The Anxious Days

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A novel by

Philip Gibbs

The Anxious Days

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The Anxious Days

I

THE *Rajputana*—that good ship of the P. and O.—crept into Tilbury Dock at half past six in the evening. The voyage from Singapore had seemed incredibly long while it lasted. Now it seemed incredibly short. Less than three weeks ago the passengers had sweltered in tropical heat, lying about in deck-chairs, sipping iced drinks, overcome by languor, and shirking bed-time in the Red Sea because of the stifling atmosphere below deck.

Now they were back in England, with an east wind blowing up the Thames and lengthening the ribbons of smoke from factory chimneys and small tugs. The sky was grey and dirty above the wharves. The river was mud coloured. The buildings beyond the wharves were black with soot. It was all very cheerless to people in whose recent remembrance the sky had been of an unfathomable blue, deepening as night came over the sea until it was pierced by a myriad stars, intensely bright. They had been steeped in light and colour, ever changing, infinite in their range and rhythm, from shining gold to sparkling silver, from sunlight to moonlight, in tropical seas where the water was iridescent and the air shimmered with heat.

Now, on a May evening over old River Thames, there was no colour of any warmth or richness or delight. It was an etching smudged in its printing on a human retina.

Most of the passengers had got off at Plymouth, but a few stood on the boat-deck at Tilbury, waiting for the liner to creep into its berth.

Two of them—a man and a woman—stood apart from the others, staring towards the docks. The man had an empty sleeve tucked into the pocket of his overcoat, and his collar turned up, hiding the rake of his jaw, but with a lean, bronzed face showing below his felt hat. The woman shivered in her fur coat.

“Ghastly!” she cried. “The same old climate. ‘Oh, to be in England’ and all that nonsense! Not for me, Commander Compton, sir! Why didn’t we go native and resist the horrors of Western civilization?”

The man with the empty sleeve smiled without looking at her.

“I’m keen to be back. London again, after five years’ exile! Thank God for grey skies and an east wind!”

The woman in the fur coat slipped her hand through his arm—not standing on the side of his empty sleeve.

“You’ll catch pneumonia,” she warned him. “Why do you want to get back to filthy old London, especially now that everybody’s broke, and wailing about the income tax and unemployment and bad trade and general hopelessness?”

The man with the empty sleeve—Commander Compton, she had called him—turned his head this time to glance at her with a quick smile. He had a naval-looking face with good-humoured lips.

“I’ve a pretty girl waiting for me,” he said. “I want a bit of home life. You know how I feel about it.”

The woman in the fur coat laughed, with her head turned against the east wind.

“Sentimentalist! If it hadn’t been for your daughter Madge, I believe you might have made love to me more ardently. Well, you’ve lost your chance, my dear! Here we are in Tilbury Dock, and there, if my eyes don’t deceive me, is my faithful but austere husband. See that legal-looking man with pince-nez? Of course he can’t see me, bless him. As blind as a bat!”

She waved to him and called out, “Coo-ee!”

“I’m afraid Madge isn’t there,” said Commander Compton. “Not that I really expected her.”

The woman next to him had taken her hand from his arm to wave to her husband. But now she turned and held out her hand.

“Good-bye, Stephen. You’ll let me call you Stephen, won’t you? Thanks so much for looking after me so nicely. I’m sorry I scared you once or twice—shy man! But you’ll come and see us in South Kensington, won’t you?”

She laughed, as though remembering amusing episodes on this voyage, under a sky full of stars, when it’s pleasant to be sentimental, and perhaps a little dangerous, even for a married woman with a faithful but austere husband, and a man of fifty-two longing to see a daughter in London.

He took her hand and held it for a moment.

“We had a wonderfully good voyage,” he said. “You were very kind to a one-armed man.”

She raised her hand to him and laughed again, and then hailed a porter who had come on board. It was the end of the voyage.

There were other partings and farewells between men and women who had made those shipboard friendships which do not always last beyond the docks at journey’s end. There had been a rather hectic love affair between a young woman and the ship’s doctor. Commander Compton had watched it with amusement and sympathy. They were having a few last words now. Then the purser came up and said the usual kind of things.

“Glad to be back, I expect? No place like old England, after all. The Election results will be out to-night. I hope those Labour laddies will get a whopping. Well, good-bye, Commander. I hope we made you comfortable?”

“Oh, rather. Best thanks, Brown. I expect it’s my last time out East.”

He grabbed a handbag, gave the porter some orders about the rest of his luggage, and lagged behind a moment at the gangway until an ayah passed with a small boy in her arms—Wee Willie Winkie, sent home for health’s sake from the Malay States, where his mother would miss him, like other young mothers exiled from their children. Most of the other passengers had people to meet them. Commander Compton searched around for a pretty face like a photograph he carried in his breast pocket. He hadn’t seen his daughter for five years, but he would know her again at a glance, although she must have grown from girlhood to womanhood.

No luck! That telegram must have missed her. He would ring up her rooms as soon as he reached the club. He might be just in time to take her out to dinner. A wonderful thought that! Dinner with Madge at some little restaurant in Jermyn Street or Soho. He had been looking forward to it while he dined with rubber planters in wooden bungalows on the edge of their plantations.

Singapore . . . Penang . . . Borneo. . . . A long way from Tilbury Dock, and already receding into the background of his mind like a feverish kind of dream, very vivid while it lasted, but now no more than a memory.

II

He sat in the corner of a smoking carriage and had a look at the headings of an evening paper. The Election results were to be declared, beginning at nine o'clock. All the party leaders anticipated victory for their own side. Mr. Baldwin was confident. Mr. Lloyd George expected a Liberal rally. He had promised to conquer unemployment. At the worst the Liberals could hold the balance. Labour was certain of heavy gains.

A fellow passenger on the other side of the carriage—they had talked now and then during the voyage—made a comment or two about the political situation.

"The same old war cries! These politicians make me sick. What England wants is a Mussolini to wake up the slackers and get a move on. It's the dole that's demoralizing the nation. What we want is Imperial Economic Unity, but what do these little whippersnappers in the House of Commons know about the Empire? They've never been further than Peckham or Tooting. We must get together or go under. Don't you agree?"

"I expect we'll scrape through," said Commander Compton.

His fellow passenger was doubtful about it. He expressed his doubts at some length, but Compton was thinking about his daughter Madge. He had an uneasy idea that he had sent a telegram to the wrong address. He might have put Church Row, instead of Church Street, Chelsea. Idiotic if he had done that! He would feel hipped if he couldn't get hold of her before dinner. He had been looking forward to their first greeting all the way from Singapore, counting the days. Perhaps Madge had gone to see her aunt—his sister Betty—in Kensington. Perhaps the telegram was lying on her doormat, unopened. He ought to have cabled earlier on the voyage. He might have sent a wireless from Aden.

His fellow passenger was deep in *The Times*. It would be very pleasant to get *The Times* on the day of publication, instead of six weeks old, when he was on the edge of a jungle in Borneo for a spell, looking after a new plantation hopelessly mismanaged by a drunken assistant—poor wretch.

Compton stared out of the carriage window. They were passing an endless wilderness of bricks and mortar, mile after mile of mean streets. He could see the washing hanging out in back gardens. Every little house seemed to have its wireless aerial. Thousands of chimney-pots were smoking, and the wind was

smudging all this smoke across the wet roofs of bluish slates. Hideous and squalid, after the unimaginable beauty of Malay—that receding dream in his memory—with its mountain peaks, swept by ever-changing colours; and great rivers swirling through alluvial flats and jungle forests; and tall, straight lines of rubber trees like the endless aisles of interminable cathedrals with splashes of gold where the sun shone aslant their trunks. The London slums again—and how good to see them! That endless vista of sooty chimney-pots—and how comforting to a homesick man, five years out East, with a daughter waiting for him.

Compton took a taxi from Liverpool Street to his club in St. James's Square. Yes, he could have a bedroom. . . . Commander Compton, wasn't it? The hall-porter remembered him as though he had just returned from a week-end's golf.

"I want to telephone," said Compton, before going to his room.

He went into the telephone box and rang up a number which he had kept in his pocket-book next to a photograph of a nice-looking girl. Sloane 2389.

A girl's voice answered him, and he spoke with a slight tremor in his own. "Is that you, Madge?"

There was a slight pause, and then the girl's voice answered again.

"No. This is Jean. Madge is away on tour. Edinburgh. I expect her back to-night, with luck."

"I'm her father," said Compton.

"Oh! . . . Welcome home! . . . She's often spoken about you."

It was a friendly voice, and had a laugh in it.

Compton hesitated. There was a look of disappointment on his face, but he spoke cheerily.

"Give her my love. Tell her that . . . well . . . I'm keen to see her! I'll ring up in the morning."

"I'll tell her."

"Many thanks."

Compton put the receiver back and stood in the telephone box for a moment. Rather disappointing. Away on tour, eh? Yes, she had said something about it in her last letter. She had fixed up a part in a musical comedy. She expected it would be great fun. Well, he would have to spend a lonely evening. Hard luck on a man just home from the Malay. Of course, he might go and visit his sister in Kensington. That was not a bad idea, failing Madge.

He rang up a Kensington number. Mrs. Middleton was dining out and was

not expected back until late, because of the Election.

Well, that was that! Dinner at the club? Not cheery for a night of homecoming. He might do a show afterwards.

The Alhambra? No, too many old ghosts there. It would make him feel blue sitting alone in the stalls.

Outside the telephone box a friendly voice greeted him.

“Hullo, Compton! Thought you were in Borneo or Singapore?”

“Just back,” said Compton. “Enormously glad to see you, old man. How are things with you?”

It was old Bartlett, “axed” out of the Navy about the same time as himself, now something in the City, but the same cheery-looking customer. He had done some pretty good work in the Dardanelles when men like him were needed.

“Things?” he asked with a grin. “Putrid, my dear fellow. This country is demoralized. Nothing doing except a pall of pessimism. Now we’re awaiting the results of an Election which will probably seal our fate as a nation for some time to come. Have a drink?”

“Dine with me,” said Compton. “I’m as lonely as death.”

Bartlett could not dine with him. He was dining with a lovely lady and going on afterwards to hear the Election results at Horridge’s in Oxford Street. It was going to be an amusing show. Horridge did that kind of thing remarkably well. All the notabilities would be there. All the little ladies.

He remembered he had another ticket. If it was any good to Compton . . .

“Oh, rather!” said Compton. “Anything’s better than a lonely seat at some third-rate play. I was hoping to meet my daughter Madge, but she’s away out of town.”

“Well,” said old Bartlett, “here’s the ticket. I’ll meet you there. White tie, you know. Any time after nine. How’s Singapore? Still wicked? I remember a girl who used to dance at that cabaret . . .”

Compton dined alone with a white tie under his chin. The club was almost empty. Probably most of the members had done some electioneering and were away in the country, or dining in restaurants where the Election results would be announced later on. He was just a little hipped because of that lonely feeling.

III

THE nation was awaiting the results of a political campaign which had stormed unceasingly for weeks in every newspaper, on thousands of platforms, in village halls, at street corners, and in public squares, where brazen voices or shrill, squeaky voices had appealed to the hopes and fears of a people impatient of bad trade, a rising tide of unemployment, and a Government which had promised many things and had done nothing.

For more than two weeks the very air had quivered with political propaganda. Electrical vibrations had carried the appeals of the political leaders into every home in Great Britain where there was a loud speaker on a corner cabinet. Young people who had been dancing to jazz music in rooms with the carpets turned up listened for a few minutes to these speeches with smiling impatience. "Perhaps we had better hear what that old blighter has to say. The same old tosh. Wah, wah, wah!"

Mr. Baldwin had said, "Safety first!" Extraordinarily characteristic of a man who believed that a genial smile with a pipe between his lips was the right attitude before a people who did not, he thought, believe in wild-cat schemes or dangerous adventures of revolt against established institutions. And yet, by some queer trick of mind, he had given the vote to every young woman of twenty-one. It was the Flappers' Vote which was to be used at the polls for the first time. All those battalions of young girls who went by morning bus to city office or big store, all the little factory girls in industrial towns, all the lipsticked little ladies who paraded before the shop windows where their underclothes were exhibited, were to have a say in the government of England. Their votes would help to decide the fate of India, which they could hardly find on the map, and intricate problems of world economics, though they were weak in the arithmetic of their own pocket money. They had listened to those speeches over the wireless and said, "How boring!" They had glanced at that poster of "Safety first" and said, "How unadventurous!"

A ribbon of light had travelled endlessly above the buildings in Trafalgar Square with a message to the people from an old Liberal leader named David Lloyd George. "*We can conquer unemployment.*" Haggard men, shuffling by, had stared up at those words of light. Some of them had been out of work for two years, three years, or all the time since the war. *We can conquer unemployment.* Well, that sounded all right. That old wizard had prepared a scheme which he was ready to begin, if the nation brought him back. He would

raise a loan of two hundred million pounds. He would build new roads, bridges, docks, canals, and all kinds of public works which add to the productivity of a nation. Two hundred million pounds. Quite a bit of money for a nation which was already taxed intolerably, but perhaps cheaper than a dole which was supporting two million men in miserable idleness. For a moment men stared at that promise in lighted words against a black sky, and then some of them shook their heads or shrugged their shoulders, and passed on. That old man had let them down before. No one could trust him. Who could trust any politician out for place and power, ready to promise anything in return for votes?

The Labour leaders were promising other things—further benefits to the unemployed, an easier way of getting the dole, less work for more money. The rich would be still more taxed for the welfare of the poor. There would be land nationalization, a control of the banking system in the interests of trade, a levelling up and a levelling down, a redistribution of wealth, so that the underdog would get his day. Great promises! Splendid dreams for those who had nothing else but dreams, and believed in the bottomless purse of the wealthy classes. A noble phrase—the redistribution of wealth! It appeals to the burglar instinct as well as to the idealist.

The last appeal had been made. All day long in every city streams of people had gone to the polling booths to put a cross against a name pledged to this policy or that. The “flappers” had used their votes for the first time, if they had not craved another half hour’s sleep before catching the morning bus after a late evening at the pictures. The unemployed—two million of them—had voted for their dole, and a bit more if possible. Old ladies who loved Mr. Baldwin—that dear, good man—had gone gallantly out into a damp day to support his representatives. Fathers of families—anxious men because of income tax returns which had caused them sleepless nights—had hurried to the polling stations before going to offices where business was bad. Now the secret ballot was made. Little slips of paper were being passed from hand to hand, and all the crosses counted by those appointed to add them up. The nation was waiting for this decision of democracy, this uncertain lottery of the mass mind.

In London by nine o’clock dense crowds were moving towards centres where the Election results were to be exhibited by newspaper offices or advertising firms. A mist was creeping up from the river and low-lying ground. It blurred the lights in Trafalgar Square, where a dense crowd was massed below the Nelson Monument and on the steps of St. Martin’s. Loud speakers blared out dance tunes to the rhythm of which the people shuffled their feet. Enormous voices, with the deep reverberation of magnified sound, bellowed

across the square, announcing the names of unopposed members. The crowd coughed, laughed, chattered, swayed like one stupendous and noisy monster.

Commander Compton, late of the Federated Malay States, edged his way along the pavement until he was caught up in that maelstrom of excited humanity.

“Don’t push!” cried a girl’s voice behind him. “Don’t you see the gentleman ’as lost ’is arm?”

Other people noticed his empty sleeve, or were careful of that left shoulder. It was the same good-natured multitude which he remembered on many days of history since early boyhood. Queen Victoria’s Jubilee—his earliest memory of crowds; Mafeking Night, when he was a “snotty”; Lord Mayor’s Show day, a score of times. But it was a queer thing to come back from a Malay forest to this scene in London on his first night home.

IV

In Oxford Street there was another legion standing ten deep on the pavement outside the façade of a great shop with tall Corinthian columns above a mass of masonry illuminated by some method of flood-lighting which made the pillars gleam white and cast black shadows between them into the deep recesses. It was a building of heavy magnificence, deliberately grandiose, like the palace of a Roman Emperor rebuilt in London. It had golden gates with the emblem of the fasces on them. Crystal torches flung their light down upon thousands of upturned faces. It was the House of Horridge.

An endless stream of motor-cars flowed along Oxford Street between the crowds, and swirled round this building to entrances behind. Mr. Horridge was giving a party to his customers and friends, whom he had invited to watch the Election results between intervals for refreshment and dancing. In London that night there were many women, and some men, more interested in Mr. Horridge's party than in the political fate of their nation. Their eager faces pressed forward on each side of the red carpet under the awning which sheltered the entrance, as people in evening clothes came out of the arriving cars and hurried into the light and warmth behind the plate-glass windows.

The crowd had quick glimpses of lovely ladies in silk or ermine cloaks, with jewels in their hair, and of men whose faces above white ties and gleaming shirt-fronts seemed familiar to them now and then. They nudged each other and called back to friends behind them.

"George du Maurier! Yes, that's 'im. Looks like a prize-fighter, don't 'e? . . . Gladys Cooper? Well, I believe so. 'Aven't seen her nearer than the pit. Thin legs, you know! . . . 'Oo's that old girl in the tiara? Some duchess, I wouldn't be surprised. Buys 'er nicknacks in the bargain basement. . . . If that isn't Tallulah, I'll eat my hat. 'Ullo, Tallulah? Oh, you naughty puss!"

Those names, familiar as household words, arrived somewhat later in the evening than the first tide of guests who poured into the big shop. The theatrical profession came on after eleven o'clock, by which time many hundreds of Mr. Horridge's customers and friends had already assembled, and many Election results had been declared. But the early arrivals were equally distinguished, if not so familiar to the crowd. Mr. H. G. Wells had arrived with a little lady in a hooped skirt who waved her programme and cried "Hooray!" every time there was a Labour gain, to the amusement of Mr. Wells, and the annoyance of her neighbours who were followers of Mr. Baldwin. Other

literary gentlemen had come to the House of Horridge, laying aside their typewriters or their fountain pens, and forgetting, or at least thrusting back into their subconsciousness, the plots of plays, novels, and short stories in order to see this drama of actuality in English history. Sisters of their craft were in even greater strength of numbers, and the practised eye might find them, or some of them, by the length of their cigarette-holders—one cannot write if smoke is curling into one's eyes—and by a slight defiance of fashion, or at least a touch of originality not devised by the Mussolinis of millinery.

There was the author of the latest "best seller", condemned to the flames of hell—and magnificently advertised—by that austere moralist, Mr. James Douglas. She was a young creature with her pretty back bare to her waist, looking as innocent as a German doll. There also was the young author of a book of reminiscences in which, with disconcerting candour, a lady of adventure revealed her love affairs with men who failed to remember her. Her dark, brooding eyes roved round the assembly on the top floor of Horridge's as though seeking for other victims, or searching for half-forgotten loves. As though in a solitude, she painted her lips again.

It was no solitude. Downstairs, Mr. Horridge's guests surged through the side entrance, and, after giving up their coats and cloaks, made their way to golden lifts, served by young women in long fawn coats with breeches to match, and Tudor caps of the same cloth, neat and charming to see. There were many peers and peeresses of ancient lineage or more modern creation, whose ancestors would have died of shame or apoplexy if a son or daughter of theirs had "gone into trade", but who, in more democratic days, had gratefully accepted this invitation from the most distinguished shopkeeper in London.

Some of them had already applied to him for jobs in any of his departments, on behalf of nephews and nieces who were anxious to earn three pounds a week, or less, after college careers and subsequent restlessness. Some of the nephews and nieces were there on the dancing-floor, fresh and elegant and amused. Surely a man might have thought, rashly, that all the prettiest women, the most flowerlike girls of England, were here to-night in the House of Horridge, unless he had remembered that there were thousands of others elsewhere waiting for the Election results, in the London clubs, in the great restaurants, in country houses and suburban homes.

Financial gentlemen with a slightly worried look because of bad trade and lean days on the Stock Exchange rubbed shoulders with poets, painters, architects, journalists, film stars, play producers, and types of all professions. There was even a Dean, smiling above a broad chest at pretty ladies who waggled fingers at him and said "Hullo, Dean!" as he shouldered his way towards them. Mr. Horridge, who stood receiving his guests with the dignity of

an American senator and the consciousness of power earned by hard work, personality, and a genius for the adventure of trade, had many friends that night.

Some of the visitors to the Big Shop, who knew their way about, or were eager to explore, went up by lifts to the roof garden, from which they could see a panorama of London below a grey sky flushed by the lights of the great city, and down into the deep gulf of Oxford Street, where the massed crowd turned white faces up to the boards which signalled the Election results.

Labour gain.

Every time those words flashed out a deep-throated roar of cheers rose from the street and shattered against the Corinthian pillars.

Up on the roof garden a girl with bare shoulders shivered and clutched the arm of a young man who was leaning over the balustrade, almost invisible in his blackness, except for the tiny glow of his cigarette.

“Very dramatic,” said the girl, “but I’m catching pneumonia!”

“Let’s drown our sorrows in drink, dear lady,” said the young man. “It looks as though Labour——” He stumbled against a small tree in a green tub, and said, “Holy Snakes!”

Down on the dancing-floor were many attractive-looking couples swaying to the rhythm of a jazz band. Through the pillars leading to another room covering an acre of floor space six hundred of the guests or more had found seats in front of a stage where a variety entertainment was provided by Mr. Horridge to entertain them while waiting for new results shouted through loud speakers and exhibited in columns of names and figures. Two performers, dressed like Italian organ-grinders, were making a loud din with drums and concertinas. One of them had a small monkey on his big drum. It peered with screwed-up eyes at all these cousins in the crowd, and at every bang of the big drum took off its cap.

The music faded out. The voice of the announcer bellowed “Labour gain!” The monkey scratched itself.

On the outer edge of the dancing-floor the young man who had been on the roof garden with the girl who had shivered stared with an expression of ironical amusement at the crowd and the dancing couples. The band was playing again, and a saxophone chuckled above the beat of drums.

“Nero fiddles while Rome burns,” he remarked brightly. “Come and do a foxtrot, Birdie.”

V

MOST of these people seemed to know each other. They moved about from one group to another, greeting friends, exchanging forecasts of the Election results, resuming conversations broken off an hour ago or a week ago.

But one man stood for some time without moving on the edge of the dancing-floor, watching the scene with a kind of puzzled smile. It was Commander Stephen Compton of the Malay States. He was in evening clothes like the rest, but they hung a little loosely on him, as though his body had shrunk after his last visit to the tailor.

Five weeks ago or less he had been sitting in a bungalow with a fellow who was quietly but steadily drinking himself to death. A Malay boy was lying on the mat at the open door, and beyond, out there in the luminous night, were little twinkling lights through open doors in the native kampong. Some of the Tamil coolies were playing their musical instruments to the interminable thudding of a drum. In the bungalow, open to the verandah, a beetle whirred round the Aladdin lamp with a suicidal mania and a loud droning buzz. A lizard which had crawled up one of the beams was catching mosquitoes. On the threshold, an old toad, as big as a kitten, blinked its beady eyes and thrust out an elongated tongue with its horned cone, catching innumerable flies with a small, sharp thud on the floor, caused as its tongue found each victim. The room reeked with the acrid smell of smoky rubber in the kampong and with the sweet scent of hibiscus blossoms on a hedge outside the verandah. Duggan, that poor drink-sodden assistant, who had made such a mess of things, was playing Patience and cursing his cards. Five weeks ago, or thereabouts. Now this scene at Horridge's.

The people, especially the young people, belonged to an England he didn't quite know. He had never learnt to know the post-war crowd really well. He didn't know what they were thinking about; what purpose they had, if any; what they were going to make of things. They were a good-looking lot on the whole. Amazingly beautiful some of these long-frocked damsels. The last time he had been in England they had worn frocks above their knees. But they didn't wear more clothes, above the waistline, than their darker sisters. The Malay women were more draped, as a rule, in their white sarongs, unless they were carrying rubber with one breast bare. It was astonishing that these English girls could carry on in a cold, damp climate without any protection for their lungs.

But it was a middle-aged crowd mostly, and this lonely man looked around for someone he might know. All their faces were unfamiliar to him. He was a stranger here. He felt like Rip Van Winkle. He couldn't even see old Bartlett, who might have introduced him to a friendly soul. Some of the people who passed glanced at him standing so still in the eddying swirl. Elderly women, some of them with jewels in their hair, looked back at him with a suddenly arrested interest, as though wondering whether they had known him in years now gone—a type of man they had liked in their girlhood, their lovers of the nineties. Even some of the younger women smiled over their white shoulders at him with friendly eyes. He looked interesting, this lean, bronzed-faced man with an empty sleeve. One of these girls nudged the boy by her side.

"Nice-looking man that! The sort of man I should like to make love to me. A sahib!"

"What, that old bird? Old enough to be your grandfather, my chicken!"

"Well, I didn't say he wasn't. I like men old enough to be my grandfather. They're more interesting than baby boys at Oxford."

Once Stephen Compton caught the glance of one of these girls and looked at her searchingly, and then came forward with a kind of eagerness.

"Surely it's Gracie? Grace Amersham!"

The girl laughed. She was a tall thing with straw-coloured hair and blue eyes.

"My mother," she said. "She'll be flattered when I tell her."

That was a hard knock for a man of fifty-two. It was twenty-five years since he had danced with Grace Amersham on the quarter-deck of a battleship in the Bosphorus off Constantinople.

"I beg your pardon," he said hastily. "I forgot—well—the flight of time, you know."

"Don't mention it. Horrid thought!" said the girl.

She smiled at him over her left shoulder as she moved away with a young man who looked bored.

Stephen Compton, late of the Malay States, had taken a knock. That mistake about mother and daughter was a sharp reminder of advancing age, and most unpleasant. Sometimes he felt preposterously young. Sometimes he had an idea that he looked ten years younger than his real age. Once or twice lately—well, more than that, to be strictly honest—he had wondered whether he wouldn't do well to marry again, if he could induce some friendly female to take an interest in him. On the boat there had been that vivacious lady who had relieved the boredom of a long voyage. The captain had chaffed him a bit

about it. One night on the boat-deck, under a sky full of stars, he had become sentimental and found the experience surprisingly pleasant for a one-armed man subject to malaria. She didn't seem to mind. She rather liked it, it seemed. She had made him forget his age by a charming flirtation which flattered his vanity, before she gave him her hand, with a little squeeze, as their boat crept into Tilbury Dock, and said, "Thanks so much for looking after me so nicely." Perhaps he had been rather foolish about it.

Now, in this Oxford Street shop on Election night, he was looking at all these young beauties with a kind of envy of the men who led them to the dancing-floor. How good to be young again, and to have the adventure of love—but not for him! He was a withered old bird. It was astounding that he should have made that mistake about Grace Amersham; skipping twenty-five years as though they were a day or two, and taking a girl for her own mother! A bit awkward really.

That kid must have thought him a doddering old fool. What a pity Madge was away on tour! He felt as lonely as death among all this crowd, not one of whom he knew.

VI

He felt a hand touch his arm, and a woman's voice spoke to him.

"Good heavens! Is that Stephen—or his good-looking ghost?"

He turned to look into the eyes of a lady who stood smiling at him. She was a lady with grey hair in which there was a little sparkle of diamonds. She had bare arms and shoulders above a black gown which made her look thin and tall. She had the complexion of a young girl, which must have been costly; and her dark eyes had not changed since this man Compton had known her in days before she paid for her complexion in an old house beyond Horsham in Sussex.

"My dear Helen!" he exclaimed. "I never dreamed of meeting you here. How absolutely splendid!"

She was still holding his arm, and gave it a little squeeze.

"I thought you were still in the wilds of Borneo, among the head hunters and dark horrors. What are you doing here, Steenie, among all these celebrities?"

He told her that old Bartlett had brought him, that he was just back from the Malay States, and that he had not yet seen his daughter Madge, who was away on tour.

"Can't we talk somewhere?" he said, as though he had been dumb until then. "I want you to tell me about everything."

"Everything?" She laughed—a pleasant contralto laugh—at this exaggeration. "Where shall I begin? What does this one-armed hero want to know from an ignorant woman?"

"Tell me about yourself," he suggested, "and about England. This Election, for instance. Is Labour going to win again? What are people thinking about over here? Are we going to scrape through? And about your husband, and your boy and girl, and old friends whom I haven't seen for five years, which seem like five hundred."

"God bless the dear man!" exclaimed the lady, much amused by all these questions. "What a lot he wants to know! Look, there are two chairs, Steenie. Grab them quickly before they're seized by some of those draggle-tailed hussies."

He strode over and took possession of the chairs, and placed one so that

she could sit with her back to a gilded pillar.

“Now,” he said, taking the other chair and crossing his long legs, “tell me. I’ve only been in England a few hours.”

“Poor old England!” said the lady whom he had called Helen, and who was the wife of Henry Lambert, a Treasury official.

“As bad as that?” asked Compton, with a smile about his thin lips. He didn’t feel so lonely now. It was good to see friendly eyes looking into his. Helen, he thought, was still attractive. Once—was it a thousand years ago?—he had kissed her behind a chintz curtain in an old manor house. Five years ago, which seemed like five hundred, he had dined with her at his cousin’s house in Regent’s Park, before going off to that distressful exile. He had asked her to keep an eye on Madge when she came down from Somerville.

“Of course, we’re all on the way to ruin,” she told him, with a quiet laugh, as though amused by this dreadful prospect. “What else is there to expect when the politicians of every party bribe the people with promises of bread and circuses? More doles and less work. Votes for flappers who ought to be spanked. That’s Mr. Baldwin’s little contribution to the world’s intelligence. Now they’re going to hand away the Empire. India is as good as gone. We can’t say ‘Bo’ to a goose in any part of the world. . . . Anything more you want to know about, Steenie?” Her eyes were filled with ironical humour.

He sat with his one arm over the back of a gilt chair and looked at her thoughtfully.

“I hope we haven’t lost our old spirit,” he said.

His glance roved round the enormous room at the top of Horridge’s, where the crowd was getting denser. It was nearly midnight, when the theatrical profession was showing up. Wasn’t that Leslie Henson, looking a bit older? . . . And surely that was Gladys Cooper?

“How’s your boy—Simon?” asked Compton.

Mrs. Lambert raised her hands and made a comical grimace.

“He worries Henry quite a lot. He’s gone into the City, and hates it, and he’s restless and nervy and in revolt against almost everything. I don’t know what to do about him.”

“Madge tells me she likes him,” said Compton. “She always mentions him in her letters. They seem to see each other a good deal.”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Lambert spoke that little word with a slight emphasis as though it conveyed a hidden meaning.

“Too much?” asked Compton. “Do you mean to say . . . ?”

“Well, you’ll get to know all about Madge,” said Mrs. Lambert. “You asked me to keep an eye on her. My dear man, a thousand eyes couldn’t follow her wayward nights. I hate to think of her in those theatrical lodging-houses, and travelling about with musical comedy companies. I can’t think why you allowed it.”

Commander Compton shrugged his shoulders and laughed uneasily.

“What could I do? Three thousand miles away! Besides, she has her head on her shoulders, if one can judge from her letters. She writes seriously at times about life and all that. Quite amazing!”

“These young people!” laughed Mrs. Lambert. “Inexplicable, Steenie. You and I didn’t care to think about the things they discuss quite freely.”

“Perhaps it’s better,” said Compton, with his thin-lipped smile. “Perhaps we weren’t so honest with ourselves, Helen.”

The announcer of the Election results recorded another victory for Labour. Bermondsey, South, Mrs. Pomeroy. Majority 7,384.

“That’s Monica,” said Mrs. Lambert. “Do you remember? She used to be Monica Heathcote before she married that brilliant husband—poor fellow! Now she’s gone Bolshie and all that.”

She looked curiously at Commander Compton, as though trying to remember something.

“By the way, didn’t you number her once among your affairs of the heart? I seem to remember an episode at Brighton in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. Nineteen hundred and six, to be precise.”

Compton flushed slightly and gave a good-natured laugh.

“I’ve seen her since then. She’s rather a pal of mine. Before the war I had to rescue her from a hostile crowd in the Caxton Hall—in the Suffragette days—and got a black eye, which didn’t look well on the deck of my destroyer.”

Mrs. Lambert smiled, and touched his empty sleeve.

“Always the gallant hero, Steenie! First in the fight for England, home, and beauty!”

Then she gave his sleeve a tug, and cried out in surprise.

“Well, I never did! Look at those two gipsies! There’s your Meg Merrilees and my Simon called Peter. I thought Madge was away on tour. And Simon told me he was going to bed, not caring a tinker’s cuss who won the Election, having a complete contempt for the politicians of every party.”

Compton sprang up from his chair before Mrs. Lambert finished these words, the end of which he did not hear.

Three yards away from him, behind a barrier of chairs and people, was his daughter Madge; and he felt his heart give a lurch, as a lover who sees his mistress after many days.

She was standing with a tall boy, looking towards the lighted board on which the Election results were posted. He could see three quarters of her face, slightly raised and lengthening the line of her pretty neck. She was in a rose-coloured frock, with bare arms and shoulders. She looked astoundingly grown up. A woman!

The boy with her—Helen Lambert's Simon—stood with his hands in his pockets, with his shoulders slightly hunched. He was a tall young man, with a delicate-looking face and a lock of hair falling over his forehead. He held a lighted cigarette, and nicked its ash on to the polished boards of Mr. Horridge's dancing-floor.

"Labour is doing rather well. I'm glad," said Madge Compton, and the words were heard by her father, who edged closer to her through the moving crowd. There was a large lady with a bare back who made an immovable barrier between them.

"Why?" asked Simon Lambert. "You surely don't think that Labour is any more honest than the others?"

"That's exactly what I do think, Simon," said Madge. "Besides, they may do something about unemployment."

These two young people were talking as though they were in a desert beyond the reach of human ears.

"They can't do anything about unemployment," said Simon Lambert. "It's caused by world forces and the general imbecility of nations, and the utter absurdity of a democratic system. But what's the good of talking politics? Isn't there somewhere in this blasted shop where I can kiss you after all this time?"

"You don't deserve a kiss," said Madge very calmly. "I've written four letters to you since I've been on tour, and you haven't answered by a postcard. Besides, didn't we have a furious quarrel before I went away?"

Simon Lambert shrugged his shoulders.

"Let the dead past bury its dead and be damned to it," he answered sulkily.

Madge laughed at this violence of speech, and then was startled by the touch of a hand on her bare arm.

"Hullo, Madge darling! When did you get back?"

Compton spoke quietly, trying to suppress the emotion in his voice. He had been trained in self-repression since he had first gone to Dartmouth as a small boy, but this sight of his daughter had given him a heart-beat.

She turned quickly, and stared at him for the tenth part of a second with raised eyebrows and an astonishment in her eyes, which changed suddenly to delight.

“Father!” she cried.

She was astounded to see him in Horridge’s. She hadn’t expected him back until to-morrow. She hadn’t even been to her rooms since she got back from the tour in time to come on here. She had changed into her evening frock in the lavatory of a train from Edinburgh!

“By Jove, it’s good to see you again!” said Compton.

He was absurdly shy of this young woman who happened to be his daughter. He hadn’t quite guessed that she had developed into such a beauty.

She presented her cheek to him and he kissed it lightly, a little embarrassed at this greeting in a crowd.

“Simon,” said Madge to the young man at her side, “you remember my father? He’s just back from the Malay.”

Simon Lambert wasn’t excited by the news. He looked a little bored about it.

“How do you do, sir?” he said, with fair civility.

“I saw you last time at Oxford,” said Compton. “Your mother is over there.”

Young Lambert nodded. “So I perceive. I was hoping she wouldn’t spot me in this disgusting crowd. Well, I suppose we’d better move in that direction.”

He moved in that direction, careless of the shoulder-blades of a thin old dame who looked like a duchess.

Madge Compton took her father’s arm and leaned against him.

“How jolly to have you back!”

“Home for good this time,” said Compton. “Thank God for that!”

“We’ll have some fun together,” said Madge. “When I’m not working. I’m really awfully glad to see you again, Father.”

“Thanks,” he said gratefully.

He led her in the direction of Helen Lambert, who was rebuking her son for having pretended that he wanted to go to bed when he was off to meet a pretty girl.

“It saved a lot of explanation,” said Simon carelessly. “Where’s the governor? Deploring the impending downfall of the British Empire, I suppose?”

“Wouldn’t Father make up well for a V.C. part?” said Madge, regarding him with a kind of professional admiration, as though casting a new play with Stephen Compton in the part of a naval officer with an empty sleeve and bronze-coloured grease-paint.

“Don’t be absurd, child!” said Mrs. Lambert, laughing at her. “And, Simon, as a punishment for sin, go and fetch me a cup of Mr. Horridge’s coffee. These rooms are as hot as—well, you know where!”

VII

COMMANDER COMPTON took his daughter home from Horridge's. As the taxi rattled through London at an hour after midnight there were still crowds in the streets and squares, thickest in Piccadilly Circus, where gangs of young men were getting rowdy and groups of girls were singing and cheering in shrill voices. To a man just back from Singapore and other distant places it was all rather astonishing and strange. Once or twice he stared through the window at new buildings which altered the skyline as he had remembered it. The tall mass of masonry above St. James's Park station, dazzling white through some flood-lighting effect, caught his eye for a moment. Rather good, he thought, but a bit fantastic—and Egyptian. He was more interested in this girl by his side—his daughter, of whom he still felt shy after five years' absence, when she had developed out of his knowledge.

"So you chucked Aunt Betty?" he remarked.

"Oh yes, Father. I had to save my own soul, you know. She was very kind, I must say, when I came down from Somerville, but I couldn't waste my young life taking her Chow for a walk and serving tea to South Kensington ladies. Paralysing!"

"Yes, I dare say. What happened about that job in a florist's shop? You didn't tell me why you gave it up."

Madge Compton laughed, and he had an idea that she was blushing slightly.

"Oh, well, that's a long story. There was a manager who became rather amorous. The situation became—absurd!"

"How do you like this stage career? Doesn't the same situation arise sometimes for a pretty girl?"

He held her hand and put it to his lips.

"Oh, probably. So far I've been with a nice crowd. And, Father, I'm very keen on it. I believe I have the makings of an actress. Quite seriously, I mean. Mr. Keening—that's a producer I know—says he's going to give me a chance in a straight play at the Royalty. Isn't that marvellous?"

Compton agreed that it might be marvellous, but he felt a little dejected about it. If Madge went on acting he wouldn't see as much of her as he had hoped.

“It sounds good,” he said, keeping the disappointment out of his voice.

They were rattling along the King’s Road, towards Church Street, Chelsea. The street was empty now, except for a few stragglers and a policeman turning his bull’s-eye lantern on to locks and bolts.

“Do you like your rooms, Madge?” asked Compton.

“Yes. They’re rather sweet, Father.”

“And that stable companion of yours? What sort of a girl? Her voice sounded pleasant over the telephone this evening.”

“Oh, Jean is a heroine. Jean Macgregor, with ginger hair and freckles, and all the virtues of the Scotch. She designs the advertisements and looks after my morals, and does the housekeeping. She’s the terror of all the tradespeople—and keeps a crippled brother up in Edinburgh. You’ll love her, Father.”

“She sounds attractive,” said Compton. “I’d like to love her, and I’m glad she looks after your morals!”

“Oh, they need a bit of watching,” said Madge carelessly. “But I give her the slip sometimes.”

He held her hand clasped in his own. He had been a lonely man without love.

“I shall have to get to know you,” he said. “Five years make a difference to a young woman of your age. Glad to have me back, Madge?”

“Delighted,” said Madge. “It’s going to be nice having a father somewhere handy in case of trouble. And here we are at my slum dwelling.”

“Well, good night, my dear. When can I see you—to-morrow?”

He stood with his hat off, waiting for her good-night kiss. It seemed rough on him that he had to go back to a lonely club.

“Oh, come up for half an hour,” said Madge. “It’s quite early yet, and I dare say we can rake out a drop of whisky for you.”

It was nearly half past one, but Compton could not resist this invitation to his daughter’s rooms on the night of his homecoming.

VIII

WHILE he paid off the taxi, she opened the front door of an old house in Church Street with a latchkey, which she took from her rose-coloured vanity bag.

“Mind the stairs, Father,” she warned him. “There’s no light unless you strike a match.”

He struck a match, but it went out on the next landing, to the amusement of his daughter, who suppressed her laughter and whispered to him:

“There are some queer people in these rooms, Father! They get a bit fractious sometimes when my friends stay late and indulge in Bacchanalian orgies.”

Compton hoped she might be exaggerating about those orgies, and wondered what kind of friends she knew.

“Great Jupiter!” he said, burning his fingers with another match.

Madge laughed, and caught hold of him.

“Here, take my hand, Father. Only six more stairs. There’s a Russian dancer behind that door. Don’t wake her up, poor dear. She might think the Bolshies had broken in!”

She opened her own door, and as she did so an enormous voice roared into the passage:

“Battersea. Labour. Saklatvala. Majority . . .”

“Mercy!” cried Madge. “They’re still listening-in to those Election results! Jean is entertaining some of her friends or—worse still—some of mine.”

“Perhaps I’d better go,” said Compton nervously.

“They’re quite harmless, Father. They won’t bite an elderly gentleman.”

An elderly gentleman? Yes, he supposed so. That was how he appeared to his daughter, though he felt so preposterously young sometimes.

She led him by the hand into a room with panelled walls, under a ceiling that had not been whitewashed for a long period of history. A gas-fire was burning in an old-fashioned grate, and in front of it was a sofa on which a girl with red hair and freckles sat in a blue silk dressing-gown, which showed her bare feet in slippers. Deep in a low chair, turned sideways to the sofa, sprawled a young man in a dinner-jacket with his trousers pulled up to reveal a bit of leg above each sock. A bottle of whisky, almost empty, a siphon of soda, and a

glass stood on a threadbare carpet within reach of his left arm. On a little round table with one leg stood the instrument from which that voice was bellowing Election results.

“Hullo, children!” cried Madge. “Turn off that loud speaker, if you have any love for me.”

The girl in the blue silk dressing-gown turned her head and raised her eyebrows.

“Hullo, Madge! I didn’t expect you for hours and hours. Glad to see you so nice and early!”

Her eyes turned towards Compton, and she gave him a friendly nod, as though not at all surprised that Madge should bring a stranger home at half past one at night. Perhaps she guessed that it was the long-lost father.

The young man in the deep chair roused himself, stood up, walked towards the loud speaker, turned it off, and then looked at Madge with a kind of amused adoration.

“I will give you the keys of heaven,” he said, as though she reminded him of an old song.

“Accepted gladly,” said Madge. “This is my father. Jean, come and behave like a lady. My father from the Malay States. Father, this is Jean Macgregor from Edinburgh. One of her ancestors fought for Bonnie Prince Charlie—unless she lies to us.”

Jean Macgregor held out her hand and smiled at Compton.

“We’ve talked to each other before,” she said. “You’ll find Madge a bit of a handful.”

Madge brought forward the young man. He was a tall young man, with a square-cut face and a cleft in his chin, and very broad shoulders under his dinner-jacket.

“Father, this is Edward P. Feldmann, Junior, of New York City. Recently of Harvard and Oxford, and now at a loose end. He speaks perfectly good English when he tries. He rowed for Magdalen and was three lengths behind.”

“How do you do, sir?” inquired young Mr. Feldmann of New York City, in perfectly good English, carefully avoiding that “Pleased to meet you” which he had discarded under Oxford influence.

Madge gave a cry of dismay.

“Oh, Father, they’ve drunk to the very dregs of Haig and Haig. They’ve been having a drunken orgy while we’ve been watching the fate of England! Disgusting of you, Edward.”

“Sorry,” said Edward, smiling, without a trace of remorse. “You were such a long time coming.”

As she stood in front of him with mock indignation, he took hold of a rosebud on her frock and looked at her white arms and shoulders as though they pleased him.

“You’re very eighteenth-century to-night,” he told her.

Jean Macgregor went to a cupboard, thrust her hand behind some disorderly books, and produced a full bottle of whisky, which she placed on the table.

“Hidden reserves,” she remarked blandly.

“Oh, you’re wonderful, Jean!” exclaimed Madge, pulling herself free from that rosebud. “Father dear, do sit down and make yourself at home. Your first night in the old country—how strange you must feel!”

He felt very strange, and a kind of intruder in these rooms belonging to his daughter and this Scotch lassie with the red hair who had a humorous face which he liked. It was astonishing to find Madge as a bachelor girl, perfectly independent, wonderfully self-possessed, and radiant at half past one in the morning, after a long journey and that scene at Horridge’s. He followed her with his eyes as she moved about the room, picking up cards and letters to glance at them with interest or indifference.

“Anything from Mr. Keening?” she asked Jean.

She had made her own friends while he was away. He would have to get to know them. That boy Simon, son of Helen Lambert, was obviously “sweet” on her in a sulky way. He had wanted to know where in that “blasted shop” he could kiss her. Cheek! This young American seemed a nice fellow, and a good type. He had rowed for Magdalen. Well, that was in his favour. Feldmann. It sounded German, which was not so much in his favour perhaps, in the mind of a man who had lost an arm at Jutland. Not that Compton felt any grudge about that. The boy looked at Madge as though he adored her, which seemed very probable. She was adorably pretty, with her brown hair encircled by a plait, and big brown eyes which glinted with amusement, and a beautiful flush of colour like an apple-cheeked country wench, though her skin was delicate and her shoulders very white. She was almost distressingly like her mother as a young girl. It was as though Phyllis, poor darling, had come back to him, as when he had first seen her at a dance on a battleship off Gibraltar. No wonder some producer fellow thought she would be a success on the stage. But he would have to wean her away from that if possible. He might take her abroad for a bit, to the Riviera, Paris, Florence, Rome, before he bought a little place in the country and set up house with her—unless she would feel too bored with

him!

She came and sat on the floor by him and put her head against his knees, which was very nice of her.

“Do you think I might have a teeny-weeny drop of that fire-water?” she asked. “And Edward Feldmann, Junior, give me a cigarette, please.”

He gave her a cigarette out of a case which looked almost too rich, being of gold with the arms of Magdalen thereon.

“My people are in town,” he told her. “They want to see you. Do you think you could bear the strain?”

“I’m a good little actress,” said Madge. “They’re wallowing in wealth, I suppose?”

The young American shrugged his shoulders.

“They’ve taken a flat in Grosvenor House. I dare say they can afford it. That doesn’t worry me at all.”

“No,” said Madge. “You won’t worry, will you, as long as Feldmann, Senior, pays the price of your wild oats—at five dollars an oat?”

“Oh, more than that!” cried young Mr. Feldmann.

“Father,” said Madge, “these Americans are disgustingly rich, aren’t they?—while the rest of the world is poverty-stricken. How do you think they do it? What’s their little secret?”

As a matter of fact, that was a question which Compton had often asked himself while reading *The Times*, five or six weeks old, among the rubber trees of Malaya. He was not ready with an answer.

It was answered by young Feldmann with a sense of irony.

“We do it on the hire purchase system and the philosophy of Henry Ford. Quite easy, dear lady.”

“Tell these children about Singapore and Penang and Borneo, Father,” said Madge. “Tell them about that pet toad; and about your Dyak servant who was killed by a snake; and the Chinese junks going down the river; and the melancholy music of the gamelan, played all night long by soulful Javanese.”

Compton was pleased that she had read his letters and remembered them.

“I’m afraid all that is rather boring,” he answered. “Besides, it’s time you young people went to bed, isn’t it?”

In his heart he hoped they didn’t want to go to bed. It was wonderful being with Madge again.

“I’d like to hear about the toad,” said Jean Macgregor.

“And it might be good for me if I knew more about a Dyak,” said young

Feldmann.

They were being kind to an elderly gentleman, and he fell into the trap and told them something about Singapore and Penang and Borneo—a good deal about Borneo—until he noticed that Madge's head was dropping against his knee and that she had fallen fast asleep. Young Feldmann, on a low stool with his back against the wall, was watching her with a faint smile about his lips. Jean Macgregor was curled up on the sofa with her bare feet turned to the gas-fire. Perhaps she was asleep too.

Compton was annoyed with himself, and distressed about Madge.

"She's asleep," he said to young Feldmann. "Hadn't we better steal away? Do you live hereabouts?"

"Downstairs," said Edward Feldmann, Junior. "But I should let her sleep. It's quite nice for her."

Madge stirred, conscious, perhaps, that her father's voice had ceased its monologue.

"Don't be silly, Simon!" she exclaimed, and then opened her eyes and looked puzzled. Then she became really awake and looked up at her father.

"Oh, I'm sorry! It was awfully nice hearing about Borneo, Father."

"My dear child," he exclaimed, "I talked you to sleep, and I can't forgive myself. It's terribly late, and you ought to be in bed. All of you."

"Well, that's an idea," said Madge. She raised herself and stood up and held on to her father's empty sleeve.

"Clear out, Edward P. Feldmann, Junior. Father says I've got to go to bed, and I'm an obedient daughter."

Young Feldmann rose, and announced that he would see her father downstairs in case he broke his neck without a guide.

"Happy dreams," said he. "Only I hope it won't be Simon next time. Why Simon? A plague on Simon!"

"What *is* this American brat chattering about?" asked Madge, with an air of annoyance which was not all sham.

Compton put his arm round her.

"Good night, my dear. I'm sorry I talked too much. It's the effect of being home again and finding a marvellous daughter."

"It's splendid having you again, Father. Oh, I'm as sleepy as an ooloo!"

She put her cheek against his and then kissed him.

Jean Macgregor came to life and lit another cigarette. Young Feldmann conducted Compton downstairs by the aid of a cigarette lighter, guarded from

the draught with both his hands. He jerked his elbow towards a door on the right of the hall.

“That’s my wigwam,” he explained. “Good night, Mr. Compton.”

IX

COMMANDER COMPTON left the house in Church Street, Chelsea, and walked back to his club in St. James's Square at a steady pace. There was hardly a soul in the streets now, except a policeman here and there to whom he said good-night, receiving a friendly rejoinder, with the word "sir". Splendid fellows, and good to see them again.

It was very good to walk in London again after equatorial heat and abominable exile. The shops in the King's Road were shuttered, and the living-rooms above them—flats now—were in darkness, except for one or two where lights were still burning behind the window-blinds. A cat slunk against his leg as he stopped to light a cigar, and he stooped down to tickle it behind the ears. It was nice to see a London cat! Across the world, in a wooden bungalow, a Borneo toad would be missing the man who had made friends with it. Some heavy lorries rattled through Sloane Square and then towards Eaton Square, taking vegetables or milk to Covent Garden, he supposed. It was only in exile that a man knew how much he loved the old country. He had yearned for it with a kind of passion. Now he was back again for good, walking the old pavements, lit by the old lampposts. . . .

Eaton Square. . . . He had gone to parties as a boy in one of those stucco-fronted houses. He had worn an Eton jacket, and his ears had stuck out above the white collar. Funny little devil he must have looked! Some of these people in Eaton Square would be hard hit by the income tax. It was rather astonishing that they could still keep up such big houses, what with death duties and all the rest of it. Probably they had got rid of half their servants and sold their country houses. It was democracy's day out, but they hadn't made a good job of it. There must be a lot of misery in mean streets, in spite of the dole, or because of it. If they could get back to work, it would be better for them than the dole. But everything seemed to be slipping. World trade was bad everywhere. The War had left a trail of ruin because of all the debts. England was in pretty poor shape. Poor old England! Nobody wanted its coal, or its iron, or its cotton, or its shipping—in anything like the same quantities. Perhaps the old country was going downhill. Helen Lambert said the Empire was going. "We're all on the way to ruin," she had said, laughing as though it were a kind of joke. Most people talked like that nowadays. Perhaps if they didn't believe it so much it wouldn't happen.

Surely what was wanted was a new leadership and a call to the old spirit

which he believed was still in the blood and bones of the people. Those girls at Horridge's looked so wonderfully vital. Some of their young men looked as though they had some stuffing in them. But they were all a bit bewildered by a changing world—and no wonder!

Out in Malay he couldn't make head or tail to it. He had tried to think out the causes of this world slump and to get the hang of things. What was happening in Russia, for instance? What was going to happen in India? And China? Why was the United States so amazingly prosperous when other nations were so stricken? Madge had asked that question, and he hadn't been able to answer it. It was difficult for the younger crowd to see a straight line ahead when middle-aged men like himself were so utterly befogged. An elderly gentleman! Madge had called him that, not knowing that she had stabbed his vanity. He didn't feel like an elderly gentleman. He refused to feel like an elderly gentleman.

That woman on the boat—Mrs. Merrington—had made love to him. He was still young enough to interest a pretty woman, thank God! Well, that was silly. Now he had Madge. . . .

He passed Buckingham Palace, and looked up at the flagstaff. Yes, there was the Royal Standard, hanging limp. The sentries were pacing outside the gates. Two policemen stood motionless, silhouetted blackly under the brilliant lamps.

He raised his hand to his hat in a naval salute. God save the King! God save old England! He felt emotional at the sight of that Standard hanging limp above the palace. He belonged to the old school. He was an old-fashioned type. He had lost an arm at the battle of Jutland. He believed in tradition and loyalty. Yes, after all, he was an elderly gentleman! No getting away from that.

The night porter in his club in St. James's Square nodded to him over the desk.

"I suppose Labour will get into office," he remarked. "It's the strongest party as far as the results show. Well, I don't suppose they'll do much 'arm, sir, one way or the other."

"I hope not," said Compton.

He went to his little bedroom. He felt lonely again on his first night back in the old country.

X

COMMANDER COMPTON had breakfast in his club, with *The Times* propped against the toast-rack. The Election results were in the first column, and the leading article took a philosophical view of the situation. Labour, undoubtedly, would be called upon to form a Government. There need be no apprehension with regard to the continuity of foreign policy under Mr. MacDonald's leadership. There was a difficult task in front of him. . . .

Compton looked over the top of his paper and observed his surroundings. Nothing had changed since he had been away. The heavy mahogany chairs stood in the same places. The silver plate dishes on the sideboard gave the same cheerful gleam as when he had departed five years ago. The head waiter, old Birdseed, who had been there for thirty years, had said good morning to him as though he had not noticed any lapse of time since they had last met. He had the same asthmatical cough. And there in the window was old Admiral Savage, putting saccharine into his coffee to ward off diabetes, precisely as he had always done at breakfast time since Compton had been a member of the club.

"Good morning, young fellow!" he had said cheerily when Compton had caught his eye and nodded to him.

Half a dozen other members straggled in to breakfast and sat behind *The Times*, reading the political news and comments. Compton knew them all by sight, and one to speak to. There was no conversation among them, and the only speech to which they gave utterance was requests for devilled kidneys or marmalade from the silent waiters.

Compton smiled to himself. It was rather marvellous, he thought, how the old tradition remained in English character and life, in spite of a changing world. Perhaps this club, and others in the neighbourhood, were its last strongholds. Everywhere else it seemed to be slipping or abandoned. That had been an astonishing scene last night at Horridge's. He had felt bewildered and very much a stranger in the land until he met Helen Lambert. Then he had had the marvellous luck to meet Madge. When was he going to see her again? She had been too tired at the end to arrange anything like that.

He was agreeably surprised when a telegram was brought him, almost while this thought was in his head.

Meet me Palace Chambers Shaftesbury Avenue one-fifteen to-day Madge.

"Any answer, sir?" asked the page.

"No, that's all right. No answer."

It was marvellously all right, and Madge must have got up very early after her late night to send that message.

She had sent it off at eight-thirty. How extraordinarily kind of her, he thought. She must have known that he would be desperately anxious to see her again. Eight-thirty! Why, she couldn't have had more than six hours' sleep. Not enough for a girl of her age. He would have to look after her beauty sleep. If she came to live with him in the country—that house of dreams—he would pack her off to bed before eleven. . . .

He had four hours to put in before one-fifteen, and the prospect seemed long because of his eagerness for that appointment. He was good-humoured when Admiral Savage accosted him in the smoking-room and seemed inclined for conversation.

"Well, young fellow, I seem to have missed you lately. Been down in the country?"

"As far as Borneo," said Compton.

"Bournemouth, eh?" said the old gentleman. "A dull place, don't you think? I prefer Broadstairs. More air, you know. Keeps you fit! Not that I can complain; I'm getting on for eighty, and have never had a day's illness, barring a tendency to diabetes. About time to prepare for my last voyage, eh? Well, I've had a good innings and I shan't be sorry to go. England is not the same since the War. They've been cutting down a lot of trees round my place in Kent. It's these Labour fellows. They want to alter everything and drag down everything. They talk of allowing mixed bathing in Hyde Park—that fellow Lansbury. Good God, sir! Did you ever hear of such a thing? My dear mother would have fainted at the thought. Now they're going to govern us. Bolsheviks, Pacifists, Socialists, Trade Unionists, as His Majesty's Government, holding the seals of office. A pretty prospect, my dear Compton! Why, they'll tax us out of existence and establish the Dictatorship of the Proletariat on the Moscow model. I tremble to think what will happen to this club."

He looked across the smoking-room, as though seeing the invasion of the Reds, looting cigars and cutting the cloth on the billiard tables, and billeting their families in all parts of the club like a slum tenement.

Compton smiled at the old man. He had once been his flag lieutenant.

“I don’t think it will go as far as that, sir. There’s no spirit of revolution in the English people. They believe in law and order.”

The old Admiral laid a hand on his shoulder. “I hope you’re right, my boy. I confess I don’t understand the present crowd. Can’t make ’em out. They don’t seem to believe in anything. They mock at everything I respect. My grandchildren tell me I’m an Early Victorian. I tell them if I hadn’t been, they wouldn’t sleep safe in their beds or know the meaning of the word ‘liberty’. They don’t know what to say to that. They’ve no answer ready. Not bad, eh? Not bad! Remember that, Compton. If anybody says you’re a Victorian and a reactionary, you say, ‘If I hadn’t been, you wouldn’t sleep safe in your beds, my dears!’ ”

He chuckled with a mirth that was becoming a little senile. Compton reckoned up the difference between their ages. Well, nearly thirty years. He still had a fair span—with luck—before he began to show signs of senility. Still, time was creeping on. . . . Fifty-two!

XI

COMPTON disengaged himself from the Admiral's conversation and walked through St. James's Square, up Duke Street into Jermyn Street, and so to Piccadilly. Not much difference outwardly since his last walk that way. There were the same old shops in which he had been accustomed to buy his boots and ties and socks as a young naval man, particular about his appearance when out of uniform. He stood staring at some coloured prints of hunting scenes. He had bought a set of them for his rooms in Charles Street before he married Phyllis. His sister Beatrice had them now, unless she had sold them or given them away to one of his nieces.

It is queer how old memories come to a man who has been absent from London for some time. He remembered standing outside this very shop and being accosted by a pretty girl who said she was the daughter of a clergyman. He could remember her appearance as though it were yesterday. She was wearing a brown dress with a floppy hat. She had fluffy fair hair and blue eyes. She said her name was Joyce. Extraordinary remembering it after thirty years!

And it was to Stewart's at the corner of Bond Street, where he now stood, that he took Phyllis to tea the day he proposed to her. He had two boiled eggs for his tea because he had come up from Portsmouth in a train without a luncheon car. Phyllis was frightfully shy, and he thought her the prettiest thing God had ever created, and before putting her into a hansom cab—he was going to dine with her people that night—he kissed her gloved hand, and she blushed as though he had embraced her in the middle of Piccadilly.

For a few minutes Compton stood outside Stewart's, motionless. Taxis and motor-cars of all types were streaming in a tide of traffic towards the Circus. He was passed on the pavement by a hurrying crowd of people unknown to him, but he saw ghosts among them: women whom he had met here before the War, pretty and elegant and gay; men who had been pals of his when they were in their twenties and thirties. They had gone to the Alhambra and the old Empire on many a night. They had dined at Frascati's and the Café Royal. Some of them had flirted with Phyllis in a friendly way, with no harm meant. Some of them had had rooms in Jermyn Street or Duke Street, and had crowded them with little parties after theatres and suppers, turning on gramophone records—rather new then—and standing drinks to young naval men and boys in line regiments with undeveloped hair on their upper lips, and under orders for India.

What had become of all that crowd? Most of them seemed to have gone. The War had accounted for many of them. Others were on the Riviera as retired colonels. Some of his contemporaries in the Navy had been “axed” after the War and were out in Kenya, or farming in a small way at home, or running garages. One of them had turned his country house into an hotel for week-enders. Another had started a boarding-house in Ebury Street. This crowd in Piccadilly, all in a hurry to get somewhere, was not his crowd. No familiar face passed him. No friendly hand was raised to say “Welcome back, old boy!” . . . Until, by an odd chance, at the corner of Arlington Street, by the Ritz Hotel, one of these people in a hurry—a woman—turned quickly, came back, and put her hand on his arm.

“Stephen! Good heavens! When did you get back? How thin and fit you look!”

“My dear Monica! By all the gods, it’s wonderful to meet you like this! I thought you were down in darkest Bermondsey. Aren’t you one of the new Labour members?”

It was Mrs. Pomeroy who had been elected to South Bermondsey, according to the results posted up in Horridge’s. Helen Lambert had spoken about her.

She looked a little worn and worried, he thought, but still with more than a trace of that beauty, spiritual and elusive, to which he had first given homage twenty-five years ago when she was a girl of eighteen.

She stood smiling at him with searching eyes, as though measuring any change that had happened in him since their last meeting.

“Yes,” she said, “I’m an M.P., and rather frightened about it! But it was great fun fighting the Election. They’ve been wonderfully kind to me in Bermondsey.”

“Why are you on the wrong side?” asked Compton. “I can’t forgive you.”

His eyes showed that he had already forgiven her, though he might be puzzled.

“I have an idea I am on the right side,” she answered, laughing for a moment. “I’m on the side of the underdogs, and the dwellers in mean streets, who have a pretty rough deal of it now in a time of unemployment.”

“Aren’t they on the dole?” asked Compton.

She smiled at him again.

“If they can get it. Do you want them to starve?”

“It’s all very bewildering,” said Compton. “I can’t get the hang of things. . . . Do you still play Chopin?”

She raised her gloved hands and laughed.

“Not often. I’m a working woman. Up to the neck in my constituency. Poor relief. Babies’ crèches. Women’s clubs. Slum dwellings. Committee meetings.”

“Too bad!” said Compton. “You look tired, my dear. You’re working too hard.”

“It’s worth it,” she told him. “One gets into touch with the real things of life, and the real people. In the front line trenches. . . . How’s your pretty Margaret? I haven’t seen her since she came down from college.”

“I came back last night,” said Compton. “I’ve just had a glimpse of her. She’s acting for a bit, and keen on it. An amazingly attractive young woman who has grown up beyond recognition, so that I feel shy of her.”

“How nice for her to have you back!” exclaimed Mrs. Pomeroy.

“She has her own friends,” said Compton, as though not quite sure that it was nice for Madge to have him back.

Mrs. Pomeroy seemed to understand.

“Oh, of course! She’ll want her own life.”

“I want her comradeship,” said Compton. “I’ve been craving for it. I’ve been damned lonely, you know—looking after coolies in Malay forests.”

He was not whining. He spoke the words with a laugh, as though making a joke of that exile.

“We’re holding up the traffic,” said Mrs. Pomeroy. “I must fly.”

He held her hand and prevented her from flying.

“When can I come and see you? Are you still in the same flat? Can you spare a cup of tea now and then to an ancient ghost?”

She looked doubtful about that cup of tea.

“One evening,” she suggested. “The same address. I’m frightfully busy, but I put papers on one side when the clock strikes ten.”

“You mean you don’t want me to come?” he asked, with a comical air of dejection.

“I mean I want you to come. I shall love you to come.”

He raised her gloved hand and touched it with his lips.

She smiled at him with a flutter of eyelashes and fled from him towards a crawling taxi, which she hailed.

Compton strode on slowly towards Leicester Square, a little emotional after this meeting with Mrs. Pomeroy, whom he called Monica in his mind and

heart. After Phyllis's death—poor darling—she had been very kind. She and Pomeroy had had him round to their flat in Westminster whenever he liked to drop in. She had played Chopin to him, exquisitely. Beyond all words, he had admired her courage and devotion to Pomeroy when he was stricken with a painful and fatal disease, which had ended a brilliant career at the Bar—and her happiness. Frightfully tragic! But she hadn't let this tragedy weaken her spirit. She was all spirit and courage, as he had seen in those old Suffragette days when she went to prison for her convictions. He had utterly disagreed with her—he had hated those militant women as a rule—but Monica had almost converted him to her belief in Women's Rights, and he had had the luck to rescue her from the brutality of a mob, as he would have done for any woman, of course.

