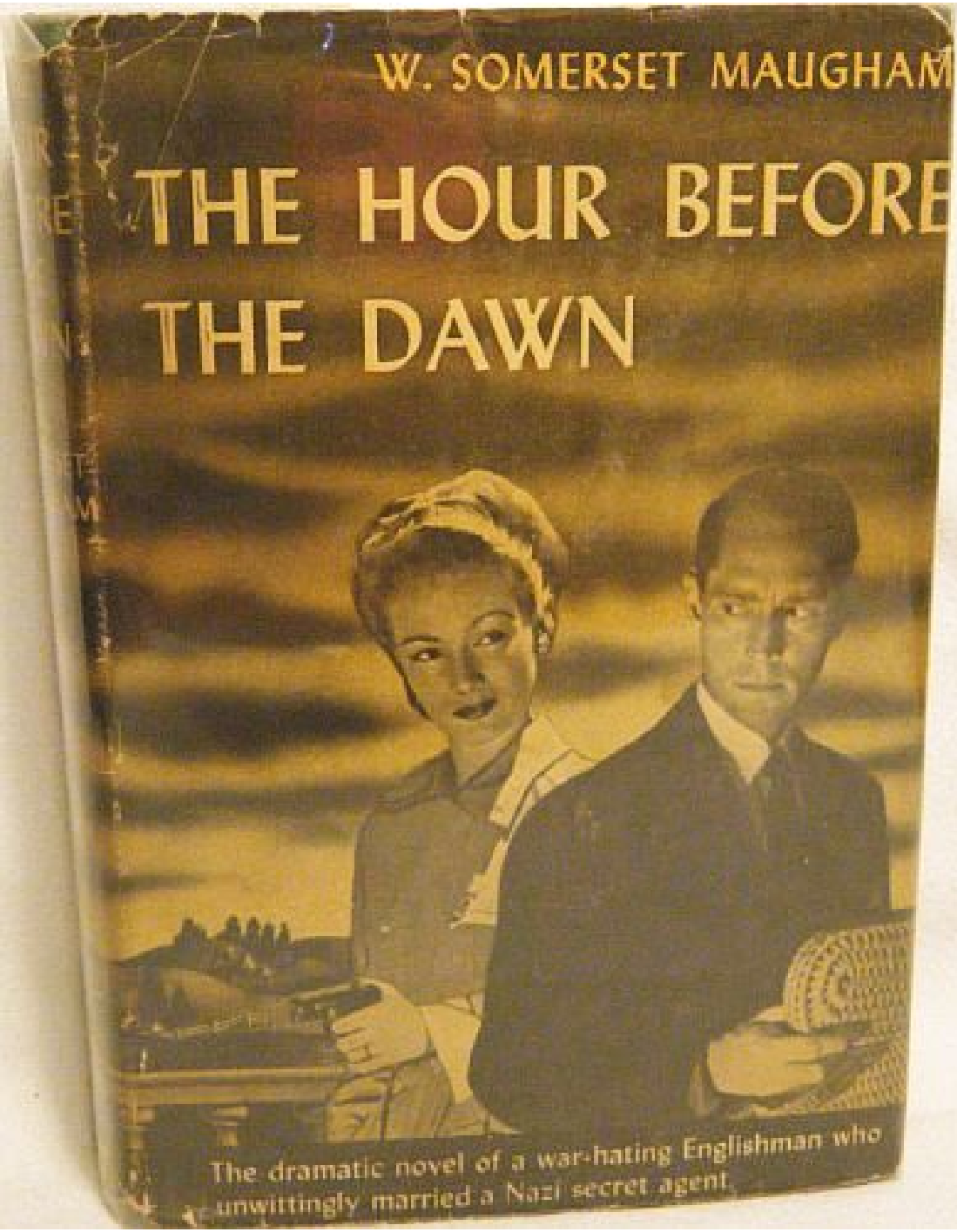
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

THE HOUR BEFORE THE DAWN



The dramatic novel of a war-hating Englishman who unwittingly married a Nazi secret agent

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W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The Hour Before the Dawn

A NOVEL

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In every work regard the writer's end,
Since none can compass more than they intend.

POPE.

THE HOUR BEFORE THE DAWN

i

SHE walked across the wide stretch of lawn, with its fine cedars, through a wrought-iron gate in a brick wall mellow with age, and out into the formal garden. There was a raised terrace that ran along the whole rear of the stately house and it was reached by a flight of steps at the top of which, on each side, was a weather-beaten Italian statue on a pedestal. The garden, rich with the gay flowers of late August, extended from the terrace to a low iron fence that separated it from the great park and prevented the cattle that grazed there from wandering in. She was a young woman with pale brown hair and dark brown eyes, slim and tall, and with that virginal look that many English women strangely retain after years of marriage. She had a straight nose, with delicate nostrils, a candid brow and a well-shaped mouth; the red of her painted lips made her clear white skin look even whiter. In her quiet, almost demure way, she was a very pretty woman, but since there was nothing striking in her appearance, since she dressed very simply, it was not till you talked to her that you were aware of it. Because she was shy she gave many people the impression that she was cold or casual, but the most censorious dowagers in the county admitted in their ponderous, old-fashioned way that though she might be a trifle offhand she was a gentlewoman. It offended them a little that she was obviously quite indifferent to their opinion of her. Without rank, a naval officer's daughter, and without a penny of her own, she had the unassuming distinction of a well-bred woman who is aware without arrogance of her place in society and makes no claim to be other than what she is.

Her thoughts troubled her and her face had been grave as she walked across the lawn, but a faint smile softened her brown eyes as she saw her mother-in-law, Mrs. Henderson, sitting on the terrace. The table was laid out for tea. A butler and a couple of footmen were in the act of bringing out from the house the urn and the tea-pot, plates of bread and butter, scones and cake. Mrs. Henderson was reading a novel, but she put it down as her daughter-in-law joined her.

"Haven't you been playing, May?" she asked.

"No. I felt lazy. They're just finishing a sett and then they're coming along."

From the terrace you could hear the voices of the players as they called the score and the ping of the ball against the taut gut of the racket.

"You're looking rather washed out, dear. D'you think the heat's too much for you?" asked Mrs. Henderson.

May faintly coloured under Mrs. Henderson's kindly but shrewd eye.

"Oh, no, I'll play after tea."

"I dare say that Roger'll be glad to have a game."

Roger was her eldest son and May's husband. He had arrived from abroad the night before and had telephoned that morning to say that he would drive down in the course of the day. It was Mrs. Henderson's birthday, her fifty-third, and according to their habit all the family were assembled. There were her two younger sons, Jim who was still at

Oxford, and Tommy who was only thirteen and home from school; and there were her daughter Jane and her daughter's husband Ian Foster. And of course there was her own husband the General. Mrs. Henderson had a suspicion that sometimes they didn't find it altogether convenient to come from wherever they might be to spend her birthday with her, especially as it was on the last day of August and there was grouse to be shot on the Yorkshire moors, but she liked to have them there, round her, on that one day of the year and though they might come when they would have preferred to be elsewhere only to please her she knew that they made the sacrifice willingly. She accepted it as a proof of their love for her. It was her only selfishness. Roger was a soldier, in the Military Intelligence, and for the last three or four years had been much out of England. He had been in Japan and in the United States, and during the last twelve months, since Munich, he had been in Spain and the Balkans, several times to France and now was just back from Poland. Mrs. Henderson had given up hope that he would be able to spend this birthday with her and it was with joyful surprise that she had heard his voice on the telephone that morning. His arrival would make her happiness complete. She was glad for May's sake too. May hadn't seen much of him of late. It was a pity she had no children.

"Here's Jane," said Mrs. Henderson, with her ready smile.

Jane Foster came through the gateway, up the steps on to the terrace, and sank into a chair. It was odd that Mrs. Henderson should have such a daughter. Mrs. Henderson was a tall, handsome, grey-haired woman, with fine features that gave her a somewhat severe look, but with mild, friendly eyes. She was dressed in black. But Jane wore bright green slacks and a green and yellow tunic with a bold geometrical pattern. On her feet were yellow sandals with enormously thick cork soles. From each sandal protruded a scarlet toenail. She was thirty-four, Mrs. Henderson's eldest child, a tall, rather gaunt, rather masculine, rather horsey woman. Her naturally dark hair was hennaed and she was as heavily made-up as an actress about to face the footlights. The obvious desire of that big-featured woman to look alluring would have been pathetic if its grotesqueness hadn't been disarming. She was a joke and you couldn't but believe that she knew it and saw the fun of it. And to add to the fantastic quality of her appearance she wore in her left eye a rimless monocle without a cord. The dowagers who have just been mentioned were agreed that if you didn't know all about her you would have said she was dreadfully common. Little escaped the sharp eye behind the monocle, and being perfectly aware of this she took care to give these ladies ample cause for their remarks.

"It's funny," they said plaintively, "that men seem to like her."

It was mortifying that at a dinner party when the men, having finished their port, came into the drawing-room they should gather round Jane and shout with coarse laughter while she aired her views on things in general with a freedom of speech unusual in county society. And her father and mother were such nice people.

Mrs. Henderson, when she took in the details of Jane's turn-out, raised her eyebrows.

"My poor Jane, are you obliged to make up quite so much on a summer afternoon in the depths of the country?"

“I feel so funny if I haven’t got my face on,” answered Jane, taking out her lipstick and painting lips that were already heavily painted.

“You wouldn’t look so funny if you hadn’t.”

Jane gave a deep throaty laugh.

“Darling, how sweet you are to me, but I love you just the same.”

Mrs. Henderson wasn’t devoid of a sense of humour.

“You’re so vulgar, the neighbours can’t help thinking there must have been a little nonsense between me and one of the gamekeepers and that isn’t very nice for me as I was only nineteen when you were born.”

“And was there, Mother?”

Mrs. Henderson and May burst out laughing.

“You fool, Jane.” Mrs. Henderson ladled spoonfuls of tea into the tea-pot and poured hot water in. “They won’t be long, will they? Who’s playing?”

“Father and Tommy are playing against Dick Murray and Dora.”

“Why doesn’t Jim come along then and have his tea?”

“Why indeed? You don’t suppose he could tear himself away when Dora’s on the court.”

“Don’t be so silly, Jane,” said Mrs. Henderson a trifle tartly.

Jane secured her glass more firmly in her eye.

“Darling, you don’t miss much. I know *I* can never get away with anything with you. I don’t know if Dora’s in love with Jim, but I know Jim’s so much in love with her he can’t see straight. And you know it too.”

Mrs. Henderson stirred the tea leaves while her daughter and her daughter-in-law looked at her curiously. She gave her shoulders a faint shrug.

“He’s only twenty-one, poor lamb. He’ll forget her when he goes back to Oxford.”

“You wouldn’t like it very much if he went off and married a foreigner, would you?”

“Even foreigners are human, darling,” said Mrs. Henderson, with what for her was considerable acidity. “I’ve noticed that’s something we English are apt to forget.”

Jane sat up in her chair.

“D’you mean to say you wouldn’t mind?”

For a moment Mrs. Henderson was silent and when she spoke it was more as if she were speaking to herself than answering Jane.

“She’s pretty and she’s intelligent. I’m terribly sorry for her. She’s alone in the world. She hasn’t a home and she hasn’t a country. And that nightmare of her father having been done to death in a concentration camp!”

“Still she is a German. If war breaks out you won’t be able to keep her here.”

“Your father says there won’t be a war. He says he knows it for a fact that when it comes to the point Hitler will climb down.”

"Father would hate Jim to marry Dora."

Mrs. Henderson looked with her mild eyes from Jane to May and then from May to Jane.

"I wonder. May has been married for eight years and she hasn't any children. You haven't either, Jane."

"What do you suggest I should do about it? Get a new chauffeur?" Jane asked.

Mrs. Henderson, going on with her thoughts, took no notice of the flippant remark.

"We've had this place for two hundred years. It's the pride of your father's heart. I don't think he'd mind much whom Jim married if only there were children to carry on."

She gave a glance at the noble façade of the great house and then her eyes travelled over the formal garden with its Italian fountain, its statues, its grass paths and many-coloured flowers, till they rested on the park beyond. There were trees there as old as the house. Under the shade of a huge oak cows were lying. As far as the eye could reach it was Henderson land. It kept them poor to maintain that vast house and that great estate. But they loved their home, she and her husband, and there was hardly a tenant who didn't farm the land that his father and grandfather and great-grandfather hadn't farmed before him. They were prepared to sacrifice themselves to hand down to their successors intact the house and land that they held in trust.

Jane was about to speak when she saw the General stroll through the wrought-iron gate.

"Here they are," she said.

General Henderson was a tall man, slim and erect, with a lined, bronzed face and white hair, whom you could never have taken for anything but a soldier. Even in tennis things he managed to look well groomed and you might have guessed that he was fussy about his clothes. His manner was brisk and authoritative, but you couldn't know him long without discovering that this was, as it were, a professional veneer and that at heart he was a kindly, easy-going man; he was brave and honest, but he had the narrowness of his caste and calling, and he had common sense rather than intelligence. He could more easily forgive an injury than a social solecism. You could rely on him to the death, but you couldn't always rely on him to do the wise thing. He walked up to the terrace accompanied by his two sons, and a moment later Ian Foster, Jane's husband, appeared with Dick Murray, the General's agent. Between them was the girl of whom Mrs. Henderson and her daughter had been speaking. Dora Friedberg was twenty. She had very fair hair and large blue intelligent eyes and a honey-coloured skin. She was slender, but with full breasts, and her elegant little head was set proudly on a lovely neck. Notwithstanding the blond and healthy radiance of her youth, there was in the firmness of her chin, in the decision of her mouth and the singular repose in her eyes when she was not speaking, something that suggested a strong will. Jane, who had taken an instinctive dislike to her, had told her husband:

"I wouldn't trust her a yard. She'd be a demon, that girl, if she was roused."

But Jane was wrong in saying that Dora was German; she was Austrian. The Hendersons had met her at Kitzbühl in the Austrian Tyrol during the winter that preceded the Anschluss. She was staying with her mother at the same hotel as they

were. Frau Friedberg was a woman of distinguished appearance and Mrs. Henderson, who was not indifferent to such things, was not surprised to learn that she was of good family. She spoke little of her husband, a lawyer, and Mrs. Henderson guessed that he was of a class inferior to her own. It was likely enough that after the ruin of Austria she had been glad to marry any man who offered her security. The two boys, Jim and Tommy, took a fancy to the pretty, lively girl and Jim went on long excursions with her. She was a beautiful skier. A year later she wrote to Mrs. Henderson to say that her father had died in a concentration camp and she wanted to come to England to get work. She didn't mind what it was and she asked Mrs. Henderson to help her to find something. Mrs. Henderson, full of pity, after consulting the General wrote back asking Dora to stay with them while they looked about. But it wasn't easy to get a job for an Austrian refugee just then. Dora could cook and was quite willing to go into domestic service, but the Hendersons didn't like the idea of it, and they thought, moreover, that in such a situation her beauty must inevitably expose her to unpleasantness. They begged her to wait till something turned up that was suitable to her education and culture. While she waited she made herself useful. The General was a justice of the peace and chairman of the local county council; and Mrs. Henderson, much occupied with good works, was on a number of committees; they found it very convenient to have at hand a willing and intelligent secretary. With Jim at Oxford and Tommy at school, they were alone for months at a time and the presence of that charming girl brought life to the great, stately house. It was the General's suggestion that she should stay with them indefinitely. She accepted it with a gratitude that touched them. The Hendersons had taken her out of the kindness that was natural to them, but before long they looked upon her with real affection. She became one of the family. In Mrs. Henderson's heart she took the place of the two daughters who had come between Roger and Jim and whose death in childhood she still mourned.

Mrs. Henderson began to pour out tea.

"How did you play, Tommy?" she smilingly asked the untidy, tousle-haired little boy who was her youngest son, when he sat down at the tea table.

"Like a foot," he answered in his treble voice. "We only just beat them."

"If you'd been on your game we shouldn't have had a look in, I suppose," said Dick Murray with a grin.

"All right. Pull my leg."

He stretched out a thin arm and took a big piece of cake.

"Bread and butter first, darling," said his mother.

"What a life!" he piped. "I thought in the holidays I was supposed to have a little happiness."

He carefully examined the plate and chose the smallest piece he could find.

"You have a rotten life, old boy, don't you?" the General smiled.

Mrs. Henderson gave her son a glance of tender amusement. He was by years the youngest of her children and she doted on him. There was in his skinny legs and arms, in that slender body and in that smooth funny little face of his something that wrung her heart-strings. She felt she must be constantly on her guard not to spoil him. But he was

growing so fast, he seemed so frail, and he was never still, busy from morning till night with one thing and another, that sometimes she was afraid; she didn't know what she would do if anything happened to him.

When Dick Murray had come on to the terrace with the others he took a quick look round and then moved as if to sit down in the vacant chair next to May; but she gave him a glance and it may be that it bore a message, for he changed his mind and seated himself by Mrs. Henderson. Jane, puffing a cigarette, noticed it. She looked at him thoughtfully. A fellow of not unpleasing appearance. He was young, four or five years younger than herself, but his hair, thick and wavy, was prematurely grey; and this, with his tanned, unlined skin, was peculiarly attractive; it made his fine blue eyes look even bluer than they were and his lashes darker. His features weren't particularly good, rather blunt, but when he smiled he showed a set of very white, regular teeth. He was somewhat heavily built, with broad shoulders, and of no more than average height. There was a charming twinkle in his blue eyes and on his face a look of great good humour. Everybody liked him; he had so much vitality, it warmed you to be with him; and if there was something aggressively animal about him, it was so healthy, it was combined with so much friendliness and simplicity of nature, that it was not offensive, but only invigorating.

"A wonderful lover, I should think," reflected Jane.

With a sardonic smile on her painted lips she now turned her gaze on her husband. Ian Foster sank his huge bulk into a rattan chair and it creaked under his two hundred pounds. He was a huge, red-faced man, with a great booming voice, and his obesity was a disgrace. He took his handkerchief and wiped his brow.

"I don't know why you should be hot," Jane said to him tartly. "You haven't been playing."

"They all ran about so strenuously it made the sweat drip off me just to look at them. It's given me such a thirst that unless I have a whisky and soda I shall pass out."

"You'll drink tea, Ian," his wife said firmly. "And if you'd run about a bit more yourself you might get a little of that horrible fat off you."

"What was it that Solomon said about a nagging woman?"

"Nothing," Jane retorted. "He said a virtuous wife is above rubies."

"Considering that you've been flagrantly unfaithful to me for years I fail to see how that applies to you, Jane."

"What did you expect when you married a glamour girl?"

"Idiots," said Mrs. Henderson, enveloping them both with her affectionate smile.

They were accustomed to hearing Ian and Jane say outrageous things to one another; they sparred all day long and when one got a rise out of the other he chortled with glee. No one knew better than Mrs. Henderson how deeply Jane loved that corpulent, gross, loquacious man and how devoted he was to the plain, gawky creature who by some strange freak of nature was her daughter. Though he was constantly flying into a passion with her, when he would abuse her in language of incredible violence, he was entirely dependent upon her and without her was lost. To him she was

the grandest woman in the world, the most amusing and the cleverest and the truest. They were comics, both of them, and theirs was a perfect marriage.

The General looked at his watch.

"Where the devil's that scoundrel Roger?" he asked. "He ought to be here by now."

"He won't be long," answered Mrs. Henderson. "His secretary phoned from the War Office two hours ago to say he was just starting."

"You'll be glad to see him, May, won't you?" said Jane.

May flushed a little.

"Naturally," she smiled. "After five months."

"I suppose he'll bring all the latest news," said Dora.

It was the first time she had spoken. She had a pleasant voice and only a trace of a German accent. The General turned to her with a kindly smile on his thin, weather-beaten face.

"Take my word for it, Dora, you've got nothing to be alarmed about. There's not going to be a war. Chamberlain will keep us out of it as he kept us out last year."

"It'll be a bit awkward for you if there's a war, won't it, Jim?" asked Jane.

He looked at her coolly.

"Not at all."

"You're still a pacifist, aren't you?"

The General looked down with a slight frown and Mrs. Henderson gave her daughter a glance of annoyance. Jim's views were a subject that she sought to keep out of the conversation. Jim and his father had already had several arguments upon it and they had said things to one another that would have been better left unsaid. Why couldn't they understand that he was a boy, only twenty-one, and it was natural at his age to have extravagant opinions? He would change them when he grew older and learnt something about life. His pacifism was like his communism, merely an expression of the natural idealism of youth. Why, you only had to look at him. He was as tall as his father, broad-shouldered and well set up, with a nice-looking sensitive face, more sensitive than Roger's, but with the same family likeness. There was nothing mawkish or abnormal about him; indeed he was a high-spirited, manly youth. Though a fine athlete who rowed for his college and had played golf for his university, he was a hard worker. He was the only one of her children who cared for books for their own sake. Roger was a great reader too, but he only read what immediately concerned his job; he had a one-track mind: Jim was a boy of wide interests, and, even making allowances for a mother's partiality, Mrs. Henderson felt herself justified in cherishing high hopes for his future. He had done well at school, he was doing well at Oxford; he was a good speaker and was going to be a lawyer; there was no knowing to what eminence he might not rise. But of course he must be sensible. Mrs. Henderson wanted to hear what answer Jim would make to Jane's deliberately provocative question. He turned to her gravely; he spoke not with truculence, but with a firmness that was impressive. He looked Jane straight in the eyes.

"Yes, I'm still a pacifist. War settles nothing. It's not only an iniquitous business, but a stupid business. There are a lot of us at Oxford and if there's a war we shall refuse to fight."

"You say that now, old boy," Ian broke in, with a tolerant grin on his fat red face, "but if war breaks out you'll change your mind all right. Heaven knows, I don't want war, but if it does come I'm going to be in on it."

"Don't be so silly, Ian," cried Jane. "You're too old to fight and much too fat."

"Will you oblige me by keeping your trap shut, darling?" he retorted.

Mrs. Henderson's eyes wandered past the formal garden to the park beyond. The late sun bathed it in a golden beauty. The trees, the gnarled oak trees with their dark foliage, the lush green of the meadowland and the sheen of the lake—oh it was lovely. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves. It gave you the impression of such perfect, such heavenly tranquillity that you felt it must last forever. You had a singular feeling that the moment would never pass, the cows lying under the oak trees never rise to their feet and the night never come. Time, as though tired of his restless wandering, stood still. Mrs. Henderson gave a faint sigh.

"When I went down to the village this morning with everyone so happy and friendly and contented, and when I look at that peaceful scene with all of you here, I can't bring myself to believe that there's even a possibility of war."

But Jim still held Jane fixed with his serious eyes.

"Are there any more questions you want to ask me?" he said.

"No, there aren't," said Mrs. Henderson sharply. "Let me have at least this one day without an argument."

Dick Murray with his good nature and ready tact threw a casual remark into a conversation that was on the point of losing its amenity.

"Lucky Roger was able to make it, Mrs. Henderson. It would have been a disappointment to you if he hadn't got back in time."

"It would. It's dreadfully sentimental and old-fashioned of me, but I'm bound to admit it, it means a great deal to me to have my family round me on my birthday."

"Let's hope Roger won't be so damned secretive as he usually is," said Ian.

"Well, he's a sleuth, isn't he?" Tommy piped in. "If you're a sleuth you've jolly well got to be secretive."

"I wish I could get into the Intelligence Department," Ian went on. "It's just the sort of job that would suit me."

"What in Heaven's name makes you think that, Ian?" Jane cried, fixing him with her monocle. "They want brains for that, my boy, brains."

He gave a great guffaw. She had given him an opening and he promptly took it.

"I suppose you think if I'd had a spark of intelligence I wouldn't have married you and I'm not sure that you're not damned well right."

But before Jane could think of a crushing retort Mrs. Henderson gave a cry.

"Roger."

He was standing in front of one of the open french windows that led from the great hall of the house on to the terrace. He had come in as quietly as was his habit and was watching them with an amused smile. He came forward and taking his mother in his arms kissed her warmly. Tommy jumped up and flung his arms round him.

"You're not too old to kiss yet, are you, old boy?" said Roger, giving him a fond embrace.

Then he turned to his wife. She had risen on seeing him and put her hand to her heart as though to stay its beating. Her pale face had gone paler still. When he kissed her she slightly turned her mouth away so that his lips only touched her cheek.

"Hulloa, May. You're looking grand."

"Have a nice journey, Roger?" she asked.

"Not so bad. A bit bumpy."

He greeted the rest of them and then his eyes fell on a stranger.

"This is Dora Friedberg," said Mrs. Henderson. "I forgot, you haven't been down here since she's been living with us. She's been a great help."

"May wrote and said you had a friend staying with you."

"The General and Mrs. Henderson have been wonderfully kind to me," said Dora with a little smile.

"Nonsense, my dear," said the General. "I don't know what we should have done without you in this great barn with no one but my wife and me to live in it."

Roger turned back to his mother and fished out of his pocket a small box.

"I've brought you a present from Warsaw, darling. Many happy returns."

He kissed her again. It was an antique brooch and Mrs. Henderson, flushing with pleasure, put it on. Roger was her eldest and best-loved son. He was the heir to the property. She looked at him now as he drank his tea and ate cake, talking the while easily, and thought with pride that he was a fine figure of a man. He too was tall, broad-shouldered and well-knit, but his face was stronger than his father's or Jim's; there was decision, even sternness in his well-marked features, and his eyes were keen and observant. Now and then they rested for an instant on Dora and Mrs. Henderson knew he was taking her measure. When he had done eating she asked whether he wouldn't like to go and put on something cooler, for he was wearing a blue serge suit.

"You and May have got your usual rooms."

"I don't mind giving you a tennis lesson after you've changed," said Tommy, with a grin.

"That's awfully good of you, old boy," smiled Roger. "I'm afraid I can't stay, Mother. I must get back to town after dinner."

"Oh, Roger."

"I didn't want to miss your birthday altogether, darling, but I'm up to my eyes in work at the War Office."

The General pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

“Come into the library with me, Roger,” he said. “I want to have a chat.”

“Oh, George, he wants to talk to May,” said Mrs. Henderson. “He hasn’t seen her for so long.”

“Let me have him for half an hour, May. You shall have him for as long as you like after that.”

“Of course,” she answered.

When the General and Roger had left them Dick Murray got up and announced that he must go.

“Aren’t you going to play any more tennis?” cried Tommy.

“I’m afraid I can’t. I’ve got a job to do in the village.”

“You might take a note for me,” said May. “I’ll go and get it. I’ll bring it out to your car.”

She went in to the house. Dick was at the wheel when she came out of the front door with an envelope in her hand.

“You look awfully white, dear,” he said, in a low voice, as she gave it to him.

“I’m nervous, that’s only natural.”

“I wish I could be with you.”

“I must do it alone.”

There was a troubled look on his good-natured sunburnt face, and his fine blue eyes, with their dark lashes, were harassed. She smiled.

“Don’t look so worried. I shall manage. You’d better be going.”

As he started the car he glanced at the envelope she had given him. He saw his own name scribbled on it. When he got out of the park gates he stopped the car and opened the letter. There was a sheet of note-paper inside and on it written in pencil only three words.

I love you.

ii

MAY went to her room. She wanted to collect herself. She wanted to be sure that she would say exactly what she had made up her mind to say. A shiver ran down her spine and her heart seemed to miss a beat as she considered the ordeal before her. But she was determined to go through with it.

At last she heard Roger come in to the adjoining room.

"May," he called.

"I'm here."

He came in.

"I was looking for you."

"Sit down, will you? I want to have a talk with you."

"That suits me," he answered cheerily. "Gosh, it's good to be home again. Mother's looking grand, isn't she? And Tommy's shooting up. He'll be as tall as Jim when he's full grown."

She looked at him steadily, though her heart now was beating fast. Her throat was dry. It was awful to be so scared. The only thing was to set her teeth and make a dash at it. She knew Roger well enough to be aware that it was useless to beat about the bush.

"Roger, I want you to let me divorce you."

"May," he cried.

He stared at her with horrified bewilderment.

"Please don't speak. I want you to listen to me. You've always been kind to me. I've got no fault to find with you. It's just that I can't go on like this any longer. I'm so terribly lonely."

His eyes were suddenly distressed.

"My dear."

"I'm not blaming you for that. I know it isn't your fault."

"I know I'm away a great deal. I'd take you with me if I could, but I can't. It's a very peculiar job I've got and I must be completely on my own."

"I realize that."

"You must know that I love you, May."

She gave him a faint derisive smile. The worst was over now and she had her nerves under control.

"I think you really do in your way. But it's not a way that brings me much happiness. You love me as you love an old suit of clothes, because you feel comfortable in it. You like to think of me sitting in the flat all ready to welcome you when you come back from one of your hush-hush jobs."

He moved uncomfortably in his chair.

"You make me sound horribly selfish."

She shook her head.

"Heaven knows you're not that. I know that your work is important and that you're very good at it. It's just my bad luck that there's no place for me in your life but just to sit and wait. That's what I've been doing for years now, waiting. I'm tired of it."

He made an odd little movement of his hands and then clasped them together. It was as though he were distraught, but were unwilling to betray himself. May noticed it and thought bitterly how well that instinctive repressed gesture revealed their married life. She looked at him sadly.

"Has it occurred to you that after being married to you eight years I'm still rather frightened of you?"

"Oh, May, what a terrible thing to say," he cried.

"It's a fact. Don't you think it's rather pitiful? You see, I don't know you. I only know the side of you you've chosen to show me. I'm not sure that there isn't another side of you that's hard and ruthless."

He looked away quickly as though there were something in his soul that he did not want her to see.

"You don't seem able ever to let yourself go. You're incapable of intimacy."

He looked back to her now and there was a good-humoured smile on his lips.

"Aren't you being rather melodramatic, my dear? I've always looked upon myself as a very simple sort of chap. I try to do my duty and I want to do my job as well as I can."

"And your job is the most important thing in your life, isn't it? More important far than me."

"Need I answer that question?" he chuckled.

"I'd like you to."

"I wouldn't think much of a chap who let his love for his wife hamper him in the performance of his duty. Would you have me otherwise?"

She sighed.

"I had no idea that you weren't just as happy as I was," he went on.

"If you hadn't been so absorbed in your work you'd have noticed long ago that something was wrong."

"You can't expect me to chuck my work."

"Of course not."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"There's nothing you can do. I want to live. I want to be happy. I'm twenty-eight, Roger; if I don't make a break now it'll be too late."

She could see that he was deeply distressed and it hurt her to pain him; but at the same time she felt that he thought her unreasonable. He didn't understand. He gave her a searching look and she coloured.

“Are you in love with somebody else?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated a moment. His eyes seemed to try to pierce her inmost soul.

“D’you mind telling me who it is?”

“Dick Murray.”

“Dick?”

His utter surprise was obvious in his face and tone. Evidently Dick was the last person in the world whom he would have expected her to have any feeling for.

“Is he in love with you?”

“Yes.”

He was silent for a while. She knew that he hated scenes and she knew how great was his self-control. He would have been ashamed to show emotion. He took out a cigarette and deliberately lit it.

“Some fellows have all the luck,” he said at last. “He’s got nothing in the world to do except make himself pleasant.”

The acidity in his tone made her flush and she was on the point of giving him a sharp answer. But she restrained herself; she was determined not to get angry. It would be horrible if they began to say cruel and bitter things to one another. She forced a little smile to her lips.

“He’s the best agent your father ever had. He’s the only one who ever made the estate pay.”

“He’s a very good agent. I knew that. That’s why I got him the job.”

It was her turn now to give him a searching look.

“He’s not my lover, you know.”

“It never occurred to me that he was. I may not know you very well, darling, but at least I know that you’d never be able to do anything underhand.”

“Dick wouldn’t either. It’s not our fault, Roger. We didn’t want to fall in love. We couldn’t help ourselves. He owes everything to you. He knows he’s let you down.”

“He’s a very good chap and he has a lot of charm. You’ve been thrown together a great deal; I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised if you’ve come to care for him.”

“I know he isn’t as intelligent as you are. You’ve got a brilliant future before you. He’s so cosy, Roger. I’m not up to your mark really. Dick and I speak the same language.”

“How do you imagine you would live if you were married to him? He could hardly stay on here as my father’s agent.”

“He could get another job.”

“Have you any idea how hard jobs are to get now?”

“That’s our look-out. We want to be married as soon as you’ll give me my freedom.”

He got up and began to walk up and down the room. He was thinking deeply. He stopped in front of her chair.

"It'll be an awful blow for my father and mother. I can't imagine anything they'd hate more."

"Your people have always been very kind to me, but I should be a fool if I didn't know I've been a disappointment to them. Your father wanted me so awfully to have a son. When they've got over the shock, honestly they won't mind very much. They'll think you'll marry again and have better luck next time."

"You've got it all settled, haven't you?"

"I've been thinking of nothing else for weeks."

"And supposing I come to the conclusion that this is only a passing infatuation and refuse to let myself be divorced?"

"I should go and live with Dick and force you to divorce me."

She saw him frown and she almost smiled, for she knew very well what he was thinking. The mere idea of the scandal such a step would cause gave him goose-flesh. But when he spoke it was to give her a shock that she had never anticipated.

"I think I should tell you that the Germans are marching into Poland tomorrow and we shall be at war in twenty-four hours."

She gave a horrified cry.

"I didn't say anything about it. I thought you'd all know soon enough and I wanted dear Mother to enjoy her birthday. Dick is in the Territorials. He'll be called up at once. It's going to be a long and terrible war. No one can tell what's going to happen to any of us."

"Oh, how awful!"

"Dick may be killed or I may be killed. This isn't the time to think of oneself. The French are unprepared and we're unprepared. The Germans will go all out to snatch a quick victory. We shall all be in it, every man and woman in the country."

May tried to control herself, but she couldn't. She began to cry. He put his hand gently on her shoulder.

"It may be that I haven't been a very good husband. Poor May. I want you to be happy. But don't you think this is a moment when we should forget our private interests? I am going to ask you for your own sake, for all our sakes, to wait till after the war. Then if you're still of the same mind I promise I'll do everything I can to give you your liberty as quickly as possible."

She sighed deeply. She was shattered.

"Very well, Roger. I'll wait."

"You know, darling, you'll have to do your bit like everyone else."

"I shall be thankful to help."

"You might stow it away in the back of your mind that I love you very much and shall always love you and there's nothing in the world I want more than your happiness."

"Except winning the war?" she smiled ironically.

"Except that, yes," he answered gravely.

And with that answer she saw that he wasn't thinking of her any more. They sat in silence.

"Hadn't you better go and see your mother?" she said at last. "If you're going back tonight after dinner you won't have another chance of talking to her."

"Yes, I suppose I had."

He roused himself unwillingly from his reflections and rose to his feet. He looked at May for an instant; his eyes were cold and his lips thin. She knew what he was thinking: he was impatient that just then she had introduced into his life a complication that might be a distraction from the pressing affairs he had to deal with. It wasn't her fault; if he had only told her before that war was inevitable she wouldn't have spoken. She would at least have waited to see what happened. She sighed. She supposed it was unreasonable to expect that in such a terrible crisis her happiness should seem of any particular importance to him. And, of course, her happiness *wasn't* of any importance to anyone but herself—and Dick.

Roger walked towards the door, but as he was about to open it, turned back. He gave a light laugh and when he spoke it was in the bright, cheery way in which he was accustomed to speak. At that moment it positively startled her.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I brought you a little present from Warsaw too. As soon as I saw it I knew it was just the sort of thing you'd like."

He took out of his pocket a small parcel wrapped in tissue paper and undoing it handed her a long gold chain of curious workmanship.

"Unless I've been done in the eye it's an old one."

"It's lovely," said May as he handed it to her.

And it was. It was either Polish or Russian. May was charmed with its delicate beauty and touched that he should have gone to the trouble of picking out something that was so much to her taste, but at the same time she was grievously embarrassed. It seemed shocking to accept a present from him after what had just passed between them.

"I can't take it, Roger," she cried miserably.

"Why on earth not? Of course you must take it. It's much too good for Jane and I practically snatched it away from the French ambassador's wife. She was crazy to get it. Don't be a fool, May."

He spoke with such good nature, with such a breezy friendliness, that she did not know what to say. She flushed deeply.

"Thank you very much. It's wonderfully kind of you, Roger."

"That's a good girl."

There was an ironical twinkle in his eyes as he nodded and walked out. May looked at the door he had closed behind him as though she could see him stalking along the passage to his mother's room. She knew that his manner, almost jaunty at the last, had changed the moment he withdrew from her sight and that his face wore once more the

stern, vigilant mien that it always wore when he thought no one was looking at him. But whether he thought of her as he went or of the war that was imminent she could not guess; what she knew was that when he entered his mother's sitting-room there would be no trace that he was anxious or troubled, and she would find him as ever sweet, sympathetic and tenderly affectionate.

May sighed. She sank into a chair and her eyes stared vacantly out of the open window. She had never really understood him. He was a strange, subtle man. Was he deceitful? No, it wouldn't be fair to call him that: it wasn't an act that he had been putting on when with so much pleasant friendliness he had given her the necklace she still held in her hands, he had always liked to give her presents, and he had felt all he seemed to feel; his breezy, chaffing, light manner was natural to him; it inspired confidence because it was genuine. And yet it was only a rind that covered the active, calculating wariness within. He was wrapped up in his work, and when he met people he judged them according to the use they might be to its furtherance. Even when he seemed to be gaily immersed in social pleasures she knew that at the back of his mind he was turning over the tortuous schemes he was always concocting. She sometimes felt that the only pure delight he ever experienced was that of triumph when he had circumvented the scheme of one of Britain's possible enemies or discovered some crafty plan that might be to the country's disadvantage. Of course his motives were patriotic, no one could have a more passionate love for England than he, but she had an inkling that there was something in his nature, pitiless and rather dreadful, that made him take a peculiar pleasure in his secret work. Because his motives were pure he allowed himself to revel in the crooked ways in which, setting his wits against theirs, he strove to combat the wiles of his adversaries. It was a game he played of which the stakes were the safety and liberty of England, and he found it so absorbing that he could not stop to consider the feelings of others. It was true what she had said, there was no room in his life for her.

May smiled bitterly when she thought that she had once imagined that she loved him. Now that she knew what love was she realized only too clearly that it was not love that had induced her to marry him. That had come about so naturally that she could not blame herself. Her father was killed in the last war and her mother was left with little more than a pension to support her. She had been a school friend of Mrs. Henderson's and when May's mother was widowed the Hendersons had offered her one of the cottages in the village. It was only a mile away from Graveney Holt and the two families saw one another constantly. From a very early age May had known that her mother and Roger's had set their hearts on her marrying him. They both attached a great deal of importance to family and May's parents, though poor, were what is known as well-connected; and Mrs. Henderson was too disinterested to care that her prospective daughter-in-law was penniless. Roger grew into a tall good-looking boy, and when he came home for the holidays, first from school and then from Sandhurst, she conceived a girlish enthusiasm for him. They were like brother and sister together. A greater familiarity existed between them then, strangely enough, than ever did after they were married. She worshipped him as his mother worshipped him, but she knew now that there was no love in her feeling for him. It was a schoolgirl's infatuation for a boy, a young man, five years older than herself.

