DELUGE

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

Title: Deluge
Date of first publication: 1928
Author: Sydney Fowler Wright (1874-1965)
Date first posted: Nov. 28, 2017
Date last updated: Nov. 28, 2017
Faded Page eBook #20171143

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at http://www.pgdpcanada.net

DELUGE

A Romance

by

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

COSMOPOLITAN BOOK CORPORATION
New York, MCMXXVIII

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America by
J. J. LITTLE & IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

Contents

DELUGE

A Romance

DELUGE

PRELUDE

TO an observer from a distant planet the whole movement would have appeared trivial. There was probably no point at which land either sank or rose to one five-thousandth of the earth's diameter. But water and land were so nearly at one level that the slightest tremor was sufficient either to drain or to flood them.

The surface trembled, and was still, and the Himalayas were untroubled, and the great tableland of Central Asia was still behind them, but the tides lapped the foothills to the south, and India was no more, and China a forgotten dream.

Once before the earth had trembled along the volcanic fissure which was then the fertile Eden of the human race, and a hundred legends and the Mediterranean were its mementoes.

Now it sank again, slightly and gently, along the same path. It was as though it breathed in its sleep, but scarcely turned, and Southern Europe was gone, and Germany a desolation that the seas had swept over.

Ocean covered the plain of the Mississippi, and broke against the barrier of the Rockies. The next day it receded, leaving the naked wrecks of a civilization that a night had ended.

There were different changes southward, where the Saharan desert wrinkled into the greatest mountain range that the world had seen, and the sea creatures of the West Atlantic learnt in bewildered death that the ocean had failed them.

In the Indian tropics a hundred leagues of sea-slime that had known the weight of mile-deep waters steamed naked to a torrid sun.

The subsidence of the first night must have been comparatively local. It was nothing more than an extension of the Mediterranean basin, which had

flooded the lower lands of Spain and Italy and part of France.

In England, as in Europe generally, the intervening day had been used in such attempts at escape as may be made by a cockroach in the middle floor when the lantern finds it.

The sea offered nothing, for the western coast was piled with the wreckage of the North Atlantic and the Irish Sea. There were no ships coming to the southern ports that day. There had been none in sight when its dawn had risen. The night-wind had swept the Channel clear, and if any had outlived the gale, which is not to be reasonably supposed, they must have been hurried far to south, where wind and water poured into the vortex.

The air offered a slight hope for the few who could avail themselves of its possibility. When the wind lessened, during the day, there were those who tried it, and may have lived, if they were able to find a place of safety before the storm resumed, but at best they could not have been many, and their hope was slender.

To most there came the blind instinct of northward flight, and as the pressure of the gale slackened, it had crowded many of the main roads with burdened stumbling crowds, or jammed them with motor vehicles which could make little progress against uprooted trees, and fallen poles, and blown wreckage, which confronted every mile of the smooth surfaces on which they had been accustomed to the high speed for which they paid so frequently in the deaths of their drivers, and in the slaughter of their fellow-men.

Now, when they felt that speed would have been their salvation, they could not gain it; but it would have availed them nothing. When the horror of the next night was over, Scotland, Wales, and all the heights of Northern England had disappeared forever. Only, by some freak of fate, the cause of which is beyond knowing, some portions of the midland plain were still above the ocean level, with unimpaired fertility, and some life upon them. Larger portions had been drowned by the wild floods that receded when all life had ended, and the salt-soaked fields could only return in the course of gradual years to a reduced fertility. There was little of human life that remained, even on the higher ground; for those whom fire and storm had spared fled northward, to their own undoing, and few from the pasture-country to southward (one of the least populated portions of the England of that time) had had the good fortune to come so far, and no farther; but life there was, both of beast and of man—life equally released from its accustomed slavery, lawless, confused, and incompetent.

The wild creatures of the woods adapted themselves the more readily to the new conditions. The change was only one of reduced caution, or of an added boldness. Man had ceased to count for the moment, and the fox walked where he would. To the rabbit it meant only that, if he had one foe the less, the others

slaughtered with an assured impunity. To his undrowsing watchfulness it made no change at all.

Rats increased in the deserted ruins, and the owls fed freely.

The domesticated animals adjusted themselves more easily than their tyrants. The cat hunted now for food, as she had done for sport before. Sheep broke out from ruined fences, or where a tree fell in the hedgerow, and gathered into larger flocks, and rams fought for their leadership. The lambs were grown, and the roaming dogs had not yet combined to molest the flocks. Within a week, the sheep had collected on the high open fields; and a herd of horses had gathered in the meadows of a river which still flowed on its shortened course—horses that wheeled with a flash of sudden hooves if a strange sound startled, or a strange object stirred in the grass as the wind found it, and came round in a galloped arc with tossing necks and lifted tails, to face the cause of their flurry. They were a strangely assorted troop of mare and gelding, of every size and color, from shire horse to pony, absurdly led by a bright-eyed, half-grown yearling, who took the unchallenged right of the only male among them.

Herds of cattle lurked in the woods, and splashed in shady pools; the pigs, too, were in the woods, to which the sows that roamed loosely round the farm buildings, finding that the morning meal was no more forthcoming, had led their hungry litters. They lay also in the potato fields, and would find their way later into the corn and to the acorn harvest, so that they ran no risk of scarcity, and before the winter came they would have worn the rings from their noses, and be able to burrow for a score of succulent roots that the woods could offer, as their free-roaming ancestors had done in the England of an earlier millennium.

Men fared more hardly. It was upon their artificial environment that the storm spent its force. There were many thousands whom this environment destroyed, quite literally, beneath its falling débris. Those who escaped from such catastrophe were less capable than the beasts they despised, either to find a temporary security, or to provide for their bodily necessities when the storm subsided. They had used their boasted intelligence to evade the natural laws of their beings, and they were to reap the fruits of their folly. They had degraded their purblind and toothless bodies, until even those which were still reasonably sound in heart and lungs, in liver and kidneys, were incapable of sustained exertion without continual food, or of retaining warmth without the clumsy encumbrance of the skins of superior animals, or by the weaving of various vegetable substances.

Every natural law that their lives had denied and their lips derided was now released to scourge them. They had despised the teaching of the earth that bore them, and her first care was given to her more obedient offspring.

It was not only that they were physically ill-adapted for life on the earth's surface, but the minds of most of them were empty of the most elementary knowledge of their physical environment.

Released in a day from the most elaborate system of mutual slavery that the world has known, they were unused to the exercise of mental initiative, or to independent action. They were accustomed to settle every issue of life, not by the application of any basic rules, or instinctive preferences, or by the exercise of reason, but under the blind guidance of their specialized fellow-men, or by assiduous imitation of the procedure of those around them. The great majority of them were engaged in repetition work which had not originated in their own minds, and made no call upon them for analysis, decision, or judgment.

Their perceptions were blinded by physical deficiency. They were incapable of clear thought, or of decisive action.

They were under a further disadvantage, which was not less serious because of a less obvious kind.

They had been restrained from many evil (and some admirable) courses, not by experience of their probable consequences, nor by observation, nor tradition, but by laws which exacted utterly illogical penalties. When the fear of these penalties was removed, they reacted variously to instincts undisciplined except by a restraint which no longer operated.

It had been a natural correlative of such conditions that where there had been no law to coerce them they (or at least many among them) had lacked the self-control needed for the dignity or even the decencies of physical existence, and had developed communally concealed habits which would have appalled the instincts of any cleanly beast. The bodies of many of them were rotten from the contagious horrors of the degradation in which they had lived, and the deluge did no more than hasten them to a swifter and more seemly end than they would otherwise have experienced.

The bodies of many others had been mutilated by expert practitioners, who had removed portions of decayed or diseased organs, or glands, or other parts, of the uses of which they were ignorant. Their enfeebled vitality had been subjected to the attacks of various kinds of external and internal parasites, from the effects of which many thousands died every year. But the warnings of these endemic diseases had been unheeded, or misread, and they had either striven to defeat them by operation or inoculation, or resigned themselves to them, as to the effect of a natural law, rather than attempt to recapture the conditions of life and health which would render them superior to the attacks of such vermin.

Even the evidence supplied by their domesticated animals, which developed a corresponding series of diseases and infirmities, as their

conditions of life were approximated to those of their masters, was disregarded. The pain and danger without which the degenerate bodies of their women were incapable of procreation was accepted as an unavoidable evil, although a study of the experiences of the various breeds of their domestic sheep would have supplied them with knowledge of the conditions under which these dangers or discomforts would have been largely avoided, even under the conditions of existence to which they had descended.

There was scarcely a man of all their millions who was not warned of these evils in a parable which had reached them from an earlier world, but they had united to deride it, some as a literal episode of primeval history, and others as an idle tale.

It remained to discover what would be brought to birth from the wrecks of such a civilization, when the fallen girders of its erections had rusted, and the coal-smoke cleared, and the fresh sea-air blew over the recovered greenness of the fields that they had once polluted.

BOOK I

MARTIN AND HELEN

MAY 31 was Whitsunday. It was one of those rare days that the English climate would sometimes give to those who had grown weary of its more sinister vagaries, green and cool and sunny after a week of showers. It was on that day that Mrs. Templeton lunched at the Websters'. She was the wife of a newspaper proprietor; a lean, short-haired, painted woman, such as were common at that period. She had no children, and made a boast of her barrenness, which she implied was deliberate. "Besides," she said, "how could we afford it, with income tax as it is, and a new car to be bought in the autumn? And then the cost of education!—I always think it is so wicked to bring a child into the world to be handicapped afterwards. Charles? Oh, men are so sentimental, and so inconsiderate—they never think what it means to us women—as Bishop Storr said at the last Congress. . . . Oh yes, I think your babies are *beautiful*—I dote on children—but I do hope you won't be silly again——"

And two days later—well, perhaps it was time.

The woman spoke with the assurance of one whose vices were popular, and who felt it was her hosts, rather than herself, who were on the defensive, for the crime of having two children in the nursery; and Helen was always polite to a guest, and had special reasons of importance (as they appeared then) for conciliating Mrs. Templeton. As for Martin, several years of law-court practice had taught him to conceal opinions till they were needed, and he contented himself with eliciting casually that she was a seventh child, and agreeing that there was something to be said for small families.

It was that night that the wind rose. It blew against the house with a steady pressure, free from gusts, and there was a continuous whining sound from the trees, very different from the rustle and creak of swaying boughs that is usual in time of tempest.

Martin, wakeful in an unusual restlessness, found it hard to turn his mind from this sound. It seemed to him that the trees whined in a conscious terror, and as though to an implacable power which they had no hope to propitiate.

The wind increased. He heard the loud crack of a tree-trunk that had snapped at the strain. There were many noises in the night. There was a crash, as though a chimney fell at the further end of the house. But Helen slept quietly through it, and while she did so, he would not rise to disturb her.

The wind came from the north. The room in which they slept had a northern wall, but the windows were on the western side. The door was on the south. It opened to a passage leading to the room where the children slept. There was no sound to alarm him from that direction.

The side of the house from which the sound of falling had come was vacant that night. The servants—a married couple—had been given leave over the weekend. The sudden illness of a brother had occasioned the absence of the nurse since the previous afternoon. They were alone in the house.

It was toward morning, in an interval of broken sleep, that he heard the telephone ringing in the room below with an unmistakable urgency. He rose and went down.

He found that it was a call from the local police station to tell him that a tree had fallen across the road adjoining his premises, and broken the fence of his field. Had he any animals loose in the field, and, if so, would he take steps to secure them? The inspector added that he had had so many accidents reported during the last hour that he was short of staff to deal with them. Could Mr. Webster's man put some warning light upon the obstruction, such as would last till sunrise?

Mr. Webster's man was away, but Mr. Webster would do it. The inspector was hurriedly grateful. He rang off. Martin went upstairs to dress hastily.

Helen was still sleeping peacefully, and when he waked her sufficiently to explain why he was going, she only said, "Don't be long; it's too cold to stay out at this time of night," and was asleep again as she said it.

The house lay at some distance south of the road, and the wind blew from the north, so that it faced him almost directly as he entered the drive, to which the house stood sideways, facing west, and though the trees must have done something to break its force, he found that he could stand against it only with difficulty. He switched on the drive lamps (for the night was still dark) so that he found his way easily, though every yard was an effort, as though the air into which he stepped were solid substance into which a foot must be forced with difficulty.

Turning to the right when he left the drive, and passing a row of adjoining cottages, he came to the place of the accident. An elm had fallen across the road, scattering the bricks of a wall which had bounded the field in which it grew, so that he stumbled against one of them while the dark barrier of the fallen trunk was still at some distance. On his own side, it had crashed through a high fence of palings, which had fallen for several yards on either side. A

flashlight torch which he carried showed the giant bole stretching far into the field, and beyond a shadowy mass of broken or uplifted branches. Having fixed the torch with some labor, and the help of a pocket-knife (rather neatly, as he thought), on the fallen trunk, so that the wind should not displace it, and it would be a warning, however feeble, to any approaching traffic, he made his way back to the house.

The steady violence of the wind was still increasing. Turning in at the gate he found it difficult to move forward without falling. Had it come in gusts of such a force, it must have been impossible to do so, but the pressure was so regular that the muscular effort needed for its resistance could be gaged with accuracy, and the greatest difficulty was to avoid an acceleration of pace, when moving before it, which would have become uncontrollable.

As he made his way to the house, he heard a heavy rumbling sound behind him, which he at first supposed to be thunder; but when it came a second time, he recognized the fall of some large building that the wind had demolished.

But no fear for his own house, which was very solidly built, entered his mind, and he regained it with a sense of relief and of recovered security.

He was of the temperament that a high wind exhilarates; and the lives of most people of that time were so bare of unexpected incident, that any unusual physical occurrence, even of a threatening character, had an effect of pleasurable stimulus, and dim atavistic instincts moved slightly in their sleep, though they might not waken.

It is a thing almost incredible to tell, but it is simply true, and illustrates the intolerable monotony of their days, that a great industry had arisen which was occupied in collecting daily information respecting the actions or accidents of their fellow-men, and informing others concerning them, so that every day millions of people dissipated their time in learning (and at once forgetting) that a woman of whom they had never heard before, nor would hear again, had left her husband; or that a husband had broken his wife's head; or a servant had taken his master's property; that a building had been accidentally burned in a distant town; or a child drowned in a river fifty miles away; and even events of much greater triviality were repeated in a series of unending monotony; yet the collection of such details over a vast area gave to their readers, whose intelligences were dulled by the conditions of their existence, an illusion of surrounding incident; and so they would spend their daily time in the absorbing of such vicarious excitement, while the actual conditions in which they existed were such that they might sometimes lack food or clothing for their children, and the land around them was neglected, or roughly cultivated by the machines which they produced in their crowded settlements, and which had replaced the living men and women by whom the work had been more efficiently performed in earlier days.

Of the joy of present living, of the captured meal and the barred door, of brief safety after hazard, of ecstatic rest after exhaustion, they knew nothing, either by imagination or by experience. So hateful were their own existences, and so hopeless were they of any change or improvement from their own exertions, that many thousands of them found relief in periods of temporary forgetfulness, during which they were enabled, by a supply of imaginary narrations, to occupy themselves with the supposed emotions or actions of invented lives. . . .

As we have seen, the house-front faced sideways to the wind's course, and it was owing to this circumstance that Martin was able, after a moment's breathless struggle, to close the door again when he entered it.

As he did this, he became conscious that the telephone was again ringing steadily, and he went to it in anticipation that he would hear an inquiry as to the work which he had just completed; but a voice was speaking already as he raised the receiver.

"*. . . should be held in readiness until more is known. Message ends. Home Office message begins. Broadcast by all means available. Post public notice this effect in all offices. Terrible calamity in Southern Europe. Land subsidence, and Mediterranean overflowing. Spain and Italy believed submerging. Telegraphic communications ceased except through Denmark. Believed no occasion alarm here, although gale increasing. Movements of population will greatly embarrass Government's efforts to meet emergency. Public notice ends. Instruct all local authorities take immediate steps control provisions. Arrange population evacuate all unstable buildings. Close all banks. Suspend all transit services, awaiting further instructions. Government taking necessary steps maintain essential services. Precautions in cities against fire urgently necessary. Panic movements of population to be . . .*"

The voice ceased, and the instrument no longer responded to any effort to rouse it. It was clear that he had received the end, and then the beginning, of a message which was being repeated incessantly for the benefit of all who could hear it.

Martin went upstairs slowly. He was excited rather than shocked or alarmed by the stupendous nature of the catastrophe. His mind was too active for his feet to move very rapidly. Was it really true? And would his own country sink also into the abyss, and they with it? Was it safe to stay in the house, and if not, what should be the alternative? What food was there in the house, and could any tradesman reach them if this storm should continue? Would the court be closed, or ought he to attempt to reach it? Thank Heaven, that brief——The fowl house would never stand this wind—the hens would be loose among those young savoys in the morning, just planted out, if they weren't dead—he must wake Helen; could anyone sleep through this wind? He

would see that the children were safe before he did so; if they were awake, he would bring them to her.

So he went first to their room, and found them sleeping as he had hoped, and the sight, illogically enough, gave him a feeling of the stability of established things, so that he went to look out of their window in a quieter and more skeptical mood. He would do nothing rashly. Those who lost their heads at such a time were the ones who suffered now, and were ridiculed afterwards.

The window was over the front door, and he could see the trees on the further side of the drive. They were not swaying at all, but bent before the wind so low that he could see over some of them (for the dawn was faintly widening) to a field beyond that was usually hidden entirely. And then the wind ceased. It ceased absolutely, and as suddenly as a clock ticks. The bent trees leapt upward.

There was a moment's pause of stillness, and then the wind came again with a sudden and augmented blast, a triumphant downward rush that swept the tortured trees before it. Some that had resisted the gradually increasing pressure half the night now screamed and snapped, or fell full length, with a rending of deep roots, and tons of green-turfed soil flung loose around them. It caught up gate and fence, and carried them like paper till they were flung against a wall that held them back for a moment, and then fell itself in an equal ruin. A crash and rumble of falling bricks came from the farther end of the house at the same moment. Martin supposed it to be another chimney falling. The noise roused him to the need for action. He went quickly toward the bedroom where he had left his wife an hour earlier, but she met him on her way to the nursery. There was no time for explanations then.

"Are they safe?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, with an affected carelessness, "but they'll be safer outside till the storm quietens. We must go out by the back door. Get yourself some clothes while I fetch them." He went back, and made a hurried bundle of each, wrapping up their clothes with them in shawl or blanket, and before he had done it, there came a louder, nearer crash than before, with an afterfalling of masonry, and the plaster fell heavily from the ceiling. A rush of wind came with it, and the door of the room, which he had left half open, banged loudly. He tried to open it, but it resisted his efforts. He had the living bundles, one under each arm at first, as he did this, but found that he must lay them down if he were to hope to gain his freedom. He pushed them under the bed, as the place which would be safe at least from the falling ceiling. The younger one, a child of two, was crying, loudly no doubt, though the storm drowned it. The elder, nearly twice her age, watched him in a wide-eyed excitement, and said something that he could not hear. She did not appear conscious that her cheek was bleeding freely where the falling plaster had caught it.

He tried the door now with both hands, but it was jammed too tightly to yield to any force that he could apply. He called loudly to Helen, but could hear no answer. He looked round for a weapon which he could use to break it down. He felt sure now that there would be no escape alive unless it were done very quickly. But at the next instant there came an augmented blast of storm, that rocked the house to its foundations. He heard a straining and cracking of woodwork, and a rush of wind in the passage without, and then the door was flung open with a force which might have killed anyone standing near, as it swung backward to the wall behind it.

With a bundle under either arm, Martin fought his way from the room, step by step, against the howling force of the tempest. As he gained the main landing, he realized that the structure of the house was still standing, and the stairs were clear, but the bedroom to which Helen had returned was wrecked and piled with débris. A chestnut-tree, which grew close against the house on that side, and of the safety of which he had sometimes doubted in times of milder storm, had fallen upon it. The great tree had broken through the roof and outer wall, and the inner wall and door were scattered across the landing.

Burdened as he was, he stumbled on past the stair-head, struggling against the wind and calling Helen's name as he did so, but receiving no answer. He gained the edge of the room, and saw that a part of the floor was broken, and the next step would have precipitated him to the space below. He paused there for a moment, keeping difficult footing, in distraction of mind between the fear that she might be somewhere there, in desperate need of aid, and the desire to place the precious lives he carried in some comparative safety. In the end, the logic of fact compelled him. He could not search so burdened, nor did he know that she might not be already in safety. Where the room had been was now a rubble of fallen bricks and slates and beams, with the great bole of the tree leaning across them, and its shattered boughs intruding.

That anyone could have lived beneath that avalanche was beyond probability.

Slowly, in a reluctant misery, he turned away, and had soon made a successful issue from the rear of the house, and across the stable yard, where he received a cut from a flying slate, which would have had more notice in quieter times, and, so, by a struggling, falling course, to a stack of last year's hay, which was still standing in the field, and which he had made his objective. It was over the ridge, and so protected slightly from the wind's full pressure, but when he reached it, he found that its thatching, and much of its upper portion, had been torn off and scattered.

He rested beneath it for a few moments, gaining strength and breath for further effort, but dared not leave the children there, as he had first intended, lest they should be smothered by a further subsidence. He realized that safety

was not easily to be found, and yet to get back was urgent, and to do that, against the torment of wind which was now raging, it was imperative that he should be relieved of his burdens.

There was a marl-pit close at hand, which gave a moment's hope, till he recalled the steepness of its more sheltered side, and the deep pool it held; there was a larger one, with a dry bottom, farther away, and on this he decided.

It was of unusual width and depth, even for a district where these old pits were frequent, and often of considerable size. It was on the edge of a clump of oak-trees, but these were to the south, so that there would be no danger from them while the wind held from its present quarter. There were some old hawthorns growing within it, on the slope of its northern bank, so that the tops of the trees were about level with the field's edge.

Here he made his way, and slid and stumbled down its easier slope, and found a sandy spot that was nearly level beneath the hawthorns, and laid his bundles down, and could at last think with some clearness, which had been impossible while the burdened struggle with the storm continued.

The younger child, warmly wrapped and covered from the wind, was surprisingly sleeping, but the elder was wide-awake, with excited, wondering eyes. She looked doubtful as he rose to go, and her lip trembled, but when he laughed and told her that she must be good and he would soon be back and her mother also, and that they would have breakfast under the trees, she took it as a new game, and only said, "Muvver come soon?" as he turned away. "Yes, very soon," he said with a light assurance he was far from feeling, wondering whether she could still be living, or if they or he would be alive when the day ended.

He paused a moment as he gained the pit's edge before he climbed out to meet the force of the screaming hurricane which raged round him. There was still no rain, but the sky was darkened with low, black clouds that hurried southward at a rate that looked fantastic, and the air had become strangely cold, so that he shivered as the wind met him.

Beneath the clouds, the whole of the southwestern horizon was of the color of heated copper.

This he saw first, because he had climbed to the west of the pit, where the ascent was easier, but when he looked to the further side he was startled by the evidence of nearer calamity. Heavy smoke was driving across the field from the fallen ruins of the house which he had left but a few moments earlier, and from the eastern wing a pillar of flame bent as the wind's gusts gripped it.

He was never clear in his mind as to how he got back to the burning building. But he had the sense to keep on up the field, so that he should approach it to windward.

When he had done this, in short time or long, he had a moment's relief in

the consciousness that he was not too late, if any rescue were possible.

He stood at last holding to a root of the upturned tree, and partly sheltered from the wind by the mass of earth which it had torn up, but which still held it; and perhaps it was then that he was first subconsciously aware that the heat and suffocation of the air he breathed were not entirely due to the burning of his own house, which the wind blew from him, but to the greater conflagration of the city on the outskirts of which he lived, and which must have involved it entirely within a few hours, if it had not then done so. With it, the wind brought a faint, continuous, wailing cry, as of the gathered lamentation of thousands, and beneath his feet a half-fledged thrush fluttered feebly with a broken wing.

Before him, the wall of the house was still standing, to the height of the first floor. The great tree which had broken the roof and the upper story was supported now by the whole structure on which it leaned, its breadth of branch distributing its weight very widely, but it looked as though at any moment the ruin must collapse entirely.

Though the lower wall stood, the window, which opened to the ground, had been blown or broken inward, and by this gap he was able to climb over a débris of fallen bricks, and beams, and shattered furniture, and broken boughs, searching fearfully in a shadowed gloom, to which the smoke of the burning wing was already penetrating, till a voice from the further side said with eager urgency, “Are you safe?”

“Yes,” he said, “but are you?”

“I felt sure you’d save them. I don’t know. But move carefully.”

He was struggling, in natural haste, toward the side from which the voice came, but now paused as she continued, while his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, and helped him to understand what she told him. “Wait a moment, and listen. I am pinned under a beam. I don’t feel hurt at all, but I can’t move, and I don’t know whether I am really injured. I didn’t care to struggle hard till you came, because, as you can see, its full weight is not on me now, but if I moved I might bring it. I felt sure when you did not come, and I did not hear them cry, that you had got them safe. You wouldn’t all have been killed at once. So when I heard nothing, I just waited. Where have you left them?”

He answered briefly, his mind occupied in overcoming, without any resulting disturbance, the obstacles that still divided them. The thoughts that the whole edifice might collapse at any moment, that a hasty movement might bring disaster, that the fire was advancing its own argument of urgency, and that the children would almost surely die unless he should return to them safely, left no mental leisure for the needless words which they had spent so much of their lives in exchanging. He was one who had lived by words, and he

was to find their use again under very different conditions, but there was an earlier lesson to be learned of their more frequent futility.

He saw that, when the tree fell, the first substantial impact had been given by a great lateral branch which grew toward the house, and which must have struck the roof and penetrated inward and downward as the tree leaned over.

From this cause, as also from the fact that it was built less strongly, the partition wall had been broken down lower, as well as more widely, than the outer one, so that its ruins had given little support to the cataract of brick and slate, of board and rafter, which had descended through the broken floor of the bedroom.

When the crash came, as she afterwards told him, Helen had been standing at an open wardrobe which was placed between the windows. A moment earlier these windows had been blown in on either side of her, with a rush of air which had nearly thrown her off her feet, but she had held her ground, and urged by this catastrophe, she had given up the attempt to clothe herself further, and had just gathered the contents of the wardrobe into her arms when the roof descended upon her. Blinded by dust and plaster, she continued to clutch the door of the wardrobe with one hand, the other arm being filled with the loose clothes she had gathered, while the floor gave way at the further end, causing the wardrobe to slide rapidly forward, carrying her before it; but, probably owing to the pull of her weight on the door, it swung round as it did so, so that it was beneath her as it was precipitated into the room below. It fell on its back, which smashed very easily, as, like most of the furniture of those days, the parts which were usually hidden were made of thin and worthless wood.

She found herself lying across it, with the loose clothes beneath her, feeling no pain, and thinking herself free to move when she would, but choked and blinded by the dust. A fresh fall of bricks and rubble came a moment later, at the further side of the room, and she lay awhile uncertain whether it would be more or less risky to remain still or to attempt escape.

As the dust began to clear, and no further fall came, she attempted to rise, and was surprised to find her legs immovable. A heavy rafter lay across them, itself bearing a mass of débris, but so placed that its further end was supported upon the ruin of the inner wall, and holding her only, she thought, as in a gentle vise, with pressure rather than weight. Indeed, she found that with a little twisting she got one leg entirely loose, and would have drawn it from beneath the beam but for the discomfort of the position which would have resulted. But when she attempted to release the other, at the first pull there was a slight movement among the broken bricks on which the beam was resting, and it settled down more heavily, so that the leg which she had loosed before was held again, and the other felt the pain of an increasing weight and

pressure. There was an ominous slipping also in the débris which the beam supported, and being confident that Martin would find her, she had decided to remain quiet for a time in the hope that he could cooperate in a safer method of release. After that she had felt faint, though she knew no cause, and had since been sleeping or half conscious, so that the time had seemed but a few minutes till she was aroused by his coming.

Martin could not tell what risk he took in the work of the next few moments. He tried to reach her with as little disturbance as possible, but as he did so an eddy of denser smoke rolled in from the hall, and he could see nothing clearly. The next moment it came more thickly in a pause of wind, with a blast of heat, and a flame glowed in the hallway.

He felt along the beam to where her legs were beneath it. He said: "When I call I will lift with all my strength, and you must pull them out instantly. I can't say whether I shall be able to do it, or for how long, or what will follow, but it seems the best chance we have. Are you ready? Now."

Then the beam lifted, tilting somewhat from one end, with some noise and confusion of falling bricks.

Helen said, "I think they are clear now," and cautiously, not knowing how far its supports might have shifted, he lowered the beam. It rested much as before, and then her voice came again, with an undertone of fear for the first time: "I can't get up. I am too weak. My legs are cramped, but I think there's something else wrong. Could you lift me?"

"Rather," he said lightly, and indeed he was relieved so greatly that they could escape the fire, that he hardly felt the fear of what this incapacity might imply, as he would have done in other circumstances.

The wind was blowing again with recovered force, and they were less choked and blinded than they had been, but the fire in the hall was closer, and a sudden spurt of flame from the stairs lit them, so that he saw her plainly for the first time, lying almost face-downward, on the heap of clothes she had been collecting.

She tried to raise herself when she saw him. "Bring the clothes," she began, and then her smile changed to an expression of sudden agony, and she sank forward in a faint from which she did not recover until he had carried her out of the burning building into a heavy rain which was now falling. The wind seemed more moderate, and though the rain was strangely cold for the season, it felt even pleasant as he left the stifling heat, the discomfort of which he had scarcely realized in the excitement of the rescue. He breathed deeply of the cooler air as he crossed the lawn, his relief that she was alive and recovered contending with fear as to the extent of her injury, anxiety to return to the children, and the consciousness that their food and all other necessities of life were lost within the burning building.

[II]

To the habits of those days, a marl-pit in a time of soaking rain was no fit place in which to lay an unconscious and injured woman, but he could think of no better resort, nor could he do other than unite her with the children if he were to go in search of food, as he surely must if their lives were to be long continued. He had realized already that they were faced by more than ordinary catastrophe, and that they must rely upon themselves if they were to find means to survive it.

During this time, and for many hours afterwards, he was too occupied with their own immediate needs to concern himself with larger issues, except as they were thrust upon him; but he could not be unaware that the northwest sky was now a lurid height of flame, where the city burnt, in which a hundred of those whom he had known most intimately had been sleeping but a few hours before. The wind was no longer steady, but veered in sudden gusts, as though it were drawn at times by the rising of the heated air. When it blew toward the burning city it was cold, and the rain was mixed with sleet; but when it came straight from the north it felt as though it were too hot and dry for the rain to cool it, though it could but have passed at a mile's distance the furnace of that appalling tragedy.

But with the wind and the rain behind him, he made quick progress down the sloping field, and, reaching the pit, he went round to the easier side, and there sat and slid down it as best he could till they had reached the place where he had left the children.

Hawthorn and undergrowth made an insufficient screen from the rain that was falling, and as they grew only on the steeper side of the pit it was not easy to find a place beneath them both dry and level. He could see nothing better than the elder bushes beneath which the children had retreated, and there at last he laid her, treading down a space of grass and nettles, and breaking away the lower branches that gave insufficient space to stoop beneath them.

The fear that Helen had not escaped without some serious injury had been growing upon him as he carried her, and noticed her exhaustion and wavering consciousness, but doubt was certainty as soon as he raised the loose wraps and dresses on which she had lain, and which he had lifted with her. Below her waist they had been soaked in blood which had dried, and in a fresh stream which must have broken out when she moved, and which still continued to drip from them.

Another moment disclosed the injury. On the left side, across the lower ribs, a piece of broken glass had made a wound about six inches long, though not, he thought, very deep.

“It hasn’t killed me?” she asked lightly, though with anxious eyes.

“No,” he answered, in the way of the world that they had known, where there was always leisure for words, whatever else might be lacking, so that a man might be expected to handle them skilfully, though he would be of little use with spade or chisel; “you’ll die of old age before that kills you. But you’ve lost a lot of blood, and you’ll have to lie quite still, and the question is how I can make you comfortable, and get all that is needed for you and the children.”

As he spoke, he saw that her eyes had wandered ruefully to the ruined dresses, and then forgot them in the realization of the children’s safety, and with a sudden consciousness of all that was lost or left, he bent and kissed her. “You will soon be well,” he said, “and nothing matters, if you are safe and the children.”

They talked quietly for a few minutes, trying to comprehend the catastrophe which had fallen upon the world, and to adjust their minds to its necessities; and then she called to the children, who were crying quietly in a frightened way, to come to her, and comforted them, telling them that she was hurt in falling, but would soon be well, and making a game of everything.

Meanwhile Martin had improved their shelter to some extent, breaking down some of the lower growth, so that they could be brought more inward and gain some shelter from the bank itself, as well as from the trees above them, and had placed the various garments and the children’s bedclothes—the only things they had saved—in the driest spot he could find.

Helen lay in the dressing-gown which she had put on when she first rose, and would have no other covering, nor was she willing that he should examine her wound again when he suggested that they ought to be sure that no broken glass had been left in it.

“Perhaps you think I ought to lose some more blood,” she said, “but I would rather have breakfast.”

Martin could sympathize with that feeling, as could the children, who were becoming fretful with hunger. They were all used to a ready meal when they rose in the morning. A marl-pit might have blackberries in September, but at the end of May it offered no evident nourishment. The world’s fate became a less urgent matter than the meal they were needing.

It would be tedious to tell the work of the next few hours in detail.

Three times Martin went out and returned loaded with such necessities as he could discover, while the wind fell and the rain ceased, and the sky became covered with a reddish, smoky haze, beneath which the wet ground steamed visibly, and, as it dried, which it did very quickly, the atmosphere was one of oppressive and increasing heat, as of an oven.

During this time they saw no living person. If any but themselves had

survived the ravages of fire and storm—and they supposed that many must have done so—they were cowering in such cover as they could find, or had fled in other directions. Such wind as continued blew towards the city—fortunately, no doubt, for them, as it was fortunate also that they were on higher ground, and that a ridge divided it from them; but it was clear that it still burnt, and indeed the whole sky, with its smoky haze, and horizons of molten copper, gave an impression of a world in flame.

Up to this time, through the physical exhaustion of his body, Martin's mind had worked in a dazed and almost mechanical manner, only dimly realizing the shadow of catastrophe beneath which their lives had fallen, and it may have been the effect of food, and a brief interval of rest, which made him so much more alertly conscious as he left the pit for the fourth time; but the dullest mind—and his was very far from that—would have been waked to some excitement when the red haze of the southern sky was transformed to a sudden sheet of flame, and a low rumble followed, as of a great noise at a great distance, and continued for some time, but with a gradually decreasing volume, till he could not tell certainly whether or when it had entirely ceased, while his strained hearing became aware that a low inarticulate murmur, as of the wailing of millions, was in the air continually.

But he turned away from the southern sky, which had resumed its previous aspect, and went on up the field in a mood of lively speculation as to the nature of the catastrophe which had overwhelmed the world he knew; and in doubt as to whether the worst had yet come upon them, and in what way, if at all, he could best protect his own from its dangers.

His objective was now the row of cottages beyond his own grounds. He thought that if they had fallen, but had not burnt, he might find there many things of value, and also that there would surely be some people still living who might be helpful, or who might need help which he could give them.

In his first hope he was disappointed. The row of cottages, from end to end, was a smoking ruin. For though many buildings were separately strong or sheltered enough to withstand the force of the gale, yet in the cities, where the older or frailer fell, and any fire was started, the wind would spread it very quickly, and such fires were too numerous for any organized resistance to be offered.

In the country districts, many buildings that fell would have escaped unburnt but for a prevalent custom of leaving enough hot ashes in their grates at night to make the restarting of the fire an easy process in the following morning.

In the towns, the fusing of electric wires may have been a frequent cause of conflagration.

Anyway, the cottages were burned, and the only sign of life was a small

dog that ran round them.

On a paved yard which had divided one of the cottage fronts from the road, a boy was lying. It seemed that he had jumped from one of the upper windows. It was no great height, but he may have climbed or been thrown clumsily from a small window, and fallen on his head, from which blood had flowed. An arm lay awkwardly, as though the shoulder were dislocated. His clothing was charred in places, but the wind must have blown the fire from him, so that he was scorched rather than burned. He was plainly dead.

As Martin stooped over him to assure himself that no help were possible, a rat ran from his clothing. It darted aside, evidently expecting a hole beneath the wall which was no longer there. Then it turned in an instant's indecision, and Martin's foot, in a revulsion of antipathy, came down upon it. It ran on a few paces unsteadily, as though partially stunned, and he stamped on it again—and again—till all movement ceased.

He felt an illogical satisfaction, as though he had successfully defied the blind and terrible forces by which the boy had perished, and had avenged his death.

He went on along the road. It was a quiet byway, running east and west, and the flight of the surrounding inhabitants had been by other ways. But the wall along its northern side was in ruins, and the bricks were scattered across it at several places. Where the elm had fallen he came to a new horror. Near that point there was a slight bend in the road. A motor, driven at a high pace round the curve, had been unable to slacken speed quickly enough to avoid the impact. It was evident that it had taken a somersault over it, flinging forward a woman who had been driving, and who now lay in a heap in the middle road.

The instinct of service led Martin to approach her. She lay in a pool of her own blood. She was not dead, for her eyes moved, following him as he bent over her. He spoke, but she did not answer. He thought to move her by the roadside, but when he touched her, she shrank, and moaned pitifully. What could he do? He saw that she was hopelessly injured. It might have been kind to kill her, but of this he was incapable.

He was sick of horrors, and his inclination was to return to Helen without seeking further for the things they needed. Seeing that the cottages had shared the fate of his own house, it became doubtful how far he might have to go to obtain them.

But he became aware that his hands were red from the blood of the woman that he had tried to succor. He would wash them before returning. He remembered that there was a stream at a short distance, and crossed the ruined wall and a park-like enclosure beyond to reach it.

While he did this he regained the nervous control that he had almost lost, and decided that it would be cowardly to return without making a further

search. He had no doubt that he had left his family in safety. It was not his presence which they would need, but the things which he could find for their food and comfort.

He crossed another field, and came in sight of a farmhouse that was still burning. Avoiding this, he crossed a hollow, beyond which he thought he saw the thatched roof of a cottage. It proved to be no more than a deserted cattle-shed which the storm had spared, as though in derision. As he entered it, a hen ran cackling between his feet. He found a nest and several eggs.

Pleased with this booty, he resolved to continue along the higher ground, making a circuit of the hollow which he had crossed, and so return by a somewhat different route, foraging as he went.

It was then that he became aware that he was walking unsteadily. He sat down on the ground, feeling uncertain whether he had done so by compulsion or of his own volition.

A piece of wall, very solidly built, that had withstood the tempest of the previous night, leaned over, and fell with a crash of brick and masonry, and a cloud of dust, that spread chokingly around him.

He felt a sensation as when a lift starts suddenly downward. After a time he got up and continued his way. If the ground were still sinking (as it must have been, and as it must have continued to do with a very steady and gradual motion, till it had descended some hundreds of feet below its previous level) he had become so accustomed to the movement that it had ceased to affect him consciously.

It did not give him any premonition of fresh disaster, as would have been the case had the earth quaked violently, or been torn apart. Its storm-beaten surface seemed quiet and peaceful enough, under a smoky pall of sky that was liver-colored in places and a glowing copper in others. It was solid earth to the view, and unshaken.

Martin made slow progress. It was a larger circuit than he had supposed, and the way through the fields was impeded by hedges which had few gates in the direction he was attempting. He was conscious of an increasing weariness, natural to the length and nature of the exertions which he had made since the previous night, and of an intermittent giddiness, and a feeling of sickness, which may have had a different cause.

At last he felt compelled to rest, where a fallen fence gave a drier seat than the ground could offer, and some support behind it, and here he remained, only dimly aware of the passing hour, till he noticed that the sun was near its setting, and rose in a belated haste, with the fear that he might not have completed his homeward journey before the light should fail him.

Even then, his concern was not that he should have any difficulty in returning, but only lest the length of his absence should have caused anxiety to

Helen. He did not think that he had far to go. Though the familiar landmarks were obliterated or broken, he felt sure that he was not far from the road which he must have crossed a mile or two further west when he set out. Once there, he could find his way in the dark. It was downhill, too, and easy going. After his rest he made a good pace. He was soon descending toward the hollow along which ran the lane to Goring Dene. He could follow that lane. . . .

But the lane to Goring Dene was under thirty feet of water that was rising, foot by foot, on the sloping field that he had crested to gain it.

Martin stopped. There was no way here. He could not easily understand what had happened. A chill of fear was at his heart which he would not heed. What stream, what river, could have risen thus? What flood could have filled it?

He went on along the crest of the field, climbing to a wider view. A sea of turbulent water stretched beneath him, dull red beneath the copper sky. He realized with a shock of horror that the whole city must be under water. He thought—he hoped—that it would not have reached to where he had left those who were dearest to him. But how could he reach them?

On his left, the water stretched to the horizon. It heaved as it advanced in long, rolling curves that did not break, except here and there, where the higher ground was not yet deeply covered.

It may seem strange that it rose so gently. It is not difficult to imagine that there were places where a swirling torrent of ocean poured into the abyss of a sinking continent with a rush that carried it far on across the face of land from which it must ultimately be withdrawn by the law that rules its level—indeed, it was such a torrent that swept the central plain of Europe, and left it sown with salt, empty, and desolate. There may have been places also where the lifting land threw off the weight of waters that it had carried since the dawn of history, with a force that hurried it, a mile-high wave, against an equal wall of advancing water, to break in tumult that men may have beheld, but could not live to tell.

But here the water rose with an amazing quietness, as the land sank, foot by foot, without evidence of either tilt or fracture.

The main rush of the Atlantic was to the mighty hollow that had formed in the Mediterranean basin. But here it brimmed gently to the falling land. . . .

To Martin it bore no aspect of gentleness. He had no assurance—he had no reasonable hope—that it would not continue to rise till the last foot of land had disappeared beneath it, yet with a tenacity of purpose and loyalty of affection which were fundamental, he continued to make his difficult way along the edge of the advancing flood in the failing light, seeking for some point at which it would be possible for him to return to the rescue of those whom he had left in this unsuspected peril.

It was in vain. The night fell, and the water was around and beneath him on every side. He could not doubt that they were dead, nor could he hope that there were many hours of life before him.

Till the dawn came, he sat unmoving on a fallen rail and watched the moonlight on the ruffled face of the waters.

He could not doubt that they were dead. Yesterday, such an incident, the deaths of his wife and both his children, would have brought a sense of desolation, of irretrievable loss; he would have felt as though the world had ended.

Now that it appeared that there was indeed an end to all the world he knew, their deaths did not affect him in the same way. They did not afflict him with a sense of separation. Only, he regretted bitterly, that he had not been with them: that he should have seemed to have deserted them at such a moment.

But he had no wish to live, as he had no expectation. His world was gone in the night. He was left there for the moment, by the caprice of Fortune, till the next tremor of land or rise of tide should sweep him to the common fate of his race.

So he sat, neither desirous of sleep, nor aware either of cold or of hunger. Awed, rather than miserable: even elated by the greatness of the events around him.

He sat and watched the moon on the water.

So the dawn found him. It came, a faint widening of gold, in a sky that the night-wind, which had blown steadily from the northwest, had cleared of the polluting dust of yesterday. The pale gold flushed rose-pink over half the sky, and was reflected upon the waters.

He watched the dawn advance, august and passionless, indifferent to the triviality of human destiny; indifferent and serene, though there should be no man living to observe its beauty, and, as he looked, he knew that life would continue.

Realizing this, he felt sorrow, as the night had been powerless to bring it. He knew that it must even be possible that his own life would continue, and realizing this, he felt fear.

He became conscious of pain and hunger. He rose stiffly, and was aware that he was very cold.

He felt the warm rays of the level sun, and an impulse of satisfaction, if not of pleasure, moved beneath the desolation of his mind.

He looked round, and resignation left him; he was a human atom once again; a private in the losing battle with death which is the common destiny of his race.

The water was around him on every side. It swept in a strong current but twenty feet beneath the place on which he was standing. It ran northeastward,

troubled by a crossing wind, but with no great roughness of surface. It broke against the steep slope beneath him with a continued murmur. It sparkled in the sunlight. It was scattered over with many drowned and broken things. A dead ox drifted past. Other things. But he saw neither man nor woman. Only, at the last, washed to his feet (for he had descended, as he gazed, to the water's level), there came a human arm, torn from its trunk by some mechanical violence, with a bundle of drenched parchments still clutched in the dead hand, which was plainly that of a woman.

He went to the top of the little knoll on which fortune had marooned him. The water was round him on every side.

He looked in the direction of his own home. There was nothing there now but the level waste of the flood. He remembered that Helen had been too injured to walk. She could not swim. She would not have left the children. There was no hope, no faintest hope, that the seas could have spared them.

He wondered whether he might find them floating in the water, but he saw that even that hope must be fruitless. The current was sweeping everything to the northeast, far out and beyond him.

He considered the possibility that he could himself escape from his present confinement. He saw that the water was not rising—had even sunk somewhat from its highest level—and though it surrounded his place of refuge, it did not appear to be of more than two or three feet in depth on the northern side, and of a width of about twenty yards, beyond which the ground rose again, and gave prospect of a wider range and a greater security.

He watched it for a few minutes, wondering whether it were still declining, so that an hour's patience might give an easier passage. He supposed that there would be tidal changes, apart from the vital question of whether the land had settled to a final stability. Certainly the water had been higher than it now was. But that might only be because it had swirled further up the slope at the first rush. He observed no change during the few moments that his patience lasted. Then he stepped in.

It was not an easy crossing. He waded more than waist-deep in places, and though there was no such current as hurried past on the other side, yet the water that was diverted to this side of the knoll was flowing steadily in the same direction, and made it difficult to keep his feet and a straight course to the nearest point of the dry ground before him.

He stumbled once over an obstacle the water hid, and recovered himself with difficulty, drenched to the shoulders.

Having dry ground beneath him once again, he wrung out his soaked garments as best he could, but he was in no mood to linger. Even beyond the calls of thirst and hunger, or of any physical discomfort, was the desire to gain the highest point he could, and learn how much of solid land was still

remaining around him.

When he gained this view, he was relieved of any immediate apprehension, for though he saw little either to south or east but wastes of wrack-strewn water, it was equally evident that the land remained unflooded for at least a space of some miles in the opposite directions.

Relieved of the fear that he had been marooned on a spot of land too small for human sustenance, he turned his thoughts to the primitive necessities of the wild—food, and water, and shelter from the certainties of rain and cold.

[III]

The first day he saw no man. His search for food was so far fortunate that he came upon the little heap of articles which he had thrown aside on the previous night, when he had first tried to outrun the water, that he might go to the rescue of his family. Among these were the broken remains of the eggs that he had been carrying, from which he was able to recover a sufficient part of their contents to provide the meal he was needing.

Beyond that he got little. He searched in deserted gardens. He ate lettuce and radishes. He made a slow and meager meal of green peas that had scarcely begun to form in the pods. He ate half-grown gooseberries, green and hard. He searched in charred ruins for food which was not there.

In the evening he came upon an isolated tool-shed in a large garden. Built in a very sheltered corner, it was still standing. There he lay down and slept.

That day he remembered clearly, but he had little recollection of those that followed.

He must have been ill for days. The shock to mind and body, the unusual exertions, the effects of wet and exposure, and of unsuitable food, had their natural consequences.

Had he been unsound in any vital organ he would have had little chance of recovery. As it was, he probably owed his life to the fact that the shed had been used by a gardener who had left a pot half full of cold tea.

This, being desperate with thirst, and after an interval of illness, of which he could not guess the duration, he found, and drank. In a cupboard he found a lump of moldy bread, which he chewed as he lay.

After this he had a time of healthful sleep, and then staggered uncertainly into a sunlit world.

He had little strength, but the instinct for life was strong and his constitution uninjured.

Of the succeeding days his memory was blurred and dream-like.

Though he had little strength, he had much patience. He lay for many hours over a burrow, till he had caught a rabbit in his bare hands. He cooked it,

somehow, for there had been matches in the shed, and he made a fire of wood without difficulty.

He followed a strayed hen, it seemed for days, till he had found the place where she was laying.

He dug up potatoes, still unripe and small, but which he could cook till his matches ended. He learned to eat raw beans.

Strength came again, and with it the desire to adventure further.

He searched among ruined houses, but was several days before he had any means of making another fire.

His greatest find at this time was a sack of sharps in a farm outbuilding, and a small quantity of bran. When he had secured a further supply of matches he made this meal into a kind of thick soup, and it was delicious to his altered palate.

He came on a woman who had sustained life, with an amazing vitality, crawling upon the ground, and dragging after her a broken leg.

He stayed beside her, doubtless prolonging her life, and almost certainly increasing her misery, after the tradition in which he had been educated. He could not save her life, for which an amputation would have been the only hope, and that was beyond his skill or resources.

She died unconquered, as she had lived, being too great for circumstance. She died with a faith serene and untroubled. Having fought hard for life, she accepted death confidently. "*Though He slay me yet will I trust Him*," she quoted, when the fever slackened.

She lay unconscious for two days before he was sufficiently sure that she was dead to bury her from the flies.

After that, he came on an open drain in a deserted highway, at which a navvy was blindly excavating. The man begged his assistance for the useless labor. He was plainly mad, and when Martin declined to help him he made a murderous attack, from which Martin escaped with difficulty.

He wondered how the man lived.

He avoided that stretch of road for the following days, until he came on the man again, then in a condition of raving insanity. He mistook Martin for his Creator, and cursed him in words unfit for reproduction.

In the end Martin was compelled to kill him with his own pick.

At this time Martin did not go far from the shore which overlooked the place of the ruins of his own home. When his physical needs were satisfied, he would sit for many hours gazing over the water. His body recovered strength. His health became more vigorous than it had ever been, but his mind lacked incentive to do more than provide for his immediate necessities.

His reason told him that the whole earth could not be under water. He expected continually to see the smoke of some approaching steamer.

But the seas remained empty.

[IV]

The hours passed very quickly to Helen after Martin left her. He had provided as far as possible for her comfort during his absence. Food and water were near to her hand. Fire was beneath her and within her reach, but it was not cold. He had left a stock of broken wood, sufficient to keep it alight till his return, if it were used with discretion. She could easily throw it on, piece by piece, from where she lay. She let the children scramble on the side of the pit, guiding them with her voice to avoid the brambles and the steeper places, but they soon came back to her. Tired by the excitement of their strange experience, they were glad to nestle against her, and slept, one on either side, in the warm safety of her arms.

Among the attempts which have been made by mankind to solve the enigma of conscious life, its end and its beginning, the most rational (as it may foolishly seem to an imperfect knowledge) is that of the transmigration of souls. With this theory there is commonly linked one of progression or penalty, by which each incarnation is controlled by the conduct of the individual in the one which preceded. Whether true or false, the two theories are without necessary sequence. It would be as probable to postulate that the ego is unalterable, and that the incarnations it may undergo are not rewards, or penalties, or of any educational purpose, but are rather a series of tests of its quality, by which its value is proved under different conditions and with conflicting environments.

However this may be (if it be at all) it appears evident that there is little difference in the nature of mankind when tested by circumstances the most refined or the most barbarous, or when compared over the longest periods of recorded history. Of this there is no clearer proof than in the actions of individuals whose conditions are sharply changed by natural convulsions, by war, or famine, or by the sudden acquisition of unusual wealth.

To each of those who had survived the first assaults of flood, and fire, and tempest, the test came, which was as though they approached a new incarnation without losing the memory of that which had preceded it.

Helen, her mind stunned by a catastrophe too sudden and too vast for immediate comprehension, and knowing only doubtfully the extent to which civilization had fallen before it, felt, rather than thought, as she lay unsleeping between her children. She had no consciousness of immediate danger. She supposed that, for the time at least, to be over. She had no fear that Martin would not return as he had promised. She was not of a nature that worries over imagined evil, and her confidence in him was habitual. But her thoughts

moved uncertainly, as does an insect whose nest is broken or removed in its absence. The furniture of her mind had become worthless. Thoughts of her home, neighbors, recreations, pleasures, garments, engagements, would obtrude or betray her into a moment's forgetfulness, only to be thrown aside with the realization that they had no further meaning. Her brain brought her the accustomed memories, to find itself always repelled and its tributes rejected. Beyond this, it had nothing to offer, except the enigma of the future, to which it could supply no answer.

So she lay, and felt only, while it commenced its patient task of covering rejected thoughts, and arranging new facts in readiness for the time when she should require them.

But there were some things which it was not asked to change, but rather to call to an added consciousness, and first of these was that instinct that held dominion separate from herself, however willingly she might foster it in every cell of her body. The instinct which her generation had been persuaded to betray, to their own undoing. Her arms tightened round the two that slept so confidently in their protection—arms so pitifully weak to shield them against the blind forces that wrecked the earth around her. Out of a sudden agony of prayer, her soul rose to that height of God-in-man which is the tragic greatness of humanity, and before which Death itself is ashamed and impotent. She knew the weakness of her arms, and was not daunted. She knew the strength of her opponents, and was resolute to resist them. They should not suffer, though the whole world fall.

The hours passed, and Martin did not return. The sun, which no longer shone down into the pit, but touched the bushes on its eastern side with the golden light of evening, told her that she was not deceived as to the time which had passed. She determined to test her ability to stand. Drawing herself carefully from between the sleeping children she rose painfully. She was stiff and bruised, but the numbness had gone from her side, though it hurt her sharply. It hurt her, too, if she breathed deeply. It hurt her more if she touched it. But she was glad she could stand.

She had never been credited with any physical courage. She would be startled by a dog's bark. She would walk wide of a quiet cow. She would certainly have run in terror from a rat had it advanced boldly upon her, though it were as absurd as though a cat should offer battle to an elephant. But she had that high quality of passive courage which can face pain and wounds, after their infliction, with a more resolute spirit than is possible to many who may more lightly take the risks which incur them.

She soon found that she could move more easily, and that she could more exactly gage her capacity to do so without hurting herself too sharply. She busied herself in many little activities of which she had thought as she lay. She

waked the children and fed them. She had a meal herself. She was hungry, and there was no good purpose in waiting to share it with Martin. Surely he would not be long now? The sun must be near setting.

Casually she looked at the further side of the pit, was puzzled by what she saw, and looked more closely. While she did so, a wave swirled over the edge, spilling through the bushes, and splashing into the hollow.

Her mind poised blank for a moment, and then waked to full consciousness of its meaning. She knew that the field below the pit sloped downward, though only gently. Beyond it, stretched miles of lower land to the river valley. Water flowing over the edge could only mean an inundation beyond conception. Before the next swirl of the rising water fell over the edge with a louder noise, and in a fuller volume, her purpose had taken shape, and she had commenced its accomplishment. With no thought of saving anything but their bare lives, and with even Martin forgotten, she was climbing up the bank, with the two children under her right arm, while she used her left as best she could to support her in the burdened climb. There was one chance—so small a chance—if she were not too late already. Her memory searched for details of every drop and rise in the ground before her. She decided that she was not yet too late—but how fast might not the water be rising around her? She *must not* be too late.

She was on the edge of the pit now, and cast a glance around, though she did not delay for an instant. Mile on mile the water stretched interminably to southward. In the shallowness of the foreground, trees rose and hedges showed. There was no regular succession of waves, but the surface heaved irregularly as it advanced. It was covered by débris of a thousand kinds. The low sun glorified it.

As she looked, a fox ran past, carrying a cub in her mouth. The creature did not mind her.

She became conscious that the children, roughly held and dragged through weed and brier, were crying in a frightened way. She was running now, though weakly enough, up the field, and changed the younger one to her injured arm. It is the highest evidence of her courage that her voice could soothe them. Sensitive to her mood, they became quiet with a consciousness of drama, but not of tragedy, as she bore them.

Her progress was not rapid, for she was weak and burdened. There were obstacles also to surmount, or avoid as best she might. But she knew her purpose, and her spirit used the little strength she had to its last atom of energy. Nature held the scale that trembled to the verdict of death, watched it—and let her go.

It was half a mile beyond that there had been a public park, where some skiffs were kept on a small lake for hiring. The park lay in a hollow, lower

than the level which the water had gained already. But the land around was higher. It might be under water now, but she thought not. When it filled, it would do it quickly. How quickly, she could not tell.

Her way was shortened by the fact that the park wall was fallen, and it was that which made the final difference. She gained the pond when water was already pouring into the hollow. She found the boats had broken from their moorings, and had been driven against a bushy bank on the further side. Leaving the children, she had to wade in waist-deep to reach them. Two of them were damaged. She found one that seemed sound. Fortunately, it was more stoutly built than the others, which were river skiffs of the lightest kind. She pulled it through the water to where she had left the children. Water was draining into the pool at a hundred points by now. The water was up to her armpits at one point as she waded back. The place where she had laid the children down was covered, but they had retreated before it. Grounding the boat, she lifted them in, and sat down on a thwart—and waited. There was nothing more to be done. She had no sculls. The water was now rising so rapidly that the boat lifted from the bank almost before she was seated. Fortunately, it rose gently and evenly. As there was no outlet at first, there was no strength of current until the smaller trees were flooded, and the expanse of water was wide and fairly clear around her. Then the boat began to drift rapidly. It seemed that water was pouring out as well as in now, and they were swept to where the stumps of a row of elms that the storm had snapped showed raggedly above the flood. There was nothing to be done. She could only watch and wait for death—if death were coming. She put the children in the well of the boat, and sat there with them, thinking that the lower they were the better the boat would balance. The boat struck something which held it. It leaned somewhat as the current pressed it. Some water splashed over. Then the rising flood lifted it, and it righted suddenly. They swept at perilous speed between the broken elm boles.

Almost immediately after, another current struck them. They were whirled round for a time in a vortex which finally hurried them along the side of the row of stumps through which they had come, and out into a wide sea of troubled water over which darkness was falling.

She baled out the water which the boat had taken. She and the children were wet and cold, and the night was coming. If they survived it, what hope was there in a world that the floods had covered? For the first time she thought of Martin. Doubtless he was dead. She supposed that few could be living. She did not know. She looked over the edge of the boat, and a dead dog floated past.

She thought of Martin, and she had no wish for life to continue. She felt the pain of her injured side, and the exhaustion which had overcome her, and she

thought that death could not be distant. She looked at the children, who crouched together with wide, frightened eyes that questioned the darkness, and she knew that she must not die if the floods spared them.

Leaning against a thwart she drew them to her and made herself their pillow. She was soaked and cold, and it was a poor bed to offer, but there was no better to be done. It was best for them to sleep while they could.

In the later night the moon looked down upon a little boat that turned and tossed in a troubled water. A woman lay where she had slipped on to the floor of the boat. It had shipped some water which washed over her face at times, but she did not heed it. Pillowed on her breasts, the children that she had saved slept peacefully. Born of a race of women that had learnt to esteem their children as less than their pleasures, who would even pay to have them murdered in their own bodies, she had redeemed her own soul at the bar of God, and whether she were dead or living was a little thing.

It was the next morning that a group of men stood on a stretch of moorland that had been purple with heather before the curse of coal had blackened it, and was now the shore of a new sea.

They saw a boat that had grounded gently a hundred yards out, but with deeper water before them. They could not see whether it held anything living, but it would be a desirable possession under their new conditions of life. But who could swim? No one, unless it were Tom. But Tom Aldworth shook his head. He could swim, but very little. The inducement was not sufficient. Besides, he was not friendly with the men, nor they with him. He was an acquitted murderer, and as such he was entitled to and received much less good-will than would have been accorded to one who had confessed, and would be hanged tomorrow. But then—was there not a movement in the boat, and, perhaps, a cry, though a weak one?

Tom Aldworth took off his coat.

As he did so the cry came again. It was the cry of a child that pressed against a mother who was very cold and did not answer.

BOOK II

CLAIRE

CLAIRE ARLINGTON stood on the edge of what had once been a steep hillside in the Upper Cotswolds. Now it was lapped by a tide that rose within eighty feet of the summit.

Steep though the slope might be, it was still green with the sparse Cotswold herbage, which grew so thinly that the white chalk showed between it, and yet the sleek, long-barreled cow that grazed on the cliff-top was evidence that it was not lacking in nourishment.

Claire was not thinking of cliff or cow, but gazing with troubled eyes upon the desolation of a quiet sea.

Looking north, she saw no sign of land, though a whitening of broken water here and there beneath her told of shallows which a lower tide would leave uncovered.

There was no sign of the Malverns. If any of the higher lands of Wales had escaped the deluge, they were too low or too distant for her sight to reach them.

Only to the northeast was there at times a doubtful hint of land. If she were only sure—She was a strong swimmer. Once she had tried to cross the Dover Straits, and had been balked by the tide when within but a short distance of the French coast. If she could only be sure that land were there—or of how far it might be.

It was but a few weeks ago—she had not counted the days, for count of days had ceased to matter—since she had spent long hours of darkness floating as best she might amidst the buffeting of continual waves, to find, when the dawn came, that she was drifting fast towards a vision of green land, and then to realize that the current which bore her near would sweep her past it, and then to battle backward, yard by yard, until the sun had risen high above the horizon, and she was aware at last that she was clear of the current's force, and each tired stroke decreased the distance to the waiting land.

Then the land on which she climbed had seemed the most blessed thing for which a living creature could pray; and now she loathed it, so that death itself might seem less bitter.

Death? No; her heart told her that she had no will that way, whatever life

might mean.

She stood there for a long time silent, gazing at the sea, the while her mind went back to recollection of all that had happened since she had survived that night in which so many millions must have perished.