He reckoned up her age. Eighteen, twenty-five years ago. Forty-three! Well, she didn't look a day older than thirty-eight. Her eyes were still humorous and lit by an inner flame of the spirit. She had gone over to Labour. He was sorry for that, not believing in the Labour programme, which seemed to him the half-way house to anarchy; but of course she was doing it with humanitarian ideas, and because she loved the underdogs—"the dwellers in mean streets", as she called them. She hadn't been very warm in her invitation to him, but he would take a chance one evening. She was one of his old crowd. He couldn't afford to let her go. . . .

XII

It was astonishing how slowly time passed before his engagement with Madge in Shaftesbury Avenue. He walked as far as St. Paul's and went into the Cathedral and sat down on one of the chairs, gazing up at the twinkling mosaics round the dome, and looking ahead at the distant choir.

A lot of history had passed in this place since old Wren's days. There had been prayers for victory here during the War, and other wars, half forgotten. Had they had any effect? Did God take sides in international quarrels? But they had comforted the living, these prayers, and given courage to women whose sons went out to the ordeal of battle.

Out in Malay he had thought a good deal about God and prayer, and survival after death. Once or twice—more than that—he had had a queer sense of being in touch with the Infinite, if those words meant anything. It was the effect of loneliness and introspection, and the mystery of Nature out East: immense, unfathomable, and terrible. God, the Eternal Spirit, the Great Cause, seemed utterly indifferent to human creatures out there. They died like flies when the forces of Nature turned against them in flood or storm. And yet sometimes he had seemed to be aware of some divine meaning behind all this conflict and surge of life. It must mean something beyond mere accident. What meaning?

What meaning? He had tried to puzzle it out under the stars, or alone in his bungalow, with tropical rain beating down upon its roof week after week in the wet season. Some of those modern books which reached him now and then denied survival after death, and mocked at any direct revelation between God and Man. They substituted a humanistic philosophy of service to the commonweal, in place of the old faith in a personal God Who would give eternal rewards to those who loved him. Well, perhaps this loss of faith in the old religion of sacrifice and love, with reward for virtue and punishment for evil, was what made the modern world so discontented and unhappy. If there were no life to come, the comforts and pleasures of this life became more important. Everybody wanted a bigger share here and now, with more wages for less work, and more profits at other men's expense. Individuals and nations were greedy for luxury. They drove the machine faster to get more wealth. The masters of the machine were driving it so fast that they were over-producing everything, while millions lacked everything. . . .

Too much rubber! That was why he was back in London, sitting in St.

Paul’s Cathedral waiting for Madge. . . .

It was all very bewildering. The more one loved, the more one suffered, sometimes. That was strange! Was there any such thing as happiness, or was that one of the illusions? Perhaps self-forgetfulness was the secret of happiness. He would like to serve old England somehow. It was not enough to have lost an arm. He was still young enough to go on working in some kind of job, for England’s sake. Perhaps that was egotism, the need of asserting one’s own personality. . . . Well, he would try to be of use to Madge. . . . Time to be moving in her direction.

He walked back from St. Paul’s, and asked a policeman the whereabouts of Palace Chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue. It seemed to be the headquarters of dramatic art and theatrical agencies, as he observed for half an hour or more, pacing up and down in quarter-deck style, arousing the suspicion of a young bobby on point duty, and the interest of certain young women who had the impudence—or the kindness, considering his age—to give him the glad eye in passing.

He watched the types who went into the building where Madge was rehearsing. Perhaps these girls used too much lipstick. He was inclined to think so. But they came hurrying up in a businesslike way, without any of that self-conscious languor and assumed haughtiness which he remembered as a young naval man when he had waited now and then at the stage door of the Gaiety, with other officers who had the honour of knowing some of the beauties of the chorus. Some of the elder men and women looked as if their luck were out. They looked worn and anxious. Perhaps the Pictures had taken away their chance of a weekly wage, or perhaps there is not much chance nowadays for actresses who have lost the first bloom of youth. One of them spoke to Commander Compton as he stood on the steps looking out for Madge.

“Ghastly, isn’t it, hanging about like this, and always the same answer of ‘Nothing doing’? What’s your luck? About the same, I suppose?”

Commander Compton lifted his hat to this woman whose fur coat looked the worse for wear, and whose eyes had a hunted expression, he thought.

“I’m not looking for an engagement,” he told her in his courteous way. “I’m waiting for my daughter. She’s rehearsing in there.”

“Oh, sorry, I thought you were one of us. Well, if I had a daughter I would rather she drowned than belonged to this profession. Of course it’s not so bad when you’re young and pretty. A Tiller girl?”

“No,” said Compton. “She’s rehearsing for a play at the Royalty.”

“Oh! Very distinguished! Sorry I bored you.”

“Not at all,” said Compton, lifting his hat again. He felt very sorry for her.

She looked tired and rather ill.

Madge was half an hour late. He was almost giving her up, when he felt her hand on his arm.

“Sorry, Father! Here I am at last. Where are we going to have lunch?”

XIII

THEY had lunch at an Italian restaurant in Jermyn Street which Compton knew of old. It was smartened up somewhat, but he recognized one of the waiters and was pleased when the man remembered him beamingly.

"Not been 'ere lately, sir. One year, two year?"

"It's your empty sleeve, Father!" said Madge. "They remember you with hero worship."

"I was hoping it was on account of my *beaux yeux*," he answered lightly. "By Jove, my dear, fancy being able to sit opposite you at a little luncheon-table! It's what I used to dream about."

He helped her off with her coat and stood looking at her with admiration and emotion.

"They'll think we're lovers, Father, if you gaze at me like that!" said Madge, laughing at him. "They'll think you're an elderly amorist taking out a little chorus girl."

"Here, not so much of that 'elderly'!" said Compton. "I was hoping they would take us for brother and sister."

He felt gay and happy in this realization of hoped-for hours. He found his way about the menu card, and ordered a nice little meal with some light wine.

"Do you know this spot?" he asked when this was done to his satisfaction.

"Yes, I've been here with Simon," she told him.

He made a mental note of that. He intended to ask her later if there was anything between her and that boy Simon. Helen had hinted at something of the sort.

"Tell me things," he said. "I want to know all about you. Five years is an awful gap between father and daughter."

"Oh, but I wrote," she answered. "I was a very good correspondent, Father, you must admit."

He admitted it. But she had left out lots of things he wanted to know. She had not mentioned her friends much, or the little details of private life. And once she had left him nearly six weeks without a letter. He had been quite anxious.

"Yes," said Madge, "I'm sorry about that. It was when I came down from

Oxford. Things were rather difficult at the time.”

“In what way, my dear?”

“Oh, well, I’ll tell you about that later. Mental and moral crises, and so forth.”

She smiled at him and searched his eyes, as though wondering what sort of a man was this father she hadn’t seen for five years—five important years of her life, when she had grown from girlhood to womanhood.

He didn’t press her about that. All in good time. He wouldn’t try to invade the sanctuaries which every girl must have, until she invited him to peep inside.

She answered his questions about relations with whom he would have to get in touch again. Aunt Emily, his eldest sister, was worried about her girls, who failed to get married. One of them, Kitty, had taken a job in a hat shop. The other, Judy, was a typist in a City office.

“Pretty marvellous!” said Compton. “Their father was slightly overconscious of his ancient lineage. One of the Furnivals of Sussex. One of his ancestors was killed at Crecy—as he was at Ypres. Now one of his daughters is a shop girl!”

“There’s nothing in that,” said Madge. “Half my friends are shop girls or business girls of one sort or another. We meet after working hours in evening frocks, which disguise our daily drudgery. I know the daughter of an impoverished peer who serves in the bargain basement of a big store. There are lots like it. Why not?”

Commander Compton considered that “why not”. It meant, of course, that there had been a social revolution since the War, bloodless but relentless. The old quality, as they used to be called, were being pulled down by taxation. They had given up their big mansions for small flats or little dolls’ houses in streets which used to be beyond the pale. Anyhow, their nephews and nieces were no longer privileged, in the old sense of the word, dropping easily into soft jobs, or living on adequate allowances until they inherited wads of money from ancient aunts or benevolent uncles. All that had gone.

“Well, it ought to kill English snobbishness,” he answered, with a laugh. “All the same, I have a faint regret for the past, when English ladies just looked beautiful, and made themselves charming, and were lovely hostesses.”

Madge smiled at him with raised eyebrows.

“Good heavens, Father! That’s prehistoric. You’re not as old as all that. Early Victorian!”

He remembered what Admiral Savage had told him about being called an

Early Victorian, and it made him feel uneasy.

"No," he said, "I'm not as old as all that. All the same, things have changed a bit. Your grandmother—my dear mother—was one of the great ladies, although she married an officer in the Royal Marines with nothing but his pay."

"I wish I remembered her," said Madge. "But I dare say she would be horribly shocked to think that her granddaughter was travelling around in musical comedy."

"Tell me," said Compton, "are you wedded to that kind of life? Isn't it rather squalid for a girl who was educated at Somerville?"

He had gone out to the Malay for five years' exile to send her to Somerville—or partly for that purpose.

"It's quite amusing," said Madge. "Of course, I hope to do better than musical comedy. In fact, I told you about that part Mr. Keening has offered me. It's a great chance, Father. I'm going into rehearsal at once. It's going to be hard work, because we produce in a fortnight."

"Oh, I'm afraid that means I shan't see much of you—for a fortnight, eh? Hard luck!"

"I'm afraid it does," she answered, looking at him with a smile. "Sorry, Father."

"Do you mind if I hang around the stage door like an old-fashioned lover?" he asked lightly, hiding his disappointment.

"Oh, you'd get awfully bored, Father."

She explained the tedium of rehearsals; the length of time they took; the waiting about.

"You'll have to take up a hobby, Father," she said later in the meal. "I should go in for golf, if I were you. Is that possible with only one arm?"

"Oh, that's the last refuge," said Compton. "I haven't come to that yet."

He waited until the coffee and cigarettes before telling her of that idea he had had in his mind for some time.

"I've been scheming things out," he said presently. "A little scheme of life for you and me, Madge."

"Yes, Father? In what way?"

She took one of his cigarettes out of his case and waited for the light he gave her.

"I've saved up a bit in that rubber job," he told her. "A few thousands. Just about enough to buy a little old place in Sussex or somewhere. I might do a bit

of farming in a small way. Fruit, perhaps, and a poultry farm. Perhaps a few pigs.”

“It sounds amusing, Father,” said Madge. “Only I’d leave out the pigs. They’re so smelly!”

Compton was quite inclined to leave out the pigs if she objected to them.

“I dare say some of these old places are going cheap,” he said. “I picture an old manor house, or farmhouse, with plenty of beams—Tudor or Stuart—and big chimneys and grand old fireplaces.”

“Aren’t they a bit draughty?” asked Madge teasingly.

“Oh, we’d keep out the draughts all right. Central heating, if I can run to it. Wood fires to look cheerful. Then there would be some fine old trees about, and a tennis lawn as smooth as a billiard table, and a rose garden, and a pergola. I insist on the rose garden for your sake, Madge.”

She laughed at this imaginary garden.

“It’s awfully sweet of you, Father. I love rose gardens now and then. When the roses are blooming. But won’t you be rather lonely in a place like that—when I’m working, you know?”

Yes, he admitted that. Of course, while she was working. Perhaps she would be resting now and then. Didn’t they call it resting while they were out of a part?

In his own mind he hoped she would get tired of stage life. There couldn’t be much fun really in touring round with provincial companies and putting up at theatrical lodging-houses. Even if she acted in town it would be very hard work, no doubt. He would tempt her to keep house with him. He would make a little paradise for her.

“I daresay I could run to a small car,” he told her. “In fact, it would be almost necessary, if I did a spot of farming. Then you could get your friends down. The tennis lawn would tempt them. There would be a spare bedroom or two. That girl Jean Macgregor might like a breath of country air now and then. That boy Simon might come down for a spell when he liked.”

Madge’s face flushed slightly as she smiled into her father’s eyes.

“You think of everything, Father!”

He ignored the comment, and continued his picture of the country house and its possibilities.

“There would be some interesting neighbours, I dare say. Of course, I don’t want to bury myself alive. But Surrey—or Sussex—is not exactly like a jungle in the Malay States.”

Madge was amused at that, and laughed.

“No, it’s not really wild on the south side of the Hog’s Back.”

“Well,” said Compton, “that’s what I have at the back of my mind, unless someone will give me a good job in which I might do something for poor old England. Meanwhile I think I’ll have a look round. I might find my house of dreams through a friendly estate agent somewhere in the neighbourhood of Horsham or Farnham.”

“I hope you’ll find it, Father,” said Madge. “It will give you something to do while I’m rehearsing and so on.”

“How long are you staying with that red-headed wench?” asked Compton presently. “I suppose you can’t break away and stay with me somewhere? A little furnished flat *pro tem*. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of South Kensington, perhaps. That would be convenient for you, wouldn’t it?”

Madge agreed that it would be delightfully convenient. And she would love to be with him. But it was a little awkward just now. She didn’t want to let Jean down, and she was paying half the rent for another six months. Besides, Jean rather looked to her as a stable companion, coming from the wild North and being rather lonesome in London.

“Oh, I understand,” said Compton. “I wouldn’t like you to let her down. But perhaps she might get hold of some other girl who would share expenses and provide companionship.”

“Yes,” said Madge. “I’ll try to fix that up, Father.”

He was grateful for that promise, and he was touched when suddenly she patted his hand as it lay on the tablecloth, fingering the crumbs, and spoke with a little anxiety in her voice.

“I’m afraid you’re going to feel rather lonely while I’m working, Father.”

“Oh, as long as I get a glimpse of you pretty often,” he answered light-heartedly.

She stubbed out her cigarette in the ash-tray and leaned her chin on clasped hands, looking at him with smiling eyes.

“You’re a darling, Father, really! But what a pity I’ve missed you so long. We’ve never been together much, have we? We’re strangers, really.”

“Hard luck, old girl!”

Madge thought her way back to a not very distant past.

“I remember dimly when you came home on leave from the China station, and other leaves afterwards when Mummie was alive. I was a brat in those days. Then you left the Navy and looked around for jobs, didn’t you?”

“I did,” agreed Compton, with a laugh at unpleasant recollections. The best job he could find was the secretaryship to a golf club in the neighbourhood of Dorking.

“I was at my beastly boarding-school then,” said Madge, “so that I didn’t see much of you, except in the holidays.”

Compton was sorry she called it a beastly boarding-school. He had stinted and scraped to send her there—one of the best in England, according to reputation and high fees.

“The only time I had you as a real father was when we went to France and Italy, before I began my ignoble career at Somerville.”

Compton had enjoyed that trip with her, and had often thought of it since as one of the bright spots in his wanderings.

“We had a great time didn’t we?” he agreed. “You were in the sweet seventeen stage; just blossoming, my dear. I was a proud father! Some of those Italian officers in Rome made eyes at you. I was a bit anxious one day when one of them took you for a walk.”

Madge laughed at this episode. Yes, her father had been rather scared.

“My first experience of the amorous male,” she remarked. “But, Father, I’ve never forgiven you for going off like that to the Malay, just when I wanted you. That’s when a girl needs a father.”

Compton raised his eyebrows comically at the challenge.

“My dear child! I had to earn a bit of brass. I couldn’t hang about doing nothing when that golf club gave me the order of the boot, after that row I had with that nasty piece of work who happened to be its managing director. Besides, you were going to Somerville for three years.”

“I know,” said Madge; “that was the absurdity. You were going to do three years hard labour in the Malay States—and then you stayed five—in order that I could waste time at Somerville pretending to absorb the higher education.”

“Pretending?” asked Compton, with raised eyebrows again, and a smile lengthening his thin lips.

“I was not good at it,” said Madge. “I just scraped through because the examiners liked the colour of my eyes. All the Somerville crowd adored me because I had ‘that schoolgirl complexion’. The Oxford men—they call them men, you know!—came round like flies to a jam-pot. It was all very ridiculous.”

Compton grinned. He could quite understand that this pretty girl of his had attracted the undergraduate crowd, if he knew anything about romantic youth. And he was glad Madge was being candid with him. It brought him nearer to

her.

“Perfectly natural,” he said. “I don’t suppose it did you any harm, my dear. It’s nice to be admired.”

“Well, it leads to—complications,” she thought, answering his smile. “Anyhow, that’s why I thought of the stage as a career. People seemed to like the look of me for some reason, so why not make them pay for the privilege? I played Juliet at Somerville. The undergraduates stamped the floor down almost. I was a real hit, Father.”

“I wish I’d been there,” said Compton. “I should have been mighty proud of you, my dear.”

“Oh, I wasn’t too bad,” she admitted. “Simon said I was better than the Neilson Terry girl. But then, of course, he was prejudiced in my favour at the time.”

Compton thought he might have been right, without prejudice. Simon again! Yes, he remembered that Helen’s boy had been up at Oxford with Madge.

“But the point is,” she said, “that I’ve missed something, Father. Home life. A parent when one wants him during adolescence and all that. An elderly aunt isn’t the same thing, exactly.”

Compton hid a secret emotion. That phrase “I’ve missed something” hit him hard. All his married life he had missed the same thing—home life, family love, a daughter’s companionship. It was the penalty of a naval career and post-war poverty. So Madge had missed him as much as all that—poor darling! Of course she was perfectly right about a girl wanting a father just as she was growing into womanhood. He could understand that. He hoped he hadn’t come back too late for comradeship.

“There’s time yet, my darling,” he said, more emotionally than he had intended. “I’m back again now. I’m here to look after you. I want a bit of cherishing myself.”

He spoke the last words lightly, with a comical face, to make a joke of very deep feelings.

Madge smiled back at him, and continued her self-revelation with a charming candour.

“Yes, but, Father, you see I have my job now. I’m no longer a schoolgirl. I’m keen on making a career for myself. It keeps me busy, you know. And then, I have lots of friends who like to see me now and then. You understand, don’t you?”

Compton patted his daughter’s hand reassuringly. Of course he understood

—perfectly.

“Oh, I don’t want to monopolize you, my dear. You needn’t be afraid of that. I just want to fit into your scheme of things. Naturally you have your own set, and I hope you will let me get to know them by and by. I don’t want to barge in too much—you needn’t worry about that!—but you’ll always find me in the background if you want me.”

“Thanks, Father,” said Madge.

Both of them were silent for a few moments, watching some of the other people in the restaurant. Then Compton looked up at his daughter and asked a question which had been in his mind once or twice.

“Is that young man Simon in love with you?”

Madge blushed slightly, and avoided her father’s eyes for a moment, but answered frankly.

“Deplorably!”

“Any reciprocity?” asked Compton.

“He’s quite a friend of mine.”

Compton pondered over these words. It would be pretty rough on him if Madge suddenly took flight as a married woman. He would be out of it, thrown back on to loneliness. No use buying that country place. No use making a rose garden, anyhow. Still, that was selfishness. The only thing that mattered was her happiness. Her next words relieved his sudden sense of panic.

“It’s quite absurd, of course. Simon doesn’t earn enough to buy his cigarettes. He’s in an insurance office, and hates it like poison. He hasn’t found himself yet. In fact, I think he’s rather a lost soul at the moment. Anyhow, I have to hold him off with both hands. Passion without pence is rather futile, isn’t it? Not to say dangerous for one’s peace of mind and so forth.”

She looked into her father’s eyes, as though wondering how far he understood the difficulty about Simon Lambert.

“A nuisance,” said Compton quietly. “Do you think I might help a bit, if I got to know the lad?”

Madge was amused at this offer of help.

“He’s not easy to know. Besides—there’s no cure for passion, Father. It’s a desperate business, isn’t it? The biological urge and all that. Well, I daresay you know more about it than I do!”

Compton was not so sure about that. These youngsters had delved deeper than the older generation, perhaps. Not that he was ignorant of passion. In the

Malay States, Nature was primitive and powerful. But there was such a thing as self-control. It had been part of his own code since boyhood. He had lived up to it fairly well, and now at fifty-two he had not the same need of it. He mentioned this fact to Madge.

“There’s self-control,” he said. “Isn’t that the meaning of civilization? Isn’t that what we’re taught by our Public Schools and our Western code of life?”

Madge laughed again, quietly.

“Simon doesn’t believe in it much,” she told him. “He thinks it’s a denial of life. Cowardice. ‘Asceticism is death’, he says now and then. You’ll have to talk to him, Father.”

“He sounds alarming,” said Compton.

“He’s all right deep down,” said Madge. “But he finds life a bit difficult. I don’t think he’s the only one nowadays! Let’s talk of something else, shall we?”

They talked of something else until Compton mentioned that young man Edward Feldmann, Junior, whom he had met in his daughter’s rooms.

“A nice fellow,” he remarked. “May I ask if he is equally devoted to you?”

Then he was conscience-stricken by this curiosity.

“Sorry, Madge!” he said hastily. “I oughtn’t to ask.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” she answered calmly. “Yes, that’s another victim of my fatal beauty, Father. But he takes it more lightly. It won’t kill him.”

She seemed to think that the conversation was getting too intimate in a public restaurant, and made a humorous ending of it.

“It’s my schoolgirl complexion!” she said. “No artificial aids. Hadn’t you better pay the bill, Father?”

He paid the bill, and was sorry to hear that she had to hurry off to a theatrical costumier’s, to try on some frocks. In the evening she was dining with the Feldmanns—Edward’s rich parents. To-morrow she was beginning her rehearsals for the new part.

“Well,” said Compton, after a moment’s hesitation, “that’s that, and it can’t be helped. When shall I get my next glimpse of you?”

It appeared that his next chance of a glimpse was on the following evening in Church Street, Chelsea. Jean Macgregor, the red-haired girl, would provide some sausages and mashed potatoes. She did them rather well.

“I’m afraid I shall have to have a taxi, Father.”

He hailed a taxi for her, and kissed her before she jumped into it. With his left sleeve tucked into his pocket, he stood there a moment outside the

restaurant—at a loose end again.

XIV

COMPTON turned up at the tick of eight for that appointment with his daughter the following evening. He had had an unfortunate day, failing to establish contact with relations and friends. He had rung up his sister Elizabeth in Kensington, only to find that she had gone by an early train to Eastbourne to visit a dying friend. He had rung up Henry Lambert at the Treasury, to invite him to lunch, but he was in conference with his chief and sent word through a clerk that he hoped Compton would dine with him at home on the following Thursday. Old Bartlett was busy in "the Market", which meant the Stock Exchange, where shares were being pegged down in consequence of a Labour victory. Other friends were away or engaged, and Compton on his first day back felt like the schoolboy who plays truant in the old tale and says, "Horse, horse, play with me! Dog, dog, play with me!" but finds that they all have work to do.

He had a lonely lunch at a restaurant in South Kensington, to which he had walked merely for the sake of walking, and was tempted to enter into conversation with a bright-eyed young woman who sat at his little table. But she snubbed him when he offered her the salt with the remark that it was a charming day, and kept her eyes glued on a novel which he perceived, by reading the title upside down, was written by an author named D. H. Lawrence, with whose work he was unfamiliar. She satisfied her hunger by toasted cheese and jam-roll, and smoked three Gold Flake cigarettes over her cup of coffee.

Baulked of conversation with his fellow beings, Commander Compton walked again after lunch through Hyde Park, and sat for a time opposite a mass of spring flowers, tulips and narcissi, which made a wonderful show, very pleasing to his sense of beauty. In spite of his loneliness, it was with a deep sense of inner satisfaction that he found himself in this old pleasaunce of London life. Better than a jungle in Malay!

With a faint smile, of which he was unconscious, he watched the people passing; the nursemaids with bald-headed babies in perambulators, and small children like fairy-tale princes and princesses, chattering as they walked alongside with hoops and toys. Life went on. The English type continued. *Non Angli sed Angeli.* Most of these children were flaxen-haired. He was surprised what a lot of young men were sitting on these park chairs, or lying on the grass. They seemed to have nothing in the world to do, unless they worked at

night. Perhaps they were out-of-works, living on the dole. Terribly demoralizing, that. Unless England began to wake up and get busy, it might be left behind. Why didn't some of these men emigrate? Had they lost the old pioneering spirit?

Compton fell into a meditation on these subjects, and then was aware that a girl had taken a chair next to his. She asked him whether he could give her a light for a cigarette, and he was quite willing to oblige. She was a smart-looking little thing, but not quite a lady, he thought, in his old-fashioned way, forgetting that the word is not used much nowadays.

"Thanks awfully," she said. "Sorry to have troubled you."

"Not at all," said Compton politely.

"Nice day, isn't it?" she asked, with a sideway smile at him. "Makes one feel that life's worth living after all."

Compton thought over this way of putting it, and glanced at her again over his shoulder. She looked about twenty-two—the same age as Madge.

"Does it ever seem that it isn't?" he inquired.

"My word, yes! It's a silly game mostly, don't you think? Unless you have luck, I mean. Some people have all the luck, of course. Would you like to take me to the Pictures this afternoon?"

Compton considered the idea for the tenth part of a second. Certainly he would like to talk to somebody. But perhaps it was hardly wise to get on friendly terms with this young woman.

"I'm afraid I haven't time," he answered insincerely, considering that he had to put in six hours or more before seeing Madge.

She took his refusal good-naturedly.

"No luck again! Well, sorry. How did you lose that arm?"

"Jutland," said Compton. "It was a battle, you know."

She laughed and seemed to have heard of it before, though it was hardly likely.

"It must have hurt. But it gives you a distinguished look. I don't suppose your lady friends mind because you've only one arm."

"I haven't many lady friends," said Compton.

"Oh, go on!" said the girl. "I don't believe that, you know."

Compton laughed at this absurd little creature.

"My dear child, I'm an old man. An elderly gentleman. I'm old enough to be your grandfather."

"There's nothing in age nowadays," said the girl. "I've known men of fifty

who dance the foxtrot wonderfully. Would you like to take me to the Palais de Danse to-night?”

“Impossible,” said Commander Compton. “I have an engagement.”

He rose and lifted his hat, and said, “Good afternoon.”

“Afraid of being pinched in the park by a policeman on the prowl,” said the girl with amazing alliteration. “Well, good afternoon. Nice to have seen you!”

He walked away.

Now what type did that girl belong to? Perhaps a little shop girl who had lost her job—or a poor little hussy who had lost her character. He was sorry for her, anyhow. She was just about the age of Madge. Very likely her father had been killed in the War, or was one of those fellows living on the dole or out of work without the dole. Beneath all the apparent wealth of London, there must be a lot of misery lurking in mean streets. He would have known more of English life if he had taken that girl to the Pictures. It might have been worth while from, that point of view, but indiscreet, all the same.

He went to the Pictures alone, at a great place near the Marble Arch. It was a week-day afternoon, but the house was crowded with men as well as women. Amazing that! How did all these people afford the time as well as the money? Hadn’t they anything to do on a week-day afternoon? He sat there through the long programme, watching a drama of love and passion, which was utterly unreal and not exactly uplifting. It was the sort of picture which, when shown out East, would drag down the prestige of the white races, as it was being done in every cinema in Singapore. The East was being taught to despise Western civilization, unless they were tempted to imitate its worst aspects. And apart from the exaggeration and unreality of these films, Western civilization did not seem in a healthy state.

Commander Compton, this lonely man, stared round at the audience in the darkness about him at four o’clock in the afternoon. They were like ghosts in the seats on either side of him, laughing a little now and then, or drawing an audible breath at some sensational moment. When the lights were turned up during the interval he saw that the majority of them were women, with a sprinkling of men among them. They had come here, he supposed, to enjoy a dream, satisfying for an hour or two their unfulfilled desires of love and romance, relieving them from the boredom of reality, killing time as, after all, he was trying to kill it. Not good, that, except as an occasional drug!

Most of these women hadn’t enough to do, perhaps, while their husbands were working for them in City offices. Probably they had a servant or two in their suburban houses or London flats. Very likely they had no children to keep them busy—last night’s papers had said that the birth-rate had fallen to its

lowest recorded figures. They had no work, no duties, no drudgery, in a social class which had lifted them beyond such things as cooking or needlework. There were millions of women in England like that. Millions more in the United States and other countries. They were the product of an industrial civilization liberating them from the toil of primitive women mated to men who worked on the land. Were they any happier for this liberation from drudgery? Wasn't industrial civilization as unreal as that picture of false passion on the screen? Wouldn't it be better for human happiness if men and women were forced to return to more primitive conditions, getting back to Mother Earth, reviving old handicrafts, doing things with their hands and bodies? Perhaps that fellow Gandhi was right in denouncing the machine as the enemy of mankind. It had destroyed simplicity. It was giving people too much leisure, which left them bored and listless. Perhaps it was the cause of all this unemployment which was spreading in England and Germany and other countries. Only the United States was prosperous, by some secret of their own. The philosophy of Henry Ford. . . .

Commander Compton forgot the thread of the plot on the screen while meditating on these mysteries. . . . Three and a half hours more before he would see Madge again. He took tea, after the performance, in a Lyons shop near the Marble Arch, and had an interesting conversation with a young man who spilt some of his tea down Compton's trousers by jogging his cup with the edge of his overcoat.

"I say, I'm most frightfully sorry!"

"Not at all," said Compton. "That's nothing. Just a spot or two."

The young man was upset even more than his tea.

"Extremely careless of me, sir."

"Not at all, my dear fellow," said Compton. "Pray don't think about it. Look, that will dry in a couple of minutes."

It was an introduction to conversation. The young man revealed that he was a commercial traveller from Manchester. He was waiting for his young lady. They were going to a cinema in the evening.

"How's business?" asked Compton.

"Rotten," said the young man. "Cotton is a lost cause. Artificial silk now, you know. Lancashire is poverty-stricken. What with a boycott in India and revolutions in China, and high tariffs everywhere against British goods, there's absolutely nothing doing."

"Still, you can afford to take your young lady to the cinema," Compton reminded him cheerfully.

“Oh, well, while there’s life there’s hope!” He glanced at Compton’s empty sleeve.

“The War?”

“Jutland,” said Compton. “A long time ago now.”

The young man nodded.

“I missed it. Too young, you know. Can’t say I’m sorry. Damn silly business, wasn’t it? I haven’t found out yet what it was all about. An elder brother of mine was killed in Flanders. If there’s another you won’t catch me getting into it!”

“Not even if England is in danger?” asked Compton.

The young man absorbed his last bit of toasted bun before answering.

“Oh, that’s an old catch,” he answered. “Whenever politicians want to drive their people to war they say the country is in danger. Well, my answer is, remove the danger, my good asses. Isn’t there the League of Nations? Don’t we believe in Conciliation and Common Sense? Isn’t that what they’re paid for?”

“Yes,” said Compton, “perhaps you’re right. But it’s awkward if a big nation refuses to believe in conciliation and common sense, and prefers high explosives and national egotism. If Germany arms again——”

“The French are making all the trouble,” said the young man. “ ‘Security before disarmament’—with the biggest army in Europe. It’s because they insist on reparations from Germany that we’re all getting into this financial mess. I’ve no patience with them. I once spent a week-end in Paris——”

He broke off his sentence and called out to the waitress.

“Ticket, please, missy! My young lady will be waiting for me,” he explained. “Good evening, sir. Sorry about that cup of tea!”

Compton was sorry to lose him. He seemed an intelligent young fellow, though rather too cocksure about his own opinions.

So trade was still bad in Lancashire? And if other young men were like this one, they had set their mind against war—even if England were in danger. . . .

It was queer that one could have a conversation like that in a Lyons tea-shop with a chance acquaintance who was a commercial traveller. World problems were bearing down upon all these City clerks and typist girls who were sitting at these little tables. They talked about them glibly. Because Gandhi had proclaimed a boycott in India, some of them would have to economize when they took their girls out in the evening. Because General Chiang Kai Shekh was advancing against General Fen in China, Lancashire was spending less money in London, and clerks were getting the sack in

merchant offices. That young man had never been out East. Perhaps he didn’t realize that Western civilization depended ultimately upon guns and bayonets for its safety. If all nations disarmed, the East would walk West. . . . An unpleasant and disturbing thought in a Lyons tea-shop!

Commander Compton paid his bill at the desk—fourpence—and walked from the Marble Arch to Chelsea, to put in time before seeing his daughter Madge.

XV

MADGE was not yet back at eight o'clock, but he was received very cordially by Jean Macgregor, the red-headed girl. She was busy frying sausages and potatoes in a diminutive kitchen, as she explained when she opened the door from which a rich aroma of boiling fat came forth.

"Come and have a look at the feast I'm preparing for you," she said.

Commander Compton went to have a look, hiding his disappointment that Madge was not at home yet.

"My word, they look good!" he said, quite sincerely, at the sight of the sausages sizzling in a frying-pan over a small gas-stove.

"Done to a turn!" cried Jean Macgregor proudly. "Did you ever see such beauties? But, of course, Madge won't be here to eat them. Well, the more for you and me, that's all."

"What makes you think she won't be here?" asked Compton anxiously.

Jean Macgregor smiled as she wiped a plate on her blue apron.

"I fear the worst, and it nearly always happens when I prepare a meal for actresses, journalists, and other disorderly creatures who keep uncertain hours. Many a time have I waited for Madge with my mouth watering over a Welsh rarebit."

The worst happened almost immediately. The telephone bell rang, with a message from Madge.

"Frightfully sorry! I can't get home till nine o'clock. Give my love to Father and be kind to him, my dear."

Jean Macgregor repeated the message word for word, not without sympathy when she saw the disappointment in the eyes of an elderly gentleman.

"Awful, isn't it? But you can rely on my kindness. If you'll carry in those sausages, I'll follow with the bread and things. No use letting them get cold, the darlings."

"Tell me more about Borneo," she suggested when she sat down to this evening meal.

Compton let her off Borneo, and conversation languished a little now and then, until Jean brightened it up by an account of a play she had seen the previous evening. Then he helped her to clear away before she sat down to the

table again and went on with a design she was doing for an advertisement of somebody's bath salts.

"Don't mind if I work?" she said. "Needs must when the devil drives. But I can prattle while I put in this lady's legs. And I'm a very good listener, if you feel like talking. There are heaps of cigarettes in that tin."

Compton felt at ease with this matter-of-fact girl, who made no fuss about him but seemed to accept his presence without annoyance.

"How do you get on with Madge?" he asked presently.

She told him that she got on with Madge "like a house on fire", though that simile seemed hardly suitable. She said that Madge filled her with admiration and envy. She just went about looking beautiful and everybody worshipped her. It was unfair really, she thought. A girl like herself, with red hair and freckles, had an uphill job. Advertisement agents gave her no special favour. They were rather put off by her repulsive appearance, whereas they would accept any bit of bad drawing from a pretty girl who made eyes at them.

Commander Compton would not pass that word "repulsive". He assured her that if he were an advertising agent he would accept her drawings on the spot. He thought freckles were attractive.

"Kind man!" said Jean Macgregor.

She spoke about Madge again.

"It's a pity she doesn't marry and have babies. There's nothing in acting really. I know dozens of girls who get small parts and then fade out. I'm afraid Madge will have the same experience when that man Keening meets another girl with a different type of beauty. Far better if she puts one of those boys out of their misery, don't you think?"

Commander Compton was cautious, and asked, "What boys?"

Jean Macgregor glanced up at him with a mischievous smile.

"Oh, well, if you don't know, I mustn't tell tales out of school."

"There's a young man named Simon Lambert," said Compton.

Jean Macgregor looked amused.

"There certainly is!" she said, with hearty agreement.

"And young Feldmann," said Compton.

"Exactly! Edward P. Feldmann, Junior. Rolling in dollars and devoted to Madge."

"Any others?" asked Compton quietly, and without undue curiosity.

"As thick as leaves in Vallambrosa," said Jean, eyeing her drawing with apparent disapproval. "The streets of London are crowded with 'em.

Unfortunately most of them haven't a bean. There's an artist in Flood Street who lives on sardines, when he can afford them. And there's a young man who works in a garage at Putney. And there's a legal laddy in the Temple who comes pretty often, hoping for a kind word. Many others crowd these rooms when I want to get on with my job. I expect you'll meet them before long."

Commander Compton laughed good-naturedly, although he felt a little uneasy at this revelation of his daughter's popularity.

"I was hoping to keep Madge to myself for a while," he said, "but I seem to have many rivals for her affection."

Jean Macgregor looked at her drawing again and made a face at it before putting it on one side and reaching for a cigarette.

"No need to worry," she assured him. "Madge receives their homage with perfect self-possession and complete indifference. It seems so natural to her. And it's Simon she really likes, though she doesn't know it."

Commander Compton was being put wise to his daughter's private life. This red-headed girl was perhaps telling him things which she thought he ought to know. He was rather grateful to her.

"Is Simon all right?" he asked.

Jean Macgregor laughed as though the question amused her a good deal.

"Simon is up against life, poor lad. He thinks it ought to be an intelligent adventure, leading to a realization of truth and beauty. He finds it unintelligent, vulgar, stupid and cruel. So he sulks about it. But he's quite a nice child, if you make allowance for temperament. . . . I fancy I hear Madge rattling the letter-box. She does that when she forgets to take her key, and wakes me out of my beauty sleep in the wee sma' hours with callous cruelty, curse her!"

Jean Macgregor went out into the small hall and unfastened the door. Commander Compton heard his daughter's voice.

"So sorry! Is Father here? What a smell of sausages!"

"None for you, my beauty!" said Jean. "And there's a father waiting for his long lost che-ild!"

Madge came in with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, looking as though she had run all the way upstairs.

"Sorry, Father! Mr. Keening took the second act all over again. One of the girls had a nervous breakdown, or I shouldn't have been here now. Has Jean been good to you?"

She slipped out of her fur coat and flung her hat on the sofa, after presenting her cheek to her father.

“You must be tired, my dear,” said Compton anxiously. “How hard those ruffians work you!”

She didn’t look tired. She assured him that she had had a most amusing time. But she confessed that she had an aching void.

“Jean darling, what about a bit of toasted cheese and a pot of tea—a large pot of tea?”

Jean professed to regard the proposal as an outrage, and made a speech on the subject with sham indignation.

“Oh yes, I expected that! Just because you think you’re beautiful, you imagine that I’m going to wait on you hand and foot! I know you lovely ladies. You’re utterly selfish. You use your goo-goo eyes to enslave your friends and get everything for nothing. Disgusting, I call it. . . . Did you say toasted cheese?”

“Anything to fill a gap,” said Madge. “What have you been doing with yourself, Father?”

“Precious little,” said Commander Compton. “Killing time—not too successfully—until I could get a word with you.”

He was able to get a number of words with her. She sat on a low stool close to him, with her head against his knees, until Jean had made the toasted cheese, and she talked vivaciously of the rehearsals. Mr. Keening was a good producer, but apt to lose his temper. There had been a battle royal with a man, Richard Jervis, who took one of the leading parts. Beatrice Aylmer had had a touch of hysteria because Mr. Keening asked her if she had ever learnt how to think. It was all very amusing and exciting.

Commander Compton listened to all this with a smile and occasional laughter. Madge made the scene alive by her mimicry. After his disappointing day it was delightful to sit here in his daughter’s rooms. It was the comradeship for which he had been waiting. And it was nice to see Jean Macgregor’s devotion to Madge. In spite of all her mockery, it was evident that she worshipped Madge for her beauty and gaiety.

But it was a pity that when ten o’clock came, according to a small clock on the mantelpiece, Madge suddenly jumped up and became restless.

“I was almost forgetting!” she exclaimed. “I promised to go round to Jenifer’s house-warming party in Tite Street. It’s going to be rather fun. Edward Feldmann, Junior, is coming up for me at a quarter past. I shall have to slip into another frock, Father. Do you mind?”

He minded exceedingly, not so much for his own sake, though certainly for his own sake, but also for hers.

“My dear child! After your hard day’s work? Surely you ought to go to bed soon. Can’t you give that party a miss?”

She couldn’t give it a miss. She had promised Jenifer most faithfully. And Edward was taking her, and would be very peeved if she betrayed him. She wasn’t a bit tired really. She was never tired.

Edward Feldmann came up punctually at a quarter past ten, looking very fresh and elegant in evening clothes, with a gardenia in his buttonhole. He was very glad, he said, to see Commander Compton again. He smoked a cigarette until Madge emerged from an inner room in a blue frock which slipped away from her bare arms and shoulders.

“Blindingly beautiful!” said young Feldmann, pretending to stagger back at this vision of loveliness.

Compton thanked the red-headed girl for her patience with him, and descended the stairs with his daughter and the American boy. There was a big car outside, waiting to convey Madge to the party, and, before getting into it, she turned to kiss him.

“Sorry I’ve got to go, Father. Won’t you come too? Jenifer would love to see you.”

“I’m not wearing a wedding garment,” he answered. “And you young people don’t want an elderly man with one arm to spoil the picture.”

“Oh, that’s nonsense! Do come, Father.”

“Yes, fine idea!” said young Feldmann, with a very good imitation of enthusiasm.

Compton hesitated, greatly tempted. But he resisted the temptation. They were only being kind to him. He would be out of place in a party of young people, none of whom he would know, and all of whom would feel constrained by his presence.

“Send Madge back in time for a little sleep,” he told young Feldmann.

He watched the car glide away. It was lit inside, and he saw Madge using a powder-puff. She waved her hand—and the powder-puff—as the car swung round towards the Embankment. He felt very elderly for a moment or two. Madge had made her own life . . . without him.

XVI

COMMANDER COMPTON dined with the Lamberts one night. Mrs. Lambert was the lady he had met on Election night, when he was feeling as lonely as death, and she was the mother of Simon who was keen on Madge.

They had quite a dinner party at their house in Queen's Gate, and Compton was pleased to sit again at a table at which he had been entertained fairly often in the old days before the War. He had often thought of it out in the Malay States as typical of English hospitality and good middle-class comfort. There was a nice mid-Victorian feeling about this dining-room with its mahogany furniture and water-colour paintings by Frederick Walker and Birket Foster.

Henry Lambert had always done himself rather well, having private means besides his salary as a Treasury official. He looked a bit older than when Compton had dined here last. His hair was thinning on top and had gone grey at the sides. The crows' feet of time had dug a bit deeper round his eyes, although they still looked out on life with a shrewd humour which had given him a reputation for wit—a little caustic sometimes. He had been a great amateur actor in the old days before the world became wearied.

"Ageing a bit," thought Compton. "But he's five years older than I am. I'm young compared with Henry Lambert!"

He felt young to-night, sitting next to Helen. Helen was good enough to say he looked absurdly young. But he had had one or two reminders of age, slightly disconcerting.

It was when he entered the drawing-room, five minutes late because he had sneaked half an hour with Madge at her rooms in Chelsea. The other guests were there when he made his bow, and one of the ladies who held out her hand to him beamed effusively.

"My dear Stephen, how enchanting to see you again!"

He couldn't remember her. She was a stout lady, very pleasant-looking, with grey hair. For the life of him he couldn't put a name to some dim memory which lurked for him in her eyes until Helen Lambert put him wise, very tactfully.

"You remember Mrs. Tavistock, Stephen? You knew her as Kitty Crichton."

Kitty Crichton! Good heavens, yes! He remembered her as a little sylph-

like thing, as light as gossamer when he danced with her on the deck of a battleship. She was lost—she had disappeared—in this luxuriance of middle age.

"My dear Kitty!" exclaimed Commander Compton in his best naval manner. "How splendid to meet you after all this time! Five years at least——"

"Ten," said Mrs. Tavistock; "and I don't believe you knew me! Well, I don't blame you. I'm not such a fairy as I used to be, although I hardly eat a lettuce leaf."

This was the first shock, reminding him of time's swift pace. The second came when a friendly hand grasped him by the arm and said, "Well, young fellow!"

It was Edmund Hall, whom he had known as a naval lieutenant on his first cruise to China, and afterwards at intervals as an instructor of naval gunnery. He was one of Compton's contemporaries. They had had many a spree together in foreign ports. They had met last in the Victory March through London, after the War, when he was in full uniform and looked magnificent. Now something seemed to have taken the stuffing out of him, and he was gaunt and haggard-looking; an elderly Sir Galahad, though still as handsome as ever. He looked ten years older than his age, which was Compton's age.

Compton must have betrayed his thought by the flick of an eyelid.

"Oh, you needn't rub it in, my dear man," his friend said cheerfully. "*Quantum mutatus ab illo!* Isn't that what we used to say? I'm just staggering up from double pneumonia and the devil knows what. I'm not so good-looking as I used to be when you and I gave the girls a treat in the Mediterranean ports."

"I didn't have a look in, old boy," said Compton. "You were the Don Juan of the British Navy. 'Handsome Harry' is what the snotties used to call you."

Admiral Sir Edmund Hall looked pleased by this reminder of his gallant youth, but he raised his finger and uttered a warning.

"Hush! I've repented of my ill-spent youth. Don't drag it up to shame these withered bones. Double pneumonia, my friend. Six months in a nursing home. Lord! Lord!"

Compton found other friends in the room. They were his old crowd mostly. There was Dick Charrington, now Lord Bramshaw and something rather important in the Colonial Office. Compton and Charrington had once shared rooms together in Jermyn Street as giddy bachelors. They had been brought up at Bow Street for disorderly behaviour—in the springtime of youth—just before the Boer War. They had come across each other again in South Africa in 1912. They had stopped, laughed, and invited each other to a drink in

Singapore, three years ago. It was good to see him here, in Helen's rooms, getting a bit portly—he had been plump even as a young fellow—but still good-looking and genial.

"Hullo, old bird!" he said heartily. "Back again to bricks and mortar?"

His wife was with him—Marjorie Tewson, as she had been when she was one of the Gibson Girls in "The Catch of the Season", and the loveliest perhaps of that lovely line. She still looked beautiful, though with a hint of sadness in her eyes, as though something had hit her spirit. Something *had* hit her spirit. It was a tragedy when that brilliant boy of hers was killed a month before Armistice Day.

Compton held her hand for a moment and raised it to his lips.

"In remembrance of good days!" he said tenderly.

She let her hand linger with him.

"A long time ago now, Stephen! Will they ever come again, do you think?"

Then there was Arthur Hammerton, now a K.B.E. or something, and a director of the Bank of England, though it seemed impossible to associate him with such a post, remembering days when he wrote love-lyrics for musical comedies in his spare time as private secretary to a Secretary of State. His wife, Beryl, was with him, the daughter of a Liberal Prime Minister. Perhaps that was why Arthur was a director of the Bank of England. She had inherited wads of money from her noble and ineffective father.

"Dogge Steenie!" exclaimed Arthur Hammerton, who was a dapper little man with sandy hair and pince-nez. "By all the gods!"

He clasped Compton's hand in both his own, and grinned at him through his pince-nez.

"How's the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street?" asked Compton, smiling down at this little man who had once been known to his friends as "Mustard Seed", because of the colour of his hair.

"Shabby genteel," answered a director of the Bank of England. "In reduced circumstances, my dear friend. How's rubber? No need to ask, alas! I have some rubber shares."

There were a few other guests unknown to Compton. Two of them were pretty women in their thirties; and at dinner young Simon—Helen's son—sat between them at the other end of the table, looking very bored for a time, until he seemed to find one of these ladies fairly intelligent, and condescended to talk to her a little.

XVII

WELL, it was good to sit at such a table after three years' exile out East. Commander Compton felt a little emotional about it as he glanced at his fellow guests. His crowd!—all a little older since he had last seen them, but still carrying on. Their friendship in the old days had been the best thing in his life. He remembered hours of laughter with young fellows who were now these middle-aged fathers of grown-up sons and daughters—how incredibly fast the time had fled!—and brilliant evenings at dances and parties with pretty girls, slim and exquisite, who were now these women growing grey or plump.

"How's Madge?" asked Helen presently, when she had done her duty as hostess and relaxed a little at the dinner-table.

"Working too hard," said Compton. "I shall be glad when that first night is over."

"That girl will lead you a pretty dance before you've done with her!" said Helen. "I don't suppose you'll see much more of her than the swish of her frock."

Commander Compton thought over that remark. He hoped she was exaggerating. Certainly he hadn't seen much of Madge yet.

"She's full of life," he answered. "She never seems to get tired."

Mrs. Lambert laughed at this remark.

"They don't nowadays. Not the girls. It's the boys who get tired. Simon was born tired!"

She looked towards the end of the table where her son sat between two pretty women.

"He's behaving quite nicely with Mrs. Balantyne. I expect they're discussing biological facts. She reads all the unpleasant books and talks about them freely. Disgusting, I call it, but then I'm old-fashioned."

Presently she turned to Arthur Hammerton—"Mustard Seed," as Compton had called him before he became a director of the Bank of England.

"How soon does ruin overtake us?" she asked. "I suppose the Labour Government is going to squander our last reserves?"

"Not if Philip Snowden has anything to do with them," answered Sir Arthur with the sandy hair. "He's not too bad as Chancellor of the Exchequer. At least he understands arithmetic, which is more than I can say for some of

his predecessors. As for ruin—which heaven forbid—it depends more on other people than on ourselves. I'm not too sure of those United States. Prosperity built on gambling in Wall Street and the hire purchase system to bolster up over-production doesn't seem to me altogether sound. Then, of course, there's Germany—there is always Germany—— But what charming flowers those are Helen! How exquisite!"

Compton found himself engaged in conversation with Mrs. Tavistock, whom he had known best as Kitty Crichton. She asked him if he believed in the Second Phase of Tribulation, and he had to confess that he had never heard of it. Out in the Federated Malay States he had missed a good many things.

"Oh, but it's marvellous!" said Mrs. Tavistock emotionally, so that her bodice seemed to be under undue pressure. "It's all worked out in the Pyramids. The Egyptians used the inch, you know, and if you follow the measurements you know everything of importance which has happened or will happen in world history. It's mixed up with the British Israelites. I can't quite understand it because it's all very difficult, but what it really means is, that we—the Anglo-Saxon race—are the lost tribes of Israel and the Chosen People. There is going to be a Second Phase of Tribulation in the world. But after ruin everywhere the British are coming out on top."

"Well, that's good news," said Compton cheerfully. "But can't we avoid the tribulation part? Personally, I don't want any more tribulation. I want a little peace and quiet. I want to settle down with my daughter Madge."

"We're going through Agony," said Mrs. Tavistock, with apparent enthusiasm. "Russia is the enemy of mankind. Labour is in league with Bolshevism."

She tried to raise the hair on his head by these prophecies of woe, and did, indeed, cause him a slight sense of uneasiness, though he didn't believe a word about the Pyramids. He had once been into those Pyramids, held up for baksheesh in the darkness of the King's Chamber by two young guides.

XVIII

LATER, at this dinner-table, the conversation became general, but it was all rather depressing.

Henry Lambert expressed the opinion that the nation was becoming demoralized by pauperizing the unemployed.

“It’s the complete exposure of democracy,” he said. “Parliament has lost its control of public expenditure. Politicians merely bribe the electorate by promises of social services. Nobody thinks of economy nowadays. Nobody remembers that in four and a half years of war we spent as much as in two and a half centuries previously. Our statesmen have been suffering from megalomania.”

“Good heavens, what’s that?” asked Admiral Sir Edmund Hall. “I thought I knew every disease, but that’s a new one on me, old boy! Don’t tell me about it, or I shall think I’ve caught it!”

“It’s a belief in a bottomless purse,” said Henry Lambert. “I knew a fellow once who invited a big party to the Savoy when he was stony broke. He provided his guests with expensive wines, liqueurs, cigars, and all delights. Then he took them on one side and offered to lend them large sums of money. Presently they became a bit scared and put him into the hands of a doctor. That’s the state of mind of our politicians. Only we don’t call in the doctor.”

“Ah, but what doctor?” asked Dick Charrington, who was now Lord Bramshaw. “You can’t believe a word these economic experts have to say. They all sing to a different tune. As for the bankers—if Arthur over there will forgive my impertinence—they don’t know the first thing about international finance, as far as I can make out. They’re just common or garden money-lenders, using their clients’ investments to make loans at high interest on very dubious security. Germany, for example.”

“My dear Bramshaw,” interrupted Arthur Hammerton of the Bank of England, “may I advise you as your little friend not to expose your ignorance in public? You may be able to find Malta on the map—though I gravely doubt it—but don’t lay down the law about mysteries which defy the most intelligent among us.”

Lord Bramshaw—that plump gentleman—ignored this jibe and maintained his belief that nobody knew a damn thing about anything, and least of all the bankers.

“I disagree,” remarked Admiral Hall cheerfully. “Henry Lambert here knows a good port and provides it for his friends. Henry, this is remarkably fine stuff.”

“Have some more!” said Henry Lambert. “Simon, pass the bottle along.”

Commander Compton ventured to make a few remarks.

“You people seem very pessimistic. Since I’ve been in England I’ve heard nothing but prophecies of impending ruin. What about the Empire?”

“Ah!” said Henry Lambert darkly, but with a humorous glint in his eyes. “What about it? What about Mr. Gandhi? How long are we going to hold India when all the little Labour laddies want to hand it away with a pound of tea?”

“Surely,” said Commander Compton, “we have tremendous reserves of spirit and energy! I can’t believe we’re down and out, or anything like it. If only we make use of our vast opportunities we can go very far yet. Look at Canada and Africa and Australia, to say nothing of the Malay States and other places of potential wealth. There’s plenty of room for new populations to build up big and prosperous nations. Can’t we get these unemployed out of this Slough of Despond in which they seem to have stuck up to the neck? They’re the same fellows who won the War. They were good soldiers after six months’ training. Can’t we train them to be good colonists and pioneers? If they only had someone to lead them they’d follow all right, unless I’m all wrong about them.”

“Where’s the money coming from?” asked Henry Lambert of the Treasury.

“And how are you going to persuade the Dominions to let them in?” asked Bramshaw. “Australia has shut its gates. Canada is sending back English emigrants who slouch about the cities living on poor relief. They have their own problems of unemployment.”

“Every time I hear the word ‘Empire’,” said Arthur Hammerton, “I expect another sixpence on the income tax. Compton, my dear old thing, you’re talking Kipling stuff at a time when it’s as dead as the poor old Dodo. The Dominions don’t care a damn for the Mother Country. They put up tariffs against British industries and expect us to import their grain.”

Commander Compton smiled round the table at this friendly criticism.

“You’re all defeatists,” he said cheerfully. “I still believe in our traditional character. You can’t kill the spirit of a people. If I had the gift of the gab I would call to the younger crowd and give them a lead out of this desolation. Instead of letting them hang about Labour Exchanges for a miserable dole, I’d lead them on to the land to grow something out of the old earth.”

“You might call up spirits from the vasty deep, but would they come?”

asked Hammerton, the banking expert, smiling through his pince-nez at Commander Compton's enthusiasm. "Our one-armed hero has the simple mind of the sailor, God bless him!"

"Oh, I'm afraid I've been talking through my hat," said Compton humbly. "I'm only a rubber planter out of a job."

"Speaking of which . . ." said Admiral Sir Edmund Hall.

XIX

HELEN LAMBERT gave the signal for the ladies to leave the table. The men rearranged their seats while the bottle of port passed round again. Bramshaw told a funny story about Lloyd George.

Commander Compton took the opportunity of moving to a chair next to Helen's son. He wanted to know more about that young man who was keen on Madge.

"I hope I didn't bore you," said Compton, "with that oration about the Empire."

Simon Lambert shrugged his shoulders slightly and smiled at Compton with amused tolerance, and then glanced at his empty sleeve for a moment.

"I'm afraid I wasn't listening very closely," he said politely. "Have some more port, sir?"

Commander Compton did not want any more port. He was rather keen to draw this young man out of his shell, to get behind that good-looking mask.

"Are you interested about these things at all? Politics I mean, and economic conditions, and so forth?"

Simon Lambert smiled again, and helped himself to some more port before pushing the bottle along.

"Well, one can't ignore them altogether. But people of my age are somewhat handicapped by the convictions of their immediate ancestors, sometimes alluded to as the Old Gang. They still have a simple faith in tradition and all that."

He looked round the table at his father's guests with smiling irony.

"I'm afraid I'm one of the Old Gang," said Compton good-naturedly. "And I believe in tradition. Haven't you any use for it?"

"Good God, no!" said Simon, as though such an idea was like the sting of a wasp to him.

Commander Compton laughed, and put his arm over the back of his chair, so that he could glance more directly at this boy by his side.

"What's your objection to it?" he asked. "Surely England owes a lot to tradition. Law and Order. Playing the game."

Simon Lambert lit an expensive-looking cigarette and blew a wreath of

smoke to the ceiling.

“Those old phrases make me feel sick, sir,” he said—“if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Commander Compton, that old-fashioned Englishman, did mind him saying so, and his face flushed, but he kept his temper and answered good-naturedly, after a moment’s effort.

“I’m sorry you feel like that. Do you usually feel sick when men of my age engage you in conversation?”

Simon Lambert made something in the nature of an apology for his previous words.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to be uncivil. I thought we were talking on the level, so to speak, in a philosophical way, without regard to age and so forth.”

Commander Compton was disarmed instantly.

“Oh, certainly. We can talk quite freely. I would like to know your point of view.”

Simon Lambert’s grey eyes were lit by a quick gleam of amusement, and he turned slightly in his chair to glance at Compton again.

“I’m afraid you wouldn’t like my point of view, sir. You see, I happen to loathe the public school code. It seems to me a horrid amalgam of stupidity and snobbishness, which makes England what it is, namely a nation incapable of facing up to plain facts and the ordinary process of evolution. As for playing the game, I don’t understand what that particular fetish means. Playing what game? The game of pretending that we are a nation of sportsmen—a bob each way on the three-thirty!—or the game of pretending that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds—when everything is rotten with old ideas that don’t fit in with present facts? Was it playing the game when men of your age—forgive me, sir—drifted into an orgy of murder and massacre which seems to have left the world in a mess of ruin?”

“I’m afraid we don’t speak the same language,” said Commander Compton, with a hint of irony. “I would like to find the key to it. I confess I’m baffled, as one of the old tradition, you know.”

“It’s time we smashed tradition,” said young Lambert. “It’s getting rather moth-eaten. I’ve been listening to Father’s friends. Pitiful, isn’t it?”

He looked round the table again, where his father’s friends were talking together over their port wine. Above the general buzz of conversation the voice of Henry Lambert, this boy’s father, could be heard most clearly.

“I rely on the conservative instincts of the ordinary crowd. You see, they’re all small capitalists nowadays.”

“Why pitiful?” asked Commander Compton. “They seem to me a pleasant company. They’re my contemporaries. They speak my language.”

“Oh, I’ve heard nothing against them personally,” said young Lambert. “They’re fine old crusted types, I admit. But they are all ghosts really. The living dead, you know. They belong to a dream world which has disappeared. The Edwardians!”

Commander Compton laughed uneasily. This young man was saying the most outrageous things in a quiet, cultured, thoughtful voice, as though quite unconscious of uttering anything unusual.

“My dear lad, you alarm me! I didn’t know I was as dead as all that!”

Simon Lambert apologized again, with that faint, disarming smile which Commander Compton found rather attractive.

“Oh, sorry, sir! As a matter of fact, I don’t class you with this company. I mean, you’ve been out in the Malay States, where I dare say people are still alive. But most of Father’s friends—and, of course, Father himself—think entirely in terms of the past. The dear old pre-War days, and so forth. England as it was and always will be—if we give it time! Prosperity coming back—if we wait patiently! They fail to understand that the whole damn past has gone phut, and that everything is cracking and breaking, and that fellows of my age are trying to get a foothold on the floating ice, if you see what I mean?”

Commander Compton did not see what he meant, but he was interested.

“We must have another talk about it,” he said. “These discussions are very helpful to a man like me. I’ve been an exile from England. The Malay States. Before that the Navy. One loses touch with new ideas.”

Henry Lambert had spoken the traditional words. “Let us join the ladies, gentlemen.”

“How’s Madge?” asked Simon, as though willing to talk a bit longer. He asked the question shyly, with a quick glance at Madge’s father.

“Getting excited about her first night,” said Compton. “Haven’t you seen her lately?”

“Not for a couple of days. We had a bit of a row. She may have told you, perhaps?”

“Not a word,” said Compton.

He joined the ladies, finding his arm linked in that of Henry Lambert’s. The ladies were kind to him. It was delightful being in Helen’s drawing-room again. She brought out some old photographs, and everybody laughed at them. It was incredible to think that women’s fashions were like that even as late as 1914. They were photographs of the golden days before the War, at Ascot,

Hurlingham, Malta, Cape Town, Cairo. There was Helen Lambert riding on a donkey under the shadow of the Sphinx. There was Beryl Hammerton lying in a hammock in the gardens at Eashing, her father's wonderful old place, now sold to pay death duties. There was a picture of Phyllis, poor darling, playing tennis in a long frock with a wasp waist. He turned the pages with a sigh, and then laughed at another photograph of a group of friends riding bicycles.

"Twenty years after," said Helen Lambert. "Rather sad, I'm afraid. It's a mistake to peep back to the happy past. . . . What do you think of Simon? Queer, isn't he?"

"Interesting," said Compton. "But a trifle intolerant of my generation, I'm afraid."

He stayed late, and was the last to go, hating to return to a lonely room.

XX

HELEN LAMBERT exaggerated a little when she said that Commander Compton would only see the swish of his daughter's frock. But he only saw her for odd half hours or on flying visits, when she was very gay and charming, but always pressed for time because of other engagements. He found himself hanging about stage doors—the play was being rehearsed at the Royalty now—smoking more cigarettes than was good for his health, and arousing the hostility of the grumpy old doorkeeper, who seemed to dislike sending in his messages. More than once when she came out she was whisked off—before he had time to salute her—by good-looking young men (one at a time, of course) lurking in wait for her with expensive-looking cars. Once when he was pacing an imaginary quarter-deck in this side turning off Shaftesbury Avenue, up and down, up and down, he turned only in time to see her jump into a taxi and hear her give the direction of the Ivy Restaurant. He was tempted to take another taxi and follow her there, but he didn't want to "barge in", as he called it. Perhaps she was meeting young Lambert there, or that American boy Edward Feldmann, or some other young fellow who adored her. She might be annoyed, quite legitimately, if she saw her father "listening-in" or waiting hungrily for her kind attention.

It was disappointing, of course. He had made up his mind so much that he and Madge were going to be close comrades after his exile. He hadn't given up hope even yet that she might keep house with him somewhere. *Pro tem.*, he had taken a service flat in Knightsbridge Court, half-way between theatre-land and Chelsea—that room at the club was not available indefinitely—and meanwhile he was keeping his eye on the estate columns in *The Times* for small country places with a bit of land. In fact, he made one or two excursions with those lists in his pocket, and had seen some very attractive old houses. There was one of them which he was inclined to consider seriously. It was amazingly like his dream house which he had described to Madge one day—their first lunch together.

It was an old timbered farmhouse, not more than thirty-six miles from London, though astonishingly remote in its surroundings, on the south side of Guildford, at the back of Shamley Green. There was nothing fake about it. It was the real old thing, built in Tudor times and still used as a farm, with sixty acres of land—more if he wanted it—and some fine old barns. It was well kept, too, though the present owner, an ex-officer, was hard up and anxious to

sell. It had a tennis lawn and a rose garden and a pergola, just as he had wanted for Madge. Only thirty-six miles from London. With a good car and a steady driver he could run Madge up to her theatre in less than an hour and a half, and back again after the play in less than that, with a clear road ahead. She could put her head against his shoulder and go to sleep, or they could have a good chat to pass the time. He would tell her all the funny stories he could think of from his naval days onwards, so that she wouldn't feel too bored. Anyhow, she could come down at week-ends and when she was "resting". Those young men could motor down after her—an easy run from town and very pleasant on fine days. There were plenty of spare bedrooms. She wouldn't be lonely. It was really worth thinking about. . . .

Madge was charmed with the service flat in Knightsbridge Court and delighted him with her presence sometimes on her way to the theatre or on her way back to Chelsea. Young Feldmann seemed to act as her chauffeur a good deal, and she kept him waiting ruthlessly in the courtyard below, laughing when her father suggested that it was a bit hard on the poor lad.