Mrs. Henderson had always been fond of her and she was pleased with the girl's admiration for the son of whom she was so proud. She treated her as though it were understood that she was the future mistress of the house. She took pains to instil into May her own feeling for the noble pile. She made her love its beauties. She taught her to appreciate treasured pieces of furniture and told her the stories of the ancestors whose portraits hung on the walls. She filled her with her own dismay when economic difficulties forced the General to sell the Filippino Lippi and the Goya. It could not be expected that a young girl should not be dazzled by the slightly faded splendour that surrounded her when she came up to the great house from the modest cottage in the village. It seemed like her real home and she could not refrain from planning what she would do when she became its mistress. Nor could she be insensible to the general feeling in the county that it had been settled long ago that she would marry Roger. There were in the neighbourhood mothers with daughters who were inclined to think that Roger could do better than marry the penniless girl of a deceased naval officer, but since it looked as though there were nothing to do about it, they decided to take a romantic view of the situation. Sometimes May wondered what Roger thought of it. He was easy and friendly, he made her fetch and carry for him when he was a boy, he played tennis and golf with her when she grew older, he danced with her, he chaffed her playfully; but he never gave any sign that he was aware of the plans his mother and hers had made for their future.

Then her mother died. It was a terrible grief to her and she didn't know how she could have borne it if Mrs. Henderson hadn't been so wonderfully kind to her. May had nothing now but her pension as an officer's daughter, she was nineteen, and she wanted to earn her own living. She had a good figure and the first thing that occurred to her was that she might become a mannequin. But Mrs. Henderson would not hear of it. Jane was married by then and Mrs. Henderson was insistent that she should live with them until her own marriage. It was then that for the first time she came out into the open with the scheme that had before been only vaguely presupposed. She told May that she had always loved her as a daughter and that it was her dearest wish, as it had been her mother's, that she and Roger should marry. May was too open to pretend to a surprise she did not feel.

"I should be a perfect fool if I hadn't known that you and Mamma had settled that when I was four and Roger was nine."

"You like Roger, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Ever since I could walk I've thought him wonderful."

"Then what is to prevent you from getting married as soon as possible?"

"Only Roger. We must let him have a say in the matter, poor brute."

"Oh, but Roger's devoted to you."

"He's never said so."

"I suppose he thought you knew. Men are apt to take so much for granted."

"There are limits."

"You would marry him if he asked you, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would." May flushed. "But, darling, you must promise me you won't suggest it to him. I couldn't bear to think he was marrying me just to please you."

Mrs. Henderson smiled.

"My dear, has it never occurred to you that you're exceptionally pretty? You only want a little more colour to be a raving beauty."

"You must promise me that."

"I understand. It's very natural. I promise you I'll never say a word to Roger. I think he's much too clever not to see that if he doesn't snap you up quickly somebody else will." She looked at May tenderly. "I'd sooner give my son to you than to anyone in the world. I know how good you are and I know you're no fool. You're sweet-tempered and you're a lady, and I'm old-fashioned enough to think that important. Sooner or later Roger will come into the property and if I'm still alive it will be a comfort to me to think that I can safely deliver the place into your hands."

"Oh, darling, don't let us count our chickens before they're hatched."

"I've had a happy life, and I want nothing now but a grandson to dandle on my knee. You must have beautiful children, my pretty."

May, young though she was then, knew very well how intense was the desire of the General and Mrs. Henderson to see the succession to the estate assured. The family's fortunes had been started in no very glorious fashion at the Restoration by a clever and time-serving parson who married a poor connection of the great lord to whom he was domestic chaplain. His patron found him useful and advanced him. In due course he became a bishop and, his wife dying, he very prudently married the heiress of a rich haberdasher in the City. When the son she brought him was of a suitable age he married him to another handsome fortune and it was this son who in the reign of Queen Anne built the house in which the Hendersons had lived ever since. He served in Marlborough's army and on one side of the chimney-piece in the great hall, a pendant to the portrait in full canonicals of the astute bishop, hung the life-size portrait of him in uniform. From that time the Hendersons had been soldiers and country gentlemen and though none had greatly distinguished himself they had for the most part acquitted themselves honourably. They had been decent people who did their duty by their country. No doubt ever entered their minds that God had intended anything else than that they should look after their property as good landlords should, sit on the bench and sentence poachers to the penalties ordained by law, hunt foxes, shoot pheasants, aid the needy, marry according to their station and hand on to their heirs an undiminished estate. And though with the decline of agricultural values their income was now sadly diminished these were still the sentiments of General Henderson and his wife. May at nineteen had no reason to think them controvertible.

She was little expecting it when Roger at last did ask her to marry him. He was home on leave for a few days' shooting and one very rainy afternoon he was sitting in the library by himself. May had been living with the Hendersons for several months. She happened to go into the library to replace a book she had taken up to her room. She looked about for another.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"No, don't bother."

She found a book and was about to leave the room when he stopped her with another question.

"What have you got?"

"*Hajji Baba.*"

"What made you think of reading that?"

"You were talking about it the other night."

"I forgot. You'll enjoy it. It's grand fun." He took out his case. "Have a cigarette?"

"Aren't you working?"

"I've been working for hours. I think I deserve a spell off."

She took the cigarette and lighting it sat on the arm of a chair to show him that she was only going to stay a minute. He looked at her with the slightly quizzical glint in his eyes that even then somewhat disconcerted her.

"You know, May, you're awfully pretty."

"It's nice of you to say so," she smiled.

"You were pretty awful when you were thirteen or fourteen."

"I know I was. Frightful."

"Funny how girls change, almost from one day to the other."

She could not think of anything to say to this so tried to make a smoke ring. He watched her.

"Not a very good attempt."

"Rotten."

"Don't you think it's about time we got married?"

Her heart gave a great thud against her chest, but she continued to try to make smoke rings.

"I hadn't thought about it one way or the other."

"Well, will you?"

He got up from the desk and stood in front of her. He was slightly nervous and it touched her.

"I can't imagine what put the idea in your head."

"That's a lie. You know I've wanted to marry you ever since I was ten."

"Even when I was thirteen and hideous?"

"I admit I wasn't so keen about it then," he laughed. But all at once he grew serious again. "May, I think you're far and away the nicest girl I've ever known in my life. I'd rather marry you than anyone else in the world."

There was one thing he hadn't said and she waited. Her cigarette was finished and he took the butt from her fingers. He turned away to put it in an ash-tray.

"I'm awfully in love with you."

"You might have said that before."

"I thought you knew it. It made me shy to say it in so many words."

She didn't know why tears should come to her eyes. She felt a little shy too and it seemed vaguely pathetic. He saw the tears and came and sat with her on the arm of the chair. He took her hand.

"Well, what d'you say to it?"

Because she felt a trifle hysterical she laughed.

"Of course I'll marry you, Roger. I don't know if it's ever struck you, but you're a great catch."

Laughing he bent over and kissed her. Since he was a boy, on occasion, when he went off to school or when he came back, he had kissed her on the cheek in the perfunctory, meaningless way in which he kissed Jane, but he had never kissed her before on the mouth. It was a curious sensation. It made her flush; its intimacy was slightly embarrassing.

"Come on," he said, lifting her to her feet, "let's go and tell Mother. She'll be tickled to death."

A shadow of irritation passed through her mind at his eagerness to do this. She would have liked to stay there alone with him for at least a few minutes. But she suppressed the feeling. He was devoted to his mother and it was only natural that he should want to give her at once the great pleasure it would be to her to hear that they were engaged to be married.

They were married in the village church and went to Paris for their honeymoon. May had never been abroad before and she enjoyed herself. Roger knew Paris well and his French was fluent. They went to Montparnasse and Montmartre. They ate in famous restaurants. It was fun to go about with someone who knew all the ropes and of course because she had known him so long and so well she felt very much at home with him. They had so many common memories that they were never at a loss for something to talk about. They had always been good friends. The only difference was that they slept in the same room. May, brought up in the country and a great reader, was not ignorant of the facts of life; Roger was an affectionate, thoughtful lover and she felt very tenderly towards him when he lay by her side and held her in his arms. For the rest she was glad and proud to give him a pleasure she did not altogether share. She was happy. It amused her that he should only now have discovered that she had a lovely body. She thought she loved him.

After eight years she knew that what she had felt for him was admiration, trust, confidence, affection, anything you like but love.

He was already at the War Office and they took a tiny flat in Chelsea. It was fun to furnish it with the superfluous furniture from Graveney Holt that they rescued from the attics. They settled down to married life. Roger went to the War Office every morning at ten, and at six, when his work was over, went to his club to play bridge for an hour or so before coming back to dinner. Sometimes they dined out or had Roger's soldier friends and their wives to dine with them; sometimes they went to the pictures or to a play; but most evenings they sat at home and May read or played patience while Roger

worked. After the first few months, during which the new flat, the new friends and the excitement of living in London had been sufficient distraction, May began to find time hang somewhat heavily on her hands. She set out on a systematic exploration of the city; she went to the galleries and museums; she visited churches. She was not exactly bored; she only felt slightly let down. She had expected a fuller life. But she was a sensible girl and told herself that it would be different when she had a baby; that would give her plenty to do and she wouldn't feel lonely any more. But unfortunately there was no sign that she was going to have a baby. She knew how much Roger wanted her to have one, and she knew that his parents were anxiously awaiting the news that she was pregnant. When a year passed and nothing happened she discussed the matter with her mother-in-law. Mrs. Henderson told her not to worry, she was very young, it wouldn't hurt her to wait a couple of years; but she saw that May was worried and to give her peace sent her to a specialist. He told her that there was nothing to prevent her from having children and advised her to have patience. But when a second year passed and a third she was more than worried and went to him again. The specialist suggested that he should see Roger and after an examination announced that there was nothing in him to account for her sterility; he gave them certain advice. They followed it with no result and as the years went on they began to lose hope. They were normal healthy people, but for no conceivable reason nature seemed to have decided that there should be no result of their union in sexual congress. It made May unhappy, not only on her own account, but because, though he never alluded to her barrenness except jocosely and remained as ever kind, tender and affectionate, she knew that Roger was bitterly disappointed; and, her nerves on edge, she thought that the General sometimes looked at her with something close to annoyance. She imagined him talking it over with his wife.

"I'm afraid we've been sold a pup, my dear," she thought of him saying.

And his wife's reply.

"Well, George, she looked healthy enough. That's why I encouraged the marriage, I thought she'd have a baby once a year."

Of course she was unjust. She knew that. They loved her for herself and never by the smallest word made her feel that she had failed them. But it was more than you could expect from human nature that they shouldn't grieve.

Early in her married life she had tried to interest herself in Roger's work, but he had not encouraged her.

"Oh, it's only a lot of routine stuff," he said when she asked him to tell her about it. "It would only bore you."

"Won't you let me be the judge of that?"

He gave her his friendly, playful glance.

"To tell you the truth, practically the only pull I have at the War Office is that I know how to keep my mouth shut, and believe me, the way some of the nobs shoot their faces off is enough to make your hair stand on end. And you know, after I've been up to my eyes in work from ten till six, I'm glad to put it out of my mind for the rest of the day. Once I've closed my office door behind me I never give it a thought."

She knew that wasn't true; she knew that when he sat in a brown study, by the fire, and gazed at the glancing flames his thoughts were busy with the problems that had occupied him during the day. But she did not insist. As time wore on she discovered certain things about him that she had never suspected. On one occasion they met at dinner the ambassador of a foreign power and his wife. Roger was seated next to her and somewhat to her surprise May saw that he was laying himself out to be as charming to her as he knew how. She had never before seen him pay any woman more attention than civility demanded. After dinner he sat again beside the somewhat massive beauty and openly flirted with her. When they got into the taxi to drive home May said rather stiffly:

"You seemed to be getting on very well with the ambassador's wife."

He chuckled and even in the darkness she could see the gleam in his eyes.

"Did you think I did my stuff well?"

"Beautifully."

"The damned fool, she thinks she's irresistible. I gave her the works."

"I don't quite know why."

"Darling, it's as plain as the nose on your beautiful face. Her husband had told her to pump me and I let her pump me. She swallowed everything I told her and I bet the wires'll be busy tonight."

May was silent for a moment.

"You were wonderfully convincing."

"I thought I was putting on a pretty good show myself."

Sometimes, as Roger was given more responsible work to do, they had the military attachés of various embassies to dine with them. He was so frank, so amiable, so guileless that no one could have imagined that there was an ulterior motive in anything he said; and if in that convivial little gathering, flushed with wine and warmed by his own good fellowship, he let fall a hint that was almost an indiscretion only May could have suspected that it was calculated. She did not know then whether to admire his astuteness or be disconcerted by his duplicity.

One morning, opening the paper, May saw that a British officer had been arrested and was charged with espionage on behalf of Italy. It was a peculiar shock to her because Roger had brought him one evening to dine at the flat and she had found him very pleasant. For days people talked of nothing else. It was frontpage stuff. But May had no notion that Roger was in any way connected with it till, meeting his chief at luncheon one day, he congratulated her on the good work her husband had put in.

"I'm not sure that we'd ever have caught the blighter if it hadn't been for Roger. He worked for months and when he was through we had a cast-iron case. Nice job he did."

She told Roger that evening what his chief had said.

"I dare say I didn't do so badly. It wasn't so easy to get the goods on the fellow; he was as wary as a fox. I had to be careful; one mistake and he'd have hopped over the Channel."

"I thought him rather nice," said May.

"He could be very amusing. I saw quite a lot of him. He had no idea we were on to him. You should have seen his face when he was arrested."

Roger gave a grim chuckle.

"What will they do with him?"

"Give him ten years, I suppose. I'd hang him."

He said it so fiercely that May looked up at him with a start. His eyes were ruthless. She shuddered. She realized that if need were, and he thought himself justified, Roger would hesitate at nothing.

Gradually May resigned herself to the monotony of her married life. She told herself that she had expected too much. It was silly to complain because her girlish dreams had remained unsatisfied. She thought of them sometimes with a smiling sadness. She had no real reason to complain of her lot. She had a husband who was devoted to her and proud of her; everyone told her he was brilliant and it looked as though a distinguished career lay ahead of him; he was kind and considerate and he was faithful to her. He was very appreciative; on all subjects except his work he talked to her as man to man and he attached weight to her opinions. She had a pleasant, pretty flat, and though they were far from rich, she never had to skimp and save to make both ends meet. In the future lay Graveney Holt, that lovely house with all the treasures it contained, the beautiful gardens and the wide-spreading park; and the numerous activities which the possession of the estate must entail.

After they had been married for four years Roger was sent to Japan as member of a mission and was away for three months. It was the first time they had been separated and feeling more lonely than ever after a few weeks she went down to stay at Graveney. She fell very easily into the life that she had led before her marriage. The following year Roger went away again, to Iran; then he went to Australia, and to Egypt and Turkey. He was plainly delighted to see her, on his return from each journey, but after a day or two fell into his old way of taking her for granted. She had an exasperated feeling that he liked to come back to her with something of the same sort of feeling as he had on coming back to his favourite arm-chair and the comfort of his old golf coat. He was more absorbed in his work than ever. She could not help knowing that to that he was prepared without a qualm to sacrifice her feelings, her comfort, her well-being. He would often stay at the War Office till eleven at night, ringing up a quarter of an hour before dinner to say he wouldn't be coming home, and she spent the evening by herself. On Saturdays, if he could get away, they would drive down to Graveney Holt, but there he was busy with his family, for which his affection was deep and staunch, and with the estate, in the conduct of which he took a keen interest; she felt herself as unnecessary to him as in London. She retired into herself. She was not a woman to make scenes and she was sensible enough to know that they would only irritate Roger. What had she to complain of? Nothing that could be remedied. She remained gracious, pleasant, a trifle silent, and never by a word disclosed that there was an aching emptiness in her heart.

Then the General's agent died and Roger strongly recommended him to engage an old friend of his called Richard Murray. He had been at school with Roger, and for a year at Sandhurst with him; but his mother, a widow, suffering a financial reverse he

had abandoned the notion of going into the Army and had gone into estate agency. May had never met him till she found him installed in the village. She took a fancy to him, and next time Roger came back from abroad told him how much she liked his father's new agent.

"He's a rattling good chap," said Roger. "He's got an amazing gift for friendship. He's as straight as a die and what he doesn't know about his job isn't worth knowing. I think Father's damned lucky to have got hold of him."

May saw a great deal of him when she went down to Graveney. With Jim at Oxford and Tommy at school the house was very quiet, and Dick brought a welcome gaiety into it. He was a bachelor and he came to lunch every Sunday, but Mrs. Henderson asked him in to dinner once or twice a week, and a day seldom passed without his coming to see the General on estate business and stopping for a few minutes to say a few words to the two ladies. Sometimes May met him in the village and they would stop and talk for a little. During the summer holidays he would often come up to make a four at tennis. It gave May pleasure to see him. He was gay, unassuming and easy to talk to. She found that she could say all sorts of things to him that she had never thought of saying to anyone else. She could talk nonsense with him as it was impossible to do with Roger. She was flattered because he found her amusing, and though she told herself that he laughed at her little jests because he laughed easily it was nice to be appreciated. Of course he had charm, immense charm, there was no doubt about that, and it was no wonder that everybody liked him. She asked herself what it was due to. Well, it was the contrast between his grey, strong, curly hair and his bronzed, smooth face; the thick lashes of his blue eyes, and that warm friendly smile that made you feel that his heart went out to you because he had a natural love for his fellow-beings. She had known him for a full year when, in London for a while and as usual alone, she received a note from him to say that he had to come up to town for a night and couldn't they dine together and go to some place to dance. She thought it very sweet of him to take pity on her solitariness and accepted with pleasure. They spent a delightful evening. He was an unexpectedly good dancer and she hadn't danced for months. When he dropped her at her door he suggested that they should repeat the experiment next time he came to London. She agreed without hesitation. It was long since she had enjoyed herself so much.

But when she closed the door behind her, instead of going straight to bed, she went into the empty sitting-room and sat down. She was breathless. When he held her hand to bid her good-bye there had been in his eyes a look so tender, so gentle, so strangely understanding, that it stabbed her to the heart. She knew on a sudden that he had realized how empty her life was and was sorry, wistfully sorry for her. And as suddenly she knew that she was in love with him, and had never been in love before. She was frightened out of her wits. That was the last straw. She had been dissatisfied with life, but resigned and determined to make the best of it, but this was going to be hell. It was bad enough to be starving for bread, and be given a stone, but when the bread was there within your reach and you might not stretch out your hand for it, no, that was too much to put up with. Her strong common sense came to the rescue. There was nothing to be dramatic about. It was only Dick's charm. Charm? People always said it meant nothing. Roger had often told her that one must be wary of people who had it. Dick was

charming to everyone, because he couldn't help it; it had probably never occurred to him that it had such a devastating effect, and there was not the smallest reason to suppose that he cared two straws for her. He was a naturally friendly soul and had wanted to give her a good time. But what had made him see that she was unhappy and lonely? She was sure that never by a word or sign had she betrayed her feeling, and was convinced that neither Roger nor Jane nor anyone else had an inkling of it. But *had* he seen it or was that just her fancy, and had she read in the blueness of his eyes a meaning that was not there? She shrugged her shoulders.

"I dare say it's only because I'm dog-tired," she murmured. "I shall feel quite differently tomorrow."

She went to bed and soon fell into a deep sleep. Next day as she had foreseen, she found herself able to consider the matter with calm. It was no good shutting her eyes to the fact; she was in love; but it never occurred to her for a moment that she could do anything but push back into her inmost heart this new trouble as for so long she had pushed back her frustrated hopes. It was impossible never to see Dick, but she made up her mind not to go down so frequently to Graveney as during Roger's absences she had been in the habit of doing, and should Dick ever ask her again to go dancing with him firmly to refuse. She must try not to think of him. With the world in an unsettled state war might be imminent, Roger told her it was bound to come sooner or later, and to distract her mind she thought it would be a good plan to take up some occupation that would enable her to be useful if it broke out. That very morning she made inquiries about nursing and a couple of days later started upon a course. That had the added advantage that it would give her an excuse not to go down to Graveney except for an occasional week-end. She found that it helped to have work to do and she took it seriously. A month passed without any sign from Dick and she laughed at herself wryly when she thought of the brave resolutions she had made to say no when next he came up to London and asked her to go out with him. She had been right, what she had thought was deep feeling on his part was no more than natural kindliness, and he would be dismayed if he knew the effect it had had on her. But she was angry with herself because she could not but feel a trifle sore.

Then one evening, when she had just got back from the hospital, and was tired and depressed, the telephone bell rang. She answered and the blood rushed to her heart when she heard Dick's voice.

"I'm only in London for the day; I'm going back tonight. I was wondering if you'd give me a spot of dinner."

This was so little what she had expected that she lost her head and did not make the obvious excuse that she was engaged.

"There's nothing much to eat. I was just going to have an egg," she said.

"Oh, that's all right. I'll bring in a *pâté* or something."

It was impossible to say that he mustn't come. And she wanted to see him so badly. His voice over the telephone, that warm, caressing voice, took all her strength away.

"You needn't do that. I'll manage."

"I'll be up at half past seven."

She sent the maid out to buy a sole and some cutlets, had a bath and put on a very simple dress. She seldom used rouge, but her cheeks were so pale that she felt obliged to put on a little. Then, with one eye on the clock, she read the evening paper. The minutes passed with maddening slowness. When she heard the bell ring she started violently; but when he came in and gave her his cordial handshake there was nothing to show that she was not her usual placid and amiable self. He explained that a sudden piece of business had brought him unexpectedly up to London or he would have written and asked her to keep the evening for him. She gave him a glass of sherry. They dined. He talked in his usual fluent, pleasant way, telling her the news of the estate. He asked her advice on some point that was troubling him and when she gave it told her he thought it first-rate and would act on it. She could not but be pleased and flattered. They discussed his plan to introduce modern methods of agriculture. He was in full agreement with her on the necessity of ameliorating housing conditions for the labourers. Their conversation could have been heard by any one and no one could have found in it anything that was not perfectly natural; and yet she had an uneasy feeling that it was not quite natural. She tried to persuade herself that it was only her fancy that he was talking in order to avoid a silence fraught with danger, and that there was in the tone of his voice something strange. The look in his eyes was anxious and did not accord with the sense of his words. Folly. She was reading into them something that was due only to her own imagination.

They finished dinner and went back to the sitting-room. They drank their coffee and May lit a cigarette. Dick asked her if he might smoke his pipe. He was silent while he lit it and then somehow the silence, like an emanation rising from the depths, dark and terrifying, a thing with a sinister life of its own, seized them, thrusting itself between them and yet drawing them together as in a common danger. Though May was looking down at the floor she knew that Dick's eyes were fixed upon her. She felt herself trembling. It was absurd that she could not speak. The silence was unendurable. At last she raised her eyes and they met his. That seemed to break the spell.

"You know, a very awkward thing has happened," he said, still in that strange voice. "I've fallen head over heels in love with you."

She did not say anything. She looked at him and tears filled her eyes and trickled down her face.

"Are you in love with me?"

She still could not speak, she only nodded.

"Bore, isn't it?"

She laughed through her tears. It was so like him to say that.

"D'you think I ought to go away?"

She gave a gasp. Her face was suddenly twisted with anguish.

"No," she cried violently. But she made a great effort to control herself. "The Hendersons wouldn't hear of it. The General thinks you're indispensable."

It was a fact that Dick had brought order into the estate which the last agent, old and none too competent, had allowed to fall into poor condition and for the first time in

years it was being run at a profit. At that rate it would be possible to start paying off the mortgages.

"It's serious, you know," he continued. "It's not just a passing infatuation that I can get over. I'm in it up to the neck and I'm in it for good."

"Where would you go?"

"I don't know. I might get another job as agent somewhere else, or I might emigrate. That's what fellows generally do when they're up a gum tree."

There was another long silence and it was May who broke it.

"Can't we ignore it?" He did not answer and presently she went on. "Why should you throw up a good job and one that suits you? No one need know anything about it. We're not going to do anybody any harm. We needn't even talk about it. It's just something between ourselves."

"I don't think I quite know what you mean."

"I don't love Roger, you know, but I'd never do anything that was—oh, you *must* know what I mean. I think the only thing to do is to go on as we were. After all, we're both decent people, aren't we?"

"Roger's my oldest friend and he got me this job. Of course I wouldn't do the dirty on him."

"Well, then?"

With his elbows on his knees and his face on his clenched fists he fell into deep thought. She watched him anxiously. Every now and then he gave her a troubled glance.

"It's a hell of a situation," he said at last.

"D'you want to go?"

"God, no. It would break my heart," he cried.

"Well, then, let's face it. Surely we've got the strength."

"You don't understand. You think we'll get over it. But I don't want to get over it."

"I don't either. It's all I've got to live for."

They left it at that. He agreed to let things slide and see how they went. She felt that he was prepared to lean on her strength and she exulted in the thought that he was glad to do so. It made her proud and confident.

"Now you'd better go," she said.

"I suppose I had," he answered, getting up. "May I kiss you?"

She did not speak. He took her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers. She had never known that a kiss could mean so much. She threw her arms round his neck.

"Darling, darling, I love you," she murmured.

"My sweet."

The kiss shattered her. When he was gone she stood where he had left her, her hands to her breasts, and felt that at last life had meaning. She was so happy that she felt there was nothing more for her to ask.

She was a very innocent woman. She had been persuaded that they could see one another occasionally and, sharing this secret, continue to act as though they were the casual, happy-go-lucky friends they had been before. It never occurred to her that nature could take a hand in the matter. Sex had not been an important matter in May's life and her relations with her husband had been perfunctory. But now a revolution took place in her. Her imagination would not let her rest and shocking, enchanting dreams troubled her nights. The touch of Dick's hand sent the blood rushing to her heart. The sound of his voice on the telephone made her knees wobble beneath her. She desired him as much as she knew he desired her. Sometimes he would look at her and the passion in his eyes possessed her with all the violence of carnal possession. She knew now what it was that had from the first attracted her to him, his overpowering virility, it called to her with a terrifying force, and she exulted in it. And because she knew that she had the strength never to yield to her desire she did not even attempt to curb it. She gloried in it. It made her feel more alive than ever before. She had a sense of triumph because she could feel something she had never thought to feel. She was ashamed of nothing now. She would stand in her room, stark naked, and look at herself in the glass and revel in the beauty of her slim figure, her breasts small and virginal, and think of Dick's body warm against hers and his arms round her. And she would laugh because everyone thought her cold. But it was not only from sexual desire that she loved Dick; she felt herself so much at home with him, so confidentially at ease. It was balm to her soul merely to be in the same room with him. He was the only person in the world with whom she was not a little shy.

Thus things went on. May's conscience was tranquil because after that first time when Dick told her of his love, he had never even kissed her. Though they had not agreed upon it, by mutual consent, as it were, they took care not to speak of their feelings for each other; and they never said a thing to one another that anyone might not have heard. Of course what made it easier was that May's work at the hospital kept her much in London and that when they met at Graveney it was almost always in the company of others. They could have counted on the fingers of one hand the occasions during that period on which they had been alone together. There was one thing of which May was quite certain, that there was no one at Graveney Holt, neither Jane with her sharp tongue and sharp eyes, nor that Austrian girl the Hendersons had given refuge to, who had the remotest suspicion that Dick was anything more to her than her father-in-law's agent.

But when Roger telegraphed that he would soon be coming home they felt that the situation they must face was insufferable. It revolted May to receive him with the pretence that she was still his loving wife. She knew that after a sexual abstinence that had lasted so long he would want a normal gratification; he was a man, young and strong, with healthy appetites, and though sex had never absorbed him he had his natural share of desire and he needed to satisfy it as he needed to satisfy his desire for food at dinner-time. May had never quite overcome the embarrassment with which the sexual act had filled her and now she felt that she could not possibly submit to it. The thought disgusted her and to commit it with him seemed grossly indecent. With Dick it would have been natural, inevitable, sacred. She had an inkling that Dick was thinking of it too. His eyes were worried and he, so frank and open as a rule, was unusually

silent, as though he were brooding over a subject he could not bring himself to discuss. A day or two before Roger was due, lying in wait to catch him when he came out of the General's study, she stopped him.

"What do you say to my coming to your house this afternoon? I think we ought to have a talk."

"That's O.K. by me," he answered.

She had been there two or three times with Mrs. Henderson to see that his maid of all work kept it clean and tidy, but she had never been to it alone before, nor of late at all. It was a pleasant house, with a walled garden, on the outskirts of the village; but it was large for a single man and Dick only used two of the rooms. He ate in the living-room, comfortable with the technical books of his trade and mystery stories, radio, pipes, tobacco, gramophone records, papers, magazines and all the litter of an untidy bachelor. It had a pleasant, lived-in, cosy feel.

"You know what I wanted to talk about?" she said when she sat down in one of the big, shabby chairs.

"I can guess."

He smiled, but his smile was wan.

"I thought I could go through with it. It seemed possible when Roger was away and wouldn't be back for ages. But now I know I can't."

"God knows I don't want you to. I love you so much, May."

"I know. I love you too. I can't pretend, and I don't believe Roger would want me to. Wouldn't it be better to tell him the truth?"

"I'm all for the truth."

"Heaven knows I've given it a good trial."

"How much in love with you is he?"

They spoke elliptically, leaping over intermediate remarks, for they understood one another so perfectly that you would have fancied they followed one another's thought without the need of speech.

"I don't think he's ever asked himself. He's taken it for granted that a husband loves his wife and a wife loves her husband."

"I owe a great deal to him. He's an awfully good chap. It's beastly to play him a dirty trick like this."

"I know it is. He's a reasonable man; he'll know we couldn't help ourselves."

"You know I haven't a bob except what I earn here. I've got about two hundred pounds in the bank."

"Does that matter?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned."

"I don't see that we've got anything to reproach ourselves with."

"Of course you know what you're giving up. This place and everything that goes with it."

“It’s a prison. It stifles me.”

He knew the idea that was in her mind though she had made no mention of it.

“D’you think he’d let you go?”

“He can’t keep me against my will. I don’t think he’d want to; that’s not in his nature.”

“I suppose it would have been better for you if I’d never come here.”

“Oh, don’t say that. It’s not true.”

He pondered.

“I think you ought to know what you’re in for. Poverty.”

“I’ve been poor before.”

“It won’t make a very pretty story, the son’s wife running off with her father-in-law’s agent.”

“Do you care?”

“Not a damn,” he laughed.

“Neither do I,” she laughed back.

“Come and sit on my knee. God damn it, let’s have something we can blame ourselves for.”

She moved over to him and put her arms round his neck. For the second time he kissed her.

“I feel so intolerably happy,” she murmured.

They talked it over and decided that she should ask Roger to allow himself to be divorced and if he refused they would force him to divorce her by going away together.

And now she had done what they had arranged only to receive the shattering blow that in a few hours the country would be at war. What was there to do now except what she had told Roger she was willing to do? Wait. She smiled when she thought how wrong Roger was when he imagined that she could change. It was funny how such an intelligent man could be so stupid. The dinner-bell rang and May roused herself from her reflections. The maid had got her bath ready. May undressed and stepped into it. She inhaled the pleasant smell of bath salts.

“I shan’t have luxuries like this when I’m married to Dick,” she chuckled.

Roger drove back to London after dinner.

iii

NEXT day at dawn the Germans invaded Poland and forty-eight hours later, on the third of September, Britain was at war. It was Sunday. There was not yet a hint of autumn in the air and the sun shone radiant in a cloudless sky. As you stood on the terrace and gazed at the peaceful scene, so fresh, so green, so mild, so amiable, it was almost impossible to realize that for hours already tanks had been thundering across the Polish frontier and bombers dropping their hideous loads on the defenceless capital. The bells of the little church in the village, the church where generations of Hendersons lay buried, called the parishioners to morning service with their familiar peal. They had a friendly, welcoming sound which, as never before, comforted the anguished heart. Mrs. Henderson and May alone went. They prayed for peace. Dick, as was usual, came to lunch and in the course of the afternoon May found an opportunity to tell him of her conversation with Roger. He listened attentively.

"I see his point," he said when she had finished. "I can wait, darling."

"I can wait too."

"It may take a year to smash 'em, it can't take longer than that, and we've got all our lives before us."

"I'm glad I told him. I'm glad everything is above-board."

He took her hand and gave it a little squeeze. They were happy to be together. They did not even need to talk very much; they had so much confidence in each other that there was no occasion for the common endearments of lovers and their intimacy was such that they found refreshment in one another's silence.

But it was a sad day. No one had the heart to play tennis. They could talk of nothing but the war. They listened to the radio and commented eagerly on every scrap of news they heard. They got Paris and tried to get Warsaw. At six they gathered together to listen to the King's speech. Big Ben struck the hour. It filled the great hall of Graveney Holt with its reverberation. The speech began with these words.

"In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depths of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself."

May and Mrs. Henderson began to cry and Jane nervously painted her scarlet lips.

"The task will be hard. There may be dark days ahead and war can no longer be confined to the battlefield. But we can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God. If one and all we keep resolutely faithful to it, ready for whatever service or sacrifice it may demand, then with God's help we shall prevail. May He bless and keep us all."

For a moment there was an awed silence.

"God save the King," said the General.

"It's no good, I must have a drink after that," cried Ian, his great booming voice husky. "If I weren't the typical strong silent Englishman I think I should probably have a good cry now."

It relieved the tension.

"No one knows what it is to be married to a damned fool like that," exclaimed Jane, "but about once a year he does have a bright idea. For God's sake give me a whisky and soda, Ian, and don't drown it with soda or I'll kill you."

The General and Ian wanted to offer their services at once and so started off for London bright and early next morning. Ian, before his marriage, had been in the Grenadiers and proposed to join his old regiment. Mrs. Henderson, Jane and May followed a little later. Mrs. Henderson had a plan and since she thought she might need Roger's help phoned him to ask if he could possibly look in at Jane's house between five and six. But when they had been gone about an hour Dora asked Jim if he would drive her up to town. She was worried by her position as an enemy alien and wished to go to the Home Office to find out for herself where she actually stood.

"Oh, you'll be all right," he said. "Father'll settle all that."

"Your father's got more important things to do than to fuss about me," she insisted. "Please."

He had looked forward to spending the day alone with her.

"It seems rather rough on Tommy to leave him all alone," he said.

"Oh, he'll be all right. He can amuse himself," she answered a trifle impatiently.

Graveney Holt was only ten miles from the sea.

"I thought we might go and have a bathe. It'll be beastly in London in this heat."

"I must go. Really. If you won't take me I shall go by train."

"Oh, all right," he smiled. "Of course I'll take you."

She slipped her arm through his. She had got her way.

"Couldn't we dine together and come down after dinner?"

Jim gave a little gasp of delight and his face lit up.

"Come on then, we'll have a lark."

When they arrived in London she told him that she wished to go about her business alone. She thought it probable that she would have to wait about for hours and would not hear of it when he told her that he would be only too glad to wait with her. She was quite firm.

"It would get on my nerves. It would only make me impatient to think I was trying your patience."

He suggested then that she should go to Jane's when she was through and he would wait for her there.

"I shall have to tell Mother that we've come up to town and shan't be back till late."

"I don't think I shall go to your sister's. She doesn't like me."

"Oh, what nonsense. Of course she likes you."

Dora shook her pretty head with decision.

"That's what you think," she said tartly. "I know."

They arranged to meet at six in St. James's Park at Queen Anne's Gate and go to a newsreel before dinner. She left him with a smile and a jaunty wave of the hand. Jim watched her thread her way through the crowd in Parliament Street till he lost sight of her. He liked her gallant carriage and the energy of her walk. Because he had nothing to do he went to the National Gallery, but finding that the pictures had been put away, went to the club to which he had recently been elected. He found no one there he knew. He read the early editions of the evening papers and then the news on the tape. He lunched. Then, over a cup of coffee in the smoking room, he surrendered himself to his reflections. They were none too pleasant. He hated war; he thought it senseless and criminal. He had long declared that he would take no part in it if it broke out and now the moment had come to show that he had meant what he said. He knew that a lot of the fellows who had thought with him, who had been so loud in their denunciations of the folly of war, would be carried away by the wave of patriotism that was sweeping the country, and, cravenly forsaking their principles, hasten to join up. He would only despise himself if he followed their example. They would say he was a coward; it wasn't true. If they only knew how much more courage it needed to stand up alone and friendless against common opinion than to stand side by side with your comrades and let yourself be shot at! They would say he was soft and feared the hardship and discomfort, the cold, the wet, the intolerable boredom of trench life; that wasn't true either. It wasn't very pleasant to see the finger of scorn pointed at you, but it was much worse to lose your soul alive. Now was the time to prove what stuff he was made of; he would be ashamed to surrender now. His self-respect was at stake and whatever the consequences he must follow the dictates of his conscience. He loved his father and mother and he knew that his decision must cause them bitter pain. Jane would mock him and Tommy would be aghast. He didn't quite know how Roger would take it. Oh, yes, he did. With icy disapproval. Oh, well, none of that could be helped. He must put up with whatever came. He was in for a bad time all right. Thank God he had the strength to endure it. He had made up his mind and nothing that anyone could say should make him swerve from the clear path of duty. You would never have thought it possible for that pleasant young face to assume an expression of such stern determination.

"Sooner or later there must be a show-down," he said to himself. "And the sooner the better."

He made up his mind at the first opportunity to tell them all what he had resolved and to clarify his thoughts sat down at a desk and wrote them out as succinctly as he could. When he had finished he glanced at the clock. His mother should be at Jane's now and he might just as well go there and wait till it was time to meet Dora. His eyes softened as he thought of her and his moody look grew tender. She understood him and sympathized with him and believed in him. Nothing mattered really as long as he didn't lose her. He loved her with all his heart. If she'd have him he'd marry her tomorrow. She was beautiful. But she was more than that; she was good and clever and brave. It was not only love he felt for her; it was deep respect. Though she was but a year

younger than himself he knew there was much he could learn from her. She made him feel very humble.

He left the club, got into his car and driving down St. James's Street crossed the Park. Jane had a little Georgian house in Westminster, close to the Abbey, and with her infallible sense of unfitness had furnished it in a style of aggressive modernity, so that her drawing-room with its chromium plate, cubist pictures and fantastic draperies looked more like the waiting-room of a beauty parlour than a room in which any human being could take his ease. She was dressed to suit her setting and with her marcelled and dyed hair, her painted face and her monocle would have made a caricaturist throw up his hands in despair. His malice could not have made her more absurd than she had made herself. She was the only person there whom the events of the last three days appeared not to have touched. Mrs. Henderson and May were subdued. They had been to Westminster Abbey and were still shaken by the sight, tragic and yet heartening, of the many people silently praying. The General and Ian, who had just arrived, were having a drink. Jim told his mother how he chanced to be in London and added that he was taking Dora out to dinner.

"I'm glad," she said, smiling at him fondly. "Sometimes I'm afraid it's very dull for her in the country. It'll do her good to see a bit of life for a change."

"What happened to you at the War Office?" Jim asked Ian.

"Need you ask?" answered Jane before he could speak. "Did you ever see anyone look more like a bear with a sore head?"

"Can you wonder?" he exploded. "I went and told them I wanted to rejoin my old regiment and some damned little whipper-snapper told me I was too old. Me! Too old at forty. I'm in the prime of life."

"I tried to see Hore-Belisha," said the General, "but he was busy, and I only saw his private secretary. I told him I didn't mind what I did as long as I did something. I can't say he was very encouraging. 'This is going to be a young man's war,' he said."

"But, damn it, I am a young man," Ian boomed. "I tell you this, I'm going to get into it somehow. Roger ought to be able to wangle something for me."

Mrs. Henderson turned to her husband.

"George dear, May and I have been talking things over and with your approval I want to take some evacuated children. If we made the large drawing-room and the ball-room into dormitories I think we could accommodate fifty or sixty."

"Of course it'll be an upset," he said, "but in these times we mustn't think of that. It'll give you something to do, my dear, and what's more, something very much worth while."

"May and I can look after them and I'm sure Dora'll be only too glad to give a hand. You know how competent she is."

"She's that all right."

Mrs. Henderson went on to explain in detail what arrangements she and May had devised and they were still discussing them when Roger came in. Ian attacked him at once.

