In the spurt of the flame, her eyes, her finely chiselled features, her blond hair, which—he could not help realising—owed as little to artifice as her hands or her lips, no longer seemed quite those of a stranger. As far as her physical appearance was concerned, he might have known this young woman for a long time.

Mentally, too, they seemed akin.

“Don’t you smoke?” she asked, while he still wrestled with these peculiar illusions.

“Not cigarettes.”

“A pipe?”

“Yes. May I?”

“Of course.”

As Camilla spoke, the dog sprang from the hearthrug; leaped for one of the windows; rested his forepaws on the sill.

“That must be Guy”, she said. “He’s home early.”

Almost at once they heard horse hoofs on gravel; and the Hawk bawling:

“Lightfoot! Damn and blast it, where’s Lightfoot? Come and take this bloodstained quadruped, will you?”

Camilla’s face changed. He saw annoyance there. She pressed the bell by the fireplace, rose, went to the window.

From there, she said: “It looks as though he must have had a spill. He has. He’s limping quite badly. Excuse me, please”.

She ran out, Tiny at her heels. Rockingham waited.

Presently he heard Hawk Wethered’s voice again, “Nothing to fuss about, my dear. I’ll be all right once I get these boots off”.

The voice sounded irritable. Nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed before his host entered the museum-like hall.

§ 2

Hawk Wethered, his young wife and his great dog behind him, had changed his red coat for an old tweed jacket, his boots and spurs for a pair of embroidered mocassins. He was supporting himself on a stick. In his free hand he carried a half-empty glass.

“Took a bit of a toss”, he growled. “Bryce-Atkinson and that memsahib of his wanted to send me home in a car. Lot of nonsense.”

He put his glass on the tea table and subsided into the chair which had been occupied by Camilla. Rockingham saw mud on his white breeches—more of it on his crumpled stock.

“Only run we had all day.” He emptied the glass; turned to his wife. “I could do with a drop more of this, my dear.”

Again Camilla rang; and the butler entered.

“More brandy”, snarled the Hawk. “And go easy with the soda, Merivale.”

“Very good, Sir Guy.”

The butler went out.

“Oughtn’t you to see a doctor?” asked Camilla.

“Bosh, it’s only a bruise. You been here long, Rusty?”

Camilla answered, “He came about three o’clock”.

The dog was at the window again by then.

“It doesn’t seem to have been much of a run after all”, she went on. “Here are the others. I’ll go and tell Merivale to bring in some more tea.”

The Hawk called after her, “Tell him to hurry up with my brandy”.

“That memsahib of Bryce-Atkinson’s”, he went on, “is a positive menace in the hunting field. And he always did ride like a tailor. You still hunt, Rusty?”

“Oh, I get a day every now and again, sir.”

“I’d get as much of it as I could for the rest of this season if I were you. The chances are you’ll find yourself without a horse at all next.”

Camilla returned, bringing the drink herself. Her husband tossed it down at a gulp.

“That’s better”, he said.

More hoofs kicked the gravel outside. Bryce-Atkinson, his brigade major, appeared—florid and solicitous—in the doorway.

“Are you all right, sir?” asked Herbert Bryce-Atkinson.

“All right. Of course I’m all right. What happened? Why are you two back so soon?”

“We lost our fox just after you went home, sir. And I thought the horses had had enough.”

Bryce-Atkinson continued, “Hello, Rockingham”; then he turned, all affability, on Camilla.

“You really ought to hunt, Lady Wethered.”

“So Guy’s always telling me.”

The Hawk appeared to have recovered his temper.

“She doesn’t approve of blood sports”, he grinned. “I’m not sure that I’m quite as keen on them as I was this morning. Getting a bit long in the tooth for taking purlers.”

His hand went to that one silver streak in his black hair. His dark eyes—as they sought his wife’s—were just a trifle too affectionate.

“Shook me up a bit”, he apologised. “Fraid I didn’t behave too well.”

“Vilely.” Camilla smiled. “But if the excuse for your bad language and the reference to your advancing years are meant to imply that you ought to be allowed another brandy and soda, the answer is ‘No’.”

“The wifely supervisions”, laughed Hawk Wethered then. “Marital discipline.

You observe that I only told you the exact truth, Rusty.”

Camilla’s eyes sought Rockingham’s. But before he could interpret the look in them, Diana Bryce-Atkinson—tall in her habit, thin-lipped, her tinted hair still showing the imprint of the bowler—came through the door.

Tea followed at once.

“Angel cake!” exclaimed Bryce-Atkinson’s Diana—and fell upon it without another word.

§ 3

As he finished dressing for dinner in a small room, gay with pink paint and new chintz, Rusty Rockingham grew conscious of perplexity. “An amazing marriage”, he mused. “Is she in love with him?”

But thought stopped there.

Slowly, he made his way downstairs. The foxhunters had gone to their baths, Camilla to write letters, at six o’clock. Dinner was still three quarters of an hour away. A footman directed him to the drawing room—formal and rather comfortless. On a marble-topped table lay a book of photographs. He picked this up and opened it.

The snapshots had all been taken in India. Here, the Hawk rode at the head of his brigade. There, he posed, rifle in hand, by a shot leopard. Under each picture ran a short line of his handwriting: “Massed Batteries. Poona, March 1933”; “A Big ’un. Srinagar. April 1934”. Automatically Rockingham found himself searching for a picture of Camilla. But in vain.

Just as he turned the last cardboard leaf, Bryce-Atkinson entered—and Merivale with the sherry decanter and six glasses.

“Clarkford and his wife are coming for dinner”, explained Hawk Wethered’s brigade major. “Know them?”

“Slightly.”

“He’s a damned old bore, and she’s worse.”

They filled their glasses, and drank.

“What do you think of the brigadier’s lady?” went on Bryce-Atkinson. “Bit of a peach, eh? Dunno why she fell for him.”

The words grated.

“She seems a very charming woman”, said Rockingham.

“You bet she is. And did the old man fall for her! I was in Bombay when it happened.” Bryce-Atkinson looked at the clock. “Tell you all about it if you Like.

Plenty of time.”

He sat down, carefully pulling up his trousers over his fat legs. Rockingham’s curiosity conquered his good taste.

“So they met in Bombay”, he said; and listened, one arm on the ornate mantelpiece, while the other continued:

“And nobody introduced them either. All frightfully romantic. She was on a sort of a world trip—staying at the Taj Mahal for a few days. Walked out all alone one evening—right into a bit of a demonstration. Not exactly a riot. Still—it mightn’t have been any too comfortable for her if the Hawk hadn’t come pouncing out of the Yacht Club just at the right moment.

“Give the old man his due. He’s got an eye for a situation—and he does know how to handle natives. I believe he had to handle one or two of them rather roughly. Anyway he got her into the clubhouse all right . . . And after that he just went clean off the deep end.

“Witnessed almost the entire process myself”, beamed Bryce-Atkinson, fondling the one pearl in his shirtfront with podgy fingers. “Grand spectacle. Took her back to the hotel, he did. Called to inquire how she was before he’d had his after-dinner cheroot, he did. Next day—a gharri-load of flowers. That night, dinner for four—my lady wife and I making up the four—at the club.

“Dancing afterwards. Did I get a dance with the lovely? Not one. Day after that, tête-à-tête lunch and out to the races at Mahalaxmi. Believe he proposed to her on the way home—and was turned down. Believe he proposed to her twice daily, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, until, on the seventh day, she accepted him. Resistance worn down by persistence, I suppose.

“Or it may have been the climate”, suggested the brigade major—and again the words grated on Rockingham’s ear. “‘The Hawk and his mysterious dove’, my lady wife called ’em. Nobody knew anything about her, you see. But a chap I ran into last week—he’s just back from California—when he heard her maiden name, told me . . .”

But there he broke off—Merivale ushering in a stumpy pugnacious-looking little man more than halfway to sixty, with reddish cheeks, pig eyes and a bristling gray moustache, accompanied by a woman of exactly the same height who might have been years his senior, dumpy and dowdy in an old black evening frock.

“I’m afraid we’re too early”, said Mrs. Clarkford.

“Wethered told me a quarter to eight, and it’s exactly twenty minutes to eight”, corrected her husband, adding, “B.B.C. time”, as he restored a heavy gold watch to the pocket of his slightly frayed waistcoat.

Bryce-Atkinson gave him sherry, which his wife had refused. He planted himself in front of the fire, and puffed out his cheeks.

“The C.R.A. took a toss this afternoon, sir”, explained Bryce-Atkinson. “He probably isn’t finding it so easy to dress.”

“Ought to be more careful at his age”, pronounced Clarkford, with a grand assumption of authority. But Rusty Rockingham recognised the bluff.

The whole of Henry Clarkford’s outward personality—he happened to know—was a bluff. No milder, no kinder English gentleman had ever won a double D.S.O. or educated a family of six on a few hundreds a year and his service pay. And next year, Clarkford would be on the shelf, with three daughters still to marry and two young sons in his own infantry regiment.

“Cutting down his own rations so that they can both have their allowances”, suggested a sudden quirk of Rockingham’s imagination. And it was then memory repeated, “If you were married and had a son, would you want him to follow your own profession?”

§ 4

Rockingham’s memory was still repeating those words as the door opened once more to admit Camilla, all apologies, Wethered, still supporting himself on a stick, and Diana Bryce-Atkinson.

“Clarkford will have something to live for after he’s finished with the army”, he thought.

And the thought recurred to him, intermittently, throughout an excellent meal.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

§ 1

Over dinner—served by butler, footman and soldier servant in a long narrow room whose dark panels swallowed most of the light—the Hawk was all the brigadier. Alternately he hectored the three men—and even Mrs. Clarkford. Only once, however, did he turn his guns on his wife.

“Won’t drink anything but iced water”, he said. “Serves me right for marrying a teetotaller.”

“Well, you would”, smiled Camilla; and again Rockingham wondered whether she could be in love with her husband.

A gross man, the Hawk!

The women withdrew before the coffee was served. Port circulated. Talk turned on shop.

“What we really need”, puffed Clarkford, “is conscription.”

“What we really need”, retorted the Hawk, “is a government that’ll tell these dictators where they get off. You can’t expect fellows to enlist while there’s all this namby-pambying.”

But for once such talk was of no interest to Rockingham.

“Clarkford will have something to live for after he’s finished with the army”, he caught himself thinking. “Bryce-Atkinson’s got kids, too. And the Hawk’s got . . . Camilla.”

It was such a shock to find himself already thinking of his C.R.A.’s wife as “Camilla” that he plunged into the conversation at once.

§ 2

The Hawk said, “It’s about time we were making a move. Don’t forget to bring that lad of yours to see me, Clarkford”.

The four men rose from the table. As they did so, Rockingham remembered that sudden envy he had conceived for William. But once they rejoined the ladies in that natural history museum of a hall, his envy, though sharper, was less particularised.

“We’re seven”, he thought suddenly. “And I’m the odd man out.”

Thought went as he joined in conversation again.

Mrs. Clarkford, knitting fanatically, wanted to know, “What you men have been

talking about all this time?” Diana Bryce-Atkinson queried a caption in the photograph album. Camilla—standing boylike, her hands behind her, back to the fire—said:

“We’ve been listening to the radio. But it’s poor. Do you feel up to a game of snooker, Guy?”

Her eyes met Rockingham’s once more.

“He doesn’t play bridge”, she went on. “Only poker.”

“I don’t play bridge either”, puffed Clarkford. “Waste of time in my opinion.”

Hawk Wethered chimed in, “Camilla rather fancies herself with a cue. I’ve just given her a new table. Come along and take a dekko at it”.

They followed him obediently, down a warmed corridor, into a beamed billiard room, where Mrs. Clarkford resumed her knitting. Diana, who had brought the album with her, said, “I’ve a perfect genius for cutting cloths. So you’d better leave me out”. The Hawk said, “I don’t fancy standing up more than I can help. But I don’t mind marking”.

He limped to a seat by the board. The two junior officers stripped the cover from the table. Clarkford, peeling off his dinner jacket and picking a cue from the rack, suggested, “As we’re only four, why don’t we play proper billiards?”

“I’d much rather”, smiled Camilla.

The Hawk shot at her, “I’ll lay you ten bob you don’t make a twenty-five break, and five bob you lose if you don’t play with Clarkford. He’s rather hot stuff at this game”.

“Done with you, Guy.”

She took the red and a white ball from the table, put both hands behind her again.

“Right or left, Major Rockingham? If it’s the red, we’re partners.”

He chose her left hand. The Hawk laughed, “You’re the lucky man, Rusty”.

She put the balls on the table. Lovely hands, she had. Lovely eyes, too. And her throat was so like Gail’s.

Once more, thought went from Rockingham.

Bryce-Atkinson broke the balls. Camilla gave a careful miss; but Clarkford scored the cannon, and made eleven before he failed at a difficult loser.

“Twenty-eight-fifty-two”, laughed Hawk Wethered some minutes later. “I’ll take seven and sixpence net cash to let you off, Camilla.”

It was her shot. She chalked a careful cue before she bent over the cushion.

“No”, she said. “This is where I make the twenty-five break.”

“Three to one in pounds against that.”

“You’re on, Guy.”

She struck as she spoke. The cue ball dropped into the left-hand middle pocket; red joined white at the top of the table. Two cautious cannons followed. “Seven”, counted the Hawk.

She potted the red twice.

“Thirteen”, counted the Hawk. “Unlucky number.”

Rockingham saw her face harden. She made no retort, only scrutinised the position with cool appraising eyes. He decided, “It’d take more than a little remark like that to shake her nerve”. Then she turned to him, saying, “The loser’s the easiest. But it won’t leave much”; and leaned to the table once more.

The screw cannon, as beautifully executed as the dropshot he had watched on the tennis court, brought the balls together again. He was conscious of mounting excitement as she scored two more cannons, leaving the red almost exactly on the spot.

“Nineteen”, counted the Hawk; and, as the red dropped, “Twenty-two.”

“Thirty shillings cash to let you off”, chaffed Camilla.

“I should take it if I were you, Wethered”, puffed Clarkford.

But the Hawk shook his head; and Rockingham saw that the lovely face hardened again as he restored the red to the spot.

“The loser this time”, he suggested.

“Yes. I think so.”

She played the shot very slowly. For the fraction of a second it seemed to her partner that the cue ball meant to stay on the lip of the pocket. Then it sank, and he was aware of the most extraordinary exhilaration.

“Splendid”, he heard himself say; and, just for the split of another second, his eyes met those of his host.

§ 3

That momentary look puzzled Rockingham. There was no anger in his host’s dark eyes—only a queer sardonic humour.

“Like her, don’t you?” he seemed to be saying. And of course one did!

“Good for you, young woman.” The Hawk spoke aloud now. “You’ll be quite a player before you’ve done.”

“Thanks for the compliment, sir”, said Camilla, stressing the final word.

She added another ten to her break. Clarkford missed an easy red winner. It was Rockingham’s turn again. Camilla examined the position.

“If you play a follow through”, she said, “you ought to be able to put both of them in.”

This—rather pleased with himself for the effort—he did; and a few minutes later Hawk Wethered was counting, “Ninety-six all. Your shot, Bryce-Atkinson. If you can’t make four out of that, you ought to be cashiered”.

It was Rusty Rockingham, however—the other three all missing their shots—who polished off the game, and at once Camilla was holding out her hand to him, was saying, “Thank you, partner”.

On which he again experienced that extraordinary exhilaration; although his, “Glad I didn’t let you down, Lady Wethered”, sounded rather stiff, because, despite the exhilaration, he had experienced his old selfconsciousness with women.

It seemed almost a relief, indeed, when her fingers released their light hold.

They played a revenge after that; but lost badly; and, when the Hawk suggested a conqueror, Mrs. Clarkford intervened with a quiet, “It’s past eleven, Henry”; and the infantry brigadier shrugged himself back into his dinner jacket.

“She always did wear the trousers”, chuckled the Hawk, as the five of them listened to the cold engine backfiring down the drive. “Wouldn’t even let him stay for a stirrup cup. Did anyone remember to put out the lights in the billiard room?”

“I did”, said Camilla. “And now I’m going to bed. Coming, Diana?”

“Rather. I can hardly keep my eyes open. What about you, Herbert?”

“Just a snifter, I think.”

“Good night, then.”

The Bryce-Atkinsons, who were occupying separate rooms, kissed perfunctorily. Hawk Wethered grunted, “I’ll be up in about half an hour, my dear”. Camilla smiled, “Don’t hurry”. The two women went out of the hall. The two younger men approached the drink table; the elder commanded, “Make mine a B. and S.”.

“Blast this knee”, he said, subsiding into a big chair. “I believe I’ll have to see a doctor about it after all. Pass me a weed, will you, Rusty? There are some in that box over there.”

His brigade major gave him a light for his cigar. He demanded a stool; propped his leg on it; took a long drink.

“Phoebe Clarkford”, he went on, “never was a beauty. Used to dance with her when I was a subaltern. Tried to kiss her once, I remember. Must have had a couple, I suppose. Got a nice clip on the ear for it. Not like these modern girls.

“Hussies, most of these modern girls”, he continued; and, after ruminating a moment:

“Met that filly of Lampson’s the other day. She’s typical. Nineteen—and up to all the tricks. Probably had her first affair before she left school. Gives you that impression anyway.”

“I think you’re a bit hard on them, sir.” Bryce-Atkinson spoke.

The Hawk’s riposte was Rabelaisian; but for once his staff officer stood his ground.

“It’s the fashion for girls to make themselves out sophisticated”, he said. “Sweet seventeen and never been kissed isn’t popular any more. I don’t think they’ve really changed—except superficially. Of course they get more liberty than they used to.”

“Liberty. Licence, I call it.”

The Hawk went off at full cry. Listening to him, and to the other’s occasional interruptions, Rockingham’s thoughts strayed back to Camilla. What a glorious figure she had. The grace of her, as she leaned over the table . . .

“Licence”, repeated the Hawk. “These modern women can’t carry their corn. If I had my way, they’d be put back where they belong—in the harem. The damn fools who altered our divorce laws have a good deal to answer for. Take your own case, Bryce-Atkinson. Here are you, married to a perfectly nice young woman, who happens to have a bit of money. Right. Now, let’s say you go up to town for some regimental dinner or other. Say you have a couple over the odds and go on to one of these night clubs. Say you find a wench who happens to take your fancy. Say you happen to take her fancy . . . And your missus finds out about it. Well, she’s only got to fire in a petition—and bang goes your marriage, kids and all, just because you’ve had a bit of fun.

“For one night only”, he concluded. “Mark that. Is it commonsense? Of course it isn’t. A man isn’t built the same way as a woman. And he never will be, whatever the law has to say about it. You agree with me, I hope, Rusty?”

“Well, sir——” began Rockingham.

But, before he could continue, the clock struck midnight; and Colonel Sir Guy Wethered, Bart., cursing his knee again, grasped for his stick.

“Curfew”, he laughed. “I shall be for it if I stay down here yapping any longer. These modern ladies don’t like to be kept waiting.”

And again—or so it seemed to Rockingham—he saw one flash of that queer sardonic humour in his host’s dark eyes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

§ 1

Rockingham, contrary to his habit, had not slept well; and woke feeling slightly depressed. Outside, a little drizzle was falling. On the way to his bath he encountered Bryce-Atkinson, unshaved in a flamboyant dressing gown of purple and yellow.

“Thought I’d better warn you”, said Bryce-Atkinson. “We shall all be dragged to church.”

Breakfast, announced by a gong and served at nine-thirty to the second, was rather a silent function.

“Discipline”, pronounced Hawk Wethered, as the three men smoked their pipes afterwards. “I don’t want to go any more than you probably do. Especially with this leg of mine. But when one possesses an ancestral home the least one can do is to live up to the traditions.”

“Is the church far, sir?” asked Rockingham from one of the hall windows.

“About a mile by the short cut. Camilla’s driving me. Her car only takes three. If it’s stopped raining, you two had better walk.”

He hobbled off.

“Throwing his weight about a bit”, commented his brigade major over the rim of a Sunday paper. “Not as young as he was. That toss hasn’t done his temper any good. Has the rain stopped?”

“More or less.”

“Then we may as well foot it. Just wait till I’ve had a word with Diana.” And he, too, went off, leaving Rockingham alone with the papers—from which he was soon disturbed by Camilla, already in gauntlets and a short leopardskin coat.

“Guy’s being rather peremptory this morning”, she smiled. “We could just as easily have had the big car out. I expect you find this churchgoing rather an imposition anyway.”

Told, “Oh, no. I always attend service if I possibly can”, she expressed surprise.

“Somehow I didn’t think of you as religious”, she said.

That she should have been thinking of him at all was a strange pleasure. Realising that such thoughts had been mutual, he experienced a renewal of selfconsciousness, a difficulty in continuing the conversation.

“Guy isn’t”, she went on. “Neither am I. Though I was brought up very strictly. Perhaps that’s the reason. But we’ve rather a good preacher. You’ll enjoy listening

to him.”

“They’re rare nowadays.”

“Not with us. Oratory comes naturally to Americans.”

“I suppose you are more talkative . . . As a nation, I mean.”

She smiled again—obviously at his change of front. A spark of understanding leaped between them. Nevertheless he felt glad when Bryce-Atkinson called from the doorway, “We’d better be getting a move on, Rockingham. Otherwise we’ll be late for the parade”.

§ 2

The rain had stopped by the time the two majors set off to the sound of church bells across the fieldpath at the back of the house.

“My young woman is as sick as mud”, confided Bryce-Atkinson. “She does like her long lie on the Sabbath. But, as I tell her, it’s no good rubbing the old man up the wrong way. Besides, I like him. Always have and always shall. Sounds silly, I know, but he’s my ideal soldier. If only *he* weren’t given to rubbing people up the wrong way, he’d be a lot higher up the ladder.”

“Quite.”

They followed the path—one talkative, the other answering in monosyllables—till they came to a stile. Clambering over this, they reached the side road Rockingham had taken on the previous afternoon. Five hundred yards brought them to the village war memorial—a cross set in a square of green turf backed by the wall of a churchyard.

“Rather good, that”, commented Bryce-Atkinson.

He stopped to read the names engraved on the plinth of the cross.

“Seems a hell of a long time ago”, he went on. “Makes one feel about a hundred. Wonder when we’ll have the next one. Pretty soon, I imagine. Nice mixup it’ll be too. Hope the Boches’ll be on our side this time. I can’t stand the French at any price.”

He reflected a moment before continuing, “When it breaks out, I think I shall send those kids of mine down to Di’s mother. She lives in Devonshire. They ought to be safe enough there”.

“You’re joking?”

“Well—I shan’t send ’em this month. But it’s the sort of thing one has to think about.”

“Aren’t you letting the Hawk influence you?”

“Possibly. His idea is——”

But, before Bryce-Atkinson could finish that sentence, Camilla drove her black and red coupé slowly past them, and parked it alongside the wall with its radiator cap close to the nearby lychgate.

The bells were sounding their last peals by then. They ceased, almost as though by order, just as Hawk Wethered shepherded his party into his family pew.

§ 3

The church—small, but beautifully proportioned, and mellow with old glass—was tolerably full; the service, from the minister’s first, “Let us humbly confess our sins to Almighty God”, as short as ritual permitted; the music and the singing well above the average.

So much, Rockingham realised—but no more. Willy nilly, his mind strayed. Had this man beside him really been joking when he spoke of sending his two little girls to Devonshire? Or did he agree with that other man, who only sat while the rest of them were kneeling, at the end of the pew? War again? The prospect seemed so impossible, so utterly cruel, so hopelessly stupid. And yet . . .

“One imagined it was impossible last time”, he remembered; and his thoughts turned from the Hawk to Camilla. Lovely, she looked again this morning. But somehow sad.

His mind still wandering, he knew that he must have caught her off her guard. She had been gazing towards the altar. Now she half-turned her head. It seemed to him that her lips forced the semblance of a smile. “Is she happy?” he asked himself.

But the low voice of Diana Bryce-Atkinson stopped thought.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t dwell on the sermon”, she whispered. With the minister in his pulpit, however, even her wandering attention was caught and held.

The man—tall and prematurely white of hair—spoke without preamble in a voice that betrayed nothing of affectation.

“I’m afraid I haven’t prepared anything today”, he began. “As some of you will realise, I’ve had rather a busy week. But I’ve good news for you. We shall have our main water in the village before the summer; and by the winter we should have our electric light. These benefits—I venture to suggest to you—are a reminder that God helps those who help themselves. I had thought of making that my theme this morning. But it seemed a little presumptuous. So, instead, I’ve chosen a text you all know—it is from the first epistle of Saint Peter, the seventeenth verse of the second chapter—‘Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king’.”

“Honour the king”, repeated the tall man in the pulpit; and, just for a second, his inspiration failed.

“Like good soldiers”, he said next; and again inspiration seemed to fail him.

Then, abruptly, he was continuing:

“We in England have good reason to honour our new king, who fought for us in wartime, who has worked for us in peacetime”.

And after that for many minutes—or so it seemed to Rockingham—the gift of tongues fell on him; so that it was no more the simple parish priest but a very “man of God” who swept into his peroration:

“Love the brotherhood! I feel that he is of our very brotherhood, this young man upon whom it has pleased the Almighty to lay the burden of kingship. I feel that it might well be of his father that the poet wrote, ‘Over all whose realms to their last isle, Commingled with the gloom of imminent war, The shadow of his loss drew like eclipse, Darkening the world’; and of our new king himself:

“Not swaying to this faction or to that,
Not making his high place the lawless perch
Of wing’d ambitions, nor a vantage-ground
For pleasure; but thro’ all this tract of years
Wearing the white flower of a blameless life,
Before a thousand peering littlenesses,
In that fierce light which beats upon a throne . . .

“That fierce light”, repeated the preacher. “My friends, before we leave our church this morning, let us all pray for him upon whose every action it will beat unceasingly. Let us pray that the light may find no blot to blacken; and that England’s Edward the Eighth may remain, like his father before him, laborious for her people.

“Laborious for her people and her poor”, quoted the tall man with the prematurely white hair; and to Rusty Rockingham it still seemed that he was God’s man as he ceased, and came slowly down among them, and turned from them, and went to his own place.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

§ 1

“A bit too sentimental for my taste”, said Diana Bryce-Atkinson, when they all emerged into pale sunlight. “Especially that last part. He can certainly preach, though. And what a marvellous memory he must have. That was Tennyson, wasn’t it?”

“The dedication to the Idylls.” Camilla answered the question. “I suppose he was rather sentimental today. But I just loved it. Didn’t you?”

She looked at Rockingham. Another spark of understanding leaped between them.

“I’m afraid I did too”, he said, struggling with a mixture of emotions he could not understand.

His host’s eyes quizzed him once more.

“Falling for her?” the Hawk asked himself.

Aloud he cut in, “That sort of thing does a lot of good. The padre ought to be out in a minute. I think I’ll invite him back to lunch. Wonder why he hasn’t called on us yet”.

“He has”, said Camilla. “Only we were both out.”

Almost at once, the Reverend Lionel Beresford emerged from his vestry, but only to refuse the feudal command.

“I’m afraid I can’t manage it”, he said in the same unaffected voice he had used from the pulpit. “This is my busy day.”

Introduced to Diana, he continued, “I believe I knew your father. We were in the same regiment. Before I . . . changed uniforms”.

The Hawk cut in again, “So you’ve been a soldier, Beresford. Temporary commission, I suppose?”

Told, “Oh, no”, and the number of a cavalry regiment, he stared.

“I sent in my papers after the war.” It was obvious to Rockingham that the stare had not gone unnoticed. “And took to the ministry instead. No honour and glory, of course. But one flatters oneself one is of some use.”

After a few more sentences, the vicar took off his hat, said goodbye, and removed himself with long easy strides.

“Nice man”, commented Diana; and Hawk Wethered, looking at that straight back in the clerical clothes, “Rummy idea. Hope he isn’t one of these socialists.”

Camilla said, with a touch of sarcasm, "He doesn't preach like one. But of course he may be. What'll you do in that case, Guy? Order your guns out?"

Willy nilly, Rockingham laughed.

§ 2

Diana Bryce-Atkinson answered her husband's, "Why don't you walk back with us?" with a mocking, "Walk? Not if I can jolly well help it". She climbed into the car. Camilla drove off.

"Lunch isn't till half-past one", said Bryce-Atkinson then. "How about going back through the village? It isn't very much farther."

"Just as you like."

They set out, walking in step.

"I don't think I ever heard a better sermon", said Rockingham after a few paces.

"I rather agree with you. But a chap like that ought to be in the House of Commons. He's simply wasted down here."

Ten minutes brought them to the little village.

"What about a glass of beer, Rockingham?"

"All right."

The saloon bar of the public house was dark, but spotlessly clean. A tall girl brought their drinks to a table under the one window. Rockingham filled and lit his pipe. The brigade major puffed a reflective cigarette.

"Give me London", he said suddenly. "A bit of hunting and shooting is all very well, but one might just as well be dead as live all the year round in a place like this."

"I believe I should rather like it."

"What—as a bachelor?"

The question brought Rockingham up with a sharp turn. He realised that his mind had been straying once more.

"Well, no", he answered slowly. "I suppose one would have to have a wife."

"Quite a lot to be said for them", grinned Bryce-Atkinson. "Provided one finds the right one." And he added, "The old man's marriage seems to be turning out all right. Though he did pounce so quickly. She knows how to handle him, don't you think?"

The question remained unanswered. They finished their beers.

"Another?" suggested Rockingham.

"No. I don't think so. We don't want to have to hurry."

"Right."

They paid, and made their way out again. One or two of the villagers eyed them incuriously as they passed up the one street and beyond the recreation hall.

“This way”, said Bryce-Atkinson, indicating a narrow lane between man-high hedgerows; and he went on where he had left off, “The old man certainly takes some handling. I admire her tremendously. She must have the devil’s own guts, too, if there’s any truth in that story I heard last week.”

Once more the listener’s curiosity conquered his good taste.

“What story?” he asked.

“Don’t you remember? I was going to tell you last night, just when the Clarkfords came in.”

The gossip hesitated.

“Of course it may not be true”, he continued. “So don’t take it for gospel. But when I told this bloke who’s just come back from California that her maiden name was Lee-Rickett he said he’d known a family of that name about five years ago in San Francisco, and that they’d had a girl who’d be just about the same age as the Hawk’s missis. These Lee-Ricketts—so he said—were simply rolling in money when he first knew them; and she’d been runner-up in some tennis championship or other. She was engaged, he said.” Again Bryce-Atkinson hesitated. “To some young fellow in the American navy. It appears they were just going to be married when the crash came.”

“Crash?” Rusty Rockingham’s single word was involuntary.

“Pretty bad one, too. Her father was a banker of sorts. Or it may have been a broker. Something to do with finance. Anyway, he found he couldn’t meet his obligations—unless he cashed in on his life insurances. So he cashed in on them—with an automatic pistol. Must say I rather admire him for it. But the shock, and the hullabaloo the newspapers kicked up about the whole thing—this chap says they’re perfectly bloody over there—were too much for his wife. She only lived about a week after he’d done himself in. And as for the lad in the American navy, it was too much for him, too. He just passed out of the picture.

“Sounds rather like a movie to me”, concluded Bryce-Atkinson. “So perhaps it isn’t true. Let’s hope not.”

They were approaching the house by then, with his wife waving to them from the portico.

“Lets me out of saying anything”, thought Rockingham; and for this he felt inordinately glad.

§ 3

Lunch proved a gayer meal than breakfast; but, once during its progress, Rockingham—catching Camilla off her guard for a moment—saw that identical look of sadness of which he had been aware in the church.

Bryce-Atkinson's story—it seemed to him in that moment—might be true. And at once his imagination was at work, elaborating the tale, making it the explanation of her marriage to a man at least a quarter of a century her senior. Yet that she had married the Hawk either for his money or his social position, he could not quite bring himself to believe.

"Not that sort", he decided, unaware that his mind was already championing her. Then he remembered Mary's, "If I gave up my job, I should be just a kept woman".

But only vaguely. For somehow even the memory of Mary had gone dim.

The port decanter circulated, and the two women withdrew. He did not see Camilla again till nearly tea time.

"What have you been up to?" asked the Hawk as she entered the hall.

"I had another hour's practice."

"We", announced Bryce-Atkinson with unusual fortitude, "have been settling the fate of Europe."

"Where's Diana?"

"Still asleep, I imagine."

"Then you'd better go and wake her up." She turned to her husband again. "Have you any idea how many people you've invited to tea this afternoon?"

"About a dozen as far as I remember. But I don't expect any of 'em'll stay very long. Except the General. He likes his game of bridge. In fact I promised him one. He wouldn't have accepted otherwise."

"Then I'll have a table put out here."

As she rang, a car drove up to the front door. Within half an hour, six others had followed. It was nearly seven before the last and most important of the Hawk's guests paid his losses and rose from the table.

"Nice place you've got here, Wethered", said the General. "You must bring Lady Wethered to dinner as soon as my wife gets back from the south of France. Hope that leg of yours'll soon be better. I'd take it easy for the next few days if I were you."

"How does he play?" asked Hawk Wethered when the five of them were alone again.

"Terribly", smiled Camilla, who had been Rockingham's partner for the last two

rubbers; and once more a spark of understanding leaped between them.

Then he again experienced selfconsciousness, and one twinge of an emotion he could not analyse, unless . . .

Unless it were fear!

§ 4

There was no renewal of that emotion which might have been fear. Yet, intermittently during the two hours that followed, Rusty Rockingham felt ill at ease.

This feeling, also, baffled analysis. Nevertheless, it grew. Every now and again during a supper for which none of them had dressed, he caught himself thinking, "It's a good thing you're off tomorrow". And when, afterwards, Bryce-Atkinson announced, "It's about time we were toddling, Di", he had the strongest impulse to say:

"If you don't mind, sir, I'll go and get my car, too".

That impulse, he suppressed. Even to suggest that he might leave before the time arranged would imply that he had not been enjoying himself.

And he had been enjoying himself. The Hawk—for all his eccentricities—was a good host. He seemed to have taken a fancy to one. A useful man to have for a friend. A bad enemy, though. Just as well to keep on the right side of the staff. . .

But the bustle of the Bryce-Atkinsons' departure killed introspection; and after their departure Rockingham forgot fear.

"Billiards", suggested the Hawk then. "You and Camilla play two hundred up—and this time I'll back my lady wife for any money you like up to a modest fiver."

"Too energetic." Camilla shook her blond head. "I'm feeling a little tired. All those people. I think I'll go to bed right away. What time would you like your breakfast, Major Rockingham?"

"Please don't bother about any breakfast for me, Lady Wethered. I can easily get it in mess."

He spoke stiffly. She answered him as a man might have, "What nonsense".

He was consciously aware, for the first time, of the charm she had for him, and of their wills clashing. But fear still stood away.

"I refuse to let you leave my house starving", she went on. "We're an early household anyway. Why don't you wait and breakfast with Guy? He always has his at eight."

"When he's on duty." Her husband chuckled. "But I shan't go to Aldershot tomorrow unless this leg of mine's a damn sight better. Still, you'd better cry

‘Kamerad’, Rusty’.

Rockingham hesitated. She laid a hand on his arm. Resolution melted.

‘Eight o’clock would suit me admirably, Lady Wethered.’

‘All right.’

She rang the bell, and gave Merivale the necessary order.

‘I don’t see why you’re in such a hurry to go to bed, my dear’, grumbled the Hawk. ‘Stay and talk to us for a bit. It isn’t ten yet.’

She, in her turn, seemed to hesitate.

‘Just for half an hour’, she said slowly, and took up her favourite position, hands behind her, back to the fire. Her charm still on him, Rockingham offered her the cigarette tin.

‘No. I’m smoking too much.’ She shook her head again. ‘Put on your pipe if you want to.’

‘Thanks.’

He lit up. The Hawk said, ‘So you were bored this afternoon, my dear?’

‘On the contrary, Guy. I don’t know which I find more amusing—your army friends or your country neighbours. You see, there’s something very attractive about . . . caricatures.

‘They’re all a bit that way to me’, she went on. ‘Like the people I used to read about in English novels. I never thought they were quite real—till I came to live here.’

The Hawk chuckled again.

‘Does that apply to Rusty?’ he asked.

His question seemed to take her aback; but she recovered herself quickly.

‘In a way’, she smiled. ‘Outwardly, at any rate, Major Rockingham is so very much the British army officer.’

‘Only outwardly?’

‘Yes. I—I imagine so.’

She fell silent. The Hawk’s eyes switched to the fire. He, too, fell silent. ‘Falling for him?’ thought the Hawk; and there was just a hint of malice in his next words:

‘Your turn, Rusty. What do you think of my lady wife? Is she the typical American?’

The answer lagged.

‘Go on’, prompted the Hawk. ‘Don’t be afraid of telling us exactly what you think.’

‘Well, hardly.’

‘I’m not sure I like this game, Guy’, broke in Camilla.

“Then you shouldn’t have begun it.”

Silence held all three of them. Suddenly, Rockingham felt awkward. His eyes, too, sought the fire. He could only see Camilla’s feet now. She was shifting her balance ever so slightly from one to the other.

Then the feet moved; and she walked to the radio; switched it on; waited for the valves to warm; switched it off again.

“Why must they always be so dreary on Sunday night?” she asked—and tension broke to Merivale’s entrance with the drink tray.

“Major Rockingham”, she said then, “would like his breakfast at eight o’clock”; and, when they were alone again: “I shan’t be up when you leave. But please come again. And next time bring a tennis racket with you.”

She held out her hand. Her hazel eyes were as frank as a boy’s. “I really mean that”, she seemed to be saying . . .

§ 5

. . . “Serves me right”, brooded Hawk Wethered. “Quarter of a century between us. Bound to happen sooner or later. But I doubt if you’ll bring it off, my dear. Not with Rusty. Too pukka. If he plays any role but Joseph with his C.R.A.’s wife, I’m a Dutchman.”

He seconded his wife’s invitation, grinning to himself in secret as he did so. For Colonel Sir Guy (temporary Brigadier) Wethered, in so far as his relations with women were concerned, was a very peculiar man.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

§ 1

Colonel Sir Guy Wethered's thoughts were still peculiar as he watched his guest open the door for his young wife. Danger had always stimulated him. And this might be danger of a new kind.

"I made her marry me", he brooded. "And I'll damn well make her stay married to me. Whether she wants to or whether she doesn't."

Not that there could be any real danger from Rusty. All the same . . .

Meanwhile the door had closed.

"Whiskey?" asked the Hawk then.

"Thanks."

"Pour me out a B. and S. at the same time, will you?"

Rockingham came to the fire with the two glasses. He was still poignantly aware of Camilla's handclasp; and, just for a second, the sheer incongruity of this natural history museum as a setting for her beauty irritated him.

Irritating, too, was the Hawk's, "That lady wife of mine'll knock your head off if you play tennis with her".

But after that he grinned, showing his pointed teeth; and went on:

"No fool like a middle-aged one. Never thought I'd let myself in for matrimony. Not my line of country. Always liked my freedom. You're the same, I gather. Or doesn't the fair sex interest you?"

The pointblank question demanded an answer.

"I wouldn't mind getting married", said Rusty Rockingham, "if I could find the right girl."

"Not so easy nowadays."

The Hawk showed his teeth again; and continued talkative while he ruminated, "Good-looking chap up to a point. Ought to take a bit more trouble with his appearance, though".

Presently he asked, "Did you give your mother my message?"

"Yes."

"Good." He fell silent for a moment. "Do you think she'd like to be called on? I'm taking Camilla up to town for a few days next month. It's a bit dull for her down here."

There was nothing to say but, "I'm sure mother would like to see you again, sir".

Rockingham said it. Hawk Wethered repeated, "Good.

"I'll drop her a line", he continued. "Just scribble her address for me and leave it with Merivale. I fancy I'll be turning in now. Where's that stick of mine?"

Rockingham found him his stick. He hauled himself upright.

"This knee's giving me gyp", he admitted. "Lend me your arm, there's a good chap."

They made their way up the stairs together; went to their respective rooms.

§ 2

Only when he was alone did Rockingham realise how often—during the last half-hour—his thoughts had wanted to stray from the Hawk to the Hawk's Camilla. Now—thank goodness—he could let them have free play.

Or would it be better not to think of her at all? Possibly. If one could manage it. But could one manage it—with Coningsby's poem singing again, echoing and re-echoing through every chamber of one's mind?

"A virgin in the fight she stands." Curious, that she should make that very impression. It seemed almost impossible that she should be any man's—least of all the Hawk's—wife.

He smoked half a pipe on that, considering her character—as he fondly imagined—with complete objectivity. For fear still stood away. Neither was he aware, even subconsciously, of any danger, when he reached the conclusion that it would be pleasant to renew acquaintanceship.

Pleasant, too, as he wrote down his mother's address and telephone number on a sheet of the Hawk's crested notepaper, proved the thought that "the old lady" would meet this intriguing personality.

"Wonder what her opinion'll be", he speculated as he climbed into bed.

He slept dreamlessly till his host's soldier servant deposited a teatray at his bedside and drew the chintz curtains. His emotions—in so far as the mechanical actions of shaving, bathing and dressing allowed him any—were still pleasurable. Definitely, a good weekend!

This last thought pursued him downstairs to the dining room. The footman brought breakfast and a morning paper as the clock struck eight.

Twenty minutes later, he was in the open air, making his way down the five steps and under the archway which led to the garage. Automatically, his mind gave him back, "Tell Graves to put his car away".

The man in gaiters and shirtsleeves, plying chamois leather on windscreen and

windows, seemed faintly surprised at being addressed by name.

“I was just going to bring her round for you, sir”, he said.

“That’s all right. I don’t expect my bag’s ready yet.”

The modest tip drew a salute. Suddenly the man’s face seemed familiar. “Haven’t I seen you before?” asked Rockingham.

“Only once, sir. Marvellous memory, you must have. I was in the fifty-second battery. When we were brigaded with the Turbans. At Nowshera. In twenty-seven, that was. I had a young horse out one afternoon. Couldn’t manage him nohow—till you rode up and told me to loosen me bit chain.”

Graves gossiped for a while. He insisted on warming up the engine.

“Hope I’ll be seeing you again, sir”, he said, just before Rockingham drove back to the front door, where Merivale and the footman were both waiting.

He gave Merivale the paper he had written overnight. The footman put his bag in the dickey.

He tipped again; was just about to drive off when he heard a window frame creak, and looked up.

The window, directly over his head, was flung open. Out of it, leaned Camilla. He perceived that she was still in *négligé*. One hand clasped red silk across her bosom; the other rested on the sill.

“I’ve two orders for you”, she laughed. “From the brigadier. He says, ‘Don’t forget to leave your mother’s address’, and that you’re to take a message to his headquarters. You’re to tell them he won’t be there till half-past eleven. And that a doctor’s to be in attendance.”

“Tell the C.R.A.”, laughed back Rockingham, “that the first of his orders has already been complied with, and that the second will be carried out immediately. I hope his knee isn’t any worse this morning.”

The Hawk’s face joined his wife’s at the window. Ostentatiously, he put his arm round her.

“There’s life in the old dog yet”, grinned the Hawk. “Tell ’em I want Laking. He said he might be going up to London today. So buzz off. Otherwise he may be gone before you get there.

“Laking”, he rasped. “Don’t forget the name, please.”

“That’ll be all right, sir.” And, a moment later, the commander of the Turban battery was away.

The commander of the Turban battery drove back for Aldershot—taking the same road by which he had come—a good deal faster than his habit. Momentarily, he had forgotten his complex about motor accidents. Sheer annoyance banished it from his mind.

There seemed no particular reason for this annoyance. After all the Hawk was one's superior officer as well as one's host, so why shouldn't he "throw his weight about", especially if his knee were giving him gyp?

Nevertheless, one resented that last peremptoriness.

"No right to speak to me as though I were a newly joined subaltern", thought Rockingham. "Especially in front of his servants."

Or should it be, "Especially in front of his wife"?

Imaginatively, he could still see the picture of the Hawk's arm encircling his wife. And that, also, annoyed him, until, making the turnpike, he slowed to his usual steady pace.

His thoughts veered then—tacking back very gradually to the exact point where he had abandoned them while he changed out of khaki into mufti on the Saturday.

Would Botley return to duty this week? A good thing—perhaps—if he did. The sooner one got this business between him and Godden settled, the better. A damn nuisance, if one had to lose Godden. What a pest women could be . . .

This reflection brought him to the outskirts of Aldershot. A few more minutes—and he was at divisional headquarters. There he found Bryce-Atkinson, and gave him the Hawk's message.

"He would insist on seeing the A.D.M.S.",^[3] commented Bryce-Atkinson, one hand grasping for the telephone, the other shuffling some papers on his desk. "Just wait till I find out if it's O.K., will you? There's something among this junk you might take along for me."

The R.A.M.C. officer's, "Blast him. All right. I'll be there", was clearly audible. Bryce-Atkinson said, "Thank you very much, sir", and hung up.

"Here we are", he went on, producing a buff form. "Not really urgent. But Headworth rang up on Saturday to know if we had any news of the fellow. It seems that Ralph Lyttelton wants him back rather badly . . . Pity . . . Because it doesn't look as though he'd get him back at all."

The name at the head of that form was "Botley". Two letters from the report underneath it blazed at Rockingham's eyes.

"Pity", repeated Bryce-Atkinson. "Still, he may get over it. Wonderful what they can do for T.B. nowadays."

"Quite", agreed Rockingham. "Funny thing to happen, though."

“Why?”

But on second thoughts it seemed unnecessary to enlighten the brigade major’s curiosity; and the commander of the Turban battery, having glanced at his wristwatch, excused himself with a smiling, “Tell you some other time. Got a lot of work to do this morning”.

“So have I, as it happens.”

“Then so long.”

[\[3\]](#) Assistant Director of Medical Services.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

§ 1

For once in his life, as he left divisional headquarters, Major Rockingham forgot to return a passing soldier's salute. Normally, he would have been at his own barracks within fifteen minutes: but today the few miles took him a good ten more.

He thought as he drove. Yet it was no good thinking. One could help neither Godden, nor Botley, nor Botley's wife. They would have to hammer out their own salvation—or maybe their own damnation—as best they could.

"No use my butting in", he decided; and Headworth, whom he found alone in the colonel's room at brigade office, agreed.

"Don't see how she can throw her bonnet over the wind-mill now", commented Headworth. "Not if he's being sent to a sanatorium. But of course she may. When a woman's crazy about a chap, she'll do almost anything."

He called for Rogers, the brigade clerk, and handed over the form.

"See that's passed to the battery at once", he ordered; and, turning to Rockingham again, "Here's the old man. I shouldn't say anything to him if I were you. Not your pigeon—officially."

On the last word his voice imitated Wily Wilbraham's; and the silky black lashes batted, just once, over his eyes before he said, "Good morning, sir. Major Rockingham's just come from the C.R.A.'s. He's had a bit of an accident to his knee."

"Who? Rockingham?"

"No, sir. The C.R.A."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Wily Wilbraham demanded details. He had a few words to say about petrol consumption. Back at his quarter, changing into uniform, Rusty Rockingham thought, "If he'd consider men more and machinery less it'd be an advantage".

Loyalty nevertheless admitted that Wilbraham Lampson, as a brigade commander, had his points.

One could be too sentimental about the mere human side of the army. Discipline had to be preserved. A colonel ought to keep himself rather aloof. When *he* got his brigade . . .

Thought wandered a little as he stooped to pat his dog. Imagination leaped forward. Another year or so—and he *would* have his brigade. With luck, he might

end up a C.R.A. He'd be well in his fifties by then, though. Getting a bit "long in the tooth" (the Hawk's phrase) for active service.

Even now, was he really fit enough to fight a battery, let alone a brigade, in war?

He decided that he was—but felt his own case might be exceptional. Then another phrase of the Hawk's, "We'll all be Methuselahs", recurred to him; and, just for the split of a second, he saw that long arm circling the red silk at Camilla's waist.

The picture vanished almost before he realised he was seeing it. Thought returned to duty as he buckled on his Sam Browne, took his cane and set out for his own office.

Thither, towards eleven o'clock, came Patterson, imagining himself the bearer of news.

"I've just been having a yarn with the sergeant-major", began Patterson. "He's found out that they're keeping this fellow, Botley, in hospital at Woolwich."

Told the full news he said, "By golly, that's rotten luck. What are you going to do about it?"

"Lie doggo."

"I suppose that's all we can do. Unless I pass on the information to the sergeant-major."

"He'll find out soon enough. And give us the office what she is going to do about it."

But Saturday came again with Battery-Sergeant-Major Cartwright still holding his hand.

§ 2

That weekend, Rusty Rockingham stayed in barracks. The mechanical side of his mind seemed almost unduly active. He had "a brain wave" about his shell fuze; and worked till the Saturday midnight committing his ideas to paper. On Sunday morning, much to the joy of Kid Masters, he took the whole brigade, less "fancy religions"—these latter including the official "Salvation Armyites", who escape completely—to church.

Among the twenty-five of his own battery on parade he noticed—slightly to his surprise—Godden.

The young lance-sergeant—it seemed to him—had aged. His face was almost colourless. A strip of plaster hid what must be a razor-cut on his cheek.

"Having a thin time", thought Rockingham. And, marching the mile to Steepdown church, he caught himself feeling unduly sorry for Godden—though such

sorrow was against his own code.

A chap had no right to “mess about” with another chap’s wife. Marriage—even if one couldn’t quite agree with one’s own mother on the divorce question—was a pretty sacred affair. If men—and women—couldn’t discipline their passions the world would soon go to pieces. Gail, now, had divorced her husband a good year before he and she . . .

But the intervention of that personal issue brought his introspective mood to a full stop . . . Until, halfway through the service, it recurred.

Last Sunday had been so different from this. Last Sunday, he had worn no sword at his side. Last Sunday . . .

Imaginatively, then, he saw Camilla again. Nor, that time, would the picture quite vanish. It continued to haunt him throughout the sermon. Only the tramp of the many boots as the men from the various units filed out and formed up before marching back to their barracks drove it away.

He took Patrick for a long walk that afternoon. A few crocuses were out. The worst of winter really did seem over. Another six weeks or so, and they would start section training. Such aimless thoughts, however, could not entirely occupy his mind, which seemed strangely restless, and slightly timorous. As though there were some subject it ought not to approach!

Stopping to light his pipe where two paths forked in a patch of woodland, he saw the dog prick up its ears. Almost at once, he heard a twig break under a boot sole; and in another moment or so a human voice—its actual words not yet audible.

The voice was coming his way, by the other path. It sounded vaguely familiar. Some instinct made him stoop for Patrick’s collar; made him draw back behind the shelter of a tree.

Doing this, he grew aware of a second voice, a woman’s, disputing with the first one, “But don’t you see, dear, that it’s all different now”.

Both voices stopped as the unknown couple approached. A glimpse of the man’s khaki sufficed. Deliberately, still holding the dog, he turned his back on Godden and the girl who must be Botley’s wife.

They went by—still silent. They took the path by which he had come. He wondered if Godden had recognised him.

Oh well, it couldn’t be helped if he had.

§ 3

Masters, brigade orderly officer for the day, was taking a solitary tea in the

dining room, when Rockingham entered the mess.

He smiled, "Been for a walk, sir?"

"Yes."

"Shall I order you some tea, sir?"

"Thanks."

The offer held a touch of hero worship which missed the elder man completely. This fresh-faced youngster, with the blue eyes and the fluff of pale moustache on his upper lip, was "shaping rather well". Otherwise one had hardly considered him.

"I've been having crumpets, sir", went on Kid Masters, as the mess waiter answered his ring. "They're rather good."

"Then I may as well follow your lead."

As he spoke, Rockingham's eyes fell on the book by the other's plate.

"Studying strategy?" he asked, with the faintest touch of superiority. "In my young days we used to read Nat Gould."

"Was he a crime writer, sir?"

"No. Racing. You can't find *Military Operations* exactly amusing. Or do you?"

Masters hesitated. Then he flushed, ever so slightly—and the elder man experienced a sudden sympathy for him. He himself had known what it felt like to be "a wart" under casual fire from one's own battery commander. A good lad, as lads went nowadays. Better help him out.

"How far have you got?" he asked, his smile transfiguring him.

"About halfway through the second volume. I'm just at the Battle of Gheluvelt. It takes time, if one reads it properly. With the maps, I mean. Were you in that show, sir? I see the battery was."

"No. I was a bit farther north. With the Second Division."

He named the battery in which he had been serving.

Masters said, "According to the map they were in Polygon Wood"; and flushed again, as though bashful of displaying too much knowledge.

"That's quite right", admitted Rusty Rockingham; and, with his tea served, he found himself holding forth, as he had not held forth for years, while the boy listened, asking an occasional question, till the orderly officer of the other brigade lounged in.

Only then did Rockingham's talk cease.

Shortly afterwards, he went to his quarter, wondering what could have made him so unusually communicative and at the pleasure he had taken in the companionship of a mere boy. After which he thought—for one fleeting moment—of William's two boys, before doing some more work on his shell.

That night, he played two rubbers of bridge, with Masters for partner. The hero

worship had just become obvious. He felt that he ought to be resenting it. All the same, the whiff of incense was not unsweet in his nostrils. Rather the reverse.

Morning broke to storm. He spent an hour of it with his signallers. One of the wireless sets gave a lot of trouble. Boardman, who eventually diagnosed the fault, said, "We always call this one the 'Maiden', sir. Because she never will go over properly". The detachment sniggered. So, despite himself, did the battery commander. He repeated Boardman's joke at luncheon. It reached divisional headquarters, via Headworth and Bryce-Atkinson, on the following afternoon.

The storm had blown itself out by then; and that Wednesday, though his knee was still in bandages, the Hawk pounced on the brigade.

He arrived in a staff car, and the world's worst temper. Why the hell—he asked Wily Wilbraham—were his bloodstained dragons still in the sanguinary open?

Informed, stiffly, of the reason—that the sheds still lacked double doors—he called down brimstone on Ordnance.

"I'll ginger 'em up when I get back", he rasped; and, just before he departed, "There aren't nearly enough men re-engaging, Lampson. Why is that? You don't know. Neither do I. But something'll have to be done about it."

Hence Headworth, poking his nose into the Turban battery's office a day later, to ask:

"By the way, sir, has Godden said anything more about re-engaging? The C.O.'s rather keen on sending as many names as possible along to division".

But a whole week more went by before Cartwright, standing rigid in front of his battery commander's desk, said:

"I have Lance-Sergeant Godden outside, sir. He wishes to speak to you on a private matter".

But, "Thought you'd like to know it's all O.K., sir", added Battery-Sergeant-Major Cartwright, his rigidity relaxing, before he went out.

§ 4

Rockingham had not encountered the Hawk during his tempestuous visit. Neither—to his conscious knowledge—had he thought of Camilla for many days. It seemed queer, therefore, that a tenuous vision of her should flash across his mind during those few seconds between Cartwright's exit and Godden's entrance.

But, with the man before him, the image disappeared.

Godden's face, as he clicked heels and saluted, showed traces of the ordeal through which he must have been passing. The look of age was still there—and a

new look, of resolution, tinged with a certain melancholy, chiefly visible in the gray-blue eyes, which made no effort to avoid his battery commander's.

"I hope, sir", he began without preamble, "that you'll sign this for me." And his right hand went to one of his tunic pockets; laid the re-engagement form on the desk.

Rockingham hesitated.

"Is there any reason why I ought not to sign this?" he asked bluntly.

"No, sir. Not now."

The voice, the whole attitude, might have been a robot's. But the meaning was perfectly clear.

"I'm very glad to hear that", went on Rockingham, looking his man straight between the eyes.

Godden's eyes flinched. One saw the pain in them—and a dumb desire for self-expression. Pity touched the battery commander.

"Sit down", he ordered; continuing, with the ghost of a smile as the other obeyed him, "I'm afraid you've been going through rather a bad time."

The lips which Phidias might have chiselled tried to answer that smile; but no words came through them. "Better have let sleeping dogs lie", thought Rockingham. It seemed too late, however, to draw back.

He considered his next move with some care.

"At least", he began, wondering why he should be taking so much trouble (and a little whether he were preaching), "you have the satisfaction of knowing that you've done the right thing."

The eyes flinched once more. But the lips remained stubborn. At last they said, "I suppose so, sir. Not that it was all my doing. If she hadn't made me see sense, we might have gone through with it".

For the second time, Godden's meaning was clear. Taken aback by the implied confidence, Rockingham—in his turn—fell silent. Outside, as once before, trumpets blew for stables. Godden's boots shifted on the bare floor.

"I'd best be going", he muttered, discipline momentarily forgotten.

"No. Wait."

Discipline resumed sway. The man waited, motionless. Suddenly speech came to the battery commander.

"I doubt that", he said. "I'm sure you're not the sort of chap to hit a man when he's down."

Godden's hands were on his knees. One saw them clutch at the khaki. Discipline went again—and something of the studied English.

"Them was almost her very words", he burst out. "We shan't be meeting again.

She went off this morning and took the baby with her. Happen it's all for the best, though I can't believe it. Not yet along anyway. Might I be going now . . .

“. . . sir?” added Sergeant Godden.

The battery commander's reserve broke. His full smile transfigured him. His hand reached across the desk, as he said:

“Go, and good luck to you. Keep your pecker up”.

“I'll try, sir”, said Godden.

One could still feel the pressure of his fingers when he turned robot again; when he saluted, marched for the door.

§ 5

The emotions which had prompted that handshake were beyond Rusty Rockingham's experience. He still felt rather ashamed of them while he was relating the bare bones of the interview to Patterson, who said, with surprising insight:

“I expect it was mostly her doing. Women are usually pretty decent when it comes to a case of illness. The best thing we can do for Godden is to keep him well up to the collar”.

This—during the weeks which followed—proved easy. For although mechanisation—on paper—is merely the substitution of petrol-consuming machinery for corn-consuming horses, even a ten-horsepower Austin will not drive itself.

Major Rockingham's own Austin, thanks to Cartwright's choice of a driver, only lost a little paint during the whole course of individual training. But the battery staff dragon pushed down a lamppost, split the side of a shed, nearly flattened inquisitive Trumpeter Lucas, and cost one of its crew a finger before it had been in use a fortnight.

While the four gun-dragons—as Signaller Boardman put it—were “Hell's own hairy traction-engines and then some”.

They were bad enough to start up. But, once started, every form of perversity known to inanimate metal afflicted them. Either the engines ran too cold, “backfiring one's eardrums out”, or they ran so hot that the radiators boiled over. When the caterpillars weren't slipping, the steering clutches were. If the pumps didn't jam, it was fifty to one on the carburetters flooding.

Or so at least it appeared to the half-trained, and to the senior non-commissioned officers who yearned for the old days of, “Ride, Attention”, and “Whips over. Left—Wheel”.

These old dogs did not take kindly to the new tricks. It was upon their junior

N.C.O.s, upon men like Godden, that Rusty Rockingham and his fellow battery commanders had to rely throughout those weeks of February and March, which kept the mechanical fitters (only two for each battery) working fourteen hours daily; while daily one preached, "It's the work you chaps do on 'em in stables that's going to save you trouble on parade".

This phrase of "old Rusty's" always made his dragon crews grin. They—he soon began to realise—actually preferred the machinery to the horses. And on a day towards the middle of March he understood the reason for this, overhearing one of his young drivers say to another, "My old man runs a garage. Thinks he knows everything about motorcars. But by the time I've done my four years I'll know a blinking sight more than he does. So who says the army's a waste of time?"

The pair saluted, and ran off to their football. Rockingham's gaze followed them. "Kids", he caught himself thinking. "All their lives before them." Unless war cut those young lives short!

At that, for the first time in these last busy weeks, he remembered the Hawk's prognostications at Woolwich. How right the man had been about Badoglio. Already he had the Abyssinians as good as licked.

"Good piece of work", mused the soldier in Rockingham. "Doubt if we could have done any better."

But all the Christian in him felt resentful as he made his slow way back to mess.

The anteroom was empty. Still pensive, he surveyed the war map pinned above the fireplace. Amba Alaji had fallen ten days ago. A few moves of those flags—and the Italians would be in Gondar. How far from there to Lake Tana, source of the Blue Nile, key to the whole fertility of Egypt?

Two days' march for a mechanised army?

Not much more! And the Red Cross, apparently, disregarded. And the treaty of Locarno torn up, the Germans back in the Rhineland. Supposing those two treaty-breakers got together? Before we were ready for them . . .

The thought shook him. He turned away from the map; picked up the day's paper. Parliament was still discussing defence. According to Winston, the Germans had already spent fifteen hundred million pounds on rearmament.

"Exaggeration?" he wondered. But the French—this last week of inaction seemed to prove—were not going to turn the Germans out of the Rhineland. They were going to make a military alliance with Russia instead.

According to Ralph Lyttelton, the French would have marched. It was we who had stopped them. And no wonder! With all three Services so weak . . .

With an effort, he wrenched thought away from international politics. As a

soldier, the less one bothered one's head about them, the better. With Patterson on leave, he'd better hop along to the office and check over those damned history sheets, those infernal log books. Nothing like a job of work to keep a chap from glooming.

But all that afternoon gloom grew on him; and that night, alone in his quarter, he felt depression gripping—as only once before—at the pit of his stomach.

Why worry about another war? To die in battle would at least be the fulfilment of his one and only mission. After all, he wasn't William. No woman would care if he went west. Besides, a war would mean accelerated promotion, the end of all this "mucking about".

He slept on that, but badly; and woke more depressed than ever, deciding that it was "high time he ran up to London for a day or so to get rid of the blues".

"Haven't seen mother for more than a month", he brooded over breakfast. "Haven't even written to her."

And there, abruptly, he thought of the Hawk again, and of Camilla, wondering if they had ever "called on the old lady".

Surely, though, his mother would have written to tell him about it if they had. And anyway, what did it matter? What did anything matter except this blasted cafard, as the French called it?

§ 6

Rusty Rockingham's cafard reached its climax that very evening to the somewhat peculiar thought, "She said, 'Come again, and bring a tennis racket with you'". For subconsciously he had never quite lost sight of Camilla.

The image, nevertheless, only became clear to him some twenty-four hours later as he sat deciphering his mother's slightly petulant:

"Why haven't I heard from you? Your friends the Wethereds have just been here. He bounded considerably but she was a pleasant surprise. They've taken two tickets for my St. Christopher's ball next week. William and Frances are coming. So is Geoffrey. He's bringing some girl or other. Here's your ticket. It'll cost you two guineas whether you turn up or whether you don't. I've got to get rid of them somehow or other".

He sent his cheque by return of post. As he wrote his initials in the corner of the envelope so that the stamp should be charged to his mess account, depression began

to lift.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

§ 1

Patterson returned to duty on the Monday. Wily Wilbraham, accordingly, could find no excuse for refusing the commander of the Turban battery and his batman a few days' leave.

"You must come and have a bite of dinner with us when you get back", he said. "My missus hasn't been too fit these last weeks, otherwise I'd have asked you up before."

Duly thanked, he went on, "I expect you're going to the St. Christopher's ball. My daughter may be there. The C.R.A. told me he'd taken a couple of tickets from your mother".

"Hence his invitation to dinner", thought Rockingham, not altogether fairly. For he had grown no fonder of his colonel in these last weeks; and every time he considered the man—although he did his best to fight the feeling—he was conscious of a faint jealousy.

Why should Lampson have the brigade? He knew literally nothing about the new vehicles. Carried his ignorance off with an air, though. Knew how to delegate responsibility. Just as well to keep on the right side of him, too. A bad fellow to cross.

Brooding thus, Rockingham returned to his quarter and broke the glad news to Noakes. The last of his depression seemed to have gone by then. Tuesday and the Wednesday's forenoon passed in a flash. As he took the wheel of his car after an early luncheon, he grew conscious of an actual excitement—though not of its cause.

The morning's post had brought good news from his collaborator in the Arsenal. Their final drawings were approved. A few sample shells would be made and tested. He attributed most of his good humour to this.

Big Ben only pointed the quarter past three when he drove across Westminster Bridge and pulled up opposite the Underground station.

"I suppose you'd like to go to see your young woman", he said then.

"If it's convenient, sir", smiled Noakes.

"Perfectly. Hop out. And you needn't report to me till half-past ten tomorrow."

"Thank you very much indeed, sir."

Noakes braved the traffic and disappeared. Rockingham drove on to Piccadilly and parked his car in a side street behind his club. The hairdresser, an old friend,

could not take him till five. The card room, as usual at that hour, was empty. He settled himself in a satchel downstairs; looked through *Punch* and one of the illustrated weeklies; ordered Indian tea and a buttered bun.

Eating this, he was accosted by Lieutenant-Colonel Gilbert Murchison, who said, "Hallo. What are you doing in town?" and took the adjacent chair.

Murchison's small talk proved heavy. But just before Rockingham went downstairs to the barber's shop he turned the conversation on "this fellow Inskip", newly appointed Minister of Defence.

"Don't see why Baldwin wanted to appoint a civilian", gloomed Murchison. "I wish we'd got Churchill. He'd have gingered things up good and proper. Damned dangerous situation, I think. The League of Nations is as good as busted. Pity we ever let ourselves in for it."

Rockingham's gloom, nevertheless, did not return; and he submitted himself gladly to an oil shampoo and an application of Mr. Dorland's special hairwash—subsequently allowing himself to be shaved.

"You don't look a day older than you did the first time I attended to you, Major", declared the privileged Mr. Dorland, surveying his own handiwork with beaming satisfaction. "Nineteen twenty, that must have been. But if I was you, I'd let me trim the moustache a bit more."

And to this, also, Rusty Rockingham submitted, commenting afterwards, "I believe you're right".

The change in his appearance, as discovered by the mirror over the basin, surprised him. A greater surprise, however, was provided by memory.

Thus he had been wont to let Borland "titivate" him before he went dancing with Gail!

§ 2

Memories of Gail lingered while Rockingham shrugged himself into the dark overcoat for which Noakes had been unable to find room in the kitbag. Outside it was still daylight. He stood on the club steps for a moment, thinking, "I haven't danced for three years".

By his car, when he reached it, stood a policeman, who said, "You oughtn't to have parked here, sir".

"But I always have."

"Well, we won't say anything about it this time. Hope you locked that dickey, sir. Lot of sneak thieves about."

“You bet I did. Thanks for not summoning me. Have a drink, won’t you?”

But the coin was refused.

“Superior sort of chap”, mused Rockingham. “Can’t be much of a job, tramping about in this weather.” For a March gale bellied the hood; and rain spattered his windscreen as he drove off.

The garage near his mother’s house proved chock-a-block. He had to leave the car outside and rely on the attendant’s promise to “put her away meself as soon as some of ’em clear out”. It was coming down cats and dogs by then. But economy had been too long his habit for him to allow himself a taxi for a mere hundred yards.

“Dripping, that’s what you are”, said Fanny when she let him into his mother’s hall. “That overcoat had best go down to the kitchen. Your mother wants to know if you remembered it was decorations.”

“Yes. You’ll find them in the bag. I’d better take it upstairs for you.”

“Not till I’ve wiped it.”

She fetched a duster. He toted the kitbag to the first floor landing. His mother called through the door of the drawing room, “Is that you, Tom?” He went in; kissed her; apologised for his neglect.

“Fanny’s got her rheumatism”, said Mabelle Rockingham. “You’d better unpack for yourself. We’re dining at the club. No room for eight in this box of a house.”

“Eight?”

“Yes. The Wethereds are dining with me. Didn’t I tell you that in my letter?”

“No. What made you invite them?”

“He mightn’t have bought the tickets if I hadn’t. But once I had, he couldn’t very well get out of it.”

“Very Machiavellian of you, mother.”

“It was, rather.”

Mabelle Rockingham smiled. She demanded a cigarette from yet another of her porcelain boxes. He struck a match for her.

“I don’t like American women as a rule”, she went on. “But Wethered’s Camilla is charming. I’ve taken quite a fancy to her. Why can’t you find yourself a wife like that, Tom? We could do with something presentable in the family. Frances”, she sniffed, “gets to look more like a plum pudding every day.”

Seizing the chance to sidetrack her, he disputed that.

“Oh, I admit Frances is pleasant-looking”, he forced from her. “But she’s got about as much personality as the Albert Memorial. And the way she fusses about those children of hers! Anyone’d think they were made of sugar.”

In a sentence or so, however, she glided back from the sidetrack on to the main

line.

“You could marry a girl of Camilla Wethered’s age”, she said abruptly. “He had no right to. He’s nearly as old as I am.”

“He’s nothing of the sort.”

“I said nearly. Anyway, it looks as though he were too old to have children. They’ve been married the best part of two years—and there doesn’t seem to be a sign of one.”

“Really, mother—”

“Don’t look so shocked, Tom. A woman of that age ought to have children, especially if there’s a title to pass on. Confound it, that must be Fanny taking your bag up to your room. Go and stop her at once. She’ll only rick her back—and then there’ll be nobody to look after me.”

Fanny, overtaken halfway up the second flight, protested furiously, “I’ve always taken your luggage upstairs, Mr. Tom. And I’ve always unpacked for you. I’m not on my last legs yet, I hope”.

But Rockingham’s smile seemed to win the day.

§ 3

At a quarter to seven Mrs. Rockingham’s eldest son left her again, and went to his own room.

“Obstinate old devil, Fanny”, he thought, looking at the clothes laid out on the bed, at the dress coat on its hanger. “She’s even pinned my medals on for me.”

Yet Fanny’s devotion touched him. A loyal old creature. And full of guts. She would help his mother to dress now. What would she do with herself afterwards? Have her supper, gossip with a cook even older than herself, and be in bed by ten o’clock. A dull life, Fanny’s. But then so were most women’s. It was only the Gails of this world who . . .

Funny, how keenly one was remembering Gail.

Beginning to undress, he did his best to switch thought away from Gail Vanduser. A whole two years now, since he had even heard from her. Probably she’d married again. She might have had a couple of children by this time. Not very likely though. Gail had never wanted children. Neither had Mary Hawkins.

Funny again—how completely he seemed to have forgotten Mary in these last two months.

Once out of his clothes and into his dressing gown, the fire—which Fanny had lit as usual—tempted him. With no unpacking to do, he had plenty of time for a sit-

down and a smoke.

Both Gail's face and Mary's floated in those first smoke puffs. But after a few seconds they vanished; and Camilla's took their place.

Natural—he mused—that his mother had taken a fancy to Camilla. She really was “charming”. Pity, he couldn't find himself a wife like that. Pity, he and she hadn't met sooner. Damnation—there went his favourite pipe.

Rusty Rockingham wondered, as he retrieved the broken vulcanite and the scratched bowl, out of which some tobacco had fallen, from the fireplace, what on earth could have made him drop his pipe. Again, he grew conscious of excitement as he rose and took his spare briar from the bedside table on which Fanny had laid it.

He really mustn't dawdle about like this. His mother hated to be kept waiting. They must be at the club punctually—just in case Hawk Wethered arrived before the arranged time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

§ 1

Mabelle Rockingham's eldest—dressing himself with more care than usual—kept one eye on his watch. The conscious excitement had subsided. No vision of any woman haunted him.

Nevertheless, he was aware of a new edge to anticipation. This evening promised pleasure. He wouldn't miss it for worlds.

A last glance at his own reflection in the mirror, a last touch to his white tie, satisfied him. He looked round for his opera hat, for his white silk muffler; decided that Fanny must have taken them to the hall; switched the lights off, and went downstairs.

The pseudo Louis-the-Sixteenth clock on the mantelpiece in the drawing room showed him that his mother would not be ready for at least a quarter of an hour. He picked up the evening paper; skimmed the report of a criminal case, and a leading article headed, "Unthinkable". Australia—he read—had good reasons for saying it was unthinkable that she should give back their possessions in New Guinea to the Germans.

Neither the criminal case nor the leader, however, made more than fleeting impressions on his mind.

Excitement was mounting again. He could not bring himself to sit down. Another few moments—and he had turned on the radio, which was still playing when his mother appeared at the door.

Mabelle Rockingham made quite a figure. She wore a purple cloak, a black velvet dress, her two orders, and most of her diamonds. The tortoiseshell-handled stick on which she supported herself had been his father's.

"I hope you approve," she said with a touch of mockery. "In the sacred cause of robbing snobs for charity an old lady must look her best."

Something made him say, "But you're not old". Her smile told him that he had pleased her.

"Get along with you", she countered.

He followed her down into the hall, where Fanny was already telephoning for a taxi. She noticed that he was very careful about the knotting of his muffler.

"You're almost presentable tonight", she chaffed. "But you ought to have a top hat. Those things look too pre-war."

“This one actually is”, laughed her eldest. “So what shall I do about it?”
“Keep it folded and carry it under your arm.”

§ 2

The rain had stopped, but the wind still blew half a gale, so that one felt glad of Mr. Borland’s oleaginous hairwash as one stepped bare-headed across the pavement and into the taxicab. But Rusty Rockingham’s one little touch of personal vanity did not last long.

His mother’s garrulity distracted him. The food at her club was usually “rather foul”. She’d ordered a special dinner, and three bottles of champagne. Did he think three would be enough?

“I should imagine so”, he answered. “Lady Wethered doesn’t drink anything.”

“Neither should I, according to the latest ideas of that fool, Lucius. He wants me to go to Droitwich for a cure now. As though I’d nothing to do except enjoy myself.”

She chatted on till they reached her club. He paid the fare while she hobbled into the bare entrance hall.

“None of ’em here yet”, she said when he joined her. “Porter, show my son where he can leave his hat and coat.”

He rejoined her, after a final inspection of his hair, in a vast apartment, its walls dotted with nondescript pictures, its armchairs with nondescript women. She had taken up her position by the fire and was smoking a cigarette.

“Nobody’s ever on time nowadays”, she grumbled; but William and Frances arrived almost before she had completed the sentence.

“Geoffrey’s here too”, announced Frances. “He’s got the most marvellous girl in tow.”

“Synthetic blond”, smiled William. “They like ’em that way in the Air Force.”

Geoffrey with his blond followed, and one of the nondescript women quizzed them through an actual lorgnette.

Valerie Danvers—introduced as “Val—you know her Uncle Absalom, mother, he’s by way of being on one of your committees”—disdained Court mourning. The “exiguous top works” (as William subsequently called them) of her pink and gold dress revealed the maximum. Her dimples were attractive; her red lips scornful, and her green eyes just a little too inquisitive.

Sipping one of the cocktails her hostess had now demanded, she whispered, “Your N.O. brother looks a bit of a stick, Geoffrey. What’s the gunner one like?”

Men with red hair are always supposed to be rather amorous”.

“He isn’t”, whispered back the wing commander. “And his hair isn’t red either.”

“It’s a kind of a chestnut, really. I’m not sure I don’t want to stroke it.”

“Pull yourself together, you little idiot. This isn’t the sort of party we’ve just come from.”

“It certainly isn’t. I feel we’re going to have a perfectly foul evening. Can’t we escape?”

“Not before midnight. At the very earliest.”

“Christopher! And I thought you were in love with me.”

“What on earth put that idea into your head?”

“I don’t know. I supposed it was being asked to meet your mother.”

“Val—you’re tight.”

“No such luck . . . I say, who’s this? The wicked marquis?”

“His name’s Wethered, more commonly known as the Hawk.”

§ 3

Valerie’s description had not been inapt. The Hawk, as he came through the glass doors, one of which a page boy held open, and stood looking for his hostess, might have been the very figure of fiction to which she alluded. All he lacked was the monocle and the gardenia.

The silver streak in his jet-black hair, the long bar of miniatures and the two pinkish pearls in his piqué shirtfront almost turned the commonplace clothes he wore into fancy dress.

His dark eyes having spotted their target, he walked quickly—if a little stiffly—to the fireplace, and shook hands, saying:

“Fraid we’re a few minutes late, Mrs. Rockingham. Sorry. My fault. Camilla’ll be along in a moment. Hallo, Rusty. How are you?”

“All right, thank you, sir. Will you have a sidecar?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Rusty Rockingham’s hand, as he picked the brimming cocktail from the salver on the little table near the fire and carried it over, was absolutely steady. But his eyes seemed to be playing him a strange trick. He could hardly keep them on the Hawk long enough to make certain that he had hold of his cocktail, so hard were they being pulled towards the glass doors. Excitement grew conscious again—and its cause at last certain. In a few seconds he would be seeing Camilla.

Here she came, head high!

The black frock enhanced the whiteness of her skin, the natural gold of her hair. Its long full skirt made her look taller than she had appeared in his mental pictures. Tonight she wore a little jewelry—an emerald on one finger, pearls at her throat.

More than his eyes were being pulled now. Automatically, as she approached the little group by the fireplace, he moved towards her, so that they met halfway across the room.

She gave him one of her boyish handshakes, one frank look from her hazel eyes. “Have we kept everybody waiting?” she asked.

“Good heavens, no. We haven’t finished our cocktails yet.”

“I’m so glad.”

She went by him, apologised to his mother, was introduced to Frances, to William and Geoffrey and “Geoffrey’s girl”. He joined her husband, who seemed in the highest spirits.

“Nearly had my head bitten off in the car”, laughed Hawk Wethered. “If ever you marry, Rusty, don’t keep your lady wife waiting when she’s all dressed up and ready to go to a party. Believe me, it isn’t popular.”

Camilla seemed to overhear. She turned her head—but turned it away again without speaking. Rusty Rockingham’s mood changed—a vague discomfort succeeding the excitement of the previous moments. Almost at once, his mother said, a trifle loudly, “If you’ve all finished your drinks, we might as well go in to dinner. You’re sitting next to Lady Wethered, Tom”.

Discomfort went.

He approached Camilla again. His mother and the Hawk led the party out of the room. The others followed, leaving them to bring up the rear.

“I owe you an apology, too”, said Camilla without any preamble. “I’ve been meaning to invite you over for tennis. But somehow the weekends have all been so busy.

“How do you think Guy’s looking?” she went on, not waiting for his answer.

“At the top of his form, I thought.”

“He isn’t really. His knee’s still troublesome—and he can’t take any exercise. I took him to an osteopath this morning. Your army doctors don’t seem too much good for that sort of thing.”

“What did the osteopath say?”

“He was rather guarded”, smiled Camilla. “And I gather that what he did was rather painful. But he promises a complete cure—if only Guy will obey orders—in three weeks.”

They were all into the dining room by then. As the head waiter shepherded them

to a round table, with a high centrepiece of spring flowers, Val Danvers, glancing round her, murmured to Geoffrey, "I say, this is Edward the Seventh with a vengeance. Do you think we'll have a sorbet?"

But, once seated between him and his eldest brother, she curbed her tongue, thinking, "Curse this Wethered woman. She makes me feel a positive hag".

Meanwhile Camilla had turned to William, seated on her other side.

"I gather you're in the navy", Rusty Rockingham heard her say. "Why aren't you in your ship?"

"Oh, I'm doing a job of work at the Admiralty this year."

"That must be interesting."

"It is up to a point. But I'd rather be at sea."

They continued to talk. Perforce one had to say something to Geoffrey's girl.

"Do you live in London?" Rusty asked her.

"Rather. Don't I look it?" She flashed her teeth at him. "There's nowhere else *to* live in my opinion. But of course I get away most weekends."

Her brightness afflicted him with aphasia. She rattled on for a few sentences. Geoffrey chimed in. Hors d'œuvres were served, then cups of cold soup.

"What I want to know", said Val Danvers abruptly, "is when our new monarch's going to take a wife. He must be contemplating it."

"Why are you so certain?" Geoffrey spoke.

