THE HOUSE OF ADVENTURE

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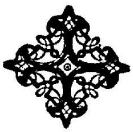
The
HOUSE OF ADVENTURE

By WARWICK DEEPING

Author of
"Sorrell and Son"



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To
DR. BEDFORD FENWICK
IN MEMORY OF HIS GREAT KINDNESS

THE HOUSE OF ADVENTURE

I

Two stragglers lay sleeping in an orchard near the village of Beaucourt, sprawling upon a grass bank under the branches of an old apple tree. The sun had cleared the horizon and hung as a great yellow disc in the purple boughs of the beech trees on the other side of the stream. Overhead stretched the thin and cloudless blue of a March sky. The grass was silvered with hoar-frost—and in the wood across the stream a bird was singing.

The men slept, two brown figures on the green bank. One sprawled on his back; the other lay curled on his side. Their boots were the colour of clay; so were their faces, the clay-coloured faces of men who had been starved, and who had fallen down to sleep the sleep of exhaustion. They were dirty with the dirt of five days' fighting and foot-slogging. Their chins were painted black with a stubble of hair, and their noses looked pinched and thin. They had no greatcoats, no packs, no puttees, no equipment; nothing but a rifle, a blue water-bottle, and a haversack between them. At the world's end a man gets rid of unnecessary lumber.

The dawn was extraordinarily still. There was not a sound to be heard save the singing of the bird in the wood on the other side of the stream. The country rolled into blue-grey distances under the level sunlight and the tranquil sky, a strangely peaceful landscape, the landscape of an unvexed and impersonal dawn. Beaucourt village slept in the sunlight on the slopes of its two hills. No smoke rose from the chimneys; no human sound came from it. Beaucourt was empty. The blue spire of its church and the gold vaned flèches of the château showed up against the purple heights of the Bois du Renard.

The church clock struck six, six calm and level clangs that were quaintly challenging, almost ironical. From somewhere—a long way off—came the soft whoof of a gun, an English gun slewed round in some quiet orchard and firing a solitary shell or two into nothingness. There was a whine in the air, a

whine that quickened over Beaucourt and became a menacing and snoring rush. The shell burst beyond the village, smashing an old apple tree and throwing up a great spurt of earth and smoke.

The man who had been sleeping curled up on his side, sat up and mopped the dirt out of his eyes, using his hands like the paws of a cat. A crack of lightning seemed to have broken the sky just above his head. The apple tree had been snapped off about three feet from the ground, and the splintered ends of the stump stood up like torn tendons.

The other sleeper was no longer a man, but a body. He was not recognizable, and from the ripped front of his tunic a red identity disc protruded, dangling pathetically at the end of a piece of frayed string.

756941 Pte. Beckett, T.
2—9——Fusiliers.

The live man looked dazed. War is an affair in which violent and absurd things happen, and men forget to be astonished. Moreover, Paul Brent was little more than a starved body, a dirty man sodden with a week's weariness and moments of great excitement and blind fear.

"Tom's dead."

He uttered the words with the confidential and mumbling foolishness of a drunkard. It seemed quite natural that Tom should be dead. An immense apathy lay like so much stagnant water over the mud of Brent's submerged emotions. He sat and stared and fingered the hair on his chin.

The man had been his comrade, his pal of pals, one of those rough-hewn, violent, warm-hearted creatures. They had fought together, drunk together, snuggled up close in the same barn or dug-out, shared their tobacco and a hole in the mud. Tom was dead, and yet if Brent was hurt by his death, it was a vague and animal pain, like the groanings of an empty belly.

He sat and stared.

His mouth felt dry.

He noticed that the water-bottle, rifle and haversack that lay between them had not been touched. He remembered, that there was a little water left in the bottle, and he reached for it, drew the cork and drank. Some of the water dribbled down his dirty chin.

Brent put down the water-bottle, and groped in the right-hand pocket of his tunic. A few bits of broken biscuit resulted. He sat and munched them with sunken-eyed stolidity, alone in the midst of that extraordinary silence,

and noticing how the sunlight glinted on the hob-nails in Tom Beckett's boots.

It was that dangling identity disc that gradually absorbed Brent's attention, like a little luminous spot of light, a red blur in the fog of his exhaustion, a point of fire in his brain. It seemed to spread and to expand, and to change from a little red circle stamped with a man's name to a picture, a picture of the man Beckett himself, of his vagabondage and his triumphs and all his boisterous good-humour. It seemed to challenge Brent, even made him unfasten his own tunic and produce the likeness of the thing the dead man wore, that little circle that was himself, the badge of a broken man and of the patchwork of a broken man's career. It became a circle through which he looked at pictures, the pictures of that other life before the war, his boyhood, the silly tragedy of his marriage, his cynical success and his still more cynical failure, those moments of anguish and of shame, the bitter gibes that covered hidden wounds.

A look of spiritualized intelligence sharpened Brent's face. His eyes ceased to be dead and listless. Something stirred in him, a passion to escape, perhaps a hunger for the finer things that had passed out of his life. The coarse-mouthed but most lovable man who lay dead there had taught him much—the human fineness that mattered, those rough bits of courage or gentleness that make life something better than a selfish scramble. For Beckett had been a vagabond with a religion of his own, a homeless man, a childless man, and yet in his way a sort of savage Walt Whitman, finding life good and wholesome and free.

Brent sat and faced it out. Watching beside his dead friend in the early sunlight of that spring morning, he saw himself as the shabby failure that he was, a man who had accepted spiritual bankruptcy with the cynical apathy of a tramp who leaves his self-respect and his citizenship in some convenient ditch. Acceptance! It was just that blind and drifting attitude that had doomed him, while Beckett—the adventurer—had punched his way towards a rude religion.

In that most singular and prophetic moment of his life Paul Brent had his vision of non-acceptance. He saw the gap in the wall and leapt through it, feeling that the dead man was offering him his chance. The burly audacity of the thing would have drawn a laugh and an approving punch on the chest from the man who lay dead. Beckett had no wife, no children, no woman who would be hurt. Brent thought of all that before he made his choice.

There was an element of solemnity and of reverence in Paul Brent's carrying out of that interchange of identities. He unfastened his own disc,

and that solitary one of Beckett's. He felt in his dead friend's pockets and sorted out his possessions, a complex that included his pay-book, a pipe, some odd buttons, ten francs and fifty centimes in money, an English penny, a stubby pencil and a couple of dirty picture postcards, a hank of string and a few matches. Brent tied Beckett's identity disc to his own braces, and put the dead man's pay-book in his pocket. His own disc he fastened to the body and left the pay-book lying upon the grass.

Then the last comradely act suggested itself, and it stirred Brent to vague emotion and a softening of his red-lidded eyes. He picked up the rifle, shouldered it, and walked up the hill to Beaucourt village in search of a pick and a spade.

As he walked up between the orchards a strange calmness fell upon him, a calmness that was neither apathy nor indifference. He became conscious of the beauty of the morning, and of the more tragic beauty of this French village with its red roofs and its red and white walls showing vividly against the purple of the Bois du Renard. Beaucourt was on the altar of sacrifice. Brent entered it by the little Rue de Rosières, and he saw things in Beaucourt that he would never forget. It was like a woman bereft of her children, standing dazed, with blind eyes and open mouth. It was as though it could not believe that the thing had happened on that soft day in the coming of the spring.

The doors of nearly all the little houses and cottages were open, so that Brent could see into the lower rooms. A gallery of pictures, impressions of a silent tragedy. Rooms full of a tumult of escape and of little treasures searched for, snatched up and carried away out of a world of disorder. Floors littered with clothes, papers, bed-linen, furniture. Chests of drawers and cupboards standing open. The last meal left upon a table, dirty plates, bottles, the chairs pushed back as the people had left them. In one cottage Brent had a glimpse of a woman's night-dress and a little black hat trimmed with red ribbon hanging on the post of a bed. An open window gave him a glimpse of a child's cot with the clothes thrown back and one pink sock left lying. Beaucourt would have hurt the heart of a cynic. At the corner where the Rue de Rosières joined the Rue de Picardie a melancholy and forlorn brown dog came nosing up to Brent and followed at his heels.

Brent petted the beast.

"You poor old devil."

He paused outside the Café de la Victoire—ironical yet prophetic name! It was a long, two-storied, lovable old house in red brick, set back beyond a raised path of grey, squared stones, and looking with its dormer windows

into the orchard and garden of the big stone house across the way. The green shutters hung open. A lace curtain fluttered from one of the windows. Brent knew the Café de la Victoire; for he and Tom Beckett had drunk red wine there.

Paul did not enter the house, but scrambled up on to the raised path and pushed through a blue door in the stone wall surrounding the garden. There were pollarded lines beyond the wall, and a quaint bosky path ran between the rows of trees. Brent followed the path, knowing that it would bring him to the yard at the back of the house, and that he might find what he needed in one of the sheds. He had turned the corner where a clump of old Picardie roses showed a shimmer of green shoots, when he became aware of the most unexpected of all things—a woman.

The woman was on the other side of the garden, and close to a gap in the stone wall where a casual shell had knocked a little avalanche of grey stones into the garden. She had a spade in her hand and she had just finished pushing back the earth into a hole, and she was treading a few green weeds into the raw surface when she turned her head and saw Brent.

Brent knew her. It was Manon Latour, who owned the café, and he guessed that she had been burying her little treasures there. She stood motionless, rigid, staring at him with eyes that looked big and black in her white face, the eyes of a woman who was afraid.

II

BRENT felt challenged.

He crossed the garden towards her, knocking the moisture from the leaves of a bed of winter-greens, and still followed by the brown dog. Brent's French was very British, the Army French of estaminets and billets, but his heart was concerned in the convincing of Manon.

"Madame, allez vous! Le Boche—il arrive toute suite!"

She stood and stared at him, and it was obvious that she believed that she had never seen him before; and his present appearance was not reassuring. She saw a very dirty man with a cut-throat's beard and a haggard face, a starved face in which the blue eyes looked like the cold eyes of a corpse. There was nothing soldierly about him save the rifle on his shoulder. The disreputable indiscipline of Brent's whole atmosphere suggested the one word "loot."

"Monsieur, que faites-vous ici?"

She stood her ground, and kept her eyes on Brent's face. She was a black-haired, black-eyed little woman with a skin of ivory; in age about six and twenty; very sturdy, very strong. Yet there was a softness about her, a white glow, a femininity, that were wholly pleasant and appealing. Manon Latour had a heart and courage. You saw the soul of her in her big, dark, watchful eyes, in her firm white throat, in her full-lipped, vivid mouth, in the confident poise of her head. She stood there and defied Brent—this disreputable straggler who had surprised her burying her treasure.

The brown dog was sniffing at her black skirt, and at the newly turned soil.

Brent managed to smile, and the thinness of his yellow face seemed to crack with it.

"Bon garçon,—bon garçon, moi. Allez, madame. Hang it,—do you think I would touch your stuff?"

She said nothing, but continued to watch his face.

Then Paul had an idea. He pointed the muzzle of his rifle at the place where she had been digging, fumbled for the bit of pencil he had found in Tom's pocket, and walking to the wall, began to print three rapid and rather straggling letters on a piece of plaster.

"R. I. P."

He stood back, cocked his head with a flick of humour, smiled.

"Compris?"

She understood.

"Monsieur, c'est vrai?"

"Oui—here,—catch hold."

He pushed the butt of the rifle towards her.

"Fusillez, si vous voulez—moi. Cela ne fait rien. Oui. Mon ami, mon comrade, il est mort. Je suis fini."

She put the butt of the rifle aside with a gentle little touch of the hand. Her eyes had softened, and they were very beautiful eyes.

"Je me confie à vous, monsieur."

"Bon."

The brown dog looked up at them both and wagged his tail. He appeared to approve of the affair, and of Manon's faith in this scarecrow of a man.

She walked down the path and into the house, leaving the spade she had used standing against the wall. Some sudden impulse made her pause in the doorway and look back at Brent. He had followed her as far as the gateway leading into the yard, and was resting his crossed hands on the muzzle of his rifle, and she noticed that he rocked slightly from foot to foot. The man could hardly stand, and her heart smote her.

"Monsieur!"

She disappeared into the house, and returned almost immediately with her hat and coat, a little leather bag, and a bottle of red wine. The bottle was half full.

"Monsieur, pour votre santé."

Brent stepped forward, and took the bottle from her. His hand shook.

"Ah, mon pauvre vieux—comme vous êtes fatigué!"

She pinned on her hat while Brent drank the wine, looking at him with eyes that were no longer hard and black, but softly brown and gentle. She was aware of his dry, cracked lips, the working of the muscles in his throat, a slight trembling of the arm that held the bottle.

"Monsieur, venez avec moi."

Brent stared. He understood. Then he nodded his head at the spade she had left by the doorway.

"Non. Mon ami est mort.—Over there. Compris?"

“Le bon Dieu vous garde,” she said.

She put on her coat, picked up her little bag, and was ready to go. The brown dog looked at them both, and then made up his mind to escape with the woman. Brent went with her as far as the yard gate.

“Au revoir, monsieur.”

“Bon chance,” he said with a cracked smile.

He watched the little black figure disappear round the angle of the big stone house that jutted out across the end of the Rue Romaine on the way to Bonnière.

“Damned plucky,” he said aloud; “she ought to have gone long ago.”

Brent went back to the garden and the place where Manon had buried her treasure. The patch of raw earth was too noticeable and too obvious, in spite of the weeds she had trampled into it, and Brent looked about for something with which to camouflage it. The smashed walls and the scattered stones offered a suggestion. The main mass of the débris lay close to the spot that Manon Latour had chosen, and Brent set about re-arranging those stones with an art that aped reality. The pattern he made pretended that the shell had struck the wall at a slight angle, and his casual dotting of the outlying fragments made the trick quite convincing. The raw earth was covered; no one would trouble to go poking about there. He completed the job by smudging out the letters he had printed on the wall, using a bit of broken stone and the sleeve of his tunic.

“Bon,” he said; “Tom would never have touched the girl’s money. There was no dirt on Tom.”

Brent collected a pick from one of the outhouses, appropriated Manon’s spade, and returned to the orchard above the stream. This orchard belonged to Manon Latour; so did the meadow below it, and a strip of woodland on the other side of the little valley. Brent took off his tunic, hung it on the stump of the apple tree and began to dig. The red wine had flushed and heartened him, but it was food he needed, and the sting of the wine soon wore off. Sweat ran from him; the sweat of exhaustion; he panted and nearly fell forward over his spade when he had lifted the first layer of sods.

He sat down on the bank, and putting his head between his knees, remained thus for some minutes. The faintness passed. The spirit reasserted itself and coerced the body.

He got to work again,—and slowly deepened that narrow trench,—giving a little grunt of physical anguish each time he made a stroke with the pick. The thing was done at last, and Brent stood resting like an old man,

leaning on the handle of the spade, and looking at Beckett's body. He had been so absorbed in the work, and his senses were so dull and unalert, that he was quite unaware of the fact that a German patrol had straggled across the field and through the orchard, and that an N.C.O. and four privates were standing a few yards away, watching him. They, too, were very dirty, these "field-greys," sallow-faced and heavy about the eyes. They looked at Brent with a mixture of curiosity, amusement, and the elemental sympathy of men for a soldier doing a soldier's job.

"Hallo—Tommy!"

Brent turned and looked at these "field-greys,"—without surprise and without fear. It was as though he had expected them. They were just dirty, tired men like himself, part of the earth, part of the great machine.

"Morning,—Fritz."

He jerked a thumb towards the body.

"My pal.—I'm done. Give me a hand, will you?"

The N.C.O. spoke English, but the affair was so elemental and so human that the whole group understood. They helped Brent to lift the body into the grave and to put back the earth, using their boots and the spade.

Brent picked up his pay-book and handed it to the N.C.O.

"You had better keep that, Fritz."

A young, fair-haired German was standing close to Brent and looking at him intently. He noticed the Englishman's dry lips and pinched nostrils, his dirty chin, and starved eyes and forehead.

He nudged Brent with his elbow.

Brent saw a bit of brown bread in the young German's hand.

"Hungrig?"

Brent smiled.

"I am—that."

He took the piece of bread, and ate with gross relish, for he was famished. The "field-greys" stood around and smoked cigarettes, English cigarettes picked up during the advance. The N.C.O. questioned Brent.

"Any English up there?"

Brent shook his head and went on eating. He was thinking of Manon Latour trudging along in the spring sunshine with the larks singing overhead.

"She ought to be safe," he thought; "she had about an hour's start. Damned nice little woman, that!"

III

So Brent went as a prisoner to Germany, and was catalogued as "Number 756941 Pte. Beckett, T."; and Paul Brent's name appeared among the "missing," a casualty that was corrected a few weeks later to "killed."

Paul Brent was a prisoner, but he had escaped, escaped from the tradition of blond hair and a thin mouth, Turkey carpets and a three-tiered cake-stand, and the memory of the greedy nostrils of a thoroughly respectable but wholly unprincipled woman. He was free, even while he sat and peeled potatoes in a prison hut, washed his one shirt, or slept square-backed on his bed of boards. A sense of liberty soaked into him. He saw a new sun, a new horizon, new stars, a sportsman's chance, a renewal of the great adventure. His manhood tightened his belt, and discovered itself in better condition, despite its thirty-seven odd years and an incipient plumpness about the waist. That plumpness had disappeared in France and Belgium, and Brent's mental flabbiness followed it out of the German prison camp.

Brent happened to be in a "mixed camp" for the first few months, and he set himself to learn French. He attacked it with such fierceness and assiduity that Alphonse,—his pedagogue, a French waiter with a family in Soho,—accused him of being in love. It was a crude accusation, and Brent demolished it.

"I finished with that—five years ago."

"No nice little French girl, Mister Beckett?"

"Not even a mam'selle. I want to be able to earn more money. Business—just business."

"I fall in love every month," said Alphonse; "it is good for my digestion."

"And Madame's temper?"

"Oh, that is an affair apart," said Alphonse; "there is no woman like my Josephine. It is quite different. She mends my socks, and sees that I have a clean collar. She has but to say 'Alphonse,' and I would leave all the beauties of the Sultan's harem and carry her umbrella. It is the woman that mends one's socks who matters."

"I suppose so," said Paul; "mine didn't."

But he became quite a creditable Frenchman, even picking up the slang and the atmosphere of the language, and teaching himself to think in French. His accent was not too English. “Bong” and “Bo-koop” ceased from his vocabulary. He learnt to imitate all Alphonse’s tricks, his little mannerisms, his expressive silences, the way he talked with his shoulders, hands, and even with his legs and buttons. Alphonse was a southerner, and gaillard. He did not merely converse; he was an amateur dramatic society in a shabby uniform of French blue.

Then the War ended, like a machine of which someone has forgotten to turn the handle. Brent happened to have been moved into Belgium about three weeks before the Armistice, and the coincidence rhymed with the idea he had in his head. Strange things happened one wet night in that particular prisoners’ camp. There were rumours, a panic, an explosion, a joyous scramble in the office of an alarmed and fugitive commandant. Someone discovered the official pay-box. German notes, wads of them, were stuffed into tunic pockets, and Brent was one of those who came by a quite respectable handful.

* * * * *

It was in a Belgian village on the road between Dinant and Philipville that Paul met the first English troops he had seen, a battalion that was settling into billets on its long march to the Rhine. Brent was sludging along a lane, a dirty grey sock showing through the toe of his right boot, all his worldly gear in a German sandbag slung over his shoulder. He had a vile headache, little prickles of heat and shivers of cold chasing each other up and down his back. He had not shaved for a week, and his greatcoat was all mud.

“Hallo, chum!”

Behind the outswung black door of a stable Brent saw a field-cooker in steaming fettle, and a couple of cooks hard at work. One of them was mopping out a camp-kettle with a handful of grass. An exquisite smell of hot stew wasted itself on Brent’s nostrils.

“Got any tea?”

The cook dropped his camp-kettle, and went and laid hold of Brent.

“Here—chum—hold up! You come and sit down. Been in Germany,—what?”

“Yes—Germany,” said Paul.

They sat him down on a ration box,—but he flopped like a sackful of old clothes, and the sympathetic one had to act as a buttress.

"You're done in, chum. Give us some of that stew in my mess-tin, Harry."

But the sight and the smell of the stew made Brent feel sick. The cook held his head like a mother, and Brent's head felt dry and hot.

"You want the doc, chum; that's what's the matter with you. Ten days in hospital in a real bed, between real sheets,—with a lovely little nurse feeding you with a spoon."

Brent protested, gripping the cook's wrist.

"I don't want the doc, old chap. I'm done up, that's all. I'd like a cup of tea, and a ration biscuit."

"Rot," said the cook, "you're ill."

One of the company stretcher-bearers happened to pass that way.

"Hi—Chucker, where's the M.O.?"

"Headquarters mess."

"Run along and tell him there's a returned prisoner here; he's sick."

"Right-oh," said Chucker; and he went.

The battalion doctor came back with the stretcher-bearer, feeling aggrieved that he should be dragged out at the end of a day's march to see some casual devil who did not belong to his own crowd. Human nature is like that, and this doctor boy was unripe and insolent.

"Hallo, what's the matter with you?"

Brent was crouching on the box, holding his head between his hands.

"Headache, sir."

The M.O. looked at him, brought out a thermometer, glanced at the mercury and gave the glass tube a sharp flick.

"Under your tongue. Don't bite it."

The sympathetic cook was damning the doctor with a pair of truculent blue eyes, eyes that said "You blighter—I'd like to punch your jaw." But the officer was not sensitive to psychical impressions; he had left a game of "Slippery Sam," and he felt Brent's pulse while Brent sat and sucked the thermometer with an air of vacant helplessness. The glass tube was tweaked out of his mouth, glanced at, and put back in its metal case.

"Hospital for you, boy."

Brent looked scared. He did not want to go to hospital.

“I’m just done in, sir. I’ll be all right to-morrow.”

“Will you!” said the doctor tensely, pulling out a note-book and beginning to scribble, resting his foot on Brent’s box, and the note-book on his knee.

“Name and number?”

“I don’t want to go to hospital, sir.”

“Don’t argue. Name and number?”

“No. 756941 Pte. Beckett, T.” said Brent.

“Unit?”

“2-9th Fusiliers.”

“Bring him along to the medical inspection room, will you? Street by the church.”

The doctor snapped the black elastic round his note-book and walked off.

“He ought to be boiled in muck,” said the cook.

Five minutes later this sympathetic and expressive soul made a dash down the road after a figure in a muddy greatcoat, a figure that had sneaked out of the cook-house with a staggering determination to escape. Brent collapsed under a hedge outside a cottage, lying face downwards in the mud. His temperature was 104.7°.

“What did you do it for, chum?”

Brent could not explain. He had fainted.

A field ambulance car collected Paul Brent and carried him off to another village where he lay in a barn for half an hour, flushed and torpid, yet resenting the efforts of an orderly to make him drink hot cocoa. An officer came and examined him, a very quiet man with a big fair moustache and intelligent eyes. Ten minutes later Brent was put on a stretcher in one of the big Daimlers, with a card in a brown envelope fastened to one of the buttons of his greatcoat; there were two other patients in the car. The quiet officer climbed in and assured himself that Brent was well covered with blankets.

“Feel warm enough?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t you worry. You’ll soon be comfortable.”

The officer’s voice made Brent do an absurd thing; he turned his face towards the canvas, and wept.

The car left its sick men at a casualty clearing station in Charleroi. Brent had a vague impression of a great red brick building glooming up into the murk of a winter night, of boots clattering on tiled floors, of many voices, and of people who would keep moving about. He was irritable, a blazing mass of physical discomfort, slipping over the edge of sanity into delirium. Two orderlies came and carried his stretcher into a ward. He was laid on a bed, and two other orderlies started to undress him.

Brent was struggling to get at something that was buttoned up in the right breast pocket of his tunic. The orderlies were trying to remove the tunic, and Brent began to fight.

"All right, old chap, all right!"

"Here, leave that alone."

"What's the matter?"

"I want my money."

"You can't have money in hospital."

"B——y hell,—give me——"

"Let him have it," said the elder of the two orderlies; "let the poor blighter have it. Shove it under his pillow. All right, old chap."

Brent calmed down like a child, but the nurse in charge had heard the scrimmage, and came sailing up in her grey dress edged with red. She was a fair-haired, hard-faced woman, with thin, clean-cut features, her eyes set too close together, and little irritable lines crimping her mouth.

"What's all this noise?"

Then a strange thing happened to Brent. He sat up in the bed, staring at the woman with eyes of anger and of horror.

"What's she doing here? Take her away—take her away, or I'll—I'll cut her blasted throat!"

The nurse screwed up her eyes at him, and backed away.

"He's delirious," said one of the orderlies; "lie down, old chap."

Brent made a sort of futile grab in the direction of the nurse.

"Let me . . . She's a devil!"

The nurse walked away down the ward with the detached dignity of a woman whose professional soul moved calmly through the world of sickness and of words, and Brent fell back on his pillows.

"What's she doing here," he kept saying; "why can't they let me alone?"

Paul Brent came very near death in that hospital at Charleroi. Influenza passed into broncho-pneumonia, and for days he lay there in a quiet stupor with bluish lips and a grey face. He was just so much pulp, not caring whether he lived or whether he died, and capable of but two semi-intelligent mental reflexes, the turning of his face to the wall when the yellow-haired nurse came near, and the insinuating of a flabby hand under his pillow to make sure that those German notes were there. He occupied a corner bed, and sometimes there was a red screen round it. His neighbour in the next bed nicknamed him "Arthur," and told everybody that he was "a bit balmy."

But Brent's illness passed, and he lay there hour by hour, watching life, and beginning to react and to think.

He saw the high, bare, yellow walls, the rows of beds with red quilts, the scrubbed floor, the canvas-shoed orderlies, the nurse, the doctor with "gig-lamps" and a bald head, the other men who dozed and chattered, or read magazines and books and letters from home. Some of the men wrote letters, and Brent's neighbour offered him a field postcard.

"What about the missis, Arthur?"

"Haven't got one," said Brent.

The red screen annoyed him. There was something irritating in the colour, a vague suggestion of officialdom, red tape, tyranny. Brent asked to have it taken away. He spent most of his time staring straight up at the ceiling, and at a black smudge of cobweb in the corner where the chimney jutted out. The dirty whiteness of the ceiling was restful; he saw pictures on it, pictures that helped him to think. There was no pattern on the ceiling; it was like a fresh sheet, a clean piece of canvas upon which Brent could paint what he pleased; and lying through those long days he worked out his pictures on the plaster, and underneath them was written the word, "Escape."

He realized that he would have to lose himself again, for the Machine had reclaimed him and would pass him with stupid efficiency on its Trucker system to some place where he would be sorted out and railed back to England. He began to live in fear of being recognized by some chance friend. Even the blond-haired nurse's absurd likeness to that other woman who had died in England still roused in Brent an elemental antipathy and a fierce alarm. He sulked, and turned over into the blind corner whenever she came near his bed.

"What is the matter to-day, Beckett?"

Her voice was an echo of that other woman's voice, a metallic voice that attacked. Brent's back remained churlishly on the defensive.

"Don't want to be bothered—that's all."

IV

BRENT was convalescent, and as his strength returned, his restlessness returned with it. He was allowed out in the hospital grounds, where he trudged about with the idea of getting himself fit, and feeling like an animal in a cage, and always afraid of meeting some disastrously inopportune friend. He had glimpses of Charleroi, that black and gray mining town with its slag-heaps and smoke and its air of shabby sumptuousness. There were women in Charleroi, swarthy little Belgian women, shops full of luxurious things at luxurious prices, the glitter of jewellery, the glare of electric light, Belgian flags, trams, red wine, pavements where a man could loiter and catch the smell of fleur-de-trèfle in a woman's clothes. Charleroi made one think of the sallow face, the lowering cloth cap, and the sexual swagger of an apache.

"Escape" was written on Brent's heart; and he had staged the first act of the adventure at Charleroi. He knew that the day of his discharge was drawing near, and he might expect to find himself handed to some casual R.T.O. who would pass him down the line to his base-depôt, and Brent had decided that he must vanish before such a thing could happen. He did not want to go back to England. He was thoroughly determined that he would never recross the Channel.

Early in January he received the final stimulus that shocked him into immediate action. He was wandering about the hospital grounds when he saw a little officer with a florid and familiar face limping down the path between the plane trees. Brent was caught off his guard. He stared, and then swung round on one heel, but the officer boy stopped.

"Hallo; isn't it Brent?—You were in my platoon?"

Brent had to face it out.

"So I was, sir."

"I got knocked out just before the retreat. What happened to you?"

"Prisoner," said Brent.

"Been sick, have you?"

"Flue, sir, and pneumonia. I'm all right now. I expect to be discharged in a day or two."

The officer boy shook Brent's hand, feeling himself half a civilian and on the edge of demobilization. Besides, Brent had always been a gentlemanly chap.

"Well, good luck."

"Good luck to you, sir," said Brent.

That incident gave the necessary flick to his decision. Men who were ripe for discharge were allowed out on pass into Charleroi, and Brent got his pass that evening; it was dated for the following day. The N.C.O. in charge of the convalescent "wing" was a far more human person than the yellow-haired nurse.

So Paul Brent went down into Charleroi on a grey January morning, with the thrill of an adventure in his blood. He had scrounged a couple of tins of bully beef and a pocketful of biscuits, his reserve ration for the road. "Escape" was in the air. The trams clanged it, the shops were ready to help in the conspiracy: the crowded streets made Brent think of a dirty, commercialized but fascinating Baghdad. He began to feel himself part of this continental crowd and no English soldier numbered and labelled for an immediate return to some niche in that damned temple of Monotony, the Industrialism of England. He was a little Haroun al Raschid wandering as he pleased in this city of adventure.

Brent's first business was to change that German money, for it would be no use to him on the road. He found a jeweller and goldsmith's that was also a Bureau de Change, and they took a thousand of his German marks and gave him French notes in exchange. Brent thought it wise to spread the transaction over a varied surface. He tried a Belgian bank, and came out with six hundred francs in French paper. A second Bureau de Change converted the bulk of the remainder. Then Brent went shopping.

The first thing that he bought was a carpet-bag with black leather handles, and he bought it at a little shop in a shabby side street. This magasin sold workmen's clothes.

A fat Belgian woman, with a moustache and overflowing cheeks and chin, showed some surprise when he asked the price of a pair of brown velvet trousers.

Brent laughed, and became confidential.

"We make what we call a stage-play, madame, a concert of varieties. The war is over; it is necessary for us to be amused."

"Clothes are very dear, monsieur."

“We English have plenty of money. At home—now—in England—what would you think I am?”

Madame scrutinized him with little black eyes half hidden between bladders of fat.

“Tiens!—how should I know?”

“I own three cotton mills and fifty houses. But in the war I was just this.”

She became very ready to oblige him, and Brent asked her advice.

“I am to be an apache, madame. A pair of velveteen breeches.—What next?”

“A cloth cap, monsieur.”

“Yes.”

“And a coat—a black coat, and a scarf to go round your neck.”

“Excellent. I will do it thoroughly and have a foreign shirt, also a leather belt.”

He packed the things into the carpet-bag, paid madame and asked to be allowed to leave the bag there behind the counter.

“I will return later.”

“Certainly, monsieur.”

Brent had brought a pack with him, and he had other things to buy, details of the adventure that he had worked out while he was lying sick in bed and seeing pictures on the ceiling. The list included matches, a few candles, some tinned food, cigarettes, a pair of civilian boots, a woollen vest, soap, a sponge, a comb, and six inches of tri-colour ribbon. He had a meal at an obscure restaurant, and the meal included a bottle of red wine that cost him thirty francs. He drank to the health of the adventure.

A winter dusk was falling over Charleroi when Brent returned to the shop where he had left his bag. The wine had made him merry, and he wasted ten minutes in a gallant little gossip with the lady of the flowing chin. It would be unwise to appear to be in a hurry; your true artist is never furtive nor a sloven in his manners.

“Au revoir, madame.”

“Au revoir, monsieur l’apache.”

Brent laughed.

“I’ll try the costume to-night and see how the boys like it.”

He went boldly through Charleroi, carrying that carpet-bag for all the world to see—but avoiding street corners where he might meet some inquisitive military policeman. The bag and its contents were explainable, but the explanation might prove embarrassing when the hospital authorities reported him missing. He came without adventure to the western outskirts of Charleroi, still warm with that good red wine. A few stars winked at him between the houses, and above the dark slag-heaps and the still darker hills.

In the lane at the back of a railway embankment, a lane that appeared to end in all the cabbage patches of a miners' suburb, Brent found the "green room" of his dreams. It was a tin shed or shelter with no door, where someone had once stored vegetables and tools. Brent took possession, lit one of his candles, and carried out a rapid change. He discarded everything English save his greatcoat, socks and boots.

There was a big ditch at the back of the shed, full of sooty-looking water. Brent crammed his tunic, trousers, puttees, shirt and cap into his pack, added two heavy stones, and sank the whole caboodle in the ditch. Returning to the hut he completed the metamorphosis by threading the bit of tri-colour ribbon into his buttonhole and tying it in a bow. An old rake handle provided him with a stick. He ran the end of it through the handles of the carpet-bag, hoisted it over his shoulder, and launched out into the unknown.

V

Paul Brent tramped it through Solre le Château and Sars Poteries to Avesnes, winning his food from the English he passed upon the road, for there is no kinder hearted soul on earth than the plain Englishman when his generosity is challenged. Paul played the part of the French civilian deported from a captured village early in the war, and the men in khaki whom he met supplied him with food, and even shared with him their precious cigarettes.

Paul remained shy of the larger villages and towns. Sometimes he stopped at a farm-house or cottage and was given hot coffee fresh from the blue pot on the stove. He was a little nervous at first of his adopted lingo, and a pretended deafness helped him when he was posed. But these French folk accepted him, and were touchingly kind. He slept in their barns and sometimes in a bed, spending the evening sitting with the family round the kitchen stove, a rather silent and solemn man with many memories in his eyes.

A very gentle mood had fallen upon Brent. He was marching away from defeat, trudging step by step from his own past, that past that seemed so full of sordid yet pathetic futilities. He found his heart going out to children, dogs, and the poor old wrinkled women who had starved so bravely for four years. Often he shared his food with the cottagers, the bully beef and jam and biscuits he won upon the road.

A man who has tasted the full bitterness of failure looks eagerly, almost incredulously at the gleam in the sky that symbolizes a new hope. Brent felt that he was escaping from under a thundercloud, and that the edge of it was behind him. He had known that emptiness of the stomach, that sense of having fallen through himself into a mood of cynical apathy and tragic surrender, when a man wonders whether he shall end his life or struggle on, whether his dead self-respect is worth carrying upon his shoulders.

"That damned fool Brent! Had his chance and missed it."

But Brent knew that his own incorrigible good nature had brought him to bankruptcy. He had trusted men, other men who had lived to make money, and he had been astonished when they had torn him asunder and used him both as a scapegoat and as a victim. His own wife had never forgiven him for the catastrophe. She, too, had been greedy. Brent knew that money was at the bottom of all the harlotry, the commercial treachery, and the fierce

physical greed of a great part of modern life. He had found War far less savage and contemptible than the assassination of souls that a rich Peace encourages.

Other men had scrambled over his body, and, now that the war had set him on his feet again, he was possessed by a great yearning to begin life over again, to make some success of the years that were to come. He wanted to feel the grip of a new self-respect, the stiff back of a new manhood. He wanted to think that he mattered, that there was yet some measure of rich blood in him that could make some other creature happy. He was curiously humble over it, boyish and innocent. And yet as he foot-slogged it along those muddy winter roads, a pilgrim in search of his second chance, he became possessed by a vague yet spiritual conviction that he would find that chance somewhere in poor, battered, devastated France.

It was on the road from Avesnes to Maroilles that Brent met the girl with the black shawl. It was no more than an incident in his pilgrimage, but an incident that flushed him with the warm red wine of humanism.

He was sitting on the butt of a broken telegraph pole when the girl came along the road. She was pretty and dark and rather slender for a French peasant, and Brent was aware of her as an eager and hurrying figure with a black shawl folded over her shoulders, and the end of it held so as to cover her mouth. She came quickly towards him. Her eyes were big and bright with hope, the desperate hope that her man had come at last.

Brent saw her falter. Then the light died out of her eyes. Her face seemed to grow more sallow, and very sad. Yet she approached him, smiling with a sudden pity, a compassionate friendliness that warmed to all those lonely ones who returned.

"You are going home, monsieur?"

Brent raised his cloth cap.

"If I find a home."

She sighed, dropped the shawl from her mouth, and sat down beside him. Brent felt that she had suffered very much; she looked ill, her soft eyes were growing old with watching.

"I thought you might be my Jean," she said, with the simplicity of one who had lived in days of great sadness.

"I am sorry," said Brent, "has he not come home yet?"

Her eyes looked far away. The fingers of her left hand pulled at a splinter that stood up from the round bulk of the pole.

“Four years. Yes, it is a long time. And our child died—died of starvation. For six months I have had no letter.”

“I am sorry,” said Brent.

She began to question him—for his presence there seemed to give her hope—and the lies that he had to tell her turned sour in Brent’s mouth.

“You have come a long way, monsieur, perhaps from the centre of Germany?”

“Yes, a long way. I was in Germany.”

“It may be that you met my Jean? Jean Bart is his name, a tall man with thoughtful blue eyes and a scar on his forehead.”

“I am afraid not, madame. But there must be hundreds of persons who have not yet come home.”

“You think so, monsieur?”

“Many are in hospital. Some were in Russia.”

She smiled bravely.

“Oh, I do not give up hope. Some day he will return. I pray to God each night and morning, when I work and when I eat.”

“Please God he will,” said Brent, and found that he had uttered a prayer.

The girl insisted on Paul going back to her home, a little red farm among poplars on the green slope of a hill above the windings of a river. Jean’s father and mother lived there, two quiet people to whom life had left but little to say. They were very kind to Paul, and he passed the night at the farm, sleeping in a feather bed in a narrow room whose window showed him the stars hanging in the bare branches of an old apple tree. There was the smell of home about the place, the home of the Frenchman who had not returned. Brent felt that the little house watched and listened with every window, its gables cocked like the ears of a dog waiting for its master.

Brent was touched by the kindness these poor people showed him. They sent him upon his way with a couple of hard-boiled eggs and some apples in his pockets, and a sense of the essential goodness of the humbler folk who suffer. The girl went with him to the gate opening upon the road.

“Bon voyage.”

Her soft eyes and her sadness put new life into Brent.

“May he return—very soon,” he said; “your husband; perhaps I have brought you good luck.”

She watched Brent march off down the road, and his going made her yearn all the more deeply for the other man who had not returned.

"Four years," he said, "four years of his youth—and of mine."

Yet Brent's words might have been prophetic, for Jean Bart came home that night.

Brent tramped on through Landrecies and Le Cateau, those tragic towns, half alive, half dead. It was when he came to the village of Maretz, lying all red and quiet under a flat grey sky, that Brent felt the new phase of his adventure, even as a man feels the nearness of the sea. He was on the edge of the wilderness, fifty rolling miles of grey-green desolation upon which a few broken villages floated like derelicts. Brent spent three days in Maretz, living with an old French couple in their cottage on the road to Serain, very busy as a forager and a collector of hard rations. He had the wilderness before him, a wilderness where he could count on neither water nor food. But Brent left Maretz rather suddenly. He was watching a party of German prisoners working at the red mountain of rubbish that had been the church when he became aware of a man in khaki standing a little to one side and staring at him intently.

Brent knew the man, a corporal who had served in the same battalion. He braced himself to the crisis, gave the man stare for stare, a blank look of curiosity, said something in French, and strolled on. Brent did not turn his head to see whether the corporal was still interested and suspicious, but he went straight to the cottage on the road to Serain, collected his bag and stick, and footed it out of Maretz.

That night he slept in a half-ruined cottage at Beaurevoir. The morning brought him luck, and a ride on a lorry that was travelling to Roisel, and at Roisel he won a hot dinner at the cook-house of a Labour Company. Things were going well. The lift on the lorry had saved him many miles of tramping and much food. That evening he reached Peronne, and saw the brown and battered town outlined against a February sunset, and all the blue waters of its valley full of the reflection of flushed clouds and gouts of gold. Brent found a corner in Peronne, a snuggish corner, even though the stars looked down on him, and it was in Peronne that he had his vision.

It was a strangely vivid affair, a dream and yet perhaps more than a dream. Brent found himself in Beaucourt, standing in the garden of the Café de la Victoire and looking at a resurrected Tom Beckett, a Beckett who sat on the heap of stones that he—Brent—had thrown over the burial-place of Manon Latour's treasure. Beckett's boots were muddy, so were his clothes, and his hair was full of blood and earth. Yet the face of Beckett was like white light. He sat and talked with the intensity of a man who was fiercely concerned in making his meaning clear, yet Brent could not understand a

word of all that his dear friend said. He was conscious of effort, bafflement, suspense. He kept noticing the gap in the upper row of Beckett's teeth, a gap that had always made Brent think of a hole in a white fence. He was astonished by the discovery that he could see Beckett's heart beating under his soiled tunic, and see it as a reddish light that waxed and waned with each beat, a mysterious and palpitating piece of glowing human flesh. And all the while, Brent was trying to grasp what his dead friend said, for he was speaking to him, as though he, Brent, the live man, were in desperate need of some human message.

"Sweat,—sweat!"

That was the one crude, forcible and enigmatic word that Brent remembered. Then Beckett smiled at him, and vanished off the pile of stones like a puff of smoke dispersed by the wind. Brent woke up and stared at the stars. He was shivering.

"Beaucourt," he said like a child repeating a lesson; "I have got to go to Beaucourt."

VI

THERE had been a slight frost. It was a brilliant February morning with a few rolling white clouds low in the blue of the western sky, and the green earth was covered with a web of silver.

Brent came to Beaucourt by the road from Rosières, and from the high ground above the Bois du Roi he could look down through the beech trees into the valley where Beaucourt lay. The valley seemed full of yellow sunlight, very tranquil and very still, and Brent could hear the stream falling over the dam by the mill. Beaucourt seemed to sleep the sleep of the dead. There was no smoke, no movement, no human sound, and Brent stood awed by the beauty of its desolation.

For beautiful it was—even as a ruin. There had been but little fighting at Beaucourt; it had been taken and passed, retaken and passed again, and yet Brent could see that there was hardly a whole roof left in the village. The church had lost half its steeple, and through the windows of the château the purple of the woods showed like a curtain. Beaucourt was a shell, a village of squared walls, gaunt gables, and a spidery web of blackened rafters, when there were any rafters at all. Fires had blazed here and there, and all about the church and the cross-roads the English shells had fallen heavily. Many of the little white houses had had the plaster shaken from the walls, and showed up as masses of intricate timber-work, pathetically naked, mere skeletons from whose bones the flesh had fallen. The woods had suffered but little. The thickets of pines and spruces beyond the church stood up green and clear. Very few shell-holes spotted the fields and orchards, nor had Beaucourt that indescribably sordid look of a village that has become a refuse-heap, a kitchen-midden of the war.

Brent went down into Beaucourt with a feeling of queer suspense. He was excited, conscious of a quickening of the heart. Some sub-conscious emotion seemed to be stirring in him, some quite unexplainable trembling of the deep waters of his self. It was not the mere fact that Beckett was buried there, nor the memory of Manon's treasure, nor yet the vividness of that fantastic dream. It may have been that Beaucourt had an elemental yet spiritual meaning for Brent, that it symbolized the unexpectedness of his own past, and pointed with its broken spire to a sky that was blue with the coming of spring.

Beaucourt touched Brent's heart. It was more than a ruined village; it was a picture of a broken life, a question mark, a half-realized opportunity.

Brent entered it by the Rue de Rosières. The stud and plaster cottages here were mere shells—doors, windows, woodwork and furniture gone, the ceilings fallen in, the tiles from the roofs making a red litter on the ground floors. Brent found himself standing in the triangle where the Rue de Picardie, the Rue Romaine and the Rue de Rosières met. The stone house at the corner had huge holes in its walls, and the stone-capped well in the centre of the triangle still carried a German inscription announcing the fact that the water was fit to drink. Brent stood and looked at the Café de la Victoire, or rather at the ghost of it; and pity—pity for a woman—filled his heart.

The red roof had gone with its quaintly inquisitive dormer windows. There were two ragged shell-holes in the front wall, and the gable ends and chimney-stack stood out bleakly against the blue of the sky. Hardly a shred of woodwork remained; the house was doorless, windowless. The gates of the yard gateway had gone. A smashed lime tree hung with its head over the wall of the garden, its boughs trailing on the raised path.

"What a damned shame!" said Brent.

He had seen hundreds of ruined houses, but somehow the mutilation of this house of Manon Latour's affected him quite differently.

Brent climbed on to the path and entered the café. He found that much of the rubbish had been cleared away, and that someone had extemporized a shelter of corrugated iron in the big kitchen and living room on the left of the passage. He noticed, too, that the beams that had carried the upper floor were still in their places.

Brent put his bag down on the tiled floor. The act had a quaint suggestiveness. He was a traveller, and the Café de la Victoire stood with a very open doorway, offering him such hospitality as was left to it, though there was no Manon to cook an omelette and make coffee.

Then Brent went for a stroll. He wandered down to Beckett's grave and found it as a low mound of weedy earth. The broken apple tree had been cut up and burnt. Brent stood there for some minutes, bare-headed, eyes looking back into the past, a sturdy, square-shouldered man with a fresh-coloured face, and a youthful moustache and beard. He looked like a peasant,—brown, blue-eyed, thoughtful.

Then he went back to Beaucourt.

Beaucourt surprised him. He walked down the Rue de Picardie to the Place de l'Eglise, and saw nothing that lived, not even a half wild cat. The

Post Office, the Hospice, and the Hôtel de Paris were respectable and voiceless ruins. The école was a little less desolated. But Brent had expected to find a few people in Beaucourt, a few of those indomitable French folk who had won the war. The village lay less than ten miles from the undevastated country, yet Beaucourt seemed to have been side-tracked, forgotten.

There was one live thing in Beaucourt and Brent discovered it sitting on a fallen block of stone by the church, a grey old man, grey as the jumble of broken buttresses and fallen pinnacles, but far more sad. He seemed just a bit of the broken stone. Brent went and spoke to him, and the old man looked at Brent with eyes that seemed dead.

"Good day, monsieur. You are all alone here?"

"Yes, I am all alone," said the old man.

His voice was flat—toneless and empty of all emotion. It seemed to Brent that the old Frenchman was beyond feeling things. He sat and munched a piece of bread; he was not interested in Brent; he was not interested in anything. When Brent spoke to him he answered like a man who had been mesmerized.

"You have come back, monsieur?"

"I walked twenty kilomètres this morning to see—that."

He pointed quite calmly to a little house over the way, a house that had had its face smashed in, a house that was almost unrecognizable. Brent felt a pang of pity, yet there was nothing to be said.

"You stay here?"

"No, I walk another twenty kilomètres. That has happened to many people. Their hearts fail them when they see what has happened."

"I can understand."

"The authorities order us to go back—but can they give an old man a new heart and strong arms? They speak of help, but no help comes. I blame nobody; we have suffered so much."

"But will no one return?"

"Oh, yes, we shall come back," said the old man, "but we wait for the spring to come, and for food. Our roots are here, I suppose, right under the ruins of all those houses. But it will need courage—courage!"

He lit his pipe, got up, and made ready for his second twelve-mile walk. Endurance, a blind, patient, half-dazed endurance, that was what Brent saw

in him, the endurance that had saved France. It was tragic and it was splendid, and it filled Brent with a feeling of deep humility.

"We young men shall have to help the others," he said.

The Frenchman gave him a look of surprise.

"Those are good words. But I have found it a selfish world. Perhaps it will be a scramble. Everybody will be too busy."

And he left Brent to think it over.

Paul returned to the Café de la Victoire, and it was then that he remembered that he had not looked at the place where Manon Latour had buried her treasure. He went out into the garden and saw the mound of stones had not been moved. Nettles had grown up in between the stones, and the inference was obvious.

"She will come back," was Brent's thought.

And he added:

"Unless she is dead."

Brent felt hungry. He had carried a couple of empty ammunition boxes into the kitchen, one to serve as a seat, the other as a table, when he remembered the fact that his water-bottle was nearly empty. He went out at once to examine the well, not liking the idea of getting his water from the stream. The windlass, chain and bucket had been left behind, and Brent opened the queer little iron gate in the well-house and sent the bucket down for a sample. He heard it splash below, and felt the suck of it as it came up full at the end of the taut chain. When he lifted out the bucket into the sunlight he found the water looking clean and wholesome. Brent smelt it, took some in his palm and tasted it. The water had neither smell nor taste.

Paul was conscious of a pleasant and boyish elation. Beaucourt made him think of Crusoe's Island. It was full of the adventure of finding things; it challenged a man's wits, promised all sorts of surprises. The idea of trying to live in Beaucourt tickled the eternal boy in Brent. He brought out a battered enamelled mug and plate from his bag, sat himself down on his ammunition box, and made his first meal in Beaucourt, tackling the inevitable corned beef and biscuits with the relish of a clean hunger.

Satisfied, he lit his pipe, for he still had a little tobacco left, and carrying his box out into the doorway he sat in the sun and meditated. His pipe tasted good; the sky was blue; he felt warm, and his boots had kept out the mud. Even the ruins of Beaucourt had a beauty of their own, a fantastic unexpectedness, a droll yet pathetic irregularity of outline. These little ruined houses were very human; some had fallen in upon themselves and

stood huddled in utter dejection; others had the staring eyes of despair; a few still seemed to be calling for help. The village resembled a little Pompeii, to be explored and dreamed about, and yet it differed from Pompeii in that it was potentially alive. It struck Brent as being rather odd and delightful that he should be the one and only inhabitant of Beaucourt, a stranger taking a holiday in this starlit and admirably ventilated ruin.

And then the old Frenchman's words recurred to him:

"We shall come back."

Brent's blue eyes gave a sudden, interested gleam. He foresaw the return of Manon Latour, and he wondered what she would think of this house of hers, what she would make of it.

Brent left his box, jumped down into the roadway, and began to examine the Café de la Victoire with an intelligently reconstructive eye. There was something of the Jude in Brent. Twelve years ago he had been a jobbing builder, carrying on an obscure little business in a west-country town, a man who had used the trowel and the plumb-line by day, and read Maeterlinck, or Green's "History of the English People" or Montaigne's Essays at night. Chance, rather than his own inclination, had pushed him into bigger things, and his marriage had discovered him seven years later as the practical partner in the exploitation of a suburban building scheme. He had been the owner of an ambitious wife, a car, and a very passable library, until other people's speculative cynicisms had brought him down with a crash.

And now, he stood looking at this French café with the critical eyes of a man who once had worked with his hands.

"Yes—if I had the stuff!"

The thought fired an extraordinary series of explosions in Brent's brain. He began to walk up and down with his hands in his pockets, an excited man who glanced from time to time at the old red-walled building, calculating, contriving. His pipe went out, but remained gripped between his teeth. Then he re-entered the house. He wanted to examine the inside of it, every corner of it, even the cellar. One of his candles gave him the necessary light, and in the cellar he made a discovery.

Some man in the near past had been fairly comfortable here. Brent's candles showed him a wire bed in one corner, a rough table with some shelves made of ammunition boxes standing against the wall, and what was of still more luxurious significance—a rusty but sound Canadian stove with its flue pipe connected with the little grating that opened just above the paving of the path. The cellar was quite dry.

"Well I'm damned!" said Brent; "here's my new billet."

VII

BRENT went upstairs again, and sat down like Crusoe to consider the situation.

A billet in Beaucourt postulated the quest of a number of elemental necessities. Brent tore the white wood lid off the box on which he was sitting, produced a pencil, and began the creation of an inventory much like an ancient scribe dabbing his cuneiform letters upon a tablet of clay.

At the top of the board he printed:—

NECESSITIES

Under this heading he wrote:

Food.
Water.
Wood for Stove.
Kettle or Saucepan.
Basin to wash in.

He headed the second list:

LUXURIES

Blankets.
A palliasse.
Furniture.
Plates and cups.
Green food. What price Scurvy
N.B. Try nettle tops.
Milk.
A looking-glass.

So much for the paper work. Brent bored a hole in the board, using his jack-knife, and hung his inventory to a nail on the kitchen wall. He was going to exploit Beaucourt in a thoroughly business-like way, and he was as full of excitement as a boy.

Brent took the first item—food. He had noticed some sandbags on the wire bed in the cellar, and he fetched one of them and started on the adventure. The last troops to occupy Beaucourt had been Colonials, and they had left Beaucourt in that open-handed, casual and spacious way of theirs, not troubling to carry away what they would be supplied with on the morrow. Brent began by exploring the big stone house across the road and found nothing that was of any use to him until he poked an inquisitive head into what had been a wash-house or scullery, a place that was weather proof and had been used as a kitchen. Brent had struck oil. He saw a pile of bully-beef tins in a corner, and on a shelf he found two unopened cartons of jam and one of marmalade, a tin half full of sugar, and two tins of Ideal Milk.

"Blessed be all Cobbers!"

Brent salved seventeen tins of corned beef. He carried the hoard over to the café, and decided that the cellar was the only safe place for his store. He made quite a game of stacking his provisions on the rough shelves, reflecting that these shelves ought to hold books, but that books were of no use in Beaucourt.

He adventured out again, and tried the école in the Rue de Picardie, glimpsing it as a fairly well-preserved place that had been patched with corrugated iron. The école had two habitable rooms on the ground floor, rooms that astonished Brent with a display of furniture, an old tapestry-covered arm-chair with the stuffing bulging out of it, a dining-room table, a wash-hand stand that had been used as a buffet, some wooden chairs, even a picture or two. Brent began to realize the possibilities of Beaucourt.

But these were luxuries, and Brent was specializing in a supply of food. The école had been an officers' mess, and in the room that had been used as a kitchen he found an old saucepan that looked capable of holding water, a mess-tin, and a spoon. The spoon was the colour of lead, but polish would have been superfluous, and Brent pocketed the spoon. In the brick coal-house at the back of the école he salved two unopened tins of army biscuits, and a canister full of tea. The tea was a trifle mouldy, but Brent had an idea that he could dry it over the stove.

The cellar of the Café de la Victoire began to look like a ration-store, and Brent attacked the other necessaries on his list. An army pick and a pile of ammunition boxes in the backyard provided him with unlimited firewood; he carried armfuls of it down into the cellar and stacked it by the stove. He had appropriated the bucket from the well, lest the next comer should take it away. The essentials were shaping splendidly, but Brent was too full of enthusiasm to play at lighting the stove. He had noticed that all sorts of

wreckage had been thrown into the gardens at the backs of the houses. He had seen iron bedsteads there, the remains of mattresses, broken crockery, rusty stoves, garden tools, coffee grinders, old buckets, enamelled pans, and God knows what. He went out like a rag-and-bone picker and explored those gardens. Even a very superficial search among the weeds and rubbish sent him back with two good plates, a cup, a wine-glass, and a pewter coffee-pot. Moreover he had seen a couple of blankets and a ground sheet dangling in a cottage, where they had been nailed up to keep out the draught.

Brent carried the crockery, glass and plate to his billet, and returned for those blankets. He had expected to find them rotten, ready to fall to pieces when touched—but an army blanket has a toughness of fibre and a vitality that has made it salvable when soaked in liquid mud. These blankets were in a very fair condition, and Brent handled them with respect and affection. An ex-soldier is not too fastidious—but Paul decided to give the blankets a good soaking in the stream, even to use a little of his precious soap on them, and to hang them near the stove.

The later the hour the better the deed. He went down to the stream and found the very place where the poorer women of Beaucourt had washed their linen, a place where a little platform of flat stones jutted into the water. The sun was a great red ball behind the beeches of the Bois du Renard when Brent returned to the Café de la Victoire, lit his candle in the cellar and prepared for a snug night.

He hung one of the wet blankets across the cellar doorway, using the length of telephone wire that had been left there by the previous occupant. Then Brent made trial of the Canadian stove, and having neither straw nor paper, he cut shavings and splinters with his jack-knife, and contrived to get the fire alight with the expenditure of a single match. Matches were going to be precious; he had five boxes. The stove behaved like a gentleman, neither smoking nor sulking, but consuming with relish the wood that Brent fed into it, and developing a hearty and convivial glow. Paul crowned it with a saucepanful of water, and having previously washed out the pewter coffee-pot and put a palmful of the Australian tea into it, he opened a tin of milk with the point of his jack-knife and sat down to watch the water boil.

Brent enjoyed that meal more than he had enjoyed anything for a very long time. He pulled the table up in front of the stove, and felt completely and cheerfully at home. He had a cup to drink from, white plates for his meat, biscuits and jam; the tea tasted good—better than he had expected. And it was hot!

“Some billet,” he reflected.

