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# BEFORE THE WIND

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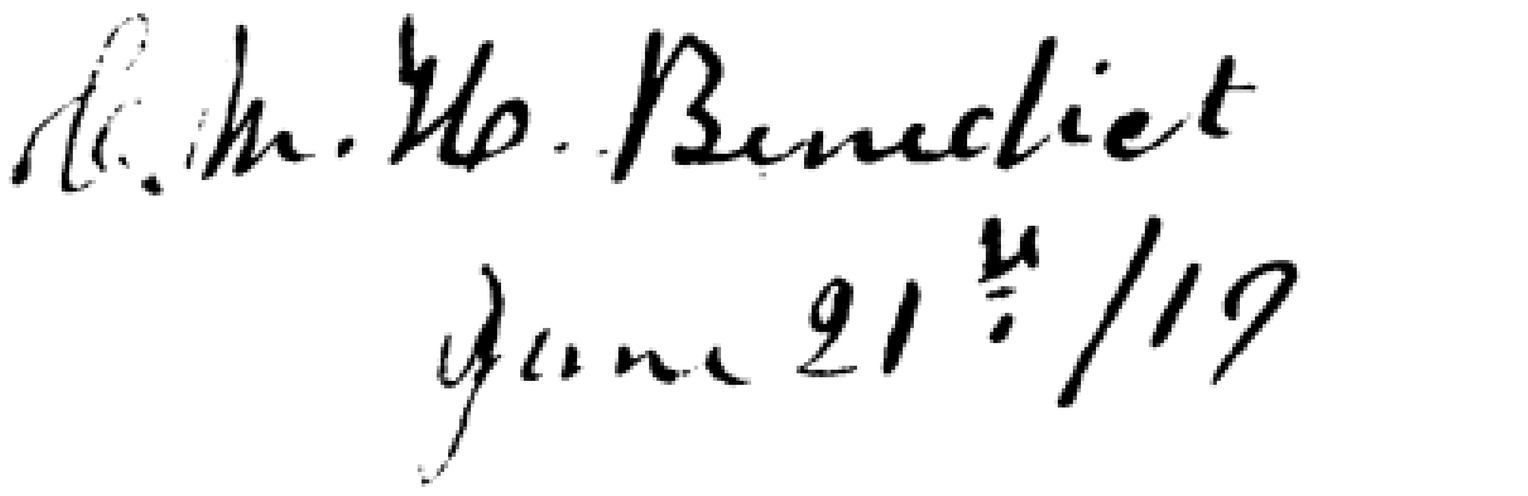

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# BEFORE THE WIND

BY

JANET LAING

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

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TO

FRANCIS M. CAIRD, Esq., F.R.C.S., Edin.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL SURGERY AT THE

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

AND, AT THE TIME IT WAS BEING WRITTEN,

"SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE,"

THIS RECORD OF THE WRACK-STRAWS

'S

DEDICATED

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# BEFORE THE WIND

## CHAPTER THE FIRST

### IN WHICH A TAG OF SEA-DRIFT SHARES RESPONSIBILITY WITH THE KAISER

It was a dark November night.

A man who, but for the accident of his birth, would have cut a grotesque and insignificant figure on this planet, was sitting in Berlin carefully guarded from intrusion, dreaming fantastic dreams of world-empire.

Because of those dreams thousands upon thousands of better men, out to materialise them, were sacrificing all that they had once held dear and sacred; flames from desolated homes were lighting up the gloomy heavens; fair lands were lying waste under cover of the darkness: and a tired young woman, by name Ann Charteris, was driving across London from Victoria to St. Pancras.

She was on her way to Scotland to take a post as companion and passing at the same time from the known to the unknown. Behind her lay seventeen sunny years of youth and one more which had been as the valley of the shadow of death to her.

In the autumn of 1914 she had been at school, a famous school, all spacious beauty and high tradition. In the teeth of the war and of all that it might mean for them her mother had sent her back there after the fateful summer holidays.

"We'll find the money somehow," the dauntless woman had said. "Now that Jim has enlisted it may fall to you to carry out our plans for his future."



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Ann knew how ambitious these plans were, and how passionately they had been cherished. Despair had seized her when she thought of her powers as compared with those of her brilliant brother. At the same time, however, pride had arisen within her and a determination to justify her beloved mother's belief in her.

Her father was a doctor and had been a notable one in his own place until three years before, after a bad illness, he had had to sell his practice and retire to the Alum Bagh, a quaint summer pleasure-house on the south coast, which had been left him about that time by an Anglo-Indian uncle. This old white villa with green outside shutters stood about a mile from the little sea-port of Lowhampton, and only the breadth of a road separated the sands from the wall surrounding its wind-swept garden set about with tamarisk bushes.

It was a loveable dilapidated abode with something debonair in its appearance even in the worst of weathers.

"It's like me," said its new owner to Dr. Warren of Lowhampton whom he had summoned just after his arrival to give him a general overhauling. "It's in its last stages, but it's still cheerful."

Dr. Warren had been a fellow-student. When he had finished his examination, he sat back silently in his chair, and there he remained for a moment looking at his stethoscope with a curious expression on his handsome weather-beaten face.

Then raising his eyes he met those of his patient fixed upon him with such evident enjoyment of his shocked state of mind that, in spite of every reason against it, he could not help his gravity relaxing.

"You are an extraordinary man, James Charteris," he said laughing a little.

"That's right, David," said his patient. "I know quite well what you are thinking, so that there is no need to say it, is there? And besides, believe me, sympathy is not the treatment. I never found it answer in these cases. What

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you've got to do, sir, is to help me to die decently, and the only way to do that is to ignore things altogether. So never ask me how I feel. You know how I am bound to feel. But come and see me often and have a smoke when you have time, and be ready always when I am at my tether's end to come and stand by the women."

. . . . . .

It was from her father that Ann at school received a letter one afternoon about a year before this record opens. It had been a day of relief and rejoicing after many weeks of heavy anxiety. The tide of invasion had been turned back from Paris. The retreat from Mons was at an end. A girl had come in waving a letter from her brother who had come safe through everything, and was sure the war would be over by Christmas.

"And here's a letter for you, too, Ann," she added, handing it over joyously.

Ann was surprised. It had been her seventeenth birthday the day before and she had received quite a packet of letters from home including one from her father who did not write often. Yet here was another from him. She tore open the envelope. Her father's letters were always a pleasure to read, long and gossipy, full of amusing little odds and ends of news.

This one, however, was very short.

"My own little Ann," it ran. "Your dear mother died very suddenly an hour ago. We must be glad that she was spared illness. At breakfast-time she seemed well and happy. Jim has just arrived on three days' leave, and is taking this to the post. We need you badly, my dear. . . ."

Afterwards Ann recalled the feeling of utter surprise that came first, as of one who has received a mortal blow from a beloved hand, her sharp sense of astonishment that she who had opened the door for her to endless vistas should have failed her now on the very threshold. It kept her calm and composed during the interview with the head-mistress and all the subsequent good-byes.

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"What a queer girl Ann is!" the girls said that evening when she was already far away. "She doesn't seem to mind a bit about her mother."

But the head-mistress had seen deeper. She, too, had passed that way and had not seemed to mind a bit either.

"My dear," she had said, holding the girl's cold hands in hers while her strong, clever, resolute face changed and softened and was as Ann never before had seen it, "you will need all your courage soon, and God's at the back of that, remember."

. . . . . .

Her father, very grey and haggard, met her at the door of the Alum Bagh.

"It is no longer herself, my dear," he said later when they stood together in the upstairs room looking down at the beautiful face so aloof, so strange in its indifference. "I can feel her with us telling us that, trying to comfort us, eager, desperate. We must not drag her spirit down. We must do our best together."

And Ann had tried her level best, but it had been very hard for both father and daughter in the first weeks.

They had begun to adjust themselves, however, when like another bolt out of heaven came the news that Jim's regiment was ordered to the front.

The war was not over though Christmas had come and gone and the light-hearted prophet of victory was in his grave near Béthune. Everywhere there was arming for battle. Every day there were farewells.

Jim wrote in great excitement and eager for the fray.

"And she would not have had it otherwise," said the father, "though I believe the thought of his going helped to kill her. Well, we must rise to this new occasion, Ann, my girl."

So again to the best of her ability Ann rose, and the rising turned the school-girl into a woman, changing her affection for her two charges into a passionate devotion. They were so helpless and so dependent upon her. It

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broke her heart to think of her inadequacy. But she spent herself in their service to the last ounce of her capacity. She was everything that she could be to them.

Jim tried to say something of this to her before he left, when he came home for one night's leave to say good-bye.

At the darkening when the father, worn out with the sorrow of parting, was dozing in his chair by the fire, the brother and sister strolled out together into the garden. On the low white wall beyond the tamarisk hedge they leaned side by side looking out over the water. It was mild and still. There was not so much wind as to stir the feathery branches of the bushes behind them. A full moon was making a glittering pathway across the sea. With a shiver Ann remembered that at the other end of that fairy road two long lines of determined men were lying in wait to kill each other. Even now as though in response to her thought three moving red lights appeared on the horizon, ammunition-transport-boats laden with broken guns for repair waiting there for the tide to rise and bring them up the river to the harbour.

For a long time the brother and sister talked there together of trivial things, conscious all the while of the depths of the unspoken, and a sense of utter incompetence was growing upon the girl when Jim suddenly laid his big hard hand on her shoulder.

"You've been a brick, Ann," he said huskily. "If anybody could have made up for—her, you would have done it."

"Oh, Jim——" Ann began, and then could say no more.

"It will be harder for you than for me," Jim went on steadily. "But I want you to know that it's all the world to a man to have—any one like you to back him."

He paused, but Ann was still speechless. As by an inspiration from the mother who was gone she realised in that moment what this departure might mean for the boy at her side, so wistful amid all his eager courage, so beautiful, so strong, with such depths of hidden tenderness in him. She had a glimpse of what life in another time might

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have meant for him, as lover, husband, father, and of what it now might mean for him. Later when she had time to think she raged at the reasons for it all. That night there was no room in her heart for anything but Jim himself, her Jim, her mother's Jim, who might be going to mutilation or death.

The grip on her shoulder tightened suddenly.

"Try if you can not to cry," said Jim. "I—I can't bear it."

Ann dashed away her tears.

"I'm not crying, dear," she said. "I only wish I was going with you. It's grand for you to be a man."

"Yes. Isn't it?" said Jim all aglow again in a moment. "Isn't it?"

. . . . . .

No letters in all the breadth of Britain were more impatiently awaited, more joyfully received, more eagerly read than Jim's were. Ann would watch for the post-girl coming along the sandy road from the town, and run out to meet her at the white gate between the tamarisks. In their afternoon walks at first she and her father always went in the direction of Lowhampton so that they might meet the girls the sooner. A time soon came, however, when the letters arrived at longer intervals, and, that none might witness their disappointment, they no longer went to meet her. Sometimes many days would elapse without any word coming from beyond the sea save the meagre censored messages in the newspapers telling of the huge struggle in which lives seemed to be of no account except as a means of destroying other lives.

"Ann, my dear," said the father at last after a long blank three weeks, "we must pull ourselves together, my girl. It can do our boy no good to go grizzling about him day after day. What we've got to do now is to send him thoughts of courage. That will be of more use to him than all our parcels."

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Wonderfully often after that they did rise to the exalted plane from whence alone thoughts of courage could be sent forth, and whether they did or not they tried to cheer each other. They worked hard too. One night Dr. Warren found his patient wrestling with large wooden knitting-pins.

"Swabs for the hospitals, sir," he said looking up at him gaily. "They shall see that James Charteris can still do something for them."

"Isn't father wonderful?" said Ann afterwards when as usual she went downstairs with their visitor to lock the front-door after his departure.

But the doctor, though he did not say so, thought her the more wonderful of the two. He hardly ever spoke to her, but he had long since taken to watching her from behind the clouds of tobacco smoke as he sat talking with his old friend. He could do this the more easily because she generally read to herself while she was knitting, judging him apparently to be interested only in his patient. He liked to see her slim brown hands busy among her knitting-needles, her flower-like face with its crown of chestnut hair bent gravely over her book in complete unconsciousness of his observation. It was no saint's face either. The grey eyes under the level brows, for all their abstraction at times, were very human. They could twinkle with merriment and flash with fire. About the corners of the mouth, too, there was always humour lurking.

"She's a chip of the old block with her mother's beauty too," the doctor would say to himself as he wended his way homewards, and in his strenuous day-times even a distant glimpse of the Alum Bagh with its white wall and its tamarisk trees would warm his heart like a cordial.

It pleased him too, though he knew that it was selfish of him to be pleased, that the dwellers there had so few other visitors. Ann's mother had not troubled to make many friends in Lowhampton, and those she had were mostly old people who found the long sandy road too much

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for them. Everybody besides was too busy with war-work for any call-making. The energetic wife and daughters of Mr. Atterbury, the family lawyer, who had been commanded by him to make friends with Ann, contented themselves with asking her to join a Red Cross work-party, and as she could not accept their invitation that intimacy came to nothing. Mr. Atterbury himself was too busy to come as often as he would have wished to chat with cheerful Charteris as he called him. His junior partner was in the field and he was over head and ears in business.

There remained the vicar, but he had just been made a war-chaplain and was too much absorbed in the military part of his flock to take much interest in the other. His only motive indeed for calling on civilians at that time seemed to be to get them to help him to fill up the programmes of music which he had rashly pledged himself to provide for the soldiers every Thursday evening. Therefore when he had asked Ann if she sang or played or recited or acted and had been answered in the negative, the inhabitants of the Alum Bagh, for all the benefit of clergy they received, might, as Mary the maid said, have been black savages.

All this was nothing to Ann, however, for it was being alone with her father that she liked best, when he read aloud while she knitted, and their chairs were drawn up to a great fire of drift-wood. In long silences they would sit listening to the sighing of the sea and the wind whispering in the tamarisk bushes. The spirit-world would seem very near them then, and the things unseen the only things that mattered.

Thus refreshed from time to time they held on to hope whether the letters came or did not come. At last, however, they ceased coming altogether.

"Oh, daddy," said Ann one night when months had passed without a word, "I'm afraid—I'm so afraid that we'll have no more letters."

"Then, my dear," he returned, "if visible communica-

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tion has failed, there is all the more need for the invisible to hold strong and steadfast."

That night as on every night they prayed together for courage, but alone in her room afterwards Ann prayed with bitter tears for news.

Her prayer was answered. Next afternoon when they came in from their walk a large envelope was lying on their tea-table. It contained half-a-dozen or so of their own letters tied together and with "Killed in Action" written across them.

Ann held out the packet to her father in silence, and as he read the inscription it seemed to her that he became old quite suddenly. He stood up bravely still nevertheless.

"Well done, my lad," he said with trembling lips.

Then, however, laying the packet on the table again, he sat down quietly in his arm-chair, and holding out his hand to Ann, he drew her gently down beside him.

They sat thus for a long time hardly speaking. The dusk closed round them, but he would not go to bed. The wind and the sea were silent with them. It seemed to Ann as though they were all awaiting something.

Once the sound of creaking shoes coming up the stairs broke harshly upon the stillness. It was Mary the maid coming to take away the tea-things.

Ann rose and met her in the door-way.

"Wait a little, Mary," she said feeling as though some one else were speaking. "We haven't had tea yet. We have had bad news. My brother has been killed. I shall ring when I want you."

It was about an hour after this, as Mary afterwards related, that the Miss called to her to run for Dr. Warren. The master had taken very ill and he was never again right sensible.

In this last particular Mary was wrong however. For a few brief moments that night the father regained consciousness. Ann, kneeling in a kind of stupor by the bedside, was made aware of the change by the hand she was holding

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trying to take hold of hers. Looking up she found his eyes open and looking at her. There was even a faint glimmer in them of the old gaiety.

Afraid to speak she patted his hand with her free one.

The stiff lips moved and she bent down to listen.

"Thoughts of courage——" he whispered.

"Yes, daddy, yes," she answered eagerly.

But no more words came and he seemed to fall into a quiet slumber.

Ann after a time slept also. Returning about midnight Dr. Warren found them still hand clasped in hand.

Ann was awakened by his touch on her shoulder.

"Miss Charteris," he began, "your father——"

"He is dead," said Ann quietly as soon as she saw the doctor's face. "I knew he was dying just now when he spoke to me."

"Then he has died as he wished to die—conscious," said Dr. Warren. "Thank God for that, Miss Charteris."

"Yes," said Ann again with the feeling as though some one else were speaking.

The doctor watched her for a moment irresolutely, as she still kneeled motionless looking at the quiet face upon the bed.

Then going out softly he closed the door behind him.

"Sympathy is not the treatment," he quoted with a twinge of remembrance.

. . . . . .

On the evening of the third day after this, Ann was seated alone in the darkening sitting-room trying to realise what Mr. Atterbury the lawyer had been saying to her during the last half-hour. From much that was incomprehensible to her this at least had emerged, that the war rolling on its course had torn not only her loved ones from her, but her means of living, and her home itself, the dear old Alum Bagh, the place of memories. Her mother's income had died with her, and her plans had been cut short in their midst. Bold strategist and clever manager as she had been, she yet

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had taken no account of anything so unlikely as her own immediate death. Of what had been left the war had made short work. They had been living latterly upon capital. There was literally no money. Even the sale of the house and of all it contained would not be sufficient to pay up everything. It was unlikely indeed that the Alum Bagh, out of repair as it was, would sell at all just now. So Mr. Atterbury had said.

"Yes, but I am there, Mr. Atterbury," Ann had replied almost immediately. "I shall of course make it my business to pay everything as soon as possible."

