

The

Battle Within

PHILIP GIBBS

A NOVEL

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THE BATTLE WITHIN
A NOVEL

By
PHILIP GIBBS

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The Battle Within

1

Mrs. Haddon, the doctor's wife, sat waiting for her husband in the car after driving him to one of his patients—Myra Lehmann, poor dear—on the edge of Fallow Green, half a mile from Ashleigh Heath. She was used to these long waits now since she had taken to driving her husband at night after he had turned his car into a ditch and bashed it through a five-barred gate. His eyes were not good enough for night driving, though he refused to admit it, and he was an absent-minded beggar anyhow.

It was twenty minutes to eleven on an April night in this marvellous Spring which had brought out all the flowers and fruit blossom with a rush of glory. She could smell the May-blossom above the unkempt hedge of this old cottage, with its peaked gable and black beams between the plaster. It drenched the still air.

There was still a glamour in the sky and it was light enough to see the pale gold of buttercups in the tangled grass of Fallow Green on both sides of a muddy track and the wooden bridge over the stream two hundred yards away.

There were little stirrings in the grass beyond the car. Mrs. Haddon saw a field-mouse run across the track, and a young rabbit scuttled into a sandbank beyond the cottage. Two birds were making love in a holly bush close by. It was a nightingale and his mate. The female gave four long-drawn notes, answered by little chirrupings of liquid sound, and then one fine burst of song magical in the surrounding silence.

Mrs. Haddon spoke inside herself.

"The darlings," she said: "They know nothing of this war. They have no anguish. For them life is love."

She gave a sharp sigh and spoke aloud.

"If only Pearl—"

She was anxious about her daughter Pearl. She was working too hard and showed signs of strain like so many other young women—and in fact all of them. They were getting a bit nervy after more than three years of war and overwork and lack of fats, and the inner spiritual ordeal. They had been wonderful and heroic, but it was hard to go on being wonderful and heroic year after year. How long now? The Eighth Army were doing marvellous things in Tunisia. It might hurry things up. It might save Peter. It was Peter who made it difficult for her to hide her terror sometimes. She had to pretend to go on being brave. They all thought she was so brave and serene. Little did they know her spasms of terror because of Peter. She had to hide all that.

An air-raid siren wailed with its rising and falling note across the countryside. There was no terror in that. Probably there was another raid on the coast. It was a long time since Ashleigh had had a bomb in its neighbourhood. The nightingale gave no heed to that banshee. It was singing with passion.

It was darker now. The glamour in the sky was fading out. Darkness was closing her about, but she could see the figure of a man in a steel helmet and the dark uniform of the Special Police moving towards her. He came close to the open window of the car and greeted her.

“Hullo, Irene. What a patient Griselda you are. Do you ever get any sleep?”

Mrs. Haddon laughed, and people in Ashleigh Heath liked the way she laughed. It was part of her charm and a sign of her courage. She was always so brave they thought, not knowing her secret terror.

“Oh, I get plenty of sleep at odd hours. What about yourself, Bob? As air-raid warden, you don’t get much peace at night.”

The man at the car window, who was Robert Fellowes, late of the Indian Civil Service, answered cheerfully.

“Oh, I go to bed in my pants until the alert sounds. All damn silly, anyhow.”

Something seemed to startle him, and he uttered an oath in Hindustani.

“That blasted woman is showing a light again. I’ve ticked her off three times already.”

Mrs. Haddon laughed again.

“Poor Marjorie. Don’t be hard on her. She’s working her fingers to the bone in the munitions factory.”

“Anyhow she has turned her light out.”

A gleam of light from the top window of a cottage three hundred yards away towards the village which had pierced the darkness for a moment was suddenly extinguished.

“All these women make me tired,” said the man in the steel helmet, grumpily. “They’ve no sense of law and order.”

“Now you’re talking nonsense, Bob,” said Mrs. Haddon. “I marvel at their

patience with rules and regulations—all these women working and waiting while their husbands are away. Huddled into these cottages with their children, lining up in queues to get their rations, doing half-time jobs, like Pearl, with only time to get home and sleep before starting to work again. I'm sorry for them, poor dears. I know all their little troubles.”

Robert Fellowes—once of the Indian Civil Service, with guns popping off in salute when he went forth on an elephant before he retired to a small house in Surrey—did not argue the point with a doctor's wife sitting in a small car on the edge of the common an hour before midnight. He could see her face vaguely—a beautiful face he always thought—with high cheek-bones and laughing eyes and a humorous mouth.

“They all confide in you,” he said. “My wife always takes her troubles to you. You hold up the morale of the whole neighbourhood.”

“I wish I could,” said Mrs. Haddon.

“You're darned wonderful,” he told her. “We all adore you, and you know I was in love with you before you went and married that damned doctor.”

“I know,” she answered; and he could see the smile in her eyes. “But all the same you went and married Gladys, and all the same my dear damned doctor was a very nice lover. But I wish to goodness he would come out of that cottage. I'm afraid poor Myra is in a bad way.”

“Serve her right,” said Fellowes. “I'm sorry I didn't let her drown. She made me spoil a perfectly good pair of grey flannel bags when she walked into that pond the other night. A deliberate attempt at suicide. If she wanted to kill herself, why couldn't she do it in her own bedroom without making me plunge into a filthy pond at midnight?”

“You're a monster, Bob,” said Mrs. Haddon. “If I didn't know you were the kindest man alive I should put you in the same class as Hitler.”

“I'm an anti-Semite,” said Fellowes, “and I don't approve of suicide; and I spoilt a pair of grey flannel bags and have used up my clothing coupons until next September.”

The siren was howling again over the countryside, with one long steady note.

“All Clear,” said Fellowes, “and there's your apothecary.”

The door of the cottage with the peaked gable and the timbered walls had opened for a moment and a tall figure came through the garden gate.

“So sorry to have been so long,” he said. “Hullo, Fellowes, making love to my wife? That's kind of you.”

“How is she?” asked Mrs. Haddon.

“Oh, I'll pull her through. A touch of pneumonia. I think that M & B will do the trick.”

He sat beside his wife, who started up the car, and spoke to Fellowes out of

the window.

“Great news from Tunisia. Anything from your son, old man?”

“Not a word,” answered Fellowes. “We haven’t had a letter for two months. Gladys is worrying, of course. Well, get some sleep.”

“Good night,” said Mrs. Haddon. “My love to Gladys.”

Fellowes touched his steel helmet and watched the car disappear down the bend of the lane.

The village of Ashleigh was in darkness now. No chink of light showed through the black-out curtains or through windows not curtained because these villagers had gone to bed before black-out time. “All our friends are asleep,” said Mrs. Haddon. “Peace be to their dreams.”

She knew them all along this double line of small dwelling places, some very old and some very new. The old ones, as old as Shakespeare’s England, with black beams cut from Elizabethan oaks, had once belonged to farm labourers. Now they had been bought and modernized before the war by women with a taste for the antique and money enough, though not much more for such a hobby. Some of them had planted flower-beds outside the garden walls. There was one fairy-tale cottage on the roadside like the witches’ cot to which Hansel and Gretel went wandering hand in hand. But here was no witch. In the tiny bedroom with the lattice window was old Miss Martindale, who kept a Swiss maid and a canary and a married niece with two children. She had a kind heart, a bitter tongue and a passion for bridge. She was also a fierce patriot, like Mrs. Marlow, the vicar’s wife, and an optimist even in the darkest days, believing that the Germans were on the point of collapse.

Mrs. Haddon, driving her husband slowly through the village street, had a mental picture of the people inside those little houses as she passed each one. Some of them were very over-crowded with children evacuated from the cities—though many of them had now gone back—or with paying guests: young mothers and their babes who had flown from London to escape the Blitz.

“It’s very strange and rather tragic,” said Mrs. Haddon aloud, after this film of silent thought.

“What is, old dear?” asked Dr. Haddon.

“It’s a funny thing, John,” answered his wife, “this village of ours is inhabited almost entirely by women.”

“Well do I know to my cost,” said Dr. Haddon. “They give me a hell of a lot of trouble every time a child sneezes.”

“Solitary women,” said Mrs. Haddon, thinking aloud, “husbandless mothers because the men are away in the war, young wives now alone, girls without sweethearts nearer than Africa, women of every age and type without a man younger than yourself or Mr. Marlow.”

“That’s why so many fall in love with me,” answered the doctor, with a

grin into the darkness. “As for our parson, he’s constantly pursued by neurotic females. He’s getting scared about it.”

Mrs. Haddon laughed and then was silent again before slowing down outside her own gate at the end of Ashleigh village.

“All these women are waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting,” she thought, “hiding their terrors like I do. They’re waiting for the miracle of peace so that their men may come back—husbands and sons before they get killed. The odds are against them the longer it lasts. The odds are against Peter.”

“Some of these women,” said Dr. Haddon before getting out of the car, “are darned glad to get rid of their men—pub-crawling husbands, sulky brutes, troublesome fellows in the house. Now they’re heroes over in Africa, a nice distance away. Their wives feel free again. That’s why they’re all so cheerful and gay as long as the bombing is on other people’s towns. ‘Let the people sing,’ says that fellow Priestley. Lots of ’em like the war better than peace, just as they did last time. It’s more stimulating. It takes the women out of their stuffy little homes. It proves to them what they always believed. They can get on very well without the men, who are mostly a damn nuisance after the love-making and the honeymoon.”

Mrs. Haddon smiled as she put on her brakes, and the smile was in her voice.

“You’re a sham cynic, old dear. As if I hadn’t found you out years ago. But don’t sit there all night. And don’t wake Pearl up when you come in. I’ll put the car away.”

2

Pearl Haddon had heard her father and mother go out at about half-past ten. That was just after she had gone to bed; but once in a while she didn't feel like sleeping, though generally she was greedy for sleep after a hard day in town at St. James' Palace and the journey back, first in an over-crowded train and then in an overcrowded bus with standing room only, and not much of that.

Mrs. Marlow had come in with her saint-like parson that evening and had made her go hot and angry over the usual argument about the German people. She had had it with Mrs. Marlow and many others a thousand times since the war began—even with her father, who was very decent about it, knowing how she felt, and why. It was absurd of her after all this time, especially as they had evidence every day about German atrocities and German cruelties. She had refused to believe them at first. Hadn't there been a lot of fake atrocities in the last war? Her father had told her that, and he ought to know, having been in France and Flanders from first to last in field hospitals and casualty clearing-stations. But apart from what was in the newspapers—all that ghastly stuff about Poland—she had met many people who had first-hand evidence whom she was bound to believe. Young Quentin Fellowes, who had escaped from France after Dunkirk, had seen the refugees—old people and women and children—machine-gunned on the roads between Dieppe and Pontoise. She just had to believe him. Mrs. Halliday's husband, a submarine commander, had seen the German dive-bombers deliberately attack and sink Red Cross ships in the Ægean Sea, and come down low to kill men struggling in the water after their ship had been torpedoed. She had to take his word for it. They had machine-gunned women and children at the English seaside, according to Mrs. Loftus, who had dragged her two little girls behind a breakwater. Myra Lehmann had made her sick with the things she told about German cruelties to the Jews in Austria and Poland. So it was absurd to get all hot and bothered again when Mrs. Marlow had denounced the whole German race and said that we ought to sterilize all German women after the war, and hoped that thousands of German soldiers would be bayoneted to death by our men in Tunisia.

“Why take prisoners?” asked Mrs. Marlow. “They are all murderers.”

Mr. Marlow had sat with his eyes down, looking distressed. His thin,

ascetic face, like a saint by an Italian primitive, had a sad look, though now and then he tried to laugh off his wife's violence of speech.

"I thought we were Christians," he said once, with one of those uneasy laughs.

"It's because I'm a Christian that I want to rid the world of Hitler and his devils," answered Mrs. Marlow.

The conversation had gone that way because of Myra Lehmann's attempt at suicide—if it was that—a few nights ago.

She had walked into the pond. Mr. Fellowes had seen her in the moonlight and had plunged in and dragged her out. She had lied to him and told him that she was sleep-walking. Of course it was a lie. She had told Pearl several times that she thought she could not bear life any more. Her mother and grandparents had been left alone all these years because of their age perhaps and because the people in their Austrian village had sheltered them. Now she had news that they had been dragged off and sent to Poland on one of those journeys in cattle-trucks which was a sentence of death. Her sister had killed herself in Vienna when the Nazis had forced her husband to divorce her.

"There are still people in this country who would let the Germans off after the war," said Mrs. Marlow. "There are still people who think that some of the Germans are nice kind folk with ordinary decent human instincts."

"I do," said Pearl.

She could have bitten her tongue out for saying that. It was only asking for a lot of silly argument. Of course it happened. Mrs. Marlow turned on her with a flame in her eyes.

"I wonder you dare to say so, Pearl, when England is fighting this crusade against the spirit of evil and your own brother is in the R.A.F. If I didn't love your father and mother so much I should say you ought to be locked up."

Pearl's mother had laughed and slapped Mrs. Marlow's hand.

"Shut up, Peggy," she said. "You always let your tongue run away with you. You're a most violent specimen of the female species."

"Thank God I'm an English woman and a patriot," answered Mrs. Marlow.

Mr. Marlow had murmured something about patriotism is not enough, and then his wife had turned on him.

"You ought to have been a conscientious objector, Timothy. You've no right to stand in the pulpit and preach to a patriotic congregation. You're worse than Dick Sheppard."

"Perhaps you're right," answered Mr. Marlow with a faint laugh. "Perhaps I'm a dishonest fellow and a bad Christian. In fact I know I am."

Pearl's mother had tried to cheer him up in her usual way.

"Perhaps you're the only Christian among us," she told him. "Anyhow, I shall come to church if all the rest of your congregation forsakes you."

Pearl had left her chair and gone sharply out of the room when Mrs. Marlow had advocated the sterilization of German women. She couldn't stand that. Whatever they said she knew that there were still decent German people. She had been very happy in Munich, where she had first met Karl von Diercksen. They had all been kind to her. They couldn't have turned into devils. Not all of them.

And yet the frightful cruelties went on and the German people seemed to acquiesce. There was the last story of Myra Lehmann and her family. It was sickening in its horror. Myra could not stand life any more because of it. She had tried to drown herself in a Surrey pond.

It was odd that after that row with Mrs. Marlow she should have torn up Karl's letters and photographs. She had given Mrs. Marlow the chance of saying she was pro-German. Now she tore up the letters and photographs of her German lover. That was when her father and mother had gone over to Myra Lehmann's cottage—or rather Dawn Davenant's cottage—where Myra had a room.

She took out the bundle of letters from a tin box which she kept locked in her wardrobe. There were about thirty of them and several photographs of Karl. The one she had liked best was in Austrian peasant dress in a white shirt and shorts with tasselled stockings. He was terribly good-looking. There was another in an English lounge suit, like the one he wore at the R.A.C. one afternoon just before the war when he had been in London. It hadn't been an amusing tea-party. The loud-speaker had been turned on in the big lounge and there was a lot of stuff about the evacuation of school children. Karl turned quite pale and wiped a little sweat off his forehead as though he were going to faint.

"I don't think I can stand this," he said. "I think I ought to go."

Peter had laughed at him.

"Sorry it makes you feel uneasy, Karl. A guilty conscience perhaps?"

She remembered that now. She remembered all her love episodes with Karl von Diercksen: the climb up the Zugspitze, a picnic at Garmisch—that was when he had first kissed her—tea and conversation with him on many afternoons at the Vierjahreszeiten, and then his London visit when she went with him to the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection—he was keen on pictures—and many theatres and concerts.

He believed that Hitler stood for peace and persuaded her to believe it too. He was all for Chamberlain and his umbrella. He refused to believe that war would come, even when there was only one more week of peace.

Then he said good-bye to her at Liverpool Street station on his way back to Germany by way of the Hook of Holland.

He was almost speechless at the end. He kept on saying: "I love you. I love

my English Pearl. Damn all warmongers who spoil life.”

“Stay here, Karl,” she pleaded with him several times.

It made him irresolute. He was almost tempted to stay, even if it meant prison. But not quite. . . .

“I’m a German,” he said. “I shall have to go back. One has to stand by one’s own folk, right or wrong. Isn’t that the English way?”

“I shall always think of you,” he told her at the last moment by the open door of the railway carriage. “Whatever happens in this war, if it comes, will make no difference to my love. Will it be the same with you, Pearl?”

“It will be the same with me,” she told him.

Now, after more than three years, she tore up his letters and his photographs. She tore them into very small pieces and went down into the kitchen and thrust them into the fire. Myra Lehmann’s story, added to all the others, had made her do that.

She couldn’t defend these Germans or any German after all the frightful things they had done. Karl belonged to the German army. Perhaps he was fighting against the Eighth Army in Tunisia and putting booby traps under dead bodies like his comrades. The wireless, the newspapers, the atrocity stories told by her friends had broken her down at last. Mrs. Marlow and others had called her pro-German because she had believed that some Germans were decent. One girl—Margaret Shillington—had cut her because she had been engaged to Karl. They had a quarrel in the bus. “They ought to put you in Holloway,” said Margaret, whose father and mother had been killed in an air-raid. Now she had torn up Karl’s photographs and his letters. That was that. She had finished with Karl and he was dead in her heart. Stone dead.

She had been perfectly calm about all this until suddenly she wept convulsively for a moment or two.

“Silly ass,” she said aloud after that convulsion. “Blasted fool.”

She put the kettle to boil on the gas-ring in the kitchen. Her father always liked a cup of cocoa when he came back from a night call.

3

Marjorie Manning, one of Pearl's friends, sat next to her that morning in the bus from Ashleigh Heath to Farningham, four miles away, where Pearl would dash for an overcrowded train to London. Marjorie Manning was only going as far as Farningham where she had a job in the munitions factory. Four or five of her fellow-workers were in the bus and said "Good morning" very brightly as they passed. The woman conductor in loose blue trousers and tunic waited to touch the bell until another young woman made a rush across the green and dropped her handbag, spilling all its contents before getting in.

"Can't you get in time for once?" asked the woman conductor with a kind of impatient patience. "You've left your lipstick on the grass."

"Oh, I'll abandon that," said the girl breathlessly.

She took the last seat opposite in front of Pearl and Marjorie Manning and turned round to them laughingly.

"One of my bad mornings," she said. "I had to get the children dressed in time for school, and Shirley overslept herself, the little wretch. I could hardly drag her out of bed."

She turned back in her seat and wagged two fingers at another young woman who was standing in front.

"I always time myself by the wireless," said young Mrs. Manning. "It's always a terrible rush."

"Yes," said Pearl absent-mindedly.

She was thinking back to her own night. After tearing up those letters and photographs she had not had much sleep until she had taken a couple of aspirins. Her mother had called her a quarter of an hour late, and had cooked the breakfast although she had been driving the car until nearly midnight.

"We are all getting a little tired," said Marjorie Manning. "One of the girls fainted in the factory yesterday. Perhaps she's going to have a baby. Mrs. Marlow says she's been walking out with a Canadian soldier. But it may be due to the long hours. If this war goes on for another year or two we shall all be skin and bone."

"Do you think so?" asked Pearl, listening with only half an ear because of her secret thoughts. Perhaps she ought to have kept one photograph of Karl, the one in Austrian peasant dress.

Five more people crushed in at Marley Green.

“Get farther up in front!” shouted the woman conductor. “Make a bit of room there.”

Marjorie Manning gave a little laugh. “We ought to have elastic buses,” she said.

Pearl Haddon did not answer this. She was very busy with her own thoughts. Now that she had killed Karl—in her heart—she felt curiously alone and empty, and yet with a kind of relief, as if some ghost had been exorcized from her spirit.

“My two babes are in quarantine for chicken-pox,” said Marjorie. “It’s an awful nuisance.”

Marjorie glanced at Pearl and laughed. “It’s no use talking to you,” she said. “You are miles away with your own thoughts.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” exclaimed Pearl. “I missed some sleep last night. Please tell me again.”

There was no time to tell anything. They had reached Farningham and there was a general exodus from the bus. The women munition workers, including Mrs. Manning, got out.

One of them, a tall girl with a scarf tied round her head—it made her look like a fair Madonna—stopped for a moment before she got out of the bus to speak to Pearl, who was still sitting there.

“Have you heard anything about Anthony?”

“Nothing has come through yet,” answered Pearl.

“Oh well,” said the girl with a sharp sigh.

“I’m watching out for him,” said Pearl. “I’ll let you know if anything comes through. Sorry it’s so long, Faith.”

“Thanks,” said Faith Harding, whose husband was missing from the Eighth Army. He had been missing for three months in Tunisia.

Marjorie Manning slipped her hand through Faith’s arm as she stepped off the bus.

“Any news of your Anthony?” she asked.

“Not yet,” said Faith Harding. “Perhaps tomorrow. I’m not worrying. I know he will turn up all right.”

“Grand morning,” said another factory worker, who speeded up to join them. “I would like to do a day on the river instead of punching holes into a fibre frame, and then doing it again with frightful repetition. But I’m not grouching. The Eighth Army is doing jolly well. Now we shan’t be long.”

They had a five minutes’ walk to the munitions factory, down some steep steps to the river-bank. The sunshine of a glorious Spring lay upon the old red roofs on the outskirts of Farningham and the sky was almost cloudless. About sixty women were hurrying to the factory. One of them wore a smart coat, not

exactly suitable for factory work. A number of them wore trousers, and one girl had a yellow sports jacket as though she was going to play polo. There was a pretty young woman in a Spring frock looking as fresh as a daffodil. One woman, more elderly than the others, might have been cast for the part of an English dowager in a Hollywood picture. Peace-time factories would not have seen them, but Hitler's war had altered their way of life and the Ministry of Labour had recruited them compulsorily—if they had not volunteered—as whole or half-time workers on the Home Front. They were among the women of England who were helping to win the war for liberty by making some small parts of the war machine now roaring and grinding over the desert tracks in North Africa.

Young Mrs. Manning went into the factory yard and climbed up some wooden stairs to a workshop above. On the ground floor only men worked, using machines for cutting plastic sheets into strange shapes afterwards delivered upstairs for pressing and bending on wooden jigs. As she climbed the wooden steps to a platform outside her own workroom she could hear the whirr of the machines and other sounds. A man was whistling "Deep in the Heart of Texas." Another, who she guessed to be a roguish-eyed young carpenter named Bert Hickling—he had the cheek to wink at her now and then—was singing "Roll Out the Barrel" in a florid voice. One of the workmen was coughing with an asthmatical wheeze.

Mrs. Manning stood for a moment on the wooden platform and looked down on to the yard and then over the old red roofs rose-coloured in the early morning sunshine. It was going to be a lovely day she knew and for a moment she regretted having to go indoors to her bench. Time was when she would have gone riding over Fallow Green or through the bracken on the hills over Ashleigh Heath. But she liked her job here as a factory girl. It was interesting and amusing, she found, and she was doing something to help on the war.

The foreman greeted her when she stepped into the big workshop where most of the women were already at their benches.

"Good morning, Mrs. Manning. Nice day."

She answered his greeting with a friendly smile. Mr. Grindle was a good friend of hers. He had been very helpful and patient in teaching her a tricky little job in which she was now expert. He was one of those men she thought who are the backbone of England with all its tradition in their spirit; simple, hardworking, loyal and dead honest. Sometimes he came round to her bench for a bit of a chat, generally when the women knocked off for tea. He was a well-read man and seemed to know a lot of history. He had been in the last war and ever since had worked for peace. Now he had strong and stern views about the Germans who had spoilt life for the second time within twenty years.

"Good morning, Marjorie," said a young woman in blue trousers and a white silk blouse, who was drilling innumerable little holes into a fibrous board. That was Betty Langdon, who had once served in a tea-shop in Farningham.

“Morning, Marjorie,” said another girl, wearing corduroy trousers and a green shirt open at the neck. “Goin’ strong, dearie?”

That was Greta Jenkins, once a factory hand in Bermondsey living with her parents in a tenement house which had been blasted into ruins one moonlit night when the “black bats” of death came over London. Her father and mother had been killed, but Greta Jenkins had kept her Cockney spirit and wit, and was a tireless conversationalist over her bench.

All these young women and two or three elderly ones called Mrs. Manning “Marjorie”—as they called each other by their Christian name. There was no caste in this workshop, but a perfect equality of status though not always a perfect sense of comradeship. Little quarrels flared up.

Tempers were frayed now and then. There were occasional exchanges of hot words and dark looks. Little tiger cats showed their claws. A whispered word of scandal about one young woman passed down the benches as though by some code of vibration and caused ironical or angry comment. Those were rare, though recurring, episodes due to the craving of human nature for drama, passionate partisanship and free right of criticism. As a rule harmony prevailed, to say nothing of musical accompaniment to the noise of drills, presses, and incessant scratching of sharp tools.

That music seldom ceased. It came at full blast from a wireless instrument recording the programme of the B.B.C. from eight o’clock till half-past five.

It was on again this morning when Marjorie Manning stood over her own bench, which she shared with Greta Jenkins. They were the two experts who put the finishing touches to the fuselage of a fighter-plane. The wireless was blaring out the nervous rhythm of American dances, and Greta the Cockney was swaying her body and tapping heel and toe in time to this syncopated and discordant merriment.

Mr. Grindle, passing Marjorie’s bench, groaned slightly and made a plaintive protest with a humorous grimace.

“Do you really enjoy that horrible noise? Can’t we turn it down a bit?”

“Turn it down,” cried Greta Jenkins. “Why, I wouldn’t do a bloomin’ stroke of work if it wasn’t for the dear old B.B.C.”

“That’s right,” said another girl working near. “No music, no work.”

“Oh well, keep it on if you like it. It’s blue torture to me, but that doesn’t matter.”

“You belong to a different age,” said a saucy-eyed young woman with a red shirt tucked into her trousers. “The modern mind needs rhythm as much as food, and thank goodness it isn’t rationed.”

Mr. Grindle laughed at this reference to the age to which he belonged.

“The modern mind, as you call it, is a queer box of tricks. But I can’t quarrel with it. It’s doing pretty well in this war and this factory.” He passed

on to the next bench where he was addressed by a dark-eyed girl in a flowered jacket over her slacks.

“Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Grindle, but may I get off tomorrow for a fortnight? My husband has embarkation leave again.”

“What, again?” exclaimed the foreman with astonishment. “Why, that’s the third time in six months.”

There was a little chorus of laughter from three or four of the other young women who were within earshot of this dialogue.

“That embarkation leave,” said Greta Jenkins, “gives me the hump. Why, some of these gals ’ave an ’oneymoon every two months! It ain’t fair on single women like me. It’s a blasted fraud and I’ve a good mind to write to Churchill about it.”

Young Mrs. Manning laughed.

“You would think differently about it if you were married, Greta. Why don’t you marry a nice-looking Canadian?”

Greta Jenkins gave a shrill laugh.

“Me? Marry a nice-looking Canadian? Why’e’d ’ave to be blind drunk and get carried to the Registry Office. I was born with the wrong kind of fice. Gord ’ad a grudge against me.”

Marjorie Manning smiled over a little screw she was fitting into the frame.

“It’s a very attractive face, Greta. Your eyes are brimful of wit and humour.”

“Oh, you can’t kid me,” said Greta. “I’ve looked at myself in a mirror which wasn’t cracked. Besides, I ain’t the marryin’ kind, and I don’t walk out with Canadian soldiers for the sake of a few drinks. We was taugt morals down in Bermondsey, not like some of the girls about ’ere.”

She happened to glance at a girl scratching lines on a piece of fibre before gluing two bits together.

“Not meaning me, I suppose?” enquired that young woman, stopping work with her sharp knife.

“Meaning those who would walk into any pub with any kind o’ feller who ’as a bit of brass,” said Greta calmly. “There’s a lot of it.”

The girl with the knife breathed hard and leaned forward.

“If you’re addressing your words to me, Greta Jenkins, I’ll slosh the life out of you when we knock off work. We’ve had too much of your lip lately. See? You think you’re damn funny sometimes, don’t you?”

“If you listen to what ain’t meant for your ears,” answered Greta, “you must put up with the consequences. As it ’appened I was speaking to my friend, Marjorie Manning. And I made no reference neither to the ‘Red Lion.’”

A sudden flame leapt into the cheeks of the young woman with the scratching tool.

"If you don't take that back," she said, "there'll be a bit of murder before the day's out. See?"

"Oh, put a sock in it," said Greta. "We're helpin' to win the war, ain't we, Betty Blinker? Here's the foreman coming again."

"All this noise doesn't seem to spoil your conversational exercises," he remarked ironically. "And so early in the morning, too."

"That's right," answered Greta. "We can't 'ear ourselves speak, but we keeps on speakin'."

Marjorie Manning went on with her work. Once or twice she glanced at the girl called Betty Blinker and noticed that she had relapsed into a gloomy silence, darting occasional flame and fury at Greta Jenkins, who seemed unaware of them and was whistling in tune to the wireless. Other conversation died down as the women became absorbed in their work. They worked in a well-lighted room with big windows through which the sunshine glinted on to their tools and machines. There was a smell of sawdust and glue and fibre which Marjorie found rather pleasant. She had made friends with most of these young women, who were all very friendly. Nearly all of them had made war marriages. Nearly all the husbands were away with the Forces at home or abroad. Most of these girls lived with their parents and put away nearly all the money they earned—two pounds ten to three pounds five a week—in war saving certificates or Wings for Victory Bonds. She had spoken once to Greta Jenkins about this.

"These girls are putting by a lot of money. It will be a surprise to their husbands when they get to hear about it."

"That's all they will do," answered Greta. "They'll be mistook if they try to lay 'ands on it."

There were tragedies among them. The prettiest girl in the room, Letty Birch—like Romney's portrait of Lady Hamilton with the muff—was already a widow after being married for only a year. Her husband had been killed in the Eighth Army's advance to Tunisia. Only a few weeks ago a girl had been called out of the workshop by Mr. Grindle, who had looked grave and sympathetic. He had had a telephone message from her father to say that her husband, who was a sergeant pilot, had failed to return to his base after a bombing raid over Essen. The girl took it bravely and refused to have a day's leave. She came back into the room with a very white face and bent over her job again. When the news leaked out in the afternoon some of the girls came up to her full of sympathy, but with a kind of anger she pushed them away.

"What's the use of crying?" she asked fiercely. "Don't we expect our men to be killed? Didn't we know that would happen when we married them? It's war, isn't it? Let's get on with our jobs."

Marjorie Manning thought that brave and fine of her. "These girls are

wonderful,” she thought. “I was born with far greater advantages and with a family tradition behind me. All my people were soldiers or sailors, but they have more courage than I have. I wonder if I shall take it as well if one morning Mr. Grindle comes to this bench and says: ‘May I have a word with you outside?’ Of course I shall know instantly what he has to say. He will have had a telephone message from Clare telling him that Gerald has been killed while his tank was in action. How shall I take that if it comes? Gerald, my dear. The father of my two babes. My lover in peace time. My dearest dear for whom I pray every night, though he seems to fade away from me sometimes and to belong to a world that has passed from a dream which I once had. I’m getting over the torture of his absence. I no longer feel the same agony of loneliness. I kiss his letters, but they don’t seem to mean much after three years. These girls are happy without their husbands. They seem happy although they say they are fed up with the war. Marriage was only an episode like the Summer holidays. Their men will be strangers when they come back. It’s all very odd and tragic in a way.”

Marjorie Manning had these secret thoughts as she went on working all day long at her bench. Oddly assorted thoughts and pictures came into her mind. Her sister Clare, who looked after the children, talked of going back to mother, who wasn’t well. If that happened Marjorie would have to give up this factory and look after the babes herself. Clare thought she ought to anyhow. She didn’t approve of Marjorie doing this job when she could claim exemption. “I’m helping to win the war,” Marjorie told her; but she only laughed and said: “Sky bosh, darling! You do it because it amuses you more than taking care of your own children.”

The faces of her friends came into Marjorie’s mind. Irene Haddon with her humorous eyes. She was a great dear. Pearl and Peter. She hadn’t seen Peter for some time. On his last leave he had played bears with the children. That was very nice of a pilot officer in the R.A.F. She liked Peter. They had gone to the same nursery school when they were small children. She had once promised to marry Peter. “Will you marry me when I’m grown up?” he asked her one day. He must have been a boy of eight then. “Of course I will, Peter,” she had told him, taking it for granted. A childish memory of hers.

Why should it come back to her mind after so many years when she was Gerald’s wife?

“A penny for your thoughts, dearie,” said Greta Jenkins.

Marjorie looked up and smiled.

“Not worth a penny,” she answered.

The loud-speaker was still blaring—good music this time. Myra Hess was playing Mozart. The girls were paying no attention to it. She could hear voices chattering loudly above the whirr of machines and the ripple of music.

"I'll have something to say to you after we knock off," said Betty Blinker, glaring at Greta Jenkins.

So that pot was still simmering.

Mrs. Langdon came round to Marjorie's bench later in the day. That was at tea-time, when they had a short respite, drinking tea at their benches. Some of the girls were smoking cigarettes tacitly permitted by their good-natured foreman. Mrs. Langdon was what the girls called "classy." Some of them went as far as saying—"a real lady, you know. Not like one of us." She was quite elderly. Marjorie put her down as something over fifty, though some of the girls thought she had turned sixty. They agreed that it was plucky of her to take on factory work at her time of life, especially as she was one of the nobs and used to drive about in a big car with her own chauffeur. She was the only one in the factory not called by her Christian name. That was because of her age and not for snob reasons.

"How are the babes?" she asked Marjorie. "Out of quarantine for chicken-pox?"

"Not yet," said Marjorie. "Aren't you working too hard? You look tired."

Mrs. Langdon laughed at this suggestion.

"Oh no. I can stick it out. I'm pretty wiry, thank God, and I'm not going to quit until we've won this war."

"How long will that be?" asked Marjorie, with a smile at her own question. It was the only one asked by the girls, who otherwise seemed curiously uninterested in the war, about which they seldom talked.

Mrs. Langdon lowered her voice.

"I met an old friend of mine on Sunday. He happens to be an Air Marshal. I must say he was very optimistic. As soon as we have cleared up Tunisia—another three weeks for that he says—we shall get ready for the big invasion. The Germans are ready to crack he says, he gives the war another nine months at most. So your Gerald will be home for Christmas."

"I hope it's true," said Marjorie. "Other people say it's going to last another six years. So one doesn't know what to believe. One just goes on waiting and hoping."

"Six years!" exclaimed Mrs. Langdon. "Fiddle-sticks, my dear! I have a friend in the Foreign Office—"

She had many highly-placed friends it seemed. Almost every day she had a little titbit of inside information which she imparted to Marjorie under a pledge of secrecy. Unfortunately it proved mostly to be incorrect, but nothing shook the faith and optimism of Mrs. Langdon. The victory in Tunisia had come to her as no surprise.

"As soon as we make our landings in France," she said, "we shall be in Berlin as fast as our tanks can move. Europe will rise in flames behind the

German retreat. My dear General de Gaulle will be in the forefront of liberation.”

She was a passionate partisan of General de Gaulle, for whom she had a devoted hero-worship.

“All these girls will have their men back soon,” she said. “Perhaps too soon for some of them who are getting a lot of fun out of life without them. By the way, that girl Patty—”

She liked her little bit of scandal.

Work again. Music. Bits of conversation. An outburst of singing. A little reprimand from the foreman to a girl who was fooling around. An argument about whether men liked war and didn’t mind being killed. The visit of an inspector, who tested measurements and seemed to find everything O.K.

“Gord, how my legs ache,” said a girl when five o’clock came round.

“Oh, you’ll soon get used to that,” said one of the other girls.

“I could have dropped when I first came here. Now I’m used to being on my pins all day. Funny how one gets used to almost everything—even the tube shelters where I slept for five months every night during the London Blitz. I quite missed ’em when I came down here. The company you know. All very cheery.”

It was the scene in one small factory. All over Britain it was more or less the same in thousands of factories bigger than this. The women of England and Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland were making the weapons and material of the great war machine which had been built up after Dunkirk when we had next to nothing. They had taken over men’s jobs, releasing them for all the Services. They had learnt to be skilled workers in dangerous jobs. In thousands of factories they were swinging and swaying to the rhythm of many orchestras in a world of women without men, and men without women. Some of them were tortured by this divorce after a few weeks or months of marriage. To some of them the war seemed unending with their men away from them. Death was announced to young wives with young husbands in the Royal Navy or the R.A.F. or the Royal Tank Corps. Some were disloyal. Some slipped into pubs and ordered double whiskeys—which cost a lot of money out of weekly wages. Some were sluts and vixens and wantons. But the little factory in Farningham was a miniature of this vast picture of women workers in war-time—with very decent girls helpful and comradely, merry and bright, and “full of beans” as they said.

Human nature was not ironed out. They were not angels.

Greta Jenkins and Betty Blinker did not look like angels when Marjorie Manning went out into the yard a trifle later after her day’s work because she had lingered to have a little talk with Mr. Grindle.

The two girls were in the yard facing each other. Their voices were raised

in anger.

“I told you I would slosh you,” cried Betty Blinker.

“Oh, go on!” cried Greta. “I don’t know what you’re talking abaht.”

“Well, take that then.”

Betty Blinker smacked Greta Jenkins across the face with the back of her hand.

“You dirty little—”

Greta closed her fist and shot it out, and hit Betty on the chin.

Marjorie Manning ran towards them, and seized Betty by the arm.

“Betty . . . Greta . . . for goodness’ sake—”

Mr. Grindle came out and saw two little tiger cats make a rush at each other.

“Ladies . . . ladies!” he cried. “That isn’t the way to settle a little argument, is it? Now go home like good girls. While there’s a war on we shouldn’t be fighting with each other like that.”

The sound of the foreman’s voice seemed to have a tranquillizing effect. The two girls fell apart looking rather shame-faced.

“Greta Jenkins insulted me,” said Betty. “I won’t take that from anyone.”

“There are some as can’t see a little joke,” said Greta. “No offence meant and that’s the truth. You ain’t got no sense of ’umour, Betty.”

“Oh, well, if you meant it as a joke,” said Betty.

Marjorie saw that an armistice had been declared. She made a dash for the factory gate. She had two minutes to catch the next bus to Ashleigh Heath—already full when it arrived so that she had to stand. A typical day in the life of Marjorie Manning, one unit in the monstrous regiment of women, recruited in a nation which knew that victory could only come by sacrifice, and hard work, and a loyalty of the spirit, and a sense of humour.

Pearl Haddon strode quickly through the crowd at Waterloo Station. The ticket collector said, "Good morning, Miss," knowing her as the owner of a season. She outflanked a party of blue-jackets waiting for the Portsmouth train and followed a group of khaki-clad girls making for the moving stairway to the Underground. They all looked plump and cheerful and warm carrying their bundles of kit.

"Oh, sergeant," cried one of them, "there's my brother at the bookstall. May I fall out and have a word with him?"

"Be your age, kid," said the female sergeant. "Come on, now."

In front of Pearl was a very small soldier in battle-dress, laden with a heavy kit-bag and other burdens including a rifle which jabbed Pearl as she stepped on to the escalator.

"Sorry, Miss," said the small soldier. "And I'm very sorry for myself, you know. What I want is cooling breezes and a nice long drink."

She made a dash for a waiting train on the Underground and was nearly caught by its closing doors and was pulled in by a young sergeant in the Tanks on the outside edge of the standing crowd inside.

"You nearly got guillotined that time," he remarked.

"Thanks," said Pearl.

"Lovely morning," said the young sergeant in a friendly way.

"Quite nice," answered Pearl, who did not encourage these conversations with Underground passengers—not that she resented them, but they were cut short abruptly by the next station or the one after the next. At Charing Cross the train gave a jerk and she staggered back against a naval officer who was supported from behind by a compact mass of passengers.

"Sorry," said Pearl.

"Quite all right," said the naval officer.

So it always happened, this last lap of the journey from Ashleigh Heath between Waterloo and Charing Cross where she had to change for St. James's Park. She had to walk now across the Park to the Palace. That was pleasant on such a morning as this, though not so pleasant in rain or sleet. Crowds of girls and some men were striding along ahead of her on their way to offices and shops. She could hear the girls chattering to each other brightly. Nothing

seemed to damp their spirits. Not even air-raids.

“Bert said to me . . . and I said to him . . .”

“Oh, he’s a cough-drop, but quite a dear.”

“I said ‘not likely. I’m not one of those girls, you know, so get that right in your own mind, if you have such a thing’.”

All the flowers in the Park were out very early this year. There was a scent of may-blossom from a tree overhanging the lake.

“I suppose one ought to be glad to be alive,” thought Pearl Haddon. “I’m glad Myra Lehmann didn’t drown herself. It’s a surrender—suicide. Father is right when he says courage is the greatest of human qualities.”

One of the sentries outside St. James’s Palace winked at her and grinned.

He would grin on the wrong side of his face if she reported him. However, it amused him.

She went through the archway in the Palace yard. When she had first come here to work for the Prisoners of War she had been thrilled by the thought that Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn had often passed under this arch. So had Charles II and his ladies and many other ghosts of history. She sat at her table in a room where the initials of Henry and Anne were carved on the fire-place and where the Royal Arms were above the panelled walls. Mary Winchester had sworn that she had seen the ghost of Anne Boleyn when she worked overtime one night. But Mary Winchester was a merry little liar.

Mary Winchester was also a merry conversationalist when one was in a mood for it. She was at her table now with a pile of files in front of her, looking very neat in her black frock with a Toby collar. She raised her face to smile at Pearl Haddon.

“Hullo, Pearl. You look a bit white about the gills. Was the morning sausage a bit off colour or did you get suffocated in the subterranean struggle?”

“I’m all right,” said Pearl. “How are you?”

“Excited by the morning’s mail,” said Mary Winchester. “One of my Dunkirk officers writes to say that his wife has run off with her paying guest. He wants to know what he can do about it in the way of a divorce. I happen to know his wife slightly. She’s a slut.”

“I’m sorry about that,” said Pearl.

“Then there’s a boy in the Durhams. He says he hasn’t heard from his wife for three months. He asks us to get in touch with her. Meanwhile, he seems more worried about a safety razor sent him by his auntie. It hasn’t arrived.”

“Any news of Anthony Harding?” asked Pearl. “I suppose his name hasn’t come through?”

“You must ask Phœbe Sturton about that,” answered Mary Winchester. “She has the list of missing men. Every time one turns up she gives a whoop of

joy. Yesterday she had a bit of luck that way. A man in the Desert Army was notified in an Italian camp. He had been missing for five months and there didn't seem a hope."

"That's great," said Pearl. "Still a chance for Faith . . ."

She turned to her own file D. to F. She would have to write to a woman in Norfolk to tell her that her husband had gone insane. There were several letters from prisoners of war whose wives had changed their addresses without notification. Could the Red Cross and St. John's get in touch with them somehow? There were many human documents in these letters from prisoners of war. Sometimes they gave her a bit of a heart-ache. Home-sickness was the prevalent malady. These men craved to see their wives and children, and their mothers and sweethearts. Some of the letters pretty tragic. Some incredibly comic.

She looked along the big room, once the banquetting chamber of English Kings. On the tables were long rows of cards, each one representing a prisoner of war—thousands and thousands of them. The line had lengthened out after Tobruk. Sometimes in her imagination they seemed to stretch to infinity, and instead of the cards with their index numbers she saw an army of young men marching wearily in endless battalions—all prisoners of war—all dog-tired—all dreaming back to the women they had left—hungry for home again.

She liked her job.

6

Mrs. Haddon heard the eight o'clock news on a May morning which will be for ever famous in history as the date of a great British victory after years of defeats.

She had come down to breakfast with Pearl shortly after half-past seven though she had had a poor night. That was because of a heavy drone in the sky which had started at eleven o'clock and continued for an hour. Almost every night now she heard that droning note, like monstrous bees above the hive of the world. Our bombers were going out again to raid the Ruhr or some other target of the night. Her son Peter would be with them. He had been over the Ruhr ten times and over Bremen and Hamburg and Dusseldorf and Duisberg. Always he had come back again, though on one night forty-three bombers had failed to return, and on another night thirty-five, and on another night twenty-four, as announced day after day by the B.B.C. in a passing, casual way, slightly hurried in order to slur over those losses by immediate reference to some other news cheering to the heart of the British people. They spoke about the loss of machines and never of the number of young men inside the machines—Peter's friends—he had trained with many of them—who had perished like moths in a furnace.

Last night Mrs. Haddon had had one of her attacks of horror, which she hid from her husband and Pearl and from all the friends who thought her so brave and gay. While that droning was on she had pressed her hands to her ears, unable to undress or to stop a fit of trembling. She had prayed for Peter but without faith in prayer. Why should Peter be saved while all the other boys were being killed? What was the good of praying except for the courage of her own soul to bear this agony of fear? Of course Peter would be killed like the others. She couldn't expect a special miracle though she went on praying. Peter would be like a moth burnt in the furnace fires with his blue eyes and his strong young body. The only thing that could save him was a quick ending to the war and that idea was just foolishness. It might go on for two years, three years. Peter would be killed long before then.

Mrs. Haddon had a photograph of her son on the chest-of-drawers by the side of the dressing-table. There he was, with his laughing eyes and mouth and the little faint marks of his freckles. It was rather a mistake, she thought, to

have it there. It might be better if she put it away in a drawer.

“I have to get on with my job,” she thought. “I’m a doctor’s wife and the mother of Pearl. Lots of women come to me for comfort and courage. I must pull myself together. I must go on pretending to be brave any day and, oh, so very spiritual. They say how spiritual I am when Peter makes me a coward and I have no faith.”

She pulled herself together and stopped that fit of trembling and tried to check her morbid thoughts. But she didn’t sleep much. She could hear her husband snoring softly in the next room. Once she thought she heard Pearl moving about her room. Pearl had seemed a lot happier lately. Something had been lifted from her mind—perhaps the memory of Karl was beginning to fade. She hoped so. Poor Pearl had no love in her life. Like so many other women in this village she was starved of love.

Mrs. Haddon saw the dawn come after a short spell of half darkness. She had pulled her black-out curtains before getting into bed, and now the light came again through the open lattice window of this old house. With the light came glad music. It was the song of thrushes greeting a new day of life blithesomely. What did they care about the drone in the night sky? They had their mates and their fledgelings.

“I must do a bit of gardening today,” thought Mrs. Haddon.

She heard Pearl presently in the bathroom. Then she heard her go downstairs, fill the kettle and turn on the wireless as usual. May Brown was doing her physical drill, half singing her commands to the tune of “Boys and Girls Come Out to Play.”

Mrs. Haddon dressed and, after washing, looked at herself in a Queen Anne mirror on the dressing-table.

“My eyes look awful,” she thought. “I look like an old hag after this sleepless night.”

She dabbed her eyes in cold water again, touched her cheeks with a little rouge and went down to the breakfast-room just as Pearl brought in the tea.

“Hullo, Mother,” said Pearl. “You’re looking very beautiful today.”

Mrs. Haddon laughed.

“Go along with you,” she answered. “I feel like a toothless witch.”

“Sausages or Spam?” asked Pearl, to whom every minute counted at this hour of the day.

“Oh, I couldn’t face sausages,” said Mrs. Haddon. “I’ll make the toast.”

The Dean of St. Paul’s was doing his bit for “Lift up your hearts.” He was talking about the need of faith in Jesus Christ. Mrs. Haddon listened to him attentively. She liked his way of speaking, but wanted to ask questions. Why didn’t Christ reach out His Hand to save these flying boys. If He could work miracles, why not now? It was all very puzzling. Jesus had wept over

Jerusalem. Did He weep over London, or Coventry, or Essen in the Ruhr?

Pip . . . pip . . . pip . . . pip . . .

She poured out a cup of tea for Pearl and called to her "Eight o'clock, Pearl."

Pearl came in from the kitchen with two sizzling sausages on a piece of toast. It was a pity they all went on to the floor, but that was the fault of the Eighth Army and the First. Our troops had entered Tunis and Biserta.

"Mother," cried Pearl, "it's our first great victory. How splendid. Well done, the Eighth Army."

She stopped to recover her breakfast, but neglected the sausages for a cup of tea and another piece of toast.

"Thank goodness," said Mrs. Haddon in a low voice. "Perhaps after this —"

"What, Mother?" asked Pearl.

"Perhaps it will bring the end of the war nearer," answered her mother.

"Oh, there's a long way to go yet," said Pearl. "But it wipes out the surrender of Tobruk. All my prisoners of war will feel very bucked up when they hear this news."

She spoke about our prisoners of war as though she were the mother of them all. To her these long rows of cards in which they were registered at St. James's Palace were human documents of individual men, nostalgic, despairing or just bored stiff.

"It's just too wonderful," said Pearl. "All these Germans out there are bottled up in Cape Bon. Montgomery says he has them where he wants them."

For a moment she stared out of the window as though seeing something far away beyond a Surrey garden. She was wondering whether Karl von Diercksen was bottled up in Cape Bon or whether he lay dead in a shell-smashed tank somewhere in Tunisia. She would never see him again anyhow.

"I must rush," she said presently. "Good-bye, Mother, until this evening. For heaven's sake get a little rest. Don't let all those women worry you too much. They suck your spirit like vampires."

"Rubbish, darling," answered Mrs. Haddon. "Don't lose that bus," and then went upstairs and saw her husband shaving, through the half-open door of the bathroom.

"Great news, John," she cried. "Our men have entered Tunis and Biserta."

"By gum," answered Dr. Haddon. "Sooner than I expected. Pretty marvellous."

"How much nearer the end of the war, John?" asked Mrs. Haddon.

Dr. Haddon smiled at her through the lather on his face.

"Oh, don't jump ahead too fast, old girl," he answered.

"I was thinking of Peter," she said. "And of all the Peters who will be

blown to bits before the end comes, if it doesn't come quickly."

"Keep your mind off it, my dear," said Dr. Haddon. "It's not like you to talk morbidly."

"No," said Mrs. Haddon, "it just slipped out. Well, it's splendid news, John."

"Great," he answered. "Really good for once. There's that damn telephone."

"I'll answer it," said Mrs. Haddon.

She always answered the telephone before Lydia Bellairs came in at nine o'clock to take over that duty and make herself useful generally.

There were several telephone calls for Dr. Haddon's medical aid. Several children had developed high temperatures—a little epidemic of measles. Young Mrs. Birkett was nervous about it. But there were two personal calls for Mrs. Haddon. One was from Mrs. Marlow, the clergyman's wife.

"Have you heard about Tunis and Biserta? . . . A slap in the face for Hitler. I hope those Germans in Africa will be killed in heaps. I hope our boys won't take a single prisoner. God be praised for a real victory at last. Even Timothy seems fairly elated."

Mrs. Haddon laughed down the telephone.

"You're always so bloodthirsty, my dear."

She declined Mrs. Marlow's suggestion to make a fourth at bridge that afternoon.

There was another private message. It was from Myra Lehmann, who had recovered from pneumonia after walking into a pond at midnight. She spoke in a low contralto with a slightly foreign accent.

"Should I worry you very much if I came round this afternoon for a little talk?"

"You wouldn't worry me in the least," said Mrs. Haddon. "If you would play a little Chopin I should have a treat."