The washing up could be left till the morning, and feeling warm both within and without, he filled up the stove, lit a pipe, and considered his new home. A soldier learns to see the beauty of comfort in some shack that would make a civilian shiver, and to Brent this cellar of his was quite beautiful. The rusty old stove glowed like bronze. The flame from the candle and the glow from the hot iron lit up the white stone vaulting of the cellar; and the well-cut stones and the neat pointing in between them pleased the eye of a craftsman. The tea-cup, glinting white, had little pink roses on it. The pewter coffee-pot struck a note of luxury. Brent looked almost gloatingly at his store of food on the shelves. He took down some of the tins of bully beef and examined them. They were a little rusty here and there, but no sign of being "blown." He had tested the meat from one of them at tea.

Again, he blessed the Australians.

And then his thoughts turned to less material things. He began to dream, while the smoke of his pipe drifted up towards the little grating where the stove-pipe met the outer air. He sat with knees spread about the stove, his body leaning forward, his hands outstretched to the warmth, a very simple and primitive man, a man who could dream dreams.

"Supposing I stay here?" he reflected.

A whole world of strange possibilities opened before him. He saw himself becoming a settler in Beaucourt, using his strength and his knowledge in helping these French folk to rebuild their broken houses. And then he began to wonder whether the French would accept him, and how far it would be possible for him to play the part of a Frenchman. His accent was passable, his fluency very fair, and he knew that he had met with no disaster on the way from Charleroi. He had posed as a southerner, and had trusted not a little to the vagaries of patois and provincialisms; but settling in such a place as Beaucourt was a very different problem. It was obvious that he could pose as a Frenchman who had been domiciled in England for ten years, and whose accent had become anglicized. It was equally obvious that he could produce no records and that he would have to depend upon an amiable acceptance of his tale and an atmosphere that included no enmity. Yet he could pack his bag and march at an hour's notice. He had a little money, and a workman's craft that could keep him. His original plan had been to wander, to go east or west as the chance offered, to spin a yarn about shell-shock and loss of memory if he found himself in an awkward situation. Nothing mattered so long as he disappeared.

Yet the adventure appealed to Brent, and Beaucourt had taken a mysterious grip of his manhood. As he sat and stared at the reddening stove

and fed it with wood from the heap beside him, he could see the women and children and a few men coming back to live among these ruins, unfortunates obsessed by the tradition of "home." He saw little Manon Latour trudging along the road from Bonnière and standing with blank face and hopeless eyes before this shell of a house. He saw old women grubbing in the ruins, bent figures bowed down and trying to clean the rubbish and the fallen beams and rafters from the floors. He saw men working savagely at little shanties, or hammering at some extemporized roof, and always with an eye on the sky. It would rain; it would blow. The gardens were full of weeds and rubbish, and would need cleaning before crops could be grown. The thing seemed almost beyond human patience.

What would they make of Beaucourt—these poor people? Would they have the heart and the courage to begin life over again?

Brent found himself becoming fascinated by the tragedy of this French village, a tragedy that was one of the bleeding wounds in the side of France. He was strangely yet humanly curious to see what would happen, and more than half tempted to lend a hand in the healing of it. The job would be a man's job, better than punching holes in tickets, scribbling in a ledger, or passing groceries across the counter of a shop.

Still—it was no more than a dream, and Brent felt sleepy.

"I wonder what will turn up," was his thought as he took off his boots and dragged the wire bed nearer the stove. Placing his carpet-bag to serve as a pillow, he lay down and wrapped his greatcoat round him.

And it was still a dream, and no more than a dream, when Brent fell asleep.

VIII

THE cellar of the Café de la Victoire was so snug and warm and Brent so healthily tired after his first long day in Beaucourt that he slept till nine o'clock, twelve sound wholesome hours.

Someone was moving about overhead in the kitchen. A box was overturned, and the clatter woke Brent. He sat up and listened to a sound that was surprising and singular because of its unexpectedness, an unexpectedness that was not without pathos. Brent sat very still, cursing the wire bed because it creaked even when he breathed and creaked most self-assertively. He could hear a woman weeping up above there, weeping her heart out with a passion that broke into little exclamations of anguish and despair: "O my little house!—what a tragedy!—What a ruin! Nothing left, not even a door."

And Brent understood that Manon Latour had returned. His first sensation was one of puzzled discomfort. He did not know whether to climb the steps and add the embarrassment of an explanation to the tumult of her emotion, or whether he should lie hidden until she had recovered her self-control. Yet it seemed rather a negative piece of poltroonery for him to sit there in the cellar listening to the sound of her weeping. There was a nakedness about her grief that embarrassed Brent. Manon thought herself alone; she had thrown herself upon the bosom of Beaucourt's solitude, and Brent felt like some Peeping Tom spying upon her nakedness.

In the end he did what the plain man and soldier in him wanted to do. Too much psychology might ruin any love affair; in life it is the emotions that matter. Brent went up the stone steps in his socked feet, walked along the short passage, and stood in the kitchen doorway, looking at Manon Latour.

She was sitting on a box, her hands covering her face as though she were praying, a little figure in black, a figure that was still tremulous with emotion. A bag lay on the floor beside the box. Brent noticed her muddy shoes, her black hat and cloak hung on a nail, and the pretty way her dark hair was wound like a wreath about her head. She had a mass of hair, lustrous as the surface of a freshly broken piece of coal, and its blackness contrasted with the characteristic pallor of her face and throat. Brent's recollection of a year ago had left him the memory of a brave and very

determined little woman with bright, dark eyes, a little woman who had faced him with a sang-froid that had impressed a man who had learnt to respect one thing and one thing only—courage. And now he saw her in tears over this wreck of a house, and her tears touched Brent's heart. He had a feeling that these were not the tears of a woman who wept easily like an April sky. She was shocked, overwhelmed, discouraged.

"Madame!"

Her hands dropped from her face. She looked at Brent with eyes that accepted him as a Frenchman who had happened to wander in, another homeless soul lost in the ruins of Beaucourt.

"Good day, monsieur. It is a pleasant home-coming, is it not?—Perhaps one expects too much!"

She gave a little twitch of the shoulders.

"It appears that I have no chair to offer a visitor. My café has plenty of fresh air, but no furniture."

Brent had felt instantly that the house was hers, and that he had no right to be in it; his sense of ownership vanished; the cellar had ceased to be his billet. He stood with one shoulder resting against the wall, considering the situation, while Manon was trying to remember him as some neighbour whose face had been part of the familiar life of Beaucourt. She saw a man in velveteen breeches and a black coat, with a dark blue scarf knotted round his neck, a man with a ruddy and rather delicate skin, a short brown beard, and a small moustache. His eyes were of that soft but intense blue that belonged to the north and the open air; intelligent eyes set well apart under a square forehead. He had a good-tempered, easy mouth. It was the face of an incomplex man, whimsical, a little sad. There was nothing distinctive about him, he was like thousands of other men, neither tall nor short, a very ordinary person, save perhaps for his eyes. They were a little unusual—less stupid and self-absorbed than the eyes of most men. There was something in them that appealed to the woman.

Manon did not recognize Brent.

"I am trying to remember you, monsieur."

"I do not belong to Beaucourt."

She noticed that he was without boots, and again she was puzzled, for his socks were clean. Either he had been in the house all the while, or he had left his boots on the doorstep. Brent saw that she was looking at his feet, and that she was puzzled.

"I spent the night in your cellar, madame, and my boots are down there."

“How droll! I seem to have seen you before.”

“It was about a year ago.”

She was interested, challenged.

“Was it here?”

“Yes, here in Beaucourt.”

And then he put his head back and smiled.

“It is still there; the ground has not been touched.”

She stared. Her eyes changed from a deep brown to black; her face grew more serious, and seemed to show little shadow-marks under the eyes and about the mouth. She stood up, came a step nearer, and looked Brent straight in the face.

“Of what do you speak?”

“The treasure that you buried in the garden.”

He saw her face as a hard, white surface, and her eyes as two hard, black circles.

“But—who are you? It was an English soldier.”

“I was that English soldier, madame. Shall I prove it?”

“Yes.”

He went and groped in the cellar for his boots, and sitting on the top step, laced them on, while Manon Latour waited in the passage. A little widow who has kept a café, and has had half the men in the village in love with her, cannot but know something of man and of the very obvious habits of the creature. Also, a pretty woman who has a head on her shoulders is apt to get very bored with the perennial fools. They all tell the same tale; they all want the same reward. Manon had grown fastidious.

But this man puzzled her from the very beginning. What was he doing in French clothes, and why had he come back to Beaucourt? She chose the direct method, and asked him the reason.

Brent was knotting the lace of his left boot. He looked up over his shoulder and smiled.

“I had a dream——”

He saw that she was quite unconvinced.

“Why does one do certain things? Have you a reason for everything? My friend was buried here, that’s all.”

He got up and went out into the yard, and Manon followed him. Brent turned into the garden through the gate in the stone wall, and walked along

the weedy path between the currant bushes and the dead stalks of last year's cabbages. He stopped at the place where the shell had punched a hole through the wall, and where the stones lay scattered.

"Is the place as you remember it?"

Her eyes were still intensely black, her forehead worried.

"No."

"And the difference?"

"The place was here—just in front of the stump of that old espalier. There was nothing but earth and weeds. No stones."

"I put the stones there," said Brent.

She gave him a quick gleam of the eyes.

"You?"

"Yes, after you had gone. I thought the thing would look more natural. Then I went to bury my friend. After that—I was taken prisoner."

She remained calm, judicial, compelling herself to a cool realization of the fact that this man had kept faith with her, if all that she had buried there was under the soil. And then, another thought prompted her to ask him a question.

"You say, monsieur, that you came back to see the grave of your friend?"

She was aware of Brent's blue eyes lighting up with a flicker of shrewdness and humour.

"No, I did not come back to rob you."

"I had not accused you of that."

"If the thought was there, it was natural."

She felt ashamed of having asked him that question, and her face softened.

"It is all so strange. You come back as a Frenchman, and in French clothes."

"That's of no importance," he said; "there is only one thing that matters at this moment—the proof that I did not rob you."

"But—wait——"

She caught his arm as he turned to fetch a rusty spade he had seen lying among the rubbish in the yard.

"Supposing someone else had found it—and taken it away?"

"Then you would disbelieve me?"

She thought a moment.

"No."

Brent went for the spade, threw the stones aside and began to dig. Manon did not move or offer to help. She stood and watched him, conscious of the sudden and peculiar intimacy that was joining her to this unexpected man. She was convinced that he had told her the truth.

Brent had opened a hole about a foot deep.

"Be careful," she said suddenly; "the silver is in a big crock. You might strike it with a spade."

Brent's blue eyes flashed her a look of gratitude. She had thrown him a "Hail, comrade," uttered one of those little, human confessions of faith that warm a man's heart. She wanted him to understand that she believed in him, and that he should understand it before the spade turned up the truth. Brent treasured these words. They touched the pride of a man who had been a failure.

"How deep did you dig?" he asked.

"About half a metre—I had so little time."

Brent thrust the spade softly into the soil and felt it jar on something solid. He glanced at Manon with an air of triumph.

"It is there."

She looked down into the hole and then at Brent.

"You are a man of your word, monsieur. I thank you."

Brent spaded out a little more of the soil, and then went on his hands and knees and began to grope in the hole. First he lifted out a big crock that was full of loose silver, one-franc, two-franc, and five-franc pieces. Below the crock lay a tin trunk painted a yellowish brown. Only a portion of the lid showed—the place where the crock had stood; the rest was covered with earth.

He looked questioningly at Manon Latour.

"Let it stay there," she said.

And then she laughed.

"You will be thinking me a miser, monsieur, but all that belonged to my husband who is dead."

"Shall I put the silver back in the same place?"

"Yes,—put it back, if you please, monsieur. That hole will make the safest bank I can think of."

“I suppose there is no one watching us?” said Brent, feeling strangely happy at being included in the conspiracy.

She looked round the garden, remembering that it was hidden on three sides by its high stone wall.

“It is not likely. I saw no one in Beaucourt.”

Brent replaced the crock, and shovelled back the earth, and Manon helped him to pile the stones over the spot. She appeared to be thinking, but her silence was without embarrassment or constraint. Her face had become the face of a serious child, a child who was neither afraid nor unhappy.

“How is it you speak French so well?” she asked him with a child’s abruptness.

“A Frenchman taught me, while I was a prisoner.”

She nodded, and the nod seemed to suggest that she understood that he had reasons, but that she was not worrying her head about them.

“Tiens! but I am hungry—I had my cup of coffee and a slice of bread at four. Since then I have walked from Ste. Claire.”

Brent threw on a last stone. There was a healthy zest in the way she spoke of her hunger.

“And Paul has not had even that,” he said; “but your house has a store-room and a larder.”

“Then it is a miracle,” she answered.

“Come and see the miracle. It is right that you should take possession.”

IX

So these two went back to the battered old red house with the patches of white plaster still hanging to the walls of its rooms, and the blue February sky showing where its roof should have been. The window of the kitchen looked along the Rue de Picardie and all the broken and jagged outlines of the village, etched with black rafters and the rawness of fractured brick. The snapped spire of the church was the colour of amethyst. White clouds floated above the beeches of the Bois du Renard.

Manon lingered for a moment at this window, her hands clenched, something between pity and anger in her eyes. Beaucourt mattered to the little Frenchwoman in a way that no restless dweller in cities could understand. It had formed the background of her memories, a quiet place where she had made a little song of the day's work, a place where life had been rich in the emotions that are her religion to a woman. She had been proud of her café, proud of her linen, of her garden. Her happiness had made Beaucourt what no other place in the world could be to her. As the old Frenchman had put it, "The roots of life were deep down under the ruins."

There were other memories, perhaps, thoughts that left a sour taste in her mouth, but Manon was thinking of the happier days. She had forgotten Brent, forgotten her hunger, as she stood looking out upon the ruins; and Brent waited like a man in the doorway of a church, some sanctuary that he had not the right to enter, feeling her at her prayers, wise enough not to disturb her. Her sadness was like a sweet smell of incense and the soft obscurity of some shrine. She was no mere material woman,—just a pretty, white-skinned, dark-eyed creature, with a beautiful bosom and a soft throat. Manon Latour had a soul, a little white fire burning in her heart. That was what Brent felt about her, the Brent who asked for those dear moments of mystery in a woman, for the flash of that spiritual fineness that can fill the eyes with a mist of tears. He did not want money; he craved for self-expression,—the simple human things, nearness to someone who was a little better than himself.

Manon's lingering at the gap in the wall that had been a window lasted but a few seconds. She turned to Brent with a soft animation that played like sunlight across the deeps of her seriousness.

"Forgive me, Monsieur Paul."

He smiled and handed her a box of matches.

"You will find a candle down there, and all that you need. I'm afraid I have not lit the stove."

Her eyes seemed to question him. "Is it that you are wiser and a little more sensitive than other men? You can hold back."

She went out into the passage, and Brent took her place at the window, lounging in the sunlight with his hands in his pockets, and recasting the metal of his vision. For a few short hours life had seemed solid and real, centred in that cellar in ruined Beaucourt, a life of quaint adventure, a boyish game played with the elements of existence as the counters. All this had changed with the return of Manon Latour. Brent felt himself adrift—on the edge again of a casual vagabondage. He was surrendering that cellar and all that it contained, food, shelter, even the vague inspiration that had been born in it. He saw himself packing his bag and marching.

"Monsieur."

He had been so absorbed in these thoughts that he had not heard her re-enter the kitchen. He was struck by her seriousness. She, too, had been thinking.

"How long have you been in Beaucourt?"

"Since yesterday," said Brent.

She sat down on the box.

"Since yesterday. And in my cellar I find food for many days, a bed, plates, blankets, all that a man would think of—if——"

She paused, looking up at him.

"What I did yesterday will be useful to you to-day."

He smiled as he spoke.

"There is the beginning of a little home for you, madame. I washed the blankets; they have not been used since I washed them, and they will be dry by to-night. The food was collected by me—in Beaucourt."

She interrupted him.

"Then—you meant to stay in Beaucourt?"

His face remained turned to the window, and she saw it in profile.

"I had thought of it. Just a whim, you know, the whim of a man who was starting life over again. By the way, the matches and the candles belonged to me. I can leave you two boxes—and if I may take one candle?"

Her eyes were dark with some emotion that Brent did not fathom.

"And where will you go?"

He refused to look at her.

"Oh, anywhere. It does not matter."

"There is nothing that does not matter. And—you want your breakfast. Shall we have it up here in the sunlight?"

Brent's chin swung round. He stared.

"Just as you please."

She got up.

"I must light the stove. Or perhaps you are more clever at it than I am. Supposing I wash those plates. I can find some more boxes and make a table and seats here. And I have a packet of coffee in my bag."

"Mon Dieu!" said Brent. "Life is good. I'll go and light that stove."

He went about the work like a thoroughly practical man, trying to limit the day's outlook to that one word "breakfast," and refusing to see anything sentimental in lighting a stove and boiling a saucepan of water.

"Anyhow, I shall start the day with a meal," he said to himself; "I wonder what she will make of this place when I have gone?"

But Manon—the woman—kept intruding herself upon Brent's prosaic philosophy.

"Mon ami—I want more water, and there is no bucket."

Brent went upstairs with the bucket and filled it at the well.

"We ought to have a cistern," she said when he returned; "it would save so much trouble."

Brent was conscious of a shock of surprise. She seemed to be thinking in twos, while he was carefully limiting the future to one. But then—Brent knew very little about women. He had not learnt to divide the sex into its two groups, the woman who can be bought, and the woman who cannot. The woman who can be bought had always thought Brent a fool, because he had made a mystery where no mystery existed. Brent was an incorrigible romanticist, and your material woman detests romance. She suffers it in novels, but finds the thing a damnable nuisance when it comes gesturing and dreaming and getting itself mixed up with the very obvious furniture of her very obvious little life. The woman who could not be bought understood Brent at once. She was ready to trust him—but that did not help Brent to understand Manon Latour.

Manon had contrived a table and two seats in the kitchen, and had spread a clean handkerchief with a pink border to give a touch of feminine

refinement to the deal box that formed the table. That handkerchief fascinated Brent. He stood staring at it while she was down below making the coffee. He supposed that she had taken that bit of pink and white stuff out of her bag. It was one of those little touches of colour, of imagination, that are like the opening of a flower, or the voice of a bird when the leaves are still in bud upon the trees.

Then he heard her calling him. She had one of those pleasant, animated French voices, soft and expressive, a voice that was made to chatter happily about a house.

"Mon ami—will you help?"

He met her on the stairs.

"The candle is burning out, and I do not know where to find another. Besides—they are so expensive; we must use more daylight. Be careful—it is very hot."

She gave him the pewter coffee-pot, and was ready to follow with the rest of the meal. And she had a surprise for Brent—a little pat of fresh butter laid out on a rice-paper serviette.

"Allons!"

They sat down at the table, with the blue sky for a roof. The day was warm, a day that heartened the world with a breath of the spring, and the coffee was fragrant, exquisite. Brent spread some of the fresh butter on a biscuit, and looked vaguely sad.

"It is very pleasant here," he said.

Manon was cutting herself a slice of bully beef.

"What children we are! And a child is the most inquisitive thing in the world."

He gave her a sudden, yet shy look.

"Are you inquisitive?"

"Well, of course. But I do not catechize a friend."

Brent gulped a mouthful of hot coffee, put the cup down, and stared at the pink and white handkerchief in the middle of the table.

"I would like to think I was that."

She understood his hesitation and kept silent. Brent was still staring, the fingers of his right hand holding the cup.

"I am supposed to be dead," he said with a kind of unwilling abruptness.

Manon put a slice of corned beef upon his plate.

“A good man has reasons.”

He raised his eyes to hers.

“A good man?—Well—perhaps! You see—I made a mess of life over there in England. I do not mean to go back.”

Manon’s eyes held his.

“You wish to become a Frenchman?”

Brent smiled one of those human and half-whimsical smiles.

“Perhaps—I want to make a fresh start. I’m not the sort of man who makes money; I’m too easy-going. I have always liked the things that you can’t buy.”

“I know what you mean,” said Manon. “One can’t buy happiness, can one?”

Brent’s eyes lit up.

“Now—how did you find that out?”

“I don’t think I ever found it out, mon ami. It’s the sort of thing I always knew. I suppose my mother gave it me. And yet, half the world never finds it out, and dies grumbling.”

Brent looked at her as though he had discovered a miracle.

“Extraordinary!—I always knew it—somehow, but the people I happened to live with did not believe in that sort of foolishness. I suppose my wife was an unhappy woman; she was always wanting something she had not got and she was always wanting the wrong thing—something that meant money. Well, of course, it fell on me.”

She gave him a look that was like a sympathetic caress.

“What a fool! And so——?”

“I smashed. Then, of course, she hated me. I was a failure—according to her ideas. If I had had a little pity, I might have got up again; but I did not get any pity. A man does like to have his head stroked, you know. Then the war came, and I got away.”

He drank his coffee and Manon refilled his cup.

“How did you manage it?” she asked.

“Manage what?”

“To be dead.”

He looked a little embarrassed, and then he told her.

“When my friend was killed down there in the orchard, I had an idea, an inspiration. He had no wife or children, no one who cared. So I buried

myself in his grave, and took his name. It was so simple. I wanted to disappear, and to begin life over again."

She was silent for a while, and her eyes seemed to be looking at a picture —a picture of this Englishman's life. Her silence troubled Brent. He began to fidget.

"Perhaps it was a coward's trick," he suggested; "what do you think?"

"It is not easy to judge."

Manon sat very still—realizing that he was in earnest.

"So you have turned Frenchman?"

He gave her a shy look.

"I managed to buy these clothes in Belgium, and then I disappeared. Paul Brent died a year ago, and if they look for Tom Beckett, my friend, well—they will never find him. If necessary, I am a Frenchman who is a little touched in the head. I have forgotten things. All my people are lost or dead; that happened in some village—early in the war. I'm just Paul—a vagabond. If people ask too many questions I just smile and shrug my shoulders."

"But—all that—will lead to nothing," she said gravely; "a dog's life. I think you had some other purpose in your mind—and you are hiding it from me."

"I have shown you the vagabond, madame, and a vagabond has no rights, no claims upon anybody."

"Mon ami," she said, "many men would say that you were a fool to trust a woman. You shall not regret it. When I look at these ruins I feel that the lives of all of us will have to begin over again."

X

BRENT's day had begun with Manon's tears, and those tears of hers and the incident of the untouched treasure had produced in both of them an atmosphere of emotional candour. Brent's confession had grown out of the emotion that the misfortunes of Manon Latour had roused in him, and the tale that he had told her made her glimpse him as a sort of lost child, a man who was better than his past. She believed that he had told her the truth. His plan to begin life over again was so naïve, so whimsical, and so sad, that it moved her pity and made her wonder whether something more significant than chance had not brought Brent to Beaucourt.

She saw that he was making ready to go. He had the restless air of a man who was girding his loins for the road and preparing to shoulder his bag. She felt that he was sad over it, and that he was not so greatly in love with the vagabond life of which he spoke so lightly. She thought that Brent had neither the eyes nor the mouth of a wanderer. She could fancy him loving a corner by the fire, a bit of garden to dig in, the smell of a stable, a glass of wine on a summer evening, someone to whom he could talk, someone who did not listen to him because he was a stranger. She did not forget the corner he had made for himself in the cellar. A man who collects cups and plates and lays a store of food has not the heart of an Ishmaelite.

The meal was over and they were sitting there in silence, very conscious of each other and of the elemental and simple needs that had made comrades of them for an hour. Brent was filling his pipe. He looked vaguely dejected, and she noticed this all the more because he was making a business of trading in cheerfulness. Brent was a bad salesman.

Manon pulled out a gold watch, a watch that she wore under her blouse like a locket.

"Eleven o'clock!"

Brent straightened with uneasy self-consciousness; he felt that he ought to be on the road. Manon had put her watch back, and she appeared to have forgotten Brent—though she was thinking of him all the while with a shrewdness that considered everything. If Manon had a heart, she also had a head.

"Mon ami," she said suddenly, "I shall stay here to-night."

"The cellar is quite dry."

“That long walk frightens me. It is seventeen kilomètres to Ste. Claire.”

“Too far,” said Brent with grim cheerfulness; “you will be quite comfortable here. Those blankets should be dry—and I’ll cut you some more wood before I go.”

She ignored those last words of his, and stood up, pushing back the box on which she had been sitting.

“I want to look again at all my little property. Will you come with me?”

Brent glanced at her in surprise.

“Of course.”

He rose and stood waiting while she took her cloak from the nail and flung it over her shoulders. And suddenly he saw her as a lonely little figure, a woman left sitting alone in this ruined house, and the man in him rebelled. He pictured her helplessness, the impossible struggle she would be carrying on against Nature, and perhaps against men. He understood that life in Beaucourt would be very primitive, and it was possible that it might be cruel. There were all the elements of a savage struggle for existence among these rubbish heaps that had been houses.

“I am ready.”

She gave him a flicker of her brown eyes, eyes that were on the verge of tears. He saw her bite her lower lip, and stiffen her shoulders as they went out into the street and stood there together looking up at the red shell of the house. A little furrow of pain, pain that was being fought and suppressed, showed on Manon’s forehead.

“Ma pauvre petite maison!”

Brent knew now that he wanted to stay in Beaucourt, that there was work here, work fit for a man’s hands.

“The walls are good,” he said; “they will stand.”

“But what can I do with bare walls, mon ami?”

She turned and walked into the yard, passing between the stone pillars that had lost their gates. The yard was full of the cosmopolitan rubbish that war creates, the elements of a civilized home reduced to one common scrap-heap. The stable had lost its roof. The little barn and the cow-house were mere timber frames from which the tiles and the plaster had fallen. Manon stood and looked at it all, and her mouth quivered.

“You see,” she said with a helpless gesture of the hands; “what is a woman to do?”

They passed on into the garden, and the garden did not despair. It had one great wound, a huge shell-hole in its centre, a pit into which the Germans had pitched their refuse, but an hour or two's work with a spade would heal all that. The two holes in the stone wall needed stopping, and the espaliers cried out for the pruning knife, but as for the weeds, well they would make green manure. Manon and Paul wandered down into the orchard, climbing through the shell-hole in the wall, and here too Nature had a smile of promise, a promise of green growth that nothing could hinder or dismay.

Manon saw Beckett's grave and glanced at Brent.

"Yes,—I lie there," he said; "queer, isn't it?"

"Was he a good man—your comrade?"

"He was a better man as a soldier than I was. That's all I care to remember."

She turned back into the garden, and her heart failed her as she looked at the roofless house. There had been an arbour in the garden at the end of the little avenue of pollarded limes, and Manon's memories led her there. The iron frame was unbroken, rambled over by a hardy vine and some climbing roses,—a round iron table standing in the centre, with a semi-circular green bench at the back of it. People had forgotten to break up the wooden bench for firewood.

Manon sat down, and looked up at Brent, who was knocking the bowl of his pipe against the edge of the iron table. His face was serious—overshadowed.

"Mon ami," she said suddenly, "I think that I am ruined."

Brent glanced at her, and her eyes hurt him. He sat down on an end of the bench.

"I can understand," he said; "it's—it's damnable."

She began to talk with an air of pathetic candour.

"You see—my life lies here; the place is part of my heart. I have the blood of peasants in me, and all the time I think of the past. This morning I did not know what I should find here; I had such hopes, such an excitement of tenderness. And look at the poor place!"

She seemed to be touching something with gentle and caressing hands.

"What can a woman do? I have a little money, but all the others will be too busy to help. I shall not be able to hire labour. And even if my hands were the hands of a man I should not know where or how to begin."

Brent had the stem of his empty pipe gripped between his teeth. He was staring at the house; and suddenly he turned to Manon.

"I am going to speak out. I shall not hurt you."

"I am not afraid," she said simply.

"Do you remember my telling you that I had had a dream? It happened at Peronne, only a few days ago. My dead friend who is over there came and spoke to me—we were here in this garden—but I could not understand what he said. When I woke up I had a feeling that I should come to Beaucourt, that it was my business to come to Beaucourt. And last night as I sat in that cellar of yours, I began to wonder whether some wise spirit had not sent me here. I want work, a new chance, something to make me feel a man. That's how it happened; just like that."

"I can believe it," she said.

He went on, not looking at her, but staring at the ground:

"I told you I wanted to make a fresh start. Why should I go any farther? I have a little money, and one will want but little in Beaucourt to begin with—just food and boots and a little tobacco. Why shouldn't I stay and rebuild your house?"

She was looking at him with her brown eyes wide open, softly, and with a kind of gentle incredulity.

"Mon ami, it is a beautiful thought; but it is not possible."

She saw the muscles of his jaw tighten.

"You mean that it is impossible for me to stay here?"

"No, no! But how can you put a roof on my house? Where are the wood and the tiles to come from? Besides——"

He began to smile.

"It could be done."

"But—you are dreaming?"

"I'm very wide awake," he said, "and I say that it could be done. You have not seen as much of Beaucourt as I have. There are army huts over there—a little knocked about—but I could get enough timber and corrugated iron out of them to do the job. You see—ten years ago I was building houses with my own hands."

"Are you serious?"

"I was never more serious in my life."

Manon leant forward over the table, one hand shading her eyes and a faint flush showing upon her face. The forefinger of her right hand traced

crosses and circles on the top of the iron table. She began to speak, hesitated, and fell back into silence. The colour died away from her face; she became very pale, so pale that even her red lips looked blanched. The very intensity of her emotion broke in a storm of fierce sincerity. She turned on Brent and attacked him.

"What is it that you want?"

And Brent did not flinch.

"I have told you. Work—a new chance—a man's chance."

She gave a flick of the head.

"Oh, I know men! They do not do things for nothing. Let us have no misunderstanding. I have nothing to give but a little money."

Brent faced it out as he had faced many a bloody ten minutes. He was a little grim, but very gentle; and all his sympathies were with Manon.

"Now we are down to the foundations," he said; "you have cleared all the rubbish away. You can hit out at me; it doesn't hurt—because you are being honest, and I'm not a cad. I don't want your money. I don't expect anything. I don't say that I shouldn't fall in love with you if I stayed here—but even if I did, it wouldn't be the sort of love that makes a man behave like a beast. That's all I have to say."

She smiled; her colour returned; her lips and her eyes softened.

"Somehow I believe you," she said, "though I could not tell you why. And yet—what would you get out of such a life, what would it lead to—for you?"

Brent leant over towards her.

"Manon," he said, "can you understand a man who has been a failure wanting to do something that is good and unselfish? Can't you understand him craving for a clean taste of life in his mouth?"

"I can understand it," she answered.

"Good God—do we always sit down and work out a sum on paper? Aren't there bits of fine madness in life—glorious things that seem mad to the careful people?"

She held out a hand.

"My friend, forgive me; but I have been a woman to whom many men have made love. The fools do it so easily and they expect a woman to be flattered and to surrender just as one opens a door."

Brent grasped her hand.

"Then—I may stay?"

“Yes.”

He threw up his head with an air of pride, and a flash of half-boyish exultation.

“That’s great of you—great. You are giving me my chance. Let’s go and look at the house; let’s get at it—at once. I want to take my coat off.”

XI

FROM that moment they were like children carried away by the excitement of the adventure. The droop had gone from Manon's eyelids. She glowed, she laughed, she chattered, her brown eyes alight, her heart full of the spirit of romance.

"What an adventure!"

"A very devil of an adventure," said Brent. "I feel man enough to tackle the pyramids."

She laughed and laid hold of his hand.

"I shall call you Paul," she said, "and you can call me Manon. Now, we must not be in a hurry; we must consider everything—like wise people."

"Heads first, hands afterwards. Let us go and look at the house, and get our plans on paper."

He carried the two boxes down into the street, while Manon searched in her handbag for something. She joined him on the strip of grey pavé between the wrecked houses, a note-book in one hand, a pencil in the other.

"You see I have a head."

Brent smiled like a boy.

"Trust a Frenchwoman to be practical! Just what I wanted. Now then."

They sat down side by side in the open street, with the February sunlight shining on them, and the silence of Beaucourt unbroken save by their two voices. Brent had the note-book open on his knee, and he was looking critically at the house.

"Now then, let's be obvious. What do you see?"

Her intense and glowing seriousness delighted him. It was like playing a game with a charming child.

"I see no roof," she said.

"Exactly. That's the most obvious thing. Let's start with that. A roof means timber, corrugated iron, nails, a saw, a hammer, a jemmy or iron bar for getting the stuff. That's bedrock. I'll make notes of all these—under the word 'Roof.' "

She looked over his shoulder while he wrote.

“How pleasant it looks on paper. We must find all that we can in Beaucourt. Can we not go now, at once?”

He turned and looked at her with eyes that laughed.

“Who was it said that we must not be in a hurry?”

“But I’m so excited.”

“Keep cool. Now, what next?”

“I see two holes in the wall, one just under where the roof was, the other on the right of the window of the public room.”

“We have to fill up those holes before we start the roof. That means lime, sand, bricks, and a bricklayer’s trowel. I write them down.”

“But can you lay bricks?”

“Yes.”

“What a wonderful man!”

“Now then—where the devil are we to get lime and sand?”

“Ah, where?”

She sat with her head slightly on one side, exquisitely solemn, frowning.

“The factory! There used to be sand at the factory. And bricks—they are everywhere. But lime? O mon Dieu!”

“We’ll manage somehow,” said Brent, “even if I have to use mud and straw. Plenty of straw in the old palliasses lying about. What next?”

“No doors.”

“A carpenter’s job.”

“No windows.”

“H’m,” said Brent reflectively, “I wonder if there is a dump anywhere about here. Oiled linen? Yes. I don’t mind what I thieve.”

She laughed.

“What morals! But—I like it. Oh, what an adventure—what life!”

Brent was making notes, and Manon pulled out her watch; its hands stood at five minutes past twelve. There was dinner to be remembered; she would be responsible for these household necessities, while her man worked, but Manon was too excited to think of eating. She wanted to explore Beaucourt, to discover all the wonderful things they needed, stacks of timber, mountains of corrugated iron. The iron would look horrible after the old red-brown tiles, but Manon reminded herself that it could be painted and that it would be the first whole roof in Beaucourt.

“Are you hungry, mon ami?”

"Not a bit."

"I want to explore."

He put the note-book away, and they started out on their first voyage of discovery. Brent turned down into the Rosières road and through a stone gateway into a grass field. He remembered having noticed half a dozen army huts standing in this field, and he rediscovered them with Manon on that February morning. There were six of these huts, and three of them were in very fair condition; one had been wrecked by a shell, and the other two damaged by splinters. There were doors to be had for the unscrewing of the hinges, window-frames also, though the oiled linen had been blown to ribbons.

Brent went through the huts, examining the rafters and the condition of the timber framing. He paced the floor of one of them to find its width, and then stood looking at Manon.

"Here is our roof."

"Is there enough?"

"Enough in these six huts to roof half a dozen houses. And I think I can use these rafters."

"I shall help," she said; "I shall work like a man."

Brent found a single wire bed in one of the huts. He put it on his back, and dropped it outside the café as they repassed it on their way into the village.

"I can rig that up somewhere. There is the shelter in the kitchen."

She looked horrified.

"But you cannot sleep there."

"Why not?"

"You will be frozen."

Brent laughed.

"I was a soldier for four years. It will be better than the fire-step of a freezing trench. Now—what about this factory?"

As they walked along the little Rue Romaine, Brent discovered another Manon, a Manon who kept stopping to look at some wreck of a house, a Manon whose brown eyes were full of pity. She forgot the Café de la Victoire for a moment and lost herself in the tragedy of these obscure little cottages, and in looking through their broken nakedness at the weedy gardens that showed behind them. Rain had pulped the fallen plaster. There was a darkness, a slime about these ruins, a sense of pollution. Manon's face

seemed to have aged. The irresponsible buoyancy had disappeared from the adventure and she left the childhood of the day behind her in passing through the Rue Romaine.

"O mon ami, my heart bleeds."

She passed in front of a cottage in which a picture of the Sacré Cœur still hung from a wall that had not fallen. "Grandmère Vitry lived here. Do you see the picture—and the tiled floor all covered with rubbish? She was so proud of her cottage—and whenever I looked in, Grandmère seemed to be polishing that floor."

She walked on a few steps and then paused again. Her face was serious, compassionate, troubled.

"I seem to have been thinking of myself and of no one else. Do you think me very selfish, Paul?"

Her eyes appealed to him.

"I am troubled. I begin to ask myself, 'Ought we to pull down those buildings—where people might shelter? Is it fair to snatch things for ourselves, when others will need them?' "

Her sudden sensitive hesitation touched Brent. He was being shown another Manon who thought of others as well as of herself. Brent's heart had gone hungry for many years, craving that spiritual food without which no true man can be happy, and in the hands of this little Frenchwoman he seemed to see the bread and wine of the great human sacrament.

"Let us think it over," he said.

He lit his pipe, and stood silent for a moment as though he was trying to visualize Beaucourt and all that Beaucourt suggested. The war had taught Brent to reduce life to its elemental facts. He had seen men do incredibly selfish things, and incredibly generous things. In attacking it had been necessary to keep your eyes and your mind on the objective, on some shell-smashed bit of trench that had to be taken—and held. You did not stop to look at the red poppies growing among the weeds.

"How many people were there in Beaucourt before the war?"

"How many? Perhaps two thousand."

"And how many houses?"

"I can't say—three hundred?"

"And all—without whole roofs. If we shared out the iron on these huts, each house might claim three or four pieces. There would be no sense in it.

Besides—I will try to get all that we want from the huts that have been damaged."

They stood there for a while, arguing the ethics of the adventure—nor did Brent find Manon easy to convince. He liked her none the less for that. She stood out against herself with a sturdiness and a courage that searched relentlessly for some sure inspiration that could satisfy the religious heart of a woman.

It was Brent who found it.

"Listen," he said; "I will tell you something that happened to my comrade who lies in your orchard. It was in an attack on the ruins of a village. We were being smashed to bits as we went up the hill; the men faltered and began to lie down. My comrade went on. We saw him climb up on a bit of wall and sit there. He lit his pipe, and waved his steel hat at us. We got up and went on."

His face lit up over that grim bit of courage.

"I can see it all," she said.

"Well—we have got to be like that. We shall be the first up the hill. Perhaps the others will be dismayed, ready to despair. We shall be on our bit of wall, and we shall wave them on, and shout—'Courage!' "

"That is true."

And then he saw the light of vision in her eyes.

"And we can help, mon ami, we can help. I see it—now—and my heart is happy. Allons! There is courage in what we do."

The factory was a red brick building on the south of the Rue de Bonnière, where the Rue Romaine joined it. Standing in the valley, its chimney and ziz-zag of walls were not part of Beaucourt as the Café de la Victoire saw it, the Arcadian Beaucourt with none of the grimy sweat of industrialism upon it. Yet the factory was to prove a treasure mine to Paul and Manon. Its glass roofs were shattered, and the machinery a chaos of rusty iron, but lying as it did, well away from the Beaucourt cross-roads, it had suffered less than any other building.

The very first thing that Brent saw in the factory yard was an iron hand-barrow tilted against a wall.

"Hallo! Here's luck."

He got hold of the barrow and found that it was sound and strong. A piece of shrapnel had torn a hole in the bottom—just for "drainage" as Brent put it. He was quite exulted over this stroke of luck.

Manon was watching him with a glimmer of light in her eyes. She had begun to like this man with his boy's moods of seriousness and fun, his moments of shyness and enthusiasm.

"It is a little present from le bon Dieu."

"For two good children. Now, supposing you take all those buildings over there, while I go through the workshops. It will save time. You know what to look for?"

She repeated the list.

"Lime, sand, a trowel—tools, anything that looks useful."

"By George—I had forgotten something. What is ladder in French? Something you climb up, see?"

He made a show of climbing a ladder, and Manon understood.

"Echelle! Of course!"

Brent left her to go on her own voyage of discovery and made his way into the factory. The tiled floor was littered with broken glass that crisped and crackled under Brent's feet. Here and there a girder had fallen and the place looked as though a Zeppelin had plunged through the roof and was rusting in a tangled mass of complex metal work. Brent saw nothing here but scrap-iron. He walked through a doorway, and found himself in what had been an engineer's shop.

The opportune and heaven-blessed discoveries of the Swiss Family Robinson were not more singular than Brent's adventure in that engineer's shop. The indefatigable Boche appeared to have used the place as a workshop and then left in a hurry, and the British troops who had followed had passed through with equal speed. Luckily no Chinese had been sent to clear up the village, and Brent was the first salvage man on the spot. He collected a couple of hammers, a wrench, a tommy-bar, two cold chisels, a brace and a set of bits, a rusty hack-saw—a whole bag of nails, and an assortment of bolts and nuts. He was like an excited miser grabbing gold. In a box under one of the benches he found a jack-plane, a pair of pincers, some files, and a gimlet. The whole affair was so enormously successful that it seemed absurd.

He filled a box with the precious treasure, and staggered out to meet Manon. She, too, had rushed to meet him, a little flushed with excitement, a blue lacquered tin of corned beef in her hand.

"I have found a ladder. Its top is broken—but you might mend it."

"Great! Look here!"

He showed her his boxful of tools.

"O, mon Dieu!"

"Everything I want! It's absurd!"

Her eyes filled with sudden seriousness.

"Someone watches over us. It is a benediction. Let us not forget."

And then she showed him her blue tin.

"There are dozens of these scattered about in the buildings. We ought to take care of them. They may help to feed some of the others when they come."

Brent's heart blessed her.

"No wonder we are lucky," he said.

They went to look at the ladder. Manon had discovered it lying behind one of the sheds; it was a thirty-rung ladder, and Brent saw that the right pole needed splinting about three feet from the top.

"Just long enough," was the verdict, "I think I'll take this home before anyone else borrows it."

He shouldered the ladder and marched off, and on his way back met Manon trundling the barrow along the Rue Romaine. She had loaded the tools into it, and the iron wheel was making a fine clatter over the cobbles.

Brent took charge of the barrow.

"I'm getting hungry," he observed.

"Poor Monsieur Paul."

She ran on ahead, and when Brent reached the café with his precious plunder, he found that she had the table ready and had washed the plates. The two glasses were set out, and in the middle of the table stood a bottle of red wine.

"Thunder, what is this?"

"I brought this with me. We will drink the health of the adventure."

She poured him out a glass of wine.

"And I have a secret."

"Then—keep it."

She laughed.

"No secrets between comrades. There are thirty bottles of red wine, twenty of white, and a flask of cognac buried in the garden."

Brent pretended to be shocked.

"You buried them?"

“Yes.”

“I wonder if they are still there. The Boche had a wonderful sense of smell.”

“I put something to mark the place, and it has not been touched.”

“Heavens,” said Brent, “you will be able to stock your cellar. What a good thing it is that Paul is a sober fellow. But I should like to remind you, madame, that we have not found that lime.”

“Did I not tell you? I found a heap of it in the factory stable. I was so excited about the ladder.”

“Something very terrible is going to happen to us. We are being too lucky.”

XII

After dinner they held a council of war. It was Manon who opened it, Manon the woman, the housewife, the Queen of the Linen and the Store Cupboard.

"I shall go to Amiens," she said; "will you please give me my note-book?"

Brent surrendered it to her, and smoked his pipe, while she sat biting the end of the pencil, a very serious and pre-occupied little woman whose eyes looked at the mottled and disfigured face of the stone house over the way, and whose right hand kept jotting down notes on the paper.

"I can hire a pony and cart at Ste. Claire. Yes, I will go to Ste. Claire the day after to-morrow, and I shall stay away three days. There are so many things that we shall need."

Brent sunned himself in the pleasant seriousness of her enthusiasm. Now and again he was conscious of a moment of incredulity as he watched her intent face with its soft curves and wreath of coal-black hair. Her brown eyes seemed to be looking into the windows of the magasins of Amiens. When she was puzzled or in doubt she tapped her white teeth with the end of the pencil. He became aware of the fact that he himself appeared to be the centre in the field of her vision. She looked at his pipe—his boots, his clothes, with the critical eyes of a little mother fitting out a boy for school.

"Potatoes!"

She made a note on the page.

"I have to think of your health," she said with wide-eyed candour; "it is necessary for a man to have good food, a little fresh meat and vegetables. It will be necessary for me to go marketing once a week."

"Then you will let me share."

He patted his pocket.

She looked at him gravely and shook her head.

"That is my affair. You work, I find the food. That is my part of the partnership. It is quite reasonable."

Brent attempted to argue, but she was very determined, and she had her way.

“You must leave me some share, mon ami. It would be absurd if you were responsible for everything.”

“Now tell me. What do you require—most urgently?”

He reflected.

“A good saw.”

“Yes.”

“A dictionary.”

“But you speak almost like a Frenchman.”

“I haven’t all the words I want—the names of things.”

She made a note of the dictionary.

“Some paint and brushes. And nails—nails of all sizes. We shall eat nails.”

When she had completed her list she tore out the leaf and handed the note-book back to Brent.

“I am going to tidy the house,” she said.

Brent had schemes of his own. He went out and paced the length and breadth of the café, and then sat down on the steps of the stone house and did sums on paper. He reckoned that he would need some hundred sheets of corrugated iron if the sheets measured six feet by two feet, and allowing for overlap. The timber for the rafters worked out at 720 feet. Then there would be the tie-pieces and battens. He saw, too, that it would be necessary to fit bedding-plates for the rafters to bear upon along the tops of the walls. That was a problem that sent him wandering through Beaucourt on another voyage of discovery.

In an alley behind the Post Office Brent found a dump of pit-props and railway sleepers. The sleepers were seven feet in length, well squared, and in good condition, the very material he needed for his bedding-plates. He spent an hour shouldering a dozen of them across to the Café de la Victoire, and stacking them in one of the rooms on the right of the passage. Brent was shaping his plans with a forethought that contemplated a complete assembling of all the necessary material. He was not fool enough to begin building before he had made sure of his resources.

Seeing nothing of Manon, he went to explore the Rue de Bonnière between the Post Office and the factory. There were some biggish houses on the north of the street, and the remains of a few shops. Brent worked through the houses, making notes of anything that might be usefully borrowed. In what appeared to have been the yard of a local builder of Beaucourt, Brent

found the head of a felling axe and a bricklayer's rusty trowel. A carpenter's saw was the one thing he coveted, but Beaucourt baulked him in the matter of a saw. He collected a coil of stout telephone wire, a French shovel, and the head of a hoe; but it was in the backyard of the last house that he made his great find.

In one corner of the yard, an old gig with black and yellow wheels was standing with its shafts uptilted, like a praying mantis. Dash-board and seat were gone, and three of the spokes were broken in one wheel, but Brent's brain rushed to imagine the uses of such a vehicle. He got hold of the shafts, and found that the gig could be trundled quite successfully; it was light, and the injured wheel would function, provided that too much was not expected of it. Brent dragged the gig out of the yard and round into the Rue Romaine, and in the Rue Romaine he met Manon.

She was coming out of the ruins of Grandmère Vitry's cottage, carrying the picture of the Sacré Cœur. She saw Brent between the shafts of the gig, lugging it along with an air of triumph. He pulled up—out of breath, for he had been trundling the gig up-hill.

"Transport," he said; "here it is. The very thing for carting our iron and timber."

Her delight was as great as his, and therein lay the secret of this little woman's charm. She reacted with the freshness and buoyancy of a healthy child, and her temperamental and French expressiveness made her an exquisite playmate.

"But—it is a triumph! Yes, the doctor's old gig, with the wheels that made you think the sun was shining."

"I'm borrowing it," said Brent with a wink; "I'm borrowing everything."

She showed him her picture.

"I shall take care of this for Madame Vitry. It was so sad to see it hanging there. Now then, you between the shafts pull, and I'll push."

The gig went up the hill with great briskness between the laughing and chattering pair of them. They ran it into the yard, and examined it there with much pride, Brent explaining how he could load the timber and iron from the huts, and run his improvised truck down the slightly sloping Rue de Rosières.

Manon had had triumphs of her own. She took Paul into the house with a dramatic gesture.

"Voilà!"

He saw a couple of chairs, one of them the arm-chair from the école, a real table, and upon it a collection of glass and china. There were cups, plates, dishes, tumblers, wine-glasses, forks, spoons, even a couple of rusty knives. A china candlestick was included. On the floor stood a big earthenware bread-pan, a kettle, and an old tin bath.

"Magnificent," said Brent.

"Borrowed—like your gig," she added, with a look of mischief.

"There are times, madame, when it does not do to be too particular."

"Ah, I have a piece of work for you—to-morrow. I have found my own kitchen stove. It is in the école."

"No time like the present. I'll collect it with the barrow."

"It takes to bits, mon ami. You will find it in the ground-floor room on the left."

"Map reference not required. I go—toute de suite."

So Brent went out again into the ruins of Beaucourt and worked till the red sun set alight the beeches of the Bois du Renard and the sky was a steely blue above his head. Brent had been exploring the château on the hill, and he stood on the grass-grown drive, with the grass crisping with frost under his feet. He heard a partridge calling to its mate, a harsh but plaintive sound in the great silence.

A sudden solemnity fell upon Brent. He looked out over the wooded country purpling in the hollow of the up-rolling night. The redness began to die down beyond the Bois du Renard. Presently a star flickered out. The air was very cold, and Brent's breath a patch of silver vapour.

The beauty and strangeness of it all seemed like the fall of a curtain at the end of that most wonderful day. Brent could hardly believe that so much had happened in ten short hours, those extraordinary hours full to the brim with inevitable adventure. He turned his head to look down at Beaucourt, a ghost village melting slowly into the dusk, a pattern of broken walls and gables, patches of whiteness, shadowy hollows like the eye-sockets of a skull. Brent saw a light shine out, a little yellow square in the darkness, solitary and strange. It was the light in the Café de la Victoire—Manon's light.

Brent did an absurd thing. He took off his cap to it—uncovered his head.

"Home," he said; "how queer!"

His footsteps seemed to make a great noise in the silent village as he walked back through the still, cold night—but Brent did not feel the cold, for his heart was warm in him. Manon was whistling, whistling like a

blackbird; the sound came out of the cellar, a cellar that was full of the glow from the stove.

She heard his footsteps up above and ran to the steps.

“It is you?”

“Yes.”

“Come down. Supper is ready.”

He hesitated at the head of the stairs, a man grown suddenly shy.

“May I? It is your cellar.”

“Do not be foolish,” she said; “I have cooked you a hot supper.”

That wonderful day drew to a close. Manon and Paul were tired, wholesomely and happily tired, and they ended the day by arguing about the blankets.

“One each,” said Manon.

“You can have both.”

“Then I will have neither.”

“My greatcoat is enough for me.”

“Mon ami,” she said, “if you think that I am going to let you sleep up there under a bit of tin with nothing but your coat, you are a little touched in the head. Take your blanket, at once, and do not argue.”

Brent surrendered. He bade her good-night and went upstairs, taking his bag for a pillow. He made a sack of his blanket, crept into it, and settled himself on the creaking wire bed under the four pieces of corrugated iron. Through the window he could see the stars shining over Beaucourt, clear, frosty stars.

Brent pulled his greatcoat over his head, and slept in spite of the cold.

XIII

MANON did not wake very early, and rays of sunlight were thrusting like sword blades through the iron grating when she opened her eyes.

The cellar was warm, and the wire bed surprisingly comfortable, and Manon lay curled up, looking at the yellow light and feeling in no hurry to leave the bed.

"Another fine day," she said; "I wonder if the man is still asleep."

She became aware of a thudding sound coming from the back of the house, a sound that associated itself with ideas of work—strenuous work on a frosty morning. Manon felt guilty. She had a vision of Paul warming himself after a night spent with one blanket under a tin roof, and she jumped up and lit the stove. She had decided to give him hot coffee.

When the stove was well alight, she brought a comb and a little mirror out of her bag and put up her hair. She had slept in her clothes, and however much she disliked the feeling of it, she realized that such things as blankets bulk big in any scheme of civilization, and that without blankets a woman's sense of daintiness might not be able to survive.

"I must go to Amiens," she reflected, as she washed her hands and face in an old tin basin half full of cold water; "but what a pity that things are so dear."

The stove needed more wood, and she went up in search of her partner, discovering him in the yard, breaking up boxes with a pick.

"You poor man," she said, "are you frozen?"

"I had to thaw my feet and hands," he laughed, "but life is devilish good."

"We will change all that—not the devilish good part of it, Monsieur Paul. There will be hot coffee in ten minutes."

"I am going to splice that ladder before breakfast."

"That is permitted. But after that, you will take a holiday."

He thought that she was joking.

"A holiday—with ten hours' work."

"It is Sunday," she said.

"That is news to me. I had forgotten the days of the week."

"Yes—Sunday. And I am going to church."

"All the way to Ste. Claire?"

"No! here in Beaucourt. The church is still there. And I suppose le bon Dieu was not driven away by shells."

"I shall come with you," said Paul; "it won't do me any harm."

It was no formal ceremony that church-going, no affair of greased forelocks, polished boots and conventional self-suppression. Manon chattered all the way up the deserted street—buoyant as the February sunshine, talking about this romance of reconstruction with a frank enthusiasm that accepted God as an interested listener. Even the battered church with its stump of a spire, and white wounds showing in its grey bulk, was a thing of life and of hope. God had shared with these peasants in the tragedy of their ruined homes. That was how Manon visualized it. The Great Mother stood there amid the rubbish, stretching out her beneficent and understanding hands. The glass had gone; there were holes in the roof, and patches of damp on the walls; the tracery of the windows had had the beauty of its Gothic curves snapped and broken. Yet this church of Beaucourt seemed to have won a deeper mystery—the ineffable smile of a martyr, the beautiful exultation that no clever devilry can kill.

Manon paused in the Place de l'Eglise. She was silent now, wide-eyed, serious. She made the sign of the cross as she looked up at the broken spire.

"It is still very beautiful. Let us go in."

The church of Beaucourt had served many purposes. It had been a hospital, a supply store, a stable, and it carried the stigmata of all these experiences upon its stones. Soldiers had scribbled on its walls, driven in nails, left lewd phrases strung upon the plaster. Whenever it rained there were puddles on the floor. Rubbish and smashed masonry choked the aisles. Someone had slept on the altar and left a dirty mattress there, but the Gothic mystery remained, the awe, that invisible something that is like the sigh of an invisible god.

Brent followed Manon into the church, uncovering his head as she dipped a finger into the imaginary water of the piscina, and made her little obeisance to the altar. She knelt down on the stone floor, and Brent knelt down beside her. She remained thus for some minutes, eyes closed, hands folded,—but Brent did not close his eyes—for his religion was centred in Manon. Brent was just the ordinary man, supremely indifferent to dogmatic religion, well able to live without it, rather mistrustful of the so-called religious people. But Manon's kneeling figure touched his sense of the beauty of human emotion. Her simple devoutness had the charm of a

pleasant picture. It added mystery to her, made her eyes more than mere mirrors of consciousness, her blood more than a red and vitalizing fluid. Brent had always been something of a mystic, a man who had disliked his mysticism reduced to printer's ink and pews.

A light breeze had sprung up. It played through the broken tracery of the windows and through the rents in the roof, making a soft and plaintive murmur like the rush of invisible wings. Manon opened her eyes, raised her head and smiled. Her face made Brent think of white light. He felt that he could trust Manon as very few women can be trusted; she had not the hard little soul of the modern girl; she would understand a man's finer impulses; she would not shock him with some sudden little blasphemous confession of crude and vulgar egotism. And yet he realized that she was no fool.

She crossed herself, stood up, and brushed the dirt from her black skirt. It was the practical, pleasantly dainty little Frenchwoman who reappeared.

"They need a broom here. And what a bill there will be for glass!"

They passed out again into the sunlight.

"It was good of you to come with me. In these days men are not devout; they have other things to think of. Are you a Catholic, mon ami?"

Brent hesitated.

"No, to be perfectly honest."

And then she surprised him.

"Do not worry your conscience. When I go to church, it is not because I am this or that, but because I know there is a God, and that life is a mystery, and that one should kneel down and feel things and try to understand. I am not a religious woman, as the priests would have it, nor am I a Catholic. Religious women are often not good women—as I understand goodness."

"You are full of surprises," he said.

She gave him a shrewd little smile.

"I went to a good school, Paul. Do you think that because I live in a village I have been brought up in a convent? We French are very practical; we think a great deal. But I am not a little fool who imagines that she understands everything. One must have a religion, and it is none the worse if you make it yourself. Never to do mean things, and never to grow hard. And to remember—always—that one's orchard and garden are miracles, and that life did not happen by chance."

Brent had put on his cap. He took it off again.

"You get to the heart of things," he said.

Directly ahead of them, and half closing the east end of the Place de l'Eglise, were the ruins of the Hôtel de Paris. The hotel stood at the corner where the Rue d'Eschelle ran steeply down to the river, a big white place, its angles and cornice of faced ashlar, its great central chimney-stack still standing up red and raw. On the other side of the street the Hospice towered up like a ragged grey cliff that looked ready to fall.

Manon walked towards the Hôtel de Paris. The ruins had a particular significance for her, for the hotel had belonged to Monsieur Louis Blanc, vulgarly known as Bibi. Manon had had cause to regard Monsieur Louis Blanc with peculiar distrust and aversion. He had been her rival, and he had desired also to be her lover; the intrigue would have suited both his body and his business.

"I must tell you about Bibi."