"Because there was all that fuss about his money in the House of Commons the other day. Didn't you read it? I simply shrieked at what one of the labour men said. He wanted to know whether H.M. had given any guarantee that he was going to get married."

"Haven't you *any* reverence, Val?" asked Geoffrey.

"Rather. I think he's a perfect pet. Though I am a Young Republican."

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's a new stunt. We have meetings once a week. We're trying to get old Wells to come and lecture. But he's being rather sticky about it."

Meanwhile champagne was being poured, and Camilla had put her hand over her glass.

"You observe I'm quite unrepentant, Major Rockingham", she said, turning away from William.

"You must have a very strong mind."

She thought that over.

"I have", she admitted, almost as though she were imparting a secret. "I often feel I ought to have been a man."

With the fish, conversation grew a little more general. With the entrée, the Hawk mounted his hobbyhorse.

“I don’t like this German business”, he began. “They’re getting above themselves again. If I’d been Sarraut I’d have given the French army its marching orders. Laval and Hoare were absolutely right. We ought to have made a deal with Mussolini over Abyssinia.”

Mrs. Rockingham took him up at once, with a forthright:

“I can’t see that Mussolini’s any better than Hitler. They’re two of a trade”.

“Possibly. But we don’t want them both against us. The Admiralty agrees with me there, I hope, Rockingham.”

The Silent Service took refuge in dry humour.

“I’m afraid I’m not sufficiently in their lordships’ confidence to answer that question”, said William; and Camilla put in, “The trouble with my husband is that he’s so blood-thirsty.”

Hawk Wethered raised his glass to her across the spring flowers; emptied it, and grinned:

“The trouble with my dear wife is that she has contracted Baldwinitis, in other words a perfect passion for our Prime Minister, which I cannot say I share”.

Again, as he spoke, Rusty Rockingham experienced that vague discomfort. Tonight it almost seemed as though Camilla and her husband were deliberately baiting each other. Was she unhappy with him?

The thought passed in a flash. But something made him say, “I’m a great believer in Mr. Baldwin”.

“Why?” asked the Hawk.

“Because nothing ever seems to rattle him.”

“Merely a proof, my dear chap, that he has no imagination.”

Their eyes met. Once again the queer sardonic humour in those dark pupils puzzled the eldest Rockingham. Then his mother said, “I agree with you, Tom. But I can’t help thinking, Sir Guy, that we’re getting just a little too political”.

And Colonel (temporary Brigadier) Sir Guy Wethered took the hint, brooding secretly, “Mahseer fishing isn’t in it with this”.

§ 4

A quick brandy (just as well there’d been no port considering that one couldn’t take any exercise) and the first whiff of his small cigar made that peculiar mind which was the Hawk’s even more than usually active.

“Onlooker sees most of the game”, continued his brooding. “I know men and I know women. Highly significant—the way Rusty championed Camilla just now. She liked having him on her side, too. She liked him from the first moment she set eyes on him. Otherwise she wouldn’t have wanted him to come and stay with us again. I’ve snookered that, though. Twice. Sly, the way she brought it up each time.”

Somehow, nevertheless, one couldn’t associate slyness with Camilla. So perhaps she wasn’t very interested in the man—yet.

“But she soon will be”, decided the Hawk, watching them covertly. “And he’s more than half in love with her already, although the silly ass doesn’t even suspect it. That’s the trouble with these goody-goody boys.”

His eyes switched five degrees to Val Danvers. Rather a nice piece of goods. Probably as hot as mustard. Bryce-Atkinson, too, must be an ass, if he really thought girls hadn’t changed.

“Wish I were the same age as Rusty’s brother”, concluded the Hawk’s ruminations. “War for the man. Woman for the relaxation of the warrior. A jolly sound idea, even if it is a Boche one.”

Aloud, with Mrs. Rockingham just rising from the table, he asked:

“How about transport to this tamasha?”

“I’ve got a bus outside”, answered Geoffrey. “She’ll accommodate four at a pinch.”

“So have I.” The Hawk turned to his hostess. “Supposing we take you and Rusty.”

“Rusty? Oh, you mean Tom. I always did dislike that nickname. Thanks, Sir Guy. I fancy that would be the best arrangement.”

As the four men followed the four women across the empty dining room, the Hawk thought, once again:

“Danger? Hardly. Only a bit of a risk. Gives me quite a kick, though. I never did like an easy ride”.

CHAPTER TWENTY

§ 1

“You sit between the ladies, Rusty”, said the Hawk. “It’ll be better for my gammy leg, that way.”

Mrs. Rockingham and Camilla were already in the car. Major Rockingham obeyed his C.R.A.’s order. Graves let one of the other seats down. The Hawk hauled himself in.

“I shan’t be able to dance”, he went on, as they started. “Confounded nuisance. Who’s this Danvers girl?”

Mrs. Rockingham disclosed the pedigree. They exchanged memories of Val’s dead mother.

“Damn fine-looking woman,” said the Hawk.

Meanwhile the other two sat silent, the overclose proximity affecting them both. In each, now, was something of excitement and something of discomfort. Yet in neither did these become fully conscious. They merely experienced relief when the short journey came to an end.

This relief vented itself in humour.

“I’m afraid I’ve been squashing you”, said Rusty Rockingham.

“You are rather bulky”, smiled Camilla.

Graves helped the Hawk out.

“Stiff as blazes”, he grumbled. “That bonesetter fellow didn’t half give me gyp. You’ll have to deputise for me on the floor, Rusty.”

There was no malice in his tone; but just a hint of it in Mabelle Rockingham’s, “Tom used to be very fond of dancing”. And, once again, her eldest son remembered Gail.

How his mother had hated Gail—though she had never suspected their intimacy. A regular old Puritan, his mother, for all her Rabelaisian tongue.

“I love dancing.” Camilla’s voice drove out recollection. Hat under arm, he followed her along the red carpet, through the revolving door, into the enormous lounge of the hotel.

There, William, Frances and Val Danvers joined them almost immediately.

“Geoffrey’s having a spot of trouble about parking”, said Val. “He asked me to wait for him and said would you all go in.”

A broad staircase led down from the lounge. At the foot of this stood several

girls in nursing uniform, chanting, “Do buy a programme. They’re only five shillings”.

“Committee”, said Mabelle Rockingham. The Hawk fished two half-crowns from a trouser pocket. The two brothers Rockingham followed his example. “Highway robbery”, he commented as the three of them made their way to the cloakroom. “But I rather liked the aphrodisiac with the ginger hair.”

It took them a little time to hand over their hats and coats and collect their tickets. Emerging from the cloakroom, they encountered Janice Lampson with Kid Masters, who mumbled a shy “Good evening, sir”, eyeing his brigadier with due awe.

“You two alone?” asked Hawk Wethered.

“No, sir. We’re with my people.”

The pair disappeared into the press at the foot of the staircase, from which more steps led down to the ballroom.

“I expect mother’s gone to our table”, said William. “She can’t bear standing in a crowd.”

§ 2

Outside the ballroom, the three men were again accosted—by a very large lady who insisted on selling them three button-holes, and a very small one with tombola tickets, of which they bought three dozen, “only sixpence each”.

“Cheaper to write ’em a cheque and stay at home”, commented William. “What are we supposed to be contributing to, Tom?”

“Woolly waistcoats for wounded Abyssinians”, suggested the Hawk.

The large lady, busy pinning a carnation at his lapel, said, “Aren’t you naughty?”—and did not blush at the riposte.

The band began to play, dancing was resumed, as they made their way round the floor to Mrs. Rockingham’s table. Both she and Camilla were smoking. Frances said, “You’re just in time, William. This is one of my favourite tunes”.

She rose. William put an arm round her. They slid off together. Rusty Rockingham took the seat next to Camilla’s.

“Aren’t you two going to perform?” asked the Hawk, seating himself next to Mrs. Rockingham.

“Presently”, said Camilla; and, continuing to smoke, began to comment on the various couples.

“They’re none of them exactly expert”, she said; and, a little later, with Janice dancing by, “Who’s that girl who just smiled at you? The one in the gray frock with

the dark hair.”

“My colonel’s daughter.”

“She’s rather pretty.”

“Do you think so?”

“Don’t you?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever thought about it.”

“No. I don’t suppose you would.”

Her words intrigued him; but he was afraid of asking her to explain them. Momentarily, his excitement had been submerged by self-consciousness. The very frankness of her eyes made him anxious to avoid them. She played with the emerald on her engagement finger for a moment before she continued:

“I see there’s to be a cabaret. We call them floor shows in my country. Don’t you feel our word’s the more descriptive?”

They were on safe ground again. Self-consciousness dwindled. Once more, as they talked on, as the other two joined in their conversation, he caught himself appraising her beauty, speculating about her mind.

Was her frankness only a mannerism? Were there depths in her? Why did she laugh so rarely, smile so often? Could she be happy—really happy—married to a man like the Hawk?

Her beauty, tonight, was positively dazzling. Other eyes than his own were experiencing the pull of it. That bald old man, now, dancing with the tall brunette. This youngster just abreast of them. Why did she seem so oblivious of their admiration? Didn’t she know how lovely she was? Or had she been too hurt to care?

“Perhaps that’s it”, he thought, remembering Bryce-Atkinson’s story—and the explanation saddened all the romantic in him, struck him suddenly speechless.

Or was it something else that had stricken him speechless—fear?

The music stopped, William and Frances returned, as his brain flung up that one word, “Fear”. Then thought left him, and he was only conscious of pleasure, of the faintest throbbing at his temples.

“Do you think we might dance the next one?” he asked.

“Why not?”

As Camilla spoke, he saw Geoffrey and Val again. They came across the floor arm in arm, Geoffrey with one of the large lady’s carnations in his buttonhole, Val carrying a programme.

“Parking arrangements ghastly”, said Geoffrey. “I had to take her to a garage in the end. Why aren’t you people drinking anything? What about a whiskey and soda,

“sir?”

“Brandy and soda”, said the Hawk, thus addressed.

“You, William?”

“Not for the moment, thanks.”

Geoffrey went in chase of a passing waiter. Val Danvers took the chair by the Hawk’s.

“Have you been tripping it?” she asked.

“No. I’ve got a dicky leg.”

Geoffrey returned. Desultory talk grew general. A figure with a megaphone rose from the bandstand to announce, “The next number will be a Paul Jones”.

“What on earth’s that?” asked Camilla.

On being told by Valerie, “It’s a sort of general pickup. You know, everybody dancing with everybody”, she said, “I don’t think we’ll have this one after all, Major Rockingham”.

The band struck up again. Geoffrey said: “Come on, Val. Let’s see who we can get off with”. Frances and William stayed at the table. Camilla, lighting another cigarette as she watched the first change of partners, commented, “In America we have a horrible custom called cutting in. But this looks even more unpleasant”.

“I rather agree with you”, said Rusty Rockingham; and once again a spark of understanding leaped from his blue eyes to her hazel.

Then, once again—and for long, long seconds—he was obsessed by the memory of Gail.

§ 3

In Camilla’s mind, while her eyes continued to follow the Paul Jones, were no memories, because—for years now—she had been training herself never to look back.

Looking forward, too—it always seemed to her—was unprofitable. One must live for today, not for yesterday or tomorrow. Only thus could one compete with life.

Yet nowadays—she mused, still watching the floor—the competition was easy enough. Here in England one could forget the past. One had neither money troubles nor social troubles. And one’s marriage . . .

“Might have turned out so much worse”, she decided. “Guy still fascinates me. There’s nobody quite like him. If only he were just a little younger. If only I could have a child by him!”

His voice interrupted thought. He was addressing Major Rockingham.

“You and my lady wife will have to shake a leg after this one, Rusty.”

What an absurd nickname. Major Rockingham’s mother called him “Tom”. She must be very fond of him. But did she understand him? There were depths in this man. He wasn’t by any means the typical “British Army officer”. Funny, how one knew that; how one had known it after less than half an hour of his acquaintance.

Funny, too—that he should have remained a bachelor. He wasn’t entirely uninterested in women. “Tom used to be very fond of dancing.” He must have been in love some time or other. Good-looking, really. Not poor. He had confessed as much. So why on earth hadn’t he married? Fastidiousness? Romanticism?

Most men were secretly romantics. Especially Englishmen. Men could afford to be. A woman couldn’t.

“At least I couldn’t”, decided Camilla Wethered—and checked introspection with a stern hand.

The Paul Jones, she saw—with something of a shock, because she had not realised herself so long thoughtful—was over. At the end of the room opposite to the bandstand, velvet-clad attendants were dragging on a small platform. A man mounted the platform. Couples clustered round it.

“What’s going to happen now?” she asked.

“Our chairman’s going to make an appeal”, explained Mrs. Rockingham. “But I don’t expect we’ll hear a word. He’s the world’s worst speaker.”

The sequel proved her right. Even the microphone only brought them an occasional word; and soon—perfunctory applause over—the band struck up a brisk tune.

“Would you like to dance now, Lady Wethered?” asked the man of whom Camilla still thought as “Major Rockingham”.

“Yes. I think I should.”

She rose as she spoke. He followed her on to the floor. For a second she was conscious of the same excitement, the same discomfort she had experienced in the car. Then his arm went round her, their hands touched, and she was only aware of pleasure.

They had circled the whole room before either said a word; and even so they only exchanged two banal sentences.

“This band isn’t too bad, Lady Wethered.”

“No. They keep quite good time.”

“I’m not keen on the very slow tunes.”

“Neither am I.”

The floor, emptyish for their first turn, began to fill. He steered her away from the

edge towards the centre. So light she was to steer, so responsive to one's every hint.

Rhythm caught, held them, made them momentarily one. Speech seemed to have lost all meaning. They did not even need to smile at each other, so sure was the sense of mutual well-being.

Then the rhythm changed, and his steps to the rhythm, and abruptly something made her say, "You don't dance like an Englishman".

Perceptibly, surprisingly, she felt his left hand tighten over her right.

His fingers relaxed. Again music held them. Once more, she experienced that sense of well-being. Yet now both her intuition and her curiosity were alight.

Her casual words had startled him; twitched away what must be a mere mask of selfcomposure. Why?

A sense of mischief, absent these many years, allied itself to the intuition and the curiosity.

"No wonder you used to be very fond of dancing", she went on, "considering that you're so good at it. Who was the lady teacher?"

A direct look accompanied the words. She saw blood mount to his hard cheeks.

"One of your own countrywomen," he answered—and could have kicked himself for blurting out the truth.

Her impulse was to hazard, "With whom you must have been very much in love". But the hazard seemed too great. Again—why?

The old sense of mischief contented itself with a knowing smile. Willy nilly, he smiled in response. A nice man. So simple. So unlike the one she had married, who had battered down her defences within a week.

Defences! One needed them. All the time . . .

Thought made her miss another change of rhythm. He compelled her into correct step. The sensation of having been mastered was not altogether pleasurable. She found herself resenting it, resenting the very simplicity of this man.

Selfcomposure, indeed. A mask, forsooth. When he wore his heart on his sleeve.

All the same, a lovely dancer. And one adored dancing. Let it go at that . . .

§ 4

. . . Ten more minutes went by before Rusty Rockingham brought his partner back to his mother's table. But he was still kicking himself for the involuntary frankness of that answer, and for his ridiculous blush.

His instinct was to keep away from Camilla for the rest of the evening. With the

music striking up again, he asked Frances for a dance; but their steps never had fitted, and she proved so infernally talkative—about the one person he did not wish to discuss.

“Isn’t Lady Wethered marvellous?” she began. “Such a lovely dancer, too. I was watching you. American women are always so beautifully turned out. They have such nice hands and feet. Her husband was telling us that she’s a southerner, though she’s lived most of her life in California. I always thought southerners were dark. Did you ever see such hair, Tom? William adores blonds. I’m positively afraid to let him be with her. Oh, look, here they are.”

William and Camilla slid alongside, danced away. Frances continued to rattle.

“I don’t think I like your brigadier”, she confided. “I can’t imagine what made her marry him, though of course he’s frightfully handsome in an actorish kind of way.”

Music stopped. Rusty Rockingham relieved himself of his sister-in-law.

“Aren’t the Gunners going to take *me* on?” asked Val Danvers. “I’m getting a bit fed up with the Air Force.”

“Feelings heartily reciprocated”, smiled Geoffrey. “Take her away and drown her, Tom. Only mind she doesn’t corrupt your morals first.”

The next dance was of the slowest. Val sidled into the arms of “The Royal Regiment. That’s right, isn’t it?”, as though she were going to sleep there. But halfway round the room she pleaded:

“Take me upstairs and buy me a drink. Your mother frightens me to death. I daren’t ask her for one and if I wait till supper, I shall pass out”.

“But isn’t there a bar down here?”

“Oh, yes. If you like dog fights and double prices.”

They stopped at the doors, made their way up the two flights and into the big lounge.

“Quo fas et gloria ducunt”, quoted Val, sinking into an armchair. “Saint Christopher bless you—and make mine a gin and tonic. Why the hell does one come to charity dances? They always make me want to scream. Everybody’s so horribly pukka. Are you, by the way?”

“Slightly, I’m afraid.”

“So’s Geoffrey. But he’s worse than you are. Because he pretends he isn’t. Don’t forget the lemon, waiter. Hello, Janice. You fed up too? Come and sit with us. This is Major Rockingham. All ubique. Like your ruddy father.”

Janice Lampson, her subaltern still in tow, smiled, “Don’t take any notice of her. She’s always like this when she’s got one of her crushes on. How’s the wing

commander, darling? Not winged yet?"

"Shut up", snapped Val, blushing furiously; and a sense of mischief, long since an absentee, rejoined Rusty Rockingham's mind.

"So it's like that, is it?" he said slowly. "I've been wondering what was the matter with her."

"Janice", said Val Danvers, the blush fading under her make-up, "always was a liar, and she'll go on being one till she dies."

Kid Masters thinking—his hero worship for once lukewarm—"Ghastly luck finding him here, just when I've got her to myself, too", drew up two more armchairs. Two more drinks were ordered. The girls continued to chip each other. As he listened to them, Rusty Rockingham's sense of mischief left him. Abruptly, he felt depressed.

Damn it all, why was one over forty? Why couldn't one be young again, like these kids?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

§ 1

The eldest of the Rockinghams was still feeling his age when Valerie Danvers said, "I suppose we ought to be pushing back. It's getting on for midnight. How about you, Janice?"

"I think I'll stay put for a bit."

"Okey-dokey. Come along, the right of the line."

The blonded girl gathered up her cigarette case, thrust it into her bag. Walking towards the head of the staircase, she laid a thin hand with painted nails on Rusty Rockingham's sleeve.

"Janice always talks an awful lot of bilge", she began. "Don't believe her, will you?"

His sense of mischief returned.

"At least", he said, "I can promise discretion."

She pulled him to a standstill. Suddenly, her green eyes were imploring.

"You needn't rag me", she begged. "It's quite bad enough without that."

Pity touched, his smile transfigured him. She was only a kid, not twenty-one yet. At her age, one felt things. He, himself . . . A very old memory brushed lightly at his mind. "Some girl or other", he remembered. "Can't even think of her name. But I tried to write a sonnet about her."

Aloud he said, "Sorry"; and it seemed to satisfy. They walked on again, came down to the ballroom.

"Do you mind if we dance?" asked Val.

The music was slower than ever. She danced in complete silence. He sensed that her mind had obliterated him. Every now and then, her eyes wandered. He knew that they were looking for his brother. Willy nilly, he fell to wondering whether Geoffrey had made love to this girl. A bit of a flirt, Geoffrey. Probably she'd led him on a bit. Rather that type. No harm in her, though. All the sophistication assumed.

Thinking thus, he saw Geoffrey partnering Camilla, who smiled at him just before her head turned. Val seemed to wake up.

"Do you know Lady Wethered well?" she asked.

"Not very. I know her husband better."

"Is he as cruel as he looks?"

"Cruel? What makes you say that?"

Her green eyes sought his blue.

“When I first saw him”, she said, “I called him the wicked marquis. I shouldn’t be a bit surprised to learn that he beats her.”

“Oh, come.”

“With a polo quirt.”

“Nonsense.” But was it altogether nonsense—about the Hawk’s cruelty? The mere suspicion made one feel physically sick.

Common sense blew away the sensation of nausea. Camilla’s husband might have his eccentricities. But he was no sadist. This child had let her imagination run away with her.

“Nonsense”, he repeated—and the music came to a full stop with a rattle of drums.

§ 2

The drums rattled again. The floor emptied. Lights were dimmed.

“This must be the cabaret”, said Valerie as Rusty Rockingham escorted her back to the table. “They always have it the same time as supper so that one shan’t eat too much.”

William arranged a chair for her. Geoffrey brought back Camilla. A waiter filled the eight glasses with a non-vintage champagne. Another waiter brought eight more cups of cold soup, while attendants were propelling two pianos towards the centre of the floor.

The pianos were arranged back to back. A man and a girl musician appeared. Spotlights flashed on their faces. They began to play. A few people listened. They finished playing. The pianos were propelled out of sight. A voice asked, “Aren’t you going to sit down, Major Rockingham? We’re supposed to be having supper”.

He realised that he had been standing behind Camilla, took the chair between her and Frances.

“Could you get me some ice water?” she went on, relapsing into one of her rare Americanisms.

By the time he succeeded in attracting the wine waiter’s attention, soup had been whisked away, the band had struck up and a pair of exhibition dancers were gyrating. Another voice asked:

“Fish, sir?”

“No, thanks.”

Looking back on the last few minutes, it seemed to Rusty Rockingham that he

must have been undergoing some mental black out. He could recollect nothing between Val's, "They always have it the same time as supper", and Camilla's, "Aren't you going to sit down?"

She, too, had refused food. Now she was watching the performance with that peculiar intentness which seemed to be one of her major characteristics.

His instinct to keep away from her had vanished. Now, he only wanted to draw her into conversation.

"Those two are rather good", he began.

"Passable." Her eyes were still intent. "The man's better than the woman. They have to be. But I always despise a male dancer."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It just happens to be one of my prejudices."

She fell silent. The wine waiter extended a bottle over his shoulder, refilled his glass, attempted to refill hers. Rusty Rockingham said, a trifle brusquely:

"No. Lady Wethered wants some water. Why haven't you brought any? I asked for it ten minutes ago."

"You didn't ask me, sir."

"Well, get some anyway."

The ill-temper underlying his own words surprised him. So did the thought, "How dare anyone keep *her* waiting?" He experienced another black out which lasted till the exhibition dancers bowed to their applause.

The waiter arrived with the iced water. Camilla thanked him, and drank. On the floor, an alleged conjuror followed the dancers. This performance, too, she watched. Frances' outspoken comments distracted Rusty Rockingham.

"I don't think much of any of them", said Frances. "And I'm not a bit hungry. Do you think this champagne's corked? It tastes rather funny."

He lifted his glass to his nose, to his lips.

"I can't find anything the matter with it."

Frances accepted his verdict, and some chicken. He noticed that the Hawk and his mother were also eating heartily. They seemed to have found a lot in common. He heard her remonstrating, "But you ought to play bridge".

Camilla's eyes were still with the conjuror. Glancing beyond her, he saw William consulting his watch and Geoffrey's head leaning very close to Val's.

At the sight, fantasy came to him. William, who hated late nights, must be wanting to take his Frances home. Geoffrey and the Danvers girl—she had said something about "a bottle party" to Janice Lampson—must also be plotting a move. Soon, the Hawk and Camilla would leave—and this evening to which he had so

looked forward be over.

He realised that he was touching Camilla's bare arm, that he was saying, "We really must have another dance as soon as this show's finished".

"Why, of course we must."

But her gold head did not turn.

§ 3

"Why did he do that?" thought Camilla Wethered. "I can't bear being touched." Yet suddenly, when those touching fingers withdrew from her arm, she felt lonely—stranger in a strange land.

This land was not hers. These people were not her own people. And they never would be. Never—as long as she lived.

The thought passed, but left a depression in its wake. For the first time since her marriage, she was tempted to look back on her one and only passion.

"Len failed you", thought continued. "When the crash came, when you were up against it, his love weakened. But can you blame him? To marry you, he would have had to give up the navy."

No. One couldn't blame Len. A man's work, a man's country, must come before his woman. Otherwise—strange paradox—he wasn't worth a woman's love.

That thought, too, passed. She flung her whole self into the present. The conjuror was off the floor. The band leader had taken his place on the dais. She felt her head turn, heard herself say, "The floor show seems to be over. Let's dance. Shall we?"

"Rather."

The word was utterly English, spoken slowly, with the stress on the first syllable. Yet in it she sensed something of youth, something of enthusiasm, the merest hint of . . . relief.

"He is young", she knew. "At heart anyway. And he liked our last dance together as much as I did. And he was afraid we might miss this one."

At the moment—just as she rose and edged her way round the table—she caught her husband looking at her; suspected amusement in his eyes.

As always, those eyes were trying to veil the thoughts behind them. Her suspicion might be wrong. Why should it amuse Guy to see her dance with one of his officers?

"The queerest man", she thought. "That was one of the reasons why I married him. For curiosity." But there had been so many other reasons—loneliness not the

least.

An arm had circled her by then; fingers were holding her fingers. But those touches she did not resent. Rather—and this knowledge seemed as clear as it seemed strange—was she glad of them. Somehow, they removed the last of her depression. Almost, she felt gay.

As before, they made their first turn of the room without speaking. They were hardly looking at each other when she was impelled to break the silence between them. And that silence-breaking, also, seemed very strange. She could hardly believe it was her own voice saying:

“I went for a walk in Hyde Park this morning. There were plenty of notices to remind me of my first lesson in the ways of the English. So I ought to have remembered it.”

Deliberately, while she was speaking, her eyes sought his. Their transparency, compared with her husband’s, pleased her. This man’s thoughts, at any rate, were easy enough to read.

“You don’t get me?” she went on, relapsing into another of her very rare Americanisms.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Think.” Her sense of mischief was alight again. Not for years had she experienced this youthful desire to tease.

“Think”, she repeated, opening her lips to smile at him. “Think your hardest, Major Rockingham. What do all the notices in all your English parks say?”

His forehead wrinkled.

“Keep off the grass”, he suggested after a few seconds.

“Precisely. I didn’t. Will you please forgive me for it?”

Once more, just for the split of a second, she felt his left hand tighten on her right. Once more, she felt his fingers relax, and saw the blood flush at the prominent cheekbones. Then, as he recovered himself, his smile answered hers.

“I was not aware”, he said, “of any trespass.”

“Then why were you annoyed with me?”

The smile went. His forehead wrinkled again. Eyes still holding his, she knew that he was thinking furiously. He danced her halfway round the room before he could bring himself to answer:

“I wasn’t annoyed with you, only with myself—for volunteering information”.

“You didn’t volunteer very much. Tell me——”

But there she broke off; and again they slid the floor in silence, hardly looking at each other, till Camilla’s curiosity proved too strong, impelling her to ask:

“Tell me, were you very fond of her? Is that why you’ve never married?”

He hesitated over his answer. She grew aware of resentment in him. Two more sparks of knowledge—as strange as they seemed clear—flickered through her mind. “I want the truth”, she knew: and, still more strangely, “He won’t refuse it.”

As yet, however, there was no real foreknowledge in either mind. The moment, for all its significance, seemed almost commonplace.

“Cheek”, thought Rusty Rockingham, “It’s none of her business.”

Yet his resentment had already dwindled; and, after another step or so, he said:

“I was. But it’s been over a long time. Three years as a matter of fact”.

“Three years is a long time”, agreed Camilla—and said nothing more. Since how could one say, “You wouldn’t have told me if you were still thinking of marrying her, if you hadn’t gotten over it?”

Gotten. Yet another Americanism. Why should one be feeling so much the American all of a sudden?

And why should one be feeling so glad?

§ 4

One was glad—decided Camilla Wethered, still dancing—to know this particular man heartwhole. Yet even that decision brought no real foreknowledge, only inconsequence, in its train. One must neither look back nor forward. Life, however resolutely one tried to steer one’s way through it, demanded a certain amount of yielding.

She remembered, inconsequently, how she had once been caught in a crowd; and how she had realised the uselessness of trying to assert her own will against the combined drag of a thousand others. She thought, in so far as her inconsequence permitted thinking, that there might be a certain similarity between that occasion and this occasion.

Meanwhile, they continued to dance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

§ 1

The dance was a long one: but to Rockingham it seemed over almost as soon as started.

“Let’s go on,” he said—his mood also inconsequent—as they stood to clap the musicians.

“All right.”

After a pause of less than a minute, music recommenced. He swung her into a waltz. Once more, rhythm caught them, held them, expelling thought.

That sense of mutual well-being was on them again. Neither spoke. But, every once in a while, their eyes met; and they smiled at each other.

Such delight in her smile!

Presently, his delight took shape in the unspoken words, “Nay, she might fly o’er fields of grain, Nor crush in flight the tapering wheat, Or skim the surface of the main, Nor let the billows touch her feet”.

And presently, just for a fleeting second, other words sang through the mind of Rusty Rockingham: “For a day and a night, love sang to us, played with us, Folded us close from the dark and the light . . .”

But in the mind of Camilla Wethered there were no words at all. Rapt, both physically and mentally, she had forgotten herself. Almost, she had forgotten the name of the man with whom she was dancing.

Rapt, both of them! So that to both—when the tune stopped and his arms abandoned her—the onrush of the realities might have been the crack of the huntsman’s whip across the back of two puppies hunting wild.

The whip stung. For long seconds, they stood blinking at the realities; at this floor which had almost emptied while they were waltzing; at the musicians on the nearby dais; at that far table to which they must make their way.

There were only two people at that table now. They went towards it slowly. Consecutive thought had returned to them. Semiconsciously they donned that armour which is civilised man’s protection against his fellow.

“I wonder what’s happened to the rest of our party”, said Camilla.

“Oh, I expect they’ve gone home.”

§ 2

Hawk Wethered had lit the last of his small cigars. His right hand held a tot of liqueur brandy.

“You two ought to take it up professionally”, he said, showing his teeth. “I’d no idea you were such a performer, Rusty.”

Mrs. Rockingham said, “William was so sleepy that Frances had to take him home. The Danvers girl told us she was tired, too. But I imagine she’s a liar. *They’ve* probably gone on to a night club”.

Camilla said, “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to say goodbye to them”.

Rockingham asked, “Is there any champagne left?”

“Not a drop”, said the Hawk—and again his teeth showed.

The dancers sat down. Camilla demanded more iced water. Her husband summoned a waiter with a wave of his cigar.

“You’ll have no digestion left by the time you’re my age”, he chaffed. “What’ll you take, Rusty? I suggest brandy and soda after all that effort.”

He gave the order, and fished out his watch.

“Quarter past one”, he commented. “Lucky we’re staying in town, Camilla. By the way, Mrs. Rockingham wants you to play bridge tomorrow afternoon. Or rather this afternoon. I took the liberty of accepting for you. As you know, I’ve got to be at the War House.”

“It’s not a party”, explained Mabelle Rockingham, “We shall only be four, unless Tom stays at home. But he usually prefers to play at his club when he’s in London.”

“He won’t tomorrow”, mused the Hawk through the fumes of his cognac. “At least I shouldn’t have, at his age. By jove, this young woman of mine’s en beauté tonight.”

The young woman in question seemed to be hesitating.

“I’d rather planned to do some shopping”, she began; then, quickly, “But I fancy I can get through everything by lunch time. Where are we playing, Mrs. Rockingham?”

“At my house. Would you care to lunch with me before-hand? I could make it a quarter to two if you like. That would give you a longer morning.”

“Thank you. It sounds delightful.”

But will it be delightful—Camilla asked herself—and is it wise?

The mental questions, the faint twinge of apprehension which accompanied them, seemed ridiculous. She dismissed them peremptorily, adding:

“That’s to say if you don’t mind lunching alone, Guy”.

“Not me. I’ll have a chop at the Senior.” And for the third time the Hawk showed his pointed teeth.

The iced water and the double brandy arrived. Camilla drank, and lit a cigarette.

Watching her, the elder woman said to herself, “She has poise. She has looks. She appears to have a certain amount of brains. She could have married anybody. So presumably she’s in love with her husband”. Aloud she said:

“Unless you and Tom want another dance, Lady Wethered, I’m going to ask him to take me home as soon as he’s finished his brandy and soda”.

“I don’t think I want to dance any more.”

But didn’t she—Camilla asked herself—and didn’t Tom?

Those questions, also, she dismissed peremptorily. But although she did not experience any other twinge of apprehension, the fact that she was no longer thinking of this man as “Major Rockingham” registered. When he put down his glass empty, she experienced a sensation closely akin to relief.

§ 3

“This hip of mine”, grumbled Mrs. Rockingham, when she reached the top of the first stairway, “really is being a nuisance tonight. You’ll have to give me your arm for the next lot, Tom.”

“Ditto my knee”, said the Hawk. “Serves me right, I suppose, for taking so much to drink.”

He assisted himself up by the banisters. Arm in arm, Mabelle Rockingham and her eldest followed. Camilla came last.

“I’m not really glad it’s over”, she decided. “I should have liked one more dance with . . . Tom.”

They reached the lounge. The two men went for their hats and coats. Mrs. Rockingham subsided into a nearby chair.

“I’ve a good mind not to get up for breakfast”, she proclaimed. “You won’t, of course.”

“Why of course?” asked Camilla.

“Because the modern generation doesn’t believe in discipline.”

“That’s what my husband says. But then, he’s rather given to generalities. Personally I never breakfast in bed and I’m always called at half-past seven.”

“Good for you, my dear. We used to have family prayers at eight when I was a girl.”

“Really.”

“Yes. My father used to read them. Or rather mumble them.”

The elder woman, momentarily out of pain, was laughing; the younger—vaguely touched by that “my dear”—was smiling, when the two men reappeared.

“What’s the joke?” asked the Hawk; and, after Mrs. Rockingham had told him, he went on:

“You were lucky only to be mumbled at. My old man used to bellow at us. He and compulsory chapel at school between ’em turned me into an agnostic, if not an atheist”.

“Are there atheists?” asked Mabelle Rockingham, helping herself to her neat feet with her tortoiseshell-handled stick.

“Plenty in Germany, I believe. And even more in Russia.”

“I can’t help feeling, Sir Guy, that atheism’s rather a pose.”

Her eldest son offered her his arm again. She disdained it with a forthright, “I can manage on the flat, thank you”. The Hawk said, “Sorry we can’t offer you a lift, Mrs. Rockingham. I told my chauffeur he could have the night off. How about getting a couple of taxis, Rusty?”

“All right, sir.”

The younger man went towards the swing doors. Looking at the elder, Camilla thought, “How you like ordering him about. You did it last time—just as he was leaving our house. You’re never really happy unless you’re commanding”.

Yet because that was one of the qualities she most admired in this strange man whom she had married, she could not help laying a hand on his arm.

For a moment, Hawk Wethered’s hairy hand covered hers.

“Enjoyed yourself?” he asked.

“Rather.”

He noticed that she stressed the last syllable. Tenderness deserted him. His innate malice returned.

“Rusty dances better than I do”, ran his thoughts. “He can give me twelve years. Any man of my age who thinks he can keep a young wife faithful to him is a bit touched.”

Meanwhile Rusty was signalling to them from beyond the swing doors.

Outside, the wind had dropped. The four of them stood under the awning for a minute or so.

“Don’t forget you’re lunching with me, Lady Wethered”, said Mrs. Rockingham; and she added—strangely for her, “If you don’t mind, I think I’m going to call you Camilla for the future.”

“I’d much rather you did”, smiled Camilla; and held out her hand.

Rockingham's eyes took in the picture they made. Some how it pleased him—and inordinately—that they were to be friends.

He, too, offered Camilla his hand. But of her alone, his eyes gave him no picture. A sudden attack of selfconsciousness kept them averted. As he turned and followed his mother towards the taxi, the only image they held was the Hawk's.

The Hawk—in that image—seemed to be grinning. For the first time in more than twenty years of acquaintanceship he wondered how far one could trust the man. Had that Danvers girl been partially right in her snap judgment?

What rot!

Suspicion—mainly subconscious—passed as his mother began to talk.

"I like that young woman better every time I meet her", said Mrs. Rockingham. "She's a real beauty in my opinion. Don't you agree?"

Some subtle instinct warned him not to agree too enthusiastically.

"Up to a point", he began.

"Up to a point—fiddlesticks. You never were any judge of a woman, Tom. Horses are more in your line. I suppose you don't even realise what her dress must have cost."

"I'm afraid I didn't consider the matter."

"Thirty guineas if it cost a penny. Those pearls were real, too . . . It's a pity Frances is quite so dowdy . . . That Danvers girl has no style at all . . . I only hope Geoffrey isn't thinking of marrying her."

She chatted on—happy enough with an occasional monosyllable for answer—till they reached home.

"You'll have to do a bit of lady's-maiding", she said when he joined her in the hall after paying the taxi. "I can't get this dress off by myself, and I can't manage my shoes either."

He helped her up to her bedroom; turned on and lit the gasfire. The shoes, he managed easily enough; but his fingers were clumsy on the press hooks of the black velvet frock; and, easing it over one shoulder, he nearly tore the strap.

"As a lover", she chaffed him just before they kissed good night, "I'm afraid you wouldn't be much of a success."

§ 4

The word "lover" had brought back Gail. Alone in his own room, Rockingham fell to thinking of her. But there was no desire in those thoughts—and, after a few seconds, they changed.

What on earth had made him confess about Gail? How on earth had Camilla's intuition stumbled on his secret?

Both questions irritated. He felt that he had made rather a fool of himself. The less he saw of Camilla after this, the better. Women were always curious about a man's "past". (Mary Hawkins had been!) Another meeting would only lay him open to crossexamination. Tomorrow—or rather today—he'd better lunch at his club and not come home till dinner time.

On that decision, he slept.

Morning broke fine. His mother, declaring herself "slightly the worse for wear", joined him at breakfast. Just as he was filling his pipe the telephone rang, and Fanny came in to say:

"It's Miss Fotheringham's maid. Miss Fotheringham's very sorry, but she's got the influenza, so she won't be able to come this afternoon. She said she hoped you hadn't arranged any bridge for her. I said as far as I knew, you hadn't. That means you'll only be two for lunch, unless Mr. Tom's home".

"We shall be four for lunch", said Mabelle Rockingham, slightly on her dignity. "Send Mrs. Mivvers up here at once."

Harriet Mivvers appeared with her slate and departed with her orders.

"I hope you hadn't arranged to do anything else, Tom?" went on Mrs. Rockingham.

"No, mother."

"Then I'll go and write some letters."

She went—leaving him ever so slightly elated. He finished his pipe on the doorstep while Fanny cleared the breakfast table; read his *Times* afterwards. Ten-thirty brought Noakes, whom he sent to the garage to wash the car.

The weather continued fine, his mood pleasurable. He decided it was high time to order himself a new suit—and set off for his tailor's. There he ran into another gunner—Adrian James, not seen since his India days—and accompanied him down Waterloo Place to Lloyds Bank.

"Doing anything for lunch?" asked James, after he had cashed a cheque.

"Sorry. I'm afraid I am."

They parted as casually as they had met. Rockingham proceeded along Pall Mall, stopping to examine a gunsmith's window, a cigar merchant's window.

"Plenty of time", he thought, glancing up at the clock on St. James's Palace; and crossed the road.

Just as he reached the pavement beyond Marlborough House, one of the sentries of the Palace Guard stiffened to attention, and presented arms.

Automatically, he stopped; doffed his hat to his King.

“Going to lunch with his mother”, thought Rockingham, walking on again.
“Grand woman.”

But almost immediately personal considerations absorbed his mind. Inside the hour, *he* would be sitting down to lunch with Camilla.

Why the hades had he let on to Camilla about Gail?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

§ 1

The question which Rockingham had put to himself proved a facer. He decided not to dwell on it. No inkling of his precise emotional condition had yet crossed his mind.

Footing it at a good four miles an hour under a clouding sky, he was soon across St. James's Park. Twenty past one found him in his mother's drawing room.

"It's going to rain", she pronounced. Five minutes later the sun had gone in. The first drops pattered on the pavement as her first guest rang the bell.

Mrs. Pillsbury, the guest in question, fairly billowed into the room. Merry of eye, large of hand and vast of bosom, she kissed her hostess with moist effusion, ejaculating sideways, "Why, it's Tom. How are you, my dear? I haven't seen you since the flood".

She accepted a glass of sherry and a cigarette.

"I've just come from my stockbroker's", she went on. "The dear man's making heaps of money for me. You ought to buy yourself some West African gold shares, Mabelle."

"You know I never speculate, Connie."

"What about you, Tom?"

"I'm afraid I'm the world's worst gambler."

"But it's the only way one can make any real money, with our iniquitous taxes. I'm told they're bound to go up again when Chamberlain brings in his budget next month. Tom, do you know why there's all this panic about rearmament? Is it just because of Mussolini?"

"Don't you ever read the newspapers, Connie?" intervened Mrs. Rockingham.

"Only the picture ones; and I don't really get any time to look at them. I'm so frightfully busy——"

"Playing bridge?"

"Well, I do play most afternoons. One simply has to keep in practice. Don't you find that?"

The bell rang again. In a moment or so Fanny came labouring up the stairs to announce, "Lady Wethered".

Yet still no inkling of his precise emotional condition troubled the essential simplicity of Rusty Rockingham's mind.

§ 2

Camilla had left her fox cape in the hall. She wore the simplest of tailormades, a felt hat of plum colour with an upturned brim, and only her wedding ring for jewelry. Mrs. Rockingham greeted her by her Christian name and made the necessary introduction.

“How did the shopping go?” she asked.

“Badly. Guy insisted on coming with me. He thinks he’s got taste, poor dear.”

“They’re awful”, said Connie Pillsbury with deep feeling, “when they’re like that. Aren’t you going to offer her anything to drink, Tom?”

“Major Rockingham knows I’m an obstinate teetotaler”, smiled Camilla, and sat down.

She had not offered him her hand; and her omission struck him as a little peculiar. He had the impression that she was ever so faintly shy. But this impression only lasted while they remained upstairs. Once at table, she seemed her usual frank self.

“Camilla’s an American”, said his mother over their grapefruit. “Though you’d never guess it. Her husband’s commanding at Aldershot. You used to know him, Connie.”

“Why, so I did. He was the most awful flirt, I remember. Oh—and he nearly won the Grand Military. Let me see—when can that have been? The year before the war, I believe. Do you race much, Lady Wethered?”

“No. I’m afraid I’m rather silly about horses. They don’t interest me very much, except when I’m riding them.”

“Do you ride a lot?”

“I used to, when I was a girl.”

“What are you supposed to be now?” Connie Pillsbury burst into a loud laugh. “A matron?”

“I’m thirty-two”, said Camilla, as openly as a man might have. “Hardly a girl any more.”

“You wait till you’re Mabelle’s age and mine—we were born in the same year and married within a month of each other. Then you’ll know how young thirty-two really is. Especially nowadays. By the way, how old are you, Tom?”

“Quite old enough to marry!” chaffed Mrs. Rockingham. “I’m always telling him it’s high time he did. But he’s so pernickety.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, her eldest son caught Camilla’s eye. It seemed to him—before he averted his own—that she smiled at him. But all she said was, “That’s

no age for a man”; and after a sentence or so he managed to change the conversation by telling them of his encounter outside Marlborough House.

“I’ve never seen the King”, said Camilla then. “In his photographs he always looks rather worried.”

“I’ve noticed that, too”, agreed Connie Pillsbury. “They say he suffers terribly from insomnia. Did you hear about the changes he’s making at Fort Belvedere? Oh—and I’ve been told that Buck House is to be entirely redecorated.”

On which Mrs. Rockingham broke in to ask, “Have you been presented, Camilla?”; and, once again, her son gathered the impression that Hawk Wethered’s wife could be shy.

“Why, no”, she said after a pause. “Guy says it’ll have to be done. But I’m rather fighting him about it. It’s expensive, I’m told. Besides——”

She broke off. Mabelle Rockingham said, “Sir Guy’s quite right, my dear. In your position it’s a thing you simply can’t get out of”.

Camilla’s mouth set stubbornly; but she did not argue; and soon the conversation changed again; soon the three women had left the one man alone with his cigar and his thoughts.

§ 3

Rockingham’s thoughts as he sat smoking were gloriously inconsequent. It was raining like the devil. Thank goodness he’d had a walk that morning. One really ought to get married. Not until one found the right girl, though. Collective training would start next week. The battery ought to do well at practice camp. It didn’t look as if one would be able to take much of a holiday this year. He would like to see those sample shells fired.

In the middle of this reverie he heard his mother’s stick thump on the ceiling, and hurried upstairs.

The three women were already seated at the bridge table. He noticed that Camilla had taken off her hat—and the grace of her right hand as it hovered over the spread cards.

“You and I, Tom”, said his mother after he had turned up his own card. “Two clubs, as usual. We shall have to play our best against Connie.”

Connie Pillsbury and Camilla took two rubbers off them. They pivoted—and he cut Camilla, who dealt, and bid a small slam in hearts after he had made it five diamonds. Reluctantly, he called the extra trick, and was doubled by his mother.

“Redouble”, said Camilla; and trumped Mrs. Pillsbury’s first lead, the ace of

spades.

She played the rest of the hand slowly, with the most intense concentration, and in complete silence, only opening her mouth just before she gathered up the last trick, to say:

“We were lucky. If the queen of clubs had been on the wrong side, I couldn’t have made it”.

“Why on earth did you double, Mabelle?” asked Connie Pillsbury, whose good humour had vanished, and did not return till Fanny brought tea.

They had played four rubbers by then; and Camilla had won all of them. The fifth and sixth, also, she won.

“You’re a perfect mascot, my dear”, pronounced Mrs. Rockingham, with her friend, Connie, scowling again. “We’d better cut for you. That’s to say if you’ve time for one more.”

Camilla Wethered looked at the clock.

“I’m not sure——” she began; then quickly, “All right. Just one.”

Connie Pillsbury spread the cards. She turned up the queen of spades, Camilla the king of hearts and Mrs. Rockingham the two of clubs.

“Looks as though I’ve drawn the mascot this time”, smiled the expansive Connie. “Hurry up, Tom. What have you gone all dreamy about?”

“Sorry.” Confound the woman. He hadn’t gone “all dreamy”. He’d just been thinking . . . how nice it was that Camilla could stay, and that he would like to play the last rubber with her.

Well, he was going to. He’d turned up the ace of hearts.

“Which seats shall we have?” he asked.

“I’ll stay where I am, please—and we’ll play with the red cards. The two club convention, as you seem to prefer it. And your deal.”

Camilla spoke with her usual decision—and unsmiling. All the same, he conceived the idea that she shared his pleasure in their being partners. She always looked her best—it came to him suddenly—without a hat.

For once in his life, he misdealt.

Redealt, the hands went against them—and they lost the first game. His wrong lead in the next hand cost them a hundred points.

“I’m sorry, Lady Wethered.”

“Don’t apologise, partner. We all make mistakes sometimes.”

How artificial the words sounded! Yet that time she had smiled.

It was her deal. She dealt with uncanny swiftness. Again he noticed the grace of her hands. Fascinating! She was altogether fascinating, this wife of the Hawk’s.

He picked up his cards; sorted, concentrated on them. After a little deliberation, she called, "Two clubs".

His mother passed. He gave the minimum response of two diamonds. Mrs. Pillsbury said, "By me"; and Camilla, "Two no trumps".

"Three diamonds, partner."

"Three no trumps."

Intuition told him that she would not make her contract. Intuition proved correct. That time she apologised; and he smiled, "Not your fault. It just wasn't there".

From that hand onwards, her luck turned. They went down fifty, another fifty. Their opponents scored sixty below; then another twenty. For once in his life, it seemed to him that the winning or losing of a mere game really mattered. Simultaneously he had the strangest impression that her mood matched his own.

Meanwhile their speech continued artificial. "It looks as though we were in rather a tight place." "We certainly are, partner." "Your deal I think, Lady Wethered." "No, Major Rockingham, yours."

They played another two hands, scoring a trick and going down a trick. They threw in a third. Camilla's eyes were on the clock again. Guy had taken seats for a theatre. Guy hated having to hurry his dinner. A difficult person to live with. Was one really happy with him? Up to a point . . .

The next hand she was dummy; and her thoughts continued to wander. Up to what point was one happy? The ease point. The comfort point. The interest point. Yes. Guy was certainly interesting. One could never quite satisfy one's curiosity about him. But beyond that point . . .

Tom—quite so, Tom—how absurd to go on thinking about him as Major Rockingham—played a trump. Half her mind asked, "No more diamonds". But the other half continued to dither.

How happy she could have been with Len!

She realised, abruptly, that they had made their contract and the second game. She heard herself say, "Jolly well played, I never thought you'd do it . . ." Then she realised that she had said, "I never thought you'd do it, *Tom*"; and selfconsciousness overwhelmed her.

Had he heard? Had his mother heard? And this other woman—this complete stranger? What on earth could have induced one to make such a gaffe?

None of them seemed to have heard. At any rate, nobody made a comment. The worst of her discomfort passed. Humour came to her aid—and common sense (after all, her husband called this man by his nickname)—and the social ease of the period. Until, with his mother dealing, she felt the drag of his eyes.

He—Tom—had heard. And pleurably. His look flashed understanding—and something more, which she could not quite interpret. Sympathy? No. Curiosity? Perhaps. Interest? Obviously.

A nice man. She had liked him from the first. Could they be friends? Why not? He was intelligent, well-balanced, of an age for friendship. Guy liked him, too. He had often said so. Guy never invited people to stay unless he did like them.

Thought petered out of her as she picked up, sorted, concentrated on her cards.

§ 4

It was nearer seven than six when Mabelle Rockingham, having totted up the scores, produced a ten-shilling note and three shillings in silver from her bag, saying, "I did think we were going to win that last one, Connie. Camilla really seems quite unbeatable". But the pseudo Louis-Seize clock on her drawing-room mantelpiece pointed no message for the young woman of whom she spoke.

For once in a way—decided that young woman—Guy would have to hurry through his dinner. After all, one couldn't break off a game in the middle of a rubber. And Guy would never know at what exact minute they had left off.

The tiny deceit this would entail worried her a little. It would be far more worrying, however, not to have "some sort of an explanation" with Tom.

How to manage the explanation, and what form it could take, eluded her. Thought, usually so precise, had become thoroughly inchoate. Intuition, nevertheless, assured her that she would be given her opportunity, and that when it arrived, she would know how to handle the situation.

The opportunity was presenting itself before she could think any more.

"Why don't you stay and have some cold supper with me, Connie?" asked her hostess. "We'll send Tom out to his club and have a really good yarn about old times."

Mrs. Pillsbury, who had already emptied one glass of sherry, did not hesitate.

"That'll help to pay my losses", she laughed.

Tom did hesitate for a second or so. Then he said, he too laughing, "I never did care for cold food. And anyway it seems I shall be de trop. Your hotel's almost next door to my club, Lady Wethered? Shall I drop you there?"

"Thank you very much."

The words were stiff. She had intended them to be so. Apprehension was with her again. Whatever explanation she and Tom were to have must remain between themselves.

But that thought, also, was inchoate. She did not draw back her cheek when Mrs. Rockingham, with a rare impulsiveness, made to kiss her, saying, "You must come and give us our revenge one of these days". The hand she gave this older woman was calm, cool, altogether untrembling. She experienced no tremor of any kind, mental or physical, as Tom accompanied her downstairs. Her own voice, in her own ears, sounded completely normal—though the stiffness had gone from it—as she said:

"No. Don't telephone for a taxi. Let's walk till we find one. I'm simply dying for a breath of fresh air".

The rain had stopped an hour back. Pavements were dry.

"There's a rank about five minutes away", said Tom.

He put on his hat. They set off. She could feel that he was a little shy—and appreciate the reason. Intuition counselled direct attack.

"Just now", she began, "when I called you by your Christian name, you were surprised. To be frank with you, so was I. It usually takes me rather a long time to . . . make a friend."

He took three strides without speaking. She could not sense his reaction at all. In that moment, he seemed the completely incomprehensible foreigner. "All British", suggested that imp of mischief which had been the companion of her youth's carelessness. But when he spoke, she was aware of his emotion.

"I'm glad you feel that way about me. I don't make friends easily either. Will it be all right if I call you Camilla?"

"Why not? I hate my title anyway."

"Really."

"Yes."

The shyness was hers now. She felt—knew—that she had crossed some Rubicon. Once again it seemed as though she were being dragged, willy nilly, by the mass will of a crowd.

They rounded the corner of the square. He experienced the most enormous difficulty—almost as though he were gagged—in breaking silence to ask:

"What time are you supposed to be dining?"

Shyness went.

"Supposed", she laughed, "is the operative word. I—we're—going to a show tonight."

"Then we'd better hop into one of those taxis."

"That might be as well."

He lifted the stick he had been carrying on his arm. One of the drivers called,

“Coming over, sir”. He helped her in, giving the name of her hotel.

The touch of his hand on her arm seemed—mysteriously—to have eased the situation. He glanced at his wristwatch before continuing:

“What time does the theatre begin?”

“Not until half-past eight.”

“Then there’s no real panic. It’s only just after seven.”

“You must make allowances”, said Camilla, laughing again, “for the appetite of my brigadier.”

To each of them, her mention of the Hawk brought a moment of selfconsciousness. But once again the significance of the moment missed them. After all, there was no reason—no earthly reason—why they should not be friends.

“He always was rather voracious”, said Rockingham, after that slight pause.

“I’m not too fond of missing dinner, myself.”

“Well, if the worst comes to the worst you can go on to supper.”

“We’re doing that anyway.”

“Then why worry?”

“I very rarely do.”

Silence enveloped them—but pleasurably. That time he broke it without difficulty.

“You’re lucky. I’m afraid I am a bit of a worrier.”

“You conceal it rather well. I shouldn’t have thought you had that kind of temperament. What sort of things do you worry about?”

“Oh, I don’t know. My job for one thing. I’ve been working on a little invention.”

He broke off. By the light of an arc lamp under which they were passing, she saw his jaw muscles set.

“That’s rather a secret”, he went on. “Please don’t mention it to . . . anybody.”

“Don’t distress yourself.” She spoke without thinking. “I’m quite good at keeping secrets.”

He did not answer. She had the impression that he must be weighing up her character—whereas actually he was considering his own. “Volunteering more information”, he thought. “Very unusual for me.” That the whole of this circumstance was unusual, he did not stop to reflect.

They were nearing Hyde Park Corner by then. He glanced at his watch again.

“You’ll be there in five minutes”, he continued. “Isn’t it extraordinary that the last rubber is always the longest?”

She realised his wish to make the conversation light; and fell in with it till she

could see the sign outside her hotel. Only one thing more—subconsciousness informed her—need now be said. She rehearsed it in her mind. The taxi slowed, drew to its left behind a bus. She went over her words once more; spoke them, still lightly.

“When are we going to meet again—Tom?”

“Whenever you like—Camilla.”

It was the first time he had availed himself of the permission to use her name. A feeling of youth thrilled her. She was just conscious of having to subdue this thrill, as she answered:

“We’re going back tomorrow. How about the weekend after this? Then you and I could have our game of tennis”.

Their taxi stopped. A commissionaire ran to open the door.

“Will that be all right?” asked Camilla.

“Rather. If you’re sure it’s convenient.”

“I’m quite positive. Otherwise I shouldn’t have suggested it. Now I must run. Or I really shall get into trouble.”

She had held out her hand; she was on to the pavement and into the hotel before he could say another word.

While he was paying off their cab, while he strolled the few yards to his club, the unusualness of the whole circumstance did just dawn on the essentially simple mind of Thomas Rockingham.

His precise emotional condition, nevertheless, continued to escape him, even as hers continued to escape Camilla—while she was smoothing the ruffled feathers of her tempestuous Hawk.

§ 5

The Hawk’s conjugal tempestuousness—provided one handled him correctly—could always be subdued. Eight-thirty found him sitting, not a feather out of place, in his stall at the theatre. By supper time—or so it seemed to Camilla—he was his most genial, in other words his most uxorious, self.

“You really must learn to control your language, Guy”, she chaffed him. “I couldn’t possibly have broken off in the middle of a rubber. After all, you accepted the invitation for me. Mabelle Rockingham is your friend more than mine. So’s Tom if it comes to that.”

“Tom!” His eyebrows went up: but otherwise he gave no sign of the selfcontrol he was exercising.

“I can’t very well go on calling him Major Rockingham if his mother will insist on calling me Camilla, can I?”

“No. I suppose not.”

He already knew that “Tom” had given her a lift. She had told him so immediately on her return, while he was still grumbling, “Damn it all, we shall only just have time for a snack”. So now he’d better know a little more.

“I’ve invited him to spend the weekend after this”, she went on.

“Have you, though? Serve him right.”

That time, the Hawk’s selfcontrol was perfect. He changed the conversation at once, began discussing the people about them. But his peculiar mind continued active. Tom and Camilla indeed—they hadn’t taken long getting to that stage. Significant. Definitely so. But had he any real cause for jealousy? Probably not. And anyway jealousy was a feeling in which he had always scorned to indulge.

“Too proud to be jealous”, he decided, as he lay wakeful some hour and a half later; and, listening to Camilla’s faint breathing, “Too sure of myself. I know how to handle men and I know how to handle the ladies.”

Besides . . . Rusty—Rusty of all men—in the role of clandestine lover? Why—the mere thought made one smile.

He woke in that mood; and insisted on taking Camilla to “my jeweler’s”, where he bought her a diamond hat clip. They returned home that night. Over next day’s breakfast he said, “I’ve had a brain wave. As you’re inviting Rusty over next weekend, why not ask his mother as well? She amuses me”.

Camilla said, “That really is rather a good idea. I’ll write to her this morning”. Two mornings later she told him, “The old lady’s coming. She’ll have to have her bridge. Any suggestions?”

“Lampson and his wife.”

“Supposing they can’t?”

“Wily Wilbraham won’t refuse. He’s too good a toady.”

“Why do you always dwell on the worst side of people’s characters, Guy?”

“Because it pays, when one has to command men”, answered Colonel Sir Guy Wethered, thinking, “And I can command situations, too”.

This situation—between Rusty and Camilla—was intriguing rather than dangerous. He could always handle it. At a pinch, a word in the right quarter would transfer Rusty to Catterick or Colchester. Meanwhile—damn it all, the man was half in love with her—it would be fun to let the situation develop. Only—one must watch it.

Accordingly the Hawk watched, from another Saturday afternoon to another

Monday morning. But all his watchfulness showed him, during that weekend, was Camilla “knocking Rusty’s head off” on the tennis court, or beating him at billiards, or partnering him at the bridge table.

§ 6

For still no inkling of their precise emotional condition had crossed either Thomas Rockingham’s mind or Camilla Wethered’s. April warmed into May before that evening when she—alone among her roses—began to ask herself, “I wonder why I’m always happier when Tom’s about?”

And May was June on the day he first assured himself that he could not possibly be in love with “Hawk Wethered’s wife”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

§ 1

That first, most dangerous, most delusive assurance presented itself for the consideration of Major Thomas Rockingham, Royal Artillery, in battery office of all places, and at the most unlikely moment, a little past high noon of a sun-drenched day.

He had just finished “ticking off” a young defaulter for being “late on pass”.

“I borrowed me brother’s motor bike, sir”, he remembered the boy saying. “And it broke down on us.”

“Us including a lady, one presumes.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, sir, it did. But she and I are walking out. I mean, it’s all on the level, sir. And I wasn’t more than an hour behind me time.”

“Eighty-four minutes to be quite accurate. Still, as you’ve a clean copybook so far, we won’t say any more about it, Blenkinson. Only don’t let it happen again, please.”

“No, sir. Of course not, sir. Thank you very much, sir.”

Lucky young devil, out with his young woman in the moonlight. Blast it, why was one always thinking about young women nowadays? Or wasn’t one? Were one’s thoughts more particularised? Hadn’t one better be straight with oneself, admit that they were?

Voices in the outer room, a knock on the door, interrupted the battery commander’s meditation. To his, “Come in”, Godden entered. They were having “quite some trouble” with “number three—that steering clutch, sir”. It was a “little beyond me and Mullins”. Could they have one of the brigade fitters along?

“Obviously. Why bother me about it?”

“I couldn’t find Captain Patterson, sir. And the sergeant-major’s had to go in to Aldershot.”

Disingenuous. Godden never lost an opportunity—these days—of personal contact. Pushing himself forward a bit? Possibly. One couldn’t blame him for that. Or was there another reason? An unspoken sympathy, a wordless understanding between them since that “bother over Botley’s wife”.

Godden went out. Calvert came in with some papers. Calvert went out. Rockingham resumed meditation.

One had better be straight with oneself. These constantly recurring thoughts

about women *were* becoming particularised. His friendship with Camilla meant a good deal to him. Their minds always seemed to be discovering fresh points of contact. They had similar tastes in books, in films. Queer—the way they had run into each other at that Aldershot picture house. Interesting, their talk afterwards. Only a week ago? Somehow it seemed longer. Tomorrow night they would meet at the Lampsons'. Saturday she was giving a tennis party.

Come to think of it, they were always meeting nowadays. A delightful person. Lovely, too. How lucky he had not fallen in love with her. For of course he hadn't. He valued their friendship far too much to jeopardise it.

Besides—she was married.

To the Hawk!

§ 2

Patterson's feet on the gravel outside, his voice calling through the open window, killed personal thoughts dead.

"Heard the latest, Tom. W.W.'s having the whole brigade out tomorrow. Brigadier's inspection or something. Headworth's just making out the orders."

"Blast. We may be a gun short. Number three dragon is up to her old tricks. Godden's just been in to see me about it."

"Oh well, they'll probably be able to fix things if they work late on her. Coming to lunch, Tom?"

"May as well, Wilfrid", said Rockingham, and reached for his cap.

Outside, the midday heat might have been India's. They were glad to escape from the blazing gravel into the comparative cool of the anteroom, where they found Ralph Lyttelton and their other two battery commanders—"Lanky" Forsyth of the heavy moustache, who was married, and the clean-shaven Potter, a bachelor like themselves.

"Even so", said Frank Potter. "We also have received advance news of tomorrow's spectacular operation. And we also are conscientious objectors."

"Speak for yourself", ordered Lyttelton. "Personally, I think I shall go sick."

"Any particular ailment?"

"Sunstroke seems indicated." Ralph Lyttelton, looking his usual picture of rambunctious health, sipped his gin and lime. "One might as well be in Addis Ababa as Steepdown. The Abyssinian war's over anyway. Three cheers for the Holy Roman Empire."

"And you a socialist." Lanky Forsyth spoke. "I don't know why we let the

Italians get away with it. We could have stopped them easily enough.”

“How?”

“Oil sanctions, dear boy. No petrol have—no march can. Don’t you agree, Rusty?”

“Up to a point.”

They discussed the matter till they went in to lunch, over which Potter proved unusually argumentative.

“Speaking with all deference to our senior majors and other experts”, said he, “I think that the last little affair in Europe was a picnic. The next one’s going to be something like a show. They’ll raze London to the ground in the first fortnight.”

“They, being?” asked Lanky Forsyth.

“The Germans, obviously. They’re bound to join up with the Italians in the long run. And I shouldn’t wonder if the Japs didn’t come in on the same side. There would be some nice pickings for them in the Shining East. Hong Kong, to start with.”

“And Indo-China”, chipped in Lyttelton. “I’m absolutely with you, Lanky. The next war is going to be something like a show. And America won’t be in it. They’ll just sit back and sell us all munitions.”

“I think you misjudge America”, said Rockingham; and because this was the first time he had intervened in the discussion, the others fell silent, till Patterson asked:

“Why?”

§ 3

Wilfrid Patterson’s “Why?”, Potter’s and Lyttelton’s pessimism, had seemed easy enough to answer. It was only later on in the day that Rockingham went over his arguments again.

Seated placidly, the dog Patrick at his feet, to watch the Turban battery’s cricket eleven fielding against Forsyth’s, he remembered the enthusiasm of his, “Because the States are a democracy. If ever it did come to a showdown they’d have to join us, and France, and possibly Russia, against the dictators”.

And he had gone on—he recollected—to maintain, “That’s why I don’t believe it ever will come to a showdown. Mussolini and Hitler aren’t fools. They can see that, too. They won’t risk another world war”.

But supposing they did?

A brilliant catch at the wicket by Boardman interrupted thought. Another of Forsyth’s batsmen came to the wicket. Why worry about world affairs—when one could do nothing about them—when life was being so particularly pleasant?

But why was life being so particularly pleasant? And why this sudden enthusiasm for “the States”?

Queer, the way one had taken to calling America “the States”. Who had taught one to do that? Camilla, of course. She didn’t believe in another world war either. It was her line of reasoning he had used against Potter and Lyttelton. Not his own!

The abrupt recognition of this came as a shock. Automatically his mind switched back a whole week—to their last talk—in that little tea shop, after that chance meeting at the picture house.

“I’m an out and out pacifist”, Camilla had said. “I hate the very idea of war. But I’m sure it can be prevented. If only your country and mine could get together! Perhaps they will, one day.”

Your country and mine. So she still thought of herself as an American, even though she was married to a British brigadier.

That recognition, also, had come as a shock. But he had not cared to argue the point with her. Patriotism, like religion, was an individual affair.

His attention returned to the game. Bombardier Challis was going on to bowl. A curious character, young Challis. As bellicose as the Hawk. (“What I’d like to know, sir—as you say you want us to ask questions—is why we haven’t closed the Suez Canal? That’d teach ’em.”)

At that moment, just as Challis’ first ball sizzled over the wicket, Rusty Rockingham looked up to see the Hawk himself.

Hawk Wethered, also in mufti, the dog Tiny enormous at his heels, was still some fifty yards away. Two of the men who were watching the match saluted him. He stopped, engaged them in conversation. Patrick, hackles up, began to growl.

“Stow it, you idiot”, snapped Patrick’s master.

Challis’ second ball knocked the middle stump clean out of the ground. The Hawk finished his talk and resumed his stroll. Now, Tiny loped ahead of him. Suddenly, Patrick growled again; and, before his master could stop him, sprang.

The next two minutes—for the idle fielders, the solitary bat, and the gunners who had been watching the game—were pure joy. As Forsyth’s battery humorist was to put it later, “The way them two dogs went for one another would ha’ done your ’eart good. But, mark you, that was only ’arf the fun. ’Cos the brigadier, see, ’e ’ad ’old of ’is great brute by the collar, an’ old Rusty ’e grabbed ’is by the tail, an’ by the time they’d got ’em apart there ’adn’t ’arf been a rumpus”.

Donald Duck, by which nickname Forsyth’s battery knew its humorist, moreover, did not expurgate his report of certain phrases which drained every drop of blood from Rockingham’s cheeks.

“I’m very sorry, sir”, he managed to say, with Tiny abashed on his chain but Patrick still straining at his leather leash. “He’s never done anything of the kind before. Perhaps the heat’s affected him.”

“Heat be sugared”, hissed the Hawk, still panting after his exertions. “That brute’s a sanguinary menace. He ought to be destroyed. Have him destroyed. Do you understand me?”

“Sir!”

“You heard what I said, didn’t you?”

And Colonel Sir Guy Wethered dragged his Great Dane away . . .

§ 4

The Hawk had been gone for a quarter of an hour. Forsyth’s team was all out, his own first pair putting on their pads. But Rockingham’s temper still seethed.

“Blast him”, he thought. “The man must be crazy. How dare he use language like that to me? In front of the men, too.”

The Hawk’s actual order, however, might not have been overheard by any of the men. They—instinctively tactful—had turned away once the dog fight was over. Therefore one need not obey. Be damned if one were going to, either. Let him take any action about the thing he liked!

“Above himself”, continued Rockingham’s thoughts. “Thinks he’s the lord almighty. Put Patrick down just because he tells me to? Not much.”

The dog, still leashed, crawled to his feet; fawned for pardon. An unwonted sentimentalism touched him. But his “Quiet—you” was stern enough.

Forsyth’s men took their places on the field; his own batsmen—Challis and Boardman—came to the wicket. His temper cooled a little, and his sense of humour tried to assert itself. What a ridiculous pother over a mere dog fight that had come to nothing—the chief combatants hardly scratched.

He bent down to examine Patrick’s scratches; and the airedale licked his hand. “So you’re sorry”, he heard himself say. “You’re trying to apologise. You want me to forget about it.”

Forgetfulness, however, was not so easy. Hawk Wethered might take action. He had never been fond of eating his own words.

Meanwhile Challis and Boardman were knocking Forsyth’s bowlers all over the field. Pleased with their effort, he relaxed again; and began to fill his pipe. After he had taken a puff or so, appeared Noakes.

“Heard you’d been having a spot of trouble with him, sir”, said Noakes,

indicating the dog. “Thought I’d come and see if there was any first aid wanted, sir.”

“And where did you hear that from?”

“Oh, I just heard it, sir.”

Noakes’ face was a blank. So was Rockingham’s, as he said:

“As you’re here, you can take him back with you. Those scratches would be better for a wash. Put a little Condy’s in the water. And let him see that he’s in disgrace”.

He handed over the leash. Noakes—his face still expressionless—mumbled a, “Very good, sir”. Patrick, after one imploring glance, went off with his tail down. Watching the pair of them away, Rockingham thought, “Barrack-room gossip. Sure to spread like wildfire. Hope to goodness none of these chaps did overhear that order”.

Devilish awkward if they had!

The disciplinary point worried him; destroyed all his pleasure in the fact that his own eleven seemed to have this game well in hand—their total only twenty behind Forsyth’s with six wickets still to fall.

Discipline had to be preserved. One couldn’t expect men to obey if their officers didn’t. In private life one might sit at the Hawk’s table. But he was still one’s C.R.A. Accordingly, if he told one to do something, one jolly well had to do it. Provided always that the thing was reasonable.

Damn it all, though, this thing wasn’t reasonable.

Nevertheless . . .

§ 5

. . . Nevertheless, the memory of that hissed, “Have him destroyed. Do you understand me?” continued to nag the essentially disciplined mind of O.C. Turban battery; and it was only with an effort that he managed to join his men while they were putting their coats on, and say the right words.

But his usual smile, he could not quite manage; and, after he had left them, Boardman remarked to Challis, “Object lesson in selfcontrol, my lad. He hasn’t quite simmered down yet. And no wonder. If anybody had damned my eyes the way the brigadier damned his, I’d have socked ’em one in the jaw”.

“Not you. You’d have appealed to the League of Nations”; retorted the bellicose Challis, and led him away to the canteen.

Rockingham, also, felt the need for a drink; but, crossing the gunpark, he remembered his lame dragon, and entered number three shed.

Godden, Mullins and one of the brigade fitters, Stephenson, were still at work.

“Take us about another hour, sir”, said Stephenson, in answer to his inquiry. “But she’ll be on parade all right tomorrow.”

“Good work”, said Rockingham; and that time he did just manage his smile.

Leaving the shed he encountered Patterson, who had come on the same errand. They strolled towards the mess. “Good chap, Wilfrid”, he mused. “Wonder what he’d do in my place.” But the slight impulse towards a confidence was instantly suppressed.

The less one said about this thing the better. It might blow over. It must be made to blow over. One couldn’t afford to risk a quarrel with Hawk Wethered. Because . . . because of one’s friendship with Camilla. Whatever else one jeopardised, one couldn’t afford to jeopardise that.

This last thought proved so staggering that it struck speech from Rockingham’s lips. He could only just realise that he must have been talking to Wilfrid, that he had broken off in the middle of a sentence, that they had stopped walking, that they were staring at each other, and that Wilfrid was asking, “What’s the matter, Tom?”

Then normalcy was almost back; and he heard himself say, “Nothing. At least nothing of any importance. It’s only a letter I’ve forgotten to write. I . . . I think I’ll get it off my chest right away. See you later, old chap”.

But even while his mind was still flashing at him, “That’s the best thing I can do. Write and say I’m sorry. Leave the next move to him. Ignore the actual order unless he puts it in black and white”, one of the servants came running from the mess to say that he was wanted on the telephone.

And once at the telephone he recognised Hawk Wethered’s own voice.

“That you, Rusty?” asked the Hawk’s smoothest voice. “Good. I really wanted to get hold of Lampson or Headworth. But apparently they’re both off the premises. It’s about tomorrow’s show. As it’s so hot, I think I’ll turn up half an hour earlier. Tell Lampson I’ll be along by ten-thirty at the very latest. That clear? Good. By the way, how’s that airedale of yours? Not badly damaged, I hope.”

“No, sir.”

“Glad to hear that. I’d give him a powder if I were you. This weather does affect ’em.”

And Colonel (temporary Brigadier) Sir Guy Wethered hung up without another word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

§ 1

“Clever devil”, decided Rockingham, making his way to the anteroom. “Knew he’d gone too far. Wanted to wash the thing out. Did it without actually apologising.”

The ulterior motive behind the Hawk’s decision, however, escaped him. It was not even quite clear to the Hawk himself.

“Good soldier, Rusty”, brooded the Hawk, still standing by the telephone in his library. “Don’t really want to do him any harm. Don’t want to do myself any either. Awkward, if he’d cut up rough. No right to tell him to destroy that dog of his.”

All the same . . .

“All the same”, continued the Hawk’s brooding, “why did I get in such a wax? Because I’m jealous of him? But, damn it, I’m not. I’m only having a bit of fun with the pair of ’em. They wouldn’t dare, either of ’em . . .”

But supposing they did?

For a moment the mental question rekindled rage. Marriage, even to Camilla, might have its drawbacks. He’d always liked his freedom. But heaven help anybody who tried to take Camilla away from him. He’d break the man. And her too.

Rage died down. His imagination had taken him too far. There was no danger—there could be no real danger—of losing Camilla. She’d never leave him for a chap like Rusty. Though of course—given the opportunity—she might cheat.

The peculiarity of this last thought did not strike him. Women, according to his personal experience, did cheat. He had assisted in the process too often not to be on his guard.

“Man of the world”, concluded Hawk Wethered’s brooding. “Lived too long, seen too much, to trust even the best of ’em.”

On which, he went upstairs to dress.

§ 2

Camilla was in her bathroom. She called through the door, “Is that you, Guy? You’re very late this evening”. He called back, “I am rather. Tiny got into a dog fight. No harm done. Tell you about it over dinner”.

His own bath had already been drawn. Fifteen minutes later he was standing among his trophies—with this Camilla, his best trophy, at his side. He put an arm

round her waist as they went towards the dining room, Tiny at their heels.

“What have you for me to drink, Merivale?” he asked.

“I put half a bottle of Clicquot in the frigidaire, Sir Guy.”

“Good man. But why only half a bottle?”

“Her ladyship thought, Sir Guy——”

“Oh, very well.”

Camilla smiled; and seated herself. He smiled back. “Discipline, eh?”

“You know a whole bottle’s bad for you.”

And of course it was.

A thoughtful young woman, this. As one grew older one couldn’t drink so much. Or make love quite so much. Lucky—that this young woman didn’t demand too much love-making. Otherwise one might not have been able to compete.

He was smiling again. He touched her hand across the table.

“What have you been doing with yourself all day?” he asked.

“Oh, I went out for a ride this morning. This afternoon I was at the club, playing tennis.”

“Find anyone who could give you a game?”

“Yes. The professional. He owed me half-fifteen and beat me rather badly. I’m going off, I think. Tell me about the dog fight. I see Tiny’s got a scratch on his nose.”

“Thanks to your friend Tom’s airedale. He and I had quite a job to separate them.”

“Really. Where did it happen?”

“On one of the cricket fields. I was just having a prowling round; and we ran into each other.”

“Is Tom’s dog badly hurt?”

“No.”

He told her a little more, making light of the whole incident, but watching her carefully. Her face betrayed no undue interest. When he had finished, it struck him that he might have been wrong not to be more open. Supposing “Tom” were to give her a truer version? He might.

“I’m afraid I lost my temper a bit”, he admitted, finishing the last of his champagne. “Served Rusty right, though. He ought to keep that brute of his under better control.”

“But Patrick seems such a docile sort of animal.”

“Oh——” The Hawk’s face stiffened, though the tone of his voice did not change. “And how do you come to know the brute’s name? How do you know whether he’s docile or not?”

“He was with us when we had tea together the other day”, said Camilla. “You remember, I told you about it. After the pictures.” And she went on, with a touch of impishness, “Tom and I haven’t met since, in case that’s what’s worrying you”.

“Did I say I was worried?” His face was smooth again; his voice bantered.

“No. But you looked it.”

Unwisdom made him boast, “If you’re accusing me of jealousy, all I can say is that the last man I’d ever be jealous of is your friend, Tom”.

Sheer mischievousness made her counter, “I wouldn’t be too sure about that if I were you. Tom might be quite attractive—if only as a contrast”.

And after that, just for the split of a second, they stared at each other, the dawn of antagonism in their eyes.

§ 3

Merivale’s entrance with coffee brought back the normal. Camilla smiled once more, thinking, “What on earth made me say that?” Her husband helped himself to a glass of port.

“We ought to have had our coffee outside”, he said. “It won’t be dark for half an hour yet.” And presently they strolled out.

His arm was round her waist again by then, and that split second of antagonism as good as forgotten. There were worse states—the Hawk caught himself thinking—than marriage. And her, thought abandoned as she put a hand over his.

“I’m glad you let me have my way about this house”, she said. “I like it better and better. Come and have a look at the herbaceous border. It’s simply marvellous what these last three hot days have done for it.”

They paced up and down the border walk till the light began to fail. Something of tenderness was in both of them. Words died away. Almost, they loved each other as husband and wife should love each other. But not quite.

He was too self-aware for that; and she—as she imagined—too wary. Between her and love stood the ghost of Len. “You were so hurt”, gibbered the ghost. “Don’t risk that hurt again. Ever!”

§ 4

The first bird twittered, dawn just showed through the chinks between the curtains, when Camilla’s eyes opened for a moment to give her a glimpse of that shape on the other bedstead.

“Happy?” she asked herself; and Len’s ghost gibbered once more, “Not as you and I could have been happy.”

But she answered the ghost with its own words: “Never again”.

For why risk love’s hurt? While one’s marriage remained . . . satisfactory. Hers was that. If nothing more. And a woman needed . . . satisfaction. So few men understood. They thought women were . . . different.

Did Tom think that?

Probably.

Poor Tom! He’d been hurt, too.

Was he in love with one?

Nearly.

Did one want him to be?

Of course not.

Only . . .

“Only it’s nice to feel he could be—if one let him”, thought Camilla, as her drowsy eyelids shut away the light through the curtains and that long shape on the other bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

§ 1

“Seven ack emma, sir”, said Noakes.

“Blast”, said O.C. Turban battery; and heaved himself up on one elbow to drink his tea.

Already, while he was shaving and going along the passage to his bath, today promised to be even hotter than yesterday. For the men it would be absolute hell.

“Wish we still had our horses”, he thought. “Wish W.W. had a little sense in his head. Just swanking. Just turning us out for his own honour and glory.”

Oh, well!

He finished dressing; stuffed the day’s orders into one of his tunic pockets, and went across to the mess. First at the table, he ordered his usual breakfast—porridge followed by a poached egg and two rashers of bacon.

Just as he finished his oatmeal, Patterson joined him.

“Filled ’em all up at stables last night”, said Patterson. “That’s one panic less anyway. If number three starts her tricks again before we’re on the ground, there won’t half be a to-do. But the old man won’t have her left behind on any account. Headworth rang up about that.”

“When?”

“After you’d gone to bed. By the way, did you write that letter?”

“What letter?”

“The one you told me about. Don’t you remember? You were just going to get down to it when you were called to the phone.”