"Look here, Roger, I want to have a word with you."

"Give me a drink, old boy. I know exactly what you're going to say. You want to get back into uniform and so does Father. You must have patience. Before we're through with this show every man and woman in this country will be wanted. Don't make any mistake, it's going to be a long and terrible business."

He looked very soldierly in his uniform, a fine and upright figure, and there was a cheerful composure in his manner that inspired confidence. He gave May a friendly little nod and she smiled faintly in return. He sat down beside his mother and as soon as she was sure of his attention she told him of her plan. He made one or two suggestions and promised to find out what she must do to put it into effect. May knew he must have important matters to think about, and much to do, and she could not help admiring the kindly patience with which he listened to his mother's long-winded explanations. He was a good son and a good friend. He was the sort of man you could rely on, but he was the sort of man you couldn't love. May had entered into Mrs. Henderson's scheme with eagerness not only because she was anxious to do whatever she could in the emergency, but also because it offered an escape from a situation that had caused her disquiet. Their flat was small; there were a living-room and a dining-room, there were two rooms behind the kitchen for the cook and the maid, a bedroom with twin beds for Roger and her, and a smaller one that had been intended for the use of the expected baby. They had taken the flat with the idea that it would do for two or three years and when other babies made it necessary to have more space they would move into a larger one. But no baby had come and Roger had turned the extra room into a study where he could keep his books and papers and receive visitors whom it was imprudent for him to see at the War Office. Of course this room could be turned into a bedroom but it might be that he would need it now more than ever; moreover, she felt a certain embarrassment at suggesting that they should no longer share the same room; it was an awkward thing to do, and Jane who liked to look in on her when she had nothing better to do would soon find out what she had done, and then the whole family would know that there was a change in their relations. It was part of the spirit of her bargain with Roger that the arrangement he had agreed to should remain a secret between them. Mrs. Henderson's plan solved the difficulty. May would be living at Graveney for the duration of the war and Roger could have the flat to himself.

"Oh, and there's something else, Roger," said Mrs. Henderson, when she had finished with the children, "I wanted to talk to you about Dora. She's afraid she'll be interned, but there's no risk of that really, is there?"

"They'll round up the German men, but I don't suppose they'll bother about the women."

"She's not German, she's Austrian. Your father and I are prepared to vouch for her."

"The difficulty is that you live within five miles of—" he hesitated for an instant "—of a military objective."

"You needn't be so mysterious about it, Roger," said Jim, a trifle acidly. "Everyone in the county knows that you've taken over the land to build a secret airfield there."

Roger shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose that's so. But we're going to take damned good care that the Germans don't, and I don't suppose the authorities will want aliens living in the immediate neighbourhood." He turned again to his mother. "What do you know about this girl?"

Mrs. Henderson told him Dora's moving story.

"With all those children in the house she'll be invaluable. You know Jane isn't much use at that sort of thing."

"None," interjected Jane.

"And May and I couldn't possibly manage alone."

"What do you think of this girl, May?" he asked.

"Dora's a good worker and she's willing to put her hand to anything. She couldn't dislike the Germans more."

"No one could be more anti-Nazi than she is," Mrs. Henderson went on. "Her stories of the way the Germans treated those poor Austrians when they seized the country simply make your blood boil."

"What's her name?" asked Roger.

"Dora Friedberg."

"I'll just make a note of it in case of need," he said, taking out his note-book and scribbling in it. "In your place I wouldn't worry just yet. When the regulations for aliens are issued Father can go and talk it over with the chief constable. If he guarantees her I expect it'll be all right."

"Shall you be going over to France, Roger?" asked the General.

"I'm trying to wangle it. I certainly don't want to spend the war sitting in an office in Whitehall."

"What d'you think's going to happen in Poland?"

"The Poles were very confident when I left. My own impression is that they can't hold out for more than three months."

"No longer than that?"

"Well, that'll be something. It'll give us time to look round and get a bit more ready than we are now."

He turned to Jim and with the affectionate look in his eyes that always came in to them when he talked with any member of his own family, jokingly asked him:

"Well, old boy, how d'you like the prospect of forming fours in a barrack square?"

Jim did not answer for a moment. The time had come and it seemed to him that his hands and feet had suddenly gone cold. He went very white. He glanced round the room and because he was nervous his eyes were hostile when they met Roger's.

"I don't like it at all," he said deliberately. "I'm not going to do it."

Mrs. Henderson smothered an exclamation and looked anxiously at her husband. He stared at Jim as though he couldn't believe his ears. Jane, her lips compressed in disapproval, took out her lipstick and began to paint them. Roger knew nothing of Jim's pacifist views; he had not seen him for some time and for one reason or another no one

had thought fit to tell him. He gave Jim a quick, puzzled glance and then after a moment's pause, laughed.

"You'll have to, old boy. You'll be called up and you'd much better go of your own accord. It looks better, you know."

Jim did not move. It was with something like scorn on his face that he answered. He was sure of himself now.

"I think war is horrible and senseless. What did the last war do? Killed millions of men and left as many men halt, lame and blind. And what for? To start again after twenty years of misery and unrest. If you like to be such damned fools as to fight you can. I'm not going to."

No one spoke for a while. Roger looked at his brother reflectively.

"I didn't know you were a pacifist, Jim," he said as casually as he might have said that he didn't know his brother was a vegetarian.

"Well, you know now."

Roger turned to the General.

"Did you know about this, Father?" he asked with an air of half-amused indulgence.

The General made a little gesture of helpless bewilderment.

"I knew that Jim went about saying he was a pacifist. I didn't take it very seriously; I thought it was just a lot of undergraduate nonsense and if war came he'd forget it."

Jim grew angry. His brother's manner, his father's words, making him seem like a naughty, troublesome child, deeply affronted him. But he controlled himself.

"You were wrong, Father," he said, rising to his feet and speaking with all the earnestness of which he was capable. "I think that war is wicked. At Oxford I signed a solemn declaration that if it broke out I would take no part in it. You despise me because I won't break my word. I should despise myself if I did."

"No one despises you, old boy," said Roger. "We're only trying to understand."

His voice was conciliatory, almost caressing, and there was a loving kindness in his eyes. May, watching him, recognized that look. They were attached to one another with an unusual love, the members of that family, and though you married into it, though they were fond and indulgent, you remained, in some strange way, outside it. They never felt completely themselves except in one another's company. Jim frowned. It would have been easier if his brother had upbraided him, he could have coped with bitter words, but that gentle tone, the deep affection in those eyes so like his own, nearly broke him. He clenched his hands, but when he spoke he hardly knew his own voice.

"I believe in God. I believe in peace and goodwill to all men. I believe that if humanity is to advance we must tear hate out of our hearts and put love in its place. This isn't the moment to hesitate. It's now that we've got to make our stand, we who hate war, and bear witness to our faith."

Roger answered with a deep seriousness equal to his own.

"We all hate war, old boy. But we think our honour is at stake."

“Poland!” Jim cried scornfully. “It was Belgium last time. What will it be next? Afghanistan? Ecuador? Bunk!”

“And we think our freedom is at stake. We’re fighting for everything that makes life worth living.”

Jim interrupted him hotly.

“We’re going to make the world safe for democracy a second time. Really, Roger. I thought you were intelligent.”

Meanwhile Ian, redder in the face than ever, had been puffing and blowing and now could restrain himself no longer.

“But look here, Jim, if the Germans start invading this country d’you mean to say you’re not going to resist?”

Jim turned on him angrily.

“Good God, Ian, don’t bring up all those stale arguments over again. We’re sick to death of them. No, I’m not. And if they come to my house and take everything that’s in it, I’ll let them take it. And if they try to rape my sister——”

Before he could finish Jane broke in with a shrill cackle of laughter.

“Don’t bother about that, Jim. I shall know how to deal with that perfectly.”

He flushed. He gave Jane a piteous look and his voice was not quite steady when he continued.

“D’you think I like to find myself in this position? D’you think I like disappointing you and angering you? It would be so much easier to toe the line and put my principles in my pocket. But I can’t. I tell you I can’t. They can beat me, they can put me in prison, they can stand me up against a wall and shoot me—I will not serve in the Army, I will not kill, I will not do anything to help others to kill.”

“No one’s going to put you up against a wall and shoot you, old boy,” said Roger mildly. “You’ll have to go before a tribunal and state your reasons for refusing military service, and if they’re accepted you’ll be put to some work unconnected with the war.”

“That I’m quite willing to do.”

Roger gazed at his brother and in his harassed eyes was now a deep compassion.

“I’m afraid you’re in for a rather rough time, old boy.”

“I can’t help that. I’ve got to do my duty as I see it.”

“We’ve all got to do that.”

Roger took a cigarette case from his pocket and took out a cigarette. He tapped one end against the silver. He seemed lost in thought.

“Is there anything more you want to say to me?” Jim asked aggressively.

“Nothing.”

“Then I’ll go. I’ve got to meet Dora. Good night, Mother. Good night, Father.”

He glanced at his father and for a moment, staring, stood stock still. He was as taken aback as though someone for no reason had suddenly struck him. Tears, scalding tears were trickling down that worn, lined face. It was such a dreadful sight that Jim

gasped. Then, with a hoarse cry of anguish, he flung out of the room. For a while no one spoke.

"I'm afraid this is a bad blow for you, Father," said Roger, at last.

Mrs. Henderson got up and sat beside her husband. She took his handkerchief out of his pocket and put it in his hand. He took it and dried his eyes. He tried to laugh.

"I'm sorry to make such an exhibition of myself."

"Don't take it too hard, darling," she said.

"I'm so ashamed. I don't know what I did wrong. The boy couldn't have turned out like that if I hadn't been somehow to blame." He sighed. "The world of today is too much for me. I've lived too long; it's about time I made way for you, Roger, my boy."

There was another silence and then Mrs. Henderson spoke.

"The boy's got a right to his own opinions. After all, that's one of the things we're fighting for. I don't suppose it was easy for him to say the things he did just now and I'm afraid he's dreadfully unhappy. He's doing what he thinks is right. I beseech you all not to make it harder for him."

"Are we expected to treat him as if he was a damned fine fellow?" asked Jane acidly.

You would never have thought that Mrs. Henderson's face could assume an expression of such sternness. Jane lowered her eyes before her mother's imperious gaze.

"You're expected to treat him as my dearly loved son. The laws of England give him the right to do what he feels is his duty. No one in my family shall blame him. I will allow none of you by anything you say or anything you do to hurt him."

iv

JIM drove through the quiet streets of Westminster, crossed Victoria Street and parked his car at the entrance to St. James's Park. He went in. It was early and Dora wouldn't be there yet, but that was just as well, for he was shattered, and he needed a little while to compose himself. He longed for her. He had never wanted her as he wanted her now. He knew he was doing the right thing, but he was wretched and she would comfort him. She was wise and good. It had been a great happiness to him to discover that she was in complete agreement with him in his opinions. She was indeed as ardent a pacifist as himself. Though like him she knew the actual horror of war only from hearsay she had the personal experience of its bitter aftermath. She had seen the despair of industrious workers who could get no work and had to sit by while their children died of starvation; she had seen the grey faces of the gaunt and hungry; she had seen the bitterness that warped the souls of those for whom tomorrow must be as hopeless as today; she had seen the brave grow cowardly, the generous mean and the honest deceitful; she had seen hatred grow up in the hearts of those who had nothing for those who had a pittance; she had seen class venomously attacking class; she had seen virtue perish, and all that lent grace to life; and the values that give man his dignity, honour, truth, loyalty, uprightness, made the mock of fools and scoundrels. And what had brought it about? A stupid, senseless war, a war brought about by greedy, ambitious, unscrupulous knaves. The misery of half a continent was the price of defeat.

And what was the reward of victory? Profiteers had made fortunes. Night clubs had raked in money hand over fist. Restaurants had done thriving business. Motor car manufacturers had sold a multitude of cars. Unemployment reached staggering proportions. The miners starved. The dole sapped the independence and the spirit of those who found in it a miserable subsistence. The moneyed wasted their substance in witless dissipation. It seemed as though the only sensible thing was to have a good time and the only foolish one to count the cost. You were honest and sober, chaste and decent; oh God, what a bloody prig! To take serious things seriously; oh, my pet, how shy-making! Virtue and valour—Christ, what a crashing bore! Flippancy took the place of wit and cynicism of wisdom. Vice was no longer shameful, sloth abject and intemperance discreditable. To be a gigolo was an honourable profession and if a kept woman gave good enough parties half the world would scramble for invitations to them. That was what the war had brought to England, an upper class dead to its responsibilities, a middle class that had renounced its standards and a working class, ill-housed, ill-fed and resentful.

Victors and vanquished, they had both been defeated. And now, fools and knaves, they had blundered into war again. No matter what they thought of him, no matter the pain and the anguish, the disgrace and humiliation, Jim swore that he for his part would be true to his conviction. It happened that he was walking by the ornamental water, and suddenly growing conscious of the pretty charming scene he stopped to look at it. An engaging smile broke on his lips as his eyes fell on the two pelicans that were waddling on the grass with an air of self-importance. Ducks of bright plumage were swimming

on the water and one of them dived down every now and then and you saw its tail flutter jauntily on the surface. Mothers with their children playing about them were sitting on the public benches. Here and there on a chair, reading a book, was a tired-looking woman. Jim sauntered on. There was an old gentleman on a bench reading an evening paper. A couple of soldiers in khaki strolled along and a Canadian trooper asked him the way to Parliament Street. The trees were in full leaf, as yet untouched by approaching autumn, and the flower beds were gay with dahlias. There was a peculiar charm in that little park in the middle of the city; it was very graceful, rural and at the same time urbane; and to a well-read youth like Jim it had a pleasant aroma of the eighteenth century. Here Tom Jones had taken the air with Lady Bellaston and Lady Teazle had listened to the blandishments of Joseph Surface. And here his own ancestors, Hendersons in tie wigs and embroidered coats, their womenfolk in hoops, with powdered hair, had hob-nobbed with the great world of fashion when they came to London on their periodical visits. Jim's heart sank when he thought that destruction must inevitably visit that happy pleasance. They said that only those who had known London before the last war knew the enchantment of life. What would they say if they were unfortunate enough to live through the next? He sought in one comprehensive look to take in what his eyes beheld so that it might be a permanent possession that nothing could erase from his sensibility. Its beauty rested him.

But he looked at his watch. It was still early and he rambled on. The air was delicious on that warm summer evening and there was something stimulating in the vague, dull roar of the city north and south of the park. It was as exciting in its way as when things, momentous things, are happening behind a closed door and you await the outcome of you know not what. Suddenly he caught sight of Dora. She was sitting on a bench talking to a woman. He was surprised, for to the best of his belief she didn't know a soul in London. The woman was talking rapidly and emphatically and Dora, her eyes fixed on her, was nodding every now and then as though to show she followed and understood. She was so much absorbed that she did not see him till he came close enough to hear that the stranger was talking German. It was the woman who noticed him first and she abruptly stopped speaking. Dora gave a start and the colour flushed her cheeks.

"Oh, Jim, I didn't expect you yet; I never heard you come up. It made me jump."

The woman looked at him for a moment and it struck him that her gaze was strangely cold, then she got up, gave Dora a curt nod and with brisk steps walked away.

"Who was that?" he asked as he sat down beside her.

"I've no idea. She was sitting on the bench when I came. She saw I was a foreigner and began to talk to me. She's a refugee. She told me her story. It was pitiful and the tragic part is that one can do nothing to help her. I felt so sorry for her."

"She looked a pretty determined sort of woman. I expect she'll make out all right."

"Give me a cigarette, will you? What have you been doing all day?"

"Nothing very much."

His tone was so despondent that she gave him a look. He was pale and drawn.

"Is anything the matter? You look dreadfully tired."

“I’m all in. I told them. That I wasn’t going to join up, I mean. They were all there. It was awfully painful. My father cried.”

“Why?” she asked tartly.

“He thinks it such a disgrace. He’s ashamed. He doesn’t begin to understand my point of view.”

She was silent for a moment and her face grew sullen. He went on.

“You mustn’t think too hardly of him. He’s an old man and we’ve been in the Army for generations. You see, he thinks if you’re not a soldier you might just as well be a chimney-sweep. And when there’s a war on he can’t conceive of one’s not moving heaven and earth to get in.”

“Was your brother angry with you?”

“Not angry exactly. Kind with the tolerant kindness with which you’d treat someone who was just a bit dotty.” Jim gave a mournful chuckle. “I don’t think life is going to be very pleasant at home.”

Dora gave her shoulders a shrug that might have meant anything.

“Did your mother say anything to your brother about me?” she asked.

A smile broke on his lips. He was glad to talk about her.

“Yes. He made a note of your name. He says it’ll be all right and I’m sure it will. It would be monstrous to intern you. After all, you’re not German, you’re Austrian, and the rotten deal you’ve had entitles you to some consideration.”

“The fact remains that I’m an enemy alien.”

“You needn’t be, you know,” he smiled.

His meaning was plain and she made a slight gesture, but what it signified he couldn’t have said. He took her hand and she let him hold it, but did not speak. A passer-by looked at them inquisitively and smiled as he went on. Jim waited till he was out of earshot.

“Darling, won’t you marry me?”

She withdrew her hand and looked down. There was the shadow of a frown between her eyes.

“If you were my wife you’d be a British subject and then the authorities would have nothing to say.”

She seemed to hesitate for an instant. She gave him a little smile with her lips, but her eyes were grave.

“You’re sweet, Jim. No, I can’t marry you.”

“Why not? I love you. You know how passionately I love you. I thought you cared for me.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to your father and mother. They’ve been so kind to me; I couldn’t repay their kindness like that. They’d hate your marrying me.”

“I don’t believe it. They want me to get married.”

“Perhaps. But not to a penniless, middle-class foreigner. Even if she had half a dozen babies they’d resent her.”

Jim sighed. He couldn’t expect Dora with her cleverness not to have discovered that his father, now Roger had failed him, looked to his second son to produce the heir on whom his heart was set. He realized that a high-spirited, idealistic girl was justified in disliking to be treated like a brood-mare.

“I need you so badly, darling. I’m going to have a rotten time, make no mistake about that; I can bear it. But I need you.”

“It would only make it harder for you if you had an Austrian wife.”

“I wouldn’t care. Then they couldn’t take you away from me. Oh, Dora, say yes. I promise you you’ll never regret it.”

She looked at him with her fine, candid eyes and leaning towards him lightly kissed his cheek.

“Don’t let’s decide now. Let’s think it over. I don’t want them to take me away, you can be very sure of that. It wouldn’t suit my book at all. If there’s any danger of that, then yes, let’s get married.”

She said it so lightly, so charmingly, that his heart was uplifted.

“I’ve got half a mind to denounce you as a German spy so as to force your hand,” he said gaily.

She laughed.

“That wouldn’t be very nice of you.”

“You might say you don’t positively dislike me.”

“You’re more nearly a civilized being than anyone else I’ve met in this country. I wouldn’t be surprised to discover that I was madly in love with you.”

“My angel.”

She put up her hands in protest against the passionate embrace she foresaw.

“Not here. It’s really too public. Didn’t you say you were going to take me to a newsreel?”

They got up and strolled out of the Park. As they came to the gate a newsboy ran past with a late edition of the *Star*.

“Paper. Paper,” he shouted. “Liner *Athenia* sunk. Paper. Paper.”

v

MRS. HENDERSON went to work without delay for it was urgent in as short a time as possible to get the house ready to receive the children she designed to take. Everyone expected London to be heavily bombed and the hospitals were instructed to make preparations to accommodate several thousand casualties. Such of the sick as could be moved were sent to the country and those who could without danger be discharged were returned to their homes. There was an air-raid warning on the first day of the war and great numbers of people, many in fun, many in fear, the majority because they thought it was expected of them, hurried to the inadequate shelters. The authorities were pressing for the evacuation of children and the trains out of London were crowded with them. It was hard at such short notice to find suitable accommodation for that daily stream.

Mrs. Henderson cleared the ball-room of its furniture and placed cots, hurried down from London, in two rows along the walls; she emptied the great drawing-room and made it into a play-room; and the big dining-room, used only for large parties, was turned into a refectory. That left the hall, decorated by William Kent and one of the show-pieces of the house, a smaller dining-room, a smaller drawing-room, and the library, its carving by Grinling Gibbons, for their own use. On Roger's advice she had decided to start with thirty children and they came in two batches, one of twelve and the next of eighteen. They came from Stepney and they were from four to twelve years old; some were decent enough, the children of respectable working-men, but others only too shamefully betrayed their parents' debasing poverty. They were ragged and lousy. They had to be washed and scrubbed and clothes had to be provided for them. The little ones were easy enough to deal with, but some of the older ones, especially the boys, were hard to control; they were of dirty habits, foul-mouthed and wilfully destructive. Two or three at first seemed quite unmanageable. They broke whatever was breakable and with eager little feet mischievously trampled on the flower beds in the garden so that not a flower was left standing. Some had never sat at a table before to eat their meals, but had eaten them on the floor, and when they were made to sit at table in obstinate rage threw everything within reach on the ground. But perhaps those most difficult to deal with were the homesick. They felt frightened and lonely in the big house in the depths of the country, and hankered for the noisy, squalid streets of the London slums. Then there were the mothers who came down for the day to see their children. Some were glad to have them out of harm's way and though they missed them could not but see that to live a healthy life in the country was good for them. They felt instinctively that they could entrust them to the kind lady who spoke so nicely. But others were more difficult. They were dissatisfied with the plain, wholesome food Mrs. Henderson gave the children and complained that they were starved. It was a grievance that she provided fresh milk instead of canned. Mean, they called it; they were convinced that she was getting money for the children's keep from the Government and didn't try to conceal their belief that she was making a good thing out of it. They resented the neat clothes she had bought for them; it was an aspersion on their ability to

clothe their children decently; and because they were all dressed alike anyone would have thought "they was charity." Nor did they hold with "all them baths" Mrs. Henderson insisted on their having. "They'll only catch their death of cold, poor little things," they protested. Several indeed insisted on taking their children away. Others came in their place, and it was a toss-up if they would be nice and well behaved or little ruffians bent on making trouble.

But in a few weeks, by a combination of firmness and kindliness, Mrs. Henderson succeeded in establishing an influence even over the most obstreperous. Her tender heart was glad when she saw how with good food to eat and good air to breathe they filled out and their cheeks grew rosy. The most acid of the mothers were obliged to acknowledge that they seemed to be doing all right and were ready to admit in a funny shamefaced way that "the old girl wasn't 'alf bad really." It was a triumph for Mrs. Henderson when a fierce, hard-featured woman, the mother of six, said to her:

"You're a lady and no mistake, and I don't mind who hears me say it."

But it was hard work. The men servants had gone, the butler to drive a truck and the two footmen into training, so that only the women servants were left. By the time Mrs. Henderson, May and Dora had tucked the children up in their cots for the night they were exhausted. The older ones went to the village school and so were kept out of mischief for some part of the day. May and Dora took it in turns to look after the others.

Dora, as Mrs. Henderson had predicted, was invaluable. She was more severe than either May or Mrs. Henderson could bring themselves to be, and Mrs. Henderson had to remind her once or twice that they were only children, children who had never had a chance to learn and so too much could not be expected of them, but there was no doubt that she knew how to keep them in order. They did not like her as much as they liked Mrs. Henderson or May, but they respected her. They soon learnt that when she told them to do anything she meant it should be done.

A curious incident occurred soon after the outbreak of war. Jim was looking at an illustrated paper and saw a picture of the staff of the German embassy leaving London. He showed it to Dora.

"Look at that," he said. "Isn't that the old girl you were talking to in St. James's Park the other evening when we were up in town?"

It was a tall, dark woman with marked features. Dora gave the picture a glance.

"I shouldn't think so," she said casually. "That woman said she was a refugee."

"It's the same hat. And she has the same hard look. I wonder if she really was a refugee."

"Well, if she was trying to get anything out of me she didn't succeed," Dora answered with her frank smile.

Jim thought no more about it. But when his father came down for the week-end and just as a matter of curiosity he thought he would show him the picture he couldn't find the paper. He wondered where it had got to. The General, despairing of getting anything better to do, was working at the central office of the Red Cross and only came down for week-ends. He treated Jim as kindly as he had always done, but avoided being alone with him; and Jim, his nerves on edge, felt that now and then his father's

eyes rested on him with a sort of unhappy perplexity. But when he deliberately looked at him, his father looked away. May and Mrs. Henderson talked to him with invariable cordiality but of indifferent things, and never mentioned the subject that divided them. Once he tried to broach it with his mother.

"Oh, Jim, let's not discuss it," she said. "Presumably you've made up your mind and nothing I can say will change it."

"Am I making you very wretched?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

One Sunday morning when they were at breakfast he found a letter on his plate. He opened it and taking out its contents showed it to them.

"The first white feather," he said.

The General and Mrs. Henderson stared at it aghast. May in embarrassment looked down and Dora gazed at him with a singular expression in her blue eyes. Jim examined the postmark.

"Not very far from home," he remarked. "I wonder which of our kind friends had the thought."

With a smile on his lips he put the feather in the button hole of his coat. The General rose from the table and walked out of the room. The others finished breakfast in silence.

In due course he received a summons from the local tribunal that had been established to hear the pleas of those who had been called up and claimed exemption from military service. He had courage and it was without fear of the ordeal before him that on the appointed morning he drove to the neighbouring town of Lewes. He was a trifle disconcerted by the appearance of the other conscientious objectors who were gathered in the hall waiting for the members of the tribunal to enter. There were seven of them and, with the exception of an agricultural labourer with an honest, open face, they were miserable, undersized, weakly creatures. It wasn't very pleasant company to be in. Jim, tall and stalwart, felt ill at ease when he looked at them; they wouldn't have been of much use in the Army anyway; they were such a pitiable crew, they gave his convictions a shoddiness that momentarily shook him. One, the first to be heard, was obviously filled with self-conceit and when he was asked on what he based his claim made a long, rhetorical harangue flaunting his communist beliefs. He was a haberdasher by trade. He refused not only to serve in the Army, but to do anything that was even remotely connected with a capitalist war. He challenged the tribunal to send him to prison. The labourer, whose case was heard next, came under a different category. He belonged to a small and obscure sect called the Twelve Apostles. In this strange and heartless world its adherents sought to carry out to the letter the precepts of Jesus Christ. It was moving to hear that plain, unlettered man proclaim in halting words his earnest faith. There could be no doubt of his sincerity. He took them far back, those who were there to decide and those who were there to be heard, and with an astonished awe you felt that you were listening to one who might himself have been a disciple of the Nazarene. Jim was deeply affected. That good man's idealism was a ray of sunshine

that flooded his heart with light and when his own turn came he faced his judges with manly confidence. He knew personally the members of the tribunal and the chairman was an intimate friend of his father's; but if any of them thought it strange that he should appear before them they showed no sign of it. Jim read the short statement he had prepared and answered the questions that were put to him.

"Are you prepared to work on the land?" the chairman asked.

"Yes, sir. I'll do that very gladly."

"Very well."

Exemption was granted him.

There were several farms on the Graveney estate, but the tribunal had stipulated that he should not work with one of his father's tenants, so next day he applied for a job to a farmer who cultivated his own land.

"Conchie, are you?" the farmer asked him.

"Yes."

"You look a strong, husky young fellow. Have you ever done a day's work in your life?"

"Not the sort of work you mean."

The man looked him up and down as though he were a strange animal.

"Well, I don't mind giving you a trial. I'm short of hands. All my young chaps are in the Army and I suppose I must put up with any riff-raff I can get."

Jim found a room in a cottage near by that belonged to a couple whose son had joined up. He was glad to get away from home. He was sensitive, and the fact that the others, his father, his mother, May, avoided any reference to his inglorious situation exasperated his nerves more than if they had openly condemned it. He felt like a man who has come back to his family after a term of imprisonment and who knows that they are always on their guard to see that no remark escapes their lips to wound him. He was at ease only with Dora. But since the children had descended upon them she had been kept too busy to have much time to give him; and he had to content himself with an occasional stroll in the park or a few minutes' conversation when he chanced to catch her by herself. He reproached her sometimes because he saw so little of her, but she told him she thought it wise that they shouldn't seem to be too intimate.

"I don't want anyone to suspect that there's anything between us till we've finally made up our minds."

"I've made mine up," he said.

"I haven't."

Her retort would have made him angry and unhappy if she hadn't accompanied it with such a radiant smile.

The farm on which Jim had found work was only six miles away and it was arranged that he should come home every Sunday to spend the day. But that would give him small chance of seeing Dora alone and he exacted a promise from her that now and then, when she could get away, she would meet him of an evening at a little

Elizabethan cottage that stood on the brow of a low hill near the high road but just within one of the park gates. It was only a short bicycle ride from Graveney. It had a thatched roof and though tiny was habitable; indeed a cranky uncle of the General's had lived in it for years and in recollection of that the Hendersons still spoke of it as Uncle Algy's cottage. But in the neighbourhood it was known as Badger's. Jim had always hoped that Roger, when he succeeded to the property, would let him have it for his own; and he liked to take Dora there and plan the alterations they would make in it.

"It would be perfect for you and me," he told her, looking at her with fond eyes.

"It certainly has a lovely view," she smiled.

Situated as it was on an elevation you could see from its windows a great stretch of the surrounding country.

"All Sussex is spread before you," he said proudly.

"It's sweet."

"I can't see any reason why we shouldn't get married right away and come and live here."

"You must be very stupid then. I've told you often enough."

He sighed. He knew by now that when once she had made up her mind no appeal could shake her. She had decided that to marry him would be a shabby trick to play on his father and mother who had been so kind to her, and though he thought her notion unreasonable he could not but esteem the delicacy of her scruple.

"All the same I wish you weren't so damned high-minded," he said.

vi

It was a lovely autumn. Towards the end of September Tommy went back to school. But by then a Russian army had entered eastern Poland and with the invasion, Polish resistance collapsed. Warsaw surrendered. The victors divided the spoils between them. The first brief chapter of the war was written. British troops in a steady stream were ferried across the Channel and Roger went on the staff of the Commander in Chief. Winter set in. Dick Murray was with his regiment in the wilds of Norfolk. Though it had been a grief to see him go, May was relieved that he was no longer there to drop in at odd moments. She felt that she must keep not only to the letter but to the spirit of her bargain with Roger and it was harder to do it when she saw him constantly. She was glad that he, like Roger, was serving the country. They did not write to one another often, but when she got a letter from him, and it wasn't a love letter, it was just an account of what he was doing, interspersed with complaints that it was all very boring, her day was made. She could hear his rich, eager voice in his matter-of-fact phrases and every casual word told her that he loved her. It was lucky for her that she had plenty to do. Her work kept her so busy that she had little time for thoughts unconnected with it and, though one day was exactly like the last, the weeks flew by at a gallop. She had not realized that Christmas was so near till Mrs. Henderson announced one morning that she was going up to London to buy presents for the children. A tree was brought in and placed in a private room, and May and Dora in their leisure moments set about decorating it. Tommy came home for the holiday. He had grown, but he was still a little boy, thin and weedy, with hands and feet too big for him and a mop of brown hair that his mother in vain tried to keep tidy. His dark eyes were keen and intelligent. His vitality was so abounding that, except when he was reading, it seemed a torture to him to sit still: you might have thought quicksilver flowed in his veins rather than blood. His movements had the clumsy, charming awkwardness of a new-born colt. Mrs. Henderson, noticing how tall he was growing, could not but think rather sadly that soon his voice would break and then in a little while he would be a great big fellow like his brothers and in the grown man she would lose the child who was so dear to her. She thanked God he was too young to fight. No harm could befall him.

Christmas Day came. The General, down from London for forty-eight hours, brought Tommy a new bicycle. The evacuated children were thrilled with their presents and the Christmas tree, of which they had never seen the like, filled them with admiring wonder. They ate turkey and plum pudding and drank ginger beer. They played games. They had a grand time. One small boy remarked that he didn't care how long the war lasted.

It was just after the New Year, one evening, while the children were being given their supper, that Tommy came in to the refectory.

"May, you're wanted on the phone," he said.

"Who is it? I can't come now. I'm busy."

"It's Dick Murray. He says he only wants to speak to you for a minute. I'll carry on for you."

May was holding a plate heaped with macaroni and she put it down quickly, for her hand trembled. She knew why Dick was calling. His last letter had told her that his regiment had a good chance of being sent over to France and he hoped to God it would come off; for he was sick and tired of sitting about and doing nothing. If there was a chance of seeing him before he went she meant to take it; she couldn't let him leave without at least a glimpse of him. She went out into the hall and then to the library, so that she could speak without risk of being overheard. She lifted the receiver, but her knees were shaking so that she had to sit down.

"Yes?"

"May, we're off."

His voice was gay and eager. She clenched her hands.

"Oh, that's splendid," she said lightly. "When?"

"Tonight. We're sailing at dawn."

"So soon? Oh, Dick."

She hadn't expected that and she had to bite her lip to prevent herself from crying.

"You mustn't be upset. I shan't be in any more danger than if we'd stayed on in Norfolk. Nothing is going to happen till the Germans attack in the spring and then we'll smash them to smithereens."

She made an effort.

"I hope it won't be dreadfully boring."

"I'd have given anything in the world to see you to say good-bye. I naturally expected to get a day or two's leave and I've been grousing like hell at being done out of it."

She couldn't speak for a moment and he asked if she was still there. She strove to keep her voice steady.

"Perhaps it's just as well. I don't think I could have borne it."

"Oh, my sweet."

His voice faltered.

"Good-bye, darling. God bless you."

"I love you with all my heart."

"Good-bye."

She put the receiver down. It was all over and it hadn't lasted three minutes. It was too little, oh, so much too little. Her mouth trembled, but she couldn't let herself cry, and she clenched her teeth. She stayed where she was, by the telephone, for a while to collect herself. She couldn't afford to let anyone see that the news she had received meant more to her than it should. Oh, the deceit—how hateful it was! When she went back to the refectory there was no sign, except the whiteness of her face, that her heart was wrung.

“What did he want?” asked Mrs. Henderson.

“He rang up to say good-bye. He’s going to France tomorrow.”

“Oh, I’m glad. He must be delighted.”

“He seemed in the highest spirits.”

Ian was ordered out to France too, for, after pulling all possible strings, he had achieved his desire and was once more in khaki. Because he spoke French adequately he had been made a Security Officer, which was a job that he thought suited him perfectly; Jane disagreed; she pointed out to him that it needed tact, judgment and common sense, and no one knew better than she that those were qualities in which he was completely deficient. He listened to her tart remarks without turning a hair.

When the time came for him to go, having agreed that she shouldn’t come to the station, he and Jane had a last drink together in the drawing-room of their little house in Westminster. He was to sail from Southampton to Cherbourg.

“I hope we have a smooth crossing,” he said. “You know what a rotten sailor I am.”

“You look awful when you’re seasick.”

“I don’t care a hang about that. I feel awful.”

As a rule they had plenty to say to one another, but just then, they didn’t quite know why, there really didn’t seem anything to say. Jane was smoking a cigarette through an immensely long holder and suddenly, as though she were angry with it, took it out and crushed the stub savagely into an ash-tray. Ian glanced at his watch and gulped down the last mouthful of his whisky and soda.

“Well, I suppose I ought to be toddling.”

“Ought you?”

She took out her lipstick and applied it to her lips. Looking at herself in her pocket mirror as she did this, she asked casually:

“You’re quite sure you don’t want me to come to the station with you?”

“Not on your life. I don’t want a hysterical woman sobbing all over my brand-new uniform.”

“Hysterical be damned. But what they want to send a fat old man like you to France for is more than I can understand.”

“Old my foot. I’m in the prime of life. And fat my other foot. I’ve lost twenty pounds since I got back in the Army.”

She gave him a derisive glance.

“No one would know it to look at you.” She fixed him sternly with her monocle. “Now look here, Ian, if you see a German coming for you, you run like a hare.”

He grinned.

“I don’t mind telling you I get awfully out of breath when I run.”

“Well, I warn you, if you go and get yourself killed I’ll never speak to you again.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

Jane threw up her hands in desperation.

“Why in God’s name did I ever marry that man?”

“I can answer that one,” he cried with a throaty chuckle. “Because no one else was such a fool as to ask you.”

Jane giggled.

“That’s right. How did you know?”

He heaved his great weight out of the chair and taking Jane’s hands pulled her to her feet.

“Give the old man a kiss before he goes.”

Jane swallowed.

“O God, I believe I’m going to cry.”

“Don’t be a damned fool, Jane,” he said roughly.

“O God, don’t let me cry. I’ll never be able to manage that man again if I cry.”

“Think of your eyelashes, darling, don’t think of me.”

She looked at him with one eye because for a reason she could only guess, the monocle was dimmed and she couldn’t see through it.

“You’re old and you’re fat and you’re stupid,” she said angrily, and then her funny hoarse voice went back on her, “but you’re all I’ve got in the world and I don’t want to lose you.”

“Shut up, Jane, or I’ll give you a sock in the jaw. If you go on like this, you’ll have me crying too.”

“I’m not crying, you fool. I won’t cry.” She made a terrible face. “Oh, Ian, I do love you so.”

“I’ve sort of suspected that for a good many years, dear,” he said, taking her in his fat arms.

She flung hers round his neck and with a fearful grimace asked him pitifully:

“You do like me a bit, don’t you?”

“You’re a nagging old bitch, Jane, but, my God, I love you.”

Their lips met and they put into that long kiss all their love and all their devotion. She tore herself away from him.

“Get the hell out of here. I can’t bear it another instant.”

Without a further word he flung out of the room, slamming the door behind him, as though they had had a prodigious fight. Jane, her eyes on the door by which he had gone, bit her lips to cling on to her self-control. Her comic, ugly face worked in strange contortions. Then she gave up the struggle.

“To hell with my eyelashes.”

She threw herself on her knees and joined her hands. “O God, keep the old fool safe.”

The tears streamed down her face. They made a terrific mess of her make-up.

And in like manner, though in their different ways, women in England through the long, bitter winter said good-bye to their men. They said good-bye to them in the crofts of the distant Hebrides and in the fishermen's cottages of wind-swept Cornwall, in the slum dwellings of the big cities, in the drab villas of the suburbs, in the orderly houses of the well-to-do and in the mansions of the great. When it was possible they went to the station to get a last sight of them as they entrained. On the coaches the men in high spirits chalked up facetious quips. Hang out your washing on the Siegfried Line. They sang lustily as the train steamed out. They were going to France. They were going to Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt or the East. Not all of them, it might be, would reach their destination in safety. The women, many of them crying still, flowed out of the station and went about their chores.

Jane continued to lead her normal life. She went out to dinner a great deal and lunched at the Ritz where you saw everyone you knew. She gave smart little parties in her tiny house. Since she lived in a convenient spot friends of Roger's from the War Office, men at the Foreign Office and members of the House of Commons were glad to drop in of an evening for a cocktail and a gossip. She generally had a funny story to tell about this general or that or a bit of scandal about a Cabinet Minister and you were pretty sure of two or three good laughs when you went to see her. Her fantastic appearance added point to her wisecracks. Of course the war was a crashing bore, but it was no use to pull a long face and she didn't see why she shouldn't get what fun out of it she could. It certainly gave her ample scope for her sardonic wit. She missed Ian; he was the perfect foil; and when the conversation was growing sticky she could always count on him to rise when, as though it were a fly and he the fat trout he really rather looked like, she flung a caustic remark at him. They played into one another's hands like a pair of black-face comedians.

But when people asked her if she missed him, Jane shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly.

"I suppose I do in a way. Sometimes I could kill him when he's here, but there's no doubt about it, absence does make the heart grow fonder."

