

DAWN



HR

S. Fowler Wright

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◆ D A W N ◆

By

S. FOWLER WRIGHT



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DAWN

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First Edition

◆ D A W N ◆

DAWN

BOOK I

[I]

THE May sun shone through the unblinded window of Muriel Temple's bedroom, and a warm wind lifted the curtains. A moving shaft of light fell on her face, and she stirred and wakened to a sense of impending evil. For a moment, she could not recall the nature of the trouble which had overshadowed her mind. "To be with Christ, which is far better,"—the words which had brought sleep came back, and with them she remembered. Six months, the specialist had said—or it might be twelve or eighteen—but it was not likely to be so long. He could not recommend an operation. He had been very kind, but quite definite. There would be more pain later, he admitted—but much could be done to deaden it. She hesitated about that. It might be better to endure the pain, if it were God's will. She was not afraid. She would want to be conscious of death when it came. "To be with Christ, which is far better." She did not doubt it.

She had hoped that another operation might have been possible, followed by some degree of recovered activity, though she knew that she would never see South Africa again. But that hope was over now. If God had decided that He did not need her further, she must not be faithless and defiant. He could build the new mission church at Nizetsi, on which her heart had been set, without her aid should He will it. She knew that; but she did not think that it was His will, or he would not have sent her this summons to lay aside the work she was doing. Perhaps, had she made better use of the time she had—

It was twenty years since she had sailed from Southampton for her first station in Basutoland. Life had seemed long then, and now . . . *The night cometh when no man can work.*

Her thought paused, as the bells of Sterrington church commenced their summons for the early communion. She did not like the Anglican service. She knew it to be full of superstitions, and laxities. Sinners should be converted, not confirmed. But she had a wide charity of mind, and today she would gladly have knelt in any place that was dedicated to her Master's service, however blindly.

She thought of dawn moving over the earth, and of a world that waked to

worship.

*Fast as the light of morning broke
On island, continent and deep
Thy far-spread family awoke
Sabbath all round the world to keep.*

She remembered how she had used that great conception of James Montgomery to move a Zulu audience. She did not think of it as James Montgomery's hymn. She did not know or care who had written it. She had no literary sense. But she had imagination, if only she were approached on the one side on which her mind was open, and she had a gift of clear and musical speech which could take an audience with her—till her throat had failed. Even in the harsh Zulu gutturals . . . *She-who-speaks-as-we-speak*, so they had called her.

*Thy poor have all been freely fed,
Thy chastened sons have kissed the rod,
Thy mourners have been comforted,
Thy pure in heart have seen their God.*

The familiar words brought comfort. God was so very near to those who sought Him. She reached out for the Bible on her bedside table. She would read the usual morning chapter. As she did so, Mrs. Wilkes knocked timidly, and, being answered, brought in her breakfast.

Mrs. Wilkes brought some gillies also. She knew that Muriel loved flowers. It was a world full of kindness, even for those for whom Death was waiting impatiently. Death might be near, but God was always nearer.

Muriel lay till late, as she had reluctantly promised her doctor, and rested in the garden during the afternoon, half asleep in the sunlight. Unused to leisure, her mind wandered backward in reminiscences that were sometimes sad, and sometimes pleasant to recall. She had had much happiness, she decided, and many mercies.

The sky was comparatively clear, its smoke-laden atmosphere having been unrecruited since the previous noon, and the sun was warm and bright. Sterrington, though on the edge of one of England's invented hells, was clear of mine or foundry for twenty miles on its northwestern side, from which the winds of that time and place most commonly blew.

Muriel felt that it was a fair world, and a kind one. It was sad to think that it might be the last earthly summer that she would see. She did not feel ill when she lay quietly: only weak if she tried to do too much.

In the evening she felt the need of joining in the acts of worship in which her life so largely consisted. There was a little Unitarian chapel in the village, but that was impossible. Unitarians (Muriel knew) are not Christians at all. There was nothing else but the Anglican church and there she went (borrowing

a prayer-book from Mrs. Wilkes) to hear a sermon from a text in the 107th Psalm, "He turneth the wilderness into a standing water," which wandered into abstract considerations of the methods of the Divine control of the cosmos, the antiquity of geologic records—the rector was an enthusiast in geology—and introduced, rather awkwardly, the newest theories as to the rather numerous occasions on which Great Britain had been separated or reunited to Western Europe, with allusions to the "Carboniferous Limestone Sea," the "deltaic apron of the Hercynian Mountains," and the "confluent deltas of the Millstone Grit," which may have featured prominently in his reading of the previous week, but were unlikely to be received with any intelligent interest by his evening audience.

To Miss Temple's thinking, it was not a sermon at all.

[II]

Muriel went to bed at once when she returned from the evening service. She had gone a good deal during the day, and she was physically tired, and mentally somewhat depressed.

She had had ambitions once; dreams, as we all have. But they were faded now. Besides, she was not her own, and the regret was an infidelity. "Thine be the glory." Tears came as she thought how little glory she had brought to God. And now His message had come that she was no longer needed. She must just rest and die.

Her thoughts wandered to the rector to whom she had listened that evening. His personality had attracted her. A somewhat ascetic face, with a weary look in the eyes. She was not uncharitable. She supposed he served God in his own way, though it was not hers. "He who is not against us is of our part." She wondered vaguely as to the nature of the work he did—so different from what hers had been among the Zulu kraals. Probably he was tired and dispirited also. The empty pews . . . But what use was there in telling people about old geologic changes, which, if they were true at all, had no meaning today? The flood was past. That was part of the old dispensation. Now there were only the troubles of the last days for the world to endure before the glory of the millennium dawn. "There shall be wars, and rumors of wars, and earthquakes in divers places. . . ." The last days might be very near. . . .

She went to sleep at last, and while she slept the earth's crust sank slightly and very gently in the northern hemisphere, and lifted slightly farther toward the equator.

It was a trivial change. Not enough to make earth falter in its settled course through the heavens, scarcely enough to change the axis on which it spun. There would be some space of bare land steaming in tomorrow's sun, which

the tropic ocean had covered; some space of water where the land had been. That was all.

. . . Muriel dreamed that she stood with the rector on a bare plain. It was black night, and the wind was terrible. They were lost in the night. He said he knew the way, but she did not believe him. He was leading her into a pit where they would drown together. And there was a voice that cried through the night, a voice she knew. A voice that cried in an agony of terror, "*Miss Temple, wake up. I think the roof's afalling.*"

Muriel was awake now. By the light of a candle she saw the comfortable face of her landlady, now white with fear. She heard the noise of a steady rush of air, which did not pause nor vary. She heard the rumble of a falling wall. She heard the woman's frightened voice protesting. "I'm scairt to death, Miss Temple. It's got such a queer sound. It's not an ornary storm."

No, it was not an ordinary storm. Muriel realized that, as she reassured her companion with a cheerful word, and began to dress quickly, for the cottage might really prove unsafe if this wind continued.

It was fortunate that her dressing was soon done, for she had scarcely finished when the window blew in, extinguishing the flickering light of the candle; and the next moment, through the darkness, there came a rattle of falling tiles at the farther end of the room, where the cottage roof was descending upon them.

Muriel stood uncertainly. There was a sound behind her in the darkness like the snapping of wood, and then a heavy sliding of something, and then a fall. But these noises, however loud and near, seemed confused and distanced by the sound of a wind which never ceased nor varied as it rushed southward to fill the void from which the land had fallen. But she knew nothing of that. She was concerned—though still with something of the serenity of those whose minds are trained to self-discipline—with the triviality of her own environment. She was aware that part at least of the roof was gone, that something struck her on the shoulder, causing her to lose her footing. She stumbled over the body of Mrs. Wilkes, and came to her knees across her. She spoke to her, but there was no answer. She knew that their safety lay in flight down the narrow stairs if they could reach them. She tried to drag the inert body, but its bulk among the fallen rubble of the roof was too much for her strength. As she made this effort, she was aware of something warm and wet that was flowing over her hand. She knew that it was blood. Perhaps she could stanch . . . She had not lived for twenty years in savage Africa to be strange to the results of accident, or any form of violence. Feeling upwards, she learned the uselessness of her efforts. The woman's head was half severed from her body.

Knowing this, she lost no further time. She crawled on hands and knees to

the place where she supposed the door to be, raising her hands continually to feel for any fallen obstacle that might confront her, or for the guidance of the wall. Her eyes were adjusted to the darkness, and she began to see a little way ahead. She found the door, and then the stairs.

Soon, she was in the open air. Stinging rain that was carried almost level on the steady force of the wind struck her face like hail. Muriel covered her face with her hands. She knew the way to the garden gate, and she feared at every moment that the cottage would collapse toward her. But she could not make much headway. Ridges of soft soil were beneath her feet. She must have been blown onto the potato bed which she had observed Mr. Wilkes to be hoeing on Saturday. She wondered where he could be now. It seemed impossible that he could be asleep in the battered cottage. Yet perhaps she ought to try to go back to warn or find him.

As she tried to turn, she heard the noise of the falling walls, as the cottage flattened to the wind. She made two stumbling steps, and fell to her knees. Then she lay flat again on the wet earth that seemed the only stable thing remaining in a world of ruin. She did not doubt the earth.

She lay there for an hour or more, while the wind blew over her. As she did so, her body recovered a measure of its strength from the violent ordeal it had endured. She had a natural desire to find some place of rest and shelter. Perhaps the rectory, which she had scarcely seen, but which she knew lay in the hollow of the hill behind the church, not more than three or four hundred yards away, might give her a haven. Her mind, courageous, practical, tenacious, was already planning the way to safety which she had thought.

She tried to remember, to construct the way which she must take before making any effort to commence the journey. Then she rose on her knees, and was surprised to find how well she could see among the surrounding shadows. But they were strange, confusing shadows. The contours of familiar things were changed and flailed and flattened. Yet she could see the gap of the back-lane gate, in the low hawthorn hedge that still stood stoutly. But the walls and roof of the well must have fallen in.

An uprooted plum-tree, dragging at intervals farther across the garden, lengthened her progress, but she found the gate at last, or, rather, the gap where the gate had been, and scrambled down the three stone steps to the lower level of the lane.

After that, progress was easier.

[III]

The lane was very deep and narrow. Trees grew thickly from the steep slopes of the banks, and lined the edges, which were fenced with hedges of

untrimmed hawthorn—untrimmed because the countryside had been deserted of all but the most inevitable labor, and those who remained to do it were old men and such of the younger generation as lacked the restless energy of a race more virile than were those who led it.

The lane was older than any record of the lives of men: older than those straight and narrow ways that the Romans cut blindly through the midland swamps and forests. The wild strawberries on its banks had an ancestry of possession that outdated the flood of Genesis.

There was an old oak on the northern bank. Its roots went deep in the sloping side. They projected also where the feet of climbing children had kicked away the soil that had once sustained them. Its branches spread, broad and low, over the narrow lane, and stretched across the field above from which the wheat was springing.

The storm struck it, but it felt no fear. It had fought with storms for three centuries. There was no lightning and it was only lightning it hated. A half-dead branch on its western side, and a weal down its wrinkled trunk, showed how nearly it had met disaster eighty years ago. But that was when the elms on the further side had been too small to shade it.

If it thrilled to the first impact of the wind through all its sap-fed fibers, it was not with fear, but with the pleasure of a sport it knew, and to which it knew itself to be equal.

It did not meet the wind's assault, as do the palms of tropic lands, with a slim bole that can bend over without snapping, and with a feathery crest of a similar flexibility; the elms had tried the idea of the straight bole, and a poor job they made of it. Nor did it grow to a full and equal amplitude, as did the ash, as in pretense of perpetual calm, or in mere contempt of the wind's power to harm it. The ash was a tree of good repute, not to be condemned by any neighbor. It would not snap and show a rotten heart, as the elm may, when it looks most confident. But yet the oak, its clutching claws deep in the rocky soil, its short thick arms jutting awkwardly from its squat and stubborn trunk, knew that it might still be there when the ash's children had perished.

It met the early fury of the storm with a joyous quickening of tenacious life in nerves that were alert and vivid with the youth of spring, and veins in which the sap pulsed strongly, despite the centuries which it carried. But this storm did not strike with the sudden and interrupted violences of the tempests which it had known so often. It struck once, and the blow endured and continued, a relentless pressure. And the hours passed, and it did not slacken, and the stubborn strength endured it, and would not fear, though the joy of strife was gone, and every fiber ached and quivered. . . . And the time came when the aching of the boughs was in the deep roots also, clutching, in terror now, to the hard rock through which they had driven deeper for centuries. . . . The aching

of the great east limb, which stretched horizontally across the path of the unceasing wind, became an increasing pain, and when it snapped at last, as a twig snaps, through its eight-foot girth, the stunned tree scarcely felt the pain of its parting. When the storm paused for a moment, and then struck with a fresh force, that bore the great tree bodily, with all its roots, and a hundred tons of the rock it gripped into the hollow of the lane, it was scarcely conscious of the calamity that had overthrown it; it leaned, still half erect, within the hollow of the lane, conscious, as in a dream, of the cessation of that intolerable strain, and falling into the heavy sleep from which it must wake at last to be aware of its ruin.

Muriel made her way up the deep hollow of the lane with comparatively little difficulty, till she came to the place at which the oak had fallen. Here she found herself wading in loose soil, and sinking deeper at every step, till she fell over a projecting root of the fallen giant, that had held its position almost upright, as it slid into the hollow.

To surmount this impediment would have been difficult in the daylight for one of her physical limitations. It was impossible in the darkness. But she was of the kind that does not easily turn from any purpose when once it has been undertaken. The bank rose steeply, its surface hidden by the overhanging shadows of bush and tree, and coated with a heavy undergrowth of bramble. But she tried it, after an interval of rest.

Actually, it was not as difficult as might be thought, for one who had ceased to regard the scratching of face and arms, or the tearing of sodden garments. Bush and tree gave support as well as hindrance to slipping feet, and aid as well as obstacle to the hands that groped vaguely upwards. The time came when she felt the wind on the level field, and, having struggled against it for a hundred difficult yards, was glad to take to the bank again, and descend as best she might into the shelter of the narrow lane.

Having surmounted this obstacle, she might have had some difficulty in finding the hillside path that left the lane and straggled vaguely toward the rectory and the church, but that there was now a measure of light around her, of which she became conscious as soon as she had outflanked the obstacle of the fallen oak.

By this light, she found her way round the hill as easily as the storm permitted, and learned its cause as the rectory came in sight. It was burning fiercely. Whether from the fire itself, or from the earlier action of the storm, its main structure, old and timber-built, had collapsed entirely. The church stood. It showed no lights, for its northern windows had fallen in, and its southern ones blown outward, and it would have been impossible to keep its candles or

its ancient lamps alight in the tempest of wind and rain which blew through it.

But the walls remained, and the squat tower, that was itself scarcely as high as the swell of land upon its northern side. And in the darkness, half-lit by the flickering glow of the burning house, the rector's household, and about thirty others of the four hundred inhabitants of Sterrington village crouched, and sobbed and whimpered, or spoke confident words to others, as their natures led them.

The rector stood in the shelter of the east porch, looking out in hesitation as Muriel reached it. He had just quieted an injured frantic woman, who had lost one of her children in the darkness as they had made their way to the church, by promising that he would himself go to its rescue.

It was not a promise that he could lightly break. Yet what could he do, till the wind should slacken, and there be some light to guide him? The glare of the burning rectory shone in his eyes, and made the howling darkness blacker. It would be difficult, he thought, on such a night, to find familiar paths, but now, when all landmarks were flattening, and the air was perilous with flying boughs, and falling timber, and the ground was strewn with ruin . . .

The firelight glowed up suddenly as Muriel approached and shone directly upon her. He could see from her stumbling walk that she was in the last stage of exhaustion.

"Miss Temple! are you hurt?" he said fatuously, as he drew her onto the seat within the porch that gave some shelter from the wind.

She could not answer for some time, but leaned back, breathing with difficulty. There was the dreaded pain in her side. . . . He was aware that she had fainted. . . .

After a time she revived. "I think I'm all right now," she said, "you mustn't stay with me. There must be so much to do."

The words reminded him of the errand on which he had been starting. He said: "I'm going to look for Mrs. Walkley's Maud. She was struck by something as she came here, and some neighbors brought her along, and the other children; but Maud's missing."

"Then you mustn't stay for me. I shall be all right now. I wish you hadn't waited."

The rector still stood for a moment. He was not a hero. He hated to be out in the rain, even with an overcoat, and some good boots. And now he was insufficiently clad, and wearing bedroom slippers. And besides, his cough — He had been tired when he went to bed last night, and now, after barely escaping with his life from the collapse of the rectory . . . And what a loss, for a poor man such as he! His library was known to book-collectors throughout the country. It was only last month that a self-invited dealer had offered him £2,000 for it. An absurd price. He believed that it was worth four. And it was

only insured for £300. . . .

Certainly, he did not want to go into the storm again in this half-clad condition to look for Maudie Walkley. . . .

If the height of heroism is to be measured by the depth of disinclination or cowardice from which it springs, rather than from a “sea-level” of normality, there was no braver deed in that night of a million of hidden heroisms that the advancing waters would cover than that of the Rev. Peter Smithers, stumbling down the slippery side of the hill into the rain-swept darkness, in his useless search for a child that was already dead.

Lost and bewildered, knowing only that he was somewhere in the lower meadows, he turned sharply more than once at the thought that he must be heading for the unfenced danger of the river-bank, till he knew that all sense of direction had left him.

He tried to read the stars, but the sky was dark with cloud already tinged with a faint red glow, that would be deeper before the morning came. He tried to locate his position from the light of the burning rectory, but that fire was fading now, and others shone or flickered around him. . . . The faint light did not prevent his stumbling over a horse that lay flatly on the ground. It sprang up in panic, neighing with a voice that started half a dozen around it. The rector tried to avoid their rush as they came upon him. He started a stumbling run, not looking where he went. . . . At the last moment, a great horse that was almost upon him tried to turn, either to avoid collision, or from a greater peril which it perceived better than he. But the wet flank struck him as it swerved. He lost his balance, and was aware that his feet were slipping beneath him as he fell. He called out, “Oh my God!” once only as he fell into the weed-grown water, and died as so many died that night, not knowing the full extent of the catastrophe that overwhelmed the world.

In the firelit church, beneath the shadow of the chancel wall, Muriel had joined the huddled group of refugees, some of whom were in little better plight than herself, and most of whom were in a terror which she did not share.

A weak and frightened voice came from one of Mrs. Walkley’s wounded but rescued children, “Oh, mummy, it does bleed,” and she felt her way to adjust the clumsy bandages with more skilful fingers than had been previously available.

What more, she thought, could she do? The mental habit of many years made her less concerned at the physical ruin around her than for the spiritual attitude of those who met it. She knew the power of song in the darkest places of the earth, among the lowest of her kind. It must not be one of her private favorites. It must be a hymn they knew.

“Abide with me. Fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens. Lord, with me abide,”

her voice rose, weak and solitary against the elemental fury of the storm.

Then a man's voice joined her. A rough loud voice, as of an outdoor worker; it could be imagined as of a carter who used it mostly as a horses' call. Then others, tuneless enough some of them. Voices that halted and quavered beneath others that were of a stronger quality.

"Change and decay in all around I see.
Oh, Thou, that changest not! Abide with me."

What matter that the weak sound was beaten down, and swept along to perish in the fury of the louder wind?

It was the voice of two thousand years. The Christian miracle. The assertion of immortality. The voice which was first heard in the serene confidence of the Founder of a faith transcending all its foolish creeds. What matter, if all things change and fade, whether the process be slow or sudden, to those whose appeal is made to the Unchanging God?

[IV]

Dawn came on a ruined world. A world that was strewn with wreckage. A world in which all the interdependent complexities by which its civilization was sustained had been rudely broken; on fence and farmhouse and forest that the storm had flattened, on burning cities that rose up, a pillar of lurid smoke, as the wind fell, there came the light of the indifferent dawn. And as the north wind slackened, the water came across the sinking land. Not violently, as it had poured, one huge and dreadful wave, into the sunken Mediterranean basin: a wave which millions must have seen, but who that saw it could have lived to tell? Gently, inexorably, as the dawn-light pierced the heavy pall of air, red as with volcanic dust, tainted with the smoke of a thousand fires, the water rose. It spread gently over the Essex marshes. It lapped against the Thames Embankment with something more than a tidal lifting. Lapped, and spilled over, and spread widely, and more widely, in among the burning streets; for, in London, as in every city in southern England, there had been more conflagrations in the falling buildings than there was any hope of quenching, and every hour the fires had got a surer hold, while beneath the feet of a populace that fled the flooded fire-fringed streets in an ever-greater congestion of panic, there were a million rats that squealed and dodged, as they made their way to the higher ground which, in its turn, would fail them.

Watchers in the early morning, on the hills above the Severn Valley, looking down the broadening stretch of the Bristol Channel, saw a succession of advancing ripples, long gentle ripples, stretching from coast to coast, as though a giant stone had been thrown into the central waters; and as each

ripple spread it lapped over a few miles farther of the level land. There was an upward rush of water in the river channel. Gloucester—Tewkesbury—Worcester—one by one as the morning passed were underneath the floods. At midday, the long waves heaved and broke against the barrier of the Malvern Hills. During the afternoon, the inexorable advance spread out around this ten-mile barrier, and flooded the higher Hereford levels on the farther side. Then it seemed, in one appalling moment, that the whole land westward of the Severn cleft, broke off, and Wales, with all its hills, slid downward, to be covered by a rush of water that had already drowned the lower Irish land. Eastward the water moved, drowning the Cotswold Hills, meeting the flood that had risen in the Thames Valley at an equal rate, lapping higher and higher around the northern Oxford wolds, and against the ridge which is the watershed of England, leaving tide-swept shallows, and islands here and there, with casual salvage of beast or man that fled across it just as the circling waters closed, or who had not tried to fly. But farther north, the land broke off, as it had done to westward—broke off, and sank away.

And all that day the northward roads were choked with flying crowds—that fled the horror of the southern flood, to perish even more surely when the farther north should sink beneath the waters. Ceaseless lines of rapid overloaded motors, held up continually by the impedimenta of the storm-strewn roads, or by the accidents of their own impatience; offering wild rewards—anything but the priceless-seeming benefit of the lift in the overcrowded vehicle—to pedestrians who would help to drag aside the broken tree, to clear the rubble of the fallen wall; cursing the slowness of men who worked heroically to keep the roadways clear, or frightening the slower cars with threats or actual violence into the byways that soon became as congested as the wider roads.

So the day passed, and the next sun rose on an ocean that had spread from the Rocky Mountains to the northern coasts of Africa, and had obliterated the isolation of the Baltic Sea.

[V]

With the first dawn the wind had lessened somewhat the relentless pressure of the night, lessened also in the steadiness of its direction, till, with the broader day, it became variable both in force and direction, a matter of short and violent gales, and sudden calms, and fierce whirlwinds of contending air.

With the first light, a straggling company from the church-porch came out to survey the havoc of the storm.

For the most part, they were a white-faced group, cowed and bewildered by the magnitude of the calamity which the morning showed them. They were

in no physical condition to regard it bravely. They were shaking with cold, or stiff with rheumatism, after their vigil in rain-soaked garments on the unfriendly stones. They were hungry, and uncertain how to look for food. They saw a world in which the familiar buildings that held the endless things that they had come to regard as the inevitable necessities of life were burnt or fallen. They gazed at horizons, livid or dusky red, which told of more than local ruin. Vaguely, they realized that there was no help but in themselves, and they were untrained in self-reliance, as they were unpracticed in self-discipline.

The little crowd spread out from the church-porch, the more robust leading their different ways to the ruins of their cottage homes, perhaps to find such food as the gardens offered—which was not much on the first of June—or to search apathetically, with stunned bewildered minds, for those that the night had ended.

Mrs. Walkley, setting out in a vain search for her missing child, whose death had cost the rector's life, took the elder girl with her, but left the wounded Cora in Muriel's care.

Cora, a thin anemic child of seven or eight years, who had been knocked down by a blown branch, and whose right arm and side had been lacerated, was evidently unfit to walk, and Muriel, who had been nursing her in the darkness, offered to continue her charge when the daylight enabled the distracted mother to set out on her useless search.

She made a bed, of a kind, from some hassocks that had escaped the rain that drove through the church during the night. She went out to find some means of washing the wounds. She found an old enameled bowl in a ditch at the foot of the rectory garden. It had a hole in the bottom, but at one side, and it would still hold a good deal of water if it were tilted. So she was able to relieve the child's thirst, and then to do what was possible for wounds that were inflamed already.

By this time the church had emptied, except for one old man who had gone out with the rest, and then returned. He was bent with rheumatism, and stood without speaking, leaning on a heavy stick, and looking down on Muriel's tattered and muddled form, and on the injured child.

At last he said: "It's milk 'er needs. . . . There's a cow in Datchett's paddock, as like as not."

"Will you show me?" Muriel said.

He seemed reluctant to move, or as though he had not heard; but in the end he came, moving painfully.

The paddock was fortunately near, just over the hill, and after an hour or more of alternate coaxing and dodging, a cornered frightened cow yielded some reluctant milk to Muriel's strange but not unskilful hands. Not what it would have given in the garden shed to its own attendant, while it licked up the

meal which was expected payment, but as much as Muriel cared to drink herself, and as much more as could be carried in the tilted bowl. For the old man would have none. He pulled out a chunk of bread and cheese from a capacious pocket. It was as though he silently implied that he was always adequately provided for such catastrophes.

At midday the old man disappeared. He did not return. Neither did Mrs. Walkley. . . . Muriel never saw her again.

The child grew worse rather than better as the day advanced. She was weak and fretful, and at times somewhat delirious. Muriel would not leave her for long, but went out several times foraging for food, or to learn what she might of the conditions around her. She watched the crowds that struggled northward on the wreck-strewn roads. She heard the wild and fearful talk that urged the weaker forward.

The road beneath the hill was bad enough, but in the afternoon, when the child fell into a restless slumber, she made her way over the fields to the main road that crossed it at right angles, going north, and here she came to a hedgegate, over which she saw a limousine on the farther side with two wheels in the ditch, which half a dozen men were toiling to move forward, while an impatient block of vehicles fretted in the rear. It was a spot where a fallen tree had been dragged aside, but only just sufficiently for one car to pass at a time, and this one had been too broad to pass it.

There had been two ladies in the car, who had alighted, and stood on the uncrowded side of the tree, watching the workers. The men it carried had alighted also, but stood holding the doors, lest others should attempt to force a way in when the wheels were lifted.

Muriel crossed over to the ladies. She was not ashamed of begging, had done so many times—for others, not herself—in a hundred circumstances. They stood, cool and clean and gaily-clothed, looking with an aloof impatience at the slow lifting of the foundered wheels.

Muriel said, addressing both indifferently: "Have you any food you could give me? I have a wounded child in the church."

The nearer of the ladies looked doubtfully at her companion who answered quickly: "No, indeed. We haven't enough for ourselves."

"Nonsense, Ella," came a man's voice from beside the car, "we can spare some easily."

"Yes, of course," said another.

"If you once start giving to every beggar—" she began furiously, but the man did not heed her. He had entered the car, and had brought out a basket from its ample recesses.

"You'd better take the lot," he said. "You couldn't carry much without something to put it in."

"I don't think I shall need all this," she said, but the car began to move forward as she spoke. There was a rush to crowd in as it turned to the middle of the road, and the cars behind hooted their impatience to take the opening way. Muriel, basket in hand, was pushed aside and forgotten. She went back with a week's provision for the sick child, and her frugal needs.

She walked back giddily, thinking at times that she was faint from the toils and exposures and lack of sleep she had experienced, at others that the earth itself was unstable beneath her. As she regained the church, she knew that the weakness was not in herself alone. The ground rocked under her feet. She was glad to sit, and then lie flatly, to reduce its effects. As the shocks continued, she considered that the open skies were safer than any roof, however solid, and carried the child out of the church, and laid her in the adjoining field.

She lay down beside her, and as the earth quieted for a time, exhaustion triumphed, and she slept heavily.

She still slept when the shocks came again, not with violent oscillations, but with a steady sinking beneath her. She might have slept on through the night in the open field. As the evening came the child waked her, asking for water.

She rose to get it, stiff, and heavy of limb, and slow of thought, but with the changed outlook that sleep will bring.

She looked round, and saw no one. She heard no sound of human life. She felt suddenly lonely. Had all the world fled to safety, and left her there to die? She looked doubtfully at the child, as she returned with the needed water. The earth was quiet now. The church still stood. The child must not lie out all night.

She carried her back to the cushions where she had lain before. . . .

[VI]

The short night ended. From the unshaken tableland of Asia, from the heights of the Himalayas, from the unchanged enduring East, across the desolations of water that had been Europe, moved the regardless dawn.

It moved across a thousand leagues of new uncertain seas of no sure tides, where fierce and unchanging currents hurried the floating wreckage of a continent, now here, now there, hurried, and flung it back—the floating wreckage, and the floating dead.

It rose over some new-made islands in the western sea, islands with raw unsanded beachless coasts, islands on which some human life still endured among their storm-swept ruins—life that cowered terrified, or dazed, or maddened, by the sudden calamity that it had experienced and perhaps survived.

It rose upon the old gray church where Muriel and the child still slept—where Muriel, exhausted by exertions far beyond her normal endurance, might have slept for many further hours, had she not been wakened by the weak reiteration of the cry for water from the dying child.

For she saw that the child must die unless some skill beyond her own could be brought to aid her—would probably die in any case, her experience told.

She hesitated as to what it might be best to do. She might find medical aid, if she sought it. She could not tell how far the settled order of civilization had left the world, or how few might be those who were still alive around her.

But when she tried to rise, she found that the question was already answered. Exposure and exhaustion had left her too full of pain and weakness for any thought of walking farther than along the side of the field to the river below, from which she had been fetching the water that they required.

Well, if it were God's will . . . She tried to talk to the restless child when she had done what little was in her power for its physical comfort, but she could not reach its mind. It gazed at her with dull unheeding eyes, or turned away its head in a sharp impatience. Later in the day, it was in a delirium of fever from which it had little respite till its life was closing.

In the afternoon, Muriel heard voices with a sudden hope. They were the voices of approaching men. They passed the door of the church, but did not enter. They had gone on to the rectory ruins. They would return, she supposed, by the same path. But her purpose to call them changed as they passed beneath the broken windows of the church, and she heard their voices in an interjected narrative which it seemed that two or more were giving to the other members of the party. . . . "If the . . . hadn't been standing underneath the crane . . ." "fetched him a wipe over the jaw, and he fell. . . ." "She'd got two ducks hidden under the seat." "Told him to—— —the skulking hound."

It was too fragmentary for any meaning to emerge, but neither tones nor words gave expectation of useful succor.

The next minute she knew that the party had turned in at the church-door. She heard rough voices, and the stamp of heavy boots on the stones.

She lay quiet, and saw them as they straggled up the aisle, though, as yet, she was unobserved. She recognized them as a group of miners—doubtless from the Larkshill collieries, which she knew to be no more than three or four miles away.

She saw the foremost man very clearly. Not tall. A blunt-featured face, not uncomely. He was looking right and left in the empty pews as he advanced. She thought of the basket of food, which lay near to her hand, and wondered how much, if any, would be left when these unwelcome visitors had departed. But she was not greatly perturbed, having an invariable formula for such emergencies. It was a case for prayer. After that, the control of the situation

was in very capable hands.

The man looked at the place where she lay beneath the wall, with the child beside her. He looked her straight in the face, and then turned a rather broad back between her and his advancing companions.

"Nothing here, Jim," he said, to a tall loose-jointed man, with a half-filled sack over his shoulders.

The man answered thickly, with an indication that he was something less than sober, but with a surprising fluency. The substance of his contention was that there was never any good to be got from a blasted church. He spat on the stones to emphasize his opinion concerning it.

A small man with a weak face and a goatish beard rebuked him with drunken solemnity. He appeared to suggest a possible connection between the recent catastrophe, and the infidelity of Jim Rattray. He also suggested that those who had escaped might reasonably be expected to show some gratitude for their Creator's favor.

Rattray's reply was again too picturesque for a literal reproduction. Its substance was that a Creator who preserved Monty Beeston, while disposing of so many millions of better men, must be weak in the head.

There was an uncertain murmur from the little crowd behind them. An uneasy murmur, from which emerged a desire that there should be less talk, and that they should "get a move on" in some more profitable direction.

"Yes, we're best out of here," said the man whose back was offering a precarious shield to the woman and child who lay beneath the shadowed wall.

Jim Rattray turned with a sudden anger which may have been prompted rather by a personal antagonism than by the words of the speaker.

"I'm not taking orders from you, Tom Aldworth."

He took a threatening step forward. Tom Aldworth stood his ground, but declined the quarrel.

"I don't fight a man when he's in beer," he remarked, as one who mentions something too obvious for discussion.

Jim Rattray looked dangerous for a moment, and then pulled himself together with an apparent effort. He said something indistinctly that sounded like "All pals here," and turned to follow his retreating comrades.

Tom Aldworth went also, without looking round at those whom he had interposed to shelter.

[VII]

Muriel Temple would certainly not have lain silent had she been possessed of her normal strength, nor was she restrained by any fear of the rough group that had approached so nearly.

But she thought of the child, and of the faintness which had come to her when last she had risen, and she lay still, and left the situation for her Master to deal with.

The miners did not return, and three days later she found strength to dig a little churchyard grave for the body of Cora Walkley, who thus found a quieter resting-place than had come to most of those whom sea and storm had ended.

With reviving strength, and being freed of the encumbrance of the dying child, Muriel rose on the next morning with a determination to learn more of the condition to which her world had fallen.

Muriel, whose life had been largely spent elsewhere, might have been less quick than a native to notice the difference in the air from the sickly struggle of frustrated light which had been locally known as a sunny day, but she was conscious of another quality. The air was salt. A fresh and pleasant wind came from the north, and it brought a strong scent of the sea.

"It can't be a mile away," she thought wonderingly. She determined that her first enterprise should be to discover the meaning of the salt taste of the northern wind; but before doing this she made her way back to the ruins of the cottage where she had been living. She had seen from the hillside that it had escaped the destruction of fire, and she hoped to recover some of her personal possessions.

But her search was useless. Others had been there before her. The little well-tended garden had been trampled by many feet. There were the marks of wheels, and of a horse's hoofs in the soft soil. Beams had been dragged aside, and tiles and bricks were scattered.

The body of John Wilkes, which had been exposed by these delvings (he had been smothered in the bed from which he had declined to rise), had been lifted, with that of his wife, into the ditch which bounded the garden on its lower side. There had been a rough attempt at burial.

She reflected that there might be other houses down the village which remained un plundered, but, before investigating further, she was still resolved to explore the limit of the land, and the meaning of the salt wind that she had breathed that morning. She made her way back to the church.

For the first time, she entered the vestry. It contained little of value, a recent theft at a neighboring church having made the rector cautious about his own property, but there was an ancient chest containing surplices and other vestments; a few devotional books; and a wall-mirror, with some brushes on a ledge beneath it. There was also an old brown jacket hanging behind the door, which the rector had used when he busied himself with the church brasses, or on other matters of cleaning or decoration which he did not always delegate to others.

She tried it on, and found that it came almost to her knees. Her hands did

not emerge from the sleeves. There was a weight at one side. She discovered a pipe, a pouch of tobacco, a box of vestas about a third full, a stump of carpenter's pencil. She emptied these out, except the matches, which were treasure not lightly to be cast aside.

The size of the coat was awkward, but the capacious pockets pleased her. They might be useful for many things. She was not only hunting her fellow men. Her food was almost exhausted. And some covering she must have.

She carried into the vestry a quantity of the hassocks and pew-coverings which had been the only bedding she had known for the past week, and the food-basket, nearly empty now; locked the door; hid the key; and started out to seek her kind.

She was aware that she must make a queer figure in the ungainly coat, but she was not greatly troubled. She realized sufficiently that others must be facing primitive necessities, and overcoming them as best they could.

In fact, she need not have troubled at all, for she was not destined to meet either man or woman till she returned in the evening. Had she made her way eastward to Larkshill, or to Cowley Thorn, she would have had a very different experience, and there was a scatter of human life to south and west; but she went up through the rectory grounds, where she almost trod on a hen as she tried a short cut through the shrubbery—a hen that dashed off her nest and flew squawking across the drive, leaving Muriel to the sight of a dozen eggs, and to the consideration of their possibilities for her empty larder. Her hand convicted them of the warmth of incubation. They were useless now, but she considered that a hen with tiny chickens may be caught very easily. She would remember the spot.

She went on by a field-path that went uphill in the direction she sought, and found an open gate into a larger field which had been plowed, but not planted. There was a cart-track by the hedge, and following this she came to another field in which oats were springing, and a dozen sheep fed freely.

Beyond was an open heath, which she supposed to be part of Cannock Chase, though she was not sure, knowing little of the geography of the district. Here the sheep were many, of all breeds and ages. They had broken through gapped hedges and fallen gates, and congregated according to their ancient practice on high and open ground.

Here Muriel turned, and looked back. She could see for several miles, but there was no sign of ending land or of encroaching sea. South and east and west there must be a wide space of land which still endured above the water. She wondered whether there might yet be a further subsidence, but she was not greatly worried by the thought. After all that had happened, the land yet seemed very solid, very firm. It is hard to distrust it.

But looking north again she saw nothing but level heath, and feeding

sheep, and the sky-line beyond. In the air, a black-headed gull circled slowly. She could not doubt that she was near the sea.

She would rest before she went farther. She lay on short warm grass, and slept long in the sunlight. She waked refreshed, and with a feeling of healthful vigor such as she had seldom felt in recent years.

She went on a little way, and stopped abruptly. The land broke off beneath her feet—broke off as straightly as though a knife had severed it. She looked down a cliff-wall of red marl, and thirty feet below, the ocean purred lazily in the sunlight, its full tide about to turn.

The sea was so quiet that a gull was sleeping on the gentle lift of the waves, its head beneath its wing. There was no sign of northern land; no sign of boat or sail. Only when she looked northeastward was she in doubt of whether the land curved outward or a separate island followed.

Looking at the peaceful water, she might have forgotten the devastation that it had wrought, had she not seen a broken chair that floated almost beneath her feet. There was nothing else in sight to tell of all that the water covered.

Muriel gazed at the ocean which stretched northward to the horizon limit, covering all the teeming life and wealth that had once been England; and though she pitied, it was without protest, as it was without fear.

. . . She sat thinking for a long time, while the sun's arc declined to the northwest, trying to understand the conditions under which life would continue, and to decide how best she could aid it.

She was not too ill to be of some use to God under these changed conditions. If it were not so, would He have preserved her, when so many millions had perished?

Surely, not too ill; though she was aware of a lassitude which made her unwilling to face the return walk, in spite of the growing thirst from which she suffered. . . . Her thoughts were broken by a scrambling and scuffling sound in the gorse-bushes behind her, and by the stampede of a dozen sheep that had been feeding near them.

She looked round, and caught a glimpse of a small white dog, a smooth-haired terrier, that was making excited rushes right and left at something that dodged it, but which she could not see. Then there came the agonized half-human cry of a captured rabbit, and a moment later the dog came out of the bushes, his prey hanging limp and dying in his mouth.

Muriel could not know whether he had been previously aware of her presence, but now he came straight toward her, wagging a stump of tail in the excitement of his successful hunting, and laying the rabbit at her feet.

Muriel loved dogs. The stranger was well satisfied with the praise she gave him. He sat down at her side, his stump still wagging on the ground, his head lifted sideways toward her caressing hand. He had a brass collar, with his

name, and his owner's inscribed upon it, "Gumbo, please return to George Hinde, The Ridge, Lower Helford."

Muriel was not very clear as to the position of Lower Helford, but she supposed (rightly) that it was covered by the placid ocean beneath her. She wondered whether the dog's master would appear, or she would hear him whistle for the return of the wanderer. She resolved to introduce herself should the opportunity come. She felt that the owner of such a dog could not be an unwelcome acquaintance.

But no call came, and the dog showed no inclination to leave her. Conscious of hunger, she began to think of the possibility of making a fire, and roasting the unexpected meal. But there was little wood lying around, and she was unsure that the gorse-bushes would be dry enough to burn freely, even if she had a knife to cut them. She must not come out without a knife again—it must surely be possible to find one somewhere.

She decided to return at once. If the dog followed her, she would conclude that he had lost his owner. So she picked up the rabbit, and returned with Gumbo trotting very contentedly at her heel.

In spite of her physical weakness, it is probable that there were few survivors of flood and storm who were better fitted to face the altered conditions under which life must now be sustained. She had seen and shared so much of primitive living, had so often been reduced herself to cruel expedient, that she was at once less perturbed by fear of privation, and abler to avoid its penalties.

Arriving home, she soon had a wood fire blazing on the open ground. A splinter of wood proved adequate to the skinning and preparation of the rabbit, and when she slept that night, in the added security of the locked vestry, with the dog at her feet, she thanked God in her prayers for the companionship He had sent her, and for the provision of the needed meal, with a gratitude which did not falter because of undue thought of the fate of George Hinde, or his family, that the waves had covered.

[VIII]

As Muriel had watched the ocean that afternoon, and tried to imagine the conditions under which human life could be continuing, she had resolved to lose no time in joining herself to those who remained alive, and that she would set out the next morning to Cowley Thorn or to Larkshill, where she felt it to be most probable that her search would be successful. It was characteristic that she did not give any thought to her own safety, or to her own advantage. It was the duty of service which called her. However limited her strength might be, she did not doubt that she could do something, in their emergency, to aid her

fellows.

But the next morning brought its own delays. She went farther among the ruins of Sterrington, and discovered, as she had expected, that there was much of probable or potential use which could still be salvaged from the ruins. Much that weather and vermin were deteriorating, if not destroying.

There was, in particular, a detached bakehouse which had contained several sacks of flour, which had been only partially protected by the ruins under which they lay. The exposed portions had attracted the cow to which she had been previously introduced in Datchett's paddock, the rector's wandering sow, and a young black pig. When these marauders had made some tactical dispositions to rearward, in the face of Gumbo's vociferous protests, he had dashed into the rubble of flour and tiles and mortar, and scattered a score of busy rats.

Muriel recognized that the flour ought to be salvaged, but she found it a laborious task. She emptied a sack which had been largely exposed and damaged, carried it up to the vestry, and then filled it, in the course of many journeys, by means of the basket which had been given her from the foundered motor; the dog keeping guard over the sacks in her absence. In the process of filling the sack she had emptied another, which was carried up and filled in turn, and this continued till she had salvaged nearly four sacksful. After this the weather turned wet, and the remaining flour was largely spoiled, at least for any lengthened storage.

Meanwhile, there was other needed food for which to forage, cooking to be done, and many things that hindered, and made the days pass quickly. She had felt that Datchett's cow should be captured, and that its milk would be welcome, but she had difficulty in finding any enclosure that could be sufficiently secured, without labor beyond her capacity.

In the end, she got it into the rector's orchard, where she tethered it. The June grass was abundant among the uprooted orchard trees, and the cow settled down contentedly; but she gave little milk. She was near her time for calving again, and the interval during which she had been left unmilked had nearly dried her.

Muriel had tried to secure the two pigs, and had succeeded, with Gumbo's energetic assistance, in persuading the rector's sow into a sty adjoining that from which she had escaped previously, but the young black pig had avoided all her efforts, and had finally disappeared.

Having secured the sow, she became aware that she must release it again, or be content to remain sufficiently near the spot to feed it daily. All these things had not been done continuously, but between others, such as a determined search for sewing materials of any kind. In her three days' search she had come on so many things she did not need at the moment, but which

she knew might be of irreplaceable value. These she must also try to secure from beast and bird and weather.

. . . And then the gardens. Already the weeds were rejoicing that the hoe had ceased to trouble them. They were beyond any possible effort from her; but on an impulse, one day, she had decided that she would, at least, save the patch of potatoes that Mr. Wilkes had been earthing-up on his last Saturday, and had spent the best part of the day in searching for a suitable tool before she could complete her labor.

One afternoon, while she was engaged in retrieving the contents of one of her most desirable discoveries—a stout leather trunk containing a wealth of silk and linen garments—two men approached the church. They did not walk openly down the road, as honest men should surely do, but came furtively through the ruined woods, among fallen trunks, and half-uprooted trees that yet showed a valor of green leaves upon their skyward branches.

They walked straight to the church, as men that had an assured objective. The one who entered first was slim and rather short, young, and dressed with a surprising neatness, as though unaware of any change in the conditions of life around him. He carried a light sporting rifle under his arm. He glanced round the empty church, and whistled to attract the notice of any possible occupant.

“Probably dead, or gone,” he remarked to his rearward companion, a fresh-colored youth, who was rarely talkative. “But we’d better look thoroughly, now we’re here. Tom was sure he saw them; and there’s been a fire outside not many days since.”

Bill Horton said, “Ah,” and followed him up the church.

Muriel had grown careless about locking the vestry door during the day. Jack Tolley lifted the latch, and the two men gazed at a sight which left no doubt that they had found what they sought.

“Here’s your chance, Bill, if you can’t get Bella. There’s one here that understands housekeeping. Ever see so much flour in a church before? And here’s half a hundredweight of Brazil nuts. It’s like a harvest service.”

Bill Horton said “Ah” again.

Jack Tolley closed the door, and retreated down the church. “We’ve got to find them,” he said, “It’s not likely they’re far. But they might scare if they saw us.”

They lay for half an hour in the orchard grass, watching the churchyard path, and were then roused to alertness by a sound of furious barking in the road below.

“That’s dogs,” said Bill, with more animation of voice than he had shown previously. He jumped the low hedge, and ran down the field, followed by Jack Tolley at a more moderate pace. Jack did not approach anything, even a dog-fight, without circumspection—especially in such days as these.

[IX]

Muriel came up the road in excellent spirits, even more heavily loaded than usual, and with such articles as no woman, even an ex-Zulu missionary, can regard with indifference, especially one whose wardrobe was in the condition from which Muriel's suffered.

She was walking as rapidly as she could for there were heavy clouds coming from the direction of Cowley Thorn, and she was anxious to get "home" before the storm should drench her plunder. Gumbo was trotting before her, equally impatient for his own reasons, thinking of the evening meal with the appetite of a young and healthy dog, whose life had become an almost ceaseless rat-hunt.

They were clear of the village, and in sight of the church, which they were approaching from the lower road, when a dog jumped up from the wayside ditch and stood in the center of the road, with a lifted tail, and an air of dubious hesitation.

The two dogs advanced slowly. Their noses touched. It is impossible to say how much was communicated between them. But whatever passed, it was a cause of instant antagonism. The dog that has taken to unmastered living will never tolerate those still content with a human servitude, and the ill feeling is returned with even greater intensity.

The two dogs backed from each other, growling deeply. The liver-colored mongrel had no thought of retreating from an enemy less than half his size, and Gumbo, aware that he stood between his mistress and the forces of anarchy, was equally resolute.

The rush of the bigger dog carried the terrier off his feet, and the two rolled together for some yards, a snarling dust-hidden heap, from which they broke apart, with their positions reversed, Gumbo now facing his mistress, and the bigger dog between them.

The big dog came again with a rush that Gumbo dodged with difficulty, and the next moment the two were struggling, with a flurry of snapping jaws, and a pandemonium of outcry, sinking to one rumbling growl as the big dog got the choking grip that he sought upon the throat of his enemy.

Muriel might be an exponent of the gospel of peace, but she was not of the kind to stand aside from a conflict of this character. The stick she had picked up from the roadside was little help; it broke the first time she applied it; but it was unfortunate for the strange dog that, like Gumbo, he was still encumbered by his late owner's collar. It offered an inviting grip for Muriel's hands—which became a choking one as her fingers worked in beneath it.

Bill Horton, watching the fight from the side of the road with an expert's

appreciation, was roused to unusual articulation at the lady's temerity. "Don't do that, miss. You'll get bit for sure," he protested, as he advanced to her assistance, with no clear purpose in his mind. Bill had no brains worth mentioning, but he knew a dog-fight as something very good to watch, and very bad to join.

The choking pull of Muriel's hands in the mongrel's collar, and Gumbo's struggles beneath him, combined to free the latter animal from the grip that held him. The big dog, having his jaws free, became a greater menace to the woman. For the moment he ignored the terrier, who had regained his feet, but was in poor condition to renew the conflict. He struggled savagely to twist free, and use his teeth upon Muriel.

"Don't loose now, miss," implored the anxious Bill, moving up to help, but uncertain how to begin. He saw that her peril would be increased at once should she loose her grip on the collar. She saw it too, and held on desperately.

Bill, having arrived at the idea, by whatever laborious mental process, that an extra hand might be useful to choke the struggling animal, made a grab at the collar. The dog, seeing his purpose, dodged, and tried to bolt, dragging Muriel along several paces. She stumbled over some impediment in the road, and came to her knees, her grip failing as she did so.

The dog turned on her quickly, the wet jaws striking her throat as a rifle sounded, and he collapsed on the road. He rolled over, howling dismally, the sound sinking to a whimper, which was quickly silent. He twitched, and lay still.

Muriel got up breathlessly from the dust. The two men were on their knees in the road, collecting an assortment of feminine garments which had scattered from the parcel which she had dropped when she went to the rescue of Gumbo, and over which she had fallen as the dog dragged her along.

"I must thank you both," she said, as they rose, and faced one another. Bill Horton grinned sheepishly.

Jack said: "That's nothing. But I'm glad we came. It was a nasty brute for you to tackle."

He looked with some respect at the woman before him. He thought vaguely that he had seen her somewhere. It was the voice of a cultured woman, quiet and musical. The figure was small and slight. He hesitated as to her age. She was not young, but she had very clear gray eyes, and a girl's complexion, her natural paleness being overcome by the exertions of the last five minutes. She might be forty.

He said: "We came to tell you that it's not safe here, and to ask you to go back with us. We thought there were two of you. Are you alone?"

Muriel liked his directness. She answered frankly: "There were two. There was a child that died. . . . Why isn't it safe here?"

"I can't tell you in a word. Can we sit somewhere?"

Muriel hesitated. She did not care to introduce such strangers to her secret stores. Then the habit of a lifetime conquered. "Yes; you'd better come with me to the church. That's where I've been living."

She turned her eyes to Gumbo, who sat licking his wounds, with as ecstatic a countenance as nature permits a smooth-haired terrier to exhibit. His tail thumped the ground in self-approbation as he saw that the attention of the party was directed upon him. He wasn't quite clear as to how the dog had died, but he was quite sure that he had done well.

Bill Horton looked him over critically. "He won't hurt," he said, meaning something quite different.

