A STIRRING AND COURAGEOUS NOVEL OF ENGLAND'S MOST DESPERATE HOUR

THIS ABOVE ALL

by Eric Knight

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LASSIE COME HOME (Juvenile)

THIS ABOVE ALL

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By ERIC KNIGHT

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To My Lass with the Bright Blue Eyes

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell: my blessing season this in thee!

—*Hamlet.*

THIS ABOVE ALL

CHAPTER I

WHEN spring was almost done the war began in earnest. In that town, people walking along the Esplanade could hear the guns.

The people were somehow relieved. They said: "The sitzkrieg's over at last."

They walked in the hard sunshine, and waited for news of victory and listened to the guns. The guns were not loud for they were far away, far up the Channel, over on the Continent. But when the fine breeze came in gladly from the sea the sound of the guns came muttering with it, and people said: "Hear that? Now he's catching it!"

Sometimes the sound was a single one, a trembling of air as if someone had stroked a big drum with one finger. Sometimes the sound overlapped into a long mumbling like a dog's first growling.

But still the holiday people and the seashore trippers walked gladly in the unusually good weather. They promenaded on the stone-faced Esplanade, breathing deeply of the rotting-kelp and brine smell of the sea. Only occasionally they would stop and say:

"Listen! Hear that? The guns!"

"Yes. Now he's catching it at last."

They listened half anxiously because it was, after all, a war, and half gladly because now all the nervous strain of waiting was over. But they were confident about the boys over there and the Allied armies, and the sounds were too crooning and remote to have evil meaning.

In a curious way they were personally proud when they heard the far-off cannonading. It was as if hearing the guns allowed them to take some small but important part in the war; as if, by the mere act of listening, they also were serving.

The weather was beautiful for walking. Sometimes the people strolled out beyond the town, going up to the cliff top. There, high up over the Channel, the sea breeze came over more steadily, like greater music. That steady wind always blew. The grass tops were riffled in sweeping planes so that they reflected the blue of the sky. Far below in the bays and coves the waves moved in like a slow motion-picture.

The guns sounded much plainer up there. Just sitting or lying there and listening made one feel in some indefinable way like a pioneer.

The guns sounded louder in the town, too. Some of the holiday people started leaving.

After that, to the regular townspeople, the unusual spell of beautiful sunshine began to seem like a wasteful gesture of nature, like an oversupply of fruit in a peculiar glut season, or an inexplicable run of herring when every fishing smack had such a

remarkable catch that no one could sell any in the overcrowded market. For fine weather in that town was a business.

If there hadn't been a war the place would have been jammed: all the boarding houses, all the hotels—even the Channel Hotel which was the most exclusive. That was the only way to make money—to be packed to capacity in the fine weather.

They said:

"After all, it's only a short season at best, and you have to make what you can to carry you through the winter."

Now, at last, they had good weather, and yet the place was, as they said, getting practically empty. They did not blame the war much. Rather, they blamed the weather. It wouldn't have been half so bad, they said, if it had only been rainy. They wished it would rain, so that all the fine sunshine wouldn't go to waste.

But they tried not to complain. After all, they said, there is a war on. One should be ready to do his bit without complaining—now that the war had really started at last and you could hear the guns.

You could hear them very plainly now, especially at night when the blackout made the town unusually still and hushed. Then the place went dead. People went for a short stroll after dinner, and when they came back for a nightcap in the bar they said it was curious how clearly you could hear the guns at night.

They listened to the B.B.C., and discussed tactics. Just let him wait a while. It wasn't Poland or Norway this time. He was up against a real army and he was getting a nasty shock. The French generals were the best in the world. Hitler had made his big mistake at last. The way the guns were going meant that we were giving him hell.

No one thought of it the other way round, not even when the gunfire came nearer—not even when it got so that you could hear gunfire at night when you were indoors.

You didn't have to go out on the Esplanade or on the cliff top any more. Lying in bed, you could hear the sound of the steady wind, and the sound of the waves thumping—but you could hear the thump of the guns, too. The windowpanes would chatter. Sometimes you could even hear the shells going through the air.

There would be a boom and then a long, sighing sound. It was like a train in the Underground, only heard at a great distance. The sighing would go on for thirty seconds, forty seconds, fifty—and then a crrrump. That was the way it sounded. Boom—then a sigh for as long as you could hold your breath—then crrrump! It had landed. The sound blanketed in the air. More often than not the crrrump was louder than the boom.

Before May became June you could see the gunfire. The sky to the southeast blinked and flashed and sometimes broke into a sustained glow. Each night the glowing crept farther west.

The situation seemed confused. In the Channel Hotel bar everyone listened stolidly to the B.B.C., but that didn't make it any clearer. When the news was over they said, well, you couldn't expect the B.B.C. to broadcast information that would give away our plans to the enemy, could you?

It was all very confusing until Churchill declared it was the Battle of the Bulge. That made it easier to understand. The Germans had pushed into a great salient. If you drew a picture you could see how simple it was. All we had to do was press at the neck from the north, the French do the same from the south. Anyone could understand it. One wondered why the Germans had been so utterly foolish as to get into such a situation.

But soon no one spoke of the Battle of the Bulge any more; just as no one spoke about Hitler missing the bus any more.

Now the guns were drumming away and rattling windows all the time. They blazed away to the southeast, the south, and finally to the southwest, too.

The war was going farther and farther along the Channel, and everyone seemed so impotent. Something seemed to be wrong. It was as if the Esplanade were a grandstand and the war was parading past right under your eyes—and you couldn't do anything to help.

The guns drummed away all day and all night; but no longer they said: "Now he's catching it!" For at last they began to think that it could be the other way round. The shells might be dropping on their own men.

For the first time, people began to think about high explosives and screaming steel and human flesh.

All but a handful of the few remaining visitors packed up and left. It was too terrible to sit in the glorious sunshine all day while the guns told you of this horrible thing happening almost under your eyes. The British army was being slaughtered, practically as you looked on. For it was clear now that it wasn't the German right wing that was surrounded—it was the British army.

It came out over the B.B.C. that the Belgian king had surrendered, and left the flank open. The Belgians had let them down. The French had let them down. There was nothing now but the British army, surrounded by greatly superior forces. The Germans had Calais. They were within a few miles of Dunkirk. The British army was fighting for its life.

And then, at last, war became terrible. When people heard the guns they shuddered. It was horrible to think of that endless cascade of shells being poured in on the tightly compressed body of the British army.

The nights became a torture of sound. There were crashes that almost shattered the windows. It meant the warships were in action. The Fleet was trying to help hold back the German army.

Now, at night, the skies erupted bursts of light and glowed with flame. In the day V-shaped squadrons of planes went roaring out over the cliffs. They snarled away at top speed, and people knew they were racing to help plug up the leaking left flank. The planes tore away and came back. They shuttled over the Channel with their loads of bombs so endlessly that it seemed as if both men and machines should drop from the sky, in defiance of aerodynamic laws, from sheer weariness.

It was then that, at last, the fine weather ended. It turned foggy.

The very last of the visitors left. They felt it had been a terrible experience, but they had stuck it out. And one thing, the weather *had* been fine. It was no use staying now

that the one good thing about it had come to an end.

The fog kept up for two days. In those two days they got the British army out. Naval craft, private craft, it didn't matter. Tugs, destroyers, yachts, trawlers, barges, pleasure boats, rowboats, canoes—anything that could float. They got in and got them out while the rear guard fought the enemy off. The beggars' flotilla went back and forth—all day and all night and all the next day and all the next night—as long as boats stayed afloat, men sailed them.

That way they got most of the British Expeditionary Force home again. But not all. For the fog lifted and it was fine again.

The guns still went on pounding, and people knew that some of the rear guard was still alive in Dunkirk. Those men fighting knew there wasn't much chance of getting boats to them now—now that the fog had lifted, but they fought on.

As long as the guns went on it meant there was a rear guard left. Standing on the Esplanade, the people of the seashore town knew that. They thought that and listened to the guns, pounding away at human flesh. They stood in the sunshine and thought of it, over and over. They were hearing the British rear guard being smashed to bits.

Suddenly everything became very quiet. The sun shone uselessly and splendidly on the holiday town. It shone on the empty splendor of seaside resort magnificence—the Esplanade, the unbroken regiments of ornamental lampposts, the steadfast battalions of benches.

The guns had stopped. It was all over. The Germans had Dunkirk.

CHAPTER II

By the time summer came the town began to look disused. It was strange to the people—such endless sunshine—and no seaside crowds. The hotels were, as they said, "starving to death."

The place became more and more desolate. By August, in the bandstand opposite the Channel Hotel, the sand had drifted up and lay, undisturbed by feet. Even the Channel Hotel was starving to death now. The assistant manager, sitting on his high stool behind the grille, thought of that. He thought of it as he stared from the window. He stared, studying the windblown patterns of sand on the bandstand floor jutting out from the Esplanade. He thought it was hard luck. The manager had just been called up with the Class of 1907. He himself was younger, but had the bad luck to be quite physically unfit. And the bad luck might have been good luck—in a business sense—if it weren't for such rotten business. After Mrs. Tirrell, he was next for the job of manager. He lifted his head as the silence was broken. The lift was coming. He tried to look happy. The modernistic lobby was empty. But beyond in the lounge, one man sat, slumped in one of the chairs. The sunlight struck the brown tweed of the man's suit, making a warm, lively splash. It harmonized with the color scheme of the lounge, and made the assistant manager a little happier in a vague way.

The indicator on the lift moved round. The door opened. A woman, a nurse, and two children came out. The children and the nurse went out into the sunlight. The woman sat in one of the lobby chairs and read a magazine. In a few moments she put her finger in the place and went to one of the windows looking over the Esplanade. She stood there a long time, watching the nurse and the children.

A bell tinkled with terrible too-loudness in the lounge. The waiter hurried in, came back, went to the bar, and returned with a cherry brandy on the tray. As he passed he caught the assistant manager's eye. He rolled his own eyes a little in a suggestive way and held up his open hand with the fingers extended. He meant to say this was the fifth brandy he had taken in. The assistant manager did not smile; he merely nodded. He dropped his head and tried to appear busy.

He heard the woman coming from the window, her heels first sounding on the tile of the floor, then quiet on the carpet, then again clicking and firm on the tile. He looked up and smiled.

"Did you put my call through?"

"Yes, Mrs. Cathaway. We'll let you know the very moment we get it."

The woman tapped her foot impatiently and then clicked back to the window. She went on tapping her foot as she stared out. The clicking sounded clearly in the emptiness of the lobby. It went on and on.

The splash of warm color in the sitting room eddied and moved. The young man in the brown tweeds came into the lobby, going a little unsteadily. The assistant manager gave him a smile of recognition—one given in passing. The young man did not pass. He came straight to the grille.

"I'm moving out," he said. "Will you have my bill?"

"Oh," the assistant manager said. "I'm sorry, Mr. Briggs. I understood you'd be staying—at least a week."

He looked so crestfallen that the young man frowned. He thought: Why should the bastard make me suffer for it? Why should I have to carry his woes? I can't help it.

"No, I'm leaving," he said.

The assistant manager cocked his head on one side and smiled belatedly.

"Pardon me a moment," he said. "I'll have the bill made out."

He went away and the young man leaned his elbow on the desk and half turned. He could see the woman looking out of the window. Her back was to him. Her legs were slim and very well shaped. The seams of her stockings were perfectly straight. Her heels were perfectly set.

He watched the tapping foot. His eyes came upwards. Her flanks were slim. She was the type that did not need to wear a girdle.

Without reasoning it, his mind shied away from undressing her, and his vision went beyond through the window. He could see six of the ornamental lampposts along the Esplanade. They were exactly like the ones he had seen through the window of the lounge—except there he saw only five. Exactly the same. It was the sameness that he couldn't stand. Five then six. But the same.

He moved slightly so that the six should be perfectly balanced in the frame of the window. He leaned his body far over. At last they were spaced properly. He felt a sort of comfort.

The woman turned, and he saw she was staring at him with something like disdain.

He thought: I'm not looking at you. I'm looking at the six lampposts. I have a right to look at the lampposts.

So he stared on, stonily; but he turned quickly when he heard the sound of the assistant manager. He was following a woman in a black dress. She had a slight mustache, but her gray hair was finely coifed.

"This is Mrs. Tirrell, the manager," the assistant manager said.

The young man thought: What the hell do you bring her into it for?

The woman smiled.

"You're leaving already, Mr. Briggs?"

"Yes."

"We understood you would be here for a longer stay."

"No, I'm leaving."

“Is there anything wrong—with the service?”

“No. I just—I’m moving on.”

“I see.”

He thought: Oh, Christ, why do they load their burdens on me. Their damned hotel is empty and they’re worrying about even one bloody guest. It isn’t my fault their hotel’s empty and they’re losing money, and they’ll lose their jobs. It isn’t my fault. They’ve no right to pass it on to me.

The woman looked up, slyly, and spoke quietly, confidentially.

“If it’s a matter of rates, Mr. Briggs . . . ordinarily we couldn’t do it, but because we’re having such a slow season, I could make some adjustment.”

He thought: Oh, God! Oh, God!

“No, I’ve got to move,” he said. “I’ll go pack my bag. If you’ll have the bill ready when I come down . . .”

He went up the stairs, ignoring the lift. In his room he picked up his already-packed Gladstone bag. He came down again and went to the desk and asked for his bill. He wrinkled his forehead as he saw the name which was written across the top in a neat, clear hand: “Clive Briggs, Esq.” He shook his head slightly as if throwing off his own thoughts. He paid the bill and the assistant manager counted the change primly. As he did so the buzzer sounded on the telephone exchange.

“Pardon me,” the assistant manager said.

The woman by the window tapped her way over quickly. The assistant came back and smiled.

“It’s your call, Mrs. Cathaway. I’m sorry it took so long . . .”

“I’ll take it in my suite,” she said.

She turned and faced the young man in tweeds.

“Pardon me,” she said.

He stood aside quickly so that she could pass toward the lift. She could have walked round him as easily as not. He paid her back by watching her legs as she went into the lift. When she turned about, in the second before the door slid to, she was aware of his intentional insolence. He smiled, almost happily.

“Oh, could you take care of this for me?” he said.

He lifted the new Gladstone bag onto the counter.

“We’ll be glad to, Mr. Briggs.”

“I’ll pick it up again some time—or let you know where to forward it.”

“Yes, Mr. Briggs.”

The young man lifted his chest as if in relief. He went quickly to the door and out onto the Esplanade.

Iris Cathaway took off her hat primly, smoothed her fine brown hair carefully as she looked in the mirror, and then went to the sitting room of the suite. She sat at the desk, prepared her mouth, lifted the telephone and said:

“Yes?”

She heard the man’s voice at the other end, lifting gladly as one does when surprised:

“Iris! What in the name of goodness are you doing down there?”

“I’ve been trying to get you for hours.”

“I just came in. When they said Leaford was calling I didn’t think . . .”

“I’m in the Channel Hotel here. I’ve got the boys with me. We’ve got to move them.”

“Well, where do you want to go?”

“That’s why I called you. Hamish, I want you to decide.”

“Me. But you know how I feel. I . . .”

“This is no time to go into that again. We’ve got to move them. I’ve taken Arthur out of the school.”

“But, Iris, if you break up his schooling any more . . .”

“I don’t want to break it up—but neither do I want the child dead. Why, there’s a military airport practically next door to the school. It was supposed to be a safe area. That’s why the school moved there. You said it would be safer.”

“Hold on, Iris. I didn’t say it would be. I admitted it, but under protest against moving them at all.”

She heard his voice grow dryly pedantic as it did when he was angry. She kept her own voice cool.

“Now, Hamish. This is no time to play the barrister. The fact is that the school was about the worst place in the world for Arthur to be. I should think you’d want the children to be safe . . .”

“Nonsense, Iris. Of course I want them to be safe. Now bring them back here . . .”

“I will not go back to London, Hamish. That’s the worst place in the world.”

“I can’t agree, Iris. There’s too much protection here. The defenses are so well organized that I don’t think they’ll ever be able to bomb London.”

“Well, I do. London’s the last place I want to be.”

“But, my God, Iris. I don’t see what you expect me to do at this distance. If you’d done as I said in the first place, and gone to Oddale . . .”

“I will not go to Yorkshire! Now we won’t discuss all that again.”

“Well, where do you want to go?”

“It isn’t where I want to go. It’s your responsibility. You’re the children’s father.”

She heard him expelling his breath in exasperation.

“See here, Iris. I have a case in a few minutes. I’ll think it over . . .”

“If that is more important than the safety of your own children . . .”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Iris. What do you want me to do? You won’t do anything I say, and when I ask you what you want to do, you say it’s my responsibility. You won’t come to London because you think it won’t be safe. You won’t go to Yorkshire—where God knows there’s nothing to bomb for miles around—because you have a silly feud

on with my father; you won't go to *your* father's because there's a steel mill a mile away; you won't leave Arthur in school because there's an airdrome near by. And where are you now? Of all places you take the children . . ."

"I came here because this is safe. This is a seaside resort. There isn't a single military objective in the town."

"Oh, military objectives! They've dropped bombs on the South Coast already. And do you think they've been coming down first and inspecting the places to ascertain whether or not they're military targets? Those Nazi gentlemen . . ."

"Please don't make a speech, Hamish. You know my feeling about this whole silly war. The Nazis are quite as capable of being gentlemen as our own army. There's no reason on earth for bombing this town."

"Then why not stay there?"

"You advise me to keep the children here when you've just admitted yourself that it's probably unsafe."

She heard him blow out his breath. Then his voice came hard and balanced.

"If you wish to stay there, it is your choice. Now what do you wish?"

"We can't stay here. It's ghastly—this awful hotel. Now I'll put up with it until you can make some decision. I want a place that's perfectly safe—where the children can grow up normally and sensibly. That's all. I want you to help me find such a place."

There was a silence. Then he said:

"All right. I'll look into it. Are the boys there—I'll say hello to them."

"No, they're out on the sands with Mills."

"I see. How are they?"

"Very well."

"And you?"

"Quite well, thank you. How are you?"

"Oh, quite fit."

"Then you'll look into it? You could see Willfred. See someone about it."

"I'll look into it."

"All right, Hamish. I have your promise."

"Yes, you have my promise."

"Good-by, then."

"Good-by."

She heard the click of the telephone. She sat for a while, then rose and looked from the window. Farther down on the sands she could see Mills, a lonesome splash of white, on the brown rectangle of the blanket. Arthur was bending over, bending straight-legged as a child will, examining something on the sand by the water edge. Prentiss ran unsteadily round the blanket, wavered, and fell.

Iris put all her muscles in a lifting impulse—as if over the distance she would lift him. Mills went on reading without looking up. The child lay there.

Iris strained. The exertion left her feeling weak and frustrated. She watched, her teeth set until the child pushed himself up on all fours, rose, and staggered again round the blanket, going over the pale gold of the sands in a drunken circle.

Iris shut her eyes, and pressed the tips of her fingers on her temples, and stood thus, unmoving.

CHAPTER III

After Clive left the hotel he went west, going through the town, then steadily along the cliff top road. He marched, going in stolid, set gait, until the sentry challenged him.

"Halt, who goes there?"

"Friend," he said.

"Advance, friend, and be recognized."

The formula was over, and now he thought it had a humorous quality. The sentry was quite young. He stood with his left foot forward and the rifle correctly at the on-guard of bayonet fighting. But the gun had no bayonet. The boy shifted his feet.

"Come on," he said, uneasily. "What yer want?"

He walked over, looking at the boy's arm band.

"Hello, L.V.D.," he said. "What's up?"

The boy grounded his rifle. He motioned with his head.

"It's a closed port, they call it. I ain't supposed to let no one down here less they got a pass. D'you have one?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, if you got business, like, you can go see 'em down there. You go down by the main road here. That's where the guardhouse is."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I was just walking. So long."

"So long," the boy said, uneasily.

Clive turned about and went along the road. A half mile further back he struck a footpath branching north. He followed it for a half-hour with the sun beginning to slant low on his left shoulder. At twilight he was on a metaled road going north. Just before dark, at a crossroads bus stop he saw two men standing. One had at his feet an old-fashioned straw satchel such as carpenters carry their tools in.

He stood beside them and caught the bus that stopped for them. He sat there, nodding with the sway of the bus, hearing the rear-end grind, and going over in his mind all the things one would do to take the rear axle down, put the differential into shape, and put the job together again.

When the conductor came around for the fares, the carpenter and his helper said: "Gosley."

He said the same. It was a sixpenny fare. The bus went on, making many stops. It was long after dark when the carpenter bent down for his satchel. Clive followed the men out.

The place was dark from the blackout, but Clive felt he was in a small town—a village. He went along in the darkness, seeing dimly the narrow pavement. More from the heavy smell of ale than through sight he found the village pub. The bar was crowded. As he went in the place was loud with the hubbub of thick county accents. Then the room quieted as people turned to look at him. He went to the bar.

"Can I get anything to eat?"

"Sorry," the bar man said.

"Well—where could I get something?"

"I dunno. You could try up the inn. Does he have any meals at the inn, Will?"

A man at the bar bent and spat.

"His daughter's poorly in bed. They'll not have anything."

"I could give you a cup of Bovril," the barman said.

"No, it doesn't matter. You might give me a double brandy."

"A double brandy, sir. Yes, sir."

Clive took his drink and went to a table. When he sat it was as if a signal had been given, and the men took up their clamor of talk again.

He sat with his head bowed. He could hear the plunk of the darts in the board. The voices chipped in singsong comments on the game. His ear became tuned to the accents, and he began to pick out the thread of sense in the voices. There was an argument at the bar. He heard a voice lifted.

"Didn't they kill three not twenty miles away?"

"Aye—and sunk a French ship taking surrendered Frenchies back to France?"

"Ah, to hell with Frogs—and Belgies too. Aye, they could walk through them bloody Belgians, but when they hit a right army, they knew it. I bet we give 'em hell."

"I'll bet if the flank hadn't been opened we'd ha' stuck there yet."

It was a young militiaman. He looked about, hopefully.

"Them bloody Belgians," the man beside him said. "It was the same in the last war. You never knew where you were with a Belgian. Half of 'em were no better than Germans, the bastards."

Clive got up and went to the bar.

"Another double," he said.

His voice rang too clearly. The man beside him stared and the conversation died. The man turned his back and went on to the militiaman.

"Well, I say, this time we ought to do the bloody job right. Last war, we let 'em off light. They don't know what war is, in Germany. Well, what I say is, this time we shouldn't stop until we've shown 'em. Right to Berlin, and let 'em see what it is."

The man turned, pugnaciously.

"Isn't that so, mate?"

He picked up his glass. He knew the men were waiting. Terriers with a strange dog among them. They didn't really want to be unfriendly.

"If you say so," he said, quietly.

“What do you mean, if I say so?”

Clive put his drink down carefully before answering.

“What do you want me to say? Yes, with jam on it?”

The man glared at him, uncertainly, and the place was quiet.

Afterwards, when he had gone back to his seat, he could hear the men talking, now in lower tones. He felt as if among enemies.

But as he drank the thought of them went from his mind. He felt the deep, warm glow spreading through his body, and he lost himself in the peace of it. He felt his head nodding and rocking. The noise about him blurred, and the words tangled into meaninglessness. Sometimes he felt that he slept, and sometimes it seemed that only his mind was sleeping. It kept waking up to find his body going independently through normal motions—moving to the bar—picking up a glass—sitting opposite a young man and lifting his glass in salute—stepping carefully around a man with a dart poised in his hand.

Then he came from the curious sleep to hear a loud voice. He saw the heavy face, and realized that he was in the argument again.

“I say, land on the Continent and take him by surprise. And, by Christ, fight it out this time if it takes every bloody last man. No surrender for good old Britain.”

“That’s what you say.”

“Bet your bloody life that’s what I say.”

“With your mouth.”

“Yes, with my mouth.”

“When does the rest of you go? When do you march?”

“I was in the last bloody war, and I’d go in this one if I wasn’t over age.”

“Too bad you’re over age.”

“Too bad about you, too. What about you?”

“I’m over age, too. I’m a grandfather.”

“A grandfather! You’ll be a bloody clout in the jaw in a minute.”

Clive saw the man swinging, so he stepped back and then struck out, gladly, viciously. He felt he had hit cleanly on the side of the jawbone. The man went down, and came up strongly, weaving his head in boxing manner.

He almost laughed, even though he felt that he had been hit over the heart. There was a curious peace at last—to be doing something. He danced back and chopped at the man going past him. He could hear the cry of the barman:

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen!”

No one was paying any attention.

There was a curious jump in time, and then he was in a press of bodies by the door. He had his head down and was slugging monotonously right and left. His arms were weary, but there was peace even in that weariness.

Then, like a broken film, the scene shut off, and there was only blackness and not knowing.

CHAPTER IV

Old General Cathaway watched his son bend over, slowly, and strike the match on the holder as he spoke.

"And how's mother?"

"Oh, well. Never changes."

He was thinking: Roger's the soundest of the three. But he's the hardest one to get at. Never get behind his mind. Wonder how he stands Diane. She must weary him to death—she does me. But probably she can't get at him really any more than I can.

Roger Cathaway lit the cigar carefully, holding the match well away from his beard.

"You shouldn't smoke another before dinner," Diane said, plaintively.

"I shouldn't, should I?" Roger said pleasantly. He held the cigar in his hands, clasped behind his back.

That was it, Old Hamish thought. You couldn't tell whether he had let Diane bully him into not smoking now, or whether he was going to ignore her politely. You couldn't get at him.

Roger rocked on his toes.

"I suppose you know Prentiss Saintby's gone to America?"

"Why, no."

"Yes," Roger said. "Think it's buying airplanes or something."

Old Hamish nodded. It would be like Saintby to get a bombproof job. The thought of the Saintbys took his mind to Young Hamish.

"I wonder where Hamish is," he said. "Didn't he say . . ."

"Oh, he'll get here," Roger said. "Blackout—it's hard getting around London now, you know."

They were silent in the awkward way of people whose minds cannot be free until the awaited person has come.

"You saw General Bullyer?" Diane said.

Old Hamish coughed.

"No, not exactly. I'm seeing him later—in a week."

"Oh."

There was silence. Then Roger put down his cigar, carefully.

"That sounds like Hamish now," he said. "I'll go."

Old Hamish cleared his throat.

“It’s been a beautiful summer, hasn’t it?”

“Hasn’t it?” Diane said.

She was listening with almost pained concentration to the sounds below. Old Hamish heard the voice of his youngest son. He went forward gladly.

“Father! Well, well. How’s mother?”

“Oh, fit. Perfectly fit. Never changes, you know. None of us change in Yorkshire. It’s the good air.”

“I think dinner . . .” Diane said.

They edged to the dining room.

Old Hamish felt suddenly depressed. Why was it so depressing to eat at the home of one’s own children? Children! Roger looked nearly as old as he did. At any rate, he looked every bit of fifty, Roger did. By God, he *was* getting to the fifty side.

“Did you hear Iris’ brother’s in America?” Young Hamish said.

“Yes—Roger just told me.”

“Purchasing steel.”

“Steel? I thought it was planes.”

“Oh? No, steel, I understand.”

Old Hamish thought: Soup incredibly hot—Roger seems to have removed himself in spirit.

“You came in to see Bullyer?” Young Hamish said.

“Yes. I’m coming in again next week. He—he sent me out a note begging my pardon, asking me to make it next week.”

“Oh.”

Roger was carving the roast, carving with incredible skill. But then a surgeon—he ought to be able to carve with all the practice he got.

Old Hamish felt cheerful for the first time at his own thought. Then his face fell.

Mutton—it shouldn’t be rare. Beef—rare as you could get it. Mutton—well done. Pork—done to a crisp. But Diane——

“Bad about Somaliland, isn’t it?” Young Hamish said. “What’s going on down there?”

Old Hamish warmed up.

“Some damnable mixup. By God, by my very God, if I had two divisions there—just two divisions! I don’t know what the idiots are doing.”

“Well, the French Near East army was part of the tactical scheme, wasn’t it? And when they dropped out . . .”

“That’s it. We shouldn’t rely on any other nation,” Old Hamish boomed. “Rely on ourselves—we always did before.”

Young Hamish bent over his food.

“Anyhow, it looks as if we’re going to have to get out.”

They were silent.

“Don’t you like the mutton?” Diane asked.

“Oh, yes—yes,” Old Hamish said.

There was no chance to avoid eating it now.

“It’s very good,” he said.

If you had to eat it, might as well throw in a few words to boot.

“I’m glad someone appreciates it,” Diane said, sorrowfully. “It’s so hard trying to get good food now—and you go to all that trouble and . . .”

Old Hamish thought: I wonder how Roger stands it. He’s built up calluses, that’s it. He just lives in some other part of him where she can’t go.

He let his own mind drift away, until he saw Diane holding the coffee pot and speaking to him.

“Don’t you think this is a beautiful design? I just got it . . .”

“Yes, yes. It’s a coffee pot that looks like a coffee pot.”

He knew his words should have been kinder. The affair was a beautiful piece of simply conceived silverware. Diane had that, at least. Taste.

“Functional,” Young Hamish said.

Old Hamish seized it gladly.

“Yes. Functionalism in architecture and everything else these days.”

“At least we’ve got through the terrors of Victorian overdecoration,” Diane said.

Old Hamish considered it, tempted to disagree with Diane for the sake of disagreeing.

“Decoration, functionalism,” he said. “That’s got nothing to do with it. Art and everything else goes bad the moment it becomes consciously something—consciously anything.”

Diane stirred.

“Should we have coffee in . . .”

The chairs were moving back. They were going to Roger’s library.

Gloomy place, Old Hamish thought. Doctors seemed to gather gloom around them in their homes.

“What time did Will say he was coming, Roger?”

Young Hamish was saying that.

“Oh, after dinner.”

“It’s after dinner now,” Old Hamish said, petulantly.

Waiting for someone always kept everyone else at such a sort of tentative stage.

“Oh, he really is busy,” Young Hamish said.

“Willfred’s quite on the uprise, isn’t he?” Roger said, gently.

“Yes. He’s going up with his party.”

“The party!” Old Hamish said. “His party. Luck—that’s all.”

Young Hamish smiled.

“Well, he backed an outside shot, and it’s in the running. It’s a Conservative Government now, but God knows what it’ll be before this war’s over.”

“Willfred,” Old Hamish said, slowly, “is as cold as a piece of beef liver—and always was.”

There was a silence, and then Diane rose.

“I must—I should see . . .”

She drifted away.

What nicety, Old Hamish thought. What outrageous nicety! And she’s the kind who’d listen at the door as soon as not. By God, by my very God, why don’t I like my sons’ wives? Who’s wrong—me, or them?

Well, Willfred *was* as cold as beef liver—and he had a right to say so. Always had been—even when he was a little chap.

“Willfred was always hard to understand—even when he was little,” he said. “Hard for me to understand.”

Willfred always had that sort of hard possessiveness—a sureness in knowing what he wanted. The other two didn’t have it. Roger, the oldest—he was too gentle. Hamish, the youngest, was too generous. Both the kind that get stepped on by the world. But Roger built defenses against the stepping-on, and shut himself away in a deep world of his own. Young Hamish hadn’t learned that. He would go on giving himself generously.

The givers. And Iris was a taker. She was like something—a female spider or whatever it was—battening on Hamish’s generosity of self, consuming his kindness. Some day she’d exhaust the supply, and then . . .

“You look well, father,” Young Hamish said.

Old Hamish brushed his gray mustache.

“I feel well. I feel well.”

At that moment he did—and then he remembered the shortness of breath. Shortness of breath when he hurried too much. Perhaps heart! Heart failure. Pop off—like that.

He wanted to ask Roger about it, but he couldn’t now. If he could get Roger alone . . .

“That sounds like Will now,” Roger said.

He went from the room, and the other two stood, watching the door. At last they heard Willfred’s voice. He came in, speaking sedately.

“Father—good to see you. How’s the mater?”

“Oh, very fit. She always is.”

“Well, the family gathering,” Willfred said. “Let’s see—it’s two years—three, since we all . . . how’s Iris?”

Young Hamish nodded.

“She’s—well.”

“Where is she?”

“Leaford—South Coast.”

“Indeed!”

Willfred looked around.

“Oh, that reminds me, I suppose you know her brother’s in America?”

Old Hamish smiled, grimly.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Buying steel."

"No, not steel," Willfred said. "Something else."

Well, why doesn't he say what it is, Old Hamish thought. Damned fool, going on as if he were carrying deep Government secrets. Superior ass. They were talking now of Somaliland, Roger listening, smiling; Hamish eagerly, Willfred superiorly. Willfred, at last, finished his speech. He had beaten Hamish down. He looked at his father.

"Did you see Bullyer?" Willfred asked.

"Why—er—I'm seeing him next week."

Willfred came closer to him, and shut the other two out from the conversation.

"Bullyer," he said.

He took off his pince-nez and regarded them. His long, sharp nose now seemed to jump out in bolder acuteness. Old Hamish saw that his hair was sanding over thinly.

"What's wrong with Bullyer?"

"Oh, nothing," he said, airily. "Only . . ." He dropped his voice. ". . . You know, I don't think Bullyer's quite the man—not after Dunkirk, you know. I rather think Condout's the coming man. Now, would you like me to—put out a feeler to Condout?"

Old Hamish drew himself up. A father could do favors for his son—but not the son for the father. Not without saying: Here is an end to a phase of life.

Not from Willfred.

"Bullyer's my friend," he said. "We were lieutenants together."

"I don't doubt that," Willfred said, complacently. "But now, it's a case of what you want and who has it. Just what—do you want?"

"By God, what do I want?" Old Hamish roared. He saw the other two look up. "It isn't what you want at a time like this. It's how can you help. God knows they haven't done so well thus far—their new command ideas, and new tactics—the invulnerability of defense over attack! Pah! The young ones haven't done so well. We're in a hole. We're facing invasion. There's lots of us with a lifetime of experience. We're waiting to do what we can. Work to do—and experienced men ready to do it. A division—a brigade—anything. But do you think we can even get a chance to serve?"

Young Hamish saw Willfred opening his mouth, and spoke quickly to drown any chance of the words, "too old."

"But undoubtedly they're in a fearful jam of work, father. It'll take some time to get around organizing men in retirement."

Old Hamish's anger at Willfred still burned.

"Then they'd better hurry—for if they don't use us chaps—there doesn't seem to be any mad rush on the part of young ones to serve."

The moment he said it he realized that in his lashing out at Willfred he had struck Hamish.

He thought: Now eternally damn—you can't strike the thick-skinned ones.

Young Hamish was passing a hand over his reddening face.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose it wouldn't do to have a war without a Cathaway in it."

“Now, Hamish,” his father said. “You know what I mean.”

“No,” Hamish said, almost angrily. “We’ve all secretly given a snort over Prentiss Saintby. And here’s a war, and father the only Cathaway ready to get into it.”

“Now, Hamish, I didn’t mean . . .”

“But there is a Cathaway in it,” Willfred said.

They stared at him.

“Roger’s girl’s in the Waffs, isn’t she? That’s one in uniform.”

Willfred said it so smugly, that Old Hamish couldn’t stop himself.

“That’s what I mean,” he boomed. “Women—girls going to war—and men standing around waiting. I don’t see how you allowed it, Roger. That’s one thing I wanted to talk to you about. I don’t like it. Prudence is my granddaughter and . . .”

“And she’s my daughter,” Roger said, quietly.

“But—but good God, man. You don’t know what sort of things come off in those women’s camps. I don’t trust ’em—women in uniforms and—and—what does she do?”

“She’s a sergeant,” Roger said. “And I don’t think . . .”

“In the ranks,” Willfred said. “Oh, why didn’t you get in touch with me and . . .”

“But she did it herself, not I, Willfred.”

“Then, goodness me, let me look into it. I can get in touch with someone and see that Prudence gets a rank compatible with . . .”

“No,” Old Hamish said. “She’s a right to stand on her own feet.”

“But, father, I don’t know which side you’re on. First you say . . .”

“I’m against women in uniform—and I’m against politicians pulling strings in military matters,” Old Hamish said.

He felt he had said it well.

“Just a moment, both of you,” Roger said. “It’s my girl—and let me explain it. When you have a child—an only child—you bring her up first with a basic feeling of security in her home. Then, next, you teach her to find security in a very complex world. You do that, not by protecting her and forbidding her to go into the world, but by letting her go out boldly, learning to stand on her feet, held up with the knowledge that there’s home security to fall back on if she needs it.

“It’s no use trying to protect girls from the world, because—some day you won’t be here to protect them—and then they’d be out in the world without even an anchor to windward.

“I’ve—thought a lot about being a parent. I’m—I’ve thought a lot about it.”

He stood, cracking his finger joints, as if embarrassed at his own speech.

They were silent. Then Young Hamish moved.

“I ought to be—be running,” he said. “I have some stuff to clean up—this dinner was short notice and I’d planned to do it tonight.”

“Righto,” Old Hamish said. “I’ll toddle with you. You’ll drop me off.”

“You won’t stay here?” Roger said, mildly.

“Why—no. Put up at the club, and get away bright and early in the morning if I feel like it.”

“You’re not staying in town?”

“Can’t say. Perhaps I’ll run up home and come in again next week.”

“I still think Condout . . .” Willfred began.

“No, no,” Old Hamish said. He made his voice more amiable as befitting a farewell. “Nice of you—but I’ll play along with Bullyer.”

They began moving from the room.

When they were in the cab, Old Hamish began framing the words in his mind. He was startled when his son spoke first.

“It’s the devil, being too young for the last one, and feeling foolishly a little too old for this. You know . . .”

“Pooh!” Old Hamish said. “Old at thirty-four?”

He felt this was too near to openly persuading Hamish. So he let his words race on.

“But then, I dare say we need barristers in war as in peace—law suits never stop, worse luck. You know, it’s funny!”

His laugh boomed in the dark space of the cab, trundling along.

“I shall never forget when I came back from Egypt with the one over my kidneys. No—the one over the kidneys was at Ladysmith. It was the Boer War, that was it. Well, when I got home your mother was—well, very distant. And finally I twigged it. It was being wounded in the back. You know, the funny old romantic idea that a soldier always kept his face to the foe, and if he got wounded in the back it was a mark of cowardice—he’d been running away. I had quite a time explaining to her how shrap bursts. In fact, I don’t think she’s got past the old idea yet. Has no conception of what an H.E. does. Still has the idea, privately, I think, that it’s all like Omdurman—and I’m on a horse, charging into every battle.”

He laughed appreciatively.

“Now what on earth made me think of that? I’ve never told anybody.”

Young Hamish thought:

He did that for me—to make me stop thinking about not going. Once he was abler with his tongue and mind. It’s sad to see a parent pass the peak of capabilities.

“It’s a good way to be,” he said. “Mother lives at peace with her ideas. I wish more of us could.”

Old Hamish’s mind jumped several moves in the gambit.

“What the devil is Iris doing at the seaside—what is it—Leaford? I thought Arthur was at—where’s the damned place they went?”

“Oh, they moved the school right next to an airdrome—or someone put an airdrome next to the school. So Iris took him away. Planes all day. She thinks its bad for children to get impressions of so much—so much militarism.”

“Ah, foolishness! It’s better than all this chuckle-headed, panicky running around. Where is she now? Leaford? For the love of heaven. Right smack across the Channel from him . . .”

“It’s temporary,” Hamish said. “I’ve got to—I’ll dig up some other place—it’ll all iron out.”

Old Hamish made a grimace in the darkness.

“Well, you know my feelings,” he said, in a slightly aggrieved tone. “But I’m not going to put my foot in it. I’ll be damned!”

“Oh, don’t look at it that way.”

Old Hamish licked his lips. Then the words got past him.

“Damn it all to hell, I don’t see why she won’t bring them to Oddale. Of all the places on this island that’re isolated and safe . . .”

He felt his son’s stony silence, and puffed out his breath. In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought.

“Damn my eyes, Iris is a good woman,” he said. “Of all things on this earth, God save me from a *good* woman. You know, some day, someone will tell her what kennel she was whelped in.”

“Now, father.”

“Her father, Old Saintby! What a saint! By God, at least I never left any by-blows to get by on bastardy rates. And he did! I have proof. He was in court for it! And then she raves about me. Me, if you please!”

Hamish thought he had never before heard his father sound so gladly and maliciously gossipy. Probably another mark of age.

“She never says a word about it,” he reproved.

“Oh, stick up for her,” Old Hamish said. “Of course she doesn’t. But she won’t bring my grandchildren to Oddale—not if it were the only single place left in Britain where they’d be safe. She’ll risk their lives . . .”

“Nonsense. I want to get them all back to London. They’ll be safe . . .”

“The very devil they will.”

“Oh, I don’t think he’ll bomb London. Why, the very effect on the civilized world would . . .”

“Poppycock. He bombed it last war, didn’t he? What makes you think he won’t again?”

“Well—this is different. We’ve anti-aircraft defenses and . . .”

“Before he’s through he’ll blast the daylights out of this place. Mark my words!”

Young Hamish moved the conversation away.

“Willfred looked well, didn’t you think? Flourishing—like the green bay tree these days.”

“You know—it would be fun to get Iris and Willfred together,” the old general said.

He was thinking: Willfred and Iris over a clothesline with their tails tied together like a pair of Kilkenny cats. Two of a kind. Greek meeting Greek. Hard, capable people.

But his son's mind had moved simply.

"Oh, they get along quite well together," he said, mildly.

"Ah, yes. But now. Willfred going up in the Government—and everyone knows Iris is an out-and-out Nazi."

"Oh, come. That's not so. She's a peace supporter, that's all."

"I've heard her argue . . ."

"Not since the war."

"Ah, now they're keeping quieter. But it'd be dreadfully embarrassing for Willfred right now with an out-and-out Nazi sister-in-law."

"Anyone has a right to march to the music of the drum he hears," Hamish said.

"Yes. And talking of drums . . ."

The cab was slowing down.

"Here's the club," Young Hamish said. "Don't ring off, cabby."

Old Hamish was standing on the curb in the blackness, leaning forward into the cab. A good thought had come, and now it was eluding him.

"Er—I'm sorry I popped off about Old Saintby," he said. "I shouldn't have told you . . ."

"I knew it," Young Hamish said. "Will told me once."

"Ah," Old Hamish said. He felt his sails fall, flopping, windless. Then his mind warmed. Drums—that was the good thought.

"You know, Hamish. I don't want to poke in—but between you and Iris—you've got to stand up and fight. I'll give you some advice. I'm older than you, and . . . well, a woman and a drum . . ."

"Should be beaten regularly," Young Hamish said. "I know, but just at this particular year of grace, the accent's on the drum. Good night."

Old Hamish shook his head, watching the cab creep away from the blackout lines on the curb. He shook his head and went into the club.

CHAPTER V

CLIVE woke feeling a hot pulsating in his head. Somewhere a band seemed to be playing. He saw small starched curtains. Then he remembered someone had wakened him by speaking.

He looked up. From his angle the young man in the room looked heroic in size, his head far up under the plastered gables of the room. There was a slight cut and discoloration beside his right eye. His wavy chestnut hair was still wet from the combing. He was smiling and holding out a mug of tea. Clive sat up and drank. Then he grimaced, handed the cup back, and laid his head on his drawn-up knees.

"Got a bad one, hey?"

He felt too ill to speak. He opened and shut his hand as a signal that he'd heard. The young man laughed happily and sat on the bed. The movement sent violet lights dancing.

"You shouldn't begrudge yourself a fat head after the binge you had last night."

"Perhaps so. Where am I?"

"My home. Told the old lady you were a sick friend. You were sick all right."

"Sick?"

"Don't you remember? Oh, my, what a do. One of the best the old Ram's Head's had in a long time."

"I'm sorry. I only remember being in an argument. I don't remember you."

"You don't! Why, we discussed everything last night—women, the world, and the war. Then Mouthy got into it and you smacked him. He got up and smacked you. Then you would ha' died laughing. Somebody gets between you to make peace and you hits him by mistake. He hits you, and then school was out for fair. It wasn't a private fight any more. Rare time we had, you, me, them, and a militiaman with his belt off smacking anyone impartial he could reach. Then the bobbies come, and we come out the alley door and over the back fences into High Street."

"It was good of you to help me. I should have had more sense."

"That's all right. It was anybody's fight."

"It was good of you to side with me."

"That's nothing. I'd do anything to upset Old Carlishaw—you know, the publican. The bastard—he opened his mouth about my mother."

"Your mother!"

“Yes. Oh, it was several years back. My mother used to make eel pies. You know, threepence each. I used to hawk ’em in a basket. Eel pies—get ’em while they’re hot—who wants eel pies! You know, shouting ’em round at night. Well, I hear someone’s giving it out that my mother’s putting gelatin in ’em. And I trace it down, and it’s Old Carlishaw. So I went down, and walked right in and took out this knife . . .”

Clive saw the young man whipping out a huge sailor’s knife which flicked open, showing a half-foot blade.

“Oh, God, put it away,” he said.

He passed his hand over his eyes. The young man clicked it shut.

“I waved it right under his nose and says: ‘Mr. Carlishaw, you bugger you, I hear you’ve been sounding off about me and mine. If you open that dirty mouth of yours again about us, I’ll take this knife and enlarge your mouth from ear to ear and give you a permanent smile that you’ll wear the rest of your life.’

“So help me, I did. And me just a kid. Then the bugger has me summonsed for threatening his life—and I bloody near went to reform school over it. Only I had good characters, so we got fined five pounds and costs.”

“Why on earth do you go to his pub, then?”

The young man arched his chest. The grin spread over his cheerful face.

“Oh, just to help out. Anything starts—like last night—I do my best to keep it lively. Break a few of his windows and smash the place up a bit. It’ll help get the Ram a bad name, and soon the good custom will go down the Chime instead.”

Clive laughed despite the aches that the spasm produced.

“So you didn’t help me, especially?”

“Oh, no,” the young man said, with vehement eagerness. “Now don’t look at it that way. Old Mouthy needed a smacking. He’s a mouthy bastard. Going to fight this war to the last bloody soldier and the last bloody sailor. Warlike bleeder, he was. He wouldn’t talk that way if he’d seen it like I did. Poor bastards wading out to us and bloody Stukas bombing the guts out of ’em. It’d ha’ made your heart bleed, chum.”

Clive studied the quilt, and then looked up.

“Are you in the navy?”

“Oh, no. I’ve been working around on packets—summers, like, we’d take out the *Island Queen*. Down Little Bourneton. You know, winkles and round the buoy for a bob a head, nippers under twelve, sixpence. We lay her up winters. Well, there was no summer business this year, so I was helping out down the garage, and the skipper sends up in a hurry that we’re going over to help get ’em out of Dunkirk.

“You should have seen that bloody old *Island Queen*, chum, eight knots and she’s racing—ten and she’d bust a gut. But she was good—you know, shallow draft. So we could get in close.

“And it was go in and load ’em up, and get out and land ’em, and go in again. What a time—everything afloat—a bloody pawnshop regatta it was. Tugs, trawlers, destroyers, motorboats—any bloody thing. And us with a shallow draft getting right in. They was on the shore—they come wading and swimming out to us.

“Ah, chum, it would ha’ made you cry bloody salt tears, it would. The poor bastards. Poor bleeding bastards. Hadn’t slept for ten days—and lying there on the shore on their backs firing rifles at the Stukas—and the bloody planes playing clay pigeon with ’em. Make your heart bleed.

“And pick ’em up and get out, loaded to the gunnels. And land ’em, and go back in again. Then, third day, the fog clears, and plonk! He drops one right down into the engine room, and good-by *Island Queen*. We swim around and a destroyer comes up and picks us up—and that’s all for us. Now I’m back—and I dunno—you don’t feel like going back to a garage, do you?”

“No,” Clive said. “I don’t think you could.”

He swung his feet from the bed.

“I suppose I ought to get dressed,” he said.

“Yes, you’ll feel better if you get up. What do you do, chum? Don’t mind me being personal.”

“Oh, that’s all right. I’m—just on a holiday.”

“I see. What’s your name?”

He hesitated only an instant.

“Briggs,” he said. “Clive Briggs.”

“Glad to know you. I’m Joe Telson. I’ll take the cup down. You’ll have to wash in the sink downstairs. Nobody’s home—it’s almost midafternoon.”

Clive watched him go through the door. He held his head a moment. Then he began dressing.

In the dusk they leaned over the old stone bridge, looking down at the stream.

“Funny, you know,” Joe said. “Looking down on the river. Always makes you feel you’re going somewhere. Moving, like. Used to look down for hours when I was a kid and feel I was going the other way from the water. Of course, the water’s moving and you ain’t, but it feels the other way round.”

“It’s quite feasible that you are moving and the water’s still,” Clive said.

“Ah, science. Yes, that way. Well, how about a pint?”

“No, thanks.”

“It’ll do you good. Cheer you up—make you clap your hands and sing.”

“I couldn’t go it. And—anyhow I ought to be getting along.”

Joe looked up.

“Where to? Where you going, chum?”

“Oh—just moving along.”

“I know, but it’s late to start today. Stay over another night. We could put you up.”

Clive studied the water. He remembered the small room with the sloping gabled ceiling, the kitchen, the tiny quiet woman with bright bronze hair, the smell of the warm coal fire and baking bread and soapsuds. It was a familiar smell.

“Well, if I could make it all right—you know, with your mother. I’d be paying anywhere else.”

“Oh, that’s all right.”

“I couldn’t do it otherwise.”

“Well, then. What you think. Since you can pay—the old lady could use it all right. Every bit helps out, you know.”

“Of course.”

“Well, what about a pint?”

“No, I’ve reformed.”

“Oh—well, I tell you what. How about running up the Waffs Camp for the concert?”

“The what?”

“W.A.A.F. The Waffs. Didn’t you hear ’em go past with their band this afternoon—when I woke you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, they have a concert every Saturday night.”

“I’ve heard concerts.”

“I know—but I know a nice little number up there. And she could get a friend. Come on—do your duty to the girls in uniform.”

Clive shook his head.

“Ah, come on. You’re not a bad-looking chap, you know. You shouldn’t begrudge spreading a little joy around. Don’t be selfish. Share the blessing of nature with others.”

Clive looked at the water, flowing darkly, steel-smooth.

“It’s just what you need,” Joe encouraged. “A nice girl to cheer you up.”

Clive looked up at the cheerful countenance, and smiled.

“I doubt it. But one thing or another—what does it matter?”

“That’s the way to take it,” Joe said. “Come easy, go easy. Live, love, and leave when your welcome’s up.”

In the dark they met, not seeing each other. In the faint light of the clouded three-quarter moon they saw only a blur that was the whitened stones set beside the road at the camp gate. They heard voices around them and knew the untouching movement of people, yet they felt isolated, chained together against their own wills in the close prison of blackness.

But the thought of appearing together in the light seemed to each an offense now against himself.

He said: “Should we go to the concert, or—would you rather walk?”

Without answering, she started away, and they walked, untouching, down the dark road.

He thought: Let’s get it over with.

They went far along the lane until walking had no sense.

He stopped by a low roadside wall where an overhanging beech made total blackness.

“Let’s sit here,” he said.

They each sat on the wall, waiting.

They felt the nearness of each other, and were ill at ease. Each had a feeling that there was a routine to go through, and the fact that it was a routine repelled them.

But Clive only knew that the girl beside him was silent, and that meant that she was waiting. He wondered what she looked like.

He drew his breath.

“How do you like it in the camp?” he said.

One could always talk and fight away routines.

“It isn’t normal,” the girl said slowly. “You can’t have a purely feminine world. It builds slowly, day after day, into a sort of hysteria. Men—you’ve got to have them round, don’t you think?”

Clive was thinking: The intellectual type. My God, this is worse. Why did I have to get stuck with one of the intellectual type?

He said:

“Did it take a war to make you find that out?”

“No, seriously. It’s like a clock winding up, hour after hour, the spring getting tighter and tighter. You feel that if you are going to see any more women, or talk about women’s things, or hear any more women, you’ll break out screaming. That’s why I came out with you.”

“But usually, of course, you don’t do this sort of thing?”

“You needn’t be sarcastic.”

“*Touché.* You’re a bright girl. But I’m interested in the way you’re trying to explain to me—or to yourself—why you’re here.”

“I’ve told you. You just want to talk to a man for ten minutes and get sane. Any man. Anything with a pair of pants on.”

“I’m anything with a pair of pants on?”

“You mustn’t,” she said. “I’m trying to cover up my awkwardness at being here. Or don’t you understand?”

Clive felt the genuine sound in her voice.

“All right, then,” he said. “Just go on talking.”

“Don’t be angry. I was talking abstractly, and you are thinking personally. It’s been a shock. I thought women were self-sufficient. I wanted to think so. I thought they could get along—but we don’t. It gets like a bunch of hysterical schoolgirls. Of course, we bottle it up, but I suppose that’s worse, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. Very bad for the system.”

“No, I don’t mean that. But I never thought of it before. I never thought how it would be for men in the army—living in a purely male life. Do they get sick of men—

of seeing men, of hearing men, of talking male talk?"

"No, a male world's a good world."

"How do you know? Have you been in the army?"

"It's true, all right. It's so in schools. And then soldiers in the army have another outlet."

"What? Oh—I see what you mean. I suppose there is that to it."

"Don't be superior. It's just that men are more honest in their relations with themselves, that's all."

"I don't know. That's a generalization. It's pretty rotten on women. This is a man's world—even in wartime when we put on uniforms and try to pretend that it isn't. I wonder why women don't fit in on organized life—because they don't."

"Most of them do, I suppose."

"Which means that I don't. That's it—I wonder, then, why I don't."

He thought: Oh, God. Now she wants us to talk about her.

"I don't know," he said. "From the sound of your voice I'd say that you're from a better background than most. Most of them are tough little devils."

"They're fine girls."

"*Esprit de corps* stuff, girl. They're just ordinary human beings with the same percentage of grubby, scatterbrained, insensate females as in ordinary life. And putting them in uniform doesn't suddenly make 'em all Maids of Orleans any more than soldiers are plaster saints."

"Kipling," she said. "Just the same they're fine girls."

"Of course they are," he said.

He slipped from the wall and found her with his hands. He wanted to have it done—to go through the motions and send her into acquiescence or revolt.

He pulled her toward him, half distastefully. Her forehead rested by his cheek. He smelled the odor of her hair. She smelled clean. Half instinctively he had prepared himself for the dry sweaty smell and slight, sickly powder overlay of none-too-clean females. Thinking this, he stood with her head touching his. She did not respond, nor did she move to repulse him in the coy routine of boy and girl situations.

He let her go. She leaned back and he could feel and hear her brushing her uniform with her hands.

"Well," she said.

"Well, what?"

"It was fairly disgusting, wasn't it?"

"What was so particularly disgusting?"

"I don't mean us—I mean, going through the motions—because we felt we had to. I came out here . . ."

"Under the impression that you thought I was different. If you tell me the one about being different I'll—I'll . . ."

They were silent. Then she said:

“You might have been nice about it.”

“Shall we go back?”

He heard her starting. They went along the lane, under the arching trees that made the blacked-out night even blacker.

It was not until they halted that she spoke.

“This is far enough—and thank you.”

“You don’t want me to take you back to the entrance because someone might see you and . . .”

“That’s true,” she said. “Then I would be like the others. You have to get used to things little by little. You don’t think so until the time comes.”

“Like the others?” he said. “I thought you said they were nice girls.”

“They are nice girls—in many ways.”

“I see . . . well . . .”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “About saying it was disgusting. I didn’t mean you. I meant—both of us—starting something that neither of us had our hearts in—not really wanting to do it but only making the motions.”

He stood silently a moment.

“That’s true,” he said. “I’m sorry I was ratty. What’s your name?”

“Prudence. Prudence Cathaway.”

“Prudence?”

He stood back and laughed. For the first time the tension of observing themselves left them.

“They should have called you Imprudence.”

“That’s what my father says. I’m always getting into so many scrapes.”

They stood in indecision.

“Look, may I see you again tomorrow night?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Probably I’ll be busy.”

“And possibly not.”

“I couldn’t be sure.”

“I’ll come anyhow. I’ll restore all your feminine ego. I’ll wait for you—up on the wall.”

“I can’t promise. What if I can’t come?”

“If you can’t come . . .”

He considered a moment.

“If you can’t . . . it won’t make any difference.”

“At least you tell the truth,” she said. “That’s a kind of torture to oneself—telling the truth when it’s so easy not to. Good night.”

“Good night,” he said.

He felt disjointedly ill at ease—as if he’d been hearing a tune that was interesting, and someone had turned off the wireless in the middle of it.

He listened for her going down the black road, but there was no sound.

CHAPTER VI

JOE came in as Clive straightened his necktie.

"Sure you won't change your mind, Briggs?"

Clive bent his head under the gabled ceiling. The late evening sunlight came in a shaft through the tiny window. He bent nearer the looking glass to inspect his chin. The sunlight made it hard to see.

"Can't do it, Joe."

"All spit, shave, and shine, eh? Appointment?"

"That's it."

"The one last night?"

"None other."

"Ah—women! Once in a while's enough."

"Sour grapes, mate. You weren't a success."

"I was that. I am when I want to be."

"But you weren't last night."

"Ah, she give me a bellyache, that Violet. I haven't time to waste."

Joe sat on the bed and hugged a knee.

"You know, chum. There was a time when I'd go for it. You know—I didn't mind how long I had to work for it. Patient—that was me. But now I'm getting to a point where—well, hell, if it comes, all right; if it don't, to hell with it."

"You're losing your manhood, Joe."

"Me? Like bloody hell!"

"You are. Either losing your manhood or approaching mental maturity."

"I'm getting more sense."

"That's what I mean."

"Then whyn't you get sense, too? Come on—just drop in with me for a couple."

Clive picked up his hat and grinned. Joe had such a serio-comic pleading look on his face.

"All right. Just one quick one—then I'm away."

Joe grinned and jumped up.

"That's more like it," he said.

They went from the cottage to the warmth of the evening. The early August air was clear and soft.

They went along unspeaking to the pub. They ducked under the low lintel and their feet moved noisily on the sanded floor. The publican saw them and came over, wiping his hands on his apron. He drew up his bulk and sniffed.

"Now, you two. I don't want no trouble tonight, so . . ."

"Oh, go fry a fish," Joe said. "Bring us two mild and bitters."

"No, let's get out of here," Clive said. "I don't want to stay . . ."

"To hell with him. You'll have a drink first to warm you up. This is a public house. Come on, Chubby."

"No. Let's get a pint of whisky and get out."

"Not me. You hear, Carlishaw? Two mild and bitters and a pint of White Horse—and hop to it."

Joe laughed as he leaned back in the leathered wall seat.

"Fair gives him the gripes—the swine."

Joe looked around happily.

"You know, that's the right idea you've got."

"What is?"

"The pint. Always take a little along, I say. Give 'em a couple of healthy swigs. Then if that don't warm 'em up to you—save your time and energy. Cut your losses and run. It's no use wasting your time on a girl if she won't warm up after two drinks."

"You're cold-blooded about your women, Joe."

"No, I'm not. Just common sense, that's all. It's no use wasting your time in sitting there and talking this and talking that, when both of you bloody well knows what you're working up to."

"Good bluff fellow, Joe."

"No. I mean, what the hell is there to talk about, anyhow? You sit and say the weather's nice, and then you sit and say nothing, and then first thing you know you're fighting the bloody war with your mouth."

"It limits conversation."

"Well, what's there to talk about any time—barring women, when you're young and single? I'll talk women and be open about it."

"Even if it's only talk, eh?"

"That's all right, chum," Joe said. He wrinkled his forehead. "If you talk women, that's only talk. And if you talk war—that's only talk, too. So you might as well keep your bloody mouth shut."

"About the war, anyhow. Let's not get going on that."

"Right! It was an effing mess, chum. I didn't like seeing the bloody British army standing up to its belly in the sea. It made you mad and—and it made you ashamed."

"Ashamed? About what?"

“I don’t know. About something—against somebody. It made you ashamed. Well—here we go saying we won’t talk about it, and you get me started on it.”

“I’m sorry. Here we are.”

“Seven-and-nine,” the publican said.

“Too bloody much,” Joe cut in.

“New taxes went in two weeks ago. There’s a war on, me lad—in case you haven’t heard.”

“Here it is again,” Joe said to Clive. He looked up. “Then why don’t you go fight it?”

“You want to start another argument?”

“Oh, go fry a fish. You’re getting yours all right.”

Joe grinned as Clive put down a ten-shilling note. The publican counted the change on the table and stalked away. They drank, and then Clive rose.

“Sure you won’t stay, Briggs? Beer’s better nor women.”

“You can get a hangover from drink. I get too many headaches these days.”

“That’s nothing to what you can get from women. You can catch wrong honey. And that don’t get cured in one day.”

“I’ll chance it. Don’t get drunk.”

“Not on this beer.”

“And don’t start an argument.”

“It’s never me that starts ’em. It’s always the other chap.”

“That sounds logical. So long.”

“So long, chum. And remember. If she don’t go good after two drinks—don’t waste any more.”

Clive waved his hand and left the pub. It was dusk now, and he went slowly along the narrow flagged pavement, his eyes still used to the lighted pub. The voices around him seemed eerily disembodied.

Time had crawled like a beetle, and the night noises of insects had become pandemonium. But they faded into forgetfulness as he heard her coming into the darker-than-darkness under the tree.

He slipped from the wall.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello.”

They stood quietly, not knowing what to say.

“I’m glad you came,” he said, finally.

“I’m not,” she said.

“Why not?”

“I still feel a little like a kitchen maid on her night out.”

“You make it sound very attractive,” he said, harshly. “If you feel like that—what did you come for?”

“Because,” she said. “Because I kept thinking you’d look like such a fool, sitting on this wall—if I didn’t.”

His senses assayed the modulation of her voice—tense beneath its poised tone. In the darkness there was no distance between them. He moved nearer, until he thought he could feel the warmth of her face affecting the skin of his cheek. But they did not touch. He rocked backward slightly.

“Nice of you to think of me,” he said. “And now—since you look at it that way—we might as well go back.”

“Perhaps it would be better,” she said, coolly.

They walked down the road in the blackness, going slowly and without speaking. Then, in a curious manner, their common malaise gave them kinship.

“You don’t mind my walking with you, at least?” he said.

“No. It’s good of you to see me back,” she said. “This way.”

She was moving through the grass at the edge of the road.

“It’s a stile,” she said. “Can you see?”

“Not a thing.”

“Here, take my hand. I know it well enough.”

He felt the warmth of her palm as he climbed the wooden steps.

“It’s much shorter over the meadow,” she said.

He followed her in the narrow path. At first he marveled at her sureness in following it. Then he found it easy to follow, too. In the years of coming and going the path had been tamped into a smooth runnel and one’s feet bumped the turfed edge when they went astray. The blackout was giving new dimensions to some of the senses.

“Man used to live without lights—once,” he said.

“Yes.”

He realized that he had assumed in a curious way that her mind had followed his. Yet she was distant. He looked at the starlit sky and stumbled, bumping into her.

“Sorry.”

“Not at all.”

Her voice sounded small, feminine. He was sorry for her.

“How are things up in the purely feminine world?”

“Fine. They’re a fine bunch of girls.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Yes. You told me. Remember?”

“Oh, that.”

He felt his attempt to comfort her was missing fire.

“Oh, now,” he said. “I’m really sorry—about tonight. You understand that, don’t you.”

Her voice came back in the darkness.

“I’m sorry, too. You’ll pardon me, won’t you?”

“It’s all right. You can do as you like. It’s a free country—they say.”

“It’s just—I suppose I’m not going to be any good at this sort of thing. And if I say anything—I suppose it sounds like all the coy things a girl’s supposed to say and doesn’t mean.”

“No, it’s nice of you to try to explain. Don’t be upset.”

She laughed.

“The silly thing is, I’m rather upset about you. You are really—well, you’re decent about it.”

“I’m a Galahad. My word—what’s that there?”

“It’s only the haystack.”

“Heavens, I thought it was a diplodocus. Looming up like that.”

She halted.

“Is this far enough?” he said.

“Yes, thank you.”

They stood in silence.

“Shall we sit down?” he said, finally. “We’ve signed the armistice.”

“Step number one,” she said, in a small voice.

He heard her sitting in the hay. He sat beside her and the rustle ended. Not seeing her, he was even more aware of her presence. They were silent long enough to hear their own breathing. He felt that she was waiting. He felt her shiver.

“Are you cold?”

“Just a little—I think.”

He fumbled in his pocket.

“Will you have a drink?”

He heard her breath come and go twice.

“Step number two, isn’t it?” she said.

But her hand followed along his arm until it reached his hand.

“The cork’s out,” he said. “That’s proper upbringing. My mother told me always to take the cork from the bottle before you offered it to a lady.”

He heard her laugh.

“Especially if it’s a lady in a haystack,” she said.

He sat with his elbows on his knees, not wishing to answer. He heard the soft gurgle. Then she said:

“Here.”

He took the bottle and drank. The whisky crept hotly to the edges of his brain. The earth seemed to tilt slightly, and stayed atilt. He put the cork back, carefully.

“Did you ever get stinko?” he said. “Blind, unconscious stinko?”

“No. Have you?”

“Yes. Two nights ago. Blind! Blotto! Out!”

“Sounds restful. What does it feel like?”

“Fine. You wake up the next morning feeling like hell, but rather magnificent in a way. Empty, tired, chastened. In a way, rather purified and shriven—as if all your psychic sins had been bleached away—or washed down the sink, or something.”

“It sounds as if it’s exactly the thing I need. I might try it.”

“I’ll be honest, my lass. There’s something I didn’t mention. The headache the next morning.”

“I’ll risk it. May I have the bottle?”

He passed it to her, and then held it as their hands touched.

“There’s remorse, perhaps, too,” he said.

“You sound like my own conscience. I don’t believe in remorse. Let go.”

He let go of the bottle.

“And a feeling in your stomach,” he said. “As if bile-green boats were pitching on a warm, greasy, dishwater sea.”

“Now you sound like Mephisto, having successfully tempted someone, gloating as he provides himself with an alibi to prove that he warned them.”

“Yes, I’m a stinker, aren’t I? But be warned . . .”

“It’s too late now,” she said. “Will you tell me when I’m getting stinko—blind stinko?”

“You’ll know.”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“A delayed action effect. Wait a few minutes.”

“No. I don’t get drunk. I’ve drunk ever so much. Last Christmas at home I tried—I drank and drank. It didn’t do any good.”

“Don’t get discouraged.”

“I’ll try again.”

“No. Wait a while. You’ll be sick.”

“It’s my sick if I want to be.”

“If you say.”

He gave her the bottle, and waited until he heard her breath expelled. He reached out and took it away.

“Should I see you back to camp?”

“No. You asked me to meet you, and now you want to hurry me back to camp. Is that being a Galahad?”

“I think perhaps it is—just that.”

“No it isn’t. It’s more I-told-you-so to your own conscience. So that no matter what happens, you can say to yourself: ‘Well, I offered to take her back.’ You don’t really want to go back.”

“Nonsense.”

“It’s true.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“All right. Then we’ll sit here and talk. We’ll talk about you,” she said.

“What about me?”

“What did you want to see me again for?”

“Oh, nothing much.”

He wished she would stop talking. Her voice sounded strained.

“It’s just that I’m woman.”

“Nonsense.”

“It is. You don’t know me. We’ve never even seen each other in the light. You don’t know what I look like. I’m just woman—something in skirts.”

“Well, I’m something in pants. Pants and Skirts, that’s all,” he said, harshly.

“Yes. It does sound revolting,” she said.

Her voice sounded thin and far away.

“Pants meets Skirts,” she went on. “Object, seduction. Shortest distance between two points.”

“You’re gabbling.”

“I have a right to if I want.”

“You’re getting tipsy.”

“My head is perfectly clear. That was the idea, wasn’t it—casual seduction of one of the Waffs. Walk arm in arm. Then clinch. Then—that’s the part where it always fades out in the cinema. I wonder why?”

“Because the cinema has more sense than to try to talk about it.”

“But it was your idea, wasn’t it? Tell me the truth?”

She was clutching his arm. He took his hand and lifted hers away. He spoke coldly.

“Well, I can’t say I wanted to see you because you’re beautiful—I haven’t seen you enough to know whether or not you are.”

“I’m not—not very.”

“And I can’t say I asked you out for conversational exercise or a little chitchat. Or perhaps you can sing—or do parlor tricks.”

“And that leaves—only the other thing.”

She sat quietly. In a childish rebelliousness he determined not to speak before she did.

“It’s no good,” she said. Her voice had changed. It was soft and small. “I wouldn’t be any good at it.”

“At what?”

“You know. I think I’d be very disappointing. You’d better go after someone else. It would . . .”

Her voice trailed away. Then she spoke brightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Well, we’ve talked about me. Now let’s talk about you.”

“Yes,” he said. “What do I think about you, eh?”

She laughed quickly, and for a second his ear was held by a sort of round beauty in the tone.

“Give me another drink,” she said.

“Are you getting drunk?”

“Not in my head. But it’s certainly helping me to talk.”

“Ah, a garrulous drunk.”

She took no notice of what he said. After a pause she spoke.

“Now. What do you do?”

“I’m on a holiday.”

“A holiday! This is a fine time.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“What’s wrong? Well, there is a little thing like a war on. There’s need for everyone to work. And—well——”

“Well, what?”

“Oh, you’ll be angry.”

“How do you know?”

“I do know—but I don’t give a damn. Why aren’t you in khaki?”

“You sound like a damned recruiting poster. Why should I be?”

“Decency. That’s why. To be decent to yourself.”

“You sound like Colonel Blimp.”

“Why not? We women can get in it. And there’s young men like you—well, if I were a man I’d . . .”

“Fight the war with your mouth probably. I punched a fat chap in the nose the other night for just that line.”

“Listen,” she said. “There’s work to do. If I were a man, I wouldn’t hold back because my age hadn’t been called, or because I could claim exemption on grounds of essentials of employment. I’d enlist. I’d stand in line to enlist! I’d . . .”

“Oh, be quiet.”

“Are you a conscientious objector?”

“Be quiet. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then why aren’t you in the army?”

“Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa!” he mocked.

“I said, why aren’t you in the army?”

“Talk sex again, you make more sense.”

“Why aren’t you in the army?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, be quiet,” he said. “I *am* in the army.”

“In the army—then what are you doing in civilian clothes?”

“A man can wear civilian clothes if he wants, can’t he? I’m on leave. I put on civilian clothes.”

“I wouldn’t be ashamed to wear my uniform.”

“It isn’t being ashamed. I want to forget it for a while.”

“I know,” she said, slowly. “Just as I want to forget the Waffs sometimes.”

“Now, we’ve talked about me,” he said. “Shall we go?”

“Not yet. Can’t we have another drink?”

“There’s just about one apiece left.”

“All right. A last toast then—to the two services. The uniform forever!”

“Nuts,” he said.

“Please!”

“Sorry. All right, then. To the Buffs, my lass, and a couple of egads! The 1890 port, Clinkers! And damme no heeltaps!”

She passed him the bottle.

“Now I do feel dizzy,” she said.

“It would be an awful waste of whisky if you didn’t by this time.”

“I feel fine.”

“You won’t in the morning. Now, shall we go?”

“No,” she said. “It’s very nice here.”

She lay back in the hay, and he bent and found her mouth and kissed her. She did not move.

“You make the first advances very nicely,” she said.

He sat up.

“Oh, damn it, let’s go back,” he said. “What are you trying to find out? What are you torturing yourself about?”

She did not answer. She put her hand out to his knee and let it rest there.

“Wait a moment, please,” she said. “Just be still a while.”

For a long time she lay, quietly. Then she moved.

“Come here,” she said.

She pulled his head slowly toward her. Then she kissed him. He cradled her head with one arm. The other hand found her breast.

“Be gentle,” she said, very softly. “Be gentle, and I won’t be frightened.”

He kissed her again. She put a halting hand on his chest. Her voice was a whisper.

“A uniform isn’t a very handy thing to make love in,” she said. “Wait a second. I’ve got to take something off.”

He did not answer. A few seconds later he felt her arms reaching for him, warmly.

But afterwards she said:

“So it was under a haystack. It is rather common, isn’t it?”

“Under a hedge is commoner,” he said, coldly.

She lay back quietly.

“I suppose now,” she said, “you’ll be able to go back to camp and talk about it: the girl from the Waffs you met and—what would your word be for it?”

“A much honester one than you’re thinking of,” he said. “And you’ll have the consolation of knowing you’ve done so much for one of the boys in khaki. It’s all in the name of patriotism. Think how virtuous and self-righteous you’ll feel.”

He turned his head away. Then he heard a movement and her hand was touching his head.

“Don’t,” she said. “It isn’t right of us to talk like this, is it?”

“It was you . . .”

“There, there,” she said. “Now . . .”

Her hand stroked his forehead slowly, and he could feel that she was staring out into the blackness. The hand went on and on, moving in a comforting way as if she were suddenly the older and wiser of the two. He began to know only the stillness of night and the oversweet smell of hay. Then, like the turning off of a water tap, time stopped. When it began again, he was sitting up, holding her arm. He heard the tail end of his own words:

“Who? Who is it?”

“Don’t,” she said. “You hurt. It’s me?”

“Of course it is,” he said, fully awake.

He leaned forward and rubbed the palms of his hands over his temples.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ve got an awful headache. Was I dreaming?”

“You must have been. You were asleep a long time, and you began grinding your teeth horribly. When I wakened you, you almost broke my arm.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ve got to get back.”

He got up and held out his hand. He did not think it curious that she should be expecting it, nor that she should find it unerringly in the dark. He pulled her to her feet. Unspeaking, in a dreamy sort of sleepy peace, they went along the path toward the camp.

CHAPTER VII

THAT week the war had drawn nearer. It was hard to realize it consciously. One always thought of wars as being far away. "The front"—that was always in some other land. Now it was England.

The front—it was becoming all England. London—the counties—it was all the front now; only the battles were fought over the land instead of on it. In the daytime the R.A.F. was shooting down his planes—but at night it was different.

At night the bombers were getting through in ones and twos. But at first one couldn't really believe in the war, even at night. Not even when the air raid warnings would sound, and pencils of light would leap into the sky and wave back and forth, and, sometimes, anti-aircraft guns would cut loose. It was hard to think of England as the front.

In those August nights people would go into the streets and look up. There was little to see. The guns kept banging away, going like the thump of a trip hammer. The guns sounded loud, but when the shell burst there was only a tiny sound like the popping of a small paper bag. It seemed a silly, weak little noise. There would be just that pop; or sometimes there would be a brief pinprick of light, like a star that was born and lived and died in one second.

In the small towns, when alarms sounded, policemen rode on bicycles and scolded the people in the streets. The people would not take it seriously. It seemed somehow sullying and un-British to scurry away from a danger that couldn't be true. And war right in England couldn't be true.

Even the most sensible people acted much as if the worst that could happen to England was a sort of thunder shower. These people stood in doorways and looked up impassively, or stayed inside and peeped through the curtains occasionally. Somehow they felt quite safe doing that. They were quite protected from this new sort of rain that never came. Most of them had no understanding of high explosives that ripped stone and steel and flesh, that killed people one hundred feet away merely by the concussion that ruptured the cells and fiber of the lungs and left a man unscratched yet dying.

True, some older men who knew this from the last war thought of it—and yet they couldn't make it real. A man could die so in a foreign land—but not here, at home, in Britain.

So children raced in the streets seeking hot shell splinters for souvenirs, and women peeked placidly through the curtains, and the A.R.P. men went about scolding the

people for spoiling the blackout. A light from one window, multiplied a hundred times, they said, was enough to show the enemy a whole town.

But when daylight came, it always seemed fantastic and impossible, even to the A.R.P. men themselves. True, there would be news of some bombs dropped. But it was always somewhere else—over the Hampshire border, or far out on the lonesome Downs. That was a long way away.

It always seemed a long way away in daylight, and especially such fine daylight. Such fantastically beautiful weather it was. The wheat was bursting into full ear. There were a lot of tiny, blue butterflies over the south grasslands.

And in the fair sunshine it all seemed silly. The Air Raid Precautions people, the Local Defense Volunteers, the parashots, the auxiliary firemen—they looked like silly badged and armletted and dressed-up figures left over from last night's puppet show. They must have felt it themselves. They looked a little sheepish, wearing their brassards and walking about in broad daylight.

It was all ludicrous in the sunshine—fat men and young lads and meek little clerks and spinster ladies and red-faced old gentlemen tramping around with a dozen strange and makeshift signs of authority. In the daylight. Only at night some people began to feel something. In the blackness they began to feel war, real war, edging nearer and nearer.

Old Hamish felt suddenly merrier as he sat in the park. He had not gone home after all, and he was glad of it. His irritation at London was gone.

The perfection of the greenery, the dappling of afternoon light and shadow, the neatness of the walks, the splashing of colors on the clothes of the children, the uniformed nursemaids—this was as it should be.

This had not changed. London itself had changed—for the worse—had become cheap, tinny. But this was as it had been for as far back as his memory went. And it would be for as long as—as long as——

He put the thought away. You could think and argue pro and con; but Britain would be Britain always. For this was really Britain. And there'd always be parks and little shavers. Therefore, there'd always be Britain.

He felt there was a flaw somewhere in that reasoning, but he liked the comfort of the conclusion, so he turned his mind away from analysis.

He looked sideways at the nursemaid on the bench with him, holding a paper-back novelette. She would read three or four lines and look up. Read three or four lines—look up. It went on regularly, like a conditioned reflex. Reading—then looking to see if the child was all right.

Old Hamish watched the children. They were going round in circles, their hands clenched beside their chests, shuffling their feet and making moaning cries in some incomprehensible sort of game.

They seemed much alike. All nice little shavers. All of them clean and nicely dressed. All extremely beautiful as only infancy can be when seen through adult eyes.

Old Hamish felt the sun on his face. He half-drowsed. Then he wakened to sound as a boy trotted over. He had a fawn reefer jacket, a blue sailor hat, the incredibly delicate skin of the British child.

"We're playing buzzers," he said.

"What?" the nurse asked.

"Buzzers. I'm the twelve o'clock buzzer."

"That's nice," she said, absently. "Come here."

She wet her handkerchief on her tongue and dabbed briskly at the corner of his mouth.

"There," she said.

The child ran away, and both Hamish and the nurse followed him with their eyes.

Hamish was thinking: Curious—their fingernails. Like the tiny crabs they'd had in the soup at—where—where? Hamish's younger one must be about that size now. Let's see—Munich—Coronation—Abdication crisis—death of the old King—before that—must be five exactly.

"How old is he?" he said.

The nursemaid looked up quickly. Hamish saw her summing up his age, his clothing, his fitness to be spoken to.

"Just turned five, sir."

Hamish nodded delightedly.

"Thought so," he said. "Fine-looking little chap."

"Yes, sir."

She fingered her novelette politely.

"Oh, go on and read. Don't let me disturb you," he said. "I must be getting along."

He got up and marched away sprucely, his cane swinging. Parks, he thought. Wonderful things. A spot of green in a city. You sat a moment, let your senses rest a moment, and there you were.

He went along past the old filled-in trenches of the first scare. Two girls, gay with lipstick, flounced past—one carrying a bottle of milk. Their voices rose, chattering, high. Hamish swung his stick and marched erectly.

This was like old days. London in the old days. Ah—no tin-pan whining and pin-ball parlors and that un-British stuff on Oxford Street then. No boop-a-dooping and hot-cha-chaing. The songs they sang now—like the rote songs of savages. In the old days—there had been songs.

"Good-bye My Bluebell!" Lord, how they sang that when they pulled out for Africa. Just to hum the first bar mentally flashed it all back—the rank smell of the Portsmouth mud flats and the odor of tar and the troopship pulling out. The old *Victory* lying there, and over in the harbor the sailors on a warship, standing in rows on the deck, their straw hats flashing in the sunshine, stamping their bare feet as they practiced in unison the cutlass drill. He could hear it now—the voice of the cutlass instructor coming harsh over the water, even over the sounds of the troops on the deck below, bellowing like mad:

"Good-bye my Bluebell. Farewell to you.
One last wild look into your eyes of blue.
Mid camp-fires gleaming; mid shot and shell;
I will be dreaming of my own—Blue—bell!"

Ah, days, days. And old songs!

"Under the Bamboo Tree!" Gertie's song. And as fresh as if it had come out yesterday. You could remember the words, which was more than you ever could of any of the things they sang today. Yet it was ten—twenty—thirty—heavens alive, nearly forty years ago. Thirty-six or seven. Just about the time of the Russo-Jap do. That would be 1904. Gertie was twenty-nine then. That made her sixty-five now. Good Lord, Gertie sixty-five. Gertie!

He looked up suddenly and saw a taxi by the Arch. He waved his stick impulsively. The cab circled over.

"Do you know Millings Garden Lane?"

"Yes, sir. Off the Millings Road."

"That's it. Number seven. Seven, Millings Garden Lane."

He settled back happily in the cab, gay with a sudden feeling of impetuous adventure. There was the faint odor of leather. His mind turned to hansom cabs.

It wasn't quite the same smell. Then there'd been leather and the good lusty smell of horse sweat mixed in. Saddle soap too, somewhere.

By God, science hadn't done a very good job of it at that. Everyone shouted about the advancements of science; but they hadn't made the world any better. Suppose you were God—with a wipe of your hand you could knock all the jittering gadgets away—sweep the world back to the old days? No motorcars, airplanes, wireless, cinemas, howling tin music in Oxford Street. Think of it!

Why, not even the veriest idiot would hesitate for a moment—wave the hand! Wipe it out!

If you could only bring the old world back! Suppose it! Now at this moment, he'd be able to hear the horse ahead of him clop-clopping on the pavement. There'd be the sweet smell of sweat and leather in the warmth. The busses would be jogging along behind the old plugs. And the brewery lorries—with their teams of enormous shires!

Traps and dogcarts and smart coachmen and a tiger on the box—flowing gowns on the women walking under those plane trees—they'd be holding parasols above their heads—and there'd be that gesture of reaching down and behind to clutch the skirt ankle-high as they stepped from the pavement. How graceful that gesture had been—all womanhood, sex, everything, in that half-turn of the hips to reach for skirts, to hold ankle-high. Ankles! What were ankles today?

Why, a man would be a howling maniac not to prefer that gentle, slow-paced old-time world to this madhouse. Of course, there was all this talk of social betterment today. Well—he wasn't rabidly and foamingly anti-Bolshevik as some men were. Dash it all, of course not. He was as ready as the next to look at it as a liberal-minded man should. But, could you say the common people were better off? Could you say their

lives were any happier? That was the test. Did they like living any more today than they had then?

No, honestly, you couldn't say they were truly and fundamentally better off. Everyone was happier in the old days, the lower classes included. Servants were servants, and, by God, not ashamed of their calling—proud of doing their jobs well. Happier and prouder. And what was progress if it couldn't make people happier? Making most of the people happier most of the time—that's what civilization was, wasn't it? And all this science hadn't done any good. It had only done harm. Look at wars today, for instance.

Wars had been positively decent things in those days compared to today. They had—well, damn it—good form, in a way. You could mock and scoff at form all you wanted, but where was the scientific substitute for it? Nowhere!

Ah, soldiering in the old days! Tight breeches with the stripe down the leg, and clinking spurs riveted to your heels. The little pillbox hat, and the white stripe down your cheek where the sun hadn't tanned under the chin-strap. Cavalry was cavalry, and the charge was still part of war. The charge at Omdurman! By God, they didn't make wars like that any more.

Of course, people got killed. They weren't *opéra-bouffe* wars. Indeed not! Chaps got killed just as dead then as now. But it seemed to have some sense. Yet—good chaps went.

Carteras with the damned spear right through him—like the snout of a swordfish! Right through him, and riding up and saying: "I never saw him—I never saw him!" And then toppling right out of the saddle. Fine chap. Six-three and a trojan on the polo field. Then—dead! You couldn't realize it. It was hard to realize even now that Carteras wasn't alive. Any moment, you felt, he'd poke his head into the tent and give that great horselaugh. A fine chap! A gallant with the ladies. That time—dancing the cakewalk—Gertie on the table—the bamboo tree!

If you laka me, lak I laka you
Then we laka both the same . . .

It would make Gertie happy to have him drop in. He should have done it long ago—a year—two years! One should remember!

"Hi!"

He tapped on the window with the cane. The driver pulled to the curb, and slid back the window.

"Do we pass a pub on the way?"

"Why, yes, sir. There's several. There's the Tun and Wheel, and the Green Arms and . . ."

"Any will do. Here. Take this pound note and get me a quart of sloe gin."

"A quart of sloe gin. Yes, sir."

The man took the note and ground the car into gear.

When there was no answer Old Hamish pressed the sneck of the door and walked in.

"Hi," he called. "Hi there!"

He waited, the wrapped-up bottle of gin in his hand. There was no sound. Quietly he walked through the kitchen, which was curiously enough the front room. He went along the hall to the "best room." A fire glowed in the grate.

Then he saw her, asleep, in the rocking-chair that was beside a huge brass bed. Her great bulk filled the chair, pressing against the sides that alone seemed to prevent any overflowing. He saw crutches leaning against the fireside. As his eyes took this in, she wakened. She stared, her head half-turned. Terror came into her face until realization overtook it. She blinked. Her eyes were rheumy.

"Gertie," he said. "It's all right. It's me."

There was, for a brief second, no apperception in her face, and then the smile bloomed, going beautifully over her generous features.

"The Captain," she breathed. "Well, bless my soul if it isn't the Captain."

"Of course it's me," he said, as if to a child.

"Come to see Gertie."

"Of course! And look! I've brought you a present!"

"A present!"

She held out her hands and took the parcel. She nursed it without opening it. Then she shook her head.

"Oooh," she said, brightly. "I just dropped off in a nap. Pull up the chair."

He sat beside the hearth, and looked at the crutches. He looked back at her. Then he started. One of her legs was missing.

"My God," he said. "What is it?"

"What?"

She followed his glance, and then she laughed. The merry, bubbling, heedless laughter that had always been her own flooded the small room.

"I had it took off," she said, proudly.

She was fully awake now and bright with liveliness.

"Took off?" he said, vacantly.

"Yes. It was me bad leg, y'know. It wouldn't get better, and always running sores. Nasty things, you know. Not nice, are they?"

"Of course not—no, indeed."

"Oooh, Captain, it got so's I couldn't bear myself. I always was one for being neat and clean—no matter what, you know I always was one for taking pride. And it got so's I couldn't bear myself. And we'd tried this and that and everything else. So the doctor says: 'There's only one thing. It'll have to come off.' 'Then off it comes,' I says, just like that.

"So off I pops into the hospital. And pop! Off comes me leg, just like that."

"But—but why didn't you let me know?" he said.

“Oooh, I didn’t want to bother anyone. I says to myself: ‘It’s your own leg, and your own mind to make up. So have it off.’ And glad I am, too. No more sores, and nasty things they are, too—you wouldn’t know unless you had some. And it’s all sewed up nice and neat. Only six weeks ago, it was, and I feel better already. Never felt better.”

She laughed again, the rich, gurgling laugh that Hamish always remembered.

“Outside one thing,” she said. She laughed again. “You’ll never imagine. I want to scratch the sole of me foot—and it’s not there. Imagine! Me foot tickles—and I haven’t got any foot!”

She laughed until the ripples spread down her body, and her plumpness quivered all over.

“I know,” he said, reprovingly. “But I’ve always told you, in case of anything, to let me know. Or to get in touch with Mr. Haskell immediately. Why didn’t you?”

“Oooh, it wasn’t anything, Captain, once I’d made up me mind. And they were that *nice* to me in hospital. The nurses were just lovely. They were so proud of me. You know, they swore up and down that they never had a patient who healed up so fast and so nicely as I did. Never!”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s just—just a bit of a shock.”

“I couldn’t help it,” she said, almost tearfully.

She bent her head and then remembered the package in her hands.

“It’s sloe gin,” he said.

“Fancy you remembering,” she said quietly, without looking up.

“Now, now,” he said. “I haven’t been scolding. Would you like a drink?”

She looked up, and the sly glance came in her face.

“Well, doctor says I shouldn’t. But—there’s glasses in the cupboard. I can’t get around very well yet. That’s why I had me bed brought down here. Would you mind?”

He got one glass and opened the bottle. The clear liquid gurgled. He shuddered at the smell. He held out the glass. Then he sat.

“Cheerio,” she said.

“Cheerio.”

He settled comfortably in the chair. It was cozy here, he was thinking.

“I can’t get over your leg, Gertie,” he said.

“Aaah,” she sighed. “Well, I can’t complain. It did its part for a long time. Danced me along life—what life I’ve had. A shame in a way.”

“That’s what I mean. It’s hard to think of you—and think of you dancing—and—well, it must be hard on you.”

“Oh, Lord love you, Captain, I can’t complain. You can’t be young forever. And I did dance while I was at it, didn’t I? I *did* dance.”

She nodded and went on.

“What I say is, you’ve got to take life as you find it and make the rough go with the smooth.”

She stared in the fire, and then gurgled happily.

"But I did dance, didn't I? And my legs were something to look at then."

Old Hamish did not realize that he was lifting his mustaches with the back of his hand.

"As fine a pair of legs as London ever saw," he said. "You beat Gaby What's-her-name—the French woman. You beat her hollow."

"Why, thank you, Captain. What a nice thing to say. Well, if you ask me, you had a grand leg yourself."

"Oh, come, now."

"Don't be bashful. You did. In them tight trousers with the yellow stripe. Soldiers—they don't wear them no more. More's the pity, I say. Say what you care to, I always liked a man to have good *legs*. And you could see what a man was like them days. Now—well, it's turned around, and you can see what a gel is like. Terrible, I think. Of course, you could us, too, but it was different with a gel in the profession, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes."

"And we always wore tights. Not half-naked like gels go round on the streets these days. You can't say we ever didn't wear tights—and it looked nicer, if you ask me. Decenter and looked nicer."

Hamish gazed at the fire and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Women looked better. And they were better—no silly cinema diets then. By the Lord, some of those old principal boys had figures. You did, too."

"Didn't I just!"

She laughed and the sound came warm and almost sexual. Her old frame shook with merriment.

"Oooh, dear. And didn't I *dance*. One and two and . . . and the cakewalk. Sossidge for tea. Remember? And I Laka You Lak . . ."

"I was just thinking of that today," Hamish cut in. "It's curious you should mention it."

"Well, it was my song," she said, simply.

He nodded, staring in the fire, and hummed the tune inside himself. It rolled the years back. She stared, lost in her own meanderings. Then she said:

"Remember the parody we had on it. Remember, after Cissie sang it straight, then me and the whole chorus:

I saw Bill Bailey
  Kissing a lady
Under the Bamboo tree.
  Bill Bailey ran away . . ."

She sang, her voice small and sweet and at strange odds with the jaunty doggerel. He looked up and watched her face, dimpling and shining over the white crocheted collar with its demure clasp pin.

He jogged his mind sternly. It was no use sitting and talking of old times. He ought to be getting along. It had all ended so long ago—Gertie! It was nice to see her settled in her old age. Old age? She was four years younger than he. But of course, age for a man and age for a woman were different.

"I must be going," he said, abruptly.

She stopped humming. When she spoke her voice was small—like that of a forlorn child.

"Will it be three years before you come and see me again?"

"Oh, no. I'll drop past. I don't often get down to London now, you know."

She brooded.

"Please stop a while with Gertie. Look, have tea, it's almost teatime. Please stay."

He stood, perplexed. It was so unusual. That had been the one thing about Gertie. She'd never questioned or pleaded or demanded his time back in the days when—when they were younger. Gertie had shown perfect understanding. But now—crippled, of course. It must make life lonesome for her.

"Look here," he said, briskly. "How do you manage now? I think you ought to have a servant—a maid or a good dependable woman to help you. . . ."

"Oh, I get along so nicely. The little gel from next door comes in. She's such a lovely little thing. She'll be in from school most any time and get us tea. If you'd wait a minute . . ."

"I must go, Gertie. But I'll look in again. And if there's anything . . ."

He heard the door slam and the sound of a child's voice, calling.

"That's Alice now!" Gertie said.

He turned and saw the child come rushing into the room.

"Oh, Mrs. Tindley. I saw . . ."

Hamish watched the child halt in mid-speech as she saw him. He smiled.

"What did you see?" he asked.

"The doctor's motorcar bumped a tram," she said, flatly.

She edged quietly to Gertie's side. Gertie put a plump arm around her.

His mind pondered on the "Mrs." Of course, Gertie had to have some standing in her world. But he had never thought of it.

"This is Alice," Gertie was saying, proudly. "She does for me, don't you, dear? Does my bed and makes my tea and everything."

Hamish saw the child leaning half-shyly against Gertie's shoulder. The girl's hair seemed tarnished red in the firelight, and her face, pale above the brown velvet of her dress, seemed brightly intelligent. She was about fourteen—just passing from thin coltishness into the first blossom of nubility. He saw her breasts pushing like fast-growing plants at the flatness of the velvet. He flicked his eyes away.

"Awkward," he thought, "the way one's eyes wander. Hardly quite decent, looking at a child."

He saw that her eyes were fixed on the gold top of his cane.

“Say how-de-do to the Captain, Alice.”

“How-de-do,” the child said.

She put one foot behind the other and plucked the sides of her dress as she made a quick bob.

Hamish smiled. A pleasant child—and well-brought up. That was the proper way. So few children today had the slightest notion of how to behave. Drop curtsies and what not.

He felt suddenly pleased.

“How do you do,” he said.

The child looked up at Gertie.

“Shall I get your tea?”

“Well, now,” Gertie said. “We’re just trying to get the Captain to stay. Perhaps if we asked nicely . . .”

“Oh, I might as well stay now,” Hamish said. “I *could* do with a spot of tea.”

“There,” Gertie said, happily. “Now let’s give the Captain a real high tea. We’ll get something nice at the shop. Just reach me my purse . . .”

“Here, here!” Hamish protested. He dropped his gloves in his hat and set the cane by the wall. He got a pound note from the folder in his inside pocket, and held it to the girl.

“Now you get lots of nice things,” he said. “Lots of them.”

“What shall I get?”

“Oh—what you like.”

“You just get what you think would be nice for us, dear,” Gertie said. “Now you show us how nice you can think up things for tea.”

The girl stared at the note in her open hand a moment, then clasped it with a convulsive movement, and ran from the room eagerly.

Hamish and Gertie laughed.

“A nice girl,” he said. “Very nice child. Yes.”

He settled himself in the chair and stared at the fire. Gertie seemed lost in her thoughts. His mind ambled drowsily.

There was a peace here, sitting in this tiny room, the fire glowing warmly. More than that—a sort of ease of mind. An ease—where one could talk naturally of bad legs—and old songs. No artificiality. The hard, boop-booping modern world far away outside the walls.

He heard Gertie laughing.

“Oooh, will you ever forget the time I did the dance on the table that New Year’s—and that Leftenant Cary-Ford?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, now, now. You was always jealous of him. And no reason to be. Because there never was a man you had reason to be jealous of or suspicious of. That’s one thing I can always say. Never! Excepting that one particular case, and you-know-who, whose name

we won't mention. And we won't speak any more about it. But outside of that, you never had reason to be jealous."

"Why?" he said, suddenly. "Why did you play straight?"

She wrinkled her forehead.

"I don't know," she said. "It's just I have respect for myself, that's all. When a gentleman takes a girl, and does proper by her, why I'd think shame on her if she didn't keep straight."

"I see."

He nodded to the fire.

"Whatever become of that Leftenant Cary-Ford?" she asked. Then she chuckled. "Oooh, he was a one, that chap. A devil if I ever saw one. Laugh! I never saw a chap so full of deviltry—like pouring the champagne in that poor cabby's hat. I often wondered what he does now?"

"Cary-Ford?" he said. "He got killed. He was a brigadier-general. Got it in March, '18."

"He did? Oh, now, isn't that a pity! Such a nice young chap he was—and never a one any fuller of fun than he was. Oh, dear, the war. And now we've got another one."

"Yes," he said. "And it's a bad one."

"Those nasty Germans," she said. "We beat them once and now we have to do it all over again. But I suppose we'll be all right. I have a wireless, you know, and I listen sometimes. The B.B.C. sounds very hopeful. But to tell you the truth, I don't listen very much."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I can't take this one very seriously, in a manner of speaking. I suppose it's—you know—getting along in years. Wars are for young people. When you get along, you can't take 'em seriously. You get thinking: I may have passed on before it's all over, and then I'll never know how it came out. You couldn't get interested in a play at the theater if you kept thinking you were only going to see the first act."

He shook his head. Then turned.

"Do you mind getting along, Gertie? Does it worry you?"

"Me?" Her laugh pealed brightly. "Lord love you, no. When you're young, age seems just too awful; but the further you get along, the friendlier it seems. Of course, I like to think of what jolly times we had when we were young—and I wouldn't want my life much different. But I wouldn't want it to be like that now. Oh, no. All that helter-skelter, and troubles and carryings-on. They're nice when you're young. But now—I like peace. Just sitting here, I'm comfortable."

He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I understand. It's very comforting here."

He rocked and the room was silent except for the spitting of the fire and the ticking of the cheap clock. He poked the fire, and then lifted a few more pieces of coal on it from the scuttle, setting them neatly with the tongs. He felt somehow that this had included him into the home—as if it now possessed part of him that had been his own before.

He sat back and rocked time away. Then, like a puff of quick, cool air, they heard the sound of Alice returning. Hamish sat up and looked round. They heard her dropping bundles in the kitchen, and coming down the hall. She came in, smiling happily.

"Your change," she said, quietly.

She tumbled the coins into Hamish's hand. They were warm from the tight clutch of her palm. As she turned, he called her back.

"Here, here!" he said.

He looked among the coins and found a half-crown.

"There you are, my girl," he said.

She came forward, shyly, and took the coin. Again she dropped her shy curtsy. He saw her looking at him from under her eyelashes in that second. Then she turned and went as if for protection to Gertie. She opened the palm and showed the coin.

"That's a very good girl," Hamish said.

Gertie stroked the child's hair fondly.