"Oh, he likes it—and it's good for him! He has the American sense of service. Besides, I've come to see *you*, Father. What have you been doing with yourself all day?"

It was delightful for him when she had time now and then to take off her hat and coat and sit with him before his electric fire. It gave him a real sense of being at home with her—what he had been longing for as a lonely man. He fussed about her in a fatherly way, placing a screen to keep off the draught, making tea for her once or twice, ordering up sandwiches because he was convinced that she had irregular meals and didn't keep up her strength properly. He even bullied her a little for not having enough sleep and going out to too many parties after her hard day's work.

"Your beauty is very precious, my dear," he told her. "It's your stock-in-trade as well as my delight. You must take care of it. You won't keep fresh if you don't get your beauty sleep. Take the advice of a wise old bird."

"Father, what a darling you are! You make me laugh when you get fussy like that. And do you really think I'm beautiful? Honour bright?"

He looked at her as she sat in a deep chair with her pretty legs stretched out and a laughing light in her eyes.

"I hate to flatter you," he said humorously. "It might seem like self-praise. I have an idea that you and I have much in common!"

"Oh, Father, you conceited man! But now I come to think of it, you're very good-looking, you know. And I believe you were an awful flirt when you were

a young man. Mrs. Lambert told me once that all the ladies were in love with you, especially in uniform.”

“Oh, I had my little successes,” he assured her with mock modesty. “But, my dear child, isn’t it a case of the pot calling the kettle black? All those young men hanging round you! I tremble for your safety and my happiness. What shall I do if you decide to marry one of them and get whisked away by some young amorist in a Rolls-Royce? Who is going to look after my grey hairs and put pennies on my eyelids when I go to sleep for the last time?”

“Father, what ridiculous things you do say! Why don’t you marry some nice-looking widow?”

“Heaven forbid!” said Commander Compton. “Besides, that’s shirking the question. I was talking about your numerous admirers—my deadly rivals to a daughter’s love. Answer me, madam!”

She answered him with a shrug of her pretty shoulders and a quiet laugh.

“Safety in numbers, Father. Besides, few of them can afford the luxury of marriage. And, anyhow, I don’t want to give up acting just yet for the sake of having babies and all that. Love is an awful nuisance really, don’t you think?”

“It has its place in the scheme of things,” said Commander Compton cautiously. He was rather glad that Madge didn’t think much of love just yet.

“Of course,” she added thoughtfully, “I may get caught one day. One never can tell. One can’t ignore the claims of sex altogether, can one?”

“One certainly can’t,” said Commander Compton.

“It’s very annoying sometimes,” said Madge. “There’s Simon getting desperate because I hold him off at arm’s length. We had a row about it the other day. He became very . . . well, foolish.”

Commander Compton remembered something about a row with Simon. The boy had mentioned it at his mother’s dinner-party.

“What sort of a row?” he asked anxiously.

Madge laughed, and blushed a little, as he noticed.

“He’s fiendishly jealous of Edward Feldmann, Junior. Because I used to let him kiss me sometimes out of pure kindness—he thinks I belong to him. Simon, I mean. He says I’m rotting up his life. Silly, isn’t it? Oh, Father, you’ve no idea what trouble I have with some of these men. They simply won’t leave me alone.”

“Very awkward,” said Compton. “Very awkward indeed, my dear. What are you going to do about it?”

“I suppose I shall have to go on being kind to them. Of course, I rather like

their adulation, to be strictly honest. It's nice to be loved—if it doesn't go too far."

She rose, with that laughter in her eyes again, and began to put on her hat—a little blue helmet—with the aid of his mirror over the mantelpiece.

"What are you doing?" asked Commander Compton. "Not going yet, surely?"

"I must. Duty calls!"

He put his arm about her and held her close for a moment.

"I'm the most unfortunate of fathers. Madge, can't you chuck this acting game and come and keep house with me? I have my eye on a sweet place in the country. You and I could be as happy as mudlarks, with flowers and birds and pigs and things."

She stayed in the arm of a hero of Jutland, but raised a rebuking finger in front of his nose.

"Now, Father, don't you get like Simon, who wants to make a squaw of me! I must live my own life, you know. One of these days you'll be proud of me when you see the curtain go up three times with your lovely daughter kissing her hands to a crowded house."

"I shall be jealous of your kiss," he said. "I'm a greedy old father. I want my daughter all to myself. I want her comradeship."

"You're exactly like Simon!" she cried, escaping from his arm and fleeing from his service flat.

He heard her go down in the lift and the clang of its gates in the hall, while he stood rather dejectedly in his lonely room. There were some times when he felt more lonely in London than he had been in Malay. He seriously thought of getting a job if he didn't buy that country place at the back of Shamley Green. . . .

XXI

It was this sense of loneliness which made him rather a nuisance to his friends and relations. At least, he had the feeling that he was a nuisance to them. There was his sister Elizabeth in Kensington, who had looked after Madge for a while when she had come down from Somerville. He went round to see her sometimes, and although she always said she was glad to see him and presented her cheek for a brotherly kiss, he had an uneasy idea that she was relieved when he refused her invitation to stay to dinner and was not altogether delighted if he did accept. She was desperately hard up, and perhaps his presence at table put too much of a strain on her one little maid and her week's allowance for household expenses. After her husband's death in India—he was an I.C.S. man—she had invested her own money in Argentine stock and English railways—both doing badly—and her present means only allowed her to live in this Kensington flat with rigid economy, which she helped out by letting the flat for three months in the season and living cheaply at a pension in Mentone. Apart from that, she had a passion for cross-word puzzles, always hoping that she would win a big prize, and when her brother lingered after dinner he noticed that she became uneasy, and that her glance wandered to those black-and-white squares in the folded copy of an evening newspaper which she held on her lap.

"Tell me another word for inhibition," she would ask suddenly when he was giving her some account of his life on a rubber plantation. Or, "What was the name of the Egyptian god with the head of a vulture?" when he was questioning her about Madge. Or even more difficult than that, "Who was the author of a line beginning 'What of the night, O Watcher'?"

Commander Compton had never paid much attention to cross-word puzzles. He didn't understand their technique. He was a perfect fool at the game, as Elizabeth told him.

"My dear Stephen, you're quite hopeless!"

Then he resented being asked to take her Chow for a little walk. Not that he disliked dogs, but he disliked this Chow, which had a regrettable habit of biting butcher boys and other inoffensive tradesmen. Elizabeth had already been summoned on this account, but she was convinced that Peter was the sweetest-tempered dog, and only goaded by spiteful boys into self-defence.

Altogether Commander Compton's visits to Elizabeth were not comforting,

though he liked to see her again, and found some sentimental satisfaction in feeling that he “belonged” to her and she to him. She had some of the old family treasures: a portrait of his mother by Watts, and a miniature of his grandmother, and a profile of his grandfather cut in black paper at the Great Exhibition of 1862. There were other things: a clock, some vases, a pair of twisted candlesticks, a William and Mary tallboy, which he remembered in his old home. They made him feel sick for a home of his own. He had always been a wanderer. Now Madge wasn’t keen on being his stable companion.

“How did you get on with Madge?” he asked his sister.

“I didn’t get on with her,” said Elizabeth in her blunt way. “I bored her. She took a dislike to Peter. And she hated Mentone when I took her there for a treat one year. I vowed I would never take her there again, for other reasons which I hardly like to mention.”

Commander Compton laughed, and refused to be alarmed.

“Something scandalous? Flirtations?”

Elizabeth raised her thin hands.

“My dear Stephen, I was really terrified sometimes. Strange young men would follow her about. Even elderly colonels tried to get introduced to her. Worse still, a horrible young Frenchman became infatuated with her—an artist, he called himself, though he looked like an apache—and I found them playing *boule* together in the Casino one evening, when I thought she was playing cards with Major Davidson and his wife.”

“How is it you went into the Casino?” asked Compton suspiciously.

Elizabeth blushed slightly, but answered with her usual candour.

“Oh, I used to play a little *boule* now and then. It’s one of the attractions of Mentone. When I’m abroad I allow myself a little licence—strictly within limits, of course.”

“Tell me something about young Lambert.”

Elizabeth was sorry for young Lambert. She thought him a nice boy, though perhaps a little peculiar. He was desperately in love with Madge, of course, but she didn’t seem to care for him.

“I’m afraid she’s spoilt, Stephen. What can you expect when she gets so much homage from men? I shall be glad to hear she’s safely married, with a baby or two in the cradle. I can’t *imagine* her temptations now she has gone on to the stage!”

“I shouldn’t try,” said Compton, rather sharply. “Your imagination might be highly improper and quite untrue, my dear. The stage is a respectable profession nowadays.”

“How about Hollywood?” asked Elizabeth. “A sink of iniquity, Stephen, and I’ll defy you to contradict it!”

He didn’t contradict it. Elizabeth’s eyes had strayed to those black-and-white squares in the folded newspaper on her lap.

“By the way,” she said, “do you remember the name of an Italian opera singer beginning with ‘T’ and ending with ‘I’!”

By odd chance he remembered it, and, under the cover of this triumph, took his leave before she asked him to take Peter for a little trot.

XXII

THERE was also his sister Emily—Mrs. Furnival—with her daughters, Judy and Kitty. He had always been fond of Emily, although he hadn't seen much of her since pre-War days. She had been the beauty of the family—a pretty blonde with blue eyes and a delicate complexion. Poor Furnival had worshipped her, and many a young officer had paid homage to her when his regiment was in India. Commander Compton was relieved to find that she hadn't changed much, in spite of living in reduced circumstances. Poor Furnival had mismanaged his affairs, and death duties had cut heavily into his estate, so that Emily had had to sell the old house in Sussex and come to London with her two girls, who were now earning their own living—one as a typist in the City and the other in a big shop—as Madge had told him. But he was glad to see that she was quite cheerful about it all, and made a joke of poverty.

"Shabby genteel!" she said. "Behold the Furnivals of Sussex reduced to squalor in a London slum. I expect they're all turning in their graves, poor dears. The proud Furnivals, with Plantagenet blood in their veins. What a come-down!"

It wasn't too bad. This little house in Rutland Street, Knightsbridge, was quite charming, though there happened to be a chimney-sweep two doors away. Emily had kept some of her husband's furniture and pictures—portraits of the Furnivals in bob wigs and eighteenth century uniforms—and his collection of Indian ivories were on the mantelpiece and corner cupboards.

"You look well on it, old girl," said Commander Compton. "Upon my soul, you look younger than when I last saw you! What's your secret?"

"Oh, I get a lot of fun out of life," she told him. "I'm not ready for the grave yet, although Kitty and Judy seem to think I ought to settle down to a virtuous old age. They're jealous of me, the little wretches. They don't like it because I gad about so much. They disapprove of my bridge club. They forget that I should die of boredom if I sat here twiddling my thumbs while they're out all day—and then rush off somewhere in the evening. Self-preservation, Stephen. Don't you agree?"

He agreed cordially, and inquired what she did instead of twiddling her thumbs.

It appears that there was hardly anything she didn't do. She was on the committee of the Women's Conservative Association, leading the storm troops

against Bolshevism and its Labour allies. She was busy with slum clearance in Notting Dale. She sold things at charity bazaars for London hospitals, and poppies on Armistice Day for crippled heroes. She visited Holloway Prison and tried to find work for the ex-prisoners, although she generally failed to find it, as there was no work for anyone nowadays. She was also a film fan when she could get time, and had fallen in love with Adolphe Menjou—a charming man! Then she had her bridge club, to say nothing of a private beauty specialist who kept her face from falling in.

"I believe in keeping young, Stephen. I decline to rust. I simply refuse to be put on the shelf!"

Commander Compton thought there was a good deal in her philosophy of life. She cheered him up by this humorous refusal to be put on the shelf. There was a message in it for himself, he thought. But her ceaseless energy, and especially her devotion to the bridge club, prevented him from enjoying her society as much as he would have liked. She pushed him out of the house, quite frankly and good-naturedly, when he wanted to linger and spend a pleasant evening.

"Sorry, Stephen. I'm off to play a bit of bridge. My vice, you know! Get me a taxi, dear man."

Several times he banged at the knocker of the little house in Rutland Street and received no answer, his sister having no regular servant, it appeared. The chimney-sweep's wife was good enough to poke her head above the area railing and give him a friendly word.

"Mrs. Furnival's hout. There ain't nobody at 'ome, sir. Mrs. Smith, who does for her, is round at Number Five."

Commander Compton lifted his hat, as he always did to a woman whatever her class.

"Oh, thank you very much. Thank you."

He was disappointed to find nobody at home. "Horse, horse, play with me. Dog, dog, play with me." Rather a poor game.

He met his nieces, Judy and Kitty. They were delighted to see him, although he was almost a stranger to them, and presented their cheeks to him—very pretty cheeks—for an uncle's kiss. But Kitty was out all day at the shop in Knightsbridge, and Judy was out all day at the City office in Austin Friars. In the evenings they put on elegant frocks and became the Furnivals of Sussex, going out to supper parties, studio dances, and other haunts of pleasure where they met the sons of ancient and honourable families who were working in garages, or painting pictures which nobody would buy—Commander Compton was not surprised, when he saw some of them—or "travelling" in ladies'

underwear, or earning a precarious livelihood somewhere in the City.

Commander Compton saw them now and then, dashing away in taxis just as he stood on the doorstep of this little house in Rutland Street, or exchanged a few humorous remarks with them when they came downstairs ready for an evening's amusement after their day of toil. He invited them to the theatre several times, but mostly they were already engaged.

"Sorry, Uncle, we'd love to come, but Dicky Harcourt is giving a sausage party over his garage to-night."

He invited them to supper at his flat in Knightsbridge, but, after all, supper with an elderly uncle was not very thrilling. They came once, and turned on his wireless and showed him some of the latest steps, and then yawned a little, and left early.

"Horse, horse, play with me! Dog, dog, play with me!"

Sometimes he went alone to the picture palace at the Marble Arch.

XXIII

AMONG the friends whom Commander Compton looked up with sentimental recollections was that lady, Mrs. Pomeroy, whom he had met at the corner of the Ritz Hotel on a morning when she was in a hurry. He ventured there after dinner one evening, remembering that she was busy as a rule until ten o'clock. But it was nine o'clock when he knocked at the door of her flat in Westminster—after all, one cannot call on a lady as late as ten o'clock—and he found her in a very pleasant sitting-room, submerged in papers which she was studying through a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, very businesslike. He noticed, with a sense of shock, that as she bent over the papers, the lamp hanging from the ceiling revealed some threads of silver in her hair.

"My dear," he said, "can you give a poor dog a bone? I mean, can you spare a few human words to a lonely man?"

"Torrents of words!" she answered, taking off those spectacles, to his great relief. "My dear Stephen, how good of you to come! That's a very good chair over there, and I dare say I can find some whisky, though I believe in temperance."

"I haven't come for whisky," he told her. "I want you to talk to me. I want you to play me some Chopin."

She laughed and raised her hands—thin, transparent hands as she held them against the light.

"Chopin? . . . I haven't touched the piano for years. My fingers are all thumbs. Is there such a thing as music? I've been answering correspondents from my constituency. It's one of the penalties of getting into Parliament. There are lots of others, I find. It's a most time-wasting institution."

"Why go to it?" asked Compton. "And above all, why on the Labour side? Aren't your friends dragging England down to red ruin?"

He spoke light-heartedly, but she looked at him alertly, with a kind of smiling impatience.

"Have you come here to talk politics? Have you come to bully me because I don't believe in your reactionary ideas?"

"Good heavens, no! I have come here for human companionship and remembrance of lovely things."

He had gone there for sentiment. He remembered charming episodes with

this woman when she was a girl. He had once lost his heart to her between his first cruise and his second, as a naval lieutenant. Long afterwards he had been her guest in this flat, and she had played Chopin to him when her brilliant husband was alive. They had been good evenings in his journey through life.

“Tell me about Borneo,” she said. “Wasn’t it Borneo you went to? I’m disgracefully vague about that side of the world.”

He told her something about Borneo, until he saw that she wasn’t listening.

“I’m boring you. I bore most people when I talk about rubber and Malays and Tamils and toads. Fool that I am!” He struck his forehead. “The garrulity of age!” he confessed. “Or the monologues of an egoist. I shall have to cure myself.”

“Nonsense!” laughed Mrs. Pomeroy. “Most interesting. But what about Madge? How does she like her long-lost father?”

Compton groaned in a comical way.

“I hardly see the lass. She eludes me. She is keen on this acting job and has innumerable friends who carry her off.”

“Naturally,” said Mrs. Pomeroy. “She wants her own life. She can’t always have her arms round the neck of a sentimental father. I hope you don’t want her to devote her young life to fetching your slippers and smoothing your anxious brow? Girls of to-day have emancipated themselves from that kind of slavery, thank heaven!”

“I want Madge’s comradeship,” said Compton. “I came back for it. I want a fair share of her. I’m jealous of those young fellows who take her out to supper.”

He spoke with a laugh, but Mrs. Pomeroy’s quick eyes discerned the serious meaning beneath his smile.

“My dear Stephen,” she said warningly, “take care you don’t become one of those loving tyrants—one of those parental vampires—who feed on the blood and spirit of youth.”

Commander Compton was startled by those words, and sat up with a jerk.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed. “That’s a terrible thing to say, Monica.”

“It wants saying sometimes,” she answered quietly. “I’ve known boys and girls blighted by the selfishness of over-fond parents.”

Commander Compton looked at her moodily, all the humour gone out of his eyes for a moment.

“I don’t think I’m as selfish as that,” he said humbly. “I put Madge’s happiness first—and all the time. But it’s natural to want a little of her

company, isn't it? I hope I'm not guilty of being a vampire if I want to enjoy a spell of home life after all my wanderings."

"You had better marry again," said Mrs. Pomeroy. "There are lots of lonely females who would like a husband of your type."

Commander Compton's face flushed slightly and he answered with a touch of self-consciousness.

"Think so? A one-armed bloke like me? Fifty-two and a bit withered."

"The prime of life," said Mrs. Pomeroy. "Besides, Stephen, you're still very good-looking, you know. That empty sleeve is the badge of courage. It makes you more attractive."

"You're pulling my leg," he protested. "All the same, if I could meet one of those lonely females, I might be tempted. Especially if she had the charm and grace of old-fashioned womanhood, which I still worship as an old-fashioned man."

Perhaps he let his gaze linger too long on Mrs. Pomeroy's face; perhaps a hint of sentiment shone in his steel-grey eyes, or could be heard in the undertone of his voice. It was Mrs. Pomeroy's turn to colour slightly. She fluttered her eyelashes at him and gave a nervous little laugh.

"I hope you're not making an offer to me, Stephen! Don't imagine that I have the grace and charm of old-fashioned womanhood. I'm a woman Labour member, and don't you forget it."

"I wish I could forget it," he said. "My dear Monica, give me some idea at least as to why you joined the Bolshies. I'm quite open to be convinced that they're not so red as the *Morning Post* makes out. I have a perfectly open mind. But I can't help thinking—on insufficient evidence, no doubt—that the Labour programme as outlined by Ramsay MacDonald means the downfall of everything that has made England strong and fine and good to live in. Besides, they're such a rummy lot—half-baked, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I do mind your saying so," answered Mrs. Pomeroy. "You know nothing about them, Stephen. You're one of the Snobs. How can you help it, as an ex-naval officer? You have the tradition of Jingo snobbery in your blood and spirit. I don't blame you. I just mention it."

Her laughing eyes jeered at him, and he shifted uneasily in his chair.

"One of the snobs? Heaven help the woman! I love all cabmen, ostlers, seamen and tramps. I was a damned good naval officer, and you can't be that without sympathy and understanding of the lower deck."

"Allied with discipline of the strictest kind," said Mrs. Pomeroy. "I know that sympathy and understanding! 'No shore leave, my lad, for answering back

to a petty officer.' "

"There must be discipline, of course," said Compton. "Life without discipline would be a bear garden or a monkey-house."

"Self-discipline," said Mrs. Pomeroy. "Discipline from within, and not imposed by brass hats with the brains of sparrows. Remember the War!"

"The woman is an anarchist!" exclaimed Compton comically. "She has leanings towards Moscow with free love and quick divorce. I shall have to report her to the police."

"Don't you be too sure of the police," said Mrs. Pomeroy darkly. "I know a police sergeant who is secretary to the Police Union. They're not on the side of tyranny, I can tell you!"

"Tyranny?"

Commander Compton jibbed at this word. He asked Mrs. Pomeroy a few questions about the tyranny, as it seemed to him, of the Trades Union Council. Hadn't they tried to organize the General Strike of 1926, with the intention of overthrowing Parliamentary government? And didn't the Trade Unions limit output, so that men slacked on their jobs and raised the cost of production, so that British goods couldn't find a market? He explained that in asking these questions he was only out for information. He was desperately ignorant of home politics and the Labour point of view.

Mrs. Pomeroy didn't like his questions, in spite of his humble way of putting them.

"The man is trying to trap me into admissions," she said, as though addressing a Labour meeting. "This representative of ancient caste and the Big Navy school is an enemy of social progress—not because his heart is in the wrong place, my friends, but because his head is stuffed with the idiotic traditions of the public school code of the Kipling era. His heart, ladies and gentlemen, tempts him to sympathize with the working classes who, after centuries of exploitation by rich and mean employers—men of avarice and greed—have at last established their claim to more decent conditions of wage and livelihood. But his head, my comrades, stuffed with old-fashioned sentiment for his own class, resents an advance to equality by a scientific taxation of those who have too much wealth for the social betterment of those who have too little."

Commander Compton laughed at this speech and made a protest.

"My dear Monica, you make me shudder! Don't you see that if your crowd go on taxing wealth there won't be any left for work or wages? It's because I sympathize with decent working men and women that I am anxious about this taxation of capital and this dole business. Isn't it a kind of Rake's Progress?

Isn't it going to drag down this old country to bankruptcy and ruin? Honestly, I want to know. I'm not heckling. I'm deeply ignorant."

"You're a humbug, Stephen," said Mrs. Pomeroy. "You pretend to be deeply ignorant because you are deeply prejudiced, and don't like admitting it. The answer to your questions is in the negative. England is still enormously rich. Look at the wills published in *The Times* every day—old ladies living in Mayfair or Mitcham leaving a hundred thousand pounds to cats' homes or cottage hospitals!—old men, unknown to fame, leaving vast fortunes which they made out of War profits. Tax 'em, living and dead, is my motto. We shall accomplish the social revolution by income tax and death duties. It's a better way than by blood and firing squads. It's the English way. We're a kind-hearted people."

"I'm not in favour of social revolution," said Commander Compton. "Why shouldn't we carry on the old order?"

"Because it's unfair and full of cruelty," said Mrs. Pomeroy. "I happen to know something about slum tenements and overcrowding. My dear Stephen, in this country of old tradition, which you like so much, there are still masses of people who have to live in one room with a wife and babies."

"Everybody seems very well dressed and very well fed nowadays," said Compton. "One sees no rags and tatters, as one used to in the old days."

"Exactly. Conditions have improved, owing to a slight redistribution of wealth and the efforts of the Labour party. The good work is still going on. Mr. Snowden's next Budget will make the reactionaries groan as they sip their fine old crusted port."

Commander Compton groaned without sipping this imaginary port.

"Alarming prospect! Well, I hope they won't take all my hard-earned savings. It's a bit thick if I went to the Malay States just to pay income tax and support married women on the dole."

"Oh, we'll leave you enough to get a bite of food," said Mrs. Pomeroy lightly. Then she laughed and declined to continue this discussion. "I thought you hadn't come here to talk politics, Steenie?"

"No. That's true. Play me that Chopin."

She shook her head.

"I've finished with all that. Turn on the radio, if you want some music. I must get on with my papers. I've masses of letters to write before I go to bed."

It was a plain hint for him to clear out. He rose reluctantly, and raised her hand to his lips again before leaving.

"My dear Monica, can't you chuck Parliament and marry a one-armed man

who would be very kind to you?”

“Heavens!” she cried. “The man is making me a proposal of marriage! This is too sudden, Steenie. And it’s too ridiculous, you sentimental sailor man!”

She laughed at the absurdity of it, and pushed him towards the door.

He went again now and then, but nearly always he found other people in her flat—Labour members who talked Parliamentary shop with her, and worried-looking intellectuals who spoke sympathetically of the Russian revolution and the Five Year Plan. It was not Commander Compton’s crowd. He didn’t like their ideas about sex and marriage. Once or twice he became rather angry. And always Mrs. Pomeroy refused him the chance of being sentimental.

XXIV

MADGE'S first night at the Royalty was not without success, although the critics were economical of enthusiasm. Naturally she was excited and highly-strung beforehand, as her father noticed when she came round to his flat for a few minutes on her way to the theatre.

"Wish me luck, Father!" she said. "I'm as nervous as a kitten. It's a fearfully difficult part, and I don't feel myself in it."

"You'll be all right," he assured her. "You look like a million dollars, as our American friends say. What about a small spot to steady the nerves?"

"Good heavens, no! I should forget all my words. It's fatal."

"I've bought a new white tie for the occasion," said Commander Compton. "Make a nice bow of it, my dear. There'll be a proud father sitting in the front row of the stalls."

She spoilt his tie utterly, laughing at its crumpled and bedraggled look when she had done with it. But he refused to change it because she had tied it for him.

"That's fine! I like to have a daughter to do little things for me. How about taking you to the theatre?"

She explained that Edward Feldmann was doing that. He would be hurt if she refused this service after making use of him so much.

"Come round behind after the play, Father," she said presently, when she had smoked a whiff or two of one of his cigarettes. "If I'm still alive I shall be glad to get a kiss. And if you can stand a drink to a critic or two and tell them to be kind . . . ?"

"Great idea!" exclaimed her father. "A marvellous idea!"

He was really more nervous than Madge on this first night. He would have given a hundred pounds to avoid the ordeal, because of his anxiety on her behalf.

"The best of luck!" he said several times. "Keep your pecker up, my darling. You look more beautiful than I've ever seen you—and that's saying a good deal."

It was true about her beauty. Her eyes were shining like stars because of her excitement, and her face had a lovely flush, which grease-paint could only spoil.

“Mr. Keening is on the edge of a nervous breakdown,” she told him. “He fairly gibbered at us this morning, and said we should make the play the laughing-stock of London. The author went as pale as death, poor fellow.”

“What a life!” exclaimed Commander Compton. “It’s worse than rubber planting. But I wish you all the luck in the world, Madge; you know that, don’t you?”

He kissed her on the forehead as she put an arm about him. She had a last word for him, which she spoke shyly.

“If you see Simon looking like Eugene Aram, you might tell him not to be silly. Tell him that I shall be cross if he doesn’t come behind after the show.”

“Certainly,” said Compton. “Shall I give first aid to any other heartbroken lads in the stalls?”

“Oh, some of them will be in the pit,” she replied merrily. “And now I must be off to the torture chamber.”

“Here’s luck!” said Commander Compton. He raised two fingers as though giving her a benediction, with a comical face which masked his emotion.

After an early dinner Compton walked along Piccadilly with his opera hat slantwise above his clean-cut profile, and that crumpled tie under his chin. A taxi-driver on the rank outside the Naval and Military Club saluted him and said, “Good evening, Captain!” because of his naval-looking face and that empty sleeve. A policeman held up the traffic for him opposite the Ritz. There was something about him which appealed to policemen and cab-drivers and old soldiers, who stopped him now and then to tell hard-luck stories in the hope of half-a-crown, which seldom failed. He still felt a sort of adventure in walking on the old pavement again, and was conscious of the beauty of London in daylight or darkness. He stopped for a moment to glance through the railings into the Green Park, which looked like an enchanted wood, and jerked his mind back to a jungle in Malay so vividly that his nostrils quivered to the smell of its undergrowth and he almost felt its exhalation of heat and rankness.

He arrived early at the theatre and was glad to see that people were beginning to roll up already. It was going to be a full house. Henry Lambert and Helen were the first friends he saw, and they inquired if he had seen Simon.

“He said he would walk, though we have a perfectly good car,” said Helen. “So like him!”

“It’s a great night for your daughter,” said Henry Lambert. “Do you remember the old days when we did a bit of amateur acting, Stephen? ‘School for Scandal’—and a very good show we put up! Well, it’s the turn of the

younger crowd now, but I never thought you would be the father of a real actress, old boy. Congratulations!”

He spoke as though acting were of more importance to humanity than guarding the British Treasury, as no doubt it is, if measured by imagination.

Commander Compton confessed that he was as nervous as though he were going to play the principal part, and that the Battle of Jutland was nothing like it in nerve-strain.

Presently Edward Feldmann, Junior, appeared in the foyer, looking as though he owned the theatre, which probably he could have done if he had liked, considering the wealth of his father, who came in somewhat later with his white-haired lady.

Young Feldmann introduced Commander Compton to his honoured parents with an easy self-assurance.

“Say, Dad, let me introduce you to Miss Madge’s father, Commander Compton, just back from Darkest Africa.”

“The Federated Malay States,” said Compton, with a smile at this geographical error.

“Commander Compton, sir,” said Mr. Feldmann, Senior, who was a grave gentleman with a heavy, clean-shaven face, “I’m happy to know you. We have had the great privilege of meeting your beautiful daughter. It would give Mrs. Feldmann and myself very considerable pleasure if you would honour us at dinner one evening at the Hyde Park Hotel. Mother, this is Commander Compton, the father of the very charming young lady who is going to act to-night.”

“And I’m sure you’re proud of her!” said Mrs. Feldmann, giving Commander Compton her plump little hand, which he held for a moment as he bent over it, noticing the glitter of many diamonds in the bracelet of a tiny wrist-watch.

In the front row of the stalls Compton was pleased to find himself sitting next to Jean Macgregor, the red-headed girl who had entertained him one evening. She looked very nice in her evening frock, and raised a friendly hand to him as he made his way towards her.

“A great evening for the family!” she remarked. “It’s a packed house, anyhow. Some of Madge’s friends are in the back row of the stalls, after saving up for a month to buy their tickets, poor dears. Of course I’m here on paper.”

She leaned towards Madge’s father before the curtain went up.

“Those sinister men on your left are dramatic critics. Don’t tread on the tail

of their coats when you pass them.”

“Do you think I might offer them a drink between the acts?” asked Commander Compton quite seriously, and he was surprised when Jean Macgregor squealed explosively behind her programme.

“They’re terribly distinguished!” she warned him. “Highbrows of the highest. Great intellects!”

It seemed curious that a man who had lost his arm in a naval battle should feel a cold sweat break out on his forehead and moisten the palm of his hand when his daughter appeared on the stage. But he knew that she was nervous, and he felt desperately ill at ease until he became comforted by her apparent self-assurance. There was a little round of applause from the back of the stalls, and up in the gallery, when she first came on, and this was not surprising to her father, who sat motionless with a little smile about his lips. She looked enchanting, he thought. She was the loveliest thing, and she acted with an emotion, and for a few moments with a passion, which knocked him edgewise.

It was a queer kind of play, very modern in its frankness and realism. He didn’t quite like it. He didn’t feel happy that Madge should have to play a part like this. It was about a girl of good family who has a baby after a passionate episode with a man who is engaged to another woman. She is a typist in a City office where the man is one of the directors. They talk with staggering candour about the problem of sex. She refuses his offer to throw up the other girl, who is deeply in love with him and whom he really loves. She is quite willing to take the consequences of her passion, and is contemptuous of the young man’s tortured conscience, and insists that he shall be loyal to the other girl. There is a painful scene when her father, a clergyman in a fashionable living, is horrified by her announcement that she is going into a nursing home to have a child. He accuses her of having disgraced his name and destroyed his reputation, and is beside himself with anger when she scoffs at him as an egoist who preaches falsities to a fashionable congregation and shirks the realities of life and the spirit of his own faith. In the third act, four years later, she agrees to marry a young man who has been in love with her from the beginning and is devoted to the small boy whom she is keeping by her typist’s work.

Commander Compton, that old-fashioned Englishman, went hot and cold during the progress of this play. It moved him very deeply, and there were moments when he had to blow his nose, not because his nose needed blowing but because there were tears in his eyes. Madge made it all seem real and lifelike, he thought. He was convinced that she had the makings of a great actress, although once or twice she forgot her words and had to be prompted. But he didn’t like her playing a part like this. Some of her words made him

flush painfully. It was not the kind of play that he would have taken her to see—though here she was acting in it!

He expressed his sense of discomfort to Jean Macgregor when she suggested a cigarette after the second act.

“It’s too painful. Honestly, I don’t like Madge playing such a part. It makes me feel . . . embarrassed.”

Jean Macgregor was amused and astonished.

“Why, it’s pap!” she exclaimed. “Very old-fashioned really. Now, if you want to lose the hair on your head, you should go to the Globe Theatre. They’re what I call modern.”

“But I don’t want to lose the hair on my head,” protested Commander Compton. “And if this is the modern drama, I don’t like it.”

“But surely,” said Jean Macgregor, “you’re old enough to face up to truth, aren’t you? I mean, you’ve been about the world a good deal. I should have thought a man of your age and experience wouldn’t be easily shocked by a simple tale like this. Doesn’t human nature get as far as Singapore?”

She laughed into his eyes, and he hadn’t an answer ready until he had thought it out.

Singapore? Yes, that was true. And as a naval man he couldn’t pose as a shy young curate. But, all the same, he hated the idea of Madge playing such stuff in public.

“Why reveal the distressing side of life?” he asked. “Why strip oneself in the market-place? Surely there’s such a thing as reticence?”

“There’s virtue in truth,” said Jean, with the calm assurance of her age. “These things happen. They belong to life. They *are* life. Then why shirk them?”

“I suppose I’m old-fashioned,” he answered, and Jean Macgregor agreed with him.

“Wonderfully so! It’s nice to meet you. I didn’t know you still survived—as a type, I mean.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” he told her. “Well, I must say Madge is wonderful, whatever I think about the play. A great actress! I’m very proud of her. She moved me enormously.”

“Oh, not too bad,” said Jean Macgregor. “Mr. Keening has pushed her about a bit. He’s a good producer.”

The two critics who had been sitting next to them leaned up against the wall and exchanged cigarettes.

“Weak stuff,” said one of them. “No construction. Missed fire all the time, don’t you think?”

“Very tedious,” agreed the other man. “Why don’t these young people invent a new theme? Why don’t they write about policemen, or Welsh miners, or dog racing? Why don’t they have a look at life? That young woman acted like a schoolgirl. Painful, wasn’t it?”

Commander Compton overheard their words, and glared at them with his steel-blue eyes and quarter-deck face. He had a good mind to speak to them and dress them down, but Jean Macgregor put her hand on his arm.

“No brawling,” she said warningly, as though guessing what he had in his mind. Gently she led him back to his seat in the stalls.

Afterwards he went round behind the stage to the dressing-room. There was Madge in her make-up, surrounded by her friends, twenty or thirty of them, including the author, a young, tired-looking man who had taken his call very nervously, and other members of the company. Young Feldmann had presented her with an enormous bouquet. Other young men pressed forward to take her hand and say the right words.

“Ab-so-lutely marvellous, Madge! . . .” “Homage and adoration . . .” “You made me cry like a baby! Behold the traces of my tears! . . .” “I must say I thought you played up jolly well, my dear. . . .” “Well, it ought to be a money-maker. . . .” “You made Gladys Cooper look silly. . . .” “As good as Edna Best. Honour bright! . . .”

Several girls, remarkably pretty—at least, to the eyes of an ex-naval man—fluttered round Madge, seizing her hands and kissing her on both cheeks.

“Perfectly sweet, Madge. I can’t think how you did it. Divine, my dear!”

Madge’s eyes were dancing and she laughed excitedly.

“I forgot my words in the second act. Wasn’t it awful? I fluffed all the way through.”

Commander Compton stood on the edge of this little crowd. He didn’t like to “barge in”. But presently she saw him and thrust her friends on one side and came over to him.

“Well, Father, what did you think of it? Any good?” She presented her cheek for a kiss and said, “Mind the grease-paint.”

“You were exquisite,” he said. “I was deeply moved, my dear.”

He didn’t say that the play had made him uncomfortable and that he disliked seeing her in such a part.

“Thanks, Father. Let me introduce you to Mr. Keening. It’s all due to him.”

She presented him to a youngish, bullet-headed man who looked worried.

“I’m afraid it’s a flop,” he said. “It didn’t go. I watched the faces of the critics—their basilisk eyes. No hope, I’m afraid.”

“Come on, Madge,” said young Feldmann. “Supper’s waiting at the Savoy.”

Commander Compton was not invited to the supper. It was a young people’s party. He watched them go off in a procession of cars.

XXV

ANOTHER man was waiting outside the stage door beyond the rays of the nearest lamp-post. Commander Compton collided with him and saw that it was young Lambert. So he hadn't gone round to congratulate Madge, and he hadn't been invited to the supper party. . . .

"Good evening," said Compton, with a fellow feeling for this young fellow who had been left out of things. "Madge expected you behind the scenes after the last act. She asked me to tell you if I saw you."

"Oh, thanks! As a matter of fact, I wasn't dressed. I sloped into the pit. One gets the feel of a play best in that part of the house, don't you think?"

"How did it go?" asked Compton. "Did they like it in the pit?"

"Lapped it up," said Simon Lambert. "Especially all the girls who would like to do the same thing, but haven't the pluck."

Compton considered this problem for a moment, and was inclined to enter into an argument on the side of the angels to which he was attached in principle and by all his upbringing and moral code.

"The modern girl has plenty of pluck, I imagine," he said. "But perhaps she knows that passion has to be paid for by a frightful price sometimes."

"Exactly," answered young Lambert. "All the cruelties of convention. All the hideous old taboos. All our social hypocrisy and shirking of Nature."

"Nature has to be disciplined," said Commander Compton. "We can't go about behaving like monkeys."

"Why not?" asked Lambert. "We're their second cousins once removed. Why should we deny our natural instincts, and the dominant impulse of life, because of a civilization which asks us to be sexless for the sake of efficiency in City offices, and denatured until we reach a certain economic standard, made impossible for most of us by this post-War world?"

Commander Compton laughed under the lamp-post.

"My dear lad! You're trying to shock my grey hairs, already rumpled by this disturbing play. Which way are you walking?"

"Any old way," said Simon carelessly.

"Well, then, come and have a drink in my rooms. I'm a lonely bird."

"Oh, I think I'll slope off," said the young man.

But Commander Compton persuaded him, and linked arms.

“What did you think of Madge?” he asked.

Simon hesitated a moment and then laughed.

“She’ll never make an actress. I’ve told her so more than once, much to her annoyance.”

“No wonder,” said Compton, rather sharply. “I think you’re wrong. She was wonderful. She lived in the part.”

“She looked all right,” agreed young Lambert. “But she can’t act. It’s absurd of her to try. She was just doing what the producer had told her to do.”

“I don’t agree,” said Compton, rather angrily. “I utterly disagree. She held me spellbound.”

“Well, of course, it’s a matter of opinion.”

Commander Compton was silent for a while. This young man baffled him. He had been given to understand by Madge that he was so desperately in love with her. It was extraordinary that he should criticize her acting in this brutal way, especially as he was wrong. Perhaps he resented Madge acting at all. Perhaps he was disgruntled because he hadn’t been asked to that supper party and was jealous of young Feldmann. . . .

That thought softened Madge’s father, who remembered that when he was this boy’s age he had been madly jealous of Henry Lambert for a time, because he was following poor Phyllis about, until Helen captured him.

“Tell me,” he said presently, “how do you like your work in the City? Is there any prospect?”

He could feel the shrug of young Lambert’s shoulder as they walked together down Piccadilly.

“If one works like a dog. And if one’s interested in working like a dog. Personally I don’t care for a dog’s life.”

“What’s your idea of a good life?” asked Compton, but shouldering their way along Piccadilly among the home-going crowd after theatre hours, the question remained unanswered.

In the flat at Knightsbridge Court Simon sat in front of Compton’s electric fire, with his legs stretched out, looking rather moody, in spite of a whisky-and-soda at his elbow. But he answered Compton’s remarks civilly enough and called him “sir” once or twice, as a sign of respect, in spite of what he had said about the Old Birds at his father’s house.

Compton glanced at him now and then with his steel-blue eyes when he was unaware of this inspection. He was a pleasant-looking lad, with clean-cut

features and a high forehead, not without resemblance to his mother, but closer to his father in the general modelling of his face, thin and long, with overhanging brows. It was the face of a thinker, but he seemed to be thinking on wrong lines, as far as Compton could make out. Anyhow they were lines which struck away from Compton's simple philosophy of life.

"You see a good deal of Madge," said Compton presently, rather embarrassed to find a topic of conversation.

Simon met his eyes for a moment, and then smiled slightly.

"I suppose she's told you that I'm mad on her? Or, if she hasn't, Mother has. Mother has a genius for giving people away, as you may have noticed."

"Well, I heard something about it," said Commander Compton cautiously. "But Madge seems to have fixed her mind on a theatrical career—at the moment. I suppose in your case a business career is of the first importance just now?"

"That's the opinion of my honoured father," said Simon. "But, failing this office boy job, I don't see any career available for a man of my ridiculous upbringing and social disadvantages."

"Disadvantages!" exclaimed Compton, laughing at him slightly. "My dear lad, I should have thought you had every kind of social advantage. Public School, University, a distinguished father—what more could a man have?"

Simon stretched his legs out further, and sunk his chin on his chest.

"I'm afraid you're out of date, sir," he said quietly. "These things were useful when people of our class bossed the show. One went into the F.O., or the Indian Civil, or the dear old Church, and other pleasant occupations with big salaries and fat perquisites, as a matter of course. Uncle Bill put in a word for his affectionate nephew, and all was well."

"Not a bad system," said Compton. "It worked pretty well."

"Quite!" agreed young Lambert. "But, unfortunately for men of my brand, that happy state of things has gone. The moneyed classes are paying for the jolly old War they enjoyed so much. The dear old Church is on starvation diet and fat livings have become lean. The Indian Civil is recruited by open examination in which the earnest student in horners and a suit off the peg from Selfridge's has it all his own way."

"Not to the advantage of India, I'm afraid," said Commander Compton.

Young Lambert said that Gandhi was making a different kind of India. Perhaps there wouldn't be a place for any Englishman of any brand.

"Our class is an anachronism," he said presently. "It's Labour that bosses the show nowadays. No gentleman need apply, for the simple reason that the

qualities of gentility are hopelessly out of date and utterly inefficient to run things in a modern way. I ought to have gone to an elementary school and joined a Trade Union. I'm told that linotype men in Fleet Street earn fifteen pounds a week. Damn good! I'm earning three pounds a week in a City office, and I'm not worth that."

"It's all rather bewildering," said Commander Compton. "What's going to be the end of it? Are we working towards a revolution?"

Simon Lambert seemed faintly amused by this inquiry.

"I rather fancy it's happened, sir. People keep talking about a time of transition. As far as I can make out, we've 'transished', as a friend of mine remarks. That's where my honoured father and his comical contemporaries have got it all wrong. They think they can put the clock back to nineteen-thirteen. They don't realize that they have become fossils of an ancient order of trilobites."

"Don't you believe it, young fellow!" exclaimed Commander Compton. "An old country like this doesn't jump away from its past. You'll see the pendulum swing back again. Mark my words."

"I will!" agreed young Lambert, with a sudden glint of good humour. "Anyhow, I've been talking awful tripe. Give my love to Madge."

He rose from his chair and straightened his waistcoat.

"Don't go," said Compton. "It's quite early."

"Oh, it's getting late. I like to sleep sometimes."

He lingered for a moment and then picked up his hat and gloves.

"Tell Madge that I'd like to see her again one day when that poisonous young swine Feldmann is not claiming her attention."

"Poisonous?" asked Commander Compton with a sudden laugh. "I thought he looked quite harmless."

"Oh, he's all right. But I happen to detest him. The rivalry of the male birds, you know! I can't compete with his rich plumage."

He didn't shake hands on leaving, but said, "Thanks for letting me bore you, sir"; and then, with his half shy smile, sloped out of the room.

Commander Compton laughed again when he was gone. The rivalry of the male birds! Yes, conditions of life might alter, but that primitive passion went on. He had hated this boy's father for hanging round Phyllis. Now his own daughter was the object of amorous competition. He was rather sorry for Simon Lambert, and rather liked him, in spite of his wild ideas and rebel philosophy. He was finding life difficult at a difficult age.

XXVI

THE father of Edward Feldmann, Junior, did not forget the invitation to dinner which he had suggested to Commander Compton at the Royalty Theatre, and it was renewed formally by a letter sent to Knightsbridge Court.

> *Mrs. Feldmann and myself would be very much favoured, if you would give us the honour of your company at dinner on Thursday next at eight-fifteen in the Hyde Park Hotel.*
>
> *Hoping you may be able to afford us this pleasure, believe me, my dear Commander Compton* . . . Et cetera.

It was a pleasant invitation, and Commander Compton accepted it with equal formality. It would give him an opportunity, he thought, of finding out something more about a young man who was one of Madge's faithful and persistent admirers.

The dinner was almost as formal as the invitation. Mr. Feldmann, Senior, presented his guest to a group of elderly American gentlemen and their wives, who mentioned his name when he was introduced, and expressed their pleasure at seeing him.

"Commander Compton, I'm delighted to know you."

It is pleasant to meet people who seem pleased to meet one. Commander Compton was touched by this reception, and at the dinner-table allowed himself to be drawn about his experiences in the War, and found himself describing the Battle of Jutland at some length, until he became slightly embarrassed by observing that everybody at table was listening to his demonstration with forks and spoons representing the first cruiser squadron.

"Now I'm sure we have been very much privileged," said Mr. Feldmann, putting him at his ease again. "We Americans don't often get the chance of such a close-up of English history."

"So you claim it as a British victory, sir?" asked one of the elderly Americans on the other side of the table.

Compton laughed good-naturedly.

"Well, in its effects, yes. It enabled us to bottle up the German fleet until the end of the War. The American Army came over without losing a man."

"Tell me, Commander," said another American, leaning forward with an

air of interested inquiry behind his horn-rimmed glasses, “how long do you think it will be before the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse take another ride through Europe? Judging from the way in which you are all arming against each other, I don’t see much chance for enduring peace.”

Compton hesitated for a moment. It was a question which had sometimes haunted him in Malay nights, after reading old copies of English newspapers.

“I shudder to think of such a possibility,” he answered. “England, at least, is giving the world a lead in peace. We have cut the Army down to a minimum and reduced the Navy almost below the strength we need to protect the Empire. It was because of the Washington Agreement that I was axed and lost my job. Not that I have any quarrel about that! In my opinion the United States and Great Britain ought to police the seas together. There’s no cause of quarrel between us, and I hope to God there never will be.”

This simple statement caused a slight sensation at table.

“My dear Commander,” said Mr. Feldmann gravely, “I deeply appreciate those words. My friends here will carry them back to the United States in their hearts.”

“Well,” said another gentleman on the other side of the table, “I hope you’re right, sir. But one can’t ignore the possibilities of commercial rivalry, nor the unsolved problem of the Freedom of the Seas, which is part of our American philosophy. If Great Britain in any future war tries to blockade American ships trading as a neutral, I wouldn’t answer for the consequences.”

These remarks, uttered in a slightly aggressive manner, called forth a rebuke from Mr. Feldmann.

“My dear George, we’re not talking Big Navy stuff at this table. Keep that for home politics, if you can’t get it out of your system. Most of us here are dedicated to the Spirit of Peace. The Kellogg Pact is a very sacred pledge, which we intend to honour.”

“An illusion! Dope! International humbug!” said the aggressive gentleman, still more aggressively. “Those European peoples signed it with their tongues in their cheeks. Look at France, refusing to disarm by a single bayonet or a single gun. Look at some of these nations squealing about their debts to the United States, while they spend their money on big and better armies.”

“England isn’t squealing,” said Commander Compton with a good-natured laugh.

“George,” said a little grey-haired lady on the side of Compton’s empty sleeve, “if you can’t discuss these things without getting hot and bothered, you had better give yourself time to cool off.”

“I’m talking cold facts,” said the aggressive George, somewhat abashed by this criticism. “I’m sure Commander Compton wants us to give him the low-down instead of talking diplomatic insincerities.”

The conversation became more general. One gentleman ventured to suggest that England was losing grip. He had been motoring about Great Britain, and was under the impression that the dole was undermining the moral fibre of the people.

“I’m a friend of England,” he said very courteously to Compton. “My ancestors came from a village in Devonshire, and I’m proud of the old blood. You’ll forgive me when I suggest that my observations lead me to think that there’s something wrong with this country which I regard as part of my own spiritual background, if you will allow me to say so as an American citizen. The British Government, my dear sir, are pauperizing the workers. You have two million of unemployed, and you don’t make it worth their while to get busy as long as you support them in idleness. It’s a wrong system, my dear Commander. Those who won’t work shan’t eat. That’s my philosophy. That’s the American viewpoint of life. That’s the cause of our great unexampled and increasing prosperity—with due respect to Mr. Coolidge and our Henry.”

“He means Henry Ford,” said the little grey-haired lady next to Commander Compton.

Compton felt bound to admit that he was uneasy about the dole and unemployment. But one couldn’t let the poor fellows starve. He had an idea that a big scheme of overseas settlement would ease some of these problems. Unfortunately British Dominions didn’t favour the idea at the moment, having their own labour troubles. Of course, American prosperity was marvellous—an object lesson to the whole world. If England could adopt some of the methods of Henry Ford . . . !

The little grey-haired lady on the side of his empty sleeve desired to say something very earnestly.

“Sometimes I think we American people are unduly favoured. Perhaps we’re getting too rich while the rest of the world seems to be getting poor. We escaped rather lightly from the War—nothing like the sacrifice of France and England. And we made money out of it while your boys were dying. That’s why I have a secret belief in the League of Nations. It’s the great hope, isn’t it? If we had been able to support Mr. Wilson . . .”

“American prosperity,” said one of the elderly gentlemen, “is based upon certain moral values which we have adopted as a people and encourage in our education and social make-up. Efficiency. Industry. Equality of opportunity. Service. And, of course, one mustn’t forget our genius for advertising, so little

understood in this old-fashioned country. In order to speed up the wheels of trade one must create new desires by efficient publicity. Progress can only be increased by developing the social needs of the community, so that they keep asking for more things and better things. Our publicity men are students of psychology, sir. They know how to exploit human emotions by fear—'*Do you suffer from halitosis?*'—and by working upon the tenderest feelings, such as mother love. The man who invented Mother's Day, when every son gives some little present to his dear one, added many billions of dollars to home trade. That's our genius. That is one of the factors which have made us the richest country on earth."

This little speech from a man who had been silent until then seemed to give spiritual and even physical pain to another gentleman opposite Compton, who groaned rather heavily and winked portentously.

"Heaven help us!" he said in a low voice to Compton. "When I hear things like that I want to burst into tears."

Instead of bursting into tears he drank another glass of port.

Mrs. Feldmann smiled a signal at a lady on the other side of the table. The gentlemen were left to private conversation. Mr. Feldmann was developing a serious argument with the aggressive gentleman on the subject of an American Big Navy. The gentleman who had winked at Compton came over with his glass of port and entered into more private conversation.

"About this American prosperity," he remarked. "Also these American virtues which are the cause of American prosperity. What's your idea about them?"

Commander Compton laughed.

"As an Englishman I can only envy and admire. I wish I had a few more American dollars."

"Now I'll tell you," said his new-found friend. "This American prosperity of ours is one of the world's illusions. One of these days it's going bust with a big bang. Then there'll be wailing and gnashing of teeth in Wall Street. Then you'll hear the howls of the poor boobs who have been buying options on margin—from the bell-boy to the millionaire boss. My dear sir, the people of the United States are gambling on futures. Our wealth is largely an I O U on the Goddess of Luck. We're all spending more than we're earning. We're all buying on the hire purchase system before we can afford the things we buy. We're all living on a higher scale than is justified by our wages sheets. This creation of new desires by the publicity hounds is going to have a bad break when mass output and speeding up of the machine are checked by over-production and under-consumption due to the shock of realities which will one

day overtake us. Our Henry is going to get a nasty jab. There's going to be one big mighty crash in our more or less United States. Yes, sir! And about those American moralities. Let me tell you, sir, that you can get away with murder in certain cities of the United States if you have enough dollars. Yes, sir! Many of our cities are in the hands of corrupt gangs who don't hesitate to shoot if they get annoyed. This Prohibition which was to have made us a moral people has demoralized us more than your dole. It has made us lawless. Many of our young people have cut loose from the old moral code. Yes, sir! And there's more crime in one day in one city of my self-complacent country than in a whole year in little old England. I don't mean to say that we're all criminals. My wife and I don't go about killing people. We don't carry machine-guns in our steamer trunks. Mr. and Mrs. Feldmann here are good people, and there are many millions like them from New York to San Francisco. I don't mean to tell you, sir, that the American people as a whole haven't many virtues, like other people over here in Europe. But what I do tell you is that there is a hell of a lot of bad stuff—mostly of foreign origin—in our industrial civilization, and that it isn't for us to come here and say that England has lost its grip, or that we can put the world wise and good. I'm listening for a loud noise. One of these days it's going to break. It's going to start in Wall Street, when American prosperity will look like ten cents. Yes, sir!"

Commander Compton listened patiently to this and more than this. He was inclined to think that this American gentleman had been drinking a glass more port than was good for him. But he seemed perfectly sober, apart from his intensity of manner and utterance.

"Shall we go into the drawing-room?" asked Mr. Feldmann.

They went into the drawing-room. Commander Compton spent a very pleasant evening talking to the ladies on uncontroversial subjects. He was led into a description of life in the Malay States, and found himself monopolizing the conversation. But these nice people seemed interested, and he was glad to have an innings.

It was not until he thought of leaving that Mr. Feldmann and his wife isolated him from their other guests for a few minutes.

"My son Edward," said Mr. Feldmann, "has taken a great liking to your beautiful daughter, Commander. Indeed, I may say that the boy is very deeply in love with her. I should be glad to have your reactions on a possibility which Mrs. Feldmann and myself regard with entire sympathy and cordial approbation."

Commander Compton's reactions were immediate and painful. He didn't want to lose Madge yet. He had been exiled from her too long. He yearned for

that comradeship which so far had evaded him, at least in its fullest degree, to which he had looked forward with deep sentiment.

“Madge is very young,” he said quickly. “And she has her career to make. She shows great promise on the stage.”

Mrs. Feldmann put in a word for her son.

“Edward is a nice boy—although it’s his mother speaking! He has never been a worry to us—has he, Dad?”

“I will say he hasn’t,” said Mr. Feldmann. “His mother and I are proud of him, sir. He did well at Harvard, and I understand that he has done well also at Oxford University. When he comes back to the United States towards the fall there’s a good place waiting for him in the Bank of Ashville, North Carolina. I would like to say, Commander, that Mrs. Feldmann and myself appreciate the honour that would be ours if our boy allied himself with your family. Nothing would make us more proud. But in return my boy would make a nice home for your daughter. We can afford to see to that. I’m not one of the great millionaires of my country, but Mrs. Feldmann will pardon me for saying that I stand well in North Carolina, and that after a life of hard work I have enough of this world’s goods to help out my son when he gets married.”

“And Edward would make a good husband,” said Mrs. Feldmann persuasively. “I know people in Europe think there aren’t any happy marriages in the United States, and I don’t deny that Hollywood gives us a bad name for divorce; but Mr. Feldmann and I have been happily married for twenty-six years—haven’t we, Dad?—and there are others like us.”

She laughed happily now, and Commander Compton was touched to see her take her husband’s hand and give it a little squeeze.

“Don’t think that our boy has asked us to put pressure on you, Commander,” said Mr. Feldmann genially. “I dare say he would be angry with us for saying anything about it. But we know the state of his mind on the subject. His letters have always been full of his friendship with your daughter. He thinks her just too wonderful, and we agree with him.”

Commander Compton rose from his chair rather uneasily.

“Madge is old enough to make up her own mind,” he said. “I have no objection at all to your talented son. On the contrary. He seems to me a charming fellow. But Madge has many young men devoted to her. Whatever she decides I shall agree to, of course.”

He took his leave more hurriedly perhaps than he would have done but for this private conversation. When he walked back from Hyde Park Corner to Knightsbridge Court he was perturbed. He would hate to lose Madge so soon.

XXVII

THAT red-headed girl, Jean Macgregor, was a good friend to the father of an elusive daughter. She made him welcome whenever he turned up on the off-chance of getting a glimpse of Madge, and didn't mind him sitting around while she worked. She even encouraged him to tell his anecdotes about the Malay States, and when he became conscience-stricken for taking undue advantage of this good nature, she assured him that she found his monologues quite soothing, especially when she was putting in a bit of "shading".

"It's as good as a gramophone," she told him, and although he was not quite sure whether he could take that as a compliment, her laughing eyes and the little pucker of freckles about her humorous nose took the sting out of any irony which might underlie that remark.

"I'm getting an old bore," he confessed. "It's always the way with returned travellers. They think people are interested in places which mean nothing to them. I ought to know better."

In return for her kindness he brought her little gifts now and then, generally flowers, which she put into gallipots on the mantelpiece, until she became, or pretended to become, suspicious of his intentions.

"You're not saying it with flowers, are you?" she asked one evening. "I mean, this isn't a courtship, is it, by any chance? If so, I shan't feel so easy in my mind. I've never been courted yet, and I shouldn't know how to behave with a proper mixture of coyness and complacency. Let us know where we stand, won't you?"

Commander Compton laughed heartily at this teasing, but was not quite sure whether it was all mockery.

"My dear Jean, as the father of Madge I'm beyond that kind of thing. These flowers have no sinister significance. They are merely saying thank you for much kindness."

She pretended to be disappointed.

"Baulked again!" she cried, putting her drawing upside down and looking at it with one eye closed. "The distinguished gentleman is not courting me. My maidenly virtue is in no immediate danger. Very well, then, I have no need to put on the manners of coquetry. Hand over that paint-brush, if you don't mind making a long arm."

They slipped into an amusing and pleasant kind of comradeship, such as might be the relations between uncle and niece. He took her to a matinée once or twice, and even went to the Zoo with her one afternoon, to show her some of his animal friends from the Malay States. Now and again, while they were waiting for Madge to come home from the theatre, this red-headed Jean changed her frock while she chatted to him through the bedroom door, which she left open, and she embarrassed him slightly, but not very much, by coming into the sitting-room in her dressing-gown.

“I’m not shocking a Victorian gentleman, am I?” she asked considerately.

“I’m a shy man,” he told her, “but quite elderly.”

She had her own friends like Madge, and departed from him abruptly at times to go to studio parties in Bloomsbury or supper parties in Soho.

“Sorry to leave you,” she said, “but youth will be served—whatever that means. Make yourself comfortable until Madge comes back.”

She even went as far as providing him with a duplicate latchkey, so that he could let himself in if she and Madge were both out when he called. She was certainly a staunch little friend, and he had a high admiration of her courage, her kindness, and her unfailing good humour. She was shrewd, too, in her comments on life; and in these talks with her, while he was waiting for Madge, he came to know more about the point of view of the younger crowd, with which he had lost touch during his exile.

“We’re out for the eternal verities,” she told him once, half seriously. “We don’t want to be put off by illusion. We want to know what life really is, stripped of the sentimental wrappings of Victorian insincerity. And that’s why people like Simon get infuriated sometimes. They find themselves smothered in a blanket of conventional ideas and traditional hypocrisy. They want to smash out of it and look life square in the face, as it is in its nakedness. Forgive my talking like this, won’t you? It’s not often I’m taken this way, but you have such an inquiring turn of mind, and look so interested when I deliver myself of platitudes.”

“Immensely interested,” said Commander Compton. “And they’re not platitudes to me. But don’t you sometimes mistake ugliness for truth and cynicism for sincerity?”

“Well,” said Jean Macgregor, with a sudden return to mockery, “it’s an interesting subject for an argument, but a misguided young man has invited me to the playhouse with him, so we’ll defer such intellectual topics until our next session. Good evening, Commander. Don’t forget to turn off the light if you go out before Madge comes back.”

It was possession of the duplicate latchkey which caused Commander

Compton to enter the rooms which his daughter shared with Jean late one evening when Madge was due home from the theatre.

He had meant to meet her outside the stage door after dinner with the Lamberts, but the little ormolu clock on their drawing-room mantelpiece had betrayed him, and he was twenty minutes late at the theatre. Madge had already gone, to his great disappointment, and he took a taxi to Chelsea, hoping to have an hour with her before she went to bed. When he let himself in he gave a little whistle as a signal of his arrival, but there was no answer from Madge, and he felt a sudden lowering of spirits.

Perhaps she had gone to some night club with one of her young men. Simon, for instance, had not been at dinner with his people. It was quite likely that he had arranged a rendezvous with Madge somewhere. She would be late again and lose her beauty sleep. He might make himself useful and boil up the kettle ready to make some hot drink for her. Jean, he knew, was out this evening with some friends down from Edinburgh.

He strode towards the sitting-room, and was surprised to see the light up before he heard his daughter's voice speaking impatiently.

"Simon, you're utterly absurd! Why don't you behave like a reasonable being?"

It was the voice of Simon which answered her sulkily.

"Because I'm not a reasonable being. I'm in love with you, and you don't give me a dog's chance."

"What do you want me to do, Simon?"

"I want you to choke off that fellow Feldmann. I want you to get back to where we were before."

Commander Compton had overheard some of these words, and stood irresolute outside his daughter's sitting-room. He could hardly creep away as though he hadn't heard. He had a sense of guilt in being an eavesdropper, although it had been due to a foolish hesitation in interrupting a private conversation.

Now he coughed loudly, and rattled his keys in his pocket, and then went into the sitting-room, talking in a loud cheery voice to cover his embarrassment.

"My dear, I arrived just too late at the stage door. Good evening, Simon. It was nice of you to bring Madge home."

They both looked at him as though wondering how much he had overheard. Madge blushed a little as he bent down to kiss her cheek.

"Hullo, Father! How on earth did you appear so suddenly? Oh yes, that

latchkey!”

“I ought to have knocked.”

It was almost a confession that he had overheard more than he had a right to hear.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” said Madge. “Simon and I were having a bit of a row—as usual. We generally do when we meet.”

Compton looked from one to the other with a smile which he tried to make natural and easy, though he felt uncomfortable.

Simon made no effort at all to disguise the situation, and looked straight down his nose at the cheap rug into which his heels were dug. His only concession to civility was to get up when Compton entered and stand with his hands in the pockets of his dinner-jacket.

“Lovers’ quarrels?” asked Compton genially.

“Yes, that sort of rot, I suppose,” said Simon.

Compton felt more uncomfortable. He disliked rudeness, especially from his juniors. He was rather inclined to adopt the naval officer touch and dress down this young man, but he decided against that on second thoughts.

“I’m afraid I’m in the way,” he said awkwardly.

“No, Father, not at all. I’m very glad you came. Simon isn’t in a good mood to-night. His manners, of course, always leave much to be desired. You may have noticed it.”

“Have a cigarette?” suggested Compton, pulling out his case and offering it to the ill-mannered Simon. But that young man shook his head and sloped off to the other end of the room, kicking a hassock out of the way savagely before he turned, with his fists still dug into his jacket pockets.

“Apologies and all that,” he said with a short, harsh laugh. “The fact is, sir, that Madge has transferred her affections to one of my numerous rivals. Foolishly I feel peeved about it. You see, in the days when we were very young, I played Romeo to her Juliet. Oh, quite a romance in the old-fashioned style!”

He spoke stiltedly, as though mimicking what he was pleased to think might be the Victorian way of speech.

“You may as well tell Father the whole story, Simon,” said Madge quietly. “If you don’t, I will.”

“Oh, certainly,” said Simon politely, but with a kind of icy irony. “The whole story, did you say, Madge?”

“The whole story,” she repeated, tightening her lips a little and becoming

slightly pale, as her father noticed.

“My dear,” he said, “I don’t want to pry into your private affairs. I don’t want to know anything which you and Simon would rather keep to yourselves.”

“Go ahead, Simon,” commanded Madge.

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

“What is there to tell? I fell in love with you at Oxford. You let me kiss you now and then. Then you were annoyed because I became the ardent lover and wanted more than kisses, as men do when they love.”