“Oh—that one. No. As a matter of fact, I didn’t. I—er—decided to let the thing stand over.”

Rockingham’s slow prevarication seemed to pass muster. But the need for it annoyed him. Confound Wilfrid’s memory—and his own forgetfulness. Why hadn’t he at least made some pretence of writing a letter, gone to his quarter after receiving the Hawk’s telephone message? Why had he sat about in the anteroom drinking?

Three drinks he’d had. And only left himself a bare ten minutes to change into mess kit. Excited, he’d been. Again, why? Not just because Hawk Wethered had acknowledged himself in the wrong . . .

Introspection, balking, refused the fence. Arkwright, Lyttelton’s senior subaltern, appeared; then Lyttelton himself, followed by Potter, cursing, “My damned

digestion. It never will work in this heat”.

“Has it ever?” asked Lyttelton; and Rockingham went out to his pipe.

As he smoked, in the sunshine outside the mess hut, introspection tried to return. But he drove it away resolutely by concentrating on the business in hand.

Eight-fifteen found him, belted but not spurred, in his office—studying a coordinated map. W.W.’s “scheme”, as set out in orders, looked simple enough. The three eighteen-pounder batteries were presumed to have dug themselves in on this line; with the howitzer battery, Lyttelton’s, here on their left. On the retirement of an imaginary enemy all batteries would advance to “Positions B”. Throughout, “brigade control” would be practised.

Meanwhile, the four batteries—the mere shaking of these windows informed one—must be forming up.

As he walked to the outer door of his office, one last regret for the old days haunted Rusty Rockingham. A fine sight it had been, one to warm the cockles of a man’s heart, when sixteen gunteams paraded together, when battery after battery mounted, when the whips went over, and his bays strained against their breaststraps, and the traces tightened, and the wheels turned, and the gunners sat to attention on their limbers.

Whereas now . . .

Yet this sight, too—it seemed to him as he stood in the doorway—held its fascination. Because these long shapes of steel, snouting from their sheds, belching and clattering and smoking to their places, betokened power.

Power! Always it had ruled the destiny of nations. Ideals could not save the weaker, the defenceless races. Inevitably, they went down before the strong.

To be strong, therefore, was a great country’s duty. Why had his own country neglected that duty? Why were her soldiers, her sailors and her airmen, so few?

Surely her fighting spirit had not dwindled. The men who were climbing up over the sides of these dragons had not changed their natures. They were still men of the Regiment. No more keen to slaughter their fellows than he himself. Yet ready, if the need came, to defend liberty with their lives.

“And the need’s almost bound to come”, thought Rockingham in that brief moment of illumination. “One brigand spared makes another brigand confident. Allow one treaty to be torn up—and you tear up all the treaties.”

Then illumination left him, and once again his mind concentrated on the business in hand.

§ 2

“Battery ready to move, sir”, announced Captain Patterson.

Major Rockingham looked at his watch. “I’ll just have a look round”, he said.

This done, he gave out his orders. Captain Patterson would establish an O.P. for the brigade. Mr. Masters would be gun position officer.

“My own function”, he added smiling, “will be mainly critical.” His own Austin—its wireless set transferred to Patterson’s—was at the head of the battery column. Immediately in rear six signallers stood ready to mount the battery staff dragon that carried the cable-laying apparatus. On the right, aligned to a hair, he saw the four gun dragons, the guns, the old-fashioned limbers.

He gave the orders: “Prepare to mount”: “Mount”. He climbed to his own car. His driver let in gear. He gave the signal to advance. Behind him the whole column woke to sputtering life.

Once again, as he heard the metallic clank which told him that the caterpillars of the battery staff dragon had begun to revolve, the commander of the Turban battery was haunted by his prescience of another Armageddon. Once again his imagination tried to visualise the real thing.

There would be none of this leisure, no sunshine, no metalled road leading out from a smooth gunpark to a mile away parade ground, about the real thing. They would move by night, hurriedly, under shell fire, under bomb fire, through mud and slush, over pot-holed pavé. And this lane would be a blazing death trap!

But today the lane which led to the gun positions only blazed with dog-roses and an English sun.

They made the end of the lane; came through a dry gap on to the commonland. After bumping another hundred yards, Rockingham gave the order to halt and dismounted.

“If number three breaks down in that lane”, he thought, “she’ll bitch the whole proceedings.” And the same thought was in the mind of Kid Masters as his own Austin slid alongside; and he too jumped to ground. His own car went on; stopped. He watched the four flags being planted.

“Wish we weren’t leading”, thought his battery commander. “There’ll be the very devil to pay if anything does go wrong with her.”

Meanwhile, the roar of batteries moving grew louder and louder in their ears.

Soon, the first dragon lifted its nose over the gap, and number one gun bumped by them. Number two gun followed; was driven on to where the G.P.O.A. ^[4] had planted his four blue and white flags. But after that the gap showed empty for a good

three minutes; and Masters' heart sank.

"Do you think I'd better go and see what's happened, sir?" he asked.

"No. Wait."

So they waited for another minute; and both could have blessed Godden and his dragon crew when number three clanked slowly over, slowly by.

"Couldn't risk taking her any faster, sir", explained Sergeant Godden, after a "Halt. Action Front" which had not gone—in the battery commander's opinion—"too badly".

"All right. Get her away."

The four dragons backed away, as the gunners manned their guns, and the "numbers one" doubled to the director and identified the aiming point. Now the angle was given out, the artillery board was set up. Presently the aiming posts were being planted; and Belinda Blue-Eyes had given out his first imaginary order. By him lay Boardman, at his ears the receivers of the wireless set, now on remote control from the Austin, concealed among bushes a hundred yards from the guns.

"Brigade calling, sir", said Boardman, deputising for Halliburton, the usual command post signaller, who had gone sick that very morning. "Are we ready to open fire yet?"

"Give them the O.K."

Brigade headquarters, invisible behind a knoll of pine trees, continued to pass imaginary orders. Forsyth's battery, Potter's and Lyttelton's, took up their positions on the left of the Turban battery. Suddenly, out and down from the pines, motored Headworth.

"The colonel says you were nearly three minutes behind time, sir," smiled Headworth, halting alongside the artillery board. "He wants to know why."

Given his explanation, he smiled again; was driven along the line, and back to the knoll; from which, at exactly nine-thirty, after three rounds of imaginary gunfire which made the loaders sweat as they handled the dummy ammunition, came the order, "The enemy is evacuating his trenches. The brigade will advance by batteries to Position B."

[4] Gun position officer's assistant.

§ 3

For the third time that day, as his guns were hooked in again, as they were

trundled forward over gently rolling ground, Rockingham's imagination tried to visualise the real thing. And with number three dragon breaking down two hundred yards away from the marked position, imagination had its chance.

This—it seemed to him when Godden, after one last curse, leaned over the steel side to tell him the worst—was just what would happen. Pity the poor men!

But they were laughing, those men, as they bent to the dragropes, as they manhandled that heavy eighteen-pounder with the split trail over the heather. To them, the contretemps seemed a joke.

And in a way, of course, it was a joke—to see Wily Wilbraham's face so crestfallen under its cap peak, to hear him say, "This really is too bad, Rockingham". Because Wily Wilbraham's thoughts appeared so obvious. He did want to "put up a good show" for the Hawk!

The brigade commander, with a last, "Get her going again if you possibly can", drove off to watch the advance of the other batteries. Number three gun was manhandled into position between number four and number two. New lines of fire were laid out. "Control O.P."—in the person of Patterson—began ordering the engagement of new targets.

Suddenly, glancing up from the rubber eyepiece of his director, Rusty Rockingham saw horses top the immediate skyline; halt for a few seconds; and pelt full gallop down the slope to the guns.

"Just like him", he thought, as the leading rider out-distanced his companions. Then he measured off the angle and bent to the board again—just to make certain that Masters had made no mistake—till the hoofs thudded to within fifty yards, and the Hawk reined his rearing black to its haunches.

The Hawk trotted up, Bryce-Atkinson behind him. O.C. Turban battery saluted; but his subaltern continued to give out his orders. For with his four guns supposedly in action, he could not stop unless Control O.P. signalled "Stand Easy": or "Battery Rest".

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

§ 1

“Turban battery shot. Over”, called Boardman down his radio telephone.

“Turban battery shot”, checked back the signaller from headquarters. “Task Monkey Two. Batteries—all. Coordinates . . .”

“Tell Patterson”, said Wily Wilbraham, now standing with the Hawk by Masters’ artillery board, “that’ll be enough.”

It was a quarter to twelve by then; and the sun grilling. The pieces were unloaded, and the sweating men stood easy.

“Tell ’em they can smoke”, ordered the Hawk. “Let’s have a squint at what you’ve been doing.”

He bent over the board, examined the map and table without comment, looked up again and back to the ditched dragon.

“Breakdown?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Where’s your wagon line? Just behind the crest, I suppose.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Humph! A bit close, don’t you think, Lampson?”

Wily Wilbraham agreed—with excuses.

“Any chance of getting that dragon going again?” went on the Hawk.

“We’re doing our best, sir.” Lampson still spoke. “I’ve sent a cyclist back for both my fitters.”

“Bloody contraptions anyway”, grinned the Hawk. “The sooner we get our tractors the better. Hallo, I seem to know that chap’s walk. Who is he, Rockingham?”

“Sergeant-Major Cartwright, sir.”

“Call him back.”

Cartwright, halfway between the battery and the ditched machine, with whose steering clutch Godden was still tinkering, acknowledged Rockingham’s bawl of “Sergeant-Major” with a salute; turned and came back at the double. Having saluted again, he stood stiffly to attention.

“Well, well”, said the Hawk, having touched his own cap peak with one finger. “So you’re still serving, eh? Put on a bit of weight, haven’t you?”

He paused.

“Unfortunately, sir”, said Cartwright.

“Too much beer, I expect. Do you remember that shoot at Trousers. Nineteen hundred and nine, I think?”

“Nineteen hundred and ten, sir.”

“So it was. Let me see. When did we meet last? One night in Poperinghe?”

Another pause.

“Rather a hot night”, continued Hawk Wethered; and, as Boardman subsequently reported to an incredulous mess room, “Believe it or not, the old ’major, he went as red as a turkey cock”.

But the Hawk only grinned, and changed the conversation immediately, asking, “How much longer have you got to serve? Another couple of years, eh? Well, let me know when your time’s up. I might be able to do something for you. That’s to say if you want anything done”.

And in that moment, in the ten minutes which followed, Major Thomas Rockingham—following him from gun to gun—realised why, whatever his superiors might think about him, Colonel (temporary brigadier) Sir Guy Wethered was a legendary figure among the old rank and file of the regiment.

Master Gunner, he would never be. But he remained the supreme master of men.

One realised that from the mere way they looked at him, from the mere eagerness with which they answered his questions. One realised it even from Wilfrid’s, “Fancy his remembering me as a corporal in Lawson’s Company—why he was only attached to us for a fortnight”, when he swung himself to saddle.

And secretly one could not help being a little envious of the rank badges and the ribbons on that long-waisted cavalry-cord tunic, of that superb figure on that seventeen-hand horse.

§ 2

The Hawk inspected Potter’s battery and Forsyth’s without dismounting; then he rode off in the direction of Lyttelton’s, out of sight in a dip to the left. Headworth called up Rockingham then, and spoke personally.

“Any idea how long he’s going to be? Over.”

“Not the slightest. I expect he’ll be your way after he’s looked at the hows. Our orders are to stand easy till we hear from you. Over.”

“Well, I’ve been letting my chaps smoke. We heard he was letting yours. Communication’s been pretty good our end. Practically no interference. Do you

think it's all right to let 'em smoke? Over.”

“Hadn't you better pretend to be busy? He ought to be along any minute now. Over.”

“Right you are.”

Another ten minutes went by. Looking back, Rockingham saw a small car bumping its way towards his ditched dragon. While he watched the two brigade fitters dismount, Boardman, receivers at his ears again, said, “The C.R.A. and the Colonel have just been sighted from H.Q., sir”.

“Battery”, bawled Masters. “Take post.”

It was nearer one than twelve by then, and no rations in the men's haversacks. If Wily Wilbraham wanted to redemonstrate the efficiency of his brigade signallers they would be late for their dinners. But the very first order from Headworth was, “Cease firing”.

Further instructions followed. The brigade would return to barracks. The order of march was to be reversed—Lyttelton's battery leading. Would O.C. Turban battery report whether number three dragon was in action. If not, would he see that a guard was left on it; and on number three gun, which would have to be brought back after the men had had their dinners.

“And how about rations for the guard?” asked Wilfrid.

“Send a Don R.^[5] for some sandwiches”, snapped Rockingham, suddenly fed up.

The reason for this escaped him—in the same way that the real reason behind his envy of the Hawk had escaped him. He attributed it to the heat, to his feeling that the morning's practice had been largely a waste of time, to his growing dislike for Wily Wilbraham, and a number of other causes which included a breeches button that appeared to be chafing the inside of his knee.

“Damn this button”, he went on; and, watching his face flush as he stooped to undo it, there came—to the man who had worshipped since he had first served under him—an idea.

“Tom's not himself”, ran Wilfrid Patterson's idea. “Something's on his mind. That was a queer business yesterday evening. He said he was going to write a letter. Why didn't he? It couldn't have been because of that phone message. The phone message was from Wethered. He couldn't have been going to write to Wethered. And afterwards he had three gin and Its. Rather unusual.”

But this seemed hardly the time for such speculations, with Potter's four guns moving off in column, and his own three already limbered up, waiting to follow Forsyth's.

So, “You’d better bring ’em something to drink as well”, snapped Patterson to the waiting orderly, “the chances are they’ll have emptied their waterbottles”.

The motor cyclist phutted off. Presently Rockingham climbed back into his Austin; and the Turban battery, minus one gun, coughed and bumped and rattled its way back to barracks.

Much to its commander’s relief.

[5] Despatch rider.

§ 3

It was more than a relief—thought Rusty Rockingham after a late lunch washed down with iced limejuice—that the day’s work should be over. This unusual heat really did knock it out of a chap. For two pins, he’d take an hour’s shut eye. After all, why not?

Duty, nevertheless, seemed to demand that he should find out what had happened to his gun. So, inwardly cursing, he lit a pipe and strolled over to the sheds.

Number two dragon was not there. But she appeared, hauling number three gun, after a few minutes. Chalkley, her sergeant, had brought a message from Godden. So far, the brigade fitters had failed to get number three going again. She wasn’t even towable. A pretty kettle of fish if that sort of thing happened in war!

The matter was one for brigade. By good luck Rockingham found Headworth there.

“We’ll let Ordnance function on this”, said Headworth; and rang them up. Ordnance protested. Couldn’t they dismount the clutch and indent for a new one? Couldn’t they free the caterpillars? How about asking the Tank Corps for help? But the adjutant won the day.

“So that’s that”, he said, replacing the instrument. “How did you think the doings went off otherwise?”

“Not too badly. But I don’t feel as happy as I did about practice camp. My chaps could be a lot smarter on their gun drill. By the way, when are we off?”

Headworth “didn’t quite know”. There was “a bit of a muck up” about it. Blasted nuisance. Because his missis wanted him to take a fortnight’s holiday with her. Not much hope of that. Too many officers on courses. Nobody to act for him.

“I dunno what we’re going to do for officers in the next ten years”, went on

Headworth. "Chaps simply can't afford to put their sons into the army nowadays. And damn few want to be there anyway. Can't say I blame 'em. Look at the pay. Look how long one has to wait for marriage allowance. Four years longer than the men. It's all very well for chronic bachelors like you. But how many are like you. I mean——"

Cyril Headworth explained his meaning with soldierly precision. Rockingham heard him out. Leaving brigade office, he remembered Cowley once more. Blast Headworth. Why couldn't he have kept off sex? Why had he used that phrase "chronic bachelor"? As though one wanted to be. As though one wouldn't marry like a shot if only . . . If only one could find the right girl.

Again—as at breakfast—introspection, balking, refused to take more fences. But the desire for sleep was gone. He prowled back to the sheds, and ran into Cartwright, who said, on being informed of Headworth's decision:

"There's only Godden and one fitter still with her, sir. He sent the other chaps back with Chalkley. I think we'll leave him be. He's happier mucking about with his engines".

They were alone. Something made Rockingham ask:

"He hasn't quite got over it then?"

Something made his sergeant-major answer:

"He will, sir. When the right girl comes along".

Blast Cartwright, saluting like a stuffed dummy. Why had he used that phrase "right girl"?

The sergeant-major sailed off, cane under arm, on his own occasions, Rockingham proceeded to his stable, where he found Gilchrist at his eternal harness-cleaning and Patrick asleep in the sun. He took Patrick back to his quarter; wrote a letter to his mother; scribbled a line in answer to one from Geoffrey, and went across to the mess.

There, he encountered Potter, and, somewhat to his surprise, Murchison, also in mufti, who had "just dropped in for a dish of tea".

"Frank's by way of being my nephew", said Murchison. "I'd forgotten you and he were in the same brigade. Did you hear about my luck over the Derby? I actually drew Mahmoud in the club sweep."

"And stood me one hell of a dinner on the proceeds", said Potter. "Gloomy Gilbert—as we call him in the family—got a bit tight for once in his life. I had to put him under open arrest till he recovered."

This was a new light on Murchison, who protested instantly, "A little more reverence, please, Frank. You seem to forget I'm your superior officer as well as

your uncle”.

But the irrepressible Potter went on, “Believe it or not, I had to take him for a constitutional up and down Constitution Hill before he was sober enough to drive himself back to Woolwich. We had another bit of luck, too. You know the monarch gave a big dinner party that night. Well, just as we were opposite Buck House—G.G. was pretty well fit for duty by then—who should we see but Stanley Baldwin and his wife. They were just driving away. Then the Lindberghs came along. At least, I’m pretty sure it was them. And after that . . .”

Potter’s voice dropped as the mess waiter took Rockingham’s order for tea.

Later, he elaborated, “Of course I don’t believe that. People always gossip if they get a chance. There wasn’t any secret about it. Everybody knows they were both there. As a matter of fact, I read it in the *court circular* next day”.

“So did I”, said Murchison. “But if I were you, Frank, I should shut up.”

The last words were so obviously intended for an order that even Potter could not afford to disregard them; and he changed the subject at once, leaving Rockingham completely incredulous.

“Utter rubbish”, he thought—and dismissed the rumour which was already gaining currency in the West End of London from his mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

§ 1

Mrs. Lampson's invitation to the night's dinner had stipulated, "Tails"; and Major Rockingham, R.A., apostrophised her for it while he shaved for the second time that day.

He was still "fed to the teeth". The mere thought of putting on that stiff shirt to which Noakes had already attached the high collar induced rage.

Why the hell must one live all one's life under discipline? He didn't want to dine with the Lampsons. If Wily Wilbraham hadn't happened to be his colonel, he wouldn't be dining with the Lampsons. These quarters were a disgrace. Tin roofs in a heat like this!

The evening had brought no breeze. It was so still that one could hear radio music, or was it a gramophone, playing in the sergeants' mess.

Still—and threatening. There would be a thunderstorm before midnight. Oughtn't one to tell Noakes to shut the car?

He finished shaving; went to his bath, soaped and sluiced himself. But the cold water refreshed neither his body nor his mind. His thin underclothes seemed clammy. It was an effort to lace his shoes. The starched linen might have been metal armour. Where had that fool Noakes put his front collar stud?

In its usual place by his white tie!

Noakes, Patrick at his heels, entered just as he was pulling on his trousers.

"They're some nasty clouds about, sir", said Noakes. "It'd be as well if you had the hood up."

"Right. Go and see to it. No. Half a minute. You've got these blasted braces the wrong way round."

"Sorry, sir."

"And you might stay and help me on with that infernal coat."

Driver Noakes, carrying out these orders, conceived the same idea as Wilfrid Patterson. "Old Rusty" hardly ever "blinded at one". Getting a bit crusty, was old Rusty. Didn't smile as often as he used to. Working himself too hard? Probably. This adjectival mechanisation. All very well for the youngsters. But the Regiment would never be quite the same without its horses. Drew chaps together, did horses. Made sportsmen of 'em.

Oh well, less than a year and one would be into one's civvies. Married, and

one's own master. Something to look forward to. Not that one wouldn't miss old Rusty. And the Regiment.

"Shall I go and put the hood up now, sir?"

"Please. And you might give Patrick a bath tomorrow. He's rather odoriferous."

§ 2

Outside—though heavy clouds obscured the low sun—it seemed fresher; and Rockingham's ill-temper waned a little as he stood to take three or four deep breaths.

"Mustn't let myself get into these states", he decided. "Silly." For, after all, this "duty dinner" had its compensation. Camilla would be there.

A grand girl—somehow one could never quite think of her as a woman. Lovely bridge player. Lovely tennis player. No fool either. Brain as good as most men's. Pity, therefore. . .

But there, for the third time, introspection refused its fence.

He walked round the edge of the tin building and across the few yards of gravel to his car. Noakes, who had just finished tinkering with the hood, was wiping the seat with a duster. A fine fellow. One really oughtn't to have blinded at him.

"Usual time tomorrow, sir?"

"Please. No, Patrick, old lad. I can't take you with me this trip."

"Here, you. Don't you go putting your dusty paws on that leather." And Noakes, holding Patrick by the collar with one hand, saluted with the other as his master started his engine and let in first gear.

"Fine fellow", repeated Rockingham's thoughts, while he drove slowly past the flag. "Dunno who I'll get to look after me when he marries that young woman of his."

But almost immediately his thoughts shot to Camilla, ricocheting from her to the Hawk.

It seemed so much longer than twenty-four hours since one had been in such a bate with the Hawk, since one had spoken with him over the telephone. A bad man to fall foul of. Lucky one hadn't. In more ways than one. Take this evening. Damned awkward, if he hadn't withdrawn that order to destroy Patrick.

"I wouldn't have obeyed it, though", decided Rockingham. "There are limits."

Meanwhile, since even the little effort entailed by driving was moistening his hands and threatening to melt his collar, he accelerated to give himself more air.

For the first half-mile, the mainroad into which he had just turned was fairly

empty. But after that repairs narrowed it, and he had to crawl with a queue. This fidgeted him, almost bringing on another attack of temper. But he managed to control himself.

After all, one was in no hurry. As usual, one had allowed oneself ample time.

§ 3

The next fifteen minutes of time saw a complete change in Rockingham's mood. But the reason for that change also escaped him. He even deluded himself about it, "W.W. does one pretty well. Sure to give us a good dinner. Feeling rather peckish. Wouldn't mind a cocktail".

Thus deluded, he turned in at the gate of a square stone house set well back from a side road, and circled its not-too-well-kept drive.

No other cars had been parked. Apparently, he was the first to arrive. He looked at the dashboard clock before he shut off his engine, dismounted, and rang the bell.

Monteith, Lampson's soldier servant, one of Noakes' few contemporaries, opened the door; and said, "Will you go in to the garden, sir? The quickest way is straight down the passage. We're a bit short-handed this evening, sir".

Rockingham smiled, and gave Monteith his hat. The passage smelt of cooking. The end door was open. Just beyond it stood Janice Lampson, bare of arm and shoulder in flowered silk.

"There's a panic", she laughed. "One of our maids. Come and help me bring on the cocktails."

She seized him by the arm, led him back into a pantry, indicated a salver with ten glasses and a shaker, which he picked up, asking:

"What happened to the maid?"

"She nearly committed suicide with a sardine tin. Mummy's practising first aid. Daddy isn't down yet. You're early, you know. Unless mummy invited you for a quarter to. She does get a bit muddled sometimes."

"As a matter of fact, she did."

They passed back into the strip of garden behind the house. He put the tray on a wicker table.

"Hell", said Janice. "I've forgotten the cigarettes."

She ran through the open french window of the drawing room and returned with a silver box.

"Have one?" she asked.

“I’m afraid they’re not among my vices.”

“I didn’t think you had any.”

She dipped a soft hand into the open box; quizzed him as he offered his new lighter. He remembered Camilla’s saying, “She’s rather pretty”. So she was, now one came to think of it, with her dark hair and her crinkled lips.

“Have you?” she persisted.

“None that I acknowledge.”

“That’s rather an intelligent answer. Do you mind if I call you Rusty? That is your nickname, isn’t it?”

The baggage! What had the Hawk said about her? “Nineteen—and up to all the tricks. Probably had her first affair before she left school. Gives you that impression, anyway.”

“How do you know?” he parried; then, quickly, “I fancy I can guess. Young Masters. Have you seen him recently?”

“No. I’m not really much of a kidnapper. But I ran into Val Danvers the last time I was in town. She hadn’t half got the blues. Her heart’s in the Highlands. Or is it Nottingham? Your brother Geoffrey is rather devastating. I suppose you couldn’t bring any influence to bear. He might do a lot worse. Val came into a thousand a year when her mother kicked the bucket . . . Hallo, here’s mummy. I say, mummy, you were an ass to invite Rusty for a quarter to instead of eight.”

Mrs. Lampson apologised and shook hands. Slighter than Janice, and taller by a good three inches, she possessed none of her vivacity, graying hair, a paler complexion, and lacklustre blue eyes, which completely belied her character.

“How’s Sally?” asked Janice.

“She’s all right. But she won’t be able to wait. I’ve just telephoned Maud Headworth. Luckily they hadn’t left. She’s bringing her Kate along. Where’s your father?”

“Behold the great one himself.”

§ 4

Wily Wilbraham in full civilian evening kit presented a very different figure to the khaki-clad colonel in brigade office. His smile—as he came across the garden—was that of the perfect host, his handshake cordial, his words smooth.

“Glad you’re early, Rockingham”, he said. “Pour him out a cocktail, Janice. I could do with one, too. How’s our Sally, Kathleen?”

Kathleen Lampson repeated her, “She’s all right”. Two more figures appeared

at the french window of the drawing room and made their way over to the wicker table. Lampson introduced them as: "My brother, Edwin, and his wife. They're spending the weekend with us".

Shaking hands again, Rockingham remembered a two-year-old divorce; and his colonel, still a major, saying, "I don't believe in it myself. But my brother's case is rather exceptional. Her husband drinks like a fish, and he and his wife never could hit it off together. Luckily there are no kids".

He tried to recall the rest of the story, but failed. Meanwhile he made conversation. Edwin Lampson, it transpired, was a busy man, "director of half a dozen companies". Slightly bald, clean-shaved, with a slightly protuberant stomach, he looked the part.

The wife—for some obscure reason—interested Rockingham more than the husband. A quiet woman in her late thirties or early forties, she radiated a peculiar atmosphere of happiness. He thought vaguely, "It's funny how few divorcees I know. It must be a rotten business"; and turned away from her to greet Maud Headworth, under whose father he had once served.

"I haven't seen the old boy for months", said Maud, in answer to his inquiry. "He's on a world cruise. We get a postcard occasionally. All we're hoping is that he won't marry again. That would be a disaster."

She laughed, showing her excellent teeth; and demanded a drink. Her Cyril joined them. They talked horse for a few moments, then the south of France.

"An aunt of mine has a villa at Antibes", she said. "I'm going to spend July and part of August with her. It'll be a shame if Cyril can't come out for a bit. Who'd be a soldier's bride? I always swore I wouldn't. And look at me!"

"Pick a civilian next time, old lady", suggested her husband. But the "old lady" was only said in chaff; and his hand rested, just for a moment, on her fine shoulder—and the one glance which passed between them sufficed.

"Still madly in love with each other", thought Rusty Rockingham. "And it must be nearly two years since I was best man at their wedding."

Then Janice drifted over to them; and—just for another moment while she was refilling his glass—he half-recalled his mother's, "They're much of a muchness. Plenty of nice ones about".

"Mother's right", he thought next. "It's high time I did settle down."

But not with "a kid of nineteen"! Better a woman of Mary Hawkins' age. Sensible. And not too good-looking. Pity that Mary had been so set against having children. But there—to Janice's, "Hallo, here's the rest of the party"—thought was obliterated in sheer sensation.

He had always known Camilla for beautiful, but never that she could be as lovely as this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

§ 1

It was still broad daylight, with a sudden shaft of sunshine broken through the hot murk, when Monteith shepherded Camilla Wethered and her husband into the garden. Halfway across the dry turf to greet them, their host too caught his breath, thinking, “Fairly takes one’s breath away. Never realised she could look quite so attractive”.

Wily Wilbraham, however, recovered his poise instantly; unlike his senior major, who continued to stare at her, till she caught his eye, and called to him, “Why, hallo, Tom”.

Her voice summoned him back to the realities. They exchanged a word or so. She was introduced to the Edwin Lampsons, to the Headworths. Janice whispered, “I wish I had hair that colour. Mine won’t even dye properly. I tried a streak once, but it looked simply awful”.

The Hawk stalked up while she was still whispering.

“You should have tried a white one”, he said. “Like mine.”

“Is yours dyed, Sir Guy?”

“It is not”, grinned the Hawk.

“Then how did you manage it?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know. Evening, Rusty. Hot for once.”

“You might tell a girl”, pleaded Janice, laying a hand on the talker’s arm.

Hawk Wethered covered that hand with both his own. For a second, his eyes glinted. “The wicked marquis”, thought Rockingham. But all the Hawk said, and he spoke gruffly, was, “Don’t you try to flirt with me, young woman. Pick someone of your own age. What you really need is a good smacking”.

He removed his hands, stalked back towards Lampson. To Rockingham’s amazement, he saw Janice flush. Something made him say, “You rather asked for it”.

“I suppose I did.” She hesitated. “By the way, you’re taking me in to dinner. Do you mind very much? I promise I won’t flirt with you. Not that I was with him. Really.”

A kid of nineteen!

§ 2

The sun still shone, the murk seemed to be clearing, as the ten of them made their way to dinner. But on the table orange-shaded candles were already lit.

“It’s always dark in this room”, complained Kathleen Lampson from the foot of the oblong table. “My husband wants to have those trees outside the window cut down. But they won’t let him. I wish you could do something about it, Sir Guy. After all, it’s your house.”

“Not mine”, corrected the Hawk, taking his place beside her. “It’s government property. But if I were Lampson I’d have ’em down first and ask for permission afterwards.”

“You would”, thought Rockingham, as he also seated himself, between Janice and Lampson’s sister-in-law, with Camilla almost opposite to him across the superabundant flowers.

She was in black again—the same frock, he realised suddenly, that she had worn at the dance. And she wore the same jewelry—pearls round her throat, that one emerald over her wedding ring. Why then this amazing change in her appearance—as though one were seeing her with new eyes?

One actually was seeing her with new eyes. And fearfully. So fearfully that the less one looked at her the better. Did she know that? Perhaps . . .

A strange tremor shot through him. He turned to Janice. As he did so, he was aware—subconsciously if not consciously—of another change. In himself.

Another tremor assailed him. For the very first time in his existence he knew the meaning of nerves. This maid was stooping to offer him a long platter of hors d’œuvres; but he dare not help himself. His hand could not cope with forks, with spoons, with these fiddly little dishes. Not while this voice was shouting and shouting inside his head, “You fool. You’re in love with her. You’ve been in love with her for weeks”.

In love with Camilla? With Hawk Wethered’s wife?

He refused the platter with a muttered, “No, thanks”. Janice asked, “What? Not even a sardine. I say, are you slimming?” He managed to answer her, to control himself, almost to delude himself, “You’re not really in love with Camilla. It’s only that she’s looking so lovely tonight; it’s only the heat; it’s only those two cocktails you had”.

But the certainty of loving her, and the fear induced by that certainty, remained.

Champagne was offered him; and that he did not dare refuse, with Wily Wilbraham beaming, “Krug twenty-one, Rockingham. Edwin sent us a case of it. There isn’t a better wine going in my opinion”. Soup was offered him; and somehow or other he conveyed it to his lips without spilling it over his shirtfront. Mrs. Edwin

Lampson asked him, “Are you in my brother-in-law’s battalion or battery or brigade or whatever it’s called?”

Somehow or other he succeeded in answering her, and in maintaining intelligent conversation, and in eating his fish.

All this time—and it seemed an eternity—Camilla had been talking to Wilbraham Lampson. All this time he had been afraid to look at her. Now, abruptly, their eyes met again, and she addressed him by name.

“The colonel and I were just discussing a bridge hand, Tom. Playing the two club convention, what would you call on five hearts to ace, king, queen, six spades to ace, king, queen, knave—and two small singletons?”

He deliberated.

“Two clubs, I fancy.”

“So should I. But the colonel doesn’t agree. He makes it five spades.”

“I agree with my brother”, put in Edwin Lampson, seated on her left—and the friendly wrangle took them to the next course.

§ 3

Towards the end of dinner—though the certainty that he loved this woman opposite to him was no less—Rockingham’s fear dwindled. That she should know of the change in his feelings for her seemed so absurd.

“Midsummer madness”, he caught himself thinking; and again, “Whatever my feelings, I can get over them.”

At which precise point in his secret meditation Hawk Wethered’s voice struck the whole table dumb.

“I’ve just been telling your wife, Lampson”, rasped the Hawk, “that it’ll serve us right if we have another European war on our hands before we’re two years older. Nothing more idiotic than our behaviour to Italy has been seen in centuries. The result’s inevitable. A Hitler-Mussolini alliance. The Italians will let the Germans swallow up Austria.”

“I doubt that.” Edwin Lampson spoke. “You’ll never get two primadonnas to agree.”

“Won’t you? If it pays ’em. Take a look at the map of Europe. Read *Mein Kampf*. Hitler’s plans are as plain as a pikestaff. He’ll do Musso down in the end. But he won’t try to pinch the Tyrol till he’s settled with Czechoslovakia and Poland. And once he’s done that, it’ll be our turn. Unless we give him back his colonies. Which God forbid.”

The Hawk stopped. Wily Wilbraham took him up, with just the right touch of deference.

“I’m with you up to a point, sir. We haven’t been too clever. But I can’t see the Germans taking us on. After all, they’ve had some of it. And the French can bomb Berlin just as easily as the Germans can bomb London. There’s Russia to be reckoned with, too.”

“Russia!” scoffed the Hawk; and Edwin Lampson spoke again:

“One gathers you’ve lost all faith in the League, Sir Guy. Surely, however, the small nations aren’t entirely negligible? Kraftpolitik, as the Germans have taken to calling it, is all very well. But there is such a force as moral indignation. Once rouse that, and you have the whole world against you. Including America. You agree with me there, I hope, Lady Wethered?”

“I——” began Camilla; and hesitated a long second before she continued, “I’m a pacifist out and out. I think war’s senseless. I think anyone who starts a war ought to be hanged.”

Her cheeks had flushed while she was speaking. Again silence held the table, from which the servants were clearing the last plates.

“Then you’d better begin with your friend, Mr. Baldwin”, growled the Hawk. “It’s his fault that we disarmed while every other nation in Europe was arming. And that’s the root of the whole trouble. Do you think anyone’d risk playing power politics with the British Empire if we had the army we ought to have, or the air force we ought to have, or the navy we ought to have?”

“Hear, hear”, said Wily Wilbraham. “Give Baldwin his due, though. He did say that our frontier was on the Rhine.”

“And that his lips were sealed. He must know that we ought to have started rearming years ago. Then why the hell didn’t he do something about it? Only because these politicians are alike; because they’re so scared of the electorate that they simply daren’t tell it the truth. What happened last time? What’s going to happen this time? We shan’t be ready. What’s the use of our present system? Everybody doing what he or she damn well pleases. If I had my way——”

“If men like you had their way, Guy”, interrupted Camilla—and Rockingham saw that her face had gone very white, “there’d be nothing worthwhile left in the world. No liberty. No beauty. No art. No culture. Just guns. And gas to choke little children to death. And bombs to blow them to bits with. You’re always raving against Hitler and Mussolini. But secretly you admire them. Because their method is your method. Force.

“Brute force”, concluded Camilla.

And for once—despite a grin, “Prettily spoken, my dear, even if not quite accurately”—Hawk Wethered ceased fire.

§ 4

The women had withdrawn; and the Hawk was himself again as he cuddled his brandy glass.

“Good stuff this, Lampson”, he said. “Where did you get it from?”

“A little chap Edwin put me on to. It’s not too dear either.”

“You might let me have his name. I’d rather like some of it.”

“I’ll drop you a line tomorrow.”

“Yes, do.”

He turned to his host’s brother; asked him a question about stocks and shares. Headworth chimed in. Talk between the five men grew general—Rockingham perforce taking part. But most of his mind was still with Camilla; and presently he dropped out of the conversation, confining himself to an occasional monosyllable while he drew slow puffs from his cigar.

The smoke soothed him. His sense of humour came uppermost. “Brute force.” That’d taken the wind out of his lordship’s sails. He *was* a bit of a fascist. And yet one couldn’t go all the way with Camilla. One day England might have to “tell these dictators where they got off”, as her husband himself had phrased it at his own dinner table.

Could one sit at her husband’s dinner table again?

The question drove humour under. Blindingly Rusty Rockingham saw his exact position if—and did one need that “if?”—he were really in love with his C.R.A.’s wife.

“Have to ask for a transfer”, he decided. “Have to get away from her.”

And yet—why?

Words from Lampson, “I think we ought to join the ladies now, sir”, jerked him sharply to the present. As he rose from the table, he was deluding himself once more. One didn’t fall in love with other men’s wives. It just wasn’t done. Therefore, one hadn’t done it.

“Care for a wash, Rockingham?” asked his colonel.

“Thanks, sir. No.”

“Then don’t bother to wait for us. The ladies are still in the garden, I imagine.”

“Right.”

He went towards the garden; halted at the end of the passage. Darkness had

fallen. The shapes of the five women seated on their wicker chairs were indistinct, till the spurt of a match showed him Camilla's face vignettted against sombre foliage. He went on. Very far away—it seemed to him—thunder rumbled. But, immediately overhead, shone a few stars.

“It's simply too hot to stay in the house”, said Kathleen Lampson. “I'm afraid we've monopolised all the seating accommodation. You might get a couple of rugs, Janice.”

The girl, seated next to Camilla, rose. He asked her, “Can I help?” She said, “No. Don't bother”. Automatically he made to take the chair she had vacated, and thought better of it.

“What have you men been up to all this time?” asked Camilla. “We thought we'd lost you.”

“Talking Stock Exchange mostly.”

“How dull.”

She drew at her loosely rolled American cigarette. The red glow showed him her eyes. He realised that he had half-inclined his face to hers; straightened himself. The other men began to emerge from the house. He experienced the most peculiar sensation of time standing still; of a scene snapshotted forever on the sensitive film of recollection. The voice inside his head was whispering, “No harm to love her—as long as she doesn't know”.

The voice inside his head was cut off by hers. “You might get rid of this for me, Tom. I'm oversmoking again.” She handed him her cigarette. Their fingers just touched. Another tremor assailed him. He moved away; stamped out her cigarette; tossed his finished cigar into the shrubbery; returned to her.

“This grass is bone dry”, she went on. “You don't really need a rug.”

Seated, his hands clasping his knees, he was consciously aware of the change in himself. The mere proximity of this woman was a sensuous delight. For the very first time her mere presence tied his tongue. He felt unutterably glad that Janice should be bringing the rugs, that the other men should be squatting down on them, that conversation should be general again. But only scraps of the talk penetrated; and presently he discovered that she, too, had fallen silent, one hand dangling, the other cupping her chin.

Seen thus—he had seated himself facing her—she seemed all womanhood. Mysterious. Scarcely approachable. Nevertheless, to be dared. And after a while he found himself daring—if only in his imagination—to grasp that dangling hand, to demonstrate his delight in her . . . Till his eyes showed him the Hawk.

The Hawk—in Rockingham's imagination—appeared watchful. He caught

himself thinking, "Thou shalt not covet . . ." And shame took him by the throat.

If his religion meant anything beyond lip service, he was already a sinner. This midsummer madness must stop.

Shame loosed his hands from his knees, wrenched him upright. Janice, who had surrendered her chair to her father, was also on her feet. Across the grass came Monteith, followed by Maud Headworth's maid, Kate.

They carried trays, which they deposited on the wicker table. "Who wants a drink?" asked Janice. "There's whiskey and soda, brandy and soda, gin and tonic."

It was a relief to carry round the various glasses, a greater relief when the Hawk said, "I don't like to break up the party, Lampson. But I've a pretty heavy day in front of me".

But he could hardly answer Camilla's cool, "See you on Saturday, Tom. Come to lunch if you can manage it. We might get in a couple of singles before the crowd arrives"; and her farewell handshake sent the blood pulsing to his head.

§ 5

The whole party accompanied the Wethereds to their car. The Headworths, their maid in the back seat, followed them away.

"I ought to be off, too", said Rockingham.

"Hadn't you better finish your drink first?" laughed Janice; and he realised that he was still holding a full glass in his left hand.

The hall door stood open. He followed her through it, and in to the drawing room. Monteith was already bolting the french windows. An uncomfortable ten minutes of desultory conversation followed. He emptied his glass; shook hands with his hostess, with her sister-in-law; bade good night to his colonel and his colonel's brother. Janice said, "I'll see Rusty off the premises, mummy"; and lit herself a last cigarette.

Alone with him, she seemed anxious for a little more talk.

"What do you think of Uncle Edwin?" she asked. "I always call him Pomponius Ego. Not that he's ever been on a horse in his life. Don't you adore Surtees?"

"I'm afraid I haven't read him for years."

"Don't you read much?"

"Well, I shouldn't describe myself as entirely illiterate."

"I'm just reading . . ."

She talked on. He did his best to cope with her. Kathleen Lampson called from an upper window, "Don't forget to lock the front door when you come in, darling".

She held out her hand, saying, “That’s a hint. Good night, Rusty. Come again soon. Don’t bother to shut the gates. We always leave them open”. He climbed to his wheel, switched on his lights, started his engine.

Waving to him, Janice Lampson thought, “Val’s right. He’s just my type. I wonder if he’s in love with anybody”, never realising that he had forgotten her very existence before he drove through the gates and on to the road.

The side road was deserted except for two shadowy figures embracing by another gate. The mainroad, when he halted before turning into it, showed never an oncoming light. “Why not?” he caught himself thinking. “I shan’t sleep if I do go back to barracks.” And in another half-minute, he was speeding for the west.

Ten miles he drove, recklessly, thoughtlessly, his headlamps swording the darkness—and yet another ten before his mind began to function in the old orderly manner, before he could repeat to himself, “This madness must stop”.

But still there was no fatigue in him, no faintest desire for sleep. This thing could not be dwelt on. It had to be thrashed out. Here and now. Tonight.

He slowed a little—and took notice of the night. Ground mists were about. The heat seemed even more oppressive. Another mile. A hill topped. And he could see, above the dipping blades of his headlamps, that there were no more stars.

Another car swept up and by without dipping its lights. Automatically, his right foot dived for the brake pedal. As he recovered vision, the wind struck.

The wind struck suddenly. Within a second, the hedgerows—motionless silver these many miles—were tossing to it. A paper leaped from the tarmac, jammed itself against his windscreen, flapped there, was torn away.

Then a few heavy raindrops splattered on the screen; and, as he topped the next rise, lightning tore the skies ahead.

He pulled up; switched off his headlamps; dismounted. Curiously, there was no wind here and no rain. He had an impression of immense calm, of immense spaces stretching to right and left of him, of a huge black hill ahead.

But in another second forking tongues split that hill from top to bottom, and a great crash shattered the calm, and out of the immense space to right of him the wind roared again, and behind it swept a solid wall of rain.

The wall caught him, drenched him, before he could climb back to his driving seat. Simultaneously, lightning flashed again, and thunder crashed again, and the hands of the wind tore at the hood, shaking the cantrails, battering at the window as he wound it up and home.

His engine was still running. He turned it off; switched on wiper and headlamps. But the wind had veered, blowing the rain straight at the screen. The electric wiper

jammed. The headlamps showed him nothing.

“Better keep ’em on though”, he thought. “Might be run into if I don’t.”

With both windows shut, he felt stifled. He opened the near one a crack. The next flash of lightning, the next

CHAPTER THIRTY

§ 1

Time and again during that month which followed the revelation of his love for Camilla, Rusty Rockingham made up his mind to break with delusion and put an end to their friendship. Time and again his best resolves failed.

Alone, it was easy enough to tell oneself, "I can't stand this much longer". But, in Camilla's company, the contemplated wrench seemed too painful. Their companionship, moreover, could do her no harm.

Of this—if of nothing else—he felt utterly confident. Want her, he might. Want her, he did. But she stood aloof from all such wants—goddess on an altar beyond whose golden rails he might never pass.

Even in his saner moments—and he had several, with virtuous resolutions almost triumphant—the absurdity, the falseness, the hopelessness of such a position did not strike him. No Galahad, he still cherished the conviction that women, with rare exceptions, were either "good" or "bad". His own goddess—as a lovelorn imagination never ceased to inform him—belonged to the former category. For her, therefore—however often he himself might break the tenth commandment—it was perfectly safe that they should continue to meet.

Meanwhile, with June drifting towards July, their meetings—though largely, as he imagined, fortuitous—became so frequent that he almost lost sight of the tenth commandment. For by then their companionship was a habit—of which, apparently, even her husband approved.

"Why on earth didn't you turn up for lunch? Camilla was expecting you", asked Hawk Wethered when Rusty Rockingham, already flannelled for tennis, was shown into the garden on the Saturday after the Lampons' dinner party.

"You'd better spend next weekend with us", he said at the close of the afternoon's play.

And on the Tuesday after that weekend—a rainy one, giving opportunity on opportunity for those talks which proved always more delightful—Mrs. Rockingham wrote, "I simply must have a breath of country air", and that she had booked rooms at a "really nice little hotel, Connie Pillsbury says she knows I'll be happy there" midway between the Hawk's house and Steepdown.

She had written to Camilla, who rang up about it ("Do you think she'd like some of our nectarines, Tom? I could take them over myself. I shall be that way on

Thursday afternoon. . . . Yes. Probably at tea time.”) as well.

§ 2

The Honourable Mabelle Rockingham breathed country air—mainly on the hotel verandah, as the summer rains were continuous—for more than a week. On the first Sunday, William, Frances and their children motored down to see her; on the second, appeared Geoffrey.

Both brothers were told, “Tom, for Tom, is being positively attentive. He motored me over to the Wethereds yesterday”.

And on the last day but one of her sojourn Tom rang up to ask whether she would care to see some cricket. “It’s only an inter-brigade match, but it looks as though we were going to have a decent day for once. Camilla’s coming. She can easily bring you along.”

It did strike Mrs. Rockingham—during the course of the match—that she had never known Tom “take to” any woman, with the possible exception of “that little demirep, Gail Vanduser”, in exactly the same way he had taken to Camilla Wethered. It struck her, too, that he was “not quite himself”.

She even went as far as to suggest, “You look as if you wanted feeding up, Tom. Perhaps a tonic would do you good”. But her mind drew no parallel between its observations—she also cherishing the conviction that women could be divided into two classes, “first rate” and “second rate”, and that any woman whom she honoured with her friendship belonged ipso facto to the former category.

To Janice, who was also watching the cricket, and who spent half an hour gossiping with them, she took an instant dislike.

“No style”, she sniffed. “Looks fast, even if she isn’t. I can’t stand these modern girls. If either you or Geoffrey bring me one for a daughter-in-law, I shall disinherit you.”

“Wouldn’t you find that a little difficult, mother?”

“Possibly. But the house and furniture are mine to do what I like with, even if the money isn’t.”

Mother and son continued argumentative. Listening to them, watching this English game whose desultoriness, though matching her mood, passed her comprehension, Camilla smiled to herself, as she was always smiling to herself nowadays.

Because the mere idea of Tom wanting to marry Janice Lampson was so absurd.

“There’s only one woman Tom would like to marry”, thought Camilla in that moment. “But he can’t, the poor darling. If only for the one reason: that she isn’t in love with him.”

For Camilla also was busy hugging a delusion, though only about herself.

Tom, obviously no god, wanted her with an equal obviousness. Lift a finger—and he would be on his knees, swearing eternal devotion. But did she desire that kind of devotion? Could she even contemplate asking Guy for a divorce?

The question—put for the first time—did not shock. There was nothing shocking—to her essentially sophisticated and essentially American mind—about a divorce case. A childless woman, fallen out of love with her husband, fallen in love with another man, had an intrinsic right to change partners.

But did that axiom apply?

“Not in my case”, she decided. “I haven’t fallen out of love with Guy, because I was never really in love with him. I’ve only been really in love once in my life—and I’ve no desire to repeat the experience. Guy suits me. Being married suits me. Why chance an upheaval? Haven’t I had enough trouble in my life?”

Query, though. Was one afraid?

§ 3

Camilla Wethered reckoned fear, whether moral or physical, the lowest of human emotions. She despised it. She had an unnatural horror of it. The mere suspicion that she herself might become a prey to it sufficed to draw her imagination along a dangerous path.

Had her youth’s affair with Len induced a complex? Was she afraid of giving more than her physical self to any man? If so, fear must be conquered—whatever the cost.

Such thoughts formulated themselves subconsciously while she still sat watching the cricket. They were present, at the back of her mind, when Tom helped his mother into the car, and waved goodbye to her. And, on their way back to Mrs. Rockingham’s hotel, chance words brought those thoughts into the foreground of consciousness.

“I have to be in town by six o’clock tomorrow”, said Mrs. Rockingham, “because there’s a meeting of our Anti-divorce League. I do hope you agree, my dear, that the law has gone quite far enough?”

Camilla did not answer immediately; but when her passenger continued, “As a christian woman I feel that our English laws are far too lax already”, something made

her say, "I don't agree with you there".

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Rockingham bluntly.

"Because I feel that the happiness of the individual is more important than any shibboleth."

"Shibboleth!"

"Why, yes. No social law can ever be more than that—for intelligent people."

It was Mrs. Rockingham's turn to delay her answer.

"But so few people are really intelligent", she parried. "There must be a code of conduct. You have one. I have one."

"Not necessarily the same one", thought Camilla. Aloud, however, she contented herself with a quiet, "That's true. I believe in the ethics of Christianity, though I'm not what you might call a religious woman."

"That's a pity", said Mrs. Rockingham; and the subject dropped.

They parted, some quarter of an hour later, the best of friends. Driving the last few miles to her home, nevertheless, Camilla again suspected herself of cowardice.

Why hadn't she stood up for her actual beliefs? Why hadn't she acknowledged, "I can't admit that any churchman, or any lawyer either, has the right to dictate my morals"? Only because Tom's mother was so English. Like Tom himself.

"Queer people", thought the American in Camilla. "They speak our language. But they don't understand our mentality." And, over a lonely dinner with her husband, the thought presented itself again.

This English husband of hers imagined himself so very much the master. Masterhood over a wife came naturally to him—and each new lack of submission as a complete surprise. He had no more idea than the man in the moon that she was just as capable of saying, "Guy, you'll have to let me go", as she had been of saying, "Since you're so insistent, I suppose I shall have to marry you".

Yet that he loved her, after his own strange semi-English, semi-Oriental fashion, was plain.

"It's nice to be loved that way", continued secret thought while she continued to make open conversation. "I couldn't stand being worshipped. Tom would do that. He would grovel to me. He would always be afraid of making me unhappy."

Give Guy his main due. He and fear, whether moral or physical, were complete strangers. Think of him tackling those frenzied natives with only a light cane in his hand. Not that Tom wouldn't have done the same. But Tom wore his heart on his sleeve. And Guy didn't. One never quite knew where one was with Guy. Another attraction. Thinking him over, he had many. Not least, his looks.

If only one could have a child by him!

If only one could be quite sure that fear had no hand in one's decision not to let oneself fall in love with Tom!

§ 4

June was July while her peculiar horror of being afraid increased Camilla's temptation to consider the possibility that she might be on the brink of falling in love with Tom. And already that rumour which had gained currency in the West End of London was seeping into the columns of her own press.

Victim of tabloid journalism herself, she treated the hints in the home magazine that still reached her every week contemptuously. A letter from a friend of Oakland University days, with its enclosed clipping, she answered in the same strain, "How can you believe such nonsense, Mary? He's the King of England. Is it likely that some gutter journalist in San Francisco has some inside information that we haven't?"

For Guy, shown both the magazine and the clipping, had merely grinned, "Preposterous". And Tom said almost the same, that afternoon when he motored over, and the rain drenched them halfway between the house and the tennis court, driving them in to her new Japanese summerhouse for shelter.

"It makes me as sick as mud", said Tom. "But of course I don't believe a word of it."

"Neither do I. It's just put in to make a story."

And it was then that she told him something of her own story, of her own treatment at the hands of, "Our gutter rags. They don't care what they print or how much they hurt people".

But Tom's face showed her that he must know more than she had told; and, pressing him, she forced the confession, "You're quite right, Camilla. It isn't exactly news to me".

The name of his informant, however, he would not give her. Neither could she be certain whether he knew anything about Len.

His reticence, even under the cozening she had practised, enhanced her respect for his character—but added a second temptation to the first. Running from the summerhouse on the pretext, "We shall have to make a dash for it. The others are due at half-past three", she was just conscious of an urge to break down his resistances.

This urge, though, must be instantly repressed, if only for his sake. A man in love with one—and the poor darling really was, even if he hadn't yet realised it—wasn't

fair game.

For the rest of the Saturday afternoon, accordingly—this being simple enough with six more thwarted lawn-tennis players to entertain—she avoided him.

Camilla's second temptation, nevertheless, did not entirely cease from tempting. While their next meeting added a third.

The next meeting was entirely fortuitous.

"We're only about half a mile from Steepdown", said Guy, one morning as they drove for London. "And there's something I've forgotten to tell Lampson."

Without consulting her, he gave an order; Graves turned the car off the mainroad, and pulled up near the wooden steps of a tin hutment. Down those steps came Tom.

She had never seen Tom in khaki. Her reaction to the sight was a surprise. He looked so much taller, so much handsomer. Impossible to think of him as a "poor darling" any more.

Tom saluted and approached. Guy, who had acknowledged the salute by lifting a casual forefinger to his gray hat, said, "Morning, Rusty"; and, after a moment's hesitation, "Lampson in? Good. I want a pow-wow with him. Look after the lady wife for me, will you? I shall be at least a quarter of an hour. Maybe longer".

Then he jumped out and ran up the steps.

Feeling ever so faintly awkward, Camilla too dismounted, saying, "I'm afraid I'm rather a nuisance. You're probably busy".

Tom smiled, "A soldier's first duty is to obey orders. Would you care to have a look round?"

Another figure in khaki approached.

"Captain Patterson", said Tom. "He's second in command of the battery. Lady Wethered."

The other figure saluted, but did not offer to shake hands. Tom continued, "You might carry on for another half-hour, Wilfrid. They didn't seem too happy in their gas masks". As he spoke, she perceived the guns.

The four guns were in a line near some sheds. Wilfrid Patterson went towards them. Men in boiler suits, who had fallen out for ten minutes, put away their cigarettes. She asked, "Is that your battery, Tom?"

"Yes."

"What are they going to do?"

"Battery gun drill in their gas masks."

"Can I watch?"

"If you think it would amuse you. There's nothing much to see."

They followed Patterson; halted some thirty yards from the right-hand gun. The figures in the boiler suits cowed themselves, stood to their pieces. Drill began. She could not make out the orders. But the battery came alive to them. She saw hands flung out in salute, the muzzles lifting, traversing. Another order—and the cowed figures were loading, firing dummy ammunition.

“It’s all very mysterious”, she hazarded. “They look rather like devils. It must be difficult to hear in those mask things.”

“Speaking’s a little difficult, but not hearing. They don’t cover the ears.”

“How silly of me not to notice that.”

“You should have seen the first ones we had.”

“What were they made of?”

“Flannel mostly. Then we had things called box respirators. They weighed about a ton.”

He held up his hand—and the drill stopped. He said, “Excuse me just a second”, and left her. She saw him confer with Patterson; realised herself temporarily forgotten; thought, “I wonder if any woman means as much to him as his work does”.

By the time he returned to her, saying, “Sorry. But I just happened to spot something”, her third temptation—curiosity—was already alight.

After another moment or so, he turned his back on the drill and led her into one of the sheds. Again his talk was of technicalities. They wouldn’t be using “these dragons” much longer. They’d have “tractors” with six wheels and pneumatic tyres. The guns, too, would be on pneumatics. “Experimental Battery” had them already. The field gun, you see, must be mobile.

“Yes”, she said. “Of course. I see that.” But what she really saw was Len, showing her over his ship. To Len, his work had meant more than any woman.

That memory went. They left the shed. Tom looked at his wristwatch; looked beyond the guns to where Graves lounged at his wheel.

“The C.R.A. should be out any moment now”, he went on.

“Yes. Perhaps we ought to be getting back.”

His gunners were still at work. As they passed them, she was aware of his attention wandering. She *had* been a nuisance. He would be glad when she went. How irritating men of his type could be. And yet, shouldn’t a man’s work—if it were worthwhile work—come before any woman? Didn’t she like him all the better because his did? How much did she like him, anyway? Quite a lot. Maybe too much. Nonsense. She wasn’t afraid of this . . . friendship. She’d never been afraid of anything in her life.

She looked across the empty gravel. Guy—Lampson beside him—was just coming down the wooden steps. Thought, like memory, went. She turned, saying:

“Thank you for showing me round, Tom”.

“I’m afraid it’s been rather boring.” He hesitated. “By the way, when am I seeing you again? We’re off to practice camp next week.”

“Can’t you come over on Saturday?”

“I’m afraid not. It’s my mother’s birthday. We’re all dining with her. And on Sunday William’s giving a lunch party.”

“Au revoir then. Unless . . .”

But before she could add “. . . you care to dine with us on Monday”, Guy was in earshot; and not until they were approaching London did he suggest, “I’ve decided to stay at a pub on the Plain while my brigades are shooting. The mess is too much like a rigger scrum for my taste. Why don’t you come with me? You’ll be lonely all by yourself. We could be quite comfortable”.

“Shan’t I be in the way?”

“Serve me right if you are. But I can’t imagine it happening. They don’t shoot at night, you know.” And the Hawk laughed.

For the first time in their married life, his laughter grated. She had an impulse to remonstrate, but restrained it. She had a stronger impulse, not altogether comprehensible, to let him go by himself. But that, too, she restrained, thinking, “Why rub him up the wrong way?”

§ 5

Guy telephoned to the hotel on the Plain that very evening. They could have two single rooms; all the double ones were already reserved.

“That all right?” he asked with his hand over the mouthpiece; and Camilla nodded absent-mindedly. For at the moment she was thinking about Tom.

And, during the days which followed, she continued to think—with various intermittences—about Tom; wondering why she missed his society so much, and whether his work really did mean more to him than any woman, and just how much he was in love with her, and what the result would be if she set herself to break down his resistances.

Was that result—she further wondered—such a foregone conclusion? Tom was so essentially good, and so essentially religious.

It must be rather comforting to be religious, to believe—with Tom’s mother—that there was only one code of conduct. Even though such a belief did exclude any

allowance for individual happiness.

Not—decided Camilla—that she was actually unhappy. This marriage of hers still held its satisfactions. But no ecstasies. No raptures.

Did true self-fulfilment demand the ecstasies and the raptures? Probably. Could one attain them? Possibly. At what cost, then?

Surely, though, the woman who counted the cost of self-fulfilment acknowledged herself prey to that lowest of all human emotions—Fear?

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

§ 1

Rockingham's short weekend at his mother's house renewed his virtuous resolutions. Sooner or later one must put an end to this friendship with Camilla. The strain had become more than one could bear.

The thing, from every point of view, was hopeless. His love could never be reciprocated. They had met too late.

Dreams of reciprocation, nevertheless, continued to haunt him. If only Camilla had not been married to Hawk Wethered!

Shame accompanied those dreams. Imaginatively if not actually he was already the transgressor, both against the traditions of his service and the tenets of his religion. Thou shalt not covet . . . thy brother officer's wife.

That Sunday, despite Mrs. Rockingham's protests, he would not accompany her to church. "I think I'll take it easy", he said to her; and to himself, "No use playing the hypocrite."

Hence—as he fondly imagined—decision. No good dwelling on the thing. Better make a clean break.

In this mood—never considering the difficulty of breaking off a friendship during the whole course of which no word hinting love had been spoken—he arrived at the furnished flat William had taken in Victoria, to find Frances and the children out.

"Man's lunch", said William. "One or two interesting chaps coming. I wanted to have it at the club, but Frances thought it would be cheaper on the premises."

The interesting chaps included a rear-admiral, an air vice-marshal, a junior politician, and—by a curious coincidence—Rusty Rockingham's opposite number from Woolwich Arsenal. Talk, slightly formal while the house-parlourmaid served luncheon, grew very intimate over the cigars.

Points of view on the value of the capital ship—the first subject of discussion—differed. The international situation, according to the junior politician who led up to it rather adroitly, depended on "whether these dictators are temporarily satisfied", and, according to the air vice-marshal, on "whether France can be trusted to play the game".

But on two subjects opinions were unanimous. Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia and Germany's reoccupation of the Rhineland had made any reliance on the League of Nations as an instrument of policy futile. Rearmament, accordingly,

must be speeded up.

“A hundred and eighty-seven millions isn’t a bad start”, said the rear-admiral. “But we shall have to spend five times that before we’re out of danger.”

And Collins, the air vice-marshal, said, “It’s no good spending the money unless we can get the men”.

They broke up about half-past three. William Rockingham went off with the junior politician to play a round of golf at Ranelagh. Rusty and his opposite number adjourned to their club.

“Do you think things are as ticklish as the admiral tried to make out?” asked Rusty, after they had discussed “our shell” for a while.

“I doubt if it’ll come to a showdown for the next two or three years”, answered his opposite number. “We might get four if we’re lucky. But in my opinion that’s the absolute limit.”

Walking back to Smith Square after that conversation, the man who loved Camilla Wethered thought of Cowley once more.

Cowley had been right. The less a soldier had to do with women the better. This dangerous friendship—on his own part, the sheerest hypocrisy—must stop.

§ 2

Back at Steepdown, busy preparing for the march to practice camp, the commander of the Turban battery had only the evenings for meditation. And since it seemed so much better not to meditate, he spent those last few evenings in mess.

The company of men, a desultory talk, a game of bridge or a game of “slosh” on the ancient billiard table, prevented overmuch thought. If one could not quite prevent a thrill, followed by a leaden feeling of disappointment, every time one looked in the letter rack, were not such feelings perfectly natural? Weren’t they a proof—not that one really needed more proof—that the decision reached over the weekend was the only possible one?

All the same, Camilla might write or telephone. She’d as good as promised to, that morning when she watched the battery drilling in gas masks. She must be rather lonely with the Hawk away at camp.

This information, but no more, had already been imparted by Cyril Headworth. “He’s left for the Plain”, announced Headworth, returning from a visit to divisional headquarters. “So we’ll be seeing him when we drive in.”

“I shouldn’t see him unless you hold a full house”, laughed Frank Potter. “I played poker with him once. Back in nineteen-thirty, that was. And it cost me the

best part of a week's pay."

His battery led the next day's "promenade", as Boardman called it. The Turbans followed—nearly three miles in rear to avoid "interference with civilian traffic". The summer was at its very worst—rainstorm succeeding rainstorm. Ten miles out from Steepdown, number three dragon—Kid Masters, who had just returned from a short course, in command of her—slewed round on her caterpillars and dropped number three gun into a ditch.

Rockingham, apprised of this by a motor cyclist, stopped his own car and went back to supervise proceedings. Drenched in the process, he gave orders to put up hoods.

Halfway to camp, they stopped for lunch; and Patterson joined him.

"We're better off without our horses", said Patterson, munching a sandwich under cover. "Bally marvellous, when one comes to think of it. I remember riding down inside a couple of days in this sort of weather and thinking I'd put up quite a performance."

"Take about three hours when we get our new equipment, Wilfrid."

They did it in something under seven, running time—and two hours later casual mess gossip ("The Hawk, Lampson? Oh, he's putting up at the Stag. Got his missis with him") shook Rockingham's decision as a shell, stripped of its driving band, shakes when it leaves the muzzle.

He played poker that night—as is the Regiment's custom at practice camp. And in such bad luck that Ralph Lyttelton couldn't help chaffing him, "It looks as though you must be an absolute devastator with the fair sex, Rusty. Funny how quiet you always keep it".

What did Ralph want to say that for? The blithering fool.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

§ 1

They had been at practice camp two days. Queer how much one had been wont to enjoy it—how dull it seemed this year.

“Routine”, thought Rockingham, woken by his faithful Noakes on the morning of the third day. “Individual training till the end of March. Collective training till July. Then this. Then divisional training. Then manoeuvres. The yearly treadmill. Who’d be a peacetime soldier?”

“Your tea’s getting cold, sir”, said Noakes.

He realised that he had been half-asleep; stretched himself, drank, and rose. Today’s shoot might be a little more amusing than yesterday’s. They would have the rolling ball and the dummy tanks. All the same . . .

Beyond the tent flap, gleams of watery sunshine were dispelling the mists. Decent weather for today’s shoot? Possibly. That might cheer one up a bit. All the same . . .

“All the same”, mused the commander of the Turban battery as he made his way across sodden ground to the mess he could remember ever since he had first donned uniform, “I wish to goodness I were out of the service.”

Why?

Secretly, he knew the real reason. But this reason, he would not admit. Because to do so would be tantamount to confessing that his decision had been rocked to its plinth, that the mere thought of never seeing Camilla again had proved unbearable.

Now that she was so close!

Imagination visioned her as he sat down at the long table and ordered his breakfast. Televised on the screenboard of his brain, she was smiling at him, “Why, Tom, how nice of you to come over”.

Easy enough to go over. A car would take one in ten minutes. One could walk there in less than an hour. One’s presence at the Stag wouldn’t look at all peculiar. Lots of fellows dropped in there for a drink.

Damnation. One must keep away from the Stag. Seeing her—actually seeing her—one might go crazy.

“Not that I could be much crazier”, he decided, sitting almost silent among his talkative fellows; and ten minutes later he was in the open air again, puffing at his pipe.

§ 2

Wraiths of white mist still shrouded the Plain. In the valley below the camp, tanks were on the move. Rockingham could hear their engines quite plainly. Presently the first dinosauric shape rolled snouting into view.

The sight stirred an old memory. One slept after battle. One woke to read a message. One grabbed for a field telephone, grumbling to the brigade adjutant, “My men have been in action for six weeks. This is the first decent night’s rest they’ve had. Do you really mean I’ve got to send fifty of ’em to Carnoy to unload a lot of tanks?”

“Sorry, old boy. But it’s a Corps order for all batteries in rest. I’ve been on to ’em about it myself. Who do you think I got hold of? The Prince of Wales. He’s doing some Q. job there. There’s no mistake, apparently.”

“But, damn it, what’s the hurry about a lot of bloodstained *water* tanks?”

Laughable, to think one hadn’t even known what the word meant, till one’s men returned from Carnoy next midday. And now that offensive weapon—the wonder of twenty years ago—would soon be out of date.

The anti-tank gun must eventually master the tank. But what gun could wholly master these other offensive weapons, whose engines one could hear overhead?

Rockingham looked up.

Nine planes swept booming along the sky. He watched them for a few seconds; looked to the valley again. The one dinosauric shape was a herd now. Over the back of the herd’s leader, he could just discern the trilithons of Stonehenge.

“Nearly four thousand years”, he caught himself thinking. “And the sacrifice is still human blood.”

His mind—unconsciously seeking relief—played with the thought till the last tank crawled out of sight. The mists had all been sucked up by them. Nearer engines—his own—were roaring into life. He knocked out his pipe, returned to his tent, donned his Sam Browne, gas mask, haversack, his compass and his graticuled field-glasses; went to his duty.

But only to his duty.

Because there was no more enjoyment in this soldiering. Absolutely none!

§ 3

No more enjoyment in soldiering. That much at least seemed clear to Rusty Rockingham as he walked swiftly down the little slope from mess to where his

battery column waited for him. But the habits of a lifetime still held. Neither did he allow himself to think of Camilla, while his quick eyes darted from gun to gun, from dragon to dragon.

“As though”, thought Cartwright, standing beside him, “I hadn’t put the beggars to cleaning ’em for two solid hours after we drew our ammunition yesterday afternoon.”

His brief inspection over, O.C. Turban battery gave the order to mount. Lampson had appeared by that time—and Lampson at his fussiest. Why wasn’t O.C. Turban battery in his Austin? Why should he be riding in one of the dragons?

“This is the one Ordnance had in for adjustments, sir. I wanted to see how she went across country for myself.”

“Oh, all right in that case. By the way, Rockingham——”

“Yes, sir.”

“The C.R.A.’s coming over to dinner this evening. You won’t be out of mess, will you?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. I just thought you might have had some appointment.”

Now what the devil had Lampson meant by that?

The brigade commander, whose thoughts had been completely innocent (“Wethered said he’d like a game of poker, and I don’t play”), stood by while the battery—its major in the leading dragon—moved off. Five minutes later, Rockingham—his mind on the vehicle—had almost forgotten the trivial words.

Presently the men of the detachment, facing one another on the seats behind his own and the driver’s, began talking. They were looking forward to this particular shoot. Keen chaps. One owed them a duty. Satisfied with his observations, he turned his head and joined in the talk. Challis, recently promoted to lance-sergeant, asked, “Will the brigadier be out today, sir?”

“Yes. I expect so.”

This information provoked grins. He knew the reason. Yesterday one of Potter’s guns had registered a direct hit, blowing one of the dummy tanks to pieces. The Hawk had called up its number one and given him a pound, saying, “Drinks all round for that one, Sergeant Lancaster”.

Irregular. But then the Hawk made his own regulations. Better not think too much about that.

He turned away from the men, and looked forward over the dark green radiator. Nothing wrong with this vehicle! They were climbing at a good ten miles an hour. Faster than a horse battery could move over this greasy ground. There went one—

teams' heads and drivers' heads just visible at skyline. Next year there might hardly be a horse battery left.

They reached the top of the long slope they had been climbing; were turned half-left by one man with a flag; halted by another. Below, at about three thousands yards, were the old infantry targets, little black figures just emerging from a wood. He saw a shrapnel shell from an invisible battery burst white beyond the figures, heard the bark of the invisible gun, took out his glasses. The next shell burst short. A good bracket. He looked for the observer and his signaller; found them. Four more shrapnel burst. He could see the splash of the bullets. "That'd have given 'em what for", said Challis.

The flag signalled that they were to move on.

Moving, they had a glimpse of the four guns that were firing; lost it as they dropped into another valley; climbed another slope. Below them, now, were the tractors that would tow their targets. These, also, the men could see, the huge ball and the wooden tanks, and the black snakes of the towing cables with their cones and swivels.

"Fairly put the wind up you", said Gunner Jameson, with two shoots and a silent practice behind him to Gunner Purves who had worn his lanyard for less than a year. "Look as though they were coming right on top of you."

"Keen chaps", repeated the thoughts of their battery commander.

But what had happened to one's own keenness? Thank the lord, this short drive was nearly over. Now one would have something to do.

§ 4

A mile on—and the commander of the Turban battery, signalling, "Halt. Action Right", as the nose of his own dragon crawled past its blue and white flag, had more than enough to do. And, doing it, a little of the old keenness returned.

Headworth and Lampson were already at the position.

"Usual procedure", said Headworth while the guns were being unlimbered. "Ball first. You'd better be getting on with your ranging. By the way, W.W. wasn't too satisfied with yesterday's performance. He says it was all right while you and Wilfrid were shooting the battery. But that Masters was rather slow in giving out his orders."

This hadn't come out at the C.R.A.'s conference. It was W.W.'s own idea. But W.W.—confound him—had not been far wrong.

"The boy's nervous", thought Rockingham, walking away—followed by his signallers—from the guns. "He's too afraid of making a mistake."

But Belinda Blue-Eyes, called away from the guns to shoot the battery some hour later, did not acquit himself too badly—although by the time he signalled “G.F. target”, the Hawk had joined Lampson at the forward position from which he was observing and correcting the fire at the ball.

“You’ll make a gunner before you’ve done, young man”, said the Hawk after that last order (“Left—two degrees. Raise angle of sight two—o—minutes. Add two hundred. One round gunfire”) had spattered the disappearing target—and the Kid blushed.

“Good lad, that”, went on the Hawk, after he had saluted and returned to the battery position. “Your lot seem right on the mark this morning, Rusty.”

And of course Lampson was forced to agree.

The three of them—Halliburton reporting, “They say they’re ready as soon as we are, sir”, from the officer in control of the targets—drove back the mile to the guns; for which the ammunition was now being prepared.

Masters ran up. A short conference followed.

“You know what you’ve got to do”, said the battery commander. “Let me know as soon as you’re ready.”

Masters ran back to the guns. Another minute—and the four breech blocks had clanged home on the shells.

“Number one ready, sir. Number two ready, sir.”

Masters acknowledged his sergeants’ shouts by raising his hand. He turned to his signaller. His signaller spoke into the telephone. Two thousand five hundred yards away, invisible tractor wheels turned; invisible towing ropes tautened.

The layers at the guns sat tense. This was going to be fun, this was. Open sights. See what one was shooting at for once. Gosh, here came the first tank, with Belinda Blue-Eyes bawling, “Tanks in Sector Two. Left section engage. Twelve hundred. Gunfire. Gun control”, and Sergeant Godden throwing number three gun over himself.

Number four, with her split trail, didn’t need throwing over. Just traverse her, put the deflection on her, and wait till the nose of the tank . . . “Ready.” “Set.” There it is . . . Right on the tip of the sight . . . Yank the lanyard . . . Blast . . . Just behind . . . Not enough deflection on . . . “Target left”.

Meanwhile Kid Masters—quivering with excitement—awaited the coming of the right section’s target. And suddenly here it came . . . straight over the brow . . . straight down the slope . . . Call the range a thousand. No. Call it nine hundred. “Fire”. Nothing to do now but trust one’s sergeants and the layers. “Traverse.” “Stop traversing.” Hell. Missed it. Missed it again. What a pace the thing travelled.

How it swerved. Straight at the guns. It'd be right on top of number three gun. Damn that layer. Damn Sergeant Godden.

No, by jiminy. Bless the layer. Bless Godden. A direct hit. Smashed the thing. Smashed it to flinders.

“Stop.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

§ 1

“Good work, Rusty”, said the Hawk, with the four guns of the Turban battery quiet again. “What did you say that number one’s name was? Godden, eh? Well, you might call him over.”

And a moment or so later he was repeating his, “Good work”; feeling in his upper right-hand tunic pocket for his notecase, opening it; taking out a pound, and continuing, “Here’s something to take your detachment to the wet canteen with, Sergeant Godden”.

“Thank you, sir”, said Godden, hand at cap peak. But he could not quite restrain a smile; and the Hawk pounced on it with the one word, “Teetotallers!”

“As a matter of fact we all are, sir.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem to have slowed up your shooting.”

At that even Mr. Tuckett, Warrant Officer, Class One—the brigade’s regimental-sergeant-major in attendance on Lampson—permitted himself a smile.

Godden went back to his gun. The Hawk, summoning the two section commanders and Sergeant-Major Cartwright, delivered himself of a short lecture.

Whereafter the Turban battery, not displeased with itself, limbered up, making way for Forsyth’s, whose eighteen-pounders they could hear barking as they unslung their waterbottles and opened their haversacks in a pleasant hollow of the rolling downs.

§ 2

The sun was still high over the Plain, and the ground under wheel drying fast, when Rockingham fell out his two officers and dismissed the parade. His momentary keenness had evaporated. Wilfrid’s talk, as they made their way towards the mess building, bored him. Aeroplane cooperation tomorrow. The hell he cared.

They took tea together. Others joined them. It was past five before he could escape to his tent, before Noakes filled the canvas bath he had hired from N.A.A.F.I.^[6] Then he changed into slacks, lit a pipe (funny, how much one was smoking!) and wrote a letter to his mother.

Just as he was about to seal the envelope in came Noakes again, looking rather self-important, to say:

“Thought you’d like to know, sir. A chap’s been and thrown a revolver at the King’s horse”.

“Where did you get that fairy tale from?”

“Over the radio, sir.”

“Is the King hurt?”

“No, sir.”

“Then why worry me about it?”

“Well, I just thought you’d like to know, sir.” And Driver Noakes, thinking, “What the yell’s the matter with him these days”, withdrew.

Alone, Rockingham licked the flap of the envelope and stuck it down. He felt annoyed with himself for having snubbed his old servant. Why hadn’t he at least made some pretence of interest? Because, latterly, he had lost interest in everyone except himself.

The recognition of this increased his annoyance, which now began—unaccountably—to include Camilla. A pity one had ever met Camilla. One had been happy enough—at least in one’s profession—before.

Another rustle of canvas disturbed him. He called an irritable, “Who is it now?”

“Only me”, said Cyril Headworth; and entered, still in boots and breeches. “W.W. wanted me to have a word with you about that aeroplane shoot tomorrow, sir. He’s going up himself—and wants all B.C.s to. Any objections?”

“Lots.”

“Thought you wouldn’t like it too much. Neither does Potter.”

“But he’s taken his ticket.”

“That’s why. He says he doesn’t mind crashing his own crate but he hates the idea of the R.A.F. doing it for him. How about a drink? I can do with one.”

“Not at the moment, Cyril.”

“Then so long.”

The adjutant went out. Alone again, Rockingham scowled at his own reflection in the shaving mirror. It was ten thousand to one against a crash tomorrow. But wouldn’t that be the easiest solution to his problem? Since he couldn’t have Camilla, was life worth a dam?

“D . . . a . . . m”, he thought confusedly. “Indian coin. Not the swear word.”

The mere fact that he could contemplate his own death with equanimity, nevertheless, seemed to dispel—momentarily at any rate—a final confusion from his mind.

At last he had found his ideal woman. Without her, there could be no real happiness for him.

But with her?

And on that, all the confusions of the last weeks returned.

[6] Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes.

§ 3

A batch of London papers were open by the time Rockingham came to mess. Lyttelton showed him one of them. He looked at the photograph.

“Doesn’t seem to have worried H.M. much”, commented Potter. “My rag says he just looked over his shoulder and rode on.”

“We don’t go in for assassinations in our country, thank goodness.” Forsyth spoke. “I wonder whether this trouble in Spain is going to be serious.”

“Oh, they’re always having revolutions there”, said Lyttelton. “I nearly got mixed up in one myself last autumn. What’s yours, Rusty?”

“Gin and It, please.”

“Right. Good evening, sir.” This to the Hawk, who had just come in with Lampson. “What’ll you take, sir?”

“Brown sherry for me.”

“Cigarette, sir?”

“Thanks. I’ll have one of my own.”

Hawk Wethered, also, spoke about the two items of news in the London papers.

“Don’t you be too sure about the Spanish business”, said he. “It’s been boiling up for a long time. The republicans did in a chap called Calvo Sotelo the other day. He was rather a big bug on the fascist side. As I’ve just been telling my memsahib, I shouldn’t be a bit surprised to see a regular civil war break out.”

“And how is Lady Wethered?” asked Lampson, always the courtier.

“Grousing because she can’t get any bridge of an evening”, said the Hawk. “I’ve promised—on condition of being let out tonight—that I’ll find her a four for tomorrow evening. Care to come?”

“Delighted.”

“And what about you, Rusty?”

“I’m afraid I’m having a battery conference, sir”, said Rockingham after a second’s hesitation. But the half-truth stuck in his throat.

§ 4

It had been only a half-truth. His conference would be over by seven. Seven-fifteen at the latest. And Camilla hated dining early. All the same . . .