Gumbo supported the verdict by jumping up, briskly enough, as they commenced to move toward the church.

[X]

Muriel led her guests to the seats in the porch. She did not invite them farther. She said: "It's pleasanter here than inside on a warm evening like this. If you'll sit down, I'll get you something to eat."

They sat down obediently, not saying that they had already explored her resources. She took the parcel from Jack, who had been carrying it since it had been reassembled from the dirt, and retreated into the church.

"It's a queer meal," she said, as she returned with a supply of pancakes she had cooked the night before, and had meant to last her for the next three days. She was sparing of fires, which meant matches. She brought some of the Brazil nuts also, and a can of pineapple. "You're welcome to this, if you can open it," she added. "I didn't make a very good job of the last."

Jack produced a large and complicated knife from a hip-pocket, which included a can-opener among its numerous blades.

They commenced with appetite, but Jack looked with some anxiety at the declining sun, which still shone fitfully through the clouds of a summer storm, though rain had begun beating heavily on the stone path.

"We ought to start in half an hour," he said, opening the subject which he knew had to be faced, with as little delay as possible.

"Do you live far from here?" Muriel inquired, speaking as casually as she might have done a month ago.

"About four miles—perhaps more," Jack answered. "But we came through the fields. It's a bit risky by the road as things are just now."

"How are they 'just now'?" Muriel queried. "Hadh't you better tell me from the beginning? You see, I know nothing."

She recognized that Bill Horton was unlikely to contribute substantially to

the conversation, and addressed herself to Jack Tolley accordingly. She was a good judge of men, and she felt more confidence in his probable character, but she had not the slightest intention of going anywhere with them that night without a better reason than he was at all likely to offer. She was unaccustomed to be led by anything other than her own conceptions of duty or obligation.

Jack considered that she must know *something*. The events of the last month could hardly have escaped the notice of the least observant. He said: "It's hard to know where to begin. I'd better introduce myself first. My name's Tolley—Jack Tolley I'm always called. I was a clerk at the collieries."

"Yes, I remember you now. I thought I'd seen you before. I'm Muriel Temple. Don't you—"

Yes, he remembered now. She had come to the colliery office, perhaps two months ago, with an introduction from one of the directors, and a request that she might be shown over the mine. He had only walked across the yard with her, to introduce her to the foreman, but he did not easily forget faces.

"Well, Miss Temple," he went on, using a title which was already becoming obsolete in the chaos of the last few weeks, "it's this way. When the trouble came there were a lot of men down the mine. Some of them got out at once, and went off with the crowd. I suppose they're dead now. Some of them got caught down below. We got them out—at least, about eighty of them—by an old shaft which hadn't been used for years. It was an old working that ran—But I needn't go into that. . . .

"And there were people still going north when the land sank. . . . I didn't see that. I was helping to get the cage to work at the old shaft. . . . But they say that the land just broke off, and slipped away. They looked over the edges, and it was hundreds of feet below them, and they could see the people running about, and trying to get back, and it seemed hours before the water flowed over them. There must have been a great part of England that just settled down lower than it had been, and the water couldn't flow over all of it in a minute. But I didn't see that. I don't really know." He spoke with some irritation of mind. His mental operations were as precise and neat as his person. He had heard a dozen more or less hysterical accounts of the stupendous tragedy, no two alike.

"Well, there were hundreds on the main road who had kept in front of the floods that followed them from the south, and only got here when the land had broken, and they couldn't go farther. They crowded the road beyond Cowley Thorn, and spread out along the cliff-side. . . . And there were those on the railway—But I mustn't go into detail. There were a lot that died. Some of them fell ill, and some seemed to go mad. And there was quarreling from the first . . . and there was no law."

“There was God’s law.”

“Well, they didn’t worry much about that. They just saw that they could do anything if they were strong enough . . . and then they found ways to get food, if they didn’t trouble about tomorrow. We found a lot at Linkworth that wasn’t burnt. That’s why we haven’t come much this way. And some of them got arms.”—Muriel glanced at the rifle, which lay across his knee as he talked, and he answered the unspoken comment: “Yes, we found some sporting guns in a country house. I’m glad we did. It gave us a chance, or I mightn’t be here now. . . . But the quarrels got worse. You see, it’s mostly men that are left, and the women made trouble.”

(Yes. It was an old tale. Women do make trouble. Muriel had observed that rather frequently.)

“And then there was the drink. Butcher’s got enough up at Helford Grange to keep them all drunk for a month, and he doesn’t care who gets it, if they pay what he wants. That’s made the trouble worse.

“So . . . there’s been a fair row,” Jack concluded briefly. “And we’ve turned Jim Rattray out.” Muriel recollected the name, and then the man. She did not doubt that there had been good reason for his expulsion. “And a lot of men have gone with him. They’re somewhere down this way. . . . And Tom Aldworth said he’d seen two women here, and we’d better look you up.”

Muriel said: “You say Jim Rattray’s near here. Do you know where I could find him?”

Jack Tolley, who was not easy to startle, looked his surprise at the unexpected query, and an expression of vague bewilderment spread over the vacuity of Bill Horton’s countenance.

“You’d be sorry if you did. There’s some of the worst toughs you ever met in that lot. You wouldn’t be safe with them if there were a squad of police in the next street.”

Muriel looked unimpressed. Her experiences of the toughs of various races during the last twenty years, and of the best methods of dealing with them, had been rather numerous.

“It might do good, and it couldn’t do any harm,” she said thoughtfully. “But if you don’t know where he is——”

“I wouldn’t say, if I did.”

“I’m sure you’d tell me, if I really wanted to know,” Muriel smiled. “But I suppose there won’t be any more trouble, unless Rattray makes it, if you’ve turned him out.”

It occurred to her that she might carry out her intention without seeking the lawless one through the wilderness. She had an attractive vision of two hostile camps, and of herself as an envoy of peace between them.

Suddenly, she decided that she would accept the invitation which she had

received. It was what she would have been doing, in any case, in a few days. She had only put it off from day to day because there had always been something left over for the next morning's occupation.

"But I'm not coming tonight," she added. "I'll come tomorrow. And I shall want a cart. I know you've got one. . . . Oh yes, I've seen the wheel-marks . . . are your people in need of flour?"

"Yes, the flour'll be useful." Muriel looked at him, and he felt the error of the "the." He realized that she knew at once that they had explored her stores in her absence. His respect for Miss Temple's capacity was increasing rapidly.

"If we bring a cart, we shall have to bring enough men to guard it. We don't want them to collar everything you've collected here. But I wish you'd come with us tonight. It's not safe here alone."

"Oh, I shall be safe enough," she answered easily. "I've got Gumbo, and some good bolts."

Jack had the sense to see that it was waste of words to argue further. "Well," he said, "you'll see us again tomorrow."

He got up to go.

When they were out of sight of the church, he stopped.

"Bill," he said, "I think I'll stay here tonight. It's the safest way. Tell Madge I shall be back tomorrow. And ask Tom Aldworth to bring Steve's cart, and about a dozen men, with the rifles. Tell him to come early; there's a fair lot to load up."

Jack went back to the orchard. When it was dark, and he judged that Muriel would be sleeping, he returned to the church-porch, where he made himself as comfortable as circumstances permitted. He did not trouble to keep awake. He calculated that the dog would give sufficient notice of any approaching danger, as he had rightly calculated that he would not disturb his mistress to announce the movements of one who had been recognized as a friend a few hours earlier.

BOOK II

[1]

ON the second day of the deluge, when the floods still rose, but the first violence of the storm had fallen, and the people of southern England, knowing vaguely that the south of Europe was beneath the waters, and that the Thames Valley was filling, had fled blindly northward, it was natural that many of them had crowded to the railway stations, seeking a means of transit which might be preferable to the dangers of the congested roads.

But the storm had left the lines in such condition that they would have been regarded as impossible under more ordinary circumstances. Viaducts had given way, and bridges had fallen in. Signal-boxes were wrecked, and signals had been swept away. Telegraph poles and wires had fallen across the lines in many places. Gates and fences, and blown wreckage of every kind, had been scattered upon them.

Yet, in such emergency, some attempt had been made to overcome these difficulties. From one of the midland towns a crowded train had gone cautiously forward, its occupants swarming out from time to time to clear the lines of the more serious obstacles. It succeeded in its northward course for about fifteen miles, and then came round a bend in the line where it was confronted by a final obstacle; for here a bridge which carried a road over the line had collapsed completely. The driver, having come round the curve at a cautious pace, was able to apply his brakes in time to avoid an accident, the engine stopping within a few feet of the obstacle; but, unfortunately, they were followed by another train, which had taken advantage of their previous labors, and had been able to make a better speed in consequence.

Urged by the fear of the pursuing floods, it had run over a clear line at a steadily increasing speed, and with a correspondingly decreasing caution. It came round the bend at thirty miles an hour, and before its speed could be materially reduced it had crashed into the rear of the standing train which had preceded it.

The next morning there had been about seventy people, injured and uninjured, still camping upon the scene of the disaster. The rear coaches of the second train had been uncoupled in time to escape the flames which had consumed the wrecked trains, and these supplied shelter. During the day they were joined by a number of men who had escaped from the mine. Some of these gave what aid they could, which was little. The conditions were such that

most of the injured died. As the days passed, others of the less fit succumbed to the combined effects of unaccustomed hardship, and the shocks of personal loss and overwhelming catastrophe.

Some wandered away. Some continued to make their homes in the standing coaches. There were about fifty of these, men, women, and children, previously strangers, drawn from every class and circumstance of life. Some of the better men among the miners who had first come to aid the misery of the injured and helpless remained among them. Some wandering strangers joined them. In spite of the addition of about twenty of the miners, the proportion of women remained higher in this community than it was among the derelicts of the road, of whom those who survived the first few weeks of exposure and hardship were camping among the ruins of Cowley Thorn, in the mining village of Larkshill, or in isolated ruins, or erected huts, scattered over the countryside.

North of where the land had fallen, there had been the two parishes of Upper and Lower Helford. Of these, Lower Helford, a populous district devoted to the manufacture of locks and similar ironmongery, was under water. Part of the more agricultural parish of Upper Helford was still visible, but separated by a space of swampy ground which the tides swept over. But Helford Grange, an old country house occupied by a family which had owned the two parishes from Tudor times, lying two miles farther south, had suffered only from fire and storm, which had reduced it to a charred skeleton. Its cellars, which were extensive, remained undamaged, and in these a man named Butcher had established himself, of which there will be more to say in his own place.

As the survivors adapted themselves to their changed conditions, they found that there was little difficulty in sustaining life during the summer days. Many previously domesticated animals wandered over the country. Many wild creatures and birds could be snared or hunted. Fruit was abundant in the neglected gardens.

Being without ordered rule, security of property, or any settled leadership, they made little provision for the future, except in isolated instances, though they might talk of the necessity of so doing. Search for plunder was the principal occupation of the community, and even this was carried on without organization or forethought.

Some of the rougher elements, including a proportion of the miners, formed themselves into nomadic bands which wandered without any settled headquarters, destroying wantonly such findings as they did not value, or which would overload their transit facilities.

As the weeks passed, it was inevitable that some men should gain ascendancy over their fellows, either by character or mental energy, but it was

unfortunate that there was no one man who became recognized as a natural leader.

There was, perhaps, only one man—Jerry Cooper, at Cowley Thorn—who had a clear purpose of taking control of the new community. He was confident of his ability, and was entirely selfish and unscrupulous in his intentions and methods. He was not generally liked, but had already established some local domination.

Jim Rattray, a slum-bred child, was of a different kind. He was too lazy, and too rarely sober, to have any plans for the governing of his fellow men. But he was popular among a certain order, he was quarrelsome and reckless, he had intelligence, and a considerable vanity.

Among others of this fortuitous community who were destined to some prominence in the events of the coming months it is sufficient now to mention two only—an ex-furnaceman, named Bellamy, and Tom Aldworth.

Bellamy was a man of enormous strength, and of a corresponding brutality. He was of a black and scowling humor, dreaded by his companions, who had yet a greater fear of his geniality. For it was in the exercise of his ferocious strength that he found relief from his broodings. Having lived in civilized conditions under the shadow of the jail, and more than once in fear of the gallows, he had suddenly found a delightful freedom, beyond any possibility of his dreams, of which he had, so far, taken advantage—if we except some minor violations—on two occasions only.

Once was in the first week of panic, when he had been a scowling member of a little crowd at the cliff-side, which listened in a wondering terror to a man who preached the Judgment of God, and an approaching hell, in a frenzy of religious emotion, which might have borne its natural fruits, under conditions so favorable, had he not pushed his way to the front of the crowd, and addressed the self-appointed evangelist.

“Eh, mister, what’s this about sending us all to hell?”

The man was inclined to be frightened by the huge form and sinister reputation of his interrogator, till he noticed the good-humored grin that was obliterating his usual aspect of ferocity. “Except ye repent—” he began.

“It isn’t fire,” interrupted the furnaceman with a widening grin, “it isn’t fire we’re worried about just now. What’s the best thing to put hell out? We’ve got too much round these parts.”

The man, who was not unused to being heckled, and could usually retort to good purpose against a far more adroit opponent than Bellamy was likely to prove, began rather neatly to allude to the waters of baptism; but the furnaceman did not want to hear him. He lifted him easily with one hand on his coat-collar, and dropped his suddenly squealing and squirming victim over the cliff-side before any of the spectators could have intervened, even had they

had the courage to do so.

He turned to face them with a broad grin of satisfaction at the joke he had played.

“You won’t hear of a better hell-quencher than that,” he remarked genially, as he made his way through a crowd that opened very widely before him.

The other incident occurred about a fortnight later.

Among the flying population that had been stayed at the cliff-edge there was a young woman who had been a teacher at a girl’s Training College in London.

Her disposition had been quiet, gentle, and inoffensive, and she had been popular both among her fellows and with the girls she taught.

When the deluge came, she had owed her life to the efforts of a chance acquaintance of the London streets, a grocer’s assistant, who had persuaded her against the folly of crowding into one of the lifts of the underground railways, a few minutes before they had ceased to work, and within half an hour of the time when the whole system had been flooded, with the loss of not less than half a million lives.

They had taken the northward road together, getting a lift from a kindly motorist. To the boy, the flight had brought a romantic idyl, beside which a world’s collapse had been an unimportant incident.

For ten days they had lived in a green arbor, where great trees had fallen across a natural hollow, making a dim green twilight above the sandy soil of the bank-side. They had fed on the stores of a gipsy caravan, which had been wrecked and deserted.

At the end of that time, they had ventured out together, and almost at once they had encountered Bellamy, with two congenial companions, roaming in search of any plunder that might be worth the taking.

Bellamy had looked at the girl, and at the puny size of her escort. He had told her with a good-humored growl to leave that monkey, and come along. The girl had hesitated. Actually, she cared little for her companion. She had always liked big men. Bellamy, seeing her hesitation, laid a compelling grip on her shoulder, at which the boy struck an absurdly futile blow, and was only conscious afterwards of the huge hand that choked him. The giant threw him aside contemptuously, with a broken neck.

“Come on now,” he commanded, with the affability which succeeded his successful violences; and the woman followed him, rather stunned in mind, but not altogether unwillingly.

A week later she came, a flying, disheveled figure, to claim the shelter of the camp in the railway cutting, showing a hand of which three fingers were broken.

Half an hour later, Bellamy had followed, a leisurely good-humored giant,

come to recover and chastise his property.

He had been met by Tom Aldworth. Tom was a young man whose love of adventure had led him into trouble in the earlier days, when he had been tried (and acquitted) on a charge of murder. He was, quite consistently with that incident (this is not the place for its explanation), of a solid reliability of character, which, as it became recognized, was giving him an increasing influence among his associates—an influence the more quickly felt because he was already known to those who had escaped from the flooded mine, and who formed so considerable a part of the male population.

He was doggedly anxious for the welfare of the new community, though he had neither the wish, nor belief in his own capacity, to guide it wisely.

He met Bellamy on the bridge that spanned the dry bed of the Rugeley Canal, and which he must cross to enter the camp from the western side.

Tom had a rifle under his arm, and he did not offer to move from the center of the roadway, as the giant approached him.

“What do you want here?” he asked curtly.

The attitude and words were sufficiently hostile, but Bellamy showed no sign of observing it. “I wants a bitch o’ mine that’s run loose. A dark-eyed bitch, with a red skirt. I know she’s hiding near here. Reddy saw her crossin’ the flat.”

“There’s a woman here with a broken hand,” Tom answered frankly. “But you won’t get her. You won’t get anything here. You’re warned off. The boys have told me to warn you. You’ll be shot at sight if you come a step nearer than Larkshill Road after tonight.”

Bellamy stood facing the now lifted rifle, as though he restrained himself with difficulty from rushing upon it. His face flushed with blood, and the veins swelled out on his forehead. He tried to swear, and it seemed that his articulation was obstructed by his own rage. He turned away, muttering something about “choking him with his own guts.”

Tom watched him till he was out of sight, and went back to talk matters over with his companions. It was agreed that an armed watch should be kept in future both day and night, and that either Tom himself, or Jack Tolley, or a Welsh miner named Ellis Roberts, should always be one of the party.

[II]

The next day Tom walked over to Cowley Thorn to see Jerry Cooper, and to learn whether they could gain any support from him in the stand they were taking. He went up Bycroft Lane, which now led nowhere but to the steep shore cliffs, and crossed Hallowby Park, which was equally deserted. No one came there, for the mansion had been burned to the ground, the park was four

square miles of bracken and storm-strewn oaks, and there was no hope of plunder in that direction.

Those who wandered abroad went inland, or eastward to where the new coast was shallow, with little bays, and depressions that trapped the largesse of the tides.

But the lodge was standing, on the farther side of the park, and had its share of life, for the old woman who had kept it was still there, having been too lame for flight (and too incredulous also), and there were a woman and two children that the seas had thrown up a month ago in a foundered boat—a woman whom Tom and his companions had rescued, and carried there, as the nearest shelter, and who had lain too weak and ill to be anything but a burden to anyone. Considering the isolation of the position, and the fact that their existence was known only to himself, he had felt that they might be safer there than in any other shelter that he could offer, and, in any case, the woman had been too ill to move.

So far, he had brought them food, and watched over their safety as far as he was able; and if he hoped for any ultimate reward from a woman who was regaining health and had no other protector, the time had not come to claim it.

So, after delivering the food he had brought, and lingering to give vague warnings to keep the children off the road, and to lock up at night (he kept the key of the lodge-gates in his own pocket, and he had made the park-palings secure, at least against any wandering animal), he crossed the road, and took his way over the neglected fields to Cowley Thorn. He saw no use in alarming those who could do nothing further for their own protection.

He found Jerry Cooper busily occupied in repairing the fencing of a paddock in which he had secured three horses. He was in his shirt-sleeves, a heavily built man, of about fifty years, hard of eye and jaw, who laid down his tools, and received him with a superficial geniality which still seemed to require him to state his business, and be gone when he had done it.

Jerry Cooper, a builder's merchant by trade, had made himself the richest man and the most powerful in the city of his birth. He had no doubt that a few years would see him in the same position again.

He was of no mind to be guided by Tom Aldworth's suggestions. He would play second fiddle to no man. He listened to the tale to its conclusion without comment, and then asked bluntly. "What's it to do with me?"

Tom knew his defeat from the tone and manner of the question, and had no subtlety of mind to overcome the hostility which he recognized. He answered with directness. "It seems to me we shall have trouble till we join together to stop that sort of thing happening."

"Well, shoot Bellamy if you want to. You needn't ask me. I shan't shoot you. Probably one of his pals will. But that's your lookout."

"I thought we might have joined together to get some order—and security," said Tom weakly.

"Look here, Aldworth," Cooper answered, in the tone which his employees had learned to dread in the old days, a tone domineering and merciless, "if you come here to me to talk, *talk sense*. What's this girl of Bellamy's to me? She hasn't come here. If she had, I might have kept her, and put a bullet through the swine, instead of talking about it, and asking other men to help me to save my skin. You've got two women in Hallowby Lodge. How many more do you want? There's not one woman to five men in this cursed place—and about half of those women are with your lot already, and now you ask me to help you when another bolts to the same hole. If you'll share level, we'll talk. If you won't, we may act in a way you won't like."

"It seems to me," said Tom, "if we go on those lines, the men may soon get fewer."

Cooper gave him an interrogatory stare before he answered. "Perhaps, you're right. But it needn't be, if we talk reasonably."

"So I will," said Tom. "We don't make them come to us, and we shan't keep them if they want to go. That's reasonable enough."

"It's not reasonable enough for me. There's forty men in Cowley Thorn, and as many more between here and the coast, and more in Larkshill, and not twenty women that are worth sixpence among us. There's half a dozen here that keep to their own men, more or less, and two sluts, and Nance Weston. That's the lot in Cowley Thorn. . . . Now you'd better think it over, and make a fair bid, or you'll have someone besides Bellamy to deal with."

"It's not our fault, if there are more women in our camp than yours. They mostly came on the train. If others have come since, I suppose it's because they think it's the safest place. I've told you that we don't force them to stay. I'll go further than that. I'll tell them just what you say. They can come here, if they like. But we shan't turn them out, if they want to stay."

Cooper had made up his mind as the conversation proceeded. He had been considering the matter for some days. He was too good a business man to take any avoidable risk, but he knew that there are times when such a risk must be taken.

He thought he saw in this question of the women (about which, in itself, he did not care very greatly, one way or the other) a means of seizing the ascendancy at which he aimed. He knew that it was through the dissensions of others that the shrewd man triumphs.

A demand for a more equal distribution of the female population could hardly fail to win him a general support and popularity. He calculated rapidly the forces at his disposal. He added the followers of Rattray and Bellamy. Perhaps Butcher also? He was less sure of him, but he could probably be

bought.

He said: "Tell them to make their minds up quickly, or they'll get it done for them. I'll give them three days."

He rose from the fallen trunk on which he was sitting, and turned his back on Tom without ceremony.

Tom stood looking at him for a moment. He recognized an opponent of a different quality from the brutal Bellamy. The man was clean, at a time when cleanliness was an almost obsolete virtue. He was dressed suitably for his occupation, at a time when clothing was apt to be negligent or fantastic. Tom did not know the intended use of the horses, but he recognized that the man was working hard, and with purpose.

He walked back slowly, thinking rather somberly of the future of those whom the floods had spared.

Tom Aldworth's mind was of no exceptional ability, either to construct or to penetrate, but he had a good share of that faculty of judgment which is known as common sense. He took active steps to induce the better sort of the scattered population to come in to the protection of his camp, and to assist its defense. He sent Jack Tolley in search of the women whom he believed he had seen some weeks earlier in the Sterrington Church, and placed an order with Butcher for a quantity of barbed wire, which was very promptly delivered, against his undertaking to supply four horses of a specified quality within one month of that date.

The horses, which Tom had thus pledged himself to capture, were required toward a larger order which Cooper had already placed, from which it will be seen that Butcher conducted his business with a large impartiality, and from which it may be deduced that he did not think that Tom's party would be wiped out very easily, or the credit given must have shown less than his usual caution.

[III]

Bill Horton delivered Jack's message well enough, but was vague and self-contradictory in his estimates of the contents of Muriel's storehouse.

Tom Aldworth was annoyed. He wanted Jack's help for a dozen things. He doubted the wisdom of sending for the woman's belongings. Why hadn't he brought her back, and ended the incident?

But the flour was badly needed. He decided to send, and he recognized that if he were to do it at all, it could not be done too early.

He explained the matter to Ellis Roberts, a grizzled Welshman, who had once been a foreman in a Welsh slate quarry, and had lost an eye in the blasting operations incidental to that occupation.

Ellis was not quick, but he was sure. He saw more with his remaining eye than did most men who were better equipped in that particular.

He agreed, after some thought, that it was worth doing, and that a daylight start would be best.

They decided not to send Steve Fortune's cart. Steve would want to make his own terms, which were not always moderate. The float would hold more, and with less packing. That was important.

There was a pack-horse available, and Ellis decided to take that also. He collected half a dozen men—eight with himself and Bill—and arranged to start with the dawn. There would be Jack Tolley also on their return, and he not only had a rifle, he could shoot straight, which was not a universal accomplishment.

They never knew whether all these precautions were needed, or whether they were observed at all, but they returned late in the afternoon without incident, traveling slowly since Muriel had insisted on bringing the cow, and a four-mile walk for such an animal, due to calve in a week's time, is a matter of less haste than dignity.

The main camp, including most of the women, and the most important stores, were located in the shallow railway cutting in which the accident had occurred. Here five coaches (each consisting of from six to eight separate compartments) and a goods van were occupied as living-rooms, and storehouses.

Other goods were piled, and some huts were being erected, at the sides, and farther back along the line.

The sides of the cutting were of considerable height at the place of the fallen bridge, but declined from it until the line became level with the surrounding country about three hundred yards to the southward.

As Muriel's little party came along the outer bank of the canal-ditch toward the bridge which they must cross to gain the security of the camp, they could observe about three-quarters of the garrison, including most of the women, engaged in the laborious erection of an efficient fence against possible raids.

Tom saw them coming, and met them on the bridge, where he had previously encountered the discomfited Bellamy.

He lost no time in the formalities of introduction. He told Muriel briefly that Ted Wrench, who was standing near, would show her where she could sleep, and could put any personal belongings which she wished to retain. He observed the sacks of flour with some satisfaction. If there should be anything in the nature of a siege . . . He looked doubtfully at Datchett's cow, a tired and thirsty animal, hanging a disconsolate head. . . . He began to talk to Jack Tolley and Ellis Roberts about the impossibility of extending his defenses to the lines which they had agreed on the previous day.

"That little rat, Reddy Teller's been here with a note from Cooper this morning," he went on. "He seems to be the general messenger. Cooper wants us to meet him tomorrow afternoon in Larkshill Road, outside the Plasterer's Arms. He asks that there shall not be more than four a side. (I suppose 'four' means he's got Butcher to join him.) We're to undertake not to be armed, and that if we don't come to terms nothing's to happen on either side till the next morning. All the others can come, as we may have to consult them, but they're to stand back. That's how I understand it."

"I wouldn't trust Rattray's gang, or Bellamy's," said Jack.

"I wouldn't trust any of them. But I can't think of a better plan. I propose that we all go,—everyone in the camp that isn't too ill, even the children. They'll go armed, all except us, and stand back, and be there to know what's arranged. I've got a plan to propose, and we may get them to agree. . . . If they try to fight us there, well, it's got to come sometime. It'll be over all the sooner."

Jack said, "I don't like it. I don't think I'll come." He stood thoughtful and hesitant. "But I don't think they'll try any tricks. Cooper believes in talk. He wouldn't risk a mistake. The others might—But we could deal with them. We might tell half a dozen of the boys to have their rifles ready, and cover the four of them. They'd be done for before us, if they tried any mischief."

Tom Aldworth nodded, and then grinned as he said: "If Harry Swain's one of them, I hope he'll aim at me, I should feel safer than if he tried for the others."

Jack said, "What's the plan you've got?"

"It's this. You mayn't think it's much good, but we've got to look at the facts. It's true that there are half a dozen men left alive for every woman, and we were mostly strangers to one another a month ago. I suppose it would have made trouble anyway, but like we are, with no law, and a few rotters among us, it was sure to make more than a bit.

"Now we've got to look at this. We *have* got most of the women here, and it isn't only Rattray's lot, and the toughs with Bellamy, that don't like it. The boys at Cowley Thorn must feel just about the same. That's what Cooper's building on. I've sent to all the men who are scattered about Larkshill, and beyond, and asked them to help us. They know what's been happening, and there isn't one that's come. You know there's some decent ones among them. I don't say they'll help Cooper. I don't know. But there it is.

"Now I'm out of this. You all think I've got a woman at Hallowby Lodge, and, however that is, I'm not asking for two. I am going to say, why not let the women choose for themselves? Tell them they've got to chum up to someone, and give them a fair time, and if they don't it's their lookout. They can make their own choice, and we'll stand by them, and settle with anyone who

interferes. . . .”

“You don’t think Bellamy’ll agree to that?” said Jack skeptically.

“No, I don’t; nor Rattray. But it’s fair for all, and it gives us something to fight for. We might get it agreed, and, if not, we shall know where we are.”

There was a moment’s silence from the two men he addressed. As all the rest would do in turn, they paused to consider the personal results that would be likely to follow.

Tom knew what was in their minds. Here were two of the best characters in the camp; if even they couldn’t——

Ellis Roberts looked at his younger rival. “That goes with Madge?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yes,” said Jack Tolley, and the two men joined hands on the bargain.

Tom saw that his plan would, at least, be assured of some support, and a hearing.

“I suppose it’s us three,” he went on, “but who’s the fourth?”

That was a difficult question. The three of them were becoming informally recognized as a self-constituted committee of management. There were several others who might have claims, but the preference of anyone would mean jealousy from the others.

“Why not have Miss Temple?” said Roberts.

Tom stared. It seemed absurd to suggest a woman, and one who had only joined them half an hour ago.

But Jack nodded. “Yes, that’s a good idea,” he said definitely.

“Well, you know her better than I do,” Tom answered. “I suppose there ought to be a woman among us. It’s their racket as much as ours. What sort is she?”

“She’s been an African missionary,” said Jack. “She knows her own mind, and how to make other people’s up for them. She’ll probably start with prayer.”

Tom frowned. “We don’t want any more of that now. . . . I suppose you know what you’re doing.”

“I don’t agree there, Tom,” said Ellis. “It’s just what we do want. A lot more than we’ve got.”

He had been a silent but liberal supporter of a little dissenting chapel in the Corris Valley. It was possibly the ugliest edifice of its kind in Wales, (a preeminence for which the competition was extremely keen), and its front elevation was ornamented with a scroll text. “It is the Lord’s doing: it is marvelous in our eyes.” There was no intention of levity.

Ellis Roberts considered that if religion had been swept away by the flood, its disappearance had conferred no very evident benefit.

“Well,” said Tom, “have it your own way.” He reflected that she had got

round the two of them very successfully—or why on earth had they brought the cow?

[IV]

Muriel followed her belongings till they came to the rearmost of the coaches. The cutting, which was usually a scene of much coming and going, and disorderly activity, was now comparatively quiet, as the bulk of its population was working at the fortification of the canal bank.

Ted showed her a compartment which he told her she would share with another occupant, whose belongings had already been moved to one side, to make room for her own possessions. The lady was absent, and Muriel expressed a hope that she was prepared for, and would not mind, the intrusion.

“She don’t count,” said Ted easily. “She’s crazed. That’s why no one’s been in with her before.”

Muriel made no comment upon this information. She questioned Ted upon the organization of her new associates, and gained an impression of what may be described as an almost systematized confusion of communal and individual ownership, growing out of the collection of promiscuous stores which were often collectively acquired, and were otherwise in excess of any single requirement. It appeared that her own acquisitions would pass into communal storage.

She found Ted Wrench to be a somewhat lazy youth—a condition which was the immediate cause of his present occupation, Tom having observed his shirking of the harder work at the barrier. He became sulky at the amount of unloading and rearranging that was incidental to the elimination of Muriel’s retentions. He reminded her that the cow had still to be properly deposited. That meant half a mile’s walk. Muriel placated him with Brazil nuts, of which she forthwith decided to retain as many as possible in her own possession. She recognized that needed goods were the only money of this community. Was it then reasonable to part with so much that she had laboriously accumulated? Well, they were offering her their protection, and they had carted the goods. Certainly, she would not be one to raise difficulty over such an issue. But she made a bargain with Ted (for some more nuts) that he should help her to enclose the space below the compartment for her hen and chickens, when the cow should have been disposed of; and she got him to fetch some immediate water for that long-suffering quadruped.

Later, she accompanied Ted, to see where her cow was to be pastured, and, by doing this, she was able to understand why its coming had been received so coolly.

The land east of the railway fell away toward the new coast, and a stream,

which flowed under the line about a quarter of a mile farther south, turned northeast, so that it crossed the narrow land between the line and the sea at a somewhat acute angle. The cattle which had been captured for the common use were confined within the area bounded by this stream, the sea, and the railway, but unfortunately, though its area was considerable, it was not fertile land. It contained the pit-heads of two abandoned collieries, and the slag-strewn ground was covered with a coarse and patchy growth, which, even in June, was unappetizing to cattle that could observe more verdant pastures on the other side of the stream.

It was also unfortunate that the stream was badly-fenced, and was fordable in many places, so that it had become a continual occupation to watch these cattle, and to fetch back those that outwitted the irregular patrol.

The cattle were valued for the milk they gave, but they were already so numerous that they were grazing off the coarse grasses faster than the summer growth could adjust the balance, and several which had failed to maintain their milk-supply had been expelled during the previous week.

Under such circumstances, it was not surprising that an addition to the herd was regarded as a doubtful blessing, and the disfavor with which the cow of the departed Datchett surveyed the barren prospect around her made it quite evident that she was equally critical of the decision that had removed her from familiar fields.

[V]

The summer evening was still light when Muriel went to rest, with a tired dog that had followed her all the day lying across her feet, on a more luxurious couch than she had known since the night when the roof of Wilkes' cottage had collapsed upon her.

It was true that three of the windows had been broken, either in the collision, or by a subsequent violence, and that she did not feel free to close the door till her companion, whom she had not yet seen, should appear.

But the evening was warm, the cushions soft and thick, and Muriel was conscious of that degree of physical exhaustion which makes a luxury of rest. She was not sleepy, and the thought came to her, with some wonder, of how much less fatigue she had felt than would have followed a day of such exertions only a month ago.

Her mind wandered to speculate as to the real character of the woman with whom she was to live in such an intimacy. Her possessions, whatever they might be, must be contained in the two suitcases which had been pushed under the seat, and in the cardboard boxes on the rack. A little traveling clock, pinned to the cushion, was ticking regularly. There was nothing of the squalid

disorders of food and clothing and utensils, inside and out, which Muriel had observed of some of the neighboring compartments. There was no evidence of insanity here.

Then she came. A dark-haired woman, good-looking in a quiet way, with gentle, rather wistful eyes. Her clothing, which had once been good, was weather-soiled and stained, but it was tidy and clean. She looked well. She did not look very unhappy. She greeted Muriel with a quiet cordiality. Gumbo, looking up inquisitively, thumped an appreciative tail on the cushions.

"I hope you don't mind the broken windows. There seems to be no means of mending them now. . . . I must introduce myself. I am Mary Graham. . . . Muriel Temple? What a pretty name. I shall be so glad to have you with me. I ought to have been here to welcome you when you came, but I couldn't leave Janet. I never do leave her till she goes to sleep. I expect they told you that. They think I'm crazy about her. But I can't break a promise like that, can I?"

"They didn't tell me anything," Muriel answered. "But I should be glad to hear."

Mrs. Graham sat down as she answered: "There's nothing really to tell. I just sit with her till she goes to sleep. I always used to do that. . . . But I didn't think it would be so long."

And then the sympathy in Muriel's eyes reached some chord of suppressed sorrow, and her expression altered. She flung herself down upon the cushions in a passion of weeping. "Oh, God, if she would only speak. I didn't think it would be so long."

Muriel was too wise to question her further. She crossed the narrow space that divided them, and soothed her with words which have comforted a million sorrows, till she went to sleep against the shoulder of her new companion.

In the morning she waked cheerfully, and went out almost at once, saying that she "must be there before she wakes," and shortly afterwards Tom Aldworth appeared, having a natural curiosity to make the acquaintance of the colleague which his two companions had thrust upon him, and seeing the necessity of some previous understanding, if she were really to join the proposed conference.

Tom came to the point shortly enough, after outlining the position of which Muriel had gained some knowledge already.

"So we've agreed to meet them," he concluded, "to see whether we can save a worse row than we've had yet. They've asked four of us to go. There'll be Jack and Ellis, and they said you might make the fourth."

Muriel was pleased, and somewhat startled by the suggestion. "If there's no one else who understands better," she said doubtfully. "You see I don't know them. I don't even know the facts properly. . . . But if you really ask me, I won't refuse. I'll do what I can."

Tom felt that this new ally was something less than enthusiastic.

"I suppose you don't think we ought to give way, whatever they ask? You wouldn't tell us to hand over those women to Rattray and Bellamy?"

He felt that to be a test question. He didn't want any doctrine of non-resistance to be preached at the conference to such men as those.

Muriel answered him frankly. "No, I couldn't say that. Perhaps I ought to say that it's always wrong to fight, but there are some times when you can't really feel like that. I don't know that killing or being killed matters as much as we sometimes think." She thought of the millions of lives that had been surrendered so easily to the indifferent floods. "But I think there's something wrong in ourselves, if we can't stop a thing like this."

Tom thought that was likely enough. He was quite aware of his own deficiencies. Muriel, who never worried an exhausted subject, changed the topic by asking, "What's the trouble with Mrs. Graham?"

Tom told it awkwardly. Even amid the deadening horrors of the last few weeks, it was something of which he would not willingly speak, and he was shy of any verbal emotion.

She had been a passenger in one of the rear carriages of the first of the wrecked trains, with her daughter Janet, a child of eight or ten years. She had escaped uninjured, but the child had been crushed very badly in the lower part of her body. She had seemed unaware of her injury, but had kept repeating: "Oh, mother, I'm so frightened. You won't leave me till I'm asleep?" They were the words (he understood) that she had used on the previous night, while the storm had beaten upon their falling home, and her mother answered them with repeated promises, till she had died in her arms.

She had sat for three days on the bank-side, nursing the dead child, little noticed amidst the conditions that were then prevailing, and when at last it had been forcibly taken from her, and carried up to the field above the cutting, where a shallow trench had been dug, for such bodies as had escaped unburnt, she had followed it, and had sat ever since, from dawn to dusk, on that common grave.

"And you can see a thing like that, and still say there's a God," said Tom, with an unusual bitterness. He had his own losses, darkening the recesses of his mind, as most men had.

"It just proves it all the more."

"I don't see that," said Tom.

"Perhaps you don't try," said Muriel.

Tom, who was never eloquent, left her the last word.

He was, in fact, in some haste to be gone. He had a private expedition to make to Hallowby Lodge, which he realized that he might not be able to visit regularly during the next few days, and there were many things on his mind

which were needing attention, and were unlikely to get it if he should leave them.

[VI]

Jerry Cooper was destined to go to the conference with only two companions. He failed to secure Butcher's support, and was annoyed at the miscalculation.

He did not expect any assistance of military value from such a quarter, but Butcher was a gentleman (of a kind), and he was sensible that they would make a better show if he were present. He could not fail to realize that Rattray and Bellamy were not very savory colleagues.

He even went himself to Helford Grange to solicit Butcher's support, and interviewed him in the cellar from which he conducted his commercial enterprises.

When he met Butcher he went straight to the point.

"I want you to come in with us. You'd rather be on the winning side, wouldn't you?"

"I haven't heard of it, yet," Butcher answered sourly. "I don't quarrel with anyone," he added. "Quarrels don't help business. That's my motto."

Cooper didn't give up easily. "You'd find we could work together," he said. "It isn't really the women. I mean to boss this show. You'd never get on with that lot. They'll clear you out as soon as look at you when they feel strong enough. You need protection."

"I don't need yours," Butcher answered, unresponsively. "They wouldn't quarrel with me, anyway. Nobody will. They'd lose too much if they did."

"*Lose?*" said Cooper sarcastically. "You've got more stuff stored here than the lot of us put together."

Butcher grinned. "The best of it isn't here. It's well hidden. No, they won't quarrel with me."

He got up, and went down the dark passage, leaving Cooper in some uncertainty as to whether the interview was over. But he was not easily beaten. He sat on stubbornly, and in a few minutes he was rewarded by Butcher's return. He had a bundle of swords under his arm, a miscellaneous collection of small-sword, saber, rapier, and cutlass.

"Rattray wants these," he said, as he laid them on the table before him.

"Well, why not?"

"He can't pay." Butcher's tone spoke his contempt for an impecunious customer.

"Do you want me to?"

"I don't care either way. I'll take seven pounds of tea, if it's clean. No dirt

sweepings.”

“Seven pounds is a lot. You know everyone’s wanting tea.”

“It may seem a lot, because we’ve found so little, so far. But it’s a risk. Farther on, the boys might find a warehouseful any morning. Anyway, that’s my risk. Seven pounds is the price, and a fortnight to find it. You know it’s to be got in small lots.”

Cooper saw that he could do no more. “You shall have the tea,” he said, as he got up, “if Rattray has the cutlery by the morning.” He counted the swords before he left. He didn’t trust Butcher, or any other man for that matter. But in that he was wrong. Butcher was quite straight in a bargain, when it was made. He valued his reputation though it was not one which everyone would consider enviable.

Cooper was still anxious to secure support. He learned, not for the first time, that the ways of wire-pullers are hard. He talked to many, and as he did so he adjusted his own position adroitly. If he gained little active support, he created a general impression that he was working for the common good, and a vague suggestion of territorial unity, of which he well knew the value. It was Cowley Thorn against the railway camp, with Larkshill as a doubtful central constituency to be won by those who were the more expert at electioneering.

He did not know what was going to happen, but he had some confidence that he would know how to turn events to his own advantage.

[VII]

It is rarely that the course of any event can be preimagined with accuracy, and this is especially true of one to which the attitudes and intentions of many minds must contribute.

Tom Aldworth had imagined a table in the center of the road, with a row of four delegates seated on either side, and behind each row a listening crowd of their followers, the lawless Bellamy and Rattray’s gangs restrained by the sight of the marshaled lines of his own adherents, and by the ready rifles which could be directed so quickly upon their leaders. The reality was somewhat different. . . .

As to Muriel, if she imagined anything, it was of the nature of a public meeting which they would address in turn, and at which she could feel some confidence that she could do her part successfully.

The day opened very brightly, and her mood responded. She felt a renewed purpose in her life. God had still work for her to do. She felt as confident as when she had set out, after an older colleague had failed, to persuade a contemptuous Zulu chief to allow his wives to attend the Mission school. Song came as she thought:

Green pastures are before me
Which yet I have not seen.
Blue skies will soon be o'er me
Where the dark clouds have been.
My joy may no man measure,
My path in life is free. . . .

She made a prayerful effort for the humility which she was conscious that she too often lacked. . . .

Even the disordered squalors of the camp gave her a subconscious satisfaction. It was all work for active hands and persuasive lips. . . .

So she was quietly happy and confident when she set out with her new companions,—a troubled Tom Aldworth, already aware that matters were not developing “according to plan”; an observant, but not forecasting Ellis Roberts, who took events as they came, and countered them with a slow and serious equanimity, as character and conscience led; and a Jack Tolley, loyal too, but somewhat aloof from the others, having a mind which was critical of all disordered and imperfect things, and who was most conscious of the reluctance with which he had surrendered his cherished rifle to Harry Swain’s incompetent hands.

Of the scene which had been depicted in Tom Aldworth’s imagination there was little that was objectively realized.

There was the ruin of the Plasterer’s Arms, a comparatively static feature, and there was the expected table—Jerry Cooper, an efficient stage-manager, had seen to that. It stood in the middle of the road, at the turning of Sowter’s Lane, and there were four chairs, of sorts, on one side, and three chairs (or rather two and an upturned tub), on the other. Cooper had no intention of having an empty chair on his side, to suggest the deflection of an expected supporter.

But the crowds were not there—and the meeting terminated in a way which might have been foreseen as quite probable, but which had not entered into Tom’s somewhat worried calculations.

In fact, the event was a forcible illustration of the lack of leadership or cohesion which weakened the powers of any of the protagonists, either for good or evil.

Under the impulse of Tom’s report of his conversation with Jerry Cooper, and of the three days’ threat which he had received, and with the evidence of the two injured women that had fled to them for protection, the inhabitants of the railway camp had been roused to something approaching unity of action. This had expended itself upon the erection of the barbed wire fence; but with the next day, and with the knowledge that their self-appointed leaders were

meeting to negotiate a possible peace that afternoon, the impulse weakened.

The general feeling was that here was a day of respite, to be used by each for his own ends, and if there were to be trouble tomorrow, it would be time enough to think about it when tomorrow came.

[VIII]

The table which had been provided by Jerry Cooper's administrative capacity was of exceptional size, and had been brought to the appointed place with some difficulty, and from a considerable distance.

He had already seated himself, with Rattray on his right-hand, and Bellamy on his left (a quick movement having been necessary to prevent Rattray securing the central position) when Tom and his three companions approached, with the little group of their supporters a short distance behind them.

The three men looked at Muriel with some curiosity, both because she was personally unknown, and was not of a kind to pass unnoticed in such a society, and because they had not expected to see a woman among the deputation. None of them had been accustomed to regard women with any respect under the conditions which the floods had covered, though their attitudes had been widely different.

Muriel had discarded the unsightly jacket of the deceased rector of Sterrington for the only alternative which she possessed,—a selection from the plundered trunk which she had discovered on the last day of her solitude. In the result, she was dressed in a manner which it would have been difficult to match among the remaining women either of Larkshill or Cowley Thorn, and Jerry Cooper wondered, behind an expressionless face, if she could be an average example of the society of the railway camp.

But these reflections, though they may take some time to set down, were of momentary duration. Jerry Cooper did not intend that anyone but himself should take the chair at that conference. He commenced at once.

"I suppose we all know why we're meeting here this afternoon. There's a few hundreds of us who aren't drowned, and there's only a few score of women among us. That's bad enough; but it's worse when most of those women are in one camp, and they hold on to any others that come their way. There's been bloodshed already over this, and there'll be more if we don't talk sense here.

"I've got no grievance myself. I'm only here to get the whole thing settled. I'm here to see a fair deal. But you can't wonder if Bellamy and Rattray feel a bit sore——"

Tom broke in with: "Let's have that out first. What's Bellamy's grievance?"

It was scarcely a wise interruption. Bellamy had a bad case. But it's discussion was hardly likely to improve the prospects of a peaceful understanding.

Cooper may have smiled inwardly as he answered: "It's just the usual thing. You've got his wife."

"His wife?" said Tom, "I thought——"

"You can call her what you like. It makes no difference. You know that. There haven't been many marriage-services in the past month. You've got his woman, and he wants her back."

Jack Tolley spoke for the first time. "We're not keeping her. She can go back if she wants to."

He looked straight at Bellamy as he spoke. Something rumbled in the giant's throat, as though a reply were attempting exit, but he did not answer. He had little use for words.

Jerry Cooper took up the answer. "How do you know that? You wouldn't let him see her to find out. His woman bolts into your camp, and you say you don't keep her, not you! But when he comes to find out, you meet him with a rifle poked at his belly."

"Mr. Cooper,"—Muriel's voice, quiet and restrained, broke into the discussion—"do you know that he killed the man she was with, and that he has broken three of her fingers?"

Cooper was not easily disconcerted. He answered with an attempt at an equal logic.

"No, Miss—Miss Temple, we don't know anything. Your men won't let us. But I don't think there's much in that. I suppose the men fought for her, and the best man won. We can't help such things happening now. Who's to stop them? Anyway, I don't suppose she minded. She was with him a week. Then they quarreled, and he was a bit too rough. But you don't ask why they quarreled, or what she'd done to deserve it."

Muriel knew the weak point in the woman's case well enough, before Cooper mentioned it. She *had* stayed with him a week. She might have been too frightened to run before—or she might not. But no decent person would force her to return to his brutality. To look at him was sufficient to understand.

She answered frankly: "I don't know why she stayed with him at all. But if you see her yourself, and know that she has a free choice——?"

Cooper dismissed her civilly enough from the discussion. "No, miss, it wouldn't. That's not the real point at all." He turned to Tom with a sudden change of manner. "The point is, what the hell it is to do with you? She wasn't your woman. We don't meet you with rifles at Cowley Thorn."

"It wasn't you, it was Bellamy," Tom answered. "We'll have no truck with him."

"Then you shouldn't keep his wife."

"We're not keeping anyone."

"Then send her back."

"Not unless she wishes to go."

"You mean she's to be another one for your lot?"

"We mean her to please herself."

Rattray broke in impatiently. "We're wasting time at this talk. They're to please themselves, are they? What about pleasing us? Fifty-fifty's the word. Tell them that, Cooper. That's a fair deal. Fifty-fifty, and our pick! We don't want the antiques. Tell them it's either that, or we'll take the lot, and the camp, too."

Cooper turned on his impatient colleague, and his jaw set angrily. He wanted to manage the interview in his own way. He did not think that Tom Aldworth was capable of sustaining an argument against him successfully, and he was quite satisfied with the course of the preliminary exchanges. Rattray, on his side, objected to the secondary position to which he was relegated. Angry glances met, and words might have followed, but Cooper restrained himself, with an effort. He saw Jack Tolley's smile as he watched them. He addressed Tom Aldworth again, in the manner of one who was trying to bring reasonable counsels to contending follies.

"You see what the feeling is. We can't let things go on as they are. The boys won't stand it. That's a fair offer enough. But we're here to deal, if you'll talk sense, as I told you before. If you don't accept, I suppose you've got something else to offer."

"Yes, I have," Tom answered. He was not naturally eloquent, but he spoke now with some fluency, his mind for some days having been full of the project which he was putting before them. "We know things can't go on as they are. We all found ourselves here a few weeks ago, just as though we'd been wrecked. Most of the women didn't know the men, and the men didn't know each other, except those of us from the mine, and there weren't many women, and they're all sorts, as you know, and here we were with no homes, and no food, and all wanting help from each other, and no law but our own hands, and some just crazed with trouble, and some not caring what happened, and—so on," he concluded weakly, and then recommenced with a new fluency.

"I reckon we were bound to have some rows before we could settle down from that start, but we've had more than we need, and as we all get to know each other they get worse. I don't know why, but they do. . . . Now what I say is this,—let the women choose. Tell them straight that they can each have the man they want, if he agrees, and we'll stand by them, whether we get left out or not. Give them a time to choose, and if they don't choose in the time, well, that's their lookout. That's fair all round, and—"

“Is it?” Cooper interjected.

“Well, why not?”

Cooper leaned forward aggressively. The groups of spectators had increased, and had closed up as the argument warmed; and there was now an attentive audience with no clear division between the supporters of either side. His electioneering instinct caused him to address himself to the minds of this larger concourse, rather than to his immediate opponents.

“I’ll tell you why it’s not fair, and why you know it’s not fair. Do you think we forget that you’ve got most of the women in your own hands? ‘Choose’ you say, and you know they’ve chosen already. We’re to promise to back them up, and it’s nice fools we should look.

“You ask us to play to your stakes, when you’ve looked at your own hand, and ours is face down on the table; and we say no to that. We say we’ll have a fresh deal.”