Commander Compton felt his heart give a lurch. These things had been happening while he was away from Madge in the Malay States. She had never written about that in her long letters. He stood there in her room with a sense of uneasiness. His little Madge! He knew nothing about her really. He had come back as a stranger to a young woman who had lived a hidden life, unknown to him.

“And afterwards, Simon?” said Madge. “What happened afterwards? You are telling the whole story, I think.”

She spoke with the same icy irony which Simon had adopted.

“Oh, I’ll play fair,” he answered, with his lips curved to a faint smile. “Afterwards I had an episode with a girl who was kind but foolish. Why not? Isn’t that human nature? Isn’t it part of the scheme of life, if there is any sense in the scheme? Can a man of my age and make behave like an ascetic in the wilderness because he can’t afford to marry? Haven’t I certain glands and nerves and impulses and desires common to all men? Am I to be regarded as a moral leper if I have a temporary affair with a girl who means absolutely nothing to me spiritually or intellectually?”

“What about the girl?” asked Madge. “And what about your loyalty to me?”

Simon answered in a harsh voice.

“I have been perfectly loyal to you.”

“No,” said Madge. “I can’t pass that, Simon.”

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s the good of loyalty, anyhow?” he asked. “You turn me down every time.”

His voice broke a little. For the first time emotion was revealed behind his matter-of-fact speech.

“Father,” said Madge, “Simon wants me to marry him—after playing about

with another girl. He thinks he has a right to me because of that time at Oxford when I was just a sentimental schoolgirl. I keep telling him that he has to earn his living before he can think of marriage, and that meanwhile I have my own career to make, and that I'm perfectly free, anyhow."

"Yes," said Commander Compton. "I quite agree, my dear. There's no question about it. And I'm here to protect you."

He turned his steel-blue eyes to Simon Lambert with the clear warning that if that young man didn't behave himself he would find himself at the bottom of a flight of stairs. And Simon Lambert read that warning in the eyes of an ex-naval officer, and seemed faintly amused for a moment.

"Oh, there's no need to throw me out. I shall go quite quietly, as the drunks say to the policemen. Good-bye, Madge. I'm sorry if I've bored you. Give my kind regards to Edward Feldmann, Junior."

He took up his hat and gloves from a side table and nodded to Commander Compton.

"Good night, sir."

"Good night," said Compton, rather shortly.

He would have had no sympathy for this young man—Helen Lambert's son—if he had not seen his face as he turned for a moment at the door and looked back at Madge. His lips were smiling, but his face was a dead white. This boy was suffering agony, which he hid under ill manners and superciliousness and sulkiness. Somehow Commander Compton, that simple man, without great imagination or subtlety of mind, read this boy's soul as for that one second he looked back at Madge and said good-bye.

Madge had turned away from him and was opening a letter which had been propped against a vase on the mantelpiece. It was in Jean's handwriting, and was probably a reminder to put a shilling in the slot for the gas fire, or some trivial note of that kind. But Madge didn't read it. She let it drop to the floor, and Compton saw that she was crying.

"My dear!"

She flung her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Father, I'm sorry! I didn't want you to be worried with all this. Men make life very difficult, don't they?"

He was worried about it, and yet he was glad to have his arm round her so that he might comfort her.

"My little Madge! Tell me. Does that boy mean anything to you? He's desperately in love with you, my dear. Has he behaved too badly? Have you finished with him?"

He could not make it out quite. Some shyness in him made it impossible to him to question her too closely about that time at Oxford, and about her feelings towards young Feldmann, who seemed to be the cause of Simon's trouble.

She sat on the hearthrug for a time, with her head against his knees, and began to tell him more about Simon.

Of course she still felt friendly to him, she admitted, in spite of his bad manners and sulkiness, and weakness and impatience. She didn't want to be too hard on him. But he had hurt her horribly. At Oxford she had fallen in love with him so that nothing else mattered. She had believed him to be a kind of Galahad. And they had had a love affair, when she had given him her whole heart.

They had taken the most frightful chances. It was a marvel they hadn't been found out. But Simon didn't care, anyhow. He was utterly reckless of convention and public opinion. She had had to hold him back with both hands. Once, at Henley . . .

"Tell me," said Commander Compton quietly, when his daughter hesitated and was silent. "I'm your father, Madge."

"Well, I had rather an argument with Simon, who wanted me to share his room. It was the first time we quarrelled."

"Who won?" asked Commander Compton. He asked the question casually, but he knew that his peace of mind depended on her answer. He hoped to God that it would be the one he wanted.

"I won," said Madge, and she took her father's hand and held it tighter.

"Good! I'm glad of that, Madge."

He bent down and kissed her hair.

"Well," she said, "I'm not sure that I played fair. I led him up to it and then revoked. He was frightfully angry with me. And I was sorry for him."

"You would have been sorry for yourself otherwise," said Compton. "Oh, my dear, to think that I was out there in the Malay while all this was happening to you!"

She didn't think it would have made any difference, after all, if he had been at home. A girl has to face life some time or other.

It was difficult, after that, with Simon. When he went down from Oxford they didn't see much of each other for a time, and then afterwards, when she took up acting and went on tour, he followed her about. He came up to Edinburgh and Liverpool and Manchester, and other places. That was before he went into the insurance office. She had loved to see him, but it was always a

temptation and a worry. They quarrelled again once, violently—at Sheffield—when he wanted to get married in a registrar's office, which was impossible, legally, without a lot of time and trouble.

He went back to town quite furious, and she didn't see him for several months, and during that time he fell into the clutches of a little slut who was working in a hat shop. She heard all about it from a girl who happened to be working in the same shop—her cousin Judy, as a matter of fact. Not that Simon made any secret about it. He wrote to her, telling her everything, and hoped she would understand. He said it made no difference to his love for her. He wrote a lot of stuff about D. H. Lawrence and the vital urge, and all that kind of thing, not knowing that he had spoilt her faith in him. He had thought she ought to understand the modern point of view.

"The boy's a blackguard," said Commander Compton. "I'm glad you've thrown him over. He wants a damn' good hiding, and I've a mind to give it him. If he weren't Helen's son . . ."

"Father," said Madge, "I think I do understand. I'm terribly sorry for him really. It's quite true when he says he loves me and that the other affair meant nothing in a spiritual way. That's what makes it so difficult and tragic in a way. I know that I mean everything to Simon. The other things are just the weakness of men's nature. Isn't that so, Father? Tell me honestly. Isn't that the truth about life?"

Commander Compton was profoundly startled and distressed. For a moment he was tempted to talk insincerely and to avoid the realities. But Madge's eyes looked into his, and he knew she wanted an honest answer.

"There are terrific temptations for men. Perhaps for women too. I wouldn't write a fellow off for ever if passion gets the better of him once or twice. It's a desperate instinct, and heaven knows I don't set up as a saint. But nowadays you young people positively ask for trouble, it seems to me. In my young manhood we were hedged about with conventions and taboos which were some kind of security against one's own beastliness. Personally I believe in them. I think they're necessary. I don't believe society can exist without them. 'The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.' Old words, Madge, but painfully true."

"Father," said Madge, "did you ever play about with women before you married Mother?"

Commander Compton's face flushed slightly. As they say a drowning man remembers his whole life in a single second, so he saw the reel of his youth unrolled in a series of pictures which sped past his mental vision. There was that girl in Constantinople when he was a naval lieutenant. And afterwards

there was a girl at Corfu—a Greek girl with almond-shaped eyes and the figure of a little goddess. . . . And at Gibraltar there was a Spanish girl. . . .

“I was a bit of a young swine,” he admitted painfully. “I philandered with pretty girls who liked the look of my cocked hat and epaulettes.”

“Philandered is a pretty word, Father,” said Madge. “But I won’t press you any more. I understand. That’s why I’m sorry for Simon. You see, he was foolish enough to tell me. In your days you didn’t tell. Isn’t that the difference?”

He had to confess that she had hit him hard. Perhaps that was the difference between his generation and hers. They didn’t hide so much from each other. They discussed these things with an astonishing candour, but he wasn’t sure that it was wise.

“All the same, I believe in the moralities,” he told her. “Simon defends himself and makes a philosophy of liberty which is only another name for self-indulgence. He doesn’t see any sin in it. At his age I admitted the sin and deplored my own weakness. Isn’t that another difference?”

“People don’t believe much in sin nowadays,” said Madge. “Isn’t it an old-fashioned idea, Father? Simon says so.”

“It’s an old-fashioned thing,” said Commander Compton. “It’s as old as hell, my dear. People who deny sin aren’t realists. They’re denying the instinct of the ape which still lurks in us. I’ve seen something of human wickedness in the seaports of the world. It’s indescribable, and beyond all words hideous.”

Madge was silent for a moment, and then spoke seriously again.

“People like Simon say that we ought not to be afraid of our bodies. Simon says that to deny human nature is to make death in life. He thinks England was ruined by the Puritans, and that we haven’t recovered from Oliver Cromwell and his canting Roundheads. Of course, he often talks like that without meaning everything he says. He’s just trying to get at the truth of things.”

“He’s on the wrong track,” said Commander Compton. “His compass doesn’t point to the true north.”

“Somehow,” Madge sighed, “we seem to have lost the compass, Father! I believe it was lost in the Great War. Don’t you?”

They talked for a couple of hours, and Compton came nearer to his daughter than he had ever been since his return. She sat there on the hearthrug by his knees, shading her face sometimes from the warmth of the gas fire, and talking without reserve, as it seemed to him, though she may have kept things back.

Edward Feldmann, Junior, was “after her”, she told him. She liked him a

good deal. He was just a big baby compared with Simon. He had a boyish simplicity of mind, and was absurdly sentimental. He wanted to take her back to America and show her off in New York. Of course, if she married him she would be abominably rich. Even now Edward wanted to plaster her with diamond bracelets and diamond-studded wrist-watches, which, of course, she wouldn't accept. His people had a house on Fifth Avenue—as well as one in Ashville, North Carolina—which must be rather like a millionaire's house in an American movie. Bathrooms to every bedroom. Vistas of spacious rooms. Old masters bought at Christie's. An Italian well-head in the backyard. A Greek statue on the first landing. Footmen standing about in respectful attitudes, waiting to serve cocktails to thirsty guests.

Commander Compton hid his anxiety by a laughing answer.

"Well, there's a chance for you, Madge. Are you going to take it?"

He hoped earnestly in his heart that she would not take it yet awhile.

"Sometimes I'm tempted," she said, putting her head back to smile at him. "I'm tempted when I get lazy or tired. But the smell of grease-paint cures me instantly. I want to go on acting, Father; I don't want to be smothered in diamonds and silk cushions. The only place I want to see in the United States is Hollywood, as an actress in a good screen picture."

"Well, you might get the diamonds without the help of Edward," said her father. "They pay preposterous salaries, I'm told. But if you go to Hollywood I shall go with you, to guard you from gunmen and gangsters."

"They might bump you off, Father!"

She told him that she would soon be looking for a new part. Her present play had been a frost. At least, it was only just paying expenses, if that.

"Couldn't you rest a bit?" asked Commander Compton anxiously. "Couldn't you put in a spell with me and have a peaceful time?"

"Oh, it may be compulsory," she confessed. "Mr. Keening is losing interest in me since those critics were so unkind. Besides, I've seen him lunching lately with a beautiful lady, and I fear the worst! I shall have to trail around the agents or take a part in a touring show."

"The country is very pleasant in an English autumn," said Compton. "I have my eye on a charming little place. Why not keep house for me for a year or two?"

It was his old idea again, but he didn't force it when Madge cried out against that year or two and talked about her career again.

It was one o'clock in the morning before he became aware of the flight of time.

“My darling, look at that clock! Surely it can’t be telling the truth?”

“The very painful truth,” said Madge, laughing at his consternation.

He held her in his arm for a moment before leaving.

“We’ve had a wonderful talk. I seem to know you more, my dear.”

“Don’t you believe it,” she said gaily. “I don’t know myself, Father! I’m just trying to find myself, and I can’t find the real me.”

“Well, anyhow, we can eliminate Master Simon Lambert.”

Madge looked into her father’s eyes with an elusive smile.

“I wonder! I should hate to break his heart utterly and absolutely.”

“But what about young Feldmann?”

Madge lifted her hands with a pretty gesture of perplexity.

“Yes! What about him? That’s the question. And there are others not yet mentioned, Father.”

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed. “I’m the father of ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’!”

“It’s because I *am* pitiful that I’m so perplexed,” she told him. “But it’s time you went, Father. We’ve talked enough, and I’ve given myself away terribly. You know all my naughtiness, or nearly all!”

“God bless you,” he said. “Keep out of danger, my darling.”

“I’ll call for you if I see the red signal,” she promised.

It was his longest evening with her since his coming back to England, but he stayed awake half the night, thinking over that conversation.

She had quarrelled with Simon, but was sorry for him. She liked Edward Feldmann, but didn’t want to marry him. She put acting first. There were other men who had been left out of her self-revelations.

He thought over those words she had said about the compass. “We seem to have lost the compass.” That was the danger of the modern world, and the frightful danger of these young people. They were all drifting on an uncharted sea without a compass. As a naval man he knew the peril of such an adventure. He had a bad dream about it.

XXVIII

In the early autumn Commander Compton bought that place on the Surrey side of Sussex, eight miles south of Guildford. It was an old farmhouse, mostly of Tudor date, except for a Georgian portico and a bit built out to make a drawing-room, with french windows, which rather spoilt the harmony. It had sixty acres of good farming land, and some fine old barns covered with black tar, and a row of admirable pigstyes. There were also a small orchard, and a good kitchen garden, and a tennis lawn and pergola. A sweet place, he thought, with many possibilities of happiness for a man from Malay. It cost him a pretty penny, which made a hole in his savings, but he had hopes of making it pay something back, although the previous tenant—that ex-officer—talked gloomily about English agriculture. He had had bad luck with his pigs, and had had to slaughter his herd by order of the Board of Agriculture, without compensation.

"It's no good growing a damn' thing," he said. "Foreign stuff pours into Covent Garden at cut-throat prices. It's not worth the cost of labour to pick the fruit. As for wheat—well, of course, it's simple lunacy to grow it in this country. Canada is over-producing and world prices make English farmers look silly."

"What about milk?" asked Commander Compton hopefully. He had an idea of doing a bit of dairy farming.

The late owner of Broadmead Farm admitted that milk helped to keep the wolf from the door. But there was nothing much in it unless one produced on a big scale.

A gloomy fellow, thought Commander Compton. Probably he had no instinct for farming and would make a mess of any business he put his hand to. In any case, there was his main object in buying Broadmead. It would make a nice home for Madge, now that she couldn't get another part, or, at least, was getting disheartened by a sudden slump in theatrical production owing to numerous failures and the competition of the Talkies.

The play which he had disliked so much came to an abrupt end after a ten weeks' run, and that fellow Keening, the producer, had not found a part for Madge in his next venture, much to her distress and disappointment, although she tried to hide it and was very brave about it. She accepted a small part in a play at the Lyric, Hammersmith, which she acted delightfully, as her father

thought, in an eighteenth century revival. But that was doing poor business and Madge anticipated its withdrawal. Meanwhile, she was keeping in touch with her agent and hoping for a place in a new play by Somerset Maugham announced for the autumn.

“I’ve set my heart on it, Father. If I don’t get that I shall begin to lose faith in myself. I’m pulling strings shamelessly.”

“I hope you’ll get it, my dear,” said Compton, but he was aware of a little insincerity at the back of his mind. At least, he would not grieve if Madge had time to rest a little. It would be very pleasant if she could spend a few months with him at Broadmead as soon as he had put the place shipshape and made it nice for her. They went down there one day, and she fell in love with the place, although her enthusiasm was somewhat impersonal.

“It’s a dream,” she said, “especially when the sun is shining, as it sometimes condescends to do. But, Father, I shall miss you horribly when you leave Town. It’s so nice having you round the corner.”

Commander Compton put his arm round her as they strolled down to the orchard.

“I’m hoping you’ll come here a good deal, Madge. Weekends. When you’re resting. Even, perhaps, when you’re acting. It’s not much of a run from Town. An hour and a half after theatre time when the roads are clear. You can drive down in that car I’m going to buy, and get back in time for the first act. You would have enough fresh air to make it worth while.”

She laughed at him and patted his hand.

“But, Father, you can’t spend all your time getting up to Town and back. What about the cattle and pigs, poor dears? Won’t they want a little attention?”

“Oh, I shall get a good man to take charge,” he told her. “Some young fellow who wants to learn farming, and who will keep an eye on the men. I expect I shall have to employ seven or eight lads, in addition to one or two old stagers who know the local conditions and how to get the best out of a piece of land like this. I shall just pretend to tell them what to do, and walk around with a straw in my mouth, looking important.”

He meant to do more than that really. He had already bought a batch of books on practical farming, soils and manures, pig-keeping for profit, dairy farms and small holdings. He intended to study the subject scientifically and show some of his neighbours that English farming could pay if properly organized on up-to-date lines.

The reading of these books and frequent visits to Guildford, Farnham, Horsham and other towns, where he prowled about for bargains in old furniture suitable to a Tudor farmhouse, made the time pass with astonishing

rapidity, and broke down that sense of loneliness and futility which had overcome him at times upon his return from the Malay States. He was not going to rush into the farming side of things until he had had a good look round and made himself knowledgeable about its possibilities. For some months he would concentrate on the house and garden, and he was already having the flower-beds and the rose garden put in order after three years' neglect by the late owner, who had let the weeds get the upper hand. There was going to be an herbaceous border each side of the pergola leading down to the orchard. He wanted to see Madge walking between tall hollyhocks and delphiniums and old-fashioned flowers in big clumps of colour.

Then the house wanted modernizing from the point of view of a woman's comfort. He had three bathrooms put in—one of white marble next to the room which Madge would have. It was the most charming room in the house, apart from the dining-room, with its panelled walls and mullion windows. It looked out across the meadows and the orchard as far as the eye could see, to the Sussex downs, with Chanctonbury Ring clearly visible on fine days.

He gave a good deal of thought to the decoration of this room, and spent no end of time choosing a wallpaper, before deciding upon a pattern of tiny rosebuds like one of Kate Greenaway's designs. Then there was a chintz to choose in the same style, very dainty and bright for a girl's bedroom. He was rather pleased with a swing mirror of the William and Mary period which he had picked up in Horsham. Madge would be able to see her beauty from top to toe in that long oval, which no doubt had reflected many pretty faces in the past. Then there was a stunning little dressing-table which he bought for her in Guildford, with tiny drawers on each side of its well, and Georgian candlesticks fixed to the mirror above. There was no fake about it. He found an old workbox in one of its long drawers, with a needle still threaded and stuck into a bit of silk as some woman's hand had put it away for the last time. He handled it with a touch of sentiment, and wondered if she were anything like his own grandmother, whom he remembered dimly as a boy. She, too, used to work flowers on silk. Now women had other interests, like Madge and red-headed Jean.

Jean came down with him two or three times to see Broadmead, and was more enthusiastic even than Madge.

"It's my idea of Paradise. If you would like a sturdy wench to keep pigs for you, or look after a poultry farm, I'm ready to offer myself at a low price. I could do a bit of commercial art in my spare time. I might even be a goose-girl, with my wild red hair tempting the local artist to put me in his foregrounds."

"What about supper parties in Bloomsbury and sausage parties in

Chelsea?” asked Commander Compton, laughing at her.

“I should leave them without a pang. I have no further use for self-conscious young men who vie with each other in verbal wickedness. I am tired of the intellectual female who raves about Epstein and pretends to believe that D. H. Lawrence is greater than Shakespeare. Give me the simple life. Give me pigs. ‘Stay me up with flowers. Compass me with apples.’ ”

Compton wondered just for a moment whether he might take her offer seriously. It would be nice to have this girl to help him keep house while Madge was away. She was a good scout. If she took up a poultry farm, or even those mythical pigs—he was rather against pigs because of Madge’s dislike for their aroma—she would do her job very well, he was certain. But, of course, she was only pulling his leg, as she generally did now that they were on friendly terms, like uncle and niece.

They had a picnic lunch one day in the orchard, and she sprawled on the thin dry grass below the apple trees with her face to the sun—it was a day in late September—and her hat flung to one side.

“Freckles or no freckles,” she said, “I worship the sun god. Glory be to the sun! This is life. This is nature. Let me sleep awhile, Commander, and forget the awful fact that I have to do an advertisement of Zeno’s Fruit Salts before Thursday morning.”

“Sleep as long as you like, my child,” said Commander Compton. “I’ll put on a pipe and meditate about soils and manures, which I find better than poetry.”

She smiled with shut eyes, but didn’t go to sleep, as he observed, and presently lit a Gold Flake cigarette and puffed it through her freckled little nose.

Compton interrupted her thoughts, after an agreeable spell of silence.

“Do you think I shall be able to lure Madge down to this place?”

Jean stretched her arms and laughed.

“As a temporary refuge from the chill blasts of adversity. I don’t think she’s going to get that part in the Maugham play. A little old bird whispered to me last night—a little old bird with a beak—that she hadn’t an earthly chance.”

Compton was thoughtful.

“It will be a great disappointment to her if that’s true. She has set her heart on it.”

“Yes,” said Jean. “Our Madge has high ambitions. Well, she’ll have her spirit broken yet. The theatrical world is without mercy and—at the moment—without money. I know half a dozen winsome lassies who haven’t smelt their

grease-paint for a year or more, and very talented too. As I said before, poor Madge ought to marry one of those boys who are panting for her. Personally I hope she will put Simon out of his misery. They are meant for each other. God has told me so.”

“Nonsense!” Compton answered, rather sharply. “She has given Simon his marching orders. They haven’t seen each other for weeks.”

“They saw each other last night,” said Jean calmly. “She went to supper with him at Sovrani’s. I happened to be dining with an advertising manager—a nasty bit of work!—at a neighbouring table.”

Commander Compton was startled at this piece of information. He was under the impression that Simon had sulked off after that scene in Madge’s room.

“I can’t understand it,” he said. “They quarrel every time they meet. Madge has no use for the fellow. Why does he keep hanging round? Personally, I don’t like his manners, and I don’t like his morals. He seems to me a bad type, and I’m sorry for his mother, for whom I have a great regard.”

“Simon’s all right,” said Jean.

Compton was astonished by that verdict from Jean Macgregor, for whom also he had a high regard because of her common sense and sturdy character and humorous shrewdness.

“How can you say that?” he asked. “You know more than I do about that affair he had with another girl. You know his pestilential opinions.”

“Exactly. I know what I know. That other girl happened to share rooms with me once. It was a pity I didn’t scrag her, as I was often tempted to. Believe me, she wasn’t a lady like Miss O’Grady. I hate to say unkind things of my sister women, but that girl was frankly—well, perhaps I had better not say the exact word, remembering your sensibilities. Poor Simon asked for trouble, of course, and she provided it. Then he was sorry for himself. As for his opinions, you needn’t take them seriously. He’s just groping for a little light in the darkness of his own bewilderment.”

“What’s his trouble?” asked Compton impatiently.

Jean Macgregor smiled at the sky.

“It’s a bewildering world, isn’t it? Didn’t men of your age help to make it so? I mean, didn’t they upset everything by their little War and its aftermath? Don’t the Simons of to-day need a little patience because they’re utterly uncertain of anything in this time of intellectual mush? Simon is perfectly sound—deep down. Only he thinks too much and finds things missing in the jig-saw puzzle of life—most important things, like love and faith.”

Commander Compton glanced sideways at this girl—how old was she?—lying full stretched on the grass, with a cigarette between two fingers stained with nicotine.

“Good heavens! You talk like a book. Did you really make all that up, or have you heard someone else say that kind of thing?”

Jean was amused by his simple astonishment.

“Mere platitudes! My father was a ‘meenister’ of the Wee Frees, and a highly intellectual man. I’ve inherited his power of thought. You’d be surprised how easily I can say those things!”

“You talk like a wise old woman looking back on youth,” said Compton.

“It’s what I feel,” said Jean. “I was twenty-six last birthday, and no man has offered me his loving heart. I’m a withered virgin. When I listen to the prattle of these baby boys in Bloomsbury I feel like some ancient witch.”

Compton burst out laughing in a hearty naval way.

“My dear child, you really are a champion leg-puller!”

XXIX

It was some six weeks later that Madge knew for certain that there was to be no part for her in the Maugham play. She took it rather hard, and her father was distressed to find her crying in his room at Knightsbridge Court one evening when she had called on her way to the theatre. She hid her face from him when he appeared, and pretended to be quite cheerful, but he saw instantly that something had gone wrong, and that her eyes were wet with tears.

"What's the matter, my dear?" he asked anxiously. "Is there anything a faithful father can do for you?"

"Oh, it's nothing," she answered quite bravely. "In the theatrical world one has to resign oneself to constant disappointment."

And then she began crying again, and wept very bitterly when her father put his arm round her.

"Oh, Father, I've lost that part! Mr. Keening told a friend of mine—the one who was trying to pull strings—that I couldn't act for nuts. That's because I wouldn't let him make love to me. But perhaps it's true, all the same, about my acting. Even Jean doesn't think I'm any good, and Simon says I have the charm of the amateur!"

Compton was angry and comforting.

"They're all wrong. I think you're wonderful. I sit entranced when you're on the stage. As for that blackguard Keening, I'll go and push his face in. Unspeakable scoundrel!"

Madge laughed through her tears.

"Father, you mustn't do that! I shouldn't like to see you in the police court. But it's very sweet of you, all the same. How absurd I am!"

She felt absurd because she began to cry again, with a rush of tears for which her little lace handkerchief was quite inadequate.

Compton took her to the theatre that night, and sat through the play at the Lyric, Hammersmith, watching her from the second row of the stalls, surprised because she showed no sign of grief, but played very charmingly as usual in the part of a laughing lady of the eighteenth century.

A young man in the stalls, sitting next to him, spoke to the girl who was with him.

"That tall thing is rather a peach, don't you think? The one in the pink

frock.”

“Do you think so? Yes, I suppose she’s not bad-looking. Too tall, perhaps.”

“An English rose,” said the young man. “I wish I could take her out to supper. What’s her name?”

Commander Compton heard his daughter’s name whispered, as his neighbours in the stalls—brother and sister, he thought—looked at the programme. He had a sense of foolish pride in this praise of Madge’s beauty, and he liked that expression “an English rose”. Yes, Madge was flowerlike and exquisite. That young man recognized beauty when he saw it, but it was cheek of him to say he wanted to take her out to supper, as though she were a chorus girl of the old type.

“Nothing doing, my lad!” said Commander Compton inside his head.

The play at the Lyric did not last beyond September, and after that Madge was disengaged and tired, and glad to drive her father in his new Vauxhall to Broadmead Farm, ten miles south of Guildford, where Surrey looks across the fields to Sussex. The house was all ready for her. There was a motherly woman from the village engaged as cook-housekeeper, with her daughter Lizzie as maid-of-all-work. The sun was streaming through the leaded window-panes and putting high lights on polished furniture, which had been picked up in “antique” shops.

“Home, Madge!” said Commander Compton. “I hope you’ll like it.”

XXX

MADGE liked Broadmead Farm in a mild October when the weather behaved itself remarkably well for an uncertain climate. She was really tired at first, and secretly dejected, as her father guessed, so that she seemed to be content to lie in a deck-chair in a pleasant corner under the shelter of the old house, reading theatrical papers or the sixpenny illustrateds, with occasional absorption in a new novel by Galsworthy, getting towards the last phase of the "Forsyte Saga", but with "Fleur" still carrying on the tale into present times.

"I think I'm rather like Fleur," she said once, but her father was not familiar with that lady.

"She must be nice to know," he answered. "I suppose you wouldn't care to rouse yourself and look at six Jerseys—first-class milkers unless I've been deceived—which have just arrived from Horsham market? I'm putting them in the lower meadow across the stream. My cowman is a first-class fellow. He was one of the lads who entered Jerusalem with Allenby when he pushed the Turks out of Palestine."

"Does that improve his quality as a cowman?" asked Madge, teasing her father for this extraordinary *non sequitur*.

"Well, it probably broadened his mind a bit. These country fellows aren't the same as their agricultural ancestors. You'd be surprised at the things they know and the things they've done. I could stand talking to them for hours if it weren't bad for discipline. One of the labourers fought in Flanders and was blown up by a mine. Another was telling me that he spent three years in German prison camps. And that nice-looking man rolling the lawn was submarined three times in the North Sea. When I hear things like that I feel proud of old England. These fellows came back to their jobs quietly with all that terrific experience in their minds. Fine, isn't it?"

"Sentimentalist!" Madge laughed at him. "Patriotism is not enough. Did someone important say that, or am I quoting Simon?"

She roused herself to look at the six Jerseys. She pretended to be interested—perhaps she was interested—in her father's farmstead and various agricultural machines he had acquired for future use—a brand new reaper-and-binder, a separator, a harrow with gleaming points, a plough which, he said, was a sacred symbol of man's labour on earth. She even listened very patiently and good-humouredly when he discoursed on soils and manures, root crops,

deep trenching, the Government subsidy on sugar-beet, and other subjects of technical importance which he had acquired by recent study until he became conscience-stricken at the thought of boring her.

“I’m not bored, Father, honour bright! I like to take an interest in the things that interest you.”

That was sweet of her. She even learnt to play chess with him in the evenings, when the lamps were lit under the old beams, and when Compton drew the window-blinds and thought how cosy it all was, and how happy he was to have a home at last after so much wandering.

But he noticed odd little things about her which made him anxious now and then, lest she should get tired of this country life. She became restless and uneasy always at about seven o’clock in the evening, and listened to the heavy tick of the old grandfather clock in the corner of the room, and glanced towards the door, or wandered up and down the long room, drawing the chintz curtains to look out into the garden where long shadows crept across the lawn.

“You look restless, my dear,” he said once. “Feeling lonely with a one-armed father?”

She explained the reason for her restlessness with a self-conscious laugh.

“I know. It’s silly, isn’t it? But I always feel on edge about this time. All actresses do. It’s an hour before the curtain rings up.”

Often when he was reading one of his books on agriculture he noticed that she was poring over the advertisements in one of her stage papers, and he heard her sigh sometimes and look up with a kind of wistfulness, as though seeing something she wanted beyond the panelled walls of an old farmhouse.

“How good a wood fire smells,” he remarked one evening when she was at the hearthside with her chin propped in the cup of her hand and her elbow in the arm of an oak settle. A pretty picture she made, he thought, in an old-fashioned frock which she had worn at the Lyric.

She looked up and smiled.

“Yes. But I prefer the smell of grease-paint. I hope I shall get an autumn engagement.”

“Must you?” he asked tenderly. “I was rather hoping you might develop a love of country life.”

He knew that he would feel desolate in this old farmhouse if she went up to Town again.

She was perfectly candid with him.

“I must have my own life, Father. After touring the provinces and getting into London productions, I can’t suddenly drop all my little ambitions and the

thrill of it all—it's frightfully thrilling, Father!—for jam-making and dairy work. Besides . . ."

She looked across at him with a shy kind of smile, and then laughed and plucked one of the petals of a ragged chrysanthemum in the big bowl which made a centre-piece for the gate-legged table.

"Besides what? Tell me the full and brutal truth, Madge."

"Well, I have lots of friends in Town. They're beginning to miss me. I don't like deserting them too long."

"All those amorous males, you mean? A father's curse upon them!"

He stared over at her, and she blushed under his steel-blue gaze.

"Poor dears!" she said. "Some of them are very amusing, and perfectly harmless."

He came to know some of these harmless and amusing gentlemen at least by name and reputation, because in the evenings they had together, those long evenings when Madge sat on the hearthrug near his chair, smoking too many cigarettes, or curled herself up on the window-seat with pillows to make her comfortable, she talked now and then of her London friends, and filled up certain gaps in the story of her life which she had not written in those letters which went out to an exiled father by way of Singapore.

There was that young lawyer in the Temple, Vincent Haseltine. He had been very devoted to her. It was through his influence with an uncle who owned a ring of theatres in the provinces that she had gained her first engagement in musical comedy. Vincent wasn't much of a success at the Bar, but he could afford to take her out to dinner sometimes, and she felt she owed him something. Besides, he was the nicest kind of person. He ought to have been an artist really, because he had that kind of temperament.

Then there was Hartley Trowbridge, who did a job in a garage at Hammersmith and lived over a mews, to which he invited her sometimes with Jean and others, although there was hardly space enough to turn round in his rooms. He was very amusing, and made her laugh more than anyone she knew. He suggested marriage every time she saw him, but didn't press the point unduly, as he was only earning three pounds a week, and that was uncertain. His father had been Chief Justice, or something of the kind, in New Zealand, but he hadn't left any money worth talking about, and Hartley was one of those men who couldn't fit into any ordinary job. His chief qualifications in life were a gift of humorous back-chat and a devotion to the English concertina, which he played like an angel. . . .

There was also Dick Wendover, the son of a Canon of Winchester, who was in a stockbroker's office in Threadneedle Street, eating his heart out

because he hated the job—like Simon in his insurance office—and wanted to become an air pilot. He had missed the boat by having been born two years too late. That is to say, he hadn't made his application before he was twenty-three. He was quite absurd in some ways. He had been to see the play at the Royalty twenty-three times merely for the sake of looking at Madge from the front row of the stalls. It was embarrassing because the programme girls made a joke of it, and the man in the box office had passed the word along to the acting-manager, who chaffed her about "the constant swain", as he called Dick. He was very noticeable, having pale gold hair and a face like the angel Gabriel. His sister Nancy had been up at Somerville with Madge. Now she was doing foot-and-mouth disease at the Lister Institute.

Commander Compton took his pipe out of his mouth and raised his eyebrows.

"Good heavens! What a queer crowd you are nowadays!"

These confidences about Madge's friends slipped out every now and then, and not as a continued narrative, and her father listened with interest and amusement, and was careful not to make any comments which might have caused self-consciousness. It was obvious that Madge had a choice of lovers. The odd thing was that she had not lost her heart to any of them, as far as he could make out, apart from her girlish love affair with Simon, which seemed to have faded out, and a slight leaning towards Edward Feldmann, Junior, who at the moment was in Paris with his people. Her stage career seemed to have the first place in her imagination and interest. Nothing else mattered nearly as much.

Once a week—on Thursdays—she went up to town to visit her agent. Compton motored with her to Guildford Station—one of the gardeners acted as chauffeur when required—and went to meet the six o'clock train by which she came back.

"Any luck?" he asked always.

"Nothing doing," she answered dejectedly. "There's a dreadful slump in plays just now."

He remembered that woman he had met outside Palace Chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue.

"Nothing doing," she had told him, believing that he belonged to her profession. If she had a daughter, she said, she would rather see her drowned than become an actress. Well, it wasn't so bad as all that, as far as Madge was concerned. She had a father to look after her, and no need of a weekly wage.

XXXI

THERE were some good days for Commander Compton with Madge at home with him. Desperately afraid lest she should get bored, he encouraged her to ask her friends down for long week-ends, or for more than that if they liked to stay.

Jean Macgregor needed no pressing. She had fallen in love with Broadmead, and after one or two short visits brought down most of her movable possessions, including an easel and canvases, and stayed three weeks without a break. “Getting back to Nature”, she called it, with a zest which was pleasant to watch. Abandoning commercial art for a time, she painted some remarkable landscapes in the modern style, which an old-fashioned man thought clever but distressing. She also revealed unexpected knowledge of gardening, and discussed the subject of herbaceous borders and rock plants in a professional way with the man who had been torpedoed three times earlier in history. As an early riser she had three hours more daylight than Madge, who liked to have her breakfast in bed, and Commander Compton tramped the farm with her, or met her coming back from lonely walks with her red hair blowing wild and her eyes filled with humorous delight at this escape from London pavements and the offices of advertising agents. The sight of a jack rabbit scampering to its burrow made her laugh, and, as there were hundreds of them frisking about in the early hours, she had good entertainment. She became excited at finding squirrels in one of the copses, and lured them into friendship with an offer of breakfast. She established cordial relations with Compton’s cows, and helped to milk them with an efficiency which won the approval of Compton’s cowman.

“She has a way with ’em,” he said one day. “The young lady would make a good wife for a farmer, I will say.”

Well, it was nice to have her there; nice for Madge who was always amused by this free-speaking young woman so utterly different from herself in temperament, but devoted to her under a mockery of disapproval.

Other friends or relatives came down from Town for a night or two in an old farmhouse for which they were loud in admiration, as a rule, with the exception of Compton’s sisters, Elizabeth and Emily, who were wedded to London life and became frankly bored towards the end of a week-end visit. Emily missed her bridge club, and was annoyed with Jean for taking her for a walk in damp woods where she made her feet wet.

“Give me London pavements and taxicabs!” she exclaimed at dinner. “So much more civilized, after all. I can’t think why you want to bury yourself in this isolated place, Stephen. I should have thought that after your exile in the Malay States you would have preferred the amenities of Town—your club, theatres, little dinner parties with old friends. It won’t suit Madge, you know. I can see the lure of London in her eyes.”

“Rubbish!” said her brother sharply. “Madge loves the place. Don’t you, my dear?”

Madge smiled at him across the table.

“You know I do, Father. But I dare say I shall hear London calling one of these days.”

“Of course you will,” said Aunt Emily. “It’s the one place where one feels alive. I know what this country life is, having been married to it at an early age. The Furnivals of Sussex—bless their ancient bones! The things I suffered as a lady of the county! All those vicars! All those vicars’ wives! All those elderly colonels and county families! Then there were the gardeners who were always getting the servant girls into trouble. And the house parties, which used to be an endless bother without any pleasure for the unfortunate woman who had to provide the comforts of her husband’s guests! Oh, I did my duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call me, but honestly I prefer a little house in Knightsbridge with one maid and a char. If it weren’t for my discontented daughters, who disapprove of my manners and morals, I should be happier than I’ve ever been.”

Madge’s Aunt Betty was extremely miserable during a week at Broadmead, and spent most of her time doing cross-word puzzles or listening to the wireless. She was terrified of six harmless cows, whom she regarded as wild beasts likely to gore her if she were in their neighbourhood; and when Jean Macgregor dragged her out for afternoon walks, she had a strong conviction that that young woman’s red hair was likely to infuriate any bull who might be lurking behind the high hedges. Her ancient grudge against Madge for unseemly conduct at Mentone—that affair in the Casino with a French artist who looked like an apache—still persisted, and she did not disguise her belief, in private conversation with her brother, that Madge’s stage career would end inevitably in immorality.

“You ought to forbid her to go back, Stephen,” she said more than once. “Now that you have dragged her away from that loose way of life, you ought to see that she marries some nice man who would look after her and tame her down. I thought that clergyman who called this afternoon was delightful, and he seemed very much taken with Madge.”

Commander Compton answered good-naturedly, although he felt his temper rising.

“My dear Betty, I haven’t dragged Madge away from the stage. She’s down here entirely of her own free will. And I can’t forbid her to go back if she wants to go back. And I can’t make her marry anybody she doesn’t want to marry. And she doesn’t need taming. And that clergyman is only one of many others who are much taken with my pretty Madge. This place is likely to be overcrowded with amorous males. They’re already beginning to swarm.”

“Don’t be coarse, Stephen, I beg of you,” said his sister.

The word “swarm” was an exaggeration, but there were quite a number of calls from neighbours within a radius of ten miles, and Commander Compton was amused and not at all displeased to see how the men, who motored their wives or their mothers from little old manor houses or neighbouring farmsteads, lit up at the sight of Madge.

Retired colonels became talkative over the tea-table and neglected their ladies for the chance of conversation with youth and beauty. They hoped earnestly that she was fond of golf, and were distressed when she confessed that the game didn’t interest her. They invited her to inspect their rock gardens. One of them showed such open infatuation that his wife—one of those frank-spoken, humorous ladies who walk about the English countryside in short skirts and big boots—reproved him at the tea-table.

“Now, Frank, stop that flirting with Miss Compton. It’s thirty years since you became a respectable married man. Don’t forget you’re getting old and bald.”

Colonel Urquhart, once of the 17th Lancers, blushed like a schoolboy, and laughed uneasily.

“My dear Louisa, what outrageous things you do say! If an old buffer like me can’t pay a compliment to a charming young lady without being held up to public mockery, life becomes intolerable.”

Mrs. Urquhart took another piece of cake—she had a country appetite—and discussed her husband’s character as though he were not in the same room.

“Frank was always a philanderer. I had a terrible time with him in India. It’s a marvel I still keep him as a husband. Even now he loses his head at the sight of a pretty girl. Still, I will say there’s not much temptation in this neighbourhood. We’re mostly old and ugly hereabouts. The younger people are lured up to Town.”

She relieved her husband’s embarrassment by changing the topic.

“It’s very brave of you, Commander, to start farming at this time of day.

Most of us are trying to sell our houses to pay for income tax. As for farming, all I can say is, God help you, because this Labour Government certainly won't. I suppose in another year or two we shall all have to apply for the dole. And then they won't give it us, the wretches, after dragging us down to blue ruin. Personally, I would like to shoot some of those Labour leaders. Bolshies to a man."

The clergyman who called and revealed to the observant eyes of Aunt Betty that he was much taken with Madge was cautiously Radical in some of his opinions. He confessed that he found a country parish in Surrey somewhat stifling intellectually and spiritually after a curacy at Wapping.

"It's rather a backwater," he remarked with a shy smile at Madge. "I take tea five days a week with elderly maiden ladies, mostly in the eighties, who have rather Victorian views of life. They are all convinced that morality died with Queen Victoria, and that elementary education has demoralized the working classes. Well, I don't want to be unfair to them. There are one or two old dames who keep their minds alert and admit that there's more happiness for more people nowadays. But on the whole, I don't have a very thrilling time down here."

His name was the Reverend Horace Whitton, and he was a pleasant neighbour to have, being a great reader—Jean and Madge discussed the latest books with him—and a broadminded man. But it was pitifully clear that he had fallen instantly under the spell of Madge's beauty. Being a shy man he blushed when he spoke to her, and even when he was talking to other people his eyes strayed in her direction. He made transparent excuses to come round more often than was really necessary, to lend a book which they had been discussing, or to bring some plants for Commander Compton's flower-beds.

Commander Compton watched his daughter with smiling eyes in the presence of this adoration, and once she read his thoughts and smiled back at him with a slight blush. She was perfectly aware that the clergyman was another victim of her fatal beauty, as she called it, and that the elderly colonel and other neighbours found her attractive. No one—certainly not her father—could accuse her seriously of flirting with these men—young or old. She talked to them simply and straightforwardly, without self-consciousness or deliberate allurement. Perhaps that was part of her charm. She made them feel that she was interested in their conversation and point of view.

Not seriously, but chaffingly, her father spoke to her about this disturbing effect she had upon the male population of rural England, to say nothing of London town.

They were walking out on the terrace above the lawn and the long pergola.

It was a mild night for the time of year, and the sky was full of stars above them, and the air reeked with the scent of wet earth and decayed leaves. Through the lozenge-shaped panes of the sitting-room window they could see Jean Macgregor leaning over a book with her elbows on the table. The Reverend Horace Whitton had just left, after some amiable pretext for a visit. They could see his headlights climbing the road which was the boundary of Broadmead Farm on the south side.

“Madge,” said Commander Compton, “there goes another of your victims. My dear child, you’re merciless to these poor men.”

She took him seriously for a moment.

“Father, it’s not my fault, honestly. I don’t do anything to make them fond of me. I just listen to what they have to say, and try to be reasonably intelligent. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t been born with a face men seem to like. If I just look at them they melt. It’s frightfully absurd.”

“It’s a privilege,” said Compton, with a cheerful laugh. “You go about with the gift of beauty—the most precious thing in life.”

Madge tucked her hand through his arm.

“It’s because I’m young, Father. These elderly colonels don’t see many girls about. I remind them of their youth, I expect, poor dears.”

“Yes, you take ’em back to romance—the beauty they missed, judging from their lady wives! As an elderly gent, I know the charm of a pretty face. It brings back dreams—and regret for boyhood and passion that has passed. I’m glad you’re sorry for the greyheads. It shows a kind heart, my dear. But what about that middle-aged clergyman, and others not yet middle-aged?”

He spoke lightly, not taking this kind of thing too seriously.

“It’s the same thing,” said Madge. “Mr. Whitton is surrounded by old fogeys. When he sees a girl like me he gets romantic and sentimental. I can’t help it, Father. It just happens. I don’t ask for it, I assure you.”

Commander Compton squeezed his daughter’s arm.

“You’re a public benefactor, my dear. You and I are a handsome couple. People like to look at us. We distribute largesse merely by showing ourselves.”

Madge laughed, and through the lozenge-shaped panes Jean Macgregor raised her head from her book to smile at them, though she couldn’t see them, looking out from the lighted room.

“By the by,” said Madge, “Edward Feldmann, Junior, is back from Paris. He’s motoring over to-morrow—so he says in a letter I had to-day. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Why should I?”

Madge did not answer that “Why should I?” but her father noticed that she held his arm tighter. He wondered, with a momentary sense of panic, whether the visit of Edward Feldmann, Junior, had any significance of an unusual kind. Madge held his arm tighter, as though she wished to keep him close to her.

XXXII

YOUNG Feldmann arrived at Broadmead in a powerful car—a Chrysler Six—which swung in through the open gate and swept round the drive in great style before standing outside a Tudor farmhouse as a contrast between things new and old. Young Feldmann himself, in a suit of plus-fours, looked as English as any undergraduate of Oxford, and a photographer taking a plate of one of England's ancient homesteads would have liked his figure in the foreground as he stood talking to Madge and Jean after sounding his horn to announce his arrival. Only one or two expressions of admiration for a Tudor front revealed his family background in North Carolina.

"Well, now, I must say this is a great old mansion! That oriel window reminds me of an Oxford college. This certainly is a real old place."

"That certainly looks like a real new car," remarked Jean Macgregor, gazing in awe and wonder at the Chrysler Six. "What are you going to do about it in Church Street, Chelsea? It's too grand for the neighbours, laddie."

Young Feldmann explained that his parents had bought it for a tour in France. He had driven them from Paris to Monte Carlo and back again to Cherbourg, from whence they had sailed a fortnight ago. They had left it behind as a birthday gift, and he had found a garage for it in the King's Road.

Madge and Jean laughed in a duet of mirth at this generosity of American parents.

"They left it behind," said Madge, "just as I should leave an old shoe behind, or a sixpenny trinket from Woolworth's! Oh, you abominably rich Americans! Aren't you ashamed of yourselves when the rest of the world is sinking into squalor?"

Young Feldmann agreed that some of his fellow countrymen were slightly conscience-stricken about the easy way in which they piled up dollars, but didn't let it worry them into sleeplessness.

"My honoured parents," he announced later in the day, "desire my early return to the home circle. In fact, I'm under orders to appear with or without the Chrysler Six by a boat sailing on the fifteenth of this month, in order to learn the trick of the banking business in North Carolina. Alas, I shall miss the charm and romance of little old England. Sad, isn't it?"

"Little old England will miss the charm and romance of Edward Feldmann, Junior," said Jean demurely. "The sunshine won't have the same glint in it

down Church Street, Chelsea.”

His head wasn’t turned by this outrageous flattery. He knew that red-headed girl.

“What do *you* say about it?” he asked, turning to Madge. “Do you think I ought to obey parental wishes or postpone filial obedience for another year or two?”

For some reason Madge blushed slightly, and her eyelashes fluttered as she answered him.

“The United States seems to want you. Didn’t you say so in your letter?”

Edward Feldmann looked at her in her country frock, as though he liked the picture she made framed in the doorway of an old farmhouse.

“I’m a perfectly good American, but I’m not in a hurry to go back. There’s a great deal of beauty in England which I shall miss on the other side. Unless, of course . . .”

He did not finish the sentence, and smiled into Madge’s eyes. It was Jean who finished his sentence.

“You mean unless you take it with you. This old Tudor house, for instance—stone by stone for the residential section of Ashville, North Carolina? On behalf of its present owner I’m obliged to tell you that it isn’t for sale, laddie. Is there anything else you would like to take back with you? Ancient treasures for dollar bills? Old masterpieces for American homes? Jacobean furniture, mantelpieces, old panelling? Oh, strip us in our poverty! We are still paying for a war in which you turned up rather late. But there are some things which we won’t sell.”

“Jean,” said Madge, “don’t be an ass. You know you can’t ruffle Edward by that kind of nonsense.”

Jean pretended to be huffed.

“Nonsense? It’s the cold and hideous truth. I’m warning the young man that although we may have to sell our pictures, there are some things we prefer to keep—and one of them is our soul.”

“There’s nothing I want to buy,” said young Feldmann. “And whatever happens, I shall leave half my heart in England.”

“Heavens, our distinguished visitor is becoming sentimental!” cried Jean. “Very soon this hard-boiled business man will be talking about mother love, and borrowing my handkerchief!”

“Jean,” cried Madge, “how utterly absurd you are!”

The idea of young Feldmann being described as a hard-boiled American

man of business made her laugh almost hysterically. They were all laughing when Commander Compton came through the gate, looking very squire-like in riding-breeches and gaiters, with his empty sleeve tucked into his pocket. They didn't know or guess that a shadow crossed his mind for a moment as he saw young Feldmann standing by the side of his big car. In such a car he might drive Madge away one day, and leave a lonely man behind.

Feldmann took both the girls for a drive that afternoon, and then after tea went for a stroll with Madge down to the copse beyond the stream, leaving Jean behind to read her book.

But she didn't read her book all the time. She raised her head and smiled at Commander Compton where he stood in front of his fireplace smoking a pipe before having a look round the farm.

"I'm afraid you may be losing Madge. That boy has come here with serious intent. He's going to ask Madge to go back with him to the wilds of North Carolina."

Commander Compton answered sharply: "Nonsense! What makes you think that?"

He could not disguise his anxiety and apprehension.

Jean teased him again.

"I saw it in his eyes. I saw it in Madge's eyes. She had a letter from him yesterday, and has been very thoughtful ever since. Of course it's a good offer. Edward's father, I understand, has half a million dollars or more to pass on to Edward, Junior. One can lead the simple life very nicely on half a million dollars or more—especially with a nice boy with kinky hair and the face of a Dana Gibson hero. If I were Madge I shouldn't turn him down without serious consideration. But, then, I'm not Madge."

Commander Compton's face went rather grey for a moment. He was annoyed with this red-headed girl for suggesting the idea, though it had been haunting him ever since he saw that boy in the drive.

"You're talking rubbish. Madge thinks of nothing but her stage career. This boy means nothing to her. And she's not a girl to be tempted by a wealthy marriage. Aren't you being rather disloyal?"

Jean flared up for a moment and then laughed.

"Aren't you losing your sense of humour, Commander Compton, sir? I was only trying to ease a delicate situation with a little of my Scottish wit, God help me! Madge doesn't care a cuss for Edward's money. I never said she did. But she's rather fond of this blue-eyed boy. All the same, I hope she won't accept him. Simon's her mate. She's bound to come to him one day, wherever she

goes—or whoever she marries.”

Commander Compton felt a slight chill pass down his spine. He liked this girl Jean—they were good comrades and he was grateful to her—but he wished she wouldn’t say such extraordinary things, such disturbing things.

“You’re a most amazing young woman!” he told her with a nervous laugh. “I believe you like harrowing the feelings of a simple sailor-man.”

“You shouldn’t have such sensitive feelings,” she argued. “It’s not right for any father to love his daughter as much as you dote on Madge. It’s not healthy. You’re only going to get hurt. I’m trying to harden you.”

The idea was too absurd—this artist girl trying to harden an elderly naval man who had lost his arm in the Battle of Jutland!

He saw the humour of it and laughed loudly, but did not get rid of that sense of uneasiness which her conversation had aroused.

XXXIII

MADGE and young Feldmann came back from their walk with a kind of shyness in their eyes, as Jean noticed after a sharp look at them. Madge had a beautiful colour in her cheeks, as though she had been walking fast on this autumn evening.

"You'll stay to supper, of course?" said Commander Compton in his hospitable way to the young American.

"Oh, thanks very much, sir. As a matter of fact, Madge has asked me to spend the week-end. I must confess that I brought a bag down on the off-chance."

"Excellent! Better come up and have a wash."

It was while the boy was washing that Madge came over to her father and put her hands on his shoulders. They were alone together, Jean having departed to her own room, perhaps with the idea of leaving them alone.

"Father," said Madge, "Edward wants me to go to America with him, to stay with his people for awhile. As a matter of fact, he wants me to marry him, but he's going to be patient until I make up my mind."

Commander Compton felt a queer pain in his heart.

"Does that mean I'm going to lose you? I was rather afraid of it, my dear."

He spoke calmly and quietly, but he was taking a knock between the eyes.

Jean Macgregor hadn't hardened him to the idea of losing Madge. During the last few months he had rejoiced in their comradeship. It was rough on him, he felt, that this American boy should grab her.

"I'm afraid it would mean living in the States," said Madge. " 'Thy people shall be my people' and that sort of thing. But I haven't made up my mind, Father. I might hate American life. And, anyhow, I shall hate giving up the stage. But, you see, the stage seems to have given up me. Those agents can't get me the smallest part. I'm rather desperate about it!"

Compton took her hand and held it tight.

"I hope you won't marry that boy out of desperation. If you marry him, I hope it will be because you love him and are perfectly sure of it, old girl. Fatal otherwise, you know!"

"Yes," she said. "I know. And I'm not sure of it, Father. Of course, I like him frightfully."

“Frightfully?”

Commander Compton had the courage and self-control to laugh at that way of putting it, though his heart was in his boots.

Madge laughed too, but not very happily.

“Father, it’s perfectly absurd of me, but I can’t be quite sure of myself or anything. I loved Simon once. I was sure of that. But he smashed things up, and now we don’t get on with each other. Edward loves me very much and he’s perfectly sweet, and I’m very fond of him. Anyhow, I think I shall stay with his people. It means sailing on the fifteenth if I decide to go back with him.”

The fifteenth? That was only a week ahead. In another week Commander Compton would be alone in Broadmead Farm. Somewhere deep down in his heart he felt sorry for himself, but being an old-fashioned Englishman he did not allow this thought to find expression or even creep up below the surface of his subconscious mind.

“I expect they’ll give you a wonderful time,” he said. “And if you make up your mind to marry that boy, I shall be glad of due notice, so that I can come out to your wedding. Do they put on top hats in North Carolina?”

Madge put an arm round his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

“Father, you’re wonderfully good to me! I shall miss you tremendously. Perhaps I’ll come back before long.”

“With that boy?”

“Perhaps I’ll leave him behind! If anybody offers me a part in a good play I’ll abandon all my lovers!”

She spoke with a kind of sincerity underneath this mockery.

Then Edward Feldmann appeared, looking very fresh and spruce after his wash upstairs.

He looked from Madge to her father with a smile which was half shy and half confident.

“Have you broken the fatal news? Does the Commander know that you’ve accepted an invitation to Ashville, North Carolina, with a half promise of staying on if you happen to like it?”

“I’ve told Father,” said Madge.

Young Feldmann turned to Commander Compton.

“Won’t you use your influence, sir, to turn a half promise into a perfectly good contract? Couldn’t you persuade Madge to marry me before the fifteenth, so that we could have a wedding party in little old London? I’m sure all her

friends would like to rally up.”

“It’s for Madge to decide,” said Commander Compton. “Whatever she decides will have my blessing.”

Edward Feldmann, Junior, agreed to this point of view.

“That’s fine. Say, Madge, can’t I persuade you? Your father would give you away, and we could have a wedding breakfast at the Ritz. The Press photographers would have a great treat, and there’d be a crowd of theatrical folk and Chelsea artists. I’m sure Jean would like to be your bridesmaid, and I would do my best to look like an English gentleman of the old school, in pepper-and-salt trousers and a stove-pipe hat. It seems a pity to miss an affair like that! Besides, we should save money by taking a double berth on the *Olympic*!”

Madge took his hand and gave it a little slap.

“Hush, my child. Don’t shock my Edwardian father with your American methods. I’ve told you that I am glad to accept your parents’ invitation to stay with them in North Carolina for a few weeks. That’s as far as I can go.”

Young Feldmann looked at her with a kind of humorous desperation. “Only a few weeks? Make it a few years, Madge, for heaven’s sake! Commander, I want you to be on my side. I’m desperately in love with your daughter. I should make her a faithful husband. My people can afford to give us a good home, with every labour-saving device and no shortage of the essential comforts. If you could exercise a little parental influence . . . !”

Commander Compton shook his head and laughed.

“It’s between you and Madge.”

A maidservant appeared and announced that there was a telephone call from New York for Mr. Edward Feldmann.

“Say I’m engaged,” said young Feldmann. “Say I’m milking cows.”

“Better go, Edward,” said Madge. “New York on the ’phone! Good heavens, how did they know you were here?”

Young Feldmann seemed to think that a ’phone call from New York was no more remarkable than one from London or the next village. He had been expecting a cable from his parents and had rung up the Chelsea post office telling them to ’phone it through to Broadmead. Perfectly simple!

He lingered to have some more words with Madge.

“Three pounds a minute, my lad,” said Commander Compton “Don’t keep them waiting.”

Young Feldmann kept them waiting while he lighted a cigarette. He kept

them waiting for a moment longer to take Madge's hand and raise it to his lips. Then he sloped off to Commander Compton's little smoking-room on the right of the hall.

He came back after six minutes, looking amused and just faintly excited.

"Gee," he said, lapsing into the American language for a moment, "they seem to have gone mad in Wall Street! A bit of a crash. I've just been talking to my father. He seems to be worried about it. Stocks and shares are being thrown on to the market. He seems to have the wind up, as we used to say at Oxford. He wants me to believe that if I don't go back by the next boat he won't be able to pay my passage money—or words to that effect! He seemed annoyed when I started laughing at him. 'I'm a ruined man,' he said more than once. 'That's all right, Dad,' I told him. 'Ask Mother to make ready the best bedroom for the loveliest lady in England who is very glad to accept her invitation.' 'Sonny,' he said, 'don't you understand? It's ruin for all of us. Everything is crashing. It's hell with the lid off. Hell!' 'For heaven's sake. Dad,' I said, 'don't shout bad language down the telephone like that or you'll break the overhead wires in an English village.' Poor old Dad seemed to take it badly. Funny, isn't it, how people like my father—an American business man, all his life in the banking business—get scared when there's a little flutter in Wall Street? Say, Madge, can this old farmhouse produce anything in the shape of a cocktail before mealtime? I'd like to drink to our happy voyage."

Commander Compton produced some brown sherry. But he was thoughtful about that message from New York.

He remembered a conversation with an American gentleman at a dinner with this boy's father. He had prophesied a mighty crash. American prosperity, he said, is going bust with a big bang. There'll be wailing and gnashing of teeth, he said . . . .

Commander Compton had invested some of his savings in American securities. It would be rather awkward if anything happened to them. And on his advice his sister Elizabeth had put a thousand pounds into General Utilities . . . . But, of course, it was inconceivable that anything very serious could happen to American prosperity. They were the richest country on earth, with illimitable resources. Still, there might be a temporary slump, embarrassing to people of small means.

Young Feldmann wasn't worried. He talked very amusingly that evening, and stayed up rather late with Madge, after her father and Jean had gone to bed; so late that Commander Compton, that old-fashioned Englishman, came down in his dressing-gown and tapped at the door before going into his own sitting-room, and called out to them:

“Don’t you young people want any sleep?”

“Coming, Father!” cried Madge. “Edward is describing the social amenities of North Carolina.”

She opened the door to him, amused by his anxiety, which she guessed by the look in his eyes.

“No need of a chaperon,” she said frankly. “Edward is quite well-behaved.”

Commander Compton was rather abashed.

“Good heavens, yes! I wasn’t thinking of that.”

Edward laughed good-naturedly.

“No ‘necking’, I assure you, sir. Madge keeps me at a distance.”

They went together up the oak stairway, carrying candles, and young Feldmann spilt the grease, so that Madge squealed with laughter.

“Edward, do behave yourself in an English farmhouse. That’s not the way to carry a candle.”

Edward grinned and held his candle high, so that his fair hair glinted.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever carried this primitive method of illumination. Mediæval! We have electric light in North Carolina.”

He kissed Madge’s hand as he said good night, not concealing his adoration in the presence of her father.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow!” he said, smiling into her eyes.

She tugged her hand away, and blew a kiss to her father, and slipped into her own room.

There was no doubt that she was fond of Edward Feldmann, Junior.

On the following day they went for a long walk together, and spent the afternoon playing table tennis with Jean and the middle-aged clergyman—the Reverend Horace Whitton—who came to lunch at the invitation of Commander Compton. He heard their laughter coming in gusts as he sat reading one of his books on farming. He liked to hear it in this old farmhouse.

That evening after supper they made a foursome at bridge, with Compton as Jean’s partner against Madge and young Feldmann. That youth overcalled audaciously, and went down heavily before Jean’s cautious and Scottish temperament.

Madge reproved him.

“You’re utterly reckless, Edward! Don’t forget that slump in Wall Street.”

“My father is head of the biggest business in Ashville,” said Edward

calmly. “I call five no trumps.”

“You’re an idiot,” said Jean Macgregor. “I double five no trumps.”

“Fine! The lady doubles five no trumps. God help her!”

It was ten o’clock, and the chimes of the grandfather clock in the hall—a fine old fellow bought in Farnham by Commander Compton—synchronized with the ringing of the telephone bell. It was another call from New York to an old farmhouse in an English village.

“You’re wanted by New York, sir,” said a country wench, not concealing her awe at this repeated miracle in her master’s house.

“Play my hand, Madge,” said young Feldmann. “Five no trumps—and a bit difficult.”

He went to the telephone again in the little room to the right of the hall.

Commander Compton slipped his cards together and lit a pipe, and spoke as he puffed it.

“I’m afraid it looks serious. I hope I haven’t lost some of my hard-earned savings. And your Aunt Betty has a thousand pounds in American stocks—on my advice, worse luck.”

Madge was unperturbed. That side of life meant very little to her.

“I expect it’s all right. America is vastly rich.”

Jean Macgregor was studying her cards with a puckered frown between her eyebrows.

“That blue-eyed boy plays cards like a gangster,” she said severely.

The blue-eyed boy came back into the sitting-room. He was very pale. Madge noticed that he put one finger round the neck of his collar as though it were too tight. There was some whisky on a side table, and he poured out a little into an empty glass, slopping it with a shaky hand.

Madge started up from the bridge table.

“Edward! What’s the matter? Are you ill?”

He gulped down the whisky and answered quietly.

“Sorry! I feel a bit queer. My father . . . It was a message from my mother . . . My dear old father . . .”

Suddenly he broke down and put his arms up to his face and wept.

Madge darted to him and put her arms round him.

“Edward! Oh, my dear! What has happened?”

What had happened was that a middle-aged American gentleman, the head of the biggest business in Ashville, North Carolina, had been unhinged by

certain happenings in Wall Street, and had shot himself in his office parlour.

XXXIV

THERE were other American business men that night of October 24th, 1929, who killed themselves because all their savings of a lifetime, all the wealth they had made in a time of prosperity, had suddenly been buried beneath an avalanche of falling stocks and shares.

In millions of American homes young people who had borrowed money to buy options on shares which rocketed to fantastic heights beyond all reality of values were caught by the downward rush and were vastly in debt to their brokers. They had banked on American prosperity going from strength to strength. They had bought houses, motor-cars, gramophones, and a thousand gadgets on paper profits and the hire purchase system. They had taken tickets for Mediterranean cruises and European tours. They had married on faith in Hoover and prosperity. They had their first baby in this golden dream. They had used their office salaries as a first security for "margins" in Wall Street, which afterwards had lured them into heavy gambling for high stakes, which seemed always to increase their fortune. Everybody was in this glorious game of dollar-chasing. Old couples who had come as immigrants to the United States thirty years before, stinting and scraping, saving and hoarding, in little businesses which had grown into bigger businesses, were enticed into this Aladdin's Cave. How foolish not to take wealth just waiting to be picked up! How silly not to multiply one's capital by investing in these wonderful shares! In a few weeks a fortune could be doubled. Why, neighbours who a year before were nothing at all were now throwing their wealth about, buying bigger and better cars, putting in new bathrooms, sending their children to expensive schools, sending their wives to Europe to have a good time and advertise American prosperity. Booking clerks, telephone girls, bell-boys, had their accounts with the brokers, went to the Talkies and the dance halls after taking their profits. Oh, wonderful game of get-rich-quick by buying without earning and spending without paying! It needed only an eye on the market prices and a tip to get in on the ground floor when new issues were offered—Gramophones, Cables, Public Utilities, anything on the list of money-making commodities. The banks had inexhaustible supplies of money which they were eager to lend for this national charivari of prosperity. Everybody was borrowing on "futures", the glorious future of this American mirage of endless wealth. Millionaires were borrowing like their bell-boys on the same mythical security of national inflation. They were spending vastly in excess of their

actual assets. The biggest, richest, mightiest nation on earth was living beyond its means by a system of I O U's which could never be redeemed because there was no such wealth in the world.