She was thankful that he was in no danger. Some of the people who came to see her were quite important and it was a comfort to her to be told by them that everything was going according to plan. The blockade was doing very well and the information that came out of Germany was that there was already a considerable shortage of raw materials. The Germans weren't starving yet, though they'd had to tighten their belts; but they were suffering from cold, for owing to the breakdown of transport they couldn't get coal in sufficient quantity. That could hardly fail to have a depressing effect on the population, which in any case had accepted the war with resignation rather than with enthusiasm. For the sake of morale, if for no other reason, Hitler would have to attack in the spring. The Maginot Line was impregnable. It was common knowledge that, though the generals, who belonged to the old army, weren't to be despised, the Germans suffered from a serious lack of company commanders, and when they got up against the well-trained and well-officered troops of the French they'd discover what a

fatal handicap that was. After they'd been beaten back from the Maginot Line the Allies would advance. The Germans would have to dig in, if a revolution didn't break out and put an end to the whole show without any more bother, and then all the Allies had to do was to sit tight and let the blockade do the rest. Jane's friends at the Foreign Office told her they were pretty confident that Italy would stay out; Bastianini, the ambassador, informed everybody who was prepared to listen that she would never fight her old ally England. It was reassuring to hear those Foreign Office men talk. They were so calm, apparently so unconcerned, you couldn't but feel that there was nothing to worry about. The war might have been a game they were playing, a game you played according to the rules in a gentlemanlike way, and if you lost it, which was out of the question but of course possible, you must take your defeat like a good sportsman. One evening Jane had three Ministers of the Crown at dinner. The conversation turned to literature and she was impressed with their intimate acquaintance with the modern poets. She had no idea they were so cultivated.

January, February and March went by.

vii

THIS story is concerned with the war only in so far as it affected the fortunes of a small group of persons, members of a single English family, and so nothing need be said here of the events that followed upon one another's heels in a rapid and appalling succession, the invasions of Denmark and Norway, of Belgium and the Netherlands. But then the French lines broke south of Sedan and a few days later the Germans captured Arras and then Amiens and reached the Channel. A week after that King Leopold surrendered the Belgian Army. The German communiqué announced that the fate of the Allied armies was sealed.

Jane was shattered. What had they meant by what they had been saying for three months, those confident fellows who came to drink her cocktails? They had never so much as hinted at the possibility of disaster. Why, Chamberlain himself, when the Germans invaded Norway, said in the House of Commons that Hitler had missed the bus. It wasn't a month ago that one of the big shots, with ribbons all over his chest, had told her that the French Army was on its toes and he'd eat his brass hat if it didn't give the Hun the surprise of his life. Ian was in France. He might be killed and the best that could be hoped was that he would be taken prisoner. Of course Roger was there too. But Roger could take care of himself. Ian was such a fool. She was distracted with fear. She went here and there trying to get reassuring news, she called up influential friends; one of the Ministers told her over the telephone that the B.E.F. was entrapped and it would be a miracle if more than thirty or forty thousand got away.

"Not so good, is it?" she said.

"Pretty grim," he answered.

She gave a little, throaty chuckle.

"I suppose Ian will be taken prisoner. I've been telling him for years he ought to take a slimming cure. He'll take it now, won't he, willynilly?"

"Don't lose your nerve, old girl," said the Minister. "We shall pull through, you know."

"Of course."

She hung up. She put her hand to her heart, for the pain in it was agonizing. With her funny face all puckered with anguish she stood biting her lips and stared at the blank wall in front of her. She felt on a sudden terribly alone. Friends? What was the use of friends? She was suffering. She couldn't face the dinner party at the Savoy she was due to go to that evening. She couldn't face solitude either. Even when he wasn't there Ian was all over the house. His clothes, his old pipes, his guns and fishing tackle, his golf clubs—she couldn't go into a single room without feeling his presence. And now the house was empty and hostile.

"I can't bear it," she cried aloud. "I want to go home."

Only her mother knew really what Ian, that great hulking brute, with his great bellow, was to her. She had to go to her as she had done when she was a tiny girl, plain

as the devil, and had fallen down and hurt herself. It was a filthy trick nature had played to give her a face like hers and a heart like hers. She packed, took the first train available and three hours later, putting on a jaunty air, strolled into the hall of Graveney Holt. Mrs. Henderson and May were alone and May's eyes were red and swollen.

"Hulloa, Mother, I thought I'd run down and see how you were getting on. This is a pretty kettle of fish those fools in Whitehall have got us into."

"We must all hope for the best, darling," said Mrs. Henderson gravely. "You mustn't lose heart."

Sitting down and peeling off her gloves Jane took a mirror out of her bag and looked at herself.

"My God, what a sight! I'm not in the least worried about Ian if that's what you mean. Before he went away I made him promise that if he saw a German he'd bolt like a hare and he knows he'd get hell from me if he didn't do what I told him." Jane fixed her monocle more firmly in her eye. "London's frightfully boring just now and I'm a bit run down; I thought if you'd have me I'd like to stay a few days."

Mrs. Henderson looked at her daughter with calm, discerning eyes and Jane had more than a suspicion that she understood the situation.

"Of course."

"I brought a few things down in a suit case. And of course my face."

What Jane called her face was a flat, rectangular metal box in a neat velvet cover. It contained a large number of little bottles, rouge, powder, lipstick, mascara, and whatever else could possibly be needed to compose that fantastic counterfeit of the human visage which she presented to the world.

"I thought you'd probably be coming down," said Mrs. Henderson. "You can make yourself useful with the children. We've tried to keep the worst of the news from them, but they're as sharp as nails, the older ones, and they come to me and ask: 'Is my dad all right, ma'am?' and I can't answer them."

"I suppose there's no news of Roger?"

"What news could there be? We're worried, dreadfully worried."

"Well, he's on the staff. Nothing ever happens to Red Tabs."

It irritated her to see May's white face and swollen eyes. Roger would get away with Lord Gort and the rest of them, but who was going to bother about her fat, old Ian? She gave May a sharp look. Perhaps it wasn't Roger that May was so upset about. It had occurred to her in the summer that she and Dick seemed on very good terms.

May rose to her feet.

"I must go to the children now. I can't leave Dora alone with them too long."

She left them. She hadn't missed the glance Jane had given her and had been seized with a panic fear that she guessed that her eyes were not red with crying for Roger. She was concerned about him, of course, she didn't want harm to befall him, but she felt certain he would be all right and would get away, the only real danger he incurred was from a stray bomb; but Dick—it was no good trying not to, she could think really of no one but him. That was a sharp, nerve-racking misery that gave her not a moment's

respite through the long day and held her sleepless hour after hour of the interminable night. She hadn't heard from him since the march of the British troops into Belgium. For a fortnight he had been in the thick of the fighting. He might be wounded; he might be dead; and there was no one she could turn to in her pain. Mrs. Henderson, ascribing May's distress to anxiety on Roger's account, was kind to her as even she had never been before. Never a demonstrative woman she sought ways now to show May how deep and sincere was her love for her. Suppressing her own fears, in order to console her she tried to make light of Roger's peril. Her tenderness was very hard to bear. May hated herself for the dissimulation she must practise, the comfort she must feign when Mrs. Henderson told her she was convinced that Roger would get back safely and she must try to be brave in this time of trial; for it was Dick she was thinking of, Dick who might even now be lying dead on the field of battle, Dick whose death, if he was killed, she could only mourn in secret. But what could she do? In her anguish she felt like blurting out the truth to Mrs. Henderson, but she restrained herself; she could not bear to cause that poor woman an added grief. It would be dreadful just then to tell her that if she had ever loved Roger, she had long ceased to do so. It would be worse than hitting a child. There was no help for it, she must bear her burden alone.

"God knows, I didn't want to love Dick," she said to herself. "I can't help myself. He's everything in the world to me."

Thinking of him, thinking of him incessantly, praying for him, she conceived the notion that if she promised God to give him up, God would spare him. It was only her strong good sense that prevented her from yielding to the temptation. God was not a cruel God and to save did not need from his creatures the propitiation of a frustrated life and a broken heart. It was the God of Moses who had claimed eye for eye and tooth for tooth, not the God of love. She fell on her knees and prayed for Dick's safety, but she prayed also for all those who were even then in deadly peril.

viii

THE next five days, those during which the evacuation from Dunkirk was effected, were days of fear to the women of Graveney Holt. Sick at heart, their faces drawn, they listened in silent dread to the radio. The German bombers without pause attacked the retreating troops and the rescue ships. The men, weary after a fortnight's hard fighting, waited on the open beaches to take their turn in the small craft that had gathered to bring the survivors to the ships that waited off shore. The Germans entered Dunkirk to find that their prey had escaped. After fearing the worst it was almost with exultation, as though victory had been snatched from defeat, that those women heard the news that, though all else was lost, guns, tanks and equipment, more than three hundred thousand men had been saved. And though they knew nothing of what had happened to those whose fate most concerned them they ventured once more to hope. All through that dark period Mrs. Henderson went about the heavy work entailed by the care of thirty children with a stern, set face. She kept the others at it too and with something like ferocity, as though hoping that by driving them to death she could take their minds off their sickening fears.

On Sunday Jim as usual came over to spend the day, but it was a sad, harassed meal they sat down to at one o'clock. The General had stayed in town over the week-end. May was silent because her heart was heavy and Jane could not bring herself to speak to Jim. She avoided looking at him and when he addressed her answered in a monosyllable. His eight months on the farm had braced him; the hard manual labour had steeled his muscles; the sun had bronzed him and he looked the picture of health. But his physical condition was an affront to Jane and it was only fear of her mother that prevented her from uttering the bitter sarcasms that were on the tip of her tongue. Mrs. Henderson looked at him sorrowfully. His face was drawn, as though from a spiritual conflict, but it gave him a new distinction of appearance and now, so strong and well in body, he was really a very handsome young man. His hands distressed her, for they were rough and stained and calloused; but for all that they were fine and well formed. It was with a demure pride that Mrs. Henderson told herself that they betrayed his breeding. Only a gentleman could have hands like that. It chanced that May's eyes fell on them too and she was struck by their sinewy power. They were like Roger's, but larger, and she hardly knew why, more significant. There was something queer about them, almost sinister, that didn't depend altogether on the hard usage that had coarsened them. They contrasted oddly with the pained, stubborn, pathetic look in his brown eyes. Mrs. Henderson gave Dora a glance. She was sitting with downcast eyes apparently absorbed in the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding she was eating with healthy appetite. With her corn-coloured hair and lovely neck she was certainly a very comely young woman. Of course Mrs. Henderson knew that Jim was in love with her, but she was quite certain that Dora wasn't in love with him. It was nice of her to have refused the offer he must surely have made. It showed that she was disinterested. For with May childless Jim must eventually inherit the property and it was a good match for a penniless refugee. Mrs. Henderson felt very tenderly to her. It was true what Jane

had said long ago, the General would hate Jim to marry a foreigner; that was of course a prejudice; she wouldn't have liked it much either, she wanted Jim to marry a nice English girl of good family, the sort of girl the Hendersons had always married; but if Dora had loved him and he was sure she would make him happy, she was the last person to put obstacles in the way. And there was no doubt about it, you only had to look at her to know that she wouldn't leave the nurseries at Graveney untenanted. Mrs. Henderson wondered what Dora was thinking about. She seemed to be holding herself apart from the rest of them and made no attempt to join in the conversation that Mrs. Henderson sought with effort to keep going. The atmosphere was so strained that, having exhausted every other possible subject, she turned to Jim and began asking him about his work on the farm. He answered her questions, but it was hard to be natural when he knew that she only asked them to avoid any reference to the disaster that weighed so heavily on their hearts. She might have been making conversation with a stranger to whom the catastrophe was indifferent. In point of fact he was happy in his work. It gave him a peculiar satisfaction to see the wheat growing in the fields himself had ploughed, and the chores of the daily round in their variety were a source of unceasing interest to him. He was proud because during the lambing season he had not lost a lamb. He sat up all night with a cow that was about to calve, not because his employer told him to, but because he was uneasy about her. He milked the cows, fed and watered the horses, mixed slop for the pigs and fed them. To work hand in hand with nature gave him a sense of peace that was very grateful to him.

It enabled him to bear with half-amused indifference the hostility of his employer. Mr. Jenkins was a small, wiry man with grey, thinning hair, a lined, bony face and red-rimmed eyes. He was determined to keep Jim on the job. The utmost praise Jim ever got out of him was a scornful grunt and when he made mistakes, as in his ignorance at first he often did, Jenkins berated him with obscene abuse. Jim had a notion that he took a malicious pleasure in giving the son of General Henderson the rough side of his tongue. He spoke of him, even in his hearing, as the conchie and would not let his wife and children have any further communication with him than was inevitable. Sometimes he would go out of his way to make Jim lose his temper so that he could go to the police and complain of him.

"Picking oakum, that's what you ought to be doing," he snarled.

Jim took care to be as civil and respectful to Jenkins as, if their positions had been reversed, he would have expected the man to be to him. But he made up his mind that when peace came and he was free he would thrash the brute within an inch of his life. That would be well worth going to prison for.

It happened that the evening before something had happened about which he could not avoid speaking to his mother. He knew it would be a score for Jane and would as soon she should not know about it, but just because of this feeling he forced himself to mention it then and there.

"Mother," he said, "d'you think Father would have any objection to my sleeping at Uncle Algy's cottage?"

This was the cottage, known to the villagers as Badger's, which was at the north gate of the park.

"Oh, my dear, it would be awfully uncomfortable for you."

"Well, the people I've been living with, the Carrs, want me to get out."

"Why?"

"It's rather a long story. When I paid my weekly bill last night, I saw Mrs. Carr had something on her mind. Carr was hanging about outside and I knew he was listening. I asked her if there was anything the matter and she said, 'Well, sir, the fact is we're wanting your room, so I must ask you to make other arrangements.' I couldn't make it out at first; my board and lodging have been a godsend to them now that their son's away and they haven't got his wages to help. I asked her why she wanted me to get out and she said it was too much work. I knew that was all rot, I give hardly any trouble; and at last she came out with it."

Jim looked steadily at Jane and there was a caustic smile on his lips. Repeating Mrs. Carr's words, he imitated her broad Sussex accent so well that, if you hadn't known how bitterly he felt, you would have laughed.

"She said, 'Well, sir, if the truth must be told it's like this. Carr, he says, what with our Bert in the Army, in the thick of the fray, as you might say, and perhaps we'll never see the poor boy again—we don't want you here. Seems like an insult to our Bert, if you understand what I mean.' "

"I'm bound to say I see her point," said Jane.

"Be quiet, Jane," said Mrs. Henderson sharply. "Yes, of course your father will be glad to have you live at Uncle Algy's. What will you do about your meals?"

"I can get them at the Cornford pub." Cornford was the name of the village near which was Jenkins's farm. Jim smiled wryly. "They're not allowed by law to refuse to serve me."

They finished lunch in an oppressive silence. Dora hadn't opened her mouth.

It was a relief to Jim to escape for a stroll with her later in the afternoon. It was warm and sunny and great snowy clouds, like white primeval monsters sunning themselves on the surface of the deep, lay at rest in the blue sky. After two days' rain the green of the oak trees was glossy and shining. Dora was what the French call *journalière*; there were days when she was almost plain and others when she was beautiful. This was a good one. Her eyes had caught the colour of the sky and there was a warm glow in her cheeks. She trod the earth with a lovely impetuosity as though it were dirt beneath her feet and she had only to will and she would sail through the air like a witch on a broomstick. Jim had never loved her with a more eager longing. He took her hand. Suddenly, to his utter surprise, she burst into a ringing peal of laughter.

"What on earth are you laughing at?" he cried.

She stopped at once and gave him a rapid, searching glance. Her bright eyes were on a sudden veiled.

"Nothing; I'm sorry, it was just hysteria. All those glum faces round the table."

He flushed in momentary vexation. He thought her tactless.

"You couldn't expect them to be very cheerful. They're frightfully anxious."

"I know. Forgive me. I didn't mean it. It was stupid. I suppose this is the end."

“What d’you mean by that?”

He was still a trifle affronted, but she gave him a charming, even a tender, smile.

“Darling, have a little sense. France is beaten. England can’t go on alone.”

“She will.”

“She can’t. What’s the use of prolonging a hopeless struggle? Don’t you want peace?”

He looked down with harassed eyes.

“I don’t want England to be beaten.”

“Why don’t you go and fight then?” she said coolly.

“Dora,” he cried aghast. “You’re not going to turn against me too?”

“Of course not. Only I don’t understand your attitude. It doesn’t seem logical.”

“I dare say it isn’t,” he smiled sadly, “but there’s nothing I can do about it. I hate war. I still think it criminal and senseless. But I don’t want England to be defeated.”

“England is defeated. What’s the good of shutting your eyes to obvious facts? The only thing she can do now is to make the best terms she can with the Germans. Then we shall have peace for a hundred years.”

“What sort of a peace?”

She shrugged her shoulders. She seemed about to speak, but apparently changed her mind, and they walked for a while in silence. Once or twice she gave him a sidelong glance from beneath her eyelashes.

“You’re very quiet today,” she said at length.

“I’m unhappy.”

“You needn’t be,” she smiled.

“I wouldn’t be if you’d marry me.”

She made a quick gesture of withdrawal.

“No, no, no. I’ve told you it’s impossible.”

“Oh, Dora, don’t say that. It breaks my heart.”

“Don’t be so silly,” she laughed. “Not yet, I meant. You know that. There’s no hurry.”

He sighed.

“I sometimes wonder if you care for me at all.”

She gave him a teasing smile.

“Have you never looked at yourself in the glass? I was looking at you at lunch today. You’re very good-looking.”

She paid him a compliment so seldom that he blushed.

“Pure Aryan, at all events,” he laughed.

She took his hand.

“You’re very sweet,” she said. “But you mustn’t try to bustle me. You must have patience.”

ix

A DAY or two later they got some good news. It wasn't what Mrs. Henderson would have liked best to have, but it strengthened her hope of better news to come. Dick Murray rang her up and told her that he thought she might like to know he was back in England safe and sound.

"Oh, I'm so glad," she answered. "Are you quite all right?"

"Not a scratch. A bit tired, you know, but otherwise in fine fettle."

"D'you know anything about Roger and Ian?"

"Oddly enough I ran across Ian on the beach at Dunkirk. I heard his bellow one night and routed him out. Don't you worry, he'll turn up."

"And Roger?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, Dick."

Mrs. Henderson could not keep the dismay out of her voice.

"Don't get in a panic, Mrs. Henderson. Everything is in a bit of a muddle just now. I expect he'll be all right. There may be all sorts of reasons why he hasn't been able to let you know. I dare say it never even occurred to him that you were anxious."

There was something in that. If he had got away with Lord Gort, and were frightfully busy, the thought might never have entered his head that there was any need to assure them of his safely. When Mrs. Henderson went back and told the others what Dick had said it was only by a miracle that May prevented a great cry of relief from breaking through her lips. She had to make a tremendous effort not to appear more than decently interested.

"I'm glad he's all right," she said very quietly. "Did he seem cheerful?"

"Quite."

She wondered how long she must stay, acting as though it meant nothing more than was natural in the circumstances, before she could get away to her room and there thank God, thank God with all her heart, for his great mercy. But Jane broke out in violent exasperation.

"If that old fool's back and hasn't let me know I'll give him such hell when I see him he'll wish to God the Germans *had* taken him prisoner."

"Remember that May and I are just as anxious about Roger," Mrs. Henderson said mildly.

Jane gave May a sidelong glance.

"Why should it be Dick that's come back? I don't suppose he matters a damn to anyone."

She saw May flush.

“How can you be so selfish?” Mrs. Henderson answered. “At a time like this we must try to hold all men equally dear.”

Though Jane protested that she was no good at that sort of thing, Mrs. Henderson had insisted on her helping with the children. She refused to do any housework, vowing that she simply didn’t know how to make a bed or sweep a room, and as for washing-up she wasn’t going to risk breaking her nails for any children in the world; but she constituted herself their entertainer. In twenty-four hours she had them eating out of her hand. She swore at them with her deep, husky voice, and threatened to beat the hide off them if they didn’t behave; they thought her the grandest buffoon they had ever seen and they crowded round her laughing shrilly at her absurdity. She told them highly immoral stories in which the bad boy came off best and the good little girl never got her reward; they loved them and made her repeat them over and over again. The babies struggled for a place on her lap, and she held them there telling them what little beasts they were, and the others pressed close begging for her attention and shouting with glee when, her monocle fixed in her eye, but a look in it few had ever seen, she made a fool of herself for their amusement.

“Why haven’t you got any kids of your own?” one urchin asked her.

“D’you think I want a lot of dirty little brats like you round me? As a matter of fact I’ve had twelve, but I always drowned them before they got their eyes open, like puppies.”

“Where d’you drown them?”

“In the water I did the week’s washing in,” she answered promptly. “Then I knew that for once in their lives they were clean.”

Then Jane received a telegram from Ian, sent on from her house in London, telling her that he was in a hospital at York.

“Both doing well,” he added. “Baby weighs forty-two pounds. Sex uncertain.”

“Fool!” cried Jane furiously. “He’s wounded. He may be dying.”

“D’you think he’d send that silly telegram if he were?” laughed Mrs. Henderson.

“O God, why did I ever marry a congenital imbecile?”

Jane sent him a frantic wire to say that she was coming up by the first train. There was a great wailing among the children when she set off for the station and she had to promise faithfully to come back soon. She was inclined to preen herself because she had been such a success with them.

“It seems to me I’ve got quite a way with kids,” she said. “I suppose it’s because they know I’m just as unscrupulous and immoral as they are.”

Mrs. Henderson gave her a tender, slightly mocking little smile.

“You can’t deceive children. They know instinctively if you really like them or if you’re only pretending.”

“Do they like Dora?”

“She’s a very good disciplinarian,” said Mrs. Henderson.

“Then they must dote on her,” answered Jane dryly.

Next day but one she wrote to her mother.

Well darling all the way up to York I designed my weeds I never have worn black but with my colouring I believe it would suit me and I thought out some frocks that were positively startling What I was going to wear at the funeral is nobody’s business Ian would have jumped out of his coffin and run screaming from the church But I’m not going to be a widow after all so I took all that trouble for nothing That big fat fool you made me marry is going to get perfectly well He got away from Dunkirk all right and then was such a donkey he would be as to get on a ship that was torpedoed The idiot got his face bashed in and lost all his front teeth I don’t so much mind about that as his teeth always were bad and I’ve been nagging him for years to have them out but his face is a mess He looks as though he’d got dropsy mumps and elefantasis (how’d you spell the bloody word) and he’s got two of the most beautiful black eyes you ever saw He can’t speak only mumble but that’s just as well because when he tries to say anything it’s only to curse and swear something horrible I really didn’t know there were so many four letter words in the language I’ve told him exactly what I thought of him and as he can’t really answer back I’m having my chance at last I’m going to get him out of hospital as soon as I can so as I can look after him myself It makes my blood boil to see those nurses fussing over him as if he was a blasted hero And the indecent questions they ask him about his bowels and him a married man too it just makes me blush all over A lot of desiccated virgins that’s what they are

Your loving

JANE

PS He seemed quite glad to see me He called me a lousy bitch this morning He is rather sweet sometimes isn’t he though of course the most selfish brute that ever was

PPS It was all a lie about his having a baby though to look at him I’ve often wondered if he wasn’t going to

x

THE men who had been rescued from Dunkirk were safely home. Roger was missing. The General went to the War Office day after day to see if there were news of him and by dint of persistence discovered that during the retreat to Dunkirk Roger had been ordered to go on some errand to a village where a battery was holding back the Germans as they tried to advance. It was known that he had got there and when the battery, short of ammunition, was forced to retire he had left in the car he had come in to go back to headquarters. He had never got there. There could be little doubt that he was either killed or taken prisoner. The General telegraphed to the Red Cross at Geneva and asked them to make inquiries. Until the answer came it was possible to hope for something better than the worst.

Mrs. Henderson went about her duties as usual, but her silence and the severity of her mien betrayed sadly the torture of her gnawing anxiety. May's heart was wrung with compassion. She reproached herself bitterly because, try as she might, she couldn't share the dumb misery that made Mrs. Henderson's eyes so woebegone. Dick was safe and well. That was everything. She went cold with terror when she thought that instead of being alive now he might well be dead, but she was horrified when, in the same breath, as it were, it occurred to her that if Roger were dead there would be no obstacle to her happiness. Oh, shameful! She couldn't owe her happiness to his death. That would be awful. She didn't want him to die. If any word, any deed of hers, could have brought him safely back she would not have hesitated to say or do it. With all her heart she desired his safety. He was young and should have many fruitful years of life before him and he had a right to them. No, no, even though his death would solve all her difficulties she didn't, she wouldn't wish his death. But it was very hard to keep her mind off the possibility that her wanton fancy, whether she would or no, presented to her. Everyone has a right to happiness and she and Dick could be so happy if only . . . if only, no, no, no—it was dreadful to think of that. And Roger perhaps not yet cold in a foreign grave. They were made for one another, Dick and she; she understood him as she had never understood Roger; they had everything in common. What fun life with him would be! He was so easy. You needn't ever be afraid of saying a foolish thing to him—he wouldn't think it foolish, he'd only laugh and think you very sweet. She had an intense conviction that with him she would have children. Heaven! It was much more than love she felt for him; it was a strange, powerful yearning as though, only half herself, in him she could find the complement of her incompleteness. Oh, it was so hard to put it into words! It was as though, hankering for home, she had been an exile all her life and in him had found the home she had always known was waiting for her.

A week went by, a week of tremulous hope; a second week went by, a week of terrified foreboding. The Red Cross telegraphed from Geneva that they had been unable to discover that Roger was a prisoner. Mrs. Henderson never spoke to May about him, but one evening when they were strolling in the garden after the evacuated children had been put to bed, she slipped her hand through May's arm.

“Darling,” she said, “I’ve thought it better that you and I shouldn’t talk to one another about Roger. I knew that you were feeling just what I was feeling and I thought it would only upset us more to speak. You’ve been wonderfully courageous.”

May said nothing. She was ashamed.

“But now I think we’ve got to talk about it. I’m afraid you must prepare yourself for the worst.”

“Don’t you think there’s any hope at all?” asked May in a low voice.

“I wish I could say yes. No, I’m afraid there’s very little. I want you to be brave. I want you to say to yourself that he died a gallant death in the service of his country, and we must be proud of him.” Her voice faltered. “We must try to find in our hearts the strength to look upon his death as a sacrifice we make willingly for the sake of the land we love and all we hold dear in this England to which we owe everything we are.”

May wished she could cry; she couldn’t. It wasn’t certain, not quite certain yet that Roger was dead, and the odd thought crossed her mind that Mrs. Henderson was anticipating the worst with a strange superstition that thus it might be averted. Poor lady. She was terribly sorry for her. And how shocking it was that at that very moment of all others she felt a pang of joy in her heart because Dick was safe and free!

She had not seen him since his return to England, but he had written to say that as soon as he could get leave he would come down to Graveney. He asked her to come to his house so that they could spend an hour or two together by themselves. Ordinarily, because it didn’t seem fair to Roger, she would have hesitated to consent to this, but now, after all the horror Dick had gone through, her desire to be alone with him was too strong to be resisted. She wrote and told him that she would gladly come. She wasn’t surprised then, but only overjoyed, when a maid called her to the telephone and she heard his voice. He asked her if she could come at once.

“Yes, easily,” she said. “I’ll get on my bike and be down in ten minutes.”

He had evidently been on the look-out for her, since as she dismounted at his door he opened it and drew her into his living-room. Her eager face froze as she saw the look on his. It was very grave. He didn’t kiss her. He didn’t even ask her to sit down.

“I haven’t come to stay. I’ve got to get back to town at once. The General asked me to come down. He phoned me from the War Office.”

“Oh, Dick,” she cried.

Her heart seemed to miss a beat and she went deathly white. She knew what was coming.

“May, Roger’s dead.”

She stared at him with horrified eyes. She was stunned. For a moment neither of them could speak. They looked at one another blankly. Dick, clenching his fists, forced himself to continue.

“He’s been posted missing, presumed dead. The General wouldn’t come; he said he had to work at the Red Cross and couldn’t get away. I think he couldn’t bear to bring the news himself and he hadn’t the heart to tell it over the phone. He’s all to pieces, poor old chap. He asked me to tell you and ask you to break it to Mrs. Henderson.”

"Oh, Dick, how awful! What a frightful thing to ask me to do!"

"I know."

They gazed at one another miserably.

"Do they know any details?" she asked at length.

"It appears that a Belgian refugee got into Havre in one of our staff cars. They spotted it and asked him how he'd got hold of it. He said he'd found it in a ditch and had got it to run. He crowded into it as many people as it would hold and eventually managed to reach Havre. It was riddled with machine-gun bullets and the front seat was covered with blood. It was the car Roger had taken when he went off that morning. The whole district was lousy with Fifth Columnists and parachutists and it looks as though Roger and his chauffeur had run into an ambush and been killed."

May sighed deeply.

"Poor Roger. God knows I didn't wish him dead."

Each knew what thoughts, unwelcome but importunate, beset the other; it was bad enough to envisage them, it would have been shocking to utter them. They were silent.

"You don't look any the worse for what you've gone through, Dick," she said at last.

"Oh, I'm all right."

They spoke as though there were nothing between them. May sighed again.

"I suppose I'd better go back. His mother's been expecting it. Poor thing, I'm so desperately sorry for her."

She moved towards the door and he opened it for her. He did not even touch her hand. He watched her as she got on her bicycle and then turned back into the house.

When May reached home she went into the sitting-room, looking out onto the terrace, which in summer they used in preference to the great hall; for she felt that she must have a short respite to collect herself. The house was ominously silent and you might have thought those old walls held their breath as they waited for impending evil. Mrs. Henderson and Dora were with the children, who just then would be having their tea, and there was no one about but Tommy. German bombers had been over the seaside town on the outskirts of which was situated Tommy's preparatory school and it had seemed prudent to send the boys home. May could see him in the garden engaged in complicated evolutions among the narrow paths between the flower beds on the bicycle that had been his father's Christmas present. She knit her brows as she tried to think how best to break the tragic news she brought. It seemed brutal to blurt out the truth without some kind of preparation, but with Mrs. Henderson in the state she was the first word must tell her everything. Poor Roger. His death grieved her piteously, and yet at the back of her mind, like a mischievous glimmer of light in the black-out, lurked the cognizance that it removed all hindrance to her marriage with Dick. She hated herself because at such a moment such a notion should occur to her. With a sigh, she rose to her feet and with set jaw went to find Mrs. Henderson.

"It's no good funking it. The longer I wait the harder it'll be."

She went to the refectory.

"Oh, May, I wondered what had become of you," said Mrs. Henderson.

But as the words fell from her lips, catching sight of May's face, she stiffened.

"Can I speak to you for a minute?"

Without a word, with a curious, swift motion, like a tiger pacing his cage, she came down the length of the room and followed May out. She shut the door behind her.

"He's dead?"

May nodded.

"Come."

She took May by the wrist and pulled her into the hall. There was something terrible about her at that moment. Very white, but with a frown on her brow, she stood fronting her daughter-in-law as though she were a thief caught in the act and she were about to mete out punishment on her. Faltering, May told her that she had seen Dick and repeated what he had said. Mrs. Henderson, listening, held May's eyes with her own as though by main force she would drag from her everything she had to tell. But when there was no more to say she bent her head and slow tears trickled down her face.

"Oh, darling, darling," cried May, wanting to take her in her arms.

But Mrs. Henderson drew herself away.

"Don't touch me."

The two women stood thus, facing one another, and May's heart was full. She wept now too; she wept with compassion for the unhappy woman who was so dear to her. She would have liked to utter some word of comfort, but she could think of nothing that might avail, and she felt that Mrs. Henderson didn't want her to say anything. It would have been so much easier if the poor thing would only have allowed her to share her sorrow. But she was shutting herself up in it and May felt that she resented it that anyone should try to share it with her. Suddenly they heard Tommy's voice.

"Mummy," he called. "Mummy."

Mrs. Henderson pricked up her ears and looked in the direction from which the sound came.

"I shan't tell him yet."

"Oh, darling, you must. He's bound to know."

"Later perhaps, not yet. He worshipped Roger. After all it's not absolutely certain. He may be in a hospital and unable to communicate. He may have lost his memory. Why should Tommy be made miserable before it's absolutely necessary? It'll be time enough to tell him when we've abandoned hope."

The younger woman was dismayed. It was true that Tommy worshipped Roger; to him he was a hero and his vocation, with the secrecy it involved, excited his imagination. He had always been fonder of him than of Jim. He adored him as a small boy may adore an elder brother who is to him the personification of adventure and romance. He thought him perfect. But after all Tommy wasn't a child, he was thirteen, bright, and with all his wits about him. It was impossible to keep Roger's death a secret and surely it would be much worse for him to hear it from a stranger than from one of

them. And how could Mrs. Henderson pretend that the event was in doubt? None of their inquiries had resulted in anything. The refugee and the blood-stained car. And how could one imagine that the General would have sent Dick down to break the dreadful news to them if he hadn't himself been certain? May sighed.

"It must be as you wish, darling," she said.

Mrs. Henderson did not seem to hear her. She turned away and went out of the room.

"I suppose I must carry on," May said to herself.

She went back to the refectory to see if she was wanted there. The children had finished their tea and Dora was clearing away.

When the children had been put to bed and they had had their own frugal dinner, Dora, as she did now and then, went out for a walk. It was still light. Mrs. Henderson, May and Tommy sat in the sitting-room. The two women knitted and Tommy, unusually quiet, was poring over some books. No one spoke. The clock struck and Mrs. Henderson looked up.

"Half past nine, Tommy. You must go to bed."

"Half a mo. I'm just trying to find something out."

"Are you?" said Mrs. Henderson, giving him a wan, indulgent smile. "What is it?"

He ran his hand through his unruly hair and faced her with a frown of absorption on his fresh, young face.

"Well, I've been giving it a lot of thought and I've come to the conclusion that Roger's a prisoner in Germany. Now if I know anything about Roger he'll escape. A lot of chaps did in the last war. I wanted to see how he could get to Switzerland. I mean, Holland's out, isn't it?"

He was so immensely serious that, if it hadn't been intolerably pathetic, one would have laughed.

"Oh, well, that'll wait till tomorrow. Come and say good night to me."

He got up and went over to kiss his mother. She took him in her arms and pressing him to her heart kissed him on the lips. A little surprised at the warmth of her embrace, he gave her a questioning look, but said nothing. When they were alone Mrs. Henderson felt that May's sad eyes were on her, but she would not meet them. She went on knitting. They sat in silence.

xi

On the following afternoon May, off duty for a while, went into the sitting-room to think things over. She knew that at that hour she would have it to herself. During luncheon Tommy, still full of his notion that Roger was a prisoner, had asked Dora a string of questions about Germany. He had been studying books in the library and was crammed with knowledge of mountain passes and unfrequented roads. He had learnt where the chief prisoners' camps had been during the last war. He insisted on telling them the plan of escape he had thought out for Roger. He didn't know how he could fail. It was painful to listen to him. May felt that it was false kindness to keep the truth from him. It was bound to leak out—why, Dick, not knowing that it was to be kept secret, might very well have told someone in the village before he went back to London, and it would be cruel to let Tommy hear it casually from a gamekeeper or one of the tradesmen. Though she didn't relish it, for Mrs. Henderson could at times be obstinate, May decided that she must try to make her see reason. Surely, after brooding over it for twenty-four hours, she must see that to go on hoping against hope was bootless.

Unwillingly May got up to look for her. She was at the door when Tommy burst into the room.

"May, May, there are two strange men in the park," he cried. "D'you think they're parachutists?"

She turned back and stepped out on to the terrace.

"Where?"

"Shall I get Daddy's gun? We'll capture them."

Unhappy as she was, she could not but smile at his excitement. He was such a kid. Of course it would be awful for his mother, telling him; he was so unprepared for it. She looked at the two men who were walking slowly towards them. One limped badly.

"They're only a couple of tramps."

"They're foreigners. Look how they're dressed. I'm sure they're parachutists."

"Nonsense. I expect they're Belgian refugees or something like that. They've probably wandered up here from the village and lost their way."

"I'd better get the gun in case."

"Don't be so silly, Tommy. They don't look in the least dangerous. I wonder if they're hungry and want food."

The two men climbed over the low iron railing that separated the park from the formal garden and were now walking up the broad grass path that led to the terrace steps. One was dressed in dirty, rumpled denims, with a beret on his head, and the other, the one who limped, had a handkerchief round his neck and wore an odd sort of jacket and a funny, high-peaked cap. They both had short, scrubby beards. They were unkempt and dirty. May looked at them with distaste. She went to the top of the steps

and stood there with Tommy by her side. As they came near it was quite obvious that they were foreigners.

"*Bonjour, monsieur, dame*," said the man who limped, the taller of the two.

May answered in French.

"What do you want? You must go round to the side door."

Suddenly, with a shriek, Tommy flung himself down the steps and into the arms of the tall bearded man with the limp.

"Roger."

May had been pale before, but now her pallor was ashy and to steady herself she put out her hand on the balustrade. She stared aghast. For a moment she thought she was going to faint. Tommy, clinging to Roger, burst into tears.

"I knew you weren't killed," he sobbed hysterically. "They all thought you were, but I *knew* you weren't."

"Of course I'm not killed, old boy."

The voice! Yes, that was his voice all right; she knew that faintly mocking ring.

"I kept a stiff upper lip when you were missing, but now—now I don't—seem—able to control myself."

"Never mind, old boy. You have a good cry if you want to."

"I'm not crying," sobbed Tommy. "It's only water pouring out of my eyes."

Roger kissed him and petted him as though he were a child. May, as still as the statue at her side, stood at the top of the steps staring. Contradictory emotions assaulted her. She was glad he was alive, thankful he was alive and well, and yet her heart sank; that was the end of those dreams that she had striven to drive away, but that for all her striving battered at her consciousness like desperate strangers beating on a door to be let in.

"Where's your mummy?" asked Roger.

Tommy snatched himself from his brother's arms.

"I'll go and tell her. Oh, she'll be so pleased."

He bounded up the steps and ran into the house shouting for his mother as he went. Roger limped up to May.

"I'd better not come too near you, darling," he said. "I haven't had a bath for weeks and I stink."

"Oh, Roger."

She threw her arms round his neck and he kissed her on both cheeks.

"I'm so glad you're safe, Roger. We've been so frightfully anxious."

"Is that why you're looking so pale, dear?" he said, with an odd, slightly derisive smile in his eyes.

"Why are you limping? Are you wounded?"

"Nothing to speak of. D'you like my beard?"

It changed his face completely. His eyes seemed larger than they used to be and his temples were hollow. He looked over her shoulder and saw his mother come out of the french window. He went towards her and she held out her arms to him.

"Oh, my boy, my dear boy."

Their lips met as though they were lovers.

"I recognized him first," chirruped Tommy, jumping from foot to foot in his excitement. "May didn't know him."

Mrs. Henderson stepped back a little and with her hands on his shoulders looked at him. Her face was transfigured and her eyes shone.

"My poor boy, you look a perfect scarecrow. No wonder they didn't know you. Don't you want a bath?"

"Badly. A drink first and a bath next."

"May and Tommy will look after you. I must phone your father. I want to tell him myself. He's been in an awful state about you. I'm sure he'll come down at once."

"I can't stay, Mother. We only stopped off because I thought you might be anxious. We got somebody to give us a lift as far as the village and I took a short cut through the park. As soon as I've had a bath I must get on to London and report. I'll see Father there."