"But you should say thank you, too," she said. "As well as dropping the curtsy."

"That's all right," Hamish said, brightly. "She has very nice manners."

"She has," Gertie said, comfortingly, still stroking the child's hair. "Always watch your manners, and be polite, and keep yourself neat and clean—and watch your figure. And then—some day——"

Her voice lifted dreamily as if she were telling a fairy tale.

". . . Some day—you'll have a nice gentleman to call on you for tea, too."

Gertie laughed, throatily. Hamish saw again, in a second, the child's glance come up warm and almost maturely and sexually alive from under her long lashes. He felt that the child must have known it, too, for she ran quickly back to the kitchen.

Hamish avoided Gertie's glance as he turned back to the fire. It was comfortable, Hamish thought, that was why he had stayed on. What more could a man want than comfort?

Of course, one would soon get tired of it—humble living—this tiny room. Die of claustrophobia. Get to hate the warm, lived-in smell. But—just at this moment of this year of his life, in the city of London—it seemed very comfortable.

CHAPTER VIII

THE pub already was well into the full chorus of evening gabble that would go on until closing time. The low-ceilinged place seemed as if it had been poured full of sound, and one only preserved a small private sanctuary in it a few inches round his own body.

Clive swilled the beer round in his mug and stared at the table. Joe made a movement with his hand, and he looked up. Joe held up a finger. At the same time, the hubbub died and the B.B.C. voice came clearly from the wireless.

The B.B.C. was announcing that bombs had been dropped on the Southeast coast. The R.A.F., however, were shooting down daylight raiders whenever they came over. The army in Somaliland was retiring.

Clive and Joe stared at the table as the mellifluously-accented words went on. When it was over the pub broke into its hubbub like horses starting from the tape. Clive looked toward the door.

"D'ye think we'll beat 'em, Briggs?"

Clive started, and then looked soberly at Joe. He looked carefully, as if seeing for the first time—or for the last—the form and shape of him: the wave of carefully combed hair under the jauntily set-back cap; the regular, good-humored features—small nose, calm eyes, large firm mouth. It was a good-natured, slightly flamboyant, very British face.

"No," he said. "I don't think we will."

Joe looked up quickly, and then drew patterns in the wet table top with his finger.

"Why not? Look at the last war. It looked as bad at times."

"Last war everyone rounded on Germany, Joe. War nowadays is like a gang fight, Joe. A bunch all scrapping—and they end up by all picking on one and beating him down. Like wolves—eating the bloodiest. Last time it was Germany. This time it'll be Britain."

"But if the United States comes in . . ."

"She won't. That's bad hopeful thinking. She won't fight with and for us. None of them will. They'll all round on us now. We're the fattest picking. There's plenty of plunder for all of them. All the nations of the earth can watch us go down, and there'll be swag enough to make them all happy when we're done."

"We're not going to be done," Joe said, angrily.

"Why not?"

"Well, we're not."

“Well, let’s not argue.”

Clive rose and looked toward the door.

“Wait a minute, chum. I wanted to tell you. I’m going.”

“Going? Where? Joining up?”

“Sort of. A minesweeper. Bill Stafford—you know, skipper of the *Island Queen* I told you about—well, he’s going, and he asked me to go along with him.”

Clive sat and regarded the table.

“I see,” he said. “Well, I can wish you luck. If that’s your line, and you’re set to go, that’s the thing to do.”

“That’s the way I looked at it,” Joe said, happily. “Might as well go for what I know and not wait till they come along and pull me into khaki and set me doing something I don’t know.”

“That’s right. A chap’s got to do what he thinks best. But I’ll be missing you. When do you go?”

“Well, that’s it. I go down tomorrow. And—you know you can take this all right from me?”

“Of course. What?”

“Well, I thought—how about you coming with me? I saw the skipper last night, and I said I had a chum. And he says, well, the more the merrier. Now you don’t have to say anything if you don’t want.”

Clive looked at the table. Suddenly the noise came into his consciousness again, crowding at him. He wanted to be away—outside. He drew circles with his finger.

“If I say no, Joe, will you understand?”

“Of course, chum. Of course. This is a free country.”

“No, you don’t see it right.”

“But I do.”

“No, you don’t. I can tell the way you say it.”

“No. A man’s business is his own. I just thought, like, I’d ask you. There’s no harm asking.”

“No. That’s right. I think—I’ll step along, Joe.”

“Hold on, Briggs. There’s something else, like. Well, I’ll be away—and you wouldn’t be doing anything to get my old lady in a jam.”

Clive sat down again. He looked up at Joe’s troubled face.

“What do you think I am?” he said. “I’ll pack up and move on.”

“No, that’s it,” Joe said. “I’d like for you to stay—as long as you want. It’s a man about. You know what I mean—just having someone around once in a while, then it ain’t so lonesome for my old lady. And—after all, renting the room to you does help. Every little bit helps they say, and there’s something to it, isn’t there? But the only thing is . . .”

“What?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ. I hate a Nosey Parker, and it’s none of my business, but there’s the old lady. But—are you a secret service chap?”

Clive looked at Joe’s solemn face and laughed, quickly.

“Goodness no,” he said. “No.”

“Well, I don’t give a bugger what you are, chum. Or what you’re up to. If you say it’s all right, and doesn’t make trouble for my old lady.”

“You’re a good chap, Joe.”

“Oh, hell. It isn’t that. Are you—are you in trouble, mate?”

Clive studied the young man before him.

“It’s all right. Nothing’s wrong. You’ve treated me well, Joe. So I’ll tell you. I’m—I’m a soldier.”

Joe nodded.

“That explains those military ration tickets you gave my old lady. But—but why didn’t you say you was in the service?”

“Look, Joe, I can’t explain. It’d take too long. But I promise you it’s all right. I’m on leave. It’ll be up soon. A few more days—then I’ll move on. Is it all right?”

“I want you to stay as long as you feel like it,” Joe said. “You say it’s all right—I believe you. It’s all right.”

Clive smiled.

“All right, Joe. Now let’s have a drink on it.”

“Yes,” Joe said. “Just one—then I’m off. This’ll be last night home, you know. And I think I’ll spend my last night home. You know how women are. My old lady would like it.”

“Yes,” Clive said. “That’s the best thing to do.”

He went and got the beers. He handed the mug to Joe.

“Here’s to the war,” Joe said. “It’s the best bloody one we’ve got.”

Clive lifted his mug.

“And here’s to . . .”

“To what?”

“To you,” Clive said. “To you—and to every last bloody one of us—and to—not to the war. To the end of it. To peace!”

“Right. To me and you and all of us and the war and the end of it. Drink up!”

They drank and left the inn. Then they were in the dusk, going through the village with quick step and senses somehow newly tuned to unlighted evenings. At Joe’s street they parted.

“I’ll take a stroll,” Clive said. “Then your mother will have you alone.”

“Do you think she’d like it that way, now?”

“I feel sure of it.”

They left each other and Clive went on in the dimness, his feet striking the metaled road regularly. It was not until he was almost there that he realized he was by the tree overhanging the wall. He paused in indecision, and then sat on the wall. Detached, in

the darkness, from time to time he heard the low voices of passing girls coming from the village. Sometimes there was a quick, uplifted laugh, and sometimes the lower note of a man's voice. Then he heard a voice that he remembered.

"Violet?"

He went into the road.

"I was with Joe Telson—at the concert Saturday night."

"Oh, it's you," she said. "This is my friend, Miss Patsy Acton. Mr.—I forgot your name."

"Briggs," Clive said. He ducked his head at a mass in the blackness which, obviously, was another girl. He heard her voice, metallic in the London way.

"It's really an enormous pleasure to meet you."

She gabbled the syllables as if it were a well-loved phrase.

"Thanks," Clive said. "Look, Violet. You're heading back to camp, aren't you?"

"Well, I was."

"Do something for me, there's a good pal. Tell Prudence I'm here, will you? You remember—the girl I was with Saturday. Ask her if she can come."

"Well, now. I don't know. I can ask her. I don't know whether or not she'll come. She's funny."

"That's all right. Just ask her."

"Well, I will—seeing it's you. But she's—awful uppy."

He heard the girls go away. He went back to the wall and sat, wishing the time away, listening as girls passed. At last there were the footsteps of one person, coming toward the tree. He jumped to his feet.

"Prudence!"

"No. This is Patsy."

"Patsy?"

"Yes. Patsy Acton. Violet just performed the introduction."

"Oh, yes. What did she say?"

"Prudence? She said she couldn't come. She said to say she was most dreadfully sorry, but she was indisposed with a headache. She says it's *that* bad it's excruciating. That's what she told Violet. Then Violet wouldn't come. She's terrible lazy, is Violet. So I come, all alone. I wouldn't have you standing out here all alone. It isn't fair to leave anyone just standing, like that, is it? So I come—all alone. I wouldn't come down here all alone, only I couldn't bear to think . . ."

"Thank you," Clive said.

He felt the girl waiting. There was a sense of her nearness.

"All right," he said. "It doesn't matter. Will you do something else for me?"

"With extreme pleasure—if I can."

"Tell Prudence—tell her I'll be here tomorrow night. I'll wait here until she comes—if she can. I'd like her to meet me. Tell her that, would you, please?"

The girl yawned, loudly.

“Well, I can tell her. I don’t know what she’ll say. She’s fearful distant and swagnay, that Prudence is.”

“She’s what?”

“Swagnay. It’s French. Well, I’ll go all the way back. And alone.”

He heard her footsteps drag away. He went back to the wall and sat. A ripening moon came up, and cast faint shadows. There was nothing he desired now so much as to see Prudence. Not being able to see her made it an intense longing.

CHAPTER IX

THE next night it was raining dismally, and he did not expect her to come. But he heard her feet squelching on the road, and heard the rustle of her mackintosh and the slap of rain on the hard fabric. Then he felt her beside him.

He jumped down and they stood, awkwardly and without ease.

"Nice of you to come," he said. "I wouldn't have blamed you if . . ."

"Ghastly weather," she said.

"Fearful. Certainly isn't romantic."

"See here, I shouldn't have come."

"I agree with you. I just said I wouldn't have blamed you if you didn't."

"Not the weather. Just coming at all. Oh—I suppose it's the feminine thing to say. You mustn't mind if I say useless things, will you? You won't mind, ever?"

"Go on and be feminine," he said. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"No, you're all right."

She stood, waiting.

"Shall we be comfortable—as comfortable as we can?"

They sat on the low wall. The rain slatted and the night was close about them, shutting them in a sort of privacy.

"I suppose there's not much help for these things," she said, slowly.

"What things?"

"You know. Don't crumble the defenses of my phrases."

He did not answer.

"Tell me about you," she said.

"No. You tell me. What do you do? Not in the Waffs—I mean in ordinary life."

"There's almost nothing to tell about me, I'm afraid."

"Now you are speaking phrases. Everyone does something. Everyone's life is full and important and dramatic—to himself at the very least."

"That's so. I studied art."

"Art? What for?"

"You know, that's what I wonder now. I wasn't very good at it, really. It's what you do—study art—it's done. You wander round and wonder what you can do. You don't like bridge, and you don't like doing nothing, and—and you're not the athletic type. So what can you do? You can get a job reading for a publisher through a friend—or start a

hat shop with a woman who's having trouble with her husband—or take up social service work—or dedicate your life to having direr illnesses than any of the others you know—or pretend you're having a career. I started a career—art."

"And now you're in the Waffs."

"Yes, and now I'm in the Waffs, sitting on a wall with a strange man—and in idiotic weather."

She spoke the last as a sweep of wind shook the beech tree, sending the gathered rain down in a torrent on their hunched shoulders.

"It is idiotic of me to keep you here," he said. "I'll take you back, eh?"

"We were going to talk about you."

"I'll tell you some other time."

"Yes," she said, slowly. "You shall tell me."

She got down from the wall and they walked along, slowly, in the pelting rain. Their feet dragged as if they wished it to last, this going along the road close together, with the storm making the world lonesome.

"You must leave me here," she said, finally.

"You don't want to be seen walking back with a man?"

"That isn't it. I don't care."

"It is it, and of course you care."

"Yes," she said. "I do care, in a way. You have to get used to things."

They stood waiting.

"Will you see me again, Prudence?"

"Why do you want to see me again?"

"Shall we complicate things by trying to express reasons?"

"It's easier not to, I suppose. But we go through moves of defense—like a chess game—doing it all by instinct. We do it, even when we know there's no defense there. It can't be born in us. It's instilled in us from the time we're little girls."

"Then you'll meet me—not under the tree. Can't I see you sometime—don't you have time off?"

She paused, and then said:

"I could get off tomorrow afternoon."

"Good," he said, brightly. "What would madame like to do?"

"What do you suggest, sir?"

"Far be it from me to be suggestive, madame."

"You do have a sense of humor, don't you?"

"Oh, a very strong one, when it's unbridled. But also I've got a tenacious mind. I still want to know what-where-when about tomorrow. Where do we go?"

"You think it up."

"I'm a stranger here myself, madame. I don't know the ways of the land."

"Well—I'll meet you at two. That's the regular camp routine. Meet you by the bus stop at two."

“Then what’s the routine?”

“You ride up to Wythe and you have tea, and then you go to the cinema, and then you come back on the last bus and tell everyone what a fine time you had. That’s supposed to be the thing to do.”

“Well, far be it from me to upset ordained schedules in these regimented times. I’ll see you at two, then, at the Gosley bus stop.”

“No, the high road one—it doesn’t matter. I’ll get on at the high road, and you can get on at Gosley. It will save a walk. Or—no. Please come to the high road and meet me there and we’ll get on together.”

“That was nice of you,” he said. “Good night.”

He stood, listening to her go away. Only when he turned about did he become conscious of how wet he was. His shoes squelched with the water.

“It has a High Street, a Main Street, one cinema and a war memorial,” she said.

He walked with his eyes ahead.

“And six pubs, one Wythe Community Center and one hotel.”

They walked in the sunlight. Now, because they could see each other, they were strangers and somehow uncomfortable.

“We’re not very bright, are we?” she said.

He knew what she meant.

“Perhaps I’d better take you back.”

She drew in her breath and walked without answering. Then she said:

“It has a nice church and a very pretty graveyard.”

He went with his eyes on the pavement.

“It’s a very pretty graveyard,” she said.

Her voice sounded small. He stopped impulsively, and looked at her face. Then he smiled.

“Is it *very* pretty?”

“Very, very pretty,” she said.

He thought she was going to cry.

“Well, if it’s very, very pretty—that makes it different,” he said.

He looked about him.

“Every teashop looked grimier than the last,” he said. “But even if this one is full of flies and corruption, it’ll have to do. Wait here.”

She stood in the sunlight, watching him go across the cobbled street. They had looked into every teashop in the town, and felt mutually repelled. She shut her eyes, and counted, childishly. At every ten she opened her eyes. She did that until, at the fifth count to ten, when she opened her eyes, he was coming back carrying paper bags.

“Rations ready,” he said.

“Was it full of flies?”

“Every kind. House, horse and bluebottle. Now—where’s this very, *very* pretty graveyard?”

“This way.”

They went along the road from town, past the last shops and a few houses of the suburbia inclination. The lane curved, and there, beneath the wineglass-shaped elms, the church was. The flat-topped wall, the stone green with age, fronted the stone-flagged pavement.

“Now, isn’t it nice?”

“Yes,” he said, quietly. “It is.”

She put a hand on the wall and jumped up quickly, turning so that she sat. He put the parcels on the wall, and then, about to jump, looked up at her face. He smiled and kept looking at her. Now, at last, he was looking frankly at her, there was no more self-consciousness.

He looked at her eyes. They were a fine gray-blue. Her hair, so light that it was almost silvery in texture, was drawn back tightly beneath her cap. Her skin was a blue-white color. Her mouth was somehow square and pugnacious. There were hints of freckles on the nose.

She was much prettier than he had imagined. Pretty? She was quite beautiful. Certainly one would never dare hope, meeting a girl at random in the darkness, to have any better luck. He was lucky!

“Well,” she said, happily.

He knew then that she must have seen gladness in his face.

“So you’re the girl I met in the dark,” he said.

“Well, what did you expect me to look like?”

“You look exactly like I imagined you.”

“You liar. You were afraid I might be cross-eyed, or have a mole on my nose.”

“I did not. I knew you had no moles.”

“Well, I have.”

“Where?”

“I can’t show you.”

He laughed quickly.

“When you went home last night,” she went on, “you suddenly realized that you didn’t know what I looked like. And then you drew in your breath, and said: ‘My God! She might look like a pan of sour milk.’ ”

“By God,” he said, “I did. How did you know that?”

She put her hands between her knees and leaned back, laughing.

“Because,” she said, “I did the same thing.”

“Oh,” he said, a little ruefully. “I suppose that is so. Well. What did you expect me to be like?”

“Exactly as you are, sir.”

“No. Truthfully.”

“I’m telling the truth. I expected you to be just as handsome as you are.”

“Oh, come.”

“You are handsome—a nice sort of face—the nose a little too fine and the mouth a little on the large side. One of your ears sticks out a little more than the other—you know your face is quite lopsided? I can see it now.”

“That’s enough.”

“No. And your eyes are very nice. A good, deep brown. They’re a little tired-looking—too late hours, that is. But your eyes are your best feature. Yes, I should say that. Rather tender eyes you have . . .”

“Tender?”

“And on the whole, it’s quite a good face. The lean type. A little too lean, but I’m glad you’re not fat-faced. I hate soggy faces, don’t you?”

He looked up into her face, without answering.

“Go on,” he said. “I don’t count in this conversation.”

“You’re vain—you want me to go on talking about you. All men are vain.”

He whistled.

“What a remarkable generalization.”

“And you shouldn’t wrinkle your forehead so much,” she said. “It’s a bad habit. Now that’s all.”

He jumped up on the wall beside her and opened the parcels.

“Ham sandwiches,” he said, “guaranteed to taste like damp cardboard. Rock buns—very rocky. And—milk!”

“Very nice, sir.”

She took a sandwich and a bottle of milk. He watched her as she ate, her uniformed figure trim. He looked down at her leg, swinging—then he watched her low-heeled shoe. When she turned he looked up. She smiled and looked away again.

“Nice,” she said. “We seem to be fated for walls. But it’s always nice—away from people.”

He nodded and laughed, but did not answer.

“What are you thinking?”

He looked up at her face. He thought: She is quite beautiful.

“It’s all funny,” he said. “Us. Sitting here. Wondering about each other. Like people newly met. Now we can see each other in daylight—partly shy, partly ill at ease, partly curious. Wondering about everything that happened before we met—and everything that happened after. Wondering about our lives, stretching back with no knowledge of each other, somehow winding tortuously right up to this point where we, two people, should sit on this wall, all full of curiosities and suspicions and defenses.”

“Not suspicions,” she said.

“Yes. Suspicions, too. Not so much of each other as at circumstance—touching the tentacles of relationship gladly one second, drawing back quickly the next for fear of possession—suspecting that and suspecting captivity.”

“Captivity! My goodness. You mustn’t think I want to capture you.”

“We all do,” he said. “We all desire to possess avidly.”

He swung about on the wall and stared at a gravestone.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Listen to this one. ‘Jonathan Stanginghorn of the Parish of Wythe. 1739-1818. Look on me as ye pass by; as ye are now so once was I. As I am now so ye shall be. Prepare for God and Eternity.’ Cheerful blighter, wasn’t he?”

“Ghoulish,” she said.

She swung her legs over the wall so that she sat facing the stone with him. He felt curiously pleased that she handled skirts so expertly and neatly. Some women were so clumsy. . . .

“But they liked it that way, I suppose,” she said. “They believed in the hereafter and were quite happy about facing it. Made it all very nice for them.”

He looked at her, hearing the clarity of her voice. He put his hand on hers.

“You’re very nice,” he said.

“Please don’t start that.”

He took his hand away angrily.

“I’m not starting anything. I was just saying you’re nice, that’s all. It was a natural thing to say—since I really haven’t seen you before.”

“What you’re trying to say is that I was quite a lucky packet to pick out of the blackout.”

“Why do you suddenly talk bitterly like that?”

“Well, I am a lucky packet. And you. You’re . . .”

“It seems to me we’ve been through this conversation before.”

“I know, but it’s hard to talk. I was going to say you were handsome, so don’t get angry. I couldn’t say that though, because it would sound unmaidenly. You wouldn’t like to have me unmaidenly, would you?”

“I think you’re very nice unmaidenly. You can’t be a maid any more.”

“That’s true. Neither maid, wife, nor widow,” she said.

She swung her legs back over the wall.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m one of the Waffs that a soldier took out in the dark. If it’s like that there’s some honesty somewhere in it, so it’s all right to leave it like that.”

“It isn’t much use talking about it one way or another, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s what I mean,” she said.

He turned, facing the road. They swung their legs. A bus went by, its engine pinging badly. He shuddered at the sound, and crumpled the paper bags. Then he halted, his arm upraised. At last he put the paper in his pocket. She looked at him and smiled.

“Can’t strew things around—by a very pretty graveyard, can I?”

“No,” she agreed. She touched his knee with her hand. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Let’s talk. What did you do—before you joined up?”

He sat up, hugging his knee.

“Rotifera,” he said.

“For goodness’ sake. What’s that?”

“Bugs.”

“Horrid word. Like bedbugs?”

“Much nicer. You’ve heard of photomicrography?”

“Emphatically not.”

“That’s good, because there’s photomicrography, and microphotography—which are entirely different things. Now you know all you need to about both, so worry no more about it, and we’ll continue up the Ganges to this tiny dot. Well, that’s a wonderful beggar named a rotifer. He’s a cheerful chap who lives in the marvelously beautiful jungle of slimy water, in which he goes around by turning himself into a paddle wheel. He’s the only animal in the world that uses the wheel as part of his body instead of using fins or legs or wings.”

“You’re not kidding?”

“S’welp me, it’s true. He invented the wheel millions of years before man got round to it.”

“And what do you do about it?”

“I don’t do much. I got a job with an old chap who cuts them up and mounts them on slides. He’s a wonderful old chap. The only man in the world who has dissected rotifers properly. But he’s after something more important now.”

“They’re tiny, then.”

“Very minute.”

“Did you always do that? How did you start?”

“Oh—well, once I was in a secondhand camera repair shop. That’s how I picked up the photography part. I’m handy at picking things up—machinery, you know.”

“Did you study it?”

“No. Just sort of came naturally—through a long series of fortuitous industrial wanderings. Once I was a dog dietitian.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“What does a dog dietitian do?”

“Well, it sounds fine. Mostly what it means is driving a delivery truck. Delivering ready-made meals for dogs—chock full of vitamins and stuff, and balanced. We deliver to your door daily. No trouble to you. Have our dog dietitian bring freshly prepared meals of highest quality ingredients for your pet every day. You know—people too thick-headed or lazy to look after their own pets.”

“No.”

“It’s true. Most everyone in cities nowadays is too busy to look after a dog. So it’s a mass business. Chopped liver and meal and stuff, all prepared in a dainty frilled paper dish. It’s quite a business. You ask anyone in the dog game.”

“How on earth did you get into such a business?”

“I could repair the truck. I told you—I’m quite handy with machines.”

“But what a curious business.”

“That’s nothing. Once I was a canary whistler.”

She laughed.

“You’re fooling. What’s a canary whistler?”

“Chap who teaches canaries to whistle.”

“Why, canaries know how to whistle. It’s—it’s nature.”

“Says you. I take my oath on it. You think canaries sing naturally, well, they don’t. Good ones—they have to be taught. They can learn from older birds, or from a canary whistler, or from a machine.”

“Oh, come. What machine?”

“A trilling machine. It has compressed air and a water pipe, and it goes on rolling and trilling all day. That’s how I got the job. I fixed the chap’s machine, and then I stayed on—feeding, you know, and cleaning and caging for market. I stuck at my post and progressed upward to special whistler for fine birds. Listen.”

He put a finger on his lower lip, and the sound of a canary trilling, higher and higher, rolled out over the quietness of the afternoon.

“Good heavens,” she said. “How do you do it?”

“It’s a secret,” he grinned. “And it takes years of practice.”

“You’re talented!”

“That’s nothing. Wait till you see me tap dance.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been an actor. I couldn’t stand it.”

“Lady, I have my code of decency, strange as it may be. I never fell that low, but I worked in an agency once—you know, that hires actors.”

“And you’ve worked with bugs and dog food.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And canaries.”

“And canaries. Lady, you believe me I worked with canaries. Why, if I ever see another canary—or hear one—or smell one, I’ll be sick. Bloody canaries!”

“Well, what did you do it for, then?”

“What did I do it for? Hark to her! Lady, I did it to eat. You know eating?—meals, food? That stuff—you get the bad habit of wanting some two—and very often even three—times a day. Hence the checkered career of employment.”

“It has been checkered, I’d say.”

“Oh, but you haven’t heard anything yet.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve had other exploits.”

“Oh, dozens. Garage repairman, safety-glass demonstrator, padlock inspector . . .”

“Padlock inspector! You go around inspecting padlocks at night?”

“No. In a factory. A lock factory.”

“How do you inspect a padlock? Give a demonstration. You look in the keyhole?”

“No. You have a tray of padlocks. You take a rawhide mallet. You tap the first padlock in its most ticklish spot. *Voilà*, the hasp flies open! What does that mean?”

“The lock’s no good.”

“No! That means it’s perfect. If you can’t rap it open, it’s faulty and you reject it.”

“What makes it fly open?”

“Lady, my job wasn’t to ask questions. It was to rap padlocks on piecework. They said: ‘Hit ’em here!’ So I hit ’em and didn’t worry about the causes—only the results. Like the old chap who hits the train axles with a hammer at the railway stations. He’d been tapping ’em for sixty years and was retired on pension, and they gave him a gold button for his lapel, and shook his hand at a farewell dinner. And he said it was nice of them, after all those years, but one thing—he always wished someone had told him what the hell he was rapping the axles for.”

“No. But what do they rap ’em for?”

He glanced up at her.

“You can tell by sound whether a wheel’s true or not, or has a crack in it, can’t you? Test by resonance.”

He held his knee with his clasped hands, and leaned backward slightly. The day was fading to the endless quality of summer evening. The smell of sweetly new dust was in the air, and he heard a thrush singing in the close of the churchyard—saying that the twilight was coming at last.

She wrinkled her nose in thought.

“But you mean you can take a rawhide mallet and go around tapping padlocks and make them fly open without a key?”

“Most common types will.”

“Aren’t you a dangerous man to be loose?”

“I’m saving the talent for special occasions.”

“And you don’t know what makes it happen?”

“Of course I do—but it would take too long to explain. I’d have to explain all about spring locks, and lever tumbler locks, and pin tumbler locks. Would you like a comprehensive dissertation?”

“We’ll save it for our old age. Tell me more about you. What else have you done?”

“Lots of things—anything that was a living.”

“But where were you educated?”

“I’m not educated, lady.”

“But you must be—you are!”

“I’m not. I’m half-educated—like ninety per cent of the people in this country. I know a little more than nothing about a little less than everything.”

“But what do you intend to be?”

“Just myself. That’s all. It’s all I can be. You see, it isn’t a case of what you want to be. It’s a case of what job a chap can get to make a living, isn’t it? You come from a

fairly well-off family, don't you?"

"It's all right. What would you be—if you could choose?"

"An undertaker, lady."

"No, seriously."

"I still say an undertaker. It's the only business never has any slack times."

"No, please tell me. Seriously."

"What's the use?" he said. "What's the use of thinking things like that with all this—this mess going on?"

She looked down at her feet.

"How much time have you got left?" she said. "You know—leave?"

"Don't let's talk about it. I hate to count it."

She looked up at him, and their glances were held for a moment. She put her hand to her throat, and then jumped from the wall. She spoke quickly.

"Shouldn't we go?" she said. "It's getting on. If we want to go to the cinema . . ."

He looked straight ahead.

"Do you want to go to the cinema?"

"It's customary," she said. "Isn't that what we came for?"

"I asked if you wanted to go?"

"What else? What do you want to do, then?"

He did not answer.

"All right," she said, finally. "Let's go find another haystack."

"Good God," he said. "A martyr. No thanks."

"Well, isn't that what you want?"

"Do you have to talk about it like that?"

"How do you expect me to talk about it? That's what you mean, isn't it?"

He got down from the wall and held her arm. Then he lifted his head.

"It's all right," he said. "There's a hundred reasons—you're afraid, and upset, and muddled. You should be. It's all right. Let's go to the cinema."

He lifted her arm over his and started back toward the town. For a while they went in silence. Then she said:

"Will you do something for me?"

"Anything you wish."

"I don't mind, but haystacks, they . . ."

"Sound a little sordid."

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it."

"Please, I don't mean it. I mean, talking about it seems a little so. It isn't really itself—when we're there. It's just—planning it."

"So, we go to the cinema."

"No. Will you—take me to the hotel?"

“Then it won’t be so sordid?”

“I didn’t use that word,” she said. “You did.”

“I’m helping your thoughts out, that’s all. Now we’ll go to the cinema if you wish.”

She stopped and clenched her fists.

“You’re exactly like a woman,” she said. “Now will you please decide on something definite and let’s not argue. I say, clearly and distinctly, we’ll go to the hotel.”

He stood a moment, then clasped her hand.

“Forgive me,” he said. “You’re a little honester and braver than I am.”

Arm in arm, walking quickly, they went to the town, and to the Wythe Hotel with its remodeled front, done in pseudo half-timbered style. It was the fake aged fronting set out hopefully to catch the summer tourist trade that now seemed nonexistent. There were no people in the chairs set about the front room. Behind the desk a girl about sixteen sat reading, her toffee-colored hair hanging wispily down toward the magazine. She looked up like a suddenly alarmed animal.

“I want a room—for my wife and myself,” Clive said. “Have you a double room?”

“That we ’ave,” she said.

She jumped down from the stool and ran toward the back. She called down the three stairs.

“Pa! Pa! There’s a lady and gent wants a double!”

She clarioned it, gladly, excitedly. Clive and Prue, standing there, felt suddenly naked and as if hundreds of people were watching them.

They saw the little man come up the steps, wiping his mustache with the back of his hand in a half-finished-meal gesture. They saw, too, the professional smile of welcome on his face drop away as he looked at Prue and saw her uniform.

“What you want?” he said.

“My wife and I—I’ve come down to visit her. We’d like accommodations.”

“You ’ave luggage?”

“I’m sorry, we didn’t have time . . .”

“We don’t ’ave no room.”

“But the girl said . . .”

“I don’t care what she said. I said, we don’t ’ave no room. We don’t operate that sort of plyce!”

The little man began to bristle with his own self-righteousness. His voice became more sharply accented.

“D’y’understand? We hoperyte a decent plyce ’ere and . . .”

“But dirty,” Clive said.

Prue began to tug Clive’s arm, but he shook her away.

“Now look ’ere,” the little man said. “Look ’ere!”

“I have a friend named Joe . . .” Clive began.

“I don’t give a bugger if y’ave.”

“. . . And if he were here, he’d put it all neatly. He’d tell you your place is dirty. You’re filthy too. Both you and your place smell. If you’d go in and scrub some of the grime off yourself . . .”

“Please,” Prue said. “Please!”

Clive looked around and she felt as if he were seeing her for the first time. Then, slowly, he smiled.

“Hello,” he said. “You’re very nice.”

He took her arm and put it over his and they left. They went along the street, walking heedlessly, not speaking. He patted her arm, endlessly. They went past the cinema, along the darkening streets. Beyond the town, she drew a deep breath.

“Phew!” she said.

“Think nothing of it,” he said.

“But I do feel grimy.”

“Don’t think of it. I’m sorry—for you.”

“No, you were right. Haystacks are—much nicer.”

“Cleaner, anyhow.”

“And not sordid at all,” she said. “Not at all.”

He held her arm closely, and they turned a corner going in step.

“You know something?” he said.

“What?”

“You’re damned nice.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, shall I tell you?”

“I’d like something to cheer me up. I don’t want to cry. He was such a grimy little man—it was contagious.”

Her voice sounded small and far away. He patted her arm.

“You’re real,” he said.

“Am I?”

“Yes. You’re much nicer than a smack on the lug.”

“What does that mean?”

“That’s what a chap in my bunch says. Chap named Montague. Old Monty. He’s a great chap. He says that when he feels good. You’re much better than a smack on the lug.”

“Then I’m all right?”

“That and more.”

“You know, sometimes you can be very nice and understanding, Mr. Briggs?”

“Thank you, Miss Cathaway. You know, that’s a funny name—but pretty, too. At first, it sounded false. But—since I’ve seen you, it really sounds all right—as if it fits.”

“Thank you. It isn’t too common, especially down here. I was born in London, but it’s a North Country name. My grandfather’s place is up there—in Yorkshire.”

“Why, I’m Yorkshire myself.”

“You are? Our family’s place is Oddale—beyond Otley. Do you know it?”

“No. I come from—a more crowded area.”

“But you don’t sound Yorkshire.”

“Oh, you lose it, knocking around. But I can talk it. Eigh lass, tha’ knaws us tongues nivver loise it.”

She laughed quickly.

“You sound like grandfather when he loses his temper.”

She looked up as they turned the corner.

“Oh, we’re back by the War Memorial,” she said.

“So we are. I don’t know how we got back here.”

He looked at the silhouette against the western sky—the bulk of carved stone.

“The hen of the British Empire setting on the sun,” he said. “I wonder what it will hatch out. Shall we take a bus?”

“If you will. It’s been such a nice outing.”

“I was glad to show you such a nice time, Miss Cathaway.”

They climbed into the bus. Now, jammed among people, they spoke no more. The vehicle went through the darkening day, and their bodies swayed together in the rhythm. After they had left the bus they went along, silently, until they reached the beech tree.

“This is far enough for you, isn’t it?”

“I’d—I wouldn’t mind if you took me a little further.”

They went slowly on the road, their feet kicking ahead of them.

“You’ve been a good sport about today,” he said.

“Don’t give it another thought.”

After a pause he said:

“Shall I see you again?”

“Do you wish to?”

“My God, the defenses we poor humans have. This fencing!”

She did not answer.

“Prudence.”

“Yes?”

“Will you come away with me?”

She stood a moment unmoving in the blackness. Then she said:

“Yes. When?”

“It would have to be—soon.”

“How much more leave have you?”

He drew his breath. “Ten more days. Ten, beginning tomorrow. It’s up the twenty-fifth.”

She stood silently so long he said:

“You don’t want to?”

“It isn’t that,” she said. “There’s so many things to figure out. I might get a weekend. Weekend after next.”

He considered.

“Now *you* hesitate,” she said.

He laughed.

“No—there’s things for me to figure out. I promised to meet Old Monty in London on the twentieth and go on a binge. But I could call that off.”

“I wouldn’t have you do that.”

“It’s all right.”

“No, wait a moment,” she said. “I forgot about the most important thing. The end of next week—wouldn’t be any good.”

“What do you mean, wouldn’t be any good?”

“Don’t be masculinely dense, please. I mean, I won’t be any good.”

“Oh.”

They stood in silence.

“Can’t you get this coming week off?” he asked. “We’d go away somewhere—for a holiday.”

“I don’t know.”

“Couldn’t you ask? Have you had leave?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, don’t you come due for leave—like we do in the army?”

“We’re supposed to. I haven’t been in service long enough, though. There’s other girls ahead of me. But they’re very decent. I could ask.”

“You’ll ask, then?”

“Of course.”

“Shall I meet you—by the tree—tomorrow?”

“No. I’ll drop you a note.”

“That’s too long. Couldn’t you telephone? Down the pub. The Ram’s Head. They have a telephone. I’ll be there at eight tomorrow night. I’ll be in the bar.”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll telephone.”

He touched her with his hands. It was dark at last. He drew her near and kissed her.

They did not speak. Then they parted in the blackness. He stood, listening to her footsteps going away.

CHAPTER X

THE moment he heard her voice he was flooded by a feeling of unreality—as if he had been carried in a strong current to strange places and alien doings and now, suddenly, wondered how he came to be in that place and doing those things.

"Yes, it's me," he said into the telephone.

Her voice sounded high and too frankly full of gladness.

"I got it, darling. It's all right."

In his mood, his mind dwelt on the word "darling." It bound him too closely. He felt uncomfortable in its possessiveness.

"Aren't you pleased?"

He brought his mind back to the conversation.

"Of course."

"You don't sound like it."

"Forgive me. It's just—where I'm talking."

"Yes, there's a fearful row. I can hear it here."

"It's shove-ha'penny. They argue all night over it."

"Can you hear me all right?"

"Yes, I can hear."

"I've got ten days, starting at reveille tomorrow. Say you're glad! I had an awful time wangling it."

"I'm glad."

"Then—where shall we meet?"

He was empty of feeling.

"At the station," he said. "The side going West."

"But I'm supposed to be on the East side. My transportation's made out for London. I didn't know where . . ."

"It doesn't matter. No one will care what side . . ."

"But they might. Please let me—be silly."

"Now, if you feel that way . . ."

"All right," she said. "I'll be on the West side. There's a train—wait till I look. There's one—just after ten. We'll get in the same compartment. If I don't speak to you till we're in—you'll know it's all right."

"What for?"

“I don’t know. So many of the girls . . .”

“What do you care what they think?”

“It isn’t what they think. It’s what I feel. Don’t ask me about it. Be gentle with me, please.”

“Of course. You’ll be in uniform, will you?”

“Certainly.”

“I see. Couldn’t you bring some other clothes?”

“I could scrape something together.”

“All right.”

“I don’t guarantee that they’ll be very West End.”

He wanted it to end.

“You like talking on the telephone, don’t you?”

“I like talking to you.”

The words, detached from her presence, seemed too arch. She was still talking.

“It’s easier to talk this way, darling.”

“I know—but I’m in a pub.”

“You poor dear. And I’m in a beautiful glass and wood cubicle with the temperature a hundred in the shade and the air a record of every perfume ever used in this camp. I’ll ring off. See you about ten tomorrow then. Please say you’re excited.”

He lashed himself mentally.

“I am, Prudence. Really I am.”

“Truly?”

“Of course I am.”

“You’re not really,” she said, quietly. “But we’ll pretend you are. Good-by.”

“Good-by,” he mumbled.

As he spoke he heard the telephone click emptily. Then the noise of jumbled voices and the heavy smell of ale and long-dead tobacco smoke struck him keenly.

More than anything else he wanted to run away—to leave this place as he had left Leaford—to start into the night and go, aimlessly, in any direction, anywhere. To go—somewhere else.

CHAPTER XI

YOUNG HAMISH saw his brother across the brightly lighted lobby of the hotel. Willfred was taking his hat from the check-girl and inspecting it fore and aft as if he would find, with great joy, that it wasn't his own.

Hamish started away, hesitated, and went back. Willfred saw him.

"Hamish!"

"Hello, Willfred."

The older brother turned to the two men with him. Hamish heard him mentioning their names perfunctorily. Then the four stood in a moment of indecision.

"I'll be getting along," Hamish said.

"No—er . . ."

Willfred turned to the others.

"I think we've covered everything then, haven't we?"

He did not wait for an answer. He put his hand on Hamish's shoulder.

"Let's pop in the bar."

"But if you're busy, Will?"

"No, we ironed it all out at dinner."

He didn't say what had been ironed out. He propelled Hamish down the steps to the bar, and they found a place at the high counter. The pre-theater rush was in full tide. The people crowded politely in the small space.

"Scotch?"

"Yes."

"Two."

They watched until the drinks came.

"Three cheers!"

"Merry-merry!"

Willfred looked around, happily.

"Quite a crowd."

"Yes."

"What keeps you in so late?"

"Oh . . ."

Hamish spread his hands and lifted his shoulders.

“Oh, don’t let me pry,” Willfred laughed.

“You’re not prying. In fact, I was just playing with the idea of going to the cinema. That’s all.”

“Good God, Hamish, what a thing to do! When a man starts going to cinemas, it’s an admission of some malaise—loneliness, *welt-schmerz*—some escapism.” Willfred said it sententiously.

Hamish, looking up, caught his brother watching him in the mirror behind the bar. As if to defend himself Hamish lifted his glass in a salute, at the same moment.

But Willfred plunged on into his theme.

“Look here, Hamish. What about Iris?”

“Iris? What about her? Oh, you mean being down at Leaford. It’ll work itself out.”

He thought: I knew that’s what he brought me down here for. Iris.

Willfred said: “I’m not trying to pry, Hamish. It’s merely that Leaford isn’t the best place to have the youngsters.”

Quick switch, Hamish thought. But you’ll wear me down and get back to it before we’re through. And I don’t know about Iris myself. My God, I wish I did know.

He said: “Is Leaford really bad?”

Willfred coughed and then picked up a handful of salted nuts. He ate one meticulously, and lowered his voice.

“It—er—looks as if it might be not quite the best place. Probably have to make it a solely military area before we’re through, I hear. Nothing definite—you understand how I mean this. Under the rose, and not a word. But it’s—being considered.”

Hamish pulled the theme to generalities smoothly.

“You mean it looks bad for us?”

“Well—you can draw the conclusion for yourself. There he is, twenty miles away. He’s certainly on our front doorstep. Of course, we’re shooting down scores of his planes. But the thing is, he can afford to lose planes, we can’t. If he can keep it up, we’re blinded. And then it’ll be—what did they say in the last war? *Il n’y a plus* for us.”

“You mean—invasion?”

“Yes.”

“But—you’re not using that for a political scare, you chaps?”

Willfred smiled benignly, and lowered his voice. “Hamish, there’s heads been toppled recently, and there’ll be lots more heads to topple, because their owners have been wrong. Well, I don’t intend to be wrong. This war—it means our chance. I don’t intend to be wrong. I accept invasion as a near-sure probability.”

“Good God, no!”

“Good God, yes. You know, there’s no special ordinance handed down from heaven that Britain mustn’t be invaded. It has been done, quite frequently. Y’know—Caesar, Hengist, Horsa, William—Romans, Norse, Danes, Vikings, Normans and so on.”

“I suppose so.”

“Well, I just pass it on to you—personally, of course. The South Coast isn’t going to be healthy. And if I had any relatives there, I’d get them cleared out now. You should insist that Iris . . .”

“It’s a bit difficult. You see, she won’t come to London, because she thinks it won’t be safe. And her father’s near a steel works. And she won’t . . .”

Willfred nodded. He knew the story, but he listened again. One could always check one report against another.

“It’s all silly, her quarrel with father,” Willfred said. “You know what it is, don’t you?”

“Of course. Some woman of his earlier days, and he has the decency to see she doesn’t go destitute in her old age. And that’s father’s kept woman! I’ve told Iris, but . . .”

Willfred laughed.

“If she could see her. She’s a plump old thing. Practically senile. Lives way out on the Millings Road.”

Hamish stared at Willfred.

“Oh, I looked into it,” Willfred laughed. “You know, quietly and on my own. She’s—well, like an old retired servant. He used to drop in to see her once in a while—but as far as its meaning anything—you know, physically—there’s been nothing to that for the last twenty-five years.”

“Well, whatever it is,” Hamish said, “I can’t see anything sinful about it. Iris is—pretty strait-laced, you know. But—I can see father’s side. What could he do? Couldn’t chuck the old girl out into the workhouse. I give him that.”

“Of course. And it doesn’t cost him above three hundred a year,” Willfred laughed. “Oh, I looked into it.”

Hamish cupped his hands about the glass.

“You know, he’s getting along,” Willfred said. “Your youngsters would do him no end of good. He just dotes on them. Of course, there’s Roger’s girl—but she’s a girl, after all. And it’s boys—grandsons. You know, there’s a time in life when suddenly people seem to want children again—and it’s way past their own procreative age. He’s at it now. Your youngsters’d give him some point in life.”

“He’s got a point in life right now—getting into the service.”

“No, he thinks that’s it, Hamish. But . . .”

Willfred lifted his shoulders.

“They won’t take him?” Hamish asked.

“Well, he’s seeing Bullyer. Bullyer can’t help him. Bullyer can’t help himself—not after that Dunkirk mess. Condout—between you and me—is the man. But he wouldn’t have any real use for father. I sent out a feeler. Oh, he could get something—local camp command or training depot. But not a real command.”

Hamish thought suddenly of his father, sitting in offices, waiting appointments that always seemed to be deferred. He got down from the stool.

“It’s hell,” he said. “Wanting to go and not being able to. It must be a very private sort of hell.”

Willfred got down and followed him. They went to the lobby and out to the street. Without speaking, they turned together and walked along. The blackout kept the city center fairly free from crowds. Their feet sounded on the pavement.

“You can’t imagine anything happening—to Old London,” Hamish said, moodily.

“Yes, you can’t imagine anything fairly well established being disrupted,” Willfred said. “It’s so in all life. Now marriage . . .”

Hamish dodged the opening.

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of adding marriage to your other successes.”

“I wasn’t thinking about me. I was thinking about you.”

Their feet fell in a slow march.

“What about Iris, Hamish?”

“What about her?”

“Well, the whole business. You see, when a chap and his wife start living at distances—it’s going for a break. It’s natural. Marriage, I’ve found, is habit-forming. Some chaps—like me and like Prentiss Saintby—we never get infected . . .”

“Oh, how’s Saintby getting along in the States? Have you heard anything?”

“No.” Willfred went back to his theme. “But other chaps, once inoculated—they get used to phases of it.”

“Oh, don’t worry.”

“I don’t worry, Hamish. But you’re my brother. And I see the signs. Iris staying away. You . . .”

“There’s a taxi,” Hamish said.

He whistled, and the car came over through the moon dusk. He stood by the door.

“Can I drop you, Willfred?”

“No, I’ve still got another conference. Keeps us going these days.”

“I suppose so. Well, good night.”

“Good night—and . . .”

Hamish smiled in the darkness.

“Don’t worry, Willfred,” he said. “However I solve it—I’ll do it very decently.”

“That’s true,” Willfred said, crisply. “That’s the very comforting thing about your type, Hamish. We can always depend upon you to do everything in such a decent way. Rather routine—but very decent.”

Willfred smiled as the taxi ground away.

CHAPTER XII

THE countryside was a moving tapestry of rare perfection. The time of the harvest was near. The unusually glorious summer had brought all green things to a rich fullness.

Already the Land Girls of the new war were getting in the hay harvest. In unmown fields the daisies stood white and the sunlight lay warmly over the land.

The telephone wires dipped and dipped in hypnotic rhythm beyond the window as he watched this wealth of August. Then he heard her voice.

"Please say you're glad to see me," she said.

There was an edge of tears to her tone, but he felt he could not turn his head.

"I am," he said. "You should know I am."

She looked down at the floor of the compartment.

"I'm not being silly," she said. "But I would like you to say something to buck me up. After all, it's upsetting—being sneaky and getting on the wrong train—and I . . . I . . ."

His head rang with a curious aching. But he was repelled by his own self-pity. He turned from the window in a surge of anger against himself, and kneeling before her he lifted her chin with his hand.

He looked into her eyes, steadily. Now, close to her, he could see the light, flecked sunflower patterns in the center of the gray-blue irises. The whites of her eyes were unmuddied. He shifted his too-close gaze to her hair. It was smooth, honey-colored. He lifted her cap and set it aside.

"I've never seen you with your cap off before," he said.

Her hair was drawn back simply from a center parting to the knot at the back of her head.

"Honey top," he said.

He touched her hair with his hand.

"Real?" he said.

She nodded, and her eyes were half-tearful.

"In a fake world," he said, "where nearly everything is brittle and false! It's real—and you're real, Prudence. You're very real. So much realer than I am."

"I'm not. I'm a fearful person. And a coward, and so much afraid."

"Now, now," he said. "You're the realest thing—right at this moment, one of the few things I believe in. You mustn't mind if I am often less than you."

“You’re not less. I couldn’t like you if you were.”

“I like you, too.”

She nodded, slowly.

“You tell the truth,” she said. “And for that—you may kiss me.”

Clive took her face between his hands and kissed her. And then, as he knelt there, the door opened with a harsh grating sound. He saw the conductor, a seedy man with mustache adroop as if wet with tea drops.

“Whoops,” the conductor said, as if he had stepped into an occupied bathroom. He turned and rapped on the glass.

It was a comedy exit, and they burst into glad laughter.

“It’s all right,” Clive said. “Come in.”

The man came in, averting his eyes exaggeratedly.

“Sorry to interrupt yer, sir. But I’ve got to punch your tickets.”

Clive rose, and they began to fumble for the tickets. The conductor stood, waiting, his eyes lifted to the ceiling.

“And she’d never ’ad ’er ticket punched before,” he quoted, quietly, as if to himself, but knowing they could hear him.

He looked down at the tiny squares of cardboard.

“One for Leaford,” he chanted. “And one for Pompey! Good old Pompey!”

He handed the tickets back.

“Different objectives, but the same path,” he chanted. “Must be friends, eh?”

The cheerful griminess of the man enveloped them.

“Of course. We’re very good friends,” Prudence said.

He waved his hand at them with a sort of pushing motion.

“I knew it the moment I saw yer,” he said.

Clive found a florin and held it out to him.

“Could we keep this compartment?”

The man cocked a finger, half in salute and half in a conspiratorial gesture.

“See what I can do. I’ll be right back.”

When he came back he knocked at the door. He slid it aside and put a card against the window.

“Private, reserved,” he said. “ ’Gainst the rules—but we have so little business these days.”

“Well, tell us about business,” Clive said. “How is it?”

The man shut himself inside with them and leaned against the door.

“To sum it up in a word, sir . . .”

“Think of that,” Clive said.

The man grinned, appreciatively.

“Well, I’ll leave yer,” he said. “It’s all right—you know, I was in the last war meself. I know how it is.”

“How is it?” Clive said.

“Glad you asked me, sir. Since you ’ave, I should say that *amor longa est*, and *tempus fudgits*. Latin, that is, as undoubtedly you both recognize. Used to say that to me old woman when I was on leave. She wasn’t me old woman then. Just engaged—that was all.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, sir. Well, ’ere I stand, wasting your fudgiting tempus. Good-by, sir. And thank you. And—good luck.”

“Good luck to you, too,” Clive said.

The man paused by the door.

“I’ll—pull down your blind,” he said, in a sort of mock reproof.

He did so, and then he was gone. Prudence sat on the edge of the seat, looking into infinity. Clive, opposite her, looked up at the pictures above the luggage net. There was a photo of Llandudno, one of the Menai Bridge, one of Fountains Abbey. He cleared his throat, and he saw the focus of her eyes come to him. He smiled.

“You know,” he said. “They’ve had those there for years—ever since I was a kid. They must be permanent—like the Magna Carta or the Dover cliffs.”

She did not answer.

“Cheerful bloke, the conductor,” he said.

She did not answer, still.

“What’s the matter?”

She shook her head.

“Yes,” she said. “He was cheerful. Only . . .”

“Only what?”

“Only—you can’t understand. But—this was the first time in my life I’ve been included in a look of bawdiness.”

“Oh, come now. He wasn’t bawdy.”

“You don’t see it. A man couldn’t. Only—all my life until now, I’ve always been looked at as if I were a china vase. Nice to look at—but that’s all. And then, all of a sudden, I’m looked at as if I were—what?”

“A thunder mug,” he said, curtly.

“You’re not helping. No, as if suddenly I’m something utilitarian, hot and alive—and naked—with all my insides visible from the outside. You wouldn’t know what I mean, unless you’d been a girl all your life until . . .”

“Don’t let it worry you. He meant to be friendly.”

“I know—but the way he pulled down the blind and shut the door . . .”

“He meant to be friendly, I tell you. Can’t you understand? The warm, gregarious, friendly understanding of the common man—or have you no touch with common man? He meant it generously—his offering to you. Friendliness!”

She put out her hand and touched him.

“You don’t see what I mean.”

“Well, what do you mean?”

“Don’t be angry. It doesn’t matter.”

She sat back and looked through the window. Then she turned and smiled at him.

“You mustn’t mind me. Be a little patient. If I take myself seriously—that’s part of me and don’t dislike any part of me.”

He stared through the window without answering.

“Closing the door,” she said. “Don’t you see, Clive? There are so many doors shutting behind me just now—and sometimes I want to stop it all for a while. Not to go back, because the doors shut permanently and you can’t go back. I know I want to go on—only sometimes I get a bit breathless and I want to say: ‘Stop—just a moment. Hold the world still, please—just long enough for me to get a little bit used to being where I am.’ ”

He wrinkled his forehead and stared at her.

“No,” she said. “You’ll make lines come.”

Slowly he smiled, and then lifted his forefinger.

“Listen,” he said.

She lifted her head, and looked from side to side.

“What is it?”

“The world,” he said. “It’s stopping. And it isn’t going to move again until you say: ‘I’ve got my breath. I’m used to being where I am. I’m utterly bored with being where I am. I want it to go on again.’ ”

She looked at his eyes, and he winked.

“It’s wonderful,” she said. “That’s one of the nice parts about it. I never thought that when you had a man of your own he could say such simple things and make you feel so wonderful inside. That’s a part of it I’d never imagined. And you do it so well. Is it because it’s really you—or because you know how to handle women?”

He shook his head and put his finger to his lips in dumb motion.

“Everything’s stopped,” he said. “Even clocks. Even my mouth.”

He closed his eyes and lay back, feeling now the gentle rhythm of the train, the swaying, the train-smell, the endless jazz beat of the wheels on the rail joints, and the clacking at the points. He opened his eyes when he heard her laughing.

“It’s all over now,” she said. “You mustn’t mind me. Poor Niobe, weeping over her departed maidenhood.”

“You said maidenhood, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

She came and sat beside him.

“It’s over now,” she said. “And he was truly a nice man—the conductor. It was nice of him to include me with the living people instead of keeping me out with the china vases. Even if I’m a thunder mug. They’re very useful, you know—and much more indispensable than vases—and very human.”

“Oh, very.”

“He was a nice conductor. I see what you mean now. He made it all human and sad and yet happy—just the opposite of the man at the hotel who made it all grimy.”

“Let’s keep that smudge out of it.”

“It’s like vegetable, animal, mineral. All my life until now it’s been a useless sort of vegetable life. Now I’m animal. That doesn’t sound nice.”

“It’s all right. When we’re planted we’ll damned soon take up the mineral phase of existence.”

“And tempus does fudgit—and the world won’t stop and let you examine your fears. So—on to the next door! Because . . .”

Her eyes went round the compartment.

“. . . We’re getting better at it. At least we have luggage this time, darling.”

“You do. All I have is a bag in a hotel at Leaford.”

“Is that where we’re going?”

“If you like.”

“I like.”

He looked at her bags.

“You have some other clothes?” he asked.

“Some.”

“You could change here,” he said. “Then when we get off—you won’t be in uniform.”

“What’s wrong with the uniform?”

“Nothing. But you’re a sergeant—and in my army life I’m a lowest private. Every time I see the stripes I feel at a psychological disadvantage.”

“That isn’t it. Why do you hate the uniform so much?”

“I don’t hate it, I tell you. Only—I’d like to think for a few moments, sometimes—that there isn’t any war.”

“I see,” she said, slowly.

She opened a grip. She looked in it, turned to him and then smiled.

“Please don’t watch.”

“Why not?”

“Well—I’m not used to it. Or—it doesn’t matter. You keep your eyes open if you want to. Only I *do* wish I had some nice things.”

“What do you want?”

“If you were a woman you’d know.”

She took off her tunic and unhooked her skirt.

“Here I go, practically on my honeymoon and——”

“And what?”

She stepped from the skirt in a flurry of motion.

“All her life a girl wonders and imagines. How it will be, and where it will be, and what it will be. I suppose every girl plans it, and you think of a beautiful lounging robe

and—and—well, you know what one would think of. And then, here I am, caught . . .”

“. . . With your trousers down.”

“What an expression!”

“Do you know, you have very pretty legs, my dear?”

“Thank you, sir. You can say nice things.”

He rose from his seat. She clutched the dress toward her and turned, holding out one hand.

“Please—don’t.”

“You’re very pretty, too.”

“I know, darling—but—please look out of the window. They say the countryside has never been so beautiful as this year. Look at that.”

“Why should I?”

“Oh, I’ve got no nice underclothes with me, darling. And I’m mad enough to bite a parson, because I have such wonderful ones home, and I left them all behind to be Spartan and businesslike for the duration. Please look out of the window, and then, when I’m dressed, I’ll tell you. And you turn round and be no end surprised, and tell me how pretty I look out of uniform.”

He stared at her and then smiled.

“All right,” he said.

He sat beside the window and looked at the dipping wires. Soon he was caught in an induced hypnosis, and he felt his head nodding in answer to the pattern of movement. His mind seemed very far away when he heard her voice.

“Now, darling.”

He turned to look at her. His eyes were dulled by the brightness of the daylight beyond the window. The compartment seemed dark. Then, like a fade-in of the cinema, he saw her emerge—first just a slimness in a dark-blue figured dress. There was a wide-brimmed hat set back from her head. It framed the wash of her hair, and her face beneath was a pale smudge. His mind ricocheted and a fragment of it was thinking: “Laurencin was right. I never saw how she meant it until now.”

“Well?” she said.

Her voice wakened him again. He moved his lips. He wanted time to think. This girl—now she was like a stranger—a taller, cooler, slimmer stranger than the girl in the bulk of a uniform.

The train was clicking on. He grasped at a feeling that this was not new. All this had happened, exactly as now, once before. Long, long ago it had been.

Why should one have such odd sensations? Of course it hadn’t happened. What quirk of the mind made one feel as if it had? This was the only time it had happened. And yet—there was still the sensation that he was reliving a cycle of incidents all over again. It had happened, exactly like this. She had turned. She had said, in exactly the same tone: “Well?”

And he had said—had said . . .

“You’re—you’re very pretty.”

“Thank you, sir. You remembered well.”

He rose and took her hand.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said. “You shouldn’t have asked me to say it, because it’s left me nothing to say of my own accord.”

She disengaged his hand and sat down by the window. He sat opposite her.

“You’re very beautiful,” he said, slowly.

“That’s nice,” she smiled. “Before I’ve only been pretty; but now I’m beautiful. It’s all progressing very nicely, isn’t it?”

She sat opposite him, primly like a child in a Sunday-school seat. It was as if, in some feminine-childish way, she was tremendously pleased with herself.

CHAPTER XIII

As they left the train she felt that events had caught her in a trap. The words went in a mental roundelay:

I'm trapped now. There's no escape. I've trapped myself.

She hardly felt the tug of ocean wind at her skirts as she watched the porter putting the luggage in the taxi. It seemed as if everyone were racing with malicious speed: the porter slamming the cab door behind them, the driver whirling the cab through spaces of empty airiness that were seaside resort streets. She had only impressions of bleak, wind-washed gray fronts of Victorian houses.

The cab was charging at gleeful speed along a lonesome Esplanade, with monotonous rows of iron lampposts. The lampposts had their backs turned coldly and were gazing out to the crashing sea.

With the telescoped time of a nightmare the cab was at a place. The brass plates said "Channel Hotel." She had only time to breathe once, to see gray stone walls, a potted palm at each side of the door, and then the uniformed boy had the luggage and was racing with fearful speed up the four steps.

Her heels were clicking on tiles, going soft on carpet, clicking again on tiles. She heard him speaking to the man at the counter. It was a horrible conspiracy of a world of men. She watched a woman come through the door, look at them quickly, and go to the lift. She put out her hand as if for support.

He turned as he felt the touch. He saw the woman with the trim figure standing in the lift. A few days ago, standing here, he had mentally disrobed her.

"All right," he said, curtly. "Let's get the lift. It's waiting."

"No, please. Wait a moment."

He looked at her, and saw her face an ashy splotch in the interior dimness.

"Good Lord," he said. "Aren't you well? Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes," she said. "That's it. Can't we have a drink?"

He took her arm and walked to the lounge. They sat in the chairs. She sat, unfeeling, unmoving, until she saw the glass before her.

"Drink that down," he said.

She drank, and sat on the edge of the chair, staring at the dazzle of light that was the window. She drew a breath and lifted her head.

"All right," she said. "Now."

She rose, and he walked beside her. The lift raced upward. They were walking down a lonesome corridor. The boy was unlocking the door. They were inside alone. She saw him flick his hat toward a bed and hated him for it. She went to the window, turning her back to him and the room, and stared out. She heard his voice.

"Ah, there's my bag. They've been keeping it here for me."

She stared out to the ocean, staring at it but not seeing it. She heard him speaking again.

"It isn't a bad room at all, is it?" he said, casually.

She did not move. She drew a breath and began speaking.

"It's really a very nice room—sunny and everything. And it looks out over the Esplanade, although we *should* be able to get a good room. The place is practically deserted. And twenty-two shillings a day is high enough for bed and breakfast. Isn't it twenty-two shillings they said? I wonder if he thought I was really your wife. He couldn't have. I didn't have a wedding ring on. I should have got one—at the sixpenny bazaar. You couldn't tell them from real for all intents and purposes . . ."

He heard only the sound of her voice, gabbling quickly. He blew out his breath and then got up. He went to her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Stop talking," he said. "What do you really mean behind all those words?"

"I don't mean anything."

"Of course you do."

"All right, I do, then. I'm just wondering."

"What?"

"I'm wondering just what I'm letting myself in for. That's all—and I have a right to wonder it if I want."

"You do. You're a free agent. You have a right to do anything you want."

She did not answer.

"Look here," he said. "I don't want any agony for anyone. If you feel that way about it, we can pack right up and get out again—or you can alone if you wish. If you've changed your mind—just say so, that's all."

"That's cowardly," she said. "Putting it up to me."

"Well, what the hell . . ."

"I don't want to be asked. I want to be told. You're the man. Take the responsibility of decision!"

"Oh, hell," he said.

He went and sat on the bed. She stood with her back to him, staring from the window. Then at last she came, quietly, and sat beside him.

"You misunderstood me," she said. "I don't want you to say I can go if I want. A woman doesn't want that. I want to be told that everything else in the world could happen, anything in the world—but above everything else you didn't want me to go—wouldn't let me go—couldn't keep the world going round if I did go. That's what I meant."

"One can't say that."

“I suppose not,” she said.

Then she laughed and got up quickly.

“How silly of me,” she said. “Wondering about being here. And I’m here, aren’t I? Shall we unpack?”

“I’ve nothing much to unpack,” he said. “I’ll have to buy a few things.”

“I see,” she said.

She went back to the window.

“Then how about going for a walk? It’s such a nice day and . . .”

He looked up at her. His mind lost itself in indecisions. Then a fragment of memory caught him.

“A *very* nice day?” he asked.

“A very, *very* nice day,” she said, turning, slowly.

“Well, if it’s a very, *very* nice day,” he said. “That’s different.”

He picked up his hat from the bed, and when he turned he saw that she was smiling. He smiled in answer.

“Shall we explore?”

He held out his arm.

“We’ll explore,” she said, taking it.

They went along the long, carpeted hall. The place was deathly quiet with the silence of unoccupancy. It seemed, in that quietness, an act of rudeness to ring for the lift.

They went down the steps, and across the lobby. The uniformed boy and the small man behind the desk watched them go. They came into the sunshine, and it made them blink. They marched along the Esplanade, past the ornamental lampposts, past the benches where no one sat.

“I know what it is,” she said, suddenly. “It’s like being at the seaside in winter—no one here, the Esplanade stretching emptily for a mile, everything all to yourself. Just like winter—only the sun’s shining. Have you been at the seaside in winter?”

“No, I haven’t. Have you?”

“Oh, yes. It’s much the nicest time to be here—although this is very nice. It’s much nicer like this—without any crowds.”

“Oh, much nicer,” he said.

They went along steadily until from the hotel their figures were dots, far up the vanishing perspective of the Esplanade.

That afternoon they walked east, far out to the place where the promenade became a road, to where the road became a path going up to the cliffs. They bent their knees, climbing steadily, up to the top where the breeze blew strongly and evenly.

They spoke about the smell of the sea—the strong odor of rotting kelp and spray. They sat by the cliff edge, watching how the waves below in the bay came like tiny eddies, creeping with a synthetic sort of time and space of their own.

Only faintly, up there, could they hear the boom of the waves as they struck the looming chalk face. As humans they became small and chastened by the vastness of far horizons.

She hugged her knees and spoke, her voice small in the great spaces.

“I’m sorry I was so ratty,” she said.

“There’s no need to be upset,” he told her.

“Not really—only—you see, I ran into my aunt.”

“You what?”

“My aunt.”

“Your aunt! Where?”

“At the hotel. Did you see the woman in the lift—she went up alone when we went to get the drink.”

He stared at her.

“You mean to say that woman—the rather trim one in the tailored suit—that’s your aunt?”

She nodded.

“Isn’t it incredible, that of all the places we could pick, she’s at the same place for some unearthly reason?”

“No, it isn’t incredible,” he said. “It’s strangely just and trite, that’s all. I never knew of anyone who—who went away for a secret holiday—as we have, who didn’t run into someone he knew. It never fails.”

She nodded, slowly.

“Well, I say,” he said. “Did she see you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Perhaps she didn’t.”

“She did.”

“Well—by God. We can’t go back there, then.”

She lifted her head.

“Why not? I’m not going to run away from Iris or anyone else!”

“But if you meet . . .”

“We won’t. I know Iris. She’ll move immediately and pretend she hasn’t seen me, and save it all up for some opportune occasion.”

“But if you *do* meet, what’ll she think?”

She lifted her head.

“Iris,” she said, “has no right to assume anything wrong about my conduct, no matter what the circumstances are, or what the exterior evidences might lead anyone to conclude.”

He looked at her, sitting proudly and calmly. Then he thumped his knee in laughter.

“Oh, my Lord God,” he said. “I never heard anything so beautifully illogical in my life. So beautifully and proudly and magnificently illogical. Let us return to the hotel with those brave banners going on before.”

He took her arm and they walked back to the town. They had dinner at the hotel. They were the only ones in the dining room. The old waiter stood at attention near their table. The place was so silent that there was a self-consciousness to talking.

They could feel only the lonesomeness of the place, the emptiness of the room, the forlornness of themselves.

After dinner they sat on a bench on the deserted Esplanade, and watched the clear light drift away.

The sunlight that had left the place went marching across wide oceans to new shores, going west, across a new continent, over far plains, into ranges of mountains and dry, sun-baked lands.

CHAPTER XIV

THE trouble with it was, Prentiss Saintby thought, you always felt as if America were a holiday world. It wasn't really, he reasoned. It was only because of its foreignness. Foreign lands always seemed to be living in perpetual holidays. Probably because ordinarily it was only during holidays that one went to foreign lands.

He docketed the thought neatly, and looked from the car window. The town looked like a horrible jumble of purpose: a too-new skyscraper with modernistic coffee shop under its lee, then ramshackle, wooden-fronted shops within a stone's-throw; motorcars that gleamed smugly like this one, then rusty rattletraps with mudguards tied up with baling wire, and driven by people who wore that unending clothing of blue overall-ish stuff.

That blue seemed like the uniform of the working class in this land. Funny, somebody had that once in a story—Wells, that was it—writing about a future world. Workers all in blue garb, nobles in something else—probably purple.

But it was quite gay in a way, that blue—deep color of new ones, then all the varying degrees of lighter blue that came from repeated launderings. The people seemed quite happy and well-fed, though.

He grasped at another thought. It was like a mixture of New York and the cowboy cinemas he'd watched when a boy. That was it. A lot of people still wore those very large cowboy hats. It made the city look a little masqueradish—but the men didn't seem to be at all self-conscious about wearing them.

He turned his eyes ahead. There was the bullethead of the Negro chauffeur. The hair was cropped, but you could see the spots where the kinky whorls would grow if it were longer.

That was another part of America. Negroes. They seemed quite jolly chaps—interesting servants. He had heard they were somewhat of a problem. They didn't seem like a problem to him, the ones he'd seen—the porters on the train coming west.

His eyes went beyond to the road. There was a tangle of streetcar tracks and paving bricks. Yet the car flowed over them with the same milk-smooth motion. He smiled and looked at the man beside him.

"It rides beautifully, Mr. Lachran," he said.

The man nodded, energetically and gladly.

"You can't get a better one," he said. "It's a British car, you know."

"Oh, yes? I hadn't noticed."

That was another part of America—being lost in the moves of conversation. Back home, in England, you could understand the words a man said, understand what he meant behind the words, and understand what he thought behind his meaning. Here, you had to listen so carefully to the pronunciation that you only understood the words. You lost everything else concentrating on that.

And people were different. That was a thing you had to understand. For instance, when he'd said the car rode nicely—you couldn't expect that such a remark would bring a delight so obvious to the other man. Yet it had—a childish sort of delight. Lachran was quite childish in many ways—an open sort of aged childishness.

On the other hand, that might be one of the things hard to understand about America. It might be a mask. It could well be. The man wasn't an idiot. No man got to Lachran's power—a real czar in his own field—by being an idiot.

Saintby sighed. He wished fervently that Lachran were a Britisher, and then he could understand him really, see the real man behind all the exteriors.

"Yes," Lachran said, slowly. "We can turn out stuff on a line; but we can't touch you chaps when it comes to a handmade job."

"Perhaps that is true," Saintby said, carefully.

"It *is* true," Lachran grated. "And its your strength—and your weakness. You don't seem to have the mind for mass-production—and you're going to have to learn it if you want to exist—in this war, you are."

"I suppose that is true."

"You're darned right it's true. It's all right making something good when you've got all the time in the world in which to make it—and all the time in the world in which to use it. But what's the use hand-finishing a thing you're going to send out to be blown up maybe next week? Huh?"

"Perhaps it's our national temperament to do our best always, no matter what we're doing," Saintby said, a little stiffly.

"Sure you do. Sure. That's what we like about you Britishers. But you can't do it with everything."

Lachran turned away, and leaned forward to tap on the glass. The car was gliding through formal shrubbery to a low, wooden building.

"Right in there! Right in there!" he shouted, irascibly.

"Mr. Lachran, it say . . ."

"God dammit, I said right in there!"

The Negro grinned happily and nosed the car into a vacant space among the others. As Saintby got out he saw its bonnet almost touched the sign that said: "No Parking. Bureau of Police."

"Oh, I say," he said. "You're in a forbidden space."

Lachran turned, almost in surprise.

"That?" he said. "We don't pay any attention to those things."

They went up the steps into the wooden building. In the large hall the attendants came forward quickly, like acolytes. Lachran greeted them happily.

“How do you like this?” he asked.

Saintby stared about him. The place was like a hunting lodge. Heads of strange antlered animals studded the walls. There was a dark gloominess to the room.

“Very nice,” he said.

“I thought you’d like it,” Lachran said, happily. “It was built on the idea of an old Scotch hunting lodge—something of that sort. Everyone says its quite British, anyway.”

“Oh, distinctly,” Saintby said.

They went from the hall through dark doors to a veranda, and then Saintby drew his breath. Coming from the gloominess, with the mixed impressions of the city still touching his mood, he was struck by the new scene. What he saw was like another world. A gay, crowded world. There was the seclusion of the veranda, with its white napery and silver. Below were people on lawns of immaculate turf, sitting at tables under gay striped umbrellas. To the left was a blue-tiled swimming pool. To the right, tennis courts. Farther beyond, a polo field. Beyond that, granite mountains rising jagged to blue heights.

“Oh, I say,” Prentiss said. “This is a spot!”

Lachran breathed deeply and happily.

“Yes, it’s pretty good,” he said. “Does it remind you of the old country?”

Prentiss Saintby drew a deep breath. You could say the place was Monte Carlo, Hurlingham, Switzerland and an unbelievable Hollywood musical comedy all in one. But the man seemed to be waiting his answer with almost pathetic anxiety.

“Why, yes,” he said. “It’s just like home.”

Lachran went happily to his seat. As he followed, Prentiss Saintby justified the outrageousness of his lie. If the man expected him to say it, why not give him the pleasure? And it was unimportant. The business—that was the thing. If he could only get the man to hard tacks—but he seemed exasperatingly determined to put off everything as long as he could. That’s why he’d been sent to the West.

Prentiss sat at the table and looked out over the scene. It was a vibration of color—flowered walks, strange blossoming bushes, the striped umbrellas, the dresses of the women, the assorted hues of bathing suits at the pool, the white of tennis flannels, the moving red and yellow spots of the shirts on the polo field.

He saw color first—and then he saw youth; a world of youth. Everyone seemed young. It was almost unbelievable. As far as he could see there was not a person who wasn’t young. It was almost a heaven of youth—sun-tanned, well-fed, handsome youth. He—and Lachran—who looked down on it, were the only unyoung ones. It was fitting that they should be detached, isolated.

“You know,” Lachran said, conversationally, “my father started this club.”

“Oh, indeed?” Prentiss encouraged.

“Yeh. There were a lot of Johnny Bulls here then. Younger sons of lords and dukes and so on. They came out here for hunting and what not, and stayed on. Why, they used to call this town Little England.”

“Oh, indeed?”

“Yeh. That’s why there’s so many things of English character round here. You’d enjoy staying here.”

Prentiss fingered the fork before him.

“It’s tremendously pleasant,” he said. “And it would be nice to stay here. Except that—well, this is wartime for us, you know. And there’s nothing I’d like better than to stay here—except of course to get business done. Now if you could give me any idea of a basis of . . .”

“Now don’t worry,” Lachran said, almost impatiently. “Don’t worry. You saw how things are. They’re working on it, and I’m turning it over in my mind, and when I get it all set—it won’t be a basis of discussion. It’ll be something that’ll just make you happy.”

“But of course, there’s an element of time . . .”

“That’s all right. This isn’t a case of hand to mouth. You fellows have got plenty for this year. It’s a steady supply for one year, two years from now you want. And I can give it to you. But just don’t push me! Don’t push me!”

Saintby looked at the table. Suddenly, now, he knew the hardness of this man behind the bluff friendliness. There was stubbornness in the last words—almost a pugnacious belligerence. Lachran had spoken almost as one would to a servant. And he—he was the British Government.

Then it was as if Lachran himself had recognized the hardness of his words and tone. For he was smiling.

“Besides,” he said, laughingly, “I like you. I like to have you round. If I came over to your country, wouldn’t you want to be hospitable to me?”

“I rather suppose so.”

“Well, there you are. You’re in my country. You mustn’t begrudge me the chance to show you round. You know—when you’re here, you’re in the best goddam part of all these United States. You can travel high and low, north and south, but you’re never going to find a finer part of these United States than right here. They talk of God’s country. Well, this is God’s country.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Prentiss sank into his thoughts. Obviously it was no use trying to nudge the old man along—he wouldn’t be hurried. And you had to treat him with gloves. He was too powerful to be antagonized.

And it had been a false move trying to talk business before lunch. Almost elemental, that. Wait until a man was fed before talking business.

Prentiss looked up, and found Lachran smiling at him—his heavy-lined old face suddenly shrewd and wise.

“So you’ve decided not to try to hurry me any more,” he said.

Prentiss drew in his breath. It was as if the old man had been able to see all the tickings and workings of his mind. He opened his mouth to speak, and then saw the funniness of it. He began laughing. Lachran’s face broke into a wide beam.

“Am I so transparent?” Prentiss said.

Lachran shook his finger in a gesture of warmth.

“I’ve got you Johnny Bulls’ number every time,” he said, happily.

“Have you really?”

“Yes. And you know what? That’s why I like you. You take a Dago or a Dutchman. I wouldn’t trust ’em any further than I could throw an elephant—and I wouldn’t give ’em the smell off my shirt. But you Britishers—you make me laugh.”

“Laugh?”

Lachran waved his hand in a gesture. Looking at the old, smiling face, Prentiss suddenly felt like a schoolboy.

“Let’s have lunch—and just put your mind on that,” Lachran said. “And when we’re set to do business, I’ll let you know. How’s that?”

“All right,” Prentiss smiled.

“That’s fine. Where in the hell is that—hey! Maurice!”

“Here, sir.”

The waiter came quietly from the doorway. Prentiss freed his mind from a sort of conscience that forbade him to enjoy anything in America while Britain was at war, and settled to the contentment of a good lunch. There was a fine chowder—wonderful name, chowder. And excellent trout.

Lachran chatted on, happily. Prentiss found him easy to listen to.

“There’s all the trout you want in those mountains,” Lachran said. “If you like to fish . . .”

“I wish I had time.”

“Well, if you like to.”

Lachran gazed at the mountains silently for a time. Then he nodded his head. He waved his hand.

“You know,” he said. “In my time, I’ve climbed over those goddam mountains from end to end—and sometimes my belly flat as a griddle-cake.”

“Yes?”

“Yeh! Look, you see that peak up there—the far one beyond the saddle?”

Prentiss looked into the clear air to where the finger pointed in the blue range.

“My mother cooked up in a lumber camp there.”

“Yes.”

Lachran paused, and Prentiss did not answer. The old man seemed to be far away. He went on again.

“And the only woman for two hundred and fifty miles around. She come out here as a school teacher from Kansas to marry a feller. They got married and he died o’ lungs a year later. But she didn’t sit down and she didn’t go back. By God, she up and hunted a job. They were starting lumbering up there, and she went as cook.

“ ‘Why,’ the boss said. ‘This isn’t no place for a lady like you.’ ‘I need the job,’ she said. He says: ‘I mean with all these men around. They’re a tough bunch.’ ‘You just give me a tent,’ she says, ‘and I won’t have a minute’s trouble with any man on the job.’

“And, by God, she didn’t. Not in all the two years she was up there. She used to say afterwards, though, she began to get a bit worried. Got so’s she wasn’t sure whether it was because of the inherent nobility of lumberjacks, or because she was so homely she didn’t inspire anyone to make a leer at her. Of course, that was kidding. Then she met my father up there.

“He hauled lumber down—made a fortune before he was thirty and lost it again. He lost it when they hit gold up there. He went back to lumbering—hauling to the mines. There was no steel then. All wood shoring. He made another fortune and lost it by the time he was forty. Made two fortunes and lost ’em both before he was forty. The railroad, the second time. Railroads cleaned him out. When I was seventeen, we were flat broke—we lived up in a shack right up there where the foothill boulevard is now. And by the time I was twenty—I had half his fortune back. By God, I did. I cleaned some of *them* out, too. By God, I made some o’ them say yessir and nosir before I was through!”

Lachran nodded as if he were dozing. Prentiss felt a moment of mental clarity—as if for a brief moment he was seeing behind the outrageous façade of this country club in the too-clear sunshine, seeing behind the man’s American veil of accent and speech and manner, to something vital and real and truly American. Although what “truly American” was he didn’t know. Only it was something that—that wasn’t pseudo-British. It was something very different from British. It was curious, he thought, that he should like and understand Americans much better when they had this “different” American quality than when they were so much like a bad imitation of Britishers.

He looked at the old man, musing. It was a hard face—almost a cruel face. Lined and discolored as if from years of hard living, hard drinking—pouched eyes, coarse stubbly steel-gray hair. Yet there was an engaging quality to the man that was almost childish in substance.

Prentiss looked up at the blue mountains, beyond the polo field with its fringe of artificial-looking trees.

“What was it like,” he said, “in the old days?”

Lachran looked up. Then he grinned, in a grim sort of way. He flung out his hand toward the mountains.

“There was the whole goddam country,” he said. “The whole—goddam—country.”

He stopped, as if that explained it all.

“Yes?” Prentiss said, with rising inflexion.

Lachran looked up at him, almost astonished.

“Well,” he said, impatiently, “that meant everything. Millions! There was millions in it—just waiting. Waiting for anyone smart enough and tough enough to come and take it. And a man took what he wanted . . .”

Then he shook his head, slowly.

“. . . But he only held what he was able. You took what you wanted—but you only held what you was able. *That’s* how it was.”

“And you were able to hold it, eh?”

“I held it. And I licked some of the sons o’ bitches that had it coming to them.”

“In the gold fields?”

“In anything. There was money in anything those days—if you were tough. And I was tough. Why look—right up there. I remember coming over that ridge one day, and there was four of ’em, sitting on their horses there waiting. I knew I couldn’t run, so I had to go forward. I was only twenty-two then. But I went right up and said: ‘What the hell do you want?’ And they said: ‘Lachran. You’re putting a flume in up there, and we don’t like it. We want that water.’

“And there they sat, with their hands on their guns. So I just says: ‘Get the hell off of here before I run you off!’ They looked at me like they thought I was crazy. One of ’em says: ‘Lachran, I don’t know whether you’re crazy or just plain tough.’ So I sat there with my hands crossed on the pommel, and I says: ‘Start figuring that out for yourselves, and figure it quick.’ And they just turned round and hauled out of there.”

The old man laughed, and looked up at Prentiss.

“So they must have figured I was tough, eh?”

“I should say so,” Prentiss said. “Four of them with pistols.”

Lachran laughed.

“Ah, I *was* tough then. I could lick anything in this valley—and then haul him up one side of the mountains and throw him down the other. I was tough.”

He nodded to himself, and then looked up quickly at Prentiss.

“You ought to see some of that country, Mr. Saintby. It’s real scenery for you. Do you like hunting?”

“I do—but I feel at this time . . .”

“Oh, don’t give that a thought.”

Lachran halted and, his face suddenly beaming, he waved his hand agitatedly to a girl below. The girl swung a tennis racket in each hand in greeting.

“That’s Mary,” Lachran said. “My brother’s granddaughter.”

He looked up at the steward.

“Sure coffee,” he said. “And Mr. Saintby—or he’ll probably take tea.”

“Well, tea . . .”

“I feel sure that you’ll like *our* tea, sir,” the steward said. “We don’t—boil linen bags with it.”

“That’s right,” Lachran said. “Maurice is a Britisher, too. Aren’t you, Maurice?”

“Yes, sir,” the steward said. “From Chichester.”

“Oh, indeed,” Prentiss said. “Beautiful place.”

“Thank you, sir. Then I may make you some tea?”

Prentiss thought of the processions of evil tea—at hotels, on trains, that he’d had in America. Always prepared so that one tasted the inevitable linen sack in which Americans kept doles of tea.

“If I could have a good cup . . .”

“Yes, sir.”

Lachran looked up, slyly.

“If you like tea—I’ve got a Chinese cook up on the ranch. If you like tea, you’re his friend for life. He’ll spend half his waking hours making tea for you.”

“Indeed?”

“Well, you might as well. You can’t do anything till I’m set. You’ve got to wait around here until I do get set. You might as well be up there as at that hotel. You know, some day I’ll do something about that. I’ve been saying we need a good hotel for the last six years. I’ll do it, too.”

Lachran stopped suddenly and grinned.

“Hello, Mary!”

“Hi!”

The girl came onto the veranda, lifting one of the rackets in salutation.

“This is Mr. Saintby, Mary. He’s a Britisher—over here on business.”

Prentiss looked up. She was a striking young woman. Like all the others below, she seemed youth and health gloriously triumphant. As if their bodies were leaping up to the sun—tall, sunburned. The white of her tennis clothes made the tan seem more deeply golden. A curious sort of white jockey cap held in her black hair.

“Hello.”

She turned away, as if ignoring him.

“Did you eat?” Lachran began.

“Long ago. I had a date with the pro, and that Cecil Hawkins is still taking a lesson. She knows it’s time, but she’s just doing it to make me mad. She’s a pill.”

Prentiss noted a juvenile quality in the young woman’s petulance.

“You’re coming up to the ranch tomorrow, aren’t you? You know, that Hawkins girl and her mother are coming.”

“Oh, gosh, what do you want to ask her mother for? She’s worse than Cecil.”

“Well, it’ll give you a chance to trim the tar out of her again.”

“That’ll be nothing new,” the girl said.

“Then I’ll see you. Mr. Saintby, here. He’s coming up for a while, too.”

The girl turned, quickly.

“Do you play tennis?”

Prentiss wondered why he didn’t deny his acquiescence to Lachran’s invitation.

“Well, I have played,” he said. He felt the need for something better. “I played in the tournament at Nice two years ago.”

The young woman’s eyes lightened.

“You did? Nice? That’s fine. There’s Johnny now—I’ll have to run. See you again, then.”

“Yes,” Prentiss said.

He was adjusting his mind quickly. There seemed something wicked, somehow, in playing tennis while all this ghastly war went on—as if a man were carousing on a grave. And yet, as Lachran said, it was merely a question of waiting, and one might just as well wait in comfort as go through days of dragging disagreeableness.

He looked up. He saw Lachran looking at him with a smile that was either one of great age and wisdom—or one of childishness.

CHAPTER XV

THAT first morning when he woke Clive saw her sitting by the window, looking out at the sea. He came up into full waking and lay looking at her. The edge of the sun came slot-wise through the window and touched into shouting light the edges of the white peignoir she wore. He waited, knowing she had heard him stir; but she did not move.

"Hi," he said, finally.

She looked around quickly, and smiled to reassure him. Then she turned back to the window.

"Didn't you sleep well?"

"All right," she said.

"Or maybe," he said, "you're one of those who can't be talked to before breakfast. Do you bite or snarl before breakfast? Do you curse the cat and kick the maid?"

"It was all right. You ground your teeth, horribly—so I got up. I'll telephone for breakfast. What will you have?"

"Anything."

She looked at him a moment. Then she picked up the telephone.

"Breakfasts, please," she said. "Two of grapefruit, two bacon and eggs, two toasts, two teas, that's all."

She turned to him as she hung up.

"That's for being mentally lazy—you'll eat what I do."

He watched her move back to the window. He got up and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry you didn't sleep well."

"You ground your teeth horribly. It was ghastly."

"The unromantic aspects that aren't mentioned in the love stories," he said, trying to please her. "Some people snore. It's never mentioned in the songs. You never get adore, implore, bedroom door, and snore. You get moon, June and spoon and then it stops. It never gets on to the part about how he ground his teeth horribly."

She smiled.

"It's hard to do that so early, especially with a headache," he said.

"Have you a headache?"

"It's nothing. Seriously, though," he said, "you should have wakened me. I didn't know I did that."

"No, it was interesting. You see, you talked, too."

“Talked? What on earth did I say?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“Oh, don’t be coy. What did I say? Did I mention any names?”

“No, you gave commands.”

“I did?”

“Yes—you were drilling a whole army, I should fancy—and using language.”

“What language? Fancy?”

“Very fancy language.”

“Very, *very* fancy?”

She nodded her head slowly and then turned from the window and smiled.

“That was nice,” she said. “Yes. Very, *very* fancy.”

“Well, if it was very, *very* fancy—that’s different.”

“It was different. You used words I’d never heard before.”

“Oh, perhaps you aren’t up on words.”

“Is that so! Then perhaps you’ve never been around art students and studios.”

He swung his legs and lit a cigarette.

“I thought in art circles they talked art.”

“That’s a misconception.”

“What do they talk about?”

“About food,” she said. “The best food you never ate is talked in art-student circles.”

“Food will be here soon,” he said. “I’d better bathe—and I’m exhausted by trying to be bright before breakfast.”

“Don’t make too much effort,” she said. “Can I call for a Seidlitz Powder?”

“No. I have aspirins. I’ll bathe.”

“Don’t hurry. It looks as if it will cloud over. Rain probably.”

“I prefer the indoor sort of showers.”

He put on his mackintosh as a dressing gown and rang the bath bell. He heard her suddenly laughing and turned.

“What’s so funny?”

“I can’t tell you,” she said.

“That’s all right. You have a right to your own life, too.”

He sat on the bed until the knock on the door told him the bath was ready. He started to follow the old woman down the hall. Then he came back and poked his head in the door.

“Be happy,” he said. “You are glad you’re here, aren’t you?”

She smiled quickly.

“Of course I am.”

He looked at her and then spoke slowly.

“You’re not,” he said. “But it was quite decent of you to say you were.”

The rain fell steadily after breakfast. They sat in the hotel room, feeling imprisoned. At noon they ordered lunch, and kept wandering to the window to look at the drabness of the rain-wet promenade.

"Oh, damnation," he said finally, his pent-up irritation rasping in his voice. "Let's go out anyhow."

They put on raincoats and went out to the Esplanade, going quickly. There was no incentive to talk. Going in step they came to the end of the promenade, and kept on up the hill.

"It's nice to have low heels on again," she said. "I got so used to them in the Waffs I'd forgotten how high heels could be uncomfortable."

"Is that so?" he said.

"Yes."

They went on climbing to the cliff top. There the wind and rain came with more force, driving almost parallel to the ground. At last, by the cliff edge, they stopped. He put his arm about her.

"This is better," she said, finally. "It isn't good for us to quarrel."

"Quarrel? You mean my explosion at the weather? I wasn't quarreling."

"I see. Shall we go back?"

He turned and looked at her, at her face with hard highlights from the rain-wetness. A wisp of hair hung straggling. She saw his eyes on it, and brushed it back angrily. He wanted to speak comfortingly, but she had started away. They went down from the cliff to the promenade. Almost at the hotel he touched her arm.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said. "Sorry for my picayune tempers. You must forgive me."

"Of course," she said. "You're much like my father. I understand."

"I don't mean to be nasty."

"Neither of us do," she said. "Only there's a frustration—we're—I don't know—empty in some way. Shut off from each other."

"Do you want to call it all off?" he said.

"Do you?"

"I certainly do if you do."

"Then it's all right for my part," she said.

He lifted his head.

"All right. I'll take the decision."

They stalked back to the hotel.

"I'll tell them," he said.

She went on to the lift. He stopped by the desk. The little polite man looked up hopefully.

"Yes, Mr. Briggs? Anything I can do?"

"Yes. You can get the bill ready—we're leaving."

"Oh, but . . ."

“And don’t call in Mrs. Whosis. Everything’s all right—it’s just that—we’re leaving.”

The assistant manager stood with pen poised.

“Are you going back to London, sir?”

“No. Just—well, probably back to London.”

“I’m sorry you’re leaving. And such nasty weather to travel. It seems a pity you couldn’t stay until tomorrow—since you have to pay whether you stay or not.”

Clive stood in thought. Just where were they going? Suddenly he laughed.

“That’s sensible. But—I’m afraid we’re moving on.”

He went upstairs. Prue was sitting by the window, still wearing her mackintosh.

He sat on the bed, and in the silence sought for some hinge of speaking. Suddenly she sneezed.

“Here, here,” he said. “You mustn’t catch cold.”

“I’m not catching cold,” she said into her handkerchief.

They sat in silence again, until once more she sneezed.

“You know, you *are* catching cold,” he said.

“No.”

Then, suddenly, she went into one of her bursts of laughter. It was a quiet laugh, soaring into a bubbling note.

“Tell me, if it’s funny,” he said. “I’d like to laugh just about now.”

“It is funny. I just realized what it is. It’s a honeymoon cold. I’ve often heard father speak of it. And now I’ve got it.”

“A honeymoon cold?”

“Yes. Didn’t you know? About ninety per cent of people on their honeymoons—well, they get awful colds.”

“They should be careful to shut the windows.”

“Yes,” she said, laughing.

“I like you,” he said.

He saw her face, puzzled and almost childlike in the deepening light. It contorted, and she sneezed again.

“Look,” he said. “This is foolish. We can’t travel with you getting a cold.”

“It really isn’t a cold.”

“It is. Now for God’s sake don’t let’s start a quarrel over that. I say it is one. You should stay over.”

“But,” she said. “You’ve just told them at the desk we’re leaving. And they’ll have the bill . . .”

“That’s all right. It won’t make any difference to them. I have to pay for us anyhow for a second day—giving notice after twelve noon makes it another day.”

“I see.”

“So we might as well stay tonight. Then we can pack off tomorrow.”

“That does sound sensible,” she said.

There was a silence that became too noticeable. He got up and walked the room.

“Well,” he said. “That’s decided. Now, we might as well eat. Shall we eat here—or downstairs?”

“I couldn’t stand either.”

“I see.”

He paced the room. Then he sneezed.

She laughed irrepressibly.

“You’ve got one, too.”

“Perhaps your father was right,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.”

He paced the room again, and then snapped his fingers.

“I’ve got an idea. Let’s go out and have a good drink. We need a good slug of something—it’ll be good for the colds. It’s no use our going different ways with the same cold. We’ll have a drink—and then a good dinner. A farewell dinner. We’ll find a place somewhere . . .”

“It might be a good idea,” she said.

She got up and they went down the stairs. Almost at the entrance they heard the clerk.

“Mr. Briggs!”

He came hurrying over.

“Your bill—and if your luggage is ready.”

“Luggage?” Clive said. His mind had been far away. “Oh yes. Well—never mind the luggage now. We’ve decided to stay over tonight.”

“Then you won’t . . .”

“That’s right. Send the bill up tomorrow morning, and we’ll take care of it then.”

The little man ducked away, his forehead wrinkled.

“Funny little man,” Prue said. “Now, where are we going?”

“We’ll find a good place. There’s got to be one good place in this town.”

The inn was low-ceilinged, dimly lit, with highlights glowing softly on the age-polished wood.

Clive stood at the door and lifted his hands and looked at Prue in an expression that said: “Isn’t it simple?”

“I think this *is* the place,” Prue said.

“A good place to spend your reclining years,” he said.

They stood by the door, watching the plump, white-aproned man bustling to the fire. He lifted the blaze in the high-hobbed hearth into a good glow. He put on more coal with a small pair of tongs. Then he turned to a table by the hearth and spread his hands in invitation. He did all this without speaking.

As they sat, he waited, his back to the fire.

“Now,” he said, finally. “What shall it be?”

“Well, something to take the chill off,” Clive said. “We’ve got post-hymeneal colds.”

“What’s them?”

“It doesn’t matter. A medical name.”

“I see. How about a hot mulled special?”

“What’s that?”

“Ah, now, sir. You just leave that to me. It’ll have you warmed up in no time.”

Clive watched him bumble away down the steps to the bar.

“Obliging cove,” he said.

“He’s sweet,” Prue said. “Like mine host.”

“That’s it. Probably read it in a book.”

“No. Give human nature credit for being human.”

“I do. What I mean is that he’s merely conforming subconsciously to the popular imagination of what he is. We all do that.”

“Do we?”

“Of course we do. That’s the trouble.”

He stared into the fire, feeling comfortable and happy at last.

“You know, Prue,” he said, “we’re all living under the chains of conformity. Conforming to what popular imagination says we should be. Take a young doctor. He knows what popular imagination says he should be; how he should walk, talk, dress, act. He conforms and soon isn’t what he really is, but a sort of walking, composite creature of what mass imagination fostered by novels and cinemas and plays says he should be.”

“Don’t wrinkle your forehead, darling.”

“All right. It’s the same with everyone—ministers, policemen, actresses, waiters—all of us. We’re all supposed to be something. We desert ourselves, and live a fake life. And really—that’s not us.”

“It makes the world smoother perhaps. You’re wrinkling again.”

“All right. I don’t think it does. I don’t mean this silly thing called self-expressionism. It’s something truer. We live too many ready-made things. In childhood we start with: a boy is this, and a girl is that. Well, a boy isn’t this and a girl isn’t that.”

“Then what on earth are they, darling?”

“Now don’t fool. I almost have something.”

“I wouldn’t fool. You’re so wonderful when you get serious. And you do have good ideas. You’ve got a very fine mind.”

“Stop it. What I mean is—we’re always peering through a false front of what we pretend to be and know we’re not. A Briton is supposed to be this, and a Protestant is that, and a Lancashireman is always something, and an Englishman never does this, and a workman always should do the other thing. Popular imagination, lumping us and crowding us and molding us.”

“Sometimes for our good.”

“Yes, but too often for bad. Suppose some morning, millions of us should wake and be free. A real revolution—a revolution of self . . .”

He pursued the thought—it was like a chase after a fox. The shape and form of what he was racing after couldn’t be seen. But if he could catch the thought, he might know—might know something important.

“If all mankind arose and said, I am not a lay figure. I am me. I am not a *brave* Briton, a *reserved* Englishman, a *stubborn* Yorkshireman, a *cold* Protestant, a *sober* workman . . .”

“Then what are you? A *cowardly* Briton, a *garrulous* Englishman . . .”

“No, by the Lord Harry, no. Because I am not one thing, I am not necessarily the reverse. Nationality means nothing, anyhow. Take the British. In France a Briton is perfidious, in America he’s a silly ass with a monocle, in Italy a gaunt, chill, cold-blooded aristocrat, in Germany a bony pipe-sucking child-starver. And we’re not those things, either.”

“Then what are we?”

“Don’t you see—we’re all things. Each person is everything in the world if he could only recognize it and admit it. If each man could only say: ‘I’m brave one moment, a coward the next; I’m reserved in parts of me, yet childishly friendly; I’m hot and cold about religion as the fears and hopes of the day move me. I am all things. Each one of us is just me—everything—humanity.’ ”

“Yes, darling. Here comes the man with the drinks.”

Clive shook his head. He had suddenly understood something—yet his words hadn’t said it. He left thoughts regretfully. The man was saluting him.

“Here you are, doctor. And madame. If you’ll try that.”

The man watched them as they sipped. Then he rubbed his hands.

“Good?” he asked Prudence.

“My, yes.”

She looked at Clive.

“It does warm you up,” he said.

“Makes you tingle all over.”

“We’ll have another,” he said.

“Yes, doctor.”

The man took the glasses, still clouded with steam, and bumbled away.

“He thinks you’re a doctor,” Prue said, “because you said post-hymeneal cold was a medical term.”

“That’s why. You know, I almost had something—about popular imagination. Only I didn’t get it out—express it right.”

She put out her hand.

“What worries you, Clive?”

“Worries me? Nothing.”

“It’s all right if you don’t want to tell me. But I know there is.”

“No there isn’t. Tell me about you. What do you think of it all?”

“What all?”

“Everything. Life—war—love.”

She shook her head.

“Have you ever been in love?” he asked.

“Oh, constantly. From childhood up.”

“No. I mean with a man?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I mean—what did Robin say to Makyn: ‘I wot not what is love.’ I wondered whether I had any capacity for it. I grew up—matured—slowly—but . . . I was engaged once.”

“But not now?”

“No. We broke it off.”

“Why?”

She looked at her hands, and spread the fingers. Then she lifted her head.

“It’s curious that I don’t mind telling you. It seems so empty of emotion now. We’d known each other a long time—oh, since before he went up to Oxford. It died and went up and down, and then when he came down from university, it got very serious and we got engaged. Then we had a fight and ended it.”

“Perhaps you’ll patch it up.”

She put her hand out to the fire, and shook her head.

“You might,” he said.