All had seemed well, except to a few brooding men here and there, sitting with telephones at their elbows and cigars between their lips, wondering when the time was coming for the big smash which they knew was inevitable. All the poor suckers would have to be massacred. All the poor guys who had believed in this fairy-tale would have to be flung to the wolves of reality. When was it coming? . . .

The banks were getting anxious. The Federal Reserve was beginning to tighten up credit, and it was this restriction of credit which forced some of the smaller fry to sell, and some of the big men. They were beginning to unload. There were whisperings that the crash was coming. A sudden fear began to shake the nerve of men who had been driving this chariot of finance up the high peaks of prosperity, sure that they could keep it in control. But it was out of control. It was lurching on the edge of a precipice. They had lost the reins. Panic, fear, took possession of the herd who had been harnessed to the Golden Calf.

No one knew why it happened that day rather than any other day. It is always hard to say how panic starts in a crowd, or an army, or a nation. But it started, and swept across the United States like a typhoon, destroying the glamorous structure of American prosperity, and leaving only the wreckage of its Aladdin palaces of fairy gold.

There was panic in Wall Street. The ticker couldn't keep pace with the falling prices. Men were shouting themselves hoarse. Their eyes were wild. They made convulsive gestures like epileptics, rushing, pushing, fighting, to get some message through to other brains seized with terror. Millions of dollars were being swept out of existence in a few seconds. Millions of shares were being marked down to levels incredibly and terribly low in comparison with their previous heights, which had been higher than the dreams of avarice. At every tick of the clock thousands of small people were smashed. As every hour passed, human greed, human hopes, became the mockery of the Joker who had lurked in this game since the cards were first dealt. Before Wall Street saw another dawn, before newspaper men dropped exhausted with 'phones still clamped to their ears, before the morning newspapers were folded in the press with screaming headlines which would shake the nerve of a nation to its depths, millions of American citizens knew that they had lost everything, beyond a weekly wage already mortgaged far ahead. Faith in American prosperity lay shattered.

Nobody will ever be able to calculate the amount of human agony which

invaded American apartment houses on the night which followed the first panic—checked for a time by groups of financiers who flung millions into the market to hold up prices, until they were beaten by another wave of panic engulfing Wall Street and dragging down the nation’s wealth to lower levels of ruin. People heard the moaning and wailing of their neighbours—old couples who had lost everything after years of toil; young people who had been betrayed by this mirage of unearned gold, and were now afraid of the future.

In an old Tudor farmhouse in rural England an American boy wept for a father who had killed himself in that time of madness and despair.

XXXV

It was one proof of the interdependence of nations in this modern world—a self-evident fact which still fails to penetrate the intelligence of certain statesmen, journalists, and other leaders of mass opinion—that a financial crisis in New York should have instant and disastrous reactions in other countries thousands of miles away, and in little homes where nothing is known of international finance or the mysteries of commodity prices and foreign exchange. Among its more trivial consequences—if the heart-strings of a young man and woman are accounted trivial—was the effect it had upon the lives of Edward Feldmann, Junior, and the daughter of Commander Compton. If the smash in Wall Street had been postponed until a few weeks later it is probable that Madge would have sailed on the *Olympic* with this American boy, and that the affectionate hospitality of a house in North Carolina and the romantic devotion of the boy himself would have led her to church with him one day, even though she was not quite sure of herself.

As it was, young Feldmann had to borrow his passage money from Commander Compton. Incredible as it seemed, his father had lost every dollar of his fortune in that first crash, having made himself responsible for loans which could not be redeemed.

They saw Edward off at Southampton. After his first breakdown he had recovered his self-possession and professed an optimism which was fine and courageous.

“I shall have to get a job. I should like my mother to know that I can earn as well as spend. Well, the United States aren’t down and out yet! This slump won’t last more than three months, I guess. Time for me to look around. I shall try for a newspaper job. Harvard and Oxford aren’t too bad as an introduction.”

“Splendid!” said Compton. “I’m certain you will fall on your feet, my dear lad. The best of luck.”

He felt deeply sympathetic towards this young man, and admired the pluck—the word is out of fashion now—with which he faced the future. He would not allow the thought that Madge might have been going with this boy to warp his sense of sympathy by any personal gladness or relief. Indeed, for a moment or two he was touched with pity beyond any selfishness; it was when the gong was sounded for passengers’ friends to go ashore and the time came for young

Feldmann to say good-bye to Madge. Before that Compton had sloped away for a while to let them have their own conversation, but now he had to remind Madge that she couldn't stay more than another minute or so.

"Time, my dear!"

"Good-bye, Edward," she said. "Write to me."

He held her hand, and then took both her hands and drew her close.

"Do you mind?" he asked, looking into her eyes. "Just once!"

"That's all right," said Madge, going a little pale.

He drew her close to him and kissed her on the cheek boyishly, and Commander Compton turned away with a sudden moisture in his eyes. He was sorry for Edward Feldmann, Junior.

He heard him speak his last words.

"If you'll wait for me I'll come back one day. Promise?"

"I hope you'll come back soon," said Madge.

"All passengers' friends ashore!" cried one of the stewards, beating the gong which has interrupted many lovers and broken the thread between many lives.

They waved to him from the dockside. He looked handsome there, leaning over the rail of the big ship with his collar turned up and his fair hair tousled in the wind.

Then the *Olympic* warped away from the quay and swung very slowly round and crept away. On board were hundreds of Americans whose holidays in Europe had been cut short by happenings in Wall Street. Some who had come over first class were going back third. Some who had come over rich were going back poor. It is astonishing what a difference it made to human lives by the alteration of a few figures in the world's ledgers—figures of illusion for the most part in the accountancy of imaginary wealth during these post-War years.

"Father," said Madge, "I feel a beast not going with him now he's poor. Perhaps I ought to have gone."

She was blinking away some tears, and turned her face away.

Commander Compton tucked her hand through his arm.

"He couldn't afford to keep you yet, my dear."

"He wants me to wait for him," said Madge.

Commander Compton glanced at her sideways, and pressed her arm closer against his side.

"Are you going to?"

She did not answer for a moment, and seemed to be thinking things out. Then she startled her father by her next words.

“It’s Simon who comes between us. If it hadn’t been for Simon I think I might have married Edward before he sailed.”

“Well, it’s all very difficult,” said Commander Compton. “I can’t understand it. I thought we had heard the last of Simon, as far as you are concerned, Madge. To tell the honest truth——”

He was going to tell the honest truth about his opinion of that young man, which was not favourable, but he decided that truth is very dangerous sometimes.

“Let’s go and get lunch,” he said. “You must be hungry.”

In spite of his sympathy with young Feldmann, he could not resist a little private thankfulness after all that Madge was going back with him to Broadmead. They went back by an afternoon train which stopped at Guildford, where Jean Macgregor was waiting for them with the car.

“I hope the blue-eyed boy kept a stiff upper-lip?” she inquired, with her usual sense of humour and her refusal to indulge in sentiment. “Here’s a wire for you, Madge. It came an hour ago and I didn’t have the nerve to open it.”

Madge opened it and read it twice intently, and then gave a little cry.

“Oh, Father! Luck at last! It’s an offer for a part in a film production at Elstree. They want me to play Dora in ‘David Copperfield’. Fifteen pounds a week! Starting next Monday.”

“That sounds good,” said Commander Compton, though his heart sank into his boots.

Jean Macgregor gasped with a look of incredulity.

“Fifteen pounds a week? Easy money! I get two guineas for a masterpiece of commercial art. Curse the woman! It’s her fatal beauty again.”

It was Saturday. Madge accepted the offer by telegram from Guildford Post Office. On Sunday she packed up and returned with Jean to their old rooms in Church Street, Chelsea. She would have to be up early on Monday morning to get out to Elstree by half past nine.

Commander Compton—driven by the chauffeur-gardener—took them up to Town, and stayed an hour before he did the journey back. An old Tudor farmhouse seemed a lonely place when he loaded his pipe in the sitting-room. After all, Madge had gone from him again, though not with that American boy.

There was a south-west gale coming up, and the windows rattled. He went upstairs to shut one or two of them against the driving rain.

He stood for a few minutes in Madge’s bedroom, which he had made so pretty for her. Those chintz curtains looked nice when the light was up. That oval mirror—William and Mary—had been a great bargain. He had picked it up in a shop at Farnham. She had done her hair in front of it, as he had seen one evening when she was dressing for the evening meal. She had looked exquisite seated in front of that old mirror, with bare arms and shoulders like an eighteenth century lady. But now she wouldn’t need it much. She would have to be up in Town for that film production.

Commander Compton wandered round his old farmhouse, shutting windows against a south-west gale, before returning to the long sitting-room with its panelled walls and mullion windows.

The fire had gone out after the servants had gone to bed. He didn’t bother to light it again as he sat in a low chair with his legs stretched out, staring at the ashes. He was only thirty-six miles from London, but now that Madge had gone, he felt as lonely as though he were back again on the edge of a jungle in Malay.

XXXVI

THAT crash in Wall Street knocked a couple of thousand pounds off the capital which an ex-naval man had put by for old age and his daughter's inheritance. He regretted too late that he had not given more attention to the gloomy prophecies of that American with whom he had dined one night at the Feldmanns' table. Not that it crippled him financially, but two thousand pounds is two thousand pounds, even if money nowadays is based on the illusion of wealth which does not exist in absolute reality—there are great mysteries lurking behind this arithmetic—and the loss of them meant that Commander Compton was somewhat more involved in the responsibility of a small farm than otherwise he need have been.

It was rather important to make it pay. At least, he wanted to run it on that basis, and that meant putting a good deal of money into the earth before he would get any back. It's no good starving a bit of land, and he had scientific ideas which were costly to start with, although in the long run they would produce more, he hoped, than his neighbours' older-fashioned methods.

Labour was a heavy item. Thirty shillings a week for an ordinary labourer. Two-pounds-ten a week for a cowman. Then there was seed, stock, winter feeding—devilish costly—artificial manures for potatoes and roots. Sprays and spraying-machines for his orchard; endless expense, as he began to find. Still, it was a cure for loneliness, although he needn't have been so lonely if he hadn't taken on the place in a moment of enthusiasm.

His idea of motoring up to Town with Madge several nights a week didn't work out. She had to be at the film studio too early in the morning, and was too tired—as even she admitted—after her day's work. He lived in hope of having her for the week-ends, and she was always glad to come, but several times had to telephone on Friday evening to say that she was working late and couldn't get away.

"Next week, Father, with luck. How are the cows?"

"Vastly disappointed, my dear. They had counted on getting a glimpse of you. I shan't get any milk from them to-morrow."

He heard her laugh over the telephone.

"Sorry, Father. Not my fault, you know."

"I know. Don't overtire yourself. Love to that red-headed girl when you see her."

Well, there he was, alone with his farm for most of the week, and sometimes for most of the month. Madge had her own life to live. She had her friends in town.

Following the trade success of ‘David Copperfield’, she signed a contract for six months at Elstree. She was not very keen on the country in winter months or wet weather, although she tried to hide this from her father and was brave in facing the rain or the mud to keep him company. No, he couldn’t interfere with her career for the sake of his own selfishness. He had to make up his mind, like other elderly men and women, that youth desired to slip away on its own adventure and could not be kept to the family hearthside. It is one of life’s tragedies, unbeknown to youth—one of the necessities for resignation when fifty years have been marked off from the allotted spell.

Commander Compton didn’t moan about it, even when he sat alone at night by his log fire in a Tudor farmhouse. It was not in his character to wallow in self-pity, though he had a twinge of that malady at times. He was grateful if he could see Madge once or twice a month. Now and again he could run up to town for an hour or two in her rooms, with Jean Macgregor as an agreeable third. There were unexpected joys when he heard the hooting of a motor-horn in the lane outside his gates, and when Madge appeared with some friend who had driven her down for the afternoon. It might have been worse. It would have been a lifelong good-bye, perhaps, if she had gone off that day on the *Olympic* with young Feldmann.

“I must get on with my own job and make the best of my own remaining years,” said Commander Compton to himself in the long sitting-room with the panelled walls. “Self-preservation, old bird. Anything but self-pity. No loss of interest in this queer game called Life, which has its good moments now and then. Friendly talks with friendly folk. Those men of mine are a good lot. I like ’em. Treat ’em well and there’s nothing they won’t do. I hated to refuse a job to that fellow to-day. Out of work, and no dole for agricultural labourers. Poor devil. I hated the look in his eyes when I told him I couldn’t afford another man. One of the old type, Saxon in bones and blood. A damn shame—all this unemployment. A waste of good men’s lives. A waste of spirit. It makes one’s heart bleed, and those political swine don’t do a thing about it! Blast them!”

He spoke some of those thoughts aloud. He was getting into the habit of talking to himself. It had begun out in the Malay. It was due to being alone so much. Once or twice he was conscious of it and tried to check it.

“First signs of senility! That wench in the kitchen must wonder what I’m prattling about. I hope she doesn’t overhear some of my naval oaths. A foolish habit! I’ll have to cure myself.”

XXXVII

He found a friendly companion in a black spaniel—devoted to him after the first half hour—which lay at his feet in the evenings with its nose between its paws, and an occasional look of adoration in its liquid eyes for this godlike man who puffed smoke out of his nostrils, and smelt of wet earth and cows and other pleasant things of life.

But he was not one of those disillusioned souls who say, “The more I see of men the more I love my dog.” He loved his dog, but he loved his fellow men just as well. At least, he was greatly interested in them, and mostly saw the best in them. Perhaps it was for that reason that his reputation stood high in the “Jolly Farmer” at the corner of the village, where his head cowman and one or two of the younger labourers gulped a pint or two of weak beer on Saturday nights in company with gardeners from neighbouring estates, chauffeurs attached to elderly dames, and a young mechanic from the garage across the village green.

“Cheery sort of bloke, your boss,” said one of the gardeners. “Always passes the time of day when we meet in the post office. Lost his arm at Jutland, didn’t he?”

Mr. Chard, the cowman, nodded, and filled up his pipe again.

“Commander. They make a ’abit of cheerfulness in the Royal Navy. Not like some of them Brass ’Ats I got to know in Palestine—all discipline and no ’umanity. Spit and polish till you dropped with dysentery, or got a bit of lead from the old Turk. The Commander takes an interest in your private life. Always asks after the missus and the kids. I’ve known ’im stand ’alf an ’our listening to my yarns about Palestine and Mespot.”

“And I expect you told him the tale all right!” said young Widgery, the mechanic, winking at Colonel Urquhart’s gardener.

“It’s men like the Commander that saves old England from going Bolshie,” said Lady Eashing’s chauffeur. “He comes up to dinner sometimes with the old lady and talks down her ear-trumpet with a voice you can hear as far as the kitchen. That’s what I call Christian charity. If there’s anything that gives me the hump, it’s talking down that blasted ear-trumpet—and then she doesn’t hear me right. What a life!”

“A little bit of Bolshevism wouldn’t do this country no harm,” said young Widgery, the mechanic. “I was reading in the *Daily Herald* only yesterday that

some old swine in the North of England has just died worth a fortune of two millions. And, meantime, there's over two million unemployed, and they talk of cutting down the wages of the cotton operatives who made the old blighter's fortune for him. It don't seem right to me. Labour ought to put on more taxes. What we want is a redistribution of wealth. I was reading in the *Daily Herald* ——"

"Now then, young Widgery," said Commander Compton's cowman, "come off it, can't you? We don't want any of that muck in the 'Jolly Farmer'. They're taxing the gentry out of existence. Look at all the old places up for sale! And look at the state of agriculture! Who's going to pay my wages if you and your stinking Bolsheviks keep putting on new taxes? Soon there'll not be a farmer who can afford to keep his land clean. What we want is a Mussolini. He'd put you in your place, young Widgery. And damn quick! Commander Compton was only saying to me yesterday, 'Chard,' 'e says, 'this 'ere Labour Government is just letting things drift. We're going along the road to ruin,' 'e says. 'This 'ere dole,' 'e says, 'is demoralizing the nation. What we want is to get more men at work, and less men living at Government expense and eating their 'earts out with nothing to do, poor devils.' "

"That's right," said Colonel Urquhart's chauffeur. "You know as well as I do, Widgery, that there's young fellows who haven't done a stroke of work for years, and don't want to as long as they draw the dole for pocket-money and live on the old people with a roof over their heads and free grub. Why, look at young Banstead over by Farnham. He's just married a girl drawing the dole, same as 'imself, and between them they get on quite nicely, thank you, and going to 'ave a baby, bless you! Why, he wouldn't even do a bit of haymaking when the job was offered him by my boss with free beer and a week's pay. 'Not on your life,' he said. 'I'm on the dole as a mechanic. It wouldn't pay me to sweat in a hayfield.' "

"No more it would," said young Widgery. "It's against the rules. What about yourself, if your boss turns you off? Work or maintenance is my motto. I was reading only yesterday in the *Daily Herald*——"

"Not so much of that *Daily Herald*," said Lady Eashing's chauffeur. "Why don't you read the *Daily Express* for a bit, my lad? It might teach you something. It might give you different ideas."

Young Widgery shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, it might and it might not. I come from Camberwell. That's where I learnt to think a bit. You people down here are all parasites of the Over-Fed. You takes your ideas from them. Lady this. His lordship over at Newlands. Class! Yes, my lady! No, my lord! In Camberwell our minds move different.

We know a thing or two about Moscow, f’r instance.”

“Well, keep it to yourself, young fellow,” said Mr. Chard, the cowman. “We don’t want any of that filth in the ‘Jolly Farmer’. And you be a bit careful, my lad. Some of us ’ere fought for King and Country when you was in the elementary school, writing dirty words on the lavatory walls.”

The conversation had swung away from Commander Compton, but it was brought back by the sound of his voice in the private bar next door, where he looked in sometimes to have a friendly word with Mr. Jasper, the landlord of the ‘Jolly Farmer’, and Miss Blight, who served in the tea lounge.

“Nice evening, Jasper! How’s the rheumatism?”

“Not too bad, Commander. Always get a twinge when there’s rain coming. Is Miss Madge down for the week-end?”

“I hope so. I’m not quite sure.”

“It’s always nice to see her,” said Miss Blight. “I saw her on the Pictures the other day. ‘Isn’t she lovely?’ I said to my friend, Miss Clatterbank. ‘That’s the daughter of our Commander up at Broadmead.’ She could hardly believe it, you know. ‘You don’t say so?’ she said. ‘Isn’t she too sweet for words?’ she said.”

Commander Compton laughed good-humouredly.

“I’m a proud father. But I don’t see as much of her as I should like to. Any of my men next door?”

He came through from the private bar and nodded to the little crowd in the tap-room.

“Good evening, all. Nice and warm in here! Anybody want a load of baccy?”

Most of the elder men stood up. They had all been soldiers or seamen in a war that was now being forgotten. It was only the younger men, like young Widgery, who remained seated.

“Good evening, Commander. I could do with a pipeful.”

Mr. Chard loaded his pipe from the Commander’s pouch.

“How’s her ladyship?” asked Commander Compton of Lady Eashing’s chauffeur.

“A bit short in the temper, sir, but otherwise very bobbish.”

“A wonderful old lady,” said Compton. “Eighty-six and still as keen as mustard. I hope I shall be as young at her age.”

The labourers and gardeners and chauffeurs laughed.

“No doubt about it, sir,” said Colonel Urquhart’s chauffeur politely. “I was

in service with an admiral who was ninety-three and still active.”

“Ninety-three!” exclaimed Commander Compton. “Why, that makes me feel like a two-year-old. Have another glass of beer, anyone?”

He stayed only a few minutes, and there was a moment’s silence until he was out of earshot.

“Talks to one man to man,” said one of the gardeners. “Not that one could take a liberty with him, you know.”

“The commanding officer, every inch of him,” said one of the chauffeurs. “The sort of man I’d like to drive. Knows his own mind, but has a bit of give and take. Human like.”

“It’s quality what does it,” said Lady Eashing’s man. “I always respect quality. It’s what they teach in the Navy.”

“We could do with more of ’em,” said Mr. Chard. “It’s a pleasure to work for ’im. ‘Chard,’ ’e says, ‘you and I ’ave got to make this farm pay for itself.’ When one’s boss puts it like that one likes to work.”

“A bit of an optimist, ain’t ’e?” said one of the gardeners. “The farmers seem to be in a bad way round ’ere. My governor was telling me they’re all broke.”

Young Widgery, the mechanic at the garage across the green, lit another Woodbine cigarette.

“Mind you,” he said, as though modifying his previous expression of opinion, “I don’t believe in blood and terror. When I says I think a bit of Bolshevism wouldn’t do us any harm, I don’t say anything against men like the Commander. He talks to me civil when he comes to the garage. I feel friendly to him.”

“And you had better talk civil back,” said Mr. Chard severely. “ ’E’d knock your blooming ’ead off if you gave him any of *your* lip. You and your *Daily Herald*——”

“Time, gentlemen, please!” said Miss Blight, putting her head through the swing-door of the tap-room.

XXXVIII

COMMANDER COMPTON was not cut off from human society at Broadmead Farm. There was no need for him to spend his evenings alone while Madge was up in town, unless he felt like it. Before six months had passed he had an extended acquaintance in his own neighbourhood, within a ten mile radius, which was easy going in a Vauxhall car driven by his gardener. His friend, Lord Bramshaw, whom he had met about the world in odd places at odd times, as far as Singapore, had a place over the border of Sussex, six miles from Horsham, and was always glad when Compton dropped over for a dinner or a yarn. Lady Bramshaw was also pleased to see him, remembering Stephen, as she called him, when he was a naval lieutenant. It was nice going there. Very pleasant to sit with old friends in a good old house dating from Stuart England, or to walk the terrace with this good-natured man (getting rather too wide round the waist), looking down a long avenue of clipped yews with a statue of Mercury at the end of it.

But Lord Bramshaw—Dick, as Commander Compton called him—was always rather gloomy about the state of affairs, and especially about his own estate.

“I doubt whether I shall be able to keep it going much longer,” he said one evening, as they sat in the dining-room together over the port wine. “If I hadn’t sold that Vandyke to an American collector I should have been in the cart before now.”

Compton glanced up at the wall where the Vandyke used to hang—a portrait of Dick’s famous ancestor.

“A pity, that!”

Bramshaw shrugged his shoulders.

“What was I to do when the old governor pegged out? They fairly skinned me alive over death duties. And when I go that’ll be about the end of it.”

He sighed heavily and looked across his dining-room, as though seeing beyond its walls.

“As it is, the place is going to rack and ruin. I can’t afford to keep the hedges and ditches in decent order. Those fields in the valley are waterlogged. And I haven’t had any rent lately from some of my tenant farmers. I can’t put pressure on them, poor beggars. They’re all mortgaged up to the neck. The fact is, Stephen, old bird, England is next door to down and out. It’s the end of the

chapter, in my opinion.”

Compton refused to accept that statement.

“No, no. It’s not as bad as that. We’re passing through the doldrums, that’s all. The old ship will weather this storm as it has all others.”

Bramshaw poured himself out another glass of port and gave an uneasy laugh.

“We’ve a mutinous crew on board. And the captain is half a Bolshie. This Labour Government is letting in the bilge water—or whatever you call it. I’m not very strong on sea-going phrases, but you can get my meaning.”

Commander Compton laughed.

“Let’s get on to dry land. In my opinion, Dick, you’re just as much to blame as the Labour Government.”

Lord Bramshaw looked up with raised eyebrows.

“How the devil do you make that out?”

“You Conservatives didn’t do a thing when you were in power. ‘Safety first.’ Don’t I remember that phrase? God help us, if that’s the spirit in which you look at life! What we want is a bold lead. The people would rise to it every time. They’re just asking for it. There’s no finer stuff to lead than the English people. Those men of mine are as good as gold.”

Bramshaw shrugged his shoulders.

“You’re a sentimentalist. They’re getting wages which agriculture can’t afford. And yet they expect me to subscribe to their cricket fund, and their football fund, and their village hall, and their village choir! It’s all take and no give. Wait till you know them better. . . . But I agree with you about the Conservatives. Baldwin is no better than a Socialist. He went to America and gave the show away by making us pay through the nose for a debt which ought never to have been acknowledged. It was their war as well as ours, wasn’t it? Blood money, I call it. Then the Government promised a lot to agriculture and let us all down. The fact is, all these politicians are in a blue funk. They’re afraid of America, afraid of France, afraid of Gandhi, and afraid of the working classes. They govern by giving away everything to everybody. What we want is a Mussolini. Someone with guts. Someone who can say ‘Go to hell!’ ”

Commander Compton smiled over his glass.

“My dear Dick, why don’t you become the English Mussolini? What a chance! And you’ve got the figure for it.”

Lord Bramshaw looked down at his somewhat exuberant girth.

“Pulling my leg, aren’t you? I wasn’t born with the gift of the gab. The

only time I open my mouth in the House of Lords is when I get going on sugar-beet. And then I spend a sleepless night before the debate comes on. I would rather face high explosives.”

The two men sat silently for some time. They knew each other well enough to keep silent if they felt like it.

Presently Compton tried to put his thoughts into words.

“We can’t go back on things, Dick. I mean, we can’t push the people back to squalor and low wages. They fought that war for us and they deserve all they’ve got in better conditions of life. They haven’t had a long innings. I remember my father paid his labourers fourteen shillings a week—married men with seven or eight children, some of them.”

“Better off then than now,” argued Bramshaw. “Money went further and they had things given to them.”

“Blankets? Red flannel petticoats?”

Lord Bramshaw failed to see the irony.

“Exactly. And they didn’t pay more than eighteenpence a week for their cottages. They’ve got out of hand. They expect luxuries where their fathers were content with the necessities. Damn it, when I go into some of my cottages I hear gramophones playing jazz dances! I ask you! And some of these young louts who do a bit of haymaking when they feel like it, or help to cart my beet as though they were born tired, come up to work on motor-bikes, bought on the hire system. And if they can’t go to the Pictures once a week they think themselves ill-used.”

Compton took another of Lord Bramshaw’s cigars.

“I’m all for it,” he said. “It lifts them out of serfdom. They’re a very intelligent crowd nowadays. I like talking to them.”

Bramshaw stirred uneasily in his chair and stared at Compton gloomily.

“Damn it, Steenie, you’re not going Bolshie, are you? I thought you were on our side. I thought you believed in the old traditions.”

Compton reassured him with his good-natured laugh.

“So I do. In my bones and blood. But one has to face facts, old man. And one of the facts is the advance of democracy and the over-population of this crowded little island. We can’t have an aristocracy preserving its old prerogatives of big estates and inherited wealth, and keeping the masses down on low diet and starvation wages. They won’t stand for it. I don’t blame ’em.”

“By God,” said Bramshaw, with a sudden irritation, “I believe you’ve gone Bolshie!”

Commander Compton waved his cigar with a gesture of denial, as though flinging that idea on one side.

“Don’t be absurd. I’m a Victorian. I’m an old-fashioned fellow. I groan every time I see the boards go up with another old place on the market for building lots. But I’ve been doing a bit of thinking out in the Malay and here in England. I’m convinced that we can’t get over our troubles and build up the old wealth by a die-hard policy of reaction. That only plays into the hands of the Labour leaders. The Conservatives ought to be constructive and make use of an intelligent democracy to get things going. We ought to produce more of our own food and get more men back to the land. We ought to develop more trade within the Empire. We ought to break down the old enmity between Labour and Capital and do some good team work for England’s sake.”

“Are you making an after-dinner speech?” asked Lord Bramshaw.

Compton was not intimidated by his sarcasm.

“I’ve a bee in my bonnet about an overseas settlement on community lines. I’d like to see a quarter of a million men—half a million with their wives and kids—relieve the congestion in this island by going out to found a new England somewhere—Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, or even Canada, if the climate weren’t too hard. There’s heaps of room. Of course, they’d have to be organized. There would have to be pioneer battalions, intelligence officers, agricultural experts . . . and a bit of discipline . . . and good leadership. . . .”

“My dear fellow!” said Lord Bramshaw.

Compton laughed good-naturedly, and went on doggedly.

“My idea is to build up a central place with light railways linking up the farmsteads, so that these folk could have a bit of civilization—reading-rooms, the Pictures, dance-halls, and all the rest of it, after their day’s work or their week’s work. It would be a national adventure. It would give us something to catch hold of. It would appeal to the old spirit of adventure and patriotism. Fellows like me—old dug-outs—could volunteer and put a bit of money in. The women could do their bit in canteens and institutes. There could be concert-parties from the Mother Country. I seem to remember we did all that in time of war behind the lines in France and Flanders. Why not do it in time of peace? This new England could be self-supporting—not competing in the markets of the world—but growing stuff to feed its own community, making things they want themselves. It would be a bit rough, but it would be the hell of a good adventure. And it would relieve things over here. There would be more jobs going. There would be more room for a fellow to turn round in. . . . What do you think?”

Bramshaw had listened with his mouth slightly open and his cigar burning between two fingers.

“Well, I’m damned!” he said. “It sounds pretty plausible. I didn’t think you were one of the dreamers. But it’s utterly fantastic, my dear old bird. We couldn’t raise the money for it.”

“A national loan,” said Compton. “I’d be one of the subscribers up to everything I have to spare. Everybody would put something in the pool. It’s cheaper than the dole.”

“The Dominions wouldn’t listen to it. They’re afraid even now of letting in immigrants who go to increase their unemployed.”

“Not organized or trained,” said Compton. “Not the right stuff.”

“The people wouldn’t go,” said Bramshaw. “Things have been made too soft for them. They’ve lost the pioneering spirit. They think we ought to pay for everything they want. Bleed the rich—that’s their motto. And, by God, they’ve bled us! What are they going to do now they’ve killed the goose that laid the golden eggs? It’s come to that almost. Another year or two of this taxation and the game is up.”

There was silence again between these two friends. Commander Compton couldn’t argue on finance and figures with a man who knew far more than he did on that subject. He hoped things weren’t as bad as Bramshaw made out—as other friends, like Henry Lambert of the Treasury, hinted at darkly. Poor old England! Why didn’t somebody get a move on? It seemed a poor game to just wait for disaster. There must be something one could do about it.

“I took a knock in that American crash,” said Bramshaw. “I invested some of my capital in American securities, thinking I’d be safer with some dollars to fall back on. If I sold out now I should be in the cart.”

“Same here,” said Compton. “Who would have thought it? American prosperity. One banked on it. They may pull out of it in six months or so. With their illimitable resources . . .”

Lord Bramshaw rose from his table and puffed out the candles on the mahogany board, putting a hand behind them.

“Marjorie is waiting for us.”

He held Compton’s arm for a moment as they went to the door and spoke emotionally.

“Sometimes I think it was lucky that my boy was killed on the Somme. I shouldn’t have had anything to leave him. This old house is bound to go when I peg out. It’s the end of the story for the likes of us. And England won’t be England when it’s a little bourgeois state like Belgium or Holland.”

“I believe in the old spirit,” said Compton. “You can’t kill it. We shall get through all right.”

Lord Bramshaw held the door open.

“I like your giddy optimism,” he said more cheerfully.

XXXIX

THE neighbouring farmers were friendly with this ex-naval man who had come among them and who was doing a bit of amateur farming, as they thought. They met him in Horsham, where he discussed milk prices with them and artificial manures, and the best kind of spray for fruit trees, and the iniquities of the middle man. He seemed to know a fair amount in a theoretical way, although he didn't lay down the law at all and asked for their advice. They liked his steel-blue eyes and his cheery way, but among themselves they shook their heads over him.

"Bound to come a cropper," they said. "These amateurs! He puts too much into his land. He'll never get a profit back at present prices. Thinks he's going to make it pay! Three years will see him through like all those ex-officer laddies who bought farms at top prices, mortgaged them for two-thirds, and sold out at a dead loss when the banks wouldn't advance another bean! Same old tale. But he's a nice-spoken gentleman. Lost his arm at Jutland, they say. Well, he'll learn by experience all right. He talks about scientific farming. A very expensive hobby!"

They invited him to tea in their farmhouses and walked round their fields with him, apologizing for weeds and waterlogged ditches and derelict land.

"Can't afford labour, Commander," said Mr. Trant over at Winton Farm, an old-fashioned type, weathered by sixty-five years in field and furrow. "That's what it comes to. In the old days a sack of wheat paid a man's wages for a week. Now it's three sacks. Wages have gone up as prices have come down. Then there's the foreigner heaving his stuff into the market. It don't matter what one grows—fruit, vegetables—it's all the same. Hardly worth the picking. Take my black currants. Couldn't get a price for them. The Germans and Dutch swamped the market before mine were ripe. Then there's fruit pulp pouring in from Russia!"

"What about apples?" asked Commander Compton.

Mr. Trant was willing to take apples.

"I'd a glut of 'em last year. I was fifty pounds down when I'd paid for carriage. Covent Garden buys Canadian apples, and Californian apples, all graded and packed like wax dolls. The old English apple is dirt cheap. It don't pay to spray them. It don't pay to pack 'em. Heartbreaking!"

Compton was thinking of his own orchard.

“It seems to me something’s wrong somewhere. California has to send its apples six thousand miles before they get to Covent Garden. We ought to have the advantage there. Why not do a bit more grading and better packing, every apple looking like a picture?”

“Who’s going to pay for labour?”

“American wages are higher than ours,” said Compton.

Mr. Trant admitted that, but had another grievance.

“The railway companies give preference to the foreigner—to get his freight. They kill the poor old English farmer. Don’t care a damn about him. Wicked!”

Compton was not to be depressed lightly.

“Let’s combine to bring down the cost of transport,” he said. “Let’s get together and re-organize agriculture and make a power of it, so that railway companies will have to sit up and take notice. If necessary, let’s arrange our own transport and get a strangle-hold on the middlemen by co-operative methods.”

Mr. Trant shook his head.

“Now you’re talking politics. Not in our line, Commander. We grows the stuff. That’s our job. Politics have never helped the farmer yet and never will. All gab! Newspaper talk. What we want is Protection, but the city folk won’t stand for it, and who can blame them? They want cheap food, wherever it comes from—the cheaper the better for them, even if every farmer in England is bankrupt. And it’s the city folk who count for votes. They put the politicians into Parliament and that’s why there’s nothing done for agriculture and never will be. Well, I dare say I can hang on a bit longer, with a little luck.”

He stared across his fields, and presently spoke rather sadly again.

“My people have been on this farm for five hundred years. I wouldn’t like to leave it before I peg out. Perhaps it’s a good thing my son was killed on the Somme. The end of the farm, and the end of the family. Sad in a way, but that’s life, I suppose. Things come and things go. Well, come in and have a cup of tea with the wife. She won’t forgive me if I let you go off without giving her the pleasure. We’re simple folk, Commander, but you’re sure of a welcome every time you come this way.”

Yes, they were simple folk, most of them, but the kind of folk whom Commander Compton liked very much. He felt at home with them, and was glad to find them in these old timbered farmhouses where their forefathers had been in Georgian and Stuart and Tudor times. Their sons had fought in France and Flanders as before them other young men from these fields had fought at

Crecy and Agincourt and Bajadoz and Waterloo. Their blood and spirit had been the strength of old England, as yeomen and ploughmen. Their simplicity and faith had given England its character. An outdoor folk, fond of beasts and birds and trees, hardened against all weathers, with a wisdom which came from solitude at the end of a plough with the sky ahead of them beyond the furrow, they were slow thinkers, slow talkers, enormously traditional in their ways and ideas, hating change, and instinctively individualists, as this ex-naval man could see whenever he talked about organization or co-operation. What their fathers had done was good enough for them. The old methods were best. Didn't they know their own soil and their own weather? They had suffered hard times before. Some of them remembered the black year of 1879, when the harvests were drowned and the sheep died and rotted, and they were ruined men. Times were getting hard again because of labour costs and high taxation and bad markets. They were holding on with a kind of smiling hopelessness.

But they were dwindling as a class, at least in this part of England. Round about Horsham many of these old farmsteads had been bought by City men and actors and successful literary men, who furnished them with sham antiques and hung brass warming-pans and pewter pots, newly made in Birmingham, above the stone fireplaces, and on the old beams freshly painted. The barns which had held good harvests were turned into studios or billiard-rooms. The fields were sold for building lots, and London architects came down to put up houses with red roofs and tall chimneys, for politicians and financiers needing week-end retreats to refresh their tired brains, or for rich tradesmen who had made their pile out of silk stockings or gramophones or motor-cars.

Commander Compton liked the farming folk better than some of these other neighbours, although he had a secret sympathy with old ladies and retired colonels who had been gay dogs sixty years before, and old ladies and gentlemen in ancient manor houses here and there, who regarded him as a bright young fellow coming into their drawing-rooms with the breeziness of youth. He felt sorry for them, remembering his own advancing years and his own loneliness at times. Their sons and daughters had grown up and departed from them. Their own ambitions, strivings, passions, were now no more than memories. They were grateful for any visitation from young people—their nephews or nieces, or children and grandchildren. And they were all rather sad, and rather anxious about the state of England, although in a few years it would not matter to them. They were conscious that their class was being taxed out of existence, that their type and ideas were passing. They saw the old traditions going, the old beauty of England despoiled by modern "progress", the old prosperity and strength of England weakened by the costs of a war to which they had sacrificed their wealth and their blood, the eldest sons or the youngest

sons. They could not understand what was happening. They were bewildered by mysterious forces which seemed to be bearing down upon the old country, and still more bewildered by new ideas of morality and manners, which seemed to them vulgar and evil and degrading. That a Socialist and a Pacifist should be Prime Minister of England was to them an incredible happening. That an ex-policeman should be Vice-Chamberlain of the King's Household seemed to them the next step but one to anarchy and Bolshevism.

They sighed at the weakening of British Rule in India, and could not forgive a Viceroy for making terms with a man like Gandhi—a rebel and a fanatic, as they thought him, whose ideas would cause a river of blood and agony unspeakable among all the races and castes of the Indian peoples. They were aghast at the free thought of Dean Inge, at the controversies between the clergy and the bishops. Modern fiction seemed to them utterly immoral. They read *The Times* and the *Morning Post*, and shuddered at the tumult of the post-War world, and half expected to see another war break out to destroy civilization by bombing aeroplanes and poison gas. All that they read of Russia and its social system filled them with fear and horror. And yet, in spite of this deep uneasiness, these hidden fears, about which they spoke rarely, they retained their courage, their interest in life, and their old habits of mind. The old ladies took Commander Compton round their gardens, to see their herbaceous borders or their rock plants, as though nothing threatened the stability of English life. The old gentlemen took him into their sitting-rooms to have a look at some eighteenth century miniatures; or some Rowlandson prints; or the portraits of their ancestors painted by Lely, and Kneller, Raeburn, Lawrence, and Reynolds, glad that they had refused all temptations to sell them to pay income tax and death duties, but knowing that one day they would have to go.

Commander Compton was wonderfully patient with them, unfailingly courteous in his naval manner.

"In twenty years I shall be as old," he thought. "I shall be grateful for some bright young lad of fifty-two to listen to my stories of Singapore. I shall be a little hard of hearing, perhaps, and present an ear-trumpet to one of Madge's children. I shall want an arm down the steps to the rose garden. Lordy! Lordy! Old age is a very lonely business."

And yet he was comforted by the marvellous way in which some of these old people refused to surrender to advancing years. Lady Eashing at eighty-six was alert in body and mind, except for that ear-trumpet, which was rather a handicap. She had strong opinions about everything and everybody, and discussed the day's news with humour and exasperation.

"Another horrible murder! Why don't the police do their job instead of

waving their arms about at the cross-roads?” . . . “I see America is not so prosperous as they thought they were. Well, that’s a good thing. It ought to chasten them a little. Always ready to give us good advice, aren’t they? Cheek! Why don’t they deal with their gunmen and gangsters?—isn’t that what they call them?”

She read the novels of Edgar Wallace, and got a thrill out of them, and was suspected by one of her nieces of having taken one of them to church because she was desperate to know the end of the plot. But perhaps that was a libel. . . .

She was ironical about her nephew, the Earl of Eashing, who sat in the House of Lords and had been at one time Home Secretary.

“A perfect fool, my dear. He hasn’t the brains of a rabbit. There’s no hope for England when we’re governed by men like that. Mr. Baldwin? Pah! That man Ramsay MacDonald, with his Scotch way of talking? Unctuous! Those Labour men who can’t speak the King’s English when they talk on the wireless! Sometimes I feel like going to Parliament with an umbrella and beating them over the head with it—the whole crowd of ’em! Why don’t they do something, instead of letting us sink to the level of a third-class Power? Why don’t they abolish the dole and put men to work? Old Gladstone was a bit of an old humbug, but he wouldn’t have let England down like these miserable men. What we want is a leader with guts. Why don’t you go into politics and show a strong hand? You’ve got a good jaw in the naval style. Those steely eyes of yours look as though they saw straight. I like some of your ideas. Think it over and let me know. I can still pull a few strings.”

Commander Compton laughed.

“Why don’t you take it on yourself, Lady Eashing? I’d vote for you at the next election. You would sweep the county.”

The old lady desired him to repeat this through her ear-trumpet, and then tapped him on the hand.

“You know you’re trying to flatter an old woman! But I’ve half a mind to do it, all the same. I’d put that woman, Nancy Astor, in her place.”

“I’d like to see you as Dictator,” said Compton, with his hearty quarter-deck laugh down the lady’s ear-trumpet.

“Fudge!” said Lady Eashing, rather pleased all the same.

XL

THE Reverend Horace Whitton, who was Vicar of Broadmead, looked in sometimes to have a pipe and a yarn with a friendly neighbour with whom he could talk more freely perhaps than with elderly ladies who invited him to their tea-tables. He was extraordinarily shy at first, especially when he made inquiries as to the likelihood of a week-end visit from Madge to her father's farmstead, but Commander Compton's genial way broke down his self-consciousness, and, like most shy men, when released from his constraint he talked too much. He also stayed too late for a man like Compton, who rose early to give a hand in the dairy.

But he was a gentle, scholarly fellow of about forty-two, or thereabouts, delicate on the chest, so that he had been removed from a parish in Bermondsey to this rural backwater, and Commander Compton was grateful for his company. It was pleasant to have a man like that on the other side of his fireplace. It was interesting to hear him talk about his experiences in a poor parish, and to get some insight from him into the spiritual state of England, about which he seemed dejected.

"The modern intellectuals," he said one night, "are undermining the old faith and putting nothing in its place, except a vague religion of humanism, which is hardly good enough to reconcile the mysteries of life and death. I've just been reading a book by Julian Huxley. He seems to abandon all belief in immortality. So do lots of others whose books are being read by the ordinary crowd. H. G. Wells, for instance."

Commander Compton knocked the ashes of his pipe out and filled up again.

"I should hate to think that death ends everything. Pretty hopeless, don't you think? All one's struggle and striving—heaps of disappointment—and then finish. What's the good of it all, if that's true?"

"Exactly," said the vicar. "And I believe it's that disbelief in immortality which makes the world so sad nowadays, and so desperate to get what can be got here and now."

"People still go to church," said Commander Compton.

He went to church himself every Sunday, though it was a matter of form rather than any passionate faith which took him there. But he liked to sit in this little church which dated from the thirteenth century, and feel in touch with the

past, and think of all the history which its old walls had seen, generations of English folk from little old manor houses and farmsteads and thatched cottages, from the time of the Plantagenets, through plagues and famines and civil wars and religious changes. As a naval officer he had read the service sometimes. His religion was a kind of patriotism and a matter of discipline. It made him feel good to hear the old prayers and hymns.

Mr. Whitton admitted that people still went to church—old ladies and elderly colonels, and farmers' wives and serving-maids. There was nothing else to do in the country. In the cities it was different, though even there the churches were fairly full—and overcrowded if there was a popular preacher or an organ recital or a good choir. It wouldn't be true to say that the churches were empty.

"Well, then, what's your trouble?" asked Compton.

Mr. Whitton smiled and gave a little cough in his nervous way.

"Perhaps I take too gloomy a view. But it seems to me that for thousands who go to church for one reason or another—to keep out of the wet—to avoid the boredom of a Sunday evening—there are millions who have no religion at all. And the advance of education means the advance of scepticism and unbelief. The intellectuals—the highbrows, as they are called—are writing, talking, broadcasting ideas which get down to the mass mind, destroying the old simplicities of faith. Sir Arthur Keith uses science to disprove the spiritual conception of life. His words are quoted in the daily papers. They are read by clerks and typists. Bertrand Russell gets a headline for his views on morality, which tempt little shop girls to go wrong. Aldous Huxley writes a book on 'Do What You Will', and it is reviewed in the weeklies, and gets into the minds of boys and girls in Chelsea, and travels by Underground to Bermondsey. These ideas are the food of the younger mind.

"The novels of D. H. Lawrence, which make a religion of sexual liberty, are read by girls in hat shops and boys in bank and Government offices. Is it any wonder that this sex business is an obsession with the modern mind? Look at the movies. Almost every picture glorifies the allurements of sex, without revealing its dangers and tragedies, and its penalties. When I was a curate in Bermondsey I was scared by the utter bewilderment of modern youth about these things, which they discussed with extraordinary candour. I must confess that the Church didn't seem to offer any answer, or at least to have any spiritual authority which they acknowledged and obeyed."

Commander Compton groaned a little, and then laughed.

"This sex business. Yes. I give it up. It's a desperate problem."

"The English bishops have compromised on the subject of Birth Control,"

said Mr. Whitton. “Dean Inge is all for it. What could I say to a little factory girl who found herself in trouble and tried to avoid motherhood?”

He believed that the idea of sin was being deliberately ridiculed by the intellectuals. Little text books on biology made out that morality was a matter of glands. Little text books on psychology tried to prove that the repression of the sex instinct was the cause of morbid inhibitions. He had heard young fellows in Bermondsey—he had belonged to a literary and debating society—argue that morality was only another name for Behaviourism and conditioned reflexes.

“Never heard of them,” said Commander Compton. “All that’s new to me. But then I am from the backwoods.”

The Vicar of Broadmead smiled at this confession of ignorance, and launched into an explanation of certain psychological experiments with dogs and monkeys.

“These scientists reduce the mind to a soulless machine. To them thought is just a series of chemical reactions to external stimuli. If the human mind accepts that explanation of its own workings, then philosophy, and poetry, and all idealism, are just nonsense. Religion becomes a mockery and God a myth.”

“Do you mean to say people are tempted to believe that sort of stuff?” asked Compton incredulously.

“Indirectly,” said Mr. Whitton. “They may not have heard of conditioned reflexes or endocrine glands, but the scepticism of the scientists, their disbelief in survival after death, their denial of any personal God, filters down to the half-educated classes. This scepticism colours the whole range of modern thought. It creeps into college rooms and slum tenements. I believe it’s spreading all over the world. Moscow is only the advance guard of a godless civilization, reducing humanity to an ant-heap, de-spiritualized and disciplined to a system of state slavery, without hope in a future life.”

“That’s a ghastly prospect!” exclaimed Commander Compton. “You freeze my blood, Vicar. I shall have to have a whisky after that. Will you join me?”

Mr. Whitton refused the whisky, and lit another pipe, somewhat to Commander Compton’s regret. It was getting a bit late. He was ready for bed.

“The Churches haven’t recovered from the War,” said the vicar presently. “There are millions of men who couldn’t reconcile that chapter of history with Christian teaching. I don’t blame them.”

“No,” said Commander Compton. “It seemed a bit irreconcilable, didn’t it? I haven’t been able to square it up.”

“One of my Bermondsey friends put it rather brutally one day,” said Mr.

Whitton. “ ‘You damned parsons,’ he said, ‘didn’t do a bleeding thing to stop the War. You said God is love, and then told us to stick our bayonets into the bellies of German boys. You’re all a crowd of crawling hypocrites.’ ”

Commander Compton laughed loudly.

“You must have had a hell of a time in Bermondsey,” he said, looking at this frail, ascetic man, who had a scholar’s face unsuited to the rough side of life. “What answer did you give to your candid friend?”

Mr. Whitton smiled, and held his thin, transparent hands in front of the log fire flickering on Commander Compton’s brick hearth.

“I couldn’t put up a defence. I had to admit that the Prince of Peace can’t be served by poison gas and high explosives. Don’t you agree, Commander?”

Commander Compton had lost an arm at Jutland. He had been brought up in a naval tradition. He was an old-fashioned Englishman. He believed in patriotism. But he had seen some of his best friends blown to bits by high explosives.

“I know what hell looks like,” he said. “It looks remarkably like war. But what are you going to do about it if you’re attacked by some unpleasant fellow who doesn’t believe in your way of life or your ideals of Christian virtue? Suppose China or Japan joins up with Soviet Russia and invades Western Europe like Gengis Khan and his hordes, threatening to destroy our civilization? Shouldn’t we be glad of some long-range guns and bombing aeroplanes? Shouldn’t we be right to use them? How are you going to get over that, Padre?”

The Reverend Horace Whitton, Vicar of Broadmead, raised his hands with a gesture of despair.

“I know. I can’t be an out-and-out Pacifist. And yet I see that war is a violation of Christ’s message to the world. My young people in Bermondsey believe that the wireless and other things are breaking down national hostilities. They think all war is senseless. If it happens again they’ll refuse to fight. But they don’t think it will happen.”

Commander Compton rose and stood with his back to the fire.

“I wish I could agree,” he said. “As far as I can make out, the nations don’t seem to be overflowing with brotherly love. France and Germany are not exactly falling on each other’s necks.”

The vicar saw that it was time to go.

“I’m afraid I’m keeping you up. I don’t often get a chance of a good talk on a subject like this.”

“It’s good of you to come,” said Compton. “I’m a lonely man. There’s

nothing I like better than a good chin-wag. But I have to be up early to look after my men. Don't think I'm pushing you out, my dear fellow."

He went outside with his friend, and walked as far as his gates. It was a night of stars, with a soft wet wind blowing from the south-west. The countryside was quiet, except for the hooting of an owl on one of Compton's barns.

He stood for a moment with his hand on the clergyman's arm, and spoke emotionally.

"A great mystery! What's the meaning of it, Whitton? There must be a God above us all, in spite of our little intellectuals. It can't be all senseless—those stars, this universe, this beauty!"

"God's in His heaven!" said the vicar gravely.

Compton laughed as he added a few words.

"And all's wrong with the world! Well, good night. See you again one evening."

"When is your daughter coming down again?" asked the vicar.

Compton was not quite sure.

"Possibly on Saturday. Perhaps you'll drop in to tea?"

"Oh, thanks," said Mr. Whitton. "I should be very glad. If I shouldn't be intruding?"

"Not at all. Not at all, my dear fellow."

Commander Compton went back to his farmhouse, smiling in the darkness. A good fellow, this clergyman, though inclined to talk too much, now that he had lost his shyness. But he hadn't a chance with Madge.

XLI

It was several months after the departure of Edward Feldmann, Junior, that Simon Lambert, that difficult young man, became a cause of anxiety to the father of an elusive daughter.

For some time Madge had kept him out of her conversation, and her father was rather hopeful that he was no longer so much in her secret thoughts. Not that he had anything very serious against the lad, beyond a general sense of uneasiness regarding his character and ideas, but he still cherished the hope that Madge might come back to Broadmead one day to keep house for him for more than a week-end now and then. Summer would follow spring, and the theatres would be closing down again. Her film contract would be worked through. He might have the favour of her company for a few months again.

It was a visit from Simon's father and mother which raised a sense of alarm in his mind and suggested that Madge was not so utterly frank with him as he had believed.

Mrs. Lambert—Helen, as he called her—broached the subject after lunch and a long walk round the farm, which had left her with muddy boots and a conviction that she was not cut out for any kind of life beyond the reach of London pavements and the flag of a taxicab.

"Stephen, my dear, Henry and I want to talk to you about Simon. Don't we, Henry?"

Henry—a pillar of the Treasury, but a lover of country life and gardens and golf greens—admitted that part of their purpose in coming down was to ask Stephen's advice about their difficult son.

"Sorry to worry you, old man, but the truth is, Helen and I are getting worried ourselves, and want to take advantage of your friendship. Hardly fair, I must admit."

Commander Compton thought it perfectly fair. That's what friends were for.

"What's the trouble?" he asked good-naturedly.

Mrs. Lambert explained the trouble at some length.

"Simon is fretting his heart out about Madge. And he's given up his post in the insurance office. Now he hangs about at home looking thoroughly miserable, trying to write a novel or something, like most of these young men

do nowadays. As though there weren't far too many novels, and far too many novelists! One can't keep pace with them. I'm sure every time I go to Harrod's ——"

Henry Lambert brought her back to the point.

"We're talking about Simon, my dear."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Lambert. "I *was* talking about Simon. I wish you wouldn't interrupt me, Henry. The fact is, Stephen, he sees far too much of your Madge. It isn't good for either of them, unless they make up their minds to marry and have babies."

Commander Compton raised his eyebrows and looked anxious and surprised.

"I had no idea they saw each other at all. I thought they had agreed to differ and leave it at that. Madge hasn't mentioned him for weeks."

Mrs. Lambert laughed.

"These young people don't tell everything to their parents nowadays. I know as a fact that Simon goes round to her rooms twice a week at least, and takes her out to dinner at queer little restaurants—the Blue Cuckoo and the Spotted Cat, and that kind of place—on other nights of the week."

"How do you know?"

Mrs. Lambert produced her evidence.

"I know a lot of young people. They confide in me. They also tell tales out of school, the little wretches. And they're all hankering after Simon, so they think the worst of Madge."

Henry Lambert spoke more seriously.

"I'm rather anxious about the boy. He was twenty-six last birthday. It's about time he began to get into his stride; instead of which he has resigned his position in the insurance office, and swears by all his gods that he won't tolerate that kind of slavery any longer. When I asked him whether he expected me to keep him, he answered quite civilly that he thought I might like to give him house-room and free grub until he had tried his hand at writing a novel. If that failed, he had an idea of going out to one of the Dominions and offering his body and soul to some Canadian farmer or Australian bushwhacker."

"Well, that shows he has a bit of spirit," said Commander Compton. "I might get him on to a rubber plantation—not that there's anything doing in rubber just now."

Henry Lambert sighed.

"There's nothing doing in anything. And it seems a waste of intelligence

for a boy like that. Harrow. Oxford. Is that all it's going to lead to—some infernal rubber forest on the edge of the jungle? You know what it means."

"Yes," said Compton dryly. "I had five years of it."

"It would be hell to Simon," said Henry Lambert. "He's fearfully sensitive. He would probably drink himself to death to avoid boredom, or take up with some native woman. Besides, I don't want to lose him. He's my son, after all. I put all my hopes on him."

Commander Compton looked into his friend's eyes with a sudden sympathy. So Henry felt like that too? Another father hating to lose his offspring!

"Henry dotes on him," said Mrs. Lambert, "and yet they're so shy of each other they don't speak the same language. Father and son—belonging to different worlds. Doesn't that always happen? Isn't it one of the inevitabilities? Give me a cigarette, Stephen."

Compton gave her a cigarette and lit it for her. He was wondering what these two old friends had at the back of their minds. They had some proposition to make; he was almost certain of that.

"I think I know Simon better than Henry," said Mrs. Lambert. "Sometimes he tells me things, and the rest I guess. Lately he has worried me to death. He looks so drawn and nervy and unhappy, poor boy. I went into his room the other night. He came in late and went up to bed without a word. Two hours afterwards he was still pacing up and down like a caged beast. I could hear his footsteps, though Henry, of course, was sleeping like a log."

"Well, you woke me up, anyhow," said Henry Lambert. "And I had had a hard day at the Treasury."

Mrs. Lambert patted his hand.

"Poor overworked man! Well, never mind. I want to tell Stephen about Simon. I went up in my dressing-gown and knocked at his door. When he opened it, I was rather shocked by Simon's face. One doesn't like to see one's son looking so wretched. 'What's the matter, my dear?' I asked. For some time he would not say a thing—pretended he had a toothache! Then he blurted out that he had made a mess of life and that he could never afford to marry Madge, and that he wanted her frightfully. I don't want to give him away too much. There are some things a mother can't tell. But that's how it is, Stephen. He's madly in love with Madge. He always has been. What are we going to do about it?"

Commander Compton was thoughtful. There didn't seem to be anything that he could do about it. Nothing that Helen or Henry could do about it either. It was between Madge and Simon—and he wasn't sure about Madge. He

answered after a fairly long pause, while these ideas passed through his mind.

“There was a regrettable episode in Simon’s life when he seemed to be disloyal to his love for Madge. He might be disloyal again. Perhaps Madge thinks of that.”

Mrs. Lambert’s face flushed slightly.

“Oh yes; that horrid little creature, Norah. I didn’t know you knew of it, Stephen. Who told you?”

“They both told me. Madge hadn’t forgiven him then. He smashed her ideal of him. It was a pretty bad smash.”

Mrs. Lambert became rather flustered.

“Simon was very naughty, of course. I don’t excuse him. It worried me to death, Stephen. But he was more sinned against than sinning. That little temptress——”

Henry Lambert interrupted his wife quietly.

“That’s all over and done with. Simon has run straight since then, to the best of my belief. I think he blamed himself for a silly infatuation which made him ashamed of himself afterwards. Your daughter held him off at arm’s length. You know what youth is, and passion. We can only thank God that the advance of old age lessens these temptations.”

“Hi!” said Mrs. Lambert. “Not so much about old age, Henry! I am only one year younger than you, and I’m not beyond temptation, I can tell you.”

Commander Compton laughed. Helen would talk like that at anybody’s funeral, and he sympathized with her point of view. He still had an eye for a pretty woman. That was one of the little tragedies of life. That kind of thing didn’t fade out as quickly as people thought.

“You’re incorrigible, Helen,” said her husband severely. “I thought we were talking seriously. I thought we were discussing a very serious problem.”

“So we are,” agreed Mrs. Lambert. “But for heaven’s sake let’s keep to the point.”

That was pretty good for a lady who delighted in conversational tangents, and even Henry Lambert smiled at this counter-attack.

“The point is, I think——”

“Exactly,” said Helen Lambert. “And now, Stephen, Henry and I have a plan. It isn’t a Five Years’ Plan, but it might work for a year or two and lead to the happiness of our boy and your girl.”

Commander Compton raised his eyebrows again.

“You alarm me,” he said. “And I must tell you in advance that I can’t do

anything without Madge's knowledge and consent. I'm not entering into any conspiracy."

Mrs. Lambert held his hand, which happened to be on the table within reach.

"Don't be scared. It's not a case of blackmail."

"I'm not sure that it isn't," said her husband.

She "shooshed" him down.

"Look here, Stephen, what about giving Simon a job on this farm? He could help you look after things and learn farming while he writes any queer stuff he likes in his spare time. It would keep him out of mischief and do his nerves good. It would give him time to think things out, and he might take to farming and Henry could buy him a bit of land to grow things on—cabbages and turnips. He wants an open air life, he says. He simply refuses to go into an office again. If you could have him here your influence would be wonderful. You know you're just the type for him, Stephen—the naval type, so steady, so restful, so traditional. You know what I mean."

Commander Compton was not taking any of this flattery at its face value. He stood up abruptly and paced away from the table.

"My dear Helen, I know exactly what you mean, but I'm not keen on it. Simon is to come here and help me look after things in his spare time. There ought not to be any spare time if he does his job well. I'm to keep him out of mischief and do his nerves good. What about my nerves? Probably he would get some village girl into trouble and put my neighbours all against me."

"That's not fair, Stephen," said Helen Lambert. "That's hitting below the belt, old boy."

Commander Compton flushed angrily, and paced up and down the room as though he were back on the quarter-deck of a battleship.

"It's not a bad proposition, Stephen," said Henry Lambert. "Of course we would arrange it in a businesslike way. I should be glad to put a bit of money into this farm in return for Simon's training under you. Something of that sort."

Compton waved the suggestion away.

"Don't talk nonsense, old man. It isn't a money transaction. I don't believe I could get on with that boy of yours. His ideas and mine are Poles asunder. I'm a bit of a disciplinarian. I might have to dress him down. Then he would want to punch my head."

"And then you'd punch his," said Mrs. Lambert. "And very good for him, if you didn't do it too hard."

“We’ve talked it over with Simon,” said Henry Lambert. “He’s rather keen on it. He thinks he could get on with you. He thinks no end of you. Needless to say, we should be eternally grateful.”

Compton stopped his quarter-deck exercise, and put his hand in his side pocket to get out his tobacco-pouch and load it up before answering.

“I don’t want to be unfriendly. You know I’d go a long way to pay back all your kindness for years past. But I’ll have to talk to Madge about it. I don’t see where she comes in. I don’t see what will happen when she comes here for a rest now and then. I bought this place for her. I wanted to make it our home—Madge and me together after all my wanderings. Now you want your boy to be under the same roof. It isn’t going to be quite the same thing for me. Besides, I’m not sure that it’s quite as it should be. People might talk. People always do talk.”

Mrs. Lambert raised both her hands incredulously.

“This old-fashioned Englishman! Is it possible that he is still living in the twentieth century?”

“There’s something in it,” said Henry Lambert. “I’ve thought about that.”

Mrs. Lambert nudged her husband’s arm and frowned at him in a comical way.

“Damn it!” said Compton. “I believe it *is* a conspiracy. I believe you want to get Madge mated to your ineffective son. I won’t be a party to it, Helen. I won’t have Madge pushed into marriage with anybody.”

Mrs. Lambert pooh-poohed this insinuation.

“What a suspicious man you are, Stephen! That didn’t enter my head for a moment. As if Madge could be pushed into anything. That very strong-willed young woman! Of course, if you don’t want to help the son of your old friends over a difficult time, say so, and Henry and I won’t bear malice. But if you care to talk it over with Madge we shall be grateful to you.”

“I’ll go as far as that,” said Commander Compton.

His usual good-nature weakened his resistance.

“I don’t object to the lad personally,” he admitted. “Please don’t think I’m sulky or uncivil. God forbid!”

Helen Lambert put her hand on his arm and smiled into his eyes.

“You couldn’t be uncivil, Stephen—not if you tried. Do you mind telling our man to get the car ready?”

XLII

MADGE came down on the following Saturday, and her father met her at the station as usual with his car. He had been thinking over that idea of having Simon at the farm and was not too happy about it. The fellow might be very troublesome. He also had a slight grudge against Madge for not telling him that she had been seeing so much of this fellow lately. But there was no grudge in his eyes when he saw her coming out of the station with a wave of the hand as she saw him standing by the car. She looked lovely in his gaze as usual, though a little worn and tired, he thought.

"Hullo, Father! I'm looking forward to a restful week-end. Thank goodness the sun is shining! How are the cows?"

"Longing to see you, my dear."

He noticed that two porters liked the look of her and stared after her with smiling eyes, and that a City man coming home for the week-end watched her over the hood of his two-seater, and that a policeman forgot the traffic for a moment as she waited beside the car while her father strapped on her bags. The sight of a pretty face, a slim figure, a neat leg, has an appeal more powerful than church bells. It's youth and life calling—beauty and romance in a drab and worried world. Irresistible! . . . .

"Like to drive?"

"No, I wouldn't like to disappoint your gardener. He has cleaned himself up so nicely."

"Tired, my dear?"

"Just a wee bit. They work one hard in a film studio. And it makes one's eyes go fuzzy."

"How much longer before that contract ends?"

"Five weeks more."

"And then?"

Madge was not quite sure what would happen after that. There was just a chance—a very slight chance—of a part in a new show at the Lyric, Hammersmith—her old crowd. But it might be postponed until the autumn.