“All the same”, decided Rusty Rockingham as he followed the crowd to table, “any excuse is better than none. And *he* won’t suspect anything.”

That momentary hesitation, however, had not escaped the keen insight of the tall man seated some six places away.

“Didn’t want to come”, mused Hawk Wethered. “Playing Saint Anthony. Thought he would if I gave him rope enough. Given ’em both too much. Serve me right if something did happen. It won’t, though. She’s not keen enough. Never even mentioned his name since we got here. Don’t believe she cares whether he’s alive or dead. Funny woman.”

But then all women were rather funny. They wouldn’t be any fun if they weren’t.

Pleased with this paradox, he turned to Lampson, and presently to another brigadier with whom he had been at Hendersons in the ’nineties. Swapping reminiscences of that private school, he forgot about “poor old Rusty”; but, with the port circulating, remembered him again.

Emotionally, “poor Rusty” had served his purpose; given one “quite a kick”. One’s theoretical objection to committing matrimony apart, Camilla suited one admirably. Rusty’s timorous aspirations had merely enhanced her value. A wife no other man wanted wouldn’t be worth having.

“More port, Wethered?”

“Thanks.”

The Hawk tilted the decanter; and drank. Life—it seemed to him—was as satisfactory as this wine. He’d always been its master. And he always would be. No sentimentality for him. Not that he was cruel. (Who’d said so? Camilla. Pulling his leg, of course.) He just liked his bit of sport.

And he’d had his bit of matrimonial sport. Taken his risk, too. Given ’em plenty of opportunity. She might easily have fallen in love with the chap. But she hadn’t. Thank the lord for that.

The paradoxical nature of this last thought escaped him. Filling his glass for the third time, he dismissed introspection—never noticing that other second of hesitancy which preceded Rusty Rockingham’s answer to a question Lampson called down the table, “I’d rather not play tonight if you can make up a game without me, sir”.

Neither did the Hawk—asking Lytton for “a couple of your best cards” to his brace of queens and his outside ace some twenty minutes later—observe the man

who had served to enhance his wife's value leave the anteroom; pass out into the night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

§ 1

It was a darkish night, moonless and almost starless, with never a hint of a breeze. Some battery must be having a sing song. You could almost distinguish the far voices. But the chatter of those nearer voices Rockingham had left behind him died down as he closed the door on them, died away before he reached his tent.

What was he to do now that he had escaped from the anteroom? Read himself to sleep?

The project did not appeal. He had the impulse to go back, to play poker, or bridge, or billiards—any game which would relieve him from this torment of indecision. He experienced a yearning—a perfectly preposterous yearning—for company. Even if it were only his dog's, left with Gilchrist at Steepdown.

Damn it, why hadn't he brought Patrick with him? It was simply hell being alone.

He entered his tent; and looked at the backs of the few books on the narrow table. Rubbish. They wouldn't hold his mind for ten minutes. Then his eyes went to his cap, to the ashplant hanging from the same hook.

"Someone else will be alone", he thought; and at that a stronger impulse took him by the imagination; till all the decencies in him scourged it away.

"Cheating", he thought next. But that thought seemed ridiculous. As though he and Camilla were lovers. As though they ever could be lovers. As though he couldn't go for a walk without going to the Stag.

§ 2

Five minutes later—it had taken him all of that to make sure of himself—Rockingham sought the night again. Ten minutes later—cap on head, ashplant swinging—he had left the last of the camp buildings behind.

Instinct took him up hill, towards the ranges and away from the vale. He walked fast. Only one thought was now present to him. This crazy passion for Camilla must be fought to a standstill. He must discipline his imagination; dismiss her—now and completely—from his mind.

"Nothing else to be done", he decided. "Hopeless otherwise."

But after a little—though his mind still seemed resolute—he found his feet veering; taking him downhill.

Halfway down the hill, he managed to stop. His eyes—by then accustomed to the darkness—showed him a known path, the sweep of the known valley, a far road along which headlights rushed, a nearer road with only a cycle lamp travelling it, the shadows of the gigantic stones between.

Those stones—those trilithons and those monoliths—had fascinated since his very first practice camp. Always, he spent an hour with them. He would go down to them now; find comfort, perchance, in their very age, in the conviction that the span of any one human life was so negligible.

A foolish verse sang to him as he went. “Life is vain—some brief delight—A transient pain—and then good night.” Comfort already. No passion lasted. Three years ago he had been madly in love with Gail. Six months ago, he had wanted to marry Mary Hawkins. How foolish, therefore—how wickedly foolish—to imagine that life would not be worth living without Camilla.

Life was always worth the living, as long as one did one’s duty, as long as one could obey the dictates of one’s conscience.

And his conscience, at least, had never wavered; had never ceased from saying, “The Wrong Thing”.

That old phrase haunted him as he approached the double circle of stones. Dimly he remembered another night when he had been drawn to them—and perceiving two lovers locked in each other’s arms and completely oblivious to his presence under the shadow of Friar’s Heel.

But tonight this place seemed utterly empty; and, trying the gate in the wire fence, he found it unfastened.

“Careless”, thought the soldier in him.

Then he pushed the gate open; passed between the uprights and under the horizontal of the near trilithon; over the undressed boulder of blue rock behind it—and so stood, staring and staring at that other human figure, seated on the altar stone.

“Tom”, said that other human figure. “Why, Tom. It’s you.”

§ 3

“Camilla! What on earth are you doing here?”

The words, spoken after only the slightest pause, sounded so completely natural that the woman who had been thinking of the speaker for the whole of this last hour could not help laughing:

“And you?”

“I just came out for a walk.”

“So did I. That hotel gets on my nerves. I felt I’d never sleep unless I took some exercise.”

“You walked all the way?”

“It’s only a couple of miles. And I rather wanted to see what this place looked like by night.”

“You’ve seen it by day then?”

“Oh, yes. Guy brought me here the day after we arrived. I—I thought you were playing poker with him.”

He was very close to her by then. But the faint selfconsciousness behind her last speech did not register.

“Sit down”, she went on. “Not that it’s any too comfortable.”

He obeyed in silence, still dazed by the shock of this unexpected meeting. She spoke once more, schooling her voice to casualness:

“Tell me something. Is Stonehenge really as old as they pretend in the guide books?”

“There are several theories about it.” His voice also—now that his tongue had untied itself—was schooled to its usual pitch. “Lockyer’s appeals to me most. He makes the date about seventeen hundred B.C. Presumably it was a temple for sun worship. This stone we’re sitting on is supposed to have been where they sacrificed _____”

He broke off, stabbing at the turf with the ferrule of his ashplant.

“Human beings?” asked Camilla.

“Probably. I was thinking, only this morning——”

He broke off again.

“Yes, Tom?”

“That humanity hasn’t altered so much in that respect.”

“What a depressing thought.”

She in her turn fell silent. It was so dark among the stones that his eyes, turning sideways, only gave him the pale outline of her profile, and the vague gleam of her hatless hair.

“It is rather”, he admitted. “But up to a point, it’s true. My job’s training men to kill one another. I’ve been practising it for three days.”

She found her voice again.

“Hence the depression, one gathers?”

“Presumably.”

“You sound just a little doubtful.”

It was very dark among these stones; but her eyes, turning sideways, gave her

just a little more than Tom's profile—his lips, tightly compressed. "Afraid of answering", she said to herself, and aloud:

"You told me, the very first time we met, that you liked being a soldier; that if you had a son you'd want him to follow your own profession".

Still no answer. Should she press for one? Or was she afraid to? No. This emotion she had been experiencing ever since she recognised his figure standing in that square archway was not fear.

What could it be then? Secretly she knew.

He spoke at last.

"It's not such a bad profession as all that. And of course it's necessary. Especially nowadays. I suppose everyone gets a fit of the blues occasionally."

"This is the first time I've ever known you to have one, Tom."

"Yes. I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm not being much of a companion tonight."

"You're being yourself, anyway."

"My worst self."

"Or your true?"

The words had just slipped out. She had never meant to say them. She ought never to have said them. This man was no fool. He would understand her meaning. He had understood her meaning.

Silence once more. This was a very old place. Anything might happen in this place. Why had she been drawn here? Why had he been drawn here?

"Tom."

"Yes, Camilla."

"Let's go, shall we?"

"Why?"

The single syllable rasped in his throat. She was aware that a sudden emotion had almost mastered him. Poor Tom. She hadn't played fair. She'd taken advantage of his surprise, of a momentary weakness. He wasn't really weak. He couldn't help wanting her so much. How much did she want him? Terribly—sometimes. Just before he came through that archway, for instance, she had been longing for the ecstasies, for the raptures, for true self-fulfilment . . .

"Why?" he repeated.

He bent towards her. His eyes were so close that she could see the fire in them. She knew that there was an answering fire in her own. If she let herself weaken now . . . But would it be weakness? She was not afraid of loving this man. She had never been afraid of anything in her life. If she renounced the raptures, it would be only for his sake.

“Tom. Please. Do let’s be going.”

“No.” One of his hands was on her. “Stay. I——”

“Don’t say it.” She must struggle against this hand.

“But I must. I can’t fight any more. You know I love you. Camilla——”

“Yes, dear.”

“You, too——”

“I—I suppose so.”

For why should she struggle any more against this hand, or against these lips—pressing themselves, pressing themselves, pressing themselves, so rapturously, so ecstatically, so eagerly and so hungrily against her own.

§ 4

Very slowly—after the rapture and the ecstasy and the eagerness and the hunger of those first kisses—a little of the accustomed sanities returned to Camilla Wethered and Thomas Rockingham. But though their lips were now separated, their hands still clung.

There was no speech—and as yet no thought—in either of them. This thing—this supreme wonder—had happened. They loved each other. Momentarily, let the miracle suffice.

While they kissed—or so it seemed to each—the rare stars above their heads had become many. Light had entered this place of stone. They could see each other clearly.

But for a long time no clarity penetrated to their minds.

In those moments they might have been the world’s earliest lovers. In those moments, they were scarcely conscious of the world’s ties, and all careless of them. In those moments, all this world’s beauty, all this world’s pleasure, seemed theirs for the immediate grasping.

Then, slowly, their hands unfastened; and, after a while, Camilla spoke.

“I never meant this to happen, Tom. I never thought it could happen.”

“Nor I.”

“Are you . . . sorry?”

“No.”

“I wonder.”

Another silence. This place of stone seemed to grow a little darker. Her fingers sought his again. He carried them to his lips. When they next spoke, it was in whispers, foolishly.

“I don’t think I could bear it if you were sorry, Tom.”

“I’m not. And I never shall be.”

“You really love me, then?”

“Of course I do, Camilla.”

“I’m so glad. At least, I think I am.”

“Aren’t you sure?”

“Not about being glad. Tom——”

“Yes, my dear.”

“It’s all been my fault. I should never have let us be friends. But somehow I . . . I couldn’t help it.”

“Neither of us could.”

“Do you believe in fate?”

“After tonight—yes.”

Words, even foolish ones, failed. Once more, they kissed. Once more, their kisses blotted out the world.

Passion had shaken him, through and through, before he released her. His lips had been so hot on hers that she was still breathless, and her knees still trembled.

“Not again, my sweet”, she stammered. “Not again.”

With a fantastic effort, he curbed passion; mastered himself; rose from the altar stone; and so stood, looking down on her, his hands steady at his sides.

After what seemed a long while, she looked up at him; and he said, very simply, “We can’t leave it like this, my dear”; and she, equally simple, “No. We can’t do that”.

Then she, too, rose; and their eyes met; and, after what seemed an eternity, both his hands rested on her shoulders.

“I can’t give you up after this”, he went on.

“You really mean that, Tom?”

“Yes, Camilla.”

“But you must let me go now.”

“Why?”

She deliberated a moment, eyes luminous, shoulders taut.

“Because, whatever else we do, we mustn’t cheat.”

The last word hung, like a sword, between them. His hands came away.

“We mustn’t cheat”, she reiterated. “Ever. It would be hateful. It would spoil everything. You see that, don’t you, my dearest?”

“Yes. Of course.”

His answer had been instantaneous. But she deliberated another moment before

continuing:

“Tom, we’re neither of us children. We must be sensible. And we must be sure of ourselves. It is true, isn’t it? We do love each other?”

The question chilled him. He answered, almost angrily: “I can only speak for myself. It’s true in my case”.

She thought, without a touch of anger, “And I imagined you would grovel to me”. Aloud she said:

“You don’t like dwelling on things, Tom. Neither do I. But this is one of the things that have to be dwelt on. You say you’re sure of yourself——”

“Aren’t you?”

“I was—while you were kissing me. But that’s not enough.”

Her frankness silenced him. He stared at her in the gloom.

“You’ve been in love before”, she went on. “So have I. Once. We’re not as young as all that. We mustn’t delude ourselves. We both know that the . . . the kisses aren’t everything. Tom—let me go now. Don’t . . . don’t rush me. Don’t let’s do anything we shall be sorry for. Remember, we haven’t only ourselves to think of. There’s . . . there’s Guy.”

Once again, a word hung between them. He still stood speechless. His eyes still stared. His knees were trembling now, but hers steady. Deliberately she took a step forward. Her right hand lifted; laid itself, ever so lightly, on his breast.

At her touch, passion remastered him. She could feel his whole body quivering as his fingers closed on hers.

“Camilla”—it was his turn to stammer—“tell me something. Who were you in love with? Your . . . your husband?”

“No.”

“Then why did you marry him?”

Once again, the flame kindled in his eyes. Once again, flames in her own answered them.

“I guess”, she said, relapsing into a rare Americanism, “that I just made a mistake about that, Tom.”

Then, once again, hungrily, rapturously, ecstatically, lips clung to lips, blotting out the world for them . . . Until, with a last, “Tom, let me go. You must let me go now, darling”, she had broken from him, and was away, almost running, through the archway of the trilithon and out the gate.

One instinct bade Thomas Rockingham pursue that figure just disappearing beyond the gate. But another instinct stayed his feet from the pursuit.

Both those instincts had been old in mankind when savage hands hewed and morticed these gigantic stones in whose shadows he was still standing. Dimly, he recognised them for what they were—man's craving for his mate, and man's fear of his fellow—before he wrenched his ashplant from the turf in which the altar stone is bedded and set off by the way he had come.

Both instincts trailed him, like wolves, up the hill. After a while, however, the fear fell behind; and he could no longer hear it whispering, "Just as well you didn't run after her. Just as well you and she have decided not to rush your fences".

For at last—said the craving—he had found his woman.

Therefore, let him take this woman.

Fearlessly.

However high the cost of her.

Even if she cost him that kingship he had never quite ceased to acknowledge—the kingship of his conscience over the desires of his mind and his body.

Since were not those two desires now one?

"Passion and companionship", he thought as he lay sleepless in his tent. "Mine with Camilla. Mine for the mere taking. Granted only that she loves me enough."

Granted only that she loved him enough! What other justification could any man confident of his own manhood require?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

§ 1

Geoffrey Rockingham, recently transferred to Farnborough, found Ralph Lyttelton at the door of the Steepdown mess.

“Is my brother anywhere about?” asked Geoffrey.

“He went out in his car just after tea.” Lyttelton eyed the flying man’s dinner jacket. “Are you feeding with us?”

“Yes. Only I’m a bit early.”

“Then come and have a drink.”

They had the anteroom to themselves. Over their gins talk turned on Spain.

“It looks as though it might turn into a first class civil war”, pronounced Lyttelton. “Those lads in the Alcazar seem to be putting up a pretty good show. But I can’t say this idea of bringing Moorish troops into it appeals to me.”

“Nor to me”, agreed Geoffrey, “Though naturally I’m for this chap, Franco.”

“Why, naturally?”

“Because I don’t like bolshevism.”

“But is the Spanish government really bolshie?”

“According to what a chap in the Air Ministry told me—definitely.”

“Well, as long as we keep out of it——”

“Can we, though?” asked Geoffrey. “This non-intervention idea is all very well on paper. But if Stalin puts his finger in the pie—and from what I hear he isn’t likely not to—Hitler and Musso’ll want a lucky dip too. Then the fat won’t half be in the fire.”

“You’re a cheerful sort of cuss, Rockingham.”

“I’m a realist”, grinned Geoffrey. “Here’s fun.”

He drained the glass which the mess waiter had brought him. Lyttelton looked at the clock on the mantelpiece; and went on:

“I’d better go and change. Will you be all right here, or shall I take you over to Rusty’s quarter? He ought to be in any moment now.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll be all right till he turns up.”

Lyttelton went to dress. Geoffrey picked up one of the Sunday papers. The Olympic Games were on. He examined a photograph of the Berlin Stadium.

“The old Boche”, he thought, “always does things well.”

Potter lounged in; and he communicated the thought.

“Too damn well”, said Potter. “I hear they’ve got three planes to our one. Is this new shadow factory scheme of ours going to work?”

“Sometime in nineteen-forty.”

“That sounds rather panic-making.”

“I don’t see how anybody who really knows what’s going on can avoid being in a bit of a panic. But I expect we’ll muddle through somehow.”

“Have another sherry?”

“Thanks. I wonder where the blazes that brother of mine has got to.”

“He’s just back, sir.” Masters, once more orderly officer of the day, answered the question as he dropped cap and cane on to the table. “He said if you were here, would I offer you a drink and tell you he’d be along in ten minutes.”

Exactly nine and a half minutes later, Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A., joined the small gathering in the anteroom.

“Sorry to be late, Geoffrey”, he said—and no more.

§ 2

Of the forty-six members of the Steepdown mess, a mere eight sat down to that Sunday night’s supper. Geoffrey, seated on his brother’s right, found him less communicative than usual. As soon as possible, Tom rose from the table, asking, “How about a game of bridge?”

Geoffrey said, “If you insist. But there’s something I rather wanted to talk to you about first”.

They adjourned to the anteroom. Potter and Lyttelton, taking their coffees with them, went off to play slosh. Soon Belinda Blue-Eyes—who had overheard Geoffrey’s request—excused himself with a tactful, “There are one or two things I really ought to see to”. The four remaining subalterns approached the card table.

“Are you going to play, sir?” asked one of them.

“Not for the moment”, answered the eldest Rockingham. “You fellows carry on. Cigar, Geoffrey?”

“You going to have one?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t. How about our taking a stroll?”

“Solvitur ambulando?” smiled the eldest Rockingham; and the youngest—answering mysteriously, “Nothing to solve, old man. Just a bit of information for you”—could not help remarking to himself, “That’s the first time I’ve seen Tom look human since he showed up”.

They lit pipes and strolled out, hatless, into the last of the August twilight.

“New moon tomorrow”, thought Geoffrey. “Hope I don’t see it through glass.”

His brother, still human, asked:

“Well, and what’s the mysterious information?”

“Only that Val and I decided to commit matrimony yesterday evening—and I thought you’d like to know about it.”

“I say.”

To a keener observer, the ejaculation might have betrayed more than mere surprise. But since Geoffrey’s mind also—and for approximately the same period of time—had been concentrated on his matrimonial future, it was only the surprise that struck him.

“I seem to have given you a bit of a shock”, he went on; and his brother, controlling himself.

“Does mother know yet?”

“She’ll know by first post tomorrow morning. Just as well she’s off on her holiday. We expect a spot of camouflaged hostility from that quarter—and are therefore seeking alliances. By the way, oughtn’t you to congratulate me?”

“Of course I congratulate you, old chap. And Val, too.”

They did not stop. They did not shake hands. But Tom Rockingham’s right arm slipped through his brother’s left as they strolled on past the flag down the private road.

“When’s it to be?” he asked.

“Oh, pretty soon. End of October or the beginning of November. It rather depends when I can wangle enough leave. Val doesn’t like the idea of a honeymoon in England. I say, you don’t think mother’ll be really foul to her, do you?”

“Why should she be?”

“Well, Val’s pretty modern.”

“So are you if it comes to that.”

“I admit I’m no William. A girl like Frances would drive me batty.”

Geoffrey laughed as they unhooked arms.

Tom’s pipe had gone out. He knocked his pocket for a match, and said, “Blast. I forgot to bring any”.

“Here you are”, said Geoffrey; and struck one.

It was almost dark by then. The spurt of flame showed him a face no longer quite so human—the lips too set under the clipped moustache, the eyes too resolutely unrevealing.

“Doesn’t seem exactly pleased about it”, thought Geoffrey; but he was still too

absorbed with his own happiness to pursue the thought any farther; and a moment later the match was out and his brother saying:

“We’ll have another drink on this, I think. How about half a bottle of bubbly?”

“On top of port”, laughed Geoffrey. “Heaven forbid.”

And, strolling back to mess, he elaborated, a trifle disingenuously:

“Funny thing. I hadn’t seen Val, up to last evening, for the best part of a week. I hadn’t even been missing her. At least not much. As a matter of fact, if anybody had told me, forty-eight hours ago, that I was going to marry her, I wouldn’t have believed him. But there, that’s the way it takes most fellows I suppose. One just gets a . . . moment of illumination. Do you see what I’m driving at?”

“Oh quite”, grunted Tom Rockingham, and his teeth clenched on the stem of his pipe.

“Anyhow, that’s the way it took me”, continued Geoffrey. “I just knew when I set eyes on her yesterday night that I couldn’t damn well do without her. I suppose you’ve never felt like that about a girl?”

“No”, lied his eldest brother; and felt the pipe stem crack.

They repassed the sentry, and were soon reentering the mess. Potter and Lyttelton had finished with the billiard table. Told the news, they congratulated—and one round of brandies and soda became three.

Towards eleven o’clock Geoffrey said, “I think I’ll be toddling. Got to be up bright and early tomorrow”; and his brother accompanied him to his car.

“If you want to write to Val”, he went on from the wheel, “her address is 47 A Princes Gate.”

Then he was off, looking so infernally happy, looking as though he hadn’t a trouble in the world . . .

§ 3

“I ought to have been more enthusiastic”, thought Rusty Rockingham as the car lights receded; and, walking slowly to his quarter, he couldn’t help thinking, “Lucky devils. Both of them. Luckier than I am.”

Yet was that quite fair when one considered one’s own present happiness, when one considered Camilla’s? Definitely—no.

Chiding himself for the imagined disloyalty, he came to his own door; opened it, and gave a low whistle, Patrick, familiar with this new discipline—it was nearly three weeks now since he had slept in stables—sidled out of the bedroom; and frolicked away into the shadows beyond the mess hut. Within five minutes he was back, and

his master at his writing table.

“Dear Miss Danvers”, began Rockingham—and took a new sheet of paper, musing, “Idiot. Of course you must call her Val.”

The letter, completed, seemed rather stiff. He added a postscript, “We’re just off for our divisional exercise. As soon as we come back you and Geoffrey must have a bite of dinner with me.”

But would they want to dine with him after——?

He brushed the incomplete question aside; sealed and addressed his envelope. A nice girl, Val. Full of humour. Her hardness as superficial as her bad manners. No fool either, with that, “Everybody’s so frightfully pukka. Are you, by the way?”

What had he answered? “Slightly, I’m afraid.” He’d meant it too. Then!

More memories of his one and only meeting with the girl who was to be his sister-in-law harried him. They had danced together. She had asked him how well he knew Camilla. She had nicknamed the Hawk “the wicked marquis”. She had suggested he could be cruel. . . .

Rot, that! The Hawk, for all his eccentricities, was a sahib. One had told Val as much. What a long time ago that seemed.

The little picture of the girl his mind had been making vanished; and Camilla’s took its place. So many pictures he had of Camilla. And each one lovelier than the last.

“That night”, he remembered, “she wore black. I suppose I was already in love with her then. Or did I fall in love with her at first sight? On that tennis court. Probably. She says I did. But she won’t admit she did. Geoffrey’s quite right. It is funny how these things happen. One does get a moment of illumination. Or is it blindness?”

But that last question also he brushed aside, once more chiding himself for the disloyalty. Blind, indeed. With this evening’s promise still in his ears, with the savour of the kiss with which she had sealed that promise still on his lips. Blind indeed! When they’d talked it all over so quietly, when they’d reasoned it all out so carefully. And not only this evening. . . .

After all, they hadn’t rushed their fences. They must have met half a dozen times since. . . since Stonehenge.

Still at his writing table, he tried to recall each of their meetings since that night in Stonehenge. But first his dog, licking his hand as though to say, “It’s about time we both turned in”, distracted him; and then the noise of feet on gravel, of doors opening and shutting; and finally a verse, forgotten since boyhood, which swam unbidden into consciousness, singing:

“I am not afraid for myself, although
I know I have had that light, and I know
The greater my condemnation.
When I well-nigh swooned in the deep drawn bliss
Of that first long, sweet, slow, stolen kiss,
I would gladly have given for less than this
Myself, with my soul’s salvation”.

Not Lindsay Gordon’s best poetry. Sheer romanticism, too. He and Camilla weren’t just foolish romantics. They were a modern couple. A sensible couple. The last couple in the world to let their emotions outrun their intellects. She had stressed that, only a few hours ago, with her, “It isn’t our fault, Tom. We didn’t want to love each other. It just happened. So let’s not talk any more about it. Let’s just make up our minds what we’re going to do about it”.

And after a moment’s deliberation she had said, “We’re both sure. We both feel we’re justified. So there’s only one thing *to* be done. Tell Guy”.

“Tell Guy.” The words, so ridiculously inadequate, so closely verging on comedy, had brought a faint smile to Camilla’s lips; but her fingers—Rockingham remembered—had been fiercely urgent on his arm as she continued:

“I understand what’s in your mind—that telling him ought to be your job. But that’s absurd. He mightn’t believe you for one thing. The chances are he won’t believe me. Not at first anyway. And for another—well, you and he nearly came to blows over a couple of dogs fighting. So let me have my own way. Please, darling. I really do know best”.

“But when will you tell him?”

“Tomorrow, when he comes back from Scotland.”

Tomorrow.

Today.

§ 4

Far off—as that last thought penetrated to Rockingham’s intelligence—a clock chimed. Waiting vainly for another chime, he realised how long he had sat in recollection; rose, and prepared for bed.

Everything was settled now—and no use dwelling on it. Tomorrow—today rather—the Hawk, back from his grouse shooting, would be told the truth. But would he believe the whole truth? Wouldn’t he imagine . . .

He might. One was apt to. Take that business with Botley's wife . . . How difficult it had been to convince oneself that she and Godden had not . . .

"But he couldn't think that of Camilla", decided the man who loved her; and dismissed the unwelcome parallel from his mind.

He clicked off the light, and climbed into bed.

Usually, it was quiet enough in this room. But tonight noise after noise kept him wakeful.

Here—curse them—came two fellows back from leave. Why must they talk so loudly? There went their taxi, revving up for no reason. The clock next. Why the hades must it chime the quarters? And what a row a mere watch-tick made, how heavily Patrick breathed.

"Nice state I'm in", he told himself. "Oughtn't to be. Now that everything's settled."

Was everything settled, though—except between themselves? Far from it. They still had to reckon with the Hawk. And the reckoning wouldn't be easy: "We can't take Guy for granted, Tom. He's very masterful. He won't like letting me go. He won't say yes to a divorce all at once. Though of course he'll have to eventually".

But supposing Camilla's judgment were wrong? Supposing the man refused pointblank even to consider her demand? After all, why should he let her divorce him? He must love her. No man could help loving her. And she *was* his wife.

The clock chimed again; the watch went on ticking; Patrick grunted—just once—in his sleep.

"No sleep for me yet awhile", thought Patrick's master; and clicked on the light; took a book from the bedside table. But the opened pages might have been Hebrew for all they conveyed.

"Wife", repeated Rockingham's mind—yet, because of the passion in him, because Camilla had now confessed she loved him well enough to disdain wifehood, the word seemed to have lost its meaning. Neither did he recall any of those virtuous resolutions which had culminated—little more than a month ago—in his fruitless decision to break off their friendship.

Camilla was his woman. All his life, he had waited to find her. Let Hawk Wethered do his worst.

For a few seconds—coldly, as he imagined—he let himself consider that worst. But—because of the passion in him—it seemed almost negligible. Supposing the Hawk did "cut up rough"? Supposing one did have to retire from the army?

A nastyish thought, that. Rather a sacrifice if one had to go on the retired list. Surely, though, it would be worth any sacrifice to have the woman one loved for

one's very own, to marry her . . . And anyway, one wasn't afraid of Hawk Wethered. One wasn't even jealous of him. One neither liked nor hated him.

Queer!

Those last certainties were so queer that Rockingham—still sleepless—tried to explain them. But for all his ratiocinations they remained inexplicable. The Hawk, as a human factor in this situation, no longer existed. One could only think of him as a material obstacle, almost as a fence that had to be leaped in the hunting field.

Once beyond that fence, one could gallop straight to happiness. And, damn it all, happiness was the only thing worth galloping after. Why hadn't one realised that before?

“Duty?” thought the man who had obeyed its call since boyhood. “But surely one's first duty is to oneself. How can one do one's job if one isn't happy?”

Just before he fell asleep, to the first trill of a bird beyond his narrow window, he thought, “William's happy with his wife and his family; Geoffrey's going to be happy with his wife and his family. So why shouldn't I take my chance of happiness with Camilla?”

Chance. No, certainty.

To which all that was best in him, all that was unscorched by passion, added:

“Besides, it's her happiness, no less than yours”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

§ 1

That Sunday night Camilla fell asleep as soon as her golden head touched the pillow; but woke a good hour earlier than usual because of what Guy called “the troops”.

Overnight, a mysterious unit of those troops had parked their lorries within sight of her side window. She could just hear men calling to one another, as she rose from bed, drew the curtain and looked out.

The men were still in their shirtsleeves. They were cooking their breakfasts on their field cookers. There went Tiny, bounding up the slope towards them. One of them tossed him a bit of food. He wolfed it. Graves followed, squatted down for a gossip.

Yesterday evening, when Tom came over for that final talk, Graves had met them, walking together in that very wood.

The memory fretted her. Graves would be meeting Guy at the local station. She’d better go with him. Just in case he talked. How silly. As though Tom hadn’t every right to come over. Guy had never objected to their friendship.

In one way, the whole thing was Guy’s fault.

This scrap of knowledge also—perceived for the first time—fretted her. She closed the curtain of the side window; opened the front ones, and went straight to her bath. Returning, she locked the door; stripped, and did her exercises. Just as she finished them, and put on her bathrobe again, Daisy, her new under-housemaid, knocked.

“I heard you get up, m’lady”, said Daisy, smiling from the doorway. “So I thought you’d like your tea.”

Camilla thanked the girl, thinking how pretty she was, and how deft.

“A lovely day, m’lady”, she went on.

M’lady. For how long?

The whimsy only amused Camilla. Guy’s title had never been one of his attractions. “What were his attractions?” she asked herself with the door closed again. Very curiously, she could not recollect.

These last weeks—and more particularly these last few days—seemed to have driven Guy right into the background of her life picture. Even Len’s image, Len’s characteristics, were clearer than his.

“I loved Len”, she decided. “I love Tom. Guy—I just married.”

But, after she had drunk her tea, she fell to thinking, “Poor Guy. He loves me as much as he can love any woman. And he won’t like losing me. If only because of his pride”.

§ 2

Merivale was already about when Camilla, in the gray flannel trousers she affected of a morning, descended to the hall. He asked her if she would like breakfast any earlier. Still pensive, she said, “I don’t think so. No. I’ll go round the garden first”.

“How proud am I?” she asked herself, answering herself, as she went hatless from the house, “Not too proud to ask Guy for a divorce anyway.” And this certainty curved her lips to a smile.

Still smiling she came to the herbaceous border which had been her especial joy. One of the under-gardeners was at work there. He touched his cap and gave her, “Good morning, m’lady”.

Once more she thought, “M’lady. For how long?”

After a few sentences in the broad dialect which she no longer found a puzzle, the brawny youth bent to his weeding. Hands in the pockets of what Guy always called her “pea jacket”, she strolled on along the border. Another day or so—and those new dahlias would flower. For next year . . . But of course she wouldn’t order the planting for next year. By this time next year she should be Mrs. Rockingham.

Sweet hope!

The hope proved so sweet that it intoxicated her. How right yesterday evening’s decision! She and Tom had waited, debated, long enough. They were made for each other. They must belong to each other. One day she would have a child by Tom. Lovely, breath-taking thought.

She was at the border’s end by then. Alone! No one to watch her as she took her hands from her pockets and lifted them—lifted her whole body atiptoe—to the sun.

Small wonder that men and women had first worshipped the sun. He was the true life-giver. Essence of health. Essence of youth. Thank him, therefore, that one was still youthful enough to feel this intoxication, to know oneself utterly and irretrievably in love.

“Crazy?” she asked herself, hands still high, body still poised like a ballet dancer’s. But wasn’t this particular craziness the only true wisdom? If not, where

else could wisdom be found?

The questions steadied her. She resumed her pacing; rounded the bothy and entered the kitchen garden.

Angus, her head gardener, was at work here; unnetting the ripest of the nectarines, picking them for table. He, too, gave her the customary good morning; and offered her one of the fruits, which she balanced in her open palm, revelling—almost sensually—in the feel of that smooth skin against her own.

“You should eat it now, m’lady”, said Angus, “while the sun’s still in it.” And another whimsey came to her as her hand closed on the red-purple fruit, as she lifted it to her lips.

“Angus doesn’t look much like the serpent”, she caught herself musing; while the man who watched her, being of a race yet more whimsical, mused, “Most of the lassies want to wear the trows nowadays. But I can no see her wearing them with Sir Guy”.

Pensive once more—and disinclined for their usual gossip—Camilla finished her nectarine, tossed the stone over the wall, and left the kitchen garden by the far gate. From here, she could see the lorries again, and men, no longer in shirtsleeves, mounting them.

Presently the lorries moved off. As she watched them go from the edge of the wood, she seemed to hear Tom’s voice—how one loved his voice—repeating: “I hope you’re right. I hope we can arrange it without my having to leave the service. But even if I do, it won’t really matter. The regiment’s had most of my life. I’ve a right to the rest of it”.

How true that was. And yet . . .

A fleece of cloud, drifting across the sun as she started back to the house, seemed to blur the happy mirror of the future. But almost immediately the rays were hot again and her marching shadow sharp on the gravel, sharp on the lawn.

Another of her gardeners was making ready to shave the lawn with the motor mower. Manlike, she thought, to the first tuff-tuff of the tiny engine, “I’ve taken such a lot of trouble to put these grounds in order. And all for nothing”.

Nevertheless one would have no regrets at leaving these grounds, or this house either. One had only distracted oneself, one had never fulfilled oneself, with them.

“There’s no happiness without self-fulfilment”, decided Camilla. “Other women are happy with their husbands and their children. So why shouldn’t I be?”

To which all that was best in her, all that was unscorched by passion, added:

“Besides, it’s Tom’s happiness as much as mine”.

§ 3

Fastidiously, Camilla washed her hands and ran a comb through her hair before entering the dining room. Breakfast was on the table. She drank her glass of orange juice; helped herself to coffee, to the poached egg and the bacon.

By her plate lay a few envelopes—one, bulky, with an American stamp—and the only home magazine to which she still subscribed. She thought, vaguely, “I haven’t even bothered to open the last three numbers. I really must have a look at this one”.

But the bulky envelope addressed in Lettice Ponder’s rather finicky handwriting excited a greater curiosity; and she opened that between mouthfuls to find several press clippings, neatly pinned together, and eight monogrammed sheets, to read, after a personal preamble:

“I got your letter the day I was starting east. It’s all very well for you to say that he’s King of England, and of course some of our newspapers would print anything. But I reckon there must be something to it, or they wouldn’t keep on mentioning her. Of course you know she’s on this cruise with him. But just in case you don’t—I read today that your government’s put on a kind of censorship—here are some photographs, and one or two stories. Oh, and a cartoon I’ve just cut out of the *World Telegram*”.

The cartoon, of a typical English dude with an eyeglass attempting to read a newspaper from which several columns had been cut, was captioned with words which set Camilla frowning. Impulsively, she tore it up.

Next, she looked at the photographs; but, before she could read any of the stories, the telephone rang and Merivale came in to say, “It’s Sir Guy, m’lady. He would like a word with you”.

Guy, telephoning from London, was his most masterful self.

“How’s my lady wife?” he began. “Fine, you say. That’s good. I’ve had to change the staff work. I can’t lunch at home after all. One of the panjandrums at the War House wants to see me. So I’ll have to go straight to Aldershot afterwards. Home about six if I’m lucky. Anyway, tell Graves to be at my H.Q. by five o’clock sharp. Unless you care to fetch me yourself. Did I have good shooting? Rather. Damn it, there go the three pips. No use wasting money. See you this evening.”

Whereupon he hung up; and Camilla returned to the dining room, thinking, “Just

as well. It'll give me a little more time to marshal my arguments". Yet what argument except the one, "I'm in love with Tom. So you'll have to let me go to him", could she really use?

"Argumentum ad feminam", said the remnants of her education. Well—there were many worse.

She poured herself more coffee, and lit the first cigarette of the day. Carefully read, the rest of the clippings Lettice had sent struck her as mere innuendoes. Thinking how angry they would make Tom if he were to see them, she tore up the whole packet and dropped the fragments into the wastepaper basket.

This done, she gathered up the rest of her correspondence, the uncut magazine-roll included; and went—as was her custom each Monday—to "do her books".

Her boudoir—on the first floor—was flooded with sunshine. She had to pull one of the curtains to keep the glare off her desk. Figuring in pounds, shillings and pence still annoyed her. It seemed so senseless to divide by twelve and twenty instead of ten. The tradesmen's hieroglyphics, too, were always a puzzle. Why weren't English children taught to write properly? She must ask the Reverend Lionel . . .

Poor padre. She had grown so fond of him. He would be so distressed. How lucky she wasn't a religious woman. Like Tom's mother. Tom's mother would be more than distressed—shocked, hostile . . . So English, both of them. The English were really too straitlaced about divorces . . .

Dash it, she must get on with these books.

§ 4

The hands of the little tortoiseshell clock—Guy's gift—were at eleven before Camilla wrote out the last cheque, and made up her total. As she screwed home the cap of her fountain pen, she fell to wondering how far his wealth had influenced her decision to marry Guy.

"It counted", she was forced to admit. "I'd always been so used to money. The little I've got of my own seemed such a pittance."

Yet one wouldn't regret Guy's money, any more than one would regret this house and these grounds.

"Tom and I will have enough to be happy on", she thought; and, looking round for a moment, caught sight of her own face in the tortoiseshell-framed wall mirror—another of Guy's gifts.

She saw that she was smiling. It seemed to her that she had never looked more youthful. She knew that she was not in the least bit frightened—as so many women

would have been—at the immediate prospect.

“Throwing bouquets at myself?” she wondered; but, almost at once, another speculation presented itself. What would one look like when one grew old?

“A little too hard?” she mused. “A little too manly? Perhaps. I used to wish I were a man. Sometimes I still wish that. Guy ought to have married somebody quite different. Somebody submissive! But how soon he would have tired of her. He’s a little tired of me—sometimes. Tom’ll never be that. Tom’s had so little experience with women. He’s only been really in love that once. I wish I knew her name. Would he tell me if I asked him? Not if they were lovers. I shan’t tell him about Len’s having been my lover. Guy doesn’t know anything about that, either. He mightn’t have married me if he had. Guy didn’t really want to *marry* me. And I didn’t want to marry him. So why did I? Just because he was so persistent? Just because he’s such an intriguing character? Or just because we happened to meet in India?”

The Indian moonlight! Perhaps one had been a little moonstruck when one let down one’s defences, when one took curiosity, and the natural craving, for romance.

The last explanation seemed satisfactory enough. And what was the use of looking back? What one ought to do was to look forward, to give one’s imagination a little rein. How should one “open the ball” (Tom’s phrase) with Guy? Gingerly or brusquely? Maybe the less one finessed the better.

“I never did care for finessing”, brooded Camilla; and her thoughts became a little inconsequent, as her idle hands played first with her silver paperknife, then with the uncut roll of the home magazine.

Soon she was slitting the cover of the magazine; flattening it, glancing through the pages, looking at a photograph here, a paragraph there. Till suddenly one paragraph riveted her attention.

The writer of that paragraph pretended to have “inside information” about, “A dispute between the King of England and Mr. Baldwin, during which His Majesty said . . .”

Fiction, obviously. Written, like those stories about her own poor father had been written, just to raise circulation. No use being angry. (Leave that to Tom.) And yet, one couldn’t help being just a little angry at the knowledge that the press of one’s own country—after all, America was one’s own country—could be so utterly impervious to the decencies.

“And to people’s feelings”, she thought.

Then thought turned personal once more. She must take these books downstairs, pay the staff their wages, give cook the housekeeping money. Afterwards she really must concentrate.

How should she open the ball with Guy? Brusquely or gingerly?

§ 5

Meanwhile the Hawk's thoughts were all personal—and far from displeasing to his peculiar mind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

§ 1

Hawk Wethered, at half-past eleven on that Monday morning, had almost concluded his talk with “one of the panjandrums at the War House”.

“I can’t say I’m any too keen on the job”, he was saying. “I’m beginning to like my home comforts a bit too much. So let’s hope the balloon doesn’t go up. What do you think the chances are, Jimmy?”

“About fifty-fifty, I should say. We’re in the dark—as usual. All we’ve been asked to do is to be ready with our recommendation.”

“Is there any alternative to me?”

“Only one.”

The Hawk named a name. The man who had sent for him grunted, “Possibly”. The Hawk grinned, rose and held out his hand.

“Sometimes wish I’d never learned the language”, he said; and took his hat.

In the wide corridor, another man of his acquaintance accosted him. They chatted for a moment or so.

“How’s that son of yours getting on, Archie?”

“He’s on the Coast—just to teach him to pay his own bills and not expect me to. How’s your wife, Hawk?”

“Flourishing. See you for lunch at the club? I’ve got to have mine early.”

“No. We’re being rather harassed these days.”

“So I gathered from Jimmy.” And Hawk Wethered strode on, disdaining the lift, by the stone stairs to the ground floor exit, where a saluting attendant took his docket.

“Damfool formality”, thought the Hawk.

He emerged into the courtyard, stood there for a moment, recollecting older days, when the casualty list had hung on this wall behind him, when the corridors upstairs had been busier.

“Blow the whole shanty to hell next time”, he thought. “Admiralty, too. Shift ’em out of London if I had my way.”

But by the time he had issued from the courtyard, crossed Whitehall, and passed between the mounted sentries outside the Horse Guards, he was grinning again. This job of which Jimmy had spoken might not eventuate. If he knew the politicians it wouldn’t. And of course—as he’d said—he didn’t want it. All the same, it was good

to know that the panjandruns couldn't do without him. Even though they would so much rather.

"Not a popular person", said his peculiar mind. "Took Jimmy all his time to be cordial."

Fun!

The last days up in Scotland, too, had been fun. He'd never shot better in his life. Pity one couldn't have put in a couple of days more. A couple of nights, too. Tricky little witch, Florrie Fitzgowrie. But she'd meant business all right. As a matter of fact, if one had meant business oneself, if one had gone all out for it . . .

Supposing one had?

Imagination, pursuing the idea, found it rather alluring.

"One can't live on caviar all the time", brooded Hawk Wethered as he emerged from the Horse Guards and cut diagonally across the sunlit square.

His way brought him to the Gunner memorial which faces Duke of York's Steps, and there once again recollections of war haunted him, driving the immediate preoccupation from his mind.

Thirty years and more since one had stood to attention while this winged horse, and these plaques surrounding it, were unveiled. South Africa! Bitter nights on the veldt. Glorious dawns. Guns in the open, shelling those far kranzes. Guns ambushed . . . A bad show, that ambush. He'd tried to warn Fellowes. But the b.f. wouldn't listen. No right to have been in command of a battery. Well, he'd paid for his idiocy. Here was his name, in bronze.

Still lost in recollection, the Hawk found himself reading other names, trying to conjure up the dead faces. A bad show altogether, that South African War. Run by a lot of boneheads. And the Great War hadn't been much better.

"Too much bloody gallantry", he mused. "Not enough brains."

Then, turning, he saw the flag on that barrack of a building which topped the left of the Steps.

A breeze had unfurled that flag, the Buddhist symbol, black and elbow-jointed on the white circle with the blood-red border; and to his eyes it seemed to shout a new defiance against civilisation.

"Have to tonk the tails right off 'em next time", he thought. And, at that, a mood akin to ecstasy touched him . . . Till suddenly he remembered Camilla's, "If men like you had their way, Guy, there'd be nothing worthwhile left in the world. Just guns. And gas to choke little children to death. And bombs to blow them to bits with".

"Good rhetoric", he thought. "Not quite fair, though. I don't really want another war. I'm too rich, too comfortable, too happy. But I'm damned if I see what's the

use of funking one. I'd rather be blown to bits than kiss the Hun's boots any day. And that's what we'll have to do if we don't hurry up and rearm."

The breeze which had unfurled the swastika died away. It drooped against its mast, as Hawk Wethered's long legs took him quickly across the roadway and two at a time up the Steps.

He halted at the top, for this was his favourite view of London; took his silver case from his hip pocket, and lit himself a fat Turkish cigarette.

High over the wings of the bronze horse of the South African memorial rose the full-leaved trees of St. James's Park. Just above the topmost branch of the highest tree, he could read the hands of Big Ben. Left and below him, only one of its buttresses visible, was Admiralty Arch. That, too, he had seen built.

"Nineteen eleven", he thought, "when Edward the Seventh opened it. Twenty-five years ago. You're not as young as you were. Probably just as well you didn't take on Florrie Fitzgowrie. No use having artificial complications at your age. Married man with a faithful missus, too!"

For Camilla was so obviously faithful. She'd quite got over that penchant for Rusty. Why, it must be the best part of a month since she'd had him to the house.

"Funny, that I should have misjudged that situation", speculated the Hawk. "Before we went to practice camp, I could have sworn she was keen on him. But Rusty's a sahib. He wouldn't let her cheat, even if she wanted to. And he wouldn't risk his promotion."

Another eighteen months or so—and Rusty would have his brigade.

§ 2

That any man in the Regiment, let alone Rusty Rockingham, should be prepared to risk losing the command of a brigade of guns for the sake of a woman seemed to Colonel (temporary Brigadier) Sir Guy Wethered—after a little further reflection—so completely impossible that he could not help wondering why he had ever given the possibility a thought.

"Jealous?" he asked himself. But that possibility, also, his essential vanity refused to admit; and, carrying introspection one step farther, he was soon telling himself:

"I'm a man of the world. Women are much of a muchness. More by luck than judgment, I've picked a good 'un".

All the same, could a man of his temperament live on even the best caviar all the time?

The question worried him. More worrying still—as he stamped the butt of his

cigarette under a neat heel—proved the bold glance of a girl who happened to be passing, and her figure as it willowed down the Steps.

“Love ’em all”, brooded the Hawk. “Always have and always shall. Got to play cricket, though. So has Camilla. I’d never stand any nonsense from her. My property!”

Having reached this conviction, he strode the few yards past Scott’s statue to his club, where he fell in with an acquaintance who was also lunching early; and encountered William Rockingham on his way out.

They exchanged a few sentences while one of the boys piled the Hawk’s guncase, two brace of grouse and his suitcase into a waiting taxi.

“Your mother in town?” asked the Hawk.

“She’s just off to Aix. Her doctor insisted on a cure.”

“Hope it’ll do her good?”

“She doesn’t seem to think it will.”

“Well, give her my regards. Miss my blinking train if I don’t make a dart for it.” And Hawk Wethered pounced off, to fling himself into a first-class carriage exactly twenty seconds before the Aldershot train started.

Recovering his breath, he encountered Janice Lampson’s amused eyes.

“You do cut things fine, don’t you?” she laughed. “I knew it was you from the marking on your luggage. That porter thought you’d missed it when you kept him waiting.”

“Serve him right. I had to have a paper.”

But the newspaper remained unread—and the question which the Hawk had put to himself just before he stamped out the butt of his cigarette unanswered—until he and Janice separated on the platform.

“Now I really do know what the phrase ‘œil dérobeur’ means”, thought Janice, who had finished a scrappy education in Paris, as he lifted his hat to her and leaped into another taxi, which decanted him at divisional headquarters just in time for a conference about the forthcoming exercise, at which he distinguished himself by remarking:

“Whoever prepared this scheme is going to have his tail twisted. We’re supposed to be rounding up an imaginary Grand Mufti. But what about the real one? He looks like being on the run before you can say Gandhi”.

This criticism, in slightly more forthright language, he repeated to Bryce-Atkinson in the privacy of his own office.

“Spot of trouble blowing up in our Jewish Protectorate. Shouldn’t wonder if it weren’t worse before it were better”, he grinned. “Can’t very well present that

mandate to Hitler, though some of our give-him-the-Empire-on-a-plate pacifists might be in favour of it . . . Anything for me to look at before I buzz back home?"

"Nothing that can't wait till tomorrow morning, sir."

"Good. Then I'll be off."

§ 3

As Graves saluted, and he made to step into his own car outside his own headquarters, the Hawk wondered, vaguely, why Camilla had not fetched him herself. After all, he had suggested that she should—and usually she fell in with such suggestions. He meditated asking Graves what she had been doing with herself that afternoon, but changed his question to, "Everything all right at home?"

"As far as I know, Sir Guy", answered his chauffeur. "Except that the Prince seemed a bit lame at exercise this morning. Lightfoot thinks he'd be better at grass for the rest of the summer."

"That hock, eh? Well, I'll have a look at it when we get in."

Latterly his master had taken a dislike to fast driving. Once beyond the confines of Aldershot, accordingly, Graves kept his speed down to fifty. The sky was still cloudless, and the evening warm. The Hawk, though he had slept well enough on the night journey from Scotland, drowsed till they turned off the mainroad; was woken by a jolt.

"What the hell——" he thought.

"Back tyre, Sir Guy", explained Graves, already at the window. "I told her ladyship we ought to have new ones. Done fourteen thousand, these have."

"Well, don't be long."

Hawk Wethered, thinking, "Damfool form of economy", alighted; squatted on the nearby grass bank. Midges were dancing. He lit a cigarette to protect himself from their bites.

"Want any help?" he called as Graves wrestled with the stubborn nuts; and in another moment or so he had his coat off, and was fitting up the jack.

"Always did lend a hand", mused Graves. "Remember him helping to dismantle a breech block."

But the job took them nearly a quarter of an hour; and by the time they had dumped the deflated tyre back into its carrier the Hawk's temper was not at its best.

"See this doesn't happen again, please", he rasped.

"Very good, Sir Guy."

"And get a move on. I want to look at that horse."

Graves, grousing to himself, “Not my fault. I told her it was time to change ’em”, took the winding side road as fast as he dared, and the next mile of turnpike at sixty-five.

“Serve him right if the other one pops”, thought ex-gunner Graves; but they reached the griffin-topped pillars without further incident, and were soon braking in the stable-yard, where they found Lightfoot waiting.

“Trot Black Prince out”, ordered the Hawk.

The corned horse whinnied at him. He watched its action for a few steps before saying, “That’ll do”, and bending to run an expert hand over the doubtful hock.

“What do you think, Lightfoot?” he asked.

“I’d turn him out for a couple of months if he was mine, sir.”

“All right. Do it. And we’ll take the two government mokes to the exercise. You realise you’re coming under canvas with me on Thursday?”

“Thursday, sir?”

“That’s what I said. Thursday.” And the Hawk strode off towards the house, leaving his ex-gunner chauffeur and his serving driver groom to a few moments’ gossip.

“He got my goat just now”, said Graves. “But it was my own fault. I ought to have stood up to her over those tyres. It’s never any use giving way to a woman.”

“She doesn’t interfere with the horses”, said Lightfoot. “More than her place is worth, I reckon. Do you think she’s happy?”

“I’ve never known ’em to have a row.”

“Would you care to have one—with him!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

§ 1

What with the delay over the tyre and the inspection of the horse, it was half-past six before Merivale, who had heard the car drive up, welcomed his master in the outer hall. Through the far door, almost simultaneously, came Camilla in tennis kit.

“You’re a bit late”, she said. “I was just going up to dress.”

“Stay and talk to me while I have a drink.”

He made to kiss her as usual. She submitted. But he did not realise it for submission. Camilla, in public, was often apt to be frigid.

“Brandy and soda”, he told his butler; and his hand lingered at his wife’s shoulder as they passed into the inner hall.

“Well”, he went on eyeing his other trophies, “how goes it? You’ve been playing lawn-tennis, I see. Where? At the club?”

“No. I just did a little practising after tea.”

She moved away from him towards the fireplace. For a second, something about her demeanour puzzled him. But then, she always had been a bit of a puzzle. That was what made her so infernally fascinating.

“Been very busy?” he asked.

“I have rather. What did they want you for at the War Office?”

“Oh, nothing very important”, he lied, easily, because it was his duty; and he, too, moved—towards a table on which lay an American magazine; picking this up idly, flipping through it while he asked a couple more questions.

At his third question, “I was just looking to see if they’d got anything more about H.M. Have they?” her interest seemed to quicken.

“Yes”, she said. “And I’ve had another screed from Lettice. Apparently that absurd story’s all over America.”

“It ought to be publicly contradicted”, said the Hawk.

Merivale came in with his drink. He sat down, glass in hand, crossed his legs, and—rather to Camilla’s relief (though this also escaped his notice)—began to gossip.

There had been the same kind of talk about the monarch in Scotland. For himself, he didn’t believe a word of it. Apparently, the lady still had a husband. So the idea of her sitting on the throne of England . . .

“Potty”, pronounced Camilla’s husband. “I’d lay a thousand to one against it. The people of this country wouldn’t stand anything of that sort. Why, do you realise that nobody who’s been through the divorce court—even if he or she’s the innocent party—is ever received? And, by the way, that reminds me. You’ll really have to get over this nonsense about not being presented. After all, as my wife——”

“I don’t want to go into that now, Guy. It’s nearly seven, you know.”

“All right, my poppet. Run along and have your bath.”

He smiled at her, indulgently. She smiled back at him; and went from the museum of a room.

“Queer girl”, he mused, puzzling his brain once more as he finished his brandy and soda. “Suits me all right, though. I never did care for clingers. Florrie Fitzgowrie isn’t that sort either. Hard as nails. Just wanted a little adventure. Perhaps I’m getting a bit long in the tooth for that kind of adventure. Nasty thought. Damn it, I don’t feel old.”

His best leopard head grinned at him from the nearby wall. He grinned back at it before he, too, went upstairs to his bath.

§ 2

Among the Hawk’s eccentricities was an affectation—never indulged in publicly—for peculiar clothes. Tonight, fancy dictated a certain square jacket of dark red silk, fastened with three blue frogs.

“Put me out a silk shirt, too, Gubbins”, he ordered. “It’s too damned hot for a stiff one. May as well be comfortable while we can. You won’t like sleeping in a tent too much. Or eating ordinary rations again.”

“No, sir.”

“And how would you like another little war, Gubbins?”

“You don’t think we’re going to have another one, do you, sir?”

“You didn’t care for Waziristan, I gather?”

“No, sir. I did not.”

Hawk Wethered, not altogether pleased at the young man’s frankness, went to his bathroom.

“I should have jumped at the chance of a scrap when I was his age”, he mused. “So would most of the troops. What’s the matter with the youngsters these days? Funk? Or is it just the newspapers? Why don’t they come out and tell people what a blasted mess all this pacifism has landed us in?” And, scrubbing himself savagely, he recollected the opening of his talk with Jimmy.

Men in Jimmy's position, chaps at the Admiralty like William Rockingham, knew the risks we were running. So must the politicians—unless they were absolute boneheads. The monarch was no fool either—having a snoop round the Mediterranean for himself.

“Good lad”, continued the Hawk's musing. “Isn't on that cruise all for fun, I'll bet. Pity he isn't allowed to say what he knows. That would stir people up a bit.”

Then a more pleasant thought distracted him; and he returned to his bedroom whistling; called through the communicating door to Camilla, “How are you getting on? I shall be ready in ten minutes”.

She called back, “You go down. I won't be longer than I can help, Guy”.

He went down obediently—she never liked him in the room while she was dressing; and paced round the house, hands at the lapels of his eccentric jacket, till he came to the terrace which faced the lawn.

There he stood still, watching the sunset glisten on his greenhouses, watching some rabbits at the edge of the wood. There, Tiny found him; and frisked about him, and lifted himself on his hind legs, striving to rest his great paws on those square shoulders.

“Down, you brute”, rasped the Hawk. “Down.”

But Tiny persisted; and finally the Hawk caught the silver-brindled paws in his long hairy hands; and man and dog wrestled together: so that Camilla, watching them through the side window of her bedroom, could not help thinking:

“Children. Both of them”.

Tom also—it seemed to her in that moment—was something of a child.

§ 3

The dinner gong called Hawk Wethered back into the house. His young wife was just coming down the stairs. He eyed her, much as he had eyed Janice in the train; and his blood pulsed, just once, with pleasurable anticipation.

“Hope you've a good meal for me, my dear”, he said. “I lunched an hour earlier than usual.”

“Am I in the habit of starving you?”

“Oh, I've no complaints so far.”

To Camilla, the words sounded faintly prophetic; but she managed her usual smile for him as they entered the dining room—the dog following—and took their places at the table.

“What about wine?” asked her husband.

Camilla smiled again. There were some small bottles of Montrachet to be finished. As they were alone, Merivale had put one in the frigidaire for him.

“Half rations”, he grumbled.

“You know you get rheumatism when you drink a whole one.”

“Oh well”, he thought, “there’s plenty of brandy. Top up with that before we turn in.”

“I brought two brace of grouse with me”, he went on. “But they’ll hardly be fit to eat by the day after tomorrow. So unless I can slip home for the weekend——”

“Do I understand you’re going away again?”

“But I told you.” The Hawk stared. “The divisional infantry are starting their move today. We’re following almost at once. Thursday to be accurate. After that you’ll be more or less a grass widow till the exercises are over.”

“And how long will that be?”

“Call it three weeks.”

The Hawk drank his soup. Merivale poured him a glass of wine. Fish was served. He noticed that Camilla took only a small portion.

“Not hungry?” he asked.

“Not terribly.”

“Been overdoing the exercise again. You’ve been off your oats for some time. How about seeing a doctor?”

“Why? Do I look thin?”

He did not answer. Once again the peculiarity of her demeanour attracted his momentary attention. She didn’t look thin; but she did look as though there might be something on her mind. Could she by any chance be going to have a baby? A damn nuisance if she were—with this job in the offing. Not that one wouldn’t like a son. Though one was just as happy without. Look at that brat of Archie Myddleton’s. Always in some scrape or other.

Camilla had always wanted children. She’d told him that before he married her. Good mother she’d make too. Not like Archie’s wife. She’d spoiled that brat from the beginning. Fool of a woman. Thank his stars, there was no nonsense about Camilla.

“She wouldn’t make any bones about telling me if she were going to have a baby”, he decided. “Probably having a spot of trouble with one of our female domestics.” And the temporary suspicion vanished from his mind.

Lamb followed the fish. She asked him who’d been at “the house party”. Eating heartily he told her, adding:

“Oh, and there was one other woman. A Mrs. Fitzgowrie. You’ve probably

seen photographs of her. Rather good-looking—and not too bad a shot. Are these our own beans?”

“Yes.”

“Very succulent. By the way, who do you think I travelled down with? That girl of Lampson’s. She tells me her father isn’t any too well. The chances are he won’t be able to come with us. If he doesn’t, your friend Tom will command the brigade. I suppose you haven’t seen anything of him?”

“Tom was over here yesterday”, replied Camilla, without thinking; and again the Hawk stared.

He had a sudden urge to question her further; but this—with two servants in the room—seemed difficult. And by the time they were at their savoury, the urge—like the temporary suspicion—had left him. So that he was entirely unprepared for Camilla’s unusual:

“We won’t have our coffee here tonight, Merivale. Put it in the hall, please”.

“Why?” he asked.

Camilla did not answer till butler and footman had left them.

“Because there’s something rather serious I want to talk to you about”, she said then—and left him to his port, of which he drank only one glass before he followed her, thinking vaguely:

“What’s up?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

§ 1

Merivale, bringing coffee and liqueurs to the hall, found his mistress standing in front of the unlit fire.

“Put your tray down here”, she said, indicating a table by her own chair. “And in case anybody should telephone, please take their number and say we’ll call them up later.”

“Very good, m’lady.”

“Oh—and I’ll ring when I want you to take away the coffee things.”

“I quite understand, m’lady.”

“Does he?” thought Camilla as the man went out. “Does Guy? No. He’s only a little puzzled.”

Poor Guy. This was going to hurt him. But only in his pride.

The conclusion proved sustaining. She argued with herself—as she had been arguing and rearguing with herself ever since midday: “He doesn’t really love me. He’s incapable of real love. I’m only ‘something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse’. And he doesn’t really want children. He as good as told me that before I married him. Oh dear, why did I marry him? Everything would have been so easy if I hadn’t”.

For although she was now prey to many delusions, she could not delude herself that the next hour would be an easy one. She knew Guy well enough not to believe that.

“It’s the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to do”, she decided. But the mere anticipation of difficulty seemed to brace resolution. Besides, she wouldn’t be fighting only for her own happiness, she would be fighting for the happiness of the man who really did love her, who really was capable of that sublime emotion . . .

“Well!” said the Hawk.

He had entered while she was still deep in thought. She realised, with a whimsical satisfaction, that the dog had not accompanied him. Then one twinge of a physical emotion she almost recognised for fear flicked her behind the knees.

“Well!” repeated the Hawk, closing the door—as usual!—without turning the handle. “What’s the trouble? What do you want to talk to me about?”

“Let me give you your coffee first”, she said; and her knees stiffened.

“Thanks.”

He moved to his customary sofa. She filled a cup, brought it to him, set it on the Benares tray.

“Can I have some brandy?” he asked.

“I’d rather we had our talk first.”

She poured her own demitasse; but remained standing—glad that her hand should be so steady—while she drank. He had lit one of his largest cigars. The smoke curled from his nostrils. Through it she saw his black eyes quizzical. She put down her cup and began abruptly:

“I’m afraid you’ll find what I have to say to you rather a shock”.

Camilla paused there. Automatically, her right hand dived for the cigarette box. Hawk Wethered made to offer her a light, thought better of it.

“Go on”, he said very quietly. “I’m used to shocks at my age.”

She snapped the catch of her lighter; blew the first puff from her lips. It seemed to him that she had never looked more desirable. But already his intelligence was darting, this way and that way, after an explanation.

“Go on”, he repeated. “Let’s know the worst.” Then, lightly, “Have you been unfaithful to me?”

“I have not, Guy.” And again she paused, fighting—though this escaped him—against a sudden gust of temper.

She took another puff at her cigarette. Still quizzing her, he saw her look harden, and her jaw muscles set.

“I didn’t appreciate that remark”, she said next; and, speaking just a trifle more quickly than her habit, “You don’t like finessing any more than I do. So you may as well have it straight from the shoulder. Tom and I have fallen in love. I want to marry him. I want you to let me go.”

And at that, rage was the Hawk’s.

He made to rise, but managed to restrain himself. If he once got to his feet, nothing would keep his hands off her.

“Rusty”, he muttered, and the mere name might have been a curse.

He wanted to curse. But it could do no good. This woman of his was mad. Rusty Rockingham must be mad. “Tom and I have fallen in love”, indeed. As though he, her husband, her legitimate owner, didn’t even count.

Yet for all the rage—for all that he had reckoned this situation, and only this very day, beyond the bounds of possibility—he experienced no real surprise. Long ago, his imagination had foreseen this, discounted it, decided how to deal with it. He had only to control himself. Let her go, indeed. When he held all the cards in his own hand.

Assuring himself thus, he felt the worst of his anger passing. But he was still too sullenly furious for speech. So they'd cheated him, had they? So they'd led him up the garden, had they? Pretending they weren't seeing each other—when Rusty had been here only yesterday—playing the fool with her—hugging and kissing her. Oh no, she hadn't been unfaithful to him. Did she think he was born yesterday? Let her tell that to the Marines.

He blinked away the hot mist with which anger had blinded him. As sight cleared, he saw how intent her eyes were. She seemed to be reading his mind. She had read his mind.

"I know what you're thinking", she said. "But it's not true. Tom's not that sort of man. I'm not that sort of woman. You'll realise that much when you're a little calmer."

The impertinence of her. The sheer brazen nerve of her. Talking to him as though he were a child.

Rage boiled again; but he continued to control it, averting his eyes from her, gazing about the room. Rifle in hand, he had stood up to the savage beasts in this room. None of these beasts had got the better of him. Neither should his wife and her lover. Only—against them, he would need more cunning.

Let her go, indeed. To Rusty Rockingham. Not much.

He looked at her again. She had put away her cigarette. She was standing very upright, lips tight, hands behind her back. He knew her well enough to understand that he must make the next move; made it, asking very deliberately:

"And supposing I believe you, what am I expected to do about it? Say, 'God bless you, my children, run away and be happy'?"

The Hawk paused there. Automatically, he took another pull at his cigar. "What's in his mind?" Camilla asked herself; but now, she no longer knew.

She in her turn deliberated. Had he believed her or not? Either way it seemed inadvisable to answer his question. Her silence stung him to another:

"Do you see me in the part of a *mari complaisant*?"

Truth forced the answer, "No".

"And Rockingham?" To the Hawk, though rage still bubbled, there was a strange new pleasure in thus catechising her. "What does he think I'm going to do about it? You've asked him, I presume?"

Again truth forced an answer, "Tom wanted to tell you himself".

"Very chivalrous of him. Am I expected to be equally chivalrous?"

"Guy——"

"Answer my question, please." Was she weakening? "Is your husband expected

to vie with your lover in——”

“I’ve already told you that Tom’s not my lover.”

“Never even kissed you, I suppose?”

Camilla’s lips were tight again, but her pale face flushed.

“A little dalliance.” Hawk Wethered seemed to be communing with himself. “Well, it’s only human, I suppose. A man married to a woman twenty years younger than himself should anticipate that there will be other . . . aspirants.”

“Guy!”

The monosyllable cracked like a whiplash. She had not weakened. Her temper was ready to overmatch his. He must be careful. Very careful.

“Yes, my dear Camilla.”

“Once and for all, I forbid you to speak to me like that.”

Silence hung between them. He reflected again. No woman in love was quite normal. And no man either. (Take oneself, when one had married this woman!) Accordingly, if he meant to bring them to their senses—and by jove he did mean to—he must go a little more pussyfoot.

So, “All right”, said the Hawk, “I won’t. Sit down. And we’ll try to discuss the situation reasonably.”

Slowly, she obeyed. The light of the tall lamp by her chair showed him a face of its normal colour, hazel eyes as direct as his own, hands quiet on silk lap, slim feet unmoving. No sign of fear. The guts she had. How could one help admiring her, desiring her? Damn it, this last half-hour had made one desire her all the more.

“My woman”, thought the Hawk. “Not his.”

He drew at his cigar again. Anger was ice now. Not against her. Only against Rockingham. Sooner or later he’d break Rockingham. Better not tell her that, though. Not for the moment anyway . . .

Thought checked. Action beckoned. The more one knew about this business the better.

“Tell me”, he asked, schooling his voice to casualness, “just what you think I ought to do.”

She hesitated a while. He did not press her. That pleasure—it seemed to him—might be reserved for future occasions.

“I’m rather ignorant”, she said at last, “about your English divorce laws.”

“You insist on a divorce then?”

“Yes.”

There had been no hesitation about that “yes”. There was none about the words that followed:

“I’m sorry to have to ask you for it, Guy. But there isn’t any other solution. I know I’m asking rather a lot—and I know I oughtn’t to have married you. But what’s the use of crying over spilt milk? None that I can see. After all, we haven’t any children. And we’ve no religious convictions. So it doesn’t matter very much”.

Didn’t it? To him.

She had fallen silent. There was a faint smile in her eyes. She seemed to be taking the whole thing for settled. Should one disillusion her? Not tonight anyway.

“Plenty of time to show *my* hand”, the Hawk said to himself, and aloud:

“I don’t know too much about divorce either. But I can easily find out. Let’s get your idea quite straight. You don’t want any scandal, I gather?”

Camilla nodded. Her husband nodded in reply.

“Rotten thing, scandal”, he went on. “Especially in the army. Lots of chaps have had to send in their papers because of a divorce case. There’s been a new ruling about it.”

He told her the ruling. For the first time—it seemed—her eyes flinched. One of her feet became unsteady. Pleasurably he pursued his advantage.

“You wouldn’t like Rockingham to have to send in his papers?”

“Not if it can possibly be avoided.”

“I suppose it could be. According to what one hears there are plenty of arranged divorces. Is that what you’re thinking of?”

Another smile, another nod, answered. Lead him up the garden, would she? Well, two could play at that game. And:

“I’ll have a yarn with my lawyer as soon as we get back from these exercises. No time to spare before that”, said the Hawk.

§ 2

An hour later, Camilla sat at her dressing table, giving a last brush to her hair.

“Guy’s right”, she thought. “We can’t do anything for the next three or four weeks. How well he took it. Much better than I expected him to . . . After all, there’s no violent hurry . . . Of course I shall have to let Tom know . . . How? By telephone? By letter? . . . It would be much easier if I could see him . . . Guy wouldn’t mind. Guy doesn’t seem to care any more. And I imagined he was so crazy about me. Am I annoyed that he isn’t?”

“Just a little annoyed”, she confessed to herself.

But by next morning the tiny wound to her vanity had healed over; and, halfway through the breakfast, for which she had purposely arrived late enough to avoid the

customary conjugal kiss, she began:

“O Guy! About that matter we were discussing last night——”

“Our divorce, you mean”, he grinned at her. “I thought we’d agreed to let that stand over till after the exercises.”

“Quite so. But——”

“You want to let Rockingham know?”

“Yes.”

“You would, of course.” He appeared to reflect. “And after all why shouldn’t you? I’ve no objection. Only—I’d rather you didn’t have him to the house again. Perhaps, in the circumstances, a letter would be best.”

“If you think so.”

“I *do* think so.” His eyes were all the brigadier’s. “In fact, I insist on it.”

“Very well.” For the very first time her eyes—or so it seemed—were submissive. “I’ll write to Tom this morning. But, Guy——”

“Yes, my dear Camilla.”

“You won’t . . . talk to him about it?”

The Hawk appeared to hesitate.

“Not if you’d rather I didn’t”, he said finally. “But supposing the boot’s on the other leg? We may be seeing a good deal of each other, you know. Supposing he tackles me?”

Camilla did not hesitate.

“He won’t”, she said. “I can promise you that.”

CHAPTER FORTY

§ 1

Operation Orders issued twenty-four hours back by Brigadier Wethered, C.R.A. Eastland Pursuit Force—on signing which the Hawk had commented to an amused Bryce-Atkinson, “Retreat-from-Mons complex, you will observe, still deeply rooted in the psychological make-up of our panjandrums”—presupposed an “encounter battle” between Eastland and Westland among the lordly stockbrokers’ homes of Surrey.

A Westland force, having broken off the battle, was now presumed to be fighting a rearguard action “somewhere in Sussex”—without unduly molesting the chicken farmers, the *littérateurs* and the early partridge shooters of that salubrious shire.

One squadron of Westland’s cavalry—“Ruddy ’orses an’ all”, as Bombardier Boardman described them to his fellow signaller at the Turban battery’s forward observation post—properly mindful of its obligations towards the civil powers aforesaid, had just limbered up a couple of obsolete machine guns, preparatory to a retirement on the “delaying position” held by Westland’s still unmechanised infantry.

Meanwhile—the two-day operation having commenced at dawn, and the time being now six-thirty of a September evening—the last obsolescent plane of the army cooperation squadron attached to Westland was just taxiing to its distant hangar. But two of Eastland’s flyers were still photographing the enemy’s “trenches”, hidden beyond the winding river by a fold of the Downs.

“Tom won’t be able to make out the barrage programme till we get the photos”, thought Wilfrid Patterson, who had been in command of the Turban battery since the day, a full fortnight ago, when it left Steepdown.

Nevertheless, there was plenty to be done; and for the next hour the battery busied itself with measuring angles from its director and from its pivot gun; with artillery board, with pencil and paper; with “Army Form B 250”, headed “5 Fd Bde Grid. Coordinates E 513728 N 202136 Height 215”; with “Army Form B 2547”, on which is filled in such hieroglyphics as “Zero Line. Rdg. to A.P. Accepted Rdg. to B.P. Log cot. subtense angle”.

All of which—mysteries to the chicken farmers and the *littérateurs* and the early partridge shooters, two of whom loitered to watch them at work—were worked out by Kid Masters, who had left Woolwich just a year ago, and Lance-Sergeant

Godden, to whom the army had taught mathematics, with Wilfrid Patterson, one time board-school boy, to check their calculations.

“A bit beyond me”, commented one partridge shooter to his companion; and they strolled off, pop-guns over shoulder, to spend a happy evening with their radios—through which an erudite professor was to lecture them on the principles of the League of Nations—and their wives, neither of whom allowed her children to play with toy soldiers, lest they should grow up into militarists or imperialists.

The Downs were blackening to the sunset by then, with the steel helmets of the first Eastland infantry patrols just visible at river bank, and only rooks in the sky.

§ 2

To Patterson, Masters and Godden, still at work in the last of the light, came Headworth, their adjutant, to ask, “Well, how’s it going?”

“We’re pretty well through”, answered Patterson.

“Good. How about night lines?”

“We haven’t laid ’em out yet.”

“Well, get a move on. There’s a good chap. We’ll be having one of the umpires round any minute. Did you hear what happened to Lyttelton coming up this afternoon? They put his whole battery out of action. Said he was under a concentration of sixty-pounders or something. The Hawk didn’t half curse their lights out. But they stuck to it. I must be getting along now. Oh, by the way, if you’re in touch with Frank, you might warn him about his night lines.”

The adjutant strolled on towards Forsyth’s battery. Patterson called Potter, who came personally to the telephone.

“Mine are laid”, said Potter; and soon—just in front and to the flank of the Turban battery’s pivot gun also—an aiming light showed through the gathering gloom.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star”, quoth Lance-Sergeant Challis to the returning Boardman. “How you signallers do see life. What’s the latest from the front line? Has Westland got it in the neck yet?”

“They’ve gone back over the river, anyway.”

“And when are our chaps supposed to cross?”

“Any time now.”

“Any time, my foot. I’ll bet you the Sappers don’t get one bridge up, let alone two, by midnight.”

“Some of the feet have got kapok bridges.”

“What the hell are they?”

“Ignorant!” And Bombardier Boardman, squatting on his haunches in the circle of men resting behind number four gun, explained.

“The trouble with some of you blokes”, he continued to the meeting at large, “is that you don’t realise that the army is now a highly scientific profession. It’s only when a chap’s a specialist, like I am——”

“That he sidesteps all the hard work”, interrupted Challis. “You go play with your valves, Boardman. Who manhandled these blinking guns through this blinking wood? We did. We don’t go joyriding in posh Austins while our betters are having their tails bumped off in a dragon.”

“Brains has to be treated better than brawn”, laughed the battery humorist; and, taking his rations from his haversack—the others had already eaten their last meal—munched in silence before unslinging his waterbottle, half-emptying it, and lighting a fag.

“According to Pip, Squeak *and* Wilfrid”, he said next, “he being our one and indivisible B.C. till Rusty is returned to us from headquarters, this particular battle will be over by tomorrow evening. But don’t you chaps imagine you’ll be back under canvas yet awhile.”

“Well, who wants to be?” Again Challis was the interrupter. “This is the life. When I was a lad there was nothing better I liked than a night in the open.”

“Poaching?”

The audience laughed. The “buddies” continued to wrangle, only ceasing as Sergeant-Major Cartwright’s vast boots came crashing through the undergrowth which fringed the wood.

With Cartwright appeared Oliver, the Turban battery’s new quartermaster-sergeant. It transpired that the latrines were far from being properly camouflaged, that Cartwright was in search of Godden, and that any man who flashed his torch so that it became visible to the enemy, attempted to light a fire, or took his boots off in his bivvy, would be “for it”.

“Active service—that’s what you lads are supposed to be on”, warned the sergeant-major; and passed on, a Homeric figure, to the other detachments through the gathering gloom.

“I must be hopping it, too”, said Boardman then. “Or Pip, Squeak *and* Wilfrid won’t be able to get his barrage programme out.”

“Lot of good you’ll be to him”, scoffed Challis, and continued to hold forth:

“What I say is—there are damnsight worse lives than the army. Blest if I know why there’s all this difficulty in getting recruits. Of course the pay isn’t all it ought to

be”.

“That’s not the main trouble”, commented Gunner Lethbridge, sucking at his pipe. “It’s what happens to a chap when he leaves the ruddy service.”

“There’s this vocational training.”

Said a driver known as Moonface, “My time’s up in a couple of years. But I’m not worrying. My old man’s an inspector on the L.P.T.B. He’s going to put my name down for the buses. They pay all right”.

“Work you pretty hard though”, suggested Lethbridge.

“Who cares as long as the brass is good?”

“Two years, eh.” Once more Challis intervened. “I shouldn’t like to look that far ahead, Moonface. The chances are we’ll be on active service good and proper, by then.”

“And who’ll we be fighting?”

“The Gerries and the Eyerics, if I know anything about it.”

“Well, if it ’appens, it ’appens”, said Moonface, who rather prided himself on being a philosopher. “But personally I don’t think they’ll take us on.”

“Nor I”, chipped in one who had not yet spoken. “I’m all for this chap, Hitler, I am. It’s a pity we haven’t got somebody like him to put our bolshies in their places. Dirty tykes with their pamphlets. And it’s all very well the newspapers bellyaching about Musso. That chap knows what he wants, he does.”

“And takes it”, protested Lethbridge. “To hell with these dictators. What price this new blighter, Franco? If he wins he’ll be after Gib.”

“Who says so?”

“My brother in the navy. I had a letter from him just before we broke camp.”

On which Godden’s voice interrupted the arguers—two of whom, one with a spade and one with a torch, departed abruptly; while a third, picking up his unloaded rifle, mounted sentry over the battery position.

§ 3

Battery-Quartermaster-Sergeant Oliver, responsible for the wagon line (or “dragon line”, as Boardman said it should be called since mechanisation), had also posted a sentry, whose loud challenge nearly woke his snoring comrades a few minutes after eleven.

The countersign having been duly given, a voice of some authority asked for, and duly failed to obtain, a map reference. Whereupon another voice said, “I think we’re all right so far, sir”; and the leading platoon of the right hand company of the

Eastland infantry took the winding path towards the guns.

A hundred yards on, the subaltern in command was again challenged; and being subsequently informed by Masters—who shone a hurricane lamp on a map for proof—of his exact position, called a halt, asking piteously, “I suppose you gunners couldn’t spare me a guide?”

“Sorry”, said Masters; and climbed back, stooping into the staff dragon with his lamp just in time to hear Halliburton say into the telephone, “All right. I’ll get him”, and Wilfrid Patterson’s:

“The coordinates of the key lifts, eh. Well, that ought to save us a bit of time. How long’ll it be before we get the complete tracings?”

This was followed by the customary “Over”, Headworth’s reply to the last question, and Patterson’s forthright, “Blast”.

He repeated and wrote down the six-figure map references for next morning’s task; turned to his only subaltern, saying, “All night job from the look of it”; and took the artillery board on his knee. Masters held the lamp for him.

“Don’t we get any sleep, sir?”

“A couple of hours if we’re lucky. None if we aren’t. Yes, Halliburton?”

“I’m on the Sappers’ wave length, sir. They’re blinding something awful ’cos the infantry won’t let ’em across some road or other. Thought you’d like to know, sir.”