Her husband among them—there was no possible hope that he could have lived. An invalid, awaiting an operation in a nursing home in Cheltenham, she would have been with him on the previous day, if the great storm had not made it impossible. She felt no keen regret. The horror had been too great. It had numbed her mind. And she knew that though she had loved him in a way, and there had been no differences between them, the bond had not been as strong as she had been taught such bonds should be. Pity rather than love—pity for a man maimed and disfigured in the prime of life—and then he had been querulous, and exacting, and jealous—so she knew, though she did not let the thought take form. But she was glad that the baby had not lived—for she could not have saved it—and how she had grieved when she had been told—but who could have foreseen?

Yes, there was no chance that he lived; not Cheltenham only, but all the land beyond—Ireland, perhaps—had gone. It was only a few days ago that a southwest wind had risen, and she had watched the great Atlantic rollers sweeping past, and felt the high surf drench her, even at that height, as she had seen and felt upon the Cornish headlands in the days gone by.

Yes, that life had left her, with all its obligations, all its occupations, its loves and friendships—perhaps she would have regretted them more keenly had not the new urgencies—But anyway, they were gone, and here she stood —free.

Free!—a fierce anger lit the somber gaze of wide gray eyes, and strong teeth bit a bleeding lip as the thought stirred her. She was the Eve—perhaps the only Eve—of the new world, and her sole thought was of risking life itself to reach that doubtful streak of land, and so escape her heritage—or perhaps to gain it?

If she could only be sure that land were there! For she knew quite clearly that whatever life might hold she did not mean to die. Then did she mean to yield? Like a trapped mouse her mind went backward and forward to find escape from a problem which gave her no solution.

She recalled how she had climbed the hill from the bay where she had landed, and found a cleft in the hilltop where three cows crouched and shivered, and how they had come to her, as though for protection from the terror of a failing world, and she had drawn milk from one of them, and slept on the short turf in the warmth of the rising sun, and wakened to know that the noon was past, and to find the cows in a recovered serenity grazing quietly around her (and the cows were hers, let Jephson say what he would!), and so,

with another meal of new milk to ease the thirst with which she woke, and clothed only in the bathing-dress in which she had landed, she had set out to explore the land that the floods had spared, and seek for further food and garments, and shelter for the night to be.

[II]

Climbing clear of the grassy hollow in which the cows had found their safety, she had reached an undulating space of land about half a mile broad, and beyond that a depression, in the center of which was the ruin of a farmhouse. The hollow of this depression in which the house stood was actually below the new sea-level, but the ground rose again on the further side. What had been a lofty upland had become an island of an area of a square mile or two only, but, on the southern side, there was another space of land of about equal extent, divided by an arm of water which receded at low tide, so that it was possible to cross it with little difficulty. This further island had been swept over by the floods, and was bare of any life, though it now stood some feet above the water.

Of this she learnt later. What she first saw was that two men were standing by the ruined house, and so, thinking little of her spare attire in her eagerness to meet with living creatures of her own kind, she had hurried down the slope, while they crossed the more level space beneath her. And with those men she had lived for the past days in the ruined house—and how she loathed them!

They had been days of urgent toil, but without privation or any real discomfort. She thought of the tales she had read of people marooned on desert islands, and of their quarrels, and of the love that always followed. But the men in those tales were types rather than individuals, and these were—Jephson and Norwood. She noticed that she always thought of Jephson first.

Neither of them was a native of the district. Jephson was a joiner by trade. He had been the foreman employed on the job of repairing the dilapidated farmhouse in which they were now living. He was a native of Birmingham. He had preferred to live on the premises, while his men lodged in the village. That had saved his life, though the room in which he had slept on the first night had fallen in, and he had been cut and bruised. The lobe of his left ear had been almost severed, and for lack of the aid of anyone with skill to stitch it, it would always hang loose.

He was a man of medium height, very broadly made, and with a heavy, resolute step. His arms were long and very hairy, the hands coarse and spatulate. He had a tuft of straw-colored beard, and a stiff mustache projecting like that of a walrus. His front teeth were decayed and broken. His head showed a skimpy fringe of yellow hair, around a natural tonsure. His eyes were

small, deep-set, and intelligent, sometimes lit with a humor which was rarely kindly. His voice was deep, and his speech came with deliberation.

He was of an intense acquisitiveness. He had lost a wife and some children, but he was more concerned as to the fate of a sum of three hundred pounds that he had deposited in the Municipal Bank of his native town. He was not of a type of mind that could easily realize that money had no intrinsic value.

It was probably a penurious habit arising from this feature of his character which had led him to live on the job rather than lodge in the village near.

It was clear to him that the house was his, as he had been on the spot when the floods came, and that Norwood and Claire could live there by permission only. His money was gone, but "Findin's is keepin's now" was the first law he announced for the regulation of his new dominion.

Certainly he knew best how to deal with it, and under his expert and energetic hands it soon began to lose the ruined aspect that age and storm had bestowed upon it.

He claimed also a dozen sheep that were running loose on the hill, because "the lands goes with the house," and with the same argument he disputed Claire's contention that the cows were hers; a contention first made in jest—for what difference did it make when there was milk for all?—but afterwards in earnest, when she found that even here the privileges of property might be employed to coerce her.

Norwood was a man cast from a very different mold. His name had been known to her before as a professional cricketer of international reputation. He had been playing at Cheltenham in a three days' match, which began on the Saturday before the storm. A too convivial evening had been followed by a Sunday of heavy sleep, after which he had started out in the evening for a long walk, which experience had taught him was the best way to recover his condition after such an episode. He had been on the hilltop, and about to turn back, calculating that he would reach his hotel in time for three or four hours' sleep before play would be recommenced, when the storm had struck him, and he had lain there for many hours with no more protection than a pile of stones where a wall had fallen. When the force of the wind slackened, he had made his way to the farmhouse, and had remained there during the flood and earthquake of the following night, after helping the bruised and bleeding Jephson to disentangle himself from the collapse of the upper room in which he had been sleeping.

He was a man of about thirty-five, tall, handsome in a rather weak and swaggering way, better educated than Jephson, but with far less knowledge or capacity for overcoming the practical issues of life. He was fair-haired, clean-shaven, with the healthy brick-red complexion of the athlete, and showing his vice only in a rather watery appearance of eyes that had still been clear enough

to watch a fast ball from the bowler's hand until the perfect timing of the stroke should drive it hard and low to the distant boundary.

The sudden oblivion of the world he knew had left him with a sense of stupefaction, from which he had only gradually recovered, to inquire what his companions thought had happened to "poor Lil"—a sister, as they understood —with rather maudlin pathos.

The condition of the lives of these three derelicts was controlled at first by the configuration of the little bay in which Claire had landed. Narrow at its entrance, it curved to the right hand and widened into a pool, which shallowed as the tide fell, so that the green of the flooded grass could be seen clearly through the water. Other things could be seen there also; and other things were left uncovered by the tide on the gently shelving beach of the bay.

For the sea-floor, which had been England, carried an empire's wealth, and the great tides washed it out of the buildings that held it, or broke them down and released it, to add to all that had floated since the flood had risen, and the little bay was like a trap to catch them.

And all these things they toiled to save without ceasing, under Jephson's restless urgency. Nothing would he admit to be too cumbersome or too worthless to be dragged up from the tide level. When that had been done, there was the harder task of carrying all that was of sufficient value over the higher ground and down to the house. Norwood was the more disposed to grumble at this incessant toil, but though Jephson's eager greed was unattractive in its intensity, Claire could see the reason which underlay it, and did her part, and more than that, in the common labor. Even timber might be worth more than they could easily estimate, for the trees on this island, which had been a hilltop, were little more than shrubs, and fuel for the winter, which must surely come, might not be easy to find.

For the most part, Jephson worked with a tireless vigor at the repairing of the house, so that there might be weather-proof space for the storing of the salvage when they had dried it. He only asked for his companions' help when something had to be done which required extra hands or strength; and he would come once to the beach with them each day to see what the tide had brought, remaining only if his help were needed, but urging them by ceaseless question and sarcasm, and by his own example, to yet greater efforts.

During this time there was little of any real intimacy between these uncongenial companions that disaster had thrown together. At first the restraint of the civilization of yesterday, the shock of the overwhelming calamity, and the urgency of their labors had combined to defer the inevitable difficulties of adjustment that were before them.

Once or twice a conflict of wills had flared into sudden anger, that might die down as quickly, but left a subtle difference of mutual relations behind it.

In the first days Claire had inclined to feel that Norwood was the more tolerable companion, and the arrangement of labor caused them to be much together, while Jephson worked at the house, but neither was in any way congenial to her.

Then there was the day when the first of the dead sheep was washed into the bay. There had been many sheep on the uplands, but it was several days before the first of them came ashore; after that some trick of the tide brought several others, but it was over the first one that the quarrel had arisen.

Claire was a woman unused to shirk an unpleasant task, if its need were clear, but her experiences had not been those of a butcher. Swollen and sodden, the carcass was repulsive to look at.

"That there sheep will need skinnin', Mrs. Arlington," Jephson had remarked. He had addressed her up to that time with that degree of polite formality.

"Not by me, Mr. Jephson," she had replied pleasantly enough, but with an intention of finality.

"Nor I," said Norwood, with a glance of disgust at the still floating carcass, "and what the hell do we want with the skin of a rotten sheep?"

Norwood spoke with irritation, born of an earlier difference. Neither of the two men had yet accepted the leadership of the other, nor found the terms of a smooth-working partnership. They were like two armies which are maneuvering for position before the battle joins, and perhaps it was from that reason, or because Jephson was not as clear in his own mind as to the degree of rottenness or inutility of the object of his cupidity as he would have liked to be, that Norwood's question was left unanswered.

He looked at Claire with a dangerous humor in his deep-set eyes, and spoke with a deliberate slowness.

"Mrs. Arlington, you'll skin that sheep, an' no 'umbug! Yes, my wench, you will. We all does our part here."

He walked away for a few yards, and looked back. She had not moved, and was regarding him with an amused contempt which hid some inward uncertainty. "Or I'll larn you what you don't want, nor I, neither." With which cryptic remark he had gone off and left them.

She had remained silent and thoughtful for some time, while she realized several things more clearly than she had done previously. One was that there is no more "romance" in a community of three people than of thirty, or of thirty millions—probably much less, because the choice of intimacy or of companionship is so much more limited.

Norwood said nothing. Barelegged, he was hauling some broken timber clear of the receding water, and did not ask her assistance.

The dead sheep had grounded and lay half out of the water.

She walked over to it and surveyed it with distaste.

"Is it really worth doing, Mr. Norwood?" she asked in a judicial tone, intended to convey that she would decide the question on its merits without reference to Jephson's rudeness.

Norwood, who probably knew no more than herself as to the value of such a hide, or of the method of salving it, had looked across with disgust and hesitation. "Beastly job," he had replied vaguely, and then, after a moment's pause, he had added impulsively: "Call me George, and I'll help you." It was just that which had decided her to undertake the loathsome task, and to do it unaided.

It reminded her that familiarity from her companions might be worse than rudeness.

She had made a hard and filthy labor harder than it need have been through her ignorance, and she had worked with a growing conviction that if the product of her occupation were really of any value, neither she nor either of the men had the necessary knowledge to utilize it, but it was done at last in a ragged way.

The next day had brought a worse horror, for it was a human body that the tide gave them after a week of wandering at the waves' mercy. Of her own instinct she would have closed her eyes and waded out and pushed the dreadful thing at a pole's end back through the channel by which it had entered, but here another aspect of Jephson's character was revealed. He had, as she had already recognized, no religion whatever beyond a few of the crudest superstitions only half believed, but he held to the ritual of burial with the foolishness of the class from which he came. It is bare justice to say that he did his part on this occasion, not resting till a grave had been opened in the chalky soil and the ghastly remnant of what had once been human deposited, with some reading of prayers above it.

It had seemed to Claire that he derived satisfaction, if not actual enjoyment, from this procedure, but, however that might be, the incident renewed the consciousness, through that single evidence, of the appalling catastrophe from which they had emerged with lives uninjured. For a few hours it had subdued the ego in each of them.

It was some days after that—but they went uncounted—that Norwood dragged ashore a wooden chest containing little of value, but in which he found a bottle which he slipped stealthily into his pocket, thinking that it was unobserved by Claire, who was working beside him. She was slightly startled, because there had been an understanding that nothing salved should be retained by any one of them, except by consent, but she said nothing.

Shortly afterwards they returned to the house together, and the occurrence left her mind. Jephson's news might have banished a more important incident.

The fresh water had failed them. The house had been supplied from a well, and surprisingly enough, had they considered it, the supply had continued after the subsidence of the land which gave it, but that afternoon Jephson had drawn some to fill a cask which they kept for the cows to drink when they came for milking, and noticed that the well was much higher than usual, and then that the cows, which usually drank it eagerly, breathed over it and turned away. He had tasted it and found it salt.

At the first hearing she had scarcely realized the magnitude of the disaster. They did not drink water. Milk was too abundant. One of the cows had calved, and they left her alone, but the other two were in full milk. She had milked them thoroughly morning and evening, knowing that they would go dry if she failed to do so. They drank what they could, and they threw the rest away. What else could they do? Had she been expert in the making of cheese or butter there was no time. Everything was subordinated, and rightly so, to the saving of that which the sea brought them. They did no cooking. They had no fires in the house. Once or twice when Jephson had wanted one for some process of the building on which he labored, he had lit a fire of rubbish outside, and then they had boiled some vegetables from the garden. Mostly they lived on foods which the sea had given. Among them were some tinned fish and a crate of bananas. There were other things put aside, including a side of bacon, and there were potatoes in the garden waiting the time to dig them. They had no fear of starvation. There were sheep, too, when they were needed. But they had no flour.

They slept in separate rooms, which they had made more or less their own, and which they kept as they would, though each of them now had its share of salvage, and would have had still more but that the labor of carrying to the house was much greater than that of saving from the sea.

Night and morning they met to eat in the common kitchen, and talked of the day's doings. Beyond that they ate when and what they would, but there was no time for life's amenities.

Jephson had a sense of order, though little of personal cleanliness, and he kept the kitchen roughly clean and tidy.

So they lived.

The sea had brought them quantities of clothing, mostly damaged, and much of it otherwise useless.

There was a large case of ladies' gloves—many gross. Claire could not have worn them had she wished to do so; they were all a size too small.

A suit of men's overalls, of which the sea had also delivered a consignment, was the most useful dress she had for the work she was doing; and when they were not working they slept.

Boots were the greatest need. Those which the men had were wearing out,

and there was no means of replacement. Claire had landed without any. She had tried going barefoot. It had not been any real hardship on soft turf, or on the mud which the tide left, till she had trodden on some broken glass and must go bandaged and lamely. The next day she found an old discarded pair of women's boots in the house. They were too large, and one was burst at the toe, but they were stoutly made, and she stuffed them till they would fit sufficiently. When the foot healed she went bare again. What life was left in the boots should be kept for the winter days. . . .

That night they talked of nothing but the failure of the well and what it might mean.

Milk was plenty, and salt water must do for washing. But milk must fail unless the cows were watered.

They knew that there was a small and muddy pool about half a mile away, where they supposed that the sheep drank, and where the cows had drunk till they commenced to fill the cask as an inducement to them to come for the milking. But they knew that this pool had been shrinking, and it might now be dry entirely.

It had been infested with gulls, of which there had been many thousands round the island after the storm. There were fewer now; many must have found a more congenial home, which proved that there was land within the distance that their flight covered. But many remained. They settled in great flocks on the lower island during the day, returning at night to roost on the hillsides of the higher land.

Norwood said that there was one place on the lower island around which they always flew most thickly. Perhaps there was fresh water there. It was a poor chance, but it was worth trying. He proposed that Claire and he should go in the morning to inspect it. Claire had answered that one was enough. She would go to look at the state of the pool where the cows used to drink.

Jephson said that he would go there himself. If it were full there was no need for immediate worry. If not, he might want them all to work at opening the well. He had an idea that it might be possible to locate the place where the salt water entered, or to tap the fresh separately. It did not sound hopeful.

Norwood had pressed Claire to go with him in the morning. She had answered shortly, and gone to her room. It had been the only one on the upper floor which had withstood the storm. A solid room. And there was a good lock on the door.

The securing of that room had been the one success she had scored on the day she arrived. It had been unfurnished, except for a heavy wooden bedstead, which might almost have been regarded as a part of the house itself. Now the appearance of the room was something between that of a marine store and a broker's shop.

She walked over to one of the windows, and as she leaned out she heard the voices of the men disputing through the open window of the room beneath her. She knew, as it seemed instinctively, that the water was forgotten, and that she was the cause of their anger.

Norwood's voice was the louder, but it was not one that carried well, and she could not hear the words. It rose once or twice in defiant tones, but more often it sounded sulkily, or as though he were giving way with reluctant expostulation. Once she heard Jephson clearly: "You'll keep off the wench till . . ." The remainder of the sentence was lost. Till what? Of the word "till" she was sure.

Tired though she was, she had lain awake for a long time that night, restlessly questioning the future and seeing no tolerable issue. She had courage, and the quality of mind that is frank with itself, as with others. She was woman, with a full experience of life behind her. Isolated as they were, she knew that it was natural that the thoughts of the men should turn to her, and hers to them for that matter. But she knew that she loathed them both, so far as any physical contact were concerned. Yet how could it end? The ocean showed no land. It showed no sail. She was the only woman of her world as far as she could know it. Was it natural that she should hold them off forever? Was it right?

There were two of them, and perhaps in that lay her immediate safety. It gave some choice also. But she had no wish to exercise it. She doubted whether the greedy coarseness and physical deficiences of Jephson repelled her more utterly than the invertebrate dulness of her more frequent companion. Perhaps it did; and yet she knew that there was more manhood in the house-builder, however ugly and brutal it might be. Probably if it came to open violence between them Jephson would win, though he was the older and smaller man. So she had thought that night. Now she knew.

But she had had no wish that they should quarrel concerning her. Only a vague thought that, at the worst, she might play one off against the other.

Then she had been startled at a sudden aspect of baseness in this atavistic instinct, that she should think of appealing to either against the other when she had no thought to reward him for his championship.

It might be hard to avoid. At best it was a mean and perilous way. Yet what else was there to hold to? She had fallen asleep with this enigma unanswered.

[III]

The following morning she had risen early, and because the sun shone and the air was buoyant, she was able to face the future more hopefully. Whatever of sinister meaning might be in the words she had overheard, at the worst they

implied a respite. “Brave men die once, but cowards die many times,” she had thought gaily enough. And how many dead there were! Surely she should be able to laugh in the sunlight.

She found the cows were smelling round the cask, but the supply of milk was undiminished. Either they had found water, or its failure had not yet affected them.

She carried in the milk carefully, with an added sense of its value. The men were waiting, and while they ate and drank they agreed on the plan that had been proposed the night before.

Jephson would go to inspect the pool on their own island. She and Norwood would explore the lower one, only they would separate and each take half the work of surveying it thoroughly. Jephson had plans already, if all else should fail, for the building of cisterns for rain-water. He was calculating on a change of weather, and wished to be ready to take full advantage of it.

Norwood seemed more cheerful than usual. He made trivial jokes and laughed at his own wit. The difference of the previous night appeared to be forgotten.

Claire and he had started out together intending to do their work of salvage before crossing the channel, which they could do only when the tide was at its lowest, some hours ahead.

They found little to occupy them. The sea was smooth, and the wind off the shore. There were two more of the dead sheep floating in, and they were of one mind to start them out again on their interrupted voyage. They had found that if any unsavory items that the ocean brought were dismissed again through the narrow entrance of the bay, the next tide would often return them unless they were started round the southern side, when the current caught them and they were seen no more. They had no use for dead sheep, however recent their decease might be. There was a difference on that point. Jephson said that they might have come from some land left just above the sea-level, to which they clung till the sea washed them off one by one. It was impossible to disprove it. He had even suggested that they might be fit for eating. If they were, their looks belied them.

Anyway, Claire and Norwood had been of one mind in poling them out of sight and reach before fresh debate could arise. What remained of the tide’s largess had been only the broken remnant of a wicker chair, a wooden hay-fork, also damaged, and a battered chicken-coop that had a long-dead hen entangled in the bars, against which it must have struggled frantically when the flood swept over it.

It was the poorest haul they had had, and took little time to deal with. So they crossed the island at leisure, Norwood still in unusual spirits and talking of the game in which he excelled. He seemed to forget that the very grounds of

his triumphs were beneath the ocean, and that few things were more certain than that he would never handle a bat again, as he expounded his theory of the best method of playing back to a swerving ball or of the result of bowling "round the wicket" to a left-hander. As he became absorbed in his subject she almost liked him, and she was well content to lead him on, and able to do so, for she had captained a cricket team in her college days, though she would have given all the cricket grounds that were ever rolled for a tennis racket and net, with a good opponent beyond it.

So they had come to the channel, and being anxious to commence their exploration, they had waded over while the water was still knee-deep and with a pull that nearly took their footing more than once as they struggled against it.

She had expected he would object to separating, though it would obviously halve the time that the survey would require, and had been determined to insist upon it, but he did not do so, agreeing readily that she should follow the right-hand coast and he the left, and that they should meet at the further end. By that means they would discover whether there were any stream such as must require an outlet, and should that fail, they could return across the inner land in search of any possible pool in the hollows.

A moment after she left him she disturbed a small bird of the finch kind, which fluttered past her, and because she had seen no sign of such life since the flood came, but only the stronger sea-birds, she turned to look after it. Norwood was still standing where she had left him. He had a flask at his mouth, which he quickly withdrew and slipped into a side pocket when he saw her looking back.

Following the curves of the land, her walk may have been a matter of two miles. The tide, being low, had exposed a portion of the hillside sloping gently down for most of the distance. At one point there was a considerable stretch of more level land that the lower tides discovered. It was a melancholy view of drowned herbage and the débris of land and sea.

She had worked thoroughly, though with little expectation, making short detours inland where any hollow invited it. The place where Norwood had said that the gulls settled was on her side. She found it to be a flat field which the high tides covered, leaving large shallow pools when they retreated, in which the birds waded and fed. There was no hope of fresh water there.

She had become used to horrors, but had never realized the full tragedy of the flood so vividly as she did that morning, walking on land over which it had swept and receded, leaving a hundred piteous relics of a world's destruction. Her mind was clear and vacant to think of what was lost and of what might be. Why of all the millions of English men and women had they three been saved? She knew that the men were worthless beside so many that the seas had taken. Were they indeed to be the parents of a new race? Was she——? Her mind

revolted fiercely. Was the whole world overwhelmed, or was that the nightmare horror of a few weeks only, from which some passing ship would soon release them? She looked with longing seaward, but the bare horizon gave no answer.

She had nearly reached the farther point at which Norwood should join her when she came to a more dreadful sight than any which she had encountered previously.

In the fold of the hillside, just below the flatter top on which she walked, there had been a clump of fir-trees which the tide had uncovered, and entangled in these trees were the remains of a group of people who had climbed to this refuge, and there had perished. It does not bear words to tell it.

She had gone on to the meeting-place and sat down on the cliff-edge to await her companion. The sun shone warmly, the wind was pleasantly cool, the sea sparkled beneath her, but her own mood gave no response. She had been taught that the earth had seen many such upheavals. Even the Bible, which her teachers had derided, contained the record of one such catastrophe. She had learnt and believed, but it had meant nothing to her, and now . . .

"Because things seen are mightier than things heard" her mind was in fierce rebellion against the cruelty of a blind Nature or a regardless God.

At the best, it was all so futile. And yet, was it? If she did not understand, how could she judge it? As so many millions of her kind had done before when faced with the blind forces that betray them to tragedy, she had striven desperately to break the intolerable veil of the enigma in which we live. She remembered the mood of Rua: ". . . and death is the better part." It was always true, it always had been. It was the way of refusal which even God could not take from the creatures for whose miseries He was ultimately responsible, and which He made His jest. A man could destroy himself if he would. So could the whole race, if God did not—as it seemed He was doing now.

To that extent they were free. But they did not want to die. Then life must be a boon worth having, with all its pains and losses. But they were not allowed to live. "Death is the better part." The man who wrote that line was dead now. Had he found it to be so? He had died in Samoa. Was there any Samoa today? Might there not be much nearer lands from which ships were now steering to search the wrecks of Europe and to bring aid and rescue? It was hard to guess. But surely the whole land surface of the globe need not have suffered because a part of Western Europe had sunk—and very gently as she realized—a few furlongs below sea-level.

Again she had looked seaward. Shallows there were, breaking the long, slow swell of the water into whitening waves that lessened as the tide rose over them, but of land no sign, nor could her gaze, "lifted in hope to spy Trailed smoke along the sky," find any hope for its searching. Her mind still thought in

the phrases of a dead literature, but the world to which it had belonged was ended, and would be utterly forgotten.

While she had watched and thought, a wind had freshened from the northwest and the sky had clouded. It was still bright overhead, but on her right hand a flying storm came from behind and moved over the water to southward. The sea had become restless and broken, and she could see that a heavy rain was falling. And then: "*I do set my bow in the cloud.*" The words came back to her as she had heard them read, and they had caught her attention once in childhood when she had been half asleep in the corner of a church pew on a drowsy summer evening.

The bow showed first in the south, stretched upward, and curved over till it descended above the land behind her. For a short minute it stood out complete, and then it shortened at its southern end and faded upward as it had risen. It was indistinct for a moment, and then she lost it entirely.

Her reason reminded her that if a covenant had been given it had been broken. She knew the physical incidence of the phenomenon she had witnessed, and she had been trained in the habit of thought that assumed that to understand the process of an event is to destroy its marvel or its significance. Yet she knew that she felt differently. She realized that men had always been dying. Death being inevitable, surely it mattered little that many had died the same night. If there were life beyond, it could not be when men died, nor how they died, but how they lived that mattered.

While life lasted it had always its problems; even now to her.

And then, just as her mind had reverted to its own immediate difficulties, Norwood's arm had come round her neck, and his drunken kisses were on her mouth. No doubt the spirit-flask which he had secreted and emptied was partly responsible. Possibly, had she been in a different mood, and had he approached her differently, the result might have been different also, though, he being that which he was, it seems unlikely. Roused in such a manner from the mood in which he found her, she reacted with a fierce revulsion. She was sickened by the stench of his drunken breath. She was not afraid at all. Naturally self-reliant and robust, she did not doubt that she could protect herself quite effectually. It was with a fresh anger that she realized that he was stronger than she. He said little or nothing. The method of his love-making revealed the weak brutality of the man. To her indignant protest he muttered something about having got his chance "where that old fool can't interfere." He had got her arms pinned to her sides so that she could not use them, nor could she resist his strength sufficiently to gain her feet, but her mind was cool and determined. She recognized that she must try to do him some serious injury or disablement. Even if she got free for a moment she knew that he could overtake her. There was no help whatever but in herself. She could not use her

feet from the position in which he had caught her. She could not prevent his kissing her face and neck, and her efforts to do so seemed to amuse him only. She would use her teeth if the chance came, but she must not warn him by an abortive effort.

Suddenly she became limp in his arms as though exhausted or consenting. He thought his purpose won, and his hold relaxed in consequence. But she had seen a piece of wood that lay on the turf near, as the flood had left it. It was a mere strip, about a foot long, but it might make a sufficient weapon.

She wrenched herself loose, snatched it up, twisted round as he caught her again, and brought it down on his face with the force of desperation. The next moment he had loosed her with a curse, and they had both risen and stood confronting one another.

The wood, little more than lath, had broken in her hand. It had inflicted an ugly bruise on his forehead, but the worse damage had been caused by a bent nail projecting from the wood, which had made a long, deep tear beneath the cheekbone, which was bleeding freely.

It was a disconcerting wound, but by no means sufficient to disable him, or to have deterred a more resolute man. Probably the game would still have been his, had he played it better. Women have been taken by force often enough from the time of the Sabines, or of the children of Benjamin, and have learnt to kiss their captors.

But Norwood had had enough.

[IV]

That had been yesterday. She had recrossed the island in advance of Norwood and swum the channel while the water was still high, so that, as he could not swim, it was some hours before he could follow.

She had been elated with the ease of her victory, and greeted Jephson with more than usual affability. He told her that there was still some water in the pool, but that it was low and muddy. Many birds were resorting to it, and the sheep drank there, as their tracks showed. Now that the cows were also going, it must soon be dry unless rain came. He proposed that they should all work in the morning at fencing it off, which would keep it clean, and they could dole it out at their discretion.

He had asked what they had found, and then, perhaps foolishly, she had told him of Norwood's attempt against herself, and of how she had foiled it.

He had heard her in silence, and then looked at her for some time in a speculative way before saying: "We'll wait till he comes back, and then I'll do the talking."

It had been late when Norwood returned, and he had seemed reluctant to

face the older man, muttering something about having had an accident, and passing on to his room.

Jephson had made a motion to stop him, and then turned back. “He don’t count,” he said shortly, and had sat down opposite to Claire, with a table between them, and spoken with the slow deliberation of one who had thought and decided. It was not an argument, but a verdict.

“Now, my wench, see here. You’re in my ’ouse, and you’re my gal, an’ you’ll do what I says. I’m master ’ere and you’ll both larn it—or go. P’r’aps you know where. I doesn’t.”

“But the cows are mine, Mr. Jephson,” she had interposed, reverting to the earlier argument in what she had meant to be a light and friendly tone, but he had continued unheeding. He spoke now with a slow emphasis that left no doubt of his meaning.

“When—I—want—you—I’ll—’ave—you. An’ that won’t be long neither. You’re mine. You may larn it soon, or larn it late, but you’ve got to larn it.” He brought a heavy hand down flatly on the board. “But don’t you think as you’ll use your tricks wi’ me. By Gawd!”—and his eyes fixed on her own, that tried to meet them steadily, and he raised his voice in a burst of anger—“I’d tan you till you couldn’t walk for a week—nor sit. But you’re one to see sense,” he added more quietly, “an’ I ain’t greedy no’ow. I don’t want no quarrels. A wench ain’t worth it. When I say you’re hisn, you’re hisn, an’ when I say you’re mine, you’re mine.”

He had looked at her for a long moment in silence, as though waiting for her to answer, and then, apparently satisfied, as she made no response, he had risen and walked out.

Then she had gone to her own room, and behind the futile safeguards of lock and bolt had blamed herself for the cowardice that had made no answer, and congratulated herself on her discretion, and had tried to persuade herself that it was wisdom rather than fear which had impelled her to silence.

Certainly she had needed time for thought, but thought had brought no comfort. Were they the only men that the world held, it made no difference. She loathed them both. The sight of Jephson in the yard beneath, busily measuring some timbers, his mind full of his proposed fencing of the pond, did nothing to reassure her. In his slow, deliberate mind he had weighed her up, and told her what her fate would be. Then he had reverted to more important problems.

She thought of the cowardly brutality of the man who had assaulted, and then of this other who would be content to share her with him, so long as he were recognized as the master. He wouldn’t even keep her to himself if it should mean a quarrel. “A wench ain’t worth it.” Was she to live at the will of such as these, and bear their children?

Surprisingly, she had gone to sleep very quickly, and had slept so well that she had not heard Jephson at work on the outside of her door. Not that he cared whether she heard him.

Perhaps he had given her more thought than she supposed. Probably he quite understood the feeling toward himself underlying the polite friendliness with which she usually addressed him. He prided himself on his practical efficiency, and he would not have spoken so confidently had he not "measured the job" as he put it to his own mind.

She had waked early from a strange dream of sinking into immeasurable depths and with an unaccountable feeling of giddiness, and hearing no sound from the rooms below, where the men slept, had resolved to come out and find the cows to drive them down for the milking. Leaving her room, she had noticed that a heavy bolt had been fixed to the outside of the door. It had not been shot to confine her, and left her to puzzle over the intention which it indicated. Probably to confine her should she give further trouble till she should be starved into complacency.

It gave her fresh food for thought—thought which hardened into a determination not to be coerced by such men, nor by such methods, and yet which could form no plan by which their lives could combine, and she maintain her integrity, if they united against her.

[V]

Over these events which have been briefly told, and over others which there is no need for telling, Claire's mind had wandered as she watched a calm sea wrinkle to a summer breeze; but as she found no issue, she resolved that she must play for time until she had contrived some plan by which she could play for safety, and that she would gain nothing by rousing the suspicion that she was not returning with the cows as usual, or by leaving the men to make common cause against her while she was absent. On her way back to the house the feeling of giddiness with which she had waked returned, but more strongly, so that she staggered, and part of the milk was spilled. For some time she lay on the turf while the sky swayed above, and she felt as though the ground were sinking beneath her. But this passed, and she rose with a feeling of unaccustomed sickness.

She found the men together at their morning meal when at last she came in with the milk pail. She knew that they had been discussing her from a look which Norwood gave before his glance fell nervously beneath her own, but neither spoke, and it was her own policy to draw their thoughts to the day's work, as though the incidents of the previous one were forgotten. Norwood's face was not a pleasant sight, the forehead swollen and discolored, and the left

cheek caked with dirt and blood, which he had omitted to wash lest the bleeding should start afresh. But it was not a subject to which any of them was likely to allude. Jephson had other things on his mind, and was proceeding to explain his program and to allot to each of them the task by which they could best assist it, when an event happened of the kind which so often shows the vanity of human forethought or apprehension.

Claire's fears and Jephson's plans went the same road when a thin stream of water from the yard outside hesitated for a moment on the sill and trickled down into the kitchen.

The kitchen was the oldest part of an old house, and was built at the time when floors were sunk, so that the strewn rushes should not be drawn out by careless feet. Probably it had then been the best room in the house, which had since decayed and been rebuilt around it. Its floor, now flagged, was several inches lower than the yard from which the water dripped so gently, yet with a quietly increasing volume.

Claire noticed it first, but did not speak, which was a measure of her mental aloofness, and it was a few seconds before she had realized its significance. Jephson saw it next, and knew its cause in a moment, but he was a man of slow speech, and he stared silently while his mind grappled with the problem which it presented.

Norwood saw it last, and jumped up with an exclamation of vague astonishment. The next moment Jephson was leading the way to the yard, where a thin layer of water was spreading outward from the well-mouth.

It was clear that the sea had broken into the well and that the water would continue to rise until it found its own level. Claire, who had often noticed, as she had gained the crest of the ridge in her daily journey to the little bay, how much lower than the sea was the hollow in which the house was built, realized that it would rise until the house and all their possessions were submerged beneath it, unless it could be checked effectually.

Was there any possible means of so doing? It is not easy to stop the ocean, but it was evident that Jephson thought it worth attempting.

The slowness with which the water rose made it clear to his mind that the sea could only be percolating through very gradually. Surely this tendency could be checked if the well were filled?

He looked round for the quickest method of doing this, and the next minute they were all three heaving bricks from a pile of loose rubbish in the yard into the splashing mouth of the well. The well was at the side of the yard which was furthest from the house, covered by a wooden flap, against a low wall that divided the yard from the garden. As the heap of bricks and stones was rapidly diminishing, Jephson fetched a pick, and, with a few expert strokes, demolished the old side walls so that they also fell into the water. Soon there

was a gap in the rear wall also, which had found the same sepulcher. Then he began to break up the yard itself, while the other two, having fetched spades to his instructions, were shoveling garden earth through the gap in the wall.

But the well seemed insatiable, and still the water rose. Claire and Norwood were above its level, for the garden was a foot or two higher than the yard, but Jephson was now working in six inches of water, and it was clear that, despite all their efforts, it was still rising, and more rapidly than before.

Jephson paused a moment, leaning on his pick, and called to Claire to ask when the tide would be at its highest. She had learnt to judge this, so that they should choose the best times for their salvage operations. She looked at the sun, and answered that it was nearly full. He asked her if she could tell whether it were higher than the upper story of the house if she went to the edge of the ridge to look.

"I can tell you that without going," she answered. "It would cover the house entirely."

But Jephson would have her go and look again, and she went rather than argue, having already decided that their labor was a waste of effort.

Jephson knew it too, but he grasped at any hope, however feeble, and worked on doggedly. He had a wild thought of dragging their possessions to the upper floor and remaining there, and perhaps being able to sally out when the tides fell. He could build a house on higher ground, and they could gradually remove their property to it. But this would be useless if the whole house would be under water continually. In that case they had better commence to save what they could.

Claire went up the hillside quietly. When she reached the top she looked round in wonder, for the sea was but a short distance beneath her. The lower island had disappeared.

She realized after the first moment's surprise that something was happening more serious than the flooding of the well, and that while they had toiled at their useless task, the whole island had been quietly sinking beneath them. After all, it was scarcely wonderful. Rather it was difficult to understand why this little space of land had remained uncovered when so much of higher ground had subsided. Anyway, it was not a time for theorizing over the inexplicable. She had no doubt that the island was doomed, and in a moment her resolution was formed to take that desperate chance which she had debated in the earlier morning. She would swim for life, as she had done on the night when the floods came. To do this she should start from the north side of the island, which was nearly a mile away. It would be well to be clear of the land before the final subsidence. For her companions she could see no hope, and towards them she felt no obligation. She was disinclined to descend the hollow again. At the least, it was loss of time when time might be priceless. At the

worst, if the sea should overflow while she were there, it might pour in from every side, making such a caldron as would drown the strongest. She could not tell; she could only imagine.

Yet she felt she could not leave them unwarned, and so she went, reluctantly enough, back to the house, round which the water had risen several inches and had spread widely over the lower ground around it.

Jephson turned eagerly as she approached, and called to know if the whole house would be covered, and she could only shake her head in reply till she was near enough for explanation. Both men stopped their work and looked at her anxiously as she reached them. The water was pouring out from the well-mouth, and it was evident that their work had been ineffectual to check it. There must have been tragedy in her face which had alarmed them before she spoke, but when she did so it was very quietly.

"It is no use doing that. You must save yourselves if you can. I think the island is sinking."

Norwood went white, and his jaw dropped as he heard her. He had the type of mind which was able to realize at once that she spoke the truth, but was incapable of making any fight against it.

Jephson was less receptive. He answered roughly, but not without a nervous note in his voice: "Nonsense, wench. You can't tell me what's wrong. It's the sea's in the well. That won't drown us."

"Mr. Jephson," she said with a quiet intensity which vanquished his incredulity, "you can believe me or not, but the sea is almost level with the ridge above us. You can think where you'll be when it pours over. I am going to save myself, if I can. I don't know what you can do. Perhaps you could make a raft. But I should do it quickly."

She had turned away and waded to the kitchen before he found an answer.

The pail of milk was still on the table, and she stooped to it and drank till she could drink no more.

Her mind was very clear, rising to the occasion with a curious feeling of exaltation. She was not troubled or afraid at all. Rather was she conscious of a great relief, as of one who has been released from impending tragedy by a supernatural power after all hope had ended.

When she came out of the kitchen the two men were running up the slope, Norwood far in advance. She turned away, and had nearly gained the higher ground on the inland side, when a roaring sound behind caused her to look round quickly. She saw a great spout of water shoot up from the well-mouth, flinging high into the air the bricks and earth with which they had endeavored so laboriously to choke its passage.

She looked over to the further side, and saw Jephson waving furiously to her to join them. He shouted something which she could not hear. She thought

the word “boat” was repeated, but could not be certain.

Anyway she was not going. She shook her head and turned away resolutely. She had done with them forever.

[VI]

As she walked over the level down, the scene was peaceful and very quiet.

The sky was clear, the sun shone, and a breeze of a pleasant coolness blew from the west, tempering the sun’s heat.

Once or twice the ground swayed beneath her, but the tremor was so slight that it might have passed unnoticed had she not been alert to such indications.

She saw that the sheep were huddled together in a frightened group, but the cows grazed placidly. The gulls were restless and very talkative.

She began to doubt whether the subsidence had not ceased, but she did not change her purpose.

One by one she discarded her clothes the while she walked, throwing them aside as things of no further value. She came at last to the cliff-side where she had stood in the earlier morning, but she stood now bare of the unsightly garb which had seemed to typify the life from which she was escaping. The waves broke about ten feet below her when she raised her arms and dived to meet them.

She swam straight out from the land with strong, slow strokes till she was about a mile away, and then turned on her back and floated gently.

A long hour passed, and still she could see the island, though she thought it lower in the water, and still she did not get the sign for which she had hoped and waited.

At length it came, in a line of sea-birds that flew up from the sinking land and turned their flight to eastward. The direction troubled her. She had the fancy that land lay to the northeast, and that there, if at all, it might be within a distance that she would be able to reach before her strength should leave her.

Birds might fly further than human limbs could swim, and their choice might be death to her, but she had resolved to take the sign when it came, and so, putting her doubts aside, she turned and followed.

She could still see them, flying steadily and straight forward. Surely there was land beyond, however far, and she must not fail till she gained it. It was noon overhead. She had about nine hours of daylight, and a short and moonlit night to follow. She felt fresh and confident. She knew that there could be no land for many miles, or it would have been visible from the cliff-top, and so she settled down to swim steadily, and to rest her mind with other thoughts as she did so.

As the afternoon passed, the sky became clouded, and a gusty wind came

behind her, raising short and choppy waves. She was conscious that the water was not as warm as it had been, but she still swam easily.

A lonely gull passed overhead, flying in the same direction, and renewed her courage.

She raised herself from time to time to search for any sign of land above the tossing waters. . . .

Now there was a chill of fear in her heart, but she forced it down and would not heed it.

She could still float for many hours, and the land might show at any moment.

Then, as she rose on a wave's lift, she saw a plank that floated in the trough beneath her. In three strokes she had gained it. Here at least was a place of rest, where she could recruit her strength and courage.

The plank was long and heavy. She thought that if she could lie upon it for a time she could rest the better. But when she tried this she found that it turned over with her. After several trials she found the best she could do was to lie upon it with her legs in the water. The sun was low now, and showed from a clear west, though the upper sky was clouded. It warmed her somewhat, but she was the more sensible of fatigue now that she had relaxed. She was suffering from hunger, too, and from thirst, and the fear came that if she rested long she would be too chilled and stiff to have courage to leave her refuge.

Already she was beginning to tell herself that it might be the safer way to drift with the plank, hoping that it would bear her to some land before exhaustion should have forced her to loose it.

She was tempted also by the thought that the night was near. Might she not pass the very land which would save her if she should go on in the darkness?

To rest till morning—it was an alluring thought, with her tired arms slackened across the plank, but her reason told her that if she were weak now she would be weaker then.

And she was not weak, and she would not die! She loosed the plank, and struck out toward the advancing night.

After that she must have swum for several hours with a will which refused defeat, but with a steadily reducing vitality. She became dazed and half conscious. Once she struck something sharply, some floating object, and the shock roused her, but it had disappeared in the darkness. She felt that if she could have obtained food and drink she still had strength to continue. "This is how people drown," she thought, "and are too tired to know when death takes them." Then she thrust the thought away, and raised herself on a wave's crest in the vain hope of the shadow that would be land. She saw nothing. Nothing but the light of the half-moon on the tossing waters. It was still night, but there was the first faint grayness of dawn along the east. She saw that she had lost

heed of direction, and had been swimming north when the blow roused her. Did it matter?

Wearily she turned, and struck out once more toward the east, as she had resolved when her mind was alert and vigorous.

It was not long after, for the moon had not yet paled to the dawn, that she became aware that the sea around was broken and turbulent. Hope came with this realization, and with hope the strength to make a final effort if she could see its objective. She could see no land, but there must be banks around her on which the sea was breaking. She calculated that the tide must be about at its lowest. At high tide these banks would be covered too deeply even for the waves to feel them. There was no help in that.

Still she struggled on with some increase of hope and purpose. Once her foot touched ground, or so she thought, as she sank between wave and wave in a place of foam and buffeting, and then, as she rose again, she saw a stretch of land, low and black, on her left hand, against which the waves broke heavily, and past which she was drifting.

In a second her exhaustion left her. There was a moment's fear as she realized that it was not her own strokes but a strong sea current that was carrying her, and that it was a mere point of shallow land which was already passing. But her mind was alert and awake once more, as though it had been saving itself for this emergency—awake with the clarity which comes when it is long since food has been taken. She realized that as the land passed, the current would lose its force, and that she might be able to gain it the more easily on its further side.

It was but a few minutes later that her feet grounded on a muddy bottom, and she waded out on to a level of mud and weed which the higher tide would submerge again before the sun had reached its meridian.

That was all.

She went on in the growing light in the hope of drier land—and the sea met her.

There was no hope here of food or of water. She was on a mere bank that the sea had drowned, and would drown again in a few hours' time; and yet, though the disappointment was bitter, she was not despondent. She had a feeling of a battle won; and was content to wait for what the fuller light should show her.

Rain came with the dawn. A heavy storm that was soon over, but that washed the salt from lips and hair, and refreshed her exhausted body. It was warm rain. It came so heavily that she was able to make a cup of her hands and catch enough to drink, little by little, till her thirst had left her.

Then the storm passed over, and the low sun shone warmly.

Looking round as the air cleared, she saw that higher land rose abruptly

from the sea a few miles to northward. Feeling that she had already won to safety, she thought of how she could rest for a time before undertaking the final swim which was still before her. The land on which she stood, which had once been a part of the high downs of Oxfordshire, had been stripped bare of its surface soil by the corroding tides, and would, no doubt, be worn lower by every sea that swept over it. It was no inviting couch, but she had scarcely lain down before she was sleeping heavily. The sun, gaining power as it rose, dried her drenched hair and warmed her naked limbs, while a great cloud of sea-birds, flying from the higher land, descended around her, to feed on that which the ocean left them.

Cautious at first, they were soon moving fearlessly around, till one doubtfully pecked at a foot which had lain so long without motion; but she only turned in her sleep, and did not wake, though the movement startled the birds into a clamorous cloud that was some minutes before it settled.

A returning wave swept up to her, lapping for a moment against her back and retiring for a little distance. It came again, and rippled gently round her, and almost at once it had spread over the flat land. She waked with the salt water in her mouth, struggling to her feet to see nothing but water around her, and unable for a time to remember where she was, or how she came to be there.

Then she was conscious of a great lassitude, and of stiff and aching limbs. She felt incapable of swimming for a hundred yards, and the land which was her only safety was at least three miles away. Her heart sank as she looked, but she had no choice but to attempt it. Should she stay where she was she would soon be washed off, as the great waves, which were now breaking vainly against the land, and sending on their gentler couriers that flooded round her feet, would reach and overwhelm her.

She waded through the deepening waves toward the quieter side on which she had landed, and slid gently into the water.

In after years she was to remember that morning's effort more vividly than all the toil of the day and night which had preceded it. For now her mind was alert from sleep, while her body was tired, as it seemed, intolerably. She had not done half a mile before she had decided that she could never hope to reach the land which rose so plainly before her. It seemed that only the instinct to defer the inevitable as long as possible caused her to make each weary stroke with a feeling that she would never be able to attempt another. She thought also that she made no progress, that she was swimming too weakly to do so, at times even that the land receded further from her. She had, as she thought, been many hours in the water, though the sun's height gave a shorter record, before the first hope came, which was less a hope than an awakening of fear—to fail at last, and with the land so near!

Weakly but stubbornly she struggled on, supported less by the remains of her physical strength than by the determination that she would not die, which she had formed in the hours of vivid life and self-confidence. It was as though her will had become too weak to change the fixed intention, so that she was powerless to release her body from the toil to which she had bound it—and then her foot caught an obstruction in the water. She lowered herself at once, in hope of grounding, but found it still too deep. She had struck a submerged rail only, but ahead, distant only by the width of a narrow field, she saw a hedge which stood almost clear of water. Very soon she was wading along it, in a mere few inches of advancing waves, only keeping the ditch's space away, till she came to an iron gate, still on its hinges, through which she passed, to feel beneath her feet the tar-smooth surface of the Oxford road.

Soon she was clear of the water, struggling weakly along the uphill road. She could scarcely direct her course, and her footsteps wavered from side to side in the white dust which had blown along the deserted surface, but she withstood the longing to lie down at the roadside, with a final effort of her failing will. Food she must have, and would, of some kind, before the luxury of sinking into oblivion with the knowledge that life was won from the waters.

Quiet close-cropped fields extended on either hand. Sheep fed in one of them, and some rooks were moving. Then she came to a wooden gate on the left hand, opening to a stony cart-track. The track fell, and turned, so that she could see no more than that a faint smoke was rising. Here she entered, the sharp stones cutting her feet till she walked on the grassy edge of the track. Soon she saw a cottage of gray stone, built under the hillside, that the storm had spared, and the smoke rose from its chimney.

[VII]

Whatever damage the storm might have occasioned, there was no longer any sign of its effects in the neatness of the little garden which surrounded the cottage. It was an unconscious tribute to the atmosphere of the place that, faint as she was, she turned to latch the little wooden gate, when she had passed through it.

As she walked up the neat tiled path, she became acutely conscious of her lack of clothes, the convention of a lifetime protesting the more vigorously because of the old-world peace of the scene before her.

Fearfully she looked through the little window before venturing to knock at a door which stood very slightly open. She saw a red-tiled room, with a kitchen-grate in which a slack fire smoldered. Before it a black cat dozed. There was no one there, and very cautiously and quietly she pushed the door wider and stepped into the room.

She thought that her bare feet made no sound, but a weak voice from a room above called to know if anyone was there. She stood still, hesitating how to reply, and meanwhile the cat rose sleepily, yawned, and came over to her, purring as she smoothed her side against a naked ankle.

Silently Claire surveyed the room. At the far left corner the stairs opened. A tall clock ticked against the left-hand wall. Opposite to her was a horsehair sofa with a dark rug lying upon it. Beside her, on the right hand, was the window, and on the further side was the hearth. There was a table in the center of the room, and on it was a large square biscuit tin, a teapot, and the débris of an uncleared meal. At this sight all other consciousness left her mind. The pot was half full of cold tea, and this she drank from it, without delay of pouring. The tin was nearly full of oatmeal biscuits.

The call from the room above was not repeated. The cat had slipped upstairs, and may have been supposed to have caused whatever noise had been overheard. When she had eaten some of the biscuits, she found the desire for sleep was stronger than the call of hunger. Even to her exhaustion the sofa was not inviting. It had an arm at each end, so that it was impossible to lie upon it at full length, and its horsehair covering showed a broken spring. She took the rug, and, stretching herself upon the hearth, drew it over her, and was asleep in a moment.

As the light was beginning to lessen through the narrow window, though it was still day without, a sheep dog pushed his way through the half-open door and stood growling doubtfully for a moment. Then he walked over to sniff at the invader of his master's kennel.

Claire was still asleep, though the first heaviness of her exhaustion had left her. She had thrown off the rug, and lay face-forward, her head pillowed on a bent arm. Dreaming, she was conscious only of a swirling depth of green water that moved beneath her, of a drift of low gray clouds overhead, and of the continual waves that fell and lifted. She would be far down in the hollow, or struggling up the smooth slope of the side, or on the crest for a moment, gazing over an expanse of heaving water in search of the horizon-line of land that never came, and always, hour by hour, there was the one outstretched arm and the other that came over—and over—and over—

So she dreamed; and the dog, that had no human speech, though he could understand it well enough, sniffed doubtfully and knew her dreaming. Satisfied that here was no occasion for enmity, he lay down beneath the table and waited till the door pushed wider and his master entered.

It was an old man that came in, walking vigorously, though he leaned on a heavy stick. He saw the outstretched body on the hearth and paused in a

natural bewilderment. His senses were less acute than those of the dog and his thoughts were slower. Seeing that she slept, he approached more nearly. In his own way he learnt, as the dog had learnt, that she had come through the waters. Her body sparkled with salt, and a ribbon of black seaweed that had curved round her thigh had drawn away as the fire's heat dried it.

He saw a woman very finely formed, with a body well fitted to overcome the floods which had been fatal to millions. She was not slim; indeed was rather solidly made, so that she might have given an impression of heaviness had she been differently proportioned. But she was long of limb, contrasting in this respect with the majority of the women of her civilization. He saw a woman young, but mature. A face from which sleep had cleared the traces of bodily fatigue and mental exhaustion. A square and resolute chin, beneath lips that could smile very easily. Lips very slightly parted, showing teeth that were large and white and regular. A broad, low brow, beneath a tangled mat of curling hair. Dark-brown hair, showing black in the shadow, with a doubt of red where the fire caught it.

The shepherd gazed at the sleeping woman with puzzled eyes, while the dog stood beside him, his alert glances moving from one to the other. Then the old man turned to the stairs, and soon there was a murmur of voices in a room above. He came down heavily on the creaking treads, and, as he did so, the woman stirred, half wakened, and pulled the rug over her.

Standing at the stair foot, he struck the tiled floor sharply with his stick. Her eyes were open now, though still troubled with sleep and with the thought of waters which overwhelmed her. She rose stiffly, drawing the rug round her. The shepherd spoke four words only, "My daughter wants 'ee," and pointed with his stick to the stairs. She went past him to the room above.

[VIII]

Claire lived for several weeks in the shepherd's cottage. She found that her adventure had only transferred her from one island to another, though this was larger than the one she had left. There were no human inhabitants except themselves. As the storm abated the scattered population had fled northward and doubtless perished. Only the old shepherd, having a bedridden daughter, had declined to leave her. Of him Claire knew little more on the last day than at the first meeting. Thoughts he must have had, but they were not articulate. Emotions he must have had, but they were not audible. Character he had, of which the main feature appeared to be a stolid though unintelligent loyalty. He had saved what he could of his master's flocks, and he still served their needs with his usual slow-moving diligence. His master's house was in ruins, but he did not touch its contents except to excavate some needed food from its

larders, and perhaps his first impulse to that arose from the fact that his master's pigs were still living, and that meal must be found to feed them.

The farm was nearly half a mile away. Fowl still ran loose around it. The disposal of their eggs appeared to have been the old man's most difficult problem. They had not been his responsibility previously. Now that everyone else had gone he must do the best he could. But if he should collect them, how could he take them to a market that no longer existed?

Except as it involved a practical difficulty of this kind, he appeared to be hardly aware of the changes which had taken place around him. Claire judged the dog to be far the more sensitive to the world's tragedy which had spared them.

No less, Claire saw that in his own manner he had the slow efficiency that came from an ancestry which might have engaged in the same labors for millenniums. Food and warmth, clothes and shelter, these were the four needs of man, and his mind went no further. Of the drowned wealth which the sea cast them, as it must be casting it wherever dry land still stood above the waters, he took no heed unless it were of some direct and obvious utility. For the rest, if it were trapped in the ruins of fence or hedge, there it might remain till the sea reclaimed it.

Yet Claire realized that his hold on life was firmer, he was more surely rooted, he was a hundred-fold more able to supply the needs of his own existence, than, say, Norwood had been, or than would have been many thousands of others who would have despised his life and derided his stupidity.

She had no doubt that when the winter came provision would have been made for the needs of life till spring returned. Here were safety and peace. But it was not these she was seeking.

The old man's daughter had been bedridden for several years with a spinal injury which at one time had been thought permanent, but an operation had been recently performed which had offered hope of recovery. The doctors had told her that after a certain period she should be able to use her legs, and that there was no reason why strength and health should not be regained. But though the time had passed, being faced with a catastrophe which had wiped out the world for which she cared and all the pleasures for which she had longed, she had made no effort.

She was a thin, peevish girl of about twenty years. Her hair and eyebrows were of a straw color so light as to be almost white. Her mind was shallow and unformed. She was evidently glad of Claire's coming. She commenced with feelings of envy and admiration, and an eager curiosity, developing, as Claire's larger and more generous nature gained upon her, into a worship which was as genuine and deep as any feeling of which she was capable.

Under the influence of the stronger will she commenced to make efforts to

regain the use of her feet, and in a few days was able to cross the tiny room, which she now shared with Claire, without assistance.

The room was a horror to Claire. It was just half the size of the living-room below. It had one tiny window, which had rarely been opened till she came, and was only opened now with much argument and querulous protest unless the day's heat should become unbearable.

Claire discovered that the window in the old man's room had been securely nailed up, as the remedy for a broken catch.

She had frightened the girl by suggesting that her father could not live forever, and that if she did not learn to walk she might be left helpless. To such a nature the idea of loneliness was as terrible as incapacity. She implored Claire not to leave them.

But Claire would promise no more than that she would return at some future time should she be able to do so.

For her resolution was fixed, nor did she disguise from herself the intention which underlay it.

Land lay to the north. Land within easy sight, though it seemed no more than islets such as those she had known already, or flats which the higher tides swept over, where no human life could be.

But what might be beyond them?

She could not tell; but she would find a mate to her own liking if the world held him.

For some weeks, none the less, she stayed in this quiet haven, waiting for such weather as would assist her purpose. At first it was warm and fine at intervals, but with high northwest winds. There were days of heavy rain. The sea was tempestuous.

She waited for a quiet sea and for a southerly wind, or the calm which sometimes comes when midsummer is receding.

Meanwhile she almost lived in the water, swimming far out every day, unless the sea were too rough even for her temerity. Once she was able to regain the land only after many hours of exhausting struggle; a needed warning, when she had begun to feel that the ocean had no power to drown her.

She had clothed herself carelessly enough in garments which the girl gave, and which she enlarged to fit her, and in some which she found at the farmhouse or from the sea's tribute. But she knew that these things must be left behind. The grave itself is scarcely more obdurate in its rejection of earthly treasures than was the way by which she wandered.

Only she made herself a bathing-dress to replace that which she had left behind on the first island, and this she now wore continually, to be ready when the chance offered.

It came on an August day, when the sky was white with high cumulus clouds and the sea breathed quietly. There was a slight breeze from the southeast. She had left the cottage in the early morning with no settled purpose and with no word to suggest that she might not be returning, though she had eaten with unusual heartiness, as one who did not know when or where the next meal would be taken; but when she had walked to the north side of the island, where the ground sloped very gradually, and the full tide, pausing on the turn, shone smooth and shallow, she knew that the sea's call had come, and waded out to meet it. Casting off her garments with an exaltation of mind similar to that which she had felt when occupied before in the same way, she reached the deeper water, and the swell of a long wave raised her gently from her feet and bore her outward.

BOOK III

MARTIN AND CLAIRE

THE later summer came, and Martin was still alone. He had made his headquarters about a mile away from his first location.

There was a single line of railway that had at one time carried some considerable traffic till the opening of another line had rendered it useless. The owners, for tactical financial reasons of no interest except to themselves, had continued to run a nominal service of an engine and a single coach upon it once daily. Apart from that, it had been unused for many years.

This line, meeting a high ridge of ground which extended from that on which Martin had taken his first refuge, was carried through a rather long tunnel.

By this time Martin had realized the urgency of making provision of food and warmth and shelter for the colder days which he supposed to be approaching.

He explored the entrance to this tunnel and found it to be dry for some distance.

There were recesses at intervals in the dark walls where he might cache the stores which he intended to accumulate. Here was a place which even the dogs, now becoming wild and wolf-like and a continual menace, would be unlikely to penetrate.

More important still, there was a hut for the use of workmen, small, but very strongly built, at the side of the line at the tunnel entrance, and beside it there was a large dump of stacked coal.

Martin was now foraging with the skill of experience and over a wider area. He had discovered isolated houses, which had not burnt and which still contained many useful things, however much they might have been wrecked by storm, and their contents damaged by sun and rain. He had learnt his present needs and could gage his future requirements.

He began a regular course of collection and storage.

The entrance to the tunnel was in a deep cutting between high banks topped by fence and hedge with fields beyond them. There was no road adjacent. He used to approach by different routes so that there should be no clear path to his hiding-place. There was a stile at the top of the bank on the

western side of the line, with rough steps leading down to the northern entrance to the tunnel, and to the hut which was on the opposite side.

He would not make a practice of using this, but finding a large slab of stone in the adjoining field he had a fancy to balance it precariously on the top rail of the fence, thinking that if anyone should approach, especially in the night-time, when he might be sleeping in the hut, the intruder would be sure to overset the stone and its descent would arouse and warn him.

He did not know what he feared, but he was becoming wild and shy, as were the creatures around him.

[II]

The summer waned and the days shortened, but the heat continued, though not without wind and storm and some intervals of heavy rain.

Martin's stores accumulated till a day came that altered his life to its foundations, and put a swift end to the purpose for which he had worked with such patient industry.

He went out that morning, as he had gone several days previously, to the prosaic task of digging potatoes, which was quickly accomplished, and to the more laborious work of carrying them back to his hiding-place.

The last three months had made him leaner, browner, and more muscular than when he had parried Mrs. Templeton's shallow blasphemies across the polished oak and shining glass and silver of his own dining-table. He still found means to shave, and to keep his hair short and untangled. His clothing was sufficient, though roughly used, and showing evidence of having been collected from miscellaneous sources.

He carried a light bamboo-shafted spear, a relic of Asian travel, which he had pillaged from the hall of a ruined house, and which he had found useful in protecting himself from dogs and cattle. He walked lightly and silently, with eyes that were alert and cautious.

He went by a woodland path that showed no change, and might have looked the same a thousand years earlier, leaving it for a narrow lane which was already deeply choked in herbs and grasses.

At the foot of the lane, where he would have crossed a wider road to the garden he sought, he came to a trampled place, and to the body of a dead woman.

She was young and had something of the comeliness of youth and health, marred by an expression of stubbornness or stupidity. Now her face was distorted from a death of violence. It was evident that she had been brutally handled and that she had resisted fiercely. Perhaps she would not have died had she not fought her persecutors with such savage anger.

But dead she was, and her death must have been very recent, for Martin, stooping to ascertain if any aid were possible, found that she was still warm. Her clothing was torn and disordered. Her arms were discolored with bruises, and one was dislocated at the elbow.

After the first impulse of pity and horror, Martin looked round cautiously. He did not think this to be the work of one man, or of two. And men who would be capable of such a crime were not the kind which he would wish to meet without warning. He could do no good here. He retreated up the lane.