During this time the man who had come with Roger was standing where Roger had left him, watching what was going forward on the terrace with a shy but friendly grin on his face. He was a short, sturdy fellow with a knowing look in his bright little eyes; he had a cigarette stuck to his lips and with a fortnight's beard on his chin, his filthy denims and the slouching way he stood, he looked so tough that had you met him on a dark night you would have been glad to give him a wide berth. Roger gave him a twinkling smile.

"Come along, Nobby."

The man took the cigarette out of his mouth, crushed it out, and putting it behind his ear shambled up the steps.

"This is my friend Nobby Clark, Mother. We had a bit of a job getting back, didn't we, Nobby?"

"That's right, sir."

Nobby spoke with a cockney accent you could have cut with a knife. Dirty as he was, and unkempt, the merry look in his eyes, the impudent cheerfulness of his grin, made his ugly, common little face singularly attractive. Mrs. Henderson held out her hand. He looked at his own, came to the conclusion it was filthy and rubbed it on his dirty denims, making it filthier still, and then shook hands with her. Roger introduced him to May, then turned to Tommy.

"This is my friend Corporal Clark, Tommy. I don't know if we should be here now if he hadn't been a damned good mechanic. Take him upstairs and give him a bath. He needs it."

"That's right, sir."

“Come along, Corporal,” said Tommy.

Tommy was a Boy Scout and he looked very nippy in his short khaki pants and his shirt open at his thin neck. Thrilled to have a soldier who had escaped from France put in his charge, he was determined to do the thing in style. He took him to a bathroom and emptied half a bottle of bath salts into the hot water. Nobby took off his foul clothes and stepped into it.

“Gorblime, don’t it smell good?” He soaped himself and then said: “Give me back a scrub, will you, sonny?”

“Right-ho, Corporal.”

“Cheese it. Don’t call me Corporal. Call me Nobby same as they all do.”

Tommy scrubbed him vigourously.

“You’re simply disgusting,” he said with delight. “I never saw anyone so dirty.”

“I was surprised at meself when I saw me feet. I ’aven’t ’ad me clothes off for a month.”

“The water’s simply black. We’d better change it.’

“Don’t you do no such thing, me lad. I like it like that. I like to see ’ow dirty I was.” He lay down luxuriously. “This is a bit of all right and no mistake. And them bath salts you put in—Lor lumme, I could stay ’ere for a week.”

“I know what you want now,” said Tommy. “Wait a minute.”

He bolted out and in a moment came back with a tankard of beer.

“What’s this? Beer? BEER.”

He put into that monosyllable all the passion that ever poet put into the praise of his mistress. He drained the tankard at a gulp.

Roger went up and had a bath too. He shaved off his beard and got clothes from his father’s room. It was a bit of luck that he and his father were of a size; the look of the things he had taken off disgusted him. It was good to put on clean linen. He was sitting at the dressing-table in his shirt sleeves, combing his hair, when May came in to see if there was anything he wanted. Though he looked again very much his old smart, confident self May was suddenly shocked at the sight of him. Now that he was shaved she saw how thin he was and white; his cheeks had fallen in, and in that drawn face his haggard eyes were enormous. He looked frightfully tired. He saw her look of dismay in the mirror in front of him and laughed.

“Don’t look at me as if I was a ghost.”

“I’ve seen you look better,” she said, forcing a smile to her lips.

“I got into a bit of a jam. I shall be all right after a few days’ rest.”

“Your limp?”

“Oh, that’s nothing. I got a bullet in my leg and it was rather painful for a bit. But it’s healing up nicely.”

“I want to tell you again how awfully glad I am that you got back safely. I’m so ashamed that I didn’t recognize you at once.”

He turned round on the stool he was sitting on and smiled kindly.

"Oh, that's all right, dear. I looked a hell of a sight, didn't I? If I'd met myself in the street I'd have cut myself dead."

"I didn't expect you. And then, coming with another man. You see, you'd been posted missing, believed dead."

"Was I, by Jove?"

"The car in which you'd been driving turned up at Havre. It had been fired at and there was a lot of blood."

"It wasn't mine; it was my driver's; he was killed, poor chap. I got away with a few scratches."

"I'm so thankful now we didn't tell Tommy. You see, we only heard yesterday. We didn't tell anybody."

"How did you hear, by the way?"

"Your father was told at the War Office. He asked Dick to come down and break it to us."

"Dick? He got away all right, did he?"

"Yes."

"Good for him." He gave her a slightly mocking glance. "I hope this isn't too great a disappointment to you, May."

She flushed deeply.

"Oh, Roger, how can you say anything so unkind? Surely you know me better than that?"

"Sorry, old girl."

He made a great play of lighting a cigarette, and then in a tone deliberately casual asked:

"Are you still in love with Dick?"

"I'm afraid I am," she replied gravely.

"I see." He gave her a friendly little smile. "Let's go down and have a drink, shall we? And then I must be off."

"Must you really go so soon?"

"I'm afraid so. I couldn't have come as it is if it hadn't been on my way to town. But I'm sure to get a spot of leave and then I'll come down again."

It was a relief to get the conversation back on to a level of commonplace.

"Don't forget that we're dying to know how you escaped. Tommy will be simply thrilled to hear."

"I'll tell you all about it in due course."

Half an hour later Roger stepped out of the front door. The Hendersons still had their chauffeur, an elderly man, and the Rolls was waiting. Nobby Clark was standing

by. A pair of grey flannel pants had been found for him and a sweater.

"Why, Nobby, you look a new man," smiled Roger.

"Same to you, sir," he answered with a grin. Then with some misgiving: "Sir, Master Tommy's given me an undershirt and drawers—silk they are—and a pair of socks. I dunno where they come from."

"His things were filthy, Roger. They just stank."

"Quite right, Tommy. That's O.K., Nobby. I expect they're my father's and I'm sure he'll be glad you should have them."

"My ole woman won't 'arf laugh when she sees me in silk drawers tonight."

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ROGER reported at the War Office, saw his father, and then he went into hospital to have the bullet still in his shoulder taken out. It was nearly three weeks before he was able to get back to Graveney. He was much better, but still looked tired, and he was as thin as a rail. Tommy made haste to remind him that he had promised to tell them the story of his escape, but he laughed and said there was nothing to tell. He had got into a jam and more by good luck than by good management had got out of it. But this was far from satisfying the schoolboy's curiosity and by dint of questioning, notwithstanding his mother's expostulations, in the end he succeeded in getting it out of Roger. He wouldn't sit down and narrate it step by step from the beginning, but told them an incident here and an incident there, as it occurred to him and the conversation led up to it, so that May had to exercise her imagination in order to construct out of his desultory reminiscences a story that hung together.

So far as she could make out, the whole thing had started with an order he had been given to transmit. There was a small village near Cassel that it had been decided must be defended to delay the enemy, and since there was no infantry available the task was entrusted to a battery of the R.H.A. It was so late at night when Roger reached it that he decided to stay the night, but at dawn an attack started, and tanks, supported by parties of German infantry, penetrated the outskirts of the village. The fighting was furious. By afternoon the ammunition had run low and the guns could only fire every few minutes; it was clear that the small garrison could hold out no longer and a withdrawal was ordered. Roger had felt it impossible to go when every man was needed and he had taken command of a small detachment of yeomanry that had appeared. But now, since he could no longer be of use, he decided to get back to headquarters. He shook hands with the commander.

"You've put up a grand show," he said.

"Well, I had to do something," the other grinned.

All the guns but two had been put out of action and they and the wounded were to be sent ahead, and the rest of the force was following later by a different route.

They were to meet at a village three or four miles away.

"What makes you think the Germans aren't holding it?" asked Roger.

"If they are we shall be damned unlucky. But we'll kill a hell of a lot of them first."

"Well, good luck to you."

"You'll want a bit of luck yourself to get through. The blighters are swarming all over the shop."

"Oh, I shall be all right. I'm going to get off the high road as soon as I can. It'll take me a bit longer, but I think it's worth it."

There was a lull and Roger set off with his chauffeur. They drove for some distance, along a river, and then, at a fork, saw a car coming towards them on the road they

intended to take themselves. There were two British officers in it and Roger stopped them.

"Is the road all right behind you?" he called out.

"Right as rain. Not a sign of a Hun."

"O.K."

He drove on. Looking at his map he saw that there was a bridge some miles on and shortly after that a side road he judged would lead him by a detour to his destination. The country was flat and they didn't spare the gas, but there was a straggling line of refugees on the road and every now and then they were held up. They passed through a wood and were just getting to the bridge when there was a sudden burst of machine-gun fire and the car swerved violently. The driver slumped over the wheel. The car skidded into a ditch and with a terrific jerk stopped, but by a happy chance did not turn over. Roger jumped out and amid a hail of bullets ran for the bridge and dived over the parapet into the water. He was hit as he went over. He swam for dear life. The Germans ran to the bridge and fired down the river, but it was overhung with trees and they could only fire at random. He wasn't hit again. Then he heard another burst of firing, much more intense, but it wasn't directed at him; he paused for a moment to take breath and then heard the droning of a plane. He guessed at once what had happened. A British plane was gunning the men who had lain in ambush and they had scuttled to the cover of the wood. He looked about him; he was pretty well done in by now, and it seemed to him that he could do nothing better than climb up the bank and hide in the thick undergrowth. He lay there for a while listening with all his ears; the firing had ceased; the Germans had either taken to their heels or had thought him not worth pursuing. He got up and, moving cautiously, started to walk, but his leg hurt him and he staggered and fell. He was wounded in the leg, though he didn't think badly, and he had what felt like a nasty cut on his face and a flesh wound in the right shoulder. He slithered along the ground and sitting down propped his back against the trunk of a tree.

"This is a howd'ye do," he said to himself.

"Why did you say that?" asked Tommy.

"I couldn't think of anything else to say."

"If I'd been you I'd have cursed and sworn."

"I knew Mother wouldn't approve of that," laughed Roger.

"Oh, my dear, after being married to your father for thirty-five years I may say that there's not a word in the English language that can make me turn a hair," she smiled.

"Go on," said Tommy impatiently.

"Well, I tried to think what I'd better do next. I thought the first thing was to have a bit of a rest, and then, when it got dark, to get back to the road and see if I couldn't find some house where I could put up for the night. You see, I had to try and get back to headquarters somehow. Luckily I had several thousand francs on me."

"Didn't you feel awful?"

"Rotten. I was wet through. I couldn't do anything about my face and my shoulder, but I thought I'd have a look at my leg. It wasn't much, but it was bleeding a bit; I'd

got a bullet just above the knee and as far as I could make out it had injured a tendon. That's why it gave me such gyp to walk. I wanted a cigarette more than anything in the world and my cigarettes were in that case you gave me, May, and they were as dry as a bone; but my lighter wouldn't work and so I couldn't smoke. Well, I made myself as comfortable as I could and just lay there—I should think for an hour, and then I heard some one trampling through the brushwood."

"Weren't you scared?" asked Tommy.

"Scared out of my wits. I took my revolver and pointed it in the direction of the sound. If it was a German he was for it."

To his surprise it was a woman that appeared. When she saw him she held up her hands.

"Friend. Friend," she said. "I've been looking for you."

"Well, you've found me," he replied. "What are you going to do about it?"

She was a stocky young woman, with a flat face and apple-red cheeks; she looked like a peasant and Roger supposed she was a refugee. She had very small, very black eyes, like buttons, and they were hard and shrewd.

"Are you wounded?" she asked him.

"Not seriously."

"I saw it happen. They were parachutists. It was luck for you that plane came along. Five of them were killed."

"How about my chauffeur?"

"He was dead."

"Are there any Germans about?"

"Motor cyclists. No tanks yet."

"How can I get away from here?"

He couldn't tell from the look on her flat face if she was stupid or hostile.

"You're an officer, aren't you?"

"Yes."

She seemed to consider.

"Look," she said then, "you're safe here for the present. Wait till it's dark and then I'll take you to the farm."

"What farm?"

"My father-in-law's. It's on the edge of the wood. Shall you be able to walk there if I help you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Don't move. I'll whistle when I come back."

She disappeared into the greenery and he was left alone once more. He was in pain and he was none too sure that she meant what she said. It might be that she had gone to inform on him and would come back with a party of Germans to take him prisoner. He

had a mind to crawl from where he was to a place of greater safety, but it seemed useless; she'd know he couldn't get far and they'd soon find him. The only thing was to sit still and take his chance. He was beginning not to care what happened. Night came and he shivered in his wet clothes. At last he heard a sound of someone coming and then a cautious whistle. He waited a moment, listening with all his ears, to make sure the girl was alone and then whistled back. She made her way to where he was lying. He could only just stand now, but she put a strong arm round him and together they made their way through the wood. He wondered if he'd find half a dozen Huns waiting for him when he got out of it, and heaved a sigh of relief when they got into the open and there was not a soul to be seen. The farm stood a little way back from the road.

"I've told my mother-in-law," the girl said. "You can sleep the night. My father-in-law has been down in the village since dinner. He hasn't come back yet."

The door was opened for them by a plump, tallish woman of middle age.

"Here he is," said the girl.

The woman, without speaking, made way for them to enter and Roger sank into a chair. He was terribly thirsty and asked for a glass of water. While he was drinking it there was the sound of footsteps outside and the girl said:

"There's Father."

She unlocked the door and a thin, wizened man, with a mean face, entered. He started when he saw Roger. He gave the two women an angry look.

"What's this? Who have you got here?"

"It's an English officer. He escaped when the parachutists attacked his car."

He clenched his fist and went up to Roger.

"Get out. Get out."

"He's wounded," the girl said.

"I don't care. The Germans are here. If they find him they'll burn the farm. I was in the last war and I know."

"I only want to stay the night," said Roger. "I'll pay you well."

"No, no, no. Get out."

"He can't go, he can hardly stand," cried the girl. "He'll die."

"Let him. That's his look-out."

Roger hoisted himself up from the chair.

"I'll go."

"No, I won't let you," she cried. She turned to the farmer and, her eyes furious, screamed: "And my husband? Have you forgotten him? He's your son, isn't he? For all you know he too may be wounded or in want of help."

"Yes, man, there's your son," said his wife.

"You don't know the Germans. They're capable of putting us up against a wall and shooting us all three."

"Let him stay the night, Michel."

At that moment they pricked up their ears. There was a screech of brakes and then the tramp of heavy boots.

"Germans."

The farmer's wife sprang to a door and opened it.

"Go in there. Hide under the bed."

The girl put her hands under Roger's armpits, lifted him to his feet and flung him into the next room. He stood against the closed door, his revolver in his hand, and heard her say to her father-in-law:

"If you give him away I'll kill you with my own hands."

There was a loud knocking.

"Open. Open."

One or other of them unlocked the door and two motor cyclists came in.

"Don't be frightened. We're not going to hurt you. We've lost our way and we saw your light. We want to get to Andrecy."

"Where have you come from?" said the farmer.

"Germany. Where did you think?"

"You keep on this road for another four kilometres, and then you take the turning on your left."

"And we're as thirsty as the devil. Have you got any wine?"

The girl set a couple of bottles before them. They took them and prepared to go, but the farmer got between them and the door.

"That'll be four francs."

"The general will be along tomorrow. You ask him for it."

The man who spoke pushed the wizened Frenchman aside with a sweep of his arm and the two of them strode out. The farmer shook his fist at them.

"Swine."

Roger hobbled back to the kitchen and sank down once more into a chair. He put his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands.

"You see he's not fit to move," said the girl. "You can't have the heart to turn him out into the night."

The farmer looked at him sulkily. It might have been that his wrath at having two bottles of wine taken from him without payment had more effect on him than pity for a wounded man. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Let him stay. But I won't have him in the house. He can go in the hayloft. If the Germans find him there I can say I knew nothing about him."

The girl gave him a suspicious stare and then went up so close to him that her face almost touched his. Her little black eyes were set and fierce.

"The Boches aren't going to find him unless you tell them where he is. Swear that you won't give him away. Swear on the head of your son."

The farmer, as though he could not meet that menacing stare, glanced shiftily away. His wife looked up.

"Swear, Michel."

The farmer uttered a filthy word. Then sulkily:

"I swear—on the head of my son."

It was a job for the two women to get Roger up a ladder into the loft. They laid him down on a pile of hay.

"Oh, my poor boy," said Mrs. Henderson, when he told them this part of the story.

"I was jolly glad to hit the hay," Roger smiled. "It's astonishing how comfortable you can make yourself when you get used to it, and anyhow it was a damned sight better than a prison camp. I was pretty well all in, you know."

He spent ten days in that loft. For next morning he was so sick that there could be no question of his going. Jeannette, that was the girl's name, brought the farmer to see him; the man looked at him angrily, and then without a word clambered down the ladder again. His daughter-in-law followed him. Roger guessed that a bitter altercation took place, but he felt too ill to bother. He could only trust in the power of those two strong-willed women over the frightened, mean-spirited man. In an hour Jeannette came back and said that her father-in-law had agreed to let him stay till he was well enough to walk. She brought him milk to drink, and food; he couldn't touch the food, but he drank the milk greedily. His leg didn't trouble him much, nor the scratch on his face, but his shoulder throbbed painfully. He felt feverish. He felt worse and worse as the day wore on and that night he was delirious. He was no better next day. He wasn't sure if it was on the third or fourth night that he heard other steps besides Jeannette's on the ladder. That was the end, he thought; either a gendarme or a Gestapo man. He was too weak to resist. But it was the village doctor that Jeannette, frightened at his condition, had persuaded under seal of secrecy to come and see him. He was a rough, uncouth fellow, who looked as if he were more used to treating animals than human beings and who was evidently nervous at what he was doing, but he was not incompetent and he cleaned and dressed Roger's wounds and gave him aspirin. After that, he came every night. Roger began to mend. He was a strong man, young and in good condition; feeling better every day he occupied his long hours of solitude in making plans for his escape. He had been looking at his maps when the parachutists had attacked him and had lost them when he jumped out of the car and ran for the bridge, so to decide what route to take he had to trust to his own inadequate knowledge of the country and what he could learn from Jeannette. She had lived all her life in the vicinity and such information as she could give him of what lay beyond was unreliable. His scheme was to reach the sea and then get a fisherman to take him across the Channel. He was thankful that he had enough money on him to make it worth a man's while. The news Jeannette brought him was bad; she said the British Army in Flanders had surrendered and the French were retreating. Weygand was in command now, and was withdrawing his troops with the idea of launching a counter-offensive at the proper moment and driving the Boches back to their own frontiers. Roger didn't know what to believe. He couldn't think it was true that the British had surrendered, but he knew in

what a perilous situation the capitulation of the Belgian King had placed them and it was instinct rather than reason that made him refuse to believe it.

According to Jeannette the whole place swarmed with Germans and it looked as though his only chance of getting through was in disguise. He asked her if she could get him clothes in which he could pass unnoticed. She suggested a suit of her husband's.

"He's about your size," she said.

She brought it to him, wrapped in a large bundle, one night, and he tried it on. The sleeves were short for him, and so were the pants, but he could wear it. He would look a sight, but so dressed no one would take him for a British officer. To exercise his limbs he walked up and down the loft for half an hour at a time. He could walk now without great pain. On two nights, after they had gone to bed at the farm, he crept down and walked for a while along the road. It made him light-headed and he was tired when he got back. One morning when Jeannette brought him food, which she did soon after dawn and then again when night fell, she said to him:

"I've been thinking. What'll you do about papers? A gendarme might stop you and ask for them."

"I've thought of that. I think I can pass as a Belgian refugee and I'll say they were stolen from me on the way."

"That's dangerous. I'll give you my husband's."

"Good girl."

She was indeed a pearl. That flat plain face, the sullen mouth and the cold shrewd eyes were no indication of her character. Roger had been mistaken in her. In her rough, churlish way she was wonderfully kind. Her behaviour proved her courage, her tenacity and her compassion. When Roger tried to express something of his gratitude for all she had done, she only made a gesture of impatience.

"It's nothing," she said. "I'd have done the same for anyone." For the first time he saw something like a smile on her face. "You're a fine-looking man. It would be a shame to let the Boches get you."

Then one morning she came somewhat later than was her habit. The sun had been up for an hour.

"Good morning, Jeannette," he said breezily. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

"I had to wait till the old man was out of the way."

"Oh, why? Is he turning nasty again? How about some food? I'm starving."

"Listen, we've kept you as long as we can. There are Germans in the village and the old man's frightened. They say they'll shoot anyone found harbouring an Englishman."

"Charming people." He gave a cheerful nod. "All right. I'll get out tonight. I'm quite strong enough."

"The old man's gone down to the village and we don't know why. You must go now. Get into my husband's clothes. I've got his papers all ready and a cup of coffee waiting for you."

It was plain enough that Jeannette thought her father-in-law had gone down to the village to give him away. There was not time to lose. He hastened to dress, climbed down the rickety ladder and walked over to the farm. He went into the kitchen. He hadn't seen the farmer's wife since the night on which Jeannette had brought him, wet through and wounded, to the farm and he greeted her warmly. But she interrupted him. He saw that she was in a fever of nervousness.

"Drink your coffee quickly," she said. "This is no time for fine speeches."

It was waiting for him on the table in a bowl. He sat down and dipping pieces of bread in it began to eat. Jeannette gave him a little booklet.

"Here are the papers."

He glanced at the photograph of a stolid-looking man of about his own age.

"I can't say he looks much like me," he grinned.

"The beard makes a difference, but he might have grown one too."

"Good God, I forgot I hadn't shaved since I got here. What do I look like?"

"See for yourself."

Jeannette handed him a glass and he saw himself for the first time since he arrived at the farm. He gasped.

"Make haste, make haste," said the farmer's wife. "Here's a piece of bread with a bit of meat in it. That'll do you till tonight."

Roger took it and stood up.

"I shall never forget your kindness to me. I should like to give you something for all your trouble."

"We don't want your money," said Jeannette. "What we've done for you we've done for France."

"Go now for God's sake," said the other.

Roger kissed them, shut the door behind him and slipped out on the road to freedom.

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THE sun shone and the air was sweet-scented with the fragrance of the morning. He was in high spirits. It was good to be on the way and the risk he ran pleasantly excited him. He walked and rested and walked again. In the evening he ran across Nobby Clark. He related the incident with so much gusto that Tommy was beside himself with glee.

"I'd been tramping all day and I thought it was about time to find some place to sleep. Well, just as it was getting dark I passed a small, two-storeyed house standing by itself; the shutters were up and it looked deserted. It was one of those little houses that you see all over France and that retired tradesmen build as a retreat for their declining years. It had a bit of garden in front with painted statuettes in it, of gnomes and dwarfs, and two great silver balls. You know the sort of thing. Typical. Well, I was dog-tired and my leg was giving me hell. I didn't know how far the next village was, and I thought it very improbable that I'd get a bed there, so I thought I'd better do a bit of house-breaking and spend the night in that empty house. I tried the door, but it was locked and so I went round to the back. There was a glass door there, but it was locked too. I looked round for something to smash it with. There was a wood shed at the end of the garden and I thought I might find something there. I did and it was just what I wanted. A hatchet."

Roger paused for a moment, a grin on his face, and looked around at his tiny audience.

"You know, I don't believe I'd ever make a first-rate burglar. I was as nervous as a cat when I smashed the lock and got into what was obviously their living-room."

"Whose?" asked Tommy.

"The people who lived there, you owl. I suppose they'd done a bunk when they heard the Huns were coming. It was crammed full of furniture and everything was covered with dust-sheets. I don't know why, but there was something damned frightening about it."

"I bet you weren't frightened, Roger," said Tommy.

"You'd lose your bet, old boy. I was trembling like a leaf. That's the worst of being a law-abiding feller. It shakes your nerve to pieces when you start breaking the law. Well, I went out of the door into the passage; there was a staircase that led upstairs and I was just going up when I happened to look at a looking-glass that was hanging on the wall. I got the shock of my life. I saw a man crouching at the top of the stairs with what looked suspiciously like a jemmy in his hand. Well, his intentions were obvious and they weren't what you might call friendly. My heart jumped to my mouth. I turned damned quick and then I saw he was a British soldier."

"And it was the corporal?"

"It was," said Roger.

The man almost started out of his skin when Roger spoke to him.

"What the hell are you doing there?"

"English, by gum," the man spluttered. He chuckled. "Lucky you spoke, I was just going to biff you one." He came down the stairs. "You don't look English."

"That's the idea."

"Got a fag?"

"Here you are," said Roger, handing him a cigarette. "Come along in here."

They went back into the sitting-room.

"How did *you* get here?" asked Roger.

"I was taken prisoner. We was in a camp first and then we was marched off somewhere, Lille or some place, and when we was passing a wood I legged it. They 'ad two or three shots at me, but they didn't get me. An' I been leggin' it ever since, goin' by night on account of me uniform."

"It does make you a bit conspicuous, I must say."

The soldier looked at him with sudden suspicion.

"Look 'ere, you ain't an orficer, are you? You look like a blinkin' tramp."

"Oh, that's all right, old boy. Don't you worry about that. Where are you legging it to?"

"Blessed if I know. I want to get back to me regiment."

"Fat chance you've got of doing that."

"Where are you goin'?"

"England. Want to come?"

"Not 'arf."

"All right. I don't know the way, mind you, but I've got a pocket compass. We'll get to the coast and then we'll see."

"I suppose you 'aven't got anythin' to eat, 'ave you? I ain't 'ad a bite all day."

"Yes, I got something in the last village I came through."

Roger took out of his pocket a hunk of bread and cheese and handed it to the soldier.

"Can you spare it?"

"Rather. All I want's a sleep. I've been walking since morning and I'm all in."

"There's a bed up there," said the soldier as he began to eat hungrily. "I been sleepin' in it meself."

"Wake me up in two or three hours and we'll get going. I don't think we'd better waste any more time than we need."

"Right you are, sir."

"And you needn't call me sir. By the way, what's your name?"

"Clark's my name."

He just avoided adding the sir. Roger smiled.

"And I suppose they call you Nobby?"

"That's right."

While Roger was telling them this Tommy had been showing signs of lively impatience and now could contain himself no longer.

"I say, Roger, was that the compass I gave you before you went over to France?"

"It was, old boy, and very useful I found it."

"I knew you would. You see I was right, Mummy. Mummy said she couldn't possibly see what you'd want with a compass."

They trudged through what remained of the night, Roger and his companion, and at dawn found a coppice well away from the road which they decided would be a good place to spend the day at. Roger went on to a hamlet they had caught sight of with the first glimpse of daylight and brought back a loaf, sausages and two bottles of wine. From his accent Roger knew that Nobby was a cockney and he learnt now that he was born and bred in London. He was a mechanic who in peacetime worked in a garage in the Horseferry Road, which is in Westminster, behind Victoria Street. He seemed an alert, clever little man who could make himself useful in an emergency and the way he had escaped showed that he had spirit. The only thing that bothered Roger was the uniform. That increased the risk of their being caught, and somehow or other civilian clothes must be got for him. It wasn't too easy, since they had to travel by night and in any case avoid even the smallest towns where they might be stopped and asked inconvenient questions. The nearer they got to the coast the greater the danger would be.

When Roger on leaving the hospital came to stay at Graveney Dora diffidently withdrew herself from the family circle. She continued to do her work conscientiously, but spent such leisure as she had walking in the park and in the evening, immediately after dinner, went up to her room. Mrs. Henderson could not but appreciate her tact, for much as they all liked her, it was natural that just then they should want to be alone with Roger and an outsider, however intimate, could not but be in the way. It was clever of Dora to realize it. She seldom joined them except at meals and then, though Roger politely sought to bring her into the conversation she seemed disinclined to take part in it. She spoke only when spoken to. Mrs. Henderson was glad to see that Roger was disposed to like her and she took care to tell him how much they all thought of her.

"Except Jane," he smiled.

"Oh, you know what Jane is. She thinks she's broad-minded, and in point of fact she's the most insular and prejudiced woman I've ever met."

"That sounds as though you were quite resigned to Jim's marrying Dora."

"Has Jane been talking to you?"

"What would you expect?"

Mrs. Henderson paused for an instant of reflection.

"I have a great admiration for Dora. I'm sure she's a thoroughly nice girl and of course she's wonderfully pretty. I suppose I've got my prejudices too and I won't deny

that she isn't the wife I'd have chosen for Jim myself, but if she'll make him happy—well, that's the chief thing; and there's no doubt that he's very much in love with her."

Jim came over on Sunday. The two brothers had not met since that afternoon in Jane's house when Jim to the general dismay had stated that he meant to abide by the dictates of his conscience. But they had a real affection for one another and Jim had been as cruelly anxious as the others when May waited from day to day for news of Roger and no news came. He was immensely happy to see him again. They chaffed one another in the old way.

"Well, old boy, I've done you out of the broad acres this time. I suppose you were counting on your chickens like mad."

"Well, wouldn't you? As a matter of fact I got an adding machine. A dirty trick I call it to do the Enoch Arden stunt on us when we'd all given you up as lost."

"Damned inconsiderate of me, wasn't it? Now you may have to wait another forty years for the property."

"I know. And it'll probably be mortgaged up to the hilt when I do get it."

"Be quiet, you boys," said Mrs. Henderson. "I'm not amused."

"Like Queen Victoria," they said in unison.

Mrs. Henderson was delighted to see that notwithstanding everything they were such good friends. Jim was in unusually good spirits. Roger chatted with him about his work as though it were the most natural thing that just at that period in the world's history he should be an agricultural labourer. The General had come down for the week-end, but he took his cue from Roger and was more genial with Jim than he had been since the beginning of the war. He even went so far as to suggest archly that he was having a devil of a time with the land girls he had heard Jim's employer had lately taken on. He was in fact beginning to accept his son's aberration as an idiosyncrasy such as you found from time to time in many old families. In the St. Erths, for instance, there was always a spinster aunt who had been shut up in a lunatic asylum for twenty years; and in the Hollingtons at least one member who was a confirmed drunk. But he was as anxious as Tommy to hear the details of Roger's escape from France and that evening at dinner made him tell again some part of what he had already told.

"But how was it that you never saw any Germans?" he asked him at one point.

"Oh, but I did," answered Roger. With his breezy smile he turned to Dora. "I had one very narrow shave of being collared by your Nazi friends."

"They're not friends of mine," she answered coldly.

He laughed.

"I know they're not. I was only being facetious."

"I'm sorry. I sometimes don't understand English humour."

"That has all the ear-marks of a nasty crack," he retorted good-humouredly.

"Go on, Roger," said Tommy. "Tell us about it."

This is the story he told them. They had been on the road two days, trudging through the night and only resting when the pain in Roger's leg became unendurable,

and early on the third morning came to a tiny village. They had been looking for a wood where they could lie doggo for the day, but the country was bare and the only thing was to push on. They were tired, hungry and thirsty. They walked through the one street of which the place consisted and opposite the church came to a humble little inn where the men of the village came to have their *apéritif* and play cards; a woman was sweeping the floor and they caught a whiff of roasting coffee. The smell was inviting.

"Let's chance it," said Roger and walked in, with Nobby following.

The woman gasped when she saw his British uniform. Roger told her in his fluent French that they were English escaping and were hungry, and asked her if they could stay there for the day. He could see by her face that she was friendly, but frightened, and he was hardly surprised when, frowning a little, she said that she would give them coffee and something to eat, but couldn't let them stay. She led them into a kitchen behind the bar and poured out for them two bowls of steaming coffee and gave them a loaf of bread. When Roger had finished he went out to ask her what was the least dangerous route they could take to get to the coast, but before she could answer a little boy rushed in.

"*Maman*," he cried, "the Germans."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when several motor cyclists stopped at the door and dismounted.

"My God, they're coming in," said the woman. "Hide yourself."

"Keep cool," said Roger.

He thought they might have seen him and if he wasn't there might find it suspicious. He quickly got behind the counter and began mopping it with a wet rag. They came in, six of them, and one addressed him in halting French.

"Two bottles of champagne," he ordered.

Pale, but apparently calm, the woman stepped forward.

"Certainly, gentlemen."

She pointed to two bottles on a shelf behind Roger and gave him a nipper to cut the wire. He opened the bottles and filled six glasses.

"*Prosit. Prosit*," the Germans said, clinking glasses before they drank thirstily.

"Why aren't you in the Army?" asked the one who had spoken before, presumably the only one who spoke French.

"I've got kidney trouble," answered Roger. "They wouldn't take me."

"Lucky, aren't you? Have a glass of champagne."

"I'm not allowed to drink. It's bad for my kidneys."

"Damn you, when a German soldier offers you a drink, you drink."

Roger filled himself a glass and drank the champagne. The soldier turned to one of the others and broke into German.

"Surly blighter, I've got a good mind to smack his face."

“None of that, Fritz,” said the man he had spoken to. “Orders are orders. The civil population must be treated with every consideration.”

“For the present. But when we’ve finished with England we’ll show them who their masters are.”

They drank the wine, paid what Roger asked for it, and crowded out. The woman began to laugh.

“Well, you had your nerve with you when you asked them twenty francs a bottle,” she said. “I sell it for five-fifty.”

He couldn’t find Nobby when he went to look for him, but on opening a door discovered him standing on the seat of a stinking toilet. He was holding the bar of iron from which he had refused to be parted and had evidently intended to make a fight for it if he was found. He followed Roger back into the kitchen, wiping his sweating forehead with the sleeve of his tunic.

“That was a near thing, governor,” he said. “I thought you was for it.”

“I don’t mind telling you that I had a bit of a sinking feeling myself.”

The woman of the house joined them. Her nerve was shaken and she begged Roger to be off. He asked her where her husband was. In the Army. He told her they would go at once if he could get some civilian clothes for Nobby and asked her if she wouldn’t sell him some of her husband’s. She wouldn’t, he’d want them when he came back, and though Roger offered to pay twice what they cost she would not be persuaded. At last he got her to let him have some overalls and these, to his surprise, she refused to accept money for.

“It’s not that I don’t want to help you,” she said, “but one has to think of oneself.”

It didn’t take Nobby long to get out of his uniform and into the overalls. Half an hour later they were tramping confidently along the high road; no one would have guessed that those two dusty vagabonds were respectively a British corporal and an officer in the Military Intelligence. They trudged on for three days more. They kept away from the towns, buying their food in villages, and slept under hedges, for they dared not go to an inn for a night’s lodging in case they were asked for their papers. Roger had those of Jeannette’s husband, but he was none too sure that he could persuade an inquisitive policeman that he was the man they said he was, and Nobby had none. Then, climbing one morning wearily to the top of a steep hill they caught sight of the sea. Roger couldn’t trust himself to speak. He pointed to the shining expanse below them. Nobby spat.

“Thinkin’ of swimmin’ across, are you?”

“You fool, Nobby,” laughed Roger.

“Let’s ’ave a sit down. I could do with a fag.”

“Well, we’ve got so far without mishap,” said Roger. “I think the worst is over.”

“Oh, you do, do you? I wish I did.”

“You mustn’t lose heart now, Nobby. I’ll get you home all right.”

“They do say that where there’s a will there’s a way.”

They couldn't take their eyes off that great sheet of water and Roger's heart quivered in exultation. Over there was England. He inhaled the smoke of his harsh French cigarette with voluptuous relish.

Nobby grinned his ugly, attractive grin.

"My old woman won't be 'arf sorry to see me," he said. "I promised to bring my Ernie a German tin 'at. I 'aven't told you about my Ernie, 'ave I? Fine little nipper, 'e is. Nine years old next month."

"Come on, let's get going. You can tell me about your Ernie when we're on the briny ocean."

They started off again and presently, below them, saw a town with boats lying in a trim little harbour.

"One of those would suit us all right," said Roger.

" 'Ow are you goin' to get one?"

"Beg, borrow or steal it."

Nobby grinned.

"You're so 'uman, sometimes I forget you're a gentleman," he said. "Can you sail a boat?"

"I have sailed a boat," said Roger prudently.

They walked on and after a while, on the cliff, came to a row of small villas facing the sea. They sat down again in front of one of them to rest and decide what they had best do next. An old woman was working in the garden and Roger had a mind to ask her for something to eat so that they needn't go into the town till nightfall. He didn't like the notion of taking Nobby with him and he thought it a risk to leave him alone. She had a pleasant, homely face. But while he was still considering, an old man of respectable appearance came up the road, evidently from the town, and opening the gate turned into the garden.

"Any news?" the old woman asked him.

"Only bad news."

"Poor France," she sighed.

He had been so abstracted that he had not noticed the two disreputable men who sat at the roadside.

"They say the English are going on."

"That's not bad news."

"How can they? They've lost everything, their guns, their equipment, everything."

Roger heard no more for they walked together up the path and went into the house.

"They're all right," he said. "They'll help us if they can. Come on."

With Nobby following he went up to the front door and rang. The old woman opened it.

"What is it?"

"May I talk to the master of the house?" said Roger.

“He’s busy. We’ve got nothing to give you, my poor friends.”

She tried to shut the door, but he put his foot in it.

“Please listen to me.”

“No, no, no. I’m sorry we can do nothing for you.”

The old man came into the passage.

“What is it, Adèle?”

“More refugees.” Then again to Roger: “I tell you we can’t help you. They come every day.”

“I am a British officer, madam. My companion is a corporal.”

The woman seemed to catch her breath; she went white and stood aside to let them pass.

“Come in.”

She closed the door behind them and led them into a room the walls of which were lined with books. The old man presented himself.

“I am Professor Dubois of the University of Rouen.”

Roger gave his name and rank.

“We have been walking for five days. We want to get back to England.”

“But there are Germans everywhere,” the professor’s wife broke in. “The town is occupied. Why do you come to us? You put us in such danger.”

The professor looked at Roger with speculative eyes. He was a small man with thick grey hair and an untidy grey beard; but he had a look that was both intelligent and kindly.

“What do you want us to do?”

“I want to get a boat. I have money.”

“Money? It’s not a question of money.”

The professor pulled his beard. He continued to gaze at Roger with musing, preoccupied eyes. His wife, on a sudden seeming to see what he had in mind, gave a gasp of terror.

“André, what are you thinking of?” she cried. “It’s not fair to me to take such a risk.”

Roger had no notion what she meant, but guessed that the professor had in view some way to help them and he turned to her.

“Madam, we should never have got so far if there hadn’t been women in France who weren’t afraid to take risks to help us. I was wounded and a peasant woman kept me hidden in a hayloft for ten days.”

“We’re old people, my husband and I. I’m a coward.”

Tears came into her eyes and rolled down her withered cheeks.

“It is our duty to help them,” said her husband.

She gave a heart-rending sigh.

“I know.” Her voice broke. “Do what you like, my dear.”

It was with a sad, unsmiling face that the professor turned to Roger.

“Can you sail a boat?”

“Certainly,” said Roger with a confidence he was far from feeling.

“I have a cutter, but she’s very small. The barometer is falling and I wouldn’t advise anyone to cross the Channel unless he was an experienced sailor.”

“It’s better to take a risk than to fall into the hands of the Germans.”

“Very well. When it’s dark I’ll show you where she lies. You can take her. But I warn you I shall have to report her disappearance tomorrow morning. You’ll only have twelve hours’ start.”

“That’ll be enough.”

“She’s got a motor auxiliary, six horse-power, but I’m afraid it’s not in very good condition.”

“The corporal’s a mechanic in civil life. He boasts there’s not an engine in the world so bad that he can’t make it go by a suitable combination of kind words and firmness.”

The professor cast a wan smile on Nobby, who had been standing there not knowing what they were jabbering about.

“Have you eaten today, my poor friends?” asked Madame Dubois.

“Not yet.”

“They’d better go into the kitchen. They’ll be safer there,” said the professor. “Anyone would take them for refugees.”

“There’s Marie,” said his wife. “I’m not so sure she can be trusted. She’ll know they’re not French or Belgian.”

“Then we must warn her.” The professor went to the door and called: “Marie.”