“I couldn’t. It’s curious, I don’t mind talking about it now. I thought I’d never get used to it. You see, he was a C.O., and we quarreled dreadfully over it.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

“What, at a time like this? You can’t see a man—when things are like this—not being willing to fight. We’ve got to fight, that’s all. Everyone! It’s—something bigger than personal feelings.”

“So in place of him you joined up.”

“Not at all.”

“Yes. He wouldn’t go—so you did.”

“I don’t think so—or perhaps that’s true.”

“To put him to shame.”

“He put himself to shame.”

“I don’t think he did.”

“You’re a soldier—and you can say that?”

“Let’s not argue, then. I’m sorry—if you feel hurt about it.”

“I don’t.”

“You do—but don’t feel too bad. I’m sorry I made you talk.”

“It’s all right.”

She looked at his face, sober and too grim. She laughed, quickly.

“Don’t you worry about it, then,” she said. “I don’t. It isn’t the end of the world. You can rationalize it that way. There’ll be other loves—common sense tells me that.”

“Yes,” he said, slowly. “It’s just that the first one is always hardest.”

“That wasn’t my first,” she said.

“Don’t try to be sophisticated. I can tell. You always can.”

She looked at him, staring in the fire. The place was dim and in its emptiness somehow conveyed lonesomeness. She smiled to herself.

“Cheer up,” she said. “I’ve had lots of other experiences.”

“I’ll bet.”

“I have, really. In Paris.”

“You in Paris!”

“Yes, me,” she said. “I had a very daring experience in Paris.”

“Very, *very* daring?”

“Yes, very, *very* daring. Do you want to hear about it?”

“If you care to tell me.”

“You do want to hear, only popular imagination says a man mustn’t be curious.”

“*Touché*—as the chap with the ax said when King Charles’ head rolled into the basket. I’m all agog. I never was agogger, in fact. What is agog?”

“I don’t know. That was in Paris when I was fourteen. It’s very important in my subsequent development.”

“Fourteen. Precocious!”

“Yes. I was walking by the fountain of the Observatoire one day, up beside the Bal Bullier—you know where the Closerie de Lilas is?”

“Don’t dazzle me. I don’t know Paris.”

“Oh, well. It doesn’t matter. I was walking, and a man came up behind me.”

“Thank you. That’s a very exciting story.”

“Wait. I haven’t finished yet. I was just trying to see how I could phrase it politely.”

“Oh, don’t stand on ceremony to me.”

“You can’t say it politely, anyhow. You see, this man, suddenly, he pinched my bottom.”

“The rascal. A bottom-pincher!”

“Yes, and it was a real hard pinch, too.”

“Ah, wonderful nation, the French. Good old nation of bottom-pinchers. Little-girl bottom-pinchers.”

“But why do they do it?”

“Just an expression of their good old Gallic courtesy. All Frenchmen are bottom-pinchers at heart.”

“Oh, but isn’t that popular imagination? You just said . . .”

“Of course it is, but the French believe it, too. Popular imagination says the Frenchman isn’t dull and phlegmatic like the Briton. He is always sexually alert. That’s the popular view. The Frenchman believes it, and tries to live up to it. Maybe he’s overdone it. Maybe that’s why his birthrate is falling.”

“Sort of overtrained?”

“That’s it. Look, the Latin nations are supposed to be perpetually amorous cockerels. I doubt whether they’re any more sexually fervent than any other race. I’ll bet that there are plenty of cold-blooded Englishmen who are calm in the daylight. But once the lights are out—they’ll give a head start to any hot-blooded Latin.”

“And the lights are always out these days.”

“That’s right. Look for a birth increase here in a year. They won’t be war babies this time. They’ll call ’em blackout babies. Twenty years from now there’ll be a crop of youngsters—all about the same age. They’ll say: ‘Oh, I was a blackout baby.’ ”

“You think long dark evenings help?”

“Couldn’t be otherwise. In the wintertime there is no fishing.”

“Maybe that’s why . . .”

“Please. No discussion of present parties.”

“Why, it never entered my head.”

“Then don’t let it.”

She smiled to herself.

“You know, I never thought I’d talk like this. It’s quite wicked, talking vulgarity.”

“It’s very natural—and when it’s natural it can’t be vulgarity any more. Let’s talk very properly, then. Do you still think we should play Wagnerian operas during wartime?”

“Silly,” she said. “Here’s Mine Host.”

The plump man set the new glasses before them, and watched them as they sipped.

“What’s in this?” Clive asked.

The man glowed appreciatively.

“Ah, some of this, and a little of that.”

“It’s red wine—with some spices.”

“Some spices,” laughed the man. His double chin began to shake. “That’s a good ’un, that is. Some spices!”

Shaking his head he waddled away. Clive sniffed and turned to Prue.

“He’s seen someone do that on the stage,” he said. “Secretive cove stuff.”

“Perhaps it is an old family recipe—been in the family for centuries.”

“Yes. It was revealed to his great-great-grandfather by an Indian chieftain out of gratitude for saving the chief’s daughter from an attack of chills and ague.”

“Where did you get that?”

“From a bottle. When I was a kid my mother used to make me take some stuff called swamp-root elixir, and that’s what it said on the bottle.”

“What did it cure?”

“Everything. Corns, warts, bunions, scars, scarlet fever, tic, rheumatism, sciatica, gout, lumbago, chills and ague.”

“But that’s just it. If the Indian had such a wonderful recipe for curing chills and ague, why didn’t he cure his own daughter?”

“Ah, that’s it. He saveth others, but himself he cannot save. Anyhow, it’s an important question. I think it should be asked in Parliament.”

“I feel very happy.”

“That’s fine. So do I.”

“I like this place. It’s good luck to us. We don’t quarrel here.”

“Quarrel? We don’t quarrel. We merely differ.”

“All right,” she said. “Just we don’t differ here, then. Did you take your medicine like a good little boy when you were small?”

“I knew I’d better—or I’d get my bottom smacked.”

“Your bottom. You know this man . . .”

“What man?”

“The man in Paris—by the Bal Bullier.”

“Oh, the bottom-pincher. Is he in again? He seems to have been important in your life.”

“I’ve led a very exemplary life.”

“Until now.”

She smiled, and stared at the fire.

“Poke it up a bit,” she said.

He got up and stirred the coals. They sat silently, sipping the hot wine.

“There was one curious thing I haven’t told you about,” she said.

“I thought so. Well, go on. Confess.”

“Well, this man . . .”

“Which one is this?”

“The same one.”

“The bottom-pincher? Persistent duck. Won’t keep out of our lives. Go on.”

“Well, this man . . .”

“You met him again, eh?”

“No, this was the same time. You’re making it hard for me.”

“If you were a man you wouldn’t make gauche remarks like that. Better get back to the story.”

“Well,” she said. “After he pinched me, I turned around, and he—he had his trousers open.”

“Right by the Bal Bullier?”

“Yes. Right in daylight.”

“Well, the old showoff! What did he do then?”

“He—I don’t know how to phrase it. He made—lewd and lascivious gestures. Is that right?”

“Perfect phrasing. So what did you do?”

“Well, when he nipped me, of course, I jumped. Then when I whirled round, and saw he was——”

“Revealing all?”

“That’s it. Well, I got so angry, I swore and shouted at him . . .”

“You must have had a good command of French at fourteen.”

“No. I shouted in English.”

“How insular.”

“Well, I was so stunned, I couldn’t be bothered to think in French.”

“But he wouldn’t understand you.”

“Oh, but didn’t he just. He understood all right, because I punched him right in the face.”

“I see, *entente cordiale* stuff. Then what?”

“Then he ran.”

“Without buttoning his trousers?”

“Without waiting for anything. He ran just as fast as his legs would carry him, and I ran after him, just shouting at the top of my voice, and telling him just what I thought of him. It was a terrible scene—going right down through the little park of the Observatoire, and nursemaids and people passing . . .”

He bowed himself in his chair, and began choking.

“I did,” she said. “It’s true.”

“My God,” he said. “It’s too marvelous. There should be a painting of it to symbolize the relationship between the two nations. Youthful British virginity incarnate, outraged, and chasing one fearful little Frenchman through the streets of the city of boulevards, art, and life. Going with her pigtails flying—and all the good French nursemaids staring in total incomprehension as they see only a foreign young hussy so avid for one of their fine French men that she chases him in open daylight through the streets. His clothing is disarrayed showing how she’d forcibly attacked him in broad daylight.”

She shook her head.

“I suppose it must have looked very funny.”

“I suppose so. Well, here’s to good old British womanhood. Drink up. How do you feel?”

“Very, very pleasant.”

“We’re very nice people,” he said.

He stretched his feet to the fire, feeling warmly happy.

“Clive,” she said, finally.

“Yes?”

“What do you think made him do it? I’ve always wanted to ask someone.”

“Who?”

“You know. The bottom-pincher.”

“My God, is that fellow in again? What about him now?”

“What makes people do that? It’s all right to laugh, but there’s something quite terrible about it. I tried to look it up in father’s books—I told you, he’s a doctor. But I couldn’t find anything . . .”

“Maybe you got the wrong book.”

“Yes. And you can’t really talk about it to anyone.”

“That’s right. It’s perversion. You’re not supposed to talk about it in mixed company.”

“I know. But the thing is, one is supposed to know. And we don’t know. We go on—girls like me, you know—pretending we know, and all the time we don’t.”

“None of us do, really,” he said. “We’re all sophisticated and hand-painted exteriors wrapped around a quivering sort of frightened curiosity about life. Everyone is.”

“That’s true. But what makes people suddenly do such frightful things? What happens in a man’s mind to make him suddenly become so outrageous?”

“I don’t know. They have a name for it. Not exhibitionism. Something else. The name doesn’t matter. Being performed by a human being—it’s human. Perhaps he was hungry—for love, physical love. He was fighting for it as blindly as a sperm rushes at an ovum. He was a warped poet, repelled by nature’s falling below his imagination. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that he’s human.”

“It’s terrible, though.”

“No, it isn’t terrible. It’s in all of us. Good and bad, right and wrong—all mixed in every one of us. All the evil in the world lives in me. And all the good, too. The potentialities of all the world are wrapped in each one of us. They’re all there, in this vessel of ourselves—and they lie there always, waiting to see what circumstances and life will evoke. Give us a fair life, and the fairness of us will come forth. Give us a bad set of circumstances, and all the evil and cruelty can come rushing forth, to go marching on to pillage and rapine and bombing cities and slaughtering innocents in a manner that seemed impossible. Cruelty, evil, perversion—it lies in all of us, waiting for opportunity to become dominant.”

“I’m glad normality’s dominant in me, right now.”

“May I not say, madame, that I’m awfully glad you’re normal, too.”

“Thank you for handing out compliments.”

“Do you like them?”

“Should I answer?”

“I’ll give you another, then. I’ll give you all the compliments in the world, wrapped in one compliment. I hereby give you words, and words, and words, and words.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means these drinks are good.”

“Nothing else?”

“Lady, it also means that I mean that those words are the symbols of all the things the poets of all the ages have tried to put into all their poems. Only they didn’t dare come out and speak plainly, because they’re poets. So they veiled the truth behind these words which have certain rounds and rhymes. I give you the things over the words and under the words, and now you have everything—a better poem than was ever written.”

“It sounds mixed up. I still think a lady would rather have a poem.”

“Poems are no good—not love poems. Nobody writes a true love poem.”

“Why not?”

“Because no one dares to. There’s a curious dishonesty in life and art, and poetry is built on dishonesty. You know what all the love poems in the world tried to say and didn’t? The poets tried to tell one eternal truth and got lost in their medium.”

“What is this eternal poetic truth, master?”

“A simple truth. That of all things on earth, God has made no more noble, nor beautiful, nor poetic, nor exultant thing than a man and woman who truly love each other in bed together.

“If we could only say that clearly, and understand it, and teach children it—we’d clear out all this wickedness of present morality—our cinemas and songs and novelettes could no longer warp mass minds with their smirking behind barrages of leers and smut and false immoralities.

“And that’s what all the poets of the world have tried to say—and have never said.”

“My,” she said. “These must be wonderful drinks.”

He smiled slowly.

“I get deeply philosophical, and you blame it on the drinks.”

“No,” she said. “I’m fighting for time in face of a rather big idea. You really, underneath the kidding, believe all that, don’t you? About poetry—and two people making love?”

“It’s one of the things I believe.”

“You think it’s true?”

“Yes. It’s true—if two people are very, very lucky.”

She stared at her glass.

“Clive.”

“Yes?”

“Are we—very, very lucky?”

“You can’t tell at first. I think in that way we are. But I don’t know you. I can only tell my part. Do you think—we’re lucky?”

She looked at her hands, and sought for words.

“I think it’s true what you said—about poetry,” she said, slowly. “It’s hard to understand—the whole thing is, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Thinking about it doesn’t help sometimes. Let’s not worry about it. I’ll do the worrying for two.”

“Clive.”

“Yes?”

“What is worrying you?”

He looked up from the fire quickly.

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing’s worrying me. Let’s have another drink—this time just the two of us.”

“Who’s the tertium quid?”

“Jean Jacques Pince-Derrière. Let’s keep him out of this.”

“All right. But we’ll drink to him.”

“That’s right. To absent friends. I’ll order another drink.”

“But we ought to eat, too.”

“One drink, and we’ll go eat.”

“Clive, let’s not go back to that hotel. Ask him if he can give us something to eat here. It’s so comfortable.”

“That’s an idea.”

“Bang on the table.”

He thumped his glass, but the place sounded empty.

“I’ll go find him,” he said.

He went over the stone-flagged room. She watched him go, and then stared at the fire. She started abruptly, then pulled the seams of her stockings straight. She crossed her legs and folded her hands on her lap and waited.

Clive came back.

“He can do it. He said, just leave it to him. Competent cove.”

“Yes,” she said. “Clive, are you married?”

“Just like that. You should give warning.”

“Are you married, or something?”

“Neither. I’m not married, nor I’m not or something.”

“That’s nice. You know what I’ve been planning?”

“To learn to play a trombone.”

“No. I’ve decided to buy you a dressing gown. You know, you do need one.”

“I can’t think of anything I need less.”

“Oh, but you do. You can’t go round wearing that mackintosh for a dressing gown forever.”

“Mine Host was in the war. He was telling me. Has the Mons Star.”

“With your bare legs sticking out. You looked so funny, this morning, following the old crone out with your upper part so military and smart in a mackintosh, and then your bare legs sticking out below. I see now why men wear long trousers—male legs certainly aren’t the handsomest part of them.”

“Nor delighteth he in the shape of any man’s legs. That’s the Bible. But you note, it doesn’t say what God thinks of female legs. Which shows that the Bible is a purely male creation.”

“I’m still going to buy you a dressing gown. A nice one. Then you can parade down the hall like a thing of masculine beauty.”

“My God, it is a parade, too. If I were in full pack I’d call it a fair route march.”

“Oh, and that bathroom. It’s so big it feels like taking a bath in Covent Garden or Crystal Palace or something.”

“You could do the backstroke in the tub.”

“It’s funny. Bathrooms should be small, shouldn’t they. Why?”

“Conditioned reflexes or something. False morality.”

“A blue robe—that’s your color. Just to set off your liquid brown eyes. A very pretty blue.”

“If I pass a man in the hall he’ll tip his hat to me.”

“There’s no danger of that. You won’t pass anyone in that hall.”

“By God, yes. That hotel’s empty—except for auntie.”

“Let’s forget her, too,” she said. “The whole town’s empty. It’s all empty. As if everyone’s hiding silently in the cellars, waiting for something to happen. And we’re strange sinners who walk around on top, alone.”

He fell suddenly silent.

“What’s the matter?” she said. “Did I say something to upset you?”

He looked up, and his face cleared and he smiled.

“Eh? It’s all right,” he said. “I wish he’d hurry that food.”

She turned her chair slightly so that they both faced the fire, and they sat in silence.

He sat up in the blackness, feeling someone near, and then realized she had been shaking him.

“What is it?”

“The teeth,” she said. “You were making that horrible noise. I’m sorry. You told me to wake you.”

He lay stiffly, listening to her go back to her own bed. He heard the whisper of bedclothes and the sound of her lying down. He lay, looking upwards into the dark, listening to her breathing. He wondered if she were going back to sleep. Then he heard her speak, softly, as one does when not sure whether the other is awake or not.

“Clive!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just wondered—are you sleepy?”

“I don’t know. Just breathe steadily and you’ll go back to sleep.”

He lay quietly, and now his wide-open eyes began to see shapes of the room, the dim angles of the wall, the line of the dresser, the curtains at the window. He heard her breathing, but he knew she was awake, and he knew she would speak again. He waited with the mounting minutes. And then it came:

“Darling.”

“Yes?”

“Are you sleepy?”

“No. What is it?”

“Tell me about you.”

“I’ve told you.”

“No. Other things. You’re in the army—and you’re on leave?”

“That’s right.”

“Why didn’t you go home for leave?”

“Home? I haven’t a home.”

“But your people. Haven’t you any people? You must . . .”

“I don’t. My mother died several years ago.”

“I’m sorry. Is your father dead, too.”

“Oh yes. He’s dead.”

“Oh, bad luck. What did you do in the army?”

“I told you. I’m a rear rank private. The rearest and the rankest.”

“Why aren’t you something higher? You could be, you know.”

“I didn’t want to be. I liked it where I was. You meet a better class of people.”

“What were you in?”

“Infantry.”

“What regiment?”

“Oh, what does it matter? Why the cross-examination?”

“Don’t get angry, darling. Only I know so little about you—and—I get wondering. All your life stretching back, and it’s a long road of mystery. I begin to wonder what made you and why.”

“I’m not angry. Go on and ask.”

“I won’t if you don’t like it. Only I wonder. What did you come down here on leave for if your home’s up North?”

“This is as good as any other place, when you’ve no relatives, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.”

She lay quietly for a while.

“Clive.”

“Yes?”

“You won’t get very angry if I ask you a question, will you?”

“How can I tell till I hear the question?”

“Well—I’ve got to ask you. Are you a coward, Clive?”

He laughed suddenly, and the spasm held him. He laughed until the bed shook.

“Good God, woman,” he said. “What a schoolgirl question.”

“Well, are you?”

“Of course I am. Every man’s a coward. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“It must have been something.”

“Well, just the things you mumble and groan when you’re asleep. And you shout.”

“What?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. You were saying: ‘Come on. Come on! You don’t want to die here!’ That’s one thing you say. And then: ‘There aren’t any more. There aren’t any more!’ That’s what you say. Any more what, Clive?”

“How can I tell? I don’t know what I’m doing in my dreams, do I?”

“But you keep on saying it. Any more *what*?”

She could hear his breathing.

“Bombs,” he said. “Bombs.”

“You mean air raids? Is that what you dream about?”

“No. Not that kind of bombs. Hand grenades.”

“Oh, I see. Are you a bomber?”

“No. Monty is.”

“Oh, the chap you’re going to meet in London.”

“Yes. I’ve told you about him.”

“But why do you keep saying there are no more?”

“Because there weren’t.”

She lay still a while. Then she said:

“Were you in France?”

“Hell, I’m on leave,” he said. “I came here to forget the army for a while. Now let’s have a little peace.”

He lay quietly and listened to her breathing. He could not tell whether she was sleeping. He listened, carefully, through the long, dark time. His ears heard her breathing. Beyond that sound was the rush and thump of the sea, so ever-present that the ear ignored it unless consciously prompted. Near by was his wristwatch, ticking furiously on the lamp table between their beds. Beyond that was a faint droning. He lay quietly a long time, and then his mind began sifting gently away. But it leaped back to awareness, and he knew he had heard a sound that meant she was sitting up.

“What now?” he said, angrily.

“Hush,” she said. “Planes!”

“Oh, go to sleep,” he said. “I heard them long ago. They’re ours.”

“How do you know?”

“By the sound.”

“But how can you tell all different kinds of planes . . . ?”

“You can, that’s all. You can hear his and hear ours. You get to know.”

“You *were* in France,” she said. “I knew it. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh, go find somebody who likes to get hemorrhage of the mouth about it. Now let’s get some sleep.”

She lay listening, as the drone of the planes came nearer. There was a sweet throatiness in their song of unison. The planes passed overhead, and then droned away inland.

"They're on their way home," she said.

"That's so. Now you can go to sleep."

She lay quietly a long time, and then she said:

"It's very funny."

"What is?"

"Well, those planes. Suppose it had really been a raid. Supposed I'd been killed—in a hotel under an assumed name with a man. Then what?"

"Then we'd be dead and we wouldn't give a damn."

"That's true," she said. "Do you like double beds?"

"They're all right. Double beds for the double life."

"I think a big bed is much nicer than twin beds."

"We must go into it all some day when we've more time. We'll discuss wallpapers, too. And our tastes in carpets."

"Don't be sarcastic, dear."

He sighed, and turned on his side. He waited with mounting tension for her to speak again. Then he heard her voice, going rather quickly.

"I don't want to be a nuisance, darling. But—please! Let's move the beds together."

He threw back the clothes, feeling a mounting hysteria of laughter.

"Stay there," he said. "I'll shift the lamp table and push mine over to yours."

He began unplugging the lamp from the socket. Suddenly he stopped in the dark.

"By the Lord Jesus Christ," he said. "I've done some balmy things in my life. But I've never got up and moved furniture around in a hotel at three in the morning."

"It can't be three, yet."

"It's long after three."

"Well, no one will hear us."

"That's one thing you can bet on. By God, there isn't another soul in this blasted edifice. Now! Is that better?"

He got back into bed. He felt her outstretched hand reaching across on the covers.

"Now," she said, happily. "We can go to sleep, and if you get dreaming bad—well, I won't let you."

"Ah, nuts," he said.

"Don't be rude, darling."

"Then go to sleep."

"I will, now. Truly. You're very patient with me."

"Go to sleep."

"You are. Beautifully patient. I appreciate it."

He did not answer. She lay, listening, until his breathing came evenly and steadily.

CHAPTER XVI

THERE was a clean, washed feeling to the air that came even into the lobby of the hotel, and the morning had a feeling of cheerfulness.

He looked up, hearing the sound of the lift door opening. She came to him, smiling. She glanced toward the desk and nodded, and then took his arm. They swung gladly onto the street.

"What makes you so happy?" she said.

"Nothing. I haven't a headache this morning for a change."

"You sneaked into the bar and had a drink, you mean."

"I didn't. I had one from the bottle before I came down. I was just laughing at the little twirp behind the desk. He was really so upset."

"About us?"

"Yes. About the bill. He said: 'It's all ready, Mr. Hanley.' He seemed so damned tickled about it. Then I told him we'd stay another day—and you'd think I'd ruined a work of art. He was quite upset."

"Oh, that's so. We told him we were leaving this morning. I forgot all about it."

"You liar," he said. "You didn't forget any more than I did."

"Of course," she said. "Unpleasant things—you just put them off hoping something happens to forestall them."

"Mental laziness," he said.

"Well, it's very comfortable—and it often works. In this case it did."

"Well, we were idiots—to get angry and say we'd do it."

"That's right," she said. "We won't get angry at each other any more. Now, where do we go?"

"Well—we can go on the cliff top!"

"That's nice," she said. "We'll sit up there, and then afterwards we'll go down to Mine Host."

They walked along, feeling a sudden sort of holiday aura about the deserted town. The wind came in from the sea, bringing torn swatches of clouds that hurried along, making the sea and land an unfolding quilt of occasional shadow and sunshine. The day was warm. Seagulls strutted calmly on the edge of the forsaken sands.

On the cliff top there were tiny, pearl-shelled snails on the grass stems, and many blue butterflies. The larks lifted themselves and sang from their hiding places of height, and the sounds of their song came clearly above the background of surf cannonading

against the chalk faces below. They walked far over the cliffs to a slope that looked seaward, and there they lay in the thick, dry grass. He lay with his head on his clasped hands and looked upward, and she sat, looking over the Channel.

"It's nice," she said. "We're very lucky."

"This is my idea of a holiday," he said. "Eat, drink, sleep."

"Nothing else?"

"Now who's getting a bawdy mind?"

She laughed in a sort of happy embarrassment.

"You said last night it was poetry," she said.

"So it is. But talking about it isn't—not always."

She lay quietly for a while, and then turned and studied his face.

"You're wrinkling again," she said.

"It's force of habit."

She moved a finger across his forehead.

"Clive."

"Yes?"

"Will you tell me about something?"

"What about?"

"About the war. About being in France."

"Oh, hell, let's forget it."

He turned over, face down. She looked at him, studying the line of the nape of his neck.

"You see," she said. "I want to know about you."

"That's feminine possessiveness."

"Well, if I'd been at the front, and seen how it was, I'd tell anyone who asked me."

"Yes. You'd be a big-mouthed hero."

"There's a difference between boasting and telling. What was it like?"

"Oh, Jesus, you won't be satisfied until you pry it out of me. It was a bloody do. Now that's it. It was a damned, bloody do. Now you know."

"Were you in it?"

"What the hell do you think I was doing? Taking tea with the general staff?"

"Whereabouts were you?"

"All over. All over."

"Where?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Well, if you were there . . ."

"You don't know. You're too bloody tired to know or give a damn whether you do or not. At first you knew, but afterwards you didn't. You didn't know anything except that you wanted to go some place and sleep for ten days straight."

"Where did you start from?"

He raised himself on his elbows, and looked at her.

“All right,” he said angrily. “You won’t be satisfied until you have it out of me. I’ll tell you. If you want to know, I’ll tell you, and then you’ll have it. You’ll have all I’ve got.”

He looked down at the grass, and plucked the stems, carefully.

“This is all there was to it, and nothing more. We were at a place called Hersin. We’d been there months, waiting. They sounded fall-in, full pack, and we lined up and started off. Monty said the Corporal told him the Sergeant-major had heard the Captain telling the Lieutenant that Jerry was coming through Holland and Belgium.

“So much for the tactical situation. Three cheers were nobly given by our enthusiastic troops who were fed up with waiting, and off we went.

“We marched. We got on a train somewhere. We rode. At two in the morning, we got off. We ate. We got in motor lorries, all except the transport. That was to follow by road.

“We went in the lorries through places called, I think, Quivrain and Quivrechain. Anyhow, it was a pottery district. Then we were in Belgium. You could tell it by the flags. The people hung them out. They were very happy. Everyone was happy. The chaps in the lorries sang: ‘Adolf, you’ve bitten off much more than you can chew.’ That’s how happy they were.

“That was all right. I won’t mock. We’d been waiting too long. We’d done our part in the ranks. We were tired of waiting. We were glad it had come.

“We rode till about noon and got out. We waited there. We got hungry. The transport was supposed to catch up with us—cookers and things like that. I don’t know. Anyhow it didn’t come. So we ate iron ration and lined up and marched. After that—let’s see—oh, busses came back some time about then and picked us up again. We rode till about midnight. No one was singing any more. We got out and flopped down. My platoon was in a barn somewhere. The farmer gave us hell for taking his straw to sleep on.

“Next morning when we got up—it was a village. The refugees had started coming. One of our cookers got up and we had hot tea. The others never found us. The refugees were too heavy on the road. That’s what they say.

“We marched again that day. We could hardly get through the refugees. They came down the road with pushcarts and wheelbarrows and perambulators—anything on wheels. The damned upper classes were coming through in motorcars, and honking like hell to get the others over to the side of the road.

“We had a hell of a time getting through. You can’t push them off the road—there were kids and sick people on pushcarts. Even when you want to march you can’t shove them into the ditch. So we went in the ditches, sometimes Indian file. We just kept on slogging that day. About dark we stopped at a place and dug in. Then we marched back about ten kilometers in the night, and we dug in again.

“We got dug in by about daylight, so then they sounded fall-in again, and we started up the road once more.

“The refugees were saying: ‘*Allemandes toute suite*.’ We said: ‘*Bonnes nouvelles*.’ We went past the first place we’d dug in, then they told us to dig in again. The one cooker kept coming right with us and made some hot stew. That cook was a good man. He kept up with us somehow.

“Then the dive bombers showed up and left souvenirs. Chaps picked up splinters. They were quite hot. But most of us fell asleep. Old Monty had dug a sort of tunnel into a bank and we crawled in there. He said it was going to be worse later.

“He was right. We woke up in the afternoon, and Monty and I went down by the road. The last of the refugees were going past. Some of them had been hit. Jerry was strafing the road with his dive bombers. They were saying: ‘*Les sales boches*.’ One woman was carrying a dead kid with its arm torn off. They said they couldn’t get it away from her and that she’d gone balmy. I think she was.

“We stayed there all that day and nothing happened. That night we stood to—two hours on, four off—and nothing happened. About ten in the morning a bunch of the Guards came back down the road.

“We knew they’d been through it. You could tell—the way they looked—their clothes and their faces and the walking wounded. When they saw us, the officer called them to attention, and they went down the road, stepping right along and eyes straight to the front. They were wounded and filthy but they went past us as if we were dirt, like the Guards always do.

“After that everything was quiet. No more refugees.

“Monty and I went in his funk hole. We were sitting nice till the dive bombers came again. Then Captain Allen came down and found Monty—they were both in the last war together. He said someone had to go back and try to find the cookers and guide them up. He had a Sergeant, but because Monty was an old-timer, he thought Monty could look after the Sergeant. He detailed us to go with the Sergeant, and he winked and said: ‘And we want food.’

“So we went back, and walked over about half of Belgium. We lost the Sergeant and a kid named Baker. We were supposed to meet at a crossroad later, but we never saw them again. Then Monty swiped a wagon and we got some grub. God, it was funny. It was getting almost dark, and I was ready to lie down and die. Monty said: ‘I’ll be damned if we go back without food.’

“And by God, we didn’t. He saw a wagon by a picket line of the Engineers, and just walked in and harnessed up the wagon, and started to drive away. As we were coming out, a sentry said: ‘Where you going?’ And Monty says: ‘General orders,’ and while the kid was puzzling it out, we were down the road and going hell for breakfast. Some time—oh, long after dark—we found a ration dump. We didn’t have any requisition, and we had a hell of a time. Monty said we were from brigade headquarters, and if we didn’t get any food he’d like to have a chit from the Captain explaining why we’d been refused. The Captain went in to call up somebody, and while we were waiting, we loaded the wagon with anything—a Sergeant came along and helped us—he thought we were all right. We put on everything—cheese, jam, bread, sides of bacon. Anything. Then we jumped up and rode away as if hell was after us.

“After that we went damn near all over all the part of Belgium we hadn’t covered already, trying to find our way back. Just after daybreak we saw a spire, and Monty said it had been to the right of us. I thought it had been to the left. But Monty was right, and we found the place, but they’d pulled out and there was no one there. So we headed for the village where the spire was, and that was empty, too. It was like dead. We drove down the main street—all the stuff was in the shops, but there was no one there. And then suddenly a Lieutenant of the Coldstreamers came marching down the street. He had his gloves on and had a walking stick, and he said:

“ ‘Hello, by God, get that jolly thing out of here quick.’

“So we turned round and left him all alone in his village with his gloves and cane complete. Monty said it looked pretty obvious that the front had moved back, so we started back, and about noon we found the outfit at a new place where they’d dug in.

“We turned over the grub and went to sleep. After that we went back about ten kilos more, and dug in again.

“Jerry didn’t give us much time and the Stukas came over again. This time they did it right. After dark we piled the wounded in the wagon we’d foraged, and started them back. About midnight, maybe, we got a stand-to, and we moved back again and dug in. There was about a foot of topsoil, and after that, chalk. It was bad going.

“Stukas found us bright and early, and the leader would tip his wings over, and dive—and then the next one right after him—a whole line of them. They’d let us have it, and then right back for home to load up honey again. We couldn’t get our casualties out.

“Old Monty found a machine gun and set it on a post and tried to pot them as they came down, but we didn’t get any. But three of our Bristols came over, and the Jerries cleared away like magic. Then the minute the Bristols were gone, the Stukas were back again until dark. Then we pulled out again and went back further. We were supposed to dig in again, but no one did much digging. A chap would be standing beside you, digging, and all of a sudden you’d hear: Clunk! Like a whole ironmongery shop falling—from his equipment. Just go: Clunk! And he’d be out. They’d be asleep before they hit the ground. They’d just groan a bit and then lie there. You could kick ’em, or drag ’em out of your way, but you couldn’t wake ’em.

“We couldn’t dig in, so they put out pickets. Captain Allen picked on us. I had to laugh. He said: ‘I’m sorry you’re for it, Monty, but they don’t seem to make them like they did in the old days, Monty. They get sleepy.’ Monty said: ‘Captain—did you ever see a dream walking? Well, I did—and it’s me.’ We got posted in a barn and took turns falling asleep.

“After that—well, we went back some more. By God, we went back—clear on through the Guards that had gone through us before. So this time we treated them like dirt, and went right back through without looking at them.

“After that—oh, what the hell. You get the general idea. Much the same, and more so.”

Clive looked at a piece of grass he was shredding. He threw it aside and looked out over the ocean.

“No, go on and tell me,” she said, quietly. “You might as well go on now.”

He laughed quickly.

"Yes," he said. "Now you've got me doing it, too—fighting the war with my mouth. No—it's no use talking."

"Please," she said. "Go on, now. It might be good for you if you told someone all about it—then you might get rid of it."

He turned and looked suddenly at her, looking steadily as if he were seeing a stranger. Then he laughed.

"I've told you. We dug in and marched back and dug in and marched back—till finally, till finally we'd marched clean to hell out of France."

He looked up and saw her with her lips curiously parted.

"Didn't we ever hold him?" she said.

Her tone sounded so plaintive. He looked down at his hands, and laughed quickly. Then he said:

"Oh, I suppose we gave him a crack once in a while. They did at Douai. The Guards cracked him at Douai. We were on the flank. They said the French were coming up fast to help us. You could hear the Guards yelling over on our left—like a crowd at a football match. When they were going over—rushing some strong point.

"We kicked him to hell out of Douai and kept on going way beyond and had him running, and, Jesus, you began to think that at last it was the miracle and we were going to have another first battle of the Marne all over again.

"But first thing you know they're ordering us to retreat to the town again, to try to link up with our chaps in Arras—and next thing we know it's hang on to Douai in a defensive action—and finally it's hold Douai in a rear-guard action—hold it to the last man! Die at your posts, boys! The chaps at Arras were trying to fight their way through to the north, and we had to hold Douai to keep a road open for 'em.

"I had to laugh. Captain Allen came crawling up—we were down behind the brick part of what had been a hothouse in a back garden—and he said the orders were no one was to retreat—for the honor of the regiment. Then he said: 'Here's your chance for a cross, Monty.'

"Monty says: 'Victoria or wooden?'

" 'What do you care?' Allen says. 'You've got to die to get either.'

"It's curious how you remember odd bits that people say.

" 'Well, old soldiers never die,' Monty says. 'And you can't tell. Maybe those frog bastards will break through to us.'

" 'You mustn't call them those frog bastards,' the Captain said. 'In future they are to be referred to at all times as our gallant allies.' Then they both laughed—it was an old joke—about the orders in the last war or something.

"So—we were the glorious rear-guard boys."

He sat, fraying the piece of grass.

"And what then?" she asked.

"And what then?" he said. "Oh, after Douai we cleared out of—oh, a hell of a lot of places—all the way up to Dunkirk, and then we got to hell out of that. That's all."

“But,” she said, “but—why did you leave Douai if they told you to stay to the last man? How did you . . . ?”

“I ran to hell out! What the hell did you want me to do? Stay there and get shot to hell as I sang: ‘Oh, let me like a soldier fall’? Stay and be nice fertilizer for some French farmer? Not me!”

She listened to his voice, lifted angrily in the great space of the flat land on the cliff top.

“I meant,” she said, softly, “what happened to you at Douai? Did you lose a lot of men?”

“What the hell! You don’t expect a rear guard to come marching out on parade front with the regimental band playing, do you?”

“Don’t get angry, Clive. You should be proud, not angry.”

“Proud—angry! That’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Well, then you mustn’t feel badly. There’s nothing wrong with an army retreating when it has to. In a way it was even glorious—a victory in defeat . . .”

“Oh, don’t talk like a newspaper editorial page. That’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Then what has got anything to do with it?”

“Nothing. It won’t do any good talking about it.”

“Why not?”

“It won’t, that’s all. You wouldn’t understand it.”

“I’m capable of understanding, Clive. I’m not—not weak-minded.”

“It’s nothing to do with your brain.”

“Well, what has it got to do with?”

“It’s more than the brain. It’s—it’s everything—your background.”

“There’s nothing abnormal about my background. It wouldn’t stop me from . . .”

“It’s middle class—that’s all.”

She looked at him quickly.

“And you’re lower class,” she said coldly.

“You pay me a compliment when you call me lower class. You pay me a compliment.”

“I’m glad you appreciate it.”

“Well, I’d sooner be out-and-out lower class than a smug, complacent, crass middle classer. The backbone of the nation! The overgrown appendices—the ossified gallstones of a nation!”

“You’re vulgar.”

“It’s the lower class coming out in me.”

She sat silently, looking out at the cloud-patched ocean. Then she regarded him, steadily. She said, quietly:

“You’re not really lower class, Clive.”

“By God, I am,” he said. “I say it distinctly. Don’t think you’re complimenting me by trying to include me among the pompous, blind, self-centered bastards who . . .”

“You *are* lower class,” she said. “Very low!”

She got up quickly and turned away, waiting. He rose slowly and stood beside her.

“All right,” he said. “All right. You won’t have to stick my lower class vulgarity very long. Only a couple more days—or you can end it now if you like.”

“It suits me if it ends now,” she said.

“Then it certainly suits me,” he said. “Let’s go back to the hotel and get cleared out.”

“All right.”

Unspeaking, they strode back to the hotel, aware of themselves only as two isolated figures in the empty town. He stopped by the desk and told the clerk they were leaving.

“You mean, in the morning, sir?”

Clive looked at the little, misshapen face.

“Of course,” he said. “In the morning. First thing. Have the bill ready.”

That night the planes came over. They were very high, and the sound was so faint that the more you listened the less you were able to tell whether it was a sound or the strain of listening that made the hum.

Clive lay stiffly in his bed, lifting his head slightly to keep both his ears from the pillow. He lay like that a long time until the strain on his neck destroyed all power of hearing.

He lay back again, and then he could hear only the near sounds: the sound of his own breathing, and of his heart beating; the watch ticking and her breathing, and beyond that the steady flow of the wind and the shattering of the sea at high tide against the Esplanade wall. Then above that he could hear again the humming—so faint, yet clear enough so that one could not deny it. When he lifted his head again she spoke, and her voice seemed suddenly much too loud.

“Darling.”

“Yes?” he said.

“Do you hear something.”

“No. Go to sleep.”

“There is something,” she said. “I can hear planes.”

“Oh, go to sleep.”

She was silent a moment. Then she said, calmly,

“There are planes. Is it an air raid?”

“No. They’re ours,” he said. “Now go to sleep.”

He lay back again, his eyes open to the blackness. He tried to empty his mind, but now he could not stop listening. Every sound seemed to clamor for recognition. He could hear her breathing, stifled against the pillow. The sound came in gasps. For a long time he tried to shut himself away from the noise. At last he gave up. He leaned on his side.

“Are you crying?” he said.

“No.”

She said it as a woman will when there is no denial of it.

“You are,” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m afraid, Clive.”

“Afraid. I’ve told you, they’re our planes. They’re probably coming home. If there’s a raid . . .”

“It isn’t that.”

“Well, what is it?”

“It’s me, darling. I’m afraid. I’m no good.”

“Oh, now—you’re all right. What’s there to be afraid of?”

“Of me—of everything. All I’m doing. Being here—in this dark room—in a hotel I don’t know—with a strange man.”

“I’m not strange, am I?”

“Not in the daytime, darling. Then everything seems all right. I can see you, and know who we are. But—we quarrel—and then in the dark, I wonder what I’m doing, and why I’m doing it—and I’m afraid.”

He waited, and the sound of the planes seemed more distinct. He began talking.

“I’m still me in the dark, Prudence,” he said. “In fact, I’m a better man in the dark than in the daylight. At least, I don’t fight in the dark—and I don’t argue with you—and I don’t get evil-tempered and . . .”

“I don’t mind, darling. You don’t mean to be, really. You can’t help being short-tempered, can you?”

“Of course I can help it. I don’t mean to, at the time. Afterwards, I’m sorry about it. I shouldn’t get so nasty—to you of all people. You’re so very patient, and nice . . .”

“I’m not. I’m no good.”

“Oh, yes, you are. You’re a fine girl.”

“I’m not, really. You’d find that out if you knew me very long.”

“I wish they were all as good as you.”

“All? Who else do you mean?”

“No one,” he said. “I say, let’s have a drink. That’s what you need. It’ll quiet you down.”

She sat up and drew a breath.

“That’s a clever way to duck the conversation,” she said.

She listened to his feet slapping on the floor.

“Close the blinds before . . .”

“I can do it in the dark,” he said. “I know where the bottle is.”

She lay, listening to the plop of the cork, and the tinkle of glass, and then the gurgle of pouring. He came back to her in the dark, and put the glass in her hand.

“Straight,” he said. “Three cheers.”

“Three cheers to you, too,” she said.

She drank and then shuddered, and held the glass out at random. His hand found it.

"Now you'll feel better," he said.

He set the glasses on the floor, and his hand found her face. He stroked her forehead.

"Now you'll be able to go to sleep."

She sighed.

"That feels so good," she said. "It's nice—but you'll get cold sitting there."

"Oh, no I won't."

"Oh, yes-you-will."

"I'm warm enough."

"Look, Clive. Let's move the beds together again. Then I'll feel better—and you can keep warm . . ."

"Oh, my God," he said. "The Midnight Movers once more. Holy Jesus!"

He got up and moved the lamp table and dragged his bed to hers. He got into bed and put out his hand. She moved over and rested her head on his arm. Then she laughed.

"Now I know you—even in the dark. And I like this room, too. It's very nice."

"Very, *very* nice?"

"Yes," she said. "Very, *very* nice. That makes it different, doesn't it?"

"Indeed," he said. "Comfortable?"

"Yes. Is your arm tired?"

"No. I don't get tired. Not in the arms, anyhow."

"They are pretty steely," she said. "I'm glad. It would have been awful if I'd got here with you and you'd turned out to be—flabby. Don't you hate flabby men?"

"Of course," he said.

He lay there, and the sound of the planes seemed to be closer.

"I used to be pretty spindly as a kid," he said, quickly. "I used to read all the strength advertisements. You know—our patent grip dumbbells will turn you from this—to this! Picture of a gent with lightning bolts coming from his biceps. I used to admire those things."

"Did you try one?"

"No. Never saved enough."

"But you got strong anyhow."

"Yes."

"Your biceps are all right. Triceps too. Pectoral muscles like iron."

"You know anatomy."

"I told you, my father's a doctor. I was the kind of kid that pried into books. How did you develop your arms finally?"

"Work. A job I had."

"What job was this. Hammering locks?"

“No. A carpetbeater.”

“Oh, you haven’t told me about that one. Tell me about it. Then I’ll go to sleep. You mean, you went out bright and early every morning, and knocked at the doors, and said: ‘Have you any . . .’ ”

“No. This was in a fabrics mill. It was very boring.”

“But I’d like to hear about it. Then that will be something else I know about you. You see, that’s what’s frightening. All your years stretching back when you didn’t know me, and all mine stretching back when I didn’t know you. Why, we might have actually passed one another on the street.”

“It’s quite probable we did,” he said.

“Tell me about carpet beating, then.”

In the pause he heard the planes. He began, quickly.

“Well, it’s piled fabrics,” he said. “You know what piles are. Not the medical kind. The nap on heavy textiles like carpets or plush or velvets and velveteens. Well, after they’re woven, they go to shearing machines—they have spiral blades round a cylinder going about three thousand revs a minute, and that cuts the pile off evenly—and a few fingers once in a while . . .”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. You can get a percentage figure on it—it’s quite a normal figure. Industrial hazard number so-and-so. Anyhow, when the carpets are sheared, then they come to you, and you beat them.”

“What for?”

“Make the pile stand out, get rid of all the fine bits of dust and pile that adhere.”

“You just do that all day? Why don’t they have a machine?”

“Hand beating’s best, I suppose. And when you have a job you don’t start wishing for a machine to come and take it away from you. Besides, a machine can’t inspect for cuts.”

“But it could. It could beat, and have a photoelectric cell to check defects, couldn’t it?”

“I suppose it could. But I was just working there. I wasn’t the mill owner.”

“But if you’d invented a machine they’d . . .”

“They’d have taken it under the employment contract saying all inventions made by the undersigned employee are the property of his employer. Then they’d install the machine, say thank you, and lay you off.”

“They wouldn’t. They’d promote you and . . .”

“You’ve been reading soppy stories, my girl. I know. Look, once when I was a kid, I invented a machine. Well, it wasn’t a machine—it was so simple that it was better than a machine. I was working on an assembly belt. Electrical equipment. The stuff came from the stamper, and they had to have a kid or somebody on the belt, just turning the stuff round for it to go into a drilling outfit. Well, at first I picked each piece up and turned it round. Then I found by sticking my finger out and holding it in exactly one spot, as the stuff came down it bumped my finger and turned in exactly the right

position. Well, I did that, but my finger started to get sore. Then I got a bit of machine steel, and I held that. But I couldn't hold it perfectly steady. So at noontime, I got an old clamp from the scrap pile, and rigged it up with the machine steel in it, and after dinner I horsed it round until I had it set exactly. So there I was, and there was the piece of steel doing all my work for me, and all I had to do was sit there reading and see that nothing slipped.

"But when the foreman came round, and saw it! God you'd have thought I was a criminal—that I'd been drawing wages under false pretenses. So they left the jigger there to do the job—or they rigged a proper one up, and the next Saturday I joined the ranks of the ungainfully unemployed."

"But you'd created something."

"Oh, yes. Have you ever tried eating a bowl of creative soup?"

"But—in the fabrics mill, didn't you get tired? How did you beat the stuff? With carpetbeaters—just like women use?"

"No. You have a stick in each hand. The stuff's on a sort of roll-up drum. You just stand there and wallop."

"All day?"

"Of course, all day."

"You beat steadily for eight hours?"

"No. Ten."

"Ten hours? But I'd think your arms would drop off."

"No, they stay on all right."

"But don't you get horribly tired?"

"Lady, you do—you do!"

"What do you do then?"

"You go right on beating—you have to. The drum is still turning. After a while, your arms build up and you hardly notice it."

"But how boring."

"No, it isn't in one way. You see, it makes no demand whatsoever on your mind, so your mind's free to go where it will—just as if you were sitting before a fire in a comfortable chair. So your mind goes to other things."

"What things?"

"Oh, payday, and how you'll get drunk, and the girl you're going to make advances to."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You couldn't think of that ten hours a day."

"No. You do turn to other things."

"What?"

"Oh, best is complicated things—try to do mathematical problems in your head. I once read about two Russian prisoners of war who used to play whole games of chess

in their heads. They hadn't any chessmen, so they just did it all mentally. So I tried that."

"Could you do it?"

"No. Only for about ten moves—until I'd get slinging knights about. Once I got to about twenty moves. But the trouble is I knew what each side was after, so I'd have to start gypping one side to let the other win. So I used to call one side me, and the other side the foreman. The foreman's side was very dense. My side would get all sorts of brilliant plays going, and the foreman wouldn't see it until it was too late."

"Didn't he ever win?"

"No one ever won. I couldn't carry it that far. But he certainly was in some awful messes when I left him."

"What else did you think about?"

"Oh, everything. Politics, economics, who held the heavyweight title from Sullivan down, the books of the Bible . . ."

"The Bible?"

"Oh yes. I used to recite it. You see, in my Sunday-school days I had a flypaper memory. Everything stuck to it. And it's pretty good-sounding stuff to shout out loud against the roar of machines. Like: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John, three-sixteen—our promise of eternal life. And poetry, too. Reams of it. But let me tell thee now another tale, for Bleys our Merlin's master as they say, died but of late, and when Uther in Tintagil passed away, wailing and moaning for an heir—I can do about a half-hour straight of that—the Birth of Arthur."

"Go on with it."

"No. It's not good poetry. I only used it for a time counter. See how fast I could do it. Once I did it in three lengths of material—that's about eighteen minutes."

"What else did you do besides gabble poetry for speed records?"

"Oh—sing."

"Sing? I've never heard you sing."

"That shows you what luck you have."

"I'll bet you sing very nicely, darling."

"Like a raven. But that's one thing about singing in a factory. You hardly hear yourself above the noise. And it passes time. Around three in the afternoon is when everyone sings."

"That sounds the nicest way yet to pass the time."

"It isn't nice. It's very terrible."

"Terrible?"

"You see, it isn't singing over your work. You're singing against it. You sing when the hours drag and it seems they'll never end. You sing when stopping time seems miles away. You sing when boredom nearly kills you. The girls start to sing, and everyone picks it up—and it's rather terrible to hear in a way."

"The girls? Were there many girls employed there?"

“Very many. There’s a high percentage of female labor in textiles.”

“What were they like, Clive?”

“Like? They were—girls, that’s all. Like your girls at camp—the Waffs. Just like everyone else.”

“Did you ever make love to them?”

“No.”

“Truly?”

“I’d say truly if I had, and I’d say truly if I hadn’t. But I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I think I was—frightened.”

“Frightened? Of girls?”

“In a way.”

“Why?”

“Oh, many things.”

“But you’re not frightened of me?”

“No. That’s different.”

“But I’m just the same as a mill girl—for making love to.”

“In essentials, I suppose you are. But not in nonessentials.”

“In what nonessentials are they different?”

“They’re not very gentle, to begin with. They can be pretty tough. That’s the way it seemed to me when I was young. They can be tough on a new youngster.”

“How?”

“They gang up on him, and sun him.”

“Sun him? What’s that?”

“Rush him and knock him flat and then sit on him and take his pants down. Take a look to see how big he is, and then get an oil can and oil him up good and rub it in—and then let him go.”

“Oh, Clive, they wouldn’t.”

“All right.”

“You’re making it up.”

“All right, I’m making it up. But I’m just telling you, that’s the way they are. They’re not supposed to be. Nobody ever writes about them like that. They’re either supposed to be unwashed riffraff, or patient, oppressed heroines—whichever side of the fence you’re on. They do work hard, and they are patient. But living has made them tough, too. I’m just telling you the way they are. It’s like—like tribal co-ordination.

“My God, I have to laugh. People get up expeditions and lug cameras thousands of miles to Africa to film the so-called esoteric and secret rites of jungle tribes—initiating the boys into manhood. I saw one—there was a hell of a hullabalo about how exciting it was. If ever anyone wanted a grain of truth, and they had the skill, they could go into any mill in any industrial town in Britain—or in any other country for all I know—and film rites and customs that are exactly as set and dark and ignorant as Africa’s. It’s the

same everywhere I've worked. When people work together in one place, and spend most of their working hours together, they get a sort of code of customs and prejudices, like a tribe. In textiles it's worse, because the people live and are brought up in tougher surroundings. They don't mean to be vicious—although sometimes they kill people."

"They kill them! Oh, come!"

"All right. Believe what you want. I've seen a boy that was killed."

"Killed? How? By girls?"

"No. By men—and very unpleasantly."

"How?"

"I told you. Unpleasantly."

"But how?"

"In a machine shop. They put the air pressure hose in his anus and turned the air on. In two seconds they'd ruptured his entire internal system, and he died screaming and in dreadful agony. You could hear him screaming all over the plant. That's how we knew. We went over to see."

"Clive!"

"I shouldn't have told you. It isn't pretty, it is? But don't misunderstand. They weren't vicious or brutal. They were ignorant. It was the machine age bringing new toys to old customs, and they did no worse with them than mankind has done with airplanes and bomb mechanisms. It was just that they had no conception of the force of an air pressure hose and the relative fragility of human tissue. They were profoundly shocked when they found out. Now, shall we talk about something else?"

She was quiet a moment, and his ears seemed to ring as he listened above the sea sound and the wind sound.

"Clive," she said, finally, "were you ever initiated?"

"No. Never."

"I'm glad. But why not?"

"Because I've always been fairly active and strong and I can take care of myself."

"But when you're small—what do you do?"

"It doesn't matter. You must fight. You fight back desperately—and you find strength somewhere. And then—well, they learn to let you alone. It's exactly the same as anywhere else in life. Nobody picks on a chap who can fight back. They learn to leave him alone."

She lay quietly, and then she said, suddenly:

"Clive, do you think we're going to lose this war?"

"No," he said, slowly. "No."

"You're not saying that just to comfort me. I'd like to know. You've been in it. Are we going to lose it?"

"It isn't the war," he said. "It's something bigger than that—and we've lost that already."

"What?"

“I don’t know. I wish I were wise enough to know. I try to puzzle it out, but I can’t. But I do know we’ve lost it.”

“But we’ll win the war?”

“No,” he said. “We won’t win it. I don’t think we’ll lose it; but I know we’re not going to win it.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’ve lost the other thing.”

“But what is the other thing?”

“That’s what I don’t exactly know.”

She lay quiet, and then he said:

“Oh, pay no attention. One’s never optimistic at this time of the night.”

“That’s true,” she said. “But it’s nearly morning. Look, you can see the room getting gray.”

He listened, intently. There was no sound of planes. He could be sure of it now.

“You’ll be gray if you don’t get some sleep. Now go to sleep. Get back on your own pillow.”

He drew his arm away, and heard her settling herself. Then he lay still, listening to her breathing. He thought she was asleep at last, and he began to analyze the strange pleasure he felt in being awake and knowing that she was asleep.

But she lifted her head and spoke.

“It was terribly nice of you to talk me through it, because I was awfully afraid just at first—and they were German planes this time, weren’t they?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he said. “Will you go to sleep!”

CHAPTER XVII

Prentiss Saintby rocked contentedly in the sun. There was a smell of heat-baked boards of the porch—and the smell of burning piñon wood that drifted up among the pines. The air coming down from the jagged juniper-clotted mountains was like cold wine, but the sun was unexpectedly warm.

He laughed to himself. So this, he thought, was ranch life!

Somehow he had expected it to be a place of dust and roughing it. Something like the cinema—low shacks and a few cowboys sitting on a tumble-down fence. Instead, there was this—this heaven: the great log château looming up on the green-wooded grounds; the individual guest houses among the pines, complete with sitting room, bedroom, bathroom of gay orange tile—the knotty pine walls, stone fireplaces, vacuum ice flasks and whisky-and-soda siphon on the table, the chintz curtains, and the sprays of fresh flowers in the vases. This was really roughing it—right down to the monogrammed towels in the bathroom and the menservants to tend the log fires.

He looked at the everlasting wonder of the mountains, and rocked time away. He only wakened from his half-doze when he heard footsteps on the porch. It was the manservant.

"Yes?"

"Miss Mary, Mr. Saintby. She asked me to tell you about tennis."

"Oh, yes. I'll change and be right down."

The man followed him into the bedroom.

"There are flannels in this closet, sir. Or if you wish, I put some shorts down here in the bureau."

"Oh, fine. Flannels."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Lachran said you were traveling light, so I thought . . ."

"Good. I'll be right along."

The man lingered, half-apologetically. Prentiss looked up.

"Is there anything . . ."

"Well, sir—if you'll pardon me. But—how are things at home?"

"At home?"

"Yes, sir. In England. You see, I'm British, too—a Suffolk man. I understand that you're just over, sir."

"Oh, yes. Yes. Why, we're quite all right. Quite. You get the news, don't you?"

“Oh, yes, sir. On the radio. But I wondered how things *really* were. How we’re getting along.”

“Oh, we’re coming along. You know—after a slow start. We’re always a bit slow getting started.”

“Yes, sir. That’s what—if you’ll pardon me—I don’t like.”

The man went slowly to the door.

“If you wish anything else, sir—the bell, there.”

Prentiss wrinkled his forehead and changed slowly. He was beginning to get used to it—people asking him about England as if the real truth weren’t being told, as if Britain were hiding something, instead of being open and honest about all news—that is, of course, about all news of nonmilitary importance. You couldn’t expect anyone to give out news that would be of service to the other chap—or that would be detrimental to the public morale. Yet everyone here seemed to think Britain was hiding something.

He finished dressing, and went slowly down the path through the scented pines, over the rustic footbridge across a needle-carpeted gully, along the more formal path beside a great lake. By the boathouse he saw Lachran, playing with two small children. The old man looked up happily and waved.

“Getting everything you want?”

“Oh, quite.”

“Good. These are my great-grandchildren,” Lachran said, proudly. “We’re running a shipping line.”

He held up the water-soaked toy yacht.

Prentiss stared at the two youngsters. They were ash blond, fair-skinned, with delicate features—so physically unlike old Lachran himself in every way. They were—were aristocratic. That was it. It was inconceivable that in four generations the rough frontier blood could produce a flesh-and-blood aristocracy. Incredible.

“How do you like it here?” Lachran prompted.

Prentiss looked at the lake, its surface a mixture of cool blues and vivid sun-struck greens from the mountains and the near-by willows and sycamores.

“Magnificent. How did you manage to find such a heavenly spot?”

Lachran beamed with pleasure.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly like this always. When I first came up here—I’ll bet not more than fifty white men had ever been up this canyon. It’s been fixed up quite a bit. This lake wasn’t here. I put that in.”

“You put the lake in?”

“Sure.”

Lachran rose. He waved his hand and a uniformed nursemaid came from the boathouse and took the children. It was utterly incongruous—the nursemaid with bonnet right out of a London park, walking under the towering tapestry of the Wild West mountains. Lachran was waving his hand expansively.

“See, we dammed up there, then we dammed the stream about a mile up the canyon and piped it in—fourteen-inch cast-iron pipe.”

“Good heavens,” Prentiss said.

Lachran laughed gladly at his wonder.

“Yeh. Then I put the bridge in. You remember where you came in, up Horseneck Gulch. I spent seventy thousand putting that bridge in. You remember it, don’t you? About twelve miles down the canyon.”

“Oh, yes,” Prentiss said. He did not remember, but it seemed impolite to say so. His mind was hanging on the thought of the miles. “You mean, your ranch extends all the way down there?”

Lachran could not have been happier.

“Why, we start a couple of miles before that. This isn’t your little island, you know. This is America—the West. Why, we go further up the other way over the divide there. Then back this way, over the other side of those Sangre de Dios foothills, and round the other side of the Sombrero Mountains. Big Sombrero and Little Sombrero. They’re both my mountains.”

“Your mountains!” Prentiss echoed.

“Yeh. Then we built this new ranch house here. We had an old ranch, and Mary liked to come up here. That was my wife. So I fixed it all up. Had an architect come here from California and remodel it. When it was done, Mary didn’t like it. So we tore the whole damn thing out, and I got another architect, and told him Mary was going to stand over him and tell him how she wanted it. And she had it all done in logs, like the old place. She had good taste.

“Then we built the guest houses. It’s nicer that way. I figure people enjoy themselves more if they have privacy—that’s the British idea, too, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes,” Prentiss assured him.

“Yeh, I’ve often heard that. And I think it’s a good idea. You can get together for rides, and so on. If you like to ride, we’ll pack a lunch and go up Big Sombrero some time.”

“I’d like that, very much—if I have time.”

“Ah, you’ll have time,” Lachran said, emphatically. He turned his head. “Ah, Mary!”

Prentiss saw the girl waving her racket almost angrily from lower down on the path.

He smiled at Lachran and hurried along toward her.

After the match Prentiss sat on the stone-flagged portico overlooking the court. He tried to appear bright as people spoke to him; but they seemed just a half-real maze of other guests. He was intent upon his own utter exhaustion.

Truly, he decided, one was a fool to try to play tennis like that when he’d turned the forty-year mark. He shouldn’t have let them drive him to it.

That was the trouble with Americans—no love of the game itself—only this intense emphasis on victory. Games weren’t a social pastime to them; they were a means to that end of winning. They played every point with something akin to vicious possessiveness.

He leaned his head on his hands.

Yet, perhaps there was a merit to it. Undoubtedly that's why they won so much at the Olympics. On the other hand, they burned themselves out here. Youth, burning itself out in a brief flash of super-excellence instead of spending a long life at standard goodness. Wars—they could ignore wars and yet play tennis games as if more than nations depended upon the outcome.

And there was a sort of belt-fed mass-production air about even the young athletes. The two girls—they were exactly alike. They had stood on the base-line, pumping their pro-taught shots with mechanical regularity—forehand, backhand, cross-court, base-line—exactly the same. Like two mechanical dolls from among thousands turned out by the same machine. Same motions, same form. Mass produced.

"Well, partner. How about changing, and then a swim?"

Mary was standing before him. More than anything else he wanted to rest there, but he found himself jumping up.

"Righto."

Mary linked her arm in his, and they went past the chairs. She smiled and called to the others.

"Good-by, Mrs. Hawkins—so long, Cecil—better luck!"

Unspeaking they went from the court until they rounded the fringe of conifers. Then, suddenly, she drew him into the thicket, and danced a war-dance. She jigged in a kind of ecstasy and peered through the bushes.

"Oh, boy! Did we trim them! After dropping the first set; then pulling up—4-6, 7-5, 6-2. Look at Old Lady Pieface Hawkins—wouldn't that sour smile etch a piece of copper. She knows Cecil never will beat me singles, and she'd have had a pup if she'd beat me even in doubles."

Prentiss stared in amazement at the girl, gloating. It was some silly rivalry—the girls always meeting in the finals of the state championships and Mary always winning.

"You shouldn't gloat," he reproved, as if to a child. "It isn't sporting."

"Sporting? Was it sporting of her to pull in Jackson as her partner? Why, he's too good. That's all the old lady brought him up for—slipping him in as Cecil's partner so's they could give me a trimming. But it didn't work. Oh, partner, you were really fine. I could kiss you."

She turned to him, her face glowing. And then, suddenly and unreasonably, in the seclusion of the shrubbery, he found himself flooded by a sensation he hadn't experienced for years—the sense of the nearness of a woman. As if a transparent curtain had rolled up, he became instantly aware of her physical being. There was the brown warmth of her forearms and neck, the warm smell of perspiration, the scent of hair.

He was so amazed at his own response, so shocked at himself, that he reproved his own senses Puritanically. It was unthinkable . . .

"Well, we can shake hands," he said, stiffly.

Instead of dispelling the tension, his answer seemed only to communicate it to the young woman. Her face seemed to glow more warmly.

“Yes,” she said.

She held out her hand and he shook it. She turned quickly and went past him to the path, and then waved.

“See you at the boathouse in five minutes,” she said, and hurried away without waiting for him.

Prentiss went to his bungalow. In the lower drawer of the bureau he found swimming trunks—three pairs. He took a blue pair with white belt, and changed quickly. By the door of the bathroom he glanced into the full-length mirror, and there he halted. With satisfaction he noted that he was lean enough. Forty-three hadn’t brought him a protruding midriff. His stomach still showed the ridge line of muscles—from crew-rowing, twenty years ago.

He looked at his face. It was still unseamed—no pouches beneath the eyes. Only a slight crinkle line. His mustache had a few gray hairs. But then his mustache was lighter than his dark-brown hair, and in the bargain it was cropped Guardee fashion, and the gray hardly showed.

Suddenly he turned away with a feeling of such distaste as he might have had if he’d caught another man staring at himself in the looking glass. He felt a little—a little unclean.

He put on his robe and sandals, and went down the path to the boathouse. She was there on the dock, dabbling her feet in the water. Her white sharkskin bathing suit was almost blindingly white in the sun.

“Hello,” he said, casually.

“Hi,” she said.

He sat beside her and they were silent. As if this were unbearable, she jumped up.

“I’ll get the canoe,” she said. “Let’s paddle.”

He got up to aid her, but she was pulling it along more dextrously than he could have done, and he was aware of it. She leaned down from the dock and held it for him. He stepped in, feeling the insecurity of the craft. Then she followed him and pushed off. He took the paddle. After all, he thought, it wasn’t more fragile than a rowing shell.

He slipped the gown from his shoulders, and paddled, intently. He found that his eyes were focused on the breasts of Mary’s bathing suit where the nipples showed in relief through the fabric. Quickly he looked up at the mountains.

“This is good fun,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “But you’ll get awful sunburned. You’d better pull over in the shade there—down by those willows.”

He paddled over, and she caught the overhead branches and held the canoe steady. She looked at him in appraisal.

“My, your skin’s white,” she said, frankly.

He looked down at the blue-whiteness of his body. Somehow he felt a little ashamed. There was an unhealthy look to white skin—among all these dark-bronze Indian-like creatures—like the body of a snail pulled from its shell.

“Why, yes,” he said. “You see, in England we don’t have as much sun as you do. More rain—and fog, you know.”

“I wouldn’t like that,” she said. “Of course, I’d like England, I think. We were going over, and then they had to start this war.”

She spoke as if it were a personal irritation—something done just to spite her. A fringe of guilt touched his mind. That he should be lolling in a canoe on a lake, when back home there was war—it didn’t seem right. She was speaking again.

“You know, you were awfully good on the court. You’re a good player—you’ve got funny form, but you’re a good player.”

“I used to play quite a lot when I was young.”

“Young? You’re not old. I don’t think anyone is old until—oh—until they’re past forty.”

“I’ve turned forty,” he said.

“Oh. Why—you only look about thirty. You look awfully young. Just nicely sort of grown up, I mean. You know . . .”

“Well, thank you. I didn’t feel awfully young on the court. In that first set I thought my lungs would burst.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” she assured him, quickly. “That’s just the altitude. Didn’t you know? You see, we’re more than a mile high here. I don’t notice it much, but lots of people, why, they can hardly walk up the front steps without resting to get their breath. But if you keep on, I always think it passes soon. That’s what you did. You kept on, and afterwards it wasn’t so bad. That’s the British way, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“I think it is. You British, you always keep at it. That’s what I like about Englishmen. They don’t quit. Now, you kept on going, and we came back and outlasted them. Really we shouldn’t have beat Jackson, not on tennis. But we did on guts. You were getting stronger and he was all pooped out.”

She stretched her arms.

“Oh, it’s nice here, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s too nice.”

“Too nice?”

He assayed his own thoughts.

“You see, over home—there’s a war on. One feels terribly guilty, lolling here, taking things easy.”

“Well, somebody has to come over here and buy supplies,” she said, complacently. “And since you’ve got to wait, you might as well wait comfortably here as in that smelly hotel. I hate it.”

“That’s true, I suppose,” he smiled.

She looked up at her hand and arm, holding to the green translucence of the overhead willows. Then she dropped her head and looked at him from under her eyelashes.

“You know,” she said. “You’re an awfully good sport.”

“Am I? What about?”

“Oh, you are. I can always tell. So, I’m going to tell you something. You’re trying to get a contract or something from Uncle Mickey, aren’t you?”

“Well, we’re discussing . . .”

“I know. It’s all supposed to be quiet, I imagine. But that’s what you’d be here for. Well, you’re a good sport, so I’ll tell you something. You want to get a good contract, don’t you?”

“Not for me—for my Government, of course.”

“I know, but if you got a good contract for your Government, that would help you—and help your reputation.”

He stared at the girl, trying to adjust his mind to her utterly realistic way of looking at his life.

“The contract’s the primary thing,” he said, stiffly. “My personal part in it is incidental.”

“I know. That’s the British way of putting it. But all the same, no matter what, it’s because—well—because I like you that I’ll tell you.”

She looked about as if for eavesdroppers, and then bent forward.

“If you want a good contract, just don’t try to hurry Uncle Mickey. If you try to hurry him, he gets hard to deal with—in everything. Just don’t bring it up. All you do, is stay here, and every chance you get—tell him how wonderful you think it is on the ranch—and how much you like the West.

“Tell him you don’t like the East, but if you had your way, you’d live the rest of your life out West. Tell him you’d even leave England, perhaps—although with regret. Tell him England and this part of the country are just alike, and you love them both . . .”

“But, my dear young lady, I couldn’t do that. I’ve already told him the ranch is magnificent. And it is.”

“Well, that’s fine. Now he likes you—or he wouldn’t ask you up here, not to stay. You’re all right if you told him you like it here—and said it really convincingly. Because—you know what?”

“What?”

“He’s funny about this place—my great-aunt Mary—I’m named after her—well, she designed it, see? And if anybody says anything about it!

“Once he heard someone laugh about the glassed porch. And he was so mad. And sometimes—well, I’ll tell you. Sometimes when people are coming up here—even big businessmen and so on—he sometimes puts on blue jeans and an old hat and shirt, and goes puttering round like he’s a workman, and listens to what they say. And if anybody says anything about Aunt Mary’s ranch house he doesn’t like—well, when they get back to the guest house, their bags are all packed and there’s a note telling them the chauffeur’s waiting with the car.”

“No, you’re making it up.”

“All right. But all the same, if you want a good contract, you just stay here as if you never wanted to leave, and don’t hurry him, and first he’ll give you a hat and then,

when he gets round to it, he'll give you a business deal you couldn't pry out of him any other way."

"A hat?"

"Yes—when he likes anyone, he gives them a Stetson—a ten-gallon one!"

Prentiss stared at the young woman. Sometimes she was so wrapped in dignity, and then, oddly, she often became so absurdly childish in her ways. He smiled to himself.

"I thank you, at any rate, for trying to help me."

"That's all right," she said. "That's because I like you."

She said it so openly that he found nothing to do except to smile in what he hoped was an avuncular manner—the adult to the child.

Just as he was beginning to suspect that the smile might look more fatuous than avuncular, she pulled the branches and sent the canoe out into the open water. She began snapping on a white bathing cap. She buttoned the strap under her chin, and became a white-helmeted Indian.

"Swim," she said.

She rolled overboard and began swimming away, leaving him sitting in the canoe, undecided as to what to do.

He paddled the canoe slowly after her. Her arms were going in the crooked uplift of the crawl. Behind her the beating feet left a trail like the wake of a ship. It was machine-perfect swimming. Like everything else—standardized and mass-produced.

And yet—yet he was aware of the comparative ineffectiveness of his own old-fashioned trudgeon stroke. He decided not to swim—just to paddle the canoe after her.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SOUTH COAST of England had never had such fine weather. The weather stayed fine and the mid-August sun shone and the clouds seemed very high up in the air.

In that fine weather the German planes came over the Channel by day and by night. But by day the R.A.F. was going up in Hurricanes and Spitfires and knocking them down all over the fair South Coast and the Channel—knocking them down at four to one—getting nearly a hundred a day that week.

People looking up to that rare sky, seeing the dogfights on the coast, began to grow confident. They began to think of the R.A.F. pilots as young demigods, who joyfully charged up into a Valhalla of blue, gladly calling "Tally-ho" to each other through their microphones when they sighted squadrons two, three, four times their own number.

People were proud and got confidence back. If that was all war was—gay adventure for young men far up in the sky—then war wasn't so bad. The sky was vast and remote, and the land was never so fair-faced as in this glorious weather.

Only the old soldiers hated the weather and thought of invasion and what might come when the enemy organized his bases twenty miles away. And they grew to hate the sunshine and longed for fog, rain, bad weather. For they knew from the last war what bad weather could do to an offensive. They knew what it could do to stop horses and men and machines.

They remembered mud in Flanders, and how the passage of a single division could so churn up a road that caissons and guns and limbers and trucks would start sinking in the ooze. They remembered how, in those days, men even muddier than the machines would pry and sweat and swear one whole day just to get a truck from a ditch onto the *pavé*. Cars were bad. Trucks worse. Horses—they were the worst of all, somehow worse than men.

For you soon got used to seeing humans in gray uniforms dead, and humans in khaki uniforms dead, and learned to pass them with no feeling about death and no curiosity about what the men had been—unless it was to go through the pockets. For they might have something—some possession—that could no longer serve them, being dead, but might well serve the living.

That way you felt about dead humans; but it did not seem fair that horses should die, and so you fought harder to save them. The horses would plunge and struggle in the mud. The men would pry under their bellies with timbers, and shout and lash and spur them. The animals would leap and bucket in strange spurts of energy. Then, suddenly, they would stop.

After that you knew no shouting, no lashing, no spurring, would make them move any more. They had given up. They would rest there, their bellies going deeper in the mud. Their eyes would be softly calm then, for they had made a peace with war and mankind.

When they got like that, nothing was any use. The man who had driven them, who had groomed them and polished their harness for the divisional transport horse shows, would keep going around to the other men, asking them to get shovels and try digging them out. But everyone knew it was no use and finally someone always took his Lee-Enfield and shot them. Sometimes the driver would beg for help until only the neck and head of the horse showed above the mud and he would hold on to the bridle, holding the head high to prevent the horse from drowning; but in the end it was the same. Someone always shot those horses.

They were better off that way—far better off than men who got into the mud. Better off than the men who got hit in pushes like Passchendaele, where if you fell off the duckboards you began drowning in mud.

That's why the Passchendaele push was made with such "a remarkably low figure of wounded." The wounded didn't live.

The first waves went in carrying slatted wooden duckboards to lay down in the mud, and if a man got hit and fell off the duckboards, he just drowned slowly in the mud and never got to a dressing station.

Or sometimes the wounded got off the duckboards of their own accord. The Canadian Colonel who was hit mortally saw the men piling up behind him, waiting to get past. So he said to the major: "Shove me over and take 'em past. We can't hold up the whole bloody regiment for one man." So they rolled him off and he drowned in the mud, too, watching his regiment go by.

Afterwards those things sound impossible, or they sound artificial and bad; but at the time they were real and hard and brave. For no man wants to die, especially slowly in mud that grips like a thousand suction cups. Yet that was the way they died, knowing the stretcher-bearers couldn't get them back down the duckwalks without holding up the whole advance.

So in a way, the horses were better off. You could shoot the horses; but it tears the intestines out of you to shoot your own wounded. You can talk of it easily, or read it easily in a story; but when it comes to doing it, you know you are cursed and are doing something that you are going to remember every night as you go to sleep or at inexplicable moments: as you lift a glass to say "Cheeroh" to someone, or as you stand in a crowded elevator, or as you open your mouth at a party to say "Double two spades." All the rest of your life—if you are lucky enough to get out and have any more life.

So if you possibly could, you did something easier and simpler and more cowardly. You would turn your head the other way.

That's the way you did it if you could. You went on, turning your head so that you could pretend you didn't see them. And you would pretend you couldn't hear them.

But you could hear them. They would call: "Chum! Chum! Hey—please! Please, chum! For Christ's sake—please!"

You would go on just exactly the same as you do in a city when a beggar tries to stop you and you don't want to argue with him or give in to him. You would go on, merely saying to yourself that it would all be the same in the end. Death would get everyone sooner or later. Even if the war did end, death would come some time—a few more years. So you couldn't really help them.

But you wished to hell they would die and get it over with and not linger there to put any more mental strain on you. You had enough to do as it was; fighting in the war and trying to keep alive. You wished to hell all men had the decency to drown quickly in the mud and stop calling. Because, in the end, it would all be the same.

That was the way it was in a bad weather push, and the old soldiers who came out alive, to live among civilians and yet be forever shut apart from them, remembered it.

And so, when people felt that the war was a sad thing, but after all, far away, and said: "But at least, we've got beautiful weather," the old soldiers would say inside themselves: "Oh, Christ—they don't know what they're going to be in for yet. They don't know! He's twenty miles away! If it would only rain—cats, dogs, and corruption! If it would only rain!"

But the weather stayed beautiful and the blessed gardens of England were never more perfect.

And there were only the youngsters of the R.A.F., going up against triple their own force, to prove to the enemy that no matter what their leaders had been, the common man was not decadent or soft.

So while Britain was still re-arming, the R.A.F. shot German planes out of the sky from the Thames to Lands End and back again.

That was the way the invasion of England was stopped. The enemy was forced to think up new plans for softening Britain. But no one knew that then, and the R.A.F. kept on knocking him out of the faultless sky all along that aged, sleepy, green South Coast.

They lay on their backs on the cliff top, almost drugged with the warm sun, and only half-awake when the tiny sound, as of a far-off, slow rending of cloth came.

"It's funny, you hear so plainly—yet you can't see them," she said.

He did not open his eyes.

"Sound travels," he said. "Watch for when they bank. You'll see the sun glint on their wings."

They were quiet, until, with a quickly rising roar, a V-shaped flight of Hurricanes snarled low over the cliff, swung out over the sea, and moved in a great climbing arc.

"It's magnificent—what they're doing," she said.

He laughed quickly.

"Well, isn't it? They're shooting them down four for one."

"I didn't say they're not, did I?"

"The way you laughed—you'd think we weren't. And we are."

"Are we?"

“The B.B.C. says so.”

“Then we’re doing fine.”

“Well, what do you want us to do?”

“You figure it out,” he said. “You figure it out. Now let’s drop the war.”

“You say something and then want to drop the subject. What on earth do you want us to do?”

“I’m not the general staff. Ask them.”

“I ask you. Don’t you think we’re doing all we can?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t. We’re not even awake. We’re running around gabbling in a nightmare. We’re still doing what we’ve been doing for years—hoping something will happen that will let us forget the whole business and go back to the comfortable way we were.

“We’re hoping the French will revolt and fight again. We’re hoping Jerry will let the war sink into stagnation so that we can settle down to a nice war of attrition where no one suffers much—except the poorer classes of people who usually develop malnutrition and kindred resultant diseases from blockades. But they usually develop them during peace conditions, too, so they should be quite used to it and content about it.

“Or we’re hoping the Germans will run short of petrol—or that they’ll read in history books that the British Isles really mustn’t be attacked or invaded. Or we’re hoping Hitler will fall and break his neck—or get assassinated by someone—or die of apoplexy—or eat a can of bad meat and die of ptomaine, or pick some toadstools instead of mushrooms . . .”

“Don’t be silly.”

“It’s true. It’s true. For years the British Government has been a Micawber Government—hoping—oh, hoping so badly—that something would turn up to stop Hitler. That’s been our policy. And nothing has turned up. It won’t turn up. I don’t know where our country’s going, but Hitler’s people know where he’s going. Because he’s written it in a book for them—and us to read. He always said where he’s going and he’s on his way. God bless the Micawbers of Britain, he’s on his way.”

“Why do you talk like that?”

“Why not? You asked me. I told you.”

She did not answer. For a long time they lay, staring up, feeling they were as far apart as the expanse of sky. Then she said, softly:

“Clive.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you think Churchill is good?”

“Yes. He’s good. That’s why they’ve kept him out of power for all these years. But I don’t think he can pull us through now, until all the others understand.”

“What others?”

“The Cabinet and the staff. Our military staff has no more idea of what it’s about than you, my innocent young woman.”

“Our staff doesn’t know anything about it—but you—you do?”

“All right, I do.”

“You know more than our general staff?”

“Strangely enough, I do.”

He rolled over and shook his finger at her.

“Come right down to it, I do! And I’ll tell you why. It’s because Hitler’s a guttersnipe. And we’ve got a Government and a general staff that was educated at Eton and Sandhurst—and they’re still thinking in terms of ‘Sporting, old man!’ and ‘That’s not cricket, what?’ Well, Hitler isn’t interested in sport or cricket. It isn’t even a question of a war as our generals and statesmen have been bred to conceive it. It’s a world idea. And it’s a guttersnipe’s world idea. And our jolly old gentry will never understand it, nor even realize it—until he teaches them. And I don’t know what the lesson will be—but I do know that lesson will be paid for by thousands of our lives.

“Yes. I have a better chance of understanding Hitler than all your blue bloods in the world. I ought to, because I’m what they’re not. I’m a guttersnipe myself.”

“Clive!”

“Well, I am. I’m one of the lower classes, you know. You pointed that out to me.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“You did, the day before yesterday.”

“Well, I don’t keep bringing it up. You do. It’s an obsession with you. Why is it?”

He did not answer. She put her hand to his face.

“Clive. You’ve got a sort of a complex about it. And you shouldn’t have. No matter how you were born, you’ve risen above it—made yourself into something—fought your way up. Why, you’re educated—far more truly educated than thousands of men and women who’ve been to universities and colleges. A man can rise above his background.”

“How nice,” he said. “You say it just like a Victorian novel. Rising above my background—and how decent you’re being to admit it. The assets of democracy. I hate my own petty attitude in having brought the matter up—and I hate more your smug attitude in trying to put it down.”

She drew in her breath.

“You know,” she said, tensely, “I often wonder why I came here with you. Why, of all the people in the world, it should be you that I picked.”

“You know why,” he said.

“No, I swear I don’t. Or I do—and that’s it. That’s what we came for. That’s the only real contact we have—getting into bed together. That’s all the good I am.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he said.

He stared down at the ground, but she was silent so long, and sat so still, that at last he looked up, and saw she was crying. All he felt was surprise that a face, normally so beautiful, should become so ugly and contorted by tears. He looked down at the ground so that he should not see.

“Why?” she said. “Why? You mustn’t do it. We mustn’t do it. I know you’re not torturing me—it’s hitting at yourself through me. When we don’t do this, we’re so happy.”

“Well,” he said. “It’s our last afternoon. Let’s go down and eat and get packed up—and tomorrow it’ll be over.”

He held out his hand to her without looking at her, and they went down from the cliff toward the town.

Afterwards, in Mine Host’s, he looked at her suddenly and put out his hand.

“Prue,” he said. “It’s no use talking about it. But . . .”

“I know,” she said. “Don’t talk. I know. It was just that I wanted it to be nice—our last afternoon together . . .”

He got up impulsively, and went to her. He cupped her face in his hands and bent and kissed her.

“You’re sweet,” he said.

“No. I’m all ugly. Wait until I fix my face.”

He watched her dabbing with the powder, bowing her head and turning it from side to side as a woman does when trying to see herself in a tiny compact mirror. When she was done, she looked up and smiled.

“Now I feel better,” she said. “Am I all right?”

He stood with his back to the fireplace and cocked his head on one side.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“No, I’m not.”

“Listen. That’s one thing I don’t lie about. To me, you look beautiful. Very beautiful, in fact. Really, don’t you think you’re beautiful? I mean—can’t you see it?”

“No,” she said. “I only know that my face is my face, and I’m not entirely satisfied with it. Of course, I know I’m not ugly—you can tell—what people say and—and the way men look.”

“That’s so,” he said. “I wish he’d hurry the dinner.”

He teetered on his toes by the fireplace.

“It’s nice here,” she said. “Do you know, we never argue here?”

“We don’t argue,” he said. “Only when we talk war. Let’s not mention it again for the rest of the time.”

“All right,” she said. “But there’s so little time. Only about twelve more hours.”

“It went fast,” he said. “What’ll you do, Prue—with the rest of your leave?”

“Oh, go home and spend it with the family.”

“Well, we could go up on the same train.”

“Where are you meeting Monty?”

“Oh—a pub we know. The Britannia.”

“We could take the same train. I ought to be back in uniform for my grand entry home again.”

“Change in the train again.”

“Go in a civilian, come out one of His Majesty’s forces.”

“That’s right.”

“How about you? You know, I’ve never seen you in uniform. You’d be so handsome.”

“Terrific!”

“You would.”

“You should hear the dainty patter of my ammunition boots.”

He stretched himself.

“Oh, hell,” he said. “In a way, I wish I hadn’t promised Monty—but he’s a great chap, and I couldn’t let him down.”

“Of course not.”

“Look, couldn’t I call you up in London—we could get together.”

“I don’t know. If I got home, the family would grab me, and I’d never have a minute.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Please, now don’t start anything, darling. I just meant that—it isn’t I wouldn’t be glad to see you, but families are the devil. They’d arrange for every minute of my time.”

“How many in your family?”

“Just me—father, mother, me.”

“I see. Oh, well, at that you’ll have a better time with them than you would here with me.”

“I never want to quarrel with you, darling. And really, truly, you don’t want to quarrel with me, do you?”

He stood by the fire, his face blank. Then, slowly, he passed his hand over his face.

“What is it?” she said. “What’s the matter?”

He looked at her in astonishment.

“Nothing,” he said. “I just said, we won’t quarrel any more. That’s all.”

CHAPTER XIX

Iris Cathaway looked from the cottage window at the rolling Somerset land. The evening light was gathering under the pendulous branches of the apple orchard beyond the quiet lane.

Suddenly, perhaps because of some influence of the dying day, she felt weak, hopeless. There was no one to lean on. She felt the world was unfair to her.

She heard Mills come in. The woman must have sensed her mood. She spoke less crisply than usual.

"It's nothing to worry about, ma'am. Probably only the excitement of moving. A single degree of fluctuation in temperature in a child is nothing."

Iris looked up at Mills, knowing what she would see rather than seeing it. The nurse was the tall, rawboned, toothy type—angular and efficient and seemingly cold.

"I wonder if it's good for them here," she said.

"It's perfectly healthy, if that's what you mean."

Mills said it primly.

"You don't like it here, do you?" Iris said.

"It's all right, ma'am. But it certainly is better than Leaford. Everything there was—so deserted."

As if she had committed herself too much, Mills stalked back to the children's room. Iris sat in the dimming light, and was slowly re-enveloped by her mood. She felt dreadfully lonely. She pitied herself in her loneliness, and sought justification for it.

She sat, unmoving in the chair, recounting to herself the myriad minute justifications of the case—the little incidents marching back over the last three years. It was as if she were arguing a case at law.

The slowly mounting bits of grievances against Hamish began to fit into a pattern. She began to feel warm and satisfied again. The pattern of her own grievances wrapped about her like a shawl and she found comfort in them, and rested in them as before a fire.

Suddenly she started. But—suppose a court gave him the children! She made a sound of exasperation. The thought had destroyed the warm satisfaction her own arguments had given her. She sat in thought a long time, wrinkling her brow. Then she rose. With many sounds of exasperation she lit the old-fashioned oil lamp. She got paper and pen from the leather writing set in her bedroom, and began writing:

Dear Prentiss:

How do you like America, and how do you do with the Yankees? Things are dull here. As you see, I am now in Somerset with the children.

I wonder if you could tell me about things in the United States. Is it livable there? Is the climate as severe as reputed? One hears constantly of floods, cyclones, hurricanes, earthquakes, and so on. Yet newspapers constantly exaggerate most things—so why not these?

I might, if I can, run across there with the children. It would be safe for the duration. There have been desultory bombings here—the papers say mostly in open fields. If one can believe newspapers. I hardly think there will be much more than that, and if so, it seems logical that it will be on military objectives. That is why I am here. There are no places of military importance near by. But really it is quite ghastly—the cottage is most primitive—and you've no idea how people in these quieter rural districts have taken advantage of the situation with regard to rents. One feels fortunate in getting even such a primitive place as this. In fact, I write this by light of an oil lamp.

At all events, let me hear from you. I suppose Clipper service will get this across fairly promptly.

My best to you.

—Iris

She sat back and stared through the patch of light. She felt better satisfied now.

At least, it was a feeler. An iron in the fire. There were so many reasons why America sounded good. It was safe—for the children. And then—if anything *did* happen between her and Hamish—if by any chance it should—the children would be safe in another sense. She had always heard that the British law was so unfairly prejudiced in favor of the father in cases concerning children.

But in America—that built a set of entirely new circumstances.

Not, of course, that she was going to America to get the children beyond Hamish's legal control. It was for their safety—but if the other matter did come up . . .

She took up her letter again and added a postscript:

P.S.—Tell me all about America. What it's like. I would like to see it for myself, and now seems like a good time. Could you help get me over there now?

She re-read the letter and then added:

The children, too, of course.

CHAPTER XX

He lay in the bed, watching her move about the room.

"You really ought to get up, darling," Prudence said. "Or *we'll* miss the train, and *you'll* miss your date with Monty."

He put his hands behind his head.

"No, we won't. There's no hurry."

"I'm almost dressed."

"So I see."

She went to the window, and looked out.

"It's a beautiful day. Do men like to watch women?"

"I'm not watching women. I'm watching you."

"Why do you watch me? That's what I don't understand."

"You charm my eye. You're pretty—and very beautifully built."

"Thank you. You feel happy this morning, don't you?"

She sat on the bed.

"You know," she said. "I suppose that's been said so many times before. As long as life has gone on. Millions of years. Millions of times. The same speech: 'You're very pretty,' and so on."

"But each time it sounds all right. You like to hear it, don't you?"

"Of course. But when you think how long it's been going on, it makes you feel a bit insignificant."

"Thinking of eternity always does. Eternity and a Stuka bomb are two things that shrink the ego."

"But going on so many ages—millions of years."

"Yes, sex is pretty old—it keeps on happening. Maybe the first words ever spoken were: 'Will you?' "

"No, probably they didn't ask. They just—well, it began."

"Cave man stuff. All right. The same thing without trimmings."

She sat a moment, and then jumped up.

"Do get up. We're late now."

He stretched his arms and lay comfortably. She sat inspecting a stocking.

"Clive."

“Yes?”

“You said I was beautifully built.”

“You are. You want to hear it again?”

“It isn’t that. How do you know?”

“Anyone can see it.”

“Yes, but how do you know. You have to have—well, a basis of comparison.”

“What you’re trying to find out is: how many other women I’ve seen *au naturel*?”

“Well, more or less. That’s putting it baldly but very nicely.”

“Baldly is correct.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Oh, don’t be difficult. You know—have you seen a lot of women—to know?”

“Hundreds.”

“Hundreds! Isn’t that a lot?”

“No.”

“But wouldn’t it be rather wearisome?”

“Perhaps so.”

“I should think so. And it must have taken so much time.”

“No.”

“Well, it must—hundreds . . .”

“It serves you right. I saw them on the stage, in choruses, in the cinema. That’s one thing about cinema. You can always count on either the girl taking a bath during the story for the masculine trade—or the hero taking a shower to give the girl fans a thrill. But just see what that’s done to mass standards. Set new levels to aim at. In the old days a man had to work on rather small personal experience. Now everyone knows what all Hollywood looks like in a nightie or less. And see what that does! In old days, a man was content with what he had. He might get a girl with a shape like a sack of sawdust tied in the middle, and accept her as Aphrodite. Now he knows different. He measures her up to the standards of the screen sirens. Thus the whole standard of feminine form is raised.”

“You talked out of that nicely.”

“Oh, do you want details? Did I ever tell you about the seraglio I was in—in Marseilles?”

“You’ve never been to Marseilles.”

“What’ll you bet?”

“Did you see anyone—nicer than me?”

“Not a one. You’re Venus, Galatea. Lady Godiva, Sappho . . .”

“How nice. Just why am I—beautifully built?”

“Well, you’re pretty sound in the pelvis yet you’re not fat in the rump, and your legs are slim, and your thighs aren’t cushioned with lard, and you don’t have pneumatic tires

on your stomach, and your muscles aren't broken on your breasts—although they're a little on the teacup size—but the nipples are nicely placed in the rosettes and . . ."

"Please. I'm embarrassed. You can't have noticed all that."

"It is a bit embarrassing, isn't it. Yet it's silly that it should be."

"I'll try and get used to the idea. Tell me some more."

"No, that's enough before breakfast."

"Look, darling. You must get up. We'll never catch the ten o'clock if you don't. We've only twenty-five minutes."

"If we miss it we miss it. I've got to bathe yet."

"That'll take you hours."

"Well, it's a half-hour route march to the bathroom. And half-hour back . . ."

"But you'll look so pretty in your new dressing gown."

"Pretty! You don't say a man looks pretty. You say he's handsome, manly, dashing, virile, appealing, masculine, well-tubbed, well-groomed, curried or mucked out. But *not* pretty. Maybe I'm devastating, or godlike . . ."

"You're all of them, darling, except your legs. If you'll only . . ."

"Then I'll stay in bed."

"No, darling. Even your legs are handsome. Here's your gown. I'll order breakfast for when you come back."

The sun was striking hard down on the napery and silver when he came back. He stood at the door, looking at the way the refracted and reflected lights burnished her face in the shade. She lifted the teapot and smiled. Without speaking he went and sat by the table at the window. Because he was silent she said:

"You must get your hair cut, darling."

"You won't be seeing it," he said. "It's short enough."

She ignored the first part of what he'd said.

"Yes, but just at the back," she said, quickly. "It should be clean there—because you've a very nice back to your neck."

"I'll try to keep it toward you, then. How's that?"

"No. Do eat. We've missed the first train now."

"Then why hurry?"

"Oh," she said. "Because—I like to get unpleasant things done when you have to do them."

He put down his cup.

"You mean that, don't you?"

"Of course," she said.

He held his cup and stared down from his window at the dancing sun spots on the sea.

"We've lots of time," he said.

“Well, let’s get something definite. What time do you have to meet your friend?”

“Monty? Oh, some time.”

“Don’t be exasperating, Clive. What time?”

“Oh, no time. I just said I’d drop in the Britannia threeish. But he’ll be around and wait if I’m not there.”

“But we’ll miss the eleven, too, Clive. And the next good one is after two. That won’t get you there in time and . . .”

“Then I’ll telegraph him and say I’ll be late. Now is that all right?”

“That would be better, I suppose.”

“All right, then. Now I’ll get dressed, and if we make the eleven o’clock train, all right. And if we don’t—I’ll telegraph.”

“All right, eat your breakfast and hurry.”

The clerk looked over the desk in a minor panic.

“I’ll have it done in a moment, sir,” he said.

“But we’re trying to catch a train,” Prudence said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I told you last night we’d be leaving this morning,” Clive said.

The clerk put down his pen.

“Mr. Briggs,” he said. “Every night since you’ve been here, you’ve come and told me you were leaving in the morning. And every morning you’ve ignored what you’ve told me. And every time I’ve had the statement prepared and ready. Until this time. One cannot cry wolf all the time, Mr. Briggs! Not all the time!”

Prudence and Clive stared at the little man. It was as if all the resentment in his soul had erupted and colored the tone of his voice. Yet his outburst was unexpected—as if a caterpillar had started to lead a revolt.

Clive began to laugh; but Prudence stopped.

“You shouldn’t laugh,” she said. She turned to the clerk. “You’re perfectly right. And we’re sorry. Now we can’t catch the train, so we’ll go out and take luncheon, and then come back for the statement and catch a later train.”

The clerk looked at her tearfully.

“I’m sorry I spoke like that, madam, but you understand how . . .”

“Of course,” she said.

She pulled Clive’s arm.

“You shouldn’t laugh,” she said, as they went out into the sunlight. “I suppose we’ve driven him mad.”

Clive did not answer. He walked along, laughing. She shook his arm angrily, and then she laughed, too.

At Mine Host’s they sat in the booth.

“Shouldn’t we order lunch?” she said.

“We just had lunch.”

“That was breakfast, darling.”

“It was so late it felt like lunch. I’m not hungry—unless you are.”

“I’m not hungry either.”

“Let’s just have another drink, then,” he said.

“I haven’t started this one yet.”

“Then let’s start conversation. Did you know conversation was a lost art? Answer quickly.”

She bowed her head and traced with her forefinger on the dampness outside her glass.

“Come on,” he said. “That’s easy. You should say: ‘Who lost it and where?’ ”

“Should I?”

“Oh, yes. Then I tell you it’s a lost art—like tempering bronze and cutting stone with obsidian and constructing dew ponds and building Stonehenge and why.”

She did not answer.

“Come on,” he said. “Can’t you even make conversation about making conversation?”

She looked up quickly.

“You see, you *are* educated, Clive. You know so much. How did you learn all that if you have no formal education?”

“Miraculous faculty for absorbing useless information—Tid-Bits, Comic Cuts—read everything.”

She looked up through the window beside her. She lifted her hand and ran a knuckle round the whorl in the old glass.

“I suppose you know how they got these things in old glass, too,” she said.

“I have an idea. They didn’t mean to get them in. Just happened when they poured it. They didn’t know how to roll panes then. I suppose that’s it.”

She nodded her head.

“How many more days have you, Clive?”

“I don’t count them.”

“Of course you do.”

“You know—five more. Tomorrow, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.”

“It went fast, didn’t it?”

“It flew.”

She was quiet and he looked at her suddenly. Then he reached out and took her hand.

“Look here, Prue—you’re not sorry? Sorry you came?”

“No,” she said. “You know that. I’m glad it happened.”

“All but for my temper. What I mean to say is—I’m sorry I quarreled. You didn’t mind much, did you?”

“It wasn’t anything, really. We got over it. Why, we haven’t quarreled all day today. People have—have to make adjustments.”

“I should have been a bit more of an adjuster.”

“Do you think it was because we were getting more used to each other? Do you think people grow closer, and then finally don’t quarrel at all?”

“That may be true.”

She looked through the window.

“Another beautiful day,” she said. “A very nice day. Very, *very* nice . . .”

He thumped his glass, as if angry.

“Come on, drink up.”

“I feel a bit squiffy now.”

“All right. We can’t have you arriving home rolling in the lee scuppers.”

“Why always lee scuppers? Running with blood. What’s wrong with the windward scuppers?”

“They’re uphill—must be. Everything rolls into the lee scuppers.”

“Of course—how simple. Look, Clive, we ought to start. We’ve got to get back to the hotel and get the luggage . . .”

“No hurry.”

“But I detest being late at trains. I always like to have time.”

“Oh, hell,” he said. “I wish I hadn’t promised Old Monty. But he’s such a real chap—I’d hate to let him down.”

“I understand—of course you couldn’t.”

“If I hadn’t promised, by God, I wouldn’t go for anything, Prue. You know that. I’m not cutting away because—because I’m tired of it.”

“I know that, darling. You’ve got to go out and have fun—with men. You’ve only five more days and then . . .”

He sat looking at his hands. Then he lifted his eyes to her face. She turned away and looked from the window.

“Oh, Christ,” he said.

He thumped the table and got up.

“I’ll go telegraph Monty I’ll be late.”

She sat by the window, feeling the minutes tick away. She finished her drink, and sat, rocking her head slightly as if in answer to some induced rhythm. Then she heard him coming. She looked up at his face. He was grinning.

“Now, all fixed,” he said. “Uncle fix everything. We’ve time for lunch.”

“Well, what train will we take?”

“None. We’re not going.”

She shook her head, slowly.

“But—Monty?”

He waved his hand.

“Oh, that’s all right. I sent him a telegram saying I was unavoidably detained—that’s the correct phrase. But if he felt like it, he could run down here for a binge. You’ll like Monty. Aren’t you glad?”

She put her hand to her throat, in a halting gesture.

“You really want to stay?”