Mr. Atterbury had blinked kindly at her then over his eye-glasses. He had been hearing rumours of late. Did this speech of Ann's mean that Lowhampton for once was not talking absolute nonsense?

"I am glad to hear that you have prospects," he had begun tentatively.

"I have no prospects at all," Ann had replied bluntly. "No prospects of skilled work at least. I have no certificates. I am not trained for anything. But I think I could be a companion."

"I'll vouch for that, Miss Charteris," the lawyer had said warmly. Ann's eyes had filled then with sudden tears, but she had forced them back.

"Do you know of any one wanting a companion immediately?" she had said as steadily as she could.

Then Mr. Atterbury had considered for a moment, his eyes bent on the fire and a strange expression on his countenance.

At last, however, as though he had made up his mind, he had risen briskly.

"I almost think I do," he had said. "Will you leave me to manage the matter?"

. . . . . .

Half-an-hour afterwards Dr. Warren, seated at his belated dinner-table, swore to himself as the maid announced that Mr. Atterbury was in the consulting-room.

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"What the devil does he want just now?" he said.

Nevertheless he rose and went to him.

His temper was not improved by hearing that all the Atterburys were in the best of health, and that what the lawyer had come for at that untimely hour was to inquire about the post of lady's companion which the doctor had spoken of the other day to Mrs. Atterbury.

"Ah, yes, for my old friends the Miss Bartons of Bartonsmuir?" said the doctor, affecting an interest he did not feel. "You must remember the Miss Bartons here years ago—rich hospitable old people with a place of their own in Scotland. They used to come here every year at one time and live for months at the hotel."

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Atterbury. "And there was a niece Lottie, too, I recollect that drove all of us young men for miles round crazy, and who used to ride to hounds with you. What has become of her?"

"She married," said the doctor shortly. "Did you say you had heard of a companion for the Miss Bartons?" he added.

His face betrayed nothing even to the keen eyes watching him.

Mr. Atterbury adjusted his eye-glasses.

"Yes," he said. "I have heard of somebody wanting a post of that kind immediately, because she's proud and hard-up and in need of money to pay her debts with."

"Do I know her?" said the doctor.

"Yes. Miss Charteris."

This time the doctor distinctly changed countenance.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Surely you don't mean that?"

"You were a friend of her father's," said Mr. Atterbury, "and in any case I am betraying no confidence. She gave me leave to make inquiries for her, though she did not know that I was coming here. There is no dishonour about the debts. They are simply the result of these cursed times. But she considers their existence a slur upon the memory

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of those that are gone, and she cannot rest till they are paid up."

"But, Atterbury, is there nothing?" exclaimed Dr. Warren. "I thought you were in charge of their affairs?"

"So I am," said Mr. Atterbury, "but you can't make money of nothing. Every single thing they had money in has either gone down half since the war or failed altogether. I've done my best. I've tried all I could to save something. But I'm no more to blame than a chauffeur who has lost his master's motor in an avalanche."

"But the house—the Alum Bagh—can't you sell that?"

"Not now certainly," said Mr. Atterbury, "and you know what it's like. A bad storm any night might strew it along the shore. If it holds together till the war is over we might get something from a mad artist for it perhaps."

"Good Lord!" said the doctor.

After that there was silence till Mr. Atterbury rose and slowly took up his hat from the table.

"Then may I tell Miss Charteris that I have heard of a post for her?" he said.

"Yes—oh, yes—certainly," said the doctor rising also. "I shall write to-night to the Miss Bartons. That is——" he paused for a moment. "I shall write to-night," he repeated abruptly.

"I wonder if he really will," said Mr. Atterbury to himself as the door closed behind him and he went down the steps.

And his mind, in spite of many distractions, kept occupying itself with this problem all the evening.

. . . . . .

About two hours later Ann was still seated thinking in her upstairs sitting-room. Twice Mary the maid had come in, once with supper and once with the lighted lamp. Both times Ann had sent her away. She wanted nothing. She would rather be in the dark she said. Mary therefore, being practical, had eaten the poached egg herself and left the biscuits and the milk and the lighted lamp on the landing.

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Then feeling sleepy as she always did when the wind was rumbling in the kitchen chimney, she had decided that, as her mistress did not seem to need her, she might as well retire for the night.

Ann, quite indifferent to what her handmaid did, leaned on at her upstairs window. The gale was rising with the tide. Out at sea a great storm was brewing. In the gathering darkness the tamarisk trees were waving wild arms skywards. She was watching them fascinated when the garden gate banged and a tall figure crossed the garden. A moment later the door-bell rang. It rang again after a little, but no Mary answered it, for the good reason that she, sensible girl, was by this time sound asleep. Ann rose uncertainly, but footsteps were already on the stair and she had guessed who her visitor was before she met him on the landing. He had been her stand-by in her day of trouble, her ever-ready, ever-willing helper. She was glad he had come now. She had been too distraught before to thank him. She had some books too of her father's to give him. From the first he had refused money payment.

"This is good of you to come, doctor," she said. "And on such a night," she added, as another great gust shook the house.

He carried the lamp into the sitting-room for her while she drew the curtains across the windows. Then they sat down facing each other beside the dying fire.

"I'm glad," she began bravely, "to have this chance of thanking you, Dr. Warren, for all you have done for us—— My father——" But she could go no further. She paused, striving to regain her composure.

"Miss Charteris," the doctor broke in, "indeed it is I who have to thank you. I cannot say what your father's friendship has been to me, nor what a blank in my own life he leaves behind him. I shall miss him more than I can tell you."

Ann sat still speechless, blinking back her tears, looking younger and slighter than ever in her black dress, the dim

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bleakness of the room, the fierce turmoil of the storm outside, emphasising her forlornness. Giant hands seemed to be rattling at the rickety windows and threatening to tear from her even their frail shelter.

"He was an inspiration to me," the doctor went on. "His life during those last months was a triumph of spirit that it did a man good to see. But," he went on more hurriedly, leaning forward, elbows on knees, his strong capable hands clasping each other, "if there was anything finer than his courage it was yours, Miss Charteris. Don't try to speak—it was—and seeing you bearing up so splendidly through everything has—has made me feel as if—as if I couldn't do without you—that's all."

"Don't try to speak yet," he went on, as Ann sat looking at him speechless now from sheer amazement. "I am saying it badly. I am past all the romance of youth, and old enough to be your father. But if you care to have the—the love of a man who needs you—needs you badly in his lonely house and in his lonely life along there at Lowhampton—it is yours. And so I have just come to ask you if—if you will be my wife, dear," he concluded.

No fervid eloquence could have moved Ann at that moment as those simple words did. As she listened wondering she realised that at the heart of her grief was the sense of not being needed any more by anybody. Yet . . . His wife . . . She sat staring at him scared and trembling.

The man's rugged face softened as her eyes met his questioningly, and a great pity for her awoke within him.

This beautiful slim brown-haired creature, so proud yet so sweet—was this the kind of wooing she should have had? Ah, twenty years ago he would have done it better! He had known how to woo then. He had been something like a lover then, though it had all been for nothing.

"Oh, I know," he went on as Ann still was silent. "It's not much I have to offer you. A country doctor——"

"My father was a country doctor too," Ann broke in suddenly, finding her voice all at once and dashing away the

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impeding tears. "And I thank you—oh, I do thank you," she went on, "for—for honouring me—but, oh—you will understand I know—you who always understand—I can't marry you, I can't indeed."

Here she fairly broke down.

But he rose and, going over to her, took her hands gently away from her face and held them.

"Of course I understand," he said. "The idea is all new to you. You had not thought of me like that."

"No—only as a good kind friend," she managed to say, looking up at him through her tears, "the best and the kindest."

"Well now you must go on thinking of me as a friend," he said, "as a friend who expects nothing from you except what you want to give, a friend who will be there thinking of you and—caring for you always, and ready to help you at any time when you have gone out into the world as you mean to do—do you not?"

"You know?" she whispered.

"Yes, Atterbury came to me. He knew that I had been inquiring about some one for just such a post as you want. Two old friends of mine—Miss Bartons whom I used to know long ago—wrote to me the other day. I should like to think of you with them. They will pay you well and they are kind souls. May I tell them you will come?"

"Yes. Oh, yes please," she exclaimed all eagerness.

Then with a quick graceful, unexpected movement she stooped suddenly and kissed his hand.

"Ah, you are good!" she whispered.

It was only for a moment, but she had worked magic unawares. It was the first touch of a woman's lips that he had felt for twenty years. Fires that he had thought long dead flickered from their old grey ashes suddenly. . . .

Almost roughly he laid her hands down in her lap, and turning away from her he began doing something to the lamp.

"I shall write to the Miss Bartons to-night then," he said after a moment. "How soon can you be ready to start?"

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"Any time," said Ann at once.

She turned to speak to him almost cheerful again.

Here once more was her father's friend, the familiar adviser in emergency. Her tears for the moment were dried. There were a hundred things she wanted to ask him about the Miss Bartons. But now, just as she wanted to talk, it seemed he wanted to leave her.

He was already on his way to the door.

"I must be off," he said. "There's a man very bad in the cottages beyond you here. I should have been there an hour since."

Heavy rain was lashing by this time on the windows.

"I'll come down," said Ann rising, "and light you to the door."

She had done it before many a time, but that night he would not have it.

"No, no—good night," he said without even thanking her.

"If she had come near me again," he muttered as he hurried away down the stair, "it's ten to one I would have made an absolute fool of myself."

Ann stood listening till the door banged behind him.

She was chilled and perplexed by this abrupt leave-taking.

Had she, after all, offended him she wondered.

Yet he had seemed to understand. . . .

But men were like that, or so at least they said in books. They wanted everything from you when they fell in love with you or nothing, so that now the doctor whom she had learned to trust was really nothing to her, or rather she was nothing to him. . . .

Sitting down again to think this out with the storm howling round the house, it seemed to Ann to add the last drop of bitterness to her returning misery. A terror seized her of what she must now suffer. Already she could feel the first chill of coming agony. Nowhere was there any help. Even the household gods were alienated—her father's chair drawn up to the round table, the lamp that had shone on so many happenings, the eight-day clock that had ticked

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out so many hours. . . . They were no more hers either. Nothing at all was hers.

A madness of grief came upon her. She could bear no more to sit there. Yet the thought of bed was intolerable. She felt she must make for the open. Without waiting to take the lamp with her she fled down the stair. At the door the hurricane fought against her, but she forced her way with the strength of desperation. Hatless, coatless, with her hair loosening behind her, she struggled down the pathway to the gate. She could have told where it was even in the darkness by its creaking. But though the moon was half-hidden amid the flying clouds, she could see the waving branches against the white background of the breakers.

Once at the gate, however, she had to stay there clinging to it. She could go no further. All the tempest seemed to be meeting her, choking her breath from her, killing her, annihilating her. A horror of great darkness took possession of her as well, and shook her soul even as the storm-wind was shaking her frail support. A sense of her utter impotence and insignificance overwhelmed her.

What was the good of battling on? she asked herself. She would have to go under at last. Even Jim had had to, and what was she in comparison? They had all gone—all her loved ones into the darkness. Even her father himself—and what had he known of what was beyond more than any other? Had he only, like Socrates, wished to give her an opinion to support her spirit in its passage into nothingness? Had all the thoughts of courage and the rest been but toys he had given her to play with?

No thoughts of courage were coming to her now. Would those who loved her if they were anywhere at all have suffered her to remain without them?

No—it was impossible.

They must be nowhere in existence then, except as that of which she dared not think, in the cemetery at Lowhampton, in that shallow grave behind the trenches. . . .

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They as well as she had been tricked and deluded into striving and praying and being brave, only to find out their mistake at the end of it. . . .

She had just reached this conclusion when a long fragment of sea-tangle flying landwards with the rain and the foam struck her sharply across the eyelids.

At any other time she would hardly have noticed such a thing, but at this moment it seemed an insult direct from omnipotence, and clinging to the gate, blinded, maddened, like a creature at bay——

"I hate You—hate You—hate You, God!" she shrieked aloud into the universe. . . .

A moment afterwards she started violently, for a hand had been laid on her cold hand where it clutched the gate—a strong warm kindly hand.

"Child, is that you?" said the doctor's voice.

It was quietly spoken, yet so near she could hear it through the storm. The gate-latch clicked and next moment he stood close beside her. She turned to him as she had so long been accustomed to turn and forgetting everything but her terror and her loneliness——

"Oh, I am glad you have come!" she panted.

There was a moment's silence. Then the doctor spoke again.

"I am on my way back from the cottage," he said. "It is a wild night for you to be out."

Even as he spoke a terrific blast laden with sleet and spray swept over them, and before it had passed, or either of them had realised what was happening, she was sobbing on his breast with his arms about her.

For a long moment they stood thus in the troubled moonlight, with the tempest roaring and beating round them, while forgotten the years fell from the man and his lost youth returned and ran like fire through all his being.

"Dearest, you need me too I think," he whispered, trembling like any boy lover. "Let us hold together always—shall we?"

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"If you really want me," sobbed Ann.

"Want you?" he cried. "*Want* you, sweetheart?"

There was something quite new in the voice. The girl responded to it instinctively.

"I'll come, I'll come then," she answered breathlessly as, drifting themselves now, with the wind behind them, they went up the path to the house together.

A moment later they were in the little hall lit only by the lamplight from the open door of the room above.

"Come soon," he whispered, drawing her yet closer.

Even as he spoke, however, sharp remembrance came to her. Her half-conscious glance had fallen on her father's old hat and coat and stick still in their places as he had left them.

She withdrew herself a little, pushing back the wet hair from her forehead.

"I cannot come to you with the debts unpaid," she said.

"Oh, my dear, I have enough for everything," he answered.

"I know and I know how generous you are," she returned, "but they would have thought it a dishonour. If—if there is nothing more—their memories at least must be safe-guarded. I must pay their debts before I do anything else, even if I never come to you at Lowhampton."

She would not be moved from this resolve though he argued on for some time still pleading with her.

"You strange stubborn thing," he said at last, holding her from him in the dimness. "You are like these tamarisks of yours—fairy-like to look at, but tough enough to withstand anything."

As he spoke he caught her to him again and kissed her cold lips passionately.

"Good night, good night, my own darling," he whispered.

Then he went out into the roaring darkness.

. . . . . .

As soon as he reached his house at the other end of the town, he wrote and dispatched his promised letter to the

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Miss Bartons. After the business-like opening he added—

"She is the daughter of an old friend who died in debt owing to the war. She considers it to be a sacred duty to clear off this liability, and until she has done so she refuses to come here as my companion though she has promised to do so ultimately. In other words, she is engaged to be married to me and you are the first to whom I have announced the fact, remembering your kindness to me in the old days and glad that my little Ann is to be with you until I am allowed to have her."

After he had sent this off, he sat on thinking and he thought so deeply that his pipe had long gone out when he turned in his chair and, unlocking a drawer near him, took out of it a faded photograph.

It was the picture of a pretty girl in old-fashioned riding costume, with her hat set jauntily on one side, a merry maid with mischief lurking in every little curl and dimple.

He smiled a little—no one could have helped it—in response to the laughter in her eyes.

"Lottie," he said softly.

Then he flung it suddenly into the fire, where it smiled still till the flames caught it.

Ann meanwhile had made her way back to her sitting-room, dazed and shaken it is true, but no longer the frenzied being who had left it. The old room also seemed different when she re-entered it. The spirits of her dead seemed to greet her there and to be glad that she was the promised bride of him whom they had known and trusted. In a strange dream-like apathy she made up the dying fire, piling on the drift-wood recklessly as she had been wont to do in happier times. Then wrapped in her white dressing-gown she seated herself before the blaze to dry her hair and listen the while to the storm still rising. . . .

Three days later she left the Alum Bagh. The wind had sunk again to a faint sighing, but great waves were still breaking on the beach beneath the tamarisks when she was arriving at St. Pancras on her way to Scotland.

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## CHAPTER THE SECOND

### WHICH TREATS AMONGST OTHER THINGS OF RUGS AND ROSE PARLOURS

"THIRD class, miss? Yes, miss," said the porter cheerfully.

"Here's a Ladies Only. Will that do, miss?"

At that moment anything would have done for Ann.

All she wanted was to get into the train, anyhow, anywhere, and go to sleep.

The porter deposited her belongings in the rack, her rug, a provision-basket from the doctor, violets from the doctor, books from the doctor, papers, sweets, from him.

The sight of all these love-gifts, tired as she was, warmed her heart as she settled herself in her corner. She drew off her left-hand glove to look at the engagement ring which had been his last present to her. It was beautiful. Diamonds. It flashed like fire in the dimness of the compartment, just as his love for her had flashed out from the dark night of storm and misery.

It had been a strange three days since, full of bitter grief, yet with gleams of comfort at times and even happiness. Her lover had hardly spoken again of love to her. He had been lover-like only at meeting and parting. The rest of the time he had been simply a good comrade, reminding her now of her father, now of her brother. And she had learned to call him David. She thought no more of him as "the doctor." As she took the ring off and slipped it on to a gold chain under her blouse she said the name softly over to herself. David. She might well call him that. He had overcome giants for her. He stood now between her and the powers of darkness, the terror, the horror that had almost driven her frantic. He had come out of the

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all-surrounding cruelty and folded her to his breast for shelter. She was his. He was hers. She was no longer desolate. She belonged to him, he belonged to her for always.

On the last evening at the Alum Bagh, he had sat with her before the drift-wood fire and had told her to leave the Beyond alone as being outside her comprehension.

"Our mental vision, we must remember," he had said, "is just as limited in comparison with what there is to be seen as our physical vision is. My hand before your eyes here," and he had suited the action to the word, "prevents you seeing even this little room, even one who loves you."