The maid, a sturdy, middle-aged woman, came in, and seeing the two disreputable tramps, uttered a groan.

“More refugees. Oh, no, I’ve had enough of them here. I’ve got nothing in the kitchen.”

“Marie,” said the professor, “these are two English soldiers. They’ve come here for shelter till night so that they may escape to England to return and drive the Germans out of the country. If you won’t help us I must send them away.”

She looked from the professor to the two men and then back again to him. She threw back her head.

“*Vive la France*,” she said.

“You know that if they’re found here we shall all go to prison.”

“*Vive la France*,” she repeated.

Madame Dubois began to cry.

“They’re hungry, Marie,” she faltered. “Take them into the kitchen and feed them.”

A look of grim determination came over the maid's broad face.

"Come along, boys. I'll feed you till you burst."

Roger was overjoyed. Their luck, their wonderful luck, kept up and here, providentially, it had placed in their hands the means of escape.

"We shall be in England tomorrow, old boy," he said to Nobby, his eyes sparkling.

When night fell the professor took them down to the harbour. He was nervous but determined; and Roger had a warm feeling in his heart for that old man, trembling in his shoes, but, though it might mean imprisonment or even death, determined to do what he thought was right. He walked ahead of them and since the night was dark they had to keep their eyes skinned not to lose him. There was nobody about. Finally he stopped.

"There she is," he whispered. "The little one painted black. The dinghy is attached to the stern. You'll have to swim out to her. It's only a few metres. Here's a torch. I must leave you. I daren't stay any longer. Good-bye and God-speed."

He did not stop to hear Roger's thanks, but hurried away on noiseless feet. In an instant they lost sight of him.

"We've got to swim out to her, Nobby," whispered Roger.

"I can't swim."

"Oh, damn. All right, I'll go and fetch the dinghy."

He slipped off his boots and coat and slid into the water. He got into the dinghy and paddled back to fetch Nobby. They climbed into the cutter and while Roger raised the anchor Nobby started pottering with the engine.

"I'll get her going in two shakes," he said.

"We must get out of the harbour first. Can you row?"

"I've rowed on the Serpentine."

"Take this rope and jump in the dinghy. Make it fast to the seat and then row out of the port."

Nobby got in and started to tow the cutter while Roger remained at the helm. At regular intervals a searchlight swept the sky. When they got out to sea Nobby clambered back on board and they cast the dinghy adrift. Nobby went to work on the engine and after a while got it going.

"It's a rotten little engine this," said Nobby. "I don't know if it'll 'old out."

"You're a mechanic, aren't you? You've bloody well got to make it hold out."

It seemed to make a terrific noise in the silence of the night and Roger cast an anxious glance at the searchlight. He knew it was planes they were looking for, but it might occur to some bright spark to swing his light over the sea. It would be tough luck if they got caught just when they had a chance of getting away. Then Nobby pricked up his ears.

"I don't like the sound that engine's makin'. I'd better 'ave a look at it." He crouched down. "I think there's water in the gas. I'll 'ave to take the carburettor down and clean it."

"All right, go ahead. How long will it take you?"

"Seven or eight minutes, and then I'll 'ave to do it all over again."

Roger's heart sank.

"At that rate we shan't get to England till the middle of next week."

They were in the open now and there was a bit of sea running.

"Beginning to bob about, ain't she?" said Nobby uneasily.

"We're running into a squall, thank God. They'll have a job to find us if they do come after us."

"I'm feelin' sick," said Nobby.

"Be sick, blast you," said Roger savagely.

He didn't feel like trying to hoist the sail in the pitch darkness, for he had small experience of sailing a boat, and he thought they had better trust to the auxiliary. But the engine only ran for a few minutes at a time. Nobby, feeling like death, cleaned the carburettor every quarter of an hour, and while he was cleaning it they tossed about helplessly in the choppy sea.

"D'you think we shall make it?" asked Nobby, peering into the darkness.

"Better be drowned than fall into the hands of those filthy Huns," Roger snapped.

Nobby vanished again.

The night seemed endless and when the grey dawn broke they were both very tired. The sky was heavy with threatening clouds and the sea was dirty. Roger had no notion how far they had gone. He didn't think they could even now be more than a few miles away from the coast of France. The daylight was a comfort, but a danger as well, for they might be seen by a German motor boat and then it was all up with them. Giving the reluctant Nobby the tiller and showing him in which direction to steer he managed to hoist the sail and then they proceeded with an easier motion. Madame Dubois had stuffed their pockets with food and there was water in the tank, but Roger would let Nobby eat only sparingly; he did not know how long they would have to make their provisions last. All that day they went on and all the next night. Every few minutes Nobby had to take down the carburettor and clean it; he took cat-naps between times, but Roger felt he couldn't afford to close his eyes. Whenever the motor began to splutter he gave Nobby a kick to rouse him. They were wet and cold and Nobby was very seasick. They didn't speak for a couple of hours at a time. Their stock of food was getting low and it looked as if soon they would have to go hungry. Luckily there was plenty of water. But where was the land? Where was that bloody land? Roger didn't like the look of the weather; the old man had said the glass was falling and if a storm came up, inexperienced sailor as he was, he was none too sure that he could cope with it.

"We shall be in the soup," he muttered.

The day seemed endless. Roger, thinking that hours had passed, would look at his watch only to find that scarcely an hour had gone by. Time loitered like an idle errand boy. You might have thought that for two steps forward it took one step back. They never saw a ship. They might have sailed an unknown sea that none had sailed before.

At long last the day drew to a close. The sun set threatening behind a bank of cloud and darkness shrouded them in a fearful loneliness. When morning came, a dun, sullen morning, with the sea running high, Roger wondered grimly whether either of them would see the night. His tired eyes persistently searched the horizon. Suddenly his heart turned over. For a moment he felt as sick as his wretched companion.

"Hi, Nobby, take a look out."

Nobby, lying in the cockpit, was groaning with misery; he raised a miserable and aching head.

"What's up?"

"Can you see something straight ahead?"

Wearily Nobby got to his feet and supporting himself on the gunwale stared in the direction in which Roger pointed.

"That?" He made a funny little sound in his throat; it might almost have been a sob. "That ain't land, is it?"

"That's what it is, old boy, land."

"Lor lumme, if I didn't feel so awful I'd 'ave me last fag."

"England."

There was something in Roger's voice that made Nobby give him a quick look. He grinned.

"Makes you feel you want to cry, don't it?"

"Shut your bloody trap, damn you," Roger snapped angrily.

Nobby, with still the remains of a grin on his sharp little face, sketched a military salute.

"Right you are, sir."

As he told Tommy afterwards: "Rare job the major 'ad to pretend 'e wasn't feelin' same as I was, but 'e was, and when 'e thought I wasn't lookin' 'e blew 'is nose so I thought 'e'd blow it right off."

For that was the end. A couple of hours later they landed on the Sussex coast.

xiv

BUT there was one part of his story Roger left untold. There was little light in the loft in which he had spent ten dreary days and even had there been enough to read by he had nothing to read. It was hot and stuffy. He was in pain. He turned from side to side on the hay trying to make himself comfortable and when he fell asleep it was only to be awakened after a few minutes by the throbbing of his shoulder. He had nothing to do but to think, and the fever that was upon him confused his thoughts so that, even when he was awake, they had the incoherence of a crazy dream. They ran riot in his aching head like a panic-stricken crowd rushing hither and thither without knowing where they wanted to go. The war, the day he had spent with the battery, the sudden shooting when his chauffeur had slumped over the wheel and the car had skidded into the ditch, the scene at the farm, Graveney Holt, his mother, Tommy, May, his ignorance of what had happened to the retreating forces—it was all muddled together like the pieces of a hideous jig-saw puzzle and every piece was a pain.

He had always valued the lucidity of his brain and it was a relief when, after his wounds were dressed and the fever abated, he found himself able to think clearly. His thoughts were dark. He was anxious about the fate of the British force; it was a bad, bad show, but notwithstanding the gloomy news that Jeannette brought him he had a strong confidence that it would not prove an irreparable disaster. England had been in a tough spot before and in the end had won through. He was in a tough spot himself. For the first time since he was wounded he chuckled; if he didn't get back to England somehow—well, he'd eat his hat. His spirits rose as he considered ways and means. He'd have to be wary—well, he was wary; he'd want a bit of nerve—well, he had a bit of nerve; he'd have to keep his wits about him—well, he was not entirely devoid of them.

He thought of May. If he'd been killed instead of his chauffeur she could have married Dick Murray. Poor May. He wondered what she saw in Dick. Of course he was a good fellow, he was a gentleman and all that sort of thing, and he had a certain charm. What else? He was conscientious, a very good agent, not a bad business man either; and he was gay and pleasant, a good shot, and he rode well. But that was about all. No one could call him intellectual. If he ever read anything beside the morning paper, the *Tatler* and the *Field*, it was a detective story. May on the other hand was a tireless reader. She had been ever since as a young girl she had had the run of the Graveney Holt library, and Roger had often been amused to discover the out-of-the-way information she possessed. She had a good brain. It was not often that he had had occasion to ask her advice, but when he had it was with pleasure that he had noticed how well she reasoned and how sound her judgment was. She had a feeling for beautiful things. Not even his mother had a more sensitive appreciation of the fine furniture at Graveney Holt. May had a charming feeling for decoration. With the odds and ends they had gathered from the attics she had made a little gem of their flat in Chelsea. It was an admirable background to her flower-like beauty.

What could all that mean to Dick Murray? And of what use would be her social sense to him? When Roger had military attachés of foreign nations to dine at the flat, or members of some mission or other, the effortless ease of her manner was beyond all praise. Because she was so natural, so candid she made them feel at home and the pleasant impression she created had more than once helped him to enter into useful relations with the strangers. He was proud of her. He had been very happy with her and it had come as an astounding shock when without warning she had asked him to let her divorce him. He could not remember that they had ever had a quarrel. They had never even had a disagreement. He recalled that at first she had seemed a trifle put out because he was reticent about his work. But it was not his business to talk, there was a great deal too much chatter going around on the matters with which he was particularly concerned, often unfortunately coming from persons in high place who should have known better, and on occasion May had been a trifle tart because she had learnt something which he had thought fit to keep secret from her. Well, it was not his fault if his superiors were indiscreet. But all that belonged to the past. For years now May had realized that part of his job was to hold his tongue and had ceased to concern herself with his affairs.

He couldn't see what she had to complain of. Of course he was away a great deal, but that again was part of his job, and he couldn't take her with him. The heads of missions sometimes carried their wives along and that meant all sorts of social complications that certainly didn't facilitate the work of the mission. It was true that when he was away he didn't think of her a great deal, he was generally too busy for that, but when he did it was with tenderness; and when the time came for him to return to England his first thought was of the pleasure it would be to be with her again. It had never occurred to him that she was lonely. She had friends in London and she could always go down to Graveney. The pity was that she had no children. They'd been married eight years and they might have had three by now. Then she would never have thought of leaving him. She would have had plenty to do and wouldn't have missed him so much. He had never let her see that her childlessness was a grief to him and when on occasion she had lamented it he had done his best to persuade her that he did not mind. So far as his means allowed he gave her everything she wanted. She had never expressed a wish that he hadn't been only too pleased to grant. He had had no reason to suppose that she was not as happy in their marriage as he was.

Certainly no one could admire her more. He felt that no one delighted as he did in her slightly fragile beauty. He liked her delicate nose, her wide-browed eyes and the exquisite texture of her skin. He liked her good breeding, her unassuming self-assurance, her tact and her poise. It might be that after the war there would be changes and that many things that had seemed of consequence before would cease to seem so, but as things were, it could not be denied that she fitted her station in life with supreme distinction.

She wasn't happy. It wrung Roger's heart to know it and the tormenting thing was that he didn't know what to do about it. For a moment he had been irritated that just when the crisis came she should have thrown this unexpected complication into his life. It was as if you were running to catch a train and someone stopped you to ask a futile question. But that was unfair; naturally she hadn't known that war was imminent. Now,

in his hayloft, Roger saw that down there at Graveney, in that peaceful scene, it was inconceivable that the world was even then rushing to destruction. Anyhow he had to face the facts. She had fallen in love with Dick and for his sake was prepared to give up all that he, Roger, had to offer her. It was a pity that there was nothing of the snob in her and that she was completely disinterested.

He had failed her somehow. What was it that Dick could give that he couldn't? He visualized his friend. With his grey, curling hair, his fine, blue eyes, with their dark lashes, his sturdy build, his hearty good-humour and ready, friendly smile—yes, he supposed Dick had a sexual attractiveness that might appeal to some women. But May was the last woman he would have expected to be interested in it. He had never found her a sensual woman and he would have been a fool to think that she was eager for sexual congress. He had not much minded that. He had not expected it. He was hard-worked and he had things to think of that seemed urgently important. And after all they had been married for eight years.

He had grown up with the idea that they would marry. Although neither his father nor his mother brought any pressure to bear on him, he was very well aware that they hoped for it. Before his marriage he had had the ordinary adventures of young men, but he had never met any woman that he liked half as much as he liked May. He had never known another as well. Perhaps that was part of the trouble. They had been as intimate as brother and sister and when they set off on their honeymoon it had been with no sense of strangeness or even of great excitement; he might almost have been going on a jaunt with his sister Jane. Of course the honeymoon had been fun; they had had a grand time in Paris. It had been nice to sleep in the same bed with May and at the same time rather comic and slightly indecent. It was somewhat like committing incest with the blessing of the Church. And what made it so delightful was that there was no embarrassment between them; they kissed and laughed and loved, and it was all as natural as going to supper in Montmartre before they went to bed or drinking their *café au lait* before they got up in the morning. It was perfect.

Since then he had never looked at another woman. During his long absences he had often had opportunities to divert himself with others, but he had never done so. He could not say that he had resisted temptation; he had never been tempted. There was always May to go back to and there wasn't a woman in the world to compare with her. She was sweet. And now his marriage was on the rocks; May wanted to divorce him and he had promised to let her if she still wanted to after the war was over. He wished he hadn't done that; he didn't want to lose her; it was not only her beauty he loved, he loved her character, gentle yet firm, quietly humourous yet sedate; she was a woman in a thousand. And he was used to her. It might be that that was where he had gone wrong, he had grown so used to her that he had taken her for granted. That was what she herself had said. She had said that she was no more to him than the chair he habitually sat in or the old golf coat he put on when he came home from work. He had been a fool. But why wouldn't women be taken for granted? With so much to do and the world in a hell of a mess how could they expect you to fuss about them all day long? A man had his work, hadn't he? In any case it was too late now, even if he had the time or the opportunity, to be the assiduous husband who spent his time forestalling his wife's wishes. Besides, he wasn't that sort of man. Funny, women were; he had always

thought May so sensible. He hated the idea of divorce. Even now that the law had been changed it was an odious business, this going down to Brighton with a stray female you had never seen before, registering at a hotel as man and wife and making sure that the chambermaid saw you in the same room next morning. It was ugly and vulgar, and the thought of the tittle-tattle that would ensue gave him goose-flesh. Roger shared with his family a horror of publicity. It would have seemed shameful to them, when they had a house-party at Graveney, to have pictures of it in the *Tatler* or the *Bystander* or when they went up to London for a few weeks to have the unimportant fact announced in the *Morning Post*. They had an almost morbid dislike of seeing their names in print. They were quiet people, with a sense of their own dignity, and anything approaching self-advertisement was disgusting to them. And there was another thing: Roger had long had the intention of standing for Parliament in his own constituency; he had ideas about the Army that he thought should be put before the nation and the House of Commons was the best place from which to do it; but in the respectable district in which Graveney was situated the fact that he had been co-respondent in a divorce case and that his wife had afterwards married his father's agent would ruin his chance of being chosen as a candidate.

But he had given his word and he was prepared to keep it. It was dreadful to think of May being unhappy, and what would their life be together if she was continually hankering after another man? She had as much right to happiness as anyone else. It was a mistake she was making, at least from the worldly point of view, but if she was determined on it, and he had never thought her a weak, easily influenced woman, what could he do about it? It was his own fault that she had ceased to love him, though not his wilful fault; it had been a dreary life he had asked her to lead, he saw that now only too clearly; it was a pity he saw it too late; and it wasn't much good to say he was a soldier and had to obey orders. Youth lasted such a little while; she was right when she said she was passing it waiting, just waiting. Selfishness on his part? Yes, he supposed it was, and the worst of it was that if he had his time over again he would do exactly as he had done before. His work, and the peculiar form it took, gave him the great exhilaration of his life. But the war would be a long one. He had expected it to last three years, but now with this disaster in Flanders he was convinced it would last five. Much may happen in five years. May would see Dick, if she saw him at all, only at rare intervals; he would change and she would change; and mightn't it be that when they met again they would find that everything was different? They had fallen in love because they were thrown in daily contact with one another; well, when that contact ceased mightn't they fall out of love? It might be that then May would come back to him. He knew so well what she'd say:

"Roger darling, I've got a sort of idea that you've prevented me from making an awful fool of myself."

"Have I, my pet?" he would answer.

He could see the amusement in her eyes, amused because she felt ever so slightly embarrassed, and yet meaning exactly what she said.

"You know, I don't really think Dick is quite my cup of tea."

"I never thought he was, sweetie."

"I've come to the conclusion that on the whole I like you best."

"I've been telling you for years that I'm quite a likable chap really."

"Well, the long and short of it is that even if I catch you in bed with one of the housemaids and you give me a black eye I shall absolutely refuse to divorce you."

"Does that mean that I've got to be burdened with you for the rest of my life?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I don't know what I'm going to do about it," he answered as he took her in his arms and tenderly kissed her soft lips.

For a moment he forgot that he was lying on hay in a dark loft and fancied himself back at Graveney Holt in the room May always had. It was a nice room. The chintz was faded, but the dressing-table, the tallboy and the bed were Chippendale, and from the wide windows you saw the green meadowland of the park and the spreading oak trees.

Though it was in response to Tommy's impetuous questioning and to satisfy his father's demand for meticulous detail that Roger told such parts of his story as he chose to tell, May had a feeling that he was particularly concerned with the effect it might have on her. His eyes rested on her and there was a look in them that seemed to say: you mustn't take it too seriously, you know; it was all rather a lark really. She had a notion that it was on her account that he passed off with a pleasantry the risks he had run and made a joke of the hardships. He spoke as though his adventure was something that might have happened to anybody and indeed as though there was nothing to it. You had to read between the lines, as it were, to recognize the dreadful danger in which he had been, how near death, and what resource, presence of mind and endurance he had shown. His attitude put May, sitting there in silence, listening intently, strangely ill at ease. He seemed bent on ridding her mind of any suspicion she might have that there was anything remarkable in his exploit, as though for such a reason to excite her admiration or to appeal to her sympathy would not be quite playing the game. You would have thought he got a sardonic amusement out of showing himself in a ridiculous light when he was in imminent peril. It slightly wounded her. It was an aspersion both on her heart and on her head. May saw very well how greatly it lessened his chance of escape to be saddled with a man in uniform who couldn't speak a word of French and she was sure that it had never even occurred to him that it would be wiser to leave him to shift for himself. She knew Roger well enough to be certain that never in the darkest moment of all had he given way to discouragement. It was in circumstances that called for his utmost that he was at his best: he was fearless, reliable, quick to decide and undaunted by obstacles.

At night when she lay in bed, unable to sleep, in the next room to Roger's with only a closed door separating them, and turned over in her mind some of the incidents he had related, May's eyes filled with tears. It was heart-rending to think of him lying there in the wood, soaked to the skin, wounded and alone; it was awful to think of those long days in the hayloft when he had lain there hour after hour, burning with fever and in pain. She wondered if he had thought of her then. Perhaps not: perhaps he thought only of the straits in which the calamity in Flanders had thrown the country and of the

slim chance he had of escaping; but if he did, it could only be with bitterness because she had let him down. He still bore on him the traces of his ordeal. His cheek-bones were prominent, his temples hollow, his face was haggard and his eyes had a hard brilliance that was abnormal. In a way he was better looking than he had ever been; his illness and the hardship he had undergone, his determined neglect of the pain in his leg as he plodded on mile after mile, had worn him down and there was something pathetic and even romantic in his appearance that he had never had before. May was truly thankful that he had come through; and it filled her with shame to remember that she had wished—no, that she had never done—that she had considered the possibility of his death. She wondered if he knew that; if he did, he wouldn't blame her, he would only find it slightly comic. Bit of a sell for the poor girl: that's what he would say. He'd chuckle. That woman who had made her in-laws give him refuge, who had brought the doctor to see him, who had done so much to get him home safely—she didn't love him; he meant nothing to her and what she had done, she had done in human charity and perhaps from patriotism. It was curious when you came to think of it that Roger owed his escape almost entirely to women; women had hidden him, women had clothed him so that he might pass without remark, women had fed him, women had risked their liberty to succour him.

Strangers. She was his wife; he had surely the right to expect something from her that strangers couldn't give him, and yet it was strangers who had done so much for him while she—what had she done? Nothing very pretty or very kind. She didn't quite know why it should distress her so much, more than anything almost, that she hadn't recognized him when he came limping along the path in those funny clothes he was wearing. If she had loved him, if she had only loved him as Tommy loved him, she would have known him at once. Not to have done so seemed frightfully heartless: it must have cut him to the quick. For of course he loved her; it was no good pretending to doubt that; it wasn't the sort of love she craved for, but how could he help it if it wasn't in him to give her that? It was a matter of temperament. May was tormented. She was conscience-stricken. In the darkness she stretched out her arms and called to Dick to help her. She wanted him, she wanted him so badly, and yet if he had been there she would have pushed him away with horror. Oh, misery! To love with all your heart and to feel—to feel what? To feel that if you surrendered to the love that consumed you, you would never have a moment's peace or happiness for the rest of your life.

For a thought, no, hardly a thought, a feeling seemed to entwine itself with her deep dissatisfaction with herself; in dismay she tried to drive it away, but it was no good; it frightened her like an angry man with his foot in a door she couldn't close; and at last, in despair, flinging the door open, she faced it. She had always been confident that Britain would win the war; it was inconceivable that she shouldn't, she couldn't be beaten; but now the possibility had to be considered that she might be. The idea filled her with horror. Yet there it was, the B.E.F. had escaped from France, but with the loss of all its equipment; tanks, guns and ammunition had to be provided before it could take the field again; France had fallen; it might be that, for all their promises, the French would deliver their fleet to the Germans; the Germans were flushed with triumph; any day now they might attempt an invasion, and who could be sure that just

then, after the disaster of Flanders, the British had the power to repel it? Hitler had said he would sign peace in London on the fifteenth of August and up till now he had been as good as his word. The peril was desperate. It was no good shutting one's eyes to it. The shame of defeat. The ignominy of living under the heel of a brutal conqueror. To lose everything you held dear; to knuckle under to people you despised; to be reduced to thralldom. There would be no more laughter then; there would be no more frankness; you would have to be constantly on your guard. May had met in the Tyrol a Bavarian prince and he had told her how, at home, in his family, they had to watch their every word, for they knew that their servants were Nazi spies who would report what they said. And defeat would mean more than that; it would mean that goodness was banished from the world and the only meaning of right was might. It would mean the end of honour and decency and fair play and uprightness and loving kindness. It would mean that life wasn't worth living.

What was it that Roger had said when he told her that the Germans were about to march into Poland? This isn't the moment that any of us can afford to think of his private concerns; or something like that. If it wasn't the moment then, it was far, far less the moment now. Now everyone was concerned, everyone must do his utmost or all would be lost; now happiness didn't matter; the only thing that mattered was England. It was vile to think of oneself. One must be prepared to sacrifice everything one held dear. May smothered the shriek that burst from her lips when, like the corpse of a murdered man rising to the surface of the water, like a discreditable action that haunts your memory, like a vulgar jingle that teases a fevered brain, the notion came to her of the sacrifice that was demanded of her. It was absurd. She couldn't make it. It was asking too much. It was as silly and childish as when Dick had been in the retreat to Dunkirk and she had been tempted to promise God to give him up if only he escaped alive. It was as stupid and dangerous as when at that time, playing patience in the evening, she had had the inclination to tell herself that if it came out Dick would be saved. What good could it do anybody if she made the sacrifice? There was no sense in it. Why should she lose her only chance of happiness? It was insane. And yet some inner compulsion stronger than her will, her reason, her instinct constrained her; it availed her nothing to say that it was witless, she knew that she would have to make the sacrifice. There was no help for it.

So one evening after Roger had been at Graveney for some days, May asked him to come for a stroll with her. They sauntered under the ancient cedars of what was called the English garden; it was shut off from the formal garden by an old red brick wall on which ivy grew thick, and it was very pleasant to walk there in the cool of the day. Though only two old men and a boy remained to tend it, the lawns were kept mowed and the herbaceous borders in flower. Just then they were in full beauty. Roger talked as he always did with her, agreeably, but of casual things, the evacuated children, Jim and his work on the farm, the Government and so on. He never referred to their personal relationship. May was a trifle nervous.

"Will you give me a cigarette?" she said.

He stopped to light it for her and as they sauntered on she slipped her arm through his. She did not look at him, but gazed straight in front of her.

"Roger, you know what I asked you just after you came back from Poland?"

"Yes."

"I don't want you to do what I asked you to do then!"

"I'm very glad."

He did not seem particularly surprised; indeed he took it almost as a matter of course. She would have liked him to be more enthusiastic, perhaps even a trifle demonstrative. It wouldn't have been unnatural if he had taken her in his arms and kissed her. He did not speak for a minute or two.

"That day I got back from France," he said then, "I asked you if you were still in love with Dick and you said you were."

"I've written to Dick and told him I don't wish to be divorced from you." She gave him a quick look. "You don't wish it, do you?"

"Of course not. I've never wished it. You see, I happen to love you."

"Won't you kiss me?"

He smiled a little shyly and lightly kissed her lips.

"I want you so awfully to be happy, Roger, I'll do all I can to be a good wife to you."

"I know you will, darling."

There seemed nothing more to say and May was relieved when she saw the General wandering towards them. She glanced at her watch as he joined them and said:

"I'm going to leave you two together. I must go and see to my chores."

Walking back to the house she felt an ease of mind she hadn't known for days. Now that she had made her decision she was convinced that she had done right; she felt almost light-hearted; she wasn't the only person in the world who couldn't have what she wanted and she had a feeling that in time this aching for Dick, this bitter aching, would grow less violent; perhaps one day it would be no more than a tender regret. Perhaps then she would even be glad that she had thrown away her hope of happiness. The letter she had written to him had been hard to write and painful; to receive it would be a cruel grief to him, but she thought he would understand that she had no alternative. At least he could never doubt that he had all her love.

She was glad that Roger had asked for no explanation of her change of mind. Though at the first moment she had been a little taken aback that he should accept it so casually, now she saw that it had been well for him to do so. But as the days went by May was a trifle puzzled that the talk she had had with Roger seemed to result in no great difference in their relations. He was pleasant, friendly and thoughtful, affectionate even, but he had always been that. She wondered if it was possible that he had not understood all she meant to intimate. His leave was drawing to an end and when he went away it might be that she would not see him again for weeks. He had a bed in his office and slept there every night, so that, even if her work at Graveney hadn't made it necessary for her to stay there, it would have been pointless to set up housekeeping together again in London. She didn't mean to do things by halves. If she hadn't made what she meant quite plain, well, she must make it plain; but it wasn't easy. She still

felt a little strange with Roger; it wasn't that she was frightened of him really, it was that she was never quite at home with him; even though she had known him nearly all her life she had never been intimate with him in quite the way in which she knew it would have been so easy to be with Dick; perhaps it was their marital relations that had made her shy with Roger, and in any case sex was something it made her uncomfortable to refer to. It had often made her flush hotly to hear Jane talk of it so coarsely. On the day before he was due to go, having given the children their dinner and done her share of the washing-up, she went in search of Roger. She found him in the library, sunk in a huge arm-chair, with a book in his hands. He looked up with a smile as she came in.

"I wanted to find something to read," she said.

"Plenty to choose from," he said with a glance at the crowded shelves.

As though she meant nothing by it, she seated herself on the arm of his chair and putting her arm round his neck, asked him:

"What is it you're reading?"

He showed her. She did not move. Her cheeks were burning and her voice wasn't quite steady when she spoke.

"Roger, when we talked about things the other day and I said I wanted to be a good wife to you, I meant every word of it. I meant all that that implies. I wanted to make no reservation."

"You're very sweet, darling. I wouldn't ever wish you to do anything you didn't want to do."

She lightly stroked his cheek.

"Don't you think it would be nice if we had a baby? Because we haven't had one yet there's no reason why we shouldn't have one now."

He closed the book he held and turning his head a little, half grave, half smiling, looked into her eyes.

"Dear heart, I think I have an idea why you said what you did the other day. It was very dear of you. But I don't believe I'm mistaken in thinking it was due to a change of mind rather than a change of heart. And in these things it's the heart that matters. I don't set much store on the Victorian notion of conjugal rights. I don't think sexual relations are very satisfactory unless they spring from mutual desire; unless they do that there's something rather humiliating about them for both parties, don't you think? There are certain things no one can force himself to want. I'm afraid it isn't enough for me that there should be desire on my side. Desire's a funny thing, you can't bid it to come, it comes unbidden; perhaps one day the desire will be mutual; I shall know, you know, you won't have to tell me."

She looked down without answering; tears rose to her eyes and slowly trickled down her cheeks. He took her hand and kissed it.

"Don't cry, my pet. It's no good grieving over things over which we have no control."

"I wanted so to make you happy."

“You have, darling, you’ve made me very happy. My heart is full of warm, devoted love for you.”

She sighed. It seemed hard that he should give her everything and she should give him nothing in return, and the cruel part of it, the part that left her miserably aware that she had failed in what she desired to do, so that her sacrifice came to nothing, was that deep down in her heart was a feeling of relief that he was content to let their relations stay as they were. She shivered as though someone were walking over her grave.

xv

ROGER went back to London and resumed his work. He had good reason to know that Nobby was a reliable, clever little fellow, so, sending for him, he offered him a job as messenger in his own office. Nobby jumped at the chance. To its other advantages was added this one, that he would be able to sleep at home, for as he said himself, "I'm a family man, I am," and he had felt it "cruel 'ard" to be separated from his wife and children.

"Lost like I feel without the missus," he had told Roger during one of their long talks on the way to the coast, "an' it's a funny thing if you come to think of it, 'cos I didn't really want to marry 'er, only she never give me a moment's peace till I did. If I told 'er once I told 'er fifty times I wasn't a marryin' man."

"I suppose she knew what was good for you," smiled Roger.

"You never said a truer word in all your life. An' that's a fact."

One day, at the War Office, Roger noticed that Nobby had something he wanted to say, but was shy about saying. He asked what it was.

"Well, sir, it's like this; I've told me old woman all you done for me, an' she says, might she thank you 'erself?"

"I don't know that I did any more for you than you did for me, Nobby."

"I told 'er you was too busy to be bothered with 'er, but you know what women are, sir, once they get an idea in their 'eads they don't seem able to get it out again an' she's been naggin' the life out of me to ask you if you won't come an' 'ave a cup of tea one day when you can spare the time. It'd be a rare treat for the kids."

"Is that all? Of course I'll come. Tell your wife I'll be delighted."

Having fixed a date there and then, a few days later he went with Nobby to the mean little house in a Westminster slum of which the Clarks occupied the ground floor. Nobby's wife was a small, untidy, brisk woman with thin, carroty hair and a missing front tooth. The two children, a girl of ten and a boy of nine, were puny, but keen-faced; they were struck with awe at the sight of the officer in uniform and watched him with speechless wonder. But Mrs. Clark was as chatty as her husband, and as unself-conscious. She had the same quick cockney humour that he had and Roger found himself laughing heartily at her quips. He was touched to see the affection that obviously existed between the members of that lively, contented family. It was touching, too, to see the pride the Clarks took in their sordid dwelling. There was no bathroom and they shared the only privy with the other people in the house; the children slept in an airless cubby-hole, and the living-room, which was the kitchen as well, was tiny and so crowded with furniture and knick-knacks that you could hardly move; but it was home and they loved it. Roger suggested that the children would be better off in the country and said his mother would gladly take them, but neither Nobby nor his wife would hear of parting with them.

“Whatever should we do without them kids to worry the life out of us?” said Nobby with his friendly grin.

“My kids don’t leave London till I leave London,” said Mrs. Clark with decision. “An’ I don’t leave London till Nobby leaves London.”

“An’, speakin’ for meself, I don’t leave London till the major leaves London.”

“And I don’t suppose I shall leave London in any circumstances,” laughed Roger.

“So there you are, as you might say,” added Mrs. Clark. “An’ if you don’t stop pickin’ your nose, Ernie, I *will* send you to the country. Whatever will the major think of you?”

“ ’Ere’s me ’anky,” said Nobby, taking out a handkerchief that was none too clean. “If you want to blow it, blow it, and if you don’t, leave it alone.”

Roger could hardly have said why he felt in such good spirits as he walked back to the War Office.

Dick Murray went out to Egypt and within a few weeks, Ian, having recovered from his injuries and got himself a handsome set of false teeth, followed. Jane was once more alone in her little house. Since it was close to the War Office, whenever she was free and he could manage it, Roger strolled along and dined with her. Meanwhile life at Graveney Holt went its accustomed way. Owing to a reorganization the General lost his job at the Red Cross and having nothing to do in London returned to Graveney for good. His uselessness made him fretful and though ordinarily a placid man he was inclined now to be moody and irritable. He felt his age. Since Dick was no longer there to look after it, he took over the management of the estate; but he was too easy-going and too irascible to do it with conspicuous success. Tommy’s preparatory school had been transferred to Canada, and his parents, not quite knowing what to do with him, decided to keep him at home till they saw how things went. Jim continued to work on the farm. Mrs. Henderson had a notion that of late he had seemed more at peace with himself. She wondered whether his passion for Dora was grown less intense: to the best of her belief they met only on Sundays and then there was nothing in their behaviour to suggest that there was even an understanding between them. It was true that in the afternoon they went for a walk, but there was no harm in that. She was sufficiently assured of Dora’s high principles to be certain that she would permit no undue intimacy. Besides, she was not in love with the boy. Of that by now Mrs. Henderson was also certain.

In this manner the summer wore on. All over England work was pursued furiously in order to prepare for the invasion that seemed imminent. Wiseacres examined the tides and decided on which day exactly it would take place. There were rumours that a party of saboteurs had landed on the South Coast and been exterminated, and rumours that a fleet of barges had been intercepted off Cornwall and sunk; hospitals in Paris were said to be jammed with German soldiers suffering from frightful burns. The Luftwaffe started in earnest to attack England and every day towns were bombed. People learnt to distinguish by the sound of the engine which were German planes and which were British. There was furious fighting in the air and hundreds of enemy planes

were brought down. At the end of September the Germans assailed London. The docks were bombed, and whole streets of poor houses in the East End were reduced to a mass of smoking rubble; then came the turn of the West End; Buckingham Palace was hit; Regent Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly: there were great holes in Mayfair where an old Georgian house had once stood. A factory in Croydon was bombed and two hundred girls were killed. Here and there a direct hit caught a shelter and few who had sought refuge in it escaped. The raids started at dusk and the all-clear did not sound till the first sign of dawn. The people of London passed harassed nights, but they went on with their work and maintained their calm.

The country was much disturbed by the common talk that Fifth Columnists were active; for it was notorious that their operations had greatly helped the enemy in the invasions of Poland, Belgium, Holland and Norway, and it was not to be supposed that the Germans would fail to employ in England methods that had elsewhere proved so efficacious. Wild tales flew about and the complaints were universal that the Government was not sufficiently alive to the danger. In consequence aliens were rounded up and numbers of them sent to detention camps. Then there was an outcry that they had been taken pell-mell, those that were suspect as well as those that were beyond suspicion, and the left-wing papers were violent on the Government's want of discrimination. But this also kept the matter in the public eye. The Hendersons were anxious. It was impossible to deny that Dora, though an Austrian who had suffered from Nazi persecution, was according to the letter of the law an enemy alien, and the risk that she would be, if not interned, at least removed to some other part of the country, was intensified by the fact that Graveney Holt lay within five miles of a secret airfield. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew about it, but it was supposed to be so ingeniously camouflaged as to be invisible from the air at the height at which enemy planes, wary of anti-aircraft guns, would be forced to fly. There was notwithstanding the danger that a Fifth Columnist might find means to give its exact locality away. General Henderson went to see the chief constable of the county and the Air Force commander at the airdrome and gave his personal guarantee of Dora's integrity. He made a point of the good work she had done since the outbreak of the war. With all those children to look after they simply couldn't get on without her. It would be a monstrous abuse of power to insist on her departure. He was a man used to getting his own way and he was extremely dissatisfied when the utmost he could extract from the authorities was permission for Dora to stay till her case was further considered. He wrote a very cross letter to Roger and was annoyed when he replied that the matter was not within his province and he was afraid nothing he might say would have any effect. Roger was not surprised when two or three days later he was called from Lewes by the chief constable. It was about nine at night and he was just finishing his work at the office. The chief constable was an old friend of the family's. He told Roger that it had been decided to remove Dora to some place, at a distance from any military objectives, which the proper authority would shortly appoint.

"I'm afraid your father will make trouble," he concluded. "He gets very peppery when he's crossed."

"I know he does," smiled Roger.

"I understand you're coming down to these parts next week anyway."

"Yes."

"I wonder if you couldn't advance it. Couldn't you come tomorrow?"

"I suppose I could, but I don't quite see the object."

"Well, I think you could make your father see reason. We've had to put up with a lot of criticism lately. It would be a bore if your father got a question asked in the House or wrote to the *Times*."

"Those are the only two things you fellows are afraid of," chuckled Roger. "All right, I'll come tomorrow. Though mind you, I'm pretty certain that Miss Friedberg is all right. My people have known her for some years and her father was done to death by the Nazis. But I agree with you, it's better to be on the safe side."

He put down the receiver and began to reflect. Dora had struck him as a nice, honest sort of girl, and it was inconceivable that she should be mixed up in espionage. If the Huns got on the track of the secret airfield it could hardly be through her; she hadn't the opportunity either to get or to transmit information. But of course if the authorities wanted to shift her they were within their rights. He smiled again when he thought of the chief constable's obvious disinclination to tackle his father. The General was an obstinate fellow. He had held various honorific positions in the county and as a large landowner and a magistrate was inclined to think that his word was law; as a soldier he had been something of a martinet and, when crossed, could fly into a towering passion. Roger had a notion that his mother too wouldn't very much like having her wishes disregarded; gentle and sweet-tempered as she was, she also was accustomed to having her own way.

Roger touched the bell and Nobby came in. At that moment there was a burst of anti-aircraft fire.

"Jerries are a bit busy tonight, sir," said Nobby.

"It does seem rather noisy. I'm just going along to Mrs. Foster's. She's inclined to be a bit jittery these days and I may spend the night there."

"Very good, sir."

Nobby helped him on with his coat and he put on his tin hat.

"You can go now, Nobby."

"Right you are, sir. If there's no objection I'll just go along an' see 'ow me old woman and the kids are gettin' on."

"Of course. Are they all right?"

"Yes, sir—when last 'eard of. We 'ad a bomb in our street last night and all the windows are gone."

"Bit chilly, isn't it? D'you think it's very safe to leave them there?"

"Well, sir, they go to the shelter in the Horseferry Road at night. Nice and cosy they are there."

"You're a damn' fool not to send them down to Graveney."

"I'm beginning to think you're about right, sir. But my old woman won't 'ear of it. Separate me from my kids? she says. Not much. I wish you'd speak to 'er, sir. Since

you give me this job she thinks the world of you."

"I'll go and see her in a day or two. I'll try and persuade her."