Tom was not quick to answer. He knew that the accusation was unjust to himself, and inaccurate in its implications, but it had sufficient substance to raise a murmur of assent from Cooper’s supporters, and it was not easy to answer conclusively.

The fact was that, in the short period which had elapsed since the deluge came, the majority of the women in the railway camp had not formed alliances of any definite kind, though there were exceptions, and the camp had not been without its episodes of violence and jealousy, with more than one resulting fatality. The ultimate difficulty was before them there, as it was everywhere, but, on the whole, since the expulsion of Rattray’s gang, the camp contained larger elements of self-respect and stability than were present in other sections of this chance-mingled population. For all that, if the women were confronted with such a necessity of selection, it might be true, that they would incline toward the men they knew, and it was a fact that those of the railway camp would come off best under such circumstances.

As Tom paused, Muriel asked in her quiet, penetrating voice, “What do you propose, Mr. Cooper?”

The interposition was adroit enough, and disconcerting to Cooper, though he did not show it. His experience had taught him the tactical advantage of the indefinite program. Heckle your opponents for details. Let your own promises be as vague as they are alluring. That was the way to win the maximum of support at the polling-booth, with the minimum of resulting worries. But such vagueness must not be allied with hesitation. Assertion must be prompt and confident, however worded. He answered readily.

“We propose nothing unfair, Miss Temple. We simply ask for a square deal all round. We don’t think it fair that all the women should be cornered in your camp, and we don’t mean to stand it. When it came to threatening

Bellamy here with a rifle when he followed his own wife, it brought matters to a head, and we're all come together now to see whether it's to be peace or war."

"Would you tell me what you propose, Mr. Cooper?" Her voice was even pleasanter than before, and her eyes met his with a friendly frankness. It was as though she declined to regard him otherwise than as being as simple and sincere as herself in the endeavor to face the problem.

But before Cooper could reply, Rattray broke in again.

"I'm damned sick of this talk." He turned angrily to Cooper. "Why don't you tell them what you mean? If there's only one woman to every five men in this curs'd place, well, there's fifteen men in my lot, and *we want three women*—and if we don't get them quietly, we'll take six. We want a plain yes or no; and we want it now."

Bellamy growled out for the first time, "Ay, that's the talk."

Tom Aldworth looked hard at the silent Cooper. "Is that what you say too?"

As he said it, a large drop of rain splashed on his hand.

Cooper hesitated in his reply. It was further than he had meant to go, and he resented the way in which he had been rushed by Rattray's interposition. But he wanted neither to break openly with his associates, nor to resign the control of the situation at which he had aimed; and while he hesitated, the storm came.

It was a storm which those familiar with English weather might have foreseen as probable from the morning's brightness. It came in a sudden torrent of drenching rain, such as will disperse a riotous crowd which has stood the threat of machine-gun fire without flinching. There was little of near-by shelter to which to flee: little of ultimate comfort, or chance of change of rain-drenched garments, for most of those on whom the storm descended. In about two minutes the road was empty of all but a table, and five chairs, and an upturned tub.

[IX]

Monty Beeston was sober. That was not his fault. It was the misfortune of poverty. He sat on an upturned bucket, which, having a perforated bottom, had outlived its original utility, with a long-emptied beer-bottle beside him.

He had a quantity of second-hand safety-razor blades, from which he had cleaned a large part of the rust, and which he was sharpening upon a stone such as is commonly used for the whetting of scythes. It is not a method to be recommended, either for the razor blades or the fingers that hold them, but Monty, ignoring a still-bleeding cut, worked diligently. Had not Steve Fortune

promised him four half-pint bottles of ink in exchange for eight of these blades, and would not Butcher give him at least three bottles of beer for the ink-bottles?

He had already learned, somewhat painfully, that it was unwise to divert his eyes from his occupation, and Reddy Teller was within three yards before he perceived that it was not a resident member of the camp who was approaching.

“Goin’ to shave that beard?” Reddy asked, meaning no offense, but seizing on the most obvious subject for opening conversation.

Monty looked up angrily. He did not like jokes about his beard, from which he had suffered in the old days. Now, there was quite a considerable part of the male population who were cultivating (or neglecting) theirs. They might become things of beauty at a future date, but that was not yet. Reddy himself might have shaved during the past week, but it seemed unlikely.

Being annoyed, Monty Beeston became critical. He wondered what Reddy could be doing, and where he had come from. The speculation was not unreasonable. Monty had stationed himself in a position which enabled him to watch the cattle at intervals, while he labored for his next drink. The field (if it could be flattered by such a name), sloped down before him; the camp was out of sight a hundred yards behind. It was not a thoroughfare. It was not a place where Reddy could have expected to meet him—or anyone. Reddy was not, strictly, a member of Rattray’s gang, nor of Bellamy’s, which had never been in the camp. He was tolerated, though not liked. But he appeared to have come from the direction of the river, which was strange, and he had last appeared (and only yesterday) as a messenger of Jerry Cooper, which was ominous.

Monty, who had sat there all afternoon (except when the storm had driven him to shelter for half an hour), did not know what had been happening, but he thought that one spy might be one too many, and he said, with his usual mildness: “If I was you, I should clear. There’s dogs—an’ bullets.”

Reddy did not seem as surprised at this remark as an innocent man might have been expected to be, but he stood his ground. “Who says that?” he queried.

Monty did not answer directly. He only said, as mildly as before, “Well, I meant it friendly.”

As he said this, he shifted his position, bringing into view a revolver of old pattern, and very large caliber, which he carried in his hip-pocket. Everyone knew of Monty’s revolver. They also knew that he had a good supply of cartridges, but no one had seen him fire it. It was, in fact, quite a good revolver, and the cartridges were also of satisfactory quality, but, unfortunately, they were not of the right size. This was a fact which Monty was careful to leave unmentioned.

Reddy Teller took the hint. He did not go back the way he came, but he made his way through the camp, and over the canal bridge, without lingering. He made his way straight to Rattray's camp, having obtained the information which he had sought, for the hint had come too late.

A well-soaked Rattray, steaming in the sun as he walked, had returned to his camp by the river-bridge, and had levied some reluctant garments from his companions, while his own were dried more completely.

The storm may have been partly responsible for the fact that nearly twenty men were gathered about the tents and beneath the awnings when Reddy joined them. Apart from that, the prestige of Rattray's gang had advanced in the mouths of men since it had become known that Butcher had supplied the swords. Not that anyone supposed that Butcher cared what became of them, or would risk a finger to save the necks of the lot. Rather, the effect arose from the contrary knowledge. It was not his feeling, but his judgment, which was supposed to be indicated. It was as though it should be known of a business firm that their bankers would back them up. Had Cooper realized this result, it may be doubted whether they would have got the swords.

Certainly they would not have got them could he have foreseen their leader's thoughts as he slouched home, steaming in the early-evening sun.

The disasters of Rattray's life were results of faults of character rather than intellect. Even when drunk, you could not depend upon him to be entirely foolish. When sober, he could be of a very dangerous cunning, if there were sufficient incentive to overcome his natural indolence.

While the meeting was still assembled, he had seen the rôle that Cooper had aimed to play, and had determined to thwart him. When the storm had dispersed them, he had made off at once in his own direction, without a word either to Cooper or to Bellamy, and, as he walked, the vague impulse to be the first to move, and to move on his own, became a settled purpose, which he had resolved to put into action immediately.

He aimed, with the audacity which may deserve success in a good cause, and will often gain it in any, at nothing less than the capture of the camp, without the assistance of Cooper.

The plan was not as wild as it might have sounded at a first hearing, though it was true that he was proposing to assault those who had ignominiously expelled himself and his followers less than ten days ago.

But his followers were now more numerous, and better armed. The camp was threatened by other enemies, against whom it must guard itself at many points. Finally, he depended upon the surprise of a night attack, and that this should be attempted at once.

He intended, if possible, to enlist the help of Bellamy, whom he felt he could control or ignore when his use was over, and to face Cooper with an

accomplished fact, with the ascendancy which would naturally follow.

The mind of Reddy Teller had worked, along a different path, to the same conclusion.

He would not have had the faintest interest in Tom Aldworth's proposal for the adjustment of the future relations of the community, for the sufficient reason that he would have known that no favors would be likely to come in his direction. He was of the kind that are always ready to join in any civil commotion, because it is only in times of violence or disorder that they can hope to gain the prizes which are the common objects of the desires of men.

He slipped in among the group, tolerated here, as elsewhere, but with no friendly greetings, till he came to Jim Rattray, to whom he spoke in a low voice.

Jim replied without cordiality, but invited him to walk apart. "Been through the camp, have you?" he asked. "Well, I suppose you can. You're not one of us. You've got a good nerve, anyway. How'd they seem?"

"No-how," Reddy answered. "You'd have cleared it from end to end with them swords, and a few pitchforks. . . . But they was coming back as I left. It won't be quite as easy tonight. . . . But it isn't that I came to tell. It's the way I found, that they won't guess. You know the river's low, and there's fords we might try, but they might be watched, and it's unchancy work in the dark, splashing through them. If they had a few rifles handy, there's some as wouldn't come back. . . . Then there's too much moon tonight for crossin' that flat ground by the works, and there's the ditch, and the wire as far as it goes. . . . But there's the bridge where the river goes under the line, that isn't watched or thought for, and the river's low there too, *an' there's room to pass under the bridge*. We'd be up the outside of the cutting-bank in two minutes, and straight up the line. If they're sleeping, they'll have no chance: and if they're up, they'll be scattered about."

Rattray listened carefully. The plan seemed good. He looked at Reddy Teller with some curiosity. How could he have foreseen that this information would be so opportune, and coincident with his own plans of the last hour?

What he said was, "Could you find Bellamy?"

Teller answered at once: "I wouldn't tell him which way we're going. I wouldn't tell anyone. Let them find out when the time comes. It's talking spoils things like this. But he might have a go at the other end. It mayn't be much help. It's the right timing we couldn't do. It 'ud be hard anyway, and he hasn't the sense. If he started too soon, it would just spoil it for us. They'd be watching all round for sure. I'll tell him half an hour after the moon shows, and we'll move at the first rise. . . . Yes, I'll find him easy."

He went off at once, without any comment from Rattray upon the program he had suggested, or the reasons which he had advanced, but he left that

individual somewhat disturbed in mind as to the wisdom of the plan to which his subordinate was introducing him.

The method of attack from beneath the bridge appeared attractive enough, and it was desirable that it should be known to as few as possible in advance. A score of the greatest disasters of military history would have terminated differently had a similar caution controlled them. It might also be well for Bellamy to operate separately. But Rattray was too conscious of the numerical inferiority of the attacking forces not to wish that their movements should be simultaneous. The plan which Teller had announced was too much like committing suicide to save your life from an advancing peril. Because it was difficult to attack simultaneously, the timing was to be deliberately different.

Well, he could alter his own timing if he wished, so that the two should agree. Contented by this reflection, he strolled back to his companions, among whom the conversation had passed unnoticed, owing to a man named England's having joined the company, bringing a somewhat rusty double-barreled muzzle-loading gun, which his industry had discovered in a poacher's cottage, together with a quantity of powder and small-shot, which would have been more useful (or perhaps more dangerous) to him, had he known how to load it.

He was now receiving advice from others of equal ignorance to his own, the use of the ramrod being very imperfectly understood.

"Any caps?" said a man at the rear of the crowd, who had not spoken before. It was a point which the owner of the gun had not considered. He looked blank. But a search among a small sack of other things which he had removed from the cottage discovered a matchbox containing a dozen or two of these necessary articles.

This point being cleared, the man came forward and examined the gun more closely, not concealing his contempt for its condition. "Might have been a good un once," he conceded. "'Bout the turn of the flood . . . meaning Noah," he added, aware that he had asserted an ambiguous antiquity. "Take a sword?" he inquired casually.

Yes, with some demur, the owner would take a sword. Having only just come into the camp, he had not shared in the original distribution of those articles. The exchange was made with Rattray watching in the background, with some disposition to interfere, which was checked by a wiser discretion.

"Boys," he said, as he came forward, "we're not going to wait for Cooper. He wants to use us to take the camp, and then treat us how he likes. We're going through it tonight. Bellamy's going in at the other end, and we'll meet in the middle. You've only got to go straight ahead, and keep together, and not stop for the women till the job's over; and we'll have Aldworth's lot cleared out by tomorrow, as he cleared us last week. . . .

“We’ve got a little surprise for them about the way we’re calling; but that’ll keep. You’d better get a good meal now, and some sleep, and we’ll start fresh when the time—You’re not going to take that gun, Harding. It might give the alarm. . . . No, I don’t mind the pistols. They’re not likely to go off too soon.”

The long summer twilight had scarcely darkened, though it was past the midnight hour, and a low moon was showing through the southeastern clouds, when a cry disturbed the silence of the night, which sounded as though it came from the river, or perhaps from a greater distance.

Miss Temple’s dog must have heard it, for he barked sharply, but there was no further sound, and he soon quieted.

[X]

The storm which had brought the conference to its abrupt and abortive end had other consequences.

It was soon over, but it had been very heavy while it lasted. Such rain drains quickly off the surface of a heavy marl soil, and the river rose several inches. The difference lasted only for a few hours, but it was at its height when the attacking party came along the side of the river, to the point at which it crossed beneath the railway. They had made a considerable circuit so that they might approach along the hollow bed of the stream, which they did in single file, there being a narrow path along the river-side which was six or eight feet below the level of the surrounding country.

When Reddy had penetrated beneath the bridge, he had found a two-foot space of brick-paved, slightly sloping margin between the wall and the water, which he had passed without difficulty in the daylight. Now it was dark, and when he led the way, with his left hand on the wall, and his eyes upon the faint light of the farther end, he found it difficult to walk so that his right foot was clear of the water. Still, he went forward confidently, with the knowledge that he had done it once already, and Rattray followed him closely.

It was different with some of those who followed. The way was dark and strange; and they did not know but that a false step might plunge them at any moment into the deeper river. They had been warned not to talk, so that they were without guidance from those that had gone ahead, and some of them were encumbered by miscellaneous weapons.

Yet they traversed it safely until the hindmost had entered, and Reddy was within a few feet of the exit, moving cautiously forward, with eyes and ears alert to the possibility of any watchful antagonist, when the foot of the man

who was next behind Rattray slipped into deeper water. He recovered himself without difficulty, but in doing so he overbalanced the man behind him, who had been holding on to his coat, and this man fell into the water with a loud splash, and with a cry that startled Gumbo the terrier.

The man was pulled out easily enough, and the file made its way clear of the tunnel without further misadventure, but the fear that the sound might have been heard, and have startled some dozing sentinel to a passing watchfulness, caused Rattray to delay his advance until he had been reassured by a sufficient period of continuing silence.

Lying under the goods van Monty Beeston heard the advancing feet. He heard Gumbo's furious barking renewed, echoed, from farther distances, by the two other dogs that the camp contained.

He lay, looking out between the wheels of the van, the bill-hook ready to his hand. He saw Reddy Teller, and knew the purpose which had brought him to the camp a few hours ago. He saw the hated form of Jim Rattray. He was not quick enough to trouble either of these, nor the one that followed. The man who fell into the water should have come next, but, fortunately for himself, he had gone home. His substitute, stumbling over a bill-hook between the legs, supposed, not unnaturally, that he suffered from the sword of the man that followed, against the promiscuity of which he had already ejaculated some urgent protests.

Blows would have followed words, had he not been too badly hurt for such arguments. He sat on the ground and swore.

Rattray looked round to add his own curses to the disorder, and to urge the speed on which their success might depend.

"Stop that damned dog, somebody," he said savagely, as Gumbo, his head through a broken window, expressed his excitement to the limit that his lungs allowed.

A man ran forward with a long pitchfork in his hand. He made a thrust at the dog, which was dodged successfully. As he thrust again the dog was pulled back from the window, which was too high above him for the man to see what was happening inside, but he thrust the long fork in as far as he could, and reckoned he had finished the animal as he pulled it back. Certainly, one of the prongs had penetrated something. As he recovered his weapon there came an unmistakably human scream from the dark interior.

Rattray, who had now come up, jumped on to the box which stood beneath the door, and pulled it open.

The moonlight shone through the opening, and showed the form of Mary Graham lying on the floor, her head on Muriel's lap. Muriel had resumed the wearing of the rector's jacket, after the drenching of her lighter garments, and he thought that he had a man to deal with, till she lifted her head, and he

recognized the cool and level voice that he had heard on the previous afternoon.

“It’s no use coming in here. You can’t undo what you’ve done.”

A frightened Gumbo whimpered beneath the seat.

The first clear fact which emerged from the confusion of the next two hours was the success of Bellamy’s first attack. He had collected over thirty followers, about half being the regular members of his own gang, and the remainder constituting the most ruffianly elements of that fortuitous community. They had a variety of lethal weapons, though there were few firearms among them. He led them forward without suffering subterfuge or obliquity. He had a single purpose in mind—the recovery of the “red-skirted wench” who had rebelled and escaped him. The others might go their own ways, but he would not be lightly turned from that purpose.

He went straight ahead, for he was not searching blindly. If Reddy had told the truth, the woman was to be found in a hut north of the cutting which was being rebuilt, and had an open gap where a window had been. The light of a fire, which was on an open brick hearth glowed through the gap. Bellamy looked in through the window-space. The woman stood in the center of the hut, the firelight showing her clearly. There was a rumble of satisfaction in the giant’s chest as he eyed her. She looked sullen, but unafraid.

“The door’s round the corner,” she said, surprisingly; “you can’t come in that way.”

That was obvious. The aperture was scarcely larger than the huge head that was gazing through it. He went round the corner. The door was of the kind which is usual in cowsheds or stables. The upper half could be opened separately. It was open now. The lower half was closed.

As Bellamy appeared before it, putting a hand over to force the latch or bolt that still hindered him from his objective, there came the voice of another woman from the shadow of the wall.

“Quick, Gladys, you’ll be too late.”

So urged, the woman in the center of the floor stepped to the fire, and lifting from it a bucket which was about half full of boiling water, she flung a part of its contents at the figure that obscured the doorway.

It may be that the damaged and bandaged hand that steadied the bucket was unfit to control it: it may be that the woman’s heart failed as her moment of vengeance came. The boiling water which he should have received full in the face, splashed partly on the floor, and partly struck his arm and shoulder as he stood somewhat sideways to open the door. But it was enough. He broke into an appalling howl, as he turned and ran in a blind torment, not knowing

where he went.

"Don't shoot, Jack. He's got his," Tom said, as the two came together, Tom from the river-fords, which had been his watch, and Jack from the canal-bank, both having turned to what they supposed to be the point of the greatest danger. It was a foolish mercy, for Bellamy was not killed, nor fatally injured, whatever might be the agony of the scalded arm and neck, or from the boiling water which had run down inside his shirt.

After the repulse of the giant, the tide of the northern fighting turned, and through all its fluctuant confusions we have clear evidence of repulse emerging, which proved itself when the daylight came.

But the fighting with Rattray's gang is more difficult to follow, and had a different issue. The morning found the most part of them an undivided force that had retired upon a position adjoining one of the disused pit-shafts, where they were still far from defeated.

They had inflicted at least as much loss as they had suffered. They had one or two rifles and some ammunition. They had some pistols of various kinds, which had already taken a toll of their opponents' lives, and they had the swords which, however inexpertly used, had proved a source of sufficient danger, and of a larger fear.

Reddy Teller was not with them. He was on his way to Jerry Cooper, with a report of the result of the fighting, as he had judged it to have gone at the first light of dawn.

Monty was telling anyone who would listen the tale of his successful prowess. He had some cause, as well as some disposition, for boasting. On the side-track beside the railway line two men of Rattray's party lay. They were both dead, and they had both suffered from the upthrust of a well-handled bill-hook as they passed the van in the darkness.

They were not pleasant to look on. The bill-hook had been whetted on the stone which had been less successfully used for the benefit of the razor blades, and it had exposed its victims' interiors somewhat freely. It cannot be said that it had operated more crudely than a motor-bus might have done any morning a couple of months earlier in a London street, but the swift descent of these derelicts of the flood from civilization to barbarism is shown in the fact that there was no hurry in the removal of the slaughtered bodies. Even a child might gaze at them unrebuked, and two did.

Monty Beeston, a very bloodthirsty character when roused sufficiently, as mild-mannered men often are, had picked his victims from the ambush in which he had lain. They were men he knew. Men that he was quite sure were better dead.

The other fatalities had not been numerous. In night fighting of such a character between undisciplined forces it is likely that many blows will go

astray, and nearly all the bullets. Most men, though they may be willing to take the lives of their enemies, will be at least as anxious to preserve their own.

Still there were dead men, good and bad, and cuts and bruises enough; and less than half a mile away, in the very center of their limited territory, their enemies were still an undefeated peril—a peril which might have been most easily dealt with had it been attacked at once, before it had any interval for rest or counsel.

But exhaustion was general. As the morning passed, most of the men slept, and the day's tasks, and the duty of watchfulness, fell to women whose nights had been as wakeful, and, in some cases, as strenuous as their own.

It was after noon when a little group of men were gathered at the side of the cutting, arguing doubtfully as to the best means of dealing with Rattray and his companions.

Tom Aldworth would have let them go. He felt that he had had enough of fighting, having done his share, and something more, during the night.

Jack Tolley was less sure. He feared a junction between them and Cooper, with further resulting troubles. It would be best to make the defeat as decisive as possible.

Ellis Roberts thought that Jack was right, but doubted whether there were sufficient courage and energy left in the camp to attack successfully. A failure would be worse than inaction. They could not order. They must depend on volunteers. How many would there be likely to be?

It was Steve Fortune who turned the scale. He had stood, silent as usual, at the back of the group, listening to all that was said, a half-bred gipsy by his dark eyes and yellow skin, and by the colored scarf round his neck. He spoke with a soft drawl, but with the accent of a northern county. He voted for a prompt attack, and he volunteered to join it. They had better end the lot, and get a sure peace for those who remained alive.

So, after some more talk, the little group scattered to collect volunteers for the attack, and after two more hours of argument, and hesitation, and weapon-borrowing, they assembled a force of seventeen, which was reduced by three, before they started, by the tears and protests of women, and increased by one under a contrary feminine influence. . . .

The plan of attack was a cause of further discord, which almost led to the abandoning of the attempt. They knew that there was rifle-fire to be faced, but they had some reason to hope that no one among their opponents was expert in the use of such weapons.

Jack Tolley made the final suggestion. He said: "They won't get us if we don't bunch. Suppose we spread out all round, and just go in as quickly as we can. We won't even fire till we get close. It's speed that matters. If they show themselves to shoot, I think I can promise to get one."

And so, as the afternoon waned, the attack was made. The plan neither failed nor succeeded.

As they converged, Rattray's smaller force made an attempt to break through while their opponents were still fifteen or twenty yards apart from one another.

Jack Tolley was not directly in the path of the sallying force, but he was not far off on the left. Against the scatter of useless shots with which they advanced to break through the extended line, he fired twice with careful and deadly aim.

He could not get Rattray. There were others of the moving group who obscured him from Jack's position, but he killed a man of Rattray's gang who ran beside him, and wounded another with a shot that followed.

The man who was most directly in the path of the advance was Steve Fortune. He stood his ground, drawing a long cavalry saber, which he had taken from beside the dead body of one of the gang, and which he had been carrying sheathed under his arm as he ran forward.

Rattray was directly in his path. The long saber-blade swept round, and he parried it with the sword he carried, a good weapon enough, but somewhat shorter and lighter than that with which he was threatened. He would have dodged past if he could, but Steve did not understand his purpose. He knew nothing of sword-play, and thought that Rattray was attempting to pass so that he might stab him in back or side.

Steve was in a panic of fear, and grasping the hilt of his weapon in both hands he thrust straight at Rattray. The two swords met for a moment, blade slid on blade, and the two men came almost together. Rattray's sword had passed under Steve's left arm, and some inches of the saber showed brightly through the back of Rattray's coat.

It was the end of Jim Rattray.

Of the rest, four men escaped, and the others were killed, or wounded and captured, to stay or wander off to Bellamy's gang at a later date as their natures led them.

[XI]

Reddy Teller had made straight for Cowley Thorn, and found Jerry Cooper without difficulty. He was busy in the field in which Tom had seen him once before. But the field held six horses now.

Reddy began at once. "There's been fighting all night, at the railway camp. I expect you've heard something of it. I thought you might like to know more."

Jerry nodded to that. "I thought they would, and I hope they've got well licked," he said contemptuously.

Reddy noticed the tone, and was careful not to mention that he had instigated the movement. "Yes, they're licked right enough," he answered, in a tone to suit the mood of his auditor. "Bellamy went in at the top end, and he's hurt or killed, so I heard say. I didn't see it. Anyhow, his lot's done. Rattray went through the river-bridge, under the line, and got right up the cutting. But his men didn't keep together. They were fighting in little groups, and being driven here and there, half through the night.

"Then, when the light came, they saw they were beat. Rattray's at one of the old pit-heads. He's got about a dozen with him. They ought to hold out there well enough."

Jerry was silent. The news was good, if only he could use the position as he hoped. If they must attack by themselves, he would much prefer that they should be beaten. A triumphant Rattray would be a dangerous enemy, or an intolerable friend. But if they were badly beaten, his own position was insecure enough. He wished he had not been so ready to challenge Tom Aldworth. He wasn't ready. He had allowed himself to be rushed by circumstance. But he was not one to waste time in useless regrets. He looked at Reddy Teller with a disfavor which he did not show, and said: "Is Aldworth hurt, or that Tolley fellow? He's the worse of the two. Have they lost much on their side?"

"I saw Perry lying dead, and I think that red-haired fellow—Wainwright I think they call him—is about done for. Dodgy Perks did for him. And Steve Fortune's pal, Conroy. Rattray stuck him in the ribs. And there's two or three others of Aldworth's lot got knocked out, but I don't know who they were. And no end of them got hurt. But I think Aldworth's all right, and Jack Tolley."

Cooper grunted. The two gangs didn't seem to have done the railway campers much damage, if that were all. "Reddy," he said, "you'd better—What do you want for all this?"

Reddy's ratlike eyes glistened, as he answered without hesitation. "I want Doll Withlin."

"Um . . . I don't know her. . . . Well, we'll see." Cooper was not one to promise freely. Reddy, judging him shrewdly enough, was not dissatisfied. "Well, find out what's doing, and what's said, and let me know." Cooper turned away in the method of dismissal which was customary to him, and Reddy took the hint and went.

[XII]

Jerry Cooper had decided upon his course of action, even before he had dismissed the self-appointed spy with which fortune had provided him. His rôle must be that of one who interferes with authority, and in the name of

order, between contending turbulences.

During the next two days he enlisted the definite support of nearly thirty men, the best of whom may have been a young man named Rentoul, who was influenced about equally by love of adventure and of the horses that Cooper was collecting so diligently, and John Coe, an ex-farm-bailiff who had been too ill to take any active part in the events of the previous days, and was still able to walk only with difficulty, but who was attracted by Cooper's obvious efficiency. Coe would have promised support to any man who would be likely to end the slack disorder, and rescue the ruined fields, by which they were surrounded.

For the rest, they were actuated mainly by the natural discontent arising from the belief that he had inculcated among them that the men of the railway camp were monopolizing the female society and were endeavoring to force an agreement upon them which would perpetuate this condition. But those who followed his leadership would, if they were unable at the moment to assert their rights, at least retain their freedom to claim them when opportunity should become more favorable.

The men whom he thus enlisted were not all whom he could have persuaded to such a course. He had no use for wasters, or for such as would be likely to prove a source of future weakness, or discord. He wanted men of his own stamp. Hard, unscrupulous, but not dissolute. Men who would submit to discipline, if they recognized the efficiency that enforced it. He was a good judge of such men, and he probably collected all that remained alive who were worth having.

But, having done this, he saw that they were not sufficient to justify him in an immediate trial of strength. The risk was too great.

Having decided this, he had a long talk with Rentoul. The following morning Rentoul had disappeared, and Cooper's horses were no longer in the field which he had fenced to confine them.

A long interview with Butcher followed, and the next morning he walked over to the railway camp, and sought out Tom Aldworth. He went very early in the day, because he was naturally an early riser, and he chose an hour at which he felt sure of finding Tom at the camp. He neither wished to make a formal appointment nor to risk an abortive call.

Some men might have hesitated as to the reception they would meet, or even for their personal safety under such circumstances, but Cooper had no lack either of courage or self-assurance, and he felt no doubt of his ability to control any situation which might arise.

He walked easily in spite of his weight. He was still fleshy, but in better condition than he had been six weeks ago, and he had always been an active man. He looked keenly right and left as he made his way through the fresh

greenness of a country that had been washed by heavy rain in the night, and was now responding to the warmth of the early July sun. He cared nothing for natural beauty. He knew little of agriculture. But he saw everywhere disorder, waste, and confusion, which his soul loathed. If he did not understand agriculture, he understood building; and he looked with contempt at the slack incompetence of the efforts to repair or rebuild which he saw around him. Law. That was what was needed—law. Law to make the lazy dogs work twelve hours a day, till they got the place straight. Law, to make them do what they were told, and to tell them how and when to do it.

He had crossed the Larkshill Road, and passed the ruins of the iron-works, and crossed the canal bridge, before he saw a human creature stirring, and then it was only an untidy slut (as he called her in his mind) who sat at the door of a half-fallen cottage, idly strumming on a banjo, to which she sang at intervals.

For some reason best known to herself she changed the tune as Jerry Cooper approached her, and started a ribald music-hall ditty of the previous winter, on which a voice came from the interior of the cottage, “Chuck it, Doll; you know I hate that one.”

Cooper remembered the name, and looked at her more curiously. So that was the young woman who was to reward the industry of Reddy Teller! She looked a worthless baggage. Probably didn’t know how to boil an egg. What fools men were!

If he had hoped to find Tom Aldworth unready or unfit to receive him, he was disappointed. He met him talking to Ted Wrench at the top of the railway embankment. He was evidently giving some admonition to a youth who received it sulkily, but this ceased as Jerry approached, and he turned to receive him politely enough, though without cordiality.

Jerry did not want cordiality. He had come to ascertain if he had yet any chance of getting his own way, but he did not expect it, and without that, he wished to quarrel—up to a point. He commenced on a jeering note which he could make more offensive than the harsh and dominating one which was his usual manner.

“Well, Tom, you’re a great man now. You’re so sure you can smash us all that you don’t even need to keep a watch on who’s coming over the bridge.”

“There’s a sentry at the old works. He’d give us warning of anything dangerous. But he’d let you pass,” Tom answered easily. (Had Harry Swain really been awake or asleep, he wondered. Well, never mind now!)

Cooper scowled. “I told you,” he went on, “when you came to me for help, that we could work together if you’d talk sense, and you wouldn’t then. I wonder if you will now. If we’d understood one another, they’d never have ventured here at all. Of course, you knocked them out, but there’s some gone who might be alive now if you’d listened, and it’s just the same today. If we’d

pulled together, there isn't a dog'd bark without asking if it might, and we should get the damned place straight."

Tom said, "Well, I asked you to help us."

"You asked me to play your game."

"I asked you to help turn those brutes out, and now we've done it without."

"Yes, you did that well enough. And now they're gone, can we deal?"

"I've no quarrel," said Tom. "But you're not liked here. That's plain talk, and plain talk's best. We'd best go our own ways."

Jerry glanced round contemptuously. There was nothing particularly in sight where they stood, but Tom knew what he meant before he spoke. "It's the way of pigs," he said brutally. "You go your way, and I'll go mine, and we'll see who comes out top in the end."

Tom knew that there was some justice in the comment. There was little of order, method, or cleanliness in the camp during these desultory plundering days. He did not doubt that Jerry Cooper would handle matters differently if they should unite to support him. He knew that he himself lacked the force of personality that the position required, and he was unhappy because he could not settle his mind on a better man. But he did not like Jerry Cooper—nor trust him. No, they must go their own ways.

So he stood silent, and Jerry spoke again. "Well, you've had your chance. You can always remember that. I shan't stay in this muck. . . . I don't say I shan't come back."

He turned his back on Tom as he said it, and walked away. The interview hadn't gone quite as he had meant it. He hadn't mentioned the question of the women—nor other matters. But he had not done badly. He was retiring because he had failed to rule. He would be first in his own place, whatever it might be. But he had contrived to give his retirement an aspect as of one who moves his seat in a public vehicle to avoid a verminous neighbor.

Tom wondered vaguely what he meant to do. He had no feeling of victory.

The next day Jerry had gone. What he could he took; but he left most of his possessions, including, inevitably, the house he had been rebuilding. He could always face a small loss for a larger gain. He looked ahead.

BOOK III

[1]

COOPER disappeared into the deserted country to the south or west, and, for the next two months, very little was heard of him. He may have known more than was known of him, since Reddy Teller appeared in Larkshill on several occasions, till it was made clear to him that such visits were unwelcome!

He certainly maintained communications with Butcher at Helford Grange; and it was known to those who rose sufficiently early that Rentoul would sometimes ride through the district in the early morning hours which had once been sacred to cats, and milkmen, and market-gardeners. But his location remained unknown. The plundering expeditions, which still continued as the weather permitted, did not go far enough, or were not in the right direction to find him. But there had been fewer of these, because the weather broke a day or two after his departure, and there was heavy rain which drove men into the shelters which they had erected during the previous weeks, and taught them the importance of rain-proof building. Even on the sunniest days, the ground was wet, and unpleasant for camping. Fields of heavy unmown grass hold the wet, and are unpleasant to struggle through, unless feet and legs are well protected.

Tom had succeeded in capturing only one of the horses which he had rashly undertaken to deliver to Butcher, in exchange for barbed wire. The horses, of which there were now two or three herds feeding in the lower lands, were increasingly wild and wary, and neither Tom nor his friends had any previous experience in such enterprises. Butcher relieved the difficulty by offering to take six boxes of matches in lieu of the three horses which were still owing.

The offer was less generous than it appeared, as he had received a message from Cooper that he was now getting all the horses he wanted, and the order need not be executed; but the selection of matches in substitution, and the moderate quantity specified, was a shock to Tom, and to others to whom he told it.

They began to count their matches with care, and to give the unopened box less freely than they would have done yesterday. They remembered the lesson of a previous week when the price of tobacco, in all its forms, had been suddenly doubled, although everyone knew that Butcher's men had looted an unburnt store, and it had been said that there weren't enough men left alive to

smoke it in ten years' time. However that might be, other supplies had been getting short, and applications to Butcher had increased, and now tobacco could only be dearly bought, and only for certain exchanges, such as tea, which had been in short supply from the first days, and was now at a fantastic height of comparative values. . . .

The wet days gave more time for talk, and for attention to the interior amenities of the dwelling-places of the community. More time, also, for taking stock of what had been collected already, and hard work at times in providing additional protection for valued goods which had been allowed to stand out in the weather.

The tides, with a change of wind, threw up in a single day more of the buried wealth they covered than they had done in a month previously. Most of it was spoiled or worthless, at least for any immediate utility, but there was still much which was worth the toil of transit, and the uncertainty of what the day would bring was, to many, an alluring gamble that surpassed any possible satisfaction that could follow a more regular occupation.

And amid such spasmodic activities the summer days passed quickly.

One day, Martha Barnes, a woman who had been living with her children near the colliery village of Larkshill, closed her rebuilt cottage, having sent her family into hiding (for reasons which will appear) among the Larkshill ruins, and made her way to the railway camp, seeking an interview with Tom, who was away at Hallowby Lodge. Not being one to be turned from her purpose lightly, she looked round and observed Monty Beeston, seated on the bucket of which we know, and surveying the landscape with his usual diligence.

"Any bosses about?" she inquired, with a laconic directness which was her habitual economy.

Monty considered her without haste. She was a woman, and therefore of no importance. Probably a woman would know best how to deal with her. "There's Miss Temple," he suggested.

"I don't want no truck with shes. I've come serious."

Monty looked on her more indulgently. She was a woman of sense, though a woman still. But he had no better offer to make. "Miss Temple's different," he explained vaguely. "She's the only boss here today."

"Then where's her?" said Martha, with no further waste of words in opposition to the inevitable.

Martha found Muriel on the off-side of the train, seated on one of the boxes by which she mounted to her own compartment. She was sewing a torn garment, and four of the five young children which were all that the camp contained were seated opposite to her on the down-line rail. Muriel had tried

for three weeks to secure practical organization, and the reassertion of spiritual and moral values as she understood them, and this was the extent of her victory. Four children out of five, all of whom would have been useful to a surviving relative, or some self-selected guardian, as cleaners, carriers, water-fetchers, or in a hundred other casual ways, had been released that Muriel might give them such instruction as she might think appropriate to their present circumstances, and the probabilities which were before them; and in two instances this concession had only been bought by services to be rendered to the children's needs, of which the garment on which she was then working was an illustration.

Martha surveyed the scene with some reduction of her usual grimness. She looked at Muriel, who had resumed the rector's coat, as more suitable for her daily occupation than the warpath garments of the one-time owner of the trunk that she had plundered in Sterrington. Becoming aware that someone had paused on the other side of the line, she ceased the tale she was telling, and lifted her eyes from the work.

The two women looked at each other for a moment in a critical silence. Within a year, they were of the same age. The one was work-worn, bony, and meager: the other, though the capacious coat partly concealed it, still had the slim and graceful figure that she had kept from the youth that was so far behind her.

Widely as their experience of life had differed, they were alike in regarding their bodies as subservient to their own wills, and alike, too, in a hundred ways which it would have surprised them about equally to discover.

"Can I speak to you, miss, for ten minutes?" Mrs. Barnes inquired.

Muriel had a trained memory for faces. She remembered Martha as one who had exchanged words with Ellis Roberts on the subject of Datchett's cow—now the happy mother of a very promising calf—as they had approached the outskirts of Larkshill. She considered that the woman must have had some serious cause to come so far. She dismissed the children, and invited her visitor to enter the compartment in which she lived.

"It's this way, miss," Martha began at once, when she was seated. "I've got three children left livin'; there's two young ones; an' Davy, that's a grown lad; and there's a girl in the house that's not mine at all.

"When that mad rush came, there was a big motor ran off the road, an' somersaulted down the field that's side the hill, above my cottage. I thought they'd be all dead, and two was, but there was a girl with her head broke, and a leg, an' I did what I could, with two children livin', an' one dead, an' not a wall left standin'. . . . It was better when Davy came back from the mine on the next day—But it's waste talk of all that. We all went through it, an' here we are. But I did what I could for the girl, and put her leg straight, an' in a day or

so she comes round, and her head healed itself, an' her leg mended in a month, or under, though not proper. It's a bit short of the pair, an' it's like it will. But she's all right now, bar that, an' a bit more useful than she'd a ben in her ma's house. She knowed naught when she got up, an' she don't know much now, but she's one to learn.

"'Well,' I says to Davy, 'there's no girls left in these parts, an' when you're more grown, come Christmas, you'd better have her than naught.' I reckon I saved her life, an' she's mine to give, if I wants; an' she says yes to that, though a bit slowlike, as some girls are."

"What does Davy say?" Muriel asked, as Martha paused, on approaching the point of her narrative.

"Davy? He'll do as his mother says. He's a good lad enough."

"Then what's the trouble?"

"Trouble is I can't let her out of sight of the door, now her leg's healed, an' she's puttin' flesh on. There's Burke, an' Willets, always round. An' there's a young lout Perkins, as follows her like a dog. Like a dog that snarls, when he meets my Davy, as I've told not to fight. 'You just keep clear,' I tells him, 'you keep clear of they, an' I'll see as you has her.' "

"But if she likes one of these men better, Mrs. Barnes," Muriel answered, "I don't see what we can do to help you. We can't make her marry your Davy unless she likes."

"It's not that, miss. I'd manage that, an' not trouble anyone. Trouble is *I don't want my Davy killed.*"

"But, surely, Mrs. Barnes, there's no danger of that, if he doesn't quarrel, as you say?"

"It isn't danger, miss, it's a sure thing, if things go on as they are. There's no law now, an' we're all made the way that we want most what we can't get. . . . I've known Burke since he was born. That's nigh on thirty year, an' he wouldn't have given two shifts o' work for the best girl that ever stepped. He was all for cards, an' the dogs, an' a bit o' drink at the week-end, an' Susie Clements 'ud cry her eyes out cuz us laughed at her tryin's on, an' the way he wouldn't see what she showed him. . . . An' now it's said as there's no girls to be had, an' he's as bad as the rest, or a bit worse. . . . Trouble is there's all talk, an' no doin'. There's been Cooper's talk, an' Tom Aldworth's talk, an' more talk that's worse; but there's no law to be feared of, an' what I say is Tom 'ud better start doin' something, or stop talkin' as though he meant as he would."

Martha, who seldom spoke at such length, now stopped definitely. She felt that the case had been fully put, and waited for Muriel's comments upon it.

Muriel was rarely slow to encounter a difficulty, or to speak her mind, however it might differ from those to whom she spoke it, but she hesitated now.

The fact was that she did not like Tom's plan, and felt that the difficulty (as far as she admitted its existence) should be fought on a higher plane. But she had had several discussions with him which had had the effect—an unusual one from such arguments—of bringing each of them to a better understanding and sympathy with his opponent's opinion. That was natural enough, because they were both anxious that the right course should be taken, rather than that it should be one of their inception, and to discover a satisfactory solution to such a problem is about as easy as to divide a square mile by a cubic foot.

But Muriel knew that it was her discouragement, acting upon Tom's natural diffidence, which had delayed any attempt to grapple with the difficult question of the marriage-laws that should regulate the new community.

Muriel saw that Tom was being blamed for that for which she was largely responsible, and she answered accordingly.

"I'm afraid it's my fault, Mrs. Barnes, that nothing's been done since Cooper went. I think that marriage is one of God's laws that we can't alter. I didn't like Tom's plan, and I don't like it now. But I do see that there are things that we've got to face. I'll tell Tom what you say, and I'll promise that I'll let you know tomorrow what's going to be done about this. If Tom doesn't come over, I will. . . . I should like a talk with this man Burke, and the others."

"It isn't talk 'ull do much, miss," Martha answered doubtfully, "when there's three hungry men, and one platter o' food that's not for they. It's knowin' as it's hot to touch that'll do most. . . . An' there's times when a bad plan's good, if there's no better. . . . But I'll be gettin' back now. I left them hid in what's standin' of Reynolds' outhouse, an' Berry's sties over the wall. . . . Except Davy's gone to Butcher's for some lime we're needin'; an' we can't go on that like forever."

Saying this, she rose and went without formality. But the two women parted with a mutual confidence. Martha was shrewd enough to know that she had won a promise that would be kept, and Muriel recognized and appreciated the spirit of the woman who fought for her son's life, and would not make any offer of compromise with such a stake to consider.

[II]

Muriel, being alone, faced the problem again, as she had done a dozen times before. A man should not be forced to marry any woman, nor a woman a man. There should be no marriage without love, and love cannot be forced. She felt also that there should be no unions of any kind without that which she considered to be a Christian marriage. How, with these beliefs, could she give any support to the proposals which Tom advocated? He had proposed that if any woman definitely elected her protector, her choice should have the support

and protection of all to whom it should be communicated.

As to the formality of “marriage,” he was indifferent, one way or other. The old laws, the old social order, had passed away. What was the use of pretending otherwise? He supposed that other customs and, in time, other laws would replace them. . . . He would ask all men to support that, so that any who interfered should become a hunted outlaw. . . . But he would not go further.

If a woman would not marry at all, she must fare as best she could; he would not ask others to risk their lives in her defense. He did not say that this last condition was bad or good. He simply said it was no use to ask for something which you could not get. . . . Muriel, less used to be concerned for herself than for others, had realized very suddenly, with a pause of pulse and breath, that this question was one that concerned herself, also. Was *she* to be told to choose one from this somewhat unshaved community? It was absurd. . . .

There had been episodes in the past. There had been the youthful captain in the C.M.R. . . . He had been very hard to discourage. And only she knew how many tears it had cost her. But he had had no faith. . . . There had been so little in common. . . . She had never doubted that she had done wisely. . . . And there had been others before that. . . . But those things were long past now. . . . She was getting old, and her health—Was it really so soon to fail her? . . . She did not tire so easily as she had done, or so she thought. . . . No, she would never do that . . . and surely others would feel the same.

She became aware that she was doing what Tom had lamented to her that everyone did now—thinking only of themselves, with no thought for the common good. But, after all, what was best for each should be the common good also. And over all there was that which was right, as she saw it. The Divine Law, which should be followed unswervingly, wherever it might seem to lead. “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away.” That was the faith she held. Tangled with false traditions, with mistaken dogma, with the customs of the race that bred her, weakened by the infirmities of her body and the limitations of her mind, it still shone with the spirit of the Galilean carpenter; that dauntless, deathless faith, which, could it be shown that He were no more than human, would so proclaim, in triumphant paradox, that He were the more divine.

What could she do but trust God, and face the new, strange questions that arose, with such wisdom as His Word supplied? She remembered the text which she had taken as her motto when she had gone out to Africa, from the old Hebrew song of faith that had echoed down the millenniums. “I will fear no evil.” How often since had it given her fresh courage and renewed her faith, in the lonely dangers and difficulties that her life had known? She put the whole matter resolutely aside, and turned to the tasks of the day.

For though she had dismissed the children, her work was far from over. She had, as was the case with all, the daily necessities of her own existence, where no shops were open, and no tradesmen called, tasks which might be light or easy from day to day, and which varied greatly with the standards of decency or comfort to which they clung. She had also the care of the sick, and of two or three who had still unhealed wounds, and of the rather frequent accidents in the camp. She had long learned that it was by this means that she could best establish an influence that could be used in other ways; and was consequently more competent than any other that the camp contained.

There would be Will Carless coming to her at midday. No one asked why he came so frequently, and stayed with her for ten minutes or more inside the compartment. He had a knife-wound in the side. Not a deep wound, nor one that need have been serious. But he had concealed it from everyone, and would not now tell Muriel how it had occurred, nor from whom he had received it. He had only come to her when its inflamed condition warned him that it would not heal without treatment. Of course she knew that it was Steve Fortune's knife that had done it, as she knew that Doll had the ultimate responsibility.

Doll would flirt with her own shadow in the glass. Whatever her life might have been in the old factory days of hard work and unhealthy living, now, with abundant food, and idle life in the sea air and sunshine, she was like a dangerous cat. She had the power to madden men with her sleek ways, and her lazy laughter.

She had captured Will, a somewhat stunned bewildered youth from somewhere in the south of England, in the first week after the flood. She may have liked his simplicity, and his inexperience. Anyway, he had waited on her like a dog, and she had lazed, and lacked nothing. Muriel thought that she loved him, and was true to him, in her own way; but she would smile on any man for a gift, and do more than that to gain one that her whim might value.

Perhaps she might alter beneath the pressure of the elemental responsibilities, but it was her creed to take all, and to give nothing. "No kids for me," she had told Muriel, yawning as she spoke, and looking at her with mocking eyes. . . .

"Does Doll know?" Muriel asked, as she adjusted the bandage.

Will looked unwilling to answer. Any reference to Doll seemed to make him uncomfortable. "She knows I hurt myself, somehow." He was hurt that she had shown so little curiosity as to the nature or extent of his injury, but he would not say that, even to Muriel.

"I think you ought to have told her. You don't give her a chance."

Will looked bewildered, and Muriel turned the subject quickly. She knew that it is so much easier to say too much than too little.

Later in the day, she saw Tom. The day was fine, and dry enough for them

to sit on some of the rusting wreckage of the burnt train as they talked. Tom and Jack shared the foremost of the undamaged compartments. At least, it had not been entirely undamaged, but they had combined to repair it for occupation.

Tom said: "I daren't ask you to sit inside, even if it were raining. I never venture in when Jack isn't there. He always says something's been moved. There are more things in there than in any other three compartments, and they're all packed so that it looks almost empty. . . . Where is he now? Oh, off somewhere after Madge, I suppose. . . . But what's the trouble with Martha Barnes?"

Muriel told him briefly. She added: "We can't hear that trouble's coming without doing something to stop it. I'll go to see this man Burke in the morning, unless you'd rather."

"No, you'd do more than I could. I thought I'd found a way of stopping that kind of thing, but I suppose it wouldn't work, and most of them won't listen anyway. There's too many who want to go their own road."

"It isn't only that," she said. "You were disappointed because I thought you were wrong."

"Yes, that's true enough."

"Well, I want to tell you I'm not so sure as I was. I don't like your idea that the women have got to marry someone, whether they like or not, or be a kind of outlaw if they don't. I don't suppose you think it's a good way either. But it may be as much as you could possibly get supported, enough for it to mean anything. And even those women who refuse mightn't be any worse off than they are now. . . . I shouldn't consent for one. I don't know whether that will surprise you. But perhaps I'm too old to matter?"

She looked at him with the humor which she showed too seldom. It was of her nature that she took life too seriously. She could be kind, cheerful, joyous, sympathetic, but she seldom jested.

Tom did not know how to answer at once. Of course, she wasn't too old; but somehow it was true that he hadn't thought of her as being directly interested.

He said at last: "I know you'll do what you think right, law or no law; and if you marry anyone, he'll be a lucky man. But I don't think anyone here would worry you, or let the others outside."

"Then you'd break your own law, as soon as it was made," she said logically. But she was relieved at the assurance, with just a shadow of underlying bitterness (she understood that second's pause quite clearly) which she hardly recognized for what it was.

"I don't see," she went on, "why you shouldn't get the men together, and get the best agreement you can. I don't think you should ask the women. It

isn't quite fair to them. But if you do it at all, it needs doing quickly. If you reckon, you'll find that about half the women in this camp are either married already, or know who they'd choose without much guessing, and the more that's the case, the harder it may be to get the men who know they'll get left out to agree to anything like you propose."

Tom said: "It won't be easy. It ought to have been done sooner. I know that. And if we try to get the men together for anything, there's many that don't come, and don't care. It's everyone for himself now, and the mess gets worse every week. I think it's partly because we had so much too much law before that everyone's afraid now of beginning the same thing. We've got troubles enough, but no one calls for the rent; and if we can't do anything it's because we *can't*, it isn't because we're afraid we'd get a summons if we did. And no one starves with the shop full of food that they daren't touch. And no one's obliged to be at work at seven, or get sacked if he's late. . . . It's just the difference between being a wild animal, or a tame one. There may be more comforts for the one, but the other's *free*. And if it doesn't get such good food in the winter——"

"Yes," Muriel interjected. "No one seems to think of the winter."

"I know that; and I've said it's a worse mess every week. But there it is. They'll all listen, and agree, and then they go off their own ways. They don't mean to be locked up again because their rates aren't paid."

"Isn't Butcher trying to get the old ways back?" Muriel asked.