Then he had spoken to her of her work and of Bartonsmuir, gazing into the fire as he described it, as though he saw it before him there. He had made her see with him the old grey house among windswept trees on the shores of that other sea.

"There is a path that you will like," he had said, "among the dunes between the heather and the sands. There are cowslips there in spring in the sheltered places, and queer little red moths flutter about among the flowers."

He had been silent then until she spoke, and soon after that he had risen to go, but first, as they had stood in the firelight, he had taken her face between his hands and looking deep into her eyes——

"So, little one," he had said, "we'll begin all over again."

. . . . . .

Ann was still far away in the firelit room at the Alum Bagh when a clear young voice close at hand recalled her to her surroundings.

"Yes, Miss Brownrigg," said the voice. "It's a Ladies Only, and there are three seats left."

A moment later the head and shoulders of an elderly gentlewoman wreathed in a grey motor-veil appeared at the carriage window. She had an anxious and hawk-like appearance and mobile eyes on the look-out for objections.

"This will do," she said, however, after inspecting the

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Ladies Only label. "Well, now we must get the luggage. Where *is* that porter? He was to meet us here."

"Oh, he'll come all right," said the school-girl behind her with all the nonchalance of youth. "Milly has gone along there to look for him. Shouldn't we just get in and keep the seats?"

"And leave Millicent wandering about there at mid-night? No, certainly not, Evelyn," said Miss Brownrigg sharply. "Besides who knows if the porter will appear at all? We may have to carry along our luggage ourselves, as people have to do now constantly."

"Oh, very well," said Evelyn, shrugging her shoulders, "I don't mind I'm sure. We must just leave our seats to providence then or this lady," she added, turning to Ann with an engaging grin.

"I'll keep them for you if I can," said Ann.

"Thank you so much," said Evelyn, as she ran after Miss Brownrigg, who already at her utmost speed was making for the luggage-office.

It was only after they had disappeared that Ann, now thoroughly awake to current events, realised with a thrill followed by a hot feeling all over her that she had forgotten to take her ticket to Edinburgh. She had been much too early on the platform and had passed through the barriers before the ticket-checkers were at their posts, and nothing till that moment had occurred to remind her of the important omission. Now it was perhaps too late. Everywhere there were signs that the departure of the train was imminent. Barrow-loads of luggage were being trundled along to the vans. Crowds of people were hurrying past the windows. The guard was exchanging parting remarks with another guard. Men porters and women porters were scurrying about together. It was now or never if she was to get her ticket at all.

She had leaped out of the compartment and gone some yards along the platform before she remembered the three seats she had promised to reserve. Rushing back she threw

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her muff, her bag, her magazines, and her rug into the four corner-seats. Then she made off again.

But she need not have been in such a desperate hurry. When she returned breathless with her ticket, the train was pretty much as she had left it. The carriage doors were still standing open. When she came to her compartment, however, she found one of the corners already occupied. The seat where she had thrown her muff had been taken by a man in shabby khaki, just out of hospital apparently, ghastly, emaciated, with drops of perspiration on his forehead.

His eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily. The girl's heart contracted with pain as she looked at him. It was to her as though Jim were seated there, flung aside, abandoned broken.

He might have been like Jim once. He looked no older. He had been big and strong like Jim, handsome perhaps too, though now he was dreadful to look at—sunken-eyed, hollow-cheeked. Ann's eyes filled with tears.

Just then, however, a chatter of loud voices began outside the window.

"I say," exclaimed Evelyn. "What did I tell you, Miss Brownrigg? Here's a man in the carriage."

"But I thought you said it was a Ladies Only," said another voice, presumably Milly's.

"So it is," said Miss Brownrigg with an air of finality. "There's a notice on the window. My good man," she began, addressing the soldier in the corner.

But the good man never so much as opened his eyes in response.

"He's asleep," said Evelyn in a lowered voice, "and he looks very ill. It seems a shame to wake him."

"Nonsense," said Miss Brownrigg, "he can't be asleep yet. He can only have been two minutes in the carriage. There is plenty of room in the other carriages. Call the guard, Millicent. Call the guard."

"No, don't please," said Ann rising hastily and gather-

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ing her belongings together. "Let me rather leave the carriage. Then there will be three seats."

"You are very kind," said Miss Brownrigg stiffly, "but, as you perceive, I have two young girls with me, so that your going out will not improve matters. Call the guard, Millicent. The man must be told that this is a ladies' carriage and that there is plenty of room elsewhere."

At this a fury of rage that almost frightened herself rose up in Ann.

"Don't *dare* to call the guard," she said, her eyes flashing, her hands clenched. "If there is plenty of room elsewhere, go yourselves there, rather than disturb this man who has been to hell to keep you comfortable!"

For a moment the three faces outside stared blankly at her. Then the elderly hawk-like one flushed and softened.

"You are quite right, my dear," she said. "Come along, girls. She is quite right. We'll get seats I daresay in another compartment."

. . . . . .

Ann, left mistress of the field, made her dispositions to remain so. Pulling down all the blinds and closing the door, she leaned out of the window to hide the empty seats behind her. So absorbed was she in keeping disturbances at bay that until the train started she hardly looked again at her fellow-traveller. It was only then that with a sharp stab of fear she noticed that he had fallen limply forward.

In two steps she was by his side. His hands were deathly cold.

"Sure enough he has fainted," she muttered.

Well, thank goodness she had seen fainting before, and there was a flask in the doctor's provision basket. She was wiry, too, for all her slightness. In a few minutes she had him laid flat on the seat, with his tunic unbuttoned, and was forcing brandy between his teeth. She was chafing his hands after that, when, looking up, she found his eyes open and fixed upon her.

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"I see I have made an ass of myself," he whispered. "You are very good. I am very grateful."

"Then if you are," said Ann, rubbing away, "please don't speak any more just now."

There was a faint smile on his lips when he closed his eyes again.

"He'll sleep, perhaps," said Ann to herself, and presently he did sleep. Then rising she laid his warmed hands on his breast and getting down her travelling-rug from the rack, she tucked it closely round him. As she did so she noticed a crumpled piece of paper lying on the floor. She picked it up and looked at it. It was a railway pass to Edinburgh and must have fallen out of his pocket.

"Well, he'll not be roused till he's there at least," she resolved, "that is if I can help it."

She sat down to keep watch, and thus they remained through the chill small hours as the train sped on under the stars. After a little Ann dozed in spite of herself also, waking always with a start to find her charge still sound asleep. She had been lavish with her brandy. A warm flush was on his face. His hands too were now quite warm.

"He's sleeping it off splendidly," said Ann to herself. "When he awakes he will be quite different."

She was determined that he should not awake, however, until he did so of his own accord, and to that end, at every stoppage she posted herself at the window, prepared to cope with all intruders.

Once at a great station, amid hubbub of talking and clatter of crockery, a kindly voice asked if there were any soldiers in the compartment.

"Yes, one," said Ann, "an invalid. But he is asleep."

"Oh, but," persisted the benefactress, "I am sure he would be much the better of this."

At the same time a large steaming mug of tea and a huge muffin were held in at the open window.

"You are very kind," said Ann, hastily taking them.

"I'll be back in a minute for the mug," said the bene-

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factress who was in a great hurry, and she took her departure.

Ann, in the seclusion of her corner behind the window-blind, thoroughly enjoyed the mug of tea and the huge muffin.

"Where is he?" said the kindly giver as Ann handed the mug back to her.

"Over there resting," said Ann. "He has been very ill."

"But didn't he feel much better for the tea?"

"Oh, yes, thank you—very much," said Ann.

"I thought he would," said the woman. "Well—good journey to you! How glad you must be to get him back home again!"

At the word keen grief awoke in Ann once more, as the train rolled slowly out of the station. The woman had spoken as though it had been Jim. . . . Ah, would that it had been! Would that it had been!

She went and stood for a moment beside the sleeper and the hot tears fell in silence, till a sob breaking from her unawares startled her back to her seat, in terror lest she should have awakened him.

She had not done so, however, because he had been awake for some time, watching her out of half-closed eyes, listening to her, wondering at her, and ever more and more delighting in her.

"Nevertheless you had better stay as you are, Fred Lorimer," he reflected, "for you'll just go off again if you sit up now and give her more trouble, the splendid little darling."

The sob almost broke down his resolution, however.

"She is grieving for some one she loves," he thought. "That's why she's so kind to me."

A babyish jealousy of this other for whom the tears were shed mingled with his other reflections. He felt relieved when she stopped crying and little by little went to sleep.

When it was that he followed her example he never

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afterwards could remember, but when he awoke the train was at a standstill and an old porter with one eye was informing him that it was Edinburgh. He sat up giddily.

"I'll gi'e ye a hand," said the porter kindly. "You jist button up yer tunic there, an' I'll fold up yer rug for ye."

"My *rug?*" said Fred amazed. "But I have no rug with me."

"What's this then?" said the porter, holding up a large green plaid. "If this is no' a rug, I dinna ken what it is."

"But it's not mine," said the bewildered traveller.

"Weel it was a' tucked roond ye when I cam' in," said the porter, regarding him humorously out of his one eye. "If it's no' yours it'll be the bonny young leddy's. My, but you soldier-laddies has a' the luck the now!"

A slow flush had mounted in the traveller's face.

"It was her that told me ye was sleepin' here an' sent me to look after ye," added the porter, "so I'd better jist roll it up."

"Well, so it seems," said Fred laughing ruefully. "But she shouldn't have done it. Is she really gone?"

"Ay, she's gone," said the porter. "She was gettin' into a taxi when I saw her. But dinna you pit yersel' aboot. The rug'll gi'e ye a chance to see her when ye tak' it back to her."

"But that's just what is putting me about," exclaimed the other. "I can't give it back. I don't know either her name or her address, my friend."

"Hoots, man!" said the porter. "There's queerer chances in the world than you meetin' her again. I met my wife——"

Fred rose hastily.

"See if there is a taxi left for me, will you?" he said. "I want to catch the first train to Rathness."

But the taxis were all gone, and he missed the first train, and did not get to Rathness until that afternoon.

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His long sleep had worked wonders, however, and he felt almost well until he saw his hostess's face when she met him at the station.

He had seen her looking out for him before the train drew up at the platform—a smart little woman in her forties with something of the coquette in the set of her neat black hat, something of the sportswoman in her upright carriage and sun-tanned cheeks. Fred's heart warmed when he saw her as every one's did, for she radiated kindliness as the sun radiates heat. A queen of good comrades she was, a regular good sort.

He rose hurriedly from his seat.

She was still staring about her, however, when he approached.

"Don't you see him, Mrs. Alleyne?" said a man in uniform who was in attendance.

And she was shaking her head when Fred held out his hand to her.

"How d'ye do, Aunt Lottie!" he said.

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed. "Is *this* Fred Lorimer?"

There was consternation in her honest eyes.

Fred giggled slightly. He felt suddenly terribly weak.

"I wouldn't have known you, boy," she said. "There, that's right—take my arm. . . . Porter! Take these things and put them into Captain Piffard's motor. Captain Piffard —this is my nephew-in-law, Fred Lorimer. Fred—this is my friend, Captain Piffard. He will take your other arm. Now wouldn't you like to go up in the luggage-lift?"

"No, certainly not!" exclaimed Fred. But he was thankful when he reached the motor nevertheless. Captain Piffard had almost to lift him into it.

"And now, my dear, not one word," said Mrs. Alleyne, "until I have put you into bed at least."

For about one minute then she was silent herself as the motor slid smoothly into the darkening town. But as they turned the last corner——

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"Fred, I must say it once," she said. "It was perfectly glorious, and we are all *so* proud of it!"

Fred groaned.

"Yes, I know, my dear," she went on hastily. "I got your letter last night saying you would only come on condition that no notice was taken of it. And I've done my very best. Fourteen people are coming to-night to meet the V.C. It was too late to put them off. But you shan't see one of them. And then I had told all the servants of course. And they'll all be there waiting to receive you most likely. Yes . . . There they are . . . with old Margaret and Johnson in front. But if you like I am quite ready to tell them that you won't see them."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Fred holding her back. "Of course I must see Margaret and Johnson. It's strangers that I can't be bothered with just now. They get on my nerves somehow and make me feel idiotic."

The verdict in the servants' hall that night was that Mr. Lorimer was the genuine article and no mistake, and it was accounted a special merit in him that though he was a gentleman born he had joined as a private, and come home with hardly a stitch except an old plaid rug. He was the sole topic of conversation below stairs both before and after the dinner party.

The party itself was a huge success. In the absence of the hero his aunt-in-law made a speech, and there was great drinking of healths and singing of "For he's a jolly good fellow."

The whole house from top to bottom resounded with uproarious noise. Fred heard it in his luxurious room upstairs where he lay in bed in charge of old Margaret.

It was twenty years, she reminded him, since she had last put him to bed, and then it had been as a punishment for being naughty.

"And little, sir, did I think——" she added, or rather began to add, for he stopped her short.

"For God's sake, Margaret," he exclaimed, "let me

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hear no more to-night about that V.C. I can't stand it!"

Seeing, however, that she was shocked and a little hurt, and feeling quite sprightly himself after a champagne supper, he invited her presently to take her knitting and pull her arm-chair close to his bedside. Then to her great satisfaction he, as she afterwards declared, told her Everything.

"Which I tell you, Johnson, was as good as anything you've ever been to—cinema or no cinema," she added.

At last, however, she shaded the light and withdrew to the fireside with her knitting.

But never had Fred felt more wide-awake. The distant sound of revelry was rather soothing. The moment he closed his eyes, however, he always found himself in the swaying railway carriage where in the corner opposite there sat a girl with anxious eyes and chestnut hair that shone red when the light fell on it. Sometimes she only sat and watched, sometimes she would come so near that he could smell the violets she was wearing and see the tears that were on her lashes. . . .

Then all at once he started violently, for a light hand had touched his hair.

"Dear boy," said Mrs. Alleyne all radiant in her dinner-gown, "I am so sorry I wakened you. It's only me. We're having a great time, though it's the play without Hamlet. I just ran up to peep at you. Margaret told me you were asleep."

As she spoke she turned to the mirror behind her and tucked a stray curl into place.

"Now be a good boy and go to sleep again," she added. "Is there anything I can get you by the way?"

"Is—is my rug there, Aunt Lottie?" said Fred unexpectedly.

"Good heavens, are you feverish?" she exclaimed, clutching at his wrist as she spoke. "Are you feeling shivery under all those blankets?"

Fred laughed.

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"Oh dear no," he said, "and you are not to go for Margaret or for your thermometer either, for I will *not* have my temperature taken. It's only that I—like that rug."

"What creatures of habit we all are to be sure!" said Mrs. Alleyne as she went to get it for him. "And just to think," she added as she tucked it round him, "what this old green thing must have seen in the trenches!"

"Didn't know they had 'em there," said an old Mr. Tosh to himself after his hostess had related this incident in the drawing-room. "They'll be having hot bottles and down-quilts next. No wonder they're all so damned dilatory."

. . . . . .

Just about this time, for it was still early in the evening, the owner of the rug was seated with her knitting in the drawing-room at Bartonsmuir. On one side of her was Miss Caroline and on the other Miss Emily Barton.

"I'm like Alice in 'Through the Looking-glass' with the Red Queen and the White Queen," she reflected as she noted, while apparently absorbed in her work, how her two mistresses were scrutinising her.

She at the same time was scrutinising them.

On her right sat Miss Caroline, large and stately, in a great high-backed deep-cushioned easy-chair. She had that serenity of manner peculiar to Personalities, and she was grande dame, too, in every sense of the word. Her old dove-coloured brocade and her gorgeous Indian scarf might have figured in the salon of Madame de Pompadour. Her square, pale, heavily aquiline countenance with its double chin would have been noticeable anywhere. It was crowned and framed in a wealth of faded hair, amber-grey in colour which must once have been quite wonderful, and was now confined, or supposed to be so—for her hair-pins had an extraordinary way of escaping—in a quaint net-cap made entirely of seed-pearls. This had two tassels which hung down on either side and were so long that they almost touched her shoulders. When she talked they glimmered and trembled all the time in strange contrast to her large

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still eyes. These gazed out upon the world from under thick amber-grey eyebrows and were the most remarkable thing about her. They were not beautiful, they had hardly any colour, but they seemed always, whatever they were looking at, to be aware of far distances. This lent a curious air of detachment to their owner's manner and sometimes a weird effect of inspiration to her utterances. She was born to command evidently as Miss Emily was born to serve her, and she was totally devoid of any hampering sense of humour.

Miss Emily, on Ann's right, was, except for a slight family likeness, utterly different from her large and dominating sister. She was small and thin and anxious-looking, and had a narrow wrinkled little face. Her grey eyes, darker than her sister's, took note of no far horizons. They were restless, always fully occupied with things near at hand, and had generally a shade of apprehension in them. She wore a black gown, a plain white shawl, and on her head a lace cap with lappets, and she was precise and neat from her tight grey side-curls to the tips of her black velvet slippers.

"And she's the practical one," Miss Caroline had said in a soft rather hoarse voice, indicating her sister with a knitting-pin.

"If I *am*, Miss Charteris," Miss Emily had retorted, "she's the clever one. She gets ideas."

Miss Caroline received this statement with a sigh.

"They are sometimes a great trouble to me," she remarked.

"A *great* trouble," she repeated dreamily.

"Yes, poor dear," said Miss Emily. "But I carry them out for her when I can. Don't I, Caroline?"

"Then," said Ann, "I hope you will let me help. I should love to."

Both old ladies beamed with satisfaction, Miss Caroline with a veiled effect as of sunshine through mist.