"Oh, I can't play now," answered Myra Lehmann. "Music is dead in me now."

"I'll bring it to life again, my dear," said Mrs. Haddon. "Come along at four."

She forgot the terrors of the night because of all the things she had to do by day.

She sat at the breakfast table and poured out her husband's coffee while he looked at his letters and the headings in that day's *Times*.

He flicked over one of the letters with a laugh.

"I suppose we shall have to invite the fellow," he said. "The Americans are rather like the Chinese in their ancestor worship."

It was a letter from an American sergeant signed Edward D. Haddon. He

would very much appreciate the honour, he wrote, of calling upon Dr. Haddon. His family in Massachusetts were descended from the Haddons of Sussex, England, and it would certainly be a great pleasure to him if he might meet an English relative during his stay in the country.

“We ought to be nice to him,” said Mrs. Haddon.

“I expect he’s a rough guy,” said the doctor. “But we ought to hold out a friendly hand. They’ve come a long way to help us win this war.”

The telephone bell rang again. Another patient for Dr. Haddon.

Irene Haddon saw the effect of the eight o'clock news upon the inhabitants of Ashleigh Heath when she went into the village stores to order the week's rations and get a cake for Myra Lehmann, if one happened to be left, which was highly improbable.

"Grand news," said a white-haired lady, Mrs. Dewhurst, who had given up her big house as a convalescent hospital and was living with an unmarried sister in a cottage near by. "Mussolini won't be able to eat his spaghetti today. Hitler will have an epileptic fit, I hope. It's the victory we've been waiting for so long."

Mrs. Haddon made a laughing remark to her, but inside her own mind she marvelled at the spirit of Mrs. Dewhurst. One of her sons—a colonel in the Rifle Brigade—had been killed before Dunkirk. As a general's widow she made no moan at the price paid for victory. These brave old women thought the death of their sons an inevitable and glorious sacrifice for England's sake. If Peter were killed she would not feel like that.

Another lady spoke to her while waiting for a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. Mr. Garvice behind the counter was busy filling a woman's string bag with a peck of beans. It was Mrs. Arkwright, one of the devotees of bridge, which she played with Mrs. Marlow, the clergyman's wife.

"I can't pretend I heard the eight o'clock news. I never get down to breakfast before nine. But my little maid was bursting with it. She has a brother in the Eighth Army. Well, it looks good, doesn't it, Irene? Dear old Winston can treat himself to an extra cigar today. He deserves it."

Mrs. Haddon nodded and smiled.

"The darkest days are behind us," she said. "Better than when we were waiting for invasion."

Other women came into the stores, all very cheerful, all chattering about the news. Most of them said good morning to the doctor's wife, getting a smile from her. One woman held her hand for a moment and squeezed it. It was a gardener's wife whose latest baby had been brought into the world by Dr. Haddon.

"I wish my Alf 'ad been 'ere to know we're winning," she said in a low voice. "Of course I'm glad and all that, but—"

Her Alf had been a boy of nineteen in a merchant ship sunk off the coast of Ireland at the beginning of the war.

“He helped us to win,” answered Mrs. Haddon. “And I’m sure he knows.”

She felt a sudden pang of pity and self-reproach. She was always agonizing about Peter. This other woman had already lost her son. So had three others in the village, still going on bravely.

“Hullo, Irene,” cried a gay voice. “Sorry you can’t make a fourth at bridge. You’re most unsociable. I suppose you’re too spiritual for bridge.”

“Not at all,” said Mrs. Haddon, laughing. “But I’m a doctor’s wife. I don’t get much time.”

“You work yourself to the bone,” said Mrs. Marlow. “And virtue comes out of you, and you always look beautiful.”

“Thanks,” said Mrs. Haddon. “I wish I could believe it.”

She had a few words with Mr. Garvice behind the counter and then left the village stores with a cheery good morning to her group of friends there.

Even the birds seemed to have heard of good news. The thrushes were singing more loudly in the cottage gardens, she thought, where children were playing noisily. Catmint was in full bloom.

Old Mrs. Mickleham, who was weeding her flower-beds, looked up and gave the Victory sign, which Mrs. Haddon answered with a laugh.

They all deserve a bit of good news, thought Mrs. Haddon. They kept their nerve through the bad days and nights, when we had our share of bombs round here, and knew that the worst might happen.

She was in her own garden for an hour of peace before Myra Lehmann called. She loved this old garden behind the Queen Anne house with its low-tiled roof and red brick walls, weathered to a rose colour by sun and rain. The fruit trees now were laden with blossom as though snow had fallen from the blue sky. The bees were busy in the catmint. Lovely shadows fell across the lawn with the tracery of branches from the apple tree by the garden wall, and the sun was almost hot on the crazy paving of the path which she was stooping to weed.

Langfield, the gardener, who came twice a week, was mowing one of the lawns, and she liked to hear the whirr of his machine.

“Might I ’ave a word with you, ma’am?” he said presently, after wiping some sweat off his brow with the back of his hand.

“Do,” said Mrs. Haddon, though she wanted to be alone and quiet in this place of peace drenched with beauty.

“It’s about my girl, Phyllis,” he said. “She’s goin’ wild, as you may say, ma’am. I’ve no control over ’er. Quite out of ’and, you may say.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Langfield,” answered Mrs. Haddon. “She does her work very well and we couldn’t do without her.”

Langfield looked at her sombrely under his battered straw hat; his eyes were very blue and his hands and arms were very brown.

“She’s carrying on with one of them Canadians,” he said.

“Why shouldn’t she?” asked Mrs. Haddon. “If he’s a nice Canadian.”

“Most likely he has a wife at home,” said the gardener. “And, anyway, I don’t like a girl of mine behaving like a slut.”

“Phyllis couldn’t behave like a slut,” said Mrs. Haddon. “She has nice manners.”

Langfield, who had not been called for by the Ministry of Labour because the last war had left a murmur in his heart, looked somewhat reassured by this praise of his daughter. “Well, I may be mistook,” he said. “But if I catch ’er fooling round with Canadian soldiers or any others I’ll give ’er the thick end of a stick, as the saying is.”

He moved off and went on with his job.

Mrs. Haddon was stooping over a flower border and presently saw Myra Lehmann come through the garden gate. She looked pale and ill though quite beautiful, thought Mrs. Haddon, who loved beauty of form and colour and sound and spirit. She had big, dark, mournful eyes and was like a Madonna by Murillo.

“I don’t know why I’ve come,” she said with a faint smile. “I shall only be a nuisance to you.”

Mrs. Haddon put her arm round her.

“Not a bit of a nuisance. Shall we have tea in the garden?”

“That would be very nice,” said Myra Lehmann. “It is very peaceful here. One may forget the cruelties in a garden like this. It is very wonderful, your fruit blossom. In Poland, I remember—”

She gave a deep sigh and her eyes looked troubled at the memory of Poland. Mrs. Haddon thought it would be better not to let her mind dwell on Poland, and took her by the hand to a flower-bed bordered by gentians.

“Are you fond of blue? Isn’t that the deepest blue of any flower in the garden? As blue as the sky over Venice on a June day.”

They had tea under the shadow of the apple tree.

Myra Lehmann was rather silent, until after half an hour she began talking.

“Of course everybody knows that I tried to commit suicide. They stare at me when I go down the village street. The boys and girls stop their play and look at me as though I were a witch, half-frightened of me. It is not very amusing. But of course I deserve it. It is not good to try to kill oneself.”

“My poor dear,” said Mrs. Haddon, “it certainly is not good, though I understand all that you have been through. But there is always something worth living for—all this beauty—and those birds singing—your lovely music. Besides, life is so brief. We ought to have patience to wait for the next world,

don't you think?"

"You believe in the next world?" asked Myra Lehmann.

"I couldn't have any courage unless I did," answered Mrs. Haddon. "Not that I have very much. I give way to fear sometimes, though I hide that from everyone. I'm a bit of a fraud as a brave woman."

"No," said Myra Lehmann. "You are brave, like all Englishwomen. I envy them this great courage. In the factory where I worked I used to watch them with wonder. They did not tremble or show any sign of fear when the air-raided siren went howling. It was only I who trembled and felt a little sick. They laughed, they talked about their boys. They sang to the wireless those foolish songs which make them laugh."

"You must have suffered from that music," exclaimed Mrs. Haddon. "After Chopin and Liszt it must have been dreadful to you."

Myra Lehmann smiled and then was silent for a little time. Presently she began to talk again.

"It was the sense of loneliness which made me walk into the horse-pond. When I knew that all my family had been killed I felt very lonely. I was in my room that night I had heard Mr. and Mrs. Davenant go to bed. One of the children had a temperature and called out once or twice, and I heard Mrs. Davenant go to her bedroom door and listen. It was what my mother used to do when I was a child. Perhaps that memory was the cause of a great loneliness which seemed to swallow me. I am quite alone, I said to myself. My father and mother are dead. My sister killed herself. My grandfather and grandmother have been murdered by Hitler. I have been a wanderer in the world, and here in England I am alone, though they have been very kind. If I am dead, too, perhaps I shall not be alone, I thought. How is it best to kill myself? I thought of the pond on Fallow Green. I had heard a nightingale singing close to it. I will go to sleep in the pond, I thought. I crept out of the house and walked through the wet grass—"

"Don't think back to that," said Mrs. Haddon. "You were only walking in a kind of dream."

"Yes," said Myra Lehmann, "it was a kind of dream. I was in what you call a trance."

"Think forward," said Mrs. Haddon. "Think outside yourself, my dear. Try to forget your own troubles because other people want your help."

"They do not want my help," said Myra Lehmann. "I can do nothing for anybody."

Mrs. Haddon laughed and held her hand for a moment. "You can do a great deal for everybody. You can play lovely music to them."

"The English people are not very musical," said Myra Lehmann.

"I think you're wrong," answered Mrs. Haddon. "I know you're wrong."

There is music in the heart of the people. And there are many other things you can do.”

“What things?” asked Myra Lehmann.

“You can teach small children. Miss Middleton, Fanny Middleton, wants somebody to help with her mites.”

“Small children would be afraid of me. I am too dark, my eyes are too big. I speak with a foreign accent.”

“They will adore you if you would cuddle them a bit and tell them fairy stories,” said Mrs. Haddon. “What you need, my dear, is to love someone even if it is only a puppy or a kitten, or some human soul in need of help. Try to love someone.”

Myra Lehmann smiled again, less mournfully.

“It is a good idea,” she said. “But who will give me something to love—or someone?”

“Leave it to me,” said Mrs. Haddon. “I will give you an adorable kitten. I will speak to Fanny Middleton about you. I will take you to someone who needs your help.”

Myra Lehmann took Mrs. Haddon’s hand and put it to her lips.

“It is impossible not to love you,” she said. “That is why I came. You are always so kind. You are always so brave.”

“Well, now,” said Mrs. Haddon, evading this personal tribute, “come indoors and play something to me. I thirst for melody. Pearl plays rather well but never touches the piano now.”

Myra Lehmann asked to be excused. “Perhaps another day.”

“You have done me much good,” she told Mrs. Haddon. “I am an egoist, no doubt. I will try to forget myself a little. Thank you a thousand times.”

Mrs. Haddon went to the garden gate with her and watched her walk into the village.

“A daughter of persecution,” said Mrs. Haddon to herself. “In her eyes are all the sorrows of her race.”

She went on with her weeding.

Many people—including his son Peter, now flying a Liberator—thought that Dr. Haddon was wasted as a general practitioner in a country district. He had distinguished degrees in medicine and surgery which might have taken him to Harley Street where he would have made a lot of money. But Dr. Haddon did not think much of money and was very careless in sending in his bills in the course of his practice. He liked trees and flowers and birds and so preferred a country life. A big burly man, very direct in speech and manner, he was thought to be a trifle rough by new and timid patients until they discovered his patience and kindness. His big hands were as gentle and sensitive as those of a woman—a gentle woman—and he was wonderfully quick to get at the troubles of the mind which were often at the back of physical disorders. He himself had a well-ordered and philosophical mind through which gleamed a sense of humour. He had three hobbies which he said might have wrecked his career as a medical man unless he had exercised a rigid self-denial. One was for Bach and Handel, which he played on an eighteenth-century flute—to the distress of his son and daughter; another was for golf, which he had had to abandon in war time; and the third was for chess, which he played too well for anyone who could give him a game in his neighbourhood, with the exception of Mr. Marlow, the Vicar of Ashleigh Heath. He seldom had time for a game after his attendance at Farningham Hospital and the Convalescent Home on the hill above Ashleigh, and his round of calls covering a fairly wide area in this corner of Surrey—mostly to those women and children whose menfolk were away in the war. But the vicar came in now and again after supper, when Dr. Haddon could hope to have an hour or two of peace unless the telephone rang with an urgent summons.

They were playing after supper one evening at the end of May, when double summer-time abolished the need of any black-out until half an hour before midnight. Mrs. Haddon and Pearl were in the garden—Pearl reading a book in a deck-chair, while her mother was clipping some over-grown bushes. The two chess players were in the study with open windows, through which there was a play of sunlight on their board.

“You’re playing a damn bad game tonight, vicar,” exclaimed Dr. Haddon, with a good-natured laugh. “That’s the second time you have put your old lady

into jeopardy. Don't you see I can take her with the pawn?"

"So you can," answered Mr. Marlow, withdrawing his queen by the courtesy of this opponent who never played a game of grab. They played on silently, the doctor whistling a bit of Bach between his teeth while he waited for the next move. Through the window came the song of an exultant thrush, very pleased with life and himself, and the snip-snip of Mrs. Haddon's shears and the distant noise of village children playing before bedtime, long overdue.

Presently, after two games which Dr. Haddon won, there was another sound, so usual and familiar that the doctor did not pay attention to it, but he noticed that the vicar's hand trembled slightly as he moved a piece.

He wondered whether the vicar's nerves were getting frayed, and looked at his face for a moment as he bent over the chess-board. It was a fine face, finely cut with a delicate, sensitive mouth and deep-set eyes. He was hardly past middle age, but his brown hair was already touched with the white above the temples. The man is all spirit, thought Dr. Haddon. He suffers too much because of the cruelties of life, and his wife gives him a hell of a time.

"Your move," said Dr. Haddon presently.

"Oh, yes. Excuse me. I was listening to those bombers up there. I hate the sound of it."

"I should hate the sound of it if I didn't know they were ours," answered Dr. Haddon with a laugh. "But, my dear fellow, do pull yourself together. You are playing a very poor game. What's the matter with you tonight?"

The vicar laughed and pushed the chess-board away from him.

"I resign," he said. "I can't concentrate. I apologize for playing so badly."

"Something on your mind, old man?" asked Dr. Haddon. "Some of your female congregation plaguing you?"

"Not that," answered the vicar with a smile.

The doctor answered cheerily. "I saw how you were waylaid on Fallow Green by that hysterical young woman, Angela Dunne. Is she suffering from a hopeless passion for you?"

"I am sorry for her," said the vicar. "She's one of the lonely women. Her husband was taken prisoner before Dunkirk."

"Oh, well," said the doctor, "some of these lonely ladies must have a man to love and you're an easy victim. Your intense sympathy sends them into a dither. They look into the loving-kindness of your eyes and are lost. You're a spiritual Don Juan."

"I know you like pulling my leg," said the vicar good-naturedly. "But it's the pot calling the kettle black. You know your women patients adore you."

"Don't you believe it," answered the doctor. "I treat 'em rough. I have a rough tongue, old boy."

"And a soft heart," answered the vicar. "You go about doing good, while I

go about conscience-stricken.”

The doctor looked at his friend sharply. He didn't quite like the look of him. There was something uneasy in his eyes. His hand had trembled over the chess-table. His mind hadn't been on the game. He looked sorry for himself.

“Had a row with your wife?” asked Dr. Haddon. “You told me once you hated rows because they shake you to pieces.”

Mr. Marlow laughed.

“I have had an argument with Gladys. But it's not that entirely. It's what lies behind it which makes me uneasy. I walk about the lanes like a haunted man or like Eugene Aram.”

“Don't tell me you have committed a murder, old man,” said the doctor, striking a match to light his pipe. “I wouldn't believe it even if they told me you had murdered that alarming young woman Angela Dunne, who well deserves to die. Keep your sense of humour, vicar.”

A sense of humour was not the vicar's strongest quality, though he could tell a quiet joke of his own now and again.

“It's like this, doctor,” he said. “I'm supposed to be a Christian. I am a priest in Holy Orders. I am under vows to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The doctor puffed at his pipe as he sat in a deep leather chair, smiling at the vicar.

“Nobody does it better, I expect,” he said. “I don't come to hear you much because I'm a bit of an agnostic and can't abide village hymn-howling, but I'm sure you're a very good Christian.”

“I can't reconcile this war with the teaching of Christ,” said the vicar. “I cannot reconcile the bombing and blasting of German cities and the inevitable massacre of women and children with the words which Christ spoke to the multitude. ‘Love one another . . . Love them that persecute you . . . Forgive thine enemy.’ . . . The whole of Christ's message was one of love, mercy and pity. This war is murderous in its hatred on both sides, ruthless in its lack of pity. Our scientists and our best brains are working ceaselessly improving the machinery of slaughter, and if women and children are in the way of the bombs and the guns they are blown to bits, blasted off the earth, buried under the ruins of their houses. How can we reconcile that with Christianity? Every night I hear our bombers go out and I shudder at the work they have to do with their four-thousand pounders. It's a terrible way of warfare. It's utterly unchristian. But none of us clergy has the courage to say so. Perhaps few of them think so.”

Dr. Haddon was thoughtful and did not turn this off with a flippant remark. He could see that this clergyman was distressed by a spiritual or moral dilemma. It was disturbing his inmost faith and sense of integrity.

“My dear fellow,” said the doctor, “I can see your position is pretty

difficult as a Christian idealist. The clergy as a whole just agree to shirk the issue. 'Lift up your heart' before the eight o'clock news makes me smile sometimes. They get off some pretty good stuff—I like the Dean of St. Paul's—though I can't think how they know so much about God. But all their talk is of a God of mercy and a God of love and a God of infinite compassion and so forth. I daresay they're right. I should like to think so, and, in a way, I do think so—using the word God as a Spirit which raises man from the beast-like state and illuminates human intelligence at its best. Bach, Handel, Mozart—the great poets and painters have some touch of divinity. I think the Christian ideal is as high as we can get, and few of us can get as high as that. But those fellows on the B.B.C. think they can back up the bombing of German babies while they tell the public that Christ taught the gospel of love and mercy. It seems to be irreconcilable. I can find no sense in it. But then I don't worry about it. I just wonder how it's all going to work out and, meanwhile, I do my job and hope for the best—a quick ending to this war and the slaughter of youth, a more intelligent planning of human life so that the humble folk get a fair deal. To do this we've got to beat Hitler and his gang first."

"We must get right with ourselves," said the vicar. "We must be honest with ourselves, and I find myself torn to pieces between patriotism—of course I want England to win—of course I want Hitler to be beaten—and my faith as a Christian."

The doctor laughed slightly.

"My son Peter doesn't worry about all that, and yet he's a more spiritual fellow than I am. I fancy many of our boys who go out to face death every night and every day are on a higher spiritual plane than their elders. They have better values of life, I believe, than some of us. They are more careless of money and material conditions. They want the other fellows to have the same chance as themselves in education and upbringing. Peter is a bit of an idealist. So is young Fellowes, who has gone missing."

"I know," said the vicar. "Young Fellowes was a very fine type. And when I think of all the heroism our boys have shown in this war, the heights of courage to which they rise, careless of death or mutilation, I marvel at them. Their self-sacrifice has no limit. But we older men are guilty of having led them into this way by failing to prevent it."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Our elder statesmen made a mess of it, certainly. But we tried to keep the peace. We went into this war almost unarmed. Hitler asked for it. Now's he got it. His bombing aeroplanes blasted Warsaw and Rotterdam and a thousand cities without mercy. Now the Germans are whining when we pay them back tenfold before the end comes, and the oppressed peoples are liberated. After all, we are fighting the spirit of Evil."

“With the weapons of evil,” said the vicar. “With hatred everywhere. Some of my ladies make me shudder because they are so drenched in hatred, so greedy for death and vengeance upon the enemy. My own wife—”

He sighed heavily and did not echo the doctor’s laugh.

“Oh, Gladys believes in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But it’s mostly verbal violence, my dear fellow. Don’t let it disturb your domestic happiness.”

“It does disturb it,” said the vicar. “My house is a battleground. I am rather unhappy about it.”

The doctor put his hand on his friend’s shoulder and spoke with kindly words.

“Take it all more lightly, my dear vicar. You are too sensitive. Laugh it off. Cultivate a sense of humour and keep your ideals for private meditations.”

“Not good enough,” said the vicar. “One cannot laugh Christ out of one’s heart or betray His message by a joke across the breakfast-table.”

“Well, here comes Irene with the coffee,” said Dr. Haddon.

9

Dr. Haddon, whose practice radiated out from Ashleigh to about fifteen miles in any direction, drove himself about by day and only relied on his wife for night calls. Being an absent-minded man because his thoughts were apt to concentrate on odd ideas which came into his head, he sometimes forgot addresses of his patients and, what made things more difficult, sometimes forgot their names, so that before the advent of Mrs. Bellairs, who came to help him, he had to telephone back to his wife from some public-house or garage to put himself right. Of course, Irene laughed at him, but that didn't matter as he liked her laughter.

Punctuality was not his strong point. He was held up on the road at times by the sight of a rare bird whose nest he located in a wayside hedge or thicket through a pair of field-glasses which he carried for that purpose. He was also held up longer than he ought to have been by games with small patients who liked this tall burly man because he treated them on the level and was very good at conjuring tricks. Then, again, he lingered in conversation with any patient of unusual intelligence or interesting character, especially if he came across anybody who shared his passion for Bach or eighteenth-century music. It was a family joke against him that he had answered an urgent call from an elderly colonel who had been taken ill at Burley Cross, twelve miles from Ashleigh Heath, and after spending three-quarters of an hour with him, talking about the last war, had departed without enquiring about his illness. The Colonel himself had spread this story about the countryside as a first-class joke, but confessed that Dr. Haddon's visit had done him a power of good and brought down his blood-pressure to normal.

It was this familiarity with her husband's absent-mindedness which prompted Mrs. Haddon to give him a reminder when he drove his car out of the garage one morning, after the capture of Tunis and Biserta.

"Don't be late for lunch if you can help it, John. That young American is coming."

"What young American?" asked Dr. Haddon vaguely.

Mrs. Haddon jeered at him.

"Don't say you've forgotten. That boy who bears our name and has the blood of your disreputable ancestors."

“Oh lord, yes. Confound the fellow. Still, I quite agree we have to be civil to him. I’ll be back at one o’clock or thereabouts. Don’t hold up lunch if I’m a little late:”

Mrs. Haddon, who was talking through the window of the doctor’s car, gave him a little slap on the cheek.

“Oh, yes, I know what that means. You’ll play tiddly-winks with Timothy Martindale; you will discuss the character of Stalin and the Red Revolution with Vera Narishkin; you will talk for an hour with that doddering old General on the coming invasion of Europe; and you’ll not give a single thought to an earnest young American who is coming down from London specially to see you.”

“My family holds me up to ridicule and contempt,” said the doctor. “No man is a prophet in his own country. And, oh lord, I’ve forgotten my box of tricks.”

His box of tricks included his stethoscope and other instruments. It was brought forth by Mrs. Bellairs, who came rushing out of the front door with it.

“Just in the nick of time,” she cried. “Oh dear, oh dear, what is the good of my orderly mind. Are you sure you have your list of appointments?”

“Certainly I have,” said Dr. Haddon, feeling in his fob pocket for a slip of paper.

“Mrs. Stripling 9.15; old Mother Longmore 9.40; Betty Cuddingford 10.15; the Loveday lass 11; Vera Narishkin . . . Lydia Allison. God help me!”

He groaned heavily as though he would find these patients intolerable.

“Oh, yes, we know all about it,” said Mrs. Haddon. “They only send for you because they love you.”

She waved her hand to him as he started the car and drove slowly down the drive.

His car was almost the only one on the road, apart from the bus to Farningham, which went thundering by within an inch of the hedge. He picked up a Canadian soldier who wanted a lift as far as Bulford.

“How are things going?” asked the doctor, by way of friendly conversation.

A nice-looking fellow, he thought, glancing at this young man in khaki with a corporal’s stripe on his arm.

“Going all right in Tunisia,” said the Canadian. “The Jerries haven’t a chance of escape.”

“No; it looks as if we had got them this time. After that, what?”

The Canadian laughed.

“Then it will be our turn. The invasion of Europe at last. It’s time we did a bit of fighting. Some of us have been here three years fooling round. Too many girls. Too much beer. Too long an exile for those with families. A bit of a

strain on morale.”

“Standing the strain pretty well?” asked Dr. Haddon good-naturedly.

The Canadian laughed again.

“Not too badly. I’ve been attending classes and other things. It helps to pass the time. Besides, I’m going to get married before there’s a chance of getting killed. One has to get all one can out of life these days. The future is very uncertain for everyone.”

He spoke with a good accent and seemed an educated young man. Before the war, he told the doctor, he had been a bank clerk in Toronto. He would never go back to that job.

“Thanks a lot,” he said, when he got out at Bulford.

“Good luck,” said the doctor.

Two khaki-clad wenches were standing at the cross-roads.

“Any chance of a lift to Farningham?” asked one of them.

“Every chance,” said the doctor. “Hop in.”

They hopped in joyfully.

“My, this is a bit of luck,” said one of them. “We missed the bus by half a minute. Not another for half an hour. What a life!”

“I daresay you get a bit of fun out of it,” suggested the doctor.

The two girls giggled. One of them answered.

“Oh, quite a bit. We went to a dance last night and overslept ourselves this morning. Our commandant will have something to say about it. Strict discipline and all that, you know. Not that I worry.”

“She’s very catty,” said the other girl. “No sense of humour, you know. One of the acid sort. Still, we have a good time on the whole. Most of the girls are good sports, aren’t they, Phyllis? It’s better than serving in a Lyons’ teashop. They’ll never get us back to that kind of job, not if I know it. It’ll be a different world after the war. We girls won’t go back to the same old drudgery.”

“Oh shut up, Jenny,” cried the other girl. “The gentleman doesn’t want to hear your beastly socialism at this hour in the morning.”

“Keep a civil tongue in your head, dearie,” answered her friend. “Unless you want a thick ear.”

They jumped out at Farningham.

“Very kind of you, I’m sure,” said one of those buxom lasses. “Thanks awfully.”

“Take care of yourselves,” said the doctor. “Don’t go to too many dances. Don’t cheek your lady Commandant.”

He liked these passing conversations with those to whom he gave a lift. They were rather illuminating, he thought. They gave him a better idea of England in war time. It brought him into touch with many different types and

the spirit of the people. On the whole it seemed to him very high in spirit and as sound as a bell. There was something Shakespearean in the frankness of the woman freed from the old inhibitions of their sex. A good many of them were enjoying the war—the younger crowd in uniform. It was a jolly kind of adventure—a bit rough now and then, and hard on girls who liked privacy and had to harden themselves against free and easy ways of speech—not at all nice at times—but more amusing than serving in little shops or going into domestic service with querulous mistresses. It was the married women with small children obliged to stand, in queues for their daily shopping, anxious about the week's rations, who were getting sick and tired of the war. Sick and tired for the return of their men and getting a bit overstrained, poor dears.

Dr. Haddon picked up soldiers and sailors and heard strange stories between one village and another. There was a merchant seaman who had been torpedoed five times and made a joke of it.

“They can't drown me,” he said. “I'm unsinkable. Likely I was born to be hanged.”

He told amazing stories of his ship being bombed in convoy and getting to port with half its crew dead and its engine kept going by wounded men—of whom he was one. His nerve was still unrattled.

The doctor had shaken hands with him, knowing that he was shaking the hand of a man born in a slum but surpassing Hector and Achilles in human valour. There were thousands like him down in Limehouse and in every British port, and with damn bad pay and damn bad conditions, though without them we should all starve and go down in ruin.

The reserve of courage in this country, thought Dr. Haddon as he drove around to pay his morning calls, is super-human. The old tradition surges up in time of war. The spirit of Agincourt and of Drake's men and the thin red lines of Torres Vedras, and the defence of Ypres when I was there, and the spirit of our men who crawled out of the mud of Passchendæle.

He was a hater of war, having seen the flower of British manhood mown down in the fields of the Somme and smashed to bits in the dull routine of trench warfare and blinded and gassed. Had he not been a young surgeon out there? But he could not go as far as Marlow, the vicar, in Christian pacifism. In any case, Hitler and his gang would have to be destroyed. The enslaved countries would have to be liberated. Of course the war ought never to have happened. We had made the most ghastly mistakes after the last war. Our own folly and carelessness had helped to produce Hitler. It was World War Number II, and it was a struggle to the death on both sides. There could be no compromise; and, as always, the innocent would have to suffer for the guilty—German women and children, good-natured Italians, French civilians bombed by our boys—his son Peter among them—if they happened to be in the

neighbourhood of our targets.

A ghastly contrast to this beauty of Nature, thought Dr. Haddon, stopping his car on a grass track outside a cottage gate and looking over a hedge to a field spangled with gold and silver, and to a line of little hills blue in the distance. Outside the garden gate wallflowers were in bloom and their rich scent reached his nostrils. There was going to be a great apple harvest judging from a little orchard here and others he had seen. It was a wonderful Spring, here in England, while the Eighth Army was pounding the enemy in their last strongholds. England was drenched in beauty.

After the war, thought Dr. Haddon, we ought to move forward a step or two in human intelligence. Surely we shall learn something out of these two bloody wars—enough to say, Never again. Enough to control the machines of slaughter. Enough to scotch the sinister brains who only care for profit and power and would lay the world in ruin again for their own megalomania. I wonder—

He pulled himself together, remembering that he had a patient to see—a young girl who was going to have an illegitimate baby and was frightened about it. Poor child. There was a lot of that sort of thing. It was due to the war, of course. What had that soldier said? Something about getting all one could out of life.

10

A young American sergeant named Edward D. Haddon from Taunton, Massachusetts, observed with watchful eyes the scene at Waterloo station on a Saturday morning while waiting for a train to Farningham. He was a tall young man with deep-set eyes, a straight nose and a square chin with a cleft in it, and in British uniform he would have looked English or Scottish, or even Irish, according to the indistinguishable strains of the British race. Standing straight-backed by one of the bookstalls he had ascertained that the train for Farningham went from Platform 7—he watched a crowd of blue-jackets shouldering their kit before moving off to a Portsmouth train, and the hurly burly of the station in war-time England which was still new to him, though he had been over here for nearly three months. Everyone looked warm, cheerful and hurried. A party of A.T.S. girls—he was not sure what those letters stood for—lunched round a canteen, getting tea and cakes from a girl who refused to be hurried and said “I can’t wait on everybody at once. Take your turn, can’t you?” Mothers with children made a dash for soldiers arriving at one of the platforms. There were greetings and embraces.

“’Ullo, Molly, ’Ullo, Bert.”

A naval petty officer, who had been standing by the bookstall motionless, suddenly strode forward and held a girl in his arms.

Two military police, with their red caps, scrutinized the assembly as though it might contain German spies. The music of a military band blared out of a microphone. Officers and men of the Tank Corps in black berets made their way to a moving staircase. A lady at the bookstall asked for the *Psychic News* and was annoyed at not getting it.

Two nurses asked a porter to get them a taxi-cab.

“You’ll ’ave to queue up, ladies,” said the porter. “A bit of a curse, I know, but there’s a war on.”

“We’ve heard that before,” said one of the nurses. “It’s an excuse for red tape and a lot of damn nonsense.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you ain’t right, lady,” said the porter with a laugh.

Edward D. Haddon, of Taunton, Massachusetts, looked and listened. He liked to hear the Cockney dialect. The people who spoke it had been through

the London Blitz. They had known how to take it. Friends of his in Taunton boasted of having Cockney ancestors.

Edward D. Haddon, having no one to talk to in this crowd, talked to himself inside his head.

“These people don’t take the war grimly. They certainly are a cheerful crowd. They look as though they’re winning this war and know the worst is over. Well, I guess that’s right, though there’s still a long way to go. That’s why I’m here. I guess we’ll have to do a hell of a lot of fighting before the Germans crack. British and Americans fighting together. That kills the Ancient Grudge, and time enough, too. It’s a hell of a long time since George Three and the Declaration of Independence. Some of our Isolationists still want to fan up that old stuff. Some of my bunch come over with their old school-book prejudices which break down mostly when they’ve seen the inside of an English home. We’re turning over a page in history, I guess. Maybe I’ll see what’s on the next page. I’ll be glad to know. That’s a striking-looking girl over there. I wonder why she looked at me like that. I like her brown eyes and her straight little nose. She looks like Rosalind in *As You Like It*. She walks with a long free stride like so many English girls. And she’s going toward Platform 7, which is mine, I’m told.”

He moved towards Platform 7 and found the train already packed with sailors and civilians. He did not see the brown-haired girl like Rosalind in *As You Like It* until he found her in the bus going to Ashleigh Heath. She was sitting in the front seat with another girl.

The bus passed out of Farningham into the countryside, going through little old villages with timbered houses here and there, and in one of them an old English inn with black beams and white plaster and a weathered roof of red tiles with wavy lines.

“This is England as I’ve read about it,” thought Edward D. Haddon from Taunton, Massachusetts. “Maybe those houses stood there in Elizabeth’s time. And I like the way all those cottages keep their gardens full of flowers. Shakespeare’s flowers. What’s that line:

“I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows!”

He had a pleasant sentimental journey to Ashleigh Heath. He knew when he came to it by a nod from the young woman in blue trousers who had given him his ticket.

“Now what?” he thought, standing on the edge of the Green. Perhaps someone could tell him where Dr. Haddon lived.

Someone told him. It was the brown-haired girl whom he had seen at Waterloo.

“Are you looking for Dr. Haddon’s house?”

“How did you guess it?” asked the American sergeant, touching his cap and smiling into her brown eyes.

“I’m Pearl Haddon. I spotted you at Waterloo.”

The American was astonished at being spotted in all that crowd. He was also pleased.

“Well, this is wonderful,” he said. “I call it a real bit of good fortune. My name is Edward D. Haddon. Your ancestors way back were also mine, according to the family Bible. In a way we’re sort of cousins.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Pearl. “Isn’t that the right thing to say to an American?”

“It goes with me, Miss Pearl,” answered Edward D. Haddon. “I’m more than pleased to meet you. This is a great day in my life. I’ve been looking forward to it for quite a time. This old village is just as I pictured it. Queen Anne, aren’t they—those little houses?”

“Queen Victoria mostly,” answered Pearl, who refused to pamper to his sentiment. “The rest are rather faked up by jerry builders.”

“That’s a new one on me,” said the American. “But I’m not going to be robbed of my historical romance. Those little hills were there all right when your ancestors and mine rode around this countryside, and fought with Harry at Agincourt.”

“Did they?” asked Pearl. “I think it’s more likely that they were keeping pigs in Sussex and scratching themselves in filthy hovels.”

Edward D. Haddon laughed and looked with smiling eyes at this representative of the English Haddons.

He liked the look of her. He liked her straight way of speech.

“There was a Haddon,” he said, “who was mixed up with the murder of a fellow in the Tower—Sir Thomas Overbury. That’s where I come in. Young Haddon took a boat to Boston, married Martha Plaskett and had many descendants—of whom I am one.”

“Lucky for you,” said Pearl. “But my mother and father are waiting for you. Our house is at the end of the village. You mustn’t expect rich food or much of it. You won’t find an ancestral castle or anything like that.”

Edward D. Haddon did not expect much food. He felt guilty, anyhow, in poaching on their rations. Nor did he crave for an ancestral castle. He was easily satisfied. Just to get into an English home would give him very great pleasure. He would have to make an apology for inviting himself.

“That’s all right,” said Pearl. “Hands across the sea and all that.”

Presently she stopped in front of a two-storied house, long and low, lying back from the road with a pleasant garden in front.

“This is our hovel,” said Pearl.

“It’s a good-looking hovel,” said the American. “It’s like a poem by

Wordsworth, or a picture by Cecil Alden.”

“Yes, it is rather sweet,” admitted Pearl grudgingly. She was not going to play up to a sentimental American in search of antiquity and false romance. She took him into the house she called a hovel.

An American Haddon was enchanted with the home of an English Haddon. It was not an ancestral castle and it had not been inhabited by Dr. Haddon and his family for more than twenty years, but it was a pleasant little house built—possibly in Queen Anne’s time—of red brick softened to a rose colour by rain, sun and wind. It had one long room to the right of the green front door, with a low ceiling and a big fireplace, and it was in this room that the American sergeant met Mrs. Haddon, who was waiting for him.

“This is my mother,” said Pearl. “She’s quite a nice mother.”

Edward D. Haddon, lately from Taunton, Mass., took Mrs. Haddon’s thin outstretched hand in a firm grip.

“Mrs. Haddon,” he said warmly, “this is a real honour, and I have to thank you for letting me come to your beautiful home as a self-invited guest.”

Mrs. Haddon smiled at the formality of this greeting.

“Not quite self-invited,” she reminded him. “We asked you to come. Isn’t it the least we can do for an American soldier who has come across the Atlantic to fight with us?”

Edward D. Haddon’s dark eyes seemed to light up at this welcome.

“It’s nice of you to put it that way,” he answered, “Of course, we just had to come. We just couldn’t stay out.”

He gave a quick glance round the room with his smiling eager eyes to which everything in England came as a fresh impression. In that glance he took in the Queen Anne-looking chairs and table, the tallboy in one corner and a grandfather clock in the other, a pair of shining silver candlesticks on the mantelshelf, the dainty curtains at the lattice windows hiding the black-out stuff, and a portrait of Irene Haddon as a girl—very beautiful, he thought.

Then he turned and smiled at Pearl who was watching him.

“This is how I hoped it would be,” he said. “My first glimpse of an English home—inhabited by Haddons.”

“Oh, it’s not much of a place,” said the truthful Pearl. “It’s just a cottage.”

“It’s a fairy tale cottage,” he answered; “and I should say it’s real English. You can’t persuade me this is a fake, Miss Pearl.”

“Partly,” she answered. “It used to be two cottages before we bought it. It swarmed with mothers and children.”

“Let’s have lunch,” said Mrs. Haddon. “I expect you’re hungry, and I know I am.”

She apologized for the absence of her husband. He might be in later. On the other hand he might not be. A doctor’s hours were very uncertain.

“And father’s hours are particularly uncertain,” explained Pearl. “He is probably talking Bach with some bedridden beauty, or playing bears with some chicken-poxed brat.”

Edward Haddon laughed. That seemed to him a good thumb-nail portrait of Dr. Haddon. He must be a kind-hearted man and a good doctor.

“Oh, he’s kind-hearted all right,” answered Pearl. “Everybody adores him, including my mother, who has nursed him like a baby since first she took charge of him.”

“How absurd you are, Pearl,” laughed Mrs. Haddon, blushing slightly at this revealing candour.

Edward Haddon seemed to have the appetite of a sparrow, though he was a tall fellow. Under pressure from Pearl he confessed that he hated the idea of robbing them of their rations.

“I know how it is,” he said. “You English folk are down to a low minimum. We haven’t reached that level yet in the land of plenty.”

Mrs. Haddon had put in a good deal of time that morning in the market town of Farningham waiting in queues for fish, waiting in queues for cakes, waiting in queues for meat pies. Then, somewhat laden, she had had to stand in a bus back to Ashleigh Heath, refusing the seat offered by a convalescent soldier in blue. But she assured her husband’s distant kinsman—if he were really that—that there was no need to stint.

“Somehow or other,” she told him, “we always seem to get enough, thanks to Lord Woolton.”

“Is that the Lord of the Manor?” asked Edward Haddon, who had come to England with traditional ideas of its lingering feudalism.

Pearl smiled across the table at him.

“Bigger than that,” she told him. “He’s the national food controller who tells us to eat potatoes instead of bread, and cuts down our cheese ration after telling us to eat more cheese, and ignore the law against pork when there’s not an R in the months. We all abuse him very much, though he’s doing very well on the whole. Personally, I’m not aware of being undernourished, though the food is rather boresome.”

She asked Edward Haddon to tell her something about his own home life and what the Americans thought of the war. It was asking possibly too much in a single question, and her distant kinsman—she didn’t believe a word of that really—was very long in his answer. Too long, she thought with English impatience of a monologue. Everything he said was quite interesting but

certainly too long, she thought. He had to be interrupted by her mother, who insisted upon giving him more potatoes and then a helping of plum-duff which he regarded for a moment with suspicion and alarm. Pearl interrupted him to serve him with sugar, to hand him custard—which he declined firmly but politely—and to put some saccharine in his coffee. He was bothered by these interruptions. He wanted to tell them, without a single word of interruption, all about his home town of Taunton, Massachusetts, and about the white frame-house belonging to his parents, and about his mother—a real American mother—who was a mistress in the High School, having graduated at Smiths, and also his father—not one of the Babbitts.

“Did you say not one of the rabbits?” asked Pearl, interrupting him again for a moment.

“No, Miss Pearl,” answered the American sergeant, with a good-natured smile. “I thought the novel by Sinclair Lewis—*Babbitt*—was known over here. Perhaps too well known, because it’s mighty critical of American social life. But, as I was saying—”

He was saying a good deal about the Isolationists in Taunton and more generally in the U.S.A. Of course, Isolationism was traditional in America. The founders of the Republic had wanted to get clear of European adventures. The policy of the United States had always been to keep aloof from European wars and troubles. All the emigrants who had left Europe for the New World had gone there to escape militarism and war and oppression and penury. It was only natural—

“Here’s Father,” cried Pearl, springing up from her chair and breaking into this sentence.

Edward Haddon had a guilty feeling that he had been talking too much and that he had been boring this charming mother and daughter, though he had not been doing so to an intolerable degree. He had not learnt the English habit of conversation at a luncheon-table, which is slightly impatient of a long narrative.

Dr. Haddon’s burly figure came into the room.

“I’m afraid I’m a little late,” he said cheerfully.

“You’re darned late, Father,” answered Pearl, laughing at him. “Our distinguished kinsman has finished his meal—such as it was. We’re quite ashamed of you.”

Dr. Haddon did not look in the least ashamed of himself.

“I’m sure you had a good time without me,” he said, and shook hands in the friendliest way with the American sergeant. “It’s nice of you to come,” he said.

“I will say it’s nice of you to have me,” answered Edward Haddon respectfully, having risen from his chair when the doctor appeared. “I’m very

happy to be received in an English home by the English descendants of my own forbears, if I may claim the honour.”

“No honour, my dear fellow,” said the doctor good-naturedly. “The Haddons were a rotten lot for the most part. My grandfather died of sclerosis of the liver due to drinking too much port. The only Haddon who has any claim to historical fame, as far as I know of my own lot, was a Jenefer Haddon who ran off with a groom in the reign of George III, after marrying a dissolute peer.”

Pearl laughed at her father.

“I believe you made that up on the spur of the moment,” she accused him. “I’ve never heard a word of it before.”

“Quite true,” said Dr. Haddon. “You will find a miniature of the jade over there with one of your great-grandmama.”

“That one?”

Pearl moved across the room to look at it, and then she turned to look at Edward Haddon curiously.

“How very odd,” she exclaimed. “It’s very like you, Mr. Haddon. And I must say you have a Haddon look somehow.”

“It’s kind of you to say so,” answered young Haddon, much interested in the miniature. “I feel very much flattered. Maybe it gives me the right to call you Cousin Pearl, and maybe you would cut out calling me Mr. Haddon. If you could bring yourself to call me Edward I should feel more at home.”

“Like all Americans you wallow in sentiment, Cousin Edward,” said Pearl, with a friendly smile in her eyes. “English people find their relatives rather a bore.”

“That’s just too bad,” said young Haddon. “I was hoping, as a relative, to see more of you from time to time, before my unit departs for foreign shores.”

Pearl said some relatives did not come under the ban of boredom. Before Sergeant Haddon returned to London that afternoon she made a date with him—to use his own phrase—and accepted an invitation to lunch at the Carlton Grill with one or two of his friends. She also said that she might get permission to show him the inside of St. James’s Palace and the work of the Red Cross and St. John’s in dealing with the prisoners of war. He was thrilled at the idea of visiting St. James’s Palace. The Court of St. James’s held for him a great deal of historical romance. For an American sergeant, he seemed to have read quite a bit of English history. He was, it seemed, a well-educated young man.

“Not so tough as I thought he might be,” remarked Dr. Haddon, after the visitor left with a formal expression of thanks, very warmly said, for having been received in such a kind way.

“He has charming manners,” said Mrs. Haddon. “What do you think of him, Pearl?”

“Not unamusing,” said Pearl. “I like the American accent.”

12

There was great news from Africa. The German Army, rounded up in Cape Bon after the capture of Tunis and Biserta, had surrendered in masses. We had captured something like three hundred and forty thousand men with many generals, including von Arnim himself. The Afrika Korps, which had fought so brilliantly and stubbornly under Rommel, was in our hands. We had taken great numbers of guns. There were no more enemy forces in the whole African Continent. The First and Eighth Armies had done their job. Montgomery and Alexander had proved their quality of generalship. The Desert Army, which had fought its way for more than fifteen hundred miles from Egypt—then gravely menaced—through burning heat and sandstorms, had reached journey's end at last with triumphant victory. They had suffered from thirst and flies and desert sores and fever. In their tanks and trucks and jeeps they had gone forward over rocky ground, fighting their way through under murderous fire. They had gone through mine-fields, with explosives under a thin crust of sand cleared away by heroic sappers or risked by the forward tanks, driven by a cavalry who had taken every risk always. Astounding feats of valour had been done by individual officers and men regardless of death, careless of it. Young English and Scottish officers, who had once been bank clerks or school teachers or undergraduates or insurance agents, led small groups of boys from English or Scottish shires against machine-gun posts concealed in the rocks, which were holding up their comrades. Indian soldiers of non-commissioned rank went out alone against these deadly guns and by some miracle of courage knocked them out before they went to certain death elsewhere. Half-blinded and half-choked by sand and dust the Desert Army, made up of young men from English and Scottish regiments, recruited from cities and farms and shops and slums, went forward time and time again through slaughtering barrage fire with flying scythes of steel, until the enemy's defences were broken and he fell back again to a new position. Behind them the field ambulances were laden with those who fell wounded, blinded, shell-shocked, and fever-stricken. Dead boys lay in the sand and among the rocks with flies gathering upon them. No time for pity. No time for tears. No thought of losses or fallen comrades beyond a "Bad luck . . . poor old Bill." The living went on exultant, keyed up with a fierce inward satisfaction and desperate

urgency. The Jerries were on the run. They couldn't hold a line anywhere except for a delaying action. Our Desert Army was on top now after the ebb and flow of advance and retreat, many disasters, bitter lessons. Tobruk was avenged. Rommel's boasts were no more than dust and defeat. The Americans were doing well, after bad days. Everybody was doing damn well. Montgomery had outgeneralled the enemy, knocked him edgewise by his outflanking movements. Eisenhower and Alexander were handling the show perfectly. It was all going like clockwork. "We have them where we want them," said Montgomery. "In the bag." Now they were bagged, the whole blooming lot.

Something had happened to them. Something queer. Was it a crack in their morale? They might have held the line of hills much longer. They had all the ammunition they needed. They had plenty of food. They had been told to fight to the death like those in Stalingrad. But they surrendered in masses, driving in their own trucks. Not exhausted and shell-shocked men. Not parched or famine-stricken men. They looked fresh and cheerful, these great batches of German prisoners. Many of them were laughing and joking. Something queer about it. But a great victory anyhow. Our first great victory after years of disappointment and defeat.

To the people of the United Nations and to all those hoping and sickening for liberation, the news of victory came with surprise and joy. No one had expected it so soon, or so big. A great darkness, which they remembered not long ago when Britain seemed impotent, unable to meet the Germans on level terms, unable to defeat them, unable to strike effectively anywhere, was now lifted from their mind. Here was the first gleam of the complete victory over Hitler—more than a gleam of hope, and to some minds now a blinding certainty near at hand.

So it was to some minds in Ashleigh Heath in which, like other villages, there were the fathers and mothers and wives and sisters of young men in the Desert Army.

Mrs. Marlow, the vicar's wife, represented the extreme optimists.

"The war would be over in six weeks," she announced to some of her husband's parishioners. "The German Army has cracked. Hitler will commit suicide, of course, unless he's torn to pieces by his own people. That would be a better death for him. I hope they will torture him before he dies. They know all about torture."

Several people in the village had already lost their boys in North Africa. The postman's son had been killed at El Alamein. Langfield, the gardener's son, had been killed in Hellfire Pass. So had Gerald Musgrave, the young husband of Susie Musgrave, who had two small children. To them this news of victory had a shadow behind it, though they hid it from their neighbours and

spoke brave words of gladness.

“My Dick would have been glad about it,” said Langfield to Mrs. Haddon, who was in the garden with him. “He said he always knew Rommel would be beaten in the end.”

“I expect he knows,” said Mrs. Haddon. “I expect he’s glad because we are.”

Mrs. Musgrave’s small boy, aged four, marched ahead of his perambulator with a Union Jack, and Susie Musgrave raised her hand and gave the victory sign to Dr. Haddon, who slowed down his car to speak to her.

“Glorious news,” he said. “How do you feel about it, Susie?”

“I feel like weeping for joy—and other things,” she answered. “But that’s silly. So I’m taking Jeremy and Simon for a victory march up the lane to Fallow Green.”

“Bob Fellowes and his wife have had bad news,” said the doctor. “Their boy has been blinded in one of the mine-fields out there.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” cried Mrs. Musgrave. “How awful for them.”

The doctor nodded.

“I’m going to see them, and rather funk it. Take care of yourself, my dear. I must come and have a game with your brats one day.”

“They’d love it,” said Susie Musgrave.

The doctor drove up the road towards the hill above Ashleigh Heath and turned at Fallow Green through some white gates to a house with a brown roof and tall chimneys where Robert Fellowes lived with Gladys his wife.

A little Irish maid opened the door and said: “Good morning, doctor.”

She lowered her voice for a moment.

“It’s a sorrowful house, it is. The mistress has been weeping her eyes out, poor soul.”

She tapped at a door to the right of the hall and Doctor Haddon went into the room. His friend, Robert Fellowes, was there in his library, deep in a leather chair with a copy of *The Times* on the floor beside him. He rose as the doctor came in, and stretched out his hand.

“Nice of you to come,” he said quietly.

“Sorry, old boy,” said Dr. Haddon.

The two men, who had been friends for many years, clasped hands and then were silent for a moment. Fellowes broke the silence.

“Bad luck, isn’t it? Poor, dear Quentin.”

“Yes,” said the doctor. “How’s Gladys, poor dear?”

“Knocked edgewise,” said Fellowes. “The news came like a bolt from the blue, just as we were thinking everything was all right. It was sent by his Colonel . . .”

He went to a side-table and took a telegram from underneath a paper-

weight, an ivory paper-weight in the shape of an elephant which he had brought from India. The doctor read it.