Then they looked at each other, for someone was trampling over the piles of broken brick inside the shell of the Hôtel de Paris. The sound came towards them. A tall man appeared in the doorway, a man wearing a soft black hat, a black coat, and the blue breeches and puttees of a French soldier. He stood and smiled and took off his hat.

"Good morning, Madame Latour."

Manon's face became a thing of stone.

"Good morning, Monsieur Blanc. A fine day for the ruins, is it not?"

Bibi was looking at Brent with a peculiar and cynical curiosity.

"I have muddled the name, have I? Madame is no longer a widow."

Manon snubbed him.

"I will leave you to guess, monsieur."

Bibi laughed. He was a sallow-faced man with a pair of insolent, light blue eyes, a nose that broadened out towards the nostrils in the shape of a green fig, and a mouth that looked as though it had been hacked out in the rough and never finished. He had a way of staring people in the face with a faintly ironical smile, a smile that put them down in the mud. He looked very strong with the strength of a great, raw-boned, nasty-tempered horse. The backs of his hands were covered with black hair.

"Perhaps monsieur is less proud?"

He looked at Brent, cocking one shoulder up, and tilting his head. But Brent said nothing. He was trying to explain his own instant feeling of antipathy towards the man, and an instinctive desire to hit Monsieur Bibi hard and square between the eyes. It was not that the man was evil. Brent had lived with evil men, and they had not troubled his temper. And then he

struck it. It was Bibi's swagger, the arrogance of the male thing who had had many successes with women. Bibi was one great swagger. He swaggered when he smiled, when he talked, even when he stood still. His very silence swaggered. And Brent had a suspicion that it was not a thing of wind and brass—but a huge self-confidence, an audacity that took life in its hands and laid it next the wall.

And then Brent remembered that he had not chosen a French name. He pulled out his pipe, filled it, and looked at Bibi across the top of the bowl as he struck a match.

"Here is my fiancée, monsieur. An English girl, too!"

Bibi's eyes snapped. He saw the joke, and he had learnt something that he wished to know. He matched Brent's pipe with a cigarette, and stood there, ugly, polite and conversational. Manon's face remained a thing of stone. She knew how clever Bibi was—abominably clever, and she wanted to warn Brent.

"So you have returned, monsieur?"

Bibi had a suspicion that she was trying to put herself between him and the other man.

"Just to view the scenery, madame. I drove over alone; the cart and horse are in the factory stable. Is it possible that I may have the pleasure of driving you home?"

"I remain here," she said.

"Tiens!—Monsieur, perhaps?"

"He is staying here too," said Manon with stubborn composure.

Bibi shrugged. He had learnt something more.

"You are more lucky than I am, madame; you have a partner."

"Yes; it is an excellent arrangement. We have come to see what can be done—but all this is rather hopeless, is it not?"

She nodded at the ruined hotel. Bibi inflated himself, spat, smiled at her.

"I shall have that up in no time. Pst!—just like that! The bigger the job, the bigger I feel."

And Manon smiled on him.

"You always were a man of resources, monsieur. I shall have to be content with a shanty, a couple of rooms,—what we can knock together. And now I have the fire to attend to; the blankets are damp; Monsieur Paul discovered them in a cottage. Au revoir, monsieur."

Bibi's hat swaggered to her.

“Be very careful of those blankets,” he said.

Manon did not speak to Paul until they were half-way up the Rue de Picardie.

“Well!—that is Monsieur Bibi,” she said; “what do you think of him?”

“A beast.”

His frankness brought back her animation.

“Yes, you are right—a beast—and a clever beast. Did you see how he was trying to find out——?”

“I ought to have a French name,” said Brent; “how would Paul Rance do? It is a river—somewhere. And if inquisitive people ask questions, and worry about my accent you can tell them—or I will—that I lived for seven years in England.”

Manon nodded.

“It is possible that we shall have trouble with Bibi. He has a grudge against me.”

“What sort of a grudge?” Brent asked.

“He wanted to buy my café—because too many people came to it.”

“Yes.”

Manon remained silent for a moment. She was thinking.

“Mon ami,” she exclaimed, “I shall not go to Ste. Claire to-morrow. I shall stay here several days. There is no time to be lost, and I can help you. We must take what we need before Bibi thieves everything.”

XIV

THEY entered the café and sat down on the two wooden chairs that Manon had salved from one of the houses. The coming of Bibi had introduced a sudden sinister complexity into the adventure, an element of discord, a threat of competition. Brent refilled his pipe. He looked worried.

"We had better begin on those huts," he said; "I'll get the tools together and go down at once."

Manon restrained him.

"No, not yet. We must wait."

"Till that fellow has gone?"

She nodded.

"Bibi is cunning. He has come here to see what he can find—and there is no generosity to be expected from Bibi. We must not betray what we are doing. When he has driven off in that cart of his, then we can work like slaves."

"There will be a moon to-night," said Brent; "I shall work all night. We must store the sheeting in one of those rooms, and I will get two doors and some shutters fitted at the first chance."

Manon held up a hand.

"Listen!"

They heard a man's boots clanking on the pavé.

"I knew he would come here."

Monsieur Louis Blanc did not stop outside the Café de la Victoire. He strolled past it with the detached and casual air of a holiday-maker, nodding at Manon who stood at the window.

"Even if you have no wine, madame—they tell me there is plenty of good water in the well."

"Yes, there is plenty of water."

He paused for a second—his hands in his pockets, his eyes considering the house.

"You have been lucky."

"Ah, monsieur, lucky! I have four walls and an abundance of ventilation."

“I have two walls and half a wall. Just because my little hotel was too near the church! We always shelled churches, you know, just to give le bon Dieu a personal interest in the affair.”

He laughed and walked on.

Manon waited till he had disappeared down the Rue de Rosières, and then ran out into the garden. She knew that from one corner of the garden it was possible to see the field where those precious huts stood, but though she remained on the watch, the figure of Louis Blanc never appeared in the field. Brent, who was equally interested in the pilgrimage of Monsieur Bibi, went across to the stone house over the way, and saw the Frenchman turn back before he had reached the end of the Rue de Rosières. Bibi stopped to look at the well, gave a casual glance at the café, and diverging into the Rue Romaine, walked off towards the factory.

Brent followed him, keeping to the orchards and the gardens behind the houses. The ruins of the cottage nearest to the factory served him as an observation post, and Brent did not quit it till he saw Bibi driving off in his cart along the road to Bonnière.

Brent ran back to the café.

“He has gone,” he said, reaching under the wire bed for the box in which he kept his tools.

Manon was ready.

“He did not see those huts.”

“I think Bibi was looking at something else,” said Brent; “your café.”

It is probable that no salvage party ever worked as Paul and Manon did, stripping the corrugated iron from those army huts in the field on the road to Rosières. They dragged the yellow gig up the hill, and Manon loaded it, while Brent used hammer, cold chisel and tommy-bar, and slid the loosened sheets down to her from the roof. They made a fine and healthy clatter between them on that Sunday afternoon, but as there was no one in Beaucourt to hear it, no one was offended. Brent allowed twenty sheets to a load, remembering the weak wheel of the gig. Then they set off for the café, Brent between the shafts, Manon pushing behind, the load banging and clattering as the gig bumped over the pavé. They carted two such loads before breaking off for dinner, a meal that lasted less than twenty minutes.

“Forty sheets. That was pretty quick work. We want a hundred.”

He had lit his pipe, and was glancing humorously at the bloody finger and knuckles of his left hand.

“Nasty stuff to handle. And I was in a hurry.”

"You worked like a devil," she said.

"I'm fresh to the tools. Show me your hands."

Manon had a slight cut across her left palm.

"You ought to have gloves."

"I'm not afraid of a cut or two."

"Look here, I can manage alone this afternoon. Supposing you collect bricks for these two holes in the wall!"

She refused to do any such thing.

"Do you think that I am some soft little cat from a villa in Paris? I used to dig and hoe all my garden during the war, and I can carry a sack of potatoes if someone puts it on my back. I don't cry off because of a scratched hand."

Brent liked her pluck and determination.

"Put a sandbag over each hand. There are some in the cellar. I don't want you with your arm in a sling."

As he crawled about the roof, wrenching off the iron sheets and sending them skiddering down to Manon, Paul was troubled by the face of Louis Blanc. The adventure had ceased to be an exciting game played by two grown-up children; it had taken on more primitive colours, colours that had not the innocence of the brown eyes and red lips of Manon, of the purple of the woods and the grey green of the fields. The world and Monsieur Bibi had come swaggering together into Beaucourt, and Brent was conscious of the unpleasant significance of the event.

Straddling the ridge of the roof, and looking at the chequer of red and white walls, the shadowy interspaces and the patches of broad sunlight that were Beaucourt, Brent realized that he had become responsible for Manon. He felt that she belonged to him, which of course was absurd. Less than two days of close comradeship did not justify a sense of possession, and yet the instinctive fierceness of the feeling astonished Brent. Why this bristling of the hair, this clenching of the fist? He had no difficulty in finding an answer.

But a far more sensitive and unselfish mood forced itself in front of these primitive emotions. Brent sat and looked into the face of his own past, a past that conjured up the present and the future. The coming of Bibi had made all the difference in the world to Brent's outlook upon life. A cloud had wiped the irresponsible and un-self-conscious sunlight from the landscape. This polite and clever blackguard had reintroduced the social compact into Beaucourt. The village had ceased to be a wilderness, even though Louis Blanc's presence in it had been a mere matter of hours. His

appearance was more than a suggestion. Society had returned in the spirit, even if it remained absent in the flesh, and Brent saw Beaucourt full of eyes, mouths, ears and heads.

His thoughts centred upon Manon. What would Bibi tell people, those refugees scattered through the villages beyond the region of devastation? Brent knew how a man of Bibi's kidney would talk. "Oh, yes, Manon Latour is living at Beaucourt with some fellow." Brent swore to himself—but swearing did not solve the problem. He had discovered that he was responsible for Manon, even though he knew in his heart of hearts that this adventure promised to be the cleanest and most beautiful thing that had ever happened to him in life.

"Hallo!"

For the best part of a minute he had been straddling the ridge, staring at a hole in one of the iron sheets, and doing nothing. Manon was waiting. His inactivity was so sudden and so obvious that it touched her curiosity.

"Tired?"

He leant forward and knocked off the head of a screw with the chisel and hammer.

"No. Thinking."

"You looked like murder."

"I dare say I did."

He loosened another sheet and slid it down to her, but she let it lie untouched, and stood looking gravely up at him.

"You were thinking about Bibi?"

He moved along the roof to attack the next sheet.

"Well, perhaps I was."

"What does Bibi matter, when we are getting all that we want?"

Brent raised his hammer and let it fall again.

"It has made a difference."

"What has?"

"His coming here."

Her eyes had gone black and opaque, as was their way when she was seriously puzzled or troubled. It was plain to her that something was clogging Paul's mind and hampering his work.

"What kind of difference?"

Brent was frowning.

“Don’t you see what has happened? I am not a fool who goes out to look for trouble, but we are not alone here any longer. A man has to think of these things.”

Her eyes gave a flash.

“Good heavens—you mean——?”

“Well, what sort of man is Bibi? Was he pleased to find me here?”

“You mean that you are afraid,—you want to go?”

Brent slogged the head off a nail.

“Damn!—I never thought you would think that! What the devil do I care what happens to me? But what I do care about——”

She caught her breath with a little breathless exclamation that was almost like a cry of pain.

“Oh, it’s like that? I understand—you will forgive me, mon ami?”

He looked down at her with eyes that had a queer shine in them.

“If you will forgive me for swearing!”

Brent went on with the work. It was the obvious thing to do, and it was a screen behind which he could hide, for Brent was one of those men who became absurdly shy in the presence of emotion. He hammered away with indefatigable ferocity, ignoring Manon who was stroking her chin with two fingers and looking at something that was a long way off.

Presently she resumed her loading of the gig, nor did she speak again till she had dealt with all the sheets that Brent had pushed down to her.

“Twenty,” she said, “we have a load.”

Brent slid down the roof, landed, and put himself between the shafts of the gig. Manon took her place behind it, and they started out of the field.

“Paul,” said her voice, just when they were on the edge of the pavé.

“Hallo.”

“I am not afraid of Bibi.”

The rattle of the wheels and the clanging of the iron sheets made it difficult for Brent to hear her.

“What did you say?”

“I am not afraid of Bibi.”

He threw his weight against the shafts and stopped the gig.

“Nor am I. Not for myself. But do you not see my point of view?”

“I have a pair of eyes in my head,” she retorted, “and in front of me I see my partner, Monsieur Paul Rance, whom I met when I was at Rennes.”

“Yes, all that sounds very pleasant, but——”

“Mon ami,” she broke in, “why are you in such a hurry to explain things to people, when no one has asked for explanations?”

She gave a push to the gig.

“Allons! You are afraid that Bibi will gossip, and that people will believe him. I am not going to be frightened by Bibi, simply because it amuses him to frighten people. Besides——”

Her brown eyes gave him a flash of buoyant audacity.

“You need not explain a thing that will appear obvious to decent people. And it is always possible for a man to change his mind.”

Brent was puzzled.

“I don’t understand you.”

She gave another and more vigorous push to the cart, looking at him with eyes that said, “What a simple fellow you are!” Brent turned about and put his weight on the shafts, and staring at the pavé in front of him, spent the whole of that journey in trying to disentangle her meaning.

During the unloading of the gig Brent watched Manon’s face as though he hoped to find it a mirror in which he could see the reflection of his own thoughts. But Manon’s face showed him nothing. She was the cheerfully determined little Frenchwoman wholly absorbed in helping him to unload those iron sheets. She refused to be sentimental or to let herself encourage Brent’s tendency towards too much self-consciousness. Men are such children, and Brent appeared to be an unusually sensitive child. He would go and get lost in the woods unless she held him shrewdly to the great work that mattered.

XV

AFTER working at the huts till ten o'clock, Brent walked back to the Café de la Victoire by the light of the moon. He was tired, dead tired, but his weariness was full of a pleasant sense of physical satisfaction; he had done the best day's work in his life, and if his hands were sore and his back one huge ache, what did it matter?

Manon had gone home earlier to light the stove. She heard Brent's footsteps on the pavé, and ran out to meet him.

"Partner, I'm tired."

He laughed over it, for he was a little exultant.

"I never thought that we could do it, rip off a hundred sheets and get them carted and stacked here. I have knocked half the weather boarding off that hut."

Manon enveloped him in a soft atmosphere of sympathy, applause, gratitude.

"Go down and sit by the fire. The water is boiling. What shall it be, tea or coffee?"

"Coffee. Your coffee?"

The tired yet happy note in his voice touched her. She had been thinking a great deal about Paul while she was watching the stove grow red and waiting for the sound of his return. In all her experience of life—and a woman can see an abundance of life in a little French café—Manon had never met a personality quite like Paul's. This little widow knew men through and through, yet Brent had puzzled her until that moment when he had sat astride the roof of the hut and betrayed the sensitive prudery of a sentimentalist. She liked him none the less for that, though it added to the complexity of the adventure. Manon was not a prude, and Paul was not a Frenchman. She realized the significance of the fact, nor did the possible unexpectedness of this man's romantic boyishness bore her. She was piqued by it. Most men are so obvious.

She had a meal ready for this tired man of hers, a man whose body had performed a tour-de-force, and whose happy weariness was ready to eat, drink, light its pipe and relax before the fire. Manon was glad of Brent's tiredness, even as she was glad of his strength. She wanted him in that mood

of happy relaxation. She saw the white stones of the cellar's vault bright with candle light and the glow from the stove. The water bubbled contentedly in the saucepan. The arm-chair from the école stood embracing the warmth from the fire. And Manon was sensitively alert to the impression that the homeliness of the place would make on Paul. She had been busy here, exerting a woman's forethought, not for purely selfish ends, but because a woman's shrewdness may become involved in the things that she does for a particular man.

"You have earned that chair."

He took it, after protesting that it should be hers. She saw him lie back and melt into enjoyment of this atmosphere of simple comfort.

"I say—this is good."

His eyes wandered—and then fell to watching Manon, Manon whose hands were busy in his service. He became aware of the pleasantness of Manon, and that it was good to look at her, good to feel her near. As she leant forward over the stove to fill the coffee-pot Paul noticed the brown depths of her eyes, the shadowy curves of her nostrils, the pretty line of her mouth, her frank forehead, and the white fulness of her throat and chin. He observed a little brown freckle rather quaintly placed in the centre of her left lower eyelid. Her hands were plump and strong, with straight, well-formed fingers; generous, capable hands. He was aware, too, of a perfume, a personal aroma that was subtle and wholly French.

"Voilà!"

She drew the table close to the stove.

"How is that?"

"I am being spoilt," said Brent.

That was exactly what she wanted him to feel. The memory of this evening was to have a particular significance.

"You amazed me to-day."

She was pouring out his coffee.

"I never saw a man work with such ferocity."

"I enjoyed it."

"Yes, but you must not work too hard. And I am not going to talk to you until after supper."

"Talking is food," said Brent, "if one happens to be interested."

Now Manon's attitude towards Brent had developed since she had realized how easily he could be affected by the swaggering cynicism of a

man like Louis Blanc. Hitherto she had not been conscious of any particular attitude towards this comrade of two days. The adventure had opened with such verve and simplicity that she had not bothered her head about the social complexities, but the coming of Bibi and Paul's instant reaction to the challenge in the big Frenchman's sensual eyes had compelled her to look at Brent more closely. She guessed that he had a thin skin, and that he was the sort of good fellow who fell into a panic if anyone accused him of behaving like a blackguard. Like many sensitive men he was extraordinarily diffident. An audacious beast like Bibi would squeeze out all his self-confidence.

"What a comfort it is to have you here."

Brent looked surprised, pleasantly disconcerted.

"In what way?"

"Because you are rather unusual. Most men—Oh!—well—you know what I mean."

It was the beginning of her conscious effort to humour her man. Paul was a sentimentalist, but Manon had a philosophy. She knew that life is always a bit of a scramble and that in Beaucourt life wad going to be rather primitive and savage. Paul's skin was too thin. She had a feeling that she would have to guard his sensitiveness—prevent his impressionable good nature from being at the mercy of hard people. Brent lacked hardness. She had an idea that this lack of hardness had been the cause of his failure.

"But you can't make a soft man hard," she said to herself; "it must be done some other way."

She felt that Brent had that queer passion for ethical self-expression that plain people call "self-sacrifice." She sensed it vaguely at first, and she could not have translated the impression into words. It was a thread, an intuition, and she followed it.

"This fine weather cannot last," she said with apparent vagueness.

She filled his cup a second time.

"And to-morrow? What will you do to-morrow?"

He knew at once what he meant to do, and she respected the quiet and orderly way in which he had mapped out the work.

"I shall bring the timber across. The rafters of that big hut will be the right size for us over here. Nothing like having all your material on the spot, and under your eyes,—especially as there seems some chance of competition."

He frowned when he thought of Bibi, and Manon was prompted by that frown. She thought of altering her plans, and she was curious to see what

effect such an alteration would have upon Brent, but she wanted her change of purpose to develop naturally and not to appear as a sudden decision forced on her from without.

"More coffee, mon ami?"

"Please. It's so jolly good."

"No more to eat?"

"Not another mouthful."

She looked at the bully beef, the biscuits, the carton of jam—and the unappetizing dryness of this fodder gave her her first suggestion. She made a little grimace, and waved a hand over the table.

"You poor man. Now, if only we had a savoury omelette and some spinach! I must change all this. That is obvious."

She appeared to reflect.

"Yes, you must have fresh food,—eggs and butter and vegetables. If I went three times a week to Ste. Claire——"

Brent had brought out his pipe, and then slipped it back again into his pocket. The gesture was full of significance.

"Smoke."

"Not here."

"But I like the smell of it."

"As a matter of fact, I am at the end of my tobacco."

"Quel dommage! But this is a tragedy. It is obvious that I must go to Amiens; I may be able to buy English tobacco there."

He corrected her.

"What a conscience you have! But, mon ami, could you spare me to-morrow? Could you carry all that wood?"

"Easily."

"And if I stayed away three days?"

She saw that he was not in the least dashed by the suggestion. In fact he approved of it.

"I shall want that saw."

"Yes—and blankets. It must be so horribly cold up there, and you were quite snug before I came. Oh, mon ami, I have an idea."

He looked up at her questioningly.

"Well——?"

“It will take many days to put a roof on the house, will it not?”

“A fortnight—perhaps more.”

“And then there are the doors and windows.”

“Yes.”

“The weather will change. Rain and wind—mon Dieu! And you, under those pieces of tin! Be quite honest with me, Paul; would it not be more sensible for me to stay at Ste. Claire and leave you the cellar—until the roof is on?”

She watched Brent’s face, and discovered nothing but a faint shadow of surprise, a surprise that was momentary and transient. He leaned forward and stirred up the wood in the stove with an old iron bar that they used for the purpose. The glow from the wood shone on a calm face, and Manon saw that it had cost him no effort to adjust life to the new atmosphere.

“A sound idea,” he said, feeding more wood into the stove.

Perceiving no resistance, Manon let the new plan develop itself.

“It is not that I am a coward, mon ami, or afraid of a rough life.”

“You are no coward,” he said with quiet conviction.

She showed a sudden animation that flowed with the full flood of the new idea.

“I can hire a horse and cart in Ste. Claire, and I must see what can be bought at Amiens. I could drive over here twice a week, and if I started very early in the morning I should be able to spend most of the day here, cook for you, and help you when you needed a second pair of hands. And then, there is the garden.”

“The garden’s important.”

“Yes, our living this summer. I could work in the garden and sow seeds, and I could use the horse and cart to collect things for you. I must think of my good partner’s comfort.”

Brent stared at the fire.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said; “I am not the one to be considered. I am thinking of you.”

They had been skimming the surface, but those words of Brent’s went down beneath the conventional crust.

“Mon ami, you are very unselfish.”

“It’s not that. A man has to think of things—other things than bricks and timber; and when there is a woman about, a man has to think of her.”

Manon was silent for a while, and in her heart of hearts she knew that Paul was right. She had used her intuition and her shrewdness to bring the adventure into sympathy with this man's simple sense of honour, and now that the thing was done she felt that Paul was happier.

"What a good man you are!"

He smiled at her and said nothing.

"You think of others before yourself. And how exciting it will be when I drive over and see what you have done; each time there will be something fresh, a new piece of roof, a door, a window."

"It will be just as exciting to me—the finest game I ever played in my life."

She frowned a little over that word.

"Game—game! You English are always thinking of games."

"The word does not fit; I should not have used it. It is more than a game."

Manon looked at her knees, possessed by a feeling of gentleness and humility. She knew now that she had been right about Brent, utterly right in her reading of his simple and sensitive character. He was no ordinary man, nor was his inspiration the inspiration of the ordinary man. Brent gave. Most men take.

"It is very strange," she said, "that you should be so good to me. I think —somehow—that doing good things is as pleasant to you as the tobacco you smoke in your pipe. Is it not so, monsieur?"

He nodded.

"Perhaps there's reason in it."

"I am very lucky."

And then she added,

"How good to be able to trust you—with everything! It is like feeling that God is near."

XVI

BRENT was up with the dawn. He heard a bird singing somewhere as he went down to the well to fill the bucket, and he stood in the street and looked at the sky with the eyes of a child. In the east and reaching to the zenith great ridges of tawny white cloud broke the intense blue of the sky. A mysterious golden light enveloped everything, the broken walls, the spire of the church, the grey-green hills, the murk of the woods, the tangled, unpruned orchards. Even the cobble-stones had a bloom of gold upon them. The brown blackness of Manon's house loomed up against the dawn.

Brent's face was a thing of delight. His beard had a more tawny richness, his eyes a deeper blue.

"By God—life's good!"

He felt good, good to the core. When he had filled the bucket and drawn it up, the splashing water itself seemed to laugh in the early sunlight. Brent stood in the street and washed, stripped to the waist, dipping his head into the cold water and letting it run over his chest and shoulders. A little spiral of blue smoke had begun to climb like some magic plant up the wall of Manon's house, and Brent could hear the crackling of wood in the stove. Manon was busy before her ten-mile walk to Ste. Claire.

An hour later she was standing at the top of the flight of steps leading to the street, her bag in her hand, her face upturned to Brent's. It was a happy face with gentle eyes, the flicker of a smile playing about the mouth.

"Au revoir."

He held her hand for a moment.

"I will look after everything."

"And take care of yourself, Paul. I will not forget the tobacco."

She turned and went down the steps, turned again at the corner by the stone house, and looked back at him with a kind of smiling solemnity. The morning sunlight was on her face, and her plain black dress showed up against the white stonework.

"Au revoir."

Brent raised a hand like a man uttering a benediction.

He remained standing there after she had gone, filling his pipe with the last dust that was left in his pouch, and smiling without realizing the smile in

his eyes. For Brent was happy, extraordinarily happy, and life seemed very good to him that morning. He was conscious of strong and simple purpose, and of the man's job ready to his hands. He was conscious, too, of being trusted; and Manon's faith in him was the most precious thing that his hands had touched for many years. He felt that he had a new heart in a new body—that he had begun to love these ruins because of their human significance. There was hope in the air, and the spring was coming.

"Off with your coat, man," said Life; "swing your hammer and drive your saw. Sweat—sweat and feel good. It is the simple things that matter."

Brent had the ultimate philosophy of life ripening in his heart. He had worked back to the wholesome state of using his hands, nor were they the hands of a machine minder or of a clerk fribbling with a typewriter or a pen. Yesterday he had worked with a ferocious forcefulness; to-day his body moved like silk, easily and with a smooth balance; his hammer went true to the mark; he had no sense of hurry or fatigue. He was above his work, its master, and in a mood that could open its eyes to the world and catch glimpses of the strange beauty that is everywhere.

In his resting moments, or when he was ready to start off with a load, he would stand for a little while and stare at the graining of a piece of timber, the dark shadows that seemed to hang in the bare woods, the sunlight on the hill, or the way some broken bit of wall cut a zig-zag out of the blue of the sky. His contentment was so complete and so pleasant that he could not help questioning it, turning it over and over like a man examining something that he has found.

"I wonder if I should get bored here—fed up?"

He laughed.

Boredom seemed so far from the mood of the moment; yet he chalked "boredom" on the black-board of his mind, and tabulated all the facts he could accumulate on the subject. He could not remember feeling bored as a boy, except in church and at school, when the buoyant youngster in him had been repressed. His marriage and too much "business" had brought other and more subtle forms of self-repression. He had been very badly bored during the thirties. And he had been short of exercise, wholesome sweat of body and of soul.

"Yes, but this is only an adventure," said the voice in him.

But was it only an adventure?

He had pushed the gig along the Rue de Rosières, and had begun to unload the timber, stacking it in the back room on the right of the passage. Each time he carried in a length of timber that reached from the floor to

some twelve feet up the wall, he found himself thinking, “Another rafter for Manon.”

“Mon ami,” he thought, using those words of hers, “why worry? We fools are always looking six months ahead and missing the glass of wine on the table.”

He decided that he would not be a creator of problems, but march straight ahead towards the broad sweep of this new horizon.

Brent spent the rest of the day in dismantling the framework of the largest of the huts, and in carting the timber to the café. The work had gone so well that he now had nearly all the material he needed for the rough work on the house, and the material included a couple of deal doors and four window-frames. One of the huts in the field on the road to Rosières had a wooden floor, and Brent made up his mind to salve that floor, for the boards would be invaluable when he came to dealing with three upper rooms. Just before dusk fell he trundled the barrow over to the factory and brought back a load of lime, making a second journey for some sand. The first job on the morrow would be the re-bricking of the holes in the walls, and after supper, when the moon rose, he went out again with the barrow and collected bricks.

Brent had not entered the cellar since Manon had left it, and at the end of that long day when he had taken his food cold, and between heroic spells of work, he went down the flight of steps into the darkness of the place. He stood holding the ground sheet aside, aware of a something that was Manon, a faint perfume—a perfume that had clung about her clothes. It made Brent think of a bed of gilliflowers on an evening in May.

He smiled, lit the candle, and glanced round the cellar. Manon had tidied everything before leaving. The cups and plates were white and clean on the shelves, she had made the bed, and left the stove filled with wood ready for a match. Old Mère Vitry’s picture of the Sacred Heart stood on the table, leaning against the wall. Brent found himself looking at it.

“There’s something in that—after all,” he thought; “and yet she says that she is not a Catholic!”

He lit the stove and watched the yellow flames climb up through the wood, and his thoughts were with Manon and her religion. These old beliefs, superstitions, as he had learnt to call them, these woodland shadows and red blaze of sunset glass, those saints, and martyrs, miracles, the wine that was blood, the tears, the terrors, the quaint paganism that lingered like sunlight on the dark edge of the eternal mystery! He had a feeling that the very soil of Beaucourt was saturated with this most human essence. It was like the sap in the roots of the plants and trees. The moderns were educated; they were—

in the mass—very material people. Even these French peasants were children of the age of reason, and yet the sap was there under their feet, the mystic heritage of centuries. That was how Paul felt it in the person of Manon Latour. The scientific farmer thinks of his artificial manure and is apt to forget the spring. The miracle has got lost inside the machine. Yet the orchards put on their white garlands like girls who feel the great mystery within them.

"One always comes back to it," said Brent.

And Manon had knelt in the ruined church of Beaucourt and then told him with a child's frankness that her religion was her own. Of course it was hers. She was as full of religion as the soil was full of spring. She had not been smothered in a town. She did not sell herself; there was more than mere sense under her petticoat. She had a soul.

"Queer, isn't it?" thought Brent. "A modern man would think you were a bit cracked if you started talking about a soul. A few hundred years ago he would have felt insulted if you had taken it for granted that he hadn't one. We're too damned clever; that's what's the matter with us."

Yet he went to bed a mixture of mystic and materialist. One of the blankets had the faint perfume of Manon's clothes.

"Smells like the spring," he said to himself.

And then he fell to gloating over that mass of wood and iron he had stacked in the rooms above.

"Well, what about it?" was the retort of the mystic-materialist. "Even a Bradbury has a potential soul. Depends on what you do with it, of course."

Manon, meanwhile, was sitting in Madame Castener's cottage at Ste. Claire. She had reached the hill above Ste. Claire about noon, and had looked down on the village flashing its white walls behind the sun-splashed tops of the poplars. The completeness and the unravaged tranquillity of Ste. Claire had shocked her a little after the ruins of Beaucourt. What luck there had been in the war! Yes, but Beaucourt and its wrecked houses had produced Paul Brent, and to Manon—the woman—Paul Brent had begun to matter.

Veuve Castener's Flemish face hung out a look of massive surprise when Manon walked into the cottage.

"What! You back?"

"Yes, I am here," said Manon to this obvious lady; "have I changed?"

Madame Castener wiped her mouth with a corner of her apron.

She was a heavy woman—all bulges and protuberances—a big cow, but kind. A widow, she lived alone. Her married son, Etienne, had the cottage next door.

"There is something to eat."

Manon took off her cloak and hat.

"Who told you that I was staying at Beaucourt?" she asked.

Veuve Castener never hurried herself. She sat down again at the round table, put a bit of bread in her mouth, munched it, and then replied:

"A man, ma chérie."

Manon laughed, and fetched herself a plate and knife and fork from the dresser.

"And they say men do not gossip!"

"It was that fellow who used to keep the hotel at Beaucourt."

"Oh, Bibi!" said Manon, with casual scorn. "I suppose he wanted to find out how long I was staying at Beaucourt. That fellow ought to have been killed in the war."

She sat down and helped herself to the very plain food that was on the table.

"So Bibi is starting a scandal, is he? How droll!"

She looked at her good friend, who continued to munch like a cow chewing the cud. There were no treacheries and no surprises in Veuve Castener; she was always the same, rolling along like a big wagon that would never land you in the ditch. Her imperturbable stupidity was an asset, weight on a critical occasion, ballast during a storm. Nothing ever threw her into a state of excitement. It was possible that when the Last Trump sounded she might keep all Heaven waiting while she mended a hole in her stocking.

Veuve Castener had helped at the Café de la Victoire before Manon's marriage. Her very slowness made her loyal, for when she had grown fond of a person there was no time for her to grow tired. Friendship, like her petticoats, seemed to last with Veuve Castener for ever.

Manon was in a dilemma. Had she felt free to do so, she would have told her friend everything, for Marie Castener was to be trusted; but Manon held herself bound to keep Paul's secret. He was at her mercy, and Manon had a sense of honour.

"I must tell you about Paul," she said: "you did not know that I had found a partner?"

"I know nothing till I am told, my dear."

“Not even when Bibi——?”

Marie gave a fat shrug.

“Oh—a man like that! A stallion who comes and neighs on your doorstep. I’m deaf on those occasions.”

“What a good soul you are. Well, I found Paul Rance at Beaucourt; he had arrived there before me, and he had been using his head and his eyes. That leads to another confession, does it not, Marie? Paul had lived in England for seven years before the war. He joined the English army. He used to come to my café,—a quiet fellow who looked at you and said very little, but I did not find out what Paul was till the day of the retreat.”

She described the burying of her treasure, and the coincidence of Brent’s appearing on the scene.

“Yes, he helped me that day, and the money is still hidden there. Paul stayed behind after I had gone; he had the body of a friend to bury, an Englishman, and he was taken prisoner because he remained behind to bury his friend. That is the sort of man Paul Rance is. He came to see me when he was released from Germany, and we struck up a partnership. He is over there—in Beaucourt—putting a roof on my house.”

Veuve Castener absorbed all this information with bland stolidity. She had always had such faith in Manon’s shrewdness that it never occurred to her to explore the affair on her own account. Her inertia accepted things. She sat in a chair and was content with what was given her. A most comfortable woman.

“So Beaucourt is not so bad as you had feared?”

“It made my heart weep,” said Manon; “but it seems that I am one of the lucky ones. The walls are there, and Paul is very confident that he can make the house fit to live in.”

Marie folded her hands over her apron. She had pleasant and pastoral visions of a beneficent future for Manon. Naturally these two had arranged the matter; when the house was ready they would marry; it was an excellent thing for Manon. The romance was so obvious to Marie Castener that she swallowed and digested it, and thought no more of the matter. A very comfortable woman.

“You have a man left to work for you. You are lucky.”

“He is such a good fellow,” said Manon.

“And Monsieur Blanc was annoyed. He will visit you here; I could not get rid of the fellow.”

Manon frowned.

“Most men are such fools. I wish you would put Monsieur Bibi in your cauldron and boil the conceit out of him. But, Marie, I want Etienne to drive me into Amiens, and perhaps you will come with me. Will it be possible to-morrow? I will pay Etienne for the horse and his time. I have things to buy in Amiens.”

Veuve Castener saw no impossibility in driving to Amiens. It was an adventure, and she would not have to use her legs.

“I will arrange it with Etienne.”

Manon spent the evening in drawing out a list of all that she and Brent needed.

At the end of the list she jotted down a rather cryptic note.

“Try and get hold of a pistol for Paul.”

XVII

THE expedition to Amiens started at an early hour. A big brown horse pulled the big brown cart, with Manon wedged in between Veuve Castener and her son. Marie, her round red face shining from the wrappings of a black shawl, overflowed with a great bunching of skirts over one mud-guard, her right arm round Manon's waist. Etienne, equally big and heavy, overflowed on the other side. Manon looked like a child between them—the centre of intelligence between two bulging bodies. Her eyes were bright, for Manon was happy.

And Veuve Castener chattered. It was her way. A silent woman when things were quiet, she became conversational in a cart, or when she was turning the handle of the "cream separator," or pounding dirty clothes in a tub. Adventitious noises seemed to stir her to animation, and the more noise there was, the more she talked.

"Yes, that fellow Louis Blanc is staying at Baudry's farm, though I would not have a man like that inside my house. Always after the women, though what they can see in the man, heaven knows. Big, of course, and a swaggerer, but with a face like a goat."

"There are two sorts of women," said Manon, "those who are attracted by a blackguard and those who are not. Oh, to be sure, a man like that is very successful."

"I prefer a quiet man—a man who can always be found. Besides, what do women expect?"

"Say—what do they want? A man like Bibi has what most of them want. He just gets hold of them in the barn—or anywhere, and the rest happens. But we are shocking Etienne."

Monsieur Castener grinned. He was laconic, slow, not interested in anything but his little farm, and he had a wife whom no other man ever bothered to look at.

"That fellow Bibi talks big. He has all the news."

"Yes; what was that you heard him say the other night in Josephine's café?"

"He said such a lot," growled Etienne.

"But about Beaucourt?"

“Beaucourt? He talked as though Beaucourt belonged to him. Said there was a fortune in Beaucourt. France is ruined, you know—but there’s salvation in the English and Americans. Sentimental people. Running about to see the battlefields and graves.”

Manon lifted her chin. She was quick, and through the clumsy disorder of Castener’s words she had a glimpse of the ambitions of Bibi. But why did he boast about them? For Bibi was no fool.

“He means to make money,” she said; “but that hotel of his is a rubbish heap.”

“They say he has plenty of cash. Talks about hiring men; and the timber he has been buying and the army stores. It seems, too, that they are going to repair the factory at Beaucourt, and put in new machinery.”

“I see,” said Manon, glimpsing more and more of Louis Blanc’s possible plans. She understood, too, why Bibi would not be pleased at the idea of rivalry in Beaucourt; he had never been gentle with people who got in his way.

But the day and its temper were so buoyant that Manon put Louis Blanc and his plans aside, and gave herself up to pure enjoyment. The road ran through the pleasant country south of Amiens, a country of wooded hills and deep valleys, all green and brown and purple under the blue sky. The tops of the poplars flashed in the sunlight, in the ditches, and along the banks crept the first shimmer of the year’s greenness. Now and again a great white cloud came sailing over the hills, or, passing between the sun and the earth, threw a mass of shadow upon some brown field or wood.

Etienne knew a little auberge in the Rue Belu by the river where he put up his horse and cart, and Manon and Veuve Castener went off together. Both of them carried string-bags, and a Frenchwoman’s string-bag has an immense capacity.

“We cannot carry everything,” said Manon. “After dinner I shall have to ask Etienne to drive round with the cart.”

Manon bought the smaller things first—coffee, vegetable seeds, haricots, sugar, nails, a few oranges, matches, candles. In an hour she had tired Veuve Castener’s legs, and fat Marie trudged back to the inn. Nor was Manon sorry to be left alone. Her shopping had little moments of intimacy that she did not wish to share with another woman; and she had Paul in her thoughts, and details upon that list of hers that had arrived there as the result of her own observing eyes. Moreover, the excitement of the adventure had invaded Amiens, and Manon found Amiens sympathetic and ready to respond to a little woman who was going back to the ruins. Certainly the prices were

extortionate, for shopkeepers are the same all the world over, but Manon fought; that short little nose of hers and her firm chin belonged to a fighter, and the French love argument. She stood squarely to the counter, smiling, hitting out with perfect good-humour, a sturdy little woman quite capable of looking after her own affairs.

She bought blankets, four of them, half a dozen sheets, and a couple of pillows. There was a battle over the blankets; they were poor things, and Manon said so.

"It would seem, monsieur, that you will insist on the refugees sleeping in their petticoats. Where is all the money to come from?"

She contrived to get thirty francs knocked off the price of the blankets.

Then she went in search of bargains, and found a shop that was kept by a little widow. The widow had children to feed, and was ready to fight for them with her finger-nails. The two women talked—and Manon did not try to fight the widow. They spent half an hour chatting to each other, exchanging confidences, and refusing to use their claws.

"It is very hard for all of us," said Manon, "and you have five children. Mon Dieu!—I have none, but my house is in ruins."

The woman let Manon have some red cotton for two duvets and several lengths of cretonne for curtains at a price that was honest.

"We women should not devour each other."

The widow kept a cosmopolitan sort of shop. Manon saw men's shirts hanging up, and a pile of blue linen trousers on one of the shelves. She knew that Paul had one solitary suit of clothes—clothes that would soon be ruined by the rough work on the house. She bought him two good shirts, two pairs of blue linen trousers, a pair of heavy corduroys, and a black alpaca coat. Manon smiled to herself as she fingered the things and chatted to the widow. There was a suggestive homeliness about buying these clothes for Paul, and she found the future strangely full of him. He seemed to have taken his place in Beaucourt, and she saw him moving about in these blue trousers, sleeves rolled up, head bare, hammering, sawing, fixing doors and windows, scrambling about the roof, indefatigable yet rather silent. She was growing quite familiar with the set and intense look in his blue eyes when he was at work. He had good shoulders and strong arms, and a clean, fresh skin. Yes, she liked Paul, the man. And it would be so easy to hurt him. This good fellow needed a protectress.

Manon wandered in a happy mood through Amiens. She was very alive, and the life of Amiens pleased her. She idled into the cathedral and rested there awhile, breathing in the soft grey tranquil atmosphere of the place, a

young woman who knew nothing about Gothic architecture and was not worried by that horrible notion that it was her duty to appreciate the beauty of the building. She left a franc in the alms box and went out in search of a tobacco shop. Manon had a little breeze with the woman who kept it—for it is quite unnecessary to let oneself be cheated even if one has been sitting in a cathedral. A few blunt remarks, with blood to Manon, and she went elsewhere. Two tins of "Capstan" and some French mixture very rich in latakia were put away in the string-bag. The price was horrible, but was she not getting Paul's sweat for nothing?

She did not forget the dictionary, though it was not a new one; newness might rouse suspicions if it happened to fall into other people's hands. Last of all she bought a saw, a plane, a folding measure, some garden tools, and a soldering set. There were plenty of leaking pots and pans in Beaucourt, and Paul was a man of resource.

The Casteners were waiting for her at the auberge, and they sat down to dinner. Marie waited to know how Manon had fared with her shopping.

"These shopkeepers are villains."

"Oh, well, they have children, most of them," said Manon, thinking of the widow. "I have not done so badly. I suppose we shall all get bargains in heaven."

They drove round to collect Manon's bulkier merchandise, and then left the grey spire of Amiens behind them. Veuve Castener had been counting the number of houses they passed that had been damaged by shell-fire during the war. She began to be talkative, stimulated by the rattle of the wheels, and detailing the gossip of some of the French soldiers who had been sent home to their farms.

"Yes, worse things happened than the wrecking of houses. There are those sluts who became too friendly with the Boche. Pierre Ledru was saying the other day that there were French girls who had hidden German soldiers—their lovers. Ledru swore that one girl was shot by her own brother for taking food to a Square-head who was hiding in a wood."

"It's easy to be virtuous—over here," said Manon; "but men are the same all the world over. I know what it must have been like in those occupied villages, especially if you had any looks."

"A Frenchwoman should always be a Frenchwoman."

"Mon ami, people do all sorts of strange things when they are starving. But why talk of these tragedies? Look at the sun over there. I love the big impartial sun, he gives the same chance to everybody."

“That’s right, mother,” said Etienne; “we haven’t had the boot on our faces like those people nearer the frontier. Besides a man has got such a pull; he can talk a woman’s honour away if she won’t give him what he’s after.”

“Etienne is a man of the world,” said Manon.

Veuve Castener grunted. She did not like being corrected by her son.

It was after supper that night, and Marie Castener was emptying the last of the coffee into Manon’s cup, when they heard a man’s footsteps outside the door. He knocked and tried the handle, but the door was bolted. Veuve Castener thought it was Etienne, for Etienne never used his voice when some more primitive sort of sound would serve. Marie went to the door and opened it, and discovered Louis Blanc.

Veuve Castener’s big body filled the doorway. She said nothing. Her bulk and her silence kept Bibi on the doorstep.

“Good evening, madame.”

He had looked over Marie’s shoulder and seen Manon sitting at the table in the yellow circle of light thrown by the lamp.

“Good evening, Madame Latour.”

Bibi pushed the words past Veuve Castener, since her big body kept him out of the room.

Manon looked up.

“Good evening, Monsieur Blanc.”

She replied to him with an air of complete unconcern, betraying neither interest nor antagonism.

Bibi scraped his boots on the doorstep and removed his hat. You might take liberties when you were alone with one woman, but you were polite when there happened to be two of them.

“Is it permitted for a poor man to come in and sit down for ten minutes?”

He smiled, and made eyes at Marie.

“I have a few words to say to Madame Latour. A business matter, you know; we are full of business these days.”

Veuve Castener spoke to Manon in a loud voice, as though Bibi were on the other side of a field.

“Here is Monsieur Louis Blanc who wishes to speak to you, Manon.”

“What does he want?”

“To talk about business.”

“Oh, let him in,” said Manon, yawning a little.

Bibi was angry at being kept on the doorstep, and at the way Mother Castener had snubbed him by talking to Manon as though he were not there. He had seen Manon's yawn, and appreciated the flat indifference of her voice; the diplomat in Bibi was ruffled. His swagger had lost its fine edge and became a more brutal weapon.

Veuve Castener let him enter. She glanced at Manon, who had reached for her work-basket and had taken out a stocking that needed darning, also wool and a pair of scissors. She dropped the scissors into her lap.

"I am going to wash up."

Manon understood what was in Marie's mind. The wash-house was at the back of the cottage, and was reached by crossing a brick-paved yard. Manon nodded.

"Sit down, monsieur."

But Bibi remained standing, watching Veuve Castener clearing away the plates, his hands in his trouser pockets. Manon glanced up at him once or twice. She noticed that Louis Blanc was wearing new clothes, a well-cut black suit, new boots, a light waistcoat. These clothes were part of Bibi's "business atmosphere"; he was a fellow who had money.

Veuve Castener disappeared with a tray full of dirty crockery. Bibi stood quite still for a moment, and then went and closed the door that opened on the yard. He came back and stared at Manon across the table.

"That is rather unnecessary, monsieur."

"Indeed!"

"You and I have nothing to say to each other that my friend may not hear."

He laughed, one of those soundless laughs, and fidgeted his hands in his pockets.

"You are still devilish pretty, ma petite."

"And you are still a fool."

He gave her a vicious yet humorous glance, and began to walk slowly up and down, his boots making a leisurely clatter on the red-tiled floor.

"That should reassure Madame Gossip,—what! So you won't have sentiment, not even from me! Let us try business, my dear."

Manon had begun darning the stocking. She looked steadily at Bibi for a moment.

"Very well, keep to business. What is it that you want?"

He swung round and faced her, legs straddling, head thrown back, loins hollowed, pockets and belly thrust forward.

"A partner."

"What for?"

"You want me to give the whole game away, do you? Yes, you little devil, you always were the best business woman in Beaucourt. And such a leg, too."

"Be quick," said Manon; "I am going to help Marie at the end of five minutes."

Bibi smiled, and began to walk up and down again, and Manon noticed that his track tended to become an orbit, with herself as the centre. Sometimes he was behind her, and she did not like having Bibi behind her, but she remained quite still in her chair, though tense as a steel spring.

"I am going to make money in Beaucourt. A little hotel—what! well advertised for the people with handkerchiefs and the fools of Americans! Kept by one of the veterans of Verdun, with the Médaille Militaire! Allons! That's all right. What do you say?"

Manon went on with her work, conscious of Bibi standing there close beside her.

"I think many things, monsieur."

"Let's have them."

"You want my house. It is in better condition than yours, is it not?"

"Tiens! What cleverness!"

"You would like to have your own way in Beaucourt, not an hotel or a café within twenty kilomètres."

"Go on guessing, ma petite."

"That is all, monsieur."

And then he bent over her suddenly from behind, tweaked her ear, and caught her by the shoulders. It had always been his way with women, to surprise them, get them into his arms. The magnetic male was very strong in Bibi; he had known women who had fought and then given him all that he wanted.

Manon had been waiting for that attack. She had expected it, knowing Bibi as she did. She said nothing, but picking up the scissors, made a deft jab at Louis Blanc's left wrist.

"Keep your hands to yourself, if you please."

She had challenged the beast in Bibi, and she sat there pretending to go on with her work, drawing her breath a little more deeply, ready to spring up, and to call for Marie Castener. Bibi had removed his hands from her shoulders, and was sucking his left wrist. She had drawn blood, quite a good red trickle of it.

"I think that is all, monsieur."

She saw him come back from behind her chair and move to the other side of the table. He had pulled out a blue handkerchief and was wrapping it round his wrist.

"Your scissors are as sharp as your tongue. A nice way to receive a man who comes to propose a little bit of business."

"What a fool you are," she said very quietly. "Don't you see that you cannot do with me what you have done with other women? You are not the sort of man who appeals to me. You are only wasting your time."

Bibi stared at her a moment.

"It is as well to know these things," he said coolly; "nothing like having reconnoitred the other fellow's bit of trench. Shall I tell old Mother Castener that the talk is over?"

"I am going out there myself. Good-night, monsieur."

Louis Blanc picked up his hat and opened the door. He stood there for a couple of seconds as though he were about to say something, but he said nothing, and when he closed the door he did it very quietly. Manon heard him walk away.

"A nice neighbour to have," she said to herself. "I wonder if Paul can fight?"

XVIII

HORSES were scarce in Ste. Claire, and Manon found that Etienne Castener could not hire himself and his brown nag to her more than once a week, so she made a bundle of the things Brent needed and prepared to walk to Beaucourt. It was rather a wonderful bundle, an omnium gatherum of tobacco, matches, nails, six fresh eggs, some brussels sprouts, half a loaf of bread, six slices of fresh meat, a few oranges, three candles, a new shirt, a pair of blue trousers and the dictionary. Marie watched the making of the bundle, and withheld her criticism until the end.

"You are not going to carry that to Beaucourt?"

"Yes, but I am. There is a saw, too, that will have to travel under my arm."

Marie felt the weight of the bundle.

"Oh, la-la, it is too heavy!"

"I am stronger than you think. See, I push a stick through the cord, put a pad between the stick and my shoulder, and there you are!"

She was away at five o'clock, after a simple breakfast by lamplight in the red-tiled cottage. The morning was very dark and still, one of those mysterious and secret mornings when the heart thrills not a little to the eternal adventure of life. There had been a frost, and the air struck keen and clear, with the smell of fresh earth that some peasant had turned up with his plough. A few stars pricked the black sky. The great poplars guarding the road were still wrapped up in their coats of darkness and of sleep, and as Manon passed along the road and up the hill she felt rather than saw the branches of those trees meeting like a high vault above her head.

She trudged along with her bundle slung over one shoulder, and the saw swathed in paper under the other arm, not hurrying because of her knowledge of the twenty kilomètres that were to be marched that day, and of the work she wished to do at Beaucourt. She was a little woman with a great heart; also—she was happy. The blackness of the morning seemed to shut her up with her own thoughts, and Manon's thoughts were many and varied as she pushed steadily along the road. The elements of life were mixed up with her thinking, and if, as the clever people tell us, ordinary thinking is but the glow thrown up by the emotions, then Manon's thoughts were made of human stuff. She felt—and in feeling she knew, and in knowing grasped the

quaint and seemingly irrational altruism of this English Paul, the essential badness of Bibi—the great truth that some people give while others take. If you do not give you will never know what life can give you in return. Manon's view of life was quite simple yet shrewd. Men had to be managed. It was very necessary for a woman to have someone to love; she withered into a stick without it. Happiness can be planned, if you love someone very much, and go about the managing of your happiness like a cheerful little housewife. Simple things matter. Men like to be praised, women to be kissed. Always back your man with your tongue, finger-nails and heart. A comfortable bed, a well-cooked meal, and a glass of wine at the right moment are worth oceans of wise verbiage. A woman should never marry a man who was not a little shy before he kissed her for the first time. Greedy eaters are soon satisfied.

She trudged on, shifting her bundle from shoulder to shoulder, and presently the dawn came, a greyness that grew red like a fire. The bare trees of a wood showed up against it, the branches like some exquisitely carved rood-screen in a church. She heard a bird pipe up somewhere in the wood, and then another and yet another till a good score were singing, for the birds had multiplied during the war. Beyond the wood a great sweep of black and desolate country cut like a broad knife at the red throat of the dawn. A solitary house with half its roof gone, the broken stump of a tree, a rifle, butt end upwards, marking a grave, a pair of wagon-wheels in a shell-hole, all these were like black symbols against that red sky. Yet there was a silence over this wilderness, a beauty, a strangeness that called; and over yonder lay Beaucourt, waiting, waiting for those who would return.

"Yes, it's beautiful," said Manon to herself; "nôtre pays est malade; it calls for help. The strong ought to help the weak. I must not forget that; my little house is not going to stuff itself with food and do nothing for the others. What a pity all the Bibis in the world weren't killed in the war!—it would have made things so much easier, and I have an idea that Bibi is going to be a nuisance. I wonder what Paul is doing? Lighting the stove?"

Her thoughts centred on Paul, and somehow this wild landscape with the red sky turning to a tawny gold swept away any little feeling of surprise that had lingered in Manon's mind. The wind blew as it pleased over these leagues of desolate country. Life was a going back to the wilderness—a fight, face to face, with the elements in Nature and in man. The little stuffy conventions had no roof under which to create a moral fog. You went out into the open with your man and laboured till the sweat ran from you, swinging axe and hammer, or plying hoe and spade. Courage and a clear

faith in your comrade, that was how Manon sensed it. Adam and Eve, with God looking on, and the Serpent out of a job.

Some three hours later Manon came to Beaucourt in the blue of a March morning. A great white wall stood up at the west end of the village like a gigantic notice board waiting for a message; the wall had been part of the factory owner's house.

"Yes, there ought to be something on that," said Manon, smiling in the eyes of the morning.

"Beware of Bibi!" she laughed.

"Or, Tommy's word, 'Cheero,' or just 'Courage.' "

She left the road and made her way over the higher ground, through the orchards above the Rue Romaine, and from this hill she had a view of the Café de la Victoire and a little human glimpse of Paul Brent. He had fixed up a length of telephone wire in the garden, and Manon saw him in the act of hanging out his washing—a shirt, two pairs of socks, and the things that he wore under his trousers.

Now Manon was strangely touched by that glimpse of him. She was smiling, but there was a little shimmer of tenderness in her smile.

"Mon ami, I would have done that for you. But it is rather sweet seeing you playing the blanchisseuse."

When she came down the hill into the Rue de Picardie she noticed that the shell-holes in the walls of the house had disappeared. Two neat new patches of brickwork had been put in, and Brent had used facing bricks of the same colour as the walls of the house so that the new work was hardly noticeable. He had got the bedding-plates into place along the tops of the walls. Between one of the end gables and the inverted V of the main partition wall a length of timber hung suspended in the air by two lengths of telephone wire, some ingenious contraption of Brent's for overcoming the problem of how a man could be in two places at the same time.

"Paul, hallo!"

He came through the old blue door in the garden wall, and stood a moment, looking down at her from the raised path. He had not expected her. The surprise and the pleasure of it were as obvious as the blue sky.

"What!—You have walked?"

"Yes."

And suddenly she was aware of a new shyness in Paul Brent. He was looking at her as a man only looks at a woman when she has become the

most wonderful thing in the world. He came down from the path and took her bundle.

"You have carried this from Ste. Claire?"

His shyness spread to Manon. She laughed. The feeling was rather exquisite, a little shiver of delight, the first note of a bird on a soft spring morning.

"Do I look tired?"

"A little."

She noticed that he seemed afraid to look straight into her eyes.

"Well, there was no horse to be had to-day, and in war the transport must not fail—and here's the saw."

He took it with an air of eagerness, pulled off the wrappings, and looked along the line of the teeth.

"Oh, great! I have been wanting it badly."

And then she fell to admiring the work he had done, and Brent stood and smiled as a shy man smiles on such occasions.

"It is splendid," said Manon; "you would hardly know that there had been holes in the wall. How clever you are with your hands."

"I learnt the business when I was no taller than you are."

"And you have been so quick. I was astonished. And then—the poor man—has had to do his own washing!"

"I had a hot bath last night, and afterwards, I washed the clothes. Well, you see, they wanted it."

She patted the bundle.

"I have something for you in there. And tell me, Paul, what is that beam doing, hung up there?"

"Oh, that ridge-beam," said Brent; "it's a bit awkward to get it into place, and I had rigged up that cradle, but I can do the job to-day with a little help."

"We will do it together. And now, have you had breakfast? Because I could eat a second one."

"So could I."

"An omelette and coffee?"

"I can't resist an omelette, but what about the eggs?"

"They are in that bundle. Do be careful."

"Trust me," said Brent.

Paul had cleaned and fitted the stove in Manon's kitchen, and she did her cooking there while Paul went out to try the saw. He had contrived a carpenter's bench in the front room on the other side of the passage, using boxes and the floor boards from one of the huts. There were some two by four battens to be worked up into a door-frame, and Brent squared the ends off with the new saw.

"It cuts like butter," he called to Manon.

"Butter! Oh, mon ami, have you any butter left? I have forgotten to bring some."

"Yes, quite a good-sized pat."

"Thank God! How near we were to a tragedy."

Half an hour later they sat down in the kitchen to that second breakfast. Manon had taken off her shoes in order to rest her feet, and she told an heroic lie when Brent accused her of having blistered them in walking from Ste. Claire. The omelette was excellent, golden food for the gods, and so was the French bread after a season of army biscuits and ration jam.