“What I’d like”, thought Patterson, “is a drink.”

He poured a little whiskey into the cup of his flask, filled up with water, drank, and offered the flask to Masters, who declined. Presently more coordinates came through, and another signaller took over from Halliburton. By then, peering out through the hood opening, they could just see the moon through the gap in the trees; and after what seemed an interminable while, during which they both dozed, a figure appeared in the gap.

“From brigade, sir”, said the figure, approaching, saluting and handing over an envelope marked “Secret”.

“Headworth must have worked like stink to get ’em out”, thought Wilfrid Patterson, scribbling his signature in acknowledgment; and, as he examined his orders and the attached tracing, he thought, “Good for Tom. We’d have waited at least another hour if Lampson had been fussing about”.

Meanwhile Lance-Sergeant Godden, too, was thinking of his temporary brigade commander—not as a soldier but as a man.

By rights, George Godden should have been under his ground sheet. But just before turning in he had had a talk with “Uncle Leo”. And after that talk, which began, “You’re going up to full sergeant, lad”, how could a chap sleep?

“Old Rusty was right”, thought Godden, standing capless, his back to a tree. “If I’d rushed my fences, as he calls it, I’d have been a nice mug. And all for nothing, with Edie going back to that husband of hers.”

Yet what else could they have done?

Edie might have written, though. Just the once. To tell him she was happy doing her duty. And he could have written back the same. Especially now he was going to put his gun up over his three stripes.

“I suppose one’s always happy when one does the right thing”, ruminated that essential simplicity which was George Godden’s, as he cupped his right hand to his right ear.

Something was on the move at the far side of the wood. Three-ton lorries, it sounded like. The sentry, too, must have heard them. He had turned. He was looking to his flank.

As Godden put on his cap and crossed the ground between his tree and the camouflaged gun, the noise at the far side of the wood defined itself.

“That’ll be the Sappers”, he told the sentry; and in a moment or so, looking along the line of guns, they saw the first lorry go lightless by.

The rest of the bridging company—black hoods against the moonbright sky—disappeared downhill towards the river. Godden looked at his watch. The luminous hands showed him that it was long past midnight. But the sharp sweet recollection of Edie still haunted him, forbidding sleep.

He left the sentry, and walked forward, past the aiming lights, to the hedge at skyline. From here, one could just make out the river, narrow and curling between high banks past those two lockhouses which Westland cavalry were supposed to have blown up before retiring. Beyond, loomed the Downs.

He remembered, dimly, reading a book that mentioned this very river and these Downs. Once upon a time—if one could trust the chap who wrote that book—there had been wolves in this part of England. Funny, when one came to think of it, how old England was. Thousands of years old. Made one feel kind of small, like. Made one feel as though one didn’t count very much. Perhaps one didn’t count at all.

“Just a lot of ants?” wondered George Godden, looking up from the valley to the immensity of the skies. But presently, looking down into the valley again, he saw what he imagined to be a column of infantry on the move in one of the lanes there; and thinking, “No right to be even as far away from ’em as this”, started back to the

guns.

As he came level with the aiming light he heard a low challenge and the countersign, given in a well-known voice.

A moment later the voice asked:

“That’s you, isn’t it, Sergeant Godden?”

Old Rusty! What was he on the prowl for? Why wasn’t he at brigade H.Q.?

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

§ 1

As a matter of psychological exactitude, Major Thomas Rockingham—temporarily in command of Left Field Brigade, Eastland Artillery—was not on the prowl at all. He had walked over from his headquarters, a barn in a clearing at the other side of the wood, for the purely altruistic motive of checking Wilfrid Patterson’s “mathematics” and making sure that he understood his orders.

Rather fortunately, because Wilfrid and Masters between them had made one slight mistake.

“And with *my* battery”, he was thinking, not quite so altruistically, as he recognised Godden, who answered, stiffening to attention and saluting:

“Yes, sir”.

“Just looking round to see everything was all right, eh?”

“Well, no, sir. As a matter of fact, I couldn’t sleep.”

It was like the man to disclaim credit for what might have been taken as extra vigilance. Like him, too, nowadays at any rate, was the smile—clearly visible in the streaming moonlight. Yet less than six months ago when one had shaken him by the hand in battery office, Godden’s had been a face of tragedy. Had he forgotten his love for Botley’s wife completely? And so soon?

Obviously, such a question could not be put. Yet, because of his own situation—and because to him, at that moment, it seemed so utterly impossible that any man who really loved a woman could ever be happy without her—Rockingham continued talkative.

“That’s bad”, he said. “You chaps ought to get all the sleep you can. Do you realise what the time is?”

“Getting on for one in the morning, sir.”

“It’s nearer half-past. And the infantry are going to attack at six.”

“Will they be able to manage it, sir?”

“What makes you ask?”

Godden smiled again. The engineers—he suggested—might not have their bridges ready.

“You can see for yourself, sir”, he went on. “From that hedge, there.”

“Really.” And Rockingham paced forward, Godden failing into step with him. For on Godden, also, was the need for speech.

They reached the hedge at skyline, parted the blackthorn, and peered over. The Sappers' lorries had reached the river. Men had just begun to unload the boxes and the girders.

"If this were the real thing, sir", asked Godden, "wouldn't the enemy be firing on them?"

"Possibly. But that's all blind ground from the other side. So the fire wouldn't be very accurate."

"Unless they had planes directing it, sir. There's enough moonlight."

"Hardly, I should say. It's almost impossible to observe fire from the air at night, you know. The best they could do would be to signal an approximate map reference."

But on that, though their eyes were still busy, both fell silent . . . Till at last Rockingham heard himself say, "I must be getting back. You'd better turn in, too".

"Yes, sir", said Godden. "Only——" And in another second he had seized the opportunity to "get it off his chest".

"I've never had the chance to tell you, sir", he burst out. "But I can't ever be sufficiently grateful for what you did for me. You know when, sir."

And after that both fell silent again for what seemed, to each of them, an unconscionable time. And not until the very end of that time, not until they were actually on their way back to the guns, could Rusty Rockingham bring himself to ask:

"Then you're quite happy?"

Perceptibly Godden hesitated. Then he said:

"Mostly, sir. Nearly always, sir. There wasn't anything else we could have done, you see. Not with him getting T.B. like that".

"Quite."

§ 2

The monosyllabic cliché with which he had closed their conversation seemed completely inadequate, but Rusty Rockingham, acknowledging Godden's salute, realised himself incapable of uttering one syllable more.

He turned on his heel and went—making his way in front of the silent gun line to the road the engineers' lorries had taken. Some fifty infantrymen were resting by the side of that road. About a mile farther up it, he could just make out the sidelights of parked vehicles. "Divisional transport", he knew, "waiting to get forward".

Leaving road for footpath, he stopped to light a pipe. "Don't see how Godden could have done anything else", he thought. "Must have been a wrench, though.

Thank the lord, Camilla and I haven't that sort of situation to compete with."

Yet it still seemed to him that the one letter he had received from her—the day before they left Steepdown—was unduly optimistic. And he memorised it once more as he walked on.

"Guy was not as angry as I expected him to be . . . Obviously he can't consult his lawyer till you both get back from manoeuvres or whatever you call them . . . But he doesn't seem to want a scandal any more than we do . . . As far as I could gather he didn't want you to have to send in your papers. Is that the right term? . . . That was last night. At breakfast this morning he said he would rather you didn't come to the house again. That's only natural, and of course I agreed to it. There's one other thing. I made him promise that he would not say anything to you if you and he happened to meet. And I promised, on your behalf, that you wouldn't say anything to him. You will keep that promise, won't you, darling? Oh, I do love you so much. I do so want to make you happy."

And of course one had kept that promise, of course one was happy—and tolerably confident. Only——

"Only I don't like the way he's taken to calling me Rockingham instead of Rusty", thought the man who loved Brigadier Wethered's wife; and, slowing his pace—for he was nearly at his headquarters—he recalled the first time that had happened, in the big mess tent of the artillery camp near Godalming, and the last time it happened, just before they marched out for this exercise.

Neither time—he remembered—had he been on duty. And at no other time—except when necessitated by duty—had they exchanged a word.

"Natural enough, though", continued Rockingham's sense of humour. "Can't very well expect him to fall on my neck and hug me. After all, she is his wife, just as much as that other woman was Botley's wife."

And on that, for the very first time since Camilla's kisses had blotted out the world for him, conscience tried to whisper . . . Till passion drowned the whisper, shouting:

"She's your woman. She loves you as much as you love her. You're the king of your own conscience. You know you're justified. Take her and be happy".

And:

"It isn't as if she had a child by Wethered", suggested passion, as the commander of Left Field Brigade, Eastland Artillery, entered the barn which was his

headquarters and lay down, still booted, for a couple of hours' sleep.

§ 3

During that short sleep a queer dream flickered, intermittently, across the subconscious mind of Rusty Rockingham. He was commanding guns in action. But these guns fired black powder; and through the thick smoke of their discharges one could actually see one's target—brown, bearded faces; galloping horses; waving scimitar. Behind and above the smoke rose clumsy breastworks, a crenellated wall and huge closed gates.

In the dream, he wore an old-time uniform and carried a drawn sword. Every time he lifted his sword, men loaded his guns by ramming charge and shell down their muzzles. Wound about his head was a turban. He had just sworn to himself, "I'll never take off this turban till we've blown in those gates", when a hand jerked at his shoulder, and a voice said:

"Four-thirty ack emma, sir".

Pushing up the wool of his old Balaklava helmet in which he habitually slept during these imitations of active service, he recognised the faithful Noakes, and an enamel mug, also a relic of his war days. From this, still blinking drowsily, he drank dixie tea.

His adjutant—he saw—was already shaving by candlelight.

"Bloody awful time to get up, sir", grumbled Headworth. "No reason for it either. The bridges aren't ready yet."

"How do you know?"

"Clarkford's brigade major telephoned about ten minutes ago. They won't be wanting their barrage before seven at the earliest."

"Did you pass that on to Bryce-Atkinson?"

"Not me. Told him it was his job. Dunno why he got on to us in the first place. Blast, I've gone and cut myself."

From the other end of the barn came a signaller with a message. Headworth glanced at it, and asked:

"Mr. Tuckett up, yet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then say I'd like to see him, please."

The regimental sergeant-major received his order and departed. Noakes brought Rockingham's shaving water and filled his canvas basin. Light was just showing through the broken tiling of the ancient roof.

“What time do you want breakfast, sir?” asked Headworth, buttoning himself into his tunic, and lighting a cigarette.

“As soon as they can cook it.”

“Right.”

The adjutant departed. The temporary brigade-commander plied his safety razor, washed himself, and let Noakes flick a duster over his fieldboots. Within twenty-four hours—he remembered—Lampson would return to duty, and he'd be back with his own battery. Superimposed on this memory there fell, as the fire of one battery over a brigade zone, another: “If war were to break out tomorrow, what would be your command? Six eighteen-pounder bundocks, four of 'em 1918 vintage, and about a hundred flannel-footed soldiers”.

“And it isn't as if you were a bonehead either”, continued Rockingham's memory of that longago conversation.

So why worry, even if Camilla's letter had been unduly optimistic; even if one were eventually forced to send in one's papers? The army didn't really need one. There were a hundred fellows just as fit to command batteries. And far more potential brigade commanders than brigades.

Such thoughts vanished, as the pictures in his dream had vanished, before he could comprehend their implication. He put on his tunic and went outside.

The sky over the clearing in the woods was still pale gray; and the dawn air chilly. Headworth's servant had just brought him his cloak. The men of the headquarters staff were already at breakfast. Noakes, obedient to previous instructions, carried out a canvas table and two rhorkee chairs.

“Why this passion for fresh air?” asked Headworth.

“Too fuggy in there, Cyril.”

“All right. You're C.O.”

They sat down. After they had eaten their eggs and bacon Headworth's temper improved a little.

“Do you think we ought to amend last night's orders?” he asked. “We gave the batteries six o'clock as their zero hour.”

“Subject to confirmation. We'd better not change anything till we have it officially from Bryce-Atkinson.”

“I suppose you're right. How about synchronising watches again?”

“Yes. Carry on with that. Carry on with everything just as though you hadn't heard from Clarkford's lot. We shall only get into trouble otherwise.”

“Not while you're the Hawk's blue-eyed boy.”

Cyril Headworth had spoken without thinking. The effect amazed him. Rusty's

eyes seemed stone in their sockets. His cheeks flushed. For a long second he said nothing—then:

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

Headworth’s silky eyelashes twitched. A lightning flash of thought informed him, “You seem to have put your foot right in it”. Stammering slightly, he went on:

“Sorry. I thought you and he were such pals”.

“Why?”

“Well, you seem to spend a good many weekends at his place. You’ve known him for about twenty years, haven’t you?”

“Longer than that”, said Rusty Rockingham; and, shocked at his own lack of selfcontrol, he forced a smile to his lips as he continued, “But I can’t quite see that prejudicing him in my favour if I made a real bloomer.”

“Perhaps you’re right”, Headworth smiled back at him. “He certainly is a bit of a martinet.”

Out of the barn, while Headworth was still speaking, reappeared the signaller with another message and his book. This he showed to Rockingham, who ordered, “Repeat that to all batteries at once, please”.

“Very good, sir.”

“Zero altered?” asked Headworth.

“Yes. He’s put it back an hour. Also subject to confirmation.”

“Thank the lord for that. Perhaps my stomach’ll function before the battle begins.”

And the adjutant of Left Field Brigade, thinking, “Rusty’s digestion doesn’t seem any too good either this morning”, rose and followed the signaller.

Still inwardly furious, Rockingham filled the first pipe of the day.

§ 4

It had been absurd, it had been utterly childish, to lose one’s temper like that, to snap at Cyril like that. After all, the fellow hadn’t meant any harm.

“But I might have done a heap of harm”, brooded Rockingham—and, for the first time in many weeks, fear touched him again.

So far, he and Camilla had been so careful. So far, only her husband knew that they loved each other. How long, though, could the secret be kept?

These things always got out eventually. When they did, people always took sides. Which side would Cyril take? And Lampson? (Especially Lampson.) If Cyril’s view—that he and the Hawk were such good friends—were the general one, it

would look as though he'd behaved pretty badly.

But that thought also—passion compelling—vanished. He and Camilla loved each other. Let people think what they damn well pleased.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was exactly five-thirty. Last night, he had only had time to check Wilfrid's figures. With this hour and more to spare, he might just as well look round the other batteries. It would be something to do anyway, something to keep one's mind off its main objective.

"May as well do the whole job", he thought; and called to Noakes to bring him his Sam Browne, his gas mask, his fieldglasses and his stick.

Accoutred, he decided to take an orderly with him, "just for the sake of appearances", and summoned Mr. Tuckett, who in turn summoned, "Gunner Harrison", in a voice that nearly shook another tile off the barn.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

§ 1

Lyttelton's howitzers, technically out of action but still carrying on with the exercise, were nearer to headquarters than the eighteen-pounder batteries. Five minutes' walking brought the brigade commander and his orderly to their position—a dip in the ground to the right flank of the little wood.

“Something ought to be done about these umpires, Rusty”, grumbled Ralph Lyttelton, who had just breakfasted with Travers, the junior of his two subalterns. “And if I have much more sleeping in the open to do, I shall be out of action with rheumatic fever for keeps. Thank the lord, it didn't rain last night. Did you get my message about the position of my new O.P.?”

“Yes.”

“It's too close. But I couldn't find anything better. Come up and have a look at it.”

“Right.”

“There's something I want to talk to you about”, said Lyttelton, as soon as they were away from the battery; and, at the words, Rockingham experienced another twinge of fear. Ralph's tone sounded ominous. Did he, by any chance, know of the situation with Camilla?

That was nonsense, of course. Nobody could know. One really must take a clove hitch on one's imagination.

“It's about Travers”, went on Lyttelton, lowering his voice so that the orderly should not overhear. “He got a bit confidential just before we turned in last night. Wants to marry, if you please. At twenty-three. Of course I told him he'd have to ask Lampson. But can you beat it, Rusty? Only fifty pounds a year over and above his pay. And the girl hasn't a bean. Have to wait seven years till they draw marriage allowance.”

“Did you . . . wrestle with him?”

“Rather. But all he says is that they're so much in love that they can't wait.”

“And what did you say to that?”

“Nothing. When a kid thinks he's in love, he's as mad as a March hare. It's different with men of our age, thank goodness. I had a spot of violet in the blood—as Masfield calls it—myself this spring. But——”

Lyttelton, stopping, turned down an expressive thumb. Rockingham, feeling

silence the better part, forced a smile. They walked on again, with the battery commander continuing:

“If a chap in the service stays a bachelor till he’s forty, he’s a b.f. even to consider matrimony. Take our own cases. We’re happy enough. At least I am”.

“Me, too”, said Rockingham—and hated himself for the necessary lie.

Another two minutes—and they reached high ground, out of sight of the howitzers. Already, the sky was blue and gold to the rising sun, Lyttelton halted again, and took several deep breaths.

“It’s a good habit”, he went on. “A doctor bloke put me up to it. One can’t be too careful of one’s health when one’s getting on a bit. Hallo, was that one of ours?”

“That”—the reports of a machine gun firing blank cartridge—seemed to come from beyond the river. Hurrying on, they made the observation post—a little gorse-fringed hollow in which Ralph’s other subaltern and one signaller had been ensconced since dawn.

“Anything doing, Arkwright?” asked Lyttelton, as they crawled in; and the forward observing officer, his right eye still at the lens of his telescope, answered, “I can’t quite make out what’s going on, sir.”

“Let’s have a squint.”

The battery commander took the telescope. Rockingham heard machine guns again; unslung his glasses, and crawled up beside Lyttelton, who commented:

“They’re not in our zone. I suppose they’re firing on the floating-boat bridge”.

“Probably.”

“If they are, they’ll scupper that platoon.”

For now, looking lower, they could see infantrymen doubling across the bridge and lining out along the river; and soon, up to the infantrymen, galloped a horseman.

“That’s the blighter who put me out of business yesterday afternoon”, commented Lyttelton. “What’s the matter with Clarkford? Why doesn’t he ask Right Brigade for fire?”

§ 2

For another few minutes, Rusty Rockingham watched the rest of the infantry company deploy. From his right had come several rounds of battery fire. Immediately afterwards, another horseman had galloped down to the bridge and conferred with the first. Imagination informed him that the machine guns on the spur must have been claimed by Eastland—his watch that he had been absent from headquarters for the best part of forty minutes.

Almost at once the signaller called to him, “The adjutant wishes to speak with you, sir”.

“Zero hour seven-thirty”, said Headworth. “Still subject to confirmation. There’s been a hold-up at the box girder bridge. I’ve informed all batteries.”

“Right.”

Leaving Lyttelton at his wireless set, the brigade commander, still followed by his silent orderly, crawled out of the hollow, and took a short cut back to the north corner of the wood, where he encountered Potter, puffing a cigarette over a map spread on an artillery board, a little way away from his guns.

Potter, who considered himself something of a tactician, had already awarded the action to Westland.

“Our infantry couldn’t possibly cross by daylight”, he declared. “If this were the real thing, Clarkford would have to wait for reinforcements. He ought to have pressed on yesterday afternoon. In my opinion, this exercise is a lot of bilge. But how can any exercise be anything else—with the infantry still on their flat feet? It’s no good mechanising their transport and leaving the poor devils to slog it.”

“Grousing as usual, Frank?”

Potter laughed.

“Soldier’s privilege, Rusty. But don’t I wish we were allowed to write to the newspapers. Why don’t they tell the public the truth? Militarily speaking, Britain’s a fifth-class power. Do you know what I often think—that it wouldn’t have been half a bad plan if we’d let Gerry land a few divisions in England last time. Just to teach the civilian population a lesson they wouldn’t forget for a couple of generations. As it is, all they care about is their blasted moneybags.”

“Touch of liver”, said Rockingham, once more forcing a smile.

Potter’s mathematics, like Lyttelton’s, were impeccable, and his subalterns always brilliantly trained. As his colonel one might have asked to see his barrage programme; but for one in his own position—it seemed to the temporary brigade commander—such a procedure would be tactless. He contented himself, therefore, with a general question, “I hope that tracing I sent you was quite clear”; and having heard, “Quite, old man. We worked out the gun programmes before I turned in. We’re laid on the opening line now”, walked on for a talk with Forsyth, which was cut short by another message from Headworth, “Zero hour—eight o’clock. From what I can gather, that’s definite”.

“Good. I’ll come right back.”

§ 3

Once again, at eight o'clock on that lovely September morning in 1936, Major Rockingham's imagination was all the soldier's. Once again his prescience of a new Armageddon came surging into his mind.

Yet that this scene he watched through his fieldglasses from his brigade observation post could be in any way correlated to the next Armageddon, his sense of realism refused to admit.

The whole of this scene, and the whole tactical exercise which had preceded it, were—in his judgment—anachronistic. Thus, twenty-two years ago, trained men had fought in France and Belgium. Thus, even today, half-trained men might be fighting in Spain.

But that any major war of the future would present even one such picture as this, he could not bring himself to believe.

Cynically, he considered the picture again. On the far side of the river, the lines of his own infantry had just begun to move forward—protected by an imaginary barrage from his own guns, now firing occasional rounds of blank behind him. Presently those two battalions would make a frontal attack on the enemy's "delaying position", just over that second spur of the Downs.

"Cinema warfare", he thought.

Yet how else could men be trained? And there were so few to be trained. Recruiting for the infantry had almost dried up. Those two battalions he could see advancing averaged barely four hundred men each—not half their peace strength. And their weapon power was as deficient as their man power. Not an anti-tank gun between them. Even the main lesson of the last war—that one machine gun is worth two hundred rifles—unlearned!

"Whose fault?" Major Rockingham asked himself, and remembered Potter's, "All they care about is their blasted moneybags".

Meanwhile, the handfuls of infantry went on—as though experience had never proved that an attacking force, if it would attack successfully, must outnumber the defenders by sixteen to one. And at nine o'clock, with the "delaying position" captured by Eastland, Major Rockingham, back in his barn, was issuing orders for his batteries to advance across the box girder bridge—as though there were no such thing as an aeroplane to drop a bomb on them or machine-gun them from the sky.

"Childish", he thought as he issued those orders. But once they were on the move again, his mind concentrated on the immediate job.

Nor was it until nearly sunset that his imagination grew active again, telling him,

“It may have been childish, but it’s been jolly good fun”.

The exercise was over by then, and the infantry on their way back to camp. He had just signed his final order—for another barrage, which would never be fired, on “Westland’s main position” as disclosed by the day’s operation. His four batteries were now working out their programmes. Soon umpires would be checking them.

“Nothing more for us to do”, said a contented Headworth. “Mind if I have a spot of shut-eye, sir?” And he flung himself down on the close-cropped turf.

Soon Lyttelton lounged up, and eyed the sleeper. After a moment or so, Wilfrid appeared, to ask, “Got any baccy on you, old man?”

“I fancy we did pretty well”, continued Wilfrid, helping himself from the proffered pouch. “Did you have the Hawk round, Tom?”

“No.”

“We barged into him twice.”

They gossiped on for a while; went back to their batteries. Mr. Tuckett came up with a query. A belated infantry company tramped by; was called to attention, given the “Eyes Right”.

As he acknowledged their captain’s salute to the crown on his sleeve, a queer thought flashed through the mind of Major Rockingham—only to be suppressed.

“You won’t have to give up the army”, he told himself. “So why even consider how much you would miss it?”

Yet that other thought, which followed immediately, “You’ve forgotten Camilla all day”, was not so easy to elude, though one could hardly blame oneself for it—any more than one could blame oneself for having been so pleased with Wilfrid’s, “I fancy we did pretty well”.

The brigade had done more than well in that last advance. These new positions were admirable. Wethered himself must admit . . . But why the blazes hadn’t Wethered been near one all day?

“Avoiding me?” ran his next thought. “Probably. Awkward position for both of us. Especially if he had to find fault.”

Next, it struck him as a little queer that he could no longer even think of Camilla’s husband by his nickname; and after that, for several minutes, he paced the turf restlessly, hands deep in the pockets of his oldest breeches, his mind almost a blank.

Pacing thus he almost heard the voice of conscience. But, as yet, the voice was too dim; and, almost immediately, Mr. Tuckett’s broke in.

“Looks like rain, sir”, said Mr. Tuckett. “We’d best be getting the plane table and the instruments under cover.”

“Yes. Do.”

The first drop woke Headworth, who rose cursing. By the time the gunner major who was acting umpire and two senior subalterns came bumping over the turf in their car, a drizzling mist shrouded the Downs; and all the vehicles had been hooded.

“If the weather’s going to be like this”, said one of the subalterns, “it won’t be much fun chasing the Grand Mufti.”

“Grand Vizier, Barker”, corrected his major, explaining, “With this trouble brewing in Palestine, they’ve altered it. At least so the C.R.A. told me when we were having tea. I wonder what’s happened to him. Didn’t he say he’d meet us here?”

“Why, yes. I believe he did, sir.”

It was not, however, until nearly two hours later that Hawk Wethered loomed tall in the doorway of a disused cow-house to which the storm had driven Rockingham and his four battery commanders with their “checkers” and their tracings and their gridded maps.

“You will be interested to know, gentlemen”, said Hawk Wethered, after a cursory inspection of the maps, “that the rest of the exercises have been washed out, and that we shall be leaving the manoeuvre area tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, sir?” queried the umpire, staring unbelief.

“Precisely. Tomorrow.” And the Hawk’s black eyes switched round the lamplit faces, as he continued:

“Speaking unofficially, I am given to understand that the division is returning to Aldershot with a view to partial mobilisation. One brigade of infantry, I further understand, will definitely be proceeding overseas. It is possible that this brigade of artillery will go with them”.

“But where to, sir?” Lyttelton spoke.

“Palestine.” The fierce gaze concentrated its fire. “Only police work I’m afraid, Rockingham. But no doubt you, as a bachelor, will welcome any relief from the monotony of peacetime soldiering.

“Not so good for married men like Forsyth”, continued the Hawk. “And, if it does happen, I’m afraid Lampson won’t be any too pleased either. By the way, Rockingham, I’ve just told Bryce-Atkinson to ring him up and tell him to stay put. You will therefore continue to exercise your brief authority until after the march back to Steepdown. I shall be issuing orders about that first thing in the morning.”

“Very good, sir.”

“And now I must be wishing you good night, gentlemen”, concluded Hawk Wethered, not altogether displeased with his own histrionics, “and a safe return to

camp.”

§ 4

It was three o'clock in the morning before Rockingham was driven into camp; and by then sheer physical fatigue had exhausted him. His legs ached, his eyes were already blurring, as he told Noakes, “You cut along. Bring me tea at reveille”, and lifted the flap of his own tent.

Within five minutes, oblivious to the rain which pattered on that tent, to the gusts which bellied its canvas, he was sleeping as men sleep after battle. Yet from the very moment of waking, in these old blankets, on this hired camp bedstead, every instinct warned him of the personal battle to come.

Camilla's letter—he knew even before his eyes blinked to the first trumpet—*had* been unduly optimistic. Her husband's overnight words proved it. His every look had been a threat.

Silent while Noakes laid out the clean uniform, Rockingham considered that threat.

Even if the brigade were not ordered to Palestine (and what could suit Wethered's book better?), there was no hope of an arranged divorce.

“Open warfare”, he decided; and the mere apprehension rekindled fear.

Once again, passion quelled fear. Nothing Wethered might contrive would baulk him and Camilla of their happiness. Nevertheless, as he shaved, as he washed and dressed—all more slowly than his habit—Rockingham realised that happiness might have to be postponed.

If the Turban battery were sent on active service, he must go with it.

“Look too bad if I didn't”, he told himself. “Even if this job in Palestine is only police work, a fellow can't scrimshank out of it.”

Surely Camilla would understand that?

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

§ 1

The weather had cleared and a watery sun was shining when Rockingham emerged from his tent, and made his way to the mess marquee.

As usual, he was one of the earliest. Unusually, Forsyth already sat breakfasting.

“Would it be all right if I ran down to the village?” asked Forsyth. “My missis is with her people. I’d rather like to telephone her. She’s going to have a baby, you know. And if what the Hawk told us last night is in the papers, she may get the wind up.”

“There’s only a paragraph to say the Command exercises have been cancelled”, put in Riley of the other brigade from across the table.

“All the same”, said Forsyth, “I’d like to go.”

He went, with his brigade commander’s permission, almost at once.

“Think I’ll do ditto”, announced Riley, who was also married. “Pretty bloody if we are sent on active service. Personally I don’t like the look of it. The War Office wouldn’t go as far as admitting that the despatch of reinforcements to Palestine is under consideration—that’s in the papers, too—if it weren’t pretty well a cert.”

He followed Forsyth. The long table filled rapidly. Finishing his breakfast, Rockingham overheard scraps of conversation:

“I had to go over to Warnham last night. The infantry got the news when they marched in. There was a positive queue at the Post Office”:

“Confound these Jews”:

“Blast these Arabs”:

“We’ve had nothing but trouble ever since we took over the mandate”:

“This chap, the Mufti, says that Iraq’s coming in on his side”:

“And the other Arab Princes”:

“That’s all my eye. Ormsby-Gore denied it in his letter to Weizmann”:

“If they send the whole division, there won’t be many troops left in England”:

“I ran across a pal of mine in the Coldstream, he wasn’t half cursing”.

Meanwhile the C.R.A. had not yet appeared.

§ 2

Just as the temporary brigade commander, already with his cap on, was leaving

the marquee, the C.R.A. made to enter. They exchanged salutes, a "Good morning, sir", a "Morning, Rockingham". Back in his own tent, the temporary brigade commander found his regimental sergeant-major waiting for him.

"Is there any news beyond what's in the papers, sir?" asked Tuckett.

"Not yet."

"You don't happen to know whether they're calling up the reservists, I suppose, sir? There's a rumour they are. It's pretty well all over the camp."

"I shouldn't believe that if I were you, Mr. Tuckett."

But Wilfrid Patterson, who joined them a few moments later, had heard the same rumour: and Forsyth, returned from the village, reported that it had taken him "the best part of forty minutes to get into the phone box".

"My missis is coming home", he went on. "Just in case we are sent out. You're damn lucky not to have one, Rusty."

Lucky! When one couldn't telephone to Camilla, when one daren't even write to her, with their whole immediate happiness at stake.

All morning, while his batteries packed their vehicles, while he waited at his headquarters for their march orders, that thought bit deeper into Rockingham's imagination. Throughout lunch—with his own march orders now issued—he sat almost silent, hardly listening to the gossip that flickered up and down the board.

If these men went, he would have to go with them. Camilla *must* understand that. But would she? It wasn't as if she were an Englishwoman. She was a pacifist, too. Hadn't she said, during one of their talks, "I don't mind your being a soldier. But I should hate to think of you shooting people who can't shoot back. Like those poor Abyssinians".

And even if she did understand (surely she would, surely she loved him enough not to keep him from his duty), how long might they now have to wait for their happiness? Months? A whole year?

Lunch over, and the brigade ready to move off, Bryce-Atkinson came to him.

"The old man's toddled home", said Bryce-Atkinson. "Thank the lord for small mercies. He's been ready to go off at half-cock ever since we left Aldershot. Lack of the conjugal amenities, one gathers. Heaven help our darker brethren if he's sent on the warpath. But from what I gathered when I was over at division this morning, he won't be. Or you either. The rumour there is that they're only sending one brigade of infantry."

Hope!

§ 3

Notoriously, Bryce-Atkinson's wishes were fathers to his thought. Yet for the next three hours, as his sixteen guns caterpillared their slow way back to Steepdown—halting at this crossroad, halting at that road junction, to let the wearying footsloggers tramp past them—hope increased in Rusty Rockingham's mind.

“Lay you five to one Wily Wilbraham's waiting for us when we get in”, said Headworth, seated in the car beside him. “And if I know W.W., he'll have ferreted out the truth.”

It was he who suggested, when they were still five miles from barracks, “The batteries'll be all right without us. Let's get a move on and see if W.W. has any information. It's all very well for you. But, quite apart from having to leave the lady wife, I'd simply hate to miss the chasing season”.

Nor did Cyril Headworth's instinct prove at fault.

Their colonel was waiting for them, on the steps of brigade office, when they drove into the gunpark. His answer to Rockingham's, “I hope you're quite all right again, sir”, sounded unusually affable.

“I had a pretty fair dose of pneumonia”, Lampson admitted. “Served me right, though, as our C.R.A. would say. I oughtn't to have carried on with that cold of mine. As a matter of fact, I was just thinking of putting in for a fortnight's leave when we got the telegram about the exercise being cancelled. My doctor thinks I ought to go to the sea for a bit. He recommends Bournemouth. Have you ever been there, Headworth?” And, having considered his adjutant's answer, he went on:

“Rather hot, you say. Then it won't matter if I put my trip off till next weekend. We shall know where we are officially by then.”

“Officially, sir?”

The adjutant's question evoked a slow smile, a perceptible wink.

“That's the operative word, Headworth. Unofficially, I shouldn't bother about buying myself a pith helmet. Or shaking the moth balls out of my khaki shorts. By the way”—he turned to Rockingham—“there was a chap asking for you on the telephone just now. From Woolwich, I gather. He said it was fairly urgent, and would you call him up if you came in before six o'clock.”

It was nearly six o'clock already.

Running into the office, sitting down to the telephone, calling his opposite number at the Arsenal, Rockingham was conscious of a distinct excitement. Once again he forgot all about Camilla as he asked for “Extension four three”.

“Hallo, Rusty”, said the voice at the other end of the wire. “You only just caught

me. The samples went off to Shoebury yesterday. Can you get away to see them tested? . . . Monday morning. You'll have to be there pretty early. I should sleep in town if I were you. I'm going to. We could meet at the station."

The train time followed. Rockingham said, "Hang on a minute while I see if I can get off"; and ran out to consult Lampson, who continued affable with his:

"I can't see any objection. Provided, of course, that we don't receive our mobilisation orders. And I'm willing to take a small wager about that".

Whereupon, just for a second, the question of the shell test became of secondary importance; though Rockingham's excitement mounted again to his opposite number's, "They've made a hundred and fifty of 'em. I popped half a dozen into the only gun-howitzer we've got here and tried 'em out against the sandbags for penetration".

"How did it go?"

"Grand."

Potter's Austin had just come in when Rockingham rejoined his colonel on the steps of brigade office. They spent an hour watching the rest of the vehicles arrive. Just before he went home Lampson said, "I'm afraid I've one bad bit of news for you. It's about that dog of yours. He was run over and killed early this morning".

The news hurt—and damnably. Somehow, too, it seemed a bad omen. Telling himself not to be a fool, and not to start blubbing at his age, Rockingham went straight to his quarter. There he found Gilchrist with Noakes; and heard the story, "I couldn't help it, sir. He just broke the string I'd tied him up with and ran off down the road . . . A tradesman's lorry, sir . . . Not really the driver's fault either . . . Patrick was always a bit wild when you wasn't there. He used to go looking for you in my opinion. Would you care to see him, sir? I've got him in stables".

And of course one had to—although it nearly tore one's heart out.

Patrick. Dead.

§ 4

There were actual tears behind Rockingham's eyes when they buried Patrick. And just before dinner on the Saturday Patterson, who had driven down to the Aldershot Club for a drink, reported in mess, "I met a chap I know in the Hampshires. They've called up their reservists. He says all the battalions in Bulgy's brigade are going. So perhaps they'll send some gunners with them. I must say I'd like to take a dekko at the Holy Land".

"So should I", said Masters; and somehow or other their talk was a new grief.

“You were as keen as that once”, Rockingham told himself; and late that night, alone in a room which seemed more dreary than ever without his dog, he fell to wondering at the change these last months had wrought in his outlook on the Service . . . Until more apprehensive thoughts intervened.

It was the best part of three weeks now since he had received Camilla’s letter. Somehow he must get in touch with her, warn her of the difficulties they were bound to encounter. But how? And hadn’t he better be sure, before taking any steps, that he was not being sent to Palestine?

Perhaps.

He slept on that—and far better than he had anticipated. Morning found him newly confident. W.W. had a positive genius for nosing out information. If they were being sent abroad, W.W. would have been the first to hear about it. In that case, moreover, they would have received some orders already. After all, the infantry had. All the same . . .

“All the same”, he decided, smoking his pipe after breakfast, “Wethered’s bound to make trouble, and this suspense is getting on my nerves.”

He spent the morning in his office, dealing with a mass of neglected letters. His mother was still at Aix-les-Bains. She had taken the news of Geoffrey’s engagement to Val badly. (“He’s bringing her to see me as soon as I come back. I shall have to do the right thing, of course. But I can’t see myself ever being fond of her.”)

After retorting in kind, “As long as he’s fond of her, I don’t see what you have to worry about”, he put down his pen for a moment. If mother objected to Geoffrey’s engagement, what would be her reaction to his own marriage with a divorced woman, after a case in which he had been the co-respondent?

Surely, though, Wethered wouldn’t drive them as far as that?

Confident once more—after all Wethered was a gentleman, and so far they had given him no cause for action—Rusty Rockingham ploughed his way through the rest of his correspondence, concluding with an invitation to Geoffrey, “Provided we’re both still in England, will you and Val dine and do a show with me either Saturday fortnight, that’s the nineteenth, or the Saturday after, the twenty-sixth?”

The church parade was being dismissed while he signed and sealed that last letter. As he watched the men disperse, recollection flashed him a picture of the Garrison Church at Woolwich. He was kneeling there, by a flat stone carved with the words, “In Sacred memory of our Fallen”.

“I?” he caught himself thinking. “Or some other?” And that was the moment when he first realised that these last months had not only wrought a change in his outlook on the Service.

“I’m altogether different”, he felt, a little uncomfortably, yet with no consciousness of wrong.

The very difference indeed—as he drove up to town after luncheon—became a cause for gratification. Nowadays he knew what he wanted; and because that want was so essentially simple (after all, he’d give up anything in the world to marry Camilla) why feel uncomfortable? Other men had fallen in love with their fellow officers’ wives. Other men had been co-respondents in divorce cases. Take Lampson’s brother . . .

A peculiarly moronic cyclist, swerving across his bows from a side road, interrupted that train of thought—but only for a second, because latterly one had lost one’s fear of accidents.

Yet another cause for gratification!

Come to think of it, one had every cause for being pleased with oneself. A few weeks ago it had seemed incredible that one’s love for Camilla could ever be reciprocated. Yet the incredible was true.

Elation followed ratiocination. Still overpleased with himself, he left his bag at his club, garaged his two-seater, and decided to take tea in Hyde Park, a walk afterwards.

Six o’clock saw him in the card room; half-past seven at the bar. He dined late with two men he had known all his life. Over the house port, talk turned on a lady who had just flown the Atlantic solo from east to west.

“Serve her right if she’d been drowned”, said one man.

“I don’t agree”, protested the other. “We ought to have a Women’s R.A.F. Why not? When it comes to bombing open cities, a girl ought to be every bit as good as a man. Possibly better. Because she’s the more savage of the two animals.”

He quoted “The Female of the Species”. They found a fourth—and played bridge till midnight. Over a final whiskey and soda, the quoter of poetry elaborated his thesis.

“If woman does the wooing”, said he, “and believe me she usually does, though she’s clever enough not to let the man know it, why shouldn’t she do some of the fighting? It’s the women and children who’ll take it in the neck next time anyway.”

“And when’s the next time going to be?” asked their fourth.

“Nineteen thirty-nine, I fancy. We ought to be ready for ’em by then if we’re lucky.”

“Ready for whom?”

“Why, the Russians and the French of course. There’s only going to be one more war. And that’ll be between the bolshevik nations and the capitalist nations.”

“Colonel Blimps all of you”, thought Rockingham. Yet the prescience of another, and a worse, Armageddon haunted his sleep.

The same foreboding troubled him when he woke next day; and, in the train to Shoeburyness, his opposite number confided that he shared it. So did one of the experts they encountered at the range.

But once the actual test began, none of those who watched had any mind for anything else; and, on their way back to London, the man who had worked for two years with Rusty Rockingham—though usually the most cold-blooded, the most scientific of mortals—kept on repeating, “We’ve done it. Jiminy-crikey, we’ve done it. Now the twenty-five pounders can go into production at once”.

They parted at Fenchurch Street. As Rockingham drove back for Aldershot, he saw the late bills of the evening papers, “What Hitler said to Lloyd George”, “New C.-in-C. for Palestine”. In mess that night, Lyttelton was all the Jeremiah.

“I don’t care a damn what W.W. says”, he pronounced. “They’re bound to send one brigade of artillery. And that’ll be us, Rusty.”

By the Wednesday night, however, it seemed almost definite that Lyttelton was wrong; and by Thursday Noakes’ face, which had grown gloomier and gloomier at the prospect of “spendin’ me last six months away from me own property, as nice a bit of skirt as ever you saw, but would I trust her not to walk out on me if I was in Bethlehem”, brightened perceptibly; and on the Friday afternoon Lampson, in mufti at his desk, said:

“I shall be at Bournemouth till the end of the month, Rockingham. Divisional training’s washed out of course. But there’s no reason why you shouldn’t carry on with a little collective training while I’m away. I spoke to the C.R.A. about that—and he said it would be good practice for you”.

And just before he went off he added, “I shall have to deal with the confidential reports as soon as I’m back”.

§ 5

There was a standing joke about W.W.’s “confidentials”, and Headworth quoted it as he drove away.

“Thanks to my magnificent example”, laughed Cyril Headworth, “this young officer has performed all his duties admirably. Lampson isn’t a bad chap really, though. As long as one keeps on the right side of him. You certainly seem to have. I’ve never known him so full of bonhomie.”

But what did Lampson’s bonhomie, what did Wethered’s suggestion, conceal?

“Good practice for me!” mused the man who loved Wethered’s wife. “When he knows damn well that he only has to lift his finger, and I’ll never get my brigade.”

For now he was more than ever conscious of a menace hanging over him, and of the need to discuss that menace with Camilla. Her husband—it seemed to him—could only be playing for time, trying to keep them separate.

As though that could help Wethered. As though he and Camilla weren’t sure of each other.

Nevertheless, *was* one so sure? Could one go on like this, week after week, day after day, without any word from her? Oughtn’t one to write?

And yet, dare one write? Supposing Wethered opened the letter? Besides, hadn’t it been clear from her letter—burned the moment one had memorised it—that one was to make no move until Wethered consulted his lawyers?

Had Wethered consulted his lawyers? Not if one knew him. He wasn’t the man to ask other people’s opinions. He’d always ridden his own line, had Wethered. But what line was he going to ride this time?

Time! How it got a chap down. How this suspense racked one’s nerves.

“Have to control my nerves”, decided Rockingham. “If he wants to ride a waiting race, I must.”

But by the Monday, with Headworth saying, “Bryce-Atkinson’s just been on the phone. Nothing important. He told me that the Hawk’s up in London for the day”, he could bear the suspense no longer.

He asked for Camilla’s number the moment Headworth left the office. She herself answered his ring.

“I was just going to write to you”, she said. “Not that I’ve any real news. Tom, I must see you soon. I can’t go on like this. All by myself. Are you free for lunch tomorrow? If so, I could meet you at . . .”

Listening carefully, answering slowly, “Yes. I remember. All right. One o’clock. And I promise not to keep you waiting”, he realised:

“That’ll mean leaving tomorrow morning’s signal lay-out to Ralph”.

What he did not realise was that he had never yet cut a duty. Even for Gail!

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

§ 1

It seemed a little curious to Camilla's lover, as he lit his after-breakfast pipe next morning, that he should be remembering Gail Vanduser. But that memory was only a flash.

Like a flash, too, passed the hours till midday, when he told Headworth, "I don't expect I'll be back much before six. Don't wait for me"; and went to change.

"Lucky I'm my own master", he thought while he stripped off his khaki. But the implication behind that thought worried him a little.

"Playing truant?" he asked himself—and frowned.

The discipline of a lifetime nagged again as he grasped the wheel of his car. Once he had left the flag behind him, however, he experienced a new elation. Life couldn't be all discipline. Because life, at its highest, meant love.

His route took him south and west. After twenty minutes—with his elation growing all the time—the railway gates of a level crossing closed ahead. He braked within a yard of them. Almost immediately he heard the puff of an engine round the near bend; and, looking up, saw the many faces at the windows of the carriages.

All those faces were young, healthy, cheerful. Many of them grinned at him, one or two shouted, here and there a hand waved, from one crowded compartment came the song of the moment, as the troop train clanked slowly by.

"Thank the lord——" he thought.

But the implication behind that thought, also, worried him a little, till the last men on their way to Palestine were carried from sight, and the gates swung open, and his tyres bumped across the lines.

§ 2

Another ten minutes—and Rockingham had almost forgotten the incident of the troop train. Camilla had said one o'clock. He must hurry or be late at their rendezvous—a lone hotel which Camilla had discovered while motoring.

He remembered her telling him about it, "It's the duckiest place imaginable. The sort one would choose for a honeymoon".

A long time, since she had told him that. A long time since he had first set eyes on her, practising backhand drives and dropshots against that wooden wall.

Memories crowded on him as he sped the last of his route. Every picture his mind conceived set the blood beating at his forehead. This woman he would be meeting within a few short minutes was the woman he loved. One day—Wethered or no Wethered—they would have *their* honeymoon.

But, until then, they must not sully happiness by anticipating the full of it. They were no ordinary lovers, no merely passionate lovers, he and she.

“The passion *and* the companionship”, he thought. “A home of our own. Children.”

Yes. Children. She had always wanted them. He, too, wanted them—and desperately—now.

Crossroads checked exuberance. Dubious, he read the names on the signpost; swung right into a wood, left into a valley. There, just outside the village, stood the hotel. Could that be her car? Yes. How the sun shone today. How that stream sparkled. How clear this air was.

She had just dismounted from her red and black coupé. She had seen him. She was waving a hand. Bless her. Always so punctual. It must be hell to marry an unpunctual woman.

A moment later he was holding her hand, saying, “We seem to have synchronised perfectly”.

Camilla said, laughing, “Don’t be so military, Tom. As a matter of fact, we’re both five minutes early”; then, lowering her voice, “By the way, are you still in love with me?”

“Should I be here if I weren’t?”

§ 3

Beyond the porch doorway by which Camilla and Rockingham had parked their cars, they came into a white panelled lounge, gay with flowers and chintzes—its atmosphere more the country house’s than the hotel’s.

For a moment they were alone. Then, through another doorway, appeared a woman not much older than Camilla, but taller and with obviously natural red hair, who smiled at them, “You’ll be wanting lunch, I expect. Would you like it in the garden? All our staying guests are out for lunch today. So I could easily manage it”.

“That would be nice”, answered Camilla.

“I hope you’re not in a hurry.” The tall woman smiled again. “We don’t really cater for the passing trade, you see. The joint won’t be ready till half-past one. It’s roast mutton. You could have grapefruit or an egg dish to start with.”

They chose the grapefruit.

“And you’ll have a gin and It, won’t you, Tom?”

“Why, yes. I believe I will.”

The woman, having indicated where they could wash their hands and the way to the garden, left them.

“I didn’t meet her when I was here last time”, went on Camilla. “I only had tea. It was raining, I remember. Tom, won’t it be nice when we needn’t be”—she paused—“furtive?”

“Rather.”

They went straight into the garden, trim with smooth lawns, clipped yews and formal borders. Under a red wall, with a gate in the centre, dahlias were in full bloom and Michaelmas daisies just opening. A maid in green linen appeared; showed them along a path between the hedges to where three tables had been set out on another patch of lawn, shielded from the house by a trellis up which late roses climbed.

“I’ll bring you your drink in a minute, sir”, she said.

Camilla said, “I don’t see why I should keep this on”, and plucked off her white beret. He had noticed, by then, that she was all in white except for her scarlet belt and scarlet shoes.

He took the beret from her, and dropped it onto a chair.

“Dare I kiss you?” he asked, his blue eyes half-tender, half-quizzical.

“Aren’t you brave?”

Their closed lips met quickly. They were still holding hands when the girl reappeared with his drink, and a patterned tablecloth which she proceeded to lay.

“Lunch won’t be long”, she said—and left them again.

“We seem to be behaving rather unwisely”, smiled Camilla. “I think I’d better have a cigarette.”

She released her fingers, and produced a thin case from the pocket of her short skirt. He struck a match for her.

“We both of us are”, he said. “Like a couple of kids. Grand, isn’t it?”

Lightly, puffing at her Chesterfield, Camilla asked: “Isn’t there a quotation about, ‘Heedless of the coming storm, the careless infants play’?”

With equal lightness he answered, “I remember something of the kind. But you don’t seem to have it quite right. Even Wordsworth wouldn’t have used ‘heedless’ and ‘careless’ in the same line”.

Camilla retorted, “Why ‘even’ Wordsworth? And anyway I don’t think it’s his”. But her hazel eyes clouded for a second as she continued: “Tom, there’s no news, as I told you on the telephone. Only—last night, when he came back from London,

Guy said something I didn't like too much".

"What did he say?"

"Let's leave that—shall we, darling?—till after lunch."

She asked what he had been doing with himself since their last meeting. He began to tell her; and was still talkative when the maid brought their grapefruit. Listening intently, she thought, "You'd hate to admit it. But you rather enjoyed having all those guns to play with".

"And you?" he broke off to inquire. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Oh, the usual. Gardening. A little tennis. I couldn't ride because Black Prince is lame. The mare's at grass, too. And Guy took the two government horses with him. You kept the promise I made for you?"

Her eyes were direct. He answered instantaneously. "We both did".

"I was sure you would."

Her eyes clouded again. One hand crumbled the bread by her plate. Then, quickly, she changed the subject, pointing to a pair of butterflies on the trellis.

"Aren't they beautiful?" she said. "Do you know what they're called?"

"Red admirals. I used to collect butterflies when I was at prep school. And moths. We used to go out at night with treacle and a lamp."

He broke off, fell silent.

"That quotation's still worrying me", he continued. "We got it all wrong. The word isn't storm, it's—— Oh, damn, I shall think of it in a moment."

But it was Camilla who interrupted another scrap of desultory conversation with:

"We are a pair of idiots. This is how it goes. 'Alas, regardless of their doom, The little victims play. No sense have they of ills to come, Nor care beyond today.' And of course Wordsworth didn't write it. Gray did. Darling"—her voice mocked, but her hand sought his under the table—"you look quite distressed. Don't. The quotation's not . . . not appropriate".

And after that—with the maid bringing cheese and butter—they fell silent again, till he in his turn mocked:

"I'm not at all distressed. I was only thinking how I once forgot another quotation. About you, as it happens".

"About me?"

"Yes. And that really is appropriate. Because it's the way I always think of you. Listen."

His tongue tripped—just once—over Coningsby's words. She laughed, as their meaning penetrated:

"You're more of a romantic than I am, Tom. Perhaps that's why I love you so

much. And yet, to look at, you're just a typical soldier".

"Soldiering and romance, in your opinion, being precise opposites."

"Well, aren't they?"

"They used not to be."

"Granted, Sir Knight. But that was when they wore vizors instead of gas masks—and broke lances for their lady-loves. You'd like that sort of thing, I believe, Tom."

"I'd break quite a lot of lances for you, Camilla."

"Idiot."

"Possibly."

"Certainly. But I don't appreciate you any the less for it. I might have been a romantic, too, if I'd been born a hundred years sooner. One of my great-grandparents must have been. He was killed in a duel fighting for the family honour. At least that's what we were told when we were children. They used to do that sort of thing in Louisiana. So silly. And yet, my own father . . ."

She had told him something of her father's story before. Now she told him all of it.

"I'm never quite sure father was right", she said. "What do you think? You're more religious than I am. Has any man the right to take his own life?"

Afraid of hurting her, he hesitated, prevaricated.

"It depends on one's code, I should imagine", he said at last; and flashingly Camilla repeated to herself his mother's, "There must be a code of conduct. You have one. I have one".

Aloud, after a longish pause, she told him:

"Southerners aren't like northerners. Father wouldn't have done it unless he had convinced himself it was the right thing to do".

And after another pause she said, "In a lesser way, we're up against the same problem, Tom. We've done the right thing so far. And we must go on doing it. We mustn't weaken even if . . . even if Guy meant more than he actually said yesterday evening".

"But what did he say? You haven't told me yet."

"Only that he wasn't going to be stampeded into seeing his lawyers. That was my fault, I suppose. I shouldn't have asked him whether that's what he'd been up to town for. Still—he's been home more than a week now. And it's nearly a month since I first tackled him."

She fell silent once more.

"Was that all he said?" asked Rockingham.

“No. He reminded me that we’d been married in a church—and that some old-fashioned people still regarded marriage as a sacrament. That came well from him, I thought! But I didn’t say so. It’s no use making him angry. He’s not exactly an angel at the best of times.

“But I’ve always been able to manage him before”, added Camilla. “And, after all, darling, as long as we’re right with our consciences, he can’t hurt us.”

“Quite”, said the man who loved her. “Quite.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

§ 1

Their waitress brought coffee and a moderate bill. Rockingham paid her while Camilla lit a cigarette.

“Don’t let’s worry”, smiled Camilla. “We’ve got this afternoon, anyway. What shall we do with the rest of it? How about exploring the village? Or”—her eyes were roguish—“do you feel that’s rather too public?”

The momentary attack of pessimism she had caused him vanished.

“A stroll”, he said, filling his pipe, “seems indicated.”

“I wonder”, said she, “if that gate in the wall is locked.”

They went back along the gravelled path between the hedges. The gate in the red wall swung to a touch. In the kitchen garden beyond, a boy was working. A wooden door in the far wall stood open.

“Where does that lead to?” asked Rockingham.

The boy grinned, “Up to the woods by Lovers’ Lane, mister”.

“Let’s go”, laughed Camilla.

“Hadn’t I better fetch my hat first?”

“Oh, bother your hat. You don’t need one.”

Swinging her beret, she went ahead. As he followed her, he felt his blood beating again. Once they were out of sight of the boy between the high hedges, he caught up with her and took her arm.

“Lovers’ Lane”, he laughed. “I expect this is where your honeymoon couples—you were quite right, that hotel would be an ideal place for a honeymoon—come of an evening.”

“I should doubt that”, said Camilla impishly, and the grip on her arm tightened.

Poor Tom! How much he wanted her. How much she wanted him. What a nuisance a code could be. She must stick to hers, though. They mustn’t cheat.

His grip loosened. They walked on. Presently the lane widened, turned, narrowed again, rose. Soon it ended at a stile. They could see the wood now—beech and oak, their leaves just browning. Others’ feet had worn a path to it, across this one green field.

She vaulted the stile like a schoolboy. In the field, he took her arm again. Now the shade of the trees loomed over them. Neither spoke as she trod beechmast and acorns under her scarlet shoes.

The path they had followed seemed to continue. Following it, the tree trunks closed in on them. Poignantly each was aware of the other's nearness—and of the privacy of this place. In another moment they had stopped, and she had turned to him, and his arms were locked about her, and their parted lips met.

The sheer passion of her kisses caught him off his guard. He heard Pan calling to him, calling to both of them; heard her voice, strangely transformed, stammering:

“Tom. Please”.

Released, she stared at him with new eyes.

“That wasn't fair”, she said. “And if we don't play fair, it'll spoil everything. At least, that's the way I see it. Don't you?”

“Yes. I suppose so.”

“Don't be angry with me, Tom. I should hate it if we . . . lost control of ourselves.”

“All right.”

They walked on again—separated. She could still sense the passion in him, and the blind anger he was fighting, which was making him ashamed. “It didn't matter with Len”, she caught herself thinking. “So why should it matter now? It does, though—terribly.”

“Tom”, her hand rested lightly on his forearm, “it isn't that I don't love you enough. It's that I love you too much. Try to understand, please. You would feel badly about it, too . . . afterwards.”

He fought with himself—and with Pan—a while longer. Then she saw his smile break and his hand covered hers.

“You're quite right”, he said. “We should both hate ourselves. Funny, isn't it?”

“Why funny?”

“I don't quite know. I've never set myself up to be a model of all the virtues.”

“Only hypocrites do that.”

As she spoke, the path ended in a tiny amphitheatre of beech trunks, backed by heavy undergrowth.

“It doesn't look as though we can get any forrader”, he said.

“No. But there's a seat.”

They made their way to the seat—a garden bench of weather-greened oak on which many lovers had carved their initials.

“We seem to be in the fashion”, laughed Camilla. “Perhaps you were right about those honeymoon couples after all.”

She made to sit down, thought better of it, asked him for the silk handkerchief at his breast pocket, saying, “Otherwise I shall spoil my dress”.

“Not very comfortable”, she went on, spreading the bandanna and seating herself. “But I don’t feel like going home yet awhile. Let’s be sensible for a bit. Supposing Guy won’t do anything, what do *we* do?”

Still on his feet, he thought that over.

“But he must eventually.”

“Would you—if you were in his position?”

“Definitely.”

“You mean, you would allow yourself to be divorced?”

This time, she could see that she was distressing him. He frowned, parrying:

“The cases aren’t quite parallel. Wethered and I have never seen life from quite the same angle”.

Her riposte was faintly hesitant.

“What you really want to say—only you don’t think you ought to—is that you and he have never regarded women from the same angle.”

“Perhaps.”

He still frowned. She perceived the need for frankness.

“Don’t be so British”, she chaffed; and her next words took him aback.

“Tell me something”, she said. “Was the other woman you were in love with—the American one who taught you to dance so well—married?”

“She had been, but she divorced her husband.”

“That made a great difference?”

“Yes. I suppose so.”

“It wouldn’t have made any to Guy.”

She looked up at him and laughed once more.

“If I had your inhibitions”, she went on, “we’d never get anywhere. As it is we’ve dragged one truth to light. If you were in Guy’s position you mightn’t allow yourself to be divorced because you really do believe in your heart of hearts that marriage is a sacrament.”

Honesty made him interrupt, “I feel it ought to be”.

She in her turn frowned.

“So do I. Now that I’m in love with you”, she admitted; and fell silent, digging at the turf with her right heel.

Mollified, he put a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m glad of that”, he said; then, his voice a little unsteady, “The woman you spoke about just now didn’t. Otherwise——”

“You’d have married her?”

“Yes.”

“And if you had”, Camilla told herself, “you would always have been faithful to her. Because you’re that sort, bless you.”

Aloud she said, “I’m so glad you didn’t, darling”.

“So am I.”

§ 2

Half an hour later, Camilla glanced at her wristwatch, and said, “I ought to be going, Tom. You’re quite right. We don’t know where we are yet; and, until we do, it’s no use our trying to be too sensible. The only thing we’re quite sure about is that we’ll never be beaten. We are sure about that, aren’t we?”

He was holding her close again, but tenderly, all his passions in abeyance, his mind with the future more than with the present.

“Aren’t we?” she repeated.

“Rather.”

“Then kiss me again.” But that time her kiss was under control; and almost at once she was freeing herself from his arms, rising, patting her skirt tidy, folding and giving him back the bandanna, laughing, “It’s got a hole in it. O Tom, you do want somebody to look after you”.

“There’s Noakes”, he laughed back. “And it doesn’t show.”

He returned the handkerchief to the breast pocket of his gray flannel suit. They set off, chatting gaily. Not until they were out of the wood, and across field and stile between the high blackthorns, did they renew their kisses, did he ask, “When do we meet again, Camilla?”

“I—I don’t quite know.”

Her hesitancy would have been patent even without the tiny stammer. She averted her eyes and flushed, ever so slightly, as she said, “Tom, do you remember the very first talk we ever had? You told me that you’d expected me to be quite different because I was an American. I said it was honest of you to admit it—and that I thought honesty was about the only quality worth having. I still think the same way, Tom. I—I don’t like meeting you like this, without Guy knowing about it”.

And a second later she was asking, “Do you mind if I tell him? It doesn’t seem fair not to”.

“Perhaps”, said Rusty Rockingham—and he did not hesitate, “that would be the best plan.”

§ 3

The lovers kissed once more before they reached the end of Lovers' Lane. Camilla promised to write, "As soon as I've any news, Tom darling. It's a shame you can't write or telephone to me, but I really think you'd better not".

The boy, still at work in the kitchen garden, grinned again as he touched his cap to them. The waitress, meeting them in the white panelled lounge, asked them if they wanted tea, and seemed disappointed when Camilla answered, "I'm afraid we haven't time for it".

The proprietress, emerging from her office and following them out into the porch doorway, hoped that they had enjoyed their luncheon and would come to stay.

"We'll try", said Camilla, "because it's so nice here"; and smiled meaningly at her lover as he opened the door of her car.

"If only we could stay", she went on, lowering her voice as she settled herself in the driving seat. "Perhaps we will, one day. Au revoir, my dearest."

Then she had let clutch home—and was gone.

Rockingham watched the red and black coupé till it rounded the bend in the valley road and disappeared at the corner of the wood. Then—all the romantic in him, and all the boy he had never quite ceased from being, uppermost—he climbed into his own two-seater.

Honest as the day, lovely as the morning, there could be no better woman in all the world—swore his romanticism—than his Camilla.

But after a while these exaggerated emotions subsided, and he began to experience a foreboding. Camilla—however much he might permit himself to dream of her—was not yet his.

Foreboding grew on him as he circled Aldershot. The very sky—clear all day but now clouding at the approach of sunset—seemed a threat to happiness. He could no longer avoid the knowledge that he had played the truant. Just as he drove up to brigade office, indeed, his imagination painted the most absurd picture of truancy having been discovered, of Wethered asking Headworth, "Where's Rockingham this afternoon?"

The only message Headworth had left for him, however, concerned "the religious education of Trumpeter Lucas, E.", whose father, a disciple of Bradlaugh, had written a four-page letter to the "General Commanding His Majesty's Artillery at Aldershot", duly "passed to you for action", via Wethered, from the artillery brigadier.

"Patterson thought you'd better deal with this yourself", Headworth had

scribbled on a memo; and, just as Rockingham was deciphering the fourth page, he looked up to see Geoffrey, very dapper in mufti, and Val, who gave him an eager hand.

“Just been showing her round”, said Geoffrey. “She had to run up to Scotland last week, and play pretty with a maiden aunt from whom we have considerable expectations. That’s why I didn’t answer your letter before. We can’t manage this Saturday because mother has commanded us by telegram. You’ve had one as well, I suppose?”

“No. Only a letter to say she’s arriving the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s funny. She said family reunion.”

The two brothers discussed the mystery, finally deciding that their mother’s sense of economy must have stopped at one continental telegram.

Subsequently Val insisted, “It’s no good pretending you’re busy at this time in the evening, Tom. Even I know enough about the army for that excuse not to wash. You’re coming to the club with us in my car—and you’re going to like it”.

§ 4

So once again that day Rusty Rockingham played truant, not returning to his quarter till nearly midnight. For—from the club, where they drank several champagne cocktails—Val and Geoffrey would have it that he accompany them to a “certain road house where we once did a spot of courting”.

During dinner, the engaged pair held hands a good deal. Afterwards, they danced.

“Don’t tell me Tom hasn’t got a girl friend”, said Val, once they had left him at the table.

“You don’t know Tom.”

“I know him better than you do. He’s in love.”

“What on earth makes you say that?”

“My dear, I can feel it. He’s quite different to what he was the other time I met him.”

“Grammar, my pet.”

“Never mind about my grammar. I’m positive I’m right. Just look at him.”

“He doesn’t look any different to me”, said Geoffrey Rockingham.

“I’ve a jolly good mind to ask him.”

“If you dare, I’ll murder you.”

“All right, my angel. Don’t go into a flat spin.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

§ 1

The fraternal decision had been accurate. Wednesday's last post brought her eldest son a letter from Mrs. Rockingham, in which she said, "As you are so much in favour of Geoffrey's marriage, you had better support the bride-to-be at the dinner I am giving in her honour on Saturday. And if you've any sense you'll stay till Monday".

Next morning William wrote to say that he had received a similar order, but that he had a "service do" on and could only "try to look in about half-past ten".

"Frances and the kids are still at the seaside", concluded William. "I find I do not appreciate what are known as bachelor comforts. Thank the lord, they'll be back next week. By the way, have you heard the rumours?"

But none of those rumours were current in the mess at Steepdown; so the question—though he puzzled over it for a few moments—conveyed nothing to Rusty Rockingham's mind, once more at its foreboding about Camilla, from whom came no word.

To distract himself, he had only work. On Friday, therefore, he paraded headquarters and the four batteries for a short route march. But Saturday morning dragged abominably; and by half-past twelve he was in mess, aimlessly perusing the newspapers, all of which had a photograph of the King, kilted at Ballater, and columns about the war in Spain.

These he read with a little more attention. One correspondent reported Madrid on the point of falling; another had gleaned the full story of the relief of the Alcazar at Toledo.

Frank Potter, who lounged in with Ralph Lyttelton towards one o'clock, jubilated, "If Franco does take Madrid, that'll pretty well finish it". Ralph Lyttelton gloomed, "More ruddy fascism". Wilfrid Patterson, joining them at the table, asked, "If you're going to London, Tom, can I cadge a lift?"

The best of chaps, Frank and Ralph and Wilfrid. But somehow they had begun to bore one. Everything—even deputising for Lampson—had begun to bore one. Why the dickens hadn't Camilla written? What the hell was that husband of hers playing at?

By jingo, this suspense had got on one's nerves. One couldn't stand it much longer.

Just as well, therefore, that one was going up to town.

§ 2

Halfway to London, Wilfrid Patterson—who had been talking his usual “shop”—broke off to ask the awkward question:

“What’s happened to that journalist girl you used to go about with, Tom? Mary something or other?”

“Mary Hawkins. Oh, I haven’t seen her for a long time.”

“Nice girl, I thought.”

“She was rather.”

The man whom Patterson admired more than any other drove the next two miles in silence.

“I’d forgotten you and she knew each other”, he continued then.

“Why, you took me to have a drink at her flat.”

“So I did.”

“And we all had dinner together afterwards. Tom”—Patterson hesitated—“perhaps I oughtn’t to say this. But I was rather under the impression that you and she were contemplating marriage. Weren’t you?”

“No.”

The forthright denial drove Patterson in his turn to silence.

“Sorry”, he went on after a pause. “Perhaps I oughtn’t to butt in. But the fact is, I’ve been a bit worried about you lately. You don’t seem yourself somehow or other. So I couldn’t help wondering whether she had anything to do with it.”

“You mean”—for all the awkwardness of this catechism, Rockingham could not restrain a smile—“you thought Mary Hawkins had turned me down and that I was secretly pining for her?”

“Something like that, Tom. Silly of me, wasn’t it?”

“Very.”

Yet not quite so silly as Wilfrid imagined, or one was forced to pretend.

“Better ride him off this line”, decided Rockingham. “He’s too near the truth for comfort.” But before he could speak again a motor horn whose note he seemed to recognise blared furiously behind them; and, as he swung sharply in to his left, a known bonnet leaped abreast and a known saloon tore by, giving them a glimpse of its one occupant.

“Did you see who that was?” said Patterson. “The Hawk. Driving himself, if you please. Wonder what he’s up to without his chauffeur.”

Rockingham—knowing the man’s habits, remembering a saying of his, “I don’t keep a dog and do my own barking, so why should I keep a shover and do my own shoving?”—was also surprised.

The saloon tore on at a good seventy. Other cars swung in to its honking. One minute—and it was out of sight.

“Too fast for my liking”, commented Patterson. “Not safe. He’ll break his neck if he’s not careful.”

Supposing—just supposing—that he did!

The mere fact that one could let one’s imagination consider such a possibility struck Rockingham speechless. He thought, with more than a touch of shame, “But I don’t want that to happen. I should hate it to happen. We can’t afford to lose men like Wethered”. And almost at once his thoughts switched to Camilla—obviously alone.

“Why not ring her up as soon as you get to town?” imagination flashed at him. But with his companion talkative again—thank the lord, the incident of Wethered had set Wilfrid off on a different tack—it dawned on him that Camilla also might be absent from home for the weekend.

And anyway, she’d asked him not to ring her up.

§ 3

Wilfrid’s only sister managed a modest hotel in South Kensington. Rockingham, having pulled up there, was persuaded in for an early cup of tea.

“We’ve had such an excitement this week”, confided Nora Patterson. “One of our waiters and one of our chambermaids had to give evidence in the divorce court . . . Such a nice couple. They gave the same name. So naturally I thought they were married. They took one of our best rooms, too, with a private bath. It was a shock when the solicitor’s man came along to inquire about them. Of course some hotels actually cater for that sort of thing. At least so I’m told. But we never have. I think the law’s all wrong myself. Don’t you, Major Rockingham?”

Rusty Rockingham hedged, “I’m afraid I don’t know very much about the divorce laws”; and, having been enlightened, “I believe ours was what they call an arranged case. The judge only took seven minutes to hear it”, lit a pipe and went.

He left his car at the usual garage, and carried his bag to the little house off Smith Square.

“Where’s that Noakes?” asked Fanny, letting him in. “Has he left the army?”

On being told, “No. He’s still with me, though I didn’t bring him up this time”,

she sniffed, “Well, you don’t need him when you come here.

“Your mother’s no better”, she went on. “So she might just as well not have wasted her money gallivanting about the continent. There’s to be champagne for dinner tonight—and that won’t do her any good either.”

As usual, she insisted on taking his bag. As usual, one of the Baxter prints on the dark wallpaper of the first floor landing hung a little awry. As usual, he stopped to straighten it before he entered the curiosity shop of a drawing room to find his mother in her favourite chair.

As usual, he kissed her on both cheeks.

She confirmed Fanny’s news. The cure had done her no good. The doctor at Aix was a fool. All doctors were fools.

“And what’s your news, Tom?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t any. Geoffrey and Val came over on Tuesday. I had dinner with them.”

“Is she going to have a baby?”

“Really, mother——”

“Well, they seem in a great hurry to be married.”

“Not in all that hurry. The provisional date is the fifteenth of November. Geoffrey thinks he can get leave then. They want to fly to Egypt for their honeymoon.”

“I should have preferred a ship.”

Mrs. Rockingham laughed.

“There’s one comfort”, she went on. “The girl isn’t a pauper. And it’s just as well William and Frances can’t come. I’ve invited that uncle of hers—and his wife. A most poisonous woman. She’s a spiritualist, I believe. Or a freethinker. The only thing in her favour is that she doesn’t approve of divorce any more than he does. Tea?”

“I’ve already had some.”

“Then have some more.”

She rang. Fanny appeared with the tray, scowling, “There was no need to ring. I was getting it ready”.

“Ideas above her station”, commented the Honourable Mabelle Rockingham. “One day, I shall have to sack her.”

“Not you, mother.”

“Serve her right if I did.”

The phrase recalled Wethered. Presently she asked after him and “That charming wife of his. Have you seen anything of them while I’ve been away?” Answering casually, “I haven’t been over to their place for some time”, her eldest

son was aware of perturbation.

But the half-truth sufficed—his mother mounting one of her hobbyhorses almost immediately.

“I found three new Toby mugs in Aix”, she went on. “They’re in that cabinet. And I picked up quite a nice chess table. That hasn’t arrived yet.”

At six she insisted on listening to the wireless news. At twenty past, she remarked, “I’m going to rest now. If Absalom Danvers and that odious wife of his weren’t coming, we might have had some bridge. Geoffrey’s aphrodisiac plays, I believe”; accepted her stick, and hobbled off.

“Bark worse than bite”, mused her eldest. Following her upstairs, however—after a glance at the evening paper which Fanny had brought when she removed the teatray—he could not help feeling a little sorry for Val.

§ 4

Dressing slowly for dinner in this little room which held so many memories, Rusty Rockingham was again haunted by a foreboding. Even if he and Camilla succeeded in conquering Wethered’s opposition, they would have to reckon with his mother’s. And his mother was an ailing woman, grown suddenly old.

He realised how old when—as usual—she called him into her bedroom; grew still more conscious of her ailment as he helped her downstairs.

“I shall have to take a flat before I’ve done”, she grumbled.

“You’re not done yet, mother.”

“No.”

She reached her chair without assistance, thinking shrewdly, “That was unlike him. Sentimental!” His new tail coat also attracted her attention. Was he “after some other woman”? Pity he couldn’t find the right one. Perhaps he had.

The idea pleased her, but she decided not to mention it. Maybe she was letting herself become sentimental. Still—sons were better married. And Tom—for all his steadiness—hadn’t passed the age when a man could make a fool of himself.

“Do men ever pass that age?” mused the cynically experienced Mrs. Rockingham—and touched on the rumour she had gathered from a chance travelling companion on her way home.

“Have you heard anything about the coronation being postponed?” she began; and, listening to the rest of the story, her eldest son remembered William’s letter.

“I can’t believe it”, he said.

“Neither can I.”

Loyally, they dismissed the topic. Fanny brought in the madeira.

“I suppose that young woman of Geoffrey’s will be expecting cocktails”, sniffed Mrs. Rockingham. “Her type lives on them, I believe.”

But with Val—announced almost before she had finished the sentence—actually approaching, she remembered her manners, and managed to say:

“You mustn’t mind my not getting up, my dear. I’m rather a crock these days”.

Val said, “What a shame”.

They shook hands a little stiffly. Rusty Rockingham noticed, with some amusement, that the girl had lived up to her, “Very well, Geoffrey, my pet, I’ll take your advice and leave the varnish off my nails”. His youngest brother, who had followed his fiancée across the room, kissed his mother on both cheeks, and asked:

“Did you break the bank at chemmy?”

“I didn’t do too badly”, admitted Mrs. Rockingham—and her smile broke some of the ice.

Almost immediately Fanny announced, “Sir Absalom and Lady Danvers”; and Rockingham found himself shaking hands with a scraggy woman in her late fifties who appeared to have dressed herself at a remnant sale, and a very tall man with a face like parchment, gold-rimmed spectacles and a massive dome of bald head.

Offered a glass of madeira, Sir Absalom said, “I’m afraid I’m rather a poor drinker. But of course this is an occasion. My dear Val, my dear Geoffrey, permit me to pledge your very good healths”. Val’s Aunt Sapphira—the name seemed incredible but appeared to be the correct one—supported the toast and permitted a refill.

“Your Geoffrey’s a very lucky young man”, she told Mrs. Rockingham. “Dear Val has such a happy disposition. Do you like her engagement ring? Val dear, show your mother-in-law-to-be the engagement ring.”

With a moue of distaste, the girl obeyed; but, as she did so, her green eyes met Mrs. Rockingham’s dark blue; and there was a subdued twinkle in them; and suddenly the elder woman caught herself thinking, “I’d rather have gone on the streets than lived with Sapphira Danvers after my parents died”.

Aloud she said, “Very nice. Are you fond of jewelry?”

“I am rather.”

“Then we must see what can be done about it. I’ll send for mine from the bank tomorrow. Some of the stones are quite good, though they’ll need resetting for anyone of your age. By the way, how old are you?”

“I told you that in my letter, mother.” Geoffrey spoke. “She’ll be twenty-one next month.”

“I didn’t marry until I was twenty-four”, said Mabelle Rockingham. “But then I never was much to look at. Which do you like best, my dear—rubies or diamonds?”

“Diamonds”, admitted Valerie Danvers after a moment’s hesitation.

Mabelle Rockingham turned to her youngest son.

“Those three old bracelets of mine”, she announced casually, “might make her quite a decent necklace.”

Said Geoffrey, equally casual, “You may want to kiss her when you see them, Val. Those old bracelets, as she calls them, are worth quite a packet”.

Green eyes met blue again.

“Need I wait to see them?” asked Val Danvers; and, stooping impulsively, pressed her young lips to Mrs. Rockingham’s cheek.

§ 5

The little scene between Val and his mother—so obviously symbolic of the girl’s acceptance into the family—had a dual effect on Rusty Rockingham. In one way it pleased, in another it depressed him. Taking his first sip of champagne some ten minutes later, he thought, “There’ll be no diamonds for my Camilla”.

And almost immediately Sapphira Danvers—truly, as his mother had said, a poisonous woman—was turning the talk on divorce.

“It’s a good thing you’re back, Mabelle”, she grated across the candlelight. “I hear privately that this new bill is coming before the House in another month or so. If it gets a reading, we shall need a big fighting fund. The public simply must be roused. I’ve already written to the Canon that I’m going to bring the matter up at our next league meeting.”

Her husband said, “I hope you agree with your distinguished mother, Major Rockingham, that divorce has gone quite far enough already. In our class, it certainly has. According to my information nine cases out of ten among people one knows are faked. There is a certain firm of Society solicitors—according to one of my informants—which actually employs, or at any rate recommends, professional correspondents”.

“Of which sex?” asked Geoffrey, his face serious but his foot touching Val’s under the table.

“Females! In our class, unfortunately, the idea that it is the gentlemanly thing for a husband to allow his erring wife to obtain what she is pleased to call her freedom still persists.”

Fanny’s entrance with the saddle, which needed carving, interrupted the

connubial duologue.

“Can you manage it for me, Tom?” asked Mrs. Rockingham; and, because this was the first time he had known her to surrender the privilege, her eldest son, plying a fairly expert knife, was again conscious of how much her ailment had aged her in this one year.

Talk had switched to desultory topics by the time he came away from the sideboard. Valerie, passing him at the doorway when his mother finally left the men alone, winked at him as though to say, “It hasn’t gone off too badly”. Danvers, who had refused even one glass of port (“I’ve already exceeded my ration. I warned you what a poor drinker I was before we started”) demanded “the—er—you know”.

Returning from escort duty Geoffrey whispered, “Did you ever meet such a b. awful couple? I’ve a good mind to tell him a really dirty story just to see the effect. But there’s money to come from that direction, too”.

“You seem to have done pretty well for yourself.”

“So damn well”—Geoffrey flushed—“that I don’t believe I’d ever have proposed to Val if I’d known just how much there was coming. Not that I don’t love her. Only—it’s going to make me feel a positive pauper before I’m very much older. The old dame up in Scotland is rising ninety. Val wants me to chuck the Air Force when she pops off.”

“Will you?”

“I might. If the old dame hangs on long enough. But it’d be a rotten thing to do till we know where we are. Three years from now we might be out of the wood, though I rather doubt it. Don’t you feel, Tom——”

The reappearance of Danvers interrupted Geoffrey’s confidences; but his meaning had been plain enough, and his eldest brother considered it for a moment as they went upstairs.

“Is war so inevitable?” he asked himself—only to dismiss the question for what seemed a more personal one, “How will mother take it when she knows about Camilla and me?”

Imagination played with that issue—over-actively—till the door of the drawing room opened to admit William, who had forgotten to remove his miniature medals.

“We broke up earlier than I thought we should”, began William. “How are you, mother? How are you, Valerie? Does one kiss one’s prospective sister-in-law?”

He proceeded with the kiss. While Val was introducing him to, “Uncle Absalom and Aunt Sapphira”, Geoffrey, winking at his eldest brother, touched left elbow with right hand.

The family sign conveyed a message. William’s eyes, as he took a seat with just

a little too much care, certainly were a shade glassy.

“Have you named the day yet?” he asked Val. “And what would you like for a wedding present?”

The girl dimpled at him.

“How much can you afford?” she retorted.

“Well, it might run to a silver fish-slice.”

“We”—interposed Sapphira Danvers—“are giving them their linen. Monogrammed, I need hardly say—though the cypher is so awkward. After all, V.R. does stand for Victoria Regina and G.R. for Georgius Rex.”

A stunned silence greeted this pronouncement; then William beamed, “But you’re not going to have a crown as well, are you?” and Absalom Danvers said, “No, of course not. But we rather thought of the Air Force crest”.