"You ought to have three months' rest at least. Just lying about in deck-chairs and hammocks. Nothing more strenuous than a game of croquet."

Madge laughed at the idea of such languor.

“I should get the fidgets. I’m very active minded.”

Commander Compton avoided the subject of Simon until after dinner that evening. At tea-time the vicar had come in, and a few other neighbours, including Colonel Urquhart, who lost his heart to Madge again and must have bored her with his reminiscences of India, though she pretended to be interested. When they had gone, Madge spent an hour in the rose garden with a watering-can, which her father filled for her from a long hose. It was a June evening, with a cloudless sky for once; and the garden was looking at its best, due to the devotion of its owner, who had taken time off from the farm to make these flowers bloom with the assistance of a man who knew his job.

“Father, you’ve made a little paradise! I love those Canterbury bells. And those delphiniums are adorable. It’s so much nicer than a film studio.”

“Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

He felt tremendously “bucked” by this approval. He liked that last sentence of hers especially.

“When is that red-headed wench coming down again? I was disappointed not to see her in Town last time I went up.”

“Oh, Jean is languishing for you. You’re her hero, Father! She thinks you are so much nicer than the Bloomsbury boys.”

“So I am,” said Commander Compton with sham egotism. “At least I get my hair cut once a fortnight.”

So they put in some good hours, very enjoyable to an affectionate father. Madge even visited the cows, and rubbed their noses, and liked the meekness of their eyes, which reminded her of an Italian waiter who was a friend of hers in a Soho restaurant—an extraordinary simile, which made her father laugh very heartily.

It was when they sat alone together after dinner, with the windows open and the scent of wallflowers coming through the casements, that Commander Compton got on to the subject that had been lurking in the back of his mind all day.

“The Lamberts came here on Thursday.”

“Yes,” said Madge. “Simon told me.”

Compton lit his pipe before following up that remark.

“Have you seen much of that young man lately?”

Madge answered without embarrassment.

“Quite often. He takes me out to dinner now and then. He comes round to the rooms when I let him.”

“Friends again?” asked Compton.

Madge laughed quietly.

“We don’t quarrel so much, but he’s very troublesome sometimes. I suppose Mrs. Lambert told you he has chucked his job?”

“Yes,” said Compton.

“He thinks of taking up writing. It was my idea partly. He’s frightfully clever, you know. He’s always thinking about things.”

“Not a good habit,” said Compton. “It’s better to stick to one’s job and do a bit of honest work. The Lamberts want me to have him down here. They think he might help me with the farm. I’m not very keen on it. What’s your idea on the subject?”

Madge looked up at her father with a kind of gladness in her eyes.

“Oh, Father, that’s a great idea! It’s wonderful! I think it would do Simon a lot of good. It’s exactly what he wants. He’s like a caged animal in a City office. He’s not cut out for that work really. And down here he would have you to talk things over with him. It would be splendid for him. Besides . . .” Her face flushed a little, and she fluttered her eyelashes.

“Besides what? Tell me. I want to know.”

“It’s not good for him to keep hanging around me in Town. I have my work to do, and he only gets into a fever when he sees me. It’s all very worrying.”

Commander Compton could see that it was worrying, but he didn’t quite understand.

“My dear,” he said, “let me get this right. What exactly is it between you and this young man? What does it all mean? Six months ago you quarrelled with him. You wouldn’t forgive him for a certain episode. Am I to take it that you have forgotten that? Are you two people in love with each other? If so, what are you going to do about it?”

Madge looked distressed.

“I don’t know *what* to do about it.”

She blinked away some tears which suddenly filled her eyes.

“Father,” she said, “I know it’s all very puzzling. It’s only fair to tell you everything—not that there’s anything startling to tell you. It’s simply that Simon is frightfully in love with me, and that it is spoiling his life and preventing him from making a career for himself. I know I shall have to marry him one day. I can see now that I couldn’t marry anyone else. That’s why I didn’t marry Edward, although I was tempted to—for a day or two. But Simon

and I belong to each other. I don't know why. It's a kind of destiny. That sounds silly, but it's true somehow, although I've often denied it. We disagree about almost everything, and yet in our minds there's a kind of understanding, and perhaps something in our bodies. Negative and positive electricity!

"He keeps on asking me to marry him, but, Father, how can I marry him when he's not earning a penny? Besides, I want to go on with my acting. Why should I give up everything just when I'm beginning to make a success? I've told him a thousand times that I want him to wait until I've had a chance. I'm not ready for marriage. I want to do other things. I want—myself. I don't mean selfishness. I want not to belong to anybody who will grab everything I have and stop everything I want to do. Simon doesn't want me to go on acting if I marry him. He wants all of me, he says. And he thinks I can't act, anyhow. You see how difficult it is!"

She stopped speaking and looked at her father with moist eyes.

Compton was silent for a little while, thinking back to her words. It was quite obvious that she was in love with Simon in spite of all her other friends. Jean had told him so more than once. It was quite certain that one day she would marry him, and her father would have to make the best of that. It seemed to be a question of how long she could hold him off—how long she could resist her own emotional stress. Perhaps that was the point to be emphasized.

"I think you're perfectly right to refuse him as long as he can't earn his own living. Does he expect you to keep him? I don't think much of his pride if that's his idea."

Madge denied that.

"Simon thinks that his father ought to finance him until he finds his right place in life. He says that's the privilege of fathers who bring sons into a muddled world which they helped to make."

She smiled again, with wet eyelashes.

"That's the kind of talk which would put my back up," said Compton. "But the point is, Madge, how does he propose to earn his living? How is he ever going to provide for you decently? This farm is costing me a good deal of money. One day I hope to make it pay for itself, but there won't be a living for Simon on it, still less for you and Simon, unless you're content to live like small-holders, scraping a bare living from a patch of earth."

Madge raised her hands with a look of horrified amusement.

"I should die in such a life! Never to see the glamour of the footlights; never to smell grease-paint; never to hear the sound of an audience settling into its seats before the curtain goes up, applauding when the curtain goes down! I

should hate to leave all that for milking cows on a foggy morning, and trudging through mud to a pigstye, and using chapped hands to feed the chickens. This place looks a dream now, Father, on a June day, with the flowers in bloom. But you know what farming means. It's a hard life."

Her father agreed. There was no denying the truth of that.

"Yes, there's nothing idyllic about farming. I happen to like it because I'm used to roughing it—and pay other men, anyhow, to do the dirty jobs. I can't see you as a farmer's wife, Madge—nor that young man Simon as a farmer. It's nonsense."

"He might be rather good at it," said Madge. "He's keen on outdoor things. At Oxford he won the hundred yards and the long jump. That's why he feels caged in the City."

Commander Compton smiled at those credentials for a farmer.

"It might be useful to do the long jump if Farmer Trant's bull breaks loose one day, but what's the good of his coming down here? Is it to be a rest cure for him—or for you, Madge?"

"Oh, you'll have to make him work. Then in the evenings he can do his writing. It wouldn't be so lonely for you, Father."

Commander Compton permitted himself one or two naval expressions of the lighter kind.

"Hell's bells! . . . Madge, don't you see that I'm vastly disappointed and horribly hipped? I don't want to act as nursemaid to this neurotic Simon. I want to act as father to a pretty daughter. I bought this house for you, but you've only spent a few weeks under its old roof. I planted those flowers for you and watered 'em—not exactly with my tears—I won't exaggerate the case—but damnably depressed because you were forty miles away in a film studio. I've been looking forward for the last five months or so to having you here for the summer vacation, and now all you offer me is Simon. I don't want Simon. Damn Simon! I want you, Madge. Send Simon to Halifax, or some other place beginning with the same letter, and chuck that acting business, and come and stay with your old dad and keep house for him."

He spoke with a laugh in his voice, with smiling eyes, with a humorous violence, and yet the sincerity came through the sham, and Madge knew that he was speaking what he felt so strongly.

She stretched her hand out across the dinner-table where they sat after the meal had been cleared—except for the coffee-cups.

"Father, I'm sorry you want me so much. You're like Simon. You're like Edward. You're like—all the others. They all want me to come and look after

them, and love them, and hold their hands. But I can't give myself to everybody. Can't I have my own life? Can't I develop my own mind a bit and make a success of myself? Women have always been handicapped like that, I suppose. Men want them and they're greedy. I suppose women *have* to be slaves. I quite see that one day I shall be dragged into slavery. I might like it for a time—and that's the danger I see. I have instincts in me which tell me I might like it for a while. But it seems like lowering one's flag to give up the stage. That was my little flag—something of my own. It's my way of self-expression, I suppose."

Commander Compton took his daughter's hand and held it tight.

"Sorry, Madge. I'm a selfish old swine. I might develop into one of those vampire parents unless I'm very careful. Of course you have a right to your own life. Every woman has. I should feel pretty mean about it if I spoiled a great actress. And that's what it would come to if I indulged in my instinct to grab you for my own company. And that's what Simon ought to get into his head. Love is not worth much if it is wholly selfish. He's thinking of himself all the time, as I've been doing—I admit."

"No," said Madge. "I can't allow that, Father. You've been a darling to me. So patient. And I knew you were lonely. Perhaps I'm the selfish one. Perhaps I ought to give in to Simon. He suffers because I won't marry him. It's a real agony to him."

"Keep him waiting till you're ready," said Compton. "Make him earn his living first. That's right and fair."

"It might help him if you had him here, Father. And if I'm free after I leave the studio, I'll come down and look after both of you for a bit. How's that? It's the best I can think of. It's not too bad as a way out for a while. I believe Simon would pull his weight under your influence. He's not a weakling really. You're wrong if you think he's a neurotic. He's just bothered about life and himself and me. You can't blame him for being in love with me, can you?"

She asked the question quite simply, and her father could find no answer to that. It was very natural that any young man should be in love with her. It would be quite impossible not to be in love with her, he thought.

"I shall have to have that young fellow down here," he said with a smile. "When do you think he would like to come?"

XLIII

THERE was some preliminary diplomacy required before young Lambert decided that he might put in some time at Broadmead without loss of pride or any enslavement of the soul. His father fixed up a business arrangement whereby his son's sense of self-respect would be safeguarded. That is to say, he paid a certain sum in advance for Simon's apprenticeship to the science of agriculture. Commander Compton wrote to the young man himself and explained that he was in need of an assistant to keep an eye on his men and study the possibilities of fruit-growing on scientific lines. He would be very glad if Simon would give him a hand now that he was at a loose end. He would be free in the evening to study or write. Indeed, he would have a good deal of spare time, as a farm of sixty acres was not much to manage. Commander Compton would be glad of his help and his company.

All this was to please Madge and pay back a long standing debt of friendship and gratitude to the Lamberts. Secretly the owner of Broadmead disliked the idea of this intrusion intensely, having more than a suspicion that he would find the youth intolerable.

The arrival of Mr. Simon Lambert was not altogether reassuring. When Compton met him at Guildford Station he found him in an extremely handsome suit of plus fours, surrounded by expensive-looking bags, among which was a set of golf clubs. And he looked a bit moody, with a sulky line about his mouth, until he caught sight of the Commander, and touched his cap civilly enough.

But his first words were ironical.

"Come aboard, sir! Nice weather for the time of year."

It was raining fairly heavily beyond the shelter of the station yard.

"Not too good for those clothes," said Commander Compton. "Let me give you a hand with the bags."

He lifted one of the bags, and dumped it again.

"Good heavens! It weighs like a ton of lead."

Simon relieved him of it and heaved it into the back of the car.

"Books," he explained. "A set of D. H. Lawrence, some Aldous Huxleys, various works on farming, and the Bible."

Commander Compton raised his eyebrows.

“An odd assortment. The Bible?”

Simon nodded.

“Rum stuff. I want to get the hang of it. Do you mind if I drive? Your man can sit behind, perhaps.”

Compton allowed him to drive, but regretted it. He drove like a racing motorist, and put the wind up an ex-naval officer, especially when they plunged into narrow roads beyond Peasemarsh.

“No hurry, my lad. I’d rather not kill anybody this morning, if you don’t mind.”

Simon eased down a little.

“Sorry. Didn’t know you were nervous.”

“I’m not,” said Compton.

“I haven’t killed anybody yet.”

“I shouldn’t try.”

Simon glanced at him sideways and smiled faintly. A mile or two further on he spoke again.

“I’m afraid my family has pushed me on to you. It’s very decent of you to let me come, sir. I expect I shall be a hell of a nuisance.”

Well, that was a fair way of putting it. It had a softening effect upon a good-natured man.

“I hope we shall be good shipmates. What’s your idea, generally speaking? Do you really want to learn something about farming? Does it interest you at all?”

Simon stared over his wheel at the winding tape of the road.

“I dare say it’s more amusing than an insurance office,” he said presently. “There might be something in it if one used one’s intelligence. Anyhow, I might take a look round. My governor is prepared to plank down a few thousand if I feel drawn towards that kind of thing. But I must confess I’ve taken up with another idea at the moment.”

“Novel writing?” asked Compton.

Simon nodded and gave a shy, uneasy laugh.

“Yes. I suppose Madge told you. It sounds silly, doesn’t it?”

“It might be all right,” said Compton. “Out of my line, you know. But I don’t quite see why you’re coming to Broadmead if you want to write all the time. It doesn’t seem to go with agriculture.”

Simon explained his method.

“One doesn’t write all the time. One potters about a good deal, I find, until one’s ideas get over the gestation period. I’m quite ready to do a bit of mucking about.”

“Good!” said Compton, with an inward irony.

“As long as I don’t have to kill things,” said Simon.

Compton reassured him.

“That’s all right. I don’t massacre my milking cows. I suppose you don’t object to spraying apple trees and killing a few bugs?”

Simon saw the irony and smiled over his wheel.

“As long as they don’t bleed. I hate gore. That’s why I’m glad I missed the Great War. So disgusting.”

He glanced for a moment at Compton’s empty sleeve and apologized.

“Sorry! I forgot for a moment that you were one of the heroes of that historical episode.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Commander Compton dryly.

They arrived at Broadmead Farm. Young Mr. Lambert expressed approval of its picturesque aspect, but remarked that it must have been insanitary before it was modernized. He seemed relieved at the sight of the bathroom within reach of his bedroom, where he remained a couple of hours after lunch, unpacking or absorbed in meditation, or reading the works of D. H. Lawrence, or, perhaps, one of the books of the Old Testament, while downstairs Commander Compton, his host and superior officer, became impatient at waiting for him, and went out into the mud and rain to one of the sheds where a sick cow needed his attention.

XLIV

An extraordinary young man! There were times when the owner of Broadmead Farm felt greatly exasperated with him. There were moments when he felt his temper rising beyond the point of self-control. There were many times when their conversation developed into heated argument. But for his essential good nature and his constant recollection that this fellow was the lover of Madge and the son of his best friends, Commander Compton would not have had patience with him.

Simon hadn't the faintest idea of discipline, which was annoying to an ex-naval man. If the weather happened to be fine, or if he had gone to bed early for once—a habit of which he disapproved—he might stroll down to breakfast at eight o'clock (after Compton had been up for two hours), looking ready for a bit of work, in plus fours and a pullover. But if the weather were unfavourable, or he had sat up late—often there was a light under his door until half past two—he sent down word by one of the maids that he had a bit of a headache and would like his breakfast in bed, or staggered down at nine o'clock and even later in his pyjamas and dressing-gown, unshaven, moody, and disinclined for any conversation beyond a monosyllable, or, at most, a sulky phrase.

"Filthy weather!"

"We can do with some more rain. Good growing weather, my lad."

The Commander's cheeriness had no effect on him.

"A cursed climate!"

If it pleased him, he worked very well. He was amused and interested in a new spraying machine, and spent several days in the orchard spraying himself as well as the trees with considerable enjoyment. He took possession of a Kentish bill-hook—a dangerous weapon—and devoted a week, morning and afternoon, to thinning a copse, only returning for meal-times with his arms scratched and his clothes—a highly coloured pullover—torn by brambles.

"Nothing like a good sweat!" he remarked after one of these adventures in wood-craft. "I've drained off some of the poison from that insurance office. I'm making that copse look like a lady's boudoir. What about a bit of draining and ditching? It will take off the water from those flooded meadows."

"Fine!" said Compton. "That's a useful piece of work. I'll lend you a hand."

Simon drew up plans for the job. They were very neatly done and drawn to scale. Without Compton's authority he took off two men from another job and set them to work cutting new ditches. For at least a week he was vastly interested in these preparations, and tired himself out with hard physical labour and a heavy spade. Then one morning he failed to put in an appearance. At lunch time Compton, who had been carrying on with the two men, ventured to inquire why his flag lieutenant had absented himself.

"A back-breaking business!" said Simon. "Those two louts can get on with it. As a matter of fact, I got going on a new chapter of my novel. No objection, I suppose?"

Commander Compton laughed, not quite happily.

"I hate leaving a job before it's done. Not good for discipline. Not according to naval tradition."

Simon raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Is that so? Well, I wasn't trained in the Navy. If there's anything I loathe, it's discipline and tradition."

That was one of the moments when Commander Compton had to put a control on his temper.

He shoved his thumb hard into the bowl of his pipe and gave himself time to soften down his answer.

"I'm aware of that. Perhaps a year or two in the Navy might have altered some of your ideas."

"Oh, quite likely," said young Lambert calmly. "It might have left me with no ideas at all. That would make life easier. It's the only advantage I see in tradition. No need to think! No worry! No perplexity! What was good enough for my father is good enough for me. And so forth. That's what makes England what it is, God help it!"

Commander Compton swallowed something in his throat.

"May I suggest that you have a slight intellectual arrogance my dear Simon?"

Simon seemed surprised by this accusation. In fact, it abashed him for several minutes, so that he answered with humility.

"Good Lord, no! Intellectually arrogant? Why, I'm just groping around in a sea of doubt. I'm not certain of anything. I should hate you to think that I have any conceit of myself. That's wide of the mark, sir, honestly."

He spoke with a sincerity which disarmed the elder man's irritation. And that happened constantly. In spite of Simon's exasperating ways—exasperating to a man who believed in order and conventional manners—he had an

engaging way of apologizing for any breach of civility or respect whenever he became aware that he might be considered guilty of that. He said the most arrogant things without the slightest notion that they might be thought offensive. He was free spoken to a most alarming degree, because he did not consider it necessary to hide his thoughts and had a simple belief that what he said was self-evident in its truth, or at least was a good subject for friendly discussion.

Certainly he devoted a fair amount of time to the theoretical side of agriculture, and seemed interested in the subject off and on. He sat down solidly to Compton's books on small-holdings, and farming for profit, and soils and manures, and fruit-growing and dairy-farming, and absorbed the facts more rapidly than Compton had done, having an uncanny way of remembering statistics—perhaps due to his training in insurance, or to a fresh mind.

"I'd like to have a look at some of our neighbours' farms," he suggested one night. "It might be well to see what our rivals are up to."

Compton was pleased.

"By all means. Theory is useless without experience. You'll find them very intelligent and hard-working folk, as good as gold. Our best type of character, in my opinion, untouched by modern restlessness and superficiality. They carry on in the same fields as their forefathers, in the same spirit. A bit slow-going, perhaps, but knowing their own local conditions and the earth under their feet. They'll give you a friendly welcome."

"I shall be charmed to meet them," said Simon, with that touch of satire which sometimes perplexed a simple naval man who did not quite know whether he was not having his leg pulled—a process which annoyed him as a rule.

They took tea with Farmer Trant, the old gentleman who remembered the black year of 1879, and who had seen many harvest moons over his three hundred acres.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Lambert," he said, shaking hands very heartily. "So you're interested in farming, eh? If there's anything I know that's any use to you, it's at your service, sir. And I've been farming, boy and man, like my family before me, as far back as memory goes. There's an old Trant in the graveyard who died in 1420, and he wasn't the first of 'em either, I'll be bound!"

"I wonder some of them didn't try to break away," Simon answered with a smile. "When you were a boy, didn't you sometimes think you would like to have a different kind of life, instead of following the plough along the same old furrows?"

“Never!” said Mr. Trant. “I won a prize for ploughing when I was fourteen. I remember my father giving me a golden sovereign for doing so well. ‘Dick,’ he said, ‘here’s something for the savings box. Don’t spend it on fairs or follies. I’m proud of you, my lad,’ he said. And those were warm words from my father, who was a hard man not given to praising lightly. Now come round some of my fields before the wife gives you a cup of tea. I’ll lead the way, Commander; I’d like to show you some of the Danish wheat I’ve sowed. It’s coming up fine.”

“What price are you going to get for it when you harvest it?” asked Simon.

Mr. Trant raised his gnarled old hands.

“Prices are dropping all the time. Over-production in Canada spoils the market for English wheat. Last year I was down five pounds an acre, counting labour costs. I’m afraid it’s going to be worse this year. I don’t see much hope of any improvement. Of course, what we want is a bit of Protection. But there’s no chance of that with a Labour Government in power.”

“I can’t think why you grow wheat at all,” said Simon, staring across a vista of wet fields in which the wheat was rising tall and green. “Isn’t it a great mistake? Aren’t you clinging to a tradition which has gone dead?”

Mr. Trant glanced at him sideways, rather startled.

“Not grow wheat in these fields? Why, this land is as good for arable as any in England. It would be a sin to put it down to grass. I shouldn’t lie easy in my grave if I did that.”

Simon became argumentative.

“But if you can’t make a profit, it seems a bit useless, doesn’t it? In my opinion, England will have to leave wheat to Canada and the States. We can’t compete with mechanical farming over vast areas. It strikes me we shall have to grow vegetables and go in for intensive farming, like the Belgians; or concentrate on milk and butter and cheese, like the Danes.”

Commander Compton began to get uneasy. This town-bred young man was laying down the law to an old gentleman who was highly respected among his fellow farmers and took a pride in his land.

He stood for a moment on the edge of his wheatfields, with a sheep-dog at his side, and thrust his fingers through his short white beard, and looked at Simon sideways under his shaggy brows.

“I’ve heard that sort of talk,” he said good-naturedly. “I’ve read about it in the papers. There may be something in it, for those as like it. Some of my neighbours are putting their land down to grass and turning themselves into dairy men. That’s not farming! That’s cow-keeping. I go in for general farming

and always have done. My land is made for it. As for wheat, it's the basis of good farming, as you'll find out for yourself one day, Mr. Lambert. Nature asks for a rotation of crops. And you want the straw for your cattle. You can't get a good balance without wheat and barley. Of course, if you're thinking of market gardening, that's a different thing. But, then, you don't want three hundred acres of the finest land for tomatoes and early peas. English farming is English farming."

"Yes," said Simon, "that's true, certainly. I agree to that."

He turned with a smile to Commander Compton, who avoided his glance and still felt uneasy as to the development of this discussion.

Mr. Trant laughed wheezily, beating his chest at a touch of asthma.

"There was a young gentleman down here from Oxford," he said. "One of those lecturers, you know. All theory! 'What we want is to mechanize English farming,' he said. 'Motor tractors and no hedges. Less men at high wages and more machines run at a cheap cost. You could make wheat pay at twenty-four shillings a quarter.' 'Young man,' I said to him, 'you couldn't run a tractor on some of my land, and I wouldn't like to see it there, anyhow. I've good teams of horses, and my ploughmen know their job. What are the poor fellows going to do if I use machines instead of men? What good is it going to do old England if there's no place on the land for the men she breeds? Isn't there enough unemployment already—enough to make your heart break? Perhaps it'll come to mechanized farming in England. Open fields without hedges, and motor-driven ploughs, and three men and a dog for a thousand acres wired in. I don't say it won't come,' I said, 'but I hope I shan't be here to see it. I'd rather be dead,' I said, 'with those that went before me on this old farm.' That's what I feel, Mr. Lambert. Loss or no loss, that's my way."

Simon looked unconvinced.

"I'm rather inclined to agree with that fellow from Oxford," he said. "We must adapt ourselves to modern conditions, you know. We can't run this little island as though it were cut off from the rest of mankind. World prices dominate the situation. What happens in Canada or the United States bears down on this farm."

Farmer Trant plucked his beard and answered rather sadly.

"No doubt you're right, Mr. Lambert. I was listening-in to the wireless the other night—my old lady turns on the loud speaker, as they call it—and there was a fellow talking with a foreign accent, maybe thousands of miles away. Queer, isn't it? Other people's speech coming into my old farmhouse, other people's thoughts altering our own minds, other people's industry competing with ours! I remember the time when Guildford seemed a long journey away.

Now the Commander here does it in twenty minutes or so in his motor-car. It's a different world since I was a boy.

"You'll forgive an old man if I say I don't like it so well. It makes men's minds restless as well as their bodies. It makes one afraid of what's happening in other countries, because very likely we shall get caught ourselves in their troubles, like we were in the Great War. I was reading about that crash in Wall Street. The Americans don't seem so prosperous as they were. Strange! Sometimes I get nervous about what's going to happen in England. All those unemployed, you know. . . . Well, come and have a cup of tea, gentlemen. Mrs. Trant will be pleased to see you."

Commander Compton introduced Simon to Mrs. Trant and saw her eyes soften at the sight of him, remembering a son who had been killed on the Somme. He behaved very nicely to her, as he could do when he liked, and was courteous and gentle to the old lady, not allowing boredom to creep into his eyes when she brought out the family album and showed him the portrait of that dead son, and many uncles and aunts and grandfathers and grandmothers, grotesquely dressed, as they must have seemed to a modern young man.

He admired her china in the corner cupboard—some pieces of lustre ware and Worcester, and comic dogs and Toby jugs—and he was interested in a set of Rowlandson prints. He also did well with her currant cake and home-made jam.

On the way home he was silent for some time, until he broke the silence with a sudden exclamation.

"Pitiful!"

"What is?" asked Compton.

"These old people clinging on to ancient ways which the rest of the world has left behind. No wonder English farming is in such a mess!"

That night they had an argument about it. Simon saw no hope for agriculture so long as English farmers failed to change their mediæval ways, growing stuff which couldn't compete with world prices, hostile to labour-saving machinery, running their farms as separate units, and refusing to co-operate with their neighbours in production and marketing.

"Exactly as they were in the time of King John!" he protested. "Wallowing in muck and mud and ancient folklore. If the same brains and science were put into agriculture as into the cotton industry or the manufacture of motor-cars, there might be money in it. But what can we do when these old gentlemen walk about their fields with the minds of Anglo-Saxons?"

"I admire them," said Compton. "They're a fine type. They're not so clever as you young intellectuals, but they have a wisdom of their own, with deep

roots. And Nature doesn’t change its laws. We have the same sun and rain and soil as in the time of King John. The old earth behaves in the same way.”

“Possibly. But society doesn’t. There’s such a thing as mass-production. Russia has a Five Years’ Plan and co-operative farms.”

“Based on slave labour,” said Compton.

Simon agreed.

“Isn’t that our trouble? Aren’t we trying to keep up wages beyond the scale of other nations? And aren’t we fighting a losing battle by sticking to the old individualism and the old policy of muddling through? All these filthy little farms defending themselves behind their ditches and hedges against World Powers and grain-growing continents. Don’t you find it rather ridiculous?”

“I find it heroic,” said Compton rather hotly. “I believe in individualism. God help us if we adopt the Russian system of State socialism!”

Simon laughed as he threw another log on to the fire.

“I’m inclined to say God help us if we don’t. But I’m not sure about it. It’s extraordinarily difficult to get at the facts.”

He did some careful work with the bellows to a fire of damp wood.

XLV

SIMON was extremely moody at times and seemed to lose himself in introspection. In the evenings, when they sat together by the open fireplace, Compton noticed that he dropped the book he was reading, deeply buried in a low chair with his legs stretched out, and stared for half an hour or more into the bluish flame of the burning logs. Then sometimes he became restless, and gave a heavy sigh, which was almost a groan, and stood up to stretch his arms and take a look through the windows at the weather or the effect of moonlight over the fields and woods.

"I think I'll stretch my legs a bit. Don't wait up, sir."

"It's pouring with rain, my lad. Far better keep dry."

"Oh, curse the rain! This room is in a fearful fug. I'll slog off, if you don't mind."

He slogged off, and came back two hours later—three hours later—wet and muddy, and haggard-looking, with a kind of desperation in his eyes, so that Compton was sorry for him, trying to guess the cause of his melancholy. Perhaps he was fretting about Madge, whom he hadn't seen now for several weeks. Perhaps he realized that time was slipping away, and that he wasn't getting on with any career which would give him the chance of keeping a wife. All his passionate impulses were thwarted. The desperate need of youth for love, the yearning of body and soul for satisfaction and happiness, were unfulfilled, and his intolerance with the conventions of life, his lack of any spiritual or moral certainties, his refusal to acknowledge the need of discipline, gave him no sense of resignation. So Commander Compton guessed when he saw that haggard look in his eyes and a line of pain about his lips.

"He's in revolt against the conditions of life. He can't reconcile his own nature with the limitations imposed upon him by the rules of the game. That's why I've got to be very patient with him. I wish I could help him. I wish I could put my hand on his shoulder and have a heart-to-heart talk, and give him some kind of consolation and hope."

But the fact was that both Compton and the younger man avoided that subject, though they talked freely about everything else. They both became shy at the mention of Madge. Once or twice a week Simon had a letter from her, but he put it in his pocket at the breakfast-table, read it up in his own room, and said not a word about it. But even if Compton didn't see the letter—he

nearly always did—he would have known that Simon had received it. It was on those evenings that he became restless and walked out into the rain or the darkness on damp nights. It was after a letter from Madge that he kept his light burning late in his room and paced up and down the boards, one of which creaked horribly, like a tiger in a cage.

Sometimes he wrote for several hours after dinner in a corner of the sitting-room, with a writing-pad on his knees and a fountain-pen flogging the paper, when he got going, with long pauses while he seemed bothered about a word or a phrase. Compton, reading his agricultural books or Winston Churchill's "World Crisis", watched him sometimes out of the corner of his eye and saw that he had a puckered frown on his forehead, or now and then a smile about his lips, as though amused by what he was putting down.

"How's it going?" asked Compton one evening.

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't the faintest idea. It's rum stuff."

"Read out a bit."

"Oh, Lord, no!"

He suddenly became self-conscious and packed up his papers. "Like a game of chess?"

"By all means. Only you whack me too often."

Simon played chess with a very keen attack. He crumpled up a hero of Jutland five times out of six. It was rather annoying to the elder man, who had to play for safety.

There were days—once more than a week at a stretch—when this moody young man became very silent and inarticulate, refusing openings for conversation, retiring to his own room as much as possible, and sulking about the house and farm. But suddenly, for no apparent reason, those moods would pass and he became talkative and argumentative again especially when the Reverend Horace Whitton turned up after dinner for a pipe and a yarn.

They seemed to interest each other. Compton had seen them measure each other up on the first introduction, the vicar looking attracted by this good-looking visitor, and Simon amused and on the defensive.

They were not unlike each other in physical type. In fact, they might have been an elder and younger brother, the vicar looking worn and ascetic and scholarly, but with the same sharply-cut profile and Balliol voice.

At first Simon seemed constrained by his presence, and sat listening to his conversation with the Commander without any effort to link up with it, until presently he made a challenging comment. It was over some chance remark of

Compton’s about a new method of grafting.

“One can hardly keep pace with these new discoveries of science,” said the vicar.

Simon laughed and spoke rather aggressively.

“Yes, I expect you find them rather awkward sometimes. Doesn’t the Church have to evade them?”

The vicar looked startled. He gave a quick, nervous glance at the younger man, and answered in a conciliatory voice.

“Why should they be awkward?”

“Well,” said Simon, “I don’t see how you can reconcile the scientific point of view with the ancient myths of orthodox religion. One can’t have it both ways. Science rules out superstition.”

The vicar gave himself time to answer.

“There’s no real conflict between science and religion,” he said after a pause. “They’re on different planes, you know. One deals with measurements and the other with values; one with physical facts and the other with spiritual evidence.”

Simon desired to have a closer definition of that word “spiritual”. He confessed that he was a confirmed materialist, in spite of occasional spasms of unreasoning mysticism, due, perhaps, to the influence of an Irish nurse in his earliest childhood.

“Surely not a confirmed materialist!” exclaimed the vicar. “Isn’t materialism as dead as the Dodo? As far as I can find out—I’m not a scientist—there’s no such thing as matter in the old sense of the word. Isn’t it energy? The composition of the atom seems to be electrical force. I read a little book by Haldane the other day. He seems to see only one reality behind all appearances, and that is spirit—unless I misinterpret him.”

Simon agreed, after due consideration, that matter wasn’t quite as dead as it used to be thought.

“Dancing electrons,” he said. “The rhythmic whirl of atoms. Alpha rays and Beta rays and all the rest of it. But I don’t see how that helps me to a spiritual conception of life. It doesn’t prove the immortality of the soul, or suggest to me that the Church of England is an infallible authority on faith and morals.”

The vicar laughed good-humouredly.

“Oh, I don’t ask you to go as far as that in one jump. But I’m glad you withdrew your label as a materialist. Are you willing to admit that our limited intelligence may give us some faint perception of a Divine Wisdom directing

those whirling atoms, and giving them order and design?”

Simon was not willing to admit that without scientific proof. It seemed to him a mere supposition. Intelligence—which was thought—was strictly conditioned by the thinking machine which could only function by the action of innumerable cells in other parts of the human body. If they went wrong, thought went wrong.

“A piano doesn’t compose a Beethoven symphony,” said the vicar.

Simon agreed.

“But the piano is one of the instruments by which music is made. Music is a series of vibrations which sound rather pleasant when they tickle the ear-drum with a definite rhythm, stimulating the sense. Is there more to it than that?”

“More by all the meaning of beauty and human emotion,” said the vicar. “More by all that men have thought and felt. Surely?”

Simon was bothered by those words “thought” and “felt”.

Weren’t thought and emotion, he asked, utterly dependent upon physical conditions? If the thyroid gland didn’t function properly a fellow became a cretin or an imbecile. If the pituitary was enlarged he became a brainless giant. If the endocrine glands were deficient in their secretions a man was a feeble creature without physical energy or mental activity. If they were over-stimulated he became a lustful beast. Then hereditary characteristics came in. A man’s mind and character were dictated by the arrangement of his chromosomes.

“His bodily characteristics,” said the vicar. “Not his mind and character.”

He looked across at Commander Compton with a secret smile. This conversation was developing on the lines of those debates he had described.

Simon had an idea that mind and character were fashioned by bodily characteristics. That was the point he was driving at for the sake of argument. Not that he knew much about it, of course, but it seemed to him that the behaviour of mankind—very ridiculous mostly—was simply due to certain animal instincts. The sex instinct first and foremost. Then hunger. Then the instinct of self-preservation against hostile and destructive forces—that is to say, things which conflicted with his bodily ease and thwarted his instincts. Surely modern civilization, so called, was simply the development of the struggle one could see through the microscope turned on the bacteria in a drop of water; things squirming about, desperate to reproduce themselves; things absorbing nutriment or resisting it if it was bad for their chemical composition; things combining against other forms of life hostile to their own. Industrialism and capitalism were just that. War was due to the same need of food and self-

preservation and the sex instinct.

“The sex instinct?” asked the vicar, with an incredulous laugh.

“Yes. That’s the dominant motive, I imagine. Men fight for the privilege of mating. Men can’t mate without economic ease nowadays. They can’t keep a home unless they’re assured of the means of existence. So when those things are threatened, or they believe they are threatened, they go for each other. Of course, it doesn’t look so simple as all that. It’s made more complicated by words like ‘patriotism’ and ‘sacred egoism’, and ‘trade competition’, and so forth. But it really boils down to the need of a man for a woman.”

“I expect you’ve been reading Freud and his school,” suggested the vicar quietly. “He’s rather out of date nowadays. Adler has taken his place and modified his views.”

Simon protested that he hadn’t got those ideas out of books, although perhaps he may have been influenced by things he had read. Mostly he had been thinking it out for himself. He had to admit that his three intellectual leaders were D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, and Bertrand Russell.

“Intellectual Bolsheviks, I’m afraid,” said the vicar.

“Oh, certainly!” said Simon. “Why not, if they tell the truth about life, or at least break down the illusions under which men live—especially in this country of tradition and timidity? We’re afraid of all thought, of course. We never face unpleasant realities. We’re afraid of our bodies, afraid of offending conventional morality, and above all afraid of truth. We prefer to be hoodwinked by our politicians, our clergy, and our newspapers.”

“Isn’t that rather sweeping?” asked the vicar with a good-natured laugh and a glance at Commander Compton, who was listening-in without taking part in this verbal duel, although he followed it with interest. Simon stood for the scepticism of the modern mind, and also for its anarchy and bewilderment. This middle-aged vicar stood for the spiritual tradition and the old moralities. He was on the vicar’s side by instinct and training.

“Perhaps it’s time to have a clean sweep of old fallacies,” said Simon. “Haven’t our minds been enslaved by them too long? Think of all the agonies men and women have suffered by self-repression imposed on them by the Puritanical code of morality. Think of all the fears suggested by demonology and the idea of God’s wrath for sin. Christianity has always hated the flesh and praised asceticism. The gospel of death in life! Hideous and immoral. If God created man with His body and instincts, why punish him for fulfilling his nature? It’s so grossly illogical. It’s so ludicrous. We don’t beat a dog for hunting rabbits. It’s the nature of dogs. We don’t slaughter birds for mating in the springtime. It’s the way of birds, and they don’t need any parson’s licence

or religious ceremony before they take a mate and build a nest.”

“No,” said the vicar. “But the other birds peck them to death if they try to steal their females. Or, at least, there are combats for the possession of the lady bird. From a social point of view, as a matter of experience—apart from Christian teaching—there must be certain rules and regulations for marriage and mating. Otherwise life would be intolerable and disorderly. Surely?”

Simon shrugged his shoulders, but didn’t answer that argument. Mr. Whitton continued quickly, as though he had gained an advantage.

“As for Christian morality and asceticism, isn’t that also based upon wisdom and necessity, for the health of mankind and the raising of human intelligence to something higher than animalism? Isn’t the Christian ideal of marriage nobler and better—more romantic, even, and more beautiful—than the old pagan promiscuity? The love of one man for one woman seems to me an ideal worth aiming at even at some cost and sacrifice.”

Simon argued against that point of view.

“It puts too great a strain on human nature. It leads to horrible immoralities and perversions. It isn’t according to man’s nature. It’s false, and creates a sense of sin, which is simply an invention of priests and ascetics, mortifying their flesh for some fanatical belief in a God who hates his own creatures when they feel the urge of the life force which He puts into them.”

“Even savages have a time of probation before marriage,” said the vicar. “They have taboos against marrying within certain degrees of relationship. I quite admit that self-control isn’t pleasant, but isn’t it worth while, on the whole? Christian marriage between two people who have been chaste before having come together is something better than one could find in a Turkish harem or—to be quite frank—a disorderly house in a seaport town.”

“Yes,” said Commander Compton. “A thousand times yes!”

“What about enforced celibacy without consent?” asked Simon. “All these City clerks who can’t afford to marry? All these shop girls who can’t find men to marry them? What are you going to do about that? Condemn them to perpetual chastity? Hellish cruelty, in my opinion!”

“Very difficult!” said the vicar with a sigh.

Simon got off some stuff about the works of D. H. Lawrence—and the need of liberating the life spirit in the half dead drabness of the English middle class. He put up the argument that Christianity and its moral code were played out, and didn’t fit in with modern conditions. The economic state of industrial civilization had altered the rules of the game, he thought. The Christian code had never been reconciled with men’s nature and habits. Now its falsity was being found out. Perhaps the Russians were right in saying that religion is the

opium of the people. There would have to be a new morality, he argued, adapted to scientific knowledge of psychology and biology. The Russian idea of marriage and divorce—both parties free to come together or leave each other at the price of a postage stamp—seemed rather good to him. And Russian communism, where everybody had the same wage and economic status, might liberate civilization from the tyranny of caste and snobbishness and economic struggle which prevented self-expression and the natural satisfaction of mind and body.

The Vicar of Broadmead shook his head and smiled at Simon.

“I’ve heard all that before,” he said. “I used to hear it in my debating club at Bermondsey.”

That was rather a hard knock to Mr. Simon Lambert. He flushed slightly, and looked disconcerted.

“Oh, there’s nothing new in it. But these ideas are beginning to move. They’re going to break up the old tradition. I don’t profess to be uttering fresh and original revelations. It’s what most of us are thinking nowadays—if we happen to think now and then.”

The Reverend Horace Whitton knocked his pipe out against Commander Compton’s hearthside.

“It’s getting a bit late,” he said. “I ought to be off. I see the Commander looks ready for bed.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Compton. “Don’t mind me. I like to hear you two going it hammer and tongs.”

The vicar rose and stood for a moment with his back to the log fire, tall and thin and ascetic—a man who had obeyed the code which Simon professed to hate.

“It’s all very interesting,” he said. “But I’m sure it’s all very wrong, Lambert. I quite agree that our intellectual leaders—the writing men who have most influence on the modern mind—are all putting out these ideas. But don’t you see where they are leading us to?”

“Where?” asked Simon.

“To the downfall of Western culture,” said the vicar. “When those ideas prevail, if they ever do, it’s the end of Europe and this civilization of ours, and all the beauty and art that belong to us. You see, we have been steeped in Christian culture for a thousand years and more. It’s in our blood and spirit. It’s in our architecture, and poetry, and manners, and social conscience, and everything we are, just as Mohammedanism has made the Turk, or Confucianism the Chinese. If we no longer believe in our own culture, it won’t

last. We shall just lapse into anarchy and barbarism, very beast-like and cruel, I am afraid. The Christian code, after all—even if you don't believe in its divinity—is a gentleman's religion. I mean, it makes for gentlemen. It's against the behaviour of the ape-man."

"How about the World War?" asked Simon.

The vicar glanced again at Commander Compton.

"Yes. I admit that's a difficult question. Christians aren't always Christlike. And it's difficult to know when to fight evil or on which side is righteousness. Don't think I pretend to know the answer to everything!"

He held out his hand to Simon.

"Can't we have another talk one day?"

"Oh, rather! But I'm afraid I talked some awful bilge. I hope it didn't shock you?"

"Not at all. You raised questions which it is my job to answer—if I can."

Commander Compton walked with his guest as far as the garden gate.

"A difficult case, that young man," he said with an uneasy laugh.

"Tragic!" said the vicar. "It's the modern disease of doubt. It's what the whole world is suffering from. But I should say he's a good deal troubled about himself. Has he had an unhappy love affair, or got tangled up in any way?"

"He's in love with my daughter," said Compton. "Of course, he can't afford marriage just yet."

The vicar was startled and embarrassed.

"Oh! Excuse me for asking. I . . . I . . . had no idea. Well, good night."

He touched his black felt hat and strode quickly away down the lane.

Commander Compton walked slowly back to his farmhouse.

"Oh, Lord!" he said, as he shut the door and bolted it. He had forgotten for the moment that the Vicar of Broadmead was "very sweet" on Madge. It must have been rather a knock to him when he heard about Simon.

That young man was pouring himself out a dose of whisky.

"I'm afraid I talked awful bilge," he said. It was the second time he had said it. He admitted that the parson had put up a fairly good defence.

Compton put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's all very difficult, old man. 'Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!' But I'm certain that a Spirit moves behind all this riddle."

"Good for you, sir," said Simon. "I wish I could get as far as that. It's

hopeless otherwise. . . . Well, bed, I suppose.”

XLVI

A VISIT to Bramshaw's place with young Lambert was not a success, and led to an argument, which became slightly heated, on the subject of India and international relations, in which Simon behaved with a lamentable lack of tact, in the opinion of his elders.

It was raised by Colonel Urquhart, who had come over from his house at Peasemarsh.

"I can hardly bear to read the papers," he said towards the end of dinner. "Even *The Times* is supporting that preposterous notion of giving self-government to India. Can you conceive of anything more absurd? Anybody who has been in India for five weeks must know that the Hindus and Moslems will be at each other's throats, and that the native states will begin to scrap with each other. It will lead to the wildest anarchy and bloodshed in the sacred name of self-government. Why, blast it, Bramshaw, what's the House of Lords doing to acquiesce in this suicidal policy?"

Lord Bramshaw gave a slight shrug of his heavy shoulders.

"I'm afraid we're pledged to it. Not my fault, you know! When you have a series of Viceroys who pander to the idealists at home——"

"Idealists! They make me tired! What idealism is there in handing over four hundred million people to a reign of terror? There must be a dominant race in India. If it isn't us it will have to be somebody else. Russia has her eye on it, of course. It all comes of ignorance at home. Those damn' fellows in the House of Commons don't know where India is on the map. They believe it's inhabited by people like themselves, with a belief in the sacred efficiency of the ballot box. They don't know the first thing about caste. I don't suppose they've ever heard of the Untouchables—sixty million of them—regarded as unclean by fellows like Gandhi. The way they treat that impostor, as though he were a great leader and a Christlike figure, makes me want to burst a blood-vessel."

"I agree," said Lord Bramshaw. "Not that I want to burst a blood-vessel. Still, it's damn' silly. It's handing India away. It's pandering to the peace cranks and the fanatics for self-determination."

Colonel Urquhart raised his hands with a tragic gesture.

"God help us! Everybody has gone mad about peace. They want us to scrap our Army and Navy when we've reduced both below the safety limit.

They're all yapping about that miserable League of Nations, the invention of an American professor—repudiated by his own people—who then foisted the absurdity on Europe. Left the baby on the doorstep! What do they think is going to happen if we get rid of our Navy? What about Japan when she gets busy about China and looks with slant eyes at the Philippines and Australia? There's a League of Nations Union in my village. The secretary had the infernal impudence to ask me to join it. 'My dear sir,' I said, 'your League of Nations Union is a propaganda organization of Blue Funk and Pink Nonsense. Before you've done,' I told him, 'you will embroil us in a war with France because you're always goading the French people for not disarming and leaving themselves at the mercy of Germany when she gets going again. No, sir,' I told him. 'We shall always have war—it's human nature—and those who want peace should prepare for war. The only way to ensure peace is the Strong Hand and the Big Stick.' The fellow left my house pretty quick, I must say."

Simon Lambert, the youngest man in the room, had sat remarkably quiet, with a glass of port at his elbow, listening to these remarks with a faint smile about his lips.

Once or twice he caught Commander Compton's eye and gave a slight wink, as though amused by these crusted types at table, and especially by the gallant old Colonel who was giving tongue.

Now he put his elbows on the mahogany board and addressed that representative of the old order.

"Don't you think, sir, that the last war proved the absurdity of that form of argument? Hadn't we better try to settle our differences in some other way—to avoid needless expense and further ruin?"

Colonel Urquhart dropped his eyeglass by the action of raising his right eyebrow.

"What's that, my dear fellow? Absurdity? Some other way? We had to beat the old Boche, hadn't we?"

"With what advantage to ourselves?" asked Simon. "Lord Bramshaw has been talking of the income tax he has to pay, and the probability that he will have to put this house up for sale. Isn't that one of the results of our glorious victory?"

"We should have been a damn' sight worse off if the Boche had won," said Colonel Urquhart.

"But we might have been better off if we hadn't fought," said Simon in his quiet, persistent, civil way. "Anyhow, apart from ancient history, it seems to me that it might be a good idea to consider war as an anachronism. It seems

more sensible to sell and buy with other nations than to bomb their cities and kill our customers. The same from their point of view, of course. Personally, I'm a Pacifist theoretically; I don't like the idea of women and babies being blown to bits, even if they're German women and babies, and I don't want a shell in my own stomach one day. For that reason I'm all in favour of international disarmament. The less guns there are the less chance there is of them going off and making a nasty mess."

Colonel Urquhart fixed his eyeglass again and turned a stony gaze on this extraordinary young man.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Good God! The fellow admits he's a Pacifist! Bramshaw, my dear old boy, this young fellow sits at your table and says he's a Pacifist!"

"Theoretically," Lord Bramshaw said, looking uncomfortable. "I'm sure he would fight all right if old England were in danger. So would all the other fellows of his age. Isn't that so, Stephen?"

"I think they would," said Commander Compton, equally uncomfortable. He hoped to goodness that Simon wouldn't get argumentative and cause a scene at Bramshaw's table.

But Simon did get argumentative. He sat back in his chair with a cigarette between his fingers and challenged the Colonel to single combat.

"I don't see why my young life should be at the mercy of old statesmen and old generals who haven't learnt a single thing from four years and a half of destruction and ruin. The younger crowd don't see the fun of it. We've fully made up our minds that we're not going to be dragged into any sort of nonsense like that if we can possibly help it. Personally, I'm convinced that if international diplomacy threatens Europe with another war, there will have to be a revolution first. The people won't stand for it. They won't back up their Governments. They know that science has invented new and more destructive weapons since the last war. The people who will get it in the neck first will be the civil populations of great cities. Those populations don't relish the idea. That's what is going to prevent war. It's the strength behind the League of Nations."

"Almighty God!" said Colonel Urquhart in a prayerful way.

"You see, it only wants a little common sense," said Simon, warming to his argument. "We're all poverty-stricken because of war debts and the cost of armaments. It seems a simple matter of intelligence to economize by getting rid of them. We shall have to come to that because of general bankruptcy, apart from anything else. We simply can't afford the luxury. We shall have to strengthen the League of Nations by pooling forces and establishing some sort

of an international army to police the world and see that some gang of ruffians don't run amok. I quite see there must be that amount of force. One can't do without policemen. It's this nationality nonsense that's at the bottom of the business—the sacred sovereign rights of every little State. Of course, it can't be tolerated by human intelligence much longer. Don't you think we must come to old Briand's idea of the United States of Europe? Isn't that the only way out of the mess?"

Colonel Urquhart became very red in the face, and puffed under his white moustache.

"I never heard such stuff and nonsense," he said angrily. "Do you mean to suggest that England—Great Britain—is to abdicate her sovereign powers and hand them over to a committee of foreign bastards?"

Simon laughed boyishly.

"Not necessarily bastards. But otherwise, why not? An international committee for the regulation of world trade, raw materials, international currency, and so forth. Of course, we could all go on singing 'Rule, Britannia,' and other old songs, just as the Scots do on Burns Night. We could still do a bit of flag-wagging on the anniversary of Trafalgar or Shakespeare's birthday."

Colonel Urquhart suddenly laughed very heartily in an apoplectic way.

"Gad, sir, I believe you're pulling my leg! You young devil, I believe you're having a game with me! Bramshaw, this young fellow is amusing himself at the expense of my white hairs!"

"No," said Simon. "I'm talking quite seriously for once. Look at France and Germany, for instance. Why shouldn't France give up the policy of fear and take to co-operation for the peace of Europe and the increase of wealth? Germany will certainly have a go at her again if the French people keep on nagging and trying to keep their heel on the necks of a bigger people than themselves. And next time France won't have the same allies. I don't see England fighting for her again. Far better make friends with the Germans, don't you think?—especially if all the European nations get together for mutual assistance, inspired by reasonable fear of the unpleasant alternative, which is blue ruin and general collapse. Don't you agree, sir?"

Colonel Urquhart sat back in his chair and rapped the handle of a fork on the table sharply.

"I do *not* agree, sir! I utterly disagree! I refuse to listen to this talk any longer! It's the talk of a defeatist! It's crawling Pacifism! It's the philosophy of Bolshevism. Bramshaw, my dear fellow, excuse me. I wish to leave the table. I feel upset."

"Let's join the ladies," said Lord Bramshaw, looking extremely

uncomfortable. “Anybody like to wash hands?”

“I think I would,” said Simon.

He winked at Commander Compton as he passed, but that ex-naval officer avoided his eyes.

In the drawing-room afterwards Simon behaved very charmingly to Lady Bramshaw and Mrs. Urquhart, that humorous lady who had accused her husband of flirting with Madge. She couldn’t understand why the Colonel kept muttering and mumbling to himself in a distant part of the drawing-room, and gazing very fiercely at this good-looking young man.

“What have you been doing to my old man?” she asked presently in a low voice. “He looks as if he wanted to eat you! Do you think by any chance that he suspects you of running off with me? Let me remind you that I am fifty-six and virtuous, if you have any such intention.”

Simon entered into the joke.

“My intentions are strictly dishonourable, dear lady. Can’t I persuade you to elope with me? I could be your lounge lizard, or your lotus-eating lover in some sunny isle.”

“I believe I am getting tempted,” said Mrs. Urquhart, suppressing a little squeal of laughter. “It seems a thousand years since I was last made love to by a subaltern with golden hairs on his upper lip.”

On the way home in the car Commander Compton spoke to Simon about his indiscreet conversation.

“Look here, my lad, there’s such a thing as tact. You nearly killed that poor old Colonel. I’m bound to say I’m not such a Die-hard as he is, and I’m all on the side of peace, having lost a very useful arm and seen what war means, but I think you went a bit too far.”

Simon was amused.

“I couldn’t help it. He just asked for it. Silly old turnip!”

“He’s quite a good old type,” said Compton in his good-hearted way. “And I think he was right about India. They’re not ready for self-government. Besides, isn’t that contrary to your own argument? Aren’t you against nationalism? Isn’t it world co-operation you’re after?”

Simon thought over that point of view, but didn’t pursue the subject. He was silent for several minutes and then laughed again at the remembrance of his argumentative evening. Later he asked a simple question.

“Has Lord Bramshaw anything resembling a human brain?”

“A very well-meaning fellow,” said Compton. “One of the best, as far as I

know.” He spoke warmly in favour of his friend.

“Then God help England,” said Simon—“if there’s any God to care!”

“I don’t like your intolerance,” Compton answered with some severity. “Has it ever occurred to you that you’re unduly critical of life and your fellow men?”

“No, I confess it hasn’t,” said Simon.

He thought the matter over until they arrived by the old hearthside in a Tudor farmhouse.

“Don’t think I have any self-conceit,” he said, as though answering that question put to him ten minutes ago.

“Well,” said Compton judicially, “I shouldn’t say you suffer from the inferiority complex.”

Simon did some useful work with the bellows.

“I’m a bit of an egoist,” he admitted, “but not stuck-up with myself. On the contrary, I assure you, I know I’m an almost hopeless swine.”

Compton’s annoyance broke down under this sudden humiliation.

“No, no, my dear lad! Have a whisky. Let’s get down to a game of chess.”

“The fact is,” said Simon, “I get impatient with the abject lack of intelligence in the world. But I’m not pretending that I have more intelligence than other people. Only one must argue these things out. I want to get straight in my own mind. I want something clearer than all this mess and muddle. At present there’s nothing but confusion. As for intolerance, I must confess I get disheartened when I hear old trout like Colonel Urquhart and pompous owls like Bramshaw.”

“Character is what counts,” said Compton. “Those two men are as good as gold. They wouldn’t do a mean or dirty thing to anyone. They stand for honour and courage and duty.”

“Character!” exclaimed Simon. “What’s the good of that without intelligence? Character didn’t save England from a bloody war. They wouldn’t do a dirty thing, you say, sir; but you must admit that men of their type have done some fairly dirty work in shooting down unarmed savages and bullying other people in the sacred name of civilization.”

“I don’t admit it,” said Compton. “I’m an Empire man. Wherever we’ve carried the old flag we’ve taken justice and fair play. Look at India before we went there. Didn’t we smash the old tyrannies and horrors and corruption? Didn’t we give them justice? Didn’t we fight with plagues and famines? Take Egypt. We brought water to the fellah. We saw that he got it without being skinned for backsheesh by Turkish pashas.”

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

“We grabbed half the world and painted it red on the map. Our pioneers went out with a Bible in one hand and a rifle in the other. Up goes the old Union Jack. Salute, you black beggars! What? You don’t want us in your cabbage patch? Bing, bang, bong! Shoot ’em down with machine-guns. The Fuzzy-wuzzies. The Zulus. The Arabs. Gentlemen, the Empire! That glorious Empire upon which the sun absolutely refuses to set!”

“And now people like you want to give it away!” said Compton angrily. “You refuse to accept the responsibility. You don’t care a damn for the great heritage.”

Simon saw that he was nettled for once, and dropped his sarcastic way of speech.

“It’s a difference in the angle of vision,” he said. “I suppose fellows of my age—some of them who’ve escaped from the Public School code—don’t believe much in the white man’s burden, and the gospel according to Kipling. We’re more concerned with what’s going to happen at home and what’s happening in our own minds, without handing out the blessings of Western civilization to brown men, black men, and yellow men. We’re definitely against enforcing those blessings by bombing aeroplanes and poison gas. We’re not so sure that we’re so vastly superior to the Eastern races as we used to think. Perhaps Gandhi’s idea of life is better than Henry Ford’s. Anyhow, there’s something rotten in this state of Denmark!”

“Extremely rotten,” agreed Commander Compton dryly. “And in my opinion it’s because young fellows like you have smashed the old traditions and the old faith without putting anything else in their place. Our friend the vicar was dead right. If we don’t think our civilization is worth saving it won’t be saved.”

Simon stood staring into the fire, pushing one of the logs with the toe of his boot.

“Why save it?” he asked. “I can’t see much in it. Some other system might work out better.”

“Oh, hell!” said Commander Compton impatiently.

Simon turned from the fireside and saw that Compton was distressed and annoyed. It was the first time that he had spoken harshly like that, and the younger man was abashed.

He came over and put his hand on Compton’s shoulder.

“Sorry!” he said. “I’m afraid I must seem very poisonous. If you’d like me to clear out you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

Commander Compton was startled by this offer of clearing out. It knocked him edgewise for a moment. He was not as angry as all that.

“Good heavens, no!” he said. “I like your companionship, my dear lad. I should be darned lonely without you. You have just as much right to your ideas as I have to mine.”

“Not quite,” said Simon magnanimously. “You’ve had more experience, sir. I’m one of life’s little failures.”

“You’re young enough to make good,” said Compton good-naturedly.

XLVII

SIMON went on with his writing in spasms of mental energy interrupted by days of introspection and renewed moodiness, and by other days when he worked manfully on the farm with a kind of nervous energy which was apt to snap suddenly. He retired hurt for a couple of days after getting a rick in the back by the zeal with which he wielded a scythe in one of the meadows. But he came out again to do some haymaking with the men, and drove a motor mower, which Commander Compton had hired from Horsham, with skill and enjoyment. His health improved and he became bronzed by this open air life, making a good figure as he stood on the top of a haycart, or taking his turn with a pitchfork, clad in nothing but a vest and a pair of shorts. At these times he looked good-humoured and healthy-minded, and Compton noticed that he got on with the men very well and kept them laughing and amused by his conversation.

"Simon's all right," he had been told by Jean Macgregor, and but for the revolutionary and subversive ideas to which he gave tongue now and then, he seemed perfectly all right to a man who was beginning to understand him and to get fond of him.

Those ideas of his were due to the modern scepticism and bewilderment of his age, and to the intellectual leadership of destructive minds, challenging the whole structure of traditional thought and morality. He was over-sensitive to the cruelties of life—he couldn't even bear to see a rabbit caught in a snare—and over-impatient of stupidities, as he thought them, which had led the world into its disorder and distress.

He had been born in the shadow of a world war, and it had darkened his view of history. Tradition seemed to him valueless because it had been led up to that. Civilization seemed hideous because of bankrupt nations and armies of unemployed and hopeless men. He was impatient of a conventional morality which imposed a discipline that he found hard to bear because of his own passion and unfulfilled desires. So far had Compton sized up this queer fellow who had been planted on him; and as the weeks passed there grew up a comradeship between them which became very pleasant, apart from intellectual disagreements and occasional anxieties.

Simon dropped some of his aggressive manners, finding Compton tolerant in his views and not easily rattled, as a rule, by statements put up to shock him. He even admitted now and then, though very reluctantly, that tradition had

something to say for itself—at least, in producing good types of character and a certain order of life which might have value. Anyhow, he developed a kind of hero-worship of Compton himself. His eyes lost their sulkiness, and his manners became more considerate of Compton's old-fashioned sensibilities. He made really valiant efforts to get down in time for breakfast, and was not so silent and unresponsive when he arrived, shaven or unshaven. He even let the Commander beat him at chess, until his opponent suspected that he was not playing the game.

"Your queen is in danger, my lad. You'd better look after the lady."

"Oh, Lord, yes! Very careless of me."

"That's the second time I've beaten you to-night," said Compton. "If it happens again I shall think you're letting me win because of my grey hairs."

Simon checkmated him next game, after a prolonged struggle.

That was the best side of him which won Compton's affection. But the worst crept out from time to time—lapses into melancholy, when he went out again for those lonely walks, coming back with a look of desperation, lapses into rudeness with Compton's friends, and lapses into selfishness when he shut himself up in his own room, absorbed in his own thoughts at a time when Compton was overworked owing to the illness of his cowman.

Then at last Madge came, looking in need of a rest after six months' work in a film studio, and the two men were glad of her company.

The meeting between Madge and Simon was perfectly natural and unembarrassed, almost as though they were brother and sister.

"Hullo, Simon!" said Madge. "Heave this bag up, won't you?"

"Hullo!" said Simon, heaving the bag on to the back of the car. "You look a bit fagged."

"Oh, not too much. But I shall be glad to get some fresh air and a bit of sun, if you can provide it. I must say country life seems to suit you. You look like the hero of 'The Farmer's Wife'."

"I feel like it," said Simon. "But I combed the straw out of my hair this morning in honour of your arrival. Would you like to drive?"

"No, not a bit. I'll sit behind with Father, like a lady."

She sat behind with her father, her hand tucked through his arm, and he felt very happy at having her again, and slightly reassured about a situation which he had thought might be embarrassing to those two as well as to himself. He didn't quite know how it was going to work out. Not by the flicker of an eyelid had either of them shown any self-consciousness. No one would have guessed that Madge had once been very much in love with this young man and still

believed in her heart that she “belonged” to him in some mystic way. No one would have believed that Simon had paced his floor at night desperate for love of her. They might have been brother and sister meeting again after a few weeks’ absence.

Yet Compton knew that Simon had been looking forward to her arrival impatiently. Not a word passed his lips about it, but he had got busy in the garden, trimming borders, rolling paths, cutting hedges, so that all should be tidy when she came. And on the previous evening he had been restless and agitated, unable to concentrate on a game of chess, getting up now and then to look at the weather, tossing his evening paper aside to stare at the ceiling with a tremendous concentration of thought to which he gave no expression.

“These young people beat me,” thought Compton, observing their behaviour in the weeks that followed. “I don’t understand a thing about them. Modern love is not the kind of thing that I knew as a young man. Or perhaps they’re not so much in love with each other as I thought they were. Anyhow, Madge has her head screwed on her shoulders, thank heaven! She’s not going to stand any nonsense from Master Simon.”

So he comforted himself, not without apparent justification. Never once in those first weeks after his daughter’s arrival did he see any secret exchange of glances between the two, nor any sign of passionate emotion between them, nor any touch of sentimentality on either side. They argued with each other in a kind of intellectual duel at times, not in the Benedick and Beatrice style, but, again, like brother and sister, without undue courtesy.

“That’s an idiotic point of view, Simon. How can you talk such undiluted nonsense?”

“Not at all. It might seem nonsense to one of your film producers who appeal to the lowest form of human intelligence, but it happens to be a theory accepted by a master mind.”

“Name, please!”

“He prefers to remain anonymous.”

Madge threw a cushion at him.

They did not seem to hanker to be alone together. There were no sudden disappearances, and if they happened to be left alone with each other there was no scurrying apart or nonsense of that kind—Compton remembered such episodes in his own youth—when they were interrupted. After lunch, during a few weeks of warm weather, they lay back in deck-chairs on the crazy-paving in the centre of the rose garden, sunning themselves—Simon somewhat scantily clad in shorts and a blue shirt open at the neck, and Madge in a muslin frock and a sunbonnet pushed back from her forehead. Compton found them

there one day asleep, side by side, and stood for a few moments looking down on them with a smile about his lips. They looked charming, he thought, this sleeping boy and girl—a picture of youth and comradeship. He envied them this youthfulness, but was astonished also that they should drop off like that in each other's company—an impossible way of behaviour between lovers thirty years ago! He struck a match to light his pipe, and Madge opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"How heavenly to fall asleep in the sun! Come and join us, Father!"

Simon stirred, and then sat up, yawning.