"You are very different, Miss Charteris, from our last companion," said Miss Emily.

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"Don't speak of her," said Miss Caroline, waving away even the memory with her knitting. "I can never forget how she spoiled my Rose Parlour."

"You see," said Miss Emily, "my sister changed her mind, just after the roses were put up. You know you did, Caroline."

"That was no reason why she should have refused to take them down again," said Miss Caroline gloomily, "but rather the contrary."

"I am glad she did, nevertheless," said Ann cheerfully, "because now I shall have the chance of doing them for you."

Again the old ladies beamed across at each other.

"Thank you, my dear," said Miss Emily, "but not until after the war. We have decided to leave it now till after the war."

The word, spoken suddenly in that quiet room full of the evidences of long and uninterrupted peace, fell upon Ann's ear with startling strangeness. What did they know of war these two old people? No more than the painted ladies in the miniatures on the walls, less than some of these perhaps, who might have danced at the Brussels ball or waited for tidings from Culloden. . . . Yet even these. . . . What had any one in these past days known or dreamed of this orgy of destruction and devilry that was going on as they sat here discussing, forsooth, Rose Parlours?

For a time after that there was no sound in the room but the click of Miss Emily's knitting-needles and the falling of the ashes in the grate. From beyond the closely drawn curtains, however, came a very faint far-off sighing. . . .

The sea. . . . Ann's thoughts sped away to another shore where the Alum Bagh stood deserted behind its tamarisk trees, and the household gods, ticketed for the next day's sale, kept watch for the last time round an empty fireplace. Then beyond the sea she saw other homes, scenes of desolation in the wake of desperate cruelty. . . .

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"You see what we must all do now is war-work," said Miss Caroline in her soft voice dropping one of her knitting-pins.

Ann started as it fell with a clatter upon the parquet and stooped to pick it up again, thrusting from her the thronging visions.

"I am glad to see you are a knitter, Miss Charteris," Miss Caroline went on. "Can you pick up stitches?"

"Certainly," said Ann, respectfully repressing a smile as she became aware of the condition of the large white bed-sock that had been handed to her.

"I am not a knitter," said Miss Caroline, watching her face.

"Oh, well——" Ann began.

"No, I am not a knitter," said Miss Caroline firmly. "Am I, Emily?"

"No, Caroline, you are not," said her sister.

Miss Caroline, with another sigh, settled herself more comfortably in her chair, and as she did so there was another little rattle on the parquet. It was a hair-pin this time. Again Ann picked it up.

"But I do what I can," said Miss Caroline as she replaced it.

. . . . . .

Late that night Ann wrote her first letter from Bartonsmuir.

"They're dears," she began her last sheet, "especially Miss Caroline, who is, I can see, the lady paramount here. To watch her reading prayers with a large wooden knitting-pin stuck through her head-dress was delicious.

"There was quite a congregation—all the house-servants, who are mostly old, and the man Japp from the West Lodge who does the motor and the odd jobs. There is a gardener, too, but he is married and supposed to have prayers at home. The man Japp, being a lone bachelor, has orders to come up every evening.

"I have a beautiful room, all old mahogany and chintz,

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overlooking the garden, and I can hear the waves. I am glad, for I could not be happy I believe—even if I could forget—away from the sound of them. But now when I am lonely I shall remember that you are hearing it too, and caring for me out of sight as you were on that night you know of.

"Good night, dear David. You have told me not to thank you, and I would do anything for you, but my heart rebels and thanks you in spite of me, again and again and again, for all you have been and are to yours . . .

ANN CHARTERIS.

"*P. S.*—In signing my name I am reminded of something else. The Two have just had a discussion as to how I am to be addressed. Miss Emily wanted to call me Ann, as I am engaged to be married to such an old friend, but Miss Caroline holds this to be undignified. I am therefore to remain Miss Charteris."

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## CHAPTER THE THIRD

### IN WHICH FOR THE FIRST TIME MENTION IS MADE OF THE WRACK-STRAWS

For a time then Ann, flung there by the great storm, rested in a content that was half exhaustion in this quiet haven. In her off-hours, however, her sorrow always awoke again and deeps within her called to deeps outside the shallow waters. At those times a growing sense of the futility and uselessness of her life troubled her, and a vision of what, with her training in sorrow, she might be doing in the world.

"I too have been there," she longed to say to fellow-sufferers. "I too have known."

Her personal sadness seemed lost sometimes in her grief for the wholesale destruction of hopes and loves that was going on, for the endless heaping up of misery upon misery. Sometimes even her losses would seem as nothing save as giving her the key to the sense of loss in others—those mourners whom she could not see, who were outside the woods of Bartonsmuir.

She would flee then across the moor to the sea-shore and pace the sands till, as her father would have said, she had adjusted herself, or she would sit there watching distant ships passing up and down the great death-beset sea-road to the eastwards. Then praying for patience she would go back to her old mistresses for whom she had soon a strong half-maternal affection. It was not their fault that they had lived immune from sorrow, that they looked from afar on the agonising world beyond their little domain with a regret which was mostly bewilderment. Sometimes, however, it was rather trying.

"Dear, dear!" they would say, when Ann, in a white heat, read out newspaper accounts to them of fiendish

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outrages and sickening horrors. It was a relief to her to do so. She wanted to make their blood run cold, to fling fearful facts and happenings down before them, to see their mild old eyes grow awe-stricken. She longed to tear asunder the web of self-complacency that peace and affluence had woven about them. In spite of her utmost efforts, however, she only succeeded very partially.

"You see they have no flesh and blood in it," she wrote to David at Lowhampton.

And then, even as she wrote the words, the pathos of them would strike her and send her back to her old dears with a remorseful compassion of which they were entirely unconscious.

Their apathy seemed to her then not a thing to rage at, but to pity. At times in the reaction of feeling which came to her she would decide that of all people in the world they were the most to be commiserated. To see Miss Caroline then watching her and pondering as though some dim perception of the truth were dawning upon her would move her almost to tears. It was like a blind man beginning to realise his blindness, a prisoner becoming conscious for the first time of his prison bars.

Miss Emily was always a comfort at these times. She never either watched or pondered, for the very good reason that she had no leisure to do either. Like any old rabbit in her hole under a battlefield, she was wholly occupied with her own business, and that business was her sister Caroline, Caroline's wishes, Caroline's plans. She was practical in comparison to her sister, but she was loyal to Miss Caroline before all things, even to the defence of her unpracticalities.

"You say no one has ever done this before," she said to Ann as she packed a library-full of sevenpennies into a chest that might have been the original of that in the Mistletoe Bough. "But what we want is initiative. We all know that. And what's that I should like to know but being the very first to do things? Caroline has noticed that

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we have been sending only a few books at a time which must cause quarrelling among the men. The thing to do therefore is to send a large quantity simultaneously. Leave it to me, Miss Charteris dear. I know what I am doing."

Ann accordingly left her in the draughty attic, with two maids in attendance, for the best part of an afternoon. The result was that Miss Emily had the worst attack of lumbago that she had ever had and the chest never went to France because Japp and McMurtrie the gardener absolutely refused to move it.

"Though I'd do anything in reason for Miss Emily," said McMurtrie to Ann who had been sent to see what was happening in the attic and to report upon it, "or for the soldiers, seein' I'm for off to be a soldier myself."

"*You*, McMurtrie!" exclaimed Ann as the big sturdy man of peace seemed suddenly transfigured before her eyes.

"Yes, miss," said McMurtrie, "if Miss Caroline will give me my leave. So I see no call for me to end mysel' the now, miss."

"And are you going too, Japp?" inquired Ann eagerly.

But Japp was half-way downstairs by this time.

"No' him," said McMurtrie, "an' between you an' me, miss, I look at him as little as I can for fear he should pit me aff the soldierin'."

"But why?" said Ann surprised.

"This why," said McMurtrie slowly. "It scunners ye when ye think that maybe ye're awa' to dee to save the skin o' sic' an imitation o' a man as he is."

The great box did not go, but the books went in small bundles made up by Ann under the supervision of Miss Emily.

"And be kind enough, Miss Charteris dear, not to say a word about it to Caroline," said the invalid. "When her plans cannot be carried out she gets low-spirited."

So to this day Miss Caroline believes that the huge chest went to the trenches.

McMurtrie's departure, which took place before Miss

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Emily was about again, touched both old sisters more nearly than all Ann's reading aloud of horrors. He had been in their service from a boy. They knew all his good and bad points as well as he knew their borders. He had never been an amiable man, but he had been their staunch retainer for many years.

"And what we shall do without him, Emily, I know not," said Miss Caroline when they were discussing it.

Nevertheless, as Ann saw with compunction for former hard thoughts, the head of the house rose admirably to her occasion.

Not only did it never seem to occur to her to refuse McMurtrie permission to go, but laden with every conceivable and inconceivable present he went off after a leave-taking that was quite a ceremony. On his last evening at Bartonsmuir he and his wife, who was very stout and emotional, were entertained to supper in the servants' hall, after which they had to appear with the others in the drawing-room at the evening worship.

"Never was anything so painful," Ann wrote to Lowhampton afterwards, "but Miss Caroline never flinched once, though almost from the beginning Mrs. McMurtrie was sobbing loudly. She read through without a tremor the whole of the first chapter of Joshua and then prayed extempore for twenty minutes, after which we all said good-bye in turn to McMurtrie, who by this time was speechless. I was really sorry for him."

McMurtrie had been gone about a week and his wife installed as gardener when another little wave from the great whirlpool lapped over into their seclusion.

One night when they were sitting at dinner with the blinds up, so that Miss Caroline might see the last of the sunset, the policeman called.

"What can he want at this hour I wonder," said Miss Emily. "Let me go, Caroline."

"Certainly not, Emily," said Miss Caroline rising. "You are still weak from illness."

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She then sailed majestically from the room, but was only absent for about five minutes.

When she came in again she closed the door and came forward to the table with the air of one who has important news to deliver.

"What is it, Caroline?" said Miss Emily anxiously.

"Orders have come from headquarters," said Miss Caroline with a kind of relish, "to darken all our windows at sunset on account of probable air raids from Germany."

Ann said nothing as she looked at the two awed faces, though for months before she left Lowhampton they had been darkening the windows. To belittle this event would, she felt, be tactless.

"We had better ring for Arbuthnot," said Miss Caroline next. "We had better ring for all the servants."

A few minutes later accordingly all the maids, Mrs. McMurtrie, and Japp filed in.

Miss Caroline from her high-backed chair then addressed them.

"Friends," she said, "the policeman has just brought me an order from headquarters to darken all our windows. Germans—fiends in the form of Germans," she corrected herself, "have of late been visiting the southern portions of this island in Zeppelins. It is now expected that they may come north here—that even this very night they may hover over us——"

Here Arbuthnot groaned, and Maggie the between-maid just managed to suppress a shriek.

"Hover over us," repeated Miss Caroline firmly, "and drop their diabolical contrivances upon us, so that it is not impossible that this whole house by to-morrow may be in fragments."

At this Mrs. McMurtrie burst into tears and two more of the audience followed her example.

"Tut tut!" said Miss Caroline looking rather pleased than otherwise at the effect she had produced. "This is no way to meet danger. Is it, Emily?"

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"No, Caroline," said Miss Emily, "but it is very natural."

"Nevertheless," said Miss Caroline, "I now ask you all to exercise self-control, to follow Arbuthnot upstairs to the attics and to bring down every spare curtain you can find there. If there are no curtains, bring table-cloths. If there are no table-cloths bring—bring anything. The invaders must not find us unprepared. Now go."

Ann was the first, next to Arbuthnot, to reach the top of the attic stairs and the first to come down again with an armful of green damask.

"It was weird to see everybody moving about in the half-light," she wrote afterwards. "Most of the windows had curtains already, but in this queer old house there are all kinds of odd windows. We were working till quite late and then Miss Caroline made me take her round the house outside. We went out by the morning-room window through the rose-garden and back by the lawn, and not a peep of light could we see anywhere either in the house or in the lodges."

Something else took place that night, however, that Ann did not report because her letter was finished before it happened. She had blown out her own light and was leaning on her window-sill, as she always did before going to bed, when she *did* see a distant glimmer. It came, too, from a place where no light should have been even in ordinary circumstances—the old stone summer-house half-overgrown with roses that stood in the corner of the garden just beneath her window.

She waited, hoping she had been mistaken or that the glimmer had been reflected from some other light within the house. But no, again there was a glimmer as of a lighted match. Some one undoubtedly was in the summer-house.

Her first impulse was to go and arouse Miss Caroline. Before she reached her bedroom door, however, she changed her mind. For what, she reflected, could Miss Caroline do,

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or Miss Emily, or even Arbuthnot, even if they were awakened, that she could not do herself?

She must at least first reconnoitre before making a disturbance.

Pulling herself together, therefore, she put on her shoes again, flung on a lay coat, and sallied forth. As she went down the stairs she reassured herself as best she could. After all perhaps she *had* imagined the glimmer, or perhaps the policeman who had warned them was resting there and lighting his pipe. This thought gave her courage to cross the ghostly drawing-room to the French window which led directly into the rose-garden. After that the spirit of adventure awoke in her and she grasped the stick that she had brought with her firmly. She was feeling ready to cope with even a German if necessary when the door of the summer-house opened and to her great surprise Japp came out.

She could see him distinctly in the starlight, but he did not see her because he was looking for something on the ground. He was half-kneeling and feeling about upon the gravel.

Instinctively Ann looked down too, and there, close to her foot, was a small white object. She stooped down and picked it up. A candle.

"Is this what you are looking for, Japp?" she said smiling to herself in the darkness as Japp started violently.

So this was all she had to fear? McMurtrie's "imitation o' a man."

"What are you doing here with lights against orders?" she added sternly.

"I—I'll not light it, miss," stammered Japp.

"What are you doing here at all?" continued Ann relentlessly.

"I'm sleepin' here," said the little man.

"Sleeping here?" exclaimed Ann. "But why are you not sleeping in your lodge?"

"Arbuthnot thought it might be better, miss," said Japp;

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"in case of a raid occurrin', I would be nearer at hand if I was needed, me bein' the only man about the house."

Ann nearly laughed aloud this time.

"Oh, I see," she said gravely nevertheless. "Well, don't show any more lights."

"But how silly of Arbuthnot," she added to herself as she groped her way upstairs again.

It made her feel sinfully comfortable in her warm bed as she thought of poor Japp doing sentinel. It surprised her, however, when next morning, as she awakened her, Arbuthnot remarked that she had seen "the orra-man" coming out of the summer-house in the early morning and wondered what he had been doing there.

"It's not like him to be so early up," she said.

Ann looked at the old woman. Sincerity was written on every line of her gaunt old face.

"You did not know that he was there then?" she ventured. "You had not told him to go there?"

"*Me,* miss?" exclaimed Arbuthnot amazed. "What would I tell him to go there for?"

Ann said no more, judging it wiser to hold her peace in case of household storms arising. She thought hard nevertheless, but could find no solution of the little mystery of Japp's choice of a sleeping-place.

That night when she again went the rounds with Miss Caroline they passed close by the old summer-house. Nothing indicated that it was occupied, yet Ann had an eerie feeling that Japp was inside, and pictured him watching them from among the shadows. She again said nothing, however, to Miss Caroline, having fallen into Miss Emily's habit of concealing little worries from her. Besides, she argued with herself, what harm could such a nonentity as Japp do anyhow—anywhere?

. . . . . .

After this, many weeks passed on eventless at Bartonsmuir, though the world outside was all a riot of fierce passions, and the call for men to go and fight and for women

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to take their places at home became every day more and more insistent.

The village when they drove through it on their way to church was a deserted place save for the old people and the children. They always went once a week besides to deposit the household knitting at the parish work-party. Ann sometimes wondered, when she went in with her parcel, what the capable-looking women who sat round the room there thought of some of the Bartonsmuir productions. Miss Caroline's generosity with money, however, prevented any overt criticism, and the Reverend Mr. Gardshore, who saw the good intention behind the bad execution, had even been known to commend her bed-socks.

The minister and his wife, however, were so busy that they seldom had time to come to Bartonsmuir and those weekly confabulations at the door of the hall where the work-party was held were the only opportunities for intercourse with them.

There was a lady doctor in the village in place of the other who had gone to the front, but their relations with her, too, were strictly professional.

"Of course when one thinks of what she must have experienced——" said Miss Emily in excuse for Miss Caroline's dislike to having her invited to dinner.

"That's just why I would like to know her," was on the tip of Ann's tongue. She remembered her place in time, however, and refrained from comment.

None of the neighbours came to see them.

"You see all the people we used to know at the places within calling distance, now that petrol is so scarce," said Miss Emily, "are either gone away or in their graves, and Caroline will not call on the new people."

"Why should I, Emily?" said Miss Caroline. "I know nothing about them."

"And you never will if you never call," Ann again had almost retorted before, once more just in time, she remembered.

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It was the humbler neighbours, however, whose acquaintance she coveted most. She longed to take the farm-dogs out for walks that lived just a mile away at the steading. This, however, she was requested not to do as they might follow her home and annoy Rover and Victor, the two house-dogs. These Ancients, as she called them in her letters to David, she spoiled outrageously, but found inadequate as comrades.

"Their names have survived their characters," she said. "Rover only roves now as far as the gate. Nothing will induce him to go an inch further. As for Victor—*he* rests on his laurels."

She longed too to go and chat with the ploughmen's wives and the village-folk two miles away on the other side. But beyond giving money to Mr. Gardshore for distribution and sending Arbuthnot to make inquiries in cases of illness or bereavement Miss Caroline did nothing in the way of visiting them either. Nor would she allow Miss Emily to do anything.