"Butcher?" said Tom, jumping hastily. "That reminds me. I ought to have got Monty and Ted Wrench to go for the fish."

"What's Butcher got to do with the fish?"

"Well, he just has. He pays Burman, and he lets each lot of us have what we need. It saves trouble, and he just started doing it, and it goes on. Of course, we pay him with other things. . . . But I mustn't stay now."

Muriel did not try to delay him. She wanted some fish herself. There had been none for the last ten days, and they had not thought it worth while to send that afternoon. Now it would be two hours before the messenger would be back, and late for the cleaning and cooking that must follow.

The fish all came from Burman, the farmer on the island which had been Upper Helford. He kept to himself, and made it clear that it would be unhealthy for anyone to trespass on his domain, but having cornered the boats, he had taken to bringing a supply of fish twice a week, when the sea was smooth enough for him to venture. These he exchanged with Butcher for such necessities as his island lacked.

The fish he brought were somewhat miscellaneous in kind and quality. There must have been strange feeding for them on the submerged lands. Lost wandering shoals must have fled starvation, or blundered upon some

gluttonous unfamiliar feeding-grounds. . . .

So Tom went off to persuade the more habitual loungers to exert themselves to bring the fish, which they would otherwise have little claim to share. And Muriel sat puzzling herself somewhat over the complicated blend of individual and communal trading and ownership which was developing around her. She recognized that the subject was beyond her grasp, but she realized the position to the extent of seeing that the basis of the confusion lay in the ownerless goods that could still be garnered from land and sea. When these sources failed, or were subjected to the assertion of individual claims, there must be some sharp adjustments, though their nature was beyond her guessing.

And when the winter came? . . . Perhaps, if there should be privations, there would be less quarreling, or would it be as bad, or worse, but from a different impulse? . . . She remembered that, in the savage lands she knew, men were most prone to quarrel over the women when crops and game were abundant.

Jack Tolley came up as she rose to go. If he had gone to see Madge, he was soon back. . . . She could judge nothing by his face, for he did not show his feelings lightly. She spoke a few moments on indifferent matters, and passed on. Could Madge really prefer Ellis Roberts, she wondered? Well, after all, why not?

[III]

Muriel went to seek Len Burke the next morning, as she had promised, and found her task much easier than she had expected. Len might be formidable to men, but he was like a big child when she talked to him.

He admitted that there were four of them (if he included Davy Barnes, whom he plainly held in contempt) who wanted Sybil Debenham, and that there had been rows about it, and might be worse. But it was all the fault of Martha Barnes, who wouldn't let the girl out of her sight. If they all had a fair chance. . . .

Muriel seized the opportunity to tell him of Tom's plan, and to her surprise, she found an immediate supporter. Len had always prided himself on being a good sport. He would not only support Tom, he would get the others to come. When was it to be?

Tom wanted to get a meeting on Wednesday evening. But that meant nothing to him. Wednesday? Which day was that?

It was the day after tomorrow, she said. Today was Monday. He had not known or cared.

There were many who still kept count of time. Butcher did, and watched

for the punctual settlement of the credits that he gave so judiciously. But there were many who had lost the count of days, and were glad to do so.

The meeting was held at the crossroads as before, beside the ruins of the Plasterer's Arms, but this time the roads were crowded from side to side. There were few men absent, and not many women, though they had not been asked to come.

Tom had not sufficiently calculated that all the men who had already contracted any female alliance would be there, and would support his proposal. They had nothing to lose, and might have much to gain by its adoption. And there were many others who were assured, often on slender grounds enough, that a woman's favor was theirs, or confident from a general vanity that they would not be left unmated under such conditions.

They passed a resolution with cheers, and without any open dissension, that they would support any woman in the choice she made, and would expel or execute any individual who interfered or quarreled to upset this freedom. Having done this, the allocation of the unattached, and of some previously doubtful women, became the conscious preoccupation of the whole community, to which those who were already mated contributed their advice, and made or thwarted opportunity.

The railway camp, having the largest female element, became increasingly populous, especially in the evening hours, and more than one inhabitant of Cowley Thorn or of Larkshill retired from it in triumph, leading his living booty before the eyes of scowling but silent rivals—exits which would have been more dignified, if not more romantic in character, had not the man usually been bowed down with the weight of goods which his acquisition (or perhaps selector would be the better word) was taking with her.

In other cases, the favored ones would join the wives who had chosen them at their own residences, so that the total population of the camp was not greatly altered, though its women lessened, and those of Cowley Thorn (where there had been scarcely any since Cooper had disappeared, taking with him five, such as were little loss) was increased considerably.

In this atmosphere, the unions of those who had remained unmated proceeded rapidly; not without some incongruities, for it would not be reasonable to suppose that selection could be made with the compatibility which had been instinctively required amid the freer choice of larger populations; not without some bitterness, and some open quarrels, of which one resulted in the expulsion of a man named Bryan, who wandered off to find Jerry Cooper, and increase his following: the first instance of the public enforcement of enacted law, and, as such, an event of some historic interest in the development of this fortuitous island colony.

Muriel did not go through this period without adding to her experiences. She was approached in different ways by several men of diverse ages and character, all of whom she repulsed with the same impersonal friendliness. Among these, the diffident homage of the man Burke, whom she had interviewed on behalf of Sybil Debenham, was the most incongruous. This sporting character, having abandoned his pursuit of the frightened Sybil, followed Muriel, like a scared dog, at a timid distance, till she shortened the physical separation to explain the wider gulfs which divided them. There were others also; but when she had made it clear that she had no purpose of marriage, she had little reason to doubt that she could walk secure and unmolested, somewhat as a nurse may do in slums which other women can traverse only at continual peril.

She had the confidence of many, and gave some hesitant advice, though it was usually of an abstract character, for she had outlived the folly of supposing that she had the gift of altering the lives of others to their own advantage.

Tom was among those who made her a confidante of their troubles. He lacked the art of graphic words, such as will make the dull-minded see vividly that which is in the thought of the speaker. But he could state the vital facts so that they became real to one who had sufficient sympathy and imagination to see them. Now he told fully what she had previously known only by hint or inference, or by the talk of those who themselves had little certain knowledge.

It began with the experience of those who had struggled up to daylight after more than twenty-four hours' imprisonment, with little hope of rescue, in a mine where walls caved in, and props gave way, and floods were rising—struggled up to the safety of the surface-world, to find that safety marvelously gone, and to a view of long-familiar scenes that had been wrecked around them.

To no others to whom storm came, and fire, and drowning floods, could the catastrophe have appeared so sudden, so inexplicable, so bewildering, as to these men who stepped out to an accomplished ruin.

A little band of them, of which Tom was one, had wandered round Hallowby Park, and found along its farther side that the whole country that they knew was beneath the waters, and while they gazed at the tossing sunlit sea, in which so many things were afloat which were not good to look at, and debated with inward fears whether the water might not be rising upon them, a little boat—an empty boat, as they first had thought it—drifting before the wind, had grounded on a shallow place a hundred yards from the land. And while they watched, a child's cry had sounded across the water, and Tom had swum out, and brought the boat to the land.

It held two living children, and a woman who had seemed dead, but they had carried her to the little lodge on the west side of the park, that being the

nearest building which the storm had spared.

She was now regaining her youthful vigor; she was a young and (Tom evidently thought) a very beautiful woman. Circumstance had isolated her from the rough and primitive conditions of the past months; and she had, as yet, no conception of what she would have to face if she and her children should be brought to the railway camp. The lodge lay out of the way of any likely wandering.

Those who knew of its occupant had little interest in a woman regarded as Tom's property, who had been seen apparently dead from exposure or other causes, and was reported to be still a bedridden invalid. Now Tom's problem was to decide whether the time had not come when the isolation must end, and she and her children be brought into the camp.

"Isn't there more room at the lodge?" asked Muriel. "Hadn't you better settle down there?"

"No, there's not much room at the lodge. There's only one room, and one bed, and there's Mrs. Webster and the two children sleeping in it, and old Mary Wittels,—to whom it all belongs, in a way,—sleeping on chairs to make room for her visitors. I had thought that if Jack had gone with Madge I could have offered them the whole compartment, but that isn't the whole difficulty. . . . You see, she only looks on me as a friend, or a servant—and I know who she is."

"Who is she? and why shouldn't you know?"

"There's no reason I shouldn't, but it makes it awkwarder than it would be. You see, she's Martin Webster's wife, Martin Webster, the barrister. I thought everyone knew him by name. He saved my life once, in a way. I'll tell you about it sometime, but not now.

"Well, she thinks he's alive, and now she's stronger she wants to set out to look for him. Of course, she can't. They lived about twenty miles to the south, about where the land ends. From what she tells me, I should think it's quite certain he's drowned."

"Is she young?"

"Yes," said Tom. "Quite. Not very. She's got two children." (Helen Webster was actually twenty-eight—five years older than Tom.) "I suppose I shall have to go to look for him, before I can propose anything else."

"What else do you propose?" Muriel asked.

Tom hesitated. It wasn't easy to explain. Of course, as things were, it had been taken for granted among those who knew that he had a first claim on the woman he had rescued, and for whom he had provided when she must have fared hardly—could, indeed, not have lived at all,—in the first days had she been left unaided. But Helen Webster, however grateful she might be, had no realization of the position. She was always friendly, was obviously glad to see

him on his almost daily visits, but her friendliness was that of an older woman, of a different education and social status. A distant friendliness, which may be a more effective barrier than dislike or discord.

And yet, while he had known this, he had set his mind on her as being naturally, almost inevitably his, sooner or later, under the new conditions of life. He did not think it likely that her husband was living. He did not see how she and her children could easily exist without his support and protection. He did not see that she could expect it to continue permanently on its existing basis. Her own self-respect would reject it, when she understood.

"Well," he said at last, "I know she's free to make her own choice, but I reckon I've got the first claim."

Muriel saw clearly enough that he spoke without assurance, and that their relations could not have advanced to any confident intimacy.

"Is she pretty?" she asked.

Tom was not eloquent. He felt vaguely that "pretty" was not the right word. "Beautiful" would have been better. But the right word failed him. Possibly he did not know it.

He answered awkwardly: "Yes—at least—It's more than that. She's *different*." He tried to think of another of the remaining women to whom he might compare her, and failed. "You see, she hasn't been through it, like we have."

"I see," said Muriel. It occurred to her, among other things, that Helen Webster might be quite capable of looking after herself. Anyway, she would defer the offer of going to see her which she had been about to make.

As Tom said no more, she added: "If you've got to look for Mr. Webster, hadn't you better get it done quickly? You can't leave her there forever, now she's got well; and I suppose you don't want her here till you both know where you are."

"Yes," said Tom. "He was square to me. I reckon I've got to go. But I shan't find him. It oughtn't to take long to look. Hatterley's been wandering round down south, and he says there's hardly anyone there at all. It's just going wild."

He thought of himself as setting off alone—or perhaps Jack would come with him, if this trouble with Madge were over one way or other. Jack was a good, though not always a very sanguine companion, and his quickness with the rifle gave a feeling of security to anyone who walked beside him. Also he knew the countryside, from the experience of many nights of unsuspected poaching in the old days.

So Tom planned, but when he went he went differently.

[IV]

James Hatterley had no cause to complain that he had been born into an uncongenial century.

He had preached the advantages of a life of bare feet, nut-butter, and parsnips (raw), and had been living in the summer woods with a wife to whom he had been too "advanced" to unite himself with the formality of a legal marriage, while he lamented the decadent civilization around him; a civilization which had regarded him with an even more confident contempt, being assured by its own majority, and had disposed of him to its own satisfaction by describing him as a crank—a word which it had appeared to mistake for an argument.

Now James Hatterley and his wife remained, and the civilization of which he complained had disappeared around him.

There is much to be said for James Hatterley, and I am sorry that the first historical fact which must be put on record concerning him after the storm rose is that he was badly frightened. His bare feet, and his habits of simple living, gave him an enormous advantage over his fellow survivors, and the increased difficulty which had arisen in obtaining regular supplies of nut-butter must be accounted a triviality in that comparison.

He should have emerged from his hollow oak on the second day, or the third at latest, and taken control of the survivors of an effete generation.

Instead of that, he lay close, and watched, and did not like what he saw, and lay closer than ever.

He had to fight once to save his wife from a stranger's familiarity, which he did sufficiently well; but he realized more vividly than ever that he was now in a world in which a summons for assault could not be issued. It may be that a prolonged diet of parsnips and nut-butter improves the health so much that the joy of living becomes too great to be lightly risked. Anyway, he lay closer than ever, keeping his wife beside him.

None the less, though he lay close, he looked out, and his eyes were good.

He saw Bellamy's gang going south, at as good a pace as the two-horsed cart that carried all their permanent baggage could be persuaded to move. He was under cover, on an elevation nearly a quarter of a mile away, but he could tell most of the men, including the huge form of Bellamy himself. He saw the two old hags who had been their only feminine associates since they had been marched with roped hands through Larkshill village. He saw another woman among them. One who did not go willingly. He could not tell who she might be.

His wife, lying beside him, had better eyes, or could use them to better

purpose.

"That's Marian Hulse," she said. "I wonder how they got *her*."

"Such things ought to be stopped," he said firmly. He rose as he spoke.

"You're going to interfere?" said his astonished wife.

"No, I can't do that. But I'm going to let them know."

He set off at once. He did not understand his own motive for this activity. Probably it was composite in character. Most motives are.

He came to the patched cottage on the southern limit of Larkshill, where Marion Hulse had been living with John Pettifer, a man of sufficient placidity to endure her tempers, but he found it empty. The door hung inwards by a single hinge. The window was broken in. Brick-ends lay on the floor, and there was blood on one of them. There was more blood on the hearth.

James Hatterley went on across the fields to the railway camp. Tom Aldworth was away, but he saw Jack Tolley and Ellis Roberts, who had kept their word, and held their friendship, since Madge had exhibited the caprice of women by choosing the one who was twice the age of the other, and of the more battered appearance.

He saw John Pettifer also, who had been left for dead on his own hearth, and who now sat on the bank-side, with a bloody bandage round his head, and a face of unnatural pallor, telling once again, to an ever-increasing group of listeners, the tale of the early morning hours.

It had been scarcely light when they had surrounded the cottage. (The days were shortening now, though the warm weather continued.) They had thrown brick-ends through the window when he would not open, and he had returned them by the same way.

Finally, Bellamy himself had forced the door. John had attempted to defend himself and his wife with a carving-knife, but Bellamy had seized his arm, and a broken wrist showed how the struggle for the knife had ended. Then Bellamy had thrown him down, so that his head struck the stone floor, and there he had lain unconscious, till the chance call of a neighbor had found him.

Tom came up as he talked. He said: "We've got to stop this. Who'll come with me to get her back?" The men looked at each other. There was indignation enough, but less resolution in their expressions. Where were they to go? Who knew where Bellamy's gang might be now? Would it not be too late to do anything? Who knew, even, whether Marian had been taken unwillingly? She was not popular. There was a feeling that anyone who had taken her might soon wish they hadn't.

James Hatterley, listening at the rear of the group spoke in his rather high-pitched voice, and everyone turned round to look. He was not generally known, and any stranger was an excitement in a community which was getting

to know everyone.

"They've gone off down the London road. They've got Marian Hulse, and they're making all the pace they can."

"Any horses?" said Jack.

"There's a rather big cart, and two horses to draw it."

"That won't help the pace. How many are there?"

"Over twenty."

"Teller there?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

"It's that damned rat's doing, more like than not," said Jack.

Ellis Roberts, to whom he spoke, nodded in reply.

Jack went on: "It's no use wasting time to get a party together. I'm fresh enough. I've done nothing all day." This was scarcely accurate. "If there's anyone who'll come with me, we'll find where they are before morning, and then if you fellows don't settle the lot, you'll deserve whatever happens afterwards."

Tom said, "Of course, I'll come, Jack."

"Better not, Tom. If I get a chance, I shall put a bullet through Bellamy; but if we're going to attack the whole gang, we'll want more help than we shall get here tonight. If you get the boys together, and you're the one who can, I'll be back before morning."

"I do, Jack?" said Ellis Roberts laconically.

"No, thanks, Ellis. I'd set a pace that wouldn't suit you after the first few miles. You come, Bill?"

Bill Horton said, "Ah."

Ten minutes after, the two men set out together. They passed Monty Beeston, sitting outside his lair. He was whetting his bill-hook with great diligence.

[V]

Jack's pursuit was speedy, and his search thorough and systematic. At midday he located the gang, which had camped in a wooded space, unloaded the cart, and turned the horses to graze.

Most of them were resting after the exertions of yesterday. Jack, profiting by the poaching experiences of earlier days, was able to get close enough to ascertain that Marian was not there.

He returned to Bill Horton, whom he had prudently left some distance away, in doubt as to the course to follow. She might have escaped, or been released, and there might be little gain from a further search. He could not challenge Bellamy for information while only Bill was with him.

It would be best, he decided, to return, and come in force to settle, once for all, the issue that had arisen. Whatever might have subsequently happened to the girl, the outrage remained, and others would surely follow should it pass without reprisal.

But as they returned, in a narrow lane, not half a mile from the place where the gang was camping, they came on the body of Marian Hulse. Her clothing was torn and disordered; her right arm lay awkwardly, being dislocated at the elbow; her face had an expression of savage anger that even death could not entirely obliterate.

"Bellamy's work," said Jack. Probably it was not the work of Bellamy only, but there was his signature in the broken arm. Had he not seen a woman's fingers and a man's wrist broken by the same hands?

Bill Horton said, "Ah," as usual, muttering something else which was not fully articulated. His fresh color showed an unusual pallor.

"The sooner the boys know this the better," Jack said but hesitated to leave the body unburied.

Yet what could he do? He had no tools suitable for digging. He could only decide that the sooner they were back the better. Perhaps it might be well for the others to see also. . . .

There were over fifteen miles of cumbered roads, and rough cross-country to be traversed, but they were back at the railway camp while the sun was still high in the sky.

He told the tale to Tom Aldworth, and the others who clustered round to listen. Indignation stirred as they heard it, and thought that no woman could be securely left, nor any small party wander far afield, as they were beginning to do again with a return of fairer weather, while such men were living around them.

"If we start early in the morning—" Jack began.

But, for once, Tom was the cooler, and the more reasonable. "There's no real hurry now, Jack. We'd better get all the men together, and do it thoroughly, and once for all. We've got to settle that lot, and we don't want any to escape to Cooper, or anywhere else. There'll be trouble enough with him too before we've finished. . . . If we get things arranged tomorrow, and start the next day, it's as much as we shall do now."

Jack saw that he was right. He had become restless, and impatient for action lately. It was not usual for Tom to give him wiser counsel than his own. He knew quite well that he could judge more accurately and see farther than Tom could often do. But he was content to let him lead, and give him a very loyal support. He himself would never be a leader of others—he knew that as clearly as he knew other things. He was too detached; he saw all sides at once. Never a leader, nor one to be led very easily. One to see, but not to succeed, he

thought rather bitterly. Even Madge—

[VI]

Tom's counsel was good in itself, but it had another reason which he had not mentioned. To exterminate Bellamy's gang would mean leading an expedition into the very district in which Mrs. Webster believed that her husband might still be living. Forty men can search more thoroughly than one or two, and it would be in the general interest to discover what that district might hold of human life or of material things. He determined that this should be done, and that he would go over to Hallowby Lodge the next morning and come to a clear understanding as to what his position would be should the search be unsuccessful, as he anticipated.

The next day was busy with preparations, and with canvassing of the scattered population to secure volunteers for the expedition.

Sympathy with its object was general, but personal excuses were many. State of health, or of boots, lack of weapons, sometimes a frank unwillingness to leave an only partly-trusted woman for so uncertain a period, were among the reasons put forward. Some who were unwilling or unable to go themselves, offered the loan of weapons, or to help to guard the camp while so many would be absent. It was a general objection that there must be enough remaining to protect the women.

No doubt it required some quality of courage, or willingness to take the chances of life, to volunteer for such a conflict, leaving a woman (and perhaps a child) to the mercy of circumstances under the conditions that were then prevailing.

Over forty promised to come on the following morning—and over twenty came. But Tom, looking at the assembled force, was well content. It included most of those on whom he had cause to rely.

They were twenty-three in all when they started, with three led horses to carry such stores as they required, for they would not impede their mobility with vehicles.

Of the men of the railway camp, Jack Tolley was there, of course, and Ellis Roberts. Monty also, and Bill Horton, and Harry Swain (with a borrowed rifle, which made his society a somewhat perilous enterprise); and, rather surprisingly, Ted Wrench was there; and—even more so, to most—Steve Fortune wasn't.

Tom was in good spirits, being one who was always roused by adventure and movement, and having a special cause in the fact that he had, at last brought himself to the point of having a straight talk with Helen Webster, and that a clear bargain had followed.

He was to search for the missing barrister in the southern country from which her boat had drifted. If he should fail to find him within a month, she was to resign herself to his ownership and protection.

That was the best he could make of the bargain, even in his own mind. She had not professed that she was willing to consent to such an alliance—had, indeed, told him plainly that she had no feeling for him beyond a compulsory gratitude—but she had given way at last, before the implacable logic of circumstance.

He had made it clear that she would have no safety for herself, nor provision for her children, apart from a continuance of the service and protection which he had given for some months already.

He had no expectation of finding Martin Webster alive. It was not a reasonable probability. But he would search fairly and well. He did not expect that it would take a month. The company had agreed among themselves that there should be no return till Bellamy's gang should be wiped out. That must be the first task to which he must direct his mind, and it appeared that it would take him into the country where Martin should be found, if he were still living. Beyond that, he must be guided by opportunity.

But he had little doubt that he would come back with a good right to claim the reward on which his heart was fixed.

[VII]

On the evening before the expedition set out, Tom had confided to Muriel the nature of his understanding with Helen Webster.

If Mrs. Webster were to remain in the isolation of Hallowby Lodge, it was necessary that there should be regular supplies delivered of many things. For this he had arranged with Will Carless, whose ready offer to join the expedition he had refused on the ground that he must ask this service from him, and also (in his own mind) because he thought that Will's absence would almost certainly lead to trouble with Doll Withlin, who was not a young woman to be safely left to her own devices. Next morning, he was additionally glad that he had not accepted Will's offer when he observed that Steve Fortune was not among those who assembled for the expedition. He did not wish to avenge one tragedy to find another awaiting his return. . . .

He could trust Will, also, to do what he undertook; and he was free from any jealous suspicion that his confidence would be abused in his absence. Indeed, the idea of any familiarity between Will Carless and Mrs. Webster was an incongruity to the imagination. The idea brought vividly to his mind how different she was from most of the women that the chances of flight and flood had left living around him, and from that realization he saw, with an

unwelcome clarity, how deep, in her eyes, might be the gulf which separated himself and her.

Muriel listened to the tale he told, trying to visualize the woman to whom his attentions were so plainly unwelcome. She had witnessed some strange matings during the last few weeks. Doubtless, such things were inevitable now. Some of them were turning out well enough. She hoped this one might also. She liked Tom Aldworth. But she wondered about this barrister's wife whom she had not met. Would she be content to remain isolated with her children at Hallowby Lodge, now that she had recovered her strength? She might be safer at the camp under such conditions. She put this idea to Tom, and ended by asking, "Should you like me to see her?"

Yes, Tom would be glad of that.

So next morning, when the expedition had started, she set out for Hallowby Park. She went alone and fearless, though most of the women were becoming reluctant to do so. There was not only the danger of human violence. Cattle and dogs roamed loosely over field and road, and with an increasing ferocity, though it was also true that they showed an increasing desire to avoid the neighborhood of mankind, and were of no active danger to those who did not seek them, unless they should come together by a mutual blundering.

But none of these dangers, either from man or beast, was very great in the district through which she walked. Hallowby Park lay in the northeastern corner of the island, with the railway camp, and the districts of Larkshill and Cowley Thorn curving around it, south to west, so that it was bounded on two sides by the not-distant sea, and on the others by the most populated part of the land. The animals within this area had mostly been captured or killed, or had deserted it for the emptier inland spaces.

Yet the way that Muriel went showed signs enough that the iron hand of civilization had been lifted from it.

Bycroft Lane was very old, and deep, and narrow. It had never led anywhere within memory or tradition except to Bycroft farm, and who knew but that some old-standing habitation of man might have been there, with a deep-worn lane approaching it through the oak-woods, when Cæsar came to Britain?

It had never been more than a narrow, deep-rutted hollow between high banks, with the park-palings at the bank top on the left hand going north; but now it was choked with weeds from bank to bank—weeds of such height that Muriel found the nettles sting her face as she slipped or stumbled in the cart-tracks, which she could not see. And the thick tangle was wet about its roots, although the weather had been fine during recent days, and her ankles and outworn shoes were quickly soaked. But she held on (half wishing that she had kept to her older garments, and the rector's coat), till she came to the place of

which Tom had told her, where some high ladder-steps supplied a way into the park. Climbing this, and seeing a better way ahead, where the rabbits kept short pasture between the bracken and finding that she had suffered little damage, beyond the clinging of many seeds that must be brushed or picked off with some patience, she was glad again that she was dressed with some appearance of respectability, for she felt as if she were calling upon someone who still belonged to the world that the floods had covered.

It was sunny between the oaks, some of which still stood up stubbornly, though their shattered forms, and great limbs flung loose and dying, showed how much they had suffered. She kept as straight as she could, choosing the broader paths, and came out to what had once been a wide expanse of lawn before the front of the Hall. But the Hall was now a charred ruin, with nothing more than some roofless stone walls partly standing, and on the lawns the grass had grown thick and long, and lay over as wind and rain had beaten it. There were tall weeds also growing on what had been a gravel drive, though these were not as dense or heavy as was the lawn, so that Muriel could trace her way without difficulty. She noticed also that the drive showed signs of a pathway vaguely trodden through its weedy growth, and that this turned off across the lawn as though to approach the ruins, and she wondered whether any human life could have found shelter in that desolation.

But she went on with no inclination to investigate this possibility, and soon saw the broad locked gates that closed the drive from the public road, and on her left as she approached, a small stone lodge, built against a sloping bank, which rose at that point above the height of the gates, and had enabled the lodge to endure the elemental fury which had cast down so many more imposing structures.

Muriel knocked at the closed door, and it was opened by a rather stout and elderly woman, who walked with an habitual lameness. She did not look as surprised to see Muriel as might reasonably have been expected, after some months of isolation, but answered with a respectful civility. No, Mrs. Webster was not in. She had gone out with the children.

“Could I find her?” said Muriel.

Mary Wittels looked at her visitor, and scarcely hesitated in her reply.

“Well, miss, she’s likely gone up to the Hall gardens. We gets no vegetables now, since the fire, and the gardeners’ leaving, unless they’re fetched. She’s most likely there, with the children. . . . No, she never goes out of the park, and there’s not many that pass, these days. Things be quiet to what they was. . . . We’re all getting on, as you might say.”

Muriel wondered whether the old woman attributed the recent changes to the advancing age of the planet or of its inhabitants, but she did not follow the subject.

She said she would try to find Mrs. Webster, and the door was closed politely, after giving her a glimpse of a small, but very comfortable interior, with a grandfather-clock ticking sedately against the wall.

The Hall grounds lay behind the house, and the kitchen-garden was on the western side, so that Muriel, following the dim track in the grass which she had previously noticed, came to it first, when she had passed the stables—burnt out, like the main structure—and made her way along deeply weeded paths, between a luxuriance of neglected vegetables and competing weeds, seeing no one, but guided, as she paused in some uncertainty at the lower end, by a sound of children's laughter in the orchard that lay beyond.

Climbing over what appeared to be the tree-crushed ruin of a rustic summerhouse, she descended into a tangled wilderness of green boughs, through which any progress must be indirect and difficult. The orchard was not large, but it had contained some old pear-trees of great size, which the storm had broken short, or uprooted, and these fallen giants had either crushed, or, in some cases, actually held upright, between their outstretched branches, the smaller standard trees.

She came on the children and their mother together, and if Helen Webster was surprised to see such a visitor, she did not show it.

She was seated on a fallen log, watching the two children—brown-limbed babies of four and two—who had been gorging themselves with raspberries (overripe, and falling at a touch of reaching fingers) and had now stopped to watch the spasmodic jumps of a frog in the undergrowth, stimulated by a cautious approach of Mary's deliberate juice-stained finger, while her elder sister, more excited than she, alternately rebuked her for teasing, and encouraged her to incite it to a fresh activity.

"I am Muriel Temple. Tom Aldworth may have mentioned me," said Muriel, as she reached the group.

"No," Helen answered. "I don't think so. But I always had a bad memory for names."

In fact, Tom had mentioned none, and had always been vague and reticent as to the affairs of the outer world.

"But," she went on, smiling, "no one's asked for a card. Visitors aren't so frequent that they're unwelcome. And I suppose we're both trespassing, really—if anyone trespasses anywhere now. There's room here."

She moved along the log as she spoke, making space for Muriel beside her. She looked at Muriel's dress, at her general appearance. Her boots, she admitted, were bad enough, but she did not look *quite* what she would have expected to emerge from Tom's lurid hintings. Had he misled her to get that hateful promise? And how and why had Muriel found her here? She felt sure that it was not an unexpected meeting.

Muriel took the unspoken point with her next words. “Tom told me about you being alone here. He cannot come himself now, because they’re gone after Bellamy’s gang—but I expect you’ve heard about that. Will Carless is to bring the milk, and other things, till Tom comes back. . . . But why don’t you have a cow here of your own? There are plenty about. You might just as well have had mine. It wasn’t welcomed very warmly where it is. Tom ought to have thought of it. . . . You’ll like Will Carless. But I said to Tom I’d come and see whether there were anything that you might need that Will wouldn’t think of.”

Muriel stopped with a feeling that she was explaining too much. It was as though she were being required to excuse her presence. It was too impalpable for resentment.

Helen did not answer directly, for her first purpose was to probe the conditions of life from which Muriel had emerged so suddenly.

She asked, “Is he married?”

“Married? Oh, you mean Will Carless. Ye-e-s.” The doubtful drawl of the word was involuntary, and she went on to explain it. “He’s living with Doll Withlin. The women aren’t changing their names now. At least Doll hasn’t.” She added: “Of course, things are so different.” She didn’t wish to give a bad impression of Doll. “People can’t marry just as they did. There’s no one to marry them.”

Helen said: “Yes, I’ve understood that. . . . It was good of you to come. I’ve got so much to ask you, I don’t know where to begin. . . . Joan, you mustn’t tease Mary. She won’t hurt it.”

The two children looked up as their mother spoke. They saw Muriel for the first time. Joan stood irresolute, but her younger sister advanced with a slow solemnity. She stood before Muriel, gazing at her in silence with wide-open eyes.

“Nu,” she said, indicating an overall of a somewhat startling blue that she was wearing.

“And mine,” came a quick word from Joan, and her sister ran to her side.

Mary still gazed at Muriel with an unwinking intentness. “Kiss,” she directed solemnly, and was in Muriel’s arms in a moment. The frog hopped away forgotten.

Joan looked jealously at the captured lap for a moment. She would never like to be left out, or to come second. “I’ll have muvver’s,” she announced. “Muvver’s best.”

Helen took up the child’s first word in a tone of apology. “They do look rather startling. But Tom brought the material, and I had nothing else. . . . I expect anything’s difficult to get now. It was very good of him to trouble.” She did not wish to show a critical ingratitude—but what better could you expect of Tom?

"I expect they'll fade in the sun," Muriel answered, with professional hopefulness. "But how beautifully you've made them."

"You don't really think so," Helen smiled. "I never tried before. But they had to have something. They ran about while I was ill in the clothes they had till they were both half naked."

"Then I think you've done wonderfully."

A child's overall is not a very difficult article to cut out or make, but no garment can be easy to unpracticed hands. Muriel thought that Helen need be, economically at least, dependent on no one. She had learned enough herself of the unpopularity of the needle in the railway camp, and of the demands which would be quickly made upon anyone who had skill and willingness to use it.

She looked down at the child that lay so quietly, with eyes that never left her face, and then at the restless Joan, already showing signs of a wish to leave the lap she had chosen.

"How like you she is," she said, alluding to the elder.

She would have said "How beautiful they are," but that she was not of those who will speak of a present child as though it were incapable of comprehension, or as though it learned to speak a language first, and to understand it afterwards.

"Do you think so?" said Helen. "I suppose Mary is more like her father. So people sa—used to say. . . ." She stopped as the words brought back a past of which she feared to think, and a future which she feared to face.

Her hesitation brought to Muriel the same realization of the gulf between past and present, though her reactions were different.

All the difficult adjustments, all the lawless violences of the past months, all the tests of body and character which had fallen upon the remnant of her race that the seas had spared, had passed Helen Webster by, in her illness and isolation, and now she looked and spoke as though she were still of the forgotten days, which were already receding into a mist of unreality.

Muriel had the faculty of judging the qualities of her associates which is acquired most often by those who live widely and variously, and have mental contacts with numerous and divergent types. She saw a woman who had beauty, and more than beauty—charm, distinction, and a self-possession that would not easily be shaken. She saw one in the dawn of youth, looking, indeed, after the months of convalescence, too virginal for motherhood.

But she saw more than that. She saw the character of one who was reticent of emotion, and reserved from action, to whom life had been something to be discussed, observed, criticized, rather than to be felt and lived. One who would give trust, and show sympathy, even friendship, freely enough, but would not give her own confidence lightly.

Her mind wandered into speculations as to what kind of man Helen's

husband had been—a successful barrister, doubtless much older than she. It was not a profession for which Muriel had any respect. Men who spoke to their briefs. Without honest conviction. It was unlikely that such a man would be of much use under present conditions. He would find his level, and it might not be a very high one.

But his wife was loyal—more than merely loyal, anxious that he should be sought when search seemed foolish. Helen being what she was, that said something for him. And the children. . . . Muriel knew enough of life to understand that such as these were do not derive from one parent only. They were beautiful children. What would the new conditions bring to them as they grew older? How much could be retained of the lost civilization, even by such as they? How much was worth retaining?

Clearly enough, she saw them as the one supreme importance to which all else should yield. If the children of this new community could be reared graciously in body and mind and character, what else mattered? Otherwise, what remained?

As she thought thus, she was already answering Helen's questions as to the conditions of life in the railway camp, and in the country beyond it. They were quietly searching questions, that, in all their variety, led to one line of inquiry: how far had Tom Aldworth been accurate in the description of existing conditions, and what hope was there that her husband might be found, and the nightmare ended? The fact was that the appearance of Muriel had made the position to which she was committed at once more real, and more obnoxious.

Having no love for Tom, and regarding him as of another social order, of a different range of sympathies from her own, she felt such a union to be a degradation. But if she had really been left alive in a world of savages, even this must be endured for the sake of the children that she could protect in no other way. But suppose it were not a world of savages at all? Suppose it were one in which there were many others such as herself? Then it would be twice intolerable that there should be such to behold her shame. . . . And Muriel, not by what she said, but by what she was, had made her doubt.

Muriel, remembering what Tom had told her already, easily understood the drift of the questions, and her answers showed it.

Helen, who had no intention of showing her feelings, or of confiding the position in which she stood to this acquaintance of an hour, realized what she was doing, and took the fence as it came. "I see you know that Tom has promised to look for my husband, Miss Temple? Do you think there is much chance that they may find him?"

Muriel understood that she was not supposed to know more than that, and that anything which implied, that Tom had confided further, or had suggested any intimacy of understanding between Helen and him would be unwelcome,

if not resented.

As it was, Helen looked at her in a speculation that she had only partly hidden. Was it possible that the woman whom Tom had sent, who knew so much, might be an alternative—perhaps a way of release? But Helen, not being given to let her inclinations deflect her judgment, put the thought aside. Muriel was not the sort to be attracted by Tom, and Tom seemed a boy to her; Muriel was ten—fifteen—possibly twenty years older, and she had no children to reduce her freedom.

Muriel was saying: “I don’t know, Mrs. Webster. I don’t know how you were parted. But I was alone a good while, and no one came my way. Everyone seems to think that most of the people who are left alive are at this end. They came on till the water stopped them. You can take that either way. It does mean that if he *did* stay in those parts he might not have been heard of here.”

Helen said: “It was when he had gone to get some things that we needed that the water came. It seemed to be everywhere all at once. I found a boat on a park-pool. There were no sculls, so we just drifted. I was hurt before that, and I suppose I got soaked during the night. That was how I was ill for so long. But I’ve learned since then that the water couldn’t have covered much farther than where we were. But I couldn’t do anything while I was so ill—and having the children, too.”

She had a secret feeling that Muriel might have done more, that Muriel would have found somewhere to leave the children, some way to search. It may have caused her to add: “I pray all night that he will be found. I feel sure somehow that he isn’t dead. I suppose you believe in prayer?”

Yes, Muriel believed in prayer, but she could not say that Martin Webster must be living because his wife prayed for that to be. How many prayers had the floods silenced forever?

She said gently: “I think there is a good chance that he is alive, and we will pray that they find him for you. . . . I suppose that I ought to be getting back. . . .” She looked at the sun, which she had learned for many years to use as the most natural reference, and which others were beginning to use in the same way. Watches might get damaged in rough work, or would break down, one by one, and there was none to mend them. The sun was an enduring alternative. Also, they saw more of it.

Helen became awake at once to the fact that it was afternoon, and to the duties of hospitality. “Won’t you come back with me?” she asked, with an evident sincerity. “It’s not more than ten minutes walk, and there will be a meal ready. Not that the children will need much after the fruit they’ve eaten. I was afraid to let them have so much when we first found our way here, but they run about all day, and it doesn’t seem to hurt them.”

Muriel said she must return, but would be glad to come again, if she might; and they walked back through the weed-choked garden together. When the flood came, at the end of May, it must have been fully planted, and in good order. Now, with four months' growth of unchecked weeds in fertile soil, the crops were not always easy to find, but they were there, and most of them had held their own, more or less successfully, against the unusual competition.

Vegetables were plentiful, for many more than the little family at the lodge, and some were already wasting in consequence. They discussed what could be saved by storage, and the labor it would require. Should Helen mention it to Will Carless? Muriel thought not, even to him. She did not wish to start wandering parties coming here from the camp, or elsewhere, especially while the best of the men were absent. But she would be glad to come again herself, and to bring any news there might be of the expedition.

So they planned, and parted; their prudence reasonable enough, but to be rendered futile by the events of the coming day, as so much careful human planning must always be.

[VIII]

On the day following Muriel's visit to Helen Webster, there was little activity in a camp from which the more virile members had departed, most of its remaining population finding sufficient occupation in the routines of their daily life, which were already establishing the obligations and interdependencies without which men cannot easily congregate, however primitive may be the form of life which contents them.

And the condition of these people was not one of a primitive simplicity. It was complicated by tradition, habits, and some continuing practices, of the highly organized civilization from which they came; while, at the same time, they had fallen, from ignorance and lack of any common directing purpose, to disorders and degradations which would have astonished the most primitive savages of any established tradition.

They ate, borrowed, quarreled, cleaned, gossiped, and gamed, as the morning passed, or occupied themselves in sorting or exchanging the miscellaneous uselessness of their accumulations, or in some fresh salvage or constructive work.

In the later morning, some of them were mildly curious when a sound of rifle-shots was heard from the direction of Larkshill or Cowley Thorn, but this feeling was excited rather by a wonder as to the firearms that could be in use, than by any fear of hostile attack.

Curiosity quickened when the sound came more loudly—a dozen shots or more that followed one another in an irregular volley, and that were nearer

than before. But these were succeeded by a long silence, giving time to discuss the nature of the noise they had heard.

Only Steve Fortune made his way over the canal bridge, and looked across the desolation that surrounded the derelict iron-works, to see the solitary figure of Will Carless approaching without any sign of panic, but at something more than an ordinary rate.

Steve decided Will had news it would be worth while to hear, and sat down on a heap of bricks to await his coming.

Will paused as he came up to him, and spoke with some evident excitement:

“Cooper’s in Larkshill.”

“Was it him shooting?” said Steve. “I shouldn’t a thought there’s one left in Larkshill now that ’ud fight a sparrow, unless it’s Pellow or Harris.”

“They’re not fighting,” said Will. “They were all firing at Davy Barnes. He’s got off on Todd’s bike down Sowter’s Lane, to fetch the boys back if he can. They say he got through safe, but I don’t think anyone really knows. They say Butcher’s lot rode off Cowley way. Anyway they hadn’t come through Larkshill beyond Bycroft Lane.”

“Rode?” asked Steve.

“Yes, so they say. They say he had about sixty men, all on horseback, and armed with rifles. Martha Barnes gave the alarm, and they were bolting for cover before he got to Larkshill. We’d better see the women do the same here.”

“Where?” drawled Steve, and Will Carless looked blank.

He hated the way that Steve always made him feel young, especially when Doll was about. But the question was not easily answered. There was plenty of cover beyond Larkshill, and about Cowley Thorn there were thick copses and shattered woods, but what cover was there in the cindered flats that lay on either side of the empty ditch of the canal, and the bare grazed fields between the line and the sea?

“Well, they’d better know,” said Steve, as Will made no answer; and the two men went back together.

It was fortunate for the inhabitants of the camp that Butcher did not appear with sixty men or with six, for there would have been no practical difference. Having nowhere to hide, its inhabitants made no attempt to do so. No one can blame them for that.

They swarmed together as the news spread, and made their way to the canal bridge, where they could see as far as the farther side of the Larkshill Road—which was on a slightly higher level—and would have warning of any hostile approach, though it is not clear that they would have found any advantage from that circumstance. There was some show of weapons among the men, and some show of courage in the presence of the women they should

protect; but the best both of men and of weapons were away somewhere in the south.

The only word of useful counsel came from Muriel Temple, who proposed that they should go forward to the Larkshill Road, and follow it to Bycroft Lane, and so turning off might gain the shelter of the high bracken in the park, where a hundred might lie close and take some finding.

But they hesitated uncertainly for an hour of waiting silence, and then began to scatter, one by one, to their previous occupations, Steve still stood among those who watched and listened. At last there came the sound of two shots, almost as one, and then of others in quick succession. They were nearer than the earlier ones had been, and more to the right.

"Bycroft Lane, or thereabouts, I reckon," said a man at Steve's elbow.

He nodded silently. "Someone ought to see what's happening," he said in his soft drawl, "I think I'll go and find out."

The group of those that remained watched him cross the barren land, and disappear to the right along the Larkshill Road. He was a hero once again in the open mouths of many women, and the thoughts of men. But he knew that he had only gone because he was in too great a fear of the danger that he could not see.

[IX]

Steve Fortune made his way as far as the turning of Bycroft Lane, without meeting anything larger or more formidable than a rabbit, though he saw a woman whom he failed to recognize with a child in her arms, farther along the Larkshill Road, as he turned up the lane.

He went on up the narrow weed-grown hollow, and he came on a brown horse, saddled but riderless, which lifted a startled head, and moved off as he approached.

Steve was both alarmed and puzzled. It confirmed the rumor which Will had brought that Cooper had come with a mounted force. Steve remembered the great elm which lay across the Larkshill Road, and wondered how a troop of horsemen would surmount the obstacle, or by what other way they might have come. He supposed the horse to be a sign of the nearness of human enemies, and he looked round carefully. For some minutes he stood and listened in silence, while the horse resumed its grazing.

He moved slowly toward the horse, but it was shy and suspicious, and turned away up the lane as he advanced. Then it stopped, as though there were something which it feared to pass. It moved nervously from side to side of the road, and then turned back, and made a rush past him, and down the lane.

Steve made no useless effort to follow it. He went on more slowly and

cautiously than before. He came upon the body of a dead man. The man was Bryan, who had been expelled from the camp after Cooper left. Probably he had wandered off to join him. He had been shot more than once through the body, and in the arm.

Steve kept on through oak and bracken, seeing the ruins of the Hall in the distance. He approached the lodge, keeping well under cover. He had not been here before, but he knew that it must be here that Tom Aldworth kept the woman and her children.

He followed the park-palings—high, close wooden palings, not overeasy to scale, till he came to a place where a rotten cross-piece had failed, and several of the uprights had been forced aside. He stepped through into a grassy ditch that ran along the side of the road. The weeds were scanty here, and there was a narrow path across the ditch, as though there had been a passageway through the fence for some time, though he thought that the forcing of the boards was recent. The ground in the ditch was still soft from the storm of yesterday. It showed hoof-marks. Steve looked at them with attention. Two horses—if not three. And all entering. He could not see that any had left. And there was the fresh mark of a bicycle tire. He supposed that that must mean that Davy was back. But what was he doing here? If Davy were back, perhaps Tom had returned also? He went slowly down the road, toward Larkshill, with an eye on the cover that grew abundantly on the high bank at the farther side, ready to retreat to its shelter at the first sign of life upon the road before him.

But it was not life to which he came. It was death again.

Rentoul lay on the road, shot through the back—Rentoul who had ridden away with those first six horses that Cooper had got together. But there was no horse here, and still no sign of any human life.

He went back through the fence, and made his way through the bracken the more cautiously that he thought he heard the sound of horses' hoofs approaching up the road that he had left. He was already ambushed in the thick ivy that overgrew the bank top above the lodge when the horses which he had heard came out from a wider circuit through the bracken, and the sound of their approach caused him to lie close.

He saw two horses, one of which was ridden by a woman, and the other riderless at her side. There was nothing in such a sight to alarm a man who lay in the ivy above her, with a carbine against his hand.

Yet Steve lay very still, for the mystery deepened. The woman was a stranger whom he had never seen before, and she carried a child before her. He had never forgotten a face, even in the old days, and now he could have sworn to every woman that he had seen through the summer months. But that was not all. It was not men only that he remembered well. He did not forget horses either. The led horse he had not seen before, but the chestnut mare on which

she rode was one of the six with which Cooper had departed from Cowley Thorn. It was the one that Rentoul had ridden and Rentoul lay dead on the road.

The woman rode astride, and with the easy gait of one who was well used to the saddle. She wore a belt with a heavy pistol at one side, and a long sheath-knife at the other.

Of one thing he was sure, this was not the woman that Tom had kept at the lodge. He had never seen, but he had heard her described. Besides, this one was not a kind that would have remained so long in solitude.

Whoever she was, she reined up at the door of the lodge as at an expected termination, and Steve heard it open as she slipped from the saddle. He saw the rider's face, as she turned after setting the child to the ground, more clearly than he had done before. It was the face of a woman dark of brow and of heavy shortened hair, young, comely, and resolute. He took little account of her dress. It was little indication in these days, but he heard her voice, the surest means of classifying women either before or now.

"I must find them if they're not back, but I think they'll be quite safe. Here's one of them, anyway."

He heard the voice that answered, which he knew must be that of the old lodge-keeper, though he could not catch her words. He saw the rider tie the led horse to a tree at the side of the drive, and leave the other loose beside it, with a word of praise and petting.

With a purposeful energy she went off at a brisk pace across the park, walking as one who took a familiar way and hitching her belt round, so that the pistol came easily to her hand.

Steve was sure that this was not a woman who could have lived among them either unknown or inactive. Yet she appeared to be known where Tom was keeping his invalid and her children, and to be occupied in their interests. He did not feel the mystery to be less, but he felt that its solution would be here, if he waited.

He had not lain for half an hour longer when he heard the feet of another horse approaching up the road. It stopped outside the gates, and a man who was also a stranger to Steve dismounted quickly. The horse had a second rider, in whom Steve had a fresh surprise when he recognized Davy Barnes.

He heard the man's voice, not unkindly, but with a commanding curtness, "You can go now, Davy." Steve knew the voice for that of one who was used to the direction of others, and who gave such an order without diverting his mind from more important considerations.

Davy walked off down the road.

The man pulled out some keys, and unlocked the gates, though not as one who was accustomed to do so. He led his horse through, and fastened it beside

the brown gelding already tethered. He stood for a moment, as though irresolute, before a door that remained closed and silent. Steve, always sensitive to the moods of others, thought that he was divided between hope and fear as he did so. But he was not of a kind to hesitate in facing the event that met him. After that moment's pause, he stepped resolutely to the door, and knocked upon it.

The old woman opened at once. Once again, Steve could not hear what was said very clearly, and that which he did hear confused him. But he saw the woman come out into the drive, and point across the park. The stranger walked off rapidly in the direction that the woman rider had taken.

Steve was feeling both thirst and hunger, but everything which he observed increased his curiosity, and his conviction that he was at the center of a mystery, though he could not read it. He had not to wait much longer before he saw a group returning across the park in an evident amity. The man carried a child. There was a second woman. Steve showed his quickness of eye when he decided that it was the one of whom he had caught so short a glimpse upon the Larkshill Road. She had carried a child, which was probably the same that the man was carrying now.

As they disappeared into the lodge, Steve began to piece matters together more successfully than he had done before. He remembered a vague tale he had heard, just as Tom's party were setting out, that some of them had promised to help him search for the missing husband of the woman that he had been keeping here. It had sounded a silly tale, and as such he had put it out of his mind. But now it returned. Here plainly enough was the missing husband, the father who had regained his children. The other woman was with him in some capacity less easy to understand.

He decided that Tom had returned with new allies, to whom these people belonged, and that Cooper had been defeated in consequence.

He had learned sufficient, and could go home in peace.

[X]

Monty Beeston sat on his accustomed bucket, but with more than usual regard for the ease of his body. He had pulled out much hay from his lair beneath the goods van. It covered the bucket, and was stuffed behind it, and before the wheel of the van against which he was leaning. For Monty, though very happy, was very tired. Every bone ached, and he could imagine the size of the blisters upon his feet without the ordeal of inspection. He had experienced the toils of war, and he claimed a full share of its glories.

His bill-hook lay beside him, and his revolver-butt stuck out prominently from his hip-pocket. Was it necessary to say that it had not been fired for

reasons which it would be indiscreet to mention? Was it necessary to say that the bill-hook had been occupied upon no greater object than the division of a dead pig? Had it not been carried boldly enough into the tunnel darkness? Could it do execution where there had been no one left to slaughter on its arrival?

There had been, alas! no beer to rejoice his return, for that which had been found in Bellamy's cart had been consumed last night; but a large jug of milk stood on the sleeper beside him, a tribute from those whose curiosity he had gratified.

He thought that he was tired of talking, but when Steve strolled up, having been previously repulsed by Will Carless with a turned shoulder and a muttered oath (the cause of which he had guessed very easily), and began to question him in his quiet drawl, Monty found that it was still a pleasure to answer. He even offered the remainder of the milk (having already drunk to the limit of his own capacity) to so satisfactory a listener.

"Settled Bellamy?" Steve inquired.