"Now then," said Madge severely, "pull yourself together, Simon. Time to do a bit of honest work. Don't leave it all to overburdened Papa."

"Hell!" said Simon. "Did I hear the word 'work'?"

"You did," said Madge. "It's a bit of a shock, isn't it?"

"Alarming!"

And yet he worked rather well after Madge's arrival. She expressed a wish to have a dovecot with some white doves therein, and Simon took it upon himself to build this thing after drawing it one evening. He made quite a good job of it, and one fine morning disappeared in the car mysteriously, and came back with an air of self-satisfaction and a family of white doves. Then, having been bitten with a zest for carpentry, he devised a summer-house which could swing on a pivot to catch every gleam of sunshine as the hours passed—providing, of course, that there were any gleams. That was a heavier job. He worked at it strenuously, even getting up at an unusually early hour to go on with it. It was magnificent, but not farming.

After that he slackened.

"This manual labour is very fatiguing," he said, during that lunch hour siesta. "I think, on the whole, I prefer the labour of the intellect. Could you bear to hear a bit of my alleged novel, Madge?"

"Certainly," said Madge, "if it's not too shocking or too sleep-making."

"It's very chaste," said Simon. "It might have been written by an archdeacon. It has the same bland dulness, I'm afraid. What about it? We might try it out in that summer-house. I'll swing it round to where the sun ought to be."

They retired to that seclusion, and Compton, passing through his garden, could hear Simon's voice reading out in a low monotone. He seemed to have written the deuce of a lot. As an ex-naval man not gifted with literary expression, Compton was rather impressed. It seemed incredible that anyone could write so many words. What on earth was it all about?

He questioned Madge on the subject, and was still further impressed when she told him that Simon was writing a masterpiece.

“Honestly, Father, it’s not at all bad. Rather naughty here and there, but there’s nothing coarse in it. Just realism, you know.”

Compton didn’t approve of realism. He didn’t approve of Madge having to listen to it.

“I fear the worst,” he said. “I’m afraid I should think it poisonous.”

“Oh no, Father. Of course, one or two episodes might shock an old-fashioned mind like yours, but we look at things differently, somehow. We’re not funky of natural facts.”

She saw that he looked distressed, and slipped her hand through his arm.

“Don’t look so alarmed! It’s quite all right. It’s just a story of family life, and rather amusing.”

She seemed a little excited.

“Perhaps Simon has found himself. Perhaps he will make a hit with this novel. Oh, I do hope so! It will make him happy at last. It’s the sense of failure and futility which has been nagging at him. We all want a little success, don’t we?”

“I’m one of the have-beens,” said Compton. “I suppose the greatest success I ever achieved was when I became the father of a girl-child, who afterwards became a famous actress.”

“Not yet!” said Madge, laughing at him. “Give me time, Father.”

XLVIII

It was about four weeks after the arrival of Madge that her father became perturbed by some alteration in the mind and manner of these two young people. They seemed suspiciously happy. Madge was always quick to laugh—but he saw something in her eyes, a new kind of luminance, a kind of inner light shining from the spirit, which was quite startling. He noticed it one day at lunch time, when she came in with a great bouquet of flowers she had gathered.

"What have you been doing to your eyes, Madge? They're like stars this morning. Have you been using belladonna?"

She was surprised, and blushed slightly as she laughed back at him.

"How absurd you are, Father! It's because the sun is shining and life reeks with beauty to-day round a Tudor farmhouse."

"But the sun isn't shining. There's a grey sky with a threat of thunder in it."

"Oh, surely it's shining!" cried Madge, looking out of the window to seek the evidence of her own senses.

"Well, that's strange! I had an idea that it was a glorious day. The flowers seemed to have more lovely colour than usual. Perhaps there is something the matter with my eyes. What do you think, Simon?"

"It's probably indigestion," he suggested. "The state of the liver has an immense effect upon one's vision."

Madge laughed again, and used her spoon to hit his hand.

But it was the cheerfulness of Simon which alarmed Commander Compton, and made him aware of an alteration in the rhythm of life in his household. That moody young man seemed to have cast off his melancholy and to be cured of his cynicism. He went about his jobs whistling Italian opera. He became unusually genial with Compton's labourers, and laughed and joked with them in a way that was not too good for discipline, though it kept them good humoured.

"Mr. Lambert ain't so shy as he was," said old Chard, the cowman. "Some of the men thought 'im a bit standoffish at first. Well, you never know, do you, sir? I remember one of my young officers . . ."

Mr. Lambert exhibited other unusual qualities. He became less

argumentative with Commander Compton's friends, and was less sarcastic in his comments about them. When Lord Bramshaw came over one evening in honour of Madge's visit, Simon was polite, and afterwards expressed the opinion that this peer of the realm wasn't such an owl as he had previously believed.

"He means well," he said generously. "I dare say he's fairly sound on the subject of sugar-beet. He has a certain old-fashioned courtesy, which is rather pleasing in these offhand days."

He was unexpectedly quiet and considerate to the vicar when he came in now and then after supper, painfully shy in the presence of Madge. He went almost too far one night, when he declared that the need of the world was a new prophet—some great scientist, perhaps—who would give a new interpretation of life in its relation to the mysteries of the universe.

"We must have some kind of faith in some kind of God," he said.

A stupefied silence followed this remark, until Madge broke it by a laugh.

"Simon, really, we can't take that from you, you know!"

He remained unabashed.

"Why not?"

"Well," said Commander Compton, "it's rather inconsistent with some of your previous utterances, my lad."

"Not at all," said Simon blandly. "I've always argued that man must have a belief in the higher intelligence, and that mankind must be worshipful of Truth. What we want is to formulate Truth and call it God. I'm really groping my way towards a simple faith of that kind. I have a certain faculty of reverence."

Even Commander Compton had to join Madge's laughter, and Simon himself was not unamused by the look of astonishment which crept into the eyes of the Reverend Horace Whitton.

Undoubtedly some change was happening in the mind of Simon Lambert. The desperation had gone out of his look. He was less nervy. He was extraordinarily pleased with himself and his surroundings.

"What's up?" thought Commander Compton.

A panic took hold of him one night. It was a sultry night in August. They had sat up later than usual with the windows wide open. Madge and Simon had played chess together while Compton sat reading *The Times*. Some poor moths were attracted by the light of the Aladdin lamps and burned themselves to death, distressing Madge by this suicidal habit. Presently she pushed the pieces off the board.

"Your game, Simon. I surrender."

“I gave you an easy checkmate some moves ago. Why didn’t you take it?”

“I didn’t see it, my little one. Poof! Isn’t it warm? Let’s get a breath of air in the garden.”

“Not a bad idea.”

“Don’t catch a chill, Madge,” said Commander Compton. “Put something round your shoulders, my dear.”

“Oh, there’s no need. Come on, Simon.”

They went out through the french window, and Compton looked after them. Madge was in an old-fashioned frock, cut low on the shoulders, with bare arms. The lamplight glowed on her hair and those pretty shoulders as she passed through the window. Simon was in a grey flannel suit with baggy trousers, and stopped for a moment inside the room to light a cigarette. Then they both disappeared, leaving Compton alone. He was interested in the leading article of *The Times*. It was on the plight of English agriculture, unable to compete with falling prices in the world market. Something seemed to be happening to bring down commodity prices everywhere. The Argentine was in a bad way. The American Government could not get rid of its reserves of grain bought at a high price from the Western farmers.

There was also an excellent article on unemployment and the effect of the dole on the National Budget. It wasn’t paying for itself. The Government was borrowing from capital to maintain unemployment relief. A financial expert had written a letter called “The Road to Ruin”.

Commander Compton read on, pausing now and then to load his pipe. Presently he dropped *The Times* and became absorbed in a book which Simon had left on one of the chairs—“Queen Victoria”, by Lytton Strachey. He had read forty pages when he looked up and glanced at the clock. Surely it couldn’t be as late as that? An hour since Simon and Madge had left the room! What were they doing out there in the garden all this time? Past eleven, and time for bed.

He had a sense of uneasiness, a kind of fear even. It was quite unreasonable. On a sultry night there was no reason why two young people should not stay outside talking. And yet he had an apprehension of a crisis near at hand which might alter things in this household, and in his life. That new light in Madge’s eyes—that new manner of Simon’s—had they any significance, or was he getting suspicious, fanciful, and Mother Grundyish? How absurd! Why did the mind allow silly thoughts like that to creep up from the subconsciousness?

He went out of the french window, and stood looking into the translucent darkness of the garden.

“Hullo, you two!” he called out.

There was no answer, and he waited a few minutes longer. Perhaps they had gone for a walk outside the gates. There was a moon at the three-quarters, half hidden behind a bank of cloud, but silvering the paths and flooding the lawns with a milky radiance. Perhaps they were sitting in the summer-house which Simon had made. How foolish of them! Madge had bare arms and shoulders. She might catch a nasty chill. In spite of the sultriness there was a touch of dampness in the air, he thought.

He moved down the steps to the lower level of the garden, and walked towards the summer-house across the grass. They were not in there. They were on a stone seat in the shadow of a clipped hedge. He saw them quite suddenly as he walked across the grass. Simon had his arms clasped about Madge. Her head lay on his shoulder, and one of her hands played with his hair.

“Sure you want me, Simon?” said Madge.

“More than anything in life,” he answered.

“Funny old Simon! So impatient!”

Commander Compton called out again.

“Hullo, you two! Time for bed.”

His voice was quite cheery, though for a moment his heart had given a lurch.

“Hullo, Father!” Madge called back to him.

Simon unclasped his arms, but not hurriedly, nor with any sign of embarrassment.

Madge took her head from his shoulder. Together they stood hand in hand before Compton.

“Jolly night!” said Compton, with an absurd attempt to talk naturally. “But isn’t it a bit damp, my dear?”

“Simon had his arms round me,” said Madge. “It was as good as an overcoat.”

Commander Compton was silent for a second before he answered.

“Was that quite wise? . . . I mean, isn’t it rather asking for trouble?”

Both of them laughed. He saw the sparkle of their eyes in the shadow world of this garden.

“Father,” said Madge, “I’m not going to keep Simon waiting any longer. It’s hardly fair on him, is it? I mean, if I’m going to marry him I may as well get on with it. Besides, I rather want to. It may be the effect of moonlight and general languor. Simon thinks it’s love. Don’t you, Simon? Speak up, my lad.

Don’t leave it all to the lady.”

“Madge has agreed to take me for better or worse,” said Simon.

“Till death do us part,” said Madge. “Rash, isn’t it?”

“Are you pulling the leg of an elderly gent?” asked Compton. Even now he was not quite sure that either of them was serious. Even now he hoped they weren’t.

Madge let go of Simon’s hand, and came up to her father, and put her arm round his shoulder and leaned close to him.

“It’s all right, Father. Simon’s going to work hard, and he’s promised to be reasonable if I go on acting. When I’m away he can stay here and do his writing and keep you company. You’ll like him as a son-in-law, and he’s devoted to you, though he hates to tell you so.”

Compton was silent again for a moment or two. So the crisis had come! Madge was going to marry Simon. She wouldn’t belong to her father so much. He would be out of it again. Of course, he had always known that would happen. It was inevitable, though he had tried to believe that it needn’t happen soon.

“You two seem to have fixed things up,” he said quietly.

Madge put her face against his cheek.

“Wish me luck, Father.”

He held her tight in his arm.

“My dear!” he said. “My dear! I’m damned jealous of Simon. I’m afraid I’ve lost you as a daughter. I haven’t had much of your company. But here’s luck, and God’s blessing.”

“Be kind to Simon,” she whispered.

He kissed her cheek and held out his hand to her lover.

“Simon, you and I are going to be partners, I understand—under this old roof. Think of all the games of chess we shall have and all the arguments! Do you think I shall suit you as a father-in-law?”

He felt the grip of Simon’s hand, strong and hard.

“I’ll try not to be a damned nuisance,” said Simon. “It’s awfully sporting of you, sir. You know how I love Madge.”

“How?” asked Madge. “Tell him, Simon, and let me hear.”

“As Romeo loved Juliet,” he said. “Do you remember—up at Oxford . . . when we were very young?”

Madge laughed. It was a pleasant laugh to hear in an old English garden, where the moonlight played on the sleeping flowers that August night, when

not a leaf stirred and there was a wonderful quietude.

They went into the house and talked things over until long past midnight. Madge was going to marry Simon. That was the gist of it.

XLIX

THE Lamberts were very pleased to hear that Simon and Madge were going to get married. Helen talked the matter over with Commander Compton when he went up to Town for that purpose, and expressed her delight.

"It will be the making of Simon. That was three-quarters of his trouble—the need of a mate. Quite natural, you know, my dear Steenie. It's the human instinct, isn't it? Now don't look so peeved. Don't forget that I'm the mother of Simon."

"I've nothing up against him," said Compton. "On the contrary, I've learnt to like him in spite of his anarchical ideas. But I wanted Madge for myself. I wanted her comradeship."

"Bless the man!" cried Helen. "Grizzling because he's the father of a girl who insists on having her own life—as she's every right to have! You're like that nasty old man who was the father of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He couldn't bear the idea of her marrying anyone. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Steenie!"

He agreed.

"I am ashamed of myself. Forget what I said, Helen. I don't really mean it. Of course, all I want is Madge's happiness."

"What about Simon?" asked the mother of Simon.

"Certainly. His also. Naturally."

Henry Lambert talked over the same subject after dinner, and alluded to the financial side of Simon's marriage.

"I've decided to make him an allowance. Three hundred a year is what I had in my mind. It's as much as I can afford."

"Very generous of you," said Compton.

"I may as well give it him now as make him wait until I peg out. Besides, who knows what's going to happen? It's no good hoarding up money to leave to one's family. Death duties knock a big hole in one's capital, and God alone knows if money will mean anything this time next year."

Compton sat back in his chair, startled by these words from a Treasury official.

"Don't make my blood run cold, old man! What do you mean exactly by that remark?"

Henry Lambert glanced towards the door, as though nervous of being overheard by a servant or anyone.

“We’re approaching a financial crash,” he said gloomily. “I don’t see how we’re going to get out of it. This dole business is eating into our capital reserves. And we’ve an adverse balance of trade—frightful—with no prospect of getting it right. The slump in commodity prices—wheat, rubber, tin, cotton, meat—is leading to something like world-wide bankruptcy. We’re the bankers of the world, with loans out in every country on earth. What’s going to happen if those loans are repudiated—by Germany, for instance? Still worse, what’s going to happen if foreign countries with credits over here—France, for example—suddenly begin to draw them out because they’re getting uneasy about our financial position? Have you read that book by André Siegfried?”

“No,” said Compton. “I haven’t even heard of it. Who is he, anyhow?”

Henry Lambert explained that he was a French writer of some eminence. He had just written a book about England. The general gist of it was that England was living beyond her means and keeping up a standard of life higher than could be justified by her trade returns.

“Damned impudence!” said Commander Compton.

Henry Lambert smiled with his thin lips.

“Dead true, all the same, I’m afraid. Our politicians—this Labour Government—won’t be warned. Snowden is the only man who understands, and his crowd won’t listen to him. Meanwhile the banks are propping up all the big industries—vastly over-capitalized. Every farmer in the country is mortgaged up to the neck with heavy overdrafts. Meanwhile there is an orgy of spending by municipalities. I shudder to think of what is going to happen.”

Commander Compton felt a chill down his spine in this warm room with its air of comfort and well-being.

If Henry Lambert talked like that, things must be serious. If he didn’t know, no one did.

“Can’t we pull up in time?”

Henry Lambert broke the band off a cigar and lit it at one of the candles on the table, and Compton noticed that his hand trembled slightly, like an old man’s hand—though he wasn’t as old as all that.

“We could,” he answered. “But I gravely fear that we shan’t, until the crisis is on us like an avalanche. Then our politicians may get panic-stricken, and do something about it. I’m afraid of the gold situation, Stephen.”

“That’s beyond me,” said Commander Compton. “It’s a dark mystery.”

Henry Lambert endeavoured to throw light on that mystery, but he only

succeeded in creating a dim apprehension in the mind of an ex-naval man. It was something to do with War Debts and Reparations, and the United States and France. The United States were taking their payments in gold because their high tariffs prevented payment by goods. That was keeping the world's gold "frozen", instead of in circulation for trade purposes. It was the wrong function of gold which was not meant to be a commodity, but a symbol of exchange. It meant that there was less gold in use, and that meant an inevitable drop in prices, because as gold became dear, things became cheap; and the people who produced those things were not able to sell them at a profit, nor to pay their debts without increased difficulty. England's gold reserves were being drained. If there were an international panic and a run on the Bank of England by foreign creditors, the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street might find that the cupboard was bare, like Old Mother Hubbard.

"We're getting perilously near the edge of the deep pit. But, of course, all this is in strict confidence."

"God help us!" exclaimed Compton.

"Exactly," said Henry Lambert dryly.

For several minutes there was silence between these two friends.

It was broken by a harsh laugh from Henry Lambert.

"All that seems to have very little connection with Simon and Madge! But the point is, that he may as well have a bit of my savings while they're worth anything. Do you think he will make good as a writing man? I earnestly hope he has found his *métier* at last."

"Madge thinks a good deal of his novel," said Compton.

Henry Lambert sighed.

"It seems to me a very precarious method of livelihood. Still, some of the novelists seem to earn a good deal by writing mush for the mob mind. I hope Simon won't produce mere trash like that."

"Madge is going on acting," said Compton. "That's a bargain between them. She'll help to keep the pot boiling."

"Not a bad idea—until a baby arrives."

Henry Lambert rose and puffed out the candles.

"Let's go into the next room. Helen has some friends with her."

L

SIMON went up to Town for a week or two to stay with his people before the wedding day, and to buy himself a few clothes. Jean Macgregor took his place in the spare bedroom, and Madge seemed to be glad of her company. Commander Compton heard them laughing a good deal as they chatted together in the garden, where they spent most of the time while the weather remained fine and warm.

Jean expressed her approval of the marriage to Compton when they were alone together for an hour or so, while Madge was upstairs writing letters.

“Well, Commander, I hate to say I told you so! But it’s much better that Madge should marry Simon first instead of spoiling another man’s life before she fulfilled her destiny. A lucky escape for the other man! She had to go to Simon sooner or later. Didn’t I say so?”

“You did,” agreed Commander Compton. “I haven’t the least intention of denying it.”

He spoke with a slight trace of irritation, which did not escape the sharp ears of Jean Macgregor.

“Oh, well, I won’t rub it in. I can guess the feelings of an affectionate father who sees his child torn from his arms by an interloping youth. But that’s life, isn’t it?”

“Undoubtedly,” said Compton.

“Meanwhile,” added Jean, “another of my room-mates goes off with a good-looking boy and leaves me bemoaning my fate as a freckled virgin, desolate, dismal, and despised. ‘O curséd spite! . . . O green-eyed jealousy! . . . O chastity!’ ”

Commander Compton laughed in spite of himself.

“My dear young lady, do behave yourself in a respectable garden! Suppose my cowman were to overhear such language?”

“Cowmen don’t care,” said Jean. “Besides, old Chard thinks a lot of me as a milker. He says I have the hands for it.”

In a blue overall above a linen frock with short sleeves, and her red hair on fire in the sun, she looked like a farmer’s lass as she might appear at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, under the direction of Sir Nigel Playfair.

“Come and have a look at my barley,” said Compton. “It’s ready for

cutting. You ought to paint a picture of it.”

It was about a week after Jean’s arrival, when they were all sitting at the tea-table with open casements through which there came the drowsy hum of bees, that Madge was called to the telephone.

She came back rather flushed, with a worried look in her eyes.

“Simon called Peter?” asked Jean, glancing up from that week’s *Sketch*.

“No. It’s someone else—quite unexpected. It’s Edward Feldmann, Junior. He’s come back. He’s got a job on some American newspaper in London, and he’s ringing up from Guildford on his way from Southampton. He’ll be here in twenty minutes or so.”

Jean Macgregor whistled softly.

“Oh dear, oh dear! A bit awkward, isn’t it, my lass?”

She had dropped that week’s *Sketch*, and was looking at Madge with big eyes, in which there was a sense of drama.

“Yes,” said Madge. “He doesn’t know about Simon. He can’t have got my letter yet.”

Jean gave a good imitation of a “hollow” laugh, as known to melodrama.

“Well, you’ll have to break the awful news. . . . Poor little devil!”

“Oh, shut up, Jean!” said Madge with sudden anger.

Edward Feldmann, Junior, arrived in less than half an hour in a hired car, no longer possessing that Chrysler Six which had been left to him before his abrupt departure to Ashville, North Carolina.

He came into the sitting-room where the tea-things were still spread. Madge stood up, with a sudden wave of colour rushing to her face. When it ebbed she was rather pale.

“Hullo, Edward!”

He came across the room to her with a quick stride. He looked a little older, less boyish, thinned down a trifle, more serious. But his eyes were alight at the sight of Madge, and he held her hand as though he could not bear to let it go again.

“You look—as I thought you would look,” he told her in a low voice.

She was in a rose-coloured frock, with one real rose from her father’s garden pinned to her breast.

He stood gazing at her with smiling adoration, and then turned to speak to Jean.

“Say, it’s fine to find you here, Miss Jean. Just as I used to think of you two in the dear old room in Chelsea!”

“Say how-do-you-do to the master of the house,” said Jean.

“It’s great to see you again, Commander! Forgive this intrusion, won’t you? But it feels like coming home. You’ve no idea how I’ve been yearning for little old England. Now I’m going to stay here for quite a while. I’ve had the terribly good fortune to be appointed correspondent for an American syndicate of newspapers. They happened to like my work, and the Big Noise was a friend of my father’s. So here I am ready to learn the English accent again. It seems a thousand years since I was at Oxford.”

He was glad to sit down at an English tea-table in an old English farmhouse, and eat some toasted tea-cake, freshly made for him. Now and again he looked across at Madge with smiling and approving eyes, which she avoided mostly with a flutter of lashes. She was nervous, and inwardly distressed, though he failed to notice this, and kept on talking very cheerily.

“How’s America?” asked Jean. “Not so self-complacent, I understand?”

She could not resist “chipping” this good-looking representative of the United States.

He answered seriously.

“We’ve taken a knock. You’ve no idea. The faith has gone out of us for a time—faith in President Hoover and Big Business, and Henry Ford, and mass production, and the banking system, and almost everything! There’s an air of depression in New York worse than a London fog. Old gentlemen sit about moaning to each other in club corners. There are bread queues lining up in the heart of the city, and down-and-outs selling apples along Fifth Avenue. American prosperity is like one of those toy pigs they used to sell in Fleet Street before Christmas. The squeak has gone out of it! . . . It’s all very strange. I can’t understand it. We’re producing so much wheat that people are starving, and so much cotton that people are ill-clad, and we’ve got so much gold that we’re all bankrupt. It certainly takes a lot of explanation. Those expert guys seem to have added up wrong! What do you make of it, Commander?”

Commander Compton could make nothing of it. It seemed to him an unfathomable mystery. Why a country like the United States, with vast natural resources, enormous industry, prodigious machine power, and immense reserves of gold, should be unable to support itself in the utmost comfort, was a problem beyond his reach of mind. He thought back to Henry Lambert’s gloomy talk, his intricate explanation of “frozen” gold and commodity prices, and a break-down of credit. All that only seemed to darken the mystery.

“We’ve anything between three and six million unemployed,” said Edward Feldmann, Junior. “It depends on what newspaper you read. From personal

observation, I should say that the white collar man is suffering most from this blizzard. He's too proud to take his place in the bread line."

"What's a white collar man?" asked Jean. "Technically speaking, I mean."

"What you call a 'clark'," explained Edward. "He's the poor guy who has worked in an office for twenty years perhaps, and now gets notice to quit. There are crowds of young fellows who were at Yale and Harvard and Columbia a year or two ago, and then went into offices down-town, believing that they were walking up the golden stairs. Now they're in the street, and their chief, who was once a millionaire, creeps round to Child's for his midday snack. It's real bad in New York. But, if you want to see a stricken city, come for a trip to my home town, where banks have gone down like ninepins in a skittle alley."

For a few moments he was silent, sitting there with a tea-cup in his hand and looking into it with a kind of frown on his forehead and a puzzled smile. It was no joke to him, this American tragedy. He had seen what it meant in human suffering and mental anxiety. His father had shot himself because of it. Many of his friends were ruined. It had taken away some of the freshness of his youth and his faith in his own country, and his hope of the future.

Presently he looked up again and laughed.

"Perhaps I overdo the gloom," he said. "Many of my friends who used to have wads of dollars still keep pretty cheerful in this time of adversity. They've invented a new slogan to keep up their spirits. 'We must learn to do without the things our fathers never had.' "

Commander Compton tried to reassure him.

"My dear lad, it's just a temporary depression. I can't think it's going to last much longer, unless something has gone wrong with our system of civilization—I mean, fundamentally wrong. And, meanwhile, nobody over here ought to feel any malicious satisfaction about distressful conditions in your great country. We're all tied up to each other. What hurts one hurts another. The prosperity of one nation adds to the wealth of its neighbours. Many of us have been hit already by the crash in Wall Street; and unless world prices rise, my farmer friends round here will be in a bad way next year. Even this little farmstead won't pay for itself as I had hoped. Here's to the prosperity and eternal friendship of our two countries."

He raised an empty tea-cup.

"Well done, Father!" said Madge.

Young Edward was much moved by this friendliness. He, too, raised his tea-cup.

“I’d like them to hear that at home,” he said.

“What about a stroll round the garden, Edward?” suggested Madge.

“Great idea! I would certainly like to see some English roses again. I’m thrilled at being back in little old England.”

Together he and Madge went into the garden, and Jean Macgregor, left with Commander Compton, heard the young American’s voice talking and laughing down the path towards the summer-house.

“Another American tragedy,” said Jean. “It won’t be easy for Madge to tell him.”

“No,” said Commander Compton.

Madge and Edward seemed to like the garden. They did not come back to the house until an hour later. There was something suspiciously like a trace of tears on Madge’s cheeks. Edward was rather pale, and looked as though that hour in the garden had aged him by a year or two.

“You’re sure you won’t stay to supper, Edward?” said Madge.

“I’d like to terribly, but I have to meet my new chief.”

“Oh, that’s a pity!” said Compton.

“I’m very happy to have seen you all again, sir. This old farmhouse is certainly a wonderful picture.”

Madge and Jean went into the drive to see him off in his hired car. Commander Compton stood watching them through the window. The young American spoke a few words to Jean with a smile about his lips. Then he took Madge’s hand and raised it to his lips with his head bent for a moment. After getting into the car, he raised his hand in salute, and Commander Compton saw Madge turn away suddenly and disappear.

Jean came back alone.

“Took it like a gentleman!” she said. “Well done the U.S.A!”

LI

MADGE and Simon were married a month later, very quietly, and without a fuss of any social kind. There were only a few friends and relatives in the church, including Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Emily and some of Simon's people. That young man would have preferred marriage in a registrar's office, but gave way to Madge, who objected to being handed over with a postage stamp, as she described that method of getting married. Commander Compton had stayed the night with his daughter at the Langham Hotel, and drove with her to the church next morning, holding her hand on the way.

"Happy, Madge?" he asked, not for the first time.

"Quite cheerful, Father! I can't quite realize what it all means. Do you think marriage makes as much difference as most people imagine? Don't they make too much fuss about it? I mean, I shall still be the same after marriage as before marriage."

"It's a great adventure," said Compton. "The greatest in most lives."

"I wonder!" said Madge thoughtfully. "I suppose it used to be when women were utterly dependent on their husbands. But now that many women have their own work outside the home it's not such a plunge, is it? When I get a part again, and leave Simon with you it will all be very much like it was before."

"Is that going to work all right?" asked Compton.

"Oh yes. That's the bargain, you know. Simon is perfectly reasonable about it."

"I shall miss you, my dear. Horribly! Think of me sometimes."

"Always, Father! You've been a great dear to me. I love you very much."

She put her cheek against his for a moment on their way to the church.

There was a battery of cameras waiting for her outside. That afternoon there were photographs of her in the papers. Commander Compton cut them out and pasted them in a book.

Simon was waiting for her in a blue lounge suit, looking not at all like a moody young man who had a grievance against life. There was no desperation in his eyes.

"I believe in a kind God!" he whispered to Commander Compton.

Commander Compton gave away his daughter according to tradition. He

held her to him just for a moment in the vestry. He raised a hand to her as she drove away with Simon for a honeymoon in Italy. He saw her kiss her hands to him through the window of the motor-car, and turned away to hide the moisture in his eyes. Henry Lambert took his arm. That night he went back to his farmhouse.

LII

THEY were somewhat dreary months for Commander Compton while Simon and Madge were away on their honeymoon. He devoted them to hard work on the farm, with occasional visits to Town to look up old friends, and he was thankful in the long evenings when a neighbour dropped in—his friend, the vicar, mostly—to break the spell of loneliness in a big old farmhouse with empty rooms. The weather did not help towards cheerfulness. It was persistently vile, and threatened to be a black year for agriculture. Gale after gale came tearing across the Sussex downs. Rain fell from inexhaustible reservoirs and flooded Simon's ditches in the low-lying meadows. The lanes and field-paths were ankle deep in mud. A farmer's life was not amusing.

Compton counted the weeks before the return of Madge and her husband. Then he had disappointing news from them. Simon was down with the 'flu in Florence. An English doctor advised another month in Italy before returning to English weather, and Madge agreed with him for Simon's sake, though she was anxious to be back.

That extra month of waiting for the travellers' return was annoying to a lonely man, but he was consoled by Madge's letters. She was happy. That was the great thing. Her marriage with Simon seemed to be a success. She wrote with gaiety and laughter in every line.

> *Simon and I get on quite well together* (she wrote), *considering our temperamental natures! Simon finds life extremely amusing with me, and he is astonished by its beauty. He says it's my beauty which has revealed the loveliness of life. Isn't that flattering to my conceit? You will be surprised to find how tolerant he has become. He's not so cynical or sceptical, and is quite touched sometimes,* par exemple, *by the simplicity and devotion of Italian peasants in their old churches. "There may be something in this superstition," he said the other day. That sounds cynical, but he confessed that he is getting to believe in some divinity of the spirit which is faintly perceived by the human mind. He thinks the love he has for me—he loves me absurdly, Father!—must have some meaning beyond mere chemical reactions. You know how he talks! We have tremendous arguments in picture galleries, and churches, and public gardens, and restaurants, and cafés, and the Italians look at us and smile, vastly*

amused by our earnestness. I think they like the look of us. The Italian girls fall for Simon's clear-cut profile.

Sometimes Simon gets angry because Italian officers give me the glad eye too brazenly. Do you remember you were anxious for the same reason years ago? He wants to punch their heads, but I like them to think I'm a nice-looking wench, if it gives them any pleasure. Father, I'm glad I married Simon. Marriage is really rather nice, and Simon is happy at last. Of course, I'm longing to get to work again. I haven't lost my ambition. One can't go on lotus-eating for ever, although Simon doesn't see why not. I tell him that he ought to be working on his novel, but he thinks that would be an outrage on a honeymoon. Anyhow, we are very much amused with each other, and even Simon's 'flu did not spoil things too much. I liked nursing him, and he liked being nursed. How silly all this must sound to you, Father; it's just honeymoon stuff, which must bore everyone except the newly-weds who think their love is unique and miraculous.

Of course, we quarrel sometimes, otherwise life would get monotonous. We had a furious quarrel last night about Galsworthy's novels—of all things in the world. Simon said they evaded the realities of life and were steeped in sentimentality and insincerity. I said Galsworthy was a great artist and understood women with wonderful intuition. Simon said his women belonged to the Harrod's school of wax models. I threw a wet sponge at him, and we had a fight and upset an electric lamp. Then we laughed so much that our next door neighbour knocked on the wall. That made us laugh still more. I had to bury my head in the pillow to smother my squeals. You have no idea what silly children we are! But it's all very pleasant. I'm getting fond of Simon. He's really quite a nice husband. You'll find him improved as a son-in-law. And now we shall soon be back, Father. How's little old England, by the way? People out here are getting anxious. . . .

They came back at last, and Commander Compton, who had counted the days, was very pleased to have them by his hearthside. It was a foul day when they arrived, with another gale howling down the chimney and rattling at the casements against which the rain was driving. But he had built up good fires, and lit all the lamps upstairs and downstairs, so that the house was cosy for them.

"Not quite so good as blue skies," said Simon, "but that's an admirable fire. Hark at that wind howling like seven devils!"

“Well, Father,” said Madge. “Sorry to have us back again? Two troublesome people to spoil your tranquillity!”

She stood there in a fur cloak he had given her, clasping his arm, with her cheek against his.

“I’ve missed you more than I can say,” he told her.

“How do you think we look?” she asked. “Has marriage made any difference to us? Do you think Simon has the haggard air of a much nagged husband?”

They looked extremely good to him. And marriage, he thought, had made some difference to both of them. Happiness had made Madge more beautiful, he was almost sure. And there was a new look about Simon. In spite of the ’flu, he was not so thin and nervy. His eyes had a sense of peace in them. He laughed more heartily, and without that note of satire which sometimes had made his laughter irritating. He had become more reconciled to life and to his own place in it. So it seemed to his father-in-law during the first few days of his return.

There was nothing much doing on the farm for the next month or so, owing to the wet weather, apart from the usual routine of dairy work, and Simon resumed his writing now and then, though he had to coerce himself, it seemed, to that task and abandoned it at the slightest excuse from Madge. He took her up to Town several times to see his people and to do a theatre or a dinner with friends of their old set. Once or twice they stayed the night in Town, but as a rule came back in Compton’s car, arriving deplorably late when he sat up waiting for them, desperately anxious until he heard the sound of the horn hooting at the gate or saw their headlights up the drive. Simon still drove like a racing motorist, and reckoned an hour and a quarter from Piccadilly to Broadmead when the roads were clear of traffic.

“Don’t forget you’re a married man, my lad,” Compton reminded him more than once. “You must take care of Madge, you know.”

Madge intervened on Simon’s side.

“Oh, I trust Simon. He’s fast, but sure.”

“Besides,” said Simon, “I don’t want to extinguish my own little light. I’m rather pleased with life just now.”

“Egoist!” cried Madge, giving him a pinch.

Now and again Commander Compton felt that he was in the way. It was hardly fair, he thought, to intrude so much into the lives of these two young people at the outset of marriage. They would want their own privacy, the right to talk without an eavesdropper, the sense of being on their own desert island

or in their own little Paradise like Adam and Eve. When this thought came to him he left them alone for a while, doing odd jobs in the tool-shed, or sawing up wood for the fires, or even sitting in his own bedroom reading a book, until Madge became aware of his absence and demanded to know the reason for it.

“Why are you always slipping away, Father? Do we bore you with our prattle?”

“Good heavens, no! But I don’t want to get in the way. I know that old mother-in-law curse. I don’t want to play the eternal father-in-law—the old man in the corner.”

“Father, how absurd! How utterly ridiculous! Simon and I love to have you with us. And, anyhow, it’s your house, and your hearthside. Simon, tell Father not to make us feel like gatecrashers!”

Simon laughed and flung another log on to the fire where he had been sitting in a low chair, with Madge on the rug and her head resting against his knees, as before marriage she had so often sat like that with her father.

“I feel a usurper, anyhow,” he admitted. “I believe I’ve got your governor’s favourite chair, now I come to think of it.”

That was true, but he had taken possession of it and didn’t seem inclined to shift.

So the weeks drifted by very pleasantly, it seemed, for all of them, until Christmas came, and then the beginning of another year, which they celebrated by sitting up late and listening to the bells of St. Paul’s on the wireless.

Perhaps it was this consciousness of another year beginning which began to make Madge restless.

She spoke to her father about it one night, and he had already noticed her restlessness.

“Time is slipping away,” she said when they were alone together, Simon being upstairs writing in his own room.

Compton agreed, but saw no reason for distress on her part.

“It’s only at my age one hates the thought of that, Madge. You have life ahead of you.”

“Yes, but I want to do something with it. I can’t go on just dug in like this. Of course, it’s very pleasant and lazy and languorous—you keep up jolly good fires, Father!—but I want to act again. For the last three weeks I’ve been smelling the ghost of grease-paint. I must get a job. I must go and harry those agents.”

“What about Simon?” asked Compton. “He’ll hate to lose you for a time.”

Madge smiled into the firelight.

“It’s going to be good for him. Too much connubiality isn’t good for any man. Besides, it’s a bargain between us. I married him on that condition.”

“True,” said Compton.

She went up to Town several times without Simon to visit her agents and certain theatrical producers, refusing her husband’s offer to drive her there and back.

“No, Simon. Get on with your writing. It’s about time you finished that novel.”

“Finished it? I’m only half-way through. It’s an incredible labour. I don’t believe I shall ever finish it. Besides, if I take you up to Town it will stimulate my ideas.”

“Now you’re talking nonsense, my child! Stay at home like a good boy, and get on with your work!”

So far from getting on with his work, Simon was utterly incapable of mental concentration during her absence.

“Can’t write a line this morning,” he announced to his father-in-law. “Let’s cut some more wood.”

“Better keep your nose to the grindstone, laddy,” said Compton. “Madge will think I’ve pulled you off your job if you spend your time sawing logs.”

“Oh, it’s an excellent opportunity to make some firewood. I’m off writing this morning.”

He was off it again in the afternoon, and suggested a game of chess. Then, an hour before Madge’s train was due, he sat staring at the clock every five minutes, and groaned heavily because the time passed so slowly.

“God! That clock seems to go backwards. It seems a year since Madge left the house.”

One evening, when she was three-quarters of an hour late because of a fog in Town, he became extremely agitated, and thought she must have had an accident.

“I wish to heaven she wouldn’t go up to Town alone. Anything might happen to her. She might get run over, or taken ill, or murdered by some mad beast in the railway carriage.”

Compton laughed at these terrors.

“Steady, my lad. I’m apt to get anxious myself when you drive her back from Town, but I don’t let my imagination get as far as murder.”

“You can’t pick up a paper without seeing some foul crime,” said Simon.

Judging from his gloom he seemed to be convinced that Madge had been done away with—possibly cut into small pieces—until she appeared a few minutes later, quite undamaged.

“I thought you had been killed,” said Simon. “I was suffering the agony of the damned. What on earth have you been doing?”

“Simple Simon met a pieman! There was a fog on the line. I’ve been travelling back like a lady in a first-class smoking-carriage. Needless to say, I had a third-class ticket. Mr. Whitton was in the same carriage. We had quite a nice talk.”

“Curse him!” said Simon. “It’s like his infernal cheek. And you haven’t given me a kiss after all these years.”

She flung an arm round his neck.

“Aren’t you getting tired of kissing? It’s so unhygienic.”

She spared a little kiss for her father—jealous of so much attention to a mere husband.

LIII

A MONTH later the blow fell. Madge had an offer of a good part in a provincial tour of Barrie's play "Dear Brutus". She was to play the artist's daughter in the enchanted wood. She had always longed to play it. She had an idea that she had been born to play it.

She told her father first, after receiving the letter by the evening post, while Simon was working upstairs.

"Of course I shall accept it, Father. It's a great chance. I was beginning to think that I should never get back."

Commander Compton was pensive about it. He felt sorry for himself.

"I suppose you will be away some weeks?"

"Three months," said Madge. "Manchester, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow—all round England and Scotland."

"Three months, eh? Do you think Simon will survive as long as that without you?"

Madge laughed, not very happily.

"Poor old Simon! It's going to be hard on him. But it's going to be harder on me. I shall have to tear myself away from this little paradise. I shall go away with a bleeding heart."

"But, my dear, why do it? It's not necessary. I can afford to keep you. As soon as that novel is finished Simon may earn a bit of money. In any case, he has that income of his own. Why abandon those who love you to drag around unpleasant places for the sake of earning unnecessary money?"

Madge looked at him reproachfully, her eyes widening with surprise that such words should come from him, at that time of day.

"Father! And you a hero of Jutland! Isn't life something more than sheltered ease? Aren't you on the side of adventure and achievement? Don't you believe in following the little flame inside one? You oughtn't to have said that about the money. I'm not doing it for that. Besides, haven't we talked over this a hundred times when you first came home, and afterwards?"

Commander Compton, that one-armed man, felt very much ashamed of himself.

"Sorry, darling! It's because I hate to lose you again even for three months! It's because I'm sorry for Simon. It's because I feel distressed at this coming

break-up of home life. But I quite see your point. You must follow that little flame—even if it takes you to Manchester. We've no right to hold you back as a prisoner of the hearthside. Yes, I see that."

They were talking about it when Simon sloped into the room, with tousled hair due to intensive thought, and a nervous hand. He had overheard some of their words.

"What's all that? Manchester? A prisoner of the hearthside?"

Madge was silent for a second, looking at him as though wondering how he would take this news.

"Simon," she said, rather tremulously, "I've had a good offer, and I'm going to accept it. It means going on tour for three months. You'll be brave about it, won't you?"

He went as pale as death. If she had told him she was going to be away for three years he could not have looked more stricken.

"Three months! Great God! I simply couldn't bear it, Madge. You mustn't accept such a preposterous offer. It's absurd. You're a married woman. It's—it's hellish."

"Simon! You promised!"

She went over to him, and put her hands on his shoulders, and looked into his eyes.

"Simon, my dearest love, you'll have to let me go. Three months are nothing. They'll pass ever so quickly. Of course, it will be horrid for both of us. I shall weep myself asleep sometimes. Don't think I shan't miss you just as much as you'll miss me, but I don't want to give up my acting. This is a great chance for me. It's the lead in 'Dear Brutus'. It puts me up a peg. If I play it well I shall get back to London. We've talked it out so much. You promised you wouldn't hold me back and make a squaw of me. We're moderns, Simon, you and I. You can't treat me like a Victorian wife, chained to domesticity. You promised me freedom. It was our bargain. Now, do be reasonable and brave, my dear and my dear."

He wasn't a bit brave. He was utterly unreasonable. He ignored his promise. He vowed that if she went on tour he would go with her. He could write just as well in theatrical lodgings or cheap hotels as he could in a mouldy old farmhouse.

"That's not fair, Simon. You promised to give Father a helping hand. Besides, it's absurd. You couldn't write a line travelling around like that. And I should be worried all the time. It's far better to be sensible about it."

He refused to be sensible about it. He said that love came first. He said that

when he made the bargain he didn't understand how hellish it would be when the time came. He accused her of getting bored with him. He said that acting was a rotten profession, anyway, and that she would never make an actress. He thought actors were the most poisonous people in the world, utterly insincere and damnably immoral. He loathed the idea of her trapesing about the country and getting double pneumonia in damp beds. He thought 'Dear Brutus' a foul play—reeking with false sentiment and silly mysticism. Barrie ought to have been drowned at birth, he said. And in any case, he implored Madge to reject the offer, and behave like any wife to any husband if she had a particle of affection for him.

"Simon! . . . Simon! . . . Simon!"

Madge laughed at him, rumpled his hair, kissed him, smacked his hand, wept a little, and laughed again.

Commander Compton intervened now and then, taking Madge's side, asking Simon to keep his pluck up, and incautiously begging him to "play the game".

"Oh, my God!" cried Simon. "If I hear that phrase again I shall break the furniture!"

"Steady, old boy!"

"Say you're sorry," said Madge. "You owe a lot to Father, you know. If it hadn't been for Father I shouldn't have been your wife. I shouldn't have been born. I shouldn't have been beautiful."

Simon said he was sorry.

That night Compton heard them talking, talking, talking in their bedroom. At breakfast next morning Madge looked as though she had been weeping, and Simon was quiet and glum.

A week later Madge went up to Town for the rehearsals of "Dear Brutus", and Simon went with her. They stayed with his people until the rehearsals were over a month later. Then Simon came back to the farmhouse alone. Madge was on tour.

LIV

As a son-in-law Simon was a difficult fellow to deal with sometimes, but Commander Compton liked him better than before his marriage, and indeed had a fatherly feeling towards him, which was based on the love they shared for the elusive Madge, and a sympathy which came from understanding—to some extent. Not that he pretended to know all that was working in this young man's mind. Far from it. In their conversations and arguments on long evenings together, Simon baffled him repeatedly by intellectual subtleties and extravagances which were beyond the mental horizon of anyone over fifty, or, at least, anyone of Compton's tradition. He accepted no authority. He took nothing for granted. He challenged every accepted theory and convention.

He was prepared, for example, to examine Communism with an unprejudiced mind when the elder man could only denounce it as a diabolical menace. He leaned slightly towards the Left, though he had, curiously enough, as it seemed to the Commander, no respect for Labour, whom he accused of snobbishness and inefficiency. Rebel as he was, he despised democracy, for which the Commander, as an old-fashioned Liberal getting more Conservative, had a sentimental regard. He believed in a new aristocracy, composed mainly of scientists and intellectuals, who would dictate to the mob mind and tell them what was good. And so on, in a bewildering maze of ideas which did not seem to link up into any definite philosophy, but were quite amusing for purposes of discussion.

Commander Compton, always tolerant, discovered many likeable qualities in him, which was good for comradeship. Madge had said that he would find Simon improved as a son-in-law. That was true. Sometimes, indeed, it was almost embarrassing. Compton occasionally caught his eyes looking at him with a kind of amused admiration, a kind of affectionate and humorous respect.

"He thinks I'm a comic old bird," thought Compton, "but he rather likes me, I think—as though I were a sort of stage father-in-law."

"How is it you're so young and I'm so old?" asked Simon one night, when there was another gale howling.

Compton took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Is that a cross-word puzzle?"

"It's a serious question. If you'll excuse me saying so, you have a childlike

attitude towards life. You still believe in appalling old sentiment, like patriotism and ‘Hands across the sea’, and ‘the Nelson touch’, and so forth. I have the mind of an old man, disillusioned by the incurable folly of humanity—look at the state of the world!—and saddened by the historical panorama of false hopes, false ideas, and the inevitable death of one civilization after another, until final extinction of the ants called men and the universe in which they find a precarious life.”

Compton grinned good-humouredly.

“My dear lad, we all begin like that. Youth is always subject to melancholy. It’s only when one’s near one’s dotage that life is like a calm sea. Besides, you exaggerate your own moods. It’s only half an hour ago since you were laughing uproariously over the story I told you about that chief petty officer in Singapore. A fellow with a sense of humour can’t make me believe that he’s old and disillusioned.”

“If one didn’t laugh, one would have to commit suicide,” said Simon. “But it’s damn’ difficult to laugh if one begins to think. The newspapers are enough to give one the hump to the *n*th degree.”

He picked up the newspaper lying by his side and read out a few items.

“Four million unemployed in Germany. . . . Bread queues in New York. . . . Two thousand bank failures in the United States. . . . Continued slump in commodity prices. . . . Disappointing trade returns. . . . British exports’ heavy drop. . . . Serious financial position in Australia. . . . Default in New South Wales. . . . Economic crisis in the Argentine.”

He dropped the paper again with a gloomy laugh.

“Pretty cheerful, isn’t it? What a glorious world in which to have one’s little spell of life!”

Compton admitted the gravity of world affairs.

“Not too good. Why don’t you get busy and do something about it?”

“Me?”

Simon smiled at the idea that he could do anything about these stupendous forces of disintegration.

“I’m quite serious,” said Compton. “Somebody’s got to do something about it. In fact, before long I’m afraid we shall all have to get busy in one way or another, such as tightening in one’s belt and growing more cabbages! What beats me is the way in which everybody sees this situation getting worse, and not doing a damn’ thing to make it better. You’re a young fellow with brains. You have the gift of the gab. You can write a bit. Why don’t you find out what’s wrong with the world and the best way to put it right? We’re always

talking about these things in front of the hearthside. But that's no good. You must tell the world, as the Americans say. Stand for Parliament and make them listen to you in the House of Commons. If you can't do that, go into Hyde Park and talk to the crowd. You young men aren't making yourselves heard. It's your turn to take up the leadership, and you don't come forward. You say the Old Gang made all this mess—and I can't deny it—but you can't shelter yourself for ever behind that excuse. It's time some of you were up and doing. For God's sake, old man, for England's sake, wake up and get busy."

Simon flicked his right eyebrow, and leaned forward with his hands between his knees.

"Are you addressing me personally?" he asked ironically. "Or are you summoning forth the legions of fearless and flaming youth—all the Nancy boys, and the little lounge lizards, and city boys, and the dog-racing laddies, with their heroic spirit of the bulldog breed?"

Compton answered seriously.

"I'm speaking to all our young men, and partly to one young man who is always criticizing life, but doesn't do much to make it any better."

Simon allowed himself to laugh.

"My dear and honoured father-in-law, do you seriously suggest that I am entitled to express any opinion about anything?"

Compton answered dryly, with just a glint in his steely eyes. "I think I've heard you do so once or twice."

Simon had the good feeling to blush slightly, and laughed again more loudly.

"Conversational exercise. Mental gropings. Not intended for publication."

"Seriously," said Compton, "why don't you think of doing something in public life? Your father could afford to give you a run for your money. You could combine it with writing. It's a four hundred a year job in the House of Commons. It would please Madge."

Simon scoffed at the idea.

"Politics? God help us! Look at our politicians. Labour—utterly dishonest, intellectually, and utterly unable to put one unemployed man into a new job. Look at the Liberals, keeping Labour in power and denouncing Labour's programme and policy. Look at the Conservatives—pottering on with old catchwords, looking back to pre-War days, and pretending that nothing has altered since then—when the whole world is in a state of flux. No, thanks! I wouldn't join that crowd for all the money on earth."

"How's the novel going?" asked Compton.

The novel was going towards the end of its last chapter. It had taken what seemed to a non-writing man an interminable time.

“Is it working out well?” asked an anxious father-in-law.

“It’s an abortion,” said Simon.

LV

On the whole, Simon behaved rather well for the first few weeks of Madge's absence on tour. At least, he settled down to work both on the farm and on his novel-writing. He was also a fairly cheerful companion to his father-in-law, and did his best, not without an effort, to hide his sense of abandonment and the agony of this ordeal of being parted from his wife. But Compton guessed how much he was suffering. He could always see when a black mood of melancholy and impatience came creeping into this boy's soul.

He became restless again, and paced up and down the sitting-room, kicking a hassock out of the way savagely, until presently he flung himself into an armchair again with a heavy sigh which was almost a groan. He took to those solitary walks again, as he had been used to do before his marriage. He didn't sleep well at night, and came down in the morning looking fagged and heavy-eyed. The weather got on his nerves, as well it might, this year of grace having begun badly and gone on worse, with interminable rain and sunless days.

"Did you ever see such a foul climate?" he asked many times, after a gloomy glance at the prospect beyond the windows—those sodden fields; and Compton's labourers trudging across the rain-swept landscape with bits of sacking over their heads; and Compton's cows standing in waterlogged meadows; and naked trees, black against a grey sky, bending before a south-west gale.

"Not too good," admitted Compton. "If it goes on like this it will beat the record of eighteen-seventy-nine, which Farmer Trant remembers as the black year of English farming."

Simon groaned heavily.

"If it goes on like this I shall take to drink. Anybody who lives in England, unless he has to, is imbecile. Anybody who takes up farming in England ought to be certified and put away."

"I've taken up farming," Compton reminded him.

Simon cut the top off his egg as though decapitating his worst enemy. Then he laughed with a sudden return to good humour.

"Sorry to grouse so much. But it's hellish, isn't it? Of course, if Madge were here it would be a bit different. I suppose it's what happens inside one that counts—the spiritual fire within. Unfortunately, now that Madge is on tour I'm deprived of that internal combustion engine."

“She’ll be back soon now, old boy,” said Commander Compton. “It’s positively terrifying how quickly time goes.”

Simon didn’t agree. It seemed to him that the days dragged by with hideous prolongation of boredom. Every night was like a thousand years.

“Hark at that disgusting wind again!”

“Let’s get out into it, my dear chap,” said the Commander. “It will blow the cobwebs out of your eyes, and, anyhow, I want you to look after those two men putting up the new fence. One of them is a champion lead-swinger.”

“Right!” said Simon.

He got into his Burberry, flung a cigarette-end into the fire, and went out into the slashing rain. In his raincoat and top-boots he reminded Compton of those young officers whom he had known in the War.

Now and again Simon seemed desperate to see Madge, and gave utterance to passionate protests about his temporary separation with a violence of language which distressed his father-in-law.

“I can’t stick it. It’s absolutely damnable. What is the good of marriage if we have to live apart? The situation is too infernally absurd. Either Madge has married me or she hasn’t married me. Curse it all, I don’t believe any man would allow his wife to go away from him like this in the first year of marriage, travelling around the country with a crowd of imbecile actors.”

“Wasn’t it in the contract?” asked Compton quietly.

“Blast the contract!” said Simon. “I had no idea it would work out like this.”

Compton urged him to be reasonable and patient. He used the old arguments about Madge having a right to her career, and liberty to develop her own talent, but while he used them he was conscious that Simon as a husband was suffering as he had done as a father, only more intensely and with a more impatient passion.

“After all, my dear fellow, you can’t adopt the attitude of a Victorian husband, insisting that woman’s place is in the home, and so forth. You’re one of the modernists. You believe in the right to self-expression. I’ve heard you argue a hundred times against the tyranny imposed upon women by the bestial selfishness of your immediate forefathers!”

Simon winced under this attack. He answered sulkily. “That’s another thing altogether. Besides, I hate being reminded of what I said the day before yesterday. That’s the way politicians score off each other. ‘May I remind the right honourable gentleman that in eighteen-ninety he is reported to have said . . . ?’ ”

Commander Compton smiled over his pipe, and followed up his advantage.

“Still, one can’t deny one’s fundamental philosophy of life between Friday night and Saturday morning without a charge of being slightly inconsistent. You must admit, my dear fellow, that you have always been up against restraint between men and women, married or unmarried. You once told me that if a wife wanted to leave her husband because she preferred another man, she ought to be perfectly free to do so on notifying the fact at the local registry for the price of a penny postage stamp.”

“Certainly,” said Simon, somewhat uncertainly, but bluffing it out. “But then, you see, Madge doesn’t prefer another man at the moment.”

“But she wants to get on with her job. She doesn’t want to be tied to the leg of your writing-table, watching you with adoration while you write your novel.”

Simon looked at his father-in-law as though surprised by this advocacy of women’s rights from one of the Old Gang.

“*Touché!*” he said with a grudging laugh. “Theoretically, everything you say is absolutely right. I must say you’ve got me all ends up, sir. But the fact remains that I shall go *gaga* if I don’t see Madge for another six weeks. I’m taking the train to Manchester this afternoon. I’ll be back on Tuesday.”

He took a train to Manchester. He also took a train to Edinburgh, and afterwards to Newcastle, Liverpool, Cardiff and Bristol, returning to a Tudor farmhouse, which was surrounded by mud and rain-filled dykes, as a soldier in the Great War came back to the trenches after seven days’ leave with his wife or sweetheart. But there was a look of peace in his eyes which lasted for a week or two. He had seen Madge again. She had made a hit in “Dear Brutus”. He was beginning to think that she had the makings of an actress. He hated to think so, because that would keep her to the stage. Manchester had gone wild about her. The critics had written some pretty tall stuff, comparing her with Ellen Terry as a girl, although they couldn’t possibly have known anything about Ellen Terry as a girl, unless they were men of ninety.

“I always told you she was wonderful,” said a proud father.

Simon smiled.

“She couldn’t act for nuts at first,” he said with that cynical candour which Compton found so disconcerting. As an old-fashioned man he could not criticize those he loved. It seemed to him disloyalty. These modern people had a curious detachment, which he failed to understand.

But for all that, Simon begrudged her her liberty, like any Victorian husband. Human nature remains remarkably unchanging.

LVI

SIMON managed to survive that first ordeal of separation from a wife who was also an actress. She came back for two months, interrupted only by some special matinée performances, during which she and Simon stayed up in Town. But he was always aware of a sword of Damocles hanging over his head. Madge would slip away from him again if she had another part offered her.

Compton, watching them both, could see that this thought and this conflict between their interests and ideas was a shadow behind their happiness. He saw a score of times how, in the middle of some jesting remark, Simon's face would suddenly become glum, and a troubled look come into his eyes, because Madge was absorbed in some theatrical paper announcing a new production or giving the cast of a new play. He became nervy again and kicked things about the room when she went up to Town without him to "harry" her agents, as she called it.

Gradually, indeed, Madge began to avoid the subject, seeing how much it distressed her husband, and had a furtive, guilty look when she opened the theatrical weeklies or pushed them under a cushion when Simon came into the room. She gave up talking about agents and engagements, and when she went up to Town pretended that it was for a visit to Aunt Elizabeth or Aunt Emily, although Simon knew quite well what the main purpose of her journey had been, and sank into gloom, until he discovered that there was no immediate chance of losing her.

Several times she spoke to her father about Simon in a rather worried way.

"I can't persuade him to be reasonable. He loves me so much, poor dear, that if I leave him for a day he thinks I've abandoned him for ever, and don't care a jot for his happiness. The fact is, Father, this farmhouse life isn't too good for him. It's too isolated. It's beginning to get on his nerves. And he has a sense of being a failure. That novel has gone to six publishers now. It's like a blow at the heart every time his typescript comes back. And then, things are so depressing everywhere—in the whole wide world. Simon worries about Germany, and civilization, and little old England, almost as much as he does about my getting another engagement. Absurd, isn't it?"

"No use worrying," said Compton. "Tell him not to worry. We shall pull out all right."

But he was getting a little worried himself. He had a faint sense of alarm at

the back of his mind about the possibility of strained relations between Simon and Madge. It was obvious that one day his daughter's stage career would come as a sharp sword between them. Madge would not surrender her art as an actress. She loved it and had faith in herself. She claimed the liberty which Simon denied or grudged so deeply. In spite of her tenderness, her devotion to Simon, her very feminine temperament, she had a touch of steel in her character which Compton recognized as his own. She would not surrender to Simon's weakness. It was an irreconcilable difference between them at the very outset of marriage, made worse, no doubt, because Simon had not yet found his place or job in life. That novel looked as though it were going to be a failure. He couldn't get it published.

The farm was not enough to occupy his time or give him any sense of achievement or success. He was beginning to hate it, and made no secret of his loathing for what he called quite truly "mud and muck". Madge, too, was beginning to find country life intolerable. Never once did she say so, but her father was distressed sometimes by the look on her face when she stared out of the window at the interminable rain, at those sodden fields, that desolate landscape, that grey, storm-tossed sky, through which the sun seldom broke with any warmth or glory. These two young people were beginning to pine for town life and its amenities and amusements. They were the wrong type for a Tudor farmhouse. Their minds belonged to London. Commander Compton had made a mistake in believing that they could be happy in his homestead. They were prisoners behind his casement windows. One day, he knew, they would escape. He would be left alone in these big old rooms, and would sit alone by his hearthside. He had made a mistake. Life is like that sometimes.

Luck was against him also—the luck of the weather. It was 1931. There was no doubt now that it would compare in history with the bad black year of 1879. "Mud and muck" was how Simon described this agricultural life. Compton had pictured it as an idyll, with Madge looking beautiful in the hayfield or walking, like Ruth, between his standing corn; but his hay had lain for weeks under beating rain, until it blackened and was worthless. There were a hundred tons of it quite rotten and no good for his cattle. Farmer Trant, that old-fashioned neighbour of his, had burnt most of his crop, suffering a heavy loss which he could ill afford after three bad years.

That old man had grown some fine quality wheat, and invited the Commander and Simon to have a look at it before harvest time.

"Looks good, don't it?" he said. "That's some stuff I grew from Danish seed—Chevalier—rather whiter than my Yeoman over there. A picture, Commander!"

Simon asked one of his awkward questions again.

“What sort of a price will it fetch?”

Farmer Trant sighed, and put his gnarled old fingers through his white beard.

“I can’t hope for more than twenty-four shillings a quarter. I could make it pay at forty shillings.”

“A bit of a loss,” said Simon. “Waste, I call it.” Under his breath, to Compton, he said, “Damn silly!”

“It’s the world price that beats us,” said Farmer Trant. “Over-production in Canada. Prices keep dropping. What are we going to do about it, Commander? It’s much the same with anything we grow. Some people say there’ll be a new Government in next October that’ll do something for the farmers. Well they’ll have to be quick. By Michaelmas many poor fellows will walk away from their farms. They’re in debt to the banks, in debt to the seed merchants, in debt to the machine manufacturers. They can’t afford labour. Look at that farm of Bob Halliday’s yonder. That’s not good farming! A hundred and fifty acres of waste-land going derelict. It makes my heart bleed. One year’s seeding means seven years’ weeding. But I don’t blame poor Halliday. A good farmer in the old days. Now he can’t afford to keep his land clean. Sad, isn’t it?”

“Tragic!” said Compton. “Poor old England!”

“Nothing wrong with the land,” said Farmer Trant. “Look at that wheat. Lovely, isn’t it? A picture. They can’t grow wheat like that in Canada. Not the same yield to the acre, nor nothing like it.”

He looked across his wheatfields with a smiling pride. But while he smiled some moisture gathered in his eyes, and two drops of water fell down his furrowed cheeks.

“Unless we can hold out another two years or so,” he said presently, “there’s no hope for any of us, not over the length and breadth of England. Why, up in Norfolk where they’re kings of farming—three thousand acre farms of the finest arable—they’re in a dreadful way, I’m told, selling their teams and turning off their men, and shutting themselves up in their farmhouses as though besieged. And they are besieged—by evil forces creating ruin in the world. I don’t understand it, Commander. We farmers don’t understand what’s happening to us. Something’s gone bad with the world. They say people are starving in the streets of New York while they’re burning wheat on the farmlands because they can’t sell it at any price. That don’t seem right. I make bold to call it wicked. It’s the devil that has something to do with it, if you’ll forgive my saying so, gentlemen.”

Simon laughed harshly, and turned up his collar against the rain which was starting again.

“A legion of devils!” he said. “Politicians, financiers, experts. They’ve all let us down, curse them!”

“And yet that wheat of mine looks good,” said Farmer Trant. “The earth has done its best. You couldn’t get better wheat in any kind of soil. My old forefathers knew a good bit of land!”

But the wheat didn’t look so good when it was ripe for the harvest. Three weeks of rain, merciless and driven by a southern gale, knocked it flat. No machine could cut it as it lay. It was a heavy loss to Farmer Trant.

LVII

THE distress of English agriculture was getting into the daily papers, alongside news of the week's sport and pictures of bathing beauties and American gangsters. Journalists were finding copy in the ruin of the farming folk. Up in Lincolnshire the potato crop had been ruined by the heavy rain. They could have stood twenty-four hours under water, but they had been drowned under the lasting floods. It was the irony of the unkind gods. In 1929 there had been a glut of potatoes. Thousands of tons had been thrown into the dykes because they could not fetch any profitable price. Now, when the market was good because of a scarcity of the crop in Germany, the Lincolnshire men had few to offer.

But the weather was only the last cause of agricultural distress. Worse than that and more hopeless, was the general misery of a world in which there was a creeping paralysis of industry and trade due to something that had gone wrong with the methods of exchange and the use of gold, causing unemployment in all countries and forcing down prices, so that there was no profit, but only grievous loss, for those who produced the essentials of life. A financial crisis in the Argentine reacted in England by some immediate and mysterious working of economic law. Sheep had fallen by one pound a head. Heifers were selling for less than their feeding cost. Foreign produce was invading the English markets at cut-throat prices with which English growers could not compete.

It was hardly worth their while to pick the fruit in their orchards. Russian fruit pulp, German black currants, American and Canadian apples—better graded and better packed—were beyond competition. High wages, costly transport, and low prices were ruining the English producers. Even milk was no longer paying for the general expenses of mixed farming. Over-production had led to a fall in prices. Thousands of farmers had put their land to grass and become dairymen. But millions of gallons of milk were being sold for manufacturing purposes at fourpence-halfpenny a gallon, which afforded no return for the cost of artificial foods and the wages of the milkers.

It was Simon who showed Commander Compton how much he was losing on his own small farm.

He sat one night working out the figures from Compton's books and pay-sheets.

“Quite an expensive hobby, this mouldy old farmhouse. I reckon you’ve lost six hundred pounds during the last twelve months, apart from interest on capital. Wouldn’t it be better to take a flat in South Kensington and join the R.A.C.? It would save you a lot of money, sir!”