Deeply regret to inform you that your son Quentin has been blinded in both eyes while advancing through minefield with great gallantry stop His other wounds are not serious and he is being taken care of in base hospital after air transport stop Please accept my profound sympathy.

“A bad business,” said Dr. Haddon. “But it might have been worse, old man. He is alive, thank Heaven.”

Fellowes raised his hands slightly, thin leathery hands.

“I don’t know. It might have been better if he had been killed. Blindness is terrible.”

Dr. Haddon put his hand for a moment on his friend’s shoulder.

“Don’t think of it that way,” he said. “Life has many compensations, even for the blind.”

The door opened and Mrs. Fellowes came in. Secretly the doctor had disliked her years ago when she had first married Fellowes. Then she had been a fair, fluffy girl without much sense in her head, he thought, with no idea beyond having a good time and flirting with every male within her reach if he amused her. She was still a pretty woman with her fair hair touched with grey and her cheeks touched by a little colour out of the chemist’s shop. She had forgotten that this morning. Her skin was white and her lips pallid; he was shocked by her appearance. She was like a woman who had had a drunken orgy. Even her hair was all over the place . . .

She gave a cry and fell into the doctor’s arms.

“My Quentin . . . blind. . . . It’s too horrible. I can’t bear it.”

Dr. Haddon held her in a tight grip.

“Courage,” he said. “Pull yourself together, my dear. We’ve all got to face these things with what little courage we have. Think of all the women who have lost their sons and keep a stiff upper lip, poor darlings. I marvel at ’em. This cursed war has only one compensation—the miracle of human courage. I know it’s darned easy for me to talk. Words mean nothing at a moment like this. Hush, my dear. Hush. Think of poor old Bob there.”

She wept convulsively in his arms while her husband, looking stricken, went out of the room closing the door very quietly.

Dr. Haddon did his best to heal a wounded soul—so much more difficult than healing a wounded body. It was on the day when the news of great victory came.

Pilot officer Peter Haddon, D.F.C., was down for leave if he came back from a night raid over Dusseldorf. He wondered if he would come back. He rather hoped he would, though by little sums in arithmetic and the law of averages which he had worked out in his secret mind—in the very hush-hush chamber of his secret mind—he had written himself off. All but one of those with whom he had done his training two years ago had “failed to return”—that phrase adopted by the writers of the Air Ministry. Sometimes when he was in his cockpit on the way to Germany—mostly the Ruhr—he tried to remember their names. Some of them were easy. They were his best friends. Some of them had been at Charterhouse with him. Charlie Steward, Bill Massey, Lionel Jarvis—that humorist—Val Merivale, Dick Lovegrove—woman chaser and egoist and with a passion for poetry. A whole string of others, some of whose names had slipped out of his memory unless he made an effort. Who was that fellow with fair kinky hair who had become very lit up one night at the “Goat” in Kensington? He had announced his conviction that the worst kind of peace was better than the best kind of war. He argued with great obstinacy and some brilliance that old Chamberlain had made a great mistake in declaring war on Germany and that there ought to have been more and better Munichs, playing for time, perhaps preventing the war by a little friendly arrangement with Hitler. No one had listened to him except Peter, who was amused by this argument, spoken in drink. What was his name? Beachhead? Bancroft? Blanchard? Something like that. No, Bultitude—an extraordinary name.

Peter Haddon thought of it when he was half-way to Gelsenkirchen. Odd, how these things jump into the mind. There was a bit of flak coming up, but nothing to worry about yet.

He didn't worry. His nerves were still all right. Funny things, nerves; He had known fellows whose nerves went all to pieces after the first raid or two. Young Cricklewood, who looked as if he hadn't a nerve in his body—one of the toughs and a pretty good boxer—had taken to his bed with high fever—utterly delirious—after a trip to the Ruhr which hadn't been particularly fierce. He was no good at all after that. On the other hand, Val, who was a delicate kind of chap and very timid with girls and no good at any kind of game—fellows thought him a bit of a Nancy—had gone through unpleasant affairs—

most unpleasant—without turning a hair. Hard luck on him when he had had his face smashed and his ears lopped off. Now they were giving him a new face and new ears—those surgeon sculptors who did marvellous jobs now and then.

Peter Haddon hoped he wouldn't be bashed about like that. He hoped he would be killed nicely and neatly when his time came. Much better, really, he thought. He was not particularly afraid of death. Anyhow, it couldn't be dodged in the R.A.F. where it was just a matter of arithmetic. The odds lessened every time one went out. Of course, there was a question of luck which defied arithmetic and the law of averages. Some fellows had marvellous luck. They had secret mascots and ludicrous superstitions. One of the crew of his own Lancaster—Luke Feilding—carried a bit of bog oak and put his faith in it. Another fellow wore a rosary round his neck though he was not a Catholic. One of his gunners—Paddy Ryan—carried a relic of some Irish saint round his neck and thought it would make him proof against ack-ack and night fighters. So he had confided to Peter one night at the base when he had been drinking more whisky than was good for him. They had had a talk about God. Ryan was an ardent Catholic though he swore abominably and was no saint. He seemed to know all about God from the Catholic point of view. He had made up his mind to be a priest after the war, having what he called a strong vocation. He had talked a good deal about mysticism which, he said, was an intense awareness of the Holy Spirit sometimes amounting to a blinding revelation. "I've had it myself," he said. "It was like being consumed by a fire and filled with light and wrapt in eternal love. Then there's the Blessed Virgin. . . ." He had talked a lot about the Blessed Virgin, for whom he had a passionate devotion as though she were his mother.

All very interesting, thought Peter. He himself had been brought up in the usual easy-going way. He had rather liked the chapel at Charterhouse. Sometimes he had had a sense of its spiritual beauty in a pleasantly vague way. God, to him, had been equally vague, as a kind of benevolence in the background like his father and mother, but not so strong as that. He had been more interested in cricket. But, latterly, he had been thinking about God now and again as the certainty of death, according to these little sums in arithmetic, came closer. Perhaps another trip or two and then no more. What did God think of this war? He couldn't like it very much. If Christ were the Son of God, would He approve of dropping four-thousand-pounders on to German cities even if they were military objectives? Of course it had to be done, but it wasn't exactly an act of loving charity. The Germans had begun it first. They had asked for it and now were getting it. One couldn't be sloppy; he took the ordinary point of view of the ordinary fellow and was pleasantly elated when he found his target and swooped over it in order that the four-thousand-

pounders could raise red hell down there. Paddy Ryan said we were fighting devils and the Satanic forces of evil.

“They’ve got to be blasted off the earth, my boy,” he said. “We are the agents of the wrath of God. We are carrying out the Divine vengeance. The angels of the Lord are with us as we fly.”

Well, that might be so. But if it were so, it was odd that the angels of God did not prevent Peter’s friends and all the other fellows in the R.A.F. from being blown to bits and burnt like moths in candle flames.

Peter Haddon thought of these things now and then as he sat in the cockpit of his Lancaster, flying on strong wings across the North Sea. That is to say, such thoughts were in his subconscious mind with other thoughts about his mother and father and his sister Pearl and vivid little pictures of Ashleigh Heath, and Fallow Green, and Surrey gardens and Soho restaurants, and the playing-fields of Charterhouse.

On the night before he was due for leave he felt in very good form. It was partly a matter of digestion. Nothing the matter with that. The other fellows smoked too many cigarettes. He had chucked that habit when he had first become a pilot, and felt all the better for it. They had a couple of hours to spare after doing the usual briefing and getting their target for the night. The Wing Commander had been a bit on the gloomy side, he thought. That is to say, he looked grave and a trifle haggard as though suffering from lack of sleep. Some of the other staff officers had the same look of gloom or at least of gravity. It had been a bad week for this bombing squadron. Two of theirs had failed to return from Duisburg, two more from Bochum, one from Gelsenkirchen. New crews and machines had turned up to replace them. Peter Haddon had lost some more of his friends. He was particularly sorry about Dick, who had had a great sense of humour and wrote astonishingly good parodies and comic verse. He had always been so vital and full of beans. It did one good to look at his whimsical face with a touch of mischief about the mouth. He had just been married and was devilish amusing about his honeymoon in Cornwall. Now he was snuffed out.

The two hours’ wait was always trying for some of the fellows, and especially to the less experienced. Peter Haddon noticed the usual signs of those who were a bit strung up. One fellow kept on lighting cigarettes and then stubbing them out after a whiff or two. Another kept fiddling with a button as he sat in one of the deep leather chairs of the smoking-lounge pretending to read a paper. The paper was upside down. Four hardened ruffians were playing bridge. They didn’t look as though they cared a damn because of a big raid over the Ruhr that night.

“Why the hell didn’t you finesse? you blighter. You gave away that trick.”

“Oh shut up, Goldilocks. Get on with this blasted game.”

Nerves a bit rattled, thought Peter.

His second pilot officer, Roger Kent, came over and flopped into the chair next to Peter's.

He was a little fellow, like a jockey, with red hair and the face of a gnome. Once he had been an actor in a repertory company.

"It's going to be a nice night for the party," he said.

"Yes," answered Peter, "and tomorrow, with any luck, I go on leave."

"That's unlucky," said Kent. "You shouldn't have mentioned it."

Peter smiled.

"All you fellows are so darned superstitious," he said. "It's like Paddy Ryan who thinks the fairies listen when he speaks incautiously."

"Oh, well, there's something in it," answered Kent. "When I was a strolling player I always knew a first night would be a wow if a black cat walked across the stage before the curtain went up."

He lowered his voice and turned to another subject.

"I always admire you, Haddon. You have your nerves so perfectly under control. You always look merry and bright before these infernal raids. You're so blasted brave."

"What's the good of worrying?" asked Peter. "I take it as it comes. I thought you did too."

"I don't like the losses we've had," answered Roger Kent. "They get me down. One misses one's pals."

"I have an idea we shall meet them again one day," said Peter. "Is there anything in that?"

"I can't be sure," answered Kent. "The padres kid us into thinking so. I'd like to believe it. But I don't think we ought to talk like this."

"Unlucky?" asked Peter Haddon, grinning at him.

"Bad form," said Kent.

"Sorry," answered Peter lightly. "Let's talk about something else. When are we going to invade the Continent? What's Churchill's next move?"

Roger Kent had the strong conviction that the invasion would begin on June 1st. He had a hunch about it.

"The war will be over by November," he said with conviction.

"Great news," answered Peter Haddon cheerfully. "Who told you that? The fairies?"

"I know one of the bugs at the War Office," said Kent. "He told me in confidence that he expected the Germans to crack within five months."

"I expect he knows as much as my aunt," replied Peter Haddon, with a quiet laugh. "Well, excuse me, old bird. I must scribble a note before we get a move on."

"Best girl stuff?" asked Kent. "Farewell kisses and all that?"

“Something of the kind,” answered Peter Haddon good-humouredly.

He wrote more than a note. It was a long letter to his mother—the usual weekly screed. She wrote twice a week as regularly as clockwork—chatty and humorous letters all about the doings at Ashleigh Heath. Now and again she got off a pretty good bit about her garden and night scenes while she was waiting for his father outside some country cottage. She helped him to see the countryside and to hear the birds and to smell the fields. She had the descriptive touch, he thought, and a sense of style, and she was never sloppy or sentimental. She seemed to take the war lightly, and certainly it did not blunt the sharp edge of her humorous mind. She never fussed about his health or safety, but he knew that she was thinking of him a lot and praying for him. Even her prayers would have a little humour, he thought. She had a gay spirit.

“Dearest Mother,” wrote Peter Haddon. He never mentioned night bombing, at least in any detail. But in tonight’s letter he said: “We are going to have another party tonight—quite a big affair I believe. Tomorrow, if all goes well, I shall have my leave at last.”

The crew of the Lancaster, L for London, were in their places at ten-thirty.

Peter Haddon had on his ear-phones and was listening to a woman's voice in the control room. She was one of those astonishing young women who were doing a good job of work with cool efficiency and skill. She had a rather pleasant voice.

As Pilot Officer, Peter Haddon had to make sure that everything was ready for the start, and spoke down the inter com to each member of the crew.

"Everything O.K., Kent?"

"All O.K."

"O.K., Ginger?"

That was his rear-gunner and a first-class man whatever happened.

"O.K., sir. Nice evening for the party."

"I hope you'll enjoy it," said Peter dryly.

And so on. He had done it a score of times before a night's raid. It was getting routine stuff, but he had the usual sense of tension before the start was made. His mind had to be alert with all its senses of touch and vision and hearing. He felt his instruments with sensitive fingers, like a pianist about to play in a symphony concert. Everything was all right. The ground staff—wonderful fellows—had seen to that. They had never let anybody down yet.

In the control room the W.A.A.F. watch-keeper was busily engaged in getting off the other bombers. She was a cool young thing, short-haired and boyish-looking. She had once been a teacher in a kindergarten and might have claimed exemption, but she had been mad on the R.A.F. and now had reached the height of ambition.

One by one she called out the names of the black bats who were all waiting to take off. "There goes B for Betty off ten-thirty-two."

"O for Orange. O for Orange. O for Orange off ten-thirty-three."

"Calling L for London. L for London."

Inside L for London Peter Haddon felt the throb of his four great engines. He knew by the rhythm that they were working perfectly, as usual. He waited for the green light which suddenly blinked forth and he taxied into the wind. He heard the voice of Roger Kent in his ears saying in a casual way which was rather forced: "Well, Peter, here we go." Opening the throttle of L for London,

Peter Haddon flew off into a night sky into which the darkness had not yet come. There was a sickle moon and the last glow of the sunset was still faintly pink. The navigating officer—Jeremy Catchpole—entered into his log-book L for London airborne ten-thirty-five.

Ginger, the rear gunner, was unusually silent and did not answer Haddon's first call. "Are you all right, Ginger?" again asked Haddon over the inter com.

"Sorry, sir," answered this Cockney champion who had once been a coster in the Commercial Road. "I got a bit of gum down my windpipe."

Peter Haddon laughed and said: "Don't choke yourself yet, my lad. The hangman's waiting for you."

He had two minds as he settled down to the long flight over the North Sea. His conscious mind was on this job in hand—his box of tricks with its heavy bomb load. His conscious mind also was listening to the hum of his engines and the voice of Jeremy Catchpole, his navigating officer, speaking over the inter com. His subconscious mind was thinking of quite different things following its own train of thought. Something about a spell of leave starting tomorrow. Tomorrow? Well, with luck. Something about Marjorie Manning. . . . Last time on leave he had played hide and seek with her two babies, little kids of three and four. Marjorie had thought it very noble of him. At least she had said: "It's very noble of you, Peter." There was nothing noble about it, but quite good fun. She was working in that factory at Farningham and said she liked it.

There was no more chit-chat for quite a while. Peter was checking his course with Catchpole now and then. Roger Kent sat utterly motionless behind Haddon, who wondered what was going on under that red hair of his. Presently the flat coastline of Holland was faintly visible through a bluish haze, like a shadow lying on the water, which was milky under the faint light of the moon getting brighter now. Once he caught a glimpse of a black shape in the distance. "Looks like one of our crowd," said Taffy Jones—the wireless operator. Haddon, who had flown this course many times before, gradually increased his height until he was at fifteen thousand feet. It was getting a little colder, but not really enough to be unpleasant.

Jeremy Catchpole's voice spoke into Peter's ear. "E.T.A. in twenty minutes."

"Keep look-out for night fighters," said Haddon. "I've heard that they're pretty thick about here."

Away from Rotterdam Haddon saw the silver streak of the Rhine three miles below. It was his guiding line to the heart of the Ruhr.

It was quiet down there in enemy territory. Not a searchlight sent its beam up—though the searchlight crews and the German gunners were perfectly aware of British bombers passing over them. They could hear the drone of this

night Armada like monstrous bees buzzing through the night at the rate one every minute or so. They were not giving their positions away until they knew what target was to be attacked. That was a new system of theirs and not a bad one.

“Turn left,” said Catchpole down the inter com.

Peter’s subconscious mind was under control. No time now for waking dreams. He was nearing his target. It would not be long now before a hellish barrage would open up on to them. The lives of those fellows behind him would be to some extent in his hands—though Catchpole as navigating officer would be mostly responsible for getting on to the target and manœuvring for position. But the pilot had to keep cool and use everything he knew about flying. He needed instinct as well as judgment—a kind of sixth sense. There was a red glow ahead in the sky. It throbbed with scarlet light and touched a few wisps of cloud, turning them into flame-coloured feathers.

“Some of the boys have got there first,” said Catchpole. “Keep high, Peter. They’re opening up on to us.”

No need to tell Peter that. He could see the enemy searchlights reaching up their long white fingers. Bunches of them on a wide arch round Dusseldorf now plainly visible. The sickle moon was bright above the black earth. There was a milky radiance in the sky where it was not throbbing with blood red pulsations. The Germans down there on the black earth were putting up the heaviest barrage. Peter Haddon saw clusters of stars twinkling below him. They were made by bursting shells. “Keep weaving,” said Catchpole. “There’s a lot of flak coming up.”

Eighteen thousand. Black birds were skimming around at a lower level. The first bombing squadron who had gone into the attack. The barrage fire was all around them. It caught them. Pilot officer Haddon, who had all his soul in his eyes, saw one bomber disintegrate. Bits of it fell and dispersed, and its fuselage was like a burning match flung away by a careless hand. Then another became a hurtling torch.

“I wonder if I’ll go on leave tomorrow,” thought Peter Haddon.

It was odd that such a thought should jump into his brain when he was listening intently to Jeremy Catchpole doing his stuff down the inter com. “Swing left. . . . Keep her steady. . . . A bit more left. . . . We shall be going down in five seconds. One . . . two . . . three. . . . Down we go, old boy.”

Two four-thousand-pounders were released from the racks at the exact moment for accurate delivery. That was after the plunge to a low level—too low for any margin of caution. Catchpole had a cool nerve. Peter Haddon was part of his machine in tune with his engines. In those few seconds he was not a human being with individual character. He was L for London and part of its power. His brain was in control of this power, but not apart from it. “Nice

work,” said a voice. That was the phrase used by Luke Feilding in charge of one of the bomb racks.

Nicely hardly described the result. L for London quivered in the shock of one explosion and then of another. The whole body of this roaring bird rocked one way and then another.

“Nearly shook my teeth out,” said Ginger, the rear gunner.

Two great fires had been lighted. A range of big buildings covering many acres had crumbled and collapsed, and out of them rose enormous tongues of fire merging into one flame through rolling clouds of smoke.

The job was done as far as L for London was concerned. The four-thousand-pounders had made a mess down there.

“Time for a getaway,” said Roger Kent.

Peter swung round and increased his height. Other bombers were arriving to light more fires and increase the area of ruin around Dusseldorf. The flak was not so intense now. Some of the German batteries had been put out of action or, anyhow, had ceased fire. Presently Peter had time to think again.

If I get out of this, he thought, I shall be on leave tomorrow. According to the law of averages it'll be my last leave. One can't expect too much nowadays. I'll make every minute of it worth while. I'll have a hell of a good time. Gardening, a bit of fishing, I might do some sketching. It makes one see more intensely and get closer to things—the shape of a twisted branch, a jolly reflection on a pond, the wavy line of some old roof, a splash of green moss on tree trunks, apple blossom, raw sienna and a lot of flake white for a haystack. I haven't touched any paints for a couple of years. Might be amusing.

Another thought came into his head when he was well away from Dusseldorf.

Some fellows of my age are already married. Lucky swine. They've made a grab at life so as to get it all in before their turn comes. It's a damn nuisance that the only girl I really like—I mean in that way—is a married woman with two kids. Nothing doing there, laddy, except tea in the garden now and then and some games with the kids, and some nice kind words from a young married woman who's the most exquisite thing I have ever met and wonderfully beautiful according to my idea of beauty, which may be fastidious. She is quite unaware of being beautiful. She has an unusual simplicity and straightforwardness. She doesn't yell or scream like some of our modern girls. She can talk intelligently about most things and she has a sense of humour like mother. She has lovely hands. Her eyes are full of laughter though she can be very serious sometimes. I like women who can be serious sometimes. She's very fond of her man whom she hasn't seen for two years. A very decent cuss I thought, but not quite up to her mark. If she weren't a married woman and the mother of two babes I might have had an ideal love

story. Anyhow, I'll walk into her garden. No harm in that. My intentions are perfectly honourable, lady. I just want to make a little joke and talk a little nonsense so that I can see the laughter in your eyes. May I have a game of bears with your two babes?

Dusseldorf was behind him now. They were over a blacked-out Germany. No searchlights reached up to them. No shells burst beneath his wings.

"Shall I take over now?" asked Roger Kent.

"Right," said Peter.

He changed places with the second pilot, that red-headed fellow with the face of a gnome.

Peter relaxed. He felt tired. Those minutes over the target had been a strain. He always felt a sense of tiredness in mind as well as body after he had brought his bomber out of a barrage. He had probably used up a lot of nervous energy without knowing it. One more raid to his score.

Fellows thought he was a lucky pilot. "Peter Haddon's luck," they said. Well, perhaps there was a bit of skill in it too, though he wouldn't claim that. Luck was nine-tenths of the game—a game of hazard.

Ginger spoke over the inter com.

"Night raiders," he said. "One overhead."

Roger Kent did some avoiding action. He increased his altitude.

Peter became alert. They were getting near Rotterdam. This was always a danger zone because of night-fighters.

He spoke to Kent.

"Keep high, old man."

Suddenly L for London gave a lurch. Something had happened to Kent. He had fallen forward and had lost control.

Jeremy Catchpole was talking rapidly through the inter com.

Peter said "Hell" in a low voice or silently inside himself. He left his seat and made a grab at Kent, who was all limp and crumpled up. He was wet where Peter held him. The wetness was warm and sticky. He was very heavy to move.

"Look after him," said Peter. "I don't think he's dead."

Other arms and hands were dealing with Roger Kent. Peter had to take over again, and pretty damn quick as he put it to himself. His four engines had taken control for a few seconds. L for London was on its way to earth—a German earth, black down there. Peter straightened out and felt master of the situation. He was sorry about Kent.

"God," said Jeremy Catchpole's voice in his ear, "that was a near thing. I thought we were for it."

"How's Kent?" asked Peter.

"He must have been killed instantly," answered Catchpole. "A bullet

through the neck, others through his ribs. Bad luck.”

“Sorry,” said Peter. “One of the best.”

“I agree,” said Catchpole. “But it was a near thing for all of us. Ginger shot down the fellow on our tail.”

“Good for Ginger,” said Peter. “I’ll have a word with him.”

He spoke down the inter com. to the rear gunner.

“Well done, Ginger. Sure you got him?”

“Couldn’t miss ’im,” answered Ginger. “Got a nice burst into ’im. Went down in flames. ’Eil ’Itler!”

Suddenly he spluttered and choked.

“What’s the matter?” asked Peter.

“Gord,” said Ginger. “It’s that chewing gum again. Swallowed it by mistake, sir. Must be excited.”

A dead man lying in his blood. Ginger swallowing his chewing gum. Jeremy Catchpole concentrating on his homeward trail. Each member of this bombing crew busy with his own thoughts. Peter was a mind in control of four great engines roaring through space with wings like a great black bat.

Journey’s end at last, above a lighted aerodrome.

“L for London . . . L for London,” called the pleasant woman’s voice. “Don’t land yet. . . . Keep going L for London. Two minutes more. Two minutes L for London.”

The stretcher-bearers were waiting for the body of Roger Kent, having been warned by wireless. The Wing Commander was there with other officers.

“Blast those night-fighters,” he said. “Are you all right, Haddon?”

“Quite O.K.,” answered Haddon. “I’m sorry about Kent.”

He went into the mess to get a cup of cocoa. So he would be going on leave. Peter Haddon’s luck.

The Reverend Timothy Marlow came out of church in his gown after early Communion service, which had been attended by only three or four women. One of them was Mrs. Haddon, who had propped her bicycle against the church porch and spoke to him before riding away. He noticed that she looked very radiant and, he thought, beautiful.

“Peter is coming on leave tomorrow. I came here for thanksgiving.”

The vicar’s eyes lighted up.

“That’s great news. Give him my love. I should like to have a chat with him.”

“Pray for him,” said Irene Haddon. “I’m sure your prayers are helpful, Saint Timothy.”

She spoke with a laugh in her eyes and voice though she meant what she said, he thought, and was abashed by her words.

“I wish they were,” he answered. “But they’re not, alas.”

She waved her thin brown hand at him—the brown hand of a lady who did much gardening—and rode off.

The vicar took the path across the churchyard to his house. He was rather glad he had escaped old Mrs. Muscat, the General’s widow. She was a grand old dame, but very talkative, and had a nose for village scandal. One of her scandals was coming down the path now. It was Molly Totteridge, who worked at the factory in Farningham. She had had an illegitimate child and had had a rough time from her father and mother and some of the neighbours. “A slut,” according to Mrs. Muscat.

“Good morning, Mollie,” said the vicar. “Off to work?”

She was a pretty girl with dark eyes, but with a full and rather sullen-looking mouth.

“Yes, worse luck,” she answered. “Same old thing every day.”

“How’s baby?” asked the vicar.

A sulky look came into the girl’s eyes.

“Oh, blast the brat,” she answered roughly. “Nobody wanted him, least of all me. I wish one could drown ’im like a kitten.”

The vicar laughed and held her arm as she tried to pass him.

“You don’t mean a word of that. He’s a fine little fellow.”

The girl hesitated and then suddenly her eyes became wet.

“You’re the only one who thinks so. You’re the only one who has ever given me a civil word since it came. And you a parson.”

“I wish you hadn’t left the choir, my dear,” said the vicar. “I’ll try to make it all right with the others if you come back.”

“Not me,” said Mollie Totteridge. “Not with them cats.” She brushed past him and went down the path.

There was a thrush singing in an old pear tree overhanging the vicarage garden. Mr. Marlow stopped to listen to its exultant and joyous notes.

“Yes, you’re a fine lad,” he said aloud. “You and your missus are having a great time with life. No rationing of worms.”

He went through the little gate in the wall. Here was his sanctuary. Here, at least, might have been his sanctuary but for invading worries in his own household. Here, anyhow, in the garden was the outward look of peace and beauty. It would be a great apple harvest. The croquet lawn had been dug up for potatoes and the vicar looked with satisfaction at his own digging. There were still flowers in the borders, however—a lovely bank of lupin with white carnations edging the bed. Their fragrance reached up to him and he stooped down to pick one. He was tempted to linger and to do a bit of weeding, which he felt very helpful to meditation and the quietude of the soul. He always felt a kind of mystical union with the Universal Spirit when he had the earth under his feet and was among growing things. But he knew that breakfast would be waiting for him. His daughter Florrie was catching an early train back to her A.T.C. camp and he wanted to see something of her before she went. She would need a little pocket-money, perhaps. Then his brother-in-law, Val—Colonel Valentine Martell—might be an early bird and eat up most of the breakfast before Florrie and her mother could get a look in. He was perfectly unconscious of taking the lion’s share, but nevertheless he took it with a noble carelessness. He was death on the marmalade.

Mr. Marlow, as it happened, was first at the breakfast table, but only by a few seconds. His daughter came down in uniform, gave him a fleeting kiss on the cheek, said “Hullo, Pa,” and proceeded to the sideboard for what she called “Eats.”

“Oh, blast it,” she cried. “These damn sausages again.”

The vicar laughed.

“They don’t get sausages, old kid, in France or Greece or any of the captured countries. But I wish you hadn’t picked up such bad language with the A.T.S. I know it doesn’t mean anything, but I don’t like to hear it on a pretty girl’s lips.”

Florrie grinned at him. She was a buxom lass of twenty-two, amazingly like her mother at the same age according to the memory of her father, but

more sturdy and plump. Perhaps her tight-fitting uniform, with its corporal's stripes, accounted for that.

"I only use strong language under the greatest provocation," she told him. "Then you wouldn't understand the words I use."

"I'm afraid I should," said her father. "I learnt to swear horribly in Flanders when I was a subaltern of the Queens. Now I try to forget it. I'm against blasphemy, even if it isn't meant."

Florrie jeered at him in a friendly way.

"You're an old-fashioned Pop, aren't you? I wish you weren't such a saint, Father. You just lie down and let people trample on you. And that reminds me. It's about time you gave Uncle Val the boot."

"He's a good fellow," answered the vicar good-naturedly.

"And he's your mother's brother. She finds him a great comfort to her."

"It's a family conspiracy," said Florrie, jerking two of the despised sausages on to her plate. "That old Colonel Blimp, my distinguished uncle, has quartered himself upon you. He's bagged the best bedroom. He eats up the week's ration of bacon in two goes. He pinches the *Telegraph* before anybody else can read it. He talks a lot of mush about strategy and tactics. He flirts with mother's female visitors. He invades your study and takes possession of it. He goes to sleep every afternoon on the drawing-room sofa with his feet on a silk cushion and, to cut it all short, he's a bloody old bore."

"My dear old thing," said the vicar, "I really wish you wouldn't use such a lot of swear words. I don't mind much, but I can't think what Mrs. Boycott would say if she overheard you."

Florrie Marlow was amused by her father's anxiety on this point.

"You needn't worry," she said. "I heard the old witch cursing her daughter yesterday in words of one syllable only allowed to sergeant-majors. But let's return to the subject of Uncle Val."

It was impossible to return to the subject of Uncle Val, as he appeared at that moment in the breakfast-room, very fresh and shining after his bath and shave. He was a fair-skinned man in spite of a career in the Indian Army, and the claws of age had not touched him much. Only a little puffiness under the eyes and the whiteness of his thin moustache marked him down as sixtyish.

"'Morning, Tim," he said very cheerily. "'Morning, Florrie my dear. Grand weather and good news on the wireless."

He went to the sideboard and lifted a silver lid from a dish.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "Those infernal sausages again."

Florrie laughed.

"Who ate the week's ration of bacon?" she asked.

"Not me," said Uncle Val. "Not more than my fair share, young woman. Don't accuse your old uncle."

“It must have been the cat,” said Florrie dryly. “Do you mind passing the marmalade.”

“Go easy with it,” said her uncle, looking anxiously at her large spoon. “Worlds may crash, but the Englishman must still have his little bit of marmalade at breakfast.”

Mrs. Marlow came down in her blue silk dressing-gown, kissed her husband on the back of his head, gave her cheek to her brother Val, and received a perfunctory kiss from a daughter in uniform.

“Anybody hear the eight o’clock news?” she asked.

Colonel Martell had heard the eight o’clock news. That fine fellow who had bombed the big dam in the Ruhr—flying low with aerial torpedoes—had done a good job of work. The water was rushing down the valley, sweeping away factories and villages and drowning the devil of a lot of people. It would slow down German arms production for several months.

“Great stuff,” said Florrie, making herself a piece of toast in an electric toaster at the side of her plate.

“I hope the flood will drown thousands more,” said Mrs. Marlow cheerfully, helping herself to two sausages.

She gave a challenging smile to her husband across the breakfast table.

He answered her smile, but accepted her challenge.

“You know you don’t mean that, my dear. You wouldn’t drown a kitten, and I can’t believe you gloat over the drowned bodies of German women and children.”

“That’s exactly what I do,” answered Mrs. Marlow calmly. “The more German women that are drowned, and the more German babies, the better it will be for the world. As well you know, Tim, I would like to see the whole German race wiped out, and the sooner the better.”

“I agree,” said Colonel Martell, putting some mustard on his plate. “Vansittart has told the truth about Germany in his *Black Record*.”

“Need we have this argument at breakfast?” asked Florrie. “Haven’t we had it a dozen times before? I’m all for smudging out the Germans, but father thinks it a bit unchristian, so why goad him at this hour in the morning?”

“I’m not goading him,” answered Mrs. Marlow. “Pass the sugar, darling.”

“And I don’t see that it’s unchristian,” said Uncle Val. “I’m a pretty good Christian myself, I hope. But I regard this war as a crusade against the spirit of evil. The Germans are possessed by seven devils or seventy times seven. They have to be punished. They deserve to be exterminated. There is such a thing as God’s vengeance. I think you will agree with me, Tim, old boy.”

The vicar had risen from his chair, he had a sermon to write that morning and hoped for some quietude in his study. He gave a little laugh directed at his brother-in-law.

“You’re a nice lot of Christians,” he said good-humouredly; “but, personally, I don’t believe that Christ stood for hatred and vengeance. I have always believed that He stood for mercy and pity and human brotherhood, and even the forgiveness of enemies. I don’t think it is really Christian to drown women and children and gloat over their floating bodies. But perhaps I’m a sentimentalist and a weak kind of Christian. The Church may be wiser than I am, and it seems to back this war with all its horrors of bombing and burning.”

“Now, look here, old boy,” said Uncle Val.

The vicar shook his head and smiled.

“I must go and write tomorrow’s sermon,” he said.

He stooped for a moment over his daughter’s chair and put his cheek against hers.

“Good-bye, my dear,” he said. “Have a good time, as far as possible. Do you want any pocket money?”

“I’m all right for money. Don’t let them bully you, Daddy,” said Florrie. “I abhor your views, but I remain your dutiful and loving daughter. So long. See you again in three weeks’ time.”

When the vicar had left the room Colonel Martell spoke to his sister with a kind of anxious gravity.

“I’m beginning to worry about Tim. Is he going a little gaga, do you think? The strain of war and all that?”

Mrs. Marlow laughed uneasily.

“Not as far as that, I hope, but I confess he makes me angry now and then. And I’m so afraid he will get into trouble by all these pacifist ideas. The congregation is already beginning to talk about it. Mrs. Pugh was quite rude about it yesterday. ‘I believe your husband is a pro-German,’ she said. ‘If so, we don’t want him here.’”

“What did you say to that, mother?” asked Florrie. “I hope you snapped her head off.”

“I said my husband was a fighting soldier in the last war and won the D.S.O. And if you call him a pro-German I’ll have to remind you of the law of libel.”

“Not too bad,” said Florrie. “Damn the woman.”

“That’s the most extraordinary thing about it,” said Colonel Martell thoughtfully. “Tim was a fine soldier in the last war. But he certainly does speak like a pro-German and a conscientious objector. It’s most distressing. It’s damned unpatriotic.”

“I know,” said Mrs. Marlow. “He drives me scranny sometimes by his hatred of all our bombing. As if the Germans hadn’t begun first, and as if they haven’t asked for everything that’s coming to them and more.”

“Oh, well,” said Florrie, “it’s not a nice kind of war, but we’ve got to get

on with it. And I've got to catch that bus or burst."

She looked at her wrist-watch, gave a squeal and made a rush for the door.

"Take care of yourself, darling," cried Mrs. Marlow.

In his study the Rev. Timothy Marlow sat down to write his sermon, but could not write it. Presently he groaned a little and paced up and down his floor deep in thought. Once he stood in front of the mantelshelf and looked at the photograph of a young officer of the last war. Gladys had put it there. It was himself twenty-five years ago. He had looked like that when he had first gone out to France in time for the Battles of the Somme. He had been keen to go out, he had been filled with the public school tradition—the tradition of Harrow. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*—he was ready to die for England. He had been wounded three times, once on the Somme, once beyond Arras and once at Passchendæle. He had been proud of his company. The men had liked him. He had enjoyed the comradeship and the adventure—until it became too much of an ordeal. His company had been wiped out many times. He had lost most of his brother officers. He had seen them mowed down by machine-gun fire and smashed by high explosives, and choked by poison gas and maimed and blinded. That had worn down his nerves, and when the armistice came something had changed in him. It was on Armistice Day that he had decided to go into the Church.

He had felt damned lonely that day thinking back to all the friends he had lost, all those Harrow boys who now lay under little wooden crosses in France and Flanders. It seemed to him, being alive by freakish odds of chance, that he must dedicate himself to the prevention of another war like this. He dedicated himself to peace. That was the only way he could serve those who had died and the boys coming after them. All that slaughter of youth would be in vain if some day it happened again. Something had changed in him. He had had mystical experiences which had startled and changed him—once when he was lying in a shell-hole on the Somme badly wounded with two dead boys beside him. His spirit had been liberated from his body, it seemed. He had had a queer vision of Divine love. And once again in Flanders, during the Passchendæle show, when his battalion had been smashed into the slimy mud of countless shell-holes and he himself lay alive among them, wounded again. He had gone into the Church with the idea of service and dedication—to the astonishment and annoyance of his young wife, who thought it silly.

Perhaps it was silly. He hadn't made a very good clergyman and he had

been constantly disappointed by the lack of spirituality and high vision among the clergy with whom he came in contact. They were content, so many of them, to take the narrow patriotic view of world affairs and to put their faith in the code of the old school tie. He had agonized over the failure of the League of Nations, and all the seething conflict in Europe. Was this the peace for which his friends had died? Was the world made safe for democracy? People forget so quickly, while he remembered the little wooden crosses in France and Flanders. Selfish interest and greed and profit-making spoiled the comradeship of the war and betrayed the dead. His wife jeered at him sometimes for taking things so seriously, for worrying himself into fiddle-strings because mankind was not angelic. That was her phrase. "We can't all be angels," she said. "You must take life as you find it."

He had seen with horror the approach of a new war. Even then people began to call him pro-German because in his small feeble way he had tried to prevent this war by advocating comradeship with the German people, before the arrival of Hitler and then afterwards until the failure of Chamberlain's Munich visit. He was not pro-German then or now. He was pro-peace and pro-Christ. Now he was in a state of hideous perplexity.

He was not lacking in patriotism. On the contrary, he had a deep and passionate love for England, and this war was not for corrupt or ignoble causes. He agreed with Uncle Val that it was against the forces of evil. Very dreadful, ruthless in its cruelties, abominable in its brutality. Many Germans were guilty of those horrors. They supported a Government which inflicted them. Some thousands certainly, perhaps some hundreds of thousands, shared that guilt and should take the punishment. But he was shocked by so-called Christians—good people like his wife and Uncle Val and many of his parishioners who demanded an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and rejoiced over drownings and death and the effect of four-thousand-pounders on German cities. There must be many good Germans, he thought. The children were innocent of all this. Youth itself had been duped and poisoned by false propaganda. In any case how could he, as a Christian priest, preach hatred when Christ preached love, or teach the gospel of Christ with any sincerity when it was utterly opposed to such a war? Surely the Church ought to condemn all war, and at least stand aloof and above the arena of murderous and bloody strife for whatever purpose. German priests were praying for victory and blessing their soldiers, while the same prayers to the same God went up in English churches. So it would go on if the Church and all Christian men and women failed to condemn war and stood for their country, right or wrong. After this war another would happen unless all spiritually-minded people combined to prevent it. Who would be our next enemy? Russia? Were we to have a holy crusade against Russia? It would be easy to arrange that. It

would be easy to drift into it. This war had been forced upon us. We had gone far to keep the peace—too far as many people thought. Yes, he agreed when Hitler showed the cloven hoof and Germany was held by a gang of power-loving gangsters. But the story went back farther than that. It went back to the Armistice, when for a little while the common folk of all countries were ready for a new kind of brotherhood and comradeship. They had been let down by their leaders who had fallen back into the old ways of power politics and national rivalry. The League of Nations had been betrayed by insincere men who gave only lip-service to its ideals. Hitler had come to power partly at least because of our own folly and lack of vision, and our failure to fulfil the promises of a better world made to those who had fought and died for it. We shared the guilt of that. We had failed like all others to advance one step to a more spiritual ideal of human brotherhood.

The British people had been wonderful in the darkest hours. They had reached heights of spirituality in their self-sacrifice and valour during the Blitz over England. How brave they had been while waiting for invasion, expecting to hear the church bells ring, knowing that if it came much of England and many of their own lives and all their liberty and chance of happiness would be blotted out. There had been no panic. He had looked into the eyes of women and seen only this strange spiritual valour. Even now in the factories and the little homes women whose husbands were in the Forces, these lonely young wives and mothers, went on with their drudgery and kept up their spirit. Would all that lead to nothing more than preparation for new wars? Would the children now being born have to be the gun-fodder of another struggle? World War No. III. They were already talking about it. It would happen if the Churches and the spiritual leaders could get no farther than national patriotism, if every time war happened they stood behind it and gave it their blessing. How could Christianity prevail if the clergy and the Bishops failed to denounce war as a violation of Christ's teaching, and if the minds of the people were becoming accustomed to killing? Over drawing-room tea-tables women heard that fifty thousand Germans had been killed or forty thousand Russians, without a tremor. They wanted more Germans killed. They wanted more German babies drowned. Was he just a silly old sentimentalist in being shocked by that? Was he torturing himself vainly because he could not reconcile such views with any Christian sincerity? Could he be honest preaching the love of Christ on Sunday, and identifying himself with this hatred and lust for vengeance from Monday till Saturday? That was his personal and private dilemma. It was all very bewildering. It made him feel damnably dishonest sometimes.

The Rev. Timothy Marlow, who was suspected of going gaga by his brother-in-law, tried to write his sermon in the midst of this perplexity. He

found it very difficult. It was made more difficult by the entry of Uncle Val, who came in whistling “I will give thee the keys of Heaven.”

“I say, old boy,” said Uncle Val, “I’ve run out of cigarettes. Could I pinch one or two?”

“Help yourself, my dear fellow,” said the vicar.

“Thanks, old boy.”

Uncle Val helped himself from a box on the mantelshelf.

He took a dozen.

Peter Haddon arrived at King's Cross on his first day of leave, took a taxi to Waterloo and caught the train to Farningham—it was a Portsmouth train crowded with sailors—and was just in time to get the twenty-to-four bus to Ashleigh Heath.

He enjoyed the journey. It was five months since he had had a spot of leave and he felt like a schoolboy on the first day of the summer holidays. Now no more night raids for a little while. No more flak reaching up to his wings. No more night-fighters chasing his Lancaster through the sky and getting in a burst of machine-gun fire to kill Roger Kent or some other fellow.

A sailor insisted on giving up his seat to him in a smoking carriage on the way from Waterloo.

“My dear fellow,” said Peter, “keep your seat and God bless the Royal Navy.”

The sailor grinned and sat on the arm of his chair.

“The Royal Navy,” he said, “is all right and no mistake, but the R.A.F. is doing most of the fighting and most of the dying just now, ain't it?”

“Well, it's damn good of you,” said Peter, taking the vacant seat. “But these little islands and their funny people—I love 'em all—are very grateful to you bluejackets for providing enough food for their stomachs and hunting down the U-boats.”

“Oh, we 'ave a soft time compared with the R.A.F.,” said another bluejacket looking like a grown-up cherub.

They kept on breaking into song in a kind of humming way. One of them seemed obsessed by one tune which he whistled softly over and over again—one line of it. It was a line from Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*.

After one of these bursts of melody one of the bluejackets addressed Peter. He had a public school accent.

“How long is the Hun going to stand up against your hammering?”

Peter raised his two hands and smiled.

“Ask me another, old man. That's too difficult for me.”

“Been over Germany?” asked the young bluejacket.

“Twenty-nine times,” said Peter.

“Gosh!”

This statement by Peter aroused the astonished admiration of the four sailors around him.

“Time you had a rest,” said one of them. “Once would be enough for me.”

“It must want a lot of nerve,” said another. “If we have to abandon ship we have the sea below us and not far below. But I wouldn’t care to bale out over a fiery furnace.”

“Nor would I,” agreed Peter. “I haven’t done it yet.”

They eyed him with a simple admiration, looking at the ribbon on his chest and sizing him up.

“When is invasion coming?” asked one of them. “Isn’t it time the Eighth Army and all the rest of ’em struck somewhere else? Can’t understand all this delay. Strike while the iron’s hot is my motto.”

After the capture of thirty thousand men and more in the peninsula of Cape Bon with many generals, there was a lull, and after this great victory which had driven the Germans clean out of Africa, the British people were impatient for more. Hopes had gone so high that reaction followed. Everyone was asking when shall we invade the Continent?

Peter Haddon did not commit himself.

“You fellows know better than anybody what it means to convoy a crowd of shipping. It’s no use our sending small packets to do a big job. How many ships shall we want to hurl a million men into France?”

“Gor blimy,” exclaimed the bluejacket who looked like a grown-up cherub. “A million?”

Well, all that was amusing to a pilot officer of Bomber Command home on leave. In the bus to Ashleigh Heath he saw a girl he knew. He had thought of her when he was flying towards Dusseldorf. She had come into his mind as one of the reasons for wanting leave so badly and defeating the law of averages until he got it. It was Marjorie Manning.

She had her back turned to him as he stood in a crowded bus and he leaned over her.

“Hullo, Marjorie!”

She turned to look up at him.

“Hullo, Peter! Welcome back.”

“You’re looking wonderful,” he told her. “Everybody looks wonderful and everything I see. The cottages, the flowers, the trees, the hills. I’m going to have a good time.”

Mrs. Manning smiled up at him.

“You deserve it,” she said. “If I can help in any way—”

“You can. By letting me into your garden now and then for a game of bears with the kids, and a talk afterwards on a quiet lawn. That’s all I want.”

“It’s not much,” she answered. “You can have all that and the babes will be

wild with excitement when I tell them. Your mother will be overjoyed to see you. We all marvel at her courage about you.”

“She’s a darling, isn’t she?” said Peter, as though his mother were a pretty girl he loved.

They could not have much more conversation, as other people crowded in.

At Ashleigh Heath he helped her out of the bus by offering his hand, which she took with a laugh as though amused by that old-fashioned stuff.

“How’s Gerald?” he asked. “I was glad to hear that he reached Tunis with his tanks safe and sound. Pretty marvellous, after all that desert fighting with hard nuts to crack.”

Marjorie Manning nodded.

“He seems to have enjoyed it all. He’s a born soldier and likes the adventure of it. He’s having a wonderful time in Tunis. But he only writes by air mail and doesn’t tell me much.”

“Still a factory girl?” he asked, looking at her slim form in trousers and a polo shirt.

“I may have to give it up,” she told him. “My sister Clare is getting fractious and fed up with looking after the little ones.”

She held out her hand.

“Come and see me soon, Peter,” she said. “Any time after supper or on Saturdays and Sundays.”

“I shall be strolling round,” he answered. “I’m glad I met you in the bus. Funny thing. I was thinking of you quite a lot when I was flying towards Dusseldorf in my last raid before leave.”

“That was nice of you,” she answered. “Have a good time, Peter.”

She raised her hand with a smiling salute and went across the Heath to her own little house which faced it.

Peter strode through the village and had a friendly welcome home from at least six people on his way. One was Mrs. Marlow, the vicar’s wife, who came across the road to him with hands outstretched.

“Peter? I would like to kiss you on both cheeks.”

“Why not,” he asked; “and, on the other hand, why?”

“You are one of our heroes,” she told him with a look of devoted admiration. “You have killed thousands of Huns with your beautiful bombs. Thank God for that, and thank you, Peter Haddon.”

He was rather staggered by those words and laughed loudly.

“Oh, I don’t think of it like that. I’m rather sorry for them really. As a matter of fact I’m only a blind instrument of Fate flying to a target for which I’m briefed and then flying home again. It’s all very impersonal.”

“You young men are winning the war,” she said. “I give it another six weeks. But don’t let me keep you another moment from your mother. I’m sure

she's longing for you. Have a good time, dear boy."

The others hoped he would have a good time. One of them was Robert Fellowes, that retired Indian civil servant, whose son had been blinded in Tunisia. He gripped Peter's hand and gave a warm greeting.

"Glad to see you back, Peter. Have a good time."

"Thanks, sir," said Peter. "I'm looking forward to it."

He dared not say anything about Quentin, who had been a friend of his. He had heard about his blindness.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Peter," said an old man standing at his cottage gate. "Fine to see you back for a time."

He was an old gardener who had worked for them a few years ago.

"Welcome home, sir," said an elderly woman who had been a nanny to many children in Surrey and now lived alone in a little cottage with a thin stretch of garden in front of it, ablaze with colour on each side of the path.

"Going strong, I hope?" asked Peter, halting to have a word with her. Years ago she had taught him to wash behind the ears, and to behave like a little gentleman, if possible.

"I hate this war," she told him. "So many of my young gentlemen are being killed. It was the same in the last war. I didn't think I could live through another."

"Oh, well, it won't last for ever, Nanny," answered Peter. "Keep your spirit up, old dear."

He gave her the victory sign and strode on to the end of the village. It was good to come back. He liked this welcome home. It was rather touching, he thought. Good will went out to him.

He went through the gate of his father's house, and walked round to the garden. He was certain that his mother would be there on a day like this. Yes, there she was, sticking up some clumps of Canterbury Bells. She heard his footsteps on the gravel path and dropped her basket at the sight of him.

"Hullo, Mother!" said Peter.

She looked lovely in his eyes. He had always thought her beautiful. He was glad he had found her in the garden. She looked best among flowers.

"Hullo, Peter!" she cried, with a little laugh.

In a second he had his arms round her and kissed a thin cheek which was wet to his lips.

"Sorry, Peter," she said. "I can't help piping my eye just for a second. How silly!"

"Perfectly ridiculous," he told her, holding her tighter. They had always been very good friends.

Nine wonderful days. Peter Haddon tried to cram everything into them; all that was good in life, all that he liked, all that was lovely. He was very sensitive to the world about him. He had a painter's eye for the shapes of things, and the play of light and shadow, and the modelling of a face, and the grace of a body. During these nine days he looked at everything as though he might see it for the last time, or as if he wanted to get it all into his mind and senses. He paused for a moment on the green when he was walking with his mother, to smile at the wavy roof-line of one of the old houses and to study its tall chimney-stacks.

"Very amusing," he said. "I must remember that."

He went for a walk with her through Fallow Green, crossing a wooden bridge below which a little stream glinted with light which came through overhanging boughs heavy with May blossom.

"Nice for a water-colour sketch," he remarked, and then became interested in a young frog down there.

"If one knew all about frogs one would know all about God," he said. "The tadpole stage seems to tell the story of evolution. By gum, there's a fish. Stay quiet, Mother."

"What a Peter Pan you are," she cried once. "You haven't grown up. Thank goodness you haven't grown up. You're still my little schoolboy always asking 'Why?'"

He took her hand and they walked along the bank of the stream, clogged here and there by weeds.

"Let's sit awhile and survey the scene," said Peter. "This is a pleasant spot. Look at the light on those little low hills. Very jolly, don't you think?"

He lay at full stretch with his face to the sun. The weather was being kind to him. It was a miraculous Spring for England, with a rush of exuberant life among all growing things. Summer flowers could not wait for their season and burst out before their predecessors had lost their glory. Tiny apples began to swell in all the orchards with the promise of a rich harvest, too heavy for the orchards unless coming winds would thin them out. Wild flowers spangled the grass and hedgerows with a tapestry of all colours. Weeds made jungles of Surrey gardens once so trim, and now unkempt because the gardeners had been

taken to lay out aerodromes destined for American squadrons now winging their way across the Atlantic. May changed her clothes into those of leafy June.

“The urge of life is astonishing,” said Peter. “It’s almost desperate in its lust for living. Terrific greediness for existence and growth. As a human animal I share that greed. I want to hug it all—every sensuous impression, every glint of sunlight, every experience which life offers before—”

He did not end that sentence and glanced quickly at his mother, hoping that she had not ended it in her mind. But she had. Without looking at him she stretched out her hand and put her fingers through his hair as he lay quite close to her in the grass. He lay quite silently for a while and then made a remark which seemed as though he had been pursuing the same line of thought. He made it in a humorous way.