"No," said Monty, "the new Captain done that. Him and his gal. Fine gal her be." He spoke as one who encounters an improbability, but is constrained by truth to admit it.

"The new Captain?" said Steve.

"Yes, we've got a real boss now. Captain Webster. Captain Martin Webster."

"You mean he'd killed Bellamy before you got there? How many has he got?"

Steve imagined a numerically superior body that Tom had encountered after it had executed its own vengeance upon Bellamy's gang, and to whom he had been forced to yield, upon such terms as he could obtain.

"There's none but him and the gal," said Monty. "They was in the long tunnel, down the line. They killed Bellamy when he went in to fetch them out. And Smith. And Donovan. And Reddy Teller. And a lot more. Then we come up, and finish it off. Bill Horton's dead. Navvy Barnes killed *him*. And Roberts shot Navvy."

"Ellis Roberts dead?" asked Steve, to whom the rapid list of fatalities was somewhat bewildering.

"Yes," said Monty. "Navvy knocked his ribs in with a spade, after he'd shot him. So Ellis said. . . . Harry Swain's hurt, and Andrews, and Ted Wrench, and Tedman—Bob Stiles knifed him over the stuff. That's about all." His voice had a note which was almost regretful, as though he feared that the list of fatalities might seem inadequate. "Bellamy's lot's done in, all except Hodd and Timms, and an old woman, that's brought back."

"What about Cooper's?" asked Steve.

"Ran like rabbits," said Monty. "Just ran. Some's pris'ners. Some's dead. Some's gone. . . . Cooper's got off," he concluded, with a regretful homage to a truth which could not be permanently avoided.

"I know some's dead," said Steve. "I've seen Rentoul and Bryan."

This was news to Monty. He inquired eagerly for details, which Steve gave very willingly, though with his usual slowness.

But it is difficult to get any clear impression from Monty's narrative. He was not false to the facts as he knew them. He did not even exaggerate. But he was picturesque. He saw the high lights only. He had a journalistic mind. We may learn more if we listen to Tom Aldworth, who is back at the camp at last, and is telling Muriel of the crowded incidents of the last two days, and of the perplexity which now confronts him.

"Yes," said Muriel, "I should like to know what's happened, if you've time to tell me."

"I want to tell you," Tom answered, "and I want your advice, though I don't see how anyone's can be any use. It's just waiting to see what happens."

"Is it true," Muriel interposed, "that Ellis Roberts is dead?"

This brought Tom to a definite explanation, and reminded him of something outside his own preoccupations. "Yes, that's true, and I'm very sorry it is. He was too good to lose. . . . I suppose Madge will go to Jack now."

"Jack's been very good about Madge. What happened?"

"Well, we came straight on Bellamy's lot. There was no difficulty about that. They hadn't moved much from where Jack and Bill found them. But there was fighting going on, and we thought they had fallen out among themselves, which was likely enough. We never got out of that idea till the very end, and it nearly made more mess than there is now.

"I don't suppose you know, but there's a long tunnel on the line near there, and we found some of Bellamy's gang at one end, and some at the other, firing into it. It was plain enough that they were fighting with some inside, but we couldn't tell who, nor what it was about.

"I asked Ellis to take as many of the boys as he liked, and set about the men at the farther end of the tunnel. There were only five or six, and I thought if we caught one we could find out what was happening. It was there that we got most of the damage. There was that brute Navvy Barnes, Martha Barnes's brother-in-law. He killed Bill Horton with a spade before Ellis shot him, and got Ellis himself in the ribs with his last blow. Ellis didn't seem to be so much hurt, and he came back to us with Hodder, that he'd caught as I'd asked him, and left the boys there to hold that end of the tunnel, but he was dead before morning.

"I tried to get the truth out of Hodder, as to what the fighting was all about, but he didn't tell the tale straight, or I wasn't quick to take it the right way, and we still thought they were quarreling among themselves, and I got Jack to take Ellis's place in charge of the farther end that we'd captured, and Reddy Teller'd gone in at mine, and I took the boys in after him to end it.

"We found a mix-up fight going on, and we took them in the rear, and they ran, what was left of them past a trolley that stood on the line—a flat trolley, one of those the repairing gangs used to use for themselves and their tools—and there was a man and woman lying down on it, and firing right and left. I called out to settle the man, but not to hurt the woman, and the man spoke to me, just quiet and clear as I said it, 'I didn't think you'd shoot *me*, Tom.' I knew who it was in a second, though I couldn't have guessed in the bad light, and him so altered, and I knocked up Jack's rifle, just in time."

"I suppose that was Martin Webster?"

"Yes, it was him, sure enough. And the words brought it all back, when I was tried for shooting a man, and thought I should hang for sure, and he got me off. That's how he is. Quiet, and quick, and always the right word, and yet not hurrying. . . ."

Tom stopped, as though he felt some difficulty in continuing his narrative, or his mind were on the past scene that was brought back to him so vividly, and Muriel said, "How does Cooper come into it?"

"I don't know that," said Tom. "I mean I don't know how he heard we'd gone off, unless Butcher ratted, and I can't see why he should, but Davy Barnes met us as we were hurrying back, and he took us across the country to cut Cooper off at Sterrington. . . ."

"Who's *he*? Davy?"

"No, of course. Mr. Webster. I didn't tell you we'd asked him to take command. He's a better man than we've got here, and he showed it then. He saw the only chance there was, and he didn't lose any time talking. We almost failed, as it was. Cooper got through and most of his men, but we knocked out two or three, and captured one, and some horses. We got Betsy Parkin back, and Tilly—Goodwin's Tilly, I mean. They only got off with Nance Weston, and she's no loss."

Muriel did not argue that. She said: "Had they done much harm in Cowley Thorn? They didn't come through Larkshill, nor here."

"No. We think they must have guessed we were nearly back, and got scared. Though we can't tell how they heard. They shot Stacey Dobson. He wouldn't bolt with Phillips and Betty. I don't know why they did that. The Captain's got his house now. It's the best there is, and it's only right he should have it."

"The Captain?"

"Yes. I mean Mr. Webster. It's what we're all calling him now. . . . We asked him to take it on, and he said no, unless we gave him a free hand to do just what he liked with everything, and we'd sign to that; and we talked it over, and all signed. It seems to give things a chance, anyway. And we've promised to stand by him, and make the others do the same, or turn them out if they won't."

He fell silent again, and Muriel saw that there was still something left unsaid. She remembered that he had made no further mention of the woman who had been with Martin in the tunnel.

She said: "Was he really alone? I thought you must have had a good deal of support from somewhere to make Cooper run, as they say he did. They say he had sixty men."

"Sixty? Well, he didn't. Nor twenty, when we saw him. That's just talk. I don't think he could have brought all the men that went off with him. It was just meant for a quick raid, to do what damage he could. He seems to have got horses for the lot, and taught them how to ride, and I suppose he thought that made it easy. . . . And so it did, near enough."

"But you said there was a woman with Mr. Webster. Did she come back with you?"

"Yes. . . . At least, not all the way. When we turned off, to cut across Cooper's way home, she came straight on to the lodge. I suppose the Captain was anxious about his wife, and I heard her offer to come."

"Not alone?"

"Yes—no—at least, she came on Davy's bike. I don't know how far. Then she got one of Cooper's horses. She's not like any of the women here. She can ride, and shoot straight. I think it was she who killed Bellamy. They'd killed half a dozen, more or less, when we came up."

"What were they fighting about?"

"Oh, just the usual thing. Bellamy'd caught her, and she'd escaped, and he tried to get her again, and kill Mr. Webster, and she reckoned she was his wife."

"Martin Webster's wife?"

"Yes. Of course, he didn't know that his wife was alive. He's gone back to her now."

That seemed natural enough. But there were points in the tale that puzzled Muriel, and she felt that there were things on Tom's mind that were still unspoken.

She said: "If Mr. Webster's gone back to his wife, where is she now—the other woman? You don't give her a name."

"Oh, her name's Claire something. I don't know any more. She signed with the rest, when we all signed, but she put Claire Webster. She said that was her

name now.”

“But she didn’t know then that his wife was living?”

“Yes, she did. That’s just it. They both knew. And I asked the Captain what he meant to do, and he wouldn’t say. They both knew, and I suppose they talked it over, and they’re no worse friends, but when I asked the Captain what he meant to do, he wouldn’t say anything, except that the women must decide, and that that was my own law. . . . So I thought he meant to stick to Claire, and might leave Helen to me. He can’t want both.

“And then there came this news about Cooper, and Claire says at once, ‘Shall I go to see that your wife’s safe?’ or something like that, and he looks glad, and off she goes—and it’s luck she did.

“It seems Cooper had sent two men to the lodge, and they’d made off with Mrs. Webster, and the children—I suppose he thought they were mine, and meant to do me a bad turn—and Claire rode after them, and got them back, I don’t just know how, but I know she shot Bryan dead in the lane.”

“You haven’t told me where she is now.”

“That’s the queerest part of it all. When I’d arranged about Dobson’s house, I went straight to the lodge, and there they all were together, as friendly as could be. I suppose they haven’t told Mrs. Webster anything, though I can’t even tell that for certain. And then the question came up, who should go, and who should stay, and was it safe to take the children so late; and Claire said she’d stay with them, and the Captain said yes, that was the best way; and we went off, he and Mrs. Webster, and me to show them the road, and she stayed there with the children.”

“Well, that seems plain enough.”

“Yes, it may, but it isn’t. Or why don’t they say so, plain out? I asked the Captain if he meant to give Claire up, now he’d got his wife back, and he wouldn’t say. And she doesn’t act like he’s giving her up either, and yet—well, I can’t make it out either way.”

Muriel said: “I can’t quite see what’s worrying you about that. I know you hoped for something different, if the Captain, as you call him, hadn’t been living. But he is, and he’s gone back to his wife, and surely that’s final. I’m sorry about the other one, but it’s a matter between themselves, and they seem to have decided it in the right way.”

“It isn’t only between themselves,” Tom answered. “If he’s gone back to his wife, it leaves Claire free for someone, and everyone understood that Claire was his wife, and now they find he’s got another they want to know where they are. They’ve mostly seen her now, and she’s one that most would be glad to get. There was a lot of talk as I came back through Larkshill. Even Butcher’s on to her. He saw her ride through Larkshill, and he said it was about time he had a pick. He thinks he can buy anything that he wants.”

"Well," said Muriel, "I suppose your new law will settle that. She can make her own choice."

"Yes, if she means to," he answered, doubtfully. He had seen something of Claire Arlington (or Webster), and he could not easily think of her as allying herself with any of the men who were still unmated around them.—"Yes, if that's what she means,—and if it's the law tomorrow. But the Captain's to make his own now. . . . And I've promised to get the others to agree to that, and I'll do what I said. But he can't want to have both. If he doesn't want to give Claire up—" He left the sentence unfinished, and went off without apology, leaving Muriel to climb into her own apartment by such light as the moon supplied, and to the sound of Monty snoring in the mouth of his lair, about ten yards away. . . .

Muriel lay down, but the problem which Tom had presented did not leave her mind. She was sorry for Tom. She saw that he still had a doubtful hope that Martin might prefer the new love to the old, if a choice were forced upon him, as it seemed that it must be. In that case, Tom's claim to Helen would be a strong one. But in the alternative, he appeared to have no more claim upon Claire, even should he have any wish to urge it, than anyone else in the camp.

She sympathized with the discontent in his mind, and recognized that he was acting well enough in still giving his loyal service to Martin; as she thought, even if a harder test were before him, he would continue to do. But though she was sorry for him, she was more sorry for others. She saw the difficulty of Martin's position, as he had seen it from the moment when Tom had told him the conditions to which he was entering.

Muriel realized that much must depend upon the character of a woman that she had not met. But if they had believed Helen to be dead—as was natural, indeed inevitable, that they should—and had then fought, at their lives' risk, to maintain the integrity of the bond which they had formed between them, it was no light thing that he should not only repudiate her, for the sake of his recovered wife, but should do it under such conditions as would oblige her to accept an alternative, and probably unwelcome, lover. Would she submit to such a condition of life? What complication might her refusal make? What dangers for herself or others?

Muriel could not clearly visualize this woman whom she had not seen, this woman with blood on her hands, who had won the admiration of the woman-hating Monty, who appeared to Tom to be of such a kind that Martin Webster might be willing to give up Helen to hold her, if such a choice should be made inevitable. She could not visualize her, but she felt that, so far, she must have acted well—with a rare courage, and with a rare generosity.

Muriel recognized that there might be something different here from the simple problems of human jealousy, or lust, or greed, with which her

experience had been too often familiar. She saw, though the thought was scarcely definite in her mind, that the constants of human experience arise from the constants of human character and environment. Here, environment, though no less powerful than of old, was of an unshaped fluidity, and the variations of character were therefore asserting themselves around her with a greater emphasis.

Then she thought of Helen. Suppose that, forced to decide between them, Martin should find it beyond his resolution to discard her rival. She saw not only how great might be Helen's grief, but her humiliation also. Not merely left, as so many had been left before her, for a younger or a more attractive rival, but left under such conditions that she would be forced, almost inevitably, into a union which she did not desire. She could refuse, of course. But what would follow, under these lawless conditions, which had scattered the countryside with death during the last two days? . . .

And then, what would be the position of her children under such circumstances? Martin dead, they would have become Tom's care, and their mother would have bought his protection of them at the price he asked. But Martin living could hardly consent to such an allocation. She saw that the fact that Helen was not only his wife, but his children's mother, would make it almost impossible for him to discard her even should he wish to do so.

Always honest with herself, she was surprised to recognize the position to which her thoughts were leading. Marriage to her was a sacrament. Monogamy was a fundamental institution of Christianity, divinely blessed and enjoined. She had never examined the bases of this belief. It was too fundamental, too obvious. But with an intellectual candor which was the more admirable because of the hostilities of belief which confronted it, she admitted that the position was not an easy one to determine.

Her sympathy for Helen weakened with the reasoned conviction that it was not likely to be greatly needed. She reminded herself again that Martin had gone back to her with the knowledge of Claire—even, it seemed, at Claire's suggestion.

But what would tomorrow bring for the one who had rescued her rival's children, and now slept with them at her side?

BOOK IV

[1]

IT would be illogical to conclude that Phillips had no Christian name because he was never known to produce it. As a man servant, which had been his first occupation, and his father's before him, he had no occasion for this distinction.

But even when his employer died, about two years before the period with which we are concerned, and he was persuaded by circumstance to take over the plumbing business of a deceased cousin in Cowley Thorn, he was never known to use it. He retained the business name of J. T. Couthlin & Co., and signed his letters, and endorsed his checks, in a name which obviously was not his.

He was engaged to marry Betty Cotwin, Stacey Dobson's housemaid, in the coming October, when it may be presumed that his first name would have been disclosed upon his marriage certificate; but even that occasion did not occur, for the flood came, and when the routine of the plumbing business departed he realized the necessity of extending his immediate protection to that young lady, and took up his residence with her on the following day, with Mr. Dobson's decided approval.

Stacey Dobson had never been responsive to the pressure of outer circumstance. He had lived his own life in his own way, and when the storm struck, and the news of flood and ruin assailed him from every side, he met the proposal of his frightened servants that he should join the discomforts of the northward flight with an indifferent but final negative.

His house was large, substantially built, isolated, and protected by the rising ground beyond Cowley Wood from the full force of the storm. It lost much of its roof: its upper rooms were damaged by falling timber. But beyond these injuries, and some internal displacements, it survived the fury of the first night, and it was from the window of an almost uninjured library (some plaster had fallen on his shoulder from a cracked ceiling, but it was nothing more than a clothesbrush would rectify) that he told the servants, who had spent a miserable night on the lawn, that they could please themselves, but that he would be obliged if they would not interrupt him further.

The fact was that he was composing a sonnet on Mutability, and the sonnet-form is sufficiently exacting to make such interruptions almost intolerable.

Only Betty remained. She had already acquired a broken head, and some other damages, in attempting to rescue some of her master's property from a roofless bedroom, and excused herself from joining the exodus of her fellow servants by explaining that her head ached, and she did not feel fit to go.

Stacey Dobson did not fail to understand the loyalty of her decision. He even made a moderate protest against it. But it was somewhat perfunctory. He really doubted the wisdom of the wild migration which was proceeding around him. He was repelled by thoughts of the miserable conditions of food and shelter which this flying population must endure, if the floods should spare them. He could not understand anyone being willing to get hot and dirty today, to reduce the possibility of being drowned tomorrow.

He said, "What about lunch?"—and Betty understood that the subject had left his mind. When the whole world is going mad around you, and the very earth seems shaky, it is comforting to have such a master.

As Betty would not go, Phillips remained. He joined her under Stacey Dobson's damaged roof next day, and two young people were entirely happy.

The result showed how far it might still be possible to maintain the amenities of a drowned civilization, under sufficiently favorable conditions.

Stacey was more than willing for these unpaid attendants to share the benefits of what remained of his roof, provided that his personal wants were satisfied, as far as possible in the old manner; and Betty regarded this condition as entirely reasonable,—indeed, it was assumed on all sides, without the necessity for discussion arising.

Stacey Dobson was a reasonable man, and in his own way a good master. His debts, by the mercy of Heaven, had disappeared in a night. He had no care in the world. He remained quietly among his books. His meals were still good and regular. If the menu showed an occasional monotony or omission, he was kind enough to pass it in silence. His bath was always ready when he required it, and he declined to notice that it was not filled in the old way.

So long as these conditions continued, he was not so foolish as to vex his mind by inquiry as to how soon they might collapse, or what might be the extent of the cellar-stores that Phillips's foresight was industriously accumulating.

When the alarm of the approach of Cooper's horsemen had reached them, he had insisted that Phillips should take his wife to a place of safe hiding without delay, even at the risk that the lunch should suffer.

When he had lazily refused to point out where they had gone, the impatient raiders had shot him in the garden-hammock in which he lay.

Tom heard of his murder while he was trying to persuade the inhabitants of a much inferior dwelling-place to vacate it, so that their new leader might be accommodated with an appropriate dignity, and being refused with some

ingenuity of excuses, he lost no time in pursuing so desirable an alternative.

He found both Phillips and Betty were willing to accept a new service of such a character and to acquire the reflected dignity of waiting upon the family of this newly-elected ruler, and they were probably happier in so doing than had they asserted a right which could not easily have been disputed, and claimed the house and its contents, as its only remaining occupants.

[II]

It was characteristic of Helen Webster that she had neither any disposition to avoid the subject of the woman who had shared the intimacy of her husband's life, nor did she allow it to disturb her mind, during the first hours of their reunion. It was not merely that her joy was too great for the intrusion of any minor discords. It was rather, though not solely, because she had a confidence in Martin's love too deep and well-founded for any jealousy to disturb it. As far as she spoke of Claire at all, it was to express the gratitude which she felt for her own and her children's rescue, a realization of the hardship of the position, and of the generosity with which Claire had acted toward her. It was well, she felt, that she had been consolation and help to Martin when he had believed that she herself was dead. But as to any possibility of her own displacement, or of an enduring rivalry, the faintest, briefest doubt had found no entrance to disturb her mind.

If Martin saw further, if he saw that a question might be approaching which it would be her part to answer, the fact that he was silent need not imply that her confidence in him was without foundation. . . .

It was still early on the following morning, and she was occupied, with a natural delight, in taking stock, under Betty's guidance, of the resources of her new home, when the sound of horse-hoofs on the road disturbed them with recollection of the alarms of yesterday.

Phillips went out quickly, to return with the news that it was only Claire who was approaching, with one of the children before her.

They met her at the gate, and with a laughing word she gave the child to her mother. She had one of the horses for Martin also. "A king can't walk," she said, mockingly.

Claire would not get down. She had promised to return quickly for Joan, and had been delayed already.

Helen, with a recollection of the Claire of her rescue of yesterday, and of eyes that had been hard and merciless as she had fired her automatic into the body of the falling Bryan, found her less formidable than she could have expected, in this laughing mood.

As she went back into the house, with Mary in her arms to be handed over

to the admiration of the waiting Betty, it seemed a very quiet and happy world, in which summer was still supreme; and if there were a chill in the morning air to remind them of an approaching autumn, it passed unnoticed.

Only Martin, clothed in a fortunately fitting suit of Stacey's, in place of the filthy and tattered apparel of yesterday, and seated at Stacey's desk, which he had swept clear of its contents so that he might commence to use it for his own purposes, was already experiencing the inescapable penalty of any form of preeminence, in the anxiety of doubtful thought which might need, at any moment, to be translated into swift and confident action.

He was still seated at the desk, making a series of rapid notes of the almost endless things which he would require to know, when Tom came to make his report.

He was able to announce that a number of those who had not gone on the expedition, and had not promised Martin their support, had now been persuaded to do so by himself and others.

Martin told him that he proposed to work quietly there for the next three days, after which he would probably require a meeting of his supporters—if possible, of the whole community.

It was evident that Tom had done well, and that he was prepared to continue the service that he had offered. But when these matters were concluded, he did not go. He had still one subject which must be raised, but on which he did not feel it easy to speak.

Seeing Martin engaged as he was, and clothed from the resources of Stacey's ample wardrobe, he was too strongly reminded of the lawyer who had put his briefs aside to defend him without hope of fee—for no better reason than that his mother had once been in the service of the family—and had saved his life, when such a result had seemed to be beyond reasonable anticipation.

This memory, and an honest belief that Martin was the one man who could save them from the disorders into which they were sinking, confused his resentment at that which he felt to be an injustice, but the nature of which, even in his own mind, he was unable to formulate.

"You'd better tell me," said Martin, who could guess well enough what was coming.

It was Claire, of course. There had been reports at first that she was Martin's wife, and as such she would have been secure from molestation. But then Helen had been seen as they had walked from the lodge last night.

Now they wanted to know which was his wife, and which wasn't. Told that his real wife was Helen, they had concluded that Claire was unattached, and to be had by the promptest wooer. Butcher had happened to be in Larkshill last night, which seldom happened. He said that he had come to see James Pellow about some smith's work that he wanted. Probably he had really come to learn

the truth about Cooper's raid. Anyway, there he was. He had certainly made the trouble worse.

The fact was that the law which had been adopted at Tom's suggestion was now working to its natural consequences. The available women having been definitely mated, those men who were left had a feeling of being permanently shut out, and it is a position which always improves the flavor of the forbidden fruit. They had been restrained from any violent reaction, in some cases by their own characters, and in others by the strength of opposition which would now be arrayed against them. It was a fact of few exceptions that the men who had secured the available women were those who were best adapted, in brain or muscle, for the conditions of the life around them.

The instinct to gain security for home and children, which is fundamental to women, had operated as it was bound to do, and they had chosen for the qualities which would give the greatest assurance of such protection.

The appearance of Claire, and the news that she was apparently unattached, had caused an unprecedented excitement. Butcher himself was said to be a candidate, and one who, whatever his physical disadvantages might be, would not readily admit defeat. It was at his instigation that a meeting was to be held that afternoon, at which it had been proposed that Claire should be present, and should be pressed to make her choice from among them.

Martin listened to this tale, but said only that he would have no meeting called in future, except by himself. As to Claire, Tom could tell them all that the law still held, and she should choose as she would. He would say no more, but he must have Tom's promise to support that, wherever it might lead.

Somewhat reluctantly, being still mystified as to Martin's ultimate purpose, as he had been from the first, Tom gave the required promise.

Having this, and judging that it would be kept, Martin dismissed him with few further words. He saw clearly enough that if his authority should be challenged, from whatever quarter, or on whatever issue, he must assert it promptly and absolutely, or his rule would be over before it had well begun.

As to this matter of Claire—well, he saw that much must depend upon her own intentions, which he could only guess, but he thought that he was acting rightly in a position which had no precedent.

His thought was interrupted by the sound of voices coming through the open window. He could see nothing, for they came from the front of the house, and the library window was on its southern side, but he heard the voice of Claire raised in an indignant anger, "Well, you can call it off." The words of Tom's reply in a tone of apologetic protest did not reach him. Claire was bringing Joan, and Helen would be certain to go out to receive her. He judged that the crisis had come, as he had supposed it would, but more quickly.

Then the voices, died, the library door opened, and the two women came in

together.

Helen spoke with her usual quietness, but there was too full a sympathy between them for him to fail to recognize the controlled emotion which her words concealed.

“Claire is—is staying here. She wanted to go, but we owe—I owe her too much for that.” Then, with a quick instinct of error: “It isn’t what we owe, but what we need. Martin, I want her to stay with us.”

She lied easily, as did most women of her social rank in the England that the seas had covered, but she may never have lied meanly, and she lied nobly now. And as she lied, she realized that the lie might become truth. In such times as were before them, she might yet be glad of such a comrade. And then—wondering if they understood all that she meant to give—she added: “I told Tom that you want us both . . . that we are equal in all things. . . . I think it’s the right way. It’s the only way now.”

Claire found no words in response. Offered all that she had instinctively felt her right, offered it so generously, against the whole weight of the traditions and customs of the race from which they came, and against the natural jealousy of her kind, she had a reluctance to take it; and in the pause Martin answered:

“Yes, it’s the only way . . . the only right one. . . . I think you both know that I couldn’t have foreseen this. . . . But the old laws are gone. I don’t mean that they were bad in that way, but we’ve got to think them out afresh. . . . I suppose, according to tradition, I ought to have chosen one of you and deserted the other. The one deserted might have been happy afterwards, but I don’t think the two could—they would always have a consciousness of having acted basely to the one that was left. At its best, it could be no more than a cowardly way of avoiding a difficulty—unless either of you had wished to go. . . . I think you had the right to decide that.”

Then Claire spoke: “But I’m not sure that it is right to stay. It will bring trouble. . . . No, I’m not sure that it is. . . . You’ll have enough without this.”

Martin answered frankly: “Yes, it will bring trouble at first. I don’t know how much, but I think it will bring it quickly. After that, we shall be stronger, if we survive. It will be best in the end.

“I’ve undertaken to rule this crowd, and I don’t mean to turn back now. And to do that I’ve got to fight them over something. It doesn’t much matter what. But I need a fight. I don’t mean violence. But I’ve got to show them who’s in control, and when they’ve learned that they can have all the freedom they’re fit for.

“It’s not going to be easy. There’s so much to be scrapped, or rebuilt. But you can both help me immensely. I don’t think there’d have been much chance, if you’d decided differently. It’s the only chance to face new

conditions boldly, and we should have failed at the first fence. . . . But we should be able to do a great deal together, we three.”

Helen spoke again. She had adjusted the defensive armor which had seemed to slip for a moment, and had regained the self-control which had rarely failed her, in whatever emergency.

“It mayn’t always be easy, but I think it rests with ourselves. I think it’s hardest on Claire, in a way. We’ve got back what we thought we’d lost, and she’s got less than she thought she had.”

She was aware, as she spoke, that she thought of Claire as something that came in from outside. They might take it in, but it would be alien still. She and Martin were one. Martin knew that. Perhaps Claire knew it too. She recognized in Claire a large-natured generosity which would simplify the adjustments which they must face together. But, primarily, it would depend upon herself to make such a household happy, or even tolerable. With the mental aloofness which was of her nature, she tried to regard it as an experiment of unusual interest. One at which she should be ashamed to fail. Surely her love for Martin should be sufficient to protect her from any risk of failure. She said, “It’s the eternal triangle in a new shape,” and was uncertain whether the metaphor were absurd or witty.

She looked at Stacey’s clock, still ticking over the fireplace. It was past midday. They had spoken slowly, with pauses pregnant of thought, and more things had passed between them than the words would have held at a smaller time. She was relieved that they had understood each other so well without emotional expression from which she always shrank. She said: “It must be time to see about lunch. I wonder what Betty’s doing.” And went out as she said it.

Left alone with Martin, Claire spoke with her usual directness. “I don’t know now that I’m right to stay. I don’t think I would, if I didn’t think of the child that I may have. But I don’t know even that. I could find somewhere to go to. I’m not bound to stay with this crowd. I found my way about a good bit before we met. . . . I’m sorry for Helen. . . . You love her better than you do me. It’s right you should.”

Martin answered with the frankness which had become habitual between them. “Perhaps I do; and perhaps it’s natural I should. But I don’t know, and I don’t want to think. I know that what has been in the past cannot be altered, and ought not to be ignored—and I know that I need you both.”

“It may come right,” she answered, “if we all play fair, and I think we shall. We’re that sort, rather. Martin, you haven’t kissed me since—”

Helen, coming back, found them together, with Martin’s arm around her. They did not move as she entered, but Claire looked up, and said: “You know, Helen, he’ll never care for me as he does for you. I suppose it’s because you

were first. . . . And because you're different from me. But I'd rather have it so than have anyone else in the world—or what's left of it."

They were finishing a belated lunch, that drawled neglected as the talk swayed between narrations of their separate experiences, and speculations of the future, when a noise of altercation arose in the hall, and three men, pushing past the protesting Phillips, entered the room together.

[III]

The first of the three was a tall, thin, elderly man, very narrowly made, which gave his height a grotesque effect. He walked with a permanent stoop, as though to discount this effect of deformity, but this manner rather emphasized than concealed it, and gave him, as he moved, the appearance which Claire had recognized when she told him, with more truth than courtesy, that she would remember him, should she wish to marry an eel. For this was Butcher. Henry Butcher, once junior and acting partner in the firm of Butcher, Trent, and Butcher, stockbrokers, of Colmore Row, Birmingham.

He was accompanied by his son William, a young man of twenty-four, of too little individuality to merit a detailed observation, and James Pellow, a man of about the same age, or somewhat older, of a rather melancholy aspect, having a smear of coal on one side of his face, and wearing a soiled apron of basil-skin, which suggested, truly enough, that he had been engaged in the work of a smithy, before being called upon to join the deputation.

There were seven present here, including Phillips who stood, passive but alert, at the open door, but none among them doubted that the issue of this invasion rested between Henry Butcher and Martin, who had risen to meet him.

Earlier experiences had taught them both to estimate a position coolly and rapidly. Martin saw that the intruders were unarmed, and though he was aware of hostility, he felt no apprehension of an appeal to the argument of immediate force. Before Butcher could speak he had taken control of the situation.

"You needn't wait," he said to Phillips; and then, turning to Helen: "I don't suppose you or Claire will want to, either. I suppose these gentlemen wish to talk to me. But there's no reason that Betty shouldn't clear the table."

His tone was quiet and decisive, but Butcher broke in brusquely, though with a voice which was little louder than his own. "The women had better stay."

Martin met his glance with one of courteous wonder. "The ladies will please themselves," he said, as one who states the obvious. "Won't you sit down?"

To be just, we must observe that the dead Stacey had his part in setting the tone of this interview. The room had an air of leisured dignity, such as was

already fading from the memories even of those who had been accustomed to such surroundings. It was improbable that such another room existed.

The men sat, though doubtfully. Helen and Claire went out.

Martin said: "Perhaps you'll tell me why you've called so—abruptly." His tone was light, but conveyed subtly that they had placed themselves in the wrong by their mode of entrance, as though they had advanced a plea of inferiority.

Butcher answered, unabashed: "We've come to find out who you are, and to take charge of the woman. We have come in the names of about ninety men by whom we have been nominated to see you. We don't want any trouble, but the woman must come with us."

The words were suave enough, but the tone was rasping. Martin did not reply instantly. He looked at his questioner. The scrawny throat worked curiously. The left hand appeared to be shriveled, as by neuritis. The man's clothing was soiled and slovenly, but Martin was too used to appraising his fellow men not to know that he had been of some social status in the old days.

Physically, he judged him to be a wreck, as he was—and with additional infirmity arising from the exposures of the first days. Yet, like many others, he was finding a returned vitality.

Butcher, on his part, was aware of the atmosphere of the room, and of the quality of his opponent. He had not guessed that Stacey had a house like this. Even his old residence in Westfield Road had not contained a room of such quiet luxury—and now, his headquarters were a range of cellars! Good cellars, no doubt. Light and dry. But cellars all the same.

Martin, armed by old practice for a battle which must be of wits, not weapons, countered his attack with a curter query: "Who are you?"

Butcher said: "I am Henry Butcher. This is my son. This is James Pellow, one of Tom Aldworth's set."

Martin recognized the hit. How much did Butcher know of the support that Tom had promised? Of the plan that had been based on so insecure a foundation? What was the significance of one of Tom's party, if such he were, being a member of this intrusion?

Showing no sign of his thought, he answered in turn: "I am Martin Webster. I have been living farther south, where the land is deserted. I came here yesterday. Tom arrived very opportunely, when I was attacked by some lawless rogues that you had turned out of this part of the country. After that, I took control of his party, at their own request. You seem to need someone to do that, judging by what was going on when I arrived."

Butcher refused this gambit. He held to the object which had brought them. "It's the women we want," he answered. "How many are there?"

"There are three women in this house," Martin replied, with precision. "I

understand that one has been here from the first. She is Phillips's wife. I don't suppose you want her. Of the two others, one came with me. The other has been my wife for many years."

"Yes," said Butcher, "I heard that. Well, you can take your pick. You can't have both."

"I hadn't heard of that law," Martin answered, smiling slightly. "I was told that the women chose. Now you say that I can pick which I will! Have you made a new law today?" He turned to the melancholy blacksmith, who had not spoken, and who now shook his head, without breaking his silence.

"No?" said Martin, smiling again. "Don't you think you should know your own laws, before you come to explain them to me?"

Butcher answered, with a higher note in his voice, for he was angered by the tone of banter that met him: "I haven't come to argue here. You can do that tonight. You've got to bring her to Cowley Common—one or both—by two hours before sunset. If you're not there, you'll get fetched."

"I shall not come tonight," Martin answered coolly. "I am calling a meeting for Thursday. We shall all come to that. I shall have something to say then."

James Pellow spoke for the first time. "Thursday?" he said vaguely. Like so many others, he had ceased the counting of either dates or days.

But Stacey's calendar still hung on the wall, and it had been one of Betty's duties to correct it daily.

"Yes," Martin said, "Thursday. It's Monday now."

He would have said more, but Butcher broke in: "I don't know who you think you are, but—"

Martin interrupted quickly. There was something in the working of that scrawny neck, which had brought another scene to his mind. "Oh yes, you do. I was in Courtfield against Marlow. I cross-examined you about the date on which the transfers were executed."

Butcher did not often show his thoughts, but he was now obviously startled by the unexpectedness of the retort. In the second of silence that followed, Martin turned from him, and addressed himself to James Pellow directly:

"If you're a friend of Tom's, he'll tell you that we're not coming to any meeting tonight, because I'm not ready, and I've got other things to do. On Thursday we shall come, and I hope everyone else will be there. After that, we shan't waste much time in meetings, unless some of us want to starve when the cold comes. Tell Tom I depend on him to see that there's no trouble tonight. As to that, he knows what he's to do. But if anyone comes here to make it, they'll get plenty."

He turned to Butcher as he continued: "I don't want to quarrel. It will be better for all of us if we can work together. It's only Cooper who'll profit if we fall out. Can't you wait three days? I shall be ready then to discuss

everything.”

Thus addressed, Pellow did not reply, but he looked round at Butcher, as though expecting him to do so. Butcher hesitated. He disliked Martin for several reasons. He thought him dangerous.

He did not hesitate because Martin’s words were conciliatory, or his voice persuasive. He did not intend that Martin should control this community, unless he could control Martin, which he thought unlikely. Nor did his mind deviate from the object which had brought him there. Like his son, and Pellow, he had no wife. He bitterly resented, in his secret mind, that no woman had shown him favor, even with the solid advantages which he could offer. But he was not one to seek his ends by obvious or violent means. He had tried threats, which had failed. And he recognized that to threaten further would be of no avail, whatever might be the sequel. He thought that Martin would be beaten, and the wish went with the thought. But suppose he were not? There would be no advantage in having committed himself to an open enmity.

He rose slowly, signaling by a jerk of his hand for his son and Pellow to do the same.

“You’ll come today,” he said, “if you’re wise. If you don’t, it’s your risk, not mine. I’ll tell the men what you say, but it isn’t likely that they’ll wait. We’ve warned you fairly.”

With these words they had reached the door, and with no further leave-taking they went out. Martin followed to the outer door, and watched them go up the road together. He saw that Pellow had found a voice, and that Butcher gave him what appeared to be a facetious answer.

He went back into the house, and found the women together. Under Betty’s guidance they were busily occupied in reviewing the resources of the establishment.

“Well?” said Helen, as he approached. She was interested, rather than concerned. She had an acquired confidence in Martin’s ability to deal successfully with any difficulty which might confront him.

“Only talk, so far. But we mustn’t take it too lightly. I want Phillips.” He went on to find him.

[IV]

“Phillips,” he said, “what’s Butcher?”

It appeared that Butcher was medicine, and commerce. He was more than that. He was wealth and power. He had made his habitation in the ruins of Helford Grange with about a dozen followers, including his son, who had been a medical student in his third year.

The younger Butcher, and a woman who had gained some experience as a

dispenser, and who was also of their party, were the only two, known to be remaining alive, who had any knowledge of medicine or surgery as it was practiced in England in pre-deluge days. This fact alone gave him an assured status, and assisted to enable him to accumulate stores with impunity, which another might have found it difficult either to acquire or hold.

From the first, Butcher had set his mind to the cornering of various articles, mostly of the less bulky order, which he foresaw would be in demand after their supplies became restricted. He had traded these articles fairly enough, and had continued to accumulate with diligence.

He claimed that there was nothing which could not be obtained from Helford Grange, if the price which he asked were paid,—a price in other articles of his own naming.

His followers were quiet and industrious. They did not menace the interests of their fellows in any open manner. They carried no arms. They took no sides. They had declined, under his instructions, to take part in the conflicts which had resulted in the expulsions of Bellamy and Cooper. If there were any provision for the defense of the Grange itself, it was not outwardly visible, nor apparent to those who called there for advice or barter.

Neither he nor his followers produced anything. They lived by barter and acquisition. Under the conditions which had prevailed, they cannot be considered entirely predatory or parasitic. Their activities must have resulted in the conservation of many useful things which might otherwise have been destroyed or wasted.

Martin observed that an ascendancy was being established which was not based on physical force, and with which he might have to reckon seriously and promptly, if another authority were not to be developed beside his own, which might ultimately prove the stronger, and of a very doubtful benevolence. . . .

Martin considered that it was unlikely that Butcher had been actuated by a simple desire that Claire should be surrendered. From her own account of her interview with him, it appeared improbable that he could hope that any personal advantage would follow. He might conceivably have been actuated by a desire to revenge the insult which he had received, but Martin judged that his feelings would not easily deflect his judgment on such a question.

. . . But all this was speculation, and his mind faced an urgent issue, which might be vital. Was there cause to fear an immediate hostility from those whom he had refused to meet till his own time, and should he make defensive preparations of any kind against such a contingency?

Martin recognized that he was alone, and almost defenseless against a combined attack. Alone with Phillips, and three women and two children. He recognized that his attitude in regard to Claire had placed a ready weapon in the hands of all who might desire to oppose him.

More than that, it gave a motive for hostility to many who might otherwise have been well-disposed to his cause. And even those who had given him their adherence had done so before this question had arisen to test them.

Yet he did not think it likely that there would be any attack to be feared that day, or that it would be made without warning. He trusted Tom. Besides, there was Jack Tolley, whom he had not seen since his coming to Stacey's house. He did not think that Jack was very enthusiastic in his support, but he was one who would very certainly be loyal to the side he had taken, and he was one to watch, and to judge the position well, and to give warning, if needed.

Finally, he decided that the probability of any danger threatening the women without sufficient warning was too slight for it to be expedient for him to be observed to be making preparation against it. It was essential that he should show no fear of the security of his own position.

Thinking thus, he let the hours pass. His mind was busy with many plans and speculations that jostled one another, so that he had an unaccustomed difficulty in keeping his thoughts on any single issue.

On two sides of Stacey's library, book-shelves rose from floor to ceiling. He began to examine these volumes. They had acquired an altered importance.

He could not tell how widely, or how utterly, his civilization had fallen. But it was at least probable that a thousand years of human effort had disappeared beneath Atlantic waves.

It might rest with him to decide how much or little should be done to conserve the wrecks of the old literatures, of the old sciences, of the old philosophies and religions. . . .

He came on a little group of scientific textbooks. They may have been of the best of their kinds, but they could contain little beside the total of knowledge—physical—chemical—biological—that the ages had accumulated, and the seas had covered. Still there could be no other end. It had been inevitable—always. It was only the date which had been unknown, which must be always uncertain. Did not every civilization that the earth had known begin with a tale of flood, and of the few that survived it?

It seemed pitiful, if this were all that remained from so large a harvest. But there must be other books elsewhere. . . . And yet, if all were gone, was it so entirely regrettable? They had held such power for good—and for evil also. It was hard to say.

How, he wondered, could the best of the old knowledge, or at least some of it, be conserved, and its falsehoods ended? Who would be competent to discriminate? Could he claim such competence? Were he of the generation that would follow, would he not resent such action having been taken?

This last thought brought another. What could be the system of education

on which the next generation would be reared? He saw that this would bear directly upon the earlier question. The peculiarity of recent years had not been the extent so much as the wide distribution of knowledge among those who had little inclination or capacity to digest or coordinate it. Many thousands who never exercised their minds at all. . . . The increased leisure that had been almost universal. . . . Not that they had lived quietly. Far from it. But the hours given to routine labor had been abnormally short—had been shortening continually, even as the labor itself had been specialized further into more intolerable monotonies.

Previously, there had been a small section of the community who were expert in arts and sciences, of which others were ignorant. The further back we inquire, the more primitive the conditions we encounter, the more marked is this division, until we find, at the foundation of every civilization, a priestly order reserving to itself a body of inherited knowledge, which the general community is only permitted to approach, if at all, by the medium of allegorical tales, the true meaning of which is quickly lost, even if explanation be given.

Which was the better way? Martin saw that the question was not a simple one. A privacy of knowledge places a great power in hands that may abuse its use. Against this was the fact that knowledge given out to a whole people becomes uncontrollable, either for good or evil. . . . Perhaps there was no absolute answer. The great error of the latest developments of Western civilization had been its tendency to treat all men as alike and equal. An equality of opportunity might be good—might be ideal—but it had gone beyond that.

Martin stood at the window as his thoughts wandered. He observed that Phillips had resumed his work on the lawn. He noticed that the larger part of the garden was in a wild disorder. There had been no attempt to tame it. But there was a small portion around the house that he had kept under control, and there the order was absolute. There was no weed on the well-rolled gravel beneath the window. The edges of the smooth-cut lawn might never have been better trimmed. . . . To try too much, and to fail entirely—He wondered if there might be any wisdom to be gained from this man who worked with so clear a purpose. He threw up the window.

Phillips looked up as he did so. “Would you like Betty to get some tea, sir?” he inquired, in his usual deferential manner.

“No, I wasn’t thinking about tea. I was wondering whether this life is better or worse than it used to be. I wondered what you’d say, if I asked you.”

Phillips showed no surprise at the question. He thought silently for a moment, doing his best to satisfy his master’s requirement as naturally as though he had been asked to find him a corkscrew. But his reply was

unexpected. "No, sir. I shouldn't say that. There's some things that's better, and many worse. But I've noticed one thing. There haven't been any suicides."

Martin looked at him in a momentary doubt as to whether the answer were to be taken literally. But Phillips was a man of a literal mind. He continued to develop the subject.

"You see, sir, there was one last year in Cowley Thorn, and four in Larkshill. . . . There was the girls that tied themselves together to drown in the round pool, and Dr. Raikes that shot himself from overwork, or so they said, and the grocer in Church Street that was hanging when they came together for the creditors' meeting, and the bank cashier at the Midland and Southern; and the year before there was a young couple that gassed themselves at Larkshill, when it came out that they'd got no money left and weren't married at all, and—well, there's been others, more or less, all the time, and I just thought that there might have been more, now that things are so much worse, as we all say; and, so far, there's been none at all."

He paused, as though in some doubt whether he had said too much, in reply to a question which he should have answered more shortly.

"Yes, Phillips, go on."

"Well, sir, I don't rightly know why it is. Things *are* worse than they were, and there's been wrong things done that couldn't have gone on before and them that do them just laugh, and do worse tomorrow. We're not as safe as we were. But we're not held down as we was.

"I think that's what makes it more worth while to keep alive. It's not so easy to do, but, somehow, it's more worth doing. We used to be held down till we couldn't move. I don't say we weren't held down comfortable, but there it was. We was held down hard, and if we ached to move—well, there was only one way, and there was some that took it."

"But it was a free country, Phillips. The laws were made by the people themselves, for their own security and comfort."

"Yes, sir, they did all that. I don't say they didn't. But I shouldn't call it *free*—not when you couldn't help having a summons sooner or later, try how you would. I had one myself the week before the flood, and when I think of it, it makes me half glad it came, and I didn't have to go, and my mother died without knowing. But you don't want to hear all that."

"Yes, go on. What was the summons for? I shouldn't have thought you'd have made a mistake of that kind in a century."

"It was the business I took over. It had been called J. T. Couthlin & Co. for fifty years, since my mother's uncle started it; it's he was J. T., and I kept it on, and used the same name, as Bill did before me, and thought no wrong—and what wrong was there? And then I was summoned because I wasn't carrying it on in my own name."

"Oh, you mean the Business Names Act. You should have registered."

"Well, sir, I didn't know, and I'd done no wrong, and I went and told them at the station, and they said: 'Then you ought to have known. You'll be fined five pounds, most likely.' And my mother was too old to have understood. She'd have said I'd disgraced the family, and must have done something bad to be fined like that. She'd almost sooner have been seen in a pawnshop, than had the police knock at her door. . . . No, sir, I shouldn't call it a free country. It wasn't bad in its way, and it was very safe if you kept quiet, and went the way you were told—but I sometimes think it may have gone on about long enough."

[V]

Martin, turning from the window, observed that Betty had entered, to lay the evening meal with the formality which Stacey had always exacted, even though there might be unavoidable variations in the nature of the fare provided.

Claire and Helen came in together.

Martin noticed with satisfaction that they appeared to be on terms of a very cordial intimacy, though his knowledge of the ways of women was sufficient to tell him that it was a fact of no certain significance.

From a score of animated questions of contrivance and management which they were discussing as the meal proceeded, Claire turned to him to explain the nature of the defenses which Phillips had provided against the emergency of attack, and which he had shown her with an evident deference that had caused her some inward amusement.

"I think he was almost nervous, till he found that I really admired his ingenuities. He appeared to regard me as an expert on such questions, till I told him that we only specialized in tunnels.

"But they seem to have had a bad time here during the first weeks—and, in a different way, later. He has got the kitchen separated from the rest of the house, and the windows barred, and the doors. His arrangements for spraying unwelcome callers with boiling water, and keeping on the supply, are really remarkable. And there are relays of red-hot pokers for hand-to-hand fighting.

"I wondered they didn't retreat into the kitchen yesterday, and defend themselves there, but I suppose they didn't know how many men Cooper was bringing, or how long they might stay. . . . Isn't Phillips talking to someone?"

Phillips was. The voices went on in the hall for some minutes. His own, quiet and deferential, broken occasionally by another, somewhat louder, and of a more open-air quality.

Then he appeared at the door. "Mr. Burman, of Upper Helford, is waiting

to see you, sir. I told him you were engaged, but he won't go, and he says he doesn't want to be long, because of the tide."

"Do you know him?" Martin asked.

"Not well, sir. He supplies the fish."

"Then the fishmonger must wait."

"They're good fish," Helen remarked, with appreciation. "Don't make him wait too long."

The fish which earned this commendation were a kind of sprat or pilchard, of which a liberal supply had been distributed on the evening before Cooper's appearance had disturbed the routines of the district.

Besides these fish, there were eggs on the table, milk, unleavened cakes, and butter of Betty's making, and some apples, and a weak solution of the precious tea.

"He isn't exactly a fishmonger," Phillips began, with hesitation.

"What is he?" Martin asked.

"Well, sir, he was a farmer on Upper Helford, and his sons cleared out with the rest, but he wouldn't leave. He's got two or three men there. You can see them from the cliff. And he just goes on farming. He doesn't let anyone go over, and when we've had a boat, once or twice, it's disappeared in the night."

"Do you mean he's on a separate island?"

"It's scarcely that, sir. Anyone might cross at low tide, if they could get through the mud, where Helford Brook used to run, but there's barbed wire now along the other side, and a stiff climb it would be."

"Isn't Helford where Butcher is?"

"No, sir. That's Helford Grange, where old Mr. Carson lived, that owned Upper Helford, and Lower Helford too, for that matter. But the Grange is a mile or more to the south, the other side of Cowley."

"Don't people go over at all?"

"Well, sir, Jim Arter tried, and he was lying this side again the next morning, with a charge of shot in his back. Mr. Burman had warned us what it would be, and he just went to find out."

This was the man who was now standing in the hall, demanding an audience with Martin, with a shotgun under his arm. Phillips mentioned the gun.

"All the same," Martin decided, "I think we'll see him, even though the gun may be the one which was discharged into Mr. Arter's anatomy. I don't suppose he's calling with a program of promiscuous homicide. Apart from that, he sounds interesting."

It was the haystack which was mainly responsible for this decision. In the course of fuller explanations than there is space to chronicle, Phillips had mentioned that the top of one of these erections could be observed from the

opposite shore, as an evidence of his farming activities. Martin felt that this placed him definitely on the side of those who would seek to conserve rather than to ruin. The fate of the investigating Arter was of a less certain significance. They knew, from their own experiences, that he might have deserved his end.

"All the same," Claire remarked, "I shouldn't care to sit with my back to him. Habits grow so easily now."

"Well, no one need," Helen said, only half seriously. "There are four sides to the table." She was less used than were the others to the proximity of potential violence, but she would have felt secure against more than one intruder in her present company. But she added, "Shall we go?" with a doubt of whether Martin would prefer their absence which would not have occurred to Claire.

"No. Why should you?" And while he answered, the question settled itself.

"I'm afraid the tide won't wait," said the voice they had heard in the hall, and the door opened to admit a man rather largely made, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, and garments that were consistent enough with the character of farmer-fisherman which had been attributed to him, terminating in a pair of brown leggings, and substantial boots.

He glanced round the well-appointed room, and at the well-laid table, with self-possession enough, but with an evident adjustment of mental perspective, which resulted in an apologetic, "Pardon, ladies"—and his hat come down in his hand.

He showed a mass of shaggy grizzled hair, merging into a beard that was full and brown. He may have been nearer sixty than fifty, but he looked ten years younger. His face was weather-beaten, but not showing any other signs of loss of vigor. His eyes were deep-set, beneath bushy brows, gray and keen, but not unkindly.

He leaned his gun, an ancient muzzle-loader, but looking in as good condition as its owner, against the wall, as Martin asked him politely, "Won't you sit down?" and indicated the farther side of the table.