In a sheltered place he sat down and thought. He had not supposed that he was the only man living in a space of land which he knew to be many miles in area, and of which he did not know the northern or western limits. He had been puzzled that he had seen so few signs of human life, though he recognized that but for Helen's accident he might have joined the rush to northward of which he had seen evidences when he had been foraging for her necessities while she lay in the marl-pit.

But he had been less keen to search for others than to watch the shore for any sign of deliverance which might approach from the outer world.

Now there was evidence that men were near in some number—violent and lawless men. And the woman, whom he supposed that they had seized from some other community, even after the brutalities which she had suffered, showed by her appearance that she had been leading a sheltered and more civilized life than his own.

It was puzzling in several aspects.

While he considered it, he heard voices approach along the other side of the hedge against which he was sitting. The voices were rough and surly. He could not understand all they said, but it was plain that they were discussing the recent tragedy, which one of them regarded as a pleasant sport, and against which the other grumbled, as at a waste of good material that might have been conserved for other occasions, and for which he blamed the violence of a man that he described as "Muster Bellamy."

"Wull, here he come," said the first voice, "tell 'im."

The second voice became silent.

Martin, crouching in the ditch, knew that a man crossed the lane about twenty yards away. He could not see him clearly without exposing himself, which he would not risk, but he had an impression of a huge and brutal form, nearer seven feet than six in height and of a corresponding bulk. He heard the men meet, but the protestant evidently considered that silence would be more discreet than speech. The only words that reached him concerned the snaring of rabbits.

He remained in the ditch for some minutes, and might have done so longer had he not realized that anyone coming up or down the lane could not fail to

observe him.

He crept through the hedge to the further side and made his way along it, watching alertly for any sound or motion.

As he approached the wood, he heard voices again. He decided not to venture through it. Should he be able to do so unobserved he might be seen as he crossed the open field beyond; he might be followed, even without his own knowledge, and his lair be at the mercy of these intruders.

It was almost equally dangerous to remain where he was.

He wanted time for thought before he could decide whether, or in what way, to approach these men or to avoid them entirely.

He decided to set out in the opposite direction, making a wide detour, and not returning homeward until the night should hide his movements.

With this object he proceeded with a furtive caution further than he had yet penetrated to the westward, taking a southward bend after some miles of progress, without any further sound or sign of human life, had increased his confidence. He came to a place of slag-heaps and silent shafts, where the face of the land was still blackened by activities which were now ended, it might be hoped forever.

At last he came to the sea. In a little sheltered hollow, where he could not be seen until after he would have heard the sound of approaching footsteps, he sat down and watched the water.

[III]

The sun moved slowly down toward the west, and Martin sat and pondered the events of the earlier day. Solitary as he was, he had no mind to join the brutal crowd that he had overlooked in the morning. Still less was he willing to expose the precious store he had accumulated to their use or waste. He saw that it would be hard to remain unnoticed should they continue long in the neighborhood. New and difficult problems might be at hand for solution. But they might not remain. He decided to regain his lair as secretly as he might, and to lie hidden there, for a time at least, in the hope of their passing.

But it would not be easy to cross the wilderness of slag-heaps and deserted shafts under continuous cover during the day or without accident in the darkness. He decided that the dusk would be his best time, either at night or morning. In the old days the earth was the more vacant of wakeful life when the sun came, but now he was less sure how it would be. Men might sleep in the heat of the day. They might like to find cover when the dusk was near. They might be watchful when the light stirred. Besides, he had no will to wait there through the night-time. He would start when the sun set, and there would still be light enough to guide him through the wood when he reached it. There

he would wait, and cross the last fields in the darkness. In a return by a straighter way, the distance was not very great. That would be easy; and the safer choice. In the morning the lightest time would come when the path would be plain to all, and the need for concealment greatest.

After his decision to wait, his thoughts wandered. He thought of Helen and the children that he had lost. There was no sane hope that they were still living. He felt an almost intolerable loneliness; and yet they seemed very far. Life was so different now.

His gaze sought absently over the tossing sunlit waters. The tide came in strongly with a wind behind it. It was nearly full now.

There was no beach such as the old shores offered to the tide's caresses. No stretch of sand or rocks, no space of shells or seaweeds, where air and water had changed dominion twice daily since the dawn of time. No mile-wide belt of teeming life and myriad strange activities. Only a stretch of sloping pasture land, green enough down to the tide-line, where lay a ridge of débris washed from ocean depths and ruined lands, and below that the surface was salt and brown and beaten. There had been no fence to divide the field from the slag-heap on which he lay; only at one place the scattered bricks of an old wall, and some way out in the water (for the ground sloped very gradually) there rose the gaunt stump of a broken tree that the storm had snapped some twelve feet from its base. Relieved of its weight of boughs, the deep roots had held against the tempest and the first rush of the flood that had swept over it; and, stubborn in its death, it still resisted, for a time, the ceaseless pressures of the patient tides.

All this Martin watched idly. No doubt, in time, the sand would spread, and limpets cling in rocky pools. Already he had observed places where the level rose more sharply and the sea had washed off the softer soil, and rocks were showing. It was all change—death and change—change and death—and yet he knew that life was sweet in the sunlight. Why else should he sigh for the thought that nothing lasted? Why else should his heart ache so bitterly for those who should have been beside him to share it?

Something moved—was it a bird?—on the water. Far out—for his sight was keen—he saw it. It was like the arm of a human swimmer: the arm of one who swam slowly and very low in the water.

It seemed incredible, but it was so.

Mile beyond mile the desolate water stretched before him. Here and there it might show white and troubled where the land would scarcely be covered at fall of tide, but he knew that there was no land where life would have survived, nor had he seen a soul since. . . .

And while he wondered, and very slowly, at little more than the tide's pace, the swimmer came on. He was sure now that it was a man. He did not

think of a woman. Could he give aid? Caution withheld him. If there were more evident need——But as yet he preferred to watch, and he shifted his position for one of better cover.

Then he saw that the swimmer had felt land and was erect for a moment. Then he was swimming again. Then he rose and commenced wading shoreward.

With a sudden amazement, and with an underthought of excitement, Martin realized that she was a woman. A wild thought came that it might be Helen who had returned, and then a pang of sorrow that it was not she.

She came up from the water in the evening light, walking unsteadily as one in the last stage of exhaustion, and suddenly threw up her arms with a sound that was between laughter and a cry of exaltation, and walked on for a few steps further, and fell forward on the turf and did not move.

Martin hesitated. His weeks of wild and solitary existence, few though they were, and the experience of the morning, had taught him caution.

Was she alone? His eyes searched the sea, but they found nothing to explain her coming. Then he saw that she had risen to her knees and was commencing to pull off the sodden bathing-dress that clung so closely round her.

It was a chivalrous instinct of his earlier life that caused him to rise and hail her as he observed her purpose.

She stopped at once, and came quickly to her feet as he did this.

She stood still, and he advanced towards her.

He saw a woman beautiful of face and form. Young, and strong, and desirable.

She looked back without fear, but her glance was alert and doubtful.

She saw a man who was still young, though he had been younger. He was lean and straight, but not tall: somewhat taller than herself, perhaps, but looking shorter in the rough soiled clothes which he was wearing. He was bronzed by the sun, and his eyes were gray and keen, but they were eyes that did not tell his thoughts unless he willed them to do so.

He was not the hero of her dreams, but he was something better than Jephson, and her tired mind told her to trust him.

They stood silent for a time that seemed long, though it was not. At last he said: “You need food and rest. You had better come with me.”

“Yes,” she said, and commenced to move forward.

“Will you have my coat?” he asked, seeing how drenched was her only garment. He made a motion to give it.

“No,” she said, and after a pause: “It will dry.”

She seemed too tired for speech. Her eyes were dark with fatigue.

After a few steps, she put a hand on his arm as though for support or

guidance. “Is it far?” she asked. He shook his head in reply, as though infected by her own reticence, but he was careful in choosing the softer way.

After a time he offered her his shoes, but she would not take them.

It was not yet dark, but he resolved to risk the return, avoiding the bank-tops and any place where they would show on the skyline.

Even in this desolation, that had been befouled by human folly beyond the rest of the earth’s surface, the green places were spreading, and it was seldom difficult to find a way where bare feet could pass uninjured.

When they gained the shelter of the wood they were walking more rapidly. She appeared even to hasten, as though anxious to complete the distance before her strength should fail her. Her mind was blank of all but weariness and the desire for sleep. His was wary now, with eyes and ears alert for any sound or motion.

But they came through it in safety, and he paused at the edge of the open field with a hand upon her arm to detain her till he felt assured of its solitude.

The unmown grass was knee-deep, and they made slow progress through its heavy swathes.

“Is it far?” she asked again, but did not appear to hear his answer. There was a gorse-bush in their way, and she would have stumbled into it badly had he not drawn her aside.

It was evident that she could not go much farther. With every step that approached his hiding-place he was more anxious lest they should be seen. He looked at her doubtfully. He did not think he could carry her far.

He tried to rouse her to a last effort, realizing that if she once stumbled and fell it would not be easy to stimulate her to further progress. He spoke loudly, as to one who was deaf.

“We are very near now. But we must hasten. There is danger here. There are men about who must not see us.”

He could not have struck a better note. It penetrated the dim weariness of her mind, waking the thought of all from which she had fled, and the purpose that had driven her. She went on at a hastened pace across the final field, and slipped and stumbled down the steep bank of the cutting.

When she waked in the shelter of the hut, she had no memory of how she had reached it, but only of a waste of tossing waters and of a distant shore toward which she struggled, but which she knew that she would never reach.

[IV]

Martin looked at her as she slept. She had fallen forward as he pointed to the bed which he had made in a corner of the cabin and had been asleep in an instant. He had prepared food, and tried in vain to rouse her to share it.

It would be better, he thought at last, to let her sleep till the morning. Her single garment had dried while they walked, and he had covered her with his own blankets.

Now he looked down somewhat doubtfully at the prize of his day's hunting. Certainly it was the strangest find that he had dragged home to his hidden lair—and the most desirable? He was not sure.

How could he tell that she might not have friends at no great distance? friends to whom she might wish to return tomorrow, and to whom she would betray his hiding-place? He was not a man of war, but a lawyer; and he knew that the reign of law was over. He must be prepared to conform his life to—

> the simple plan
> That they should take who have the power,
> And they should keep who can.

But his training had taught him not to vex his mind with a problem till all its factors were known. In the end he would act according to the impulses of his nature, which would hold; though creed and law seemed to have been swept away in the deluge.

He covered her carefully. Then he collected such other garments and rugs as he had accumulated and made a bed for himself. He considered whimsically that had this happened a few months earlier he would have felt compelled to make his bed outside the hut. Well, the night was warm and he would not have minded that. But he knew that he should not have done it for her sake or his own, but in obedience to the almost intolerable tyranny under which a community of men such as he had known will coerce their fellows.

Now he was free for the adventure of life untrammeled—or at least trammeled only by forces that are at once beneficial, and blind, and impartial. So he thought; but who has ever foreseen the future?

He did not wake till the August sun was high, and found his companion still sleeping heavily. There had been rain in the night, and the banks of the cutting were steaming to the increasing warmth of the morning. It meant that there was water in the ditch at the further side of the metals, such as he could use for all purposes except drinking, and that water need not be fetched from the stream till the next day.

He washed and dressed with something more than his usual care, and then remembered that he had not arranged the stone last night in its usual position, and he climbed the bank and adjusted it.

Then he prepared a meal. With some reluctance he drew on the store of pressed beef and biscuits which were his assurance of life during the colder months to come. There were eggs already boiled. There was water to drink. He had no mind to light a fire, nor to go foraging while a stranger was in his

home.

Then he sat and watched her for a time as she slept. He was not easily hurried either in thought or action.

Would she wish to stay when she waked? Would she wish to betray him to others? She was a delight to watch as she slept. Rest had smoothed the fatigue from her face, and the healthy vigor of the open life she had been leading had resumed its right. Trained to the knowledge of men, he judged of her favorably both in mind and in body. There was an instinct in him which desired her fiercely. But she was a stranger as yet.

It crossed his mind that a bolder man would take that which the gods gave, and with shorter thought for the morrow. Was he of a lesser manhood—or more scrupulous? He decided that he was nothing better than cautious, and he was not sure that he did not despise himself for that quality. Cowardice was its familiar friend. But his will ruled, and his thoughts left it unshaken.

Still—he did think. He imagined her as his wife and with children around them. He was not without experience of life. Neither, he thought, was she. She was not over-young, and she had not the look which is so commonly characteristic of the unwedded woman whose first youth is over. He could foresee many difficulties, changes, troubles. This hut, so convenient and sufficient——"Hostages to fortune"—there was much still to be learnt from the wisdom of an age that had ended.

He became aware that he was hungry, and laid a quiet hand on her shoulder to wake her.

After a time the touch roused her. She opened wondering eyes to the dusky interior of the cabin. She had no memory of how she got there. She was conscious of stiffness and of a pleasant lassitude. He remained silent, and confidence grew as she watched him.

At last he spoke: "Will you tell me how you came?"

He did not ask her who she was, for such a question would have lost its meaning. People were no longer other than themselves, or that which they appeared to be.

She said: "I swam to the land. I had been all day in the water. I cannot remember since."

"Yes, I saw you land," he replied. "I helped you here. Have you no friends?"

"No," she said, "I am quite alone."

He was glad at the word, but she was afraid that she had spoken imprudently and became silent.

"You will need food," he said, "there is breakfast waiting outside." He went out.

She followed a few moments later. She moved stiffly, but in the close-

fitting bathing-dress she appeared tall and graceful and of a fine vitality. He was conscious that his heart was beating more rapidly, but his manner gave no sign as he asked: “Are you warm enough in that dress? I can find you clothes of a kind.”

The tone and the words pleased her, and she laughed for the first time, giving him open friendly eyes as she answered.

“Oh, no, it is warm enough; and I am used to this. I don’t think I should care for yours. Let’s have breakfast first, and then we can think of other things. If you knew how hungry I am——!”

She had glanced at the torn and clay-soiled clothes he wore as she answered, and he was the more self-conscious as they approached the meal before them.

But of that, at least, she was not critical. She became aware that her hunger was ravenous.

There had been a rough table in the hut, which he had dragged out on to the metals to make more room in the interior. It stood sufficiently far under the tunnel to be protected from the rain of the night, and he cleared it of the litter of unsorted spoils which had been piled upon it, and laid the meal with a greater formality than he had been accustomed to use. Stools, which had also been expelled from the hut, were now requisitioned.

They sat opposite one another, neither forgetting the courtesies due to host or guest as their training had taught them, yet aware that the old restraints were broken and that each was playing a lonely hand in which human law and convention and privilege would take no part. The only laws that concerned them now were those which are fundamental and inexorable.

Outside, a lark sang to the morning.

As he divided the meal, he made an apology for its lack of variety, and she laughed in answer: “I have never enjoyed the look of one in my life so much. Do you know that it is more than twenty-four hours since I have eaten? And how far I have swum since then!”

He waited for her to continue, but she fell silent. They were both friendly, but guarded. Could she say that she had risked the waters to escape from men she despised or loathed; and then again from a secure and peaceful place, because she sought a man that would content her? Not yet, anyway.

On his part, he spoke of his solitary life and of the magpie-store he was accumulating, but he avoided any allusion to those he had lost, nor would he mention that his most precious things were in a recess a hundred yards down the tunnel, where even those who might invade and spoil his cabin would be unlikely to find them.

The constraint of each increased with the consciousness of the reticence of the other. As she ate she reflected that she could not stay there unless she were

prepared to face a greater intimacy than she was yet disposed to grant—and he had shown no sign that he desired it!

On the impulse of a sound instinct she rose as the meal ended and held out her hand. She gave him a glance of frank gratitude as she said: "I cannot thank you enough. You have been too kind. You may have saved my life. I think I will get on now."

He was not prepared for this, and he took the offered hand while scarcely conscious of his answering words: "It was nothing. It was a pleasure."

As she turned away he knew that he did not want her to go like that, but of what he did want he was uncertain. She was already half-way up the bank when he called to her to come back. She hesitated, and he called more urgently. "You cannot go that way unless you know the trick of the stone."

At this she paused, being puzzled. It crossed her mind also that she ought to have asked if there were any service she could render him in return for his hospitality.

She came back doubtfully.

"Where were you going?" he asked.

She answered lightly. "I am going to see the world. I have had enough of sea-water. Perhaps I shall follow your excellent example and do a little collecting. Judging from what I see, I don't think I shall starve. Or perhaps," she added, "I am on an island again, and it is all your property? If you would give me a limit?"

He saw that her mind went back to some earlier experience, but he did not ask it. He said simply: "You can go if you wish. But I can tell you some things first which may help you."

He sat down at the foot of the bank, and after a moment's hesitation she sat down beside him.

He said: "There is sea to the south, and on the east it is very near. I do not know how far there may be land to the west or north, but until yesterday I had supposed myself to be the only one living. Then I saw a party of men. I did not like them, and hid. You might differ, but I think if you should join them you would regret it. There may be others living of whom I do not know. I had explored several miles before yesterday and had seen no one. There are cattle and neglected crops, and there are some houses that did not burn. Certainly you need not starve. If you meet with those men, I ask that you will not tell of this retreat. They were of the kind which wastes, but does not store, and what I have would be scattered."

"Of course, I wouldn't do that," she answered readily. "But what kind of men are they?" She was not at all sure that she did not want to meet them.

He said: "I did not see much of them, nor did I wish to see more." Briefly he told her what he had seen.

She was silent, and he went further. “You can stay here for a time, if you will, or longer; but you know what it must mean if you do so. You are alone, and it may be best for both.” But she was silent and made no response. He could not tell what she thought, but he felt that he was blundering, and that neither of them was prepared for an instant decision. Only he was determined now that she should not go.

His trained faculty of compromise showed him the way to avoid the issue successfully. He said: “Suppose you stay for a week. We can be friends for that time, and you can help me in many ways. Then you can go if you will, and I am quite sure that you will not betray me.”

“Yes,” she said, “I do not know—no, I mean I certainly should not betray you to anyone. Anyway, I will stay today if you really wish it.”

He was surprised at his own pleasure as he gained this concession, though she rose as she said it, and stood doubtfully, as though half regretting already, and with a shyness that she had not shown previously.

If there were any lesson of his past life which he had learned beyond forgetting, it was the folly of the extra word after the point is won. He turned the subject instantly, and resolving to trust her wholly, he asked her help to remove some of his stores to the further cache which he had commenced in the depths of the tunnel.

She agreed, of course; but added a question as to whether there were any possibility of finding clothes if she sought them. She knew that if the weather changed the need might become urgent at any time. She had a further thought that she would rather seek them for herself than take them from him, even though there should be anything suitable among his goods, which was not very probable.

He answered: “Yes, I think we could find something, but we will go together. The other matter can wait. Most of the houses were burnt. It is astonishing how few escaped fire when the storm overthrew them. When they were in rows or groups they were always destroyed, as far as I have yet explored, but some escaped that were solitary, and there are still many things to be found uninjured in the ruins. Some of them might be made more comfortable than this tunnel; but I think we are safer here, for a time at least.

“Your best chance would be at a house about two miles away, part of which is still standing, and it is in the direction where we are least likely to meet those we would avoid.”

He considered a moment. Their worst danger was that they should be seen as they started, and their hiding-place be located. Besides, the shortest way was through the tunnel.

“Do you think you could walk bare-footed through the tunnel?” he asked. “It is a long way. Or could you make use of my shoes? I know they are too

large."

"No," she answered; "my skin ought to be thick enough now. I can walk on the sleepers. Have you a lantern?"

Yes, he had that.

They went back into the hut together, and prepared for the expedition. He produced the lantern, and a clean sack, and a large basket.

He showed her his armory. There were two trophies of travel which he had taken from the hall of the house to which they were going. A hunting-knife with sheath and belt, and a five-foot spear with a bamboo shaft.

She laughed at the quaint weapons, and when she understood that he intended to carry them she supposed that it was as a protection against the men he had seen on the previous day.

"No," he answered, "they are too numerous. If we see them our only chance would be in flight or to attempt friendly relations, which I don't think would be possible. But there are cattle the way we are going, and they are wilder than they were. The cows with young calves are the worst. One of them would have had me down but for a lucky thrust which caught her in the mouth, and after that I had to walk backwards for a time, threatening her with the point, till I gained shelter.

"I always take the spear when I go that way now. You can have the knife and belt, though I don't suppose you will need it. But it is useful for many things."

He showed her also an automatic pistol with a store of ammunition which he had found, and which he now proposed to hide in the depths of the tunnel.

"Why don't you take it with you if there is any danger?" she asked. "I suppose you can use it?"

He answered frankly: "I never fired a shot in my life, but I know how it is made, and how it works. I had to defend a man last February who was accused of murder, and had been shot at with such a weapon, and it was necessary that I should know how it acted. But it is best that I should not take it now, for the reason I have explained already."

It was the first allusion he had made to his previous life, and it took her thoughts at once to the trial of which he spoke, which had been a universal topic of the time.

"Then you are Martin Webster?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "I was—I don't know what I am now." They were both silent after that, while she adjusted her mind to this new conception of his personality, and his went back to the triumph of the crowded court, when the words *Not Guilty*, for which he had fought for three strenuous days, came from the foreman's lips.

"I suppose he really did it?" she asked, as they started along the tunnel.

"Oh, yes," he replied at once, showing that their minds had been on the same track, "but the verdict was right all the same—as the wrong verdict often is—or was."

They were silent again, their minds reverting to a catastrophe too great for speech and a future beyond foreseeing.

The tunnel was about a quarter of a mile long. After the first hundred yards it bent slightly to the right, so that the entrance was no longer visible. Water dripped from the roof, and there were wet pools underfoot as they advanced toward the point of light which marked the further exit.

They came out between high banks, topped with thick hedges, but these banks decreased in height as they proceeded till they reached the locked gate of a level crossing. There was no road here, but a cart-track only at the side of a field of beans, the crossing being nothing more than a right-of-way for the farmer whose land the railway had divided.

It was characteristic of Martin's caution that he had not marked his passage by forcing the lock, but had climbed over with the loads which he had brought back from the ruined house which they were seeking.

There had been no collieries on this side of the line, and now that the murky atmosphere, which had been an unlifting blight upon the midland plain, was gone forever, the fields showed as fairly as though no pollution had ever touched them.

The cart-track followed the side of a tall hedge, and then passed through a small wood, emerging on a steep and narrow lane, which descended between high wooded banks, the trees often meeting overhead.

They heard cattle breaking through the undergrowth as they crossed the wood, but they did not see them, nor anything living larger than a magpie, till they were at the foot of the lane, when they came on a large and shaggy dog as the road turned. They were within a few yards only when they became conscious of each other's presence. The dog backed a few paces, growling savagely. Its hairs bristled, and it advanced again, seeming disposed to rush them.

They had both halted abruptly. Martin was slightly in advance. He had the spear in one hand, and the empty sack was thrown over his left shoulder. Claire was carrying the basket with the lantern within it.

On an instinctive impulse he threw the sack at the dog's head, and it checked it for a moment. Then he waited with the spear lowered, grasping it firmly in both hands. Every instant he expected it to charge. It was a large and savage brute, and he felt that he should be in a poor case if the spear broke or were brushed aside when it did so.

It moved from side to side, watching the spear-point that moved with it.

Claire stood behind, frightened, and very conscious of her bare legs and

scanty covering.

The dog would not advance or retreat, and he felt that the tension could not continue.

"Draw the knife," he said, without taking his eyes from the dog for an instant, "and then throw the basket at it."

She drew it out, and the sight of the straight, keen blade gave her a moment's confidence. He had thought that the basket would divert the dog's attention the while he thrust with the spear, but she threw it badly, and it passed over its head unregarded.

She saw that she had failed, and picking up a large stone threw it with all her force. It was a poor throw enough, but it fulfilled its purpose. It struck the brute on the shoulder, and as he flinched sideways, a second too late to avoid it, Martin thrust, striking beneath the side of the throat. The dog sprang back, howling. Martin could not tell how deep had been the wound beneath the thick matted hair, but the blade was red, and blood was falling fast where the dog stood. For a moment it stayed uncertain, and then turned and fled down the road.

"That's a good job," he said, with a deep breath of relief. "It might have been awkward."

"Yes," she said, "thanks to you. I was horribly frightened."

"So was I," he answered. "But you see that the spear can be useful."

They went for some distance along the road—already turning green on the footpath, though there was little sign of life, as yet, in the poisoned dust of a narrow roadway—and then took to the fields again, till they came to the house they sought.

It had been somewhat old, but very solidly built beneath a rise of ground which had sheltered it from the direct force of the tempest. With fallen chimneys, and lifted roofs, and blown-in windows, it yet held some semblance of its original shape, and gave some shelter to the furnishings which remained within it.

They crossed a garden which had once been well-kept, and was already choked with weeds and ravaged by beast and bird; a rabbit starting from beneath their feet, and a covey of partridges making off along the hedge-side. They passed a wide, paved yard, scattered with broken slates and timbers and the bricks of a fallen chimney. At the door he paused.

He said: "The things we seek are most likely to be on the upper floor. To search there will mean some climbing, which is not very easy or safe. Suppose I collect everything which is likely to be of interest to you and bring it down, and meanwhile you could fill the basket with vegetables from the garden, which we shall be glad to have."

"Thanks," she said, "but I would rather see for myself. I expect I can climb

where you can."

But he would not give way, and, seeing that, she became equally obstinate. She would not have been averse from his plan, for she was unexpectedly tired, the exertions of the previous day having had their effect upon her, but the same cause rendered her less equable than usual, and the search was one which she would rather undertake herself than leave to him.

Seeing that she would not otherwise give way, he told her his real reason. "When the roof fell there were two people in the upper rooms. They were dead when I searched there. They were not a pleasant sight then; they will not be so now. But please yourself."

She laughed at that, thinking of the dead sheep she had skinned and of far worse things that she had seen on the island where first she landed.

"I am not a child," she said, but as she said it her will weakened, and she added: "But it shall be as you wish."

[V]

It was very hot in the garden. She filled the basket with such peas and beans as mice and birds had spared, and then with larger vegetables, and after that she came to some wall fruit-trees, now striking upward shoots from amidst a rubble of fallen brickwork, and picked a dozen large, ripe plums that the crowding wasps had not yet ruined. Half of these she ate, and half she saved for Martin with a scrupulous honor.

He was to call her when he was ready, and she sat down and waited. Her mind was on the possibilities of her new life. It seemed to hold the beginnings of wonderful, and perhaps of dreadful, things. She thought of Stevenson's pregnant line, written of a woman whose circumstance was little different from hers: "To bear the weight of the desert, and the babes of a kinless man."

With a clear perception of all it meant, she resolved that if she should accept such a union she would give something better than the parasitic affection of Victorian women, or the barren selfishness of their descendants. In the exaltation of this mood she felt a renewed resentment that Martin should have thought her unfit to accompany his search. When the next occasion came . . . !

It was just then, as she was drowsing into quietude, that she was aroused to alert attention by the sound of a heavy body that broke through the snapping bean-sticks. The next moment the head and shoulders of a large sow pushed its way through, and came grunting and rooting toward a bed of weed-choked beetroot, which grew up to the edge of a narrow path, on the further side of which she was seated.

She rose hastily.

The sow lifted her head, stood a moment, and came forward, the objective appearing to be the basket that was on the ground beside her.

She became aware that a number of half-grown pigs were following the sow at no great distance, plowing through the tangled growths of the neglected garden with much scuffling and squealing.

Claire took a step forward, shouting at the sow to scare her, but she continued to advance. Her impulse to leave the basket to its fate became almost irresistible. Bare feet and legs are a poor equipment for such contest. But the resolution which she had just made had sufficient force to hold her. She realized the courage that was needed if men were to dominate in the changed conditions of life, and stepped boldly before the basket.

The animal hesitated again, but years of wandering round the farmstead had left her without the fear of man, which is instinctive in those that have been born to the wilderness, and her recent months of savage freedom, in which there had been no creature to thwart her will, had given a confidence which she had not previously known.

She jerked her head angrily, and advanced with a deep grunt and the menace of open jaws.

Had Claire been her real objective, or had she known how to use her strength, there could have been only one possible issue to such an argument in spite of the knife which opposed her.

Had Claire shown a second's lack of confidence the result might have been the same. As it was, her glance met the small, cunning eyes boldly, and the knife slashed at the advancing head.

The sow dodged the stroke with surprising agility, and an angry snap of jaws that could have cracked a thigh-bone without effort. But in an instant Claire had repeated the stroke, and the knife-point caught in the nostril of the flinching snout.

With a squeal of pain the great pig turned and dashed away through the garden, with her half-grown litter, startled by the sound of their mother's terror, following her in a wild confusion.

Claire stood for a moment to watch them, flushed and exultant, her head lifted, a drop of blood falling from the knife she held, showing, in the close-fitting bathing-dress, that neither concealed nor distorted, like a statue of triumphant womanhood, combining all that is best in savagery and civilization. Then her mood broke into laughter at her trivial victory.

The confused outcries of the flying litter died into distance, but left a sound of regular and persistent squealing, which became more dominant as the other noises died. It came from the further end of the ruined garden, penetrating and monotonous. It needed little wisdom to guess that one of the flying troop was intrigued in some arresting catastrophe, and less than the curiosity of her

maternal ancestor to incline Claire to its investigation.

She found a young boar-pig caught in a gap in the garden palings. It seemed that a blind rush at a hole which was scarcely large enough for its passage had carried it half-way through, bending back a piece of broken pale, which its strength might have been sufficient to break entirely, but it happened, unfortunately, that there was a projecting nail which had caught into its back. If it pushed forward it drove the nail deeper. Either it could not wriggle back or it lacked the sense to attempt it. What could it do but wriggle at intervals till the pain of the nail in its protesting ribs caused it to desist and squeal for the help of a mother who was already becoming indifferent to the claims of her half-grown offspring, and who was now fully occupied with a pain which she could not rub out of her snout, however deeply she buried it in the cool dampness of the soil of the ditch to which she had resorted?

Claire knew little of pigs, except under the post-mortem circumstances in which they had unwillingly contributed to the nourishment of her own body. She vaguely supposed them to be greedy and obstinate, which they are, and dirty and stupid, which they are not. The squeal of a pig does not awaken human sympathy as readily as the cry of a calf or lamb. There are reasons for this, as for everything, and the subject is not without interest, but a consideration of pigs is outside the scope of this record.

But Claire's instinct for nearly thirty years had been to go to the help of any calling need. She tore away a tangle of kidney beans which had grown over the fence, that she might see what was wrong more clearly. She decided that if she pulled the animal backward she could get it clear without any great damage or difficulty. She grasped its hind legs with that purpose, but as she touched them it wrenched them free vigorously. It renewed its efforts to struggle forward, and pain and fright gave fresh volume to its vociferations. I think that, had it taken its attempted rescue more quietly, Claire would have pulled it free, and it might have galloped off to be the father of hundreds. But the attitude it showed stirred in her a more primitive instinct than sympathy—that of capture and acquisition. Why should she not secure it? She realized that the uses of a boar-pig are limited. But a pig is pork. In fact, the pork before her was as fine as free range and abundant feeding could make it. Had it been less plumply rounded it might then have been rooting with its companions in the ditch where its mother lamented.

Claire had a practical mind, and could act with promptness and vigor, or she would not have been enjoying life in the sunlight when so many millions of her kind had perished.

She looked at the pig and she looked at the knife which she had still carried in her hand as she had come to the scene of action, and had laid on the ground as she knelt to investigate.

They seemed made for one another.

But though she was unpracticed in procuring the decease of pigs, she felt sure that it would be wrong to commence operations by assaulting it in the hindquarters. It seemed more natural to approach it at the other end. But that end was beyond her reach, and she did not know how difficult it might be to get round to it. "*Never the time and the place*," she thought whimsically, as she pondered the problem. It occurred to her also that if she should approach from the other side the pig might make a successful effort to wriggle backward and be lost entirely.

The hunting instinct had not waked in her mind for twenty seconds before she was searching the débris of the garden for the thing she needed. She found it quickly enough in a length of rope which had been pegged down to mark the edge of a path which someone had been trimming backward and had left unfinished.

Two minutes later half a hundredweight of protesting pork, its hind legs tightly bound together, was being hauled backward from the palings.

[VI]

Claire looked at her capture, which was floundering awkwardly among the trampled weeds, her foot upon the end of the rope that tied it, in some doubt as to her immediate purpose. Then she put the knife back into its sheath and decided to carry the pig to the house and consult with Martin as to its destiny.

It was less easy than she had supposed. Had it been dead it would not have been a very light or easy burden. Alive and wriggling, and with its front legs kicking vigorously, it was an awkward and very slippery load.

Martin, roused by the continued disturbance, and coming through the garden to discover its origin, met her as she approached the house, an animal looking half as large as herself struggling furiously under her right arm and emitting squeals which were limited only by the capacity of very healthy lungs.

Martin laughed. "I thought the sties were empty. But may I ask where you are carrying the author of this delightful concert?" he asked.

Claire was hot and breathless, furious with herself for the folly that had taken a living burden when a dead one could have been carried so much more easily. She bit her lower lip in a way she had when her temper failed. She was carrying the animal with her right arm round its middle and her left hand holding an ear to stave off the wriggling head, the sharp teeth and growing tusks of which she did not view with entire complacence. And why hadn't she tied its front legs? she thought angrily.

As Martin spoke, the pig, perhaps stirred to fresh effort by his approach,

succeeded in a backward struggle that brought its tied hind legs to the ground, from which she recovered it with difficulty.

"It wasn't in a sty. It won't much longer. Don't you know what pigs are for?" she replied somewhat confusedly, but Martin understood well enough, and also that he had failed to strike the right note, as he had failed before, with this new companion. There was a grim meaning in that emphatic phrase, "*It won't much longer*," that made him realize that he had still much to learn of the character of the woman before him.

With a changed tone, he said quickly: "You've done well to catch it, anyway. Let me help." But she refused curtly. She did not know why she was so angry. She said: "There is enough here to repay you for what I shall eat till I go tomorrow. I like paying my debts."

They entered the house together by the back door into a large kitchen which was uninjured, except that some plaster had fallen from the ceiling, and that rust had spread on range and stove.

She dropped her burden on to a stone sink that was under the window, bringing the rope forward as she did so, and after a brief struggle succeeded in tying the front legs, after which it lay helpless enough though by no means reduced to quietude, either of lungs or of body.

"Are you proposing to kill it here?" he asked, feeling himself reduced to the part of a spectator at this unexpected episode.

"Yes, where else?" she replied reasonably enough. "Do you want it to make this row forever? And won't there be less to carry?"

"You seem to know," he said. "Have you often killed them?"

"No," she answered shortly, "but if I don't know how I soon shall. I know you strike their necks, and then they 'stare like a stuck pig.' I've often wondered why. Have you?"

This was a little incoherent again, but he answered with an exactitude which was a result of professional training rather than mental pedantry.

"If you mean have I wondered, no, I can't say I have. If you mean have I killed pigs, no again. But I have seen it done. If I may humbly suggest, I shouldn't hold the knife as though you intended decapitation, nor should I lean over it in that affectionate manner, for reasons which you will learn if you do. There is a traditional preference for driving the blade straight in, and you might turn it this way if you wish to qualify in the art."

Claire drove the long, keen blade down with a vicious thrust, and it was really Martin's fault that it was done with such force that the point came out at the back and was blunted on the stone below.

She stood back the next moment, the dripping knife in her hand, not having wholly escaped the deluge of blood for which Martin's enigmatic warning had not fully prepared her, looking with a sudden revulsion of feeling at the body

that still squealed and struggled before her.

"Oh," she said, "I haven't killed it now! Why didn't you do it?"

"I don't think it will quarrel with you on that score," he answered dryly, and as he spoke she knew that its movements were becoming feebler and the squeals were fainter.

He saw the reaction from which she suffered. "There's no need to stay here," he said. "Come into the next room and see what I have found for you."

The adjoining room to which they passed was full of dull and heavy furniture, which must have given an effect of musty age even when it was occupied. Now it had an atmosphere of stale depression, and yet suggested an unimaginative stolidity before which even the tempest which had wrecked the world had retired defeated.

On a round mahogany table in the center Martin had collected a pile of dresses and other clothing, which he turned over for Claire's inspection, for her own hands were obviously unfit to touch them. They had belonged to at least two women, and half of them were much too small for her use. They were serviceable rather than attractive, and those which attempted finery were the least tolerable of all. Some had been damaged by the weather; others, retrieved from the interiors of solid chests or other receptacles, were in better condition. A miscellaneous collection of shoes and boots completed the exhibition.

They went back to the kitchen, where the body of the pig now lay inert and flabby on the sink, over which Claire found a tap from which water still ran; and here she cleansed her hands, and then returned to the inner room, where she sorted out as much of the gathered spoils as could be packed into a swollen sack; Martin assuring her that he had already sufficient store of such requirements as would enable her to repair or alter them to her use.

Then she retrieved the abandoned basket from the garden, and finally they joined forces in a recovered amity to assault the body of the pig.

They started an hour later, beneath a midday sky of cloudless heat, and made a burdened but uneventful way back to the entrance of the tunnel, where they paused to light the lantern before entering it. Here, half hidden in the long grass of the embankment, beneath the shadow of the wall, there was a small, solid padlocked structure with "Danger: Explosives" painted in red across its door, and beneath it, beside the line, there lay a rail-trolley such as was commonly used by repairing gangs on lines where the traffic was not too frequent for their safe employment.

Martin had previously tried to get this trolley on to the line, but had found it beyond his single strength to raise it. He had brought a crowbar on a previous day in the hope that it would solve the problem, and now looked at it with increased hope. It was one of many things in which two could do more than twice the work of either.

But he looked at his companion with hesitation. It was not his nature to be inconsiderate, nor unobservant. He saw that she was approaching exhaustion. He said: “If you can help me I think we can get this trolley on the rails, and then I can punt you home. Will the effort be worth the relief which will follow? It is not really far through the tunnel.”

She answered with unconscious gratification at the attitude he showed, both in tone and manner, but with some unwillingness to admit the fatigue which was overcoming her, “Yes, I am tired; but I can help. What do you want me to do?”

He showed her how best she could assist him, and as the work proceeded she became aware how carefully he avoided any abortive effort, and used the strength of both to the best advantage till he had achieved his purpose, and the trolley stood on the rails for which it was built.

“Have you defended an engineer as well as a murderer—and a pork butcher?” she asked as they stood somewhat breathlessly surveying their completed labor.

He was pleased by the implication, as men always are at the suggestion of proficiency in an occupation which is not theirs, but answered lightly: “We learn a little of many things in my profession, but nothing thoroughly—or at least we did. Some of them come in useful now, but not many.”

They laid their spoils on the trolley, and being seated upon it, Martin began to propel it forward, using the spearshaft as a pole for the purpose. As the trolley kept to the rails, they would have traversed the darkness easily enough, even without the help of the lighted lantern. Claire was too tired for speech, but she was conscious of a contentment such as she had not experienced since the first night that she had struggled against the waters. Not since then, till now, had she met with man or woman to whom she could talk as to a comrade, or an understanding equal, and she felt that he was hers if she would, and, perhaps, if she would not, he would still take her. There was a paradoxical pleasure in the thought, and she sank her head on the soft sack and was asleep on the instant.

Martin looked at her sleeping. Very weary she looked, but very comely also, and very surely desirable. He wondered anew what distance of space, or hazard of adventure, had sent her to him from the empty reach of sea. But for the men that he knew to be wandering near, a nightmare of possibilities, he would have thought of her as the Eve of a lonely Paradise. The mystery of her coming he could at least discover when she waked, for he felt that she would answer with a frankness which she might not have offered in the earlier day. He saw that she had strength and grace very far beyond the average of women, and he concluded that she must have suffered from more than ordinary exhaustion on the previous day for its effect to continue so obviously.

She waked when the trolley stopped, stretching yawningly as she stepped from it. “I think I could sleep forever,” she said, laughing at herself, “and, oh, I should be so hungry if I were not too thirsty to think of anything except water.”

The mention of water reminded him of their most urgent necessity. “We have only a little left,” he said, “that is fit to drink. Let us have a meal now, and then you can sleep all afternoon while I fetch some more.”

She considered this plan, but without enthusiasm. “I shall sleep all right,” she said; “I think it would be difficult for anything to keep me awake much longer. But why not wait till evening, and we would go for the water together?”

The truth was that the shadow of uncertainty, which is inseparable from every parting under wild and primitive conditions of life, was rendering her unwilling that he should go alone. She remembered what he had told her of the camp that was near the stream. She had another thought, at which she shuddered. Suppose he were away and they came in his absence and found her sleeping? “No,” she said, “I couldn’t sleep here alone. I should be terrified.”

She spoke lightly, but he saw that she was serious, and was pleased to see it.

“Very well,” he said, “I can go on moving our goods down the tunnel. I’m not tired, and it will be cooler than in the sun. We’ll go together when it’s dusk. It may be safer then.”

She noticed the unconscious “our” with a satisfaction kin to his own, though she gave no sign; and it was in one of the rare moods of mutual sympathy that are so seldom and so brief, even among those of an established intimacy, that they ate their meal together.

When Claire had retired to the hut, Martin worked diligently to remove the remainder of his possessions into the greater secrecy of the recesses that were in the sides of the tunnel. For some distance inward they were fairly dry, more so on one side than the other, and now that he had the use of the trolley he made rapid progress. He purposed to remove all traces of habitation from the outside, at least until he were assured that the unwelcome strangers had left the neighborhood. Glad though he was of the new companionship which the seas had sent him, he saw well enough that it had closed any possibility of a peaceful or neutral meeting with men of the character they had shown, and that it was an urgent necessity to arrange for flight or hiding. His inclination was to secrete his property and then to wander away until they could return with security. He felt that hiding-places could be found where they would be less easily located, and from which they could escape more readily.

When he came to survey the carcass of Claire’s successful hunting, his eyes had an expression of humorous uncertainty. Pork was good food enough,

but the weather was hot and his appetite for it was limited. They had no means of salting it, and he was somewhat hazy as to the procedure. He had never defended the proprietor of a bacon-curing establishment. Finally he cut out a portion of the loin, which he resolved that they should cook for the evening meal, and suspended the remainder in the damp coolness of the inner tunnel.

He delayed to rouse her till evening, and when he did so, proposed that they should go for the needed water, and leave the preparation of a further meal till their return, to which she agreed very readily.

They set out at once, each carrying an empty bucket, and Martin fastening on the knife which had already proved its utility.

"Won't you take the spear also?" she asked doubtfully. She had a feeling of uneasiness about this expedition, such as she had not known when they went out in the morning—a premonition of evil. Perhaps the fellowship of the intervening hours had already brought some sense of responsibility, some loss of freedom, rendering her more susceptible to the suggestion of any outer hostility. Perhaps it was only because they were going in the direction of those whom they did not wish to meet.

Anyway, the hours of sleep had brought a change of feeling, as they do so frequently, as though the seeds of thought and emotion had matured in the resting mind.

It was not only that fatigue had left her, and that her feet moved lightly, and her spirits were buoyant, but there was a nervous consciousness of Martin's nearness, even though he were not in her line of vision, a sense at once of elation and of timidity, a shyness to which she was little used, an acute awareness of the scanty garment that covered her, an instinct of resentment that he should so observe her, and under all a desire to draw his glance, and a disappointment that she was not more sure that she did so.

From these conflicting feelings there had come a relieved assent at his prompt suggestion of occupation and movement, and then the foreboding doubt to which she would not listen—for she knew that water must be fetched—but which gave its tone to her voice as she asked, "Won't you take the spear also?" from which he knew that she was troubled.

He shook his head, but added in explanation: "We shall have the full buckets to handle on our return. It is silence which is most important, and, of course, not to spill them. We must avoid clanking them if we can. But probably I am careful about nothing, and the men I saw may be miles away."

It occurred to her that but for her coming he would not have had to take this risk so soon, but it was futile to apologize for that now. She shook herself free from the fear that vexed her. "Right," she said; "lead the way then, and we must remember not to chatter."

They climbed the steep bank and lay for some minutes at the top, looking

beneath the hedge before they ventured further.

The balanced stone was still poised on the top rail of the stile. The rank meadow that sloped down before them was empty of any visible life. Martin considered that there could be no probable reason why the men should move secretly if they were still in the neighborhood. Far to the right a kestrel hovered in the sky, but that proved nothing. A rabbit, avoiding the thick growth of the neglected meadow, ran along the further side of the hedge. Soon a wood-dove flew overhead and settled on the trees of a little coppice that lay at the left hand and beneath them. It seemed a good sign.

"Come now," he whispered, but added: "Don't speak unless you must." He was still cautious, and remembered how far voices will be carried on silent summer evening air, and how easily a conversation beginning low may rise to an accustomed level.

She nodded only in reply. A pleasant sense of adventure was succeeding to the earlier fear now they were moving. They lifted the stone aside and crossed the stile with their buckets in silence.

Undisturbed, and undisturbing of anything beyond the size of a field-mouse, they went on until they came to the stream they sought.

It was slight and shallow enough, not more than knee-deep if occasional pools were avoided, but moving briskly and showing a clear bottom. What it may have shown three months earlier, before the earth had cleansed herself from the pollution which stained her, is another matter.

There were pollard willows along the bank, which was about eight feet above the water at the place at which they reached it, and it fell too steeply for their purpose. They stood for a moment, somewhat screened by the branches, hesitating in which direction to look for an easier slope, when they were arrested by a burst of song from the opposite bank.

It was the voice of a man who came along a path on the further side. He did not appear to observe them, and a common instinct caused them to stand motionless, trusting to stillness and the intervening branches.

He came along by the side of the stream till he was almost opposite where they stood, and then climbed over a gate and went off by a field-path which branched away from the water.

He was very short and very fat. His clothes were soiled and torn. He wore a very dirty, parti-colored cap. He walked jauntily, considering his weight, but stumbled as he cleared the stile as though he were not over-sober.

Martin, trained to judge men quickly, wondered whether he had been a jockey, and were now consoling himself for years of abstinence no longer necessary.

He tried to catch the words of the receding song:

"When you saw the legs of Sal, you
Bought her up for half her value."

Presumably a mare; and more certainly an ex-jockey. Not formidable, but a man to avoid. The face had shown gross and vicious as he passed them. More serious, he was not the kind to be alone and so merry. He was a sure evidence that there were others about who might be of a different quality.

Very cautiously they skirted the willowed bank till they found a spot where it shelved down gently to a shallow bog. The opposite bank was a thicket of elderberries and hazels, on which the fruit was already black, and the nuts were ripening.

They sat down on the bank-side, and Claire proposed that they should stay there till the dusk came. It seemed safer than to venture again across the open fields. It was strange to think how disquieting had become the sight of a fellow-man.

Martin agreed, but reminded her that they had intended to cook a meal on their return. She did not mind that. Even the suggestion of the waiting pork did not move her. She was vaguely frightened, and did not want her Eden to be disturbed by strangers.

Martin, on the other hand, felt some relief, which he told himself was illogical. The man meant others, who might be very different. Still, the fact stood that the one they had seen was contemptible. He felt an increased assurance of his capacity to avoid them or to deal with them successfully if a collision should occur. The man had the effect of farce where he had looked for tragedy. But Claire was right all the same, and it was best to wait. Surely they were safe among the bushes from any probable oversight.

Safe or not, it was very pleasant as the heat decreased. The sun was setting, and it was almost cool by the waterside in the shade of the branches.

They began to talk very quietly. After a few abortive suggestions Martin made a direct attack upon his companion's reticence.

"When I saw you first I was inclined to wonder whether the coming of Aphrodite might not be a recurrent incident in the world's history, but the bathing-dress and a sufficient knowledge of English—and a disposition to understudy Diana rather than the more amorous goddess—is it rude to wonder—or to ask?"

She answered slowly: "No, it's quite natural. I might have told you before." She smiled slightly. "If I don't introduce myself no one else will. I know who you are, so it's only fair. But how shall I begin? My name is Claire. Do you want to know that I took a B.A. at Newnham? I went through the war, which mattered so much once, as a motor driver. I once had a scratch on the arm from a shrapnel bullet, of which I think I was rather proud, but it is

becoming increasingly hard to find. I was twenty-nine last April, which usually means thirty—or more. I have had a baby which died. I had an invalid husband who cannot now be living. I once nearly swam the Channel—but not quite. Finally, I swam here."

She paused, and they were both silent, and so still that a vole landed on the narrow edge beneath their feet and commenced a careful toilet without observing their presence. Her words had called up memories of so many things that were best forgotten. Or were they? It was hard to tell.

After a time she resumed in a different tone. "But I know I didn't answer your question. What you want to know is where I came from and why, and what I've been doing for the last few months, and what I can tell you of any other land which is still above the water. Well, there is not much to tell. This is the largest space of dry land I've seen since the flood came, and it's not very large as far as I know yet.

"I lived on one island for the first few weeks with two men, and left it because I was rather tired of their company."

She glanced at him as she said it, but he was looking at the water and gave no sign of his thoughts. She went on quickly.

"At least, I'm not sure whether I left it or it left me. We seemed to have similar intentions just about the same time. Anyway, we left each other. I lived on another island with an old man and his daughter for about the same time. I found it dull, and came here where things seem livelier. But I don't intend to stay six weeks anywhere again. It might grow into a habit too strong to break. I shall go on in the morning."

Martin did not think her serious, but he read the challenge in her words, and realized that the jest might be earnest if he took it too casually.

"I don't think you will," he said quietly, with eyes that her own avoided, "and I shall be sorry if you do. I have been very lonely. And," he added more lightly, "you might go further and fare worse, you know. Did the jockey please you so greatly?"

"Beast," she said curtly, startling him for an instant, till he realized that the brief epithet was not for him, and then they were silent for a space again. Neither of them was so inexperienced of life as to be blind to the road which opened before them, or unaware of what it held. Neither was of the kind which gives way lightly to a casual passion. Both were aware of an attraction that drew them strongly together. Both, from different standpoints, were afraid of impulsive action. The old restraints were broken down, the old safeguards were swept away, and they knew not what, if anything, would succeed them. Caution that was half a fear lest he should act with impulsive folly, and half a fear lest over-haste might defeat his purpose to win her, controlled his words, and held back the hand that pressed the ground behind her. Only he was fixed

in mind that she should not leave him. Only, perhaps, would he have learnt the strength of his own purpose had she attempted to do so.

Pride, on her part, held her to an equal reticence. Not at any price should he have cause to think, through glance or word, that she was free to the familiarity of a day's acquaintance, or willing to mate with the first man to whom the chance of her wandering might bring her. She realized that he knew nothing of her, but by the account which she herself had given, and that only by her own reactions to him could she give evidence of her veracity. The restraints of law and of a thousand hounding conventions were gone, it might be, forever, but the mean of human nature was unaltered, and each of those who still lived would continue its demonstration. Eons pass; dynasties fall, and races perish; land and water change as the earth's surface shrinks or wrinkles; the earth swings outward into glacial space and all life ceases, except in frozen seas or deep-sea slime; the call of her sister planets woos her sunward again, and life awakens in new forms with an indomitable vitality; invincible in defeat, life goes forward, as it seems, with faith inflexible toward an eternity of disasters, of which there is no one that knows a beginning or can forecast an ending; and through it all there is that which is changless—*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

But Claire and Martin did not think of life, because they were living—living the supreme conception of the earth's Creator, which is eon-old and as unborn as tomorrow.

So they sat silent, while the shadows lengthened, in no haste to move, and feeling an easeful security in the quiet cover of the surrounding thickets, and then—there was a movement behind, and Martin looked round quickly. He saw a huge form towering over them. He saw a swarthy brutal face, coarse and fleshy, with matted hair overhanging it, and a black stubble of beard. He saw eyes that were murderous, but without rage. They were eyes that enjoyed murder. He saw a massive, hairy arm that grasped a sledge-hammer halfway up the handle, making it look small and light for his purpose.

He saw all this in an instant, for as he saw it the sledge was raised to strike him. A second later, had he stayed or had he tried to rise, his life would have ended; but on the impulse of his fear he slipped down the bank, and the blow missed.

It was that second later, and no more, that Claire had seen his movement and would have followed—to find the giant's hand was in her hair, and that she was caught beyond escaping. Yet she struggled for a moment, and may have saved Martin's life in the action, for her captor, having got his grip firmly, turned his attention from her, and with an oath of anger flung the heavy sledge after him just as he was gaining the bushes on the other side of the little stream. Gripped by the hair as she was, she had seized the arm that held her in

her raised hands, and though she had no strength to win her freedom, she had so shaken his balance that the throw went wide—wide enough, at least, to pass over Martin's shoulder, missing the head at which it was aimed, and at the same moment Martin had disappeared in the protecting shelter.

Claire fought for a moment in a frenzy of fear and loathing, as she felt the strength, and looked up at the brutal face of her captor, but she was too sane to continue when it was so plainly useless. Holding her at the length of a hairy arm, with a fistful of hair in his grip, he raised and shook her like a rat, while with his other hand he caught the only garment she wore, at the back of the neck, and ripped it off her. She cried out sharply at the indignity, whereat he brought a heavy hand down on her back and shook her once again. Then, satisfied that he had taught her quietness, he tucked her under his arm and carried her away, just as (the thought crossed her) she had carried the squealing pig on the previous day.

She heard the giant chuckle to himself as he strode on, but at least she would not make the pig's mistake and kick to no purpose, or to be repaid with further violence. She remembered how she had used her chance against Norwood in a like emergency. This was a more formidable danger, but the lesson held. She would wait her time and save her strength to take its advantage fully. But what chance would be here?

They came, as the darkness fell, to an open glade in the oakwood where a wood fire was burning. About a score of men and two women were seated or moving round it. The smell of roasting pork told that they also had found that pigs were running loose in the woodland. A cart stood in the shadow, and two horses were tethered.

Heads were turned as the burly giant approached with his burden, and rough voices questioned. He answered nothing till he had entered the circle.

"Here's luck, boys," he growled in a voice that was almost genial, as he threw Claire on the ground and put one heavy booted foot between her shoulders. "All in turn; but I'm first," he said, and called to one of the women who came up with some lengths of rope. She was lean and slatternly, with a straggle of straight gray hair, and eyes that showed bloodshot in the firelight. She bound Claire's ankles tightly, and then her hands behind her back. As she did this she muttered to herself with an evil satisfaction. "A pretty piece," Claire heard, "but she'll be dead before morning." She hated the hag more fiercely even than the man whose foot was on her shoulders, though the rough nailed boots cut her to the flesh, and left a row of bleeding stripes along her back as he dragged it off when he saw that she was tied securely.

Lying helplessly on her face, Claire's range of vision was somewhat limited, but she could turn her head from side to side, and realizing that they had done with her for the moment she began to consider her position.

The woman who had tied her was now sitting on the ground at her right hand a few yards away, facing the fire. There were others beyond, but she could not see clearly. The fire was large and very hot, and they sat down at some distance from it, making a wide circle. There was the trunk of a tree at her left, and her captor sat beside her with his back leaning against it. Her head and shoulders were full in the firelight, and he could see at once should she make any effort to release her hands. She could see little of the other men. The one who had caught her was clearly the leader of the gang, and it seemed that they gave him space very liberally. The other woman had brought him food on a meat-dish, and a great pot of drink, and she supposed that they were all engaged on their meal, though she could not see them. It needed little foresight to tell that her time would come when the feast ended.

She began to regret that she had not fought more strenuously while she had at least the free use of her limbs to aid her, and one man only, however formidable, from whom to escape. Now they would all be against her. Or would they? If she could raise strife among them she might yet find safety in the confusion. She supposed that they had been respectable, or, at least, law-abiding men but a few weeks ago. Surely all could not have degenerated so quickly to the brutal level of the one that had seized her. Yet what did she know of the results which come when the restraints of law are lifted, to enable her to judge this probability? The men she had met so far had given her little cause for confidence. There was Martin. But he had bolted when the test came, she thought bitterly. Was it possible that brutality and cowardice were the controlling forces which ruled when authority and order left the world? Yet there might be one decent man among them to whose protection she could appeal, and who would think some risk for such a prize to be worth taking.

She looked up at the huge and brutal form beside her, and she knew that the hope was vain. She remembered the way in which he had grasped the heavy sledge half-way down the haft with his right hand, while his left had subdued her. Then something cold touched her between the ankles and she started sharply. The face on which she gazed looked down on her suspiciously. She took a kick in the ribs and an order to be quiet, with a curse for emphasis. She let her head fall, and her eyes were hidden.

In the shadow, where her feet lay, she knew that a knife was slowly cutting through the cords. Then they were free, and for some moments nothing more happened. She wondered whether anything more *would* happen. She did not doubt that it was Martin who had so contrived to help her. Now she must choose her time. If she sprang up quickly she might disappear in the shadows, and it might not be easy to find her. But she was unsure how well she might be able to move with her hands tied behind her back, or how much she would be able to see at first as her eyes left the firelight. If she fled noisily they would

find it easy to follow. Then she closed her eyes, thinking that they would be more prepared for the darkness. But she must not be long. To delay might be to lose the chance which was offered.

She looked up to see whether her captor's eyes were upon her, and met them gazing down with a greedy anticipation. He was leaning back on the tree-trunk, his meal ended. The froth of liquor was on his mouth, and he licked the pork-grease from his hand as he regarded her. She thought fearfully that she had delayed too long. Any moment the monstrous filthy hand might reach down to grip her by arm or hair. Could she avoid him quickly enough if he should do so?

He saw the fear in her eyes with a chuckle of anticipation. In imagination he felt her struggling beneath the violence of his hands and the weight of his body. Then he saw her gaze go past him with a startled wonder, which was veiled in an instant. He was not quick to perceive, nor used to fear, but a premonition of danger made him turn his head to the point above him that had caught her notice, but the next instant it sagged forward as though he slept. He remained in that position for a few moments, and then his body fell sideways; but it fell unnoticed amidst the pandemonium that surrounded it.

[VII]

Martin Webster had the qualities and defects of his legal training and practice grafted on to a personality that must now prove itself under new conditions and adapt or perish. The quick agility by which he had avoided the blow of the descending sledge was some evidence of adaptability. The swiftness with which he perceived that he would not be followed, as the aggressor would be more interested in retaining the prey which he had already captured, and that the two objects were incompatible, is perhaps to be credited rather to his earlier practice, as may be the coolness with which he stopped, when the branches hid him, and doubled back to obtain possession of the sledge, even before he could tell whether its owner would cross the little stream to attempt its recovery.

To keep cool, and to score every possible point in the game—that had been his life's learning. To take no needless chance, to move only when you must, or when you were sure, had become equally habitual.

Many a man, having a companion seized by such violence, and having the aggressor's weapon in his possession, would have attempted an immediate rescue. Some would have found the assault upon himself alone a sufficient provocation. Martin was of a cooler and more cautious kind. The fact that the man had attempted his murder would not have stirred him to take the slightest risk or exert effort for vengeance, apart from any fear that the outrage might be

dangerously repeated.

He was capable of being moved by the impersonal consideration that the brute was unfit to live and might do evil to others, but such springs of conduct rise in the intellect, and are not productive of blind or impulsive action.

Claire was the acquaintance of a few hours only, but already he had resolved to possess her. Besides, he was of an instinctive loyalty, and he was not destitute of the primeval instinct which was revealing in such diverse ways the characters of those who had survived the deluge. If he were not constrained by any overpowering impulse to rush blindly to her rescue, neither did it cross his mind that he could abandon her to her captor.

From the hazels that concealed him he watched the exhibition of brutality, and the monstrous strength which stripped and shook and beat her into passivity.

Wrath came to him as he watched, and the wish to kill, but his self-control was unshaken. The dusk favored him. As the giant strode on, too assured of his own strength to expect pursuit or to dread it, Martin followed him closely, the woman's white body gleaming in the failing light, and making his task the easier. When they came to the camp-fire he was obliged to approach with an increased caution. He was not daunted by the fact that the man had found companions. His mind, trained to avoid the unproved assumption, knew that with numbers contention of different wills might operate to help, as probably as their unity might conspire to resist him.

When he saw that the giant's coming was received with quietness, and that he dominated his companions, he saw also that no immediate violence was intended. He wriggled up as silently as a rabbit moves, patience overcoming his lack of practice in such maneuvers. He perceived that Claire's feet were so deep in shadow that no one sitting in the circle of light would be able to see them. The knife was keen and sharp, and his greatest care was to avoid cutting the flesh in the darkness, the ankles lying over one another, and being very tightly tied. It was done at last, and they were free and uninjured. To do that had been obvious. The next step was less easily decided. He felt that the decision could be made with leisure, for some time would be needed for the circulation to be fully restored to the bound feet, which might be vital to their escape. He considered, as she had done, the chance that she could leap up suddenly and escape in the darkness. He did not like it. The light fell on her hands, and he decided, though reluctantly, that he could not release them unnoticed while her captor was watching beside her. Then he weighed the thought, if he killed him, should he have time to loose her hands before the others would be upon him? Appearing the more audacious, reason told him it was the safer plan to attempt.

He would not only have destroyed the nearest and most formidable of their

enemies, but the one who would be most likely to call the word which would rouse the others to any swift and combined activity.

He thought first of the knife, recognizing that he must strike without mercy, and that there could be no time for a struggle. He knew that his opponent could break his back with one hand should he bungle the first stroke and be exposed to reprisal. Hesitating where to strike, he thought of the sledge hammer that lay beside him. Strangely, for one of his logical practice, he felt less compunction about destroying his antagonist through that means than by the knife, remembering that the attempt upon his own life had been by that method.