“What the hell do you think I did it for?”

She swallowed and smiled.

“You’re an idiot, darling.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I am, aren’t I? But all the same we stay.”

“But you’ve a wonderful mind, too.”

“Of course I have. The executive type of mind. Solve things—pop—like that. The thousand-pound-a-year mind. I wanted to stay—bang, like that! The answer came. Stay. You wanted to stay, too, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you say so?”

“A woman can’t be—be forward. I thought you might be fed up.”

“Well, isn’t it the same for a man? I thought you might be fed up.”

“I’m not, darling.”

“Give me a kiss, then.”

“Right here?”

“Well, if a man can’t kiss his own wife in a pub . . .”

He felt the awkwardness of his words.

“Well, as far as anyone else here is concerned, you’re my wife,” he said.

She held up her face. He rose and bent over the table. When he sat down again, she shook her head.

“You know,” she said, “it’s unbelievable.”

“My kisses?”

“Oh, they’re unbelievable, too. But I mean this town, this place, this window, this table, you, me, us being here. Five days ago—none of it existed. Ten days ago you didn’t exist. Then nine days and fourteen hours and about thirty minutes ago a very stuffy male voice said: ‘Shall we go to the concert; or would you rather walk?’ And you were born.”

“Was I stuffy?”

“Oh, very. I hated you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no. It wasn’t your fault. Only—it’s hard to remember it’s true. Everything’s unbelievable.”

“I get that feeling, too, sometimes. All is imagination! What was it the man said? Some day I shall revenge myself on my enemies—I shall kill myself, and thus end the world for all of them.”

“Perhaps it’s wartime that does it,” she said. “There’s so little—so little time . . . oh, let’s have lunch.”

“I’ll get Mine Host,” he said.

It was only afterwards, when they came down from the cliff top in the darkening evening, that they remembered the clerk in the hotel. They stood on the Esplanade and looked at the ornate stone front of the Channel Hotel with the acanthus-leaved panels, and the twin potted palms by the door.

“Oh, that poor little man,” she said. “He’ll have an attack of apoplexy.”

“We could get our bags and move out—and go to another hotel.”

“That’s cowardice.”

He stood, looking at the building.

“Up the rebels,” he said, finally. “Here we go.”

They came into the lobby. The assistant manager jumped into a sort of electrified activity, as if that would erase his tardiness of the morning. He nodded his head, and spoke.

“Your statement is all ready, Mr. Briggs!”

He saw them halt, stare at him, and then, as if by a single signal, turn in laughter and run to the stairs.

“Well,” he breathed to himself. “Well!”

There was nothing else for him to say. The holiday world had been torn so completely from its age-long routine that he now lived as if in a dream. If the town could be so empty in such beautiful weather—well then, anything—really anything—could happen.

Nothing would ever be real any more.

CHAPTER XXI

"At a steak fry," Lachran had boasted, "you eat steak. You're in the cattle country now."

It had sounded absurd, childishly flamboyant. And yet it was happening. Prentiss Saintby looked over the electrically lit glen. Beef! Nothing but beef! People at the long tables eating it as if it were a regional rite. No potatoes, no vegetables. Just slabs of beef.

Lachran himself, in a white apron and chef's cap, was flipping it happily onto an outdoor grill.

That was the boastful side of the American nature, Prentiss thought. The side that was so hard for a Briton to understand. The Americans were constantly springing to exaggeration to remind themselves of what they were—while the Briton constantly turned to depreciation lest he should be guilty of reminding anyone of what he assumed everyone knew he was.

There was the cult of more and bigger here, always as a sort of reminder. A man put six telephones on his desk to remind himself that he was a busy executive; they built bigger and better skyscrapers to remind themselves that they were now a bigger and better nation; they ate nothing but beef to remind themselves that they were in one of the beef-wealthiest spots on earth. The rich constantly did absurd and crudely magnificent things to remind themselves that they really were no longer poor.

Yet back of it there seemed to be a fear. There was too much fear in America. No one took anything for granted. They were afraid it might not be true.

Even the cult of bigger and better was based on fear. All the advertisements in the land seemed based on some fear. If you don't use this dentrifice, you'll have black teeth, bad dispositions, floating waistlines, and you'll lose your job. If you don't buy insurance you'll be killed suddenly, leaving a pretty but helpless wife with four children and a mortgage company ready to take the home. If you don't use this, or eat that, or buy the other thing, you'll lose your social position, your health, your beauty, your life—you'll never be slim, or beautiful, or married, or popular.

That was the mass fear. The fear of the wealthy was—that the wealth wasn't true. Of course, back in the East where the wealthy families were older, they had more poise about it. But here, it seemed as if they must constantly remind themselves of their wealth by a flamboyant gesture. Hadn't learned how to take it for granted.

But taking for granted—there was a danger in that, too. You could see that in Britain. After all, one wanted to be fair. There was a sort of rude, crude, lusty honesty

to this life—a sort of—of Elizabethan lustiness. That was it—Elizabethan.

Undoubtedly when the first great fortunes came rolling into England from the Spanish Main in Elizabeth's time, there had been the same silly, magnificent, flamboyant aspect to life—eating too much to show they had enough, drinking too much to show they could. A loud, wasteful generosity.

But had they feared as these men did?

Here, there was fear behind everything they said. Fear of the people, of their own Government. The violent hatred they voiced of "the goddam reds!" The utter depth of their antipathy to their own governmental regime. There was no political discussion. That was an important difference between England and America that he should remember. At home, he could walk into a pub and hear workmen putting up intelligent arguments for their political beliefs. Here there was only a chorus of empty phrasing. And there was no appeal through prides. Only through prejudices.

The way the wealthy spoke of Roosevelt, one would think that instead of being elected by popular and democratic majority vote, he had somehow stolen his office.

Prentiss left his thought abruptly. Lachran was advancing to him, a steak held on a long fork.

"Come on, eat up!"

"Thank you—I really couldn't. Not any more."

"You having a good time?"

"Oh, excellent."

"Now when you get back home, you can tell everyone you've been to a real American steak fry!"

Lachran was waving the fork happily. His face, under the great chef's cap, was purple with the exertions of his hospitality.

"When the King and Queen came over here," Lachran boomed, "I see where they gave 'em a hot dog roast! Hot dogs! Good God Almighty! Hot dogs! If they'd ha' come here, we'd ha' given them real man's food!"

A man clutched Lachran's shoulder.

"That was New Deal economy," he shrilled.

The people squealed in outrageous appreciation. Prentiss heard the high, strangulated laugh of a woman rising higher than the rest.

He backed away, but the man left Lachran's shoulder and clutched Prentiss's arm.

"You know, I don't think you should call Roosevelt a bastard," he said.

Prentiss drew himself up stiffly.

"I quite agree with you, sir," he said.

"No. Not unless you can't think of anything worse!"

The man bent over in laughter, and the ring of people screamed appreciatively.

Prentiss suddenly felt isolated and outrageously British. He was fearfully embarrassed. After all, it was their matter. He was an outsider and had no right to any opinion—or to express one.

Then, too, he had the deep British traditional respect for a man in office. After all, it was *the* President of the United States they were speaking of; the man holding the most august office in this country of more than one hundred million people. Yet they . . .

Probably that was democracy—being free and equal. But it was something he'd never understand.

"Pardon me," he said, stiffly.

He squared his shoulders and pulled away from the group. Quickly he left the lighted glen. Then, in but a few yards, the world changed. Behind him the lights through the pines were but a glimmer. Here the world was in moon-touched dimness. One could even see the glittering white of the snow-capped peaks far away, hanging as if detached in the light-flooded air.

Only the howl and laughter in the glen behind him remained to challenge the austerity of the place. That woman's laugh, rising in high stridency, now sounded all the more vulgar. A profanation of something splendid—the sweep of this country with its cool-wine night air—more magnificent in some ways than the Scottish Highlands.

He turned by the lake, heading up the path to his cabin. It was then he saw a moon-halated splash of white down the dock. He paused.

"Hello, there," he said, inquiringly.

"Hi!"

It was Mary's voice. He walked along the planking slowly.

"Aren't you at the party?" he said.

"Yes, don't you see me there?"

Her voice was strangely petulant. He laughed at the emptiness of his own remark under analysis. He sat beside her.

"Don't you like it up there?" he asked.

She made a quick, explosive sound with her lips, and waved her hand as if brushing something away.

"We're not supposed to stick around," she said. "They get going on stories—and anyhow, we cramp Uncle Mickey's style when he gets wound up. He doesn't like us to hear."

"Oh, I see."

"Not that I haven't heard everything worth hearing," she said, quickly. "When we were kids, we used to creep up through the trees—me and Jim—my cousin. I've heard 'em all, anyhow. Pretty filthy most of it, if you ask me."

She kicked her legs disconsolately.

"You'd better be getting back," she said.

"Oh, not at all. I'd much rather stay here—if you don't mind."

She turned her head, abruptly.

"Do you really mean that?"

"I most certainly do."

She drew in a deep breath, as if suddenly happy. Then she straightened.

“I tell you what,” she said, animatedly. “Let’s me and you do something.”

“Do something? But—er, what?”

“Oh—something. Look, we’ll get a car and go to town. How’s that?”

“Why—if it’s all right.”

“Of course it’s all right. Come on.”

She jumped up before he could move, and he followed her up the path to the garage.

“You stay here,” she said, quietly. “I’ll get a car.”

He stood in the cold light, hearing the rumble of sliding doors. He saw the glow of lights, and then, long after, the roar of an engine. The gravel spun beneath wheels and clattered tinily into the night. The headlights swept dazzlingly, and then she opened the door of a small truck.

“Hop in,” she said.

Before he was in the seat, she slipped in the clutch, and the car jumped away. The door slammed itself in the leap. He held the catch of the door, staring out onto the road where the headlights fought against the wash of the moon. The car rocked slightly at the curves and the gravel slatted up under the mudguards. He glanced at Mary. The dash light underlit her handsome face. She drove with a sort of hard, nervous intensity.

“Steady there, girl,” he said, almost involuntarily, as they rounded a curve.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I know the roads.”

He saw that she did not turn her head as she spoke.

“Aren’t there speed limits?”

“We’re still on our own roads—and nobody cares anyhow. Unless you have a smashup. I’ve been driving since I was six.”

“Six!”

“Uh-huh! Me and Jim used to swipe the cars when we were young. Once we took the Mack truck. Uncle Mickey had a Mack up here for hauling and stuff. We came down here and got it stuck at the ford, and a flashflood came down. I wish you could see what it did to that truck. It took it three miles down the canyon, and buried it under a few tons of rock.”

“But what did your uncle say?”

“Oh, he was hopping mad. Said we might have been killed, and if we ever got a car stuck in the ford again, he’d tan our hides. But right after that he got a bunch of contractors up and put the bridge in, so we don’t ford the river any more. I used to like it. See, it’s down here.”

She swung the truck over the stone and concrete bridge, and then up the ledge road on the other side where a sheer face came down to the water. He clutched the door handle.

“Don’t be scared,” she said. “This is still our road, and there’ll be nobody coming the other way.”

The car raced along, climbing up the steep, narrow road. The chasm was splendidly rugged—like a setting for the *Walküre*, Prentiss thought. He turned his eyes back to the

girl. And there was something splendid about her—a goddess of the machine—the dash light a temple lamp before her.

"There," she said.

The car was at the top.

"That wasn't bad for a light truck, was it? I wanted to get one of the cars, but they've taken all the keys out, so I had to take the pickup."

"Pickup?"

"Yes. This truck. It's what we call a pickup."

She swung the car from the road onto the open ground of the mesa, and headed back toward the canyon. Prentiss ground his teeth and pushed with his feet as if he would jam on a thousand invisible brakes. He reached for the door. At the last moment she put on the brake and the car halted at the rim of the gorge.

"Isn't that nice?" she said.

Prentiss swallowed.

"Yes," he said. "Really magnificent."

"I knew you'd like it. I like to sit here at night, and just look out!"

She threw off the lights, and immediately the tortured rock land below them came into moonlit relief. The sharp shadows cut the myriad flutings and outcroppings of the rock. It was hard to believe that the earth really contained places as impossibly wild and angular and immense as the scene before him.

"Wonderful," Prentiss said.

She lifted her arms lazily behind her head and stretched. Then she turned and looked at him.

"I like it here," she said.

As she spoke, at that moment, Prentiss again was swept by a flood of sexual awareness. Without turning his eyes he could see the girl completely—the golden-brown columns of her bare legs where the tiny dash light still shone on them; the almost Negro-black of her arms and face and throat in the moonlight.

One part of his mind was prompting him, urgently. It said: "Wake up. She has driven you here—for what?"

He turned as if on a challenge and looked at her. She turned her head, too, and looked at him frankly.

"You know," she said. "I like you!"

Even while he was surprised at his own temerity, he turned, and cradled her head. She kept her face upturned—waiting. He cupped her face and then kissed her full lips.

"You're beautiful," he said.

She smiled, slowly, as if buoyed by a satisfied and happy interior wisdom. She bowed her head and he sat upright again. Then she leaned forward to the ignition keys.

"Let's go to town," she said. "And we'll have a drink."

He pushed his hand over his brow. He was trying to read the meaning of what she had said.

“All right,” he said.

He felt, somehow, like a swimmer who has just learned to swim, and who, feeling the first exciting tug of a river current, isn’t sure whether he likes it or not.

She was backing the car. Then she raced over the open land, and onto the dirt track. The car sped, racing, down the long incline. He could smell, now, the scent of the dry flatlands—the rank odor of long-dried dust and sagebrush and baked air.

At first, as they went racing through the night, he felt strangely elated.

“She suggested it herself,” a part of his mind said. “It won’t be your fault, one way or another.”

But as the sense of physical desire ebbed from him, this feeling was replaced. He began to feel trapped. He wished he had never come. Suppose she—she were—expert—in these matters? And he was not? So long ago, at the university, he hadn’t been particularly expert that night. Things had been so terribly muddled. He had let himself be trapped.

“How—how far?” he shouted.

She smiled without turning her head.

“Forty miles. See the glow on the horizon? That’s the town. I can do it in a half-hour.”

He felt the absurdity of his position. The best thing to do was get out of it all. Tomorrow—tomorrow he would see Lachran and demand a showdown and get the whole business over with.

He sat stiffly, fortifying this resolve, until the machine reached the town—first some shacks, then dark houses, then lonesome streets with nearly all the shop-fronts dark. It was somehow ramshackle and yet had that mountain sense of cleanliness.

One lighted place glowed garishly in the night. He watched Mary nose the truck in toward the half-dozen cars by the curb and turn off the ignition.

“All right,” she said, happily.

He followed her, wondering how often she had done this, how well she knew the route to take. He wondered just where she would lead him.

Then she turned by the dazzlingly lit window in the night street.

“Here it is,” she said.

She opened the door. Prentiss following her in, stood in amazement.

Somehow he had pictured a den—a sort of Wild Western place where one sat at a pine table under the wooden balcony that led to the cubicles. And here . . .

Here was an antiseptic place alive with eye-smiting light, with white tile, with sanitary architecture, with noise. Even the magnified wail of a screechingly loud automatic music box was triumphantly defeated by that deafening noise of gabble. Youthful gabble. American youth again—too tall, too handsome, too well-fed. It was almost an abhorrent monotony of youthful handsomeness. Behind the counter similarly handsome young men and girls, indistinguishable from the others except by their white caps and uniforms of starched snowiness, were lifting great beakers. It was an outrageous conglomeration of whiteness, noise, and that strange American vitality.

And he had thought . . .

Even before he could laugh, Mary was pulling him to two vacated stools at the counter. She maneuvered him in ahead of a rush of youth from the other direction.

“Got ’em,” she said, triumphantly. “My treat. Whitey! Whitey!”

A youth with his white forage cap set at an incredible angle on the back of his blond head looked over and grinned somehow austerely.

“Less noise from the ten-cent seats,” he said.

He slid thick glasses along the tile counter, and then came over to them. His eyes swept Prentiss quickly.

“Hi, Mary,” he said, affably. “What’ll it be?”

“Jumbo malted frost,” she said. “How about you, Mr. Saintby? A malted frost is awfully good.”

“Oh, the same.”

“Two, Whitey.”

The youth swept away. With an incredible dexterity he held glasses, flipped levers, ordered whirling machines to obey. It was a perfect, time-taught poetry of motion. The glasses seemed to flow from his hand along the counter and stop before them.

“Service,” he said.

“Thanks,” Mary told him.

He put his arms on the counter, and glanced again at Prentiss, quickly. Then he said:

“Your superman’s in here.”

“Oh, my gosh,” she said. “Well, I can’t help it.”

She turned to Prentiss as Whitey moved away.

“Isn’t this a snaky place?”

“Snaky?”

“Yes. Everything’s snaky this year. Last year it was super.”

“Oh, slang.”

She nodded as she bent her head to the straws. Then she lifted it.

“Isn’t this the best ten-cent drink?”

“Oh, decidedly.”

Mary rocked her head to the drowned stridency of the music machine that not only played records, but sent out a sort of aurora borealis of strident lights from primary-colored panels of glass, where, in addition, awe-inspiring and endless bubbles of air rose through liquid-filled tubes.

“Artie Shaw,” she said. “Do you like him?”

“I don’t know him,” he said, puzzled.

“Don’t you get Artie Shaw in England? Do you like Ray Noble?”

“I don’t know him, either.”

“But Ray Noble—he’s English!”

“Is he?”

“Of course. He’s . . .”

She stopped abruptly.

“Uh-uh!” she said. “Here he comes.”

She looked round quickly. Prentiss saw a wavy-haired young man edge gloomily beside her.

“Hi, Mary,” he groaned, sadly.

“Hi, Joe College,” she said, brightly. “This is Mr. Saintby—he’s just over from England. Bill Southers!”

Prentiss felt that she said it with a curious possessiveness.

The young man looked up, blankly.

“Hi,” he said, tonelessly, and then moved away.

“Who’s that poor young chap?” Prentiss said.

“Oh, him? He’s just gloomy. Getting over a crush. Have another?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t.”

“No, that’s the trouble. They make such big ones. Check, Whitey!”

She edged from the stool as Prentiss took the slip of paper. He paid the cashier and they went back to the small truck with its square body and enclosed cab. She clicked on the switch, and backed away.

“Thanks—I was going to treat you,” she said.

As they left the town, Prentiss felt suddenly happy. It had turned out very well, he told himself. It hadn’t been what he expected—and thus he’d never had to put certain parts of him to—to a test. He was very relieved, on the whole, that it had turned out as it did.

He leaned back comfortably as the car went out over the flat, rising land. Mary flicked her eyes at him.

“That was an adequate drink, eh?”

“Yes,” he said. “And very interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“Yes. You know—seeing that part of America. I suppose that’s America, too—very typical in many ways. One likes to see things.”

“Oh. Don’t you have ice cream dives in England?”

“Not quite like that. Where do all those young people come from?”

“University. There’s a university here.”

“Oh, I see.”

Prentiss lay back. Suddenly he felt aged, alien. He sat quietly, and they did not speak again until they were at the bridge. Then she stopped the car.

“It was nice of you to go with me,” she said. “It was swell.”

She lifted her face calmly to be kissed.

Prentiss bent over and kissed her, meaning to do it casually. But as he did so, he felt again the wave of desire that was so foreign to his nature. He wished to press his hands against the fullness of her soft breasts. Even as he considered it, she straightened.

“Thanks,” she said.

She started the car and they went up the winding road, into the pine grove. By the house she turned in the garage, quietly shut off the engine, and reached for the lights. Then Prentiss started. A voice cut in, rasping, hard:

“Where’ve *you* been?”

There was anger, challenge, in the voice. Prentiss felt himself go chill, like a schoolboy caught in grave sin. It had all been harmless—but how could Lachran know that? He saw Lachran’s face by the open door.

“I just went riding with Mr. Saintby,” Mary said.

As she spoke, Prentiss saw Lachran’s face ease, and break into affability.

“Oh, *you* went with her!”

He laughed, quickly.

“Young lady,” he said. “You were just going to get particular hell. I thought you’d gone off gallivanting alone.”

He walked with them from the garage.

“You know, she has a habit of taking them goddam machines and racing all over the country. I don’t give a damn, but if she has an accident out there all alone, hell’s fire, she could lay out there all night without anyone finding her.”

“Oh, I drive perfectly well,” Mary said, angrily. “You imagine things.”

“All right,” Lachran said. “But all the same, you don’t dare drive alone all over the countryside. Now I tell you again. I got a right to have some peace of mind. It’s all right though, since you weren’t alone.”

He put his hand on Prentiss’s shoulder as they neared the rustic bridge.

“Well, I’ll be seeing you. I left something for you—sent it up to your cabin.”

“Oh, thank you,” Prentiss said. “Er—good night.”

He walked unsteadily over the narrow bridge toward his cabin. He put his hand to his brow. It was slightly damp with perspiration.

Curious, he thought, that a man could be innocent, and yet feel so guilty. Or that a young woman could be so innocent and yet sound—otherwise.

He looked at the night world about him. The moon was low, now, and the place seemed darker.

A paradise. But a sort of foolish paradise. And all this had nothing to do with his mission. Tomorrow—tomorrow he must get Lachran down to figures. There was absolutely no reason for the man to waste time any more.

He went into the cabin and clicked on the light. On his bed was a great, pearl-gray Western hat. On the leather band inside was stamped, in tiny gold letters:

“The owner of this hat is a friend of J. Michael Lachran.”

He stood, staring at it.

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN CLIVE turned from the telephone she was still standing the same way: with the two fingers of her right hand pushing the hair under her hat.

It's the color of dead grass, he thought. That's it. The color of dead grass.

"Monty's blown right down here," he said. "I told him to come up."

"I heard," she said.

She took her hat off and went over to a chair and picked up Clive's dressing gown. She hung it in the cupboard. Then she went to the chair by the window and sat down.

"Now we can all eat together," Clive said. "You wait. He's a great old Monty, Monty is."

They both waited until the footsteps sounded, and then Clive threw open the door. Prue, sitting there, thought she had never seen him do anything so gladly.

"Glad to see you, Nipper. Bloody glad to see you!"

Then the man saw her, and he paused. His voice had been rasping—too overbearingly loud. His figure was bulky in the ballooning uniform of a private. He was squat—almost fat—and she thought his face coarse and brutalized. When he pulled off his cap at the sight of her she could see short-cut black hair standing on end. She knew that his thick neck went straight up to his skull at the back.

"This—this is Prudence, Monty!"

The man put on a smile of welcome, and his teeth shone, too perfect and white—like a dentist's advertisement.

But he did not move toward her. He looked back at Clive, and nudged him.

"So, this is why you wouldn't come up to London. Can't say I blame you a bit, my lad. Can't blame you a bit."

As he spoke the last he grinned at Prudence as if he expected approval. She felt as if she were a horse being inspected. Everything about the man was coarse, vulgar, low-class. She turned to the window.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Montague?"

She had waved her hand to the chair, but she saw he was sitting on her bed. She tightened her hands.

"You might as well call me Monty, Prudence," he said. "Everyone else does. Montague. The moniker doesn't fit the kisser, does it?"

He grinned at Clive as if it were a great joke. She sat quietly, forcibly opening her hands. She let them lie in her lap, and then, from some dim purpose, left an awkward

silence between the three of them.

Clive stirred. He was thinking: You can never do it—never make a woman understand why you like and love and admire another man. They see only externals.

He turned angrily to Monty, and cupped his hand and brought it down on the other's knee.

"Well, Monty the Monte Carlo millionaire! By God, it was good of you to come down here," he said. "We'll have a beano! Wasn't it good of him to come down, Prue?"

He wanted her to say yes. Even though he understood her dislike, he wanted her to say yes, just for Monty's benefit.

"Did you have a good trip down, Mr. Montague?" she said.

"That I did!" He turned to Clive. "Couple o' Wiltshires on the train, and a commercial traveler. We got the civvy into poker, and we squeezed him every pot. I got near two quid."

Prudence turned away as she saw Clive shaking his head admiringly, as if this were a fantastic achievement, but one to be expected of such a great man. She heard him say:

"It's good to see you, Monty. You get a room here?"

"Too posh for me, my lad. I'll kip at a lodging house somewhere."

"Well, we ought to get you set first. Then we'll have a real celebration. How's that, Prue?"

She turned her head.

"You two go," she said. "I'll meet you at Mine Host sevenish."

Clive felt angularity in purposes. He wanted to protest. But Monty cut in.

"Righto. Let's go, Nipper. We'll see you later, Prudence."

Unwillingly Clive got up.

"Well," he said to her. "Be—be careful."

"Of what?"

"Oh—blackout, and walking alone—and . . ."

"What's there to that?"

"You can't tell. Motorcars. Damned things racing along without lights and—well—anything."

She waved her hand.

"Good-by."

Unwillingly Clive turned. Monty was waiting at the door. They went out together, not speaking. On the street Monty said at last:

"That was smart of her."

"What?"

"Sending us out alone. Knew it'd give me a chance to ask you who she is, and why and where and what for and also."

"She didn't do it for that reason."

"You don't know much about women, then, Nipper. Where'd you get her?"

"Oh—I've known her a long time."

“You don’t mean to say so?”

“Look here, Monty. She’s a nice girl.”

“Of course she is.”

“Well, she is.”

“I said she was, didn’t I?”

“But the way you said it . . .”

“Oh, come off it, Nipper. I wasn’t born yesterday, and I’m not a bloody Y.M.C.A. Jesus-singer. When a chap goes on leave with his girl—what’s wrong?”

“She’s a good girl, Monty. You just don’t like her.”

“I don’t even know her, Nipper, so don’t get upset. I don’t know much about that kind.”

“What kind?”

“Now don’t get narky. I mean her kind—class. She’s class, Nipper. Anybody can see that. She’s high class. Educated. But that’s all right. So are you. That’s the kind of girl you ought to have—not no tart. You can see she’s got class—and looks like a million pounds.”

“She is beautiful, isn’t she, Monty?”

“That she is. But then everybody’s girl’s beautiful. Don’t you know that? There never was a woman too bloody ugly that somewhere there wasn’t a man believed she was the bleeding picture no artist could paint. Same with a man. Never a poor bleeder so crummy-looking there wasn’t a woman somewhere believed him every statue in the Tate Gallery rolled into one. Why—there’s even been times when a woman has thought something of me.”

Clive lifted his head. Now it was the same, he thought. Now things were the same.

“No,” he said.

“And no sarcasm, my lad. I don’t boast. I just use that as an example.”

“It was your wealth, Monty. That’s what attracted them.”

“Wealth. I’ll say one thing. I’ve always had more looks than money—and you can figure that one out.”

“That leaves you bankrupt both ways.”

“Not half, it doesn’t.”

They walked in step down the pavement. Now they were in a unison. Clive felt light-hearted.

“But she is beautiful, isn’t she?”

“All right, if you want me to say it, she’s the icing on the cake.”

“You don’t have to say it. I don’t need corroboration.”

“Then what did you ask me for?”

“I didn’t ask you. I told you.”

“And you’ve known her a long time, eh?”

“Yes—pretty long.”

“Well, you deserve a good un.”

“No, Monty. I don’t deserve her.”

“Oh, don’t put ’em on a pedestal. There’s just good uns and bad uns, that’s all. If you draw a bad un then hell’s a promised land where you’ll get relief when you die. And if you get a good un, then you’ll be willing to go to hell when you die because you’ll have had all the heaven one man can ask while you were alive. But don’t put ’em on a pedestal, and then some day you can’t cry your bleeding eyes out because you think they’ve fallen off—because they never was there in the first place.”

“The sage of Soho. Shall we have a drink first?”

“No, let’s get a place to kip first. How was your hospital?”

“Oh, all right. How was yours?”

“Oh, cushy enough.”

They went in silence, each comfortable in it.

“Bleeding dead hole,” Monty said.

“It’s crowded to the roofs in summer, ordinarily.”

“Good job it ain’t now.”

“What for?”

“Jerry’ll come knocking soon. Stands to reason, don’t it? He’s no bloody fool.”

“I suppose so. I’m on leave now—let’s forget it.”

“Righto, if you’re fed up. This seems to be the right area.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Smells like it, Nipper. Lodging house streets smell the same all over—fried liver and onions in the cellar-kitchen and cat muck in the hall upstairs. Same smell everywhere. See—there’s a sign.”

Mine Host’s was crowded that evening when Prudence came in. She knew that they did not see her coming. Through the layers of cigarette smoke she could see Clive’s mouth moving as he spoke, animatedly, but his words were shut out by the hubbub back in the bar. Then she stood by the table, and Clive looked up.

His eyes are happy, she thought. He is stimulated and excited and happy. Men need men.

“Now we’re all here,” he said. “A drink! Whisky soda!”

“No, port please.”

“Busy tonight. I’ll go dig one up.”

She turned to watch him go. Then she began pulling off her gloves, slowly. When she was finished, there was nothing else to do. She looked up at the man opposite her. He was letting his eyes travel over her, and his face held a half-smile.

“Well,” she said. Her voice was cold.

Monty lit a cigarette, almost insolently. He left it in his mouth and the smoke trailed down his nostrils.

“I don’t care,” he said. “But you might make it nice for him. I know it’s bloody hard for a woman to meet her chap’s friends. She always wonders: ‘What can he see in

that chap?' You don't have to lay it on."

She folded her gloves neatly, and left him without answer.

"All right. You're class. I'm not. But he's class, too. He's educated, too—but he don't stick it in your face. That's being a real gentleman. He's so real you don't think about it after you've been talking a couple of minutes. He's sky-high."

The force of his admiration left her disarmed.

"He—he thinks a lot of you, too," she said.

The man smiled. When he spoke again it was as if everything was settled.

"Oh, that's just because we're in the same push," he said. "You know—sticking together. When you eat and sleep with a chap for months, like in the army, well, you get chums. And he's all right. You're all right, too—for him."

"I don't know."

"Oh, yes. I'm not talking of what kind of woman I'd like. I'm talking about what'd be good for him. He's bright, and young—and he'll get along if he gets someone good. A lot of thinking goes on in that kid's napper. And he's got stuff—he could stick, that kid could."

She looked at the table.

"Was he—was Clive a good soldier in France?"

"Was he a good soldier!"

When he went no further she looked up. She noticed that his eyes seemed incongruously gray. He spoke evenly, holding her gaze.

"Was he a good soldier!" he repeated, slowly. "You know him, don't you? What do you think?"

He looked at her, almost distastefully, she thought. Then she saw him lift his gaze and smile. He spoke over her head.

"Got it, eh? Leave it to an old soldier to scrounge the rations quick."

She turned as Clive set the glasses down.

"I got a couple of rounds while I was at it," he said. "Never seen it so busy here."

He sat down, and smiled at Prue.

"Well?" he said. "Where were you when I came in?"

"France," Monty said.

She wanted to stop him from talking.

"We started to talk about France," he went on. "And that reminds me, Nipper. I hear you're up for a bloody medal."

Clive shook his head in a sort of angry disbelief.

"No," he said. "No!"

"God's truth. Saw the R.S.M. in Piccadilly and I asked the old sweat to have one on me—I knew him back when—so he unbends enough to shift three or four, and he says both you and me go up for ribbons for the do with Allen."

"No," Clive said, distastefully. "No—no!"

"All right, you bloody hero. You wait and see."

“What’s it for?” Prudence said. “What about Captain Allen?”

“The bloody hero pulled him out. Didn’t he tell you?”

“Oh, no. Don’t start building it all up, Monty. Forget it. Here, let’s drink.”

Monty ignored him.

“He was a bloody hero, Prue. I don’t like bloody heroes,” he grinned. “I’m an old soldier. Do you want to hear about it?”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Oh, don’t be so bloody modest, Nipper. I hate a modest bleeder worse nor I hate a hero. You did it—and now you got to put up with it.”

“What did he do, Monty?”

“I got scared, that’s what I did. Truly. I was so scared I had the trots. Now let’s have a good time—we’re on leave. . .”

“Everybody’s scared, Nipper, at the time. Not right at the time. Either before or after. Anybody who says he wasn’t frightened—he never was in it. The thing is, right at the time. . .”

“Monty likes war, Prue. He likes it so much he didn’t get enough out of the last one, so he had to get into this one. And he likes talking about. . .”

“I’d just as soon go to war as try to gyp a living out of the wholesale greengrocery business. And that’s no lie.”

“But what about Captain Allen?” Prue said.

“Didn’t he tell you about Douai?”

“No.”

“I did.”

“He didn’t, Monty. Don’t listen to him. Just tell me.”

“Oh, it was a bloody do for fair.”

“You can have it,” Clive said.

“It was Ess, Pee, and corruption all around.”

“You can have it.”

“See, modest, Prudence. That’s what I don’t like about him. See, we’re in Douai. We’ve got to hold.”

“We will hold this position to the last man. I’ve told her, Monty.”

“That’s right. To the last man, it was.”

“And the last drop of blood.”

“That’s right, and. . .”

“The thin red line of heroes, Prue.”

“Let Monty tell it, Clive. Now don’t interrupt.”

“He can have it.”

“What then, Monty?”

Clive nursed his glass.

“Never introduce your girl to a pal,” he said. “Or first thing you know you’ll be on the outside of a triangle.”

Prudence smiled at him. She knew he was glad because she and Monty seemed to be friendly to each other. He didn’t wear modesty as a pose, she knew. He didn’t like talking about the war; but he was so happy to see that she and Monty were friends that this came first.

“Well, we’re by a bit of a greenhouse,” Monty went on, expansively. “A bomb’d hit near and sort of pushed it over on a wall—a bloody regular natural pillbox it was. Cover overhead, perfect field of fire through a hole in the wall. Snug as a bug in a rug we are, and no planes can see us. Camouflage—we look like a ruin, that’s all.”

“We were like a ruin—perfect ruins.”

“Shut up, Clive.”

“Well, there we sits. And over he comes. And oh—we took them typewriters and knocked our initials all over him. He’d pushed us around ever since it started and when we took Douai that was the first real crack at him we’d had. Been waiting so long we was happy to see the bastard coming.”

“He means it was a change from the monotony of running away, Prue.”

“Nothing wrong with a retreat, my lad. And we made up for it. Oh—wiped ’em down—like playing a hose on ’em. Make you laugh and cry your bloody eyes out at the same time to see the way he come walking up. Cruel the way he walked into us.

“We melted him right away to nothing. Then another bunch came, and we plowed ’em under. Skittles, it was. Cruel! After that he starts bunches rushing to get us, but they wasn’t sure where we was. Cat and mouse—and he was the mouse. We pinned his ears back all afternoon, and then all night. Just ticky-tacking. Then I remember I scrounged around and happened to find a bottle of whisky. . .”

“You happened to steal a bottle of whisky.”

“Don’t be rude, Nipper. It’s the same thing in war. Any old soldier would. . .”

“Old soldiers never die.”

“They simply fades away. Well, we certainly faded him away, all right.”

“And then we faded away. Tell her how we faded away when he got rough.”

“Well, you didn’t expect he’d come marching up at the halt on the left form platoon for the whole bloody war, did you? You had to expect he’d bring up nasty stuff. But it was certainly good while it lasted. Like knocking dollies down at a shy. Then it was *his* turn, and he brought up a few mortars and a few tanks. . .”

“Don’t forget that nice *flammenwerfer*. You wouldn’t have her think just a few tanks could make the British army run.”

“Oooh, that was a bloody thing, wasn’t it! Well, you can’t grudge him. It was his turn to play cat and mouse, and him the cat for a change. I still have to laugh, when I think of how he chased us round that bloody town—to hell and gone and back again.”

“Take a laugh for me, too. You’ve got a good sense of humor. Look, if you don’t want that drink, I’ll take it.”

“You leave it alone. Well, Prudence, then I comes round a corner and there’s Nipper again, sitting right on top of a pile of bricks, cussing something fearful and taking a

bloody Bren apart. . .”

“Putting it together, I was.”

“Either way, you was on top of a pile of bricks. So we chucks his Bren and keeps mine and hunted around for a place where there wasn’t Jerries. Lumme, there was Jerries everywhere. Every bloody cellar in town was filled up and standing room only. Clive runs up out of one, and I have to laugh. He’s white as a bloody ghost, and he says: ‘Oooh, there’s about fifty Jerries down there. I almost walked into ’em.’ So I says: ‘Well, they can share part o’ what I’ve got among ’em.’ And I chucks down a bomb. After that we started to retire. . .”

“We ran like hell.”

“All right. We decided on a strategical advance to the rear. That’s what. We go down a street—and funny thing, you remember there, Clive. I had to laugh. There was a bloody top hat sitting right in the middle of the street. A top hat, mind you, Prudence. Imagine, in the middle of a bleeding war. A top hat, lying there right in the middle of the street. And I starts laughing, thinking how that got there. You remember that, Clive?”

“No. You’re making it up.”

“God’s truth, I’m not. Just before we come to that street where them poor bleeders were lined up.”

“I know. How about a drink? I don’t see how you talk so much without a drink. Don’t you get dry?”

“Lumme, that street was something, though. They’d plastered ’em pretty. First off I thought it was our outfit that was moving out and sat down to rest. That’s just what it looked like—like a full company on a route march, flopped for a five minutes’ rest. But they was all dead—every last bloody one. They must have been filing out, and they copped ’em from both ends of the street, and mowed the whole bloody lot down.

“Lumme, that street give me the shivers now I think of it. All of us there—maybe a hundred of us in that street. And every bloody one dead except me and Clive. Sitting there like they’d fallen out for rest on a route march. Some sitting, like, and some just squatting against the wall and in doorways, and some lying down like they were tired, but easing the straps on their packs and resting peaceful.

“And us stepping over the bodies of our own chaps, and the street quiet, and only us alive. Like being in church, it was, if you know what I mean. Very respectful, of course. Funny, we didn’t even run—you wouldn’t think a Jerry would open up on you then, any more than he would in church.

“So we come up out of that street, and then down by a square, and we could hear him tap-tapping at us, and we’d spray around a bit with the Bren to keep him respectful. Then we begin to come on a few of our push that’d been dropped.

“I saw Young Harris, there, Clive. Dotted right through the head, he was—bloody hole at the back you could put a dinner plate in. We sees more of our push, and we knew we’d gone out that way. Then we happens on Captain Allen—lying in the gutter—dotted him with a half-dozen emma gee bullets right across his chest.”

“Why don’t you hold your trap?” Clive said.

She heard his voice ugly with coldness.

"Well, I'm telling her, not you," Monty said, pugnaciously.

"You're telling her! For Christ's sake, forget the war for ten minutes, will you? I don't mind, but Jesus Christ, you're going to be like these old soldiers who go on yapping about it all the rest of their lives. You'll kill more men with your mouth before you die than the whole bloody army did in France in the war—this one and the last one."

"Don't get nasty."

"I'm not getting nasty. I'm saying I'm bored."

"I'm not," Prudence said, quickly. "I'm not, go on."

The two men looked at her. They had forgotten about her. Her face was set, and her teeth were held together so that the lower ones showed.

Why is she like that? Clive thought. What can make a woman go into another person like that? In a sort of trance. Women are more terrible than men. God help the world if women ever start fighting wars. It'll be worse than anything men ever knew. God help the world then.

"Oh, Ess, Pee, and corruption," he said. "I'm going in the bar. You fight your war."

Prudence watched him go, her face not changing.

"Now. Go on and tell me," she said.

"You really want me to?"

"No. But you've got to tell me. I've got to hear it. What about Captain Allen?"

"Well, I just looked down, and I was saying: 'Lumme, here's Allen copped it, too.' And then he opens his eyes, and says: 'Clear out. Didn't you get the order to clear out?' Just as if he was balling us out. And I says: 'No, sir. We've been hiding in too many cellars—we didn't get no order.' 'Well,' he says, 'clear out. You should have cleared out last night.'

"Then he closes his eyes like he's very tired and impatient with us for keeping him awake. And Clive says: 'How about you, sir?' And he opens his eyes and says: 'To hell with me or anybody else who can't make it. If you can get out, go on out.' Then he closes his eyes again.

"And there we were. I sit down on the edge of the pavement, and there was Allen in the gutter, and Clive standing up, nursing the bloody Bren and about fifty bloody Jerries across the way somewhere taking rising shots at us, and bouncing them bullets all over the pavement. It was like standing up in the middle of the rifle range, hearing 'em smack and sing and go ricocheting.

"Well, we couldn't leave him there, and we couldn't stay there, so Clive passes me the Bren and gets him by the shoulder straps and hoists him up, and I get down in the gutter and start dotting a few where it'd do most good.

"I could hear Allen saying: 'No, leave me here. Please, you're only making it worse. Leave me here, please.' And Clive saying: 'Oh, you bastard. I'll be a sod if I will. Oh, you bastard!' Cussing the Captain with everything he could lay his tongue to.

"Now that's funny. But it takes lots of chaps like that. Chaps you know never said a bloody or a damn in their lives—cussing like that. And never remembering it

afterwards. Especially young chaps in their first do. Some of 'em cry, and some starts to puke and go on puking and puking all the way through a push—and some gets the runs, and I've seen 'em going over with their gun in one hand and holding their trowsis up with the other. And sometimes some of 'em sings at the top of their lungs. And some just cusses solid through the whole thing. But it's funny, now I think of it—I never heard one of 'em pray through a push. No, most often it's cussing with everything they can think of, and they don't know it. Because if they did, you wouldn't think anybody would pop off into the next world with such language on their lips, now would you?"

"No. Then what? Captain Allen?"

"Oh, we got him out. It was a bloody do, though. The Jerries got their hair up—you'd think they'd got enough of us without wanting just the three of us left. We'd been horsing round that town among 'em nearly all day. Now we was like a couple of burglars trying to get away with a sack o' silver through London in daylight. Everybody was after us—more and more. It was all right while the ammo held out. I'd spray 'em with the Bren, and then hop it quick after the Nipper. Then I'd flop and spray 'em again till he was round the next corner. Then I'd hop it after him, like that, you know. Then the ammo ran out, so I chucked the Bren and let 'em have it with bombs. Then when them was gone, I yells after the Nipper, and he lets me have what he's got. Then when them was gone, I'd yell for more. And that way we got through the bloody town. Clive'd pull him round a street, and go hunt for bombs, and I'd suck-hole and bomb 'em for a while till they started getting round us, and then we'd pull out. I'd yell: 'More bombs, Nipper.' And every time he'd say: 'This is the last one. There isn't any more,' to make me not waste 'em. But he always got more . . ."

"There isn't any more," she repeated. "Yes—but where did he get them from?"

"Oh, pick 'em up, you know—from bomb bags that'd been dropped by somebody—or scrounging around among the dead chaps. Every time he'd kid on it was the last—so's I wouldn't waste 'em, see. But every time when I was out, I'd yell: 'More bombs, Nipper.' And like a good kid, he'd have 'em. He'd drag the captain up the street, and then he'd scrounge around and find some and say they was really the last. . . ."

"There aren't any more. I can't find any more," she said.

"That's right. Then we're getting by a street with a row of trees each side, and we're playing peepo round the tree trunks, and he says: 'Really, this time, Monty. Really—there aren't any more. I can't find any more.' He sounded so bad that I knew he meant it. And there we was, stuck. So I says, 'Well, here's where they're one up on us.' 'Hell,' he says, 'So-and-so, and Ess and Pee and Effingwell this and that. Come on.'

"So we grabs Allen, him the shoulders and me the feet, and we run till I'm so bloody near dead I can't hold up. And Allen keeps waking like and saying: 'Please, put me down. Please! It's worse this way. Please.'

"I was so done in, I says: 'We can't do no more, Clive.' I was finished—you know how I mean—you don't care whether you sit there and just get killed—as long as you sit. You're so tired, you're through. And I didn't know what we'd do—I didn't care, neither. And then Clive looks round, and there's a bloody motorcar, sitting up the street—you'd see lots of 'em round, you know. Deserted. Refugees get as far as they could,

and then run out of petrol or have some trouble. This had had a war walk over it. Windows smashed, and front tire hit and everything. So the Nipper says we'll drag him up there and see. So we drags him up. There was a couple of our chaps knocked off there—been firing round the car and then been knocked out—heavy gun from a tank, I should say. We stuffs Allen in, and the Nipper says: 'There's petrol, Monty.' 'What about ignition?' I says. Well, of course, there wasn't no key, but the Nipper says: 'I'll start this Essing Effing thing, I will.' Cussing top of his lungs, he was. And he takes a safety pin out of one of the dead chap's first aid dressing, and dives under the steering wheel. Laugh, I nearly falls over. There's his legs sticking up in the air and a bloody war going on. They was popping us proper. So I flops down and gets one of the dead chap's rifles, and gets two of 'em before they start to get careful again.

"I hears the starter turn over, and the Nipper shouts to jump in. I jump in, and he'd shorted the ignition—regular trick it is, for nipping a car—you know, chaps steal a car once in a while—some chaps. There we sit, and the starter going whoo-whoo-whoo-whoo, and I can hear the battery getting weak, and still no start. But you could smell the petrol, with the carbureter being flooded.

" 'No juice,' I says.

"So the Nipper hops out, and throws up the bonnet, and out I get again, and go back to me clear little hipe—you know, a rifle—in the gutter to keep 'em back. I'd fire a clip, and then take another off the dead chap—out of his pouches, and look around for more targets. And they was working up through the houses and making it nasty. I looks up once in a while to see how the Nipper's coming along. You know, that was funny. For the first time he's stopped cussing. He wasn't saying a thing. By God, I'll never forget that. He was just standing there, working on that car, as cool as if he was home in his own garage. I remember, as I looks up at him he pushes his helmet back with the back of his hand, and then wipes his nose with his wrist, and gets a smear o' grease up his face, and wrinkles his forehead.

"It wasn't like he was in a hurry. It wasn't like he didn't hear the bullets or care about 'em. It was just like he'd forgot about the whole bloody war and everything, and was just very interested in his job. Almost like he was saying: 'Now isn't this a very pretty and interesting piece of repair work!'

"Oh, I was proud of him, I'll tell you. Cool—cucumbers is boiling compared to what he was. Then he slams down the bonnet, runs round the wreck, hops in, and wuff! Off she went. I get in, and he slaps her in gear, and off we go, flippety-floppety-flop, with the front wheel flat and the tire slapping on the valve.

"And—now this is the cream of the lot—we gets to the corner and right then the tire comes off as we turn. The tire goes straight ahead, we goes round the corner on the rim, and we come smack into a bunch of Jerries that's creeping round to cut us off. And right beside the curb there's a tank just stopped and a Jerry officer talking to the chap in the tank, telling him something.

"Round the corner we come, right into that. And what do you think the Nipper does? He sits up straight behind the wheel and I can see this Jerry officer looking straight at him and Clive looking straight at the officer. And Clive lifts one hand, half like he's saluting and half like he's waving. And the officer almost starts to salute and

then looks as if he'd changed his mind. Then I couldn't see him no more. But surprised! Those Jerries were that surprised, they stood there, and didn't fire a bloody shot. Not one bloody shot! Can you believe it?

"And mind you, we got past some of 'em as close as I am to you, and I puts up my hand and cocks my snook at 'em, and I looks back, and there they are, cocking their snooks back at us—like a bunch of kids—all of us, wiggling our fingers at our noses.

"Now you tell that to anyone! You tell 'em that, and ask 'em to believe you. But so help me Christ, that's the way it was. And if the Nipper had ha' stopped, or tried to turn round, or tried to back away, I'll bet that tank'd ha' shot the living be'jesus out of us. Course, it didn't take more than a minute or so. But just the same, there it was—us driving right through about a hundred Heinies, and all cocking snooks at one another.

"Laugh! Afterwards I start to laugh till I can't sit up straight any more. What with the look on their faces, and the front rim o' that car sounding like a steam roller on concrete, I nearly died.

"And that's the way we come out of Douai. And up the road, we pick up a couple of Guards that's wounded, and then a couple of walking wounded hop on the running board until we hit a rear-guard emma gee post, and go through that. And then a real ambulance comes along, and everyone's swapped over. And we run about a mile more before the petrol gives out, so then we hoof it and finally run into some Green Howards, and then the Welsh Guards coming marching up from Arras, through the Jerries, and then we knew we'd held Douai long enough for the Arras chaps to get away.

"Well, we got in with a bunch of casuals—oh, Green Howards and West Kents and Durhams and Northumberland Fusileers. We was all mixed—except them Welsh Guards. Lumme, they come out of that scrap, going in step like they was on regimental parade. But they wouldn't have if we hadn't held Douai, or they'd ha' been cut off.

"Well, we got out all right, and they got the Captain to hospital and out of Dunkirk all right, and I hear he's coming good. He's a good one, Allen is. I knew him in the last war. I knew him well.

"He had plenty of the old stuff. When we left him I ask him how he is, and he doesn't say anything. After a while he says: 'Thank God we got a navy, Monty.' That was kidding, y'know. We used to say it in the other war. He didn't know how right he was, at that, the way it turned out."

He sat, staring at the table. Then he lifted his drink.

"Thank you for the story," she said.

"Ah, that's all right."

"No, thank you. I wanted to hear."

"I don't tell it so good."

"You do. There wasn't many came out—out of your regiment?"

"Oh, not as bad as you'd think, you know," he said. He said it cheerfully. "Quite a lot of us. Ones and twos and threes—like me and the Nipper. Surprise you how many got out."

"How many did?"

“Oh, couldn’t say about numbers—’course, a rear-guard action—well, that’s what a rear guard’s for, you know. Can’t everybody get out, now can they?”

“No. That’s it. They can’t.”

She sat fingering her glass, and suddenly wishing that Clive would come back.

Clive stood in the bar at the counter, cupping his glass, not hearing the mixed talk sounds, looking at the white porcelain tops of the long levers on the beerpulls.

He was thinking: Killing and getting killed, it didn’t count much. When you killed, you didn’t mind it. If you were killed yourself, you couldn’t mind it. It was only afterwards, thinking about it, away from it, that it was bad. When you were out of it, your not-fighting mind ruled you and you were able to look back at the motion-picture of yourself and neither understand it nor like it. But when you were in it, it wasn’t really bad. It was only when you were out. Then you couldn’t talk, unless you lied, because you couldn’t believe or justify yourself. But when you were in it a different mind and force ruled you, and you did what you had to without hurt or concern, doing it quickly and coldly, removed from any peacetime moralities.

When you were in it you could take life as impartially and decisively as in peacetime you could take scissors and snip a rose—and think no more about it. Not just Jerries—enemies. Anyone—any life. Your own men.

The chap who came down along the wall, bending, running quickly, coming through the smoke of the burning houses, dodging round the tangle of fallen wires in the street. And Monty yelled: “Hey, chum! Where you going?” Then the man came over, running, his feet crunching in the shattered glass of the old greenhouse. He crouched down, holding his rifle as by force of habit, his lips beyond control. Then he said at last: “I’m getting out of here.”

“Oh, get the wind down,” Monty said. “Get it down, we’re all right here as long as they’re holding out over in the houses on the left. They can’t get at us. Just move down the end of the wall there and take a pop at ’em once in a while.”

“No,” the man said. “No. I’m getting out of here.”

“Oh, take hold of yourself, and get down the wall,” Monty said.

“No. You can’t order me around. You’ve no right!”

“No right, eh?” And Monty had crawled on his hands and knees. “No right? I have a right. I’m senior soldier here—and I tell you to get down the wall.”

Then, jumping into motion like a suddenly released spring, the man had stood, facing Monty, his rifle thrown forward at the on-guard, the bayonet at the throat, the left knee bent in the semi-classic parade-ground style.

“I’m going out, and I’ll shoot any bugger who tries to stop me.”

He had turned, quickly, pointing the bayonet first at Monty, then at Clive, then at Monty. Clearly the chap was insane, then. Insane as a man could be. Dangerously insane—pointing the bayonet first at one, then the other. Insane or a spy.

Whatever he was, the second time he had turned to Monty, Clive had lifted his Lee-Enfield quickly, and shot him through the side of the head.

“Nice going,” Monty said. “The poor barstid.”

That was all. And then they had gone back to the low greenhouse wall. It was over. Forgotten.

Forgotten then; but now remembered, it had different dimensions. Dimensions so great, you didn’t talk about it. You only thought about it:

How could I—I, this person, me, who owns these hands that I can lift before my face and see—I, the owner of these hands? How could I have done it like that—and never think about it any more at the time, nor say any word about it then? If then I could do it without remembering, why can I see it now with not forgetting?

Oh, hell. Forget it. He deserved it!

Deserved it? Who are you to say any man, any creature, should suddenly stop having being and knowing?

Perhaps he was a spy.

He wasn’t! He was a tired, exhausted man.

He was dirty with panic.

All right. He had done what he could, and stood it as long as he could. Who knows how brave he had been until he couldn’t stand it any more? Modern warfare bears on the nerves until . . .

O.K. then. O.K. I should have stopped and had him psychoanalyzed. We should have tested his reflexes . . .

He was a live human being.

He was rotten with fear.

And you—you weren’t racked and hounded by fright?

I did what I had to. So did the others. They had guts. They stuck it out. He was no different than the rest. He should have stuck it out like everyone else—even the wounded, and the ones there was no hope for, they didn’t go rotten with fear. Even the ones hit, who knew it was all over for them, they lay there and wrapped themselves in some fine, faraway dignity that removed them over and beyond you so that you, the living, were less than they, the dying, and they never spoke a word, and waited there to go out that way.

They did it! He wasn’t even hit. The only one in hundreds like that. The others, they died properly.

Hell, died properly. What a neat phrase. How would you like to take an afternoon off and go die properly?

It doesn’t matter about the phrase. There’s a truth behind it I don’t know how to say. They died properly—kids, youngsters. By God, by Jesus, by Christ and Mr. Chamberlain and the Cabinet, they died—and the way they did it will be a reproach forever to us who didn’t.

Coming up through the garbage of the streets, coming up through a lonesomeness like Sunday in a business center, coming through the mist that was smoke of burning houses and the pall of pulverized brick dust and smashed mortar, you saw them among the rubble: the dead ones in the myriad unbelievable undignified postures that sudden

death invents, and the badly hit and dying ones wrapped in some curious isolation that made them untouchable.

It was no use trying to touch them or help them. If you, torn by the shame and hatred of your own being alive and going out and leaving them, if you tried to help, it was no use.

You knew that, yet you went to them. You went to them for exactly the same reason that a wealthy man gives a beggar a half-crown—to quiet your own conscience.

If you couldn't walk on past the next one, and you stopped and said: "Can I do anything, chum?" the way they looked at you was reproach enough for having trespassed blunderingly into a place where your livingness gave you no right to be.

They said no, or they shook their heads no, and sometimes their faces were wrenched up in pain, or sometimes calm because the wound and their own dying had shocked them beyond pain, but the eyes were always the same. The eyes always looked at you pityingly, as if excusing you for the tremendous blunder you had made in talking such inconsequential silliness.

If you tried to rouse them from it, they resented it. They wanted to die properly. "No, no—leave me here, chum!" What made them do that? Captain Allen the same—even though he pulled through. So many said that—as if a narcotic had lulled them and they no longer wished to be free of it.

It was no use trying to help. The one with the ginger hair that he'd tried to get out before they got to Allen.

"No—no! Leave me here, chum!"

"Come on! Here, you'll be all right. Slip your arm round here. Monty, get his other arm there."

Three, four, five steps. Then:

"Chum, chum!"

"You're all right."

"No—chum! Will you—I've got to—undo my breeches."

"You haven't time!"

"I've got to! I've got to! Please!"

The ginger hair and the white-waxy skin that often goes with the red-head complexion, and the mixture of pain on the face, and embarrassment. A man, embarrassed even in death by natural functions.

Then they reached up under his tunic flaps and undid the leather belt with the collection of hat badges on it, and then found the buttons and undid the suspenders. His flanks were that blue-white color, amazingly light. They held his arms as he crouched, and strained, and nothing came. They pulled his breeches up and lifted him again. And again:

"No—again! I've got to! I want to go mates!"

Standing again, sweating, in the brick-shattered street, and looking back, wondering in how many seconds the tanks or armored cars would come round the corner, and looking down again at the crouching boy.

Then dragging him along again, feeling him grow heavier and heavier between each stop when he crouched and strained and nothing happened. Dragging him until Monty said:

"Hey!"

Then you looked up and saw the ginger head thrown back to the sky, and the jaw, dropped on its hinge, hanging so wide open.

You let him down slowly, although dropping him now would have been no different, and you saw him there on the cobbles, and saw your own feet, and saw Monty's feet, and heard Monty saying:

"Shot in the gut! Makes 'em think they have to go!"

"Oh, was that it?"

"Yes. That's the way you can tell. Come on, let's get on with it."

That's all you said then. Like receiving a clinical report. And only now, afterwards, when your peacetime-mind came back, you saw it and tasted it and felt it and knew what you had done. You knew the enormity of it, and it had outrageous unreality. Not you—you couldn't have said it so! Nothing in it was true! Not really a man died—only a motion picture! Not in person!

All right, try to tell someone that was it. That was war: standing by a boy who crouched, trying to relieve his riddled guts and do it with humility for having brought his necessity out of privacy and placed it before them!

Tell that for your war story! Tell her that, Monty, when you're going good! Tell anybody that at your next afternoon tea, and watch how patiently and humbly they'll listen!

Tell them about the other one—the one leaning by the car that you got away in. When you went over and said: "Can you get this car running," thinking that the two of them had wanted to start it. Only one was down in the gutter in the impossible posture that meant he was dead, and the other, leaning against the car, half-sitting on the mudguard, half-leaning, his hands crossed over his belly, opened his eyes and you knew that it was another of them, somehow satisfied now death had come, only waiting for it to come quickly and leave behind a world in which he might cry out or scream.

Only he didn't look wounded. The one in the gutter—yes. The leg half torn away above the knee, and the already-blackening pool that was dusted over with gray from the settling grime. But the other, the still-standing one; seeing him clutching his belly, you reached out a hand.

"No, chum! No! Leave me be!"

But there was no mark on him. He couldn't be badly wounded. You lifted his weak hands to see, and started to unbutton his tunic, and then it all fell out, sliding and wet, cascading onto your boots as the man, too, slid sideways and down, his head thrown back against the spokes of the wheel.

Then—there you stood in the entrails of a living man, and lifted your feet back politely from under them, and listened to the snoring, shuddering groan that should have stopped but that went on and on . . .

Monty saying:

“Put the poor bleeder out of his misery, Nipper. Here!”

You stepped back, carefully, gravely, and Monty turned from picking up the rifle and placed it quickly against the turned neck, under the ear, and pressed the trigger, holding the rifle one-handedly.

The next minute it had no meaning and no reality and you were trying to get Captain Allen in the car and then, knowing there was petrol, saying: “Short the ignition under the lock.” And then, under the hood, checking back from the dead plugs—the distributor, the mag—the mag—what in the name of God kind of carpenter calling himself a mechanic last taped over this half-made joint to fall apart and . . . “Now we’ve got it, Monty.”

That was real—all that part. But not the other. Only until now. Why was it real now?

Because I remember it and know it and can say even out loud:

That is true and it happened—and if it were not true and did not happen to you, you could not know it.

I could invent it.

You could not. No one can. You can invent a bandage on the brow set esthetically at the right heroic angle, or an arm in a sling, or oh, let me like a soldier fall upon some open plain this breast expanding for the ball to blot out every stain, or Florence Nightingale in high-heeled shoes, or mid the war’s great curse stands the red cross nurse she’s the rose of no man’s land, or Lady Sylvia Putz has completed her course as a nurse without anyone becoming aware of her identity until she had concluded it.

You can invent an arm off, and a leg off, and the edges all tucked in neatly, and the sleeve that is empty, and he fell in Flanders Field and skylarks and poppies row on row—except that it was the crosses row on row. You can make up a war memorial and an unknown soldier, even.

You can make those up.

But you can’t make the other things up.

No one could be that good. Nobody could be as daringly inventive about war as war can be itself. Therefore it is true—and you did it—and the hands you had are those hands now before you holding the glass—and because they are there, then all the rest is there, too. Only if you can invent your hands away, can you invent the other away?

It is true.

Well, what of it? It’s been going on for centuries—thousands of years. I didn’t make the war. I didn’t make myself, nor my brain nor my memory nor my nerves. Maybe you have to be like that while it’s happening. You have to be, or you couldn’t go through it. And if you’re that way when it’s happening, then it’s no use being another way when it’s over.

Hell. Sit up, pull yourself together, and don’t think about it. Take a swift one. Drink it up and live, love, and laugh like anyone else. Who are you to be unlike anyone else, you lousy egotist? Are you any better than the Duke of Wellington, and Nelson . . . oh, kiss me Hardy! Kiss me Hardy, kiss me long. It’s all the same in the long run, and you made no difference. The dead ones would be all the same dead—and if they hadn’t died

there, then old age, or occupational disease, or gallstones, or hardening of the arteries would have got them.

Drink up. And now—order another round and see how Monty the Monte Carlo millionaire is getting on. Never introduce your donna to a pal.

I don't mean that. Monty wouldn't try anything.

The hell he wouldn't. Any man will if conditions are right.

But Prue wouldn't.

Any woman would if conditions are right.

Not Prue. You can tell. They're that way, the ones like her. You can trust them a thousand miles away, or you can't trust them while you run out to the latrine. And she's the kind you can trust. You know—no man was ever really fooled. You know the many women you can't trust, and you know the few you can.

How do you know?

How do you? You can't say how you know—but you know it all the same.

What a fine philosopher you are. A two-whisky philosopher!

He held up his forefinger to the barmaid.

"Three whisky sodas," he said.

"Three?"

"Not all for me. The others."

She grinned. When the drinks were ready he walked slowly and too concentratedly to the table. He saw Prue look over Monty's head and smile, and then Monty saw the smile and turned and grinned.

"Y've been long enough, Nipper. I've been talking her to death."

What was the use of taking it one way or another? Take it as it came.

He edged into his seat beside Prue.

"Well, did you make it good and heroic, Monty?" he said.

"He made it funny, Clive," Prue said.

His brain began going quickly again.

Funny. Oh, my God! Saying it's funny, but using the phrase to cover up admiration. The way she looked up when she said that. That's the last straw—being looked at like that—eyes bright—a sort of excitement in them. Funny! She doesn't know about the boy who couldn't go, or the one disemboweled over my feet. Women are crueler than men—crueler in their ignorance. Let them see war—civilians—women. The French women know.

"Yes, it was very funny," he said.

She caught the curl to the edge of the words.

"I mean, coming out—he was telling me about the car you fixed and coming out, laughing fit to die, and thumbing your noses."

"Unfit to die, you mean."

"Remember, Nipper?"

"No."

“There, you see. I said I had a better memory nor him, Prudence.”

“I never denied it. You’re full of memories. You’re the official reciter.”

“Who is?”

“You are. Tell her some more stories. Go on spilling your mouth.”

“I don’t spill my mouth, my lad.”

“You do. You’re the official reciter. You’re just full of military *contes*.”

“Now is that any way to talk before a lady?”

Monty was laughing, but Prudence saw that under it he was getting angry.

“I’m merely using a tea-party phrase of the upper classes, Monty,” Clive said. “You wouldn’t understand it. Give us a military *conte*.”

“I’ll give you a *conte* over the napper in a minute. You’re drunk.”

“Give her the *conte* about the way you talked over the telephone to the Divisional General.”

“That was in the last war.”

“That wasn’t the way I heard it. It was this war. I’ll tell her. It’s my turn to be *raconteur*—see, that’s the same root, Monty?”

“It was last war.”

“He’s the one that’s drunk, Prue. It was this war. He found a phone and hooked in on a wire with a safety pin, and a voice said—a very pretty voice: ‘Who is this?’

“ ‘This is the commander of the advance guard echelon,’ Monty says. ‘Let me speak to the Major General.’

“And by God, if he doesn’t get the Major General and kidded the life out of him. ‘This is Private Effingwell Clancey of the Covent Garden Clanceys,’ he says. ‘The Jerries are throwing things at us. Can’t you do something about it?’ ‘Look here,’ the General says, ‘this is no time for practical jokes. We’re busy up here.’

“ ‘Busy?’ says Monty. ‘What the hell you think we’re doing down here? Punting on a lake? Why, you dugout king, why don’t you come down here and bloody well reprimand me?’ ”

“You’re drunk, Nipper.”

“I am not drunk. Just because I tell one on you . . .”

“That wasn’t the way it happened. It wasn’t like that. It was the last war and . . .”

“Ah, you see? You see the way truth gets twisted when too many people get talking. By this time even you don’t know what really happened.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m not—and if I am, who’s got anything to say about it?”

“You talk like that to me, Nipper, and I’ll smack your behind.”

“And how many besides on the detail?”

“No more—just me. Any day!”

Prudence lifted her hand to her mouth as she saw Monty rise up, his paws on the table. Clive stood, too, his finger tips spread, touching the table lightly.

“Please,” she said. “Now, please . . .”

As she spoke Monty lifted his hands, palms in, and weaved his head in a quick, flowing motion. As Clive lifted his own arms, the squat man reached out in a motion almost too quick to see, and, flat-handedly, smacked Clive on the buttocks, and then was away again before Clive could move.

Prue could hear it—like the dull sound of a paper bag popping. Monty was beginning to smile.

"Now," he said. "Now then."

Clive straightened slowly and suddenly shook his head as if in pleased and puzzled admiration. He rubbed his buttock with a childish motion.

"By God, you're the only man can get away with that, Monty. You know why, Prue? That's because he's Monty from Monte Carlo, the sweetheart of P.B.I., the Old Man of the Infantry, the bloody perennial of the Foresight Fusiliers. Come on, sing us the 'Foresight Fusiliers,' Monty."

"Now, now, Nipper. That ain't proper—not afore ladies."

Clive watched Monty sit. Then he sank to the seat, turning to Prudence.

"You see, he doesn't know it."

"Well, if it isn't proper to sing, don't embarrass him."

"Embarrass who? Him? Old rhinoceros hide? Ha, if he can't sing it, he doesn't know it. Do you or don't you know it?"

"All right, I don't know it, Nipper. Now, does that suit you?"

"Yes. But you know 'Old Soldiers.' "

"Ah, that's proper."

"That's Monty's song, Prue. That's our song. Come on, Monty. Give her 'Old Soldiers,' and make it loud. Wait, we'll finish this round first."

Clive finished his drink as they watched.

"Now, come on, Monty. 'Old Soldiers.' Ready?"

He beat time with his hand, and they sang. Prudence looked from one to the other, hearing the words, the grating voices:

Old soldiers never die,
  Never die, never die.
Old soldiers never die
  They simply fade away.

When they were done they looked at her and saw her face crinkled in an expression of pain.

"Now what's wrong?" Clive said, happily.

"My heavens!"

"It's a good song. Monty learned that in the last war. It's our favorite."

"The song's all right—you're not kidding?"

"Kidding? Why, what about?"

She knew they were not.

“Why, you’re both absolutely tone-deaf,” she said. “Now I know why you and Monty are friends. You’re the only two people in the world that could be as tone-deaf as each other. You know—two of you together is—why, it’s as if two sets of quintuplets were born in the same town.”

“Listen, thousands of people like to hear us sing that.”

“What thousands?”

“Why, we never had a concert without us singing that by request. Popular request. Acclaim. It wouldn’t have been a concert if we didn’t sing it. The Colonel said me and Monty singing ‘Old Soldiers’ was always the hit of the show. We always did it to thunderous applause. Isn’t that so, Monty?”

“Right, Nipper.”

“I’ll bet they’d applaud it,” Prudence said. She felt happy for them. “You don’t really know you’re tone-deaf, do you?”

“What’s that, Nipper?”

“Like being color-blind in the ears.”

“That makes it all simple.”

“You don’t know you’re tone-deaf—do you, Monty?”

“Sounds all right to me—once we get started together we’re all right.”

“It’s marvelous,” she said. “Do you know that you both changed key twice—and each time you jumped a whole fifth?”

“What’s that mean, Nipper? Make that simple, too.”

“A fifth. It’s United States slang for a quart of whisky. She says we need another fifth. How about it?”

As he rose, he felt her hand on his sleeve.

“No, Clive! Don’t drink any more.”

Clive looked down and brought her into focus.

That’s always the way, he thought. The reforming urge. At first they were all right, and took drink for drink with you. And then, before you knew it, they were saying: “No, please. Don’t take any more.” You could hear it all over. “Oh, come on home, Alf. You know you’ve had enough!”

He kept his head steady.

“I don’t want to be made into something I’m not,” he said, unsteadily.

“No,” she said, putting out her hand. “Sit here and sing me another song.”

“No. ‘Old Soldiers’ is the only one we do good.”

“Well, I’ll sing you one.”

He looked at her, his head unsteady. Then he sat, suddenly.

“All right. You sing us one. That’s fair, isn’t it, Monty?”

She bit her lip, feeling suddenly embarrassed. She thought of songs—songs. Then she lifted her head, and started. She felt her voice nervous and small amid the hubbub.

Believe me if all those endearing young charms
Which I gaze on so fondly today . . .

Though she sang quietly—or perhaps because she sang quietly and unlike the usual alcoholic roaring of a public house—people at the near-by tables turned and listened. The place grew quieter, and she wished the roar and babble would start again to cover her confusion.

Suddenly, in that moment, she felt her head whirl with unreality. What was she doing here—she, with two common private soldiers who now called her by her first name, sitting in the common room of a workingman's public house? Among these common people who stared at her?

She fought back her own snobbishness. The people were so friendly, she said to her mind. There was a warm, close friendliness—an acceptance of her—an unashamed group feeling that one never had in the West End. She looked at Clive. His eyes, unmoving, were fixed alcoholically on her face.

Did love—did love mean that? All of it? Beeriness and going with a man down into the places of his life?

Oh, hell, she thought. It means everything. The best and worst—the rough and the smooth. And the difference between this man and the others she had known was that he wasn't proud of his best and wasn't ashamed of his worst, and thus brought to them both a covering of humanity.

No pose. No everything-good-on-the-surface and the bad things hidden. No putting a best foot forward. No company manners. There was a deceit in social nicety that he didn't have and these people didn't have—and scorned to have.

She looked at him, singing, still self-consciously:

As the sunflower turns to her God when he sets
The same face which she turned when he rose.

Then she felt warmly excited and happy in a foolish way, for the people were clapping their hands.

Monty was saying: "Here, I'll take a bow for you!" And he was standing, bowing like a variety artist to the people who laughed and picked up their drinks again.

But Clive was looking at her, and he reached out his hand almost as a blind man might, and barely touched the tips of his fingers to her hair.

There was the moment, with Monty standing, and Clive's hand reaching out; with the hubbub of noise and smell of tobacco smoke and ale.

She wanted to cry: This is it! Stand still, time! Stand still here and let me breathe. Don't hurry me along. Please time, stand still! This is it!

CHAPTER XXIII

CLIVE lay back in the sand, hard-packed between the rocks. The cliffs, going up overhead, were much bigger, it seemed, than when one was on top. Now they had an awesome quality—like going into a cathedral when you were young and your senses tasted everything, and feeling the immensity of stone.

Up overhead the seagulls screamed, turning and angling their wings as they hovered near the cliff face.

He closed his eyes. The hot, queasy, morning-after feeling in his stomach robbed him of any desire but to lie there and not move. The light hurt his eyes and made the violet flashes of pain go through his temples. He lay, listening to the strumming of the wind against the great chalkstone face, listening to the swirl and crash of the sea, the scream of the gulls, the sound of Monty and Prue talking, as they sat, back against the rock face.

". . . it was a great and brave thing."

That was Prue's voice—talking about the war again. Oh, why not? History in the making. Anyhow, she liked Monty now—you only saw what was real in Monty when you got over the first shock of his exterior, his uncouthness, his unschooled manner.

". . . do what you have to do. It ain't being brave nor a hero. You know you've got to do it and you do. If you knew you didn't have to, you wouldn't."

"You'd obey an order, though, wouldn't you? I mean, if you were told to do something, even if it were foolish, you'd do it, wouldn't you—as the Germans are supposed to?"

"Someone had blundered," Clive said. It hurt his head to speak. Perhaps they hadn't heard him.

"It depends. If there was sense to the order."

"Suppose you didn't think it was sensible?"

"Oh, then. It depends on how many officers there was round watching me. Some officers is all right, though. They'll help you swing the lead. Like once we put on a raid, and didn't. Soldiered on the job. You don't just go out and get killed."

"What raid?"

"Oh, this was in the last war—that was how I got friends with Captain Allen. Only he was Second Lieutenant then. I had to laugh."

Clive could hear Monty chuckling, hear Prue's voice, caught by the wind.

"Tell me about it."

Like a child. Tell me a story. Wanting to have stories to confirm and strengthen her own conformity with the popular patriotic surge.

"Well, it was on the sector above Ypres. First off it started with measuring the lake there. Man had to crawl out every two hours and stick a wire-post down beside a rock to see how deep the water was."

"What for?"

"Knock me blind if I know. Probably they were afraid Jerry might be getting ready to flood us—you know, turn it into our trenches—we had pumps going all the time in that sector.

"We had to measure it six times a night or so. Jerry had to measure it, too. Nice and friendly. He knew we had to. We knew he had to. Nobody hurting anybody else.

"We'd hear him crawling out and pretend we didn't. He'd hear us crawling out, and pretend he didn't. It got so we'd give Jerry the signal when we was back—the old tiddley-winks on the Lewis. Chap we had—name o' Bogie Miller—had a trigger finger that was a knockout. He could play tunes on a Lewis. So when our man got back, he'd play the tune. You know: shave-and-a-haircut—bay-rum. And same with Jerry. When their man was back, they'd do the same. Shave-and-a-haircut—bay-rum!

"Everybody knew. Even the blokes on the brigade emma gees—heavy ones, firing over our heads—they knew about it and would keep quiet. Then when everybody was back, you could send up Very lights and sweep the old typewriters up and down if anybody came around, and you knew nobody was out there to get hurt and everybody was satisfied.

"Well, everything's fine until the Major goes down on two weeks' leave, and his second in command—Captain Goss his name was—takes over. Iron-monger collector, he was—you know, had the M.C. and bar, and dying to get a D.S.O. So this is his chance. Moral superiority. We own no man's land right up to his wire. Patrols out all the time. That was his line.

"So patrols go out, wandering all over, one of 'em gets lost and starts coming in the wrong post, and the kid on the emma gee gets the wind up, and pours it all over two men and a lieutenant—kills the officer. Bloody near cut him in two.

"Well, Captain Bloody Goss has to report casualties. He's all red hot. Got to have revenge. More patrols out. Blood for blood. Second night, he's out with a patrol and happens to catch the poor Jerry that's measuring the lake, and they grab him, but he yells, so they shoot him and get back.

"Well, we'd just give Jerry the shave-and-a-haircut to tell him our man was back, and then we knock off his man. The only way he can see it, it's a dirty trick. So he starts patrolling.

"That's one thing about this moral superiority up to the other fellow's wire. The other side is liable to get exactly the same idea. Then there's no more peace in life. Patrol, counter-patrol, bombing party, raid in force, counter-raid. Finally Jerry puts on a box-barrage party, comes in and captures three and knocks off four. The C.S.M. copped it. Nice old bleeder, he was. Put in years, and donkey's years, in India, and was up for his pension and retirement in three more weeks.

“Goss is going bloody raving. Well, just then Allen comes back. He’d copped one and had been down the line at hospital. So Goss picks him for duty—since he’d had such a nice long rest.

“You know how it is: Party will leave post number three at zero minus whatsizname, establish moral superiority, if possible bringing back prisoner for identification, harass all enemy patrols and return at zero plus a banana through post nine.

“Well we’re all blacked up and over we go. We get in an old crater, and then Allen sits down and says he’s going forward to reconnoitre.

“He says: ‘I’ll take Old Monty.’ ”

Clive lifted his voice.

“Did they call you Old Monty even in those days?”

“Well, I was younger then, of course, but I was a little older than some of the kids.”

“A little older! You must be older than God now. How old are you—no kidding?”

“Let him go on, Clive. What about the raid?”

“Oh. Well, Allen says: ‘Where are you, Monty?’ ‘Here,’ I says. ‘Damme,’ he says. ‘I didn’t know you in your nigger minstrel outfit. But even that don’t improve your appearance. Come on.’

“So we crawls—and crawls and crawls till we’re finally in another shell hole.

“Then he says: ‘Montague, what would you say if I’d told you we’d been right through the enemy wire?’

“ ‘If you says so, it’s true, sir,’ I says. ‘And when I know something is true nothing could change it. Not even a court-martial before ten generals and a bloody pile of drums high as Nelson monument.’

“ ‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘But it isn’t a very exciting raid.’

“ ‘Well,’ I says, ‘they pulled a minnie back today and I don’t think many people know of it. It could have moved tonight, if we bombed the position pretty heavy—over by the old ruin. Maybe we killed a couple of Heinies doing it.’

“ ‘You’re too artistic,’ he says. ‘If we killed any Heinies why didn’t we get a mark of identification?’

“ ‘I know where there’s a dead Jerry with shoulder straps,’ I says.

“So we fix up a perfect story. And off we crawls. I had to laugh, ’cause Allen grabs my foot, and whispers: ‘My God, no wonder you were sure you could find him in the dark. Is that him?’ ‘It ain’t no rose garden we’re smelling,’ I says.

“So off I goes and saws a shoulder strap off this Jerry. When I get back, Allen’s holding his handkerchief very dainty in front of his mouth.

“ ‘I don’t know what regiment, he is,’ I says. Then he starts laughing. ‘I know,’ he says. ‘He must belong to that famous Limburger regiment we’ve heard so much about.’

“After that Allen takes out his Webley and lets fly up in the air, and I chuck a dozen bombs. Right away the Jerry line starts writing signatures all over, and it sounds like a hell of a battle for five minutes. When it’s all over, we crawl back and pick up the patrol.

“Next day Allen says to me: ‘You remember the mule going up by the Menin Gate?’ ‘Indeed I do,’ I says. ‘It’s a clear memory.’ ‘By God,’ he says. ‘I thought that was the ripest thing I ever smelled until last night. It was a mere violet. Private Montague, last night you performed as heroic a deed as any man in this war.’ ‘It was nothing, sir,’ I says. ‘When I was a nipper we used to live right opposite a tannery.’ ‘You’re still a hero,’ he says, ‘and I’m going to see you get the M.M. first chance I have.’ And by God, he did, and that’s the way I got my M.M.—all for cutting a shoulder strap off of a corpse.

“And we took it back and everybody was satisfied. Allen told Goss all about how we had bombed a minnie out of its post, and Goss was satisfied, and a week or so later the Major comes back off leave, and we’re satisfied. Everybody’s satisfied. That’s the way it is.”

Monty threw up his hands, as if to say that was the end of the story. Prue shook her head, slowly, her forehead creased.

“Was there much of that?” she asked.

“All the time,” Monty said. “Any man who was ever at the front did something like that. They all did it. It’s an old story.”

Clive lay, feeling the throbbing in his head—a delicate pounding that played syncopations in between the crash of the surf.

“You bet it’s an old story,” he said. “Too good to be true.”

“The sleeper wakens,” Monty chanted. “The sleeper wakens! All the same, it’s a fact.”

“A fact is a lie and a half,” Clive said.

“I tell you, it’s true.”

“Go on! It’s full of holes.”

“What holes?”

“I’d answer that properly if Prue wasn’t here, too.”

Clive lay and laughed, and then felt his own laughter streaking pain through his head.

“Now what’s wrong with the story, Nipper?”

Clive rolled onto his stomach. He looked at Prue, sitting with her back against the rock, her hands clasped about her knees, her skirt tucked tightly between her legs. He smiled, suddenly loving her for her neatness. Some women slopped their bodies and clothes around . . .

He turned to Monty.

“All right. How do you explain about the detail? They weren’t in on it.”

“Well, they’d heard bombing and shooting, and he told ’em we’d been on a raid, but he said he was going to report they were all in on it. If anybody come to you and said he wasn’t going to mention that you weren’t in on a dirty detail, you’d say O.K., wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. I suppose I would, in the final analysis.”

“There you are, then.”

“No, it still doesn’t smell good. How about the shoulder strap. If he’d been there long enough to stink, it’d be from some outfit that’d left long ago.”

“Ah, we didn’t care. But that turned out best of all afterwards. Goss sends in a big report about how in the last ten days he has so established our moral superiority that the Saxon regiment has been withdrawn, and Jerry’s brought up a fresh Wurtemberger regiment to face us.”

“Oh, come on,” Clive said. “Intelligence would know where that Wurtemberger regiment really was.”

“True, my lad. But what are they going to do? Ask questions in Parliament? No, they’d laugh and say it was one on Goss. Intelligence knew what was happening. Everybody knows what’s really happening in a war except bloody boy scouts like Goss. When the Major come back, Goss was transferred to some school or other—to get him out of the way.

“Real soldiers never wanted his kind around—but you take men like Goss—you can’t keep ’em down. I see him again once—back of Amiens in the ’18 push. We’re going along, full pack. A big motorcar comes along behind us, tooting us all off into the ditch and covering us with mud and corruption. And there was Goss—a major, and wearing a brass hat and red tabs, and looking executive as General Haig.

“Ah, he was a bloody ribbon collector, that Goss. Some’s like that. You can’t keep them down.”

Clive looked again at Prue. She was staring into infinity. She brought her eyes into focus, and smiled at him.

“Hello,” he said, quickly.

“Hello.”

“You like stories?”

She smiled, half-ruefully.

“I don’t know. It all sounds so strange—so incredible. It’s not at all like the stories you read in the papers.”

“Of course it ain’t,” Monty said. “But it’s true though. Nipper here says I’m a bloody liar. But I know what happened. I won’t argue.”

Clive sat up.

“No, I don’t call you a liar, Monty. Oh, undoubtedly you embroider the edges and hemstitch the story up. But, in essentials, the story is probably correct. I suppose it’s been so in every war.”

“I’ll bet,” Monty said.

“Of course,” Clive said. “Popular imagination and the soldier. Why, I’ll bet when Julius Caesar landed somewhere near here—I bet he did plenty of fixing up to send back to the constituents in Rome—making things sound as they ought to have been instead of as they were.

“And who then, or now, is to question Caesar’s version?

“Why, I’ll bet that nine-tenths of history as we know it never happened that way at all. And it will go on that way as long as we have lowly human beings fighting the wars, and generals writing the reports.

“If a general loses, does he admit his lacks? Not one bit. If he loses, he says he foresaw it, only the politicians wouldn’t give him more tanks or rifle-brigade men, or more maps, or better toffee for the troops, or whatever it was—and if his troops happen to win, he says that’s exactly the way he planned it.”

Prudence shook her head.

“No,” she said. “There must be something to generalship and strategy. Napoleon—Marlborough—their great campaigns.”

“Ah, but Nipper’s right. I don’t know much about ’em, but first I want to know who said what happened in the campaigns. *They* did, didn’t they, and the rest of the chaps had to take their word for it.”

“But they won the campaigns!”

“I don’t know,” Monty said. “I picked up a book about the last war once. About scraps I’d been in myself. Why, it would make you laugh to read it. It was all too cut and dried. Not like it happened at all.”

“But a private soldier can’t know the larger issues?”

“In the sum he knows the largest issue of all,” Clive said. “Whether he comes out with his life or not.

“And that’s what soldiers know and historians don’t. The first duty of a general is to keep his reputation alive, and the first duty of a soldier is to keep himself alive.”

“What happens when the two run counter?”

“What do you think? Soldiers lives are far more common than general’s reputations. Soldiers, like ammunition, are expendable and resupplies may be indented for.”

“Darling. What a face you make!”

“Why shouldn’t I make a face?”

“But every soldier can’t feel like that. If he did. . .”

“No more war.”

“No, it ain’t that,” Monty said. “Way I look at it is this. You don’t have to say anybody who went through Douai and Dunkirk wasn’t all right. There’s plenty of chaps willing to die for Old England and so on; but good soldiers or old soldiers won’t go chucking away their lives unless they see some sense to it.

“There never has been a time when there wasn’t men in England, ready to go out and die if there was some sense to it that they could see.”

“If you can see any sense to getting killed at all,” Clive said.

“Well, way I look at it, Nipper, a chap admits he’s ready to die the day he ’lists. But the trouble with green soldiers they don’t know enough to be able to tell whether there’s sense to it or not.

“If you had all green soldiers, they’d go risking their lives for nothing, and the first thing you know you’d have a dead army. But, the first thing an old soldier knows is. . .”

“To keep his rifle clean and his bowels open,” Clive said.

“No, now. . .”

“To obey the orders of superior officers at all times.”

“That’s eyewash.”

“To walk my beat in a smart and soldier-like manner . . .”

“Come off it. His first duty is to stay alive, as you said, so’s he can go on being a soldier.”

“Sooner let it be said: ‘There goes a live coward’ than ‘here lies a dead hero,’ eh?”

“Dead heroes don’t fire no guns. While a live coward can chuck a bomb tomorrow.”

“If he was a coward yesterday, why should he fight today?” Prue asked.

“Ah, now y’re asking something,” Monty said. “Nobody knows what makes a chap run one day and fight another. I’ve seen ’em do both—and I’ve done both myself. Mostly, a chap fights because of one of two things. He’s got to fight or be killed—or he can see some sense to what he’s doing. If it’s like at Douai or Dunkirk, well that makes sense. If it’s like Goss’s raid and don’t make sense, he’ll just do enough so’s he can’t get shot by a firing squad for disobeying orders, and not do enough to get shot by Jerry.”

Prue stared from one to the other.

“You mean to say, then, that wars are fought with millions of individuals deciding whether they will or won’t fulfill orders—each man deciding whether it makes sense to him?”

“That’s exactly true,” Clive said. “And its what generals never understand. Individual men reason it out, and when it gets to the point that individual men can see no more sense to the way their lives are being used—then the war’s over. You didn’t win the World War because any general solved it. It was just the Jerries couldn’t see any more sense to the way they were being killed so they went home.”

“That’s true,” Monty said. “If you’ve got to be killed you want some sense to it.”

“But, when is it sense?” Prue asked.

“Well, Douai was, and Dunkirk,” Monty said. “They made sense. So the chaps stayed and got killed. Now the papers says they’re heroes. That’s pig-wash for the people to read. It wasn’t being heroes. It was just common sense that a rear guard would have to pick a place to hold so’s the others could get out.

“So when they said: ‘Take Douai back and hold it,’ and ‘Hold the Canal de Bergues,’ nobody was being a bloody hero, and getting killed didn’t come into it.

“You didn’t say to yourself: ‘I don’t want to get killed.’ You just said: ‘Well, it makes sense somebody’s got to stay behind and cop it, and it’s just our bloody luck to get the detail, that’s all.’ Oh, and maybe you said too that it showed the command must think you’re a bloody good outfit to get what they call the honor of staying. When you’re a soldier you’ve only got two things to believe in—to take pride in yourself for being a clean soldier, and to think your regiment can knock the ears off of any other that ever lined up on parade. Oh, maybe you get the wind up a bit, but then you laugh and say: ‘Well, any bloody band o’ jam-wallahs can pull out and keep on going; but you’ve got to have a regiment of real troops to stay behind and stick it.’ That’s what I figure is the big thing the British nation’s got, if you come right down to it. We can stick it. We can stand up and stick it better than any other bloody nation on the earth.

“Anyhow, we knew we had to stick it at Douai and Dunkirk, and chaps would do it because it made sense, and if it hadn’t made sense we wouldn’t have done it.

“Likewise, at Dunkirk the navy could see the army had to be got out, so that made sense to them, and they come in and got us out, and a nasty job it was for ’em. But nobody groused.

“I tell you, if you could have seen the way they were pulling them wounded up on the boats and laying ’em on deck in rows, and not one of ’em saying a word, only just lying there and waiting and holding on to themselves so they wouldn’t say anything, and chaps like the Nipper, up to their necks in water all day and then letting other chaps have their places and going back to take another day on the beach with them Stukas—well, nobody can grouse. Remember, Clive, that Colonel brought that outfit out—every man he had left carrying two rifles so’s Jerry couldn’t cop ’em?”

“Yes,” Clive said.

“Well, that was all sense,” Monty said. “Arithmetic! Lose 50,000 to get 250,000 out. You had to. If the 50,000 didn’t hold, the whole bloody push would get smacked.

“Funny, one time I got thinking that if you were dead you were just as dead if 50,000 went with you as if 250,000 went. But there’s cockeyed thinking there somewhere, and I knew it. Most of the time I’d say: ‘Well, if you cop it, you cop it, and Ma was right and I never should have enlisted in the first place. But you’ve been lots of places and seen lots of things, and there isn’t much to do you haven’t done, and so what the hell! Do you want to live forever!’ So I says: ‘Yes!’ So I says back: ‘Well, you ain’t going to anyhow, so if you go now you might as well take as many Jerries along with you as you can and then it’s a fair swap.’

“And we did take a few, too. That first wave that come over—did we spray ’em clean! Remember, Clive, that first bloody push, coming over singing?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“The way them bastards were singing, it sounded like. Remember?”

“Yes.”

Clive got up slowly, feeling the breeze come cool on his aching head.

“I’ll take a walk,” he said.

He went to the water’s edge and leaned against a rock, gnarled and studded with limpets and smelling harsh of the slow rot of sea life. He watched the edge of the wave trickle up through the runnels of sand, almost to the rock—almost.

He thought: When a wave reaches this rock, you are dead. As surely as that, as surely as time itself, it shall come. Dead, like the others dancing over the gun sight.

When the first wave came, lines of them, it was not real. Perhaps they were singing. You only remembered now that there was, far away, a noise—tiny, torn gusts of sound. Had that been singing? You were too busy with so many things in yourself to know clearly then. You were saying: “At last, you bastards! At last! You’ve made us run, and march, and dig, and march and run—and now, it’s our turn. At last!”

When you looked over the sights at first they blurred, and then you saw the target—just figures like ants, bobbing and dancing on the gun sight. Slowly you realized the targets weren’t dancing—they were still and it was your gun shaking.

That was when Monty said: “About eight hundred yards! Let ’em come to two hundred. Don’t tip ’em off yet.”

You looked up at him and smiled and licked your lips, feeling them cracked and hot and dry. Your throat was dry and your heart was thumping up high in your chest and you struggled to keep from puking.

You waited and tried to swallow, and your gullet seemed to scratch your dry throat and at last you could hold it back no longer, and you turned your head and puked—and puked. And there was nothing to puke. You hadn't eaten for so long. Only bitter water in the retching, and you spat and flung the stringy slime from your mouth and wiped the smear of tears from your eyes and thought:

"Now he knows it. Now Monty knows how stricken with terror I am."

But when you blinked and looked at him and made the muscles of your face smile to show you were all right, he said: "That's O.K. Lots of 'em do it either before or after."

So you got your eyes clear and looked over the sights and found your body shaking with a stagefright that sent the gun jumping all over the landscape.

Then you gripped yourself and concentrated and ordered your lungs to breathe slowly to stop the gasping for breath, and the sights became still, and you lay, balancing the crawling ants on the top of the foresight—until a gun opened on the left almost making you fall from sudden fright at its sound.

Then Monty said: "Ah, why didn't they let him come in closer? Why didn't they let him come?"

Then you knew it was no use waiting, and you steadied the gun and squeezed, and the clatter of your own machine gun deafened you and you fought to keep the butt to your shoulder so that the jumping would stop, and you blinked and saw the men dropping.

At first you couldn't believe you had harmed them. It was inconceivable that such a small action on your part had played any part in the tearing of flesh or bone, or in the finality and utterness of death to some human. You wouldn't believe it. You even hoped it wasn't so. They weren't dead. They were just hiding. They'd heard your bullets, and they'd just flopped.

So you waited, the gun still at the point, waiting until they got up again, and you'd spray them again. But they never got up, and you waited and waited, but they never got up. And you looked for something else, but there was nothing else. You looked at Monty, and he said:

"Round one! Round two coming up!"

After that it was not the same. The next time they came you thought impersonally. You thought of the range, and of what a good place this was, with plenty of protection and a fine field of fire. After that you did it over and over and over like a timeless dream that only changed its monotony when the Stukas found you, and dived and dived, and the flash blinded you, and your head felt like a gourd being squeezed and let go, quickly, time after time.

That was the second day. Time moved so curiously. Yes, the second day. Curious, the voice over the housetops, calling: "Are ye all right still down there, A. Company?" and you'd shouted back: "O.K.!"

Then Monty had pulled his good one. He pretended the Stuka had knocked them out and they lay quietly. When the Jerries came crawling, half-bent, they'd not fired. They watched them come on, with more and more confidence, coming nearer and nearer, until the gun on the left had begun sweeping them, trying to cover the extra field of fire.

It had been like a moving picture, watching the German officer crouching, hiding from the gun on the left, but in full view of your field of fire, waving his men round to the flank. You'd lain quiet and watched him as he waved and shouted. You'd watched them sweat and bring up their machine gun and start getting it in place. And just when it was about ready to fire, Monty had nudged you: "Now let 'em have it!"

Then your guns chattered, and above their cracking stutter you heard them on the left, shouting: "Good old A. Company!" They'd thought you'd been knocked out.

That was a dirty trick—lying doggo and letting the Jerries believe they were safe. At two hundred yards—you couldn't miss. But after that you knew men didn't hide because of your bullets. For you'd seen them go down—over the top of the sight you saw the officer jump up, and then spin round as if an irresistible hand had plucked him by the shoulder. And he got up again and started to crawl, and then suddenly sagged flat. After that he never moved again, and every time you looked out, there he always was—just as you had stopped him while he was trying to crawl away. Never any different.

Then the heavy stuff started coming, and you saw chunks of houses erupt with a roar. But you didn't feel really bad until you heard the awful roar of a *flammenwerfer*, and the gun on the left went dead. Monty went crawling by the greenhouse wall and into the cellar to see what had happened. Then for no reason, it seemed, the tanks came in behind, and you turned round and fired from the shoulder, the gun's recoil swinging you in a wild pivot. You heard the flame thrower roaring and knew you were firing silly bullets at a thing of armor plate and steel. You heard the shriek of its cannon—being fired point-blank at fifty yards and you knew it was all over. The front had broken somewhere else and you were cut off. You shouted for Monty, feeling terribly alone, but he never came. So you ran, crouching, going with an agony of speed, and dove into the cellar. After that it was like cops and robbers on a city-wide scale. You tried to find your way out through the town. But Jerry had the town. You hid from the tanks and climbed through windows and went out back doors—hiding from the tanks and firing at the enemy infantry that had seeped in from the broken flank, and that went running and hiding through the empty streets. You abased yourself and skulked, and came out for a vicious minute of freedom and revenge when you saw a chance.

You ran, and hid, and fired and ran, until you were so tired, and in that tiredness so empty of fear of even death itself, that you dropped on the pile of bricks and ludicrously, hopelessly, began trying to make the gun work again.

That was when, from nowhere, Monty came up, large as life—his chunky, solid figure coming steadily up the street, carrying the Bren, his hand lifted in signal—just as cheerful as ever. And somehow, seeing him, you became alive again, and had fear again, and thus believed in life again. So you got up and said: "Hi, Monty." Ah, a great chap, Monty! A great chap!

The water almost reached the rock. Clive reached out and dug a runnel with his heel. The next wave came up the runnel and lapped at the rock.

That was the end.

He went back to the cliff face.

“We ought to go,” he said. “The tide’ll cut us off soon.”

Monty nodded and went on talking:

“I suppose when the chaps on one side come to the conclusion that it ain’t no sense any more to what they’re getting killed for, then the war’s fini, napoo!”

“But,” Prue said, “the Germans may consider it right to risk being killed for something that we wouldn’t consider worth it.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t follow you. If there’s two rights, I can’t be worried about their right. It’s what we think is right that’s important to me, and to hell with their ideas.”

“Spoken heartily, Monty,” Clive said. “Let’s go. You’ve got to the point where you admit finally it’s all prejudice. It takes a brave man to say it, Monty. To hell with their ideas, and up with our own. That’s the simplest and most truthful analysis.”

Prudence looked up and smiled at Clive. He held out his hand, and she swung up, taking his arm. They went along under the cliff face until at a headland the waters lapped up to the cliff. When each wave ebbed back there was a momentary path over the puddled sand between the chalky rocks.

Clive ran through. Then he turned, and as the next wave ebbed, he watched Prudence. Laughing and jumping, she came through the puddled water, her skirts held to her knees, and, above the roll of her stockings the white of the well-made legs showing. The slanting sun was striking full on her, and as she ran, she laughed as a woman will.

And like the bursting of sudden and new sunlight, he found himself knowing that it was important to remember all this.

Remember it all, a fierce, hidden part of his mind shouted. Remember it! The time, the place. Remember it as you see it, all frozen to bring back at any time. It will always last, this crystallized moment. Everything will last for you in this second. You will remember the sound shut in by the cliff, the sound of her laughing, and the sound of the sea, and the smell of the water, and the sun coming flatly at her as she jumps over the pool, and Monty back there, standing, and waiting his turn to run through. This you will never forget.

And as he thought it, she came and he opened his arms to her and she ran to them. He lifted her from her feet and swung her round and shouted:

“Jesus Christ!”

Then he looked down at her and they knew what they both felt and thought. But she looked up at him and said:

“Hello!”

He bent his head to her face.

“I wish to hell Monty wasn’t here,” he said.

She lay unmoving in his clasp.

“Behave yourself,” she said.

“Then we’d go home and go to bed!”

She looked at him, her eyes laughing.

“I’ll tell Monty. What a thing to say about your friend!”

“Go on and tell him. You daren’t!”

“I’ve too much decency and modesty.”

“That’s right,” he said. “You have. I’m glad you have.”

He put her down, gently, and then linked his arm with hers.

“Wait for Monty,” she reminded him.

“Let him find his own girl,” he said.

But she made him wait, and then she linked arms with Monty too.

That way the three went back to the town, and to Mine Host’s, and listened to the B.B.C.

A lot more German planes had been shot down, and everyone was very confident about Churchill and what he had said to Parliament.

CHAPTER XXIV

HAMISH walked to his flat, feeling the London evening about him, the slow, long sinking into endless twilight that somehow was like all else in Britain—steady, unhurried, done without vulgar abruptness.