“It would be amusing to fall in love and get married. I’m missing that from my experience of life.”

“Why don’t you, Peter?” asked Irene Haddon. “There are lots of nice girls about all ready to fall in love with you if you give them half a chance.”

He laughed and disagreed with this.

“Hardly possible on nine days’ leave, especially as most young females are working in factories or government offices or travelling around the country—the Lord knows why—in some kind of uniform and lots of kit. Strapping young wenches, rather hot and sweaty.”

He sprang up and held out a strong hand to his mother.

“We’d better get back, hadn’t we? Pearl will be home soon, and I promised to have a game of hide and seek with Marjorie Manning’s kids before they go to bed.”

“Marjorie is lovely,” said Irene Haddon, “and she has a good little brain, I should say.”

Peter agreed.

“Unusually intelligent.”

“I’m so sorry for all these lonely young wives,” said Mrs. Haddon. “It’s very tragic for them.”

“I daresay many of them feel happier without the men. I’m not sure it isn’t a good idea for wives to see their husbands only very occasionally. Some men make a damn nuisance of themselves, no doubt.”

He spoke jestingly and was only half-serious.

“Your father has never made himself a nuisance to me,” said Mrs. Haddon with a laugh. “But a doctor is not often at home.”

So this mother and son talked together like that, each of them avoiding all talk of war or night raids or the odds of chance for a pilot officer of Bomber Command on leave for nine days.

It was with Marjorie Manning that he had a serious conversation one evening. She began it after he had been playing with her two children, one a boy of four and a half and the other a girl of three not yet introduced to her father because she had been born during his absence in Egypt.

They had said good-night and were being dragged off reluctantly to bath and bed by their Aunt Clare, who was Marjorie's elder sister.

"Peter," she said, "what are you going to do about the post-war world when it comes?"

She sat back in a garden chair in the shade of an apple tree. She had changed her factory clothes and wore a garden frock which made her look very young and girlish. There were no stockings on her legs, which were pretty legs, as Peter thought.

"There may be no post-war for me," he answered with a smile. "I am in one of the dangerous trades."

"You'll come through all right, Peter," said Marjorie Manning with perfect confidence, as though she knew the future of life. "It will be up to you to reshape things, won't it?"

"To me personally?" he asked, with a smile in his eyes. "I'm afraid I can't accept that responsibility. No, Ma'am."

"Peter," she said seriously, "my boy Jeremy is four and a half years old. In fourteen years he will be old enough to be called for World War No. III if it happens. Are you going to let it happen? I mean, are you and all your friends going to let the old people and the old gang make another mess of things as they did after the last war, and sow more dragons' teeth to make the next war certain? I don't want Jeremy to be made healthy and strong and well trained in order to be a soldier of World War III. I can't see the sense of life or any good in it if we mothers have to bear children just for all this murder and maiming."

"No," said Peter; "I agree with that."

It was very pleasant here in her garden he thought. There was a jolly pattern of tracery through the branches of the apple tree. A thrush was singing in the hedge. There was a scent of sweet briar close to him somewhere. His eyes bathed in the colour of a flower-bed with tall blue lupins behind a mass of gold-petalled flowers.

"I'm serious," said Marjorie Manning, "don't let your mind wander away from the subject, Peter. I'm asking you what you're going to do about it. And I don't mean Peter Haddon only, but the men of the Eighth Army who have done so gloriously in North Africa. What are they going to do when they come back? Let things rip? Go back to the old order? Pass on control to those who want to hold on to power and keep everything exactly as it was until the next war appears on the horizon and the call comes to Jeremy and his contemporaries?"

"I think about it sometimes," answered Peter. "It's all very difficult, isn't it?"

He had sometimes talked about the shape of things to come with some of his friends in the R.A.F. A few of them—his rear-gunner Ginger among them—were on the extreme left and had unmeasured admiration for Russia. They were all for some system of Communism and talked a lot about vested interests, and the tyranny of trusts and combines, and the iniquity of the bankers who controlled credit and restricted its issue, causing tidal waves of unemployment. Most of the others were pretty mild in their political views, but thought there ought to be great changes giving the average man a better chance of security, but keeping things much as they were. One or two talked mostly of a spiritual revival which they thought was the only hope of mankind.

Marjorie Manning smiled at Peter's phrase, "It's all very difficult."

"I seem to have heard that before," she said. "My father used it in the last war. It won't carry us very far."

"How far do you want to go?" asked Peter cautiously.

She had her answer ready. It was clear to him that she had been thinking passionately about all this.

"I'm ready to go as far as the leadership of youth will take us, even if it means sharing everything with everybody."

Peter raised his eyebrows humorously.

"The leadership of youth? Wasn't that the phrase used by the Fascist boys and the Nazi lads? Hasn't it taken them down the wrong road?"

Marjorie Manning's eyelashes flickered for a moment.

"That's a nasty one," she admitted. "I don't quite know the answer."

She found the answer presently. She meant the leadership of young men with fine ideas and generous enthusiasm for all humanity, and completely new standards of value about money and material comforts or luxuries. Surely among the men who had been fighting in the Desert and all those in Europe who had seen the extreme horrors of modern war there would be a new leadership to make a better kind of world for everyone. A world without war.

"What do you think, Peter?"

Her eyes had a little flame in them. She spoke with great feeling and sincerity, he thought. It made her look more lovely.

"I'm all for it," he answered. "But, honestly, I don't know what's working in the minds of my contemporaries, if anything. They all have different views, and they don't know much about economics and political history. They're pretty vague about it all. As far as I'm concerned—"

He broke off with a laugh as though his unfinished thought amused him. But it was not really amusing. He was thinking that as far as he was concerned the post-war world might not be his mundane affair. He might not be in it. He

was, he thought, like an old man on the brink of death to whom the problems of the future were not of personal importance, and would have to be left to the next crowd.

“As far as you are concerned?” asked Marjorie, smiling again in answer to his laugh.

“There’s too much of this youth stuff,” he said, avoiding his secret thought. “What is youth? When does it begin and end? With the boys of eighteen who don’t know the first thing about life? Or is a man of thirty still in the army of youth? What about forty?”

“Oh, one can’t draw a hard and fast line,” admitted Marjorie. “And, of course, we want to take advice from our elders now and then, with the freedom to reject it if it’s dug into the old ruts and afraid of change.”

She laughed now herself.

“Perhaps I’m talking awful nonsense, but I don’t want my children—or anybody’s children—to be bombed and blasted. And I hate the idea of going back to the old caste system. Since I’ve been in that factory I’ve become democratic. I’ve become a bit of a Socialist. Why should I have more wealth than those girls? They are grand.”

“We shall lose something if we’re all on the level,” said Peter. “I don’t believe much in the lowest common denominator. We may lose the fine flower of civilization and individual quality. Still, I’m all for raising the minimum.”

So they talked in an English garden, very quiet and very peaceful, with birds singing their evensong.

“I must go,” said Peter presently. “I mustn’t desert the family.”

He rose from his chair and looked round the garden and then at Marjorie Manning.

“It’s all very lovely here,” he said. “I hate to tear myself away.”

“Come again often,” said Marjorie. “But I mustn’t be greedy. Your mother has first claim.”

“Greedy?” asked Peter, surprised by that word. “Greedy for me? I wish I could believe that.”

He laughed at the idea of Marjorie being greedy for him. That was quite absurd and quite impossible.

“It’s nice to talk to a man sometimes,” said Marjorie. “This is a woman’s world round here now that all the men are away. And it’s nice to talk to you, Peter, because you listen to my nonsense as though I were talking words of wisdom. Besides, I used to pull your hair and wrestle with you—all legs and arms—in that little school we went to years ago. Dear Peter Pan!”

When he took her hand to say good-bye she offered him her cheek and he kissed her lightly.

“Is that fair on your distinguished husband?” he asked rather shyly.

“No harm in a friendly kiss,” she answered lightly.

“That’s true,” he agreed. “I’ll come for another tomorrow.”

He walked out of her garden. He was getting a lot out of his nine days’ leave. Every minute of it counted. Every second was precious and exquisite. That second when he kissed her cheek was very good indeed.

Pearl Haddon had been glad to see Peter and sorry that she had to go up to town every day while he was on leave. But they had some good talks with each other in the long light evenings and sometimes sat up talking long after their father and mother had gone to bed. They had quarrelled fiercely as children. As a small girl Pearl had suffered from an inferiority complex about her big brother, who could do most things better than she could, such as cricket, climbing trees, and riding. Her secret adoration and hero worship had been concealed under verbal fireworks and physical tussles. Well, they had grown out of all that, and talked reasonably and seriously about most things with friendly candour and few concealments.

One night during his nine days' leave she came into his bedroom in her dressing-gown and sat on the edge of his bed. He was reading a book called *The Last Enemy*, but put it down when she came in.

"A very fine book and rather helpful in a way," he said, "but if you want to talk I've no objection. On the contrary, I'm coming to the opinion that sleep wastes a lot of life. We sleep too much when we might be up and about."

She picked up his book and glanced at it.

"Who is the 'Last Enemy'?" she asked.

"Death," he told her.

"Oh!"

"We all have to face that," he said, after a moment's silence. "Some of us sooner than others."

"Does it worry you?" she asked.

"Not much. Sometimes I think it's a bit queer to be very much alive at one second and perfectly dead a moment later. But I can't say I funk it. Sometimes I wonder what is on the other side—if anything."

"There must be something on the other side," said Pearl thoughtfully; "otherwise it wouldn't be worth while suffering all kinds of agony like this war, and trying to keep a certain decent code, and all that. Besides, we're Christians, aren't we? If so, we're bound to believe in the Resurrection, aren't we?"

Peter smiled at this way of putting it.

"You don't seem very certain whether you're a Christian or not. I'm afraid

we're both like that. In fact our generation seems to be like that, groping for truth but not finding it with any sense of certainty—apart from the Catholics, who seem to have no difficulty with their faith. I envy them. All the same I have an odd sort of conviction, not intellectual exactly, but a kind of consciousness that we go on after death. That may be a wish thought, due to the desire of the ego to continue its personality. But I think there's something more in it than that. I think there must be a Mind behind all this beauty of the world, behind all this pattern and design which we call life. What I call Mind, other people call God. And it seems possible to me that mind may exist without body—or body as we know it. Everything material is really energy—electrons revolving around protons. That is to say, there is nothing material in actual fact. All is an illusion or an appearance. A kind of dream-world made by our own thought and senses. Perhaps we shall walk into another kind of dream, as real as this to ourselves—perhaps a continuation of this.”

Pearl laughed.

“All that's too difficult for me,” she said. “But I believe in a future life apart from all reason or evidence. And I think most of us do instinctively. Otherwise we shouldn't be so careless of death or take so many risks. I mean people of our age, Peter. Your friends and mine. Girls who drove their ambulances into the heart of the London Blitz and didn't care a damn, or didn't let it bother them, because they were out to save other people.”

“I know,” said Peter. “My crowd is mostly like that unless they lose their nerve. The idea of death doesn't frighten 'em much. The more vitality one has the less one is afraid. That's rather odd.

“I suppose patriotism is a very powerful passion though we never talk about it. I suppose all of us would rather die than see England invaded and defeated. I know I would. I suppose that really is the urge behind us to face all hell if need be, that and personal pride not to show the white feather or the yellow streak. A fellow doesn't let down his side and all that schoolboy stuff. Very good in its way, no doubt. Anyhow, it does the trick. To defend England is like defending our mother. I daresay the Germans feel exactly the same. Hitler or no Hitler.”

“I suppose you kill a lot of Germans?” said Pearl, with a question in her voice. “You can't avoid it, I suppose?”

Peter nodded again.

“Bound to,” he said. “But I can't say the thought gives me any pleasure. I'm sorry for the civil population in the industrial towns. Very decent people, I dare say.”

“Some of them,” agreed Pearl. “But if they go on supporting Hitler they must take the consequences.”

“They can't do anything else,” said Peter, “poor devils! They're just

trapped.”

“They might revolt against it,” said Pearl. “And too many of them are involved in all these atrocities and horrors. They all know about Poland. They made a film of it. They can’t plead ignorance.”

Peter raised his eyebrows slightly.

“I thought you refused to be a Hun hater. I thought you had a soft spot in your heart for Germans, or at least admitted that there were good Germans as well as bad. Personally, I’m prepared to admit it.”

“I shall never talk to a German again,” said Pearl.

She spoke the words almost fiercely, and her lips tightened.

Peter looked at her searchingly and then laughed.

“So you’ve done with that fellow Karl?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ve done with him,” answered Pearl.

“I liked him,” said Peter. “He was a good type. But I don’t want to rake up painful emotions, old girl.”

“That’s all right,” answered his sister.

For a moment they were silent. They were both listening. Above the roof of Dr. Haddon’s house there was the heavy vibration of great engines high up in the sky. It was like the buzzing of monstrous bees.

“Target for the night,” said Peter. “My crowd, perhaps. I can’t say I’m sorry not to be with them. I’m having an excellent spot of leave.”

“Mother hates that noise when you’re away,” said Pearl. “It fills her with terror, though she tries to hide it.”

Peter was astonished to hear those words.

“Oh, I can hardly believe that,” he answered. “Mother has the Spartan code. She never fusses about me.”

“I went into her room one night,” said Pearl. “She was trembling. I had to hold her in my arms.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” said Peter.

Presently he yawned a little, and Pearl took the hint.

“Well, good night, big brother.”

She kissed her hand to him and slipped out of his room.

He was going to lunch with her next day in town. They were both to be the guests of that American kinsman, as he called himself, Edward D. Haddon of Massachusetts. She had already lunched with him several times.

20

Staff-Sergeant Edward D. Haddon, of the United States Army, was having a good time in England, and hoped he would stay there for a considerable time—despite frequent rumours that his special unit would be wanted elsewhere in the near future.

These rumours were fairly serious. They came from staff clerks who dealt with the General's orders and correspondence, or from officers who talked freely after double English whiskies in London hotels.

"This atrocious English weather," said one of them in the hearing of young Haddon lunching in the Restaurant des Gourmets in Lisle Street, Soho. "Thank God, we shall soon be changing it for a sunnier clime. Oranges and lemons, brother!"

"How do you know that?" asked another officer at the same table. "Personally, I guess we're here for the duration. I expect to talk with an Oxford accent and marry an English dame."

"You won't have time," said his friend. "Take it from me that our bunch will be going through the Straits of Gibraltar before the apples ripen in English orchards. We're for the next show-down."

"Then why the hell did they send us here?" asked his friend.

"Now, I'll tell you."

He lowered his voice. Edward Haddon did not hear the rest of it. But the beginning of it had given him a vague sense of uneasiness, as did all these rumours of leaving England for the Mediterranean or elsewhere. He was not averse to active operations. On the contrary, he would be disappointed if he did not see some fighting on the way to victory. But he wanted a bit more time in England. He had made some very pleasant contacts. He was having a grand time. He had fallen in love with England and with one girl in England. Yes, he was under no illusion about that. He had fallen very deeply in love with a young kinswoman of his—Pearl Haddon of Ashleigh Heath. He thought her the most beautiful thing he had met in life—all that he had imagined of English girlhood, so delicate and fine and proud, so exquisite in grace, so candid—like Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

One of the men at table with him in the Restaurant des Gourmets was not in love with England, or with any English girl. It was young Holzapfel of

Kennebunkport in Maine.

“This is a fine country—for a week,” he said, over a plate of *gigot d’agneau*, which seemed distasteful to him.

Young Haddon grinned at him.

“What’s your quarrel?” he asked.

Holzapfel, who had been through Harvard and was not without a knowledge of history, turned his blue eyes on to young Haddon and smiled back good-naturedly. He had the straw-coloured hair of his Germanic ancestry.

“I have one long big quarrel,” he answered, “in spite of my neighbour Kenneth Roberts, in Kennebunkport, who has written Oliver Wiswell trying to prove that the English Tories were right after all, I don’t forget George III and all his blackguards. I don’t forget that England is our hereditary enemy. I don’t forget that they made suckers of us in the last war and are making suckers of us in this.”

Haddon laughed and spoke ironically.

“Yes, sir. We’ve come over here to save the British Empire. Our buddies, and maybe ourselves, are going to die in the fields of Europe because the darned English can’t take care of a war which is theirs and not ours.”

“You’ve said it, brother,” said Holzapfel. “And that’s God’s own truth.”

“It’s God’s own poppycock,” answered Haddon, with a touch of anger. “If it hadn’t been for the R.A.F. and the British Navy and Merchant Service, we Americans would be walking through the ruins of our skyscrapers. Do you think the United States can live freely in a world dominated by gangsters? Do you think we should have any security with Latin America as the jumping-off ground for the lovely Nazis? British heroism saved civilization—including ours—when this little island stood alone and refused to surrender in its soul.”

Another man at Haddon’s table in the Restaurant des Gourmets laughed good-naturedly at Haddon’s words. He was a long lean fellow from Fort Worth, Texas, who had been on a ranch before being drafted for the war which had seemed the hell of a long way off and no concern of his until something happened at Pearl Harbour.

“You boys make me smile,” he said. “You get all hit up about the causes of this World War II, and whether England is a land of heroes or a playground of dirty politicians who get other people to fight their battles. What the hell! We’re all of us suckers, ain’t we? The poor darned peoples can’t do a thing about their own destiny. They have just to line up as gun-fodder when the bunch of crooks on top say the word ‘Go’. This war is the same old racket between the Al Capones of the world. You and I, friends, can’t do a darned thing about it.”

Haddon had been glancing round the restaurant. He had an idea that it contained a great deal of the meaning and drama of this war.

These people sitting at the tables could tell some pretty tragic stories, he thought. Back of them would be the history of Nazi tyranny and cruelty, and Hitler's invasion of peace-loving countries, and the courage of men who refused to surrender, and in exile were still putting up a fight, with England as their sanctuary and last stronghold. Two French naval officers were sitting at one of the tables. At another was an elderly man, obviously a Jew, with his son and daughter. Across the room were some Polish officers, talking in low earnest voices. A French woman shabbily dressed, but with a touch of smartness, was smoking a cigarette over her coffee while she talked in French to an English officer of the Guards—a very young man with a fair moustache and the complexion of a new-born babe.

"This England is a great country—for a week," said the man from Fort Worth, Texas.

"It's going to seed," said Holzapfel. "It's old and decrepit and corrupt. London is a rubbish heap of junk. English women don't know how to dress, and I haven't seen a pretty girl yet. I'd give a million dollars if I had the chance of a walk down Fifth Avenue again."

Haddon brought back his roving glance and looked at Holzapfel.

"Some folks don't know what they're looking at," he said. "They have a moral and spiritual squint. They just don't understand English women are shabby because they're making munitions and wearing four-year-old frocks while they get on with the war. London shops don't carry any luxuries because the people are putting everything into war stuff. When I walk round London, with its shuttered shops and look of desolation, I get a great kick out of it. It's a fortress city, whose citizens took the Blitz without flinching, and came up from the cellars of bomb-blasted houses choked with dead, maybe, and did not wail. I feel proud to be walking in its streets. I'm glad that my ancestors were English folk."

Holzapfel laughed at him again.

"My God, Haddon," he said, "you make me feel sick with your sentimentality. You're just wallowing in false romance. I expect you've fallen in love with some starry-eyed English girl with flat feet and long teeth."

Haddon coloured up hotly for a moment, but laughed off this remark.

"Your German name warps your mental outlook," he said. "I believe you've tattooed the Swastika on your right arm."

He left the restaurant early. He had arranged to meet Pearl Haddon in St. James's Park at half-past one. She had agreed to stroll around with him for half an hour before going back to her work for war prisoners in the old Palace.

She was waiting for him on the bridge over the lake.

A number of young girls, bareheaded, from Government offices perhaps, were leaning over the bridge in their luncheon hour watching the ducks.

Over the bridge with its vista of the Foreign Office and the Admiralty with little turrets and domes curiously Oriental and dream-like under the blue sky of a golden day—not so rare in England during this early Summer as Haddon had thought—was typical of London in wartime. Staff officers from Whitehall came across in pairs chatting together in what Haddon believed to be the Oxford accent. There were naval officers and French marines, and young girls in uniform, and young soldiers in battle-dress.

They all looked cheerful and there was no sign in their eyes or on their faces of the ordeal through which they had passed when they awaited invasion and heard the enemy aeroplanes over their chimneys.

Young Haddon overheard the words of an English officer.

“What did Churchill mean by that cryptic remark: ‘Before the leaves of Autumn fall’? Invasion?”

“Not on the Continent,” said the other. “Impossible.”

“Sicily?”

They passed on, and young Haddon raised his hand in salute to a pretty girl. To him she looked more than pretty. She looked beautiful, he thought. So tall and slim and straight, so delicate and exquisite, like an English daffodil, he thought.

As though she knew he was coming she turned suddenly from looking over the bridge and met his eyes. She raised her hand in answer to his salute and said: “Hullo, Cousin Edward!”

“This is going to be a wonderful half-hour for me,” he told her.

“Why wonderful?” she asked, with a smile at his sense of wonderment.

“I find it wonderful,” he said, “meeting you here like this. To me London in war-time is always wonderful and I’m surprised to find myself here. Somebody once said: ‘War is hell’—General Sherman, I believe. Well, I guess he knew, and I’m not contradicting him, but this St. James’s Park on this particular day seems to me like Paradise. The English climate has been very much maligned.”

“Which way shall we walk?” asked Pearl. “Not a chance of a seat, I’m afraid.”

They walked on the edge of the lake and there, by luck, found two vacant chairs.

Pearl spoke of Churchill’s words at the Guildhall—“Before the leaves of Autumn fall we shall attack in the Mediterranean and elsewhere.”

“Does he mean the invasion of Europe?” she asked this young American.

He referred to the words he had heard pass between two English officers on his way to the bridge.

“One distinguished member of the British Army says that’s impossible. Maybe he knows. Maybe Sicily is next on the list. Well, I’m willing to leave it to your Winston Churchill. I guess he knows the right time and place.”

“Russia is yelping for a Second Front,” said Pearl. “I should have thought Tunisia was that all right.”

“We’re going to have trouble with those Russians,” said Haddon grimly.

Then he laughed.

“Don’t let’s spoil this half-hour by political conversation. Tell me how you’re getting on with that good work of yours.”

“My prisoners of war?” asked Pearl.

She smiled and then gave a little sigh.

“The poor dears in my section are not all as happy as they should be. Some of the wives have gone off with other men. Disloyal little sluts!”

Her American kinsman was more tolerant.

“I’m sorry for all you young women,” he said. “It’s darned hard on you having to carry on alone so long.”

Pearl glanced at him sideways and her eyes softened.

“You seem to understand human nature,” she told him. “And it’s not for me to cast stones at my sisters. I haven’t been as loyal as once I thought I should be.”

He was startled by her words.

“Loyal to whom?” he asked. “You haven’t been concealing a husband from me, have you?”

He asked the question lightly, but with an anxious look.

Pearl laughed and then gave a sigh.

“I was in love with a man once. I was engaged to him. Now I’ve given him up.”

“Unlucky for him,” said Edward D. Haddon.

He was sorry to hear that she had been engaged. Somehow this was a blow to him, although it was an affair of the past.

“He was a German,” said Pearl. “When the war began I promised to wait for him. But I’ve no use for any German now after all their beastliness.

Anyhow, I expect he's dead."

Young Haddon was silent for some little time. It seemed quite a long time, though it was only a second or two.

"They certainly have done some atrocious things," he said. "But I wouldn't say there are no good Germans. I guess every nation has its good and bad. All the same, I'm glad you've given up that particular German. I don't like to hear about him. I may say I hate his guts, if you'll pardon an American expression."

"It's not a nice expression," said Pearl, though she smiled at it.

"That's how I feel, lady," said Edward Haddon. "And there's something else I feel very deeply, though I hardly like to mention it in St. James's Park, with all the world and his wife passing up and down."

"Very secret?" asked Pearl.

"Belonging to the secret chambers of my heart," answered Edward.

He leaned forward a little with his hands between his knees.

"There's a chance," he said, "that my unit may be leaving England in the near future. I belong to a technical branch. I dare say we shall be wanted for active operations 'before the leaves of Autumn fall', as Mr. Churchill says. If that's so, I shall be sorry to leave England. I shall be sorry not to have more talks like this."

"I shall miss you, Cousin Edward," said Pearl.

He sat back in his deck-chair and pushed his cap back.

"It's nice of you to say so," he said. "I'd like to think that is more than English courtesy."

"Oh, it's quite sincere," answered Pearl. "I'm a plain-spoken wench. What I says, I mean."

She looked at her wrist-watch, gave a little cry and sprang from her chair.

"Two o'clock! I must run! Good-bye, Edward."

"Now, say—" said Edward, hastily.

He stood by her side and kept pace with her—a rapid pace.

"I wanted to say a thousand things more," he told her.

"No time now," said Pearl. "I shall be late."

"I wanted to tell you—" said Edward.

A soldier and his girl, hand in hand, walked between Pearl and Edward. Perhaps it was Pearl who let them through.

"If I could have a private conversation with you—" said Edward, getting abreast of her again.

"I'd like to have it," said Pearl. "But not now, Edward. Excuse me if I run away from you, won't you?"

"I don't want you to run away from me," said Edward.

But she ran across the road leading from the Park to St. James's Palace, and he had to lag behind because of several taxi-cabs bearing down upon him.

She waved to him from the other side and he could see her smile, before she turned and hurried towards the old Palace where she worked among the ghosts of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and the first and second Charles, and many merry ladies of the Court.

“That half-hour went in a flash,” said Edward to himself. “But I’ll remember it always—the blue sky over London, the ducks in the lake, the flowers round its edge, the view of towers and turrets beyond the bridge, and Pearl sitting in a deck-chair with the sun in her eyes. . . . Oh, boy! It’s a great thing that she has given up that German. If she still loved that German my luck would have been out. To hell with Hitler, and the whole German tribe! Pearl was in a hurry today. I’ll say she was. But I’m going to be in a hurry tomorrow. Maybe I’ll have to hurry a lot if I want to grab all the happiness in life before I quit this English dream. . . . Pardon me, ma’am!”

In a moment’s absent-mindedness he had bumped into a lady walking up St. James’s Street, with a Pekinese on a lead.

“Not at all,” said the lady graciously. “Thank God for President Roosevelt!”

“On behalf of the President I thank you,” said Haddon, answering her smile. He hadn’t heard an uncivil word in England. He hadn’t asked for one.

Peter Haddon spent his eighth day of leave mostly in his mother's garden. They had lunch and tea out of doors, and to his mother he seemed happy and cheerful. They talked about books and birds—some of the books which she had read and which he wanted to read if he had time, and the birds of their own neighbourhood and of their own garden.

Only once did they speak of the war. It was when his mother spoke about Churchill's words at the Guildhall—"Before the leaves of Autumn fall."

"What's going to happen?" she asked. "Invasion of the Continent?"

"I doubt it," said Peter. "Too formidable. Needing too many ships and too many men. We shall go on with the bombing war and make one or two excursions in the Mediterranean, no doubt."

Mrs. Haddon looked at her son and he heard a faint little sigh.

"I hate the bombing war," she said. "Is it worth while? Is it going to win the war?"

Peter sat farther back in his deck-chair and shut his eyes to the sun.

"Oh, it's worth while," he said. "We're smashing up the German war machine at its production points. It's helping to win the war. But in my judgment, which may be wrong, we can't do it by bombing alone. We must move men to regain territory and push the Germans about."

He gave a little yawn and then laughed.

"To hell with the war, Mother. It's a most unpleasant subject of conversation in a garden like this. Look at those roses! Aren't they like lovely ladies? I must really rally up to go and smell them. All England is in their scent. All the sweetness of peace-time gardens and pretty maids all in a row, with a hey nonny nonny, and a hey nonny no."

He raised himself in his deck-chair and escaped from it without collapse and strode off up to the rose-beds, stooping down to breathe in the fragrance of his mother's flowers.

Presently he came back with a sprig of lavender which he had plucked from the border.

"I once read a book by a fellow called Powys," he said. "*In Praise of Sensuality*. That was a title to catch dirty minds. Really, it was rather a good book, showing what a lot of good things we miss if we allow our senses to get

dulled. The sense of smell ought to be more developed. There are so many good smells—wood fires, tarred roads, earth after rain, new mown hay, and all the herbs.”

So they talked of one thing and another, or did not find the need of talk. It was at six o’clock that he told his mother he would slope off for a bit.

“To Marjorie Manning?” she asked.

He nodded and said: “Yes.”

“Is it wise, Peter?” asked Mrs. Haddon.

Their eyes met and he saw that hers were anxious.

“Unwise, perhaps,” he admitted with a smile. “But pleasant and harmless. I’m very fond of her, and she’s very kind.”

“You know best,” said Mrs. Haddon. “But I wouldn’t like you two to get hurt—or one of you.”

“It’s my last night of leave,” said Peter. “I just want to say Cheerio and so long. I shan’t do any cave-man stuff, and Marjorie is like Cæsar’s wife.”

He grinned at his mother and raised his hand before going to the back gate, over which he jumped lightly.

He found Mrs. Manning on the veranda by the side of her house. She had just put the children to bed and told Peter that her little girl had caught a chill or something.

“A little bit of a temperature. Oh dear, these infants, they’re always getting something.”

“Bad luck,” said Peter. He pulled up two garden chairs and placed them where they caught the evening sun, still high in this double summer-time.

“I’ve been sitting in garden chairs most of my leave,” he told her. “It’s my idea of Heaven. An easy-chair, a garden full of flowers, the twitter of birds, a green lawn, and a human creature by one’s side, lovely to look upon and pleasant-voiced.”

“Intelligence required?” asked Marjorie.

“Just enough to carry on a reasonable conversation without irritation on either side. Tolerance and placidity of mind desired. A sense of humour equal to a mild jest, but no brilliance or forced gaiety.”

“Well, here I am,” said Marjorie. “Portrait of a lady in a few lines. I’m not quite sure about being pleasant-voiced. Isn’t my voice a bit tinny?”

“It is not tinny,” he assured her. “It has a ’cello-like quality. I like to hear you talk, whatever you may happen to say.”

“You mean even if I talk nonsense?”

“You never talk nonsense,” said Peter. “You have a charming candour. You see life straight. You are, thank God, without affectation.”

Marjorie Manning laughed quietly.

“My dear Peter,” she said, “you have an Irish strain in you somewhere. One of your ancestors kissed the blarney stone. But it’s all very pleasant and flattering even if one knows it to be untrue.”

“I’m a truth teller,” he answered. “As a matter of fact I’ve come to believe that truth is very important even in trivial remarks. I believe all decent human relationship must be based on sincerity. I think we learn that in the R.A.F. When one’s boxed up in a kite with other fellows, starting out on a raid, all the little tricks and artificialities fall away. You see the naked souls of men, especially when one gets into a bit of bother. Here comes a bunch of them.”

Bomber Command was starting for another raid. The drone of engines

vibrated in a clear sky still thinly blue. They were visible like migrating birds.

“Quite a party,” said Peter. He stood up for a few moments, looking intently upwards.

“Seventy-five . . . seventy-six . . . seventy-seven . . .”

Mrs. Manning looked up at them also for a few moments and then lowered her eyes and watched Peter staring at his knight companions. He stood perfectly still, like a figure in bronze, with his face uplifted and its profile clear-cut against the whitewashed wall of the veranda. He had an intense look as though his soul were straining to join that crowd of men and machines up there—or at least as though his mind were with them.

He turned presently and sat down again with a smile. “They’re all chattering down the inter com,” he said. “They’re all keyed up. Some of them won’t come back tonight, but they all think the other fellows will get it. They all back their own luck.”

“Don’t they get frightened?” asked Marjorie.

Peter shrugged his shoulders lightly.

“I suppose we’re all frightened a bit. But we don’t let it get hold of us. We develop a kind of fatalism.”

“Are you a fatalist, Peter?” asked Marjorie.

Peter turned and smiled at her.

“I’m keen on life,” he answered, “but not greedy. I’ve crammed a lot of life into these nine days. A lot of happiness, I mean—in a quiet way—which is the best way. You have been one of the bright spots, Marjorie. I shall always remember these hours.”

“Thank you, dear Peter,” answered Marjorie.

He looked her in the eyes and spoke quietly.

“You know that I love you, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Marjorie, “I know. I’m sorry about it, Peter, in one way, and glad in another.”

“Why are you sorry?” he asked.

“Because it would have been better if you had loved someone else who could have given back all that you wanted and all that you deserve.”

“Oh, I don’t deserve anything,” said Peter hurriedly. “And there’s no one else I could love now. It was about two years ago that I knew I loved you in a tremendous kind of way. It was when I saw you in my mother’s garden—do you remember?—and my heart gave a kind of lurch and I thought yes, of course, it’s Marjorie. That’s why I don’t want any other kind of girl. I fell in love with her as a kid. She comes into my dreams quite often.”

“Poor Peter,” said Marjorie very tenderly. “I’m sorry. I’m terribly sorry.”

“Why?” he asked again.

She was silent for a moment before answering that question, and then

spoke tremulously.

"I'm sorry for myself as well as for you, Peter. This is your last night on leave. Shall we tell the truth to each other? All the truth that is in us?"

"Why not?" he answered. "Truth is best between you and me."

"I love you too," she told him. "You are in my dreams as I am in yours. When I am in the factory you come into my thoughts. I feel your presence in a queer way. I love you very much, Peter, because you and I were made for each other really. I made a mistake in marrying Gerald. I only knew afterwards. I love him, too, of course. He is the father of my babes. I want to be loyal to him. But there's something queer about my love for you. There's something mystical about it. I don't think it's wrong. I don't want it to be wrong."

Peter listened with a kind of wonderment and with a kind of joy, yet in a troubled way.

"Why, that's wonderful," he exclaimed. "I had no idea we met in the dream world. I didn't guess that you were more than kind to me. But it makes it difficult, doesn't it? I mean there was no harm in my loving you. I don't ask anything and I didn't expect anything beyond sitting here and getting a light kiss from you. But now, after what you tell me, it's a bit dangerous, isn't it?"

"Very dangerous, dear Peter," admitted Marjorie. "Dangerous to our souls and our code of honour. But I had to tell you."

"I'm glad you told me," said Peter. "But it changes things somehow. I was content with a light kiss. Now I want to take you in my arms. I want on this last night of leave to hold you against my heart, to kiss your lips."

"Peter," said Marjorie, "don't let me forget my husband and my babes. Let's keep loyal to what we have always tried to be. Don't let's spoil things by any foolishness."

"No," he said. "No, I agree with you. But there's no harm as far as I can see in putting my arms round you and kissing your eyes and your lips. Is there any harm?"

He bent over her chair and put his arms beneath her and drew her up out of the chair until she was standing with his arm about her and his lips tight to hers.

She pushed him back a little.

"Peter, be good! One kiss and then good-bye, my Peter."

"One kiss only," he said, "between you and me, Marjorie. One kiss which will last me for ever."

"I love you, Peter," said Marjorie. "But I want to keep it an ideal love without harm in it."

"Of course," said Peter. "No harm in it. We'll be perfectly loyal to your old Gerald. Why are your eyes wet, Marjorie? And why do you press me back when I try to hold you closer?"

“Don’t hold me too close, Peter. Let’s talk quietly again. Let’s keep away from each other.”

“You’re frightened,” he said. “I can hear your heart beating. And you tremble in my arms. Why are you frightened? I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I’m frightened,” said Marjorie. “You’re getting passionate, Peter. Oh, don’t get passionate! I ought not to have told you. I thought you could bear the truth.”

“It’s a lovely truth,” he said. “I’m glad to know it. Put your head against my shoulder. Let me kiss your ear. There can’t be any harm in that. How lovely you are, Marjorie. You have such a beautiful head.”

“Don’t love me too much, Peter,” said Marjorie. “Don’t love my body or the shape of my head. Let’s keep our love in dreamland.”

“Come to me again in my dreams,” said Peter. “I will meet you in yours. Let me kiss you under the chin, Marjorie.”

“Peter, don’t make a slut of me,” said Marjorie. “I’m a married woman. My man is fighting for England. Let’s keep decent, Peter. Say good-bye to me.”

“Oh, not yet,” he pleaded. “I’ll behave like a perfect little gentleman. Look, I only hold your hand now and kiss the tips of your fingers.”

“You are kissing my arms,” said Marjorie.

“Good Lord, yes,” said Peter. “A pretty arm. So soft. So lovely to touch.”

Suddenly a child’s cry rang out from the window above the veranda.

“Mummie . . . Mummie . . . I’m so hot!”

“That’s Joyce,” said Marjorie. “Oh, I must run to her.”

“I’ll wait,” said Peter.

He waited on the gravel path below the veranda while Marjorie was upstairs. A thrush was singing its evensong. Other birds were warbling. There was a golden light in the garden with the sun behind lines of tall cypress trees. Lovely shadows lay across the little lawn. Peter stood there motionless. He was thinking of the sudden passion which had leapt up in him. He was surprised and startled by it. It was rather alarming in a way. It made a man beside himself. It made him do things which he didn’t want to do. And yet it was spiritual as well as physical. Soul as well as body were mingled in this terrific desire.

He turned quickly at the sound of Marjorie’s voice.

“Peter, poor little Joyce has a temperature of one hundred and three. She’s very feverish. Could you ask your father to come round?”

“Of course,” said Peter. “I’ll go at once.”

“Good-bye, dear Peter,” said Marjorie.

She held out her hand and he kissed it lightly.

“I shall remember every moment of this,” he said. “Many thanks, Marjorie.”

I hope Joyce will be all right.”

“Dear Peter. Dear Peter,” she said, with a little cry.

He went out of her garden.

Peter had to be off early next morning and he stayed up late in order to make the most of his leave. His father had gone round to see Mrs. Manning's little daughter and came back with the reassuring news that the child had developed a slight infection in the throat which had made her temperature shoot up. He did not expect anything serious.

"A charming young woman, Mrs. Manning," he said. "Unusually intelligent and a fine character."

Peter agreed, and then met his mother's eyes and knew that she had guessed with her usual intuition that something had happened between him and Marjorie. Perhaps he had given himself away that evening after coming back. He had been a little absentminded and missed some of his father's talk about the war at the supper table. He had a great respect for his father's balanced judgment and analytical mind. He had no fanaticism or passionate prejudice. He could talk about the Germans without explosive hatred, though not slurring over their cruelties and atrocious acts under Nazi leadership. He was certain, he said, that masses of the German people were still decent and kindly folk with a horror of this war into which Hitler had led them. It was easy to say that they ought not to have been led that way and ought to have revolted against him, but after all, Hitler had led them out of the depths of misery and had given them a new hope for several years, promising peace in a Germany strong enough for self defence. His creed and propaganda had duped and doped the younger generation, he had debauched the mind of youth or at least called to its racial instincts and their love of regimentation and flag-waving and heroic symbolism. If we had been utterly defeated in the last war we should have awaited a leader and followed him to the death if he had promised to wipe out our humiliation. The people of Germany could do nothing anyhow against the secret police and the concentration camps.

"But, Father—" said Pearl.

She argued that the whole German people were guilty of the brutal treatment of the Jews and had raised no protest about this or any other beastliness.

"To some extent," agreed her father. "I'm not trying to whitewash the Germans. They have a brutal strain in them, though great numbers, I feel sure,

are free from it. I don't believe in condemning a whole nation."

"They have been disgusting in their way of fighting," said Pearl. "They don't attempt to rescue our seamen when they've been torpedoed. They've turned their guns on to Red Cross ships. They machine-gunned the refugees on the roads. Isn't all that true?"

For a long time she had refused to believe these things, remembering her German lover. Now she believed them.

"I expect all that's true," said her father. "But a lot of it is unknown to German civilians. They never hear a word about such things. They will refuse to believe them after this war."

"But my point is—" said Pearl.

Peter missed his sister's point. He was thinking back to his hour with Marjorie Manning. He had held her in his arms and had kissed her. He had become passionate and carried away by this revelation of her love for him. He had never guessed that he could be so inflamed. It was like a flame, this passion of love. It had been wonderful, but very dangerous. He wanted to be loyal, like Marjorie, to the ordinary code of honour in which he had been brought up. Was love like this above the ordinary code of honour? He would have to think this out. It might be better to keep this love for Marjorie on a spiritual plane, cutting out passion. Even that would be wonderful, though it would want a hell of a lot of discipline. . . . It was then that he missed part of his father's conversation.

"A penny for your thoughts, Peter," said his mother. "You're in a brown study."

"Oh, they're worth more than a penny," he said lightly.

He went into his father's study for a time after dinner and they talked about the war again, in an abstract way as though it did not concern them personally.

"My little Russian Princess thinks we shall have a lot of trouble with Stalin and Company," said his father. "She thinks they are still deeply hostile to ourselves and the United States. If Stalin defeats Hitler—and it looks as if there is some chance of that now—he will want to dictate the peace, and it won't be our kind of peace. He will want a slice off Poland, says Vera Narishkin. He will take the Baltic States. He will extend his sphere of influence over Serbia and Bulgaria. She is convinced that if Germany is defeated they will all go Communist and join Russia. That would be a formidable menace for us. I confess she disturbed me by her prophecies. She's a highly intelligent lady."

Peter smiled at his father.

"I can't say I'm worrying about all that," he said. "One war is enough for me. I don't expect to see the new pattern of life in the distant future."

"Why not?" asked his father.

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, well!”

He did not complete his explanation. The R.A.F. did not make for long life. In a few nights, perhaps next night, he would be over Germany again, or on a long hop to Italy.

His mother came in with the coffee and Pearl joined them. There was no more war talk except for a few minutes after the nine o'clock news, mostly about bombing.

“Will the Germans stand up against all this?” asked Pearl.

“For a long time yet,” said her father. “Germany is a big country. The southern Germans are sorry when Hamburg gets it hot, but go on eating their sauerkraut with the usual appetite. So we ate our sausages for breakfast when Liverpool or Hull had a bad raid.”

“Quentin comes home on Friday,” said Mrs. Haddon, changing the subject quietly.

Dr. Haddon gave a groan.

“A sad home-coming, poor fellow. Tragic for his mother.”

“Too frightful!” said Pearl.

They talked about other neighbours. One of them was the vicar, who had dropped in several times to see Peter.

Dr. Haddon laughed.

“He’s getting into trouble with his congregation all right.”

Irene Haddon smiled. She had a soft spot in her heart for the vicar.

“I’m afraid he’s a lonely Christian,” she said.

“I can see his point of view,” said Peter. “I had a talk with him yesterday. This bombing business, to which I belong, may be necessary to win the war—as I think it is—but if I know anything about Christianity, it isn’t Christian. But then it’s very difficult to live up to the Christian ideal, isn’t it? Is it possible for humanity to reach such heights?”

“We’ve failed so far,” said Dr. Haddon dryly.

He had to make a sick call at ten o'clock that evening, and before he went he said good-bye to his son, who went into the hall with him while Mrs. Haddon was getting out the car.

“Take care of yourself, old man,” said his father. “The best of luck!”

He put his arm round Peter’s shoulder and kissed him as though he were a small boy. He had not done that for several years.

“Thanks, Father,” said Peter, rather touched by this paternal caress. “I’ve had a lot of luck up to the present. Perhaps I ought to touch a bit of wood.”

He touched the panelling in the hall.

“Don’t keep Mother out too late,” he said. “On second thoughts, I think I’ll come along with her and sit in the car.”

“Great idea,” said his father. “I’m afraid I shall be some little time. It’s another illegitimate child arriving in this strange world, which is not a very beautiful place for young lives, legitimate or illegitimate.”

He went into the house.

It was a beautiful world to look at as, at last, after a long evening in double summer-time, the light faded and a lovely twilight, nowhere near darkness, softened all forms and colours around Fallow Green. There was still a twitter of birds in the hedgerows, and some distance away Surrey nightingales were giving song in ecstasy. There was a tangle of flowers in the grass. The foliage of silver birches stirred with a whisper in the faint breeze. An old farm-house, into which the doctor had gone, had been colour-washed in yellow of a pale primrose colour, through which red bricks showed here and there. Its tall chimney-stacks stood out darkly against the luminance in the sky.

“A bit of old England,” said Peter. “I dare say that men born in that old place fought in the Crimean War and the Napoleonic Wars, and Marlborough’s campaigns in Flanders, and away back to the Civil War, and away back still—who knows—to the Armada. We’ve been a fighting race, and many of our men came from places like this.”

“They would never have dreamed of a war like this,” answered his mother. “Look at those searchlights. If I didn’t hate what they mean I should say they were beautiful.”

They were standing outside the car. Above them in a sky which was not yet dark with night, long white fingers reached up. Almost straight above them was a gigantic cross of white light—a St. Andrew’s cross. Night flyers were about, showing tiny lights as they skimmed across this patch of sky.

Peter laughed quietly.

“Don’t hate what they mean, Mother. They’re defending Ashleigh Heath and the way to London from enemy attack. I hate them over Berlin or the Ruhr. It’s most unpleasant to be caught in a beam and to know that German gunners have found their target.”

Irene Haddon sighed.

She put her hand on Peter’s arm.

“I would let myself be chopped up in small pieces,” she said, “if I could stop all this.”

“You must take it as it comes,” said Peter. “That’s life from beginning to end, isn’t it? I would rather be blotted out over Berlin than die of cancer, or be stricken with rheumatoid arthritis or infantile paralysis. Besides, I’m a darned good pilot and a lucky skipper. I don’t intend to be blotted out over Berlin if I can help it.”

He spoke very cheerfully and gaily to reassure his mother, who was so anxious about him.

She laughed as though she believed him.

“Oh, yes, I know I’m silly sometimes in getting frightened about you.” Then she shivered slightly, and said: “I think I’ll sit in the car.” He sat beside her with his arm behind her holding on to her shoulder, and they stayed like that without speaking for some time. It was his mother who broke the silence.

“You came back from Marjorie Manning with stars in your eyes, Peter. Are you very much in love with her?”

“With everything that’s me and of me,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” said Mrs. Haddon. “You shouldn’t have let it happen, Peter.”

“Can one help these things happening?” he asked. “One gets just caught up. Besides, subconsciously I’ve always been in love with Marjorie since we went to the same kindergarten. Only I didn’t know it until lately.”

“It will lead to tragedy for both of you,” said Mrs. Haddon. “You both have a certain code. You can’t go off with another man’s wife, Peter. She can’t leave the father of her babes.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s the devil of it. But I don’t see why we can’t love each other without that—without doing a bunk or anything messy.”

Irene Haddon put her hand up to her son’s face and touched his cheek.

“Peter, you’re not telling the truth to yourself. You are old enough to know what passion is. It’s like a burning fire.”

He knew she was right. Had he not caught afire that very evening?

He answered after searching his own mind.

“I want to be dead honest with you, Mother,” he answered. “I want to be dead honest with myself. You’re perfectly right, and I know really that if I were with Marjorie again I should want to break all laws and conventions and codes. I learnt that this evening to my great astonishment. I was no longer Peter Haddon as I imagined myself. I was Romeo, or Abelard, or one of the lovers of romance at whom I used to jeer. I suppose I shall have to play the game, as the Guv’nor used to say in his old-fashioned way. I suppose I shall have to remember the old school tie and the old ladies of Ashleigh Heath and Public Opinion and all that kind of thing.”

He laughed uneasily.

“You needn’t bother about the old ladies of Ashleigh Heath,” said Irene Haddon, “although I dare say they’re right in their sense of morality. I think it would be better for you to remember Gerald Manning. You are a friend of his, aren’t you? Does one betray a friend? Do you, my Peter?”

It was a straight question which Peter answered after a moment’s struggle within himself.

“I should hate to do so. It’s the worst crime, isn’t it?”

“It’s pretty bad,” said Irene Haddon. “You’ve never been a cad, Peter. I hope you never will be.”

Peter was silent for quite a time. Then he spoke again:

“We’re talking under the stars, Mother. In time of war we’re all living dangerously; it’s best to talk straight and get down to the bedrock of truth if possible. The truth in me is that I’m completely and absolutely in love with Marjorie. I think it’s a bit mystical, some touch of the spirit in it. We come to each other in dreams. Our thoughts reach out to each other. But it’s earthly also in my case. I can’t cut a line between my body and my spirit. But I can do a bunk from Marjorie in a geographical sense. I can cut and run. That’s what I’ll have to do. Allah is great, but juxtaposition is greater. I forget who wrote that.”

“It will be very hard for you,” said his mother.

“Not so hard, perhaps,” he answered quietly. “I mean I may be wafted away anyhow. A sudden swerve in the wrong direction when the flak is flying about. One of those beams over Berlin catching my kite in its light. See what I mean, Mother? We’re telling the truth to each other, aren’t we?”

“Truth is terrible now,” said Irene Haddon. “Sometimes I wish I had never brought you into the world, Peter, into this dreadful world with demons waiting for you, turning you into a demon with bombs under your wings. Oh, I know you’re defending England and all our lives and liberties. I know I ought to feel a mother’s pride in a heroic son. So I do, but my heart bleeds also, drop by drop. Oh, my son, my little son!”

For a few moments she lost control. For a few moments she wept.

“It’s all right, Mother,” said Peter. “It’s all right. You believe in Eternal Life and the Resurrection of the Body? If I go soon I go young—and that’s rather a good thought—never to grow old and lose one’s teeth and one’s sight and one’s senses. If what you believe is true—and because you believe it I’ll believe it—death is nothing. I shall be somewhere. You will know me when we meet. I shan’t have changed.”

“Sorry,” said Mrs. Haddon. “I made a fool of myself on your last night of leave. I’m an emotional ass, Peter.”

“You’re a very wise woman,” said Peter. “I have the highest respect for your intelligence and sensibility.”

He spoke these words with a laugh and other nonsense which made her smile.

Later that night, after getting back in the car, he stood at the open window of his bedroom looking out over his mother’s garden, where the trees were edged blackly against a luminous sky. The night air was fragrant with the scent of grass and flowers and moist earth. It was very still and silent in the village beyond the garden wall. No glimmer of light showed from between the trees. Ashleigh Heath was sleeping behind its black-out curtains.

“I’ve had a good leave,” thought Peter Haddon. “I’ve been drenched in this

beauty of life. Perhaps I've been a bit morbid. There's no reason why my luck shouldn't last. Perhaps I went too far with Marjorie—I mean too far in letting emotion get hold of me. It was very wonderful. A most astonishing experience, this passion of love. But I've got to cut out passion. My love for Marjorie must be without passion, disembodied and spiritual. There's no harm in that. No betrayal. It's merely a question of self-discipline, or is that impossible? Perhaps I'm just kidding myself about that. Allah is great, but juxtaposition . . .”

He thought this question out for quite a long time, perhaps for nearly two hours while he stood motionless staring into the shadow world of the garden.

“A queer dream, this life,” he said aloud after those two hours of consciousness which was hardly thought.

He lay on his bed and slept in his clothes. It seemed only a second later that he heard his mother's voice calling him.

“Time to get up, Peter.”

His nine days' leave was over.