He knew that every second would count when once he had struck the blow, and he laid his plans very carefully. He moved round the back of the tree, memorizing the mossy roots so that he could return without stumbling. Then he raised the sledge in both hands and stepped out from the shadow. Claire saw him as he did so, and their eyes met for an instant. Almost, this glance undid them. The victim's head turned as the blow descended. The hammer struck its object, but not with the full force which must have smashed it in, however hard it might be. It struck a glancing blow only. But it was enough. And the marvel was that it was all so swift and silent that it passed unnoticed.

Had Martin anticipated such a possibility it is likely that they might both have escaped before any opposition had been aroused. As it was, he had returned round the back of the tree and was already cutting the rope that held her hands before his movements, which aimed at speed rather than secrecy, caught the notice of the hag that was seated nearest. Claire had risen at once when she realized the attempted rescue, and was standing sideways to the firelight so that he could see what he did, when the woman screamed and pointed.

"Keep still," he said sharply, as he heard it, and the next moment she was free. They might have escaped, even then, without conflict, had not a little red-haired man with a rat's face, who was on the further side of the fire, thrown a short-legged stool with such force and accuracy that it brought Martin to the ground for a moment. In the meanwhile others were running round from both sides. Seeing that the nearest, who had come from beside the woman who still screamed and pointed, would be on him before he could rise, Martin caught up the stool by the leg and threw it at his feet. The man stumbled over it, and fell sideways into the fire. He lay thus, his face in the glowing heart of the wood, till one who was behind him caught him by the legs and pulled him clear. He screamed so horribly that the attention of everyone was distracted for a moment toward him. Action is swift at such a crisis. In the seconds during which the man had stumbled over the thrown stool, fallen, and been pulled free, Martin had passed the knife into Claire's hand and caught up the sledge to

face the group that were coming toward him from the other side of the fire. Claire had run three or four yards away, supposing Martin behind her. At the first scream she looked back. She saw Martin, the sledge in his two hands, ready to wield it against the group of men, and separated from them only by the body of their leader; but they were all looking sideways to where the burnt wretch writhed and screamed on the ground, as was Martin also. Only the woman who had given the warning, the same who had bound her hands and feet so brutally, was unmoved by his torment. She had caught up a hatchet and was creeping furtively to strike at Martin from the back. There was no time for warning, and to have given it could only have diverted his attention further from the men that might rush him at any moment. There was no time for thought: there was scarcely time for action.

With the knife in her still numbed hand, Claire ran forward. She was scarcely conscious of the force with which she struck at the side of the scraggy neck till she felt the weight of the wretched body pull on her hand; till it collapsed entirely and slid off the knife. It lay kicking and bleeding, but there were no screams here; the knife had done its work too well.

Claire did not stop to see it. She caught at Martin's hand, and together they disappeared into the darkness. They were twenty yards away when the pursuit began, and they might have outdistanced it easily had not Claire stumbled at that moment into a tangle of brambles, which brought her to her knees and tore her at every movement of her bare body in a hundred places.

The emergency was too serious for such obstacles to control it. She struggled on into a clear space, when Martin, who had turned and followed, caught her arm and pulled her down beside him, for the pursuers were around them on every side, and he remembered how her white body showed in the darkness. But running from the light of the fire, and confused by their own noises, they neither saw nor heard that whom they sought were in their midst, and they had soon spread out in a loud and futile search for those that they had left behind them.

Claire and Martin began to investigate their position very cautiously, for they were still so near to the camping-place that they could hear the voices, and sometimes the words, of those who had remained there, and those who had pursued them were beating the wood at no great distance. They found that they were close to the bole of a large tree, with a rough bark,—an oak, most probably—with a wall of brambles before them. They tried crawling round the trunk, but found the brambles on the further side were closer and higher, so that they could make no progress. They decided that it would be safer to remain where they were than to venture out until the search should be over.

They could now see very dimly. The night was moonless and cloudy. A star showed occasionally, but was quickly hidden. Their sight of sky was

limited by the oak branches above them. The night was very warm, and there was no dew. The brambles formed a screen of impenetrable blackness around them.

Lying side by side, the thoughts of each turned inevitably to the companion that fate had brought so strangely, and to so swift an intimacy. In Martin's mind there was an exhilarating sense of victory and possession. He was elated by the success of his rescue. That he had won, he would hold. Claire was less sure of herself. She was grateful to her deliverer, but she was not one who gives lightly or decides on impulse. Now she had no mind to give, but she might be in the mood to be taken. Her most conscious thought was of her lack of covering and of how she might find some garment before the darkness left her.

She was grateful that he made no movement to touch her.

Then they heard the noise of men returning, three or four of them it seemed, disputing loudly, with foul oaths for argument.

It was clear that they planned to beat the woods when the light came, and that Claire was their objective.

They came nearer and nearer. At last one of the men stumbled against the outer edge of the patch of brambles into which Claire had fallen. She felt Martin's arm draw her down lower and closer. Pulling himself free, the man's foot caught, and he fell heavily. There was the loud report of a rifle. The flash lit them, and they lay still, wondering whether they had been observed. A voice cursed the fallen man for his folly. A groan answered. The men were grouping now within three yards of where they lay. A match spluttered. The groans continued. They understood that the man had shot himself as he fell. He was being roughly pulled to his feet and stumbling away between them. Possibly the injury was not very serious.

One man lingered. He put an investigating boot into the dark tangle of briars and brambles. He called out that there was cover for half a score. His companions, concerned to get the wounded man moving, were not impressed. The doubter compromised with his suspicions, realizing that a further exploration would be painful and unsupported. He fired into the bushes. The hidden pair made no motion as the report sounded, and the bullet passed over them. The man stood listening for a moment, and then they heard his heavy feet receding.

As the tension ended Claire became conscious of the arm that held her. She endeavored to move apart, but Martin had no will to loose her. Rather, he drew her closer.

"Please," she said, as she endeavored to release his arm. She tried to speak lightly, but there was a nervous note in her voice that betrayed agitation.

"You are mine, now," he whispered in reply. "I will never loose you."

A sudden anger seized her. She struggled fiercely, pulling her right arm free from his hold. “Loose me now,” she said, “or you will be sorry in a moment.”

He knew that she had the knife, and he challenged her boldly.

“You can kill me, if you will; but while I live I will never loose you.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“You know I cannot,” she said at last, “but I can cut your arm till you move it.”

He laughed at that, forgetting those in the camp that might hear him. “If you cut one arm, I shall use the other,” he answered. “It is only death that will part us. While we live you are mine.”

“For always?” she said doubtfully, but with a new tone in her voice that was in itself surrender.

“For always, and always,” he answered, and he heard the knife drop from her hand.

“It is all so strange,” she said in a low tone, as though she thought aloud, “. . . and so different . . . I don’t know . . .” But he did not heed her, and she sighed and gave her lips to his kisses.

[VIII]

There was a faint moonlight when they resolved to leave their shelter. The camp had been still for some hours, and they could not tell whether any watch were kept, but there could be nothing gained by waiting. The knowledge that there were at least one or two rifles in the possession of the gang, against which their own weapons would be of little avail, made it imperative that they should be far away before the darkness lifted.

Martin cut very quietly through the prickly screen which surrounded them, and then carried Claire across it so that she escaped with no more than one last embrace from an overhanging brier, which tore her flesh as he bore her forward and it strove to hold her. She did not dare to call aloud to delay him, and before he knew, it was left behind them. He had been glad to hold her in the joy of the sudden intimacy which had taken them, but he was short of breath when he released her in a clear aisle of the wood, for she was little less than his own height and of such a figure as weighs more heavily than its appearance indicates.

Martin’s plan of action was already clearly outlined in his mind, and he told her briefly as they hurried through the shadows of the woodland path.

“We cannot stay in the tunnel. They know the direction from which we came, and when they search in the morning they will be certain to find it. They would close both openings, and we should be caught like netted rabbits. If they

did not ferret us, we should have to come out, or starve, sooner or later. But if we go back quickly we can load the things we most need on to the trolley and escape upon it. I have an idea that if we set fire to the hut and the dump of coal beside it they will be drawn to the blaze and we can escape at the further end of the tunnel in a greater security."

She said: "Yes, we must go back first. I must have the clothes. And then we can't escape too far, or too quickly. But shall we stop for the water?"

It was a good thought, he agreed, and need delay them but little. At least, it took them only slightly aside from their shortest way, but after they had found and filled the buckets, which were still where they left them, they found their progress was slower, and much of the water was spilt as they hurried on. Still, they did not propose to stay in the tunnel, and it might be of little importance.

The dawn was growing as they neared their destination, and as the sky cleared and a light breeze moved over the meadows, the air became chillier than it had been in the summer night, as it sometimes will as the day opens, and it was not only the outraged convention of a lifetime, but a more physical discomfort which caused Claire to dive so quickly into the hut where the sack of clothing lay, the moment that she could put down the bucket, which she had been obliged to handle carefully as she descended the steep embankment.

She might have stood for the goddess of summer, as Martin saw her disappear through the door of the hut, round-limbed and tall, and with the effect which results from fineness of line rather than actual slenderness. She had one of those perfectly proportioned bodies which come unmarred through the ordeal of motherhood, and it gleamed all the more whitely for the scars and bruises which showed on back and shoulders from the brutalities of the earlier night and the red wheals of the bramble scratches. Martin looked at her with admiration, and with a sense of possession, and a fierce fighting instinct to hold her with his life if need be, such as was not commonly experienced in the more tepid atmosphere of his earlier world; for what was there to rouse it?

He was moving coal so that there should be no remaining gap between it and the hut when she came out. He meant the blaze to be a good and a lasting one.

She had found stockings, and shoes that were not unsightly, and a nondescript dress of some thin material, and she looked not unlike an exceptionally attractive housemaid if the subtler indications of head and hands were left unheeded.

"By Jove," Martin exclaimed as he saw her, "what a shame!" and only partly pleased her.

"It won't fit so badly," she said, "when I've had time to alter it, and there are other things which will be useful. What can I do to help? We can take this, can't we?"

She hauled out the sack of clothing, somewhat lessened in bulk, and lifted it into the trolley.

Martin assented, of course. He proposed that they should have a good meal first, and then load and go.

He did not think that haste was urgent. If their pursuers should awake so early they would have their own hunger to think of first: when they started searching they would probably take some time before they found the tunnel. Even if they did so, to escape should not be difficult. The trolley would make better speed than anyone could do by running through the fields overhead.

Claire was of the same mind; she was very hungry, and well content to leave his judgment unquestioned.

They ate freely, talking gaily the while, and looking forward to exploring the deserted country together. Both of them looked younger than yesterday. Life was theirs for the moment, and they exulted in its possession.

Loading up took a long while. Martin had accumulated a large quantity of things, many of which he was unwilling to leave. The capacity of the trolley was limited. Among many things it was hard to say what could be replaced in the future. There were hesitations and changes. Things had been hastily moved on the previous day, and some that were most important could not easily be found. The morning was well advanced when they were ready. But they had little anxiety. The plan was good, and they did not fear that both ends of the tunnel would be approached at the same time. They were elate and confident.

The plan was good; but Joe Harker spoilt it.

Joe was the ex-jockey that they had seen on the previous night and dismissed from their minds so easily. That was a mistake. Had Martin seen him three months earlier he might have judged differently. It is difficult to associate obesity with the cunning knave or the dangerous villain. But his gluttony was incidental only, his cunning was as fundamental as the greed which had now broken out in a released direction. Three months ago he had been on the point of retiring from his profession. He was rich, and he was tired of the abstemiousness that it required. He had run a bookmaking business through the relative of a lady friend, and if anything had been suspected it had not been proved; he had ridden crookedly more than once or twice, enough to fill his own pockets and those of his friends, but not often enough to bring him under the notice of the stewards. He had celebrated his resolution not to ride again with a drunken orgy at a roadside hostel. He had sunk down unnoticed on the floor of a marquee in the hotel grounds, where the storm had found but did not rouse him. The tent was flattened by the wind, and a falling pole struck him to a deeper unconsciousness. Better men around him died or fled northward to a certain destruction, leaving him to crawl out dazed and suffocated from the heavy folds of the tent, to find a changed world that was

already settling itself to a recovered serenity.

The gang had accepted his company, though he was not of their kind, for he was soft and plausible in his manner, had a gross and merry wit which they could understand, with an endless store of shameless tales and reminiscences which he could relate without fear of consequences now that the world he knew had ceased to be; and beyond this, he had proved a capacity for finding food and drink which approached the miraculous. He was of a restless alertness, active in his own way when sober, and his eyes missed nothing.

He liked to forage alone, and to win a cheap popularity by leading others to the things he found if they should be too much for his own requirements. It was this habit which had led him to the cutting in Martin's absence on the previous day, and an insobriety which was more assumed than real had not prevented him from seeing them as they had watched him in a fancied hiding.

His cunning mind was turning over how best he could use his knowledge to his own advantage, when his plans had collapsed at the appearance of Claire and her captor.

He had not joined the pursuit, for he was a man of peace—not from lack of courage, for his nerve was iron, but because he despised the taking of a needless risk, and the crudity of violent methods repelled him.

In the half-deserted camp he had surveyed the body of their fallen leader with an appearance of solicitude. He had been forward in suggesting that others should lift it into a position of greater comfort. Nothing more was attempted. There was no one of any surgical experience among them. If he had any knowledge of the treatment of wounds, he did not see that anything would be gained by disclosing it.

It was after the chase had returned, and the sleeping camp was silent, that he had walked over to look at the sprawling bulk of the felled body. Certainly it was not dead. It was breathing heavily. It might be dying. A broken skull was at least a probability. There was, in fact, nothing worse than a pulped ear and a fractured cheekbone. The lucky turn of the neck and the brute strength of the huge head had saved their owner from any heavier damage.

Joe, listening to the labored breathing, and gazing at the bruised and blood-stained face, decided that he was of no account for the moment, even if he were not settled forever.

He was glad of that, for the gross-natured giant was the only man there that he really feared. He could manage Donovan and the rest, even Rat-face; but this man had black and violent humors, which would change in a moment, and no one could understand their cause or avoid their consequences.

He walked away and lay down under the wagon. Everyone slept on the bare ground while the weather was warm and dry. There was no forethought among them. They wandered at random, wasting and plundering. So far, drink

and food had been abundant. The complicated controls of civilization were lifted from them. The slave-labor, which had been the price at which they had been allowed to eat and breed, was no longer compulsory. They wandered blindly in an ecstasy of indolent self-indulgence broken by bouts of violence. Only Joe had sufficient prescience to lie where he would be protected from a sudden storm.

He lay awake, scheming how he could make most use of his knowledge. Perhaps the two would fly, now that they had been discovered, and the hut could be his, with all its stores. But there were difficulties. He was of a nature that could not endure solitude. He must be with those of his own kind on whatever terms. Then it was certain that the search would recommence in the morning, and that the tunnel would be examined. There would be little care for the injuries that their companions had suffered, but they would hunt for the woman. It was the lack of women which marred the paradise of their new life, and which had led to the tragedy of a few days ago. If the men had been less drunk, and the fool had not fought so fiercely, it need not have happened. It had been stupidity to cause her death—sheer waste, which he always hated.

No, he would not like to live in the hut alone, and there would be the fear that they might come back. He had seen too much of their fighting ways to meet them alone. He meant to have the woman, but he meant that others should do the fighting. But why should there be any quarrel, if they found him there when they returned? He could ingratiate himself with them. After that, there were many ways by which a man could die, and the girl would be his. His fertile mind leapt forward to plan the murder. A tale of a treasure hidden in one of the open shafts around them, or of a cry that he heard coming from it. A push behind for the man that leaned forward to listen.

But the flaw in all this planning remained that the search would be certain to find the tunnel. He did not think they would catch the girl. She would escape at the further end. He had seen how quickly the trolley could be poled along the rails. He had no mind to stay there alone on the chance that they would return after they knew that their hiding-place was discovered, and that their goods had been spoiled and scattered. His mind turned to a better plan. They must be caught as they emerged from the further end of the tunnel, and the man killed and the woman captured. But he could not do it alone. He thought it probable that they had no firearms, or they would have used them already. Two men should be enough to settle the matter without his help, and not too many with whom to share the woman afterwards. There might be quarreling then, but he could trust himself to contrive that it should be with each other rather than with him. Smith and Donovan were the ones he needed. They had two of the four rifles that the camp contained, and they disliked each other already. So he planned.

It was when the faint moonlight assisted the light of the dying fire that he moved cautiously round the camp and roused the two men whose help he needed.

Before dawn they had made their bargain, swearing such oaths as he supposed would bind them. He was to lead them to where they could shoot the man and capture the woman, and the three of them were to make off together, sharing her between them.

It was not long after Martin and Claire had left their perilous hiding that the three men crept silently from the sleeping camp.

They passed the body of their wounded leader and the dead hag that still lay beside him, her head in a pool of curdled blood. The man who had fallen in the fire was still enough now, lying face-downward. Someone had mercifully kicked him on the head till he ceased screaming, and he had not moved since then.

The man who had injured himself with his own gun was also sleeping at last, a swathe of bloody bandages covering a hand from which a finger was missing.

There was evidence enough that they were seeking those who could defend themselves with some ability, but the argument of magazine rifles is one that is not easily answered, and Joe, having no rifle of his own, or ability to use it, felt quite comfortable as to the safety of the rearward position which he intended to occupy in the campaign he was organizing.

He led his party straight to the embankment that overlooked the further end of the tunnel. He calculated that their intended victims would be certain to emerge there sooner or later, whether in voluntary flight or through having been dislodged from the end they occupied. Even though they remained undiscovered by his late companions and had no intention of fleeing, he had learnt that they made expeditions in that direction, and it could only be a question of time before they would fall into the trap which awaited them.

The plan was simple, as great strategy usually is, and would have had an excellent prospect of success, even had not Martin and Claire been working strenuously to support it, not only with their essential presence, but with a selection of all that would be most useful to Claire's captors, and supplying the speediest means of removing themselves when they had seized her.

However, they knew nothing of the reception which Fate was preparing, and when they had at last set fire to the hut, and to the dump of coal beside it, to such good purpose that a great column of smoke was rising straightly in the still air, they set out very gaily.

They had planned to wait for a time, till the smoke should have had time to draw any searchers to the end of the tunnel which they were leaving, but the heat became so great, and the smoke (some of which the direction of the

draught through the tunnel inclined inward) was so discomforting, that they started almost immediately, poling themselves along at a leisurely pace, and reserving their strength for the speed which they intended to raise when they should be in the greater danger of the open country.

The faint light of the lantern illuminated the hanging body of the unhappy pig as they passed it, but Martin did not appear to notice, and Claire silently suppressed a feeling of annoyance, which she knew to be unreasonable. She was not sure that she had not been a fool, but in any case its natural destiny had been frustrated by larger issues.

It would take more than that to vex her mood of this morning. She wondered whether Eve may not have felt a like elation when she left the narrow confines of Eden for the adventure of the larger world.

Jestingly, she propounded this problem.

The words raised a question in Martin's mind which he had not previously considered, but, after a moment's silence, he responded to her mood, and answered with a similar flippancy.

"I'm afraid that you're one of those numerous people who have never read the Book of Genesis. If you ever do, you'll find that Adam was turned out alone, presumably for not keeping his wife under control. Probably, being a woman, she wormed her way under the palings to join him. It is presumed that she did this, because the next verse tells us of the birth of Cain."

Then he continued more seriously. "But I haven't asked you yet whether you're a Christian Scientist or a Plymouth Sister?"

She laughed in answer. "Does it matter now?" And then with a swift change of intuition to the mood of his own mind: "Oh, but I see what you mean! No, I don't think we shall differ."

Did it matter now? He wondered. Had the world in which it was so respectable to profess sectarianism, and so *outré* to profess Christianity, really perished? Having the type of mind that instinctively disentangles the teaching of Christ from the accretions of the centuries which have obscured and degraded it, he had never sympathized with the chatter about progressive revelations or the substitutions of ritual observance for unwelcome truth which he had watched around him. But *did it matter now*? If any number of the men of the white races survived, Christianity, in some form, would survive with them. Would such a catastrophe as had taken place drive them back to the essentials of the faith they held? Might it even induce them to give the precepts of their Leader a belated trial? It could scarcely be hoped. He remembered the terrible prescience of the words of Christ.

So his mind wandered; and then he knew that they were nearing the end of the tunnel, and Claire was speaking as she blew out the lantern. "Had we better go cautiously or get up speed?"

"Oh, push ahead," he said. "The sooner we're clear of these parts the better. I've no doubt it's quiet enough now. Have you got the pole I made for you?"

"Yes," she said, picking it up to supplement his own efforts, and so, rousing the trolley to a greater speed, they passed out into the sunlight.

[IX]

The men that Joe had chosen to join his ambush do not concern us, except so far as they illustrate some aspects of that civilization from which the floods had cleansed at least a portion of the earth's surface. They were not types. No man is: no individual can be. But they were typical in many ways of the disease which festered within the body of a civilization which was insensitive to its own corruption.

Even the Victorian complacency had been more conscious of this corruption, and had been more concerned to correct it, than had been the age which had succeeded. Later, when a million of their best lay dead in Flanders and Gallipoli, and beneath the ocean which their ancestors had conquered and ruled for centuries, what could be hoped from a nation which allowed the seas to be surrendered in peace which had been held in war? which allowed its children to be crowded in noisome and indecent dens for lack of housing, while a million men stood idle, because it dare not defy the treasonous policy of a workmen's union?

Their ancestors, finding their own children too numerous for the frozen lands that bore them, had won at the sword's point the fairest island that the northern seas contained, and held it through a millennium of change and war.

Themselves, with lands their parents won for their heritage lying vacant, were content to deny life to their own children rather than exert themselves to cross the seas to possess them. It may be that they would have sunk from this apathy into a final degradation and become the degenerate slaves of more virile races; it may be that reaction would have set in, or that the mercy of another war would have given them a further trial at the bar of nature; but the seas had spoken to a different purpose. Good or bad, their harvest was over now, and it remained only to test the nature of the seed they had left for the fecundity of a further spring.

Donovan was a man who would have been of little account under any conditions of life or system of education. His Irish father had settled by some chance in a Staffordshire village, and had allied himself to a woman there whose thriftless ways had been too evident to enable her to marry among those who were more familiar with her. They had lived narrow, quarrelsome, and unwholesome lives, and had died of the diseases which were bred by dirt, by

alcohol, and by preserved and contaminated foods. Their son, with the heavy shapeless lower features of the cross-bred Erse, but without the humor or the soft speech which went far to redeem them to a tolerable humanity, had something of the coarse vitality which often follows the mating of different races. He was capable of sustained physical exertion. He had few ideas of his own and little initiative. He had an unimaginative brutality which took the place of courage. His idea of warfare was to shoot from behind a hedge. He enjoyed watching rats or rabbits killed by dogs in a confined space. He liked to watch the footballers that were hired for his entertainment by his local club, and to shout abuse at those against whom they played. If his own side lost he was prepared to vituperate them with equal violence. His idea of humor was the representation of a discolored nose; of wit, an allusion to the excretions of the human body. His instincts were primitive, and he was incapable of thought without physical or emotional incentive. Under a training adapted to his mentality, and mated at an early age to one of his own kind, he might have led a harmless and decent existence as an agricultural laborer.

Instead of that, he had been introduced to foul and filthy living, he had been compelled to dark and filthy toil in caverns to which men should never have penetrated. He had been compelled to attend a school for several years, where the inevitable physical detriment of herding large numbers of young animals in one pen, be they children or chickens, had not been compensated by any useful instruction. He had vacuously attempted to memorize the climate of Patagonia, but he had learnt nothing of the decent conduct of life in his own inferno. He had not taken part in the recent war, having been retained by the mine which employed him. He had frequented a shooting gallery, and with his present weapon he could be relied upon to hit something within six feet of the object at which he aimed if it were in his immediate vicinity.

Smith was of a different and more dangerous kind. A man of forty, of a lean and battered aspect, he had a high, thin nose, eyes that were at once cold and predatory, and a close, thin-lipped mouth which seldom opened except for an exclamation of profanity or an obscene jest. His hair was black, straight, sleek, and scanty. He was reticent as to his past, but called himself an Australian, probably slandering a continent when he did so. He had certainly been in that country for some years, and had there volunteered for the war, actuated by a ferocity which was drawn to any scene of violence, and by a vague expectation of plunder and of opportunities for the rape of women.

He had won a commission, been decorated, court-martialed, and dismissed from the service for conduct of the sort that is not advertised, on evidence which might have been considered insufficient in a civil court. He was obsessed by a debased sexuality, such as is stimulated by the excitements and restraints of an unhealthy civilization, and which Freud appears to have

supposed, very foolishly, to be the common curse of humanity.

An urban population, knowing nothing of animals, has quaintly given the name of "animalism" to this lowest of human vices, but it has no affinity to the loyalty of a rat to his doe, or the tenderness of a wolf for his mate. It is, in fact, the vice which, among all the outrages by which humanity has defied the laws of its Creator to its own undoing, is most alien from anything existing among the wild creatures which men have left unmurdered, nor has it any approximate parallel among those that they have brought into servitude and association.

He had maintained an appearance of efficiency and neatness even in his present environment. The most exacting of sergeants-major would have been satisfied by the condition of the rifle which he was hoping to use to such congenial purpose. He boasted, truly enough, and it was readily believed, though he had not proved it, that he could shoot with a deadly accuracy.

Joe Harker's tactics, like his strategy, were of a Napoleonic simplicity. A hundred yards from the mouth of the tunnel, half-way up the embankment, there grew a clump of that dwarf species of birch which fed the reindeer on the arctic plains, and while no longer common in England, showed a capacity to spring up on any spot which was kept clear of heavier timber while remaining uncultivated. Behind this cover he stationed his two riflemen with orders not to shoot till their victims were actually beneath them.

Being unarmed, he could assist most usefully by hiding behind the little hut which stood by the entrance of the tunnel. When they had shot the man, the girl would most probably run back to that refuge, when he could turn her from the cover she sought. If she ran in any other direction they would chase her together. But he supposed that she would yield to the threat of the rifles without such difficulty. She might be too frightened to run at all.

So they took their stations and waited.

The tactics were good enough, but the best of generalship must finally depend upon the capacity of the officers and men which it employs. It chanced that Donovan took the position which was nearer the mouth of the tunnel. They were both well hidden, but he was in a position to see, and to fire if he wished, before his companion could do so. Smith could get a clear shot only at that part of the line which was directly beneath him. Doubtless, that was the time for which to wait, and if they did so their positions were of equal advantage. But it happened that Smith had little confidence either in Donovan's skill or discretion. He thought, rightly enough, that he could have carried through the enterprise much better had he been single-handed, and wondered why Joe had not been content to enlist his assistance only.

Joe might have come to the same conclusion had he not felt that he would be safer if they were a more numerous party, in which either might be incited against the other if he should feel it expedient.

Smith was rightly confident that if the shooting were left to him there would be no hitch in the program. He wanted it done efficiently, and he wanted the pleasure of doing it. He did it in imagination a dozen ways as he lay and waited. Finally he decided that he would drill the man through the head and then nick the woman on both buttocks. Just to make her jump. She would be none the worse, and would show his brand ever afterwards. If she tried to run after that, a threat to shoot again should be sufficient to stop her.

But he did not want Donovan to blunder in and spoil the neatness or claim the credit of his efficiency. Also, they did not want the woman shot, and he was correct in thinking that if Donovan aimed at Martin he would be in somewhat less danger than anyone else who might be near him.

So the end was that he proposed to Donovan that he should shoot first, and that Donovan should hold his fire till he saw the result of the first shot. Donovan refused with a grunt. He asked why. No man likes a reflection on his own skill. He had sense enough to see that if he consented to take a back seat in the attack he might be expected to occupy the same position when they came to reap the fruit of the success they anticipated. A suggestion that he should change places roused a deeper suspicion and received a curter refusal. Smith tried a last card. It was evident that Donovan could get the first shot in the positions they occupied, and after the dispute they had now had he would be quick to take it. He proposed that they should toss for positions, and to this the gambling instinct of his companion responded. They tossed, and Donovan won. Smith then proposed that they should toss again, on the understanding that if he lost he should definitely resign the first shot. Donovan agreed, after some arguing, tossed, and won again. It was an operation in which he was not easily cheated, and, in fact, each of them was too well aware of his opponent's qualifications to do more than watch for any lucky chance of dishonesty.

After this, Smith resigned himself to the position. He had no doubt that Donovan would miss, nor that his own bullet would find its victim a second later.

Meanwhile the hours passed. The sun was high enough now to make them uncomfortably warm, and the bushes before them gave no shelter from it. They were finding it much easier to drowse in the heat than to keep alert and watchful, when their attention was attracted to the column of black smoke that rose from the fire that Martin had started. But for that, it might have been that the trolley would have been well under the ambush before Donovan would have been awake to its coming. As it was, he had his rifle in readiness as it came out of the darkness. The dispute in which he had been engaged had left him with a dull suspicion of his companion's purpose and a resolve that nothing should rob him of the first shot which the coin had given. The trolley was not ten yards clear of the tunnel when he fired. Of the bullet, no more can

be said than that it went somewhere in the direction of the equator, and there we must leave it.

Neither Claire nor Martin could see very clearly. The sudden light dazzled them. But their senses were alert for any warning of danger, and a rifle-shot is sufficiently plain in its meaning. Before its echo died they had stopped their way and were pushing back for shelter. They were helped by the fact that the gradient at that point was slightly upward, and the trolley reversed and slipped backward the more easily in consequence.

Smith guessed in an instant what was happening, leapt to his feet, and fired over the bushes. With no time to aim, he so far justified his skill that the bullet struck the wheel over which Martin was leaning. Donovan fired again, and the trolley disappeared.

Cursing at each other and at the escaping quarry, the two men plunged down the bank.

Joe had watched what had happened with a mixture of wrath and amazement at the folly which had spoilt his plan, but he made no motion to join the pursuit. He had seen an automatic pistol which lay ready to hand for the use of those they were hunting. But he made no motion to delay his companions. He had no objection to any risk they might take for his prospective advantage. Having no suspicion that their opponents were armed, and confident in the rifles they carried, the two men entered the tunnel together.

Martin saw them coming and stopped the trolley. He thought rapidly. They were already in darkness, while the men showed clearly with the light behind them. To retreat further would be to involve all in an equal obscurity. To strike a match would be to invite their own destruction. Rightly or wrongly, he thought it best to hold their ground and fight it out if the men came further. The next moment they were off the trolley and crouching behind it together. He had loaded the pistol before they started, and now tried to recall the arguments as to the action of such a weapon in which he had once engaged in so different an atmosphere. He knew that it would continue to discharge so long as he pressed the trigger. He must remember that. Had he not heard it urged with much forensic eloquence that at a time of excitement a man might continue the pressure involuntarily? He must not waste his shots in such a manner. He must keep cool. He must shoot to kill. Should he aim straight or low? and at what distance? He was less clear on these points, and a mistake might be fatal.

The men were still advancing, but more slowly now. They were not yet used to the darkness.

Claire’s voice came, very low, and sounding cool enough, though her heart beat as though it would choke her. “Do you know how to use it?”

He said: “I shall manage.”

A second later she spoke again. “If you like to let me—it might be safer—I shall not miss—I was taught in France.”

“No,” he said, “it wouldn’t do to miss,” and passed her the pistol.

She knew then that she had won a man on whom to lean in any crisis. She had no fear of missing.

The men were nearer now. They could see the trolley, though not clearly. Donovan, a little in advance, lifted his rifle. “Hands up,” he called vaguely to the darkness. Smith, standing back, with eyes accustoming themselves to the shadows, was searching for Martin. He meant to shoot at sight. They had no use for prisoners. “Don’t shoot the woman,” he said, his thought recurring that Donovan would blunder somehow. But Donovan’s mistakes were ended.

Claire rose deliberately. She fought for her man’s life, and to keep herself clean of their hateful hands. There was no thought of mercy in her mind, and if her heart still beat hard she did not know it. She fired twice at the man that was nearer. Donovan screamed out. His rifle rang on the rail. He staggered and fell forward. “Oh, Gawd, she’s got me,” he sobbed. But no one heeded.

Claire was running forward, firing as she went at a figure that crouched and dodged to avoid her bullets, and still made better speed than she. Martin ran with her, the spear in his hand. The thought of both was to reach the flying figure before it should have leisure to turn and aim. Smith’s only thought was to run clear of the death-trap into which he had fallen.

Three times Claire missed him, and it was her last shot that found his ankle. He pitched forward as he ran. Claire saw his face as he twisted round, but found her pistol was empty. Martin was close beside him, the spear leveled. “Oh, kill him quickly,” she said: “*I saw his face.*” She was conscious only of a frenzy of loathing.

Smith had no wish to be killed. He realized instantly that the pistol was empty. He grasped the rifle, which had left his hand as he fell, and swung it round in Martin’s direction. Claire snatched the barrel. It swung right and left as they struggled, the one to point it at Martin, the other to direct it from him. It went off twice.

Martin thrust with the spear, but the wounded man twisted sideways. “Oh, be quick! I can’t hold it,” Claire panted. “Kill him somehow.” Martin thrust again, and almost missed, but not quite for the blade came out wet. He drove it in again, missing Claire’s knee by an inch, as the wounded wretch pulled her down with the rifle which she would not loose. But this time he made no mistake. He felt the sharp blade sink into the belly of the struggling form, and drove it in—inwards and upwards. Claire was conscious that the rifle was in her own hands only. She rose to her feet, breathing with difficulty.

“Thank God, that’s over,” said Martin. But was it? With a common

impulse they looked toward the mouth of the tunnel, in fear of further antagonists. They saw Joe Harker, who stood there for a moment now that the shots had ceased, and vanished quickly as he saw that they had observed him.

Martin stopped to pick up the rifle and to search the dead man for any ammunition he carried, and they made their way back to the trolley.

Donovan gave no sign of life. He lay where he had fallen. They secured his rifle also and a further handful of cartridges.

Claire became conscious that the front of her dress was soaked with blood.

They remained for a time in a mutual hesitation as to their next course of action. There was, in fact, nothing to prevent them continuing their first intention. There was no one to withstand them, and pursuit would have been improbable. But they could not know this. They had no knowledge of the completeness of their victory. Besides, they were both unused to scenes of violence or bloodshed. They were excited and shaken. They found that they were of one mind to retreat further into the dark security from which they had adventured so hazardously, and take thought and counsel as to the position in which they stood.

Having done this, they decided that their case was unpleasant but not desperate. They had abundance of food. They had some water, and the wetness of the inner tunnel assured them that they would not perish of thirst, though the moisture it provided might not be of the most palatable kind.

They did not think that an attack would be very easily successful, or that their opponents would adventure it lightly after the lesson that they had received. If they remained in the middle tunnel and watched in turn, a surprise would be difficult. They did not think that their enemies could be very numerous, and they would be at the disadvantage of having to guard two widely separated points. It was at least doubtful whether they would have sufficient persistence to besiege them under such conditions for any lengthened period.

On the other hand, the central tunnel was a very noisome habitation, not to be willingly endured for many hours, and incessant watchfulness would be irksome. To remain in darkness would be intolerable; to use a light would give away an advantage, the value of which could only be tested by experience, which might be fatal.

The plan on which they resolved was to return to the other entrance and to observe whether the fire had died down and whether there were any evidence of the presence of their enemies or attempt to attack them from that direction. They decided to leave the trolley so that they could move more silently, and more quickly take shelter if they should find it needful.

In the inmost part of the tunnel they retreated into one of the recesses which broke the wall at regular intervals, and lighted a candle there while

Claire exchanged her blood-soaked garments for others from the bundle she had taken, and they examined their weapons.

They were of one mind that they would fight to the last extremity rather than that Claire should fall into the hands of those that sought her, but they were unused to the decisive logic of violence and would be instinctively reluctant, even now, to initiate it.

Martin proposed that Claire should remain in the comparative safety of their retreat while he went on alone to investigate, but the quick "No, no," which she gave to that proposition, in a tone which was at once abrupt and appealing, showed how far her mind had fallen from its normal serenity.

They examined the rifles which they had captured, pooling their knowledge. They were the newest service pattern, deadly enough in expert hands, but Martin found them heavy and awkward to handle. He took one, but he did it reluctantly. He preferred the lighter, simpler weapon which had already done good service. But the other rifle Claire would not take. She, too, had her preference for the lighter pistol, which she understood and had proved, and for the knife, which it now seemed natural to have so belted that her hand could reach it quickly.

After all, the spear went with them. For when they started they decided that no light should betray them, and Claire, whose hands were free, proposed to take it so that she could touch the wall to guide them as they walked. And thus they went, quietly and quickly enough under the dripping roof of the tunnel, Claire walking nearer to the wall and feeling her way in the increasing gloom, for owing to the bend in the tunnel the darkness became denser as they advanced toward the further entrance, and Martin walking with a light hand on her shoulder and the loaded rifle under his left arm.

They spoke little and very low, not knowing how sound might carry, and for that reason the time seemed the longer till they reached the bend and should have seen the white light of the opening; but they found here a hot and heavy atmosphere smoke-laden and oppressive to breathe, through which a light blazed for which the sun was not responsible.

It was evident that, though the hut might be ashes, the dump of coal had not burned itself out, and the heat would deter anyone from exploring the tunnel-mouth while it lasted.

The silent walk had given Martin time to reflect upon their position, and his first conclusion had been that they had done foolishly to leave the trolley. While they were at this end it was liable to capture should a second invasion occur, which was not likely, but possible.

It was mobile. It gave some cover against attack. It held the choice of their possessions. He proposed that they should return to it and move it to such a spot as they might select to hold for defense. He had a vague design that they

should prepare barriers at some distance on either side, whether by stretched ropes or pits, such as would secure them against surprise in the darkness. If lights were used, their assailants would be under a disadvantage for which they might pay very dearly.

He doubted whether even the hope of seizing Claire would be sufficient to induce men to such a risk after the losses they had suffered.

Claire assented readily to his proposal. She was getting too tired to think of much beyond the oppressive atmosphere in which they moved. The hero or heroine of fiction is rarely disabled at any physical or emotional crisis by the minor ills of mortality, but Claire's experience was different. Both she and Martin had reached a point of bodily health which had been rarely known in the civilization which had left them, but the strains and excitements of the last three days had been beyond the normal endurances to which she was equal, and now she was conscious that her head throbbed painfully and that her first desire was for clean air, to climb out into the wind and light, and sleep—and sleep.

Martin, less emotional, more detached, his body used to a severer mental discipline, was less near to the exhaustion of his nervous resources. His mind was occupied with ultimate issues rather than present discomforts.

Claire kept beside him, making no complaint or protest, even when his anxiety to regain possession of the trolley led him to urge a faster pace through the darkness, but she was only partly conscious of what she did, her mind fixed upon the moment when she could sink down upon the trolley, making some kind of resting-place of the load it carried. She watched impatiently as its bulk began to show against the light of the entrance towards which they moved.

She knew that Martin was speaking, and answered something, though she did not hear him.

As they approached it, with eyes accustomed to the darkness, Martin was satisfied that it still stood as they had left it. Beyond, the entrance to the tunnel showed blank and empty. He was relieved and satisfied.

But they were none too soon. Claire was asking, in a voice that sounded tired and distant, if she might rest while he propelled it to the place he wished, and he was already assenting, with a sudden, contrite sense of her exhaustion, when she saw that which roused her to sudden wakefulness. "*Look*," she said, in a fierce, changed voice, and struck from his hand the match which he had ignited to guide her to the rest she needed.

[X]

The sun was high in the sky when the felled giant, who had been groaning and moving restlessly, sat up and scowled at a deserted camp. He was unsteady

on his feet, and his head swam dizzily, but he rose as well as he might and made search for food and drink. Food—of sorts—was plentiful, and there was a store of bottled beer in the cart. He drank heavily. He ate, though it was agony to the fractured bone. After a time his head felt clearer. He had but one thought, which dominated even the pain of his throbbing wound—to take vengeance upon the man who had injured him and the woman who had occasioned it.

He walked round the forsaken camp and stared gloomily at the dead bodies. He concluded, wrongly, that there must have been more than one who had attacked them. The two horses, loosely tethered, were grazing quietly. There was no sign of life. Even the old woman and the man with the damaged hand had gone with the rest. He did not care where they had gone, or what number of enemies he had to face. Had he not once killed or maimed a dozen men in a Shanghai bar when a fury took him? He had caught them by arm or leg and flung them round against wall and table. Then he had fought his way back to the engine-room of his ship, and when the police had followed, the captain had politely informed them that if it were Bellamy that they wanted they could arrest him there; and they had gone back for further force, and other business had prevented them from returning. That was before another incident had caused a sudden inland flight from the docks at Liverpool, and he had become the attendant demon of a Staffordshire furnace. But those days were over now, and a man could do as his anger willed, and none would stay him. His mental processes were never complicated, and on this occasion they saved him from needless hesitation. He knew the direction in which he had found the pair he sought, and with no plan in his mind, he set out to hunt them.

He passed the spot where they had found sanctuary during the night, and stopped to stare at it. In the daylight the cut and trampled brambles seemed a very feeble protection. He saw the sledge which Martin had left when he carried Claire across the thorns, and picked it up with a frown of satisfaction. But he did not mean simply to kill them. In his imagination he tore them in his empty hands. They suffered gross and fantastic violences.

He went straight on till he was clear of the woods, and then the black column of smoke led him to the cutting, where he found his companions gathered.

It was at the same time that Joe Harker came along the bank-top, singing to himself as he came. After the fashion which is attributed to the medieval minstrels, he would compose his thoughts into doggerel verse which he hummed to his own music, as Martin and Claire had heard at his first acquaintance. It was usually a cheerful strain, for Joe was a man who enjoyed living, and no less now that he could eat his fill without detriment to his financial prospects.

"Donovan's taken a meal of lead,
Donovan's dead; Donovan's dead.
Dick Smith was settled with steel instead,
But Joe preferred to be left unfed.
The dead men 've gone where the dead men go,
But they'll find it's harder to deal with Joe."

He viewed Bellamy's recovered vitality with a disfavor which he was careful not to indicate. The furnaceman scowled at his cheerfulness; it was a mood for which he had no use. But Joe gazed back into the repulsive face, red on one side and streaked and livid on the other, with unchanged serenity. He had information to give. He usually had; and he knew its value.

There were about half a dozen men grouped on the edge of the embankment when Bellamy and Joe approached it from their different directions, and it appeared that they might just as well, or as badly, have been anywhere else from there to the antipodes for any difference that their presence made.

Reddy Teller, the rat-faced individual who had thrown the stool the night before, imagined himself to be in charge of operations in the absence of better men; but it is at least doubtful whether this opinion were shared by those around him.

So far the only plan he had evolved had been to persuade the men who had the two remaining rifles to fire some oblique shots into the tunnel-mouth and shout to their quarry to come out, under various ghastly penalties should they delay to do so. There had been no response to these persuasions. The inducements offered might have been open to criticism. The heat of the burning coal, which deterred the attacking party from a close approach, would have been at least equally forbidding to anyone emerging from the inside; and finally, there was nobody there.

But, to do Mr. Teller justice, it is not easy to see what more he could have done so long as his attention was confined to that end of the tunnel, while the fire continued. At this time it was still in full blast at its source, and had spread through the dry grass upon the further embankment. That had burnt itself out to the hedge that topped it, or nearly so, but they drew further back as they became aware that the nearer side was now bursting into flame, which was soon to set the fence ablaze against which they were leaning.

"Boys," said Joe, grinning amiably, "how about two ends to a tunnel?" The question was received with a chorus of explanation and argument. It appeared that the larger half of the party had held the opinion that Martin and Claire had left the tunnel at that end when they lit the fire, and had started in pursuit accordingly. They had evidently tired of the enterprise after a mile or two of

disappointment, for they could now be seen returning in the distance, a quarrelsome and dispirited party. It was a hot day.

The others who had remained had held the opinion that they were not likely to leave the safety of the tunnel unless compelled, and that they would prefer to remain at the end to which the fire gave some protection.

Joe replied by narrating what had occurred, only varying facts by the statement that he had seen Smith and Donovan slipping away with the two rifles in the early morning, and had followed out of curiosity to discover their purpose. It was a version likely to be less unpopular than a more veracious narrative, and neither Donovan nor Smith was in a position to contradict it.

Bellamy's distorted scowl was unchanged while he was speaking. He looked as though he were still partially stunned by the blow he had received. Perhaps the pain that throbbed in his cheek, and the beer that he had swallowed so freely, assisted to confuse him. But the brutal mind held tenaciously to its purpose. His eyes did not leave Joe's face as the tale was told, and when it was over he spoke two words only: " 'Twas them?"

Joe chuckled. "Oh yes, 'twas them. You could choke the man with one hand. But the bitch'll fight."

Joe spoke with malice. He was more than willing to incite the wounded giant to seek his prey in the tunnel. He was adroit in his implication that the man was not formidable. It amused him to think of the great brute falling as he had seen Donovan and Smith that morning. It would amuse him equally to see the woman kick with the giant's hand on her neck. He loved sport. In the end he meant to have her himself, but the risks were for others. If anyone understood him it was Teller, who watched him cunningly.

But his words were needless and unheeded. Bellamy's purpose was fixed before he spoke, and his next move was unpleasantly decisive. He had the sledge in his right hand and he thrust his left under Joe's elbow. The movement was too unexpected for Joe to avoid it.

"Show us, lad," he growled in a tone that was almost friendly, but when Joe did not move he pulled him forward with a sudden threatening ferocity.

Joe was no coward. He felt the pressure of the huge hand that dragged and bruised him. He saw that he must depend upon his own wits if he were not to risk the fate of those whose lives had already paid for their imprudence. "Right," he said, with his usual grin of amiability, "I'll show you." He started back along the hedge-side, adapting his pace as best he could to the giant's heavy stride with an appearance of alacrity. But the bruising grasp on the fat arm did not relax, nor, characteristically, did it occur to Joe to attempt any resistance. It would have been useless in any case. Even had he won a moment's freedom he was no runner in his present form. Slow and heavy though Bellamy might be, he would have caught him in twenty yards. But Joe

trusted his wits to save him.

It was not more than a ten minutes' walk; would have been less than that but that the hedge-side path did not follow the shorter course of the tunnel and that the way was steep at first, though it took the hill at a slant.

Joe tried conversation, wishing his companion to think him as keen as himself upon the dangerous ferreting that he had undertaken. He got no answer.

He took refuge in one of the tuneless songs which, whether impromptu or the issue of previous cogitation, appeared to be inexhaustible. They were mostly of a pattern which left a doubt in the hearer's mind as to which of the themes of the Persian poet—"Horses and women"—had supplied their inspiration. Possibly Joe himself was no clearer.

"Never a skinnier
Jade of Virginia——"

he commenced very cheerfully, but nothing further will ever be known of the sequel of these ambiguous lines. Bellamy shook him savagely. He desired no diversions from the object of their expedition.

Joe went on in silence.

It was when they came to the fence that edged the top of the bank above the entrance to the tunnel that he was able to use his wits for his skin's safety. He remembered that Smith had brought a miner's lamp for use if they should have decided to explore the tunnel after the murder which they had planned. No doubt it still lay where he had been in ambush behind the birches.

They could not well climb the fence arm-in-arm, and Joe's willingness to go first, and his suggestion that they should use the lamp, dispelled any doubt the furnaceman may have felt; or he may have become careless of his companion's movements now that he had guided him to the place he sought.

Anyway, he let Joe scramble down the bank in advance to where the lamp lay, and then, when they had lit it, to continue ahead till they had reached the rails.

When Joe waited for him there and walked by his side to the tunnel entrance, he made no further effort to hold him. Perhaps, as he thought himself close to his intended victims, his clouded mind lost consciousness of other matters. Anyway, Joe carried out the plan he had formed. They went up to the very mouth of the tunnel together, and then with a sudden spurt of agility, Joe turned and bolted up the further bank. Bellamy took no heed of him whatever. With the lamp in one hand and the sledge in the other, he went on between the metals.

Finding that he was not followed, Joe turned on the bank and waited. A long minute passed. Then a rifle-shot reverberated loudly. He thought that he

heard the bullet pass, and concluded reasonably that it had left its objective uninjured. Two other shots followed, but less loudly, followed by a longer silence. At last he ventured to the mouth of the tunnel. He stood there for some time, alert to retreat at the first sign of life that the dark entrance might offer; but nothing moved. As his eyes adapted themselves to the shadows he could see dimly the bulk of the loaded trolley. Curiosity striving with caution, he went a few steps forward. He came to the body of Smith. It lay between the metals, face upwards. It had bled very freely. Curiosity died.

He was not normally sensitive to the unseen, but he felt that death, and the menace of death, were around him. He believed that he was watched, though he could see no one.

With his instinctive preference for mental rather than physical conflict, he tried to propitiate the darkness, calling to the unknown to inquire if any help could be given.

His voice sounded hollow and unnatural, and an echo returned it.

There was no other response, either of sound or motion, and he turned back to the sunlight.

[XI]

It cannot be known whether Bellamy saw the light before Claire's hurried action extinguished it. He may have done so, but the sequel leaves it in doubt.

He walked forward steadily, flashing his lamp from side to side, the heavy hammer in readiness. He moved as one who searches for cockroaches. His sole concern appeared to be that his prey should not pass him in the darkness.

The civilization which persecuted motherhood and yet regarded human life as a super-sacred thing was beneath the waters, and the incidents of the last two days had emancipated Claire from its superstitions by the hard logic of circumstance. Since the last sunset she had escaped the extremity of degradation, she had won a lover, and she had killed twice without mercy. Yet she was by nature sensitive, kindly, and chivalrous beyond the custom of women. To any other living creature she would have reacted differently, but the sight of this man, the memory of the indignities which she had suffered, of the fate which had shadowed her, roused her to an implacable hatred. She did not fear him, though she was still black from the blows he had given her; she did not think of flight; she felt that it was Martin's place to kill him.

Martin was cooler. He had won the fight, and he had won the woman. His adversary had won nothing but a broken head. He had no occasion for bitterness. But Claire's tense whisper, "Don't fire too soon; make sure," told him how she felt.

Anyway, he saw quite clearly that he must shoot to kill, and had no doubt

that he should do it. He wondered at the folly of their opponents who came in small numbers to be shot down when a rush of many might overwhelm them.

He was behind the shelter of the trolley, Claire being on his right. He rested the rifle on the impedimenta with which it had been loaded. Bellamy walked between the metals directly toward them. Martin did not think he could miss, though he was unused to the weapon. He wondered how hard it would kick. If he missed, he could fire again. So he waited. In fact, under the hypnotism of Claire's admonition, he waited too long.

The giant form was not twelve paces distant when he fired. It did not seem possible to miss; but miss he did. The furnaceman's neck was grazed by the bullet, that was all. Up to that moment he had shown no sign that he observed the trolley though he was so close upon it. But as the shot was fired he ducked and ran round the right-hand side before Martin could get another shot at him.

Claire saw him coming upon her and met him bravely. She fired twice. Both shots hit their object, and the second caused the giant to falter in his stride, but they did not stay him. And then he had struck the pistol from her, and one huge hand was on her throat choking the cry which she would have uttered. She struck fiercely with her right hand at the loathsome face that was so close to her own in the half-darkness, hitting the fractured cheekbone, and caused the great head to flinch and groan, but it would have availed her nothing against the strength which was choking her had not her rescue come at the instant.

Martin let the rifle go as he realized what was happening, caught up the spear which was leaning beside him, paused only for an unavoidable second because Claire was between him and her attacker, and then thrust as she swayed aside in the struggle. It was no mortal wound, but the blade cut through the tendons of the leg, which gave way so that the huge form collapsed to the ground, dragging Claire with him. But he loosed his grasp as he fell, and the next instant she had struggled free.

The sledge-hammer was dropped as he fell, but lay close at his hand. Knowing how he could throw it, Martin snatched at it, catching it near the head in his left hand just as Bellamy got it at the other end. His strength would have been no match for his opponent, but he jabbed at the clutching hand, and it loosened, and he was able to pull the hammer clear. He stood a few paces back, with Claire beside him. There was something bestially repulsive in the sprawling form that was incapacitated, without any mortal wound, and that was making grotesque efforts in the half-light to rise and reach them. Claire, her throat painful and her breath still coming with difficulty, was conscious only of fear and a hysterical desire to end the horror. "*Oh, kill him, kill him*," she urged, and did not know that her voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

Martin hesitated, with less than his usual logic. Their opponent seemed

helpless, and there were deep instincts which objected to the killing of a fallen foe under such circumstances. While he paused a large stone came under Bellamy's groping fingers. Rising on his other arm, he threw it with all his force. It hit Martin over the left temple, and he fell where he stood.

After that Claire killed him. If she might otherwise have hesitated she had no choice when she saw him crawling toward Martin. She ran forward and got the spear a second before his hand would have reached it.

Then began a scene of which she would never afterwards think willingly, though she was to see much of bloodshed and much of horror in the days to be. She circled round the sprawling bulk, giving it quick stabs whenever she could, while keeping clear of the great hands that made desperate efforts to reach her, well knowing that if she should once fall into that fatal hold her life would end very quickly. Nor could she safely stab, except where his hands could not reach the spear, or so quickly that he had no time to grasp it.

It was only when he was weakened by a dozen thrusts that she got him fairly in the throat, and as she pulled the spear free that time she knew that it was over, and with the thought knew that her own consciousness was leaving her.

Had Joe ventured to a fuller investigation he would have found Bellamy still twitching slightly in a pool of his own blood, while Martin lay stunned a few paces distant, with Claire faint and unconscious beside him.

But Joe went back, wondering whether Bellamy might not be chasing them through the tunnel to where the fire would block, or his companions seize them.

If that were so, he wished to be in at the death. If Bellamy had failed, it would be a chance for better brains, and he thought he knew where to find them.

BOOK IV

HELEN AND CLAIRE

THERE are women who are incapable of tragedy. An invincible triviality protects them.

Mary Wittels was of this order. Fortune, which had endowed her with a mysterious malady, variously reported as neuritis, rheumatism, or sciatica, but which she honestly believed to be peculiar to herself, had, with an almost equal kindliness, appointed her lodge-keeper to the Staffordshire mansion of the Earl of Hallowby. No one who knew the earl would be likely to suppose that she received any remuneration from that source, and it was therefore a natural development in the social disorder of which she was a by-product, that she should support herself by the retailing of gossip in return for the offerings which her neighbors gave her. She did this without malice, and became, in the course of years, somewhat expert in distinguishing between that which was authentic and that which would bring discredit upon her should she extend its publicity. With a generosity which is seldom duplicated, Fortune befriended her again when it was spreading ruin over a continent. Unable to join the wild flight to northward (even had her common sense been insufficient to prevent such a folly), she owed her life to two further circumstances.

First, the Earl of Hallowby was a gambler. Not being a bookmaker, and being too stupid even for successful dishonesty, he lost continually, as honest gamblers are apt to do. There is nothing here to regret. His money passed into other hands. They may have been better able to control it for the common good: that they were less so is not easily to be imagined. Being short of money, he fell among lawyers, who gave him good advice, and robbed him further with an air of detachment which gave their procedure an appearance as of the inevitability of natural law rather than of human ingenuity.

He desired to cut down an avenue of trees which his ancestors had planted, and inquired of them whether the conditions on which he held the estate (which was entailed) would permit him to do so. They informed him that it was a doubtful point which the Courts must settle. The question depended upon the construction of a single unpunctuated sentence in a document which had been drawn in their own office. In the course of two years the Courts had decided it as he desired, incidentally saving the life of Mary Wittels, for the

avenue extended to the lodge gate and would surely have overwhelmed her. The timber was sold, a large part of the proceeds remaining in the hands of the legal gentlemen he had trusted. They signed a strip of colored paper, and their bankers transferred a substantial sum from "Clients' " to "Office" account when they received it. It was all most orderly. They robbed him strictly according to scale, and their intelligence was such that they would have considered it dishonest to charge him more than the rate agreed by the trade union to which they belonged. The bureaucracy took its share of the plunder with a like urbanity.

The Earl of Hallowby did not doubt that the propriety of felling trees could be affected by the appearance of red stamps on blue paper, and that those who had brought these colors into juxtaposition were entitled to a third of the proceeds of the avenue to which they related. In the end it made no real difference except to Mary Wittels.

The second point on which Fortune had befriended her was that the lodge was very squat in shape, and was built of heavy stone blocks. Unlike most buildings of its kind, and possibly because it was built against a bank which rose steeply at the northern side of the lodge gates, its roof had a single slope to southward.

It would be wrong to say that Mary was not affected by the storm. She was destined to remember it for many years as the night when her larder window was blown in with disastrous consequences to a pot of strawberry jam which Mrs. Swadkins had given her. The next day her leg was troublesome, and, supposing that callers would be few in such weather, she lay in bed.

When the storm fell, and the road became congested with a flying crowd, she remarked to herself (quite truly) that it was "wurs nor a bank 'oliday." She got up to close her window from the noise, and asked the passers what was "up" to explain their haste. But they took no notice, or replied with nonsense such as should not be spoken to an elderly person who asks a question politely. She was too sensible to believe them, and the latch clicked sharply as she closed it with less than her usual calmness.

During the evening she had been wakened sharply from a pleasant doze by a sensation of sinking, which had left her faint and dizzy. At the same time the clock had slid perilously along the mantel-shelf and the china dogs had fallen. There had been a noise of earth and stones that rattled upon the roof from the ivied bank above it. No doubt, in that lay the whole explanation, and she knew how *that* must have happened. Drat them boys!

As the day passed, the hurrying crowd passed with it, and the moon looked on an empty road and a small gray building in which Mary was sleeping peacefully. No doubt Mrs. Swadkins would call in the morning and tell her the news. There must be a fair somewhere.

The morning came, bright, and warm, and peaceful, and though Mrs. Swadkins did not call she had other visitors. They were some men from the mine. They carried the body of a woman, and asked leave to lay it on her bed. They had two children with them wrapped in their coats, children that were alert with hunger, but shy of strangeness, aware that they were kindly held, but looking ever with a pleading wonder at the still form on the bed which they had tried so hard to waken.

Tom Aldworth was one of these men. He was wet through as though he had been in the pond. She guessed an accident, but she could get no reasonable details. As to that, she never did. It was two days before anyone had the sense to tell her the real news; that the Hall had been burnt down while she slept, and no one had got the engines from Netherfield. There had been floods, too, worse than those of 1910 if they told the truth—but "folk will exaggerate." It seemed that most of her old neighbors moved away after the Hall was burnt. Anyway, they no longer came to see her. And those who did come, after a time, brought her more fish, and less of other things, than she needed.

Also, a few days after the storm, there was trouble among the miners and some strange men that had come into the district. Other changes came as changes will; but they did not greatly affect her. Ten years after, she died.

I should be sorry to give the impression that Mary Wittels was an exceptionally foolish woman. She had, among other things, the practical helpfulness that is common to those who live lonely lives and minister to their own necessities.

She quickly discovered that Helen was not dead, and fortunately for Helen she knew nothing of medicine. There were very few doctors or nurses of that time who would not have worried the faint spark of life into extinction, after the fashion of those who poke too zealously at the faint effort of a flickering fire till it gives up the unequal contest. It would have been unfair to blame them. They had been taught to do so many things, some of them of a quite useful or comforting nature, few of which would have done any harm to a healthy body. They had also developed an expert technique for rendering death as arduous and prolonged as possible. It would not have occurred to them that a life which had survived the exertions which had prostrated its body, and the exposures of the night, would be very unlikely to retire when that body was quiet, and warm, and unworried. Besides, had she died under such circumstances, they would almost certainly have been accused of having done nothing to save her.

If many people at the extremity of weakness were waked, and washed, and harried to death, others were healed very skilfully. But only very few of the poorest and lowliest of that time were allowed to die in peace.

Mary did no more than to cut off the sodden garments—partly dry where

the morning wind had reached them, but still soaked where they had been beneath her—and to cover her warmly, giving her the hot-water bottles which she kept for her own comfort.

She had told Tom Aldworth that he must bring milk and other things for the children, and he returned with these later in the morning. She did not ask how he got them.

She asked for money, which he gave her freely, but told her that the printed slips had lost their value, as he did it. Tom Aldworth would have his joke.

Later Helen waked to an uncertain consciousness. She drank the milk that was offered. She knew that the two children were lifted in to her, one on each side—there was no other bed—and she returned to a contented oblivion.

But she did not quickly recover. There was no one to name her malady. Were it pneumonia, or rheumatic fever, or both, or neither, there was no one to tell her. Pain and thirst she knew; fever and delirium. Through it all the children slept beside her. In conscious intervals her weak hands held them. When she was at her worst, she would change to contented sleep when the old woman lifted them in to her. And they were very quiet and very gentle as they lay beside her, with the age-old wisdom of children, their minds aware of the present, without the preoccupations of the years which civilization would have destined for them, making their later lives to pass with the deadened consciousness of an unhealthy dream.

In the end, as the days dawned and the sunlight fell on her through the open window, the fever left and health returned very slowly.

Through it all the old woman ministered to her, sleeping in a cushioned chair by the hearth with her legs on another. She thought of the five one-pound notes in the tea-caddy, and felt that she could not grumble, though her bones ached somewhat in consequence.

Every day Tom Aldworth brought the milk and food which they needed—except for two days, when he was absent, and food was scarce.

Then he came again, with a bruised chin and a reddened bandage round his arm. Trouble there must have been, but it did not come near them.

Then he was as regular as before, and the children learned to look for him, and would run to meet him along the road where vehicles no longer passed to their danger.

But after a time Tom stopped that. He spoke to Mary vaguely of cattle that might be wandering, and then, seeing that he had not impressed her, more definitely of a “mad dog” that was running loose. She was alarmed at that. Mad dogs were in her own tradition. Jim Poulton’s great-uncle had died of a mad dog’s bite, and Jim had inherited the cottage at Cross-over, and married Jane Welch in consequence. Everyone knew that.