He turned in his apartment and rang for the lift. Inside he jabbed at the automatic buttons. If you could shut emotion on and off like that!

As he left the lift he heard the stridency of a far-off bell. Hurriedly he unlocked his door, and ran to the telephone. The instrument had no hum—only that metallic deadness.

He put down the telephone, but sat there by the window, his bowler still on his head. He stared at the square below, lovely in the mellow light.

When the telephone rang again, he was almost frightened by its near-by dinning.

He picked it up quickly, and heard the line singing and snapping, clipped operators' voices—and then Iris's, saying:

"But there should be an answer!"

"Iris," he said. "Iris—it's Hamish!"

"Oh, hello, Hamish. I've been trying to get you for . . ."

"Oh, London," a girl's voice said, in infinite distance. The tones were a mixture of telephone clipped-ness and county broadness. "Hello, London!"

"Will you please get off the wire," Iris's voice said. "Or I'll have you reported."

The wire snapped into a higher-toned humming.

"Hamish?"

"Yes, I'm still here," he said. "I'm so glad you called, Iris. I've been thinking about—where you and the children should stay. Willfred thinks that Leaford will be . . ."

"We're not at Leaford. That's why I called you. We're in Somerset—at a fearful little place called Pondeggan."

"Somerset! But . . ."

"But you wanted me to leave Leaford, didn't you? First you tell me Leaford is a bad place to be, and when I move you're upset."

He waited, hearing his own breath come and go—three times. Then he said:

"Iris."

"Yes."

"Won't you—you—come back to London, please! If I can . . ."

“London is out of the question, Hamish. It’s too dangerous—for the children.”

He breathed heavily again.

“You’re not—you mean that, Iris? It’s because of possible bombing and—not for any other reason that you won’t come here?”

“Why, of course, Hamish!” He heard her laugh rising, disarmingly. “Why—of course.”

“I see,” he said.

He waited, until he was aware of his breathing again.

“Iris,” he said, finally. “Look, I’m coming down there to see you. We can talk—iron things out . . .”

He heard her laughter rising again—fragments like the tinkle of breaking glass.

“Why, Hamish, I couldn’t think of pulling you away. You’re busy.”

“Business is not as important . . .”

But she was going on, drowning him in words.

“We’re all right, and perfectly comfortable, Hamish. And this is a charming little place . . .”

Then he knew. He was not listening to the rest of her words. He knew. He had conducted too many cross-examinations in court, seen too many people betray major truths by a minute contradiction in their answers, not to know.

In that moment some part of Hamish Cathaway fell heavily away, some part of him whose going left a dull, empty sickness. But even as a witness betraying himself on the stand somehow filled him with sorrow rather than joy, he was flooded with compassion now.

Iris was no longer his wife—only a poor, weak, witness before the court of her own life. He spoke, sadly, knowing that she would know, too.

“But, Iris, you said it was a fearful little place,” he said.

Sadly he waited knowing nothing she said would alter the fact that it was the end between them, and that for some reason which he could not care about, she was yet unwilling to admit it.

“Oh, it was the place—the village I said was fearful. It’s a terrible little hole, Hamish. You’d laugh if you saw it.”

She laughed, as if to encourage him to forget thinking and become conscious only of her words.

“But the cottage is charming—old and quaint, but so cozy.”

He was thinking: A man can’t decently cross-examine his wife—not even when she is no longer really his wife.

“I see,” he said. “Thank you for calling and—telling me. Good-by.”

He placed the telephone back without waiting to hear her answer. Then he sat, his hand still on the phone, staring from the window.

Half-expectantly he hoped to see London at its sweetest hour—the hour when the dusk shroud settled over her and the sky lost its last, washed sadness. When, in the dear

familiar smell of evening mist and soft-coal smoke, the windows in the square lit up, one by one.

Then London became most beautiful of all—the old lady of cities wearing her concealing gown of darkness, with her modest jewels of lights twice-worn—once in the bosom of her buildings, and once again at her feet in the ever-wet, reflecting pavements.

Now—now—there should be people going home with bent heads, going across the square into the momentary clearness of the circles of lamp-light on the rain-washed pavements, and then fading into the darkness again.

But—there was only the blackout. Life had changed—and a lifetime and its habits—and seven million lifetimes and their habits had changed.

Yet, you couldn't think of anything happening to London—not really. Not bombing or war.

But then a man couldn't imagine anything happening to his life, his home, his family unity, the love of his wife—until it came. This had come to him—and so would the other. Because Iris was done with him—London could be bombed. Because it could be, it would be.

"How foolish," he said, aloud.

But he sat, held in a sort of paralysis—and time flowed by unbrokenly, for no bells now tolled the chimes of the hour. Time flowed, and was gone, and he sat in mental ineffectuality.

He sent his ships of thought on far and brave voyages—but they sailed away and came back again without having touched any other port.

At last he lifted the telephone and, counting the holes in the darkness, dialed his brother's number. But he only got Miss Lankaster, who told him Willfred was at a conference.

He took off his hat and sat by the window in a stagnation of not thinking. It was long after when Willfred called him. He made his voice warm and cheerful.

"Ah, Willfred—I say, will you do me a favor—a big favor?"

"Of course, of course."

The older brother's voice was gladly loud.

"Why—er—who do I see about—er—joining up—the R.A.F.?"

"Good God," Willfred said. "Good God!"

"Why, what's the matter, Will? After all, there is a war on—and if a chap can't serve . . ."

"I know, Hamish. But you—you'd be far more use in some military-legal department. Or . . ."

"Now, Will, I don't want any glorified office-boy-in-top-boots job. If you get me that, it's all off. R.A.F. or nothing."

"But your age, Hamish! They want veritable kids for the R.A.F."

"Oh, they must need older men—executive officers and what not. After all, I'm only thirty-five. And I've a good O.T.C. record, y'know."

“I know, but—but what about Iris and the youngsters, Hamish? Have you told her?”

“No. I just decided—after due thought.”

“But isn’t it a bit hard on her? Leaving her with the worry and responsibility of . . .”

“Oh, she’s all right. I’ve just got her all fixed up nicely—in Somerset. And I’m afraid women have to put up with a little discomfort in wartime, too, y’know. Now be a good chap and get busy. I want immediate appointment. Immediate! You said you’d do me a big favor.”

“All right, Hamish. Of course I will.”

“Good man, Will.”

Willfred cleared his throat.

“Look here, Hamish,” he said. “You’re not doing this for father, are you? To satisfy his soul? Because in a way I’m serving—and Roger’s really serving . . .”

“Why, no, Will. Honor bright, that never entered my head. I’m going because I want to—not for father, or the Cathaway name. But it will make the old chap feel better, won’t it? Don’t say anything till I’m vetted and in and all. Then I’ll break him the happy news. It is good news, my going, isn’t it?”

“Oh, quite, quite,” Willfred said. “And since you’ve decided, I can tell you—it certainly won’t do any harm to have a Cathaway in the forces . . .”

Hamish thought: He doesn’t say just whom it won’t do any harm to.

He smiled wryly.

“Thanks, Will. Expedite it, will you?”

“I’ll telephone you the moment I hear any word.”

Hamish hung up the telephone. Somehow he expected now to find release. But he didn’t.

He sat by the window unmoving, still staring into the blackout.

Monty put down his mug.

“By God, this sea air fair gives you an appetite,” he said. “Say, let’s have some fish and chips. Toss you who goes and finds a fish shop, Nipper. Heads I go, tails . . .”

“Not with your half-crown, my boy,” Clive laughed. “Liable to have two tails.”

“Why, what a dirty, suspicious . . . All right. What date then, odds or even? I ain’t looked.”

“Even.”

“It’s odds. You go.”

“Here, let me look.”

“I will not. You think I’d bloody well lie?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t see, then. Prue can look. See—ain’t that odds? Don’t let him see.”

“Yes,” she said, laughing. “It’s 1907, Clive. You lose.”

“There y’are, my boy. Bring me a steak and a tail—plenty o’ vinegar.”

“You crook,” Clive said. “I bet you run off with my girl while I’m gone.”

Prue looked at him, and they answered smiles. She watched him go to the door. Monty watched her. When their eyes met he said:

“He’s a great Nipper, the Nipper is, ain’t he?”

“Yes,” she said.

“You know, you got to take care of that kid, Prue. Don’t you think he looks thin?”

“I don’t know. You see, I haven’t known him long.”

“Oh, I thought you had. I see. Well, he must have lost fifteen pounds in that hospital.”

“He was in hospital! Was he wounded?”

“No, he had pneumonia.”

“You’re not kidding me?”

“Strike me! And he should have had it. First in the canal—and then in the sea. Canal de Bergues, we were at. That was when we come up near Dunkirk—there was a Lieutenant-Colonel—hot stuff he was—collecting casuals to help hold this canal. They was holding the bridgeheads—making sure our chaps had all got through, and then the Engineers was to blow the bridges up. Only Jerry got there first on our bridge; gets a square hit with a nine-point-two, and what with our charge under it in the bargain, it goes up with a hell of a bang without waiting for us to press the button. And there we was on the wrong side. But this old Colonel was hot mustard. Kept walking up and down without any tin hat on, saying:

“ ‘Oh, we’re fine. We’ve lots of bombs. We’re fine.’

“But that night he said we’d better get to hell back on our own bank and so we all took a swim. That’s where the Nipper took cold if you ask me. And in the water at Dunkirk wasn’t exactly no cure.”

“What did he do at Dunkirk?” asked Prue. “What was it you said to him about staying behind?”

“Oh, that’s what gets me mad. We got separated there. See, that’s the difference between an old soldier and a green one. I was willing to stay as long as it was any use—but the minute I couldn’t do no good, I’m as ready to go as the next. I’d had one day on that bloody beach—all day June first, and it was getting worse and worse. There’s a long line o’ chaps stretching—oh, maybe two hundred yards out to sea—up to their necks at the far end. Like a queue lined up for rations—only out into the sea. Jerry had bombed all the docks to hell then, and the whole bloody harbor was near choked full of trucks and tanks and ships of all kinds he’d sunk. So they brought in rowboats—anything shallow draft—and picked us up off the end of the queue.

“Well, some of the kids is almost dead on their feet. They can’t even climb in the boat—and some can’t swim. So them that can still stand is helping hoist the others into the boats as they come—one thing, it was done right. I mean, no pushing and scrambling. I give ’em that. Although most of ’em by June first was too dead on their feet to care much.

“Well, we’re pulling kids up by their trowsis seat, and the sailors pulling on their arms, and there’s an R.N. officer in a white jersey and he says: ‘Last boat for Blighty

for a while, boys, but there'll be others soon.'

"Well, there's a Major standing in the water, and he says: 'Thanks, you men. You'd better get in yourselves. You there, that wounded man.'

"See, he thinks I'm wounded. When we was running back in the dark after the canal, I trips on some of our own wire, and gets my sleeve caught and just about tears it off my tunic. Well, there's a bit of a scratch up here on my arm, so I puts iodine and a dressing on it—I always look after cuts and things on account of lockjaw—but this Major sees the bandage and thinks I'm wounded.

"When he says that, I don't wait. In I go, head first. Packed in like sardines, we are. And I yells, 'Come on, Nipper!' Cause they're saying: 'Four more—three more—two more—one more!' And I yells: 'Come on, Nipper!' and he has his hand on the boat, and I thought he was getting in.

"Well, then the boat swings around loaded to the gunnels, and I hear 'em saying: 'That's all! That's all.'

"And when it's swung round I looks back at the poor devils left—and there's the Nipper, still standing there. He'd let another blighter get in the boat ahead of him, and he just looks at me, trying to put a smile on, and says: 'Good-by, Monty! Good luck!'

"And off we went and left the poor bastards up to their neck in the sea."

His mind came from the vision of his story and he looked at Prue, but she dropped her head and watched her hands, twisting her glass around, so he could not see her face.

"And I asked him if he was a coward," she said.

"Hell, coward—that's got nothing to do with it," Monty said, looking away from her. "That's the trouble with you civilians. It was a bloody silly thing to do, that's all. That's ribbon-hunting stuff—just the same in a way as that bloody Major Goss. Hero stuff. It ain't good soldiering and it ain't good sense! Me, I'll stick when I can do any good—and when I can't do no more good—I'll get out and save myself for another day when I can. *That's* good soldiering."

"Perhaps all men's codes are not alike, Monty," she said quietly.

"Maybe," he said. "I don't mean he was really doing it to cop a ribbon. It's just like the Nipper to pull bloody silly things like that. That's why—you got to sort of take care of him. You haven't known him long—things happen quick in wartime—but at that I suppose they turn out just as good as if you had more time. But take care of him—and yourself, too. You know—don't let him get you into no trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble?"

"Trouble. You know. The family way."

She lifted her head and saw he was almost blushing in confusion, so she put out her hand.

"That was nice of you to think of me, Monty."

"No. It's just the Nipper deserves a nice girl like you—and I wouldn't want to see you both get into nothing you couldn't get out of if you wanted."

She sat, silently. Then she said:

"When did he get out of Dunkirk, do you know?"

“Oh, next day he come over the Channel in a rowboat. That’s what he said. Here—he wrote me a letter.”

She watched Monty fumble in his breast pocket. From between the leaves of his pay book he took a letter, handling it carefully as does a person who receives few letters, and to whom they are not casual things. Then he opened a worn case and put on a pair of steel-rimmed glasses.

Immediately the personality of Monty changed, and his appearance spoke of another side of his nature. Just the wearing of the glasses turned him into an almost old, but vigorous man, of sentimental and benign nature. She thought: Now I understand him. Now!

She heard him read, pronouncing the words laboriously, as if they were not the same things that he used in ordinary talking:

“North Camp, Gollam. June five. 1-9-4-0. Monty from Monte Carlo . . .

“That’s what he calls me, kidding, see?

“Monty from Monte Carlo. How are you? I saw the C.S.M., and I hear you are working the scratch for another wound stripe . . .”

He looked at her, soberly, over the top of the absurd glasses.

“I wasn’t working a stripe really, but it got a bit of infection—and anyone with a scratch that come out of Dunkirk, they was sticking into hospital.”

He cleared his throat and went on.

“. . . Drop me a line here and let me know where you are. This is a casuals camp. There are quite a bunch from our former division. Easy life. I slept the clock round yesterday. We got out the night of June two. A most—a most . . .

“Here, you can read it if you want. You’ll read quicker nor I will.”

He took off the glasses, and she saw that he had become hard-faced and ageless again.

Then, looking at the sheet of paper, seeing the small, hard-edged, upright writing in even lines, she thought: This is Clive, too. Clive—this writing—and now I know one more hidden side of him and know him better by the ordered character of these marks. She read on, swiftly:

> . . . A most amazing cove of a major brought us off in a rowboat.
>
> I hear Allen got out all right. I went back to C.C.S. after you left, but they’d got all the casualties out except the ones that couldn’t possibly be moved. Weather too clear and he bombed the hell out of us on the beach next day and few got out. I went down west on the beach—it was quieter there and around dark this major rowed up.
>
> Quite a story. I’ll tell you some day. The bird had been cut off all alone down toward Calais, so he acquired a rowboat and rowed all the way up to Dunkirk to get back to his outfit. His outfit had all pulled out the day before, so when he saw how things were he loaded us in—four of us, and rowed us back. Big, tough red-headed ape he was. Had a chest like a piano—and hair on it like a coconut doormat.

So you see, I came home in style with a major for a gondolier.

Let me know where you are, and when you get out we'll have the biggest bloody binge to celebrate you ever saw. You know me, mate.

Your

—2265657

"If he didn't know where you were, how could he write you?" she said.

"How? Just stick a chap's rank, regiment and number on an envelope and put British army on it, and it'll get to him—sooner or later. Here's another one he wrote."

Monty was holding it out happily—as if he had a quite permissible pride in owning such valuable documents. She opened it and read it aloud:

Tillington Hospital
Tillington-on-the-alleged-Weck,
Bucks.
June 9, 1940

To Monty the Midas of Monaco:
Greetings.

I've got a rest cure, too. Went on sick parade with a cold yesterday expecting M. and D. and they called it pneumonia. So here I am. A Yorkshireman for luck. Feel pretty filthy, though.

But I'll try to get out so we have leave together. We'll celebrate return to life yet.

—22etc.

"Can't he think up things to call you?" Monty said proudly. "Here's another."

She took the final sheet and read it.

Tillington Hospital
Tillington-on-Weck,
Bucks.
Aug. 3, 1940

Dear Monty:

Sorry to call it off at the last moment. Not that I can't get my leave beginning a week from today—I don't know why they're even holding me here now. I feel perfectly well.

But I've been here two months, which is too long, and lying here and hearing the other chaps talk has been bad for my philosophical digestive system. I've got megrims, vapors, and cosmic biliousness. All that means nothing except that I'd be bad company, and I'd like to get away alone—away from armies and uniforms and the B.B.C., and think a few things out for myself.

You do understand, don't you, why I call off going on leave together? But I'll get myself all sorted out mentally and meet you at the old Britannia in Soho on the 20th—round three in the afternoon, say, and we'll have the binge, anyhow. I won't go back on that. We'll do it in a satisfactory soldier manner, get picked up for D. and D., and go back to camp broke, sadder, and no wiser.

I know you'll forgive me. So—the Britannia at three pip emma on the 20th.

Until then . . .

—Clive.

"And I made him miss even that," she said. "I'm truly sorry."

He was folding the letters, his thick finger stubs moving with clumsy care as he put them in the pay book.

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "We can all have just as good a time here, the three of us. More the merrier. Tonight, tomorrow, then Saturday I go back. I don't see how my pass is made out to end Saturday, and his to end Sunday. How did he work that, I wonder?"

She did not answer.

"How many more days you got?" he asked.

"Mine's up Sunday, too. I had ten days. Oh, let's not count days—it—it sounds like—like bad luck."

He regarded her, steadily—almost sorrowfully.

"Yes. Wartimes make leave days go fast," he said.

But as he spoke he saw her face change and he knew she had not heard his last words. Her eyes and her face went into a glad birth of new aliveness.

"Here he is," she said, looking over his head.

And Monty's mind said: If ever a woman should look like that for you, mate, when you come into a pub! If ever just one'd look like that!

And in a flashing wave of bitterness and envy and loneliness he bent his head, buttoning his flap pocket. But in that second it was gone, and he looked up, grinning, at Clive with his face damp and alive from the soft mistiness of outdoors.

"You was long enough, my lad," he said.

"Had to wait. Some trouble rationing fish or something."

He was unwrapping the newspaper parcel.

Prudence thought: He's so happy. When he's like that . . .

"Well, I see we had to clear out of Somaliland," he went on. "Read a cove's paper over his shoulder while I waited. Thought that would cheer you two warmongers. Here! Shift that mug!"

He slid a mug across the table. It teetered on a crack between the boards, upset, and splashed toward Prue. She rose, quickly.

"Oh, Clive. Now look at my dress!"

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . .”

The men dabbed at Prudence’s skirt with their handkerchiefs. The dark stain spread over the warm gold of the tweed.

“I’m awfully silly to be nice about this, Clive,” she said, softly.

“Lots I know would ha’ picked up the mug and conked him over the head,” Monty reproved.

“What kind of women do you know, Monty?” Clive laughed.

“Never mind that.”

“You ought to get him to tell you about life, love, and how to handle women, Prue. Come on, Monty, tell us.”

“Women,” Monty said seriously, “is a thing gentlemen don’t discuss. And especially in public—and most of all not in a pub.”

“Bravo, Monty,” Prudence said. “Bravo. That shows you how to be a gentleman, Clive.”

“That’s one thing no one can make me, I’m afraid.”

He straightened.

“There, that’s pretty fair. I’m sorry.”

He looked up, and she saw the brown of his eyes, and she smiled, quickly. They held the glance for a second, and a thousand unspoken conversations were said.

“We’ve got to eat, too,” he said, laughing.

He lifted the paper-wrapped portions.

“Three steaks, three tails and six-pennorth o’ taties.”

“Ah—I like fish and chips,” Monty said, inhaling appreciatively. “You know—that’s one thing I miss in the army.”

Prudence looked at the gold-brown mass.

“It doesn’t seem right—bringing our meals in to Mine Host’s when he . . .”

“Oh, he won’t care,” Monty said, breezily. “Long as we buy a pint or two. Eat up!”

Prudence waved her fingers.

“We haven’t forks.”

“Forks,” Clive said. “We don’t use forks on fish and chips in the lower strata, do we Monty?”

“That’s swanking, is forks.”

Clive looked at Prudence.

“Did you never eat fish and chips before?”

“Not from a shop. We weren’t allowed to. They were supposed to be bad for us.”

“Why, this is what they raise their babies on where I come from,” Clive said. “Right off the bottle and on to fish and taties.”

“Just for that,” she said. “You may go get yourself another drink.”

“No,” he said. “I’ve reformed. I’m going to be a moral citizen. Early to bed, early to rise, and all that. So when you’re through eating don’t you think we ought to be getting back?”

“I don’t think so,” Prue said, firmly.

“Don’t let me keep you,” Monty put in, quickly. “I’ll push off.”

“I’m a bit tired, Monty,” Clive said.

Prudence saw the smile in his eyes.

“I’m not, darling.”

“But—er—we could get up early and go for a walk,” Clive offered.

“All right. And I’ll drop around in the morning,” Monty said. “About—say about eleven o’clock.”

They sat unspeaking, holding their poses seriously for a moment. Then the façade of words collapsed and all three burst into simultaneous laughing.

“Just for that,” Clive said, “we’ll all stay and have a good old binge.”

That night the air raids came at last. The anti-aircraft guns opened up and so it was no use pretending any more that the planes were ours, coming home. It had gone beyond pretending. You could hear him bombing all along the South Coast.

The sirens wailed in that town, as in the other towns, and the blackness became alive with people seeking shelter. Because it was the first raid they did not go, as they were to later, in an accepted routine, moving in a coherent obedience. They were still individuals and so they acted, as people do under a new danger, each in his distinct manner.

Some of them went to the shelters in boredom and with grumbling, because they were not able to picture terrible and sudden death and so did not believe in what they were doing.

Some could picture death, and so they went with panic hiding behind the sagging of their lips.

Some had even more imagination, for they could picture themselves in death, but they could also picture themselves in life, too. These were the most afraid of all; for, because they could visualize themselves as others saw them, they covered it all up with a pose and were too noisily cheerful. They wanted to sing and joke to coat the others with their own veneer.

But there were others who could see all these things, and could understand, too, that one sham is as bad as another—the sham of panic and the sham of acted-out heroism.

These were the very best of all. They went to the shelters and sat quietly; or they stayed where they were, in some strange way elevated beyond the clutches of life and death, dwelling alone in a place where their own inner integrity kept them company.

All these people went to the shelters or not according to their inner mechanisms. At first, when the bombs did not arrive, the loud-mouthed ones wanted to leave the shelters, boasting that it was a false alarm; and the fearful ones wanted to stay in the shelter always without wishing any reason for their desire.

But the bombs did fall. At first it all sounded insignificant and disproportionate. It was fantastic and unreal. There was no enemy to see and no enemy to hear.

Far away the sky line was waving and dancing with air-defense lights. The mutter of guns was edging down the coast like an audible tide. It came nearer and nearer. Pinpricks of light began to blink and erupt far up in the sky. Then, with a suddenness that startled, the hidden guns near by began to bang. They sounded as if they were in the next street. They banged like angrily shut doors. And finally came the gentler but uglier sounds—a third, and then another, and then another—sounds that kept saying, as they crept nearer: Krupp! Krupp! Kkrrruppp!

Then the men who had been in wars would nod almost appreciatively and say: "That's 'em! They always tell you where they're made. Krupp! Krupp! That's 'em."

But younger men said:

"Is that all?"

They found comfort in hearing that bombs sounded so far away and insignificant while the furiously banging guns were so near and loud and important.

But those who were near panic, and who knew nothing, did not hear guns or bombs. They heard only the total noise, and began to feel the mighty and overpowering terror of warfare.

The loud-mouthed ones, with the ignorance of half-knowledge, would boast and joke too loudly. They did not know of delicate mechanisms that ordained lines of flight, of flawless, singing trajectories, of men who labored at fine instruments so that a shell should burst at a designated place on that curving line. All they heard was the faraway sound of the bombs and the much greater noise of the guns, and they would say:

"Now we're showing him! Don't worry, everybody. We're giving him what for now."

But the men who had been in wars—these men knew, and they understood. They could hear the sounds and translate all the meanings.

When the first siren sounded, those who had tasted war could see men, far away, in ships and in camps and in offices, reporting and telephoning. They could see other men bending their lights, taking slips of paper and plotting courses on a map. They could see others telephoning ahead to towns that lay in the path of the slowly defining direction of the raid.

When the lights wavered in the sky, those who knew the shape of war saw men sitting before wheels, sweating in the closeness of their unbreakable concentration as they shut out all other life except their one wheel, their one row of figures, the one commanding voice that came clearly although it sounded like one coming through light years of space.

When the guns sounded, those who knew the perfume of war not only heard them and saw the pinpricks of light, but they saw men, too. These were men, again so rapt in concentration that nothing existed in the world beyond their tiny province. Men who sat with hands at dials, and who gazed into a world of prismatic haze where two crossing spider webs lived, and where they searched, as a biologist searches in a microscope, for a glimpse of shimmering divorced blobs that danced in the void like badly printed color reproductions come to animated life. And when they found them, they began to speak from their other world, not knowing nor even wondering if a plane were plummeting toward them with machine guns spitting, or zooming up from a bomb dive.

Only their hands twisted and turned tensely on the knobs until the lazy, half-seen blobs crossed and recrossed each other and flicked into momentary units of focus, and they droned:

"Eight five four five! Eight five six five! Eight five nine oh!"

All along the path of the raid, machines turned and miraculously computed intricate trigonometrical problems; but always men controlled them, men moving in a frozen sort of race, not knowing any world about them beyond the one lens or wheel or line of figures that was their part of the teamwork.

Those things the men who had eaten war and survived it, knew and pictured as the guns banged. And their ears heard, too, the whining of falling fragments from their own shells that had exploded far above. They heard the pilli-willi-willi-willy of a downward screaming nose cap and knew what would happen to blood and flesh and bone that might mischance to be in the way of such.

They heard the faraway Krupp-krrruppp! They knew it was small because it was far away. But they understood what was happening over the horizon. And they sometimes said:

"Some poor blighter's copping it!"

Such men as these walked to the shelters and sat there unspeaking, or more often they stayed at home and talked with their own integrity and said: "Might just as well carry on."

For they know that safety is a matter only slightly affected by the laws of slim percentage.

They believe that Fate writes a man's name on a bomb, or a bullet, or on a screaming shell fragment, or on collapsing brick. And when the name is there, it is there and that is all there is to it, and to run or hide or burrow is but the ludicrous wriggling of a worm.

They know there is no law of human or of God above which ordains that a falling bomb shall not hit a street as easily as a field, a building as aptly as a public square, a church as readily as a slum tenement, a king's palace as impartially as a cow byre.

They know that whoever and however a man may be, and wherever and whenever he may go, there modern war's death can drop on him in timeless suddenness and with beautiful impartiality. And they do not hurry nor hide.

For above all, these, who are the truly brave, know that having bought a life on the hire-purchase plan they must pay for it with a death—and the day and date of the payment is a secret only to the Manufacturer.

But they do not speak of all this. And if they must speak, as to their wives, they would say:

"Take the kids and go on down if you want to. I'll stay here and have a hot cup o' tea for you when you get back."

And if a wife protests, there is nothing more to say beyond:

"Well, you're just as liable to cop it one place as another and—if it's got my number written on it, well, I'd just as lief have it here before my own fire as chasing down the street and hiding down some bloody cellar."

Such ones as these, firm in this only comfort and philosophy that can leave man his inner dignity, go on eating or drinking or reading or writing letters or making love, or partaking in any of the other ordinary and multiple activities of which the human is master or servant.

Such people as these can be killed. Such people can be beaten in a war.

But not very readily.

CHAPTER XXV

In the darkness she clutched his arm convulsively, and he could feel the drive of her fingernails through the sleeve of his pajamas. He knew then that she was really terrified. No one, aware and knowing, would grip with such viciousness—such disregard for the other.

He lay, feeling the sharp pain in his biceps and felt momentarily the cold hatred of a soldier for a civilian—the squirm of malicious joy as something cries: "Now! Now they're tasting it, too!"

Then he remembered her face and her smile and her calm spirit. He put his other hand over hers.

"Ah! What's eating you?" he said.

"It—it was so close—it dropped—so very close."

He could hear her fighting for breath. He laughed, knowing as he did it that she would feel his body shaking.

"Fathead," he said. "It was one of our guns."

"But—there's no gun as close as that."

Her voice had a lift to it. He reached out and drew her head to his shoulder.

"They sound close at night," he said. "It's a gun. You'll know all right when a bomb does drop."

She pulled away from him.

"Clive—let's get out of here. We should be in a shelter."

He lay so long without speaking that she lost her momentary panic. He drew her head back again.

"It's no use, Prue."

But she pulled away from him again.

"Of course it is! That's what shelters are for! They wouldn't have them if it wasn't safer. Please—let's go down!"

He sat up, hearing the banging of the guns, and beyond that the unsynchronous drone of a German bombing plane. He put out his hands in the dark. He found her hands and held them.

"Look," he said. "This is the time when you can't do anything. You're in for it now. You're in it at last. There's nothing to do. Do you understand?"

"But we've got to do something! Got to! Something! We could at least go . . ."

“Listen, Prue. It’s just the same here as anywhere else.”

She became angry at his lethargy, and forgot her fear. It was silly, lying there as if hypnotized or drunk, waiting dully for death. Action at least was some sort of protest against death.

“Clive! Do get up and let’s get out of here!”

She shook him as one would a sleeper, but he held her hands.

“It’s no use running around,” he said. “You can’t save yourself that way.”

She heard him laugh quickly, and in the dark she shook her head.

“Prue, did you ever hear the story of the old lady in the last war? She always went walking around the streets when the Zepps came over bombing, because she had a son in a musketry camp and he’d written her that a moving target was always harder to hit.”

She shuddered.

“Don’t,” she said.

“Oh, come on. Laugh!”

“I can’t.”

She plunged her head on his shoulder and hid her face.

“Just hold me,” she said. “Hold me!”

He lay with his hand patting her bare shoulder, his hand going steadily like a metronome. His eyes stared into the darkness and he listened to all the sounds, coldly translating them into action. He could hear the drone of the planes, the snarling sound coming nearer. The gunfire almost drowned it out, but he listened beyond the banging and heard the drone. A nearer gun jumped into crashing outburst. He could hear the great sigh of the shells as they soared away. Then he listened to the drone again.

It was so plain now that she heard it. She lifted her head. As if to speak aloud would betray them she whispered:

“They’re coming over.”

“No,” he said. “They’re ours.”

“They wouldn’t fire at ours.”

“They’re ours. Now don’t worry.”

His hand patted her shoulder automatically. He shut out again the sound of the guns and the sound of the sea and the sound of their own breathing, and listened to the hum. They were about overhead now.

If a bomb was coming, it had been released long ago. It had been dropped out there before the plane was overhead.

It was coming now, in a thin curve—at first riding with the direction of the plane, but then as gravity pulled at it, curving gently and gently more downward, straighter down, and down—like an Aubrey Beardsley line, drawn down and down—and the line finished where?

On this hotel?

They’d know soon.

Thirty seconds, twenty——

He counted the jump of his own heartbeat to keep steady time.

Six—five—four—three—two . . .

He heard the clicking smack, and in that instant his mind said:

You do hear it. They always said you'd never hear the one that hit you, but you do. I'm hearing it, and now I'll never live to tell them you do hear it.

And as he thought that, the thought going as thoughts do in times of stress like a winking of light, he was aware that it was not a bomb. So he had not had time to move, and he lay still, hearing the clicking smash, and feeling her clutching him again.

He made his voice calm.

"Piece of shrap," he said. "It was just a shell fragment from our own guns. It hit on the roof."

"They're his planes, aren't they?"

"Yes," he said. "But it's all right now. If they'd dropped a bomb for us it'd be here now. You needn't worry."

She took a deep breath.

"I'm not worrying any more," she said. "I'm sorry I got like that. It's all gone now."

"That's the stuff," he said. "Stiff upper lip. Old school tie. I thought the upper classes always had an old school tie."

She lifted her head.

"It's not a bad idea."

"That's it," he said. He listened to the planes drone away as the gunfire swelled to the north. "Rugby, Eton, Harrow and all that. Steady from stroke to bow. Play the game, you cads, play the game."

"Don't be mean about it."

"I'm not being mean."

"I couldn't help it. But I'm all right now."

"Don't mind me," he said. "Put your head here."

"I'm all right now. I won't be frightened any more."

He cradled her head and listened. Then he smiled, bitterly, into the darkness.

"A raid won't frighten you any more?"

"No. I won't be frightened any more."

"That's good," he said. "Because there's another bunch coming over."

He lay quietly, listening to the new drone and the crescendo of the guns. He heard her voice, muffled.

"It's all right, darling. But—it's only—that it's so noisy."

"There, there. Noise can't hurt you. And you're going to wear your stiffest upper lip, aren't you?"

"It's no use. I'm still frightened."

"Of course you are," he said. "Everyone's frightened. That's got nothing to do with being brave. You're frightened, sure—but you're braver than you are frightened—see?"

"I'm not brave."

“You are—and you’re beautiful.”

He almost laughed as she answered. And he said to himself: That’s all—keep on talking to them and you’ll get them all right sooner or later. He was listening to what she had said—a whispered interrogation:

“Am I beautiful?”

“Of course you are!”

“No—not of course. Please don’t say of course. Say I am.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Really I’m not. But if you think I am. I’m glad, if you think I am.”

Then he knew that she knew she was holding on to talking, too. And he felt suddenly angry at himself for having been spiritually superior.

“Prue—my eyes say you are beautiful. Should I tell you that? Do you want to know that?”

“I want to hear you say it.”

“Then I’m saying it.”

“Clive.”

“Yes?”

“You’re not saying I’m beautiful just because there’s a raid on—to make me stop thinking about . . .”

“Of course not. I should have told you before. And I’ll tell you again when it’s all over because . . .”

His mind, racing then, said: It is true! You don’t hear it! You never hear it coming!

For the crash was so loud that the very air in the room vibrated in a sort of agony, and the flash beyond the blackout curtains made an instant of day inside the room. Then, mixed in with the hysteria of the guns, they could hear the sound of slipping stone and brick, and the sudden thump of a collapsing wall.

Now it was here, his mind went methodically, in a marching step, unhurried.

“Now that one,” he said, “was a bomb. And fairly close. But not nearly as close as you’d think. In the morning, we’ll go out, and you’ll be surprised how far away it was—streets and streets away.”

She, too, spoke calmly now, as if all fear had gone.

“No—it’s right on the Esplanade, outside.”

“I’ll bet you a bob—and we’ll look in the morning.”

“If there is any morning,” she laughed.

“Aaah, now! We’re really safe from now on, and the closer it was the safer we are. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place. You know, Monty swears that in the last war when the chaps saw a shell land, they’d run right into that shell hole for cover, because it’d be a long time before another hit there. He swears that’s true.”

“Monty! I wonder if he’s all right?”

“Monty? Listen—if they bombed this town until there wasn’t a brick left whole, and every person but one was killed—well, the next morning they’d come and find

Monty was that person—and he'd be sitting on top of the pile of bricks with a roof already constructed and a fireplace improvised and breakfast sizzling in the pan. Don't worry about Monty."

They lay, listening to the guns.

"You never worry about anything, do you, Clive?"

"Me? I'm the biggest worrier in the world, but I conserve my worrying energy. I don't worry over things that can't be changed. It's no use worrying over bombing raids. The worrying—someone should have done that long ago—years ago. It's too late to worry now. All we can do is—is stick it. We've got to stick it."

She lifted her head suddenly.

"Aren't they coming back again? I can hear . . ."

"No. Those are ours. Truly this time. I can hear—see! The guns are slacking up to the east. Listen, you'll hear the guns die down."

As if in comedy contradiction the nearest gun opened into a mad chattering crash, and then, at last, was quiet. Like thunder rolling down a mountain valley, they heard the barrage rumble away inland. Then he clutched her, excitedly.

"Hear that?"

"What?"

"Machine guns. Hear it? We must have fighters up. Imagine—going up and trying to get 'em at night!"

"I can't hear anything."

"No, you've got to get used to the sound to know it. Hear it?"

"No."

"I could. It's gone now. I think the worst is over."

"It's so quiet now, isn't it. Almost so quiet it hurts your ears."

"Yes."

"I was frightened."

"No, you were all right."

"No, I was terrible. I'm so ashamed."

"Oh, no! Don't be ashamed. Everyone's frightened at first. You'll get better at it. You get used to it. You're a soldier now—you've come through your first one. You'll be all right next time."

"Next time? Clive!"

"Yes?"

"It was worse at Douai and Dunkirk, wasn't it? It was worse than this."

"Oh, a bit hotter, of course."

"No, it was a hundred times worse—he could see you and come at you in daylight. It was like this—only a hundred times worse. You were crowded on that beach—all of you—and no anti-aircraft guns to keep him off—as helpless as if you were crucified . . ."

"Oh, no. We lay on our backs and potted the hell out of him."

“No, it was a million times worse than this . . .”

“Oh, no. In the dark it’s worse. This was in the dark.”

“No. In the daylight he could see you . . .”

“Well, what the hell. It’s no use getting steamed up about that now. It’s over. It’s ancient history. Look, the raid’s over. We ought to go down.”

“Oh, we can stay now, can’t we?”

“No,” he said. “When you should stay here, you want to go down, and when we should go down, you want to stay here. This is the time to go down.”

“What for?”

“Oh—may be someone hurt. Hear ’em—someone calling down in the street. I’ll go.”

“No, I’ll go with you.”

She sat up, and then heard him sitting silently.

“Aren’t you getting dressed?”

“I was thinking,” he said. “There sounds like enough of them there now—there’ll be ambulance corps and L.D.V. and police and . . .”

“And what?”

“They might go round asking for identification.”

“You’ve got your leave papers, haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes. Yes . . . only they might want to know what I’m doing in civvies. Oh, to hell with it. I’ll go.”

“Listen,” she said. “There *is* someone calling—oh, someone’s hurt, Clive.”

“We’ll go down.”

He heard her moving as he sat on the edge of his bed. Then her voice came from the darkness.

“Clive!”

“What now?”

She came to him and her outstretched hand touched his face. He felt her fingers flutter down his face to his throat.

“I understand now,” she said. “And I’m sorry. You needn’t be afraid any more, darling. I do understand.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s all right. I know now. Dunkirk and Douai—they were like this only a thousand times worse, and going on hour after hour, day after day, without stopping—all day and all night and all next day and . . .”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he said. “If we’re going to go down let’s get dressed and don’t be theatrical.”

“You’re afraid to talk about it,” she said. “But I know.”

“Hell, if you know so much—tell me where my socks are. What’s these?”

Her hand touched his, and she laughed, warmly.

“It isn’t a these, darling. It’s a that—and it’s mine.”

“Well, how the hell did your clothes get mixed with mine?”

“They’re not. This is my chair. Your chair’s over there on the left.”

“Well, which the hell is left—which way are you facing?”

“I’ll turn on a light.”

“No—they haven’t sounded the all clear yet. Which is left?”

“What way are you facing?”

“Nuts—tell me north, south, east, or west. What’s this?”

“It’s me, darling, and you know it. Please—Clive!”

“You are beautiful, Prue. I told you I’d tell you after the raid was over.”

“It isn’t really over yet.”

“I’ll tell you again, then. My God!”

“What?”

“I found my socks.”

“There—you see what you get for having moral rectitude.”

“Moral what?”

“Rectitude.”

“What a terrible-sounding word. Moral rectitude! Sounds like a perversion.”

“Darling! What an awful mind you have.”

“Haven’t I? Sometimes even I’m amazed at what a filthy mind I have.”

“No, you haven’t. You’ve a nice, clean mind.”

“Now, where’s my trousers? What’s this?”

“It’s me again.”

“Heavens, aren’t you dressed yet?”

“No. Are you?”

“No.”

He felt the firm warmth of her and the sheen of the silk slip that passed under his hand.

“We should go down,” she said.

“We should.”

“We should get dressed.”

As she spoke she lay in his arms, unmoving. He felt the hot warmth mounting to his throat.

“Which is more important—getting dressed or . . .”

“Or what?”

“Or not getting dressed, of course.”

She did not answer and he knew that her eyes were closed. Then, suddenly, he lifted his head. There was a mixed sound of voices on the street below. He shook his head as if to dispell a swarm of gnats about it. He went to the window and listened. Then he turned.

“Something about somebody buried in the cellar of the shops,” he said. “I’ve got to go down. They’ll need to dig ’em out.”

“I’ll go down, too, then.”

“No, it’s . . .”

“I’d rather.”

He pulled on his clothes swiftly. Then, suddenly, he laughed.

“By Christ,” he said. “I didn’t really hate Jerry before. But I’m beginning to work up a first-class wartime hate.”

“Why, darling, what can you mean?”

“You know what I mean. I never thought I’d ever have such iron will.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“All right. I’ll show you later on.”

“I can’t imagine what you mean.”

“You know, all right. Are you dressed?”

“A second.”

He held open the door and waited. As she came from the room he looked back.

“It’s things like this,” he said, “that make a chap hate his fellow man.”

Then he followed her down the corridor.

CHAPTER XXVI

THEY went out onto the cap rock leading the horses that walked, pince-toed and meticulously.

"There," Mary said, waving her hand. "Isn't it swell?"

Prentiss Saintby looked over the contortion of canyons below them. In the cold, sunlit mountain air the detail stood sharp like a time-exposed picture. Far below one could see each individual juniper bush against its baked ungreenness of grass. Juniper, then piñon, then pine, as the eyes traveled up—up to the snowcaps that were always there.

"Magnificent," he said, with a lifting inflection.

"I told you it was worth the ride."

He turned and looked at her. She was dressed in the blue denim men's trousers, the plaid wool shirt, the big hat of the country. It was still too much like a carnival costume, he felt. The great pearl-gray hat that Lachran had given him—it seemed as outrageous as those feather war bonnets the Indians presented to distinguished guests. So this hat now identified him as part of the outrageous pose. He felt he had no right to wear it. As if someone would appear at almost any moment—someone he knew—and say: "My God, Saintby! What in the name of Heaven are you doing in that outrageous actor's getup?"

He thought this, looking at Mary. And then he began to think of the curve line of her neck below the ear. There the skin was lighter; but even there it had that brown-golden purity that made his own skin mottled and unclean by comparison. He thought: The healthiest animals in the world. What a land! How lucky!

She turned and caught his eye and then smiled happily.

"Now," she said. "Let's eat. I could eat the arm off a polecat—as Uncle Mickey says—almost."

His mind didn't follow her. They spoke so quickly, the Americans, with such odd jokes of their own. But he followed her physically and they unstrapped the saddlebags and set the food on the flat rock. The horses stood, heads down to the trailing reins. Quite a trick, he thought, teaching the horses to stand without being haltered. Imagine in a hunting field . . .

"This is my favorite spot," she said.

Incongruously, she was biting into a sandwich as she said it. Only youth could so mix two elements. He looked away.

"Yes—too beautiful," he said.

There was a sudden wave of sickness in him for the real green of grass—green such as these people had never seen.

"*Too* beautiful?"

"Yes."

She waited. He felt she was like an artist whose picture had been adversely criticized. He fumbled to find appeasing words.

"You see—this may be hard for you to understand—but I haven't the right to enjoy it. I haven't the right to enjoy anything. I'm here on business—and one almost feels at a time like this that it's wrong to take part in such heavenly peace. Wasting time while . . . while . . . well, there's a war on."

"But you're not wasting time. I've told you before. Believe me! He gave you a hat like I said he would, didn't he? He's—he is like an old robber baron, isn't he?"

Prentiss nodded absently—almost irritably. He didn't want to discuss Lachran. He wanted to think about himself. She was a little obtuse not to see that.

"There's such a thing as an inner compulsion to duty," he said. "I suppose inwardly I shan't be satisfied until I'm home."

Mary unwrapped a sandwich and handed it to him.

"It must be awful there," she said.

She said it casually, as if saying: "Canada gets lots of snow in the winter."

"Awful?" he said.

"Yes. You know—I heard on the radio that they're bombing the towns in the south of England."

"Yes," he said. "It's rather hard to stop them now they've got the French channel ports."

"It's really quite terrible. Women and children. What will they do about it?"

"I don't know. It's rather hard to say what to do. I have a sister there—she has two little boys. I just had a Clipper plane letter. She's fearfully upset about finding a safe place for the youngsters."

"Why doesn't she come over here?"

Again she said it in that casual tone that belied understanding. As if saying: "Why not come indoors when it's raining?" Like that.

"Oh, you don't just up and do things like that—in wartime. There's restrictions, of course. Formalities. And she knows no one over here. And there's breaking the children off from schooling—one of them. And re-establishing them in a totally different environment. It's a problem."

"Why don't you tell her to bring them here? She could visit us—and this is a swell place for children. I grew up here—I stayed with Uncle Mickey most all the time."

The Americans, he thought. So terribly casual. Do it—like that! He smiled to himself.

"It's fearfully nice of you to suggest it, but . . ."

"But what? You want a written invitation? When we say anything we mean it. Bring them over here, then they'll be out of the silly war. It's so damned silly. Why

don't they stop it?"

Why don't they stop it? Like saying: "Why doesn't somebody go and turn off that water tap. It's dripping." How casual!

"It isn't like that," he said, coldly. "Britain must go on. Somebody's got to stop Hitler."

"Oh, he'll die some day," she said, almost angrily. "Or if he's so rotten, his own people will kick him out. Maybe they like him. Maybe he's good for Germany . . ."

"What can there be good, my dear girl, in a man whose record has pages such as the swallowing of small countries, the terrible persecution of the Jewish race . . ."

"Oh, the Jews. I'm sick of hearing about them. They're not worth going to war for. Oh, I suppose they're all right. There was a Jewish girl at school, and she was all right. But they're not worth fighting for. They don't fight themselves. Did you ever hear of a Jewish explorer or a Jewish general or soldier or pioneer? No, they just want to sit and make money."

"They are industrious people."

"You don't like them really. You're just arguing. Why, look at the Jews in this country. They're all Communists. And what has Communism turned out to be? Just the same as Nazi-ism. They're linked hand in glove. They're just the same thing. Stalin and Hitler shared Poland. They're secret allies. I just read that they both send their rotten propaganda into this country through the same channels, and in the same form.

"So all the Jewish Communists are actually working for the man who murdered the Jews—if he did. And they know they are. And yet you talk of helping the Jews. They haven't enough sense to help themselves. They're actually teamed against you."

"Please," he said. "You mustn't be so very vehement."

"I'll be vehement if I want. I'm sick to death of hearing about saving the Jews. Let them save themselves. I know one thing, the whole bunch of them aren't worth a dozen nice English people like you—or the boys in your air force who get shot down. Either England's crazy to fight for the Jews, or else she's just using it as an excuse."

"I'm afraid," he said, "your background makes you a little biased. I'm sorry it came up. We'll drop it, eh?"

"Why should we drop it because you haven't any argument left? You're afraid to discuss it honestly."

"All right. I'm afraid," he said.

They looked out over the clear space, across the incredible country. Then at last she put out her hand and touched his arm.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have said you were afraid."

"That's all right."

"No. Them thar's fightin' words round here, stranger."

He smiled at her parody intonation.

"No," she said. "I don't mean you're afraid. That's one thing I'll say for the British. I've seen lots of them—we've had a lot of Britishers one time and another down the

club with polo teams and so on. And I think they've got what it takes. Every one of them that I ever saw did.

"But I still mean what I said about—the other. I hope you never go back."

"Ah, but somebody must."

"There's plenty of others. I hope you stay here."

"Why?"

He led the question consciously, feeling inside himself a squirm of hate for doing it.

"Because," she said, simply. "I like you. And I'd like to see you come to this country and—and settle down here."

There was such honesty in her tone that he felt ashamed. He saw her turn so that she was kneeling. Her eyes were clear. She knelt, and he knew she was waiting for him to kiss her. Again he felt, between them, that surge of awareness that he thought had been left behind in his youth. But he shook his head. Such honesty as hers needed honesty.

"No, Mary," he said. "It's no use."

"What's wrong?"

"You're a little too young to understand completely."

"But I do understand," she said. "I know all about it. We had it at school—biology and so on. And I don't believe in the double standard if it comes to that. I know all about freedom of the sexes."

"Mary," he said. "The very way you say that—it's like a child saying a lesson by rote."

"But I'm not a child. I'm nineteen."

"You're what?"

"Well, I'll be nineteen soon."

He put his hand to his throat, and suddenly many things became clear. These American children, with their grown-up bodies and grown-up freedoms—but in some ways their minds stayed their own age. That accounted for the curious mixture of naïveté and adulthood in Mary. He'd thought she was at least twenty-four. She had the body and poise and manner of a grown woman. And here she was, eighteen, and with all the wonderings and experimentings of eighteen. That was it. He was an experiment in her life. He smiled quickly.

"Mary, have you ever been kissed—before I did?"

"Of course I have," she said angrily. "Lots of times. I'm not a kid."

"But you've never been made love to?"

Again he was swept by the clearer honesty of her mind.

"If you mean, am I a virgin—yes. But everybody's got to grow up. Everybody's got to find out about things. I believe in being honest and not kidding myself. And I like you and . . ."

"And you're like your granduncle and going to get what you want?"

She looked at her hands.

“That wasn’t a nice thing to say.”

“No,” he said slowly. “It wasn’t.”

He put his hand on hers, and though he did it sincerely one part of him was quite conscious of the virtue of his own renunciation.

“Look, Mary. One month, two—and you’ll forget me.”

She looked up angrily.

“Of course I will,” she said, matter-of-factly, “of course I will if we don’t do anything about it.”

He felt suddenly deflated. It was as if her honesty were so crystal clear and straightforward that it made his own routes of thinking seem tortuous and cunning.

She shook a finger at him.

“Look, tell me honestly. You like me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, slowly. “In fact, I might as well admit that I’ve never felt quite about anyone the way I do about you.”

She turned her body and sat, as if she had won.

“Well, there you are,” she said. “And you’re a fool if you don’t do anything about it. Here! Have a sandwich.”

Prentiss took it absently. He was thinking that it was curious that all his life he had been impervious and untouched by women, and now, suddenly, this beautiful young creature had been able to make him masculine and alive. And yet—there was the disparity in age—he was forty-two—forty-three really if you counted. And there was Lachran, and his mission, and his career, and the need for speed.

The thing to do was to get Lachran’s answer without any more delay. That was it. Of course, that didn’t quite settle the matter of Mary. But it would be politic from now on to treat her in a paternal sort of way. That was it—interested and yet paternal.

“You’re a curious child,” he said.

She turned and looked at him and in that second he saw scorn and contempt and sorrow in her glance—as if she had read every last minute twisting of his mental processes and knew them for what they were worth.

CHAPTER XXVII

THEY lazied on the cliff top and one more day raced away. In the afternoon's warmth they came down to the town and had tea at a small shop.

Then Prudence sent the men away.

"I've got to go back to the hotel—and do some washing," she said. "Go play marbles, or something. I'll see you at Mine Host's at seven."

When she left them the men headed along the lane that went inland.

The elms laced overhead and the foliage, thickened to the richness of deepest August, cried that England was fair. Walking along that inland lane, going steadily in a way that made miles glide away, Monty puffed on a shortened clay pipe, and the smoke eddied in the still air behind them.

"How's the head now?" Monty asked.

"A little better."

"Drinks and air raids are too much, together. How'd she take the do last night?" Monty asked.

"Prue? Oh, all right."

"None of the people copped it in that sweet shop?"

"No, they dug all three of 'em out all right."

"That's the bugger of shelters. I wouldn't ha' gone down, only I took the old lady where I'm staying. She's a card. But some of 'em—you know. More I see of some civvies, more I like the army."

Clive did not answer.

"Run round like chickens with their bloody heads off," Monty went on. "No discipline. It's nasty. And that's what they're off to have to learn. If they do—all right. Because, you know, air raids ain't bad one way of looking at it. Nothing to 'em. Keep your head, scatter, don't bunch and don't worry. Because not many's going to be killed. Oh, one-tenth of one per cent—about the same as would be killed by motorcars or falling down cellar steps in a year. Worst air raids anyone could put over won't kill as many as we used to lose on the quietest day of the war—when there wasn't a push along the whole line."

"Yes. But there's women."

"That's it. That's what makes it untidy. That's why the regiment is better. Not that women aren't all right—in their proper place."

"Ah, and their proper place . . . ?"

“Now, Nipper!”

“Good old army subject.”

“No, sensible, now. What I mean is, that’s what women’ll never understand. About a war. The way it is, orderly like and neat with no women around.”

“What you mean is, you’re saying a good word for the benefits of a purely male society.”

“Sure. Anyhow, that’s what sends most chaps off to join the army. Way they have it, they go because the women send off their heroes. Like hell! They go to get shut of women. Look at chaps joining the Terriers. Going to camp and getting shut of the missus for a whole week or so. That’s what sends fifty per cent of ’em up, I’ll bet. It eases everything. Once you get shut of women, you breathe easier. Things get sensible, and no worrying . . .”

“And you spend ninety per cent of your free time discussing what you’ll do when you meet a woman again.”

“Ah, that. Yes. You get hungry for women, and so you take it out in talk. But army’s all right.”

“You sound as if you’re dying to be back.”

“Well, in a way I won’t be sorry to be pushing off first thing in the morning.”

“First thing? Sick of us, eh?”

“No. Well, it’s just you have your girl—and that’s all right. But with the best chum in the world, it’s always odd man out.”

“No, don’t feel like that, Monty. Prue likes you and if you want to stay till late . . .”

“No, we’ve had a good time. And what’s there to do round here—beyond taking a walk. Walk up the cliff! Walk down! Walk up the lane! Walk back! I should ha’ thought you’d had enough bloody marching to suit you for a while.”

“But look at the scenery, Monty. It’s just that you don’t admire scenery. Where’d you want more beauty?”

Clive waved his hand. They went to a stile by the roadside. Below, in a hollow, a farmhouse grew from the earth. In the evening light it had become one with the fields and the elms that sent their wineglass branches over its roof.

“Ah, now scenery,” Monty said. “That’s all right, and I don’t suppose that for scenery you’ll ever beat Old England. But give me good old London.”

They leaned their arms on the stile and looked into the dale. It was the time of the swallows’ wheeling, when the evening afterlight is coming and time takes on a quality of meaningless suspension. For a long time they were silent, and each went with his thoughts. It was Monty who stirred first.

“Well,” he said. “How about getting back?”

“No,” Clive said. “Wait!”

He drew a breath and faced his friend. He half put out a hand toward him. The words came rushing.

“Monty. I’ve got to tell you. I’ve been meaning to, and—this is the time to—You’ve been through it with me, and I’ll tell you. Your leave’s up tomorrow and you’re

glad to be getting back in the army. Well, I—I'm not going back!"

Monty took the pipe from his mouth and stared at him. They looked at each other, unspeaking, and neither heard in the long span the tinkling of sheep bells as an unseen flock moved toward the fold. Far away a rooks' colony rose into strident vote by voice and then subsided. There was the endless hum of insects.

At last Clive spoke.

"Well—that's it. That's what I'm telling you."

Monty stood, his mouth open. Then, as if with an effort, he put the pipe in his pocket and turned toward the farm.

"Well," he said. "What the bloody hell do you want me to say, Nipper? I knew there was something up. Ah! Wearing civvy clothes and signing up at a hotel under a false moniker. And—and the way you've been talking and acting."

"Listen, Monty. I'm sorry—but I've thought it all out. It's all I've been thinking about—ever since hospital. There's something wrong. You know it too. I'm not going back. And you can think what you like of me."

Monty turned about and then sat on the lower step of the stile. He dusted his paws together, carefully, and looked at the ground. It was as if he were talking to it.

"What I think of you?" he said. "What I think of yer? God lumme, Nipper, I been through it. For Christ's sake, don't you think I know? Why, every bloody last chap who's ever been in it—not bloody base wallahs but fighting men I mean—every one of us has thought the same at some time. He'll go A.W.L. and never, never come back, not if they shoot him! He'll go and surrender and get out of the war! He'll give himself an S.I.W. and do it so smart nobody'll ever be able to tell!"

He looked at the ground, sadly.

"And when the time comes—he don't do it. Why, one time, up in front of Arras, it got so's me and a chap named Martin—well, we'd been in over four years then. Four bloody, long, years o' war! And—me and Martin finally copped a Jerry rifle. He's to go down the bay and give me a blighty, then I'm to do the same for him—a nice one for both of us! Just below the knee!

"There was the rifle—there was us. But we didn't do it. You see—you talk about it, but when the point comes, you don't do it. You just—stick.

"That's it. You stick. You say: Oh, it's a bloody mess and why is it my luck to be in it? But I've got to stick.

"That's what makes a soldier hate civilians—all civilians. He's in it—and they're not. That's why you feel better to a Jerry soldier than you do to one of our civilians. Sure, you'd shoot him. But then when you're fed up you'll shoot anyone—outside your own regiment. In the last do we got so fed up toward the end you'd just pot anybody, we was so sick of it. Portuguese, Frenchies, our own airplanes! Just open up and give 'em one for luck—from being sick of it. You hate everyone, but you hate civilians worst of all, and you haven't a chance to pot them for luck. They're out of it and so you hate 'em worst.

"That's the way you get, but it's all right. Because in the end you always stick—the good chaps do. And you'll stick too when the time comes."

Clive looked down at his feet.

"No, Monty. You underrate the strength of my convictions."

"Ah, convictions my earhole. When the Sergeant says fall-in, you won't have none left."

"I will, Monty. You see, it's bigger than all that you've been talking about. You remember the other night you said men stopped being killed when they became convinced their lives were being wasted on something foolish. Well, I'm convinced."

"Foolish? You want Hitler and his bloody push to beat us?"

"Words, Monty. I won't argue with you. You're too good a chap. But I had to tell you. You're going back tomorrow. I've been thinking it over ever since I went in hospital. All the time I've been on leave. I haven't thought about anything else. I . . ."

"Except your girl."

"That was an accident. And in a way, a sad and a bad one. I didn't mean to get her into it. We started out and—it just got like this."

"I know, but now she's there. What'll she say?"

Clive lifted his shoulders.

"Ah, you'll come back," Monty said. "I'm betting on you."

"You'll see. I won't."

"You will, Nipper."

"I won't."

Monty got up from the stile.

"All right, Nipper. You'll come back of your own accord, because you won't be able to do anything else."

"I won't."

"You'll have to, Nipper. You can't get away with it even if you wanted. Not these days. What are you going to do? They'll pick you up. There's coppers all over. Bloody M.P.'s stopping you for your papers. You'll get picked up in a week. And then what? It's up the bloody glasshouse for a deserter. Have you ever heard of the glasshouse?"

"The glasshouse?"

"Ah, you're still a bloody civilian. You ask any old soldier about the glasshouse. It ain't supposed to be there, and nobody ever asks questions in Parliament about it—but it's there. You—you're a chap what thinks. Why, they'd break you in one week. They'd break your bloody heart and soul. Why, I've seen chaps that were hard rocks—ten times as hard as you—one chap had served time for manslaughter—and one month of the bloody glasshouse had the pride beat down off of 'em so they're crawling on their knees and begging and praying for a chance to go back to the front and get killed. That's what the glasshouse is."

"You're trying to frighten me. Why—that's what we're fighting against. Dachau and concentration camps in Germany . . ."

"Dachau! Their concentration camps!"

Monty sat down on the stile again.

“Look, Nipper. I’ll tell you. And don’t call me a liar, because—well—I was there. I’d got the one in my thigh in ’17, and we was back in Blighty at a training depot. They was starting to teach us saluting by numbers again. They said we’d become sloppy soldiers—and us with wound stripes, knowing more about how to stay alive in a trench in winter and fight a bloody war than all the bastardly button-polishing shave-and-shiners that ever was. And we had a little Lieutenant, who was a rare prick. And, of course, we made his life miserable. Wouldn’t put a snap into anything. And one day, he takes his bit of a cane and lashes me over the head with it.

“I won’t ever forget that day. We was on a cliff top, and there was this yellow gorse all blooming. And I took that cane off of him, and broke it, and I pulled the bloody tunic off of him and threw it in a gorse bush, and then took his own bloody Sam Browne and beat him within an inch of his life—and two sergeants too, what come up—bloody old sweats. I marked ’em for life.

“They took me up for it, and the sergeants swore he’d never hit me first, and I got the glasshouse. I knew I was for it.

“There’s nothing to do, Nipper, when they say that. One chap, once, refused to go—he just laid down and wouldn’t get up. They put him in a wheelbarrow, and had two sergeants wheeling it and they was ordered that at every ten paces they was to tip him out, and ask him if he’d walk, and if he wouldn’t, to pick him up and smash him back in. And they went down the road to the station like that. He was tough, and he held out till he was unconscious, but they didn’t stop even then. They was under orders. Tip him out every ten paces for three miles to the railway station, and if he didn’t say he’d walk to slam him back in. And maybe they killed him—but he went, even if all they delivered was a body.

“So help me Christ, that’s true!

“And I went. I went to that special place they got for what they call recalcitrant soldiers. Nipper—they don’t need to shoot a soldier these days for desertion. They’ve got a way of making him beg for a chance to go out and die for his country. The glasshouse! Where they kill or cure you! Where they tame lion tamers! Where they make a man that’s volunteered to fight for his country ache day and night and cry for mercy and wish he’d never been born!

“That’s the glasshouse, Nipper!”

Monty’s voice rose to a shout. Clive, hearing its tones hanging in the summer evening air, shook his head, slowly, and shut his eyes.

“That torture,” he said, “would be the lesser one.”

“Lesser? Wait a minute. You know what they do? Drill you from dawn to dark. And every drill movement is done at the double under full pack. You know why? Because they know no man can ever do it. You go doubling and doubling, until you drop from exhaustion—and then they have you, see?”

Monty’s voice dropped, and his regular teeth bared as he spoke.

“Guards with rifle slings, Nipper—that’s what. So you’re refusing to obey an order, are you? You’re dropping out without orders, are you?

“Rifle slings, Nipper. And big bastards swinging ’em as hard as they can! And it’s surprising how you can swear you couldn’t crawl another step—until they get at you—

and make you yell! Yell that you want to get back in line and go on doubling!

"You find new strength where you'd have sworn you didn't have none.

"Harder, tougher men than you'll ever be, Nipper! Yelling for mercy! Rifle slings if you fall out from the double. Rifle butts on your toes to make you snap into line. Never a minute, day or night, when they're not watching you! That's why they call it the glasshouse. Everything on the double. Even going to the latrine. A guard with rifle standing over you and only so many seconds a day for that, too.

"Nipper, before Christ, I've seen a chap grow a streak of white hair down the middle of his head in one week. I've seen it!

"I've seen them things. Perhaps you've wondered why I've never been a corporal even, or a sergeant. That's why. I'm a glasshouse man! And I tell you, if you don't go back, they'll catch you surer than all hell and send you there and they'll break your bloody heart and soul and spirit for you! And if you won't let your spirit break, then they'll beat the bloody life out of you.

"And they can! Who's to say they can't do it? You're in the army! You have no rights left the day you put that uniform on, and they can kill you!

"Tell me, Nipper, what's the difference between being reported 'Killed in Action' and 'Died in the Line of Duty'? You answer that for yourself."

Clive looked over the deepening dusk of the little valley.

"There couldn't be such a place—in England," he said.

"Nipper. Don't call me a liar. I've been. I've seen it. And you'll see it. You're in the army now, and I swear they can do anything to you in the army except put you in the fambly way. And I swear they can make you feel like you're that way, too. Even a chap that comes to serve of his own free will. If he bucks the system, they can make him wish his mother had never been born. So don't buck the army, Clive. You can't buck the whole, bloody, British army.

"You! A chap like you with imagination and what thinks—it'd be a breeze-over."

Monty laughed, quickly.

"All they'd need to do with you is stand you up the first ten minutes, and have a sergeant put his ugly mug two inches from yours and start working on you. He'd start on your mother. He'd start telling you she was a syphilitic whore and work from there up, and in fifty seconds you'd clout him in the jaw. And then they'd have you. Ten of 'em would jump on you and start with chunks of rubber hose.

"Why, you're made to order for them bastards! You wouldn't even know how to stand with your face straight while they went over your family tree with all the filthy stuff they've learned in a lifetime. And they've learned plenty."

Clive drew a breath.

"Thanks for telling me, Monty," he said. "Because it all helps. I can't imagine that in civilized England it's true—but you say it is, and if it is—then it's just one more reason why I won't be any part of it. If it were true a hundred times, Monty, I'm not going back!

"It was nice of you to try and frighten me into it, but I'm—not—going—back!"

Monty rose, and took Clive by the arms.

“Look, Nipper. I sort of like yer—like you was my own son—and I really am old enough to be your father—and if you was my own kid I couldn’t—love you more. But I’d hate to live to that day when you stood up and heard a court-martial say: ‘Thirty days in the glasshouse.’ Why, I’d bloody well cry my eyes out now, and go down on my knees to beg you not to chance it, except for one reason.

“And that is—when time’s up—I know you’ll come back to the mob.”

Clive looked down and shook his head.

“It’s nice of you, Monty. But there’s something involved even bigger than all that, Monty. It’s bigger than me and yet it’s—inside me.”

“All right. But I’m betting on you coming back.”

“I’ll take that bet, Monty.”

So they smiled at each other, and there seemed nothing more to say. Monty took out the pipe from his pocket, and began hunting for matches.

“Well, I suppose we ought to be getting down the old Bull and Bush if we’re to meet Prue,” Monty said. “It’s late now. Have you a match?”

“Here.”

They started walking, going along briskly, each thinking back over what had been said. It was not until they were back at the edge of the town, and the dark wing of night was throwing its shadow over the seaside town, that Clive spoke.

“Monty—you know what I mean by all this, don’t you?”

“Oh, sure—sure.”

“I mean—I want you to feel right about me. I couldn’t want a better chum than you were, and I don’t want you to think I’m—well, that it’s just because I’m afraid.”

Monty put out a hand and stopped Clive.

“Look, Nipper. You come up that bloody road from Douai with me, didn’t you? And you stuck at Dunkirk when—when I was through. And I’ve seen soldiering with lots of men, and in lots of bad places, and in lots of pushes—but I wouldn’t ever want nobody to stick better than you did. And that’s all a chap can do—and that’s all I’ll think about—no matter what you do now. I’ll just think of the way you stuck coming up that Douai road. And what you did at Dunkirk. I could have cried my bloody eyes out when I seen you left standing in that bloody water, Nipper. And if I’d had more guts myself, I would ha’ jumped out o’ that boat and stuck with you—only I was so done in I couldn’t move. I couldn’t, Nipper. I wanted to hop out and swim back, and I never thought—for no man—I’d ever—well . . .”

“Oh, forget it, Monty. It’s all worked out right. Let’s forget it, eh?”

“All right, Clive. Only one thing more, and then we won’t talk about it any more. When are you going to have it out with the girl?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps I won’t even tell her. Her leave’s up at reveille Monday—or whatever they have in the camp.”

“Why not? She’s a good head—listen to what she says.”

“Well—it isn’t any use passing my responsibility onto her.”

“Perhaps that’s right,” Monty said.

Then they started into town, and the military training held them unconsciously so that they walked in step and could not help their feet falling on the pavements in perfect rhythm.

The sunlight, endlessly racing west, round and round the turning mass of lands and mountains and seas and crawling dots of humans, so that one land's darkness is another land's light, had gone from the Atlantic and the industrial East and the Corn Belt, and racing on, now began to lose itself behind the mass of the Rockies.

The flat-angled beams of it came through the mountain gaps, and fell horizontally on the rocks and lands of the torn valleys, turning them into cardboard shapes of two dimensions, like the flatnesses of a stage setting.

Old Lachran sat on the front porch of the log mansion, lolling with his eyes half closed. From inside the house the sound of guitars tinkled from the radio, and the voices lingered lovingly on the lift and fall of the music.

Where seldom is heard
A discouraging word . . .

Old Lachran croaked along with the singers. When the song was done, he spoke aloud.

" 'Home on the Range,' " he said. "Now that's a beautiful song."

"It is, indeed," Prentiss agreed.

"You know, this is God's Country."

"Yes, very beautiful."

"You having a good time?"

"Oh, yes. Of course, I don't want to wear my welcome out, and I would like . . ."

"Been having a good time with Mary, haven't you?"

Prentiss saw Lachran lighting a cigar. In the flicker of the match he caught the glimpse of the old man's eyes, turned sideways, as if to see what effect his words would have. Very old, hard, wise eyes they seemed.

"Oh, she's a very delightful child," Prentiss said, stiffly.

"Hah," Lachran said, as if meaning: So you take that tack, do you?

He looked at the point of his cigar.

"She tells me you've got a sister and two nephews that're trying to get out of England."

"Well, it isn't exactly trying to get . . ."

Lachran waved the cigar, impatiently.

"Well, she says she invited them through you to come here and stay. And that goes."

"But we couldn't impose . . ."

"Now, don't talk that way. You tell 'em to come stay with us as long as they like and if you don't, we'll be sore. Anyhow, everybody here's going to have to take care of

some refugee before it's all over, so we might as well start with someone that's related to a friend. All right? Now we mean that."

"Well, I can at least cable my sister, and tell her of your very fine invitation."

"Yeah. This'll be a good place for 'em. Look at it—could you want anything finer?"

"It's magnificent."

"Yeah. It'll do them good. A good place to bring up kids. You know I brought Mary up here?"

"Indeed?"

"Yeah. Her father and mother bust up when she was two. Mother wasn't worth the powder to blow her to hell anyhow. She got killed in an auto accident up at Reno a year after. And her father—I couldn't say much better for Tim. That's my younger brother's boy. Soft—couldn't stick to anything. Now Mary—she's like her great-grandmother. Did I ever tell you, Mary's grandmother was married by the time she was sixteen?"

Prentiss felt the web of the conversation closing round him. He moved his feet uncomfortably.

"Indeed?"

Lachran puffed his cigar.

"Now Tim. I have him at the Eastern office now. But he isn't worth a damn. There isn't a man jack I could really turn things over to. You know, it's surprising how few men there are who can take executive responsibility these days."

"Indeed?"

Lachran looked at his cigar again, and went on, relentlessly.

"Say, you like this country. Did you ever think of settling down here?"

"I haven't thought of it."

"Ah, I see. Well, you ought to give it a thought. You know, the way I look at it—and no offense implied—Britain's shot. She's run the world for four-five hundred years—and done a damned good job of it while she was at it—a goddam good job. Nobody denies that. But anybody with half an eye can see she's through. She's cleaned up.

"And this is the country that's going to run things from now on. We've got to. We're the only country with the resources, the man power, the wealth, the initiative, the vigor. This is the coming country to lead the world and take up what the Old Lady across the water has laid down. And if a man was wise, he'd keep his eyes open and look at it squarely.

"Now you take me. If I were a Britisher, I'd think it out straight. There's still lots of opportunities in this country. Oh, I know you hear 'em going around saying there's no more opportunity. That's not so. It's just that there's not enough good men to take the opportunities.

"For instance, my business. Now you'd think with all this unemployment I'd be able to put my hand on a hundred young men I could trust. Well, the fact is, there isn't a goddam one knows his arse from a hole in the ground when you come down to it. That's a fact. And a man like you—that knows the business, that's handled big deals, that has integrity, that knows the business from the ground up—and that's one thing for the British. By God, they learn a business from the ground up. Over here, they come

out of college and are willing to take over as vice president or general sales manager, or maybe put a year playing around in the mines and smelters, but they won't learn it right. And you chaps do. Now a chap like you, if he should decide to settle here, he'd be grabbed up like a shot. In fact, if I had a chance, I'd pick up . . ."

"I'm afraid," Prentiss said quickly, "that such things are rather idle conjecture now—at this point. You see, there's a war on. And that's the main job in hand. If I could get some idea of the figures on . . ."

"O.K.," Lachran said. "Sorry I got your British up. I'll have figures for you within twenty-four hours."

He got up and walked into the ranch. Prentiss walked slowly to the guest house.

Now, he thought, you've made the old man furiously angry, and you'll never get a decent price.

He became angry at the thought. An old man's desire to buy a husband for his niece could intrude itself on a matter of national importance—on a man's career. It was shameful—outrageous!

But even as he tried to add fuel to his own anger, he found his mind slipping away.

Job as, say, vice president of the largest cartel in the world in the field—this girl for his wife. This young, strong, beautiful American girl who could stir his senses as no other woman had ever done.

Of course, he wouldn't do it. Of course not! But most certainly it provided material for the mind to dwell on with something akin to a pleasant glow.

Mary! Married to her. The golden skin, deep tan, and then creaming away to a lighter color where—where—of course she couldn't be sunburned all over. There were places——

CHAPTER XXVIII

THEY had come out at closing time, that hour that is always the same: coming out into the dark with the hubbub of voices and the calls of good night sounding a little too loud in the darkness; then tasting the fresh air which for the first time lets one become aware of the fugginess of tobacco smoke and acrid beer fumes and stale air in which one has sat warmly all evening.

Thus they came out, and linked arms too warmly, and said good-by to Monty at his corner. Then Clive and Prudence were in the sudden lonesomeness of streets when all others were abed.

In the blackout, Prudence grasped his arm and went along happily. She hummed pleasantly the tune that the talking machine had played in the pub:

Adolf! ’Old yer ’and out!

She squeezed his arm suddenly in a feminine gesture of happiness.

“It was a nice farewell party,” she said. “Monty was so funny.”

“Yes,” he said.

He thought that by only making his steps a little shorter they kept pace in unison quite well.

“You didn’t drink so much tonight.”

“Well?”

“Nothing, darling. I’m glad. I don’t like to see you feeling so horribly in the morning. You have too many headaches.”

“Watch the curb,” he said.

They stepped down and then up. Now paces were free again.

“Monty was so funny,” she said. “He was so solemn. What was he trying to say?”

“How should I know what a drunken man has in his mind?”

“Oh, don’t be so teetotal. He said: ‘No matter what he tells you, remember there wasn’t no better soldier that come out of Dunkirk than the Nipper.’ What did he mean?”

“How should I know? Lots of ’em fight the war over when they have a skinful. That’s what a veteran is. Go on talking till he’s a toothless rambler in the Old Soldiers’ Home—no one listening to him. Can you picture me that way?”

“No. I mean about that ‘no matter what he tells you.’ Does he mean you’re going to tell me a horrible secret?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.”

“Well, why get so angry. There is a secret! What is it? You went to prison once for stealing pennies from the collection? No, I know. You’re married already and have ten fat babies.”

He walked silently. His mind was saying: Now it comes. Here it is! Monty’s burned your boats. She’ll find out sooner or later. You won’t be able to see her face now when you tell her. Get it over with! Here it comes! Here it comes! Here . . .

“He meant—I was going to tell you—that I’m not going back. That’s all.”

He kept his voice cold and casual, and the inflection rose and fell with finality on the last two words. She did not falter in her pace. She spoke casually, not understanding.

“Not going back? Where?”

“To the army,” he said. “After my leave’s up. I’m never going back. Now that’s all there is to it.”

They went along steadily, turning onto the Esplanade. The night sea air came in damply and warmly. He drew a deep breath.

“Oh, it smells good. I’ve never known better weather.”

Only then did she drag his arm.

“Wait a moment, Clive! You’re joking. No! No, you’re not. You mean you’re going to desert?”

“Not going to. I have.”

“You’re spoofing. You’re on leave. Oh, Clive—don’t rag me.”

“I’m not. Oh, I have a pass. But mentally and morally I’ve been a deserter for the last ten days. And I’m going on being one. I’m not going back and that’s all there is to it, and let’s forget it. We’ve got tomorrow and the day after—and after that it won’t matter as far as you’re concerned.”

“Won’t matter! Wait, Clive. Wait!”

She pulled him toward a bench on the path by the sea-wall, but he stood stiffly. She sat, resting her hands on her knees, rubbing them forward and backward slowly.

“Clive—are you—are you—you’re not joking?”

“Now, Prue, don’t make a scene. Let’s go home. It’s late.”

“I’m not making a scene, darling. And there’s absolutely no one on this whole Esplanade except us if I were. And I don’t care how late it is. But you’ve got to tell me.”

“I’ve told you. I’m not going back, that’s all. Now I had to tell you . . .”

“That’s it. *Why* did you have to tell me?”

“Well, it was the only decent thing to do.”

“That’s it! If it was decent to tell me—then it’s just as decent to tell me *why*. You owe me that, too.”

“All right. I owe you a lot of things.”

“I’m not putting it that way,” she said. Her voice was somehow distorted. “You know I wouldn’t put it that way. You don’t owe me anything. Not anything. We’re even. I could get up and walk away now—and we’d be even. I should do that—get right up and walk away and never see you again—except—I don’t believe you. It’s just an idea that’s come into your head.”

“All right!”

He lifted his head and looked out to the blackness where the surf pounded.

“It’s all right if you don’t believe me. It’s better if you don’t. But I had to tell you.”

She thumped her knee.

“But why, Clive? What’s your reason for not going back? You *must* have a reason.”

“Simple. Because I don’t want to get killed. I’m a coward, that’s why.”

“You *are* a coward,” she said. “You can do things in the excitement of war—but that’s not being brave. Anyone who wouldn’t serve his country the first time things don’t go right—he’s a coward. You’re a coward.”

He laughed, quickly.

“All right, you want to get me angry so I’ll break out and puke a lot of words. But I won’t. Have it your way. I’m a coward, I’m a rat, I’ve got no backbone—but all the same, I’m not—going—back! I knew you’d make a stink about it.”

She sat silently so long that he shifted his weight on his feet.

“All right, now,” he said, finally. “Shall we go home?”

“No,” she said, tonelessly.

“Well, you can’t sit here all night,” he said, angrily.

“Yes, I can.”

“Oh, you talk like a child. That’s typical feminine finagling. You know I can’t leave you here.”

“Go on, go on! Leave me!”

“That’s ugly.”

“It is ugly, isn’t it?” she said.

She got up quickly and walked away—away from the hotel, down the Esplanade. He stood a second until she was gone in the darkness, and then followed her. He caught up with her.

“Now, Prue!”

She stopped and faced him.

“What can I do, Clive? What can I do?”

She turned away and went on walking. He walked beside her.

“You can forget it, that’s all. It isn’t cataclysmal. The world will go on just the same. It’s nothing to make a stink about.”

She did not answer.

“Look,” he said. “If I hadn’t met you, you’d never worry. You’d never have worried about one man who resolves not to go back.”

“But I have met you, Clive. And that’s it, don’t you see? I have met you. I have—more than met you.”

After that they went on, unspeaking, going miserably. They went up the well-remembered path toward the cliff top, walking together but with a world between them, until, at last, she turned away and faced the sea. She stood there and he went to her in the blackness, and touched her arm.

“What are you crying about?”

“I’m not crying.”

“You are.”

“Oh, Clive. I’m not a wailing woman. Not really. But it’s just rotten luck—rotten luck on me.”

She walked away from him. He stood a moment and then followed her toward the cliff face. For a second his heart leapt with fear as he thought she might have stepped over. Then he saw her sitting, her head bowed, he sat beside her and put his arm on her shoulder, and then drew her to him.

“I’m a stinker,” he said. “I never bring much good luck to anyone.”

“It isn’t you,” she said. “It’s—everything.”

Her voice was muffled as she spoke with her head bowed.

“I’ve told you about Arthur,” she said. “Well, I’ve told you about him. We’d always known each other—and we were engaged. And then I gave him up because he was a conshie. And now—you!

“Of all the people who might walk up in the dark and say: ‘Do you want to go to the concert; or shall we walk?’ Or the millions of men who might have been there at a concert in a Waffs’ camp—it’s you. And you’re the same. Can I help wondering about it?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s a bloody mess. I’m sorry you had the bad luck to take up with me. I suppose I don’t have those noble instincts that . . .”

“But you do, Clive. You do! That’s just it! You’re really fine and gentlemanly—in the real sense. You’re better than the men who got things without working for them. Really you’re so fine—and that’s why I can’t understand why. Why—why? Why won’t you go back? Tell me, and then I can understand too.”

Her head was lifted now, and her voice was clear. He blew out his breath.

“Prue,” he said. “I’ve lived for twenty-seven years. And I think it would take me twenty-seven years to tell you why. You see, I’m not a Quaker nor a Communist nor any ‘ist’ or ‘ism’ or party or faith that has a clear set of rules for action. I’m me, and—I have to worry everything out for myself without the comfort of phrases that are pat and party lines that relieve one of the necessity for thinking.

“And what I think and am—that’s my own. I haven’t even any right to inflict it on anyone else. I don’t want party rules given me, and I don’t want to give rules for anyone else. I don’t want to affect anyone else. I don’t want to change you one iota or one bit.

“You believe certain things. All right! Go on believing in what you do. I don’t want to destroy your faiths and beliefs any more than I’d want to tell a child of three that his

mystical and blissful belief in Father Christmas is a lot of lies."

"I'm not a child of three."

"I can't argue," he said. "Look, let's go back and forget it."

He drew her to him to kiss her as if that would be an armistice. But as he held her she stiffened.

"Listen," she said. "Listen!"

They sat in arrested motion, their heads turned upwards.

"He's coming again," she said.

They sat for long minutes, straining their ears, half hearing, half not hearing the distant hum. One could say it was there, or that it wasn't there. Then they heard the ululating siren in the town below and to their right. They sat, waiting, for the first crash of noise. But it did not come.

"That's what's worst," she said. "Waiting for them."

"Now," he comforted. "Now!"

"I wish they'd come," she said. "I wish they'd come and get it over with."

"That's what you call getting the wind up," he said. "The morale of our troops is low. They're carrying their tails between their legs."

He recited it in parody of an army communiqué.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get down."

"No," she said. "I'd sooner be up here than shut up in a room—feeling as if the next bomb would come right down. You feel trapped in a room."

"All right. We'll stay here."

He put his arm around her and they sat quietly, now hearing the hum plainly. They could see the lights leap up into the sky toward the East.

"Clive," she said, suddenly. "You're not a coward. I'm sorry I said that. I know you're not. Even if I'd never known about Douai and Dunkirk—I'd have known it. Because—when anything's happening as it is now, you have so much courage that it flows over into other people, and gives them strength. And that's why I don't understand why you won't go back. Why? Tell me!"

He blew out his breath again.

"I can't," he said.

"Do you mean you can't tell me because you don't know—or because you can't talk to me?"

"I think I know all right."

"Then it's talking. You can talk to me all right, can't you?"

He stared into the blackness.

"Yes, I suppose I can talk to you all right. Only—I never had anyone to talk to—talk to about everything. But talking to you—it's like talking to myself now—and I don't mind it."

"Then you could tell me why you won't go back."

"Yes, I can talk to you—in the dark—I've got used to you, and I don't mind."

“Then why not tell me?”

“I—I don’t want to change you—and what you think.”

“I’m not asking for persuasion or argument or change of mind, Clive. I’m asking for—understanding. Don’t you see?”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Then you’ll tell me?”

“Yes.”

He paused, breathing heavily as if searching for a beginning point.

“Look,” he said. “You remember the other night Monty said men’ll die all right if they see sense to it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s true. We were willing to go and die. Not heroically or falsely, as that sounds. But every man somehow had thought of it, and was willing.

“Well, I see now there isn’t any sense to dying. It doesn’t make sense. So I’m not willing to be killed any more. That’s all.”

“But the elementals are still the same, Clive. We didn’t get beaten in France! If you knew how people think with pride—pride in their hearts—about all you men who were at Dunkirk. There’s a nation proud of you! It wasn’t a retreat! It was . . .”

“No, I don’t mean it that way. It’s hard to make words say it clearly. Try to understand.

“When we went to France, we went, believing something. Well—but when we, or at least I, came out of Dunkirk, we knew that something wasn’t true. We knew that we weren’t in a place where we were being asked to die because of justice or equality or anything else. We were being asked to die because other people had been blind and incapable and blundering and smug. And now I know those things are not the things I’ll die to preserve.”

“But Clive, no one could foresee . . .”

“No, listen to me now, and don’t ever forget. We were there with rifles, bayonets, machine guns, and artillery—yes. But he was there with tanks—thousands of them. With thousands of planes. With motorized divisions. And most of all—with new techniques of employment of these superior arms.

“Why were we put against such ungodly odds? Didn’t our side know of it? Was it blissful ignorance that dying, bleeding bodies can forgive?

“No! By God, there was Poland—he had used the same methods of war in Poland. We’d run into the same thing in Norway and found no matter how brave our men were we hadn’t a ghost of a chance of defeating his system. Then why didn’t we recognize that? What made them think that if the Poles couldn’t hold a vast country beyond a couple of weeks against such new armaments and techniques, that we would?

“But no. They ignored the military lessons of Poland. They ignored it in their smug way. They said, really, within their hearts: ‘Oh, of course. The Poles! Backward people, the Poles! Not to be in any way compared to the fiber of real British troops.’

“By the Lord God above us, did they think that a British body is any more impervious to bullets, to *flammenwerfers*, to fleets of tanks, to skies black with dive bombers, than Polish bodies? Is there something, then, in the blood of these men called British that means their flesh won’t rend, or their bowels can’t be torn out?

“Before Christ our own torn wounded were ground to unrecognizable pulp under the treads of tanks almost before the useless rifles could fall from their hands—before my eyes that saw it done!

“And who did that? Who sent us out to pit our bodies against steel? Who employed us with arms and techniques as out of date as those of the Boer War’s red uniforms? Who ignored the plain lessons of Poland?

“It was the men of words. They said: ‘The British Tommy will pit his skill against the wicked and unholy brute force of the enemy and by his will power and courage and stamina and superior confidence, he’ll hold the line.’

“Those men committed a crime against public trust, against common sense, against life itself. For even a child knows that will power of the dying cannot slow down the approaching tank one fraction of an inch; nor can fortitude of the living clear the sky of a sun-stopping plague of Stukas. So, then, even a statesman should know that bravery is no shield; for when the bullet comes, the greatest hero in the world drops exactly as dead as the lowest coward, and a bullet will not turn aside nor have prejudice for one or for the other.

“Because those evident truths were ignored, someone failed. They failed! They failed! And who was it who failed? Was it the men at the top who in months of waiting never saw that we’d need more tanks, anti-tank guns, more planes, newer techniques? Or was it I who made the mistake—or was it Monty—or was it any of the chaps who came up the road from Douai—or the chaps who never came up the road from Douai—or the men who thrust their very bodies into the gaps around Dunkirk—or who lay out on the beach there and never rose again? Who failed?”

He looked into the blackness, and again he saw them—in the street as he and Monty came round the corner. The men who had been trapped, who lay there on the pavement so thick that at first they could only think that it was a regiment that had fallen out to rest. And only slowly, as the street lay silent and still and without movement under their eyes, their minds grasped the fact that they were in a street of the dead. They were looking at mass death. Men who had been trapped by the tanks that now were far ahead. And then they knew, too, that they themselves had been swamped by a German tide that had flowed on and left this silence through which they must wade. And that they must surrender, or die—or fight their way back to their own lines.

And this picture, forming in his mind, cried for some expression, but he felt pity for her. It were better to make things seem brighter—and even then they were dark enough.

“We had some planes,” he said, slowly. “The chaps that flew them—they were as good as any who ever went up. But they were one against twenty. Who made that mistake? Who said British kids in planes were worth ten of any other breed? Who sent those kids up to die? Me? Monty? The chaps in Douai? The men of Dunkirk? The chaps in the planes?

“No! By God, no! Never us! We die! But the other fellows made mistakes—and their mistakes didn’t even give us a bloody sporting chance.

“So—I don’t believe in ’em any more. And I’d be a bigger coward than any of them if I went back, dishonoring my own beliefs and conclusions. I’ll honor my own integrity and refuse to die to perpetuate their incompetence.

“Now! That’s all! I’ve told you! It’s finished.”

She sat silently for a while and then he felt her moving. She put her hand across her body and clutched his own upon her shoulder. She spoke out to the darkness, and her voice was unsteady and low.

“I’ve tried to think how it was, Clive. In the raid last night, I tried to understand. And now I know it must have been like that—only a thousand times worse. I know, too, you’ve suffered a shock from a terrible experience. I’ve heard you in your sleep, shouting for more bombs. And I know you’re not a coward. And I also know that even the words I am going to say will sound empty and silly and false.

“But there are bigger things than you, Clive—and than me. And we’ve got to fight for the sake of those things, and we’ve got to win. We’ve made great mistakes. But you can’t blame everything on us. You can’t blame us for the French collapse—and the Belgians surrendering—you can’t blame that on us.”

“Why not?” he said, harshly. “Why not? Why didn’t we know France was internally rotten? Leopold lukewarm? Who’s been running our foreign policy and our military affairs in these last years? If they didn’t know—how is it Hitler always seems to know? Why does he always know surely in advance—and we only know at the last second when we have to use a stopgap—and use human bodies for the plug?

“But I live—and so I learn. I see now that it always has been so.

“I tell you I see now it has been the same over my entire life. It goes back to the entire government of Britain ever since the last war—a series of governments so rotten that they should be shot. Internally hollow and externally vain and smug. Dozing—thinking that because we’re the British Empire nothing unsporting can happen to us! Sitting contentedly on an internal industrial and social scheme that has stunk of its own stagnation and the poverty of the quarter of the nation it couldn’t employ and daren’t let quite die of hunger! Moved only by one policy in foreign affairs—dread of an end to their own smug security, thus blindly hating Russia in the hollow dread that a strong Russia would lead to a revolt of their own labor supply.

“God knows I’m not a Communist nor a fawner on Russia, but God knows too any clear-sighted Englishman can see that the sole core of our foreign policy in the last twenty years has been motivated only by a blind, unreasoning fear that British labor might come up from the stink of the dole and revolt.

“It has been fear of Russia every time. The fear that made the British Fascists foster the rise of all that Nazi-ism means—in the hope that a victorious Germany might turn and rend Russia to get the granaries in the Ukraine. It was fear of Russia that made us go through the outrageous farce of nonintervention in Spain even while German and Italian machines crushed the liberal government—which our leading papers never even called the Loyalists, but always designated as the Reds—to leave forever a big stinking smudge on the name of British journalism.

“The same smudge that left us ignorant of fateful crises concerning our king and Government until the American papers alone told us the news. It was that same fear that made mockery of our democratic right of free speech, so that even in peacetime a highhanded censorship deleted pages from American news magazines coming over here. What did they fear we should do if we read those pages?

“Always blind hatred and fear of a strong working population that was too doped by the dole ever to dream that it was filling them full of terror.

“And now Hitler has turned on the hands that created his misbegotten shape. And Franco will, too. On the day that Franco gnaws at the British hands that fostered his birth to power, I shall laugh. Inside myself I shall laugh at the mysterious and incredible justice of it all.

“And so I say, and I believe with all my heart—and God forgive me for making a speech—but I see now clearly and believe most utterly that these men in Britain, in my lifetime, held by greed and motivated by fear, have destroyed all that strong generations and great men have worked and fought and died to attain.

“And I only tell you now what history must say when we are gone from the unseeing darkness of this night—that—if the British Empire dies, it did not die in Elizabeth’s time, nor in Victoria’s time, nor under the sway of Cobden, Bright, Pitt, Gladstone, nor any of the others.

“It died during the blind regime of men who ruled during my lifetime. And as Hitler holds them guilty, so do I, too, hold them guilty and accountable before every British lad who’s put on a uniform and who offered to die, and before the yet unshed blood of our women and children who shall surely die before lights shall shine in these nights again.

“They’re guilty—guilty—guilty!”

“But Clive,” she cried. “Don’t you see! Don’t you see! We still must fight! Granting there is justice in what you say—to be conquered by Hitler would be worse.”

“There’s the rub, Prudence! There’s the rub! That’s what we must try to see clearly through the awful confusion of this age—the question we should answer in our souls with fearful and crystal truth. It is the question that tortures me. If Hitler won, could it be worse, or weaker, or more shameful?”

“But there’s not a doubt! Think of—of his persecution of the Jews, as one thing. You can’t deny that his cruelty . . .”

“I don’t deny it. It was the cruel, cheap work of a demagogue, fostered by the smug privilege of his own and other lands, who used fearful guttersnipe methods as he climbed to power. It was the work of a panderer. A man who pandered to mass prejudices as surely as any Roman emperor burning Christians.

“But hating him for that isn’t going to blind history to the other things he’s done—and victorious nations and ideas write the histories of the world. Why don’t you also talk of what he’s done since he got into power? He’s built and reconstructed. He’s brought order to his nation from chaos. He’s got no such thing as unemployment. He’s driven out the very smug overprivileged classes that brought him to power believing him a sort of silly little weak-pated idiot. He’s given a nation hope. He’s given a nation something to make it work for him, slave for him, march with him—and win with him!

“Call it what you will—evil if you wish. But I say he’s given his people something that our leaders haven’t given us.

“They’ve given us nothing to love, nothing to adore, nothing to trust, nothing to work for and slave for and march with—and nothing to win for.

“It’s too late now to call us in at the last moment and say: ‘Save us—save this system—by the very token of the dole on which you have starved for twenty years—please come out and die for it and for us.’

“They have given us nothing to fight for.”

“But Clive, there still are things to fight for—things they can’t take away from any Briton. And for those we have to fight! This is a world of realism.”

“Realism, Prue!” He laughed quickly. “Call me a fool in your age of realism. Perhaps I am a childish idealist. Perhaps I wanted a William Tell. Perhaps I wanted a Robert E. Lee, a Sir Richard Grenville, a Montcalm, a Washington at Valley Forge, a Boadicea, a Joan of Arc.

“For we have had too much realism. Perhaps I wanted in this age of realism men who would rule us during peace as devotedly and self-sacrificingly as the British kids at Dunkirk died during war.”

“You’re very contradictory, darling. You see, one moment you, personally, don’t want to fight. And the next you say you desire someone to be the Joan of Arc of the time.”

“No, you’re wrong. I have fought—and, somehow, I think I will fight again. But it must be for something more honest and real than the words given us now. What do we fight for? For democracy? And democracy for whom? For ourselves? For others?

“Democracy is a world force. It cannot exist unless the world believes in it. But does it believe in it?

“Is there one other land now ready to stand beside us and say, clearly and unmistakably: ‘Democracy is our concern, too. So with you we will fight to the end as you fight, and with you we will die as you may die!’ Is there one?

“Then I say if there is no other land that will fight for democracy, then I will not fight to force democracy on any other land. But I know what I *would* fight for! I’ll fight for a hope of a new Britain with its unknown virtues, but not for the old Britain whose vices I know.”

“But we’ve got to fight!”

“We don’t have to fight.”

“What else can we do?”

“What else? Use the brains God gave us. Reason like humans instead of animals, and see clearly what the future forecasts. Sign peace. We shall in the end, so why not now?

“At this moment we stand alone—without an ally. We cannot take an army to the Continent and beat him. Unless he can bomb us into weakness, he cannot bring an army over here and defeat us. So what will it be? Think—think now! Be a human being. Use your faculties of reasoning and logic, and tell me what it will be?

“It will be a stalemate—the most horrible thing in war. It will be both sides trying to starve the populace of the other. It will be sinking ships. It will be cutting off food supplies.

“All except for the privileged! They shall eat to their gorging!”

“Oh, Clive. Rationing is the same for all!”

“If you want to be a realist, for God’s sake be a consistent one. Rationing is for the poor. There will always be luxury foods that are unrationed. The coupons may give the mass but a florin’s worth of beef a week—but the hotels shall have jugged hare, sole, *l’angouste*, pheasant, venison, oysters, and quail on toast, and there you may gorge to sickness—and without even anyone so much as mentioning your ration book! So we may eat here at our not-so-splendid hotel—as long—as long as my money holds out. As long as I have money for luxury—I shall not starve for want of a necessity.

“But the poor, the workman, with only money for necessities—his foods shall be rationed and you know it and I know it, for we are living outside rationing ourselves now.

“This war will become the long-drawn-out misery of starving all except the privileged of the civilian populations—to the effect of teaching people how to accept a life that is still more miserable, still more mean, still more ruled by fear and hatred—a life that will weaken the stamina of growing youth and reproductive adulthood for another generation.

“It will become open and ghastly bombing of cities where civilians—women, children—will be torn and smashed into horrible pieces of flesh, to die mercifully or to live on with jaws torn away, legs gone, faces smashed into such repulsiveness that you’ll turn your head away as you walk on the street.”

“They won’t dare bomb towns like that—they know we’d both be able to do the same.”

“They wouldn’t dare bomb us? Oh, Prue, Prue, Prue! You are akin to the generals who think British bodies will stop more armaments than Polish ones. What—what makes you think the men who bombed Warsaw and Rotterdam to stinking piles of rubble and flesh will suddenly refrain nobly from doing the same to a British town? They are bombing on this coast—now—as we talk. Insignificant, small bombings. How long before it is London? Hundreds of planes over London?

“Oh, it will be done more gently—more honorably—with crocodile tears on both sides at the necessity, but it will be done.

“Prudence Cathaway! As truly as I sit here in the dark, on this cliff, with the first planes of the great struggle now overhead . . .”

“Looking for military objectives. We do the same!” she said.

“Hear me out. As I sit here, so help me, let me tell you two words. I have told you one: malnutrition. I will tell you another: reprisals. Learn it! Reprisals! Learn it, remember it, and when it means something dreadful to you, ask yourself whether one, untutored, half-ignorant man had not been able to see that far ahead. Reprisals! It is a word that Britain shall know, the crocodile tear that will be shed by the sanctimonious of both nations—and damned be he who cries it first.

“We shall bomb his railways. He will bomb our docks. A bomb shall hit a house near the docks, a fragment shall hit a hospital. We shall both cry out aloud to the world. The way we shall shout, one will believe that the only targets ever struck by the enemy were hospitals, maternity homes, asylums for the aged, shelters for homeless children, and ancient and honorable cathedrals. We shall both play that game.