Spring had passed into summer, a little chilly at first but without much rain in England and with a fair share of sunshine over fields which had gone back to plough twice as much as in the neglectful years, and into gardens where flower-beds had been turned into potato or cabbage patches, and on to allotments where elderly men laboured on the long light evenings after toil in workshops and offices.

There was an illusion of peace in London and the countryside. The Germans made a few tip-and-run raids over the coastal line, killing a few civilians here and there, or getting a lucky shot into a seaside restaurant where a crowd of young officers had just sat down to lunch. "Very light casualties," said the official *communiqué*, with great comfort to those who heard no explosive bombs in their own neighbourhood and had no friends or relatives among the killed and wounded. The Battle of Britain and the Blitz seemed far-off memories. Life had become almost normal again except for black-out and rationing, and absent men, and separated families. At least the dark menace of death and ashes and the likelihood of invasion had been lifted from the nation's mind by some miraculous change in the fortunes of war. Now there was only impatience for the beginning of the end. Russia had taken the offensive after the German Spring attack which had utterly failed. They were smashing through the German fortress positions. On a thousand miles front *Pravda* was calling upon Britain for a Second Front as though the victories in Africa had been trivial.

What next, and where next, were questions asked by men behind their evening papers or over their luncheon tables. The Eighth Army, after their triumphal victories, seemed to be taking a long rest. No news came from Africa. Were we going to invade the Continent at last, and liberate the occupied countries, weakening, and some of them dying from hunger and disease? How long, O Lord, how long? This cry came from Greece and Norway and Belgium and France. Are they never coming, those English? Shall we be dead before they come?

"Before the leaves of Autumn fall." That was a promise and a pledge, but the time and geography of the attack were still uncertain, and, as the weeks passed and Summer lengthened, a kind of irritation and criticism crept into

many minds. Time is getting on, they said. Surely something ought to happen tomorrow? There was whispered news of great concentrations of barges and light craft in British ports and creeks. Surely for invasion of the Continent—perhaps in half-a-dozen places at the same time. But over the wireless came only news of air-raids by day and night on German cities and factories and railway yards in France. Hamburg was blotted out. The Ruhr was one vast wreckage. Berlin was being evacuated by women and children. The American Fortresses were smashing Germany's war production by day while our Lancasters and Wellingtons were on the job at night.

In Ashleigh Heath, as well as in a thousand English villages, there was this period of waiting for great news, and prophecies were made under red tile roofs or thatch that the war would end before another Winter. So said the vicar's wife with absolute certainty of conviction. She said it to Dr. Haddon, who smiled and answered, "I hope you're right, dear lady."

"Meaning that you think I'm wrong?" she asked aggressively.

"I don't see how it's going to happen," he answered; "but I don't rule out a German collapse. If the Russians break through . . ."

He turned away from the vicar's wife and took off his hat as a car came down the village street.

"Oh, God," exclaimed Mrs. Marlow in a low intense voice. "It's too frightful. It's too tragic. That poor young man. My heart bleeds for his father and mother."

"It's rather a sad home-coming," said the doctor. "The price we have to pay for war."

In the car was a young man blinded in Tunisia. It was young Quentin Fellowes of the Eighth Army. With him in the car was his father.

"We're just turning into Brook Lane," he said.

"I remember every inch of it," answered Quentin. "First we come to the hollow tree into which I used to creep as a small boy. Then six oak trees above the bank before we get to the gate of Bradfield's farm. On the other side of the road is old Mother Marden's fairy-tale cottage, like the one in Hansel and Gretel with its timbered posts a bit cock-eyed and its tall chimney on the slant."

"Half the chimney was carried away during the Blitz," said his father. "The burst of a bomb cut it clean in half."

"Oh, bad luck!" exclaimed Quentin. "Did the old dame escape?"

"Oh, she was all right, though she thought she had gone to Kingdom Come!"

Quentin laughed and there was a little excitement in his voice.

"Our house next," he said. "Home at last."

His father glanced at him. He had taken off his bandages and wore dark

glasses to cover his sightless eyes. But there was a radiant look on his face, like that of a boy coming home for the holidays.

The car came to a halt.

"I'll help you out," said his father.

"That's all right," said Quentin. "Two steps down. Then five yards of crazy paving. Then two steps to the porch."

He opened the door of the car and leapt out.

"I'll give you a hand, Mr. Quentin," said the driver.

"Oh, don't bother," answered Quentin. "I'm coming home, you know." He hesitated only for a second at the two steps and then walked swiftly up the crazy paving until he touched the two steps below the porch. He was at the front door before his father stood at his side.

"The door's open," said Quentin. "Is Mother in the hall?" He called out gaily: "Hullo, Mother! Here I am."

It was the moment which his mother had awaited with a kind of terror—this first meeting with her blinded son. She had prayed for courage at this moment. She had expected him to break down and weep as when he had hurt himself as a small boy. But now she heard his gay voice in the hall calling to her, and when she went out of her room to meet him she saw that radiant look on his face as though wonderfully happy to be home.

"Quentin!" she cried. "My poor Quentin!"

He went towards her as though he saw her and held out his arms.

"I've had all the luck in the world," he told her. "Here I am, home again with you and the Guv'nor. All the way from El Alamein. Can you believe it?"

He laughed quietly, as though amused by this great luck, while he put his arms round his mother and kissed her many times.

"Oh, Quentin," she cried. "Oh, Quentin, my dear."

Her tears made her face wet and he took out his handkerchief and wiped her cheek.

"Hush, little Mother," he said. "I don't suppose I look as beautiful as I did before. These glasses must make me look a bit sinister. But that's nothing to cry about. I'm going to make a joke about being blind. I'm not going to let it get me down. I daresay I shall be a bit clumsy at first and need a certain amount of help for a few days or so, but I'll soon learn the way about upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber. It's a question of memorizing. I find it extraordinarily interesting. One's other senses get more developed. Touch, hearing, smelling. You have a pot of roses on the little table there. I remember the little table, you see."

He touched their petals and stooped down to breathe in their scent.

"How's old Emily?" he asked. "Going strong, I hope?"

Old Emily was the faithful old drudge who once had given him his bath

and scrubbed his dirty neck and made him wash behind his ears.

“She’s in the kitchen,” said his mother. “She prays for you every night and morning.”

“Good for her,” said Quentin cheerfully. “And I expect she’s done me a lot of good. I’ll go and see her.”

He felt his way to a passage on the left which led to the kitchen. “Hullo, Emily,” he shouted. “Where are you hiding yourself?”

She was not in hiding. She had heard his voice in the hall. She was standing at her kitchen door mopping her eyes with the corner of her apron.

“Oh, Master Quentin,” she cried.

He groped out for her and put his arm round her shoulder and kissed her little wrinkled face.

“Glad to see you again,” he said, as though he saw her perfectly. “I often used to think of you when I was in the Eighth Army in North Africa. I used to tell my friends about your rock buns. I used to say ‘Emily Snagg’s rock buns can beat the world for quality’.”

“Oh, Master Quentin,” said his old nurse, “I’ve made you some today.”

“Of course you have,” he told her with a laugh. “I’ve never come home yet without looking forward to tea and toast and the famous rock buns.”

He heard her sobbing as she mopped her eyes again.

“Now, look here,” he said, “not so much snivelling. A blinded man doesn’t want people to sob over him. He doesn’t want to hear pity in people’s voices. He wants to forget his handicap and carry on.”

“I’m sorry, Master Quentin,” said old Emily. “I just can’t help it. I remember you as a bonny boy with eyes as bright as stars.”

“I wish you had washed my soul as well as you had washed my neck when I was the toughest young ruffian in Ashleigh Heath,” said Quentin.

He laughed again and took the wrong direction to the door and knocked his nose against it sharply.

“I must remember that,” he said. “Very careless of me.” He went back into the hall and felt his mother’s hand reach out for him.

“We’re having tea in the garden,” she told him.

“That’s great,” he answered. “In Tunisia I used to dream of tea in the garden. When water was scarce and the heat of the desert was scorching, I had a vision of illimitable cups of tea and a deck-chair on a green lawn. It was my mirage. Oh, Lord! I forgot that step.”

He stumbled and clutched his mother’s arm.

“Another thing to remember,” he said. “One step down, then a pillar on the right with climbing roses, then across the path to the lawn.”

“Here’s a deck-chair, old man,” said his father, grasping his right arm. “Be careful, won’t you? These chairs are a bit of a trap.”

“Well do I know it,” answered Quentin. “I remember pinching my fingers so that I squealed. I say, isn’t it good to be home! Hark at those birds, busting themselves with song. And that lavender is exquisite—‘Who’ll buy my lavender, three sprigs a penny’.”

He stretched out his long legs and lay back in the deck-chair.

“Are you there, Mother?” he asked.

“By your side, my dear,” she answered.

“Is the tea on the table?”

“Quite ready,” she told him. “I’m just going to pour out.”

“And Emily’s rock cakes?”

“A plateful of them.”

“Grand,” said Quentin. “What more does a man want in time of war?”

He gave his old gay laugh again. There was no despair in it. No self-pity.

“You’ve kept the grass nicely mown,” he said, touching the lawn with the tips of his fingers. “Pretty good work in war-time.”

“One of my jobs,” said his father. “It helps to keep me fit.”

“Well, now it’s going to be one of my jobs,” said Quentin. “You’re fit enough, Father. By Jingo, one day I’ll have a go at it.”

He seemed to be full of energy and full of gaiety. He was the same Quentin who had played cricket on the village green and knocked up eighty runs on a Saturday afternoon, and gone dashing about the countryside on a motor-bike, and fallen in love with all the pretty girls in Ashleigh Heath, with a laughing heart. The only difference were the dark glasses over his eyes but not over his spirit.

“Quentin,” said his father after a few weeks, “is the happiest fellow in Ashleigh Heath. He puts us all to shame. He doesn’t ask for pity and is angry if he gets it.”

Dr. Haddon had private sources of information about the war. Information was perhaps hardly the word for opinions, rumours, and “I have it on good authority”, which came to him on his round of visits to patients within a ten-mile radius of Ashleigh Heath. But they were interesting, partly as a revelation of the psychology of those who called for medical attention. They ranged from extreme pessimism to extreme optimism, but here and there he picked up queer facts not mentioned on the wireless or printed in the newspapers.

There was, for instance, a young fellow named Halliday with a French wife—rather delicate and ill-suited to the English climate, being a lady of Provence. Halliday was an officer in the Intelligence and disappeared from time to time on secret missions, during which period his wife Yvonne was nervous and anxious. He seemed to know a lot about conditions in France and the state of mind of the French people.

“How do you know all this?” asked Dr. Haddon one evening.

Halliday laughed and hesitated for a moment.

“It’s my job,” he answered. “I was over there yesterday. But it’s all very hush-hush.”

“A doctor is like a priest,” said Yvonne. “One can tell him anything, can one not? Tell him of your strange adventure, Geoffrey.”

She laughed as though it were an amusing adventure, though she added words which revealed anxiety.

“When I hear of these things I tremble. It is too, what you call, risky.”

It appeared that young Halliday made frequent visits to France by aeroplane, from which he was dropped with his parachute in lonely places. He was in touch with the underground organization of resistance getting ready for the day of liberation. It was tricky work and sometimes he had had hair-raising escapes. On his last trip a few days ago he had dropped down near a certain market town. He had instructions to go to a café frequented by French miners and speak some words which he learnt by heart to the woman behind the desk. The market town was crawling with German infantry and tanks, but this little café restaurant was on the outskirts, and young Halliday, dressed as a French peasant, made his way there without incident. In the *estaminet* were about twenty miners drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. The woman behind the

cash-desk stared at him as he came in.

“*Bonjour, Madame,*” he said, touching his cap. “*Vous avez perdu votre chien, n’est ce pas?*”

The woman looked at him and then threw up her hands in delight.

“It is the brave officer,” she cried. “It is superb. His disguise is perfect.”

The twenty miners stared at him, laughed loudly, sprang to their feet and surrounded him, clapping him on the back.

“You are the English officer we expect? *Cré nom!* It is unbelievable. You deserve a drink of cognac, but there is no cognac.”

Young Halliday, who told this story, laughed at the reminiscence.

“I was scared stiff by this public acclamation. There were a lot of Germans in the near neighbourhood. The whole thing was a farce.”

From young Halliday Dr. Haddon heard many interesting things about French life and opinion under German occupation.

The food situation was getting desperate in the cities. Children were dying from malnutrition. German officers behaved “correctly”—that was the word they always used—but the loathing for them was intense, and they knew that one day when the flame of hatred raged about them they would have a thin chance of escape from their billets. They would not go out by the front doors. A majority of the French people half-dreaded and half-hoped for an Allied invasion. But the underground organization of resistance was increasing in numbers and strength, despite the death penalty for being in the possession of arms. They were receiving and hiding quantities of weapons and high explosives. There was a secret army ready to co-operate with the forces of liberation when the signal came.

“When will it come?” asked Dr. Haddon.

Young Halliday smiled and quoted some words by Winston Churchill—“Before the leaves of Autumn fall.”

Then there was a young officer in one of our commandos. Dr. Haddon had been called to see his wife one night when she was about to have her first baby. Her husband was a coward for her sake. He seemed to have no courage at all.

“Pull yourself together, my lad,” said Dr. Haddon a little roughly.

No courage at all when his pretty wife was in labour. But only a week before he had dropped down from the sky with a parachute troop on to a German airfield—the headquarters of a bombing squadron. Our air chiefs were anxious to get hold of a secret gadget for radiolocation which the enemy had just invented. By our secret Intelligence they knew its whereabouts. This boy, who trembled and went sick with fear when his wife was in pain, had walked straight to a room in this German air station, stepped over the dead body of a German soldier, found the secret gadget and put it in his pocket. There had

been some dirty work. His parachute troop had had to fight for it. “It wasn’t a picnic,” said this young officer quietly. Now he was on leave, three miles from Ashleigh Heath, pale, haggard, and sick with fright because his wife Judy was having a baby.

“This war is fantastic,” thought Dr. Haddon, as he stepped out to his car where Irene was waiting for him. “One hears almost unbelievable things.”

He read the letters written by young fellows in the Eighth Army to their wives or mothers.

One mother who was dying, though she didn’t know it, asked the doctor to read out the last letter she had had from her boy. It was rather touching and rather fine, thought the doctor.

The boy was a young lad he had known in the village when he was errand-boy for Grimley the butcher. Now he had fought all the way from Egypt to Tunisia.

It has been a grate experience, he wrote to his mother. I think it is a grate honor to belong to the 8th Army I have lost many of my pals but they have died in a good cause, and helped to save old England and the British Empire. Isn't that worth it? Of course when I think of England I think of Ashleigh Heath and Fallow Green. And most of all I think of you mother to whom I owe everythink. I'm having a grand time in this place. Plenty of oranges and sea bathing and great fun with the natives—I mean the Italians who are very friendly—just as if we had never been enemies. Lots of pretty young women here but I don't have much to do with them, me being engaged to Liz. It's all very peaceful but I must say I want to get going again. I'll be glad when the Eighth Army gets its sailing orders for a new campaign and another knock at Jerry. Them Germans has got to be beat or God help the world.

“I want to see him again,” said this boy’s mother. “Are you going to make me well before he comes home?”

“I’ll do my best,” said Dr. Haddon cheerfully.

He knew that his best would never make her well in time for that home-coming.

General Hammerfield, whose gout was due to the sins of his ancestors, was always interesting because of his views on war strategy and the general situation—views expressed with great violence and habitual pessimism. He had commanded a division in the last war and thought that most of his fellow-generals were half-wits suffering from arrested development. Now in this war, which he thought ought never to have happened—the politicians had made a horrible mess of things, he thought—we had made, he said, every possible mistake. He had been all against our Army going into Belgium.

“Sheer madness,” he said at the time. “The *braves Belges* can’t be expected to hold up the German Army and we shall arrive just in time, with quite

insufficient strength, to retreat at full speed.”

He was contemptuous of the Maginot Line upon which the French had built their faith.

“Does that turnip-headed old Gamelin really believe that the Germans will attack their beautiful line? Why, a child can see by looking at the map that the Germans will attack down the open corridor opposite Sedan where the line ends.”

He raged against the small packets of men sent to Norway and Crete.

“The best we can do, General,” said the doctor.

“The worst we can do,” he answered, uttering a groan because of his gout and his mental anguish. “It’s no use striking anywhere unless one strikes in strength, and we haven’t the strength. We only waste good men and suffer world-wide ridicule.”

His gloomiest prophecies had been fulfilled. For three years they had been right. Now when things were going well he was disconcerted, and hedged a bit. He had been dead wrong about Russia, like almost everybody else. He had given Russia three months before total defeat.

“They can’t move their men about,” he said. “They can’t feed ’em. Peasants and garage hands made into generals can’t compete against the most professional army in the world. They’re an ill-equipped rabble, poor devils, and they’ll just be massacred by the German Panzer Divisions and the German dive-bombers.”

He was wrong, as he admitted grudgingly. Now he believed that Russia would make a separate peace and put us all into the cart.

“Before ten years have passed,” he said, “we shall be fighting the Russkis with our German allies—those beautiful blond boys whom now we revile. Such are the ways of men. Oh, my sainted Aunt. Oh, my detestable forbears. Oh, Golly and oh, Jemeny.”

These last words of agony were wrung from him not by the folly of men, but by the red-hot pokers of hereditary gout.

He knew some of those in high command, and peers of the realm who sat in club arm-chairs and blabbed political and military secrets in strict confidence. Now and then he passed on information of this kind to the doctor. It was mostly falsified by events, but it was amusing and instructive to a general practitioner in a rural district to get these rumours and views from high places.

“I don’t believe your exalted pals know a damn thing about anything,” he once told General Hammerfield.

The old General’s eyes glinted beneath their shaggy white brows.

“You’re perfectly right, my dear doctor,” he said good-humouredly. “It’s just pothouse rumour. But I’ll give you one tip which I think will come off.

Sicily next. Then Italy. 'Before the leaves of Autumn fall', as Churchill says. A damn silly idea in my opinion. Italy is a side-show. The Germans want to keep the war away from their frontier. We shall be playing their game. Oh, hell. Oh, damnation—devils and torturers. Satan's imps."

He was not giving a character study of the Germans. He was bewailing and cursing the gout fiends at him again.

"You're no damn use as a doctor," he told his medical adviser. "The whole medical profession is a pack of charlatans. They can't cure a common cold. They don't know the first thing about diet. They don't even know the cause or cure of gout. Doctor, you're a complete humbug. Clear out and don't come to see me again."

"You're a blasphemous old sinner, General," answered Dr. Haddon good-naturedly. "I don't come to cure your gout. I can't cure it. I come to let you get off steam about the war and our social state. I come out of kindness. Meanwhile, take some of this dope. It will ease down the pain a bit."

"Forget my abuse," said the General. "You're a good fellow really, Haddon. A quack, of course, but a great big lump of good nature. I like your funny old face."

They parted on good terms.

Sicily and then Italy, eh? . . . So that was it. "Before the leaves of Autumn fall." He hoped his son Peter would get through the next phase. Better than the invasion of France. Less bloody for all those young fellows in the Eighth Army and now the Fifth—wasn't it the Fifth?—whose mothers and wives were waiting in Ashleigh Heath and elsewhere. Waiting for the war to end, believing, some of them, that the war would end before the winter, working in factories, some of them going off with other men. Listening to *Workers' Playtime* during the lunch hour. Smoking too many cigarettes. Keeping their spirits up marvellously. Not doing badly on the rations, here and there suffering from queer neuroses due to war strain and overwork, and the absence of their men, and the list of casualties in the R.A.F. mounting to high figures during all these bomber raids.

War is becoming a normal habit, thought the doctor. We're getting settled down to it. Peace will be very unsettling.

His little Russian Princess was on his list again. She had once been Princess Narishkin. Now she was Mrs. Cummerford, the wife of a naval captain in the Mediterranean. This young officer had met her on the Island of Prinkipo after the last war, when part of the British Fleet was at Constantinople, and when we were feeding Russian refugees after their flight from the Crimea, when Wrangel's men were defeated and driven into the sea by the Red Army. They had lost everything, the Russian officers and aristocrats, everything except a few jewels in their boots, and a childish sense

of gaiety which made them laugh at utter destitution after they had wept, and before they wept again. They had gone for donkey races on the island of Prinkipo and their balalaikas had tinkled incessantly. The golden Bosphorus was around them. A blue sky was overhead. They could see the domes and minarets of Stamboul across the water. They lived like gipsies until they had to retreat from Prinkipo to the slums of Constantinople, to its cabarets where Russian girls danced nearly naked for Turks and British seamen, and to little restaurants where little ladies of the Imperial Russian Court and others of less degree became kitchen-maids and waitresses, and where their husbands and brothers and lovers in the rags and tatters of Cossack uniforms kissed the hands of Grand Duchesses, or the little hand of Princess Narishkin, before being served to a meal for which they had no money to pay.

Dr. Haddon had a soft spot in his heart for this little lady whom he called Princess. He guessed her age as forty something, adding up the years that had slipped by since that dream on the Island of Prinkipo when she had met her naval lieutenant. But she was still beautiful, with her black hair looped over her ears and a piquant delicate face as white as ivory and eyes full of humour when they were not dark with tragic thought. She made love to him in a merry way, which he knew, or at least hoped, was harmless.

“Look here,” he told her, “you mustn’t kiss me. It’s ridiculous, Princess, and not good for my reputation.”

“It is so long since I have kissed a man,” she cried. “I need kisses. I shall become very ill if I do not kiss now and again.”

“Well, kiss your gardener,” said the doctor. “His face is more hairy than mine. Or go and kiss the vicar. For God’s sake remember I’m a respectable family doctor with an adorable wife and a grown-up son and daughter.”

“It’s very safe to kiss you because you are a family doctor,” said the little lady. “In any case, I love you. Not with passion, doctor, but with respect and devotion. You are a healer. When you come into the room my wheezy lungs become quiet. And you are very wise. You are one of the few Englishmen with whom I can discuss war, life, beauty, and truth without offending their traditional ideas. You are intelligent. You have a great heart. You have pity even for your enemies. You have the tolerance and understanding of Tolstoy. There is a love for all humanity in your eyes. That is all, doctor.” She looked at him with her head a little on one side and her eyes half-closed, concealing the humour in them.

“It’s a damn sight too much,” said Dr. Haddon. “It’s a mouthful of nonsense. Let’s talk with some intelligence. If you don’t behave yourself I shall go away and inform the police. Let me listen to these lungs of yours. What have you been doing with yourself? Sitting on damp grass? Having a hot bath and sitting by an open window?”

"I have been living, or trying to live, in your English climate," answered Vera Cummerford. "It is, of course, impossible. That is why your people do not live—I mean in a human, intelligent way. They are so busy trying to keep alive that they have no time for thought or philosophy, or beauty or art."

"You're talking nonsense again," said the doctor.

She admitted it. Presently she gave up talking nonsense. She talked about the war and what might happen after the war.

"It is the beginning of a new world era," she said. "Most of you English people think that the end of the war is in sight and that then everything will go back as it was before with just a little more social service, and a minimum wage, rather high for unemployed and widows and old people. But that is not so. Nothing will ever be the same. This war is only the prelude to others."

"God forbid," said the doctor, putting away his stethoscope.

"There will be a re-grouping of races," said the little Princess. "If Japan is defeated China will be your next enemy. They, too, believe in Asia for the Asiatics. You will never get back Malaya."

"I hope you're wrong," said the doctor.

"Russia, too, is an Asiatic Power," said the little lady. "We only touch the fringe of Europe. Russian eyes turn eastwards and not westwards. Stalin is an Oriental. He smiles at your Western ideas of democracy. The idealism of the United States does not touch him. He just makes use of it to get war-planes and tanks. Do you think he will join the United States and Great Britain in a new democratic world? Do you think he will play a little game of ball with you according to the rules of English tennis? He will not play with you like that, dear doctor. He will link up with the Chinese. He will teach them to fly and make guns and tanks, four hundred million people taking to the air added to one hundred and sixty million of Russian technicians. That is a thought, is it not?"

"It's a very unpleasant thought," said Dr. Haddon. "It will spoil the rest of the day for me."

"There are other little thoughts I have," said Vera Cummerford. "It is that democracy is finished. You are fighting this war for it, do you not say? A beautiful thought to humbug the peoples. Perfectly false, alas. We are in the hands of Destiny, and Destiny decrees otherwise."

"Has Destiny told you?" asked the doctor, grinning at her.

"One can read Destiny if one sits quiet and looks into the future. I sit quiet, having few intelligent people in my neighbourhood. I see a little of what is hidden."

"Tell me," said the doctor, looking at his wrist-watch. "If you can tell me in two minutes."

"In one sentence," answered Vera Cummerford.

“Let’s have it, my dear Princess,” said Dr. Haddon politely. “Destiny in one sentence is priceless.”

“Humanity,” said the little lady calmly, “is on its way to the state of the termite ants.”

“A horrible idea,” said the doctor.

“I see it coming,” said his Russian Princess. “The individual will no longer exist with free will and free thought. He will become a soldier ant, or a worker ant, under the control of the State, which will be the nerve centre of the ant-heap and the controlling brain. Socialism, Communism, Fascism, Nazidom, they are only little stages on the way. Stalin knows that. Chiang Kai-shek knows that. The Pope is afraid of it. I, who am not the Pope, am afraid of it. The individual will lose his individuality. He will be compelled to live, act, work, fight, and die at the bidding of the System—the law of the ant-heap. Humanity will lose its soul like the termites and the insect world. It is because they have given up God for the efficiency of the machine.”

Dr. Haddon smiled at this Sybil who prophesied this dreadful doom.

“I sometimes have an idea that we are in danger of such things,” he admitted. “We are tending to arrange our social system to suit the lowest common denominator and to put the State above the individual. We must fight against that. It’s the coming struggle no doubt. Meanwhile, dear lady, I must go on my rounds and leave you to your morbid imagination.”

“Don’t go, big doctor man,” said Vera Cummerford. “I have a great deal more to tell you. I am bursting with thoughts of the most dreadful kind.”

“I don’t want to hear them,” said Dr. Haddon. “I’ve no time to wallow in Russian melancholy. Take care of that chill. Don’t go dancing in the garden without any clothes on.”

“What a charming idea,” exclaimed Mrs. Cummerford. “I believe I will. I will dance Pavlova’s *Swan Song* on the front lawn. How it will shock the old ladies of Ashleigh Heath. How they will rush to tell each other, and how my old gardener will enjoy himself.”

“Well, that’s all right,” said the doctor. “You’ll be dead next time I come. Good-bye.”

She held out her tiny hand for him to kiss.

On the way back from his Russian Princess, as he called her, he overtook a young man walking rapidly up one of the lanes. He carried a white stick, being a blind young man, though nobody would have guessed it because of the swiftness of his stride.

The doctor slowed down his car and spoke to him.

“Hullo, Quentin, my dear fellow. Dr. Haddon speaking. How are you getting on?”

“Not too badly,” said Quentin Fellowes, late of the Eighth Army. “I took

an awful purler this morning, but that's only to be expected now and then. I'm finding my way about pretty well, and I'm beginning to pick up lost threads. Thanks to your wife—that adorable and helpful lady—I have a first-class secretary who reads to me for five hours a day and takes down notes. She is highly intelligent and infinitely patient, so we get on very well.”

“I know,” said Dr. Haddon. “My wife told me. Myra Lehmann enjoys the job. It's just what she wants. Take care of yourself, my dear fellow. Don't take too many risks or walk at too big a pace. These country lanes are very dangerous with military lorries taking sharp corners.”

“I hear them coming,” said Quentin, “and my white stick makes them slow down. It's astonishing how kind people are to blinded men. It makes me think the best of human nature. Well, so long, doctor. Don't let me keep you.”

He waited until the doctor had driven on, and raised his white stick in salute.

Myra Lehmann, who not long ago had walked into a horse pond to drown herself because of life's cruelties, was aware that a new happiness had come to her, or at least a forgetfulness of self, and a sense of reconciliation with life. She had been shy at first when she had gone round to see Quentin and offer her services as reader and secretary. Irene Haddon had suggested this idea to Quentin, who had been glad of it, and said he was badly in need of such help. But he warned Mrs. Haddon that it would be a hard job for anyone.

"I shall be a bit of a slave-driver," he told her. "The only way to overcome my handicap is to work like hell, and I have all sorts of plans in my head. I'm not going to sit down and mope."

He was not sitting down when Myra called upon him the following afternoon. He stood in front of the fireplace in a room which his father had given him for his study, and Myra Lehmann, who saw him for the first time, was struck by his fine physique and handsome looks.

His face and hands were still tanned by the African sun. In his lounge suit he still looked a soldier, standing with his shoulders well back, upright and alert.

"Good morning, sir," said Myra Lehmann.

"Good morning, Miss Lehmann," said Quentin. "Only for goodness' sake don't call me 'sir'. That's a bit too formal!"

He held out his hand and missed hers for a moment.

"This handshaking business is difficult," he said. "I shall have to practise the right technique. Sit down, won't you?"

He took three quick steps to a window, pulled out a chair with the certainty of a sighted man and placed it beside his desk.

"I can find my way about this room," he told her, "without being clumsy. One has to memorize everything." He turned to the mantel-shelf, took a pipe from it, loaded it up from a case in his pocket, and lit it without fumbling.

"If you come along here," he said, "I don't want you to move anything. Pipe at the end of the mantelshelf. Box of matches next to the clock. That footstool took a bit of knowing, I stumbled over it every blessed time until I learnt its exact location. Now everything in this room is in my mind. Well, let's get down to business. How much time can you give me?"

“As much as you want,” answered Myra timidly.

Quentin laughed.

“Well, there’s a limit to my greed for work. Shall we say three hours in the morning and two in the afternoon, with an occasional spasm of overtime? Of course I would pay you extra for that.”

“I shall be entirely at your service,” said Myra.

“Well, that’s fine,” he answered. “Now I’ll tell you what I have in mind.”

He had a lot in his mind. As a regular routine he would want her to read out *The Times*, beginning with the leading article and the main items of news and, most important of all perhaps, the correspondence. He would also want her to read out the leading articles in the *Manchester Guardian*. Then there would be the weeklies like the *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, and *Time and Tide*. He wanted to keep in touch with current opinion of all shades including the ideas of the Common Wealth crowd and the Individualists. There were a number of books and pamphlets he wanted to read. He had made a list of some of them. Intelligent skipping would be necessary with these. He wanted to get at the guts of them. “Do you think you can do that?” he asked.

“I’ll try,” said Myra Lehmann.

“There’s another thing,” he said presently. “I want to learn German. You can help me over that.”

“I shall be glad,” said Myra.

“I know the rudiments, but I shall have to mug them up again,” he told her.

He wanted, too, to do other things. He wanted to get everything of importance in the way of planning for the post-war world. The American plan put out by Henry A. Wallace, Cordell Hull, and others. The plan for an International Police Force developed by Lord Davies and others. The problems and difficulties of an International Air Force. A good deal about an international currency and world credits.

“It’s going to bore you an awful lot,” he said with a laugh. “Do you think you can stand it?”

“I’m sure I can,” said Myra. “I shall be much interested.”

“The fact is,” he told her, “I want to take some part in this war planning. I was in the Eighth Army. The fellows out there are talking and thinking a lot about these things. Many of them won’t live to see them realized. There won’t be much of the Eighth Army left when this war is over. They’ve a long way to go. But their spirit will live. We can’t let them down; because I’ve had the luck to be blinded instead of blotted out, I feel that I ought to do something about it—something, I mean, to fulfil their ideals of making a more decent world, with fair play to the ordinary crowd, and a better chance of happiness, and some security of peace, and more spiritual ideas and values.

“I’m an Eighth Army man. It’s my future job in life to carry on the

tradition beyond the war. A bit ambitious perhaps, but then I believe in ambition if it's for a good cause. I can see good adventure ahead, and I'm keen on it. I shall have to earn a living, but I don't want much.

"Perhaps I'll put up for Parliament one day—I don't see why not—"

He seemed to be speaking to himself rather than to Myra Lehmann, but she answered warmly:

"They are very splendid, your ideas," she said. "I should be very proud and honoured if I could help you in the slightest way."

He laughed boyishly.

"Oh lord, yes. But I'm afraid I've been letting off some hot air. I may be putting my hopes too high and exhibiting a fair amount of self-conceit."

"Not in the very least," said Myra Lehmann. "I am deeply moved by all you tell me."

"Well, I haven't told you very much," he answered good-humouredly, "but if you'll take me on as an experiment I dare say we shall make a go of it. What about starting now?"

She started by reading out the first leader in *The Times*. She was nervous and made several mistakes in the pronunciation of long words.

"That doesn't matter," he told her. "I like your accent and you have a charming voice. It helps a lot."

"I am very glad," said Myra.

She was very glad of this work for a blind young man who was so passionately resolved to overcome his handicap.

He worked her hard. Sometimes her voice became tired and a little hoarse. Sometimes all this reading was a strain on her eyes. He never noticed that and seldom gave her a respite. He treated her as a kind of automaton—a reading machine—and seldom indulged in casual conversation. She was his paid secretary, and he treated her on these terms, though now and then he apologized for being a slave-driver. She was glad to be his slave. She saw the flame in his spirit. She followed his adventure of the mind. She came to know a young man training himself for leadership, and inspired by the tradition and comradeship of men like himself, who were fighting and dying for some ideal beyond the price of life itself. It was an astonishing experience, she thought, for a Jewish refugee. She was glad that she had not drowned herself that night when this boy's father had dragged her out of the pond.

Pearl Haddon was not unaware of the things which her American kinsman desired to say to her. She knew that she could not prevent him from saying them unless she kept out of his way. For a time she did keep out of his way while she thought things out inside herself. He was very much in love with her. Without any word spoken she read that in his eyes—Haddon eyes—and in his voice. He was humorous and gentle and courteous and kind. She liked his ideas and the way he put them. She liked his sudden laughs and the whimsicality of his mind. She liked his sentimentality about old England, though she made fun of it and teased him about his misguided love for the faked antique. He was the best type of young American, she thought, and that was a good type. She knew, knowing herself pretty well, that if she let herself go she would fall in love with him quite emotionally. Was it playing the game to let herself go? She wasn't sure. There was still a ghost in her heart—a young German named Karl. One could be loyal even to a ghost. She believed in loyalty. She was haunted by the promise she had made to her German lover to wait for him however long the war lasted. The tearing up of his photographs and letters with a “That's that” had not quite exorcized him. Anyhow, now that Edward had come on to the scene and showed an eagerness to make love to her, the memory of Karl was painful and insistent. Not all German cruelties made him quite dead in her heart. She remembered his tenderness, his devotion, his idealizing of her beauty and spirit. She had loved him with a girl's first and flaming love. But now he was the enemy of her country. In his blood were the German traditions and racial qualities, the blood of people who had been murderous, heartless, and merciless in this war—torturers of Jews, killers of hostages, cold blooded in flogging and beating their prisoners in the concentration camps. They were not lies, those stories. She had to believe them. Karl was guilty of them, at least as far as the whole German people shared this guilt of obedience to a system which did these things. Perhaps he had machine-gunned women and children. Perhaps his hands, which had once caressed her, had shot down English boys slogging back to Dunkirk, or trapped in the desert round Tobruk. What right had his ghost to come back to her? Wouldn't she be a little fool and a little traitor to deny Edward his love, to deny herself his love because once she had been engaged to a German? She

was very worried about it.

Edward Haddon was very worried about her aloofness. She made excuses not to lunch with him. She would not stay up in town to do a show with him. She pleaded hard work and overtime in St. James's Place; but he suspected a deliberate intention to put him off and was hurt about it, as she could tell by his notes to her.

Have I offended you in any way? he wrote. Have I been a clumsy American doughboy ignorant of English manners and the ancient code? If so, dear Cousin Pearl, forget it and forgive it. I am your most devoted kinsman. I guess I could say more than that if I were not darned afraid of writing too much. Will you make a date with me, Cousin Pearl? I have three days' leave due to me from Friday next. If I do not have the chance of seeing you, those three days will be worthless and wasted. Will you not send me a cousinly line from St. James's?

"What about asking our American cousin to come down for the week-end?" she enquired at the breakfast-table on the Thursday of that week.

She saw her mother's eyes soften at this question and could not avoid a slight flush of colour. Of course her mother had guessed everything, including her worry about the ghost of Karl. Her mother always read her thoughts like an open book.

"Quite a good idea," said Mrs. Haddon. "I have been wondering why we don't see more of him. What do you say, Mr. Apothecary?"

"It's all right by me," answered Dr. Haddon. "I like the fellow. A good type."

That morning Pearl buzzed him a telegram, as she called it.

What about three days' leave with us in Ashleigh Heath does it appeal. Pearl.

The reply was received in the Prisoners of War Department in St. James's Palace. It was handed to her by Lady Mary Chichester, who hoped it was good news. A telegram in war-time was not always good news.

"I'm not sure," said Pearl with a faint smile.

Of course it was Edward's answer, and she knew that if he accepted she would have to let him say the things he wanted to say.

It appeals more than anything in the world A thousand thanks to you and your family. Edward.

"Good news, I take it?" enquired the inquisitive Mary.

"Nothing tragic," answered Pearl evasively. "Not yet."

She asked for the week-end off. It was the first time she had done so since working for the Prisoners of War.

"Of course," said her Chief. "You've been indefatigable, my dear."

It was queer, she thought, that she had asked for the week-end off. It was a

sudden impulse. Perhaps it was a sense of kindness for Edward, who would be hipped if he had to spend three days on his own at Ashleigh Heath. Her father was kept busy with his patients and her mother was doing something at the Women's Institute, taking the chair for some blooming committee.

This is going to be a difficult week-end, she thought, on her way down from Waterloo. I shall have to make a big decision one way or the other. I can't keep him on a string. It isn't fair, really.

He arrived on the Friday morning just before lunch-time and she went to meet the bus which brought him.

He strode towards her with a suitcase in one hand.

"It's wonderful to see you again," he told her. "I thought I had been put into the discard. When I had your telegram I did a song and dance, and I'm humbly grateful."

"Nice to see you," she answered, without too much enthusiasm. "How are things going?"

He answered with his American attention to fact.

"If you mean the war, I should say there's a lull before the storm. If you mean life generally, and mine in particular, I'll say that it has brightened up considerably since Thursday afternoon when I had your message."

"Well, I hope you won't be too bored down here," said Pearl, keeping the conversation friendly but discreet.

"Bored in Seventh Heaven?" asked Edward. "No, lady. That's ruled out. This village and its surrounding countryside is my idea of Paradise. And I don't believe it has a serpent anywhere about."

Pearl laughed at this description of Ashleigh Heath. "Oh, lots of snakes and serpent's tongues. We wallow in scandal. We specialize in the seven deadly sins."

"You make me laugh," said Edward Haddon. "I should say the worst sin in Ashleigh Heath wouldn't raise a blush on an angel's cheek. And Jemeny Cricket, look at those hollyhocks outside that venerable cottage. They've grown as high as Jack's beanstalk."

"It's a growing year," said Pearl. "We're going to have a bumper apple harvest. Father says the wheat is coming on splendidly."

"Great news," answered Edward. "This little over-populated island won't starve to death just yet."

They walked together at a swinging pace to the end of the village. Pearl stopped a moment to speak to a blind young man swinging a white stick.

"Good morning, Quentin. Do you remember Pearl?"

The blind young man took off his Panama hat.

"Of course I do. The prettiest girl in Ashleigh Heath. You must be beautiful now."

“Afraid not,” laughed Pearl. “How are you getting on?”

“Learning quite a lot,” said Quentin Fellowes cheerfully. “I’m mugging up German, and getting on like a house on fire. And my lady secretary is a jewel. Five hours a day of intensive reading. No joke for her.”

“Come to tea one day,” said Pearl, “won’t you? You will like to meet my American cousin. He’s with me now. He would like to shake hands with you—Edward, this is Quentin Fellowes of the Eighth Army.”

The two men grasped hands.

“It’s an honour to meet you, sir,” said Edward. “I take off my hat to any man who has fought with the Eighth Army.”

“Thanks,” said Quentin.

He swung his white stick, again feeling for the edge of the kerb, and passed on.

“God!” said Edward in a low voice. “Blinded, poor lad. It makes my blood run cold.”

“Mother says he’s strangely happy,” answered Pearl. “He wants to be one of the leaders of the Post-War World. He wants to get a fair deal for all his comrades.”

“That’s great,” said Edward. “I take off my hat to him. I like his courage. I hope I have a small fraction of it.”

He was strangely moved by this meeting with Quentin Fellowes, and mentioned it again during the week-end.

“I wouldn’t have the courage to face blindness,” he said. “If these Jerries get me one day I hope it will be a nice clean wound in the arm or leg.”

He went for a walk with Pearl on the heath above the village and found great pleasure in the view across the Sussex Downs, and closer at hand in the silver beeches and the golden gorse and the English wild flowers on the banks of a steep, sunken lane down which they walked.

“These flowers make me think of Shakespeare,” he said. “It was Shakespeare who made me love England. I guess I was a boy of fourteen when I first came under his spell in a white farmhouse in Taunton, Massachusetts.”

“You must have been a studious boy,” remarked Pearl. “Weren’t you rather different from most American boys?”

He laughed at this question.

“Some American boys read books,” he told her. “They begin with *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Dickens is not unknown. I dare say we read much the same as English boys and girls, including *Sherlock Holmes* and other classics.”

“I’d like to go to America one day,” said Pearl incautiously.

It was incautious if she wished to avoid any emotional crisis. She didn’t avoid it, for it gave him his opening.

“I’d like to take you there,” he said. “I’d be the happiest man on earth if you would let me take you there when we’ve got through with this war. I’d like to show you my home town of Taunton, Massachusetts. It’s a nice little town, and there’s some good country round about it, little sandy tracks with silver birches and rocks cropping up through the soil, and lakes—with Indian names—bigger than I’ve seen in England, and very lovely in Summer. Then I’d like to take you up the Mohawk Trail in the Fall. You’d be surprised at the flaming colours—all tones of red up to flaming scarlet. It’s a great panorama; the hills rise up pretty steep, and mountain streams come rushing down into deep-cut valleys; pretty good for picnics or a camping holiday with a nice little car on the roadside.”

“It sounds very nice,” said Pearl, rather overwhelmed by this enthusiasm.

He stopped in his track across the heath and stood in front of her with an eager light in his eyes.

“Will you come?” he asked. “Will you come with me one day? Could you bear to leave little old England and make a new home out there?”

“I wouldn’t mind going on a visit,” said Pearl. “After the war—”

She tried to be non-committal and casual, but he would not let her off with that.

“Pearl,” he said, “don’t you know what I’m driving at? Don’t you understand what I want to say? I’ve been trying to say it for a while back, but I just didn’t have the courage. And I haven’t the courage now. I’m a timid sort of guy, really. I’m a shy cuss, really, though you wouldn’t think it, maybe. I’m just trying to say that I’m very much in love with you. No, that’s not the truth. It’s an understatement. I love you as Romeo loved Juliet, as Orlando loved Rosalind. I’m just crazy about you. I find you enchanting and lovely. You are all that I have dreamed of English beauty and English womanhood. I love you with everything that is best in me, with all I am, and all I hope to be. I mean, you’re my ideal. I’d try to live up to you. I would be worshipful. I’d be your lover for life. Tell me, Pearl, could you bring yourself to love me a little, just enough to put up with me?”

Pearl laughed, but it was a nervous laugh—as though he made her shy and afraid.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure. You love me too much. I’m not as wonderful as all that; I’m just an ordinary English girl and not a lady of romance. You’re seeing me through sentimental eyes. You’re making an ideal of me, Edward. I’m not at all ideal, you know.”

“That goes with me if you insist,” he told her with a laugh. “I’ll just keep my own opinion about you while you keep yours. It’s the secret of perfect friendship I believe. But you haven’t answered my question—I mean that one about the chance of your being able to love me, maybe a little and maybe a

lot?”

He looked at her with a kind of desperate devotion. Upon her answer depended all his happiness, he thought.

“Does it need an urgent reply?” she asked him evasively. “Couldn’t you give me a bit of time, Edward?”

He was not wholly disappointed by these words. They seemed to give him a chance.

“How much is ‘a bit of time’, Pearl?” he enquired, smiling at her. “A minute and a half? Two minutes?”

“A few weeks,” she pleaded.

“Before the leaves of Autumn fall?” he asked; and then spoke more gravely.

“Say, Pearl, it’s like this. I’m a man in a hurry. We’re all people in a hurry nowadays, aren’t we? I mean, this war makes life uncertain for all of us, civilians as well as soldiers, men as well as women. I’m in a special hurry because I’m expecting orders to go places. They might arrive any time. I guess within a month.”

He held her hand as he stood by her side on that open heath, on a sandy track through silver birches which reminded him of country round Taunton, Massachusetts.

“Say, Pearl, I’m a timid lover. If I were a different sort of guy I’d risk everything by taking hold of you and kissing your lips and doing cave-man stuff, but it wouldn’t go with an English girl like you, and I’m a shy American.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you gave me a kiss,” said Pearl. “In fact I should like it.”

“You would?”

He seemed astonished. He was certainly delighted.

“Why, Pearl, that’s more than I dared hope, though not more than I wanted.”

He took her arms and drew her towards him and kissed her lips.

“That was great!” he said, when she drew away from him. “That was Seventh Heaven!”

He was dismayed to see a glint of tears in her eyes, which she tried to hide by turning away from him.

“Pearl,” he cried, “what’s the matter? Have I hurt you? Have I been clumsy, like a tough guy from New England?”

“No,” she said. “You’re very kind to me; but Edward, I’m not quite free. I’m haunted by a ghost. He was my lover. He kissed me once like that. He had a right to kiss me; I was engaged to him. I promised to be loyal. I’ve told you about him. He was a German.”

Edward Haddon looked distressed for a moment. Yes, he had heard of that German lad, but he thought all that was gone like the wind, a bad dream, a painful little memory just emerging now and then faintly from the subconscious mind, but otherwise dead and buried.

“Now, Pearl,” he said soothingly, “forget that Jerry boy. I’m not even jealous of him. I just wash him out. The war broke all promises between your folk and Germans, and my folk and Germans. There’s nothing but death between us—death and a river of blood. Their leader is the arch liar of history, beating Baron Munchausen. What did he say? ‘I’ve no more territorial claims in Europe. I will cross no people’s frontiers. All I want is peace.’ All Germans share his perjury. They’re all guilty of his atrocities because they’re fighting for him. ‘Heil Hitler!’ when he massacres Jews. ‘Heil Hitler!’ when he executes Poles and French hostages. ‘Heil Hitler!’ whatever devilry he does. I dare say that young German who was once a friend of yours was a nice-looking fellow and well educated with good manners. I dare say he was very decent. But hasn’t he become a soldier of Adolf Hitler? Doesn’t that convict him of crime? Hasn’t that debased him lower than the beasts? He has no hold over you now, Pearl. Let him stay in Hitler’s hell. Forget him.”

Pearl listened to this with serious, questioning eyes. This young American, a Haddon like herself, was saying things which had been in her own mind, though not in those words so strong and fierce. They were her own arguments for disclaiming any loyalty to Karl. It was the truth as she saw it in her own secret thoughts.

“I suppose you’re right,” she told him. “I think you are. Loyalty to Karl would be disloyalty to all that we’re fighting for—Peter, and all the other boys—I see that.”

“You’ve said it,” answered Edward. “There’s no more to be thought about it. And Pearl, I’m still that man in a hurry and the seconds tick on.” He raised his wrist-watch to his ear and smiled at her.

“I feel as wise as Shakespeare’s fool in the forest,” he told her:

*“and so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,
and then from hour to hour we rot and rot”.*

Pearl laughed almost light-heartedly, as though his speech—quite a speech—had exorcized that torturing ghost of memory.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked simply.

He seemed staggered for the moment by the utter simplicity of those words. He hesitated for a moment and then answered squarely with equal simplicity.

“I want you to marry me.”

She fluttered her eyelashes, and a faint flush of colour crept into her face

and there was a tiny smile at the corner of her lips.

“When? In two years? Three years? After the war, of course, however long that may be.”

“No,” he told her quickly, “I don’t mean that. I mean tomorrow, in the village church here. What’s against it?”

Pearl laughed out loud.

“Can’t be done, man in a hurry. We have things called banns. You have to be shouted in church, as the village folks say. That takes three weeks. Besides . . .”

He paid no attention to that “Besides.”

“Three weeks!” he exclaimed with horror. “Why, it’s no wonder you take a hell of a long time invading Europe. We go faster than that in Massachusetts, I guess. Three weeks may be no good to me, sweetheart. I may be going places in three weeks from now.”

“What’s your idea?” asked Pearl. “A quick marriage and the good-bye to a lonely wife who may be a widow before the war ends?”

She smiled at him, but the question was asked seriously, wonderingly. Hadn’t she seen that happen to girl friends and village women? Embarkation leave, a war marriage, a girl left to have a baby. A widow in three months or six. Sally Plunkett. April Loveband. Kitty Jordan. Girl widows with babies, since their boys never returned from Dunkirk sands.

Was it worth it? Kitty Jordan thought so.

“Better to have loved,” said Edward.

Pearl interrupted him ruthlessly:

“I know the end of the quotation,” she said. “But I’m not sure it’s true. It may be one of those falsities which delude sentimentalists.”

“Are you afraid of sentiment?” asked Edward.

“I dislike it if it’s sham,” answered Pearl. “You Americans so often mistake fake stuff, don’t you, for the deep, underlying truth of things—the stark, fearless truth which I admire.”

“You’re cruel to the Americans,” said Edward, looking hurt, but not feeling so hurt as he looked. “I’m a perfectly good American—quite typical, and I have an idea we see things pretty straight, perhaps a bit straighter sometimes than the sophisticated English.”

“Now I’ve hurt the American susceptibilities,” exclaimed Pearl. “How careful one has to be with our American cousins!”

He made a gesture, putting that on one side.

“You can trample on every susceptibility in my make-up,” he told her. “I’ll like it. But do we get married on Monday? Can’t we persuade the village parson to quicken his pace about those banns?”

He put his arm round her waist like a village lover and she felt the pressure

of his hand.

“Edward,” she said, not protesting against this way of walking with him, “you’re asking me to jump into marriage with you.”

“Yes,” he said, “I’m asking you to take the leap. You’re a brave woman.”

“And what happens when you’re away?” she asked.

“I may be killed,” he said simply; “but I should have had all the bliss that life holds, and I wouldn’t quarrel with old man Death.”

“And me?” she asked. “What about me?”

“It depends whether you think a man’s supreme love is a good memory. We should have climbed the stairs to Seventh Heaven. A few moments more or less does not count in time because afterwards, as far as I can make out, there is no time. We should have fulfilled our desire for the uttermost joy. We should not have missed each other in the dark. That’s how I feel about it, and it’s not fake sentiment with me.”

“You’re a romantic,” said Pearl. “I like you for being a romantic of the early Victorian era with an American accent.”