Roger walked along to Jane's house and let himself in with a latch-key. She was playing the piano.

"I suppose you know there's a hell of a raid on," he said with a grin, as he opened the door of the drawing-room.

His words were accompanied by another burst of anti-aircraft fire. It sounded to Roger as if the planes were just overhead.

"I suspected it, I admit," she answered, going on with the Chopin waltz she was playing.

Roger poured himself out a whisky and soda. Jane's playing was better than you would have expected and he listened to her with pleasure.

"You played a wrong note there, dearie."

"I did it on purpose."

Suddenly she stopped and turned round on the stool. He saw that her face under the outrageous make-up was drawn and that her eyes were haggard.

"I couldn't knit any more; I was dropping every other stitch. It's no good denying it, Roger, I'm just scared stiff."

"Why the devil don't you get out of London, then? You've got nothing to keep you here now that Ian's gone. Go home. You'll be safe there."

She gave him an indignant stare.

"Me leave London? Why, I wouldn't miss the excitement for anything in the world."

There was a dull thud and the house gave a little tremor like the tremor that passes through a ship when a great wave strikes her. A bomb had fallen not far away.

"Blast them," Jane barked angrily.

"You're looking awfully tired, darling."

"I haven't slept very well for the last few nights," she replied with a deprecating smile. "To tell you the honest-to-God truth, I've been much too frightened."

"Why in heaven's name don't you go and sleep in a shelter?"

She snorted.

"I'm not going to let old Hitler drive me out of my house. I wouldn't give him that satisfaction."

"I think the chances are that he won't hear about it."

Just at that moment there was a deafening explosion and all the windows in the room were shattered. Jane gave a piercing shriek and Roger instinctively sprang to his feet and put his arms round her.

"It's all right, dear. No great harm done. It fell next door."

"Oh, I'm scared, I'm scared," she whimpered.

"Come on down to the basement. Where are the maids?"

"I sent them to a shelter. They went before the raid started."

There was a terrific noise of firing and again the explosion of a falling bomb. The house shook and rattled as a tea cup on a saucer held by a trembling hand rattles and shakes, and with a crash, covering them with dust and debris, part of the ceiling fell down. They leapt out of the way. The lights went out.

"Come on," said Roger, grabbing her wrist, "we'd better get out of here. We shall have the house on our heads in a minute."

They hustled down the stairs. Jane snatched up a fur and they ran into the street. There were patches of flame where incendiaries had fallen and the house next door was burning. Men were running along, airwardens and police, and there was a shouting of orders. You couldn't see planes, but a hundred searchlights swept the skies. A-A guns were firing furiously.

"We must run for it," said Roger.

"I can't run in these heels."

"Damn your heels."

He took her arm and scurried her along. The nearest shelter was that off the Horseferry Road where Nobby's wife and children were and that was where he wanted to go, but in the black-out it wasn't easy to find the way. They passed vague and mysterious figures, people hurrying like themselves, hurrying, and in the darkness they were like flitting, shapeless chunks of night. Suddenly they heard the sinister, terrifying whistle of a falling bomb ahead of them.

"Throw yourself on your face," cried Roger.

To make his meaning plain he gave Jane a slap on the back and they both flung themselves full length on the pavement. The bomb fell and the crash was deafening. For a moment Jane thought she would choke.

"That's all right, get up," said Roger.

"I don't want to get up. I'm very comfortable where I am."

"Get up, you fool."

He pulled her roughly to her feet. She clung to him and he knew that she was badly shaken. Her voice didn't sound her own when she spoke.

"I thought we were for it then, Roger."

"Bit too close for comfort, wasn't it?" he said grimly. "Bastards!"

"I don't know why I don't have a heart attack. I've never been so frightened in my life."

"Come on. I expect we shall have to go round. The road's blocked ahead of us."

Suddenly Jane gave a sharp cry.

"What's up?"

"Wait a minute, I've forgotten something."

Before he could stop her she had kicked off her shoes, picked up her skirts and was racing back to the house they had just left. He couldn't imagine what she'd gone for. He groped about for her shoes. For a moment he was at a loss; he was afraid to go after her in case he missed her in the black-out; it was better to wait where he was. He fumed. Several minutes passed and he grew desperately anxious. He was on the point of going back to try to find her when up she ran. She was breathless. He saw that she was carrying something.

"I'd forgotten my face," she panted. "I only just got there in time, the house is on fire."

"D'you mean to say you went back to fetch your damned make-up," he shouted at her. "You might have been killed."

"I had to have my face."

He was so angry, he very nearly hit her; but he didn't: the absurdity of it struck him suddenly and he burst into a shout of laughter.

"Don't stand there laughing like a fool," she cried irritably. "Let's get to this damned shelter. I'm scared stiff."

"I don't believe a word of it. You're as brave as a lion."

"I had to have my face, you idiot, bomb or no bomb. And I've ruined a pair of brand-new silk stockings and I shan't be able to get any more. What a life!"

She leant against Roger while she put on first one shoe and then the other.

"Now you've got your make-up perhaps you'd like to paint your lips."

"Don't be a damned fool, how can I in pitch darkness?"

"If you're quite ready then let's get a move on and be damned quick about it."

"If you want to run, dear, you run. I'll find my way all right."

"If I have any more of your lip I'll give you such a smack on the jaw you won't be able to speak for a week."

"Spoken like a perfect gentleman," she said.

There seemed to be a lull and they walked through the black uncanny streets. Searchlights restlessly swept the sky.

"Is the raid over?" she asked.

"The planes have passed over. There won't be another wave for a few minutes."

They took one or two wrong turnings, but eventually reached the shelter. Two or three wardens were standing outside and one of them opened the door for them. The shelter was a large one, with several rooms, and it was crowded with people. Some, trying to sleep, were lying on mattresses or blankets and some on the bare concrete; others were sitting on chairs and camp-stools. Others again were eating and drinking, and a group of four men, sitting on the floor, were playing cards. Others stolidly read the newspaper. Women chatted in undertones and a good many were knitting. There were boys and girls and children in arms. It was hot and smelly. Jane stopped for a moment as the musty stench of humanity assailed her nostrils.

"The stink," she said. "I can't stand this."

"Nonsense. You'll get used to it in a minute."

He pushed forward, for he wanted to find Mrs. Clark and put Jane in charge of her so that he could go back to the War Office. He was afraid it had been hit. He looked about and in the second room caught sight of Nobby with his wife and children. They had found a corner for themselves and the two children were lying together on a couple of blankets.

"Why, look who's 'ere," said Nobby, as he and Jane made their way to him.

He jumped up and saluted.

"This is my sister. She's just been bombed out of her house, so I thought I'd bring her along here."

"My dear, I've lost everything," said Jane cheerfully, as she shook hands with Mrs. Clark. "I've got nothing except the clothes I stand up in, and my face, thank God."

The children sat up on their blankets and stared at the painted woman in her fantastic raiment.

"Who's that, mum?" asked the little boy.

"Now then, Ernie, you go to sleep," said his mother sharply.

"I ain't sleepy."

"Shut your eyes, lovey, and pretend you're sleepy and you'll be asleep in no time."

Jane looked at him with an impassive face and deliberately winked at him. His mouth fell open and he stared at her in startled amazement. Room was made for Jane to sit down and Mrs. Clark offered her a cup of tea.

"I got a thermos," she said. "I ain't got a cup though, you'll 'ave to drink it out of the top."

"Never mind that. I'd love a cup of tea."

There was another burst of gunfire.

"There they are again."

"How they can expect children to get their night's rest with all this bombing and all them guns is more than I know," said Mrs. Clark.

"You'll be all right here for the night, Jane, won't you? I must go back to the War Office," said Roger.

"Of course I shall be all right; I've got my face with me."

"Mrs. Clark will look after you. I'm going down to Graveney tomorrow morning. You'd better come with me."

"I suppose I had. I hate leaving London, but I must have a roof over my head—though they do say that streetwalkers are doing a wonderful business just now."

"You'll be able to get a taxi when the all-clear sounds. Then the best thing you can do is to go along to the Dorchester and have a wash and brush-up and I'll come and fetch you after breakfast."

"Right-ho. Domineering man, my brother," she added to Mrs. Clark. "Though what they'll say to my turning up at the Dorchester in a fur coat and my harlequin négligé is

nobody's business. They'll probably take me for the Archbishop of Canterbury."

Roger and Nobby started to thread their way through the crowd when there was an explosion so near, so loud, so shattering that it seemed for an instant as if the shelter had been struck. Women shrieked and all, men and women alike, leapt to their feet. The wardens shouted: "All right. No harm done. Keep calm." Many of the children burst out crying and there was a loud, confused buzz of excited talk. It had evidently been a close shave. Roger, with Nobby at his heels, pushed forward to the entrance and as he passed the card players noticed that they hadn't interrupted their game. He almost laughed. A woman shouted: "Now then, boys, 'Roll out the Barrel' "; and a lot of them started singing. The guns blazed away. A pasty-faced lad came through the doorway of the room in which the Clarks had their corner and hurried up.

"Mrs. Clark, there's that woman as lives in your house," he said, "will you come along? She's taken bad and the nurse is busy. She's askin' for you."

"Oh, poor thing, yes, I'll come immediately." She gave Jane a hesitating glance. "Would you mind keepin' an eye on the kids, ma'am, I shan't be long?"

"Don't hurry. I'll look after them."

The children were white and tearful. It had been a bad fright. Jane tried to get them to lie down again, but they were too startled.

"Don't let them hurt me, miss," the little girl whimpered.

"Of course I won't let them hurt you," Jane answered in her gruff, deep voice; then she gave a cackle of laughter. "You couldn't be more frightened than me, dear, and when I'm frightened I always do my face."

She reached over for the velvet-covered box and opening it displayed enough bottles, tubes, little china pots and what not to stock a beauty parlour. The two children watched her open-mouthed and wide-eyed as she began upon the complicated process of making herself look more like a figure of fun than nature had done already. Some of the people had settled themselves down again in the hope of getting to sleep, but there were still a number scurrying here and there, and there was a lot of nervous talking. But the two children, fascinated by Jane's proceedings, forgot their fear. She gave the little girl a smile, that queer, droll smile of hers that was so disarming that your heart went out to her.

"Like me to do you?"

"Oh, yes," cried the little girl.

"Come here then."

Jane daubed cream on the child's face, powdered and rouged her, reddened her lips and darkened her lashes.

"Your mother won't know you when I've done with you," she chuckled, as a sudden burst of firing made her start. She was in the middle of giving the child a fine pair of arched eyebrows. "That's made a mess of your eyebrow; I shall have to do that one again. Spit on your hanky, child."

"Do me too," cried Ernie, wild with excitement.

"You're a boy. You can't have your cheeks rouged. I'll give you a moustache."

With her eyebrow crayon she painted a black moustache on his upper lip and gave him whiskers and a goatee; and then, giggling, with her lipstick gave him a bright red nose. Jane was contemplating her work with a good deal of satisfaction when Mrs. Clark came back.

"Look, mummy," the two children cried.

"Why, whatever 'ave you two gorn and done?"

"She done it."

"Now you'll 'ave to 'ave your faces washed."

"I don't want me face washed," Ernie whined.

"What was the matter with the woman?" asked Jane.

"Oh, she's all right. She's only goin' to 'ave a baby. Could I leave the kids with you, ma'am? I think I ought to go back. It may come any minute now."

"Go ahead. They'll be all right with me."

"We needn't 'ave our faces washed, need we, ma'am?" said Ernie as soon as his mother's back was turned.

"Not until I wash mine," said Jane, "and I'm not going to do that till the all-clear sounds."

Just then Roger came back and told her what had happened. The bomb had fallen in the street just opposite the doorway and two wardens had been killed and a man who was just coming in badly wounded. But all the same they had to congratulate themselves; if the bomb had fallen a little more to the right it would have got the shelter fair and square and the slaughter would have been dreadful. Roger went off and Jane settled herself down on the blankets with a child on each side of her. Soon they fell asleep. She lay on her back longing for a cigarette, and stared at the ceiling.

"Very rum life is," she muttered. Then, thinking of the woman in labour: "And my God, what a place and time to have a baby."

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JANE was up and about betimes next morning, for when need be she could cope with an emergency as well as anyone. She found a friend at the Dorchester who lent her a dress to go out in and a hurried visit to the shops in Regent Street provided her with an outfit sufficient for the moment so that when Roger drove up to fetch her she presented an appearance that was not too fanciful. Since it was but little out of their way they went to have a look at her house. Nothing remained but a bare wall against which a bath was precariously perched. Houses on either side had been burnt out and men were already clearing the debris. The roadway was littered with broken glass. For once Jane found nothing to say. Heavy tears rolled down her painted face.

"Never mind, dear," said Roger.

"Damn you, I do mind."

He drove on. The household had just finished luncheon when they arrived at Graveney. They were all, all but Tommy who had gone off on his bicycle, in the sitting-room having their coffee; and though it was a week-day Jim happened to be there too. He had had to go to the dentist's and had dropped in to lunch. Mrs. Henderson and May were knitting and Dora was listening to the General who was telling her how he would conduct the war if he were Prime Minister. She had heard it all before, but notwithstanding appeared to listen with interest. Jane and Roger's appearance was a surprise, for he had not telephoned to announce their coming and Jane, without giving them a moment to draw breath, broke into a humourous account of her adventures on the previous night. She had already told her story several times at the Dorchester so that by now it was highly coloured. It had become a slap-stick farce so outrageous and so absurd that her listeners in their laughter lost sight of the fact that she and Roger had escaped death by a hair's breadth. When she had finished Roger got up and sat down beside Dora.

"Miss Friedberg, I've got bad news for you," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave here. They're tightening up on aliens and the authorities think it undesirable that you should remain at Graveney."

Before she could speak the General burst out irascibly.

"I never heard such nonsense," he cried. "I'll go and see the chief constable again. Who the devil does he think he is? I've given him my personal guarantee that Dora is all right."

"We can't do without her, Roger," said Mrs. Henderson. "She's been incredibly useful and she's worked wonderfully well."

"I'm awfully sorry, Mother, but I'm afraid there's no help for it. I knew it would put you out, that's why I thought I'd better come down and tell you myself. I had a little job to do here anyway."

Dora seemed less agitated than the others; she even smiled a little when she addressed herself to Roger. He had a suspicion that there was something derisive in the

smile.

"I suppose it's on account of the airdrome," she said. "I've never been near it. In fact I don't know exactly where it is."

"It's maddening, all this red tape," the General fumed. "Why, she's like our own daughter. She isn't even German, she's Austrian, and she's as anti-Nazi as we are."

"All that's perfectly true," answered Roger. "It's inevitable in a time like this that individuals should suffer hardship. It's not a question of interning her. It's only that she's got to go and live in some place that the authorities approve of. She's an alien and she's got to adhere to the regulations."

"But she's not an alien," said Jim quietly. "She's a British subject. She's my wife."

There was a general gasp of astonishment.

"Is it true, Dora?" asked Mrs. Henderson.

Dora's face in repose often had a sullen look and it had it now.

"We were married last August," she answered.

"Why have you kept it secret? I didn't deserve that of you, Dora."

There was an unaccustomed coldness in Mrs. Henderson's eyes.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Henderson. I'm afraid I'm very much to blame. How could I expect you to be pleased that your son should marry a penniless refugee that you know nothing about?"

Mrs. Henderson raised her eyebrows.

"Is that the sort of people you think we are after living with us all these months?"

"She didn't want to marry me, Mother," said Jim, with a pathetic eagerness that she shouldn't think ill of Dora. "I asked her over and over again and she refused. She begged me to wait till after the war."

Roger looked up quickly.

"What made you change your mind?" he asked Dora.

She hesitated an instant.

"He was unhappy. No one was very kind to him here."

"That's not true, Dora," said Mrs. Henderson, sharply. "We couldn't approve, but we respected his convictions."

"It wasn't respect he wanted, it was love."

Mrs. Henderson looked from her daughter-in-law to her son.

"I'm a soldier's daughter and I'm a soldier's wife and I'm a soldier's mother. It's been a bitter grief to me that a son of mine should refuse to fight for his country, but I accepted his decision. I tried to understand and to sympathize. I felt sure he wouldn't have done what he has if his conscience hadn't persuaded him it was the right thing to do."

The General had been looking at Dora. She was so pretty and young; he had a soft spot in his heart for her. It would be a pity if his wife said anything to hurt her.

"It's no good crying over spilt milk, my dear," he said. "What's done is done. She's his wife now."

"This alters things, Roger, doesn't it?" asked Jim.

"I suppose it does."

He understood now the meaning of the derisive smile that he had seen on Dora's face. He glanced at May. She wasn't knitting, but sat there, looking down at the floor, with knitted brows. Jane was painting her lips and managed to put into that proceeding the maximum of disapproval.

Dora rose to her feet and went over to Mrs. Henderson.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Mrs. Henderson."

"I want my son to be happy, Dora."

"I shall try to make him so."

Mrs. Henderson sighed and then drawing Dora down, kissed her.

"If you do that I shall have nothing to forgive."

"Dora can come and live with me at Badger's," said Jim.

He had been sleeping there since the people with whom he had found lodging at first had turned him out. The cottage was partly furnished and there were still plenty of unwanted things in the attics at Graveney to make it pretty and comfortable. Walking, if you took the short cut through the park, it was barely a mile from the house and by road not much more. Dora could very easily continue to help with the evacuated children. Jim's remark eased the tension and with relief they entered upon a discussion of the sheets and blankets, pots and pans, dishes and plates, knives and forks that would be required to enable the young couple to set up housekeeping.

Roger left them to it and drove off to Lewes to keep his appointment with the chief constable. He found him in his office, waiting, a grizzled, retired colonel, slightly fussy and not too bright, and with him were an officer of the R.A.F. from the neighbouring airdrome and a police inspector.

"Well, is it all settled?" asked the chief constable when Roger had taken a seat.

Roger frowned.

"I'm afraid it's not. There's a snag. It appears that she's a British subject. She's married to my brother."

"What? Damned fool." The chief constable recollected himself. "Sorry, old man."

"Oh, that's all right. They've been married since August. For reasons best known to themselves they've kept quiet about it."

"That's awkward."

"I don't quite know what to do about it," said Roger.

"The fact remains that the Germans know we've got an airfield in the neighbourhood," said the R.A.F. officer.

"What about your camouflage?"

"That's all right. No one could spot it who didn't know it was there. We had a German plane over the other day. It had obviously just come to have a look and when we sent a plane up after it, it sheered off. Someone's given the show away; there's no doubt in my mind about that."

Roger had been as surprised as the others to hear that Jim and Dora were man and wife, and he didn't like the idea of Jim having married a girl who when all was said and done was an enemy alien, but he thought like his father that there was nothing to do but make the best of it and now that she was one of the family his instinct was to stand up for her.

"You know, as far as this girl's concerned," he said, "I'm pretty sure you're barking up the wrong tree. She's Austrian in the first place and my people have known her since long before the war."

The chief constable turned to the detective.

"You haven't got anything more to tell us, Inspector?"

"No, sir. She seems to have no friends outside. She's a good worker and everyone speaks well of her."

"What about her correspondence?"

"She's never had a letter since we've been on her track."

"That's not very strange," said Roger. "Her only relative is her mother who lives in Austria."

"Of course we knew she'd been seeing a lot of Mr. James Henderson, but that was none of our business."

"Where did they meet?"

"In Graveney Park and sometimes she went to see him in that cottage he's been living in. Badger's they call it."

"If they were married it's natural that they should be together sometimes," said Roger.

"I'm not saying it isn't, sir," answered the inspector. "Of course we didn't know they were married."

"So I suppose you put the worst construction on it."

"Come off it, Roger," said the chief constable. "They're young and she's a damned pretty girl. What construction would you expect the inspector to put upon it?"

"Well, sir, if you want the truth, the fact is, sir, that my man saw a light in the bedroom when she was there."

"And drew the obvious conclusion," continued the chief constable. "Don't look so glum about it. If they were occupied as the inspector seems to think they were, it's unlikely that she was up to any monkey business. It all sounds perfectly normal to me and I think we can probably give her a clean bill of health."

"Where is this cottage you're talking about?" asked the airman.

There was a large-scale map open on the table round which they sat and the inspector pointed out the exact position of Badger's. The airman raised his eyebrows.

“Funny,” he said. “Look, Henderson, there’s Graveney Holt and there’s Badger’s. From your house it gives a direct line on our airdrome.”

“Remember it’s only a four-roomed cottage with a thatched roof. It couldn’t be seen from the air.”

“I dare say not. Unless someone showed a light. It seems to be on a hill.”

“Hardly that. A hummock.”

“Are you quite sure of your brother? He’s a conchie, isn’t he?”

Roger thought the question offensive; but answered pleasantly enough.

“I’m absolutely sure of him. He’s a damned fool, but he’s been an ardent pacifist ever since he went up to Oxford. He’s incapable of doing the dirty.”

“Incapable,” agreed the chief constable, who had known Jim all his life.

“Is he going on living at the cottage?” asked the airman. “You’d better tell him to be very careful not to show a light.”

“He wouldn’t be such a fool as that. But I will. I’ll get my mother to see that they take every precaution.”

“They? Who’s they?”

“Of course his wife is going to live with him.”

The airman looked sulky.

“I don’t like it and it’s no good saying I do. Someone’s given the show away and I miss my guess if we don’t get bombers over one of these fine nights.”

“Damn it all, you can’t prevent a man from living with his wife,” said Roger.

He was irritated at the fellow’s persistence. He might be a good airman; he was an obstinate, insular and narrow-minded man. It was exasperating that at this time of day you should still have to deal with people who suspected anyone who hadn’t had the good fortune to be born British. But as ever Roger was wary of his prepossessions. Even though the airman had rubbed him up the wrong way, it wouldn’t do to pay no heed to his misgivings. And he was none too easy in his own mind. He couldn’t see why Dora had insisted on making a secret of her marriage with Jim. The reason she had given was flimsy. Her behaviour struck him as unpleasantly deceitful. He rose to go, for he had urgent matters to attend to elsewhere.

“I’m sure I needn’t tell you fellows to keep your eyes skinned,” he said, in his hearty manner.

It was a general admonition and if they applied it to a particular case that was not his look-out.

xvii

JIM and Dora set up housekeeping. They ransacked the attics of Graveney for such furniture as they needed. Jim brought his books and the woodcuts he had had in his bedroom, and they gave the tiny parlour a homelike air. Mrs. Henderson gave them linen. The General drove over to Lewes and brought back the kitchen utensils of which Dora had given him a list. Having got over the first shock he was delighted with his new daughter-in-law and described admiringly to his wife the brisk, orderly way in which she put everything in its place.

"Jim might have gone a damned sight further and fared a damned sight worse," he told her.

Jim was thankful that now everything was open and above-board. He had hated the deception he had been forced to practise; it seemed so unkind to his parents, and he had only consented to it because otherwise Dora refused to marry him. It was heaven to sit facing her at the little table and eat the supper she had cooked for him. It was heaven to sit in an arm-chair by the fire in his slippers, smoking a pipe, while she in another arm-chair on the other side of the fire place knitted woollies for the children. It was heaven to talk, it was heaven to be silent. It was heaven to think that after a while they would go up to bed together. Now everything would be all right. For things hadn't turned out quite as he had expected and marriage hitherto hadn't been as completely satisfying as he had hoped it would be. He was passionately in love with Dora and it perplexed and hurt him that his passion roused no corresponding warmth in her. She had sought to avoid the consummation of their marriage until the time came when she was prepared to acknowledge it and she had only yielded when he threatened, half jokingly and half angrily, to produce the marriage certificate to his family there and then. But he was too sensitive not to be conscious that she submitted to his embraces with coldness.

He was young and inexperienced and even if, since Dora had sworn him to secrecy, it had been possible to seek advice, there was no one with whom he could have brought himself to talk the matter over. He would have been ashamed to speak of it to his mother, and Jane would only mock him; there was a virginal quality in May that made it impossible for him even to think of mentioning it to her. It never entered his head to consult Roger. He was driven therefore to reassure himself with the scraps and pieces he had heard about women and tell himself that they weren't like men and that desire in them was more slowly awakened. Yet from the look of her, so fresh, healthy and blooming, you would never have suspected that Dora was a frigid woman. She was very modern and highly educated; what they called the mysteries of sex were no mysteries to her; seeking for a plausible explanation for behaviour that seemed so contrary to her nature he asked himself whether it was possible that she had attached some mystical value to her chastity and could not yet reconcile herself to the normal exigencies of the male. From the very first Dora had given him to understand that she was not prepared to have a baby and, though unwillingly, he had agreed that it would be as well to wait till they could announce their marriage. Now that this had been done

and they were living together there seemed no reason to hesitate. To his dismay Dora would not hear of it.

"No, no, no," she said. "This is no time to bring a child into the world."

He tried to reason with her. He knew how much it would please his parents and if she had a baby it would dissipate any feeling of disapproval they still might have because Dora and he had married on the sly. The dearest wish of his father's heart was to behold the birth of a boy who could inherit the land his forbears had owned so long. Dora listened to him in sullen silence. He would never have believed her face could bear such an expression of exasperated stubbornness as he saw on it then.

"If you loved me you'd want to have a baby by me," he said.

The look she gave him sent a cold shiver down his spine. It was a look of hatred. He was so startled that he said no more.

Of course she had been working very hard for a long time and it might be that she was suffering from the strain. She was worried about her mother in Austria of whom she had had no news since the outbreak of the war. He must go easy. He must be very kind to her and hope that with time she would change her mind. After all, he couldn't expect to know already the business of being a husband and why should he expect her to know that of being a wife? They both had a lot to learn. They had to get used to one another and they had to discover all the things about one another that only the intimacy of common life in marriage can manifest. As time went on he discovered one or two things that he wasn't prepared for. He discovered that Dora had a quick temper. He had never seen her anything but composed and good-humoured; indeed at Graveney they had often marvelled at the fact that nothing put her out; but now she seemed at times to be seized with an uncontrollable irritation and would say sharp and wounding things. One might almost have thought that marriage had changed her disposition. Then her face went red and there was a cruel hardness in her eyes. She would recover herself very quickly, say she was sorry and behave towards him with unwonted tenderness. But he hated to see her like that and, though without definite intention, made it his business to avoid giving her occasion to be annoyed with him.

Another thing that distressed him was her attitude towards his relations. He was deeply attached to them and it was a grief to him that she was inclined to be acid about them. Considering how kind they had been to her, and how generous, it seemed rather ungrateful. She took care never to say anything about his mother, but it was not difficult for him to guess that she looked upon the General as an old fool. Jim would have thought his father's open partiality for her would have touched her. Perhaps it was natural that she didn't like Jane or Roger. She couldn't understand that Jane's offhand way was only a mannerism and that, for all her brusque downrightness, she was a thoroughly good sort. You could expect short shrift if she thought you were trying to put something over on her, but if you were really in a hole you could count on her doing her damnedest to get you out of it. And if she made a perfect sight of herself, well, did it really matter? It amused her and did no one any harm. It was true that Roger had tried to turn Dora out of Graveney, but he was only doing his duty; it didn't seem fair to hold it up against him. Dora said he didn't like her and when Jim said she must give him time, answered with a shrug of the shoulders:

“To tell you the truth I don’t care a damn if he does or not. He’s ridiculous.”

“Why d’you think him that?” asked Jim with a smile of frank amusement, for that was the last thing he would have said of his brother.

“Don’t you know that May is having an affair with Dick Murray?”

“What on earth are you talking about?” he said with amazement. He laughed. “My poor Dora, May’s incapable of doing a mean and despicable thing.”

“She’s been in love with him ever since he came down here. She doesn’t care twopence for Roger.”

“Nonsense. They get on like a house on fire. You’ve got your knife into Roger and you’re prepared to believe anything to his discredit.”

“Ask Jane. She knows.”

Jim was vexed, not because he thought there was a word of truth in what Dora said, but because she could so calmly make such shocking aspersions; but he did not want to start an argument that might become acrimonious.

“I don’t think you know English people very well yet, darling,” he said mildly.

“Jane doesn’t suffer under the disadvantage of being a foreigner. Why don’t you ask her?”

“Shall we talk of something else?”

Dora shrugged her shoulders disdainfully. What she had said rankled, but Jim told himself that he would be a fool to take it seriously; women, he knew, were inclined to say outrageous things about one another and half the time they didn’t mean them. After all, it wasn’t unusual for people not to like their in-laws, and women were funny, they were sensitive about all sorts of little things that men wouldn’t think worth bothering about. It might be that Dora in her somewhat dependent position at Graveney had suffered slights that he had never noticed and that he was sure weren’t intended, but that had stung her. Well, now they had their own home that couldn’t happen any more; he felt pretty sure that she only had to know his people better, and perhaps in a different way, as one of the family herself, to discover that they weren’t really half a bad lot. And even if marriage hadn’t given him quite all he had hoped, at least not yet, he couldn’t complain. He had wanted to marry Dora ever since they first met at Kitzbühl, and he was married to her. She made him wonderfully comfortable in that dear little house. She did all the housework herself and kept it like a new pin. It was a treat, after his long day at the farm, to come back to that nice cosy room and eat the tasty Austrian dishes she had prepared for him. He thought it was too much for her, for after she had made the beds and washed up the breakfast things in the morning she went off to Graveney to help with the children and did not come back till it was time to cook supper. She worked seven days a week. But when he suggested that they should get a woman from the village to help her she refused.

“I like to do everything for you myself,” she said.

She could be very endearing when she chose: when she said things like that he could have died for her. It might be that she didn’t love him quite as much as he loved her, well, he could hardly expect that, perhaps he wasn’t very lovable, but surely if he

loved her enough he could make her love him as he wanted to be loved. There was plenty of time; they had all their lives before them.

When the airman told Roger he was convinced the Germans had got wind of the secret airfield he was right. Bombers came over twice, but it looked as though they weren't able exactly to locate it, for they went away without discharging their loads, and it wasn't till a month later that an attack was made on it. That night, Dora, saying she was tired, went to bed early. Jim was reading and, wanting to finish a chapter, told her he would stay up a little longer; but once she was gone he felt restless and so in a few minutes, putting down his book, he went up to their room. He was surprised to see that she hadn't started to undress. The room was in darkness, but she was sitting at the open window, though it was a cold December night, and she had just lit a cigarette. She was holding the match in her hand and it gave a surprisingly bright light.

"Dora, what are you doing?" he cried.

"Lighting a cigarette," she answered unconcernedly.

"Put out that match. You mustn't show a light like that."

"Oh, don't be so silly. We're miles from anywhere."

"Put it out I tell you. I've told you how careful we must be."

He snatched the match from her fingers and blew it out. He shut the window, drew the curtain and lit a couple of candles.

"It was so hot downstairs in that poky little room, I felt I had to have a breath of air."

He happened to catch sight of the match she had used. He took it up. It was a fusee. This is a match with a long black head and a wire core in its stem, which holds its flame for a considerable time and which some people in England still use because it doesn't easily go out in a wind and is convenient for lighting a pipe in the open.

"Why on earth were you lighting a cigarette with a fusee?"

"I didn't know I was. In the darkness I just took the first box I could find."

"But how d'you happen to have fusees?"

"Oh, I've had them for ages. I thought they might be useful."

"A light like that can be seen for miles."

She put up her mouth to be kissed.

"Oh, Jim, don't be such an old fuss-pot. What harm can it do in the depths of the country like this?"

He put his arm round her and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Darling, those R.A.F. people don't much like the idea of your living here because you were Austrian. I know it's idiotic, but there it is. If anyone saw that light we shall get it in the neck."

"It was stupid of me; I didn't think. I won't do it again."

"Suppose you give me those matches."

"Trusting fellow, aren't you?" she smiled.

But she handed him the box and he put it in his pocket.

Jim slept so soundly that he heard neither the planes coming over nor the firing, and it wasn't till next morning when he went to work that he knew that the airfield had been bombed. No harm was done and it was not positive even then that the Germans knew its precise situation; it might well be that having only a vague idea of it they had dropped bombs at a hazard and chance had favoured them. But Jim was worried; the planes, it appeared, had come over at nine and it must have been around half past eight when Dora had lit her cigarette at the open window. Of course it couldn't be anything but a coincidence, the light of her fusee couldn't have lasted a minute and it was absurd to think that, even if it had been seen from the air, a reconnaissance plane could have seen it and by rounding up a squadron somehow given it a direction. It was a heart-felt relief when a few days later there was another raid which could by no possibility have been connected with any carelessness of Dora's, because it came on an evening when they were both at Graveney. There was a good deal of uneasiness in the neighbourhood and a lot of people were convinced that there were Fifth Columnists at work in their midst. It wasn't hard to guess the names that were given them. He, because he was a conchie, and Dora, because she was a foreigner, were under suspicion and he was conscious of a veiled hostility in the persons he encountered. It vexed him, but he knew there was nothing he could do. Since he did not want to disturb Dora he took care not to give her any hint of the feeling against them. Fortunately, since she never went anywhere except to the big house to look after the children, there was no likelihood that she would discover it.

It was getting on for Christmas. General Henderson had the gout. He was sitting in an arm-chair, with his foot up, in the great hall of Graveney Holt reading the *Times*. Tommy, in the Boy Scout uniform that gave him an inordinate satisfaction, curled up in another chair, was reading a book. It was seven o'clock and the General looked up as it struck.

"Tommy, you haven't done your good deed for the day, have you?" he asked.

"I haven't had a chance, Daddy."

"Well, you can do one now. Just walk round the house and see that no lights are showing. Put a coat on."

"All right."

The little boy ran out and when he had been gone a few minutes Jim came in.

"Hulloa, Father," he said. "I thought I'd come round and see how you were and take Dora back with me."

"I can't walk yet, but I'm better. Dora's gone. She left about half an hour ago."

"She can't have. I've just come from the cottage and I didn't meet her on the road."

"Perhaps she walked back through the park."

"She wouldn't do that. It's pitch dark."

"I know she's gone. She came to say good night to me."

“I wonder where the devil she is.”

The front door opened and slammed and Tommy came racing in.

“Daddy, there’s a fire.”

“A fire.”

“It’s just where your cottage is, Jim.”

“Gosh!”

He ran out and Tommy bolted after him. They could see a blaze in the distance. They jumped on their bicycles and rode towards it. The road was winding and they lost sight of the fire, but on turning a corner came in full view of it.

“That’s not the cottage,” cried Jim. “My God, it looks like a rick burning.”

They pedalled with all their might and as they came near saw that in fact it was a rick blazing fiercely in a field a few hundred yards from Badger’s.

“How did it catch?” asked Tommy. “D’you think it’s a signal?”

“It looks damned well like it.” Jim gave an anxious glance at the sky. “We shall know very soon.”

As they reached the field two or three men ran up with pitchforks and began raking at the hay, trying to get the fire under control, but the heat was intense and they had to give up. The whole rick was in flames.

“You nip back home, Tommy, and ring up the police station,” said Jim. “I’ll go and see what Dora’s up to.”

He was thankful she’d had the sense to keep away. Heaven only knew what those men would have said if they’d come and found her there. He went back to the cottage. Dora was standing in the dark at the open window of their little parlour looking at the blaze.

“Where have you been, Dora?”

“Nowhere. I’ve been waiting for you to come back.”

“I was here half an hour ago. You weren’t here then.”

“I was. I didn’t hear you. I had a headache and went upstairs to lie on the bed.”

“But your bike wasn’t in the shed. That’s why I went on to the house to ride back with you.”

“Well, it was. I put it there myself.”

Funny. He could have sworn her bicycle wasn’t in its usual place.

“There’s nothing to do about that rick. It’ll just have to burn itself out.”

“I love a fire. It’s thrilling.”

Jim saw that she had no idea that it might be a signal. He thought he had better not say anything.

“I wonder how it caught.”

For a while they stood side by side and watched the soaring flames. Presently Dora turned away.

“D’you want to go and wash?” she said. “Supper’s ready.”

“All right. I’ll only be a minute.”

When he went up to their bedroom he noticed that the bed showed no sign of having been lain on, but of course Dora was a tidy woman and she might very well have smoothed down the counterpane and shaken up the pillow if she had mussed them up. They had barely started to eat when he heard the hum of planes overhead. He jumped impulsively to his feet.

“Good God! It was a signal then?”

“What d’you mean?”

“The rick.”

“Oh, Jim, don’t be so silly. D’you mean to say you think someone set fire to it on purpose?”

“It’s obvious now.”

“It’s much more likely a tramp set it on fire by accident.”

“What would a tramp be doing at the bottom of that field at this time of night?”

“He might have been going to sleep there. For goodness sake sit down to your supper. You’re not frightened, are you?”

“No, dear,” he grinned.

He sat down and went on eating. Then in the distance they heard the sound of firing.

“That means they’re over the airdrome.”

She pricked up her ears, but did not say anything. They finished the meal in silence.

Tommy got home and proceeded impetuously to tell his father about the burning rick. They heard the planes too and this raised his excitement to fever heat. He wanted to run upstairs to look if he could see anything from an upper window.

“No, you little devil, you stay here,” said the General. “I’m not going to let you out of my sight.”

“I won’t go out on the roof, Daddy. I promise.”

“You do as I tell you. Read a book.”

“I don’t want to read a book.”

“Then twiddle your thumbs.”

Mrs. Henderson came in.

“George, there are dozens of planes flying over.”

“I’m not deaf, dear. It looks as though they were making a mass attack on the airdrome. I hope our fellows get after them.”

“I’ve left May and Jane to keep the children quiet. They’re all mad to go out and see what’s happening.”

“I can’t blame them. If it weren’t for this damned foot of mine I’d be out myself.”

Tommy looked at him wide-eyed, but was too wily to say anything. Bitterness filled his soul as he took cognizance once more of the flagrant injustice of grownups.

"I'm worried about the boys who've gone down to the village for choir practice," said Mrs. Henderson.

"What the devil have they done that for?"

"Christmas carols. They were so keen to go I didn't like to disappoint them. There are five of them who've got good voices and the choir-master wanted them."

"They'll be all right," said the General calmly. "The Huns aren't going to waste their bombs on them."

"I know, but when the planes go back they'll come right over us, and you know, when they're unloading no one can tell where a bomb will drop. I think I'd feel easier in my mind if they stayed where they are till the raid's over."

"All right then, telephone."

"How can I? They're practising in the vestry."

Tommy saw his chance and leapt at it.

"Mummy, shall I go down on my bike and tell them? It'll only take me five minutes."

"No, Tommy, I don't want you to go out."

"Oh, Mummy, please let me. I might see a German plane brought down."

Mrs. Henderson felt a great responsibility towards the young children placed in her care and she knew she would never forgive herself if anything happened to them. She didn't know what to do.

"Daddy, tell her it's quite safe," pleaded Tommy.

The General smiled. He loved the boy's eagerness and he was proud that he was fearless. A chip off the old block.

"Honestly, my dear, I don't think there's the smallest risk. If you're really anxious about the kids why don't you let him nip down to the village?"

Mrs. Henderson hesitated. Somebody ought to go; she hadn't ridden a bicycle herself for twenty years; of course there were May and Jane; if it was dangerous for Tommy it was dangerous for them. With a sigh she gave in.

"All right, dear, you can go. But you must stay till the raid's over, and tell the choir-master to keep all the boys in the crypt."

"All right, Mummy; I promise you I shall be all right."

He dashed out. But he had no sooner gone than Mrs. Henderson regretted it. She walked up and down the enormous room restlessly. After a while the General looked at his watch.

"You can stop fussing now. He's got there by this time. It's ten minutes since he left."

She drew a long breath of relief. They put out the lights and opened the windows to listen to the distant firing. They looked up at the sky, but could see nothing. The night

was pitch black. Then they heard once more the sound of planes overhead, but whether it was another wave coming over or those that had come going back they could not tell. Suddenly they heard a dull thud.