"No, Emily," she would say. "You are not fitted for a philanthropist. You are so kind-hearted and so easily taken in that you would inevitably do more harm than good."

This, she said, applied also to Ann, who had strict injunctions to leave all this kind of visiting to Arbuthnot.

"We must think of their benefit before our own pleasure," she would add. "You know, Emily, George used to remark that being kind to people is apt to become mere selfishness."

"Now who *is* George?" thought Ann, and she hated him whoever he was when from the top of the highest dune she looked across the moor towards the village. It would have been some outlet at least to have visited the people there. She imagined all kinds of things going on in that little huddle of red roofs with the old grey spire at the end of it—comings and goings, rejoicings and weepings. People were *living* there. At Bartonsmuir they were only existing.

She would stand sometimes looking over at it till the darkness closed down and lights carefully curtained glowed

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in the cottage windows. Then she would go speeding home across the moor to spend the evening in the warm pot-pourri-scented drawing-room, knitting again, knitting, knitting, and picking up stitches and hair-pins for Miss Caroline.

It seemed to Ann at these times that the call from outside came in after her and tore at her very heart-strings, rousing reverberations there that sounded loud through everything, through her consideration for her old mistresses, through her affection for David, through even her duty to her beloved dead.

At last after a letter from David in which he told her that he had joined the R.A.M.C. and might be called up at any moment, one March night when the wind was howling in the chimneys and lashing the woods to fury, she could no more contain herself.

Her two mistresses and she were seated in the drawing-room as on the first night of all, and Ann had been reading the evening news aloud to them, when suddenly she threw down the paper and exclaimed——

"Oh, isn't it *terrible* to be doing nothing at all to help?"

Both her hearers stopped working and Miss Caroline dropped at least half-a-dozen stitches.

"*Nothing*, Miss Charteris?" she said dumbfounded.

"Yes, nothing," said Ann letting herself go at last. "For what is a little bit of knitting in comparison to what *I* might do, for instance?"

She started up from her seat with her hands clasped in front of her as though imploring their comprehension.

"You see it's nothing for you," she went on; "it isn't always calling to you and calling to you. You could not go out to do hard work even if you would."

"You mean," said Miss Emily, "that *you* could, Miss Charteris dear, and that that is what is annoying you."

"Annoying me!" cried Ann passionately. "It is more than I can bear sometimes. You see," she went on before

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Miss Emily could break in again, "you and Miss Caroline don't really need me, Miss Emily."

"In that you are mistaken, Miss Charteris," said Miss Caroline suddenly in a strange gruff voice.

"Oh, yes, Miss Charteris dear," chimed in Miss Emily.

"Ah, you are good to say so," said Ann, "but I know it is not true. I am a luxury, as four out of your five maids are luxuries. Ah, do you not see how you and people like you—good, kind, dear people—are keeping back hundreds of workers?"

For a moment there was a palpitating silence. The room seemed all a-thrill with the shock of Ann's last speech. Then the practical Miss Emily spoke.

"But what would you have us do, Miss Charteris dear?" she said soothingly. "If any of them want to leave they have only got to say so of course."

"I know, I know," said Ann calming a little.

"With regard to yourself it is a different matter, however," Miss Emily went on. "Doctor Warren told us why you were here—in order to pay off debts. It is a sacred duty."

"Yes, yes," said Ann. "I want to make money—but I have been thinking—they—those who are gone—would understand if I waited with that till after the war—the need for workers is so great—so urgent. They would be the first to understand, and though I should hate to leave you——"

"Don't do it. Don't even say it," said Miss Caroline suddenly again. "Give me time. Give me only time. Even till breakfast-time I believe would be enough."

She was leaning forward in her seat, her pearl tassels quivering, her pale eyes fixed glassily upon the opposite wall.

"Caroline," said Miss Emily whenever she looked at her, "is it——?"

"Yes, it is, Emily," said Miss Caroline. "And if you will

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not be too tired to read prayers to-night," she added after a moment, "I should prefer to go now to my room."

Without another word she rose, dropping as she did so her entire knitting upon the carpet. Then she stepped slowly towards the door. As though remembering something, however, she halted there with her hand already on the handle.

"I wish to make my starting-point clear," she said. "It is that neither you nor I, Emily, justify our existence at this crisis by our personal usefulness."

"Oh, Miss Caroline," cried Ann, jumping up again distressed. "I did not mean that. Indeed I didn't."

"My dear Miss Charteris," said Miss Caroline, "I know better than you do what you meant, for this reason that for some time I have been thinking the same thing myself. Your words to-night have merely served as a match to a fire already laid for lighting."

Here she paused for a moment regarding the leg of a table fixedly as though her cogitations had already begun. Then opening the door suddenly——

"I am glad it is a windy night," she said. "I always think better in wind. Good night, Miss Charteris, good night, Emily."

With these words she took her departure, leaving behind her another palpitating silence.

Ann still stood looking towards the door. She was possessed by remorse and self-reproach. It seemed to her as though she had just been wantonly cruel to these two harmless creatures. After all if they were personally useless was it for her to point out the fact? It was as though she had held up a mirror in malice before their insufficiencies. Had the war then, besides depriving her of all she loved best in the world, bereft her finally of common sense? Had the call from without made her forget the duty of protection she owed to these two old people?

Miss Emily's voice interrupted her troubled thoughts.

"Sit down, Miss Charteris dear," she said. "There is

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no need to worry I assure you. We had better ring for Arbuthnot now in case I should forget to tell her after prayers about the hot milk."

Ann rang the bell twice as was the custom, and after an interval Arbuthnot entered.

"Miss Caroline will be requiring the large scuttleful of coals and the milk to-night, Arbuthnot," said Miss Emily.

"You see, Miss Charteris dear," she added afterwards with a sigh, "when an idea comes at night like that dear Caroline seldom sleeps till morning."

She sat idle for a moment looking over her spectacles at the fire.

"Ever since she was engaged to the late Mr. George Torphichen it has been like that," she went on at last. "Before that they did not worry her—the ideas I mean—but since then she has felt obliged always to work them out to their conclusions."

"So this is who George was," said Ann to herself.

"That is his portrait over her bedroom mantelpiece," Miss Emily continued presently, going on with her knitting again. "He was minister of the parish church, and very, *very* clever. Our father unfortunately—disliked him. Indeed we never dared to tell him that they were engaged. He—my father—had such a violent temper."

Miss Emily shook her head over the memory.

"And George so hated scenes," she went on. "We decided to wait until he was transferred to a more important parish. Meantime he used to teach Caroline logic among the dunes. That was their courting—he teaching and she learning. He would preach his next Sunday's sermons to her while I kept watch in case any one should interrupt. Ah, yes, these were trying times. But they're all past now—long, long past."

"He died?" said Ann softly.

"Yes, he wasn't strong, you know," said Miss Emily, "and the cold east winds—— One day they had sat too

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long, and that very night he took very ill and in a few days was dead."

"How sad!" said Ann.

"Yes, Miss Charteris dear," said Miss Emily. "But though it is wicked to say it—oh dear it was a relief! You see—it seems very unkind even to think it—but I am sure my father would never have allowed it. Poor George was so very—so very——"

"Unsuitable?" suggested Ann.

Miss Emily nodded and then shook her head expressively.

"But he was quite a genius," she hastened to add, "and that's what attracted Caroline. Like to like. And he certainly taught her to think, and not to be satisfied till she comes to some conclusion, though many a time I have wished he hadn't—poor, *poor* George!"

. . . Ann, too, that night wished that the unsuitable George had not taught Miss Caroline logic, as she lay awake unable to sleep for remorse and the wind which was keeping every door and window in the old house creaking and rattling.

Several times through the turmoil she heard the sound of talking, and once, rising to reconnoitre, she found that it came from the open door of Miss Emily's bedroom. Creeping nearer along the corridor she stood for a moment or two where she could see Miss Caroline's shadow on the wall and hear her voice raised in exposition.

"No, Emily," she heard her say. "The argument that we are as useful as we can be, because we give our money away to war-funds, is of no use except to prove that the sooner we are out of existence the better, as what we give away is nothing to what we might bequeathe."

"This is fearful," thought Ann. "Is she thinking of committing suicide?"

But somehow, and this comforted her, she could not imagine Miss Caroline committing anything so crude. The mere suggestion, however, gave the deliberations in process from that time forth a new and painful interest. Ann found

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herself awake now not only because of her recollections but because of her apprehension as to what Miss Caroline might think of next. As though she were awaiting the crisis of an illness every sound in the house now became of extraordinary importance. When the talking in Miss Emily's bedroom at last ceased and she heard Miss Caroline's soft yet heavy foot-falls in the corridor, she fairly bounded up into a sitting position in her excitement. But Miss Caroline did not come in. All that she saw of her was the glimmer of her candle as she passed. Unable to lie down again just then, however, Ann rose and went along the passage after her. The bedroom door was ajar when she reached it, and quietly pushing it open she peeped in.

Miss Caroline, in a gorgeous dressing-gown of her own design and a white frilled night-cap, was seated in front of a roaring fire sipping milk out of a steaming tumbler which she held on a diminutive silver salver. From an oval black frame above the mantelpiece the faded portrait of a raw-boned youth, with a very long upper lip and dressed in the clerical garb of more than half a century ago, looked down critically and rather sourly upon her deliberations. Between sips she sat motionless for lengthened periods looking fixedly at the blaze, with her head cocked on one side as though she were listening to the rumbling of the wind in the chimney.

"But, in reality, I suppose she is working It out," thought Ann, and for the first time curiosity about the idea *as* an idea awoke within her. She went back to bed wondering what it was, and lay awake weighing probabilities and possibilities, until mental exhaustion and the sough of the storm combined sent her at last into a sound slumber.

She was awakened at six o'clock by Arbuthnot who came as an emissary from Miss Caroline. The Mistress would be obliged if Miss Charteris would meet her as soon as possible in Miss Emily's bedroom.

Ann needed no second telling. She sprang out of bed, and hardly waiting to put on slippers and throw on a dressing-

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gown she hastened to the rendezvous. There she found Miss Caroline seated by another blazing fire and sipping another glass of milk. Miss Emily was still in bed. She had a pinched and all-night air as she sat propped up with pillows under the canopy of her great four-poster. She nodded inattentively in response to Ann's good morning. There was a tense look of expectation in her little tired, anxious eyes. She kept them fixed on her sister and Ann sat in suspense too, while Miss Caroline, with an air of thorough enjoyment, finished her refreshment to the last drop in silence.

Then, however, setting down her empty tumbler, she motioned to Ann to take a seat opposite to her.

"Miss Charteris and Emily," she then began, "you will be glad to hear that my new idea is now, so far as I can manage it alone, complete. My arrangement is made. It now only remains to carry it into execution, and for that I shall require not only your co-operation but that of this entire household."

Here she paused for consideration.

"Whatever is it?" thought Ann, and glancing towards Miss Emily she saw her swallow painfully and draw her Shetland shawl more closely round her.

"I began, as you are already aware," Miss Caroline went on, "by considering our own position, and, listening as I did so to the storm outside, the name Wrack-straws suggested itself to me. It may not be original, but it is eminently apt. That is what you and I are just now Emily, in this great storm that is shaking Europe—Wrack-straws—flying before the wind—of no use to any one—fit only for some rubbish-corner."

At another time Ann, as she reflected afterwards, would have smiled at Miss Caroline in her voluminous robes likening herself to such insubstantialities. At the moment, however, she had no difficulty in being serious, and she heard Miss Emily swallow once again.

"If this were all," Miss Caroline went on, "we might

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remain as we are and make no difference to anybody. But this is not all. As you, Miss Charteris, very rightly put it, we are obstructing the usefulness of at least half-a-dozen other people."

Here Ann would have interrupted, but Miss Emily forestalled her.

"You said seven last night, Caroline," she said. "You remember there is Mrs. McMurtrie."

"I now purposely exclude her," said Miss Caroline. "We shall need her ourselves."

"Oh, Caroline!" exclaimed Miss Emily imploringly, "would it not be better to exclude Arbuthnot, rather? Mrs. McMurtie is such a *very* incapable person!"

"It is for that reason that I exclude her," said Miss Caroline. "In retaining her we should be keeping back practically nothing from the public service."

"Oh, dear," groaned Miss Emily, "I do wish the war was over!"

"But, Miss Caroline——" Ann had only time to say before Miss Caroline waved her into silence.

"Hear me to the end first," she said. "I had thought this all out when a new idea suddenly occurred to me, or rather the old idea suddenly developed into a new phase. I remembered that we—you, Emily, and I—were not the only Wrack-straws in existence."

She paused impressively, but her audience waited for more, Miss Emily hugging her Shetland shawl tighter, Ann pushing her hair back from her forehead.

"I remembered numbers of people," Miss Caroline went on, "rich like ourselves, personally useless like ourselves, wrack-straws like ourselves, who are cornering labour."

"Yes, yes, Caroline," said Miss Emily eagerly. "There's Julia Corstorphine for one. She has six servants, and anybody more personally useless than she is you couldn't find. She can't even knit badly."

"Who are cornering labour," Miss Caroline repeated, glaring reproachfully at the interruption, "and the thought

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suddenly came to me, why not corner *them*—why not stack them all together?"

"Eh?" said Miss Emily bewildered.

"Why not stack them?" repeated Miss Caroline, "collect them, sweep them out of the way, and make the same labour suffice for all of them, thus increasing our usefulness and lessening their obstructiveness?"

Miss Emily's face was still a blank, but Ann leaned forward eagerly.

"I see, I see, Miss Caroline!" she exclaimed. "You will invite some here to Bartonsmuir and Arbuthnot and the maids and I will attend to them."

Miss Caroline beamed.

"Smart girl!" she said approvingly. "You at least should be satisfied for your work will be increased five-fold. Instead of only us two you will have ten people to be companion to!"

"I shall do it willingly," said Ann, all enthusiasm. "How clever of you to think of it, Miss Caroline! Just imagine, if they have all six servants like Miss Corstorphine, we shall be releasing sixty people."

"Certainly," rejoined Miss Caroline, "that is if we can get ten in, and I am sure we can. The attics can be fitted up. Well, Emily," she added, turning towards the bed, "you are saying nothing. What do you say to it?"

"Well, Caroline," said Miss Emily, "it isn't a question of what I will say. You know what I always say. It's a question of what *they* will——"

"Who? The servants?" said Miss Caroline sharply.

"No, the—the Wrack-straws," said Miss Emily.

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## CHAPTER THE FOURTH

### WHICH BEGINS WITH POLITE LITERATURE AND ENDS WITH AN ORDINARY TAPER

Two days later, after hours spent in consultation and composition, ten letters went forth from Bartonsmuir, and in due course the replies received made manifest what the Wrack-straws said to Miss Caroline's proposal.

The first reply was from Miss Julia Corstorphine whom Miss Emily had described as a typical Wrack-straw. It was therefore rather disconcerting. It was written by her secretary.

"Miss Corstorphine presents her compliments to Miss Barton and regrets that she cannot accept her kind invitation to reside at Bartonsmuir during the period of the war, as she does not consider herself qualified to claim a share of the benefits offered. Only yesterday she opened a bazaar in the Corstorphine Hall at Netherton and was told by the provost in his vote of thanks that she was the most helpful member of the community. She therefore cannot reconcile it with her conscience to usurp the place of one who is so unfortunate as to be personally useless."

"I always did dislike votes of thanks," said Miss Emily. "They are so misleading, and now see what harm they do! The very woman who should have been here thinks herself 'not qualified.' But don't let us say anything about it yet to Caroline, Miss Charteris dear."

Ann heartily agreed. She had been deputed by both her mistresses to open all the replies that came and break the news good or bad to them. She kept Miss Julia Corstorphine's letter in her pocket for two days, and was glad she had done so when three very encouraging letters came

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which more than counterbalanced the mortification of Miss Corstorphine's refusal.

The first Ann opened was written in a big untidy hand with lines running aslant across the pages.

"BUSHFORD HOUSE, NETHERTON.

"DEAREST CAROLINE," Ann read aloud—

"Your most interesting letter containing your most ingenious suggestion was handed to me this evening as I and three friends were just sitting down to a game of bridge. I immediately put it before them, and for an hour or so we discussed its merits. Julia Corstorphine happened to be one of my guests and mentioned that she had had a similar letter which she had answered in the negative and also in the third person. But, dear Caroline, no one, I hope, minds her. My other two guests did not, I assure you. They were Mrs. Pitmirran of Nutting, who is a Wrack-straw of the worst type, having not only servants galore but two motors and a carriage as well. She has consented to accompany me. Also Mrs. Fennimore of Flails whom I think you have met—who must be near eighty, but who looks about twenty from behind because of the trans-formations she always wears. We three, feeling convicted —as the revivalists say—of being worse than useless in the present crisis, all wish to give your experiment a fair trial. We have agreed, therefore, to make new wills as soon as possible leaving all our money to war-funds and then to proceed together to Bartonsmuir, where we hope to arrive, dear Caroline, all by our lonesomes in about a week.—Yours affectionately, MAUD BELLAIRS."

"There, Caroline!" cried Miss Emily in high delight.

Miss Caroline, however, received the news almost coldly.

"It will depend," she said, "upon the other replies whether we shall be able to accommodate Mrs. Pitmirran and Mrs. Fennimore. I had not included them in my estimate."

"Then how fortunate it is," exclaimed Miss Emily at

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once, "that Julia Corstorphine has refused to come, Caroline!"

"Refused?" said Miss Caroline incredulously.

"Yes—and so has Mrs. Turnham Dodd," chimed in Ann hastily, eager to get another disclosure over. "At least," she corrected herself, "this is a letter from her niece—'Miss Turnham Dodd in the name of her late aunt——' "

"*Late!*" exclaimed both the Miss Bartons.