Manon Latour found herself looking at Paul as many a savage woman must have looked at the man whom she had chosen for a partner. Strength might matter in Beaucourt, and Paul Brent looked strong. He had a good chest and shoulders, and a squarish and intelligent head well set on a sinewy neck. She had seen him with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, and remembered noticing how big and powerful his arms were. She knew that Paul was not the man who would fight for the mere love of fighting. There was too little of the animal about him for such savagery. Moreover, he was too good-tempered, though when a good-tempered man gets angry, the fire is all the more to be feared.

"All Englishmen can box; is not that so, mon ami?"

Paul was drinking his third cup of coffee. He set the cup down and stared at Manon.

"No. Why?"

"It is useful. And you——?"

"I have never boxed in my life," said Brent.

He saw the faintest of faint frowns on her forehead. Bibi could box, and his boxing included tricks with his feet.

And then she began to tell him about Bibi, how he had come to her and suggested a partnership, but she did not tell Paul that Louis Blanc had tried to get her into his arms.

"You see we quarrelled, and I packed him out of the house, and now we are in his way. His idea is to attract the tourists to Beaucourt, charge them ten francs a bottle for wretched wine, sell them souvenirs, and all that. It will take months to get that hotel of his rebuilt, and this place of mine would have suited him very well while he was rebuilding the hotel. You will have to be very careful of Bibi."

Brent's hand had felt instinctively for his pipe. Manon saw it, and leaning over, took a tin of tobacco out of her bundle.

"Voilà! And English too!"

His eyes lit up, not merely at the sight of the tobacco, but because she had remembered.

"That's good of you, Manon. What did you pay for it?"

"That is my affair."

"Nonsense. I am not going to let you pay."

"This time it is a present," she said; "and when you wish to pay for the next you will have to send me in a bill for the work you have done."

But he was annoyed.

"Look here, I have fifteen hundred francs down in the cellar."

"Very well, you shall give me ten presently, if you promise not to argue every time. Don't you see that I wish to make some return?"

Brent's face softened.

"I am sorry," he said; "it is like you to put it in that way."

He opened the tin, filled his pipe, lit it and puffed with immense relish.

"Now, what about this prize bully, Monsieur Blanc? Do you mean to say that he may come along and try to frighten me out of Beaucourt?"

"That is just what I do mean," said Manon; "you do not know Bibi as I do."

Brent's eyes glimmered.

"I have met men like that. But they always left me alone. I used to laugh at them—and get on with my work. You can't quarrel with a gatepost."

"Bibi would," said Manon; "he's a savage. Do you know what he did once?"

"Well?"

"There was a bull on one of the farms, a fierce beast. It chased Bibi one day; he had to run. What does he do but come to Beaucourt, pick up an axe, and go back to fight the bull. And he killed it, battered its head all to bits,

and then paid the owner. Threw the money at him. Bibi likes a swaggering gesture."

"What a pleasant brute," said Brent, but the glimmer had gone out of his eyes.

Manon began putting on her shoes.

"I wanted you to know. You see, if Bibi tried to hurt you, it would be because of me."

"I don't ask for a better reason," he said, looking her straight in the eyes.

And Manon coloured. She bent over and picked up the bundle, and began to place the things in order upon the table.

XIX

PAUL watched Manon arrange all this merchandise of hers upon the table, the yellow oranges, the blue linen trousers, and the white and blue striped shirt, the tobacco, matches, and candles, the old brown-covered dictionary, the fresh greens from Veuve Castener's garden, the slices of cooked meat wrapped up in a page of *Le Petit Journal*. It was a wonderful bundle that she had carried from Ste. Claire, and Brent was touched by all the little things that she had troubled to remember. After those three days of separation this visit of hers to Beaucourt with this weight of good human stuff on her sturdy shoulders seemed to give to their partnership an essential French and intimate solidity. Brent felt that he mattered to Manon. She had shopped for him, and shouldered the merchandise ten miles. A shallow man would have felt flattered, but to Brent it brought a sense of warmth to the heart.

"Manon?"

She looked up, smiling.

"We are going to argue again as we argued over the tobacco."

"Oh, very well," she said with a little gleam of her brown eyes.

She felt in the pocket of her skirt for her purse, opened it with serious deliberation, and picked out a few francs and some paper money. She unfolded the notes, one of fifty francs, two of ten, and three of five, and spread them on the table, putting an orange on each to keep them from blowing away.

"We are going to be very business-like. Let us see; I suppose you are working here at least ten hours a day, and I can afford to pay you a franc an hour. Five days of ten hours makes fifty francs. So I begin by paying you fifty francs."

She held out the fifty-franc note to him, but Paul made no effort to take it.

She pretended to be surprised.

"Isn't it enough?"

Brent looked at her quickly.

"I don't take your money."

She flourished the note.

“There you are! How logical! And I don’t take your money, Paul, so there is the end of it.”

Paul answered her with a slow, uneasy smile.

“That is all very well, but a man can’t live on a woman.”

And then she scolded him with a sudden fierceness that made Brent think that she was angry.

“Do not be so foolish; you are not living on me. What should I do if I had no one to help me here? Think. Men who can use their hands and their heads are going to be little gods in a place like Beaucourt. Men are scarce in France; we have lost so many of them and there is so much to do. Are we partners, or are we not? If we are partners I pay you good money, and you pay me for what I buy for you; and if you quarrel about the money, mon Dieu, I will give you the sack!”

They burst out laughing—both of them—at the idea of Paul being sacked.

“There, you see how ridiculous you were making things, wanting to be so proud.”

“Yes, but wait a minute. Supposing I decided that I should like you to buy me a piano.”

“Then I should begin to think that Paul had been at the red wine. You are not made that way. You give; you would always be wanting to give. Now, be a good man and go and try on that shirt and those trousers.”

Paul went like an obedient boy, and reappeared some five minutes later, looking quaintly self-conscious.

“They feel just right.”

She turned him round with a dominant forefinger.

“You must take care of your good clothes. I have bought you a fine pair of velour-à-cotes trousers for Sundays, and a little black jacket. Those linen trousers will wash. And now—I am quite rested; let us work.”

That swinging ridge-beam overhead was the first thing to be tackled. Paul went up the ladder and straddled his way up the gable end to the chimney-stack, and gave his directions to Manon. She had grasped what he wanted her to do, and had run out into the yard and got hold of the telephone wire whose lower end was fastened to a bit of an iron bar that Brent had driven into the ground.

“I pull?”

“That’s it.”

There was a slot in the throat of the chimney-stack where the original beam had taken its bearing, and Manon pulled on the stout wire until Paul held up his hand. He lay along a sloping bit of wall, and guided the end of his beam into the slot.

"All right. Fasten the wire again."

He scrambled down, shifted the ladder, and climbed the partition wall. Manon had run round into the room below and had hold of the other wire.

"Ready."

She raised the beam, waiting for Paul's signal.

"Enough."

He worked the end into the slot at the top of the partition wall, and the thing was done.

Manon clapped her hands.

"How exciting! Now, what next!"

Paul came down to the top of the front wall of the house.

"I want to try one of the rafters from the hut. One of those long things there. If you could give me the end of it——"

She did so, and Paul tried a balancing feat, like Blondin with a pole. He had braced the wooden sleepers together so that they lay solidly along the top of the wall, and resting the butt of the rafter against one of them, he prepared to lower it towards the ridge-beam.

"Hallo! Just a minute."

He had paused.

"If the thing falls, our crockery may suffer. Pull that table into the corner."

Manon pushed the table into a safe place, and watched Brent handle that length of timber. It was a ticklish job; an attack of nerves or some lack of balance might have landed him down below with a broken neck. Moreover, it was a test of strength; and when the rafter came to rest with some three inches of its end projecting over the ridge-beam, Manon sent up a little cry of applause and triumph.

"Oh, mon ami, splendid! And how strong you are."

It was the man who dominated for the moment their little world of adventure, the man with the strong hand and the contriving head. Brent stood looking down at her and smiling.

"Now, then, the hammer and gimlet, a packetful of long nails, and the saw. I shall have half those rafters up to-day."

She collected the tools and nails, made two journeys up the ladder and handed them to Brent. One end of the rafter was all ready cut to fit on the bedding-plate and Brent secured it with a nail driven half home, and then went up the slope of the partition wall, sawed off the upper end at an angle so that it dropped flush against the ridge-beam, and drove nails home.

"Now—it is going to be easy."

He told Manon to fasten another rafter to the end of the wire that they had used for raising the end of the ridge-beam, he pulled it up, unfastened the wire, ran the rafter down the opposite slope of the partition wall, rolled it over till it was on a line with the rafter on the other side, shaped the upper end with the saw, and nailed it to the beam; with the two lower ends fastened to the sleepers on the wall Brent had completed his first span.

The rest was repetition, with Manon acting as ladder boy, and Paul working along a framework that grew stronger and more rigid with each pair of rafters that were fixed.

Half-way through the morning Brent told Manon to rest.

"You have another thirteen kilomètres to walk, and I can get along on my own."

"Very well, I am going to cook your dinner."

"Is that resting?"

"Of course. I sit on a chair between the stove and the table. But take care, you must not drop sawdust into my frying-pan."

"I have too much respect for my dinner."

So Manon collected wood and her pots and pans, and did her cooking in the roofless kitchen, while Brent scrambled up above, hammering, sawing, and whistling "Roses in Picardie," his blue trousers more vivid than the blue of the sky. He was happy and strenuous, and kept up such a merry piping that he made Manon think of a jolly bird in a cage. She sat and watched him with soft eyes.

"Quel oiseau y at-il?"

Brent looked down from his rafters and laughed.

"A blue bird, Madame Taquine. Blue birds are lucky."

"The bird shall have a glass of wine for dinner. And what is that pretty song you whistle?"

He told her, and she began to imitate him, picking up the melody and whistling it while she fed the fire.

"Now, there are two birds in a cage," she called up at him, "and what am I? A black bird with brown eyes?"

Perched up against the blue sky and climbing about the increasing intricacies of his roof timbers, Paul developed a healthy hunger, and the savoury smell of Manon's cooking drifted up to him from below. All his old "tool sense" was coming back, and he was working with a speed and a precision that would have damned him in the world of Go Slow. But then Paul had an object, a spark of the sacred fire, and the little capitalist down below there—even Manon—who employed him, would have opened her eyes very wide if he had preached by his acts the Religion of Slackness. Paul had seen her slip away into the garden and begin digging in the corner where the iron summer house stood. She returned, holding up a bottle of wine to encourage her man.

"Now you know where it is."

She felt that the wine was as safe as the silver.

The dinner was all that a dinner should be, and they drank the health of the new roof. To Manon's eyes the house began to look quite "dressed," and already she saw herself voyaging over from Ste. Claire in Etienne Castener's big blue cart with the bits of furniture she had collected, and turning the Café de la Victoire into a home. This house of hers would lead the way in Beaucourt, and stand as a live thing to encourage the others.

"I want to look again at Bibi's house."

Her watch told her that she would have to be on the march in half an hour, and there was the washing up to be done. She was not going to leave Paul with a lot of dirty crockery.

"You can heat up the meat and the vegetables for another meal," she told him, "and perhaps you know how to fry eggs."

"I can boil them and judge the time," laughed Paul.

When Manon was ready for the road, Brent walked with her by way of the Rue de Picardie to look at the Hôtel de Paris. The place, standing as it did at the cross-roads, had suffered badly from shell-fire, and the ragged walls rose out of a deplorable chaos of rubbish—old iron and broken brick. It had been a biggish building, and Brent saw that the house had gathered itself round the great central mass of brickwork in which were the chimney flues, a mass of brickwork that stood like a lonely tower in the middle of the ruin. The main beams of the roof and floors had taken their bearings from this central tower. The staircase had curled round it, and in any reconstructive scheme this mass of brickwork would serve as a point d'appui.

Brent climbed over the rubbish and examined the chimney-stack with the eyes of an expert. There was a great crack running up one side of it, a crack that spread upwards from a raw chasm at the base of the mass where a shell had exploded. A good third of the foundations had been blown away, and the whole pile seemed to balance itself precariously on the edge of the shell crater.

Manon had followed Brent over the heaps of brick.

"Look at that," and he pointed at Louis Blanc's chimney-stack.

"It seems ready to fall."

Brent was frowning.

"Half-an-hour's work with a pick, or a Mill's hand-grenade, and a bit of wind, and the thing would come down like an old factory chimney. Take that gable end of the house with it too, probably,—and put our dear friend back for weeks."

Manon's eyes met his.

"It would be a blow to Bibi?"

"Well—that brick stack is going to be very useful when they begin reconstructing the house. And if it fell it would be pretty sure to bring that wall down."

"But we could not do it, Paul."

Her face had a touch of fierceness.

"It would be such a dirty trick, the sort of trick that Bibi would play on other people."

"I thought you would say that," he told her, with a significant little smile.

"Then you wanted to find out——?"

"Yes."

"O my Paul," she said.

Brent looked sheepish.

"I should have known that you had some strong reason—that the fellow is such a beast."

"He may be that, but we could not fight him in that way. I don't believe you would have done it, Paul, even if I had asked you."

"I was pretty sure you would not ask me."

"Thank you," she said.

Brent walked with her as far as the factory, and turned homewards along the Rue Romaine. She had given him a soft look of the eyes, and a little

smile, and Brent was happy.

"She's great," he kept saying to himself; "by God, I'm glad she trusts me!"

XX

THE day dawned very red, with the whole horizon flushed like the inside of a shell. The sky overhead was as grey as a pearl; there was no wind moving and the air lay soft and still.

Brent stood on the doorstep and scented a change in the weather. Rain was coming, and there might be wind with it, and he looked up at the new rafters overhead and was glad that he had fixed none of the iron sheeting. A gale could blow through the timber-work like a north-easter through the snoring rigging of a ship that has struck her sails, and do no damage, but Brent took the hint that that red sky gave him. He would have to block up those doorways and windows before sheeting the roof, or some malicious devil of a March wind might come crowding in, heave up the whole structure and deposit it in the backyard.

He had lit the stove and he had coffee, a boiled egg, and real bread and butter for breakfast. His pipe tasted good after that meal when he went up aloft to complete the fixing of the rafters on the half of the house over the kitchen. The sky looked like a great flat sheet of grey rubber, with a dirty patch of darker clouds sticking to it here and there.

"Yes, you are going to rain all right, damn you," said Brent; "pity you couldn't have put it off for three days."

Paul had finished the fixing of the rafters and had been nailing on the battens that were to take the galvanized iron when Louis Blanc cycled into Beaucourt. He came by the road past the château, and from the high ground there he could not help seeing the fresh white timber-work of the Café de la Victoire's roof showing up against the lead-coloured sky. Bibi dismounted and stood holding the machine by the handle-bars. Paul Brent was visible as a blue and white figure moving against the white timber, and Bibi could hear the faint tap-tap of his hammer.

The "propriétaire" of the Hôtel de Paris had the mentality of the superficially civilized man who has retained the worst blood of the savage. Louis Blanc was a Parisian, a Parisian of the cabaret type who happened to have been born in the provinces. He had a long head, immense appetites, and an exaggeration of the Latin temperament that the word "flamboyant" describes so well. A crowd made him brave, especially a crowd of women, and one woman would do the trick if she happened to be pretty. Bibi

swaggered; but there was a streak of cowardice in the man when you cut the hair of his vanity. He was just the precocious, unlicked, boastful, dirty-minded boy of sixteen who had never been socialized, and who remained a boy at the age of forty.

But Bibi had a head. He was ingenious. He had avoided hard work, and he had prospered. "Always get somebody else to shift your muck for you," was one of his sayings.

He had been very successful with women, though he had had his head bitten off on occasions. He did not understand that some women are fastidious. Bibi was not fastidious.

Beaucourt was in ruins, but the proprietor of the Hôtel de Paris had glimpsed the possibilities of a ruined village. For the plain person the problem of Beaucourt was shelter, work, food; the peasant, like Father Adam, would have to live on his own sweat, reclaiming those fields and gardens, gulping his potage, and swallowing his own potatoes and haricots. That was not Louis Blanc's idea of life. He despised the peasant. He was modern, no agriculturist, but a manipulator of other men's activities. He meant to create an artificial value in Beaucourt. He had money, and a man who was ready to back him with more money, a rich Parisian bourgeois whom he had met in the army who had been piqued by Bibi's idea. Beaucourt was to be an "exhibition village," a centre for the sentimental fools who would visit the battlefields, and might think it quaint and charming to stay in a village that was rising like the dead from its ruins.

A week ago Bibi and his man of money had visited the Tourist Agencies in Paris. Bibi had declaimed.

"In three months there will be an hotel in Beaucourt. Some experience, hey!—for Americans and English to stay in a devastated village! Table d'hôte inside, and people putting up rabbit hutches, or camping in the church or the cellars! The tourists will be able to see it all from my windows, and they will have their comforts too, good beds and full bellies. People like to be comfortable, messieurs, even after strolling down a devastated street. Wine—yes—plenty of wine. And relics—cartloads of relics. You can visit the graves, drive to Albert, Peronne, Villers Bretonneux, Chaulnes, Roye, Moreuil. Bus services to St. Quentin and the Hindenburg Line! Do you not see it all, messieurs?"

One of the principal Tourist Agencies saw it very vividly. Louis Blanc had an idea. They were ready to put him on their list and to advertise Beaucourt: "Spend three days in a devastated village. Comfort among the ruins. Unique provincial hotel just rebuilt after being demolished by shell-

fire." They rose to Bibi's idea, but they were a little sceptical about his scheme for rebuilding the Hôtel de Paris.

"Thunder, but I am getting the stuff," said Bibi, "and I am getting the men."

Which was an exaggeration, for neither building material nor labour was to be had at a wave of the hand. Bibi was agitating his case with the Préfet and the Mayor of the Commune; he was trying to buy timber, tiles, army stores, army huts, anything and everything.

And there he stood on the château hill and saw that damned fellow of Manon Latour's putting up a roof before he—Bibi—had bought a foot of timber!

"The devil scorch his blue trousers, but where did he get that wood?"

Louis Blanc walked his bicycle down the château hill, and left it leaning against the wall by the doorway of the Hôtel de Paris. He went in and had another critical look at this place of his, crunching over the broken bricks, examining the walls, the foundations. The precarious state of the great central chimney-stack was as obvious to him as it had been to Paul; the raw and ragged concavity at the base of it looked bigger than ever, so much so that Bibi's eyes narrowed and little ugly wrinkles showed about his mouth and nostrils. He was a suspicious beast. A man who is ready to play dirty tricks on others is always imagining them being played upon himself. Bibi climbed down into the hole and examined the brickwork. There were no pick marks upon it, no signs of freshly broken surface, but Bibi was not satisfied.

He went and stood in the Place de l'Eglise and surveyed the stage upon which he was to mount this financial tableau of his. He looked at the church with its broken spire and worm-eaten walls. Yes, the church was just as it should be; the scenic effect of it was excellent; sensible people would leave the church just as it stood, a sensational and picturesque relic. Here was one of the outrages of the great war slap up against his windows; the tourists could stare at the church while they sat at dinner in the salle-à-manger. Bibi suspected that no funds would be available for the restoration of churches. That was excellent. Who wanted churches, unless they were of sufficient interest to be written up in guide-books? The shell-scarred lime trees, ranged round the Place like the pillars of a piazza, had a decorative and realistic effect, and Bibi decided that the lime trees must not be touched. He turned his attention to the Hospice. The Hospice was a very interesting ruin, and Bibi thought of trying to buy the building, visualizing it as an admirable annexe in the event of the scheme proving a success.

The tap-tap of Brent's hammer echoed faintly through the ruins. The sound was insistent, challenging, busily competitive. It annoyed Louis Blanc, kept up a noise like the yapping of a dog, and disturbed his material visions.

"Confound that fellow!"

He called Brent a foul name, and then walked into the Rue de Picardie. Bibi was jealous of Manon, and jealous of the enterprise she had shown in gathering up the threads of life in broken Beaucourt. A woman had got ahead of him, and Bibi's vanity felt the insult; women were created to be spectators and to supply the applause. Louis Blanc wanted Manon, and he wanted her house. She was so plump and pretty and provocative, and she would have made such an excellent little manageress, for even tourists like a pretty French madame busy about a house. But Manon had declared war upon Bibi; he had his grudge against her, and since she was only a woman, Bibi transferred the grudge to Brent.

Reaching the end of the Rue de Picardie, Louis Blanc had a view of the work that Paul had completed, and it was the work of a craftsman, no bodging job perpetrated in a back garden by an enthusiastic amateur. Bibi stood in the street and gazed, and the longer he looked, the more fiercely he disliked Paul. Brent was on the roof, nailing down battens at great speed, a couple of nails in his mouth, and his back to Louis Blanc. It was evident to Bibi that Manon had made a catch, and that the fellow up there on the roof was worth many smiles.

He shouted at Brent:

"Good morning, monsieur."

And a moment later:

"Where the devil did you get that wood?"

Brent turned sharply, and sitting on one of the lower battens, looked down at Bibi. He saw him as a tall man, feet planted well apart, stomach thrown forward, his fists bulging out of his trouser pockets, a man who looked all angles, lean shoulders jutting out, jaw cocked, cap over one eye, elbows truculent. Bibi reminded Brent of a big and blackguardly variation of "Captain Kettle."

He removed the nails from his mouth, and wished Bibi good morning. The first drops of rain were beginning to fall.

Louis Blanc repeated the question that Brent had failed to answer:

"Where the devil did you get that wood?"

Brent smiled down at him.

"Found it," was all he said, and turning round, resumed his hammering.

Bibi looked hard at the middle of Paul's back. It would have been a great pleasure to him to have climbed up and thrown that fellow off the roof, but there were things that Bibi wanted to find out. The rain drops fell on his face, and suggested shelter. Bibi mounted the path and entered the doorway of the Café de la Victoire. He poked his head into the room on the right of the passage and saw stacked in the farther room all that timber and galvanized iron that Paul and Manon had salved from the huts.

It was pure chance, but Brent's hammer took it into its head to slide off one of the rafters and land on the stone floor of the passage within two feet of where Louis Blanc was standing. Brent looked down and saw Bibi, and Bibi was looking up at him.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was an accident," said Brent.

"Nicely arranged."

"Well, you have no business there, anyway, monsieur."

Bibi stooped, picked up the hammer, and sent it whirling into the ruins across the road.

"Voilà!"

He stamped into the other rooms and looked at everything at his leisure, while Paul came down the ladder to find his hammer. He knew the sort of man that Bibi was, and he had no intention of letting himself be tricked into a rough and tumble with him. Such men are best held at arm's length by a show of good temper.

Brent had the luck to find his hammer almost at once, and he was up the ladder again and hammering hard before Louis Blanc had satisfied his curiosity. Bibi looked up at him, puzzled.

"Oh, there you are!"

"I shan't drop it again, monsieur. There is no need for a tin helmet."

He saw Bibi's teeth.

"A nice little hoard you have here. Did you buy it?"

"We bought it by working for it, monsieur."

"You stole it," said Bibi.

Brent paused, smiling.

"Look here, monsieur, you tempt me to drop the hammer on you."

"Try it, my boy, try it."

Paul let fall a subtle hint instead of the hammer. He wanted to be left alone.

"Why don't you go and look for some yourself, monsieur. The good God helps those——"

"Oh, go to hell!" said Bibi.

He slouched out of the house, turning up the collar of his coat because of the rain, and Brent saw him walk down the Rue de Rosières. It appeared that Louis Blanc did not know of those huts, which was amusing and rather suggestive; Bibi had despised Beaucourt, and had not bothered to discover what Beaucourt could give him. When a man has big ideas, he does not trouble to grub among rubbish heaps.

Brent descended, looped the ground sheet over his shoulders, and went back to his work. Louis Blanc had disappeared, but presently he came swinging back along the Rue de Rosières, and Brent had a feeling that he had seen those huts.

Bibi went past the café with a cocked chin and a gleaming eye.

"You had better not take any more of that," he shouted at Brent; "it belongs to the State."

Paul nodded at him.

"All right. It's no use to you, I suppose? Good morning."

Bibi called him a certain foul thing, and stalked on. He had made up his mind to hire a wagon and horses and salve some of that stuff for himself.

But he was feeling very evil towards Brent, and when Bibi hated a man he piled every imaginable infamy upon the enemy's shoulders.

"That fellow would play me a dirty trick—if he dared, but I frightened him a bit about the hammer. Wonder what a woman can see in a tow-headed sheep like that?"

It was raining hard and beginning to blow when Bibi got on his bicycle and rode for Ste. Claire.

Early in the afternoon the rain came with such a pelt, driven by a rising wind, that Paul had to leave work on the roof. He began rigging up a shelter in the big front room on the other side of the passage—a shelter that would enable him to push on with his doors and window-frames and defy the weather. He had stacked a reserve supply of dry firewood in the cellar, and when dusk fell and shut out the wet and melancholy blur of the Beaucourt ruins, Brent was not sorry to retreat to the cellar, light the stove and feel snug and dry. He lit the candle, put the kettle on the stove, and spent the time

cutting the mortices for the window-frames, using a couple of boxes as a bench.

By nine o'clock the wind had worked to a gale, and its bluster became so menacing that Brent climbed the cellar steps and stood in the passage under the shelter of the wall. The wind was snoring through the timber-work overhead, and now and again a gust would smite the house a full smack with the open hand, but the walls of the café took the blow without flinching. Brent thanked his luck that he had not been caught with the roof half covered, for the gale would have made a mess of the whole structure.

As he stood there in the darkness, he became aware of Beaucourt as a place of weird noises. The broken walls and hollow spaces made so many Pan's pipes for the wind to play upon. There was the noise, too, of things falling. Blocks of brickwork and strips of wall that had braved it out in quieter times subsided under the push of this furious north-easter. Remnants of roof slithered down with a clattering of tiles. Plaster that had clung to the stud-work crumbled to join the rubbish below. A rusty piece of corrugated iron went clanking and clashing up the Rue de Picardie, till a gust tossed it into a doorway and left it at rest.

Suddenly, like a big gun loosing off in the thick of all the tumult of the wind's attack, some mass of masonry or brickwork came down with a crash. Brent felt a distinct vibration of the earth, a thrill of the foundations under his feet.

"Hallo, there goes Bibi's chimney!"

He was right.

XXI

Madame Castener had lit the lamp when someone knocked at the door of her cottage. The wind was roaring in the poplars and blowing the rain against the windows, and Marie Castener opened the door no more than an inch, for lamp glasses were terribly dear.

"Who is there?"

A man's voice came out of the darkness, a brisk but quiet voice.

"Good evening, madame, I am sorry to trouble you on such a night, but they tell me that Madame Latour is here."

Manon was sitting at the table with a sheet of red linen that was to be the cover of a duvet hanging over her knees. The lamp was turned low and the corners of the room were in comparative darkness. She saw a little man wearing a black-caped overcoat and a soft black hat step quickly into the room while Madame Castener closed the door behind him.

The visitor bowed to Manon, pulled off his hat, and, coming into the circle of light, began to unbutton his overcoat. He was a compact, square-shouldered little man, short in the neck and legs, with a shrewd, grey, close-cropped head, very bright eyes and an air of humorous benignity. He smiled at Manon as she put the red linen aside on the table, rose, and held out her hands for his coat.

"Monsieur Durand!"

"I have surprised you."

She hung the wet coat over the back of a chair, turned up the lamp, and looked at Monsieur Anatole Durand with eyes that told him nothing. Monsieur Durand had owned the château at Beaucourt. He was neither an aristo nor a parvenu, but a solid little man whose father and grandfather had been solid men before him, millowners at Lille, men who had made money. Anatole had bought the château at Beaucourt about ten years before the war. A man of ideas and of energy, he had tried to teach Beaucourt certain things that it did not know, and Beaucourt—like most villages—had had no desire to be taught anything. Monsieur Durand had not been popular. He had lived up there in the château, and he had not belonged to the château. A peasant may abuse an aristo, but, even in abusing him, he recognizes the aristo's indigenous right to be there. Durand was an importation, a city man, a big little fellow who appeared to think he had right to interfere with the other

little fellows in Beaucourt. The soul of the peasant had shown its surliness. Durand was just a bumptious manufacturer who had come to amuse himself in the country. Beaucourt had held its nostrils at the smell of his autocar. What did Beaucourt want with an autocar? What did Beaucourt want with electric light, and a dynamo driven by water power? The man was a fussy, new-fangled fool.

"Be seated, monsieur."

Anatole Durand sat down, knees well apart, his hands resting on them. Marie Castener had drawn up a chair on the other side of the table; she began to darn stockings with an air of phlegmatic detachment that left these other two free to talk.

"So you are like the rest of them, Manon," said Durand, looking her straight in the face.

"How is that, monsieur?"

She glanced at him and went on with her work.

"Of course—I was unpopular. That busybody, Durand! Always wanting something new!"

"You know Beaucourt as well as I do, monsieur," said Manon.

Anatole Durand sat squarely on his chair. He was a square man all over, square in the boots, the head, the jaw, rather like a little copy of Thiers, that irrepressible, compact bit of energy.

"Well, they can hate me as much as they please, but I always was a man who must push a stone out of the way or cut down a rotten tree. I'm an old fellow, Manon, but my work is over there. I have another ten years left."

There was a little quiver of emotion in his voice.

"I have no children, you know, and plenty of money. I am not one of the ruined ones. You can't take your money away with you when you die. Did ever an old fellow have such an opportunity?"

Manon raised her head, and her eyes seemed to see something.

"Why do you come to me, monsieur?"

"You have gone back to Beaucourt."

"In a sense, yes."

"You are rebuilding—you are one of those with courage."

"I have hope, monsieur, and I have had good luck."

Anatole Durand's eyes glistened.

“Life is like this, madame; there are those who work and create; there are those who wait and grumble. Some people sit still and say, ‘What a tragedy! What can we do? When is the Government going to help us?’ Those people will not rebuild Beaucourt; they will not bring back the smile and the good sweat to all that poor desert.”

“You think as I think, Monsieur Durand.”

He gave an audacious and triumphant little wave of the hands.

“Do not call me an egotist, my dear, if I wish to consecrate the rest of my life to the healing of these wounds. What better work for a Frenchman! And that is one of the reasons why I have come to you, because you have the courage, because I felt that you must think as I have thought.”

Manon put down her work, and looked at Anatole Durand with eyes of immense seriousness.

“Monsieur, listen a moment. When I first went to Beaucourt I thought only of my own bit of property, myself, but when I had seen Beaucourt and felt the pity of it, I began to think of my neighbours. Yet I say to myself, to help others you must first be strong yourself. So I did not hesitate to look round and get what I could, timber and iron from some army huts, tins of beef, tools, bits of furniture—which I shall return.”

Durand smiled at her.

“It is the spirit of France; do not apologize for it, madame, for it is the spirit that will rebuild Beaucourt. But now, I ask you, what will have to be done for the others?”

“Food,” said Manon promptly.

“Yes.”

“Tools, material, wood to build with.”

Old Durand clapped his hands.

“Exactly. Well, it will be my business to try and arrange all that. The Americans and English will sell us their camps and their stores, and I shall be one of the first to buy. We shall have to open a canteen at Beaucourt. Now, madame, I shall drive over in my autocar to-morrow. Will you go with me?”

“With pleasure, monsieur,” said Manon; “and if I may take a little bundle——”

“Anything but a piano or a cupboard,” said Anatole, with a laugh.

The storm blew itself out during the night, leaving wet roads and a blue sky and a smell of spring in the air. Durand and his car, an old-fashioned

four-seater De Dion, called for Manon at nine, with Anatole at the wheel and a luncheon basket on the back seat. Manon's bundle was no terrible affair, stores for Paul tied up in a blanket.

But someone was before them on the Beaucourt road, Louis Blanc on his bicycle, a Louis Blanc who was not in the best of tempers. He had visited nearly every farm in Ste. Claire, offering good money for the hire of a wagon and a couple of horses, but no one had been able to oblige him. He came into Beaucourt by the Bonnière road. In the Place de l'Eglise he dismounted and stood staring. Something was missing from the broken outlines of the ruins of the Hôtel de Paris; the great central chimney had fallen.

Bibi dashed his bicycle down upon the cobbles. He was in a rage—the dramatic, white-faced rage of the French "rough," a rage that must gesticulate, stamp up and down, let itself loose on something. He stormed in and looked at the ruin, and a pretty mess the chimney had made of it. Falling on the gable end next the Rue des Echelles, it had sent it crashing, and this mass of brickwork, striking the tottering wall of the Hospice across the way, had brought down the whole façade of the Hospice into the road. The mouth of the Rue des Echelles was full of broken bricks and stones.

Bibi looked at it all, and swore. The centre-piece of his house had gone; there were only three walls instead of four—nothing left that could carry a roof. The end fronting on the Rue des Echelles would have to be rebuilt before anything could be done in the way of putting up timber.

Bibi stamped about, kicking the bricks, and flapping his arms like some furious bird. He was not a man who could satisfy himself by cursing the elements or black-guarding a purely impersonal wind. He wanted a tangible, human enemy, a personal quarrel, a feud that could be prosecuted with boot and fist. He wanted to take somebody by the throat, smash his fists against real flesh, smell real blood. Bibi was a savage. His rage was the anthropomorphic rage of a savage that spits in the face of its idol-god and hammers it with a club.

That chimney had not fallen itself. Therefore someone had helped it to fall. Therefore someone had played him a dirty trick. These deductions following each other easily through Bibi's mind, proved that someone could be none other than that fellow of Manon Latour's.

"Voilà!"

The motive was obvious, so obvious that Bibi had not to search for an enemy. He had found his quarrel and he fastened on it like a snarling dog.

He walked up the Rue de Picardie with those cold eyes of his full of a hard glare. His fists were stuffed into his trouser pockets; he swung his shoulders as he walked, and jerked his head from side to side. The fighting mood flared in him.

Paul was at work on the roof. He had carried up about twenty sheets of corrugated iron, and his hammer began to ring on them as Louis Blanc came up the street. To Bibi the noise was like the clashing of sword and buckler, a barbaric sound echoing out of his savage Gaulish past.

"Hallo, there!"

Brent turned, and leaning against the roof, looked down at the man in the street. Bibi's figure was foreshortened. His long chin seemed to stick out; he looked all shoulders and feet.

"Good morning," said Paul, "it has turned fine after the storm."

Bibi grinned and looked at the ladder that rested against the front of the house.

"So you thought that dirty trick of yours rather clever."

"What trick, Monsieur Blanc?"

Bibi raised a big hand, its fingers hooked, as though he were reaching for the man up above. He looked ugly, devilish ugly.

"Come down," he said.

Brent sat and considered him.

"What's the matter? What are you talking about?"

"Come down," said Bibi again; "you know what I mean."

Brent's eyes went hard. He knew what had happened to Louis Blanc's house, having strolled up there soon after dawn, and he sensed some connexion between the fallen chimney and that ugly figure in the road. The fellow wanted a row; he had found an excuse for it; but Brent had made up his mind not to give Bibi his chance. A row might prove most damnably awkward, and Paul meant to smile the man off.

"Look here," he said. "I'm busy. What's all this about?"

"Come down," barked Bibi, with the persistence of a furious dog.

Brent laughed, turned, and pretended to go on with his work, but he kept an eye on the top of the ladder that projected above the wall.

"You pig of a coward," said the voice.

Brent began hammering.

"You knocked away the foundations of my chimney."

Brent went on hammering.

Then he saw the top of the ladder give a jerk, and he was round in a flash. Bibi had one foot on the third rung, and the two men stared at each other.

"Look here," said Brent, still smiling, "you keep off that ladder. I have had nothing to do with that chimney of yours."

"Liar!" shouted the Frenchman.

Brent gave a French shrug.

"It's the truth; take it or leave it. But get off that ladder."

Bibi began to climb up, and Brent bent down, gripped the top rung, and held the ladder out from the wall.

"Look here, if you try to come up, I'll pitch you over."

Bibi did try, and Brent kept his promise. Man and ladder went over into the road, Bibi lying like a big beetle with the thing on top of him. He slipped from under it, got up, and began to behave like a madman. He picked up the ladder, dashed it against the raised path so that it broke in the middle, and then went on to kick it to pieces with his heavy boots. He was like a wild animal that had lost all control and all sense of pain, and Brent sat and watched him with something of the feeling of a man who is safe in the branches of a tree. He understood now why Manon had looked so serious when she had spoken of Louis Blanc. The fellow could behave like a beast, and he had the strength of a beast. Brent had ceased to smile.

"I shall want a long spoon," he reflected, "a devilish long spoon. Life in Beaucourt is going to be hot stuff."

Into the middle of this display of animal energy came Anatole Durand's car, poking its red nose round the corner of the Rue Romaine, and stopping by the well, for Bibi still occupied the road. He had not finished kicking the ladder to pieces, and his heavy boots made such a noise that he had not heard the car.

There was a very droll look on old Durand's face. Manon had glanced at Paul on the roof, and Paul had smiled at her, but Manon did not smile. Here was this evil spirit loose in Beaucourt, this man who had always behaved like a spoilt child when baulked of some desire.

"So that fellow hasn't been killed," said Monsieur Durand. "What a pity! Let us ring for the concierge."

He sat there and blew blasts on his motor horn as though Louis Blanc were the walls of Jericho.

Bibi left the remains of the ladder and walked across to the car. The imperiousness of old Durand's horn annoyed him, nor was it any pleasure to him to look into the quizzical and bright eyes of the manufacturer from Lille. Anatole was not afraid of anything or anybody, and he had always spoken of Bibi as a dog that wanted thrashing. The presence of Manon modified the situation, and brought the sex swagger back into Bibi's attitude.

"You seem to have no respect for your boots, monsieur," said old Durand.

Louis Blanc stood in front of the nose of the car, hands in pockets, feet well apart, his body swung back from the loins.

"If a fellow plays you a dirty trick, monsieur, you go round to give him a thrashing, hey. But that fellow up there was afraid to come down, so I have smashed his ladder for him. You see!"

"Tiens!" said old Durand, "but what is it all about?"

"If you ask that fellow up there," and Bibi shook a fist at Paul, "whether he did not knock down the chimney and wall of my hotel, he will tell you a lie."

The voice of Manon interposed itself.

"Monsieur Blanc imagines that other people behave as he would behave. That is the whole trouble."

She looked up at Paul.

"Have you touched Monsieur Blanc's house?"

"Is it likely? The storm blew the thing down. I heard it fall about nine o'clock last night."

Bibi shrugged his shoulders. The violence was dying out of him; it had exhausted itself for the moment; and he had a certain astuteness; the grapes were sour on this particular morning.

"You are a man of the world, monsieur," he said to Anatole Durand; "you know that things do not happen of themselves, especially when certain people wish them to happen. But the truth remains; that fellow is a coward and a liar, and it was to madame's interest."

Anatole gave a little bleat on the horn.

"I think you have got a bee in your head, Monsieur Blanc. We French do not play such tricks on each other."

"So it is three to one," said Bibi; "and against a man who was three times wounded. Voilà! Into the ditch with you all! I'm off."

He went swinging up the Rue de Picardie, and Durand and Manon sat and looked at each other.

"What is the matter with that fellow?"

"What was always the matter with Bibi, monsieur? He has an idea that Beaucourt is an opportunity, that he is going to show off and make money. He always had the biggest voice in the place, you know."

"Yes, a fog-horn of a man," said Durand, "a big drum. But what about our St. Simon up there?"

They climbed out of the car, and joined in council with Paul. But old Durand's attention was divided. He was in Beaucourt, the place of his Frenchman's dreams, in the thick of these dear ruins that were to bloom again under his hand. He looked at Manon's house, and was delighted, and his delight almost forgot the worker and the work. Here was his symbol, his example, his banner of hope. He wanted to run through all the village on those sturdy little legs of his, and dream hard-headed dreams of reconstruction.

Manon understood.

"Go and look at Beaucourt, monsieur. I will see to my partner."

Anatole dashed off, opening a big note-book. He had carried a big note-book all his life; it was his Bible.

"Expect me in half an hour."

Manon stood in the road and spoke to Paul.

"What happened?" she asked.

"He came round here like a mad bull, and when he tried to climb the ladder I pitched him over, ladder and all. It's a nuisance; I shall have to make a new ladder."

Manon laughed. She liked Paul's shrewdness, his smile of restraint.

"And now I must get you down."

She happened to know that old Durand carried a length of stout rope in the locker under the back seat of the car. He had told her it was there. "If we break down, well, I have a tow-rope." He liked thoroughness, to be prepared for all eventualities.

The rope served its purpose. Manon threw up the coil, and at the third attempt Brent caught it. He fastened the end to one of the rafters and slid down.

"That's that," he said tersely.

Manon looked at him with eyes that were brighter than the eyes of a man.

XXII

Anatole Durand was away for two hours, and when he returned to the Café de la Victoire he found that Brent had extemporized a ladder out of some lengths of timber and was at work again on the roof of the house. The gale of the preceding night had been a warning to Manon's partner, and he was in a hurry to get the whole roof covered in before the wind rose again. Manon was helping at the foot of the ladder, and making further use of Monsieur Durand's rope. She had knotted a big loop at one end of it, a loop which would grip a couple of sheets of iron, so that Paul could draw them up.

Old Durand sat down on the running-board of his car and watched. He had seen his château, and he had seen Beaucourt, and perhaps he had been a little discouraged, though Manon had warned him against what he called "la maladie des ruines," but as he watched the cheerful activities of these two, Brent hauling up the sheets and nailing them down with the speed and precision of a human machine, the adventure of it thrilled him.

"Hallo, that's life," he said, "the spirit of youth that strives and creates. Youth is not daunted. Look at that fellow's strong brown arms, and the little Manon with her sleeves rolled up. Mon Dieu! but it is splendid! Ça ira, ça ira!"

He threw his big note-book on to the front seat of the car, took off his coat, and was ready for the dance. He could not resist the music of those two happy figures, and the fine clang of the hammer.

"Hallo, you two, here is a recruit. Set me to work, my dear."

Manon exclaimed as only a Frenchwoman can exclaim.

"Monsieur has caught the fever! We shall all call you Papa Durand, Père de Beaucourt."

Anatole winked at Paul.

"Now let us see what she will give me to do! She has made use of my rope——"

Manon stood considering, hands on hips.

"I have it. Monsieur was always a great gardener."

"That's it. Give me a spade. Turning up the good soil for the first crops!"

“It will be the first soil turned in Beaucourt. The honour is yours, monsieur.”

“Before God, it is an honour,” said old Durand with sudden solemnity.

So he set to work in Manon’s garden, clearing the rubbish, and starting his trench with all the careful deliberation of the professional gardener. He whistled, he perspired, he took off his waistcoat. Life was good, the simple life that grows out of the soil.

Manon went in to cook the meal. She had brought eggs and butter, and she made an omelette. There was a white cloth on the table, glasses, a bottle of wine, half a loaf of bread, some cheese. When all was ready, she went forth with a saucepan and a spoon and hammered her gong.

“Messieurs, le dîner est servi.”

Old Durand came in with a shining forehead and eyes that laughed.

“What, the hotel is open already!”

He shook hands with Paul.

“You are the very man we want, my friend. I congratulate madame on her partner. I hear you have lived in England?”

“Seven years,” said Brent, and swallowed the lie, not liking it. Durand was a man to whom it was no pleasure to tell a lie; there was something of the frank, brave child in him.

They sat down to the meal, and it was Anatole who talked, and he talked like his note-book. He expressed himself in energetic, jerky phrases, like a man pushing a big stone up a hill.

“Work, that’s it. The world has got to get back to work. There is nothing so good as work. Look at my appetite! I saw it all mapped out while I was digging. We must get at the soil, grow our food, grow more food till we have food to sell. Then we can buy clothes, and pots and pans, and curtains—the things that the towns have to sell. Quite simple, is it not? But to begin with we shall have no food and little shelter. That is where Papa Durand will come in. I shall buy food; we will open a public kitchen and a canteen. I shall buy stores, timber, felt, iron sheets, stoves. Perhaps you, Monsieur Paul, will be my director of works—who knows? Perhaps madame will manage the food. We must get the strong men and the women back, shelter them, feed them, give them tools. Not charity, no, but a new chance. It is not wise to make things too easy; if people do not work, they shall not come to our canteen. The old women and the children had better stay where they are until Beaucourt has its feet on the rock. Yes, I shall live here, and work here, when I am not scouring the country for stores, or shouting at officials. The

officials always have wool in their ears. They say, 'Your plan shall be considered,' and then put it away in a drawer. But you, my friends, and the like of you, will be the saviours of devastated France. I drink your health, madame, and wish you 'bonne chance.' "

When the meal was over, and Monsieur Durand had lit a cigar, Manon took him to see the huts in the field off the Rue de Rosières. Two of these huts were in perfect condition and had not been touched by Brent; and there were two others that could be put in repair. Each hut would hold about twenty people.

Anatole was delighted.

"Here we are! Shelter for forty men and the same number of women—barracks for the workers till we can find something better. Then there are the cellars in Beaucourt. I shall use the cellars of the château as my depôt for food."

He scribbled in his note-book.

"I shall be in debt to Beaucourt," said Manon, "but I shall pay the debt."

"How so, my dear?"

"We have taken more than enough material to make another hut."

"The example will pay for it. I suppose that fellow—Louis Blanc—knows of these buildings?"

"Yes."

"Confound him!" said Durand.

She left him wandering among the ruined cottages, and returned to the café and to Paul. Manon's ideas had been enlarged by the enthusiasms of old Durand, for he was a man who had remained young, whose brain was vital and alert. Age was horrible to Manon, even though she pitied it, age with its stupidly staring old face, its eternal questions, its eternal condemnation of anything new. She found herself picturing the Beaucourt of the future. What would it be like?—a little world of old men and old women, grumblers, backbiters, grudging folk who could never forgive youth for being young? The figures of Paul, Bibi and old Durand seemed to stand in the foreground of the new Beaucourt. She was more than a little afraid of Paul. How would Beaucourt accept him? Had the war made people broader-minded, more generous, more ready to say "This man has done good things; let us judge him by his works"?

Paul had shifted his ladder to the other side of the house, for he had completed the roofing of the half next the street. Already this house of hers was ceasing to look an empty shell; it had a solidity, an overspreading

shadow. Something thrilled in her. She looked up at the man, her man with his brown arms and sturdy back, and a strange new tenderness awoke in her heart. She would stand by him; she would place herself resolutely between him and the past. What did the past matter? It was the future, the brave looking forward, and the light in the eyes, the hands strong for the labour that was to be. These were the things that mattered.

"Paul."

She called him, and her voice had a new softness, a note that was for his ears alone. He turned and looked down at her, this dark-haired little woman in her black blouse and black and white check skirt. The woman in her and the indefinable perfume of her womanhood seemed to rise to him like the scent of the spring.

"Come down," she said; "I wish to talk."

Brent smiled, hesitating.

"I want this finished before the wind gets up."

"Yes, I know," she answered; "you work like a devil."

He laughed and came down the ladder, and when he was standing at her side, he felt that they had passed some invisible landmark, and that Manon knew it and was holding out a hand.

"Where is Monsieur Anatole?"

"Dreaming," she said, "dreaming, but I think his dreams will come true."

"A great old man—that."

"Because he is not old. He looks forward, not back. If he can only give his eyes to Beaucourt, it will be good for Beaucourt—and for us."

She turned through the gateway into the garden where old Durand's first ridge of freshly turned brown soil showed at the end of a green carpet of weeds. The path under the pollarded limes and between them and the stone wall was broad enough for two. It had many memories for Manon, many associations—this old garden; it was an intimate place, and Brent was no longer a stranger.

"I am worried about Bibi," she said.

She looked up at Paul with a full, frank glance of the eyes, a glance that seemed to open the whole of her world to him.

"I can look after myself. I don't want to quarrel with the fellow."

"You are thinking that he could make trouble?"

"Yes, that's the danger."

They walked to the end of the path in silence, a silence that was like a lane that led towards a clearer view of the future.

"How great is the danger, Paul?"

She spoke very quietly, and in turning, looked calmly up into his face.

"Do you not think that I ought to know?"

Brent stood a moment, his eyes set in a stare of thought. He was wondering what had prompted her to ask him that question, nor had he any quarrel with her right to ask it, and in a measure, he was glad.

"You have every right to know—I will tell you."

"Wait——"

She touched his sleeve.

"Do not misunderstand me. If I wish to defend my friend, I must know how the attack might come, I must have my eyes open. And then—of course, it all depends on whether you are happy here."

Brent smiled.

"If you say that I may stay, I stay. Such a second chance does not often come to a man. And now—I'll tell you."

"Everything," she said with a quick look at him.

"Everything."

He found the making of that confession far easier than he had thought. On his first day in Beaucourt he had given her mere hints, sketched a vague outline, but now he drew in every detail, withholding nothing, painting his life's picture with a simplicity and a sincerity begotten of the war. He had lived two years in an English prison, having been convicted of fraud—but the fraud had been of another man's making. Brent had trusted people; he was good-natured; he had left all the legal details of the adventure to the other man.

"Of course I was to blame," he said; "I was just as responsible as he was; I ought not to have gone about in blinkers. I abetted his swindling because I did not take the trouble to find it out. My wife knew it all the time; she was one of those women who are mad to make a show. I never forgave her that. When I came out of prison the war had started, and I had my chance. But after the war—there was nothing. Do you wonder that I had a horror of going back?"

"What a tragedy!" she said; "just your good nature."

He glanced at Manon.

“One ought not to be too good-natured. But for that disgrace—and the truth of it—I’m free.”

“Quite free?”

Her dark eyes looked into his with a candour that was almost fierce. And Brent understood.

“Yes, free. My wife died during the first year of the war. I’m quit of the whole miserable business; only, over there, I should always be labelled an ex-convict. I didn’t mind so much during the war; you lost yourself in the bigness of it and in the heart of your pal. But when it was over——”

“The past came back.”

And then she smiled, and opening the old blue gate in the garden wall, looked out over Beaucourt.

“There’s the old world—everybody’s past. We are beginning all over again, old Durand—you—I—even Bibi. But Bibi will be just the same as ever, and after all there is so little for Bibi to find out. You are just an Englishman who chose to stay in France.”

“I’m a deserter,” he said. “I suppose they would call me that. Beckett—the man buried over there would not have grudged me the chance; he was the sort of fellow who never minded risking his head. I have seen him go to a farm that was being shelled and bring away the dog that was chained up in the yard.”

And then he added, “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing. You are just Paul Rance, a Breton who had lived in England, and who has not gone back to England.”

“Yes,” said Brent; “but there are occasions in life when a man has to produce papers, documents, and I have nothing but the pay-book and disc that belonged to my friend. I would rather like you to take charge of them.”

“You can give them to me; I will lock them up in the box I have at Marie Castener’s. And now that I know everything, it seems nothing.”

Brent was looking through the gateway at the ruins of the village.

“You are very generous,” he said. “We will see what Beaucourt makes of me. If it accepts me as a good sort of fellow, it may ask no questions. It is about time I got back to work on the roof.”

They walked back to the house, and before he climbed the ladder, Brent went down into the cellar and returned with the battered brown Army Book and the identity disc. He gave them to Manon.

“There is my pledge.”

“It shall always be honoured,” she answered him, slipping them into her blouse.

XXIII

HALF AN HOUR before dusk Anatole Durand started up the engine of his car, and glanced round for Manon, who had been putting on her cloak. Durand saw in this delay a loitering of lovers, nor had he any quarrel with a romance that seemed part of the soul of the new Beaucourt. "If I am loved by the young," was one of his sayings, "the old can hate me as much as they please." His protest was a mild bleat on the horn, and a jab at the accelerator that set the engine roaring for a couple of seconds. He had a side glimpse, as he turned the car, of Manon and Paul coming out of the doorway of the Café de la Victoire, Paul's blue trousers very close to Manon's black and white check skirt. There was an indescribable nearness about their figures, and yet just a little space between them, that magnetic space that separates the hearts of lovers who have not confessed.

Manon was saying something to Paul. She looked across at Durand.

"I am coming, monsieur."

"I am thinking of those shell-holes in the road near Les Ormes."

Manon climbed into the back seat, and Brent leant over and wrapped a blanket round her. She had a little canvas bag in her hand, a bag that contained something heavy, and she dropped the bag into one of the pockets of Paul's coat.

"I managed to borrow it," she said, "after much trouble."

Old Durand refrained from looking over his shoulder.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Manon gave Paul a nod and a brightening of the eyes.

"Be careful," she said, "or I shall be worried."

The red car squeezed its way round the well and disappeared into the Rue Romaine, leaving Paul Brent looking at the empty sunset and feeling the canvas bag that Manon had dropped into his pocket. He drew it out, unfastened the string at the mouth of the bag, and saw protruding the lacquered butt of a little revolver, a mere cheap toy of a pistol such as they made by the thousand in Belgium before the war. There were half a dozen cartridges at the bottom of the canvas bag, and Brent emptied them into the palm of his hand.

The forethought was Manon's and therefore he had no quarrel with it, discovering in that little weapon associations of tenderness and pathos. The war had made him a fighting man, yet this pistol did not seem to be the tool of a fighting man, but rather a thing to be carried in a pocket like some hooligan's knife. Brent smiled, but the memories of Manon were behind the smile. He had seen Bibi in action and the beastliness of it had sobered him, suggesting a wild dog among the ruins, a dog that might leap out and snap at your throat. The whole business was primitive and preposterous, rather unconvincing to an Englishman who had been trained to a disciplined and orderly way of killing Germans. The idea of being set upon and bludgeoned in a ruined French village suggested the *Police News*.

The dusk approached, and this ghost village had an inhuman silence. Old Durand's car seemed to have trailed the last thread of life out of it, and a sharp shadow fell across Brent's face. His chin went up; he stood listening. Somewhere in the Rue de Picardie a loose tile clattered down, and the fall of it was like the sound of an avalanche.

Brent slipped six cartridges into the drum of the revolver, and put it back in his pocket. He stood a moment looking up at the new roof that covered the western half of the house, and if his pride swelled itself out a little, the feeling was justified. Under the level light of the sunset the old house had warmed to a soft, ruddy brown, and those blind eyes needed only window-frames and shutters painted a battered blue to make it melt again into its green nest among the orchards. In all his life Brent had never done a piece of work better or more quickly, and the man in him exulted.

He entered the house, and hesitated in the kitchen with a half-puzzled look upon his face. The sunlight had reached out over Beaucourt like a great hand, a hand that was suddenly withdrawn, and through the oblong of the window he saw the outlines of the ghost-houses, ribs showing, eye-sockets grey and empty. The room itself was filling with the dusk; objects in it were growing indistinct; the chair on which Manon had sat looked like a ghost of a chair. The silence was extraordinary. Brent had known the same silence over No-Man's Land on quiet nights, but there had been men near—other men. Here there was desolation, that and nothing else.

His own face had a touch of grimness. He was listening all the time, without perhaps realizing that the drums of his ears were tense; and he was conscious of a sudden feeling of acute loneliness, an uncomfortable loneliness, chilly, fidgety, unpleasant. He pulled out his pipe, filled the bowl, lit the tobacco, and found himself biting hard at the stem and ceasing to suck at it, in order to listen.

"Wind up!"

He smiled. An old soldier getting the wind up in Beaucourt! Did anyone ever meet a ghost coming down Tottenham Court Road? He sat down in Manon's chair, stared at the blank emptiness of the window space, and thought of lighting the stove and going to bed. Brent had got out of the habit of locking doors and fastening windows, but Beaucourt, this silent, twilight Beaucourt, brought him back to a primitive understanding of the habit. He was a civilized man again who still takes precautions against primordial savagery. He was the hermit-crab in its borrowed shell, but this particular shell had gaps in it. And somehow in the chill of that dusk Brent knew that he did not relish sleeping in that cellar, where a man could creep down the steps in his stockinged feet and stun him before he could move.

He decided that he was not going to sleep in the cellar, and he went below and carried up the wire bed on his back. Then he brought half a dozen sheets of galvanized iron and some lengths of timber into the kitchen so that he could barricade the window and the door. The cunning of the old soldier suggested an additional device, some sort of harmless booby-trap to guard the front and back doors, a few old tins scattered about, a loosely slung wire that would bring a saucepan clattering down if anybody touched it. The virtues of a good house-dog, and of stout doors and shutters, needed no emphasizing.

Brent barricaded the door and window of the kitchen and went to bed. Manon's revolver lay ready on a box; also a candle and a box of matches. Beaucourt was still, extraordinarily still, so silent that it kept Paul awake, listening for the sound of anyone moving outside the house.

He was growing accustomed to the stillness, and beginning to feel drowsy and less on the alert when something brought him back to a state of acute attention. He could remember having been scared as a boy by the sound made by a snail crawling across a window-pane, and this sound that he heard was just as peculiar and unexplainable. It made him think of a hand rubbing softly across some roughish surface. It seemed quite near, and yet he was unable to localize it in the darkness. Brent lay absolutely still, knowing that the confounded wire bed would creak and complain if he made the lightest movement.

The sound changed abruptly, became sharper and more metallic. It suggested finger-nails picking at the edge of a sheet of metal, and in a flash Brent seemed to visualize the origin and the meaning of the sound. A man's hand had been feeling its way across the sheets of corrugated iron that closed the window until it had come in contact with the edge of one of the

sheets. The hand had been testing the solidity of the improvised shutter, and whether it was possible to slip one of the sheets aside.