Phillips placed a chair, and withdrew.

"You will like something to eat after your voyage," Helen said pleasantly. She was too practiced a hostess not to deal with the situation easily, though she had some hesitation in placing this informal visitor socially, and her voice had that note of aloofness—remote, rather than condescending—which came into it so easily.

The man hesitated, from whatever motive, and glanced keenly and thoughtfully round the little group before he answered. Then he said, "Thanks, ma'am, I've got half an hour," and took the waiting chair.

Claire thought, as she passed the apples, "She'll always do the queen-stunt

better than I should." If Martin were to be the king of an island state, she had no doubt of who would be better adapted for the part of official wife. But for John Burman's presence, she would, no doubt, have said it, with her usual frankness.

Burman ate, and surveyed the fare. He was quite at his ease. "I see you're careful with the tea," he remarked, looking at Martin. "I reckon that thief Butcher's got plenty."

"Why do you call him a thief?"

"You're new here," Burman answered. "Tom tells me you've settled Bellamy's lot, and set Cooper on the run. I suppose Butcher'll come next."

Martin declined to be drawn. He said, "It was really Tom who settled Bellamy's lot, and saved our lives in doing it. We had been obliged to kill Bellamy before that. . . . I'm afraid there'll be more trouble with Cooper. . . . Yes, they've asked me to take control. Are you with us?"

Burman did not answer quickly. At length he said: "I'm not with you. I may be for you. That depends on what you mean to do. I'm not against you so far. I came to learn. . . . We shan't quarrel, if you leave Helford alone."

Martin considered. Here was another unforeseeable factor. A declaration of independence at his very door. Of independence, but not of active hostility.

He did not know what other complications might follow should he accept this. But he liked the man. And he needed friends. He answered diplomatically:

"I don't want to disturb you. From what I've heard, Upper Helford has been able to look after itself. But I think I can ask your help, because it seems to me that we shall be fighting your battles. . . . You've got a haystack."

Burman was not slow, but he did not follow this. He said: "It's not for sale. We shall need it for our own stock in the winter."

"That's what I meant," said Martin. "What other stacks are there?"

"There's not one that I know of," Burman answered.

"Well, how long would they leave yours, when they learn what winter means? There are cattle everywhere, running wild. But it won't be only the wild ones. There are cows fenced up, more or less, all over the place. Everyone seems to be living largely on the milk. I don't know how it is that there has been so little forethought, except that there's been so much to plunder, and so much quarreling. If we can do something to organize things now—if it's not too late—I think you should be willing to help us."

"Maybe, yes," was the cautious answer, "if that's what you mean. But I can't do much this side. I won't risk—" He broke off abruptly. "I'm helping now with the fish. And a pinch of Butcher's tea, or a pound of tobacco, all I get back. But the fish mayn't last. They come and go. There's times when we catch none, and times when we bring up strange sorts that we daren't eat. I

think, maybe, you've come about the right time."

He sat silent for a minute or two, as though he were weighing Martin's problem in his own way, and then spoke again: "Butcher looks ahead, in his own way. He won't starve. But he only plans for himself. . . . Yes, I reckon it's about the right time. There's some decent ones among them, but they want leading. There's that missionary woman ought to help, and there's Ellis Roberts—you could trust him."

Martin said, "Ellis is dead. I didn't see him alive." He told briefly what he knew of the matter.

"That's bad luck," said Burman. "There's worse left." He rose, saying that he should miss the tide.

Martin felt that this man could help him in many ways, and that his good will would be worth getting. He wondered how he could win a similar confidence.

"We mustn't ask you to stay now," he said. "We know the tide won't. But, if I may, I'll come and call on you tomorrow. I should like another talk, when we've more leisure."

It had entered his mind that to offer to go alone into Burman's territory, after what had happened to the adventurous Arter, would be a sign of confidence which might attain his end, but he quickly learned his mistake.

Burman was half-way to the door when he spoke, and he swung round instantly.

"No," he said, with a note of anger in his voice, for which there seemed little provocation. "I allow no one my side." Then he paused abruptly, as though a new thought had entered his mind. He looked at Helen, who had risen courteously at his abrupt signal of departure. When he spoke again, the anger had left his voice, which had a note of hesitation, even of awkwardness, of which he had shown no sign previously. "If you like," he said, "I'll take the girl."

"I think not," Martin answered quietly. The proposal was as puzzling as it was audacious. It might be a jest, or a foolish insolence. But Martin did not judge the man as likely to err in such directions. In the present social disorder, it might even be taken as a serious offer of marriage. He might not understand the existing relationships.

Helen stood silent and self-possessed. A smile at the absurdity of the suggestion parted her lips.

Burman was quickly conscious of the ambiguity of his proposal. He added: "If you trust me, I'll trust you. She shall come back tomorrow, if the calm lasts."

"I think not," Martin repeated. "I trust you well enough, but the suggestion is unreasonable. There is no occasion for hostages. If you wish to work with

us, we shall be glad; but, if not, I think you will be the loser.”

“You offered to come yourself. I only want to be left alone.” He appeared to realize that the proposal was hopeless, and attempted no further argument, but he was plainly disappointed at the refusal.

“I don’t mind going,” said Claire.

She spoke impulsively. The love of experience, of adventure, may have impelled her, but she was aware also that the impulse sprang from that clear and sudden realization that Helen would always be the “official wife.” If she were to do her part to make a success of the strange ménage into which fate had thrown them, it was outside the house, rather than in it, that she must prove her value. She had formed her own opinion of Burman, and did not fear him. Beyond that, she felt that there must be some reason for such a proposal, and she was of some curiosity to probe it.

Her words drew the glances of those around her in a surprise which was general. Helen made an exclamation of protest.

Claire looked to Martin as she spoke, and saw the assent which quickly followed his first surprise and reluctance. He would much rather have gone himself. He would have rejected the thought of Helen going alone, even had she been willing—which it would be difficult to imagine—with an abrupt finality. But Claire was different. He did not think that any treachery was intended, though there was an impression of mystery, which might prove to be of much account, or of little.

Burman looked directly at Claire for the first time. Previously, his attention had been directed to Martin; his admiration to Helen. His offer had been deliberate, with a motive which they could not know. It had been to take Helen. Not any woman who might offer.

Claire was conscious of a glance that was shrewd and penetrating. She felt that she was being comprehensively appraised, as might have been a heifer at Helford market six months ago. But it was too impersonal for resentment.

“I can’t wait more’n a minute,” he said.

Claire, rightly taking this for assent, answered, “I shan’t be half,” and went out of the room.

Helen followed her at once. They heard her voice, “You’ll need—” as the door closed.

“She’ll be quite safe?” Martin asked.

“Yes—if the calm lasts.”

Martin said no more on that point. He had not been thinking of the danger of water. A minute passed, and Burman glanced restlessly at the door. He was clearly uneasy at the delay.

“Sister?” he said abruptly.

In a few words Martin told him the true position, including the claim upon

Claire which was being made by the rest of the community. He felt he could judge the man by how he accepted the confidence.

Burman offered no opinion on the ethical aspects of the problem. He said, "I'd back you'd come top in a scrap."

Claire, being a woman, was more than the half-minute she promised. But she had little preparation to make. During her retirement, she appeared to have done no more than to resume the belt of yesterday, with the knife and pistol which she had used to such good purpose in the tunnel fight of two days ago.

If she had made other provisions for the night's absence, they were not outwardly visible.

Burman looked at her belted ironmongery with more interest than satisfaction. "If you don't come friendly—" he began.

"It's not for you, it's before," Claire answered, with sufficient clarity.

Burman nodded. "We'd best be moving," he said restlessly.

Claire followed him through the door, waving a hand of casual parting. "Back tomorrow. . . . Take care of the chestnut," her voice came back cheerfully through the closing door.

[VI]

"Will she be safe?" Helen said doubtfully, as the sound of their steps receded. She was not quite easy in mind, feeling obscurely that Claire had taken a risk to which she had been invited, and which she should have accepted if anyone were to do so.

Martin answered: "I think she'll be safe enough. There's something we don't understand yet. . . . I don't suppose she gave it a thought, but it's a fact that it removes her from the scene for the time, if Butcher or the others should try to make any trouble."

The "two hours before sunset" were already passing, and Butcher's threat was upon them.

Then Jack Tolley came. "There'll be no trouble today," he reported. "There's been a heap of talk, and some quarreling, but our lot knew their own minds, and the rest didn't. Friscoe talked big about what he'd do, and Pellow keeps quiet, and Butcher's trying to make all the trouble he can, without coming into the front row, but I think they mostly mean to wait to hear what you've got to say. I think you'll get them all to the meeting. It's what happens then that's going to settle it. Pellow may need watching. He's quiet, and stubborn. His sister's married to one of Butcher's men. He helped us turn Bellamy out. He's a good fighter. But he wouldn't come with us this last time. I don't know why. He's hard to drive, but if he trusts you, he'll come willing. . . . Tom's been after Burman. He thinks he might help." He began to

explain about Burman.

Martin stopped him to tell him of what had happened, and of Claire's going.

Jack made no comment, being unsure whether he had been told all the truth, or what else might underlie her departure.

Martin asked if he could stay for a time. He had a project of compiling a complete register of the population of his new dominion, with details of each individual. In particular, what occupations they had previously followed, so that he could have a comprehensive knowledge of the human material at his disposal.

This was work to Jack's liking. He was used to the pen. He liked method. He would willingly stay for an hour. They were on this work together, when Phillips announced that Butcher was again requesting an interview.

It was sunset without, and the shadowing of the room was already warning them that the work could not be continued much longer. The resources of the house did not include any provision for artificial lighting, under the new conditions of life. It was a problem which was only beginning to become serious, as the days were shortening.

"Yes, I'll see him," Martin answered. "I expect we've done for tonight," he added to Jack. "No. Don't go. You'd better hear what he's got to say this time. . . . Yes, of course you'll stay." The last words were to Helen, who was reknitting a damaged garment for one of the children.

Butcher entered without formality. He pulled a chair up to the table, and sat down so that Martin was opposite to him. He ignored the others. "May I see you alone?" The tone was something less than rude, but it lacked courtesy. It was not a command, but it assumed that assent would follow.

"I don't see any need for that."

"I think it would be better. There are one or two personal matters which I should like to talk over."

"I am willing to hear them."

"I would prefer to see you privately."

"I never see anyone alone now."

It was a decision made as it was spoken. Martin guessed that the man had come to propose some form of alliance, whether in good faith or treachery, and he had no mind that such a bond should be suspected between them. It was best that Jack should hear.

He thought that Butcher was annoyed and disconcerted, though too practiced in control of voice and expression to disclose his feeling. "Just as you like," he said easily. "I only thought you might prefer it, as it's a business talk. It doesn't matter on my side. But what happens when we all meet Thursday can best be settled beforehand. If you want the girl, I don't say that it

couldn't be managed. Or if you want to settle Cooper, and control things here in your own way, I don't say that mightn't be managed either. It needs someone. But if you want both you'll ask too much, and you'll get nothing. If Tom's lot stand for it, there's too many others that won't."

He paused, as though for Martin to answer, seeking to gage the effect he had produced. But Martin only said, "Well?" as though discussing a matter in which his interest was perfunctory.

Butcher went on, "You've got one chance. If it were known that Tom and I would both support you, you wouldn't have much trouble. Not at first, anyway. If you'll say what you really mean, I may find I can make a deal. I've come in a friendly way to talk it over."

"And if I won't deal, you think you can head the opposition successfully?" Martin suggested.

Butcher shook his head. "No, I don't quarrel," he said, "I've too much to do. But you'll fail without me. You can try, if you like. You'll learn when it's too late."

"I shall not fail," Martin assured him confidently. "Don't let that idea mislead you. It might be a dear mistake. . . . Tell me what you want."

Butcher did not find this easy to do. He really wanted an alliance with Martin which would have secured his commercial activities—an alliance preferably to be made in secret. But he was not yet willing to propose it plainly. "If we were assured of peace and security—" he began.

"For what?" Martin interrupted curtly.

The interruption confused Butcher for an evident second. Then his practiced suavity in negotiation resumed, and he answered readily.

"For our lives and property, and—"

"I couldn't promise you that. As for your lives, there may be men among you who may be needed should I decide to deal with Cooper, or should he attack us again. There will be no security till he's finished, one way or other."

"Then you would destroy all individual freedom? Do you think you can make military service compulsory? It couldn't be done. Even as things are, it couldn't last for a week."

Martin smiled slightly. "You assume too much. I don't intend to make anything compulsory. You can join Cooper tomorrow, if you prefer. The roads are open. But I'm not going to have my best men risk their lives, and perhaps lose them for the benefit of those who do nothing. . . . As to property. How do I know what you have, or how you have gained it, or for what purpose it may be needed by others? Suppose the spring should come, and I should find that all the available seed for some necessary crop should be in your hands. What do you suppose I should do?"

"But if that were so, I should be prepared to sell it. Surely you would not

support any man who would take it from me without payment? That would be anarchy. If you allow such things as that, no man will save anything. There will be no incentive to labor. You would reduce every man in the end to a common poverty. I suppose that you would support me in selling it.”

“At a price of your fixing?” Martin answered. “Not for a moment.”

He leaned forward, and spoke slowly and decisively. “Mr. Butcher, I should hang you sooner. If we are to work together at all, we must understand each other clearly. There will be no lack of incentive to work, if I have my way. Every man shall have the fruit of his labor, and shall sell it at the highest price he can get. I have watched the other incentive—the incentive of starvation. I will have no man working on such terms that he has a scanty margin for himself, after he has handed the bulk to others.

“You may sell your corn at your own price, *if you have grown it with your own labor*. You may sell fish at your own price, *if you have caught it with your own nets*. But not otherwise.

“That, at least, is how it seems to me that it will be best to have it. . . . But I may see reason to change my view. I cannot tell. You may barter for your own need, and I will protect you to hold what you gain, even though it may be coveted by others. But if you gain by barter that which you do not need, so that you may take a later advantage of the necessity of others, I may interfere to protect them.

“And there is one change about which there is no doubt at all. There will be no charging of usury. Not even though you label it ‘interest,’ and profess that its moderation renders it harmless. A spade today has the same value as a spade three years hence. To think otherwise is to support the subtlest and most devilish slavery that the world has known.”

Butcher did not appear to resent this plain speaking, nor to regard its personal aspect.

He said, “I have heard that kind of talk before, and it sounds well, but it won’t work. You’ll find you can’t go far without capital in some form, and you can’t use capital without some risk of loss, and you can’t have risk of loss without some prospect of gaining. You’ll find that’s the real point, and I don’t know how you’ll get over it. But perhaps you do. I shan’t interfere.”

He spoke as one who listens to a youthful folly, such as can only be taught by experience. He did not oppose it. He only advised—and smiled.

Martin did not answer directly. “There is a form which all who joined us agreed to sign.” He saw that Jack had it in readiness. He passed it over.

Butcher’s face was expressionless as he read it—twice, and very carefully.

At last he said: “If I sign this, does it mean that I adopt your views, or believe in the possibility of their success?”

“No. Naturally it cannot. It means obedience. Neither more—nor less.”

“And if I decline?”

“I shall do nothing till Thursday. After that, those who do not sign will go—how far I shall tell you then. I may put them afloat.”

“You can’t do that; there are no boats.”

Martin, who, for once in his life, at least, had said more than he meant, thought it best to pass the retort in silence. Butcher made no further comment. He wrote with practiced ease a somewhat illegible signature, beneath the neat regularity of Jack’s handwriting.

He rose immediately. He said, “You can have my name now. I won’t wait till Thursday. You can tell the others I’m with you. You’ll find my support’s worth having. I’ll say good day now.”

Giving no time for reply, he turned, and went.

Helen looked at Martin with troubled eyes. “Do you trust him?” she said doubtfully.

“I don’t trust him at all, beyond the point at which his interest may move with ours. . . . Probably when I’m murdered, and half-forgotten, he’ll still be trading. And he probably thinks he can outwit anyone who talks as foolishly as I do. . . . Even Jack thought I had more sense.” He turned a sudden smiling glance to Jack Tolley, with the last words. But though Jack may have been surprised to learn that his mind was read so clearly, he was not disconcerted.

He answered, “No, sir. Not quite. I’m not sure that I understood. But I expect you’re right. I only thought that there are a lot of things that want doing before such questions will matter, if they ever do. But I think you’re right about Butcher. He thinks we shall have our own way, for a time, at least, and he didn’t mean to be the last to come on to the winning side.”

“What was my mistake about the boats?”

“Well, there aren’t any. There was the one that Mrs. Webster came in, but it disappeared. And there were two others—none of them was fit for the sea. They all disappeared the same night. Then there was a sailing boat washed ashore, badly damaged. Dick Pugh patched it up, and it went also. Everyone thinks that Burman steals them, but there’s no proof.”

“He seems enterprising,” Martin commented. He would know more about him when Claire returned.

But the next day came, and though the sea was calm, Burman’s boat did not appear at the expected hour, and Claire did not return.

[VII]

As he went out of the gate, Burman turned to the right. It was the opposite way from that which Claire had ridden in the morning, and she looked round with an alert inquiry as the walk proceeded.

The district had been well-wooded, oak and ash lining the hedges, and copses of young timber, and hazel-thickets filling the hollows. Cottages had been scattered here and there, usually well back from the road, with occasional larger houses. Now the trees were fallen or scattered, some of them still showing a valiant effort of green on their uprising branches, though their trunks were prone, and their roots were largely extruded.

They met a man of Butcher's with a skip of fish on his back. He passed a word of civil greeting to Burman, and gave a look of silent curiosity to his companion.

Claire judged that her departure would soon be known to others. She wondered whether any effort might be made to prevent it.

"How far is it," she asked, "to the boat?"

"Maybe a mile—maybe more," he answered.

"It's a pity we didn't use the horses," she said. "I suppose someone could have taken them back."

"You might have said so earlier. I didn't know you'd got any," her companion answered.

His pace was fast, even for Claire, and he seemed disinclined to talk. He turned off from the road to the right, at a broken stile. They went by a well-trodden hedge-side path, on which a young bull confronted them. It showed a red wound where it had been gored in the shoulder.

Driven from the herd by a parent twice its weight, and having been chastised for its presumption, it was in a mood to make trouble.

Its front hoofs pawed as they approached, and its head moved threateningly. Claire saw a red and sullen eye, and would gladly have turned aside, but Burman did not change his pace or direction. He had sent too many of its kind to the butcher.

Before it had made up a sulky mind whether to contest the path or to yield, it was aware of a rough push from a gun-barrel in its ribs, and a voice that made no doubt of who was master here. It turned away with a new confusion in its mind, having had reason to suppose that the human race was of a somewhat softer kind. It concluded that it was a bad day for young bulls, which would have been confirmed had it understood the farmer's thought, and the words that followed.

Claire was aware of some muttered contempt for the townbred people who had made such an exhibition possible. Then he spoke aloud. "Understand cattle?"

"Not much," said Claire. "They seem to understand you."

"There's two hundred," he said, "to be found without going very far from here. Round them up. Keep the best through the winter. Kill and salt the others. Don't keep more than you'll feed when the snow comes." He walked

on in silence.

They came to a place where the land sloped down to the water. Here there had been a plantation of young firs, which had met the full force of the gale. A path had been cleared through fallen trunks and broken branches; otherwise they must have waded among them, for the storm had literally flattened them against the hillside.

Looking over dead upstanding boughs, and green upthrusting saplings, and weeds that often grew beyond her height in this incredible chance of unobstructed sun, Claire had short glimpses of familiar sea, until they turned right-hand, to descend a narrow eastward hollow, in which some of the smaller trees still stood; and as it widened they came to the water.

The tide had turned an hour ago, and the boat, moored to a tree that grew at the water's edge, was straining on the rope that held it. Two men rose as they approached, and began to haul her in. One of them was a stranger to Claire. The other was Monty Beeston.

They looked at Burman's companion with a natural wonder. Everyone knew that visitors were not welcomed at Upper Helford. Perhaps she had deserted Martin for a more exclusive companionship. So they speculated silently.

There was a husky whisper from Monty, as Burman dropped into the boat before her.

"Going willing?" he asked anxiously.

"Quite," she said. "Back tomorrow." She judged that the woman-hater would have been pleased to attempt her rescue, had she denied it.

She jumped into a boat that swayed two feet below her. The boat was small for the open sea, but heavy for a single rower. Burman had strength, but little skill. In fact, he had never seen a stretch of water larger than the local reservoir till the ocean paid him this unexpected visit.

They were in an alley of water less than twenty yards across, with wooded banks on either side, from which they ran out quickly, as the tide drew them.

Burman was none too quick in getting the boat's head straight, and the sides of the narrow channel were perilous with up-jutting trees, which Claire could dimly see as she bent over the boat's side in the deepening dusk. That was their first trouble. The water was full of obstacles. Burman had learned a way of safety at full tide, but the last hour made a difference. He told this briefly, as they came clear of a little headland, and the open sea was before them.

"Oh, I expect we shall manage," she replied with unruffled cheerfulness.

"Can you swim?" he inquired.

"Yes—a little." The dusk hid the smile with which she answered.

"I can't," he said. He pulled harder. He watched the receding shore, using

his left only.

Claire shipped the rudder, which had lain in the well of the boat. "Tell me where to steer for, and we shall get on better," she suggested.

"Can you?" he answered, with relief in his voice.

She looked round. Behind them, the land they had left showed abrupt cliffs, amidst which the little channel from which they had issued was no longer visible. To north and east the falling night showed nothing but open sea. On her left hand, as she sat at the tiller, was the peninsula, or island, of Upper Helford. At this state of the tide it was completely isolated.

Lower Helford was beneath their keel. At low tide it would be barely covered. Ruined buildings, not yet completely demolished, the broken spire of a chapel, and the head of a mine-shaft would show above the water.

The eastern shore of Upper Helford was steep, though its height was not great. The raw new coasts that were being formed by sea and wind were very different from those that had endured for millenniums. There was no sand, no smoothness. Soft soils were still being subjected to swift corrosion. Their surfaces were fanged with numerous projections of wood and stone and metal from the remains of human activities, and with the stumps of broken trees.

He rested on his oars for a moment to give her the directions for which she asked. It appeared that there was no place for landing on this side. They must go round the head of the peninsula, and land on its western coast.

Looking landward, as he spoke, Claire noticed a herring-gull on the water, scarcely two oars' length distant. It was not troubled by their presence. It was not troubled by the waves. One by one they seemed to slide beneath it, and pass on, and leave it serene and indifferent. The east coast of Upper Helford was about a mile in length. Already, they were almost level with its northern limit. Beyond it the summer sunset had faded, and a planet brightened. Every second that Burman rested the position of this planet altered, drawing closer to the dim lift of the land's edge.

"We are drifting fast—" she began.

"Yes," he said. "We left it too late." He started rowing again. "If you go for that star, you'll be about right now. We'll have to keep close inshore as we go round now, and risk it."

The sea was not really rough. As they came round the headland they met a breeze from the southwest, but it was not enough to disturb it greatly. But now and then they would pass through a space of more turbulent water, and once Claire thought she heard the noise of breaking waves on her right. It was too dark now to see more than a short space around them, the shadow of the coast they were passing, and a few stars that were brilliant overhead.

"Is there any land to the north?"

"You'll see tomorrow," was the only answer.

Burman pulled hard. He was not inclined to talk. He was, in fact, very frightened. To every man his own perils. He would rather have faced the fiercest bull that ever breathed, with a cudgel for his defense, than be here, on this night of waters, of which he had learned just sufficient to dread. . . . He knew little of the power of the helm, or of the assistance that Claire could render.

Had he been alone, he might have failed in a very difficult struggle. As it was, they made their landing well enough, at a spot where a row of pollard willows showed dim heads above the water; and passing these and crossing a submerged field, where the oars touched bottom more than once, they turned into the deep pool of a little land-locked bay, and were hailed, as they grounded on a gravel bank, by a boyish voice from the darkness.

[VIII]

As the boat grounded, Claire saw a boy's form appear vaguely out of the darkness, with an exclamation of reproach for the lateness of the return, which checked abruptly—no doubt, she thought, as her presence was recognized.

"It's all right, Chris. Tie her up now, and come on. We'll talk at the house," said Burman, as he lifted a small sack from the bottom of the boat, and led the way into the darkness, with Claire behind him.

"Careful here," he warned her, a moment later, as he began to mount some steps in a confronting wall of blackness. "There's no rail, but you'll be right if you follow close."

She could scarcely see the steps, but she realized the advantage of "following close" under such circumstances, and did her best to keep pace with one who climbed an accustomed way. It seemed that the steps, which were of wood, ran up the side of a cliff that rose like a wall, so that she could steady herself with a hand that pressed against it as she climbed.

It was lighter as they gained the top and a narrow path that began to descend after a stile had been crossed, to a field where cows bulked dimly, to some farm-buildings, and beyond these to the farmhouse itself.

It was not more than five minutes' walk, and they were entering the kitchen as Chris joined them after securing the boat. An oil lamp was just alight on the table, and Burman turned it up, showing a low oak-beamed room, with a large and ancient hearth.

"I thought you'd need it tonight, dad," said the voice behind them.

"We haven't had a light yet. We go to bed when it gets dark," Burman explained. "We save here."

Claire was conscious that she was being inspected with some curiosity, and that introductions were lacking.

"I expect your son—" she began.

"Daughter," Burman corrected.

"Your daughter is rather surprised that you've brought a visitor."

"She's very glad to see one," said Chris. "I expect you're hungry. Dad's usually starved when he comes back."

Claire explained that they had had a meal not very long before, but Burman dismissed the idea. Chris would fry them some ham and eggs. He sat down heavily in a fireside chair, after inviting Claire to one that was opposite.

"We'll leave talk till tomorrow," he said.

She watched Chris, adroitly active with the frying-pan, and decided that she would still have taken her for a boy, had she not been informed differently.

The girl, meeting Claire's eyes, broke into a moment of laughter. "They're Sam's," she said. "Some he left. I looked awful in them at first, but I've filled out since then." She still looked slim enough. "I was just his height, so they don't do so badly now. . . . I suppose you're staying with us tonight, but I don't know where we shall put you up. I don't expect dad thought of that."

The words might have seemed inhospitable if spoken differently. But they held a light-hearted friendliness which robbed them of ungracious meaning.

Her father, who had been considering the problem for the last few minutes—it was true that he had not thought of it earlier—was relieved to hear it mentioned. "There's good straw over the hen-loft," he ventured with some timidity.

"She can't sleep there, dad."

"She's slept on worse than straw," said Claire. "It sounds heavenly." She yawned as she spoke, for it had been a long day, of some incident, and she was conscious of a healthy tiredness.

"We can't do better for tonight, Chris. Now can we?" her father asked.

Claire thought of a time, not many months ago, when she had slept on a bare patch of land that the seas submerged daily—slept till she was washed by the returning waves, and had to leave her haven for that last swim that had so nearly ended . . . She made it clear that the straw would not be unwelcome.

She had promised not to leave the loft before Chris should call her, lest the men should be surprised at her presence, but the undertaking was needless, for she was still sleeping when the noise of the pushing-up of the trapdoor disturbed senses which had become alert, even in sleep, to the danger of surrounding movement. She half rose from the depths of the clean straw in which she had buried herself, as Chris advanced toward her.

"No, don't get up. I want to talk to you here. I've got ten minutes. I've told Ned that I shan't take him out today, unless he does the pig-feeding. I shall

have breakfast ready in half an hour.”

She sat down on the floor, chin in hands, elbows on knees, and regarded Claire attentively. She gave a little sigh of relief, as though the inspection had satisfied her. “I’m not going to ask you anything now. I know dad wants the first innings. But I want you to promise that you’ll tell the real truth, whatever dad asks you to say.”

Claire said: “I don’t know what you mean; but that sounds easy to promise.”

“I’ll take you out to fish later on, and we can talk then. You’ll have to see grandmother first. . . . I mustn’t stay now. Breakfast’s in the kitchen. I’ve told the men you won’t shoot them.”

“How many men are there?”

“Two—three, if you count Ned.”

“Is that all there are of you?”

“Yes—except grandmother. The boys wouldn’t stay. That’s why I’ve got Sam’s clothes. They’re better for some things—and they save mine. I don’t know when I shall get any more. We don’t get much for the fish, besides tea and tobacco. Dad doesn’t mind; he says it’s safer—but I mustn’t talk about that yet. I really must go now.”

She jumped up lightly, and disappeared down the ladder. Then her head appeared again, as she called out: “Come inside in two minutes, and I’ll have some hot water ready. That’s what I came to say. We’re not really savages.”

Claire followed a few minutes later.

[IX]

After breakfast, before the talk with John Burman which was to explain the purpose for which he had invited her, Claire had sat for more than an hour with his mother, a bedridden woman, obviously of great age, but with her faculties still clear, and had guessed something of the trouble from the anxious questioning which she had encountered, and the allusions to the granddaughter which had recurred continually.

Anyway, she was not kept in doubt when he began. He came to the point immediately.

“Well, ma’am, you’ve seen how we live, and how few we are. You can guess how we’d have fared, if we’d not kept to ourselves. But it’s the girl that’s the trouble. No one knows that there’s one here, and I don’t mean that they shall. Not till times change, anyway. She’s quite safe here, though she’s a bit too free with that young lout she takes out to the fishing.”

“But she’s only a child,” said Claire.

“She’s not as young as she looks. She was at college last spring. Came

home for Whitsunday, or she wouldn't be here now. Her brothers cleared, but she chose to stay. Well, she doesn't like being cooped here. The fishing kept her quiet for a time. That was her idea. She used to go fishing in Cornwall. So when I found a sailing-boat that we could patch up—I don't let them keep any boats on the other side—she started fishing with a net we used for the beasts. But she's done better than that now. . . . Well, she promised me she wouldn't go over to the other side, nor be seen on this—not that that would matter so much in those clothes she's wearing now; and she'll keep her promise right enough while it lasts, but she's saying every day now that it won't last much longer.

"She knows there's hundreds on the other side, and things happening, and she feels out of it all. When I tell her how things are she thinks I just talk to scare her. I thought if she heard the same tale from you she might learn that older folk know best.

"She's just a child, as you say, and I wouldn't have her see what's going on on that side, not if she were as safe as a church. . . . But you'll know how to tell her better than I, and maybe she'll hear reason from you."

"You want me to tell her just how things have been, neither better nor worse?" asked Claire. "Well, I'll do that. But I hope they'll be better soon. You won't want to keep her here alone, if we get them straight? She can't be here all her life, can she?"

John Burman did not look very pleased at this suggestion. The fact was that, real though his anxiety for his daughter might be, he valued his isolation on other grounds. He might value his daughter most, and he had no doubt of the sincerity of the motive which he expressed, but he also valued the farm which his ancestors had held for four hundred years.

He answered doubtfully: "We must talk of that when it's done. We'd best take things as they are now. I'll be glad enough to see them changed, but it's not done yet."

"I think there's going to be a change, and I think it's coming soon," said Claire confidently. "But there may be trouble first, and I'm sure Chris is best out of it. I'm quite willing to tell her that. You'd better keep Ned ashore. I shan't want him listening. We'll have a good talk in the boat."

"You think you'll manage?" he said, rather doubtfully. "Ned's a handy lad, and she's taught him a good bit."

He was not quite sure what the nature of this conversation, which required no auditor, was going to be.

"Yes, I can promise that. I'm quite used to boats," she answered easily. She remembered the worry of the night before, which she had thought so needless.

He looked at her speculatively.

"Did you kill Bellamy, as the talk goes?" he surprised her by asking.

“More or less, I suppose. There wasn’t much choice,” she answered. Would everyone always look upon her, she wondered, as having blood on her hands? If they could only understand how easy—how inevitable—it had all been.

“I shouldn’t like her to get those kind of ideas,” he said vaguely, but Claire knew what he meant.

[X]

“You’d better let me steer, if you can manage the sail,” Chris said. “The wind’s all right, but it’s only at one spot that we can get her over Low Meadow, even with a good tide.”

Seen by daylight, the little harbor, where was moored the fleet of boats Burman had collected, was a gravel quarry, into which the seas had poured on its lower side, so that the water it contained was much deeper than that of the flooded fields over which the waves had advanced to fill it—fields Chris still called by the names they had borne for a dozen generations in the mouths of her ancestors.

Claire saw the wooden steps that she had climbed in the darkness, an old disused flight to the level of the higher road, which had become the only means of reaching the unflooded part of the quarry floor.

The fishing-boat was small, but stoutly built and lugger-rigged, such as were common on the Welsh coasts. It was not difficult to handle, but it drew more water than the one on which Burman was accustomed to visit the mainland, and there was reason for Chris’s sigh of relief as they left the willows behind them, and felt the stronger breeze of the open sea.

It blew from the southwest, scarcely enough to roughen the water, which lay sunlit and placid to westward with an unbroken surface. Northward it showed ridges and knolls of land, too low and small and sea-swept for any human use.

The boat went smoothly onward, keeping to the edge of the shallower water, Chris talking all the time of the flooded land beneath them. “That’s the Hundred-acre that we’ve just left. Dad’ll never forgive the sea for taking his two best meadows.

“It’s here I get the best fishing, where the level keeps changing. Oh, it’s safe enough. I’ve been aground once or twice but I’ve got off. But I wish I’d learned to swim. . . . Could you really? I should love to learn. . . . We’re not going to fish today. We’ll just anchor, and talk. . . . Have you really had such ripping times? You looked as jolly as a pirate when you came in last night.”

“Some things are jollier to talk about than to live through,” Claire answered. “It’s been a hateful time, and it looks as though there’s more trouble

ahead. You'll never know how lucky you've been to be out of it. Fighting isn't jolly, except in books. It isn't jolly to get killed. It isn't jolly to hurt others, and watch them die. And it isn't jolly to know that your friends may be getting hurt or killed to protect you."

"I don't care," said the girl, "it isn't jolly to know things are going wrong, and not to be able to do anything to help, or to know what's happening. You might better be dead than that. You're just as dead as though you'd got killed, and you feel meaner."

"I know how you feel, but I think your father was right, all the same. You couldn't have done any good, and it's he who might have been in danger, if they'd known you are here. I hope things are going to be better, but if you understood how they have been—"

"How can I, when dad won't say a word he can help, except 'promise not to be seen'? They can't be killing each other all the time; they'd be dead before now, instead of eating a boatload of fish, every time I catch it."

"I'll tell you all I've seen, and all I've heard. You ought to know for yourself."

"I thought you looked the right sort. . . . Luff a bit. We can anchor in that pool. . . . That's about it. There's no hurry about getting back. There's some food under the seat."

So they sat and talked, or rather Claire did—a narrative broken by a battery of eager questions—till she became uneasy at the sight of the waning day, and remarked that it must be time for them to return.

Chris assented easily, but her comment on the information she had received did not suggest that the desired impression had been very deeply made.

"Golly, what a lark it all is!" she said gaily. "But you don't know everything. Nor dad. I've got something to show you when we get back, if you'll promise not to tell."

"I'm afraid I shall have to go home when we get back. It's getting late now."

"You can't get back tonight. It's too late already."

"I'm afraid I must. I promised definitely."

"Well, you couldn't. Not till tomorrow. It wouldn't be possible for dad to get the boat back. You don't want him drowned, do you? Besides, I really have something to show you—something you'd never guess."

[XI]

The following morning, Burman came with the morning tide, which was not his custom, bringing a note from Claire.

DEAR MARTIN:

If I'm not needed, I may stay a day or two longer, but let me know if I am, and I'll be back this afternoon.

I've got something on here rather interesting, and it might possibly be important, but I'll explain it when I get back. I am quite safe and well. Love to Helen, and, of course, to yourself. Kiss the babies for me.

CLAIRE

Martin sent a brief answer that there was no need for her to return till she wished. Perhaps, he thought, if she stayed away over Thursday, it might not be a bad thing. The note was cheerful. He knew that she could take care of herself. And he was finding already that he had little time to think of anything which was not forced upon him, little for his recovered children, little even for Helen.

Jack had come again, with a surprising amount of neatly tabulated information. He had prepared a census of the known population, with names and descriptions, and had found it to be somewhat larger than had been previously estimated. Excluding Cooper's gang, who were regarded as outlaws, and those at Upper Helford, whose numbers were not certainly known, it summarized a total of men 308, women 155, and children 31.

Martin left Jack congenially occupied in tabulating these records while he rode over to the railway camp, the condition of which, and of the surrounding country, he was anxious to see.

He went alone, having told no one of his intention, not even those of his own household, till the moment of starting. He realized that he must now move abroad at some personal risk not knowing what secret enmities he might have excited, or what plots might be contrived against him.

He kept to the main road through the ruins of Larkshill, meeting no one, and passed the narrow weed-choked entrance to Bycroft Lane.

Beyond that point, where the Larkshill Road bent to southward, Jack had warned him that it was blocked by the fall of a factory, and other obstacles, and that he would make the better progress by a field-path, which he would find on the west side of the road. He found this path easily. It was narrow, but worn hard.

Even to Martin, who had not the eye of a farmer, the state of the fields was appalling. Four months ago, they had been tamed and planted. The pastures had been grazed green and smooth, or enclosed for cutting. In the arable fields, the roots were sown, or the corn was springing. It did not seem possible that four months' neglect could have made so great a difference.

It was not a summer that had lacked fertility. In the fields where Burman

had toiled in Upper Helford, though he had been short-handed through the loss of his sons, and diverted by many urgencies, hay and corn had been heavy in yield beyond precedent—perhaps, in part, because the haze of dirt which had hung in the air of the English midlands since his boyhood had at last been lifted, and the white clouds parted to skies of deeper blue than could have been seen before in ten years' watching.

Elsewhere they were fertile also, but they were weed-choked, trampled, and infested with vermin; and flocks of seabirds, forsaking their accustomed diet, fed freely on the ungarnered grain.

Martin got no sight of his goal till he came to the limit of a field which a tall hedge bounded.

Four months ago, the scene on which he looked had been one of the saddest products of the folly and greed of man that has ever repulsed the light on which our lives depend. Ruined iron-works showed ahead; a pit-head or two to the northward. Ground spread with the unseemly entrails of earth responded slowly, even now, to the wooing of sun and rain, and only patches of the coarser weeds had attempted its conquest. The bricks of fallen buildings, even though they had escaped the flames, were so blackened by the dirt to which they had become native, that they showed as though charred by fire. Between the ruins of the iron-works, and the nearest pit-head—perhaps half a mile away—he thought he recognized signs of the encampment to which Jack had directed him. A trodden path that showed in that direction, straight ahead, and almost at right angles to the road beneath him, confirmed this supposition.

He turned his horse to the right, seeking a place at which he could descend to the road in safety. Looking down thus, he saw a man standing. He could not see his face. He was well-grown, but he gave an impression of youth. He was standing in obvious uncertainty. He went a few paces along the road, and then returned. His foot kicked the ground on which he gazed. He twisted in his hands a stick of some pliable wood, which bent without breaking. Farther down the road, there came the lilting sound of a banjo.

Martin continued his way. He stopped again when he came to the spot from which the music proceeded. Here there was a green recess in the bank, and the hedge was gapped, as though some creatures, men or animals, had found that the side was not too steep to clamber.

In the hollow, half sitting, half lying, was a young woman, with the banjo on her lap. She did not see Martin, who looked down on her at leisure.

The sight was pleasant enough. She was of attractive aspect, and she was evidently well-content, both with herself and the world. She wore no hat, and showed a head of black and glossy curls, lightly restrained by a green ribbon. Her dress, though not innocent of crease and stain, was very brightly colored. Slim extended legs were silk-stockinged, and her shoes (however acquired)

were neat and new.

She strummed the banjo idly, humming snatches of song, between bites into an apple which lay half-eaten beside her. Footsteps sounded on the road, and she looked up doubtfully. As she recognized them, a frown darkened her face, and her lips set sullenly.

"So you're here," said the youth that Martin had seen already.

The needless information obtained an answer of equal brevity. "And here I'll stay." She touched the banjo to a defiant note.

Martin saw his face. A mere boy. He was five years younger than she—perhaps more. He had a face which was naturally good-tempered, but was now distorted by a combination of anger and misery.

He stood irresolute, and she said: "You'd better clear. You won't get much if you stay." Then, as he stood silent, she added: "You get me what I told you, and then we'll talk."

"You know I've—" he began.

"Ada's got two," she answered.

"I don't know why you chose me, and then treat me like—" he began again.

"Those that chose can change," she interrupted quickly.

"I'd see you dead first."

"You're the kid!" she mocked.

His glance fell on her left arm. She drew it back quickly. It had three bracelets on it, of which the lowest flashed with a setting of diamonds. He stepped forward, and seized the retreating arm, drawing it roughly upward.

"Stop it, Will. You're hurting," she said angrily.

He took no notice. His fingers went under the bracelet, breaking it off her arm in two pieces, and the next moment the fragments of the gaudy toy were flung over the road into the ditch.

"You can tell Steve he'll go the same—" he began, but did not finish, for she had swung round her other arm, and struck him on the face.

"And now you'll get it," he said.

He had got a good grip of her before she guessed his purpose, but when she did there was a moment of furious struggling, with screams of protest. "Will, you brute—I'll tell Tom Aldworth."

The invocation was unfortunate. "Tom told me to do it. He said, 'Do it well, if you don't want it to end in murder.'" His voice, though somewhat breathless, was almost apologetic, but he had got her well over his knees, and the stick was descending.

Martin did not move. He was not at all sure that there would be wisdom in interference. In the end, he might be thanked by neither. The woman was now screaming abuse and protest, mingled with shrill cries as the strokes caught

her. But he only held her down the harder, and pulled her farther over, to operate on the back of the stockinged legs.

"Tom said, 'Do it well,' " he repeated, with the same note of apology to her protests. But when her tone changed to a note of pleading, and "I didn't mean it, Will. I didn't mean anything. . . . I won't do it again. I won't really," the blows paused. Martin judged it time to leave the scene unnoticed.

If they might not have thanked his intervention, still less would they have been likely to welcome the knowledge that there had been a spectator of this domestic difference.

[XII]

Martin rode on thoughtfully. Here was another aspect of the dearth of women, and its results. *Those who choose can change*. He wondered whether Tom's legislative wisdom had provided for that contingency. The young man known as Will was a stranger to him, though he judged that he was one of Tom's party. He had not been one of those who had joined the expedition against Bellamy. Probably he had been among those who had feared to leave their women unguarded—not, it seemed, without reason.

He was glad that he had observed the incident. Knowledge is power. To those who rule, it gives the power to act with wisdom. The power of knowledge is greatest when it is unsuspected. The realization of this was the second lesson in the isolation which he had chosen.

He came to a place where field and road drew to a common level, and a fallen gate was little obstacle to his passage, though his horse must step with caution among its broken bars. He decided to ride back to the point at which he had first struck the road, and take the path which had shown on the farther side.

The pair whose vocal and physical arguments he had observed, must have heard his approach before he could have seen them. He passed at a quick trot, not looking toward their retreat. But he was aware that they were close together, and he thought that the man's arms were round the woman, whose face was hidden.

He found the path easily, and walked his horse forward, for it was not wide or clear enough for any speed to be ventured. A short distance ahead, he saw three men. They were not coming toward him. They were stooping around something at the side of the path.

They rose as he approached, and he pulled up to speak to them. Two he knew already. They were out for a day's shooting, or trapping, and had rifles under their arms. Martin wondered what reserves of ammunition were available, and if there had been any thought to conserve it. Suppose that the

only remaining quantities should be in the hands of Carter or Butcher? That, like a thousand other things, must be the subject of a prompt inquiry.

The third man was a stranger. Hearing him called Steve, and supposing him to be the giver of the bracelet, Martin looked at him with speculation. He was a sallow-skinned man. Young enough, but a growing baldness had caused him to protect his head from sun and flies with a colored handkerchief, knotted at the corners. With greater conventionality, but less evident reason, a similar handkerchief was round his neck. Below that, he wore a fancy waistcoat, and a pair of moleskin trousers. He did not indulge in a shirt—a garment which appeared to be falling into a very general disfavor. A fancy waistcoat may be left unwashed for a few months with a less evident protest.

Steve had laid down an empty sack and was occupied with a white smooth-haired terrier, of which he was the apparent master, whose eagerness for a rat under some sheets of corrugated iron had caused the halt. The dog sniffed and barked round the edge, its stump of tail quivering with excitement.

Martin did not like the man's looks. He thought his eyes to be cunning and shifty, but he wanted to know him, and he took the shortest route to his confidence when he asked, looking at the dog, "Are there any more like him?"

"No," said the man. "T'old bitch bolted. This one bain't mine. It's Miss Temple's." He spoke with some traces of the dialect of a northern county, but in a very soft and drawling voice. His voice gave him an unexpected individuality. Martin understood how he might attract a dog—or a woman.

From him Martin learned that more than one of the dogs that had at first attached themselves to human owners had heard the call of the wilderness, and disappeared. The one that had belonged to Steve had become restless when a dog howled in the darkness, and had slipped away, and not returned.

Talk of this, and of the possibility of preserving the purity of some of the old breeds, led to the question of how much might be the extent of the remaining land, or of the men still living upon it.

"I want two or three volunteers," Martin added, "who will find out what Cooper's doing, and how many are with him. I want them to go beyond him, till they come to the water again, and let me know if there are any left alive who might be friendly, or needing help themselves."

He did not expect any immediate response, but Steve Fortune answered, "I'd do that," in his soft drawl. Here was a man that would take some knowing.

But he must not stay talking here. He had a further objective. He asked if he were taking the right path, and the men looked at each other doubtfully. He was on the straight way right enough, but he couldn't keep on it. At least, the horse couldn't. There was the canal. It was empty. But it was not easy for a horse to cross it, and the bridge was half a mile away.

Steve said, "I'll go. You won't need the dog." He passed the sack to one of

the others. Martin understood that a guide had been provided.

He had not come to the bridge before he had seen many indications of the rough and sordid existence to which even these people, who had been represented to him as the best element of the population, had descended.

He passed four men and a woman who sat on a patch of grassy ground, playing cards. The men played, the woman watched, looking over the shoulder of one of them. She said something in the man's ear, as Martin rode up. The man shot him a sudden glance, beneath a mass of shaggy hair that overhung his forehead. The glance was not friendly. He took no further notice, bending down to the game. Martin did not know any of them. They gave him no greeting. He saw that they were staking a few sticks of tobacco, and a heap of shining jewelry, among which some large diamonds glittered from ring and pendant. Probably the tobacco was the more highly valued now.

Gaining the camp, and inquiring first for Tom Aldworth he learned that he was away. A large ship's mast had been washed ashore, and Tom had got a party together to salvage a quantity of wire rope and ladder which were attached to it.

Hearing this, Martin rode over the flat and barren waste that lay between the camp and the sea along a beaten path, formed by the dragging of many heavy objects from shore to camp, and easily found the band of workers around the broken mast, which lay half-covered by a falling tide.

Tom and about a dozen helpers had already detached a quantity of wire rope and hempen cordage, and were now grouped around the cart which had been intended to assist its transport, but which was exhibiting a weakness that foretold a breakdown in the first fifty yards to anyone who was not of an exceptionally sanguine temperament. Neither horse nor cart appeared to have suffered from underwork on the rough tracks they followed, and the former, turning a patient head toward the arguing group of its masters, appeared to regard the difficulty with a quiet contentment.

There was a confused murmur of greeting as Martin rode up, not deficient either in respect or cordiality, and the group parted for Tom to advance to his horse's shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Martin asked.

"More than we can put right here. The hub's cracked, and that's loosening the spokes. The axle's about done for too. Butcher's got a spare wheel he wants to sell us. But we can't do anything here without Pellow. And it's a question whether he'd come. We miss Ellis Roberts with things like this."

"Well, I want to talk to you. Why not walk back with me, and see Pellow yourself? They can go on stripping the mast as the tide falls, and getting ready to load."

Tom agreed readily, and they walked back together.

"I suppose you're fairly sure things will be all right for tomorrow, or you wouldn't have been busy on that?" Martin asked. "It didn't look very urgent."

"I'm not as sure as I'd like to be," Tom answered. "There's too much talk, and the more they talk, the less they're sure about anything. I tried to get them all on to that job to keep their mouths shut, and give them something to do. But they wouldn't come, except those I'm sure of."

"There's no fresh trouble?"

"Not exactly. Only they're wondering what you mean to do, and whether they're not promising too much. They're afraid of having to obey a lot of laws they won't like. Miss Temple says the same."

"Says the same? Says what?"

"She says it's no use making a lot of laws."

"I want to see Miss Temple. My—Mrs. Webster told me about her." (Should he say "my wife," or "one of my wives" in future?)

"I think you'd better."

"Has she much influence?"

"She might about turn the scale. I don't mean merely a majority. We shall have that, with Butcher's lot coming in. Jack says that's certain. But we want more than that, now you've said you'll turn out those who won't join. We couldn't turn out nearly half. And we couldn't turn out the women."

"But Miss Temple wouldn't want to leave us? I thought she was about the best helper you'd got."

"I don't know. . . . She's the sort you can't turn. I think she means to help us, in her own way. But she could get about half the women in this camp, or hold them off, and it's not much use having the men alone."

Martin saw that. The idea of the men having sufficient loyalty to him to turn their wives into the wilderness, because they declined his authority, was absurd.

In a rash moment he had said that the women, equally with the men, must pledge their support, and whatever difficulty followed must be overcome, if he were not to fall at the first fence.

"I don't think there'll be any trouble about that," he said easily. "I expect they'll vote together—the women and their men—when the time comes. Is it only with the women that Miss Temple's influence counts?"

"No. There's about ten men—perhaps twenty—here and round Larkshill, that will do anything for her. Men like Burke, some of them, that won't for me. . . . And she can talk—especially when people get together. Straight simple talk, that persuades. If she comes tomorrow, and says your way's wrong, she'll get everyone who's doubtful against you, and shake the rest."

"Well, I don't know that. I can talk a little myself," Martin answered. "But it's best done first, and alone. I'll see her now, if I can. She seems to have

some ideas. Is she the sort that won't change?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. She won't mind changing if you show her she's wrong. But if she thinks you're wrong, she'll say what she thinks. . . . It's all religion with her. . . . And getting people to clean the camp."

[XIII]

Martin found Muriel busy with some domestic work at her own location. She offered him a small, work-hardened hand, and asked him to enter the compartment which was bedroom and living-room combined, but was, even so, a more luxurious dwelling than was the portion of most of those around her.

She called Monty, who was somewhere near, and he took charge of the horse. The sky had clouded, and a fine rain was commencing, so that Martin was glad to accept the offered shelter.