" 'Her late aunt,' " repeated Ann, " 'thanks Miss Caroline Barton for her invitation, but is surprised to see it nevertheless, not only because of the nature of it, but considering the intimation which appeared in last Thursday's *Scotsman*.' "

"This is terrible, Caroline," said Miss Emily. "How could we have missed it? Poor, *poor* Matilda Turnham Dodd! Well, after all she was ninety-three and would have been a great responsibility."

"Thursday was the day we sent out the invitations," said Miss Caroline as though in soliloquy. "Still it should not have happened."

"It was all my fault," said Ann. "I forgot to read the notices that day. If I had I should at once have recognised the name. Here is a letter from another niece, from a Miss Ellen Eldershaw."

"Oh, Ellen Eldershaw?" exclaimed Miss Emily. "Well—and what does Ellen say? We have never seen her, but her sister was at school with us and if there ever was a Wrack-straw upon earth it was that sister of hers. So, from all I hear, is this one whether or not she realises it. Read on, Miss Charteris dear."

"Dear Miss Caroline," Ann read, "I am directed by my aunt, Miss Eldershaw, to thank you very much indeed for your kind invitation to come and reside at Bartonsmuir for the period of the war. She is unable yet to give a decided answer to it, but she thoroughly appreciates and admires the manner in which you are supplying one of the

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most urgent needs of the present day and hopes that so long as it is possible you will keep a place open for her.—Yours sincerely, E. ELDERSHAW, JUNR."

"The aunt may be doubtful," said Miss Emily, "but the niece is quite certain what she wants her to do. You may count upon Ellen Eldershaw anyhow, Caroline. She will never be able to help coming if the niece wants her to whatever she may think herself."

"Then," said Ann, who had opened another letter, "here is an answer from a Miss Gellatly. Her servants have all been quarreling so intolerably since her German butler was interned that she is glad of any excuse to shut up her house for a time. She has given them notice in a body and recommended them to go and do munition-making, though she hopes for the sake of their fellow-workers that no two of them will be engaged in the same factory."

"Then we have now," said Miss Emily, ticking the names off on her fingers, "Mrs. Bellairs, Mrs. Pitmirran, Mrs. Fennimore, Miss Eldershaw, and Miss Gellatly. Have the Miss Wanlesses not answered yet, Miss Charteris dear?"

"They will—not be coming," said Ann, her eyes meeting Miss Emily's for a moment. "Nor will the Miss Killigrews. I have burned their letters."

"Then that makes all the replies," said Miss Emily with determined cheerfulness. "Caroline, all the replies are in. Five Wrack-straws are coming. That will give them each two rooms."

"Far too much," said Miss Caroline discontentedly. "We must have occupants for these other rooms. If only five are to come then the plan will be only half carried out. We must think of more names, Emily."

The "we" Ann supposed was a figure of speech. Miss Caroline at all events did not think much that evening. Probably she considered that she had already done enough thinking. Anyhow in the interval between dinner-time and prayer-time she made up considerably for her night

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of wakefulness, and, save for occasional whispered discussions between Ann and Miss Emily, hour after hour passed in unbroken silence.

At prayer-time, however, Miss Caroline awoke to some purpose.

When they all rose from their knees they were asked to sit down again, and then she announced to the servants for the first time the part they were expected to play in the immediate future.

Ann, watching the amazed faces, guessed something of the shock it was to them to hear that so many strange mistresses were coming into the house. Yet all was still until the cook rose to her feet. Fortunately, she was too angry to get under way for a moment and in that moment Arbuthnot rushed into the breach, if that could be called rushing which was so deliberate. Probably she alone had known or guessed what was coming, and had prepared herself to meet the emergency.

Anyhow she made quite a speech.

With her eye on the cook, she reminded them of the long years that most of them had lived at and received kindness from Bartonsmuir. She then reminded them that it was the duty of every one to do special work at this cruel time, and that they might count themselves lucky, some of them, that it was only stew-pans and not explosive bombs that they were asked to handle. She then proceeded to say, that after the experience of mistresses that they had had they need none of them surely be afraid of having the number of them increased. If they were all like the Miss Bartons, these ten ladies that were coming, the attendance on them would be a pleasure. (Here there was great applause, and the cook visibly softened.) And whatever they were, in any case, Arbuthnot went on to conclude, whatever the Miss Bartons thought fit to order in these cruel times would be carried out by the household to the best of their ability, and this she herself would answer for.

This closed the proceedings for there was no vote of

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thanks, Miss Caroline evidently considering that none was needed, and the staff, without further comment in that place at least, parted for the night pledged to exert themselves to the uttermost.

It was after all this, when the three of them were having biscuits, that Miss Emily said——

"What about asking Lottie Alleyne, Caroline?"

"As a Wrack-straw?" said Miss Caroline.

"My dear Caroline, of course not!" exclaimed Miss Emily. "Surely a woman who runs canteens, and prisoners' parcels, and soldiers' mending, and—and—everything in a country town, besides entertaining people from billets and uncomfortable camps, from morning till night, week in, week out, and having wounded relatives staying constantly as well, is *not* a Wrack-straw?"

"No, I suppose not," said Miss Caroline dejectedly.

"But she may know of some, Caroline," Miss Emily hastened to add.

"Yes, and be glad to dispose of them," said Miss Caroline brightening. "Kindly write to her, Miss Charteris."

"Mrs. Alleyne, The Gables, Rathness, is her address," said Miss Emily. "She is our niece, Miss Charteris dear—once one of the prettiest and naughtiest of nieces, still one of the most affectionate and generous-hearted."

"I shall write to her at once," said Ann with enthusiasm.

And not only did she do so, but, unknown to her two mistresses, who might have worried about her in their beds, she went out afterwards and posted the letter. Two miles she went to the village post-office in the faint light of a half-moon. Nothing interesting happened to her, however, either going or returning.

. . . . . .

The letter thus romantically posted at dead of night arrived at dusk on the following evening at its destination, and was laid by Johnson amongst others on the hall table, where it reposed for an hour and a half before any one so much as looked at it.

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Mrs. Alleyne was in the drawing-room all that afternoon surrounded by men in khaki for the most part and all the women and girls that she could muster who at the moment were not working at something. The number of these fluctuated. Some in V.A.D. uniforms had to run away before tea, others rushed in just in time for it, but had to go off to the needle-work guild afterwards, others again had to take their turn at the canteen. A fair proportion, however, remained to entertain and to be entertained, and of these Evelyn Gardyne was soon the centre. She was a school-girl home for her Easter holidays, who could sing and play, as Mrs. Alleyne said, "Anything." She could chatter, too, and had the kind of voice that is heard through any amount of talking.

"Yes, wasn't it fun?" Fred Lorimer heard her say as he handed cups of tea to belated new-comers. "It was just about this time last year when we were coming north and at St. Pancras a soldier got into Miss Brownrigg's 'Ladies Only' carriage. She spoke to him and he took no notice. He was asleep or faint I think. At any rate he looked awfully ill. But Miss B. was determined to have him turned out. Indeed, she had told me to call the guard, when what do you think happened? A girl, who was sitting in another corner, started up—such a pretty girl—and said—

"'If there is room elsewhere as you say, go yourselves there, rather than disturb this man who has been to *hell* to keep you comfortable!'

"I wish you had seen Miss Brownrigg's face and our faces, too, for that matter."

She turned lightly to the piano again.

"Miss Gardyne," said Fred under cover of some laughter, "you don't happen to know the name of that girl, do you?"

"Oh dear, no," laughed Evelyn. "She did not give us time to get to know her. We all trooped off then as meek as lambs to another carriage and did not see her again."

As she spoke her eyes met his and she became aware of

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an eager light in them. At the same moment he became aware of her awareness.

"Do sing this now, won't you?" he said, hastily taking up a song at random.

"Certainly if you wish it," she said, blushing a little as she played the opening bars. She had never seen that light in his eyes before and it was rather wonderful. What if—well stranger things had happened—and Mrs. Alleyne, she was sure, would like it—otherwise why should she invite her so often to the Gables to play to Mr. Lorimer?

A little breathlessly she began to sing—

"Come to me in the silence of the night,
Come in the speaking silence of a dream.
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright
As sunlight on a stream . . .
Come back in tears, come back in tears,
Oh, mem'ry, hope, love, of former years. . . ."

The tremor of nervousness in the clear girlish voice lent to the passionate words a curiously poignant charm. There was dead silence round the singer when she began the second verse. Even the talkers at the other end of the room stopped to listen.

"Come back to me in dreams that I may live
My very life again though cold in death.
Come back to me in dreams that I may give
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath . . .
Come back to me in dreams!
Speak low, lean low,
As long ago my love—so long ago."

"My dear Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne when the after-silence had ended in applause, "if you intend to take that cup of tea to Mrs. Baxter, pray do so before it gets quite cold."

Fred started and spilled some tea as he went.

"I never could stand Lord Henry Somerset's songs," said Mrs. Baxter as he handed her the half-depleted cup.

Afterwards he remembered noting quite mechanically

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that she had an aggressive lower jaw, but he could not remember answering anything to her remark, and wondered if he had been rude.

Mrs. Baxter was in no doubt as to that.

"Mr. Lorimer has not improved," she said to her hostess. "I suppose he thinks that for a V.C. manners are unnecessary."

"What has he been doing?" said Mr. Alleyne.

"Didn't you see?" said Mrs. Baxter. "He spilled half my tea, handed me nothing to eat, and went away while I was talking to him."

"You must excuse him," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He has had a bad time and, though he looks so fit, he is not himself yet."

"Well for his friends' sake I hope not," said Mrs. Baxter. "Yet it's not like Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne to herself. "Is it possible that he and Evelyn——"

"May I have some more tea?" said somebody else, and she had no more time to think that afternoon.

Meantime Fred had seated himself in a dilapidated old chair that he specially loved, all alone in front of the smoking-room fire, an unlighted match between his fingers, an unlighted cigarette between his lips. Many a time during the weeks he had spent at the Gables making a desperately slow recovery he had sat in that chair alone with his dreams and imaginings. All, however, had been but shadowy things compared to this evening's vivid realities. For one brief moment the curtain had been lifted. The girl whose face night and day was haunting him had stood before him speaking, living. Then the song had intervened that had driven him crazy for the moment. Was it possible that never again he was to see the unknown girl who had protected him in his extremity? In all future days was she destined to be merely his love of long ago? The thought was intolerable. Was she only to come back in dreams? To speak low—lean low—only in dreams?

"Then I can't stand it," he said to himself quite quietly.

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It had come to that. He was possessed. Without this girl with the russet hair and the tears on her eyelashes life was nothing—friendship was nothing. . . . She had said—for, of course, it was she—it must have been she whom that girl had seen in the railway carriage—that he had been to hell. Again to-night she might say the same. He was there now, and all for the sake of her who did not care a button about him. For, of course, she did not care. She only cared for the other man who had died or been wounded or something, and for whose sake she had been kind to him. If she had cared anything she would, at least, have left some indication of where to find her, some address, some message—not a rug without an initial even. She would have looked out for the advertisement he had put in all the papers for the owner of the rug and have sent some answer.

After all she must be a heartless creature not to think of what he might feel about it. . . . But then those tears trembling on her eyelashes. . . . She was not heartless, only maddeningly stupid not to know what harm she was doing. . . . For how could a man get well ever—mentally well at least—in the state he was in? He could not get well for longing for her. He would die in the end very likely like Jimmy Green in Barbara Allen—a nice ending for a V.C.—futile—idiotic. . . . Yet what other end could there be to this fever of the soul that had possession of him, that conjured her up before him at every turn, in every twilight, in every dawning, worst of all that made her partner with him in every little daily happening.

Yet physically he was strong again. She would not know him now if she saw him. The wreck she had taken care of all that wonderful night—emaciated, unshaven, with blood-shot eyes—he shuddered as he thought of himself then—had vanished. Now in the mirror above the mantelpiece he could see himself, clean-shaven again, clear-eyed, good to look at. The sight thrilled him for a moment with a sense of his own power. . . . Ah, if he could but

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meet her—could but look once more into her eyes, perhaps he might be able to make her forget that other man! At least she would be sorry for him again, for she would know how desperately he needed her.

But he would never see her. She would never know what she had done to him. Things happened like that in this accursed world and a man must go on, if he were a man at all, just as if his heart were not sick within him. Well, anyhow it might not last long for him. A week or two more and there was the Front again and death perhaps. . . . Then if spirits were free, as some said they were, he might find her once more—see her across the great gulf fixed—make himself known perhaps.

At this point, however, he had a sudden revulsion of feeling.

He sprang to his feet.

"I'm getting absolutely maudlin," he exclaimed aloud.

Then shaking himself down and pulling his tie straight, he went back to the drawing-room to make himself agreeable to his aunt's guests.

He was too late however. The guests had all gone. Only the hostess was left in the drawing-room sitting in front of the fire reading letters.

"Is that you, Fred?" she said without looking up. "Come and let me scold you. You have mortally offended Mrs. Baxter."

"I was afraid I had," said Fred, establishing himself near her. "But as you told me she always did take offence at everybody sooner or later, I didn't think it mattered."

"Not to you perhaps," said Mrs. Alleyne. "But I have had to make it up to her. And I am glad to say that you will have to suffer too. I have had to invite that uncle of hers—old Mr. Tosh—to dinner."

Fred groaned.

"Surely not the man," he said, "who is writing a book *now* called 'The Utter Impossibility of Germany ever going to war with Britain'?"

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"He had begun it, you see, in 1912, poor man," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He has changed the title now to 'The Utter Impossibility of Annihilating Germany.' "

"Bah!" said Fred, "he doesn't know what he is writing about."

His aunt watched him for a moment over the letter she was reading as he lay back in his chair frowning heavily at the fire.

"It is strange to see you turned soldier, Fred," she said at last; "you—the student—all for toleration and internationalism."

"Ah—that was before I had seen things," said Fred.

His thin face seemed to sharpen and grow more lined as she looked at it. The eyes under the frowning brows reflected the glow of the fire. At last, as though something intolerable to behold were there pictured, he closed them for a moment and sat up in his chair.

Then, finding her watching him, he smiled rather wryly at her.

"Surely you don't mean to tell me that only old Tosh is coming?" he said in a tone she had learned to know well. It meant that there was to be no more talk of the war just then.

"Did you expect Mrs. Baxter?" she laughed. "She is going to the canteen, my dear. That is why I had to ask him here. She says some of the servants always give notice after he has dined there alone he is so bad-tempered."

"Mrs. Baxter going to the canteen?" exclaimed Fred. "But I thought she had quarrelled with every one there?"

"So she has," said Mrs. Alleyne. "I've only just managed to patch things up between her and Mrs. Wilkinson this afternoon. They are going together to-night along with Mrs. Coulter who has tact enough to get on with Bengal tigers. What I should do without dear kind Mrs. Coulter to act as padding between some of these people I can't think."

"Well, but who is coming here to act as padding between

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me and old Tosh?" asked Fred. "I must at least have Piffard. I hope you have asked Piffard?"

"He asked himself," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He said you would be sure to want him for a fourth at bridge. And for a wonder he is off duty to-night."

"Good old Piffard!" said Fred. "When we get sick of bridge, as we soon shall with Tosh playing, he can refresh us with his detective stories."

"Yes," said Mrs. Alleyne absently, for she was becoming absorbed in one of her letters.

"It must be fun being a detective," Fred went on. "If we both come through this scrimmage with enough of us left intact, Piffard and I might go into partnership."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Alleyne again.

"You're not attending," said Fred looking up. "You're taking no interest in me. Don't read any more letters."

"Spoiled boy!" laughed Mrs. Alleyne. "But I must just read this one. It's too amusing. Wait. I'll read it aloud to you. It's from a dear old aunt of mine, Caroline Barton of Bartonsmuir, who used to try to bring me up once."

"What a disappointment you must have been to her!" said Fred.

"Well this is written by her companion," said his aunt. "Dear Mrs. Alleyne," she went on reading aloud, "I have been asked by Miss Caroline Barton to inform you that she has arranged to receive at Bartonsmuir ten personally useless people who are doing harm at this crisis by appropriating labour which is urgently needed elsewhere. By assembling these Wrack-straws, as she calls them, here she makes it possible for them all to be attended by the same servants. They will pay their own expenses and will have the services of the Bartonsmuir staff which includes, besides the usual maids, a motor-man and a companion.

"Five Wrack-straws have already intimated their arrival, but five rooms still remain vacant. Miss Caroline, therefore, would be obliged if you will send her by return the names

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and addresses of any you think might care to avail themselves of this opportunity. If all ten places are occupied she hopes that at least fifty capable persons will be set free for state service—each Wrack-straw having had on an average five or six attendants.—Yours sincerely, ANN CHARTERIS, *Secretary*."

"Now isn't that delicious?" said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Is it a joke?" said Fred.

"Not a bit of it," she replied. "It's Aunt Caroline all over. The Wrack-straws! Who else would have thought of it?"

"The companion must be an enthusiast, too," said Fred, taking the letter into his hand and looking at the neat rather hurried writing, "to think of being companion to ten more people. She would need to have the tact of a Mrs. Coulter."

At the word his aunt suddenly seized his arm.

"Fred," she exclaimed. "I wonder if Mrs. Baxter would go."

"Never," said Fred. "Besides she has her uncle to look after, hasn't she?"

"He wouldn't mind," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He'd be far happier in rooms with his man somewhere than alternately being neglected and made an excuse of. She's a Wrack-straw besides, if ever there was one, and always flying in people's faces. She is as wealthy as those others, too, and has as many half-idle domestics."