The sound ceased, and Brent's hand went out for the revolver. He fancied that he could hear a movement along the raised path towards the street door, and he waited for the clink of one of those tins, but his booby-traps gave him no warning. There was an interval of silence, quite a long interval, and Brent's ears were beginning to play him tricks. He was lying on his left side, his face turned towards the kitchen doorway, its barricade of iron sheets and timber a black patch in the plastered wall opposite him, when he saw a little thread of light outline the lower edge of the barricade. It was very faint, a mere greyness, diffused from some light that was burning in one of the rooms on the other side of the passage.

Brent pushed back the blankets, drew up his feet, and lifting his legs slowly over the edge of the bed, sat up. The wire netting creaked, but the sound coincided with a very distinct and crisp rustling in one of those other rooms, a rustling that suggested the brushing up of shavings in a carpenter's shop. It was one of those sounds that struck an old familiar memory on Brent's brain. He had taken the precaution of carrying the ladder into the kitchen, and it stood slanting against the partition wall just below the gap in the uncompleted roof. Paul felt his way to the ladder, tested its steadiness with a pressure of the hands, and mounted it slowly, Manon's revolver in his left hand.

A sudden broadening glow of light met him as he reached the top of the wall. There was the distinct crackle of burning wood, and then Brent understood. He caught one of the rafters, pulled himself on to the wall, and lying flat along it, was able to look down into the back room on the other side of the passage.

He saw a man down there, a man who was bending forward and feeding chips and bits of wood on to the fire he had lit on the floor. He had piled his shavings against Brent's stack of timber salved from the dismantled huts, and the flames were beginning to lick at the pile of floor boards. Brent set his teeth, and changed his pistol from his left hand to his right. The man was Louis Blanc; Paul knew him by his cap and clothes, and those angular projecting shoulders.

Brent might have saved himself much future suffering and travail if he had obeyed that first impulse and shot Bibi as he bent forward over the fire. He did not do it. It was one of those deeds that became impossible directly the instinctive impulse has been gripped and held. Brent fired straight at the

fire, and the bullet sent a spurt of burning chips over the feet of the man below.

Bibi gave a leap like a cat, all four limbs spread. Paul had a momentary glimpse of his face, lips drawn back tight over the teeth, eyes furious and surprised. Then he dodged sideways out into the passage, and Paul heard the saucepan clatter against the stones as Bibi's ankles struck the wire. There was a pause, a scuffle, an oath.

Brent used Bibi's favourite expletive.

"Voilà!" he shouted. "I missed you on purpose. Next time I shan't miss."

"Go to the devil," said the other voice from somewhere in the street.

Paul scrambled down to save his timber. Manon had brought him a little electric torch, and after dismantling the barricade across the kitchen doorway, he stepped into the passage. Bibi might still be hanging about outside the house, and since it was possible that Bibi was armed, Paul went to the street doorway, and flashed his torch along the path and across the road. Seeing no sign of Louis Blanc he made a dash for the back door, and using a bit of board scooped the mass of burning shavings away from the timber pile. The floor was of tiles, and Brent was able to beat out the scattered fire.

He had no more sleep that night, but sat on a box in the corner of the kitchen, his blankets wrapped round him, torch and revolver ready. During that long watch he did some very practical thinking on the subject of doors and shutters, and the values of a good watch-dog. If there was to be a battle of wits among the ruins of Beaucourt many of the advantages would rest with Bibi; he could attack when he pleased; an eternal "standing to" to repel some chance raid was not a pleasant prospect.

"I might put the police on him," Paul thought, and immediately saw himself in a legal tangle, and being handed over as a deserter to a corporal's guard.

Before the first greyness of the dawn he lit the fire, made himself some tea, and then started the day's work. It took him less than an hour to finish sheeting the roof covering the right half of the house, and he saw the sun come up through the beech trees of the Bois du Roi and flood the broken walls with yellow light. There was nothing to break the silence save the sound of his hammer, and in the calm of the dawn Brent found it difficult to believe that Louis Blanc existed.

He knocked off for breakfast, and then took a stroll up the Rue de Picardie. Not twenty yards from the café he came upon a rather amusing and significant proof of the impetuosity of Louis Blanc's retreat, a pair of boots

standing neatly, even demurely, in the middle of the street. Bibi had pulled off his boots here before making his attack, and Brent pictured him in his socks pedalling that bicycle of his back to Ste. Claire.

Paul was inclined to be elated over the finding of those boots, and to attach too triumphant a significance to this rather ridiculous detail. Louis Blanc had the soul of a "sneak-thief," and the courage of a bully. Shot at, he evaporated, and Brent was tempted to believe that he had finished with Bibi.

But he kept to his plan, and began by closing the back door of the house with a barricade of iron sheets and timber backed by ammunition boxes filled with bricks. There were three ground-floor windows in the unroofed half of the house and Paul covered them with more sheets, driving the nails into the hard old mortar of the walls. He was nailing up the last sheet when he heard the sound of a car.

Old Durand had chosen a different road that morning, and had come by way of the Rue de Rosières. He pulled up outside the house, and Paul, standing there hammer in hand, saw Manon's eyes fixed on the barricaded windows.

She gave a look of interrogation, frowning slightly.

"Just to keep out the wind," Paul told her.

She did not believe him, and while Paul was talking to Durand she went in and discovered the blackened tiles in the back room, the charred shavings, and the scorched pile of floor boards.

Durand drove on to the château. He wished to make a survey of the place and to examine the cellars, and Paul found Manon standing in the doorway, a very serious Manon, with eyes that demanded the truth.

"What happened last night?"

"What do you mean?"

Brent's eyes were tired and red about the lids, the eyes of a man who had had no sleep.

"Someone tried to light a fire in there."

He nodded.

"So you have seen it! Yes, it was that pleasant neighbour of ours, Bibi. He sneaked in when it was dark, but I happened to be awake."

She wanted to know everything, and Brent described all that had happened, and how he had frightened Louis Blanc with the revolver she had left him.

“I wish you had killed the beast,” she said with a passion that surprised Brent; “no one would have been any the wiser.”

“I couldn’t shoot the man in cold blood.”

“Cold blood! You have too nice a sense of honour. Bibi would have burnt you alive, or suffocated you in cold blood, as you call it.”

And then her eyes softened.

“Yes, it is like you to be generous; but this madness of Bibi’s puts me in a different temper. I am coming to live in Beaucourt.”

“But Manon!”

“You can argue for ever and ever, but I am coming. I have a sense of honour, mon ami. And as for worrying about what old women might say to me, nom d’un chien! but they can go to the devil. I stand by my man.”

XXIV

At seven o'clock on a misty March morning Etienne Castener brought his horse out of the stable and harnessed him to the big blue cart. The two women were busy in Manon's cottage, and a little yellow dog, bought by Manon the night before, and tied by a piece of string to a leg of the table, kept running round and round until he had wound himself so close to the table leg that any further circumlocutions did not seem worth while. A wooden packing-case, two yellow trunks, a table, an arm-chair, a cupboard, the frame of a wooden bed, a mattress, a hamper of vegetables, and a basket of food had been placed outside the cottage to be loaded to the cart. Manon had been able to save a little furniture before the Germans had entered Beaucourt, and it had been stored in Marie Castener's grenier.

The blue cart crunched out of the muddy yard into the road, and drew up outside the cottage. A few neighbours had collected to watch the departure; one or two of them brought presents, a few apples, a bag of potatoes, a string of onions. Manon was popular.

Among them was Mère Vitry, a refugee, whose picture of the Sacré Cœur Manon had rescued from the cottage in the Rue Romaine. There were quite a number of refugees in the neighbouring villages; Anatole Durand had a list of the names, and he had visited them all and persuaded them to remain in the villages for another week. Within ten days he hoped to have a supply of food in Beaucourt. "Without food, my friends, we can do nothing."

Etienne began to load the cart, his mother helping him with hands and tongue. She was very strong and she would not allow Manon to do any more work. "You keep your strength for the other end, my dear. There will be plenty to do in Beaucourt." So Manon stood and watched, holding the yellow dog by the string, and Mère Vitry stood beside Manon and looked at her as though she were a new Jeanne d'Arc. Mère Vitry had a face like a wrinkled brown boot, with buttons for eyes. Her black skirt had a great plum-coloured patch where her bony old knees had worn the cloth thin.

"You will take care of the picture, my dear?"

"Yes, I will take great care of it," said Manon.

Mère Vitry explained that the picture had belonged to her mother in the days when her father had come back from the Russian war, and that it had

hung in the same place and on the same nail.

"My father drove that nail, and every two years I used to put a new piece of cord on the picture. And you say there is no roof left in the house?"

"Just a small piece. There are no whole roofs in Beaucourt."

"Enough for an old woman to sleep under, perhaps. I shall be there when the spring comes."

Etienne had loaded the cart, and had so arranged the arm-chair that it formed a seat for Manon. He was going to walk beside his horse.

"I shall walk," said Manon.

Marie Castener scolded her.

"Get up and save your legs. Etienne can ride all the way home."

Manon laughed, kissed Marie, climbed up into her seat and took the dog in her lap. Marie Castener stood by the wheel; she was feeling important with all these neighbours listening while she helped to launch Manon on this great adventure.

"Etienne's boy shall come over twice a week with eggs, vegetables, butter and bread. He can ride a bicycle, you know. If you want anything write it down on paper, for Pierre forgets everything, save the time for his meals."

Manon leant over towards this stolid, ugly woman who had the heart of a saint.

"How good you have been to me."

"Don't be sentimental," said Marie Castener; "haven't I enjoyed it?"

The blue cart moved off, and the neighbours made the departure quite a public occasion, waving to Manon and shouting "Bonne chance." It was an emotional moment, a dramatic moment—Manon sailing out into the wilderness with all her belongings loaded on the cart, to begin the new life, the life that was to be so bitter and so heart-breaking to many.

At the end of the village, just before the road turned up the hill under the poplars, stood the farm-house where Louis Blanc had been lodging. A meadow planted with a few apple trees separated the house from the road. Bibi, an unshaved and slovenly Bibi, was leaning over the farmyard gate when Manon and the cart went by. She did not see him, but Louis Blanc watched the brown horse and the blue cart go slowly up the hill.

His jaw seemed to lengthen; his lower lip protruded; his eyes looked mere slits. He rubbed his chin between finger and thumb, and spat over the gate. It appeared that Manon had a way of getting things done; she had a cart

at her service when he, Bibi, had been unable to hire a cart, and she had a man to work for her. Now she was going to Beaucourt with all her goods and chattels to take up life in the Café de la Victoire. Bibi's nostrils looked pinched, he sneered.

"A nice fix she would be in," he thought, "if someone kicked that fellow of hers out of Beaucourt."

That was the centre point of Bibi's vision. The bottom had fallen out of his own enterprise, and he had been listening to panegyrics on the philanthropy of Anatole Durand: "Ah, if all wealthy men were like that, if there were no profiteers." The whole business made Bibi savage. Manon and her man were flaunting their success, while old Durand was preparing to spoil the place as a fertile field for speculation. And the fools applauded him!

"They think it is going to be a little heaven," was Bibi's reflection as he sludged back through the dirty yard to drink his morning coffee.

At Beaucourt Paul Brent had spent a very peaceful night, lying safely behind a good door and barricaded windows. He was up at dawn, and washing with confident publicity in the open street, his head full of the thoughts of the coming of Manon. He had become a little less self-conscious in his attitude towards Manon, less ready to consider the possible prudery of a repopulated Beaucourt, less afraid of the activities of Louis Blanc. And romance joined him in the misty street, and walked back with him over the grey cobbles and into the house of Manon Latour. Paul reintroduced sentiment into the house. It is said, perhaps with truth, that the French are a hard-headed and unromantic nation, killers of birds, teaching even the sex-bird to live in a very practical and ungilded cage, but Paul Brent opened the door of the cage. His love sang in the open, welcoming its mate.

He played at being housewife, turning everything out of the cellar where Manon was to sleep, brushing the brick floor, laying out the new blankets she had bought the previous day, and hanging up a little cracked old mirror he had found in one of the houses. The cellar had all the best of the furniture, a couple of chairs, an improvised wash-hand stand, a cupboard, a neat little wooden platform beside the bed for the reception of Manon's feet when she emerged in the morning. There was a jug and basin, a tin bath, a table beside the bed to hold her candlestick.

Having sentimentalized and prepared the cellar, Paul set to work in the kitchen. He had borrowed a rather battered cupboard-dresser from the école, and on this he arranged all the crockery, plates neatly paraded on the shelves, coffee-pot, cups and glasses clean and polished. The commissariat

occupied the cupboard. He arranged a shelf over the stove for the pots and pans. His own bed he pushed away into the far corner, with a couple of ammunition boxes underneath it to hold his few belongings and his clothes. The rest of the furniture included a table, the old arm-chair, a couple of plain chairs, with a second table under the window.

Paul stood and looked round the room. It pleased him; it had the air of a room that was lived in, and yet something was lacking. Everything was in order, even to the box of wood by the stove and a glazed crock full of water. A touch of colour was needed, that little live flame of sentiment, that unpractical something that appeals to the heart. A man does not live by bread alone, nor is love satisfied with pots and pans. Brent went out and searched, and down by the stream he found what he needed, a sallow with its soft yellow "palm" blossoms shining in the thin, March sunlight.

He gathered a bunch of palm, chose a blue and white jug he had found in someone's back garden, filled it with water, and arranged his bit of "life." The jug took up its vigil on the table by the window. The sunlight struck a note of colour on the yellow blossoms. Brent stood and smiled. He felt, somehow, that the room was complete.

About eleven o'clock the blue cart turned the corner of the Rue Romaine with Manon and her yellow dog perched in front of the load of baggage. Paul was fixing a window-frame in the window of one of the ground-floor rooms, and he came forward hammer in hand. The yellow dog stood up on Manon's lap and barked at him.

"Be quiet, silly."

Manon handed the yellow dog to Etienne and climbed down. She was in a very happy mood, a little excited and exultant.

"Paul, this is Monsieur Etienne Castener."

The men shook hands, Etienne smiling one of his broad, slow smiles.

"Tiens, but you have a front door!"

Manon had not noticed it, for she had been looking at Paul.

"Mon Dieu, so we have! A real door! When did you finish it?"

"Last night."

"Let me see how it opens and shuts."

She ran up the steps of the raised path, and tried the door like a child playing with a new toy.

"And it has a lock and bolts!"

Etienne stood and stared at the house, still smiling that slow, country smile. He was easily astonished, and the Café de la Victoire astonished him.

"You must have worked like the devil," he said.

Paul took a fancy to Etienne. He was one of those silent fellows with the smell of the soil about him, and he had no tricks.

"Some things are worth working for. Shall I help you unload the cart?"

Manon had walked into the kitchen and found herself entangled in a new atmosphere. It, too, had a door, only a matchboard door it is true, but the door gave the room a new homeliness. She saw the dresser with its crockery, the box of wood by the stove, the table by the window, the blue and white jug with its posy of sallow bloom. Her heart seemed to utter a little cry of pleasure and of tenderness. She went forward, picked up the jug, and buried her face in the yellow palm.

"A Frenchman would not have thought of it," she said.

She heard the two men struggling with something heavy.

"Manon!"

She ran out.

"Where will you have this?"

It was the cupboard.

"It is for you, Paul."

He looked at her with the eyes of a lover.

"In the kitchen, then? I have prepared the cellar for you."

"The kitchen, then."

She stood and directed the two men, happy as a little housewife arranging her home for the first time. Then she descended into the cellar, lit the candle, and experienced a moment of exquisite pleasure. Her eyes missed none of the details. This little white-arched cellar held more than a bed, a table, a cracked mirror; she felt in it the soul of the man who had been busy here.

Paul was waiting at the top of the steps. She turned and met him.

"I thought it would be warmer for you down there," he said.

She stood leaning against the wall.

"Thank you, Paul. It is so good to come back, when a man has taken so much trouble."

Brent was silent a moment.

"What will you have down there? The bed and the trunks?"

“Please. The wooden box can stay upstairs.”

When everything was settled, Etienne had unharnessed his horse, fastened him to the wheel of the cart, and given the beast water and an armful of hay, they sat down to a meal in the kitchen. Manon had unearthed a bottle of red wine. She and Paul kept looking at each other, and at the different pieces of furniture in the room. There was a conspiracy of pride, of congratulation between them, a half-shy tenderness that looked and looked again. Castener was all curiosity, all questions. His eyes kept wandering up to the roof.

“You have plenty of air,” he said, “plenty of air.”

And then:

“What will you do for a ceiling?”

“I shall put in a floor there when I have finished the rest of the roof.”

“And the stairs?”

“We shall have to be satisfied with a ladder, to begin with.”

“But you will be able to go to bed. What does it matter! And some day, I suppose, you will line all the inside of the roof?”

“Canvas to begin with; wood when we can get it.”

Etienne munched bread, and still stared at the ceiling.

“It is wonderful,” he said, “quite astonishing.”

After the meal he harnessed his horse and prepared to drive off.

“I must bring my plough over here one day,” he said; “an acre or two of ploughed ground would be useful.”

That was the way of the Casteners; they did not appear to see much, but they saw what mattered.

When Etienne had gone, Manon lit the stove and put on the coffee-pot. There was no more work to be done that day; it was a saint’s day; there was something sacramental about it. Manon pointed out the yellow dog, who had curled himself on the arm-chair in the sunlight.

“We will call him ‘Philosophe,’ ” she said; “he has set us a good example. But there is no reason why he should have that chair. It is yours.”

Brent smiled, picked up Philosophe, and sat down in the chair with the dog on his lap. He lit his pipe, and they drank coffee, and talked. Manon’s eyes kept glancing round the room, caressing everything in it, the soft eyes of a woman who is happy. The room was uncomfortably high, the walls showed patches of discoloured plaster and raw brickwork, and the window of the room above let in rather too much fresh air—but it had the

atmosphere of home. You could light a lamp at night, and draw up intimate chairs close to the stove.

"What will you do next?"

Paul was pulling the yellow dog's ears.

"Finish all the window-frames and doors on the ground floor, and put up shutters. I suppose there is no chance of getting any glass."

"Linen will have to do, or canvas, to begin with. We must divide up the day's work. I shall take all the household work and the garden."

"What about seeds?"

"I have a whole boxful of seeds in that case. The Casteners have promised to give me potatoes to plant, also young lettuces and cabbages. If Etienne ploughs up part of the meadow we can put potatoes in there, and perhaps a little corn and some winter roots. I am going to keep a few chickens, and later on a cow and a pig."

"You will be busy."

Manon was looking at the unglazed window-frame.

"I wish we could get some of that oiled linen that the English have. The other day, when Monsieur Durand and I drove from Rosières, we passed what you call a dump."

Brent's eyes brightened.

"What sort of a dump?"

"Sheds, and great piles of stores, boxes under tarpaulins, and an English soldier lying on a bench asleep. It is close to the railway line. I wonder if the English are selling their stores?"

"I think I will go over some day and have a look at that dump," said her partner.

XXV

WHEN Louis Blanc walked into the Coq d'Or, the old men seated at the white deal tables became as mute as birds when a hawk sails overhead. Mademoiselle Barbe was perched on a high chair behind the little comptoir, surveying the room with a pair of green-blue eyes, eyes that showed the white of the eyeballs between the lower lid and the edge of the iris. Mademoiselle Barbe had red hair, a big mouth, and a complexion like china clay. She was a thin young woman, an enigmatic young woman, with long limbs, narrow hips, and a rather prominent bosom.

"Good evening, Monsieur Blanc."

Bibi sat down at the table in a corner, his hands in his trouser pockets, his feet thrust out. He looked in a bad temper. One by one the old men got up and went out, for there was no pleasure in gossiping with an uncomfortable fellow like Bibi in the room. He made himself felt like a thunderstorm concentrated within four walls, an oppressive person, explosive, threatening to make a noise and blow out the windows.

Mademoiselle Barbe watched Bibi. She had the arched and voracious nostrils of the woman who is a natural bird of prey. Her quick temper made men think her capable of a great passion, a creature who could bite in the excitement of a love affair, but Mademoiselle Barbe was as cold as a cat.

"You are in a bad temper to-night."

She took a glass from the shelf, mixed Bibi a drink, and coming round from behind the comptoir, put the glass on Bibi's table. She did not go back to the comptoir, but half leant, half sat on the table next to Bibi's, her hands gripping the edge of the table, thin, loose-jointed hands, rather red about the knuckles.

Bibi drank.

"You mix a drink very well."

"I always do things well," said Barbe, with an insolent lift of the chin. "I have ideas, you know, like a man."

Bibi looked up at her with eyes half closed. He had talked a good deal to Barbe of the Coq d'Or. She stimulated him. She was a clever girl, provocative, the sort of woman who was Bibi's natural partner, a woman who could seize things with her claws. And Louis Blanc's mentality was

such that when the gas was out of an enterprise and his conceit somewhat deflated, he needed a woman like Barbe, a glass of absinthe, and a mouthful of rolling words.

He had boasted to Barbe of all that he meant to do in Beaucourt, how he was going to call his hotel the "Champ de Bataille," and make a fortune out of American tourists, nor in Bibi's vision were the people of Beaucourt forgotten. Army food bought cheaply and retailed at an immense profit seemed a mere question of shrewd foresight. Barbe had encouraged Bibi to talk, perhaps because he piqued the tigress in her, and she was bored with tame men. Mademoiselle was greedy and ambitious, and the Coq d'Or afforded a girl no scope.

"That old busybody of a Durand is going to be a nuisance to you," she said.

Bibi jerked his shoulders. He had always posed before the red-haired girl as a devil of a fellow, a man who always got his own way.

"Durand! A talker, that's all. Give me a little of this stuff in Beaucourt," and he tapped the glass with a finger-nail, "and we will explode Anatole like a paper bag. Meanwhile, I have somebody else to settle with. When people get in my way, I push."

Barbe nodded her head.

"That was a dirty trick, knocking down that chimney of yours."

"I haven't squared the account yet."

"I thought you were rather fond of Manon Latour," said the red-haired girl.

"She had a house that could easily be repaired."

"How cunning you are!"

Bibi laughed.

"But she would not do business with me, you see. Not that I cared two sous about her; I don't get excited over black-haired women. I shouldn't have meddled with her and her man if they had left me alone; but when a fellow plays you a trick like that——!"

"He wants the boot," said Barbe.

"He will get it, my dear. The fellow has a pistol and is rather free with it, but I shall manage. Meanwhile I have my plans."

Barbe was interested in Bibi's plans. She had begun to think that she would like to share in them, and she believed that she was the very woman for Louis Blanc. It appeared that Bibi had postponed the scheme for

rebuilding the Hôtel de Paris; his new idea was to buy a couple of big Adrienne huts and erect them in an orchard at the back of the hotel. The red ruin would serve as a sort of placard, a dramatic advertisement for the wooden hotel among the apple trees. "You make your money quickly," he explained, "and then clear out. In ten years the sentimental people will be tired of the battlefields."

"But if Manon Latour has the same idea?" Barbe asked.

Bibi finished his drink.

"That's it," he said; "that place of hers is being repaired too quickly. But if I frighten that fellow of hers out of Beaucourt, she will be in a bit of a fix. I shall hire a gang to rush my huts up."

"And when are you going to get the huts?" said Barbe, looking straight into Bibi's eyes.

That was what she wanted to know—how much solidity there was behind this man's march-music.

"I am going to Amiens to-morrow to see a contractor, and I expect to meet my friend who handles the money."

"How exciting! And you will come back and tell me all about it?"

"You can bet on that," said Bibi.

He was building hotels in the clouds to impress the red-haired girl and to encourage his own conceit. Boasting was Bibi's food of the gods; and, when he had rolled a procession of fine words off his tongue, he began to believe that everything would be as he said it was. And yet there was a streak of cunning in all his vanity. He advertised his visit to Amiens, let all Ste. Claire know about it, because it was possible that he might wish people to think him in Amiens when he might be somewhere else. The contractor who had army huts to sell was a creature of the imagination, and even Bibi's financial friend had begun to show an inconvenient cautiousness.

But he went to Amiens, walking to Boves with a little black bag in his hand, and taking the train from Boves to Amiens. He put up at a cheap hotel in the quarter north of the cathedral, and spent a day visiting certain agencies, a firm of builders, and an official at the hôtel de ville. Nobody seemed to know anything; there was a shrugging of shoulders, a suggestion that everything was waiting for the people at Paris. Monsieur Clemenceau, it was said, had made some sort of promise, and the Tiger was a man of his word. The builder whom Bibi visited hinted that he might be able to obtain one big hut, but it would cost Bibi forty thousand francs, and the price did not include charges for transport and re-erection.

“It is necessary to pay through the nose,” said the gentleman with brutal candour.

Bibi spat and went out denouncing profiteers. What was a soldier of the Republic to do with such wolves ready to tear the wool off a sheep’s back?

He fell into a rage, and could think of nothing but of Manon Latour and the way Brent had managed to baulk him. Bibi was always a man of one idea, one passion. Since his scheme for capturing and exploiting Beaucourt seemed in the air, its place was taken by an animal hatred of Paul and a desire to humiliate Manon. Louis Blanc had something of the mentality of a madman whose whole strength can be concentrated upon one definite and violent act. His power of self-expression was purely physical. He had the cunning of a savage, but very little self-control. It is difficult for decent people to understand how certain crimes are committed. Appetite will explain many of them, appetites that flush with hot blood those baser centres of a brain that have not received the living impress of social self-consciousness.

Louis Blanc settled his bill at the hotel, walked to the station and left his black bag at the consigne. He went out into the town again, bought some bread and cheese and a bottle of wine, and had supper at an estaminet. About nine o’clock he started out of Amiens on foot, not hurrying, for he had plenty of time to reach Beaucourt before daylight.

About an hour before sunrise he pushed through a gap in a hedge south of the Rue Romaine and worked his way through the orchards to the back of the stone house opposite Manon’s café. Bibi had explored the stone house on one of his previous visits. Its staircase had not been destroyed, and it was possible to reach the upper rooms, one of which still retained its joists and a few floor boards. This particular room faced the street and had had a ragged hole drilled in its front wall by the shell of an English sixteen-pounder. Bibi entered the stone house from the yard at the back, treading very carefully lest he should set a tin rolling or crack a piece of fallen tile under his boot. He sat down in one of the ground-floor rooms until there was sufficient light to prevent him bungling the climb up the rickety stairs. The ruin was full of the greyness of the dawn when he took his boots off, crawled up the stairs, and, scrambling across the joists, lay flat on the platform of floor boards, and close to the hole in the wall.

He had a good view of the house across the street, and by moving his head he found that he could see the whole of it, and also a large part of the garden. The shell-hole in the wall was less than a foot in diameter, and by keeping well back in the shadow Bibi felt pretty sure that his face would be

almost invisible to any one across the way. He had been lying there about twenty minutes when he heard the café door unlocked, and saw Brent come out with a bucket in his hand. Paul dropped out of Bibi's view when he jumped down from the raised path and went to the well to draw water. Bibi heard him washing in the street, and sousing his head in the bucket.

But Louis Blanc was tired. He had the whole day before him, and he had his own particular plan. He meant to make Paul fight, hand to hand and body to body, and he wanted to eliminate the odds in favour of a man who might carry a pistol in his pocket. So Bibi ate some of his bread and drank a few mouthfuls of wine, and went to sleep, curled up against the wall.

The day's work was in full swing over the way when Louis Blanc woke up and looked out through his porthole. It was a March morning, with a wind humming in the ruins and clouds moving quickly across a broad blue sky. Paul was up on the roof, fixing the rafters on the other half of the house, and the splashes of passing sunlight played upon the white timber, his blue breeches and darker coat. It was the sound of his hammering that had awakened Bibi. Manon was at work in the garden, sleeves and skirt rolled up, turning over the soil with a spade.

Bibi lay like a big cat and watched them. The morning passed away, and about noon he saw Manon enter the house and move to and fro in the kitchen. Smoke showed at the top of the chimney, signalling the approach of the dinner hour. Presently Manon appeared on the path and called to her man, and Brent came down from the roof.

When the meal was over, Bibi saw Paul standing at the kitchen window, lighting his pipe. Manon was clearing the table, and talking to Paul. Brent loitered a moment, and then came out on to the footpath.

"I shall be back before dark."

Bibi heard the words very clearly. He saw Brent turn back when he had passed the window, and take something out of his pocket.

"I'll leave you this."

"Put it on the table," said Manon.

Bibi saw Paul reach in, place the revolver on the table, and walk away. He turned up the road to Rosières, and disappeared behind the ruined houses. Bibi lay and watched the window, the pistol lying there on the table and the figure of Manon moving about the room.

"If she forgets to pocket that pistol?" he thought.

And Manon did forget it. She went back to her work in the garden, and Bibi seized his chance.

He took off his boots, descended the stairs, looked cautiously out of the doorway, and then made a dash across the street. He came back with the revolver, and turned to his observation post in the upper room. Manon was still digging in the garden, turning up the brown soil under the shadow and sunlight of the March sky.

XXVI

Paul Brent was bound for Harlech Dump, those huts and little hillocks of stores that Manon had seen on the road to Rosières.

Paul was not concerned with the economies of Harlech Dump. He had four fifty-franc notes in his pocket, and in his head a list of articles that would be very welcome at the Café de la Victoire. He wanted canvas, oiled linen, screws, nails, door-hinges, window-fittings, paint, paint-brushes, locks, an additional bucket, some extra tools. Harlech Dump was like a quarry in a land that had no stone. It was a temptation to any man involved in the primitive struggle for existence in such a wilderness. It was food laid out in sight of men who were hungry, and guarded by a bored N.C.O., two physically unfit privates and the theoretical fence of international commercial arrangements. Brent wanted to buy. He did not know what steps the Disposal Board, or whatever the authority might happen to be called, was taking to rid itself of these stores. Certain civilized needs cried out for satisfaction. Over there in England people had houses to live in, a grocer and a butcher round the corner, roofs to keep out the rain. Kent had not been pulped into brick dust and Maidstone pounded into a rubbish heap.

Harlech Dump stood in the corner of a field where the Rosières road crossed the railway line. The farm-house to which the field had belonged showed as a red ruin against the background of a wood of poplars. The dump had all the dreariness, the bald, boot-worn manginess of such places. There was a stodge of mud about it that was drying with the March wind and changing its colour from brown to a yellowish grey. Two rusty Nissen huts faced each other across a roadway made of cinders. Duck-board tracks lay about the place like huge dead worms oozing into the sludge and the slime of the soil.

The dump looked deserted when Brent came down the hill, and crossed a corduroy bridge over a big ditch. A brown figure sat on the doorstep of one of the Nissen huts, scraping a pair of boots with a jack-knife. The man was wearing no puttees; his buttons were dirty; he had not shaved. Even at a distance of thirty yards Brent recognized all the significant symptoms of a "fed-upness" that reminded him of Wipers and no leave.

The man turned his head like a sulky bird and looked at Brent without curiosity. He was one Corporal Sweeney, in charge of the guard at Harlech

Dump. The guard was asleep and snoring inside the Nissen hut, sleeping the sleep of the bored. There was no estaminet within ten miles, and the few trains that were running passed by on the other side.

Brent walked up the cinder track. He meant to try his French on the keeper of the dump, and if French would not serve he could fall back on bastard English improvised for the occasion.

"Bon jour, monsieur."

Corporal Sweeney went on scraping his boots.

"Go to hell," he said.

Brent smiled as though Corporal Sweeney had uttered words of English politeness.

"Parlez-vous français, monsieur?"

"Urn poo," said the corporal; "learnt it in your billets."

"Vous avez bien de choses ici," Brent indicated the stores with a sweep of the hand.

"What's that?"

"I spik liddle English, monsieur. I find house—village—napoo—comme ça. C'est triste, c'est terrible!"

"Come back to roost in the rubbish, have you?"

Corporal Sweeney's broad face lost some of its stiffness.

"What village?"

"Beaucourt, monsieur. I work the night, I work the day; I put on roof."

"Tidyin' up the 'appy 'ome."

Brent plunged.

"Is it possible, monsieur, peut-être que vous vendez les choses?"

"Do what, bloke?"

"Sell——?"

"Sell!" said Corporal Sweeney, "I'd sell the whole dump."

And then he added, "I want to get home."

The thought of "home" caused an emotional explosion in this bored and unshaven man. It roused a sudden exasperation in him, an exasperation that produced a feeling of sympathy for this supposed Frenchman. Corporal Sweeney was home-sick, Paul homeless. The remedy seemed so obvious to a man who spent a great deal of the day cursing the dump, the authorities who made the dump, the authorities who kept the dump where it was. Why the hell didn't they sell it, give it away, or send it home? Corporal Sweeney

did not bother his head about official subtleties, the difficulties of transport, the question of finance. He was not interested in the pocket of the English Public; in fact, he was in a mood to pick that pocket and distribute the proceeds to his pals.

"Capitalists! That's what I'm doin' here in this muck 'eap. Protectin' the property of the bloke that pays taxes. He's at home, makin' money, and lookin' after the kids."

He got up and walked about, and became aware of a fifty-franc note in Brent's hand. He flared.

"What's that? Put that money away. Compris?"

Brent put it away.

"Mais oui, monsieur. Comme vous voulez. Mais, il faut payer——"

"Come 'ere," said the brown man. "Lord love you, do you think anybody knows what they've got in the dump? Course they don't know. Got a list, have I? Yes, and it's all wrong; who bothers now the war's over? What d'yer want for the home?"

Brent made a pretence of trying to understand.

"You no sell, monsieur?"

"I want to get home," said the corporal, "and the French—they want this stuff. Me or Clemenceau or Lloyd George would settle the biz in five minutes; the Tape-worms'll take years. Come 'ere."

He conducted Brent to a big hut that Paul had not seen before, and kicked open the door. The hut was full of miscellaneous stores, like a ship-chandler's shop or an ironmonger's warehouse. And Brent was tempted. Like Corporal Sweeney he was a simple man in need of certain simple things, and he wanted so little. If he helped himself, he would owe the British Public something, but the British Public owed Paul Brent something, his unclaimed gratuity and back pay. His one fear was lest he should get the corporal into trouble.

"Catch hold,—prenez."

"Mais, monsieur, l'officier vous en voudra, n'est-ce pas?"

"Officier—fini. They don't know what's here any more than I do. And they don't b——y well care. Voyez-vous?"

Brent looked round the hut. He saw the very raw material he needed, canvas, oiled linen, paint, ironmongery, stuff to make the bowels of a reconstructive artist yearn. He nodded, smiled at the corporal, and shrugged his shoulders.

"You let me take some things, monsieur?"

"Catch hold," said Sweeney.

Paul made his selection, but he made it like a Puritan, and with an eye as to how much he could carry. A roll of canvas, a smaller roll of oiled linen, a seven pound tin of red paint and one of green, two brushes, four locks, six sets of butt-hinges, some screws, a keyhole saw, an assortment of nails and tacks. He made a bundle of the plunder by rolling it up in the canvas and lashing it with a length of cord.

The corporal looked on approvingly. He was a man who worked with his hands, and the Frenchman's nice and practical taste in choosing his raw material piqued the domesticated craftsman in him. Moreover, this fellow was not greedy.

"I've got an old hen house at home," he said, "needs paintin', and some new tarred felt on the roof. Lord love a duck, wish I was there."

Brent tried the bundle on his shoulder. He found that it was not too heavy for him to carry.

"Monsieur," he said, "tousand thanks. If officier says pay—I pay."

"Officer—nah poo. The stuff will only rot here, old cock."

Paul shook hands with the corporal.

"Monsieur, you visit Beaucourt. Fumez cigarette, drink glass of vin rouge."

"Bong, très bong," said Corporal Sweeney; "me for Beaucourt, mossoo, toote sweet."

Brent took the road to Beaucourt with that bundle on his back. The wind had dropped, and the western sky was a great arch of blue, with the sun coming and going behind hummocks of white cloud. From the hill above Harlech Dump Brent could see Beaucourt, a distinct chequer of red and white between the purple of the woods, the broken spire of its church a soft blue line against the blue horizon. He dropped his bundle and sat down to rest on the bank side of the road, with the sunlight playing on him through the branches of a road-side apple tree. There was a little wood behind him and in it birds were singing.

Brent sat and looked towards Beaucourt, and his thoughts were of the simplest. He was busy making a canvas ceiling or canopy for the kitchen, and filling his windows with oiled linen. He had a boyish desire to go home and to paint that front door, at once and without delay—a joyous April green. It was very pleasant to work for Manon. She was so delighted with

things that he always felt that he wanted to fetch her to see any new piece of work that he had completed. He liked to watch her eyes and face light up.

Some day he would try his hand at painting a sign-board and nail it up over the front door. “Café de la Victoire,” and underneath it her name, “Manon Latour.”

But it was possible that her name might not be Manon Latour.

Brent smiled and, picking up his bundle, walked on towards Beaucourt. He was well content with life, a life that was full of the fascination of contriving, creating, conquering; a simple life in which hands and head worked together. No thought of Louie Blanc crossed his mind. The evening was too peaceful.

XXVII

About four o'clock that afternoon Louis Blanc came down the stairs of the stone house, crossed the street, and walked into the kitchen of the Café de la Victoire. Manon was still working in the garden, and Bibi strolled about the room with the air of a man in possession, his hands in his pockets, his eyes looking at everything with cynical amusement. These two people were preparing to make themselves comfortable; they had their furniture, their pots and pans, plenty of food to eat and wood to burn. The red and blue tiles of the floor had been scrubbed until they had regained some of their pre-war polish. The table by the window had a cretonne cover, blue pansies on a green ground. The crockery on the dresser reflected the pleasant pride of the housewife.

Bibi threw his cap on the table, pulled the arm-chair up to the stove and sat down. The blue coffee-pot was standing on the stove, but the fire had gone out, and it was no business of Bibi's to light it.

"I will have my coffee when she comes in," he said to himself; "it is her business to serve her clients."

The position of the arm-chair did not satisfy him, for there was no warmth in the stove, and the chair did not occupy the strategic point necessary to Bibi's plan. He moved it back against the opposite wall and close to the door, so that anybody entering by the door would not see the chair or its occupant until they were well inside the room. Bibi splurged in it, legs spread, in an attitude of comfortable arrogance. He was always a man of attitudes, especially when there was a woman in the game.

He had been sitting there for half an hour before he heard Manon's footsteps on the stones of the raised path. She suspected nothing, but had suddenly remembered that she had left the revolver on the table by the window; also it was time to light the fire. Bibi had shut the kitchen door, nor did Manon remember that she had left it open. Louis Blanc had drawn in his feet, and was sitting upright in the chair, his left arm extended and laid across the door like a spring compressed to close it at the psychological moment.

Manon lifted the latch and walked in. Her eyes were turned towards the table by the window and the pistol that should have been there; the door hid

Bibi. She went towards the table. The door closed behind her like the lid of a trap.

"Good evening, madame."

Manon turned. She saw Bibi sitting there with an unpleasant smile on his face. He had edged his chair a foot to the left so that it was impossible for her to open the door. He held her caged. And Manon understood in that moment of fear that Louis Blanc had her pistol.

"It is you, monsieur."

She spoke quite calmly, for after the first leap of the heart her courage came back to her. It was necessary to be calm and cool with a man like Bibi; she knew that by instinct. It was her business to try and hold all horror and fear at arm's length, to refuse to believe in Bibi's beastliness, to find out what the danger was and how to meet it.

"You are always a man of surprises, monsieur. Meanwhile I must light the fire."

Bibi kept looking at her and smiling and saying nothing. He reminded Manon of Marius, the village idiot, who was always smiling and pulling the hair on his chin; but Marius had never attacked a woman. Manon walked to the stove, and, standing so that she could watch Bibi, lifted the round top, and dropped in some paper and wood from the fuel box.

"I will have coffee," said Louis Blanc.

"Bien, monsieur."

"And an omelette."

"So the café is to be christened, is it? I shall have to charge three francs for an omelette; provisions are difficult here."

"Don't worry yourself; I owe a bill already."

She went to the cupboard and collected what she wanted, eggs, butter, a frying-pan, bread, coffee and a tin of milk. Bibi watched her. She was so deliberate, so unflurried, holding him at a distance, treating the affair as a casual incident. Her composure piqued him. He had a sudden desire to see Manon inflamed, struggling while he held her down and buried his mouth deep in her warm throat.

He put his hand into his coat pocket and drew out the butt of the revolver. He glanced quickly at Manon. She had seen what he had wished her to see, and he let the pistol slip back into his pocket.

"You would like some herbs with your omelette, monsieur?"

Her eyes were black and steady.

"Yes, some herbs."

"Perhaps you would like to come nearer the stove. It will be warmer."

"This place suits me. And hurry up. I'm hungry." Manon went on with her cooking, opening the iron door from time to time and pushing a handful of wood into the stove. She was wondering when Paul would return, and what would happen when he returned. Bibi was thinking of what might happen before Brent came back. He no longer desired Manon because she was Paul's; he desired her because of her white throat and plump arms, and that body that would struggle.

Manon did not hurry. She wished the cooking of that omelette would last for ever; it seemed a sort of queer barrier between Bibi and herself, a postponement of the beastly purpose that looked out at her from the man's eyes. She knew what she felt, what she feared, what she shrank from.

"So you are all alone here?"

"My partner will be back—very soon."

The omelette was ready. She turned it out upon a plate, and Bibi stood up, pushing the arm-chair against the door with one foot, while he caught hold of another chair and turned it towards the table. He sat down. Manon pushed the plate, the bread, and a knife and fork across the table, and poured out a cup of coffee.

Bibi ate. He had an unclean way of eating, and an ugly trick of pushing out his lower lip like a ledge and shovelling the food over it. He tore the bread with his fingers. Manon had helped herself to a cup of coffee, and all the while she was listening.

"Sit down, madame."

"I prefer to stand."

Bibi looked at her curiously, as though she were part of the food on the table.

"This fellow of yours works hard."

"He is a very good partner, monsieur."

"He works too hard," and then he made a coarse jest at Paul's expense.

Manon stared at Bibi as though she did not understand him.

"Do not pretend to be so innocent. A woman only pulls up her petticoat when she pretends to look innocent."

"Yes, that was always your idea of a woman, Monsieur Blanc."

Bibi finished his second cup of coffee, and wiped his mouth on his hand.

"So you think this fellow Brent is a better man than I am."

"I have never thought about it. There was no necessity."

"You are mistaken. I shall have to put the matter right. I don't like to think of a pretty woman believing what isn't true."

He got up from the table and went and sat in the arm-chair by the door and, feeling in the breast pocket of his coat, brought out a little black cigar.

"A match."

Manon took a box from the shelf and threw it to him. He caught the box, and flourished it with an air of gaiety, the cigar stuck aggressively between his lips. Manon watched him light the cigar and puff blue smoke, making a sucking noise with his lips. She had always hated Bibi, but her hatred of him became more like a foul taste in her mouth.

"Something to eat, something to smoke, and a woman to talk to. Come and sit on my knee, coquette."

Manon began to clear the plates from the table.

"That is not on the bill of fare, monsieur."

He was smiling.

"I'll include it. I am owed a good deal. Come here—at once."

Manon set the plate and cup on the dresser, and loitered a moment, fighting the horror of Bibi's gradual attack. She felt herself helpless, shut up in a cage with a beast who sat there and gloated. She knew that it was useless to appeal to the decent man in Louis Blanc, and that evasions would only amuse him. She wondered how long it would be before he grew violent, how long she would be able to hold him off. And if Paul returned, it might only add to the horror.

"Come here."

She made herself face Bibi, but kept the table between them.

"The joke has gone far enough, monsieur; it does not please me."

"So you think it is a joke?"

"Of course."

He was lying back in the chair with his legs spread out.

"No, it is not a joke. Regardez!"

He took the revolver out of his pocket.

"Come here, or I shoot."

"You are very brave to threaten a woman with a pistol."

"Is it the pistol you object to?"

"Of course."

He stood up, and, posing himself, threw the revolver through the unglazed window. It fell somewhere in the ruins across the road, breaking the great silence with one ringing and discordant note. The gesture pleased Bibi. He turned to Manon, smiled, and sat down again in his chair.

"Voilà! Your man will have to fight with his fists. And if he does not fight after I have emptied his glass for him, well, he will smell like a goat, hey?"

Manon felt stiff, frozen, unable to move, yet her heart was beating hard and fast, and she knew that her knees were trembling. She began to grow angry, angry with the fierceness of a wild thing trapped and played with and tormented beyond her patience. There was a knife on the table. She was ready to snatch at that knife and fight.

"Are you coming here," said Bibi, "or shall I fetch you?"

"You beast!" she said.

Manon had expected his violence and it came like the leap of a dog. Bibi pushed the table against her with a thrust of one big boot, so that she was thrown against the stove. She had made a grab at the knife, but before she could strike at him, Bibi's long body was leaning over the table, and he had her by the wrist.

"Drop it!"

Her brown eyes blazed into his.

"You beast."

"C'est ça."

He took the cigar from his mouth and held the red end against her forearm. Manon flinched, twisted, cried out.

"Drop it."

Her fingers relaxed, the knife fell on the floor.

Bibi tossed the cigar into a corner, and suddenly, with a straightening of his long back he pulled Manon over the table, catching the other wrist, and turning her over so that her face was under his.

"Now then——"

Someone was coming along the path. Manon heard a man whistling, and the sound of his footsteps. She cried out in anguish:

"Paul! Paul!"

XXVIII

Paul Brent gave one look through the unglazed window, dropped his bundle on the path and made for the door. Half a minute ago he had been walking slowly up the Rue de Rosières with that camel's hump of a bundle on his back, feeling fagged and ready for a rest, but there was no tiredness about the man who went in to rescue his mate.

When Brent stormed in, overturning the chair that had stood against the door, he found Bibi waiting for him like a bear with its paws ready to rip. The overturned chair lay between them, its legs in the air as though it were shouting a ridiculous protest and trying to keep these two wild men apart. Manon had slipped away and was leaning against the dresser, her dress torn open at the throat, her eyes swimming black in a dead white face.

Brent and Bibi looked at each other. There was nothing to be said, nothing that words could express or satisfy. Then Bibi pushed the chair aside with a sweep of a big foot, and the two men rushed in.

Bibi could box a little, but there was no science in that fight; it was just a savage rough and tumble. The Frenchman was a head taller than Paul, heavier, and longer in the arms. He could have floored Brent at the first punch had the affair been less of a whirlwind. Paul went in bull-headed, smothered a smash at his face, and ducking, got his arms round Bibi's body. He had the under-grip and was shorter and stockier than the Frenchman, and he rushed Bibi against the table, heaved him over and got on top.

Freeing his right hand, he tried for Louis Blanc's throat, but in mere animal strength he was no match for this great stallion who had always boasted that he had the legs of a horse. Bibi gripped Paul round the middle. His legs wrapped themselves round Brent's; he heaved, twisted, rolled Paul on his side. They remained like that for a moment, Bibi jerking his lean throat away from the grip of Paul's right hand. Then Bibi gave another twist. He came up and had Brent under him, his jaw digging into Paul's throat, and so close that his own throat was guarded.

"Voilà!"

Manon saw the smear of satisfaction on his face, and her heart sickened. She had stood aside, watching, till she saw that Bibi had her man pinned under his big body. She picked up a knife from the dresser and came forward.

"Let go."

Bibi glanced up, showing his teeth, and that momentary slackening of his attention gave Brent a chance. He got one foot round the leg of the table, and managed to roll Bibi to one side. They had been near the edge of the table and they fell, Brent uppermost, Bibi's head striking the tiled floor.

Brent broke free and stood up, panting. He saw that he would have to keep the fighting open, the beast was too strong for him at close quarters. He jerked a glance at Manon.

"Run, get out of the room."

She tried to force the knife on him, but Brent's rage would have none of it. He was not ripe yet for a clutch at any sort of weapon. Bibi, still giddy, was scrambling up, his mouth and chin all slaver. Brent rushed at him, and struck hard and straight with a workman's arm and fist, and Bibi went back, knees sagging, his feet paddling like the feet of a duck. Brent swung again, missed, fell against the Frenchman and was shoved back with the flat of the hand in his face. Brent staggered against the table, hung there a moment, and went in again like a game dog that has been rolled over but not hurt. But Bibi had recovered his balance and had had a second in which to think. As Brent came at him he lashed out with his right foot, a full, swinging, upward kick that caught Paul in the stomach.

Brent's face went the colour of clay. His mouth gaped. The kick had sent him reeling down the room. He seemed to bend over himself, to double up in the middle. He fell in the corner, turned over, writhing, and lay face downwards, legs quivering. He was conscious of nothing but a knot of agony in his stomach, a vast nausea, a desire to vomit.

Bibi stood and stared. His shoulders drooped a little, and his head was none too steady, but he appeared to perk up into sudden arrogance like a big, triumphant bird. He flapped his arms, opened his mouth, and the laugh that came from it was like a crow.

"That's burst the balloon," he said.

Then he became conscious of Manon. She was standing between him and Brent, but a little to one side, her face white and stiff with a vague, shocked wonder. She seemed to hesitate, her impulse stooping towards the man who now lay huddled in the corner.

Suddenly she turned on Bibi. Her lips were thin, bloodless; she looked starved, but in her eyes there was something indescribable, a facing of the ultimate vileness of Bibi's strength, a defiance of physical defeat.

"Yes, and what next?"

Bibi seemed to rear on his haunches, his hands stuck in his pockets.

"Your fellow is thrashed. He is no good, is he? I can take what I want, my dear. What do you say?"

She hung her head as though beaten, her wits struggling against a sense of helplessness.

"And all this happens, because a silly ruin is blown down by the wind."

"You got in my way, both of you."

"We were here, that's all. Haven't you any decent feeling?"

Bibi looked at her with flat eyes that gloated. The physical rage was still strong in him, and he was taking his triumph.

"You wouldn't have me. You shan't have him. I can finish with him presently, and then I'll finish with you."

"There are the gendarmes," she said.

Bibi splurged.

"Rubbish! We're in the wilderness, wild man's land. I can do what I please. That fellow got in my way, and I have kicked his belly in. Who's to know if——"

She shuddered. She was looking at Paul, and suddenly she saw his hand move as though making a sign. Her eyes swept back to Bibi; he was watching her; he had not seen.

"You have beaten him; is that not enough?"

"If I get what I want for it."

"Be reasonable."

"Drop that knife," he said; "you have still got it behind your back."

She let it fall on the floor. She wanted to keep Bibi talking to hold him off.

And Brent lay there, listening. His strength was coming back; he had been sick, and the pain had died to an ache of the muscles. His rage was returning, a cold rage that lay low and was cunning. He was up against savagery, a beast who had to be fought with the methods of a beast. Right down in the core of his brain was the thought that he had got to beat Bibi, even if he killed him. That kick had brought Brent down into the primitive trough; there were no rules, no nicenesses, no points of honour in a savage scramble with a man like Louis Blanc.

He listened. Manon was talking, talking for time. He loved Manon, and his love was a rage.

"Paul is dying," he heard her say.

Bibi shrugged.

"He's quiet, anyway."

Brent moved slightly, groaned; but his body was stiffening like a spring. If only he had some weapon! His right hand went out slowly, gropingly, into the corner, and touched something smooth and cold. It was an empty wine-bottle, the bottle that he, Manon, and old Durand had emptied a few days ago. He gripped the neck of it, braced himself, his left arm pressed against the wall.

He was on his feet before Bibi moved. A wooden chair stood against the wall close to where Brent had been lying, and as the Frenchman rushed in, Paul grabbed the chair and swung it at Bibi's feet. It tripped him, nearly brought him down, and as he hung there, pawing the air to get his balance, Brent smashed at his head with the empty bottle. It broke, leaving the neck a jagged end in Paul's hand.

Bibi was down over the chair. He made a grab at Brent and caught the front of his coat; his face was upturned and Paul struck at it with that dagger of glass. He saw Bibi's face change like a grotesque mask; the mouth opened, the eyes closed, the forehead was a knot of anguish. He uttered a cry, and began to claw at Brent like a beast gone mad. Paul struck him again, and wrenched free, leaving a piece of his coat in one of Bibi's paws.

Bibi was on his feet now, his face a red stream. He groped, made a rush, and stumbled over the chair, and Brent realized that the man was blind. The glass had entered one eye, and the other was full of blood.

He slipped round the centre table, with a glance at Manon who had run to the door; he made a sign to her, a sign that she understood.

Bibi mopped his eyes with his fists. The hideousness of him was a thing Brent never forgot. And the beast was dangerous, agonized with pain and the rage of its half blindness. He blundered against the dresser, and brought half the crockery clattering to the floor. And suddenly he seemed to get a glimpse of Brent through the red fog of his own blood, and he charged, arms swinging. Paul slewed the table round, but Bibi lunged forward over it, and got a grip of Brent's coat.

Paul tore free, striking at Bibi's arm. He had to keep away from those ferocious and clawing hands, and he knew it, but Bibi was blind again, and raising himself up from his sprawling position on the table.

"Paul——"

Manon had come back, and she carried the short iron crow-bar in her hand that Brent had used in dismantling the huts.

"Keep out," he said hoarsely, "it's too foul, this."

She went, after giving him that bar of iron.

Bibi was shaking his head like a dog just out of the water. His foot touched something on the floor—the knife that Manon had dropped; he groped for it, and stood up. He had begun to curse, calling Brent every foul thing under the sun, and he kept on cursing as he felt his way forward. There was cunning in Bibi. He fumbled at the table, seeing Paul dimly through a red mist, and suddenly he vaulted on to the table and made a scrambling rush at Brent.

Brent swung at the upraised arm. The bar caught the forearm bones about two inches above the wrist, and he heard them crack. The knife fell; Bibi's hand sagged over like the absurd stuffed hand of a dummy. But Brent's gorge was rising over this filthy scramble, this savagery of animals in a cage. He steadied himself, brought the bar down over Bibi's head, and saw him crumple to the floor.

Brent stood, staring. He felt sick, unsteady, a man who had got up to the neck in some foul ditch. There was no exultation in him, yet no pity. He had downed a mad beast, and he was grim and cautious.

He bent down and pulled Bibi against the wall. He did not think there was any more fight in Louis Blanc, but he took no risks. Up-ending the table, he lowered one end of it on to Bibi's legs, and loaded the arm-chair on to the table. That would prevent a man who was playing 'possum from getting up too quickly.

"It's all over, thank God."

She came in to him, an impetuous passionate figure, arms spread, eyes alight.

"Oh, my Paul!"

Her emotion was like a flood of rain, a perfume, some softening human passion after those moments of savagery and bloody sweat. She ran to Brent and Paul caught her. Her head was on his shoulder; she trembled; she clutched him with tender hands; her body seemed to warm itself against his.

"Oh, my Paul, we are saved!"

"Ma chérie."

Then she broke down, and with a passion that went to Paul's heart. He was human once more, a decent, gentle fellow; the beast was dead; her tears seemed to cleanse him.

“It was my fault, my foolishness. I left the pistol lying by the window, and he must have been watching. He threw it across the street into the ruins. It need never have happened.”

Brent held her head in the hollow of one hand, and looked down into her wet face.

“Well, it has happened. Perhaps it was better that it should happen, once and for all.”

“Is he dead?”

Paul glanced over one shoulder at Bibi, and his eyes hardened.

“No, but he has all he can carry, one eye gone, and a broken wrist.”

Manon was feeling in the pocket of her apron, and she showed Paul the pistol that Bibi had thrown into the ruins. “I ran across a moment ago, and I had good luck. I found it almost at once. Keep it.” Brent slipped the pistol into his pocket, and discovered that Manon’s face seemed growing dim. He could not feel his feet; his knees shook; he was exhausted, and Manon’s tears and clinging hands had exhausted him still further. This flare of emotion and the exultation of it had left him faint.

“Ma chérie, I’m done up.”

She had felt his weariness almost before he had begun to tremble, and she became the little woman who had no more use for tears. He staggered as she helped him towards the table by the window. He seemed to collapse on it, bending his head till his forehead touched the wood.

“Oh, you are hurt!”

“Something to drink,” he said.

She ran to the cupboard and brought back a bottle half full of red wine, and sitting on the table, she raised Paul and held his head against her shoulder. It made her think of giving a sick child its drink, and an indefinable tenderness stirred in her. She held the bottle to his lips, letting him drink a little at a time.

“That’s better,” he said as the wine warmed him and put a new flick into his heart; “I could eat something.”

Her shoes crunched on the broken crockery as she searched in the cupboard for food. She brought him a slice of cold meat, and some bread and cheese, and Paul ate—while she sat beside him. And suddenly they seemed to become conscious of the outer world, of a rich sunset, of a stream of golden light, and the sound of a blackbird singing. A thrill of joy, of mystery, ran through both of them. They looked into each other’s eyes, and kissed.

XXIX

PAUL had found his pipe; he was filling it and staring at the floor, when something yellow whisked into the kitchen. It was Philosophe, Philosophe who had been missing all day and who now floated in with an air of having been round the corner. The dog yapped and pawed at Manon's apron.

"A lot of use you have been to us," said Brent.

But Manon kissed Philosophe's head and then pushed him away.

"I could forgive anything to-night."

"Even—that?"

She pressed her hands to her eyes.

"No, not that. What are we to do now?"