“That’s how I am,” he confessed, “and, lady, I ain’t ashamed of it. No, sir! Say, that’s a noble oak just there. I guess its gnarled branches have given shade to centuries of lovers. I’d like to sit on its roots with you and look over the English countryside with that blue hill smudging the horizon and those little old farmsteads down below surrounded by patchwork fields.”

“Tired?” asked Pearl insincerely.

“A lover of Nature and one woman,” he answered.

They sat together on the gnarled roots. They had the world to themselves except for the tap-tap of a woodpecker in a near-by tree, and a startled rabbit who saw them and bolted.

“You wouldn’t think there was a war on, would you?” asked Pearl.

“It’s the Peace of Paradise,” he answered. He put his arm round her again and drew her to his shoulder, and kissed her hair. She put her hand up to his face and he thrilled to the touch of her fingers. Presently—how long?—quick footsteps sounded through the bracken on a grassy track leading past them.

“What about it?” whispered Edward.

“Don’t move,” she whispered back, clutching his arm.

A young man passed by. He was whistling softly to himself something of Chopin’s. It was a young man swinging a white stick, which every now and again he used to tap the grass bank on the side of the track.

“Oh, my God!” said Edward in a low voice when Quentin Fellowes had passed beyond earshot. “That poor young fellow.”

“I believe he’s happy,” said Pearl.

“He must have some inward vision. I pray to God that if I’m blinded I shall remember your face as I see it now and have some spiritual light maybe to

guide me.”

“Come back alive, Edward,” said Pearl. “I shall want you.”

He held her closer to his side and she raised her head for his kiss. They sat there on the heath above the village of Ashleigh, forgetful of time. Once a squadron of Typhoon bombers passed overhead and streaked towards the coast.

“There’s war over there,” said Pearl. “Have we forgotten it?”

She had heard the eight o’clock news that morning. Thousands of Germans were being killed by the Russians, who were smashing through the enemy lines at a place called Byelgorod, or some such name. They were flattening out the Kursk salient, whatever that might mean. The Germans said they had destroyed more than a thousand Russian tanks and repulsed the Russians with bloody losses—near Bryansk, wasn’t it? Young men were dying in heaps on both sides. How many cripples would there be now in Germany and Russia? How many mutilated and blinded and shell-shocked? There was silence in Tunisia. No news came from the Eighth Army, but something big would happen soon. That would mean the death of other young men from Ashleigh Heath, the husbands of the girls she knew. But here on the heath there was peace, with birds singing and little fleecy clouds making shadows across the fields of oats as they passed over the sun.

Edward answered her last question.

“That reminds me of my hurry. When am I going to marry you, Pearl? When are you going to marry me?”

“This year, next year, now or never?” asked Pearl teasingly.

They were late for supper.

“Sorry, Mother,” said Pearl. “Edward and I couldn’t tear ourselves away from the heath. It was marvellous in the warm sun, with a perfect view of the Sussex Downs.”

“Yes, very lovely,” said Irene Haddon.

Pearl avoided her eyes. Her mother could always read her thoughts.

She couldn’t hide anything—not that she wanted to hide anything about Edward D. Haddon, of Taunton, Massachusetts. She had agreed to marry him in due and reasonable time.

Pearl went into her father's study that night when Edward and her mother had gone up to their rooms. He stayed up late, as a rule, reading the morning papers or some medical book in which he was interested. He was there now, in a deep arm-chair with a reading-lamp at his side, though the black-out curtains were not drawn and in this double summer-time there was still light in the garden.

"Busy?" asked Pearl.

He put down a book and smiled at her. "Never too busy for a talk with you, my dear. How's everything?"

"Father," said Pearl, "you're the wisest man I know. I want your advice."

He laughed as she sat on a low stool a yard away from him. She looked very pretty, he thought, uncommonly like his wife when she was a girl, though not quite so beautiful. Irene had been marvellous.

"I'm glad of your good opinion," he said, "but you're mistaken, old girl. I'm not in the least wise. I make a damn fool of myself about almost everything. I can't even remember the names of some of my patients."

"You have a lot of sense in your noddle, Father," said Pearl. "You've thought things out to their roots. As a doctor, you know about the human mind and all the problems of life."

He laughed again and raised his big, finely-shaped hands—a surgeon's hands.

"I wonder if I do? Certainly I study human nature a bit and have some elementary notions on mental therapy, but I don't know much about life really. I just stand on the threshold of its mysteries wondering what it's all about. I can't make head or tail about this war, for instance. All its slogans are meaningless to me; I see only the martyrdom of man due to his own lack of sense and morality. Our enemies of today will be our friends of tomorrow. Our friends of today, our beautiful Russian allies, for instance, may be our enemies of tomorrow. It's all very odd. It's all very bewildering."

"I haven't come to talk about the war," said Pearl.

"Have a cigarette, my dear," said her father. "Any little trouble? Your eyes look like stars."

"Cousin Edward has been making love to me," said Pearl.

Her father was not staggered by this announcement.

“Very natural of Cousin Edward,” he answered. “Only to be expected.”

“He wants me to marry him,” said Pearl. “And he wants it pretty damn quick. He says he’s a man in a hurry.”

“The American way, no doubt,” said the doctor. “They’re all in a hurry, aren’t they? though what they’re hurrying towards, Heaven alone knows. What are you going to do about it, my dear?”

“That’s where I want your advice, Father,” answered Pearl. “Do you believe in these war marriages? Do you think it’s a good thing to marry a man who will probably go off and get killed somewhere before the war ends?”

Dr. Haddon did not answer that question at once. He looked at Pearl as though she were one of his patients and then reached out for his pipe and loaded it.

“A difficult problem,” he said. “Speaking on lines of ordinary prudence and common sense, I should say these war marriages are a mistake. Some of the girls I know round here hardly had time to know the men they married. When those fellows come back they will be like strangers. And these young women, some of them, have no sense of loyalty—it’s expecting too much of them after two or three years of separation—and go fooling around with other men. I say fooling around, but I can quite understand their need for a man’s companionship. They’re not unsexed because they’ve been wedded for a fortnight. Passion suddenly grabs hold of them and carries them off their feet. There are lonely men as well as lonely women. All these Canadian soldiers, for instance, cut off from their own womenfolk, meeting nice English girls, or girls of no stern code of morality. Those fellows crave for a woman’s tenderness. How can you blame them if they carry on with a girl? How can you blame the girl? It’s all a most unnatural situation. All the ties are loosened. And war and death are always in the background over the chimney-pots. We’re living like Bocaccio’s ladies and gentlemen in the time of plague. It doesn’t make for high morality, except among the rare few who become more spiritual and dedicate themselves to a passion beyond the body. Still, all that’s getting away from your question about war marriages. Impossible to give you a straight answer, my dear. Prudence is against them. But do we get the best out of life by prudence? Is Safety First the noblest slogan?”

“It sounds pretty mean to me,” said Pearl. “Peter doesn’t work on that way of life.”

“No,” said Dr. Haddon. “Nor any of our people. Otherwise we should have made terms after the fall of France.”

“Do you think I ought to take the risk?” asked Pearl. “Shall I marry Edward and let the rest go hang?”

She added a few words in a lower voice.

“I should rather like to have a baby.”

“Why not?” asked her father. “It’s the fulfilment of a woman’s nature.”

The conversation was interrupted for a few moments by the sound of engines vibrating heavily over the chimney-pots.

“Off again,” said the doctor.

Pearl went to the window and stared out above the tree-tops.

“I can see their little lights, like fire-flies,” she said.

“A murderous way of war,” said the doctor. “Old Marlow will be listening. This blasting of German cities in return for their blasting of English cities doesn’t seem to him Christian. I don’t suppose it is. In fact I’m quite certain it isn’t. But we haven’t got as far as Christianity yet, have we? Anyhow, there’s no other way of smashing the Germans, and they’ve got to be smashed. They asked for it.”

“Good luck to those boys up there,” said Pearl. “How many will be missing tonight?”

“About a tenth of their number,” said the doctor. “It seems to work out like that. Ghastly business! We’re all in it. We all share the guilt of it. Not those boys, of course. They’re as innocent as babes and inspired by a glory of courage and self-sacrifice. That’s what makes war so devilish inconsistent and hard to avoid. Human insanity and Divine courage. The destruction of mankind by the machines invented by human genius and the splendour of youth daring all things like avenging angels for ideals which I fear will be betrayed, as we betrayed them before. What a mix-up! What a hotchpotch of nobility and folly, the cynicism of wicked old men, whose damned stupidity made this war possible, and the splendour of our youth who go out to die for England’s sake and hold their lives as cheap as candle-wicks.”

“It’s beyond our imagination,” said Pearl. “None of us realize what all this means. We go on here in Ashleigh Heath as though nothing much were happening and everything were very jolly. Mother goes on weeding in the garden and plucks off the dead roses. All the girls in khaki flirt with any boys they can find, and drag their kit from one platform to another as happy as sand-boys. I’m very much concerned with my own little miserable ego, and have an excellent appetite for meals while all the occupied countries are starving to death.”

“Quite all right,” said her father. “It’s the only way of keeping sane. The individual looks after himself whatever agony there is around him. That’s why man has survived all his calamities in history.”

Pearl turned away from the window and came back to her stool.

“Well,” she said, “so you think I ought to marry Edward?”

The doctor smiled at her and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“My dear girl, it’s entirely up to you. It’s not a question to be argued out

with pros and cons. Do you want him? Do you love him? Is it a love like a flame and like a hungry appetite? Don't marry him if you think the price may be very heavy; but if you want to fling yourself into his arms, if your body and soul desire him, then it's worth it. See what I mean?"

"I think it's worth it," said Pearl. "I do desire him. He's a nice lover."

"Good," said Dr. Haddon; "that settles it, doesn't it? Why did you ask my advice? You wouldn't take it if I argued against your own impulse. You would be wrong if you did."

"Thanks, Father," said Pearl. She stood up as though going, and then said something else.

"Do you remember Karl? I promised to wait for him whatever happened in the war. How about loyalty?"

"You were a child then," said the doctor. "Loyalty mustn't be a slavery or a torture, unless to break it would be to smash one's own self-respect and all honour."

"Yes; but, Father," said Pearl quickly, "that's just it. Self-respect and all honour. If I chuck Karl—"

"No, no," he said. "You're perfectly free now. When he went back to Germany, choosing loyalty to Hitler, he broke with you. He can't have it both ways. He can't kill English boys one day and marry an English girl afterwards as though he had been a perfect little gentleman and all was forgiven. Isn't that true? Isn't it the truth in your own mind? I'm not doing any special pleading to get you out of a moral dilemma. It seems to me the simple truth."

"Thanks, Father," said Pearl again. "I knew that I could count on your advice. You understand so much. You have such a big head and such a big heart without bitterness, and without hatred, and without meanness. You've been a very nice father to me."

"Bosh!" he said. "I'm just an ambling old apothecary."

He put his arm round her shoulder and hugged her close.

"It's only the other day I gave you a pick-a-back," he said. "And now you have the cheek to come and tell me you're going to get married. That's the tragedy of fatherhood. That's the law of life. Damned hard on the old 'uns!"

"Sorry, Father," exclaimed Pearl. "I expect I'm a blasted little fool in getting carried away by a man from Massachusetts."

"The Americans make good husbands," said the doctor. "They let their wives trample on them. It's nice for the wives."

Pearl slipped from his arm.

"And now to bed," she said. "A thousand thanks, honoured sir. It's time you hit the hay, as Edward says."

She blew a kiss to him and went upstairs. A door was ajar with a chink of light showing. It opened wider as she came upstairs.

“We didn’t say ‘good night’ properly,” said Edward D. Haddon.

He took her in his arms.

“In this cottage,” said Pearl, “a whisper is heard in every room.”

“I’m not worrying,” said Edward. “I don’t care who knows that I’m going to give you a chaste kiss.”

“Make it chaste, darling,” said Pearl.

He kissed her with passion, and then she fled from him at the sound of Dr. Haddon’s heavy tread coming upstairs.

There was a secret battle in the mind of Quentin Fellowes and he had to fight hard. It was a battle against blindness and the despair which might overwhelm him if once he gave ground. He would never give ground. He was determined to win his victory over that demon of despair. He could do it only by working incessantly and avoiding moments of idleness when he might be overtaken by self pity and regret for all the things he missed—colour, the lovely shapes of things, people's faces, the play of light and shadow over fields, the sun and the sky, everything which gave form and meaning to life through the precious sense of vision. He had been into the dark pit. That was when he first knew he had been blinded.

He had been drowned in self pity. Then one day he had struggled out of bed and started laughing. He had laughed at some absurd joke told to him by a fellow-officer of the Eighth Army who had lost both his legs and was wheeling himself about the yard.

“If that fellow can joke,” thought Quentin, “why can't I laugh? The spirit is beyond wounds. I will see with the spirit.”

That was his first step on the way to victory. He made other people laugh by telling comic stories about his men—his Cockney humorists. If he could do that there was still a use for him, he thought. He had been a bit of a humorist himself, he had always seen the gay side of things. Why not see the gay side of blindness and make a joke about coming up against a door-post, losing the bed in his own room, upsetting a glass of water, not finding the way to his mouth at first, with the clumsiness of the newly blind? It was damn funny sometimes. Better make a joke of it than make a moan. Easy to say that, and fairly easy to adopt that pose in public, but not easy always when left alone, or at night before sleep came. Blind! Always in darkness. Helpless, like a baby crying in the dark. Helpless? Not if one educated oneself to be blind, to remember the places of things, avoiding breaking or spilling things, training one's sense of hearing and one's sense of touch, and even one's sense of smell. He would try to have good table manners, feeling for the glass and cutlery and the salt cellar before he used them, then remembering exactly so that he could take things with ease, and help himself. Enormously difficult at first, with many disappointments and upsets, but after a while easier.

At home in his father's house he was doing rather well, and he could go for a walk on the heath at a good pace with the skilful use of a stick. He knew his way to the heath partly by sound and partly by measurement of paces, and partly by the smell of things. On the right hand side of the lane there was a rivulet always chattering over stones. That gave him his clue to the next turning in the steep lane leading to the hill top and the heath fifty paces on, and the smell of the haystack in the field by the broken gate. Up the lane the tangled roots of big trees on the banks. Once he tripped over them and sprawled into the mud. Well, a sighted man might have done that, or an absent-minded cuss with his head in the air and a sonnet in his mind. He had to remember that root. Easy going now because of the climb. Then the heath with different air, different scent, wet sand, bracken, fir trees, and a faint far-off whiff of the sea coming with the wind across the Downs. Solitary walks, but busy all the time with measuring, touching, smelling, listening. No time for self pity. He was in training.

Not that he need have been solitary. There were his father and mother always ready to give him an arm to lead him about, to act as his eyes. But he didn't want to be led about. He wanted to be self-reliant as far as possible. He had to be careful about that, not to hurt the feelings of his mother and father.

He explained it to his father, who was a man of understanding and good humour, one of the very best.

"I don't want to be mollycoddled, Father. Don't always give me a hand down those steps. I'll never learn anything if I'm always relying on other people. I want people to say 'that fellow is blind but it makes very little difference to him'."

"I think you're right," said Robert Fellowes; "and I must say, old man, that you've taken the terror out of blindness—I mean the terror and the agony of other people who suffer in the presence of a blind man like your mother and myself. For a time when I first heard of it, I wished you'd been killed. Your mother was utterly stricken. Now, by all that's holy, you keep her laughing. It's marvellous, my dear old man. I'm proud of you. I boast about you. I say that son of mine has reached the heights of heroism. Blindness? He lost his eyes for England's sake, but it hasn't spoilt his career. He's just beginning it. One day he will be Prime Minister and help to build the new world."

Quentin laughed at his father as they sat together in the garden.

"Well, I don't know about being Prime Minister," he said, "but I'm going to have a shot later on at getting a seat in the House."

"I'll be your unpaid Secretary," said his father. "I'll go canvassing for you. I'll kiss all the pretty girls on your behalf."

"No, I'm dashed if you will!" said Quentin. "That's my privilege, and I shall be thought a fine and chivalrous fellow because I'll kiss the ugly ones as

well, not knowing the difference—worse luck!”

They had long talks about the post-war world and the kind of place it ought to be. Occasionally they took different points of view and had different political ideas.

“I’m afraid you’re becoming a damned socialist, old boy. Forgive my saying so, but your last argument. . . .”

“I’m not a socialist, my dear Guv’nor. On the contrary, I have a perfect passion for individual character and liberty of mind, but we must start with a fair minimum—a very high minimum—of decent comfort and education for the whole nation.”

“With a great danger of pauperising the community,” said his father; “with a still worse danger of pandering to the lowest common denominator, and so producing a mass of low-class character and low-grade intelligence.”

So they talked many times with good-humoured argument, modifying and shaping each other’s ideas. Robert Fellowes, as an Indian Civil Servant, had had a considerable experience of administration and political ideas. He was by no means a dyed-in-the-wool Tory of the old school. But he was startled sometimes by his son’s forward-looking vision, and his indifference to conventional thought. He looked at most problems from a spiritual angle, putting them to the test of Christian ethics and fair play. He was too idealistic, no doubt, thought Robert Fellowes. He had not come up against the snags, the jealousies, the greeds, the little meannesses, and the lethargy of human nature, especially in public and political life. He would take some hard knocks, poor lad.

Quentin read his thoughts.

“Oh, yes, I know I’m inexperienced, and I know there will be many bunkers. The post-war world is not going to be made up or run by angels of light. The spirit of evil will put up a darned good fight. All the forces of reaction will come out from their lairs.”

This comradeship between father and son was a new source of happiness to the elder man. It was strange that the blinding of his son had brought this boon to him. Talking like this or listening to Quentin’s stories of the Eighth Army, Robert Fellowes forgot sometimes that his son was blind. He was so vivid, so vital, and so keen about life that it was hard sometimes to remember his handicap.

Bob Fellowes knew nothing of Quentin’s secret battle against despair, his hours now and then of spiritual as well as physical darkness.

He had been working too hard. He seldom gave his mind a rest. He seldom gave his secretary a rest during the hours she was with him, but every day now he knocked off for an hour of pure pleasure and delight. It was Irene Haddon who gave him the idea by a question she asked.

“Do you ever get Myra Lehmann to play for you? She’s a beautiful pianist. She plays Chopin like an angel and Mozart like Myra Hess.”

“Really?” asked Quentin. “Yes, I remember someone told me about that, but it slipped out of my mind—or what the right honourable gentleman is pleased to call his mind. I’ll ask her one day to play a bit.”

He asked her that afternoon. She had been reading out the Beveridge Report, which was hard reading and hard listening. Suddenly Quentin interrupted her.

“I think we might leave that for a bit. What about a little music for a change? Would it bore you to play something? That piano isn’t bad unless mother has forgotten to have it tuned.”

“My fingers are like thumbs,” said Myra. “I’m so out of practice.”

“A good idea to get some,” suggested Quentin. “I’m keen on music, but I’m not hypercritical. What about one of Chopin’s Nocturnes?”

“I’ll try,” answered Myra diffidently.

She played one of Chopin’s Nocturnes. She played it, he thought, exquisitely.

“Good God!” he exclaimed, “that’s wonderful. Chopin touched the stars. His spirit was like a white flame. Unearthly, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” said Myra. “It is pure melody, is it not? As pure as water from a spring. But sometimes one hears an anguish in his soul. He was sad, I think.”

“Play again,” said Quentin. “This is a real treat.”

She did not play Chopin this time. She played one of Mozart’s Sonatas, very lively and gay-hearted.

Quentin laughed at the end of it.

“I should have liked to know young Mozart. A lad after my own heart.”

“A great genius,” answered Myra. “God gave him the most precious gift. For the time in which he lived he was very original and audacious in his technique. Of course he played on plucked strings. There was no piano then. It is very Eighteenth Century.”

“Play again,” asked Quentin. “What about old Beethoven? Do you know any?”

Myra smiled to herself. She had studied Beethoven in Vienna for fourteen hours a day. She played Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, or part of it.

“Damn fine,” said Quentin. “I had no idea . . .”

He had no idea that his paid secretary whom he had worked so hard, tiring her voice making her read reports and speeches and pamphlets, was such a fine pianist with a world of music in her mind and on her finger-tips.

“What next?” he asked. “You fill this room with glory. You light it up for me.”

“It’s a great pleasure,” said Myra.

She played some of Schubert's songs charmingly, thought Quentin, who was enjoying himself. She has a perfect touch, he thought.

"This is going to be grand for me," he told her after an hour of this music. "Blindness doesn't matter when you play like that. Let's have some more tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. We'll make a habit of it."

"I should be very pleased," said Myra, "if I can give you a little pleasure."

"A lot," he told her. "What about a musical evening now and then? Dr. Haddon plays the flute rather well. He's a great fan of old man Bach."

"I should be very happy to play for him," said Myra. "I have a great love for Mrs. Haddon, who has been very kind to me."

"I'm afraid I'm a bit of an egoist," said Quentin with a laugh. "I grab at everything which makes me forget my blindness for a bit. I'm a ruthless slave-driver and forget that other people want their rest and leisure. I haven't thanked you enough for giving up so much of your time to me. And now this music . . ."

"You are making me very happy," said Myra. "Before you came I was rather lonely, you know. Now I have a good job. I like it."

She did not tell him how much she liked it, nor what a difference it made to her, this drudgery for a blind young man. She watched his face and was astonished at its radiance sometimes, when she read out something which appealed to his imagination and sense of humour. She was aware when a dark mood was creeping on him. She anticipated his needs for a box of matches to light his pipe—he disproved the saying that blind men do not smoke.

She watched him with an intensity of interest of which he was quite unaware. She had never known an Englishman like this, nor any Englishman so well. Was he typical, she wondered?

If so, then one could know why the people of this Island, so small on the map of the world, had found and held so great an Empire. He had the vitality of athletic youth. Sometimes he moved like a leopard about the room. He had strength and grace. His will power was wonderful in this fight against blindness. His mind was eager and questioning and yet self-confident. Certainly he was an egoist absorbed in his own interests, a little careless sometimes of other people's personality, and yet he had charming manners and was very courteous. An English gentleman, thought Myra Lehmann, Jewess. Perhaps it is in its way the best type produced by civilisation. It is strange, she thought, that such a type should be an idealist as well, keen on raising the level of the mass and planning a new world in which he and those like him would lose their privileges and distinction.

Quentin did not read those secret thoughts about him. She meant nothing to him, or not very much as a human personality. She was a good reader. She was an excellent secretary. Only this discovery of music in her made him less

aloof. She was certainly an excellent pianist he thought.

He was not without other music. It was provided by the B.B.C. and, like all blind men, he found his wireless instrument priceless. Not that he tuned in much to jazz and dance music and funny stuff, though it amused him now and then, and his laugh rang out at the back-chat of comedians. It was the news he listened to most, and he never missed the Brains Trust and talks on social questions.

He listened to the 8 o'clock news on the morning of July 10th. He was shaving at the time with a safety razor which did the trick without the aid of a mirror—useless to him. While he was lathering his face they put on a record of *Les Cloches de Corneville*, old stuff but very cheery. He whistled a bit of it as he sharpened his blade in a glass of water. Then came "Lift Up Your Heart." A Methodist parson was talking of certain aspects of Christ's character. His gift of friendship. His hatred of hypocrisy. It was rather well done, thought Quentin.

"Good Morning, everybody. This is the 8 o'clock news."

A pause. The lull goes on, thought Quentin, taking the stubble off his upper lip. The Russians are getting impatient and keep on calling for a second front. As if we hadn't made it in North Africa, to say nothing of our nightly bombing and our war with U-boats.

"This morning," said the announcer, *"news was received at 6 a.m. that our troops have invaded Sicily. The attack began at 3 a.m. As yet, no further details have come in."*

Quentin Fellowes, once of the Eighth Army, dropped his razor.

"The Eighth Army goes on," he said aloud, and for several moments he stood there without moving, with his head slightly raised and a smile on his face. Then suddenly he turned and clasped his head and leaned with his forehead against the bathroom wall.

I'm out of it, he thought. I'm not there with the crowd. They've gone on without me.

He uttered a kind of moan and felt stricken.

"Are you all right, Quentin?" his mother called out. She was the other side of the bathroom door.

He pulled himself together with a strong effort of will power.

"Quite all right," he answered. "Great news, mother. The Eighth Army has invaded Sicily. Things are beginning to move again."

"That's good, dear," answered his mother.

Mrs. Manning continued her work at the little factory in Farningham, having persuaded her sister Clare to look after the children. There were two reasons why she wished to carry on with this war work in spite of early hours and now and then physical exhaustion. One was her sincere desire—Clare sniffed at it—to help towards winning the war as far as a woman's ten fingers could make any difference. Her family had all been soldiers or sailors. Their tradition for service for King and country, right or wrong, was in her blood. There was another more secret reason. She found this factory work tranquillizing to her nerves, and the workshop a kind of sanctuary in which she could get away from people—nice people though most of them were—and think things out in her own mind. This drudgery helped, and with it the whirr of machines, and the buzz of conversation, and the music of the wireless always in the background of these hours at her bench. She liked, too, the company of her fellow-workers, these young women who had mostly made war marriages and were grass widows at an early age. She liked their courage, their gaiety, and their honesty. They were so dead earnest in their speech and character. There was no social insincerity about them. They blurted out the truth that was in them. Their views about the war were stark in their realism, just like their views about life. Highly alarming sometimes, but very amusing she thought.

Their comments on the landing in Sicily were typical of their sense of humour.

“Good old Eighth Army,” said Betty Blinker. “Now they’ll be fighting the ice-cream merchants. A walk-over, I should say, until they happen to meet the Jerry boys. One must say they know how to fight—those damn Germans.”

“A bit of a side show, isn’t it?” asked another girl. “Of course the Germans will like it if we get tied up in Sicily. It keeps the war away from their own doorstep, don’t it? Always glad to fight in other people’s countries.”

“It’s the Russians who are killing most of the Jerries,” said a fair-haired, blue-eyed wench in green trousers and a scarlet pull-over. “Don’t take no prisoners, neither, I should say. Fifty thousand Germans dead in ten days according to the wireless and dear old Father Stalin. Round about Bryansk. Of course you can’t believe a word of it, but it’s nice to hear.”

"I'm just as sorry for German dead as I am for Russian dead," said a girl at one of the benches near by. "I'm against war altogether. I prefer boys alive instead of dead, and I don't mind who knows. A silly business, I call it, murdering each other like this. What good does it do to anyone? No sense in it as far as I can see."

Greta Jenkins paused in her job and gave a shrill laugh at the girl who disapproved of the war.

"My Gord!" she cried. "You could be locked up for sayin' things like that. Bloody treason, I call it. You'd like to see a few dead Germans—'eaps of them—if you'd been through the London Blitz. Put me in front of a German and see what I'll do to him."

"No work today?" asked Mr. Grindley, coming round to this part of the workshop. "A nice little tea-party I suppose."

The girls smiled at him and went on with their jobs. Comparative silence followed for an hour or more.

During that hour, as during other hours, Marjorie Manning was left to her own thoughts. They drifted always to two young men, Peter and Gerald—one her lover and the other her husband. It was like being torn in two, this love for both of them. How could she reconcile it? How could she keep them both in her heart with any sense of decency, and any code of loyalty? And yet she could and did. She could not expel Peter from her heart. She could not betray Gerald. Peter had been very passionate. He had held her so tight—so tight. He had kissed her with burning kisses. She felt them burn her lips now. Suddenly he had made her see that she and Peter really should have belonged to each other. She had always had a sense of missing somebody who had gone away but might come back. She had had many dreams like that always looking for somebody who had gone away and got lost somewhere. Of course it was Peter, though no dream had ever told her that. She had only understood it that evening, in her garden. Of course it was Peter who had got lost. But now Gerald was there. She had loved him and married him. He was her dear husband, always kind, always yearning for her when he was away. It was hard on Gerald. She would never tell him about Peter, and she would never let him down. How could she let him down without horrible treachery? He was in Sicily now, though she could only guess by his airgraph letters. She was quite certain that he was in Sicily by little hints he gave. After the landing they were having hard fighting round Catania according to the news. He might be badly wounded at this very moment. Not dead. She knew that. She would know somehow if he had been killed. His airgraph letters were out of date now. She had not had one for nearly seven weeks. He must have known that he was going on a dangerous adventure—this Sicilian show. He had written more emotionally than usual. He had sent her his deepest love. He wrote how much

he missed not seeing the children, his two darlings who were growing big and lovely without his getting a glimpse of them. For that I curse Hitler most, he wrote. This separation from you and the children is sometimes intolerable.

She had kissed that letter. How could she be treacherous to the man who wrote it now fighting for England, thinking of her every night, yearning for his babes and home life? Suppose he came home on leave or badly wounded? Supposing she were unfaithful to him and he came back to an empty house, learning that his wife had fled from him, as some fighting men had come back? How horrible! How vile she would be! It couldn't happen like that. She wasn't made that way.

And yet, there was Peter. He wrote to her every day. His letters were upsetting to her because they made her think of him too much.

"I am always thinking of you," he wrote. "I am always remembering that wonderful hour in your garden. The other night when I was on a raid over—well, never mind where—I didn't care a damn for the flak. I had a vision of you standing at your bedroom window with all lights out looking at the searchlights and the stars over Ashleigh Heath. You looked very beautiful, my dear."

In one letter he wrote something which reassured her a little.

Don't be frightened of what I feel for you, he wrote. I propose to behave like a perfect little gentleman. I'm not going to lure you up any dangerous path leading to a poisoned Paradise. But this friendship of ours may be a very perfect thing if we make it so. It need not bring a blush to the angels in Heaven, or to the old ladies in Ashleigh Heath. Think of me when you look out of your window again at the stars and the searchlights. I like to have your spirit with me on a night raid.

She sent her spirit to him when she heard the bombers going out in these twilight nights of summer, and once wept a little because her Peter—was he not her Peter?—would be flying over the furnace fires again. One night he might be burnt to death like a moth in a candle-flame. One Peter and six other men. It was frightful, this war in the air with its night losses recorded on the wireless in a few casual words—*Fifty of our bombers did not return to base*. Then good news of the Russian advance, or good news about progress in Sicily, where Gerald was fighting. She hoped her prayers would reach out to Gerald. Peter and Gerald—Gerald and Peter. This dual love tore her in two. Was it wicked? Could she help herself?

"Ullo, Marjorie," said Greta Jenkins one afternoon when she had been thinking like that, "you've been lost to the world for the last hour. Taking no notice of nothing. Any trouble, dearie?"

"Oh, lots of trouble," said Marjorie with a laugh. "Life is very difficult, isn't it, Greta?"

Greta thought life was all right as long as one didn't mess about with men or strong drink. Most girls only had themselves to blame if they got into trouble. Silly little sluts they was.

"A damn good spanking wouldn't do them no harm," she thought.

"I dare say you're right," said Marjorie, who did not wish to pursue this argument.

All the same she was sorry for any girl who made a mess of things. It was so easy to make a mess of things. On the whole these girls in the factory were wonderfully good, and some of them were grand. They were wonderfully kind to each other in spite of a tussle now and then, and an occasional flare-up of temper. They were quick in sympathy for any girl who had bad news or fell ill, and had to be taken off to hospital for operation. Illnesses and operations excited them, and they discussed their own ailments in times past, with great detail and candour. There was one girl for whom they had particular pity. They called her Faith, though in times of class distinction they would have called her Mrs. Harding or even ma'am. It was Faith Harding of Ashleigh Heath, a friend of Pearl Haddon and Marjorie herself. Her husband Anthony had gone missing in North Africa. He had been missing for several months, but she was still quite certain he would turn up. The girls had enquired about him frequently for some time, and always Faith Harding had made the same kind of answer.

"No news yet. Perhaps it will come tomorrow."

Then the girls stopped enquiring.

"Better not ask," said Greta Jenkins. "It only reminds her, poor dear. She'll never see that young feller again. My 'eart fairly bleeds for 'er."

Then one morning they noticed that something had happened to Faith. She looked different somehow. She walked up to her bench with a sort of radiance in her eyes, though she went to work quietly.

It was Greta who noticed something. She nudged Marjorie, who was sitting on the same side of the bench.

"'Ave a look at Faith. A bit queer this mornin', don't you think? Looks as if she'd seen a hangel or 'ad a new baby."

It was halfway through the morning when Faith told two of the girls a piece of good news which passed quickly through the workshop.

"My husband has been found. He was a prisoner of war in Italy but managed to escape dressed as an Italian fisherman. He went on a boat to Sicily when he heard we had made a landing there. Now he is with his own battalion again. I knew he wasn't dead; I just went on waiting."

"Faith Harding has found her husband again," cried one of the girls. "After all this time. It's like a miracle." One of the girls went up to Faith, flung her arms round her and kissed her.

"We're all as glad as if it had happened to us," she said.

But one of the girls burst into tears. It was Cicely Barnett, whose husband had also gone missing and then was found. He was found dead in a wadi on the way to Tunisia.

Mr. Grindle, the foreman, spoke to Mrs. Manning as he stopped for a moment at her bench.

“Wonderful news about Mrs. Harding’s husband,” he said. “Unbelievable if one read it in a novel. But then this is a fantastic war. Anything may happen.”

Marjorie nodded.

“I’ve been talking to Faith. She takes it very calmly, but there’s a new light in her eyes.”

“I’ll have to write a book about this factory,” said the foreman. “That is, I would if I could write a book. All the drama of the war is here in this workshop. And if I could read the minds of all you ladies—”

He laughed at this alarming thought.

Marjorie smiled back at him.

“It’s a good thing you can’t,” she said.

It was a good thing that Mr. Grindle was not a thought-reader. As a Methodist he would be shocked to know how her heart was torn in half between Gerald and Peter.

Poor Peter. She could never give him what he wanted, which was all of her. He would be a lonely lover. Would he go out on another raid tonight, she wondered? Every night now our bombers went out with many squadrons—Poor Peter!

Considerable controversy was aroused in Ashleigh Heath by a sermon preached by Mr. Marlow, the vicar, on a Sunday set apart for special prayers. He had chosen for his text, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," and in the opinion of many of his parishioners, his whole sermon was unpatriotic, drenched in pacifism, and insulting to the Forces and the Nation. He had deplored the spirit of hatred which, he said, was taking possession of many minds. It was, he said, right to hate evil, but not to let that righteous anger destroy one's sense of pity with those who were the victims of evil on the enemy's side as well as ours. He had heard people say that there were no good Germans except dead Germans. He had heard women of gentle character and upbringing expressing a desire to obliterate the whole German race and to drown all German babies.

Perhaps, he said, that was only verbal violence, but it revealed a complete lack of the Christian spirit, and even a complete lack of common sense. For even the use of common sense, apart from all Christian teaching, should let people know that German children were not responsible for the crimes of their parents, and that the tyranny of Hitler, the cruelty of Himmler, the horror of the concentration camps, were directed against German people hostile to the Nazi creed, and its poisoning of the German soul.

Hatred was the father of cruelty. Those who were most loud in the words of hate might do cruelties as bad as those they denounced. The killing of prisoners, for instance, would lead to reprisals. They in turn would lead to counter-reprisals, until the vicious circle would make men like demons without chivalry or compassion. He had found from experience in this war, and the last, that the fighting men of both sides had less of this spirit of hatred than the civilians at home. After the Armistice of 1918 there had been a camaraderie between British and German soldiers on the Rhine. In this war our boys who flew out to Germany on night raids did not wish to kill German women and babes, though they killed them, but to smash the enemy's war machine and to weaken his fighting power. We were all torn, as he himself was torn, said Mr. Marlow, by the horns of a terrible dilemma. One was the need of defeating Hitler and his evil creed, and the other was the conviction in people's minds—most people's minds he hoped—that modern warfare and especially the war in

the air against civil populations was a terrible violation of civilized ideals, and a complete denial of Christ's message to men. Our prayers for victory, said the vicar, will be in vain if they are drenched in murderous hatred, and as a Christian Minister I shall be a liar if I repeat the words of Christ and pretend that they are being fulfilled by bigger and better bombs for blasting our enemies off the face of the earth, as they have tried, and still will try, to smash us into dust and ashes. The Christian code is not to answer murder by murder, and massacre by massacre, and torture by torture, but to denounce those things and the evil spirit behind them. We are in some ways guilty of this war by having failed to rise to any spiritual height after the last war. I do not wish to whitewash our enemies, who have done atrocious things, but in this terrible war in which we are all involved let us at least fight nobly and not basely, whatever the code and baseness of our enemies. Let us pray for a victory over evil and not for any bloody vengeance which may spoil our cause and motive in this fight. I believe the mass of people in this country have but little bloody-mindedness. They want to get on with the job and end it as soon as possible, in order to get on with the true values of life. And I know that our young fighting men, our heroic young airmen, our officers in the Fifth and Eighth armies now in Sicily, have the old code of chivalry in their souls, and are fighting as Crusaders, and not as butchers or executioners with a thirst for the blood of women and children. Let us therefore pray for them and for a victory which will have to punish the criminals and destroy the evil powers raised against us, but will have for its result a peace more secure than the last, because based on justice, fair play, and Christian Charity.

That was the gist of it, though he quoted many words of Christ relating to pity, mercy, and love.

He was utterly unaware of the restlessness of his congregation. He failed to hear the loud coughing of his brother-in-law, Colonel Val Martell. He did not see his wife's face going white and then red, and then white again. He did not hear Miss Martindale's audible comment of 'Outrageous!' nor did he see old Lady Birchdale stand up, tread firmly over the feet of those who were in the same bench with her, and walk out of the church with her head held very high and an angry fire in her eyes. She was remarkably like Queen Bess at that moment, as Irene Haddon thought with a little secret smile.

After some hesitation and whispering in the back pews several people followed her example and departed from the church.

The vicar had been unconscious of this public disapproval until he was aware that his brother-in-law the Colonel had risen from his seat in one of the front pews and gone striding to the door. Just for a moment he was startled—I hope he hasn't been taken ill, he thought.

The Colonel had been taken ill. At least he was very much upset. Most

damnably distressed, he said—as he informed the vicar over the luncheon table on this Sunday morning.

Mr. Marlow had lingered after the service to talk to the church-wardens, and was surprised and shocked by the violence of their criticisms. It was Major Martlett who attacked him first.

He was a grey-haired little man who on parade days of the Home Guard wore the medals of the last war on his chest, including the D.S.O. and the Legion of Honour. He had always been quick to take offence, and now, as the vicar saw, was deeply offended. For a moment or two he was silent as he stood in the vestry and failed to answer a friendly remark by the vicar on some small point. He breathed hard and then spoke explosively.

“I resign my position as churchwarden! I—I cannot attend this church again. I—I have never heard such outrageous disloyalty, such preposterous nonsense, such drivelling and dangerous—yes, dangerous and damnable absurdity spoken by a clergyman of the Church of England.”

“I almost agree,” said Mr. Henry Holloway, the other church-warden—a tall, melancholy man whose son had recently been killed in Tunisia. “I don’t want to say harsh things, vicar, I have been grateful for your sympathy and kindness personally, but I feel bound to protest most seriously against your sermon today. It undermines the purpose and spirit of all our nation’s heroism. It was an insult to our young men who have died for England’s sake. It misinterpreted in my opinion the message of Christ Himself. Did He not chase the moneylenders from the Temple? Did He not believe in the avenging wrath of God? But this is not the time or place for argument. Have I not discussed this subject with you a score of times? I ask you to accept my resignation with that of Major Martlett.”

Mr. Marlow was astounded.

“What have I said?” he asked. “What was wrong with what I said? Have I been guilty of saying things which might give pain and offence to anyone?”

The Major laughed harshly.

“Pain and offence? You can’t make me believe that you are unaware of the very deep and dreadful offence you have given today to all of us.”

“I am utterly unaware of it,” said the vicar. “I am innocent at least of all intention to hurt anyone.”

Mr. Henry Holloway grasped Major Martlett’s arm for a moment as though warningly, and then spoke in a kindly voice.

“My dear vicar, I think you ought to take a little holiday. This war is a great strain to your nerves, no doubt. We have seen it creeping on you for some time—I mean this nerve strain—and, shall I say, a slight lack of mental balance? We are all sorry for you. I should advise you, as an old friend, to go down to Cornwall and have a complete rest. We will, if you agree, arrange for

a *locum-tenens*.”

Mr. Marlow looked searchingly first at the Major and then at Mr. Holloway.

“Do you gentlemen think I’m mad?” he asked.

“Overstrained,” said Mr. Holloway. “Just a little unbalanced, my dear fellow.”

Mr. Marlow looked at him again with that searching gaze and then suddenly laughed strangely.

“These gentlemen,” he said, as though they were strangers to him, “think I am mad because I condemn hatred and brutality, and pray for a victory of justice and human charity. Did I say more than that? I think not.”

He hesitated for a moment and then held out his hand to the Major.

The Major put his hand behind his back.

“I have resigned,” he said.

“And you, Holloway? Do you refuse to take my hand?”

Mr. Holloway did not take his hand, but put his own hand on the vicar’s shoulder.

“Go away for a holiday,” he said. “You need a rest, vicar. We will look after things.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said the vicar. “Perhaps I am mad. That never occurred to me.”

He laughed again, and without another word went out of the vestry, walking quickly across the churchyard to the vicarage.

He noticed uneasily that there was an ominous silence between his wife and the Colonel when he came into the dining-room and stood for a second to say grace.

“It looks a little like rain,” he observed.

Mrs. Marlow glanced at him and laughed with a kind of exasperated humour.

“That’s the kind of thing you would say,” she told him, “when your congregation walks out on you and when you have mortally offended everyone by your disgusting pacifism. It looks a little like rain, you say! How wonderful! How utterly inadequate to the situation!”

“Well, it certainly does look a little like rain,” answered the vicar, carving a very small joint. “Have a bit of fat, old boy?”

He addressed this question to the Colonel, who was glaring at the very small joint as though he had a grudge against it.

“I’m very upset,” he answered. “I’m damnably distressed. I don’t mind whether you give me fat or whether you give me lean. I’ve a good mind to walk out of this house and never sit at your board again. That sermon of yours was poisonous. I couldn’t stick it out. Filthy pacifism. Dam’d unpatriotic.

Treasonable. By God!”

He prodded his fork into a roast potato which the vicar had put on his plate as though he wished to murder it.

“I must say it was awful, Tim,” said Mrs. Marlow. “I went hot and cold. I nearly sank through the pew with shame. When Lady Birchdale stalked out of the church I nearly had a fit.”

Mr. Marlow stared at a very small piece of mutton on his plate in a thoughtful, examining way. Then he raised his head and laughed.

“I seem to have put all the fat in the fire,” he said. “I can’t understand why. It seemed to me a very harmless sermon.”

“Harmless?” asked the Colonel. “Harmless did you say? Men have been shot for saying less than that. In Hitler’s Germany a man would have had his head cut off by a sharp axe for uttering words like that. Rank, crawling pacifism. I can only think you’re going gaga.”

“Let me help you to a slice more mutton,” said the vicar.

“No,” said the Colonel firmly. But he weakened and passed his plate grimly.

“Tim,” cried Mrs. Marlow, “you’ll drive me crazy. I want to be loyal to you, but I find it very hard to live with a man who irritates me to the point of exasperation and puts one to public shame. I’ve a good mind to run away. For two pins I would leave you.”

“I should be extremely helpless without you, my dear,” said the vicar. “All my buttons would fall off. I don’t know whom I should get to mend my socks. I should be a most miserable fellow.”

He looked over to his wife and smiled at her affectionately.

“You don’t seem to realize that it’s dam’d dangerous as well as dam’d silly,” blurted out the Colonel. “If one of our Security Police had been in the church today he might have tapped you on the shoulder after the service and led you off to Brixton Gaol.”

“You exaggerate,” said the vicar. “My poor little harmless sermon won’t make me worthy of any kind of martyrdom. As for the headsman’s axe in German—isn’t your argument in favour of what I said? I mean that in this country we must hold on to the Christian code as far as possible, in order to avoid plunging into pagan barbarism, with the headsman’s block and the torture chambers for those who denounce cruelty and have Christian ideals?”

“Do you wish to make peace with those swine?” asked the Colonel.

The vicar hesitated. That was his dilemma. That was why he was torn asunder by irreconcilable ideas.

“I should like to help the decent-minded Germans to make peace easier,” he said, “by overthrowing Hitler and liberating themselves from this evil spell of blood and horror which many of them I am certain abhor. I agree that we

can't make peace with Hitler or Nazidom. We must go on with this sacrifice of youth, but if we reach out to our Christian comrades in Germany . . .”

“There are no good Christian Germans,” said the Colonel. “The whole race must be exterminated.”

“Hear, hear,” said Mrs. Marlow. “Thank God the Russians won't stand any sentimental nonsense.”

The vicar made a mild comment.

“I notice that many people who denounce German cruelties and barbarism wish to retaliate by more cruelties and more and better barbarism. A very dangerous creed. It leads to a vicious circle of lower and lower degradation. You have murdered my brother. Therefore I will murder your cousins and aunts. Out of that state of mind comes no hope of future peace nor a more beautiful way of life.”

“Frankly,” said the Colonel, “I don't give a curse for a more beautiful way of life. That's the kind of idealism talked by Communists and Bolshies.”

“Our brave Russian allies?” suggested the vicar with a smile. “Have some of this plum duff, Val. Very nourishing.”

He tried to avoid this subject of conversation. He tried to soothe the ruffled tempers of his wife and brother-in-law, and to keep his own. He was glad when this meal was over and when he could retire to his study to think things out. Inwardly he was distressed. Had he said anything in that sermon which was a just cause for so much criticism? Had he unwittingly said unpatriotic or disloyal things? He could not believe so, because his temptation—the real and strongest and perhaps most dangerous temptation in his spirit and mind—was to shelve Christian teaching in favour of simple, old-fashioned and traditional patriotism. Instinctively he belonged to that school of thought. It would have been easy to him to have declared a moratorium on the Gospel of Christ “for the duration”, returning to it after the next armistice day. Victory for the Allies? Yes, he hoped for that. The defeat of Hitlerism, utter and complete? Yes, he prayed for that. But did not his own faith and service compel him to look at this war on all sides—this war of destructive machinery and aerial bombardment—contrary to any faint glimmer of Christ's spirit and teaching? If the Churches and individual Christians rallied always to their national flags, and refused to condemn war as a monstrous evil, should we ever get any kind of peace for humanity? Should we not go from one war to another, from World War II to World War III and so on and on with ever increasing efficiency in the machinery of slaughter, until civilization itself would perish and the lights would go out?

He had been through the agony of the last war. He had seen the slaughter of our best youth. Such waste of human and spiritual values. He remembered those young men who had been his comrades and had died in Flanders and on

the Somme. Had they not been utterly betrayed by the abandonment of idealism, by the lack of any leadership beyond national self-interest and international rivalry? France had sunk into corruption. The United States had revoked on the League of Nations and entrenched themselves in Isolationism. Our own leaders had given no more than lip service to the League, and had proclaimed the virtue of Collective Security while they had no moral power or even material power to attain it. But the root cause of this frightful war was the failure of leaders and peoples to move one step forward in human comradeship and Christian morality. By that failure Hitler arose and the devil stood with him. Were the Churches blameless of all that? What were they doing about it now? They were national propagandists. Their prayers were at the service of the B.B.C. between dance programmes and Cockney comedians. They did not reconcile—they did not even try to reconcile—the frightful horrors of war with the words of Christ which they repeated emotionally before the eight o'clock news. . . . Anyhow, he had reached a crisis in his life.

It was pretty serious.

He knew it was serious when he received a letter one morning from his Bishop. It was written in the friendliest way, but it brought the crisis nearer.

My Dear Vicar,

I have had quite a number of letters from your parishioners. To be quite accurate—I have had six. They seem to object very strongly to a sermon you preached recently on the national day of prayer, and to views you have previously expressed in the pulpit and in private. Well do I know how unreasoning and intolerant are some well-meaning people, but I fear I must take some notice of this, and I propose to come and see you for a little discussion about it on Wednesday afternoon next, which I hope will be convenient to yourself.

I hope your health is good in spite of the severe strain on our spirit and nerves in this unhappy time.

A very friendly letter. But those last words faintly suggested the idea already in the mind of men like Henry Holloway—a kindly fellow—that the Vicar of Ashleigh Heath was the victim of a nervous breakdown.

The Bishop arrived at Ashleigh Heath in a democratic way by bus from Farningham. His gaiters excited the interest of the butcher's boy, the lad who cycled round with the grocery stores, and several children on the green.

His Lordship the Bishop had a clean-shaven, fresh-complexioned face with smiling grey eyes and silvery hair going thin on top.

He waved his stick at the children, patted the smallest boy on the head, said: "Thank you, my dear," to the conductress of the bus, who had set him down at Ashleigh Heath, and strode away to the vicarage at a good strong pace.

Mr. Marlow was waiting for him in his study and felt the warm grasp of a friendly hand.

"Glad to see you again, my dear vicar," said the Bishop. "This is a charming village. I have a soft spot in my heart for this parish because of its enchanting surroundings."

After these preliminary courtesies he came to the matter of his visit. He came to it with a smile as if it were not very serious.

"I fear you have been having a spot of trouble, my dear fellow. What's it all about?"

Mr. Marlow answered his smile.

"I'm afraid I'm labelled in the minds of some of my parishioners—not all by any means—as a crawling pacifist and most unpatriotic man."

The Bishop laughed and waved his hand as though waving away this charge.

"You won the D.S.O. in the last war," he said. "Isn't that a good answer? Doesn't it carry some weight with your congregation?"

Mr. Marlow hesitated for more than a moment while the Bishop lighted a cigar, after asking permission to smoke it.

Then he answered simply.

"I don't want to shelter under my record of the last war," he said. "I am not a fire-eating parson. I find it impossible to reconcile the frightful horrors of this war—and the spirit of hatred and vengeance taking possession of many minds—with the teaching of Jesus Christ."

"My dear fellow," said the Bishop mildly. "My dear fellow."

He put the tips of his fingers together and looked over them at the vicar, still with a friendly smile.

“Surely,” he argued mildly, “you don’t deny that we are fighting the spirit of evil? Surely you admit that there will be no freedom of conscience, no light of Christianity, nothing but darkness and devilry if Hitler is allowed to win?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Marlow. “That no doubt is true. I see it blindingly.”

“Good!” said the Bishop. “Good! Then what’s the trouble? I see nothing that need worry you, my dear vicar, or cause any dissension in your congregation.”

Mr. Marlow shook his head, and then looked into the Bishop’s eyes—those kindly, smiling eyes.

“Bishop,” he said, “this war did not begin in nineteen-thirty-nine. It began farther back in history before even the last war. It began with the lack of Christian charity and human comradeship in the minds of men who played for power and greed and wealth—who thought only of national rivalry, and had no vision of peace behind their customs barriers and their frontiers of the mind. The common people, the little people, the helpless crowds, asked for peace and security. They had better ideals than their leaders, and a finer morality. But they were betrayed again as they have been betrayed a thousand times. Surely you, a bishop, and I a clergyman, dedicated to the Spirit of Christ, cannot and must not condone this war—or any war that may follow it—as though it were unavoidable and spiritually necessary? Unless the Christian churches and all Christian people, and all decent-minded men and women have some better vision than that, beyond the limitations of national interest and national pride, this war, like the last, will only lead to the next—more murderous in its power of destruction, more terrible in its hark-back to utter barbarism.”