After a few words of initial courtesy, he said directly: "Tom Aldworth tells me that you don't think these people need laws—or is it only that you think they don't want them?"

"I think they don't need laws, they need leading."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning just that. They don't need laws. They need decisions."

They were both silent for a moment. Martin, because she had expressed an idea which had been inarticulately present, but discouraged in his own mind, and she because she waited for his response. Seeing him silent, she went on:

"Mr. Webster, I'm not a lawyer, and I haven't got your capacity. I know we need someone to take control, and I know I couldn't. I've thought of everyone here, and there's no one really fit that everyone would obey. I want to help you, if I can, but that's what I think, and if you make a lot of laws and penalties—and I suppose laws must mean penalties—straight away, I think we shall have more trouble, and I don't think even you—I don't think anyone—could prevent it.

"It seems to me," she went on, "that laws should come gradually. We've had one law already about the women. I told Tom that I shouldn't take any notice of it, and fortunately no one's made any trouble about that." Was there a tone of bitterness in her voice that denied the smiling of lips and eyes? It was so slight, if so, that Martin could not detect it with certainty. "The idea was good enough, but the law was silly. There were so many things that might happen that we couldn't foresee. We're not ready for laws yet. They'll break themselves, or get broken. I don't know whether you'll understand, but I can't put it plainer than that. We don't want laws, we want leading."

"I see what you mean, quite clearly," Martin answered. "You mean you

want orders, dealing with immediate needs, rather than permanent laws, dealing with general principles of conduct or policy.

“It isn’t such a simple alternative as you might think. It will lead to something like what we used to call case law—that is, one thing at a time will be decided on its merits, and the next time there’s a similar difference, or anything like it, there will be an appeal to what was decided then; but it may be best to start in that way. . . . May I ask you this: If I begin in that way, will you come and speak in my support on Thursday? I’m going to ask a good deal, if you do. I don’t look upon it as a country that’s to be governed, but rather as a ship that’s to be steered to port—and a ship that’s among the rocks if it isn’t on them. It’s not a case for arguing, or thinking that we can steer two ways at once. I’ll concede all you ask. You shall have leading, not law. Shall I have following, not argument?”

“I don’t like promising too much,” Muriel answered. “I shouldn’t do what I thought wrong, and I won’t promise blindly. But I think you’re right. I think it’s the only way we’ll succeed, and that I ought to agree. . . . I’ll promise this now. As long as I’m here, I’ll give you all the help I can. If I can’t follow, I’ll come and tell you, and if you ask me to clear out—well, I’ll go.”

“I think that’s all I could ask, and more than I could expect,” Martin answered, “and I think it means that, with your help, we shall succeed. I’m very glad I have seen you.”

“I don’t think,” Muriel answered, “that you’ll find that my help makes so much difference. But I don’t think that it matters so much whether we succeed or not. I know we can’t always feel like that, and we shouldn’t do much if we did. But I was sitting up most of last night; it was fine, and not very cold, and I was—not well enough to sleep. And I was watching the stars, and thinking how short our lives are, and how we are small and lost in the great space that we can see, but could never reach, and I thought of those terrible words of Paul, ‘*without God in the world.*’ I had never felt alone, as I did then. . . . And then I thought of all that the seas had covered, not the men and women only, but all that they had built and made: all the buildings, and the pictures and books that they thought so wonderful. They just passed in a day, and the stars continued. . . . It was all so trivial that had gone. . . . And then faith came again, and I thought of the promises of God. . . . And it seemed that nothing comes to us—nothing that we gain or lose—can matter, except how we face it. And then I thought of the lines of an old hymn that you’ve probably never heard, or might think silly:

‘He hath His young men at the war,
His little ones at home.’

—and I thought that if there’s nothing hard to face, it may be that God doesn’t think we’re worth trying. As though He knows we’ll break at any test, and He

just leaves us in contempt.”

She stopped abruptly, and then added, in a different voice: “But you’ve got other things to think of. You must forgive me going on about my own thoughts. I’ve had no one to talk to lately. . . . But you won’t want to go through this rain. It won’t last much longer. It’s clearing now to the south. . . . You can depend on any help I can give. I believe you’ve been sent to help us. There’s only one thing that could make me feel differently, and I feel sure I’ve no cause to doubt you there. But I hope you won’t mind telling me. I think we ought to know—and we’re bound to know, one way or other.”

She paused a moment, as though hesitating how to frame the question, and Martin said: “I’m sure you wouldn’t ask anything without reason.” His thought was, “Am I going to lose her support after all?” He did not doubt what was coming.

“It’s about Helen. You know I saw her before we knew that you were found,—and then we heard that there was another. Of course, everyone’s talking about it. Some say that you mean to keep one, and some the other; and some say that you want to give Helen up, but can’t because of the children; and some say you mean to go on as though you’d married them both. I was thinking about this last night, and I saw how difficult it must be, and I thought if you had the strength to do right in a position like that, you’d be the one to get things straight here. Would you tell me what you do mean to do?”

“Miss Temple,” he answered, “I can’t expect you to look at a matter of this kind quite as I do; and I can only say that if I lose your support I shall be sorry. —I should be sorry, even if it meant less than it does. I hoped that we should be friends, and it is a friendship that I should value. I hoped that you would be friends with—with Helen and Claire. But there can be no disguise about the decision that we have made. It didn’t rest with me only. I consider that I am bound to both, and to that we stand. It is Helen’s view, as well as mine. It was her independent decision, as I felt sure it would be. There is no law to guide us now, as you have said, and we had to think what was right, in circumstances which could not have been foreseen.”

“I didn’t say there was no law. There is God’s law always to me.”

“Well, we don’t think we are going against that.”

“And you thought I should?” Muriel frowned slightly, as though the implication was not too pleasing. “Well, perhaps it was natural. But I thought about this last night, and I couldn’t be sure. I thought you were bound to Helen. ‘*Whom God hath joined—*’ The words wouldn’t leave my mind. They’re not easy to understand. They were used to baffle a trap, and I suppose they’re not meant to be easy. And then I saw suddenly that ‘God’ didn’t mean a priest. It meant something greater than that. And I thought that if you’d all meant to be loyal to one another—well, this was the test, and if you all came

through the right way, it meant that there's still something better left in the world than the hateful things that we've seen here."

[XIV]

There were over four hundred people gathered on Cowley Common, sitting on grass or heather, or standing between the gorse-bushes in the background.

The sun shone warmly, though October was opening, and, except for a passing gull, there was no sign on that open heath of any change having come to the world, since Cowley fair had been held on the same spot a year ago.

Curiosity had proved more powerful than Tom's earlier efforts for the common good, and there were not ten people absent who could, by any possibility, have been expected to come.

Martin spoke first, from a raised knoll of land which had often been a showman's vantage-point for declaring the wonders which a penny would disclose to such as penetrated the entrance of his booth.

He saw Tom's supporters grouped together, and the gleams of a dozen rifle-barrels among them showed that he was leaving little to chance.

He saw Butcher, with his household servants, marshaling themselves as near as possible to the place from which he would speak, as though to allow no oversight of the importance of the support they gave.

He saw Muriel Temple moving quietly from one to another, doubtless making it clear that she would support him.

He felt a conviction of victory, such as he had sometimes known as a difficult case approached its verdict, and which he had never known to mislead him.

He was glad that Helen was beside him, though he had discouraged her presence. But she had felt that, in Claire's absence, it might fall upon her to defend both her and him, and to avow her own approval of the decision which had been made.

His only anxiety was that Claire had not returned. He felt that this might be misread. But it was too late to alter that now.

Muriel came up to him. "I understand that Tom's going to speak, and then Butcher. If there's no one else, I should like to say a few words after. I don't think Butcher ought to have the last word today. But I shall have to ask you to lend me your knoll. I'm too short to talk to people from the level."

Martin did not speak very long. He felt, as he commenced, that the attitude of many of those who heard was anxious, critical, and noncommittal, though there were few who were really hostile.

He reminded them that he stood there at no suggestion, as it was at no desire, of his own.

He went on to say that he did not purpose to impose new laws which would reduce their freedom, but, for the time at least, till they had reached a more stable social condition, he asked obedience to the orders which he would issue. He asked only that they should all work heartily, so that they might provide for warmth and shelter, for food and clothing and comfort, during the winter which must now be near them.

If disputes should arise, they must be brought to him, and he would try to settle them fairly, and they must pledge themselves that in such cases they would accept his decision. It was no time for doubts and divisions. If any man would not work with them in this way, now was the time to speak, and he would be free to leave them, taking his possessions with him.

But they must decide now—those who had not pledged themselves already—for there was little time for talk. There were a hundred things to be put in hand. They must give him their support today, or he might decline it tomorrow.

Before he reached this point, he was aware that the feeling had changed. They did not want a repetition of the old organizations, the old bondages, the old bewildering weight of laws and restrictions, but they were conscious of the need of leadership.

Almost all the laws that they had known in their previous lives had been laws that imposed burdens, or restrained activities; and it was with the sensation as of a cloud that had passed that they recognized that their new leader was more concerned to stimulate than restrain.

Seeing that he had won the mood of those to whom he spoke, he ceased quickly, avoiding the peril of the further word.

Tom Aldworth followed. His words were halting and few, but the cheers that met them did not allow his pauses to show very awkwardly. There were many in the crowd of better education, men who were shrewder and cleverer than he, but he was the one who had thought from the first rather of the general welfare than of his own advantage, and he had won a confidence which such men as Butcher could never gain.

Butcher spoke easily, and adroitly. He blessed the new start which was being made, but it was in a tone of benevolence, rather than respect. There were subtleties that only Martin understood, and which may have been meant for him only.

His voice did not carry well, and all that was generally recognized was that he had given his support to Martin. It was remembered that he had held aloof from Cooper, and it was regarded as evidence that he had decided that Martin would overcome whatever opposition he might encounter.

Muriel spoke briefly. She spoke as she would have done to a single auditor, with the simplicity beside which any artifice is a baffled inferior.

Martin had sat unmoved, in the seat of honor, while receiving the fulsome praise of after-dinner speakers who had been acknowledged masters of the art of oratory, but he found it less easy to maintain the mask of indifference while Muriel, having put the facts of the social and economic depths to which they had fallen, expressed her confidence in his ability to transform them. "I believe God's sent him," she finished, "and I'm going to help him all I can."

The words did not reach more than half the audience, for attention was distracted by Claire's appearance. She came through from the back of the crowd, drawing the eyes of many men, and of all of the women. She saw a vacant chair beside that on which Helen was sitting, and walked confidently toward it.

There was a silence so absolute that it had the effect of sound. It called the attention of those whose thoughts or eyes had wandered. This was a matter which had been forgotten—to which no speaker had alluded—but which had been represented as a vital issue, only three days ago.

Martin knew that he was already assured of the support of a majority of those around him, but that the extent of his triumph, the question of whether the meeting could break up without a note of discord, would be decided now.

Helen saw it also, and she did not fail him.

There was a moment during which both she and Martin might have left the meeting, and none would, have observed their departure. Every eye was directed upon the advancing woman.

To those who had been with Tom on the Bellamy raid, she was known already. They had known her as Martin's wife; as his comrade in the tunnel fight. There were others who had seen her riding recklessly through the debris of the Larkshill Road to the rescue of Helen's child. To most, she had been a name only, but of a mysterious quality. She was the woman who had killed Bryan in Bycroft Lane.

Had she come to make claim to Martin in this publicity? Would she challenge him to choose between herself and Helen? Were they on the threshold of some exciting drama? Was the automatic that was belted so conveniently to her hand to take a part in the argument?

Their eyes followed her till she gained the group that had risen as she approached. They observed the meeting of the two women in a dramatic contrast.

Helen had used every resource available to maintain the standards of dress and appearance to which she had been used in the earlier days. So dressed, she had an aspect of delusive fragility: even of a loveliness which might have been thought to have left the world.

Claire had come straight from the landing-place. Whatever might have been the secret activity which had delayed her, it had not tended to the

cleanliness of the clothes she wore. But she had not known what might be happening in her absence. She knew that her presence had been promised at this meeting three days ago, and she had delayed for nothing.

They saw the hands of the two women meet. Helen said something, and they could hear the gay tone, though not the words, of a laughing answer. They saw the quick movement (purposely delayed, as they could not guess, till their eyes were upon it) by which Helen adjusted her chair to make more room for the one beside it. They sat down together. . . .

Monty Beeston had brought his bill-hook to the meeting, in the vain hope that there might be a need for its services. It was an unpopular weapon in a crowd, and it had secured him a prominent isolation.

He had watched Claire's approach in an agony of excitement, lest he should have to make election between two contending loyalties.

Now he leaped up, in an uncontrolled excitement, waving his weapon round his head, and burst into a raucous cheer, which was lost next moment in the noise of four hundred voices.

For the moment courage—courage and character—had triumphed. If there were discontents and reluctancies among the crowd, they were silenced by the knowledge of their minority.

But Martin knew that his real trial was still to come.

They left the Common, while the sun was still shining. But there was a cold wind from the north. The summer days were ended.

BOOK V

[1]

DOLL WITHLIN lay dying. She was beyond any human help available, and would have been beyond the help of all the skill of the earlier days. But she did not feel very ill. And the pain was less.

She lay gazing out of the open door with frightened eyes at the frozen pathway, and the cold sea-mist upon the whitened fields beyond.

A wood fire blazed beside the foot of the bed, and Muriel Temple sat at the farther side, and tried to give comfort, where no comfort was possible.

"But you don't *really* think I shall die?" came the plaintive repeated question. "I want to live. And he told me there was no risk at all. He said he'd often done it before the flood. He said everyone did it then. I'd always said I didn't want any kids. . . . I don't care what happens after you're dead. I don't believe anything does. I want to live. . . . Why don't you make him come and do *something*? I don't care what, if I don't die."

"Dr. Butcher said he can't do anything more," Muriel answered, thinking truth was best, "and, besides, the Captain has taken him."

Butcher Junior was, in fact, sitting with his hands tied behind his back, a very frightened man, under the guard of Monty Beeston's bill-hook, knowing that nothing would give Monty greater pleasure than to have an excuse for using it.

"You don't really think I shall go to hell?" the dying woman began again. "It can't be very wrong, if everyone used to do it. He shouldn't have told me, if it was. It was he did it, not me."

"I don't think you knew how wrong it was," Muriel answered gently. Who was she to say what the verdict of God would be upon this woman, with the mind of a wilful child, who had allowed the destruction of that which should have been most sacred, and could not see, even now, that it was anything serious, apart from the penalty which it brought upon her?

There had been a time when Muriel would have answered without hesitation, and her creed had not consciously changed. But she had learned that she was not God, and that His ways are past finding out, even by those who serve Him. *Shall not the Judge of all the earth, do right?* Faith may answer with an assured affirmative, but even faith may falter as to what that right may be.

[II]

There was a very different scene in the house of the "Captain," as Martin was now universally called, where Butcher was pleading for his son's life.

Martin had declined to see him alone. Helen and Claire were present, and Jack Tolley, who was now fully employed as his secretary, and living with Madge in a house at Cowley Thorn.

Butcher deserves some respect for his position, and some admiration for the self-control that he was exercising. He was fighting for his son's life. It would have been difficult for him to find words too strong for the contempt he felt for Martin's ethical standards, or the anger and hatred that raged within him. But he knew that Martin would not be moved by such expressions, and he was using every resource of his diplomacy to secure his purpose.

"I thought I'd heard it said that you didn't hold with capital punishment, even for murder."

"I've never gone that far," Martin answered, "but I should never make a law by which it would be an ordinary penalty. Murders vary so greatly in culpability. There is no crime which requires so much to be left to the discretion of those who try it, as to what the penalty, if any, should be, if the fact be proved."

"It isn't as though he'd meant to kill her. He didn't think he'd do her any harm—and you don't know that she'll die, even now."

"What you say is beside the point. I know he didn't mean to kill her, and I shall not deal with him any differently from how I should do if she were well. I intend to execute him because he has killed a child."

"But the child never lived at all."

"Mr. Butcher, I am sorry for you, and I want to answer patiently, but I am not a fool. Whether the child had a separate life, or to what extent, we neither of us know—nor do we know what life is. To kill life, or to prevent it, is a distinction of doubtful reality, and of no practical importance. . . . But I cannot have the idea of abortion alive among us.

"We have both lived in a time of pleasure and luxury, among people who employed others to spend their lives in their service, and who would say without shame that they bought their comfort at the cost of their children's lives. Now we live hardly, and the lives of our children are recovering their natural value. I would rather see half the community dead tomorrow, than that the seed of those evils should take root among us."

"But there was nothing new in such practices. Intelligent people of all ages, even savages, have seen the necessity of regulating the population."

"I did not say it was new," Martin answered patiently. "It might be difficult

to discover a vice that is. The advocates of practices which were destroying the nations of Western Europe, when the waters intervened to do it more decently, would claim the prestige of discovery and the authority of age in the same sentence. . . . But we are not discussing European civilization. We have to build our own. So far as one man can, I will create a public opinion in which children shall be the honor of those who bear them, and their avoidable absence a woman's deepest shame."

"But what if the little island on which we live becomes overpopulated?"

"It is not an immediate question, and it would be as reasonable to let it influence our minds today, as to commit suicide to save ourselves from the risk of dying of old age. But I can tell you what will happen if we have had any success in rearing children of a sufficient vitality: they will take to the waters, to find what other lands are open to them."

Butcher had not exhausted his arguments. But he was fighting for a life, not an argument. He said: "I can't agree, as you know, but I don't wish to urge anything against your judgment. If you make such a law, I should advise my son to obey it, and I should expect him to take the consequences, should he fail. But you have agreed that beliefs and practices were different in the civilization in which we were reared.—Is it right to exact a penalty beyond that which would have been a legal possibility in those days, and of which my son had no warning?"

"You are mistaken. I heard something which caused me to warn him two months ago. He appears to have thought it possible that Jack's wife here, being now married to him, would not want to bear Ellis Roberts's child, or that Jack would not wish her to have it. Anyway, he gave her some hint, of which I heard, and I warned him plainly."

"There is another consideration," Butcher replied, "which you may have overlooked. My son is the only man among us who has been trained for the profession. Without him, there is no expert advice available."

"It wouldn't influence me, if it were so, but, in fact, it isn't. You may not know that Hatterley in exploring our northwest coast has discovered about fifteen people, and that one of them is an experienced doctor. I hope to get them to come here when the sea is favorable."

"Well, even so, two doctors aren't too many for all the people here. One might die, any time."

"I'm afraid one will," Martin answered, with a brutality which he regretted as soon as it was spoken, but Butcher did not appear to notice it.

He went on: "There's been a good many points of friction between us. There's the cloth now, that we were arguing about last week. You've got something to sell now. I want to save my son's life, and I'm prepared to bid high."

"I'm not prepared to deal," Martin answered, "but I'll consider all you've said—and perhaps some things that you haven't; and give you my answer tomorrow."

"Would you listen to Miss Temple?"

"I would listen to anyone. I've no reason to think she would support you. Have you?"

"I don't know, but I must try all I can. She's a religious woman. She ought to see it differently from how you do."

"Well, I believe she's with the dying girl. You can try if you like."

Butcher went out.

"I never thought I should be sorry for that man," Helen said. "Is there no other way? Of course, you know best."

"I'm sorry for the father," said Claire, "but the man needs hanging, all the same."

[III]

Dr. Butcher stood trembling in the uncertainty of life and death, his hands still tied, and Monty still beside him, while Martin looked at him with a contempt which he made no effort to cover. There were the same group in the room that had been round him the night before.

Muriel was not there. Butcher had seen her, and had implored her to use her influence for his son's life, and she had disconcerted him with an unexpected question, "Is he sorry for what he did?" He had answered it as he thought she would wish, but there had been a second's pause, which she understood. She knew Butcher.

She said: "I will see the Captain, if you ask me again; but I don't know that I shall help you, if I do. I should like you to know that before you ask."

He had looked at her in silence, and turned away.

Now Martin's voice broke the tense silence of the room. He addressed himself to the father.

"Mr. Butcher, I have thought of all you said, and I have remembered the atmosphere in which your son was trained. I don't mean that all the doctors were of his character, or of his way of thinking, because that would be to malign dead men, among whom I had valued friends; but I am giving him the full benefit of the worst influences which may have acted upon him.

"I am about to take a course which is merciful, but I wish I were sure that it is something better than moral cowardice which has led me to this decision. I do not wish to take your son's life with my own hand, and I do not wish to require of others what I am unwilling to do myself. He will have six hours to leave the district. After that, if he should be within five miles of this room at

any time, or if by word or writing he should so much as mention any one of the vices of which he learned in the old days, to any one of our people, young or old, he shall die very surely, without mercy or delay. I should not hesitate again. . . . Monty, you can loose his hands.”

There was no word in reply, either from father or son. The condemned man leaned his released hands on the table, as though he could not stand steadily. He breathed hard, as though he had been running. His father came over to him. He put a hand under his son’s arm, and led him out.

Helen said: “I think I’m glad you’ve let him go. He won’t come here again. He’s too frightened.”

“I think I’m sorry,” said Claire. “I don’t want to think that such a man is alive. I can’t get it out of my mind, and I know I ought to.” She had the thought of her own child, that was coming. She did not want any thought that should not be gracious: no thought of ignoble things. But thought is hard to control, perhaps hardest when there is conscious effort to do so. She had a feeling that it would be ended if the man were dead.

[IV]

It was scarcely five minutes after the two men had left that Steve Fortune was at the door. He had met Monty along the road, and asked him what the Captain’s order was about Dr. Butcher. Monty, who did not like him, gave a fantastically sanguinary reply, which he would have regarded as satisfactory, if he had been able to credit it.

He went on, and as he reached the door, Martin came out. That was better than he had hoped. He had not expected to get past the vigilant Phillips without considerable difficulty. The Captain himself would talk to anyone, but those about him constituted a difficult barrier to surmount.

“Can I have a word with you, Captain?”

“You’d better come inside, if you’ve anything to say. It’s too cold here.”

Martin knew him to be a man of unhurried speech, and the cold was bitter. There was a sea-mist also, that lay thickly over the land, and might not lift all day. A cold, wet, penetrating mist, such as they had had many times during the past month. A new thing, and unpleasant to these English midlanders.

He talked to Steve in the hall for a few moments, and let him go. He went in to Helen and Claire, who were working on the provision of warmer garments for themselves and the children. There was still material available, but not much, and Butcher was known to have a quantity of uncut rolls of cloth—a very large quantity, it was believed—which he would not sell at any reasonable figure.

“I’ve had Steve Fortune here about Dr. Butcher,” he said. “He wouldn’t

say what he wanted, when he found that I'd let him off. I half thought he meant to volunteer as executioner."

"It's never easy to tell what Steve's thinking," Helen answered. "Wasn't he fond of Doll?"

"There was some trouble about that before I came. So Tom told me, and I saw something of it myself. But there's been nothing since."

The conversation was interrupted by Muriel's entrance.

"I want to see you alone," she said to Martin.

"Quite alone?" he said, in some surprise, for there were few things which were not shared openly among those who were present.

"Yes, quite. I've promised."

"Then come into the library."

"It's about Dr. Butcher," Muriel began, as soon as the library door was closed upon them. "His father came last night, and asked me to see you, and I declined; but Doll has told me something this morning which alters it—or you may think so. Anyway, she thinks you ought to know. But she told me only on condition that I tell no one but you; and that Will Carless should never know, under any circumstances. I've promised that, and I can say nothing unless you do the same."

"Very well, if you think I ought."

"It's this. She says the child wouldn't have been Will's. It was Steve Fortune's. She says she was sorry after it happened, and she hasn't spoken to Steve for three months. I think he bribed her with something. You know she's always been like a child for anything she could wear.

"She says she got to hate the thought of always having Steve's child, and Will not knowing. And she was dreading that it might be like Steve—you know how different they are—and everyone would guess. She says she begged Dr. Butcher to do something to stop it, and he said he was afraid of you, but he gave in at last.

"I told her you ought to know, and she agreed as long as Will never hears. They've been happy together the last three months, except for this trouble on her mind, and I suppose now she's dying—"

"It makes little difference in what I think of the doctor; and, in any case, it's too late to alter anything. I've let him go, with a warning that he'll be shot unless he keeps away."

"I can't say I'm glad," Muriel answered, "though perhaps I should be. I only brought you this tale because I knew I ought. . . . I don't want any man killed, but I think the children come first, and I don't think even you know how far this trouble goes. You see I get a good many confidences that I can't repeat. But I can tell you this: if they spoke their real thoughts there are about a quarter of the women who would say that Doll didn't do anything wrong at all.

There are several others who don't want children, and don't mean to have any. Some of them are beginning to see that children may be useful, and they'll be lonely later on; but you won't do much with some of the other women. I'm only saying this because you should know the truth. It would have done good if you had had Dr. Butcher hanged. They won't think much of him being sent away. It will look weak—and a man that's sent away can come back."

Martin said: "I knew I was wrong about Butcher. It was just cowardice, because I didn't like killing him. And it won't make any difference to his father's enmity. As to his coming back, well, we must just wait, and see."

[V]

Helford Grange had been built about four hundred years earlier, on the ruins of a castle which had been stormed and burnt in the Barons' Wars. That castle had been ancient and decaying in Lancastrian times. It was said that it had been built upon the site of a stronghold that had repelled the Mercian raiders of an earlier millennium.

The cellars of Helford Grange were of a great, but uncertain antiquity. They were very extensive, and had been dark and ill-ventilated when Butcher had first occupied them. But he had altered that.

He had made progress in many ways during the last few months. He had enlisted the services of seven additional men, so that he now had a force of fourteen on whom he felt that he could rely. He still used them for the systematic raiding of the deserted country, and though he professed the creed of the peaceful trader he had armed them, for the legitimate reason that the wild places into which they penetrated were rendered unsafe by the increasing ferocity of the dogs and cattle.

He now sat with his son in an inner cellar, which he used as his own apartment. It was furnished simply, and without harmony of form or color, but with articles of selected value.

The bedstead in the corner of the room was a choice example of Sheraton; the desk at which he sat was of polished oak, of ample size, and of many internal intricacies. Its papers were neatly arranged, and there was a rack of account-books above it, containing records of a thousand complicated barterings, which he entered and balanced with his own hand.

The cellar was lighted by an oil lamp, and a faint light from a weed-hidden grating that opened into the side of an ancient moat.

He was writing a letter to Jerry Cooper, while his son sat waiting beside him.

"You'll have to go today," he said, as he blotted and closed it down, "and you'll have to start at once, if you're to be there before dark. But who to send

with you I don't know. Reeves took most of the men to do that digging at Tipton. I don't think they can possibly be back for two days yet, though I sent Pollock and Sims after them as soon as the trouble started. That only makes me shorter. I've got no one fit to go now, except Slater, and he doesn't know the way properly. Besides, he wouldn't like to come back alone. It's not safe in the night."

"Couldn't he wait there till tomorrow?"

"Yes—if he got there, but he mightn't find the way before dark."

"I can't go alone. I've never been farther than Sterrington."

"We might hide you here till we get the men back. But I don't like it. Webster's hard to move when he's said anything. It won't last much longer now."

A woman pushed open the heavy oak door, without the ceremony of knocking.

"There's that Steve Fortune waitin' to see you, sir. He says it's important."

"Tell him I can't see him today—No. Here, Maria. . . . Tell him I'll see him in a minute. He may be just what we want." He rose and followed the woman to the outer cellar, in which he had once bargained with Jerry Cooper for the army of Rattray.

Steve stood by the door. He was not asked to sit down. He said he wanted a smooth-haired terrier dog. He believed two or three had been seen running loose, but he couldn't get on their tracks. He'd pay well. He'd give a week's work, if he could get one caught for him.

Butcher was not stirred by the offer. Dogs were hard to catch now, and his men were busy. He let Steve turn to go before he said, "You know the way to Cooper's camp, don't you?"

Yes, Steve knew that. He had spent a month, at the Captain's order, exploring the inland ways from coast to coast, and reporting the results—or as much as he had felt inclined to tell.

"I want someone to guide Dr. Butcher to Cooper's camp. I want him to start now. I'll give five yards of good cloth. It's a high price."

It certainly was a high price. So high, that Steve saw that Butcher meant to settle the matter without haggling. But he was not enthusiastic. He would have to come back alone. No man would like to do that.

Butcher pointed out that he need not start his return till the next day. In the end he agreed, provided the question of the dog should be reconsidered.

Butcher arranged that he should have a meal there, and be ready to start in half an hour. He did not see the smile which quivered on the Gipsy's face as he left the room—a smile that died at once, as though afraid that even the walls should see it.

Dr. Butcher was a very miserable individual as he crouched beside the wood fire which Steve was making on the frozen ground. They had wandered for several hours in search of Cooper's headquarters, and the short day was fading around them.

Steve had chosen their camp with care, at a spot where a thick ledge of holly protected them on the weather side, and he had started a fire about three yards away, so that they could be in some safety between these barriers. He persuaded the weary man, with some difficulty, to do his share in searching for the needed wood, by threatening that they would be devoured by dogs before morning, should they fail to outpace the challenge of the advancing dusk.

When they sat side by side between the barriers of hedge and fire, Steve had a different tale. He shared the food he had brought very fairly, tending his companion with an exemplary solicitude. He drawled lamentation that the shortness of the winter day had made it impossible to finish their journey before the night had closed upon them.

He said that he would take the first watch, but that Butcher must be prepared for prompt action if he should call upon him. The dog-pack came so quickly.

"But if we keep the fire going—" said the trembling man. He was not used to such exposures, and cold and fear combined to make him shiver miserably on the frozen ground.

"It's not much good for the *dogs*," Steve drawled. "Did I say *dogs*? I shouldn't have said dogs. It might keep off the *cattle*. But dogs rather like fires. They're used to fires. Didn't you hear tell of how Reeves and three men with him were turned off their own fire, down south, a week ago? The dogs only drove them off, and sat round the fire to get warm. But they caught one of Cooper's men. They found his bones by the fire in the morning, and it wasn't near out then."

Butcher had no means of checking the accuracy of these statements. He could not have slept had he tried, though mind and body were wearied by the experiences of the last two days. He could only sit and watch the face of Steve in the firelight.

The night became very dark and still. There was a mist that hid the stars. The cold was cruel. He could see nothing now but the face of Steve, which seemed to be turned upon him all the time. He didn't speak. He just looked and looked.

Watching Steve, and shivering with something worse than cold, he said, "I wonder what time it is."

It was a silly remark. He had one of the few watches which were still going

accurately. But he must say something. Steve spoke then. But he spoke of time differently. He said: "I suppose it might have lived eighty years. Longer than you could now. You must be near thirty. It don't seem fair somehow." He did not appear to expect a reply. It was as though he thought aloud. He went on, still as though he followed his own thought only. "If that had been my kid—but, of course, it wasn't. She wasn't my girl. But if it *had* been my kid, I should have killed you *slow*."

Butcher's eyes were fixed upon him, as though fascinated, but he made no reply. He heard the quiet voice: "I suppose you're not afeared of Will Carless? He didn't know, did he? No, you wouldn't have told Will. And you're not afeared of him, now you've killed his girl. . . . There's no call to be afeared of Will. He'd just blubber, most like, and let you go. . . . Now if that had been *my* kid—but we know it ain't—I should have killed you *slow*."

The night got darker before the dawn, and Butcher slept at last, his head on a pack that he had been carrying, his body stretched before the fire, as Steve had considerably made space to allow him to do.

Steve sat looking into the fire, and when the flames flickered upward they showed that he was smiling at his own thoughts. It was a cruel smile. The man that was stretched before the fire would have slept the worse had he seen it.

The fire sank lower, but Steve did not rebuild it. It died to a glow of ash, and then to grayness.

He rose at last. He groped in the pile of wood which was beside him, and lifted a heavy log. Butcher's legs were between him and the dying fire. It was so dark that he had to feel for where they were, and pass a hand lightly along them. Then he brought the log down heavily. He heard the bone crack. His victim woke from sleep with a scream. He tried to rise, and he screamed again. He thought that the dogs had him by the leg.

He called on Steve for help, but there was no answer.

[VII]

It was midday when Steve came to Jerry Cooper's headquarters, and he had traveled hard to reach them. He said that he had camped with Dr. Butcher, and taken the first watch, and had then slept, while the doctor watched in turn, but when he waked in the morning, he was alone. He had searched for hours, and had then come on, thinking that the doctor must have preceded him.

He led them back to the camp where he said that they had passed the night. The fire still burned. The camp was in a hollow thicket, between two oaks.

When he had done all that he could to assist an unsuccessful search, he went home.

Four miles from home, he went to look at a place where men had camped

by a holly hedge. There was no one there now. But he looked farther, and found a dead man who had tried to force his way beneath a denseness of undergrowth, where he appeared to have stuck, or his strength had failed. It was a silly thing for a man to try with a broken leg.

"He must have crawled half a mile," Steve said slowly. "I'm glad I fed him. He'll do now for the dogs to finish."

[VIII]

There was trouble with Butcher. There was nothing fresh in that. There had been trouble from the first. But he had been careful up to now, not to press any difference to a last extremity.

He had been adroit to compromise, ingenious in producing such positions that Martin would see the expediency of settlement.

Only on one point—an attempt that Martin had made to establish a system of banking credits, which would have taken the place of money, and adjusted the dealings of the community by bookkeepings in the terms of the old coinage—had he definitely defeated Martin's intention. Butcher's own transactions were so large a part of the commercial dealings of the community that it was impracticable to continue a currency in any form that he declined to recognize.

But, apart from this matter, his opposition had never been pushed to extremity; and if it were a fact that those who were known to be unfriendly to the new rule had somewhat lower prices and easier credits, if there were subtle suggestions that the hardness with which Martin had driven the preparation for the winter months had not been really necessary, and that it would have been easier to have relied upon Butcher's miscellaneous resources, they had been too indefinite either for reproof or reprisal.

Yet this constant sapping had not been without its effect upon the less intelligent and more turbulent elements. And it would have been impossible, under any condition, for between two and three hundred men to be worked for three months, as Martin had done, without some discontents arising.

He had tried to obtain such supplies as would make them independent of Butcher, but he had only partly succeeded. The time had been too short, the needs too many, and it was easy for Butcher to hint that had these stores been divided or retained according to the individualism of earlier days each man to whom he spoke could easily have purchased from him directly the requirements which could not now be supplied.

Now there was friction over the cloth of which Butcher had obtained a large supply in the earlier days, when his plunderings had been more discriminating, more far-seeing, and more industrious than had been the short-distanced and spasmodic raidings of others.

Martin was determined that cloth should be handed over without such exchanges as must render them short of other needed things before the return of the warmer weather.

It was in a final effort to resolve this position that Butcher came to see him one winter evening, when there was no light upon the frozen roads but that of stars and snow. Yet he found his way without difficulty, for the roads between Larkshill and Cowley Thorn had been cleared by Martin's orders before the commencement of the dangers of the early darkness, and Butcher himself had seen that the byway to Helford Grange had been in that condition from a much earlier date.

The subject of Butcher's son had never been mentioned between them since the mystery of his death a month ago. Martin had a private conviction that Steve was in some way responsible, but there was no evidence to support such a suggestion. Butcher's thoughts might move in the same direction, but he could not suppose that Martin had any connivance with it. He knew how he had himself selected Steve as his son's guide, and he knew, also, that Martin was not of a kind to instigate a secret assassination.

None the less, he regarded him as the primary cause of the resulting tragedy, of the nature of which there was no doubt, for the bones had been identified, and were now buried in the garden of Helford Grange.

Yet whatever hatred his mind concealed, Butcher came to compromise, as his nature was, and had Martin met him in the same way, the course of events must have been widely different, though they might have led to the same end by a longer path.

"I've come to say," he began, "that I want to work on a friendly footing, if we can. It does no good to anyone for it to be known that we can't pull together. I don't think you're fair about the cloth. If I hadn't taken my men six months ago, and dug it out, and carted it here, it's most likely that it wouldn't exist today. But I've come to say that you can fix your own price, if you'll leave me to decide who's to live in my own houses. You can't say that that isn't a fair offer."

"I'm glad you've given way about the cloth, because I couldn't have had much further patience. We made up what we'd got the end of last week, and it's badly needed. But I'm sorry that I can't make a bargain about it, such as you suggest.

"I can't have Pellow moving into Pollock's house, because he's got a good enough one of his own, and because I want Ringwood in there. It's convenient for what he's doing, and he's got a wife and two children, and expecting another, and they're all living now in a single compartment of a railway coach. Surely you can see that there can't be any doubt of what ought to be done."

Butcher looked unusually obstinate. "I've promised Pellow," he said, "and

I don't trust Ringwood. I don't trust him for the rent. His health's bad, and it might break down any time. . . ." He looked speculatively at Martin. He tried a final concession. "I'll take Ringwood, if you'll tell Pellow that it's your doing, and if you'll guarantee the rent."

"Rent?" said Martin. "There won't be any rent."

"But it's my house," Butcher protested, in a genuine bewilderment. "Everyone knows that. Sims has paid me rent, ever since I moved out of it to go to Helford."

"Then you can move back if you like."

"I don't want to move back myself. I merely want a good tenant."

"I'm sorry that these differences should arise, but I cannot allow the old system of renting houses to be reestablished among us. I knew nothing of your arrangement with Sims. . . . Supposing, as you suggest yourself, that Ringwood couldn't pay the rent you would fix, do you suppose that I should allow you to turn him out of the house?"

Butcher hesitated in his reply. At last he said: "I can't make out whether you mean to try to abolish private ownership, or not. I know it can't be done, and the attempt could only increase our difficulties; but I can't even understand what you are aiming at. You appear to allow some forms of property. Do you mean that houses are to be an exception? And, if so, how are they to be built in future, and who will be expected to do it?"

Martin answered: "It's a fair question to ask, and I'll answer it as far as I can. I don't propose to abolish private property, which is the natural incentive, as it is the natural reward of individual effort. But I hope to avoid at least some of the resulting abuses which have been within our own experience.

"I am aware that I am only experimenting, and I am aware that I may find cause to modify the position which I am now taking. But regarding houses and land (the original owners or occupiers of which are no longer among us) I am willing that every man should claim the one he occupies, or the land which he is able and willing to cultivate, or otherwise use. A house or field which is left vacant may be occupied by others, and if there be more than one who desires it, I will try to decide fairly between them.

"I do not wish to take away the fair rewards of industry, nor do I suppose that we can avoid inequalities of wealth arising in future; but if we were to work together, with that object, we might do much to mitigate the resulting evils.

"Regarding houses, I do think that it may be possible to make a simple rule that the man who occupies, owns. There is no communism in that. So long as he occupies a house, or cultivates land, he will have protection in the ownership which he exercises. I see no reason why it should not be passed on at his death to another member of his own family, but beyond this I am not yet

prepared to go. I see that in avoiding one difficulty we may encounter another, but I regard a system under which one man may own the homes of a thousand of his neighbors as intolerable, and I am resolved that it shall not be reestablished here."

"If you allow any right of transfer, at death or otherwise," Butcher replied acutely, "it may be made conditional, and the principle of sale or letting is at once admitted."

"Possibly, though not necessarily. But, even so, the position created would be very different from that of the old landlord-and-tenant law, because there would be no right of distraint or ejection."

"It's no use having claims that you can't enforce."

"No?" said Martin. "Then how about the credits that you give, as far as I can understand, to about two hundred of our own people? You know that there are no longer any legal means of enforcing payment of a debt, yet you continue to trade, in the assurance (I suppose) that most men are honest, or that the consequences would recoil upon themselves, should they fail to maintain satisfactory business relations with you."

Butcher was silent. This was the unmentioned matter which had been at the back of his mind during the past months, and which, more even than Martin's remote responsibility for his son's death, caused him to weigh the risk of an alliance with Cooper, and the declaration of open war.

Taking his silence as no more than an admission of the force of the illustration, Martin went on:

"There is nothing really novel in that. The absence of any legal means of recovering a betting or alcoholic debt did not reduce those businesses to a universal cash basis, even under the old conditions, and it would be absurd to suggest that the betting or beer-drinking fraternities were of a higher commercial morality than the rest of the nation. But the debt of law was replaced by the debt of honor, and often received prior consideration in consequence.

"It shows that, if men had had the courage to see it, the penalizing legislation for the enforcement of legal obligations might have been swept away, with all its cruelties, oppressions, waste; and credit trade would still have continued upon a better economic basis, and in a cleaner atmosphere."

Butcher tried to speak temperately. He had realized, as Martin spoke, that it was war between them,—war which could find no ground of compromise, and could give no quarter. Really, he had always known it. Only, there had been the timidity of the trader. The reluctance to take a risk until there should be no means of avoidance. But he did not want Martin to read his mind. He must have time to think.

He said: "It is a system—or a lack of system—which you propose, that

appears to open the door to very great abuses. Abuses which would be inevitable.”

“It would avert greater ones,” Martin answered. Did this man really think that he should be an instrument for the collection of his accounts? That he was going to reestablish all the old machinery of summonses, and executions, and distrains, the accumulation of “costs” upon the poor, the foolish, and the unfortunate—the sale of their possessions to others, who might not desire them, at any price they would bring? That he would degrade some of his people to be the tools of such methods?

No. He might make many mistakes. He had much to learn. Much that might only be discoverable by the test of experiment; but there were, fortunately, some things that he had learned already. He had been a lawyer, and that road was closed. He knew already where it led.

Almost at the same moment, the realization that had come to Butcher came to him also. There could be no permanent peace between them. He must either break this man, or let him break everything for which he himself was striving.

They looked at one another in a silence that became more significant as the seconds passed.

“You needn’t trouble about the house. I’ll tell Pellow that you want it for Ringwood,” Butcher said at last.

It was a capitulation in words, but Martin did not fail to understand it. The time for compromise was over. In future, it must be a condition of either secret or open war.

“I’m sure it will be the best way,” he said coldly.

Butcher went out.

Martin passed into the next room, in which Jack was working. Helen and Claire were there also.

“Jack,” he said, “who’s on the patrols for the next fortnight? Are they men you can trust?”

“Mostly. Vincent’s doubtful. There’s no harm in him, but his wife hates you. That’s always dangerous.”

“Any of Butcher’s men?”

“There’d be three next week. He’s been keeping all his men at home lately. I meant to tell you. He says it’s the cold. He let me know, so that I could use them while they’re about. It’s just the routine. Had I better tell them they’re not wanted?”

“No. But don’t trust them. Set an independent patrol farther out on their nights. I don’t think it’s the cold. I think it’s war.”

He added: “You’d better let Burman know quietly tomorrow that I want Tom back at once.”

Tom had been at Upper Helford a great deal during the last few weeks. He

seemed to like going there. He was superintending something which was going on there with the knowledge both of Burman and Martin, but of which nothing was spoken. Last week, he had taken over two men that he could trust, and they had not returned.

[IX]

The next day the cloth was unconditionally delivered. Butcher sent a message to Ringwood that the house which Sims had vacated was available for his occupation.

There was only one incident that showed the intention which underlay these surrenders. Pellow's forge had disappeared in the night, and his house was vacant. He took with him the two best carts, and three horses. His removal left them without a smithy, or any expert worker in iron—a vocation that had recovered much of its ancient importance.

Burman came from Upper Helford, and had a conference with Martin which lasted for two hours. After that, there was a new activity. Burman's boats, four in all, including the lugger, came in twice a day, if the weather permitted, and went back loaded with many stores. Volunteers had been found to handle the boats; but they were not permitted to go ashore, and two of the boats, in which they returned, were now moored to the mainland when not in use.

The lugger, manned by Claire and Chris, ventured several times when the weather was too rough for the smaller boats. Even the winter darkness did not restrain these activities. After a week, the frost broke, and there was heavy rain, but the work was not interrupted.

Then, on the second night of rain, Jack came to Martin with the report that Joe Harker had ridden over from Cooper's to Helford Grange, and returned after a long interview with Butcher.

Steve Fortune had seen him leaving Cooper's place, and other watchers had seen him at the Grange.

"I've sent Steve straight back," he concluded. "He says Pellow's there, and he's shoeing horses, and repairing harness and arms, as hard as he can. He's sure there's something afoot. He says Joe's not as fat as when he was with Bellamy. I suppose Cooper works him harder."

Joe Harker was an ex-jockey who had attached himself to Bellamy's gang, and had now the position in Cooper's intelligence department left vacant by the deaths of Rentoul and Reddy Teller. He was not a man of war, but he could ride, and had good eyes, and a ready wit.

"I reckon," Jack went on, "that they've got forty-seven good men that they're sure of, besides a few wasters. That's counting Bellamy's fourteen.

There's some I can't trust, that might go either way, and some that only care to keep clear of a row, but I've twice his number that I'd trust anywhere.

"Couldn't we strike first, and round up Butcher's lot? They wouldn't fight by themselves. Then we ought to be able to tackle Cooper in the same way, and get it ended." He looked anxiously at Martin for a reply.

"I don't think we can, Jack. They've given us no excuse to attack them so far, and I don't want to be the one to start a war. But it isn't only that. Suppose we attacked Butcher, and he held out at the Grange till Cooper came up? Suppose we had to besiege either of them, or first one, and then the other? We couldn't do it. Think it out. We haven't even got tents, and the weather's cruel. Besides, the attackers always lose most heavily in such cases.

"Or suppose we found Cooper wasn't there when we arrived? You must remember he's got almost all the horses. He might be here before we could get back."

"There's the ammunition, Captain. If we took the Grange, I expect we should find some there. . . . And there's another thing. We shall lose more men if we seem frightened. I don't mean they'll get killed. They'll desert. I've heard some talk already."

"You must tell them to trust me, Jack. I won't alter the plans I've made. We'll have the Grange before we've done. I may see farther than they do."

The following day, Helen went over to Upper Helford, taking her children with her. She returned next morning, having left them in Chris's charge.

She came home soaked and tired. The weather was still bad. Snow was falling, that melted as it fell, and the field-paths were deep in mud.

She found Muriel with Martin. She noticed, as she entered, that Muriel looked ill and dispirited.

"What I want to ask you," Martin was saying, "is this: Suppose you had a message from me at any time, day or night, that Cooper is moving to attack us, could you get your people to evacuate the camp at once? I should want them to leave everything, and come just as they are—to come by Bycroft Lane, and across the park, and then by the fields over to Cowley Thorn, to be accommodated in the houses there."

"No. I don't think I could. Not at any time of night or weather. And I should need a better reason than I have yet. . . . Can't you find some way of peace, without more fighting?" She spoke wearily, being ill and tired. She added: "They won't like leaving all their things. How soon would they get back?"

"I can't say that," Martin answered. He was tired also, and he had hoped for readier cooperation here than he seemed likely to get. "If the women don't

value their husbands, or the men their wives, more than their other possessions, they must take the consequences. . . . I'm not starting a war. I believe that Cooper is preparing to attack us at the present moment. What do you suppose he wants? What sort of life do you suppose there'll be for Helen or Claire, or for yourself, if Cooper and Butcher do as they like here? And I can tell you this—most of the men who are any good won't be alive then. You can make the best of what are left."

He spoke with an irritation that arose from the unexpected nature of the opposition he was meeting; but Muriel kept both her self-control and the position which she had taken.

"I'm not refusing to help you. I'm only asking to understand. And it's no use promising something I couldn't do. Why not ask Tom?"

Helen interposed. "Tom doesn't go far from Chris these days, if he can help it." She spoke in an effort to change the tone of the conversation.

Her words drew Muriel's attention to herself. "Wherever have you been? You're wetter than I am. And you look tired out."

"I expect we're all rather tired," Helen answered. "Unless it's Claire. I left her helping to reload the boat. It's wonderful how she keeps on. . . . I've been to leave the children at Upper Helford."

"At Upper Helford!" The fact that Helen should have done that, and returned to take her part here, impressed Muriel with the seriousness of the position as no words from Martin would have been likely to do.

He answered her exclamation. "Yes. It's the only safe place. I should have sent every child there already, and every woman that could be sheltered, but for the effect it would have. . . . I'm afraid I didn't explain very patiently, but it seems to me that if they attack us it will be a fight that neither side can afford to lose. It will be a fight to a finish, and, I'm afraid, without much mercy on either side. You'll find that what Cooper's men will want will be the women alive, and the men dead.

"Miss Temple, the real trouble's this. We're scattered over an area of several square miles, and we can't defend it. We're bound to close up, or we shall be defeated in detail. If I get all the men together, I can't force a fight where I like, because Cooper's men are mounted. Would the women like them to raid the camp while the men are away? Would the men like to leave them to such a chance? . . . There's one thing we do know—Cooper will have to come by the upper road, if he is to make a junction with Butcher. If he has any sense—and he has that—he'll come over the heath, where the horses can move quickly. We are bound to hold Cowley Thorn, because it covers the landing-place, and, if we're beaten, Upper Helford's the only retreat we've got. Besides that, it's the only point from which we can strike back. You can guess what would happen, if we were drawn into the open country in this weather. . . .

There's another thing that we're not telling anyone, but I can trust you not to repeat it. We've scarcely any ammunition, and Butcher probably guesses that, if he doesn't know it. But we don't want it to get about yet among our own men."

Muriel said: "I expect you're right; and I'll do what I can, if it comes to that. But I hope it won't."

[X]

Joe Harker slipped wearily off his horse, as he came up to Captain Cooper, who had seen his approach, and stood waiting for his report.

Joe was two stone lighter than when he had ridden off from the scene of Bellamy's death three or four months ago, to take the news to Cooper, which had ended in his abortive raid. But this had been a hard ride, even for his present condition, and the weather was execrable.

"Well," said Cooper, giving his subordinate the hard gaze, devoid of geniality, which was his common regard of either friend or enemy, "what tale does he tell now?"

"He says he's ready any time," Joe answered, "and the sooner the better."

"When does he want us to move?"

"He says, two nights after the full moon there will be two sentinels that he can trust between the Belsham Road and the Common. We shall get right through to Cowley Thorn before anyone knows it. . . . He says, don't make any preparations till the last minute. He doesn't want any suspicion."

"I don't need advice from him. You can go back and tell him that the deal's on, but he must come himself to arrange it. I'll see him tomorrow night, at this time, in Burchell's Hollow."

Joe looked perturbed, and doubtful. "He won't do that—"

"Then the deal's off. I don't trust Butcher," Cooper said shortly. "He must come himself."

"He'll say it's a needless risk."

"Tell him I'm the best judge as to what I need. He'll come."

"You know the warning he's had. If he's caught it's most likely he'll hang him."

Captain Cooper laughed. "Why not? . . . But he won't be caught. If he is, he's no good to me. I don't want men who can't keep their own skins."