They heard a sudden sound in the silence, a queer sound that startled both of them. Philosophe was licking Bibi's face.

Brent stood up with a tightening of the mouth and limbs.

"Come here."

The dog sneaked out from behind the table and went and lay down by the stove.

Brent removed the chair and the table. He found Manon standing beside him, and together they looked down at this mountain of a man who lay stretched along the wall. Dusk had come; the room was filling with it, and a little darkness covered the mask of Bibi's mutilated face. He moved a leg, stirred slightly, and seemed to become conscious of physical pain.

Paul and Manon looked at each other.

"What's to be done?" her eyes asked his.

Brent was grim. He stood biting the stem of his pipe, a man who had not forgotten and who would never forget. Things might have turned out so differently. He had no pity for the man down there.

"Don't touch him," he said; "keep away. He's foul."

She caught her breath.

"I couldn't touch him. But must he stay here?"

"Good God, no," said Brent. "This place has got to be cleaned."

Bibi moved. He raised his head, propping himself on one elbow. He seemed to be thinking, remembering, feeling, but like a dull, helpless animal. He rubbed at his eyes and uttered a foul word. Brent's back seemed to stiffen.

"Hallo," he said.

Louis Blanc raised himself to a sitting position, his back against the wall. He looked up at Paul, his head rolling from side to side, his slashed face a thing of loathing. Everything was dim to Louis Blanc, even the voice of the man who spoke to him.

"Water," he said.

Paul stood over him, yet keeping his distance, for though the beast was maimed he might still be dangerous, and he was taking no chances with Bibi.

"Don't move. Do you hear what I say?"

Bibi used a foul word, but Brent caught him up.

"Drop that and listen. I have that pistol, see; we found it all right, and if you try any tricks I shall shoot and shoot to kill. Sit there and take your orders, and keep that foul tongue of yours quiet."

Bibi said nothing; he was beaten, a battered thing, half blind, sullen with pain. Paul had spoken to Manon, and she was pouring some wine and water into a glass that had survived the storm. She brought it to Brent, also a thick slice of bread cut from a loaf, and Brent put the glass and the bread on the floor and pushed them within Bibi's reach, using the end of the iron bar.

"That's the way to feed a wild beast," he said, "if I touched you again I might kill you."

Bibi lifted the glass in his left hand; his head was very unsteady, and he spilt some of the wine down his chin; the stuff stung his cut lips, but he drank it down, and began to mumble the bread. The room was full of the dusk, and Manon lit the candle. Paul had gone to the window, and was sitting on the table, watching Bibi. The candle light lit up Brent's face; it was a serious, frowning face, the face of a man who had made up his mind about something.

"I'll take a sandwich with me," he said.

The candle light flickered in Manon's eyes.

"But where are you going?"

"Half-way to Ste. Claire; sort of slave-gang stunt. He has got to foot it somehow."

She looked into her man's eyes and said nothing. There was a calm blue glare in them that she could not have softened even if she had pitied Bibi.

"Supposing he cannot walk so far?"

"We didn't ask him to come here. He is going to walk four miles. After that—I have finished with him."

He turned to Bibi.

"Do you hear? You have got to get out of this. You want a doctor. I'll see you half-way to Ste. Claire."

Bibi grunted.

"I can't do it."

Brent spoke quietly, but he showed no mercy.

"Get up. No, I'm not going to help you, or touch you. You will get a doctor at Ste. Claire; you'll get no doctor in Beaucourt."

And Louis Blanc moved. He rose slowly on his feet, steadying himself against the wall, and stood there, feeling his strength.

"Come on," he said sullenly, "you are merciful sort of people, you two. I'm half blind. You'd like to see me in the ditch, wouldn't you? But I'll get to Ste. Claire."

Manon had slipped a paper of bread and cheese into Paul's pocket.

"Quick march."

He watched Bibi grope to the door, and half feel his way out of the house and down into the street. It was growing dark, and Brent followed him at a distance of a couple of yards, the revolver in one hand, the iron bar in the other.

"I shall be back soon," he called to Manon.

And so he set out to drive this half-blind Polyphemus out of Beaucourt, walking among the ruins like Bibi's shadow, ready to shoot if the man in front of him hesitated or hung back. Neither of them spoke, save when Brent uttered a word of warning. "Right . . . Left . . . Keep in the middle of the road." He found that Bibi's pace was lengthening when they had passed the factory, and were on the road to Bonnière, and he went along at a steady slouch. The stars were out overhead, and there was no wind rustling the dead grass and weeds in the wild fields beside the road. They heard the sound of their own feet on the broken pavé, nothing more.

Brent wondered what was passing in the mind of the man in front of him, and the picture of Bibi lurching along in the darkness brought back the night of a memory in the Arras battle of 1917. Paul had marched a German

prisoner back from the line, a big, tusk-faced sergeant-major who had been badly wounded in the right shoulder, and Brent remembered how all the swagger had gone out of the German. He had thought of one thing and one thing only, how long it would be before they reached a dressing-station. He had kept on worrying Brent: "I bleed, Tommy, I bleed."

They had covered two miles when Louis Blanc spoke. He was sullen, but something stronger than his hatred of Brent marched at his heels.

"What's the time?"

"I don't know. Perhaps about half past seven."

Bibi walked on in silence for several minutes. Brent noticed that their pace had increased.

"Have we passed Des Ormes?"

"Don't know the place," said Brent. "Why?"

"There's a road that turns off there, the road to Boves."

"Why do you want to go to Boves?"

"I shall find a doctor at Boves. I want one, don't I?"

And Brent understood. Like that German at Arras, Louis Blanc was tame; he had the fear of death in him, or the fear of blindness, which is the living death. Every step that he took was so much ground covered on the road to a place where a man might be found with hands that could heal.

A queer, elemental pity stirred in Brent, a feeling that even penetrated and suffused itself through his physical loathing of this man.

"You want to go to Boves?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where does the road turn off?"

"Past the farm called Des Ormes, a clump of dead elms close to the road."

"I'll look out for it," said Brent.

He kept his promise, and managed to make out these ghostly trees reaching out their black and maimed tentacles towards the stars, and learning from Bibi that the road to Boves branched off on the right hand about a hundred yards farther on, he watched for it, and found the road as a greyish streak diverging across the darker fields.

"This is the place."

Louis Blanc grunted.

"You'll be bringing in the police, I suppose?"

Brent did not answer him at once, and Bibi began to fidget. He stood poking his head like an eager dog in the direction of Boves.

"It all depends," said Brent, "on Madame Latour's wishes."

"Hell! Never mind; are you sure this is the road?"

"It's the first road on the right after Des Ormes. Can you see?"

"Enough. I'm off."

And he went slouching away into the darkness, leaving Brent standing there, nor did Brent move until he could no longer hear the grinding of Bibi's boots upon the road.

At Beaucourt, in that room of her simple affection, Manon had sat for a while by the light of the candle, looking at the débris left by those two struggling men. What a sordid affair, what a horror to be forgotten and washed out of the mind! A chair broken, furniture overturned, crockery smashed on the floor,—a patch of blood on the tiles where Bibi had been stretched by the wall. And Philosophe, true to his name, asleep beside the stove, caring nothing for what had happened.

Manon jumped up. The inspiration was obvious, and yet passionate in its demands. She must get rid of this pollution, put it at once out of her life, her life that was Paul's. A great tenderness was awake in her, a feeling that this little room was sacred, and that it had to be resanctified. She lit another candle and set to work to cleanse it; sweeping up the broken glass and crockery and carrying it out in a box to the ruins across the road. She set the furniture in order, and finding the blue and white jug broken on the floor, and Paul's bunch of yellow palm lying beside it, she gathered up this emblem of the spring, found another bowl for it, and placed it in the same place on the table. There remained that red stain on the floor. It revolted her, but she made a mop of an old sack, and washed out the stain. Yet her ideal of purification was not complete; this room was to have a living atmosphere, warmth, light, homeliness. She wanted Paul to see it again as he had seen it before that savage fight. She lit the stove, put a pan of water on to boil, spread a clean cloth on the table, laid two plates, two cups, two knives and forks, a dish of meat, cheese and bread. Then she drew the arm-chair close to the stove and sat down to wait. Philosophe, undisturbed by these practical yet spiritual activities, still slept, and the dog's passivity was a piece of comforting naturalism, like the bunch of yellow palm on the table.

Paul returned earlier than he had expected. She ran to the door to meet him, and found him struggling with the bundle that he had left lying on the path.

"I had forgotten this, and nearly fell over it."

She caught hold of one end, and helped him in with it. Then she closed the door, and, going to the stove, pretended to be busy making her coffee, but she was all waiting—as a woman waits—to see whether her man had the inward and the outward vision.

Paul noticed everything, the clean floor, the bunch of palm on the table by the window, the white cloth, the tidy dresser. It was good, all good, the very touch his heart asked for. He looked at Philosophe, who had not troubled to get up and greet him. Tranquillity had returned; Manon had washed away the stains.

He went softly across the kitchen, and put a shy man's arm round her.

"What a good piece of work you make of life," he said.

She turned to him quickly.

"Here is your chair by the stove."

She was looking up into his face; he was grey, weary to the point of exhaustion, but the shine in his eyes broke through all the physical shadows.

"Just the same as before," he said, "and like you, clean and good. Ma chérie, I'm just all out."

She made him sit down in the chair, and drew up the table so that he could take his supper by the stove. Paul let himself relax, for there was a sharp ache in the muscles that had been bruised by Bibi's boot. He looked at the stove, at the sleeping dog, at Manon, and the day's work seemed done.

"Would you like your plate on your lap?"

"No, I'll turn to the table."

She did not worry him with questions, sensing his weariness and the happy and human sloth that had fallen upon his body. His face regained its colour; the tired lines were softened; he had the air of a man who was well content.

Presently he lit his pipe, and looked up at her with a flicker of tender humour in his eyes.

"A lot of good that dog was to us! A good name—Philosophe. He got out of the way, like the clever people during the war."

She gave Philosophe a gentle kick, but he took not the least notice.

"And Bibi?" she asked.

"He's beaten," he said; "I believe we have finished with Bibi."

He described Bibi as a big and frightened shadow lurching along the road to Boves.

"Shall we put the police on him?" he asked her.

“It’s for you to say.”

Brent looked at her. Her eyes had darkened. There are things that no woman likes to see dragged into the hard light of a law court.

“Let us leave it alone,” he said. “I have a feeling that we have finished with Bibi. I hate stirring up mud; life’s been so clean here.”

She made a sudden movement towards him; and Paul sat up, took her face between his hands and kissed her.

“Good God,” he said, “it seems a lot for a man like me to ask for! All that I know is—that I’m going to make good here. Will you let me prove it?”

Manon’s eyes held his.

“You are too much afraid of people, Paul. If we are partners, let us be honest. Why should we not tell old Durand and the Casteners and people like that——”

“What shall we tell them?”

“Mon ami, you are making me the man.”

He drew her face to him again, and kissed her slowly and with great tenderness.

“All right,” he said; “but I’ll not marry you till this place is all that I want to make it.”

She laid her hands on his shoulders.

“What queer things you men are, some of you. If it was not for that, I would——”

“Tell me,” he said, his hands on her wrists.

She gave a quick, defensive smile.

“No, show me what is in that bundle. It’s so exciting, this new home.”

XXX

It seemed to Paul Brent that peace and the spring came suddenly to Beaucourt, and that even in this war-scarred country there was a beauty that had a mystery and a strangeness of its own.

The fruit trees in Manon's orchard were big with bud. Brent had joined her in reclaiming the garden; the rubbish and broken boughs had been cleared away, the wall mended, the fruit trees pruned and cleaned, the soil dug over. Seeds were in with neat little labels showing the rows—lettuces, beans, peas, early potatoes. Paul had rescued and nailed up the hardy vine that grew on the south wall of the house.

He was happy. He liked to wander down to the stream, and see the willow blazing gold, the young grass lushing up, the purple woods ready to burst into leaf. The great chestnuts in the avenue at the château were beginning to open their brown buds. Paul found violets in flower on a sunny bank, and came back with a child's handful of them to Manon. He heard the wryneck in the woods, and soon the cuckoo would be calling, and as for the blackbirds they sang to him night and morning. The war had been merciful to Beaucourt in passing over it so lightly, and the spring seemed to call for the brown faces and the strong hands of the peasants.

It would seem that the world has to rediscover the great truth that it is the simple things that matter in life. The sap in the stem of a young oak is worth all the orchids that ever were pampered. Paul Brent was fortunate in his happy drift into the simple and innocent life, with its elemental needs and primitive triumphs. He was to escape so much of the disillusionment of the years after the war, nor was he to become the victim of that strange physical apathy that flamed now and again into feverish erotism. Men had had the strong drink of an abnormal excitement snatched away from them. They were pushed back to the bench and the desk and the coal seam, and life seemed a damnable dulness. Money meant escape. There were thousands who were mad for money.

Brent fell straight into the lap of nature, with a fresh handful of simple ideals ready to be sown, and he sowed them in Beaucourt and watered them with a happy, human sweat. He did not want to slack and talk and theorize; the days were too short for him. He loved the work of his hands, the simple sensations, the smell of the sawdust, the crisply-curled shavings his plane

ripped from a plank, the new nails he hammered in, the paint, the clang of his hammer, the snoring of his saw, the smell of the soil. Life was good. The whole house was re-roofed; he had more leisure to enjoy the true craftsman's love of accurate detail; he could stand in the middle of the road with his hands in his pockets, and Manon beside him. They were never tired of looking at the house, the new roof which Paul thought of tiling or thatching some day over the galvanized iron, the windows with their neat yellow panels of oiled linen, the front door which Paul had painted a gay green.

They were as proud as a couple of children over a sand castle. And Brent had fought for his castle and held it.

"Looks fine, doesn't it?"

And Manon's eyes were full of the spring.

In the matter of the more spiritual things these ideals count, and Paul—that simple fellow—kept his panache. Perhaps there are no English words capable of expressing the subtle personal pride of a Cyrano de Bergerac, or the emotional exultation of the chivalrous soul that has stooped to no foul compromise. Paul kept his panache. He had never heard of the word, but he was the master of all that it expressed.

He was in love with Manon. He looked love at her, but he did not make it, and Manon had the heart to understand. He was one of those natural gentlemen, bricklayer, shepherd, fisherman, what you will. He had his notion of chivalry, a chivalry that could give, wait, hold back. He did not rush to pick the flower and flaunt it in his buttonhole. Such men are laughed at by the shallow and the dirty-minded, but somehow they keep the love of a woman. You may find them in cottages, villas, country houses. They have escaped the curse of wanting to be self-consciously clever.

Paul and Manon went to church each Sunday, and stood for a few minutes under the shattered roof. They were not religious people as religion was understood in the Victorian days. Their sacrament was a little silence, a pause, a looking backwards and forwards, a holding of hands, a gentle generous emotion. They thought of the dead, of the children, of seed-sowing and harvest, of good comradeship and the peace thereof that passeth understanding.

Paul had his ideal, his task.

"I'll ask her to marry me when I have made the place good," was his thought.

And Manon accepted this, even though she might have to face little humiliations in the acceptance. She kept her eyes on the man's broad ideal.

It was a big tree that would grow; it was strong, slow, hardy. If casual tongues dropped a few seeds of discord, of gossip, they were but little bitter weeds which the tree would smother.

"I love him," she said to herself.

And Paul loved her with each nail he drove, each joist he fitted, each barrow-load he cleared from the place. He loved her in washing, in eating, in cutting wood for her stove, in looking at the white clouds sailing over the new roof, when it rained, when it blew, when the sun shone. She was in every corner of his life, and he in hers.

Sometimes he was greatly curious to know what that other man of hers had been, this Gaston Latour who had been killed early in the war. Manon had been married less than a year. She had a photo of her first husband somewhere, and one evening Paul asked to see the photo. Sometimes, he had an uncomfortable feeling that he was wearing a dead man's shoes; he wondered, too, how he was filling them.

Manon took a candle down to the cellar, and brought back the photo.

"Gaston was a good fellow; we agreed quite well."

Paul looked at the man's picture. Gaston Latour had been one of those sickly Frenchmen, cold, pale and prominent of eye, with a big forehead and a weak beard. He stood with his hands resting on the back of a chair, staring straight in front of him.

Manon had been watching Paul's face, and with a sudden, quick but quiet motion she took the photograph away from him. It is possible that a woman does not like to see her lover repelled by the face of the man who had first possessed her.

"That was nearly five years ago," she said; "and, if you please, we will forget it."

"I'm sorry," Brent told her; "weren't you——?"

"It was a very excellent marriage; our parents arranged it, and my father died six months later. No, this house always belonged to us, not to the Latours."

She took the photo back to the cellar, nor did she return for some minutes, leaving Brent warming his hands at the stove. She had said so little, but enough to make Paul understand that her first marriage had not been happy, that it had left no delicate roots behind it. If Brent was guilty of a secret gladness, he hid it, but the gladness was there. He felt sorry in an impersonal way for that cold-eyed fellow who lay dead somewhere in France, but the human part of him was with Manon. He hoped that it would

come all fresh to her, as fresh and as rich and as generous as it seemed to him.

April came, and it rained hard for two days, driving Brent indoors. At dinner they sat and looked at the roof, watching for drips, and exulting when no drips appeared. Paul had been fixing the floor of the room above the kitchen.

"It is a splendid roof," said Manon; "it is you who rain sawdust."

"I can't taste it."

"Look in your potage. I was away only half a minute, but you managed to drop that wooden salt of yours into the saucepan."

Brent gave her an oblique, laughing look.

"Supposing we put up the ceiling. It will be rather like laying a carpet upside down."

"That canvas?"

"Yes."

"How delightful! But can you do it alone?"

"No. Two hands to stretch it, while the other nails."

"Let's begin at once," said Manon.

And that is how Anatole Durand found them, perched up on the joists, Manon stretching the canvas while Paul drove in the tacks. They were so busy hammering, talking, laughing, and the rain made such a patter on the iron roof that they had not heard his car. But Anatole Durand was an event. He had not happened for three weeks.

"Hallo, mes enfants!"

Two faces looked down at him.

"Monsieur Durand! But what do you think of our ceiling?"

"Magnificent!" said Anatole, and, in a hurry to get out a dramatic cry of his own, "And what do you think of my American dump?"

"Comment, monsieur?"

"I have bought it," he said, shining like a little sun-god. "I have bought my American dump!"

They had come down after that, for a canvas ceiling could not suppress such a little excited, restless sun. Here was an event, a sensational episode in the history of Beaucourt! Manon brought out her wine, and they sat round the table, and talked—at least Anatole Durand talked. He opened his fat

note-book on the table and began to roll off figures with the voice of a curé chanting the mass.

"Yes, I have bought it, but I had to race around like a comet. Just listen, my friends."

He chanted triumphantly of timber and iron sheets and rolls of felt by the thousand, tins of preserved meat, fruit, milk, salmon by the tens of thousand, coffee in hundreds of kilos, blankets, tools, barbed wire, buckets, candles, soap. Wine and honey in Canaan! The oration was Biblical, exultant.

"It must have cost you a fortune, monsieur," said Manon.

Durand would not boast about the money he spent.

"Oh, I have plenty left. It is the best bargain I have ever made in my life."

"And where is the dump, monsieur?"

"A hundred miles south of Chalons, perhaps. But I have arranged for the hire of a dozen lorries, and we will have it here in no time. Now see what it is to be thorough. I have here the cubic space of the dump, and the cubic space of the cellars at the château, you know what good cellars they are, and all the food and the blankets can be stored in them. The timber and the felt and the iron sheeting can be stacked in the courtyard."

"You are a wonderful man, Monsieur Anatole."

"I'm just an old boy," he laughed.

She poured him out another glass of wine, and he sipped it, looking round the room with eyes of appreciation.

"You two children know how to work. You are quite chez-vous here, already."

Manon glanced questioningly at Paul. Brent nodded.

"And we are fiancés, monsieur."

"Why, that's splendid!" said old Durand holding up his glass; "your very good health, and good luck to us all."

They drank.

"And that fellow Louis Blanc seems to be out of the picture. The Coq d'Or was full of the gossip."

"Tiens, what has happened to Bibi?"

"He is in hospital at Amiens, and they have taken out one of his eyes. It is said, too, that he may go blind in the other. When they asked him to explain how it happened, he said he had had a quarrel with some English soldiers, and that three of them set on him."

Paul and Manon exchanged glances.

"Shall I tell him?" her eyes asked him.

Brent nodded.

"That is not quite the truth, monsieur. You are our friend, and you can keep a secret. Bibi came by those wounds in this very room."

"Tonnerre—here?"

Very simply she described to Anatole Durand all that happened, and so vivid were her words that the old man found it difficult to sit still. His eyes lit up; he had the eyes of a fighter.

"But it is incredible! What a wild beast! You did very well, Monsieur Paul, to thrash that stallion."

He jumped up and clapped Paul on the shoulder.

"So you wish me to say nothing of this?"

"It is not a pleasant tale for Manon to tell."

"And the fellow has got his deserts. I am ready to wish he may lose that other eye, and be harmless for the rest of his life. But let us talk of something more pleasant."

He lit a cigar, and, walking up and down for a moment on his brisk legs, paused abruptly in front of Manon.

"I have some good news for you."

"You are full of good news, Monsieur Anatole."

"Well, listen. When I was in Amiens I fell in with a gentleman who is planning excursions to the battlefields. He wanted to know of a place where the richer sort of people might be able to spend the night, and get the atmosphere of a devastated village. 'My friend,' said I, 'I know the very place in my own village, a little hôtel that will be ready to receive such people in a month or two.' He jumped. 'It will be very simple,' said I. 'The simpler the better, my dear fellow. We want the proper atmosphere.' So, my dear, if the idea pleases you, I will drive you over to Amiens in a day or two, and you can make arrangements with this gentleman. It should be quite a prosperous enterprise."

Manon jumped up and kissed him, and Durand did not appear to object. He was a democrat, and the new Beaucourt was going to be very democratic.

"What a good friend you are."

"I'm just an old boy," said Durand.

XXXI

THAT evening, when the sky had cleared, Manon and Brent opened up a hole under the wall where Manon's treasure lay buried, and carried the silver into the cellar. Anatole was to drive over again next day and take Manon to Amiens where she was to meet the gentleman who was promoting these pilgrimages in Picardy, and also deposit her valuables with the "Société Générale." Paul was shovelling the earth back into the hole when Manon came back along the path, walking slowly, and stroking a black eyebrow with a meditative forefinger.

"Dear soul, look!"

Her face flushed a sudden excitement. There was a vivacious buoyancy in her pointing finger. Paul was head up on the instant, ready for some dramatic event.

"What is it?"

She was pointing at the brown soil behind him, and there was a child's delight in her eyes.

"The little green dears!"

Paul turned and looked, one hand on the handle of his spade, and he smiled. Strung between two of the white seed pegs stretched a thread of green thrown into vivid contrast by the rain-darkened soil, nothing more nor less than a row of lettuce seedlings just opening their twin leaves. A string of emeralds would never have seemed so innocent or so precious.

"The first of our children," said Brent, "the little fellows!"

He looked shy, but Manon snuggled up and in some silent way made him understand that her hand wanted to be held.

"Is it not wonderful?"

"Everything's wonderful," said Brent, with a glimmer of blue between half-closed eyelids.

"Here's where we began, over that hole in the ground. Just because you happened to catch me playing with a spade. And now—a year afterwards—these!"

"Like a live bit of ribbon, isn't it!"

"And a few weeks later we shall be eating lettuces!"

“Méchant!” she said. “Be serious. How do you like Anatole’s idea?”

“It’s an inspiration.”

“Very well, we will have supper early, and then we will sit down and make plans. Oh, I didn’t tell you, Marie is giving me six pullets.”

“So we shall sit down and make plans for the pullets.”

“Be serious! No, we must arrange the rooms and the furniture, and see how much money we can afford.”

“Oh, that’s it? Well, look here, I put my money into the business or I go on strike.”

“But, Paul——”

His hand closed firmly on hers.

“It’s got to be. I’m a man. Don’t you understand?”

She looked up at him with soft, consenting eyes.

“Oh, yes, I understand perfectly. But who is to handle the firm’s money?”

“You, of course,” said Brent. “I always was an idiot with money. I’ll take my share, keep a little pocket money, and put the rest back into the business.”

“Do you understand pigs?” she asked him with quiet irrelevancy.

“I did keep one once.”

“And cows?”

“I dare say I could learn to milk a cow. I’ve studied more difficult things than that.”

With supper over, Manon cleared the table, lit two candles, produced a writing pad and pencil from the cupboard. They drew two chairs up on the side of the stove, and sat with their heads close together, Manon sketching out a plan of the house. There would be seven rooms in all, four on the ground floor, and three above, but the rooms on the other side of the passage were rather small, and one of them could only be reached by passing through an outer room.

“The visitors would have to take their meals here in the kitchen, unless we arranged to let them use the public room on the other side of the passage.”

“English people might not like that. Let them sit and see their own food cooked; it would amuse them.”

“I should have to engage a strong girl to help.”

"That wouldn't be difficult, would it?"

"I am thinking of the bedrooms," Manon said. "We shall have only four, even if we use the little ground-floor room that looks out on the garden."

She scribbled lines and crosses on the paper, frowning on the problem.

"Supposing we were to give the girl that little room."

"Yes."

"Keep the public room where it is, and turn the back room into a little salon for the visitors or ourselves. But that would only leave us one spare bedroom."

She continued to scribble on the paper.

"When we get married," she began, "it will save a bedroom."

"Yes, that's so," and he also looked at the scribbles on the paper, scribbles that meant nothing; "meanwhile I might rig myself up something outside, or sleep in the cellar. But I suppose we shall need the cellar."

"We might put a partition across that room," and she pointed upwards with the pencil; "but it would be so much simpler——"

"All right," said Paul; "we'll think about it. Now, what about furniture?"

They made a list of the furniture that would be needed, Manon writing the name of each article under such headings as "Salon," "Girl's room," "Visitors' room," "Our room." The list began to frighten them not a little.

"Hold on," said Brent; "I can make tables, cupboards, wash-stands, if we can get some decent wood. Bedsteads and bedding seem to be the main problem. I expect the prices are up in Amiens."

"I have about seventy thousand francs. Sixty thousand are invested in Rentes. That leaves ten thousand for furniture, and stock and current expenses."

"I can put a thousand to that. Not much, is it?"

"You are putting in more than money, Paul. It will be yours as well as mine. All this could never have happened without you."

Paul went to bed with his head full of the new enterprise, and the hundred and one inventions and ingenuities it suggested. He remembered having seen somewhere a room decorated with arched trellis-work painted a soft green, the arches hung with mauve wistaria made out of paper. Then his thoughts jostled against the problem of "baths." Would English tourists of the richer sort expect and demand baths? Brent's enthusiasm could not see itself rising above hip-baths and one can of water heated up in the corner of an outhouse. Fuel—like bedrooms—was going to be precious, and Paul

went to sleep thinking of that particular bedroom and Manon's simple solution of the difficulty.

"A good solution, too," said Brent; "but I'll stick out till I have finished the house."

Durand's De Dion was with them early, but not so early that Manon had not been able to help Paul finish the canvas ceiling of the kitchen. She was below in the cellar, dressing, while Brent loaded the valuables into the car.

"Any news of Louis Blanc?"

"Nothing," said Durand. "By the way, do you know all the wells in Beaucourt?"

"No."

"Then I will send old Prosper Cordonnier over with my sanitary expert; he knows them all."

"You are having all the water tested?"

"We should look fools if it turned out bad, hey? Hallo—now, voilà le printemps!"

Paul turned and beheld the miracle of a French working woman in her Sunday clothes. It was not that he had never seen Manon before in that little black chapeau, black velour costume, and those neat suède high-heeled shoes. He could remember her going to church in those same clothes when he was billeted in Beaucourt during the war, but now they seemed different. They had a more personal and a more intimate meaning for him. He was aware of her small feet, of the quiet, sleek chicness of her clothes, of the roguish sedateness of that little hat. His thoughts went back fifteen years. He was thinking of a certain fair-haired girl with a razor-edged nose and mouth, coming out of the back gate of a big house, and wearing a blue plush hat covered with red cherries, an electric blue dress and the yellowest of yellow boots.

"How you stare!" she said.

Paul's thoughts came back from that other life.

"Monsieur Durand used the exact word."

"And what was that?"

"Printemps;" and he added, "this April seems to belong to me—somehow."

They drove off, and Brent went to work, but the sun was shining, and his thoughts got in the way of his hands. He was so happy that he seemed to pause and to look suddenly at this happiness of his with the eyes of a man

who was afraid of losing it. He had been nailing down the floor boards on the joists of the upper room that was to be their bedroom, and this sudden inward questioning of his own dreams sent him idling into the sunlight. He crossed the street, sat down on the doorstep of the stone house over the way, and looked with serious blue eyes at the café.

It occurred to him again that it would need a sign and that he would paint it. But might not the painting of that sign be about the last piece of work he would accomplish in the reconstruction of the "home"?

He lingered over the word "home." It was very sweet to him now, but would it always be so sweet? Certain panic thoughts gathered round him like officious and penny-wise old women. He was an Englishman; would he be happy living as a Frenchman? When the house was finished, every stick painted, and the little farm without a weed, might not a sudden restlessness seize him? Would he be content to live all his life in a French village? That other home of his in England had never been a home in any spiritual sense; he could remember going out one night in a miserable and lonely rage and throwing bricks through a little greenhouse that had been his particular pride. But surely this would be different? Manon was different; he was different. And yet, at the bottom of this panic mood was a horror of hurting Manon, of falling short of her some day in the measure of his happiness.

"Fudge!" he said, and got up suddenly; "it's just cowardice, that's all. Haven't I seen it in the war, chaps who were always looking for things to go wrong? It's the same with the fellows who write books, books in which everybody gets into the gutter and all the world's wrong. Just funk—Hallo!"

A certain aggressively smart figure had swung round the corner, buttons and cap badge polished, chin shaved, puttees neatly rolled, boots black and glossy as the back of a rook.

"Cheer-oh, cove."

It was Corporal Sweeney with the grey grouse out of his eyes, a proper man, well groomed.

"Bon jour, monsieur, comme vous êtes gai aujourd-hui."

"Demobbed, demain, compris?"

The two men smiled at each other, and Sweeney cast an eye over the house.

"Your dug-out, what?"

Brent nodded, wondering if he might allow himself a little more English.

"A bit of all right. Blimy! You've got a roof and winders."

"Entrez," said Paul, and took him in and gave him red wine.

The corporal had cigarettes; he offered Brent one, and lay in the arm-chair and drank in the goodness of life.

"Wonder if you get me, bloke?"

He had begun to philosophize.

"Me for a bit of garden. Be home in time to get my pertaters in. Ever kep' pigeons?"

"One time, monsieur."

"Lot o' sound gum in pigeons, and chickens. Make you feel sort of homy on Sunday mornings. Hear 'em cooin' and cacklin' and cluckin'. Got any kids?"

"Des enfants, monsieur?"

"Got it."

"I get married this year."

Corporal Sweeney gave a wise grin.

"Funny stunt—gettin' married—but it's all rite; yes—it's all rite. Used t' think it was kind of bloomin' monot'nous. Well, I dunno. If you start goin' round the corner with strange gals, well, it's good-bye to the chickens and the pertaters. Besides it's a mug's game. Who's your real pal? She as you have 'eard tryin' not to scream out when she's bearin' the kid you've given 'er; she 'oo cooks yer Sunday dinner. T'aint slosh, it's the truth."

Paul smiled. He pretended to have picked some of the pith out of the man's harangue.

"You talk good, monsieur. I tink I be ver' happee here."

"Course you'll be happy," said the soldier almost fiercely; "it's inside a chap, ain't it? 'Course there's other things that count. So long as a chap don't keep spittin' down his own well! Bein' happy is like keepin' yer buttons polished. It's a 'abit."

Brent could have quoted an occasion when the corporal's buttons were distinctly dingy, but he refrained. Mark Tapley might have turned into an average, decent, grumbling Englishman had he been stuck down at Harlech Dump.

" 'Ere, bloke," said the corporal before leaving; "what's wrong with you having a little more paint and canvas for the 'appy 'ome. I shall be gone to-morrer. And you could do with it."

Paul fell. He had a passion for paint, and he reckoned that the British Public still owed him money.

"Vous êtes très agréable, monsieur."

“You come along back with me. I ain’t ’ad an eighteen pounder shell in my chicken-’ouse. You ’ave.”

XXXII

Over the great wilderness the cuckoo was calling, and the blackbirds sang deep-throated in the orchards. Cowslip time had come and gone; a richer season followed after, with all that wild world rushing into leaf, covering all ugliness with a film of beauty. The old orchards were white in the narrow valley where the stream ran through deep green ways; the trees were snow-trees—rose-edged—floating between the mystery of the woods and upon the blue distance of the horizon. Grass and weeds were springing up everywhere in the streets, in the ruins themselves, threading even the rubbish through with emerald wire. There were blue-bells in the Bois du Renard above the château, and masses of yellow broom waving on the uplands.

Beaucourt came to life with the spring. Wonderful things had happened when that droll, that little wizard of an Anatole Durand had flicked his wand hither and thither. Dust had risen on the roads. A string of lorries had lumbered up the street, and a gang of men had unloaded stores in the green-grey courtyard of the château. The cellars were full of food; the yard itself stacked with timber and iron. On the circle of turf at the end of the avenue of chestnuts stood a white tent with a camp-bed, a chest of drawers, a table, a washing basin, a chair, Anatole Durand's home. He took his meals at the Café de la Victoire, where Brent's hands were keeping pace with the buoyant rush of the year.

Men were repairing and cleaning the huts in the field on the road to Rosières, and a temporary camp-kitchen was being improvised. New winches and buckets had been fitted to the wells. A couple of tractors and light waggons had panted over the desert roads, and the tractors were at work, ploughing from dawn till dusk. Great strips of brown soil waited for a catch-crop. Old Anatole went about with his note-book, like a field-marshal or a parish priest, organizing, organizing.

Then came the day when the first batch of refugees returned. They arrived in waggons from Ste. Claire and many other villages, with their few possessions piled up, like a convoy of settlers in the old days travelling west. The carts and waggons collected in the field where the huts stood, and with them came Monsieur Lefèbre, the parish priest. Anatole Durand met them in the field. He and Monsieur Lefèbre kissed each other, the agnostic and the Christian.

There was a hot meal ready, iron coppers full of good stew; Manon was in charge of the hut where meals were to be served. But these peasants sat down on the grass in the open air like pilgrims on a feast day. They laughed and talked. One or two of the women wept a little. They had left the children behind.

Durand and Monsieur Lefèbre sat side by side on the tail of a cart. They talked; they looked straight into each other's eyes.

"Do you remember, my friend, how we used to disagree?"

The priest smiled. He had jocund black eyes in a red face, and he was a good man, if fat.

"Our text is the same to-day. Go forth and recover the wilderness, and comfort my children."

"I have a bed in my tent," said Anatole; "you can use it."

"That is brotherly of you, but I shall sleep with the men."

Durand looked round at the peasants sitting on the grass, and his eyes blessed them.

"Monsieur, I wish to speak to these people presently. I wish to explain what I have done, what I have planned to do, what we all must do. You will speak to them also. What better place than the church?"

"In the old days, monsieur."

Durand shrugged.

"Life is so big," he said, "that we shall forget to knock our feet against the stones."

When the meal was over, Monsieur Lefèbre got up on the cart and told the people to gather in the church. His jocund black eyes had always been more persuasive than his preaching, and nobody grumbled at being asked to go to the church. Monsieur Lefèbre was a good fellow; he deserved his place on the stage, and to these peasants the day had a religious meaning; they were attending the sacrament of the soil. Paul and Manon walked with the crowd, and stood under the broken roof of the church, with the blue sky showing through it, and grass sprouting through the stones on the floor. Manon was looking at many familiar faces. There were the Graviers who had kept the tiny boucherie in the Rue de Bonnière; the Crampons—Claude Crampon pulling his long nose in the same odd way as though to make sure he had not lost the end of it; the Guiveaux, Pierre with his huge flat butter-coloured moustache, and Josephine, whose red hair was always untidy; the Pouparts, who had kept a grocery shop, yellow as ever. Old Lebecq carried his cock's head high in the air, and behind him his two big daughters giggled

together. Philipon, who had been a blacksmith as well as a farmer, held his pretty little wife by the arm; his swarthy face was very solemn, and he frowned as though he wanted to get to work. Lacroix and his wife and boy looked thin as figures cut out of brown cardboard. Big Jean Roger was smiling at everybody and picking his teeth with a red match. His daughter Lucille seemed rather sad; her eyes were vacant; she had lost her lover in the war. There were one or two younger men who had recently been demobilized, and a few strong boys who were half inclined to make a joke of the whole affair. Philipon looked round at them with his fiery eyes and a gleam of teeth in his black beard.

"Shut up! The dead don't make fools of themselves like that."

There was no more horseplay.

Monsieur Lefèbre stood on the steps of the choir. His deep voice rolled out a prayer, and after the prayer he spoke a few simple words to the people. He was much moved; his chin shook a little; and the people were moved with him. They had come back to their homes and their fields; the blessed spring was with them, the green joy of the year. They would go out together, without jealousy, helping each other, planting in this ruined village the imperishable patience of a victorious France.

Lefèbre gave way to old Durand. Anatole's grey hair seemed to bristle; he looked straight at them all with shrewd, smiling eyes; his enthusiasm had a flash of humour.

"My friends, we used to quarrel a little. Perhaps it was my fault. To-day I am happy; I feel that we have something better to do than to quarrel—work."

Philipon gave a growl of applause.

"That's it—work!"

He glared at the group of youths. Anatole went on.

"Bien. It is not my ground or your ground, it is our ground. It is our Beaucourt. What do you say? The women to the gardens and the rubbish heaps, the men to the saw and the hammer and the fields. But you know what to do. I am an old man, I am enjoying myself; I am spending what I cannot take with me. I do not stand here and crow; I want to be just a little old man in Beaucourt."

There were cries of emotion from the little crowd.

"We understand, monsieur."

"Without you it could not have happened."

Durand made a face as though he were not far from tears.

"That's it; we are all Frenchmen together. Now, then, let me explain."

He went on to speak of the stores, material and tools that he had collected. They were to be divided equally and as the need arose. The tools and the seeds would belong to the village. He wanted a committee, a village council composed of both men and women to consider what was fair, and to decide all that should be done. He spoke of Manon and of Paul, and Paul blushed. Durand called him an expert, a practical builder. Let them go and look at the Café de la Victoire and see what Monsieur Paul Rance had accomplished single-handed, and the sight would cheer up any pessimist. Monsieur Rance had offered to give three hours a day to the community; and to put himself at the service of anyone who wanted advice. As for the canteen, well, Madame Latour had that in hand, but she would need women to help her.

"Now, let us finish with words. Let us choose our council before we break up. I suggest a council of four men and two women."

"And a president," said Philipon.

"I propose Monsieur Durand as president"—this was from old Lebecq.

Anatole was elected. They chose Philipon, Lebecq, Jean Roger and Monsieur Lefèbre as the men, Manon Latour and Madame Poupart as the women. The council agreed to meet three times a week at eight in the evening, and Monsieur Lefèbre suggested the sacristy of the church as their council-chamber. A board would be set up in the Place de l'Eglise on which the notices and the decisions of the council would be posted.

"Allons!—to work," said old Durand.

Philipon echoed him.

"To work. That's our motto."

In the passing of half a day the whole atmosphere of Beaucourt had changed, and the familiar silence of the ruins was broken by the new life. Brent was planting potatoes in the field below the orchard, for Etienne Castener had brought his plough over in a cart and ploughed up half the field for them, and as he dibbled in the seed Brent could hear voices everywhere. The hollow shell of the village echoed with them; the place was like a comb full of working bees. Each family had gone to what had been its house, that brick ruin or shelter of timber, and for a while there had been silence. What problems, what discouragement! Where and how to begin? They had been told that Beaucourt had been more fortunate than the majority of villages—villages that had melted into mere piles of rubbish. The little groups stood about, staring, bewildered, lamenting, wandering through the wreckage and the gardens, standing on the tiled floors of what had been rooms. And in

nearly all cases it was the woman whose instinct escaped first from that apathy of staring. The housewifely habit stirred in her. Perhaps she began to clean her kitchen floor, throwing old tins, broken bricks and tiles, rags, anything, out into the street. That was what Durand had advised them to do; he had planned to have the rubbish carted away and dumped in some field. Very soon the men were at work with the women, each cleaning his particular shell, uncovering his kitchen hearth. Their blood warmed. Beaucourt was full of the sound of voices, the clatter of tins and broken tiles. Figures appeared on the walls, or in the spider web of the sagging timber frames, scattering useless patches of tiling, or knocking down loose beams and joists. Beaucourt was at work. Anatole Durand found Philipon sweating like a swarthy Hercules in his little house in the Rue du Château, knocking down useless bits of wall with a big hammer, while his pretty wife carried off the sound bricks and stacked them in the yard.

"Thunder, but this is life!" said the sweating peasant; "I'm happy."

Manon was walking back from the canteen when she caught sight of a little old figure approaching along the Rue Romaine. It was none other than Mère Vitry dressed in her rusty black Sunday clothes, and carrying a shabby bag. She had been left behind at Ste. Claire as too old to face the first struggle with the wilderness; but Mère Vitry had had no intention of remaining in Ste. Claire, and her indomitable legs had carried her to Beaucourt.

Manon went to meet her, greatly touched by this old thing's courage.

"Mother, what are you doing here?"

But Mère Vitry was in no need of pity. She seemed to be overflowing with the sap of a renewed youth; her little black eyes twinkled; her weather-beaten face was all smiles.

"Here I am. Do you think I was going to be left behind?"

Manon kissed her.

"Come to my house. You must want something to eat."

"I had my meal on the road, my dear. I would not quarrel with a cup of coffee."

Manon took Mère Vitry home with her, and the old lady removed her cloak and bonnet, and sat down with an air of complete contentment. Her eyes observed everything; she was the most cheerful soul in Beaucourt. Her philosophy was touched with the irrepressible optimism of the spring.

Manon offered her her bed.

“No, I shall sleep with the others. They thought I should be a nuisance, no use; you shall see. I shall put on my old clothes here, my dear, and then go and begin tidying the house. It needs it.”

It did. There was but a third of the roof left, and no windows and no doors, and in the garden weeds and rubbish competed with each other. Mère Vitry put on her old plum-coloured skirt, and black and white check blouse, borrowed a broom and an old spade, and marched off to battle like the true Frenchwoman that she was.

Monsieur Lefèbre, taking a parochial stroll, found Madame Vitry sweeping out the rubbish from the tiled floors of her kitchen and bedroom. He stood and watched her a moment, a most human smile on his generous face, and then that plump right hand of his made the sign of the cross.

“So you are busy already, madame?”

She leant on the broom-handle, thin hands clenched, black eyes bright with renewed youth.

“One cannot be idle, monsieur, when there is so much to be done.”

“You have walked from Ste. Claire?”

“I feel very well, monsieur, very well indeed. To-morrow I am going to work in my garden.”

“Splendid,” said the priest.

Her face lit up.

“Come inside, Monsieur Lefèbre; I have something to show you in my garden.”

She led him through the house and into the garden where the new growth of the year was pushing up through broken bricks and coils of wire, old tins, the rusty frame of a bedstead, battered petrol cans, barbed wire, the wheel of a cart. The wooden frame and rusting springs of an old box-mattress lay across the path. But Mère Vitry was looking at none of this rubbish. She was pointing upwards and smiling at a gigantic apple tree whose limbs had been shot away. The tree was nothing but a torso, a huge, mutilated stump, but from one limb a young branch had grown out and brandished against the blue sky two little sprays of white blossom.

“That is fine, is it not, monsieur? He is holding up his flag; he is not beaten.”

She laughed.

“Here we are together, the old woman and the old tree. I flourish a broom, he waves a bit of blossom. What do you think of it, monsieur?”

The priest's face was lit up like the face of a saint.
"It is France," he said, "the very soul of my country."

XXXIII

MANON had described to Paul Mère Vitry's return to Beaucourt, and Brent had been so touched by it that he went down very early next morning to the house in the Rue Romaine. The old fruit tree welcomed him, throwing its white banner against the flush of the dawn, and he set to work at disentangling the miscellaneous rubbish from the dew-wet weeds. He had cleared away all the heavy débris and made a dump of it on the cobbled path between the cottage and the roadway when he was surprised by another enthusiast, Monsieur Marcel Lefèbre.

"Good morning," said the priest; "it seems that I am a little late."

His black eyes had a glitter of fun in them. He carried his cassock over his arm, appearing to the world like any good bourgeois ready for an hour's work in the garden.

"That's the worst of it."

Brent touched the pile of rubbish with the toe of a casual boot.

"So you have left me nothing to do?"

"There is plenty left, monsieur. I thought I would come down and move the heavy stuff for the old lady."

"We are beginning very well in Beaucourt," said Lefèbre, "very well indeed."

These two good men stood for a few minutes and talked. They were friends from the first smile, equally simple and courageous in their outlook upon life, answering at once to a generous touch of the hand. Lefèbre had the soul of a peasant, with all its shrewdness, its grasp of the elemental facts that keep men strong and wholesome. This return of the people to their homes and to their soil was to him a veritable sacrament. He knew that it is good for man to suck the milk from the bosom of Mother Earth. In the towns souls are hand-fed, dissociated from the great miracle of nature. Lefèbre hated the great towns. They gave babes strong drink, false appetites, parched mouths, the lust after lust. Men walked restlessly in the streets, men who are envious and unhappy after the long dulness of the factory or the shop. They had turned no soil, nor gone to bed happily tired.

"What can one make of this little house?"

He was looking at the patch of brown tiles and the bare rafters. His face was eager, inquisitive. Brent felt the thrill of his humanity.

"It could be made quite strong again."

"You think so."

"The roof can be covered with felt, and later it can be retiled. A door and some windows—and there you are."

Lefèbre hung his cassock over the sill of one of the empty window spaces.

"I will go up to the château and get a roll of felt. Would you take down those tiles?"

"It would be better."

"If you could spare five minutes later in the day for a little criticism?"

"I may be able to give you a hand," Brent said.

Monsieur Lefèbre went for some tools, nails and a roll of felt, and when he returned to the Rue Romaine he found Mère Vitry standing in the garden under the old fruit tree. She was smiling, a child's wonder in her eyes.

"Look, monsieur, a miracle! Someone has been here."

"A friend, perhaps."

"It was you, monsieur, who carried away all that rubbish?"

"No. But miracles happen, madame, even in these days. There is always the miracle of the good man."

Mère Vitry crossed herself, and looked at the roll of felt under Monsieur Lefèbre's arm.

"And you—you are going to work, too, monsieur?"

Lefèbre's jocund face broke into creases.

"I am going to try and put a roof on your cottage. That will be another miracle!"

Manon had gone to the canteen which she and Madame Poupart were to manage with the help of two of the older women. They had had a boy assigned to them, a strong young rascal whose duty was to trundle the day's provisions down from the château in a hand-truck, chop wood for the stoves, and to make himself useful in any way that God or Manon chose to order. He sulked the first morning, having promised himself the excitement of helping to pull down some of the ruins.

"People who are lazy get no dinner."

He argued the point with Manon, and it required the dinner hour to convince him that these women were in earnest. When the file of men had passed to the tables with full plates, Master Jacques stood by the iron boiler, holding a tin plate that was empty, and inviting Madame Poupart to use her ladle.

"We had to cut the wood," said the lady, "to cook your dinner. You refused to cut wood; we give you no dinner."

The logic of the thing was so convincing, and Madame Poupart so determined, that Jacques went out and laboured to earn his plateful of stew.

Anatole Durand and Brent spent the morning making a pilgrimage through the village. They visited each house to which the head of a family had returned, Paul examining each building and giving his opinion as to what could be done. Anatole stood by with his inevitable note-book, jotting down the details of this tour of inspection, while Brent and the owner looked at walls and gables, sagging roofs, shell-bitten chimney-stacks and questionable foundations. Each problem differed a little from the other; each house had its own particular sickness. Some were dead, so dead that there was nothing to be suggested save that a new house or hut should be built in the yard or garden. Anatole made a note, "Try and buy huts." There were stud and plaster houses with the timber framing fairly sound; the walls of these could be replastered or covered temporarily with felt. There were brick houses that a little ingenious patching would put into passable repair. There were mere broken shells that needed building up squarely before they could carry the cap of a roof. In many cases a crumpled mass of tiles and rafters would have to be removed before the actual work of reconstruction could be begun. The old houses built of the chalky limestone of the district were the most hopeless of all. When such a house had been wounded, it had crumbled, cracked, dropped masses of masonry, dribbled loose stones out of the wounds, bled itself to death. The war had taught Brent to respect the extraordinary tenacity of good brickwork. You could square up the ragged walls, fit a patch into the holes, and the house was as good as ever.

Beaucourt saw Paul Brent as a brown man with a short, pointed beard and friendly blue eyes. He seemed a pleasant fellow, capable, rather quiet in his speech, and with an accent that was vaguely foreign. He was a stranger and Beaucourt kept a critical eye on strangers, but Brent went so wholeheartedly about his job and was so obviously a man of his hands that these peasants accepted him. They were too busy to be inquisitive. Brent had sat up late for many nights dragging out of the dictionary the French for such things as plaster, felt, rafters, joists, mortises, concrete. He had made a

list of all the technical words that he could find, learnt the names by heart, and made Manon hear his lesson.

"You ought to shout more," she told him; "you English just talk to yourselves."

He looked at her with the eyes of a lover.

"Shall I shout those dear words?"

"You may keep that soft voice—for me."

She had been a little anxious for her man, knowing that he had prepared himself to face a possible ordeal in this return of the natives. It was not only that he loved her and that he had come to look on Beaucourt as a home, but he had a man's horror of betraying himself and of being damned as something worse than a fool. She knew that he would imagine that the humiliation would spread to her, and she could picture him packing his knapsack and marching off into the night.

He came back to her in the evening with the air of having spent a happy and a human day. There was laughter in his mood, not the laughter of ridicule, but laughter that had felt the pathos and beauty of the thing that had inspired it. He had been down to Mère Vitry's cottage, and had discovered Monsieur Lefèbre on the roof, a sprawling, enthusiastic, happy figure with a distinct celestial shininess about the broad seat of its breeches. Monsieur Lefèbre was stripping the roof of its remaining tiles and lowering them carefully in an old bucket with a bit of wire fastened to the handle. Mère Vitry stood below, unloaded the bucket, and packed the tiles away in a corner. They were as absorbed as two children playing a game.

"It has been a great day," said Paul; "I don't seem to have puzzled anybody. And the way these people work——"

He sat down in the arm-chair and watched Manon laying the table. She was very good to watch, and every now and again her eyes gave him the glimmer of light that a woman gives to her lover.

"Let him pass—Paul Rance, a good Frenchman."

"I believe I shall pass," he said. "I like your people. They smell of the soil."

She balanced a fork, pointing it at him.

"And remember, they will like you. You see, you are such a good fellow, and——"

He sprang up suddenly and caught her, and holding her face between his hands, looked long and steadily into her eyes.

“Yes, you are just my life. I had to fight for you, didn’t I? But I have been afraid, ma chérie, that these people might not want me here. I might be found out.”

“Do not run to meet troubles,” she said; “you will have very good friends in Beaucourt. Besides——”

She clasped his wrists for a moment with her two hands, and then moved gently away to lift a boiling kettle from the stove.

“Let us look at the house—afterwards, at everything.”

He stood watching her devoutly.

“It’s so good that sometimes I am afraid.”

“What is there to fear in Beaucourt?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

When the meal was over they walked out into the garden and looked at the green crops, those rows of beans and peas and lettuces paraded so exactly on the clean brown soil. The holes in the wall had been filled in; the fruit bushes were covered with a film of green, and the pollarded limes showed a thousand emerald tips. From the garden they passed to the orchard, and Brent stood a moment by Beckett’s grave. He had put a white wooden cross there, but he had never been able to persuade himself to paint up the lie of his own name.

Manon drew him away.

“Now we will look at the house.”

They went over it as though they had not seen the Café de la Victoire for three months. It still remained a perennial wonder to them, something of a miracle, a thing that grew and fed upon the labour of their hands. Already it had an atmosphere, the human friendliness of a place that is lived in. It was ready to be the secret home of their love and their memories.

Brent had put up a simple staircase to the upper rooms. They were still open to the bare rafters of the roof, but Harlech Dump had provided canvas for the ceilings, and all the floors were complete, save the floor of the back room on the right. Brent had used up all the wood that he had salved from the army huts.

Manon was dreaming the dreams of a housewife. She stood in the middle of the room that was to be hers and Brent’s, her back to the window, her thoughts busy with furniture, curtains, linen. In a week or two she would be able to go to Amiens and buy furniture for the new home. She looked at Paul.

“Come and hold my hand.”

“What is the problem?”

“I’m thinking. We will have the bed there, and a big cupboard against the north wall, and another cupboard with shelves in that corner. I should like one or two bright-coloured mats.”

“A little colour is good,” said Brent.

His left arm went across her shoulders, and they stood silent, thinking.

“There is only the floor of that room, and the ceilings——”

“And then?”

She looked up at him, and her dark eyes were intense.

“Promise me, you will never run away.”

“Run away?”

“Yes, don’t you understand? This is going to be ours, whatever happens. Besides, what is there that could happen?”

Paul kissed her.

“I almost wish——” he said.

“What do you wish?”

“That the village knew everything—that it could judge me as an Englishman who had made a mess of life in his own country.”

She held his arms.

“Mon chéri, perhaps, some day, we will tell them, but of what have you to be ashamed? Let us win them first. How I wish we had wood for that floor.”

Brent held her close.

“Yes, that was my promise. Do you think it is easy for me to hold out?—and yet, I’m going to hold out for six months. I’ll win Beaucourt before I ask you to marry me.”

She stroked his cheek.

“What spurs you wear on your conscience! Am I to agree? Well, what can a woman do? Who’s that?”

Someone had entered the house. It was Anatole Durand, an Anatole who wanted to gossip, and he stood at the foot of the staircase, looking up.

“Hallo!”

“Won’t you come and look, monsieur?”

He climbed up on his brisk legs, amused, smiling.

“Talking over the furniture, hey?”

“There is one room that needs a floor, and we have no more wood.”

“Wood—wood? Why, I’ll give it you.”

“But we have had more than our share in taking the wood from those huts.”

“Tiens,” said old Durand, “isn’t an old man allowed to be silly now and again? One can’t help having favourites, you know.”

XXXIV

THERE were two very happy men in Beaucourt during that miraculous spring, Anatole Durand and Marcel Lefèbre.

Things went well, amazingly well. There were no quarrels, very little jealousy, and no slacking. At the end of the first month more than half the people were out of the huts and back in their own houses, and though the roofs were of black felt and the windows of canvas, the critical period had passed. The Philipons had sent for their children; so had many others. Mère Vitry was back in her cottage, with the picture of the Sacré Cœur hanging on its nail, and in her garden were crops of lettuce, spring cabbage, peas, beetroot, potatoes. There were days when the whole village went out into the fields, with Monsieur Lefèbre heading the pilgrimage, and the seed-sowing was a public sacrament. Durand's tractors had ploughed up hundreds of acres, and though the season was too late for wheat, these peasants, labouring from dawn to dusk, seeded those great brown fields with beans, potatoes, cabbage, beetroot, turnips, peas and swedes. The luck of the season was with them. It was sunny and dry, and the battle was with the weeds. A hundred hoes and a blazing sun fought and suppressed grass and charlock, dock, nettle, sorrel, buttercup and poppy.

The orchards had only missed one year's pruning, and promised well. Even flower seeds had not been forgotten. Manon was to have beds of mignonette, marigold, Virginia stock, red linum, gaudy nasturtiums. There were buds on the old rose trees, and Paul had done some pruning. The Bois du Renard was in full leaf, and the château chestnuts had had a wonderful display of white wax candles. The white thorn, too, had looked like snow. Old Durand had had lilac in bloom, and he had sent Manon a mass of it for the big bowl in the window. Paul had found her burying her face in the blossom, and he had caught her in his arms and kissed her.

"You smell like the spring."

She had ruffled his hair with her hands.

The village continued to take its principal meals at the canteen, for this public kitchen saved time, labour and fuel, and allowed the women to spend the whole day about their houses or in the gardens and fields. Other families were returning, and, to relieve the congestion in the huts, some of the people who were more forward in their houses arranged to do their own cooking

and to eat their meals there. The école was turned into an additional rest-house for the new-comers; they took their share of the work, food and material; the Council of Beaucourt administered a patriarchal justice. There were no gendarmes in the village.

Civilization began to re-erect its old landmarks, and Beaucourt made quite a jest of the new post-office when Madame Bonpoint, who was very fat and very red and a little severe, made Beaucourt think of a broody hen sitting on a clutch of eggs in a coop.

Pierre Poirel, the village farceur, put his head inside her doorway and crowed like a cock.

"Comment?" said the lady.

"Are the letters hatched yet, madame?"