"Send in her name then," said Fred. "No saying what might happen. That kind of person always likes to be doing something new. Only if you want her to go, don't let her know you do."

"I shall tell her nothing," said Mrs. Alleyne, "but I shall write at once to Miss Charteris." She paused for a moment looking at the letter again. "Who I believe," she added with a little laugh, "is engaged to a man who wanted to marry *me* once."

Something in the smiling eyes that met his arrested Fred's attention—something he understood.

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"Lottie!" he exclaimed, forgetting the "aunt" as he often did.

"Yes," she said nodding. "I was a silly little fool once."

"But now——" said Fred.

"Now you see it's an old story," she laughed, "and he has forgotten and so should I, of course."

"But can you—does one ever forget, Lottie?" he said.

She looked at him curiously for a moment.

Then she sprang up.

"Not so far as I know," she laughed. "But now, dear boy, I must get that letter written."

They did not meet again till just before dinner when she reappeared in what she called her evergreen gown.

"At whom are you setting your emeralds?" said Fred as he made her a low obeisance on the hearth-rug. "Is it old Tosh or is it Piffard?"

"You ridiculous boy," she said. "It was on your account I put them on. They are the Alleyne emeralds and are to be handed to your wife when you marry."

She was startled to see how his face changed at the word, but her surprise did not appear in her kindly eyes.

"To my wife?" he whispered.

"Yes, dear," she answered, "and I hope to goodness you'll find her as soon as you can, for these green stones are a constant anxiety to me. If I didn't love to wear them sometimes I'd have them put into the bank for safety. Old Margaret is always advising me to do that."

At this moment Johnson opened the door.

"Mr. Tosh's man is here, m'm," he said, "asking if you would let him know if it's all right that he should come back at nine for him."

"But surely," said Mrs. Alleyne, "he must take his orders from his master."

"His master always forgets, he says, what the orders was, m'm," said Johnson.

"So he wants me to countersign them?" laughed Mrs. Alleyne. "Where is the man?"

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"Here, m'm," said Johnson. "Here, Albert!"

A stout, pale, rather handsome man, with sleek fair hair and sleepy-looking eyes, instantly and noiselessly appeared.

"Excuse me, m'm," he said in a subdued well-trained voice, "but the last time I fetched Mr. Tosh at the time he had ordered there was quite a scene. Then when I waited longer and was not there at the hour there was a worse scene. So I just slipped round beforehand to-night to see what you would think best to be done, m'm. It makes unpleasantness in the party when he loses his temper the way he does, m'm. Now to-night he said nine."

"Nine does seem early," said Mrs. Alleyne as gravely as she could, "when dinner is at half-past seven, doesn't it?"

"You see," said Albert, "when he gave the order he was at his writing, m'm, and when he's at that he never wants to stop. But when he's once out he forgets his writing sometimes and wants to stop where he is. I'm sure he'll want to stop here, m'm," added Albert.

"Well, Albert," said the hostess, "the difficulty can best be solved I think by your staying here all the time. Johnson will give you some supper, and in return you can help Johnson, as the table-maid has just come and is inexperienced. Will that do, Johnson?"

"As you please, m'm," said Johnson dutifully.

"Though if there's one thing I can *not* stand," he added afterwards to old Margaret, "it's folk forcin' theirselves in like that upon me."

Before dinner was over, however, he had changed his opinion of Albert. The young man was so deferential, so anxious to learn from him. Yet he waited with a dexterity which Jane the new table-maid could never hope to reach, though she, like a sensible girl, never took her eyes off him. It was a pleasure to see him handing round the plates. Only once he made a little slip and that was when he looked up for the first time and caught the eye of Captain Piffard fixed upon him with a puzzled expression.

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"Now where have I seen that man?" the captain was saying to himself, when there was a loud ejaculation from Mr. Tosh who was sitting opposite to him.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, turning upon the unfortunate Albert. "Take care what you are doing. Don't you see that you nearly knocked over my wine-glass?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Albert meekly.

"And so you may well be," retorted his master, "making an exhibition of yourself and me, as though you had never been accustomed to wait upon decent people!"

The little old man for the moment was a-glare with anger; his face with its bristling white eyebrows and its crown of rather long white hair resembled a large red gooseberry embedded in a very high stiff collar.

His misfortune, however, served to ingratiate Albert more than anything else could have done with the sympathetic Johnson, and to distract the attention of Piffard from him by making that gentleman devote himself thenceforth to the restoration of harmony.

Later, however, when they had sat down to bridge and the two men came in with coffee, the likeness of Albert to some one he had seen struck him again and more forcibly than before.

"Lord!" he said to himself. "If it's not that chap at Greywoods that went off with the diamond star it certainly is most uncommonly like him. But it can't be surely, after five, six, no—seven years. If it is, he must have played his cards well. Anyhow, I'm not going to make an ass of myself over him a second time."

He was careful after that never so much as to glance in Albert's direction. He was rather absent, however, till he made a misdeal and Mr. Tosh sharply called him to order.

He would have been more absent still could he have seen through three stone walls into a remote pantry where Albert had retired on some excuse or other to snatch a moment's

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conversation with Jane, the inexperienced table-maid. She was not so new to him as to the household it seemed.

"Well, old boy," she said in a low tone as she lit a taper to see him by, lighting up at the same time her own pert little face. "What's to be done now? Here I am standing to, and ready to take your orders, sir."

"You're a smart little devil, Jane," he said, looking admiringly at her out of his heavy-lidded half-closed eyes, "and the costume suits you. But it's all no go, my girl."

"No go?" she said surprised.

"At least I am afraid not unless something special turns up."

"Something special?" she said. "What do you want more than those emeralds you saw to-night, eh? I shouldn't have thought you could find anything better than that necklet. It was special enough for me, anyhow."

"Well, get it then," said Albert.

"*Me?* I couldn't," said Jane. "There's a dragon of an old woman called Margaret in charge of them who ought to have been made a special constable."

"Well, my dear, let me tell you there's more of her sort about. Did you see that man in uniform that was at dinner?"

"You don't suppose I'm blind, do you?" said Jane.

"I wish *he* was blind," said Albert vindictively. "He's Piffard, the gentleman detective."

"What?" exclaimed Jane. "The man who was staying at Greywoods five—six—seven years ago?"

Albert nodded.

Jane was silent for a moment. Then she tossed her dainty cap-strings.

"What does it matter?" she said. "You scored off him that time."

"It was a rare bit of luck though," said Albert, "very rare. However, one never knows when another chance of the same sort may turn up."

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"Well, if it does I'm all there, you know," said Jane. "Now clear out or old father Johnson will suspect that you are flirting with his nice new table-maid."

"Well, so I am," said Albert, "and I am not going now without one kiss at least."

"Oh, rot!" said Jane. "I never was one of the kissing kind."

"Well, I am," said Albert. "Put that taper down. It's in my way."

"I won't," said Jane, "and if you come an inch nearer I'll singe you with it."

"No need to do that, my girl," said Albert. "The Germans will be doing that soon enough for you."

The taper wavered.

"Albert," exclaimed Jane, "you're never thinking of going soldiering, are you?"

"Didn't you see the evening papers?" he said. "I'll jolly well have to go soon now whatever I think."

"Well, then," said Jane, "there's one thing certain, Albert. I must be out of this first. I'm not going to be left here servanting."

"Nothing easier, my dear," said Albert. "All you have to do is just to tell your mistress that you've been sent for suddenly to go to a hospital somewhere about Land's End to take the place of a V.A.D. cousin who has been ordered to Salonika. She is the kind that will give you a send-off the same night with wages paid, railway ticket, and everything."

"Albert, you really are so clever," said Jane, "that, as you are going soldiering, you may have just one—— Oh, goodness me—take care!" she added.

"No, I won't!" said Albert recklessly.

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"What's that smell of burning?" said Johnson sniffing, as five minutes later his guest joined him at his private supper-table.

"Is there a smell of burning?" said Albert.

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"Bless me, don't you smell it?" said Johnson. "And there's a hole in the lapel of your coat that would let a penny through!"

"So there is," said Albert examining it. "It must have been the taper that did it."

"The taper?" exclaimed Johnson. "What sort of a taper?"

"Oh, just an ordinary one I—came in contact with," said Albert.

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## CHAPTER THE FIFTH

### IN WHICH BRITAIN GAINS A NEW RECRUIT AND GERMANY LOSES ONE

In the drawing-room bridge was in full swing and the irascible Mr. Tosh was in high good humour.

"He'll never learn to play properly, you know," Fred said afterwards, "because he has such ridiculous luck, and partners like you, Lottie, who can't be nasty to him."

Certain it was that in spite of his going five in hearts without the slightest justification he and his partner seemed to be carrying all before them, when a long-drawn thin sound shrilled suddenly into the pleasant silence.

"The telephone," said Mrs. Alleyne, clutching her cards together apprehensively.

"Your lead, partner," said Mr. Tosh.

But Johnson was already in the doorway.

"Mrs. Baxter to speak to you, m'm," he announced.

"She should have been called Bother instead of Baxter, Cecilia should," said Mrs. Baxter's irate brother as the hostess fled, and his two opponents had only partially succeeded in pacifying him when she returned to infuriate him more than ever.

"I am sorry," she said breathlessly, "but I must go to the canteen. Mrs. Baxter has been telephoning. Mrs. Coulter has taken ill, and the caretaker has had to go home with her, leaving only Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter, and they—they are not getting on. I must go at once. Will you just play three-handed?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Alleyne," said Mr. Tosh rising, "since my sister, not content with turning me out of the house for dinner, is now, it seems, turning me back into it

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again. Well, thank heaven, I have my work. Will somebody tell Albert?"

Albert did not need to be told. He was in the hall with his master's coat over his arm, and the sight of him there, so reliable and capable-looking, suggested a new idea to the harassed hostess. Pausing in her flight up the stairs she hurried down again and back into the drawing-room.

"Mr. Tosh," she said, meeting that gentleman on his way to the door, "will you lend me Albert for an hour at the canteen?"

"My dear Mrs. Alleyne——" began Mr. Tosh, but Fred immediately chimed in.

"The very thing, Aunt Lottie," he said. "We'll have a smoke now, and Piffard will tell us one of his tales, and then we'll finish the bridge when you come back, or if you prefer it, sir, Piffard and I will see you home. We would be no good anyhow at the canteen."

"Why Cecilia should require so much assistance I cannot understand," grumbled the old man. "And to hear her talk one would think she did everything in this town single-handed. Well if I must—I must, I suppose. Tell Albert he may go for an hour. But not one moment longer. Remember, not one moment longer."

At the end of the allotted time, however, Mr. Tosh had quite forgotten his own injunction. He was seated before the fire between the two young men absorbed in one of Piffard's narratives.

When the hour was actually announced by the little Boule clock on the mantelpiece Piffard paused for a moment.

"Go on, sir," said Mr. Tosh impatiently. "So the hostess came to you, did she? And you suspected one of the guests?"

"I suspected the servant of one of them," said Piffard.

"Well, and what did you do then?"

"Ah, that was the disappointment, I could do nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing at all," said Piffard. "You see, the thing was

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lost during an interview the lady of the house—who was a young and very charming woman—had with one of the guests in the library late one night. He was a young fool with no real harm in him, but he was madly in love with her at the time and she had a very jealous old husband who, if he had heard what had happened, might have ruined the boy for life. There was a big screen in the library and she was afraid that her lover's servant, who was the man I suspected as the thief, had been hidden behind there all the time. But we had no real proof. All that I had to go upon was that I myself had met the man coming out of the library after our hostess and her admirer had gone. Even if I could have caught him with this, however, which was doubtful, the lady would not even let me try to catch the thief when she heard who I suspected, in case he in his turn might denounce her to her husband and tell of the scene she had had with his master. The rascal had counted on this, I believe. Though he knew I suspected him, I think, he was as cool as a cucumber."

"And went off with the diamond star," exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "What fools women are!"

"Or what unselfish angels!" said Fred.

"Bah!" said Mr. Tosh. "I don't call her unselfish. Probably she hushed it up as much for her own sake as anybody's. Besides she very likely led the fellow on—*I* know 'em. But in any case she let loose a criminal upon the world. That's what she did. And you connived at it, sir," he added, turning suddenly upon Piffard. "I'm surprised at you—calling yourself a detective too—very surprised."

"You are not half so surprised, sir," said Piffard, with some heat, "as that thief will be when I catch him, as I have every intention of doing, every hope of doing."

"Aha!" exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "You have your eye on him then? You are on his track?"

"Yes, I am," said Piffard, "but it's a watching game. I cannot lay my hands on him till he does something else. And to-morrow or the next day I may be ordered off to

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France or Egypt or Mesopotamia. The war plays the very deuce with my work."

"By Jove, sir!" exclaimed the old man, slapping his hands on the arms of his chair, "rather than let the fellow escape I myself would track him down for you."

"Or I," laughed Fred. "It would be the beginning of our partnership, Piffard."

As he spoke the telephone bell rang again.

"Mrs. Alleyne wishing to speak to Mr. Lorimer," said Johnson entering.

Fred sprang up and went out.

His aunt's voice sounded agitated.

"Are you there, Fred?"

"Yes."

"I have sent Albert back to take Mr. Tosh home."

"Yes."

"And whenever he is gone I want you to come down here."

"What? Hasn't Albert washed up the cups properly?"

"Yes, yes," said his aunt breathlessly, "but I want you here and Captain Piffard too if he can come."

Here he was rung off abruptly, and turning he became aware of Albert standing in the hall behind him. At the same moment the drawing-room door opened and Mr. Tosh came out.

"That man of mine is late as usual," he was saying when he saw Albert. Then—

"What the devil do you mean," he exclaimed, "by not letting me know that you were there, sir?"

"If I were Albert I should murder Mr. Tosh," said Fred as he and Captain Piffard groped their way together along the darkened streets.

"No you wouldn't," said Piffard. "Not if you were Albert."

"Perhaps not," said Fred. "He has the patience of Job."

"And twenty times his cleverness," said Piffard.

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Mrs. Alleyne met them in the passage at the canteen very businesslike in a blue linen overall. She had a scared look in her eyes nevertheless.

"My dears," she said as soon as she saw them, "an awful thing has happened. I've lost two rings out of that emerald set."

"What?" said Piffard sharply.

"I've lost two rings," she repeated, "out of that set of emeralds—your set, Fred, and I'm at my wits' end to know what to do about it."

Her lip quivered.

"But they can't be really lost," said Fred.

"How did you lose them?" said Piffard. "Sit down here, Mrs. Alleyne, and tell us everything first. You had them on when you came here then?"

As he spoke he ushered her into the dining-room, a large place where the air was heavy with the odour of teas and suppers. All the food, however, had been cleared away from the long counter at the further end, and only one feeble gas jet was burning.

They sat down at one of the deserted tables.

"Yes, unluckily I had them on," said Mrs. Alleyne. "I was in such a hurry, you see, that I did not notice them till I was here. Then—for I hate buttering scones with stones on—I took them off at once and put them into a cup on that table at the back of the counter there."

"Just an open cup?" said Piffard.

"No, I put a saucer over it."

"And at the end of the time you found that the cup and saucer were gone?"

"No, only the rings, that's the strange thing," said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Then some one must have taken them purposely and put back the saucer again," said Fred, "some one thinking they were not safe there, perhaps—Mrs. Wilkinson or Mrs. Baxter. But of course you asked them first thing."

"No, Fred, I did not," was the unexpected answer.

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"Aunt Lottie! Why not?"

"I dared not," said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Dared not?"

"No. You see they were at daggers drawn. They had had a regular battle before I came in about some trifle that no one would think of quarrelling over, and it had left them both in a state of mind in which they were capable of believing anything about each other, and I must say," added Mrs. Alleyne "—and that is what makes me so scared—I can't help thinking myself that one of them must have taken the rings."

"Aunt Lottie!" exclaimed Fred. "Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter!"

"Well, who else could? Not a soul was behind the counter all the time except myself and these two women."

"Are you sure quite of that?" said Piffard. "Could none of the men who came to the counter have taken them?"

"Not one. You see the cup was behind where we were standing serving. We were between it and the counter. Even if we had not been there is a wide space between it and the table where the cup was standing."

"Where's the pantry?" said Piffard, looking round him.

"There," said Mrs. Alleyne, pointing to a door opening into darkness straight from the space behind the counter.

"Oh, yes," said Captain Piffard.

"Albert was in there, of course," said Mrs. Alleyne, divining his thought, "washing dishes and making tea, but he never came in here once."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Had you a lot of men in this evening?"

"Crowds," said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Oh, yes," said Piffard again. "Well, you must be tired. You should come home now."

"Yes, Aunt Lottie," added Fred. "The rings will turn up all right. My theory is that one of your two ladies has put them in a safer place and has forgotten to tell you about

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them. You will be getting them back to-morrow morning from either Mrs. Wilkinson or Mrs. Baxter."

"I do hope you are right, Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne doubtfully, "but don't you think to make quite sure we might make a search first? I might go through the cupboards while you and Captain Piffard do the floor thoroughly."

Fred looked with distaste at a fragment of scone smeared with jam which was lying near where he was standing.

"Do you want us to go down on our knees to it, Aunt Lottie?" he said.

"There is absolutely no need to look further here, Mrs. Alleyne," said Captain Piffard with conviction. "The rings are not here I am certain. Doubtless Lorimer is quite right. You will be hearing about them to-morrow morning."

"You think that really?" said Mrs. Alleyne eagerly. "I am so glad. It gives one confidence. I have had a bad hour and a half I can tell you."

"Do you mean to say you missed them so long ago as that?" exclaimed Piffard.