At which juncture—fortunately for Val, whose sense of humour had almost conquered her epiglottis—Fanny carried in the grog tray and announced:

“Your car is here, Sir Absalom”.

“Early to bed, early to rise”, then quoted Sir Absalom Danvers. “Our young people, I believe, wish to trip the light fantastic.”

“Don’t be too late, Val darling”, grated his Sapphira—and so went.

§ 6

Geoffrey and Val stayed till a quarter to eleven.

“That girl”, pronounced Mrs. Rockingham, as her youngest son’s car backfired off into Smith Square, “has breeding. But if she must dye her hair, why doesn’t she dye it red? It would go better with her eyes that way.”

“I approve of her eyes”, declared William.

“You”, declared Mrs. Rockingham, “have had too much to drink.”

“Not too much”, laughed William. “Just enough. I nearly put my foot in it, though.”

“Nearly! Tom, give me a brandy and soda.”

“But your rheumatism, mother?”

“It isn’t rheumatism. It’s arthritis. It can’t be cured—and I endure it better on alcohol. William had better have beer—if that idiot Fanny has brought up any. William—give me a cigarette.”

She lit up, and drank. Her eldest son uncapped the one bottle of beer.

“The sooner those two are married the better”, she went on. “Otherwise I shall murder that aunt of hers. Why don’t you follow the good example, Tom? The

trouble with you is that you're too pernickety."

It seemed the moment to ride her off. Tom looked at William.

"Just before dinner", he said, "mother appeared to be definitely against this marriage. Now she's all for it. How do you make that out?"

"I gave up trying to make mother out when I was a mid-shipman", said William, laying a hand on Mrs. Rockingham's shoulder. "But she's the best we're likely to have, so I suppose we've got to put up with her. I heard rather a good story tonight, by the way."

He told the story at some length, and capped it with another. Their mother pretended to be shocked.

"It's high time your Frances came back", she continued. "I shall write and tell her so. One of you two'll have to help me off with this dress. It'd better be Tom. He's quite sober."

"Then I'll up anchor", said William; but at the doorway he turned to add: "Talking of wives being away, you really ought to keep an eye on your brigadier, Tom. I ran into him at the restaurant where we had our do. And if he was with a maiden aunt—well, I don't know what one looks like. Scandalous—the way you fellows in the junior service behave."

Half-undressed, Mrs. Rockingham asked casually of her eldest son, who had not answered William's last remark and appeared strangely short of further conversation, "Do you happen to know when Wethered's Camilla will be back from her holiday?"

He hesitated a second before replying, "I'm afraid I don't. I didn't even know she'd gone on one".

"Perhaps she hasn't. I wouldn't put anything past that husband of hers."

"Really, mother——"

"Or William either—when he's in that condition. Men are pretty much alike. Not that it's as important as people try to make out. For a man, I mean. It's different for a woman."

And Mabelle Rockingham, having explained her views on the comparative freedom of the sexes with considerable exactitude, dismissed her eldest to his own room—but not to sleep.

§ 7

There was little sleep that night for Rusty Rockingham; and at church next morning—he did his best to avoid going there but his mother insisted—religion

seemed to have gone out of him.

All the certainties except one—that he and Camilla needed each other—seemed to have gone out of him.

William's parting information, however, had presented him with a hope.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

§ 1

Rockingham's hope elaborated itself during the rest of that Sunday he spent in London. Thinking over—in so far as his passion-vexed mind was capable of thought—what William had told him, Nora Patterson's story of the couple at the Kensington hotel, and Sir Absalom's, "Nine cases out of ten among people one knows are faked", he very nearly succeeded in assuring himself that these three pieces of information were connected.

"Wethered", insisted his imagination, "may have cut the Gordian knot."

Common sense was faintly dubious about this; but his knowledge of the man's character backed imagination. Wethered, notoriously an amoralist, had always been for quick action. Faced with an impossible situation, he might have chosen the easiest way out.

Taking a long afternoon walk through deserted streets—never had one experienced so fierce a need for physical exercise as during these last weeks—Camilla's lover threw common sense to the winds. In his mind the thing he wanted to happen had actually happened—and she was already his.

So overwhelming, indeed, proved this imaginative certainty that it brought on a mood of complete confidence. And while this mood lasted, his mind would not even consider the complications which must arise after Camilla had divorced her husband.

True—he and Wethered would still be in the same regiment. But the Royal Regiment was quite large enough to hold the two of them.

Only while he was driving back to Steepdown, with the car open and the night air as warm as midsummer's, did the realities reassert themselves and foreboding return.

§ 2

Driver Noakes, bringing his master's tea on the Monday morning, found him wide awake.

"Lovely morning again, sir", said Noakes. "Making up to us for the summer we had. I've been over to the mess for letters, sir. The post isn't in yet."

But that morning's post held no letter from Camilla, and neither did the afternoon's.

“Brought Rosalie home in a regular muck sweat, he did”, commented Gilchrist to Noakes over a beer that evening. “No need for me to exercise either of ’em. When’s the old man due back?”

“Lampson? Sugared if I know. What’d you say was the matter with old Rusty? It can’t be a woman. He don’t hold with ’em.”

“Could he be hard up?”

“Not he. Careful sort of chap with his money. ’Sides, his mother must have plenty.”

Meanwhile Patterson also had sought a confidant—in Ralph Lyttelton, who said, “Now you come to mention it, I have noticed a difference in him. He keeps himself much more to himself than he used to”.

And on the Tuesday evening—to the complete amazement of Potter and Riley—old Rusty lost his temper over a game of bridge.

“Lucky it wasn’t a guest night”, commented Frank Potter as they drank their final whiskies. “Never known him blow up like that before. Could he have been tight, do you think?”

“Dunno. But he nearly got my rag out. If he hadn’t said he was sorry——”

“That wasn’t like him either. I say”—Potter winked—“I’ve just been reading a book that says men have a change of life the same as women do. That might explain it.”

“Don’t be such an ass. Rusty’s the same age as we are. I expect it’s just a touch of liver.”

“Or perhaps acting colonel has gone to his head.”

They discussed the matter till bedtime, deciding finally that the outburst must have been due to the slowness of promotion.

“Rags my nerves, too, sometimes”, said Riley. “The army’s a bit of a blind alley these days. Even if a chap has the whole alphabet after his name like Hawk Wethered, he can’t really get anywhere. There are too many old boys at the top. I’d clear some of ’em out if I had my way.”

“They’re all right for training”, countered Potter. “And so are we. By the way, are you coming to the sergeants’ dance tomorrow?”

“Not if I can jolly well get out of it.”

But both of them went; and, walking back to their quarters afterwards, they again fell into talk about “old Rusty”, who “really ought to have looked in, even if only for half an hour. W. W. always does”.

For it was not until the Thursday that a letter from Camilla restored something of normalcy to Rockingham’s behaviour. Because at least she still loved him, and was

still resolute in their purpose.

Though otherwise her news seemed disquieting enough.

§ 3

Camilla's lover read, memorised and burned her letter before he went to breakfast. Commonsensibly considered, it made the hope conceived in London look rather absurd.

“When it came to the point”, she had written, “I decided not to tell Guy about our meeting. I wasn't afraid to. But it did not seem advisable. He was in a queer mood when I got home. If I didn't know him so well, I should say he was sulking. He left me alone for the whole weekend. And he went up to town again yesterday. According to him—to see somebody at the War Office.”

The postscript read:

“There's one thing I forgot to tell you. I've had a letter from your mother. She wants me to go up and play bridge with her. I'm writing to say I'd love to when I'm a little less busy. But of course I shan't”.

Yes. A disquieting letter. Reconsidering it nevertheless—during a lazy morning in brigade office—one could not bring oneself to feel all hope excluded. Wethered couldn't go on lying doggo indefinitely. He must take some action. And whatever action he took would be a relief.

Just after 'stables' Geoffrey rolled up, and insisted on being given lunch, at the end of which—following a spate of talk about “This damn fellow, Lloyd George. He's been raking up a lot more mud about the war. Says the generals never told him what was going on. Likely, I don't think”—he confided:

“Well, I'm all right for leave. So we've fixed the wedding day for the fourteenth—not the fifteenth, that's a Sunday—of November. Those adjectival Danverses insist on my being married in my busby. So you'd better get your red and blue cleaned”.

And next morning, Friday, brought word from his mother. Could Tom come up for an hour or two, and help her with the list of invitations?

Another surrender of maternal privilege, in which also—any occupation being

preferable to none while suspense lasted—one might find relief.

§ 4

That weekend, the last in September, the weather continued unseasonable, so that it was good to be out of uniform, waistcoatless in a flannel suit. But the bricabrac-cluttered room in which his mother kept him for four mortal hours while they went through her address book stifled Rusty Rockingham—and he came near to losing his temper at her meticulousness.

Did it really matter which distant members of her family and his father's were "blackmailed into sending wedding presents"? And at her final, "That only leaves the W.s. We must invite the Wellingboroughs, the Wileys, and the Winthrops, but I can't quite make up my mind about the Wethereds", he very nearly gave himself away.

"I'd leave Wethered out", he said brusquely—then, controlling himself, "unless you're really keen on having him."

"I like her so much", said Mabelle Rockingham, but did not press the point.

She, too, sensed something amiss with her eldest son; and when, next morning, he again jibbed at accompanying her to church, she remonstrated, "Even if you don't consider you've any duty to your religion, Tom, you might consider your duty to me".

He gave way—she had had a bad night and her hip was obviously painful. Throughout the service, however, he felt the complete hypocrite; and a long sermon by a provincial bishop, subsequently headlined as "The Sanctity of Marriage", did nothing to restore equanimity.

They lunched alone. He went for a walk afterwards; but common sense walked all the streets with him. Returning towards five o'clock, he found Frances, William and their two children at tea. Lucky devils—William and Geoffrey. But his own luck was out.

His mother had an appointment—"Bridge and supper with Connie Pillsbury—she asked me to be there by six if I could manage it". William said, "Come back with us, old chap. There's plenty of cold beef and pickles". He refused, with another touch of brusquerie; and went to his club, where he failed to find a rubber after dinner.

Back at Steepdown he read a thriller till nearly three o'clock in the morning, and woke with a mouth dry from oversmoking to learn that there were no letters for him. Lampson, returning to duty that day, asked if the C.R.A. had been over.

“Funny”, said Lampson, on receiving negative information, “he usually drifts along once a week.”

He mentioned the confidential reports again, and decided that a new subaltern, who had joined on the Friday, should be posted to the Turban battery.

Faunthorpe, the bespectacled subaltern in question, recognised his battery commander for the “rather decent major” with whom he had once sat at table in the mess at Woolwich. But he thought it better not to mention this to anyone except Masters, who commented:

“Are you quite sure? It isn’t like him. Except for our C.R.A., he’s supposed to have the best memory for names and faces in the regiment”.

“I’m definitely sure”, said Faunthorpe—and Belinda Blue-Eyes, though he held his tongue about them, began to indulge in speculations similar to those of Noakes, Gilchrist, Potter, Lyttelton and Patterson.

Nothing of this, however, penetrated to Rockingham’s sensitivities, momentarily obsessed with the single question, “How soon shall I hear from Camilla?”

He heard on Tuesday by the second post. Guy had been up to town again. She had tried to tackle him. He’d “stalled her off”. His “lawyer bloke” was still on his holidays; wouldn’t be back for another week.

“I don’t believe him”, she wrote. “But of course I can’t say so. Darling, we mustn’t go on like this much longer. If he doesn’t make up his mind soon, we shall have to meet and talk over what we’re going to do. I would like to write you every day, but it seems so silly.”

And next day she wrote:

“He’ll be away all day tomorrow, Thursday, shooting pheasants. I think I shall go to that picture house. You remember. We met there by accident last time. The round begins at four o’clock”.

One felt a fool, and rather a guilty fool, as one peered about the darkness of the little cinema theatre. It was a thrill to discover her—but one could hardly say anything for fear of being overheard.

It seemed inadvisable, moreover—to each of them—that they should be seen leaving the picture house together.

“Let me go first”, she whispered; and, with a final hand pressure, “How about Wednesday week? I’m lunching with some people quite near that hotel. I could

come on afterwards. Half-past three shall we say?"

"All right, Camilla." And she was gone.

Sitting there for another ten minutes, Rockingham was again conscious of guilt. These clandestine meetings weren't playing the game. But then Wethered wasn't playing the game either. Curse the man. It would be so easy to let oneself hate him. But one mustn't do that.

"He's within his rights", Rockingham's conscience tried to whisper as he drove himself to Steepdown. "After all, she's his wife."

Passion stilled the whisper. Remembering William's, "If he was with a maiden aunt I don't know what one looks like", Camilla's lover fell to wondering whether her husband might not have forfeited those rights.

Surely, though, even Wethered wouldn't do that?

Thought diffused. Back in barracks, only the immediate memories obsessed him. How dear she was, his Camilla. Silent, they had still been the same companions. Just to be with her, near her, touching her, sufficed the main need.

§ 5

The unseasonable weather had broken. Friday dawned to chill rain. That day, the Turban battery soaped and oiled one section of its solid-tyred guns.

"We'll be having the new carriages before long", said Wilfrid Patterson. "And scrapping the dragons. A chap I met at Ordnance told me the tractors were almost ready for issue."

Lucky Wilfrid—his mind still on his profession. Poor Wilfrid—always so worried before he was shown his confidential report.

"It's more important than ever this year", he said as they rode out together on the Saturday afternoon. "If W.W. doesn't say I'm qualified for promotion to field officer, they may retire me."

"He will", consoled Rockingham.

"Let's hope so. I don't know what I'd do with myself as a civilian."

And on the Sunday, Wilfrid brought up the subject again, saying:

"It's pretty important for you, too. I've just been looking up King's Regs.; and, as you've been a major for four years, he's obliged to put in whether he thinks you're fit for promotion to lieutenant-colonel. Not that there's much doubt about that. Lord, I wish tomorrow was over. Don't you, old chap? We shall know where we are then".

The question of his own confidential, however, hardly troubled Rockingham at

all. Not until half-past three on the Monday afternoon, just before Lampson showed him that document in the meticulous handwriting, did he catch himself thinking, "Pretty grim, if he hasn't recommended me for promotion".

But of course Wily Wilbraham had.

"Though I suppose you'll have to wait at least eighteen months for it", he said. "And even then you'll be lucky. Talking of that, Rockingham——"

Lampson hesitated, stroking his neat gray moustache.

"Talking of that", he repeated, his eyes veiled and his lips unsmiling, "I do hope there's no truth in the hint the C.R.A. dropped about you when he asked me how soon I'd be sending my reports in."

"Hint, sir?" Rockingham's heart missed one distinct beat.

Again Lampson hesitated.

"Perhaps that's putting it a little too strongly", he went on, just baring his teeth in the smile which went so well with his nickname. "All the C.R.A. actually said was that he'd heard you might be leaving the army. So naturally, you and he being on such good terms, I couldn't help wondering——"

And there he broke off, stroking his moustache again, while Rockingham in his turn hesitated, and his heart seemed to miss two more beats.

"It's the first *I've* heard of it, sir", he said finally; and stooped over the table to put his initials on the heavy white paper.

Lampson said, "I'm sure the C.R.A. will be glad to know that. He seems as pleased with your work as I am. If Patterson's anywhere about, send him along, will you?"

A quarter of an hour later Patterson returned to the battery office.

"Everything O.K.", he jubilated.

And perhaps it might be—for him.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

§ 1

Once again, very late on that same Monday afternoon, the commander of the Turban battery brought his mare back to officers' stables in a lather which did no credit to his horsemanship. And that night he could not trust himself at the bridge table.

For the "hint" Wethered had dropped to Lampson was only capable of one interpretation. No getting round that!

He tried to get round it till nearly midnight. Lampson—he attempted to tell himself—might have misunderstood Wethered. Wethered—he sought to assure himself—might be bluffing.

But why should any man—least of all Wethered—start bluffing when he held "every card in the pack"?

"Got you by the short hairs", said the soldier in Rockingham. "Have to leave the army if he says so." And on that it was in him to hate the man . . . Till morning, bringing another letter from Camilla ("Don't forget Wednesday, darling"), brought a cold new calmness, an icy determination to take her away from Wethered, whatever the cost.

"Worth any cost", said that icy determination; and all that day, the sixth of October, his mind rejected any other thought, any other purpose. Let the man do his damndest. He could never keep them apart.

§ 2

That night, Tuesday, happened to be a full guest night, with several civilians present. One of these, a man in his middle sixties invited by Lyttelton, mentioned a new demand by Germany for the return of her colonies.

"We'll never give 'em back to the Nazis", said Lyttelton.

"We may have to."

"Why?" asked Potter.

"Because we're not strong enough to resist blackmail. Even our socialists have begun to realise that. I see by this morning's papers that they've decided to back rearmament."

"As something of a socialist myself——" began Ralph Lyttelton; and, over the

port, talk turned on politics.

But the word “blackmail” lingered in Rockingham’s mind.

He did take a hand at bridge that night; and sat late afterwards, drinking a second whiskey and soda, and thinking while he drank it, “If Wethered imagines he can blackmail me with the threat of making me leave the army, the sooner he learns the truth the better”.

For the truth—his determination continued to inform him—was indubitable. If one had to give up one’s career in order to marry Camilla—one’s career could go to hell.

§ 3

Camilla’s lover woke in the same mood. The mere fact that he had arrived at an unshakable conclusion seemed to restore all his old equanimity.

His battery, at individual training, needed less than an hour’s supervision. By a quarter past eleven he had coped with Calvert’s office work. There were no defaulters. Just before midday he strolled over to brigade office. Lampson had gone into Aldershot. Headworth, casually informed, “I shan’t be here this afternoon”, said, “Neither shall I. W.W. seems to have given up chasing the clock’s tail since he had that go of pneumonia. The mellowing process appears to have set in. I don’t believe he’s as ambitious as he used to be”.

And that word “ambitious”, also, lingered in Rockingham’s mind while he changed into mufti, while he took early lunch.

Two o’clock found him on the road with his two-seater open. But by two-fifteen he was competing with the hood sticks; and ten minutes later with a screenwiper which Noakes had forgotten to grease. The wiper functioning again, he drove cautiously through a blinding rainstorm—only to arrive at the rendezvous a good twenty minutes before time.

The proprietress of the hotel recognised him at once. This made him feel a little awkward—as did the stray glances of an obvious army couple seated in two big chairs before the fire in the white panelled lounge.

Having asked the proprietress if he could have a drink, only to be told that it was “after hours”, he picked up a day-old paper and retired to the window seat. Soon, the man in front of the fire said to his wife, “All right. I’ll run upstairs and get your mack for you”.

It was still raining, though not so heavily, as Rockingham watched the two cloaked figures pass out of sight down the road. “Lucky they’ve gone”, he thought.

“We shouldn’t have been able to talk otherwise.” And, almost at once, he saw the bonnet of Camilla’s car.

She was out of it before he reached the porch doorway.

“So you were early too”, she smiled, giving him both her hands. “How lucky. I can’t stay very long. Because the padre wants to see me about a jumble sale he’s getting up. And the only time he could manage was half-past five.”

“The padre? Oh, you mean Beresford.”

“Yes. We’re the most tremendous friends these days. Funny, isn’t it?”

“Why?”

Camilla burked the question with another smile. They entered the lounge and took the two vacated chairs. The same waitress who had served their lunch approached.

“Tea?” asked Rockingham.

“I suppose so.”

The order given, Camilla, who was in tweeds, pulled off her gauntlets.

“Well”, she asked with an assumption of casualness, “have you any news?”

For a second he debated with himself whether or no to tell her of his interview with Lampson. On the whole it seemed better that he should.

She heard him out, her forehead wrinkling but her eyes steady.

Tea came and she poured it out.

“I’ve a little news too”, she said then. “Guy’s seeing his lawyer this afternoon. I don’t feel that we need take your colonel’s talk too seriously.”

“What makes you feel that?”

“Something Guy said last night.”

For a second she debated with herself whether or no to tell him more.

“As you can imagine”, she went on after a pause, “our recent conversations haven’t been too easy. I’ve read a book most nights; and Guy has amused himself with cataloguing his . . . other trophies. But after he’d told me he was seeing his lawyer, he asked me if I was still definite about wanting a divorce, and when I said that I was, he cocked his head on one side, and laughed, ‘What my lady wants she mustee have’. Apparently that’s a quotation. He said it served him right, too. For having married a woman so much younger than himself. So it looks as though we were going to be all right, Tom.”

And after that they fell to planning the future till it was time for her to go.

All the romantic in him, and all the boy he had never quite ceased from being, were again uppermost in Rockingham as he sped back to Steepdown from that second meeting at the hotel.

Next day, and the day after, passed in dreams. Saturday brought a letter. Guy's lawyer was taking "counsel's opinion—whatever that means. He says I must have patience for another few days. So must you, darling".

And patience—with his icy determination still lasting—seemed easy enough.

That night—almost for the first time since his dog had been killed—he slept the clock round; and Sunday's papers carried the appearance of good news.

"These Arabs are calling their strike off", announced Frank Potter. "So perhaps the feet'll be able to send their reservists home. Damn bad luck on them having to be called up. Let's hope they don't find their jobs pinched when they reapply for 'em."

"Not much hope of that", gloomed Wilfrid Patterson. "Trust a civilian to do a soldier down if he sees a chance of it. And what price the wives of the chaps who have to stay on in Palestine? Their separation allowances are a bloody disgrace. Do you realise they don't even draw rations?"

"What I always say", proclaimed Lyttelton, looking at his subaltern, Travers, who had not yet summoned up enough courage to ask Lampson for permission to marry, "is that soldiering should be a profession for bachelors only."

And at that, just for a second, it seemed to Rockingham as though he saw a dead face grin toothily by candlelight. But his vision of Cowley did not endure.

"You're talking nonsense, Ralph", he said. "Your father was a soldier. So was mine. I should say that the army is more of a hereditary profession than most are. And a good thing, too."

"Mystery solved", remarked Potter after he had left them. "Our Rusty's in love—and apparently the coy innamorata has at last decided that she will be more than a sister to him. Hark—he whistles."

For that Sunday after breakfast the commander of the Turban battery went whistling to his quarter; and on the Monday, dining with Geoffrey's R.A.F. mess at Farnborough, he no longer envied either Geoffrey his Val or William his Frances.

Patience.

Just a little more patience.

One had merely to wait—and Wethered's lawyer would settle the whole business.

A decent chap, Wethered. A real sahib. Funny, that one should have misjudged him.

§ 5

Had one misjudged Wethered, though—with Monday gone—and Tuesday gone—and Wednesday gone—and only one more letter from Camilla to dispel foreboding?

“What’s the man playing at?” thought Rockingham, as he galloped the heather that Thursday, the fifteenth of October.

And on Friday, the sixteenth, came the chit.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

§ 1

A motor cyclist delivered that chit to Cyril Headworth, who tore the envelope casually, thinking, "Only more bump from Bryce-Atkinson".

But the peremptory words scribbled on the buff form made him stare.

Wily Wilbraham, shown the message on his return from an inspection of the married lines—a job he detested—stroked his gray moustache and blinked.

"Done anything about it yet?" he asked.

"No, sir. Shall I pass it on?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Hallo, there he is. Rogers!"

"Sir." The brigade clerk came to the door of the office.

"Just run along after Major Rockingham, and tell him I'd like to see him for a moment."

"Very good, sir."

His colonel's summons through Rogers had been couched in the usual verbiage—yet every single one of Rockingham's forebodings returned to him as he saluted, as he listened to that opening, "This has just come from the C.R.A."

Then Lampson handed over the form; and, reading, he had hard work not to betray emotion.

For "this" was an order, not to be disobeyed.

"He seems in a great hurry. Any idea what he wants to see you about?" asked Lampson, concealing curiosity with a fair assumption of nonchalance.

"No, sir."

"It's a peculiar kind of order."

"In what way, sir?"

"The mufti", smiled Lampson.

And of course he was right. Reporting to headquarters, one naturally reported in uniform. So what the hell was Wethered playing at?

Be damned if one knew.

His colonel not pursuing the mystery, the commander of the Turban battery stuffed the chit into his tunic pocket, saluted again, and went to his own office.

His defaulters were still to deal with. His sergeant-major marched in the pair of them. One, he let off with a caution. From the other, he stopped a day's pay.

"About Lance-Sergeant Godden's promotion, sir?" asked Sergeant-Major

Cartwright, with the two defaulters rejoicing outside. "I have the form here if you'd care to sign it."

"Godden?" Rockingham's thoughts had returned to the form in his own pocket. "Oh, yes. We arranged to put him up, didn't we?"

And a moment later he had signed.

The incidents were mere routine. Once out of the shed and skirting the gunpark, he forgot all about them. Why the hades had Wethered ordered him to report in mufti? The answer seemed obvious. They were to discuss . . . Camilla. For two pins, one wouldn't go.

Go, however—the order had come officially through Bryce-Atkinson—one must.

While he changed out of uniform, Rockingham's forebodings grew: and his usual gin and It did nothing to ally them. Lunch was an ordeal. He escaped from mess as soon as possible; meditated a telephone message to Camilla, and thought better of it.

"No use worrying her till we know where we are", he decided, and went for his car.

Noakes—the old reprobate—was on special pass: "To see my fiancy, sir. She's spending the day with an aunt of hers that lives in Farnham". The car needed a clean. The selfstarter jammed at the first push of the button. He rocked in vain; had to summon a fitter.

Bad omens! Driving fast for Aldershot, he felt determination melting. But, as he braked outside divisional headquarters, it froze again.

"Showdown", he thought. "Just as well. No good mucking about any longer."

But in the office he found only Bryce-Atkinson, who imparted:

"No. His lordship isn't here—and he won't be coming back. He left a message for you, though. He said he'd be at his house—and would you please go along there".

Once again, what the hell . . .

§ 2

The brigade major, unlike one's colonel, proved unable to restrain his curiosity.

"If you don't know what it's about", he said, after two fruitless questions, "I'm damned if I do. All I was told this morning was to have you here by two forty-five. Then he telephoned—goodness only knows where from—that he wouldn't be turning up this afternoon but that he wanted to see you all the same. By the way, you've heard that he may be going."

“Going? Where to?”

“Don’t ask me.” Bryce-Atkinson smiled. “I’m the three wise monkeys. But that’s the rumour—for what it’s worth. And it doesn’t look as though I’ll be going with him. Otherwise he’d have said something about it. Maybe he wants you on his staff.”

What an idea!

The idea, nevertheless, seemed to satisfy Bryce-Atkinson; and he proceeded to elaborate it.

“Remember me to Lady Wethered if she’s at home”, he said at parting. “Diana and I haven’t seen her for quite a while.”

It was raining when Rockingham climbed back into his car. He had to wait for a funeral, on its way to the Red Church. “Another bad omen”, he thought as he lifted his hat to the hearse.

Time, now, seemed of less importance. He drove slowly—thinking his hardest—out of Aldershot and along the turnpike. Turning left into the Hampshire side road, he remembered consulting the very first letter Camilla had ever written to him.

Snowdrops had been out then. Today, leaves were already browning—and he was a different man.

Rounding a corner, more memories haunted him. Here, two lovers had been strolling arm in arm. “Lucky young devils”, he had thought. But was it so lucky to be in love?

The mere question seemed a disloyalty to Camilla. Furiously he scoured it from his conscious mind. A cowardly question! Cowardly, too, to let one’s thoughts dwell on bad omens. He was the luckiest man alive. She loved him. Let that—and the certainty that nothing Wethered might contrive would keep them separate—suffice.

Confident once more, and telling himself, over and over again, “Whatever the man’s up to, I shall know all about it before I’m an hour older”, he reached the known crossroads, the last mile of mainroad, the last turning, the stone pillars topped by the weather-beaten griffins, the drive between the rhododendrons.

There—as always slightly forbidding—rose the gray stone house.

He braked before the house, and went up the five steps. Merivale answered his ring, and took his hat.

“Sir Guy’s expecting you, sir”, said Merivale. “He’s in the library. This way, please.”

The butler led through the inner door, through the big hall with its grinning trophies. He opened another door. He announced, “Major Rockingham, Sir Guy”.

“Good afternoon, Rockingham”, said Hawk Wethered, standing tall by the

groined fireplace in which logs glowed. “I want you to meet Mr. Robson, my solicitor.”

Mr. Robson, unlike his client, offered a hand, which Rockingham accepted. Merivale was still in the doorway.

“Please tell her ladyship”, went on Hawk Wethered, “that Major Rockingham is here and that I should like her to join us.”

“Very good, Sir Guy”, answered Merivale; and left the three men alone.

§ 3

There followed, for Camilla’s lover, one minute of complete stupor. A trap had been sprung on him—and there was no way out. Meanwhile the contriver of the trap talked easily, almost genially . . .

He had originally intended—said Hawk Wethered—that this meeting should take place at his headquarters. And only between the three of them. On second thoughts, however, it had seemed better that “my wife” should be present. Because hers was the “paramount interest”. Mr. Robson had agreed “with certain reservations”.

“These legal gentlemen”, proclaimed the Hawk, “are very fond of making reservations. We soldiers prefer more direct methods. You agree with that, I hope, Rockingham?”

Rusty Rockingham, fighting to clear his mind, nodded. Hartley Robson, who looked more the typical middle-aged man about town than the typical solicitor, pinched his neat blue tie; smiled; began to say something; and thought better of it.

For Camilla was already at the door.

Her gold head—it seemed to the man who loved her—was held a little higher than usual. Her hazel eyes—he knew instantly—were trying to flash him a message. He managed to interpret the message, “This is none of my doing”.

Then she came straight across to him; held out her hand; and said:

“I didn’t know you were coming till a few minutes ago, Tom. But I’m glad you’re here”.

She looked at her husband next; and he, too, read a message in the eyes she turned on him. “Good staff work. Caught you on the hop”, thought Hawk Wethered—and his peculiar mind rejoiced.

He moved to his desk by the window, in front of which—Rockingham saw—three chairs had been arranged.

“I propose”, he said, “that we all sit down and get to business. You’ll find the

middle chair the more comfortable, my dear Camilla.”

“Your thoughtfulness paralyzes me”, she smiled. “May one ask why you have suddenly called this . . . conference?”

She was still on her feet. Seeing her right hand clench, Rockingham grew conscious of the anger in her, and of the selfcontrol she must be exercising.

“When you telephoned me that you were bringing Mr. Robson over”, she went on, “you might just as easily have told me that you were asking Tom, too.”

Silence ensued. Hartley Robson pinched his tie again.

“That would have been even more thoughtful”, continued Camilla.

“Possibly”, said her husband—and his words were still genial. “But I couldn’t be quite certain that Rockingham would . . . obey his orders. He might have developed . . . scruples. However, as he’s here, we may as well start.”

He seated himself. Perforce the three did likewise.

“Before we begin, Lady Wethered”, put in Robson, “I should like to say that I am here against my personal wishes, and solely at your husband’s particular request. If he had followed my advice——”

“But I didn’t”, snapped the Hawk. “And I don’t intend to. This lady happens to be my wife. This”, he paused for an imperceptible second, “gentleman is one of my subordinate officers. Allow me, therefore, to tell them what I propose doing in my own way.”

Another silence ensued. Visibly, Hawk Wethered controlled his temper. Camilla was still smiling at him. All right. He would meet her on her own ground and with her own weapons. The nerve of her, thinking he of all men would play the chivalrous husband, blot his copybook so that she and her lover could get away with it.

“Think they can get away with murder, these modern women”, he brooded.

Nevertheless, his smile answered hers. A moment ago, he had been all the brigadier. Now, all the actor, he continued, both hands on the edge of the mahogany desk:

“The last thing I propose to do—I need hardly say—is to add to the embarrassments of a situation which is already difficult enough. You, my dear, put that situation very clearly when you told me that you wanted a divorce. May I take it that you, and Rockingham, are still of the same mind?”

He looked from one to the other; waited for their answers.

Rockingham spoke first. “You may”, he said; and Camilla, “Certainly”.

“So far then”, said the Hawk, still smiling, “so good. We know where we are—all of us, including Mr. Robson, whose advice, I may as well tell you both, was against this meeting.”

He paused there, and picked up the dagger he used as a paperknife with his right hand.

“Mr. Robson”, he went on, “had one excellent reason for giving me such advice. He said that as the injured party—an offensive phrase, I’m afraid, but I don’t quite see how we can improve on it—any action *I* might take would be liable to misconstruction should the matter eventually come to court. And Mr. Robson, I’m sorry to tell you both, went even farther than that. He told me that in this country, unlike some others, the mere fact of a husband agreeing with his wife to give her the necessary evidence for a divorce is regarded as collusion. Even, therefore, were I willing to consent to such a procedure, an official known as the King’s Proctor might—if it came to his knowledge—intervene.

“In which circumstance”, he concluded amiably, “none of us would be any better off than we are now.”

§ 4

After those words there followed a third silence—seemingly interminable. The Hawk’s eyes had dropped. He began tapping the desk with his paperknife. Nerves on edge, Rockingham watched him. Presently his blue eyes sought Camilla’s, asking dumbly, “What next?”

Anger was rising in him. So far—he realised—Wethered had only been playing with them. But again the message Camilla flashed him proved easy to interpret; and, obeying her, he said no word.

Finally the taps ceased; and the Hawk’s dark eyes, lifting, darted one glance at his wife.

“Well, Camilla?” he asked.

She answered him bluntly, “The law seems to be on your side. I gather that you mean to take every advantage of it”.

“Not every advantage”—the mouth under the jet-black moustache still framed a semblance of amiability—“only one of them. Can’t you try to be just a little reasonable, my dear? Even if you are so much in love.”

The phrase struck her speechless. He had meant it to; meant to make those lips purse and those pupils contract to pinpoints. If only he could make her lose her temper. Rockingham, too.

Rockingham’s face had flushed. Now it was dead white. How he must be hating all this. Serve him right. Did it, though? Not his fault. The woman’s. Blast these women. All above themselves. Didn’t any of ’em understand that a real man had

only one use for them? Didn't Rockingham understand that? Not he. Too much in love, the fool.

"Like I was", brooded the Hawk, "when I married her. Cuckoo ever to marry." And for a second his thoughts switched to Florrie Fitzgowrie.

Kippers or caviar? Did it really matter? All cats were gray at night. And all of 'em cheated. This one had. Led him up the garden properly. But two could play at that game. Fun—these last weeks. And safe fun. Florrie wouldn't talk—too much to lose. So now for the big joke. Tell 'em where they got off. Both of them. And watch the effect.

He brooded another moment.

Then, "Even if you are so much in love, my dear", repeated Hawk Wethered, "you should realise that it's slightly unreasonable to ask me to let you do the divorcing. Oughtn't the boot to be on the other leg? Mr. Robson thinks so. Can't I persuade you to agree with him?"

Camilla's lips were still stubbornly pursed. He darted a glance at Rockingham.

"And you?" he asked, rasping on before the other could answer him:

"Not that it matters. Even nowadays a husband has some rights—and I mean to stick to mine. Once and for all, let me make myself quite clear. On no account whatsoever will I consent to a collusive divorce case. If Camilla wants what she's pleased to call her freedom she must take it. You will observe that I am accepting her assurance she has not already done so. But she must take it at her own risk. And yours, Rockingham.

"And yours, Rockingham", repeated Hawk Wethered. "Only please don't think I'm threatening you. I shall not ask for . . . damages."

There he ceased, left hand smoothing the silver streak at his forehead, right hand still tapping with the steel paperknife, his eyes now on his wife, now on the man who loved her, each tense, each silent, while Hartley Robson, though he too kept silence, shifted on his seat.

"This is getting too close to connivance", judged Robson; but for an instant Rusty Rockingham's anger blinded judgment.

"That's very liberal of you, Wethered", he sneered—and the tapping stopped.

For another instant rage blinded the Hawk, too. He made a movement to rise.

"If I may be allowed to give one more piece of advice, Sir Guy——" began the solicitor.

"You may not." With a fantastic effort Hawk Wethered restrained himself from rising. "This is my business and I'll settle it in my own fashion."

Dropping the dagger, he gripped the desk with both hands as though they would

wrench its top off. His eyes were black fire. His voice snarled.

“Major Rockingham——” he began; and all that was left of discipline in Camilla’s lover, answered “Sir”; and after that, for many seconds, neither of them could speak because of the blood beating at their foreheads. So nearly had they come to blows.

“But it mustn’t come to blows this time”, thought Hawk Wethered; and presently he heard himself say:

“Never mind the ‘sir’, Rockingham. I’m talking to you as man to man. I’ve made my position clear enough. What’s yours? Are you game to face the music?”

Rockingham did not hesitate. “I am”, he said.

“And you, Camilla?”

She—it seemed to the unhappy solicitor—did hesitate for the merest split of a second. But her words, when they came through her taut lips, were definitive.

“As long as our marriage finishes”, she said; “I don’t care how.”

“The guts of her”, thought the Hawk. And there for the last time he paused; there for the last time he picked up his steel paperknife; there, for the last time, his glance rested with the woman who was still his wife.

“Then we all know where we stand”, he said; and, forcing himself to a final assumption of geniality:

“I have good news for you, my dear Camilla. In a few days, I shall be leaving England for the East. My new appointment—in case such matters still interest you—entails promotion. Naturally, however—things being as they are—a mere major-general cannot hope for your company. I hope, nevertheless, that you will continue to look upon this house as your own . . . until such time as our mutual friend, Rockingham, can provide you with more pleasing quarters. Once he has done so, you have only to advise Mr. Robson, and he will take the usual steps.

“Not very pleasant steps, my dear Camilla”, perorated Hawk Wethered, “for any of us. Least of all for me. But do not take that too much to heart. I shall console myself as best I can for the loss of your charming companionship with the knowledge that I am continuing to serve my country. Unlike your future husband——

“Unlike your future husband”, he repeated, his teeth grating on the words, “who will not, I feel confident, quarrel with my only other condition.”

And there, for the last time, his glance rested with the man who was trying—still vainly perhaps?—to take Camilla from him. And looking on that man he remembered, very curiously, one of the few lines of poetry which had ever appealed to his peculiar mind.

“Let him take her and keep her”, he quoted to himself; and aloud:

“But it’s hardly necessary for me to state that condition. Because I have no doubt that you, Rockingham, realise even better than I do the necessity of retiring from the Royal Regiment before you decide to live in—please excuse the directness of my phraseology—open adultery with your superior officer’s wife.

“Open adultery.” For the last time, the Hawk repeated himself. “An unfortunate law, ours. But I’m afraid you’ll both have to comply with it. And now, if you don’t mind leaving us, Rockingham——”

Already he had pressed a bell on his desk. Already his butler was at the door. Already he had said, “Major Rockingham will not be staying for tea, Merivale”.

So one could only go . . .

§ 5

. . . Before he went, Camilla’s lover extended a polite hand to Hartley Robson, who took it and said, “Goodbye, Major Rockingham”, a little awkwardly.

But there was no awkwardness about Camilla’s handclasp or her smile, “Au revoir, Tom”.

Thank God for her courage, and the beauty of her—and, above all things, for that “au revoir”!

CHAPTER FIFTY

§ 1

The hands of Camilla's little tortoiseshell clock—Guy's gift—pointed to half-past three. Her silver-framed calendar—another of his gifts—told her that it was Wednesday, the twenty-eighth of October, 1936. Twelve whole days since that incredible scene in the library—and her very last in this house.

"It's never any use looking back", she told herself.

Yet today, somehow, one must look back, if only to be clear with oneself, if only to make certain that one was doing the right thing.

That one scene in the library had been followed by another. "Do you really imagine, Guy", she remembered herself flaring, "that I shall stay here another moment after what you've just said?"

Nevertheless, here she was. Why? Because of Mr. Robson? Or because she had been afraid to burn her boats?

The questions confused her. Mr. Robson had certainly pleaded, "Is there any reason to be quite so precipitate, Lady Wethered? I understand that Sir Guy will be leaving within the week. Surely you could wait till then. It would make things so much easier". While Guy, though scorning to plead, had also urged her to stay on, "If only for the sake of appearances".

But had either of them really influenced her decision? Hadn't the real influence, the secret influence, been fear?

"Wasn't I frightened", she asked herself, "from the very moment Guy told me he'd sent Tom that order?"

Possibly. Yet this fear, first in her experience, had not been personal. And it had vanished when Tom answered Guy's first question with those two words, "You may".

What, then, could have been the cause of fear? Why should it have recurred as soon as Tom left the library? Why—now that her boats were actually burning—should she once more be experiencing this emotion which had always been a stranger to her?

Tom knew what she was doing today. Tom had agreed that this was the only thing one could do. He hadn't shown the slightest fear. Yet his advice had been the same as the solicitor's. He had used the identical word, "precipitate": "You were quite right not to be precipitate, darling. There's no point in leaving his house till he

leaves England”.

Surely one could trust Tom? He was so steady. He had kept his temper so well, and under such provocation. He could even admit—here it was in his letter, the very first love letter one had ever received from him—that Guy was perfectly within his rights.

She found herself—with no recollection of having taken it out of her bag—re-reading that letter; and in another moment she found herself kissing it. The fool love was making of her. But what a joy in this folly. And in this new sense of freedom. Guy had been gone three whole days. Another hour, less than an hour, and she would be rid of the trappings with which he had decked her, out of his cage.

All the same—could it be because the trappings had been so fine and the cage so spacious?—memories remained active in her. And through every recent memory walked this same newcomer among her emotions, this strange impersonal fear.

The newcomer was only a wraith. He had no face, and barely the outline of a body. He never spoke a comprehensible word. And yet, one was always waiting to hear his voice.

“You were waiting for that”, suggested memory, “when you agreed to take Mr. Robson’s advice and stay on, when you dined alone with Guy in the evening, when you telephoned to Tom next morning, when you and Tom met in Aldershot, when Guy left you to spend those three days in London, when you met Tom again, when Guy came back to you, when you and he said goodbye to each other.”

“And you’re waiting for that voice now”, said the clock’s tick when memory receded.

But the wraith was still speechless, still without face or body, as Camilla Wethered—wrenching her mind back to its immediate duties—totalled her last book, wrote out her last cheque, and screwed home the cap of her fountain pen.

For the house—Guy had insisted—was to remain staffed and open under Mr. Robson’s supervision until “after Christmas”:

“Just in case you should change your mind, my dear Camilla”.

That was the only other point on which he had insisted, and the very last thing he had said to her.

Change her mind, indeed. What did Guy know of love such as hers for Tom?

Did he really imagine her a coward? Or was it just his vanity that had spoken? Could he still be in love with her—after his own ultra-British fashion?

These questions, also, confused Camilla Wethered, making her slow way—books in hand—downstairs.

§ 2

The Reverend Lionel Beresford, who had led his squadron in more than one charge against the Turks, removed the clerical hat from his prematurely white hair, and gazed thoughtfully at the two weather-beaten griffins outside the Hawk's gate.

"None of my business", he thought. "Probably only my imagination."

All the same . . .

All the same, he went on up the drive, thinking, "If she's taking the next boat out to her husband, she'll tell me—and there'll be no harm done. It's about time I paid my respects anyway".

But what he saw at the foot of the five steps set his imagination going again. Why all that luggage in, and at the back of, the car?

He approached the car; and Graves, touching his cap, vouchsafed immediate information. Her ladyship was just off to London. To stay with friends? Well, no, he—Graves—didn't think her ladyship was going to stay with friends. Not to start with anyway. Some hotel or other. He—Graves—didn't rightly know the name of it.

The butler came to the door while the chauffeur was still talking. Behind him came another of Beresford's parishioners, a newcomer whose name (dash it, why was he so bad at names?) he couldn't remember. The girl in uniform carried yet another piece of luggage. She smiled at him as she handed the small suede-covered suitcase to Graves.

"This is rather awkward", thought the Reverend Lionel Beresford.

He smiled back at Daisy and ascended the steps.

"I was just passing", he began to Merivale, in his unaffected voice. "But, as I hear that Lady Wethered is just off to London, I won't worry her."

Camilla herself interrupted, from the inner doorway, "I thought it was you. I'm not in the least hurry. In fact I was just meditating whether I'd have tea before I started".

"And that's the very first time", thought the clergyman who had begun life as a soldier, "that I've ever heard her tell a palpable untruth."

He protested, "But you're all ready for the road". She insisted, "Even if I am, you must drink a stirrup cup with me"; and gave Merivale the order. He recognised her mood for resolution, but not the prime cause of resolution, not the urging thought, "Your boats aren't really burnt yet. Even these servants don't know you're never coming back".

She led him into the natural history museum of the hall; closed the door, and walked to the fireplace where coals still burned; faced him squarely, her hands

behind her back.

“I should have written to you from London”, she began bluntly. “But as you’re here, it’s easier to say it. I’m breaking with my husband. Are you very shocked?”

“I should have to know”—bluntness met bluntness—“more of the circumstances before I could answer that, Lady Wethered.”

“There is only one circumstance. I’ve fallen in love with someone else.”

This time, he knew, she spoke the exact truth; and, because she spoke so proudly, all his experience of life—one had heard this tale from so many lips!—told him how useless it would be to argue with her.

“I’m sorry”, he said—and momentarily that was all.

She shifted on her feet.

“I was afraid you would be”, she smiled. “But it’s no good trying to dissuade me. My mind’s made up.”

He spoke his thought, “I understand. I won’t preach at you. Tell me something. Is the man you have fallen in love with also married?”

“No.”

Silence hung between them. She broke it with a quiet, “Won’t you sit down, padre?” and moved to her own chair by the fire.

“Thanks”, he said lightly; and, with the faintest touch of sentiment, “We shall miss you in the village.”

It struck her that he was displaying no surprise. Blunt again, she asked, “Have you been expecting this to happen?”

“Yes and no. I’ve often wondered whether you were happy.”

“I’m happy enough now.”

Her eyes glowed. Once again he knew that she had spoken the exact truth. Faintly perturbed, he looked away from her at the grinning beasts’ heads on the walls. A grim man, Wethered; and—if one could trust gossip—no Christian. Maybe she had some excuse for leaving him. But the code was the code.

Feet outside, the rattle of a tray, the creak of the door stopped selfcommunion. The butler put the tray on a low table between them. “Graves had better have his tea, too”, said Camilla.

“Very good, m’lady.” And Merivale went out.

“They’re all staying on”, she explained. “My husband insisted on the house being kept open.”

“But he knows you’re leaving it?”

“Yes.”

She poured his tea. He observed that her hands were absolutely steady—and

that she had not forgotten he liked the milk put in first and two lumps of sugar.

“Plucky woman”, he caught himself thinking. “And the last to lose her head.”

Again, while he drank, silence hung between them. She seemed to be debating with herself.

“My husband knows everything”, she said suddenly. “I told him immediately.” (She would, of course.) “That was two months ago. But he wouldn’t come to any decision.”

“He has now?”

“Yes. He’s promised me a divorce . . . on the condition that he does the divorcing. My . . . the man I’m in love with says we can’t blame him for that. But of course it will mean a scandal. You are shocked, aren’t you, padre?”

He took refuge in humour.

“You can hardly expect me to give you my blessing, Lady Wethered. As a churchman——”

“I know”—she smiled the interruption—“how difficult that makes it for you. But you haven’t been a churchman always. And I’ve never pretended to be a churchwoman, have I?”

He did not answer; but his eyes, almost the same colour as Guy’s under dark lashes, were distressed, and ever so slightly uncertain. She pressed her advantage.

“I’ve never believed”, she went on, “that marriages are made in heaven. Marriage, to me, is just a civil contract.”

“And you claim the right to break that contract?”

“I haven’t broken it—yet.”

Her meaning was completely obvious. Momentarily, he forgot his cloth, and all his sympathies as a man went out to her.

“Must you?” he asked.

She lit herself a cigarette, and passed the case over to him before she answered, “You know your British laws better than I do, padre. What else is there for me to do—if I’m to be happy? In America, the law doesn’t insist on a woman . . . being taken in adultery.”

That time—his eyes showed her—she had shocked him.

“I’m sorry”, she said in her turn; and, relapsing into a rare Americanism, “But that’s all there is to it. At least from my point of view. Remember—you promised not to preach at me.”

He blew the smoke through his ascetic nostrils before he answered:

“It would be sheer presumption on my part if I did. Only——”

He hesitated; and she had to prompt him.

“Only what?”

“Must you be quite so precipitate?”

Once again, that significant word!

Hesitation seemed hers now. Her eyes no longer glowed. But he could perceive no distress in them, nor any hint of uncertainty. And when she spoke he knew that she had only been searching for a phrase.

“I’m not being quite so precipitate as you imagine”, she said slowly. “This is only . . . the first move. There are reasons why . . . we can’t make the next one until _____”

She broke off there—why, he could not imagine.

“For about another fortnight”, she concluded abruptly. “And now”, looking at the watch on her wrist, “I really must be off.”

He tossed his cigarette into the fire, rose and held out his hand.

“Would it be out of order”, he queried, once more taking refuge in humour, “to ask where you’re going?”

Her mood softened. She gave him an address, which he repeated.

“If you happen to be in London during the next week or so——” she began.

“I might be. I could be. If you wanted me.”

If she wanted him! Did this man, like Guy, imagine her a weakling?

But Camilla’s mood was still soft as she answered, “It wouldn’t be fair to let you imagine that there’s the slightest chance of my changing my mind. I’m afraid I’m beyond that, padre”.

And her eyes clouded, just for an instant, when, with a last, “Still, you might just want to see me”, he left her alone.

§ 3

“I wish she’d told me who the fellow is. I do hope he isn’t in the army”, thought the man who had charged with his own squadron, as he walked quickly away down the Hawk’s drive.

But the thought seemed superficial, almost sacrilegious; and, back at his bachelor vicarage, he felt the need for prayer, because this question of divorce had always troubled him. Must husbands and wives suffer life-long unhappiness for the sake of a mere code?

Falling on his knees, he asked that question—once again—of the Godhead who, according to his belief, alone ruled the universe. Once again, however, he was vouchsafed no direct answer.

“It depends”—the Godhead seemed to be saying—“on the individual case.”

A hard saying! The Reverend Lionel Beresford, nevertheless, prayed on—asking that Camilla Wethered’s heart might be changed, if only for the sake of others.

“For the sake of my parish”, he prayed. “They’re so ignorant—most of my parishioners. Some of them might make the individual case an excuse for satisfying the lusts of their own flesh. Save them from this bad example, O Lord. Show Camilla Wethered her duty.”

Yet was that duty so plain? Wasn’t love the highest duty?

Perhaps.

Still troubled, he rose from his knees, and walked to the window. Night had fallen. Light was shining from the recreation hall.

Electric light! That, and the main water, he had brought to his parishioners. But the light of Heaven, the waters of spiritual healing—could any one soul bring those to any other?

“One can only try to show them the way as one sees it for oneself”, he thought.

In the meantime Camilla, after patting the dog Tiny for the last time, went the way of her own vision—to London Town.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

§ 1

“Hypocrisy”, decided Camilla, already halfway to London Town. For obviously her home-leaving had been that.

Rightly, she should have said farewell to all her staff, thanked them for their good services. Instead, she had made nothing but pretences to them, leaving even Angus, even Merivale, under the impression that she would be returning within a week or so.

Yet had the pretence quite served its purpose? The British were so good at keeping stolid faces. Merivale, at least, must have an inkling. And what about this man who was driving her, this tight-lipped Graves?

Why was she being driven by Graves? It would have been better to take her own car. Why had she made any of these pretences? Only because of Guy.

Dominant to the end, her Guy. She could respect him for that—and for many other qualities. If only she could have had children by him. Supposing she should have no child by Tom?

The supposition distressed her. She remembered something she had once asked Len, and Len’s answer, “I guess that’s true. You would never be completely happy unless you had a family to keep you busy, just as I’d never be completely happy if I hadn’t my job to keep me busy”.

Len had kept his job. But Tom . . .

Graves, stamping on his brakes, half-skidding, only just avoiding a head-on collision, killed introspection dead. She leaned forward, wound the partition down.

“You were going too fast”, she said. “Do be more careful.”

“I’m sorry, m’lady. But that chap cut out. Right over on his wrong side, he was.”

“All the same, you were going too fast.”

He slowed to forty-five. She had a glimpse of his face in the driving mirror. He was scowling. He had never really liked her. He was Guy’s man, through and through. When the others were dismissed, he and his wife would stay on as caretakers.

How they—and the village—would gossip.

Let them. She didn’t care. She was going to be happy—so happy—with Tom.

§ 2

Rain began to fall, a chill wind swept across London, as Graves drove off the bypass and through Putney for King's Road. The partition was still down. Before closing it to keep the draught out, Camilla gave him his directions. The face in the mirror registered a trace of surprise.

"Just because I'm not going to the usual hotel?" Camilla asked herself. But, once they arrived, Graves' manners were the perfect chauffeur's.

"I understand you'll let Mr. Merivale know when you wish me to bring you back, m'lady", he said; and saluted her before she followed the hall porter who had taken her hand luggage to the bureau.

Unexpectedly, the receptionist handed her a letter. With a little thrill of excitement she recognised Tom's handwriting. There was another thrill at finding herself alone in this strange room, in telling the two porters where to put her suitcase and her boxes.

Now, she was really free.

The porters went out. She opened her letter.

"Just a little line in case you should feel lonely—and to tell you that I can't very well get out of giving that infernal lecture. However, I'll be with you by half-past eight."

It was only just a quarter to seven. She unpacked one box and put her clothes away, thinking, "It's fun to do things for oneself again. It's lovely of Tom to come up and spend the first evening with me".

Outside, though this was not a main street, people talked, occasional taxis hooted. After so many weeks in the country, that was fun too.

She stripped off her tweeds, took a bath, took just a little more trouble than usual with her appearance, put on a dark dinner dress and a silver coatee, lit a Chesterfield—and considered the room.

For the price it was large, fairly comfortable, and completely British in its lack of all but the necessities. In America, for instance, she would have had a proper light over the dressing table, and recessed cupboards, instead of this mid-Victorian wardrobe and the walnut chest of drawers which matched it, for her clothes.

"I'd have taken a suite", she thought, "if I could have afforded one." Or would she have? Possibly not.

The implication behind that thought brought a flush to her cheeks. She was

conscious of yet another thrill, and of a new impatience. This last, and very resolutely, she quelled.

A maid knocked; entered; asked if she might turn down the bed. Still smoking, Camilla left her to her chores; and went along a rather gloomy landing to the staircase.

“Tom said this place would be quiet”, she remembered.

It certainly was.

§ 3

Two flights brought Camilla back into the heavily carpeted hall. Except for a man who might have been a centenarian, and who wore an actual skull cap with his old-fashioned smoking jacket, it was empty of guests. Tarnished gold letters incised on darkest mahogany over a near door indicated “Reading Room”.

As she made to open this door, a page boy forestalled her, and clicked on what purported to be lights. These showed what purported to be a fire, into which she tossed her cigarette, and a marble-topped table on which lay various London newspapers—surprisingly of the day.

She picked up a paper she scarcely knew by name; and seated herself on a hard chair under the chandelier. Instantly—her attention arrested by a front page story—her mind flashed back to the last letter she had received, only three days ago, from Lettice, “I simply can’t understand what *your* newspapers are up to. Ours aren’t making any secret of it. We’re hearing about her on the radio, too. Didn’t you even know that she was divorcing her husband?”

And that rumour at least—the divorce had been made *nisi* yesterday, at a place called Ipswich—was true.

“But the rest can’t be true”, thought Camilla. “The King can’t be going to marry her. People at home don’t understand this country as I do. They mightn’t even understand why Tom should have to leave the army before he can marry me.”

Did she herself quite understand that? The “Royal Regiment”—as both Guy and Tom occasionally called it—was not like a regiment of infantry. It was so much larger, Tom and Guy might never serve together again. Why, therefore . . .

The entrance of a man and woman—both middle-aged; she, tall, bright-eyed and over-blonded; he, shorter and self-effacing—checked thought. They approached the table, and examined the newspapers.

“It doesn’t seem to be here”, said the man; and the woman, looking at Camilla:

“You must be Lady Wethered. The girl at the desk told me you were coming. I

knew your husband in India”.

She introduced herself—and the man, “Colonel Carruthers. He lives here, too. Aren’t these lights terrible? And they never have a decent fire”.

Then her eyes fell on the paper Camilla had been reading.

“Could we see that when you’ve finished with it?” she asked. “The *Planet* hasn’t even got it in, and the *Comet* only gives it a paragraph. I met her once. She’s terribly fascinating. An American. Don’t you admire American women?”

“I happen to be one”, said Camilla; and Enid Drury-Pottinger, who was not distinguished for her tact, “Really. I should never have thought it. You’re not from Baltimore by any chance?”

“No.”

Feeling a little awkward, Camilla surrendered the paper. Just as she did so, the page boy reappeared.

“There’s a gentleman to see you”, he said. “Shall I bring him in here?”

“Please.”

Tom, in a dark suit and still wearing his overcoat, took her hand. Perforce she introduced him to the other two; and perforce Enid Drury-Pottinger had to gossip.

“I’ve just been telling Lady Wethered that I used to know her husband”, she began. “We were talking about *the* divorce. What do you think, Major Rockingham? *I* hear that the coronation’s certain to be postponed. Won’t that be exciting?”

Meanwhile, fortunately, Colonel Carruthers had consulted his watch.

“The last round begins at a quarter to nine, Enid”, he interrupted. “So if we don’t want to miss the first picture we shall have to be off.”

§ 4

A tiny silence followed the gossipers’ departure. Then, impulsively, the lovers kissed; and looked at each other, and kissed again.

“What on earth was that woman talking about?” asked Rockingham. Told, and shown the paper, he frowned, “The way people yap. I came up by train, with a chap called Murchison. He couldn’t talk of anything else. It’s all rot in my opinion. You think so too, don’t you?”

“Yes. Tom—don’t look so bad tempered. Aren’t you pleased to see me?”

“Rather.” The frown vanished. “What time did you get up?”

“Not till nearly seven. Just as I was leaving, Beresford came to see me. Tom—I told him everything, except your name, of course. Does it matter?”

“Why should it? Was he very horrified?”

“He didn’t exactly approve.”

She told him a little more.

“Where are we dining?” she asked. “Not here, I hope.”

“Is it as bad as all that?”

“No. My room’s quite nice. But if the dining room’s anything like this——”

“I’m sorry.” He looked about him. “I’d forgotten this place was such a mausoleum. I haven’t seen it for the best part of twenty years. Mother used to stay here during the war. Before we gave up our house in the country. Come along. We’ll get a taxi.”

In the hall, they discussed where they should go.

“Somewhere cheap”, she suggested. “Shall I run upstairs and put on a hat?”

“Oh, don’t bother about that, darling.”

“Ought you to call me darling in public?” asked Camilla; and each laughed because—with the porter gone for their taxi—there wasn’t even a cat in the hall.

The porter reappeared. They went down dry steps, across drying pavement.

Tom gave the taximan an address in Soho; and handed her in.

“One of your bachelor haunts, I suppose”, said Camilla.

“Wrong. One of Geoffrey’s. And the food’s jolly good.”

Her hand had crept into his.

“This is rather lovely”, she whispered. “No more subterfuges. I wish you could get away every evening. Tom—I can’t help grudging the army this last fortnight of you.”

“I feel that way, too.” His arm had crept round her shoulders. “But we must wait until Geoffrey’s safely turned off.”

“Of course.”

She fell silent. Tom was quite right. The moment he put in his application to retire, he would have to tell his mother the reason. And his mother had quite enough on her mind with Geoffrey’s wedding. And until Tom had actually put in that application, nothing on earth would make him . . .

Funny—how one knew that. Funny—how much more one knew about this man than one had ever known about Guy.

“Of course”, she repeated. “And I don’t really mind. I was only razzing you, as we call it in America.”

“I mind”, he said. “Like hell.”

The passion in his voice excited her. She snuggled against his arm. He lifted her hand to his lips; held it there. She realised that they had just turned into Hyde Park;

realised nothing else until they were in lighted streets again.

“The way we’re behaving”, she said as he released her.

“Like a couple of fools”, he laughed. “But that’s the way I’m feeling.”

“Me too. Grammar or no grammar. Tom—have you any idea where we’re going to live?”

“Not the slightest.”

“We shall have to think about that.”

“Yes. I suppose so. Where do people live when they have to live in sin?”

“Not at that hotel anyway. In the best British novels they usually go abroad till things have blown over.”

“Do they? I always imagined they took a studio in Chelsea—and didn’t care how hard it blew.”

“Tom—we’re neither of us like that.”

He was still holding one of her hands. She felt the grip of his fingers tighten.

“By God, we’re not”, he said; and he in his turn fell silent—though the grip of his fingers did not loosen—till the taxi stopped; and they alighted from it; and went in, through a double doorway, to be greeted by the smell of smoke and food, and a tubby little restaurateur who escorted them to his only vacant table, at the far end of an inner room.

As they seated themselves side by side on a narrow sofa, a dark woman smoking a cigarette in a long holder waved a hand at them and Tom waved back.

“Who’s that?” asked Camilla.

“Mary Hawkins.”

“Ought I to be jealous?” (He had told her something—though not all—about Mary.)

“Hadn’t we better wrestle with this menu first?”

They chose carefully. The wine waiter counselled claret.

“Can’t I tempt you to break the pledge?” asked Tom.

“No. You’ve tempted me to break quite enough vows already.”

He ordered half a bottle for himself, and orange juice for her.

“Do you think your Mary’s jealous?” whispered Camilla. “She keeps on looking at us. I believe she’s coming over to talk to you. She is. Damn.”

Mary Hawkins, after a word to the man at her table, rose and came across the room. Tom rose too. Camilla sensed that he was feeling a little awkward, as he took the proffered hand, large and capable, with faintly varnished nails.

“How are you, Tom? I haven’t seen you for ages.”

“All right, thanks. And you?”

“Overworked as usual. I’ve only just left the office.”

“I don’t think you know Lady Wethered.”

“I don’t. But the name’s very familiar. Why, of course.” She turned to Camilla. “We had your husband’s photograph in the other day. And a news paragraph. He’s just been sent out to Transjordania.”

Tom asked hastily, “Why have you only just left the office? You don’t usually work so late”.

“Fleet Street’s rather hectic these days”, said Mary. “There’s such a lot we could print, if only we dared. Personally, I think we should do much better to blow the gaff. It’ll all come out in the wash before Christmas anyway. At least that’s what my editor says.”

Camilla spoke a woman’s name. Mary Hawkins nodded; smiled, “Well, cheerio, Tom”; and went back to her table. Once more Tom frowned.

“That silly story”, he said, “seems to be all over the shop.”

“Why silly? They *may* be in love with each other. After all, it does happen. Look at us.”

Her hand rested on his knee. Once more the frown vanished.

“I rather like the look of your Mary”, went on Camilla. “You might have done worse than marry her. Are you sorry you didn’t?”

“Of course I’m not.”

“All right, darling. Don’t be angry with me. I only wanted to be sure.”

Food and drink interrupted banter. As always, Camilla ate heartily. Coffee before them and a cigarette between her lips, she looked towards Mary again, querying, “Does she write gossip?”

“No. What makes you ask that?”

“I was only wondering.”

But he had read her thought.

“You hate that sort of thing, don’t you, Camilla?”

“Yes. I regard newspaper gossip as an intrusion on privacy.”

She took three slow puffs at her cigarette.

“Perhaps we’d better go abroad”, she said abruptly. “But of course there’s your mother. She would miss you a lot. And, somehow or other, I believe she’ll be on our side.”

“She’s always approved of you. She told me once that I ought to find a wife exactly like you. Not”—he frowned once more—“that it really matters a hoot what she thinks. Or anybody else either.”

“It’s lovely to hear you say that.”

Her mood changed. Momentary misgivings vanished.

“Have you decided what you’re going to give Geoffrey for a wedding present?” she asked.

“No. Not yet.”

They discussed that—and Val. Mary Hawkins rose and went. The restaurant was emptying. Tom looked at his watch, called for his bill, which she insisted on examining.

“I don’t call it so cheap”, she said. “When we’re married we shall have to be more economical. I don’t think you realise quite what a pauper I am. Still, I’m no bad cook.”

“Do you really imagine I shall let you do the cooking?”

“Won’t you have to?”

“No.”

Their previous talks had scarcely broached finance. His bill paid, he told her his income.

“I’ve been saving for years”, he admitted. “Once I got my captaincy, I never touched Uncle Marmaduke’s money, except when I wanted something very special, like a new hunting saddle. I’ve been lucky with investments, too. And of course—by jove, I never thought of that—there’ll be my pension.

“Then there’s the shell”, he added, smiling. “That may bring in a few pennies.”

But even while he smiled at her, Camilla felt misgiving return; and, in the taxi back to her hotel, she clung to him more passionately than ever before.

“Tom”, she begged, “swear to me that you’re not sorry, that you never will be sorry.”

“My sweet, why should I be?”

“Because you’re giving up so much.”

The darling. As though she weren’t giving up infinitely more!

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

§ 1

Camilla's hotel when she and her lover reached it, was in darkness, and its front door closed. They had to ring for the night porter; who came at leisure, and eyed them with disapproval. Passion was out of them by then, and Camilla smiling again.

"When do I see you next, Tom?"

"Tomorrow evening?"

"You can't come up every evening."

"Why not?"

Their wills clashed.

"Because it's too tiring for you."

"Friday then?"

"If you insist."

"I do. You must come and help me to buy Geoffrey's wedding present. I think I'll ask Lampson for leave and stay at the club for the weekend."

"Won't your mother find that rather peculiar?"

"Luckily, she has a friend staying with her. I suppose I can't kiss you good night?"

"With that man"—she glanced over her shoulder into the darkness beyond the doorway—"watching us?"

"Let him", smiled Tom Rockingham—but he only lifted his lady's hand to his lips.

§ 2

The door of the hotel was reclosed. The taximan still waited. Having told him, "Waterloo. There's no particular hurry", Rockingham leaned back against the leather; took out and filled his pipe.

He had not smoked all the evening. The taste of this tobacco seemed exquisite. Exquisite, too, was recent recollection. Why must one wait even a night longer for complete happiness? Why hadn't he "fired in his papers" twelve days ago, immediately after that incredible scene in Wethered's library? Had he been afraid to? Not much.

"Not afraid of anything", he brooded. "Don't give a damn for anybody. Know

what I want—and mean to have it. Grand!”

Twelve minutes more found him at the station, with another twenty to wait for his train. One of the refreshment rooms was still open—but refused him alcohol. The newspaper kiosks were shut. He refilled his pipe and paced the main platform for a while, thinking how childish it was that a man of his age couldn't spend a couple of nights in town without asking leave of his colonel.

And this in peace time, with only old croakers like Murchison envisaging the prospect of another war.

All the same, this very platform he was pacing evoked memories of war. Willy nilly, ghosts peopled it. He recollected taking a draft out. Via Southampton and Havre, that must have been. The leave trains always ran to Charing Cross or Victoria.

Queer, how close in time it seemed—that scene more than twenty years old.

The ghosts edged away. He looked up at the clock; began to make his way to his own platform; was clapped on the back; turned to see Ralph Lyttelton.

“I've been to a show”, announced Ralph, who was in evening dress. “Not bad either. Made me laugh anyway. What have you been up to—a spot of poodlefaking?”

The shot was too near the target for comfort. Fortunately the gunner did not wait for his reply.

“I took old Wilfrid to the theatre with me”, he went on. “He's gone to see if he can buy a paper. Got one?” This to Patterson at ten yards range.

“No. And I'm damned if I can remember the name of that horse your pal in the bar told us to put our shirts on for the three-thirty.”

“Well, you'll see it tomorrow. Come along.”

They went along, showing their third-class tickets at the barrier, and found an empty smoker. As he settled himself in his corner, it struck Wilfrid Patterson that this meeting with Tom was quite a coincidence, because they had been talking about him just as they drove up to the station.

“Rusty's bucking up”, he remembered Lyttelton saying; and his own, “I've noticed that, too. He seems quite himself again.”

At that moment, Tom actually seemed a little above himself. One had never seen him look more cheerful. He must have come straight up to town after that lecture.

So it might be a girl!

“Hope he's not too keen on her”, thought Wilfrid Patterson. “If he married, it'd be such a loss to the mess.”

The train jolted off. Lyttelton began to talk about the musical comedy they had

seen.

“You ought to go, Rusty”, he said.

“All right, I will.”

Patterson’s eyes closed. The other two chatted on. He heard Lyttelton ask:

“By the way, have you heard about Travers?”

“No. What’s he been up to?” said Tom.

Anything to do with the brigade interested Patterson. His eyes opened. Lyttelton was just tapping a cigarette on his metal case.

“The young blighter”, he said, “is chucking his hand in.”

“Chucking the service, you mean?”

“Yes.”

The commander of the howitzer battery tapped his pocket for matches, and lit up.

“W.W. refused his consent to the marriage”, he went on. “I told Travers that was what would happen. After all, he hasn’t got his second pip yet. And from what I understand the girl isn’t . . . Anyway, his people aren’t too gone on her.”

“He seems to be”, interposed Tom, with a smile Wilfrid found difficult to interpret—and Ralph laughed:

“You’re right there. Clean off the deep end. But that’s no excuse for resigning his commission. Not at a time like this. When it’s odds on our being at war by next summer. Dirty work, I call it. And I took the liberty of telling him so. Damn it all, we’re short enough of subalterns——”

“Possibly.” Again his friend’s smile puzzled Wilfrid Patterson. “But why do you imagine we’ll be at war by next summer, Ralph? I thought you socialists were all for peace at any price.”

Lyttelton laughed again, and quoted the words of an old song.

“If the managers only thought the same as mother”, he began; then, abruptly serious, “Not at any price, Rusty. When so-called civilised nations start bombing open towns and making the State into a kind of Baal . . . Besides, how are we going to keep out of it even if we want to? Did you read what that bumptious fire-eater Goering said yesterday? He means business just as much as the Kaiser did. And the trouble is we’re not ready for ’em. Nuffield was quite right—whatever the politicians say. God help us if it comes to a war. And it will come to one, as I told young Travers.”

“Well, if it does, he can always rejoin. And anyway, it’s not your pigeon, Ralph. You’re only his B.C., not his father confessor. Personally I don’t agree with you about a war, unless you socialists start one for us—and I don’t see why the lad

shouldn't be happy.”

“Strange words”, thought the attentive Wilfrid, “for Tom.”

§ 3

Lyttelton, also slightly taken aback by those last words, changed war talk to horse talk. The train jolted on. Arrived at Aldershot, the three shared a taxi to Steepdown; had a final drink in Patterson's quarter—and separated for the night.

“Ralph's potty”, decided Camilla's lover as he snuggled between his blankets. For never once, since that scene in the Hawk's library, had its old prescience of another Armageddon haunted his mind.

His mind was closed against every haunt—and every prescience except one. Only a little longer—and Camilla would be all his.

That night, he slept like a top. Woken by Noakes next morning, his eyes went straight to the calendar hung on his sleeping-room wall. Thursday, October the twenty-ninth. And Geoffrey was to be married on Saturday, the fourteenth of November.

Before then, he and Camilla must decide where they were going to live.

That Thursday Geoffrey “drifted over” from Farnborough for lunch. Faced with the choice between glass and silver, he chose, “Silver. It's more pawnable. But you'd better wait till I ask Val whether she'd rather have a rose bowl or a cigar box. She's dining with me at the club tonight. Why not join us?”

“I'd be very glad to.”

Afterwards, they talked their respective shops.

“We're being re-equipped”, said Geoffrey. “Something new in fighters. All very hush-hush—and rather wizard. At least that's what I'm told. I'll believe it when I've taken one of 'em up.”

He gave a few technical details.

“We're being re-equipped, too”, said his gunner brother. “Six-wheeled tractors instead of our dragons. The first two arrived this morning. Would you like to have a squint at them?”

“I shouldn't mind.”

They strolled out of mess and across the gunpark to one of the hooded lorries, about which clustered a knot of curious men.

Tom in his turn gave a few technical details.

“Plenty of weight”, criticised Geoffrey. “They'll take some steering. That's where you hook on the gun and limber, eh?”

“Hook in”, corrected the gunner brother, smiling. “And I gather we’re to call the new vehicles trailers, not limbers. That’s to say when we get ’em.”

“Well, sixteen of these’ll make a nice target for a bombing squadron”, commented Geoffrey. “Especially if they come down to about a thousand.”

“You forget our two Lewis guns per battery”, laughed Tom.

“We fire them off once a year, too”, commented Potter, who had joined them while they were talking. “And they’re usually on show for the C.R.A.”

Geoffrey stayed for another half-hour. Afterwards his gunner brother took his usual ride. “No hunting this year”, he thought, as he walked Rosalie back to stables and handed her over to Gilchrist. But the thought failed to depress.

After tea, he gossiped away another half an hour with Forsyth, whose wife had just undergone an operation.

“Going to cost a nice packet”, grumbled Forsyth. “Not that I grudge the money. It always beats me to know what you bachelors find to do with yourselves of an evening.”

“We work, old boy”, put in Potter, from the other side of the fire. “Devilish scientific profession, modern gunnery. You should attend one of Rusty’s lectures on cylinder wear, and how to make much of your carburetters and clutches.”

“Nice chaps”, thought Rockingham. “May miss ’em a little.”

But that thought, also, failed to depress; and later, when he dined with her and Geoffrey at the Aldershot Club, Val’s sensitivities almost duplicated Wilfrid Patterson’s.

“Not nearly as stuffy as he was when I first met him”, she decided. “I’m jolly nearly sure I was right about his being in love. For two pins I’d ask him. In his own way, he’s just as good-looking as my Geoffrey. I do wonder what *she*’s like. Shall I ask him that, too?”

Discretion, however, restrained both queries—and she kept her conversation with him superficial until the moment before she stepped into her car.

“I suppose you couldn’t get away tomorrow afternoon?” she said then. “Uncle and aunt are actually giving a cocktail party for me. Geoffrey’s coming of course. He could easily call for you—and drive you back afterwards.”

Her prospective brother-in-law’s, “Sorry. But I’m afraid it can’t be managed”, did not—she imagined—ring quite true.

§ 4

As he drove himself back to barracks, after a final drink with Geoffrey, the

necessary suppression of truth was a tiny weight on Rockingham's mind. But that night he slept more soundly than ever—and the long weekend was one long delight, marred only by an encounter at the Regent Street shop where he and Camilla arrived late on Friday afternoon to choose Val's rose bowl.

For William and Frances, as it so happened, were buying their wedding present at the same place.

"She insisted on my leaving the Admiralty early", explained William.

His poise, like his wife's, was perfection. During the short talk which followed, not a look, not an intonation registered their surprise at finding the lovers together.

"They were surprised, though. It was quite a shock for them", said Camilla, once she and her Tom were alone again; and he:

"I don't see why. This is a free country. And, as they'll have a very much worse shock before they're very much older, there's nothing for us to worry about."

Over that evening's meal, nevertheless, they decided ("One of them's almost sure to tell her about meeting us", suggested Camilla) that Tom had better telephone to his mother; and, doing so next day, he was led into a second suppression of the truth.

"Why can't you have lunch with me?" asked Mrs. Rockingham.

"I've a lot of things to do, mother."

"Then how about dinner?"

"I'm afraid that's booked, too."

Finally he consented to "look in about six o'clock"; and found her with a woman he particularly detested, also a member of the Anti-divorce League, who held forth at length about, "This new bill. It's coming up any day, now. They want to make three years' separation grounds for a divorce. I ask you, as a Christian, Major Rockingham, whether that isn't iniquitous".

But his mother's state of health worried him even more than her friend's talk.

"She's nothing like the woman she was this time last year", he told Camilla, when he fetched her from the hotel. "And she's making as much fuss about Geoffrey's wedding as though she were giving the reception herself."

They dined at another Soho restaurant that Saturday; and on the Sunday he drove her into the country for luncheon.

Mollison had just set up a new record for flying the Atlantic. There had been a near revolution in Iraq. The report of the royal commission on the armaments industry had been newly published. They discussed these public matters in the public coffee room of the country hotel. Once they were back in the car, however, Camilla said, with a touch of masterfulness, "We can't go on like this, darling. We're neither

of us restaurant hounds. We must have somewhere where we can sit and talk without people overhearing. So if it's to be a flat in London" (they had as good as decided it must be on their way down) "why shouldn't I begin looking for it tomorrow?"

And, called to the mess telephone towards six o'clock in the evening of Monday, the second of November, he heard her excited:

"Tom, I've found the very thing, and I'm moving in on Thursday morning. You must come up and see it. There's a kitchenette—and I'll cook dinner for us".

§ 5

On the Tuesday night, as he lay sleepless, there came to Rusty Rockingham, also, a wraith without face or body. But because that wraith might not yet speak with him, he did not know it for fear. Neither did he know why certain words he read in his paper next morning, "I, Edward the Eighth, do solemnly and sincerely in the presence of God profess, testify and declare that I am a faithful Protestant", should seem so significant.

For what was any faith which he himself might have once professed, compared with the winning of Camilla?

"Just a formula", cried his intellect—and those twin desires which had usurped kingship from his conscience—as Rockingham went on parade that Wednesday morning.

Yet to one formula—though all religion seemed out of him—he still clung. And so did Camilla, kissing him goodbye that Thursday night.

"O Tom", she whispered between their kisses, "if only we could cheat. But we can't, either of us. It's not in our natures. And it would be cheating. Because you gave Guy your word you'd leave the regiment . . ."

Had he actually pledged his word to Wethered? Maybe he hadn't. All the same, how right she was, how clean and fine, how lovely and how companionable.

"I feel that way, too", he said—and hoarsely, "With us, it must be all or nothing."

"All or nothing", repeated Camilla's mind with the door closed between them.

And that night there seemed no fear left in her. Since of what—with such a little while to wait for complete happiness—need either of them be afraid?

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

§ 1

All that Friday morning Camilla potted happily about her new service flat, which reminded her, just a little, of home.

There were recessed cupboards in both bedrooms—and a bathroom tiled from floor to ceiling—and a refrigerator in the kitchenette. There was even a radio, artfully concealed in the panelled wall of the one large well-lit living room, which overlooked a big courtyard of grass and shrubs.

The radio—and the dreams one could dream to music—sufficed her for companionship till it was a quarter to two; but while she debated where to lunch, the telephone shrilled, and answering it, she heard Enid Drury-Pottinger's voice.

"Such a coincidence", said that bright voice. "Who do you think I met at a dinner last night? Your friend, Major Rockingham's, mother. When I mentioned that you'd been staying at our hotel, she asked me for your address. The girl at the desk—you know what a fool she is—didn't seem too reliable. So I thought I'd ring up and make absolutely certain. Have you taken the flat for long? May I come and have tea with you one afternoon?"

"Oh, do", said Camilla—and hung up.

The whole incident was annoying. Mrs. Rockingham—according to Tom—hadn't asked after her during his Saturday visit. So he hadn't "volunteered any information". And one couldn't be sure whether William or Frances had mentioned that chance meeting at the Goldsmiths and Silversmiths. Besides Mrs. Drury-Pottinger was a type—common to England and America—one found difficult to abide.

Thinking thus, Camilla decided to lunch in the restaurant attached to the flats. But, hardly at table, she was again called to the phone, this time by Tom's mother herself.

"I'm very angry with you, my dear", said the unmistakable voice. "I had no idea you'd moved up to London. Why haven't you been to see me?"

"I've been rather busy", prevaricated Camilla.

"Getting into your new flat, I suppose. But now you're settled in, you haven't the slightest excuse for keeping away any longer—and I insist on your dining with me. Just wait while I look at my book."