The Bishop listened good-humouredly.

“Now let us examine that,” he said. “Let us get down to logic and common sense. We have to take the world as we find it. God knows that it’s a wicked world. God knows that the Christian ideal is unfulfilled and perhaps unattainable, being above the reach of human weakness and frailty. But here we are in this war, not of our own making this time, except for lack of foresight and a thousand mistakes of politicians and great carelessness. Not of our own making this time, my dear vicar. Mark that well. It is vital to the argument. Did we not go very far—too far, perhaps—in the desire to keep peace, certainly to the point of humiliation? I was a Chamberlain man, I frankly admit. I set my hopes on his visits to Munich. Hitler did not want peace. He lied and lied. He forced war upon us when we were weak, and, alas, unarmed. We accepted that dreadful challenge with great heroism and, I admit, with great rashness. All our people accepted it, knowing its price in agony and sacrifice. They stood heroically in the time of the Blitz. The common man and

woman in this country will not slacken or weaken until victory is theirs. It is the people's war, as in Russia. It is a spiritual war against foul ideas. Isn't that the truth, vicar?"

"It is the truth," said the vicar. "I am abashed by all this heroism. It is supernatural. The glory of our youth is beyond words. But all this heroism—in other countries besides ours—does not balance with the agony and the darkness and the ruin caused by this war. It should never have happened. The next war, of which already there is talk, should never happen. It is the denial of Christ's message to men. I cannot give allegiance to a Church which in every war and in all wars takes a national point of view, incites people to hatred, or at least does not call them to remember pity, and mercy, and human comradeship across the frontiers."

The Bishop glanced at him uneasily and then laughed quietly.

"It's an interesting point of view. Looked at from the highest spiritual plane there may be something in what you say. The Christian churches have not shown that unity which is very desirable. But all that must wait until after the war."

"We said that last time, Bishop," Mr. Marlow reminded him.

"We must beat the Germans first," said the Bishop. "We must smash Hitler and his ruffians."

"Even if we have to blast the whole of Germany off the map?" asked Mr. Marlow. "And then, or soon, the whole of Italy?"

"I'm afraid so," said the Bishop. "So long as they support their evil rulers and share the guilt."

"School children, and babies in arms, and young girls?"

"Terrible but inevitable," said the Bishop. "As always in history, the innocent must suffer for the guilty. There is no escape from that law of life."

Presently he rose from his chair, and when Mr. Marlow rose also he put his hand on the vicar's shoulder.

"You ought to take a rest, my dear vicar. Go down to Cornwall with your lady wife. I will put in a *locum-tenens*—say for three months."

Mr. Marlow smiled again.

"You think I am suffering from nerve strain and a mental breakdown? It has also occurred to other people. They think I am mad."

"Not at all, not at all," said the Bishop with geniality. "Not in the least mad, my dear fellow, but over-sensitive, over-scrupulous, and, if I may say so, troubled by illogicalities and a psychological complex. Well, well, I must be catching that bus."

"I will walk with you to the bus," said Mr. Marlow, "but before you go I wish to resign my living. I shall go out into the wilderness. I shall try for another kind of job. I see no hope in the Church to which I have belonged."

For the first time the Bishop was startled.

“No, no,” he said. “I won’t hear such a thing. You are one of the men we want. After the war your ideals will be most necessary.”

Mr. Marlow laughed a little harshly.

“After the war?” he asked. “Won’t that be rather late? Or do you mean after the next war?”

The Bishop did not answer. He looked slightly offended for the first time. Then the frown passed from his forehead and he spoke good-naturedly.

“I dare say you think I’m a Worldly Wiseman? I dare say I am. But my advice to you, vicar, not only as a bishop but as a friend is, Carry On. Don’t resign. Never burn your boats even for a spiritual or intellectual scruple. You are impatient because of the world’s wickedness. I am patient, knowing that man will never be angelic, never wholly spiritualized, always with a bit of the beast in him and a spark of the Holy Spirit. I am tolerant even with my own faults perhaps. I do not ask too much or expect too much of poor Christians or poor heretics. I have my own little doubts, my own uncertainties. But I have no doubt at all that now we are in this war—perhaps we are all a little to blame, though Hitler was the arch-demon—we must get on with it to a victorious end, whatever the price, whatever the sacrifice. Well, enough of all that! I shall be glad of your company as far as the bus. No, I won’t take a cup of tea, thanks very much. Ask your lady wife to forgive me. Thanks. Thanks.”

They walked rather silently to the bus, which was waiting on the edge of the Green.

“Good-bye, Bishop,” said Mr. Marlow. “I will wait until you send down another man. I will clear out as soon as possible.”

“A *locum-tenens*,” said the Bishop. “Three months in Cornwall. Very restful and very pleasant. *Au revoir*, vicar.”

He stepped on one side to let a lady get into the bus.

He had been brought up in a good school of manners—Eton. Magdalen.

He had been very patient with a troublesome vicar who had got up against his congregation for pacifist ideas in time of war.

He was sorry for Marlow’s wife.

While Peter Haddon and his crew were being briefed for their next target—the long hop to Italy for the third time—another group of young airmen were getting their orders for a flight at dawn. But they were going to fly in the opposite direction, from France to England. They belonged to the 308th squadron of fighter-bombers—Messerschmidt 109—of the German *Luftwaffe* base behind Boulogne.

A senior officer of their group, Flight-Captain Schlottmann, sat at a deal table in the operations-room studying large-scale maps of England's south-east coast. There was nothing he did not know about that coast, having flown over it scores of times himself during the Battle of Britain and afterwards.

"You will make for the Shoreham Gap," he said. "Avoid enemy action as far as possible. I have already given you your targets. You fully understand, gentlemen?"

"Perfectly," answered one of the young airmen coldly. "Another tip-and-run raid to provide propaganda for Goebbels."

These words were followed by a quiet laugh from the other flying men.

Group Captain Schlottmann looked up from his maps and spoke sharply.

"You are here to obey orders, Diercksen, not to talk politics. I wish to add that some of your opinions and remarks have been reported to me by your fellow-officers. I advise you to be careful."

The young officer whom he had addressed shrugged his shoulders slightly. He was a good-looking young man with a row of decorations for valour on his breast. He answered the Group Captain with a kind of cold indifference.

"Is that so? May I ask what opinions and remarks? Also, I should be interested to know the names of those fellow-officers who have reported my private conversation."

The Group Captain's lips tightened. His eyes seemed to harden.

"You may be able to ask such a question at a court-martial," he said harshly. "I have made a report to the right quarter and will inform you of the result in due time. Meanwhile, you will carry out your duties. I refrain from placing you under arrest."

"I am much obliged," said the younger officer coldly and politely.

"That is all, gentlemen," said the Group Captain.

There was silence among the other flying officers. They rose and saluted before leaving the operations-room. Then one of them laughed as he walked by the side of the young airman whose opinions had not found favour with his superior officer.

“You’re in for a spot of trouble, Karl. I warned you. Schlottmann is a fanatic and we have more than one Judas among us. You have been too careless, my friend.”

Karl von Diercksen was not outwardly disturbed by the scene that had just taken place. He answered very calmly:

“I expected something of the kind. That fellow Schlottmann is a good pilot, no doubt, but he has the intelligence of a rat and the manners of a pig dog.”

Several other officers spoke to Karl von Diercksen when they reached the mess-room on the edge of the aerodrome.

“Sorry, Diercksen,” said one of them. “Very bad form of Schlottmann to speak like that.” A very young officer, whose schooldays could not have been far behind him, laughed boyishly.

“Who has been giving you away, Karl?”

Another officer lowered his voice when he spoke.

“It’s a bit of a warning to all of us,” he said. “Perhaps we have all been a bit indiscreet lately. It all came of that argument the other night about the lack of retaliation for English bombing, and the weakness of the *Luftwaffe* in Sicily. It became too hot. That fellow Stahmer put the lid on it when he shouted out that Germany had lost the war in Russia and that we were now in retreat everywhere. Of course he had been drinking heavily as usual.”

“*In vino veritas*,” answered Karl von Diercksen. “He told the truth for once.”

“For God’s sake be careful,” said his fellow-officer, glancing sharply over his shoulder.

“It’s all right,” said Karl von Diercksen, “we all think the same, don’t we? I mean those of us who have the slightest intelligence.”

“You say the most terrible things, Karl,” said one of his friends, “as though they were very simple platitudes.”

“Let’s have some food,” said Diercksen.

As he sat at table with four of his fellow-officers in the long mess-room which had been built recently—its predecessor had been gutted by British bombers—glances came his way from those at other tables. Some of them were hostile and others seemed to be amused. The ugly words “court-martial” passed from one table to another.

Diercksen remained very silent for most of the meal. The three other men did most of the talking. One of them had been for three days’ leave in Paris. He had seen one or two shows—extremely poor stuff.

“Paris is like a tomb,” he said. “I hate going there really, but what else can one do with three days’ leave? Besides, I have a young brother there. It was nice to see him.”

“Paris used to be a gay city, I’m told,” said one of the flying men. It was the young man who had accused Schlottmann of bad form. “Now it is inhabited by melancholy folk who turn their heads away when we pass. Even in the shops there is no civility, but only a cold and grudging service. It gets on one’s nerves. The food situation seems pretty bad, I should say, for the unfortunate civilians.”

“All the same, Paris is beautiful,” said one of the others. “It is magical at night. On one of these summer nights with a harvest moon I stood in the Tuileries gardens at midnight when all the statues gleamed white and the grass was still faintly green, and the Louvre was black in the shadows flung by the bright moon. A romantic city with a great tradition of history and genius.”

“Is that history according to Hitler and the Nazi school-books?” asked Karl von Diercksen, breaking his silence.

“Shut up, Karl,” said the youngest man at table.

Diercksen went into his silence again, while the conversation of the others remained for a little while on the character of French genius at its best before political corruption destroyed it.

“I regard Paris as more dangerous than the front line,” remarked one of the airmen presently. “Anyhow, it gives me the creeps. Hardly a night passes without one of our officers or men being murdered or shot at in some back street.”

“People don’t love us in the occupied countries,” said Diercksen, breaking silence again. “Is there any reason why they should? Haven’t we asked for hatred everywhere? In Russia—”

“Shut up, Karl,” said one of his friends again. “And, for God’s sake, don’t get on to the subject of Russia and all that *schweinerei*. It will take away my appetite.”

“You fellows are afraid of the truth,” said Diercksen with a slight laugh, “and you look scared every time I open my mouth, and you seem to think I’m going to talk high treason. As if I haven’t kept my own thoughts to myself since September, 1939, and that’s a hell of a long time for self-repression.”

The others laughed uneasily.

“Your self-repression seems to have broken down lately,” said one of them. “We all admire you, Diercksen—look at that row of ribbons you have—but we don’t want to ask for unnecessary trouble.”

“I’ll face it alone,” said Diercksen carelessly.

After his evening meal he strolled out of the mess-room and took one of the deep chairs in the smoking-room next to a window looking over the

aerodrome. The long summer light was still shining on the runway of the brown turf scorched by the August sun. At right-angles was a road lined by French poplars. It led three kilometres away to a French village with a church which had been gutted by bombs from a night raid by the R.A.F., and a dirty little estaminet where German soldiers swilled beer and tried to get friendly with two little sluts who waited on them. In the room was one of those pianos into which one put a coin to get a jingle-jangle of atrocious music.

Diercksen had called on the French *curé*, a cultured old man who had been very cold at first as though he resented this visit from a German officer, as of course he did. On Diercksen's second visit he was less hostile and had spoken about the history of his little church, now much ruined. He was surprised at Diercksen's interest.

"It astonishes me that you should find any interest in a French church—an ancient little shrine of the Christian faith. As a Nazi and a follower of Hitler —"

"I'm not a Nazi," Diercksen had told him. "I hope I have some intelligence."

The old *curé* stared at him.

"Is it not dangerous to tell me that?" he asked.

"Very dangerous," Diercksen admitted, "if you were not a priest and a man of honour."

For a moment the old man was silent. Then he spoke with a kind of restrained passion.

"It is very terrible what Hitler and his Nazis are doing to the world, all the human agony they are causing, the rivers of blood, the destruction of beauty, the spiritual darkness. One day the German people will have to pay for all this, and the innocent will suffer with the guilty. You say you are not a Nazi, and as a priest I respect that admission."

"There are many people in Germany who are not Nazis. There are still civilized minds in Germany."

The old *curé* raised his hands.

"That is difficult to believe. They do not revolt against so many cruelties. They do not attempt to overthrow Adolf Hitler, who is possessed by an evil spirit."

"It is not pleasant to face the headsman's axe," answered Diercksen. "For a time they believed that Hitler was inspired only by the will to restore the rights and pride of the German race. They thought he stood for peace and justice."

"In Poland?" asked the priest. "When he attacked Russia?"

"There are many of us disillusioned," said Diercksen. "There are many millions who know that Hitler has led us along the road to ruin. I speak to you frankly as you are a priest. Perhaps also because my own mind is tormented by

these things. I have to hide them from my fellow-officers—except a few who think like myself. For four years, or nearly that, I have had to live shut up in myself.”

“That is very tragic,” said the old man. “I am sorry for you. I am even a little sorry for the German people who one day will have to suffer the flaming vengeance of their outraged enemies. It will be a terrible vengeance. There will be no pity. There will be no mercy. The Russians will be very ruthless.”

“It is not a beautiful prospect,” said Diercksen.

So he had talked with the old French priest in that village at the end of the long road lined with poplars, which he could see beyond the aerodrome as he looked through the open window of the smoking-room that evening after supper.

One of his fellow-officers—it was Hans Holzbach, who had sympathized with him after that scene with Group Captain Schlottmann—came across the room and took a chair by his side.

“May I take coffee with you,” he asked, “or do you prefer to be alone?”

“Let’s have coffee,” said Diercksen. “Why this formality?”

Hans Holzbach smiled as he stretched out his legs.

“You’re one of the silent thinkers, Diercksen,” he said. “You’ve always held aloof, God alone knows what you’re always thinking about. I prefer not to think. It’s the only way one can get through this infernal war.”

“Yes,” said Diercksen ironically. “I’ve noticed that you don’t give your brain much of a chance.”

Hans Holzbach laughed good-naturedly.

“Oh, I keep it in check as much as possible, but occasionally it thrusts up.”

The two young men were silent for some time. One of the orderlies brought them coffee, and Holzbach smoked a cigar from a box he had bought in Paris. The smoking-room was fairly crowded now, and there was a buzz of talk. Some of the airmen were playing bridge as usual. They belonged to the 308th squadron, ordered to raid the English coast at dawn.

They tried to forget that unpleasant fact.

Holzbach glanced towards the bridge players and then spoke in a lowered voice.

“The situation looks serious in Russia,” he said.

Diercksen nodded, but did not answer.

“Goebbels chatters his usual nonsense. The elastic front. All according to plan. Shortening our line. Does that deceive anybody?”

“They insist on being deceived,” said Diercksen.

“The loss of Bryansk is terrible. When you think of all the German blood to get there, and all the labour put in to make it impregnable from Russian counter-attacks; meanwhile, the Russian Army is smashing its way towards the

Dnieper. But I'm worried about Smolensk. If that goes the game is up in Russia. It will be a definite and irretrievable defeat. It opens up a hideous prospect for Germany."

He glanced again at the bridge players nearest to him. They were intent on their game.

"It stares one in the face," said Diercksen. "Stalingrad was Germany's black day. It meant that we had lost the Russian campaign which ought never to have been begun. It was Hitler's madness. It was raving lunacy. It was against the advice of all the best brains in the Higher Command—such brains as they have."

Hans Holzbach looked over his shoulder.

No one was listening. There was a general murmur of conversation. Those fellows in the centre of the room were getting noisy over bottles of French burgundy—getting scarce now. The bridge players were holding a post-mortem over their last game.

"He ought to have gone for England after Dunkirk," said Holzbach. "They had nothing."

"Except the R.A.F. and the British Navy," answered Diercksen.

Holzbach shrugged his shoulders.

"If we had put everything in they wouldn't have had a chance. The whole *Luftwaffe* with all its reserves. As it was we gave them time. Then we lost ourselves in Russia, and divided our strength. I shall never forget that winter of forty-one—forty-two. Pneumonia swept us down. We lost more men by that than by Russian guns. It's a wonder the whole army didn't perish. I had double pneumonia myself and nearly passed out, but it was worse for the infantry. The Russian wind cut through their clothes as though they were made of tissue paper. The poor devils had no greatcoats until women's furs began to arrive, and then not enough to go round. It was a cold hell—worse than a hot hell!"

"Do you think I don't know?" asked Diercksen. "Wasn't I there?"

"I forgot for a moment," said Holzbach. "When I think of Russia my blood turns cold. Yes, of course you were there. I've only to look at your beautiful ribbons."

"Pretty souvenirs of hell on earth," said Diercksen.

They were silent again until Diercksen suggested that they should go for a stroll.

"Let's get some fresh air," he said. "This place stinks of stale cigars and sour beer."

Hans Holzbach rose and accepted the suggestion.

"It's easier to talk out of doors," he said. "One doesn't have to crick one's neck looking over one's shoulder lest some Judas or fanatic is listening in. And you have a penetrating voice, Diercksen. And you say the most dangerous

things with alarming candour.”

“Oh, I don’t give a curse who hears me. I’m tired of all this fear and suppression and sham allegiance to a maniac.”

He spoke the last words without lowering his voice. An officer heard them and started in his chair, turning slightly pale, as though afraid to be in the same room with a man who talked like that. He stared furtively at Karl von Diercksen as he strode through the room—a tall, handsome fellow of the Bavarian type. An aristocrat. Highly decorated for valour, but no good Nazi as everyone knew, at least in his own squadron. He just asked to be court-martialled. If he hadn’t been an air ace he would have had his head lopped off long ago, except for the fact that his views were beginning to creep up everywhere in the *Luftwaffe*.

The two friends walked down the long straight road lined with poplars.

“This is a hideous countryside,” remarked Holzbach. “How I hate this straight road and those poplars and that filthy little village to which we shall come soon if you walk as though the devil were chasing you.”

Diercksen slowed down his pace.

“Sorry,” he said with a laugh. “Your legs are shorter than mine.”

“You Bavarians are fanatical walkers,” said Holzbach. “Being a Berliner I like to stroll. I wish to God I were in Berlin, except for those abominable air raids by those English swine.”

“We began that kind of thing first,” said Diercksen. “Now they’re paying us back a hundredfold for the London Blitz and what we did to Coventry and Plymouth and all the rest of it in England. Now we squeal about it and talk about barbarism.”

They walked on a hundred paces before Holzbach spoke again.

“All the same it is frightful. I have relatives in Bremen—or rather I had before they fled. They say Bremen has been obliterated like Hamburg and the Ruhr.”

“I know,” said Diercksen. “I listen to the B.B.C.—like most of us who want to hear the truth or something like the truth.”

“This war is a competition in murder,” said Holzbach. “Civilization is destroying itself.”

“We ought to have thought of that before,” said Diercksen sharply.

Hans Holzbach glanced sideways at his friend.

“You are damnably pro-English,” he said, with an uneasy laugh.

“I’m a perfectly good German,” said Diercksen. “That is to say, I should be a perfectly good German in blood and tradition if we had not become slaves to a group of gangsters and a foul creed. I know you agree with me, Holzbach. I know that every intelligent German—I’m not talking of those Nazi boys—agrees with me. Even some of the young students in our universities are

beginning to see the truth of things. Two of them had their heads cut off not long ago for leading a spiritual revolt against this Nazi filth—this jungle code.”

They were silent again until they reached the village. Some German soldiers, coming out of the estaminet, saluted them. Through the open door came the strident music of the mechanical piano.

“There is a charming old *curé* here,” said Diercksen.

Hans Holzbach did not seem interested.

“Let’s get back,” he suggested. “This is not an alluring spot. It fills me with depression.”

They turned back the way they had come.

“I don’t like our situation anywhere,” said Holzbach presently. “Those damned English will certainly get Sicily, where, by the way, I have a brother fighting. After that they will, of course, cross the Straits of Messina to the mainland. Then, if I know anything of the Italians, our beautiful allies will throw up their hands and cry for peace.”

“Obviously,” agreed Diercksen dryly.

They walked on for a couple of miles without speaking. Then suddenly Holzbach stopped and put his hand on Diercksen’s arm.

“Diercksen,” he said emotionally, “we have been betrayed by our leaders. The whole German people have been betrayed. Hitler has been a gambler with the fate of Germany and he has lost the throw. Look at the state of the *Luftwaffe*—after all Goering’s boastings. German cities are being blasted into dust and ashes and we do not even retaliate except by ridiculous little raids such as we are going to do at dawn tomorrow. We have abandoned the making of big bombers for night-fighters. This is an acknowledgment that we are on the defensive. We are losing the war in Russia. That seems to me a certainty. We have lost the initiative everywhere. We can only hope to defend ourselves for some uncertain time, and as we fall back to our own frontiers everywhere in the occupied countries, as here in France, the fires now burning underground, the fires of hatred and vengeance, will burst out and spread like a forest fire and pursue our rearguards with fury. I am not a coward, I hope. I also wear a few ribbons. But when I see all this in imagination, there is an icy touch down my spine.”

“It is the same with me,” admitted Diercksen. “I have horrors in the night. And then I curse those men, that gang of ruffians and bandits under a homicidal maniac who have led us down this road to hell. When I left England, just before the war, my German blood called to me. I decided that in all honour and loyalty I must fight on the side of my own folk—for the Fatherland. Now I see that it would have been better if I had stayed in England and spent these years in an English prison. One should not go on fighting for a madman.”

“No,” said Holzbach. “One must go on fighting to the bitter end.”

“Even if it drags Germany deeper down to ruin?” asked Diercksen.

Holzbach looked him in the eyes squarely.

“Even then,” he said. “Perhaps most of all then.”

“You’re wrong,” said Diercksen. “The overthrow of Hitler and his Nazi chiefs is the only hope for Germany. That must be done by the Army and the Air Force. We must lead the revolt against the madman and the tyrants. We must refuse to fight under their orders.”

Holzbach turned pale.

“Those are terrible words,” he said. “If they were overheard we should not make that flight at dawn. We should be shot by an open grave.”

“Well do I know,” answered Diercksen. “And perhaps that would be a good end. We should at least be martyrs to the truth.”

“I have no wish for martyrdom,” said Holzbach. “I would rather be shot tomorrow in a raid over England.”

“It may happen,” said Diercksen with a smile.

They were nearing the aerodrome. This time it was Diercksen who stopped and spoke, putting a hand on Holzbach’s shoulder.

“I have an idea,” he said, “that I shan’t come back tomorrow. I should like to thank you, my friend, for all your kindness and loyal friendship. We have fought many times in the same squadron. Better still, we have talked intelligently many times. You are one of the very few whom I could trust when I said dangerous things. If I don’t come back, think of me sometimes and raise your glass to my ghost.”

Holzbach was startled and deeply moved.

“My dear friend,” he said, “that is nonsense. It’s a morbid thought. Put it out of your mind. You are the bravest man I have ever met—the finest pilot. For you to speak words like that—”

Diercksen laughed quietly.

“Nevertheless,” he said, “I have an idea I shall not come back from that raid at dawn. Good-bye, my dear Holzbach. Remember me to your wife.”

He shook hands with his friend and then, as though not wishing for any further talk, strode away from him towards his own billet.

Flight-Lieutenant Karl von Diercksen was billeted with other officers of his squadron in an old French farmhouse on the edge of the aerodrome. The farmer and his family had been evicted to make room for them and the farmstead was utterly neglected and in a filthy state. Its courtyard stank horribly of manure and rotting straw. In the winter it was deep in mud and muck, but now that had dried up and was infested with flies and mosquitoes, and voracious rats which fed on the garbage thrown out by the orderlies. The farm buildings were going to rack and ruin and the barns had lost most of their tiles due to a visit by the R.A.F., who had scattered their bombs in and around the aerodrome. Inside the farmhouse it was not too bad, though cheerless and uncomfortable. The plaster was peeling off the walls, and there were cracks in the tiled floors of the kitchen and living-rooms, furnished barely and hideously.

Diercksen's bedroom was upstairs, overlooking the courtyard. Down the passage were the bedrooms of four other officers of the 308th Squadron who had not yet returned.

On his way upstairs Diercksen had a glimpse into the kitchen where three orderlies were sprawled over a deal table playing some gambling game. At the sound of his footsteps they straightened themselves up for a moment as though ready to spring to attention. But he passed them without a word and went up to his room and locked himself in.

Opposite his truckle-bed was an old chest of drawers in which he kept his underclothing and personal belongings, and a tin box in which he kept his papers. It was to that box he now went, unlocking it, and carrying it to a rickety table with one leg propped up on a paper-covered book. The box was stuffed with letters among which were a few photographs of his family and friends. He pulled them all out and began to tear up some of them, but then paused to read one or two. He read the last letter from his mother in Munich, written a few days ago. They had had a frightful raid, she wrote. Many people had been killed, including some of their friends.

You remember Fräulein Elisabeth von Mühlbach, I am sure? You thought her elegant and charming and highly intelligent. She was killed by the blast of one of those terrible English bombs which destroy everything over a great

area. I dare not describe to you the ruin that has been caused in Munich. Your father and I would be heartbroken if we did not know that you, dearest Karl, remain unscathed by all the dreadful risks you have to take. May God be with you. I pray for you unceasingly, and God I am sure has you in His keeping. How otherwise could you have gone through so many battles in the air, and killed so many of the enemy without a scratch to yourself? I know you will smile and be sceptical of this, but it is true nevertheless. God will punish England for its inhuman ways of warfare, and in spite of our disappointments in Russia I still have faith that our beloved Führer, with God's help, will lead us to final victory.

As Diercksen read those last words he gave a harsh laugh and tore the letter into small pieces. His mother adored him, but they had had painful scenes now and then because of his lack of allegiance to the Nazi creed. He was sorry for his father, who thought as he did, and secretly mistrusted Hitler before and during the war. Only to Karl did he reveal his inmost thoughts and, lately, his deep despair.

Diercksen glanced through other letters and then tore them up. But there was one little batch in a separate folder upon which he had written three words. They were "Letters from Pearl." They had been written to him in England before the war. Some of them were still in their envelopes and bore the English postmark of Ashleigh Heath. They were his love-letters, which he had carried with him in this tin box since the beginning of the war, in Belgium, and France, and Russia, and now back to France again. He knew most of those letters by heart. He did not read them again now except for seven words at the end of one of them.

I send you all my love. Pearl.

Below them were four little crosses, meaning kisses.

A photograph was with these letters, fastened to them by an elastic band. He slipped it out and looked at it closely, with a smile on his lips. It was the photograph of a slim, fair girl who looked very English, and in his eyes beautiful.

"She may have changed a little," he said aloud. "In four years at her age one changes a little."

He hesitated for a moment before putting the photograph in the breast-pocket of his tunic. The letters he tore up with all the other letters and papers from the tin box. Among them were official documents notifying him of promotion and new honours for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. Among them also were his military passport, identity card, and other personal papers relating to his squadron and rank.

He felt in the pockets of his tunic and found other papers which he tore into small pieces.

He was like a man preparing for death.

There was an open fire-place in this bare room. In the grate were old cigar-ends, old razor blades, and other rubbish. Copies of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Völkische Beobachter*, left about by some of his fellow-officers who came in to talk and smoke, were lying on the floor. He chose the *Völkische Beobachter* to make a fire in the grate, which he lit with his cigarette-lighter. The paper was damp, but he got the fire going and fed it from the torn-up letters until every scrap was burnt.

There was a bang at the door while the ashes were still smouldering. Diercksen sprang up, turned sharply towards the door and called out one word.

“*Herein!*”

It was one of the orderlies, who saluted rigidly.

“Action stations in fifteen minutes,” he said.

“Good,” answered Diercksen.

The man glanced round the room and saw the remains of the fire in the grate.

“You have any orders, lieutenant?” he asked.

“No,” answered Diercksen—“That is, yes. Wait a moment.”

He went to the bottom drawer of the chest and pulled it out. Inside was a brown-paper parcel tied up strongly.

“Take that down to my hangar,” he said. “Pack it into my cockpit.”

“*Schön.*”

The orderly picked up the parcel and put it under his arm.

“Don’t break the string,” said Diercksen. “Don’t burst the brown paper.”

“At your orders,” said the man.

He turned smartly and Diercksen heard his heavy tread going down the uncarpeted stairs.

Presently two or three officers came up and went to their rooms.

“Ready, Karl?” shouted one of them.

“Quite ready,” answered Karl. “How’s the weather?”

“Perfect,” said his fellow-officer.

Ten more minutes. Karl von Diercksen smoked a cigarette, sitting on the edge of his bed. There was a racket going on in the other rooms. His friends were getting into their flying-kit, and kicking things about and shouting to each other. Diercksen flung his cigarette away and put on his own flying suit.

A signal bell rang. That meant action stations.

Diercksen looked round his room lit by an oil lamp. He had a queer smile like a man saying farewell to his prison cell after his sentence had expired. In this room for the last few months he had had many dark thoughts. He had paced up and down, up and down after kicking off his boots, thinking those dark thoughts. He had sat on the edge of that truckle-bed with his head sunk,

and darkness in his soul, and anger, and exasperation. Over there on a deal commode by his bedside was a cheap wireless set to which he listened to the news over the Paris radio, but more often from the B.B.C. When listening to London he flung a blanket over the set and sat with his head under it lest his orderly or one of the Nazi-thinking officers should report him.

It was not good to hear, but it was nearer the truth than the lies and propaganda of Goebbels and his team of tame journalists. Naturally the English told more about their successes than about their losses, which they slurred over sometimes.

But the truth came through—the terrible truth about the Russian campaign and their own victories in North Africa and now in Sicily. They were undeniably true. So also were their accounts of their devastating air-raids over German cities and ports. Now and again he listened to English music—not so good as German music—much of it indeed was German, bringing back to him his best memories of life.

One night he heard a good tenor voice singing “I saw a lady passing by” and “Drink to me only with thine eyes.” He had once sung those songs in an old English home. Pearl was at the piano.

This room had been the prison cell of his soul and sometimes his torture chamber because of an agonized yearning to see Pearl again, and because of his hatred of Hitler who had led Germany into this blood bath with all its horror.

In this room he had planned a way of escape from all that, and then rejected it, and then a dozen times returned to it.

Now tonight he knew he would never come back to this room. He would never return from that night raid.

He heard a rush of feet past his door. Time to go. Zero hour.

Twenty-five planes—Messerschmitt 109—were throbbing with the vibration of their engines. In his cockpit Karl von Diercksen answered the calls of the mechanics and one of the ground staff officers.

“*Schön*” . . . “*Schön*” . . . “*Jawohl*.”

He felt about for that brown-paper parcel which he had given to his orderly. It was there within reach of his seat. His fellow-pilots were ready for their numbers to be called for the get-away. In the half-darkness with a glimmer of moon, through fleecy clouds he had seen them get to their places. One had called up to him.

“Good luck, Diercksen.”

It was odd, that. Perhaps the fellow was thinking about the court-martial which might be awaiting Diercksen. One of his sympathizers. It was Kurt Stahmer, who had been at Heidelberg before the war.

One by one the fighter-bombers were sent off by a harsh voice which bellowed through a microphone from the operations-room.

It was Diercksen’s turn.

“Let her go.” He was No. 13 on the rota. An unlucky number, he remembered. He had had the devil’s own luck during the war. Lots of luck and perhaps a bit more skill than some of the other pilots who lately had been under-trained.

He opened his throttle, followed the lights down the runway, swung round to face the wind, pulled his elevator stick and left the ground. In three seconds he was above the line of poplars beyond the aerodrome. He was away.

Ten minutes to the English coast. Just a hop. A brief spell between two cigarettes, or between life and death. Time enough to look back and see the film reel of all a lifetime and the last four crowded years.

Diercksen looked back now and in those ten minutes saw a thousand pictures of his own life and the intolerable drama of his mind, torn between conflicting loyalties, getting *kudos* for a job he hated, torture in his conscience, now and then having to keep himself under a tight discipline of self-suppression because his views were hostile to most others, and always racked by passionate love and desperate yearning for a girl who had promised to wait for him on the other side of this infernal conflict. He had been cut off from her

by the sharp sword of war. They would have been married if the war had been postponed for six months more. Neither of them believed it would happen, until it happened. For a time he had felt her spirit near him. He could almost feel the touch of her hand and the warmth of her body even during that cold hell of the Russian winter. A thousand times he had called to her in his mind when flying over burning cities or battle-scarred land.

“Pearl. . . My English Pearl. . . My sweet English flower.”

He had thought of her even when he was killing English boys. He had met their types at Oxford, and in country houses round Ashleigh Heath. They had laughed and joked together even about Hitler, whom they regarded as a comic. Pearl’s brother Peter had been one of them. He was always pulling Diercksen’s leg as he called his chaffing, but they had become good friends. They had amusing lunches together in London, in little Soho restaurants, and the Queen’s Restaurant in Sloane Square, and tea on the terrace of the R.A.C. Pearl had come as fresh as a daffodil, a little shy, but with her English sense of humour and her English candour so straight and frank and unaffected.

He had thought of her in strange places and at strange times when he was a fighter-pilot encountering the R.A.F. during the retreat at Dunkirk. It was the first time he had met the Spitfires—better, he thought, than his own Fokker. They showed extraordinary audacity, these English boys, breaking up German formations even when hopelessly out-numbered. They had killed many of his own comrades in that first crowd. They had given him some nervous moments circling around him and forcing him down. Twice he had had to bale out from a burning kite. There was an exhilaration in those first battles, and especially in these single combats. It wasn’t like the dirty war down below. There was a touch of chivalry about it. It was a tourney in the sky and, as far as he was concerned, without any personal hatred. He shot down several Spitfires, and was glad to see them go down. It had been his skill against theirs, his life against theirs. One had the instinct of the hunter or the hunted, sometimes one, sometimes the other. He had been the hunter and the hunted. He did not think “Here’s an English boy who might be Peter.” He thought “There is a Spitfire. *Achtung!*”

Afterwards it was different, at least for him who had loved England and might have had an English wife but for this ghastly war. Sometimes he thought when he got back to his squadron headquarters, “Today I killed a young fellow in the R.A.F. just in time to avoid being killed by him. Perhaps it would have been better to be killed by him. It would simplify things. It would be a quick way out of this devilish dilemma in which I find myself, hating the war and those Nazis who made it, but defending my country because I am a German and love my country.”

He had not gone over the English coast in the Battle of Britain. He had

been stationed in France before being switched to the Eastern Front. He had fought the French pilots in the first phase of the war until they disappeared from the sky and France collapsed. That was when he won the Iron Cross and other decorations and was on the way to become an ace because of his infernal luck. Perhaps it was because he was careless of his own life and coldly indifferent to death, being torn between conflicting loyalties. He had got into trouble now and then by expressing admiration for the R.A.F., and admitting their miraculous victory over the German *Luftwaffe* during the Battle of Britain. That put him in the wrong with the Nazi boys, though very decent fellows in his own squadron—nearly all dead now—had agreed with him.

He did not take part in the blitz over England and was glad of that. It was a murderous business, mostly against civilians. Often he wondered if Pearl had been killed, but he never could bring himself to believe that. He would have known. Some message would have come to him. He would have heard her cry to him.

He had become unpopular in the mess. He had spoken hotly about this war against civilians, and derided the attempt to break down English morale by such methods. "I know the English," he said. "They have an unconquerable spirit, and let us remember a fact in history: They always win the last battle."

He had spoken those last words to anger those who listened to him. At this time it was impossible to believe that England would win the last battle or any battle. After Dunkirk they were without strength. After the fall of France they stood alone. Their sea supremacy was threatened by U-boats working from the French, Belgian, and Norwegian coasts. The sinkings of their merchant ships was catastrophic. Only their dogged will-power kept them in the war—that and the leadership of Winston Churchill, who called to their old tradition and was answered by the old tradition. But what he had said about them winning the last battle angered some of his fellow-officers to the point of cold fury. There had been a hot scene in the mess-room. One fellow had tried to hit him and received a blow on the tip of the chin which amounted to a knock-out.

He had been court-martialled and severely censured.

He had pleaded a careless phrase in the heat of an argument.

Only his distinctions as a fighter-pilot got him off. Then Russia—with all its dirt and disease and ruin and scorched earth and guerrilla warfare, punished by hangings and shootings, and all ways of death and destruction. Total war. Total hell.

He thought of Pearl when he was in the ruins of Russia, in burnt-out cities, wind-swept aerodromes, in snowdrifts, round wooden huts, in Russian market-places where dead men swung, and when he flew over fields of dead, German dead and Russian dead. In his mind Pearl stood as the beauty of life beyond this foul dream from which one day he would escape. Escape from Hitler and

his ruffians who were leading Germany to hell. Was there any other way except death? . . .

Now he had torn up all his papers like a man preparing for death. He was certain he would never return after this last raid. . . .

Ten minutes of flying time. All these memories and thoughts, and a thousand more, were crowded through his brain in these few minutes.

He could see the coast of England dark beyond the glimmer of the sea. There below him was Shoreham Gap to which he had flown on the course set for him. He was flying low at two thousand feet. The twelve planes preceding him were not visible. They had already dispersed for their different targets in this tip-and-run raid so utterly futile. Searchlights were up. Two of them made a big cross in the sky. Many others were groping with their long, white fingers for the enemies overhead, of whom they had been warned by radiolocation as soon as they had left their base. One long beam moved towards him and almost touched his wings, but he swerved away from it and then increased altitude. Others took up this game of hide-and-seek. They were after him, one lone plane flying over the Sussex Downs. There was Chanctonbury Ring, a good land-mark with its circle of black trees on the bare Downs. He had once been there with Pearl on a summer afternoon after a drive from Ashleigh Heath in a little green car which belonged to her. She had read out to him while he lay outstretched on the smooth turf with his face to the sun. What was the name of the book? Yes, he remembered. One of Kipling's—*Puck of Pook's Hill*.

One beam switched to an angle of thirty degrees and caught and held him. His cockpit was flooded by its light. Gunners down there had a good target for their anti-aircraft fire. He could see the burst of their shells above and around him. Good shooting. He dived a thousand feet before flattening out, and then was caught again by one of the searchlights from which he swerved again, dodging it, and weaving to avoid flying into the flak which was vomiting up at him. Heavy stuff. He heard the whine of it. A bit of shrapnel plugged through his cockpit just above his head. It must have been a fair-sized bit of metal by the sound of it.

Once when he was flying a big bomber in Russia his navigating officer had had his head cut off by a bit of jagged steel curved like a Turkish scimitar. Another bit hit his fuselage and rocked his kite. It was getting hot, this stream of flak about him. He increased altitude again and got away from that bunch of searchlights for a few seconds, but he was picked up by another group of them. They were very quick to get on to him. His cockpit was flooded with white light again.

He was like a moth in a candle-flame. They were using up a lot of shells, those fellows down there. They had made up their minds to get him. One shell got him and shot a bit of his tail away, as he could feel by the sudden lack of

control, when his machine flew crazily until he steadied it. Hit again. This time his port wing was cut in half and more holes were plugged in his fuselage. He went down in a dive. The black earth came up to meet him. Well, he would never go back to Hitler's Germany. He had escaped.

August had passed with an uncertain summer, a little chilly now and then, but without much rain and with lovely days when England was perfect in its beauty. In the orchards the apple trees were heavily laden with a rich harvest. The crops had been splendid and were being gathered in. The nation's larder would be re-stocked for another winter of war, thanks to the heavy toil of the farming folk and the land girls. Merchant ships were bringing supplies from overseas to fill Lord Woolton's storehouses and maintain the level of his ration books with an almost miraculous avoidance of submarine attack. The Royal Navy, the Fleet Air Arm, and the Mercantile Marine had hunted the German U-boats out of the Atlantic at least for a time. For weeks no Allied merchant ship had been sunk in the seven seas in any part of the world. Those wolf-packs would come back, but they would know that they were following the tracks of death. Hitler had lost his U-boat war. In British and American yards new ships were making up the frightful losses of the merchant fleets at a rate marching ahead of the enemy's sinkings. The Germans were in retreat everywhere. The Russian summer offensive was scoring stupendous victories, regaining thousands of small villages and towns as their line of advance moved on with irresistible force, like that of vast waters moving. Herr Goebbels talked glibly of an "elastic front." Hitler claimed that the retreat was "according to plan", with the purpose of shortening his line. But it was a forced retreat, mauled as it went by the ferocious assaults of his enemy never giving them a respite, striking hammer blows in unexpected places, showing a military genius by unknown generals, and a human courage of the Russian masses beyond the imagination of the world who watched this struggle with a kind of awed wonderment. They were beginning to envelop Smolensk which Hitler wished to keep. They were driving down the Dnieper like flood waters against which no barrier would stand. They were squeezing their enemy into a narrow corridor in the Kuban down south. The guns of Moscow were firing salutes for many victories. "According to plan" was a phrase which must have sounded grimly to thousands of German soldiers—half-baked boys—ordered to hold on to key positions at all cost before they were slaughtered in heaps, with a courage which was also heroic in its obedience to orders, which were death.

In Sicily, British and American troops had done their job after hard and

bitter fighting in Catania.

In Italy, fantastic things were happening. Mussolini—once the hero and idol—had fled. The King and Marshal Badoglio had declared war on Fascism and arrested the Fascist leaders. Italy was between the devil and the deep sea, for the Germans were in possession. “The war goes on,” said Marshal Badoglio, but it was a hopeless war for the Italians.

People were still asking themselves whether there would be an invasion of the Continent “before the leaves of autumn fell”? They were counting the number of weeks which still remained for such a possibility. English harbours and rivers were crowded with barges. “That must mean something.” Canadian soldiers said “Wait awhile. Our turn is coming.” All over England troops were on the move. Long convoys passed through English villages. Something was going to happen, something very big. Any morning now on the eight o’clock news. . . .

And at night, when dusk fell, there was always the heavy drone of our bombers going out. Another raid on Germany, another colossal smash at the German war-machine and at German morale. “Thirty of our bombers are missing.” That was the price we had to pay. Seven times thirty in number of men. “A light price,” said our Air marshals. “Compared with the Battles of the Somme in the last war, almost trivial,” they said.

Something had happened to the German *Luftwaffe*. It had revealed a strange weakness in North Africa. It had failed to check our landings in Sicily. It had concentrated on fighter pilots to stop our bombing, which they failed to stop in spite of those losses of ours, but they seemed impotent to retaliate on England as far as bombing was concerned. People were streaming back to London, bringing their children with them. “Oh, there won’t be any more bombing,” they said with cheerful assurance. The prices of flats were going up. New little restaurants were being opened. “The war will be over this year,” said city men, glancing up from their evening newspapers. “Anybody like to take a bet?” After the black days and the black years when there was no sign of light and only a blind faith, things looked so bright that men and women were dazzled by it and could not see the long road ahead.

That was the mind and mood of the British folk when September came. That was the mind and mood of certain people whom we know in Ashleigh Heath, one village like a thousand others. But they were not untouched by the uncertainties of war, and by its tragic drama even at this time when things looked brighter and there was a kind of lull.

One of them, who was Pearl Haddon, had a message which was not according to plan. It came from Edward, on the telephone one evening after supper. There was an urgency in his voice and a kind of emotional excitement.

“That you, Pearl?”

“Here I am, Edward.”

“Pearl! Oh, my dear!”

His voice trembled. He sounded husky. He sounded desperate about something.

“Anything the matter?” asked Pearl. “Tell me.”

“Oh, Pearl! . . . My future wife. . . . My dear heart! . . .”

Pearl heard a kind of sob in his voice.

“Edward,” she said, “what has happened? Something frightful?”

“Something terrible,” he answered. “Something which gives me the hardest knock of my life. Sweetheart! . . .”

Pearl turned a little pale, her voice trembled too.

“I can face most things,” she told him. “At least, I’ll try. What is it, Edward? I want to know.”

Edward was silent for what seemed a long time. Was he weeping? There was a queer sound on the telephone.

“Say, Pearl,” he said, “we’ve both got to be brave. I’ve got to keep what courage I can, though God knows I have very little at this moment of time. I’ve been ordered to go. I’ve just had embarkation papers. I have to leave tomorrow evening.”

“Tomorrow evening!” exclaimed Pearl. “Oh, Edward.”

“It postpones our wedding,” he said. “It’s hellish. My heart just drips blood.”

“Bad luck,” said Pearl. “Bad luck on you and me, Edward. I’m sorry.”

She was too English to say all she felt, too English to break down at the end of a telephone. But this news hit her. It was rather a crashing blow, though Edward had hinted that such a thing might happen. Hadn’t he said he was a man in a hurry?

“I must see you before I go,” he told her. “I just must see you, Pearl. How and when? I can’t get down tonight.”

“What time are you going tomorrow,” asked Pearl.

He was going by a six o’clock train to some southern port. He could meet her at four o’clock somewhere. Not before, worse luck, as he was bagged for many duties by the officers who were going with him—a bunch of seven.

“I want to meet you where we can talk as though we were alone in the world,” he said.

“A crowd is the best place,” said Pearl.

“No,” he answered firmly. “I want to meet you where I can hold you in my arms.”

She laughed a little, though her eyes were wet.

“Hyde Park?” he suggested. “We can take a taxi there and keep it waiting at a distance. Say, isn’t that a good idea? If any idea could be good while my

heart is dripping blood and I feel like hell.”

Pearl thought it out.

“I could get away at four,” she told him. “I’ll meet you where the buses stop at Hyde Park Corner. I’ll be there at a quarter-past four.”

“A quarter after four,” he said. “I’ll make it that. Oh, Pearl, I’m just a stricken man. I feel mad about it. We’re being torn away from each other. I hate that General’s guts for doing it. I’m very, very sorry for myself.”

“Cheer up,” said Pearl. “It would have been worse if it had been our wedding day. That’s one comfort.”

“Not to me,” said Edward. “One day of marriage is better than separation before the wedding. One day of marriage would have been one day of heaven.”

Three little pips sounded.

“You’re spending a lot of money, Edward,” said Pearl.

“I’m going to spend a lot more,” he told her. “I’m going to talk to you all night, and to hell with the expense.” It was a telephone girl who said “No, you’re not. Other people want the line.” They were cut off.

Pearl’s mother came into the room by the side of the hall where the telephone stood on a small table.

“Edward all right?” she asked with a smile. “You two have a lot to talk about.”

“We shan’t talk much more,” answered Pearl. “Edward is ordered abroad. He goes tomorrow at six.”

She had kept her courage at the telephone. Now she wept a little.

“Oh, my dear,” cried Irene Haddon. “My poor dears—both of you.”

“It’s all right, Mother,” said Pearl in a moment or two, after touching her eyes with a little handkerchief. “That’s life and that’s war. Millions of girls have to do the same thing. I’m sorry for Edward, that’s all. He had set his heart on it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Irene, kissing her daughter.

Irene Haddon was sorry for so many people in this wartime. Sometimes she wished she had not been born with so much sympathy for other people. There was a lot of wear and tear about it. Sometimes she felt torn with pity for girls who lost their young husbands, six of them in Ashleigh Heath during the last few weeks of the Sicilian campaign, and for mothers who lost their sons, and for Quentin Fellowes in his blindness, and for Marjorie, and for Peter who had gone back to Bomber Command with a passion in his heart which could never be fulfilled.

Now she was sorry for Pearl again, who had been unhappy for so long in the first years of the war and now for a little while had been happy again.

“Home rather late, Mother,” said Pearl next morning at breakfast. “Edward goes at six. I shall have to catch the quarter-to-seven train and the half-past

seven bus. Home shortly after eight. Don't wait supper."

She looked as though she had had a restless night, but there were no more tears.

"Give my love to Edward," said Mrs. Haddon.

"The best of luck from me," said the doctor, who had been out late last night and had come back when Pearl had gone to bed. "I'm sorry for you, old girl," he added. "Damned hard luck."

"The second time, Father," said Pearl quietly. "But it's all right. I can take it."

She kissed the back of his head before going out of the room quickly to catch the bus at the Green.

Dr. Haddon looked across at his wife.

"Life has been rather hard on Pearl," he said. "They were tragic, those words of hers—a second time. Her first lover and now her second taken off by the war."

"Poor Pearl," said Mrs. Haddon. But she was thinking mostly about Peter.

That afternoon Pearl stood at the bus stop by Hyde Park Corner.

Crowds of people passed her, many in uniform. They queued up for the over-crowded buses. Some of them she noticed didn't play fair and edged their way in advance of others who had waited longer. The women conductors were getting rattled at this time of day and rang their bells angrily after turning off people who tried to get into a bus already jammed up with human bodies.

A Canadian soldier spoke to Pearl.

"Anything doing tonight, lady?"

"Nothing," said Pearl.

"There's a nice picture at the Plaza," he said. "Come along with me?"

"No, thanks," said Pearl. "I'm booked already."

"Bad luck on me," said the Canadian. "Another boy friend?"

Pearl nodded, and then saw Edward. He jumped out of a taxi and shoved some silver into the driver's hand. He had already seen her, and pushed his way through the crowd to reach her.

"Pushful, ain't you?" said a young girl with great sarcasm. "Like all you Yanks."

"Sorry," said Edward, disregarding her.

He took Pearl by the arm.

"Let's get into the Park," he said.

They went into the Park and walked down to the Serpentine and along its edge.

Edward spoke gravely and sometimes emotionally.

"This is a terrible blow," he told her. "It's like a stab at the heart. Worse still, it's like a stab in the back by an unseen enemy."

“Don’t take it too hard, Edward,” said Pearl.

“I’m taking it a bit hard,” he admitted. “I was in sight of the Promised Land. Then this bolt from the blue thrust me back into the desert. Our wedding day is now a mirage. There’s all the war to go.”

“We’re getting towards the end,” said Pearl. “At least, everybody seems to think the end is in sight.”

He shook his head despondingly.

“A long way to go,” he answered. “A long, uphill road and very stony, with Old Man Death waiting round the corners.”

“Don’t talk of death, Edward,” said Pearl. “Look ahead to life.”

“I’m feeling morbid,” he admitted. “Soldiers are supposed to be brave, aren’t they? Well, I’m not brave this evening. I’m stuffed with terror and quaking fear. Supposing I were to lose you for ever? Supposing I don’t come back? I’m scared because this may be the last hour between you and me, Pearl.”

“No,” said Pearl, holding his arm tighter. “That’s not the spirit in which a man should go to war. He should be sure of coming back.”

“I’m not sure,” said Edward. “I’m darned uncertain of it. I’m no hero, believe me.”

They walked into Kensington Gardens on this September evening. The grass was brown after summer sun. A few little leaves were falling from the trees and chased each other down the gravel paths. A grey squirrel ran up to an overhanging branch and looked down on Pearl and Edward, who glanced up at him.

The sun was warm at this hour and the scattered chairs were filled by young men and women in uniform, or by elderly civilians.

“I want to hold you in my arms,” said Edward.

“People will see us,” answered Pearl.