So she approved when Tom put a new chain on the park gate, and a

padlock of which he kept the key, even though she could not have got out herself had she wished to do so. He was so careful that he went at times through the park itself to see that the mad dog was not there, and strengthened the weaker spots in the fencing.

But nothing vexed them, neither dog nor cattle, and the day came when Helen could sit out in the little porch, and Tom would stay to talk with her.

Naturally, with returning strength, her thoughts turned to Martin. She felt sure that he lived. She did not blame herself. She knew that Martin would feel as she did that the first thought must be to save the children. She could not have done this had she waited for his return. But she realized that he must suppose that they had perished. It was her first duty to seek him. She questioned Tom eagerly as to where he might still be living, and the way by which she could search.

Tom did not refuse to help, but was not entirely encouraging. He saw difficulties in such a search at which she did not guess, and of which he was not quick to tell her.

He knew that there was a considerable expanse of country—probably half of Staffordshire, and stretching further west than that county, above water. On its northern portion there were a considerable number of people living who had been arrested in their flight by the surrounding floods. He believed the southern portion, where it was possible that Martin might still live, to be inhabited very thinly, if at all, except by some roving bands of licentious character, who had been expelled from the general community, or had voluntarily left it. He had himself been engaged in a conflict which had resulted in the expulsion of some of these. He said vaguely that it was a question of the treatment of women. Some had been killed on either side in this fighting.

Among those who remained she learned that there was great confusion. There was no government. There was neither freedom nor discipline. Appeal was made to old laws, or their authority was denied, as advantage turned the scale.

There was no settled law of property. Each man took what he could find, and kept what he could hold. Crimes of violence were frequent. There had been communal acts of lawless justice. Spasmodic attempts at order and government were springing up, and jealousies and disputes were destroying them.

Helen saw that she would have no easy task; and there were the children to be considered. Anyway, she must wait till she should be stronger. Could she ask this man, who had done so much, to do more to help her? It was while she dwelt doubtfully on this thought that an accidental discovery unexpectedly assisted her. It was the back-sheet of a picture paper, such as had been

produced daily in millions for a race which could afford to purchase them, but which could not exert itself sufficiently to feed its children.

Over the top were the words "THE WATSON MURDER." Beneath was a portrait of Martin as "Leading Counsel for the Accused," and then, in the dock with a warder on either side, "Thomas Aldworth." She had no doubt of the identity. The name and the likeness were sufficient evidence. She remembered that Martin, who had no regular criminal practice, had taken the brief because he had known the prisoner's mother. He had told her that he had done it because the boy was worth saving, and there would be no chance for him whatever if he fell into the hands of Burtis Kennet, or any of the lawyers who made a reputation by defending clients who were almost always hanged at the conclusion of their eloquence.

Having this knowledge, she hesitated as to the use, if any, to which she could put it. She owed much to Tom Aldworth. She could not tell whether he knew that she was Martin's wife, and were actuated by any motive of gratitude. She had told him her name casually, not supposing that it could have any significance. But that was after he had been waiting upon them through the first weeks of her illness, when he could have known nothing.

She knew that he had companions now, though she had seen nothing of them. They might know of his past. More probably (she supposed) they might not. He might not welcome the fact that she should be aware of it. Nor would she care to use it to coerce him to unwilling service. She decided to say nothing; but the knowledge made this difference, that she had the less scruple in asking him for any further help which he might be willing to render. This she resolved to do, but, with a fine instinct, she first destroyed the newspaper which provided evidence of his identity.

After she formed this resolution there was a second unusual interval of two or three days during which he did not come. When he came he appeared tired and preoccupied, but on her saying that she had decided to set out the next day to find the place from which the floods had driven her, or, at least, to see how nearly she could approach it, his reply was alert and decisive: "You cannot possibly do that now."

She said: "I don't see that it need be such a great matter. I know where we are now, and I don't think my home could have been more than twenty miles from here—and perhaps not more than fifteen in a direct line. You have told me that at least several miles in that direction" ("More than that," Tom interjected) "is above water. I feel sure that my husband is living, and I know where to look for him. He could not suppose that I have escaped, nor would he search at this distance. I may be wrong in my hope, and he may have died, but if I see how far, and in what direction, the country was flooded, I can better judge whether this hope has any reason to support it, and if he be alive it

should not be difficult to find him. Surely there must be some on that edge of the flood who have escaped, and they would know if he be living."

Tom was not quick to speak. He had many things on his mind of which she knew nothing. He had no reluctance to serve her, but she was asking more than she knew.

He felt that there was much to explain. She had been living in a world of which she had no realization. In the eyes of this world, she was his woman, though she did not know it. He had only to say, "I do not want her," and she would be very quickly taken by others. Even here, that was so. Farther south—

He felt that he must tell her all, but he found it hard to begin. He was not naturally eloquent. And there was a space between them that was not easy to overcome. The friendliness of her eyes was so remote. Even her gratitude came from a distance.

She was five years older than he, and he knew that she regarded him as a boy. The natures of men and women had not changed, though they were reacting differently to a new environment.

She saw that he was silent and embarrassed, which was significant of something exceptional, for his words and actions were usually of a direct simplicity.

They were standing outside the door of the lodge when she first spoke. She was of the same height as he, though she appeared taller. She looked at him in some wonder at his silence, and his eyes fell before hers. She saw a young man, short but broad, strongly built, with a blunt-featured face, showing character rather than intellect. Not a weak face, but one that a child would trust in an instant, as her own children did trust. As she trusted.

He was conscious that here was the woman for whom he longed, of whom he dreamed, whom he had saved and guarded, standing before him in a recovered loveliness, in his power, and dependent upon him. His surely by the strongest rights, and his to take without restraint except only the restraints of his own nature if such there were.

His by every right! What would she say if he told her? And the time had come for the telling.

A fear struck her that he might know that Martin was dead.

She spoke in a voice that was low and troubled. "You have something to tell me. Shall we sit here?"

She led the way to a rustic seat by the gate, which he had repaired for her use.

It was afternoon, and the babies were asleep on the bed. The old woman dozed by the hearth. They were alone beneath the unchanging trees. Only the weed-grown drive showed that the hand of man had been lifted from the land that he had once tamed to his purpose.

Tom spoke awkwardly at first, not knowing how best to begin, but the woman he addressed was neither child nor fool, and she may have already guessed or imagined more than he supposed of that which he had to tell her.

"You couldn't go alone," he began. "You couldn't go alone *anywhere*. I couldn't take you safely into the part you came from, unless we were a large party. I'll find him for you, if I can—if you really want him. I don't suppose he's alive. It isn't likely. But he saved my life once, and now I've got to do this. But I hope he isn't."

The last expression burst out as though against his will, and he lifted his eyes suddenly and gave her a direct glance as he said it.

"Tom!" she exclaimed. "Why on earth——" And her eyes fell, and her voice sank into silence.

"You've got to understand," he said doggedly. "If we leave here at all, you've got to go as my wife. It's the only possible way. If you don't want me, you must choose someone you like better. They wouldn't help you to find a man that's gone. It isn't sense. You couldn't expect it."

"But," she said, "I thought you told me—I know there's no law now—but I thought you said that you had driven out the men who——"

He interrupted her. "So we have. So we did. Some of us got killed doing it. Some more of us may get killed tomorrow. We haven't finished yet. That's another tale that I've got to tell you. Then you'll understand better. We've given the women more choice than we have ourselves. But they've got to choose. I'd better tell you how it began.

"When the earthquake came, the land broke north of here. It's as though it broke across and was pushed up. If you go north, you come to a high cliff and look down on sea. Nothing but sea. If you go south, it's mostly downhill until the land comes to the sea and goes under. It's as though it was lifted sideways, although, of course, very slightly.

"When this happened there were still a lot of people on the roads that go north. When the roads were snapped off short they had to stop—if they hadn't gone too far. Those behind came on to the same point, and so there were hundreds of people along the northern edge, but few left in the land behind them.

"Most of the people were in a state of panic. In the first weeks many died. Some from disease and exposure, some from violence, some because they just seemed too frightened to live. They robbed each other. They searched ruins for plunder. It's not much better now. But some of us are trying. We know there's a winter coming.

"I was down a mine when the first trouble came. There was a fall, and we thought we should never get out. But we did at last, along a disused working. I needn't tell you about that. When we were out it took some time to find out

what had happened, and longer for some of us to believe it.

"We were a mixed lot, but we had one advantage. We knew each other, and most of the other people were strangers.

"So we kept together more or less, and the others feared us, till we quarreled among ourselves.

"Most of our men had lost their wives and families. If they weren't killed in the ruins they had fled to the north and been drowned. When they understood that this thing had come to stay, they wanted others. That was the trouble. There aren't enough women to go round. Not nearly. There was quarreling and fighting, and some women were taken by force from those who were weak or friendless. Some of them were very badly used.

"We got a meeting together to try to settle what should be done. It was proposed that things should be left to go on as they were, and if two men wanted the same woman they could fight it out. But most didn't like that. The women were too few. It meant too much fighting——

"No one wanted you then. You were too ill. They didn't think you would live. That's why you were left alone. I asked whether they would listen to a proposal from me which would be fair to all. I said I shouldn't claim anyone except you, anyway. So they supposed I should be fair, as it meant nothing to me, and a lot of them listened.

"I said the only peaceable way would be to let the women choose for themselves. I said that every woman could say which man she preferred, and if he were willing to have her, that ended it. If he were not willing, she must choose again. There weren't many men that were unwilling. They were too much afraid of getting left altogether.

"But if a woman wouldn't choose, I said she must take her chance. With only one woman to every four men, you couldn't ask those men to fight for a woman to keep her unmarried, unless she'd a good reason to show for it. Anyway, they wouldn't have done it. I had done all I could.

"But a lot wouldn't agree. There was a man named Rattray—he got killed—and Jerry Cooper, and a big brute named Bellamy. They wanted to dice for them, or to have them in turn, one way or other. We quarreled over that, and drove them out. Some went with Bellamy, and a lot more with Cooper. We were all the better without them.

"But they are wandering about to the south, plundering what they can find. I don't think they have any women at all. Certainly not many. We didn't think they'd dare to come near us again, but last week some men from Bellamy's gang came in the night and stole a girl from a place about a mile from here.

"We knew we'd got to stop that, so a number of us set out to search. I was one of those who found her. She was dead. But we know who did it.

"Tomorrow morning we're going out to hunt them. There are about forty

of us who are willing. We intend to kill the lot. They will be no loss, and there will be no safety for anyone till it's done. We shan't interfere with Jerry's gang, unless they interfere with us, but I expect it will come to the same thing in the end. It must.

"We've got to make a new start, and we ought to make it a good one."

"But," she said, her mind striving honestly enough to visualize the things he told and to understand them fairly, and yet reducing them to the personal equation, as a woman will, "it doesn't seem a good start to make women marry against their will. It seems savage to me."

"It's not much use saying that," he answered shortly, "unless you can tell me a better way. A way that'd *work*. We haven't tried it long, but it seems better than it used to be. Of course, it's different from if there were more women. You've got to look at things as they are."

"But what should you do if a woman refused to make a choice at all?" she asked anxiously.

"They don't," he said bluntly, and she fell silent. She thought that she must find Martin at any cost, at any risk; and to do this she had only the aid of the man beside her, to whom she owed so much, and to whom, in the eyes of all that remained of her civilization, she belonged already.

Her mind went off on a fresh track. "I suppose," she asked, "you let them be married properly? You haven't abolished marriage as one of your improvements on the old order?"

He stared at her in a moment's silence before he answered.

"We haven't got any registrars, if you mean that, and the churches went with the rest. It's not that that makes a marriage." His meaning was, perhaps, more clear than his grammar. "And the clergy haven't been very fortunate in surviving. There was one man who started preaching about hell-fire, and Bellamy threw him over the cliff before anyone could interfere. It was one of the reasons for driving Bellamy out, though I don't think any of us had enjoyed the preaching. We thought we had troubles enough. The flood's rather washed religion out, hasn't it?"

"I don't know that," she said quietly, "if it were true a year ago, it must be true today. A flood cannot change it—even such a flood as this. But I see how you felt. It wasn't quite the right kind of preaching for those who heard it. But I think that men must always have a religion. They will rather have a bad one than none at all."

"I don't know," he said, "I never had much. But things are all wrong as they are. And getting worse—and they'll go on getting worse, unless we can find someone to boss them."

He fell silent. Both of them had the same problem in mind behind the conversation that screened their dispositions for a battle that must be fought

out before they parted.

As he did not continue, she asked a question natural to one of her social and political experiences. “If there’s so much confusion, why don’t you have a meeting, and choose someone to govern, someone to get things in order?”

He laughed shortly. “Yes, it sounds easy. We tried that. But how could people choose who were all strange to each other? And who was to say who was to vote and who wasn’t? Some said the women should vote, and some wouldn’t have it. We quarreled over that, and got no further. You have to begin somewhere. We’ve got no start. And most of them didn’t come, and wouldn’t have cared what we voted. They were looking for food. But I’ve learnt one thing. It’s only strength that counts. Anyway, it’s only strength at the start. But they’ll most die when the cold comes, if nothing’s done. There’s a lot that are dying now. It isn’t all the best men that got saved. Votes? No, by God!” His voice rose to a sudden energy that startled her, for she had never heard it from him before. “I’ll tell you this. There are forty chaps that are coming with me tomorrow, and if we knew of any man who was fit to boss this show, he’d have his chance, and if that damned Butcher tried to stop it, he’d go after his motor——”

“After his motor?” she inquired in some natural confusion, that did not pause to ascertain whether Butcher was a surname, or indicative of an occupation which had a necessary and honorable place in the social order from which she came.

“Oh yes,” he said, “the lads sent the motors over the cliff. Best thing, too.”

He did not explain why these evidences of the progress of civilization had received such treatment.

“Now, *he* could have done it,” he began again, and she knew at once of whom he spoke, though no name passed between them. “I almost wish he were here.” He turned to her with the vigor of a sudden resolution, and she knew that the moment of decision was upon her. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do, and I’ll tell you why. But I shall want a promise from you.

“He saved my life once. I was caught, and tried for murder. I’d done it, right enough. I told him that. I didn’t see I was much wrong. It was Dick Winter who started it. He asked me to join him for a lark in a burglary at a house near where we lived. Of course, I said ‘Yes.’ I’d have said ‘Yes’ to anything. Life was so dull then. We didn’t know what was coming. If I had, I’d have waited. And then I should have stayed at Tanner’s Green Colliery, and been drowned, and shouldn’t have been here now. Life’s a queer game, however we play it.

“We thought the place was empty, but when we got there Dick funked. He said he’d stay outside and watch. I never saw him again.

“I went in, and I hadn’t picked up anything before I had a pistol bullet by

my ear, and a voice shouting to me to put my hands up. I put them up right enough, but there was a table by where I stood with a stick lying on it, and my hand went up with the stick in it, and came down just as he fired again. He didn't hit me—I don't know whether he meant to—I think he was too scared to know himself—but I hit him. He was dead next day. They said he had a very thin skull—and the stick was a loaded one. How was I to know?

"I got away, but they caught me. They proved there were two of us, and that one stayed outside. They proved that I was one of the two. They proved a lot, but they couldn't prove who was with me, and they couldn't prove which of us went in. I'd had the sense to wear gloves.

"So I was sent for trial. My lawyers wanted to defend it differently, but he had his own way. He wouldn't trouble about anything except that they couldn't prove it was I that went in. He just held on to the one point that even a murder case has to be proved, and it was their business to prove it, not ours to prove I didn't. We didn't trouble to dispute that I was one of the two.

"I didn't think he'd win it, but he got the judge half-way with him, and the jury went the rest. I suppose they all thought I was guilty by the line we took, but it came off right in the end.

"Now I'm not going to take his wife if he's alive and wants her. I'm not that sort.

"I'll look for him where you say, and if he's there I'll bring him back. You can't ask more than that.

"But if I can't find him, you're mine, and you've got to promise that first. I'll look for him straight enough, and if he's not found you're mine in a month from now. I won't ask whether you'd rather I found him. I'm doing this for him, not for you. I'll never ask that. But you've got to promise first. I've done something for you already—I dare say I want you more than he ever did. And you can't go now and pick up another girl in the next street. I think that's a fair deal all round, and I hope you'll say the same."

He looked at her rather anxiously, but there was an expression of dogged determination about his mouth, which told her that he was prepared to fight for what he thought his rights, though he might not wish to do so.

She said: "Even if you don't ask, I must tell you. You have been good to me, and the babies, and I know we might have died but for you. I can see that we owe our safety to you all the time. I'm not ungrateful. I suppose it's generous of you to say you'll help me at all, if you feel as you say; but I don't care for you in the way you mean. I don't care for you in the least. It's the truth, and it's best said. If you'll help me, I'll thank you, and if you won't I'll set out alone."

"Oh no, you won't," he said. "I go on my terms, or not at all."

She flashed into sudden anger. "If you think you'll get me that way, you're

just wrong. You never will. I'd kill myself sooner."

"No, you wouldn't," he answered, her anger turning his own mood to a smiling geniality. "You'll find we'll get on well enough. You'll be glad enough before long. Besides, you forget the babies."

Yes, for the moment, she had forgotten the babies. Her heart sank at the thought, for she knew that, at the worst, she must yield at last. She might put off her decision, she might escape in the night, but what fate would be hers in such a world as he had shown her? What fate would come to her children?

He seemed to understand her thoughts, for he went on. "You think it's hard now, but it isn't really. If he's dead, you must marry someone. That's sense. That's what women are made for—and men. You can't stop at two babies. You're too good for that. We're learning to look at things straight, and to see clearly."

It was a strange wooing, without any familiarity or attempted tenderness. He had his own ideas of honor, and he would do nothing till they were agreed upon the death of the man who had once fought to save him; but he had made her feel that she was in his power, and that he would have his way in the end. She knew also that it might have been worse, and that there was some right in the claim he made. She showed how far she had weakened when she said: "Anyway, a month would be far too short a time to prove anything."

"No, it wouldn't," he answered. "You don't understand how things are. If he's alive, I'll find him in less than that. But it's that or nothing. I needn't go at all."

"You won't go alone," she said, "I shall come with you."

"No, you won't. You couldn't. You *won't* understand," he said with a note of unusual exasperation. "You're safe here, fairly safe, because this road leads nowhere now, because there's twenty or more of us camping between you and the land side, because they know I'm not one to play tricks with, because they haven't seen you since you were carried in, washed-out and dead-looking, because they don't know you're well again. But you won't be very safe when I'm away, and you won't be safe at all if I don't come back, unless I promise you to someone I can trust before I go."

"If I don't come," she asked, "how shall I know that you have really searched?"

"Because I say so, and because I needn't do it, and because I've told you why," he answered, and in the end she promised. What else, she thought bitterly, could she do? And yet she was not wholly unhappy. She believed that Martin lived. She believed that Tom would play fair. She believed he would find him. She had trusted so often to Martin, and he had never failed her yet. Surely he would come before it should be too late. And she had saved his children! She believed that she would meet him yet without reproach or

sorrow.

She lay awake that night for a long time, praying that he would come back before the month should be over, and meanwhile, in the warmth of the forest night, in the deep grass that grew between the oak and the brambles, Martin held a woman down beneath an arm that was tense with passion, and gave his answer to a voice that pleaded: "*For always, and always?*"

[II]

They were twenty-nine men, not forty, who met Tom Aldworth next morning. Some who had promised did not come, having good reasons or bad ones.

Some of those who did, were unwilling that so many should set out together, not trusting those who would be left.

In the end he set out with twenty-two others, of whom he was the actual though not an elected leader.

His position was given tacitly in recognition of a proved and stubborn courage, and a mind that was always sure of its own purpose. They had found him ready and unflurried in moments of difficulty, with a straightforward habit of mind that sometimes made a muddled issue look simple. It had become a saying among them that "you are always sure of Tom."

They had learned to recognize in him also a sense of equity which gave confidence, and the value of which was realized in the lawless chaos to which they had fallen.

This chaos is sufficiently indicated by the smallness of the force which was now setting out. It is true that it was comparatively well armed and equipped for its purpose, which its members had little doubt of their ability to fulfil. But their aim not being merely the defeat, but the extermination of Bellamy's gang, properly required a decisive superiority in numbers, as well as in spirit and weapons, and it is less than creditable to the majority of those who had joined before in the common interest, to expel the more brutal elements of the community, that they should have been absent now. But there was not here a sufficiently urgent necessity or immediate danger to unite them in more than verbal indignation. They were agreed that vengeance must be executed, but most of them were content that the necessary exertion should be their neighbor's portion. Even of those who had definitely promised their help nearly half were absent.

But neither Tom nor his companions were greatly worried by these defections. The men who had assembled represented the best and the boldest elements in the fortuitous community to which they belonged. They all had firearms, either their own property or borrowed from neighbors for the purpose

of this expedition. The gunroom of a country house, which had been occupied by a nobleman of the game-preserving order, and which had escaped the ravages of storm and fire sufficiently for its armament to be little damaged, had supplied the majority with the lethal weapons they carried. But it was somewhat surprising to observe how generally the survivors of this world catastrophe had been able to produce or discover arms with which to defend themselves or to assist their depredations.

On the other hand, Bellamy and his followers, having been taken by surprise, had been disarmed before their expulsion, and even the four rifles which we have seen them to have possessed had been subsequently acquired, and their existence was not known, though it was obvious that they might have found some means to arm themselves afresh in the course of the nomadic plundering by which they lived.

Only in the event of Cooper's band obtruding themselves into the argument, which did not appear a probable contingency, was any serious fighting anticipated.

A long chase, with a scattering of those they sought, was an issue of which they were more fearful, and to avoid this they were concerned to move with speed and secrecy, and to surprise their intended victims.

It does not appear that there was any doubt among them as to the justice, as there was certainly none as to the expediency, of their intention. The men of Bellamy's gang could not all be equally guilty, and some might be entirely innocent of the abduction and murder which they were avenging, but, to the mind of Tom Aldworth at least, the problem was capable of only one solution.

The men who had been expelled with Bellamy had been of such character that they had looked to him as a natural leader: they advocated conditions of life which would have destroyed any possibility of a decent reconstruction of the civilization which had been swept aside. The incident which had occurred was a natural consequence of such an outlook.

The evil must be dug up from the root if they would not spend future years in abortive picking of its poisonous seedpods.

In looking at the position from the outside, it must be recognized that a community in which men predominated so largely could not easily adjust itself without conflict.

Nature, holding an impartial scale, would not fail to secure that the men most fitted to the new conditions should become the fathers of the next generation, although an individual life might fall to the dice of chance.

It was the exceptional fate of these people to have to live through conditions the most opposite in human experience. Having abolished the name of slavery, they had evolved a severity of social discipline beside which the average circumstances of the world's slaveries would be of a licentious

freedom. Suddenly they were removed from these restrictions to a condition more chaotic than those which had prevailed among the savages of Central Africa before they had bent their necks beneath the foot of the European.

The little force marched lightly, three pack-horses in their rear being sufficient for their equipment.

Before noon, following the London road, they had left twelve of its milestones behind them. They could have made more rapid progress, but they were controlled by the pace of scouts who were moving cautiously forward through the fields on either side, which were often too overgrown for easy passage even where the necessity for cover did not embarrass them.

Their way was through the wooded beauties of Cannock Chase, which, washed by rain and fed on clean sea-air, were recovering from the pollution which had degraded them. The highroad itself, showing a hardened and petrol-poisoned surface, still lay, a gray wheal from the whip-lash of civilization, across the face of the land.

It would have shown little change from what it had been three months before but for the piteous débris of the northward flight, which was still scattered upon it. These relics of disaster, together with the ruins of walls and buildings, the wrecks of trees, and poles, and wires, would have made vehicular progress slow, if not impossible, without a clearance, for which there was no inclination among those who had survived the event which caused them. Even the led horses often advanced with difficulty, and this was sometimes increased by their own nervousness, as when one of them stubbornly refused to pass the rusted wreck of a limousine, which appeared to have turned a somersault in the middle road after striking a hand-truck which it had overtaken and now lay with the clean-picked bones of a human arm projecting from beneath it.

But for a party of men on foot the road still allowed a quicker and easier passage than the fields and woodlands could offer. It was also safer, for the cattle, which were becoming wilder with every week of their recovered freedom, were disposed to avoid it, lurking rather by the sides of pools or in wooded places.

At the end of twelve miles they came to a point where the main road no longer supplied either a direct route to their objective or the cover which they felt that the remainder of their march required.

Here it crossed the cutting along which ran the single line of rail with which we are already familiar, and it was by this route that it was resolved to continue the advance, in ignorance, of course, of the events which had drawn the gang they sought to occupy it a few miles further south.

Students of military history know how wide is the gap between the theoretic and actual speeds at which even a small force in the lightest marching order can advance into a hostile territory.

The track between the metals was good enough, though it was now grown with a variety of coarse weeds, obscuring the sleepers, against the edges of which the horses stumbled frequently, but before that stage was reached they had to be persuaded to the descent of a bank which was too precipitous for their liking, and after the load of the first had been overset, it had been decided that it was necessary to unpack them and carry their burdens to the foot of the bank, where they were reloaded. Being so lightened, the horses made no further trouble about the descent, but an hour of tiring work in an afternoon of oppressive heat had been necessary, and when three or four miles further advance had been made, the desire for a second halt (for they had rested for some time before leaving the road) became too general to be ignored in a force which knew no more discipline than is derived from a spirit of good-will and the inspiration of a common purpose.

It was Tom Aldworth's proposal, the common sense of which had been easily approved by his companions, that they should endeavor to locate the camp they sought before the darkness came, but that they should not make any near approach until the night had fallen. Then they would surround it completely and attack it when the light returned.

As they approached the climax of their enterprise, Tom was conscious of an uneasy fear lest they should be met in a manner too pacific for their own intentions. His disposition was far from implacable, and he realized that what may be planned in the heat of indignation or at the dictates of reason may be difficult to execute in cold blood at a later period.

He would have been very honestly indignant had it been suggested that he desired that any of his companions should be killed or wounded, yet, so illogical are the instincts of humanity, he did almost articulately hope that those whom they pursued would offer violent resistance to the fate which he intended for them.

But plans and fears alike were wasted. Possibly no action, probably no campaign in the world's history, has conformed to the tactical or strategic anticipations of either leader. Even Sir John Moore was forced at Corunna to give reluctant battle; even King John (a very able strategist) lost his mobility in the Wash; even Nelson—and Tom Aldworth was none of these.

Yet he showed more discretion than has distinguished some generals of international eminence, for when a faint haze of smoke was observed to be ascending about half a mile before them he halted at once, drew his little force into cover, and sent Jack Tolley forward, on the blind side of the hedge, to ascertain its meaning. He felt that his caution had been justified when the quiet

of the late afternoon was disturbed by the thudding echo of rifle-shots a few moments later.

The scout returned speedily. He had the virtue of reporting that which he saw with a literal accuracy, neither blurred by imagination nor confused by comment.

He stated that there was a tunnel about half a mile ahead, at the entrance to which a dump of coal had burnt itself out, and that the embankment on either side had also been alight, with the fencing above it. At one place it was still smoldering. A dozen men and a woman, some of whom he recognized as having been driven out with Bellamy, were watching the entrance to the tunnel. Two of these had rifles, and shots from these were fired into the tunnel at irregular intervals. But Bellamy was not among them, nor was Smith, of whom they were particularly in search.

These facts were capable of an explanation which was accepted too lightly. The gang might have quarreled among themselves, and Bellamy, with those who still held with him, be besieged in the tunnel to which they had retreated.

If they were engaged in destroying each other, there did not appear to be any urgent necessity to interfere. Certainly they did not wish to fight Bellamy's battles.

There appeared to be no reason why they should hurry their plans to such an extent as to disclose their presence before the darkness fell. They pitched camp in a wooded hollow near the line.

Recognizing that a tunnel has two exits, Tom sent the scout to explore further. He discovered that Joe had enlisted the help of four of the gang, who were throwing up a barrier which was already becoming a serious obstacle to anyone who should seek to come out at the further end.

Being men skilled in the handling of pick and shovel, they had made rapid progress, working two from either side and avoiding exposure to a direct line of fire by raising a mound before them as they advanced. They were cutting a trench of considerable depth across the entrance to the tunnel, and had removed a section of the rail as they did so. Joe had no intention of allowing Claire to escape in the night.

He sat on the bank, in the pleasant coolness of the evening air, smoking placidly and watching the labors of those that he had induced, by whatever promises, to carry out his plans.

As he did so he hummed his satisfaction at the increasing mortality which afflicted his companions. He had no doubt that Bellamy was dead. There had been the shots—and then the silence, and that was hours ago now.

"Bellamy lies on the cinder track;
They die of something, and don't come back.
I don't care what, and I don't care who,
For they're far too many when girls are few."

He thought with much contentment of the dead, contorted body which he had seen in the tunnel. He thought he could contrive that there would soon be others. He flicked a gnat from his wrist before it had time to bite. He had a very sensitive skin. . . .

The scout's report made it clear to Tom that the occupants of the tunnel were undergoing a siege of a determined character, but gave no cause to alter the supposition that the gang had quarreled among themselves. On his return, the scout had noticed that a cart was being brought into the field beside the line, and that the besiegers were evidently intending to camp there for the night.

[III]

War is an art, not a science. Its practice has been compared to the strife of the chessboard, but there is no similarity. To approach a true comparison we must imagine the game of two players whose sight should be so imperfect that they would see clearly only on their own side of the board; the portion from which their opponent's pieces would advance to attack them being dimly visible or in absolute darkness.

It is obvious that Martin and Claire might have left the further end of the tunnel without opposition after their defeat of Smith and Donovan, and again after the death of Bellamy, had they then been in a condition to do so. Even when Joe returned for the third time with his four assistants it is doubtful whether any one of them, having no firearms, would have stood his ground against a resolute sally. But they could not know this. They were afraid of the risk, and their fear was reasonable.

Yet when they saw the barrier being raised which would render it difficult for themselves and impossible for the trolley to pass out by that exit, they were disposed to regret that the risk, however great, had not been taken.

It was evidence of a settled purpose to besiege them, which was, in itself, daunting. It showed that their success in killing those who had invaded the tunnel had not been decisive in its results. They had only the vaguest knowledge of the number or personalities of their opponents. Others might have joined whom they had not seen at the camp. They realized that they might be attacked at any moment, either by night or day, or they might be merely blocked up until discomfort or starvation should dispose them to make terms

with their besiegers. They must be incessantly alert for an attack that might never come.

To Reddy Teller the position was very simple, and he had no intention of prolonging it. Among those of the gang that still lived he was—apart from Joe, who was scarcely reckoned to be one of them—the most capable, the most resolute, and possibly the least scrupulous. It was his disadvantage that he was not popular. Yet the plan that he proposed—after Joe had left them—was adopted readily enough. It was simply that they should wait for the darkest hour of the coming night, and then creep in silently and without lights.

If their opponents should be awake and in equal darkness they would have the advantage of numbers, while being otherwise on an equality; if their opponents should have any light they would be at a disadvantage, and the man could be shot and the woman taken with little risk. It sounded simple, and Teller, though not otherwise an attractive character, was not lacking in the courage or resolution to carry it out, as we may judge from the promptness and accuracy with which he threw the stool when he first came under our notice.

He had been content for Joe to occupy himself in blocking the further end. It not only prevented the escape of their intended prey, but it removed Joe and four others from the scene of the successful action which he anticipated. Reddy planned to be on the spot when Claire was captured, and he did not mind how many others should be absent. *The fewer the better fare*, was his motto.

Joe was equally assured of the superiority of his own strategy. He had acquired a wholesome respect for the prowess of those they sought, and he was well content that others should take the risk of the capture. He was not even disposed to think that the first attack would succeed. He might have countered his rival's proverb with *He laughs longest who laughs last*.

No doubt Joe was underrated by his new companions. He was not a heroic figure. He never had been that, and his newly acquired obesity was of an undignified order. They knew nothing of the cool and skilful riding which had made his reputation in a world that was already losing reality. He might prove a Napoleon of the new days, but even Napoleon at Acre . . . It is so difficult to be wise before the event.

And even Napoleon might have failed to provide against a foe of the proximity of which he was entirely ignorant. Fate was unkind to the military dispositions both of Reddy and Joe in this particular.

Tom Aldworth, better informed of the position on the chessboard than were any of the four whom we have already considered, and having the further advantage that he was aware of the extent of his ignorance, was yet left by the scout's report the victim of an indecision which he did not disclose to his companions.

It had been clear to his earlier mind that the whole gang must be destroyed,

and that hesitation today would be the regret of tomorrow. He had influenced others to this opinion. Having a habit of thought which was direct rather than subtle, he told himself quite honestly that he still held to the same view. It was immaterial that all might not (indeed could not) be equally guilty of the outrage that had brought this verdict upon them. They had labeled themselves by the leader and companions that they had chosen. But the absence of Bellamy and of the one of whose guilt they were the most certain, the fact that the gang (as it appeared) were fighting among themselves, and the possibility (however unlikely) that the difference might be of the nature of a moral revolt against Bellamy's leadership, disquieted his mind, because he felt unable to decide on the right course of action until he were more fully aware of the facts, and he had a reasonable conviction that their purpose would never be fully carried out should they commence to parley.

He sat silently facing this problem while his companions slept around him. They were tired after the day's march. It had been understood that they would do no more till darkness came. Four of their number—condemned to vigilance by the verdict of a spun coin—were watching from the surrounding cover. They did well to sleep.

But Tom Aldworth, leader in fact if not in name, and therefore servant of all, must wake and think. After doing which he rose and walked over to Ellis Roberts, who opened his solitary eye and sat up as he approached.

Ellis Roberts was a spare, grizzled Welshman who had migrated from the Corris Valley to the Cannock coal-fields when the importations of Portuguese slate had resulted in the closing of many of the poorer mines in the former locality. He had lost his left eye, and had been fortunate to escape so lightly, when a comrade's carelessness in the blasting operations in which they were employed had endangered the lives of a dozen men, and he had risked his own to warn them.

"Ellis," said Tom, "we ought to find out what's going on in the tunnel. Could you get six of the boys to go with you—or more if you think you'd need them—and catch one of the men at the other end? I expect he'd tell us. There are only five men there, and it shouldn't be difficult to surprise them. They'll be watching the tunnel, not the bank above. If you catch one (or more, for that matter) and settle the rest, you'll need to bring him back here, and leave enough of the boys to take their place. We mustn't let Bellamy escape, or the others. But there can't be many shut in or they'd need a larger force at that end to hold it. It looks like one, or two at most. But they must have some reason for wanting him, or them, very badly."

"You mean catch one and kill the rest?" said Ellis. "Did Tolley see who they were?"

"Jack Tolley got close enough to count them, and he says that he's sure of

Ted Watson and Navvy Barnes. There was one man that he didn't know, and he thinks the fourth was Hodder. He's not sure of him. He didn't see any arms. These four were working—blocking the exit from the tunnel. There was a little fat man beside, but he's sure that he hadn't seen him before. He wasn't one of those that were with Bellamy when we turned them out. He was sitting on the bank by himself."

Ellis thought for a moment, and then said: "I think six ud do. If we surprise them, six is as good as sixty, and if we don't they'll run and be lost in the dark. Barnes wouldn't fight, nor Watson. They'd scare too easy. Hodder might, if he's there. . . . Yes, I'll do it."

He got up and went round the camp to pick the help he needed.

[IV]

Martin, his mind struggling to recover consciousness of its environment, was aware of Claire's voice from the darkness. His head throbbed painfully, but she had drawn it to the comfort of her lap, and he had no disposition to move or speak. He did not understand clearly what she was saying. It was by an effort of reluctant will that he asked at last: "Is he dead?" He knew that there were many things of which he should be thinking, many things that he ought to do, but he did not want to remember them. He would face them at the next moment—and the moments passed. When he brought himself to speak he did not know that his voice was scarcely audible.

Claire answered quietly. "Yes, he's dead. There's no need to worry about him, or anything."

He relapsed into silence, which she did not attempt to break.

When she had recovered from her own fainting—the first that her life had known—and had found Martin still unconscious as he had fallen, she had risen to the emergency, as some women will. She lost even the feeling of exhaustion which had previously overpowered her. She had located the injury more by touch than sight in the half-light of the tunnel, and had found means to bathe and bandage it with clean linen from her store of clothes on the trolley. But first she had found and reloaded the pistol, which now lay near to her hand, and as she sat against the rails with Martin's head on her lap, she watched and listened incessantly, her eyes on the arc of light at the entrance, her ears alert for any faintest sound that might come from the darkness behind her.

As she watched she thought. She saw with an increased clarity, in the light of her new experiences, that it was necessary to face the altered conditions of life without evasion or flinching, and that only those who could do so successfully would be likely to survive them.

Different though they were—widely different, both in character and in

mentality—she and Martin were alike in this, that they could think honestly and were capable of acting without regard to prejudice or convention as their reasons prompted.

She knew that Martin had hesitated to shoot a fallen man, and that it was owing to that moment's weakness that he himself was now helpless. She did not blame him. Far from it. But she recognized that it was an error for which the price must be paid. For this time she did not think the price would be heavy. She had gained an increased confidence now that Bellamy was dead. She was alert and cautious, but she was not fearful. She recognized that Martin's need was time for recovery, and that every moment in which nothing happened was a moment gained on their side.

But for the future, if they desired life, they must learn to shoot first and to think afterwards. Ultimately, she realized that force rules under whatever guise.

Were they, then, to degenerate to conditions of savagery? Surely it did not follow. In material things, in most of the luxuries to which they had been used, there must be great changes if they were to live on this small and isolated territory. There must be hard work, hardships, privations. But she saw that this was an entirely separate question. Hardship and poverty are not inconsistent with nobility of life and conduct. Ultimately, that must depend upon the characters of the people concerned, upon the social order that they build, upon those whom they choose to regulate it, or who are imposed upon them by force or craft. In the next generation it must depend upon the children that they bear and upon the training they give them.

Somehow, from the survivors of the civilization that had been swept away, a new tribe must be formed, a basis of mutuality established: and its nature would depend at the first upon the characters of those who had escaped the deluge. There must surely be some who were different from those that she had yet met—and the more of the higher and the fewer of the baser sort the better it would be. Her mind went over those that they had killed. So far as she could judge them they would have been little help for the new community. Her reason told her that Martin's life and her own were the more valuable. Still, it was by successful violence, and through no other quality, that they were alive at the moment. She thought of those they had killed. Four. She did not include the man who had fallen into the fire. That was not their doing. For that matter, she did not know that he was dead. But there was the woman that she had killed, and there were the men that lay between them and the daylight.

Startled by the thought, she realized that of the four, three had met their deaths at her own hands. Was she stronger than Martin? She knew she was not. More capable? Not that either. Braver or cooler in danger? She did not think so. Was she more blood-thirsty, more merciless? She did not think that either.

Even two days ago she would have regarded it as incredible that she should take life time after time. It was not significant that it had been her part to kill them. It was just how the cards had fallen.

Anyway it was loathsome work. She had seen enough of what hostile violence can do to the human body when she had been nursing in France, but those wounds had been almost all from the blind force of explosives, and she had never been on the actual scenes of hostilities. In books men fought and died with a discreet gentility. A sword went neatly through the body, a bullet entered the head, or the heart (for the fatal cases), or the lungs (for those that were to reach an interesting convalescence). It was all done with propriety. There was none of this ghastly scuffling, *With confused noise, and garments rolled in blood*. The old Hebrew poet who wrote that must have seen fighting.

Her mind reverted to the man whose head was on her knees. It was true that he had hesitated where she would not have done so. It seemed that the event had proved him wrong. She did not avoid the issue, nor did she doubt him. She was content—more than content—with the man she had found and chosen. She would be true to him till life failed her, as he would be true to her. She was as sure of him as of herself, and she was glad of her choice. She did not doubt that he was wiser, as she knew that he was stronger than she. Perhaps he saw more broadly, more truly, than she was able to do. To see all sides does not conduce to prompt action. She had seen that force was the ultimate court of appeal. But was it the ultimate height, or the ultimate depth only? *And yet show I you a more excellent way.* That was also a thought that must be faced without flinching.

Her mind attacked the problem from a different angle. Why was there the need for violence? What induced or required it?

She saw herself clearly as the cause of these deaths. She had brought death when she landed. It was incidental that any of them should have come from her hand. But they were hers equally, whoever might deal the blow. And why was it?

They fought because they were men and they wanted the same woman. That was natural. In a way it seemed right. She fought for her own choice among them. That seemed right, too. It was right that the best man should succeed among those who desired her. It was not only best for the individual, it was best for the race. There was the mystery of the further life. Of children that would or would never be.

Among all the impulses that urge mankind there can be none where the stake is greater than that.

It was right that the best man should have her, be the price what it might.

But if one of them should have killed Martin would she not be his by the same law? What was best, and by what standard of judgment? There was

confusion here. Confusion of two ideals. The right of the man's strength and the right of the woman's choice. Could they accord, and, if not, which was the higher?

It would be interesting to talk it all over with Martin at another time. His mind was better than hers. He could analyze more clearly, perhaps more coldly, than she. She had learned that already.

Thinking of this, she realized another aspect of the problem of life which confronted her. She knew quite well that Bellamy had not seized her with any purpose of comradeship or permanent union, of mutual obligation or ultimate parenthood. He had obeyed a fierce instinct which worked without thought of her welfare, or any further purpose than to satisfy its own craving. Having done this, and being of a kind that takes no thought for the future, he would have passed her over to his companions for the same purpose. They would have pursued their purpose, though she should have been injured by their collective brutality. She might have died. She had heard of what had happened to another unhappy woman a few days before.

But this horror was not natural. It was incidental to the fact that the men who had survived appeared to be so much more numerous than the women. Even so, she knew that all men would not act in the same way.

Martin would not. Yet she remembered that he had taken her himself very promptly, not without violence, and it was to hold her that he had been fighting. What was the ultimate distinction?

Love and lust—in the language of Victorian subterfuge. But she knew that that distinction was less than honest. Martin had not desired her less than those men. She would have instinctively resented the supposition. Nor was it for love of Martin, whom she had never met, that she had risked her life in the waters. She saw clearly that if she had not met Martin—if he had never lived—she would have sought another, and probably found him. That was no cause for shame.

It was in the free choice of mating, the acceptance of its obligations, the loyalty that held as fast in distress as in prosperity, that the difference lay. She saw clearly that the desire of man for woman, or of woman for man, is not a base thing that can be sanctified with difficulty, but a sacred thing that can be too easily degraded.

It was while she thought thus in the darkness that Martin stirred and spoke again, his voice stronger and clearer than it had been previously. "I don't think I'm much hurt. What happened?"

She told him briefly. He answered: "I was a fool—a slow fool. But he didn't seem dangerous. I shan't make that mistake again. You did well." He fell silent. He went over all that had happened. He recognized that the woman whom the sea had given him was one that might not be equaled among a

thousand. One fit to survive while millions round her had perished. He saw that she was one of those who had come through, not by blind chance that saves or slays as it will, but by her own strength and courage. Many of the unfit might still be living, but there should be enough of those who had survived by their own exertions to improve the race of the future. One of these was surely the woman that now was his. Was he such a one? He was less sure. Anyway, he was very fortunate in having gained her.

It was natural, from such a thought, that his mind reverted to Helen. Suppose she had lived. . . . He knew that she could not have come through their recent perils as Claire had done. She had not the physical strength of the woman who had trained herself in battle with the power of the waters that were destined to overwhelm her race. She had not the courage. She had not the nerve—not, at least, of the same kind.

There was no disloyalty in his thought. Only a sharp pang of regret for the days that were gone forever, for the lost love, the lost comradeship. Suppose that she were still living? It was a fantastic thought. His reason told him that it could not be. But if she were? Would he not rise to seek her at the first hint of such a possibility? He knew that he would, and that Claire would have no power to stay him. Would she wish to? Would she come with him on such an errand? He wondered. He looked up to eyes that could be dimly seen in the shadows. Eyes that he had already learned to trust and know. Gray eyes, wide and clear, under brows that were black and heavy. Eyes that were not looking at him now, but gazing watchfully at the arc of light where the tunnel opened.

He knew that she was not one to think or to act meanly. Yet what she would say or do in such a case was beyond his knowing. Ought he to have told her of Helen? What use was there in waking the pain of the drowned past?

He tried to turn his thought to the urgent needs of the moment, but the fancy held him.

Fifteen miles away, Helen, sitting beside her sleeping children, with the shadow of Tom Aldworth's threat on her mind, prayed with a fierce intensity. Surely Martin lived! Surely, if he lived, he would find her! She did not think of another woman. She would not have cared if she had. She knew so well that his love was hers—she knew him so well. But she did not know that he lived, though she would not allow herself to doubt it. He *must* come back. He must save her.

So she prayed as the light fell. Did her thought reach him?

At least, his mind was on her. Suppose, he thought, that she still lived, by some miracle that was beyond his guessing. He should go back to her. That, at least, would be right. Did he wish to desert Claire? No, never that. Ought he to do so? He had pledged himself to her, in good faith and without reservation. There might be a child—hers and his. He was not troubled by the old laws;

they were gone. But what would be right in such a case? It was strange that he should wonder over a question that could never arise and which he could not solve.

Could a man be equally loyal to two women at once? Reverse the thought. Would he have shared Helen with another man? Would he share Claire? The thought was monstrous. Yet wherein was the difference? He saw that there is one. In the old days people had chattered of the "equality of the sexes." Probably they had meant nothing. They seldom did. If they meant anything they did not know what it might be. They were trained to avoid logical thought. If their minds came against a custom, a convention, they would not face it; they turned aside and thought crookedly. He saw that there is a difference. If a woman live with two men the parentage of her children is doubtful. If a man live with two women there is no such confusion. Each child knows its father and mother. Each mother knows her own child. There are other differences. It is flouting facts to ignore them.

Yet his mind went further, and he saw that there is something under such conditions which the woman suffers which the man does not. All the children are his, but they are not hers. Here is root enough for a fierce jealousy—for a fierce hatred.

His mind was on the issues of polygamous marriage, not on casual physical infidelities. He had never interested himself, except as his professional work had required it, in the baser ways of mankind.

All this was academic speculation only. Helen was dead. He knew that. Yet it was an instinct of loyalty both to her and to Claire which decided him that Claire ought to know. Or was it that Helen's prayer was not unheard, and that this impulse came as its answer? It may have made some difference in the end that Claire's mind had been prepared for that which must follow. It is hard to say.

Anyway, he told her. He told her of Helen and of the children. He did not disguise his sorrow. He did not suggest any possibility that they could still be living. Helen could not even swim; and the flood would have overwhelmed the strongest. Besides, he knew that she would never have left the children.

When he finished, Claire said simply: "I am sorry. If you can think of any hope, we will search for them together, when we get clear of this." She did not doubt that she meant it. She was not one who lightly yields, or who readily shares beyond reason, but her mind was on the mother and the two children that the floods had swallowed. She was glad, as she had been before, that her own child had not lived.

Martin felt that she spoke with sincerity, and her sympathy deepened his affection for her. So she gained by her giving: proving, as she did so, that there were still powers in the world besides the rule of violence which had seemed

supreme as she had considered it. *And yet show I you a more excellent way.* Perhaps there were other powers that were not yet dead.

[V]

As they talked, they watched the entrance to the tunnel, and the time came when they noticed the blocking operations that Joe initiated. The significance was obvious. The killing of those who had first attacked them had not disposed of their danger. Rather, it seemed to have led to a more determined and systematic investment.

Naturally, the question rose of whether the other end were being blocked in the same way. If it were, there was an end to any hope of escaping upon the trolley. They would have to fight it out there to the last, and must be destroyed in the end, unless they could annihilate their opponents, or inflict such losses that they would decide to leave them. And they did not know how numerous they might be. The prospect was not hopeful. Its realization brought Martin to his feet, with a decision in his mind. He was unsteady at first, and his head was painful, but beyond that he was none the worse. He said: "We must see if they are closing the other end. If so, we've got to fight it out here, and we've got to think how we can injure them, and how much, and how soon, and how often. If we can do it safely, we must strike first, and not wait till they come at us. Every man we can kill or wound is one more step to safety. But if they haven't closed that end, we'll try to get out tonight as best we can, and take the chance of the dark."

Claire said: "Do you feel fit?"

"Yes," he answered, "I'm well enough, and it's my own fault if I'm not. I shan't make that mistake twice."

They shared a meal, for which both were more than ready, allowing themselves a light, as it seemed unlikely, from the activity at the tunnel-mouth, that any immediate attack were intended. Even if they were to be invaded from the other end, and the work they now watched were mainly to prevent their flight, it was natural to conclude that the attack would not come till the hole should have been securely stopped.

Then they mounted the trolley, extinguishing the light again, and poled cautiously toward the other end.

The night was falling as they approached it. The fires had died down, though they still smoldered. They ventured close to the entrance, encouraged rather than otherwise by a random bullet. The danger was small, as the shots came obliquely from the top of the embankment, and they were evidence that no enemy was penetrating stealthily inward through the darkness.

They could not observe that the line had been disturbed at this end, and

Claire's impulse, now that they had decided to sally out, was to take the chance at once; but Martin differed.

"They won't start pulling rails up tonight, if they haven't done so already," he said reasonably. "And we shall have a better chance toward the morning. If they want us to come out, they've probably set a trap a little further on. Suppose we found the line pulled up, and a dozen of them around it? But in a few hours they'll be asleep, more or less, and the darkness will make us equal.

"What I propose is this: we'll just pole ourselves clear of the entrance, and then push the trolley on, and leave it, and take our chance up the bank. If they expect us to try to escape that way, it will deceive them, and in the dark we ought to get clear. We must just let our things go. Our lives are worth more than they are."

So it was agreed, and to fit them for what was before them they arranged to sleep and watch in turn; Martin, in spite of his wound, insisting successfully on the first spell of this vigil.

[VI]

It was three hours after dark when Ellis Roberts came back to the camp. There was no man with him except the prisoner he had captured. He had come quietly enough, for his hands were tied, and Ellis led him in a noosed rope which tightened round his neck very easily. It had been necessary on several occasions to stop for Ellis to loosen it, in spite of all his prisoner's efforts to avoid any pull upon it. Progress under such conditions had not been rapid, but Ellis would take no chances.

The camp was awake now. They had risked a fire in the hollow, having decided that those they sought were sufficiently occupied to be unlikely to discover it.

In the flickering light they crowded round Ellis and his prisoner. Ellis passed the halter to the nearest. "Take him, someone," he said, and sat down on a fallen tree. "Boys," he said, "I want a drink." His single eye gleamed with its usual intelligence as he set down the mug, but his tanned and wrinkled face looked pale in the firelight. They saw a long cut across the back of his left hand on which the blood had dried, for he had not troubled to bind it.

Tom came through the group, and sat down beside him. "Hurt, Ellis?" he said.

Ellis followed his glance, and looked down on the injured hand. "That's naught," he said; "but I've got a bash in the ribs. Reckon it won't count by tomorrow." He sat silent. He was never quick of speech. They waited impatiently.

"Tell us, Ellis," Tom urged.

He seemed to rouse himself with an effort. “They’re mostly dead,” he said at last. “We did the job right enough. They killed Bill Horton. Ted Wrench got a knock on the head that’s left him silly. He’ll be right enough. I’ve left them to guard the way out. The rails are pulled up, but it’s not really stopped. I didn’t see the fat man, but the rest are done for. When we——” His voice, that had become slower and less distinct as he went on, now sank to silence.

“Better lie down, Ellis; you’re fair done,” said a man near him. Ellis did not hear. His mind was back in the fight. He had been wrong about Navvy Barnes. He had come at them like a wild beast through the bullets, his shovel whirling round his head as he did so. It had struck Bill Horton on the back of the neck, and he had fallen forward with his head half severed from his body. Then Barnes had come at him, and for an instant their glances had met in the firelight. He had seen the murderous rage in the eyes of the cornered man, as the shovel swept round toward him. He had fired, coolly, with careful aim, and because a bullet is more speedy even than the swiftest motion of human hands, the blow that struck his side had lost most of its force. He had fallen, but he had been up again in a moment. He had led his prisoner here, though every step had been painful. It was strange that it was so hard to think how, or to be sure where he was——

It was Jack Tolley who caught his arm as he slipped forward.

They made him as comfortable as they could, but his injury was beyond their skill or resources. They found a badly bruised side, and evidence of a broken rib. They thought that he might be better when he had slept. But in the morning he was dead.

His mind had been clear, for a time at least, after they had laid him down, and his words showed that he had little doubt of what was coming. “Jack,” he had said, “if I go out, she’s yours, if you’ll have her. But you must look after the kid.”

Jack had looked round at his companions. “You heard that, boys?” he asked, and they had nodded in answer. . . .

Tom looked at the prisoner. It was the man called Hodder. The man that “might” fight, if he were cornered. Ellis had not been sure.

Hodder was a short awkward man, somewhat bent in the back. He might be middle-aged. It was hard to say. He was rather like a battered ape in some aspects. He could use pick and shovel well enough. Beyond this, he had habits rather than character. How he would react to new circumstances was difficult to forecast. Even the folly of the past civilization, which had affected to believe that all men were equal (whereas there were no two alike in all its millions), would hardly have contended that he would be likely to benefit by the curious compilations of fact and theory which they required their young to assimilate, or, at least, to remain unoccupied for a period of years which might

be utilized in that way.

When the time came for choosing, he had chosen Bellamy. There was nothing else against him of any definite kind.

"Now, Hodder," said Tom, "where's Bellamy?"

Hodder shook his head. Actually, he did not know.

"There's a branch over your head," said Tom, "a good, strong branch. I shall hang you there if you don't answer."

"Can I go if I does?"

"We'll see about that," Tom answered, whose own mind was not clearly decided on that point; "but you'll certainly hang if you don't. Where's Bellamy?"

"In the tunnel."

"Is he alone?"

"I dunno; Joe said as he went in."

"Then who's with him?"

Hodder looked puzzled. "I dunno that," he said doubtfully. Tom glanced upward. He thought, with some excuse, that Hodder was wilfully reticent. Hodder, who had some excuse for his difficulty in following the line of examination, made haste to add: "There's likely him and the gal."

Tom did not follow this statement, but it made him realize that he was not questioning to any good result. If the paradox be excused, his mind was illuminated by the fog it had raised. He tried a broader method.

"Tell me," he asked, "what you know about those who are in the tunnel, and why you were shutting them in."

Hodder was not good at narrative. If, under the influence of a due allowance of beer, he indulged in reminiscences among his mates, he might repeat himself a score of times before any coherent meaning emerged from his rambling sentences. But fear is a sharp spur, and he started off now with a hurried confusion, which had almost the effect of fluency.

"Muster Bellamy"—the title which the floods had somehow swept from the speech of men, sounded queerly to those who heard it—"Muster Bellamy stole 'is gal. A fair 'ot un 'er is. 'Er knifed Sal, 'an got clear. Struck 'er 'ere." (A hairy paw rubbed the left side of his neck.) He grinned with the pleasure of the recollection. It was a fault of articulation that caused Tom to suppose that it was Sal's ear that had suffered. Not knowing the lady, he let the point pass without further elucidation. "We lost 'em in the dark, and Joe Timms shot 'is own 'and. Joe says as 'ow they killed Smith. I dunno that. It was Sal as tied 'er. Muster Bellamy 'ad just 'ad 'is pork. 'E looks round, and down it come. Knocked 'im flat, it did. Reddy throws the stool and down 'e come. Over the fire it were. 'E throws it back, and Spink falls in the fire. On 'is face, he does. Muster Bellamy's gone to fetch 'em out. Fair devils they be."

He paused, his face in a kind of hellish ecstasy, as his mind recalled the violences which he had been privileged to witness, after nearly fifty years during which it had been mainly fed on the records of crime and shame which the reporters of the daily press had collected for the mental diet of his kind. For forty years the power of reading which had been driven into his boorish brain had been exercised in no other way. He had been given this mysterious power, for which he had not asked, and had been fed on filth for its use. But he had only read of crime before, and now he had been privileged to see it.

He stood silent now, fully believing that he had given a full and clear explanation of the events of the last two days.

Tom shared his delusion. To his mind it seemed clear that there had been a quarrel in the band which had developed to a murderous affray, in which both men and women had joined. A woman had killed another of her sex, and then fled into the tunnel with a male companion, pursued by the vengeance of the friends of the murdered woman. Bellamy appeared to have ventured in alone to deal with them. That seemed likely enough.

There was nothing in the tale to excite sympathy for the fugitives. But it was all evidence that the gang must be stamped out. Tom saw that more clearly than ever. Ellis was hurt already. Bill Horton was dead. Bill had been a better man than the best of Bellamy's gang. Such things would go on while they remained.

There were points in the picturesque confusion of Hodder's statement which Tom should have noticed. Points which suggested a less simple explanation than that which he accepted so quickly. Points which Martin would have seized in a moment. But Tom had neither Martin's brains, nor his legal training.

He did, however, make one further effort. He asked: "Who is the fat man?" He remembered that he had been apparently in charge of the operations at the further end of the tunnel, and that Ellis had failed to catch him. He was not one of the original gang.

Hodder stared a moment. He could not understand why the question was asked. The caution of the under-dog had taught him to be slow in such circumstances. He said, at length: "That's Joe. The jockey."

Tom was puzzled. Jockeys are seldom fat. But it might be a nickname, perhaps given in derision. It didn't matter anyway. He said: "Was he in the fight?"

"Not 'e," said Hodder, " 'e don't fight. 'E don't count nowt."

"But you said he shot his own hand?"

"No, I dain't," Hodder protested with a flicker of indignation. "That were Joe Timms." His mind was puzzled by the stupidity of his questioner, who could not tell one Joe from another.

Tom gave it up.

There remained the question of what to do with the prisoner. There were no jails now. It must be kill or loose. He did not think the man dangerous.

"Now look here, Hodder," he said, "I ought to hang you, but we don't want to, unless you make us. We've come here to settle Bellamy and all his lot. If you do as you're told, and give no trouble, you won't get hurt. If you don't, you'll very soon be a dead man. You can go where you will, but we shall hunt you down, and you'll be shot like a rabbit."

Hodder looked round the group that were watching him. They were men to fear. Men to obey. Men with whom he would be safe. He had no love for danger. He was well content to remain.

They took the noose from his neck. They untied his hands. He watched Tom go off into the night with a dozen men. He was told to stay in the camp with the two who remained. "Will they kill Muster Bellamy?" he asked his new companions. His only regret was that he would not be there to see it.

[VII]

It would be idle to narrate the dispositions by which Tom and his companions surrounded and surprised the camp of their enemies. Tom was something less than a military genius, and the information would add nothing to the records of the art of war. In itself, the operation lacked interest, because they found it empty.

One of the horses had gone. They attached no importance to this, if they were aware of it, but it was actually of far greater moment than the absence of the men they were seeking. Had they done so, it would have made no difference, for the animal, under Joe's able guidance, was already some miles away. It was a good many years since she had felt anyone on her back who knew how to ride, and the experience recalled the far-off days of prideful youth, before a shaft had galled her. Joe rode with a purpose, and though the night was cloudy, he was able to keep a fairly direct course, and he knew when it was better to trust the mare than to depend upon his own judgment. He had time enough, and he made good progress through the night.

Besides the remaining horse, they found Joe Timms of the damaged hand. He made no resistance. He was not aware of the sanguinary intention with which they had called so unexpectedly. He made no objection to telling them that Reddy and the rest had started to explore the tunnel about an hour earlier. Had he been asked more, he might have given a more coherent narrative than Hodder had supplied, but, in fact, he was not. He was of a somewhat higher intelligence than Hodder. He had been a laborer of the lowest type in the old order. Coarse, foul-mouthed, brutal, and commonplace, he had yet kept within

the laws of the civilization which had produced him. His only trouble had been a fine of forty shillings for throwing a live kitten on to the fire, and even this had been on a Saturday night, when it could not be expected that he would be entirely responsible for his actions. Tom dealt with him as he had done with Hodder. He received the same promise, but judged that it would not be kept if there should come a safe opportunity of breaking it.

The fact that the camp was empty raised a fresh problem, which his companions looked to Tom to resolve. They had accepted without protest his assumption of control when he had sent Ellis on his successful foray. They had left him to question Hodder and to decide his fate. They had let him plan the attack which had won them an empty shell. It was natural that they should now look to him for guidance when an unexpected situation confronted them.

Tom's inclination was always toward the most direct solution of a confronting problem. He could plan with some intelligence when plans were needed, but his instinct was for the frontal attack. It is sometimes a successful method, but it is not economical.

Now he decided on a direct pursuit through the tunnel. This was hazardous enough, as operations in the dark are bound to be, but there was this to be said for it, those whom they pursued would have no reason to apprehend an attack from the rear, and would be very unlikely to have taken any precautions against it; also, the further end of the tunnel was held by so small a force that a collision could scarcely fail to be disastrous to those who had been stationed to hold it if the whole of Teller's band should emerge upon them.

Tom decided to follow Reddy with the best speed they could make, and dispatched Jack Tolley to warn the little party who had captured the further exit, both of the forces with which they might have to deal and of the attack which he would be making upon their rear.

Jack Tolley made his way very speedily, having the faculty which remembers a path which has once been followed, and which is not confused by the darkness. He was in good hope that he would arrive before Reddy's party, they having, presumably, to make a cautious and contentious passage, and was sure that he would do so before Tom Aldworth's pursuit should have arrived, even if it were not delayed by any earlier opposition.