Compton examined the figures.

They didn’t look good, he admitted. “Still, I’m not broke yet. Luck has been against us so far. It’s been a bad year, old boy. This slump in prices has hit us hard. I expect things will look up next year.”

Simon spoke with a touch of his old aggressive manner.

“What makes you think that?”

“There’s a silver lining to every cloud.”

Simon laughed scornfully, and Madge, who was reading a novel at the table by the light of an Aladdin lamp, looked up with a smile at him.

“What’s the joke, Simon?”

“The same old joke,” said Simon. “The optimism of age which refuses to look at reality. Your distinguished father thinks the world can be cured by the methods of suggestion as practised by Coué. Every day, in every way, the world gets better and better! So does President Hoover of the United States. And so does the Labour Government of this benighted country. What everybody fails to see is, that our particular form of civilization has gone bad. As far as England is concerned, we’ve broken down hopelessly. If we don’t adopt a Five Years’ Plan like our Russian rivals, we shall all be starving in a year or two. I met the governor yesterday—he’s got the almighty hump after a private visit to Germany. He says they can’t pay another dollar in reparations, nor any interest on the money we’ve lent them. He’s expecting a crash in Central Europe. Meanwhile, our illustrious statesmen are borrowing a million pounds a week to pay for unemployed insurance. But your noble father, with the breezy cheeriness of the naval mind, assures me that there’s a silver lining behind every cloud!”

Madge pushed her novel away and spoke reprovingly.

“Simon, aren’t you being rather rude to Father? I can’t allow that, you know.”

Simon’s face flushed for a moment at this rebuke.

“I hadn’t the slightest intention of being rude.”

“Perhaps it was a regrettable accident, Simon. But you *were* rude. Wasn’t he, Father?”

Commander Compton fingered the bowl of his pipe. He could see that Simon’s nerves were on edge. It was still raining outside. It had been raining

since breakfast. The room was overheated. They had been stuffed up in it too long. And Simon's typescript had come back again by the afternoon post. And those figures he had worked out had not made for cheerfulness.

"Simon is never rude to me," said the Commander. "We argue a donkey's hind leg off about everything 'twixt heaven and earth. What's that about the Five Years' Plan, my dear fellow?"

A soft answer turneth away wrath. Simon was lured into a political monologue mainly concerned with the need of an entire reorganization of life in England. Why didn't the farmers get together, he asked, and establish a decent system of marketing? Why didn't they scrap wheat and cut out Denmark with cheese and bacon and eggs? Why did they allow themselves to be undersold at Covent Garden by Californian apples, which had to travel six thousand miles before they reached the market? Now they wanted Protection to shelter themselves behind their own inefficiency. Their mentality belonged to the period of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. So did the mind of the English politician. . . .

Madge had resumed her reading, but she glanced up at the end of Simon's monologue.

"You ought to go into Parliament, Simon," she said with a quizzical smile. "You'd teach 'em!"

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

"What about bed?" he asked. "I'm fed up with this day of history. Hark at that foul rain! It's like a scene in a Russian play. Rain, mud, and muck."

"Play a game of chess with Father, my dear, and let me finish this exciting novel. It's by Edgar Wallace."

"Good God!" said Simon. "Are you reduced to that kind of dope?"

Madge turned over a page.

"It's most amusing. Why don't you write a detective story, Simon? You might make pots of money."

She spoke carelessly, not realizing that she had wounded the author of a philosophical and highbrow novel which no publisher had yet accepted.

He answered bitterly.

"I doubt whether I have the talent. It wants a bit of a brain to do that sort of thing!"

Madge heard the gloom in his voice. She flung her book on to a chair.

"Aren't we getting rather morbid?" she asked. "Father dearest, turn on that wireless. Let's hear a little music from Mayfair. Let's pretend we're in some

hectic night club. Simon and I are going to dance.”

“I don’t feel like it,” said Simon.

“You’re going to feel like it,” said Madge.

She held out her arms to him. They danced to the sound of a jazz band coming across the ether.

Commander Compton watched them.

Things were reaching a crisis. Simon wouldn’t stick it out much longer. Madge was getting restless again. One day he would lose them both. They were ready for escape from this old farmhouse.

LVIII

THERE was another crisis creeping closer to a Tudor farmhouse as it was coming close to every little house in England, and elsewhere in a bewildered world. It was a crisis caused by fear, and lack of confidence in international credit, and a slowing down of world trade, and the rising unemployment of the world's workers, causing misery in great cities, and despair among the farming folk of all nations, and a menace to the very structure of industrial civilization.

Germany and Austria were on the edge of collapse, and, strange as it seemed to simple-minded men like Farmer Trant and his neighbours, the distress of those two countries, so remote from their own fields, so alien to their own ways of life, so sharply in competition with their own markets, was an immediate cause of peril to the financial security of England. The old phrase, "As safe as the Bank of England" had become a national proverb, unquestioned and unchallenged by every nation on earth. The pound sterling had been as good as gold, people thought. Was it possible that the Bank of England was no longer safe? Was it even conceivable that English money might go bad, as German money had gone bad in the time of "inflation", so that the more that was issued the less it would buy, until at last it would buy nothing at all?

Germany had declared her inability to pay reparations which she had only paid during recent years out of the immense loans granted to her—on bad security—by the United States and other countries. The slump in commodity prices had halved her revenue, and she could no longer buy dollars and francs and pounds to pay her debts. Her debtors had been forced to give her a moratorium postponing all reparation payments. England had agreed to a "standstill", pledging herself not to withdraw her credits from German banks.

But something was now happening to English banks. They were being drained of their gold reserves. Every week the newspapers recorded immense shipments of bullion to France and the United States. "There is no cause for anxiety," said the financial experts in the newspapers. But they reported further shipments of English gold.

It appeared that the French people were becoming anxious about their securities in England. Their anxiety reached something like a panic, created, perhaps, by French journalists and writers, who pointed out day by day that England was spending far more than she was earning, that the British Government was borrowing a million pounds a week to pay for

unemployment, that the Budget could not be balanced, that the British people had an adverse balance of trade, that something was rotten in their state.

When their own money was withering in its real values, French investors had sent their money to England for safe keeping. French traders with England had left their profits from sales on this side of the Channel. French *rentiers*, not too sure of their own Government's stability, had bought British bonds, Egyptian bonds, and other securities guaranteed by British credit. Now they were shaken by all these rumours of financial weakness in England. They were withdrawing their credits and their balances. They were demanding gold, more gold, still more gold, from the vaults of the Bank of England.

It was pouring in a steady tide from one side of the Channel to the other. Another tide was flowing further across the Atlantic from London to New York. "There is no cause for anxiety," said the newspapers. But the Governor of the Bank of England was getting nervous. The City of London was getting nervous.

The man in the street was only vaguely aware of all this. He was not in the secrets of the Governor of the Bank of England. The man in the railway carriage—the City man who reads the financial news on his way to the office—was a little nearer to the facts. He was touched by a sense of uneasiness, which he expressed over the top of his newspaper to the man opposite.

"France is taking some more of our gold. Do you think we can stand the racket? It doesn't look good to me. Still, I dare say we shall scrape through all right. England always does."

And here and there were men and women who knew a little more than that, and didn't like what they knew. One of them was Henry Lambert, a Treasury official and the father of Simon. And another was Lord Bramshaw, Commander Compton's friend.

Henry Lambert came down to spend a week at Broadmead to see how his son was getting on, and Bramshaw came over to dine with him at Compton's invitation.

It was still raining. It hadn't stopped raining for a week. There was a half gale blowing from the south-west, hurling itself against the window-panes. Out in the fields the crops lay flattened. All over England farmers were bemoaning their losses. But in Compton's farmhouse there was no sign of any national or domestic crisis, except perhaps a gloomy look in the eyes of Simon Lambert, and a slight nerviness on the part of Madge, who had received a letter which she had taken up to her room after reading it at the breakfast-table without passing it over to Simon.

Henry Lambert looked tired and worn. But he was interested in the farm,

and had walked about a good deal in spite of the rain, changing his clothes when he came back to the house. Then, at the suggestion of Madge, he had retired to his room to take a nap before dinner.

“I confess I’m feeling a bit tired,” he agreed. “I’ve been having a hard time lately at the Treasury. That German trip knocked me edgewise for some reason. Nerves, of course! It was a bit of a strain. To some extent the fate of England hung on my mission.”

“Your governor doesn’t look too well,” said Commander Compton, speaking to Simon when his father had left the room.

“Worried,” said Simon. “Most people seem to be worrying at the moment. What’s the use? One can’t alter the inevitable operation of human stupidity.”

Madge laughed at him.

“It sounds as if *you* were worrying, Simon!”

She put her arm round his shoulder and laid her cheek against his for a moment, before he sloped off to change for dinner.

She listened for a moment to his heavy tread up the staircase. Then she turned to her father.

“Father, I had a letter this morning from Mr. Keening. You remember him, don’t you? The producer. He wants me to play in a repertory company at the Duchess Theatre. It’s a great chance. We start with a play by Chekhov. He has offered me a splendid part.”

“Fine!” said Commander Compton. He had been expecting something of the sort. It would mean losing Madge again, as he knew by her next words.

“I’m afraid it means living up in Town.”

“Yes,” said Compton. “Repertory, eh? Yes, that looks like a long innings. Have you told Simon?”

She smiled elusively.

“Not yet! I’m sparing him the blow as long as possible. He’s going to be rather difficult, I’m afraid.”

They had no further conversation about it just then, as Lord Bramshaw arrived, looking almost as worried as Henry Lambert.

“Foul weather!” he remarked after his first greetings. “I’m afraid God has a grudge against poor old England. Perhaps we’ve deserved it.”

He cheered up slightly over a glass of Compton’s sherry, and at dinner exerted himself rather successfully to entertain Madge by his stories of foreign royalties whom he had known as a young man in the Diplomatic Service. Simon sat looking moody, though now and then he roused himself for the

ordinary civilities of the table. His father questioned him about his novel, and looked dejected when Simon confessed that it hadn't a chance.

"I was hoping you had settled down to a literary career."

Simon laughed uneasily.

"I'm afraid I'm one of life's little failures. A deficiency of thyroid, perhaps."

It was over the coffee that Lord Bramshaw alluded to the thoughts that lay behind all trivial talk at many dinner-tables that night.

"What about this crisis, Lambert? Can you give us any hope? Are we going to keep on the gold standard?"

"I'm afraid not," said Henry Lambert. "I don't see how we can. France is draining us dry. Our reserves are exhausted. Needless to say, I'm speaking privately."

There was a silence round the table of Compton's old farmhouse. It was broken by Lord Bramshaw, who sat back in his chair heavily.

"Good God! Is it as bad as that?"

Compton asked a question.

"What does it mean exactly, going off the gold standard?"

Henry Lambert crumbled the bread by his side with nervous fingers. When he answered his voice trembled slightly.

"It means that the pound sterling, unbacked by gold, will find its real value in the international exchange according to our balance of trade. It may be worth fifteen shillings. If we don't economize and balance our Budget, it may be worth twelve shillings, or ten, or twopence-halfpenny. In any case, it means something which I thought I should never live to see. It means a world-wide shock to British credit."

Commander Compton struggled to take a cheerful view.

"What about this idea of a National Government? Won't that help us to pull through?"

It was Bramshaw who answered.

"MacDonald is seeing the King to-night. But I hear there's a revolt in the Cabinet. Henderson won't stand for cutting down the dole. He's afraid of the Trade Unions, and the unemployed, and all the crowd who want more money for less work, and more taxation of the Idle Rich to pay for social services. I'm one of the Idle Rich. That's to say, I'm selling the pictures off my walls to pay for income tax. I sacked two more gardeners to-day, poor devils. That's what taxation means to them. They can't have it both ways. . . . I don't see much

hope for a National Government when these Labour men refuse to face the facts which stare us all in the face. They don't care a curse for England."

"The people care," said Compton. "If there's a crisis you'll see the old spirit rally up again. I'm certain of that. There's a traditional loyalty in our folk, which will always reveal itself when the old country is in danger."

"It's in danger now," said Henry Lambert gravely. "But the people don't know. How can one expect them to understand the movements of gold and the mysteries of foreign exchange?"

It was Simon who answered his father.

"How can one expect any of us to understand? The experts have let us down every time. The bankers have played hell with false counters. All this talk of money and gold—what does it all mean? As far as I can make out it doesn't mean a damn thing. All these war debts, and national debts, and loans, and credits, are just so many promissory notes on the future which the human drudges can't redeem. We've all been gambling in futures. I don't profess to know much about arithmetic, but in my humble judgment all this money stuff—gold or paper—is a sheer illusion. It doesn't represent any kind of reality. Isn't that so, Father?"

Henry Lambert stared across at his son, and looked startled.

"I wouldn't put it quite in that way, Simon. Perhaps I haven't the courage to put it quite in that way. But the fact is, gold has become divorced from reality to some extent. It was never meant to be shifted about the world as a commodity. But as long as the United States won't allow Europe to sell them goods because of high tariffs, the debtor nations have to pay in gold, which goes out of circulation into dark vaults. The same thing is happening in France. It's the cause of the slump in prices. Prices fall when there is not enough gold to go round—and there's not enough. It's a complete breakdown of international credit. There's no bridge between production and consumption. The bridge has broken down."

"We've all gone mad," said Simon.

Henry Lambert smiled faintly with his thin lips.

"I agree, speaking generally. It's the breakdown of intelligence."

Simon leaned on the table with his elbows.

"Surely to God there's enough intelligence left in the world to get together and formulate a series of simple propositions, which would lead to something like order out of all this chaos."

Henry Lambert shook his head.

"Too many obstacles, my dear fellow. Inflamed nationalism, party politics,

dense ignorance of economics, avarice, greed, and selfishness. We can't get straight without self-sacrifice. And who is ready for that?"

"We've had too much of it," said Bramshaw. "We can't stand another dose if it means more taxation."

Compton intervened again.

"I'm not so sure. I believe, when England's up against it, we're all ready to tighten in our belts."

Bramshaw shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Our class perhaps. But not the mob, old boy. You can't put your patriotic stuff over Trade Unionists and street-corner orators, and the average working man. Take it from me. I know 'em."

Simon sat back in his chair and spoke with ironical laughter.

"Everybody blames it on the working man. Damned unfair, I call it. I blame it on our Elder Statesmen, and our senile politicians, and our corrupt Press and our ancient fetishes. The older crowd have never looked beyond their noses. They haven't seen what is going to happen three months ahead."

Henry Lambert reached across the table and touched his son's hand.

"Yes, we plead guilty, Simon. That's perfectly true. But what are the younger men doing? Why don't they take up the leadership? We're waiting for you. We're getting tired. Isn't it your turn now?"

Compton tapped the handle of his fork on the table.

"Hear, hear! It's what I've been telling Simon more than once."

"What the hell can *we* do about it?" asked Simon.

It was Madge who interrupted all this gloom. She laughed at these men discussing the downfall of human intelligence.

"What a dismal conversation dear people! Can't we think of something gay to-night? Can't someone make me laugh?"

It was Commander Compton who made her laugh.

He danced with her on his polished boards to a tune on the wireless, until it was interrupted by a lecture on the intelligence of the anthropoid ape, which seemed a special joke for the benefit of Simon, who saw something ironical in that comment on contemporary events.

In thousands of English homes at thousands of dinner-tables there was the same kind of talk that night. There was a sense of apprehension in England, as though hostile forces were advancing upon the last strongholds of her wealth and well-being.

England, so proud in the past of her financial strength, had become a

beggar in the world's money market, cap in hand to the United States and France. She was asking them to lend her many millions of their gold to prop up her credit, and they were making conditions before they granted the loans. The British Budget must be balanced. The dole must be cut by ten per cent. There must be drastic economies in the public services. There must be extra taxation widely spread.

Ramsay MacDonald had formed his National Government, pledged to these conditions. He was pleased to call it a "National" Government, though the Labour Party had refused to join it, shrinking from that cut in the dole for which they believed the people would not stand. The Trade Union Council had had something to say about it—quite unpleasant! Only Philip Snowden, a little grey-faced man with a strong jaw and obstinate blue eyes, and Jim Thomas, who had once been an engine-driver, and one or two others of the Labour Cabinet, broke from their own crowd, reversed their own policy, denied their lifelong convictions, and drew back from the abyss which threatened to engulf all classes in general ruin.

If English credit could not be upheld, if the pound sterling went the way of the German mark, such things as a cut in the dole or less money for social services would be of no account. The wages of working men would not buy the essentials of life, because they would be paid in money going bad before they could spend it, as those who knew German history since the War remembered with a sense of fear.

Conservatives and Liberals joined the National Government under the leadership of a man whom once they had loathed as a Pacifist, a Socialist, and a Labour leader. He spoke now over the wireless, and his words—uttered with emotion in a Scottish accent—came through the loud speakers into many English homes like that of Commander Compton of Broadmead Farm. There was to be an equality of sacrifice, he said. He called upon the people to support him in the urgent task of balancing the Budget, and at all costs to avoid the dangers of inflation and the downfall of the pound. "We have our backs to the wall," he said. "The worrrld . . ."

It was all very bewildering to simple souls.

LIX

It was during this time of crisis that Madge broke the news to Simon of her new engagement in a repertory company. He took it badly. Commander Compton heard them talking it over in their bedroom until long after midnight. He heard Simon's protests rising to anger, and Madge's pleadings and lapses into silence, when perhaps she wept. Presently he heard the monotone of Simon's voice in a long argument, not so passionate, and the quiet answers of Madge, resolute to make him see the need of reason.

Compton could do nothing about it. He sympathized with Simon, who felt that Madge was slipping away from him again so soon after their marriage. The boy was dejected because of his own failure to make a career for himself. It was a great pity that novel had not been accepted. He was utterly "fed up" with farm life. His brain, always busy with the problems of his time, had no active outlet to save him from introspection and brooding. He needed some ambition of his own, some adventure to which he could apply his nervous energy. This amateur farming on a small scale wasn't good enough. His intelligence—rather remarkable in the opinion of Compton in spite of disagreement with many of Simon's views—needed a broader outlook than the boundaries of a small farmstead failing to pay for itself and deep in mud. Yes, Compton was sorry for this nervy son-in-law, who, beneath all his eccentricities and exasperations, was sensitive, humorous, and charming. But Madge's plea for the liberty of her own way of life was not to be challenged. She was an artist as well as a wife. She had something to give to the world in beauty and grace. She had this little flame in her heart. No husband had a right to put it out.

It was strange that Simon—modern of the moderns—should be trapped in this conflict between love and liberty—so old-fashioned! He would be broken if he maintained that attitude of possession. Madge had that touch of steel in her character which came of a family of naval men. She wouldn't yield to Simon's anger or Simon's groans, though she loved him with a lovely and laughing tenderness.

At breakfast next morning Simon himself made the announcement which Compton had been expecting. Madge was having breakfast in bed after that midnight conversation.

"I shall be going up to Town with Madge in a week or two," said Simon. "She has accepted an engagement for a repertory season. Of course, I shall go

with her. We shall probably take a flat somewhere. Madge will be earning a good salary—and I shall be a kept man.”

Compton tried to be cheerful.

“Any chance of your coming back again, or have you had enough of this old farm?”

Simon stared out of the window. It was still raining, of course.

“I should go *gaga* if I stayed here any longer. Farming is foul, anyhow. It’s not a civilized way of life.”

“It’s been a bad year,” said Compton.

Simon ate his eggs and bacon.

He broke silence again when he lit his first cigarette.

“Don’t think I’m not grateful. You’ve been devilish good to me, sir. I must have been very trying!”

“We’ve had some good talks,” said Compton. “I shall always remember them. What are you going to do in Town?”

Simon stared down at the tablecloth as though interested in the pattern of the crumbs he had made.

“That’s the problem,” he answered after a pause. “I shall have to get some kind of job. Perhaps I’ll have a shot at Fleet Street. I might crawl into some newspaper office and write bilge about flappers and bathing beauties. ‘Do men like women with red hair?’ and so forth. It ought to be easy.”

Compton put on his pipe. Simon was a difficult problem.

“You ought to do better than that, old man. Why not have a go at politics? The country needs young men like you. It looks as though there’s going to be an election. Bramshaw thinks it’s certain. It’s a good chance. You might help to save old England.”

Simon smiled faintly.

“I want to save myself. In any case, this National Government is an absolute ramp. The very people who dragged us to the edge of the precipice are now posing as heroes because they propose to save us from the bottomless pit. A bit ironical, don’t you think?”

“It’s England I’m thinking of,” said Compton. “Nothing matters except that. What about your Five Years’ Plan?”

“Yes,” said Simon with a satirical laugh. “What about it? What chance is there for any plan? It’s just a skedaddle to save our skins. And it’s too late, anyhow. We’re not going to keep on the gold standard. Personally, I think it will be a good thing if we go off it. Gold is a fetish. The more I listen to the

poor old governor, the more I'm convinced that he and his fellow experts have worshipped a golden image like the Patagonian savages uttering prayers and incantations to a dead thing."

Compton shook his head.

"I can't agree with you. Not that I understand these mysteries. But I shudder at the thought of England without gold reserves."

Simon laughed in his ironical way.

"Fetish worship! The only thing that matters is exchange of goods."

Compton pondered over his words. Simon blurted out things which were very startling, but sometimes they seemed to have a reason behind them.

"I rather fancy you have a flair for politics," he said. "Why not go into the House and test your theories? Your father would pay your expenses. I wouldn't mind sharing them if you'd let me. I believe you might be one of our younger leaders."

Simon's face flushed with sudden self-consciousness.

"Good God, no! . . . But it's frightfully good of you to say so."

"Think it over," said Compton. "And here's Madge, looking as though she needed some more sleep."

Madge came down in her dressing-gown and pyjamas and kissed her husband and her father.

"Well, Father! I suppose Simon has told you that we shall be going up to Town in a few weeks? The rise of the curtain to a new play. I think it's a flat in South Kensington for the hero of Jutland. You can't stay down here alone, you know."

She could not hide her delight at the thought of going back to Town and the stage again. She and Simon had had enough of a Tudor farmhouse so far from the lights of London.

LX

SIMON and Madge went up to Town a week or two later, and Compton was left in his farmhouse. Somehow he knew in his heart that these two people whom he loved would never come back for more than a day or two, or a week or two, now and then when they wanted some country air and a glimpse of sunshine or a spell of quietude. If he decided to stay on at Broadmead he would have to make up his mind to loneliness. It was quite obvious that Madge was not going to stay by his hearthside, or by any other hearthside provided by Simon.

All his plans for a pleasant comradeship with a pretty daughter had gone astray. From the very moment he had set his foot in England she had evaded his attempts to capture her, except for these last few months with Simon as "first leading gent" in her private drama. He was back where he had begun. He would have to content himself with hurried visits. He would have to wait for her at stage doors. If he took her advice and a flat in South Kensington he would be the elderly gentleman again, saying, "Horse, horse, play with me; dog, dog, play with me!"—getting into the way of old friends who were busy otherwise, and annoying his sisters by dropping in at awkward moments. No, he disliked the idea of South Kensington more even than he disliked the prospect of growing old by himself in a Tudor farmhouse.

It was the dilemma of advancing age—fifty-four now, and too old to start a new adventure. Here at Broadmead he would have a job of work to do. He might buy some more land and employ more men, and—quite likely—lose more money, although he had a "hunch" that something would be done at last for English farming.

The Election was coming along; Ramsay MacDonald had decided to appeal for "a doctor's mandate" to apply drastic remedies in an urgent case. It would revive the old fight of Free Trade and Protection. They were talking of putting a quota on wheat. The Conservatives were all for a tariff against foreign imports.

A newspaper peer, a little gnomelike man with a big head, was already engaged in a raging propaganda for Empire Free Trade, which appealed to the simple and patriotic soul of an ex-naval man turned farmer, not very good at arithmetic, but deeply anxious for some action which would reduce unemployment and help the country in its hour of need.

It needed helping.

Two items of news which came over the wireless shocked him profoundly. The first was the incredible news—incredible and horrible to an ex-naval officer—that a mutiny had broken out in the British Fleet. He was dining with Bramshaw that night, and it was Lady Bramshaw—Marjorie, as he called her—who switched on the loud speaker at nine o'clock in time to hear the news announcements. Colonel Urquhart was there with his wife, and a few other neighbours from country houses round about.

"Listen," said Lady Bramshaw, "they may say something about the political situation. Does anybody want to hear?"

Colonel Urquhart didn't want to hear. He was talking about his pig-sticking days in India, and he hated to be interrupted. But he was hushed down by his masterful lady.

"Finish your story afterwards, my dear, especially as we've all heard it before and it's not very interesting."

They didn't use the word "mutiny" over the wireless. They called it "trouble in the Fleet". The men objected to cuts in their pay. Their women objected to it. The men had declined to obey orders. They had refused to lift anchor on some of the battleships. It was Bramshaw who used the ugly word after a few moments of stupefied silence.

"Mutiny, by God!"

"I can't believe it," said Compton. "The men are as good as gold."

There was silence again in an English drawing-room, until Mrs. Urquhart laughed nervously and put her hands up to her throat.

"I hope it isn't the beginning of Bolshevism! Hasn't it always begun in the Fleets? Russia! Germany!"

Colonel Urquhart puffed out his little white moustache. "Preposterous! Newspaper stuff! Those fellows ought to be prosecuted. It's a libel on the Senior Service."

Lord Bramshaw looked at Compton with moody eyes.

"If there's disloyalty in the Fleet, old man, we may as well throw up the sponge. It's the end of England. It's the end of the Empire."

Compton shook his head and raised his hand.

"I decline to believe it. It's some misunderstanding about pounds, shillings and pence. It's not serious, take it from me. It can't be true, Dick."

There was enough truth in it to make flaring headlines across the newspapers of the world. They used that word which was avoided by the announcers of the B.B.C. "Mutiny in the English Fleet" was written in black letters across the front pages of French newspapers and German newspapers

and Japanese newspapers. They were read over their tea-cups by serious little gentlemen in Tokio, who smiled and took down maps of Manchuria and Shanghai. The French Press sent their special correspondents to naval bases, and published sensational accounts of unrest in the British Navy, read by French financiers and French merchants, who went to their telephones and gave orders for the further withdrawal of balances in English banks. The flow of gold across the Channel quickened its pace.

Perhaps it was this talk of mutiny in the British Fleet which had something to do with the second item of news, alarming to the mind of Commander Compton, sitting one night in his own farmhouse with the vicar on the other side of the hearth, as it alarmed millions of other minds, not only in England, but in many countries of the world which had still had faith in English credit.

England had gone off the gold standard.

The loans from France and the United States—over a hundred million pounds—had failed to steady international confidence in the little old lady of Threadneedle Street, who had fallen into distressed circumstances. Most of it had already gone in a vain endeavour to prop up the pound sterling. The National Government, faced by a note from the Bank of England, had declared to the world that no more gold could be paid out.

The vicar—that ascetic, thoughtful man, was in Compton's room when the news was announced over the wireless.

"What do you make of it?" asked Compton. "Does it mean ruin?"

The vicar raised his hands.

"These things are mysteries! I've never understood the meaning of money. People like ourselves are in the hands of the economists and the experts, and they seem to have let us down. It's like the War. The common folk knew nothing of the powers moving behind the scenes until they found themselves caught in a death-trap prepared by men of whom they had never heard, and by forces over which they had no control. Does it mean that we're all ruined? Is England going the way of Germany?"

Commander Compton refused to believe it, as he had refused to believe in a naval mutiny.

"I have faith in our own folk. We shall scrape through somehow."

The Chancellor of the Exchequer—that little grey-faced man with a soft voice and a strong chin—desired to speak to the British people. He spoke on the wireless. He contradicted everything he had said a few weeks earlier about the necessity of keeping on the gold standard by every kind of sacrifice. At least, he saw no cause for dismay. Going off the gold standard might give Great Britain an advantage in world markets, and help to secure a balance of

trade. It would be a good country from which to buy, and our imports would be restricted automatically. There was no reason for alarm.

“Keep steady!” said the Prime Minister in an interview with a newspaper man.

Commander Compton, who had faith in his own folk, was justified at least in their lack of panic during this crisis. He went up to Town once or Twice to see Madge, who was staying with Simon’s people, and to look up old friends and relatives. He looked at the faces of the people in the streets and in Tubes and buses. They had no look of sharp-eyed anxiety. The women were shopping as usual, as though they still had faith in the value of their money. There was the same traffic crush in Piccadilly—an endless stream of motor-cars, as though England were still the richest country in the world. It was all very queer. Once or twice this ex-naval man, who had lived for a time on the edge of a jungle in Malay, had a sense of unreality as he walked the London streets through their moving crowds.

Perhaps this civilization was standing on a very thin crust, he thought. Perhaps these great banks and offices and buildings and shops were only propped up by a system of credit which might break down—it seemed to have broken down—and leave them in ruin. Perhaps all these people, fairly cheerful, utterly unconscious of any menace to their lives, might be poverty-stricken and hungry in a year or two, because something had snapped in a system which had created their prosperity. It seemed to have snapped in the United States. The whole world was staggering on its foundations because of some strain which had broken the old rhythm of trade and industry.

“I’m getting morbid!” said Commander Compton aloud in Piccadilly.

“It’s due to poor old Henry Lambert,” he thought. “He takes this crisis too seriously. As a Treasury official, it worries him to death.”

It seemed to worry him literally to death, although the doctors called it pneumonia. He died after two days’ illness, a few weeks after Madge and Simon had gone up to Town. Compton had an uneasy feeling that poor old Henry might have caught a chill that day at Broadmead when he had walked about in the rain. It was a great grief to his friend.

LXI

SIMON came down to the farm one day to pick up some of his clothes and papers which he had left behind in a room upstairs. His father's death had been a shock to him, as Compton had seen on the day of the funeral, when he broke down for a moment at the graveside. Between him and his father there had been the antagonism of ideas which is almost inevitable between fathers and sons in a period of history when youth and age are separated by the memory of a world war, and by the conflict of different creeds with tradition on one side and revolt on the other. Henry Lambert had been shy with this intellectual son, so aggressive sometimes, so intolerant, so ironical, and yet, as Compton knew, he had been devoted to Simon, and had suffered because of his son's unhappiness. Something of all that had come to Simon at the graveside, when it was too late for expression, too late for understanding.

His father's death had made a difference to his financial position. He could afford to provide a home for Madge now. He wouldn't be a "kept" man living on her salary.

He spoke about these things to his father-in-law before going back to Town.

"It seems unfair that I should come into the governor's hard-earned money. It's all wrong really. I haven't done a stroke to earn it. Somehow I should like to pay back by making good use of it as far as it goes."

"I like to hear you say that," said Compton.

Simon flushed slightly, not being given to self-revelation of any emotional kind.

"I've been thinking things over," he said. "This damned Election, for instance. I've been asked to stand as a National candidate for South Bermondsey. Of course, there's not a dog's chance, but I'm half inclined to have a shot, just for the fun of the thing. Madge wants me to accept. What do you think?"

Commander Compton had no need to think. His emotion was stirred.

"Great!" he said. "Great! I'll come and canvass for you, old lad. A bit of work for England in her hour of need."

Simon laughed and spoke with his usual irony.

"Of course it's only putting one's head into a madhouse. This Election is

Bedlam let loose. There are five brands of National candidates, all saying different things. Simon Liberals, Lloyd George Liberals, National Labour, Conservatives, Mosleyites—what the devil can the mob mind make of it all? It's a circus. It's a pantomime!"

"Not quite," said Compton. "I don't care what brand it is as long as it supports a National Government. We've all got to pull together, or we're going down together. We must make these economies and get rid of the abuses of that deplorable dole. We must do something for farming. I believe in self-sacrifice all round, even if it means another bit on the income tax. This Election is going to decide the fate of England one way or another. If we fail now—if the old spirit is dead in us——"

Simon laughed again.

"My dear Commander! I shall win hands down if you get going like that in South Bermondsey."

"You bet I will!" said Commander Compton. "And lots more like it. Give me the chance!"

Simon laughed again. "The one-armed hero of Jutland! Irresistible in any political meeting."

Somewhat later in a conversation which excited Compton and gave him new faith in his son-in-law, Simon let out that he was going to put some of his father's money into a new weekly paper which was being run by a group of his friends. He would be one of the editors. They were going to work out a Five Years' Plan for England. They were going to include agriculture, of course, in their survey and proposals. He was rather keen to deal with that particular department.

Commander Compton was enthusiastic.

"That's splendid. You've plenty of ideas, my dear fellow. Organization. Marketing. Mechanism. How often we've talked it over."

"Not without heated argument," said Simon, smiling at his enthusiasm.

"Never mind. Let's have your ideas. I'll be a subscriber to that paper. I shall be proud of my son-in-law."

He caught hold of Simon's arm and held it tight.

"I'm proud of you, my lad. You're getting busy. We want fellows like you."

Simon refused to admit his own conviction on the subject.

It was characteristic of him that he told his most astounding piece of news just before he left, as he was getting into his car for the drive home.

“By the way, Madge told me something last night. She fainted at rehearsal and had to come home.”

“Nothing serious, I hope?” said Compton, looking worried.

“Well, rather serious! She’s going to have a baby. She won’t be able to play in that repertory show. Poor old Madge! Hard luck, isn’t it?”

He raised a hand and drove away from Broadmead Farm.

LXII

LIFE and death. . . . Death and life. Compton had been deeply distressed by the sudden death of his old friend Henry Lambert. Now he was deeply moved by the news that Madge was going to have a baby. Strange and deplorable as it seemed to him afterwards, his first thought when Simon told him was that of personal dejection.

"I shall be a grandfather. I shall be an old man. On the shelf, old bird! No more adventures. The creeping on of age. Grandfather Compton. Lordy! Lordy!"

But that mood passed almost as quickly as the thought had come. It was followed by anxiety for Madge, by regret because she had lost her chance in the first play of the repertory company—she had so set her heart on it, poor dear—and then by the emotional, the wonderful thought that a new life was coming into the world for which he was in some way responsible.

Madge's child! His grandchild! The line of heredity going on to a new chapter of history.

It would be a queer, bewildered world into which this child would be born. No man could prophesy what kind of world it would be before it lived to be as old as Compton was then. Civilization was threatened by forces of disintegration. Another world war would wipe it out. Bolshevism, Communism—they might reach out to England if this financial crisis did not pass. There might be a revolution in the United States because of the vast gulf between the millionaires and the masses, and because something had gone wrong with its moral values. This child coming to Madge would see some turbulent history and strange happenings. He hoped to God it would not be caught in another war, to have its body mangled by high explosives—the heir to Madge's beauty, the body which she would build.

This thought of Madge's child made him more excited about the Election that was coming. He believed that it would decide the fate of England one way or the other, as he had told Simon. He was eager to do anything and something to bring a National Government into power, pledged to economy and energy, and individual action.

During the Election he abandoned his farm and lived down in South Bermondsey, though he slept at Henry Lambert's old house, where Simon and Madge were now dwelling, with Helen to look after them.

Helen had taken her loss courageously. She was glad of the Election because it gave her something to do. Every morning she and Compton started off together to canvass the little houses in mean streets, and to speak for Simon at outdoor meetings, which were pretty rough sometimes.

“You’re a certain draw, Steenie,” said Helen. “That empty sleeve is worth five thousand votes to Simon. And I didn’t know you were such an orator. You hold them spellbound!”

“Don’t pull my leg, dear lady!” said Compton.

But it was true. The working men and women of Bermondsey liked the look of this naval man. They liked his simple style of speech. He made them laugh sometimes, and they could hear what he said because of his quarter-deck voice, and the things he said seemed to be sound because of his emotion and sincerity. There was no snobbishness about him. He was all on the side of the working folk, he said.

He wanted them to have good homes and good wages. That was why he wanted them to vote for a National Government, because there wouldn’t be any wages, and perhaps no homes worth calling homes if the country was put into the hands of men who had refused to face unpleasant facts. Everybody would have to make a bit of sacrifice—even the unemployed. They would have to lose something off the dole. But who wouldn’t do that, he asked, to save the old country and keep the flag flying? He was quite certain that the working folk, and the unemployed, and the very down-and-outs, would put something into the pool now that hard times had come.

He didn’t belong to any party. But a National Government wasn’t the same thing as Party Government. It was team work for the common good. He believed that the English folk and their fellow people in Scotland and Wales would give the world an object lesson in loyalty to old traditions and loyalty to the old spirit of courage and common sense. They had saved their country in time of war, now they would save it by the same spirit in time of peace.

Down in the crowd there were men who had been in the Grand Fleet during time of war. They were willing to give a friendly hearing to this ex-officer who had lost his arm at Jutland. Some of them were hostile to those naval men who had refused to obey orders when they were asked to take a few shillings less on their pay-sheets. Some were hostile, however, to the threat of cutting down the dole. Commander Compton had to stand a heckling now and then, but he stood it good-humouredly, with a flash in his steel-blue eyes, and laughter sometimes at his own ignorance.

“Tell us about the gold standard, Commander. How does it work?”

“I’m damned if I know,” said Compton. “I’m not a banker. I used to be a

seafaring man.”

“What about Lloyd George’s cure for unemployment? Why didn’t your lot carry out that?”

“I haven’t the least idea,” said Compton. “I was out in Singapore, raising rubber which I couldn’t sell.”

“Well, what the hell do you know about anything? Why do you get up there and talk bilge to the working folk?”

“I don’t know much,” Compton answered with great good nature. “But I reckon I know enough to say that two and two make four. And that’s all you want to know in this Election. The Labour crowd added it up wrong. They said two and two made six. You can’t spend more than you earn without getting into trouble. They spent more than this old country was earning, and then they borrowed to make up the difference. When people do that in South Bermondsey they find themselves in the police court. Vote for Simon Lambert, the National candidate. He’s good at arithmetic. I happen to know, because he’s my son-in-law and looked after my accounts and kept me straight.”

Cheap stuff. Simple dope for the masses. But sincere and honest. Compton believed in what he said. It gave him an astonishing power of persuasion at a time when politicians are not in the habit of believing what they say.

It was a queer coincidence that Simon Lambert was opposing Mrs. Pomeroy, with whom Compton had once been sentimental.

The Commander went round to see her one night in her committee-room and had a talk with her alone after she had cleared some of her helpers out of the room.

“This is an awkward affair,” said Compton, after raising her hand to his lips. “I never expected my son-in-law to be your opponent.”

Mrs. Pomeroy was pleasant about it, and humorous.

“It’s a romance. And I’m going to give him an awful whopping. That young man is saying the oddest things, I’m told. People don’t know whether he’s a Tory or a Bolshevik!”

Compton tried to put the matter straight.

“He’s for the National Government all right. And I’m not at all sure he’s going to be whopped. I’m doing my best to get him in. Will you forgive me?”

“Of course!” said Mrs. Pomeroy. “You always were a simple and affectionate creature, Steenie. The naval mind! God forgive its simplicity. ‘Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves. Britons never, never will be slaves!’—unless this so-called National Government gets in. Then they’ll be slaves all right. They’ll be trapped in Tory reaction. Less wages. High tariffs.

Dear food. And more wars. A lovely prospect! Oh yes, you can smoke your pipe, my dear man. This is Liberty Hall!”

Compton ventured to ask a delicate question.

“Tell me, as an old friend, as your ancient lover, my dear, how can you find it in your conscience to support those Labour laddies who ran away from plain facts and all honesty?”

“Fudge!” said Mrs. Pomeroy.

“How do you reconcile their action with what Philip Snowden says? He was their leader. He says they’re all dirty dogs. It makes one’s blood run cold when he speaks on the wireless. He gives them hell without mercy. And yet I find you taking their part. I can’t understand it.”

Mrs. Pomeroy smiled at him in a pitying way.

“You wouldn’t! I’m too busy to tell you, Steenie. And too tired. Snowden is a renegade. He’s revoking everything he’s said during his political life. He has turned his back on his own people. It’s the poor who are going to be made to pay for his economies. A cut in the dole? Disgraceful, Steenie. Is it their fault that they can’t get work? Equal sacrifice all round? Humbug! Hypocrisy! Cant! It makes me sick. Are the financial swindlers of this country—the bankers who lent loans on bad security—going to give up a single cigar or any of their comforts? Not on your life! It’s the working man who’s going to get less baccy, and it’s the working man’s wife and children who are going to have less food. They’re going to feel it in their bellies, poor dears. This National Government is the biggest swindle that has ever been engineered to keep a people quiet by appealing to their patriotism. Steenie, my dear, you’re a fool! They’ve duped your innocent heart. You’re one of the mugs!”

He tried to argue with her, but she laughed and pointed to the door.

“Tell that boy Simon he’s going to get the biggest whopping in his life,” she said as a parting word.

Commander Compton went across to Simon’s committee-rooms. Mrs. Pomeroy’s words had worried him a little. He hoped to heaven that when the National Government got in there would be fair play all round, equal sacrifice for all classes, a fulfilment of pledges.

On the platform Simon Lambert was a good-looking figure as a Parliamentary candidate. After his first nervousness for a few days of political oratory, he had developed an easy and confident style, a kind of smiling carelessness, as though he really didn’t mind whether these people elected him or not, or listened to him or declined to listen to him. He seemed to think that this Election was an extraordinarily foolish affair, anyhow, but one of those things which had to be endured at certain intervals, like the measles or the ’flu.

It is probable that two-thirds of his audience did not understand the irony with which he spoke about the five varieties of National candidates—the Simonites, and the Georgites, and the Mosleyites, and the Baldwinites, and the National Labourites—with different devices on their banners, and each suspicious of the other.

The old dog-fight of Free Trade and Tariff Reform was surging up again, but left him cold. He ridiculed the extremists on each side of that conflict, and was satirical on the subject of Empire Free Trade as expounded by the Beaverbrook Press and that little gnomelike man who was, he said, a pedlar of dreams in the street of illusion. Half the audience thought he was supporting Lord Beaverbrook, and cheered lustily. Half the audience thought he was in favour of upholding the sacred principles of Free Trade and cheap food, and cheered with equal enthusiasm, and he smiled back at them with a faint surprise at their complete misunderstanding of his attempts at humour.

They were pleased with his attack on the Old Gang which had made such a mess of things. They could all understand that, especially as most of his audience were youngish men and women working in factories and offices and shops, with a grudge against the baldheads who paid their inadequate wages and called them to order if they discussed the movies in working hours. He was all for a Plan, it appeared, and that word seemed to appeal to them. It was a Plan to be worked by the modern mind, untrammelled by old traditions and prejudices and party totems. He wanted a rally of the younger intelligence, and these younger people in the hall felt flattered, and agreed with him. The world, he said, was suffering from a complete breakdown in human understanding. He looked to the electors of South Bermondsey to do something about it, and while they cheered him loudly he turned to smile at Commander Compton, and his audience did not see his faint, ironical wink.

He was rather good about the gold standard. He launched into elaborate explanations of that mystery which left his audience with the impression that they understood it, and that perhaps they were the only people in the world who did understand it. He spoke of the illusion of money, the use of false counters, the issue of promissory notes on the future, and it sounded very convincing. It convinced them that unless they voted for a National Government they wouldn’t be able to go to the Pictures so much, or be able to take out their best girls to the local dance-halls. They very much appreciated the point of view of this young candidate who wanted them to have better wages and shorter hours, and a chance of intellectual recreation, by which the general level of intelligence—deplorably low outside the district of South Bermondsey—might be raised for the good of humanity and the prosperity of poor old England.

There were favourable comments among his audience in the Public Baths, where he spoke. They were overheard now and then by Commander Compton, sitting below the platform.

“Nice-looking, isn’t he, Bert? Reminds me of Owen Nares in that picture we saw last week. Well, he’s going to have my vote, I don’t mind telling you.”

“A bit hoity-toity. Still, I suppose he can’t help speaking with the Oxford accent. None of them can, you know. It’s catching.”

“He’s pretty hot on the Old Gang. I must say I agree with him. Time these old dead-heads were put in their coffins. Look at the world they’ve made! Disgusting, I call it. Why, look at what we have to put up with in the rush hour. I haven’t had a seat for a week.”

“Well, he’ll get the flappers’ vote all right. All the girls have gone dotty on him. It’s his West End style, you know.”

“If you ask me, I think he’s a bit of a prig. Too pleased with himself. Thinks he knows everything.”

“See that girl next to the chairman? Lovely, isn’t she? That’s Mr. Lambert’s wife. She’s an actress. . . .”

“Go on! You don’t say so!”

Simon Lambert took a sip of water from the glass on the table.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m afraid I’ve bored you a good deal. Sorry! It’s a very boring business, isn’t it? I’m sure you’d much rather be at the Pictures. But I now have the pleasure of calling upon Commander Compton—a hero of the Great War, and a lover of England. You’ll like to hear him. He has a breezy way with him, due to the naval tradition and all that. If I get in for South Bermondsey it’s because I’m his son-in-law. Commander Compton . . .”

Compton shook his fist at Simon, and the audience roared with laughter. The ladies in the audience pitied him because of his empty sleeve. They liked his steel-blue eyes. Everybody liked his simple and straightforward way of speech. They were even inclined to tolerate his rather fervid patriotism, although he was interrupted by a group of young Communists, who were howled down by the rest of the audience.

Madge came to some of Simon’s meetings, when she felt well enough. Generally she sat next to her father in the front row of seats rather than on the platform. Sometimes he gave her hand a squeeze when everybody was listening to Simon.

“How are you feeling, darling?” he whispered.

“Quite all right, Father. Simon is doing rather well, isn’t he? I’m feeling proud of him. Of course, they don’t understand him when he gets satirical.

Naughty, isn't he?"

"He'll go far, that young man," said Compton.

Generally he took Madge home in a taxi. He had quiet talks with her before Simon arrived after midnight.

"My baby will be coming in October," she said one night.

Commander Compton kissed her hand.

"Feeling happy about it? It's wonderful to bring a new life into the world."

Madge smiled at him and put her cheek against his in the old way.

"It's rather an interruption! I wanted to be in that repertory company. Now I shan't play in their first production. Simon has won, after all. He's made a squaw of me!"

"Isn't it worth while?" asked Compton. "Isn't it the most glorious adventure, my dear?"

Madge had tears in her eyes. He could feel their wetness on his cheek, and he put his arm round her and held her tight.

"I daresay it will be nice having a baby," she said presently. "If it's a boy I shall call it Stephen, Father."

"I shall be honoured," said Commander Compton, and he spoke with the simplest sincerity.

Madge spoke again after a little silence.

"I'm frightfully glad Simon has found his job in life. He's wonderfully pleased with himself. They like the stuff he's writing in that weekly paper. He won't be so miserable when I go back to the stage after baby comes."

So she was going back. Her father admired her spirit, her resolution, her refusal to surrender.

"What are you going to do about the farm?" she asked presently.

"Oh, I shall carry on," said Compton.

Madge laughed and held her father's hand.

"You and I are obstinate people, Father."

"It's the steel in us," said Compton.

"It's the little flame," said Madge.

She spoke of Simon again with her old gaiety.

"I wonder how Simon will behave as a father. He'll be awfully ironical when he sees the image of himself looking up at him. I shall laugh at the sight of them both."

She laughed then quite happily. She looked very beautiful in her father's

eyes. There was a worship in his heart because of her loveliness and courage. It was only once that he saw her tears because of her disappointment about the play.

LXIII

On the day of the Election our friend the Commander was not alone in his conviction that it was a fateful day for England, that immense issues were at stake, that it was a test of democracy and its claim to self-government.

If they voted now for a party which denied the need of self-sacrifice and promised them social benefits which the country could no longer afford without borrowing its way to bankruptcy and ruin, then democracy would defeat itself, and there could be no faith in it again. This counting of heads would be a mockery, if they were empty heads without intelligence or common sanity, or loyalty to an old spirit of fortitude which had armed their forefathers in times of danger and distress. So Compton thought, and others like him—men of tradition, old-fashioned people, "the living dead", as Simon had once called them bitterly and brutally.

He went about in London that day, anxious, emotional, deeply stirred by a sense of drama. Over and over again he found himself repeating the words of a boy named Harry, standing in a field called Agincourt:

> ". . . O that we now had here
> But one ten thousand of those men of England
> That do no work to-day!"

It was queer how those old lines came ringing through his head. Agincourt was one of the days when England's fate was at stake. Perhaps that was the reason. Another day was when he lost his arm at Jutland. And many of the men in the crowds about him, going to the polling stations as he watched them, must have been somewhere in France or Flanders on March 21st, 1918, when England was hard pressed in the field. Did they remember? he wondered. Which way would they vote now? And those younger people, those little "flappers" with their high-heeled shoes and silk stockings—what did they think about this situation? What did they know about the gold standard, or the need of balancing a Budget? It was difficult, after all, to defend the democratic system. Simon ridiculed it. It seemed to him senseless. He thought everybody ought to pass an examination before being given the right to vote. Yet these people's lives would be affected, perhaps depended utterly for food and wages upon what Government would come into power. Perhaps some instinct in them, the instinct of self-preservation, would lead them to vote the right way. He believed the right way was for this National Government, pledged to economy, representing all parties as a Committee of Public Safety.

Mrs. Pomeroy's words had shaken him a little. She had scorned the idea of equal sacrifice. She had denounced the appeal for a National Government as a dodge to cut wages and lower the standard of living among the working folk. They would have to make the sacrifices, she said, while others would sacrifice nothing of their comfort or their luxury. He would hate to believe that. It wasn't true, he thought, remembering his neighbours in the country, and his sisters Elizabeth and Emily, and others. They would have to pay more income tax, which had already driven them out of their old homes into little houses in mean streets. His farmer friends were in the last ditch of distress. Bramshaw had sold his pictures, and would have to give up his estates. In voting for national economy they would vote for more taxes and increased poverty, and the loss of things they loved, the old things of their inheritance, land and houses and beauty.

Even then they wouldn't go hungry. That was true! But surely the alternative to a National Government would mean hunger in millions of little homes if the pound sterling went bad because of an unbalanced Budget, and more borrowing from reserves of wealth which were nearly exhausted. This Election was not like others. It wasn't a question of party interests or class interests. It was for a clear decision between the rake's progress and the way of honour. It was for the safeguarding of English credit in the world.

How would they vote?—these city clerks, and factory girls, these young mechanics, and costers, and middle-class mothers, and fathers of families in tenement houses, and ex-Service men, and Jewish tailors and seamstresses, small shop-keepers and shop assistants, whom Commander Compton had watched going to the polling station where the posters of *Vote for Lambert and a National Government!* clashed with those of *Vote for Pomeroy and the Wages of the Working Class!*

He had moments of deep despondency. It was so plausible, that appeal to vote for the wages of the working class. All these people belonged to the working class. How could one expect them to vote against their own interests, as it seemed, without a lot of argument?

Simon was quite sure he was going to be "whopped".

"Not a dog's chance! Don't come and hear the results to-night. Take Mother to Horridge's—and Madge, if she's well enough. I don't want my family to crowd around and see my humiliation. Not that I care very much. It's been good fun."

"I'd like to stand by you to-night, old man," said Compton, gripping his arm.

Simon laughed.

“No, no! You stand by the women folk. I don’t want Madge to get into this crowd to-night. It might be rough. Besides, you’ve worked like a hero. What votes I get will be due to you.”

Compton refused to accept that.

“Bosh! They like you, my lad. All the girls have fallen for you. I believe you’ll romp home.”

“If I limp home I should regard it as a giddy miracle. I must say I’ve enjoyed myself. It’s been a mental tonic. I feel as fit as a flea.”

He had a bright look in his eyes. The morbid introspective look, which Compton had seen so often on the farm, had gone. He was alert, keen, and pleased with himself.

“Give my love to Madge. Tell her I shall accept defeat like a little gentleman! And if it’s victory I shall lay it at her feet. I don’t suppose I’ll get home before three or four in the morning. Don’t let her stay up.”

Commander Compton gave a naval salute to his son-in-law.

“England expects . . . Good luck, my dear lad. God bless you!”

Simon grinned. The Commander’s patriotism always amused him. He couldn’t live up to it. These mid-Victorians were so emotional! . . .

Madge felt too tired to go to Horridge’s in Oxford Street. She would stay at home and listen to the results on the loud speaker. But she wanted her father to take Jean Macgregor, who had set her heart on going. Mrs. Lambert—Helen—would keep Madge company.

“Do you think it’s quite respectable?” asked the Commander. “Me and that red-headed wench?”

He spoke half seriously. In any case, he was disappointed Madge couldn’t go. But, of course, he understood.

“Don’t tire yourself, my darling. Go to bed early. Your health is more important than this Election—to those who love you.”

Jean Macgregor turned up in an evening frock of flowered silk. She rather liked herself in it, and turned round three times to show it off.

“My own design! What do you think of it, Madge?”

“Ravishing!” said Madge. “Take care of Father.”

“That’s all right,” said Compton. “I’m going to be a grandfather soon.”

Madge blushed and smacked his hand.

“Don’t mind me,” said Jean. “I feel more like Queen Elizabeth than ever.”

It was ten o’clock when they reached Horridge’s in Oxford Street. To Commander Compton it seemed that the clocks had been put back two years. It

was the same scene as on the night when he had reached London from Singapore. The crowds were gathering again, surging to the places where the results were to be shown, good-humoured, noisy, expectant. Outside the side entrance of Horridge's, two lines of people waited to see the notabilities stepping over the red carpet and going through the swing-doors. Mr. Horridge, handsome, bland, courteous, received his guests—the same guests who had been there two years before: the old duchesses, the impoverished aristocracy, the famous novelists, the long-haired poets, the financiers, the Anglican parsons, the stockbrokers, the actors and actresses, the lovely ladies with bare backs and long dresses, at whom Commander Compton had stared with admiration after his exile in Malay. He had stood there alone, a one-armed man, wondering what all these people were thinking about, feeling out of it, as lonely as death, until he had met Helen Lambert and then, with a sudden lurch of the heart, his beautiful Madge. Two years had gone by so quickly. He was two years older, alas! Soon he would be a grandfather.

"An amusing show, isn't it?" said Jean Macgregor, holding on to his arm. "All the notabilities. A pageant of 'Who's Who'."

She pointed out some of them. She seemed to know them all by sight. Some of them knew her and wagged friendly hands above their heads.

"The Bloomsbury boys," she explained. "Disgusting, aren't they?"

"They seem all right to me," said the tolerant man at her side.

"It's their minds that have gone bad," she said. "Addled with Epstein and Einstein, Rima and Relativity. Oh dear, oh dear! Do you think we could get some of Mr. Horridge's claret cup before the crush is too great?"

"I'm keen on the Election results," said Compton. "Still, if you must start drinking . . ."

Some of the women turned their heads as they passed this naval-looking man with an empty sleeve, and a red-haired wench on his arm.

"They like the look of you," said Jean. "I'm a proud woman to-night."

"How did you vote this morning?"

She looked slightly embarrassed, and made a reluctant confession.

"I voted for one of the National Government laddies. Of course, I'm Labour really. But just for once I 'verted. Old man Snowden scared me stiff."

"Good for old Snowden, and good for you," said Compton. "You deserve a claret cup. Let's drink confusion to the men who ran away."

"And lived to fight another day!" said Jean warningly.

The first results were astounding. They came from Macclesfield and Northern towns, the strongholds of Labour. The National candidates were

winning by vast, incredible majorities.

“They’re routed!” said Compton. “We’ve scattered ’em like chaff!”

Jean Macgregor cheered for her ancient enemies.

“I feel like a renegade,” she said, after that demonstration. “I think I’ll cheer the next Labour victory just to be quite fair.”

“I shall pretend I don’t know you,” threatened Compton.

But there was no next Labour victory. There were only Labour defeats, everywhere and every time. The majorities of the National candidates beat all records—twenty thousand and twenty-two thousand. They were winning in industrial towns where the unemployed were thickest, in cities where Free Trade had been a religion, in boroughs where no Tory had sat for years.

Commander Compton felt something rise in his throat. It affected his eyes. He had to turn away to hide the moisture in them once or twice. His faith in English character was justified. The old spirit had been proved again. The working folk had voted against their small self-interests for larger loyalties. Why, many of the unemployed must have voted for a cut in the dole! That was very splendid, wonderfully noble. He hoped to God this National Government would not let them down. It was going to have a prodigious majority if the whole country went the same way as these results.

This crowd in Horridge’s, all these notabilities who were unknown to him, though Jean knew their faces and their claim to fame, were exultant at first, and then a little stupefied by the overwhelming victories of the National parties.

Compton could hear their comments around him.

“Incredible!” . . . “Absolutely marvellous!” . . . “There won’t be any Opposition”. . . . “It’s a tremendous responsibility for the new Government. . . .” “Good God, there’s another of them from Manchester—nineteen thousand majority! . . .” “It’s the end of Free Trade. . . .” “It’s a national verdict against the spendthrifts and the Bolshies. . . .” “It’s the beginning of a new chapter. . . .” “Amazing!”

Mr. Horridge had provided an entertainment again for his guests during the intervals of waiting for new results. Two men with concertinas were playing negro jazz. On the dancing-floor the younger people—those beauties in long frocks and bare backs, these young men whom Jean had called the Bloomsbury boys—were moving round to the rhythm of a stringed orchestra. It was a repetition of that night two years before when Compton had stood here feeling as lonely as death.

“I wonder when Simon’s result will come through,” he said. “I believe

he'll get in. If he does, I shall have to drink something stronger than claret cup. We shall have to drink to a future Prime Minister."

"He'll never be that," said Jean. "He isn't good at team work. And he's too honest."

"What a cynical young woman you are! Can't a Prime Minister be honest?"

"Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle," she assured him.

She became wistful for one of Mr. Horridge's pink ices, and he managed to get one for her, and sat with her behind a gilded pillar while she consumed it.

There was a lull in the Election results. Jean made use of it for conversational purposes.

"What are you going to do about the farm, Commander? Are you going to abandon it for a flat in South Kensington?"

Compton shook his head.

"No, I shall keep my hand on the plough. There's a chance for farming with this new Government. They'll have to do something for agriculture."

Jean Macgregor was thoughtful.

"Would you like to take me on as your goose-girl?" she asked presently. "You'll be lonely on that farm. I should like to keep company with you. You'd find me good at mending socks, and I'm pretty useful as a milkmaid, you must admit!"

Compton laughed.

"There would be a pretty scandal in the neighbourhood! It wouldn't be respectable."

"You could make a respectable woman of me if you liked. A simple ceremony in a village church, and all is well."

"My dear child! What nonsense you're talking! I'm going to be a grandfather next month. I'm a horrible old man."

"I like horrible old men," said Jean. "But, of course, I can't thrust myself on you. If you reject my love so brutally, I can't do anything more about it. There's such a thing as virgin modesty."

Compton looked at her sideways and laughed again.

"If I thought you were serious . . ."

"Oh, I'm perfectly serious. I'm offering myself. A house-keeper on board wages. Marriage not essential, but no reasonable offer refused. A loving heart. An artistic temperament. Cheerful conversation on winter evenings. Ladylike manners. Fond of reading."

“Don’t you go vamping me,” said Compton, greatly amused by this young woman. “I’m fifty-four and a half.”

“I’m looking thirty in the face,” said Jean. “We should make a very suitable couple.”

“They’re calling out some more results,” said Compton, springing up from his chair.

Jean tucked her hand through his arm and spoke reproachfully.

“Rejected! Rebuffed! Woe is me!”

They went between the pillars from whence they could see the Election results and hear the voice of the announcer.

“It’s Simon!” cried Jean excitedly.

“South Bermondsey. Lambert. National candidate. Majority . . .”

It was a majority of fifteen thousand.

Commander Compton turned rather pale, but his steel-blue eyes were suddenly luminous, and he spoke with a tremor in his voice.

“That’s wonderful! This is a great day for England. Madge will be glad and proud to-night. Bravo, Simon! Well played, sir!”

Jean held on to his arm and laughed at him.

“What a nice man you are!” she exclaimed. “So simple. So emotional. So Early Victorian. So much nicer than the Bloomsbury boys with their cynicism and their smutty minds.”

“Let’s go and tell Madge,” said Commander Compton.

Madge knew when they went home. She was still listening to the results through a loud speaker, with Mrs. Lambert, greatly excited.

“Simon’s in!” said Madge. “Fifteen thousand majority. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Her eyes were shining.

“It’s a birthday present for the babe,” said Compton, bending down to kiss her.

He walked out into the streets after Madge had gone to bed, and after he had seen that red-headed girl into a taxi. She had offered her cheek to him demurely, and he had given her a fatherly salute, a grandfatherly kiss.

The crowds were going homeward, talking and laughing as they passed. Simon would be receiving congratulations in South Bermondsey. Mrs. Pomeroy hadn’t whopped him after all. She would be sporting about it. She would be the first to take his hand.

He walked towards Hyde Park, where it was very quiet, except for a few

taxis passing. It was a pleasant night, and he took off his hat to let the wind blow on his forehead. He stood there for some time, very still, with his empty sleeve tucked into his pocket, and the light from a lamp-post touching his sharp profile. There was a smile about his lips. He could not help thinking of that red-headed girl's absurd proposal to him. Of course, it would be nice to have her about the house. It would be very lonely on the old farm without Madge and Simon. Still, it was absurd to think of it, at his time of life. Next month he would be a grandfather. . . .

There was a glare in the sky over London, tremulous and rosy from some flood-lit buildings.

He had had an emotional day. He felt emotional now. The country had given its verdict. It was a verdict for honour and honesty, and self-sacrifice. It was a marvellous tribute to the working classes, who would make, after all, the greater sacrifice. There would be a heavy task for the new Government. They weren't out of the wood yet. There were many dangers ahead. England might become poverty-stricken in spite of all economies. Something had gone wrong in the world. Something had broken in the old system. In every country there was distress and unemployment and empty treasuries. A queer world in which Madge's child would be born! No one could prophesy what was going to happen. But one thing *had* happened. England had proved her steadfast spirit, her fortitude, her old traditional loyalty in a time of danger.

Surely it meant that, if it meant anything. He hoped to heaven the new Government would not betray the people by party strife or selfish policies. All over England—and Scotland and Wales—the farming folk would be glad to-night in their old farmsteads. They would look out on their fields with a new hope in the coming dawn. They might get a price for the things they grew. But, of course, Simon was right about the need of organization and marketing. Simon was one of the younger minds, needed for the new leadership. The old men had had too long an innings. Yes, that was true, although experience counted and the tradition of the older minds. One couldn't go against tradition. It was the strength of England. It was the cause of this day's victory.

Commander Compton, ex-naval man, an old-fashioned gentleman, a simple soul, raised his hand in salute to the spirit of his own folk.

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The Branding Iron

The Grey Parrot (*12th Thous.*)

HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Suzanna (*10th Thous.*)

The Snow Patrol (*12th Thous.*)

Where the Loon Calls

LYNN GUNNISON

Moran of Saddle Butte (*14th Thous.*)

WILLIAM H. HAMBY

The Ranch of a Thorn (*11th Thous.*)

The Seventh Hunch (*10th Thous.*)

JAMES B. HENDRYX

Beyond the Outposts (*53rd Thous.*)

Downey of the

H. H. KNIBBS

Partners of Chance (*17th Thous.*)

Temescal (*14th Thous.*)

Wild Horses (*15th Thous.*)

JOHNSTON McCULLEY

John Standon of Texas (*13th Thous.*)

Ranger's Code (*104th Thous.*)

The Range Cavalier

KENNETH PERKINS

Ride Him, Cowboy (*15th Thous.*)

The Beloved Brute (*30th Thous.*)

ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

Wheat (*29th Thous.*)

EDWIN L. SABIN

The Rose of Santa Fé (*11th Thous.*)

MAY SUTHERLAND

Mounted (*15th Thous.*)
Frozen Inlet Post (*30th Thous.*)
Gold and the Mounted (*36th Thous.*)
Snowdrift
Without Gloves (*56th Thous.*)

EMART KINSBURN
Squatters at Dabchick Lake (*12th Thous.*)

One o' the Herd (*23rd Thous.*)
The Stony Trail (*10th Thous.*)

ALBERT M. TREYNOR
The Runaway Trail (*15th Thous.*)

WILLIAM WEST WINTER
Quemado (*10th Thous.*)

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Anxious Days* by Philip Gibbs]