“And when we both have shouted loud enough and long enough to convince even ourselves of his wanton monstrosity, we shall fling off the mask. At last it will be what we really want. Our excuse will come if we wait long enough for the accident. And then we shall breathe the word. We shall say: Reprisal!”

His voice sank low as he spoke.

“Then we shall go into something that will make the work of the Visigoths and Red Indians, even the exploits of Tamerlane who built a pyramid of a million skulls, look like antique amateurishness. Then we shall slaughter truly, and go on slaughtering in needless processes of slow and miserable attrition. Oh, he will do it first—of that I am confident. For he has more planes. It is easier for him to fly over us from a hundred miles away than for us to fly over his cities five hundred miles away. Each plane of his will have five times the fire power of ours.

“And we are British. We are honorable—or, shall we put it your way? He will do it first because he most surely lives in an age of realism, and a world of realism.

“Realism! Let us then be realists, and sit here resignedly, seeing with open eyes and unprotesting mouths that we are committing ourselves to a course which can only result in our towns being smashed and pulverized, night after miserable night, until our few survivors have learned how to live like troglodytes, back to the cave men.”

“But, Clive, we can’t surrender to forces that would do that! You amaze me by talking so inconsistently.”

“Am I inconsistent? Listen to me—free your mind of all you have heard until now. Let us sign peace. Forget that Hitler has been pictured for years as a funny little man with a mustache like Charlie Chaplin’s. Let us admit that he is one of the most ruthless realists in the world—a realist and a coward—for the two are the same—whose realism has seen with clarity beyond all the knowledge of his own generals, of opposing statesmen. He is a realist.

“He would know that Britain would come to the peace table a tough, unconquered nation, and he’d have to talk to us in that light. He would want a new Europe for himself—a redistribution of colonies. Then let it be so. I do not want any British boy to die for colonies in Africa. I am perfectly willing to have the sanctimonious sufferers put down the white man’s burden. There is no God-given law that Britain shall administer the jungles—only the law that we got there first and grabbed them.

“Well, let someone else have them for a while. I don’t give a damn who has them. And if you talk to me of raw materials, I shall say I won’t offer my life for good old Shell Pet., nor Incorporated Rubber Industries.”

“That’s glib talk, Clive. But you know our industries are the life of people—working people.”

“Has their life been so jolly in the last twenty years of smug British money-changing that it could be much worse? Perhaps we need a change. Perhaps our methods

need jolting.

"By God, let's stop raving about Hitler and his race prejudices and his bullyings and his tempers. God knows they are there. But let us learn from him his equally undeniable and brilliant advances in national techniques. We could learn from him some of the new things that would give our country something to believe in again."

"You want to see this country Nazified!"

He felt the horror in her voice.

"If the stricken areas and the stagnant economic slums of the dole towns in the last twenty years has been democracy—yes!"

"I don't believe you want it. You're just arguing! It would be the end of freedom!"

"Prue, a man will die for his own freedom and never complain. But when his children's guts ache with hunger, he'll swap it for a loaf of bread and call it a better bargain."

"I want both freedom and bread."

"So do I. But democracy in Britain has been making us ask ourselves for years which one of the two we want."

"I," she said, "would fight for both and think it a better battle."

She moved from his arm and lay down on the grass. He felt her withdrawn from him, coldly. She was miles away.

"All right," he said. "I didn't want to talk about it. It was you who insisted."

She did not answer. He turned angrily, and then his anger sank.

"All right, Prue," he said. "I told you I didn't want to ruin your belief in Santa Claus. And I may be all wrong. But so help me, those are the things I have worried about. Those are the things I've been thinking about, that turn in my head till it burns—and give me no peace. And before God, I believe in my own thoughts with greater ease than I can believe in the men who have let the British Empire decay in the last twenty years. And, believing my own beliefs truly—what is there for me to fight for in this war?"

She lay still a while, and then her voice came, clearly, flatly.

"You might fight for England," she said.

"England," he said, quietly.

She sat up, suddenly, and began talking, vehemently.

"Yes, England," she said. "The way you say that word means that you understand what I mean. You've told me all the things your mind tells you you won't fight for. What about all the things your heart tells you you should fight for?"

"What things?"

"Ask your heart!"

"I don't think with my heart. Tell me a few. Mention six."

"Ah, don't talk like a glib debater," she said. "Not to me."

They sat quietly, feeling their anger. At last she spoke, quietly and slowly.

“All right. I’ll try to tell you a few. If anyone asks me what Britain is, he robs me of answer—because everything it is can’t be spoken about—and if you do, the speaking shames the thing and turns it into something as tawdry as a popular song.

“But because you—and I—we’re what we are—and we’ve been what we—have been—I want to say them. Only—they’re hard things to say, Clive—they’re intangible things and easy to mock—and you’d make fun of them . . .”

He wanted to cradle her head now, and he was ashamed of his anger.

“That much,” he said. “That much—you know I wouldn’t.”

“But if you did,” she said, “it wouldn’t alter them. If I said . . .”

She paused, finding words. He looked into the blackness over the Channel.

“If I said it was Shakespeare—and thatched roofs—and the countryside, you could mock. Because those things have been told before and I haven’t cleverness at finding new phrases that make them alive in words again. If I said it was—was speakers in Hyde Park free to say what they wish—and polite bobbies on the corner—and these cliffs here, and Drake alive in memory—you could curl your lip superciliously.

“If I said it meant the Magna Carta and all that went into it—and the freedom of common man that sprang from it—and speaking your mind without fear, and the knowledge that your own home, no matter how wretched, is still your castle, and all the heritage of liberty that man in this age has found—you could laugh because it’s been said before.

“If I said England was the thump of a bat at cricket, and the New Forest deep in ferns and holly trees standing tall; if I said it was May blossom rich in spring and bluebells like a God-sent carpet, and the rain and the shine and the green of our blessed land—if I said it was the larks that will sing here tomorrow, high in the sun, tomorrow and for ever—if I said it was the shout of a newsboy on the corner, or the sound of a taxi horn, or the quick, clipped cheerful talk of a cockney passing in the dark, or the age and dignity of our cities—of the fog and the green of grass and softness of voice and skin—or the sense of fair play that we’ve given to the world—if I said it was all those, you could mock because words have said it so often before that they have tarnished the things or blotted them from understanding.

“If I tried to say it is all the things that make the pride and joy and gentle gladness of the British people—I would use words badly and shame the things themselves by doing so.

“Oh, Clive, I can know those intangibles within me, and know they are our heritage—shining and glorious things that cannot be pulled apart and analyzed and then remain the same, any more than you can pull a flower apart to look at it and ever restore it to itself once more. But they live in me.”

She was quiet, and then her voice went on, more calmly.

“You tell me that we’ve had bad rulers—and I add that we’ve had bad ones before—and they’ve come and gone. You could laugh at me if I said that my poor intangible things are England—and not bad cabinets and bad ministers. You could debate and out-argue me and destroy those shining things that are there—always there—somehow eternal like spring—and falling in love. Things that always exist and always keep on happening.

“I can’t tell you of them if you won’t see them beyond the emptiness of words. But I’ll make you see, Clive. I’ll make you see!

“England, Clive—it’s—it’s Captain Allen—and Monty—and the boys lying in a row in Douai.

“And it’s you—it’s you, Clive, it’s you. England is you coming up the road from Douai, and standing up to your neck in water at Dunkirk. And England is helping the weaker men into the boats instead of getting in yourself—and seeing the last boatload filled up and knowing you’d have to go back for another day and lie on the beach, firing a single-action Lee-Enfield against dive bombers. That is England, Clive.

“For whatever you are, blood and bone and mind and heart and spirit, England has made you—every part of you. And even if you don’t understand the other things, you understand that. You must! And when you say the word, England, it must be for you now as it is for me—warm inside here, like music that’s rich beyond the power of music. I can feel it in my breast here.

“It’s one word, Clive: England. I say it, and it means all those things and sometimes—just saying it—it’s too much to bear. And—and those are the things—and you’ve got to go back and fight for them.

“Because—that’s England, too—knowing we shan’t be beaten—knowing we’ll never give in if every last one of us dies—we won’t be beaten, we won’t! We just won’t!”

Then she sat quiet, and was so long silent that he reached out his hand and touched her in the dark.

“All right,” he said. “All right. Only you mustn’t make a hero of me. I just—fought for my life—and any man, Monty, Allen, anyone, will fight hard when he’s doing that. Any man of any land. Bravery—and even heroism—they’re not the sole prerogative of any nation.

“As for the other things—if England means that to you, I’m glad for you. I almost wish it meant that to me, but it doesn’t.”

“Why doesn’t it mean that to you, Clive? It could!”

“No, it can’t. Because—in a way you’re right. If I am what I am—if England has made me what I am—then it has made my doubts and confusions just as much as it has made any other part of me. And I can’t escape them because—well, you remember Ulysses said: I am a part of all that I have met.”

“Then you’re a part of me and what I believe, Clive.”

“No, Prue. I am more a part of things I have known longer and experienced more bitterly—things that—it’s too late to speak of them now.”

“But you must speak of them. I told you what—what it was hard for me to say. Say it, Clive. Perhaps they’re only fears and . . .”

“No, they’re not fears.”

“How do you know? You know—you said you could talk to me, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then—tell me. You are speaking to no one—but me.”

He drew a breath.

“All right. I’ll try to tell you, Prue. You’ve told me what England means to you. I said you were lucky. Now I’ll tell you what England means to me.”

She heard his voice turn harsh and sharp-edged.

“It means walking around until your boot soles are thin, and hoping against hope that the next place you go there’ll be a job.

“It means taking any old job, no matter how ugly or distasteful or incompatible with your hopes and ambitions of youth.

“It’s meant a furtive childhood—when life most of all should have been splendid and strong.

“Prue, I accuse no one. I say I am part of all I have met—wartime queue lines and wartime food rationing were my first memories. It’s meant wandering and being out of work and the dirty side of life and none of the rewards.

“Pink hunting jackets! Week ends in the country! Tennis flannels and jolly times boating—and pass the ’94 Port, old man! D’ye ken John Peel in the morning!

“Yes—there’s that England somewhere, for some of you. But it hasn’t been the England I’ve shared.”

“I know, darling,” she said. “Being hard up and not having a billet is fearfully upsetting . . .”

“Fearfully upsetting! Good Christ, you don’t even understand what I’m talking about. Filth, poverty, want, hunger!”

“Oh, come now. Don’t you exaggerate in retrospect to bolster your own attitudes. You’ve lived. You’ve got health, and you’ve got an education and . . .”

“Oh, Christ,” he said.

He sat in the dark and laughed.

“God forgive me for being angry at you,” he said. “But now I’ll tell you. I see I haven’t used words that are clear enough. So help me God, I’ll tell you. You deserve it for your middle class smugness—for your blind inability to conceive what life is like beyond your own little ring. As I’ve never told another person, I’ll tell you.

“You’re going to get it. There’s a whole night here before you. Now hear about the chap you’ve taken up with.”

He bowed his head.

“You know where I’ve spent most my life? In slums! England’s green fair land? I was born in the back street of an industrial slum, amid corroding jerry-built brick and flushless privies. Born in slums you never knew—and trying for all my knowing years to fight out of them.

“Do you know the smell of poverty? Do you know what life is like there—even with people who are clean and proud and who fight? Did you ever sit by the hour as a child with your feet in the oven to cure chilblains and know the hopelessness of your own crying because you were too poor to have boots that didn’t leak? Do you know even the physical pain of slum childhood? Have you ever sat for hours, alone, hugging your swollen face where untended teeth ached and festered?

“Did you ever sit for days by the hearth holding a bread poultice to your distended jaw where bones splintered by inept and careless work at the free dental clinic rotted

their way out—sit there for days in misery afraid to go back where they treated you so, biding it because you knew you were too poor to have a doctor, biding it until the whole mass burst and blood and pus and splintered jawbone and all cascaded down into your own small, trembling hands?

"Do you want to hear of poverty so real that every factor of life is measured against the reply of: 'We've no money?' Do you?"

She put out her hand.

"It's what you are now," she said. "That's how I see you. You don't have to tell me of—of the other."

He moved his hand.

"No. I'm petty. I'll have my revenge. I'll tell you. Now. You have a right to know me. I—I'll say things I don't even say to myself.

"For is this not what every man does some time in his days—sits down and tells some woman the story of his life? 'Let me tell you the story of my life.' Only generally, it's prettier, somewhere nobler. Mine doesn't even start with dignity.

"Do you know what it's like to grow up as a bastard child? Do you think you can picture that?"

She drew her breath quickly and put out her hand.

"You're a human being, Clive. People—these days—don't hold illegitimacy against the child born out of wedlock. We use sense nowadays . . ."

"Oh, don't they? Perhaps in your life, yes. But not among my people. We have narrower codes and sterner moralities. We're closer to fundamentals of life and so must hate creatures that are live offenses against our codes.

"I do not blame my people's blind narrow-mindedness. I only say I resent and hate the ugliness that it made of my childhood.

"A bastard! Something to find out slowly and painfully when you're too young to carry the knowledge philosophically—why neighbors never speak to your mother, why every other child in your street is superior to you. Something to find out when you start going to school, on the sudden day when the other children, with the infinite cruelty of children, call the word out at you on the street as you go home. And you go home and ask what the word means—and you are not—and cannot be—answered.

"It isn't pretty or philosophically rationalized where I come from. Somebody's fine by-blow—how simple! The gent in the straw hat in the picture in my mother's chest of drawers. Some gay blade of the upper classes who did the lower classes the honor of picking out one of their prettier girls—infusing the common folk with a dash of bluer blood—then going away gaily with a light heart and a sense of duty well done. Somebody—who?

"You never find out. Not even the solace of open knowledge. You don't talk things over where I come from. You don't accuse your own mother of adultery. You avert your face from the perpetual reality that is you. Your only defense is to hold your head up outwardly—while inwardly you wish—wish—wish that you could be born again into life—only this time, decently and properly.

“That’s long childhood—old enough to wonder and half-know—too young to know and rationalize. Later you see it all. You build the past from the present.”

He lay back quietly, and listened to the anti-aircraft muttering far down the coast. Then he laughed.

“I was born beside the coke works. First line of an autobiography. I wonder how I know that. I never asked anyone. I can’t even remember it really. Only—I know—every time I come to a place—as I walk in a street—where a whiff of that gassy, sulphurous smell of a coke works drifts by, my mind leaps back to a window where I am looking out at a blank, brick wall. That must have been a coke works. I don’t know where the house was. But I remember the window. There are bits of memory, untied from reality, that float by. Being bathed in the bread-dough bowl in the sink beside that window—looking out at the coke works wall and seeing how bricks are set—patterns of long ones and then a row of ends to the front.

“Somewhere memory becomes consecutive—about the time you begin to go to school. Education! Mass education under men who are no more educators than I am a statesman. Gray buildings, concrete play yards where we slid in monotonous rotation on candle-waxed slides during a five-minute interval that was known, so help me God, as playtime.

“In those schools—ah, the playing fields of non-Eton—there was rote-taught education under men bored to unimpressionability by the utter dreariness of the system—men who didn’t care—some men who, as I can see now, actually were pathologically unfit to handle children. Men who were warped—sometimes mentally dead—too often hack workers who had in their weariness developed a streak of sadism.

“Men who started the school day by ostentatiously taking out a cane, setting it carefully and in full view, with its end in a bottle of water so that capillary action should make it three times as heavy.

“There! The cane is in the water, and the water is in the cane. So now the day is set to begin that noblest of enterprises—the education of our British youth that is the heritage of our tomorrows.

“Prue, I don’t think I ever would have had an inkling of what education might really be, except for the accident of one man. One man!

“One man, there by haphazard luck, to change the course of your whole life—doing it not, I think, because he had what one might call a love of children, but rather because he had love enough of his own integrity and soul to do a job with skill and thoroughness and understanding.

“One man, by chance—and amid all the muck of your life he suddenly prompts you to look over the rim into a place so beautifully vast that there seems no horizon—the field of reasoning.

“You know, we don’t go in for toys much in my world. I think the only toy I ever had was a pair of roller skates—two-and-six-penny roller skates. Those skates, and that one year of school are tangled hopelessly and sillily in my memory as the only truly happy parts of childhood.

“School stopped being torture and fear and bullying, and suddenly became a place where there was equality and understanding and encouragement of thought and a love

of reasoning.

"And then—just when you're beginning to reason—beginning almost to burst with your desire to know more, learn more, think more, reason more, understand more—you're fourteen. You've been too bright, Prue. You've passed Standard eight a year ahead of time, and so it snaps off. You're a worker. You're finished with education.

"Working certificate and your first pair of long trousers. You don't fight against it. You don't say: 'My mind is alive—I want to know, to understand, to learn—perhaps in my life to teach others.'

"You want all that, but you know of necessity that there are more immediate things. You've seen your mother count pennies from the vase on the mantelpiece too long. You've eaten bread and margarine too many times. You've smelled too many homes where they eat roast beef on Sundays. You've lived an entire life on a ha'penny a week for—God save us—spending money.

"But when school is over and you have your certificate—at last, at last you're going to change all that. You're a man of fourteen. Education is a dream; but life—that is real!

"You'll meet life on its own ground. You'll plunge into this world and by vigor and sweat and willingness and worth and intelligence and industry—you'll make your home bright and clean. There'll be food and clothing and money and shoes and stockings. You! You'll do that!

"You know how to do it. You've been working for years—after school. You've been paper boy, butcher boy, peddler. You've shouted hot peas at night. You've minded neighbors' children. You've pushed prams. You've scrubbed neighborhood privies. You're the bastard child of the neighborhood, and so you're thankful that people are so kind and forgiving as to let you have such opportunities.

"Somehow it is glorious. For you're old enough now to begin to see objectively, and this fortifies your pride. You know how it is—you see it. You're starting the lowest of even the lowest of the lowly. You're starting at the bottom, because there's nothing further down in the scale. And you'll show them! You'll make everyone proud of you!

"I started out to be an apprentice printer—or we hoped I could work up to that. It was funny! But I started.

"I remember that morning—how we got dressed—how mother took me—how we both trembled in the factory office. Suppose they should say I was too tall, or too short, or not strong enough, or too weak-looking. We both, I think, trembled over that. And then I was afraid—afraid of the terrifying possibility that I should get work, and be left there all alone among strange people and strange machines."

But you buoyed yourself up with the knowledge that this was what you had to do. It would end the other things. The herb-beer sign and the washing-neatly-done-here sign, and the paper flowers that people made when, for some reason known only to the gods above, there were no more trousers that needed flies made on them. Making flowers—and mother stopping and rubbing her glasses and looking through them as she held them out to the gas-mantle and saying: "I'll have to go to market and try a different pair." That's how you got glasses. You went down to the market and stood at the stall

where the specs were and tried them on and tried them on until at last, by patience and your skill and wisdom, you found a pair that "just fitted you."

He went on talking:

"Am I stacking the cards? I don't know. I don't think I am telling a story to you, sitting on this cliff top at night, talking to a girl that now I feel doesn't really exist—perhaps I am telling a story to myself to try to find out what has made me, and why I am this person sitting here, with my weaknesses and wonderings and prejudices and strengths.

"It cannot be bad fiction, for it is true—and God help me, nothing can make it less true, or make it less lugubrious or futile or grubby or hopeless.

"I cannot find words to make it sound rich or magnificent—but accept it or leave it as you wish."

It was easy to remember it—sitting in the dark—looking back—seeing the things that happened as if there were cinema scenes flashing clearly to be reported to someone else—someone who lay in a totally different dark and could not see them.

"I got the job. I made duplication jelly! Duplication jelly!

"Do you know duplication jelly, madame? Have you ever thought about its consistency? How it got into cans? Have you ever touched it, smelled it, boiled it, splashed in it, struggled in it, reeked of it?

"Beautiful stuff! Made by the experts of our letter-duplication jelly department in our modern and up-to-date factory! That was me. I was the whole blasted bloody department—a bright and willing boy."

Bright and willing! The mind-cinema moved in quick montage now and he could see a figure. Almost unrecognizable. Yes, that was himself—that filthy, reeking, grubby child there.

Silly pipestem arms on a man-size shovel. So many shovels of this sack. So much coloring. So many sheets of the glistening gelatin. Dump them into the set-pot in the yard. It couldn't be made inside—the far-above aristocracy of printers and binders and rulers would have died of the stench that came up when the cow hoofs started to boil.

You made an efficient system of it, though. You stoked the fire with the packing cases the cans came in. You set the cans in a great row on a board. You shoveled. You boiled. You ladled out the bubbling, stinking rot. It splashed. It burned. It got into your hair, your clothes. The ladle was too heavy. That was it. It wabbled in your hands. You splashed yourself, got coated with the muck—became a bloody walking mass of damned jelly.

You put labels on the cans. No, first you shoveled in another batch. While that was cooking, you put the tops on the shining new cans. You pasted the labels on. You stacked the finished cans in the new and smaller cases. You hammered the ready-made tops on the cases, and lugged and shoved each one onto the "finished" pile.

By that time the mess was boiling again, and you raced to set out new cans. Name of sweet God, how many cans had you made in your life? How in the name of industry could all the offices and businesses in the world have used all the letter-copying jelly you'd made? Who used it? When? Where?

Restaurants—that was it. They used it to make the duplicate menus in cheap eating houses—the menus that were always so faded-violet in print you couldn't read them. And there'd be export, too. Clerks in Rio de Janeiro and Shanghai and Bombay, rolling off letters. By God, you *were* a department.

And a pariah, too. The first day, at noon, when you took the snap can, and sidled into the building to eat your bread and margarine and tea—you saw it: the girls and the pressmen and the compositors wrinkling their noses—and you knew you were an offense to them. They couldn't eat and stand your stench.

After that you ate always outside—built yourself a small shelter high up in the packing crates. You wormed in there, and like an animal—ate alone. You were shut off from society by a stench. So you became merely a working, smelling little animal that lived in a cobbled yard, whose life was letter-copying jelly. And you knew you were an offense to living.

At night, when you went home, you learned to go in by the cellar, to strip off your clothes there, to scrub in the half-barrel that was your washtub. You changed to the clean clothes your mother had hanging there. And that always made you feel somehow proud.

He said:

"I made letter-copying jelly. After that I got a job in a sawmill, and . . ."

"But—weren't you to be apprenticed as a printer?" she said. "Did you get the sack?"

He smiled, and lay back in the grass.

"Prue, I never got the sack in all my life—unless the plant shut off. No—nothing logical like getting the sack. No proud or decent or sensible reason for ending it—only mischance and an outrageous thing we have in my life called pride.

"I made jelly for a year and a half. Above me were two boys inside—printer's devils—next in line to be apprenticed. I used to sigh for one of them to break his leg or his neck. But they were very healthy. They were waiting for someone higher up to die—then we'd all move up the ladder. But I don't think printers die. None of them did the year and a half I was there. I never even got inside the shop.

"So then—this is funny. There was a brass foundry next door and something was stolen there. I don't know what—probably bits of brass. Anyhow, when I got home one night a detective was there with a search warrant. I didn't know who he was at first. I rather liked the bloke. He certainly showed more personal interest in me than any soul had done since the schoolmaster. Then he searched the house—just as a matter of formality—and patted me on the head and said I was a good little chap. Quite a compliment to have the law certify that you don't steal.

"But after that I couldn't very well go back."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Well, you can't. I can't quite explain, unless I were to make you understand somehow our whole system of life in my world. You see, you have prides—warped they may seem—but they are a code of life and you adhere to them. My mother

cried. ‘All my life, I’ve tried and tried,’ she said. And—well, she didn’t say anything else, but that meant all the things we know and feel—and that I don’t think you could.”

“But what was wrong—if you hadn’t stolen anything . . .”

“Oh, it meant that the police had been in our home, and all the neighbors, looking from behind the curtains, would know it, and that somehow that had broken something we’d had to work many years to build up. Police are a terror in my world. Even to have them investigate you and enter your home breaks some pride—the pride that your home is adamant against the outside world. Oh, I can’t explain.

“But it was plain I couldn’t go back. The firm had obviously given my address—I was suspected in spite of all ‘the good words’ spoken for me by—by the someone my mother had humbled her pride to, to get me the job in the first place. After that—you can’t go back. Not even if you starve.

“Cutting yourself off from a job is damned poor defense or revenge, I suppose. But it’s the only one you have—just as men go on hunger strikes and die for a principle.

“So I never went back. I learned to look for work. I learned to walk the roads.”

Going through the inglorious routines of talking your way into the “magnificent opportunities” that poor and ambitious childhood manages to fill so well—only to find that they are blind-alley occupations. So many jobs that were industrial utilization of juvenile labor—that lasted only while you were in a certain age bracket. And when you passed that bracket and came to an age of higher pay—well, there was always another annual crop of bright and willing boys to replace your aging quota.

“What did you do?”

There was her voice—and how long ago had she said that? What did he do? Taker-off behind the saw at the sawmill. A bobbin setter, a doffer in worsted. A print-goods factory worker—pushing a bogie up and down the floors. A brass foundry. No, that was after assistant in the fried fish shop. Then the bicycle and motorcycle repair shop with old Goshie—if the poor old chap hadn’t died. Goshie was a good old duck in his way. And the assembly line in the hardware plant and . . .

“Oh, I did various things, you know,” he said. “You have to move around—there’s always slack times and business failures and strikes and layoffs and so on. But I never got the sack.

“You see, my lower class pride is still there. I never got the sack. Always had a very fine set of recommends. My recommends! To whom it may concern. May I not say that the bearer . . . and so on.

“You learn to hunt work. You get quite expert at the hardest job of all—hunting a job. A job is a job, but getting one is a profession—almost an art.

“You learn how to take anything. Whatever it was, I was it!

“At first—no, I wasn’t exactly it, but I was a bright boy and I was willing.

“But that’s too honest, and it doesn’t bring a high quota of positive results, as the employment experts say. Later I learned better. You learn to say yes, you are it. You know the job thoroughly. Then when you get in, if you’re quick, you look around. The other chaps know. You don’t even have to say: ‘Hey, chum. Show us how it goes.’ They know the minute you stand up to your machine. Generally they’re very decent—and

when the foreman's not looking, they'll nip over and show you. Working men understand each other curiously that way. They don't like to see you steal a trade or even a semi-skilled job and rob them of work. But they know what it is to be laiking, as we say in Yorkshire. So they'll tell you so much—and if you're bright enough to pick the rest up or figure it out, they won't say anything. If you can't—out you go. Or if the foreman's a bastard, he watches you and you never get above a half-day in.

"Stealing trades. I've stolen more trades—I can wire a house or put in plumbing, read a blueprint and machine a part to fine precision clearances. I can run a ship's wireless or stand in front of any industrial machine and have it figured out in ten minutes. That's the way you become expert. You teach yourself.

"So you keep working, shifting, going from one job to another, getting older, and wondering where and when your ambition is going to flower—until you run into something. Bump! Head on.

"The production bosses like you, and there's a good job up above you that you can move into if——

"Then you suddenly see where life has fooled you. You haven't got the if. The technical knowledge. The—we have a word for it with a capitalized letter. You haven't the Education.

"Suddenly, one day, you understand that. Brightness, willingness, energy—they're not enough. You think you see it. A chap has to have education, too. Education is—it is something other people have and you haven't. And the desire for it is something that makes fortunes for men who have schools that advertise in magazines: 'Do you want to be a wireless expert, a hydraulic engineer, a motor mechanic? These men make high wages. Enroll now for our course. Hundreds of jobs waiting for men with skilled training.'

"My God, it's pitiful—that whole business. Kids burning with ambition, studying nights—and so many of them are never able to finish paying for the courses. Or suddenly they run smack up against the fact that you can't do it. You left school too early. No amount of willing brightness alters the fact that there are elementals of mathematics and geometry and chemistry that are great, blank areas. You've got to go back first and take up where you left off at fourteen.

"You try going back, and find that the habit of concentration has died quickly during even the few years of useless, brainless, beast work. You not only have to learn facts. You've got to learn how to learn again.

"So you charge piecemeal at the mysteries and at your own mental habits. Going to libraries. Enrolling in night schools. Reading whole pages that don't make sense and that your brain won't make sense of. Falling asleep over books. Trying to swallow the whole world.

"And then—and it's a very sudden thing—at last your hopeless mind begins obeying again. You race through whole pages and cry: 'How was it that this wasn't clear before? It's simple as pie.'

"Then at last you waken to the size of that world of fermenting thought in yourself. You know you are looking through lenses within lenses. Each thing you learn turns you back to some other thing you must know first in order to understand completely. You

flower into a wild gorge of reading—a blaze of desire to know it all. You're driven from a machine to mathematics, from math to industrial development, from industrial development to history, from history to political economy. You have to get into science, art, religion, mythology, archaeology, military campaigns, philosophy, psychology.

"You read it all, wanting to swallow the world entire, and building a religion of books—until you have mental stomach-ache.

"And that isn't cured until the next great day dawns. The day when suddenly you see it isn't reading, it isn't pedantry—it isn't even this education.

"It's thinking and reasoning independently. Not reading what other men thought and swallowing that secondhand for your own thinking. Not blinding the issue with what history says is so and saying it must be so. For then the world would stand still and progress no more.

"You see in your mind's dawn that learning without reasoning is pedantry; that all the accumulated knowledge of the earth only comes to us so that we can go on reasoning with greater clarity—reasoning things out—being wrong so many times—being right so very few times. But at least, knowing before your own conscience that you are not mouthing things you do not know and do not understand—that at least, you have tried to see clearly. Reasoning, not to confute past experience, but because you see that past experience of each man now dead has given you higher eminences upon which to stand and thus see further on than they could.

"And that is where I stand now—here, in the dark, with you, a girl named Prudence Cathaway. Talking to you—trying to tell you truthfully why I am what I am—not talking as men are supposed to talk, perhaps, not speaking of myself as men are supposed to be—not picturing an outward shell for you or the world to see.

"I've told you, with, I hope, neither boasting nor mock humility nor undue dramatization of self—but as truly as I could because—because my own mean, grubby, dirty, useless little makeshift life has been so much like ten or twenty or thirty million other lives in this land. Makeshift, paltry, aimless.

"I told you—because you made me angry—with your false picture of Britain. Some of England may know splendid educational facilities, the psychological foundation of home and family security, the advantages of proper nourishment and essential medical care, the health and grace that comes from carefree games and play; the aesthetic appreciation and development of good taste that come from good clothes, splendid old schools and tasteful home backgrounds. But for every blasted one of your kind, Britain has a hundred living, breathing, longing, ill-educated, often brave and ambitious, and usually thwarted little brats such as I was.

"And what have we to fight for in your England? Why should we preserve the rose we've never been allowed to smell—to be guardians of the feast whose very garbage we have not been allowed to share?

"Good people of England! Oh, good, brave, patient people of England! I want something so much better for you than always showing the world how patiently you can want in peace, and how uncomplainingly you can die in war! Something—so much better."

He lay still in the darkness, until he heard a sound. He turned and put his arm about her.

“Oh, come, come now. It’s nothing to cry over now. If you wanted to cry, you and your middle class should have wept your bloody eyes out—long, long ago.”

He laughed and comforted her.

“If you’re like that,” he said, “I’ll never, never in my life again sit on a cliff top during a long night with an air raid going on, and tell you stories.”

He felt her sitting up, shaking her head. Then she was speaking, her voice a ludicrous mixture of tears and laughing.

“I can’t help it,” she said. “I keep thinking of the poor little boy who only had one pair of roller skates.”

He laughed with her.

“Now what a thing to remember—out of all I’ve told you. One pair was grand. If I’d had ten pairs—I’d have forgotten what a joy they were.”

“But that horrible dentist. Why didn’t you make a case of it?”

“He’d made enough of a case of it, I suppose. And everybody knows in my world that in a free clinic they use poor people for experiments so that they can do better operations on the rich. So when I got man-handled, no one was surprised or outraged or hurt. It was expected—and it was I who had committed the sin by ignoring the mores of my people. Everyone knows that the way to cure an infected tooth is to put laudanum on it until the pain goes away and the nerve dies and the tooth rots out—and to cure infected eardrums or incipient mastoiditis one puts a small, hot, boiled onion in the ear, and so on. I should have bowed to these wisdoms.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s terrible. Father tells me—even in parts of London they’re like that. They’re so stubborn. I can’t see why.”

“Because we are bowing to custom—and economic pressure. Doctors cost money, we mustn’t admit we’re poor, so we say we don’t want doctors because they’re no good. That’s all.”

They were silent. Then she said:

“But how did you get to be an authority on rotifers. You remember you told me. . . .”

“Good God, I’m no authority. I was lying—just boasting to a girl when I said that.”

“But you do know something about them!”

“Merely incidentally—but you don’t want to hear any more.”

“Oh, I do. We’ve—we’ve got so little time left now. And the raid—I didn’t hear any all clear, did you?”

“No.”

“Go on talking to me.”

“We ought to get back so you can sleep.”

“No, we’ll have lots of time to sleep afterwards. Tell me about the rotifers.”

“Well, it’s a fine old chap named Vollenbee. Ever hear of him?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, you will. He and Blackidge—Blackidge is a plant disease chap. He was in British Honduras, and I met him—I was assistant sparks on a boat. That was after my mother died. I shipped on boats—just to keep working and it gives you some time to read—steward and so on—and I chummed up with an American chap—a wireless operator—and we got this boat in Galveston—in the States. We wangled a license for me. I learned the code in a couple of days. The captain knew I was no good, but he didn’t give a damn. The ship was under Panamanian registry, and the maritime law makes them have an assistant operator on a cargo boat if she picks up passengers—and I was cheap.

“Well, on one trip back I met Blackidge—he’d been working on a disease blight that ruins banana land—and we got talking. Interesting stuff they do—with plants, you know.”

So clear—you could smell it now. At night, and the boat rolling in the heat with the cold air chuting down from the ventilation system into the cabin, and Blackidge, with his cigarette-yellowed fingers clutching the glass. Drinking the ice-cold tropical beer. Blackidge talking with the endless rush of a man too long in foreign-speaking parts, talking like a man hungry for talk. Glad of anyone with even the barest understanding of his work, glad to gush it all out to them.

The boat rolling, and the thump-thump-thump of the engines and the voices, going on, and on . . .

“Well—oh, a year later I was back in London and we got laid off. I was chumming with an assistant engineer—Charlie Drewes. He had a cousin starting a bit of a garage, and we’d just been paid off, so we went into the repair business with him—just to tide us over. I started to scout around for patronage—you know, go call on everyone with a motor and ask them for their work. And I dropped in on Blackidge—he’d given me his address. And I met old Vollenbee there. I got yarning with him that night, and he asked me to drop over. He liked me, I suppose that was it.

“So I went over, and he showed me his stuff, and it was very interesting—you can’t know how interesting. And he had to have a high-speed camera rigged up. So, oh, just for fun, I did it—and I had to machine a part for it. You know, you can’t have butcher machine parts for a precision instrument like a fine camera. It was—well, you know what a stroboscope is?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, it doesn’t matter. At all events, I got this high-speed camera right for him, and he was fearfully pleased about it. So he let me in on what he was really working on and—well the garage wasn’t big enough to keep us all going, so he asked me to chuck in with him. The rotifers—they were only incidental. You see, Vollenbee’s after a new microscope. Something so vast—that all other types of microscopes will be ancient history. You know how a microscope works?”

“I’ve looked through my father’s.”

“Well, your father’s will probably give you 2000 powers. A light microscope. Then there’s an ultra-violet-ray type gives you up to 5000 diameters on photos. But Vollenbee’s after something gigantic—revolutionary—an atomic microscope. He was in touch with men in Germany on it—but the war’s killed that, now. But you see,

building it—you've got to machine parts of—oh—infinite, infinite exactitude and—well, I've told you I'm pretty good at machines—and Vollenbee's so damned patient with a chap. You see—he likes me. So he let me work on the construction.

"He's a great old bird. If he gets what he's after—he'll get micro-photographs of 250,000 diameters. A quarter of a million—to your father's 2000. You see what that means?"

"Why, yes, you'll be able to find out about diseases . . ."

"Well, we won't, but other chaps will—bacteria, viruses, germs we've only suspected—perhaps soon atoms—we'll see them."

They sat a moment, unspeaking. Then she said:

"Clive. With that work before you, and hating the war—what in the name of Heaven made you join up in the first place?"

"I didn't feel like that about it then, Prue. You see, we wanted to go. We wanted to do it long ago. We were the people of liberal thought, if you want to call it that. When the duly elected government of the people in Spain was being destroyed by Germany and Italy, we wanted England to go bravely then. When Munich came, we wanted to fight. When Czecho-Slovakia was torn apart, we wanted to go.

"It was a curious situation—perhaps for the first time in Britain the common people truly wanted to go to war and the conservative controlling classes didn't. Usually it's been the other way around. And when they finally took the step, we all went gladly—everyone of liberal thought—praying that it wasn't too late.

"But now I see that it was too late—and I see that they're going to bumble along in this war just as they did in peace. If the Empire dies, it will go down with the classic remark of Hitler missing the bus as the death-knell note of crass stupidity.

"I believe they are perverting the goals of this war. They could only make it a true crusade by stating our goals and aims. What *are* we fighting for? A new world? A better world? Wisdom in world order—or to be the bully of the schoolyard again?

"If you ask—and people have asked—you shall be told only that 'We shall think of peace when we have won the war.' That isn't good enough—not for me. I refuse to die for a pig in a poke."

"But any peace we give will be better than Hitlerism, won't it?"

"I could tell you that if I knew our peace."

"But Hitler's peace will be slavery for all weak nations. At least we've not enslaved and brutalized people. The British record for administration of colonies stands before the world to be admired and . . ."

"Prue, don't make me laugh. I won't laugh at you, because what you say is only the result of your life and its limitations."

"Don't be insulting."

"Insulting! I'm not. Good God—our colonies! Our name! How many parts of the globe are there where people greet every rising sun with a curse for the name of Britain and another one for every Britisher born of woman?"

"Where?"

“Where? Whose history books have you read all your life? All over the globe! The Boers of the Transvaal whose pioneered lands we stole, and burned their farms and imprisoned their women and children. The lesser breeds of Egypt and India who have been ruled only by our military domination. The bombed Arabs in Palestine. The imprisoned Negro strikers of Trinidad.

“Millions of descendants of Irish emigrants to the United States curse the name of Britain even now into the third and fourth generation. Why else should a New York Irishman sit nightly at a wireless in Berlin to pour out in English his hatred of Britain—Lord Haw-Haw?”

“Well, there’ll always be injustices, but if we don’t govern those lands—someone else will.”

“White man’s burden stuff.”

“But we’ve administered and brought order and built roads and railways and brought health services. I know that. In India . . .”

“True. But why? Because we wanted raw riches they had. So we civilized them in the name of freedom. What is freedom? Prue, if a nation wants to sit on its collective fundaments for twelve hours a day in the sunshine, and go dusty and dirty and barefoot and lazy and happy over ten billions of untapped oil or tin—freedom is letting them have the right to do it. But no, we have to industrialize and civilize them.

“Prue, suppose a race of Martians came down here with superior wisdoms and armaments and took us over—and they also had a terrible vitality that surpassed our understanding which drove them to unceasing work for twenty hours a day—would you consider it a civilizing influence if they immediately changed our life so that we had to work twenty hours a day to stay alive?”

“It would be uncomfortable for one generation only, and then we’d adjust ourselves.”

“Exactly. And I can say precisely the same holy words for a victory by Hitler and a world Nazified.

“Prue, be honest. Say if you will that we rule a fifth of the earth because we were strongest, and took the lands by force and intend to hold onto them by force, but for the love of Heaven don’t ask me to believe what your elementary school books tell you about the world’s shining admiration for the British. The virtues that we have are respected. But by God no other nation respects and admires our smug assumption that God descended from Heaven and put a special mantle on the British and told them they should rule colonies in his name.

“No nation loves us for our smug home-taught assumption of our own holiness, when we’ve been vicious and wrong.”

“Where have we been vicious?”

“I’ve told you—Africa, the Indies, India, Asia—where haven’t we been smug and self-seeking and posed as holy champions. In the last war.”

“We didn’t introduce gas, nor bomb cities, nor invade small countries in the last war. They did it.”

“So they did. And what was our righteous answer? Blockade! Look, Prue. I’ll tell you a story. On one of the boats I was on—as a steward—well, every night we had to clean all the silver. It wasn’t a bad time—we’d all sit around in the empty dining room, polishing silver and yarning and kidding with the boat thumping along.

“One night one of our chaps started kidding some German kids—there were a half-dozen Jerries among the stewards—and it got down to some point that all us British were a pretty well-built bunch of chaps, and the Germans as a whole were spindly and scratchy-looking. And one kid smiled, and said, very quietly:

“ ‘But you see, you did that, when you starved all our mothers while they carried us during the war.’

“Prue, you know, I’d never thought of that before in all my life. I’d known of our blockade, I’d known of the courage of the men in ships who held that ring tight; but until that moment I’d never seen it as women, thin, malnourished, carrying inside them children that were to be living monuments to our efficiency.

“At that very moment, Prue, I could have cried—cried at my own smug blindness and for that generation grown to manhood in Germany to curse Britain for its physical ills.

“Later on, there was one kid—an Austrian. He told me what his mother told him of Vienna during the war—and for two years after the war while we left her in chaos under our peace terms—of the women who sold themselves on the street for bread—when Vienna was known to the world as the city where you could buy the most beautiful and well-bred of young women for a sum that was only a portion of a penny in exchange rates. And he said:

“ ‘Clive, I will tell you. When I am here talking to you, and I see your face, and we sit like friends and discuss, I do not hate you. You are a good fellow and I even like you very much. But when I am going to sleep and I shut my eyes, I can hear my mother telling of it and I say I will hate for ever every Englishman that lives. It is all very curious. I am your friend—and yet I must say that to you.’ ”

She heard his voice sink.

“But Clive, that is war. They tried to do the same to us. They sank our ships—torpedoed passenger ships, and men and women were drowned.”

“They did! They did! And we called on the world to witness the brutality and bestiality of it. But when we enforced our blockade, we accepted it merely as a quite sporting military and naval maneuver. We had a name for it. Blockade! It sounds so martial and simple. But translate that word into terms of pregnant women falling in miscarriage from lack of nourishment, to babies existing in malnutrition that was to mark many of them for the rest of their lives—and then you begin to understand that while we can forget the word blockade, the nations we did it to have never forgotten us.”

She looked at the first hint of gray to the left. Then she sighed.

“Clive, you may have had a rotten childhood, but that’s no reason to let resentment be the driving force of your life, and delight in everything that’s anti-British.”

“Anti-British. Ah, Prue. Perhaps I am only anti-British from the standards of your people. For I tell you truly, I think there is no better race in the world when once we

have left behind our arrogance. I want no other land, I want no other people to live among. The common people of this land have virtues that—well, in this war they'll bomb each other's cities when they've got their excuses—and I think then you will see—and I think all the world will see—the mettle of this island's pasture. Not generals, not statesmen, but people of the slums and industrial warrens from which I came, will show the world something as shining and clear as a beacon head. And in what a horrible and useless proving ground our common people shall show that in their very poverty they have a richness of fortitude and bravery and cheerfulness and calm of spirit so splendid that it shall stir the world to murmur in admiration.

"And yet, I would see it all come with calmness if I could but believe that those who paid the bills would share the rewards.

"And they must. This time, I believe they shall. I cannot help but believe that, this time, they shall share. I think that at last the old England is done for. Win, lose, or draw, your smug middle class England is gone.

"It will go if we lose. It will go if we win. But it will go most surely if we lose, and I would risk losing a war if it ensured winning a new life."

"You couldn't want us to lose!"

"Lose what? If there are things in England that can be killed by the loss of a war, then they deserve to die. But what is fine and enduring in England, cannot be killed by a military defeat.

"That is why I won't go back. I want my life so that I can go into the bigger fight of the new England that will rise after the war. And I refuse to offer it to be squandered now to preserve the bad things of Britain which I know surely will have to go even if we win. Why should any man risk death to preserve what isn't worth preserving, and what can't be preserved even if his bloodshed helps bring victory?

"There, I have said it all. Please! Let's talk no more. It's nearly day."

She could see him now, in the gray light, sitting, nursing his knees, the tweed of his suit smelling damply from the dew, his keen-edged, cheerful type of face drawn with the intensity of his long speaking. She shook her head.

"War is bloody, isn't it?" she conceded. "If it's all so wrong, why do we have wars?"

"No, they're not all wrong, Prue. War is a peculiarly human activity and I think we'll have it as long as we have man. In many ways I like war—peculiarly enough, I am what they call a good soldier. If I go back, I suppose I'll get a medal, and be a tin hero.

"I suppose what I want is to be fighting in a good war."

"What's a good war?"

"Oh, I think the American War of the Revolution was a good one—for the Americans, not for us. I think the wars of the Aztecs against the Spanish were good ones. The wars of the Boers against the British. It's curious, good wars aren't always victorious ones. Justice sometimes triumphs and sometimes is beaten—and even more frequently poor justice gets lost in the shuffle.

“And that’s what we’ve got to watch out for this time. If I ever do go back it will be not to die to win a war, one-half as much as it will be to live to see that justice doesn’t get lost in the shuffle—justice, not for England, nor for Germany, but justice for poor, living, bleeding, bloody humanity.”

“And who can give a justice for all?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t think there’s anyone that does know.”

They were quiet, watching the cool dawn, hearing the first seagulls screeching. At last he spoke.

“Ah, well. We’ve talked a whole night away. Did you hear the all clear?”

“No. But I suppose it must have gone.”

“Probably. Shall we go back?”

He looked at her, and then, seeing her clearly for the first time in many hours, and knowing again her beauty and the peace of her spirit, he smiled, quickly.

She put out her hand, and he took it, and helped her up. She clung to his arm, happily, and they went down from the cliffs, along the empty dawn streets, to the cold-looking hotel. She turned, and took a last look at the sea.

“Clive, I’m so glad you talked. I know it was hard to do it.”

“By God, I did talk once I got started.”

“But I’m glad you told me—you got rid of a lot of it.”

“It wasn’t exactly getting rid of it.”

“Just having told someone will get rid of it.”

She looked at the sea as she spoke.

“And—and so—I know you’re going back.”

“Oh, now look here. If we start . . .”

“No. Let me say it. Don’t talk back at me. I’ve heard all you’ve said, and so I know you’re going back. There’s something will make you.”

“What?”

“The same thing that’s motivated everything in your life—when you were in school, and hunting for a job, and not going back to your job after the detective came. Pride. That’s the driving force in you—and it’ll be greater than your reasoning, even. You won’t be able to live with yourself if you don’t go back.

“You see, I’m not begging you. I’m confident. I know you will.”

“You’re not begging me, eh? You think that’s not begging me? Prue, I’d give anything if I could just say nothing. But I’ve got to say it. I’m not going back!”

“Not even if I begged you?”

“You wouldn’t do that. Besides, there’s nothing you could put into words that you haven’t said by every gesture and tone and patience and kindness already. And if you spoke those things aloud they’d be less eloquent. So—it would still be no.”

Then, because he felt her hurt, he reached out his hand and taking her chin he turned her face toward him.

When their eyes met, he inclined his head and winked. She winked back at him, and they smiled.

“You’ve told me only one side of you,” she said. “There are two sides of you—in conflict. And I know which side’s going to triumph in the conflict. The one you’re repressing and denying. You’ll go back.”

He shook his head, slowly.

Then they went into the hotel, the doors swinging too loudly and their footsteps refusing to be quiet in the lobby where a kneeling, shapeless woman, sloshing the floor with a great rag, looked up slowly and then went on working.

CHAPTER XXIX

Iris closed her mouth in a thin line, as one who is extremely patient under wearisome provocation. She heard the trilling voice:

"Your call to London is thrrrough!"

She heard the sound of the humming electrical void, and then, as far away, Willfred's voice, impatient.

"Yes—but what is the call?"

"It's I, Willfred," she said, crisply. "Iris!"

His voice changed.

"Ah, hello. I've been hanging on here ten minutes. What is it?"

"Will—you've got to help me."

"Yes, what is it now?"

"*Now?*" she echoed. "You sound as if I were a perpetual nuisance."

"Not at all. I'm glad . . ."

"It sounded like it."

He thought: She can't do that to me—now.

"Now, Iris," he said, deep-throatedly, "don't call me up to ask me to help you and then scold me in the bargain. If it's about Hamish, I'm afraid it's his choice and . . ."

"It isn't Hamish. I've just got his letter. I think it was outrageous—just throwing up everything in a haphazard way and . . ."

"Come, Iris. When a man offers to serve his country in time of need, it's not exactly . . ."

"Well, I didn't call to talk about Hamish. It's something else. It's about the children. I suppose you know we had terrible air raids in Leaford—we just barely got out ahead of them. But for me, the children . . ."

He almost laughed as he heard the accusation in her voice.

"I'm sure I'm not responsible, Iris. And if you've called me to have them stopped . . ."

"Don't be flippant, Willfred. I'm frantic about it. It's so absolutely ridiculous—dropping bombs everywhere . . ."

"Well, here in London we're . . ."

"I don't want to be in London. I don't want to be anywhere in England. That's why I've called you. I've just had word from Prentiss. He's suggested that we stay with

some very good friends of his in America. He says it's perfectly livable there. Now I want you to arrange it for me."

"But Iris, there's a devil of a lot of regulation."

"I understand they're sending children over to Canada."

"Well, if you want them sent on the refugee list I'll . . ."

"I don't want them sent. I don't want my children in Heaven-knows-what household—and there's utterly no reason why they should go as refugees—alone, that is. I want to go with them—and see that they're properly tended. This war wasn't their making—and it's utterly ridiculous that their lives should be risked in it."

"This war wasn't the making of any other child in Britain, Iris."

"I'm not concerned with other people's children, Willfred; I am concerned and responsible and accountable for my own. I don't want them to be brought up under the demoralization of fear and danger when by taking action myself I can avoid it. That's merely common sense. Now I want you to arrange it—whatever there is to do."

"I don't know, Iris. If you don't list them as refugees—there are rather stringent regulations about leaving the country—how much money you may take, and so on."

"That's ridiculous. You can get round it."

"But I can't, Iris. I'm not yet the head of the Government."

"Oh, don't be exasperating. People *are* leaving the country—actresses, authors. I read . . ."

"But they're on cultural missions—in a sort of way—and . . ."

"Nonsense. If some tuppenny actress can get out of the country, I can. My children are as good as any half-witted and vulgar dummy of a girl on her way to Hollywood."

He did not answer.

"Please, Willfred," she said. "Just this one thing. Do help me. Please, help me! I have no one else who . . ."

"Now, now, Iris," he said. "I'll—I'll look into it."

"You'll do it for me?"

"I'll—do what I can."

She straightened from the telephone and looked at the wall of the room. It seemed too abrupt to end it now.

"Children do deserve a chance to live, Will, don't they?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes. Er—what does Hamish say about it?"

"Well, I haven't written him yet. The way I looked at it, there's no use upsetting him now—he's so busy—doing his bit. But I'll write him—and you've promised, haven't you? You *have* promised?"

"I'm not particularly given to lying, Iris," he said, stiffly.

Then he realized he had let her trap him into acquiescence. But she was going on:

"I didn't mean that, Willfred. You don't know what a load you've taken off my mind. These bombings—you're a darling."

"Yes," he said.

There was a pause, and then her voice came again—too brightly casual.

"Oh—you'll never imagine who I saw at Leaford, Willfred."

"No, who?"

"Prudence!"

"Prudence?"

"Yes—Roger's Prudence."

"Oh? How was she?"

"I don't know. I didn't have a chance to speak with her. You see—she came in with a man. They had their luggage and I thought—well, it isn't exactly the time for a relative to interrupt, is it? Of course, I thought it might have been harmless—but they registered as man and wife. I looked, afterwards. Just curious—as anyone would be. Mr. and Mrs. Clive Briggs, the name was. Briggs. I don't know any Briggses, do you?"

He heard the rising inflection, too metallically bright, and he was thinking: Now she's nailed me with that. Told me that so I can't go back on my promise—threat of scandal! All right then. A fair exchange.

"Oh, indeed," he said. "Well, I'd forget about it if I were you. And in the meantime—I'll take care of the other thing for you."

"You're a darling, Willfred. Good-by."

Still staring into blankness he hung up the phone and pressed the buzzer.

They all came to him now. Iris, Hamish—soon his father. That—that was power—to have them come to you at last—the sign of coming power.

Sitting there, he felt the thrill of a Metternich—a Richelieu. He almost started physically when his secretary spoke beside him.

"Oh, Miss Lankaster. My sister-in-law—she wants her children to go to America—she wants to go with them."

She made a note in her book.

"That would be Sir Arthur Drewling," she said. "Should I call him?"

"Yes. You might do that immediately."

He saw her hesitation.

"Well?"

"There's still that matter he spoke to you about. We haven't done anything . . ."

"Yes," he said. "Yes. Oh—let him have it. Let him have it."

"Should we call him on that first—and then drop him a note about the children tomorrow?"

"That's right," he said. "That *would* be the best way."

He looked up as the door closed.

Miss Lankaster, he thought. Really a very efficient woman. Very efficient.

Old Hamish came up out of the clear sunshine of the London street, and the quiet dimness of the club settled round him. He wandered to the reading room, and idled the

minutes away over the *Sphere* until he saw Bullyer at the cloakroom.

Bullyer was in mufti—but it was always the same, Hamish thought. The same square, handsome face—the sort of face to inspire confidence and trust and loyalty. They were shaking hands.

"Good of you to give me time, General."

"Why, General, I've always time for one of the old push."

Hamish felt as though his shoulders were squared. General—the title coming from Bullyer meant more than one could imagine. But then—and they were moving to the dining room—the phrase coming after it was exactly the one that he had used so often—to a soldier who had asked for help, that you were going to refuse politely—of necessity, of course:

"Always time to talk to one of the old push."

His shoulders felt unsquared again, and he sat at lunch, watching Bullyer eat methodically. He answered crisply the small-talk—one waited until the inner man was satisfied, and then, when he was in a better humor . . .

Bullyer had lighted his cigar, and was sitting back comfortably.

"Well, Cathaway. Now what is it I can do for you?"

Old Hamish laughed.

"We all want something, Bullyer, don't we?"

"I only wish I could do twice as much for the chaps from the old mob."

That bad note again, Hamish thought. But . . .

"That's it," he said. "We've—served with you. You know what we are—what we can do. We never thought it would come again—but here it is and—here we are!"

He spread his hands, quickly and cheerfully, and Bullyer laughed.

"Nobody can ask where the boys of the old brigade are this time, can they?" he said. "But—it's a little different this time—a long way to Tipperary, eh? And from it."

The mention of the word made the tune go jumping through Hamish's mind. The unsung music, merely existing in his imagination as a tune sometimes will, stirred him as if the massed Guards bands were playing the national anthem—the third verse when the basses and the rolling drums really mount in grandeur.

Singing Tipperary. Swinging along the roads—all those good chaps! Ah, Thiepval and Flers and Courcelette and Ypres and La Bassée! The column singing—singing and marching its way up into history.

And then in a split moment his heart sank and he felt sick. So many of them—now, where were they—so few to see the repellant sight of the job to do all over again.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "A long, long way, General."

He knew he had been answered. It was no use pretending. Now he knew what he was—the worn, war-horse general! That was it—the ridiculous figure you always saw in cartoons in *Punch*—he was that exactly, even down to the white mustaches, the purple face, the hook nose, the beginning of the corporation.

And Bullyer—due to go because of that ghastly Dunkirk affair which hadn't been any of his doing. Bullyer, with enough worries. It would be calloused to add the least

bit more to the chap's load—even the light burden of having to say no to an old friend.

Hamish put a smile on his face, and pushed back his chair.

"Well, I know you'll be busy, Bullyer. I just—thought it would be nice to say hello. Good of you to take an hour off to have lunch with—one of the old brigade, eh?"

He knew he had done it well. And then, he saw Bullyer reaching out a staying hand.

"Cathaway—that's damned decent of you. I know what you want. Once you had a division. Now you'd take a brigade—a regiment—a staff job—training depot command. And . . . well, I wish one-tenth of the people who want something would take the answer as nicely as you did. And—I hope—I take it as well, too."

Hamish felt himself swelling. That was Bullyer. Was there any wonder they swore by him? Every last man who had served under him? And yet, he was going, too. A damned shame. A bloody shame! They'd have a fine chap like Bullyer out—the new ones, the shysters, the schemers, these men of the new, shifty generation.

Bullyer was laughing, reaching over and clapping him on the arm.

"Who fired that bloody minniewerfer, eh?" Bullyer said.

They both laughed, suddenly and explosively, and they saw heads turn quickly and then turn away. The phrase had been a catch-word, a slogan, back in '16. The time Bullyer had visited his brigade and they'd gone down to his front line, there'd been a crash, and the company commander had roared it: "Who fired that bloody minniewerfer?" As if outraged that even an enemy should dare to fire when his front was being inspected. One almost expected a head to pop up across the stretch of bleak land, and a humble voice to say: "It was I. Private Gustave Schmidt of the 18th Bavarians, sir!" And then all one could imagine as an answer was: "Sergeant-major! Take his name. Have him report for company office tonight!"

"Who fired that bloody minniewerfer?"

Hamish laughed, happily.

"That was a hot corner," he said.

"That and many another," Bullyer said.

He pushed his chair back.

"I must trot along, Cathaway—but—you know, there's no one I'd rather have. And don't lose heart. I'll keep you in mind. There may be developments. I'm—I'm to be held for—further assignment. That's *sub rosa* yet. What it is—well, you can use your imagination. It may be a big job yet. The tactical situation is all changed. Interior lines, now. There'll necessarily have to be some decentralization of command—subcommands—units organized to hold at any threatened points until the major forces can arrive. On the whole, the situation will necessarily give rise to older principles of defense—the militia idea.

"Then there'll be lots to do. Now why don't you interest yourself in that? Organization of L.D.V. They'll be solidified into something less irregular as time goes on. And it's important—quite as important as anything else."

"Thank you," Hamish said.

He was nodding and smiling, and they were leaving the dining room. His mind was creating the picture—himself, an obsolete one-time brass hat, marching up and down

the village green with fourteen farm lads and a half-dozen pub loafers straggling in line behind him.

He swallowed, and shook hands with Bullyer.

"I'll—I'll think it over," he said.

Then he moved away, lest Bullyer should ask if he could drop him from his car anywhere. And he had nowhere to go. There was nothing for him to do.

Nothing—nothing for him to do here. Nothing for him to do in London. There was no reason for him to stay here. He might as well go home—and—and do nothing there. No one needed him. He was old—old! The world had done with him before he had done with the world!

He went slowly to the cloakroom for his hat and cane.

Prentiss watched the girl come down the mountainside at a full gallop. He set his teeth on edge. It was unreal—impossible. No one rode a horse full gallop down a rocky slope like that.

It was like everything else here—that was it—unreal. Like her riding and the horse she rode—with its theatrical silver mane and tail. A palomino—that was the word they used. Unreal, like the king's ransom of a silver-laden saddle and trappings on the black horse that Lachran sat—sitting there watching Mary come toward them. It was all unreal—the fantastic melodrama of the way she slid her horse to a stop on its haunches.

"There's about three hundred and fifty of them in the valley there," she said. "And practically every darned one with a calf. Oh, they're sweet."

She turned to Prentiss.

"Their little white faces."

"Twinkle, twinkle little star," Prentiss found himself thinking.

The Herefords—they were like everything else here—a fiction—a game. The fiction that the West told itself for its own delight—the make-believe of the cowboy world. Artificially reproducing the world that was gone—as surely as the cinema did.

Lachran's cattle—they must cost him a fortune. The fantastic prices for herd bulls, the enormous staff of wranglers and fence-patrol men and servants and cooks. It was all fiction. Something created by a rich man's fortune to simulate lusty simplicity that no longer existed.

"Ride down the chuck wagon and tell Jose we're coming," Lachran said.

He watched her wheel the palomino and go loping away—over the folds of land in the valley. Now in sight—now out. But always going steadily.

Prentiss heard Lachran chuckling.

"By God, there's a rider for you," he said.

Perhaps, Prentiss thought, it was part of man's eternal attempt in maturity to fulfill the wishes of childhood. Undoubtedly that was it. When he had been young, Lachran had wanted herds, land, ranches. Now—he just bought these things with wealth and tried to catch old desires. But you couldn't. You grew old and old and . . .

Lachran had halted his horse beside a dry arroyo. Prentiss saw him staring down—staring as if something were there. Prentiss looked at the same spot. There was nothing. He looked back at Lachran. The tired old eyes were almost closing. Then Lachran looked sidewise—almost wickedly—and said:

"Want to talk business?"

Prentiss clutched at scattering thoughts.

"Business?"

"Yes. What you came here for."

"Why—if you're ready."

Lachran smiled and looked out at the land.

"Goddam fine country, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes."

"But you wouldn't want to stay here?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because—because I'm British. And Britain—it's my home—and it's more—more real there."

Lachran clutched the silver pommel and eased himself in the saddle.

"She'll get all this some day," he said.

With a leap of his mind, Prentiss knew he was now speaking of Mary.

"Indeed?" he said.

Then, for no reason that Prentiss could see, Lachran bent forward and began laughing. He laughed until he coughed. When the spasm had passed he looked up.

"Listen. I'm going to do business with you," he said. "And I'll tell you how I'm going to do it. You tell me exactly what price—*exactly*—you think I ought to give you. Deliveries in ten thousand tons—for as much as you need. You tell me what you'd sell it to the British Empire for—if you was me?"

Prentiss looked up at the rocky bluffs across the valley. The man wasn't fooling. He knew that. This was his way of doing things—and you had to do things his way. He was the man holding all the cards. The price! The price!

Lachran could hold them up for anything he wanted, really. It was all a farce. It didn't matter what the British Empire hoped for. The best they could hope for was six and a half cents. That was American money. Six and a half. It would be magnificent. Six and a half would mean his mission had been a success. Six and three-eighths—that would be a triumph. Six and a quarter—a miracle! No one had dared hope . . .

But an asking price. Something to start on. A price so low that when Lachran came high, they could split the difference. Put it low enough—very low. Then beat Lachran down and down . . .

"The best we could hope for, Mr. Lachran, would be six and a half cents."

He heard his own voice saying that, coldly—almost to his own surprise.

"Of course, if you decide to hold for higher . . ."

Lachran was looking at him, and grinning. Then he was leaning over and straightening the mane of his horse. Prentiss noted in that second that the horse had its mane split neatly so that it fell on both sides of the neck. He noted that, as if saying that it were unusual and he must be sure to remember it. Lachran was looking up, smiling again.

"I suppose you know—we'll have our own armament program coming up?"

"That would be related to quantity in production, Mr. Lachran?"

"It would be related to bigger demand than supply and that means price, doesn't it?"

Prentiss looked down at the arroyo.

"Yes," he said. "That's perfectly true."

He heard Lachran laugh, quickly, as he set his horse down the bank. It slid, gained its feet, and bucketed up the loose gravel at the other side. Lachran rode like a centaur, for all his age.

In a sudden cold fury, Prentiss clapped the outrageously long spurs in his own horse. It reared, plunged down the crumbling slope, and came up the other side with furious drivings of its hindquarters.

Lachran lifted his eyebrows.

"That's the way I like to see a man ride," he said.

He looked around at the land again, as if enjoying the suspense. Then he took his thumb and prodded Prentiss in the ribs, as if enjoying, too, the circumstances which allowed him to take such familiarities.

"Six and a half cents," he laughed. "Six and a half!"

He pointed his finger at Prentiss.

"And you know what I'm going to do?"

"No," Prentiss said, quietly.

"Well," Lachran said, menacingly. "I'm going to handle this deal like it was Jesus Christ running my business. I'm going to sell it to you for—for six—cents—flat!"

Prentiss sat, feeling that he and Lachran were both insane. Then Lachran burst into a raucous cackle.

"You know why I do that?"

Prentiss swallowed and shook his head.

"Because I like you, Jack. And you know why I call you Jack?"

"No."

"I call you Jack because your name's Percival."

"But," Prentiss said, "my name isn't Percival. It's Prentiss."

Lachran looked at him wide-eyed for a moment, and then, with a harsh outburst of laughter, he touched the spurs to his horse and went away in the cream-smooth, rocking-chair canter. Prentiss could see him rocking backward and forward in the saddle from the force of his own laughter.

He thought: The man is mad. There's a streak of insanity in him as there is so often in successful men. He's clearly mad.

Then another part of his mind was saying: Six cents flat! Good God! But if the man was mad—perhaps it was another of his jokes. But no man would joke that way. Ah, if it were only down in black and white—and signed. If it were only down in writing.

CHAPTER XXX

PRUDENCE opened the drawers of the dressing table, one by one, and then slammed them shut. She looked about the room.

"There's nothing," she said, "as desolate as a room you've lived in—and then you're packed to go. It looks—like a Christmas tree after all the decorations are taken down, doesn't it?"

He looked from the window, nodding his head. Then he turned and saw her standing in the middle of the room amid the suitcases. He stared so steadily, that she put her hands on her uniform and pressed it as if to straighten it.

"Does it make me strange, darling? But I'm just the same."

She went to him and kissed him.

"There! Aren't I the same?"

"You're the same," he said.

He held her and they turned, looking from the window at the sun that danced on the smooth Channel.

"So nice," she said. "And it's gone so quickly. It seems only yesterday we moved in here—and yet worlds have happened and I know time has passed; but I can't believe it's flown like that. Am I being banal, darling?"

"No. You're saying—really—the most complimentary thing you can. It's no use talking about things when—when you're leaving someone like this. Everything has been said before. The damned novelists and the songwriters have taken all that one can say and used it and reused it until they've perverted all the meanings and destroyed all the words and phrases and sentiments. I never thought all this would happen, either."

"It is funny—the way we met. Why did you come down here in the first place, Clive?"

"Oh, I wanted to get somewhere alone—and figure it all out."

"And you weren't alone. Why did you—speak to me—at the concert?"

"Multiple chance and mischance. And—no matter what turmoil a man's in—certain physical appetites just go on."

She laughed.

"And you sated your physical appetite on me?"

"If you want to put it that way," he said, quietly. "You know it wasn't like that."

"Clive—what have you done about—about physical appetites all your life up till now?"

“Here—and there. And you go hungry a good deal of the time. It’s a mess. This is no time to talk about it. We’re all packed. I thought we’d talked ourselves to death.”

“You’d think so, but there’s so much I don’t know. Was it—were they all the same? Am I the same?”

He was thinking: You forget so many times, and you want to forget so many times.

A trellis—bougainvillaea—a tango from a squawky talking machine in the heat—singsong of Spanish—a monkey holding a piece of ice from the cuba libre, feeling it melt, and staring with a look of amazement on its quizzical half-human face.

That was it. You remembered circumstances and surroundings but never the thing itself. You remembered neither desire nor release from it.

“That’s something a man can never answer,” he said. “If you were exactly the same, I should swear by all the Bibles in the world you weren’t. And if you weren’t the same, I could say no more or less. But——”

When he paused she looked into his face. It was expressionless and blank. For nearly a minute he stood, thus. And then, suddenly, he went on:

“—no one’s been the same as you.”

“That was a long pause before you got that out,” she said.

“Pause—what pause?”

She held his lapels and looked into his eyes.

“Are you all right, darling?”

“Of course I’m all right. What’s the trouble?”

“I was wondering—where did your mind go to when you stopped talking? What did it think of?”

“I stopped talking? I just said . . .”

“And you didn’t pause?”

“I? What on earth’s wrong with you?”

“There!” she said. “You see? You don’t know. I’ve seen you do it before—start talking and then stop—and it’s like a curtain going down on your mind. And then it lifts, and you go on again. And you don’t know it. You don’t know a part of your life’s missing.”

“Look, are you trying to tell me I’m balmy?”

She pushed him gently to a chair, and then knelt, looking up at him.

“Clive—it’s a sort of aphasia. You’ve had a tremendous shock. You’re not well . . .”

“Me? I’ve never had a sick day in my life, barring the cold . . .”

“But your headaches. You have headaches every morning . . .”

“If you drink all evening and talk all night—of course you’ll have headaches.”

He started to get up, but she held him back, gently.

“Please, Clive. I know what I’m talking about. You’re not well. Ask for a medical board. They understand things now—shellshock and aphasia. Ask for rehospitalization. You’re really ill. I know. My father’s a brain specialist and I’m sure!”

He was staring at her, seeing the sweet symmetry of her features beneath the peaked cap, the silver edging of light on the ashen hair that was almost covered—the bright hair that showed only above her ears. He saw her eyes, her brows twisted with her own vehemence as she spoke.

Then he smiled and put his hands under her arms and, rising, lifted her to her feet.

"That was nice of you," he said. "Thinking up such a nice excuse for me. If a man decides he won't serve in the army, then he must be mentally unbalanced, *ipso facto*. The funny thing is, I'll bet we could get away with it, too. But—it's no use. I'm sane—and I'm—I don't want to hurt you any more, but I've got to say it. I'm not going back."

"Clive. I swear before God . . ."

"Ahhh!" he said.

He put his hand over her mouth. Then he took it away, kissed her quickly, and picked up the luggage.

"You'll miss your train," he said.

"Damn the train!"

He saw her standing, dejectedly, by the window.

"Hey," he said. "Where's the old school tie? Thumbs up! There'll always be an England, eh?"

He put down the bags, went to her, and lifted her chin with his clenched fist.

"That isn't the spirit that built the Empah," he said. "You know, stiff upper lip—what? The Light Brigade! Steady the Buffs and that rot. Eh?"

She laughed slowly at his mocking. Then she nodded. He picked up the bags and they went from the room, down the empty hall, down the steps to the marble-set lobby.

The little man behind the desk looked at them, aggrievedly, and Clive remembered how many times he'd made out the reckoning before.

"This time," he said, "we're really going—only I want you to take care of my luggage—until I call for it."

The little man looked at the bag as if he suspected that this meant it wasn't all over, even now.

Clive paid and they went out to the Esplanade, into the sunshine, walking quickly as one does when good-bys are over spiritually and remain only to be said emptily.

As they turned from the sea toward the station, she said:

"Have you enough money? You ought to let me share the expenses."

"I'm all right," he said.

Then they were at the station. He bought a platform ticket, and they stood in the place of steam smell and waited. She pictured the train, racing now toward them—coming too quickly.

"Clive," she said, breathlessly. "I wanted to tell you. It wasn't your fault—deception. I knew all along. I knew."

"You knew what?"

"Oh, that you—something was wrong. Your name. Registering as Clive Briggs—and your name's really Hanley, isn't it?"

“Monty gave me away, eh?”

“No. He did—but before that you gave it away yourself. Talking to me you called yourself Mr. Hanley. It was so transparent, but I didn’t want to do anything, so you didn’t fool me. Don’t think that. But be careful! Clive, darling, you’re so bad at lying. I didn’t know you very long, but I could always tell when you were lying. You’ll make such a bad conspirator. So do be careful. What will you do now? Oh, I wish we had time. Where are you going? What are you going to do?”

“I’ve told you—I’ll have to figure it out.”

“But where will you go? Will you write me? Have you plenty of money? You’ll need money . . .”

The train came sweeping splendidly round the curve, and the noise was greater than his voice. He nodded, and then spoke in her ear.

“I’ll write you some time.”

“When?”

“When—when something gets settled.”

She was in the train, leaning from the window. He held her hand.

“Look,” he said. “Worrying never helps. Don’t worry. Just remember this is the way it had to be; this is the way we should want it to be. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Your conviction carries you one way—and mine carries me another, that’s all. We’re both being honest. It isn’t that one way is right and the other wrong. It’s just that perhaps both convictions are right—if you have enough guts to follow the—the one that’s yours.”

She started to speak, and then the train was moving, cruelly. He saw her lips opening and shutting, and then she knew he hadn’t heard, so she lifted her hands and let them fall in a gesture of helplessness. He held his hand up, palm forward, and laughed.

Then, to shut out from his eyes the too-long-drawn-out vision of her going away, he turned and went quickly from the station. Now he faced a new, a different world.

He stopped on the street, took out his pocketbook and counted his money. Two pounds, and some change.

As long as that lasted, it was all right. He could live, eat and be free. But after that—it would get harder.

He wondered why he was walking back toward the hotel. There was no reason to do so. He could go east, west, north. All England was his—as long as he didn’t get caught.

His leave was up at midnight tonight. After that—hare and hounds.

He faced about and went north and then west, walking steadily through the Sabbath calm of the streets. Soon he left the town behind.

Lachran rose from the porch swing, getting up as if his bones creaked. He looked at Prentiss, once more himself in business suit, bowler, with raglan coat over his arm, properly gloved.

“All dressed up and ready to go, eh?” Lachran said. His voice sounded like the creaking of an unoiled wagon wheel. Prentiss thought again about the eyes—the wrinkles could make them either merry, or sag so that they looked the most evil of things. By God—suppose Lachran didn’t like you! Suppose he hadn’t liked him!

He held out his hand.

“Again, good-by, Mr. Lachran. And I can’t possibly thank you enough for your kindness—hospitality and so on.”

Lachran laughed.

“And for the contract, too, eh?”

Prentiss half-bowed, stiffly.

“And for that, too, of course, Mr. Lachran. I can’t express to you my feeling of how co-operative you’ve been—however, I shall make it fully clear to the Commission about your—your generosity.”

“You mean, you’ll put in your report that you said six and a half—and I said six?”

“Why—certainly.”

Lachran came forward slowly and held Prentiss by the arm. Then he shook his head, sadly.

“By God,” he said. “You British are so goddam honest that—that I don’t see how the hell you ever get anywhere.”

Prentiss shifted his feet, uneasily.

“Well how about one—a deoch and doris you call it, don’t you?”

“I don’t drink in the middle of the day,” Prentiss said.

“That’s right. I never drink except between meals—unless I get a chance. Well, your bags are in. They wired down to Calamosa, and they’ll flag the streamliner for you. You’ll be in New York in two days—you’ll be there quite a while, won’t you?”

“It’s very possible.”

“Damn right you should—after the deal I gave you. They should keep you here steady if you can get contracts like that. And—if you’re wise—you’ll work it to stick here. To hell with going back and being torpedoed and bombed. Stay here. This war won’t last forever—and if you decide to stay—remember this is God’s Country—come out West. Come see me. Will you?”

“Thank you, Mr. Lachran.”

“Not at all. It’s just that I get what I go after—most of the time. Mary’s driving you down?”

“I think so.”

“Well, good-by. And—your sister and her kiddies. Remember, if she can get here . . .”

“She’s getting permission to leave—I had a cable.”

“I mean that, then. This is open house for her.”

“If only for a short visit—she’ll come.”

“They come for a weekend—and stay the rest of their lives. That’s the West. Well, good-by!”

“Good-by, sir.”

Prentiss went quickly down the steps. He breathed freely for the first time in days—as if he had escaped from a lion’s lair. A benevolent lion, of course—but one that, as far as you could tell, might turn savage at any moment. He was in the car, and hearing Mary’s voice.

“We’re taking the pickup again,” she said. “That’ll teach you not to turn your nose up at trucks any more.”

“But I didn’t. I . . .”

“Don’t tell me. I saw your face the first night—when we went to the garage and I backed the truck out.”

He heard the gravel spurting from the tires. She drove bitterly, intently, and there was no speaking until the forty miles were gone and they were in the desertedness of the station yard of a Western town on the Sabbath.

Prentiss looked about. There was no sign of life—no one to take the bags. The yard, the signs: Railway Express, Western Union—the strange signs of America. The nostalgic longing for better things in the painted sign on the brick wall of the three-story building: Monte Carlo Hotel.

“It’s never much on weekday, and worse on Sunday, but you should see it on Saturday night,” Mary laughed. “Here, I’ll give you a hand with the bags.”

“No,” he said. “No.”

He carried them to the platform, and as he did so, with the bag bumping his legs, he felt suddenly that she would have done it better than he. He saw her down the platform, making signs through a window to someone within. He went toward her and saw the unshaven man, without collar, wearing a green eyeshade, jabbing his finger at his own nose.

“She’s on time,” Mary said. “Right on the nose. Well!”

She flipped herself onto a baggage truck, and swung her legs, staring at him. He watched the legs, swinging—blue-denimed legs, with the high-heeled kangaroo-skin boots—delicate boots festooned with intricate designs of white leather—butterfly patterns, leafy scrolls. Then she spoke, staring ahead.

“Well, it’s good-by. You see, I was right, wasn’t I? About waiting and letting him have it his own way. Wasn’t I?”

She turned and looked at him, and he felt somehow abashed by the openness of her gaze.

“I—I can’t thank you enough. You know that,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “I know. Maybe you’ll come back some day. I like you—you know that, too, don’t you?”

He buttoned his glove, reprovingly.

“Anyhow, you got your contract. That’s the main thing,” she said.

He felt himself growing red about the neck.

“You mustn’t put it that way,” he said. “You talk as if the contract was everything, and now I’m running. But you must understand—there’s a war on, and I’m not my own man.”

“But you *are* going,” she said. “You just don’t like me, eh? I’m not your type.”

He wished the train would come.

“Look here, Mary. You’ve been fearfully decent, and all that. But . . .”

He looked at her and again he felt, as so often before, the desire to hold the girl, to touch her flesh, to kiss her mouth, to kiss her throat, to bury himself in her body almost. And feelings like that—they weren’t—well, they weren’t decent. It was bestial!

“I know,” she said. “You’re overbred—you can get a strain of horses like that.”

Even then he did not know how clearly she had read him—more clearly than he would ever understand himself.

“I say, now,” he said. “You look like a grown woman, Mary; but after all, you’re only eighteen—at first I thought you were a grown woman.”

“What’s wrong with that? One’s grown up at eighteen if—if you’re grown up. You can’t help it.”

“But I’m old enough to be your father.”

“You only look about thirty,” she said, smiling.

“But you don’t understand . . .”

She stopped swinging her legs.

“All right,” she said, angrily. “We don’t have to argue. Good God, you don’t have to spend an hour drilling it into my head that you won’t go for me. If it were only true. But I know you do like me and you want me. But I can’t make you see yourself straight. That’s all.”

She started swinging her legs again and spoke brightly.

“Well, in a couple of years I won’t be eighteen. Think you’ll ever be back this way?”

Prentiss looked at her. His mind leaped to the thought. Two years—no more war—a free man—business here—with Lachran—a home—this beautiful girl as his wife—children . . .

His own thoughts trickled away like water sinking in sand. He knew, in a flash of clarity, that it would never come. Somehow he knew he could never take his life in his hands bravely and boldly and do anything like that.

He sought for extenuation. Then he found it. In a couple of years she’d forget him. This would be just a childish infatuation. She’d get married to some youngster—to Joe College. That was it. Really she loved Joe College. And he was thus wisely renouncing her—tenderly and sadly, of course; but with great wisdom.

But the great opportunities for a man here, and the picture of this broad-breasted girl at a doorway, with children, as he came home in the evening . . .

“I might get back some day,” he said.

That played everything safe. It left the whole matter open—not to do anything about, of course, but to play with in his mind.

She lifted her head.

“Here’s the train,” she said, coldly.

They left the truck as the fluted steel coaches raced by and the train screeched to a stop. Somehow Prentiss felt strangely important. It was another alarming American way—stopping an express at a wayside station—for one passenger.

White-garbed Negroes were taking his bags, setting a footstool before the steps of the Pullman.

He turned to Mary. He was afraid that she might want to kiss him before all these people, so he held out his hand, quickly.

She held it, and looked at him steadily.

“You know,” she said. “You’re a rat!”

The vehemence in her voice startled him. But before he could speak, she finished her sentence.

“Running out on me like this.”

“Good-by—it’s been charming,” he said.

She let go of his hand, and with one motion unbuckled her belt and put it in his hand.

“Take that to remember me by,” she said.

She walked away, and he stood, staring at the heavy concha belt. It was a band of broad leather, studded solidly with great ornamental plaques of intricately chased Indian silverwork. He stared at it.

It weighed a ghastly amount—must be tons of the stuff on it. But . . .

The porters had his bags aboard and were waiting for him. He clambered in. He looked back. She was standing by the corner of the station, watching him. She lifted her hand.

He wanted to climb down the steps again—run to her, crying out:

“It’s real, Mary! There’s never been anything like this in my life before. It’s real. Wait for me. I’ll be back! I’ll be back!”

But then he thought that those things—they weren’t done—except in silly motion pictures. And—and all the people staring from the window of the train—the porters and blue-uniformed white men waiting.

So he merely lifted his bowler and said:

“Cheeroh!”

Then the train was moving away, and he went into the coach, feeling only that he must look utterly ridiculous, coming aboard like this. Dash it—it was a silly way to get on a train—all alone—so that the whole world watched you. And coming in carrying in one’s hand this—this confounded outlandish silver collection.

He dropped in his seat and put the belt between himself and the window.

“Porter. Can you get me a newspaper?” he said.

“Yassuh,” the Negro said, happily.

He looked through the window. After all, these things were all right, but a man shouldn't be swept from his main theme by incidentals. And, after all, there was his duty. That was the main issue, and he'd done it. All the rest was incidental. Thus he justified himself.

The porter came back with the paper, and Prentiss lifted it, building a private world about himself.

Now—at last—he was comfortable again.

CHAPTER XXXI

General Cathaway sat at his desk in the library at Oddale, his eyes closed. He was composing a letter in his mind:

To the Editor of the *Times*,

Sir:

In this hour of crisis it is axiomatic that Britain should take every advantage of her man power. There are, today, thousands of experienced men who are ready and willing to serve. Far, however, from seeming willing to utilize these men of experience, the Government—[No, not the Government. It was our Government. Let us say the nation—that spread it.]—The nation today seems all too blind . . .

His mind wavered and he came up from concentration, knowing a shadow had passed over the French windows. Emily was there, opening them. The midafternoon air swept in like a grand dowager entering a ballroom, and he knew the scent of earth and ivy and sun-warmed hay.

"Ah, so there you are," she said.

He hunched his shoulders irritably. She spoke as if he had just settled there. Anybody should know he'd been there almost solidly for six hours, trying to think this thing through. He wished she would go away so he could catch the trend of his letter again.

"You should be outside, dear," she said. "Too beautiful to stay indoors—and the dahlias this year!"

She waved the secateurs.

"You should take a walk."

Then she was gone.

He felt anger that he knew was irrational. He had wanted her to go; but when she went that way he felt opposite anger that she should walk away, ignoring all evidence that he was in a devil of a stew.

He put his mind back to the comfort of the letter—but it was no use. The thing seemed to have slipped his mind, and he could find no warmth in the anticipation of writing it any more.

He passed his hand over his brow. It didn't matter, anyhow. Writing letters to the *Times* was no use, for wasn't it a refutation of everything he wanted to prove? Only old, useless, otherwise impotent men found any release in writing letters of protest to the

Times. The writing of it thus would prove everything that he wanted to deny—that he was old. There was nothing he could do. Except die.

Ah, now—since one had to die—if he could only get at the head of a squadron of cavalry and charge—right into the Germans! One wouldn't mind dying that way. Dying in a useful way.

But no more cavalry! New wars! Airplanes—but how about taking an airplane, diving it at something—at Hitler? Ah, now there was a thought to play with! Crash—out goes General Cathaway—out goes Hitler. That would be an end! "Fitting end to long military life," the obituary notices would say.

If one could do it! If one . . .

Then his dream fell like a sinking suet pudding and his heart went cold. The fact was—he couldn't fly a plane.

He tried to find other—more possible—grand dreams. A suicide squad of old men who didn't mind dying? Why not? At Omdurman—by God he didn't want to die then. He'd been young then—wanted to stay alive. But old men didn't mind . . .

It was no use. His mind wouldn't play. No use creating silly daydreams. One went on, old, useless, getting crotchety. No nobility or beauty to an end—senility. Better to snap it off in some good way. Take a horse, ride at everything, crash and break your neck. No—too impossible. Like asking a swimmer to drown himself. He'd probably go on riding for years, becoming one of those horrid old men who get a reputation for utter daring in the field—and get to like it. And then start jumping wisely.

But he was old—old—old . . .

There was only one sure way. One—one!

He opened the desk drawer slowly and looked round-eyed at the Webley.

"Curious," he thought. "In all my life I've never once before thought of suicide."

But never, until now, had he been conscious of what he had become: a useless, aged, somewhat ridiculous, lay figure. How often must people have snickered at him behind his back!

The dugout general. Not even dug out. Left to molder into death.

Suicide, cowardly? Not at all. It would take a lot of nerve for a man to lift that gun, place it at the temple, squeeze—not pull—the trigger.

He took out the revolver carefully. Fantastically his mind noted that for the first time in his life he now felt it was a dangerous weapon. He handled it gingerly, putting it on the desk before him. He sat staring at it.

He began to picture afterwards. A mess—of course. It would be hushed up. Accident. But Emily! The mess of it.

You couldn't do it. A man in his class wasn't even left the comfort of suicide.

And then (the thought struck him with blinding force) if you did it, you'd never know how the war came out. All the rest of eternity, there would be the war, with the Germans temporarily on top.

Yet—he was a laughable figure. Now! He could remember dozens of times lately when young men had laughed quickly as he spoke. Now he knew what they were laughing at! He was ridiculous! Ridiculous! Oh, the shame of it!

The revolver lay before him, and he stared at it until it was the only thing he could see. All the rest of the room was black and only in the halo of light lay the revolver.

It was a long time later that he became aware that there had been knocking at the door. He snatched the gun, and put it in the drawer, covering it with one hand.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Gen'ral. Blenkinthorpe."

He closed the drawer slowly.

"Come in," he said.

The old man came in, limping, holding his hat. He reeked of the cow byres. He ducked and bobbed his head.

"Ah heeard ye were back, Gen'ral."

Old Hamish drew his breath.

"What is it?" he said angrily.

He wanted to get the old man out, get back to the important contemplation of himself on the dizzy precipice of eternity.

"Ah, everything's reight and proper."

"Well, then, what do you want?"

"Barrin' a couple o' things, as ye maught say?"

"What things? Get it over with, man!"

"Eigh, nowt much. All's fine, barring we're low on feed. Ah can't raise cows be'out no grain and . . ."

"I'll take care of it. And watch it—it's expensive! How in the name of God they expect us to increase food-stuff production and nail down the price of what we produce while they let grain go soaring out of sight, I don't know."

"Aye, mucky times, Gen'ral."

"Is that all?"

"Aye—barring a few odds and ends. There's the next to the biggest Yorkshire."

"Well?"

"Well, she farrered—and et 'em all. Ivvery last one."

"By God, if I turn my back one minute . . ."

"Nay, that ain't all. That there Tinkerbell—she dropped her calf. Outside o' that we're pretty lucky."

"Lucky? Her calf! Why she's not due . . ."

"That's reight, Gen'ral. Stillborn, it were—but there's one comfort, Gen'ral. It were a bull calf anyhow, so all's well in a way. 'Cept she's took a milk fever. Eigh, her bag's that hard—and veins standing out—and not a drop o' milk . . ."

"God Almighty! This place is a madhouse. If I turn my back . . . what have you done for her?"

Old Blenkinthorpe cocked his head upward, and recited as if from memory:

"Ah give her white pepper in powder, two ounces, and mithridatum, four ounces, and lenitive electuary, four ounces, to be given in a quart of Hollands gin—and Ah bled

her three times a day meanwhile milking eight times a day in an endeavor . . .”

“God Almighty, you’ll kill the damned beast!”

“Nay, Gen’ral. Now that’s a recipe we’ve used for two hundred years and more. It come back fro’ ma great-great-great-grandfather, it did. Wrote in his own hand.”

“You great-great-grand-aunt,” Old Hamish exploded. “Oh, God—if Fenley hadn’t enlisted we’d be all right.”

“Now lewk here, Gen’ral,” Blenkinthorpe said, slowly. “There’s noa reason to talk like that to a man. Ah don’t know what tha’s in such a mawngy hig about, but doan’t tak’ it out on me! Ah’m dewing best Ah can, short-handed. Ah been oop two neights running wi’ t’beasts, and if ma best ain’t good enow, then tha knaws what tha can dew!”

He turned away and plodded to the door.

“Wait a moment,” Old Hamish said. “Now don’t get insolent and—and Yorkshire. Where’s that oaf of a grandson of yours? I hired him. Why don’t you make him pitch in and stay up with them?”

Blenkinthorpe halted and half-turned.

“Well, while tha were i’ Lunnon, Gen’ral, he jined a gang what Purkiss is gating oop to strangle Gairman parachuters, and he says that’s a full-time job.”

“Why, that damnable Red! Is he back again? Why, he has no authority to raise an army in this village.”

“Aye, well, he’s dewing it. He’s teaching people how to strangle chaps in the dark wi’ wire, and how to chuck bombs made out o’ bottles o’ petrol at tanks, and how to blow oop coolverts. He says this is a people’s war like they hed i’ Spain where he was. Garreting people, he calls it. Like bloody murder.”

Old Hamish rose and put his hands to his waist while he expanded his chest.

“I think,” he said, “it’s about time I came back here and looked into things. Now you go on back, and take a rest . . .”

“Nay, Gen’ral. Ah don’t intend to be talked to like tha’s been dewing by noa man, and if what Ah dew ain’t good enow for thee, then . . .”

“Oh, go on back, and don’t thee thou me,” Hamish said, warmly. “Now go back to your cottage and take a nap. I’ll go down and get someone to give you a hand.”

“Tha’ll find no one willing these days to put oop wi’ the things Ah dew. If tha can’t get no one . . .”

“Then I’ll come and give you a hand myself. Now go on—get a little rest.”

Hamish pushed the man gently to the door. Then he strode out into the hall and pulled on a felt hat. He had a vague feeling that he was walking away from something.

But life pressed you so damned hard with the irritable minutiae of living! Life was such an endless business.

CHAPTER XXXII

THERE was a railway bridge going over the road. Under it the young soldier stood, feeling without knowing it that the more complete blackness wrapped about him there would somehow keep him more comfortable.

He was from Cardiff, and his mind kept going back to his home—out beyond the Marquis of Butte's restored castle—it looked as real now it was restored as the big castle they had in the cinema about Robin Hood.

He thought it rare funny to be so far from home, living a life that woke him up at odd hours and set him to standing there. There was nothing to do. Sometimes the railway trains thundered overhead, and that made you think of the end of the world and God. You always thought: What if the bridge should come down? But you always stood there, trembling, and stuck it out.

For the rest, you kept your ears open. If it was the Sergeant making the rounds, or coming with the relief, you began walking up and down in what you had learned was a smart and soldier-like manner, doing that until you were sure they could hear your foot beats. Then you stamped to a halt, and shouted:

"Halt, who goes there?"

And he said:

"Sergeant of the guard with the relief."

Then you had to think hard about how the relief man took your place, and you took his place, and you all marched out to relieve the next post. Bloody silly, not letting you go right back and sleep. But you had to go all around with the rest, collecting the old guard and dropping the new sentries, until you were all relieved sentries, and then you went back.

You had to remember so many things. The other night, the Corporal of the Guard had said to him: "Now, Davis, look you. You should study up on that." That was the part where the new man stepped on your beat and you left it.

It was hard to remember. The rest—that was easy. If anyone else came, you stood in the darkness and said: "Halt, who goes there?" And he said: "It's me. I'm going back home fro' the village." According to the Sergeant they should say, "Friend," and you said: "Advance, friend, and be recognized." But they never said that. They said: "What the bloody hell—I'm on my way home." And you had to let them go. You couldn't do anything else.

He wished they would learn the other thing, though. That would make it all much better and soldier-like. They ought to teach civilians the rules about guards and guard

mounts, too.

He hunched his shoulders, and counted the time. Surely it was now eleven. Probably much past, but surely it was safe to say it was eleven. Then at twelve, they'd come. And say he got in by twelve-fifteen. Then he could sleep until quarter to four. Two hours on. Four hours off.

He stopped pondering, listening to a sound along the road. A civilian—coming toward the town this time. He drew himself together, and advanced his left foot. One was supposed to throw the rifle forward to the on-guard with the bayonet, but it was risky doing it in the dark. The old chaps, the Sergeant and so on, could do it with their eyes shut and never drop the rifle. But it was best . . .

He edged the bayoneted rifle forward. Then drew his breath.

"Halt! Who goes there?" he challenged.

"Friend," the voice said.

Private Davis stood confused. For once the answer had been correct. Perhaps it was an orf'cer of some sort. He sniffed. The footsteps had stopped. What was next? Now he had it.

"Advance, friend, and be reco'nized!"

He waited. He could hear faint, mysterious sounds out in the dark. He could half see a movement by the hedge.

"Come on," he said, coaxingly. "Advance and be reco'nized."

There was still no answer. It was all imagination, Private Davis decided. Then his mind jumped. But it couldn't be imagination, because someone had answered: "Friend"! There had been someone out there—and now they were gone—through the bleeding hedge and up the hill, no doubt.

Now who would do that? A German spy! A parachute troop chap. That was it! Those Germans would have studied everything up. Only a German spy would know enough to say "Friend" correctly. But what should he do? Fire his rifle?

It would make a bloody awful row—and then there'd be the trouble of cleaning it in the morning—pulling the pull-through up and down and getting the barrel shiny for inspection. And he'd be one round shy. There was always such a bloody fuss about every man having the right number of rounds at kit inspection, and you were told off if you were any missing. Like as not it would get him into all sorts of vague trouble—like the time he and Dai Thomas had decided to pool blankets so they could have one under them and one over and had slept together—and the orf'cer prowling at night had prodded them awake, and taken their names, and next morning they'd been for it at Company H.Q., because it seemed there was a whole lot of laws about men not sleeping together.

But you ought to do something. What were you supposed to do when you said advance and the chap didn't advance? Nobody had ever raised that question. But you'd have to do something—ask someone.

"Corporal!"

He called out loud. Once his voice echoed and re-echoed under the railway bridge, he drew new confidence. He ran from under the bridge toward the village. He yelled at

the top of his lungs.

"Corporal! Corporal o' the Guard! Corporal o' the Guard!"

It was all right to call the Corporal. He wouldn't get as mad as the Sergeant if he was doing something wrong.

Clive, bent double, ran quickly up the hill.

His mind said: Now—at last it's started. You've been expecting it—waiting for it. Now it's started. You're on the run. Do it well. Give them a long run—a long, hard run. Do it well, please.

Then he laughed to himself as another part of him spoke at the silliness of what he was doing. It seemed ridiculous—melodramatic. But if he'd gone on, perhaps the sentry would have asked for papers—and he'd have been arrested.

Then his heart quickened, for he heard the sentry calling, suddenly in the night, for the Corporal of the Guard.

Why should his heart jump and his throat go suddenly dry? Some vague reaction. The reaction of being hunted.

That was it. It was as old as man—the fear when being hunted, the fear of the quarry. A terror, to be dreamed of. That was it—when you had a nightmare in childhood, the nightmare where the tigers raced behind you, and you ran, ran—like a slow-motion cinema. Then, in that dream, you had exactly the feeling that had struck white fear in him when the voice sounded in the night. Being hunted must be one of the oldest of human experiences.

He began to laugh again—and then he swore as he felt himself stumbling into a flock of sheep. He heard them scampering and baaing as they eddied away from him like waves before the prow of a ship.

Knee-deep in sheep—better than knee-deep in June.

A new sound rose, sudden and menacing. A dog's voice was lifted in apperceptive alarm, to his left. He veered to the right and then felt the shock of his shins striking stone. A wall!

He stood, expelling his breath at the pain of it. Then he looked back. There was the voice of a man, urging the dog. That was too bad. He had been going north. Now that way was cut off. He could go back and then circle around again—or what did it matter? North or south. Really he had nowhere to go.

He trotted along, down the new slope, until his lungs began to ache from the exertion of running.

"Look here, you're damned tired," he said.

He must have covered over fifty miles in the last two days. You couldn't keep that up forever. And he was hungry, too.

He half saw a hedge before him. He felt it with his hand—tall hawthorn! He found a gap in it and went through to the road. It ran east and west. Which should it be? West—go west, young man. West it was.

He walked along until he noticed that he was limping. He sat by the hedge and pulled up his trousers leg. He could feel the stickiness of blood on his hand. He wet his finger with saliva and rubbed the wound tentatively.

It was too bad—the whole mess. He'd intended to rest, and now he was on the move again.

The ditch smelled sweetly of dampness and greening things. He could crawl through the hedge and rest—rest.

He sat, gathering enough energy to get up and make the effort. And then he heard the sound, carrying far in the night stillness. The distant, shattering noise of a motorcycle being started. Then another.

He got up, the fear of the hunted quick in his throat for a second again. Then he quieted it.

It merely meant he could stay there. They'd get to this road. He had been going north. They'd conclude that he'd circle along this road and try to get northward again somewhere else. So—he would go south.

He crossed the road and climbed the stone wall. There was pasture under his feet. If he went carefully, he could make quite a good distance before dawn. Before daylight, he'd find some place to sleep.

He'd never wanted to sleep as much—not since Douai. Dunkirk—that had been beyond any desire. But coming up to Douai—then he'd been tired. But there was surcease in wanting sleep as much as this. At least, it excluded all else. You couldn't want anything as much as he wanted sleep, and have any other thought share your mind, too.

You could walk on . . . all you wanted was some superior faith to push you when you were tired . . . why people took up as Communists and Fascists . . . not because they were Communists or Fascists but because the muddle of the complex world of today made them tired and these things offered some sort of order and method to follow . . . Prudence believed in . . . believed . . .

His head dropped suddenly and jerked upward again. He knew he had been walking in his sleep. He would concentrate on keeping awake. You didn't stay awake though. Each time the time of waking became less and less . . .

He woke to find himself standing by a haystack. He sank to his knees, and rested there a moment. He was asleep before he fell the rest of the way.

Grimly, slowly, his mind straggled up. He started to close his eyes against too-strong light again, and then he remembered with a sort of anger that there was a pain in his side. A foot had kicked him.