First he was, but none too soon for his purpose. He found the little party crouching under the barrier which had been raised across the entrance and listening to a sound of rifle-shots which came at irregular intervals from the cavity of the tunnel. They told him that they had first heard them about half an hour earlier, and at a much greater distance. Two or three times since there had been pauses of silence, after which they had sounded nearer. They had not thought of danger to themselves as they leaned over the earth-mound listening to this enigma of conflict, till Harry Swain had been struck by a bullet. Since

then they had crouched under the barrier, uncertain whether to attempt to obstruct the issue of the tunnel occupants should they attempt it. They were obviously relieved that Jack had come to advise and reinforce them.

They had, perhaps, some excuse for vacillation. Of the six men that Ellis had chosen to accompany him, Bill Horton lay dead under the bank, Ted Wrench sat nursing a bandaged head, and fully convinced that he was unfit to assist them further, and Harry Swain, whose collar-bone had suffered in its collision with the stray bullet already mentioned, was obviously off the active list, though he was less ready to admit it.

They had stamped out the fire which had been first lighted by the gang, of which Hodder alone was now living, and around which they had since warmed themselves very cheerfully, considering that it would make them easy marks for anyone who approached from the tunnel darkness. But Tolley, with better judgment, proposed that it should be started again, and so built that it would throw its light on anyone who should attempt to clamber out of the tunnel. With himself, there were four unwounded men, and two of these stationed on each side of the embankment, and being amply supplied with firearms, could make the exit sufficiently hazardous and would be able to distinguish friends from foes, while it would be difficult for anyone to see them across the glare of the firelight.

If, as he anticipated, they would soon encounter a rush of Reddy's party, with Tom in chase, an oblique fire would be less dangerous to their own friends than one directed down the course of the tunnel. The fate of Harry Swain was a warning too clear to be disregarded.

The plan being agreed, the fire was quickly waked into a fresh activity, a supply of wood for the night having been collected by its first builders, and they then arranged themselves as Jack had suggested.

The night was much chillier than had been those that preceded it. It was cloudy also, with a fine rain which was little more than mist falling at intervals. But it was not very dark, and was becoming less so, for the moon was rising and the clouds were of no great density.

Jack Tolley kept his eye on the black arc of the tunnel and his rifle ready, but his thoughts wandered. His weapon was a sporting rifle of a very light pattern, and had been ignored by his companions, who preferred something of a more formidable aspect.

But it suited Jack. It bore a famous name. It was as neat, and slim, and precise as its owner. It was as well-kept as when he had picked it from the rack in the gunroom. Jack's neatness had been a joke in the miner's cottage where he used to lodge. He had been a clerk at the mine. He had risked his life to give aid and warning when the cage had jammed in the main shaft. Probably he had saved his life by the risk which had appeared likely to lose it. He was a clerk

who had come through—a living proof that a man may be greater than his environment.

He had been accurate in his work. He had been accurate in all he had done since. His companions still joked at his neatness.

Now his thoughts wandered, but they were not without discipline. It was natural that as he lay there he should think of some of his poaching exploits in the old days. Expeditions so coolly planned, so carefully executed, that no one had ever guessed them, unless it were his parents in a Yorkshire village to whom he posted the game. But he must not think of them. He supposed that they had perished. He had trained his mind not to think of the old things. But there was Madge. He would have Madge if Ellis died. He supposed Ellis would die. He was the last man to make a fuss about nothing. He must have felt that he was fatally injured or he would not have spoken as he did. Jack did not hope he would die. His thoughts were clear and clean. But if he did . . . He had tried to get Madge for himself. He could not understand why she had chosen Ellis. A man twenty years older than he—or she, either. A man with one eye. He wondered how she would like the change. He knew just how she had felt to himself. He was too neat, too precise. He was not romantic. He thought she had liked him better with the fuller acquaintance of the recent weeks. They had been strangers when the choice was made. But she had been loyal to Ellis. It would not have crossed his mind to suggest that she should be otherwise. And there was to be a child. So Ellis evidently thought. Well, he would do his best for it. Ellis was a good man. But perhaps he would not die. Perhaps he would die himself. He might get killed in this hateful scrimmage before the night was over. He thought of Bill Horton lying at the foot of the embankment beneath him, with other men that he did not know. It might have been he instead of Bill. It might be his turn next. Tom was right. They must end it, and then find some way to live peacefully. . . . There was a sound of shots in the tunnel. A sound of voices and of running feet. A man was scrambling over the barrier. Did he know the face in the firelight? His finger pressed the trigger, and the man fell backward.

[VIII]

It had been agreed that Martin should take the first watch. He did not intend that there should be a second. He was resolved that Claire should have what sleep she could, and he did not intend that many hours should pass before they made the attempt on which they had decided. He knew that their chances would be less when the moon had risen. About a quarter of an hour before moonrise would be best. At that time they might get clear in the dark and would then have an increasing light to guide their flight. He turned his plan

over in his mind and found it good. Even a few yards of start, and it would be hard to keep their trace in the darkness. In the morning they would be far away—free. Safe. Nothing that he had gathered mattered beside that possibility. Death tonight, or many years of life—with Claire. It was a great risk for a great prize.

So he saw it. He saw also that his plan had one defect. They might be attacked earlier. He must be prepared for that. Thinking of this possibility, he had an idea.

It was about the same time that Reddy had an idea also. They were both good ideas, but they did not harmonize. Reddy's ideas concerning the rising of the moon, if any, were of the vaguest; but he wished to get the job over before Joe should return, and that might happen at any time.

His idea was true to the type of his mind, having a simple but effective cunning.

To search a tunnel some hundreds of yards in length in total darkness for two people who have shown already that they have both the will and the power to kill, is not an attractive program. Reddy had no desire to run any risk, but he had faced it lightly, because he was sure that he could think of a way of carrying it out with safety. He had first thought of a silent crawl through the darkness and a deadly blow or a fatal shot at the man who sat or lay in a lighted place. If his victim should have a light, that would still be the best way. But he might not. Then they must advance hand-in-hand across the width of the tunnel. That seemed obvious, or otherwise their prey might elude them. They might pass them in the dark and give a clear road of escape. But he did not like the idea of the human chain. He had wit enough to see that it would not advance with silence and regularity. If one end of the chain should encounter those they sought there would be instantaneous confusion. They might escape very easily. Or the woman might be killed. They must avoid any risk of that. Or they might kill each other in the darkness. He saw that they must have a light. But he did not like the idea of being a target for bullets that might come out of the darkness. Hence his idea. They would move in two columns, feeling the wall on either side as they did so, and the two foremost men would carry a rope stretched across the width of the tunnel with a lantern slung at its center. This would be if the tunnel showed no light or till they should see one. Then they could extinguish their own light if it seemed well. This method would enable them to advance rapidly and in comparative safety, while the stretched rope would make it impossible that their victims should pass unnoticed.

They had only two rifles, but it is doubtful whether this could be considered a disadvantage to the attack as he planned it, which did not aim at a long-distance duel. Firearms are of a promiscuous danger in a scuffle in the

darkness. And the woman must not be risked. Tigress though she might be, she would yield quickly enough when she saw that the man was dead. If not, she must be knocked on the head with moderation. A very quietening procedure.

Though they were short of rifles they were well supplied with a miscellany of lethal weapons—pistols, knives, bludgeons, hatchets, and a sheathless sword, which made its owner unpopular as a close companion.

It is the part of a good historian to appreciate the points of view of all the protagonists whose acts he chronicles. We observe that these men started down the embankment in an excellent humor. If their enterprise were somewhat more hazardous than the ferreting of rabbits it had also the hope of a richer prize. They were hunting the royalest game that a man may. They had run her to earth, and they had no doubt that they would have her out before morning.

Martin's plan was this. He considered the possibility of their enemies venturing into the tunnel instead of going soundly to sleep during the time that he was allowing them, for that purpose.

It was a disconcerting possibility. They had had fighting enough. All they wanted was to escape in safety. He wondered whether it would be possible to hide in such a way that a hostile search might pass them, leaving the way to safety open behind it. He could see no possibility till it occurred to him that such an attempt would be sure to enter by the right-hand wall, as the ashes of the fire must have fallen across the leftward side of the entrance, and must be deep and hot, and would naturally be avoided. Also, they would be moving as silently and secretly as possible. They would be in greater fear of being observed from the inside as they entered than when they were in the darker interior. Suppose that Claire and he should hide in the shadow of the further wall and very close to the entrance—would it not be almost certain that the search would pass them? The position would be so unexpected. But that would mean waking Claire and leading her to a place of waiting which would lack the comfort of the bed which he had made for her on the trolley. Though aware that he was weighing two questions of widely different importance, he was reluctant to do this. He had thrown off most of the load from the trolley (for what more did it matter?) leaving only an outer pile of such things as would give protection at front and sides to anyone lying upon it, with a bed of blankets and rugs in the center. So prepared, it was not only a couch for her immediate rest, but would give them all possible protection when they should venture out. They had taken it back beyond the bend of the tunnel and had placed their lighted lantern between the rails about thirty yards away. They had loaded the rifles that they had collected and laid them side by side on the trolley; the spear was there also, but its shaft had cracked in the course of its

last struggle with the heaving body of Bellamy, and, till it should be repaired, its days of good service were over.

A conviction that they ought not to stay there longer conquered his reluctance to disturb her. “Claire,” he said softly. There was no answer. He leaned over, speaking more loudly. He touched her shoulder. He felt her hand that was under her cheek. The fingers closed on his own, but she did not wake. She murmured something inarticulate, and relapsed into a deeper slumber.

Why should he not go alone to see whether his plan were practicable before disturbing her? He was sure that she would not wake. She was in no likely danger, while he would be between her and the obvious entrance. He would be a very short time away. There might be a guard placed in the tunnel entrance already. But if so it would be well to know. It would be desirable in any event to survey the position before they should venture out. It might be better to do that now than immediately beforehand. If he should attract notice it would arouse vigilance, which might relax again as the hours passed. When they *did* venture it should be without preliminary warning, and at the utmost speed to which they could urge the trolley.

These arguments seeming sound, he acted accordingly. He armed himself with the knife and the automatic. He did not take the lantern, not wishing Claire to be alarmed by its absence should she awake before his return, and because he wished to run no risk of observation from the outside. He felt his way along the wall in the darkness.

He found the entrance to be much as he had expected, and was satisfied that his plan had been good. Its weakness was that it was now too late to execute it.

He looked for a moment at the shadowy sides of the embankment and at a sky in which a few stars showed between the cloudier spaces.

It was very peaceful and very still. He wished that they could start out at that moment. His inclination was to get it over, either for good or evil. But he was not accustomed to act upon impulse. He knew that if any watch were kept it would be more likely to be wakeful now than at a later hour of the night. He was not sure that it might not be best to avoid the trolley entirely and to creep quietly up the nearer bank. Even if they were stayed they could shoot quickly, and there would be a good chance of escape in the night.

He was about to return, having resolved to awake Claire and discuss his newer plans, when he was aware of movements—quiet, stealthy movements that were out of sight on the further side of the tunnel. Round the edge of the wall, very dimly, he saw a face appear. He crouched back, his pistol in readiness. After a few moments of silence he heard a cautious whisper. A lighted lantern came into view. It showed the rat-like face of the originator of the enterprise. Reddy had at least one quality which is needed for successful

leadership. He led.

Now the men were crawling into the tunnel, *and spreading across it*. They were between him and Claire before he had realized the danger. He crouched as low as he could. So far the lantern was held back. He saw the light gleam on a rifle-barrel or two. There were a dozen men. More. Should he ever return to Claire? Would she ever know what had happened? Would she think that he had deserted her? At least she would not do that. He could kill some of them before they killed him. But what would her fate be afterwards? He saw that he ought not to have come so close to the entrance, but it was too late to regret it. Should he run out and so draw them to follow him? But they might not do so. He knew that it was Claire that they really sought.

Suppose he did so, and they merely put a guard at the entrance, and went on to surprise her?

Better to follow them unobserved if that should be possible, or to fight it out here if he should be discovered.

It seemed strange that they did not see him. More or less, some of them must have done so, but not clearly enough to know that he was not one of themselves.

They were lining up now against either wall, the two men who had the rifles leading on either side. It had been decided that the last couple, not the first, should have the rope and the lantern. The rope would not then impede their companions if a rush forward should be needed. They did not think of retreat. Also, they would be in advance of the light, and probably nearer than their quarry would realize.

The last man on Martin's side came over with the rope in his hand. They were to draw it taut before the lantern should be slung upon it.

He did this, giving no attention to Martin, but as they commenced to move forward he noticed that someone was behind him. He half turned, and made space for Martin to pass him.

"Now, mate, move ahead," he said roughly. The man at the other side of the rope was pulling it forward.

On a sudden impulse, that formed as the chance came and the danger threatened together, Martin raised the knife in his hand, and struck with the strength of desperation and the bitterness of the dilemma to which his rashness had betrayed him.

The knife struck the back of the man's neck, severing the spinal column, and penetrating for half its length. There was a sound from the victim like a little cough; nothing more. For a second Martin's hand clutched the haft of the knife convulsively, with the man's weight pulling upon it. Then, with a saner impulse, he let it go, and caught at the rope already slipping from a nerveless hand.

During their momentary altercation the man next in advance had gone forward a few yards. No one noticed what had occurred. Reddy was further ahead, on the other side. If anyone were puzzled as to what the scuffle might mean, he was not sufficiently so to start an investigation that did not concern him. They wanted speed—and silence. Martin felt the rope pull, and went forward. His knife was gone, but he had his pistol ready in his free hand. He saw that he was safe for the moment. He waited his chance.

They went on thus till they came to the bend in the tunnel, on rounding which they saw the light between the metals. Very dimly the trolley showed beyond it.

They were advancing very silently. Probably Claire was still sleeping—trusting to the vigilance of a man who had failed her. He could not tell how far ahead the foremost of the line might be, but so long as he went on and did nothing he knew that the danger approached her in advance of any help he might render.

Now he saw them, as they came level with the light ahead. His plan was formed now. They were not far in advance. There is an instinctive desire to keep together on such occasions.

He would wait till he came to the light ahead, and then drop that which he carried, and run forward. The suddenness of the movement might allow the seconds which would enable him to get there first. If Claire were awake she would probably shoot him before he could hope to be recognized. He must chance that. But he must not start while the light was ahead. He must not run *into* the light. That would be to make recognition too probable. Recognition from those around him. That must be avoided if possible. While they took him to be one of themselves he had his chance. At the worst, he could use his pistol, and that would warn her.

Probably he was right in wishing to leave the light behind him, but he found the next moment that he had no choice in the matter.

Reddy had conceived an objection to the device of the rope being revealed, as it must to anyone who might watch from the darkness, if it were passed over the stationary light. He had crawled back, and was speaking to the man who had the other end of the rope. Courageously enough, though his danger differed from anything which he could surmise, he was now walking over to speak to Martin.

That settled it. Martin gave the rope a jerk which swung the lantern wildly in the air, and then loosed it.

It went out as it smashed on the ground, and there was darkness round them, though there was light ahead.

As it fell, the flash of Martin's pistol streaked the darkness. He had aimed at Reddy, but could not tell with what effect. He ran up the center of the line as

he had never run in his life before. There were cries around and behind him. A rough hand grabbed his arm, and he ran on struggling. He changed the pistol to his other hand and fired, and the hand loosed him. The trolley was close now. From it, a rifle-shot burst, as it seemed, in his very face. He felt the sting of the powder. He was just on the point of turning to run round the trolley, and he never knew whether he had fallen instinctively to avoid the danger of a second shot, or had stumbled upon the rail, as he did so, but down he came. "Don't shoot, Claire," he called, as he struggled to his feet, only half aware in his excitement of the pain of a bruised shin-bone.

"Yes, I knew," she answered, "I fired past you. Can you pole us back? They are too close."

He was on the trolley now, and a few vigorous pushes were sufficient to widen the distance. As he paused, a figure came between them and the light, and she fired again.

She said: "I've got that one. I think I missed before." A hoarse voice from the darkness confirmed her opinion, almost in the same phrase. "She got me," it called out, "the damned vixen!" Martin wondered how he knew or guessed that it was a woman that fired. Possibly her face had shown by the flash of the shot. He felt for another rifle, and lay down beside her. He would not use the remaining bullets in his pistol, keeping it in reserve in case there should be an attempt to rush them.

There was a pause now, and they lay with ears and eyes strained to read the messages of the darkness, but they did not speak. Explanation must wait.

The lantern still burned on the ground where they had laid it. No one went near it. No one passed between them and the light again. But there were faint whispers and stealthy movements along the sides of the tunnel. They began to fear that if they fired again it might bring a rush. Without such a provocation, the attack might be delayed, their enemies being unable to communicate safely now that they were so close, and unlikely to start such a movement except in concert.

Very quietly, Martin laid down the rifle, and picked up the pole again. He propelled the trolley about twenty yards backward. There came no sound of pursuit.

He picked up the rifle again. He fired into the black vacancy before them—again and again. Claire did the same. The reports were deafening in the narrow tunnel.

"Blast the swine! they've got me now, Reddy," came another voice. There was a sarcastic comment to the effect that he was not much hurt or his voice would be different. There was a growl for them to be silent. Martin and Claire fired together at the place from which the voices came, which was disconcertingly near them.

A scream answered, piercing the stillness. It was repeated again and again. It was so shrill and agonized that it hardly sounded like a human voice.

It appeared to infuriate the companions of the wounded man. They seemed to abandon their purpose of taking Claire alive, and opened fire on the trolley.

Martin and Claire had the experience now of lying close while the bullets passed above them, or jarred upon the frame of the trolley.

Martin poled backward again, and just in time to avoid a rush of their enemies. One man grabbed the side of the trolley. Claire brought her rifle round, but he caught at the barrel, deflecting it as she fired. Then the load upon that side over which he was attempting to clamber gave way, and he fell backward, dragging the rifle with him. She had to loose it to save herself. The next moment it was being used against them. In the excitement of the struggle they had not noticed that the light had increased around them, but now they saw that not one lantern but several lit the scene, and in the hands of men who carried them openly. There were many shots now. It seemed that their enemies were fighting among themselves. They crouched close, for it seemed that the bullets were everywhere, but ready to defend themselves again as the need should come.

"What's here?" said Tom Aldworth's voice. "Shoot the man, but don't hurt the woman."

Martin had his pistol covering him as he said it, but he did not fire. He laughed easily, the sound coming strangely in the sulphurous inferno in which they confronted one another. "I didn't think you'd murder me, Tom," he said quietly.

Tom knocked up the rifle of a man beside him. "Friends here," he shouted. Actually, the danger of further violence was over. The only two of Bellamy's gang who were left alive were racing toward the further exit, where they supposed that their friends would be waiting, there to fall to the rifles of Jack Tolley and his companions.

Bellamy's gang was ended.

Tom looked at Martin as though he found it difficult to understand that he were here. He did not ask what chance could have brought him into such a company. The thought of the narrowness of his escape was upon him. Suppose that he had allowed Martin to be killed by his companions! How could he have broken the news to Helen? Would she ever have forgiven him? He did not think so. But what difference did it make? With Martin living, his chance was over. His thought passed to the woman who had been Martin's companion. There was an aspect of intimacy between them that was unmistakable. As he looked, he saw her lay her hand on Martin's arm. She said something, to which he replied with a glance that had more than admiration or affection in its significance. After all——

[IX]

Tom told Martin in the morning.

It is to his credit that he did this when he might have let him go in ignorance, and Helen might conceivably never have heard of his continued existence. For Martin wished to go. He met Tom in the morning while Claire still slept, and the camp was stirring lazily under a sun that already approached its meridian, and he asked this as a favor.

He began on it at once. He said: "Tom, I don't know who these men are that are with you, or what your quarrels may be. I won't ask what would have happened to us last night, if you hadn't known me. I think you saved my life, so if you owed me anything before, we may call it level. I'm only asking one thing, and that is that we may get clear away now.

"We have been fighting for two days to save my wife" (so he called her) "from the men with whom you seem to have had your own quarrel, and I don't want to have to start again. Your companions may be a decent lot. I don't know, and I don't ask, but we want to get away by ourselves, and I think I can trust you to help us. You can have our goods, except what we can carry away in our own hands. I am only asking you for my wife's safety. The rest can go."

Tom was surprised. His mind had been too busy with his own trouble to consider the aspect in which he and his companions were likely to appear to Martin. He began on the minor issue.

"We didn't know they were yours. You didn't say. Which are they? But you're quite safe here, and your—the woman. But there are things which I must explain. Let's sit down and talk it over."

He led the way to the fallen tree where he had sat with Ellis Roberts the night before. Ellis lay dead now a few yards away. They had covered him from the flies. He must be buried before they moved. There were others to bury. They had learnt that it is not wise to leave dead men for the dogs to find. They grow savage and more bold on such diet.

Tom pondered before he spoke. He was sorely tempted. "His wife." It seemed clear that Helen was not missed or wanted. Suppose he let Martin go as he wished? Helen would be his in a month's time. Suppose that she should learn it later? Could he not say: "I found him with another woman, whom he called his wife. It is evident that he did not want to return to you. It was the kindest thing to conceal it." Nor was it likely that Helen would ever know. Martin's name had not been asked or mentioned. Why should it? He might go —forever. Life was precarious enough for all today. Especially so for a lonely man with an attractive woman beside him.

But Tom could not bring himself to do this. He had given his word to

Helen. There was the old debt to Martin, which should be paid. Beyond that, he had another plan. He meant to offer Martin the monarchy of the narrow lands that the deluge had left. He thought that they could seize it together, and that Martin could save it. But he did not forget Claire, and found some hope in the thought. He felt that it justified him in beginning on other things before giving the news that Helen lived.

"You mustn't think," he began, "that we're like the brutes that attacked you. We came here to make an end of them, and found you'd done half the work already. If you'll tell me what the things are that you claim I'll see that you have them, if they're not too many, and if they're things that you really need. You can't expect more than that. It's all looting now. No one earns anything. No one makes anything. No one grows anything. If we find anything it's ours, but only if we need it. There's no law now for anything, but that's understood, and seems fair."

Martin said: "All the things in the tunnel were my own collecting, but I don't want to argue that. Shall we take what we can carry, and leave the rest? I'm glad they found the pig."

For, after all, Claire's hunting had not been wasted, and a smell of roast pork was in the air.

"I expect that will do," Tom answered, "but, you know, it's all lawless. Most of the boys here will listen to me, and we're all trying to get some order, but if we don't agree, the weak have to give way, or we fight it out. There's nothing else to be done. And nothing's done that needs many of us to agree before we start it. And no one works for the future. Everything's too uncertain. We're just living on what's been done in the past, most of which can't be replaced. Some of them seem to think we can go on plundering forever. They're not even saving seed. What we want is someone who will take control, and make the rest obey him. If you would do it——"

Characteristically, Tom went straight to his objective. Martin did not appear to notice. He cut into the moment's pause with a question of his own. It was vital to any decision as to remaining among them.

He said: "There's one thing that puzzles me. I'd been living here alone for some weeks. Then I came on this gang that you call Bellamy's. Now I've met yours, who seem a more decent lot. There may be others. But I've only seen two old women, and two young ones, and of the two young ones, one was dead, and the other—I mean my wife—swam here from another piece of land. Are all the women dead?"

"No," Tom answered, "there are still some alive, and some children, but the men are the most numerous. You see, we're a mixed lot. Just some of those who happened not to have got too far to the north when the ground gave way in front of them. I suppose more of the men than the women got clear of the

wrecked houses and the fires—and some of the worst of the men, those who only cared for themselves—were among the survivors.

"Then there were those of us that were shut in the mine. When we got clear it was too late for us to go on northward and get drowned. We should just have walked into the sea. We were about two hundred, and that made a big difference. We found the village in ruins. A few of the women who had not been hurt were still there. Those that wouldn't leave till they knew that their men were dead. They came off best. Got their men again, and saved their lives as well. It was a queer chance. But most were gone——

"So there was quarreling over the women. It wasn't all the men's faults. Some women are devils. But some men are brutes, too. It all needs a fresh start."

Tom hesitated a moment, and then thought he saw a way of bringing out his more personal news in an easy way. It had got to be done somehow. He took the plunge. "There was one woman that I helped to save the morning after we got clear of the pit. We found the sea at our doors. Most of the men were searching in the ruins of their houses, but it was a ghastly work, and there was no hope. Those that had escaped knew that no one was left alive in the wreckage. Most of them had bolted. Some of us, who hadn't any families to look for, went to the water's edge. We wanted to see whether the land were still sinking. There was a boat that looked empty grounded a little way out. Then we thought that there were children in it. I swam out. I was the only one that could swim. It wasn't far. There was no danger." Tom felt that it would be unfair to imply that he had saved the lives of those that the boat had held. Perhaps also he was reluctant to come to the dramatic part of his narrative. "I got it, right enough, and paddled it ashore. It was quite easy. There was a woman in it that seemed dead, and two children——"

"*Two children?*"

The question came with an abrupt incisiveness that Martin had not used since he had last been in a court of law, and which he had not often used there, except to a witness whom he knew to be lying.

"Yes, sir. There were two children," Tom answered, his mind reacting to the form in which the question came. Martin had listened up to that point with an alert attention, for he was obtaining information from the one man that he could trust, on which must depend his decision of remaining with them or taking the chance of the lawless solitudes around him. But at the news that the children had been two, a sudden hope had leapt and died as he realized its absurdity. Yet, though his reason dismissed the thought, its coming had put him on guard and his voice was level and toneless, and his eyes inscrutable as he asked the next question. It was with the expression he would wear when a hostile counsel was inflicting a damaging cross-examination upon his chief

witness, and no one who watched could judge whether he knew that he was beaten or was prepared to over-trump the trick when his turn came for the playing. He asked, in a tone of casual interest only: "Did they live?"

"Yes," said Tom; "there was nothing wrong with the children. They were cold and wet, but they were right by the next day. The woman was nearly dead. But we nursed her through. She's well now." Martin said nothing. He continued to look at Tom as though implying that there was more to be told. It was a habit that had got many a foolish extra word from all but the wariest. Tom blundered on. "It's a funny thing that I thought she was your wife till I met you last night. She told me so."

"What is her name?"

"Helen."

"Is she well now?"

"Yes, quite."

"Is she . . . married?"

"No. She believes you are still living. I came partly to look for you."

"Are the children well?"

"Yes."

"Why were you doing this for her?"

Tom answered straightly. "Because she promised to marry me if I failed to find you."

"If you should fail . . . she would have no choice but to marry you?"

The incisive question startled Tom, who was unconscious that his grammar had been corrected. Probably Martin was also, but it was a revelation of character that he should do it at such a moment, as was the power of inference that the question showed.

Tom answered frankly. "No, I don't see that she would. It's a rule we made. She must marry someone. To all the rest she's my woman now. It's that that's kept her safe."

"How far is she away?"

"About twelve miles, or fourteen." He looked at Martin, and said abruptly: "Do you want her?"

Martin answered quietly. "She is my wife, Tom. I think you've been very good to us." He saw clearly enough that Tom had some cause for his question. He saw that the position was conventionally difficult. He did not know what its issue would be. But he was not consciously troubled. The joy of knowing that Helen lived, and his children, was too great. He was not aware of any difference in his feeling for Claire. He had gained a great confidence in her loyalty, and in a largeness of nature which is not most common to her sex, during their brief period of intimacy. It crossed his mind, always inclined to the analytic, that he ought to feel differently, but the fact was that he was

anxious to tell her. Anxious to ask her to share his joy!

This did not prevent him realizing Tom's standpoint with an equal clarity. He saw that Tom had hoped that Helen would fall to his share. He might still hope it. How would Tom act if he should realize that that hope were lost? He might turn awkward. Or he might ask for Claire. Certainly the knowledge that he claimed Helen as his wife must diminish his right to protect Claire if it were known among these men in whose power they were. He thought he could trust Tom. But he took no risk that could be avoided.

"Tom," he said, "it isn't you and I that can settle this. The women must have a voice. How soon can we get back?" He added: "I will tell Claire. But I think this is between ourselves. It would do no good for others to know till we've talked it out."

Tom saw that. Suppose Claire wouldn't give Martin up? Suppose Helen wouldn't forgive such an infidelity? There was hope here, though of a doubtful sort.

"It's no one's matter but ours," he said. "That's true. We could be back by tonight."

Martin left him to seek Claire.

But Tom found that they could not be back "by tonight." Had that been possible many things might have ended differently. But Tom's impatience was wasted on men who were tired and who saw no need for such haste. There was spoil to collect and pack. There were some grounds to be tended. There were dead men to be buried. It was agreed that they could not move till the next day. What was the haste? Knowing nothing of the activities of an ex-jockey, scarcely, indeed, knowing of his existence, Tom could give no answer.

There was trouble enough for the remainder of the day in dividing the plunder of Bellamy's camp and of the stores which Martin had accumulated, and on which he urged no claim, partly because his mind was on other issues and partly for more politic considerations.

The bickering ended in a sudden outburst of anger, in which Bob Stiles stabbed Tedman under the arm, and would probably have paid for it with his life had not half a dozen of their companions interfered to part them.

It was just then that Tom noticed Claire and Martin coming over the fields toward the camp together. He had not seen either of them since his conversation with Martin, now some hours ago. They were talking eagerly as they came, but there was no sign of ill-will between them. Tom thought, not without some justification, that the omen was favorable to the hope which he would not willingly lose, even now. But things had not occurred as most people would have expected. They seldom do.

When Martin had gone to seek Claire, whom he had left asleep at the hedge-side, he had found her place vacant; but guessing what her purpose

would be, he had been in time to see her disappearing into the wood that bordered the stream on the banks of which they had been first encountered by Bellamy.

When the fight of the previous night had ended, and they had realized that they had nothing to fear from Tom and his companions, the reaction had brought consciousness of an exhaustion that was both mental and physical. Claire would gladly have sunk into sleep on the spot from which their last defense had been made, but even then she had felt the impulse to get back to the open skies from the foul darkness of the tunnel, made more hateful by the dead bodies with which it was now littered and by the stenches of blood and powder that hung in the damp air. She had readily agreed to Martin's suggestion that they should make the necessary effort to reach the camping-place of their new companions. But reaching there, and being provided with such comfort as the camp could offer, she had fallen into an instant slumber beneath a wild-grown hedge, sheltering her from the light rain that would clear with the approaching dawn.

But when she waked in the broad daylight, and cast off the blankets that had been given for her use, rising with a vague sense of well-being and of danger past, she was appalled at the filth and disorder of her garments and at her own condition. More urgent even than the call of a very healthy appetite was the desire for water and to improve her appearance before she should have confidence to move among the strange men who were already busy with the morning meal. She observed Martin engaged in the conversation with Tom, of which we already know the import. She had not the remotest premonition that it could affect her own future. Her one thought was to cleanse herself from the filth in which she had slept. She remembered the little stream. She had no fear of any danger. In the confidence of completed victory she did not even give a thought to the cattle and other animals that were becoming a menace to those who walked unarmed or incautiously. She started over the field at as good a pace as the heavy swathes of unmown grass and some annoying stiffness in her own limbs would allow her. She had thought to be back before Martin should have observed her absence, but she had not reached the stream when she heard his pursuit, and turned to greet him.

She was gay at heart, with the joy of victory and freedom won, and the exhilaration of sunshine and a south sea-wind, and was surprised that he did not respond more readily to the mood in which she met him. Misreading the thought behind his eyes, which were serious, though with an elation of their own, she said, "You are no better," in a tone of light defiance.

He caught her meaning with the quickness which they always showed to each other's moods, and answered: "I am much worse. You are delightful always. But a bath will suit us both."

Her words recalled him to a sense of his own physical condition which the news of Helen's escape had obliterated. He was very hungry, with an appetite that he had rarely known in the old days—an appetite enforced by muscular and nervous excitements and by the clean sea-air that was round them. Left to his own choice, he would probably have gratified it before he had satisfied the desire for a more superficial renovation. But he followed her feminine preference without protest. He had news which he was anxious to tell her. News so great that all else seemed dwarfed beside it.

Yet he did not tell it at once. It seemed too great to be mentioned casually as they splashed in the little stream, and Claire sought for places that were deep enough for the exercise which she loved and which had brought her safely through the perils of a drowning world.

In the delight of a recovered cleanliness, she must wash clothes also that were caked with tunnel mud, and a blood-soaked stocking. For she had only learnt on waking that a bullet must have grazed her heel as she lay on the trolley. Beyond that she had no damage except a few bruises, of which she had not known till she saw them, and the marks of Bellamy's blows on her body.

Martin had some bruises also, and the left side of his face was discolored by the effect of Bellamy's successful marksmanship.

They sat on the bank at last, in a bushy shelter, while the sun dried the garments which Claire had spread upon the branches above them. They had no fear of oversight or of interruption. Claire was now the more anxious to get back to the camp. "I could eat a sheep," she said vividly.

Martin answered: "They were eating that young pig you captured. I hope they'll leave some for us." He changed to a more serious tone as he continued. "But I've had some great news this morning. I was only waiting till we could really talk to tell you. Tom Aldworth says that Helen is alive and in safety."

If her heart paused for an instant she did not show it. She said: "And the children?"

"Yes," he answered.

She looked at him with the wide-open glance which he had learnt to trust. "I am very glad," she said simply. She looked down to the water.

After a moment's pause she said, "We ought to go quickly," and was silent again.

He found a difficulty in speaking which he had not expected. He felt that Claire would take her own line, and that it was already clear to her what it must be. He did not want to give her up. He did not love her the less because of the joy of knowing that Helen lived. That was a fact. It might be right or wrong, natural or unnatural, but it was a fact, and they were facts that counted now. The days of divorce courts were over. They were no longer ruled by the terrors of a vile publicity, by the hectic filth of the daily press. They could

decide for themselves in matters which were theirs only. So he thought, with less than his usual wisdom. There can be no concourse of men, civilized or savage, large or small, in which the individual will not be persecuted to conform to the opinion of others. It is the inevitable penalty of congregation. They would learn that before long, and in unexpected ways.

She startled him by her next words, which came low and as though spoken to herself as she still gazed at the water: "I am glad that I shall have your son."

"You cannot possibly . . ." he began.

"Yes, I think I shall," she said confidently. She lifted her eyes to him again as she continued. "We have done nothing wrong. Neither of us. We couldn't know. . . . Will she mind?"

"No," Martin answered, "she will understand," and then as he spoke he doubted.

He knew Helen, with the confidence and intimacy of a union which had been almost perfect in sympathy, and—to a point—he was sure.

He was sure that it would make no division between them. He had once said to her when a business necessity was taking him away for a month or two: "I don't believe you'd mind if I found someone else to console me while I'm away."

She had smiled her answer, as though it were a question of little import, "Not if you wanted to."

"But," he had added, "you'd want to know all about it when I came back."

"Why, of course," she had answered. That was obvious. She was of the temperament that finds it almost as pleasurable to watch life as to share it. She would have regarded a mental infidelity as of more import than a merely physical one.

So far he was sure. But how she would feel toward Claire was another matter. Here he was less certain. And of the future—he could not tell.

He knew that both Helen and Claire were capable of generosities beyond the average of women—capable of large generosities in the decisive issues of life. But that is to be great at the great moments; and the small moments are many.

But Claire was speaking again. "I'm glad," she said, "that you told me before you knew." The meaning was clearer than the words. Perhaps she was right. He did not see that it mattered. She added: "She will be so glad you are alive. . . ."

He was realizing more clearly than he had done before that the issue was between the two women rather than between himself and them. He did not yet realize that, even now, they would not be able to escape from the opinions of others—that these might be decisive. He did realize that Claire had taken it well, and it added to the exaltation that was natural as he thought of this

unlooked-for recovery of those who had been dearest to him. Certainly, Claire had taken it well—he might say with a nobility of outlook which he had no right to claim. For Helen could be no more than a name to her. Perhaps she did not greatly care? But he did not think that. He would have little right to complain if it were so. But he did not want to lose her. He did not intend to lose her. He must talk it over with Helen. He thought that she would understand. But there was Claire's standpoint also. It must wait till they met.

It may seem strange that neither Claire nor Martin should have met the issue with straight words. Did they mean to part or to continue together? If they decided that they must part, would it be with laughter only, or with tears and kisses? There was no word of parting. There were neither kisses nor tears. Both of them had assumed that Martin would return to Helen immediately. They were not of the characters to consider any other possibility. And Claire had assumed that she would go also. "*We* ought to go quickly." Beyond that she kept her counsel. That was simply because she saw that nothing could be resolved till she met Martin's wife. It was between her and Helen.

From a different angle, Martin felt in the same way. An instinctive loyalty to Helen prevented him from discussing the future, even with Claire, until he had first agreed it with the one whom he recognized to have the first right to decide.

Claire rose, stretching herself luxuriously. It was good to be alive in the sunlight. She felt the clothes above her. They were dry enough. Anyway, she was too hungry to wait longer. She began to dress.

Martin rose also. He saw blackberries.

[X]

On the way back Claire said: "Are there many people alive where we are going?"

Martin told her what he had learnt from Tom. He added that the confusion appeared bad enough. "Tom said they needed someone to boss them. He offered me the job. He seemed to think he had it in his gift."

"Did you accept?" she asked with a quickened interest.

"I didn't answer."

"You could do that. It would be rather fun," she said thoughtfully.

"It would be hard work," he answered; "there's always some fun in that. It would mean that many would pay for one's mistakes instead of a few only. It would mean that I should probably get murdered in the end—and very likely deserve it. Yes, it would be fun enough."

"Shall you accept it?"

He laughed at the idea. "I hadn't thought of it seriously. If I ever accept

such a position I shall have ascertained first that it is offered in earnest."

They were talking of the life which could be developed under the new conditions and of the possibilities which it offered of building something better than had been previously, when Tom saw them returning.

He met them with his own trouble. Could nothing be devised to stop the quarreling over the spoils, which was threatening the harmony of the expedition? Like many others before them, they were finding that success is more disintegrating than failure.

There was discord over the ownership of the cart and horse which had been seized. Discord over the right to load it. Acute disputation with the owners of the pack-horses, as to their right to burden their quadrupeds with captured articles too bulky for any manual transit, to the exclusion of those which they had brought for the general welfare. Discord over principles of distribution: Could each man keep that which he found? Was he entitled to all that he could carry, or ought they to share alike? How could they value the articles that they plundered? How many pots of raspberry jam would be equal to a pair of ivory earrings?

Martin listened, and said: "You can't draw lots. Everyone would get what he doesn't want. Even choosing in turns wouldn't be satisfactory. Why not have an auction?"

Tom stared at that. "What could they bid?" he asked, "and who could they pay? You mustn't forget that money has no value now."

"I don't," said Martin; "it never had. But we can pretend, as we used to."

Tom did not appear enthusiastic. "It would never be agreed," he said, "because some have plenty of money, and some have none. Some have thrown it away, and some are hoarding it. They cannot believe that its value is over." He did not say that he was one who had destroyed it. To be fair, it was not that which was first on his mind.

"I don't think that matters," Martin answered; he was thinking quickly, and a plan had formed which might have more far-reaching effects than those who accepted it would be likely to contemplate. He explained it to Tom, who said it would do well enough if the boys would agree. Jack Tolley would be the best one to explain it to them. Jack was called, and understood it almost before Martin had finished speaking. He would tell them all that it was the best way.

It was about an hour later that the contents of the captured camp, with Martin's own accumulations, were collected in the center of a ring from which no man was absent.

Claire, watching curiously, observed a new Martin in the man who addressed them from the same stool which had been flung backwards and forwards two nights ago with such tragic consequences.

The voice, modulated easily to the necessities of the occasion, was coolly

dominant, as he explained the conditions which the men had individually accepted already. Jack Tolley stood beside him with a notebook which had been rescued, somewhat soiled, from the tunnel-floor, where it had been carelessly flung by one of the seekers of booty who had scorned its utility. Now it contained the name of each man on a separate page, with a sum of twenty pounds to his credit, as remuneration for his share in the expedition.

Against that credit he could bid as high as he would for any article that he wanted. When it should be exhausted he must bid no more until those who had balances still to their credit had also completed their expenditure. If all or any of them should have credits still left when the spoils were distributed, they should remain for benefit on the next occasion of such a distribution.

Martin told them plainly, though without protest, that most of the goods before them had been found and stored for his own use, but as they had come to his rescue (however unintentionally), and as he hoped to be one of them in the future—the news of Helen's existence among them had compelled him to this decision, at least until he had found her—he was willing for them to be distributed. There were a few articles only that he wished to retain for himself or Claire, of which he read a list, and they were removed without protest.

The auction went smoothly. It was of no moment to anyone but the buyers that prices should be high, and Martin made no effort to raise them. They were erratic in comparison to the original value of the articles, as was natural. He sold the horse and cart on condition that they should not be claimed until they had been used on the return journey for the general benefit of the expedition—a very popular solution, which reduced their value to a very moderate figure, even in the eyes of the original claimant.

When it was over, there was a sense of orderly solution, which was gratifying to men who had recently seen so much of the evils of anarchy.

The succeeding hours were spent in the separate packing of the goods of the party, and in allocating their means of transit. Even with the help of the captured cart, they would march heavily. When this had been done, it was evident, even to Martin's concealed impatience, that no move could be made before morning.

Toward evening there was thunder, with a storm to southward. They missed the worst of this, but the rain reached them for a few minutes, and drenched them quickly.

It was as warm as ever when the storm had passed, but a fire must be lit for the drying of soaked garments. Round this fire they sat, at a respectful distance, but in the conventional circle which is older than history. To sit round a fire—to place a bed against a wall—these are primal instincts which operate without reason, or, at times, against it.

Martin joined the circle, in the absence of Claire, who had wandered apart.

She did not want to talk further. She felt that, till Helen had been told, there was no more to be said.

Martin found that the conversation fell as he approached the circle. He was welcomed well enough, but a silence followed. He sat down by Jack Tolley, who began at once to tell him of the disordered life of the community from which they came. Then he stopped abruptly and jumped up. "I'd better speak to them," he said, and followed a little group who were withdrawing from the further side of the fire, arguing as they went.

Jack came back in a few minutes. The men did not return with him. He spoke to another man, who rose and went after them. He sat down by Martin again, and continued the interrupted conversation.

Then Tom Aldworth, who had not previously joined the circle, came behind them. He called Jack, who rose at once, and went with him.

Martin realized that there was a subject of interest which he was not asked to share. He was not greatly concerned, for his thoughts were on more personal matters. He was glad to be quiet.

A man sat near him, smoking a short and dirty pipe. He did not speak, but he gazed at Martin with a silent fascination, so that finally he was constrained to observe him. He had the red skin of the beer-drinker, the hirsute ornaments of a goat, and the brown eyes of a spaniel.

"What's the trouble?" Martin asked idly. He recognized the man as one who had bid an unexpected and needless pound for a marble statuette which had been found incongruously among the lumber of Bellamy's camp. No one else wanted to be burdened with it. He might have had it for sixpence. He was the man they called Monty.

Now he said: "Trouble is they doesn't know they've made their minds up, and Tom's only just tellin' them. They'll know now." He continued to gaze at Martin with his dog-like eyes. "We wants a good killer," he added, with a wistful satisfaction in his voice, as of one who watched the opening of an unexpected heaven. Martin felt that he was the subject of this unexpected description.

"Do you mean that I am 'a good killer'?" he asked, with some curiosity.

"Best we've met, you bet. And the gal. Fine gal 'er be." He spoke in the tone of one who pays reluctant tribute. He added: "But gals ain't no good. Rotten bad they be." He spoke with the conviction of an experience of which he would not risk repetition. Here was one to whom the paucity of women would bring no grief. Martin wondered what had led him to volunteer for such an expedition—to risk his life to avenge a dead woman who did not concern him. Actually it was the hero-worship which was more necessary to his happiness than any feminine ministrations. Once it had been Jack 'Obbs and Andy Wilson. Lately it had been Tom Aldworth. Today it was Martin Webster.

Behind the bleared eyes, and the beer-reddened skin, there was the soul of a romantic. Perhaps a cleaner, healthier life might yet do something for this man, whose father had been a drunken sot, and whose grandfather had been among the foremost statesmen of his day.

Martin thought with some surprise, some amusement, and some hesitation, of the character which appeared to be attributed to him. He had been less conscious of successful killing than of the perpetual danger of getting killed. He felt the idea that he was of a sanguinary disposition, or of exceptional ability in the use of arms, to be absurd. Yet his reason told him that the dead bodies which had been strewn in camp and tunnel must have appeared rather numerous. They did not know how naturally it had all happened. He wondered whimsically whether they were considering him for the office of champion to the community. He was not a man of his hands. He had had enough of single combats to satisfy him till his life ended.

Tom came back, and Jack Tolley. There were others behind them.

Tom said with a new formality: "Mr. Webster, they've all asked me to speak to you. We want you to boss this show."

Martin realized that this was a serious proposition; at least, in its intention. He rose, and faced them.

"Will you tell me just what you mean?" he said quietly.

"We mean just what we say," Tom answered. "You can say what you want done, and we'll see you get it. We want someone who can say what's needed, and get the whole thing straight. We want law," he added, "but not like the old days. We didn't like them, and we don't like what we've got now. We want law—but not lawyers."

Martin said: "But I'm a lawyer myself."

Tom answered quickly: "Then you know what we mean when we say that we don't want any more. We want laws we can understand; and not too many. We want things *done*. We want to be told what needs doing most. If we quarrel, we want someone to whom we can go to decide it. We don't want to tell one man, who tells another, who takes it to another, where we all lie our best, and then find that the one who decides has never understood it properly, and that the one who loses has to pay them all five. But that's by the way. You know what law used to be, and you can't think that we want that again. But we think you're straight, and you're the best man we have, and we'll do what you say, if you'll get on with the job."

Jack Tolley interposed before Martin could answer. But "interposed" is misleading. He did not break in hurriedly, nor did he risk the second's delay which might have enabled Martin to commence his reply. He picked his moment with the neat accuracy with which he would have balanced a column.

"There's one thing about which we should like to be sure, which we should

like you to promise. We don't want the law altered about the women. Some of us didn't like it at first, but it's working now, and we don't want it changed."

He was thinking of Madge, bequeathed to him by the dying Ellis. Knowing the wish of the man that she had first chosen, and faced by the necessity of making a second choice promptly, he did not doubt that she would have him. It was true that he spoke for others besides himself, but it was he who had suggested that they should make this condition.

Martin saw his risk clearly. Here were a score of men, half of them from one mining community, who would naturally hold together, asking him to accept the control of a fortuitous population of some hundreds, for the majority of whom they had no right to speak. They professed the wish to give him a free hand, and in the same breath, their two spokesmen stipulated, the one that he should be sparing in the laws that he made, and that they should be administered simply, the other that a very crude marriage law which they had instituted should be continued to perpetuity.

It was immaterial to consider whether their ideas were good or bad. It was the evidence that he would be in the hands of a demagogy unless he were firm at the commencement, which was important.

"I am sorry to refuse you," he said, "but I cannot accept your offer."

Tom looked disconcerted. He would not have been surprised had Martin discussed conditions, but he had not expected so blank a refusal.

He answered with equal directness: "Will you tell us why?"

"Yes," Martin said readily, "I will tell you. It is because you ask more than you think, and offer less.

"You offer what is not yours to give. How can a score of men speak for hundreds of others, who do not know me?

"You offer me a free hand, and qualify it before you have finished speaking.

"You say that you think I could steer your ship to safety. You may be right or wrong. You are probably wrong. But if I could, it would be as captain. It would not be as chairman of a committee.

"I have not asked for such a position. I do not ask it now. I will tell you just what it means. It means that you would profit by my successes, and that I should pay for my failures. It means that I should wake while you sleep. It means that my anxieties would never cease: that my work would never end. You are asking for my whole life, which is the price of such precedence.

"If I were to accept such an offer, if I were to take the risk of accepting it from you, who are not a tithe of those for whom you profess to speak, or whom you propose that we should coerce to the same end, it must be on my own terms, which are that you make none. None whatever.

"If I alter your marriage laws, they must be altered. If I tax you to half that

you have, you must pay me without question. If I tell you to hang your best friend you must fetch the rope with a good will.

"I may do none of these things, but it is a risk you take. You must either trust, or not trust me. I will be captain, or nothing. I will not consult the boatswain as to the sails I carry.

"I will have no committees. No voting. No wasted hours of talk. No follies of compromise.

"The time may come for these things, and if it should, I will tell you. But that time must be of my choice, and not yours.

"If you do not like these terms, you can refuse them. You may be wiser to do so.

"If you like them, I will have them written down, and they shall be signed by every man here. But it must be those terms or none."

He paused for their answer. He scarcely expected assent, though he had learnt to rely upon the influence of his voice and personality, but he knew that it was the one chance, if chance there were, of success in such an enterprise.

Tom spoke impulsively. "I'll sign that." There was a chorus of supporting voices, among which Monty's was audible.

Jack asked coolly: "What about those who don't?"

"We shall turn them out," Martin answered; he knew that audacity only could carry this thing through successfully. "Those who won't sign must go elsewhere. They may be glad to come back. But we must have a community that is not divided. We will give the choice to each in turn, and they must sign, or go."

"Are you speaking only of those here, or of everyone who is left alive?" Jack asked again.

"I mean those here first, and then everyone," Martin answered.

"And the women?" said Jack.

"Yes, and the women." He had not, in fact, thought of them till the question was put, but he did not hesitate in his answer.

He waited for the next question. It was evident that Jack was not one to be hurried. The pause had given men time to think, and he judged that the result would depend now upon Jack's decision, of which there was no indication. But he asked no more questions. He said: "I will sign. I think it's a good way."

Martin looked round and saw nothing but assent and eagerness. He noticed Claire standing at the back of the group. He said: "Boys, I'll tell you why I've asked this. We've got a chance, if the land holds firm beneath us, such as comes once in a million years. A chance to start fresh—and to start free. I shall want the help of all of you. But it must be one man only who chooses the way we go—or we shall go nowhere. A few steps this way, a few steps that, and we are back where we were. I may not always lead you the best way, but I shall

not walk in a circle. We know the best things of the life behind us, and we know the worst, and it will be our own fault if we don't make something better than has been."

He said no more. He knew the use of words, and he knew their limits. He told Jack Tolley to write out the declaration for the men to sign. It was drawn in simple but emphatic words, an undertaking without embroidery or appeal to unseen powers. Martin had not practiced for seven years in English law-courts without learning that a man who will bear false witness or betray his fellows is not deterred by the blasphemy of an oath.

It was written in the notebook which had been used to record the items of the auction. One by one the men signed it, on the tailboard of the captured cart. There was no man who refused or hesitated. At the end Claire came forward. "I thought women were to sign also?" she asked Jack, who was superintending the ceremony. He held out the pencil.

Having it in her hand, she hesitated for a moment, and then wrote firmly.

Later Martin went down the list with Jack, learning the names and some biographical particulars of his first subjects.

At the end he found the signature *Claire Webster*. Was it a declaration of war with Helen? He did not think that. Was it at least a sign that——But it was waste of effort to speculate. In a few hours he would know.

BOOK V

THREE

MARTHA BARNES cleaned her pre-deluge doorstep. It was the only part of her original tenement which was still available for such ministrations. Martha was a widow. She was the sister-in-law of Navvy Barnes, of whose end we know, though we have lacked time to survey the previous details of an ill-spent life. Martha occupied the end house in the mining village. She was a small, scraggy, white-faced, sharp-featured woman with a shrill and bitter tongue. She had four children, of whom the eldest boy was old enough to be down the mine when the storm broke.

Of the three others, one had been killed by a falling wall, but she had rescued two at the cost of some burns which still disfigured her face and arms.

Having her son in the mine, it had not occurred to her to join the rush to the north, which had crowded the highroad that ran through the length of the village and had stampeded most of her neighbors.

When Davy appeared, she had lost no time before instructing him to commence the rebuilding of their ruined home.

He was a moon-faced youth, showing more resemblance to a burly alcoholic father than to the mother that bore him. To that mother he had learnt to yield an unquestioning obedience, and he had set to work very promptly to the erection of an edifice of balks and pit-props, undeterred by the fact that the remaining inhabitants of the ruined village had deserted it in favor of the scattered houses of the countryside or for the wrecks of the pleasanter village of Cowley Thorn, about two miles away.

Now there was shelter again for the Barnes household. There was dry storage for the various articles which his mother's foresight directed Davy to collect. There was a tethered cow on the rough grass beyond the slag-heap, and there were two young pigs snoring in well-fed contentment in a sty which had been erected among the ruins of the deserted village. And the front doorstep, on which none of the departed inhabitants had ever dared to place a polluting foot, was as clean as ever.

This wooden hut, in which Martha defied the fate that had swept a score of nations to oblivion—and which may be taken as symbolizing the spirit, at once hopeless and indomitable, in which our sentient life faces the blind forces of

the inanimate which may destroy it at any moment—contained another inhabitant. When Sir John Debenham left the ruins of his country house in the neighborhood of Fenny Compton, he had been breathing heavily as he took the steering-wheel of the limousine in his podgy and unaccustomed hands. His chauffeur, who had incurred a broken arm in the endeavor to save some of his master's possessions, he left to his fate, but his wife and daughter cowered (with a pet lapdog) in the upholstery behind him. It was only a week before that Sir John had been warned to avoid excitement, and had paid a fee of five guineas for this somewhat obvious wisdom. His plethoric disposition was ill-adapted for the excitements and dangers of the chaotic flight in which he was involved, as he cut perilously into the congestion of the Warwick road. He survived several accidents. He escaped others by such miraculous chances that his frightened wife gained confidence that Providence had risen to the occasion, and was acting as might be anticipated where people of their importance were jeopardized among the ruck of inferior humanity. But his breathing did not improve as the day lengthened, and as they ran down the slope of the road toward the ruins of the village beside which Martha was giving some attention to her own burns, and more to her rescued children, it was the head of a dead man which lolled over a steering-wheel from which the hands had fallen.

Fortunately the road bent somewhat at that point, and a damaged cyclist was the only evidence of its aberration which the car left on the road as it plunged into the field that sloped downward on the left-hand side.

Sir John's wife was dead. Providence should be able to look after itself, even though it had shown its incompetence to protect the Debenham family, but it must have heard some emphatic comments on its deficiencies when the lady encountered it upon the heavenly pavements.

Her parents were dead, but Sybil Debenham was alive, with a cracked head and a broken leg, from which injuries she would doubtless have died where she lay but for the assistance which she received from Martha Barnes, of whose household she became a regular inmate. Her leg was mended, only a slight limp illustrating the inferiority of amateur to professional setting. Her head bore a scar which was concealed by her lengthening hair. She was an ineffectual fluffy girl, who had been carefully trained to incompetence. Now, in wiser hands, she was being inured to many useful occupations, including the care of the two younger children. "To larn yer, when yer has brats o' yer own," as Martha bluntly told her. Under such conditions, and separated irrevocably from Coxon's Pills, which her mother had honestly believed to be necessary to the continued existence of the human race, she was gaining a health which she had never previously imagined. Saved by the effects of her accident from the dangers of the earlier anarchy, she had been successfully claimed by Martha at

a later stage as the bride-elect of the moon-faced Davy, an allocation to which she had given a frightened assent when the alternative of passing into the hands of strangers had been thrust upon her. She was even learning to find an unacknowledged pleasure in the shy and silent worship of the youth for whom it appeared that she had been destined by the caprice of so strange a fortune. And as she gained in strength, and in willingness and capacity for the unfamiliar household tasks which were thrust upon her, his sharp-voiced parent became somewhat less skeptical as to her fitness to fulfil so honorable a destiny.

Martha, busy on the already mentioned doorstep, raised her head and looked up the road down which Sir John's car had once so abruptly descended. Like the Dictator: "North looked she long and hard"—only it was southeast on this occasion. Then, like the Dictator, she took prompt and energetic steps to meet the observed emergency.

She bent down to her work; she called into the interior of the three-roomed hut with which Davy's energy had already enriched them, without lifting her head in that direction.

"Davy," she said, "listen 'ere, and don't show yerself. Go out at the back, and make 'aste to Ted Nuttall's. Tell 'im Cooper's gang's on the way, an' there'll be 'ell to pay if they don't clear the women out sharp. Then borrow Ben Todd's bike, an' get out by Sowter's Lane, an' find Tom Aldworth. Tell 'im that while 'e's 'untin' that 'ulkin' Bellamy, there's Jerry come to call, an' 'e'd better be back today, or there'll be no cause to 'urry. 'E ought to be somewer back on the main road by now. Yer'll get through wer the Plast'rer's Arms stood at the corner."

Davy had learnt obedience from infancy. Having received instructions which may not be as clear to the reader as they were to him (which was of the greater importance), and which were designed to prevent his premature collision with the invaders, he did not argue nor ask, but laid down the tool which he had been sharpening on the grindstone (looted on the instructions of a far-seeing parent), and set out on his appointed mission.

He heard his mother's voice as he departed, instructing Sybil to remove herself and the children to a place of safety among the deserted ruins, with a judicious threat to her offspring that they would be tanned till they cudn't stan' should they fail in silence or promptitude.

Having completed her dispositions in the face of the approaching enemy, Martha resumed her doorstep.

[II]

There was dawn in the northeast sky when Joe Harker, riding somewhat

wearily, for he suffered from too many weeks of soft living, had approached the locality in which Jerry Cooper had established himself and his following.

Jerry Cooper was of a character very different from that of the brutal Bellamy. He had been a builder's merchant in a South Midland town, his real occupation having been that of city councilor, in which position he had used his opportunities for patronage and (indirect and legalized) peculations to such good purpose that he had become known as the richest man in his native city, and was honored and trusted accordingly. It was only a few months earlier that it had been discovered that an alderman of his city, being a poor man with an invalid family, had very culpably employed the services of some municipal workmen for the repairs of his personal property. The matter was an open scandal. The wretched man, who had given a large part of his time to the thankless service of his native city for nearly forty years, had robbed it clumsily and openly of £17 4s. 11d. Naturally, he resigned the office which he had dishonored. There were many who would have let the matter rest there, in view of the age and previous services of the culprit. But Councilor Cooper felt differently. In a speech of homely eloquence he dwelt upon the importance of maintaining the purity of municipal life, and urged his colleagues that natural sorrow for the delinquent's fall should not blind them to the public duty that was thrust upon them. In the result, the necessary resolution which consigned their late alderman to the lawyers' clutches was passed by a small majority of very uncomfortable men (the honest members of the council being a minority), and he was tried before a judge, who condemned him to serve a term in the common jail to vindicate the importance of maintaining the purity of municipal life.

It is fair to place on record that the judge did this with a genuine sorrow, honestly supposing that he had fulfilled a public duty by this contempt for the principles of the Christianity which his country professed to reverence. The editor of the local newspaper, having written a leader concerning the vindication of the purity of municipal life, remarked that he was "damned sorry" in the privacy of his own home. But Councilor Cooper had no regrets. It was impossible to feel anything but contempt for a man who could rob so clumsily, or who could have felt the need to do so, after neglecting so many years of opportunity of enriching himself at the expense of the city he served. . . .

Councilor Cooper had lost his office. He had lost his property, which had consisted largely in "eligible building sites" and in ground-rents which his industry had "created." He had lost most of the things he valued. But he had not lost his character.

As he had ruled there, he would rule here. As he had been efficient there, he was efficient here. Under his directing energy the ground floor of a

straggling stone farmhouse had been repaired and roofed. Its newer and more extensive farm buildings, which, having been erected strong and low, had suffered less than the house, had been repaired equally.

Here he had established himself with his following, which consisted of twenty-seven men and five prostitutes. There were no women or children.

He lived and worked for one object—the overthrow of those who had cast him out, and for his dominion over them.

He would have pointed with confidence to the results which his organization had achieved already as evidence of his fitness for the precedence on which his mind was set.

He had already explored the limits of the land which the seas had spared, and knew its extent, resources, and remaining inhabitants better than Tom Aldworth or any other member of the larger community had exerted himself to do.

He had searched in every possible direction until he had obtained sufficient arms and ammunition for the equipment of his followers. He had captured sufficient horses to mount them. Stalls and byres once filled with rows of milch cattle were now occupied by these animals. He had never previously mounted a horse, but he had now trained himself for the rough riding of the wilderness of the countryside, and all but three of his followers, who were physically incapable from various causes, were practiced daily in the same manner.

His object was the creation of a military force, the efficiency of which would compensate for the smallness of its numbers, and which would enable him, at the right moment, to strike such a blow as it would not be necessary to second.

He did not expect any attack to be made upon himself in the meantime, being well informed of the shiftless and divided ways of those over whom he intended to assert a natural supremacy, but he took precautions, both against that possibility and against the possibility of insubordination among his own followers.

The house in which he lived was barred and barricaded as though it were besieged already. It was occupied by the three inefficients already mentioned, who acted as his menial servants, by the five prostitutes, who were lodged here nominally for their own security, but actually so that he might control the rotation in which they bestowed their favors upon his obedient followers, and by a trusted guard of an officer and five men, in whose loyalty he had sufficient reason for confidence. The remaining men, divided into three similar troops of six, each with its own officer, slept in the ruined barns, which would be sufficiently rebuilt for their comfort before the winter cold should require it.

Joe, coming early to this military establishment, and inquiring for its

proprietor, was received by men who were alert and civil, but who declined to conduct him to "the Captain" till the opening of the house door should announce that its inmates were stirring. They gave him food, for food was plentiful. They fed and groomed a tired horse, for that was a task of which they had learned the importance. Had Joe attempted to leave they might have shown him a different temper, but he had no such intention. He was too tired even to be normally observant. Where he ate he slept, till he was stirred by a foot that invaded his ribs with little ceremony, and a voice that told him that the Captain would see him.

Joe was not taken into the house. He was led to a repaired shed, in which the officer of Troop Three, who was responsible for the commissariat and for such farming operations as were connected therewith, kept his records and balanced his accounts.