It was Pierre Poirel, too, who scrawled on the doorway of his eccentric-looking cottage, "Villa des Nouveaux Riches." And all Beaucourt laughed at the joke. The village had recovered its sense of humour, which was an excellent symptom, for a community that can work hard and laugh has no social sickness to fear.

Durand restarted a carrier's service between Amiens and Beaucourt, and three times a week a carrier's cart left the Place Vogel, carrying passengers and parcels. Beaucourt used to take its relaxation in an evening gossip on the Place de l'Eglise, about the time the carrier's cart rolled in. Anatole would be there, Monsieur Lefèbre, the patriarchs, the women. You could buy *Le Petit Journal* or the *Echo de Paris*. For a few sous, too, you could get a good cup of coffee at the house of Manon Latour, and ask the advice of that fine fellow, Paul Rance.

Paul was growing popular. His day was full from dawn to dusk, and when he was not working at the café or in the garden, he was helping some villager with his house. Paul tackled all sorts of problems. He rescued derelict roofs, underpinned dangerous walls, patched broken chimneys. Manon's man was a good fellow, a much better fellow than the rather querulous and thin bearded Gaston who had been Manon's first husband, and Beaucourt approved of the betrothal. It accepted Paul. He could use his hands.

Brent had a share in preparing one of the great sensations, Beaucourt's first shop. The enterprise was Madame Poupart's. Paul built the shelves, the counter, the window stage, and, since the venture was a private one, he was paid good money for the work. He took the notes home and handed them to Manon.

"Put them in the partnership bank."

He was very happy over that money, and Manon was happy with him.

Few people could get near Madame Poupart's shop when first it was opened. The window was only six feet square, and you had to push hard to obtain a glimpse of it. Not that Beaucourt was in mad haste to spend its money, or to buy the cheap pipes, sweets, picture postcards, reels of cotton, brown crockery, matches or lead pencils that were arranged in the shop-window. It was the fact that Beaucourt had a shop. People crowded like children to stare at it.

Animals began to arrive and they could not have created more interest if they had walked out of the Ark. The Philipons had a brown cow; Monsieur Talmas, the messenger, kept two horses; the Lebecques had a pig, but the idea of keeping a pig was soon plagiarized by other people. Hens clucked and scratched, and cocks crowed. Someone gave Mère Vitry a cat.

Nor was the Café de la Victoire without its live-stock, and Philosophe—a very useful beast—soon had to acknowledge rivals. Etienne's blue cart arrived from Ste. Claire, carrying a calf secured under a net, a coopful of young chickens, and Marie Castener in her Sunday clothes. Etienne and Paul were left to man-handle the calf, while Marie stumped all over the house, making Paul's new floors shake, and talking as she had not talked for years. She kissed Manon in nearly every room as though she were sealing a blessing, quite forgetting that she never could abide people who were impulsive and sentimental.

"And when are you going to be married?"

"Very soon, my dear; in three or four months, perhaps."

"Three or four months! What are you waiting for? If I were that fellow Paul I should not be able to keep my hands off you."

"He is a very good fellow," said Manon, "and very patient."

"Patient! A man ought not to be patient. Talking of bad men, have you heard the news about Bibi?"

Manon's face hardened.

"No. What is it?"

"He's blind—stone blind. They had to cut out one eye, and the other got affected. A man like that quarrels once too often; those English soldiers cut him to pieces."

Manon paused on the stairs.

"Be careful; they are rather steep. Did they ever catch those Tommies?"

"No."

"And what is Bibi doing?"

"Living at the Coq d'Or. They say there is something between him and that girl Barbe. She'll keep him in order, if any woman can do it. I suppose he has some money."

When the Casteners had gone Manon told Paul the news about Louis Blanc. They were leaning over the stable door, and the calf was sucking Manon's fingers, a protest against its weaning.

"Poor devil!" said Brent, "I would rather be dead. I never thought——"

"I can't pity him," she answered; "I suppose I ought to, but I can't. I wonder if he will come back to Beaucourt?"

"What could a blind man do here?"

"Make mischief. I hope he will stay where he is; there would be something horrible about a blind man crawling about the village. Be careful, ma petite, do you want to eat my hand?"

Brent leant over and rubbed the calf's head, and the little beast's sapphire blue eyes looked up at them without fear.

"This thing is tame enough."

"Etienne's beasts are always tame. Yes, you have beautiful eyes, my dear."

And though they did not confess it to each other the thought of Bibi blind and helpless haunted them all that night.

The working days slipped by, and in his white tent at the end of the avenue of chestnuts old Durand slept the sleep of a healthy tired child. He was irrepressible and he was happy, up soon after dawn each morning, and shaving in the doorway of his tent before rushing down into the village to begin another day of creation and adventure. Marcel Lefèbre was his partner in this early morning enthusiasm. Lefèbre slept on an old wire bed in the sacristy. Everybody knew that he spent the first two hours of the day working in the church, clearing out the rubbish, scraping the floor, and daubing whitewash over the banalities and blasphemies that casual hands had scribbled on the walls. The "flip-flop" of that brush and the priest's splashed face were a rallying cry and an ensign to Beaucourt. The whole village gathered in the church for Sunday morning mass. The peasants came because they liked Lefèbre and because the service seemed to be a sort of social sacrament, a very human hour when they stood in silence side by side, and felt the humanity in each other. The dead were there, and the children. And there were those, Philipon among them, who had called the mass a mummery and a swindle, but who came to the church because Marcel

Lefèbre's religion grew in the soil. Even these children of reason felt that it was good to gather together and to drink of the cup of common humanity.

Beaucourt was happy, rather proud of itself and ready to echo old Durand's cry of "Ça ira, ça ira." There was a competitive spirit in the air, a spirit that was good for Beaucourt and for France. People asked each other, "What are they doing in Peronne, in Domart, in Caix, in Roye, up in the North? We can show them something here. It grows, it blossoms." Beaucourt had some little reason to be proud of its work.

Yet there was a shadow. It arrived suddenly and unexpectedly, and it was cast by a man. Nobody save Durand and Lefèbre imagined that there was anything sinister about the shadow or felt that any new thing had arrived in Beaucourt. What did a little fat man signify, a manufacturer, a fellow who had been known as the "Elephant" because he had a nose like a trunk and trousers that made one think of an elephant's legs? M. George Goblet was just a coarse little man whose life had been given to the making of money. In the old days the factory had seemed good for Beaucourt; some of the girls and women had worked there, and nothing terrible had happened. The peasant, not the ouvrier, had dominated the village.

Monsieur George arrived in a car. Durand met him walking down the Rue de Bonnière with Marcel Lefèbre, and Lefèbre had the look of a man whose dinner had not agreed with him.

"What, you back!" said Durand, with a quick glance at the priest.

Monsieur George had lunched in his car on chicken and a bottle of Château Citron. He smoked. He was cheerful; his face looked red and beneficent, but Marcel Lefèbre—the Christian—wished him in hell.

"Monsieur Goblet is restarting the factory."

"Tiens," said Durand; "he will have to bring his own workpeople; we are too busy here."

Monsieur George smiled.

"Enterprise, my dear sirs. I am going to get the place tidy. Men do not grow on currant bushes these days, but I have been in Paris and elsewhere."

"Riff-raff," said Anatole aggressively.

The "Elephant" looked at him suspiciously with his little eye. He had never been able to understand Durand; he thought him a fool. And, of course, they disliked each other. It would never have occurred to Goblet that these two men had an affection for Beaucourt, an affection that resembled the love of an old man for a daughter, and that they suspected him of being ready to debauch her innocence.

Goblet was a man of platitudes.

“France has to get to work. There is going to be a race for trade.”

“Trade? Of course. One is apt to forget these things. We have got to fill the shop-windows so that silly women may spend money.”

“I make cloth, Monsieur Lefèbre. That is one of life’s necessities, is it not, or would you rather have the women running about naked in the fields?”

“You are unanswerable, monsieur.”

Anatole edged Lefèbre gently out of the conversation, for M. Marcel had a hot temper and a way of losing it with righteous sincerity.

“Monsieur George has been reading ‘Penguin Island,’ ha, ha! He is right; we cannot have our villages full of naked angels. But where are you going to put your workmen?”

“Tents or huts.”

“And feed them? We have our own organization, but we can’t feed your fellows.”

“I have not asked you to, have I? I did not start business yesterday; I have my scheme just as you have yours.”

“And you have managed to buy machinery?”

“Should I go out without my trousers?”

Anatole and the priest left the “Elephant” standing coarsely on his dignity outside the gate of the factory. They walked back arm in arm to the Place de l’Eglise.

“My dear friend,” said Durand, “M. George is behaving like a reasonable and enterprising citizen. What good will it do to us or Beaucourt to quarrel with him? I think we are in danger of becoming a couple of sentimentalists.”

“God forgive the reasonable people,” said Monsieur Lefèbre. “It was the devilry of common-sense that killed the child in man.”

XXXV

EARLY in June, the Café de la Victoire being ready for its furniture, Manon made her great expedition to Amiens. The canvas ceilings were up, all the timber-work stained or painted, and Paul had papered the walls of the kitchen, the two best bedrooms, and the coffee room. Manon had chosen a pattern of pink roses for her room; the windows were to have rose-coloured curtains, and the bed a rose-coloured duvet; Paul had stained the floor the colour of old oak.

They left Philipon's girl, Luce, in charge of the house, and travelled to Amiens in the carrier's cart, sitting on the wooden bench behind M. Talmas, and under the black canvas cover that had a little window on either side. Manon had a carpet-bag at her feet; she was to stay three or four days. Paul carried his travelling gear wrapped up in a black and white check handkerchief; he wore his velvet trousers and black coat. There was no one else in the carrier's cart, and as its grey-blue wheels rolled slowly along the straight roads under the poplars, beeches, limes and acacias, Paul felt himself back in some ancient bit of England. M. Talmas' van would have found country cousins in the Weald of Sussex or among the Somersetshire orchards. Cæsar Talmas, too, was a bit of old France, with the head of a grenadier, a tuft of grey hair on his chin, and his eyes as blue as his breeches.

This cart dropped them at the Place Vogel, and they walked to the Rue Belu, Paul carrying Manon's bag. Across the green-black water of the river, and with its windows looking at the chestnut trees and in the inspired grey glory of the cathedral, stood the Auberge de l'Evêque, a tall, old, white house with yellow shutters, a rust-red gate and door. Manon knew the place. It was clean and quiet, and she had written to retain two bedrooms.

They stood on the bridge for a moment, and looked at the cathedral.

"When we have left our luggage," said Manon, "we will go in and say our prayers."

Madame Berthier of the Auberge de l'Evêque, one of those crisp, firm-fleshed Frenchwomen, with a ruddy face and fair hair, met them like an old friend. Manon had a bedroom on the first floor; Paul a little room under the roof. Madame Berthier gave them coffee, and chattered to Manon about prices.

“The cheap shops are not always the cheapest,” was her dictum.

Manon agreed.

“If you mean to live with the same furniture all your life, why not have it good to look at?”

“Like your wife,” said madame with a roguish look at Paul.

“Yes, that’s so, madame. I find that she is very pleasant to look at.”

“Thank you, mon ami. Are you coming out with me to the shops?”

“Of course.”

“Then put on your hat.”

It was a showery day, but that did not trouble them, for whenever the rain began to fall Manon found a shop in which she wished to enquire the prices. She was in no hurry, and they had explored all the streets in the neighbourhood of the Hôtel de Ville before Manon made her choice. She bought her furniture at a shop in the Rue des Chaudronnières, cupboards, chairs, wash-hand stands fitted with drawers, a big French bed.

They had hesitated over that bed, and the shopkeeper and his wife joined in a debate that became a sort of family discussion. Manon could buy an iron bedstead of the English pattern, with a mattress and pillows for four hundred and ninety-five francs, but the French wooden bed looked handsome and more homely. It would cost them six hundred francs.

“What do you think?”

She looked at Paul.

“I like the wooden one.”

“It is a beautiful bed, madame, and the box-mattress is our very best.”

“Why copy the English?” said the proprietor. “Think of the price they are charging us for coal.”

“An iron bedstead looks rather cold in a room.”

“Yes. More suitable for old maids.”

“Be quiet, Jules. I assure you, madame, that if you are going to have a pretty room for yourself and Monsieur——”

They bought the wooden bed, and walked on to the Rue Dumeril, where Manon had discovered two shops that had pleased her, one of them a bazaar that supplied anything from a table-knife to an enamelled soap-dish. At another shop over the way Manon bought material for curtains, some cheaper bedding, and two rugs. She had her lists made out in a note-book, a hypothetical price placed against each article, and she worked methodically through each list, refusing to be hurried. It was a very serious affair this

restocking of a kitchen and a linen cupboard, with every sheet, towel and blanket to be examined and handled, and Paul saw that it would take days.

"I shall leave you at home this afternoon," she told him, as they walked back to dine at the auberge; "a man in a draper's shop is like a dog on a string."

He laughed.

"It does not bore me, you know. I just stand and look at you."

"Yes, and it upsets my ideas."

"I'll go shopping on my own; there are those tools and fencing wire that I want to take back to-morrow in Talmas' cart."

"That is a good idea. And, oh, Paul, don't forget the spinach seed. And this evening we will go and sit in the cathedral, and afterwards we will drink coffee or a bock outside the café. You don't wish to go to a cinéma, do you?"

"Is it likely?" said her man.

Brent had known Amiens during the war, but the Amiens of his wanderings while Manon shopped was not the city he had known of old. Amiens depressed him. Its narrow, crowded side-walks and penitential pavé made life uncomfortable for a stroller who soon grew tired of staring in shop-windows, and Amiens—like all cities—had the power of impressing itself with unpleasant vigour upon the casual countryman. The peasant is jostled out of his little, quiet complacencies. He has not the spaciousness of the fields to comfort him; the city cinéma-show tries his eyes. Too many people, too much noise, too much restlessness!

Amiens made Paul feel home-sick. He sat on a damp seat in one of the boulevards, a man with the soul of a peasant, a man to whom—after the first hour of window-gazing—this city could offer nothing. He felt tired, absurdly tired, and ready to be taken home like a child. Home? What was home? The place where he worked, where the crops grew, where he sat by the stove in a French village? Yes, it was that and more than that, and in those moments of loneliness Paul discovered the blood and the flesh behind the conventional picture. To man home was a woman, the woman, that and nothing else. The rest was mere furniture, baggage, call it what you will, inanimate things that become alive only when a woman moved among them and turned them into mute symbols of sentiment and tenderness. It was Manon who mattered, Manon the woman.

It began to rain again, and Paul jumped up. He walked fast down the wet streets and the people in the streets had ceased to be strangers. Even the few

figures in khaki refused to accuse him of being an exile, a bastard Frenchman masquerading in French clothes. He looked up at the flèche of the cathedral, and his heart felt big in him, big with a sense of the common humanity of them all.

Paul went straight to the auberge, and opening the glass-panelled door, found Madame Berthier knitting. She looked up at him with a smile.

"Manon is not back?"

"Not yet."

He went out with happy impatience, and waited on the bridge in the rain. He felt that she would come that way, and while he waited there a very wonderful thing happened. The battered-looking street, the grey quays, the green-black water of the river had seemed heavily grey and ugly. Suddenly the sun broke through, sending down a shower of yellow light, while the rain continued to fall. A coloured bow overarched the city. The chestnuts glittered, wet with a beautiful splendour of light. The cathedral seemed to tower into the sky, flashing its dripping stones and pinnacles and windows, its flèche ashine against a great black cloud.

Paul stood spellbound. His eyes were the eyes of an awed yet delighted child.

Manon surprised him in that moment of un-self-consciousness. She came across the bridge without his seeing her, and the look on his face made her think of a window opened in heaven. His face was wet with the rain; he was smiling.

She did not speak, but came and stood beside him as though to share the beauty that enchanted him; to gaze at the sun-splashed trees and the splendour of mystery that enveloped the cathedral. Paul's smiling eyes came down out of the heaven to her, and the smile became human.

"I've been waiting here. I thought you would come by the bridge."

"You have been feeling lonely," she said.

"How do you know that?"

He caught her hand and held it firm and fast, and they leant over the rail of the bridge and looked at the still water whose surface was no longer blurred by the rain. There were wonderful reflections in the water, and there were strange lights in Manon's eyes. She had felt the strong grip of Paul's hand, and a quiver of deep passion that woke a cry of exultation and of understanding in her heart.

"I want to go home," he said.

"Home?"

"To Beaucourt."

He felt the pressure of her firm, warm fingers.

"Is Beaucourt home to you?"

He smiled down at the water.

"I felt like a lost child this afternoon. I had to come back to try and find you. I wanted you; I never knew I could want you so much."

"Mon chéri," she said; "so you waited out here in the rain? And then the sun shone?"

"And you came back. Home is where you are. That's a great discovery for a man to make, is it not?"

"Had you never discovered it before?"

"No."

"Then I am the first woman you have loved," she said simply; "I am very happy."

Paul kissed her softly on the cheek, and their reflections in the water below imitated that kiss.

Madame Berthier gave the lovers an early supper, and after the meal they wandered out into Amiens, walking arm in arm. To Paul Amiens was no longer a strange city full of cold, anonymous faces. They entered the cathedral and sat a while in the great nave, watching the pigeons flying to and fro in the sunset light of the clerestory, for the glass was gone from many of the windows, and the pigeons nested in this great dovecote. Paul held Manon's hand. They spoke in whispers.

"Only good men could have built this place."

"Good workmen, anyhow," said her lover; "I think we have forgotten something."

"Mon Dieu, something I should have bought?"

He gave a soft laugh.

"No, not that. This place reminds me of that house of yours."

"Ours," she corrected.

"Ours. You could put it here inside the cathedral. It's part of the same stuff. I don't want to live in a world of sky-scrapers."

"What are sky-scrapers?"

"The buildings in New York, America. It's a great age, but, good God, I'm satisfied with Beaucourt."

"Always?"

"You are not going to die yet, are you?"

"Mon chéri, not before you marry me."

"And there will always be work to do in Beaucourt, the sort of work that makes a man go to bed happily with the smell of good soil or sawdust in his nostrils. I say, that was a wonderful bed we bought this morning!"

"Yes. We should not have liked an iron bed. You will hold me very close, some day, my Paul."

"And I shall never let you go."

Next morning Brent tied up his belongings in the check handkerchief, kissed Manon, shook hands with Madame Berthier, and marched off to the Place Vogel. Monsieur Talmas' cart started at nine on the return journey to Beaucourt, and Paul found two other travellers on the wooden seat, an old lady who was joining her married daughter, and Monsieur Poupart, who had been spending two days in Amiens buying goods for the shop. Poupart had a yellow face and a melancholy manner, and the old woman had been boring him with the irritating vivacity of second childhood. She asked interminable questions.

"Work the pump, will you?" said Poupart to his neighbour; "my arm is stiff. They had la grippe in the house where I have been staying; I expect I have caught it; I always do."

"I have had la grippe thirteen times," said the old lady triumphantly, leaning forward and looking across Paul at the pessimist.

"The thirteenth attack should have killed you, madame;" and, in a truculent aside, "you would never have had thirteen attacks if you had been my mother-in-law."

The old lady chattered to Paul all the way to Beaucourt. She was very inquisitive, and Paul was hard put to keep her curiosity within the limits of a decent reticence, for her old hands were ready to pull everything to pieces, even to interfere with her neighbours' clothes. She asked Paul if he was married, and cackled when he told her that he was only betrothed.

Poupart listened with a sardonic solemnity. He caught Paul's eye, and nudged him with his elbow.

"Push her downstairs."

Paul laughed.

"La Croix would have done that years ago if he had not been a fool."

"I understand what you are saying, quite well, Monsieur Poupart. No one has been able to break my neck for me."

“What a pity, madame!” said the man.

Monsieur Talmas’ cart entered Beaucourt by the Bonnière road, and just beyond the gates of the factory, where a number of workmen were lounging, they passed a waggon drawn in at the side of the road and laden with the sections of a hut. Brent, who had been looking at the factory, felt himself nudged by Monsieur Poupart’s sharp elbow.

“Look there!”

Ten yards beyond the waggon a man was sitting on the grass bank, the man whose closed eyelids seemed sunk in their eye-sockets. A girl with red hair was standing beside the man, a girl with narrow lips and a prominent bosom. She was speaking to the driver of the waggon who was unhooking his horses.

“It is Louis Blanc,” said the shopkeeper, staring inquisitively at the woman.

Paul was conscious of a shock of astonishment. It was Bibi himself, blind and bearded, sitting there and listening to what the girl was saying, his head slightly on one side like the head of a listening bird. A couple of sticks lay on the bank beside him! He was dressed in his best clothes.

“He’s blind, you know,” said Poupart; “poor devil!”

Brent’s eyes were grim. He realized that he had not prepared himself for the return of Bibi, for Bibi had passed out of the life of the village, and his reappearance filled Brent with a feeling akin to nausea. It was the return of something that was essentially evil, an element of discord, the spirit of malice.

Paul was staring hard at Louis Blanc and as the cart passed him Bibi raised his head with a jerk. His eye-sockets were fixed upon Brent. He seemed to feel the passing of an enemy and the challenge of an enemy’s eyes.

Paul drew back and looked away. He heard Bibi speaking to the girl with the red hair; he was asking her who was in the cart that had passed.

“It’s the carrier’s van,” she said.

“Who’s inside?”

“Two men and an old woman. Now, then, are you quite sure this is your piece of ground? It lies opposite the end of the factory wall.”

Bibi had owned half an acre of orchard here.

“Yes, that’s it. Count the trees. There used to be thirty-six, all apples. They were standing there months ago.”

Barbe, of the Coq d'Or, took a step up the bank and counted the trees.

"I make the number thirty-five."

"Near enough. We will have the hut off the waggon here. Give me a hand; I can help the fellow to unload."

Some of the workmen came across to help in the unloading. They thought that Bibi had lost his eyesight in the war; and Barbe was very attractive to men. They fraternized with Bibi.

"You are good fellows," he said, "not like these damned peasants. There will be some good wine here when my buvette goes up."

"What, you are going to sell drink, old man?"

"Plenty of it," said Bibi.

XXXVI

THE events that agitated Monsieur Anatole Durand were the arrival of the "Elephant's" workmen and the birth of Bibi's buvette.

Anatole had Marcel Lefèbre at his elbow, and Lefèbre had never hesitated to say that it was in the factory that the modern social diseases were hatched and bred. If you argued the point with him and quoted the example of Monsieur Menier and his Chocolate Town he would answer that there were very few enlightened men like Monsieur Menier, and that factories existed not for the good of the workpeople but to make money. To Marcel Lefèbre the making of money was the root of all evil. It debauched both the capitalist and the worker, begot the bastard lives that men live in great cities, made life hectic and unreal. He combated the assertion that the peasants were hard, greedy, less intelligent than the dwellers in cities, and he would ask you whether a man who could carry out all the varied and scientific work on a farm had not a more fully developed and intelligent life than a workman who spent each day cutting threads on a screw, who read nothing but the "red rags" and talked about things that he did not understand. In the villages you found no venereal disease, few prostitutes, none of the grosser sorts of crime. An occasional murder, perhaps; but Lefèbre was a man of passions—disciplined passions—and yet he could understand the violence that shed blood. There are occasions when the killing of a man is a wholesome and a cleanly act.

It must be confessed that Lefèbre's prejudices were justified by the temper of the men whom Monsieur Goblet introduced into Beaucourt. The "Elephant" had picked up the dregs of the casual labour that had been set free from the munition works and the army, fellows who drifted, youngsters who had learnt too soon the vices of grown men. Very few of Goblet's original "hands" had returned; some had been killed; others had settled elsewhere; for the few who were ready to return there could be no technical work until the buildings had been repaired and new machinery installed. Durand had spoken of "riff-raff," and the words fitted the case exactly. Monsieur Goblet had picked up the riff-raff that is to be found in all cities. There were some good men among them, one or two of the older bricklayers, the engineer, and two of the mechanics. The rest were a bad lot, ready to run about the village and make trouble with the women.

As for Louis Blanc's buvette, that, too, could not be helped, nor does any sensible Frenchman quarrel with a seller of good wine. Bibi's buvette grew up like a gourd, for the workmen over the way saw that the plant was for their own pleasure, and spent the evenings in helping it to grow. They put up Bibi's hut for him, built Mademoiselle Barbe a throne and a set of shelves, knocked tables and benches together, even helped with the furniture. Bibi had a small marquée as well as a hut. He meant to sleep in the marquée, but Mademoiselle Barbe demanded a door and a lock, and the room that was partitioned off at the end of the hut. For one day Bibi distributed free drinks in token of his gratitude to the good fellows who had their eyes fixed on the red-haired girl's petticoat. Bibi became popular. He had a fine collection of lewd stories suited to the gentlemen whom the "Elephant" had imported into Beaucourt.

Durand professed to see virtues in Louis Blanc's establishment.

"It will keep the roughs out of the village."

Lefèbre insisted on seeing the truth.

"There is part of the village that may be glad to join the roughs."

"Mon Dieu," said Anatole, "are we not rather like a couple of fussy old hens?"

"My religion spreads its wings over the children. You know very well, my friend, that Goblet has opened the lid of the box. We shall have trouble here."

Durand bit his finger-nails.

"There may be a way of persuading that fellow Blanc to disappear."

Paul missed the events of those few days, for Amiens had made him a present, the present that Monsieur Poupart had expected to bring back with him. Brent went down with influenza, an influenza of a particularly virulent type. He was alone in the house, Luce Philipon having returned to her parents, and the disease struck Paul like a dose of poison. He was at work in the morning; that evening he was delirious, with a temperature that had soared.

About nine o'clock in the evening old Prosper Cordonnier, who slept at the château, and acted as Anatole's "store-guard," was sent down by Durand to the Café de la Victoire with a message to Brent. Anatole wished him to come up next day and make a rough survey of the château. Cordonnier found the café shut up, but hearing a voice, he knocked at the door. No one answered the knock, so Cordonnier tried the door, and finding it unlocked, walked in.

It was still sufficiently light for Cordonnier to see his way about the house, and he discovered Brent in bed in the little room whose window overlooked the garden. Paul was delirious, and talking all sorts of imaginable nonsense, and he was talking in English. Cordonnier stood and stared at him. This lingo was strange to Prosper, who had passed his refugee years working on a farm in the Gironde.

Cordonnier bent over the bed, and shook Brent by the shoulder.

"Hallo, old chap, what's the matter?"

Brent pushed him away.

"Bosh," he said, "bosh! Oh, go to the devil!"

Cordonnier left him, but he stood in the passage for a minute or two, rubbing his chin and listening. Prosper had been known in Beaucourt as "Mutton Head," a man of slow movements, very stupid, yet touchily conscious of his stupidity. People had laughed at him, and this laughter had bred in Cordonnier a stubborn reticence. He used very few words, and those of the simplest. He talked only of obvious things, and if anyone asked him for an opinion he bolted back into his silence like a rabbit into a hole. He had one failing, a fondness for drink, and he had been heard to argue with a mild recklessness upon the contrasted virtues of farmyard dung and chemical manures.

Cordonnier went back to the château.

"That fellow Paul might have been talking German," was the thought that entered his head, "but we won't say anything about that. They always laugh, the fools! A man should keep things to himself."

He told Durand that Paul was sick. "I found him in bed, monsieur. You had better see him yourself in the morning."

"Nothing serious, Prosper?"

Cordonnier avoided expressing his opinion.

"He was in bed, monsieur, so I came away."

Anatole was with Paul early the next day; the high fever had passed, and he found Brent flushed but sane. He remembered nothing of Cordonnier's visit, nor had it occurred to him that he might have been babbling in English.

"This comes of taking a holiday in Amiens."

Durand lit the stove in the kitchen, warmed up some milk, and made Paul drink it.

"When does Manon come back?"

"To-morrow."

“I will fetch Mère Vitry. She is a good nurse, and she will be glad to look after you.”

And there the incident ended. Mère Vitry came in, a very willing angel of mercy, with her patched skirt, and her bright black eyes. She washed Paul’s hands and face, talking to him as she would have talked to a baby, and shuffling about the house in an old pair of felt slippers. In the toe of one of these slippers a mouse had gnawed a hole, and the little black circle fascinated Brent. It looked like a bird’s eye.

Manon returned next day in Monsieur Talmas’ cart. She found Mère Vitry sitting in the kitchen, darning Paul’s socks, her cat asleep on the table by the window, and the coffee-pot ready on the stove. Manon had been in a state of pleasant excitement from the moment that she had left Amiens. She was returning to her home and to her lover.

“You have been looking after my man. How good of you.”

“S-sh!” said Mère Vitry, “he is asleep.”

“Asleep!”

“He has been ill, my dear, but he is better. Monsieur Durand says it is la grippe. Perhaps you had better not go into the room.”

Manon put her bag on the table, took off her hat, and behaved as Mère Vitry would have behaved in impulsively flouting her own advice. She went to the door of Paul’s room, opened it without a sound, and stood looking at him as he lay in bed asleep.

It was that kiss on the forehead that woke Brent. He opened his eyes to find her bending over him, her warm red mouth still shaping a kiss. Her clothes and her bosom smelt faintly of some delicate perfume, and her hands were touching his shoulders.

“Mon pauvre,” she said.

Brent lay and looked at her. He was thinking that he had never had a more pleasant awakening than the lips of Manon had given him in their new home.

“So you are back.”

He was content to look at her, and she understood the happy indolence in his eyes.

“You should have sent me a message. How long have you been ill?”

She sat down on the edge of the bed, and held one of his hands.

“I am not complaining.”

“No?”

“To wake up like this, and suddenly see you, here. But, little woman, you ought not to be here.”

“Who says so?”

“I do. I don’t want you ill.”

“Indeed!”

Deliberately, wilfully, she bent forward till her face was close to his.

“I am afraid of nothing that you could give me. So there.”

Brent would not kiss her lips, but he kissed her hand.

“I shall be up in two days. Life is so exciting just now. When does the furniture arrive?”

“On Friday.”

And suddenly he remembered that Louis Blanc had returned to Beaucourt. He wondered if Manon knew.

She was leaning back and looking at him, aware of the sudden seriousness of his eyes.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“You are in pain?”

“No.”

“But there is something; I am not to be deceived.”

He smiled up at her.

“How you notice things.”

“Yes. I saw Bibi and his new hut near the factory. Is that what is worrying you? Monsieur Talmas told me. It does not worry me.”

Brent’s face cleared. In some ways women are more courageous and more imperturbable than men.

“Well, then, it does not matter,” he said, “but I wish that fellow had taken his blind face somewhere else.”

In their happiness they were ready to forget Louis Blanc and that brown hut of his among the apple trees on the bank above the Bonnière road. The buvette was complete. Mademoiselle Barbe had her comptoir and her shelves for bottles, and at night the factory workmen crowded in and sat round the improvised tables and drank Bibi’s execrable wine. Those who were unable to find room in the hut made themselves at home under the apple trees. They were noisy; they sang. Bibi had a chair beside Barbe’s comptoir. He talked a great deal, but he never laughed. His blind face was

the face of a man who listened for some particular voice, the voice of an enemy.

This hut of his was like an outpost, or a rallying point in the inevitable antagonisms that were stirring in the village. Peasant Beaucourt looked at it with unfriendly eyes. It was not that these peasants were saints; far from it; and yet it was as though that arch-peasant, Monsieur Lefèbre, had placed Bibi and his buvette under an interdict. There were elemental discords between the tiller of the fields and these ouvriers. The peasant had his home, his wife, his daughters, his work, his crops; the factory hand was an Ishmaelite, noisy, contentious, cynical, full of crude theories about double pay and less work. He had no woman with him, and your barrack-housed man is a troublesome dog. He will spend half his night sniffing after petticoats, and in Beaucourt the petticoats belonged to the peasants.

This tacit antagonism existed long before it was actually provoked by the inevitable escapades of the "Elephant's" roughs. To Beaucourt, the Beaucourt that followed Durand, Lefèbre, Philipon and their party, Bibi's buvette was out of bounds. No one went there. If a man wanted a little red wine, he got it at Manon's café, and so, almost insensibly, the Café de la Victoire became involved in the feud.

Prosper Cordonnier was the first of the peasant party to secede, and his secession was furtive and occasional. This bibulous and inarticulate old man had felt a dryness at the throat whenever he passed along the Rue de Bonnière. His timidity and his passion for strong drink struggled together for a long time before that scorching and dusty day provided both the temptation and the opportunity. It was three o'clock in the afternoon; everybody was at work, and Prosper, who had been on an errand for Anatole Durand, passed Bibi's buvette at an hour when it was empty. Bibi himself was sitting in the shadow of the doorway; Mademoiselle Barbe had gone to Amiens in Talmas' cart.

Prosper loitered, looking shyly at the board over the door. It occurred to him that it would be polite and neighbourly to speak to Bibi, this poor fellow who had lost his sight.

"Good evening, monsieur."

Bibi sat up very straight in his chair.

"Hallo, who's that?"

"Prosper Cordonnier."

"Come up and drink."

Golden words on a scorching July day! Prosper Cordonnier surrendered.

"Help yourself," said Bibi.

It was pleasantly cool and shady in the hut, and Prosper, after selecting a bottle and a glass from Mademoiselle Barbe's shelves, sat down on a box by the doorway.

"It is very warm, monsieur. What shall I pay you for the wine?"

"Nothing," said Bibi.

"But, monsieur——"

"You did me a good turn once, I don't forget. Pour me out a glass, old chap."

Cordonnier had laid a hand upon one of the most potent of Mademoiselle Barbe's bottles, and in a little while the cords of his tongue were loosened. He became affectionate, talkative, foolishly confidential, dragging his box close to Louis Blanc's chair, and tapping him on the knee with an intimate finger. He began to gossip about Beaucourt, the peasant part of Beaucourt. He had his grievances. His dignity in Beaucourt had never been sufficiently considered.

"Tiens, but what do I do at my age but run messages for Anatole Durand! And believe me, monsieur, I get two francs a day for it, my food, and a couple of blankets. Because a man has learnt to hold his tongue some people think he is worth nothing at all."

Bibi sympathized with him. Old Cordonnier was a prodigious bore, but a blind man has to be patient.

"He is a dull dog, old Durand."

"What I complain of, monsieur, is that he has favourites. Look at Manon Latour and that fellow, Paul Rance."

Bibi yawned.

"Are they favourites of his? Fill up your glass, Prosper."

Cordonnier babbled on.

"That fellow Paul Rance has a tin of milk a day; I have to carry it down each morning."

"What, is he ill?"

"La grippe. And that reminds me of a funny thing, monsieur. I happened to go down to the café when he was taken ill, and he was all alone there in bed, and talking to himself in German."

Bibi sat very still in his chair.

"But that sounds absurd. How did you know it was German?"

“Well, it was not French, monsieur; but of course, nobody ever pays any attention to me, so I never mention such a thing to anybody.”

He raised his glass and drank to his own neglected dignity.

“It is a great mistake to gossip, monsieur. I always hold my tongue. I’m not an old woman.”

Bibi did not answer him. His blind face seemed to have sunk back into the shadow of the hut. He was breathing deeply, nostrils dilated and twitching. This old fool of a Cordonnier had dropped a casual spark and set an idea alight.

For Bibi’s hatred of Paul Brent had become an obsession. His blindness intensified it, shutting him up in the darkness with his hatred of the man who had taken away his sight. He would sit for hours thinking of a possible revenge, but he spoke of it to no one, not even Barbe.

XXXVII

Brent was up and about on that great day when the furniture arrived from Amiens. It made a triumphant entry into Beaucourt, piled in two waggons, and followed by half the youngsters in the village. All the morning was spent in unloading it and carrying it into the house, for Paul's staircase was a staircase of moods and prejudices, and refused to be taken by storm. The two men who came with the waggons exercised much patient and laborious persuasion, inspired by the enthusiasms of Manon and some practical sympathy in the form of red wine. Young Beaucourt stood on the pathway and stared through the windows.

Brent was aware of Manon as a pair of happy eyes, and a blue and white check torchon. She was everywhere, polishing, supervising, issuing orders in that caressing voice of hers, a housewife in heaven. Paul followed her about like a Greek chorus. He had been forbidden to carry anything heavy, and very often he was made to sit down in a chair.

They hung up curtains, put down rugs, moved the beds to and fro until Manon's critical taste was satisfied. She would run forward, give a touch to some piece of furniture, and then come back to Paul and stand holding his arm.

"How does that please you?"

"Everything pleases me," he would reply with the broad appreciation of the male.

Neighbours arrived and had to be shown over the house, Mère Vitry, Mesdames Poupart and Philipon. They were enthusiastic and without envy, for Manon was popular with women, and it was not easy for them to be jealous of her. There was no guile behind her enthusiasm; she was so practical yet so human that these older women seemed to feel the unspoilt child in her.

"So you will be married soon," said Madame Poupart with a glance at the new bed in Manon's room.

Manon was laying out the new sheets with the naturalness of a woman whose whole heart was absorbed in the great affair.

"Yes, I expect so. Paul is such a man for thoroughness. He insisted on finishing all the repairs before we thought of marrying. What do you think of this linen?"

The women examined the sheets, holding them up to the light, stretching them between their hands, and even scratching the fabric with their finger-nails. They talked all the while, and, though Manon used her tongue, her eyes were the essentially eloquent part of her. “We are going to be happy,” she said; “I feel it in my blood and in my soul.”

Madame Philipon was rubbing the linen between a thumb and forefinger.

“It is not so good as before the war.”

“Nothing is,” said Madame Poupart; “one cannot expect it.”

Manon gave a lift of the head, and laughed.

“What are you laughing at, ma chérie?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“You are thinking that your marriage will not be like these sheets?”

Rosalie Philipon’s eyes were shy and affectionate.

“Perhaps!”

“I think you will always be happy. There are some women to whom a man cannot be unkind.”

Brent had disappeared downstairs with the amused tolerance of a man who recognizes his own occasional superfluity. He was sitting straddle-legged on a chair by the kitchen window watching the two men preparing to drive their two waggons back to Amiens, and listening to the voices of the women up above. The animation and the intimacy of their voices soothed him. He fell into a day-dream in which he felt happily conscious of all the elemental happenings of life, a woman’s kisses, the warmth of her bosom in those dear moments of surrender, the tranquil sound of her breathing, the practical and caressing presence of her by day and by night. These voices suggested other thoughts and emotions. They seemed to fill the house with the spirit of the great human mystery. These women were busy about a bed. It was almost as though they were waiting for the little cry of a child—that faint whimpering that fills the hushed house with a sense of tender exultation and relief.

Brent’s eyes were blue and vague, but suddenly the alertness came back to them as he glanced along the Rue de Picardie. Something unusual was happening in Beaucourt. He saw a crowd of children, an English officer wheeling a bicycle, and behind them a G. S. waggon with three khaki figures riding on it. The two waggoners were standing in the middle of the road staring at the procession.

Brent had a moment of panic, the panic of a man with a secret. These familiar uniforms were so unexpected and so reminiscent of much that he

wished to forget. He stood up and felt his heart beating hard and fast.

The window was open and he heard one of the waggoners explain these English to his comrade:

"Les exhumeurs."

The truth flashed upon Brent. They had come to open Beckett's grave.

He was conscious of a profound discouragement, an inward protest! What an omen! Why had they chosen this day of all days? He had a feeling that he wanted to run away out of the house, and to remain away until the affair was over.

Cordonnier was knocking at the door.

"Madame Latour?"

Brent got a grip on himself. He felt that he could not leave this business to Manon, and that he did not want the taint of it in her heart on this most happy and innocent day. He went to the door, and found Cordonnier and the officer waiting on the path.

Cordonnier looked under his slow eyelids at Brent.

"Monsieur Paul, here is an English officer who has come to take away a body."

Brent glanced at the officer. He was the most harmless thing imaginable, a Moth in Spectacles, one of those anomalous males without masculinity, in age about five-and-forty, mild, a little frightened, with a brown moustache that fell down over a precise mouth. Brent seemed to know that there was a patch of baldness under his cap. He was indifferently shaved. His tie was in a lump. He wore very new leggings that did not fit.

"Bonjour, monsieur."

The officer began in text-book French.

"Bonjour, monsieur, est-ce que vous avez un soldat Anglais enterré ici?"

"There is a grave in the orchard, monsieur."

The officer blinked.

"Have I your permission to remove the body?"

"Certainly, monsieur. I will show you."

He got the Englishman away before Manon could appear, and taking him round by way of the yard, showed him the grassy mound and the wooden cross below the bank in the orchard. The soldiers took off their coats and set to work. Brent turned away to rout a dozen inquisitive youngsters who wanted to see the body dug up.

"Allez!"

He looked white and fierce, and the children fled.

Brent sat on the bank and made himself watch this opening of Beckett's grave. There was something final about it, something symbolical, and yet—as performed by these English Tommies—it was utterly without reverence. They smoked cigarettes; they were immensely casual and indolent; it was evident that they considered their officer a negligible old woman. Brent watched them with an increasing dislike. He saw one man spit into the grave, the instinctively dirty act of a mere common man, and for a moment he was almost on his feet and ready to call them "swine." His eyes met the brown, short-sighted eyes of the officer. Brent understood that he, too, despised and loathed these men, but that he was afraid of their brute animal obtuseness. This, too, was symbolical. It reminded Brent of a saying of Anatole Durand's: "In these days the brain of civilization is afraid to tell the body of civilization what an ignorant brute it is."

Manon came out into the orchard, saw Paul sitting there, and understood. She gave him a mother-look, a caress of the eyes, and slipped away without his realizing that she had been so near to him.

One of the soldiers stuck his pick into something.

"The old ——'s there, chum!"

The officer winced. Brent looked fierce. He made himself go and stand beside the officer.

"Your men have not much respect for the dead, monsieur."

The Moth in Spectacles understood French better than he spoke it. He looked almost timidly at Brent.

"It is habit, monsieur. They are awkward brutes."

He spoke to one of the men.

"Be careful, Saunders; that Englishman was alive once."

"B——y nice job he left us, anyhow," said the man, with sulky insolence.

The disinterment was soon completed. Brent saw his own identity disc taken out of the grave and handed to the officer, and a sudden curiosity moved him. He edged close and looked over the little officer's shoulder at the red circle lying in his palm. The Tommy had cleaned the disc by spitting upon it and rubbing it on his breeches.

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The officer brought out a note-book and entered the details, while the men put what was left of Beckett into the wooden shell that they had brought in the waggon. Brent stood and looked at the hole in the ground. He was thinking of that morning in March when Beckett had been killed. He remembered the frost on the grass, the sunlight, the stillness, the white splinters of the apple tree, the hob-nails in the soles of Beckett's boots. The memory carried him to Manon, Manon who was alive, Manon who loved him. He turned away and walked back to the house, conscious of an immense gratitude to her, of a tenderness that had felt the taunt of some unclean act and rushed to purify itself in her presence. How clean and wholesome and human she was! Those dirty, soulless men in khaki spitting into Beckett's grave; those conscript grave-diggers turning over the bones of a dead valour!

Manon heard him enter the house. She was upstairs. Something in her seemed to divine his mood. She called to him.

"Paul, I am here."

He climbed the steep staircase that he had built, and found himself in her room—their room. And, suddenly, her arms went round him. She held him close with all her sturdy, human strength, and drew his face down to her shoulder.

"My man has such a soft heart."

He turned his head, and with an emotion that was very near to tears, kissed her warm throat.

"It might have happened some other day."

She smiled over him compassionately.

"Well, it is over. That mound there in the orchard always made me a little sad. Now, look, all this is yours and mine; it is ours."

She made him look round the room at the new bed with its clean linen and red duvet, the rugs on the floor, the curtains that she had tacked up at the windows.

"It is alive," she said, "our little home."

He held her close, and they stood with heads bowed, as though praying.

In the street a blind man led by a small boy had stopped outside the Café de la Victoire, and was turning his sightless face to it with a hatred that had inward eyes.

“It is a fine house they have now,” said the boy; “the door looks as green as an apple.”

Bibi said nothing. The boy led him away down the Rue de Picardie, and neither Manon nor Paul knew that Bibi had passed their house.

XXXVIII

THERE is more folly than sin in the world—but an evil man takes folly and uses it—and in the process makes it evil.

These factory workers came and drank at Louis Blanc's buvette. They talked and talked extravagantly as some men talk after a war—and there were bad men among them. Mademoiselle Barbe, who was as clever and as careful as a cat, and who had nothing but scorn for eloquent fools, kept her eyes in particular on Pompom Crapaud and Lazare Ledoux.

Little Crapaud was as ugly as his name, an undersized little devil with a broken nose and dissipated blue eyes. He was always laughing, and when he laughed he made a noise like a goat. Crapaud had been in prison for some particularly filthy crime. He had worked on "munitions" during the war.

Ledoux was different. He was like a lean dog that had been flayed alive, and was all red flesh and staring eyes. He was raw both within and without. He gave the impression of a man who was always leaning forward to seize something or to spit in an enemy's face. He talked like a "flame-thrower," and his eyes grew more and more red as he talked. You could see the venom swelling in that long, lean throat of his—his hands clawed ready to tear and to destroy. His black hair seemed to stand on end—electrified. He was always dirty, and smelt of stale sweat.

Ledoux was a "Red." He had been born and bred a "Red"; it was his natural colour. He had an infinite capacity for hating anything and everything that smelt a little sweeter than himself. He called all clean, good-natured, orderly people "capitalists" or "bourgeois." He hated anyone who worked hard, or who was thrifty. He hated all peasants, especially those peasants who owned land.

That chance gossip with old Cordonnier had given Bibi an idea, and in the bitter darkness of these summer days he sat there like a spider spinning a web. He listened to these roughs talking "communism." Ledoux was an orator; he made speeches—malignant, violent speeches that were very pleasant to discontented men who preferred the new humanitarian theories to the merciless facts of life. Ledoux had all the old clap-trap dogmas, and Crapaud—who was his dog—yapped applause.

"The workers create everything with their hands. All capitalists are thieves. Everything should belong to the workers."

He had the usual sentimental view of the noble workman joyfully pouring forth sweat for the sake of all the other workers in the world.

"Never will you see such labour—such wonderful things done, such a mass of riches for everybody."

Bibi listened to Ledoux. He was one great silent sneer, but he never let Ledoux know that he was sneering. At night, when the men had gone off and the buvette was shut up, he and Barbe would discuss Ledoux and roar with laughter. Barbe was a mimic. She knew exactly what life was, and what men are, and that Ledoux would have been much less of a fool if he had not been so repulsive to women.

"What nonsense!" she said; "that fellow has never been allowed to kiss a pretty girl. I should say that women don't like him—so he is one of the mangy dogs with a sore head."

She had placed her finger on the inflamed core of Lazare Ledoux's discontent. He had failed to get what he had thirsted for in life, and his red eyes had blazed. He preached love, love of the people who were like himself—and he was the very essence of hatred. The blood of his ideals was envy.

It is easy for a bad man to understand the nonsensical malignity of such a theorist's dogmatism. Good-natured people are apt to be moved by the fanatic's enthusiasm, his burning words, his apparent altruism. He offers freedom, noble and more spacious lives. He talks of the "children of to-morrow." And Bibi, rogue that he was, laughed at Ledoux, and his laughter was justified.

"Voilà!" he said; "give these gentlemen their food and their wine and other people's houses—and then ask them to sweat for the good of humanity! How much work will they do? Precious little. They will loaf about and talk all day, and make the shopkeepers clean the streets. . . ."

"Most men are lazy," said Barbe, "it is the women and the children who matter. An empty stomach is man's master."

But if Bibi despised Ledoux and Crapaud and the crowd who listened to them, he saw that it might be possible for him to make use of their passions. These men were firebrands, wolves. They talked internationalism, worshipped Lenin, yet hated the Germans. Ledoux was more venomous than usual when he spoke of the German Socialists. He had not forgotten what he had suffered in the trenches—for Ledoux was a physical coward and sordid fear does not breed love. He was ready to scream at his brethren across the Rhine: "Yes, you behaved like swine. You were ready to help the shopkeepers when you thought you were going to plunder our shops. And you let your honest men be put in prison."

If Bibi had the civic morals of a house-agent, he was almost as successful as the house-agent in trading on the good nature and the carelessness of the average man and woman. He could create an atmosphere, spin a web, and wait for the flies to arrive. He set himself to create an atmosphere about the Café de la Victoire. When Ledoux raged against the capitalists and the shopkeepers, Bibi would say, "You are quite right, monsieur; we have them here. I keep a shop and sell wine; but what can a blind man do?"

He would tap the ribbon of the Croix de Guerre that he wore on his coat.

"Anyhow, I would work if I could, and I picked up this in the war."

They fell upon Bibi's neck and reassured him. He was "bon enfant"; he could tell a good tale, and he sold them wine. He did not give himself airs. Even Ledoux liked the swaggering frankness of the man who called the peasants "the muck of the land."

Bibi spun one thread at a time.

"Of course, the shopkeepers will do anything. Now look at these people in the café over there. Do you know how they got their material?"

The buvette asked, "How?"

"Stole it. They came back to the village before any of the others. There were some army huts in a field. They pulled two of them to pieces and used the stuff."

This made Ledoux furious.

"That's individualism. The huts belonged to the community."

"That's what I say. Now, take this hut of mine; I bought it; I look on it as a sort of pension, a box for an old soldier."

"There is nothing wrong in that."

Bibi smiled at them all.

"And the boys are kind to me and drink my wine. Now those people at the café are capitalists, and their capital gave them a start of everybody else. Is not that so, monsieur?"

He turned his face towards Ledoux.

"There's the infamy!" Ledoux was standing and reaching out with his hands. "Even in a place like this the capitalist has all the advantages. Look—a ruined village, all the poor people coming back! Everybody ought to start on equal terms—but no! Back comes your capitalist and your shopkeeper, and they have their feet half-way up the ladder. All capital should be confiscated."

“What about the factory?” said a voice.

“It ought to belong to us. Who is putting it in order? Who gives the sweat?”

“That’s right,” shouted little Crapaud; “old Goblet ought to be paid a salary—or wages—by us. Why should he have fifty thousand francs a year for sitting in an office?”

“Then there is that fellow Durand,” put in someone else.

Bibi waved his arms.

“A wash-out! He only amuses himself; he is one of the sentimental fools who is getting rid of his money. But what makes me savage is the smugness of the people.” He was working to bring the conversation back to the Café de la Victoire.

“Smug! Mon Dieu! They look down on us; we are not good enough to mix with them. Soon they will be calling their place an hotel. Why, I would bet you that if a couple of you boys walked into that place and asked for a drink, they would not serve you.”

This created an uproar.

“Let us try it,” shouted little Crapaud. “Here, Lazare, you and I will go round to-morrow and put the wind up these aristos.”

Ledoux showed his teeth.

“I have no objection.”

“You will be turned out,” said Bibi.

Crapaud and the orator put Bibi’s prophecy to an experimental test. They strolled in the cool of the evening to Manon’s café, and saw Manon herself standing on the path admiring the new sign-hoard that Paul had put up that very morning. Brent was working in the garden, and the wall hid him from view.

It was Crapaud who did the talking. Ledoux was useless with women, being too uncouth and too sombre a beast.

“Good evening, madame; we have come to try your wine.”

Manon looked at them. She had never seen these two men before.

“I am sorry, monsieur, but my café has been closed for a week. We have been too busy.”

Crapaud winked at his comrade.

“Then what is that sign doing up there? All that gold lettering looks very inviting.”

She did not reply to Crapaud, but entered the house with the finality of a Frenchwoman who does not argue about her authority in her own home. Ledoux's red eyes looked evil, but then Ledoux was a coward.

"Bourgeoise——!" He used a foul word.

Pompom Crapaud had the physical audacity that Ledoux lacked. He jumped up on to the path, entered the café, and, walking into the kitchen, sat down in Paul's arm-chair. A minute later Manon found him there, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, and his cap over one eye.

"What do you want, monsieur?"

"A drink."

Manon kept her temper.

"I have told you that my café is not open, and this is my kitchen."

"You had better take that board down," said Crapaud; "I protest that I have the right to sit here as long as it remains up."

Manon looked at him, and went for Paul. She explained the situation to him, and Brent attacked it good-temperedly. He walked into the kitchen and smiled at Pompom Crapaud.

"I think you have made a mistake, monsieur."

Brent's smile annoyed the pirate.

"It is your sign-board that is making the mistake."

"Even the sign-board does not give you the right to sit in madame's kitchen."

"I sit here," was Crapaud's retort. "Make what you can of that."

Brent made so little of it that he took Crapaud by the collar and transferred him to the street. The little man had no more strength than a half-grown chicken, and he went quietly enough.

But he swore at Ledoux.

"Here, you are a pretty pal; you are bigger than he is."

Ledoux glanced at Brent, and fidgeted his hands in his pockets, but he did not attack.

"Well, we have found them out, haven't we?"

"Name of a dog—but—I—found them in!"

They went off quarrelling up the street.

Other and more sinister incidents enlarged and filled in the outlines of the feud that was growing in Beaucourt. There was the affair of the Bois du Renard, an outrage that made old Anatole Durand go down and deliver a

speech in the Place de l'Eglise. A few nights later there was a scrimmage in the Rue Bonnière in which young François Guiveau had his jaw broken. It was followed by the incident of the attack on Luce Philipon as she was walking home alone in the dark along the Rosières road. Her father had gone to meet her, and he caught the two louts trying to drag the girl into a field. The blacksmith was a very powerful man, and he beat both these young roughs senseless with his fists. One of them had tried to knife him, and Beaucourt never forgot that picture of Philipon trailing the lout by the arm all the way up the Rue de Picardie and along the Bonnière road to the factory. There was a crowd outside Bibi's buvette, but no one tried to rescue the trailing, bumping figure. Philipon threw the fellow over the factory gate. He was pulp, and had to be taken to Amiens in a waggon.

Lefèbre and Durand deplored these happenings. They turned their eyes towards Louis Blanc's buvette, and saw in it a storm-centre, a Pandora's box, a pest-house.

"We shall have to try and get rid of that fellow."

Durand's hair bristled.

"And Goblet's men will start a riot. I think we are strong enough to give them a surprise. I wish I could buy that factory."

XXXIX

BRENT had been at work in the château, putting one of the "wings" in repair against the winter, when that yellow English touring-car pulled up outside the Café de la Victoire. It was a big car, and it contained, besides the chauffeur, a manufacturer from the Midlands, his family, and its appendages.

They were all gathered on the footpath, a big red man in a grey flannel suit, three women rather elaborately dressed, a "flapper" with red hair, and a small boy with eyes like blue marbles. The women had white, puffy faces. They stared at everything, Manon, the house, the resurrected ruins, Paul Brent, the scattering of children, as though they were staring at things in a shop-window. There was a quite extraordinary lack of animation or intelligence about them. They looked overfed, replete, satiated.

The man was trying to explain that they wanted five bedrooms and late dinner. And was there a lock-up garage for the car?

"Mais, non, monsieur, c'est impossible."

She looked relieved when Paul joined them.

"My fiancé speaks a little English."

They all looked at Brent as though he were some sort of savage. He heard one of the women remark that it was probable that the beds would be dirty, and that the agent at Amiens had told them a lot of lies.

Brent was annoyed. He spoke to the man in English.

"We can give you a simple meal and two bedrooms. As you see, we are very busy here."

The small boy and the flapper giggled.

"We'll have to sleep in the car, pa."

"But it's absurd," said the fattest of the three women, "We were told at Amiens that we could put up here. Of course, if these French people don't want us or our money——"

They held a family council on Manon's doorstep, and the fact emerged that two of the women had made up their minds that they wanted to spend the night in a devastated village. It would make ornamental conversation at home. The man was neutral; he had never been in France before, and though of military age, had functioned very successfully on the home front. The

chauffeur, an ex-soldier, listened with an air of interested cynicism to the argument.

"All right," said the Midlander; "you give us three rooms and we can manage."

Paul translated the proposal to Manon.

"But you would have to turn out."

"I could sleep in the cellar for a night. Leave it to me. They shall pay through the nose."

He turned to the man.

"Fifty francs each for the night. That will be three hundred and fifty francs."

The white, flaccid faces of the women showed a first flicker of animation.

"Fifty francs each!"

"But it's outrageous! We paid half that at Amiens for the whole day."

"But think of the rate of exchange," said Brent; "and this is not Amiens."

The man looked uncomfortable. He was not so hard as his satiated women—and France had filled him with vague qualms.

"Harriet, you know, these people have suffered a lot."

His wife looked at him with oblique contempt.

"Oh—well—if you feel like throwing money about! I suppose wine will be included."

"Wine is an extra, madame."

Her eyes said, "Robber, and after all we English have done for you!"—but her man made up his mind not to argue. Somehow Beaucourt was too big for him.

"All right. Show us the rooms."

Brent surrendered the party to Manon, and piloted the chauffeur and the yellow car into the yard. As he switched off the engine, the ex-Tommy gave Paul a brotherly grin.

"You stuck 'em all right. Good biz."