He blinked his eyes, and, looking up, saw the man. Instantly the flash came into his mind that it was so the peasant-worker hero was always photographed in the Soviet motion pictures—from below so that the figure loomed against the sky, by the angle of sight made heroic in size.

Then the aching came into his flank like a delayed message, and he felt the pain on the bone, and sat up, holding the aching spot.

“You filthy bastard,” he said.

That was what had wakened him. The man had kicked him. Not stirring him with his foot, but kicking so that the heavy toe bit through cloth and flesh and drove against the bone.

Then he saw the man was holding a pitchfork within a foot of his face, and grinning, triumphant over his advantage. The blackened gaps of teeth showed in his mouth. His eyes were narrow, piggish.

Arise noble peasant, Clive thought. The noble peasant. The evil, cunning swine.

He sat back on his haunches. One could always out-think the brute type.

“Well?” he said.

“I said,” the man went on, slowly, “what t’hell d’ye think y’re doing there?”

Clive began dusting the hay from his sleeves.

“I slept here,” he said.

He kept on patting and smacking his tweeds into cleanliness, rising from his knees, bending over, not looking at the man.

“Well, what’re y’doing ’ere?”

Clive looked up, still bent over. He was wondering why he should be seized with such bitter hatred of the man. The cheeks, below the slant eyes, were beefy red. No reason to hate a man because his cheeks were thus, his eyes were so, his nose was so-on.

“I slept there,” he said. “I’ve been taking a walking trip.”

“Agrrh—y’re no walking tripper.”

“How do you know?”

The man thrust his chin forward triumphantly.

“Because y’got no ’aversack!”

There it was. Finality. Haversack: walking tripper. No haversack: no walking tripper. How could one argue beyond such simplicity?

“You could go on a walking trip without a haversack,” Clive said.

His head ached furiously and he realized he was tired. His weary mind drove him into fine debates. He had lost direct thought, and felt now only the necessity of convincing the man of illogic.

“They don’t,” the man said, cunningly.

“But you could. Look here, suppose you decided to start from here on foot, to go on a walking trip . . .”

“I wouldn’t do no such thing.”

“But if you did—you’re a free Englishman, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“And you could go without a haversack, couldn’t you? No one could make you take a haversack if you didn’t want to?”

“That they couldn’t.”

“Well, there you are,” Clive said.

He started away, casually and quickly. The man, belatedly, moved the pitchfork as if it were a bayonet, at Clive's throat.

"Hold on," he said. "There's been a spy round 'ere loose all night. We've got orders to collar any suspicious character. Y'd better come along o' me and see the Colonel."

"Don't be silly," Clive said, gently.

He put out his hand, quietly, and took the tines of the pitchfork and brushed them aside. Then he walked past. The man, undecided, puzzled, let him push the weapon aside. But then, as if he welcomed less stringent action, he clutched Clive's coat.

" 'Ere!" he said.

Unreasoning anger—the same anger that moves men in battle—possessed Clive. He acted without conscious direction. He twisted away, savagely.

"Now don't pull me around," he said.

The man came, advancing his left foot and his left arm, as one does who wishes to trip a man. They tussled, quickly, and Clive struck the man in the hollow space below the meeting of the ribs.

"Y'bastard," the man said.

As he reeled back, he clubbed the pitchfork in both hands, now hurt enough so that he no longer reckoned the effect of his action. He swung the fork viciously, and Clive, trying to roll away from the blow, felt the tines crashing against his skull behind the ear. There was a roaring in his head from the concussion. He did not know until he saw the man, lying by the haystack, clutching his bleeding mouth, that he had lashed out and caught the man fully on the face. He rubbed his knuckles, a slow tentative rubbing.

"There," he said, quietly. "Now, let me alone."

He turned and walked away to the north. He was halfway to the hedge when he felt sudden nausea from the pain on the side of his head. He bent, holding his stomach, retching. He spat, and straightened. Looking back, he saw the man running to the farm buildings. He felt too sick to go on, so he retraced his footsteps and went back to the haystack and sat down.

The next time he looked round the stack, the man was pedaling furiously down the side lane on a bicycle. He turned west at the road, and raced away.

Now, Clive thought, it is all up. I'm too tired to get up and walk, and they'll have men all over. At least, though, I'll have a good rest. If he didn't see me come back, this haystack is the last place they'll search. After they don't find me, they'll doubt his story, and he'll come back here to show just where I slept and what he said and what I said. By that time I'll have more strength. By God, I'll give 'em a run yet.

Half idly his mind became quite detached and interested in what was happening—as if it were another person. Lying by the haystack, he watched the road for nearly a half-hour. Then he saw figures coming up the road—the man and a constable, both on bicycles. Soon after there was a car, with men clinging to the running boards. The car caught up with the bicycles just as they turned into the side lane. It was too narrow to allow them to pass, so the motorcar jounced on the ruts, going in low gear, behind the cyclists.

He thought: It is like watching a tactical military lesson on a terrain board—the kind where you move pieces of colored wool to represent companies and platoons and machine gun squads.

The forces were now deployed, debouching from the farm buildings, spreading out in an advance line, doubling toward the sky line at the north.

It was so pretty he smiled. When they had gone over the brow of the land, he felt sudden disappointment, as at the end of a game. Lazily, he got up and strolled to the farm. He felt light-headed and confident as he came into the yard. A chained dog barked and the farmer's wife came to the kitchen door.

"Good morning," he said.

The barn was a beautiful stone building, he thought.

"Did you get him?" the woman called.

"I don't think so."

"Oh."

She would wonder . . .

"They sent me back to guard the transport."

"Oh, is that it? You look as if you'd been in a mess."

"I was just getting up and having breakfast."

"Would y'like a cup o' tea?"

"I would," he said. "But—I can't leave my post, and . . ."

"There's some ready now," she said. "I'll just bring y'a cup out to th' step."

He went toward the door, with his mind moving slowly and warmly as if in a pleasant dream. She brought him the tea, and he drank, the warmth bringing tears to his eyes. He gave her the thick mug back, and walked over to the motor car. He got into the driver's seat. The ignition keys were gone. He felt pleased that the unknown driver was neat and orderly in this manner.

He tried the dash compartment, hoping to find tools to short-circuit the ignition lock, but the small door was locked, too. And there wasn't time now to do the job without tools.

He got out of the car and studied the two bicycles. The constable's was the better machine—but heavier.

He got on the other one, rode steadily down the lane, and turned west along the highway. At a curve, another carload of men flashed past him, and he waved his hand. He saw answering waves, and then, detached, one face that stared in astonishment. Then it was all gone.

No use worrying, he said, calmly.

He went on until he came to a curious crossroad of five corners. He took the road going southeast, pedaling without hurry.

The girl stood with her arm half-lifted, and then dropped it as the car went past, the dust tearing in quick whirlwinds behind it. She stared after it, swearing. She was so

intent that she did not turn when the man on the bicycle dismounted beside her.

"What's up?" he said.

It seemed incongruous—a car broken down so early in the morning.

"Stinkers!" she said. "Loathsome damned stinkers. You'd think someone would stop. I always do—even when I'm alone."

"What's the trouble?"

"I'm stuck. And don't ask me if I've got petrol. I have! And don't ask me if I'm getting current to the sparking plugs, because I am."

He went to the tiny car and looked under the lifted hood.

"Get in and step on it," he said.

"Do you know anything about a car?"

She was staring at his crumpled clothes.

"I'm a wizard with them. Step on the starter."

The girl got in the car and he heard the starter whirr. He flipped his hand back as the hot spark from the plug stung his outstretched finger.

"Those things'll give you a shock," the girl said.

"I know, I know," he said, angrily. "It's the quickest way. I'm in a hurry. Choke it with the ignition on."

He heard the whirr, the sucking of air in the carbureter, the cough, half-fire, and shuddering dying away. He looked at the carbureter, at the glass vacuum container in the feed pipe, showing plenty of petrol. Then he laughed, remembering the particular faults of that make of car. He locked the bonnet.

"Move over," he said.

The young woman stared at him, antagonistically.

"It won't start," she said.

"What'll you bet?" he laughed.

She flounced over in the seat. He got in, took off the brake, and let the car roll back down the gentle slope. He held in the clutch and slipped in the gear.

"That's high speed forward," she snapped.

He did not answer. He let out the clutch, and heard the pistons going backward, driving air into the carbureter. He stopped the car, then stepped on the starter. The engine whirred, coughed, and then roared.

He meshed in the gears, and started the car down the road, easing into top gear and going along with the engine humming.

She tapped his arm.

"All right. Thank you."

"I'll drive for a bit," he said. "I'm going this way."

"But—but your bicycle."

"It isn't mine," he said. "Just borrowed."

She was quiet a moment. Then she blazed.

“Look here! Stop this car and get out! If you don’t, I’ll—I’ll have you arrested by the first policeman I see.”

“Don’t do that,” he said. “It would make me angry. I’m tired. I’m a Jack the Ripper—a very dangerous sort of chap—unless I’m let alone.”

She was quiet, and then he heard her crying, a moaning, sobbing outburst. He slowed the car.

“Look here,” he said. “Don’t be frightened. You know that was all rot. Are you really in a funk? Are you really? Or are you just pretending you are so that I’ll get out?”

She sat up as if she’d been stuck with a pin, and he saw her face was dry.

“I’m damned well not afraid of anything—not of any man,” she said. “If you had any decency you’d get out.”

“And if you had decency you wouldn’t have pretended to cry.”

He drove silently.

“How far are you going?” he said.

“To Little Reshmore—about thirty miles west of here. And when we get there I’ll have you turned in.”

“Oh, dear,” he said, wearily. “You know you won’t.”

“I will. So help me I will.”

He drove carefully, knowing he was tired and afraid his co-ordination might be below par.

“Who are you running away from?” she snapped.

“I’m not running away from anything. In fact, I’m running after something. A man in pursuit of his conscience.”

“Running away from your conscience, most likely.”

“That’s the usual case, but I’m an unusual one.”

She studied him.

“Look, would you mind driving a little faster? I’m late now. I’m supposed to be in Little Reshmore at five and twenty past eight. I drive much faster than this.”

“Women do,” he said. “These clockwork cars fall apart after a year if you push them.”

“What’s wrong with this car?”

“Sorry. It’s a beautiful car. I didn’t mean to insult your car. What do you do in Little Reshmore?”

She stared straight ahead.

“I’m a district nurse.”

“Have you been out on a case?”

“No. Yes.”

“Which?”

“No. I’ve been visiting a friend.”

He turned his head and glanced at her quickly.

“Why do you wear those terrible horn-rimmed glasses?” he asked.

“For my eyesight,” she snapped.

“You needn’t have those goggle rims.”

She sighed.

“It makes me more professional-looking—it helps. Makes the damned people stand up and take notice—they’re more liable to do what I tell ’em.”

“It’s a shame,” he said. “You’d be quite good-looking without them.”

“Eyewash,” she snapped.

“You know it’s true. You’re very pretty.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I should have someone to tell me that every morning. It would help.”

“Doesn’t he tell you?”

“Who?”

“The friend that you visited?”

“I . . . I didn’t say it was a he.”

“It’s all right,” he said. “Living can be a bloody mess, can’t it? And full of trouble, and posing. It’s none of my business. Forgive me.”

She sat quietly. Then she studied him, carefully.

“You know,” she said. “You’re a queer sort. Who’s after you?”

“That’s my worry,” he said.

“I suppose you know you’ve got a nasty laceration on this side of your head behind the ear.”

“Is the skin broken?”

“It is.”

“Look,” he said. “What’s this town?”

“I wouldn’t give you any information if . . .”

“I don’t care what it is, but I want to know—are you going to make a fuss?”

“I must. It’s my duty. I’ll call to the first policeman I see.”

“Ah, duty,” he said. “In that case, I must drive round the town some way, and it’ll take a long time. You’ll be later than ever.”

She did not answer.

“Look,” he said. “I’ll make a compact. You keep quiet, I’ll drive you to Little Reshmore and get out quietly. If I do that, what will you do then?”

“Report you,” she said. “I have to. There’s a war on. I don’t know who you are.”

He nodded.

“You’ll not do anything in this town we’re coming to?”

“All right.”

“Then here we go.”

They went through the town, not speaking. As they left High Street, he said:

“I didn’t see a policeman in the whole town.”

She pressed her lips together. They came out onto the open highway. The car hummed along, the air strumming on the canvas top.

“How far now?” he asked.

“About five miles.”

“You’re still going to turn me in?”

“I must.”

“Look,” he said. “Give me ten minutes’ grace. Even animals get that, don’t they? Don’t they let the fox have some grace or something like that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not interested in hunting. If you saw as much filth and neglect and poverty as I do, you’d not be very interested in pink coats, either.”

“We are traveling together in more ways than one now,” he said. “Bravo, and up the rebels. Then give me ten minutes’ start. It’s sporting. When you play hare and hounds, you have to let the hare get started. I’m not asking much. I could just take your car and keep on going.”

“You’d have to stop for petrol soon.”

“There’s plenty—these do about forty to the gallon.”

“This doesn’t.”

“It would if you took care of it.”

She blew out her breath.

“We’re almost there,” he said. “Ten minutes?”

“All right,” she said. “You understand. I’m sorry. I don’t want to do it. But I must.”

“Every man must follow his convictions,” he said. “It’s all right. I’ve not done anything bad. It isn’t your worry, but you needn’t be upset. I just want time, that’s all. I want time to think.”

“About what?”

“About the thing that I won’t worry you about, Nurse.”

“Over there,” she said. “Park over there.”

He eased the car toward the low, one-story building.

“Is this your office?”

“No. I want you to get out here. My office is over in the next street.”

He stopped and opened the door.

“Thank you,” he said. “You’ve been decent.”

He saw she was holding back the cuff on her left arm with her right forefinger, staring at her watch with a nurse-like air of communion.

“Nine minutes and forty seconds,” she intoned.

He grinned, and looked at her face.

“I still insist, without the glasses, you’d be very pretty.”

She bit her lip.

“Nine minutes and thirty seconds.”

Then she looked up.

“Oh, please don’t try my patience,” she said. “I . . . I . . .”

“I’ll go. I’m sorry.”

“Wait. Get in this car.”

He got in again, slowly.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to drive me further?” he said.

“No!”

She was opening her bag.

“Turn your head.”

He twisted his chin toward his shoulder, and then felt the bite of medication stinging behind his ear. She painted quickly about the bruised swelling. Then he felt her pressing the taped ends of a bandage.

When it was done he turned to her.

“Why did you do that—tell me—I always wonder about people.”

“It’s my duty,” she said. “It’s my training—you neglect cuts and scratches, and get infections and sores through ignorance, and then we have to . . . to. It’s my duty to do it, that’s all.”

She looked up fiercely.

“But it’s my duty to turn you in, too, and I’m going to—and don’t think I’m not. Now this time I really won’t stop. It’s ten minutes.”

She looked at her watch.

“Go,” she said, almost as if starting a childhood race.

He slipped from the car and walked along the pavement. At the corner, he halted. Then he came back.

“Nine minutes and twenty seconds,” she said. “Please go!”

“I know,” he said. “I just want to tell you. This car—it’s the garageman’s delight. They make fortunes on that carbureter. It’s the bug in the design—a spot of dust can put it blooey.”

“Nine minutes and five seconds.”

“Garagemen know it—hail it with delight. I’ll bet you’ve had the same trouble a dozen times—and paid five bob every time. All you do . . .”

“Eight minutes and fifty seconds.”

“. . . is get to a slope when it begins to cough, let it roll, and put in an opposite gear. That is, if you’re rolling back, put it in forward. If you’re rolling forward, put it in reverse. That blows the carbureter out, see?”

“Eight minutes and thirty seconds.”

“Do you understand?”

“Eight minutes and twenty-five seconds. Yes. I’ve heard what you said and thank you.”

“Best way to do, is get a breather—an air purifier—and have it attached. You can get one cheap.”

“Eight minutes and fifteen seconds. Thank you.”

“That’s for fixing my head—my duty, too, you know. Good-by.”

“Eight minutes and ten seconds. Good-by.”

He went quickly away. Then he returned.

“Oh, this is important,” he said. “Don’t forget to have the ignition off when you’re blowing the carbureter out. Otherwise, you could have a nice little fire under the bonnet, spraying all that atomized petrol around in the air. Do you hear?”

“Seven minutes and thirty seconds. Yes, thank you.”

She was still staring, intently, at her watch, her lips set firmly. As he went away he heard her saying:

“Seven minutes and ten seconds.”

He went round the corner to the public square. At one side a knot of busses eddied toward the pavement. He ran over quickly, and caught one that was moving away.

He could still feel the girl counting. He put his hand to his ear, and felt the bandage. She would have to report that, too, of course. Duty!

He pulled it off, quickly, feeling the throb in his head as the gummed tape tugged at the skin.

He came into reluctant wakening, tasting his mouth and feeling the warmth of his face on one side where it had lain on his hands.

He saw the mug of beer before him, still untasted, and then remembered coming into the pub. The man behind him shook his shoulder again.

“Come on. Closing time!”

He felt the man’s tone—the brusque one that publicans used to drunks and vagrants—people who fell asleep in pubs.

He walked sleepily from the place, and went into the blackness. A long time afterwards he found himself echoing the tone the man’s voice had held, and repeating, like a nursery rote: “Come on. Closing time.”

He was going along a paved highway. Now his mind was reiterating a foolish song—one that a lad had sung at the billets in France before it all started:

> Don’t send my boy to Eton!
> Please send him down to Limehouse instead.
> Before I’d see him sigh about the old school tie,
> I’d sooner see the little blighter dead . . .

He walked along briskly, he thought, to the unsung tune. But next he found himself sitting on the edge of the roadside ditch. He lay down and went to sleep.

With no halt in time he was awake again, hearing a noise that he knew he had heard many times in half-waking. It was broad daylight and the sun was high. He lay, eyes open, until the noise came again: the sound of a motorcar racing past within a few feet of his head—a whooshing of torn air and the thrum of the motor droning away. Going past: Hhhhhhwoowhh!

He thought: Curious none of them saw me.

Then he remembered how the speed of a car strangely disengaged its driver from the world he was moving through.

He got up and continued walking, steadily.

When he saw the cross in the market place he realized that he had desired to reach this place. He was glad somehow that his long voyaging of the afternoon had not really been aimless.

So he smiled with rare satisfaction, and with a sense of pleasant memory went past shops, a hotel, more shops, the war memorial, then out along the lane to a churchyard wall.

He sat on the wall, staring at the gravestones quite contentedly until dusk. He wanted nothing, desired to do nothing.

His mind was roused from this curious blank contentedness only when he saw the minister coming from the church to the rectory. Clive watched him, thinking the white surplice, blowing gently, made him look like a moth in the dusk. Then he saw the man was looking at him, inquiringly.

"Oh, I'm not a parachute trooper—or a German disguised as anything—you can search me for weapons if you wish."

Clive heard his words and mentally played the record of them back to himself in a sort of astonishment.

He was protesting too much. He should have said something else. The man had stopped. Clive looked at him and smiled.

"The trouble is," Clive said, "that you look too much the part."

That did not seem clear, either.

"What I mean is—too much like the ones who play the roles in the cinema—character parts."

He thought that did make sense, for it was so true. There was the complete makeup: the delicately silvered hair, the calm eyes, the inner peace that had been there for years and so had molded the face into tranquillity.

But the man was startled. He hadn't said the right thing again. He must concentrate—like a drunken motorist stopped by a constable.

"Can I do anything for you?" the minister said.

Ah, Christianity! The helping hand!

Clive got down from the wall.

"No," he said, coldly. "You can't help any of us."

His eye saw the dim words on the gravestone. He read aloud:

"Here rests with God Aram Fletcher of the Parish of Wythe. B. 1742. D. 1821."

He looked up.

"Now he lived through Napoleon," he went on. "He must have gone through just the same . . ."

The thought trickled away and he followed another.

"It's funny," he said. "All over they've pulled down thousands of signposts—for safety. Just think—thousands of parachuters dropping from the sky and, being a very methodical race, marching to the first signpost—and it isn't there. So they'll be baffled. They'll stop and say: 'We're lost! Heil Hitler! We can go no further!'

"Because you don't think the Hun'd sink so low as to read these gravestones and know he was in Wythe. If so—out with the gravestones——"

He saw the pain on the man's face.

"Oh, now," he said. "I didn't mean destroy them. Don't destroy old England. Our new England—yes! Let that be destroyed. Let us destroy all hope of a new England! But don't risk the hallowed ivy on the crumbling Basingstoke walls. Stain not the old school tie. Because . . ."

He looked at the church, rapidly becoming a silhouette in the twilight.

"It's beautiful—Norman, isn't it?" he said. "Truly old."

"Yes, truly old," the minister said, slowly.

Clive leaned on the wall with his arms folded. He was conscious of a trance-like weariness. It had really passed beyond weariness, so that he felt as if he were living in some fourth dimension where time was a shining fog that enveloped him and held him prisoner. It seemed that he had always been here beside this churchyard, and that he always would be here, and that it was the most inevitable thing in the world that he should be talking with preternatural awareness to this unknown man in clerical robes.

"You know," Clive said, "they must have believed in those days. Really and truly believed—to make yielding flesh shape stubborn stone—and nice words I'm using about it, too—putting one piece on another so that this should endure when they were gone, to remind us that faith lives longer than mortal body."

"A moment ago you were willing to see such things destroyed."

"I am," Clive said, angrily. "I am. You will mourn about them and cry out to the world about them when they are being destroyed—more than you will about humans being destroyed. What arrogance there is in that! What arrogance to talk as if what the spirit of the British people has once created, it cannot create again. It is the spirit that put the stones there, not the stones themselves, that matter."

"You think then, that your new England could build such a church?"

"No, you're right," Clive said. "We'd build bigger ones—but because someone believes in the profit that will come at the end. The old chaps—they had faith."

"But one moment you try to tell me the same spirit is here today, and the next you say that the spirit isn't here."

"That's right," Clive said. "I am talking in circles, aren't I? No one has faith today. No one. Not that kind of faith."

"Perhaps you speak only for yourself, my boy."

"How nicely you reprove me. You're a nice chap. You're not a pipe-smoking parson, nor a horsy one, nor a backslapper, nor a Holy Joe—have you seen the kind that say damn and slap you on the back to show you they're almost as human as you are? Don't you want to convert me?"

“I only feel rather sorry for you, my boy. For your rudeness, and—no, that is a little thing. I’m sorry for anyone who hasn’t the comfort of faith—and the peace of belief in prayer.”

“Oh, but I have. I have found peace in prayer.”

He laughed, quickly.

“Don’t let anyone kid you, padre. When you’re in a jam you pray—even chaps like me. By God, I prayed. At Douai I prayed to God and Jesus and Lenin and Buddha and the Pope and the Virgin Mary—everyone. I was a bit too tired to pray later on. But when I could pray, I didn’t miss any of ’em—it’s no use taking chances when it doesn’t cost any more, is it?”

The minister turned away, and then stopped, and looked back, quickly.

“You were in France?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was going to get round to the pleasure of deciding that when I had a free moment. I couldn’t decide whether it was sentiment or sentimentality—or even instinct. Once—one sun-glad afternoon—I sat on this wall with a girl. We wanted to—well, you know. We had nowhere to go. We went to the hotel down there, but they wouldn’t take us. So—we got on the bus and went home again. She was—very beautiful.”

“But you were in France?”

“Oh, yes, truly. Very truly I was. Does that make a difference? It makes me—one of our boys, doesn’t it? You should ask me in to tea. That’s what’s supposed to happen. Go on—ask me in to tea.”

“You’re—not in uniform.”

“No. I’m not. You see—I’m a deserter.”

The minister looked at the ground.

“Now you should ask me in to tea,” Clive said. “It’s the thing—almost like ‘so that the scriptures might be fulfilled.’ ”

The minister frowned, and motioned with his hand.

“Please don’t walk on the graves.”

“We shall soon trample on the dying, but we shall always keep off the dead. Isn’t it easy to talk this way? It’s perhaps the religious influence.”

He felt himself swallowed in a pit of sickness, and he walked, conserving his strength. He followed through doors, to a room with a fire burning. He sat in a chair before it, feeling the warmth drugging him. He did not know when he went to sleep. He only remembered waking. The minister had changed from his robes. He looked much older and frailer in his dark-gray suit. A woman was placing a tray on the table. Then she was gone.

“You should be a bishop, at least,” Clive said.

“I’ve had some ham sandwiches made. Sit here.”

Clive turned his chair toward the tray on the low bench.

“My name is Polkingthorne,” the minister said, soberly.

“And mine’s Halliburton—Richard Halliburton—alias Clive Hanley, alias Clive Briggs a famous explorer. Deserters always use aliases.”

“Sugar?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just as long as it’s something warm. It’s funny being famished and very tired. Makes you feel religious.”

“It isn’t necessary to talk like that.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve talked too much lately. Far, far too much. I wouldn’t talk at all like this if I weren’t tired. It puts you in a floating sort of space and the tongue wags—but you think you’re seeing with great clarity. Perhaps I am—perhaps I only imagine it—as a drunk often imagines he’s exceedingly witty. I see now why the saints fasted—you get into an ecstasy and—I might pop off a revelation any moment.”

The minister handed the tea.

“Your tongue must have been your worst enemy all your life,” he said. “It’s a knotted whip flagellating your own back.”

“No, I’ve been a pretty quiet chap. It’s just recently that I’ve started vomiting so many words. It’s getting to be a habit. I wouldn’t gabble now except—you know—the tiredness. Makes me most un-British, doesn’t it?”

“You might eat instead of talking.”

Clive ate, silently, and then felt suddenly too full.

“I can’t—eat any more,” he said.

“Rest a moment, and then try again.”

“No. It’s all right. I’m sorry I was so glib and petty. I should go.”

“Where?”

“Oh—just along. There’s nowhere—I can’t stay here. Or—I could. I come in and cry sanctuary. Isn’t that it? Sanctuary! Then you have to bar the door and no one can take me away.”

“There is a sanctuary in the church—not a physical one any more. A greater one. A spiritual one.”

“I should have expected that. I asked for it, didn’t I? And you have to try to save me.”

“A person must save himself.”

“True, padre, true! Now we’re together. We’re all looking for some way of saving ourselves—and we’ve nothing to believe in any more. Once people did believe—but not any more. Because you’ve failed. Your church has failed. Once the church flamed into the blazing hopes of almost every man alive—now, not one person in twenty has any hope in religion or any hope for religion.

“You’ve failed. You failed in the last war. You played politics so that your God was on both sides—and if the Germans lost, then why groan because they believe in God no more and have created a new thing to worship? God didn’t save them, no matter how they believed.”

“Perhaps our cause was right, then.”

“Yes, but they believed, and their ministers were telling them your same God said they were right. It’s politics. The same politics the church played when you put our own King off his throne. Windsor—the man who might have helped us now. And you’re failing now—in this war. Your church and your God won’t stop bloodshed—nor women and children dying. It won’t halt greed nor avarice nor ruthlessness. It won’t give any guarantees . . .”

“We guarantee nothing. A guaranteed result needs no faith. Faith is believing—when there seems nothing else left to believe in but the faith that inspires you.”

“That’s true—but it’s too late for that faith now—for your church. You’ve blessed too many wars in the name of justice for both sides.”

He got up and looked about the room. He saw his crumpled felt hat on a chair by the door. He took it.

“I should go. Thanks for being patient. And keep your fine old church meaningless and empty while all the vermin . . .”

He stood, transfixed, for a passing of seconds, and then went on:

“. . . now infesting the wounds of the old, diseased lion slowly eat him to death.”

“The lion isn’t dead yet, my boy. It’s alone—but not dead. And come the four corners of the earth and we shall shock them.”

“It’s three corners, padre. Quote correctly—and then finish it. Finish it. If England to herself—do—rest—but—true!

“Do rest but true! There’s the rub. England has been true to some things—but she hasn’t been true to the people who are herself. Well, good-by and thank you. It’s been a very enlightening conversation. I—you’ll report me?”

“That is for my own conscience.”

“Don’t let your conscience work too quickly, padre. A nurse, the other morning, gave me ten minutes’ grace. The church can hardly do less than the laity.”

“You know, you’re sick, my boy. Is there anything . . .”

“Just a bit light-headed, padre, that’s all. I don’t need anything. Is it all right for me to go?”

“Yes. I—may I pray for you?”

“Why not? If it makes you happy, please do. I would if—if it seemed sensible. Well . . .”

“Wait. Before you go. You’re an intelligent young man . . .”

“Thank you.”

“You’ve said things that make me very angry—if I were younger—years ago . . .”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, that doesn’t matter. But I want to make you understand one thing. I don’t see you as a person, but rather as a symbol of your age. You’re a product of the age of reason—not the age of faith. This church, long ago, was built in an age of faith. Since then we entered the age of intellectual process, which will have faith in nothing beyond the limits of reasoning.

“Because you have no intellectual belief in a hereafter, you deny yourself the lifelong comfort of faith in the soul’s immortality. So your age of reason and intellect and science has brought war—misery, bestiality, bloodshed, hunger, needless cruelty. Then you, of the age of reason, dare to blame us, who still believe in the age of faith.”

Clive passed his hand over his face.

“You’re mixing me up—and I’m tired,” he said. “Do you mean that you’d have us have faith in a thing when our reason tells us we can’t believe in it? Faith in the soul and the hereafter we don’t believe exists?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe in the soul and the hereafter—heaven, hell, God’s throne?”

“No. I do not believe intellectually in them, and yet I have faith in them. Any fool can have faith in what reason tells him is certain. Faith is the quality of believing beyond reason.

“Remember that—and when the world has faith again—so many troubles will vanish and problems be solved. Communism, Fascism, these are mere intellectual conclusions. But conclusions of faith will solve what these cannot. That’s all you are looking for now. You’re looking for something—something—in which to have faith. You’re trying to find it by intellectual processes—and that’s what the world is doing. And it’s finding nothing—nothing in which to pin its hopes—nothing to move forward to gloriously.

“Don’t think, my boy. Feel! Consult your feelings, not your reasonings. If you do—your problem will be over. You’ll—you’ll go back to your regiment or post or whatever it is in the army.”

“Oh, no, I won’t.”

“You will—because of a feeling—something that’s beyond cold reasoning. It’s the thing that is the essence of what we call—patriotism.”

“No, padre, you don’t understand, do you? Don’t you see that won’t move me? Patriotism—that isn’t enough.”

The words hung in the room, and then Clive shifted.

“Sorry,” he said, as if he had committed a social error.

He shook his head.

“Funny—Edith Cavell said that, didn’t she. Patriotism—isn’t enough. I thought it was just a sort of slogan—I never understood what she meant until now. I must be growing up.”

He moved his feet.

“You’ve been nice, padre,” he said, “and so—I’ll try to repay you. I’ll give you something—something rare. Truth! A common man’s truth that is precious, for it may bring you understanding of us.

“You say I am looking for something in which to have faith. It is true. I and millions like me. And now ask yourself why it is that we scorn to look for a focus of that faith in your church.

“Because your church has shown not the least understanding of the horrible morass in which we common men wade. So your churches are empty, and yet we go in our

millions to cinema houses, theaters, football matches. Why? Because by my eternal soul those things, warped and poor as they are, are nearer to God and the common man's need for him than your church, with its timid fears.

"Your church has lived in terror for generations. Terror. All the multiple and beautiful teachings of Christ you have thrown away, because you know they would offend the rich and privileged whom you love and fawn upon. To cover the lack you have put into the church of Christ the jewel-laden trappings and pomp he never knew and could never love. And of all the sins Christ catalogued, you have found only one that does not repel the rich, because it is universal and has nothing to do with their being rich—sexual sin! And so you have made sex itself a sin. The original sin of Adam. Christ born without sin! The only sin you dare preach about in your terror!

"You have preached it until the mystery and glory of procreation—the most inexplicable and so perhaps the most holy of all human deeds—has become soiled with dirt, and the children you instruct learn to whisper of it as smut.

"You have made into your one emphasized sin what millions of normal humans know within their hearts is a God-hallowed joy and the core of life and home and family. The only sin you preach! And then you wonder why the millions desert your church and worship at the truer temple of a poor love film at the cinema. The millions desert you and your warped teachings, until your churches echo only to the footsteps of the sexless—the thwarted maidenly women, the widows; until your churches are notorious to the common man as the gathering centers of willowy young men devoid of natural sex instincts.

"And all because you dare not teach Christ lest you offend the rich, the selfish, the batteners on privilege.

"Ah, padre, if no one shall ever give you the priceless gift of common man's truth again, it is here now; and I say only openly that which common men say among themselves in crueler words all over this land.

"Padre, a few days ago I lived in what you would call a state of sin. But before the Lord who made us, I believe I was then nearer to God than the teachings of your church.

"And your church shall not be as near to God as I was until it ceases to ignore the teachings of Christ that are not to its purpose, until it ceases to batten on corruption and dirt and poverty, until it refuses to say that 'give all that thou hast to the poor' was all right twenty centuries ago, but doesn't mean anything today.

"Give to the poor? You batten on the poor! In my town, where I was born, the most notorious acres of corroding slums and poverty-ridden homes are owned by the church and operated by the church. The very under-soil rights where the miners muck for miserable wage are owned by the church.

"Not a single pitiful basket of coal goes from the productive shovel of a sweating man to a poor hearth there without the hand of the church reaching in to draw its tax on the coal, and then get its other piece of silver for use of the very grate it is burned in.

"Give them up! Follow Christ once more! Have done with your ridiculous version of sin, with your pomp and liturgy! Rise up from your sheer terror of the privileged!

Come back into our lives as we live them today, fear them today, fight through them today.

"For if you did those things you would not need to ask us to come back to your church. We did not leave you. You left us. It may not be too late. We are waiting, nearly forty millions of us in this land, for you to give the church back to us!"

He put his hand against the wall and turned his head, feeling suddenly sick.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Sorry I had to talk to you like that."

He stumbled away, but heard the man call. So he halted by the door without turning round. He heard the minister speaking.

"God go with you. I—I shall pray for you."

"Yes," he answered, without looking back into the room. "Pray for me. Pray for yourself, too. Why not take in a little more ground while you're at it. Pray for England—all poor, bloody England. No—pray for humanity. For every last poor devil who's going to blow somebody up—or be blown up himself; or who's going to be torn or wounded or drowned or buried or burned or gassed when we really get this war going. Pray for poor, stinking, lost humanity."

He went out quickly into the close, feeling the burn of his own anger and shame for having talked like an orator. He saw the twilight had faded, and the bats were flying, diving toward the portal light, making their screaky sounds as they plunged and rose.

The grass smelled newly fresh and the dew was heavy.

He hated himself for having gone into the rectory—for his tiredness and smart-aleckry, and final honesty, and his very anger at these things.

He turned down the road toward the south, going through the town and out along the highroad.

At dawn he was looking into a cup of earth. Down in the cup lay the village. Within himself he found satisfaction, some sort of completion, because he had come here.

He sat on a fence, and watched the melodrama of sun-flecked clouds turn to the sanity of daylight. He heard the birds quiet down from their always-new excitement over the daily wonder of the returning sun.

Down in the village the smoke of hearth fires rose newly from chimneys—one cottage, then another. The smoke edged along in the depression, joining into a bank until it lay like a mist.

He waited until people stirred out of doors. Then he went down the road. Once he started, for he saw a uniform. Then he laughed at his own fear. It was the postman, beginning his day's work of routine rounds.

He knocked at the cottage door, and heard feet moving. The door opened, and he was lost in the magic of this simple happening. Then he looked up.

"Hello, Mrs. Telson," he said, casually. He looked at the fresh-brushed shine of her coppery hair.

He was unprepared for her reaction. She caught him by the arm, pulled him in, quickly, and shut the door. He sat in a chair, and then saw she was before him,

smoothing her hands on her apron.

"What is it?" she said, quickly. "What's the matter?"

He looked up at her face—like Joe's only smaller and as if the skin were dryer and finer.

"Nothing," he said. "I was just passing—and I wondered if Joe were home."

"No," she said. "He's joined up—on the mine sweeper. You know that. There's nothing wrong with Joe?"

The last words jerked out, without evenness of flow.

"No, no," he said, noting her fear. "I've not even heard from him. I was just passing—and I thought I'd—drop in and say hello."

She did not answer, and he saw her hands moving on her apron and knew she was in some indecision. He looked up and smiled.

"Mr. Briggs," she said. "Y' look awful done in. What's been happening?"

"Nothing," he said, angrily. "Nothing. My name's not Briggs. It's Hanley."

Her voice sounded perplexed.

"All right. It's Hanley. Would y'like—a cup o' tea?"

"Yes," he said. "I would."

He heard her saying:

"I was just making myself a bit of breakfast. You know, there's no reason to making breakfast proper when Joe's not home. For myself."

Then he was stirring, waking, feeling the hot warmth of a knitted quilt against his face. He sat up on the sofa. The miracle of time-elapsed had happened again. The day was almost gone. The cottage was dim, and there was only the too-loud ticking of a clock.

He got up and found his shoes and put them on. He stirred the fire and sat waiting.

Mrs. Telson came back, her ribald velvet hat sitting pathetically on the neatness of her ginger hair.

"Ah," she said. "I just popped out to do a bit o' shopping."

"I fell asleep."

"Yes. I put you on the sofa and took your shoes off."

"You put me there!"

"Oh, y' walked but you were like the very dead."

She seemed to like the phrase.

"Like the very dead," she repeated. "I suppose you could stand a little something to eat."

"Yes," he said. "I'm very hungry."

His head felt clear again, and his thoughts came in orderly manner. He watched her move about the place, setting the food on plates—a little sliced boiled ham, a few disks of sliced polony. She moved the kettle over, put tea in the pot, cut bread. Then she made the tea, the brave-angled spout of the kettle jutting the water into the pot in a firm curve.

They ate, not speaking, except as she passed the plates to him.

When the meal was over, he sat, fumbling for a cigarette.

"I'll—just drop out for some Players," he said.

He found his hat on the nail behind the door. With his hand on the sneck he turned.

"I'll be running along," he said. "Thanks—and—could I pay you?"

She pushed her hand as if brushing away a fly.

"I couldn't think of it," she said. "Joe would be that put out. Could I tell Joe—where you're going?"

"Oh, I'm—just going along," he said.

"If you want to stay, you're welcome. The room's there."

He thought: If I am caught, it wouldn't be good for her. And money's low. As long as the money lasts, I'm all right. I can get along. But after that—when you haven't money you're beaten.

"Thank you, no," he said. "I've got to be getting along. But thank you for tea."

He went out to the street, and turned without hesitation along the lane. He went over the bridge, along the metaled road. The darkness shaped itself round him.

When he reached the overhanging beech tree, he looked at it as if in surprise. Then he laughed at a sudden recognition.

So that's where you've been coming for the last three days, he said mentally. Here—this place. This is where you've been heading.

He felt light-headed again. But he nodded his head in appreciation, almost, of his own astuteness in working to such a goal. He went to the wall, and sat there. At first, there was just satisfaction in being there. Then his mind moved forward.

He had come—to meet Prue. But it would only mess things up—make trouble for her as well as for him—destroy her peace of mind. And—and if he saw her, he should have something settled in his mind.

But it's settled, he said to himself. You're not going back—that's settled. There's no change.

Then there's no reason to see her.

He sat there in the night, until the thought came of his own patience in thus waiting through such lengths of time.

You've developed a new sort of patience in the last few days, he said. How many days—what day is it? I must look it up.

He listened to voices. Girls were coming down from the camp toward the village.

Quickly, in a moment, he made a compact with himself. If he heard Prue's voice, he would speak. If he didn't—then the comfort of having been here was all that he would allow himself.

Lost in the shadow, he heard the unseen girls go past. His longing for Prudence swept him so that he felt it in the pit of his stomach. He said: If I hear Violet—then that is a sign I should ask her to tell Prue I am here. No—you made a compact with God about Prue. If she comes herself, you can speak to her. Violet isn't in it. You didn't say anything to God about Violet, and now you're ringing her in.

He decided two things simultaneously. That you couldn't make a compact with God if you didn't believe in Him. But you had to keep a compact you made with anyone, even if you didn't believe he existed.

He heard the girls going past. A fit of coughing swept him, but he muffled it. Perhaps they had not heard. He didn't want to frighten them.

He thought of when Prue stood beside him here—how the sweet smell of her hair came up in the darkness. He tried to remember the smell, but he couldn't recall it. One could say a smell existed, but you couldn't recreate it as you could a visual image, or a tune.

He recalled a tune—the flashing of it. There was a visual image, too. The face of a Prue, embarrassed, yet sticking to it, that night in the pub. Her cheeks half flushed and her head tilted down as she sang:

> Thou wilt still be adored, as this moment thou art,
> Let thy loveliness fade as it will . . .

Ah, nice to remember Prue like that—and now—and now—he was hungry for the sight of her. That was why he had come afoot these miles—coming here almost subconsciously and instinctively. He hadn't known the way here but he'd got here. To see her—to let his eyes be glad and happy again—only—he couldn't. He had to decide something first—something . . .

He touched the stone of the wall with his palm, stroking it.

Somewhere, to the right of where he sat, not more than a quarter of a mile away, Prue was existing, living, breathing. Now—at this moment—what? Lying down? Reading? Undressing coldly in the barracks hut—coldly, among women? The limbs that were warm and that he now knew so well, the shape of her good shoulders narrowing down to the waist—such good shoulders for a woman.

He caught his breath at the thought. She—she . . .

He got down from the wall.

It's no use thinking, he said to himself. It's no use playing mental games. It's no use pulling her into it.

He walked long the road in the dark, and then, without pause, within a few feet, he felt rather than saw the blinding flash of a torch. Even as he blinked, his mind worked with what he thought an almost instantaneous quality. It would be the policeman pushing his bicycle up the road. He made his rounds, especially to see that none of the girls was molested—none, that is, who did not wish to be . . .

"Good evening, constable," he said. "It's just me—from the village."

As he spoke his eyes saw, in the light reflected from himself, the bicycle. Then he knew he had been right. It was the constable.

He walked on, almost without having paused. As he went he listened. The constable was not moving. There was no sound of footsteps. The light was switched off.

One part of his mind thought:

How careless. How lax! Suppose I were a spy. Letting me go like that.

But it was only the careless way in which he had walked past that had freed him from questioning. The man would be puzzled. In a few seconds he would see that he had been circumvented. He would come back—ask for papers—and then . . .

Clive crossed the road. He felt the ivy-covering of a tall wall. He ran along it to the iron gate of a villa, and turned inside. As he did so, he looked back. The faint beam of the man's torch showed. The man was coming back. Pulling himself back behind the wall he saw the flash of light. The constable was throwing the torch beam right and left as he rode.

There was the quiet *whtt* of tires. Now the man would go back to the village. He'd be back in ten minutes with the L.V.D.'s and half the pub crawlers in the place.

He came out from behind the wall and ran back along the road. He found a side lane between hedges and turned left. He wondered at his certainty in feeling. Then he thought:

I am doing this instinctively, like an animal. They will be certain I'll move away from the village as fast as I can. Instead I am circling, going round it and then going south. How clever of me to do that without reasoning it out first.

He struck a crossroad going west. He turned along it, trotting slowly. If he went too fast his ears began to sing. He found another main road, going south. He turned left again. The roadbed was hard. He trotted and shuffled and walked and trotted, keeping alert for the sound of a motorcar. It was a good car road. If a car came, he must get into the ditch.

But people had stopped driving cars at night since the blackout—unless they had to travel. That made it easier.

He felt sure that he was clear now. He even began to doubt that there'd been any chase started at all. But for some reason, he could not slow down to a walk. He trotted and shuffled, and kept changing from one to the other, until his whole being lost itself in the ache and beautiful ecstasy of covering ground.

That night he slept, dry and comfortable, under a road bridge over a canal. The towpath was a mixture of sand and long-dried horse dung; but it was dry and comfortable. He woke with the dawn, and lay there for more than an hour. Then he washed his hands and face in the canal, lying belly-flat on the path and leaning down to scoop up water. He saw carp in the slow-moving water, and dribbled splashes from his finger tips to see if they would rise. But they lay about two feet below the surface, moving their fins, backing up in the water, sinking slowly at rest and then fanning the fins again so that they rose a few inches once more.

Suddenly he saw clearly a scene from childhood—a man with distorted face snatching a jam jar from his hand and crashing it to the roadbed on a bridge while he shook with childish rage and impotence. The splotch of water in stony dust—the fish, flip-flopping, dying. Frantic—to save the fish! But nothing else to put him in.

He got up, shaking the water from his hands, feeling much refreshed.

Poor drunk, he thought. I remember it keenly because that was one of the first wantonly cruel things a grown-up ever did to me.

Doesn't that say something? Among ignorance, want, poverty, hard living, you never had a man carelessly cruel to you until you were about seven!

The men were rough, and brutalized, and hard-drinking, and worn into callousness; but they were soft and tried to be gentle to the neighborhood children, even when they were roaring drunk Saturday nights.

Clive mopped his face with his soiled handkerchief, feeling the uncomfortable rubble on his face.

"Poor blighter," he said. "If he remembered it, later he'd squirm inside himself. But he wouldn't remember. He'd have to be so drunk to do it, he wouldn't remember afterwards. Poor bleeder, wandering drunk on a Sunday. Poor bleeder."

He started away, following the towpath until, by a lock, a worn footway branched across a field. He turned along it, took the main road, going with the sun at his left. When the sun was highest and his shadow behind him, he swung from the road to the open downs, going through the tough grass steadily, wearily, but with a certain great satisfaction.

He came out of the darkness into Mine Host's, and felt that at last he had reached safety. Like a game of childhood—moving colored dibs on a board. One square was the same as another, except that when you were on some you weren't safe, and then you hit a certain one—then you were safe. What the devil was that inane game? You threw dice. Ludo—that was it. Ludo!

Mine Host was saying greeting, staring at him.

"I've been taking a tramp," Clive said, yet knowing the words were not enough excuse, "I'll have—a mild and bitter—and have you any of the veal and ham pie?"

"Well, I just have some, sir," the man said, as if conferring a favor on an old friend.

"Bring me—a big piece. A very big piece."

But when it came he could not eat it all. He was again irritated and surprised that he, in his hunger, could eat no more. Yet he felt full, his stomach distended, after a few bites.

He sipped the ale, and felt very happy at the table. He heard the men in the taproom, and heard their arguments—about the obstacles put on the flatlands about to upset any plane that attempted to land.

He smiled to himself, feeling, but not forming the thought: Ah, but if you only knew what I know. I know something, and you don't. I have a secret.

Wrapped in this curious complacency, he sat until closing time. When he heard the voice calling time in the bar, he went to the dark street. He still felt curiously satisfied. His limbs were beyond tiredness, and his mind seemed to work with a pleasing smoothness.

There was little sensation of his own walking. His own movement through the blackness felt only as if he were going effortlessly through a sort of liquid velvet that opened and closed behind him in agreement with a secret understanding between nature and himself. No one else knew this secret. It was very pleasing to have it.

He was near the hotel when he became aware that he could not go there.

“They might ask you for papers now,” he said. “Before, you had a leave pass and they didn’t ask. Now you don’t have it, they will. It is nature. When one door opens another door closes. All except the Germans. They fooled nature and the British by refusing the gambit of the Schlieffen Plan twice in a row.

“Who the hell are you—a general? A fat lot you know about it. Think about your childhood fish in a jam jar. What had it to do with your manhood? What psychical effect did it have? What, psychoanalytically, did it mean that you should remember them this, yesterday, tomorrow morning?”

He went upward, along the cliff path. When he came to the place where he and Prue had lain during the air raid, he sat down.

“You have walked a long way to get here,” he said. “Tomorrow—tomorrow . . . There is nowhere else to go tomorrow. This is the end. You have got here. There is nowhere to go afterwards.”

This seemed like quite satisfactory and pleasing reasoning. He nodded his head at it.

“But—tomorrow—what are you going to do?” he said. “Reason it out now. Now that you’re thinking clearly. Decide on your next move.”

Then suddenly, blazingly, triumphantly, it all became very clear.

“Tomorrow you go and give yourself up!”

It was such a delightful idea that he laughed inside himself. Truth was, he thought, a very simple thing—not complex or chaotic.

“You’re not running away because you are a coward,” he said. “But that, you can’t prove to anyone else. All your reasons for going back and not going back cancel out. Therefore it’s a draw. Maybe the minister was right about reason versus faith.

“The age of reason in you says you don’t want to fight in such a warped and ill-defined war. The age of faith in you says you must fight so that Britain won’t lose. Brain and emotion, deadlocked in a struggle—your body the battle ground.

“See how simple and clear it is? You can’t go on running any more—you’re too tired, exhausted. So you give yourself up, present your mental and emotional opponents to headquarters, and throw the whole mess in their laps. They’ll have to decide.”

He smiled secretly again. It was such a good joke—putting the whole mess up to them. Let them have the worry.

“Look here, this chap has two opposing selves that cancel out. What can we do with him?”

Nothing in Army Regulations, nothing in the King’s Rules and Orders, no precedent.

“Well, if he cancels out, the chap isn’t there. He’s dead. Send the matter to the Graves Registration Department.”

“But it’s G.R.D. that’s sent it to us.”

“Oh, then report him missing in action.”

He smiled and fell asleep, happy in the simplicity of it all.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE dawn broke splendidly and Clive came down beside new barbed-wire defenses on the cliff into the town and went to the hotel.

Feeling as if he were watching a cinema that suddenly flashed to the part in the middle where one had come in, he watched the assistant manager take his bag from behind the desk. He stared at his watch. It was too early for the London train.

He went to the lounge where he had sat the first day, and tapped the bell. He ordered a brandy, drank it. He went to sleep in the deep chair, thinking: God please send me a sign.

He woke again, first fearing he had slept too long and then knowing the cause of his wakening. Someone was talking:

"My God, why don't they stop it! The idiots! It's medieval—this slaughter. They'll bomb our cities . . ."

He leaned round the back of the chair and the intense, half-whispering voice stopped. The man looked at him. He was chunky, the flesh of his face ready to sag into jowls. He was talking to a slim young man who sat, nodding agreement. The fat one turned to his glass, drank deeply, and belched.

Clive got up.

"Thank you, God," he said in his thoughts. "That isn't a very first-class sign! But it points the way. If those two are on one side of the question, I want to be on the other. Which means I'm on the right path."

It seemed sound and satisfactory reasoning.

He picked up his bag and walked to the station. He had slept too long in the lounge, and the station clock accused him of it.

He went to the ticket window, and said:

"What time's the next London train?"

"From or to?"

The voice made him conscious of the man—the voice of a person who loves to talk, to quibble.

"To."

"In about—five and twenty minutes, sir. Six and twenty, nearer."

"Thanks. Where's the lavatory?"

"Over there."

Clive went into the place, which smelled as only such places smell. He peeled off his coat, took his small kit from the handbag, and washed and shaved carefully. He felt much better and more capable after washing. Then he changed into his uniform. He stuffed the civilian clothes in the handbag, put his washing kit into his haversack and slung it over his shoulder.

"There. That part's finished," his mind said. "Now you've burned that bridge behind you."

He snapped the bag shut and went out to the grilled window.

"One for London," he said.

The man stared, recognizing him.

"Oh-er," he said. "Have to see yer pass."

Mechanically, now that he was in uniform again and in the garb of obeying, Clive took out his pay book and drew the pass from it. The man studied it. He shook his head. Clive prompted him.

"Yes, it's made out for Affield—that's in the North. But I came here instead."

The man shook his head ruefully, and then grinned.

"C.B. for you," he said.

"It doesn't matter."

"I know, but yer pass says you shouldn't be here. You should be in Affield."

Clive felt the petty and infinitely regulated life of the army closing down on him.

"Oh, what does it matter," he said. "Just give me the ticket to London."

"But I can't. Yer pass says you should be in Affield—and you ain't. And it says you should be back by now—and you ain't. How did you get here?"

Clive felt weary at this—the beginning of explanations.

"I've been on a walking tour. Look—when I don't want to go back, nobody interferes with me. When I do want to go back—immediately they want to stop me. Now will you sign on that pass the fact that you refuse to sell me a ticket?"

The man grinned, appreciatively.

"Not me, I won't, my lad. Just catch me. No, you'll have to take it over the R.T.O.'s office and have it stamped. Then I'll sell you one to Gollam—not to London."

"I have to go through London to get to Gollam—that's just north of London. They sent us up there when we came back."

The man held the pass.

"Oh, was y'in Frawnce?"

"Yes."

"Oh-er!"

The man cuddled the pass and leaned forward on his elbows.

"How was it, mate?"

"Bloody Christly."

"I bet."

He rubbed his smudged chin.

“Look here, mate,” he said. “I should turn you over the R.T.O., y’know—but—I’m an old soldier meself. I know what it’s like. Yer go on leave—and go on a bloody good rickety-rack—and there y’are—a few days overdue.”

“You’ll sell me the ticket, then?”

“I shouldn’t,” the man said. “But . . .”

He passed over the ticket and Clive handed him the last pound note. The man made change tentatively. He half held to it.

“You know,” he laughed, reminiscently, “one time—in ’18 it was—I overstayed me leave—near Christmas, it was. And I’d ha’ overstayed longer—but where could yer go?

“Go in the bloody Eagle Hut that they put up for the Yanks, and catch a nap in the chairs, and round midnight, in’d come the bloody M.P.’s and out the window we’d go, over the fence, and into the Aussie Y on the Kingsway. Get settled there. No more than close your eyes. In’d come the bloody M.P.’s again. Then out and back to the Eagle Hut. That way all night, like bloody rabbits, we were, running around.

“So I reported to the R.T.O. and went back—and all I got was reprimand. But I wouldn’t ha’ gone back so quick even then, except you couldn’t find no place to stay with an overdue pass, and they wouldn’t let you sleep, and you got so bloody tired, you had to go back to rest. Get tired of it, you do.”

“Yes,” Clive said. “It beats you. You don’t think you’ll give in, but you do. You can’t go on running forever.”

“That’s right. Now look, reely I should make you go to the R.T.O., but you know why I’m doing this?”

“Because you’re a decent chap.”

“No—no. It’s because you’re fighting troops. So help me, if you was bloody A.S.C., or some base-wallah bunch—I wouldn’t do it.”

“A.S.C. got it at Dunkirk like anyone else,” Clive said.

“Well, serve ’em bloody well right. All they did in the last bloody do was ride around and pinch the strawberry jam, and by the time it got to the P.B.I., what was there? Plum and apple! I’ve never ate another spoon o’ plum and apple since—that bloody sick of it I got. Artillery got melon, division got marmalade, Engineers copped black currant and raspberry, strawberry never got past the bloody A.S.C.—so it was plum and apple for us, the whole bloody war! Nobody gives a bugger about the poor bloody infantry. That’s why I sell you a ticket—’cause it’s time someone did a decent on the P.B.I.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Well—I’ll be off. Where can I get paper and envelope?”

“Ah, want to write your girl?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what I like to see. You write her, and get it off yer chest and go on back—you can’t get above a few days C.B. at most. Right down on the platform—at the news counter. The girl’ll sell you some.”

“Thanks. Look—there’s a good pigskin bag in the lavatory—got a good tweed suit in it. Pair of shoes, too. You can have the whole lot.”

He turned away abruptly, went to the stall on the platform and bought a cheap ruled pad and envelopes. He took pencil, and, sitting on a bench, began writing, quickly.

Dear Prue:

I couldn't write you until I had decided—had something to say. Now I have.

You were right in a way. I am going back. But only partially right. I'm going back to tell them what I told you—or as much of it as they'll listen to.

I don't do it as a martyr—wouldn't make a good martyr, I'm afraid. I do it, truly, because I can't go on being a hare to their hounds. I make a bad criminal. I loathe being chased and hate myself for hiding every time I see a uniform. It's a sort of unclean feeling.

But I haven't gone back on my convictions. One must have integrity. A man has a right to free thought only if he will pay the price of admitting his thought. If I daren't admit what I believe—then I have no right to believe it.

So we must all speak boldly, as clearly as we can in these days. If everyone who believes it's the new world of peace we've got to live for, and not the old world of war we've got to die for—would say it loud enough—I don't know what would happen. That doesn't matter. A man is a world unto himself—that's all. If there were no other man in the world to speak as I do, to believe as I do—if my speaking it means ostracism of others, or contempt of others—I still must speak my belief—or be unworthy to have it. Do I love my own dignity more than I should?

Good-by—and our coming from darkness into the light of knowing each other was very *very* sweet. What will happen to me in the great machine of the Army, I don't know. I don't care. I am tired. I want to say how decent you were—odd fragments of thoughts and memories—I wish I'd been more decent to you. Don't worry. I'll let you know what happens. Some day we'll be out of all this. And until that day I hope you are my friend, as I am

Yours,
Private 2265657
QODLI, I.T.D.,
B.E.F.

Crushing to ego to know that that collection of figures and letters means me—and me alone of all the people in the world. That's what man rebels about in all life—being letters and figures—a symbol.

Shall we meet again after this war's over? I hope so.

—Clive.

He addressed the envelope to the W.A.A.F. camp at Gosley, and gave the letter to the girl at the counter.

"You'll buy a stamp and post it?" he said. "You'll do that?"

"Oh, I will that!" she said.

He was listening to the intonation of her rising voice, lifting, clipped, in the southern way. He found a half-crown and gave it to her, leaving her staring at the coin.

Now everything was over. He had only to wait for the train.

CHAPTER XXXIV

It was on the train that he knew. He knew it with blinding clarity.

He had been asleep, and woke feeling that he was smiling in his contentment. Then he had let his mind play softly, as he lay back, with head nodding to the motion of the train, his eyes closed. His mind, at peace at last, played with memories.

The train motion brought back the memory of riding with Prue on the train. When she changed from the uniform, she said: "Please don't watch—or you can keep your eyes open if you want to—at least we've got luggage this time."

He smiled, fondly.

There was a braveness about her, a logic that was brave. After all, she had been plunging out into a frightening and unknown part of life. But she had wanted to come with him—that much was even. He'd said: "Will you come away with me?" They had been under the beech tree.

Under the beech tree, she'd said yes—without hesitation. No, she had been silent awhile and he'd said: "You don't want to." She'd said thus, he'd said so, she'd said: This and this and this and I forgot about the most important thing—saying it well and modestly—for it would be hard for a girl to express that to a man she hardly knew. That was the clearness of Prue—the sort of bravery—making things factual and unhidden.

"Don't be masculinely dense, please. I mean I won't be any good the end of next week."

How openly she'd put it where most women . . .

And then he knew.

He sat up, hearing the words as if it were an inner recording machine, and he had placed the needle back several grooves on the disk:

"What do you mean, it won't be any good?" (His voice. Now hers.) "Don't be masculinely dense, please. I mean, I won't be any good!"

He sat up, his eyes open, looking about the compartment as if he wanted to stop the train, to get off, to run backward into things happened and hold them still.

But she had been good! She had been . . .

Or probably she'd miscounted! Women did. Or used it as a defense . . .

He sat back again, and gave his mind orders to release the thoughts and move on. But it would not go on with its idle games of remembering.

Not Prue. She wasn't the kind—either to miscount or to use lying defenses. She'd say yes or no and to hell with it. But not go through life sloppily disremembering or

hiding femininely behind cheap excuses.

She'd gone back, knowing—no, no woman would do that.

Prue would! Prue would! Remembering, she'd expect you to remember!

He beat his fist on his knee. If only the train would hurry to London—to London—to London. If only the damned, crawling train would move. If only time would jump by without the human necessity of living it!

At London, he half-ran down the platform. He was almost at the ticket-taker's gate before he saw the M.P. and remembered then that part of his existence. He had forgotten about that. He turned about and walked against the crowd.

If he got arrested now—but he mustn't be arrested yet! Not until he talked to Prue.

He knew the platform would soon be empty and then the M.P. would see him, so he went back to his carriage and got inside. He opened the far window, dropped to the tracks, and walked up a deserted platform. Ahead, the gates were locked. By the tall iron fence was the back of a news counter. On each side the poster boards, wired to the palings, shut him off from view of those outside.

He turned into the corner by the stand, and then jumped away as he felt someone—a man in uniform. The voice spoke, quietly:

"Get in here. Don't give us away."

The voice was Canadian. He saw the man turn and gaze from between two of the poster boards out into the station.

"Bastards," the Canadian said. "Checking everyone."

He turned and smiled.

"How long you overdue, pal?"

"Getting on for a week."

"Hell, I'm two weeks out. But I've got ten pounds left yet, and I'll be goddamned if I'm going in till I've spent 'em."

The comradeship and open speech of the army and the uniform settled on Clive.

"I've got to telephone someone," he said. "I don't care if I get taken up, as long as I telephone first."

"Sure. Telephone your lawyer. Have him file a *habeas corpus*. Fat chance to get your body back, eh?"

"Perhaps they'll go soon—after the train's cleared."

"No, they lock the gates. Look—they collected three."

They looked through the chinks and saw the M.P.'s, smart in their uniforms, leading three soldiers away.

"Sons of bitches," the Canadian said. "Goddamn them—and goddamn William of Orange and Mary and . . ."

"Why William and Mary?"

Clive, cloistered in the dimness, felt dizzy, but also somehow amused by the voice, nervous and hard.

“They let the first Mutiny Law be passed. Before that a soldier stood at law just as a civilian. But the Scots Guards, I think, decided to go home in a body. They caught ’em up by Lincoln or somewhere. Then after that they put a Mutiny Law through Parliament. Later it became permanent. Didn’t you ever wonder why the minute you lift your hand and take the oath you’ve given away all your civil rights—you’ve no recourse to civil law even for your life?”

“Interesting,” Clive said.

“I was studying law,” the Canadian explained. “It’s goddamn interesting. Say, it looks clear now. What do you say if we try the fence? I’ll toss you who goes first. Wait—I’ve got a lucky half dollar.”

He spun a coin. “Heads, me—tails you.”

He lifted his hand.

“Crap,” he said. “Tails. All right, I’ll leg you up, then you give me a hand. Alley-oop!”

He crouched, cradling his hands expertly. Clive stepped into the locked hands.

“Hike!” the Canadian said.

Clive sprang, and felt himself lifted. He caught the top of the twelve-foot palings and looked out. No one in the station seemed to have seen him.

Then he looked down. Immediately below, an arm-banded soldier stood calmly, waiting. His mustache stood at a waxed and perfect angle.

“All right,” the M.P. said, as if to a child. “Come on down. Come on down.”

He said it coaxingly, singsongly, as drill sergeants did in their version of sarcasm.

For a second it was tableau, with no movement. Then Clive felt the Canadian below, pushing his feet.

“For Christ’s sake, take the lead out of it, brother.”

Clive kicked his feet free. He began to laugh. The spectacle was comic—the man below, unconscious of the situation, trying to push him over, the man on the other side, ordering him to come as if weight of authority would make him willingly jump into captivity. At last the Canadian looked up.

“What the hell?” he asked.

“M.P.,” Clive said.

Clive jumped back down inside.

At the movement the tableau broke. The M.P. ran for the gate. Without a word Clive and the Canadian broke away, raced down the platform, and went running over the maze of tracks.

Afterwards Clive wondered what became of the Canadian. Two uniformed men appeared suddenly from behind a sort of sentry-box hut, and Clive shouted:

“On your left, Canada!”

But the Canadian raced straight ahead, his body bent curiously, as if he were carrying something. He plunged at the men and Clive saw as in a flash picture the two tacklers being knocked apart and going over in a ridiculous sort of way. Then he himself turned left, and veered away, running disjointedly over the rails and the ties.

Suddenly he saw a handrail, where a bridge crossed a street. There was a stone buttress, and twenty feet below the city traffic flowed. He looked back. The mustached M.P. was racing along, calling:

"Halt, there! I order you to halt!"

The whole thing is ridiculous and undignified, Clive thought, angrily.

He squirmed, belly-flat, from the buttress, and hung a moment by his hands. He kicked himself away from the wall and dropped. The jar as he landed seemed to shake every bone. His teeth ached and his mouth tasted curiously metallic. As he got up, painfully, from the pavement, a man and two women half-paused, looking at him—not speaking nor quite stopping, but hesitating.

He half-lifted his hand to them, and then walked away quickly into the London crowd, not looking back.

At last the door was opening.

"Why, Mr. Hanley!"

"Hello, Mrs. Anderson. I was ringing Blackidge's bell. He isn't home?"

"Why now, you've just missed him. He's taking the night train for Edinborough—not a half-hour ago he went."

He bit his lip.

"Oh, hang it," he said. "I wanted to put a call through on his telephone."

"That's all right," the woman said. "Come in. I'll let you in."

He went into the dim vestibule and she clicked on the light and fumbled with a ring of keys.

"I never expected to see you," she went on. "He told me you was wounded and went to hospital."

"No, I wasn't wounded. It was just pneumonia."

She looked at him.

"If you ask me," she said, "you still look awful poorly. A shame, sending the boys out of hospital before they're all hale and hearty again."

He followed her as she went up the stairs, pulling herself heavily on the banister at each step.

"And how's Mr. Vollenbee?"

"I haven't seen him," he said. "I just got in, and I wanted to telephone—and this was so much closer."

"Yes," she said, almost proudly, as she unlocked the door. "I always say this is so close to everything—very central. There you are. You just make yourself right at home, Mr. Hanley. Is there anything you want?"

"No—just the telephone. Thank you."

"That's all right, now. That's all right."

He heard the door close, and almost ran to the telephone. He began the struggle against the cheerful impersonality of telephone girls. He waited, pushing the cap back

from his head, feeling his forehead heavy with sweat. Then, at last, he pushed the cap backward and off his head altogether in a quick gesture. Through the ringing electric void the voice was coming, tinnily. He began the next battle—against the insensate coldness of petty military officialdom.

"We cannot bring anyone to the telephone for personal calls."

The voice trilled it, happily, and as if by long rote. It sounded so final.

"This call's from London. It's important."

"Who is calling?"

"It's—it's a member of her family."

"Will you leave the message—we'll deliver it to her if it is important."

"I can't—it's too complicated."

He heard voices, far away, discussing the case, languidly. The voice of the operator dinned, close, in his ear.

"Please don't ring me off, operator," he said.

"Are you thrrooooough?" drooled another voice.

"Oh, my God," he groaned. "Please get off the line."

Tinny officialdom came back in the person of another voice.

"We-cannot-bring-anyone-to-the-telephone-for-personal-calls," she chanted, happily.

"Oh, Christ bite it! We've been through that," he moaned. "When is she off duty?"

There was another echoing of his question at the other end, and then bright conversation. At last he was included, too.

"We have no records here of duty rolls."

He felt desperate.

"Look, please. She'll be through about four-thirty, probably. Now . . ."

"We have no records here . . ."

"I know—just listen. Just write this down: Mr. Hanley is calling. Will you write that down? Then give her the note—have it delivered—anything. Ask her to call me at . . ."

He looked at the telephone.

". . . at Oxford double-seven oh three. Have you got that number?"

"Oxford double-seven oh thrrrree!" trilled the voice.

"That's right. It's very important. I'll be here, waiting. And—thank you."

He hung up and wiped his forehead.

He had told himself so many times that there was no use hoping the message would get to Prue, that when he finally found himself picking up the receiver in the bell-loud room, his strength left him. He was hearing her voice and feeling as if there were nothing in the world he could do but be sick—not a word to speak—only cry or be dreadfully and violently sick—hearing her voice.

"Prudence," he cried. "Oh, Prudence—Prudence. Oh, Prudence!"

“Darling—are you ill?”

The alarm was in her voice, and he gathered his nerves and will and controlled his tone.

“No,” he said. “No. It’s just—I’ve waited so long. I thought you’d call about four-thirty and . . .”

“I came down the village to the Ram’s Head to call—I couldn’t talk from camp with everyone listening.”

“No, of course not. You’re a good girl. You’re a bright girl.”

“Oh, darling, what are you doing—where are you in London?”

“I’m—I’m at Blackidge’s—did you get my letter?”

“No, I didn’t get any . . .”

“Oh, no. Of course. I only posted it today. I’m going to give myself up. Nothing matters about that. I want you to come here—now. We’ll get married.”

He heard her breathing over the telephone. Then she said:

“When?”

“Now. Come now—can you get away—get leave . . .”

“Never mind leave,” she said. “I’m coming—don’t give yourself up, Clive—don’t get arrested—don’t do anything until I see you.”

“Of course not, Prue. If I gave myself up, God knows when we’d have a chance to get married. Maybe years. But I’ll go back after and have it all out. I don’t know how long it takes to get married—I’ll have to find out . . .”

He began to laugh, happily.

“Oh, Prue,” he said. “You’re—you’re so beautiful—and I love you.”

She did not answer.

“You believe me, don’t you? You do believe me?”

“Yes. I believe you. Because you never said you loved me before—you never said it when—when you just wanted me.”

“But I was an ox—I didn’t know. I should have known. But I didn’t. Someone should have told me. You! But I know now—it’s so plain. And—but do you love me?”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes—I’m very sure.”

“But why did you just go away—oh, come up here, and we’ll get married and then I’ll go back and tell them how I feel, and I don’t give a damn what they do.”

He waited for her to speak, and when she didn’t, he said:

“You do want to marry me, don’t you?”

“You know I do, darling. But—there’s licenses and all that sort of things—and aren’t there banns and . . .”

“Oh, not in wartime. You can wangle these things—don’t you know someone who . . .”

“Father would know someone, I suppose.”

“Well, come on, then. What time can you get here?”

“I can catch a bus to town—and I think there’s a train there about seven. Yes, there is. I know there is. At ten past seven. Then I get to London at five and twenty minutes to ten. I’ve been up on it myself. Then I’ll be a deserter, too.”

“I’ll be waiting at the station, Mary Ann.”

He felt as if the line were from a happy, popular song. He felt light-headed with happiness.

“Well, hadn’t you better go, then? Don’t miss the train.”

“The bus doesn’t go for nearly half an hour yet,” she said. “Talk to me. You know, when a girl’s said yes to a proposal—she must talk to somebody about it. And you’re the only one—unless I go in the bar and . . .”

“No, I’ll talk to you.” He laughed. “How are you, Prue?”

“Oh, I’m fine. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I’m so happy.”

“Me, too.”

There was a pause.

“Prue.”

“Yes?”

“Are you going to have a baby?”

“I knew you were going to ask that.”

“Are you?”

“Why—yes.”

“Why in the name of God didn’t you say something? Just going away . . .”

“Well, I wasn’t sure for one thing, darling. You know—I thought—making love might have upset it—you know—the time. And then I couldn’t say anything—it would be like trying to blackjack someone into marrying you—making an honest girl of you. And you hadn’t said anything—so I couldn’t, could I?”

“You mean, you’d rather take it on the chin than tell a man who hadn’t enough sense to know he loved you—and what a lucky idiot he is to even have a chance . . .”

“Now, now.”

“But having a baby’s a serious matter.”

“Darling, you’re telling me. It’s damned serious, I’ll tell you—even in these days. You can be modern and broadminded, but when you find out you’re going to have a baby—you worry.”

“Ah, Prue. I’m an idiot. I only happened to remember by chance and—you’d said, you know . . .”

“I remember.”

She laughed, happily.

“What’s so funny.”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Tell me now.”

“I was just thinking, darling—wait until I get my hands on that woman here at camp who gave us the lectures on hygiene. She said there were nonconceptive cycles—but I suppose I wasn’t a proper cyclist.”

“That’s all right, now. He’ll get under the wire—and he won’t be a little bastard like his father was.”

There was a pause.

“Clive.”

“Yes?”

“You’re not marrying me—just for that. Either—just for him, or just to make an honest girl of me.”

“No, Prue. I love you. I love you truly. Look, don’t miss the train. You’ll be paying a fortune for this call.”

“Darling, what’s money?”

“A hell of a lot.”

“Not compared to this. I do love to hear you—I’m all tears and sweat and standing in the hall of the Ram in the dark—and I don’t care what anyone hears—but there’s no one here. It’s wonderful, Clive. How are you?”

“We’ve been through that before.”

“I know, but I want you to talk. I love your voice. It’s so firm—and comforting. I’ve been scared—but I’m all right now. Your son’s a stubborn chap. He’s like his father. He’s been hanging on with both hands.”

“What did you do?”

“Everything. I’ve drunk about twenty gallons of stuff that was supposed to do the trick and stood on my head by the hour. All the girls have been most sympathetic.”

“Jesus, did you go around telling everyone?”

“You don’t have to tell anyone, Clive. When you go on leave—they suspect it or expect it—you know, they take it for granted that—that there’s risks. And you can’t fool them—you live together—and I’m not sure they don’t keep your calendar and know when you should come around.”

“I know—like the army. You can’t have a personal life, and soon you forget to want one. You get used to mass life with mass prides, but no individual shames and no desire for concealment. Look, we’ll have to ring off.”

“No, darling. It’s such a beautiful night.”

“What in the name of God are you talking about?”

“I’m sure it’s a beautiful night. Don’t mind me. I’m all upside down. You know, not every girl’s proposed to over the telephone.”

“It’s a hell of a way. I wish I had you here—I’d show you.”

“I know you would, darling. You’re wonderful. We’ll be dreadfully happy—we won’t quarrel any more—I know we won’t.”

“No, I’ll never quarrel with you as long as I live, Prue.”

“I know you won’t, because—well, it’s funny. You see, we made love the reverse way. Most people start out in love—and it gets less and less and less. We started at the

other end. We went to bed together and didn't care much, and we quarreled, and then love got more and more until we end up by being really in love. And it'll go on like that. It's funny, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's all puzzling. Think how many millions of chances there were against it."

"How?"

"Well, just meeting you out of a thousand girls at the camp by chance—and I didn't know you were—well, as you are, or we'd never have started—you know, I just thought you were an ordinary girl in uniform—a nice girl, of course."

"Thank you, sir."

"And now—I feel like scolding you for it; like saying: 'Prue, how dare you take up with just any soldier who comes along in the dark.' "

"But it wasn't any soldier, darling. It was you."

"But that's what I mean. How did you know it was I?"

"My psyche knew, even if I didn't."

"Well, your damned psyche might have got you in a mess. Look here, suppose I'd been an old rounder—I might have had syphilis or gonorrhea . . ."

"Please, darling! Is that nice?"

"I might have! I might have been anybody."

"But you weren't just anybody, darling. Something inside me *must* have known it was you—because I never went under a haystack with anyone before."

"Well, don't let that psyche get loose again. One lucky bet is enough."

"Oh, darling, we were lucky."

"Hadn't we better ring off?"

"No, there's twenty minutes yet—and I'll never in my life again be in this stuffy hall, just having accepted a proposal of marriage. It's just this once. Let me have it. Wartime's so funny. Just go on talking."

"What shall I tell you?"

"Oh, what you like for breakfast, and what your favorite color is and—Clive."

"Yes."

"You never had any of those things, did you?"

"What things?"

"You know. Venereal disease."

"Of course. I've had all seven varieties."

"No, seriously, darling."

"Of course not."

"I know that—but it's all very frightening. You know, in the lectures, they always speak of them as coming from a man consorting with evil women. I always wondered why it wasn't from a woman consorting with evil men."

"We'll go into that, some rainy evening when I've got my slippers on by the fireside, and all three children are safely abed."

“Three! Is that all. No, it’s important—to talk things over with your future husband—because V.D. accounts for a lot of sterility in men—and I don’t want not to have healthy children—lots of them.”

“You’ve got one now, and little Oscar seems healthy enough. That should prove I’m not riddled with disease.”

“I know, darling, but no one ever tells you properly about it all. Of course, I got it out of father’s med books later. But when we were young—you should have heard the lecture on biology we got. The instructor drew a circle, and said: ‘Now that is the egg.’ Then she put a dot in the middle, and said: ‘When the egg or ovum is fertilized, it begins to grow, and thus life is formed.’ And then we were supposed to know all about it. It’s terribly fearful and dangerous, being a girl.”

“Ah, Prue, you’re wonderful. I love you.”

“Oh, say that again.”

“I just said it.”

“I know, but say it again, please.”

“What for?”

“Because—I want to hear it a hundred times. It makes me feel all wonderful and creepy inside.”

“Inside where?”

“Just inside, darling. All over inside. In my tummy and chest and throat, and I don’t mind that my outside is sweaty and I’m all messed up—because I’ve been crying . . .”

“Ah, Prue—Prue. I love you. I do love you. What an ass I was not to recognize it before. When I could do something about it.”

“No, it’s wonderful this way. Because—it’s like everything else we’ve done. Not every girl is proposed to by telephone—with probably hundreds of people listening in. You’re wonderful to have thought of it, darling.”

“Yes, I’m a wonderful chap, all right.”

“You are. I feel so . . .”

“So what?”

“Delirious, in a way. Like the first time at the panto when the curtain goes up.”

“Is that what love’s like?”

“Oh, many other things. It’s like seeing the Guards troop the colors for the first time—and the sad part of the Fifth—and the first daffodils in spring at the market—and oranges in your stocking at Christmas—and going to church on Easter in your new, beautiful dress—and yet it’s sad, darling. Like the first time you realized that you weren’t going to live forever.”

“Love’s quite of lot of things, isn’t it? I feel terribly responsible.”

“Well, what’s love to you?”

“Oh, it’s like having worked all week and the whistle goes, and it’s payday.”

“Anything else?”

“Oh—knowing there’s no Father Christmas, but finding something in your stocking just the same.”

“Is that all?”

He sat quietly a moment.

“It’s like—like having walked all your life in darkness, and dirt—and suddenly breaking through a curtain and seeing a great valley before you in the sun—and you know it’s a new world and a new life from then on—forever.”

“That’s wonderful, Clive. I wonder how many people have tried to tell their lovers what love was?”

“Oh, every poet since the world began—millions who were poets—white, yellow, black, brown people—thousands of them trying to do it now.”

“That spoils it—to think others are doing what we’re doing. It’s beautiful what you said, Clive—about it being a new world. I don’t want to talk any more now, darling. Say good-by, Clive, and—I love you.”

“I love you, too, Prue.”

“It’s wonderful of you to do it this way—I’ll tell our grandchildren . . .”

“My God, grandchildren already. If we go on another minute we’ll be merely ancestral memories.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be on that train?”

“Darling, come armies, Waffs, hell, or high water—I’ll come on that train.”

“And come hell or high water, I’ll meet you.”

There was a pause, and then, neither having said good-by, they ended. Clive heard the click at the other end, and the dead hum of the wire. He looked at his watch. Two hours and forty-five minutes to wait. Two hours and forty-five minutes to wish away as he’d never wished for time to go before.

He came down through the blackout feeling weak and light-headed, but also quite elated. His mind ran ahead, and then with a twinge of discomfort he remembered that there’d be M.P.’s at the station. If he’d only used his head, he told himself, he could have told Prue to meet him at Blackidge’s. But he’d been excited—talking to her.

The elation came back as he thought of her. He would see her ten minutes sooner by going to the station. He felt as if ten minutes sooner was worth his right arm. And he could fool any M.P. He could say he was going in to get the train for Gollam. He still had his ticket.

I said I’d be there in spite of hell and high water, he said to himself. And I will. I’ll get there. I’ll find a way when I get there.

But, he reasoned, it would be safer to arrive there just on time, then he wouldn’t have to loiter at the station.

He looked at his watch. Twenty minutes to go. Plenty of time yet.

He made his anxious feet dawdle. He tried to find something for his mind to dwell on, to ease it of its impatience. When he heard the siren go, he was almost pleased. In the half darkness he could hear and see people running—laughing and running. He felt

angry that they should laugh. But then, he thought, that part of London was safe. The people didn't know what bombing was yet.

He listened to the sirens screeching, rising and falling in short banshee wailings. The all clear would be a single steady note, but the danger signal was, quite properly he thought, a fearful, unsteady sort of yodeling.

He stood in the street, listening. He couldn't hear any planes. The lights were beginning to leap and swing to the east. There was a faint rumble of gunfire there. But the planes weren't over central London.

Perhaps, he thought, the balloon barrage really put the wind up the pilots. Must be hell and all, going along in the dark, never knowing what instant you'd crash into a cable that would tear the fabric and metal of the machine away—sheer it off, leaving you to sail down—down. . . .

He cupped his hand and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. Still eighteen minutes to wait for the train. He was far too early.

He drew back into a doorway. He could wait there—wait for a while. He would count away ten sixties and then start again.

He was only in the second sixty when a man came into the darkened doorway, sensed him there, and spoke.

"Doesn't look as if they'd get this far, does it?"

"No," he said.

He went back to his counting, feeling that by this time it would be fair to begin the third sixty. He concentrated on counting slowly, and then his mind was drawn away. Half-irritably, he felt as if the man was speaking again. But the man was silent.

Then he heard the sound.

It was the whining drone of a German bomber, coming as if in a dive. Even as he heard that, his ear distinguished the sound of a dying engine, going as if fighting for waning life. He stood tensely, assaying the sound, hearing the engine fight—*Brrrrt—brrrrt—brrt-brt-brt-brrrrrrt!*

He felt himself in the cockpit, trying to gun a shattered motor, desperately opening the throttle, coaxing the engine.

So completely was he one with the unknown German above that he felt himself go weak in the stomach as the motor faded into a crackle of guttering backfires and then went dead. There was almost silence, until the new sound flowed in—the high, singing whine of a plane coasting with a dead stick. It came nearer—nearer—he could hear the shrill tear and whistle of air. The plane was losing altitude—low, now—passing almost overhead. Low! Almost at the chimney-tops. And then the houses across the street leaped into silhouette as the night bloomed into an instant of white light, and at the same time the crash came.

At that instant he started running. Automatically he shouted over his shoulder as he went:

"Crash!"

For an angry moment he wondered why on earth the man wasn't running beside him. Then, as he turned the corner, he understood, for he was struck obliquely by

someone in the dark running the other way.

Oh, Jesus, he thought. The silly bastards. Running the wrong way. Oh, Jesus.

Then he turned the corner, and saw the street breaking into yellow light. The plane had struck the slanting roof of a three-story row of small shop-fronts, and had been driven almost completely down into the building. The tail of the plane still showed at a brave angle in the light of flames that were beginning to lick upwards.

"Poor bastards," he was saying. "Poor bastards—they'll roast to death!"

He ran across the street, and as he did so a man in shirt-sleeves came out of a side door.

"Were they killed?" he shouted.

Then they passed, neither waiting to give or get answer. Clive stumbled on the flight of steps, leading to the rooms above the shop. He went upward to the first landing, and then he stopped. The back of the building was a white-hot mass, and a puddle of fire was running from under a door, going like a swift river.

He jumped away and ran back down the steps, thinking: Petrol. Petrol running down. Poor devils. They're done for.

As he thought it, he heard a dull, dignified boom, and he knew a petrol-tank had exploded.

He thought: Perhaps they were killed when it hit. I hope so.

He raced across the street and then turned, holding his hand out before his face to shield it from the heat. The fire was roaring now, crackling viciously. He saw that the flames were not pointed tongues, but great billows, round-topped like smoke. But it wasn't smoke. It was mushrooming clouds of bubbling fire.

He stood, thinking it strange that the street should still be deserted except for himself. Then, a great ember boiled up and began to fall. From the light of it he saw the man who had passed him, kneeling, scrabbling by the wall. Holding his arm before his face he ran over. The man was pulling with his bare hands at a mass of shattered tile and rubble and broken glass from the windows above.

"Here," Clive said. "Here!"

The man still scratched with his hands, and kicked at the pile of rubbish.

"My wife—my kid! They're in the cellar!"

"Well—isn't there a door . . . ?"

"It's in the back—blocked up! They can't get up!"

The man never stopped his frantic scrabbling. Clive stood, brushing at the man's shirt. In the back it was glowing. The thin, smoldering line was creeping in an ever-widening circle. The man had not felt it. Then Clive saw that the man's hair and eyebrows had been singed away.

"Here—look out," he said.

He began kicking the rubble away, his heavy ammunition boots going in arcs, pushing aside the debris. He saw at last an iron grating. He was so intent on clearing it that time had no meaning. Then the beam of a torch flashed down and he saw a helmeted policeman.

“What is it?” the policeman said.

Clive kept kicking the grating free.

“His wife and his kid’s down here.”

“Whose?”

Clive looked round.

“I don’t know. Chap was here a minute ago. Says someone’s down here. Chap in his shirt-sleeves. Burned.”

The policeman shone the torch. There was a small cellar window below the grate.

“Grab hold, there, soldier. See if we can pull it up.”

They bent with their shoulders against the wall for leverage, and tugged on the grating. The four pronged ends seemed to have been set into the flagged walk with a lead filling, and the grate did not budge.

“If we had something . . .” Clive said.

He looked about, aimlessly.

“A Jerry plane,” he said.

The policeman’s chest was rising and falling as he panted.

“I know.”

“Poor buggers—they got roasted,” Clive said.

The thought was too much to bear. He shook his head.

Look here, they’re Jerries, he said to himself. They’re Jerries and they copped it, that’s all. They came bombing and copped it. That’s all.

“Come on, both try this end,” the policeman said.

They bent and tugged together. Suddenly, without warning the grating tore loose, and they staggered back, trying to keep balance.

“There,” the policeman said.

He went to the small air-way and, putting one hand on the wall, dropped his leg into the space and kicked backward with his heel. He kicked several times, quickly and neatly, and then shielded his face as smoke crept upward. Clive peered at the smashed window.

“Shine your light,” Clive said.

Shielding their eyes from the now-intense heat, they looked down—almost dispassionately, as men do when judging a problem that needs nice assessment.

“By God, I couldn’t get through there,” the policeman said. He looked at Clive. “And you’re bloody near as big as me.”

Without speaking they lay down on the rubble-strewn pavement, their heads close to the air-way.

“Can’t hear anyone. Can you?” the policeman said.

Before Clive could answer another voice sounded. Then Clive knew he was hearing the last rumble of motor trucks. A helmeted man was beside them.

“What’s up?”

“There’s a woman and a kid down there—and it’s too small.”

“Who says so?”

“A chap—he was round here. In his shirt-sleeves. It was his wife and kid.”

“Oh, must be the man they just picked up at the corner. He was wandering round.”

The new man threw his torch on the window. Then he looked at more men behind him.

“ ’Ere—let’s ’ave a look at it!”

A wizened Cockney whose helmet came down over his head with a sort of variety-hall comedy effect knelt before the gap.

“I c’n make that,” he said, almost proudly. “ ’Ere—’old me ’elmet.”

“Good old Snod,” someone said.

The other men laughed.

Clive backed away, leaning against the wall. He felt a pain across his stomach from the exertion of pulling the grate. He watched the little man’s face contort into a grimace as he squeezed himself through the window. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

Inside the house he could hear the calls of the Auxiliary Fire Service men. There was a tear and crash as jets of water ripped into the blazing interior. He felt the heat baking his face, and bent low against the wall.

At last he heard the men calling down into the air-way. They were pulling at something—a very small child. The Cockney was shouting up.

“I cawn’t find nobody else.”

Clive knelt quickly by the air-way.

“There must be another there,” he shouted. “The chap said his wife was down there too. Take another look.”

He stayed, kneeling beside the air-way. The policeman was still there.

“Was the kid dead?” Clive asked.

“I don’t think so. Probably just smoke. They’ve got her over the ambulance now.”

Clive felt that the firemen were getting the blaze controlled. The heat seemed less intense.

“That water might drown anyone in the cellar,” he said. “Better drown nor burn,” the policeman said.

Clive bent lower, hearing a sloshing sound. The wizened, cheerful face showed in the beam again.

“Cawn’t find a thing.”

Clive swallowed. Sending a man back—sending a man back to go somewhere you couldn’t go yourself. But a woman . . .

“I’m sure he said his wife,” he said.

He turned to the policeman.

“I’m sure he said his wife, too.”

The policeman looked down. The face of the Cockney stared up, looking first at one, then the other.

“All right. I’ll look agyne,” he said.

They lay beside the window, waiting. The time seemed to crawl. Another helmeted figure knelt beside them.

"Where's Snodgrass?" he said.

Clive looked at him.

"The little chap? He went back again—the man said his wife was there, too."

The man did not answer. He knelt, his head turned curiously upward, as if regarding the sky.

"We ought to be getting him out of there," he said.

He lay down on the pavement and shouted.

"Snod! Hi—Snodgrass!"

He gave a sudden exclamation of impatience. The policeman jumped up, stretched himself slowly, and then walked backward, looking up. Just as he went, Clive heard the cheerful voice:

"I got 'er. Way at the back trying to get up the stairs. I don't know whether we can get 'er through this 'ole. 'Ere—grab 'old."

Quickly the man above reached down in the air-way. As his head and shoulders went from view, Clive knelt and knotted his hands in the man's coat-tails. He heard the Cockney below.

" 'Op to it, Chief. It ain't nice down 'ere."

The man struggled, wriggling backward, pulling the woman by her arms. Her head rolled loosely on her neck. Her shoulders wedged in the small frame of the smashed window.

"Grab her hand and pull," the man said.

There was urgency in his voice.

Just as Clive grasped the thick plumpness of the wrist, and began to pull, he heard it. The hard, high cries that cut clearly into consciousness.

"Look out!"

"Look out! The wall!"

"Look out!"

Frantically he tugged with the man beside him. The body was jammed. Clive looked up above.

The wall was still there. It hadn't moved. Perhaps they had made a mistake. With his head thrown back, his feet braced against the building, he tugged so that he felt sickened that the woman's bones and flesh should be put to such straining. The wall was still there. It was still. . . .

Then he saw that it wasn't the same. The wall was edging outwards. It was beginning to slant. It was all happening with the horrible time-distortion of a nightmare. Time and action had lost all true value beside speeding thought.

He looked round and saw the figures of men, transfixed. They were in the positions of running, and he knew that his eye had stopped them in motion as a camera will—that it had frozen them still in one split second of their urgent movement.

His mind raced on to the problem. The wall, falling, would reach completely across the street. Some of those men—some of them—they'd never get to safety. The top of the wall would catch them.

Even as he thought, like a man pulling on a rope at tug-o'-war, he strained at the arms of the woman. Clive thought: But it's worse for Snod. I made him go back. Now he's in there—and perhaps he knows. Perhaps he's all right, though. Perhaps the cellar ceiling won't give way. Perhaps he'll get out all right. But I made him stay in there, and so I can't run now.

He looked up again. The wall was bowing, gravely and courteously, falling—falling. . . .

There was a rending of cloth as the shattered edge of the window tore at the clothes of the woman, and then her body came free.

Only then, as if the reaching of this goal of freeing the woman had also freed his mind from immediate happenings, did Clive remember. He let the woman's arm fall.

Prudence! He had said that, hell or high water, he'd be there.

You said you'd be there, his mind accused.

Well, hell. . . .

A new thought came and he held it with almost triumphant pleasure. There would still be time. They'd hold up the trains in an air raid. The train—now, at this moment—would be darkened, halted somewhere. It would be late. He had plenty of time. Plenty of time, if. . . .

He looked upward again. The wall was spreading out like a dark blanket over the street. Now the top of it was disintegrating into individual bricks as do the edges of a wind-torn cloud on a sunny day. The wall was breaking horizontally across the middle—bowing from the waist, now.

He would have plenty of time to meet Prue. . . .

Then the thought came clearly.

If he ran! If he ran! If he got away.

But he looked at the sweating face of the man beside him, still holding the arm of the woman, his head thrown back as he watched the wall spreading a dark wing over them.

"Oh God," he thought. "I can't get out. I can't. I'm too tired. I can't run. I'm too tired."

He bent to pick up the woman, looking up at the other man as if for help. As in a slow-motion picture he saw the man's head coming down from its gazing aloft. Their eyes met.

Clive knew then that the world held nothing else but the four of them—the man beside him, the woman, perhaps dead, the little Cockney looking up from the cellar, and himself.

The man's eyes were sinking in a sort of sadness. Together they knelt. Clive could see the little Cockney's face at the cellar window—his mouth open in the framing of one word of a question. He saw the look in the little man's eyes. It was too late to answer. It was too late to pick up the woman now. Too late.

The man beside him was bending forward. Clive did the same. They bowed their bodies together over that of the inert woman. Holding their heads in their hands, they crouched there, hearing at last the roar of the collapsing wall, waiting for the torrent of stone and brick that would come in that second to cover them.

There was a first crash, a sense of sudden pain, and then, miraculously, Clive felt himself standing. He looked about him.

There had been no passage of time, and yet he knew time had elapsed, for he was being half-carried, half-led by two men.

Forcibly he stopped, and pushed them away with his hands. Then he understood. He had come out alive. They had dug him out—no worse than getting knocked out at football. He had been knocked unconscious, but he was all right now. There was no pain.

He gathered his words as he drew his arms free.

"No," he said. "I'm all right now. I've got to go."

It was harder to talk than he'd imagined.

"Go? Where?"

The men were staring at him, open-mouthed, still reaching for him with their hands.

Clive rocked on his feet and considered. Then the thought came. He struggled to make his clumsy mouth say the words.

"To the railway station," he said, slowly. "I've got to meet someone—at—the railway station."

He started away and then felt himself on a tilting world. He had to walk in a slight half-circle to keep from falling. But the world tilted still further so that he fell. He got up and started again. The men tried to take his arms but he shook them off. He walked several steps and fell again. He made his arms push his body up from the road. He got to his knees. He set one foot before him and stood. He took a step and fell again.

He lay there, not feeling the men pick him up.

Prudence sat, her face turned toward the great clock. She did not see it—her eyes were focused hundreds of miles beyond. Only occasionally the sense of what her eyes were seeing came to her consciousness, and she half realized the meaning of the arrangement of hands and numerals.

A lethargy possessed her—one that paralyzed all further thought and action. It was as if there were a contest between time and fact. If she were only patient enough—patient enough long enough—fact would change. And this sitting here alone, waiting, would not be true.

Then, at last, someone was speaking. As she looked up and made eyes function, she remembered dimly that this same Military Policeman had marched past and re-past her many times, his eyes, turned sidewise, focused on her.

"What train are you waiting for, Miss?"

The station now seemed cold in the small-hour drabness. She looked at her wristwatch with a simulated motion.

It was idiotic to sit there, to pretend any more that time had not gone past. It was foolish to walk any more to the entryway, to the platforms, to the waiting room, to deny evident truth.

But what else was there to do?

Oh, come on, Prue, she said. Come on! Be alive! Don't act as if—as if . . .

She got up, slowly.

"I seem," she said, "to have missed—someone. Yes, I've missed them."

She picked up her bag and walked away.

Roger Cathaway went quickly to the waiting room door and threw it open.

"Well, Prue!" he said. "When the nurse said you were here . . ."

Even as he went to her, he felt the shock that always came on him now as he saw his daughter. Somehow, in his mind, she always lived as a girl of nine—with honey-toffee plaits down her back—riding with him in his car on his calls.

Why was that? Why should it be the age of nine that she always took in his memory? Perpetually nine . . .

He saw her rising, and looking at her face above the mannish uniform, he got that wave of pleasure that came from knowing she was beautiful.

"What on earth . . . ?" he said. He was kissing her, and then he put his arm around her. "Come on in the sanctum . . . What on earth brings you . . . ?"

She was sitting. He stood and looked at her.

"Why, you look tired."

A fugitive smile passed and she said:

"I sat in Lyons all morning."

He turned and fiddled with the Venetian blinds, and the room sank into gentler light. He spoke without turning.

"Then we'd better pack you off home and let you get some sleep. How much leave have you got?"

"I haven't got leave," she said.

He turned quickly, and went to her and took her hand.

"What's the matter?"

She looked at his hand and smiled.

"Bedside manner," she smiled.

He nodded happily, and went back to his chair. He took out a cigar and lit it. She watched the match, so near his beard.

"What's the diagnosis?" she said.

He looked at his cigar.

"Oh, a little fatigue. Some mental worry. Otherwise—sound and healthy as—as a blooming rose."

She nodded. Then he spoke quietly, although he found it hard to get the words out.

“Prue, you know, people come from all over to sit in that chair—hundreds of ’em—and pay a lot of money, too, by Godfrey. And sometimes it is something wrong behind the skull and then it’s surgery. But most of the time—there’s nothing wrong, and you just have to talk. And what would be the use of me if I could help everyone in the world—and when it came to my own daughter . . .”

She moved her lips without speaking, and went to him. She put a finger on his top waistcoat button.

He swung in his chair and patted his left shoulder.

“That,” he said, “is my public crying shoulder. A few odd thousand people have cried on that one. But this . . .”

She saw the lean fingers of his left hand touching his right shoulder.

“. . . this one’s a private one—reserved for members of my own family.”

Like a child, she sat on his lap, and put her head on his shoulder. Her eyes, open, could see his beard—out of focus—a reddish-gray mass. The smell of cigar smoke in it drove her back to childhood. It was a father-childhood smell.

“You know,” he said, and his voice sounded far away, “it’s funny. I always think of you as a kid in pigtails.”

“Well, I’m not,” she said. “I’m quite a bit heavier. Suppose anyone walked in and saw you with a woman on your lap.”

“Scandal,” he whispered. “But no one will come in.”

She lay quietly, her face feeling the roughness of his coat.

“Father.”

“Yes?”

“Has anyone the right to unload troubles on anyone else? Passing troubles and responsibilities on . . .”

“You have a right to pass them on to your parents,” he said. “We bring you—all too protesting—into the world. You have a right, and . . .”

He broke off and took another thread.

“You know, I always wanted to be a good father . . .”

“You have been—always.”

“Perhaps so. Perhaps not. But now—you’re grown up—you’re getting so far away and . . .”

She felt suddenly sorry for him—he had outgrown the magic godliness of fatherhood and that place in him now was empty—getting older and older.

“I’ve had my leave,” she said, suddenly. Her voice was flat. “I went away with a soldier. We stayed on the South Coast. Then—yesterday he called up and asked me to come to London—and we’d get married. But—he wasn’t at the station. So—I walked around all night. And came here. That’s all.”

He did not say anything.

“Are you shocked?” she asked.

“No—not in one sense,” he said. “Not morally—only a little—and that’s about you suddenly being so grown up that you . . .”

They sat, quietly.