Joe found himself confronted by "Captain" Cooper, who was seated at the further side of a deal table.

He let Joe stand while he scrutinized him with hard eyes in a blue-jowled face.

But Joe, though still somewhat sluggish of mind from interruption of the sleep he needed, was as cool as he.

"Who are you?" said the Captain, accenting the final syllable in a way which was something less than complimentary.

"Joe Harker," And then as one who drops a bomb from a casual hand: "Bellamy's dead."

Jerry Cooper started inwardly. The news was of importance to his plans. He had watched the desultory wanderings of Bellamy's gang with a natural contempt, and had already decided to assimilate it as soon as he should be ready to do so. But not till then. He was a business man.

His pulse may have quickened, but his face gave no sign as he answered.

"I didn't ask you about Bellamy, but about yourself."

"And I told you both," Joe grinned in unabashed response, "but I'll take it back if you don't want to know."

"I want to know what I ask," Jerry said sternly.

"Well, you know it now," said Joe, who was not deceived by this apparent lack of interest in the news he brought. "I can go, if I'm not wanted."

"No, you can't."

"Well, I don't want to," said Joe with unruffled good humor.

"You might." There was menace in the curt reply, for there was a lack of respect in Joe's attitude which Jerry Cooper was not accustomed to encounter.

Joe said nothing. This was too much after the pattern of interviews with owners, with whom bargains were made which were not for public knowledge, for him to be disconcerted. As usual he had information for sale, and he knew

its value.

As he said nothing, but continued to smile comfortably, Jerry had the next word.

"What were you?"

"A jockey."

Jerry stared in an open astonishment. A less cautious man would have called him a liar without reflection. This obese individual—but the name brought memories—Harker, who rode Mustard for the Morley Stakes. He had made ten pounds on that race. Could this be the man?

"Then you can ride now?"

"I rode here."

"Where from?"

"About ten miles away."

"Cross country?"

"Yes."

"Why did you come?"

"I wanted better company than I'd got."

"Do you want to join me?"

"I might."

"You will." There was the same tone of menace that Joe had heard before, but it left him unruffled.

Jerry Cooper changed his manner. He became the successful tradesman interviewing the traveler to whom he could give or withhold the order on which his month's commission depended.

He pointed to a stool. He turned aside from the table. He adopted a gruff and distant geniality.

"Tell me about it," he said.

Joe took the stool, for he was tired of standing, but he did not commence his narrative.

"I won't work," he remarked with a note of finality, as though that had been the subject of conversation. "I can find things out if I'm left alone."

Jerry nodded. "I want a man like that." Then, as Joe continued silent, he added: "I don't buy goods I've not seen. I shall pay you fairly. You'll get what you're worth."

"Then I'll get enough," Joe answered amicably. "Bellamy's dead, as I told you before——Fighting over a girl——There's a girl and a man wandering loose. I don't know where from. Bellamy stole the girl. Then she got clear, and they broke his head. They're devils to fight. Then he followed them into a railway tunnel. He didn't come back. Now there's Tom Aldworth, and Jack Tolley, and their lot, trying to wipe out what's left of the gang. They're all fighting each other. It's a fair mix-up. If you drop on them now, you can get

what's left. I want the girl."

"Could you manage her?" said Jerry. "She sounds a live one."

"Easy," said Joe, grinning responsively. "Tie and starve. Let me try?"

Cooper nodded. "It's fair pay," he said amicably. "But we're not going there first." He got up, and led the way to the door. "Let me see you ride," he said curtly, with a return to his earlier manner.

Joe followed him at an easy amble that kept close enough to the heavy stride of the taller man.

Councilor Cooper had not been fat, but he had been described as "beefy"—even as of a comfortable circumference. Captain Cooper was hard and fit. He moved quickly despite his weight.

Joe did not want exercise. He wanted sleep. But he did not think that objections would be well received. Nor did he want to waste time. He wanted to see the anticipated expedition set out.

He quickly demonstrated that he could ride. There was not one man under Jerry's orders who had understood how to ride a horse before he drove them and himself to acquire the knowledge. Horse-riding had almost died out in the England of that time.

But here was a man, as Jerry quickly realized, who could see at a glance what a horse could do, and could coax him to it. He was just the man that he needed to control his stables, and to teach riding to his new recruits. For he would have no one but mounted men in the force he was molding. He believed in mobility.

Joe received this proposal without enthusiasm. He preferred a lazier life. Captain Cooper changed the subject, questioning him closely about the events with which we are already acquainted. When he had obtained all the information with which Joe could supply him, he stood frowning thoughtfully for a time, and then walked into the house, leaving Joe standing.

Half an hour later the leaders of the three troops were summoned into the house. They came out with an air of suppressed excitement, and commenced preparations for marching, but Joe found them indisposed for conversation.

After a time, Cooper came from the house, spurred and belted, and with a more military aspect than he had shown previously. He came straight to Joe. He said: "We are taking three troops. Your own horse will be tired. You can pick a mount from Number One Troop. Get a meal, if you want one. We start at noon."

"I can't fight," Joe said cautiously. He wanted to be on the spot, but——

"You weren't asked," Jerry said, with contempt. "You must look after yourself."

At noon they started. They took no baggage. What each man carried of food, or utensils, or ammunition, was strapped with his blanket behind the

saddle. They were equipped for speed—and for some added burdens on their return.

They moved with scouts ahead, and with outriders on either flank, as though invading a hostile country, though there was little enough of reason for supposing that any attack would be made upon them. Every man had a rifle of some kind, though the patterns varied. Some wore cavalry sabers, though their appearance was rather of mounted infantry of the looser kind. They rode in single file, for the roads were blocked and cumbered, and it was often the easier way to avoid them in favor of hedge-side paths which were trampled by the wild life that was increasing in the deserted fields.

When they had gone on for an hour, Joe pushed his way forward.

"Captain," he said, as he drew level, "we're off the way. We're riding too far north."

Cooper turned upon him with a burst of inexplicable ferocity. "You damned ape!" he said. "Who asked your interference? Keep your place, and your mouth shut."

Joe fell back wondering.

Before night, being no fool, he had guessed their objective. They were not riding to the attack of Aldworth's little force, or to rake in the remnants of Bellamy's gang, but to make a raid, in Tom's absence, upon the unsuspecting community from which the best men were absent.

They halted for the night in a sheltered hollow, having accomplished the last miles with cautious movements under all available cover. They had met no man, and felt some confidence that no one had seen them.

In the morning the distance would be short, and the horses fresh for the double burdens which they must bear should the raid succeed in its object.

As they halted, the Captain came up to Joe. Being in good spirits, he spoke with a renewed affability: "I keep my word. You shall have the girl, if we get her, as I intend we shall. If we don't, you shall have a pick from the others." He went on: "Do you know where Tom Aldworth lives?" Joe had to confess to an unusual ignorance. "It is no matter; Rentoul does. You'll go there with him and Bryan. It will need men who can ride. Tom has a wife, and there are two children. I don't know whether they're hers. Bring the lot." He added: "There'll be no fighting there, unless Tom's back."

Joe made no objection. It sounded easy work—with two others to do it. He was quite sure that Tom would not be back.

They lay quietly during the night, no fires being allowed, and a wide ring of covert sentinels protecting them from the risk of unsuspected observation.

In the morning their Captain showed no haste to move, and the sun was high when he called them together, and explained his purpose: "Boys," he said, "we haven't moved early, because we're giving the men time to leave the

houses, and get scattered. You can shoot any that come your way. The more the better. But I want quick work, and I don't want you to get hurt. You're more use alive. If they've got guns, they'll have left them at home, and by when they get back we shan't be there. But if they were all at home, it would be just a fight from house to house. It isn't shooting we want here.

"We shall ride straight past the mine, and on to Cowley Thorn. Troop Two will take the houses up the stream. Troop Three will go through the village. Troop Four will keep with me, except Bryan and Rentoul, who know their job already. Fifteen women's the catch we want. I won't go with less. But we don't want fighting here. Only speed. Each troop keeps together. You must get the best catch you can. I don't promise you each the one you carry off. It's teamwork. But the better you catch, the better for all.

"I'll tell you where we meet again, when we pass the spot. After that, we ride south. They won't expect that, and they'll probably lose the track—if they follow at all. But they don't ride, mostly.

"Two miles out, we shall put the women down, and they'll be walked home by Barton and Pleshleigh Ash. Troop Two will guard them. They won't be followed. If any follow us at all, they'll come on after the hoof-marks. We'll make them clear in the right place.

"We shall go on from there, and scout for Tom Aldworth's lot. He's fair sure to come back by the highroad. We ought to make an ambush there that they won't live long to remember."

He spoke with confidence. He believed, with some reason, that he had trained his men to a far higher efficiency than that of any that they were likely to encounter. And he felt that the plan was good. He might have attacked Tom first, but the advantage of surprise might have been lost at the village, and this was essential. The men there, and along the adjoining coast, were formidable from their numbers, though not otherwise to be accounted seriously. Surprise was everything. He had not meant to make such a move till the days were shorter, but the opportunity of Tom's absence, and of defeating him separately when he should have been presumably exhausted by previous fighting, was too good to be lost.

It was about an hour to midday when they descended the road that showed the ruined mining village on its northern side, and observed that there was a single erection with evidence of occupation, and that a woman was cleaning her doorstep before it.

[III]

Captain Cooper reined his horse, and looked down at the kneeling Martha. Martha wrung out her flannel, and looked up at the Captain.

He would never be a graceful horseman, but he sat the great bay he was riding easily enough. He looked fit to lead in a better cause than that in which he was now engaged.

He said: “It seems to take a long while to clean it.”

She answered quickly: “There’s some cleans what they don’t dirty, an’ there’s some as dirties what they don’t clean.”

There was a possibility of meaning here which he did not probe. Instead, he asked: “Where’s the gaffer?”

“I’m gaffer here,” she said shortly.

“Come, missus, you don’t live here alone.”

“The children’s up for the berries in Cowley Wood. They don’t stay home all the day,” she answered.

Captain Cooper looked at her veteran figure, and at the meager, burn-scarred face, with the straggly wisps of graying hair around it. He looked back at his men: “Anyone want her?” he asked, with a sardonic smile. The men grinned in answer. The long line of horsemen was in motion again. Martha turned into the house. The clatter of horses became fainter. She heard a shot from the valley. She looked pleased. Davy was a good boy!

The first house beyond the ruined village stood well back from the road, with a field behind it, and beyond that a straggling copse. It had been rebuilt sufficiently to give shelter. Smoke came from a stove-pipe chimney.

They saw a woman running to seek refuge in the copse. Some warning she must have had, for she was already in flight when they came into view of the house.

The bay horse plunged, and the Captain kept his seat with difficulty. There was the report of a rifle.

The Captain saw a red mark on the horse’s counter, where the bullet had scored it. He was not lacking in courage. “Come on, men,” he shouted. They clattered down the road to the gate.

The man did not wait to fire again when he saw how his first shot was received. He ran out of the back of the house after the woman.

A stern word from the Captain checked the pursuit, which would have scattered his men to so inadequate a purpose.

“Forward,” he said, “and keep together. You know the orders.”

They went on down the road.

[IV]

Among the minor insanities of the England that the floods had covered had been the production of motor cycles capable of moving on a smooth surface at such speeds as must obviously result in many deaths and injuries on its

crowded highways. Such deaths and mutilations did occur in unregarded thousands, not only the riders themselves but many innocent pedestrians being destroyed or maimed without effectual protest, in a country which was oppressed with countless laws, but was without intelligent government. The "vested interest" of those engaged in the production of these vehicles was alone sufficient to prevent any active intervention by governments which depended upon the corrupt financial support of the wealthier sections of the community, which were almost openly collected, and euphoniously described as "party funds."

Instead, therefore, of suppressing a nuisance so murderous and so useless (for most of the riders of these vehicles were actuated simply by the desire to escape for a brief interval from the enforced monotony of the mechanical slavery in which they lived, and after rushing over the public roads would return abortively to the place from which they started) by the obvious method of preventing the manufacture of machines of a power and speed which could have no legitimate utility, a system was developed of fining those who committed various technical or other offenses against an elaborate system of regulations of little practical value. The money so collected went to swell the huge funds controlled by a complicated system of local bureaucracies. It followed that any man could endanger the peace and safety of the community if he were prepared to pay for an uncertain proportion of these incidents; that the public were quietened by the illusion that steps had been taken for their protection; and that the administrators of the official funds profited at the cost of their neighbors' blood.[1]

---

[1] That this statement does not misrepresent the position is shown by the fact that a single individual was fined *over forty times* for dangerous driving in various forms, without any steps being taken to cause him to discontinue the practice.

One of these machines had been owned by a friend of Davy Barnes, who had initiated him into the mysteries of its control, and had allowed him some practice in riding it—an occupation which was promptly vetoed by the good sense of his mother when it came to her vigilant ears. Her mind was little occupied by any consideration for the welfare of the community, but she pointed out that he could risk his life in the mine as much as any reasonable youth should desire, and that his earnings were of importance, not only to herself, but to the younger children.

Happy in the knowledge that he could now use one of these lethal

instruments with his mother's sanction on the cumbered highroad, Davy hurried to convey the warnings which she had enjoined upon him, and proceeded to the acquisition of the only motor bicycle that remained in working order and supplied with the necessary fuel to incite its activities.

Ben Todd was absent; but Davy was not delayed by that circumstance. Had the privileges of friendship or the greatness of the emergency been insufficient to justify its abstraction, his mother's orders would have been exoneration for a much greater delinquency.

Davy had a reputation for simplicity, but he was not a fool. He understood very clearly why he must take the side-road that his mother had indicated, and that haste was needed.

He was not slow, having inherited much of the physical ability of his mother, but the petrol-tank had to be filled, and some adjustments made, before his machine was able to career, back-firing joyously, upon the public road.

To follow Tom by the direct way, he would have had to strike the main road, continue along it until he had passed the deserted village and his mother's cottage, go on up the hill, and turn off to the left at the hilltop by the southern road which Tom had taken two days before, and by which Jerry had planned retreat.

To do this would have been to encounter Jerry's force, with its natural consequences. His mother's directions had provided, as far as possible, against this danger. Yet the highroad must be crossed, and for a short distance he must continue along it, before he would come to the side-lane he was seeking.

It followed that Jerry Cooper riding at the head of the ten men who were still with him, and coming briskly round a bend of the road, observed a motor-cyclist approaching at a quick wobble from the opposite direction.

The cyclist could not have failed to observe so large a troop of horsemen before him, yet he came on unregardingly.

Jerry had a quick and practical mind. He saw the lane that turned south two hundred yards ahead, and guessed the cyclist's objective. He saw that even though they should put their horses to the gallop, it was a race which they could not win. He gave a quick order to halt and fire.

The horsemen spread out across the road, each firing as quickly as he could come up clear of the men that had been riding before him. They fired from the saddle. The half-trained horses jibbed and flurried, and some confusion resulted.

The shots came thickest as Davy approached the turning, making a wide curve to avoid the débris of a fallen wall. A bullet dinted the handle bar. Another struck the front wheel, and left a spoke projecting at right angles to its original purpose. A third rattled the petrol-tank. The machine bounded

perilously over a brick-end, and disappeared round the corner. “A crowded hour of glorious life” might never come to Davy Barnes, but he had had half a minute. Half a minute of ecstasy. His broad face beamed with delight. There was nothing better that life could give until his mother’s fiat should deliver to his custody the waiting Sybil.

But Jerry Cooper sat the great bay, frowning. He knew already that the surprise had failed. Now Tom would be warned. He was a business man. He knew when to cut a loss. He did not think that Tom could be very near. He did not think that Davy could continue his erratic course very much further. He knew the state of the roads. There was time yet. He would like to carry off Tom’s household. They would be useful hostages, at the least. But he did not think that the need for hostages would arise. He did not wish to abandon the men he had sent to fetch them.

He was too cool-headed to defeat himself as some men will, but he changed his plans on the instant. It was no use thinking of attacking Tom now. Tom would be warned. He would not lose men and risk prestige in a useless skirmish. And he would draw his scattered force together at once. They would carry off what they could, and retreat by the direct road—the way they came.

He looked round at the disordered group that had pulled up behind him. He turned his horse.

“Fall in,” he said sharply. “It’s no picnic. We’re betrayed somehow. Look alive.”

He led the way back at a quick trot, and turned off at the road to Cowley Thorn. He would join the troop which he had sent that way a few minutes earlier.

An hour later, sitting prudently behind a bolted door, Martha heard the clatter of their retreat.

Jerry, riding ahead, looked doubtfully at the cottage. If he thought—but time was not to be wasted, and the door was closed. He had no proof.

Behind him came a double line of horsemen, variously laden. They did not lack spoil. But they had only three women, willing or unwilling. And two saddles were empty. There were white faces also, and blood-stained bandages among the troop. They had found the houses empty. They had beaten a wood or two. They had killed more than one man, including a wifeless individual whom they had discovered in a hammock in a weed-choked garden reading “David Copperfield.” It was a silly murder, but yet the man may be envied. He had had three months of blissful life, without work and without debts, and he died as the summer waned.

Jerry Cooper led the way up the hill. He halted on the top where the roads forked. The jockey should have been here by now, with Rentoul and Bryan. He hoped they had not failed. Rentoul had brains. So had the jockey. He looked

back on an empty road. He did not think they would fail. They might have found it necessary to take another way. Rentoul knew the country. But he had said that he would wait here. He liked to teach the men that they could trust his word. And he liked to be obeyed.

For half an hour he kept the troop standing there in the heat of the afternoon sun. Now and then a horse pawed restlessly or a bridle jingled. Otherwise they sat silent and motionless.

Then he gave the order to ride forward. He knew when to cut a loss.

[V]

The road to Cowley Thorn turned left from the main road, slanting somewhat backward and curving till it ran almost due west.

Further on, on the same side, but striking in a more northerly direction, was the road that had once led to the mansion of the Earl of Hallowby and to the village of Lower Hedford, which was now under water.

It was up this road that Joe and his two companions had turned their horses, under the guidance of Rentoul, who had scouted over the district during the summer nights until he knew his way better than most of those who had not lost their right to live there.

Among the men who had followed the lead of Jerry Cooper, he was, perhaps, the most decent. A love of adventure, a genuine admiration for a man who seemed stronger and more capable than those who opposed him, joined to a certain callousness of temperament, had led him to follow Jerry Cooper, and he was not of the kind to lightly admit an error or leave the side he had taken.

Riding now at a brisk pace, which had outdistanced the rest of the party (and cleared the main road too soon to encounter the approaching Davy), but not so as to tire their horses for the harder work which was before them, the three men fell into conversation upon the orders which they had undertaken.

Joe was anxious that the abduction should be carried out with sufficient speed to insure that they should not be left behind the retreat of their companions. He had a plan in his own mind, but before he proposed it he inquired as to the intentions of his companions.

Bryan, a coarse-featured man with a large wen under the left eye and the general aspect of a stage assassin, thought that the presence of the children would make it easy. “She can’t run far with the kids, and it’s most like,” he said, “that she won’t leave them. If they’re indoors we shall have them out easy enough.”

Joe suggested that they might persuade them to come by quieter methods.

“It’s dirty work, anyway,” said Rentoul.

Bryan stared.

Joe said: “Tell her we’ve come from Tom, and she’ll go quiet.” He liked the easier way, and he knew that violence is almost always stupid.

They turned their horses into the by-road. So far they had seen neither man nor woman. A distant shot as they took the corner told them that the other troops were at work, and that some resistance was offered, but all seemed peaceful here.

Yet they had not gone a hundred yards along the narrower road when a shot came from the wooded roadside behind them. There was a high bank on the left along this road. It would have been a hopeless folly to dismount and search for their assailant. With a common impulse they quickened pace to get beyond range of the danger. Rentoul was lying forward as though to reduce the mark he might give for a second shot. They did not think that he might be wounded. But the chestnut mare he rode, who had known her rider’s ways for two months of lonely scouting, was aware that something was wrong. She slackened pace and stopped at the roadside. He half slipped, half fell from the saddle. He reached a hand to his back and felt under the shoulder blade. It came back reddened.

His companions reined up for a moment, and then rode on.

“He’s out,” said Bryan.

Joe had no intention of risking delay for a wounded man. He had a practical mind. “There’ll be two for one of us to manage,” he said. “You’d better take the kids.”

Bryan did not reply.

The chestnut mare stood by her master, puzzled and nervous, but she did not offer to leave him, though the smell of blood frightened her as she breathed over the prostrate body. After a time she began to feed at the roadside.

Joe and Bryan rode on. It was awkward that Rentoul should have been knocked out. It was he that knew the park and the way to enter. Still, they could not easily go wrong now. So they thought; but they lost time by continuing to the lodge gates, which they found to be secured beyond their means of forcing. To climb them would have been little benefit unless they were prepared to haul their captives over on their return.

They went back, seeking for a place where they could break through the palings most easily. There had been no sign of life from the lodge.

They had to go back for some distance, thanks to Tom’s repairing energy, before they found a place where they could force a gap without any great difficulty.

Here they entered, and riding through a growth of bracken which rose to their horses’ shoulders, under oaks that had withstood the storms of three centuries, they came on to the main drive and turned toward the lodge they were seeking.

Then they pulled up sharply, for a woman stood on the path before them.

"Let me speak," said Joe, and walked his horse forward, taking his cap from his head.

Helen's heart beat with fear, but she had seen that there would be no time for concealment—they had come so silently over the mossy turf—and she stood her ground bravely.

"I have a message," Joe said, "for Mrs. Aldworth; are you she?"

"No," said Helen, "at least, I am—I think you mean me."

"Tom says that Jerry Cooper's coming, and you won't be safe here. He's sent us to bring you away."

Helen looked at the men, and did not trust them. Yet it might be true. She temporized.

"I cannot leave the children," she said. "Is there really much danger?"

Joe answered: "We are to bring the children with us. Tom said there were two. But we can't wait. He sent three of us, and one was shot as we came up the road."

Helen still doubted, but his words turned the scale. The message said that there were two children, and regarded their welfare as well as her own. Also, she had heard the shot. The tale seemed true, and the danger must be very near.

"Need we get any things?" she asked. "Is there time? The children are close at hand."

"Better come as you are," said Joe, whose mind was on an opposite danger from hers.

She called the children, who were playing in the woods only a few yards away.

"You'll take the kids," said Bryan, speaking for the first time. Joe did not prefer this, but he did not want an altercation before the woman, who might take alarm. He looked at the children. They were light enough. One before, one behind. He could manage. Their mother lifted them, and with Bryan's help they were strapped securely. They were timid of his strangeness, but keen on the unexpected pleasure of the ride.

"Much better this way than any fuss," thought Joe.

It was Helen's turn now to mount. She stood doubtfully beside the unattractive Bryan.

"Shall I get up behind you?" she said doubtfully.

"No," he said, "in front." He reached a hand, and she jumped easily enough with a foot on his stirrup. He drew her up roughly. Handcuffs clicked on her wrists. A rope was twisted. He threw her over so that she hung like a sack above the horse's neck, her loose hair trailing. She was powerless even to struggle.

Joe surveyed his companion's methods with some disgust.

“Better have done it quieter,” he said.

Bryan turned on him with a sneer. “It’s all done quiet enough. She won’t hurt. A few jolts won’t kill her. Don’t I want me hands free to fight? We’re not clear yet.”

“Right,” said Joe; “but get her safe to the Captain.” He grinned with his usual amiability. He had no mind to quarrel with Bryan. If he killed her it wasn’t Joe that would get the blame.

They debated by which way they should return. They had no wish to ride back along the road where Rentoul had fallen. There might be other bullets in waiting. They decided to cross the park. There must be a road on the further side, so they thought.

They looked back and saw an old woman staring at them curiously from the door of the lodge.

[VI]

We have seen already how minor factors, unknown and incalculable, may defeat the soundest-seeming plans and deride their contrivers.

So had it happened again; for though the tactical defeat of Jerry Cooper by Martha Barnes may be considered a direct issue of superior generalship, the fact that Tom Aldworth’s force had passed from his control into that of a man who was hurrying back to a lost and recovered wife must be recognized as being outside the possibility of foresight or calculation.

It was owing to the impetus of this circumstance that the returning force was within four miles of the road-junction at which Jerry had halted, when a motorcycle was observed to be making a determined, though somewhat tortuous, advance towards them.

For Davy, though not without accident, had done better than Jerry had anticipated. The primary necessity of carrying out his mother’s instructions had given both confidence and caution. It was not a probable supposition that the cycle would venture on any rebellious escapades; it was unthinkable that failure should result from his own default.

Martin was walking with Claire at the head of a tired and laden procession, only kept in motion by the fact that their new leader was ahead, and that both he and Claire were as burdened as any. But Davy did not know him, and addressed himself to Tom, to whom his message had been directed.

“Mother says as Jerry Cooper’s come a-callin’. ’Ur sez yer’d better ’urry now, or yer needn’t ’urry at all.”

He found himself the center of an excited group of questioners, to whom he gave a sufficient account of his experiences to prove that he carried more than a rumor of panic.

He showed the broken spoke, the leaking petrol.

Martin stood on the outside of the group, listening and resolving.

His mind, behind the habitual calm of his manner, had been in a state of hardly controlled excitement since the episode of the night before.

Always in the front of his consciousness was the coming meeting with Helen. There would be so much to tell—so much to hear. There was Claire also to be introduced—explained—included.

Behind this anticipation there was the thought of the power that had come so strangely into his hands. If he could make it real! It was such a chance! He had but a score of followers. They might be able to bring others. They appeared sure of that. Sure of the power they could give him. But how to use it if it should come? He must be cautious and patient. He must give his life to their service. He knew that there is no other road to any real supremacy. He must walk as burdened as any.

He must be ruthless also. He had not practiced in English law-courts without learning the evils which had been eating the heart of the nation. There would be a cleaner social order to build up. There would be evil practices to suppress. Diseases to be stamped out. There would be new controls to be devised. There would be a hundred practical issues to be determined promptly. What could be conserved of the old wealth? of the old knowledge? What was worth the saving?

So he had thought, and Fate, as usual, dealt the cards, and here was the need for action, prompt and decisive. Action which, he saw, might establish or confound him on the threshold of the dream with which his mind was exultant.

The men had got what they could from Davy. Some of them were already throwing down their burdens and loading rifles, which had been put aside as though their use were ended.

He advanced through the group. He said to Davy: “You said there were twenty of them. Are you sure there were no more?”

Yes. Davy was sure. About a score. All mounted.

Martin turned to Tom. “If they’ve got clear, have we horses to follow?”

Tom shook his head. They had nothing better than their own legs. “But if they’ve taken the women we’ll soon catch them. They can’t keep riding forever. They’d come to the water.”

“Tom,” said Martin, “think hard. Which way will they clear out? They must have timed the raid when they knew you’d be absent. They’ve seen this boy come to warn you. They fired to stop him. They won’t come back this way. Do you know where they camp?”

Tom shook his head. “Not one of us knows that. But they went off first down the Belsham Road. They’d be likely to go the same way. They couldn’t go far by any other, unless they came here or walked into the sea. They’d keep

that road—for the first three miles, anyway."

"How many of these men have families that may be in danger now?"

Tom looked round. Five there were—or six if we must reckon Jack Tolley's interest in the unconscious Madge. Five who had left children or women to the doubtful protection of others while they came on this venture. And there was Helen, and hers. His own matter, and Martin's. But he owned that she would be fairly safe. The park was far off and solitary. In a hurried raid, in which they would keep together, they would be unlikely to find her.

Martin's resolution failed for a moment only. He knew the right thing, and he could not ask of others what he would not do himself. Suppose Tom—But he must take the risk.

He spoke to the men.

"Boys," he said, "every minute counts now. If any of you haven't thrown down everything but what he'll need in a fight, he'd better do it quickly. The three wounded men will stay here, and the women and Hodder.

"The rest of you will follow me. We're going to try to cut off their retreat. It's a poor chance, but it's the best. But I say this, if any of you want to go straight to protect his own I don't forbid that. He can fall out. But I think he'll find he's not needed at all, or he'll be too late. In two minutes we march."

He looked at Tom with an anxiety which he did not show. If Tom elected to go to the relief of Helen he could not forbid it after what he had said, and he was conscious how it might appear in some possible developments. And he wanted Tom. He was the best man he had. But he felt that he had done right. It was the best chance, and it was his duty to lead it.

But Tom made no motion to go. It was Jack Tolley who spoke. He said: "It sounds the best chance, and you'll need us all if it's Cooper's gang that you're fighting. You know how we feel. We'll come if you tell us—but not else. We want orders for that."

He looked round, and the men nodded.

Martin saw that there was some reason in the attitude he took up. If he were ordered he would come. He would not have it said afterwards, under unforeseeable circumstances, that he had been told that he could go to Madge's succor and had not done so.

"Right," Martin said. "You will all come. Who knows the way best? We want to cut into the Belsham Road before it forks below Sterrington Church."

He knew the road well enough. He had cycled along it more than once in the old days. The fields and lanes were another matter. But Jack volunteered readily. He could have found his way in the dark. Had done so, in fact, on the moonless nights that the poacher loves.

Claire touched his arm. "You won't want me?" she asked.

He hesitated for a second. He had learned to rely upon her so much in their

four days' intimacy. And he knew that they might need every hand that could press a trigger. Perhaps if she had not raised the question, but had just come, he thought . . . But it was not women's work. And women were so few now! It was not a question of what he wished. He had no right to allow it. He shook his head. "No. You must stay here with the others. I hope you've seen your last fight."

"May I go to Helen?" She pointed to the cycle that Davy was holding in readiness. "He says he can take me."

"Yes," he said. He was surprised and grateful that she should have proposed it. He thought that she would be safer that way than in the fighting. But he was relieved also. "Will it carry you?" he asked, with an eye on the leaking tank. Davy grinned affirmatively.

The men were already streaming back along the road, for Jack was leading them in that direction toward a field-path which would be speedier than a more direct attempt across the wild-hedged pastures.

Martin went to the cart to get his own rifle. Claire came beside him. "I'll have the pistol," she said, "if you don't want it." She ran back to the waiting Davy. "Good-by," she called, "and good luck. You'll find them safe tonight." She did not look round for a reply.

[VII]

Martin hurried past the sacks and bales and bundles that had been cast aside by his followers, and which were now being collected by the inefficients whom he had appointed for that duty.

He was making no use of the horses. They were only four. They were tired. And his men could not ride. And the way they were taking might not be easy for mounted men. Four good reasons. They would not have been of any conceivable utility. The three pack-horses had been overloaded, and were lame and exhausted. The one remaining horse for the cart was in a worse case. It had been impossible to bring it along the line, and it had been started off in the early morning to make a detour of some miles by rough and rutty ways. It was being urged on with difficulty when Davy's appearance proved its unexpected deliverance, and demonstrated to its simple intellect that Providence is not entirely blind to the sufferings of the innocent.

Martin pushed on rapidly till he had regained the head of the column. He said to Jack: "How much time can we have?" Jack calculated. "We shall be in Ekin's Lane in twenty minutes. It's a mile from there to Sterrington. A mile and a bit. The roads don't run so far apart till the split comes at the church. . . . It ud have been four miles back, and more, and three miles on the other road. We save nigh two hour."

"Shall we do it?"

Jack doubted. "They'll make good speed," he said, "when they're clear of the hill. It's a good road. About the best that's left."

Martin knew that this must be so. The road ran high, between low hedges and open fields. It was wide and well-ditched. It had little roadside growth, beyond a low thorn or a clump of elder. Earthquake and storm might have left it clear for all its length.

There was little comfort in that. But he recalled with more satisfaction that the road fell before it forked at Sterrington. There was cover there. A good place for an ambush.

"Can you manage a better pace?" he said. Jack broke into a trot beside him. The column straggled behind.

[VIII]

Claire had proved her nerve a score of times since the night when it seemed that the whole earth had failed her and she had kept afloat in the waters. She had done some things at which she could shudder afterwards, wondering whether it were not a nightmare from which she would wake to the familiar outlines of the wistariaed window of her Cheltenham home. But she had not previously occupied the precarious rear of a motorcycle that rushed along a wreck-strewn road at a speed that was sometimes twenty miles an hour, and that varied continually as it swerved and jibbed and shot forward at a different angle.

She would almost have preferred to have to face the brutality of Bellamy once again, certainly have preferred to stand up to the rifle of the approaching Donovan.

Yet they had no accident. They passed more than one group of excited people, whose activity was plainly of the talking kind, at whom Claire looked curiously, and who looked at the strange woman that Davy brought from nowhere with a livelier wonder.

They turned into the road that led to the lodge without any incident that is worth recording, and had gone but a short distance along it when they observed a saddled chestnut mare that grazed at the roadside.

At the sound of their coming it lifted a sudden head and appeared about to gallop away, but an urgent word from Claire—the first she had uttered—brought the machine to a halt. She jumped off.

"Davy," she said, "wait a moment. I want that horse."

She did not intend to remount the cycle under any earthly circumstance. She was still alive. She would be content—and grateful.

She walked up to the horse. A man lay near, on the roadside grass. She

bent over him doubtfully. She had seen men die. She had seen men dead. She knew that death was here.

The man's face was young, and not evil. It drew her eyes. It was the face of one who had taken the adventure of life gaily. He had been shot in the back. She wondered on which side he had fallen.

The mare came nearer. She stretched her head toward the dead man.

Claire had a feeling that his spirit was beside them. That there was something which he would have explained if he could. His face was peaceful. He did not look as though he had grudged his end. She had a feeling that he was glad that the bullet had found him. It might be thus that an Overruling Power had turned him from a wrong path he had chosen. Who knows?

She laid a hand on the mare's neck, and their eyes met. "You've got a mistress now," she said, smoothing the glossy shoulder.

She began to shorten the stirrups.

"Can yer ride 'er?" said the wondering Davy.

"Davy," she answered, "I learned to fall off a horse before I was six; but I haven't learned to fall off your carrier yet, and I don't want to begin. Have we much farther to go?"

"Not far," Davy answered her. It was about a quarter of a mile to the gates of the drive, but Tom had left them locked. He did not think that they could get in by that way.

"Very well," said Claire, "we must find another."

She mounted, and they went forward side by side, at no great pace, with an eye to the high fence that bordered the park on their right hand.

They came to a gap where it had been broken down. "We had better go through here," Claire said, "or, at least, I will. You wouldn't get the bike through the wood. I think you can go home, Davy. I ought to find my own way now."

She turned the mare to the side. There was no footpath, but a slight bank of grass and then a shallow ditch before the broken paling. The ditch was wet from the storm of the night before. Rain had been heavy in that part. She saw hoof-marks in the soft mud. They were quite fresh. A sudden terror chilled her. She had said: "You will find them safe tonight." Would he? Was she too late?

Davy was bringing the cycle over the grass behind her. He did not want to be left behind.

"It's no good, Davy," she said. "I'm riding fast."

She pushed the mare through the gap.

He saw them plunge into the bracken, and the oaks hid them.

Five minutes later Mary Wittels looked up at a woman who sat astride on a chestnut mare before her door and questioned her eagerly.

The woman had no hat. Her short, dark hair was in a tumbled disorder.

There was a bruise on her forehead. She wore the dress of a housemaid, and a leather belt, with a long sheathed knife and a heavy pistol.

Mary's shrewd old eyes surveyed her, and she answered respectfully. She had lived to see funny times. She did not know why she was dressed up like that. She might be play-acting. But Mary knew a lady when she saw her. Knew her by her voice and words, and by her easy seat in the saddle.

"No, ma'am," she said, "they seemed to go willin'. An' then, when she was up it seemed as how he threw 'er rough-like over the 'orse. . . . No, I'd never seed them before. . . . No, they didn't go back under the trees. They rode straight for the 'all."

Claire tried to learn what were the other exits from the park and what roads might be beyond them, but it was many years since Mary had been fifty yards from her own door. She explained that the Earl had objected to people crossing the park. The gate on the further side had, she believed, been blocked up years ago. There was nothing beyond but Bycroft Lane, and that led nowhere but to Farmer Richards', as folk said wasn't there now.

Claire thanked her hurriedly with an absurd pre-deluge feeling that she ought to give her a shilling, turned her horse, and rode rapidly up the drive.

She had no doubt that Helen had been abducted, either by force or by fraud, by some members of Cooper's gang. Only twenty minutes ago. The old woman had been exact on that point. She had noticed it by the aged timepiece which still ticked against the wall, as little altered as herself by the collapse of Europe.

Claire thought quickly. She had only a vague idea of the geography of the surrounding district. But it was clear that when they crossed the park they must be riding away from the direction by which they came, and by which they must ultimately return. It seemed clear, also, that Tom would have time to cut off the retreat of the gang if they were still operating in this manner. So far, good. (As to this, a careful calculation may leave us in some doubt. A good horse will cover much ground in an hour. Certainly, had they returned by the direct road they would not have kept Jerry waiting for the full half-hour he allowed them, and then he—But we anticipate.)

Claire supposed them to be better acquainted with the country than herself, but here she was excusably mistaken. They had relied on Rentoul for guidance, and Rentoul was dead. If we explore causes we shall find that it is the nameless firer of the shot that killed him who did more to bring these events to their destined end than all the anxious thought and subtle planning of Jerry Cooper or Joe, of Claire or Martin, of all, indeed, but Martha Barnes, who is in a class by herself.

Claire's geography was vague, but she saw that they must come round to the right sooner or later to regain the highroad and to rejoin their companions.

Could she cut them off if she should attempt the same direction at a sharper angle? It seemed the right thing to do, but she did not like to leave the drive on which she rode much faster than she could hope to do over the rough ground of the park, in which the rabbit-burrows were a continued menace to her horse's feet.

She passed the ruins of the hall on her left, a heap of ashes and blackened, fallen stonework, and then saw the weed-dimmed sign of a path on her other hand that crossed what had been a space of open lawn and struck into the woods beyond. Its track was plain, for the gravel weeds had grown less rankly than the grass on either hand. Claire turned her horse and rode rapidly, with a new hope in her heart. She saw that those she pursued might have taken the same way, in which case she could only hope that a greater speed would enable her to reach them before they could gain the protection of their companions; but they might have kept to the main path, which would give the better hope of an easy exit for their burdened horses, and if so, she might hope to have them.

Anyway she had a straight path and a good horse—how good she was only beginning to realize—and she must make the best speed she could.

So she came to the limit of the park and found that the last few yards sloped down to a high fence, over which a ladder of steps allowed pedestrian passage, but she saw no means by which her horse could cross it. She was about to make her way along the side of the fence, in hope of some more practicable exit, when she heard the sound of hooves, and voices in disputation.

On the further side of the fence there was a deep and narrow lane, obviously the Bycroft Lane of which the old woman had told her. Even on the higher ground of the park, which was level with the fence-top, it was too deep for her to see how great was the fall, but on the left hand the ground rose sharply on both sides of the fence, and in such a way that she could look up to the lane itself as it descended toward her.

It was a narrow, twisting lane, deep-rutted by the wheels of centuries, choked now with a five-foot growth of docks and nettles and a thousand hedge-weeds.

Claire looked up and saw two horsemen descending. The foremost was loaded with two children, one before and one behind. She saw his face, and recognized an earlier acquaintance with a start of natural astonishment. He saw her at the same moment, and the sight stopped in mid-sentence the raillery with which, for whatever purpose, he had been infuriating his companion's temper.

"Devil take us both," he ejaculated, "it's the fighting bitch!" The expression may have been lacking in respectful courtesy, but was not without some justification. He felt a prudent satisfaction in the living shields that were

before and behind him.

Now Claire, who, as we know, had a strong will and a resolute courage, had done what seemed to her to be the obvious and only thing when she had ridden to the rescue of Martin's wife and children. But she had no natural gift for strategy. She had done what Martin would not have done in forcing an issue thus without any settled plan as to how she should act when the crisis came, and now that it had arrived she was in no mood to fear it.

Certainly she had no fear of Joe, on whom she looked with contemptuous physical repulsion. She had always hated fat men!

The other man was less distinctly visible.

But it is fair to recognize that she would probably have acted in the same way had Jerry Cooper himself encountered her with such a booty. As to whether that should be accounted to her credit, two opinions are possible.

To her mind (which yet lacked any subtlety for its contrivance) it was clear that she must attempt a rescue.

Indignation and contempt gave her a moral ascendency over her antagonists, and supplied the impulse of her first audacity.

Even while the exclamation of the ex-jockey left his mouth, his horse's descent in the steep lane carried him out of Claire's view. In another moment they would have ridden past beneath her.

She reined her horse back for a few yards and rode straight at the fence.

It was a reckless leap. Taken, it is true, at the level of the fence-top, but from a distance of several yards, and into a depth which she could not see. Some credit is hers that she was not thrown clear of the saddle, but it is due to fortune only that the mare came down on four feet and uninjured.

She came down within a few yards of the advancing horsemen. The startled animals plunged and swerved. There was a second's confusion, while Claire recovered her seat and control of her horse, and Bryan found himself jostled into the hedge so that he kept his saddle with difficulty. As he reined his mount back into the middle of the narrow lane he found himself looking into Claire's eyes at two yards' distance. He had a short-barreled carbine, loaded, in a holster at his right hand. He wrenched at it hastily. Claire saw the action, and her hand went to her pistol. The two weapons came up together, but the smaller, lighter pistol was an instant earlier. The one shot followed the other as quickly as a clock ticks, but the carbine was already falling from a broken arm.

Claire looked at the man that was disarmed before her. In his aspect, though she hardly knew that she had paused, lay the answer to the question, should she spare or kill? Had he been such as Rentoul I suppose that there would have been a different issue. But Claire had been taught already that the obtuse superstition of her earlier training that all human life is of an equal

sanctity was no longer tenable.

She looked at the man, and at the woman who was carried so brutally at his saddle-bow. She fired again, and again. The body rolled from the saddle.

But Joe, who had a better seat and a cooler head than the dead man or the living woman, was away already. He had pulled his horse straight and pushed past the chestnut's tail even before she had recovered her feet from the leap or Claire had realized how she had landed. He was riding down the lane as fast as the rutted weed-choked surface and the burdens that he carried rendered possible, or at least prudent, for even in peril Joe was a cautious man.

The two women stood facing one another beside the waiting horses and the body of the dead man. It was not the meeting which Claire had purposed, but Fate deals the cards, though there may be freedom to play them. Claire had noticed the handcuffed wrists as she had helped Helen from the horse. She had turned to the dying man, and found the key she sought in the first pocket she searched. Now their hands met as she released her—rival?—her enemy? She looked at Helen with an interest which her protagonist could have no cause for feeling. She was not of a jealous nature, but that meanest of human passions stirred in her heart as she did so.

We have seen too little of Helen. We may look, as Claire looked—it is but the hurried glance of a moment, for Joe is making off down the lane, with eyes on his horse's steps, and ears alert for any following sound.

There was something more than personal in the contrast of these two women, whom a hundred chances had conspired to bring together so strangely.

Had they met four months ago, in the old ways, there would have been differences of character and outlook such as often make for friendship. But today those differences had widened to a point which would have seemed beyond thinking.

Helen knew of the changes which had come. She had been told. She had intelligence to realize what it must mean. In that first emergency, when she had fought for her children's lives, she had shown that she was not without courage or resource, if the call were great enough to rouse her.

But since then her illness, and the isolation in which she had lived, had held her from any actual contact with the new conditions. And she had always been one to look at life, rather than to face the arena's dust, or to seek its triumphs. Her life had been in her husband, and in her home, and in a lively interest in the events of the outer world.

Now she stood dizzily, and her hair—which she had never cut off after the last craze of the world which had ceased to be—was disheveled.

But, apart from that, she showed no change from the conditions which were gone forever.

The hope—however faint—that Martin might return at any moment as the

result of Tom's promised search had caused her to dress with more than her usual care. It is idle to ask what she wore. The fashion of one year was the derision of the next. It is equally idle to ask how she contrived it. She had skill with hand and needle; and when had a woman failed at such devices, since the first monkey sat in some convenient tree-fork, and sewed the leaves that should make a mystery of her sex?

Claire looked, and knew. She was conscious of her own garments.

Claire saw a woman of her own height, who looked taller: of her own age, who looked younger. Helen was in robust health, but, beside Claire, she looked fragile. She had a charm, a wild-rose beauty, with which Claire well knew that she could not compete.

Claire had little vanity. She did not doubt that her own judgment would be that of others. She might have a man's friendship, but it was here that his eyes would turn with the desire which makes a woman's heart beat quickly. And Claire was a woman. And when she thought of a man, she meant Martin.

All this was thought or seen as the handcuffs parted. Hands touched. Slim hands, fine and white, with rose-pink nails, were loosed by larger hands that were unclean, and scratched, and scarred, and hardened by many a rough task of recent days.

Claire would have been less than woman had she failed to observe the contrast, had she not wished that her own nails were unbroken.

All this took no time in the doing.

Helen looked at the bruised face and uncouth dress of her abrupt deliverer, but she scarcely saw them. She may be excused some bewilderment, and her mind was on one thing only.

She said: "Can you save them?"

Claire said: "Can you ride?" She looked at the dead man's horse.

Helen hesitated for a second. She could not ride, as she could not swim. Yet for her children's safety there was nothing that she would not have ventured.

But the second's hesitation was Claire's answer. Besides, she thought (without unkindness), she would be useless.

"You had better wait here," she said. "My horse is faster." Bryan's was obviously not of the quality of the chestnut with which Rentoul's scouting had been accomplished. "I will bring them to you."

Her foot was in the stirrup as she spoke, and her leg went over the saddle.

She looked at Helen again. There was much that should be told before Martin met her. Things he would rely upon her to have told. And there was no time. But at least she could say something.

"I came to tell you that Martin is alive, and may be here before night. We have been good friends, Martin and I. More than friends. I ought to tell you

that. I will bring you the children."

It was more than she had clearly intended to say. She had meant to say simply that Martin was alive, and the rest had followed.

She saw joy leap into Helen's eyes. She did not know whether she realized or regarded the meaning of the words that followed. She rode on down the lane.

Helen stood looking after her. Mechanically her hands went up in an endeavor to rearrange the mass of brown-gold hair, and desisted, having no means to fasten it.

Claire was right. She had hardly heard. There is nothing that conveys character, or gives warning or confidence, so surely as the human voice. Helen had heard a voice which had the largeness of Claire's own nature. It had said: "Martin is alive—I will bring you the children." What else could matter?

Helen laughed uncertainly. She said aloud: "She is like a valkyrie." She could have kissed her feet.

She went down the lane. She expected to meet her at any moment returning with the rescued children. She came to the highroad. She went on, and saw neither horse nor rider, but she saw something which quickened her pace along the smoothness of a tarred road, which was still clear of any growth, though few men trod it.

It was the peculiar devilishness of the civilization which the seas had ended that it had dug death from the earth's interior. The surface of the earth had been adapted by its Creator, through incalculable periods of preparation, for the support of sentient life, and with such life, on and above its surface, and for a few inches below it, it was crowded, life-in-life, small and large, to a miraculous minuteness, and with a bewildering complexity. It seemed the design of the Mind that formed it, that not an inch of this precious surface, redeemed for a brief while from the barren wastes of ether by gigantic operations continued through incalculable periods of time, should be destitute of the life for which it had been made ready. But this civilization, sinning in this direction far beyond any which had preceded it, tore up the living surface of the earth, and smeared it with the dead matter below, from which life shrank back, baffled and terrified. Men substituted the dead smoke for the living light, the dead steel for the living hand, the dead steam for the living horse, fatuously believing that they progressed toward some higher plane of being than that which their Master had provided for them.

They boasted that they had increased the possibility of human life on the earth's surface, not having the wit to see that they had not increased its area of potential fertility by a single inch, nor found a method of cultivation more intensive than that of the spade in a man's hand; and that, at the most, they could only claim that they had made it possible for large numbers of the race to

crowd together at a distance from the food on which their lives depended.

They did not see that every yard of the earth's surface which they deadened with coal or steel, with tar or petrol, every process which they carried out by the forces of dead matter rather than by the activities of living cells, definitely decreased the total of animate life, whether human or vegetable, which the earth could bear.

Three months had passed since the earth trembled, and its surface sank, but this stretch of highroad still ran, cursed and bare, between the wild-grown hedges. Running east and west, it had borne little of the wild rush to the northward. A fallen elm lay across it. It bore the skeleton of a dead sheep that the dogs had eaten. Otherwise, for the most part, it was smooth and vacant.

But Helen did not regard these things. She scarcely saw them when, two hundred yards away, a child stood uncertainly, very bruised, and lost, and tearful.

For the next hour Helen remained seated on the fallen tree, holding a sleeping child in her arms, and watching an empty road. Then she rose doubtfully, and went homeward. She supposed it was there that Martin would seek her. There she might find news, or means of succor. She went back by the way she had come; hope, anxiety, and anticipation, contending for supremacy in her heart.

[IX]

I shall have failed very thoroughly in interpreting the character of Claire Arlington (or Webster, if we allow it to be reasonable that a woman should adopt the name of the man with whom she has established the most intimate of human relationships) if it has not become evident already that she was one who would strike straight and hard for any object to which her purpose turned, without over-careful calculating of either risk or cost in the gaining.

She rode down the lane at a pace which would have appalled the cooler mind of the man she followed. At every stride she risked a stumble in the hidden weed-grown ruts, but she came through safely, as audacity may, and swung round into the highroad, to find that she had made up most of the time that she had lost in the freeing of Helen, and that Joe, now riding hard enough, was but a short distance before her.

As she came down the lane she had not been thinking of Joe, or of the children, but of a more personal problem. The pang of jealousy which had stirred her heart as she had observed the loveliness of the wife that Martin was about to recover had quickly died, finding no nourishment in an unaccustomed soil. But the conviction remained that Helen's right not only was that of a chronological precedence, but was irrevocably established in a feminine

superiority which it would be futile for her to attempt to challenge. She was accustomed to the knowledge that there were few women, among the score of millions that had dwelt around her, against whom she could not compete in the sports of either land or water. Of this she thought but little, but in more feminine comparisons, she was of a convinced humility. With such a wife, could she hope that Martin would continue to regard her? It was not sense to suppose it. Friendship would continue, surely. But beyond that—nothing. Friendship with Helen? How would Helen take the tale which she had come to tell her? She felt that she had nothing to excuse. She would not be apologetic. If Fate had loaded its dice for their undoing, it was against herself they had fallen. But as to how Helen would take it, she considered, as Martin had done before, and like Martin—she was not sure.

She did not calculate that if she should succeed in the recovery of the children, she would have placed Helen under any obligation of gratitude. It was not the kind of thought to which her mind was native. Besides, it was not for Helen that she was attempting it. It was because they were Martin's children. Her relations with Martin being what they were, it was an action which was obvious and inevitable. It was an affair of the family. She did not think this. It was of the fundamentals, on which we all act without thinking, though they are not the same for all of us.

So she came into the highroad, and saw Joe but a short distance before her. The distance was lessened when Joe came to the fallen elm.

It is needless to say that he was a good horseman. The horse he rode was the best of six, for he had done his own choosing. It might have jumped the tree easily enough, but it was a large tree, and Joe did not know his mount. He did know enough to be doubtful, and he was always cautious. Then, the horse was awkwardly burdened.

Instead of taking it as it came in the middle road, he turned to the further side, where the fallen bole was slimmest. Here, on the grassy edge of the road, he scrambled rather than jumped the horse across it.

By this time Claire was close behind. She rode straight at the tree. The chestnut took it like a swallow. She cocked a backward ear for her mistress's approval.

Claire laughed aloud. "Good girl," she said. The chestnut's pace quickened.

There is a school of theologians which asserts that the souls of animals (if it allow them to have any) are of an inferior quality to those which have been bestowed upon the human race. Dogmatic theology is of no importance, unless we regard it as a form of mental gymnastics. The only safe deduction from this particular speculation is that theologians are not horsemen.

A man may talk to his fellow-man for a week, and yet may not reach the

understanding which may be born in an hour between a horse and a trusted rider.

The chestnut could not mention that she had come that way, in the early morning hours, half a score of times before, with Rentoul on her back. It was a jump she knew. Whether modesty or truth would have constrained her to tell it is beyond knowing. Nature withheld the temptation.

Joe looked back, and, for the first time he was anxious. He saw that the mare had spurted, and the distance shortened behind him. He could get a little more from his own horse, but not much.

He had a pistol, which he had obtained at Cooper's camp, though it was against his prudence to show it unless the need were final. It may be questioned why he did not relieve himself from such pursuit by using it, either against the horse, or against the woman.

The explanation is simple. He regarded Claire as his own property. She was the reward which Cooper had agreed should be his portion, if she should fall into their clutches. Now, very humorously, she was riding in the direction he required, and—he did not doubt—to her own undoing. His mind went forward to the spot at which the raiders were to assemble when their spoil was taken. He did not doubt that some of them would be there already. They would not be visible till the hilltop should be gained, and then it would be too late for flight on a horse that would be already exhausted. He pictured the troop burdened with a score of captives—tied and protesting. A score of screaming, weeping, struggling, or secretly contented women. None but he would have brought his capture riding obediently behind him. He was well pleased also with the result of his venture. Helen had escaped, and his two companions had been shot down, but that showed how perilous had been the enterprise which he had come through successfully. He would have brought off the children. They would be sufficient hostages for any purpose. A man will do as much to save two members of his family as though three were in jeopardy. So he supposed. Two—or one. That had become a practical question. He looked back again at the pursuit. The chestnut ran easily. He had looked back so often thus when the last lap opened. No man living could better judge of the capacity of the horse that shortened the distance behind him.

If Claire could ride well enough, he knew that the next hundred yards would see them neck to neck, and it was a risk that he had no mind to take. He had not stayed to see the end of Bryan, but he had heard the shots, and it was Claire who had come clear of the conflict. She was the "fighting bitch." She should keep her place in the rear.

He resolved that he must drop one of the children. He would have liked it to be the elder, but it was Joan who was serving as an involuntary shield for his back, and her work was too useful to terminate. He loosed the younger, Mary,

and pitched her into the grassy ditch at the roadside, where she lay for a time before rising, bruised and frightened, but without any serious injury. Joe had endeavored to throw her so that she should not strike the hard road, nor suffer useless damage. It is right to record that as a fact; it would be wrong to give him any credit for this consideration. Like many of his type he disliked to inflict pain. When he avoided it, he was considering his own feelings only. He would not have lost a finger to save the lives of a hundred children, had they been ten miles away. They might have been boiled alive, and he would have grinned untroubled.

Claire saw the child fall, and her eyes, which could be soft enough at the right time, hardened, as they had done when she fired into the body of Bryan. It was the look which Helen had caught, as she had looked up, and seen a fierce and merciless light in large gray eyes under black and meeting brows, which was in her mind when she said: “She is like a valkyrie.” It was a look which she would long remember, which had printed on her mind one aspect of Claire’s character as an indelible record.

It was then that Claire first looked at Joe with the resolve to kill him. But Joe had no wish to be killed, and we have seen that he had some adroitness in avoiding danger.

Claire supposed that he had dropped the child with some thought that she would stop to pick it up, and that he would escape with the other. But she had no mind for this (of which, indeed, he had not thought—he had acted under the spur of necessity). But, for the moment, his lightened horse made a better pace: the distance did not shorten between them. Rather, it lengthened slightly. For more than that, Joe made no effort. He would not waste the strength of his horse beyond the need of the moment.

We have seen what was in Joe’s mind, but why did not Claire fire at the horse before her? The answer is simple again, though it may seem foolish to many. She did not think of it. Her quarrel was with the man: she had none with the horse. It was not an idea which would be likely to come to her mind, or one that she could have received without repulsion; or adopted, except in the most desperate of emergencies.

So they passed the end of the lane that led to the lodge up which she had gone an hour ago on Davy’s wobbling chariot, passed the lane on the left, down which Davy had dodged away from the bullets, passed the road to Cowley Thorn on the right. They passed a group of excited men, the dismounted Davy among them. Some of them were armed. They appeared to be collected there with no definite purpose. They waited to hear of the doings of those of a more resolute kind—and meanwhile it was a sufficient occupation to question Davy.

They gazed in a loose-mouthed wonder at the flying riders. One man fired.

The bullet, vague as the mind that sent it, broke a high twig in a distant hedge.

The road was now less clear than it had been. There were fallen walls and trees, and shattered fences, which human industry had been insufficient to more than partly clear at the worst places.

Pace must slacken at times, but, with Joe's skilful riding, the distance held.

Now they were near the ruins of the mining village, and the hill rose before them. Joe felt that the game was almost over, as indeed it was. He used a sharp spur as the ground commenced to rise beneath them. He had been saving something of his horse's strength for just this effort. He did not give Claire credit for a similar strategy. But in this he was wrong. For some time she had been riding the chestnut well within its capacity. She had seen the rise of the hill long before they had reached it, and had resolved that it was there that she would call for the sudden effort which should draw level, and give her the shot which would not risk the child. As soon as the ground rose she would do it. The pistol was in her hand already. But how often do things happen as we intend them?

Joe's gelding felt the spur, and quickened a stride that was already slackening on the rising ground. Claire's chestnut felt an urgent heel, and heard a voice that called her to a further effort. Joe's practiced ear caught the quicker beat of the hooves behind him. He looked round, and the look was fatal.

Twenty yards ahead Martha stood at her cottage door, a yard-broom in her hand. She had heard of Claire. Davy was not a youth to gossip in the village street before reporting at his own headquarters. Martha judged the position with an instant accuracy. The broom spun beneath the legs of the flying horse.

Had Joe been looking, the result might have been different. He was a clever rider. As it was, the gelding did not come to a complete disaster, it broke its stride, staggered, and came to its knees a few yards further down the road. But Joe, riding with turned head and a slack rein, shot clean out of the saddle, and lay motionless.

Claire dismounted beside him. The child, strapped to his back, had fallen with him, but he had been a useful pillow to break her fall. Claire loosed her, with a wary eye on the sprawling form beneath, which made no motion. Joan was unhurt and untroubled. She seemed to recognize Claire as a friend, and to trust her without scruple. She looked at her with excited eyes, but without fear. She said something which Claire could not clearly follow.

Claire lifted her in her arms, and looked again at the fallen man. He might be dead. It was more than likely that he would recover.

Anyway, she could not shoot him there, now that he had fallen, and in the sight of the child. She put the pistol in her belt.

She lifted the child, and swung back into the saddle. She thought, "Another

horse may be worth having." She caught the gelding's rein, and he trotted beside her. So she rode back through the group that still talked and did nothing. They looked at her with a new wonder, but no one stayed her.

Martha had retired behind a closed door after the broom left her hands. She watched from a window. Now she came out again. She picked up the broom. She noticed, with some annoyance, that it now had a cracked stale. She looked at the silent figure on the road. There might be compensation here. She stooped over him. She could observe no injury. Her hand went into an inviting pocket.

"No, you don't," said the voice of Joe. He grabbed her wrist, and she struck at him with the broom to free it.

He struggled to his feet. "No, mother, I'm not hurt," he said, with his usual grin, "you won't search me this time. I've got a pistol." He appeared to bear her no ill-will. It was not evident that he realized that it was by her hand that he had fallen.

"I couldn't move till that hell-bitch cleared," he added, in a needless explanation.

He had had many a worse fall than that. There was nothing more than a cut hand, and a bruised knee.

Martha looked at him shrewdly, but she made no answer. She went in and shut the door.

He went up the hill.

[X]

It has been said with truth that a campaign is won by the general who makes the fewest mistakes, where all make many.

The operations which we are now considering illustrate this axiom.

Captain Cooper had advanced to his anticipated surprise with caution. He had scouted far ahead, and on either flank, though the prospect of any resistance to an advance which could not have been foreseen was remote enough.

Now that he was retiring, he was less careful, when he was in the greater danger, though he could not know it.

The danger, if such there were, would appear to be from the rear, but the fact is that he regarded the adventure as ended when he gave the order for the retirement.

He was in a black mood. He did not hide from his own mind that he had been defeated without a battle. He had been defeated by Martha Barnes, though he was ignorant that he had been outmaneuvered by a woman. He had lost two men killed, and two missing (who were killed also), besides the jockey. A total of three women, and some miscellaneous booty, was a poor set-

off. He was poorer also by three horses.

He rode at the head of the retreating column, his mind on what had been, rather than on anything which might be. He knew when to cut a loss.

Had he thrown out his flank-riders with his usual discretion they could not have failed to observe the breathless line of riflemen who were approaching Sterrington, as he rode down to the place which had been a village. There was no village now. Fire and storm had destroyed it. But the squat tower of the church still showed among such trees as had survived to screen it.

The road ran steeply down, narrow, between high hedges, with the church on the right, and a rise of meadow on the left. It was toward the crest of this leftward ridge that Martin's little force were now straining. They aimed to have descended, and lined the hedges on either side of the road, before Jerry's band should have appeared.

Martin knew that they would show conspicuously on the crest, he could not tell for how far; he went on first with Tom to the shelter of a stunted thorn.

He saw the line of laden horsemen riding down the lane. Failure. He was too late by ten minutes.

He took it quietly, though the disappointment was bitter.

"We're too late, Tom," he said. "Can you see who they've got?"

"They've not got much," said Tom, "if they tried for the women. I can see three. There's Nance Weston for one. She's not much loss. There's no man here that would risk a finger for Nance. The second's Goodwin's Tilly. I wonder how they got her. Goodwin lives far enough off. I can't see the third."

Martin's eyes followed the road. He never ceased to fight a case till the judgment was given.

"Tom," he said, "can't we cut them off higher up, if we hurry?"

Tom answered alertly enough. "We might, if we keep along the ridge—if they take the south road. They won't make much pace up the hill. It ud be a near thing either way."

It was a chance—no more.

The road forked beyond the church, and if they took the more northern route it was good-by to Goodwin's Tilly as well as to Nance the worthless.