“Let them see,” said Edward. “It will do them good.”

“Behind a tree then,” said Pearl.

“That’s a good tree,” said Edward. “I guess that thousands of lovers have made use of it. It’s a kindly-looking old tree. It seems to beckon us with its long arms and green fingers. Pearl, Oh, my dear. Is this our good-bye?”

He put his arms about her, standing in the shade of the old tree. They were not invisible. Two nursemaids, with their babes in perambulators, nudged each other and giggled. An old lady looked over at them and shook her head. Down the gravel path, three yards away, many people passed. But Pearl put her head on Edward’s shoulder and let him kiss her in Kensington Gardens.

They said good-bye at Prince’s Gate, where Edward hailed a taxi to take him back to his headquarters. He was ten minutes late already. He had less than three-quarters of an hour before his train went, and some of his gear was

still unpacked.

At the end he faltered and turned pale.

“God bless you, sweetheart,” he said, “for everything—for your love—thanks a lot. Wait for me, won’t you?”

For the second time in her life—not a long life—Pearl heard those words from a young man who loved her. “Wait for me, won’t you?”

He put his arms about her again and kissed her.

Then he got into the taxi and she saw his stricken face through her own tears as he drove away.

Karl von Diercksen made a crash landing on Warrenhurst Heath. His fuselage was smashed and the remainder of his port side wing was torn off by the stump of a tree. He hit his head against his instrument board, and for a few minutes he was stunned.

“Perhaps I’m dead,” he thought, when his mind began to work again.

But he was alive on Warrenhurst Heath in Surrey, England, as afterwards he knew. He had to wait for the first glimmer of dawn before doing anything about it, when he climbed out of his cockpit and felt himself all over. No bones broken. No blood. He had had his usual luck, if it was luck.

When the first faint light crept into the sky he stared about him. He was standing in bracken turning brown. There was a sandy track across the heath going through clumps of silver birches. Close to him were some gorse bushes laden with golden bloom gleaming faintly in this pale light of dawn. Two miles away or thereabouts was a long low hill black against the lightning sky like a crouching lion. To his right the heath dipped down to a flat countryside cut up by hedges and stretching away to a distant line of little hills, hardly visible. Things were alive about him. Small beasts of the heath. He heard, down in the valley, the first cock-crow and presently a dog barking. In the silver birches, and in an old gnarled tree with dead branches beyond the gorse bushes, there was a twitter of birds stirring in their nests.

“England,” said Karl von Diercksen aloud in German. “Good God. Here is England. I have come.”

He stood by his smashed machine thinking deeply. Presently he moved nearer and scrambled up so that he could reach into the cockpit with his left hand. He groped about until he felt something for which he was searching. It was a brown-paper parcel, the one he had pulled out of the bottom drawer in his French billet and given to the orderly. He threw it out, and then jumped down beside it and tore at the string until it broke—rotten war-time string. He opened the brown paper with a clumsy haste, stooping low to do it.

There was a uniform inside, neatly folded, an airman’s uniform with wings above the breast-pocket.

“I wonder?” said Diercksen. He stood up straight and looked round the countryside, again still in the twilight before the dawn. There was no sign of

any human being about. Only rabbits were about on this heath, coming out of a sand-bank near the oak tree with its dead branches. Soon, perhaps, there would be human beings about. Not much time ahead for a German pilot on Warrenhurst Heath.

“I wonder?” he said again.

He stared down at the airman’s uniform. It belonged to a dead English boy named Geoffrey Halstead. Inside the tunic pocket was his identity disk, a wallet with seven pounds ten shillings and sixpence in English money, a letter from his mother and one from a girl named Bridget. Diercksen had known this boy before he died of wounds. Diercksen had killed him. He had been on a reconnaissance flight over Boulogne and neighbourhood at dawn on a day in June. Diercksen had brought him down. He was badly wounded, but not dead. He did not die until three days later. Diercksen had visited him in the field hospital. A very nice lad who didn’t know he was dying. He talked about his mother and sister, and didn’t bear a grudge against Diercksen for having brought him down. “I knew you had me,” he said. “You kept on my tail all the time. A bit more experience I expect.” He had been trained in Canada. He hadn’t been in action more than three times. He spoke civilly to Diercksen, but asked a few painful questions.

“Why are you Germans so damn cruel to the Jews?”

“Why don’t some of you bump off Hitler?”

“The Russkis are doing pretty well, don’t you think?”

“What’s the matter with the *Luftwaffe*? Short of petrol?”

“How long will they keep me in this hospital?”

He died on the third day and was buried near by.

“I think we ought to send his personal belongings to the Red Cross,” said one of the nurses.

“Yes,” said Diercksen, “I’ll see after that. Have them packed up for me. I’ll take them to my billet. After the war I would like to write to his mother.”

The nurse made no objection. She thought Diercksen was sentimental.

“I never want to shake hands with an English person after this war,” she said. “They’re utterly ruthless. All this bombing and blasting of German cities
...”

“Didn’t we begin it first?” asked Diercksen.

“Oh, that’s different,” said the nurse.

He took away the parcel, and kept it in his billet.

It was that English boy’s uniform which suggested a way of escape. He had thought about it a hundred times and then rejected it and then was tempted by it again. In this uniform and with that boy’s papers he might walk about England. It would be a way of escape from this madhouse Germany, from those Nazis, Nazi half-wits, from all his torture of mind. Pearl was in England.

He wanted to see her again. He would risk anything to see her again. He would gladly be a prisoner of war in England if once, for half an hour, he could see Pearl again and hold her in his arms and say: "We have not long to wait now. Another year at most." . . .

It was taking a risk. He didn't want to be shot as a spy. If he put on that dead boy's clothes—

He tore off his flying-kit and his own uniform. It was not warm at this coming of dawn and he felt himself shaking. Was it coldness or nerves?

He slipped on the uniform of an English airman. It fitted him as though he had been measured for it except for the sleeves, which were short. The boy must have had short arms.

The sky was now faintly flushed by the sunrise. Light crept over the heath, bringing out more colour and the details of things. The gorse blossom shone with the glint of gold. Beyond the sandy track was a patch of heath as red as spilt wine. There was a silver chorus of birds singing their matins. Down in the valley not one cock, but many cocks, were saluting the rising sun.

"What now?" asked Diercksen aloud.

Something was happening in the sky. All around him the air was pulsating. The earth under his feet seemed to vibrate. The throbbing of many engines was overhead. No unusual sound to him. He knew its meaning. English bombers were coming back again after a night raid over Germany, no doubt. He looked up at them and saw them like a swarm of gnats growing bigger as they came nearer and lower, as big to the sight as black vultures with the light catching them.

They had been bombing some German city, leaving a track of fire and ruin and German dead.

"My enemy," thought Diercksen. "I ought to hate them. On the other side I would do my best to kill them. Now here—"

He started and looked round sharply.

Was that a footstep in the bracken? Someone coming?

It was a dog, a black retriever which sprang through the bracken and then stood regarding the airman.

"Good boy," said Diercksen in English. "Good old fellow."

The dog wagged its tail and came closer and allowed Diercksen to pat it.

"I must hurry up," he thought. "A man may follow this dog."

The dog bounded away again after a rabbit.

Diercksen folded up his flying-kit and uniform, tied it up with the string from the brown-paper parcel, and walked away with it for a quarter of a mile over the heath. He found another sand-bank above which was a tangle of gorse bushes. He thrust his bundle into the centre of them, kicking it underneath them, until there was no sign of it visible to a passer-by.

Then he walked along a track which seemed to lead somewhere because it was more than a field-path. It joined a well-made road going downhill. Diercksen walked along this road for a mile more. He seemed to be on an open common and near human habitation. Three goats were tethered there. He passed a few cottages with their curtains still drawn because of the early hour. The road swung leftwards, and he passed several small houses with big gardens, and then a big building of red brick, a pleasant red, mellowed by time, with smooth lawns around it. Diercksen stopped and looked over a white gate which opened on to a broad drive.

“I believe I remember this,” he thought. “I believe Pearl drove me past this place in her little green car.”

He walked on again perhaps another mile—the road forked. There was a signpost with two arms pointing each way. Diercksen read the names and knew them.

Crowhurst.

Farningham.

Diercksen remembered he had been to tea in Crowhurst with Pearl and her mother. They had had tea in an old Tudor—or sham Tudor—house. Tea and bread-and-butter and strawberry jam and Devonshire cream.

Farningham was the market town to which he had always come when visiting Pearl at Ashleigh Heath. He knew his whereabouts.

He walked into Crowhurst, feeling fagged now, and hungry and in need of a hot drink. An English cup of tea would be wonderful.

He glanced at his wrist-watch. Six o'clock. Later than he had thought. He must have taken a lot of time hiding his uniform and walking across the heath. Not more than six miles or so.

He had had to rest for a bit, overcome by a queer faintness because of that crash perhaps. He had smoked one of Geoffrey Halstead's cigarettes from the silver case. It was stale and rather hot. He must have gone off in a kind of faint. Now he felt better, but strangely tired. What Peter had called “doggo.”

He walked down the little High Street of Crowhurst, remembering it now. It was very old-fashioned and very English, with a few half-timbered houses here and there and old brown roofs above neat little shops. The shops were still shut but he met his first human being. It was a girl in trousers and a blue overall. She was putting some milk bottles into a small truck attached to a motor-cycle. She looked at him and smiled and spoke cheerily.

“Good morning. It's going to be a nice day.”

“Good morning,” said Diercksen, touching his forage cap.

He would like to have asked her a few questions—was it possible to get a cup of tea anywhere and something to eat? But his courage failed him. He was not quite sure of his English. Had he forgotten it all? Did he have a strong

German accent? He had spoken it well before the war, but that was a long time ago now.

He walked on at a slow pace. His boots seemed filled with lead. He had a bit of a headache. On the other side of the street was a row of four cottages between the shops.

A youngish woman came to the gate and put down an empty milk bottle and then looked down the street. Perhaps she was waiting for the other girl with the motor-cycle and carrier.

Diercksen saw her looking at him as he was about to pass her, and with a sudden impulse he stopped and spoke.

“Good morning. Is there any place here where I can get a cup of tea and something to eat?”

The young woman, who wore corduroy trousers and a blue blouse, seemed amused by the question and laughed.

“Nothing doing until nine o’clock,” she told him. “Up and about rather early aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Diercksen.

“The morning after the night before, eh? Did you miss the late bus?”

“Yes,” said Diercksen, “that is so. I missed the last bus.”

The young woman laughed again.

“Oh, you boys. Always getting into unnecessary trouble. Too much beer. Too many girls. I know.”

“Well, thank you,” said Diercksen, about to pass on.

But she looked at him good-naturedly and spoke again.

“You look a bit browned off,” she said. “Well, I won’t ask any awkward questions. What you did last night is no business of mine, is it? If you care to come in to an untidy room I could give you a cup of tea all right. Not much for what the R.A.F. is doing, I don’t think.”

“It’s very kind of you,” said Diercksen.

“My sister Liz has to get to the factory at seven,” said the young woman. “A bit of a scramble for breakfast. Care to risk it?”

Diercksen decided to risk it. He was really in need of a hot drink and something to eat.

“I should like to,” he answered. “I should be very grateful.”

The girl looked at him again and laughed.

“Oh Lord, don’t be so formal and polite. There’s a war on, isn’t there? Come inside and forget the old school tie and all that silly stuff.”

I am being too formal, thought Diercksen. I have forgotten how to talk colloquially. I shall betray myself.

He followed the young woman into a small room with a low ceiling. On the table were the remains of last night’s supper, three or four dirty plates,

some cups and saucers, with the dregs of cocoa, an ash-tray in which several cigarettes had been stubbed out, half an apple pie in a cracked dish, and a bit of stale bread on a wooden platter.

“Sorry,” said the girl. “We went to the pictures last night and came home a bit late. Liz didn’t feel like washing up. No more did I. But one has to pay the price in the morning.”

She glanced with a smile at Diercksen and added some more words.

“One always has to pay the price in the morning, eh?”

“It is certainly like that,” answered Diercksen, trying to answer her smile and speak cheerfully.

“Oh, cut it out,” said the girl, as though this answer annoyed her slightly. “Shy or something? You don’t talk natural like. Here, put a match under that gas jet won’t you, while I clear these things and get Liz out of bed.”

She went to the door of the room leading into a passage and called out in a high note:

“Liz . . . Getting up? Liz . . . Coo-ee.”

A girl’s voice answered from upstairs.

“Shan’t be long, Kitty old dear. Putting my pants on. Any hot water?”

“Hot water my foot!” answered the other girl. “Do you want me to boil the kettle and wait on you like a lady’s maid in the pictures?”

“Quite an idea,” answered the girl upstairs.

The girl called Kitty laughed quietly.

“Just like Liz,” she said. “All lipstick while the other girl does the dirty work.”

She raised her voice again.

“There’s a gentleman visitor down here. You’d better hurry up. A very nice-looking boy of the R.A.F.”

“Liar,” said the girl upstairs.

The girl downstairs came into the sitting-room again with a little low laugh.

“Won’t she be surprised when she sees you sitting down to breakfast? Here, you haven’t lit the gas-jet, laddie!”

“I couldn’t find any matches.”

“Under your very nose,” said the girl. “By the sink there. I thought the R.A.F. had to be quick on the uptake. Colour blindness barred and all that.”

“Sorry,” answered Diercksen. “I didn’t get much sleep last night. A bit of a binge, you know.”

He remembered that word “binge.” It was one of Peter Haddon’s in the old days.

“Ah, now we’re talking,” said the girl cheerfully. “You’ve said it, buddy. I sure guess you sprang a party last night. You sure did.”

Diercksen recognized her last words and their intonation as an imitation of the American accent. He had heard it over the B.B.C. while his head was under a blanket.

“Darned good American,” he told her.

She grinned and went on with her work, which was done in a hurry.

Off went the dirty plates and cups and saucers which she carried into the kitchen, after opening its door with her foot. Off went the bit of bread on the platter and the half of an apple pie in a cracked dish. Off went the table-cloth with its crumbs which she whisked into the fire-place. Off went the ash-tray with its stubbed-out cigarettes.

She came back for the third time from the kitchen with a handful of knives and spoons which she threw on the table.

“Set them around,” she told him. “Can’t stand on ceremony this morning. Liz has to be at the factory at seven o’clock. Sausages or spam, little boy?”

“Sausages,” suggested Diercksen, “if you can spare them.”

“They’re yours,” answered the girl. “You can have my share. They make me vomit.”

She went back into the kitchen while he laid the knives and forks. He laid for three. Through the kitchen door he could hear the sound of sizzling, and above this sound a girl’s voice singing loudly:

*“Yankee doodle came to London Town,
He looked around and said this town’s O.K.
Yankee doodle did a magic thing,
He made the people sing . . .”*

“A good song,” said Diercksen, when she came back to the sitting-room.

“Now don’t be sarcastic,” laughed the girl. “And for goodness’ sake sit down and get some of these sausages inside you. You look chilled to the bone, Mr. Officer.”

She made him sit in front of a plate of sausages and fried potatoes. Then she poured out a cup of tea—very black, he thought.

“Help yourself to milk and sugar,” she told him. “You needn’t say grace, baby boy. Just shovel it down. No time for manners.”

He sipped some of the tea. It was very comforting and life restoring. He could feel the colour coming back into his face.

“Where’s that little daughter of sin?” asked the girl, pouring out her own cup of tea which she drank standing.

“Liz?” asked Diercksen.

“You recognize her,” said the girl, with a laugh which showed her white teeth. “Yes, that’s Liz.”

“What’s Liz?” asked a girl coming into the room in a hurry.

She stared at Diercksen and opened her eyes wide at seeing him there.

“Good God,” she cried, “I thought my sister was pulling my leg.”

She patted her hair as though it might be disordered and then, in an affected voice, said: “How do you do.”

“Put a sock in your mouth,” said the other girl, “or rather put some porridge in your tummy. No time for being ridiculous. Fetch your own food, won’t you? I’m not waiting on you.”

“My sister Kitty is a perfect cat,” said Liz. “She doesn’t even introduce us. May I ask your name, sir?”

She was fooling, and annoyed Kitty, who treated her rough.

“Those who don’t ask questions don’t hear lies,” she told her.

“Oh, very well,” said Liz, pretending to look offended. She came back with some gluey-looking stuff in a soup plate. Diercksen remembered it as porridge. It had once filled him with horror. She sprinkled some sugar over it, ignoring her sister’s reminder to go easy with it.

“How’s the war getting on?” she asked Diercksen, after some mouthfuls of this stuff.

“Well,” said Diercksen.

“Now that we’ve mopped up Sicily,” said Liz, “I’m wondering where we go next. Perhaps you know?”

“If he knows, he won’t tell,” said Kitty, who had taken her seat at the table and was making a spam sandwich.

“In Bomber Command, aren’t you?” asked Liz, not at all abashed by this rebuke.

Diercksen nodded and took another gulp of tea.

“Well, you’re doing great work,” said Liz. “Every blooming night over Germany. I hope you’re killing those Jerry boys like lice.”

“Quite a lot of them are being killed,” said Diercksen.

“And the women and babies?” said Liz. “I’d kill every German woman so that she couldn’t have brats to grow up for World War III.”

“You’re a bloodthirsty little wretch,” said Kitty. “I don’t hold with war, anyhow.”

“I’m not speaking to you, old dear,” said Liz, “I’m talking to our guest, though I don’t happen to know how he comes to be our guest at this early hour of the morning.”

She looked suspiciously at her sister, who winked humourously at Diercksen.

“I do not like to kill women and children,” said Diercksen. “I do not want them to be killed.”

Liz burst out laughing and spluttered a piece of toast.

“You’re one of the comics,” she cried. “That would raise a big laugh in a

factory canteen. R.A.F. boy speaks. Rich Oxford accent. I do not want to kill women and children. I do not want them to be killed.”

Diercksen tried to laugh. He succeeded in making a noise something like a laugh. Then he made one or two enquiries about the district. How did the buses go to Ashleigh Heath? What was the fare? Did these young ladies happen to know the Haddons of Ashleigh Heath? Yes, of course, Dr. Haddon was very well known. He had a daughter called Pearl. Was she still alive?

“Alive?” asked Liz. “Well, I haven’t heard she’s dead since yesterday when I happened to see her in Crowhurst.”

Kitty had been listening to him.

“You’re not English, are you?” she asked. “You sound your r’s in a funny way and you speak English like a school-book.”

Diercksen tried to answer calmly and naturally.

“I’m Dutch, as a matter of fact.”

Kitty seemed satisfied.

“Oh, that accounts for it.”

“Well, bye-bye,” said Liz. “See you this evening.” She made a rush for the door. Soon afterwards Diercksen took his leave and said: “A thousand thanks, Miss Kitty.”

The girl called Kitty put her hand up and pulled his ear.

“I’d like to go to Holland one day,” she said, “if the Dutch are like you, dearest child.”

She waved her hand to him from the front step as he went out of the garden gate leading to the little High Street.

“Watch your step, Dutchman,” she cried. “Don’t let the Jerries get you.”

She went back into the house and he could hear her voice singing again:

*“Yankee doodle came to town
And looked around . . .”*

He took the first bus to Ashleigh Heath.

Karl Von Diercksen had not yet paid his fare to Ashleigh Heath when he was struck by the thought that at this hour in the morning it would be impossible to see Pearl and very unsafe to walk about the village. Someone might recognize him in spite of four years of war having passed and his disguise in an R.A.F. uniform.

Pearl had introduced him to her friends. He had gone to tea with them sometimes. He remembered a pretty girl named Marjorie. She had just married a good-looking fellow called Gerald Manning who was a friend of Peter's. She would know him instantly. And there was quite a likelihood that he would meet Dr. Haddon going on his morning round, or Pearl's mother, always busy with the village folk. His only chance of escaping recognition would be to get away from Ashleigh Heath in daytime and come back after dark, when somehow he might get a message to Pearl and see her for a little while.

A young woman in blue trousers and tunic was taking the fares.

She came to him in his turn and gave him a friendly glance.

"Farningham?"

He nodded. Yes, he had better go to Farningham, where there were more people about less likely to know him.

He handed her a shilling of Geoffrey Halstead's money—the boy he had killed. One day, somehow—unless he were shot as a spy—he would pay it back to the boy's family.

Unless he were shot as a spy—yes, that was a very possible ending to this adventure. A German in R.A.F. uniform. It would be difficult to explain that away.

This is a fantastic situation, he thought. What would these people do if they knew a German was sitting among them? Perhaps they would tear me to pieces.

They did not look like people who would tear anyone to pieces. There were two young girls in khaki uniforms, several girls in trousers who looked like factory workers, two or three elderly women with string bags, an old man in corduroy trousers, three boys shoving each other about and exchanging caps, a French sailor talking to a pretty English girl in the seat just in front of him, and on his left a man in city clothes, an English gentleman reading a newspaper.

I am in England, thought Diercksen. I'm in an English omnibus travelling through Surrey. Only a few hours ago I was in my squadron of Messerschmitts 109, fighting for Hitler. It is like a dream. Perhaps I am only dreaming.

It was too real to be a dream. It went on too long. Other people came into the bus at various stopping places. More girls who looked like factory workers. An elderly man in a fawn coat and riding-breeches who looked like a farmer. A Jewish-looking man with a beard. Two soldiers with "CANADA" on their shoulder-straps.

These men would kill me like a rat if they knew that I was a German officer, thought Diercksen.

One of the factory girls who had just come into the bus sat down by his side, glanced at him over her shoulder, and said: "Nice morning."

"Charming," answered Diercksen.

"A spot of leave?" she asked.

"Yes, I've been on leave," he told her.

"Well, I hope you had a good time," she said. "It goes quickly, doesn't it?"

"Too quickly," he answered.

"I'm getting fed up with this war," she told him. "Can't you boys finish it off quick? Why don't you find out where Hitler is and drop your best bombs on him? Wouldn't that hurry things up?"

"Excellent idea," said Diercksen. "But he is not easy to find."

"Oh well, you're doing well," said the girl. "Been over Germany lately?"

"Not very lately," answered Diercksen. "I've been more over France."

"It amounts to the same thing I suppose. As long as you're killing Jerries. When are they going to crack up?"

"Not just yet," answered Diercksen. "Perhaps in a year or so."

"A year? Oh my Gord!"

The girl laughed as though a year were another lifetime.

Presently she jumped up, nodded to him and said: "Best of luck. I hop out here."

She hopped out. He was glad that the seat next to his remained vacant until they reached Farningham, when everybody got out.

He walked through the old market town again and remembered it well. He was astonished to find it undamaged by bombs. There was no sign of ruin. There were no gaps among the houses up the High Street. There were no holes through the old brown roofs. In Germany the people believed that almost every town in England had been smashed to dust and ashes during the time of Blitz. Even he had believed it.

He stood outside a Tudor-looking house. It was a bun shop, in which several times five years ago he had taken tea with Pearl.

I must see Pearl tonight, he thought. At all costs I must see her tonight.

His difficulty was to put in time before the late evening. He might arouse suspicion if he loitered in a purposeless way about this town. He walked rapidly to its outskirts as though he had some business on hand, and found himself down by the river. He remembered it again, this little river with a boathouse and tea-garden. Pearl had taken him out in a punt. She had laughed at him because he got into trouble with the punt pole and nearly fell into the water. It had been one of their golden days. He had remembered it in Russia, among the ruins and horrors.

He crossed over by a little bridge to the boathouse.

A man was busy bailing out water from a leaky punt.

“Any chance of a boat, sir?” asked Diercksen.

The man looked up and laughed.

“You’re an early bird,” he said, “and for Gord’s sake don’t call me ‘Sir.’ Want a rowing boat or a canoe?”

“A canoe,” said Diercksen. “That would be very pleasant.”

The man grinned again.

“Haven’t you got a nice girl with you? Wouldn’t that make it a bit more pleasant?”

“I am quite alone,” said Diercksen. “I meet my girl later in the day.”

“Oh well, as long as you have a girl,” answered the man carelessly.

He pulled in one of the canoes and Diercksen got into it, taking off his tunic and putting it in the bow.

“No one on the river yet,” said the boatman. “You’re the first out.”

The sun broke through later. It glittered on the stream which flowed through harvest fields where the wheat had been gathered into stooks. A long, low wall belonging to some old park was on the other side, until it ended by a high sand-bank where some small boys were bathing. They waved their hands to Diercksen and called out “’Ullo!”

“Hullo,” answered Diercksen, raising one hand to them.

Tall rushes grew on the river’s edge, and on the bank overhanging branches of old trees were low above the water. Somewhere in the distance a bugle sounded and later a church bell tolled.

This is a dream, thought Diercksen again. I do not feel myself. I am somebody else. It is unreal.

He stopped paddling and lay up among the rushes and thought back to his own life during the past four years—those hateful, frightful, torturing years of war—with divided loyalties, because of his German blood and his English friendships and the spirit of Pearl who was to have been his wife. For a time he had been excited and took a little pride in the sweeping victories of the German army.

They were stupefying. Nothing could stop the terrific power of the German

war machine. France had collapsed like a house of cards. England was in the direst peril. He was sorry for England. It would be terrible if England were invaded. They would fight desperately and heroically, even though almost unarmed after Dunkirk. Hitler's Nazi boys would tramp through the sunny fields of Kent. They would advance on London. There would be slaughter in the Surrey villages, and on Surrey hills.

The men of England would die in their last ditches. English girls—Pearl—would die also under storms of shellfire in the ruins and in the furnace fires. Then came the battle in the air. The R.A.F. had beaten the *Luftwaffe* against all odds, and England still held the command of the sea. That had saved them. There would be no invasion. That maniac, Hitler, invaded Russia. . . .

Hitler had been a perjurer and a liar. Now he was leading Germany to ruin. The German people knew it now, though they dared not tell each other. All their victories were in vain. Even when the bells were ringing, many of them had looked into each other's eyes and whispered four words:

“Wir siegen uns todt.”

“We are conquering ourselves to death.”

Germany had been a lunatic asylum and a concentration camp. Men like himself had to keep silent and hide their thoughts even from their own families and friends. The Gestapo was everywhere, in the restaurants, in the hotels, in the railway trains, in officers' mess-rooms, in barracks. The German people were enslaved and obsessed by doubt, fear and despair. There was no freedom of thought, no criticism, no personal liberty of any kind. It was intolerable for any intelligent man or woman. That was why he had escaped at last.

Here, on this little river in England, there was a sense of peace—an illusion of peace. It was beautiful and charming as he had always thought of England. Boats came up the river as the sun grew warmer. In one punt was a young mother with three laughing children. Some soldiers in hospital blue rowed by, waving their oars like windmills. Young girls passed him in canoes and smiled as they passed. Girls were singing in one of the punts.

This is like Paradise, thought Dierksen. It is like peace.

He lay down in the canoe and slept with his face to the sun. He slept for three hours.

When he returned to the boathouse the man in charge looked at him curiously.

“A bit odd, ain't you?” he asked. “Staying out so long and all by yourself? Didn't meet your girl friend on the bank I suppose?”

Dierksen forced a laugh.

“I fell asleep,” he answered. “I was quite doggo.”

The boatman accepted the answer and showed a touch of sympathy. “Oh well, that's natural, after all those bombing raids. Must be a bit exhausting to

the nerves.”

“Yes,” said Diercksen, “they make one very tired.”

He paid the money from a pound note belonging once to Geoffrey Halstead. Then he went back into Farningham and had a light lunch in a tea-shop at the bottom of the High Street. It was crowded with women of a good class, as he called them in his mind. As far as he could see he was the only man among them. They were all talking and laughing at the little tables. Pretty women some of them, he thought. There was no agony on their faces though they must have been through the Blitz, and awaited invasion, and suffered through the long period of defeat and disaster. War had left no trace on their faces. That was very strange, he thought. In Germany the people were not so gay, not so merry in their conversation, not so untouched by the stern discipline of war even for civilians.

This is the English way, thought Diercksen. This is why they always win the last battle. One cannot defeat them, because their spirit refuses to surrender. They are very wonderful, these English.

He had a sudden idea that Pearl might be here in this tea-shop. What should he do if suddenly their eyes met in this public place? Perhaps she would not recognize him. She might think that a young man in R.A.F. uniform was rather like Karl von Diercksen who had once held her in his arms. But Pearl was not there.

He still had many hours of daylight. How could he fill them up?

After his meal he saw a queue of women and children and soldiers in hospital blue queuing up outside a picture palace.

In there I should sit in the darkness, he thought. It is a good idea.

He took his place in the queue, which was moving forward.

“All alone, mate?” asked one of the men in blue.

“Just for this afternoon,” answered Diercksen.

“Hard luck. Well, have a good time. They say this picture isn’t bad.”

He bought a ticket and went into the darkness. A girl with a torch took his ticket and pointed with her light to a vacant row of seats towards the front.

Diercksen sat down and the empty row filled up. Next to him was a girl in trousers. On the other side of her was a small boy.

Diercksen sat motionless. His mind was still excited by the astounding fact that he was in England, free of Hitler and Nazi discipline and espionage, but not free in England. He had no illusions about that. One false step, one wrong word, one chance recognition, and he would be a prisoner in England under the suspicion of being a spy. Technically, he was a spy in this uniform. He hoped he would be shot and not hanged. It must be very horrible to be hanged, he thought, but even that might be more agreeable than the headsman’s axe for traitors in Germany—those poor, harmless wretches whom Himmler called

traitors—typist girls, sallow-faced clerks, school teachers who had spread rumours of German defeats in Russia.

The picture on the screen caught his interest and even held it, though strange thoughts were moving at the back of his mind.

It was about an English soldier called Colonel Blimp. He seemed rather a fool at first, but afterwards developed into a fine English gentleman, kindly and chivalrous and yet a little stupid. He had to fight a duel in Germany. The duel scene was done with accurate detail. Then he became friends with the man he had fought. The last war had happened and each fought for his own country, but afterwards the German—now getting elderly and tired—came to England as a refugee from Hitler's Germany.

This is very extraordinary, thought Diercksen. How is it that they put on a picture in this time of war which is sympathetic towards a German? Only the English would do such a thing. And these people here seem to like it. That girl next to me is weeping—unless she has a cold in her head.

He saw the picture twice, remaining in his seat when the first audience went out and the second came in.

He had more time to wait—endless time, it seemed.

There was still full daylight when he stepped out of the cinema. He had another meal in a little restaurant, and lingered over his coffee, reading an evening paper which he had bought outside.

The big headlines were about Russian victories on a thousand-mile front. They were pressing forward to Smolensk with an encircling movement. They were smashing their way through German fortified positions which opened the way to the Dnieper.

There was a map with these place-names on the front page.

Diercksen studied them. He had flown over them, dropping bombs on concentrations of Russian troops and transport. He had been billeted in some of those towns after their capture two years ago.

He had seen the misery of the Russian people, gaunt-faced women, starving children, young girls with fury in their eyes having suffered great brutalities, and always dead bodies hanging from roughly-made gallows—the saboteurs and guerrillas and spies and Jews and *franc-tireurs*. By the laws of war there was no mercy on *franc-tireurs*, and the German generals of the Nazi type did not trouble their minds about the laws of war.

"*Herr Gott!*" said Diercksen aloud, looking at the threat to Smolensk.

"Is that how they swear in the R.A.F.?" asked the waitress, who had leant over him to put his bill by his plate without attracting his notice.

Diercksen forced a laugh.

"A bit of slang," he said. "We picked it up in Africa."

The girl lingered for a few words.

“A German aeroplane crashed on Warrenhurst Heath this morning,” she said. “The body of the pilot hasn’t been found yet. Looks a bit suspicious to me. What’s to prevent a spy dropping down like that?”

“Do not the Home Guard keep a good look-out?” asked Diercksen.

The girl gave a little squeal of laughter.

“Oh, the Home Guard! They wouldn’t know Hitler if he came down in a parachute in the middle of High Street!”

“I have heard many good things about the Home Guard,” answered Diercksen.

“Oh, well, I have a brother in it,” said the girl, “so I ought to know. Of course they’d fight all right.”

Diercksen paid up and left the restaurant. It was now getting dusk. He went down to the station and let three buses go by for Ashleigh Heath while he waited in the shelter which was almost dark. Then he caught the fourth bus. It was now dark.

Twenty minutes to Ashleigh Heath from Farningham. He heard its name called out by the woman conductor, who said "Cheerio" when he got out.

It was dark, but with the darkness of a summer night. The mists of autumn had not yet come, and he could see his way well enough to walk down the village street. He remembered its small houses. At the far end of them on the right was Dr. Haddon's house. He came to it and stood outside. The black-out curtains had been put up, but a little chink of light gleamed from one of the rooms.

Pearl is in there, he thought. My dearest Pearl. My heart's desire. If I have any luck she is there at home. May God grant me this luck, this one supreme moment for which I have risked all things and for which I have waited through years of agony.

It was some time before he had the courage to go through the gate. He walked slowly up and down fifty paces one way and then back again.

An elderly man passed him and said "Good evening." Presently one car passed him with dim lights. Two soldiers came along talking and laughing. Then for ten minutes there was nobody in the village street.

He stood by the gate with a profound hesitation in his mind.

Should he go in and ring the bell and ask for Pearl?

Suddenly he heard voices. A woman's voice said: "Don't forget your box of tricks, old dear. I'll go round to the garage."

For a moment there was a shaft of light from the front door. Then it was shut, but he could see two figures moving at the end of the short drive. A tall, burly man and a woman slightly built. He knew them as Dr. Haddon and his wife.

Mrs. Haddon disappeared and the doctor stood outside his house lighting a pipe. The little flame from the match lit up his face for a second.

Dierksen moved away from the gate and stood motionless, close to the hedge in the darkness of an overhanging tree. He had liked these two people. They had been very kind to him before the war; Mrs. Haddon had always been gay and charming and beautiful. He would have liked to speak to them and say. "It is Karl von Dierksen. Do you remember?"

No, he dared not do that before seeing Pearl. They might refuse to let him

see Pearl. They might hate him now.

A car moved slowly out of the garage twenty yards away from the house.

“Ready?” asked Mrs. Haddon. “Don’t stand there like a rock.”

“What a woman you are,” answered the doctor. “Always bullying a poor devil.”

Mrs. Haddon laughed and said, “Come along, Mr. Quack.”

The doctor lumbered into the car and shut the door with a bang. Then it came slowly out of the open gate and went up the village street.

“*Leiber Gott!*” said Diercksen in a low voice.

He waited another five minutes and then went through the gate, walked to the little front door and rang the bell.

It was opened after a short delay by a nice-looking woman who glanced at him and said “Good evening” in a friendly way.

“Good evening,” said Diercksen. “Is Miss Pearl Haddon at home?”

Upon the answer depended all his chance of luck.

“Yes,” said the woman. “What name shall I say?”

Diercksen hesitated for one second.

“Will you say a friend of her brother Peter.”

“Oh yes. Do come in.”

She opened the door wider for him and he stood in the hall with its white panelling which he remembered well.

“I’ll call Pearl down,” said the lady who had shut the front door hurriedly. “She’s upstairs. Come into the drawing-room.”

He stood in the drawing-room with its white panelled wall and low ceiling. It was the room to which his mind had travelled so often from Germany, and France, and Russia, and while he was flying over burning cities with flames stabbing through the smoke, and over battlefields noisy with guns. There was the piano in the corner where he had sung “I know a lady sweet and fair” and “Polly wolly doodle”, and old students’ songs with Peter and Pearl.

There were the little miniatures of eighteenth century Haddons.

There was the portrait of Mrs. Haddon as a girl. He remembered the low bookshelves with books of all sizes and colours, a set of Dickens on the left next to Thackeray’s novels and those of Scott. On the mantelshelf stood the silver candlesticks each side of the clock.

Here I was in Heaven once, thought Diercksen. Nothing has changed.

His heart was thumping at his ribs. He was in a state of high emotional excitement. Was he going to faint or something? It would be silly if he fainted at the sight of Pearl.

The door opened and she came in.

“Good evening,” she said. “Have you come from Peter? He’s all right, I hope?”

He could say nothing. He felt speechless. He saw her looking at him at first with a smile and then suddenly her face went very white, and the smile faded from her lips, and she stared at him as though seeing a ghost which frightened her.

“Pearl,” he said in a queer harsh voice. He did not move towards her and she was standing some distance away from him.

“Who is it?” she asked in a low, frightened voice.

“It is I—Karl,” he said. “Oh, Pearl, my dearest. My well beloved. Heart’s dearest.”

She was still staring at him as though he were a ghost.

“No,” she said in a kind of whisper. “It can’t be. It can’t be Karl.”

She put both her hands to her head as though to assure herself that she was in the body and not in some dream or nightmare.

“It is I—Karl,” he said again. “I have escaped from Germany. I am here. Oh, Pearl, my sweetheart. Do you still love me a little? Do you remember your promise to wait for me whatever happened in the war? I have come to you again.”

He moved towards her now. He stretched out his hands to her. He wanted to take her in his arms, but she put her hands out as though to thrust him away.

“Don’t touch me,” she cried. “Don’t come near me.”

He stood still again, and his hands dropped to his side.

“I have frightened you,” he said. “You do not believe that I am Karl?”

“How did you come here?” she asked. “Why are you in that uniform?”

“I crashed,” he told her, “this morning at dawn. I put on these clothes.”

“Are you a spy?” she asked. “Have you come as an enemy?”

“No,” he answered; “I am a fugitive from Hitler. I have escaped from that maniac and all his ruffians. I am glad to be in England. Do you not love me any more, my little Pearl? Have you forgotten our great love, our boy and girl love when we were happy? It is only four years ago.”

“You are a German,” she said in a low voice. “You are an enemy of England. There is a river of blood between us.”

“No,” he said, “I have always loved England. My heart stayed in England when I went away.”

“What have you been doing?” she asked. “Have you been fighting against us?”

“I was a German airman,” he told her. “Until yesterday I was a German pilot. I have finished with all that. Now I ask for your love and pity, my Pearl. For one word of love. For one kiss from you. I shall go away in a little while. Perhaps I shall be shot. But I wish to hold you in my arms. I wish to weep upon your breast. I wish to have a few beautiful moments with you, my dearest heart.”

He moved towards her again, but for the second time she thrust out her hands and said: "Do not touch me. Do not come near me."

"Why not?" he asked in a broken voice. "Do you hate me, Pearl? Why should you hate me? In this little room we loved each other."

He spoke like a broken man.

She gave a little cry.

"Oh, why have you come back? I tore up your letters. I tore you out of my mind. You were like a ghost in my mind. You are like a ghost now."

"I am not a ghost," he answered. "I am Karl whom you once loved. Why did you tear me out of your mind?"

She did not answer for a moment. For the first time she moved away from the door, though not towards him much. She moved sideways towards one of the windows with their black-out curtains.

"You Germans have done terrible things," she said. "For a time I tried to defend you. People said I was pro-German. I said there were many kind people in Germany."

"That is so," said Karl. "There are still many kind people in Germany. Do you not believe that?"

"No," she answered, with a kind of anger or despair. "No; there can't be. You have all done such ghastly things, every kind of cruelty, every foul way of fighting, every kind of atrocity."

"War is terrible," said Karl. "It is without pity. I have seen all that."

"You have tortured and murdered the Jews," said Pearl, in a low voice.

Karl von Diercksen raised his hand.

"The Jews," he said. "Poor wretches. Poor wretched people."

"The Poles," said Pearl. "Warsaw. Are they all false, the tales of atrocity?"

Diercksen seemed to look back into his memory.

"We were ruthless in Poland," he said. "Total war is ruthless. Many horrors happen. But I was not there. I do not know all that happened."

"You machine-gunned the refugees on the roads in France," said Pearl. "Isn't that true?"

"Orders were given to harass the refugees," said Karl. "Doubtless it was to create confusion. I do not defend that. I am not one of those who did it."

"Your submarine crews shoot at our sailors when they take to the boats," said Pearl. "You shoot at our airmen when they are baling-out. Every day we hear these things. I refused to believe them until I had to believe."

"The young Nazis have been brought up in a bad code," said Diercksen. "They have been trained in brutality. Hitler and his disciples have debauched the mind of German youth. That is why I have escaped at last. I am hostile to all this. I have tried to remain a little civilized. In the German air force there is still a little chivalry. Some of my comrades were gentlemen."

He moved towards Pearl and reached out for her hand and tried to raise it to his lips, but she dragged her hand away from him.

“Your hands have English blood on them,” she said. “Haven’t you bombed our cities and killed our women and children?”

“Your air force is now bombing German cities and killing our women and children,” he said. “It is worse than our Blitz. You do it better than we did.”

“How many English boys have you killed?” she asked.

“I do not know the number,” he said. “But your boys have killed more of us. The R.A.F. is now very strong. Your aeroplanes are better than ours, I think. It is England’s triumph.”

Suddenly he laughed harshly.

“Why do we talk like this? I came to tell you of my faithful love. I came to hold you in my arms before I become a prisoner of war. What is all this war to two people who love each other? We have no share in this war. We did not help to make it. We are its victims and were torn apart by the war criminals. We were both lovers of peace. We believed in beauty and lovely things. We did not hold with frontiers or with racial hatred. You loved Schubert’s songs as I loved your old English songs. You gave yourself into my arms and felt safe with me. Why do you now hate me? I am the same as before. I have not changed. I am your faithful lover.”

Pearl gave another little cry. It was a cry of anguish.

“Why have you come like this?” she said. “I thought you were dead. I did not want you to come back, Karl. It’s worse than if you had been dead. I belong to someone else now.”

It was the first time she had used his name.

“To someone else?” he asked, in a broken way. “That is very bad luck for me.”

“I couldn’t help it,” cried Pearl. “One can’t help anything. We are all helpless. Life tortures us.”

“Tell me,” said Karl, “who is this someone else?”

But she didn’t tell him. There was no time to tell him. Someone was ringing at the front door-bell.

“There is someone at the door,” said Pearl. “What are you going to do?”

“I shall wait here,” said Diercksen. “It doesn’t matter.”

Someone opened the front door and they heard voices.

There was a tap at the drawing-room door and a man came in. It was Robert Fellowes, who was an air warden of Ashleigh Heath.

“Sorry, Pearl,” he said, “but you’re showing a light from this room. It’s shining all down the village street.”

He moved quickly to the window and pulled down a corner of the black-out curtain. Then he turned and saw Karl von Diercksen and looked

embarrassed for a moment.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Pearl. I didn’t know anyone was here. Is this one of Peter’s friends?”

He went towards Diercksen and held out his hand.

Diercksen did not take this outstretched hand. He stiffened and stood at attention.

“I am a German officer,” he said. “My name is Karl von Diercksen. I crashed in England this morning. It is your duty to arrest me, sir.”

Robert Fellowes, in his uniform of the special police, stared at this young man in the uniform of the R.A.F.

“Good God!” he exclaimed.

He turned to Pearl and spoke to her.

“Is he pulling my leg or something? I mean—”

“It is true,” said Pearl. “Before the war—”

“Yes, I remember,” said Fellowes. “Well, what the devil am I going to do about it?”

“I wish to be arrested,” said Diercksen.

“But why on earth are you in this uniform?” asked Fellowes sharply.

“I will try to explain it, sir,” answered Diercksen.

“Pearl, I’m terribly sorry,” said Mr. Fellowes. “I shall have to do my duty of course. It’s a most extraordinary affair. Unbelievable.”

“I will come quietly,” said Diercksen. “I will make no trouble.”

“Good God!” said Fellowes again. “Good God! In Ashleigh Heath—”

“I am at your service, sir,” said Diercksen.

“Perhaps I had better telephone for somebody.”

He produced a cigarette-case nervously and held it out to Diercksen.

“Have a cigarette?”

Diercksen shook his head.

Fellowes went to the telephone on a side table and called up someone at headquarters.

“We shan’t keep you waiting long,” he said to Diercksen.

He was extraordinarily embarrassed by the situation.

Diercksen stood there motionless. On the other side of the room Pearl waited, not looking at Karl.

It was five minutes before there was the sound of a car arriving in the drive.

“Excuse me,” said Fellowes. “That must be Mallory.”

He went out to open the front door.

“Oh, Karl,” cried Pearl, “I’m sorry.”

She faltered towards him blind with tears.

He strode towards her and took her in his arms and kissed her lips with

passion.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Good-bye, my heart’s dearest.”

Presently they took him out and put him into the car and drove away in the direction of Farningham.

Pearl had fainted. She was lying on the drawing-room floor when her mother came in. She had seen a ghost.

Peter came to the end of his luck—"Haddon luck," as his squadron had called it. It happened over Naples, to which he had made the long hop there and back—thirteen hours flying-time—once too often.

Mussolini had gone, but Italy was still in the war according to Marshal Badoglio, who repeated this several times to his people and to the world. Looking back on these weeks of history, it seems a pity that our bombers should have been sent to Italy at that time, for now we know that behind the scenes negotiations were going on for Italy's unconditional surrender and that it was only a question of the date. It was as plain as a pike-staff that Italy would come out of the war, and that all that the people wanted was the end of it and liberation from the Germans whom they had hated from the beginning. It was only Mussolini and his Fascist flunkies who had dragged them into it on the side of Germany.

The boys in the Piazza Venezia had cheered themselves hoarse shouting: "*Duce! Duce! Duce!*" and young Italian armies fed on rhetoric and inflamed by the call to their blood and history—"Pro Patria . . . Mare Nostrum . . . Giovinezza . . ." had embarked for North Africa with cheers and flowers. Mussolini had backed the wrong horse. He had challenged British sea power to which he was most vulnerable. Now Italy was down and out. They had lost everything, including the faith in Mussolini for whom once they had a hero-worship. Across the Straits of Messina was the victorious British Army, whom now they would greet not as enemies but as liberators from those hated Germans who had used them as slaves and gun fodder, abandoning them always in the time of defeat.

So it was a pity that Peter Haddon and his crew should have been sent to bomb Naples again. A few days later there was no need to bomb Naples, except where the Germans held their line around the city.

He had been brought down by German fighters, who had chased him over France. One of their shells had put one of his engines out of action. A bit of his fuselage had been torn away, and his petrol tank was leaking badly.

He had to make a crash landing and had done it well. He himself had received internal injuries from which later he died. Poor Peter!

He did not die until several weeks later. They hoped to save him in the

Italian hospital to which he was taken. So it was reported afterwards by Gerald Manning of the Eighth Army, who was one of the first to enter Naples after the battle of Salerno and the heavy fighting which forced the Germans to retreat.

“One of our bombers failed to return.” So it was told on the eight o’clock news.

The Air Ministry was very kind about it when they rang up Mrs. Haddon. They very much regretted that Pilot Officer Peter Haddon and his crew had not returned to base after a flight to Italy. No details were available. It was possible that he had crashed somewhere or baled out. They would, of course, inform the next of kin at once if further news came through.

“Thank you,” said Irene Haddon, who answered this call on the telephone.

Pearl had just gone off to her work in London.

The doctor was shaving himself in the bathroom. The September sunshine was streaming through the windows of the little breakfast room.

Irene Haddon stood for a little while without moving and as though unable to move. All the colour had gone from her face. Her eyes seemed to be looking beyond this room. A faint smile came to her lips—a terrible smile if anyone had seen it.

“It has come at last,” she said aloud. “Of course I knew it would come. Peter knew.”

She was unaware that she was talking aloud.

Presently she moved to the door and called out.

“John—John, my dear. Come down.”

“I’m shaving,” answered the doctor cheerily.

“John, come down!” she cried, “I want you.”

Perhaps there was something in her voice which startled him. He came downstairs quickly with some of the lather still on his face.

“What is it, old girl?” he asked. “Not feeling too well?”

“I’m all right,” she told him. “It’s Peter. The Air Ministry—”

Dr. Haddon looked at her. The colour had left his own face.

“Is he dead?” he asked. “Poor old Peter!”

“He’s missing,” said Irene. “He failed to return.”

She gave a queer laugh.

“That beautiful phrase. Three of our bombers—or thirty—or forty—failed to return. Who cares? Aren’t we winning the war? Isn’t it all splendid? Aren’t we having a grand time? Isn’t our morale magnificent?”

“Steady, old girl,” said Dr. Haddon. “Steady, my dear. Keep hold of yourself. You’re a brave woman.”

“I’m not a brave woman,” cried Irene. “I’m brave about other people’s sons, but not about my own. Not about Peter.”

She began to weep with violence and Dr. Haddon went to her and put his

arms about her.

“There’s still a chance,” he said. “We must hope for the best. Perhaps he’s alive and well. Peter always has great luck.”

“Sorry, John,” said Irene presently. “I mustn’t make a fool of myself. Other mothers know how to take it.”

She took it so bravely in the face of the world—her little world of Ashleigh Heath—that people marvelled at her.

“Irene is splendid,” said Robert Fellowes to his son Quentin.

“Irene Haddon is the most spiritual woman I know and quite the bravest,” said Mr. Marlow, still Vicar of Ashleigh, although he had resigned his living.

“Irene is so much braver than I am,” said Marjorie Manning, who had heard this news about Peter and broke down one morning, weeping at her bench in the factory at Farningham.

It was Marjorie who had the first detailed account of Peter’s death. It was an airgraph letter from her husband.

Peter Haddon died today, he said. I was by his bedside; he was quite conscious for a little while before the end.

He was quite bucked up when I told him how we were getting on in Italy. “Good old Eighth Army,” he said, “and good old R.A.F. Damn fine work.” He seemed quite cheery and on the mend. Presently he said he wanted to tell me something. He told me with a smile. “I am very much in love with your wife, Gerald. Do you mind?”

I said: “Of course you’re in love with my wife. Everybody is in love with Marjorie. Why not?”

He seemed amused by that answer.

“I kissed her,” he told me. “I was very passionate, old boy, believe me.” I said: “I wish you could kiss her again. I wish she could kiss you now.” He seemed grateful for those words. “It’s damned decent of you,” he said, gripping my hand. “Give her my eternal love. Promise?”

I promised.

He seemed to doze after this and then opened his eyes and looked at me again.

“I have loved two women,” he said. “My mother and your wife. Perhaps my mother comes first after all, now that I am briefed my last long hop!” “I’ll tell your mother that,” I said, “you’ll fly home again, old boy.” “Think so?” he asked hopefully for a second. Then he said: “No, I’m dying. Give my love to England and everybody. If my spirit walks it will walk down Ashleigh Heath. Tell my mother and Marjorie that I may walk in upon them one day. Who knows?” He gave a faint laugh and then dozed again and two hours later died.

Marjorie read that airgraph letter, spilling her tears on it.

That evening she went round with it to the doctor’s house and asked for

Mrs. Haddon.

Irene was in the little drawing-room. She had been informed that Peter was dead.

“I’m sorry,” said Marjorie. “I loved him, you know.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Haddon. “Poor Peter. We must try to be brave, mustn’t we? We can take it, can’t we, like all the other women in this war?”

She read Gerald Manning’s letter, and then spoke again.

“Perhaps he is near to us now,” she said.

She looked across the room as though he might come in at the door.

Above the chimney-pots the air vibrated with the drone of heavy planes. More bombers. . . . More Peters. . . . The war went on.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Battle Within* by Sir Philip Gibbs]