"What's that?" cried Mrs. Henderson.

"A bomb. Some blighter unloading."

"It sounded awfully close."

"Hard to tell."

"That means they're going back?"

"Yes, I suppose they found it too hot for them."

"I wish I hadn't let Tommy go."

"Oh, my dear, don't be so silly. He's all right in the church. The choir-master's a sensible fellow, he won't let any of them stir till the all-clear."

She tried to smile.

"I'm sure he won't. Don't take any notice of me; I'm only nervous because I'm so tired."

"Well, the fun's over for the present. Sit down and rest yourself. May and Jane can look after the kids for once."

The anti-aircraft guns ceased fire and silence, as softly as falling snow, settled upon the night. They shut the windows, drew the curtains and turned on the light. Mrs. Henderson was exhausted and lay down on a sofa. The General, putting on his spectacles, went back to his paper and in a few minutes she dropped off to sleep. She was awakened by the coming of Jim and Dora.

"We came over to see if you were all right. We heard a bomb and it sounded pretty close to you."

"We heard it too," said the General. "I think it may have fallen somewhere in the park."

"D'you think they got the airfield?" asked Dora.

"We shall hear tomorrow. There was a lot of firing overhead. I suppose that means we sent planes up after them. I wonder if we brought any down?"

They went on talking over the raid and then Jane came in.

"We've put all the little brats to bed, Mother," she said, "and they're waiting for you to go and say their prayers with them."

"The boys who went down to choir practice aren't in yet."

"Yes, they are; they've just come in. They're undressing."

"But where's Tommy?"

"Tommy? Isn't he here?"

Mrs. Henderson gave a frightened gasp.

"Don't get in a state, dear," the General said, frowning. "He's all right. He's probably only up to some mischief. You know what a young devil he is."

But she was terrified and nothing that anyone said could reassure her. Jim suggested going out to look for him, but that seemed useless. The only thing was to wait. They racked their brains to think of a possible reason for his non-appearance.

"He must know how anxious I am," said Mrs. Henderson.

"I'm sure he's only stayed out on the chance of seeing something exciting," said the General.

"But it's all over now," cried Mrs. Henderson.

"If I hadn't got the gout I'd give him a damned good hiding when he comes back."

But when there was a great, thundering knock of the bronze knocker on the front door they all had a sickening fear that something dreadful had happened. Jim went to the door and opened it.

"Who is it, Jim?" asked his mother in desperate anxiety.

A constable came in.

"I'm afraid there's been an accident. Your little boy, ma'am."

Mrs. Henderson put her hand to her heart and stared at the man with horror-stricken eyes. The General rose painfully to his feet and hobbled up.

"Where is he, Constable?"

"Two chaps of the Home Guard have got him."

He signed to the unseen men waiting at the door and they brought in the body of the dead boy. There was a silence of black horror. They were stunned. Then Jim sank into a chair and covering his face with his hands burst into tears. Mrs. Henderson looked at the child with a frozen face. It was heart-rending to see.

"Take him upstairs," she said. "Put him on his bed."

Jim thought she was speaking to him and getting up went towards the two Home Guards, but his mother stopped him.

"Don't touch him," she cried. "Aren't you ashamed to cry like a woman for a child you wouldn't defend like a man?"

He gasped when he heard her words and, his face ashy white, shrank back. Jane stepped forward and touched one of the Home Guards on the arm.

"I'll show you the way." Then to her mother: "Come, Mother."

"In a minute. The children are waiting to say their prayers."

Gaunt-faced, her eyes tragic, she went with slow steps out of the room.

Those who were left, Jim, Dora and the General, were silent. The General sat slumped in his chair, and Jim, glancing at him, saw how hard he was trying to maintain his self-control. He sat staring into vacancy, but his mouth was twitching. He felt Jim's pitying look.

"Someone must go and tell May," he said.

"I'll go." Jim turned to his wife. "You can do no good here, Dora; you'd better go home. I shall stay the night."

"After what your mother said to you?"

“My mother has the right to say what she damned well likes to me.”

His tone was so strange that she gave him a quick look of misgiving. Their eyes met in a cold stare.

“As you like,” she said at last, with a slight, contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

She went out without another word.

xviii

JIM telephoned to the War Office and told Roger the awful thing that had happened. Work prevented him from getting down that night, but he said he would come as early as possible next morning. Then Jim sat with his father. They found nothing to say to one another and so after an hour he went up to the room he had slept in as a boy. It looked bare without his books and pictures. An alien room, a room that seemed to resent his presence. He tried to read, but dreadful thoughts distracted him, and the words on the paper made no sense. He read the same lines two or three times over and his mind remained blank. The blood in his head was throbbing, throbbing, and every now and then a stabbing pain shot through his skull as though someone had thrust a red-hot bodkin into it. Agony; but not such agony as his appalling thoughts. They chilled him to the bone and he shivered. He put a match to the fire. It warmed his icy hands and feet, but against the cold in his heart availed nothing. Horror! Horror! An anguished sob burst from his throat and in anger he dug his nails savagely into his palms; he felt near tears; this was no time to feel sorry for himself. He wished he had never been born; he wished he was dead. He felt as though phantoms, crowded and menacing, pressed him on every side and he could not force a way through.

Presently the handle of his door turned softly and his mother came in.

"I thought you might be asleep. I didn't want to wake you."

Her face still bore that look of anguish he had seen on it when they had carried in the child's body, but she was calm.

"Jim, dear, I'm sorry I spoke to you like that. I didn't know what I was saying. It was dreadfully unkind. Will you forgive me?"

Tears came to his eyes.

"Darling, there's nothing to forgive."

"I've always loved you and I know how bitter life has been for you all these months. And now I want your love more than ever." She kissed him tenderly; then she said: "I want you to come and see Tommy."

The little boy lay on his bed. You could not see the wound that had killed him. Mrs. Henderson looked at him sadly.

"I'm not certain if one ought to regret those who die in these times. Perhaps they're fortunate to be out of it."

They stood for a while in silence. Then she gave Jim a piteous look.

"Do you believe in God, Jim?"

"Yes."

"I try to. Would you mind, I'd like to pray."

They sank on their knees by the bedside and buried their faces in their hands. After a little Mrs. Henderson rose to her feet.

"I must go to your father," she said. "And you must go to bed. There's no use in your tiring yourself out. Good night, darling."

"Good night, Mother."

But though he undressed and got into bed he could not sleep. He tossed from side to side in anguish of spirit. He tried to find reasons to allay the suspicion that beat upon his consciousness, thump, thump, thump, like the hammering of a nail into a granite wall. It was so monstrous that you only had to look at it fair and square to know there couldn't be anything in it. It was against nature: it was as incredible as that water should run uphill. A dozen little incidents that when they happened had made no impression on his mind now recurred to him. He remembered the woman he had seen with Dora in St. James's Park and whose likeness to the woman on the staff of the German embassy had so struck him; Dora had said she was a refugee with whom she had got into conversation: was it true, or was she a German agent and had Dora been in relations with her? Was it possible that Dora had managed to get herself invited to stay at Graveney because the German Secret Service knew that Roger was in the Military Intelligence and thought it would be useful to have someone in the house who might get hold of useful information? It wasn't the first time Jim had miserably asked himself if Dora had married him only because otherwise the authorities would have insisted on her leaving. Was it she who had first given away the closely guarded secret of the airfield? And that evening, a fortnight back, when he had found her lighting a cigarette with a fusee when an ordinary match would obviously have been more convenient, was it only a coincidence that shortly afterwards the German planes had come over? Was it she who had set fire to the rick? Jim buried his face in the pillow trying to shut out the dreadful fear that assailed him. He loved her, loved her with all the strength of his soul and with all the vigour of his body. It was inconceivable that she should have acted a part for so long; and it was inconceivable that anyone should be so dead to the natural feelings of gratitude for all the kindness his father and mother had shown her; it was inconceivable that anyone should be so treacherous. He hated himself that such doubts should even occur to him. There must be an explanation for everything, but, O God, what was the explanation? She couldn't be a spy, he loved her so much; there must be an explanation.

Towards morning he fell into an uneasy doze, and though used to early rising did not wake till nine. He was angry with himself for he had purposed with the first light of day to go to the field in which the rick had burnt on the chance that he might find out how it had been set on fire. He knew what he meant to look for. He did not intend to go to the farm that day; he wanted to be with his father and mother, and there would be dreadful things to see to that they were in no fit state to deal with. He dressed in haste and set out. He did not take his bicycle, but went the shorter way through the park; he passed his own cottage, but there was no sign of life in it and he presumed Dora was still asleep; he did not go in; he took the gate out of the park and walked along the road. What he feared had happened, the police were there; two cars stood in the road and when he came to the stile that led into the field he saw that several men were busy over what remained of the rick. He climbed over and tramped across the stubble till he came up to them. Among them were the village constable and the local inspector of police.

Nodding, he bade them good morning. It was easy to guess that they had come with the same intention as himself. They were routing among the ashes.

"You chaps are on the job early," he said in as hearty a manner as he could assume.

"We've been at it since it was light enough to see," said the inspector. "And perishing cold it was when we first come."

"What are you up to?" Jim asked.

"We're trying to find out how the fire was started. We've been through the ashes with a fine tooth comb."

"What do you expect to find?"

"We shall know when we find it."

"Pretty hopeless I should think."

They didn't know what to look for and he did. If they went away he would have a chance.

"We haven't done so badly so far."

His heart sank.

"Got anything?"

"Something."

The inspector pointed to a handkerchief that lay on the ground. Jim walked over and looked. There were four or five charred fragments on it, little bits of wire that had resisted the heat, and on one of them was still a scrap of fibre. Jim wouldn't have known what they were if he hadn't known what to expect.

"Any idea what they are?" asked the inspector.

Jim shook his head.

"I wouldn't be certain, mind you, but they look to me as if they might be fusees. If that's what they are and we can find out who they belonged to we shall know who the devil was that set fire to this rick."

Jim's mind was in a daze. He wanted time to think.

"You don't think it was an accident? A tramp lighting his pipe."

"Ever heard of a tramp going about with a box of fusees in his pocket?"

Jim was silent. One of the men still working over the ashes cried out suddenly:

" 'Ere, what's this?"

The inspector stepped over to him quickly.

"Don't touch it, you bloody fool," he exclaimed as the man was about to pick up what he had found.

The inspector got a shovel and scooped up the object together with the ashes that surrounded it. He took it aside. It was a fragment of charred sheets of paper held together by the wire that had been used to bind them. A little jagged bit, perhaps two inches wide, had resisted the flames and you could just see on it the beginnings of printed lines.

"Looks like a pamphlet or something," said the inspector. "Be careful with it now. It may be important. Looks as though they'd used it for a torch." He peered. "Blowed if I can make out the words."

Jim couldn't either. But he had recognized the type.

The black of printer's ink was slightly shiny, visible against the brown of burnt paper. He knew that that charred scrap had once been the *New Statesman*. He stared aghast. He thought the inspector looked at him curiously and he pulled himself together.

"Well, I'll leave you fellows to it," he said. "I haven't had any breakfast yet and I'm getting peckish."

He walked away. He knew now what he wanted to know; he knew now what he had feared to know. There was smoke coming from the chimney at Badger's: Dora was up and had lit the fire. He went back to Graveney. Miserably, his heart wrung with pain, his brain dazed with the dreadful assurance of Dora's guilt, he went about the necessary things he had to do that morning. She didn't come, so Mrs. Henderson, Jane and May had to see to the children without her brisk and efficient help. They did not mention her and Jim had a notion they were glad she had kept away. The General hobbled about the house as in a maze. He could find nothing to do and when, his gouty foot still hurting him, he sank into a chair it was only to stare moodily into space. No one knew how Tommy had come by his death; he had been found on the road, fifty yards from where the bomb had exploded, and had been hit by a fragment. It could only be supposed that instead of staying with the other boys in the crypt he had gone out to see what he could of the fighting. Soon after lunch Roger arrived. It was a sad meeting. They all had difficulty in finding anything to say; after such a tragic event words were futile and they spoke to one another in broken, inept sentences. What was the good of saying you were broken-hearted? What was the good of saying you were sorry? Roger had been to the airfield on his way and told them what had happened there. Then Jim said he would go over to the cottage and see why Dora hadn't appeared.

"I suppose she's too upset," said Mrs. Henderson mildly. "Give her my love and tell her not to come over till she feels up to it."

Roger came to the door with Jim.

"Jim, old boy, I have something to tell you that I think you ought to know," he said.

Jim looked at him, his white face going even whiter, and waited. Roger hesitated for a moment.

"We've found out that Dora's mother wasn't Austrian, but German. Her husband, Dora's father, was Austrian. He was a socialist and anti-Nazi. His wife betrayed him to the Germans and he was put in a concentration camp. He died there."

Roger saw his brother's face stiffen.

"That's not to say that Dora shared her mother's views or had any connection with the act that cost her father his life."

Jim found nothing to say. He got on his bicycle and rode off. He was sick at heart. He too had been relieved that Dora had not come that morning; he had been turning over in his mind what he must do and his head was aching; he felt as though a slow fire

within his skull was burning his brain. He dreaded seeing Dora. He longed, he longed desperately for her to have an explanation of those damning facts. Even now, though the evidence was overwhelming, he had a faint tremulous hope that she might somehow be able to clear herself. What heaven it would be if those doubts that racked him so cruelly could be dispelled and, taking her in his arms, he could beg her to forgive him because he had ever had the disloyalty to suspect her. Then something occurred to him. He turned round and rode back, past the gates of Graveney again, to the village. He went to the one general shop it boasted, a little shop that provided all the odds and ends the villagers needed, and asked for a box of fusees.

"Lor' bless you, master Jim," the old woman who kept it replied. "We ain't had none of them for donkey's years."

He got back on his bicycle and rode to the cottage. He found Dora lying on the bed in their bedroom reading a novel.

"Hulloa, where have you come from?" she asked coldly.

"From the house. Why didn't you go there today?"

"I didn't think they'd want me."

"The children have still got to be washed and fed."

Dora shrugged her shoulders.

"I was angry at what your mother said to you. It was cruel."

"Nonsense."

"I haven't your capacity for turning the other cheek."

"Roger's come down."

"Your mother will be glad of that. He's always been her favourite son."

"Several poor chaps were killed last night, but not much damage considering has been done to the airfield."

"Oh?"

"Aren't you glad?" he asked, eyeing her.

"That men were killed?"

"No, that no great harm was done to the airfield."

She slightly shrugged her shoulders, but made no remark. She got off the bed and lit a cigarette.

"Dora, the police have been routing around in the ashes of the rick."

"Oh?"

"They've found charred fragments of fusees." He waited an instant, watching her face carefully to see what effect his disclosure had on her. It remained impassive. "You set the rick on fire, Dora."

For a moment she was taken aback, but only for a moment. She gave her head a scornful toss.

"Don't be so stupid, Jim."

"How'd you explain the fusees?"

"I don't know that any explanation is necessary. You know they weren't mine. You took mine away from me."

"I took one box away from you. You might have had another."

"I hadn't. Anyone might have fusees. One of the workmen on the estate."

"They're not much used now, you know. I've just come from the village shop. They haven't had any for years. How did you ever come to have some?"

"I don't know. I happened to find them. I thought they were yours."

"Where were you last night when I came in?"

"I told you. In this room."

"How is it that your bike wasn't in its usual place the first time I came and it was when I came back?"

She smiled slightly.

"I've been thinking about that. I've remembered that I left it outside and then went out and brought it in."

"Why should you have thought about it? Because you thought it might be necessary to furnish an explanation?"

She frowned.

"I'm rather tired of answering your questions, Jim. I want to read. Please leave me alone."

"You were out of the cottage for just the time necessary to cycle to the field and set fire to the rick."

"It's a lie."

"I can't prove it, but I know it's so."

"All right, have it your own way. Now please leave me."

"Dora, there's no doubt in the minds of the authorities that the rick was set on fire as a signal to German planes. They're going to make an inquiry. D'you think they'll be satisfied with the answers you've given me?"

"Why should they ask me anything? The only thing against me is that I'm a foreigner. Except for that no one would dream of suspecting me."

"I think I should tell you that the police didn't only find remains of fusees. They also found remains of a *New Statesman*."

She gave a start now and for the first time he saw fear in her eyes.

"It was only a charred fragment and the local people don't know what to make of it. But they'll find out what it is in London all right. Who is there around here who takes in the *New Statesman* but me?"

They stared at one another for a moment.

"Anyone can get into the cottage in the daytime," said Dora. "Anyone can get hold of a paper that's been thrown in the dust bin."

He made no reply and they continued to stare at one another.

"What are you going to do?" she asked at length.

"I can't bring myself to give you away." He paused. "If I'm asked questions I shall have to tell the truth."

"You say you love me."

He flushed.

"God knows, I love you. I loved you. You don't love me, do you? You married me to become a British subject."

She looked at him sharply. He could see that she was thinking.

"What if I did? It's no crime. It's what lots of other refugee women have done. Do me the justice to acknowledge that I never said I loved you. After all, May married Roger because he was a good match; I've been a better wife to you than she's been to him. I've refused to have a baby; I've told you why: this is no time to bring a child into the world. You can't really think I set fire to the rick. What would have been the object? You know just as well as I do that if the Germans get here I shall suffer."

"Just before I came here Roger told me that it was your German mother who betrayed your father to the Nazis and sent him to die in a concentration camp."

"It's not true. That's just another of your English lies."

"Our English lies? That's a funny thing for you to say."

He noticed the rapid intake of her breath. It looked as though, taken unawares, she had made a blunder and was aware of it. Her face red, her eyes dark and sullen, she gazed at him reflectively. She lit another cigarette.

"Do you really believe I set fire to that beastly rick?"

"I'm certain of it."

She inhaled the smoke and watched it emerge from her nostrils.

"And if I did what's it got to do with you? This war is no business of yours. You're a pacifist."

"Do you think I don't love my country?"

She had regained her self-possession and spoke now with calm. There was no longer any hostility in her tone; it was indeed strangely conciliatory.

"I'm sure you do. But then why not listen to reason? England's beaten. She deserved to be beaten. Nothing lasts forever in this world, and you've had a long spell of power, you English; now it's our turn. You don't really suppose the Germans are the inhuman monsters your propaganda makes them out to be. In a revolution severity is necessary and there are bound to be excesses, but in reality we're *gemütlich*, idealistic, warm-hearted people. We've always admired the English. We're only too anxious to be friends with you if you'll be sensible enough to accept the inevitable. You were ruled by the Romans for four hundred years and they transformed you from half-naked savages to civilized people. We're prepared to give you our science and our culture, our art and our organization; we'll teach you our industry and our discipline. The French are a logical people and they've accepted the New Order. Can't you see that it's only

common sense to look facts in the face and cease this useless slaughter? You're a pacifist: we offer you peace. You're clever, Jim, you're well educated; the Germans want Englishmen they can put in a position of authority. Your name means something in the county and the party would welcome your collaboration. You know, they're no fools, the Nazis; they'll be glad to have German women marry English men and produce children who'll be half German. The party has always rewarded those who've served it well and they owe me something. Wouldn't you like to own Graveney? You love it better than anything in the world. We could be very happy there, Jim. I promise you you'd never regret that you married me."

He had listened to her without trying to say a word, but as he listened he went paler and paler.

"And what about my father and mother and Roger?" he asked now.

"We've got accounts of long standing to settle with Roger. He'll be disposed of. Your father and mother are old, they can be sent away."

"You slut!"

With his open hand he smacked her face so hard that she staggered. She put her hand to her cheek and held it there. She was not frightened, but mad with rage. Her eyes blazed.

"Swine," she screamed. "Swine. I have no patience with you. You're as stupid as all the rest of you. All right, you can hear the truth. Yes, I married you because I wanted to be a British subject. Yes, I lit a fusee at the open window as a signal, and the fusees were given me for that purpose. Yes, I set fire to the rick to give our planes a line. And now you know, what are you going to do about it? Call the police? Have you forgotten that by your English law a husband can't give evidence against his wife? That was the second reason why I married you. The third was that I knew you were a fool. Go on, call the police. I shall deny everything. What can you prove? I'm a German, yes, that's true, but you're a conchie, and your word's no better than mine. Doesn't it strike you that the fusees might have been your fusees just as the *New Statesman* was your *New Statesman*? D'you think I'm frightened of prison? The Germans will be here in three months and they'll release me. I shall swear that whatever I did, I did because you forced me; I shall swear that you set the rick on fire yourself because you thought a German victory was the only way of bringing about peace. If I go to prison, you'll go to prison too. But you'll stay there."

It seemed as if she had cast off the self-restraint she had exercised ever since she came to Graveney Holt, the ceaseless guard she had kept over her every word, her every action, and were drunk with the sudden liberation. Her eyes were black with hatred and she was like a woman possessed.

"You say you love your country. You make me laugh. If you loved your country you'd be prepared to die for it. D'you call yourself a man? I despise you from the bottom of my heart. D'you think I'd have married you if there'd been any other way of doing the work I was sent here to do? A child? I should have been ashamed to have a child of yours. I hate you as I hate all you English with all my soul. How can you be expected to understand me—you poor, mean-spirited creature? I knew the risk I was taking when I came here. I took it gladly. And I've done what I had to do; they know

where the airdrome is now and before they're through they'll bomb it to pieces. And it's me that led them to it, me, me, me."

She burst into a rasping scream of laughter. Her lovely face was a mask of malice. Jim stood swaying a little on his feet as if he weren't quite sober, and his lips twitched as if he were trying to speak and couldn't form the words. His face was livid and there was sweat on his brow. There was so strange a look in his eyes that on a sudden she was frightened. She stopped laughing abruptly and the silence between them was as startling as the crash of thunder. She stepped back, away from him, and gave a quick glance at the door. He moved towards her and she knew what he was going to do; she made a dash for it, but he caught her by the arm and pulled her roughly back.

"Jim, Jim," she screamed.

Before she could say another word he had put his hand over her mouth and with a violent gesture flung her on the bed; and then he took her neck in his avenging hands. He was very powerful and though she struggled desperately she struggled in vain. He pinned her body down with his knee. He was like a man mad with a mute and sinister madness. His hands, rough with hard usage, strong with hard work, pressed upon her throat. Her face swelled and went blue and her eyes stared horribly. Her mouth opened wide as she fought for breath. His teeth clenched, blind fury in his look, his pitiless hands pressed on her windpipe. When he released her she was dead. He panted like a man who has run a race. He looked at the woman lying on the bed, a horrid sight to see, and a great shudder passed through him. He sank into a chair; he felt very tired. He couldn't think; his mind was blank. The silence in the room was ghastly. It was a silence that was alive.

He couldn't have guessed how long it was before he heard the sound of a car stopping and the toot of a horn. He did not move. There was a knock on the front door. He looked out of the window and recognized Roger's car. He went downstairs and opened the door for him.

"Jim, is Dora here?"

"Yes."

"Can I see her?"

"What do you want to see her for?"

Roger came in and sat down on the edge of the table.

"Well, old boy, I'm afraid you've got to prepare yourself for a bit of unpleasantness. I don't mind telling you that she's been under observation for some time, but nothing actually has come up against her, except what I told you just now about her mother. She wasn't quite straight about that. She very distinctly gave us to understand that her mother was Austrian and anti-Nazi. I'm sure it'll be all right, but they want to question her about her movements last night. The chief constable is up at the house. You'd better come along too so that you can confirm her statements. Where is she?"

"Upstairs."

"Call her, will you, old boy. I want you to come along in the car right away."

"She's dead," said Jim quietly.

Roger looked at him aghast. What Jim said was incredible.

"Dead? What do you mean?"

"I killed her."

"Good God!"

He looked at the little wooden staircase and ran up. In a minute he came down again. He looked at Jim in silence.

"She set fire to the rick. It was a light she showed a fortnight ago that gave the Germans a line on the airfield. She was a spy."

"But, my God, why did you kill her?"

"I killed her because I had to. I killed her because I wanted to see her dead."

Roger gave a deep sigh. For a long time neither of them spoke. But something had to be done; they couldn't stay there indefinitely and stare at one another.

"I'm afraid you've made an awful mess of things, old boy," said Roger, almost in a whisper.

"A hell of a mess. I only had in my heart, love and peace for all men. And it's all gone phut. I had to stand by my convictions. It's funny, isn't it, that I who put up with all that humiliation rather than take a human life, should have killed the person I loved more than anyone in the world?"

Roger was shattered. Poor Jim. He could only feel compassion for him and deep affection. And what was there to do?

"I'm afraid you're in for a very sticky time," he said, his voice husky.

"Shall I be hanged?"

"No, of course you won't be hanged, but you'll have to go to trial. You know what English justice is, we can't take the law into our own hands. A good lawyer will be able to make a pretty good case in your defence. I'm sure any jury would bring in a verdict of manslaughter."

"You mean I'd get off with a few years in prison."

"I can't say. I dare say you wouldn't get more than a year or two."

"What shall I do, Roger?"

"One can't give advice in a case like this, old boy."

"What would you do if you were in my place?"

Roger, looking down, hesitated. It was horrible to say what was in his mind. He thought of his father and mother. What a fearful blow to them, what a grief and what a humiliation! And then there was something he hadn't the heart to mention; it wouldn't help Jim that he was a conscientious objector; it would seem strange to a jury that this man who wouldn't fight for his country should kill his wife. They might find him guilty of murder and then he'd be condemned to death; the sentence would be commuted to penal servitude for life. Fifteen years. He forced himself to answer Jim's question, but he couldn't look at him and kept his eyes on the ground.

“I think if I’d been so unfortunate as to kill somebody I wouldn’t want to put up with all the beastliness of a trial. I’d go while the going was good.”

“You’re a good friend, Roger,” Jim replied, with a little smile. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“I know you have courage, old boy.”

Roger’s face was grey. He stole a glance at Jim. There was something he wanted to ask, but he couldn’t bring himself to speak. Jim caught the look and understood.

“I’ve got my gun,” he said.

Roger shut his eyes. He was afraid he was going to cry.

“I think if one’s got to do something unpleasant it’s better to do it quickly,” said Jim.

“I dare say you’re right.”

Jim held out his hand.

“Good-bye, Roger. You’ve been a brick to me.”

“Good-bye, old boy.”

Roger’s eyes were wet with tears so that he could hardly see his way out. He got into the car and waited. In a few minutes he heard within the cottage the sound of a gun being fired. He leant over the wheel and hid his face. Then he pulled himself together and drove back to Graveney Holt.

xix

It would serve no good purpose to tell of the consternation, the horror, of the persons concerned in this story when Roger broke his appalling news to them. They were stunned by this new and unexpected sorrow; it would be futile to dwell on the anguish that desolated them. Because of certain circumstances connected with national defence it was possible to avoid the wide notoriety that such a sensational occurrence must otherwise have aroused; but the facts in a garbled form were bruited about the neighbourhood. The General and his wife, shamed as well as unhappy, were touched by the expressions of sympathy they received even from persons unknown to them, and by the great kindness that was shown them by all and sundry in their tragic misfortune. Though nothing could console, to discover how much they were loved and how deeply respected made their grief perhaps a little easier to bear. Mrs. Henderson sought to still her gnawing misery by unremitting toil on behalf of the little band of children entrusted to her care. For a while, now that Dora was no longer there to give her efficient help, the others had so much to do that there was little time to give way to fruitless mourning; but presently Roger persuaded Mrs. Clark to come down with her two children, and she proved a capable and willing assistant. Her lively bustling, her quick humour lightened the darkness of that sad house. Roger was fortunate in that his work demanded all his attention. He made a point of coming down to Graveney, even if only for a few hours, whenever he could get away. He was the only son left to his parents and he knew how much he meant to them. Relations between Roger and May remained cordial, even intimate, but they were those of two very close friends and not those of husband and wife. It was to her alone that he told the story of that last awful visit of his to Badger's. She heard it with fear and pity. She knew it was true that in Jim's place he would have done as Jim did, but it was a hard, pitiless thing to tell poor Jim to kill himself, for that was what it amounted to, and it distressed her and a little frightened her too, that he should have been capable of it. And yet, what was the alternative? To face the music; to stand trial, with perhaps a shameful death at the end of it, and at best the horror of imprisonment, and on release a life without honour or usefulness. Poor Jim. He was not twenty-two. So young. Too young. It was shocking that Roger should have been able to bring himself to do such a fearful thing. His manner to his father and mother was so tender, so charming in its solicitude, that she could not doubt for a moment that it sprang from a deep and genuine feeling: how could he be at the same time so ruthless and so gentle, so harsh and so kindly? She sighed unhappily; it was no good trying, she could never feel at home with such a man; there was something in him that repelled her. Yet he was all she had now, for she neither wrote to Dick nor did he write to her. She had made her decision, for reasons that seemed good, and was prepared to abide by it.

It was hard that her sacrifice had brought her no satisfaction; she could not even persuade herself that it had any utility. With a touch of humour she told herself that it was like leaving a peach for somebody else to eat and seeing it go bad because nobody wanted it.

The war went on, Greece withstood the Italian onslaught with unexpected tenacity; the German Air Force bombed the cities of England, men, women and children were killed; the British pounded away at the Rhineland and the Channel ports, they made ready with grim determination to repel the expected invasion; and then suddenly the British Army set upon the Italian troops and drove them out of Egypt. They drove them back into Libya, stormed stronghold after stronghold and took prisoners by the ten thousand. The triumph was spectacular, and the public enthusiasm, after so many disasters, was great. But Jane's satisfaction, like many another woman's whose kin were in the fighting force, was mingled with apprehension. Ian was in Egypt and she had not heard from him for weeks. Dick Murray was in Egypt too. One morning May went down to the village on an errand and one of the Graveney tenants stopped her.

"I'm sorry to hear about Captain Murray, Mrs. Roger," he said.

Her heart almost stopped beating.

"Has he been—has he been wounded?"

"Mrs. Murray, his mother, wrote to his housekeeper. She got the letter last night. Yes, he's been wounded."

"Seriously?"

"She didn't say. I hope not; but we miss him here, you know. He was very popular with the tenants. It would be a good thing for all of us if he were invalided out and could come back."

When she got home and told what she had heard she constrained herself to speak calmly, but she was in a pitiful state of anxiety; of course General Henderson and his wife were concerned, Dick was a competent agent and they liked him, but they contented themselves with saying they trusted it was nothing of consequence; Jane, to her relief, asked if inquiries couldn't be made, and the General said he would drop a note to Roger and tell him to find out if he could how Dick was. Roger was due for a few days' leave very shortly and was coming down to Graveney; perhaps by then he might have heard. With her heart in a turmoil May found it hard to accept the casual way they took the matter.

"I understand there've been astonishingly few casualties," said the General. "Good man, Wavell. I knew him when he was Allenby's chief of staff."

But when Roger came down, May could not bring herself to ask him whether he had any news. Though sick with fear, she compelled herself to listen with a show of interest while he talked of the recent raids on London and the seriousness of the German attacks on Atlantic convoys. She had been able, if not to forget Dick, at least to keep from thinking of him as long as she knew he was well and safe; and she had tried to persuade herself that the pain of parting from him forever was growing more endurable; but now that he was wounded, perhaps dangerously, her love, like a fire that has sunk and on a sudden wind bursts again into leaping flame, was as consuming as it had ever been. She knew now that nothing could ever kill it. It was when the General entered upon a discussion of the Libyan campaign that Jane put the question that May, though it trembled on her lips, had resolutely prevented herself from asking.

"Oh, Roger, have you heard anything about Dick? You got Father's letter, didn't you?"

Roger gave May a fleeting glance.

"Yes. I cabled. He's on his way home."

"Is he badly hurt?"

It seemed to May that he hesitated for a brief instant and she held her breath.

"I don't really know. His life is not in danger."

It seemed a strange answer. She had an inkling that, though he spoke to Jane, it was to reassure her that he added the last sentence.

"When will he be back?" asked Jane.

"Any day."

Only three days later, early in the afternoon, Mrs. Henderson, the General and Jane were sitting out on the terrace, for it was one of those warm sunny days that we sometimes get in England at the end of March. The two women were knitting and the General was reading the *Times*.

"Where's Roger?" asked the General.

"I don't know where he's gone," his wife answered. "Here's Clark, he may know."

Roger had brought Nobby down so that he might see his wife and children and the Hendersons had taken a fancy to the facetious little man. He was walking towards them, along the centre path of the formal garden, and the General called him up on to the terrace.

"Well, Clark, been taking a stroll in the park?" he said.

"Yes, sir. First 'oliday I've 'ad since the beginnin' of the war. It's a treat to me."

"Where's the major? My wife tells me he went out early this morning."

"Yes, sir. He didn't say where he was goin'."

"I wish Roger wouldn't be so damned secretive about all his movements," said the General, after dismissing Nobby. "Why couldn't he say where he was going?"

The General had taken his grief very hardly. He had aged much in the last three months and was apt, even more than before, to be unreasonably peevish over trifling annoyances. He had imposed upon himself a determined silence in respect of the catastrophe that had befallen; he could not speak of Tommy and would not speak of Jim; but the strain had worn him down and his nerves were in a state of fretful irritability. Mrs. Henderson understood that his pettishness was only superficial; beneath, he was the devoted, unselfish, well-intentioned man he had always been.

"Isn't it lovely today?" she said now, to distract him, "Some of the shrubs are already in bud."

The General, taking off his reading glasses, scanned the fair sight that he had known as long as he could remember. The trees were bare of leaf, but the grandeur of their naked branches lent the landscape, in summer so urbane, a more solemn austerity. The contours, in that clear, limpid air, had an exquisite and precise delicacy. It was

indeed a noble prospect. He gazed at it with singular intensity. You might have imagined that he thought never to see it again and was impressing every particular of it on his perceptivity so that it might remain an imperishable memory. He sighed.

"I wish it weren't so lovely. It's on a day like this that I feel what a wrench it'll be to part with it."

"Oh, Father, don't talk like that," said Jane cheerfully.

"My dear, it's no good fooling ourselves. We shall never be able to live here after the war. We shall be as poor as church mice. The life we knew and loved has gone never to return."

"Nothing in the world can last forever, George," said Mrs. Henderson. "We've had a pretty long innings."

He smiled at her sadly.

"I'm not grousing, dear. It would be inhuman to expect me not to regret the past, but I hope I can face the future like a man. Jim and Tommy are gone now, and after me there's only Roger to come."

"Oh, George," Mrs. Henderson began compassionately.

But he interrupted her.

"No, dear, let me speak. I've been chewing the cud on this for a long time and I want to get it off my chest. We haven't always been wise, we landowners, and I dare say we've been complacent and high-handed, but on the whole we've been decent and honest and we haven't done badly by our country. Perhaps we've accepted the good things our happy lot provided us as though they were our due, but according to our lights we've tried, the best of us, I mean, and I think I may say most of us, to do our duty. But you're right, dear, we've had a long innings. What is it that feller Landor said? Something about warming both hands before the fire of life. 'It sinks and I am ready to depart.' The future belongs to the soldiers and sailors and workmen who will have won the war. Let's hope they'll make it a happier and better England for all the people who live in it."

It was not often that the General gave expression to such feelings. Mrs. Henderson took his hand and pressed it in loving sympathy. She too could not but be sad that the land should know them no more. Silence fell upon them. It was broken by the appearance of Nobby with a packet of letters. The General took them and handed one to Jane.

"Here's a letter for you, dear."

"It's from Ian," she cried excitedly.

She tore it open and began to read it avidly.

"Where's it from?" asked the General.

"He doesn't say. He's well and happy. Bless his heart. Grousing about the heat. Oh, listen." She began to read aloud. " 'Have you seen Dick Murray yet? He ought to be back by the time you get this. Rotten luck for him, wasn't it? Anyway he's out of the war, poor chap.' What can he mean?"

"I'm afraid it means he's very badly wounded," said Mrs. Henderson.

“They wouldn’t have sent him back if it hadn’t been pretty serious,” added the General.

“Oh, poor Dick.”

Just then Roger came out of the house.

“Oh, Roger,” cried Jane. “I’ve just had a letter from Ian. It looks as though Dick was badly wounded.”

“I’ve just seen him. I’ve been to the hospital he’s in.”

“How did you know where he was?”

“I made it my business to find out,” he answered dryly. “Where’s May?”

Jane gave him a questioning glance. He looked very grim.

“He’s not dying?”

“No, he’s not dying.”

“May’s with the children.”

“Go and take her place. I want to talk to her.”

His manner was so peremptory that ordinarily Jane would have felt called upon to tell him somewhat crudely where he got off, but she had an instinct that this was no time for backchat.

“All right.”

She went into the house and in a moment he followed her. May found him walking up and down the library. It was the room he liked best in the house. She stopped dead still on the threshold when she saw his face. She flinched. She thought he was going to tell her that Dick was dead. Her knees shook.

“Come in, May.”

She stepped forward. She put her hand on the back of a chair to steady herself.

“I’ve just seen Dick. He’s at a military hospital about thirty miles from here.”

“He’s not dying?” she cried.

“No, he’s not dying, he’s blind.”

She gave a great cry and tears trickled down her white cheeks. He watched her in silence. With a desperate effort she controlled herself and raised her eyes to meet Roger’s.

“I must go to him, Roger.”

“I know.”

She had a sudden pain in her heart, as though it had been pierced with a sharp knife, for though he spoke so quietly his voice was desolate. She had tried to persuade herself that he had long since ceased to care for her, but it was no use; she couldn’t be so dishonest as to pretend to believe it; she knew that in his strange, undemonstrative way he loved her truly.

“Don’t think me terribly unkind, Roger.”

“My dear, I know you’re incapable of being unkind.”

"If this hadn't happened I promise you I'd have stayed. I thought I'd get over it in time. But now it's different. You do see that, don't you?"

"Yes, I see that all right." A funny little sound issued from his throat; it was something like a melancholy chuckle and something like a sigh. "The luck's against me."

"Can I go now?"

"Yes. Nobby will drive you over."

"Good-bye then, and thank you."

"Good-bye, May."

She held out her hand and he took it, then with a strange, bitter smile dropped it; she turned and walked quickly out of the room. He hesitated a moment as though he didn't quite know what to do, then took up an illustrated paper and sitting down on a sofa began to look at it. Time passed. He heard the door open, but did not look up. It was Jane. She came over and sitting down beside him affectionately slipped her arm through his.

"Why aren't you looking after the kids?"

"Don't talk, you fool."

He went on looking at the paper and she looked with him.

"I suppose you know," he said.

"Yes, I've known all along."

"I did love her so, Jane, in my way."

"I know you did, old boy. I'm afraid it wasn't the right way. Women are queer cattle."

"You never really liked her, did you?"

"Oh, yes, I did. I thought her a dear. A little colourless, but very sweet."

"Cat."

He turned the page and looked at another.

He didn't know how long he had been looking at the same picture.

"He's blind, you know. As soon as I heard that I knew I hadn't a chance. I knew that if she had to choose between a man who was hale and hearty and a man who was blind she wouldn't hesitate. Damned unfair advantage to take, I call it."

"Rotten. D'you think he did it on purpose?"

"You fool, Jane."

He turned another page and with a show of interest they looked at a row of young women in large hats and a few sequins, each of whom was kicking a black-stockinged leg as high as her head.

"Anyhow I've got my work. That's all that matters, isn't it?"

"And to coin a phrase: there'll always be an England."

He smiled and for the first time looked at her.

“Not a bad phrase either. But I seem to have heard it before.”
“You can’t have. I’ve just invented it this moment.”
He slipped his hand along and took hers and gave it a little squeeze.
“You’re a good girl, Jane.”
“No, dear,” she said. “Not good. Beautiful.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Hour Before the Dawn* by W. Somerset Maugham]