If they should turn to the south, there might be time, or there might not. The way across the fields would be the shorter, and the more level. But it might be rough, and slow walking. In the end, it must depend upon the pace at which the horses were ridden up the hill.

Fortune favored the attempt in so far that the raiders came on to the southern road. Had Tom or his friends had sufficient enterprise to locate Jerry's camp in earlier days they would have known that they would be certain to do so.

For the rest, though Fortune gave something to the importunity with which

Martin had wooed her favors, yet she did it with a niggard hand, as though she grudged her surrender.

Jerry Cooper, leading the column on his great bay, reached the hilltop at a walk, for the pace had slackened on the ascent, and looking round as he did so, saw a dozen men, with Tom and Martin leading, coming across a field of oats in which the cattle had wandered. What had not been eaten had been trampled flat enough to make little obstacle for the runners, but they were scant of breath, and could do little toward an extra spurt, when they saw that they were again too late for their purpose.

Martin judged the position quickly. If his men should halt and fire from where they stood, the leaders of the climbing column might suffer, but the others, toiling up the hill behind, would take their places. It might soon be that they would be engaged in a duel in which his own men would be exposed, while their opponents would have the protection of hedge and ditch. He was not disposed to stake the lives of his men in such a conflict.

Besides, he had left Jack Tolley, with half a dozen others, to follow the road's course, and come up in their rear. That was to prevent the backward flight of horsemen who could not be pursued on foot to any possible purpose. But he had to consider now how that portion of his force would come into action.

He called out: "Come on, men. Don't stop to fire." He continued to run forward.

He saw Cooper, sitting coolly enough, lift a rifle to his shoulder, and fire twice. Other figures were showing beside him. He turned, waving an arm, and shouting to those behind. Then he spurred forward. He meant to get his force clear, if he could, by the speed of their horses' legs.

Very nearly he did it. Of the fourteen men that were still with him, nine got through without a shot being fired to stay them. With these men he rode back into his own farm-yard as the evening was falling. They had dropped much of their plunder. They had brought Nance Weston. He had ridden out with eighteen men the day before—besides the jockey. He came back with nine. Two more men rode in the next morning. Joe came also, on foot. A weary man.

Martin's troop, finding nothing but a fallen gate to stay them, had run into the road while the rearmost five were still breasting the hill. One of these fell at the first shot. The others rode back down the hill. At the foot, Jack's party blocked them. Two of them had women on their horses' cruppers. This held back the men's fire, and seeing this, there was an attempt to ride through them. At this one man succeeded. Another was shot down in the attempt.

The shrill voice of Goodwin's Tilly saved the life of her captor, whom she persuaded to yield, and who was afterwards useful in betraying the secrets of

the band. Whether Goodwin had any cause for satisfaction in this development is less than doubtful. But that is another story.

Betsy Parkin, a foolish woman who had been slow to believe the danger, and too late in attempted flight, had slipped down from her captor's horse with unexpected agility as he had halted at the first uncertainty. She hid in the ditch, being a prudent woman, till the firing ceased. Her captor, relieved of her retarding weight, had leaped his horse over the hedge, or forced it through it, and was first seen making off at as good a pace as the heavy soil of a field of unhoed mangels permitted. He was followed by half a score of bullets, which caused him some palpitation (for he had a weak heart), but did no further damage. He was the other man who got home in the morning. Martin marshaled men that were tired, but triumphant. It had not been the decisive stroke for which he had hoped and planned, but it was sufficient, and a bloodless victory.

They collected the recovered booty. They put the women on the captured horses. They marched back well content with the leader that Fate had sent them. They saw nothing of Joe, who had very prudently left the road when he found that the appointed rendezvous was deserted.

[XI]

As the little force, tired but hilarious, straggled down the hill, Martin realized that victory had brought no respite from the responsibilities which he had undertaken so readily.

He knew that a sound military policy would have dictated an immediate pursuit of the fleeing Cooper. But he judged this to be impossible. A word to Tom confirmed this opinion. The men were divided between a desire to seek their scattered homes, and a wish to recover the booty which they had left on the earlier road. Both desires were natural enough. They had not the cohesion of a military force.

His own wish, no less than theirs, was to escape to his private interests—to his recovered family. But he was the first among them—and he was the servant of all.

When they came to the junction of the road at the hilltop, he inquired for any man that could ride to take the news of victory to the waiting camp, and to order that the cart and pack-horses should be brought forward. It was only four miles away, and the cart could be sent back for a further load if that should be necessary.

There was difficulty about finding a man who could ride. One was pushed forward at last, who was alleged to have become expert by illicit exercise of pit-ponies. His seat in the saddle suggested that he had not transgressed very

frequently, or to any personal advantage.

Martin saw that there were matters that must not be left to chance to determine. There were the horses, and some other things, which must be auctioned in the previous manner. There might easily be disputes, arising from the promiscuous way in which the men had abandoned their possessions, at the last call to action. If he would have freedom for himself, he must delegate the authority which he had taken. He called the men together, and appointed a later hour for these divisions. With these, Jack Tolley would deal, as his own deputy. He thanked them for the way in which they had marched and fought. He told them that they were free to go their own ways, till they should hear of his further plans.

They cheered him with a good will. There was a note of life in the sound, as of a new spirit in the community.

Martin turned to Tom. He assumed that it was he who would lead him to Helen. But Tom excused himself. He had no wish to be present at such a meeting. Discretion and inclination were at one on this point. He remembered that Claire had gone ahead. The situation was ambiguous enough. He would leave time for explanations, and for Helen to realize it. He had not lost hope.

He suggested that a guide could easily be found who would show the way to the lodge. He said that he was anxious to see some of the men who had not been with them—men on whom he could rely to support Martin's authority, if they should be informed of it in the right way. If he might, he would follow at a later hour.

Martin was well content. He had no wish that there should be onlookers at his first meeting with Helen. He found a ready guide in Davy, who was still relating his experiences to a changing audience. What Martin heard from him increased his haste. Davy told him of the dead man on the road to the lodge; of the hoof-marks, and the broken paling; of a rush of flight and chase which had passed with clangor of flying hooves along the gaping street; of how Claire had ridden back with a child in her arms, and a captured horse at her bridle. In the last three months Davy had seen several things happen. Momentous things. But not after this kind. It had been better than a circus of his childish memory. Better than the Tipton cinema, whose glories were forever departed.

So far, good. Certainly Claire had justified her offer to go to Helen's protection. The rescued child stood out as a clear fact from the narrative. All else might be well. But might she not have ridden to avenge, as well as to rescue? Might he not be going to a reunion in which Death was a partner?

"Davy," he said, "can you ride?"

Davy's moon-face was blank with denial.

"Well, you soon will."

The group of lounging listeners stared at the voice of curt authority with

which Martin commandeered the best of the horses, which were being unloaded beside them, and at the alacrity with which his wishes were followed.

Betsy, getting down with more deliberation than she had shown on the hillside, and answering some rough chaff concerning the absent Parkin with an unbroken good-humor, found herself bustled to the ground with unexpected celerity.

Davy, in another minute, was hoisted to a precarious eminence, where he must clutch at Martin's belt and await disaster, as he pitched and swayed upon his bruised and jolted way.

So they came to the lodge gates after a short and hurried ride, which was long to both, though from different causes. Lock and padlock yielded to the keys which Tom had provided.

Within the gate they came to a brown gelding, loosely tethered, and to a chestnut mare that grazed freely beside it.

Martin fastened his own horse.

"You can go now, Davy," he said. The door of the lodge was closed, and it was by an effort of will that he stepped toward it.

[XII]

Claire had hesitated as to the route by which she should return to the lodge. She had an uncertain recollection of having asked Helen to wait for her in the lane, but she might not have done so. It was almost certain that she would have followed Claire as far as the main road, and that she would have the child that Joe had thrown down. The child might be hurt. In any case it would be natural to carry her home.

Then Claire had the two horses. She did not wish to abandon them. Though she had leapt down into the lane she knew that she could not reverse the process. If she should take the horses that way there she must leave them. And there was the child in her arms.

For every reason it seemed best to go straight to the lodge. There she could leave Joan. There she could leave the horses. If Helen were not returned she could cross the park on foot and pass the stile without difficulty. Little time would be lost, and she would be sure to meet or find her.

So she did. She handed Joan to Mary Wittels, who showed little surprise or emotion. She set out over the park and found it a much longer way than she had supposed.

She climbed the steps and came down almost on the body of Bryan. The man lay with staring eyes and distorted face. He had not died easily. He was not good to look on. It was not a pleasant sight for the woman who killed him. Her thoughts warred discordantly. He had deserved his fate. Would there be

any hope of peace or decent living while such men continued? Who made her his judge? Was there man or woman left alive whose hands were as red as hers had become in four short days of violence? How long would she walk immune, should these feuds continue? She thought of herself lying tomorrow as he lay today. "*He who liveth by the sword . . .*" It was just enough. . . .

But she had saved those that she set out to rescue. She had been loyal to Martin. Martin, whose child might be in her own body. Then she must shoot quickly indeed. It was not for herself, but for her child also.

Had she done rightly so to risk her life, when her child's might be at stake also? She saw that she had had no choice. Had she declined she would have been as a mother who tempts her son to cowardice or dishonor to secure his safety. For while a woman carries a son in her body it is not his life only, but his character, his honor which is in her keeping.

Had she done otherwise, how could she have expected to have a son worth having? She thought only of a son.

With such thoughts she went down the lane. Like the park, it was longer than she had thought it. Toward the bottom she came on Bryan's horse, but she could not catch it. It had the distrustful mood of one that had been unfortunate in its rider. It moved on before her, almost colliding with Helen as she appeared at the end of the lane, with Mary in her arms.

Claire called to her before they met. "She is safe at home." Helen did not ask whom she might mean. She said: "Has he come?"

"No," Claire answered, "but he may be here any moment. He has taken the men to cut them off somewhere if he can as they retire. I didn't understand more than that."

"The men? Then Tom's back?"

"Yes. It was Tom who told him that you were here."

They were both silent for a time. Helen wished to ask many things, but they were for Martin to answer. It was on him that her mind was fixed. And she was half afraid of Claire. Fear and a depth of gratitude contended with a doubting wonder.

Claire had much to say also, but she was in no haste to begin. She wondered how much Helen understood of what she had said already.

As to that, Helen understood well enough—at least, verbally. How much it implied was a larger question.

It was Helen who made the first move—perhaps naturally, having the most to learn. Besides, she was as incapable of a moral cowardice as Claire would have been of a physical weakness of a kindred kind. When her question came it was of a very deep simplicity.

"Why did you come?"

Claire did not answer at once. Instead, she said: "Shall I take the child?"

She held out her hands.

It was a natural question, for Helen had carried it for a long time. She looked less fit for such a burden than, in fact, she was.

She hesitated for a moment, and then accepted. But Mary clung to her mother. Her eyes watched Claire incessantly. She was not frightened. But her arms held to her mother.

They went on as they were.

Then Claire said: "I came to find you. We were afraid there might be danger. Martin could not come at once. They had chosen him for their leader. He wanted to stop them if they should have carried anyone off."

This was vague to Helen. She knew even less than Claire of Cooper's gang, or of the politics of the new life. "Did he ask you to come?"

"No," said Claire, not clear as to what the question might intend, but keeping to the fact, as her way was, "I offered when I saw that he could not. We did not think that there was any real danger, but I thought he would be glad for me to come. And I wanted to talk to you. Of course, he had told me about you. But he had believed you were dead."

"He could not help thinking that," Helen answered quickly. She would imply no blame to Martin, even by silence.

"Don't you think I had better tell it from the beginning?" Claire said.

"If you like," was the answer, in a tone which was polite but had become distant. It implied that it was a matter of no importance—or, at least, of no importance to Helen. That was how Helen felt, or tried to. What Martin might have done while he believed her dead was a matter between themselves. She would not discuss him with Claire. She needed no apology from her. Martin knew now that she was alive, and, naturally, it would be the end of any intervening episode. If there were any difficulty Martin would know how to deal with it. He always did. Why had the woman come to her? Well, as to that, she had come to save her from danger. She had saved her—and the children. Helen remembered the position from which she had been rescued. It was not a pleasant thought. It was the affront to her dignity that she resented. It had been an ignominious posture.

But Helen would be just, even to her worst enemy, though she might not love him. She did not know to what fate she might have been carried, or her children, but she knew that Claire had ridden swiftly to her rescue when she learnt her peril—ridden alone to face two men at the risk of her own life. But even for this she thanked Martin rather than Claire. Even though he could not come himself he had known how to protect her. He had known whom to send. Martin would do the right thing. He always did.

If this woman of the reckless leap, of the quick shot, of the murderous eyes (for that vision persisted) had been useful to Martin as she had been useful to

her, if she had given him pleasure when his own wife was absent, she would be grateful—grateful and friendly—but Claire was outside the intimacy of their lives, and that she must understand.

Claire understood the rebuff very well, but she was not easily snubbed—gray eyes, frank and straight, looked into blue ones that did not fall, though the color deepened beneath them, and the tone was gentler than the words in which she answered.

"It is not if I like at all. It is because you must know. He thought you dead. He pledged himself to me, '*for always and always*.' " There was a tone of reminiscence as she quoted, a note of Martin's voice which Helen knew, and for the first time this thing was real to her, though she would not admit that it could menace. "Then we heard that you were alive. I shall not try to hold him from you. I could not if I would. I know that, now I have seen you. But I should not have tried. You have the first right. I came here to tell you. But it must be clear between us. I am not second. I may bear his child, and that child is as yours. It shall have no second place. My honor is your honor, and Martin's. I may give up all besides, but not that."

Helen said: "Were you married?" The question arose from her seclusion of the past three months, but she was no fool, and had regretted it before she heard the note of scorn in the answer.

"*Married!* I have just told you that I may bear his child."

Helen made some amend in the friendlier tone in which she asked a question that went deeper. "Did you love him?"

Claire paused for her answer. She knew that she had taken the peril of death to seek a man to her liking and to avoid those from whom she shrank. She was seeking the best she could, and after that first repulsion she had taken the first that came. It was bald fact, and she did not shirk it.

She answered with the disarming candor which was the strongest weapon of a mind that had little of subtlety.

"He was the man that I chose. If it had not been he I might have chosen another. So might you."

Helen's emotions were deep and shy. They did not open readily to a passing caller. They could always be approached most easily by way of intellectual stimuli. She acknowledged the directness of the thrust with a new respect for her antagonist—and perhaps a new liking.

Before she had framed her reply Claire continued. "It is not only that I chose him. He chose me. You cannot alter that. He thought you were dead, or it would not have been. I know that. He is of that kind. So am I. If you were not living I could not give him what you will, but I could give him—different things."

Helen was not quick to speak even now. She could not think or speak with

this straight-thrusting simplicity. Her mind was too complex. But she had her own intellectual candor, and it admitted *touché* a second time.

She knew Martin with the clarity of a long companionship, of a love which was as passionate as her nature allowed, of a loyalty which would not have faltered at a far worse pass than was now confronting her, of an intellectual intimacy that Claire might never have equaled, and she saw with this clarity that Claire's words were true. There was a side on which Claire might content him as she never could, even though she might agonize to do it, even though Martin's loyalty, which she did not doubt, might never own it, even to the secrecy of his own mind.

With this thought there came also a fuller realization of the generosity of her rival. She might be secure in her mind that she could hold her own against a hundred Claires. But Claire had not known this. She had not known—and she had come to give.

All the fineness of her nature was in the simplicity of her answer. "I am sorry. Tell me."

Hearing it, Claire knew that all that mattered had been told already, but it was just that which was needed to make it easy to tell the rest.

She said: "It is a few days, but a great deal has happened. You must be tired with the child. Shall we rest?"

They were in the park now, and they sat down at an oak's foot. Claire realized that she was tired also. The day was advanced, and she had had neither food nor rest since Martin's impatience had started the laden march in the early morning. She felt the apathy of exhausted nerves and tired muscles, and would have been glad to rest in silence. But she told the whole tale. Not only of the last few days, but of her first struggle for life in the night of a drowning world, of her horror of the men with whom Fortune threw her, of her further challenge to Death that she might escape them, of her life with the old shepherd and his daughter, of her further search, and of how Martin had found her; of their first companionship with its distrusts, and of how quickly they faded, of her capture by Bellamy and of the fight that followed, of the night among the brambles, of the fighting in the tunnel, of the killing of Bellamy, of the last attack that had so nearly destroyed them, and of how Tom's party had rescued them without intending to do so. All this she told, and of the day that followed, with a convincing bareness, in short, clear sentences that made it real to Helen, who was always responsive to the spoken word.

She understood, as she heard, the conditions of the outer life, of which Tom had told her so vaguely. For the first time it became vivid—and near. Little as Claire made of her own part, it did not need any great imagination to see what she had been to Martin in those tensions of conflict. She saw also—for Claire did not disguise it—that it was for her that he had run the risk, for

her that he had fought so desperately. Claire rose in her regard as something that Martin had valued—and Martin judged well.

Also she saw that Claire had a stronger case than she had attempted to set up. "*For always and always.*" It was not the kind of pledge which can be broken with honor. But it had been given in good faith. And Martin had not known. It was a pledge that, so she thought, he could not keep. Claire saw that. But it was hard on Claire.

Her mind, seeing many sides and with characteristic intellectual impartiality, saw questions yet to come which were not easy to answer. She looked ahead, and her mind was troubled. She longed for Martin to come. She wanted to talk it over with him. He would tell her what it would be right to do.

She felt now that it was due to Claire to say more than she had yet done, but Claire did not invite it.

Mary had been playing around them, and Claire had coaxed her to her arms at last, where she nestled confidently.

Claire looked down at the sleeping face with a new tenderness in her eyes. She said: "Tell me how you saved them."

But the tale was not told then, for Helen had seen that Martin came to her through the bracken.

[XIII]

Claire looked away. She had seen Helen in Martin's arms. She had run to him, so that it was at some distance that they met, for Claire had not moved. She saw Helen in the arms of the man that was hers—and hers. She thought that she was weeping. It was an abandon of emotion that she had not looked for in Helen. It was not in her own way, and she had not thought it to be Helen's. She saw that these two had had a common life for years—common interests, children—the comradeship which is more than all in marriage, and is so often absent. It had seemed that the grave had closed between them, and miraculously it had opened again, and life was renewed—and dearer for the separation which had befallen.

Beside this, what was she? The love of a summer night. The comrade of a tunnel fight. The episode of a mood—of a moment.

It was so different from what it might have been; from what she had set out to win.

She had dreamed of the solitudes and dangers of an empty world, of the weight of the wilderness. She would have endured these with Martin. *Endured?* They would have been a joy beyond words.

But Fate had given her to him, and held her with a tie that she might ignore but which she could not break. It had brought her back from the clean

solitudes, from sky, and grass, and sea to the commonness of the life of a new barbarity, for so she felt it.

And there was no way to break loose. She was no longer free. No longer single. There might be a child.

She became aware that she was very tired.

She looked up, and they were standing before her. They were hand-in-hand, and Helen's eyes were radiant.

Martin was looking at the child. She lifted it to him, and as he took it, and as it half waked and nestled down against him (as it had done in those so different days three months ago, and as it would do again, with little thought for the interval), their eyes met, and she was aware that Martin understood: that in some way which she had not previously apprehended as possible, his reunion with Helen had not divided them.

"How did you get them back?" he asked. She wondered how he knew or guessed, and he saw the question in her eyes, and added: "Oh, Davy told me. I didn't know you could ride."

"It was really nothing," she answered, with a recovered lightness in her tone which made ease for all of them, "it wasn't really I. I simply rode him hard. I had the better horse. She's a beauty! But he could ride better than I, which made it longer. It was the man you said was a jockey. I thought I should have him the next minute, and I suppose he thought the same. Anyway, he looked round, and just then an old woman threw a broom at his horse's legs. He was thrown clear of the horse, with the child behind him. She wasn't hurt —scarcely frightened. I left her with the old woman." She added: "He had thrown Mary from his horse before then. Helen picked her up. I could have killed him for that."

"Didn't you?" said Helen, guilelessly enough. But she had gained an impression that death was the routine experience of those who met Claire's displeasure.

"No," said Claire, "I left him in the road. He didn't move, but I don't think he could have been much hurt. It was a simple fall. But I brought his horse."

Martin said: "He had cleared off before we came that way; I expect he was shamming. He would have been better dead."

They walked back to the lodge together. The conversation on the way did not exclude Claire; Martin was adroit to prevent it, but she realized, though without bitterness, that it would have been better that they should have been alone together. She resolved that that should come very quickly.

After arrival there was a difference. The limited space of the little room, the slender resources of the tiny larder, must provide rest and refreshment. Helen felt the responsibility of a hostess, though the place was scarcely hers. She felt almost in the same relation to both Claire and Martin, and exerted

herself accordingly. Mary Wittels took the invasion good-humoredly. She was reluctant to occupy her accustomed chair until assured that seats (of some kind or other) were available for her visitors, whose status (by her own standards, which were not entirely foolish) was plain in spite of the dirt and disorder of the quaint attires in which they were dressed, by their own caprice, or by that of Fortune.

But they could not stay in the lodge. They had realized that, before Tom came with his plans for their deliverance.

There was but one room and one bed, on which Helen had slept with the children, and another which Tom had improvised for the old woman when it became evident that Helen's lengthened stay would make it unreasonable for her to continue with nothing better than the chairs which she had first utilized.

It was a physical impossibility to trespass upon her more than Helen had done already. But Tom had thought of that.

He had thought of many things during the last few hours.

There had been dim dreams in his mind for many weeks of what might be done to bring light and order into the wrecks of a social system which had itself been chaotic. But he had sufficient wisdom to know that he would not be wise enough to achieve it. Something he had done. Some things he had influenced. To have attempted more would have been to fail entirely.

But in Martin he believed that they had found the man that was needed. And he was one in whom he had an exceptional confidence, acquired in an exceptional way.

He had sat in the dock while a hired advocate struggled, with all the ingenuity of one of the subtlest brains in a profession that makes a trade of subtlety, to interpret evidence in such a way as would procure his destruction. That was how such matters were conducted in the England of that day. A man accused of murder, however innocent—which Tom was not—would at once have all the wealth of the country and its legal ability directed against him. The police would make exhaustive inquiries without regard to the expenditure incurred. They would unearth persons who would exhibit incredible memories of the color of a man's shoes, or of the shape of his necktie. Advocates would be hired at huge fees to practice the extremity of human ingenuity in constructing a case against him.

Being so attacked, his ability to defend himself on the same plane must depend upon the amount of money which could be collected among his relatives to hire lawyers of equal skill and of a corresponding capacity. Cases occurred of persons accused of crime being proved innocent after they had been reduced to beggary in defending the proceedings successfully. But for them there was no restitution.

Only if a man could prove that he had no means whatever the law would

contemptuously provide him with an advocate so that the game against him could be played with an aspect of outer decency. But if he had anything to lose, the lawyers stripped him bare.

That was the law and the practice. The results would have been even worse but for the fact that the individuals concerned were often better than the system which they had been trained to serve.

Tom had faced this ordeal with the simplifying knowledge of his own guilt (for in many ways a true charge is more easily endured, and in some cases more easily rebutted, than one that is false) and with a well-founded belief that there would be little hope for mercy should a verdict be obtained against him.

He had relied, during those hours of tension, upon the man who had undertaken his defense, and had watched his battle fought, as he could never have fought it, with a stubborn patient tenacity that did not attempt to minimize the strength of the case against him, but declined to admit that it could not be conquered. He had not been over-anxious or over-despondent during that ordeal. Strange though it may sound, he had not been very miserable. He was not himself of the disposition that finds trouble too easily, and he had gained confidence from the support of the man who had made him feel that he was as concerned as himself in the issue which they were fighting.

In that strange intimacy, when Martin Webster's brain and will had stood between him and death as literally as he stood, in fact, between the dock and the judge's seat, he had, perhaps, learnt more of the character of his advocate than Martin had learnt of the prisoner that he was defending.

He knew that Martin was not of those who go lightly into battle, who face odds gaily and in a confidence of overcoming. Rather would he calculate his opponent's forces to the last ounce they could offer, estimating them at their full value and judging with a cool discretion the possibility of defeating them. He might lead a forlorn hope very skilfully, certainly with courage, if he should undertake it at all, but he would know it for what it was.

As he looked unflinchingly at his opponent's strength, so would he look unflinchingly at his own weakness. He would not disguise the truth.

And, though a lawyer, he had no natural reverence for convention or respect for precedent. He had a singularly open and sometimes unexpected mind.

Tom had the wit that can appreciate qualities of mind and character beyond its own capacity. He believed Martin to be the man that could save them.

Confused with these dreams and with this personal loyalty was his desire for Helen and his uncertainty as to the issue which had arisen.

He had fulfilled his promise to Helen. He had found her husband. He would have recognized this as fatal to his own hopes and having the effect of finality, but for the presence of Claire, a confusing and unexpected factor.

His desire for Helen was real, and his claim substantial. He had saved her life, he had protected her through very difficult times so completely that she had been scarcely aware of the peril in which she lived, and by claiming her for himself he had not only saved her from others, he had shut himself out from competition for the favors of the remaining women of the community. In the result, he might have lost all and gained nothing.

He deserved sympathy, though his love for Helen, with whom he may have had less in common than he supposed, and which was the result of a fortuitous intimacy (though that is the basis of many lifelong unions), may not have been very deeply rooted, and his subsequent proceedings may be condoned, though they may not be entirely defended.

He came now with the news of a suitable asylum for their necessities of the night, and, more than that, of a place which Martin might consider fitted for his headquarters at the commencement of his new authority. So far, Tom's conduct had been beyond criticism. He had been industrious to distribute the news of the adherence to Martin, to which the members of the expedition had pledged themselves, and of his qualities of leadership, and to enlist the support of other friends who had not been with them. In this he had been successful beyond any reasonable anticipation. In making inquiries for a suitable home for their new leader he had only faced an obvious necessity, and relieved a difficulty which Martin had already realized. If it be true also that he supposed that there might be awkwardness as to who should accompany Martin to the proposed location, the problem was not of his making.

He came into the little crowded room and saw at the first glance that there was a degree of freedom and harmony which he might be excused for not having anticipated. He had scarcely entered before Helen's hand was out, and she was thanking him for his successful search with a voice and manner which left no doubt of her happiness.

He had heard something of Claire's ride after Joe Harker, and his inquiry after the children's safety brought an enthusiastic account of her successful rescue, which gave an equal evidence of Helen's gratitude and admiration. It was confusing to Tom.

He may be excused if he doubted whether Helen knew of the relations which had existed between Claire and her recovered husband.

He turned to Martin to report the activities in which he had been occupied. He ended by saying that the raiders had murdered Stacey Dobson, and that his house would be available for Martin's residence. It would be advisable to occupy it as quickly as possible, though there was little risk that anyone would attempt to seize it, as it would be supposed that Stacey's servants would now hold it, but he had arranged with them.

This involved some explanations. Stacey Dobson, whose death we have

observed after three months of unclouded happiness in his garden hammock, had occupied a comfortable country residence with a southwestern aspect and a rise of ground in its rear. It may have been already observed that most of the buildings which had escaped entire destruction were in such situations. They were substantially built, they were isolated, and they were protected by their position from the direct fury of the storm which had preceded the earthquake. Not all or most of such buildings escaped destruction, but they were the only conditions under which it was possible that they should have even partially survived.

Stacey was in his library when the storm commenced; he was still there when the earthquake ended. He did not expect to survive. He observed that he was involved in a world catastrophe, but he was not over-greatly perturbed. He had no inclination to join the hurrying crowd that screamed and jostled on the road without. He hated dirt. He hated discomfort. He hated contact with his fellow-men. He was invincibly indolent. He waited the caprice of Fate in an entirely gentlemanly manner.

He would have displayed a similar detachment toward the visit of the bailiffs, whom he had good reason to expect on the following morning when the storm broke. Remembering that probability, he observed compensations in the course which events had taken. He reflected on the wisdom which had led him to continue his leisurely existence unperturbed by the cloud of debt which had been enveloping him during the last few years.

He heard the roar of the storm and the crash of falling timber. He heard his chimneys descend, and he had good reason to suppose that the major part of his residence was in ruins. He was not insensitive to these events. He composed a sonnet on Mutability. He wrote it out with a neat precision. He considered the finer points of punctuation with a fastidious care.

His housemaid, Betty, survived, with a bruised head and with some other minor injuries which we need not investigate.

She came to seek her master as soon as circumstances rendered it possible for her to do so.

She told him of much which he had been able only to imagine, but which confirmed the judgment that he had formed already.

Mr. Dobson went to the safe. He counted Treasury notes to an amount of twenty-two pounds ten shillings, and handed them to her. He remembered that her wages were about six months in arrears. “I don’t think,” he said, “that we need trouble to deduct the insurance.”

He went to his desk, and from a drawer in which his papers were very neatly ordered, he selected some writs and various other legal documents of a kindred kind, including a Bankruptcy Notice and a Poor-Rate Summons.

“I think, Betty,” he said, “you can burn these.”

He felt quietly cheerful.

He called Betty's attention to the few articles of a fragile nature which the room contained, which he had removed to the floor at the first shock of the earthquake, to a spilling of ink on his desk, which he had been too late to avert, and to a crack which was developing in the ceiling.

The last was the most serious. "I should like Phillips to see it," he said definitely; and then: "What about lunch?"

For the next three months Stacey had found the world going very smoothly. All necessity for work (even congenial work) had ceased. The brief article on Etruscan Mythology intended for the Birmingham Post (which had become a reliable market for his single-column reflections on miscellaneous subjects) remained unfinished. The books which had been sent to him for (eulogistic) review by the Bookman remained unread, unless his own caprice should desire them.

Betty remained in attendance. Phillips, a young plumber of Cowley Thorn, to whom she had been previously engaged, directed his energies to rebuilding a portion of the ruins, and was invited to reside upon the premises. The young couple, as satisfied as Stacey himself with the provisions which Providence had made for their well-being, were content enough to wait upon him and forage for their common needs, and he was thus enabled to continue an existence which, without suffering any unaccustomed privations, was freed at once from the obligation of work, and the burden of debt that had previously embarrassed him.

When his incursion into Victorian fiction, on the morning of the day with which we are dealing, was disturbed by Phillips with the news that Jerry Cooper's band was approaching, he had looked up from the hammock in which he lay and answered with his usual aloof urbanity.

"My good man, they don't want me—or you. But they may want Betty. It is a desire with which we can both sympathize very easily. But I don't see any reason why we should let them have her. You had better take her into Cowley Wood and lie close. You can tell her from me that lunch can wait."

Phillips looked doubtful. "Won't you come, sir?" he asked. "They're a rough lot."

"No, Phillips," he answered. "I'm too comfortable where I am. Besides, if they see me here they won't suppose that anyone has left the house."

The man went a few paces and hesitated. He had a liking for his curious master, and thought him foolish to remain.

Stacey saw his hesitation, and added: "I shouldn't waste time, Phillips, if I were you. You might be sorry tomorrow. And don't try to go far. It isn't running that will save you. It's lying close. Get Betty well into the brambles. She'll be scratched now, but glad afterwards."

He returned to a consideration of the conversation of Betsy Trotwood.

It was well for Phillips and Betty that they had lost no time as he had suggested, for it was scarcely three minutes later that the troop that had been detailed for Cowley Thorn reined at his gate, and the next moment two of them were riding up the garden path. They did not observe Stacey, and had they continued through the orchard they must have seen the fugitives crossing the field beyond. So Stacey considered, with an unhurried mind. He raised himself and called after them. They pulled up at the voice, and commenced to question him. They called to their comrades to surround the house. As he had foreseen, his presence and occupation gave them the impression that no alarm had reached here, and they concluded that the occupants must still be about the premises.

He told them, with a careful accuracy, that he had two servants, of whom he had seen one enter the house only three minutes ago. He suggested, with a polite irony, that they should respect the privacy of his residence.

They left him to search the house. Supposing that the inmates would be in hiding, they spent ten minutes with a result which need not be stated. They returned to Stacey with a natural anger and a request that he should rise and assist the search. He replied that he would do so with pleasure when the day became cooler, but at present he was too comfortable.

The sergeant of the troop shot him through the head where he lay. "Captain's orders," he said. " 'Don't waste time. Shoot the men.' Come on, boys. We'll get nothing here." They rode on to Cowley Thorn.

It is probable that Stacey had saved the life of Phillips and the happiness of the woman. He did this from the same cause that had made the payment of Betty's wages so irregular an event in earlier days. He was himself throughout. With many faults, he had still been greater, in one aspect at least, than were most of those that the seas had swallowed. He had declined to be dominated by his environment. He had lived and died as near to individual freedom as was possible in those days.

As we have observed, it was a silly murder. Like most human actions, it had a variety of unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences. The first of these was that Tom, hearing of it, had promptly interviewed the grief-stricken servants and arranged, by whatever arguments, or threats, or persuasions, that the succession of the freehold should pass not to themselves, as would have been most natural under the existing conditions, but to the new leader whom he was introducing. Probably they were well content with this solution. Both Phillips and Betty were of the dying class of English people to whom it was natural to give faithful service to others. There was much nobility in its ideals and practice, and it had been succeeded by baser things, but it preferred security to responsibility.

Tom explained the circumstances briefly to Martin and Helen. The house was about two miles away in a direct line, but it was over three by road, and the road was easier. The day was far advanced, and he proposed that they should go without delay. The dead master of the house would be already buried. Betty had promised that all possible provision should be made for their comfort.

Helen looked doubtfully at the children, already sleeping. She was reluctant to disturb them further. She was not prepared to leave them. She was not prepared to suggest that Martin should go without her. She asked Tom what accommodation they could rely upon at the house to which he would take them.

He was not clear on that point. It was doubtful whether more had been rendered fit for occupation than would provide for the two servants, in addition to Stacey's own apartment. But that alone, if it were only his library and an adjoining bedroom, would be much more than the lodge could offer.

Claire cut the knot. She said to Helen: "Hadn't the children better stay here for tonight? I will stay with them. It's the best way for them, and far the safest. If you find everything satisfactory where Tom is taking you, you can fetch them in the morning, or I will bring them."

Helen hesitated. They had scarcely left her sight since she had saved them from the floods. But she knew that Claire spoke reasonably. They could scarcely be safer than with Claire, who had proved both her willingness and her power to protect them. And she wanted Martin—to herself. She turned to him for decision. Martin turned to Tom.

"I don't think there'll be anything more to fear from Cooper's lot. Not for some time, anyway. Is there any danger from the people round?"

Tom shook his head.

"They won't come here," he said. "They never have done. They know me too well. Anyway, they wouldn't come for the children." He looked at Claire, hesitated, and stopped. Then he added: "It sounds the best way."

"Very well," said Martin, and then to Claire: "If you don't mind?"

Claire laughed. "I shall like it," she said. "I shall be asleep before you've gone two minutes."

Tom was still puzzled, but recognized that the problem was postponed, not solved. He still thought that Helen could not know, but he was baffled by the easy understanding which seemed to exist between Martin and Claire, and by the apparent good-will with which she almost thrust him into the arms of her rival.

He led the way to the new house.

But, left alone, Claire did not laugh, nor did she sleep quickly. The old woman went to her bed. The twilight came. Claire sat beside the sleeping

children. Her eyes were somber, and she bit her lips as she had done when she stood and watched the water from the Cotswold Hill.

She heard the tethered horses move without. An owl hooted. She got up and barred the door.

Her glance fell on the sleeping children and softened. Should she stay or go? It was so hard to think of what was right, and not merely of what had been customary. She was his, as Helen was his. And he hers. But Helen had the first right. Her mind moved in a circle. There might be his child and hers. It should not be less. It should not be second. If he should be the first among them, as she thought he would, then the child was his. His eldest son. Not less than Helen's children. In no way less. Of course she must not go. Where should she? How would she provide for an unborn child, alone, and wandering in such a world? Where should she bear it?

Her thoughts went to Martin. After all, it would be his child, as much as hers. The problem was not hers alone, but his also. Perhaps he saw no problem. She felt certain that he did not wish her to go, nor expect it. But she saw difficulties that he might not see, if she should remain.

She was not jealous of Helen. Helen had not wronged her. Nor had she wronged Helen; at least, not with intention or knowledge. Indeed, she knew that she had not wronged her in any way, for she had not alienated Martin's affection from her. Of that she was sure—and glad. Otherwise, there would have been tragedy, where now there was none. Surely there could be no cause except for rejoicing in the recovery of one who was loved, and who was well worthy of the love that was given? To think otherwise would be to think basely. Then was it a natural consequence that she should part from Martin? Was it a good thing that they should part? And, if so, exactly why was it?

A man could not have two wives! It was not the custom of their race. But to state a fact (if fact it be) is not to explain it.

It was better to have one only. Probably happier for the man. Certainly better for the woman. But if there were, in fact, two? That was the issue which they had to face. If she removed herself, she resolved it, perhaps in the best, perhaps in the only way. She would be equal to that if she should think it right. But she would not sacrifice the child. Her mind came back, full-circle, to the point from which it had started.

She knew the way in which the drowned civilization would have decided it. A man might marry two women, each believing herself to be the only wife he had. It would punish the man, which did no good to him, nor to the women. A most utterly abortive stupidity. It did not punish him for any moral wrong he had done. He might have lived with a woman for years, promised her marriage, and then deserted her and her children to marry another, and the law was indifferent to a monstrous wickedness. If the deserted woman should have

any means of support—if she should make no complaint—it would not interfere. But if he were to marry two women in a legal way, then it interfered. Its dignity was offended. It acted like a petulant child, careless of the misery which it caused. And for the women it had a solution of a callous stupidity. The first had all: the second, nothing. The first was bound: the second, free. It had no regard for their wishes; no regard for circumstances; no regard for either justice or mercy. It was inflexible in its folly. There was no help there, for there was no wisdom.

But those laws were dead. There was no law now—unless Martin should make it. She thought that they were utterly free—as free as is possible in any human circumstance. They three—she, and Helen, and Martin. There was no law to coerce, protect, or punish. It was their own characters which must decide. Finally, it was Helen. She had the first right. Claire allowed that; though whether from any reasoned conviction, or from the bias of tradition, she was not analytical enough to determine. She would go, rather than contest a claim which Helen would not admit. But there might be another life to consider! She would not sacrifice her child. So her mind went round the circle again, and found no outlet.

So she thought, seeing many things clearly. But there was one thing that she did not see, which Tom had seen from the first. Which Martin had seen also, and which had already occupied his mind as the decisive factor in the problem that was before them.

A low moon shone through the little window. Its square of light moved upward to the coarse coverlet of the bed, and to the faces of the sleeping children. Martin's children—and Helen's. With a rare tenderness—for she was not lightly demonstrative—she bent and kissed them. As she did so, it seemed to her that a solution came. It should be the children first—always the children. But how, and what, did it solve?

Comforted, but with no logical cause, she lay down and was asleep beside them.

[XIV]

Martin and Helen were not quick to sleep either.

In the moonlit shadows of a room more luxuriously appointed than anything to which they had been accustomed, even in the earlier days, and in the recovered sanctuary of each other's arms, they talked long of many things, joining again the threads of divided experience, and looking forward to a united future the possibilities of which were beyond their seeing.

Martin told of his loneliness, and of how Claire had come to him out of the water. He had not sought her. He did not say this. He did not excuse himself.

He did not think of any excuse being needed. But it was clear to Helen as he told it. He did not touch on the future. It was Helen who said later, “It seems hard on Claire. I wonder she doesn’t hate me.”

“She doesn’t hate you?” Martin asked. Certainly he did not wish that.

“No,” Helen said, “I think she likes me a little, though we are so different. I don’t think she could hate anyone, unless they deserved it. She’s not that kind. . . . I shouldn’t like her to hate me.” The vision came again of Claire’s eyes as she had emptied her automatic into Bryan’s falling body. “I’m sorry about it all. We owe her a great deal. . . . You’ll know what we ought to do.”

So she left the responsibility to him, as she always had done. He did not answer, but he saw that the final decision would not be his, but hers.

In the morning they waked to a new world. They waked late, and tired. Emotion stirred reluctantly, and limbs were slow to fulfil their usual service. But it was not an exacting world. Time had ceased to tyrannize in the old manner. It moved inexorably, to change, to winter, to decay, but it did it quietly. The human yoke, the complexity of interdependent duties, had been removed. It was a new dawn, and the day would be of their own making.

It was knowledge that Martin most needed—knowledge of the character and conditions of the community into which he had intruded so strangely. He wished to know many things of which he had not yet been informed, and from a different angle than that of Tom Aldworth and his associates.

He questioned Phillips, and found him a mine of information. Deferential in manner, offering no unasked opinion, he was yet clear in his replies, and had obviously studied the life around him with an observant thoughtfulness. Martin did not doubt that he had been an efficient plumber, but his tradition was that of the English man servant of the better kind.

Meanwhile Helen was questioning Betty with a similar experience. To her, Helen came as a miracle. A mistress resurrected, akin in dress, and habit, and manner to the best of those that the seas had swallowed. Seeing Helen, she realized how great was the gulf that widened continually between that which was, and that which had been.

They were disturbed by the sound of horses on the roadway. Phillips, looking hastily out, announced that there was no cause for alarm. Going toward the gate, they saw Claire dismounting lightly, with Mary in her arm. The brown gelding was there also. Her voice, buoyant and confident, called a greeting as they approached. She put the impatient Mary into her mother’s arms. “I’m going back for Joan,” she said; and then to Martin: “I’ve brought you the jockey’s horse. He’s not bad, but I’ll never give up the chestnut. . . . A king can’t walk,” she added with a mocking smile.

Helen thought her different from yesterday. She had thought her taller than she now seemed. Larger. More devastating.

"Did they worry you?" she asked.

Claire laughed again. "They didn't wake me in the night," she said, "if you mean that. They did in the morning, or I might still have been asleep. Do you *always* tell them tales when it's scarcely light?"

She turned back to the gate. "I promised Joan I wouldn't wait, and I've taken a long time to find you."

Then she turned away, and was back in the saddle in a moment.

[XV]

It has been said by those who have recovered from prolonged illness that the desires and interests which had previously absorbed their minds are often found to be no longer dominant. They remember, but no longer feel them. The old fertility is dead, and the ground is fallow for a new sowing.

So, to a lesser extent, change may come between a night and a morning. The problems which had held Claire from sleep in the moonlight hours had receded. She knew of them still. She knew that they must be faced; but her mind was untroubled.

She saw her course clearly. She would take one of the children to their parents—she could not safely carry two at once. That would necessitate a return. There would be no awkwardness, prolonged at the first meeting. After that, when she returned, they could talk things over at leisure. Whatever was decided, she did not intend that there should be ambiguity or delay. She had none of Martin's calculating caution; none of Helen's aloofness, that would wait and watch the event, rather than be active to form it. She liked to ride straight at a fence, without too much inquiry as to what lay beyond it.

She did not know more than the general direction and distance of the house she sought, as she had heard Tom describe them, but she was confident that she would find it easily.

The morning was cooler and cloudy. There was a hint of autumn in the air. Some leaves fell lazily.

As she rode, she looked round with a lively interest at the country of which she thought, with a half serious, half deriding mind, as of a kingdom into which Martin had entered. She had had no leisure to observe it yesterday.

She had then been only subconsciously aware of the rabbits. And the rabbits were everywhere! There would be no danger of immediate starvation. And the old oaks—how well they had stood the storm! Great limbs had been torn and scattered, some had been swept far distant from their parent trunks. But the trunks stood, and some still showed a good head of fading green above

the seas of bracken.

The country lane had been well wooded, but she saw, as she had seen elsewhere, that, apart from the great oaks of the park, the trees had had no power to withstand the tempest, except where they had grown thickly, and then they had been snapped short or uprooted, until a barrier of their broken limbs had been swept and piled against those that remained, so that the northern side of any wood showed the full havoc of the storm, while its southern aspect (especially where the ground had any slope to southward) might have little remaining evidence of the ordeal that had passed over it.

But for the trees that were single, and for those that lined the roadsides, there had been no hope at all. The single house might have the better chance, for the danger of fire had been less, but the trees that stood had been grouped together.

She met no man or woman, even when she came to the main road, where she marveled at the pace at which she must have ridden yesterday when she saw its condition.

It would have been impossible, but that the telegraph poles, being on the south side of the road, had fallen clear with their tangled wires. As they fell they lay. She saw that the tops of two or three poles had been cut off and removed. But the two-handed saw that had been used for this purpose had been cast aside when its immediate need was over, and lay rusting.

She heard the distant sound of a hammer. Someone was working.

Surely it would be worth while to clear the roads! With sane usage their surfaces would last for a generation. But whose duty, or whose interest, would it be to do it? Were they to have taxes again, and all the old organization of industrial slavery? She was glad that it was Martin's problem, not hers.

She rode on some distance past the turning for Cowley Thorn before deciding that it was the road which she must take, and had just gone back and turned into it when she heard shots in an adjoining coppice. She heard the cries of pheasants.

She was walking the horses quietly at the time, and did not alter the pace, though she prepared to cast loose the led horse, and ride hard if the need should arise. She had had enough of fighting—and there was the child on her arm.

But it was Jack Tolley who came into the road, having heard the noise of the horses. He carried a pheasant, and two rabbits. He came to her horse's head, and she pulled up, seeing that he wished to speak.

He guessed where she was going. "You might take this," he said, holding up the pheasant, "Betty'll know how to cook it. I expect I've shot my last bird."

"Your last bird—why?"

"Because the Captain's sure to stop it. I only thought this morning. I suppose we shall have to begin thinking. I've got about sixty cartridges, and when they're gone, what use will the rifle be?"

Claire saw; but she was in a cheerful mood this morning. "Perhaps it won't matter," she said. "There seem to be enough cartridges left to reduce the population considerably. I suppose we shall stop sometime. But I've been wondering about the cattle. I saw nearly thirty beyond the hollow where the road drops. How will they do when the cold comes?"

Jack could not answer that. His knowledge of the feeding of cattle was too vague, but he recognized that it was a question of some importance. There was no hay, and the fields of roots were choked with weeds, and ravaged by cattle, and sheep, and pigs. And the rabbits were everywhere. If there were no intervention, how many of these creatures would survive the winter, however mild it might be?

Claire, seeing that no wisdom was to be obtained from Jack as to the future of the cattle, would have continued her way, after getting more definite directions from him than she had had previously, but Jack kept a detaining hand on her bridle. He had something to say of a more personal application, but seemed to have some difficulty in commencing.

Remembering what she had heard of his own concerns, she wondered whether he might be intending to confide a trouble, and opened the subject with the direct friendliness which was her natural manner.

"Did Madge take it the right way?"

"Oh, yes," he said, in a tone that made it clear that that had not been on his mind. He was, in fact, happy in the knowledge that the lady in question had accepted the inevitable with fewer tears than he had expected, and with an implication that the death of Ellis, however sincerely she might regret it, was not without compensation. It may have been the happiness of his own experience that inclined him to give Claire a warning that was not without delicacy, in view of how little he knew, either of herself, or of her relations to Martin. But he went on easily. He knew what he had to say, and it was not his nature to bungle.

"I think you will like to know what is being said. It was after Tom took them to Stacey's place. There was a crowd on the road here. They were coming back from the auction. They all wanted to see the Captain."

"Martin?"

"Yes—and his wife. They expected you to be with him, instead of a woman no one had seen before.

"They were puzzled—and curious. Everyone asked who you were. Women matter now. Tom said the woman they saw was the one that had been sick, that he had kept at the Hall lodge—his woman; and that it had turned out that she

was the Captain's wife. It sounded a queer tale. Then they asked whose wife you were. Tom didn't seem to know how to answer. He said it was between him and the Captain; but no one would have that. Butcher told him it was between you and ninety men who had got no wives, and that he was just one of the ninety."

Claire frowned thoughtfully. "Well?" she said, for Jack remained silent.

"That's all," he answered. "But I thought you'd like to know beforehand. They may want you to decide before the day's over."

"Decide what?"

"Who you'll choose. . . . You know," he added, as though he were making a personal apology, "we told you what the law is. A woman can choose the man she will, and we all agreed to stand by her, and protect her choice. But if she won't choose, she's for anyone that can take her."

"Jack," said Claire, "that law's dead."

"I don't know," Jack said doubtfully; "does the Captain say so? If he does, I'll stand by him, and I suppose Tom will, and some others, but we shall all be fighting again by tomorrow. . . . It wasn't a bad law—for the women. . . . If you've lost the Captain, why not choose Tom?"

Claire looked at Jack, and considered. He could be trusted to say what he meant—to say it precisely. She recognized a mental independence, which might give trouble at a future time. He was loyal, but it was not a blind loyalty. It was like having a cat in the house. You could not call it to heel like a dog. But having said that he would stand by Martin in this thing, he could be trusted to do it. She decided on the disarming candor which was her most natural weapon.

"Jack," she said, "when the flood came, I had a husband in a nursing home at Cheltenham. Was I right to suppose him dead, and act accordingly?"

"Yes," he said. "How could he have lived? It's all under water there."

"Not all," she answered. "But I had no doubt he was dead. I have none now. You see, Martin felt the same about his own wife. It seemed just as sure. And now he has found her alive."

"So that was Tom's wife—and you've changed round?" said Jack, who may be excused for interpreting the position in that way.

"No," said Claire, "she was never Tom's wife. He was taking care of her till she could find out whether Martin were living."

Jack expressed no opinion on that point.

Claire added: "There's been no change at all."

Jack thought a moment. "Well, that brings us back where we were. The Captain's got his own wife now, and it leaves you free to choose."

"I'm not free at all," said Claire.

"But you don't still reckon you're the Captain's wife? He can't have two,"

said Jack.

"It's not what I reckon," said Claire, "it's the fact that counts. I am."

"What does the Captain say?" asked Jack, not unreasonably.

"It's not a question of what the Captain says—the Captain knows," said Claire.

"The boys won't stand for it," said Jack doubtfully. He wasn't very clear as to what Claire meant to do, but he was sure that the sense of the community would regard her as free for others, now that Martin had recovered his real wife. "His real wife" was how he put it in his own mind.

"Jack," said Claire again, "it's a long way from the Cotswolds. I've swum most of it—not all at once. I did that to avoid two men that I didn't like. I'd swim back before I'd take a man that I didn't choose."

"Well, they want you to choose," said Jack.

"I have chosen," she answered. She rode on.

Jack looked after her. "He'll be lucky that gets her," he said. He became aware that the pheasant was still in his own hand. He was annoyed at that, for his oversights were few, and he did not regard them lightly.

Claire rode on in good spirits from the encounter. She began to see the real difficulty of her position, which Tom had seen from the first—but she saw it differently.

Then she delivered Mary to her mother's arms, as we have seen, and rode back for the elder child.

[XVI]

After Claire had left, Tom came to see Martin. It was he who had given the account of Claire and Helen which had resulted as we have heard. He had said nothing which was either untrue or misleading. He could have been more explicit as to the relations which he believed to have existed between Martin and Claire, but it is improbable that that would have made any difference to men so situated, and it might be argued that it would have been unchivalrous to have done so.

Yet his conscience was not easy, for he was aware that he had done nothing to avert an immediate crisis—had, indeed, regarded it with satisfaction. He was convinced of the closeness of the understanding which existed between Claire and Martin. He might well hope that if Martin were forced to make an open choice, or lose Claire, he would elect to have her rather than Helen, in which case his own claim on Helen might be admitted by herself, and would certainly be recognized by the community. He might hope something also from Helen's natural resentment at the disclosure. It did not enter his mind that she would have been told by those who (as he supposed)

were most concerned to conceal it.

He knew also that he could have averted the whole difficulty had he allowed the conclusion to which Jack's mind had turned as the most natural interpretation of the whole matter, and which would have been borne out by the fact that Claire had remained at the Lodge. He could easily have allowed it to be supposed that there had been a change by mutual consent when it was discovered that his wife had occupied that relation to Martin in the earlier time.

It would have been sufficiently near the truth, and it would have been difficult for anyone to make capital from such an incident.

Tom was conscious therefore of a treachery of intention, and of a willingness to take his own advantage from difficulties which threatened those with whom he was associated, and which he was doing less than he might to avert, rather than of any active betrayal. Yet it gave some constraint to the natural openness of his manner as he met Martin, who led him into Stacey's library, and told him to sit down, as he had much which he wished to say.

Martin had taken a swift advantage of the amenities of his new residence. Stacey's clothes were good, and fitted him comfortably. Seated at Stacey's desk, and adding rapidly to a pile of notes which he had made already, as Tom answered the questions suggested by a night of thought, and by the information which Phillips had already given, he reminded Tom more strongly than yesterday of the lawyer who had once fought for his life, and saved it.

Martin was well aware as he talked that there was something troubling Tom's mind, but he gave no sign. It would come out soon enough.

At last he said: "Listen, Tom. I don't want any false start. There's a great deal to be considered, and when we move it must be in the right way.

"Cooper doesn't count for the moment. We'll deal with him, but he can wait. He won't trouble us for a day or two. But you must set someone to watch him.

"I want you to bring me one by one the best men that you can trust, so that I can talk to them and see what their capacities are. I shall want them for the jobs they can do best, and, first of all, I must know them.

"Besides that, I want you to get all the signatures you can and let me know also of any men you *can't* trust, or who may be making trouble. If you can get them to come I will see them also.

"For the next three days I shall stay here. I don't suppose I shall go out at all. Then I shall want you to call a meeting of all the people who will come, and make sure that those who are with us will be there.

"I shall be ready then to say what I want done and how it's to be started."

Tom said: "There's one thing that won't wait."

"You'd better tell me," said Martin.

"It's about Helen—partly. There was a lot of talk after you came here last

night. They were puzzled. They hadn't seen Helen before, because no one goes that way; the road leads nowhere now. But they knew that I had a woman at the lodge who was called my wife."

"You've explained this before."

"Yes, but not to them. They thought your wife had come with you."

"Well?"

"Well, if she wasn't, they want to know whose she is."

"You mean Claire?"

"Yes. They mean Claire."

"Then tell them."

"I don't know."

"But I told you when first we met."

"But you didn't know then that Helen was living."

"I see. What's the real trouble, and how near?"

"There's a meeting this afternoon. All the men that want wives will be there. They'll want Claire to choose."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then she's any man's that can take her."

"Tom, you could have saved this trouble."

"I don't see how."

"I do. But we won't talk of that. The plan seems fair enough. We will ask Claire to choose. I understand that the man she chooses must consent, or the choice must be made again?"

"Yes."

Martin looked hard at Tom. "She might choose you."

"I don't want that."

Martin suggested again. "She might choose me."

Tom looked up questioningly. "Then you'd give up Helen?"

"I didn't say so. The women choose. It's your own law. It seems good enough to me. Good enough for this occasion, anyway. But I don't know how it will end any more than you do. I guess—but I may guess wrong. Perhaps you'll get what you want. But I don't think you will. Nor they."

He changed his manner to a sudden sincerity. "Tom," he said, "don't you see that I've no right to decide this? No right at all. I have no right even to say what I think, or what I wish. The women must decide, and *they shall have their way*."

He looked searchingly at Tom, and said quietly: "You must promise this, Tom. The women shall have their way."

Tom looked puzzled and half sulky. He said: "Do you want them both?"

"It's not what I want that matters. It's not what's been done in the past. It's what is. It's what's right. Neither of them may want me. Or both. Or they may

differ. They may make conditions which are incompatible. Circumstances may arise which would make it right for me to say what I think—even to make a choice. But till they do—unless they do—I shall say no more. It is your own law. The women choose."

He sat silent for a moment, and Tom was not quick to answer. He was puzzled by Martin's attitude, and could not decide whether it left any hope for himself. He supposed that Helen knew nothing yet, and he built something on that. He had always been taught that a man could not have two wives. He had never thought why. It was the law. He knew vaguely that the majority of the earth's inhabitants had a somewhat different opinion. But these opinions were negligible because their skins were not pink. He did not suppose that Martin intended to promote a general practice of polygamy. It would be arithmetically difficult with the supply of women at its present level. But the situation was scarcely of Martin's making. It was the product of circumstance. He was under obligation to two women, and he was leaving them to decide what should happen in future. They might decide to share his affections. It seemed unlikely. They might toss a coin. But that was a man's way rather than a woman's. They were more likely to quarrel. They might both resent the fact that he made no decided choice between them. As his first and "legal" wife, Helen had the greater cause for resentment on such grounds. So it seemed to Tom.

"I want your promise," Martin repeated.

"Yes," Tom said at length. "I promise that."

Martin rose at once. "Tell Jack," he said. "Have the men you can trust in readiness if there be any sign of trouble. But I don't think there will. You can tell them that Claire will make her own choice, and if that means a meeting to look them over, they shall have what they want. But you can tell them that I call the meeting now."

Tom went out, and he turned back to his work. He thought that he had acted rightly in a position in which precedent or tradition was of no value. Neither was it a case in which wrong had been done, and its consequences must be endured. He could see no wrong.

Nor was he aiming to avoid a responsibility which was properly his. If they came to him he would say what he thought was right, but it was between themselves in the first instance. That was how he would have ruled had such a case been brought to him for judgment. If they should differ, then it might be his part to decide. But not till then. It would be so much the best if the right decision should come from them.

So he thought, and waited.

Tom did not go far. At the gate he met an angry Claire. She rode up with Joan on the chestnut's neck. She spoke playfully enough to the child as she handed her to Helen, who had come out at the sound of her approach, but her eyes were alight with anger as she turned to Tom, who had stood aside to make way for her entrance.

It was not only what Jack had told her, though that had given cause enough, but it had helped her to understand what had followed. There had been men waiting round the locked gate of the lodge when she returned, men along the road, both as she went and came, men who would not willingly let her pass, who had justified their importunity by the use of Tom Aldworth's name.

There was one man that she would have ridden down but for the child on her arm, and the impulse had brought realization of how quickly the habit of violence grows. It was five days since she had come up from the water to the spot where Martin had watched the sunset. Five days! and a life of difference had arisen between that hour and this.

Helen, always quicker to understand than to act, saw that something was wrong. She had turned toward the house with Joan's hand in hers, and would have invited Claire to follow. She had wanted a talk with Claire herself—a talk which she foresaw would be difficult.

But when she saw how Claire had turned upon Tom, even as the child left her arms, and of how she barred his way through the gate, and the anger in her eyes, Helen stayed, with the child beside her.

"Tom," said Claire, "who told you I was for sale?"

Tom, though surprised by the anger he had provoked, and having already been given sufficient of which to think, stood up to the attack stoutly enough.

"No one," he said. "I never thought you were."

"Then why say it?"

"I never did."

"I understand that you have made me the object of an auction this evening."

"I've done nothing of the kind. . . . It isn't I at all. You don't understand. . . ." Tom began in some confusion of mind before the complicated inaccuracies of the case that Claire was making against him.

"Well, you can call it off."

"I can't do that," said Tom; "I didn't call it on. It was the law before you came, and it's the law still. The Captain's just said so. He says you can choose whom you will."

"And if I don't?"

"Then it's between you and them. It's every man for himself. We shan't interfere. It's the best way to make your own choice. They're a rough lot, some of them."

"Did Martin say that?"

Tom hesitated. "No, he said you'd choose."

"I see. . . . Whom should you recommend?"

"It's not my matter. They're not all bad."

"There's a man named Butcher. I told him that when I want to marry an eel I shall know where to look."

"Did you tell Butcher that?" said Tom, with satisfaction. He had his own quarrel with Butcher, which does not concern us.

Rallying his mind from the first fury of her attack, Tom saw that she had reason for anger. It must appear to her that he was assuming that Martin would cast her off, or even actively working to produce a position which would oblige him to do so.

Knowing that he had an opposite intention, he felt unjustly accused, though the truth would hardly have increased his popularity with his present audience.

He looked at Helen, who watched the duel in silence. He wondered what she would say could he lead Claire to disclose that it was her bond to Martin that held her.

But no leading was needed. Claire took the fence with her usual directness.

"You can't say you didn't know. What name did I sign in the book?"

"Claire Webster," said Tom, "but I thought now . . ." He looked at Helen. He thought that Claire was forcing an issue recklessly, and wondered how the other woman would take it. But Helen gave no sign. He could not tell how much Helen knew; but Claire was forcing the issue. There was no mistake as to that. She went on. "You knew whom I was with when you found us. You knew how I signed the book. You knew we thought that Helen was dead. You knew *everything*. Do you think you can make a law to change me from one man to another? You say it's a law that the women choose. But I have chosen."

She turned to Helen. "We'd better have this out now, or there'll be more trouble in the end. No, don't go," she said to Tom, still blocking his way. "You'd better hear, and you'll know what to tell your friends." She turned to Helen again.

Her voice changed and softened. She said: "I suppose men will always try to make laws for women. But it seems to me it's the facts that matter. Martin thought you were dead. He couldn't help thinking that. I'm very glad he was wrong—and you know how glad he is. But he thought you were dead, and I chose him—and he chose me. I have his promise. He said *For always and always*. I may have his child. Is his promise nothing because you are living? I think you must answer that.

"I don't know what you will answer, but I know that what these men ask I will never do. I cannot do that. I will have the man I have chosen, or none.

"If I am not wanted here, I will ride away—and his child with me. It is for

you to say."

Helen felt as though her heart had stopped its beating. She tried to speak, and the words would not form to her purpose. But her eyes did not falter. She felt that they were waiting for her to speak, and that the hours were passing.

But it was only a moment. Then she said. "No, you couldn't do that." She looked at Tom, and said: "Claire will stay here because she is Martin's wife. I am very proud that she is. She is the best of us all. There is no first between us. It is one honor for both."

She held out her hand. They went into the house together.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Deluge* by Sydney Fowler Wright]