A pause followed.

“How about tomorrow night?” went on Mrs. Rockingham, and, before one could interrupt, “My son William and his wife are coming. She doesn’t play, but if I can get hold of Tom we shall be four for bridge. I’ll ring him up at once—he’s sure to be lurching in mess—and let you know. That’s to say if you’ve no other engagement. You and Tom always get on so well. So we ought to have a nice evening.”

And Tom’s mother, without waiting for an answer, hung up.

§ 2

There was nothing to be done—because one couldn’t possibly ask for the mess number before Mrs. Rockingham did—except return to one’s table.

“Tom may be able to choke her off”, thought Camilla; but ten minutes later—fortunately she had ordered cold food—she was listening to, “That’s all right, my dear. He says he’ll be delighted. So let’s make dinner a quarter to eight, shall we? Then we’ll have plenty of time for our game”.

Again there was nothing to be done; and Camilla, having accepted the invitation, finished her lunch, spent an hour at the hairdresser’s, and went for a walk. Walking her fastest, she was a little inclined to be angry with Tom, “Rather weak of him”, she thought. Yet how else could he have behaved? And what did it matter—with so little time to go?

“Only eight more days”, she thought; and, back in her kitchenette, meditating eggs and bacon, to be followed by a solitary visit to the nearest picture house, she was pleasantly thrilled by yet another call, and Tom’s own voice saying:

“I knew you would understand. That’s why I didn’t ring up before. It’s a little awkward of course; but it would have been a jolly sight more awkward if I’d tried to get out of it. If William or Frances say anything, we can always pretend we met by accident”.

Yet the necessity for pretence distressed her a little; and that night, after two disappointing pictures, she slept worse than her wont.

Morning brought a love letter from Tom; tea time the man himself, quoting, “Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive”. But he made so light of the deception that they ended by laughing at themselves.

“The trouble with us”, he said, just before he left her, “is that we’re both too respectable.”

And that, up to a point, was true.

“Foolishly respectable?” she asked herself while she dressed. “Inhibited? Letting

‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’, like the poor cat i’ the adage?’

As she was being driven to Smith Square, nevertheless, she could not help realising how impossible it would be to face this ordeal had not she and Tom respected that last inhibition.

For “ordeal”—from the moment Mrs. Rockingham’s front door opened—seemed the only correct word.

Fanny (how much Tom had told her about Fanny) m’laded her and took her cloak. Tom’s mother upbraided her again.

“He’ll be down in a minute”, she said. “You’re ten minutes early, you know. Help yourself to a glass of madeira—I’m sorry, my dear, I forgot you were a teetotaler—and tell me what you’ve been doing with yourself all this time. What brings you to town? I expect you found it rather dull being all by yourself in the country. When are you going out to join your husband? Or aren’t you?”

Fortunately Tom appeared before she had time to reply; and, almost before he had time to take her by the hand, William and Frances followed him into the room.

William’s eyes—it seemed to Camilla—were just a little curious. Neither he nor his wife, however, alluded to last week’s meeting. Nor did Tom’s mother repeat her awkward question until they were halfway through dinner—and by then one had composed oneself sufficiently to answer:

“My husband went off in such a hurry that I haven’t yet made up my mind what I’m going to do”.

“It depends on the sort of quarters he can find for you, no doubt”, said Mrs. Rockingham; and William (bless the man):

“I gather they’ve given Sir Guy rather a roving commission. Isn’t he more or less a liaison officer to the Arabian Dreikaiserbund?”

“What on earth’s that?” asked Frances; and, with Tom explaining, and talk drifting to Middle Eastern politics, the worst of the ordeal seemed by—though one could not help wishing, all the time one made impersonal conversation, that when (to use Tom’s phraseology) the balloon went up, one would not be altogether outcast from this pleasant family circle.

And that secret wish strengthened in Camilla Wethered as she and Frances followed Mrs. Rockingham’s halting progress up the narrow stairs.

“I’m such a crock these days”, said Mrs. Rockingham, edging herself into a seat at the bridge table, which had been set out while they were drinking their coffee. “And I find things worry me so much more than they used to. I shall be glad when this wedding’s over. Frances, did you go to see the florists? Did you give them my message?”

“Yes, mother.”

“And what did the robbers have to say for themselves?”

“They said it was their usual charge.”

“Then I suppose I shall have to pay it. Oh, dear, that miserable Fanny has forgotten to put out any markers. They’re in the middle drawer of that tallboy.”

“All right. I’ll get them, mother”, soothed Frances; and, before reaching up to the tallboy, she smiled conspiratorially at Camilla, as though to say, “When they get as old as this, one has to humour them”, while her mother-in-law continued:

“Do you know the girl Geoffrey’s going to marry? But of course you do. I’d forgotten. She’s not nearly as black as she paints her eyelashes. In fact, I’ve taken quite a fancy to her. I only hope Tom finds one as nice. Though of course a girl of Val’s age would be too young for him. He oughtn’t to marry anyone under thirty”.

“Then you want him to get married?”

Camilla’s words had been spontaneous. Equally spontaneous were Mrs. Rockingham’s:

“My dear, you know what men are. If they don’t get married they only get into some mess or other before they’ve finished. Tom very nearly did that four years ago. I wasn’t supposed to know he was in love with the woman. But of course I did. Her name was Gail something or other. The very worst type. Made up to the eyes. She’d been through the divorce court, too”.

“Really”, said Camilla, taking refuge in complete Englishry. But her heart sank.

§ 3

Mrs. Rockingham, thumping three times with her rubber-shod stick, summoned the two men from the dining room—and for the next two and a half hours Camilla’s thoughts concentrated on the game.

She played her best. So did Tom. To both of them, however, it was a relief when William, glancing at the clock, said, “Don’t you think you’ve had about enough, mother?” and Mrs. Rockingham, “Meaning that you have. All right, we’ll make this the last”.

Twenty minutes later they were settling up, and William saying, “I’ve the car outside. We’ll give you a lift home, Lady Wethered”. Soon, she was back in the safety of her own flat.

Seen in retrospect while she undressed, the evening seemed to have passed off well enough. Yet she could not help feeling a bit of a hypocrite; and the more she considered Mrs. Rockingham’s, “She’d been through the divorce court, too”, the

more she realised the inflexibility of the old lady's opinions.

"Poor Tom", she caught herself thinking. "He'll hate to quarrel with her."

Surely, though, Tom's life was his own.

He said almost the same thing himself, next morning when he called for her in his car:

"The old lady's sulking because I wouldn't take her to the service at the Abbey. She doesn't realise that I'm grown up. Mothers never do, I imagine. Goodness knows what she'll say when I tell her I'm sending in my papers. But of course she'll come round in the end".

It rained that Sunday. They only drove a little way out of town; and returned to the flat about four o'clock.

"I'll make you some tea", said Camilla. "Afterwards, we'll have a real good talk." But, just as she returned from the kitchenette with her tray, the front door bell buzzed, and, opening it, she encountered Colonel Carruthers, and Enid Drury-Pottinger who said, "We were just passing, so we thought we'd look you up".

Colonel Carruthers' poise, as he shook hands with Tom, equalled William's. His Enid, however, permitted herself one distinct lift of the plucked brows.

"Are you staying in town, Major Rockingham?" she asked, with Camilla gone to fetch two more cups.

His answer, "Yes. At my mother's", seemed to amuse her. She eyed him with a touch of roguishness.

"Are you going back to Aldershot tonight?" she went on.

"Unfortunately. You see, I have to be on parade rather early tomorrow."

"They work you pretty hard in the service nowadays. It was different in my time", commented Carruthers. "You're a gunner, aren't you? What battery?"

"The Turbans."

"Really. How interesting. When I was with my battalion on the Aisne, you used to shoot over us. One day, I remember——"

And the retired colonel of infantry, thinking, "Enid never had any *savoir faire*. She'll only put her foot in it if I give her a chance", continued reminiscing till Camilla, who had decided it necessary to cut some bread and butter and telephone down to the restaurant for cakes, returned to the living room with the cups and the plates.

"Must you really be going?" smiled Camilla after enduring this second ordeal for the best part of sixty minutes. But with the door closed again, she frowned, "I wish we'd stayed in the country, Tom. I simply detest that woman—and I'm sure she suspects the worst. She would!"

"Why?"

“Darling, don’t be so innocent.”

“But surely you don’t think that those two——”

Camilla’s frown vanished. Laughing full-lipped, she silenced him with kisses; calling him, “Sir Galahad”; teasing him till passion rose between them, and, putting her away from him, he muttered, “Damn it all, I can’t stand this much longer”.

Outside, the rain drove and drove. They heard a car honk, and a taxi hoot, before she admitted, standing tense and lonely:

“Neither can I, my sweet. Must we?”

His eyes were rampant desire. She saw his left hand clenched, his right opening and shutting. He took a step towards her; backed away again. After a silence that seemed interminable, he said:

“Not if you don’t want to”.

The words chilled her. She knew the truth behind them.

“But you?” she asked.

He half-turned from her. She realised the battle he must be fighting with himself while she fought her own.

“I’m a fool”, he said at last. “Why the hell should we wait?”

“You want to, though?”

“Yes.”

“And”—for the first time she told him a deliberate lie—“so do I. Really. I’m just as big a fool as you are. I want all or nothing, too. You see, you . . . you couldn’t stay with me, Tom.”

He turned to her again; faced her squarely, his eyes still blazing, but his words under control.

“Only six more days”, he said. “I’ll put in my application the moment the wedding’s over. After that . . .

“After that”, his lips quivered, “you’ll be all mine.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

§ 1

Noakes said, "Your tea's getting cold, sir". The calendar at which Rusty Rockingham was staring said, "Monday. November 9". He thought stupidly, "When I was at prep school, we used to mark off how many days to the holidays". In a neighbouring quarter, some young fool of a subaltern had just turned on a gramophone.

He barked at Noakes, "Find out who's making that infernal row, give him my compliments, and ask him to stop it".

Noakes said, "Very good, sir. I imagine it'll be Mr. Masters".

Rockingham countermanded his order, thinking, "Nice lad. Why shouldn't he play the thing if it amuses him? It isn't his fault that I'm in such a temper".

And, after all, why should he be in any temper? A man must live up to his code.

The thought soothed. Drinking his tea, shaving, taking his bath, he mused, "Camilla was quite right. If she hadn't insisted on our dining out, we might have lost our heads. And we mustn't. Because Wethered put us on our honour".

Bless her again, therefore, for her fineness, for her cleanness, for having the same code of honour as oneself!

That thought exhilarated. He put on his uniform, and walked over to the mess, where he found Lyttelton, smoking a cigarette in the anteroom.

"Heard you come in last night", laughed Lyttelton. "Nice row you made, too. Woke me out of my beauty sleep."

"Sorry, old chap."

"Oh, that's all right. I only wish the news were. My rag says that Franco's as good as taken Madrid."

At table, Frank and Wilfrid were discussing the same report.

"These Spaniards", said Frank Potter, "seem pretty stout fighters."

"With the Italianos and the old Boche to help 'em."

"Well, the Russkies are helping the other side, aren't they? So it's fair dos."

Rockingham took no part in that conversation. He ate quickly and in complete silence—his eyes flickering every now and again to the far end of the board, and the face of young Travers above its white collar and its school tie.

Travers would be leaving before lunch. One might never see him again. A few days more—and one might never see any of these faces again.

Rather a wrench? Worth it, though. The army in peacetime really was a bit of a backwater. Supposing one didn't retire, one would still have to wait the best part of two years for one's brigade. And anyway life wouldn't be worth living without the woman one loved . . .

"So that's that", brooded Rockingham. But the face above the civilian collar at the other end of the table continued to intrigue him. Somehow or other, it looked a little sad. Somehow or other—though one had hardly exchanged two words with the kid since his arrival, more than a year ago now, at Steepdown—one couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him.

"Rushing his fences", decided Rockingham. "Too young to know his own mind. Probably just a sex attraction. Wonder if Ralph handled him properly."

Yielding to a sudden impulse, he rose, and walked round the table, and said:

"I gather you're leaving us this morning, Travers".

"Yes, sir."

"Well, good luck—and I hope you'll be very happy."

The boy blushed; stammered, "Thank you very much, sir"—and took the proffered hand.

§ 2

Slightly ashamed of himself for the concession to sentiment, the commander of the Turban battery left the mess and lit the first pipe of the day. Actually, one might just as well stay off parade. Masters—that lad really had come on well—was taking the signallers out. Cartwright would look after the gun drill. Godden could be trusted to train the drivers on the new tractor; and Challis with the gas-chamber squad. Why not let Wilfrid check Quartermaster-Sergeant Oliver's accounts, and Calvert's log books and history sheets?

The more responsibilities Wilfrid took on the better. He would have them all on his shoulders by this time next week.

Habit, however, proved too strong; and for the rest of the morning the commander of the Turban battery potted happily about his not very strenuous duties—"poking that sharp nose of his here, there and everywhere", as Bombardier Boardman confided to Lance-Sergeant Challis when they forgathered after stables in the wet canteen.

That Monday, there were no defaulters; but, just as Rockingham was about to leave his office, Headworth came in to say, "The C.O. would like to see you for a minute, sir. Between you and me and the gatepost, he wants to ask you a favour. His

missis is one short for dinner tomorrow—and they're entertaining the new C.R.A.".

"Blast him", thought O.C. Turban battery—for Tuesday evening was to have been Camilla's. "He'll have to do without me." On second thoughts, though—one had done nothing but ask for leave recently—it seemed better to humour Wily Wilbraham. If only for the last time!

"The very last time", continued the secret thoughts of O.C. Turban battery as he saluted his colonel, as he listened to that tactful:

"I hope you're not doing anything tomorrow night, Rockingham. And my wife hopes you'll excuse such short notice. But, as a matter of fact, we're in a bit of a hole, and if you could help us out by making up the dinner table . . ."

So how could one refuse?

"I could have, of course", Camilla's lover wrote to his lady in the quarter of an hour before lunch. "But it wouldn't have been good staff work. I simply must keep on the right side of him, because otherwise he might just insist on my staying with the battery till my application has been sanctioned."

As he sealed his envelope, nevertheless, Rockingham again thought how childish it was that he should be in any way dependent on the whim of a superior; and, taking his usual gallop under stormy skies, he experienced—for the first time—the full irk of discipline.

Damn it all, a man of his age, with enough money to secure his independence, should be able to do exactly what he liked, when he liked, and how he liked.

Why had he dillydallied so long? Why the blazes hadn't he put in his application to retire from the service immediately after that scene in Wethered's library? Why not write the thing out anyway? The very moment he got home.

That urge proved irresistible. Handing his second horse over to Gilchrist, he went straight to his office, asked Calvert for his copy of King's Regulations, left the book at his quarter while he drank a hasty cup of tea in mess, and returned to study it.

The difference between "Retirement" and "Resignation" (Page xvii) he knew well enough. Section 224a only confirmed what he had already written to Camilla, that he must not "quit his corps" without leave; and the second paragraph of the same section yet another piece of knowledge—that he must not serve a foreign power for five years without first obtaining the permission of the Army Council.

Easy enough to give that undertaking! But how about this last Section 229? How about notifying one's "intended place of residence", and reporting "any subsequent change of address before retirement"?

Rather a pill, this one. Quite a pill, putting the whole thing down in black and

white.

“Best swallow it, though”, thought Rusty Rockingham, taking and dating a sheet of foolscap. But just as he had written, “I undertake that I will not enter the service of a foreign power”, Noakes swung the door open; and, immediately, after he had told Noakes, “I don’t want to be disturbed”, came Patterson.

“What’s your trouble, Wilfrid?” he asked, hastily covering the application with a piece of blotting paper.

“I only looked in for a chat, Tom. Are you busy?”

“I am rather.”

“Right ho. I’ll buzz off.”

The door was reclosed. After a few seconds, Rockingham took pen again and finished his sentence; began the next one, “My intended place of residence is——”

Where? One couldn’t very well give Camilla’s address. Mother’s then? Hardly. She might cut up rough. She would be bound to cut up rough—at any rate to start with . . . Oh well, the club would do. The porter would send anything on.

So that was that.

Now for the, “I have the honour to be, sir, your obedient servant”, and one’s signature.

§ 3

Signing the paper, blotting it, locking it away in the despatch box where he still kept the blueprints of his shell, Major Rockingham, R.A., caught himself thinking:

“Don’t see why I should wait till after the wedding. Don’t see why I shouldn’t break it to Lampson tomorrow”.

That was a bit awkward, though. Tomorrow night he would be dining with Lampson. And the day after—he remembered suddenly—would be the eleventh.

“Doesn’t seem quite the right thing—to retire on Armistice Day”, he decided.

Then his door opened for the third time and a mess waiter summoned him to the phone.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

§ 1

“Don’t panic”, laughed Camilla over the mess phone. “I only rang you up because I was feeling rather lonely. How are you, darling?”

Her lover laughed back, “Not too bad. Only I’m afraid I’ve one little bit of bad news. I shan’t be able to come up tomorrow. Lampson wants me to dine with him, and I can’t very well get out of it.”

“Colonel’s orders?”

“More or less. I wrote you a letter just before lunch. So we’ll have to make it Wednesday instead.”

“But I can’t manage Wednesday.”

“Damn. Why not?”

“That pest, Enid Drury-Pottinger. She insisted on my dining with her—and gave me three nights to choose from. I didn’t like to be rude. Thursday will be all right, though. And, Tom—couldn’t we go dancing?”

“I don’t see why not.”

They talked a while longer. Changing into mess kit, he thought, “She’s so sensible. Gail made a regular fuss the only time I had to put her off”. But the long-absent memory of Gail proved faintly disturbing, and his comparison between the two even more so. Because, after all, there could be no comparison. He had never really loved—he had only taken his pleasure with—Gail.

“Lost my head then”, he decided. “Happens to most chaps, I suppose.”

Later that night, however, it struck him that he had never been able to make up his mind to part with his last souvenir of Gail Vanduser, a snapshot taken in the early days of their acquaintance—and, not until he had unearthed this from the bottom of his despatch box and torn it into small fragments, could he compose himself for sleep.

§ 2

All next day, rain fell in torrents, making outdoor parades impossible, beating on the tin roofs until even the stolid Patterson admitted, “This does get on a fellow’s nerves”.

All that Tuesday, nevertheless, the thought that his application to retire was

actually written out kept Rockingham's nerves steady. Why permit oneself even the vestige of a cafard with only a few short hours left to serve?

Seven-fifteen, with the rain abating, found him in tails. By a quarter to eight, he was circling the not-too-well-kept drive of Lampson's square stone house.

As on the occasion when he had met Camilla there, he was the first to arrive. The same Monteith, the same smell of cooking, the same Janice greeted him.

"Aren't we lucky?" she laughed. "The new C.R.A.'s a bachelor. So we're not going to be turned out."

Her mother appeared almost immediately, saying, "This really is nice of you. I do hate an odd number at a dinner table. The Bryce-Atkinsons are coming, and so are the Clarkfords".

Soon they were twelve, and entering the dining room. Again he sat next to Janice, with Mrs. Clarkford on his other side, and Diana Bryce-Atkinson opposite.

"We haven't met since that dinner party at the Wethereds", began Mrs. Clarkford. "I called on her the other day. But the butler told me she was up in London."

Diana Bryce-Atkinson said, "I ought to have called, too. It must be jolly lonely for her".

Janice put in, "If I were as good-looking as she is, I wouldn't be lonely for long"; and her mother, overhearing, rebuked her, "The things you young people say nowadays".

"Honi soit qui mal y pense", laughed her daughter; and, turning to Rockingham, "I suppose you know I'm to be one of Val's bridesmaids."

From the other end of the table came the new brigadier's, "I shouldn't care for Wethered's job myself. But of course he's absolutely the right man for it. The Hawk always did understand Orientals. I imagine his wife will be joining him by Christmas".

The hardbitten spouse of the Sapper colonel on his left said, "She'd better hurry up—or she'll find him with a harem".

Janice whispered to Rockingham, "That's the way he always strikes me. You know Val calls him the wicked marquis", and wondered why her brightness should evoke no smile.

§ 3

It was strange—and strangely perturbing to Camilla's lover—how, all through their meal, conversation would revert to Hawk Wethered.

Even more perturbing, however, were Bryce-Atkinson's direct questions, put

the moment the women had withdrawn, "I haven't seen you since that afternoon at divisional headquarters. What actually happened? What was it all about?"

"Oh, nothing very important."

"The old man didn't offer you a staff job, then?"

"No."

Wily Wilbraham, telling them to draw their chairs up and help themselves to some more brandy, saved a longer catechism. But Bryce-Atkinson's rather watery eyes continued over-curious: so that Rockingham was glad of the new C.R.A.'s, "What do you think of the way things are going on the continent, Clarkford?" and, after Clarkford had given his slightly pessimistic opinion, of the Sapper colonel's:

"I feel we all get the wind up too easily these days. From the way most people talk, you'd think the next world war was just round the corner. Personally I can't see Hitler taking us on, or Mussolini either. They've too much to lose and too little to gain by it".

"I agree", said the new C.R.A. "Up to a point."

On that they adjourned, to another hour of desultory conversation during which—with no further mention of the perturbing name, and Bryce-Atkinson at the other end of the drawing room—Rusty Rockingham's thoughts became a little inconsequent.

The new C.R.A. seemed a sound man. These people—a little dull though some of them might be—were the kind with whom one liked consorting. Socially, the army had its advantages. Once cited as co-respondent by Hawk Wethered, one would be barred from a good many of those advantages. This house, for instance, might no longer be open to one . . .

A word from Janice recalled him sharply to the present. Soon, the company had broken up; and, driving back to Steepdown, his mood changed.

Social advantages, indeed. Sheer snobbery to let that influence one. Once they were married, only hypocrites would close their houses to him and Camilla. Why, Lampson's own brother had been through the divorce court. Who worried about that sort of thing nowadays?

"Only a few cranks like mother", he told himself as he undressed.

§ 4

That Tuesday night, nevertheless, Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A., again slept badly; and the first post on Armistice Day brought a disquieting letter from his mother.

“I’ve seen another specialist”, she wrote. “He tells me there’s a new operation. I’ve a good mind to risk it once the wedding’s over. At the worst it can only kill me.”

Poor mother! She was having a pretty thin time. Soon, William would be at sea again. With Geoffrey married, she wouldn’t be seeing so much of him either. That left only oneself. If she really did decide on having this operation, it would be a shame to upset her . . .

Nevertheless, one’s own happiness, and the happiness of the woman one loved, came first.

“Camilla and I”, he thought, as he smoked his after-breakfast pipe that morning, “are right with our own consciences.”

So how could anything else matter?

Even the eleven o’clock gun!

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

§ 1

All the same, Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A., caught himself dreading—could it be actually dreading?—that which would follow the firing of the Remembrance Day gun; and when, some two hours after breakfast, he walked slowly across the brigade square to where his own men, and Forsyth's men, and Frank Potter's men, and Ralph Lyttelton's men waited the coming of their battery commanders, his heart—for all its happiness—misgave him.

For this—it seemed suddenly—might be his last parade.

And now, with Wilfrid at the salute, he was actually taking over this parade; now, almost for the last time, he was ordering, "Turban battery. 'Shun"; now—could it be for the very last time?—men marched to his orders, and men halted to his orders, and he faced about, and stood, his eyes on his colonel, till that one report echoed hollow from beyond those tin roofs . . .

After that, for second after second, nothing moved—save one lone sparrow on those tin roofs; and no sound whether from near or far, not even one little whisper of breeze, troubled the Silence, hanging heavy from gray skies over the long double line of the living, standing rigid in honour of their dead.

Yet even while those seconds still lasted, Major Rockingham's thoughts were not wholly with the dead. And—the parade dismissed—all his misgivings vanished. Neither did they return till late on that idle afternoon.

For not until late on that idle afternoon did Ralph Lyttelton, looking up from the *Times* crossword puzzle, chance to say, "I am an ass. There was something I particularly wanted to ask W.W. And I've suddenly remembered he won't be back till tomorrow evening".

And tomorrow morning one had meant to put in that application.

More delay!

§ 2

It seemed strange—and strangely perturbing to Camilla's lover—how much, all through the rest of that idle afternoon and all through the evening which followed, his mind chafed at this new delay.

As though another twenty-four hours counted. As though anything counted

except the certainty that one was doing the right thing.

And, damn it all, one was doing the right thing. One couldn't have one's cake and eat it—stay on in the regiment *and* marry Camilla. How marvellous, though, if one could!

That idea, ridiculous though it was, also perturbed him—and he experienced quite a difficulty in dismissing it from his imagination before he slept.

All the same, he slept dreamlessly; and woke to fixed determination.

Just before he finished dressing, he opened, and peeped into the despatch box. There the application was. Another twenty-four hours—and he would be giving it to Lampson. Meanwhile, no harking back. And, above all, no mention of a misgiving to Camilla.

She had never weakened. Neither must he.

Thursday morning's paper carried two photographs of the King. One showed him, in uniform, at the Cenotaph; the other, in mufti, at the Albert Hall.

Wilfrid, too, had been at the Albert Hall.

"You ought to have come with me, Tom", he said just before lunch. "You did last year, you remember. It was simply too marvellous this time. The King read the poem himself."

But not even an echo of the poem which begins, "They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old", came to the deaf ears of Camilla's lover. Neither did his mind give him back any picture of the year-old self whose eyes had blurred to the trumpets sounding the Last Post, and the, "We will remember them", and the million poppies raining on the bared heads of the Legion.

For between that self and this self stood a woman. And to her he must go.

§ 3

Rockingham went to his woman that Thursday evening, an hour after sunset, driving his hardest, by the railway gates at Sunningdale, for Staines and the Great West Road.

High lights showed him that road, beckoned radiant towards London. A few more days—little more than a day and a night—and they would be living together in London.

That was almost the very first thing he said to her, holding her close to him before they left her little hall. And, on the way to the restaurant she had chosen for their dining and their dancing, each wished that they had never left the shelter of that little hall, and the rooms which opened from it. And this thing, also, he said,

whispering it as they sat down to dine, so that she must needs frown at him, mock-serious, "You mustn't be so impatient, Tom".

Yet in her, also, was an impatience—and, at long last, the voice of fear.

"Happiness may still be snatched from you", said fear; and, almost, she could see its face—or was it Len's face?—grinning at her over Tom's shoulder when she first rose to dance with him. But—his arm once round her—the face vanished. Neither could she hear any voice save his and the music's.

"Your man", beat the music. "Yours. Yours. Yours."

And for all that was left of that all-too-short evening it seemed that he was all hers, and that nothing more could come between them. For by tomorrow he would be as good as free.

That was almost the very last thing he said to her, holding her close again, so close that their two bodies seemed one body, and she could scarcely stammer, "O darling, why must you go?"

Yet even while she still stammered, she knew that he must go; and after one last kiss which seemed to drain every drop of blood from each of their bodies, she broke out of his arms, laughing, "Don't let's be too crazy, Tom. It isn't worthwhile".

§ 4

And of course it wasn't worthwhile, with such a few more days—with little more than a day and a night really—to wait for complete happiness.

Nevertheless, even while the dark door of that little hall was shutting away the vision of Camilla, there came to her lover also a fear.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

§ 1

It had no voice, Rockingham's fear. Neither the face of it, nor the shape of it, might he by any manner of means perceive. Yet somewhere beyond perception, floated the wraith. And all the way back to Steepdown he was dimly conscious of that wraith, menacing him, threatening him, threatening his happiness and Camilla's.

And suddenly, overwhelmingly—just as the flagstaff and the guardroom, and those low tin sheds that edge the great oblong of brigade square, were swept into the glare of his headlights—he experienced his need for prayer.

Foolish, he thought—almost cowardly, he thought—that one should give way to this need for prayer. And all the while he was undressing he fought with himself, telling himself, over and over again, “Even if you must pray, don't go on your knees”.

Yet at long last he found himself on his knees, begging of that personal Deity in whom he had never quite ceased to believe, “O God, don't let anything rob us of our happiness”; until—or so it seemed to the fallibility of his finite mind—he was given his answer, “Happiness is in your own hands. Take it”; and rose fearless; and so slept; and woke again to see Noakes tearing the old leaf from the calendar.

“Friday. November 13”, read the new leaf of the hanging calendar. But no superstition troubled the mind of Major Thomas Rockingham. For had he not prayed, and had he not been given his answer—and was not this as good as the end?

It seemed a little queer to him—and, when he bent to lace his fieldboots, just a little sad—that this should be the very end—maybe the very last time he would wear this khaki. After all, though, he had served his quarter of a century. Long enough!

“Too long”, he thought. “A chap gets groovy. No use being groovy.”

And once more, looking at the despatch box, deciding to let his application lie there until it was time to take it over to brigade office, he thought, “No use harking back”.

In that mood, he strolled across to breakfast. Potter had gone on leave the day before. Lyttelton arrived late—and grumpy. Wilfrid went off almost at once, saying, “I want to see how that new draft from the depot shape at gun drill”. Belinda Blue-Eyes followed him out.

“No use my going on parade”, thought Rockingham as he too left the table. “I'll just hang about till Lampson turns up.”

Yet habit still held; and, after a few restless minutes in the anteroom, and a casual glance at the news under the headlines, “The King With His Fleet.” “Baldwin’s Lips Unsealed.” “Premier Admits We Should Have Rearmed in 1934”, he left the mess, and made for his office.

There, too, was a calendar; and, just for a second as he glanced at the ill-omened date, its significance came home to him.

“Might have chosen a better day for my last”, he caught himself thinking. But his, “Bring in anything you want me to deal with, Calvert”, betrayed no hint of nerves. Neither did his hand falter as he signed those three forms his battery clerk laid before him.

“That the lot?” he asked, his voice still normal.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

For good it was—decided Major Thomas Rockingham, R.A.—to feel that one need no longer dwell on this thing. And in a moment he had risen from his table, was walking by Calvert’s to the outer door.

Men of the new draft were at drill near that outer door. Watching them, stood Wilfrid. Just for another moment, the battery commander eyed the gun drill.

“Might be worse”, he caught himself thinking.

Then, glancing across brigade square, he saw Lampson’s car.

Janice drove that car. She drove it right up to the steps of brigade office. Watching his colonel alight, he decided, “I’ll go straight to my quarter, get that paper, give it to him right away”.

But even as his feet translated decision into action, he saw Headworth’s figure join his colonel’s on the steps of brigade office; saw the two heads close; saw both heads turn towards him.

Then Headworth was at the double; was checking from that double; was halting; was standing within half a pace of him; was looking him between the eyes.

“R.A.F. Farnborough wants you on the telephone”, said Cyril Headworth, still looking him straight between the eyes. “I’m afraid it’s rather bad news, sir.”

“My brother?” he heard himself ask.

Headworth nodded.

He heard himself ask one more question:

“Has he had a crash?”

Again Headworth nodded.

Already, one seemed to know the worst.

§ 2

A man with whom one had drunk port and played bridge confirmed the worst. Afterwards that man said, diffidently, "Perhaps you could come along. Perhaps you could break the news to his fiancée".

"And to mother", thought Rusty Rockingham. But his voice was the schooled voice of the war years as he answered, "Right. I'll come over"; and his fingers were steady as they put the instrument down.

"Take my car, Rockingham", said another voice—no less schooled than his own—which he hardly recognised for Lampson's. And at once Janice—how came she to be standing by this table?—was saying, "Yes, do. I can get home all right"; almost at once one was grasping the wheel.

Rockingham tried to argue with himself, as he let in gear and swung that wheel hard over, as the heavy car skidded on the loose gravel, as he straightened her, as he revved away past the flag and the saluting sentry, "This won't make any difference, this mustn't make any difference, to me and Camilla".

Yet even in that moment he knew that it must make some difference; and that he dare not let his thoughts stray to Camilla. Because of his mother. And because of Val.

His first duty now was to his mother and to Val. Neither of them must learn of this through the newspapers or over the radio. Why wasn't he driving straight for London? He couldn't do any good at Farnborough.

But here—already!—the windsock marked the flying field. And in another minute, nearing the field, he saw the crashed plane, and the men, the vehicles gathered round that plane where it had fallen, smashing, burning the hedge.

Wisps of smoke still curled from the foot of that hedge. But the road had already been cleared. And in a few more moments—scarcely realising how he had come to this place—he was standing on tarmac, talking with the man to whom he had spoken on the telephone.

"He would take her up himself", said that man. "She was one of the new fighters. Only delivered yesterday."

Then he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder, "He's in there. In the mortuary. He isn't burned very badly. Would you care to see him?"

And of course one had to do that for Geoffrey, just as one had had to do it for Patrick.

Geoffrey and Patrick—both dead!

The incongruity of that thought did not escape Rockingham; troubled him as he

stood looking at the thing on the slab. But, as he turned away from the thing on the slab, all his conscious thoughts were again for the living. For his mother. And for Val.

“I’d better be getting up to town now”, he said to Geoffrey’s group captain who had accompanied him into the mortuary. “There’ll have to be an inquiry, I suppose?”

“Yes. That’s the usual procedure.”

“And—and you’ll have to keep him here?”

“Till Monday, I should say. Maybe Tuesday. It depends on the coroner, and how soon the ministry send their expert down. I’m—I’m terribly sorry this should have happened, Rockingham. You’re going straight to Miss Danvers, I suppose. Tell her how sorry I am—how sorry we all are.”

“But mother”, thought Rockingham; “how am I going to break this to mother?” as they shook hands, a little stiffly, as he drove away for the railway gates at Sunningdale, for Staines and the Great West Road.

This morning gray skies lowered over that road; and no lights beckoned radiant towards London. And now he saw a great storm burst over London, matching the storm in his soul.

For ever since Headworth first broke this news to him, there had been a strange tumult in his very soul. Momentarily, he could not even regret Geoffrey. He could only regret that immediate happiness which Geoffrey’s death had dashed from his own lips.

And now he knew that he was biting his lips, biting them till the blood came.

Yet those lips were steady enough, and his blood cool enough, and the soul within him resolute enough, as he drove the last of his way, debating, “Who first? Val or mother?”

And as he drove the very last of his way, it seemed best that he should go to his mother.

But there, on her doorstep, stood Val.

And even as he drew abreast of Val, even before he spoke with her, even while she said, speaking her fastest but with a queer catch in her voice, “I’ve rung three times, but Fanny just won’t answer”, he realised that she must already know . . .

Then, still with that queer catch in her voice, Val had said, “They told me when I tried to telephone to him. I knew he meant to try that plane this morning. I had a hunch something like this might happen. That’s why I did telephone. They told me you were on your way up, too. But I didn’t expect you so soon”; and Fanny had opened the door to them, and they were in his mother’s house.

§ 3

“You’d better let me break it to her”, said Mrs. Rockingham’s eldest son, as he and Val stood—Fanny watching them—in the narrow hall of that little house.

“Perhaps that would be best”, said Valerie Danvers. “I’ll wait here.”

The girl’s eyes were dry—but Fanny’s already suffusing.

“Is it about Mr. Geoffrey?” quavered Fanny.

“Yes. Miss Danvers will tell you.”

Rockingham’s voice was still, the schooled voice of the war years. Alone and swiftly he went up the stairs.

The door of the drawing room was closed. He hesitated just a second before he opened it. There sat his mother, in her favourite chair by the fireplace, over which hung the case with the sword.

“Tom”, she said—she too looking him between the eyes—as he approached her. “What brings you here? Why are you in uniform?” Then, very quietly, “I thought I heard Val downstairs. Was it Val? Is it . . . bad news, Tom?”

“Yes, mother.”

“How bad?” Her dark blue eyes were still direct.

“The worst, I’m afraid. Geoffrey——”

“He’s been killed.”

“Yes, mother.”

“That poor girl!”

For long seconds, she said no more. Her face had gone stone gray. Her lips quivered. He saw her bite them. He came close, laid a hand on her shoulder, feeling it rigid under his fingers. He tried to say, “I’m so sorry, mother dear”; failed. Outside, another storm burst, spattering the windows. At last, she spoke, very quietly and rather more slowly than her habit, but with no catch in her voice.

“That makes three”, she said. “Your father. Arthur. And now Geoffrey. It’s God’s will, of course. But it’s rather hard on an old woman, Tom.”

Now his own eyes suffused; and he bent to kiss her.

“Don’t”, she said sharply. “It doesn’t help if one gives way.”

He straightened himself. She bit her lips again. The hands worked on her lap.

“Did you tell Val?” she asked suddenly.

“No.”

“How did she find out?”

“She was telephoning to Farnborough.”

“And she came straight here?”

“Yes, mother.”

“That was very brave, that was very kind of her. That’s why I mustn’t give way. Will you send her up to me?”

“Now?”

“Please, dear. But, Tom”—her lips were steady at last, yet her eyes newly imploring—“don’t leave me. Don’t go back to Aldershot.”

“Of course I won’t, mother.”

“Bless you, my son.”

§ 4

Val had said, “Very well, I’ll go up”. Val had been gone from the dining room a good ten minutes—Fanny, too, “I must telephone to Camilla”, thought Rockingham. “I must tell her.”

Then—for the first time since he had shot headlong from Farnborough—he remembered that he had been driving Lampson’s car.

“Must get it back to him”, he thought next. “I shall want some clothes, too.” And at that, for the first time since he had revved away from the gunpark, he felt his brain functioning in the old orderly manner.

With a frown creasing his forehead, he stepped out in to the narrow hall, picked up the telephone, and dialled TOL.

The operator, the Steepdown exchange, answered almost immediately. In another moment, he was talking to Headworth.

“I’ll ask him”, said Headworth; and, after a short pause, “The colonel says you’d better take a week’s leave. I’ve sent for Noakes. Will you hang on—or shall I give him his orders?”

“I’d rather give them to him myself.”

Another pause. Then Noakes came on the wire. His, “Yes, sir. I quite understand, sir. I’m to bring your car up, sir; and drive the colonel’s car back, sir”, were satisfactory.

But that was the end of satisfaction. Because how could one call up Camilla at the risk of being overheard?

The drawing room door—he could see from where he stood—was still closed. He thought of the nearby call office; thought, “I can’t leave the house yet”; went back to the dining room; fumed there till Val reappeared.

“There’s—there’s a lot to be done”, faltered Val. “She insists on everybody being sent telegrams. I’m going home to cope with that. She says you and she will

arrange about the church, and . . . and the newspapers. Tom”—her green eyes were still tearless—“would it be sloppy if you put in that Geoffrey died for his country? Because he did.

“Because he did”, she repeated, clutching with the painted fingertips of her left hand for the diamond device she was wearing at her throat.

Then—with a last, almost fierce, “Put the motto in anyway, Tom. It’ll only mean four words extra. And—and they’re pretty damned appropriate”—she was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

§ 1

The front door of Mrs. Rockingham's house slammed. Quickly, and staring straight ahead of her, Valerie Danvers went past the dining room window. Slowly, Mrs. Rockingham's eldest son returned to her up the stairs.

She was at her desk by then.

"I'm writing out the notice", she said. "You had better telephone to William. He'll tell Frances for us. Come back when you've done."

William knew already.

"Collins has just rung from the Air Ministry", said William. "You met him at lunch, you remember. I'm glad you're there. Because I can't possibly get away now . . . Yes. I'll let Frances know . . . Mother must be very cut up. Give her my love. Tell her I'll come in about five o'clock."

Upstairs again, his mother handed him the laconic writing, "ROCKINGHAM. On November 13, Wing Commander Geoffrey Rockingham, D.F.C. Doing his duty".

"That's all I want", she said.

"Val wanted something else."

He told her what Val wanted. She took back the paper; added the four words, "Per ardua ad astra".

He asked: "Oughtn't we to put father's name in? And yours?"

"No. Rockingham's enough."

There was a funny pride in her voice. It seemed to his imagination as though she had said, "Everybody knows us. We've always been a service family".

"Give me my stick", she went on; and rose; and hobbled to the vitrine between the windows; and opened it; and took out first his father's scroll of honour, then Arthur's.

"One has to be proud", she said slowly. "It's the only way. I told Val that. I hope I helped her."

"I'm sure you did, mother."

She put back the scrolls, and closed the vitrine. The telephone rang. They heard Fanny come up the basement stairs.

"See who that is", said Mrs. Rockingham, as the extension bell shrilled.

The voice at the other end said, "I'm speaking for the *Evening Reporter*——"

Mrs. Rockingham's eldest son said, "Wait"; and put his hand over the transmitter.

"A newspaper man", he explained. "What shall I tell him?"

"I'll speak to the man myself."

She spoke for five minutes, very quietly again, but no more slowly than her habit. Just before the conversation finished, he heard her say, "I shouldn't ring up Miss Danvers if I were you. She can't tell you any more than I have". After she had hung up, he remonstrated with her:

"Why did you tell him all that?"

"Mainly to save Val. It's no use being angry. The man was only doing his duty."

Duty again! Why must she harp on the word? He had a different duty. To Camilla. He must telephone to Camilla. She mustn't learn of this . . . this setback to their plans from the newspapers.

"Still more delay", he caught himself thinking—and suddenly, in his very soul, tumult renewed itself; suddenly, he loathed himself for this thought, which was all wrong, which was shameful—shameful as his inability to regret his brother's passing except as a hindrance to his own immediate happiness.

Was he then so far gone in . . . in sin?

Scarcely formulated, the question vanished from his conscious mind. The tumult in his soul stilled. Again, he felt his brain functioning in the old orderly way. He must make some excuse; get out to that call office.

But his, "Hadn't I better take that notice to *The Times* at once, mother?" was met with a quiet, "There's no hurry. I want you to telephone to the florists for me. Then there's the Canon. He ought to know as soon as possible".

So that it was past twelve on that Friday, the thirteenth of November—with lunch put back half an hour—before Camilla's lover could escape from his mother's house.

§ 2

All that Camilla had found to say when her lover telephoned to her from the call office had been:

"Darling, how dreadful. I must write to your mother at once. Yes. I'll be in after five, but don't bother about me if you can't get away".

Now, with only a few precious minutes more to spare—for this time he had made, "I think I'll take a walk now William's here", his excuse for leaving the house in Westminster—she said:

“We mustn’t think of ourselves, Tom. You’ll have to stay at your mother’s till after the funeral”.

And that, of course, was right. Everything Camilla had just been saying was so right. A few days more or less didn’t “matter so terribly”. One could put in one’s application as soon as one went back to Aldershot.

All the same . . .

“All the same”, thought Rockingham, “Geoffrey’s being killed has made a difference.”

Yet what could that difference be?

He argued with himself even while he was kissing Camilla goodbye that evening: “It’s only the shock of the thing. Tomorrow I’ll be as certain as ever I was”.

The morrow, however, brought no certainty, only a renewal of the tumult in his soul. This day, Geoffrey and Val should have been married. This very night, he had meant to go to Camilla, to stay with her. Why had he dwelt on this thing? O God, why had he dwelt on it? Was happiness to escape him, just because of his brother’s death?

“Never”, he swore to himself.

But that evening—sitting alone with his mother—he saw her weaken, for the first time since he brought her the fell news.

They were listening to the radio. Suddenly she said, “Please turn it off, Tom. It doesn’t help. It’s getting on my nerves. What do you think Val’s doing tonight? I feel we ought to have invited her here”.

“Surely she’s better alone?”

“A man might be. Even a woman might be. But not a young girl, Tom. If only her mother were alive——”

And suddenly the tears glistened in her dark blue eyes.

“At least I have you and William”, she went on. “And Frances, of course. But they don’t count as much as you do. Married people belong to each other. I’m glad, now, that you never did marry. You’ll stay on for a day or two after the funeral, won’t you, Tom?”

“If you want me to, mother.”

For what else could one do? Here was yet another duty.

“Always duty”, he thought after she had controlled herself and left him. “Never joy.”

Rockingham slept his worst that night—blaming himself, every time he woke, for his heartlessness. Geoffrey was dead. Geoffrey had been killed—as Val said—for his country. But he, Geoffrey’s own brother, cared neither for him nor for the country. All he cared about was his own happiness.

And that, nothing would make him give up!

He woke still resolute. His mother insisted on going to church. Dutiful, he drove her there; went in with her. She limped in her mourning—but her head was held high.

The service meant nothing to him. The sermon seemed mere mumbo jumbo. He was through with all that. Because the Church, if he let it have its way, would deny him his woman. And nothing—nothing on God’s earth—should make him give up his woman.

Yet if Geoffrey had thought only of his woman, he would never have flown that fighter himself.

This knowledge burned—and Camilla, when he went to her that afternoon, seemed cognizant of it.

“I know what you’re thinking”, she said, at a pause in their talk. “You’re thinking that he needn’t have taken that plane up on the eve of his wedding day. But you would have done the same thing yourself, Tom.”

“I wonder.”

“I don’t.”

There was no passion in them that afternoon, but more of high companionship than they had ever experienced.

“You were very fond of him”, she said just before they parted. “You mustn’t think less kindly of him because of me.”

This, too, seemed right. Wholly so. One allegiance must not nullify all the others. He must not care less for his family just because he cared for Camilla. But his family—when the time came—must accept Camilla. He would stand no nonsense—even from them.

That Sunday night, William and Frances came to supper. By common consent, they kept talk away from Geoffrey.

“I hear the monarch’s going up to Wales next week”, said William. “I wish to goodness something could be done to scotch these rumours. It’s simply extraordinary how persistent they are. I was with our press officer the other day. He showed me some of the American papers. One of them actually announces the wedding for next June. Scandalous, I call it. The editor of that rag deserves a horsewhipping.”

“I hear——” began Frances; but her mother-in-law stopped her at once.

“I hear things, too”, she said. “But I keep my mouth shut about them. And I strongly advise you to do the same, my dear.”

“Why, mother? It’s awfully interesting.”

“It may be interesting, as you call it. But it’s very disloyal.”

William pretended to agree; but, when the two women had gone upstairs, he returned to the subject.

“I hope to goodness these rumours aren’t true”, he said. “The mere idea of his abdicating gives me the shivers. We’ve had enough social unrest since the war without that having to happen.”

“But why on earth should it happen?”

“Because whatever else happens”, pronounced William, “he can’t stay king and marry her.”

“Even if he’s in love with her?”

“My dear chap, what the hell’s that to do with it? He’s the King, isn’t he?”

“Are you implying that a king mustn’t fall in love?”

“I’m not talking academically, Tom. I’m talking practical politics. We’ve quite enough trouble to contend with abroad. We don’t want any at home.”

William’s eyes were cold. He bit off the end of his sentence.

“I understand”, he went on, “that mother insists on going to the funeral. I’ll ring up Collins again tomorrow. He says that as far as their experts are concerned there’s no reason why we shouldn’t have the funeral on Tuesday. But of course it all depends on the coroner. Collins asked me whether we’re going to be represented by a solicitor at the inquiry. I said I didn’t see any point in it. Do you?”

“No. I can’t say I do. There must have been something faulty about that plane, William. Geoffrey was the last pilot in the world to pull the wrong string, as he used to call it.”

“Funny you should remember that. I’m trying to remember the last time I heard him use the expression. It was here. The best part of a year ago. Just after King George’s funeral. We drank a whole bottle of the nineteen-six.”

“And Fanny made an awful fuss about getting it up for us.”

For a few moments, memories held them silent.

Then, abruptly, William said, “Well, here’s to him”; and drained his glass.

§ 4

That Sunday night—for the very first time since Headworth, looking him straight between the eyes, had said, “I’m afraid it’s rather bad news, sir”—Major Thomas

Rockingham, Royal Artillery, felt it in him to mourn for his dead brother.

Such a good chap, Geoffrey had always been. And so gay. So much gayer than oneself or William. Always laughing. Always making the best of things. A realist, though. “Spirit be sugared. It’s no good putting your blind eye to that particular telescope, Horatio.”

Queer—thought Rockingham, as he undressed himself—how plainly one could hear those words, and others spoken by William and Geoffrey on the same occasion.

“The civilian population will certainly be for it. And who’ll get the blame?” asked William.

“His Majesty’s Army, His Majesty’s Navy, and His Majesty’s Air Force”, answered the ghost of Geoffrey.

But now Geoffrey was beyond all blame. Because he had not thought only of his woman. Because, even on the eve of his wedding day, he had taken that fighter up himself.

This knowledge, also, burned—and deep. All next day in court—William had telephoned when he arrived home, “There’s a message from Collins. He’s going down, and offers to take one of us with him. I can’t. But you’d better. Mother’s sure to want to know everything”—this knowledge scorched Thomas Rockingham.

Geoffrey was beyond all blame. But what of oneself—if one thought only of one’s woman, only of joy, nevermore of duty? Could one indeed be that far gone in . . . in sin?

And yet, how could this thing for which one was still resolute, be sin? And yet, one had done one’s duty—more than one’s duty—five and twenty years of service.

And yet, how could one forgo joy, seeing that another’s happiness—Camilla’s—depended on one’s own?

So again that night, sitting alone with his mother, telling her—for some of it had been secret—all he might about the day’s inquiry, Mrs. Rockingham’s eldest son swore to himself that nothing on God’s earth or beyond it should make him give up the woman he loved.

And once more, two days later—shivering in the icy wind that swept across the burial ground after the Last Post had sounded for Geoffrey—he swore that very oath.

“Camilla’s happiness as much as mine. Her happiness even more than mine”, he told himself as they were driven back—he and these two mute miserable women, the one who should have married Geoffrey and the one who had borne Geoffrey—to the little house in Westminster.

But there he still shivered. And from there, towards eleven o'clock on Thursday morning, Mrs. Rockingham said very calmly through the telephone:

“Is that the adjutant? Is that Captain Headworth? I thought I had better let you know, Captain Headworth, that my son isn't likely to be back tomorrow. He has a touch of pleurisy and he is running rather a high temperature”.

§ 5

“A hundred and four”, said Doctor Lucius at six o'clock that evening. “On the whole, I think I'd better send for a nurse.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

§ 1

The calendar on Mabelle Rockingham's desk said, "Wednesday. Dec. 2, 1936". Mabelle Rockingham said:

"Tom's given us all a rare fright, my dear. Why aren't men more sensible? I knew it was sheer madness for him to go out so soon".

"So did I", thought Camilla. But of course one couldn't admit that.

Week-old words and pictures flashed through her mind. She heard Tom telling her over the telephone, "Did you get my letter, darling? I do hope you haven't been worrying. I'm perfectly all right now. I'm coming straight round to see you".

She saw him entering her flat, sitting in the big chair by the electric fire. She heard herself say, "I'm sure you're still running a temperature. Yes. I'll make you some tea if you insist. But you must go home immediately afterwards".

She felt his lips febrile, his hands cold on hers, as they parted. She watched him, from her high window, as he stepped into a taxi. She remembered thinking, "When he's all mine, I'll make him take more care of himself". She remembered how she had blamed this old lady for letting Tom out of the house so soon.

Then, "It really wasn't my fault", said this old lady. "I did my best to stop him"; and both smiled.

"Let's hope it will be a lesson to him", went on Mrs. Rockingham; and Camilla, "Is he allowed visitors yet?"

"Oh yes. Since Sunday. Major Lyttelton and Captain Patterson were both here that afternoon. And on Monday Colonel Lampson came. I thought it was so nice of him, especially as he was just off for his holiday. But of course Tom's always been very popular in the regiment. Why, I remember, dear, that when he first joined——"

But before Mrs. Rockingham could continue, Fanny brought in the teatray, and, immediately on her heels, entered Val.

The girl—Camilla noticed—did not wear mourning. After kissing Mrs. Rockingham, she extended a hand.

"And how are you, Lady Wethered?"

"Very well, thank you."

"I really came to see how the invalid was getting on."

"So did I", thought Camilla. But that, also, one could not admit.

The ostensible purpose of this visit was purely social. One had hesitated—and

for the best part of an anxious week—about making it.

“Tom’s mother”, one had thought, “will think me such a hypocrite when she finds out the truth.”

This thought, recurring, made further speech difficult for Camilla. Fortunately, Val had plenty of news.

“Do you know what I did last night?” she said. “I went down to see the Crystal Palace fire. Of course I couldn’t get near it. The police had closed all the roads. There were simply thousands of cars. Yes. I’d love a crumpet.”

But, although she ate two of the crumpets and continued almost as talkative as she had been on the night when one had first met her, Camilla could not help realising that this was no longer the same girl.

It seemed as though sorrow had matured her; given her a dignity. It must be sorrow, too, which had drawn the bond between her and Tom’s mother so close—this being apparent every time they looked at each other.

But those two, of course, were of the same race.

This thought, also, made talk difficult for Camilla; and, while she still brooded, “It’s funny. The more I live by myself, the more I realise how American I am”, Val shot at her:

“And what do you think of the bishop’s speech, Lady Wethered? Do you think he was really alluding to Mrs.——?”

“Please, dear”, interrupted Mrs. Rockingham. But there was no holding Val.

“I know you don’t think I ought to talk about her”, she said, taking the stool in front of the fire, and laying one hand on Mrs. Rockingham’s knee. “But everybody is. It’s really quite an open secret that H.M. wants to marry her. Why, they had a cabinet meeting about it last week. I hear that poor old Baldwin’s simply worried to death.”

“Naturally”, let out Mrs. Rockingham, adding swiftly, “If you want to go up and see Tom, dear, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t. Tell him Lady Wethered is here. He might just like to see her, too”.

“Might!” mused the sense of humour in Camilla. Nevertheless, she could not help feeling herself more than ever the hypocrite once Val had taken that very obvious hint.

§ 2

“It’s quite on the cards”, said Mrs. Rockingham, just as Valerie Danvers closed the door of her cluttered drawing room, “that Tom would like you to go up and see

him for a few minutes. You won't mind, will you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Men always make such bad invalids. He's fussing to be allowed out of his room. We've had to promise him he shall come down tomorrow."

"Is that quite safe?"

"Doctor Lucius thinks so." And both women fell silent for a moment, till Camilla—feeling awkward—said:

"I didn't understand what speech Miss Danvers was alluding to. I suppose it was in this morning's papers, but I've had a lot to do and I've never even looked at them".

"It's here if you care to read it", replied Tom's mother, handing her the *Morning Post*.

Quickly, Camilla's eyes scanned the column.

"I'm afraid", she went on, "that I still don't understand. This seems to be all about religion."

"There are two sentences", explained Mrs. Rockingham, "which seem rather significant."

"You mean the ones about hoping that the King is aware of the need for religion, and wishing that he gave more positive signs of his awareness."

"Yes. You see, his father used to attend divine service every Sunday. So naturally——" But there Mrs. Rockingham stopped.

"I still don't believe the gossip", she went on. "But it's all very disturbing. And I do happen to know Val was right about that cabinet meeting. Did you see *The Times* leader?"

"No."

Mrs. Rockingham fell silent again.

Camilla folded up and handed back the paper. As she did so, more words, more pictures—words and pictures which she had taken from an envelope addressed in Lettice Ponder's handwriting only twenty-four hours ago—went flashing through her mind.

Tom's mother—it seemed to her—was looking very worried, yet at the same time rather stern. She heard herself say, "I expect it'll be all right"; saw the lined face opposite harden.

"The monarchy", began Tom's mother, "means a great deal to this country. But the Protestant faith means more. I agree with Bishop Blunt there. All the same, I wish he hadn't said anything. It seems so . . . inopportune."

But, as she spoke, they heard Val's feet on the staircase; and, for Camilla, the

thrill of the moment wiped out the news of the day.

§ 3

Val, tall in the low doorway, was smiling, “Tom does want to see you. But that nurse is a perfect young dragon. She says the room is much too small for three people to be in at once”. Mrs. Rockingham was smiling, “Then you had better stay and keep me company while Camilla goes up to him, my dear.

“Only don’t”, added Mrs. Rockingham to Camilla, “stay with him too long.”

Once outside the drawing room, the woman who loved Tom Rockingham also smiled, because her tactics, or should it be strategy—hadn’t Tom once explained the difference?—were succeeding so perfectly.

“Clever of me”, decided Camilla; but the knowledge of having played the complete hypocrite pursued her up the short flight of stairs, at the top of which stood the “perfect young dragon”.

She, too—stiff in her stiff linen—insisted that one should not stay long.

The door of Tom’s room was just ajar. Nurse pushed it open; closed it on them. They looked at each other for a long second. Then Tom laughed, “I know what you’re going to say, darling. That this serves me jolly well right”.

At the words—Guy’s pet phrase—a tiny chill went through Camilla. But, almost instantaneously, sheer thankfulness for his recovery suffused her.

“All right”, she laughed. “I won’t nag.”

He had risen from his armchair at her entrance. Except that he looked a little thin, he might have been his old self. He opened his arms and she went to them. His lips were cool. The tweed jacket he wore smelt of heather.

“Nice”, she said, snuggling to him. “Kiss me again, Tom. Were you very surprised when Val told you I was here?”

“Not very. Somehow or other, I rather expected you would turn up.”

“And you’re glad to see me?”

“I should just say I was.”

They sat down at a small table on which lay the book he had been reading and his pipe.

“You’ve been smoking”, she said. “Ought you to?”

It was his turn to laugh.

“The doctor seems to think it’s all right. So don’t you worry. I shall be downstairs tomorrow.”

“So your mother’s just told me. Tom, what a funny little room.”

She glanced round her—at the patchwork quilt on the bed, at the photographs on the wall, at the bookcase, at the old-fashioned washstand. Her eyes came back to his face.

“I expected you to look worse”, she went on. “I’ve never seen you wear that tie before. What are the colours?”

“Don’t you really know?” He laughed again, fingering the blue silk with the red zigzag. “They’re the regiment’s. Very few of us sport them nowadays. I often wonder why.”

Unexplainably, another chill ran through her.

“They’re rather pretty”, she said; then, glancing round her again, she asked, “What do you keep in that very official-looking box?”

He chaffed her, “Aren’t you curious? What do you think I keep in it? Love letters?”

But, just for a second, he, too, was conscious of a chill that he could not explain.

“As a matter of fact”, he went on slowly, “my application to retire is in there. You remember my telling you I’d written it out.”

Another second of silence held them. Then, suddenly, his hand covered hers.

“Lampson was here Monday”, he said. “I jolly nearly gave it to him then. I would have, if he’d been going back to Steepdown. Thank goodness, he won’t be away very long. We’re only allowed sixty-one days’ leave in the year, you know, and he used up nearly three weeks of his after he was ill in the autumn. Lucky, isn’t it? I don’t quite know what we should do otherwise. Because, when I go back to duty, I shall be in command. And I can’t very well ask my own permission to quit my corps till my application’s sanctioned.

“Or could I, do you think?” he asked, raising her hand to his lips.

A discreet knock interrupted them before she could answer. Nurse brought in a glass of medicine, which he drank distastefully.

“Filthy stuff”, he pronounced.

“But, Major Rockingham”—the nurse protested—“it’s doing you such a lot of good.”

She looked at the visitor as though to say, “You’ve been here quite long enough”. But Camilla made no move. She went out. But still Camilla sat unmoving . . . Till, abruptly, Tom rose; and stooped; and put both his hands on her shoulders, while the old words broke from him, and all the old rapture, all the old ecstasy went through and through her, blinding her to every doubt and every fear.

Since surely there could be no doubt, and nothing to fear, with Tom standing over one, with Tom assuring one, “My darling, I love you so”?

So sweet, that reassurance. So lovely, his eagerness for their next meeting.

“Leave the tactics to me this time”, he said, releasing her. “A little afternoon bridge, I think. Just to amuse the poor invalid. How about tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“Because you won’t be up to it.”

“The day after, then?”

“But——”

“But me no buts. Just keep yourself free, and I promise you mother shall telephone.”

“Couldn’t you do that yourself, Tom? I rather like to hear your voice, you know.”

“Well, it might just be managed. This is nurse’s last day, and mother has to go out at four o’clock tomorrow. For one of her precious league meetings. Camilla——”

“Yes, darling.”

“Shall I break it to her?”

But—again before she could answer—that discreet knock interrupted them, and nurse opened the door, saying, “Your brother’s come to see you, Major Rockingham”.

Camilla’s poise matched William’s.

“I was just off anyway”, she smiled as he entered—and went thoughtfully down the stairs.

§ 4

“Val had to go”, said Mrs. Rockingham when Camilla reentered the drawing room. Frances, who now sat with her mother-in-law, rose and shook hands.

Her poise—it seemed to Camilla’s imagination—was not quite so perfect as William’s. Her pale brown eyes appeared faintly quizzical.

“How did you find our invalid?” she asked.

“I was pleasantly surprised.”

They eyed each other for another instant. Frances resumed her seat. Fanny entered with the madeira. This, and a glance at the pseudo Louis-Seize clock, made Camilla all selfconscious. She had been too long with Tom. Now, she was outstaying her welcome.

“I must be going, too”, she said; but Mrs. Rockingham detained her with an

excitable, “No. Sit down for a minute. You remember what we were talking about just before you went upstairs. Well, Frances—or rather William—really has brought us some news. William heard this afternoon at the Admiralty——”

“If you mean he heard about the King’s wanting to get married”, interrupted Fanny, “it’s most of it here in the evening paper.”

And she handed the paper to her mistress without another word.

Fanny, leaving the three women speechless, went out. Frances rose again, looked over her mother-in-law’s shoulder while she read. Automatically, Camilla joined them, stared at the bold type.

“So it was true all the time”, she thought. “Only, the British newspapers wouldn’t print it.” And once again she felt altogether the American, stranger in a very strange land.

This feeling deepened to Mrs. Rockingham’s first words.

“Outrageous”, burst out Mrs. Rockingham. “Positively outrageous. He must be mad even to think of it.”

“Why, mother?” Frances spoke. “If he’s really in love with her?”

“Have you gone mad too?”

Visibly, Frances quailed. Visibly, her mother-in-law controlled herself.

“I still don’t believe it”, she went on; and, reading again, “There’s nothing definite here. It doesn’t actually say he’s told parliament he intends to marry her. Constitutional crisis—fiddlesticks. If there were any real truth in all this, we should have heard something about it from Mr. Baldwin”.

“But, mother”—Frances spoke very quietly—“we’ve been hearing about it for months.”

Silence followed. Mrs. Rockingham’s eyes fastened on Camilla’s.

“What do you think?” she asked; and, with Camilla still meditating her reply, continued:

“Let me tell you one thing. If this is true, if he really insists on marrying her, he’ll never be crowned”.

CHAPTER SIXTY

§ 1

Mrs. Rockingham's vehemence made it still more difficult for Camilla to go. She seemed so typical of storybook England as she sat there, arguing with Frances, "I'm just as loyal as you are. I know what he's done for the Empire just as well as you do. But our King isn't like an ordinary man. He can't just follow his own inclinations. And he isn't an ordinary king, either. He isn't like——"

She named another monarch; and sniffed at her daughter-in-law's, "Mother, why are you so hard?"

She was hard, of course. Yet secretly, Camilla couldn't help seeing her point of view, and William's, when he joined them a few minutes later.

"It's no good letting your heart run away with your head, Frances", said William—and, with Camilla seizing the opportunity for departure, insisted on accompanying her downstairs.

"I told Tom what I know about this business", confessed Tom's only brother, "and he's just as worried as I am. Whichever way it goes, you see, it can't have a good effect in the services."

"Even if he doesn't marry her, Captain Rockingham?"

William's eyes were a puzzle. He hesitated before he said, "I hope to God he doesn't"—and let her out of the house.

The night was fine, Camilla's flat within two miles. Thoughtful again, she decided to walk.

These weeks since the death of Geoffrey—could they have been nearly three?—had only made her love Tom the more. His love hadn't cooled either. His last question proved that. So why worry? Why not be philosophical? Another fortnight's delay—his colonel was sure to be back by then—didn't really matter.

They had known their own minds for so long now—ever since that July night in Stonehenge.

§ 2

Outside the block of flats, when Camilla reached them, stood the usual newspaperman. Presented with his usual copper, he said, "You're lucky, miss. That's the last one. Rare run on 'em tonight. And no wonder".

Inside, a liftman with whom she had made friends gossiped freely as he took her up. He “didn’t know what to think”. But Enid Drury-Pottinger, who telephoned while Camilla was changing to dine in the restaurant (“You can’t lunch with me tomorrow. Or Thursday either. Oh, dear! Then we must try to fix some day next week”), had already nailed her colours to the mast.

“I told you this was going to happen”, she chuckled. “And I told you what a row there’d be. But he’ll win. He’s bound to. They can’t do without him. And they know it.”

Who “they” might be, she did not condescend to explain; and Camilla—glad to be rid of the pest—let her thoughts return to her own affairs, only to have them interrupted again the very moment she approached her usual table.

For the couple at the adjoining one, who had recently scraped acquaintance, immediately invited her to share it and would not take no for their answer.

“We’ve only just ordered our soup”, began the better half of that couple; and, with Camilla hardily seated, she went on, “We were wondering, just before you came in—you mustn’t mind, I’m awfully curious and the moment I knew who your husband was, I simply had to look him up in *Who’s Who*, that’s how I found out you’re an American—whether you know this Mrs. Simpson”.

And they, too, gossiped, with a freedom which Camilla found both amazing and distasteful, until she could break away.

She would have gone to her own apartment then; but, just outside the restaurant, she encountered—to her supreme annoyance—a man who smiled at her and said, “You don’t remember me, Lady Wethered. I met you just before you were married. At the Bombay Yacht Club”; and as good as forced her to take a cup of coffee with “me and my memsahib”.

That couple also—after formal inquiries about Guy which made one feel rather uncomfortable—insisted on discussing “this extraordinary news about the King”.

“It would be a marvellous thing in one way”, said Mrs. Ivor Knowles of the Public Works Department, no more distinguished for tact than Enid Drury-Pottinger, “if we had an American woman on the throne.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about”, said her husband; and Camilla left them still disagreeing over their “starboard lights”.

Her own sitting room seemed a haven of rest. She smoked and read for an hour; took a bath, and slept normally. But her Thursday morning’s paper was one shrieking headline; and suddenly she experienced an urge—almost uncontrollable—to lift the telephone and demand Tom.

Because William had said that this news was worrying Tom; and because—oh,

well, just because one wanted to know exactly what he thought about it.

Or wasn't that the real reason? Did the real reason lie deeper? Could one be imagining—actually and fearfully imagining—that this news would affect one's own future?

"It can't, and I'm crazy", she decided; and suppressed the urge; and dressed herself, in a short white skirt and a sleeveless scarlet pullover, for squash.

§ 3

It had been a whim of Camilla's—conceived from the moment an aimless prowling round this building disclosed the fact that there were several courts in the basement—to learn squash rackets. And she had given way to that whim as soon as she realised that Geoffrey's death must mean the postponement of her happiness.

After all, why not? One must have something to do. One mustn't let oneself become flabby. Or fat.

Inspecting herself in the long mirror of the recessed cupboard, it seemed to her that she might be getting just a little fat, and that—during these last weeks—she had been oversmoking again. Her left hand, as it lifted this shaggy snuff-coloured coat from its hanger, seemed almost as though it wanted to tremble.

Then the tiny mood of hypochondria vanished, and recollection said, "These are the very same clothes you were wearing when you and Tom first met".

Chiding herself for the sentimentalism, she could not help revelling in it. As long as one could indulge in such sentiments, life was worthwhile. A woman who never let her heart run away with her head just wasn't a woman at all.

Glooms vanished as she slipped into the coat and tucked the light racket under her arm. The ensuing forty minutes were pure enjoyment.

"You've a wonderful eye", said the dour Scots professional, as he opened the door to let her out of court. "And this morning there's no been much wrong with your footwork."

Then he too—with a quarter of an hour to wait for his next pupil—referred, cautiously, to the news.

"It's a great pity", said Sandy Frazer. "They'll no be liking it where I come from." And his lips closed in a grim line.

Upstairs, Camilla found her chambermaid, who should have been at work, devouring the paper. Curiosity urged her to ask a cautious question. The answer astounded her. Here was storybook England again—puritan to the core.

She finished her book, and cooked herself a light lunch. Lettice Ponder's last

letter demanded an answer—and an apology.

“You seem to have been right”, she finished. “The British papers broke the story this morning. At least, most of it. Nobody can talk of anything else.”

Three o’clock saw her at exercise again, tramping for Hyde Park. These last days, an idea had begun to shape itself, vaguely, in her imagination. Tom ought to go to the seaside after his illness. Why should she stay in London? A week’s notice—and she could give up the flat.

Elaborating the idea while she swung along at her best pace, she grew conscious of irritation. Why had Tom, why had she herself, been so overscrupulous about that promise to Guy? Surely, now that Tom had actually written out his application to retire from the army, they could consider themselves free, and honour satisfied?

What was honour anyway? A shibboleth, like glory, for which men killed one another. So stupid of them. And yet . . .

“And yet”, thought Camilla, turning homeward, “I mustn’t weaken. Tom wouldn’t like me to. And I shouldn’t care much for myself either—if I did.”

Thought diffused as she entered her flat. Irritation, and the conflict of purpose which had creased her forehead during most of her walk, gave way to excitement. It was a quarter to four already. Soon, the telephone would ring. She would wait for tea until it did.

Lighting a cigarette, she sat down by the instrument. Tom might have “broken things” to his mother. Still more exciting—if he had.

The minutes dragged. She finished her cigarette, yearned for another. Only sheer willpower kept her hand from the flat tin.

At last the bell shrilled, and she had scooped up the hand-microphone, and Tom was saying, “Hallo, is that you? Good. I thought I might have got another wrong number. . . Well, it’s quite all right about bridge tomorrow. And mother wants you to lunch with us first”.

His tone conveyed rather more. There was really no need to question him. Curiosity, however, had its way.

“No”, answered Tom. “I haven’t told her. I’ve had no opportunity. Besides, you and I didn’t have time to discuss it with William bursting in like that. Thank goodness, I’m rid of my nurse. She was beginning to drive me potty. By the way, what do you think of the news? It looks pretty bad, doesn’t it?”

And even he—even Tom—gossiped for a moment or so, till she interrupted him with a quiet, “I gather you’re alone”.

He laughed back, “Absolutely. It’s Fanny’s afternoon off, and cook’s so deaf she couldn’t listen-in if she tried. Doctor Lucius was here this morning. He says I’m

to be allowed out by Sunday. Only for an hour, though. And only if it's quite fine".

"What else did the doctor have to say?"

"Oh, the usual . . . He wants me to take a week at Brighton or somewhere like that. Awkward, isn't it?"

"Why awkward?"

"Because I'm jolly well not going to leave London as long as you're here."

"But supposing I came too?"

The wire went silent. She could almost see him reflecting.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't", she persisted. "Wouldn't you like me to?"

"It's a ripping idea. Only——"

"Only what, Tom?"

Again the wire went silent; but, in imagination, it seemed to convey his every thought; and she realised—not for the first time—just how accurately she knew this man, when he answered:

"I was only wondering whether we ought to".

She took refuge in humour, asking, "Even if I don't stay at the same hotel?" He answered, with another laugh, "There are plenty of 'em in Brighton".

But, although he went on, "Let's dwell on that for a day or two, shall we?", and continued lovably talkative for five minutes longer, she could not avoid the realisation that he was as typical of storybook England as his mother and that girl who had answered her casual question with such astounding fervour this very morning.

Guy had imposed the condition that Tom should retire from the regiment. Tom, if only tacitly, had accepted that condition. Until he had actually put in his application to retire, therefore, he would be more than reluctant to . . .

Not, mark you, that one did not feel exactly the same way about it oneself!

§ 4

"I really do feel that way about it myself", decided Camilla, sitting alone at the pictures after an early dinner, during which she had spoken with nobody. "And I should hate Tom to be any different. I couldn't trust Him if he were."

For that she could trust Tom to the last limit, even the fear which had become acutely vocal during his illness ("No news again. He would let me know something if he were well enough. He must be very ill. He may be dying"), had never put in doubt.

Lights went up in the picture house while she still hugged that certainty. The audience stood for "God Save the King". A few voices sang the words. She sensed

something curiously electrical—something that struck her as curiously un-English—in the atmosphere. Outside, the placards read, “Crisis. Latest”.

In the omnibus that took her home she overheard two women talking.

“They were just going to replate page one when I left the office”, said the first woman.

The voice sounded familiar. Turning her head, Camilla recognised Mary Hawkins. But the recognition was not mutual, Mary being too absorbed.

“No,” said Mary, in answer to a whispered question. “They hadn’t decided on the headline. But we’re using her photograph. And saying he wants to marry her. After all, why shouldn’t we? It’s been in the American papers ever since she got her divorce.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

§ 1

“Your mother’s in a rare state”, announced Fanny, panting in with Rockingham’s breakfast tray on the Friday morning. “All because of that picture paper I take in. I wish I’d never showed it her. That I do.”

She continued garrulous while she arranged the table; and went out, muttering, “You mark my words, Mr. Tom. She’ll have a stroke one of these fine days if she lets things get on her mind so”.

A good thing, therefore, that one had not broken one’s own news.

That news, nevertheless, would have to be broken sooner or later; and, as he slipped from bed and donned his dressing gown, Camilla’s lover once more considered its effect.

“Mother will hate it”, he knew. “It’s so dead against her principles.” And he remembered the absurd scene she had made when he ventured to suggest that the new bill for the reform of the divorce laws seemed “fairly reasonable”. (“Reasonable, indeed. I call it absolutely outrageous. Why don’t they abolish marriage altogether while they’re about it?”)

Mothers bark, though, had always been so very much worse than her bite.

Hugging this certainty, he sat down to the table and uncovered the hot plate. Thank goodness, one was nearly well again and that one wouldn’t be needing any more sleeping draughts. The damn dope gave one such rotten dreams.

Rejoicing in his recovered appetite, he wolfed his poached egg and the two rashers of bacon, helped himself to marmalade, cleared the toastrack, and poured out his tea.

“Richard’s himself again”, his mind quoted, as he filled a pipe.

His own paper, he had not yet opened. It was no good worrying too much about this “constitutional crisis”. William had been far too pessimistic. Five to one, the whole thing would blow over. Besides, one’s own affairs were infinitely more important.

Just as well, though, to have a squint at the news.

§ 2

Mrs. Rockingham, hobbling from her own room, knocking on and opening the

door of her son's, found him still absorbed in the leader.

"I just came in to see how you were this morning", she began; but her very next words betrayed the prevarication.

"Tom", she said, "this is *too* dreadful."

"Why, mother?"

For answer she handed him Fanny's paper, with the photograph, with the staring black, "The King wants to marry Mrs. Simpson. Cabinet answers 'No'!"

"This rag", she fulminated, "has no decency. It ought to be burnt."

"You still don't think the story's true, then?"

"My dear", she sat down heavily on the chair he had placed for her, "I know it's true. Even the *Morning Post* doesn't make any secret about it. How can he? Oh, how can he?"

Her hands were shaking. To his amazement he saw tears in her eyes.

He said, almost roughly, "Pull yourself together, mother. It isn't as important as all that". She stared at him as though he had been a stranger.

"How can you say such a thing?" she asked, "Doesn't the country mean anything to you, either? Don't you see what it will mean if he insists on going through with this? Have you forgotten he's the head of the Church, Tom?"

"Is that any reason why he should not marry the woman he loves?"

The words Rockingham had never meant to say struck his mother speechless. Her eyes dried, hardened. She continued to stare at him as though he were a stranger.

"I would never have believed it of you", she said at last. "God help the Empire if there are many people who think like you and Frances seem to. Are we to have a woman who has divorced two husbands sitting with her third on the throne of England? Why, it's—It's impossible, Tom. You must see that."

Secretly, he did see that. But all his own love for another woman urged him to argue.

"You're making a mountain out of a molehill", he began. "He can marry her without making her his queen. My paper says that's what he wants to do."

"A morganatic marriage!" Mrs. Rockingham sniffed.

"Well, why not?"

"Because the Archbishop of Canterbury would never consent to have it celebrated."

"How do you know?" Again Rockingham spoke unwisely. "And anyway the law can't refuse to marry them. There'll be nothing to prevent it, once her decree has been made absolute."

“Tom!”

The single syllable revealed all her heart. It conveyed a whole speech—the very same speech she had once read over to him before going to a meeting of her league, with its peroration (of which she had been so proud): “Holy matrimony is the very plinth of our Protestant Faith. Let the Church once sanction the marriage of men or women—even innocent men or women—who have been through the divorce court, and it will be the end of the Church of England”.

“Tom!” she repeated; and rose, and hobbled out.

§ 3

Alone again, Rockingham was aware of anger. “The old fanatic”, he thought.

Yet at least she had been sincere.

“And I wasn’t”, he admitted to himself. “Not quite.”

The admission fretted him. He relit his pipe, and read the paper his mother had forgotten to take away. This thing didn’t look like blowing over. If the King really had asked the cabinet to allow this marriage, and the cabinet really had refused permission, it would be the very devil.

“Poor chap”, he caught himself thinking. “I’ve always admired him. He’s jolly popular with the army, too.”

A queer thought, considering how nearly one was out of the army. Still, one hadn’t actually left it yet.

That last thought seemed even queerer. Because it was so certain—so definitely and absolutely and irrevocably certain—that one would be out of the army within the next fortnight or so. As soon as ever Lampson came back from his leave.

Why, even in those beastly dope dreams one had never seen oneself revoking that decision. One had only seen faces, especially one face . . . Better not dwell on that!

Fanny, knocking, dispelled fantasies.

“Your bath’s ready”, she said. “That fire wants making up. Your mother’s gone out. Mrs. Pillsbury just rang up to ask what time lunch was. As though she didn’t know as well as I do that your mother always has it at half-past one.”

He left her stoking the tiny grate; heard her go past the bathroom door with the breakfast tray. A good soul! So was mother. She would come round all right, give him her blessing one of these days. All the same . . .

“All the same”, he decided, “it’s a nuisance she’s quite so prejudiced. Camilla will need friends when we do cut the painter. I don’t like to think of this house

closed to her.”

And, just for a moment, he gloomed.

A cold sponge after the warm bath heartened him. Back in his room, he made a careful toilet, and went downstairs for the first time. His legs seemed a bit shaky, but otherwise he felt—in his own phraseology—like a two-year-old.

How about letting Brighton go by the board?

Half-past eleven—he had spent the interval trying to get short-wave stations on the radio—brought Doctor Lucius, whose face always reminded Rockingham of a Dutch cheese.

“Up, I see”, beamed Lucius, as though he had made a scientific discovery of considerable importance. “Let’s have a look at you. Did you sleep all right? Did you eat a good breakfast? Splendid. All you want now is a breath of sea air.”

The brief inspection finished, however, his whole demeanour changed.

“I want you to do something for me”, he began. “Your mother’s flirting with the idea of this operation for rheumatoid arthritis. I’m all against it—at her age. But I’ve very little influence. You have.”

He described the operation at some length; and, having extorted a promise which struck him as rather reluctant, referred to the topic of the hour.

“Bad thing for the country, whichever way it goes”, he said. “The person I’m most sorry for is his mother.” And, just before he went, he added, “It must be a terrible thing for a man in his position to have to choose between love and duty”.

“It isn’t so easy for any man”, thought his patient.

But on that also it seemed better not to dwell; and Rockingham turned on the radio again; was still playing with it when his own mother returned, apparently contrite, to ask:

“What did Lucius think of you? Fanny tells me he called”.

§ 4

After a little finessing, Mrs. Rockingham’s eldest son brought their talk round to his mother’s operation.

“So that old fool’s been taking you into his confidence”, she mocked. “I thought he would sooner or later. Frightened, is he? The only thing that’s frightening me is the expense. That’s why I haven’t made up my mind yet. But this constant pain gets me down, Tom. My judgment isn’t what it used to be. And I flare up too easily.”