Captain Cooper and Joe were both right about Butcher's feelings—and his decision. He didn't like going, but he went.

In fact, there was little risk. He had spies whom he could trust, for the good

reason that they had little to hope from Martin. He went and returned by night, meeting Cooper in an old saw-pit hollow, by the light of a moon that was near the full, and the whiteness of a thin snowfall, which barely covered the ground in the more sheltered places.

Dimly seen to each other as they were, they were yet conscious of the changes which had taken place in both since they had gone separate ways some months ago.

Cooper was harder, leaner, and his voice, which had always been of a metallic quality, was harsher and more dominating, easily changing into a tone of menace.

Butcher could not be leaner than before; his difference lay in the fact that the veneer of gentility worn in his stockbroking days, which had been thinning four months ago, was now entirely lost, and his appearance and manners approximated more nearly to those of a suave and unscrupulous huckster.

The conversation was short and pointed. The weather did not invite delay. There was already a basis of understanding between them. Cooper was to rule, and own and control the land. Butcher was to be the monopolist of all commercial transactions.

Butcher had one new point on which he wished for an understanding. He had lost his son, and he had a natural desire to replace him with another heir. But it was a matter on which Cooper was disposed to be contemptuously complacent.

“Webster’s widows?” he said. “You could have both if you liked. Only I promised one to Joe, when he brought in the first news about her. I don’t believe in breaking a business promise. Of course, if she pushes into the row, and gets killed, as she’s the sort to do, that’s her trouble. . . . Oh, she’s like that, is she? Well, Joe’ll have to nurse it when it comes. . . . Yes, you can have the other. More your sort, is she? Don’t think I’ve seen that one. They’re all much alike to me. . . . Second night after the full moon? . . . No, early morning’s the time. No night-work for me. An hour before sunrise. We shall come along the Belsham Road, and then through Larkshill, and push on straight for the railway. . . . Why? Why, because I’m not a fool. Because, if they suspect anything, they’ll look for us across the Common, or up the road from Larkshill to Cowley Thorn. They’ll think we shall aim first at joining you, and lay their plans accordingly. Of course you’ll attack separately. Why not? You’ve only to see that they don’t get between you and Helford Grange. If they’re too strong, you can fall back, can’t you? You’ll do your part, as long as you keep them busy. Only don’t lie low, and do nothing, or you’ll be sorry afterwards. . . . We couldn’t keep together, anyway. My men are mounted. I’ve trained them more than a bit since last time. I reckon they’re good for Webster’s lot at two to one, and perhaps rather more than that. . . . Yes. That’s

all. There's this infernal snow coming again. . . . The second night after the full moon. One hour before dawn. We shall be there."

He did not know that Steve Fortune lay at the top of the bank above him, very wet and uncomfortable, but hearing every word he said, and a good deal of Butcher's replies.

But when he got back to the shelter of his own roof, and sat with John Coe, his farm bailiff, and the one man to whom he gave some measure of trust and confidence, he said contemptuously:

"That's Butcher's idea of planning.—A week beforehand; and I'll bet there'll be half a dozen that know of it by this time tomorrow. I think I could tell which night it will be, but I shan't say, even to you. It won't be the night we've arranged. That's the one thing certain."

[XI]

Steve Fortune brought his news to Martin next morning. It gave shape and definiteness to the menace under which they had been living, and stirred the preparation for defense to a redoubled activity.

Martin warned Steve not to give any hint to others of the knowledge he had gained, lest word be carried to Butcher which would cause their plans to be altered. Martin wanted time. The full moon was three days ahead. He had five days.

It was a peculiarity of the position that Butcher's men were still moving freely among them. He knew that Martin must now be aware of his enmity, but while his men were accepted in their due turns for the patrol work, he supposed that he was not suspected of any collusion with Cooper.

He had cautiously enlisted three or four more men whom he had known to be discontented, and who awaited his call to join him openly at Helford Grange. He had put that place into as good a state of defense as his resources permitted, and his fourteen men were well-armed. He kept them from further expeditions on the pretext of adverse weather, and Martin appeared to accept this explanation, while he debated inwardly whether it would not be best to make a sudden attack upon the Grange, before the date which had been fixed for Cooper's coming.

Thus there was general pretense, but little deception. There was probably no one within the district who did not move under a sense of impending catastrophe.

Of the scattered population in the woods, and in isolated dwellings, some came closer in, and others disappeared into the farther wilderness, preferring to take their chances of cold and solitude rather than to await the fury of the storm of human passions which was overshadowing them.

Martin heard of these defections without regret. He had little use for the cowardly or the irresolute, and the reduction in numbers simplified the hardest part of the problem which confronted him.

He had a message from Burman that Tom had finished the work on which he had been occupied, and hoped to return himself during the next day. It was a needed encouragement; for, under an outer aspect of confidence, Martin was aware that the continued strains of work and anxiety were threatening a physical collapse.

The secret plan he had formed seemed more hazardous, as the time approached which must test it, with the lives of all who were dearest, or who relied upon him, staked on its success.

He found himself constantly wondering, as he looked on the faces of those around him, whether they would be alive in a week's time, or in what condition of misery that he had brought upon them. He saw now that he could so easily have made some compromise with Butcher which would have delayed this crisis, if it had not averted it permanently. . . . He watched the weather, hoping secretly for a deep snow, such as would render Cooper's attack impracticable.

That afternoon, he went over to Upper Helford himself to inspect what had been done, and on his return he made public announcement that, as there was apprehension of an attack by Cooper, all women and children who were willing could be accommodated there until quieter times. Even though it meant the abandonment of their homes to those who went, the four boats made a loaded journey, in the course of which one was nearly swamped in the wintry sea.

For the first time for a fortnight, Claire came home that evening. She reported that there was now sleeping accommodation for all the women and children who were likely to avail themselves of the protection it offered. Loft, and stable, and byre had been utilized, and some rough protections had been erected for the ejected cattle.

"I want you to take Helen back with you tomorrow," Martin said. "It's a useless risk staying here longer."

The two women looked at each other, and Helen shook her head.

Claire said: "Why shouldn't you? It's my turn to be home for a bit now."

"I didn't mean that you should stay instead," Martin interposed. "I want you both there. We don't know what may happen any moment now."

"Claire's occupied too much with the boat to look after you here," Helen answered. "I'm not going till you do."

"I don't need any looking after—and Betty can do that anyway."

"Betty's going tomorrow morning. I've arranged that with Phillips."

"I'd much rather you'd go," Martin answered, but he did not contest it

further.

He went out of the room, and Helen said: "Of course, I couldn't go, and tell Betty to stay, though she was willing enough. I don't really mind, now that the babies are safe. I suppose Upper Helford really is safe, whatever happens here?"

"Oh, it's safe enough," Claire answered confidently. "Tom's put some extra barbed wire that he got from the camp along the shore side. There was a good bit there before that. I should be sorry for anyone who goes that way, if he isn't wanted. . . . I shouldn't worry, if I were you. Martin always comes out all right in the end."

"I can't help worrying. Martin never worried before, but he does now, though he won't let people see it."

"Yes, I know that. Who wouldn't, with a plan like his? But you'll find he'll keep to it, all the same. . . . We shall all be glad when it's over. I hope the weather won't get any worse. They overloaded the boats today."

[XII]

It was the evening of the first night after the full moon. The weather had been so rough that they had been unable to use the smaller boats, and though Claire had made one passage in the lugger successfully, she had taken only four women, no others being willing to face the storm. She had had so much difficulty in returning that she had given up the idea of a second attempt, and brought Chris up to the house with her.

She found Tom there, and Jack Tolley, taking instructions from Martin as to the procedures of the next morning, which broke off as they entered.

"I brought Chris up for the night," she said, in explanation. "There's nothing wrong, but the wind's worse than ever, and there's a bad sea, and what's the use of taking the boat over empty, to bring it back in the morning? There wasn't anyone but Monty and Pettifer at the landing-place when we got in."

They knew that wind and rain were the explanations of that solitude, for there was no longer any unwillingness on the part of the women to seek the safety of Upper Helford.

It was only this evening, and to the men that were now with him, that Martin had told the news that Steve had brought, fixing the attack which would be made upon them at the end of the following night, and even now he had warned them not to mention the fact to any.

"We don't want them," he said, "to change their plans, because they think we suspect them. But we'll clear the railway camp completely tomorrow, and we'll finish getting the women over, if the weather's at all possible."

As Claire entered, he had ceased speaking, to listen to her report. It was a day lost. It meant that the complete evacuation which he had planned would be impossible tomorrow. But they must do what they could. Anyway, they would finish clearing the railway camp in the morning. The women must come to Cowley Thorn for the night, as he had first planned.

They had nothing to fear for tonight—and in such weather. But Tom said he would make his way round the patrols, all the same. He would leave nothing to chance.

No one had worked harder than Tom during the last weeks, and no one showed so little sign of fatigue, either of mind or body. He was of a disposition that works with the expenditure of a minimum of nervous force, and he was under the influence of Chris's contrasting vivacity.

"Can't I come with you?" she said eagerly, and changed to a frown of petulance at the chorus of negatives which the proposal caused. It was her first night on the mainland, though she had brought the lugger to the landing-stage in Claire's company several times previously. That was the extent of her father's permission, even now that he had gained confidence in Martin, and was offering the asylum of the island to the threatened settlement.

But now, under the stress of weather, Claire had brought her out of the loneliness of the last few months to this place of excitements, and it would have been a heavenly ending to a day of storm and struggle, could she have tramped six miles of rough ways in rain and wind, in the company of the man with whose slower moods she could play so easily, and with the romance of shadowy danger in the darkness of the farther fields.

It was the measure of her triumphant audacity—perhaps, to the judgment of a colder reason, of selfishness and ignorance also—that the gravity of those among whom she moved had no power to impress her. Even Claire's confident courage seemed to her tame with the taint of maturity. But to Tom she was as adorable when she urged to a reckless adventure of curiosity as when she tempted and then eluded with audacious teasing.

[XIII]

That night, Martin could not rest.

He had slept somewhat better than usual the night before, having arrived at that stage of his plans at which there seemed nothing more to be arranged, and it only remained to see to what issue they would lead.

The night found him restless, with a sense of impending evil which would not leave his mind. He went over all the preparations he had made, all the orders he had given, and decided that nothing had been overlooked, nothing more could be done till the morning came.

He was alone in the house with the four women. Phillips was taking his turn in the patrol work, and would not be back till three o'clock. There was nothing in that. He had no fear of a personal attack. The doors and windows were strongly bolted and barred. It had been arranged that, at any threat of danger, they should retire into the kitchen, which had its own defensive preparations, and await relief. A shot would be heard in the nearer houses of Cowley Thorn, where nearly thirty of his men were barracked, and would bring help in about four minutes. Besides, for several reasons the occurrence of such an attack was as unlikely as its success. It was not that which vexed his mind.

He sat on in the library as the hours passed, reviewing all that he had done, or failed to do, in the last four months, and wondering whether it were about to end in abortion, or would lead to the foundation of better things than had yet been reached.

If he could win now, he felt that the way ahead would not be impossibly difficult. Doubtless, there would be blunders, disappointments, discouragements enough; but yet, if he could win this fight, he felt good hope for the future. If he could win this fight. *If—*

—And if not?

It was useless—worse than useless—to dwell on such a possibility. He must not fail.

He heard the voices of Helen and Claire. They had not gone to bed either. Perhaps they were as restless as he. He went into the dining-room, and found them before the fire.

But they were talking of other days. A chance reference by Helen to a school friend, whom they had both known in Cheltenham many years earlier, had brought up reminiscences of an already half-forgotten world; and they had been talking without regard to time, and in oblivion of all the anxieties pressing upon him.

"I can't rest tonight," he said. "I think I'll take a ride round, as soon as Phillips returns, and see that everything's all right. I shall feel easier tomorrow, when we have cleared the camp—and Larkshill, too, if we can persuade them to come."

"You can't ride tonight," Helen said. "The weather's worse, rather than better. And what use could it be?"

He told them of a misgiving that had come to him. "If they should have seen that there can be no special advantage in tomorrow night, mightn't they alter the date, and, if so, wouldn't they make it earlier, rather than later, when they heard that we're moving all the women to Upper Helford?"

"They can't make it much earlier now," Helen remarked, with some reason.

"Mightn't they decide not to attack us at all, if we just go without fighting?" Claire asked. "They get almost everything we've got, and they know that we couldn't all stay there forever."

It was one of the doubts that had been in Martin's own mind, and if they acted in that way he was not sure that it would help his plans. It would look rather silly if nothing happened, and they had to return at last to their deserted and plundered homes. But he knew that things wouldn't be quite like that. He had one card to play which they could not guess. And, in any case, with the women in safety, he could use his men more freely. No, he didn't really fear that.

But he did want it over quickly. There was no accommodation—scarcely the barest shelter—for so many at Upper Helford. There must be discomforts, even privations, from the first. Hardened though most of them were, there might be disease if it should continue. The crisis could not come too quickly—after tonight.

"I shouldn't think they'd be likely to do much in this weather," Claire suggested. "It wouldn't suit Butcher's rheumatism."

He was aware that he must seem unreasonable in this midnight anxiety, but it would not leave him. A lover of the occult might have connected his disquiet with the long line of horsemen that moved very silently along a road nearly ten miles away. But there is a simpler alternative.

Was the weather really so impossible? He went to the garden door, unbarred it, and looked at the night. It was still windy. A cold wind from the northwest. But the sky was clearing, and the moon shone on pools in which the ice was forming. It would be colder before the dawn.

He closed the door, and went back into the dining-room. "I'll wait till Phillips comes before deciding. He won't be long now. Then perhaps I'll lie down. But there's no sense in you both sitting up as well."

But they said they did not want to sleep either. They sat and talked of old and distant things, with silent intervals, as do those who wait for the news of birth or death, or of a surgeon's work in an adjoining room.

Then Phillips came.

He had news, though it was of no certain import. Joe Harker had ridden in about two hours ago, and was with Butcher at the Grange. His horse had been unsaddled, and it seemed probable that he was not returning. That might mean a message that Cooper's plans had been changed. It might mean only that he was the bringer of final plans for tomorrow night.

"I wish you'd get my horse, Phillips. I'm going to take a ride round before I turn in."

Phillips was slow to move. "I don't think I'd do that, sir. If I may say so, sir." Phillips thought of his master first. If others wouldn't keep a good lookout

for themselves, they should be the ones to suffer.

"Perhaps you wouldn't, Phillips, and you might be wiser than I. But I think I shall, all the same."

Helen was silent. Sympathetically, she was feeling something of the apprehension which disturbed his mind.

Claire may have felt it also. She said: "It seems a crazy thing to do; but if you must go, you'd better take my horse. She's so sure-footed in the dark." She thought also that she was so much the swifter. Probably the best of her kind that the island held.

She fetched him the automatic she had been carrying, which had done them such good service in the tunnel fight. He would take no other weapon.

Would he take some more cartridges? There were only about a dozen left, besides those with which it was loaded. No, it didn't matter. It was unlikely that he would have any occasion to use it.

"I shall be back before it's light," he said, more cheerfully now that he had found the relief of action. "I don't suppose I shall be away more than two or three hours."

They did not guess that they would never meet in that room again.

[XIV]

He rode first to Cowley Thorn, where he was not surprised to find an alert watch, for Jack Tolley was in charge there, and he was not one who trusted to chance.

He went on to the landing-place, and found the boats well guarded. The sea had gone down somewhat, with the falling wind, though the swell was still heavy, and it seemed probable that the boats would be able to venture out in the morning. This was well also.

Riding westward, above the high shore facing Upper Helford, he looked over a broad sea-channel, to a cliff shore along which a sentry was pacing, behind the hedge of wire. Like Jack, Burman left nothing to chance.

The tide was flowing out beneath him. In a few hours the hollow of Helford Brook would be bare enough for a man to walk or wade across it, as Arter had once found, though he had made little profit from the discovery.

Martin turned inland from there, and rode almost up to the ruined walls of Helford Grange. All here was silent and peaceful, though he thought that a faint light shone upward, probably from a cellar grating in the line of the old moat.

Left hand then, in a wide curve round Larkshill, and so to the approach of the railway camp across the road from which he had first ridden up to it four months ago. But he did not cross the road. He had no wish to disturb them. It

came to his mind that they would be watching (if they watched at all) for mounted men, and that he would be a cause for alarm, should he approach from the southward.

The moon was bright now, and there was a white frost on the fields. He reined up, looking over the hedge into the silent road beneath him. All was quiet.

He recognized now that it had been a foolish thing to do to come out for such a ride in the night. There was nothing left but to go home, and regret the sleep he had lost, for which he supposed he would suffer tomorrow night, when he would be really needed.

But he was reluctant to go. Strangely reluctant to commence the return that would be a confession of the folly which had brought him out.

And while he sat silent, he saw the figure of a man that came running toward him along the hedge-side. The man was within twenty yards before he saw Martin and stopped abruptly.

"I shall fire, if you move," Martin called out; and Will Carless knew his voice, and answered pantingly.

He came to the horse's side.

"There are about thirty men coming up the road. They must be close now. I had to come round the field, so that I shouldn't be seen."

"You must leave the camp to me now. Take the field-path to Larkshill, and warn them there. Tell them to clear out to Cowley Thorn, and not to lose a second. Never mind what they leave. They're not to fight there, unless it's to give the women time to get clear."

Will Carless ran on.

Martin turned his mind to his own problem. The camp was scarcely a mile away. But he could not get his horse down the bank at that point. To cross the road, he must go some distance farther south, but it was the quickest way, if there were time to do it unseen.

He rode on, his ears alert for every sound, his mind on the fact that Cooper had changed not only the night, but the direction of the attack. He was not an opponent to be regarded lightly.

He came to where the fields fell to the road level, and the gap that he had ridden through four months ago still gave free passage. He looked cautiously at the empty road, before leaving the tall shadow of an ancient hawthorn hedge that, though leafless, made a ten-foot barrier of light-proof thicket. . . .

Something moved in the distance, up the frosty center of the moonlit road. . . .

He turned his horse into the hedge on the farther side of the gap. He could see nothing from that position of whoever were coming up the road, but as they passed, he would see their backs; and they would not see him, unless they

should turn their heads to look—and the dark shadow of the hedge would be a good cover, even then.

He waited so long that he doubted whether his sight had not misled him; then they began to pass him, two abreast, their horses walking, with muffled hoofs.

He counted them as they passed. Nearly fifty men. Seen by a better light, they might have appeared the oddest troop that were ever assembled for a military enterprise. They were mounted on horses of very different qualities; there was no unity of clothes or accouterments; they were armed with an extraordinary variety of weapons, ancient and modern, that a six months' search had accumulated. But to those whose lives were staked upon defeating them they were sufficiently formidable.

As he counted mechanically, Martin debated in his mind if he should not fire among them, and then trust to his horse's speed for safety. Would his shot be heard, and give warning? Would it stir this slow approach to a very different pace, which would hasten attack, and give no time for flight? Should he not give a longer warning if he waited, and rode rapidly to the camp after he had crossed the road? They might even wait till the dawn before they attacked, if they had no cause to suspect that an alarm had been given.

While he debated thus, Cooper passed him. He was disposed to fire then, but hesitated, and the chance was gone. Perhaps it was best. He was not a practiced shot, and the light might have betrayed him.

They had all passed now. Forty-seven or forty-nine. In another moment he could cross the road—and then his mare neighed!

She may have recognized some old companion of Cooper's stable, from which she came. She may simply have resented the fact that the other horses were disappearing up the road without having been made aware of her existence. A horse answered from the road, and she neighed again.

Martin abandoned concealment, and pushed out into the road. It may have been a mistake. It is possible that there might have been no disposition to investigate what was no more than a horse's neigh from a roadside field. But his first thought was for the warning of the camp, and if he were to be chased he wished to be on the right side of the road.

But he found that he could not leave the road at this point. There was an awkward ditch, and a high hedge beyond it. He did not know what the chance might be to the south, but he knew that, a little farther on, if he should ride toward the camp, there would be no obstacle whatever. Road and waste land had no division of hedge or ditch or wall to impede him.

He turned his horse to follow the invading troop, and, as he did so, he became aware that Cooper was leaving nothing to chance. He was sending two of his men back to investigate the shadowy figure on the road behind him.

It was at that moment that the depression which had been weighing upon him, and against which he had been fighting for several days, was suddenly lifted. He trotted confidently forward, the automatic concealed against his horse's neck.

Cooper had pulled his horse to the side of the road, and was looking back, to see what happened. Observing a single horseman, who rode forward to meet his men, he did not suspect an enemy, but he thought that a messenger from Butcher had been sent to intercept him with news of some unexpected development. He rode back also.

Martin quickened his pace. The men were near, and there was still this obstructing hedge on his right. If he could pass them, and get up to the man behind—who he felt sure was Cooper—the way of escape was clear.

He edged his horse across the road to the right. The two men met him.

"Is Captain Cooper here?" he demanded. "I want to speak to your Captain."

The men were strangers to him, and he to them. They were puzzled, but this was not like the approach of an enemy. They gave him way, and turned their horses to follow. He quickened pace as he passed them.

Cooper saw that they had allowed his passage, and was confirmed in his previous opinion. He called to Martin to halt, as he approached, and turned his own horse across the road to stay him.

"I am Captain Cooper," he called out. "What have you brought?"

"This for you," he answered curtly. He remembered the remark about "Webster's widows," and, as he spoke, he lifted his hand, and fired.

But he should have fired without speaking. The tone, rather than the words, gave a warning to Cooper's mind, so that he swerved somewhat with a quick instinct of danger just as the shot came.

The bullet, which might have found a deadlier lodging, struck his bridle-arm, as he pulled on the rein, and the jerk caused the horse to rear. Doing this, it took the next bullet in its own chest, and horse and man came down in a heap together.

Martin turned his horse as the second bullet was fired, and made off, at a rapid pace, over the waste land that lay between the road and the canal-ditch.

There was some half-hearted pursuit by slower riders, from a force which he had rendered leaderless for the moment. There were some random shots. But the suddenness of the event and the covering night gave him sufficient advantage to make retreat seem easy, and when he rode into a camp which had been already roused to activity by the firing, he was alone and unpursued.

Martin's attack upon Captain Cooper had succeeded by its unexpectedness, as an audacity may often do. Among its major consequences must be counted the restoration of the cool and tenacious attitude with which he was accustomed to face a conflict, but which had faltered under the working and waiting strains of the previous days. It had succeeded also in causing disorder, and a delay which was of vital importance. It had not killed Jerry Cooper, nor inflicted any disabling injury.

Cooper had a bad fall, and a bleeding arm. The fall shook him for a time, and the arm must be bound up; but he was not of a disposition to be lightly turned from his purpose, by an undue regard to an injury.

Within fifteen minutes, he felt himself fit to continue, and issued his orders accordingly, without losing time even to curse the men who had let Martin pass them. His horse was dead, and he was content to take from one of his men an inferior and quieter animal such as could be safely ridden with only one arm in working order.

Then, preferring speed to any further attempt at secrecy, he ordered John Coe to ride on with twenty men to attack Larkshill, while he advanced upon the railway camp with the remainder of the force.

It was arranged that Butcher should advance, at the first sign of dawn, upon the defenders of Cowley Thorn, either to capture it, if the resistance should be feeble—thus cutting off the line of retreat to Upper Helford—or at least to hold them engaged until Cooper could join him.

The experiences of the next few hours were blurred in the minds of those who fought or fled from Larkshill and the railway camp to the doubtful refuge of Cowley Thorn. If their memories held any clear impressions, they were rather of the events of the later hours,—of the group of women round the boats that waited the slow rising of the indifferent tide, while the noise of battle and pursuit pressed closer; and of the embarkation at last, the while the remnant of the little guarding force fought hand-to-hand with the horsemen who had dismounted to reach them among the fallen larches. Or they would recall that longer wait for the tide to ebb again, so that those who had defended Cowley Thorn could retreat over the hollow of Helford Brook to the security of the barbed-wired cliff of Upper Helford—a wait under a fire from their assailants to which they could make little reply, because there were few, except Jack Tolley, who had any cartridges left, and during which time they had twice to repulse, in close and sanguinary fighting, the rushes which were intended to make a final end of the resistance they offered.

It was here that Helen and Claire had waited, with a distracted Betty, who had good cause to believe that Phillips had perished in the house from which

they had delayed their flight too long. For they had been reluctant to leave it in Martin's absence, and the advance of Butcher's men had left them scanty time for flight to the protection of the houses in Cowley Thorn which Martin had chosen as the first line of defense at that point. A flight from which Phillips had obstinately returned to test the quality of the defenses which his ingenuity had provided, and had found them of such avail that, in impatience of the unexpected delay which this resistance caused, Reeves had ordered his men to set fire to the house. This the more frugal-minded Butcher was too late to prevent, when he came up.

He had intended that house for his own occupation, as he intended Helen for his own wife. But now a dense column of yellow smoke rose upright in the frosty air—an omen, as it seemed to many on either side, that Martin's reign was over.

But Phillips was not dead. He had not anticipated the event with accuracy, but he had known that a siege cannot long be sustained without a sufficient supply of water for the garrison, and he now owed his safety to the fact that he had filled a large hogshead of water in the cellar, to which he retreated, the temperature of which never rose above a tepid warmth as he crouched within it.

It was mainly due to Jack Tolley that the final retreat to Upper Helford was achieved without loss or disorder.

The few women who had retreated in this direction, and who had not been taken off in the boats in consequence, were first transferred to the other side by means of the horses, as soon as the tide had fallen sufficiently. Martin had returned Claire's horse to her, after he had united his retreating bands on the heath between Cowley Thorn and the sea; and with the two others indifferently ridden, but fastened to her own bridle on either hand, she had forded the falling channel three times before the water was low enough for pedestrian passage.

Then, when the time came that the fighting force could retreat across the lessening water, Jack Tolley had volunteered to hold back pursuit with his single rifle, and had proved equal to the occasion.

It was just before that time that Cooper had endeavored to combine his own force and Butcher's in a third charge, which he felt sure, if it could once reach its objective, would decide the issue; but he found his men were of little heart to attempt it, and Butcher's even less so.

Cooper asked contemptuously if they would follow his leading, to which they agreed, but disconcerted him somewhat by inquiring from whom they were to take orders, if he were killed.

It was Jack Tolley's rifle that was responsible for this question. In the charges that they had made already they had learned that the first man to break from cover was hit immediately. Cooper was not a professor of heroics; he was

a practical business man. He said no more about the leading of charges.

So they watched and waited, till three riderless horses appeared at the cliff top, and ran loose over the heather. Correctly surmising this to indicate that their enemies were already crossing the hollow, and would provide an easy mark for the bullets of those above them, they made another attempt to advance, on which a single shot came from the gorse-bushes that lined the edge of the cliff, and Reeves, who was somewhat in advance of the others, pitched forward awkwardly, and lay still. His followers retreated too hastily for a second shot to be necessary—for Jack shot with economy.

Seeing the effect of his bullet, he judged it to be an excellent time at which to slip down the cliff, and follow his companions to safety, leaving his enemies to a half-hour of further waiting, before they ventured to investigate whether he might still be there.

[XVI]

Captain Cooper looked across at the cliff front of Upper Helford, and down at the intervening hollow, into which the tide was flowing. He considered that it would be passable during the night, and that the moon would still be good. He was pleasantly aware of victory, though he was not elated beyond reason.

In the course of one day's fighting, against an unmounted, but larger force, he had captured the railway camp, the ruins of the mining village of Larkshill, and the larger and more populated Cowley Thorn—the latter with the assistance of Butcher's force.

He had his own list of dead and wounded, but he reckoned that the retreating force had suffered at least as heavily. They had counted seven who lay dead upon the territory that they had captured.

Besides these, they had captured about a dozen more or less seriously wounded men—for there had been no possibility of the retreating force carrying them over the Helford hollow. Concerning the fate of these prisoners Cooper frowned uncertainly. He had no scruples, one way or another, but he would rather be the ruler of fifty men than of thirty. He must see how they talked in the morning.

But they had taken no women.

Cooper looked thoughtfully at the last retreat of the man that he was resolved to break, and calculated the chances of one bold thrust, which would end the fighting, and make his gains complete.

He knew that his men were exhausted with the efforts of the day. They had been in motion most of the previous night, on which point they were at a disadvantage, for most of their opponents had been able to sleep till dawn.

Still—there was exhaustion on both sides. He was half inclined . . . But it

might be difficult to arouse his men to a further effort.

The sky was clear. There was little wind. It would be very cold before morning. . . . Perhaps his own physical condition decided the argument. He had not slept for forty-eight hours. He had taken a wound, and he had lost blood. He was not fit to lead such an attack, and he felt that it would not be successful unless he did so. John Coe was dead. So was Reeves. Butcher? Not he.

There was no sense in risking a failure. No. They should sleep tonight, and let their opponents' spirits sink as they reflected on the desperation of their condition. . . . He could do with some sleep himself.

[XVII]

Claire came to Martin with the news that Belle Rivers was not to be found among the women. She had not been in any of the boats. Ted Rivers wanted to go back to find her. Might she take him in the lugger? Chris would come also, and the boy, Ned. It would be safe enough, for who would watch the deserted landing-place?

Martin did not think it safe, but he would not refuse, if Claire wished to do it.

Belle had been in the frightened group of women who had fled up Bycroft Lane. She had been with them as they crossed the fields toward Cowley Thorn, and when they turned to take the field-path to the landing-place. She had been missing after the first sharp skirmish with the horsemen at the edge of Cowley Wood.

"Ned thinks she probably lost her nerve, and hid in the wood," Claire added in explanation. "She'll be almost out of her mind if she's alone there. You know her baby's due in about two months, and the cold will be cruel."

"Yes," Martin admitted, "we ought to try. I suppose no one else could manage the boat in the dark? But, of course, you'll stay in it with Chris; and Ted and the lad can go and look. If you think you're seen, you must come back at once, and they must hide on the land. It mayn't make many hours' difference."

"Oh, there's no real danger," she answered lightly. "They'll all be as tired as we are. They won't look where they're expecting no one to come. But I'll take this, if I may." The pistol changed hands once again. "It has a busy life between us," she laughed, as she went out.

There were about forty men in the dim-lit kitchen of the farmhouse of Upper Helford.

The lamp shone on the deal table in the center, and the men stood crowding in the shadows of the large low-ceilinged room. They were as many as it would hold, and they were the men whom Jack had picked as most fit in physique and courage for the part which they would be required to take.

They were wearied men, conscious of good fighting done, and of a momentary respite in the security they had reached. Confident, also, in their leader, and with the comforting knowledge of a meal just eaten, which had been ready on their arrival. But they were dispirited by the sense of defeat.

Martin stood with his back to a great fire, so that his face was in shadow. He was conscious of a controlled excitement, and of a great weariness, which made that control difficult, but he knew that he must not relax until this struggle should be over.

His voice, when he spoke, had the confident coolness which it had held all day.

“I want you all to have a good sleep now, and then be ready at about two hours before dawn, when we hope to give Mr. Butcher an unexpected visit. There is something which has been in preparation a good many weeks, but it has been necessary to keep it quiet, and it has not been mentioned by anyone, except on this island.

“Some of you know that Helford Grange is a very old building—how old it is hard to say—and it is probable that there has been a farmhouse here at Upper Helford for about an equal period.

“There have been ancient tales of a passage below the ground that connected the two, and of uses to which it was put, but it had never been discovered in modern times, and most people had ceased to believe in it.

“Well, some months ago Miss Burman discovered this passage—or, at least, one end of it.

“It was followed underground for some distance, and was then found to have fallen in. That wasn’t surprising. The wonder was that it remained at all, after what’s happened. But the land between here and Helford Grange hasn’t changed relatively—not much, if at all, and it seemed worth investigating.

“Tom Aldworth took it in hand, and I sent over Smith and Gilkes, who, as most of you know, were used to such work in the mines, and we’ve got the passage sufficiently cleared and repaired. We know where it opens, and how it opens, into one of Butcher’s cellars, which is too full of goods for him to find out we’re coming before we’re there.

“I think you’d better get some sleep now. You’ll sleep rough tonight, though we’ve most of us known what it is to sleep on worse than straw in the last six months. But if you all do your parts, as I know you will, I think we shall be back in our own homes by this time tomorrow.”

There was no cheer as he finished, but a murmur that was half a chuckle

and half a growl. There was none too dense to see how different would be the position if Butcher's gang should be surprised asleep in the fancied security of his own cellars, nor the effect of the capture of Helford Grange, with all its stores.

[XVIII]

It was three hours before the first light of the winter dawn, when Martin came through the outer door into the farmhouse kitchen, where a great fire was still burning.

He had been round to sleepy sentries, and changed them twice, for his mind had been vexed by a fear that there might be some traitor among them who would carry news of the plan which he had disclosed, and that the men who trusted him might be led into a death-trap in consequence. But there was only one way back to the mainland for anyone who was not prepared to swim for half a mile in the wintry sea, and he had seen that the cliff top was well patrolled.

Claire was by the fire, as he entered, and Helen, who had risen from a late attempt at rest, was with her. They had Belle Rivers wrapped in blankets before the fire, and were feeding her with warm milk. She lay white and half-conscious, and talked deliriously at times, but Claire spoke hopefully.

"I think she'll come round now, but we were afraid before. She's not been fully conscious since we found her, and she was so cold in the boat."

"How are things looking ashore?" Martin asked.

"They're dead quiet. You ought to have a walk-over, if you go now. We could have sung hymns, if we'd wanted. There's no sign of life anywhere. We shouldn't have found her if we hadn't shouted right up to Cowley Wood. She must have known Ted's voice, for she answered, and crawled out from under a tree, though she didn't seem to know us when we got up. I think she fainted when she knew we'd found her."

"Then you didn't stay in the boat?"

"No. Chris stayed. It didn't need two."

"It was a foolish risk. If they'd caught you—"

"Chris's risk. Not mine. But the little devil nearly killed us all coming back. She steered us the short cut that we can't take very safely, even when the tide's full, and we've got light to see where we're going. We grounded once, and shipped about half a ton of water, and then we slid clear. I don't know what the keel looks like. . . . I suppose she thought Belle couldn't stand much more. . . . I'm sorry for Tom."

"Why?" said Tom, who came in at the moment, and had not heard the preceding words.

"I'm sorry for anyone that Chris marries."

"Who said I was going to marry Chris?"

"No one. You're not. She'll marry you—if she likes the way you kill Cooper."

"Kill Cooper?"

"Yes. Or someone else. If you don't know what I mean, I'm too tired to explain. I'm just going to sleep, and you don't seem to have waked up." She turned to Martin, returning the pistol as she did so. "Your turn now. You'll find a bullet missing. I had to shoot Joe Harker. . . . Yes, we had a few words, and it seemed necessary. . . . No, no one heard us. No one came, anyway. He was just spying round, after his own style. Looking for Belle, I expect. . . . No. I tell you it's all as dead as a church. . . . But I'm going to bed now. Helen dear, you'd better come too. Betsy Parkin can look after Belle. *Noblesse oblige* is all right, but you overdo it. . . . Besides, I want your help. Joe wasn't the only one who got shot, and I'm afraid I'm a bit messy. . . . I thought that would fetch you."

She was in the passage with the last words, and Helen followed her, as Chris came in at the outer door.

"Claire hurt?" she exclaimed, in reply to Martin's question. "She was all right in the boat. I'm sure she's not much hurt."

Reassured on that point, Martin turned to Tom. He was going to rouse the men now, and they would start in about twenty minutes. Food was ready to be taken in to them in the large barn where they were sleeping. Martha Barnes was seeing to that.

Tom had been underground, and reported that all was well. Martin went out to rouse the men, and left him alone with Chris, and Belle Rivers asleep or unconscious before the fire.

It was ten minutes later that Helen reentered the kitchen. She found them standing some distance apart, in the attitudes of those who are waiting idly for something to happen. It may seem a reasonable deduction that they had found the time pass slowly, but reasonable deductions are sometimes wrong.

"Is Claire really hurt?" Chris asked, with something as nearly approaching anxiety as she had ever been known to show. She was eager for the romance of life, but her romantic requirement was a world in which you hurt your very numerous enemies, not one in which they hurt you or your friends in unpleasant places.

"No," Helen answered. "She's asleep now. The shot must have just grazed her side. She says Joe shot first when he saw her drawing her pistol."

Burman came in as they talked. He wore the wide-brimmed hat, and leggings, and had the shotgun under his arm, as when he had first introduced himself in Stacey Dobson's library.

"You won't mind a volunteer?" he asked, as Martin came in from outside, at the same moment. Martin assented, thanking him for the help he offered. He had given the hospitality of Upper Helford, and ungrudging help in food and shelter and service, on the sole condition that his own freedom remain, and that neither he nor his be considered under Martin's authority.

Then the men began to file into the kitchen, and Tom put himself at their head, with Smith and Gilkes, and led the way to the cellar.

The others followed in single file, Jack Tolley, and Burman, and Burke, who had given good evidence of strength and courage during the previous day, being next behind them. Steve Fortune was in the first ten, his imagination already uneasy at the idea of this subterranean transit. He would willingly have been farther back, and there were those farther back, including Davy Barnes, who would gladly have been farther forward. Last of all, an indignant Monty ended the line, Tom having considered that the unpopularity of his bill-hook and his own impetuosity, would have a good effect in the prevention of a straggling rear.

[XIX]

It was a natural assumption from Claire's experience that Cooper was neglecting to keep a sufficient watch, and it had a degree of truth, though the inference may have done less than justice to his own abilities of leadership.

He did not anticipate any attack during the night, yet he set two of the most reliable of his men to share the task of watching his own side of the Helford hollow; and he chose four others to divide the duty, two after two, of patrolling the outskirts of Cowley Thorn.

Of these last, one of the two who were to take the second watch was Joe Harker. The other sentry, after half an hour of what he considered to be an utterly useless vigilance, found a straw-lined corner sufficiently comfortable to enable him to complete the rest he needed. He had been enjoying this sleep for about ten minutes when Joe and Claire made comparison of their shooting abilities, and it would have required a good deal more to rouse him than the sound of two pistol-shots something over a quarter of a mile away.

Yet he slept uneasily as the night passed, having a dormant fear that he might fail to wake before his comrades should be astir, and his fault be discovered. It was about an hour before dawn that he intruded upon the rest of his captain, as he had been instructed to do under such circumstances, with a tale that he had heard shots in the direction of Helford Grange.

Captain Cooper yawned, and got up reluctantly. He was heavy with sleep, and his wounded arm throbbed painfully. It sounded an unlikely tale. Yet he came into the road to do his own listening.

The night was very still; the stars were bright; the cold was bitter.

He stood listening for some time. He had good ears. He thought he heard a fox bark in the distance. Besides that—nothing. He yawned again, and went back to sleep.

The sentry, having given proof of his vigilance and received no thanks, felt that he had earned a further rest, and took it; but not for long, being waked again by the sound of shots which were too near to be doubtful.

He looked out from his refuge, to see a group of his comrades standing unarmed, in a sleepy bewilderment, already in the hands of their enemies, whose rifles menaced them, and to observe that some resistance was being offered farther along the road, where a house stood from which shots were being exchanged with those by whom it was surrounded.

He was a prudent man, and one who could estimate the probabilities of such a position very easily. He went home.

Arriving there, on the back of a horse which he had been prompt enough to secure without observation, he had no scruple in providing for his requirements from Cooper's stores with the liberality which the severity of the season suggested, and disappeared into the wilderness, with Nance Weston for company.

Seventeen men, who were less fortunate than he, stood in a group on the main road in Cowley Thorn. Their hands were tied, and half a dozen men who stood round them with loaded rifles made the idea of escape unpopular.

Martin surveyed them with embarrassment, and Burman, who stood beside him, with unconcealed disfavor.

They were an unsavory group. The countenances of most of them illustrated the attractive candor with which Nature is accustomed to own her errors. They were not improved by the fact that they had not washed for two days, more or less, and that those who were without the usual straggle of beard had not shaved for a similar or longer period.

"You won't keep this scum?" said Burman bluntly. "I don't see what else I can do," Martin answered. The prospect was far from pleasing. It was made worse by the fact that there were a dozen men at Helford Grange, including Butcher himself, who had surrendered in the same way. The surprise had been almost too great, the success too complete to please him.

Cooper, sleeping with a well-bolted door, and with eight of his best men in the same house, was still offering resistance, and Martin, not wishing to sacrifice life without necessity, had withdrawn his own men (now better weaponed than before by the capture of Butcher's arsenal) to give him time to think it over.

"You'll be sorry if you do," Burman persisted. He was a farmer, and he regarded them with a professional eye. They were poor stock. Poor stock, not

worth its keep. The fool hopes the impossible, and goes on feeding. The wise man kills it off. "Well," he said, "I shall close Helford again if you do. You must face your own troubles. I'll have no vermin there."

Martin was silent. He knew Burman spoke sense. He had paid heavily, more than once before, for the hesitation which now troubled his mind. But he knew also that he could never give an order to shoot men in cold blood. He had no jail, even had he been disposed to confine them. What could he do, except give them life for a promised loyalty, and hope for the best?

"They've been badly led," he said. It was the best excuse he could think of, but he knew that most of them had chosen their leader, and many would have been better pleased with a worse one.

"You'll be keeping their leader next, like you have Butcher. What'll be the change, when the fighting's over?"

"I don't think they'll fight again," Martin answered. What was the use of talking?

"No. A shot in the back's more likely."

Well, if so, it was a risk that had to be taken. He couldn't refuse quarter to men who yielded without a blow. "And now here he comes," said Burman.

Captain Cooper was walking down the road, with his hands raised over his head. He had decided that he could gain nothing by a prolonged resistance, and he might lose much. He had been impressed, also, by the fact that the first of his men who had shown his head had been shot through it by Jack Tolley's rifle. He had learned to face facts.

"You can name your price," he said, as he came up to Martin. "I give you best."

Burman brought his shotgun to his shoulder, and fired both barrels.

Cooper collapsed on the road. He lay on his face, and the blood spread out on both sides, over the frozen road.

Burman turned to Martin.

"I'm not under your orders, Captain Webster. We bargained that. But I've done what you couldn't do, and you'll thank me later. I'd rather it had been that cur, Butcher, but he'll be no trouble alone. I expect he's finished pricing the tea." He paused a moment, as Martin did not reply, and then said, "Friends still?" and held out his hand.

Martin hesitated, and then took it.

"There's some things has to be done, though we mayn't like doing them," Burman added. "It's all in Joshua. I suppose you'll save the rest now. If I knew how long you'll live, I could tell how long you'll be sorry. But I shan't interfere again."

The morning sun was still low, shining from a clear sky upon a frozen world, and there was little stir of life at Upper Helford, except among those whom anxiety did not allow to rest, when Steve Fortune came back to the farmhouse door with a note from Martin to Helen, to say that all was well, and that the women could return to their homes. He added that there were about twenty men more or less seriously wounded, who were in urgent need of attention.

His own men were tired, and he still required their services in many ways; could Helen send some of the women at once to undertake such duties? As the need was urgent, Steve would guide any of them by the underground passage who might be willing to come that way.

Helen delayed only to give the good news to Chris, and went to find Muriel.

It could not be said of either of them that they were fit for further exertion, but it was not a call to be disregarded.

"Claire's asleep, and I wouldn't wake her. She's done her share," Helen explained. "And Chris will get together the best crews she can for the boats from the men that are still here, and take as many as they will hold. I expect they'll all want to get home at once now. But it'll be about three hours before they can start. I don't suppose many of the women will be willing to go the underground way, unless we do it."

Muriel said: "You look worn out, and I'm afraid I'm too tired to be much good when we get there, but I'll come, if you really think it will make that difference. . . . I'm glad it's all over. There ought to be better times now."

They went together to enlist the help that was needed. It was scarcely an hour later that Steve led the way through the passage with about a dozen women behind him.

The passage sloped down for a long distance, and then became level. It was damp and cold, and very dimly lighted by a series of lamps which Tom and his fellow workers had fitted to the roof.

Muriel had the dog with her. He went on for a short distance gaily enough, and then whined, and hung back, till Steve called him, when he ran on without further protest.

They were less than half-way through when Helen noticed that Muriel was falling behind, and went back to her. She had stopped beneath the light of one of the lamps, and seated herself on a piece of timber which had been brought for repairing the tunnel, and left unused. It had been about there that the falls had been worst, and the repairs most extensive.

"I'm afraid I'm too tired to come on just yet, but please don't wait. I shall be all right in a few minutes."

"You don't look tired: you look ill."

"I'm not as strong as I was, and I've done a good deal since yesterday. But I don't want you to wait. There'll be so much to be done. . . . I'll come on when I've rested."

"You're not fit to do anything more."

"If I don't feel better, I'll go back."

"I think someone ought to be with you."

"No, please, Helen. You'll be needed there. I should be wretched if I felt I were keeping you. And there's really no need at all. And—there are times when we all like to be alone."

The last plea was not easily to be ignored, especially by one of Helen's training and temperament. She went on reluctantly.

Muriel had spoken no more than the truth in saying that she wanted to be alone. She had worked beyond her strength, and the stresses of the last two days had produced an emotional exhaustion beyond the experience of those who had reacted with a simpler selfishness.

She was aware now, too vividly aware, of the misery of those who were wounded, and were so unlikely to be well-tended—of the thirst, the cold, the pain. But she could do no more. She had fallen out of the ranks. After she had rested awhile, she would go back. "His little ones at home." If God would not use her further, even that must be taken patiently. . . . But she did not want to think. She was too tired. She wanted only to rest. Above all, she had not wanted to talk. She was glad Helen had gone. But Helen always understood, though her own feelings were so carefully covered. . . . And the pain was coming again—that came so often now. . . .

It could have been only a few moments, for there can be many thoughts in a little space, and Helen's steps had not died in the distance, when a spray of water fell on Muriel's hand, and did not cease.

She looked up, and saw a tiny jet that shot out from the opposite wall, beneath the lamp. A very thin jet, but coming out very strongly. Did it mean that the sea was breaking in?

She forgot the pain she was feeling, in a panic instinct of flight.

Then, with the thought, there came to her the memory of a tale that she had read in childhood, of someone—was it boy or man?—who had saved a dike in Holland through which the seas were breaking, by inserting his arm in the hole. It might have been nothing more than a tale.

She stood irresolute. If she ran after those who had gone before, she could give them warning, and they would hasten. Surely, she could do a more certain good in that way, and her own life would have no better chance than the

others? She knew suddenly that she did not want to die. She had been fighting against death all these months. Striving to ignore the pain: to persuade herself that it was less intense, or less frequent. Praying for miracles. Had there not even been a vague unquieted hope that it was not too late—that out of this strange chaos to which the world had fallen might come the things she had never known—love, children, home? She did not want to die.

The pause of uncertainty was no longer than a footstep takes, but every thought and action that her life had known, every faith and doubt, every valor and weakness, were in the scales that trembled to the decision that she was taking. Then she had crossed the tunnel, and her hand was pressed upon the cold clay soil from which that jet of water burst.

And as she did this, fear left her mind. It faltered back for a moment, as the thought came that if the pressure of her hand could prevent the passage of the water entirely, it might not get worse, and, if she could endure long enough, help would be sure to come. Hope came at the thought, and fear reentered with it.

But the hope died quickly. She saw that it could not be. Her hand could do no more than check, it could not stanch the flow.

She began to doubt whether her efforts could really make much difference. Whether they would be sufficient to save those who were still so short a distance ahead, so unconscious of the danger behind them.

And, seeing this, she saw also that it did not matter. She saw the high purpose of life, which overshadows its eternal frustration, its reiterated futility.

In those few minutes that she stood there, how much she knew, and thought, and remembered! Death might be near, but life triumphed. . . .

The water was spraying out from each side of the pressed palm, and between her fingers. It was deadly cold, numbing her hand. She moved it for a second, thinking to improve its position, and a stream as from a hosepipe, shot out across the tunnel. She was able to push her hand into the hole, and, for a moment, she stayed it. Surely they would be safe by now?

The light flickered, and went out. She was in a darkness such as the earth's surface can never know. . . . There came to her a vision of that Whitsunday morning when she had wakened to sunlight, and fresh air, and to a shadow of death which she had fought, and then accepted with the words of an earlier confidence. "To be with Christ, which is far better."

The rush of water was too strong for her arm to contend against it. She thought that it was breaking in at other points also. Surely they must be safe by now! She gave up the useless effort.

She did not know that she spoke aloud in the darkness: "*—which is far better.*"

The confident words died, and the ocean floor fell in.

It was nearly midday before Martin was able to relinquish control to the hands of others almost as tired as he, and to return with Helen to Upper Helford—his own home was in ashes—for the rest he needed.

They went in the returning boats, and he slept heavily for a few hours, and then waked with a stiff and aching body, but with a mind alert and restless, so that he rose, and went out, and walked for a time upon the northern cliffs, which looked upon an ocean that showed no limit.

He saw that, for the moment, the fight was won. . . .

Whether for good or evil, he had become the ruler of this little land, this isolated tribe, and he could do with them what he would. By one stroke of successful strategy, by the accident of that discovered passage, he had made a name which would be a tradition of greatness long after he had ceased to be. But he did not know that. He saw less, and he saw farther.

He saw the futility of all endeavor. He might rule with an old wisdom, or a new foolishness, but he would die, and his will with him, and even that which he had sown in wisdom might be brought by others to a foolish flower.

He became aware that the wind was colder, and that the night was falling around him. "The night cometh, when no man can labor."—The words entered his mind as a warning, and as an unescapable doom. What use was there in thought, and anxious effort, in a world in which the night was always approaching?

His influence might be good or evil, but it would pass like a shadow, like an impression in water. The water might give way very easily to the moving hand, but it would close as easily behind it, and what would be altered? And the hand was Life, the water Time. Was it not a wiser rule to accept the inevitable end, and not to exhaust its brevity with a useless effort? *The night cometh when no man can labor.* . . .

And then the thought came that these were the words of one who had the gift of putting the deepest wisdom into a simplicity of words, and that he had used them to a directly opposite argument.

It was because of that approaching darkness that the labor should be neither delayed nor stunted. Taking no anxious thought for the morrow, the day's work must be done as best we may, because the darkness is so certain—and so near.

The new order of life which he was striving to build might have disappeared tomorrow; but what he did with such partial success, with such inevitable errors, today would have become a fact unchangeable, the significance of which was beyond his seeing.

The night moved round the earth. It followed daylight, as men are followed by the overtaking feet of Death, but there was no finality in its triumph. For behind it followed forever the indifferent dawn.

The End

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Dawn* by Sydney Fowler Wright]