"Oh, no, I only missed them a little ago, but there was the quarrel first. They were not on speaking terms by the time I got here, but they said things *at* each other. I was quite ashamed before Albert."

"Albert should be used to having things said at *him*, anyhow," laughed Fred as he helped her to put on her coat.

"What I should have done without Albert I don't know," said Mrs. Alleyne, "for the caretaker was a long time in coming back, and neither of those women would wash up, because that is what they had been quarrelling about. The dirty dishes would have been piled sky-high—but Albert is a most capable man."

"He is, indeed," said Captain Piffard. "Most capable."

. . . . . .

"I'll give them till to-night," Mrs. Alleyne said, when next morning no message came to The Gables about the rings.

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Then when night came—

"I'll give them till to-morrow night," she said.

But to-morrow night came and there was still no message. Captain Piffard came in after dinner to hear the news.

"Oh, I am glad to see you," said Mrs. Alleyne. "Do sit down. I am more than ever at my wits' end. No message has come about the rings. Isn't it awful to think that a rich woman of good standing—for they are both that—could stoop to do such a thing?"

"Yes, if one has to think it," said Piffard, seating himself on the chair indicated and selecting a cigarette. "But for my part I don't think it."

"You *don't* think it?" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne. "But I thought you did?"

"You were mistaken," said Piffard. "I never thought it."

"But you believe they were stolen, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, now that they have not been returned. The replacing of the saucer on the empty cup proves that."

"But then—who—who——"

"My dear Mrs. Alleyne," said Piffard leaning forward and speaking in a low voice. "I have almost no doubt at all that it was Albert who stole those rings at the canteen."

"Albert!" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne, remembering Albert as he had appeared there at work in his shirt-sleeves, absorbed, dignified, with a towel flung over his shoulder.

"Albert!" she said again. "Oh, that's not possible!"

"Excuse me," said Piffard. "But I know him better than you do. Do you remember that last story I told you, Lorimer, that night old Tosh was here?"

"Rather," said Fred. "You don't mean to say that——"

"It's the same man—yes," said Piffard. "I thought that night at dinner that I recognised him. He has shaved off a moustache he had then and is much better-looking, but even if he had worn a mask I would have made sure it was he by his manner of working."

"Of working?"

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"Of stealing I mean. He's a student of character this man. He is not only wonderfully quick and deft with his hands, but he has the mental capacity to seize moral opportunities—immoral I should say, for the people he robs are always in some awkward little predicament. Last time," he went on turning to his hostess, "it was a married woman who wanted to shield a foolish young lover of hers that he robbed of a diamond pendant. Now he robs you—seeing you to be in a difficult position between two women who dislike each other so much that they will be capable even of suspecting each other."

"The wretch!" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne. "But he is wrong this time. Neither of those two women would believe that the other did such a thing."

"My dear aunt," said Fred laughing, "you yourself have just been believing it."

"So I have!" she remembered in dismay. "You see," she explained, "I am so certain that Albert never was outside the pantry that night."

"Ah, but that's just where his special capability comes in," said Piffard. "I tell you his talent is quite wasted in ordinary thieving. He ought to have made his fortune as a conjuror."

"You mean you think he could have come behind the counter without any of us three women knowing it?"

"Certainly," said Piffard. "It would be child's play to him. You had crowds of men you told me in the canteen that night. I can see quite well how it would be. He would watch his moment when you were all at the other end of the room, one of you downstairs in the kitchen, perhaps, the others with their backs turned. It would be all over in a minute. He would be back at his dishes with the rings in his waistcoat-pocket before any one knew he had left his post."

"The fiend!" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne. "Well, thank goodness you are here, Captain Piffard. Now we shall be able to catch him."

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"Shall we though?" said Piffard watching her. "How about Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter?"

"Why? What have they to do with it now?"

"This much," said Piffard, "that if we arrest him on suspicion he will of course accuse them."

"Oh, heavens, I had not thought of that!" cried Mrs. Alleyne. "Now stop laughing, Fred. This is no laughing matter."

"I can't help it," said Fred, rocking in his chair, "when I think of the faces of Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter as they will appear in the dock together—still not on speaking terms."

"Oh, don't," groaned Mrs. Alleyne. "Well, it's a good thing after all that you take it so lightly, Fred, since the rings are yours and not mine after all, for of course now I must give up all hope of recovering them. Even a breath of this would utterly ruin the canteen and of course just now that must come before everything."

"Even my professional reputation I suppose," grumbled Piffard, "and I must let my man go scot-free for the second time."

"Hard lines," said Fred. "Do you really think, Aunt Lottie, that it would make any difference to the canteen? Surely they would have the sense——"

"No, I can't risk it," said Mrs. Alleyne firmly. "You have no idea, Fred, what some of these people are. Think of it—both these women accused and each suspecting the other and saying so. No. I'm sorry, but I really can't risk it. I would rather replace the rings myself if I have any money left when the war is over and the canteen closed for ever."

"That settles it then," said Piffard. "Albert once more has won the trick it seems. But he can't get such chances every time and he will be so conceited after this that he is bound to make some bad blunder."

"Ah, and then you will catch him," said Mrs. Alleyne. "And if there is anything I can do to make up——"

Here the door opened and Johnson appeared with a note.

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"From Mrs. Baxter, m'm," he said advancing.

The three in council round the fire looked up with interest.

Mrs. Alleyne took the note and felt it over eagerly.

"I thought they might be in it," she said with a sigh, as she tore open the envelope.

Then after she had read the contents in silence—

"Listen to this," she said without further comment.

"DEAR MRS. ALLEYNE,—I hear you are in need of some one to go to the canteen to-morrow and write at once to let you know that I am quite free to go at any time. A wealthy old lady who is, I am told, of good family and has a small property, has been inspired—for I can call it nothing else—to offer house-room and the use of her servants to a limited number of people—all paying their own expenses of course—who like herself are wealthy and without encumbrances. These she calls Wrack-straws. They are totally useless persons and, indeed, are hindering by their presence the public usefulness of others. You will not be surprised to hear that I at once applied to her on behalf of my brother Alexander, with the happy result that he and his man left for Bartonsmuir this afternoon. (Bartonsmuir is the name of the place.)

"It is now my intention to go into rooms, close the house here, and dismiss the servants, so that I shall henceforth be able to devote myself entirely to assisting you.—With kind regards, yours very sincerely, CECILIA BAXTER."

. . . . . .

"I had not included men in my estimate of course," said Miss Caroline on the morning of the day which was to witness the arrival of Mr. Tosh and Albert. "But in these times we must adapt ourselves to circumstances. Kindly go, Miss Charteris, and tell Mrs. McMurtrie that she must come up to the house this afternoon to reside during the period of the war."

"Caroline!" exclaimed Miss Emily. "Do you think this is wise? Mrs. McMurtrie——"

"Must adapt herself like the rest of us," said Miss

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Caroline firmly. "According to his sister, Mr. Tosh suffers from a very violent temper. It will prevent dispeace if we give him and his man the East Lodge."

"Except the dispeace with Mrs. McMurtrie when she is asked to give the East Lodge up," said Miss Emily.

"Oh, I'll manage it," said Ann confidently.

She found it more difficult, however, than she had imagined it would be. Mrs. McMurtrie at first could not or would not comprehend what was required of her, and then when she did understand she was very wroth. At last, however, by dint of flattery and persuasion mingled with veiled threats Ann succeeded in transferring not only her but her large cat, called Walter after the absent McMurtrie, to their new quarters. They were just in time to see from their window the approach of the car bringing Mr. Tosh and his attendant.

"What a funny little red-faced man!" said Ann, who was watching the arrival from another window. "He's like a golliwog with white hair."

"Hush, Miss Charteris dear!" said Miss Emily who was peering over her shoulder.

"It's all right, Miss Emily," Ann replied. "He's too absorbed in Miss Caroline to hear any one but her at the present moment."

"And no wonder," said Miss Emily proudly. "I only wish we all had Caroline's manner."

Ann dutifully acquiesced, smiling a little nevertheless at the thought of herself sailing about with her hands clasped in front of her as Miss Caroline did.

"The servant is quite a handsome man, don't you think?" was Miss Emily's next remark. "Oh, dear, dear, his master is scolding him for something, and apologising to Caroline at the same time for doing it. It's for taking the portmanteau out of the motor—when he did it all for the best too! Poor fellow, poor fellow! How very patient he is with Mr. Tosh!"

Thus on the very doorstep of Bartonsmuir Albert won

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golden opinions. Arbuthnot who was present also as guard of honour to Miss Caroline heartily endorsed Miss Emily's praise. When he came in at lunch-time therefore with his master he was warmly welcomed in the servants' hall, and by the time the meal was over he was the admired of all the company assembled there.

The household above stairs, however, with the exception of Ann, did not see him again until prayers, when he appeared at the end of the procession of elderly women-servants along with Japp the odd-man.

Ann, who had been dispatched to the East Lodge during the afternoon to see if all was right there, had found him busy in his shirt-sleeves with Walter the cat, looking as though he had not been transferred at all, established on the table lazily watching his operations.

"He was here when we arrived, miss," said Albert when Ann exclaimed in surprise at the return of the exile, "and the master's quite delighted with him, which is a mercy."

It was. For no flattery or persuasion would induce the heartless Walter to share poor Mrs. McMurtrie's banishment. He deigned to visit her occasionally. He allowed her at times to shed tears over him. He ate the tit-bits she spread before him to lure him to the Big House. But hardly were they swallowed when he would go back to the East Lodge and resume his place on its new tenant's writing-table. He liked the feeling of the papers apparently, for from among them it was impossible to dislodge him. And while the manuscripts he lay on were continually being corrected till some of the sheets were mere confusions of insertions and erasures complicated with blots and muddled references to other pages, Walter in their midst remained unaltered and unalterable.

. . . . . .

As Albert spoke he went on unpacking his master's writing materials. He had previously packed away—he told Ann—Mrs. McMurtrie's ornaments and other breakables.

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"When Mr. Tosh is in one of his tantrums you see, miss," he explained, "you never know what he might be doing."

"Does he often have them?" said Ann anxiously.

"Yes, miss, at Rathness he had," said Albert. "You see a literary gentleman like him is easily upset. He's got too many ideas, you see, miss. That's what's the matter with him. You would think that was a good thing, but it's the very worst for a gentleman that is wanting to write a plain book. He gets—say—a chapter done. Well and good. But then somebody comes in and gives him a new idea that won't fit in, or that upsets all the old ones. That's very worrying, miss. Then this war. You see the book was about why it was impossible that Germany should go to war with Britain. Well—then the war began. That was very worrying again, miss. All the book has had to be altered now. No wonder he is a little hasty sometimes."

"I do like Albert," Ann reported to Miss Emily. "He is so interested in his master and so sympathetic. He has made the front room at the East Lodge already into the neatest little study, with the old box-bed for a book-case and a bowl of crocuses on the writing-table. You have no idea how nice it is."

Mr. Tosh meanwhile, in baggy tweeds and with a large fawn-coloured wide-awake clapped on the back of his head, was wandering about the grounds in the spring sunshine, forgetting his worries in the congenial society of Miss Caroline.

"Yes, Miss Barton," he said as they paused to look at the hepaticas, "I have a presentiment that I shall finish my book here as Johnson might have finished his *Rasselas* at the country-house of Mrs. Thrale."

"Sir, you delight me," said Miss Caroline beaming. "Little did I dream that the East Lodge was to harbour such a guest."

"If I might read portions of it to you occasionally it would be an inspiration to me," continued Mr. Tosh.

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"Nothing would please me better," exclaimed Miss Caroline quite charmed.

Thus by prayer-time the first Wrack-straw and his servant were on the best of terms with the household. At this function Albert sat with folded arms and the utmost decorum between the stately Arbuthnot and Japp, making the latter seem more ill-grown and furtive and futile and miserable than he had ever before appeared. His master sat at the other end of the room, stiffly erect, his hands resting on the arms of his chair, his lips pursed, his ruddy cheeks slightly distended, his head a little on one side, like an attentive robin redbreast. . . .

It was the next day at breakfast that the telegram came announcing the arrival of Mrs. Bellairs and her two friends.

Sanders the table-maid brought the news down to the servants' hall where the two house-maids, Watson and Williams, still sat talking to Albert.

"So," said Sanders, "one o' you must come and help me with the silver, seein' that I've been helpin' you all week with the rooms. Last night at dinner I was black affrontit of it, and once all these folks come there'll be less time than ever to thorough-clean it."

Neither Watson nor Williams, however, seemed to be enthusiastic.

"I've still plenty to do myself," said Williams.

"Can I not help?" suggested Albert. "I'm used to silver, and Mr. Tosh told me that if I dared to enter the Lodge again before a quarter to one he would throw the ink at me."

"My, but I'll be glad if you will, Mr. Figgis," said Sanders amid the general laughter, and without more ado the two went off together and were soon hard at work in the silver-pantry.

It was a lightsome pleasant place with cupboards all down one side and a large safe on the other where special heirlooms were kept. A long table was there too and com-

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fortable chairs so that the labour of the cleaning process was reduced to a pastime.

"And never have I seen in all the years I have been among silver a better cleaner than Mr. Figgis," Sanders reported afterwards. "He did the things in half the time I take, and gave me, that thought I knew all there was to know, some real fine notions."

Quite an array of forks and spoons and other minor accessories was already gleaming at one end of the long table when the front-door bell rang sharply, and then after an interval more urgently.

"Watson will be up in the attics," said Sanders, "but Williams must be hearin' it."

Sanders, however, was either wrong about Williams hearing it or in her inference that she would consider it her duty to attend to it, for a third time the bell rang, and this time in a prolonged and determined manner.

"You'll have to go, Miss Sanders," said Albert, polishing away at an enormous soup-ladle.

Sanders banged down the tea-pot she was working at, wiped her hands hastily, set her cap straight in front of a dish-cover instead of a mirror, and then, tying on another apron as she went, she departed in high dudgeon.

Hardly had the door closed behind her when Albert turned in his chair.

The big safe was just behind him. In a moment he had whipped a bunch of skeleton keys out of his pocket and was trying them one after the other in the lock of it. He had already tried two and was adjusting the third when a slight noise just outside the window attracted his attention. Turning again hastily he saw to his dismay a pasty face just outside the bars there. It was Japp with a can of water and soap, a large mop, and an inscrutable expression, engaged apparently on window-cleaning operations. He must have just arrived, but it was impossible to tell from his stolid countenance what he had seen or not seen in that fraction of time. His shabby cloth cap was pulled

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well down over his eyes and a mask of stupidity was over his face. Something indefinable about him, however, convinced the astute Albert that it was only a mask. That student of character was profoundly disconcerted. To add to his confusion the key stuck in the lock. There was nothing for it but to wrestle with it until it came out feeling all the while the eyes of Japp upon him. He just missed having to do it under the eyes of Sanders as well. He had only resumed the soup-ladle one instant before she reappeared and his equanimity was by no means restored by Japp's elaborate unawareness of his presence. After he had nodded to him twice in a friendly manner without receiving the slightest response, he was constrained to conclude either that Japp was short-sighted or that he meant to cut him dead. Since the cleaning of the windows had been entrusted to him Albert was forced to the latter explanation of his behaviour—unless he was only absorbed in his work or indifferent or thoroughly stupid.

The uncertainty was very harrowing and the situation was not rendered less uncomfortable by the return of Sanders. When she resumed her seat with her back to the window Albert for one moment thought of changing places with her, but remembered just in time that Japp might then, if so inclined, make signs behind his back to Sanders Clearly the only thing to be done was to carry off the situation and deal with the Japp complication afterwards. Sanders benefited by this resolution to the extent of a most entertaining half-hour until with the departure of Japp Mr. Figgis subsided into a normal cheerfulness.

At a quarter to one, when he was repairing to the East Lodge, Albert saw Japp making for his abode at the West one. He was shambling along still carrying his pail and mop, and if he *did* see Mr. Figgis on the other side of the lawn he again took no notice of him. As Albert went on his way he cursed his luck. He was caught in his own toils. He had been surprised.

"Whoever could have dreamed," he said to himself,

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"that that little idiot would appear just there of all places!"

It made him furious to think what an insignificant creature Japp was and how feeble was the hand into which he was delivered. He mused about it all day. After luncheon he returned to his room at the lodge. It was the third and smallest room in the little house with a window looking out on Mrs. McMurtrie's cabbages. But ponder as he might he could think of no plan either to find out whether Japp had realised what he was doing at the safe, or to prevent him informing upon him if he wanted to.

Mr. Tosh in the throes of composition next door did not ring for him till five o'clock. The early spring dusk was already beginning to fall and he was making tea for his master on Mrs. Murtrie's fire when the closed motor with Japp driving and piled high with luggage passed the lodge on its way to the Big House.

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The two Miss Bartons, attended by Ann, Arbuthnot, and the housemaids, were all waiting in the hall. As the motor came to a standstill before the steps, Miss Caroline with Miss Emily and Ann came out on to the threshold.

A hearty laugh heralded the appearance of Mrs. Bellairs, a very stout but still very handsome woman in her seventies.

"My dears," she said, unwinding herself from a motor-veil, "here we are after the most amusing journey I have ever experienced. I have not enjoyed myself so much since I was seventeen. Most of our luggage is lost, I believe, but there is still some left. I am afraid your man will have to go back for it as we could not get it all on to the motor this time. Now, Sophy," she went on, turning to the motor again, "come along. All our trials and troubles are ended."

As she spoke she handed out a pale, grim woman whose wrinkles and general attenuation contrasted strangely with the richness and amplitude of her clothes. On her head she wore a large and heavily trimmed hat, and the coiffure beneath it was of a dull golden colour.

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