The apology was transparent. He accepted it with a quiet, “You ought to take things more easily”.

“I know I ought”, she said, and picked up her book.

Watching her over the top of his own novel, Rockingham relented completely. Women of her age were entitled to their fixed ideas.

It was nearly one by then. He went to wash his hands. Just as he emerged from the downstairs cloakroom, Connie Pillsbury billowed in through the front door, ejaculating, “I know I’m early. Isn’t this a dreadful business? I’ve just been on to my stockbroker. He says things are a shade better this morning. Thank goodness, I haven’t much open. By the way, who’s our fourth this afternoon?”

“Lady Wethered.”

“Ho, ho.” She poked a fat finger at him. “Is that why you’re staying at home again? But of course. I forgot. You’ve had influenza. I do hope you’re no longer infectious. I’m simply terrified of it.”

Escorted upstairs, she unbosomed herself—the word, as Rockingham’s mind conceived it, seeming peculiarly apt—for the next quarter of an hour, silencing even his mother with her, “I know just what you’re thinking about it all, Mabelle. But it’s high time you gave up being such a die-hard. My paper says he mustn’t be allowed to abdicate on any account. I agree with that absolutely.

“Absolutely”, she repeated, as Fanny announced, “Lady Wethered, ma’am”.

“This is so nice of you, Mrs. Rockingham”, began Camilla; but her lover sensed the faint touch of awkwardness in her voice.

Almost immediately Fanny announced lunch, during which Connie Pillsbury continued the unbosoming process at succulent length.

“It’s all so romantic”, she said towards the end of the meal. “I was so excited about it yesterday afternoon that I never went near my bridge club. By the way, have you been presented yet, Lady Wethered?”

“Presented?” Camilla’s wits had been woolgathering. Once again, as she brought them back to her neighbour, Rockingham sensed that faint awkwardness.

“Don’t you remember? You were trying to make up your mind about it the last time we both lunched here.”

“Why, so I was. What a marvellous memory you must have, Mrs. Pillsbury.”

“Confound Connie and her memory”, thought Rockingham, with the woman he loved continuing, in answer to a further question, “No. I haven’t done anything about being presented so far”.

But, once the three women left him alone, his own memories of the previous occasion when he had played bridge with them became acutely active. Even then—all those months ago—he had known that he was in love . . .

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

§ 1

The same old thump of his mother's stick recalled her eldest son's mind to the present. As on the previous occasion, he hurried upstairs to find the three women already seated at the card table. But this time he cut with Camilla—and they lost the first two rubbers without taking a single game.

He was playing his very worst. She chaffed him about his last double.

“It must be the influenza”, she said.

Then they pivoted—she to Connie Pillsbury, he to his mother—and his play improved a little, though not much.

To his mother's grumble, “You're out of luck this afternoon”, memory grew active again. He seemed to hear Ralph chaffing him, “It looks as though you must be an absolute devastator with the fair sex, Rusty. Funny, how quiet you always keep it”.

When had Ralph said that? One night at practice camp, over a game of poker. And a night or two later, fate had taken one to Stonehenge.

Queer—he could not help thinking—the tricks fate played a chap. If he hadn't gone to Stonehenge that night, if Camilla hadn't happened to be there, they might never have found out that they were in love with each other. And, so thinking, he revoked.

“Your fault, Mabelle; you forgot to ask him”, chided Connie, marking the penalty; and again Camilla chaffed him, “What's the matter with you this afternoon, Tom?”

As if she didn't know! As though a fellow could concentrate with those hazel eyes watching him, with those white hands fascinating him. A lovely woman—and so very nearly his own.

Marvelling that she should be able to keep her concentration, he jerked his mind back to the cards; and managed to win a rubber. Then tea came, and they broke off for twenty minutes.

“I wonder if there's any more news”, said Mrs. Rockingham; and Connie Pillsbury, “Let's send Fanny out for a paper.”

“No. It's raining.”

“Shall I go, mother?”

“I should think not.”

They resumed play. Towards a quarter to six, Connie Pillsbury began to fidget.

“I simply must know how the stock exchange closed, Mabelle. What time do you get your paper?”

“About half-past six as a rule. Two no trumps to you, Connie.”

“Three hearts to you, Mabelle. Would you mind if I turned on the wireless?”

Tom and Camilla passed.

“Three no trumps. You shouldn’t be such a gambler”, said Mrs. Rockingham.

“Four hearts to you, Mabelle. Besides, there may be some news about the King.”

“Four no trumps”, bid Mabelle Rockingham severely; but, with another rubber finished and the hands of the pseudo Louis-Seize clock pointing three minutes to six, she said, “Turn the thing on, Tom. If anything’s happened we may just as well know it.”

And soon they were all listening to, “In the House of Commons this afternoon, Mr. Baldwin . . .”

§ 2

“Sport——” announced the B.B.C.

“Turn it off”, pronounced Mrs. Rockingham; and, with her eldest son already obedient:

“You heard what the Prime Minister said, Connie. There’s no such thing in English law as a morganatic marriage, and neither our government nor the governments of the Dominions are prepared to introduce one. So that’s that”.

She spread the cards, but did not turn one. Connie Pillsbury asked, “What do you think’ll happen now?”

“He’ll have to give her up, of course.”

“But supposing he won’t? After all, why should he?”

“If you can’t see that, Connie——”

“Don’t be so prejudiced, Mabelle. There’s nothing against the woman. It isn’t as if she’d been divorced. And he’s a jolly good king. I’ll tell you what I think. I think it’s just because of what he said when he went up to Wales.”

“Nonsense.”

“Oh, I know it’s useless to argue with you. But I’m sure Tom agrees with me, don’t you, Tom?”

“I agree that he’s been a good king”, said Rockingham, speaking a trifle more slowly than his habit.

“And you, Lady Wethered?”

Camilla hesitated. Once more, at Tom’s words, she had experienced that peculiar chill.

“I don’t feel I’m entitled to give an opinion”, she said; and she too spoke very slowly.

“Why ever not?”

“Well, you see”—faint humour seemed the only refuge—“I happen to be an American.”

“You’re a British subject”, interposed Mrs. Rockingham; and something made Camilla say, “You’re not quite right, there. I didn’t lose my citizenship when I married Guy.”

An infinitesimal silence followed. Mrs. Rockingham turned a card—the three of clubs. Connie Pillsbury opened her lips, but closed them again without speaking. She, too, exposed a card—the five of diamonds, Rockingham and Camilla followed her example.

“King and queen of hearts”, laughed Connie. “A royal marriage.”

“You and I”, frowned Mrs. Rockingham, who had not missed the allusion. “Their choice of seats and their deal.”

“We’ll leave you where you are, mother”, smiled her eldest; but, as he dealt, as he sorted his hand, even as he said, “One spade, partner”, concentration failed again. Why had Camilla said that, why on earth had she mentioned Wethered?

“Three spades”, said Camilla, with his mother passing; and once more he riveted his attention on the game, holding it there until, after a final, “What a lucky player you are, Lady Wethered. If that finesse of yours hadn’t come off we should have saved it”, Connie Pillsbury totalled her losses, asked him for her bag, paid up, ejaculating, “I really must be off now, Mabelle”, and dashed away, leaving another infinitesimal silence behind her.

“I must be off too”, said Camilla, breaking that silence. But Mrs. Rockingham detained her, Mrs. Rockingham insisted on explaining “just how wrong that fool of a woman is”, and “just how much harm it’ll do if there has to be a general election”, before Tom escorted her downstairs.

§ 3

The little hall of his mother’s house—she was always mean about new electric light bulbs—seemed darker than ever to Rockingham after Camilla went.

True, they had snatched one kiss. True, they had arranged he should telephone

to her tomorrow. True, she had whispered, “Silly. Of course I still love you. What on earth are you looking so depressed about? You didn’t play as badly as all that, darling”.

And yet—one had the hump.

Why should one have this hump? Just because one had been ill? Just because one had forgotten to take that beastly tonic after lunch?

“Probably”, he decided; and returned upstairs with the evening paper he had found in the letter box.

“Camilla could easily have seen herself out”, Mrs. Rockingham admonished him. “You’ll only have another relapse if you don’t take care of yourself. You’d better go straight to your room now. You know you’re not supposed to stay up to dinner.”

The suggestion was agreeable. He only pretended to dispute it. Mother, obviously, had mounted a new hobbyhorse; on which she would rock until this business of the King’s marriage was settled. To broach the subject of his own marriage would be perfectly futile.

Not that there could be any parallel between the two!

This last idea, indeed, struck him as so extravagant that he dismissed it immediately. His own marriage was a purely personal affair—and definitely legislated for. It concerned nobody except himself and Camilla. His mother—when he eventually did broach the subject—would have to realise that.

Kissing her and leaving her, he grew more cheerful. The fire in his own room burned brightly. Fanny had put his carpet slippers to warm. He unlaced and took off his shoes, made himself comfortable in his old shooting jacket.

“Bachelor comforts”, he thought while he was eating; and the thought struck him as a little strange.

The meal cleared away and his pipe on, he took *The Years Between* from the bookshelf and lost himself in Kipling’s poetry. Not until his mother stamped in to wish him good night, did the outside world intervene.

“We shall know more tomorrow”, she said just before she left him. “Let us hope the worst won’t come to the worst, Tom.”

So worked up, she was. And not without justification. But did he himself really care?

“Not as much as all that”, he decided. “I expect it’ll be all right. No use panicking.”

Once again that night, however—although he took no sleeping draught—the faces peered at him in his dreams.

§ 4

The faces were all speechless, and nearly all unrecognisable. Only in the last moment before waking could Rockingham be certain that one was Geoffrey's, and another—very queerly—Sergeant Godden's. But by then Fanny had clicked on the light, and dumped the teatray on the bedside table.

"They don't know what's happened to that there Mrs. Simpson", said Fanny. "Regular mystery, according to my paper. Nice times we live in, I must say, Mr. Tom. Still, your mother's a little calmer this morning. So let's be thankful for small mercies. Will you have your bath before your breakfast?"

"Please."

She inquired how he was feeling. He told her, truthfully, that he felt fine. By a quarter to eleven, when he made his way to the drawing room, he had forgotten both his overnight depression and the faces. The prospect of a whole day indoors did not please him too much. But he was not going to take any further risks with his health.

His mother—marvellous, the energy still left in that crippled body—had gone out to do her weekend shopping. Before he could settle down to a book—the paper, for some peculiar reason, he merely skimmed—Lucius "popped in just to have a last look at you".

"Doctor Brighton", reordered Doctor Lucius. "But if you want to drive yourself down, take it easy here for another three or four days. Did you have a chance of talking to your mother about that operation?"

"Yes. I don't think you need worry for the present."

"That's good", beamed Lucius, and gave place to Fanny, who announced, "There's a young gentleman downstairs—a Mr. Masters—he wants to know if you'll see him."

"Of course I will. Send him up."

Belinda Blue-Eyes entered shyly.

"I'm just going on my holiday", he said. "I asked Captain Patterson if he thought you would mind my calling to see you. You're looking all right, sir."

Offered a cigarette, some of his shyness left him. He talked about the battery. Trumpeter Lucas' father had come all the way from Liverpool to see Captain Patterson. ("We sent him to the padre, sir. I believe they had quite a row. But Lucas' father won, sir. Lucas is to be let off religious instruction, and of course that will give him more time to learn his signalling.")

He talked about the brigade football team. ("It's funny, isn't it, sir, the way the men don't like us playing soccer, but always want us to play hockey with them?")

And, just before he rose to go, he talked about, “Travers’ wedding. I don’t really want to be his best man, sir, but I feel so jolly sorry for him”.

“Why?” asked Rockingham.

Kid Masters hesitated.

“I don’t quite know, sir”, he admitted. “Just because he’s a civilian, I suppose.”

The very last thing he said was, “I expect you’ll be jolly glad to be back in the saddle again, sir”.

Somehow or other, that hurt.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

§ 1

“Silly to let it hurt”, brooded Camilla’s lover. “Discounted all that sort of thing weeks ago.”

But as he heard the front door close and the Kid’s voice calling, “Hi! Taxi”, his imagination fell to wondering what Masters and that new subaltern of his would say, what Wilfrid and Ralph and Frank and Forsyth would say, what the men of the battery would say, when they heard he was retiring.

Would they think he was letting them down? They might. And when they found out the reason for his retirement . . .

Damn one’s imagination. Why worry about a lot of flannel-footed soldiers? Let the men think, let them say, anything they damn well pleased. Let his brother officers think and say what they damn well pleased. Was a regiment—even the Royal Regiment—to keep his conscience for him? Not much.

Thought diffused, turned inconsequent.

Then, weirdly, the single word “regiment” began to obsess all his mind. He remembered looking that word up in the Oxford Dictionary, remembered his surprise at discovering that it had so many meanings—selfcontrol, for instance—and the control or influence exercised by one thing (or had it been one person?) over another.

But his mother’s entrance brought the mental gymnastics to a full stop.

§ 2

Just behind Mrs. Rockingham came Frances, whom she had met at the Stores.

“I insisted on her lunching with us”, said Mrs. Rockingham. “William’s coming, too. He ought to be here any minute. The joint’s big enough.” And off she went on her hobbyhorse again. The way everybody wanted to talk. One could hardly get served. Everybody felt, with her, that they could trust Mr. Baldwin . . .

Even William’s patience became exhausted (“Can’t you give it a rest, mother?”) before they were halfway through their meal.

But William, also, was riding a hobbyhorse.

“This German-Japanese pact”, he began, once he and his brother were alone, “is of more importance than most people realise. We’ve just had the office that Italy’s

going to sign up too. What's behind it—according to my idea—is that the Japs are out to hack another slice off China. And of course we shan't be able to stop 'em. We can't afford to weaken ourselves in the Mediterranean.”

And at those words—for the very first time since that scene in Wethered's library—his prescience of another Armageddon troubled Rusty Rockingham's mind.

It was a relief when William, saying, “Saturday afternoon or not, I must be toddling back to the Admiralty”, walked out of the house—still more of a relief when Frances and his mother went off to their matinee.

The very moment they had gone, he rang up Camilla; and kept her in conversation for the best part of a quarter of an hour.

“I'll take a taxi as far as Hyde Park tomorrow, and do my first walk there”, he told her. “Meet me by the Achilles statue about twelve o'clock.”

“If it's fine, darling. You mustn't come out if it isn't. When are you off to Brighton?”

“Wednesday or Thursday if I obey the egregious Lucius.”

“I rather like ‘the egregious Lucius’. It makes him sound as if he were a Roman emperor. Have you made up your mind whether I'm to come with you, Tom?”

“Hadn't we better talk about that tomorrow?”

“All right.”

After a little more talk, she hung up. His blood was beating furiously by then. Why shouldn't she come to Brighton? Why should he play about any longer? The sooner they gave that man Robson his evidence, the sooner Wethered would fire in his petition. The sooner the petition was fired in, the sooner he and Camilla would be free to marry. All the same . . .

“All the same”, he decided, “I'd rather wait till I've put in my application. Because that's what I gave Wethered to understand I would do. And it doesn't seem right, not to stick to one's word.”

Then he remembered that he had never actually given his word; and temptation flared in him. Who would laugh loudest at one for this last, this most ridiculous scruple?

Hawk Wethered himself!

§ 3

He had no intention—decided Camilla's lover, as he sat watching his mother play patience after dinner that Saturday night—of modelling his own behaviour on Wethered's. A code was a code. No need to go back on one's bond—even an

implied bond—merely because one happened to be in love.

But the moral confusion underlying these and similar thoughts did not entirely escape his notice. Neither had he quite forgotten the tumult of emotions which harried him after Geoffrey's death.

That tumult had not rearisen. The one certainty left on its subsidence, however—that Geoffrey, had he thought only of his woman, would still be living—could no more be entirely escaped than a piece of further knowledge. His present code was rather different from the one which had dictated, "Dismiss Camilla from your mind. Nothing else to be done. Hopeless otherwise", just before he turned downhill for Stonehenge!

"Bit of a prig then", he consoled himself. And that night only Camilla's face haunted his dreams.

Next morning's breakfast, he ate downstairs—and alone.

"I felt lazy", said his mother, sending for him afterwards. "But of course I can't miss church today."

She did not elaborate, but he could read her thoughts. He did more than skim the Sunday newspapers, of which she took in three; and the obvious conflict of opinion worried him. One man, whose judgments (although occasionally disagreeing with them) he had always felt to be sincere, vented the forthright opinion that the King must on no account be allowed to abdicate; another that he must renounce either his happiness or his throne.

"What's my real opinion?" Rockingham asked himself. But neither consciously nor subconsciously could he bring himself to answer that question—and once more his imagination, taking refuge from the larger issue, fell to wondering what his brother officers would say, what the men of the battery would say, when they heard that he was retiring . . .

Not—once again—that there could be any parallel between the King's case and his own!

That idea still seemed too extravagant for consideration. Nevertheless, he was aware—as he went upstairs to put on his walking shoes—of a faint bewilderment. He could just hear church bells; but no message in them. Soon, he would be meeting Camilla. No more priggishness, no more credal religion, no more wrestles with conscience, for him.

His mother fussed into his room. He must remember that this was his first day out. A fine day, thank goodness. But he must wear a muffler. So he was taking a taxi as far as Hyde Park? Not a bad idea. She would have one, too. Her infernal hip! Before she was very much older, she wouldn't be able to walk a yard. Unless she

had that operation.

“I don’t think I should risk that if I were you.”

“Yes, you would, Tom. If you were in as much pain as I am.”

He helped her down into the hall. Fanny produced the black leather case that held her prayerbook and hymnbook; called her taxi for her.

“Poor old lady”, he thought, as he wound the white scarf round his neck and shrugged himself into his overcoat, telling Fanny, “I’ll walk as far as the cab rank.”

What a joy to be out in the air!

Approaching the rank, he saw that the two drivers there must be having a heated argument. But they stopped before he was quite in earshot; and only as he stepped out at Hyde Park Corner did his own driver vouchsafe, “I never thought I’d live to see this happen in England, sir. What his old father would have had to say about it!”

And on that, once again, Rockingham thought of his men.

A little early for his appointment, he lingered—slightly amused by some of the Sunday horsemanship—by the railings of Rotten Row. There, too, men and women were arguing; and, listening to them, his whole sense of loyalty rose in revolt.

Beastly, for a man who held the King’s commission to hear him discussed like that.

Frowning and furious, he turned his back on the gossipers; and crossed the other road.

Camilla—walking fast from the direction of Marble Arch—appeared almost at once. As he took her gloved hand, his momentary ill-temper left him.

“I was here by eleven”, she said, greetings over. “So I thought I would go and listen to the speeches. I’ve always wanted to. Tom”—her eyes clouded—“are those men allowed to say anything they like?”

“Pretty well, I believe.”

She, too, had heard people gossiping and disputing.

“Will it do any harm?” she asked.

He frowned again.

“It’s a tremendous pity”, he said. “Especially at a time like this.”

But there he broke off; and when, taking his arm, she attempted to pursue the subject, he said, with a strange touch of abruptness:

“Let’s talk about something else, shall we? You mustn’t let yourself get like mother, you know.”

Camilla smiled, “Has she been very trying?”

He smiled back, “She has rather. And it’s no use. It isn’t as if we could any of us do anything”.

They walked and talked—mostly about themselves—for three quarters of an hour.

“I think you’ve had enough”, she said then. “What happens tomorrow?”

“You lunch with me.”

“Where?”

“How about the ladies’ room at the club?”

“That doesn’t sound very exciting.”

“You seem to forget I’m still an invalid.”

Her laugh matched his. He hailed another taxi. She kissed her hand to him as he drove away. Not until he was reentering his mother’s house, did it strike him that neither of them had even mentioned Brighton.

“Just as well”, he decided as he carved the roast beef.

§ 4

Mrs. Rockingham still observed, “My at home day. The first Sunday in the month. People always find that so easy to remember”. The Danverses, unfortunately, had.

They arrived, dragging the unfortunate Val with them, at exactly twenty minutes past four. Sir Absalom gloomed, “A general election? Let us hope it will mean no more than that. Communism is the menace”.

His Sapphira opined that the real menace was fascism. She had heard, privately, that the army was absolutely honey-combed with it—and lost all her faith in the navy after Invergordon.

Whereupon Mrs. Rockingham for once lost her manners, and was just falling upon the traducer of the Services with tooth and claw, when Fanny announced the Reverend Rollo Peters whose attitude, after a brace of crumpets, proved to be both muscular and Christian.

Strength of purpose must not exclude charity. The real menace to the constitution lay in the division of counsels. He was no totalitarian. But the function of a newspaper was to print news, and not to criticise those in authority.

“Let us hope we shall hear good news tomorrow”, purred the Reverend Rollo.

Val whispered, just as she was leaving, “I’m beginning to wish we really were a republic, Tom. If you get much of this, I bet you’ll be glad when you’re back at Steepdown”. And her words, too, hurt.

“Silly to let little things hurt me”, he brooded, listening to the talk—and always on the same subject!—of two more visitors.

But, that night again, sleep showed him Geoffrey's face, and Sergeant Godden's, and one other, more a mask than a face, which grinned toothily by candlelight.

“A message for you”, the mask seemed to be grinning.

In the dream, he tried his hardest to understand that message—yet could hear no word.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

§ 1

On the morning of Monday, December the seventh, nineteen hundred and thirty-six, Rusty Rockingham's newspaper announced, "Decision within 48 Hours"; and Rockingham himself, "I'm going to lunch at the club today, mother—and I don't see why I shouldn't play a little bridge afterwards".

The same morning's first post brought a letter from Patterson which began, "I do hope you're all right again", and ended, "How soon do you think you'll be back at duty?"

His slight verbal prevarication about playing bridge had been easy enough. But how to answer Wilfrid, he simply did not know.

"Leave it till tomorrow", he decided; and went out.

A bus took him most of the way to his club; he walked the rest, and sought Mr. Dorland, whom he found disengaged and inclined to be voluble as he plied his scissors.

"Of course it's not for me to say——" began the hairdresser; and hardly stopped during the shampoo.

The bar was open by the time he finished his handiwork; and Rockingham—with nearly three quarters of an hour to waste—went up for a gin and It.

Dorland, he felt, had been "rather too free with his tongue". But, compared with the talk in progress between three members—none of whom he knew—at the other end of the counter, Dorland had been courtliness itself.

That such a conversation as the one to which he now listened could be taking place in a service club struck him as almost incredible. Once again, his sense of loyalty revolted. Yet how could one protest?

Soon, the bar began to fill, and an acquaintance from the card room took the neighbouring stool.

He began, "What do you think's going to happen?" and pressed for an answer. Rockingham hedged; and escaped in to the hall, where he stood watching the tape machine. There, Murchison accosted him.

"I've been afraid of this ever since his father died", confided Murchison; and memory sharpened at his words.

Momentarily, Camilla's lover saw himself in the mess at Woolwich, saw Hawk Wethered rising from the table, heard him propose, "Gentlemen, I give you the

health of our new King, Edward the Eighth". Momentarily, the year-old thought—"A nice beginning for a new reign"—struggled for recollection, but could not quite formulate itself in the conscious mind.

Murchison, after a few more pessimistic words, sought the bar. The remembered picture began to lose its contours, as the tape machine clicked out, "A better tendency in gilt edged".

Somehow or other, this proved comforting. Although why one should need comfort—with Camilla due to arrive in ten minutes—the lord alone knew.

"Flu's apt to depress one a bit", Rockingham assured himself. "I'll be all right as soon as I see her."

And when, some quarter of an hour later, they seated themselves at table, the assurance seemed completely true.

§ 2

The lovers took a leisurely luncheon, avoiding—almost as though they had signed an agreement not to refer to it—the topic of the hour. Afterwards Tom smoked a small cigar, and Camilla three cigarettes.

"Do you feel up to a movie?" she asked.

"Rather. How about the Empire? Let's walk, shall we?"

Camilla in her turn said, "Rather". They left the club to find the newsbills screaming, "Mrs. Simpson at Cannes", "Mrs. Simpson at the Villa Lou Viei". But still neither of them referred, by so much as a sentence, to the topic of the hour; and in the picture house they sat silent, although every now and again their hands touched.

"I've made you miss your tea", said Camilla, as they made their way out past the barrier. "How thoughtless of me. I'm not fit to look after an invalid. We could have some here. Or ought I to send you home now?"

Tom laughed, "What nonsense. I'm as fit as a fiddle; and I'm all for a dish of tea. Besides, there's something rather important we've got to talk about.

"Brighton", he added impulsively.

"Brighton?"

"Yes."

He took her arm; led her upstairs; seated her at a lonely table; seated himself; planted both elbows on the cloth. A waitress took his order. After that, he looked at Camilla for a long moment without speaking. Then he said, almost casually, "I don't know how you feel about it, darling. But I can't help feeling we've dwelt on things

quite long enough”.

His meaning was obvious. For the very first time since that hour in Stonehenge, sheer emotion and sheer surprise struck her completely speechless. She could only stare at him.

He stared back at her.

“Well?” he asked.

Finally she found her voice, asking in return, “And you’re prepared to give way to your feelings?”

“I am, Camilla. What about you?”

She had never known his eyes, his whole personality, so dominant. It seemed impossible to deny him—yet instinct urged her to try.

“Is this quite the place”, she hedged, “for such an important decision?”

He shot back at her, “It isn’t as important as all that. We shall have to give Robson his evidence sooner or later. So why not sooner?”

“Only because you promised——”

“But I didn’t actually make a promise. Besides, we never intended to wait as long as this. Did we?”

“No.”

Again, they stared at each other. Almost thus—she remembered—Guy had striven to beat down her defences. Since Guy had succeeded, could Tom fail?

“Let’s cut the painter and have done with it”, he went on.

Her last flimsy defence crumbled. She heard herself saying:

“All right. If you insist”.

The waitress, bringing their order, seemed to provide the most ridiculous anticlimax. Camilla could not help smiling, as she poured out, “You’re very masterful all of a sudden. Do I have to start packing the moment I get home?”

He smiled back, “No. You can have till Friday. I may go a day earlier, to arrange for rooms and things”.

“Is that the customary procedure?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. I’ve never run away with anyone before.”

He was smiling, too. But he insisted on driving her home; and his lips, were hot on hers as they kissed goodbye in the taxi, as he whispered, “See you tomorrow, my sweet. We’ll arrange everything then”.

§ 3

“That wasn’t like my Tom”, thought Camilla, letting herself in to the empty flat.

“What’s happened to him? What’s changed him?”

But no such thoughts were in Rockingham’s mind as the latchkey he had borrowed let him into his mother’s house.

Not until another day was by—with all their own plans made, with the actual hour at which he was to call for her in his car on the Friday morning chosen—did he begin to question his own conduct.

And even then, even while he was driven home past the silent crowd which had collected round Buckingham Palace on that Tuesday evening, passion still blinded him to the truth.

There was only one truth. He and Camilla loved each other. Yet, that night again, the faces haunted him sleeping. And, by the Wednesday, he too was saying to himself, “But this isn’t like me. Something’s happened. I’ve changed”.

Most of that day, too, he spent with Camilla; but all that day, subconsciously if not consciously, he was aware of a questioning. Something had happened to him. Something had changed him. Only—what? Only—when?

He walked home that evening, by the same way, seeing the same crowd; and as he walked those two questions became conscious, confusing him, irritating him, almost infuriating him.

For this—he felt—was no time for selfanalysis. Long since, he had burned his boats to the water line. Monday’s decision—Tuesday’s confirmation of that decision—had been right. Thirty-six hours more—and there could be no retreat from happiness.

Thank God for that. Thank God for those unpremeditated moments when he had spoken his heart out.

“Moments of madness”, said a sudden fear. But he answered fear, “No. Moments of sanity”.

Since surely a man could be too scrupulous, too much the slave of old allegiances? Surely love dissolved all the old allegiances, creating its own code?

That last thought seemed to calm all his confusions. Pledged to Camilla—and his very honour was pledged to her—he must not hesitate, he dare not hesitate. Since, hesitating, he might be tempted to . . .

But how could a man flirt with that particular temptation, even in the privacy of his own soul?

Once again, nevertheless—as he sat talking with his brother William after dinner that Wednesday evening—Rusty Rockingham grew aware of a tumult in his soul, of a secret battle there, of a conflict which swayed this way and that way between the old allegiances and the new.

For, that evening, his brother, also speaking his heart out, said, "I'm not attempting to judge him, old chap—and I'm not criticising him. I wouldn't influence him, even if I could. There are just a few things a man can only settle with his own conscience. And this is one of them. But if I were in his position, there's only one choice I could make. I couldn't give up my country for a woman.

"Even for Frances", added William—and, very secretly, the old allegiances gave him right.

§ 4

Very secretly, too—sitting late and lonely by a dying fire on that same Wednesday night—the man whom his regiment knew as Rusty Rockingham did flirt with temptation; did allow himself to contemplate, in the last privacy of his own soul, the breaking of his pledge to Camilla.

Not—he assured himself—because of anything William had said. Not—he reassured himself—because there could be any parallel between his own case and the case of that other whose decision, or so it seemed, was still tarrying. But just because . . . just because of these pictures he could see in the last flames of this dying fire.

For all these pictures were battle pictures; and, even when the last flame dwindled, imagination still showed him the flashes of guns—of his own guns—of the Turban battery—stabbing the darkness.

And now, over all his soul, there fell a darkness. Since who commanded that phantom battery? Not its own commander. Not he. Not Thomas Rockingham. He was with his woman, was Thomas Rockingham, safe and sound and out of harm's way, while his men clanged home the breech blocks, while his men snapped back the firing levers, while his men dropped dead across the trails, cursing him, with their last breath, because he had deserted them for a woman.

Yet, because he had pledged his word to a woman, he would not let himself weaken for any picture the fire showed him, nor for any that might come in sleep.

It was long—that night—before Rockingham fell asleep. And even in his dreams the battle pictures still haunted him—showing him men who laboured, with the last ounce of their strength, at heavy dragropes.

And those men, too, weary though they were, spared breath to curse him, because he had deserted them for a woman, while one with a hawk's face mocked, "I shall console myself with the knowledge that I am continuing to serve my country".

And, just before he woke, he saw two other faces: the first, as it were of some

Greek god; and the second also manly, although it looked at him through Camilla's own hazel eyes.

And, almost in the last moment before he woke, those faces opened their mouths to speak with him.

"There's bound to be another European war before we're very much older", said that face which might have been a Greek god's; and the one with Camilla's own hazel eyes, "Val wants me to chuck the Air Force. But it'd be a rotten thing to do till we know where we are."

And, in the very last moment before he woke, the man whom the Royal Regiment knew as Rusty Rockingham heard that face which looked at him through Camilla's very own eyes say, "Three years from now we might be out of the wood, though I rather doubt it"; and the voice of yet one other.

More mask than face, that one other, yet it too spoke, grinning toothily by candlelight, "It isn't a question of religion with me . . . Let's say this war people are always talking about starts tomorrow . . ."

Nevertheless, battle pictures or no battle pictures, faces or no faces, one's word, one's very honour, were pledged to one's woman. And already—here came Fanny knocking—tomorrow was today.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

§ 1

“He’ll abdicate today”, said Mabelle Rockingham, who had insisted, despite Fanny’s protests, on joining her eldest son at breakfast. “That’s obvious. Do you think the Yorks will postpone their coronation?”

“I can see no reason why they should.”

Tom tackled his poached egg. His mother poured herself some tea.

“You don’t seem very interested”, she went on. “And you’re not looking too fit this morning. The sooner you go away to the sea the better.”

“Well, I’m going tomorrow, aren’t I?”

“How did you sleep?”

“Oh, not too badly.”

“You ought to stay at Brighton at least a week.”

“So Lucius says.”

“Is there any need to be quite so grumpy, Tom?”

“Sorry, mother.” For a moment his smile transfigured him. “As a matter of fact, I did have rather a poor night.”

“So did I.”

She helped herself to a cigarette from the porcelain box between them; lit up; reopened her paper, and waited until he was at the marmalade.

“I still can’t feel it’s true”, she said then. “I wonder what your father would have had to say about it. And your Uncle Marmaduke, I dreamed about them both last night. I’m sure I don’t know why. Tom, you don’t think there’ll be any trouble, do you?”

“Good heavens, no. Why should there be? If he goes, it’ll be of his own accord.”

“But will people believe that? There’ve been quite a lot of demonstrations. I saw one myself yesterday. Fascists.” Mrs. Rockingham sniffed. “There’s nothing they like better than fishing in troubled waters. And as for——”

“I thought you admired him so, mother.”

“I did—up till this week.”

Instinct rather than conviction urged him to a dispute.

“You never could see anybody’s point of view but your own”, he began. “There is another side to it, you know.”

“The romantic side, I suppose.” Again she sniffed. “But the British Empire isn’t Ruritania. You go to the movies too much, Tom. In real life, people can’t always follow their hearts. Especially people in authority. Take even men like yourself and William. You both have to live under a discipline——”

“Only as long as we’re actually serving.”

“That’s true. But I can’t see either of you asking to be put on the retired list just because of a woman.”

Conviction rather than instinct urged him to argue, “It’s been done over and over again, mother”.

For the split of a second, she eyed him severely. Then she began to laugh.

“You always were one for an argument”, she said, when she had finished laughing. “But I’m not going to have my leg pulled at this time in the morning. You wouldn’t give up the army for Helen of Troy. You’ve never had a thought outside the regiment since the day your father and I took you down to Woolwich, and photographed you on that gun. A nice mess it made your clothes in, too. I remember I was simply furious. I suppose you’ve forgotten all about that, Tom. I wish I knew what I’d done with the photograph. It must be lying about somewhere. I think I’ll tell Fanny to have a look for it.”

And this very evening one had promised to tell her not only that one was sending in one’s papers, but why!

§ 2

Mrs. Rockingham, grumbling, “Bother this fog—just the day I want to get my shopping done early”, hobbled out of the dining room. Frowning, her eldest son lit a pipe.

Why—he wondered—had Camilla extracted that promise from him? To tell the old lady everything before they ran away together must involve something more than a mere argument, a mere dispute. She would rage. She might even cry. She would certainly beg him to reconsider his decision. Far better to present her with the fait accompli, after one had given one’s application to Lampson.

Confound Lampson. Why had he chosen this particular fortnight for a holiday? If only he hadn’t, one could have kept one’s implied promise to Wethered.

Confound the old lady’s memory, too. Why had she chosen this morning—of all mornings—to mention that childish business on the Great Gun of Bhurtpoor? And why the devil—on this morning of all mornings—should one have received a long letter from one’s opposite number at Woolwich?

As though it mattered whether the “panjandrums” (need the man have used that word, so reminiscent of Camilla’s husband?) did or did not adopt their shell!

All the same, Rockingham reread the four pages of the letter, and meditated his answer with some care. His opposite number—and the Ordnance Committee—were perfectly right. That gaine always had been the difficulty. It could be improved. Just a little more powder in the pellet, perhaps. And a slightly thicker washer. Why not have a look at those old blueprints before one went out?

Stuffing the letter into his pocket, he made his way up to his own room, unlocked and opened his despatch box—only to feel purpose fail at the sight of those words in his own handwriting, “Sir, I have the honour to request . . .”

With another frown, he relocked the box, and scribbled a few non-committal words. He hadn’t been very well—he wrote. He was going away for a few days. As soon as he came back, they had better meet and discuss the committee’s suggestions. Then he remembered that he had not yet answered Wilfrid’s letter.

To that, also, he wrote a non-committal reply, thinking, “Why volunteer information? They’ll both know soon enough”.

His mother called to him while he was sealing his envelopes. He ran down to the drawing room; found her already dressed for the street.

“Connie’s just telephoned”, she said. “I’m lunching with her and playing bridge afterwards. There’s plenty of cold food in the house if you would rather not go out.”

“I’m sorry,” said Rockingham. “I meant to tell you, I’ve arranged to lunch at the club today.”

One last lie! But she would know the whole truth this evening. So why fuss?

“No use fussing any more”, he decided, as he helped her downstairs. “And to blazes with nightmares.”

Yet her farewell words, “That man’s never sent the sketch of the tablet we’re going to put up to Geoffrey, and he promised it for yesterday”, brought back a fleeting memory of those visions which had been shown to him in the night.

§ 3

Mrs. Rockingham, taking the list which Fanny brought up from the basement, hobbled off into the raw mist. “She’s pretty gallant”, her son caught himself thinking. But, there, introspective thought stopped dead, because one had quite a lot of little jobs to do before one met Camilla for luncheon, and the sooner one began doing them the better.

The car must have attention. More than three weeks since one had put her away

in the garage. Nearly a month since she'd been driven up to London by "that old reprobate, Noakes".

Having shrugged himself into his oldest overcoat, in the pocket of which he found a pair of soiled string gloves, Rockingham followed his mother out of the house, and walked the hundred yards to the garage.

"She could do with a wash", admitted the garage attendant. "But she's all right for oil, and I've had the battery on charge. That man of yours told me I'd better."

"Did he though?"

"Yes, sir. The weekend before last."

And of course Noakes had been in London that weekend. To see his girl. He'd called at the house, too. Only one hadn't felt up to seeing him. A good chap. Pity he was leaving at the end of the year. One would have to find another servant. Gilchrist might do . . .

Amazing aberration—when one wouldn't be in the army oneself!

The garage attendant burred on. If he was the major, he wouldn't license this old bus again. That battery really needed a replat. The tyres weren't any too good, either. She wouldn't fetch much more than thirty quid. A bit more on exchange, of course. And, talking of that, had the major tried the new Clemondas? A nice job. Self-changing gear *and* a fluid flywheel.

Smiling once more, Rockingham declined to trade; and, having given a final instruction, "I want her cleaned inside as well as out, please", went back to the house for his best overcoat, a decent pair of gloves and his umbrella.

"A lady telephoned", Fanny had written on the pad by the instrument, "She said would you make lunch an hour later." He tore up the paper and went out again. A bit reckless of Camilla to leave that message. Fanny was rather good at recognising voices. Not that it mattered—now.

The extra hour gave him plenty of time. He walked another few hundred yards; but the thin fog made his eyes smart; and he soon jumped onto a bus, from which he alighted at the top of St. James's Street.

Come to think of it, he only had to look in at his bootmaker's; have a tin of his special tobacco (he'd forgotten that yesterday) sent either home or to Brighton; and buy himself a new hat.

His bootmaker, after saying, "That's quite all right, Major. You'll have them back, soled and heeled, by this evening", proved as anxious for trade as the garage attendant. It really was time the major treated himself to a new pair of fieldboots—"Those two old pairs of yours, they're not even regulation". The major would be surprised—he really would—to find how much more comfortable he would be with

the three buckles.

“Well, I’ll think about it”, said Rockingham; and this second aberration—as though one would ever be wanting another pair of fieldboots!—amazed him even more than the previous one.

“A bit potty today?” he asked himself as he walked out of the shop.

To reach his hatter’s, he had to cross Piccadilly. Waiting for the lights, he recognised a man on the opposite pavement. The man waved to him. In another moment or so, they were shaking hands.

“And what are you doing with yourself these days, Loxley?” asked Rockingham. (After all, one had to pretend some interest in the welfare of a brother gunner.)

“Oh, I’m in a Territorial job. Rather interesting. The only trouble is recruits. We simply can’t get the chaps to join up.”

“Really.”

“No. And this abdication business isn’t going to help either. I suppose he has made up his mind to go.”

“Ask me another, old chap. It certainly looks like it.”

“Well, I don’t see what else he can do—except give the lady the go-by. Where I am now, up in Lancashire, opinion seems to be absolutely unanimous.” And Loxley, having voiced that opinion with considerable forthrightness, walked on.

Rockingham’s hatter, outside whose corner shop they had been standing, confined his talk strictly to business; and was stamping the usual “R.R.” inside his new bowler within a quarter of an hour.

“Shall I send the old one down to you at Steepdown?” he asked. And again Rockingham was conscious of a very slight mental aberration, as he answered: “Yes, I suppose so. . . No, on the whole you’d better keep it for me”.

But with that his mind seemed to clear.

Whatever else might happen, he was *not* going back to Steepdown for more than a few hours. It wouldn’t take longer than that to give Lampson his application, and hand over the battery to Wilfrid. Not that Wilfrid would be allowed to keep the battery . . .

Damnation. One was not going to let oneself dwell on that sort of thing. One was through with the regiment—and for keeps.

§ 4

Cocking his new hat, which was still warm, just a little more over his left ear, the man whom the Royal Regiment knew as Rusty walked the few yards up Bond Street

to his tobacconist's.

"Going away for a bit of holiday, sir?" asked the counter man, as he wrote down the Brighton address. "Hope you'll have better weather than we're having in London, sir. Awful, isn't it? Suitable, though."

"Why suitable?"

"Well, sir, things couldn't be much worse. Not according to the papers. I expect we'll know by this afternoon. It's a great pity, don't you think, sir? I can't help feeling that there's something behind it all. Something we aren't being told about."

"I shouldn't worry my head on that score if I were you", snapped Rockingham; and pocketed his change.

The counter man's words had perturbed him. Considering them as he strolled back into Piccadilly, he remembered the Reverend Rollo's "division of counsels".

"King across the water?" he caught himself thinking.

Surely, though, this issue was plain enough for anybody's understanding? No king, however well-beloved of his people, could affront their most cherished tradition, their deepest sentiment.

Tradition and sentiment! Idols? Like one's duty to the country.

Yet was that duty a mere idol?

"God knows", he thought. And, once again, a fleeting memory of the visions which had been shown to him in the night harassed his mind.

§ 5

Silently, secretly, subconsciously—even while he sat at lunch with his Camilla—those visions, and those three faces, two of the dead, and one of the living, represented themselves to the man whom his regiment knew as Rusty.

Silently, secretly, stealthily, the last messenger of that conscience over which he had so long imagined the desires of his mind and the lusts of his body to have won the complete kingship came knocking at the secret throne room of his inmost soul

...

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

§ 1

Consciously—all the while they sat at luncheon in this same Soho restaurant where they had first dined together—Camilla's lover had only been aware of her beauty. For today, even after all these months of loving her, it seemed as though one were seeing that beauty through new eyes.

One had been aware of this in the first moment of meeting. One was aware of it still more poignantly now, as she rested her hand on one's knee for a moment, as she said, "Tom, we're the very last. Let's go, shall we? I've still one more little job of shopping to do".

"Can I come with you?"

"If you like."

She ground out the stub of her cigarette. He called for his bill, and paid it. They rose from the table. The waiter helped him into his overcoat, and handed him his hat. The tubby little restaurateur, rising from his own luncheon, bowed them out.

It was still foggy, with a few drops of sleet; but Camilla refused a taxi, saying, "The shop's only just around the corner".

He chaffed her for the Americanism. She chaffed back, "All right. Round the corner, as you're so pernickety"; and took his arm.

"Only a new pair of evening shoes they're altering for me", she explained, "Let's hope they won't be like that dress-maker who made me late this morning. I've never been late for an appointment with you before, have I, Tom? Do you think Fanny really did recognise my voice?"

"I should doubt it. You seem to be buying quite a trousseau."

"O Tom"—the hand on his arm tightened—"not that word."

They walked on in silence. A clock showed them it was already half-past three. Another minute or so, and they were entering the shoeshop. A salesgirl came forward, to say:

"I shan't keep you waiting very long, m'lady. Won't you and the gentleman sit down?"

They sat down on two of the many chairs, which were arranged in a long double row. A little way away, another salesgirl knelt before a large woman whose demands had already littered the floor with boxes from the high racks. Behind them, an artificial voice complained, "I'm afraid these won't do either. They're not my

shoe at all’.

The owner of that artificial voice also caused the floor to be littered with boxes; and the perfume she affected was an offence to Rockingham’s nostrils. His own bootmaker’s shop was small and quiet and smelt pleasantly of leather. Another memory sharpened in him. Once he had accompanied a woman—could it have been Gail?—to her dress-maker’s.

But once only! The mere atmosphere of that place had nauseated him. So did the atmosphere of this one. He heard himself ask Camilla, “Do you think that young woman will be very long?”

“Don’t be so impatient”, she smiled; and, once again, he was only aware of her beauty, of the way the dark lashes fluttered over her hazel eyes, of the way her red mouth crinkled at the corners, of her gleaming hair. Thank the lord, she didn’t dye her hair, or use a scent that made one feel physically sick, that she didn’t paint her face or tint her nails blood red.

Yet another memory sharpened in him. Once—but only once—Gail had insisted on his fetching her from a beauty parlour. Why the hell should he be thinking of Gail?

Memories went as their own salesgirl knelt, and Camilla stretched out a foot to her. The most exquisite feet, she had. Everything about her was exquisite. And she loved him. By tomorrow she would be all his. Could any man be luckier, happier?

“Thank you so much”, said Camilla. “They’re just right. Yes, I’ll take them with me, please. How much do I owe you?”

The salesgirl told her. Another girl, cold of eye and incurious behind the plate glass of the cashier’s box, took her money.

Smiling again, “Don’t say how much you hated it all, darling, because that was quite obvious”, she preceded him into the street.

§ 2

“I didn’t hate it as much as all that”, protested Rockingham, unfurling his umbrella, for the sleet was now heavy. “Let me take that parcel for you.”

“But you simply loathe carrying parcels”, countered Camilla, still smiling. Then, for the first time in many weeks, he saw her eyes cloud.

“I must be going home”, she said next. “I’ve still some packing to do.”

“All right. We’ll charter a taxi. Can I have a dish of tea with you?”

“Tea, Tom? Why—we’ve only just finished lunch.”

For the first time in months, he sensed constraint in her. She had not taken his arm. She was still standing outside the shelter of his umbrella. He extended it over

her, saying, “You’ll spoil that hat, if you’re not careful”.

She smiled again, but blankly. Her eyes were averted. He realised what she had been looking at, when she said, “Fancy. It’s past four already. I had no idea we’d been in that store so long”.

He noticed her use of the word “store” as he had noticed her use of the word “around”. But something warned him not to chaff her about it. Subconsciously he was aware of another warning, as she went on, almost under her breath, “We ought to have the news any moment now”.

Again, he made no comment, saying only, “I’ll drive you back to the flat anyway”, and signalling to a passing taxi, and handing her in.

Their taxi had to turn. Immediately, they were in a traffic block. Subconsciously he experienced a third warning. One had known this Camilla in many moods—but never in a mood quite like this.

There was no smile on her lips now. They were a single line. Both her hands, still ungloved, clasped the shoe box. Her eyes stared away from him, out of the window. Again, he realised what she was looking at—a newsman carrying the placard, “Today’s Hopes And Fears”.

The jam of vehicles eased. Their taxi jerked on a few yards, only to stop at a corner. Her eyes were still averted. He had the curious impression that she was squaring her shoulders.

They jerked on once more; stopped again. He said stupidly, “The traffic seems worse than ever this afternoon”. She did not answer. Another clock showed him the time. A sudden fear caught him by the midriff.

Covering both her hands with his, he asked: “What’s wrong, darling?”

Still she kept silence. Then a shudder galvanised her, and her head turned. He saw that the pupils of her eyes had become mere pinpoints.

“Everything”, she said through tight lips; and, before he could pull himself together, the newsboy on the bicycle had pushed his way past the near window; had put foot to pavement, was tearing his satchel open.

“Everything”, repeated Camilla. “And ever since Monday. You know that even better than I do.”

Papers were hurled from the satchel. A man caught them. He unrolled a bill. Words flared at them.

“The King Abdicates”, they read.

“The King Abdicates.” The traffic block broke. Their taxi shot forward. But those words followed them—seemed to flare from every corner. And, so long as those words were visible, none passed their own lips.

§ 3

They were nearing her flat when Camilla next spoke.

“You’d better come in with me, Tom”, she said then. But the voice might have been the voice of a stranger; and his lips remained closed.

The cab stopped. Automatically, he helped her out. Still clasping the shoe box, she led the way to the lift.

“I suppose you’ve heard the news, m’lady”, said the liftman, as he closed the door on them. “Shall I send you up a paper?”

“No, thanks.”

Her voice—to Tom Rockingham—still sounded like a stranger’s. A great fear had fallen on him; but, as yet, little knowledge. What had changed this woman? Why was “everything wrong”? What had she meant by her “ever since Monday”? Didn’t she love him any more? Had she—perhaps—never loved him? That, surely, could not be true.

The lift door opened. He followed her over the soft carpets, round the angle of the landing. Automatically, she handed him her parcel; took out her key.

This familiar flat was in darkness. She clicked on a light. Still acting like a robot, he closed the door; put the parcel down on a little mahogany table. A visiting card lay on that table. More words flared at him. He spoke again, stupidly, “Beresford. You didn’t tell me he had been to see you”.

Camilla said, “He called yesterday evening. But that hasn’t anything to do with it”.

“To do with what?”

“Us”, she answered, still through those tight lips.

She opened another door, clicked on another light, bent to turn on the electric fire. Again, as she stood upright, he had the impression that she was squaring her shoulders. But the pupils of the eyes she turned on him were no longer pinpoints. They were wide windows out of which, just for the split of a second, peeped the woman he knew, the one woman whom he had ever really loved.

Yet, when he put out a hand to touch that woman, she seemed to shudder again, and drew back a pace.

“Please don’t, Tom”, she went on. “Please, just listen to me. I—I won’t be very long. But perhaps”—once more she smiled that same blank smile—“you’d better take your coat off.”

He obeyed her. She ripped the hat from her hair and flung it on the sofa. Her golden head was high now, and her eyes resolute.

“Ever since Monday”, she repeated. “Ever since then, everything’s been wrong between us. We haven’t been ourselves for a single minute. You know that even better than I do, Tom.”

“I don’t know anything of the sort, Camilla.”

“But you do.”

For long seconds they faced each other in silence. Then, very quietly—her voice no longer quite the stranger’s—Camilla said:

“Don’t let’s be melodramatic. Let’s just sit down and talk it over like two sensible people. We’ve always tried to be that—even when we haven’t quite succeeded”.

Again, he obeyed her. She took the chair on the other side of the fire.

“I know what you’re thinking”, she continued in that same quiet voice. “I usually do know what you’re thinking. But it isn’t true, Tom. I don’t love you any less—because I’m not going to run away with you tomorrow. I’m not, you see.”

She fell silent again. From him burst the words:

“But you promised! You did promise”.

“Before I understood why you made me. Since then—I’ve been weak. Mostly for your sake. Even an hour ago, I couldn’t make up my mind to hurt you. Tom, think! We both made another promise. Not in so many words, perhaps. But still—a promise. On Monday, you decided we should break it. Why? I asked myself that, the moment you left me. And I found the answer. The only reason why you insisted we should run away tomorrow, Tom, was that you were afraid you might weaken if we waited any longer.”

“Camilla”—again the words burst from him—“that’s not true.”

She hesitated for as long as it took to cross one leg over the other. Her face seemed to have grown a little shadowy. He realised that the blood, beating up behind his eyes; was blurring his sight—and that he was very angry.

“Don’t be angry”, she said. “I’m as responsible as you are. And I’m not saying that you knew you were afraid. I didn’t know that—until I remembered something your brother William told me, that day when I came to call on your mother. He interrupted us, you remember, just as you were asking me if you should break the news of our love to her. Afterwards, I was alone with him for a minute or two. He told me that you were just as worried as he was. About the King. You were, weren’t you?”

Only a single word burst from him:

“Yes”.

Again, she hesitated. He tried to follow the workings of her mind, but they

eluded him.

“You’ve never told me how much you were worried”, she said at last. “With me, you’ve hardly wanted to discuss the thing. There’s a reason for that, too. And the same reason. Fear. You’ve been afraid to tell me your real feelings. But I’ve known them all along, Tom. Because they’re the same as my own. No woman is worth that price. No woman can ever be worth a man’s life-work, a man’s country.”

And there she ceased.

§ 4

To the man who still loved her—in so far as he was capable of loving—it seemed a lifetime since Camilla had ceased, since he had begun to argue, very quietly, because the blood no longer beat behind his eyes:

“What have my feelings about the King—or your feelings about him for that matter—to do with it? We’re not the keepers of his conscience. He must have convinced himself that he’s doing the right thing. Just as we’ve convinced ourselves that we’re doing the right thing. Otherwise, there’s no possible parallel”.

And another lifetime it seemed since Camilla had said, “No parallel. But a lesson. At any rate, for me. I can’t go away with you tomorrow, Tom. Or ever. I just can’t”; and yet a third lifetime since that low, “You see, this isn’t the first time this has happened to me, dear. I never meant to tell you about it. But now I must”.

She was still telling him that story—the same, and yet so different from the one he had heard, nearly a year ago, as he and Bryce-Atkinson walked back to her husband’s house.

“Len”, she was saying, “thought it would be dishonourable of him not to marry me. And of course it would have been if . . . if I’d been going to have a baby. I would have let him—in that case. I should have had to—for the child’s sake. But I couldn’t take the sacrifice of his whole life just for my own sake. Because I knew how much the navy meant to him. More than I ever could.

“More than I ever could”, she repeated; and, once more, out of those wide windows which were her dilated pupils, peeped the very soul of the woman he would never quite cease from loving.

Yet did he love her enough?

“You know you don’t”, her eyes seemed to be saying; and, after a tiny pause, her lips said:

“It’s the same with you as it was with Len, dear. The army means more to you than I ever can. You wouldn’t be really happy without your work. And if you

weren't happy, how could I be?"

And, when he denied that also, saying, "I can never be happy without you, Camilla", she smiled, almost pityingly:

"Have you forgotten the very first talk we ever had—and what you said about tradition? You can't get away from your traditions, Tom. Any more than I can get away from mine. I come of soldier stock, too. Perhaps that's why I understand you so well".

And after that she said, speaking as directly as Ralph or Frank might have spoken:

"If you'd been in Geoffrey's place, you would have taken exactly the same risk he did. If you'd been in the King's place, you would never even have considered giving up your throne for a woman. Because that's the way you're built, my dear. And it's no use denying it".

Neither could he deny it—since both those things were true—although he swore again, "I can never be happy without you"; and rose; and came over to her; and put both his hands on her shoulders, begging her, almost ordering her:

"If you still love me, come away with me tomorrow".

But, "No", said Camilla. "No. Not because I don't love you. But because I do love you. Because love tells me I couldn't make you really happy. And that's not your fault either. Or mine. It's just the way we're built. And the time in which we live."

Then, "The time in which we live", she repeated; and she, too, rose, facing him squarely, speaking from her inmost heart.

"This isn't a time for little people", said Camilla, speaking from her inmost heart. "Or selfish people. Or people who are afraid to own up when they make a mistake. We made a mistake. Both of us. Can't we be big enough, can't we be unselfish enough, can't we be brave enough, to admit it? I can, if you'll let me, Tom. Please, let me. Please admit—oh, won't you admit?—that you're just trying to be chivalrous."

And with that one word "chivalrous" still hanging between them, she went on:

"People can't build their lives on a mistake. Len and I couldn't. Guy and I couldn't. You and I can't. We shall be all wrong with each other. Right from the start. And if—if this war you used to talk about so much were to happen, you . . . you would simply hate me".

And with that one word "war" hanging, like a sword of fire, between them, she said very slowly:

"You haven't wanted to discuss that with me, either. Not for a long time. Not

since you promised Guy you would send in your papers. I wonder why. Were you afraid of that, too? Or wouldn't you let yourself think of it? But . . . but you're thinking of it now, aren't you, Tom?"

And of course he was—although he did attempt to deny it; putting out his hands to her again, begging her again, almost ordering her again, imploring her:

"Camilla, we can't alter things. It's too late".

But "No", said Camilla stubbornly. "It's not too late. That's just the reason why we can . . . alter things. And we must, Tom. We simply must. For my sake no less than for yours. Because I'm built the same way you are. Because I can't bring myself to do . . . something that I now know to be wrong."

And on that, taking both his hands, she said, very simply and with no more stubbornness in her:

"I've never been religious, dear. But, as I told you once, I was brought up very strictly. Perhaps that's why I can't help believing that I've been . . . shown the light. So, please, don't try to stop me from following my light".

And how could one try any longer with the first tears one had ever seen there glimmering in her eyes?

§ 5

There were no tears in Thomas Rockingham's eyes as he sat alone with his mother that same Thursday evening. For he, also, had seen something of the light; and was trying to follow it.

But that night a greater fear than any he had ever known in battle harried him sleepless, harried him to his knees. And, even after he had risen from his knees, that great fear still tore at his vitals. Since, for all that Camilla had told him in their last hour—or had it been many hours?—she had not told him what she herself planned to do.

He had not even pressed her—the sheer selfishness, the sheer littleness, the sheer folly of him!—about what she herself planned to do. He had been content with her one calm assurance, "I don't quite know yet. All I do know is that I shall never go back to Guy".

Yet she might do worse—so very much worse. She might do the very same thing which her father had done. One never knew with a woman. Surely, though, his woman was altogether too brave, too fine, too wonderful, to take her own life?

Next morning, nevertheless, fear continued to whisper—after all one never did know with a woman!—that she might have taken her own life.

And not until he had actually seen her again, not until they had talked it all over again (hours again, they talked that Friday morning), not until she said, "It's no use, Tom. And you know it's no use. My mind's made up. I'm going back to my own country. I'm going back to America", did fear lift from him, did he finally bring himself to kiss her goodbye.

§ 6

Thomas Rockingham can never quite remember what happened after he and Camilla kissed that final goodbye—only the door closing on her, and the liftman's face as he took him down, and the rain that seemed to be falling as he walked out into the streets.

He cannot even remember how long he walked those streets, or whether he ate that day, or how he came back to his mother's house.

All he recollects clearly is a voice which spoke to him and his mother, sitting by their fireside in her house—a voice which they had once recognised for their King's.

"To declare my allegiance", said the voice they had once recognised for their King's. "You all know the reasons . . . I did not forget the country or the Empire . . . But . . . I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility . . . without the help and support of the woman I love."

"But what of the woman I love?" brooded one man of the millions who listened to the voice which had been a king's on that night of Friday, December eleventh, nineteen thirty-six.

And, as the voice died, away, that one man fell to brooding, neither in bitterness nor in pride, but with a great humility, because the personal Deity in whom he would never again disbelieve had first vouchsafed His light to Camilla:

"There, but for the grace of God——"

EPILOGUE

§ 1

Lance-Bombardier Gilchrist, the colonel's airedale obedient at his heels, made his way to the officers' mess kitchen, and demanded the colonel's morning tea.

"Fine day, for once", said Lance-Bombardier Gilchrist.

"If it lasts", gloomed the pessimistic messman. "If it lasts, Crissy. This is the worst summer that ever I remember. And that's saying something, that is. Nineteen thirty-six was a bit of a stinker. But nineteen thirty-eight—cor—look what happened up at Manchester, not a single ball bowled——"

"You and your cricket", scoffed Gilchrist. "That's all you ever think about. Don't forget to warm the pot, now."

"Teaching your grandmother to suck eggs. Just because you've got a stripe up. As though I don't know how old Rusty likes his tea as well as you do. Here, Patrick _____"

He tossed the dog a piece of sugar, and handed over the tray with a Parthian, "All you ever think of is how soon we're going to tell these dictators where they get off. A bloody-minded militarist, that's what you are, Crissy. Wait till you've had some. Then you'll know better".

Lance-Bombardier Gilchrist, deigning "the old sweat" no answer, went out, and across the gravel. A minute afterwards, he had knocked on his master's door.

Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Rockingham, of the Royal Field Artillery, was already awake.

"Late, aren't you?" he asked.

"Not that I'm aware of, sir."

"You are by my watch."

"Yes, sir. But you always keep your watch two minutes fast, sir."

His smile transfigured Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Rockingham to "old Rusty".

"No catching you out, is there, Gilchrist?"

"I hope not, sir."

The shaving water was on the washstand by then; and the teatray on the bedside table; and Patrick on his haunches extending a paw.

Rusty took that paw in his right hand, and patted the woolly head with his left, before he said, "Down".

The dog obeyed, couching himself on the rug by the bed to scrunch up another

piece of sugar. Gilchrist busied himself with the uniform, with untreeing the three-buckled fieldboots.

“Any more news from Noakes?” asked his colonel, pouring himself a second cup of tea.

“No, sir. But he’s promised to let me know as soon as it happens. His wife’s expecting any day now. Do you think there’s any chance of her making up the full troop, sir?”

That time—and it was still rare with him—old Rusty laughed aloud.

The joke and the recollection of Noakes’ twins—to whom Noakes had insisted on his standing godfather—were still making him smile, as he jumped out of bed and began shaving.

“Troop”, he mused. “Rather neat, that.”

For, since the recent reorganisation, under which one’s command was known as “a regiment” instead of a brigade, the war strength of a “troop” (three to each of the two “batteries”) would be four guns.

§ 2

Still from that same quarter in which, nearly two years ago now, he had passed so many sleepless nights thinking of Camilla, Rockingham went to his bath.

Once again, Belinda Blue-Eyes, now a full lieutenant, was playing his gramophone. And why not? Life belonged to the young. One must let them have their heads. No use strafing them as long as they did their jobs properly. A nice lad. The sort of son one could have hoped for, if . . .

But why look back?

As Camilla had always said, as she had written in that very first letter from the States, it was never any use looking back. One must take life as it came, be a philosopher.

A grand woman, Camilla. The very grandest. Wise beyond her years, too. She deserved happiness. She’d waited long enough. (“Len and I hadn’t met for nearly nine years, Tom. It seemed so funny seeing him again. He’s grown a little bit like your brother William. He never married. He’s taking me out tomorrow . . .”)

And, in that very last letter, she had written, “Len’s gone to sea . . . He’ll be away six months . . . The lawyers say that if I applied for a divorce over here I could get it . . . Then if I married again under American law, Guy would only have to apply to your courts . . . It all sounds rather complicated, and of course I haven’t made up my mind yet . . .”

But of course Camilla would make up her mind to marry Len. And they would be very happy together. Thank the lord for that—and much more.

“I’ve so much to be thankful for”, decided Rockingham, towelling himself vigorously. “At least, I’ve found myself. And so many chaps never do. Even if I’m not rapturously happy, I’m content with my lot.”

Donning his dressing gown, he returned to his quarter. Patrick still lay on the rug by the bed. If there were any letters this morning, Gilchrist—under the strict order, “Don’t you ever bring me the post first thing, young man”—would have put them on the desk in the other room.

He opened the communicating door; went to the desk; sat down at it, and picked up the one envelope there. The Kid’s gramophone was now playing that eternal “Little Old Lady”.

“Not very appropriate to mother”, thought Rockingham, toying with his ivory paperknife. “Wonder what she’ll be breathing fire about this time.”

But the “old lady’s” letter was mainly about Val, whom she had taken abroad with her. (“There’s a young man here. He wouldn’t be my cup of tea, though his manners aren’t too impossible. Still, she seems to like him, and I suppose that’s really more important.”)

Only towards the end did the old-time handwriting grumble, “This spa isn’t doing me the slightest good. If you and that fool Lucius hadn’t been so against an operation, I might have been running races by now”.

She was still playing chemmy, however—and collecting Toby mugs—and, when at home, hobbling from one committee to another. Thank the lord for that, too. One would miss her—and the likes of her—when she went.

“Bound to go one day”, mused the new philosopher in Rusty Rockingham. “That generation. My generation. All of us. No good being too sentimental about death. Or life either. No good being too sentimental about anything.”

Yet sentiment touched him as the dog nuzzled at his bare knee; and, donning uniform, his thoughts turned to Camilla again.

What a lot one owed her. All one’s present certainties. One’s very command.

§ 3

A knock, a voice disturbed Rockingham’s musing. To his call, his second-in-command entered; and gave him the due, “Good morning, sir”. He smiled back, “Morning, Wilfrid. What’s your trouble?”

“Nothing in particular, Tom”, smiled back Patterson, the marks of the three stars

which had been replaced by the field officer's crown still visible on his khaki sleeve. "I just wondered if you'd gone to breakfast yet."

"As you perceive, I'm still fasting."

"So am I. I thought I'd have an early prowl. I had a look at the jerks. In my opinion——"

And Wilfrid continued to air his opinion of physical training as they strolled across to mess, where they found Lyttelton, now in command of the other "regiment" at Steepdown; and Potter, just about to leave their own, who also gave his bachelor colonel the due, "Good morning, sir".

"I hear you're turning your whole bally circus out for the C.R.A., Rusty", began Lyttelton. "Wish you joy of it. Thank goodness he hasn't taken it into his head to inspect my lot."

"Your turn next, sir", said Potter.

"If we're not mobilised first, Frank."

"Mobilised my foot—with all due respect, sir."

"Well—let's hope you're right."

Ralph Lyttelton turned to his paper.

"Guns threaten Gibraltar", he went on. "Two more of our ships sunk in Spain. The Japs have blown another few thousand Chinese to hell. Jerusalem's under martial law. The Fakir of Ipi's been having his usual spot of fun—and cost us three lives. Hitler's going to double his air force. Franco says he's bound to win in the third year—and Musso wants to know why the hades we don't ratify our agreement with him. Peace, perfect peace. If I were Prime Minister——"

"You couldn't be, with your liver", interrupted Rockingham; and the only subaltern still at table rose and left the room lest he commit a breach of etiquette, thinking, "The old gentlemen are well away with it".

Ralph, subsiding, applied himself to the marmalade. Kavanagh, a senior captain newly transferred to Rockingham's regiment, lounged in.

Frank said to Wilfrid, "I've had a letter from Forsyth. He says Catterick's a cross between a swamp and an ice field". Wilfrid said to Frank, "I wish we could get a ruling about the turbans. It looks so damn silly only having 'em on four of the guns".

"The Turban Troop", quoted Frank Potter from the day's orders, "will be the right troop of the right battery. But what, my noble hearers, are we to call the whole battery?"

"They were calling 'em 'wings' yesterday", grouched Ralph Lyttelton. "And the day before they were 'groups'. They'll probably call 'em 'units' tomorrow."

And once again—as he listened to the technical discussion which followed—sentiment touched the mind of Rusty Rockingham. Because the Turban battery, as a self-contained unit, existed no more.

§ 4

“Great-uncle Marmaduke would have had something to say about that”, mused Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Rockingham as he lit his after-breakfast pipe in the anteroom. “It can’t be helped though. The new scheme’s pretty sound. Once we get our twenty-five-pounders, we’ll have at least double the fire-power.”

And those twenty-five-pounders would be firing his own shell.

The thought proved as pleasant as the day’s first tobacco. He flopped into his favourite chair—no point in panicking off to brigade office, leave that to one’s adjutant—and applied his mind to *The Times* crossword puzzle.

First across clue. “Requisite for a modern general.” Five letters. Now what the blazes could that be? Possibly, “youth”.

The idea amused him. He pencilled it in; tried the down clue, “How Tomlinson accosted the devil”. Eight letters. Hadn’t Tomlinson “yammered, ‘Let me in’!”? He had. First letter “y” again. Then “youth” was right.

But, even as his pencil printed that second word, memory flashed at Rockingham, “We’ll all be Methuselahs by the next great war”; and, just for the split of a second, it was as though the Hawk’s self were grinning at him from that empty saddlebag on the other side of the fireplace.

The best part of two years now, since one had last set eyes on the Hawk!

He put away the puzzle, and fell pensive again. Camilla’s husband, with “Lieutenant-General” in front of his name and a C.M.G. after it—had been back in England for six months. One was bound to run into him sooner or later. Awkward, when one did. Devilish awkward. Time to jump that fence when one came to it, though. Better try some more clues.

The very next clue, however, proved such a teaser that Rockingham put down the paper, and went back to his quarter, taking Patrick—who had remained in the anteroom while he ate his poached egg and rashers—with him.

Just as they crossed the gravel a flight of the new four-hundred-mile-an-hour Hurricanes—eight synchronised Browning guns on their wings—screamed over in close formation and was gone.

“Ought to have more of ’em”, he thought. “Ought to have our new guns and our new shells. Still—things are a bit different from what they were two years ago. Give

us just one more year of rearmament and reorganisation—and heaven help anyone who tries to tackle the British Empire.”

But would that bring the world any nearer to the prime requisite of civilisation—Permanent Peace?

The thought depressed the Christian in him. War was a crime. No getting over that. Yet to invite war by weakness was to encourage crime, to make its eventual commission a certainty.

Geoffrey had seen that truth, died for it. William had seen it with his, “We’ve been trying to show the world an example for the last seventeen years. All the continental nations have done is to put their fingers to their noses”.

A stout fellow, William, in his big ship.

“Happy ship”, thought William’s only brother, reliving that fortnight’s cruise aboard her. “And mine’s a happy regiment. A man can only do one job in this world. And, as the world is today, our jobs are still worthwhile ones. Without us, there wouldn’t be a hope.”

For, nowadays, there really was a hope—and a growing one—that bullies might learn their lesson without having to be taught it with bullets, bombs and gunfire, and peace be preserved for another generation.

So, once again, thank the lord—and Camilla, for showing one one’s duty.

A grand woman. The best in the world.

§ 5

Wondering why Camilla should be so much in his thoughts this morning, the man who still loved her memory buckled his belt, cocked his cap on his head, tucked his cane under his arm, confined Patrick to his quarter with one mock-stern word, bent to give him a last pat, and went to his office.

There he found Mr. Cartwright, newly promoted to be his regimental sergeant-major, and Parsons, who had taken over the adjutancy from Headworth some three months back.

“About these new warrant officers class three, sir”, began Captain Parsons, after the exchange of salutes. “Division’s very anxious to have our list in by this afternoon—and Mr. Cartwright thought you might consider including the name of Sergeant Godden. I’ve asked Captain Kavanagh about it, and he says he’s quite agreeable—though of course he’s only just taken over the battery and doesn’t know very much about the man.”

“Nepotism!” smiled Rockingham—but the word conveyed little to the

newcomer, Parsons, who had not yet discovered the relationship between Godden and Cartwright; and nothing to Cartwright, who had never heard it before; and who added, standing stiffly to attention:

“We’re rather short of N.C.O.s whom we can recommend, sir”.

“Quite”, said Rockingham; and again he smiled. “But remember, Mr. Cartwright, that these new warrant officers will be doing the same duty as our old junior subalterns.”

“I have not forgotten that, sir.”

“So you honestly think that Sergeant Godden is sufficiently reliable for us to send his name forward?”

“I do, sir.” And Regimental-Sergeant-Major Cartwright added, “He’s engaged to be married, sir. To a very suitable young woman, sir”.

On which Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Rockingham, M.C., speaking much as Wily Wilbraham might have spoken, and from the very same chair, said, “I fail to see why we should allow that to affect our judgment, Mr. Cartwright”; and Mr. Cartwright said, “I only thought I’d mention it, sir”; and a blue eye under rusty-coloured brows came very near to winking, as the judicial voice continued:

“Let us hope that the future Mrs. Godden waits until we have a vacancy in the married lines before she follows Mrs. Noakes’ example”.

Once again, nevertheless—as Cartwright added his nephew’s name to those seven others—sentiment touched Rusty Rockingham, and memories haunted his mind.

§ 6

Cartwright saluted, and went. Parsons stayed on, answering questions, for another five minutes before he took the signed form out to Bombardier Calvert, whom Rockingham had “pinched from the battery” on his promotion.

Alone, Rockingham’s thoughts returned to Godden.

“Stretched a point there”, he thought. “But I owe him something, too.”

And after that, just for an instant, he caught himself thinking of Cowley.

Then, shrugging his shoulders as though to dismiss all such memories of a past which could no longer influence, however much it might have conduced to, this present certainty, he went out to his guns.

They were forming up, his two batteries of guns, and the seventy wheeled vehicles, the thirty motorcycles which served them. To the lay mind, the whole square might have seemed in confusion—but not to his.

As once he had known his gun teams and his wagon teams, almost so he now knew these heavy cars—cars for battery commanders and seconds in command of batteries, cars for survey officers and surveyors, cars for troop commanders and gun position officers, cars for cable-laying, and cars for the wireless sets—all manned, all moving forward, silently except for the purr of their engines and the scrunch of the big pneumatics on the gravel, from their sheds.

And now, out from those other sheds, snouted the sixteen six-wheeled tractors that could haul his guns and his trailers, all of them on pneumatics and spring-carriages, across almost any country, and along good tarmac at forty miles in hour.

The sight fascinated, absorbed all his mind. For long minutes, he watched it; watched order emerge from the apparent chaos—until, now, the first line of green trucks had been dressed, and now the second, and now the tractor-drawn guns.

There, far, one of the four-five howitzers which Lyttelton had once commanded, marked the left of the long line of guns. Here, close, an eighteen-pounder of the Turban troop marked the right of it.

And here, already, came Wilfrid, stiffly at the salute, to say, stumbling a little over the unaccustomed word, “Regiment ready to move, sir”.

“Right”, said Wilfrid Patterson’s colonel. “The C.R.A. won’t be here for another half-hour, I imagine. Get the men mounted—and I’ll just have a look round.”

Officers saluted, N.C.O.s and men sat to attention, while “old Rusty had his usual look round”; but, once they were at ease again, Sergeant Chalkley whispered to Sergeant Godden, “There ain’t much that misses his eagle optic, is there?”; and Lance-Sergeant Boardman whispered to Sergeant Challis something that made Challis snigger:

“Old Rusty’s tyre pressures are all right these days. Besides, his dog isn’t on parade. Where did you get that tit-bit from, Boardy?”

“Oh, I just happened to hear it. May not be true for all I know.”

But, even while Boardman was still speaking, Frank Potter bellowed, “Right battery. Attention”; already, past the flag and the saluting sentry, slid the C.R.A.’s car.

§ 7

The C.R.A.’s car stopped; and two men dismounted from it. That much, the colonel of the regiment—now standing by his own eight-hundredweight Morris with the landing wheel tyres, which was parked on the extreme right and a length in front of the first line—saw clearly.

Also, he had a dim impression of two red-banded caps approaching; and of a third head, which he just recognised for Bryce-Atkinson's, following behind.

But, with his hand at his own cap peak, everything was blacked out, except two fierce eyes.

Then a voice, only just recognised for his own C.R.A.'s, said, "I think Rockingham was here when you were commanding, sir. He had the Turban battery"—and his sight cleared, and he knew that he was face to face with the Hawk.

One had to put one's chin up before one could cross eyes with the Hawk. And, just for the split of a second, one was conscious of an awkwardness never before experienced, even on one's first parade.

Nevertheless, this was a parade; and the Hawk had to speak the next word. So let him—and get it over. He couldn't very well deny knowing one. Couldn't he, though? He'd always ridden his own line, he'd always been a law unto himself, had Hawk Wethered.

"Mr. Rockingham, a little harness cleaning seems indicated. This surcingle buckle is as rusty as your hair." Funny, how those old words came back to one. Funny, that the Hawk's eyes no longer looked so fierce, that he seemed to be grinning.

Damn it all, he was grinning, sideways, as he said, "My memory for faces isn't quite what it used to be, Armstrong. It gets a bit rusty as one grows older. That's Rockingham's nickname, in case you don't know it. Rusty. As a matter of fact, I gave it him myself, when he was one of my subalterns in the old forty-eighth".

And turning, laying a hand on the green-painted wing of the truck, in which Trumpeter Lucas and the driver were still sitting to attention, he continued, "I've just been telling Armstrong that it's damn ridiculous not to have double screenwipers on these contraptions. I tried one in the rain the other day—and I couldn't see a yard in front of me. I always like to see where I'm going. Don't you . . . Rusty?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why not have them fitted at your own expense? They don't cost much. And, after all, you can afford to put your hand in your pocket. I gather you're still a bachelor. That is so, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"All the more reason to see where you're going."

And the Hawk added, "I always think it serves fellows damn well right when they don't see where they're going, Rusty".

Which was Hawk Wethered's manner of saying, "My fault as much as yours. Let's wash it out, shall we?"

Or so it seemed to Rusty Rockingham, escorting him from vehicle to vehicle,
from gun to gun . . .

THE END

Basil Street, London.

October 1937-July 1938.

FRANKAU

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Gilbert Frankau—pronounced FRANKO—was born on April 21st, 1884: the eldest son of Arthur and Julia Frankau (Frank Danby, the novelist).

Educated at Eton as an Oppidan Scholar, he there founded *The X Magazine*, subsequently producing his first volume of verse, *Eton Echoes*, in 1901.

Entering his father's business in 1904, after two years' apprenticeship on the Continent, he remained a cigar merchant and cigarette manufacturer until the Great War. During this period he produced another volume of verse, *The X. Y. Z. of Bridge*, and in 1912 his famous verse satire, *One of Us*.

A business journey round the world gave us the dramatic poem, *Tid' apa*.

From the outbreak of war until he was invalided in February 1918, Frankau served as an infantryman (9th Battalion East Surrey Regiment), as a gunner (107th Brigade R.F.A.) and as propaganda officer in Italy. His soldier poems enjoyed wide popularity and are collected in the two volumes, *The City of Fear* and *The Judgement of Valhalla*.

Frankau's first prose novel, *The Woman of the Horizon*, in which he originally created the character "Peter Jackson", was published while he was still serving. *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant*, followed in 1919.

Meanwhile he had given us the second of his verse satires, *One of Them*, originally published in *The Tatler*.

By then the family business had passed into other hands, and Frankau took up authorship and journalism as a career.

Readers will recall the following novels: *The Seeds of Enchantment* (1921), *The Love Story of Aliette Brunton* (1922), *Gerald Cranston's Lady* (1924), *Life—and Erica* (1925), and *Masterson* (1926).

In that year Frankau went to America. His impressions, originally published in the *Morning Post*, are to be found in *My Unsentimental Journey*.

After the publication of the novel, *So Much Good* (1928), and an adventure in Fleet Street, came the prose satire, *Dance! Little Gentleman*, and the novels, *Martin Make-Believe* (1930), *Christopher Strong* (1932), *The Lonely Man* (1932), *Everywoman* (1933), *Three Englishmen* (1935), and *Farewell Romance* (1936).

During the year 1937, Frankau gave us his third verse satire, *More of Us*, and

his sixth collection of short stories, *Experiments in Crime*.

The remainder of his short stories are collected under the titles, *Men, Maids and Mustard-Pot* (1923), *Twelve Tales* (1927), *Concerning Peter Jackson and Others* (1931), *Wine, Women and Waiters* (1932), and *Secret Services* (1934).

In the Spring of 1938 we published *The Dangerous Years*, an even greater success than *Three Englishmen* which up to this time had been his most successful novel in America. Both novels were among the outstanding best sellers of their respective seasons, but with the American public *The Dangerous Years* was even more popular than *Three Englishmen*.

The Dangerous Years went through fourteen American printings. William McFee called it "A high-speed, streamlined 'Forsyte Saga,'"¹ in the *N. Y. Sun*; the *N. Y. Times*, "An authentic picture of a significant phase of contemporary life"; the *N. Y. Tribune*, "Here is writing with impact and indelible reality"; *The New Yorker*, "A family chronicle which is lively, highly colored and full of big moments"; Harry Hansen in the *World-Telegram*, "If you want a story filled with the clash of temperament, with action and emotion—this book keeps the reader's interest on the alert through 686 pages"; *The Atlantic Journal*, "In this book Gilbert Frankau has produced what is perhaps the finest prose in his long career. A dramatic new novel of pre-war and post-war society."

As Douglas West so aptly put it, . . . "Mr. Frankau paints his scenes with a dazzling clarity. No novelist is so incapable of boring his readers. He keeps up an incessant excitement about his people and their concerns. He is, that is to say, a born story-teller."

We venture to predict that *Royal Regiment* will eclipse even the success of *The Dangerous Years*.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Royal Regiment* by Gilbert Frankau]