“I’m not shocked about—the other,” he said. “I was talking about being a good father. You know what I think it is—being a good father? It’s loving your children—loving them when they’re good—and loving them just as much when they’re bad. No matter what you did—if you murdered someone—that wouldn’t make any difference to my essential love for you—and no matter what you did you’ve a right to come here and ask help and comfort. You know, I really mean that.”

“I know you do,” she said. “It’s funny talking like this.”

“Yes,” he said. “Who is the chap? I’d like to wring his neck.”

“No,” she said. “You wouldn’t know him. He’s—just a private soldier. That doesn’t sound nice, does it? A girl in the Waffs runs off with a private soldier and then he leaves her waiting at the church. Does it sound hackneyed and sordid—the servant girl’s tragedy?”

“You needn’t talk about it if you don’t want to. It’s all right. You’re—still you.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t mind talking. I want to now. I’m not ashamed. I met him—in the dark. I didn’t even see him. The moment I heard him speak, I knew. I knew I’d do whatever he asked me to. I knew what he would ask me. I wanted him to. Why is it like that? We weren’t in love—then. What makes it like that?”

He rocked slightly, as if she were a tiny child.

“The wisest of us don’t know that,” he said. “It’s so many things. It’s how old you are—whether your body is rebelling against physical restraints imposed by custom, which in turn is ruled by economic necessity—most people are physically ready to be married long, long before the age they’re able to sustain and support a home. Or it’s how the moon is—what your emotional state is—what you ate the day before—what tune an orchestra has played and left ringing in your head—what smells or scents there are in the air—everything you’ve ever done or sensed or thought in your entire life somehow has created a contributory stream that pours into that one moment. You see?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I haven’t been a bad girl—or casual or promiscuous—even in kissing. And yet—I knew he would ask me, and I wanted him to. If he hadn’t asked me, I’d have asked him if I could. If I’d been the man and he the woman, I’d have asked him. So it wasn’t his fault, was it?”

“There’s no blame in it. It’s something removed beyond blame. And it’s best to forget it all. A private soldier—and a physical encounter. The only thing to blame was his making a fool of you and then not keeping his promise—and your wanting to sustain a purely physical relationship by . . .”

“No,” she said. “He wasn’t like that. He was a private soldier but—but . . . Look, suppose you were to have photographs—microscopic photographs a quarter of a million times as large as things are. Could you have that?”

“No. What for?”

“That’s what he was working on. Really, he was brilliant. What if you could have it?”

“In that case—it would—enlarge the perspectives in fields of medicine in prevention of diseases—like taking blindfolds from a man—like discovering that there

was an America. But present microscopic power is . . .”

“But it’s doing something with electrons. Photographing with electrons instead of light. That’s possible, isn’t it?”

“Theoretically it may be. But in practice . . .”

“But he says they’re doing it. Not him—but an old man—oh, I forget his name. Follenbee or something. I forget.”

“Vollenbee?”

“Yes, that’s it. Do you know him?”

“I know of him. He’s a crazy old coot—he might do it.”

“Well then, it’s true. You see? What he said—it’s true. Couldn’t we get in touch with Vollenbee and—and find out where he is?”

He rocked on his chair.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Do you want to, Prue? This chap, whoever he is—well, it seems pretty plain it’s just been a casual encounter as far as he’s concerned and . . .”

“No,” she said. “It can’t be that. He wouldn’t have asked me to come here unless he . . . you see . . . I know he wouldn’t.”

“You think he wouldn’t.”

“No. Now you say that, I *know* he wouldn’t. You see, it wasn’t just—just the other thing. It was when we started, but not afterwards. He’d been in the mess at Dunkirk. It had—upset him. We stayed awake and talked at night. Of course, we made love, too.”

He laughed, warmly.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “That sounds fairly true.”

“And he didn’t want to go back. So, we argued about it. And we had a quarrel about it. But we made it up—and we left it at that. And then, yesterday, he called me. He hadn’t gone back, but he said he’d solved it and thought it out, and he was going to go back and have it out—but first, we’d get married. And I came—but he wasn’t there.”

She felt herself crying—from weariness, she thought.

“I don’t want to cry—or—or be a fool. But . . .”

“That’s all right,” he said. He patted her comfortingly. “You have to tell someone. And now—what do you want to do?”

“I don’t want to do anything,” she said. “I can’t seem to want to do anything. And I’m absent from camp and . . .”

“There, there,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’ll attend to it—you’re ill and can’t go back—until you want to. I think you’d better take a cab home, and get some rest . . .”

“No,” she said. “I can’t do that. Mother—I just couldn’t go through it with her. You know how I fight with mother. Right now—I couldn’t stand it.”

He bent his cheek toward her head and smiled. His mind moved far away, and he felt a glow of triumph.

“Have I been all right as a father?” he asked.

She sat up.

“Yes,” she said.

“Then suppose you run upstairs and just take a nap in one of the beds. I’ll tell Miss Hanks to . . .”

“No,” she said.

She got up.

“No. I’ve been soft long enough—now I feel better. I’ll get a cab and go home. Thanks for being patient.”

“All right,” he said. “And whatever you decide to do, remember—I’m on your team.”

“I feel all right now,” she said. “I’m sorry I went limp—I’ll just go home and give myself a good talking to.”

He got up.

“I’ll run you home.”

“No. Mother would wonder why I saw you first. Just have Miss Hanks call me a cab.”

CHAPTER XXXV

He heard the rustling sound, but when he pushed against the warmth of the covers and opened his eyes, the sound was gone and Prudence was there.

He gathered speech from the weakness inside him, and said:

"Hello."

"Hello," she said. "You mustn't talk."

He smiled at the silliness of this and shut his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, Prudence was gone. A lamp was burning dimly and the nurse was going away. The rustling sound was there.

Almost gleefully he arrived at the fact that the rustling was the sound of the starched skirts of the nurses—and he knew he had heard it a long time and that it was now familiar. He felt sorry for their legs, brushing against the harshness of unflowing material.

He nodded, and closed his eyes.

He woke and saw Prudence was there again, and he thought the interlude had been a trick of the mind.

"Hello," he said. "Still here?"

"No, don't talk."

"But we've just been through all that," he said.

He watched her face and smiled.

"Here, here," he said. "There's nothing to cry about, now. It's no use crying."

"I won't," she said. "I'm not crying. Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm hot. There are too many covers."

"No."

"Look. I feel perfectly all right. I'm not sick. I feel fine."

He felt elated with the truth of this.

"How did we get here?"

"You were in an accident. They brought you here."

He lay thinking.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said. “What I meant was—how did you get here. I didn’t meet you and . . .”

“Your pay book—and your pass. The hospital notified military police; they notified the regiment, and Monty heard about it and wrote me. He wrote me at camp and the letter came to me here, yesterday. But it’s all straightened out now. Don’t worry—and go to sleep.”

“I’ve been asleep.”

“But you’ve got to get strong.”

“I am strong,” he said. “What’s wrong with me?”

“A little concussion, that’s all.”

“Poor little concussion,” he said.

He lost focus of her and saw only the blankness of walls. He tried to rivet attention on something he wanted to say, but then he saw it was dark again, and the light was burning, and she wasn’t there.

He stirred and she went to his bed.

“What is it?”

“A drink, please. I’m so thirsty.”

His voice sounded faint and cracked. She took the small spouted cup and dribbled water onto his chapped lips. He shut his eyes and nodded.

Then he opened them and smiled and said:

“Hi!”

She was so tired of seeing his face, set as if there were no life there.

“Please don’t talk,” she said. “I must call the nurse.”

“You’re always saying that,” he said. “Always saying I mustn’t talk.”

“You’ve been ill.”

He laughed, happily.

“It isn’t a real hospital,” he said.

“What?”

“It isn’t a real hospital.”

“No, darling. It isn’t a real hospital. It’s all right.”

“Because there’s no flowers. If it were a real hospital, someone would bring flowers, and there are none.”

She heard his voice go back to mumbling.

“You know that. There are no more. This is the last one! There’s no more . . .”

“Clive,” she said. “Please. You’re here—in hospital!”

She held his shoulders, but she knew her voice was not reaching him. She hurried away to get the nurse.

He opened his eyes, feeling someone holding his wrist. A broad bearded man was there, taking his pulse. A nurse stood behind him.

"Hello," he said.

The man did not answer. He just looked at him, and winked.

"I know you," Clive said.

It seemed extremely funny.

"You're Prue's father."

The man nodded, still not speaking.

"You know how I could tell? The nose. It has a flat snub part below the bridge just like hers."

The man began to laugh, silently and curiously as if it were a tremendous joke. Then he put Clive's hand down carefully.

Clive felt tremendously happy over his success. He wanted to go on talking but the putting down of his hand was like a final curtain that put an end to it all.

He opened his eyes and stirred. Prudence's face came into his vision, and she said:

"A drink?"

"Yes," he said. "Please."

He swallowed the dribbles of water and then smiled.

"I was dreaming," he said.

"That's right. Go back and dream some more."

"No. I want to tell you. Stay here."

"I'm staying."

He held her hand.

"I dreamt—I was at the hospital."

"Yes, darling. That's right."

"No. I don't mean here. I know I'm here. In France. I want to tell you about it."

He was silent a long time. Then he said:

"It was when I went back—to see if Allen had been moved out all right. They'd got everybody out of the hospital but the men too bad to move. They couldn't move them. And the Medical Officers knew someone had to stay behind with them, and they drew lots and a young chap got it and do you know what he said? He said: 'I've won!' That's what he said. He laughed and said: 'I've won.'

"Well—that's the story I wanted to tell you."

"That's nice," she said. "Now go to sleep."

He closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WAKING to the first crash Old Hamish thought of death. He always woke that way now, and the thought left him lying in a cold agony of fear. Some day—soon—there would be no waking. He would be in this bed—dead for eternity. It wasn't being dead he minded—it was the eternity. Never coming back. Never coming back. Never . . .

There was a second crash, a woman's startled cry, a sound by his door.

"What is it?" he said.

"It's Thomas, sir. The Germans are bombing."

"Nonsense—it's merely anti-aircraft fire. Now there's nothing to be disturbed about."

"But the maids, sir . . ."

Hamish pulled the dressing gown about him and went to the door. Thomas stood with a torch in his hand. Beyond, in the blackness, there were cries. Hamish lifted his voice.

"Now there's nothing to be alarmed about," he called. "Nothing. There's nothing here for miles around to bomb."

The sensation of giving orders seized him, and he felt that more was needed.

"However, I want everyone to go immediately to the cellars. Go calmly—take warm clothing. That means everyone."

As he closed the door a nearer battery opened fire, and he could hear the angry tattering of a machine gun. He saw his door open and light flood through.

"Emily," he said. "Put out the light."

"I've drawn the blinds," she said, gently. "What is it?"

"Oh, bombers overhead," he said. "Get dressed—we're going to the cellar."

"What a nuisance," she said, gently. "I'll stay here."

"No," he said. "I want you to go down—set the rest a good example. I can't expect them to keep order if . . ."

"All right," she said. "I see."

The door closed and he fumbled for his clothes. He pulled on breeches and an old pair of field boots. They were the quickest.

He went to the side door and opened it. Emily was dressing. It was years, he thought, since he'd seen her in—in disarray, lifting her dress over her head. But at a time like this, a man's place . . .

“I’m ready,” she said.

He went to the table and turned off the light. She took his arm and they edged into his room in the dark, and then to his door. As he opened it a glow of light shone on the carpet. He thought: Exactly the shape of a cone of fire in shrapnel dispersion. Then he heard Thomas’ voice.

“I thought I’d wait for you. Everyone else is down, sir.”

The artillery bursts punctured the smooth-flowing sound of the words. Hamish felt a glow of pride. This—this was doing it properly. By God! No German raiders . . .

He crooked his arm.

“All right, Thomas,” he said.

Emily took his arm, and Thomas walked before them, shining the light backward onto the stairs. A window rattled from the concussion, and Emily said:

“What a dreadfully silly noise! They shouldn’t have it so close!”

He thought: She is like all women. Hasn’t the slightest idea of what war is about. Easy for women to be calm and brave. No idea of the ghastly mess H.E. made—torn chunks of bloody meat among shattered bricks and stone dust and . . .

They had started down the stone-flagged steps now to the underground spaces. Thomas was going ahead of them, lighting the way carefully.

Hamish went slowly, partly for Emily’s sake and partly because it was rather a grand procession, he thought. People stirring below. The staircase. Thomas before them. Almost as if he ought to announce: “General and Mrs. Hamish Cathaway!”

There were patches of white in the darkness—the faces of the maids. A sound rose, muffled. Thomas spoke quickly.

“Jane Alice—stop it! Find that wicker chair for madame! Should we have the lights on, sir?”

“Yes—yes. Perfectly safe here now,” Hamish said. “Of course.”

The lights clicked on, and Hamish surveyed the scene.

“We ought to have a few more chairs here,” he said.

The odd tubes of the central heating system somehow made him think of a word—bowels. The bowels of the earth. He smiled.

“Is everyone here?”

Thomas looked about.

“Maude, Jane Alice, Elisabeth, Henry—second Henry—where’s second Henry?”

“ ’Ere—Ah’m i’t’corner ’ere,” a boy’s voice said.

“Yes, we’re all here, sir,” Thomas said.

Hamish nodded pleasantly. It was a warm sound—all present or accounted for, sir. Thomas should have saluted. He felt as if he should give the command: “Stannat—ease! Stand easy!”

“Ah—Blenkinthorpe!” he said. “Now everyone else is accounted for I’d better go down and see what’s happened to him. Everyone else stay here—you understand? No one leaves until I give the—the word.”

Happily old Hamish went up the steps, through the dark rooms and into the night. The eastern sky was alive with waving tentacles of light and the muttering guns in the background were a steady accompaniment to the near-by banging.

Giving ’em hot and heavy, he thought pleasantly, as he walked down the path.

Then he thought: On their way to Liverpool, no doubt.

There was a whirr and a smack, and he knew a nose cap had passed near him.

“Damned idiots,” he said.

But he found himself trotting now. He went down the slope toward the cottage, and thumped on the door.

“Hi—hillo! Blenkinthorpe!” he shouted.

There was no sound. He opened the cottage door and blew out his breath.

“Phew,” he said. “Dirty old tyke.”

He called again, but the cottage echoed emptily. He stumbled upstairs. The rumpled bed was empty.

“Silly old devil,” he said. “More trouble . . .”

He went out into the night again and stood, hesitantly. Then he heard behind the shouting of guns the lowing of the animals in the barn. He saw a faint light there. He trotted to the barn.

“Dammit,” he shouted. “Put that light out there!”

He heard faint and rebellious sounds in thick dialect. Indignantly he strode into the barn, smelling the sweetness of it. He saw the old man, crouched inside one of the loose-box stalls.

“Dammit, put that lantern out—and get up the house! Into the cellar!”

“Nay, Gen’ral—ye can’t leave a poor beast. Pride—her time’s coom ahead. She’s that bad! And we allus has trouble with her at best.”

Hamish arrested his movement of bending to pick up the lantern, and looked over at the cow. Oddale Pride! He went near. The great cow lifted her head and smelled him, sadly. Then she hiccuped.

Curious, Hamish thought. Cow is the only animal in the world whose belch is a sweet perfume—if man . . .

Then his mind clutched at the fact that the cow was in trouble.

“Poor girl,” he said. He knelt down and scratched her between her horns.

She was magnificent. How often he’d stood by that head—General Hamish Cathaway, D.S.O., M.C., M.V.O., (Ret.) and Champion Oddale Pride again winner at . . . she’d been dried off, five, six, seven—she shouldn’t calve for . . . but Blenkinthorpe was right. Oh, damn! A premature—and the vet fooling his time away in the army—no, hold on—a man’s duty in time of war . . .

“The banging done it,” Blenkinthorpe was droning. “When it started Ah coom to comfort ’em, and good job Ah did, for here she is . . .”

“Good man,” old Hamish said.

Then he remembered the world beyond the barn.

“Good man. Stay here. I’ll let them know up there, and I’ll be back . . .”

“Nay, Gen’ral, it’s . . .”

Hamish hurried away, smiling. When he left the great stone barn, he turned up his coat collar as if going out into rain. He trotted up the path, and suddenly the sound of the guns and the air-rending snarl of shells sighing on their way cheered him and made him happy as if they were a fragrant and half-forgotten love song of his youth—one he had never expected to hear again.

He went to the cellar and took the torch from Thomas.

“I’ll be down in the barn,” he said, calmly. “Don’t worry—stay here, everyone.”

Upstairs he took a flask of brandy from the sideboard. He jogged back to the barn. The beasts were all standing. But there was no sound of chewing. They were standing in fright at the unusual noise.

“She’s ter’ble bad,” Blenkinthorpe said. “Ah thowt tha’d never coom. See—she’s started.”

The old man went to the cow and placed his knees against the hindquarters and tugged.

“Ah can’t find t’yead,” he panted. “Coom lass—hev a try. Poosh ’ard!”

He struggled, agedly. Hamish held the torch and watched him. The minutes flowed on and on as Blenkinthorpe grunted and strained. Finally he stopped.

“Eigh, Ah’m flaid we’re off to hev a bad time wi’ her. Ah’m done for.”

“Nonsense,” Hamish said. “Let me try.”

“Nay, Gen’ral, tha’ll get all nasty muckied oop!”

“Nonsense, man! Hold this torch!”

He tugged at the slippery, warm wetness, pulling until he felt sickness in his stomach.

“Nay, Gen’ral . . .”

“Come, man. We’ll both try. Get hold, there!”

They both tugged, straining ineffectually, panting heavily.

“That’s noa road,” Blenkinthorpe said. “Two owd men—not half as good as one real one.”

“Don’t chatter—pull, man!” Hamish shouted. “The head’s coming!”

They swayed and leaned, but they only got in each other’s way and the birth would not come any further. They rested from their labor, and wiped their hands on straw, and tugged again, not knowing how much time was going past. At last Blenkinthorpe sat on the edge of the concrete dung runnel and moaned.

“It’s noa goa. She’ll dee,” he said.

“Nonsense, man. If you’d . . .”

“ ’Tain’t me and it ain’t thee, Gen’ral. It’s ’er. She’s give up. When they give up trying they’re done for. Unless we try to tak’ it out piecemeal. That’d save her.”

“I’ll be damned if I will, man.”

“Aye, and she’ll be damned if we doan’t.”

“I’m going to . . .” Hamish started, belligerently.

Then the different crash came and a blinding light winked and died to a glow. The animals stirred. There was the smell of explosive, Hamish thought. He ran to the door.

“Incendiary,” he said. “Down in the field. Let it burn—there’s nothing there, thank God.”

He went back to the cow. Suddenly he felt a focus for his impotence.

“Damned bloody Huns,” he said.

“Aye, the’re boogers, all reight, ain’t they?” Blenkinthorpe agreed.

“By God, just for that, Blenkinthorpe, we’re going to do it. By God, we’ll show them. Here! Come hold her head!”

He forced the cow’s head back, and poured the brandy from the flask. It sloshed down her throat, and as the fumes rose she shook her head away. Blenkinthorpe expertly held her jaws together, and stroked her throat, waiting until she had swallowed.

“Now.” Hamish said. “Get me a wheelbarrow.”

He remembered afterwards that Blenkinthorpe had just opened his mouth to speak when it came—a wave of overpowering light and an irresistible crush of air rather than a crash. He had had his hand on the cow’s flank, but now he was in the concrete runnel, groping for the torch. There was still the sound of falling stone overhead, and this time he really smelled the explosive charge.

“Bloody fools,” he was chanting. “Bloody fools! What in the name of God do they want to bomb my barn for?”

Then he was holding the torch, and Blenkinthorpe was clutching his arm.

“Are y’all reight, Gen’ral?”

“All right? All right?” Hamish echoed. “I’ll bloody well show them I’m all right. By God, if they think indiscriminate bombing is going to demoralize our civilian population . . .”

He stopped, almost aghast at his own use of the word civilian toward himself.

“They’ve hit t’granary wing,” Blenkinthorpe intoned, factually. “The boogers!”

Hamish drew himself up.

“Blenkinthorpe,” he commanded. “Go get me that wheelbarrow. I’ll get this damned calf born if they blast the whole bloody barn over us, stone by stone. You understand? We’ll do our duty.”

“It ain’t us,” Blenkinthorpe pointed out. “It’s ’er—if she’d do ’er duty.”

He went mumbling away and came back with the wheelbarrow.

“Now a rope,” Hamish said.

The old man edged away again. When he came back, Hamish turned the wheelbarrow over, tied the rope to the wheel, noosed the other end about the calf’s neck.

“Now,” he said. “Sit on that wheelbarrow with me, and pull on the wheel. Something’s going to come.”

They sat on the wheelbarrow, bracing their legs against the dung runnel in the floor, pulling on the spokes, leaning back to keep the barrow from tilting. The rope wound, tighter and tighter, around the axle. They pulled until the blood stood in their faces.

"Eigh, it's noa use," Blenkinthorpe grunted.

"Pull, man, pull! Don't talk!"

They tugged and then Hamish saw the old man's crinkled face turned to him, and a childlike air of wonder on it.

"By gum," he said, "summat boodged!"

He breathed the words in awe. Hamish shone the torch. He saw the knees of the calf.

"Aye," Hamish said, and went on in echo of the dialect. "Summat has budged. You've hit the nail on the head."

They grinned at each other, and lay back, getting their strength.

"Let's try pulling it bi' hand," the old cowman said. "Or happen us'd pull the booger's yead off."

They undid the rope, and sweated and struggled again. It seemed, in that long timelessness, that all else had gone until Hamish heard a voice that had called before. He shone the torch and saw Purkiss.

"Turn that light off," Purkiss snapped.

"What the devil!" Hamish said. "Who are you to tell me—what are you doing here? Get out of here! Get off my property!"

The damnable Red—invading one's land!

Purkiss stood, his head thrust forward. Then he smiled, slowly.

"I'm not interested in your property," he said. "But—we're the A.R.P. unit of the village, and we've just put a fire out."

He turned away, and then came back.

"And as a warden I can order you to put that light out. I don't want to have to do it—unless you won't."

Hamish swallowed, gathering his breath. The damned Red. Teaching honest lads how to strangle people, and calling that soldiering. Just an example of the nasty, tricky ideas the world was getting. No honor. He'd tell him that. But Blenkinthorpe spoke first.

"Us is getting a calf borned, Purkiss. Ye can't leave a poor beast . . ."

Purkiss flashed his own torch, and then, without a word, walked away.

"Eigh, us should ha' axed him to bear a hand!" Blenkinthorpe said.

"That—that assassin? The devil we should. Look, she's working herself now. Here—it'll be over in a little while."

Quickly, now, the calf was born, and Hamish stood, looking at the tiny hooves—the miniature quality of birth. Like a baby's fingernails. Blenkinthorpe was crooning:

"Eigh, a heifer! A bonny lickle heifer! And marked like her daddy. Sitha, Gen'ral—like her daddy! A bonny lickle heifer."

He looked up happily.

“Eigh, Gen’ral—tha’s all stoof and blood! Tha’d better leave it to me now—Ah’ll tend to t’afterbirth. It’s a mucky job.”

“No, I’ll see it through,” Hamish insisted.

But he felt tired, and there was a grayness of near dawn. He sat on the wheelbarrow, not watching the old man.

“Come,” he said at last. “We’ll get cleaned up—and have a tot to warm us.”

They went outside to the bird-loudness of before dawn. In the gray light he saw the knot of village men grouped around the arched entrance to the old threshing-floor—an entry as well-built and as fine as any church could boast. But not now. There was rubble and hanging stone and a great pit. The men were telling him of the damage. He saw a truck, outlined in the background.

There was a sick emptiness in him as he mourned for the archway. He heard Blenkinthorpe’s voice, somewhere in the dimness:

“Ah says to him: ‘Two owd men isn’t as good as one real one.’ And he says: ‘Blenkinthorpe, ma man! Thee and me’s been together all on us lives. And us has had our ins and outs at one another, but us is two real Yorkshiremen. And, by gum, Yorkshiremen, owd or young, isn’t off to be stopped by a lickle thing like a bomb dropped by no fooking Germans.’ And he says: ‘Goa get me that wheelbarrow . . .’ ”

Old Hamish shook his head. Already the event was building into village history, to be re-embroidered and more richly trimmed on each telling.

He lifted his voice:

“I want to thank all you A.R.P. men for your fine work tonight. And—if you’ll step to the house, I’m sure they’ll find a little something to warm you before you go!”

He heard the hum of satisfaction—the voices of men calling their chums. He found Blenkinthorpe.

“Get me the bucket,” he said. “I’ll clean off a bit.”

He peeled off his coat, wearily, feeling stiffness in his arms. When Blenkinthorpe brought the bucket, he splashed in it while Blenkinthorpe stood by. Then he heard alarm in the old man’s voice:

“Why, tha’s wowndid, Gen’ral! Tha’s wowndid!”

“Nonsense,” he began.

Then he saw the long gash over the muscle of his forearm, and, seeing it, the stab of pain came into it. The tension of the excitement fled, and he put his hand over the blood-clotted gash.

“It’s nothing, man,” he said. “Give me my coat.”

The old man draped the coat over his shoulders and held his arm. Without a word they went jogging to the house—trotting together as men go when one is being led from the football field with an injury.

“Now, man,” Hamish said. “Now, man!”

Blenkinthorpe was running into the house, calling.

“The Gen’ral’s got a wownd! The Gen’ral’s got a wownd!”

And then, suddenly, they were all there—the girls with white faces, Emily holding his arm, Thomas holding the chair in the library as they eased him into it. As if he were dying!

"Now, now," he said. "It's nothing—absolutely nothing! Now everybody go about his business."

But no one obeyed him. Emily was bathing the arm in the basin of warm water. Thomas was at the telephone.

"Thomas! Put that telephone down! We don't need a doctor. It's a veritable scratch!"

He heard Blenkinthorpe's voice:

"Eigh, there were once a chap, name o' Fleckihorn, it were, and he birthed a cow, and he hed a coot on his finger—nobbut a bit of a scratch, it were. But i' five days, it swole and swole and he deed i' terrible agony."

Hamish closed his eyes. He did feel weak—probably lost quite a bit of blood, he thought. He heard Thomas talking to the exchange. This time he did not stop him.

He opened his eyes and smiled. The faces of the girls were white. He felt the sear of iodine in the cut.

"Will you get about your business?" he said. Then he coughed. "Well—since you're all here . . ."

They were good people. They had behaved well.

"I just want to say, how splendidly you've all behaved. Everyone—Thomas for taking charge in my absence—the rest of you for carrying on, accepting discipline.

"That's it—discipline. If we have that—no one can hurt us. Air raids can't hurt us. They can't demoralize us. Then, when they're gone, we can all carry on with our jobs—each with his own job. Because we're all front-line soldiers in this war. Each of us has a duty to perform . . . each of us . . ."

A duty! But what was his duty? This war—and here he was . . .

"There, you've talked enough," Emily said. "All right, everyone."

He opened his eyes and nodded.

"Yes. Thomas—please see that the men—the A.R.P. men—are given something warm—a drink."

"They didn't wait, sir. Purkiss—er—said that they had to go back on duty immediately."

"Oh, he did, did he?"

Hamish now felt unreasonably weak and irritable. He waved his hand at them, to shoo them from the room. When he opened his eyes, Emily was smiling at him.

"Dammit," he said. "You needn't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing, Hamish. I'd never laugh at you. There—I think it was a very fine little speech. Just what they needed."

"No," he said, and his voice held the pent-up misery of all the past months. "It was showing off. I—I feel so useless. Oh, Emily, I feel so useless in this war!"

There! It was said. Just said like that—in the middle of nothing. He stared at the desk, feeling like a miserable child. She stood, not looking at him. Then, slowly, she patted his thatch of white hair.

"But you're not useless," she said. "It was true what you said, Hamish—each of us to our own duty."

"But—but what's my duty? The world is being torn . . ."

"Your duty is—just being here, Hamish, that's all. And it's a lot. In all the other wars—they were always abroad. It was like a holiday for you—going away. But this one—it's here. We're all in the front line, you said. And I suppose we are. This is the realest war you've ever been in, I suppose. The only real one. And perhaps getting Pride's calf born was the bravest and most important part you've played in any war you've ever been in.

"And—think how much more there is to do—carrying on—this place. Food—as important as bullets and all that, you know! And morale—each village a fortress of strength.

"It doesn't need generals so much this time, dear—because we'll all turn to the natural men of strength. And since you are so strong—you must be the pillar to hold up hundreds of us here. You must be our leader."

She went on patting his head, and he stared into space, beginning to design new castles of thought on the foundation she had built.

"There—what a long speech I've made," she said. "I think that's the doctor coming."

She went from the room, and Hamish bent his head. Suddenly he laughed.

This desk—here—such a little time ago, he'd thought of committing suicide. And now—here was a life! Emily was right. Each manor house a fortress—the return to the baronial system—without serfdom, of course. Only the good things of it, of course. The lord of the manor protecting and uniting his people! Oddale an island, strong and self-contained, defying all the enemy's might, turning out food for England—if the damned fools would keep the price of grain down.

The thought of that broke the picture. He thought, suddenly, of Purkiss—not letting the men stop for a drink. Those chaps—liable to cause trouble after the war. Social reform—all right, that was. But social reform was one thing, and Bolshevism another.

He grew irritated by the necessity for argument within himself. It would be better to go back to the other picture.

Oddale, a center of strength, and himself, the center of the center. Himself versus the world, and let come what may.

He heard Emily's voice—talking to the doctor. He opened his eyes and sat up. He was old—old . . .

He crushed the thought away, pressing the bandage about his arm until he felt the pain.

A wound! He was really in this war! Five wars—five wounds! Five wars for his country—five wounds on his body! A man . . .

The voices were near. The doorknob was turning. He opened his mouth, ready for the first phrase. He would say:

“Ah, Dennison—all this damned nonsense! Nothing but a scratch, man! A mere scratch!”

The door was opening.

He spoke.

CHAPTER XXXVII

DINNER dragged interminably. Prudence fought back temptation to say bitter things to her mother. Her mother knew she was being shut out from something, so she was being too bravely bright and sparkling. That was to build up for the punishment. Then, afterwards, she could say:

"Heavens knows I'm nice as can be, but you two—you just keep *everything* from me!"

Her mother was chattering on. "You're not eating anything, Prue! Heavens knows it's hard enough to get good food—and then no one eats it. It takes all the joy out of the work one has to put on planning a meal. And I got lamb especially for you."

Prudence made herself eat.

"Heavens knows," her mother sighed, "I see so little of either of you any more. You come home on leave and you don't spend a minute . . ."

Prudence bowed her head, watching her father. He went on with his meal silently, letting the words flow past him. At last he coughed, and pushed back his chair. He put his serviette aside.

"Sorry I have to run," he said. "I've a case . . . Want to come with me, Prue? You can drive for me. The devil in these blackouts. It's beginning to get dark earlier . . . September . . ."

She got up quickly and pushed him before her. If they hurried they would hear less of the complaint that would come. She heard the despairing tone following her into the hall:

"I don't see why you *both* have to go and leave me. If you've got something up your sleeves, you might at least take me into your confidence. I'm sure I—and the raids . . ."

"The all clear went five minutes ago," Prudence shouted, and then shut the door.

They went to the car at the curb and Prue started it. When it was under way, crawling along, she blew her breath:

"I thought I'd die—please—what about him, father?"

"Well," he said, slowly, "we'll operate tomorrow at eleven. Then we'll soon have him all fixed up . . . and everything'll be all right."

She felt surcease in the nervous outlet of driving the car. She kept her eyes ahead.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked. "It isn't a simple concussion, is it? What's wrong? You have names for things . . ."

“Oh, no,” he laughed. “If I told you, then you’d go home and look it up and get worried. There’s danger in half-knowledge. You know, years ago when we knew less about cancer, I read about it and I was sure I had it. Cancer of the throat. Nothing could convince me I hadn’t. I still have it, regularly—twice a year. I go and get examined, and nothing will convince me . . .”

She knew he had taken the conversation away to make it easier for her.

“Please,” she said. “It’s worse not knowing.”

She pulled the car to the curb and waited.

“Please.”

“Well,” he said. “If it were anyone else, I’d lie. But there’s nothing to lie about. That’s the devil of brain work. Ninety per cent of the time we say we know—and really we never do until we get inside and take a look. And then—it always turns out to be something amazingly simple.”

“Is his skull fractured?”

“No, there’s no fracture!”

“There’s something else?”

“Yes—there’s a sub-dural hemorrhage at the left-rear of the skull.”

“What’s that? What’s sub-dural?”

“Oh, you know—the dura’s one of the three coatings over the brain—and there’s a hemorrhage under it—giving some intra-cranial pressure.”

“And you cut through and relieve the pressure.”

“Yes, I’ll take the clot away.”

“But I thought the scalp was torn on the forward part of the skull.”

“It is. But that’s not the seat of the real trouble.”

“How do you know it’s in the back?”

“It’s simple. You test various reflexes . . .”

“And each part of the brain relates to a different reflex?”

“That’s it, more or less. No response somewhere—that part of the brain controlling it is suffering. Now that’s all there is to it. Elementary, my dear Watson. You know that everything that can be done, will be done?”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Then—try not to worry about it. Shall we drive—we can’t go back home yet. Or shall we sit here and talk?”

“No, I’ll drive.”

She drove slowly and aimlessly through the curious emptiness of the blackout, concentrating on driving well, keeping the engine pulling smoothly. Long afterwards she thought of her father. He was curiously silent.

“You told me not to worry,” she said, “but aren’t you worried yourself? You seem to be.”

She put out one hand and he took it.

“If it were just any case, you’d never worry about it,” she said. “But just because it’s for me . . .”

“That’s all right, Prue. Of course I worry a bit more. I always worry a little, you know. If I don’t worry—perhaps I wouldn’t be a good doctor. And this chap—he’s strong and healthy.”

He waited.

“Yes, there’s that much,” she said.

“Never been sick, has he?”

“No. I remember he said he’d never been sick a day in his life. Except minor things—he had a jaw infection when he was a kid—bad dental work—and things like that. Oh, yes—and he had pneumonia after Dunkirk. I’d almost forgotten that.”

“Pneumonia? Of course. A lot of them did. Exhaustion and exposure, no doubt. He was a nice chap?”

She smiled and nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “Of course. But I don’t know much about him. Merry fellow, was he?”

“Oh, yes. We used to laugh and have a good time.”

“Not all the time, though. You were serious sometimes.”

“Oh, yes. We’d lie awake—and talk—in the bombing raids.”

“Yes. Quarrel sometimes?”

“Oh, well. One does—it’s human.”

“Yes, of course. But—violently?”

“Sometimes.”

“Did he get bad-tempered?”

“Not unless I deserved it—or if he had a morning after.”

“He’d get bad ones?”

“Sometimes. I didn’t, though.”

“Why did you drink?”

“Oh, just for good times. You know, he was on leave—and he’d been through quite a lot and wanted to forget it. But he was very brave. Really. He gave up his place in the boat at Dunkirk to let another man escape. He didn’t tell me. His chum, you know—Monty? He told me. He was really—so brave and fine.”

“I see. Was he hurt at Dunkirk?”

“No—you mean physically? No. All he got out of it was a bad cold that turned into pneumonia—from standing in the water—when they waded out to the boats. But, of course, it must have been quite a tremendous strain on all of them, physically and mentally. I know it was constantly on his mind. He didn’t seem to be able to forget it.”

“Oh, did he tell you that?”

“Not at first. He didn’t even say he’d been there, but I knew. At night—he’d grind his teeth terribly and shout out things.”

“What things?”

“About the war—about not having any more bombs. They were in the rear guard at Douai. And they’d had to hunt for bombs . . . Do you think it affected his mind?”

“No, no. I’m just interested in him. I don’t know him, you see. But he was always perfectly rational?”

“Of course. That is—well, it’s nothing, but sometimes, when he was talking, he’d stop—just as if everything were blank. And then he’d go on—right where he left off.”

“Start talking, stop, and then go on?”

“Yes. Is that bad? Does it mean anything?”

He sought words quickly.

“Oh, no, no. Most of us do that, you know. If we’re thinking—only a fool goes right on babbling, letting his tongue get ahead of his mind.”

“Yes. He’s got a good mind, father.”

“But headaches. He had lots of headaches?”

“Why, yes, he had. Is that a symptom of something?”

“No,” he said. “Not necessarily . . . Ah, there it goes!”

They heard the banshee wail of the alarm. She looked at her luminous watch.

“Nine-eighteen—and third tonight,” she said. “And that’s more terrifying than the raid itself.”

He knew she hated the scream of the alarm.

“No,” he said slowly. “You wouldn’t say that if . . .”

“Are there many injured?”

“Yes. It’s getting heavier every night. We’re beginning to get quite a good many. You’d better take me home. Or should we run round to St. Joe’s and see how he is? He’ll be asleep . . .”

“No,” she said. “We must run you home in case they need you. And you’ve got to have a good rest for tomorrow.”

“Yes,” he said, slowly. “When one is my age—we don’t have quite the recuperative powers of you youngsters. We’ve got to have rest.”

“Yes,” she said. “We’ll go home and you rest.”

They drove home, hearing the thump and mutter of anti-aircraft fire. It was far away—in the East End. London—their London—still seemed safe. His planes didn’t seem to be able to get to central London.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Iris lay back in the deck chair, feeling the sun on her closed lids. She analyzed her nausea. It was as if her stomach were a floating thing. When the ship rolled, her body rolled with the boat, but her stomach kept its own level.

Every time she thought of the headline the nausea rose. She could still see it: "320 Children Saved From Torpedoed Ship." She had almost canceled her own sailing—but she hadn't.

She began to get a glow from her own bravery at having sailed. For now they were safe—out of the U-boat zone. Safe from it all now—bombs, raids, U-boats—thanks to her courage and decision.

She heard the chant of children in organized play, and thought of her own children. Mills, she told herself, was so very capable. She went to sleep.

When she opened her eyes once more, the chanting children were gone, but the young woman in charge of them was in the chair beside her.

"Hello," the girl said, with outrageous cheerfulness. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm not a particularly good sailor." Iris said it reprovingly.

The young woman stretched.

"Ah, it's good to get them down for their morning nap—a few moments to relax in."

Iris did not answer.

"You know, you ought to let your two little boys come into the organized games," the young woman offered. "They stand and watch so longingly."

Iris put her hand to her head and then closed her eyes.

The young woman spoke sharply.

"Well, they're very nice children," she said.

"Oh, yes, yes," Iris said. "It isn't that. In fact, I was most agreeably surprised. They hardly look like refugee children. Like the ones from the London slums—that all ran back home again."

The young woman laughed.

"A family I know had seven of those," Iris went on. "Seven! They hadn't the least notion of ordinary cleanliness. They wet the bed and three of them needed delousing. Finally, this family left the children with the servants and came to their apartment in town."

“That was funny in a way,” the young woman said. “The children coming from the town to the country—and the people moving from the country to the town.”

“It was terribly mismanaged,” Iris said.

“I suppose so. But this is well handled. They select the children rather carefully for overseas evacuation, you know. But still—in a way—you feel almost sorry for the less privileged children. It’s almost as if their background precludes them from a chance at a life free from bombing and slaughter.”

“Not at all,” Iris said, curtly. “You wouldn’t send our worst representatives to America. All children can’t go—so it’s only natural to wish to preserve those of the finer type.”

“I suppose that’s so,” the young woman said. “In a way—they’re like ambassadors to another land.”

“Exactly,” Iris said. “You wouldn’t wish the kindness of people in another land to have to put up with our slum children.”

The girl sighed.

“I suppose not,” she said. “This war is awful. But then, one thing, it’s certainly widening the horizons of so many youngsters. Slum children getting out into fresh air in the country; these fine kiddies, seeing new lands, new ways.”

She leaned forward, feeling that somewhere there was a great and important truth hiding among her words and she could almost see it—almost.

“Yes,” Iris said.

She drew her breath. It was such a relief to be out of the awful U-boat zone.

“Yes,” she went on, “I suppose that in so many ways this war is doing a great deal of good—a *great* deal of good!”

She lay back in the luxury of the warm sun, closed her eyes, and went to sleep again.

CHAPTER XXXIX

ROGER soaped his hands mechanically. He was remembering Prudence as he left her, standing in the corridor that had no depth. The end windows made such long reflections in the polished surface of the floor that she had seemed to be a blonde-haloed figure standing, somehow miraculously, in a bottomless pool.

He looked at the sand-glass above the washbasins, and heard Ferris' voice:

"You know Dr. Mathis, Dr. Cathaway?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Yes. How are you, Mathis?"

He put cordiality in his voice, and then let his mind go far away, again. He fixed his eyes, unseeing, on the white of the wall, turning his hands, turning and turning.

His mind, untethered, leapt away to memory of a long-gone summer at Torquay. He wondered why, of all things, it should think of that.

He thought: But let the mind roam, free. Soon, it will have to come to heel, to be ordered, to be marched this way and that, without release.

He kept his eyes fixed on the wall, holding up his hands. Then he was flexing his hand inside the rubber glove, absently. And now:

"We're ready, doctor."

He went into the operating room. There was the flood of light. Beyond that, nothing existed—the glass partitions, the outer theater—just black space. There was some dim movement. The medical students—assembled for a Cathaway operation. He felt suddenly tired.

He stood, his arms hanging. Then Ferris caught his eye and dipped his head, once. He walked toward the whiteness of the tent and stood, looking at the bluish-gray of the shaven scalp showing through the apex of the tent. This skull—this man—and Prudence. This man——

"We're ready, doctor," Ferris said.

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

He held out his hand and the hypodermic syringe was placed on his fingers. Quickly he infiltrated the scalp with the novocaine. Then he straightened and spoke clearly.

"From the history of this case and from our physical findings we believe this to be a sub-dural hemorrhage affecting the left parietal region."

He held out his hand for the scalpel, and drew it over the blue-gray in the first, swift, biting line.

“However,” he said, “there are inescapable indications that the case may be further complicated.”

He was thinking: It is always like a thin-lipped mouth, breaking into a gentle smile: the way the scalp creeps back showing the skull.

He watched his hands, working strongly and firmly.

This man, the beloved of his child. His daughter. The little girl in pigtails . . .

“The patient is a soldier, who experienced the recent action. Undoubtedly he was affected by the strain of the war—although he is in good physical condition. However, upon his return from France he was hospitalized for pneumonia, and discharged later upon recovery.”

The beloved—not a girl in pigtails. The blonde-aureoled young woman he had left waiting in the bottomless pit of light. Prudence. Prudence . . .

“The patient was brought here after an accident, with quite sizable lacerations of the scalp at the front of the head. The present clot, however, is as I said in the parietal region on the left side.”

Prudence. Prudence. Prudence. Lord alive, the word had no meaning or sense. What in heaven’s name had made them christen her with such a meaningless sound? Prudence! But the woman downstairs. She wasn’t meaningless . . .

“It seems evident, then, that the hemorrhage was due to a trauma incurred some time prior to the accident which brought the patient here. Indeed there are still signs of a newly healed contusion anterior to the left ear.

“You may notice, incidentally,” he said, “the great care taken to avoid hæmostasis. We are checking the hemorrhages with the clips. Formerly, the ligatures necessary . . .”

He heard his voice droning on, and saw his hands moving, and thought: Get back to the point. You’ll have to get there sooner or later.

“The indications of complications,” he said aloud, as if reminding himself.

He set the Hudson burr against the white bone, feeling the warmth in his throat that was always there when metal first ate at bone.

“There were certain signs of spasticity on the part of the patient. This should be remembered in conjunction with the fact that the patient has also suffered pneumonia recently, and that X-ray reveals a fibroid tuberculosis of the right lung.”

There, it was said.

“Perhaps some of you may draw anticipatory conclusions from these facts.”

He went on working, now silent, lost in the concentration of the operation itself. As he set the instrument for the fourth time, he spoke again.

“The Hudson burr,” he said. “Extremely efficient—making it impossible to penetrate any deeper than the thickness of the skull itself.”

His mind returned to Prudence, but he forced it away again, and found almost release in speaking aloud.

“This is, of course, the Gigli saw.”

He bent, now again rapt in his work, passing the wire-like saw through the aperture and under the skull. He caught the end, and began the back-and-forth sawing, pulling

the flexible toothed band steadily. He watched the line creep closer and closer—and then the first side of the flap was done. He began the second. His mind escaped again.

The young woman downstairs—young, full-blooded, ripe. This man, her beloved. After it was all over he would go to her and say—he would say—he must begin now to get words ready for that moment. He must have words ready to say to her . . .

The three sides of the oblong were finished.

"We now turn back the osteoplastic flap," he said.

"At the completion of decompression," he went on, automatically, "we may expect the pressure of the hemorrhage to push the brain into the aperture in a hernia-like manner. There is usually great intra-cranial pressure. Yes—frequently quite great."

The rectangle of skull came away and hung attached to its hinge of scalp. As if obedient to his words the gray pulp rose tightly.

Then, even as he felt the glow of an operation going exactly to schedule, the chill passed over him.

Something in him said:

You knew it would be so. You knew it would be so. You knew it. You thought luck . . . luck . . . there is no luck!

The nurse was removing the towel with which she had wiped his forehead, and then he knew he was sweating.

"Thank you, nurse," he said.

How long had he stood there? How long—three seconds, perhaps. The present—the now—the people behind the glass—Prudence . . .

The thoughts came in words. Gethsemane—Prudence—luck—and truth, too. The final element—truth.

Gethsemane, he said to himself. Comparing yourself to Christ!

I wish I could die, he said, inside himself. If I could die and not be here—never be here. I can't even do this much for Prudence.

He spoke, slowly, and he knew his voice was steady and dispassionate.

"Unfortunately," he said, "you at that distance are unable to observe what we have here. But those of us here can see a certain thickness of the meninges—there is a flocculent serum—tubercular in origin, I surmise."

He saw Ferris peering, bending forward.

This man—this Prudence—that Prudence—and his hands . . .

He drew his breath and made himself speak.

"We shall continue operation for the removal of the clot."

He held back his head so that the perspiration should not drop. He felt the towel pass over it.

He watched his hands at work, feeling that he was plodding along an endless road. There were buildings on each side. But no doors. One had to go on, on—an endless distance such as existed only in a child's nightmare—to get home.

He saw her sitting by the window in the hall, now no longer that shining pool, for the daylight had almost gone. He was searching for words to say, and then felt somehow cheated when she spoke first. She turned her head and smiled and said clearly:

"They took him into his room. He looked—rather done in."

"Of course," he said, irritably, thinking that she knew better than to expect a patient to be lively directly after such an operation. "Of course. In the morning . . ."

"Yes. In the morning," she said. "Shall we—go?"

He thought: If she'd only given me a chance, I'd have told her. I've got to sooner or later. But . . .

They went silently from the hospital. He was climbing in the car, and she was bending forward to turn the key. She halted in the movement and looked at him as he pushed his hand over his forehead.

"You're tired, aren't you?" she said. "I know—nearly four hours it took. It's a very long operation, isn't it?"

Now! This is the time to tell her. . . . If she were only looking away from him.

"You know," he said, and his own dawning thought gave him surprise. "If I weren't—a respected doctor—I'd go out and get blotto! Absolutely blotto!"

She snapped the key and started the car.

"All right," she said. "Let's. Me too."

"Ah, but Prue . . ."

"No," she said. "I couldn't possibly go home. I couldn't—I'd yell—I couldn't . . ."

"But—I wouldn't know where . . ."

"That's all right. I'll take you," she said. "I'll take you."

He felt the curious end-of-the-world feeling—as when he had been a young man and had gone off on irresponsible rickety-rackety crew jaunts around London. He was surprised that that world still existed—it hadn't ended when he had left it—the world of dancers and well-gowned women and laughter into wine cups. What a staid life he had led! How staid he had grown!

"Sorry," he said. "I don't do so well."

"You're dancing wonderfully," she said. "You'd learn in no time. You're so light on your feet."

"I used," he almost boasted, "to dance the maxixe."

It was curious, he thought. This half-savage custom of holding a woman, going through certain strictly regulated motions in time to music.

And this woman—this wasn't Prudence of the pigtails. So it couldn't be Prudence. It was a woman whose breasts made soft contact with his body when he held her.

He shook his head, and misstepped.

"Sorry," he said.

The dance was over and they sat at the table. Then he shredded his own feelings. Of course, this was Prudence, and he was her father. Most—most irregular—having unfatherly feelings.

But, too, she was a woman like—like any of the others sitting at the tables. That was what was so hard to understand. He looked at her, and she smiled.

"You'd make a wonderful dancer," she said.

"Huh!"

"You would. I bet people are saying—look at that distinguished-looking man—how well he dances."

"No," he said. "If they said anything, they'd say: 'Look at that damned old codger with the beautiful young girl. Must be his money that does it.' "

Suddenly he was tired.

"Shall we go?"

"All right. It's almost closing here—and we won't be able to get another drink."

When they were outside in the cool darkness, she said:

"I don't want to go home—let's keep on going."

"Where? I thought you said everything closes at this time."

"I'll bet it doesn't," she said. "Wait here."

When she came back she took his arm.

"I knew I could find something—the doorman told me. You'll have to say you're a member of the club."

It was only a short distance, and then he was knocking at the door, seeing a pair of eyes inspect him through the sliding panel. The door opened.

Inside he sat at the table, looking at the small place, packed with men in uniform, and amply supplied with enough hostesses to go all round.

"My word," he said. "Illegal places like this—right in the heart of London!"

The whisky was horrible. He shuddered and watched Prudence drink, quickly.

"That's the way to do it," she said. "Let's have another."

The waiter, dirty-aproned, brought more.

"Don't make yourself ill," he said.

"It's all right. If I've got to get drunk—who's a better guardian than my father? You'd take me out on a binge any time, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," he said.

He felt ashamed of himself and of the place. It was all right for the others—all the young men with wings on the chests of their uniforms. Youth couldn't be sullied by it—but he—age turned it tawdry.

He turned and watched the girls—pitiful in the bright frowziness of soiled evening dresses. There wasn't one who—who could make a man's pulse beat rise a fraction—unless he were tight. Prue—she was the only clean-looking thing here.

"Poor drabs," he said.

“Don’t pick on them,” she said, angrily. “They’re doing their best. Can we have another?”

He was surprised at her tone. But then he nodded. He couldn’t scold. If a man took his daughter out—he couldn’t change in the middle of it all and suddenly become the restraining parent. He watched her drink, and then they sat moodily at the table.

“It’s no use,” she said, suddenly. “We don’t get tight, do we? Not blotto!”

He drew a pattern with his finger on the table top. Her head was down, watching him. He looked up to smile at her, and saw her face.

“Now, Prue—don’t cry, please.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “They’re used to crying women in places like this. No one will pay any attention.”

“No, I meant . . .”

“I won’t cry,” she said. “It’s just—I’m all right. I’m not going to make a fuss.”

She took the handkerchief he offered and wiped her face, quickly.

“How long will he live?” she said.

He opened his mouth to speak.

“Why,” he began. “The—he’s in . . .”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I know. I went in and watched, and I heard you.”

He bowed his head, watching her finger.

“Yes—I felt sure you were there.”

“One of the nurses let me in—she didn’t know it was—she just thought it was one of your operations—any operation. It wasn’t her fault.”

She looked at him and smiled.

“Poor you,” she said.

“No! Now . . .”

“Poor you. Knowing your daughter was out there—and yet, knowing that that mustn’t make any difference—and having to say it. You had to say it. Tell the truth despite my being there. I—I couldn’t have loved you as much if you’d—you’d not said it.”

He was silent.

“What’s spasticity?” she asked.

“His muscular responses on the right side . . . pertaining to spastic . . .”

“Can’t you do anything for him? Can’t they do anything?”

“All we can do is—give him twenty grains of sulfanilamide four times a day,” he said. He recited it as if mocking the words.

“Then what will happen?”

“Tomorrow morning—it’s this morning now—he’ll appear much better. That’s the relief of the hemorrhage pressure. He may be quite rational—and quite relieved.”

“And then?”

“Toward evening we should expect certain—signals to display themselves.”

“What signals?”

“Rising temperature. There’ll begin to be moments of irrationality.”

“And then?”

Her voice was muffled, and he saw she was sitting with her elbow on the table and her hand shielding her face so that he should not see it.

“Now, Prue. It’s no use—torturing yourself with it. You can’t help . . .”

“No. Go on. I might as well know it all now. I’m all right. Look, I’m not crying.”

He did not look at her.

“Rising temperature,” she prompted.

He went on, as if reciting a lecture.

“In the following twenty-four hours, we should expect to see the fever mounting. Twelve hours later pyrexia will be well advanced. The patient will become stuporous. Then comatose. Pulse will become rapid—slowly it will become imperceptible. Breathing will become more and more labored. We may have Cheyne Stokes breathing.

“In from forty-eight to seventy-two hours from the operation, the—death will take place. Death will take place.”

He still looked down at the table, waiting. He heard her move.

“Thank you,” she said. “Can we—this is such a very loathsome place—can we go home?”

“I think we’d better,” he said.

CHAPTER XL

COMING through the Saturday morning quietness she had thought: Suppose he has died. Suppose he has died in the night! Hurry! Suppose he has died!

But when she opened the door and saw his eyes turn toward her, such a gladness swept her that she forgot everything else.

He said: "I've been waiting a long time for you."

She went to the bedside and smiled down on him.

"I couldn't come before you were awake and—and washed, could I?"

He smiled, slowly.

"Oh, you look so fine," she said. "You look so much better."

"I am better," he said. "I feel so clearheaded. Just a bit squiffy in the stomach, that's all."

While she was hearing the aliveness of his voice, she remembered for the first time since she had been in the room—he wasn't going to get better.

A cry rose within her: It isn't true. Perhaps luck is with us. Perhaps somehow—miraculously—he's going to get better. Perhaps they made a mistake. Perhaps they were wrong! There were mistakes sometimes . . .

While the wild hope was being born in her it died, and she heard the voice of her father in remembrance going tonelessly: "Tomorrow morning—it's this morning now—he'll appear much better. That's the relief of the hemorrhage . . ."

The hope was gone and a cold sickness passed down into her as if she had swallowed it.

But he might . . .

No, she said inside herself. It's no use hoping.

She sat in the chair and leaned toward him.

"I feel better than I have for months—really," he was saying. "Really, Prue. I don't think I've felt better for months. He certainly is a good doctor—everybody in your family's wonderful. I could hear him lecturing—quite plainly at first. Afterwards—I got a bit sleepy, I think."

"He's the best there is—I told you that."

"But I feel so good!"

"Then don't talk."

He turned his head and they looked at each other for a long space.

“I’m all bandages,” he said. “I must look a mess.”

“Vanity. Lie quietly.”

“I don’t want to be quiet . . .”

“For me.”

“All right,” he said.

She heard him become quiet and unmoving. She watched the slanting sunlight touching the right edge of the window. His voice came again, and her heart was like a clenching fist as she wondered if it were weaker already.

“Prue.”

“You want something?”

“No. Only you.”

“I’m still here.”

“You’ll stay here?”

She thought: he must know. He’s never used such a weak, petulant tone before. Never.

“Yes, I’m staying here now,” she said, as to a child.

His voice was strong again.

“No. You go whenever you’re bored.”

“Bored? I’m not bored sitting here. I’ll never be bored . . .”

“I hope not. Prue—I’ve been so ratty with you at times . . .”

“No, no. Hush now. If you keep on talking . . .”

“But I want to talk. Let me talk—I’m not maudlin or anything like that. It’s just—I can think so plainly. Everyone ought to go to hospital to learn how to think. And I’ve been thinking—well, I haven’t made things very nice for you. But after this bloody mess is all over—and I get out of here we’ll—you’re still going to have a baby?”

“Yes,” she said. And then, as if this were not enough, “I’m keeping him warm for you.”

His voice came, half-dreamily, as from far away.

“That’s good. You know, we’ll have to get married quicker than all hell. I don’t want to continue a long line of bastards. But we’ll have to hurry to get him under the tape as a nine months’ baby—a little premature, of course.”

“Don’t worry. There are so many premature babies in wartime.”

He laughed, sleepily.

“Yes, and always the first one. Positively amazing how many first babies insist on getting themselves born in seven months. Even in young married couples of the very nicest families. And then, after the first one, all the rest insist on coming in nine months in quite the stodgy, slow-paced, orthodox way. I’ll bet all the rest of ours do, too.”

“All the rest?”

She thought: It can’t be true. They must have made a mistake. There could be such luck.

“Fie, sir,” she said. “To talk to a maiden thus.”

“Maiden,” he laughed. “Poor little haystack baby.”

“How do you know he’s a haystack baby?”

“Oh, masculine intuition. You know, I’m still angry about that.”

“Angry? What about?”

“At you—taking chances like that. Suppose I’d been someone else—and walked off and left you with a fine fat baby under your belt! Then what?”

“But I’ve told you before, darling. I knew it was you.”

“Then you’re lucky. I didn’t know it was me—then. And I didn’t know it was you.”

“I didn’t either, truly. But it’s worked out, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. And after this, we’re going to live very placid, normal lives. Sound citizens. Legally married. Hearth and home, and six bouncing children that look like you . . .”

“Six, good heavens!”

“Of course, six. I think that’s a very nice round number.”

He laughed to himself, warmly.

“Six babies, and furniture on the hire-purchase, and the gas bill to pay, and the insurance man coming round once a week—and he’d better not start calling oftener—when I’m not home.”

His voice dropped.

“I haven’t got anything,” he said. “Could you put up with it?”

She turned her head away.

“You know that,” she said.

“It won’t be so bad. When this war’s over, I’ll get my job back—and we’ll have fun. You’ll like ’em all. We’ll have old Monty drop around. And you’ll like Blackidge and Vollenbee. It’s wonderful how many fine people there are. Old Vollenbee is immense.”

“I met him,” she said.

“You did?”

“Yes. Father telephoned him and he came here, but you were in a bit of a stupor; but he’ll come again.”

She thought: Now—this is the only time. It would have to be now.

“Shall I go out and give him a ring?”

“No,” he said. “Stay here. I don’t want anyone . . .”

“All right. But you must rest.”

“Do you want me to?”

Her mind said: No, let him talk now. Let him talk while he can, because afterwards . . .

“Yes,” she said. “I want you to.”

“If I do, will you promise not to go away?”

“All right. I won’t go away.”

He held out his hand and she took it, and felt sudden horror that it was so warm, and feared he was burning in fever. Then she thought: People's hands are always warm when they lie in bed.

When he was asleep she put his hand under the covers and sat, watching the sunlight move and the dust motes whirl.

The sound of city life grew strong, but the stronger sounds of a hospital, a more concentrated city of life and death, were nearer. She heard the almost silent rubber-heeled passing of the nurses in the hall outside, their going betrayed always by the rustle of starched clothing. The hours crept along to high strangulated wails of babies at feeding time in the wing below, and to the far-off sound of crockery in the diet kitchen.

When the nurse came in, they smiled at each other silently. Then the nurse went away with the *whtt* of rubber heels on the waxed linoleum and she sat quietly again.

The nurse set the tray on the stand.

"I brought some tea and toast for you, too," she said to Prue.

She went to the bed and stood, looking down. Then she touched his shoulder. Prue heard his voice.

"I'm—I'm thirsty."

The nurse's voice came brisk in a nearly calloused cheerfulness.

"Of course you are. I brought you some nice tea. Miss Cathaway will give it to you."

She smiled at Prudence and went away. Prudence took the small, spouted cup, and poured the tea into his mouth. She waited for him to swallow, and he smiled up at her. Then he hiccoughed.

"So sorry," he said. "Isn't that rude!"

"You can't help it. Here, some more."

She gave him tea until he shook his head.

"You take yours," he said.

He turned his eyes and watched her as she ate, and they spoke to each other continually through the complete satisfaction of smiles. When she was done she put the tray on the stand beside the door, and sat down again.

They were long silent. She saw his eyes, aware and alive, staring at the light of the sunny window.

"Shall I pull the shade?"

"No," he said. "No. I was just thinking, Prue. I love you."

"Now," she said, as if comforting him. "Now, now!"

"No. I just want to tell you. You see, I've told you so many things. I've told you too many things. Some of them I shouldn't have told you.

"And I've said contradictory things—and some ideas were right and some only half thought-out. I've been—so, so confused."

"There," she said. "We all have."

“That’s it,” he said. “All of us so confused. It’s—it’s an age of confusion—not knowing where to believe, and where to have faith. All searching for something—something to do with human dignity it is—not a cure for the world, but wanting to have some faith in the right of man to seek a cure. Not Christianity—but Christ—something to do with kindness—and pity—and loving poor bloody humanity, not for what it ought to be, but just for what it is.

“All of us, the whole world, wanting that and being so confused. The age of confusion.

“And I might have gone back to fight—because my heart said yes and my mind said no—and I’m beginning to believe we’ve trusted intellect too much and our hearts not enough in this last hundred years. We’ve used the yardstick of logic so much we’ve forgotten there’s the unmeasuring quality of love.

“I might have gone back—I don’t know.”

“Whatever you’d have done, you’d have been true to yourself,” she said. “You would because—you’re brave.”

“No, I’m not brave,” he said.

“But you are. No one would have let another man take his place in a boat when . . .”

“That wasn’t being brave, Prue.”

“Then why did you do it?”

He lay silently, then suddenly he laughed.

“You know, I’ve thought a lot about that—and I know why I did—and it had nothing to do with being brave.”

“What was it then?”

He drew his breath.

“It was—rebellion! Revolt against circumstance.”

“Revolt?”

“That was it. Because I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t mind bunging the others in, because I always knew that I could get in at the end. And then—when I was going to—I looked at the poor chap behind me. And—well, don’t you see it? Can’t you see? Think what it was.

“The poor devil, he’d been standing in that line, and seeing himself get nearer and nearer, and counting the boats, and counting the distance ahead of him. And he got nearer and nearer—and could even count the men ahead of him now. And then the boat comes and they say it’s the last one, and he counts the men ahead and how many will get in and he knows he might just get in. And they load, and load and there’s four ahead, three ahead, two ahead, one ahead, and then . . .

“That’s all. And you see him there, and you wonder why fate had to stop it right at him. There were a thousand others, it’s true. It wouldn’t have mattered for him so much if he’d been a hundred men back, or even ten men back. But him—that man! What had he done that fate should stop right at him?

“And you wish you were God and could change it. And you know you can’t be God, but you want to take your fist and strike Fate in the face—no, it isn’t anything as brave and bold as striking a blow.

“You can’t be God, but by God, you can be a man and so—you bung him in. It was so easy—far easier than getting in myself. I knew it was silly, but inside myself I laughed and laughed—because I’d had such a revenge on Fate. I’d spit right in her ugly face.”

She held his hand.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Really. Why there was a doctor . . .”

He stopped, and she saw him immobile. She got up quickly and looked into his eyes. They were blank and empty of meaning. And then, as she watched, they became alive again and he went on where he had halted.

“. . . in the Casualty Hospital and they drew lots . . .”

“Hush, darling. You’ve told me about that,” she said.

And her mind was saying: It’s begun. It is true. There is no luck. It’s beginning.

His voice was going on, normally and strongly. She looked at her watch and said mentally, and coldly:

Two-seventeen. The first lapse occurred at seventeen minutes past two.

As if she were recording it on a chart.

Late in the afternoon she thought: He still sounds very normal.

The nurse came in with the chart clipped to the board. She went to the head of the bed and looked at him.

He said: “Hello!”

“Hello,” she said. “I think Miss Cathaway ought to go now.”

“No,” he said. “Please—let her stay.”

“Don’t be so selfish,” she said, as to a child. “You don’t want her to get tired and get ill too, do you? She’s got to get some dinner.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I’m sorry. Will you come back later, Prue?”

“Yes. I’ll come back,” she said.

“All right.”

He watched her take the dark-blue beret and the light coat from the chair. Then as she turned away he said:

“Aren’t you going to kiss me good-by?”

“Yes,” she said, and the tones came out coldly. “I’ll kiss you good-by.”

She went and bent over him. She felt the hotness of his face and smelled the acrid sweetness of medication and the dryness of lint bandages. She thought: It is like kissing someone already dead, and hated herself for the unbidden thought.

She went out quickly. He called after her.

“Knock when you come, Prue. I might be flirting with the nurse.”

The door closed.

“My, you are feeling better today,” the nurse said. “Open your mouth.”

He moved his head to escape the thermometer.

“Isn’t she beautiful, nurse?”

“Yes,” she said, primly. “Miss Cathaway is an extremely beautiful young woman. Open your mouth!”

“We’re going to get married, nurse. You can be first to congratulate us. We’ve been planning it this afternoon—six babies and a home in suburbia. As soon as I get out of here, we’ll be married.”

The nurse stood still, staring through the darkening room to the light of the window. Then she put the thermometer back in the glass of water, stirred it quickly, and flicked it dry with a snapping movement of the wrist.

“That’s—that’s very nice,” she snapped. “You mustn’t talk. Open your mouth.”

Then she took his wrist, and stood, holding it, still staring from the window. She took the thermometer, looked at it, and wrote on the chart.

“What temperature, nurse?”

“You’re not supposed to know. But—it’s normal.”

He watched her go to the door.

“Nurse!”

“Yes?”

“Am I going to get better?”

“Of course you are,” she snapped. “Of course—if you stop talking and rest. Of course you’ll get better.”

He lay still.

“Thank you,” he said, at last. “It’s all right. Thank you.”

When Prudence came back the room was dark. She went to the window, looking out. The sounds of hospital were clearer now, but she had become more used to them and they flowed smoothly around her consciousness.

She stood until, with abruptness, the sirens began, and she watched the sky to the east erupt into its aurora borealis of searchlights. She heard him stir.

Quickly she pulled the blackout blind, and went to his bed and snapped on the night lamp. She saw his lips moving.

“Thirsty?”

He nodded.

She poured the driblets of water into his mouth, and he nodded again.

She put down the spouted cup and sat beside his bed and they were quiet. Then he said:

“They’re raiding?”

“Yes. It’s far away.”

“I thought it was.”

She thought perhaps he had gone back to sleep when he spoke again.

“If you have toothache you can treat the teeth,” he said.

“That’s right,” she said. “You rest.”

“But it wouldn’t cure toothache. It would come again. Of course, you could pull the whole blasted lot out and put false ones in. That’s what Hitler’s doing. But it’s no good. It fixes toothache for one generation, but the next will have it just the same. I suppose all we can do is go on treating it and treating it, generation after generation.”

She thought: It is the beginning of irrationality.

She waited but he seemed to be asleep again. She put out the light and went to the window again and lifted the blind, gently. There was more gunfire than she’d ever heard before. It seemed to be the biggest raid yet of the war.

It was a new roar of a city—not traffic, but guns. The new city noise—London’s guns.

She remembered then that he had said it, angrily. They will bomb each other’s cities—oh, I don’t pretend he won’t do it first. For we are gentlemen . . .

There was a great glow in the sky now in the East, and the housetops and church spires began to show in hard silhouette against it. Fires—incendiary bombs!

She heard him stirring and went back to him. She took his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right.”

“No, I’m sorry I wasn’t nicer to you—when I had a chance.”

“Oh, darling, you’ll have lots of time to . . .”

“No, I know,” he said. “It’s all right. Please go away.”

She felt the stab of ridiculous hurt.

“Go away?”

“Yes, please. Go away.”

She drew her breath.

“All right. I’m going.”

He did not answer. She went back to the window, hearing the angry drum of London’s defense batteries.

The next morning when she came the nurse was sitting by the bed.

“I’ll stay here now,” Prudence said.

The nurse went away. Prudence listened to his breathing, now intense. He seemed as in a troubled sleep. He woke up twice and she gave him a drink. When the nurse came in to take the temperature, Prudence watched him turn his head from side to side to avoid the thermometer, in a petulant, tired sort of way.

After the nurse had gone she sat by the window again, letting time dribble past. At last he spoke, clearly and strongly. She bent over him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I said, do you know Old Monty?”

“Yes,” she said. “I know him.”

“A good chap,” he said. “A very good chap.”

He shook his head as if in some secret satisfaction, and closed his eyes again.

She sat, feeling the aloneness of a room where an ill person lies. Her father came in and smiled at her. Then he held the hand on the bed, feeling the pulse. He folded it back neatly under the bedclothes.

“How is he?” she said.

Her father was a long time framing his lips for answer, so she said:

“No, that’s a silly question to ask. It doesn’t give you anything to say, does it?”

“You’d better let me take you out for some lunch.”

She nodded.

“You look tired,” she said. “Were you busy last night?”

“Quite busy,” he said. “Rather a heavy casualty list last night, I understand—the heaviest yet.”

They went down the hall.

“People’ll have to learn to wear helmets. I had one with a falling splinter right in here.”

He pointed with his finger sticking straight down toward the top of his head.

“We took it out—and there seems a very fair chance of complete recovery. Very peculiar case. Odd—unusual.”

“I suppose you’ll get some very interesting cases now.”

He nodded.

“It seems quite probable.”

After lunch she went back. As she came in he was stirring, turning his head from side to side and breathing heavily. She took the water cup and dribbled drops onto his lips. She noticed that they were cracked and dry from the fever.

He swallowed without opening his eyes. She went to the window and sat on the chair arm, staring from the window. Below, in the maternity wing, a woman cried in labor. The cries went on into the afternoon.

When she heard him speak again the sound was harsh and unintelligible. She went to him, and his eyes were alive. He moved his lips.

“Water?” she said.

He shook his head from side to side, but she held the spouted cup and he swallowed. When she put it down his voice came rasping.

“No. Your hat,” he said.

She put her hand to the beret.

“Oh, this? You mean I’m not in uniform.”

He shook his head, almost in disgust.

“Your hat. Take it off,” he said.

“Why, of course.”

She took it off and smoothed her hair in an unconscious gesture.

“There, is that better?”

He smiled and nodded his head. He reached out his hand and took hers. She sat in the chair and he lay quietly. The tight grasp on her hand repelled her. The sick warmth of it and the possessiveness of the clutch made her feel as if it were a foreign thing, fastened to her to draw away her own aliveness and strength.

Then she thought: No. He wouldn’t do it if he were conscious and well. You mustn’t mind it.

The next time he moved he let go of her hand. She sat through the afternoon, watching the moving of his head from side to side and the turning of his body. He began muttering. The sounds were generally unintelligible. Once she heard the words: “There are no more.”

She put her hand on his head.

“Please,” she said. “Please. You’re all right, Clive. You’re here.”

He grew quiet but did not open his eyes.

When it grew dusk the muttering was heavier. He gabbled sound. At one time the voice lifted and fell in a horrible tunelessness, and she heard words:

“And around the dear ruins . . .”

Then the sounds were jumbled again.

She thought of his tone-deafness, and went to the window and stood there. She thought: He is remembering the night I sang. Even while he is dying, and yet fighting to stay alive, he is remembering me. And I—I begrudge him the touch of my hand.

She stared on through the window. When the nurse came she turned.

“I’ll sit with him now, Miss Cathaway.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I don’t mind staying.”

The nurse went away, and she stood there, watching the darkness come over the city.

When it was dark she pulled the blind and turned on the nightlight. She gave him water and sat, unmoving.

He woke once more and said:

“What time is it?”

She looked at her watch.

“Ten past eight,” she said.

But she knew he had not heard her.

A few minutes later the first raid warning sounded. She heard the guns rise to a greeting roar again. The total of noise grew louder and louder. It was louder than the night before.

She thought: We must have some guns that don’t give their position away until they’re needed. So this must be a bigger raid than last night.

She could hear the building shuttering gently, and the window vibrated as if from a far-off, slamming door.

She thought: The raids are coming up the estuary again.

The nurse came in and stood at the door:

“Everything’s all right,” she said, as if by rote. “It’s a long way away.”

Then, as if a duty had been done, she went on.

“It’s the East End again. They say they’re catching it terribly.”

When she came to her senses, smelling dust and odor of crumpled brick, Gertie heard the voice, calling pitifully:

“Mrs. Tindley—oh—Mrs. Tindley! Please—Mrs. Tindley!”

She felt pain rack her shoulder.

“All right. Gertie’s coming now. Gertie’s coming!”

Aching in all her plump body, she crawled on her hands and knees, pulling at bricks and timber in her way. She groped in the darkness.

“Gertie’s coming, love,” she called, encouragingly. “Where are you?”

“Here—oh, Mrs. Tindley!”

“Gertie’s coming, now.”

In the darkness at last she touched the warmth of the child’s body.

“There, now. We’re all right.”

She drew her hand back in horror. It was warm and wet and sticky. That would be blood. But . . .

She felt again over the child’s body and found her arms, her chest her stomach, her legs. And then she stopped. That was where the warm stickiness was. At the knee her hand felt frayed pulp and splintered bone. She felt along the leg. The foot was pointing the wrong way. The child was on her back, but the toe of her shoe was pointing down.

“Oh,” she said. “Lord help us.”

She tugged at her apron and took it off. She tied it round the slim, smooth leg above the garter at the knee. She strained, pulling it tight until it bit into the flesh. Then she knotted it.

She crawled back in the dark cave of rubble and held the child’s head on her lap.

“Oh, Alice,” she wailed. “Ye would come and sit with Old Gertie! If ye’d only gone to the shelter like ye should!”

The child’s voice came, small and faraway—somehow dreamily.

“I’m hurt, aren’t I, Mrs. Tindley?”

“No, no. Now ye’re all right! Do ye feel hurt?”

“No. I don’t feel anything.”

Well, think o’ that, Gertie thought. The Captain had been right.

She cradled the child’s head.

“I put a turnikay on like the Captain said,” she comforted. “Ye see, ye never know when knowledge comes in handy in life. I remember the time—oh, so long ago—that he came in, and nothing would do him except I should learn first aid. He’d just been

having to take it, and I suspect he wanted to show off—or he wanted the fun of putting a turnikay on my leg. Ah, he was a rascal. Men are. But there—I never forgot it, and now it's all right, isn't it?"

She felt that her talk hadn't reached the child.

"Do you think they'll get us out of here, Mrs. Tindley?"

"Oh, yes, yes. They'll be digging for us now. Nasty German devils, I call 'em, bombing us. Oh, they'll have us out in no time."

She sat there, waiting, and then, not knowing why, she began to rock her body, holding the child's head, singing softly:

"If I laka you like you laka me
Then we laka both the same.
I laka say, this very day,
I laka change your name."

She heard the child's voice again:

"There's a fire, isn't there, Mrs. Tindley? I can smell it."

"Ah, hush love," Gertie said.

She felt the cold clutch at her heart.

"Hush now—don't think o' things like that."

She began singing again.

"I saw Bill Bailey kissing a lady
Under the bamboo tree.
Bill Bailey ran away, and his sweetheart to this day
She's never changed her name."

She sang it over and over, in the darkness where they lay trapped.

She waited, listening.

"You think the fire will catch and burn us, Mrs. Tindley?"

The voice was tinier now. Perhaps the tourniquet wasn't right. Bleed to death . . .

"No, no. They'll come and put it out. Ha—that nasty fire grate. It never did draw good. That's one good thing."

She rocked and sang again, going over and over the verses of "The Bamboo Tree." Then the child's voice came, now very far away.

"Mrs. Tindley?"

"Yes, Alice?"

"I'm coo-cold!"

Gertie pressed the head closer.

"There, there," she said. "There, there. We'll soon be out."

She rocked the child—waiting and waiting—but not believing.

Because she didn't believe it, when it came it was magical, miraculous. A clink of wonderful blinding light came from a torch overhead. There was a scrambling sound,

and then a cheerful cockney voice:

"Is there anyone down there?"

"Well, if we weren't what would ye expect us to say?" Gertie snapped.

"All right, missus. Keep yer shirt on. We'll 'ave yer out in no time."

"You watch what you're doing, young man. You're sending all kinds o' things down the back of my neck. And hurry up. There's a little gel hurt bad down here."

"We're coming!"

Then she heard voices and the urgent thumping of metal on stone and the sharp orders of men. The showers of dirt and stone came down and she bent her body over the child's face. Then the light was too dazzling and the legs of a man were descending.

"Here we are, missus," he said.

He threw the torch on them, and for the first time she saw the child—the velvet dress, splotched and dust-stained and matted with filth. The white of the child's soft legs showed, and she bent forward, quickly and pulled down the skirt so that it should be decent.

"Be careful with her," she said.

The man picked up the child and passed her upward to unseen hands. "Watch it," he warned. "She's just about got a leg off."

He turned again.

"Come on, Grandma."

"You watch where you grab me," she said.

"Drop a rope, up there, will yer?"

Gertie's head began to swim, and she had little knowledge of being lifted up beyond faint inklings of impropriety in position and costume. She slapped a man's hand.

"You put my skirts down and leave my leg alone. I know it's off—it wasn't took off down there. It's been off a long time."

Then she was being helped toward an ambulance. She saw the stretcher with the doctor bending over it.

"I'm all right," she said, pulling away.

"Now, Grandma, come on."

"I'm no grandma," she snorted. "Take me over there."

She half hopped, holding the men's shoulders, until she was beside the doctor, looking down at Alice, and she said:

"I couldn't find no stick to turn the turnikay—and the Captain said . . ."

"All right," he said. "You did fine. She'll be all right. Get 'em both in."

They wanted to make her lie down in the ambulance, but she protested. So they gave way and let her sit beside the cot inside, and they were going through the street, racing along. And in that space at last the child's voice came.

"My leg's off, isn't it, Mrs. Tindley? I heard them say so."

Gertie fumbled for her handkerchief. All her plans for Alice gone wrong, now. No dancing for the child—no growing up to splendid life in the chorus and a song bit to

sing—no Johnnies at the stage door—no Captain to set her up decently and take her out on fine parties—and finally fix her up with a nice comfy little home when she grew old. Now it all wouldn't come true.

Then she blew her nose—angry at her own tears.

"Don't worry, love," she said. "Old Gertie'll take care of you. You came and sat with old Gertie instead of going to the shelter. And so—I've got lots of money saved and we'll see that barrister of the Captain's and I'll make a will and when I die you'll have all my money. There. Now isn't that all right?"

"I'd rather you didn't die," the child said.

"We've all got to some day—but until I do—I'll take care of you anyhow. You and me—together. I'll take care of you."

The child sighed.

"And I'll be just like you—only one leg. You'll have a wooden leg, and I'll have a wooden leg."

"That's right," Gertie approved, cheerfully. "We'll be just alike. You with a left, me with a right!"

"We'll have two good legs between us."

"That's it. I'll have a right and you'll have a left, and between one and the other—we'll make both ends meet."

She laughed merrily over her own words so that her plump bosom shook.

"Between one leg and the other, we'll make both ends meet. Oh, my! What a thing to say! Oh, my!"

CHAPTER XLI

THE next morning Clive was still alive. The day nurse came in and said:

"Shouldn't you rest? It's no use . . . Well—here's the paper."

She left the newspaper. Prudence picked it up from the bed and put it on the chest of drawers. She sat through the morning, and again the world existed only in sounds.

Again the cycle of sounds moved through the living city of a hospital: the stiff skirts everlastingly whispering near the door as the nurses hurried past, a woman's cry lifted as a new time of labor came, the punctual squawling of babies in the wing below as feeding time drew near, a piece of china crashing somewhere in a kitchen.

But, always, closest of all, was the sound of his breathing. She sat with her hands folded, listening to it.

The day wore on to afternoon, and he was still breathing.

Then, at last, one sound came nearer and the door opened and she looked up.

"Hello, Prue."

Her father was standing in the doorway. She felt that he was suffering, and she wanted him to go away, quickly.

"Hello," she said.

He went to the bedside, and held the pulse of a hand that had no meaning or connection with anything. She knew it was an idle gesture, meant to comfort her. To show her that it was no one's fault—that everything had been done and was still being done properly.

As if he knew that, too, he replaced the hand and came to her.

"You'd better come home and get some rest," he said.

She placed her hand on his.

"I've stayed this long. I—I want to stay on."

"But it doesn't do any good, Prue. You can't help him. You can't help by sitting there. He doesn't know you're there. It would be just the same if you went home."

She nodded.

"I know. I've said that. But—you can't let anyone die alone. Even if they don't know."

"Prue—please come home."

She shook her head. She meant to smile to help him, but smiling was too exhausting. Then she heard him go, abruptly. She put her face in her hands. She did not

hear him come back until he touched her shoulder.

"Now, now," he said. "Now, now!"

She turned her head away.

"It wasn't for him," she said. "I won't be silly. It was for you."

"There, there," he said.

He gave her a handkerchief. It seemed so big. She put her face in it.

"It wouldn't be so bad if it weren't so illogical and silly and without reason. A man goes through all that—Dunkirk and everything—and comes out all right. And then after that he gets killed in London."

"There, there," he said. "It wasn't the wall falling on him. It was—things reaching back into his life. When he had pneumonia—when, long ago, the first tuberculosis germ lodged in his lung."

"And I wouldn't mind, but—you mustn't mind me crying. It's only that—he takes such a dreadfully long time to die. It isn't fair. You said seventy-two hours. And it's long past that. Just because he was strong and full of the strength of living—he has to suffer for it—burning to death. And you don't do anything. Couldn't you give him adrenalin, or a blood transfusion? You're a doctor, and you can take shrapnel out of other men's brains, but when it's him—of all people I want, you can't . . ."

She got up suddenly and turned toward the window and blew her nose.

"I'm all right now," she said. "I shouldn't have cried. We're not supposed to."

"It's better if you do."

"They say that. I don't know why. It doesn't do any good if you do. It's around five, isn't it? They're beginning to go home."

"It's just five."

"You will be careful driving. You drive so badly. In the blackout—keep your mind on what you're doing."

"Of course I will."

"It's just so useless—and he takes such a long time. You couldn't give him anything—something that would end it?"

He did not answer.

"Of course, I wouldn't want you to," she said. "I was just thinking. Even when you know it's no use—you can't kill anyone you love. And he can't feel anything, can he?"

"No. He doesn't feel anything and he doesn't know anything. His heartbeat is getting faint. It will be very soon."

"Yes, it can't be long, now. Just let me stay."

"All right," he said.

He kissed her, quickly and clumsily, and then he was gone.

She walked to the bedside. The face under the bandages was unmoving, gray, waxy. The stubble of beard showed along his chin and over his upper lip. She thought: The face has died already.

She stood, looking down and not seeing him any more, until the door opened and the nurse stood, waiting.

"Would you like me to bring you a little something for tea, Miss Cathaway?"

"No," she said, "thank you."

One couldn't eat here in this room.

"You should try to take a little something, though."

There was pity in the voice, and she didn't want it.

"I'll run out and get some tea," Prudence said. "Then I'll come back."

She went out to the street, to the city alive. She went to Lyons, where the cakes and buns stood in wonderful pyramids in the glass cases in the imposing entryway. Inside, the orchestra fought its daily battle with opposing sound: the mass volume of talk and called orders and thundering of china ware.

She drank tea and tried to eat the buns. They tasted atrociously dry. She watched the woman at her table feeding parts of a fish and chip special to the tiny girl beside her. The orchestra crashed in their ears. One tune seemed very popular. They played "Roll Out the Barrel."

Roll out the barrel,
We'll have a barrel of fun.

The words said themselves to the music. Everyone applauded, and the young man with the violin smiled and bowed, and then turned to conduct again with even more vigor.

She walked back to the hospital in the gathering dusk. The city seemed to have a new air. One had grown used to evening coming without any shop lights coming on. But now there was a new feeling—a different feeling. It was a feeling of a race against time.

Then she understood. The new night air raids were making people anxious to get home before the first planes came over. That was why there was a tenser tempo as the crowds poured into the Underground and caught busses on the run and pedaled furiously on bicycles and streamed along the pavements.

She walked back slowly, reading the signs as if it were all new: "Salada. . . . Save and Win the War. . . . Snack bar."

What a nasty, sneaky sound! Snack bar!

She looked at the signs outside a cinema house. "The Lion Has Wings." The slant-eyed girl. Once she had been so keen about the cinema. Elissa Landi had been her favorite actress—her English was good and she looked—intelligent.

What was looking intelligent? Did intellect shine through the face?

It did. But what were the dimensions, the proportions, the shapes and designs of it? No one knew. Just—knowing.

Like saying this combination and massing and arrangement of seeing organs and hearing organs and smelling organ and eating aperture is beauty. And this so-similar but not the same arrangement of the same things is ugliness.

There should be no such thing as a proud beauty. Beauty should always be humble, because it was all such an accident.

Her footsteps had brought her back to the hospital. She went up the stairs into the room, and took off her hat and sat down to wait.

As deeper darkness fell, the city outside grew into a new quietness—as if hushed as it lay in wait for the raid, and then the nearer noises were louder ones and closer to her than even before.

She was so intent on them that the outside noise had been going for a long time without it affecting her consciousness. Only, suddenly, she thought of being in bed and staring into darkness and whispering: "They're coming over!" And then his voice saying: "No, they're ours," saying it calmly and half-patronizingly—and yet she had known he was lying even while she chose to believe him.

She sat, hearing the sirens wail, and hearing the muttering of the archies over in the East. The cannonade began—more unanimous, louder even, than the night before. The door opened and the nurse said, quickly:

"There's another bad one on. Do you want . . ."

"No, it's just as well to stay here."

"Yes. I only wanted you to know. They don't usually get as far as this."

The nurse went out, and Prudence felt anger—that the woman had spoken to her as if there were no one else in the room—no other living creature. Ignoring the one in the bed. Discounted already.

She got up and turned the small light out and sat by the window, watching from behind the thick curtain. She watched without altering her gaze. It was just the same—the sky alive with darting, rushing searchlights—leaping, waving, like tentacles of some sea monster fishing at random from a lair.

She heard the shudder of bombs falling, and felt glad and a little elated. It was only just. If he had to lie there dying—somehow it made it more equal that she should sit here living under a raid.

Slowly she got a conviction. As long as the raid would last, he would live. As long as bombs fell, he wouldn't die.

Then, without preparation, she felt the window shudder in front of her as a bomb fell some streets away. There was a grunting sound of the air, and then, after it, a tinkling of glass—going on, tinkling, falling, showering below. Before it had finished, she heard the lifted wail of children, frightened, and the cry of a woman. The cold, professional voice of a nurse cut loud through the darkness, coming from another wing and echoing in the courtyard outside.

Even while her mind was beginning to read the words the nurse had said, the world jumped into a dimension beyond sound. There was a staggering blaze of light that somehow made the eyeballs ache even in the darkened room. She felt her head pulsating as if it had been crushed between giant nutcrackers.

The world seemed utterly noiseless for a second, and then, as the sense of sound returned, she heard the rising lamentation, the outburst of wailing of frightened children. The glass tinkled again below in an endless shower, and then the hospital became alive to a rushing sound—as if all the nurses with their sounding skirts, running without consciousness of dignity, had united to give the world a great, rushing whisper.

Then, above the bedlam of the children's crying, a woman's voice lifted in a cry—and the screaming went on.

She felt the puff of night air and saw that the windowpanes had gone. Carefully, methodically, she lifted the heavy, empty frame and reset it to trap the end of the curtain tight. She went to the bed and leaned over in the darkness. The faint breathing still came.

The nurse's voice came from the opened door.

"Everybody that can must go down to the first floor," she said.

"No," Prudence said. "It isn't much use going anywhere."

"It's safer."

"It isn't much use. Did they hit—anything?"

"I don't know, Miss Cathaway. I've got to stay up here. But they say it's the contagious wing. Wouldn't you think they'd be more *careful* where they aimed their bombs!"

Prudence considered it. The nurse seemed to believe that a man, far, far up in that blackness, picked one spot from the mass of endless buildings below him.

"I've got to get this floor cleared," the nurse said.

Her voice was flat and curt again. The door closed.

Prudence went back to the bed. She bent over and listened. The breath came unsteadily, a quick gasping. She felt the pulse with her fourth finger. It was still there—faint, dying—then rushing into fierce tempo again.

She sat by the bedside, waiting. The screaming of the woman had stopped at last. Instead there were the voices of men in the courtyard below, calling quickly, shortly to each other. A truck roared up and more voices sounded. She thought: That is another world.

She listened endlessly to the breathing, dying away, coming up again in fighting gasps.

The door opened and the cone of a torch shone on the floor, and in the reflected light she saw the nurse and a man.

"Those who can't go downstairs—we've got to put them under the bed," the nurse said.

"Under the bed?"

"Yes, it'll be some protection."

"No, please. It won't make any difference now. Please!"

She wanted to say: You can't give him the indignity of dying—on a floor—under a bed. Why force on him in death what he wouldn't have done in life?

"I suppose . . ."

The nurse turned away and the man followed her, closing the door.

She listened to the barrage. She thought: He said that—a little at first, and then more and more. It isn't the East End now. It isn't the docks. It's just trying to wipe us all out—everything and all of us.

She left her thoughts. Above the barrage his breathing sounded, rasping, high. The ugly sound rose higher and then died. She felt his pulse. There was no pulse. No heart action. He had stopped breathing.

Then it came, the pulse leaping and fluttering, as he drew in great, agonized gasps.

She put his hand back under the covers, and went to the hall. It was completely dark. The current was probably off, a circuit broken somewhere. She waited until a door opened in the emptiness, and the nurse and the man came out in their yellow pool of light. She called the nurse and walked to her.

"He's—he's dying now. Doesn't—doesn't someone want to know about it?"

The nurse stood, hesitatingly.

"I—we'll try to get down there, Miss Cathaway . . ."

"No. I suppose it doesn't matter. It wouldn't do any good—but I thought someone—it's all right."

She turned away, and the nurse called:

"I'll be down as soon as I can."

Prudence went back, wondering why she hurried—like hunting a fox. Wanting to be in at the death.

Please, she said inside herself. Please don't start thinking like that.

When she got back the room was silent. Then the gasping fight for breath rose again. She thought: This is the Cheyne Stokes breathing. Now death won't be far away.

The barrage dinned on without cease. The shrapnel from the anti-aircraft guns patted like gusts of rain on the roof. The far-off bombs thudded, going dully like heavy things that fall and grunt. The near ones roared and made more splendidly martial noise.

She listened to the breathing and counted the spaces between the gasping fight for breath.

She did it without any feeling. There was no feeling left in her. Somehow all potentialities for any feeling had been used up and she was empty and dry.

She counted on between the gasps. She counted—waiting—and the counting went on this time without end. The breathing did not come.

She felt for the pulse again. Then she put the hand back under the cover, and felt in her bag for the small torchlight she had carried ever since the first blackouts began.

Holding it in one hand, she bent over the bed and looked down. She knew she should feel sorrow somehow, but there was nothing to feel. The face—it was not Clive's. It had no relation to Clive—this thin, pinched, waxy, unshaven face, with one eye slightly and ribaldly open. Clive—he was something alive, intense.

She smoothed the open eye shut. Then she picked up the chart, studied her watch, and wrote, carefully: "Patient died at 2.17 A.M." She put the date underneath. Then she

went out, carrying her hat in her hand.

With the torch still in her other hand she wandered about the dark corridor until she found the nurse.

“He’s dead,” she said. “I marked it on the chart.”

Their two torches formed twin pools of light at their feet as they stood there, and in the upper dimness she saw the nurse lick her lips. Prudence spoke quickly.

“Is there anything I can do now—do you need any help?”

“No, thank you, Miss Cathaway. We’ve got everything settled on this floor, and the raid—it seems to be letting up.”

Prue listened. She thought: He died before the raid ended. How silly to say he died. He died. That has no meaning. He is dead. It doesn’t mean anything, either.

“That’s right,” she said.

“You ought to get some rest, Miss Cathaway.”

“Yes. I suppose so. I feel . . .”

She walked away, going down the dark hall, down the dark steps. On the first floor she saw a dimly lit jam of cots, pressed side to side. There were chairs and mattresses on the floor. Emergency battery lights had been placed along the wall, wherever there was room for them. She edged through the press, standing aside for the intent, hurrying nurses. There was no wailing now—only the hum of voices pitched low, and that hum echoed softly against the shining marble walls and heavy stone pillars of the first floor.

She went out, down the front steps, to a city somehow deserted and yet madly alive with urgency and action. In the courtyard the steel-helmeted men moved through the moonlit night. She saw the shattered wing of the hospital. The bomb had sliced away a front wall and left the building open to view—like an opened front of a doll’s house. Men were scrabbling at the foot of the rubbled brick and stone.

It had no meaning. She turned away, and went on walking toward the east where the sky was ruddy with blazes. The dome of St. Paul’s seemed like a battle ground where the cold tones of the moon fought the warm reflections of fire.

The guns wakened again to a full-voiced roar, and she thought: Another wave’s coming over.

A man with black helmet glistening called to her:

“Here, you. Get under cover!”

She wondered at his rude way of speaking. Then she thought: He thinks I’m a streetwalker. It must be hard for them, being spoken to like that.

“All right,” she said. “I’m going now.”

She walked along toward the fires that leapt high, and heard the sweeping patter of shrapnel on the roofs and the streets. And then, suddenly, the blast lifted before her, and she trembled.

Even she had never visioned that a burst could hold such terror—making her feel tiny, insignificant, of utterly no importance. Only the blast was an important thing. She felt her wrist grasped, and she was drawn into an arched alleyway.

“Where you going?”

She half saw the khaki uniform. A soldier.

“Nowhere,” she said.

She started from under the arch and heard him calling as she went away:

“Hey! You can’t go walking around. Hey!”

She went along the streets, echoing with gunfire. Sometimes there was the harsh drone of motors, and the ambulances streaked past in the empty streets. The fire engines roared along, racing through the night from one fire to another.

She thought: Poor auxiliary firemen. Everyone joked about them—but now they’re not a joke any more.

Poor men—perhaps they’d been like her—not knowing what they were letting themselves in for. You took an action—one little action—and after that life swept you away.

Perhaps it would be good for them all to be swept away—torn from habit and routine. So many people tried to live on the bank of life—and life really was in the stream.

You couldn’t be both on the bank and in the stream. Always there came the exact moment when you let go. An infinitely fine and exact point where letting go began and fighting in the stream started. Perhaps a moment when someone said:

“Hi, Cathaway! Going to the concert party tonight?”

Or the moment when a man’s voice said in the dark:

“Shall we go to the concert—or shall we take a walk?”

One moment, and after that, head over heels in the current, torn along, trying to get breath.

After that, you were one of those who had looked so ridiculous when you were on the security of the bank, dabbling your feet. But it was funny—when you were in it, it was those on the bank who looked ridiculous—playing at life instead of living it.

That was it. That’s why those on the bank feared war. It was because war was so much more impartial than peace. It struck at them all equally—those smug ones on the bank, those fighting in the current.

A severed arm was as severed whether it belonged to a prostitute or a duchess—or perhaps both. When death came, it was as absolute for a Prime Minister as for a private soldier.

Thus, somehow, war was godlike. No—not godlike—it was human. For it was humanity exposed, and there was nothing in it and could be nothing in it that wasn’t in humanity.

She halted, for suddenly the sky before her lifted with light, and a great blaze sent tongues high. There was another blaze to the left. One to the right.

She went through the drab streets and felt heat on her face. At last she could see figures, flitting about the blaze. The steel-helmeted men were crouching with the hoses that lay in snaked mazes. She watched them, hearing the roar of the flames, and feeling the glow on her face. The thudding of bombs was near, and the water poured over her feet—water filthy with the tossing mass of charred wood fragments.

She heard a voice beside her.

“If ye stand over ’ere, Miss.”

It was a little, middle-aged man—his greenish billycock set at a firm angle.

“It’s a do for fair, ain’t it? They lights the fires, and then they can see to ’it with the bombs.”

She nodded.

“Why ain’t you ’ome?” he said.

“Why aren’t you?”

He put back his hat and scratched his head, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

“Blimey if I know. I come out ’ere—and I’ve been ’ere for howers. And I’ve got me Sunday best on, too. Ah, bombing women and children! I won’t ’alf catch it when the old woman sees me. But—you just stay, y’know. I’ve been watching ’em—look at ’em. Bombs and fire and everything. They can stick it, can’t they? Can’t they stick it?”

The pathetic pride in his voice stirred her, and woke her feelings for the first time that night, and she suddenly became aware again—aware of body and tiredness and mental weariness. The thoughts whirled in her head. Clive saying:

“Well, you’ve got to stick it!”

And Monty saying:

“Well, ye just had to stick, y’know.”

Sticking it! Wasn’t there anything to come of it all—this little Cockney—the men at the fire—all of them—sticking it? Saying: “You just have to stick it, you know”?

She looked at the little Cockney, and suddenly she felt the hotness rush up in her body and through her throat. Without bidding or forbidding her eyes welled over, and hot tears streaked runnels on her face. She had not cried for Clive dying, but now she cried for this little man who stood, not knowing why he stayed.

“ ’Ere, ’ere,” he said, in outraged embarrassment.

She turned away. Now at last she felt again. Women and children!

Suddenly, as she walked, she put her hand on her belly. A baby. She was glad she hadn’t yet told her father, or he’d want her to—do something about it.

There was nothing to be done about it. She could carry on. She’d go back into uniform—go back to camp and serve until—as long as they’d let her. Then they’d find out—but until they did, she’d serve. Then—the baby!

The thought struck her suddenly—and she had not thought of it before—that now he must be fatherless. No changing that now. Fatherless like his father. The finality of that had meaning, and only at that moment did she feel that Clive had died—and from then on he was dead.

In that moment his death became real, and so it also became fitting in some way that the flames should rise, the earth erupt, the buildings should topple, streets open up, plains tilt on end.

She stood in the deserted, sound-mad street, her hand still on her belly.

“Without a father—like your father,” she said. “But you’re going to have a better time of it than he did. You’re going to have a better England to live in! Because we were both right. Both right! We have to fight now for what I believe in. And after that, we’ll have to fight for what he believed in.

“We’ll win this war because—because we can stick it. And then, God help us, we’re going to win the peace, too.

“You won’t have it like him. You’ll live in a better England than he did, because you deserve it! Everyone deserves it!”

She began walking home in a night that was alive only to flame and to noise—noise that no longer seemed insane, but stubbornly defiant. And she was somehow proud to be in it and a part of it.

For she knew she was hearing a sound that no man had heard for long centuries—the roar of London, her back to the wall, defending herself.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *This Above All* by Eric Knight]