It was an unfortunate coincidence, but the unpleasant impression stamped upon the consciousness of Beaucourt by these New English reacted upon the popularity of the Café de la Victoire. It was the stupidity of these people, their spiritual obtuseness, that offended the French. The whole family went out to explore the village as though Beaucourt were the "White

City." They had paid their entrance money, and they had come to stare. There was something insolent in their largeness, and in the largeness of the car. Their very clothes were offensive in Beaucourt. They strolled, they talked in loud voices, they pointed. They were amused by the wrong things, and untouched by wounds that should have made them ashamed. There were moments when the man appeared awkward and uncomfortable, and showed a disinclination to loiter. The women were absolutely insensitive. Their super-fatted souls were blind to the sacrilege of certain attitudes. Two of them poked their heads into the interior of Madame Poirel's cottage. It was one of the side-shows, and they examined it with the eyes of cows. Madame Poirel happened to be sitting in her chair, patching a petticoat. She had lost her two sons in the war.

"What do you wish, mesdames?"

The Englishwomen did not realize they were on sacred ground, standing on the very stone where Madame Poirel's boys had sat as toddlers. They did not see the room as a place of memories, a dim interior that was almost a shrine. They stared. They made remarks. One of them nodded casually at the Frenchwoman.

Madame Poirel got up and very calmly closed the door.

The explorers were surprised—indignant.

"Well, what manners!"

"It's quite true what Kate told us. The French hate us."

"But isn't it beastly ungrateful of them?"

"My dear, it's all a question of coal."

The family moved on. Madame Poupart's shop amused them immensely. The boy pointed it out with a finger of scorn.

"Ma, look at the rabbit-hutch!"

"Shut up, Fred," said his father, glimpsing a long and yellow face at the window—the austere face of Madame Poupart.

The women sided with the boy.

"Don't be so touchy."

"Aren't we here to see things?"

"I don't think the French like it," said the man.

It did not seem to matter to the women whether the French liked it or not.

The English always visit churches; it seems to be a habit with them, and the Hoskyn family had the unique experience of seeing a French priest,

wrapped up in an old sheet, diligently whitewashing the walls of his church. They did not recognize Monsieur Lefèbre as a priest, associating clericalism with an appearance of blackness and physical inactivity. The boy dabbled his fingers in the piscina, and had to be told to take off his cap.

Monsieur Lefèbre was a polite soul, nor was he conscious of any lack of dignity. He turned about and, whitewash brush in hand, gave the Hoskyn family a jocund smile and a slight bow. He was met with obtuse stares.

"The verger—I suppose."

"There's nothing to see here, John, and that fellow will be after a tip."

They sailed out, leaving Monsieur Lefèbre with upraised eyebrows and an expression of amused and irresponsible gaiety.

The family walked along the Rue de Bonnière and discovered Bibi's buvette. It suggested a chicken-house, and they paused in the road to stare at it, a compliment that was returned by the men who happened to be in the hut. Ledoux, Crapaud and several others crowded to the door. The self-evident contrasts of life provoked an instinctive hostility—and civilization was in the melting-pot.

"Voilà les anglais!"

"They arrived in a big automobile; I saw them. Conspuez les profiteers!"

"Yes, and they are lodging at the Café de la Victoire."

Bibi pushed his way to the door, feeling the arms and shoulders of the men. Ledoux was speaking with a snarl in his voice.

"Capitalists, look at them! Fat and rich, blood-suckers, tradesmen. We are monkeys in a cage, are we? Get out!"

He shook his fist at the Hoskyn family, and with outraged ideals they moved on.

"These French are savages!"

"Why—we might be Germans!"

The men at the doorway of the buvette continued to discuss the presence of these English in Beaucourt, and Bibi, leaning a hand on the shoulders of Crapaud and Ledoux, turned their passions towards the Café de la Victoire.

"There you are! What did I tell you? These English pay well, and that is all those two at the café care about. They did not build their place for decent working-men, but to make money out of the rich English and Americans who come to stare at our poverty."

"You have touched it," said Crapaud; "Bibi goes straight to the heart of things."

Ledoux stretched out a hand that was like the clawed foot of a bird.

"Capitalists? They sell everything. They ought to be kicked out of Beaucourt."

"Yes, why don't we smash the place up?"

Bibi gave a kind of rolling laugh.

"That's the music. But wait a bit; I am finding out something about those people; I might be blind, but I can see through a wall. Yes, just you wait a bit, my lads, and I may have something surprising to tell you. Then we'll make a night of it, and send up the balloon."

If Beaucourt was moved to some resentment against Manon for taking these English into her house, Manon herself soon saw too much of them. She had sent for a girl to help her, and these two Frenchwomen cooked, and made beds, arranged a table for six, and did their best to make the tourists comfortable. About sunset, Paul was at work in the garden when Manon came out to him, a Manon who was wholesomely and humanly angry.

"Mon Dieu, but they are impossible! They have no manners."

"What has happened, chérie?"

"Happened! Nothing has happened, but everything is wrong. I can understand their grumbling. But they swarm in and behave as though the house belonged to them; they shout down the stairs at me, 'Femme de chambre, ici, toute de suite!' They ask for all sorts of impossible things, and the women look at me like angry cows."

Paul tried to comfort her. He felt rather responsible for these English.

"They have made a lot of money during the war, and they don't know how to behave. They are leaving to-morrow."

"Thank God! Paul, are all the English like that?"

"Heavens! no," he said. "We are very decent folk when we are not too rich. The bother is that people like that are so damnably stupid."

She snuggled into the hollow of his arm.

"My Paul, I love this place so much. It hurts me to have such people in it."

"Well, we will have no more. That's very simple. I like them as little as you do."

The girl who had come to help Manon appeared suddenly in the garden.

"Oh, madame, o-là-là, ces anglais!"

The Hoskyn family had demanded baths.

“Baths, baths for six! Do they think this is London?”

Brent burst out laughing.

“All right; leave it to me. When do they want the hot water?”

“At ten o’clock, monsieur.”

“Tell them it shall be there.”

Punctually at ten o’clock Paul deposited a tea-cup full of hot water outside each door. He knocked at Mr. Hoskyn’s door. It was the lady who opened it, expecting something in petticoats and not a man. She wore a lace nightcap, and a pink silk dressing-gown.

“What’s this?”

“The water for the bath, madame,” said Paul with complete solemnity; “we shall not charge for it in the bill.”

XL

THE house was finished, or as good as finished, and then something happened to Paul Brent.

He had been like a child absorbed in a game, building castles on the sands with a playmate to help him, conscious of the sea and the sky as a spacious blueness; of the schoolroom and the copy-book he had thought but little. The house was finished. There was a pause. He stood up, feeling a sudden sense of fateful melancholy spreading across the sands. He seemed to hear voices. He looked into the eyes of his playmate—and awoke.

It had been raining, but the evening sky had cleared when Manon went out to search for her man and found him sitting on the bank of the stream with his back against a poplar tree, and his feet close to the water. He did not hear her footsteps, and she stood still a moment, looking at him.

He appeared to be watching the water, yet she imagined that he did not see it, that he was not aware of its movement. He looked infinitely sad. She had a curious impression of him as having been removed to a great distance from her; and yet never had he seemed so near.

"Chéri," she said softly, guessing that the panic moment had come, and that her man was awake.

Paul turned his head very slowly, as though it was not easy for him to meet her eyes.

"Hallo! Come and sit down."

She sat down close to him.

"Well, you will tell me," she said, "of what you are thinking?"

He hesitated, his hands resting rather helplessly on his knees.

"I was thinking what a mess I had made of things."

She had known that this awakening must come; this pain of the conscience. She had foreseen it, and she was prepared; she was there at his side.

"You are thinking of our marriage?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Her voice was very soft and curiously tranquil. She did not attempt to caress him, or even to touch him with her hands. She knew that it would hurt, and that there were moments when this man had the soul of a fanatic.

"What have I been doing all these months?"

He appeared to ask himself the question, and she answered it.

"Making me very happy. And now, suddenly, the game is over. We were like children. And now, you wish to tell the truth."

He raised his eyes and looked at her with a kind of astonished awe.

"How did you know?"

She touched his sleeve with the tip of one forefinger.

"How? Why—was it not inevitable? It was bound to happen to you; I knew that when I came to realize the sort of man you are. Well, I am quite ready. You may tell me the truth. We will go and see Monsieur Lefèbre."

He rested his chin on his hands and stared at the water.

"It's amazing," he said.

"What is, chéri?"

"Your—your——"

"Calmness?"

"Yes, that. And your generosity, and the way you understand."

She gave a little, touching laugh.

"To get married—in France—one has to exercise much common-sense. People ask questions, demand papers. Of course there were moments—quite long ago—when I was not sure whether you would ever want to tell the truth. And—of course—a woman——"

He looked at her with a quick, brave deepening of the eyes.

"Manon—you mean? What would you have done——?"

She stared at the water, quite still, her lips pressed firmly together.

"I don't know," she said presently; "do not ask me to tell you."

Paul Brent was much moved. He had been in such a confusion of remorse, self-accusation, loneliness and pain, that he had been capable of obeying any rash impulse that raised a cry of retrocession. For the moment the only possible future for him had seemed exile from Beaucourt. He would have to shoulder his knapsack and disappear. And then Manon had come to him, calm, practical and tender. She seemed to have touched him with a cool and soothing hand. There was nothing that he could not say to her or she to him.

“How you help a man,” he said.

She moved close to him and into the hollow of his arm, and they sat there under the poplar while the dusk came down, and the water grew dark and mysterious.

“You thought of running away, chéri?”

“Yes.”

“How much more cruel that would have been to me! What would people have said, and how humiliated I should have felt. I would rather you told the truth.”

“You are not afraid of it?”

“No.”

He turned her face to his and kissed her.

“Little woman, it seems the only way out. Life’s so queer. When I began this adventure and started that harmless lie, I never thought that it would end like this. I shall have to clean the slate again, and that means England and more trouble. Still, there it is.”

“But you are doing it for me.”

“And for myself, too. Let’s be honest.”

She snuggled close.

“Chéri,” she said, “they cannot do anything very terrible to you, can they?”

Brent looked at the dark water. There was a slight rustling of the leaves of the poplar.

“I suppose I’m a deserter, but desertion when a fellow is due to be demobilized isn’t very serious. Then, I impersonated another man, though Beckett wasn’t hurt by it. He was a lone man. And then, of course, I have upset the records and returns; that’s about the worst crime you can commit in the army.”

He laughed.

“You see, I’m dead. They may refuse to let me come to life again. And the official letters that will be written—and the fuss——!”

She laughed with him—glad of this happier mood.

“Why, after all, chéri, it is only a great joke. You have done nobody any harm, and think of how you have helped us in Beaucourt. We shall have good friends here. They, too, will see the joke, this great human adventure. No one will bear you any malice.”

“There is Bibi,” he said.

“What can Bibi do?”

She sent him to bed comforted and utterly in love with her loyalty and her generous common-sense. She was a little woman whose sturdiness helped a man—for most men are little more than big children, and the woman who loves a man is also his mother. Manon refused to utter tragic cries and to dissolve into passionate and romantic misery. Her capable hands pulled the knot to pieces. She had faith in her common-sense.

“We will tell the truth,” she said, “and look happy over it. A smile goes such a long way. If you sneak about looking miserable, the world invents scandals to account for your looks. It may be that you will have to go to England, chéri, but I shall trust you to come back.”

She took the whole affair in hand, for women are more courageous than men. Anatole Durand and Monsieur Lefèbre should be told, but they went first to Monsieur Lefèbre. It was after supper and before dusk when they walked up to the church and found Monsieur Lefèbre repairing the floor of the pulpit. Through the broken west window of the church the sky showed all yellow, and the light was on Manon’s face as she stood by the pulpit steps.

“We have come to confess,” she said, “and to ask for your advice.”

Lefèbre looked at them both—Manon honest and sturdy—Paul a little shy and obscured. He had grown fond of these two, and his sympathies were alarmed.

“What is it, children?” he asked.

“We wish to be married,” said Manon, “but we cannot be married until we have told the truth.”

Monsieur Lefèbre took them into the sacristy, which was also his kitchen, bedroom and salon. He gave Manon and Paul the two chairs, and sat on the box-bed that had been brought from one of the huts. His serious face troubled Paul Brent.

“Now what is the difficulty?”

His dark, jocund eyes looked straight at Paul.

“I had better begin from the beginning, monsieur. It is all my fault.”

“No, I am just as guilty as he is,” said Manon.

Monsieur Lefèbre looked pained. He had certainly been guilty of favouritism in his spiritual attitude towards these two, and here they were confessing some secret sin.

"Let Paul speak——"

But Manon read his face.

"Yes, monsieur, but I wish you to understand that nothing has ever happened between us. He has been more honourable and gentle to me than any man I could have dreamed of. He is a good man, from heart to head."

She gave Paul a very wonderful look.

"Now, tell Monsieur Lefèbre everything."

And Paul told him, beginning with his life before the war, and then linking it to that March morning when he had been tempted to lose his old self in Beckett's death. He watched Monsieur Lefèbre's face as he made his confession, as though the mirror of this man's humanity would show him the very judgment of God. Lefèbre sat with his head a little forward, his face very grave and somewhat sad. He had glanced up quickly when Paul had confessed that he was English, but after that he kept his eyes fixed on the table in front of him. The sacristy began to grow dim, and Lefèbre's face grew dim with it. A feeling of solemnity seemed to fill the place, with its rude, home-made furniture, and its air of austerity. Lefèbre listened and said nothing. He was like some sombre figure in a sanctuary, obscure, enigmatical, waiting to give judgment.

There was a moment when Brent faltered, obsessed by a sudden sense of loneliness. His left arm and hand were resting on the table. He felt something touch his fingers. His hand closed on Manon's.

His heart seemed to take courage, and the obscure figure of Lefèbre ceased to be terrible.

The man on the bed began to ask him abrupt questions.

"You are a widower?"

"Yes."

"And this man—whose name you took—he had no wife, mother, or children?"

"No, monsieur; he was one of those men who wander about the world and settle nowhere."

"And when you came to Beaucourt, you had no idea that it would end like this?"

"No, monsieur, I was so happy working here for Manon that it was not till the place was nearly finished——"

And then, quite suddenly, Monsieur Lefèbre astonished them both. He began to laugh, the generous, rolling laughter of a big, human creature who

asks of God that life shall not be mean.

"You children!" he said. "You children!"

He got up, waving his arms like benedictory wings.

"Where is my candle? And the matches. Let us have light here. God be thanked that I am no bigot. Moreover, I thank you two children for coming to me."

He struck a light and lit the candle that was stuck on the top of an old tin, and they saw that his eyes were all ashine, and his rosy face happy.

"But you gave me a fright, you two. Monsieur Paul, masquerading is the very devil!"

He shook a forefinger at Brent.

"So you will tell the truth."

"Monsieur," said Paul, "there is one woman whom a liar could not marry ——"

"Chéri, you are not a liar!"

She jumped up and kissed him, and Monsieur Lefèbre raised his hands over them.

"Now, we must be serious. Let us see what we can make of this tangle. What is your idea, Paul?"

"I shall have to surrender myself as a deserter, monsieur. I suppose I shall be sent to England. If they could be persuaded to look at it as you have done——"

"Well, that is not impossible. The great thing is not to be in a hurry. One moment——"

He pulled a note-book towards him, opened it, and read a few notes that were neatly written at the top of one page. He reflected, smiling.

"May I tell Monsieur Durand?"

"We were going to tell him," said Manon.

"Good. The thing is for some of us to interest somebody else in the affair, and for all of us to give Paul such a character that your English authorities will see this sin of his with our eyes. Sunday, yes, Sunday. On Sunday Monsieur Durand and I go to Amiens."

He closed the note-book, and smiled at them both.

"Let us keep our mouths closed for a week. It is possible that I may find a way to interest somebody in our Englishman. It is possible that we

ourselves will approach the English authorities. Then it will not be as though you went to them as a deserter, friendless, unspoken for——"

He sent them away much happier than they had come to him, which is the best thing that can be said of a man's religion, and when they had gone he blew out his candle and went up to the château to see Anatole Durand.

The Place de l'Eglise lay in darkness, but there was a light in the post-mistress's hut, and in passing it Paul and Manon nearly ran against big Philipon, who had come to see if Monsieur Talmas had brought him any letters. Philipon recognized them and stopped.

"Hallo, you two! Good evening, madame."

Then he tapped Brent on the chest with a friendly forefinger.

"Have you left anybody in charge over there?"

"No."

"I should get back home. Do you hear?"

They listened, and heard in the distance the sound of men singing a rowdy song.

Philipon nodded.

"A little zig-zag and parading the village! It is time we did something with that buvette of Louis Blanc's. Hold on; I'll walk back with you."

He poked his black head into the post-office.

"Any letters, madame?"

"No, monsieur."

"What is that boy of mine doing in Germany?"

He took Paul's arm and the three of them entered the Rue de Picardie. Philipon was an affectionate animal in spite of his frown and his rumbling voice, and Brent had helped him in the rebuilding of his house. His fatherliness stretched out a protective arm over these two. It is the big men who are most warm-hearted and sentimental, and Philipon was always saying to his wife, "Look at those two at the café! What a romance! It does one's heart good."

They walked along between the queer shapes and little twinkling lights of Beaucourt, with the stars shining overhead, and Philipon's big feet falling emphatically on the cobbles. Here and there men and women were sitting in the open doorways. They exchanged remarks with Philipon, whose familiar bulk and swing of the legs were known to all.

"Bibi's nightingales are singing."

"It is time we did something with that drinking shop."

“I hear they are sending us two gendarmes.”

“Gendarmes! We can manage our own affairs. You wait. We are ready to give those fellows a lesson.”

The singing grew louder as they neared the end of the Rue de Picardie, and it appeared that Monsieur Goblet’s young men were coming down the Rue Romaine. Manon was holding to Paul’s arm. She was not frightened, but she was serious.

“We could do so well without them,” she said.

Philipon grunted.

“Don’t worry, madame. People who make the most noise are always the biggest cowards.”

When they reached the end of the garden wall Paul lifted Manon up on the raised path, but he and Philipon kept to the road. About a dozen “roughs,” with arms linked together, had swung round the corner out of the Rue Romaine and were dancing the can-can in the roadway below the café. They were rowdy and derisive, shouting and kicking up their heels in front of the house.

“Hallo—hallo!”

“Profiteers! Stuck-up pigs!”

“Let’s spoil the paint for them.”

“Shut up. They’re in bed. You are interfering with the embrace.”

“You there, is she nice to cuddle?”

“When is the baby expected?”

They roared with laughter, and then Philipon loomed up like a big ship in the starlight.

“Allez! Keep your snouts out of our village. We have sticks ready.”

The choir oscillated, swayed, and seemed inclined to wind itself in a spiral about the smith, but when Philipon rapped the stone wall of the path with the iron bar that he had been carrying these rowdies thought it wiser to laugh.

“Hallo, there goes the dinner-gong.”

“All right, sergeant-major.”

“And there is madame, too!”

“Bon soir, madame; we thought you were in bed. We came to serenade you!”

The human chain gave a wriggle towards the Rue de Picardie, but Philipon put himself in the way.

“You can go back by the other road. Beaucourt is bored with you.”

They chaffed him, but they took his advice. Manon had unlocked the door. She turned and thanked Philipon.

“Come in and drink a glass of wine.”

“Pardon, but I go to bed early in order to get up early. I think those lads are all wind. Good-night.”

“Good-night, monsieur, and thank you.”

“It’s nothing,” said the smith.

Manon was lighting the lamp in the kitchen when Brent came and put his arm round her.

“I wish we could blow Bibi and that crowd off the face of the earth. I don’t like the idea of leaving you here with those fellows about.”

XLI

In the full blaze of an August afternoon Louis Blanc made Barbe take him up the hill to the Bois du Renard. They had locked up the buvette, and the red-haired girl led Bibi by the hand along the field-path to the wood. Her head shone like a piece of red metal close to the blackness of the man's coat; she had to watch the ground so that Bibi should not stumble.

"My God, but it is hellish to be blind!" he said; "I cannot even see you, you know."

She helped him over an old, fallen trench at the edge of the wood, and in crossing it he slipped and fell against her. They stood, clinging together on the edge of the rotten bank; but Barbe had a body like steel, and she held the man on his feet with his head resting against her bosom. They remained thus for a moment, Bibi's face flat against her red blouse as though he were burying his face in an armful of flowers.

"Ah, but you smell good."

He took great breaths of her, holding her close, and pressing her body to his till it was curved like a bow.

"Do you want to break me, you great rough?"

She was delighted, a sensuous cat, her eyes half closed, her chin resting on the crown of Bibi's head.

"There is something left in life after all. Let us sit down in the shade."

"Anywhere?"

"No. I want to be where I could see all Beaucourt like a meal laid out on a table."

She chose a shady place for him at the foot of a beech tree, spreading out her skirt and making him sit on it. From the Bois du Renard it was possible to see the whole of Beaucourt and the fields and woods lying about it in the broad August sunshine. Bibi sat with his knees drawn up and his elbows resting on them. Barbe let her right arm lie across his shoulders.

"There it is," she said; "I can even see little Crapaud putting new tiles on the factory roof."

Bibi moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Tell me all about it, just as though you were painting a picture."

She humoured him, describing Beaucourt and all that she could see happening in Beaucourt, using that brisk and satirical slang of hers, the language of the comptoir.

"There is the church with half its spire knocked off, and, I suppose, inside of it old Lefèbre is splashing whitewash about. The post-office in the Place—just like a flat grey louse crawling up to have a bite at the church! Someone is walking about in the ruins of your hotel."

"Yes, my hotel! Who is it?"

"It's too far off for me to see, but he has a basket, and seems to be picking up bricks."

"My bricks! Well, it doesn't matter. Go on."

"Half-way down the Rue de Picardie a peasant is lying flat on the roof of a house. He has a white patch on the seat of his trousers, as though the curé had given him a smack with his whitewash brush. Then we come to the café. I can see the café quite plainly."

"We will stay there a moment. What is happening at the café?"

"A woman is hanging out linen on a line in the orchard."

"That's a waste of time—when we are going to dirty it for them."

"Oh—yes—and I can see the man. He is standing on a ladder doing something to the new sign-board."

"More waste of time. We shall drop a bomb on them next Sunday."

Bibi remained silent for a while, his blind face like a grotesque gargoyle spewing hatred over the house of his enemy. Barbe watched him out of the corners of her eyes, her arm resting upon his shoulders. She knew that some plan was forming in his mind, and, though he had thrown out nothing but hints to her, she was ready to help her man.

"What happens on Sunday?"

He turned his blind eyes to her.

"You are not going to cut my hair—like that woman in the Bible."

She answered sharply.

"You can't get on without me. Isn't that so?"

He put an arm round her.

"That's the truth. You know how to mix the drinks."

"So that is to be my job?"

"I want all of them mad on Sunday. I shall want old Cordonnier well fuddled and in a state to swear anything. What's the best stuff for it?"

She reflected, leaning her chin on the palm of her hand.

"There is that jar of cognac. It is fiery stuff. I could mix it with the wine. What are you going to do?"

"I keep that card up my sleeve."

"You must tell me," she said; "I shan't give you away."

He drew her head close to his face, and whispered in her ear.

"The man is a Boche. Now do you see light?"

Neither Manon nor Paul had any suspicion that danger was so near to them, nor guessed that they were to be made the victims of a drunken mob. Quiet people do not foresee such catastrophes, nor is happiness a window that opens upon tragedy. The very house they had rebuilt lulled them like a cradle. It was so very precious, so much a portion of their human selves that it shared that immortality that seems part of us when we love. The wholesomeness of the place was unassailable.

Moreover, Paul Brent's mood of pessimism and self-distrust had passed. To share a secret with a friend is to halve the burden of it, and Lefèbre was more than a friend. He and Durand were at the café early on the morning after Paul and Manon's visit to the sacristy. They sat in Manon's kitchen, with the doors and windows closed, and talked the affair over from end to end.

Durand had pretended to be scandalized.

"My favourite Frenchman turning out English! A nice game you have played with us!"

"I am very sorry, monsieur."

"Well, well, don't look so miserable. The war has turned the world upside down, and after all—it is this that counts."

He looked round Manon's kitchen.

"We ought to judge a man by what he does. A simple rule of life and how rarely we follow it! Now, then—it is for us to provide this Englishman with a French character."

He smiled at Lefèbre. There appeared to be some secret between them, some dramatic and very human dénouement that they guarded like a couple of sentimental old men.

"It should not be difficult," said the priest.

Anatole turned to Manon.

"Monsieur Lefèbre and I are going to Amiens on Saturday. We have business there—a deputation, a meeting upon the devastated regions. I can

interest a friend or two in his little romance; what is more, we will approach the English authorities. If we give this rogue here a passport it will make things so much simpler."

Manon slipped across the room and kissed him.

"I do not think they can be very hard on us."

"My dear, I had better take you with me to see some English colonel with a red band round his hat. Feminine influence, you know! If you put your arms round his neck——!"

"You can tease me as much as you like, both of you, for I love you both."

"Lefèbre," said the manufacturer, "this house is becoming dangerous."

It was Anatole Durand who advised them to send for Marie Castener from Ste. Claire, and to arrange for her to stay with them in Beaucourt during the next few weeks. He pointed out that Brent would have to go to England, be released by the authorities, and return with the necessary legal proofs of his identity. Meanwhile Marie would be the very woman to help Manon in the house. She was so solid, so imperturbable, such a good friend, quite as capable as a man of dealing with men.

"If any of Goblet's fellows stroll round here, Marie would only have to stand in the doorway."

Durand lent her his car and drove Manon over to Ste. Claire. Marie was willing to come to Beaucourt, and she accepted Manon's confession with her usual phlegmatic reasonableness.

"A good man is the same everywhere. You can trust me to keep your secret."

"It will not be a secret long."

"So much the better. For myself I always prefer to tell people before they find out. But that man of yours is clever; he took us all in."

"Well, I helped him," said Manon.

Marie Castener was to come to them on the Saturday. Etienne would drive her over in the gig, for Etienne wanted to see how things were going at Beaucourt. There were people who called it the "miraculous village," and she smiled shrewdly at Anatole Durand.

"Monsieur is a wizard."

Durand, looking happy, shrugged off the compliment.

"Everybody has worked hard. We are so proud of Beaucourt that we have asked a very great man to come and see it. But I am giving away

secrets. I am very glad that you are coming to look after Manon, madame."

"I have always found Manon very well able to look after herself, monsieur. But then—I am—solid."

A man whose hands are well occupied is not, as a rule, a man of moods, and yet a quite unexplainable sadness took possession of Paul Brent on that Friday evening before the coming of Marie Castener. It was the last evening that he and Manon were to spend alone before the uncertain days that would follow his surrender to some English Provost-marshal. Paul had become resigned to the idea of surrender; it was his penance before his marriage, the only path by which he could come back to Manon with no lie in his heart. It was the thought of leaving her that troubled him, and gave an edge of pain to his tenderness. He was astonished to find how deeply this new life of his had rooted itself in Beaucourt; England mattered to him hardly at all.

"It is the woman," he said to himself; "it is the woman who matters."

As they sat at supper Manon became aware of his silence. She noticed that his eyes wandered about the room, this room that had seen the beginnings of the adventure, the defeat of Bibi, the exultation of their first embrace. She saw Paul look at the pictures on the walls, the new curtains, the bowl of asters on the table by the window, Philosophe asleep on the rug by the stove. This familiar room was pleasantly and wholesomely complete. It was home.

"Yes, without you it would never have happened," she said.

He looked at her across the table with the tenderness of a grown man whose love is far deeper than the romantic devotion of a boy.

"It makes me miserable to think of leaving it."

She stretched out a hand and let it rest on his.

"But you will come back very soon. I have a feeling that they will not do anything very terrible to you, and Marie and I can carry on."

Dusk was falling. They did not light the lamp, but went out like lovers into the orchard and watched the moon coming up huge and solemn in a cloudless sky. It was one of those perfect summer nights, very gentle and still, when you can fancy that you can hear the dew falling out of the silent sky. Holding hands they wandered down to the stream and followed its flickering movements in the moonlight, walking close to the poplars and the old pollarded willows. The trees were silent as death. There were no fences here, and the meadows seemed to stretch into the illimitable moonlight.

"How peaceful it is."

She slipped into the hollow of his arm, her head on his shoulder.

“It is so good to be able to trust a man. Do you not know what that means to me?”

“I know that nothing matters to me—but you.”

They stood close to the trunk of a white poplar, and kissed.

“You belong here now, mon chéri. You are sure that you will never be home-sick for England?”

Brent looked at the moon.

“It is like this,” he said; “a man learns what life can give him, and what he wants life to give him. The things that matter—the simple, happy, restful things! You may run all over the world looking for something you left in your own village. When you are young you are always wanting the apples on the other side of the wall. I’m not like that—now—thank God!”

She stretched out a hand and touched the trunk of the great poplar.

“Trees are so wise. They stay in the same place, it is true, but they grow; they see the great fields and the good, wise life of the fields. They feel the wind, and see the sky and the moon and the stars, and hear the water running through the meadows. Mon mari, I think we are going to be very happy here, you and I.”

XLII

SUNDAY came as a day of great heat, sultry and oppressive. There was thunder in the air, and Beaucourt did not go out to work in the fields, but remained at home sitting in the shade, or lazily busy in its gardens. At noon there was hardly a soul to be seen in the streets, and for an hour no one passed down the Rue de Bonnière save old Prosper Cordonnier, loping long-legged and guiltily to Bibi's buvette. The hut among the apple trees above the factory was the one live, noisy spot in Beaucourt. The hut itself was like a baker's oven, and the men lay about on the grass under the orchard trees and under an awning that Bibi had put up. Barbe was kept busy serving them with drink, for it was a thirsty and quarrelsome day, a day when men's tempers feel the great heat.

As Anatole Durand said, after the event had happened, "What a confession—that so much trouble should be caused by a bottle of cognac, a drunken 'sheep's head'—and a few lies!" Yet Bibi's plan was so simple and so dangerously human because it appealed to the baser passions. Given sufficient cognac, a fuddled and persuadable fool like old Cordonnier, and one stark audacious lie, and the machine would move. It happened that there was ample cognac; Cordonnier became valiant and obstinate in his silliness; and Bibi's lie had all the assurance and the completeness of the truth. The Café de la Victoire was a bonfire to which these rowdies were to put a match.

Bibi handled the affair very cleverly. He sat on a stool, under the awning, and twitted Pompom Crapaud and Ledoux with the repulse that they had suffered at the hands of Paul and Manon. He was playful and sardonic, and as potent for evil as the cognac with which Barbe had drugged the wine.

"Those capitalist swine," snarled Ledoux, with eyes that looked inflamed.

"Well, you funked it, old man," said Crapaud; "the fellow put me out all right, and you stood by and watched."

Ledoux was lying close to Bibi's stool, and Louis Blanc bent over him with ironical playfulness.

"Did you ever bayonet a Boche, Lazare?"

"Plenty of them."

“So did I. I was rather good with the toasting-fork. But I never ran away from a Boche.”

Ledoux looked at him fiercely.

“Is that a cut at me?”

“Well, you let a Boche throw your pal into the street. Ask old Cordonnier over there.”

That is how it began. Bibi had the whole crowd round him, and old Cordonnier was swearing to all sorts of things with nods and winks that were meant to be cunning. He was too fuddled to realize the seriousness of the affair or to understand whither these men’s passions were tending. It seemed no more than a riotous and irresponsible jest invented to make the day merry.

It was so easy to inflame these roughs whose blood and brains had been heated by the stuff Barbe had given them to drink. A mob never reflects. It spills itself like wine out of a split cask and makes straight for the gutter.

Bibi told his tale—the tale that his hatred had thought out in the darkness of those summer days. Cordonnier had given him the idea, and he had elaborated with an ingenuity that made it convincing. He asserted that Manon had remained in Beaucourt after the Germans had occupied it; that she had had an affair with a Boche, that this Boche had “deserted,” and taken her away with him through the lines.

“You see how it worked,” he said. “Women are queer fish, and this woman was infatuated. The fellow may have found out where she had buried her money. Everything was upside down just then; the ‘front’ was a sieve, and this Boche was fed up. He gets Manon through the lines, and is taken prisoner. After the armistice he escapes, and where does he make for? Beaucourt, of course. He knows that he will find the money and the woman there. A useful fellow, too, who can use his hands and speak French like a Frenchman! And there they are in Beaucourt with the best house in the place. A nice pair, what!”

There was a confusion of angry and excited voices.

“A Boche!”

“But I say, old man, it doesn’t sound possible!”

Bibi held up a fist.

“Listen. Cordonnier there heard the man talking German. When he told me that, I thought I would try it myself, and one night I got Mademoiselle Barbe to put me under their window. When a man is shut up in a house with a woman, does he talk German just for the fun of it?”

"You heard him?"

"I did. And I can tell you my blood felt hot; it made me think of those nights when one heard the swine talking in the trenches."

It was Lazare Ledoux who jumped up and called for a crusade. He was the torch-bearer, the inflamer of mobs.

"Come on! We'll cut the woman's hair off, and kick the fellow into the street. Come on!"

At the Café de la Victoire the peaceful details of an idle summer day were proofs of how little this storm-burst was expected. Manon had run down to Mère Vitry's with a few lettuces and a basket of beans, and had stayed chatting with the old lady. Marie Castener was washing up the dishes. Brent, in his shirt-sleeves, had pulled the arm-chair to the open window, and was lighting a pipe before sitting down to read a day-old copy of *Le Petit Journal*. Someone was splitting firewood in a barn across the way, and the steady chunk-chunk of the hatchet was almost as rhythmic as the ticking of a big clock.

Brent had begun to read an article on the coal problem in France, an article that contained some very bitter criticism of the British miner, when an unusual and yet familiar sound drew his attention from the paper. Back in his brain were many memories, sense impressions left by the war, and this particular sound reminded him of a company of infantry marching into its village billets. There was the unforgettable pounding of heavy boots on the pavé, and yet this noise was different. Troops marched in step. This footwork belonged to the undisciplined and scrambling rush of a crowd.

Paul turned in his chair and, leaning sideways, looked along the street. He remained quite motionless for some seconds, staring at this little mob of men debouching from the Rue Romaine. The two leading figures gave Brent the first hint of how the coming of this crowd might be a threat to the Café de la Victoire. Lazare Ledoux had blind Bibi by the hand, a Bibi whose face looked white and fatal beside the inflamed faces of the other men.

Brent stood up. His jaw and mouth seemed to set into hard, bleak lines as he saw the wild eyes of these men turned towards the house. Lazare Ledoux caught sight of him standing at the open window, and Ledoux's mouth became a red-edged splodge of howling blackness.

"Voilà le Boche!"

The crowd howled in chorus, and Brent felt the cold hand of fear run its fingers down his spine. He had heard that human and bestial sound before when a company of drunken Bavarians had rushed over to raid a front-line trench. The courage in him had felt brittle as glass, and yet as hard. But now

he was conscious of a swift and desperate coolness, an instant's lucidity of thought between spasms of pain.

He went quickly to the door, opened it, and stood facing the crowd, and from the moment that he looked into the wild faces of these men who hung at Bibi's flanks Brent knew that the mob-horror was upon him. There was no reason in those eyes—nothing in these furious men to which he could appeal. He had a glimpse of Bibi's teeth flashing white in his black beard, and then he shut the door on them and shot the bolts.

"Fetch him out!"

"We want the woman."

Marie was standing in the passage, her face like a great round wondering moon.

"Quick! Get out by the back door, and through the garden. Stop Manon; she mustn't come here."

Marie stared at him, and Paul went to her and pushed her bodily towards the back door.

"They think I'm a Boche. For God's sake go and stop her. I'll keep them interested here."

She went blundering across the yard, and out by the gate leading into the orchard. Crapaud and half a dozen other men just missed the flick of her petticoat round the angle of the wall as they ran into the yard to guard the back door. Brent had closed and bolted it, and Marie got away.

Ledoux and several others had swarmed in through the kitchen window. They came into the passage as Paul sprang for the stairs. He had no weapon, but he turned on them there with the ferocity of an animal driven into a corner.

"What do you want, you devils? I'm an Englishman. Keep clear."

"You are a Boche," shouted Ledoux; "no more tricks. Drag him down, lads, out with him into the street."

XLIII

As Marie Castener turned into the Rue Romaine she heard Bibi shouting like a madman.

"Put me at the door, put me at the door."

They humoured him, and he began to lash at it with his big feet till the flimsy thing broke away from its fastenings and showed the struggling group upon the stairs. Ledoux was leaning against the wall holding his head in his hands; three other men were dragging Brent down the stairs.

Marie Castener panted down the Rue Romaine, waving her hands in the air.

"Mon Dieu—ces hommes!"

For once in her life her phlegm deserted her, and her emotion overflowed her bulk. She was to stop Manon—prevent her returning to the Café de la Victoire—but beyond that her ideas were hazy and uncertain.

Fifty yards down the Rue Romaine she met Manon coming towards her, a Manon who had seen Bibi's mob rush past Mère Vitry's window. With the rush of those fatal figures an equal fear had leapt into her heart. She had hurried out, and here was Marie, stertorous and quaking, and trying to look calm. From that moment Manon knew what was happening at the Café de la Victoire, and that it was her love against the mob.

"They are there?"

Marie spread out her arms.

"Don't go. Paul told me to stop you."

"He told you that!"

She slipped past big Marie as easily as a dog dodges a bull, and began to run towards the corner where the three roads met. Marie Castener turned and lumbered after her, and now that the secret was out she began to use that deep, low voice of hers. Doors were opening, and people pushing their heads out into the street. Marie shouted to them, waving an arm like an Amazon heading a charge.

"Come on, all of you—come on. Help me to save Manon."

When Manon came to the meeting of the roads she saw a sight that she was never likely to forget. A thing that looked like a bundle of torn clothes

was lying in the middle of the street, and Bibi was kicking at it with his heavy boots. There was something grotesquely disgusting in this great blind beast feeling for Paul Brent's body with his feet, trampling and hacking like a blind stallion. The crowd stood round with an animal stupidity that is fascinated by violent physical action.

Manon's face lit up with a white and inward blaze. She picked up a loose cobble-stone and ran forward; a little figure of silence, purposeful and intense. No one in the crowd noticed her until she had opened the circle, that little arena held by certain elemental passions, and had flung her stone full in Bibi's face. It took him between the eyes and laid him on the cobbles.

That physical act of hers dominated the crowd. She stood over Paul's body and looked round at these men, these creatures of a brutal impulse whom strong drink and their passions had inflamed. It was a moment of physical balance, of hesitation, of poignant self-consciousness, when some little act or word turns men back from the smell of the shambles.

"Why did you do it?"

She spoke in a quiet and accusing voice, like a grown child who is unable to understand the ways of rough men.

"He had done nothing to you. He was a good man."

They stood grouped around her, furtively awkward, suddenly self-conscious, and therefore very near to shame. She had turned and was bending over Paul Brent, when Lazare Ledoux, rocking on his heels, shot out a malignant and accusing hand.

"The fellow is a Boche."

She straightened up and faced Ledoux.

"It is a lie."

He grimaced at her.

"I say he is a Boche. And you—a Frenchwoman—have given yourself to a Boche."

Manon did not move. Her eyes looked straight at Ledoux.

"It is a lie. This man is English, and I will prove it. But what have I to do with any of you? Oh, Marie, help me!"

Marie Castener appeared, pushing the men aside as though they were bits of furniture. There were other women with her, a dozen of them, and a few men. Manon was down on her knees with Paul's head in her lap, bending over his grey, dirt-smeared face. He was bleeding from the mouth, and from a bruised wound on the forehead.

“He breathes!”

Marie was down beside her when Ledoux tried to interfere. She turned, and swinging a huge arm, caught him across the face with the back of her hand.

“Get out.”

Two other women pushed him back, and the crowd laughed. Ledoux, looking evil, went round to where Bibi was sitting up, still dazed but potentially dangerous. Ledoux helped him to his feet.

“It was the woman who hit you with a stone. Come on.”

Ledoux was too late, for Beaucourt intervened. It came in force down the Rue de Picardie, led by Philipon, who carried a blacksmith’s hammer. Someone sprang on the side-walk and collared Pompom Crapaud, who was caught at the café doorway with a tin of petroleum and a bunch of straw. The two crowds jostled each other, waiting for some inflammatory word or act that should set them alight, but that faction fight never developed. Philipon’s hammer may have had something to do with it; also, these peasants were quiet fellows; they had the strong bodies and the obstinate blue eyes of the men of the open country. Almost imperceptibly they pushed Goblet’s factory roughs back towards the Rue Romaine, took possession of the central scene, and held it.

Manon was kneeling, body erect, watching Bibi and Ledoux, who had been cut off from their friends. Her eyes met Philipon’s. She pointed.

“Those two.”

Ledoux had been trying to make away, but Bibi held him by the arm.

“Hold on, what’s happening? Is the house alight?”

Ledoux was frightened.

“Look out! The whole village is here, and the women are spiteful.”

“He’s dead, that chap, isn’t he? Whose hand is that? Hallo!”

“Mine!” said Philipon. “You stand where you are, Louis Blanc. And you, too, you dog with the red eyes. Here, look after these two beauties, some of you.”

And suddenly, yet with deliberation, he took Bibi by the beard and held him as a man might hold a goat.

“Yes, you, Louis Blanc, it is not for me to spit in the face of a blind man. Stand still, will you? If there is law in Beaucourt to-day it is the law of my hammer.”

Louis Blanc stood still. He had always been afraid of Philipon, the one man in Beaucourt who was stronger than himself.

Meanwhile, the unconscious figure of Paul Brent and the two kneeling women bending over it held the crowd silent and attentive. Here was a little human scene that had all the helplessness and the inevitableness of tragedy, a man lying dead in a village street, and a woman holding his poor head in her lap. That is how the crowd saw it. They looked at Manon with a shrinking curiosity, a sympathy that was kindly inarticulate. With her hands she was wiping away the dust from Paul's hair, her eyes quite tearless, eyes that seemed to look at a sudden emptiness, a vacancy in life. Paul was not dead, but she believed that he was dying.

Philipon joined them, sombre and gentle.

"How is it with him? How did it happen?"

Manon raised her eyes to his.

"They have kicked him to death. It was Bibi's doing."

She bent over Paul.

"He still breathes. If only we had a doctor! Marie, what shall we do?"

Marie Castener had been passing her big, slow, capable hands over Brent's body. She had felt his heart beating under his torn shirt. Marie kept her head.

"He is not dead—a doctor—that's it! They always say, 'Never pull an unconscious man about.' Josephine, and you, Claire—run into the house for some blankets; pull them off the bed. Has anyone a bicycle?"

"If Anatole were here, he would drive to Amiens for a doctor. He is at Amiens, if he could be met and told."

She raised her head to listen. Philipon, too, was listening with an attentive look on his face, and in that most dramatic moment in the history of Beaucourt the whole crowd seemed to turn instinctively to the opening of the Rue Romaine. They heard the musical bleating of a horn. Someone on the outskirts of the crowd held up a warning arm as the nose of a long grey car slid slowly out of the Rue Romaine. Old Durand's De Dion was following at the tail of the grey car. The crowd edged back. They saw Monsieur Lefèbre standing up in Durand's car, his hand on Anatole's shoulder, his jocund face very stern and troubled. The grey car pushed on until it reached the space about those central figures; it stopped there like some intelligent beast wholly sensible of its own dramatic significance. There were four men in the grey car, and one of them had the white head and the indomitable and unforgettable face of the man who had refused to

see France defeated. It was the “Tiger,” the Father of Victory, Georges Clemenceau.

XLIV

Anatole Durand jumped out of the car and ran towards the group in the middle of the street. His bright eyes saw everything, Bibi and Ledoux held by four men, the figure lying on the cobbles, and the women bending over it, but the most vivid and arrestive thing of all was the white face of Manon.

"Monsieur Anatole, a doctor?"

Durand gave a dramatic jerk of the hands.

"We have one here in the car—Monsieur Lafond!"

A man with a black beard was already leaving the grey car. He was short, compact, square, with alert brown eyes shining behind pince-nez, a figure of good-humour, and of energy, direct yet easy in all its movements. He came forward pulling off his gloves. One of the women threw a folded blanket on the ground beside Paul Brent, and the doctor knelt upon the blanket.

Durand and Lefèbre were talking to Philipon and Marie Castener, and Durand's anger was explosive. He looked across at Bibi and Ledoux, his nostrils inflated, his bright eyes agleam.

"Those dogs! Presently—presently!"

He faced about, and, walking to the grey car with an air of sturdy courage, stood close beside the Father of Victory. And these two old Frenchmen looked each other in the eyes.

"This village of yours, Monsieur Durand, seems a little quarrelsome."

"I am not humiliated, monsieur, but my heart is sore. You will tell me that life is ironical?"

Clemenceau laid a hand on Durand's shoulder.

"My friend, I have always set my teeth. What hurts you hurts me. What has happened?"

In a few jerky sentences Durand gave Georges Clemenceau the pith and soul of this village romance.

"The man who raised the flag here, and was the first to attack the ruins, but then, he had the soul of a peasant, of a worker, a creator; the city eats

and destroys; the countryman grows and harvests. Once again it is the peasant spirit that will save France."

He leant his arms on the door of the car.

"Yet is it not strange, monsieur, that I—a foolish old man—should have chosen this very day to show you the pride of my heart? Perhaps we had grown a little vain here, and Providence sent a few drunken blackguards to chasten us."

Clemenceau was frowning, and his bushy white eyebrows bristled.

"No. The work stands. The quiet men will always thrash the talkers. Is that the house—there?"

He looked intently at the Café de la Victoire.

"Yes—one man's work."

Georges Clemenceau smiled.

"He was very much in love. God forbid that this should end unhappily."

A little human murmur rose from the crowd, a pleasant sound such as animals make when their young run to them for milk. The doctor was smiling behind his glasses, for Brent had opened his eyes. He raised a hand and touched Manon, a Manon whose face had suddenly lost the calm of tragedy and was like broken light, quivering, tenderly shaken. She began to weep—tears of quiet emotion.

"Oh, mon chérie!"

Paul looked up at her and nothing else.

"They have not hurt you?"

"No, no."

The doctor patted her shoulder and continued to watch Brent.

"I do not think he is going to die, madame."

"No, monsieur."

"He has a rib or two broken. We will get him into the house, and I can dress that wound on his head. It is probable that Monsieur Clemenceau will let us send the car back to Amiens for the necessary drugs and dressings. Is there a bed ready?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The doctor got up, and seeing Philipon, instinctively chose him for the work that was to be done.

"It is essential that he should be moved very carefully. I shall want a door, something flat, and four helpers. One has to be cautious when a man

has been kicked about the body."

Anatole Durand rejoined them with a face that beamed.

"There is nothing very serious? No? Monsieur le docteur, I am overjoyed. Well, Paul, my boy, we are going to mend you in five minutes."

He was down on his knees beside Manon.

"My dear, it is your happiness that weeps."

She raised her face to his.

"Monsieur Anatole, almost I am afraid yet to be happy, but I am not afraid of all that must follow."

"The aftermath?"

"Yes, I must speak. Is it true that Monsieur Clemenceau is in that car?"

"Quite true."

"It is an act of God. Will you ask Monsieur Lefèbre to speak to the crowd and tell them to stay here? I shall leave Paul and Marie and the doctor when we have put him to bed. First of all I wish to speak to Monsieur Clemenceau."

"He will listen to you, my dear. We told him your tale to-day, and he understands."

Philipon had found a length of "duck-board" in one of the yards; blankets and coats were spread on it, and Brent lifted gently on to this improvised stretcher. Philipon and three other men carried him into the house, past the smashed green door that showed scars left by Bibi's boots, and into the little room whose window overlooked the garden. He was put to bed there, Monsieur Lafond helping Manon and Philipon, while Marie stood in the doorway and watched.

Paul was aware of a voice speaking to the crowd—the deep and pleasant voice of Monsieur Lefèbre. The curé was standing on the raised path in front of the café, and his massive and impressive head looked the colour of bronze.

"My friends, Madame Latour asks you to remain here. She has something to say to us all, and I—who know the truth—ask you to stay and listen."

The crowd acquiesced. It had no thought of dispersing when the stage was still set, and Monsieur Clemenceau himself descending upon Beaucourt like a god in a car. They had cheered him, and someone had begun to sing the "Marseillaise," all the men standing bare-headed in the August sunshine. Then the crowd resigned itself to interlude, grouping itself in doorways, and

along the raised path, and even sitting on the cobbles. Most of Goblet's men had slipped away, but a few loafed defiantly at the corner of the Rue Romaine. And from that moment it was Anatole Durand who acted as the master of the ceremonies, going briskly to and fro between the Tiger's car and the café. At last he appeared with Manon on his arm. The crowd stirred with a sound like the rustling of leaves when a wind ruffles the hanging boughs of a wood.

They saw Manon and Durand descend the steps at the end of the raised path, and walk towards the grey car. Manon stood close to the running-board of the car, a sturdy little woman with a dignity of her own, her tears gone, her eyes steady and determined. Durand introduced her.

"This is Madame Latour."

Georges Clemenceau removed his hat.

"Madame, Monsieur Durand made you known to me in Amiens. I have been admiring your house of adventure. What can I do for you?"

They understood each other at once, these two.

"Monsieur, I wish you to judge us like a father, myself, my betrothed, and those two men there. I shall speak, and they can answer me. I wish this to be done before all the village, before all those who honour us. I shall tell the truth—the whole truth."

Clemenceau's eyes glimmered under their white eyebrows. He considered Manon, and the heart and the head of him found her good.

"Work heals all wounds," he said, and then, with a smile at this little Frenchwoman, "I am to give you patriarchal justice? What could be better! And the doctor needs my car."

He turned to Durand.

"Let us have some chairs placed on that path in front of the house. Now, madame."

He left the car, followed by his two officials, and mounted the raised path, keeping Manon beside him.

"To begin with," he said, "I must look at this house of yours while Monsieur Durand is arranging the stage for us. It interests me vastly, this house."

He entered the café, pausing to look at the broken door. "A Prussian trick, that!" His round, white head seemed to sink more grimly between his shoulders. Manon had to show him the whole house from cellar to roof, and to give him an account of how they had lived through that adventurous spring. His eyes twinkled, he noticed everything; his interest in all the

human details of the house was simple and intense. Stubbornness and courage appealed to him, and there was courage in every corner of this little provincial home. He saw in it life, inevitable yet miraculous, pushing its way through the ruins. It was a poem in timber and iron, an emotion, a part of the heart of France.

At the foot of the stairs he turned and looked up at Manon.

"He has done well—this man of yours. I will see him presently."

Then he went out into the sunlight and faced the crowd. Five chairs had been set in a row along the raised path, and Georges Clemenceau took the centre chair. On his right sat Lefèbre; on his left Anatole Durand. Manon had the chair next to Durand, Philipon the one on the extreme right. Clemenceau nodded to Durand. Bibi and Ledoux were pushed forward into the open space below the path, and the crowd closed round them. There was silence.

XLV

EVERY man and woman in the crowd watched Georges Clemenceau, for his presence dominated them all. Even the naturalness with which he sat in his chair and looked at them from under his bushy eyebrows seemed part of his greatness, part of his magnificent yet subtle simplicity. They saw in him the man who had held up the sword-arm of France, a man who could be stubborn with the stubbornness of a peasant. That round head of his and that almost feline face had a shrewd and humorous benignity. The Tiger could smile, he could hate, and he could love.

He began to speak to them, leaning back in his chair; his hands resting on his thighs.

"Let me tell you that in the country men do not make speeches; they put their hands to the plough and hoe; that is the eloquence we understand. To-day I came to this village of yours to see if Monsieur Durand had been telling me fairy tales, and I find a little family quarrel going on, and someone has asked me to sit here as the head of the family to decide who is right and who is wrong. At my age—and in these days—the things that are right and good for our country seem so plain and so simple that it is easy for us to judge whether a man is a good citizen or not. The ruins and the very stumps of the dead trees call to us for help. He who builds, he who plants, he who gives his sweat to France, that man is the man whom we honour."

He paused, smiling round at the listening and attentive faces. He was speaking like a peasant to peasants, and he had his hand on their hearts.

"Let me tell you that I have visited many villages. What happens? The people crowd round me; they say: 'Monsieur, when will the Government help us? We have no material. What are we to do? It is sad, it is tragic.' And I say to them, 'Work, children, work. Do not wait for the bureaucrats and for indemnities. The world is a selfish world, and officials do not hurry, but I will hurry them with all the strength that is left to me. Our sufferings are not yet over, but let us suffer a little longer for France. Work; look about you, do not sit still and wait. Clear the ground—gather together what you can; we will see to it that you have food and fuel. During the war we gave blood; now—we must give our sweat.' And they are good people; they see that I cannot promise miracles and they forgive me."

Paul Brent was lying in the little room listening to Monsieur Clemenceau's voice. His face was turned to the window that opened on the garden, and he could see the line of the stone wall and the branches of the lime trees making a broken pattern against the blue of the sky. Beaucourt seemed very silent, extraordinarily silent, and yet Brent knew that nothing but a brick wall separated him from all those people. The street below the Café de la Victoire was as quiet as a court of justice, and the voice of Clemenceau was the voice of a judge.

Marie Castener sat on the chair beside the bed, a big, blond, patient woman, who listened intently to all that the great man said. Now and again she nodded her head and made some comment. "Yes, that's sound sense." "This man gets to the heart of things." "We make our own miracles." "Listen, Manon is speaking."

They heard Manon's voice coming out of that same silence, the profound silence of men and women whose sympathies are challenged by some drama of life that stirs their emotions, their loves, and their hates. They had listened to Clemenceau with stolidity and interest, but when Manon Latour began to speak to them their eyes lit up with living passion. Into the open space where Bibi and Ledoux were standing someone had pushed Pompom Crapaud, and at the sight of this sinister little devil still carrying his tin of petroleum, the crowd uttered its first cry of anger. These peasants looked meaningly at each other. Mouths and eyes hardened. A house had become a sacred object in Beaucourt, and Crapaud had been caught in an act of sacrilege.

Manon was standing beside her chair. The sight of Crapaud angered her as it angered the crowd.

"What had we done to you that you should wish to burn our home?"

Crapaud giggled. He found himself between Bibi and Ledoux and facing Clemenceau, that grim old badger with the white moustache. Fear made him impudent and vicious. He leered up at the blind and sullen face of Louis Blanc, and at the uncertain and flickering eyes of Lazare Ledoux.

"You look cheerful—you two!"

He nudged Bibi with his elbow and was shrugged aside by an angry jerk of Blanc's big body. Bibi was sulky and furious; these "roughs" were of no more use to him.

"Get out!"

Crapaud was jostled against Ledoux, who looked like a great melancholy bird disturbed on its perch. Ledoux was afraid. His red eyes could find nothing pleasant upon which they could come to rest.

“The capitalists have got us, old man!”

“Shut up, you fool.”

Manon had begun to speak, and in that little, quiet room Paul Brent had held out a hand to Marie Castener. Instinctively she drew a motherly chair nearer to the bed.

“Can you hear?”

“Yes; she is telling them everything.”

Paul lay and looked at the blue sky. His body ached; it hurt him to breathe, but he was conscious of a great tranquillity, the contentment of a sick man who surrenders himself and his fate to the care of others.

“I am glad,” he said.

Manon was invisible to them, but her voice and the words that she uttered made her visible to Paul Brent. She was speaking very slowly, and with the naïve persuasiveness of a complete and intimate simplicity. Brent could picture her standing on the raised path in front of her house, rather pale but very determined, looking steadily at these many familiar faces, her eyes as dark as her coal-black hair. She did not hesitate or search for dramatic effect, but told them the tale of her house of adventure—how the English soldier—Paul Brent—had come into her life, how Bibi had grown jealous of their home, and how his brute violence had lost him his sight. She did not attempt to excuse Paul’s concealment of his identity, but she explained it.

“I will tell you,” she said, “how it came about. He had been in an English prison before the war; he had made himself responsible for another man’s rogueries. After the war he did not wish to return to England, but he desired to begin life again as a Frenchman. He came to Beaucourt where he had buried his friend, and here we met again, by chance—for he had billeted himself in my cellar.”

She held the crowd on the most delicate of threads, and instinctively she made haste to strengthen it.

“Many of you will ask me why I trusted him, a man who was a deserter, and almost a stranger to me. I will tell you.

“He had helped me to bury my treasure. When I returned to Beaucourt, it was still there. . . .

“He intended to go away; it was I who asked him to stay. . . .

“He told me the whole truth from the very beginning, and when we realized that we loved each other, and that he wished to marry me and remain in Beaucourt, he told the truth to Messieurs Lefèbre and Durand, and

this very week he was to have surrendered himself to the English in order that our marriage might be honest and clean."

It was Bibi who interrupted her, and it was this very interruption that gave her the inspiration that she needed.

"It is rather late in the day—to marry."

She turned to Bibi with a calm frankness.

"You hear what this man says? I will answer him. Had I given my whole self to my betrothed, would Louis Blanc be the man to accuse me of shame? But it is not so."

She faced the crowd again, with her hands on her bosom.

"Am I stripping myself that justice may be done to the man I love? Why do I love him so much? Because he is not so stupid as most men, because he did not ask me to give him the thing that most men ask for, because I could trust him. He helped to build my house; he helped to make my home; he protected me. We are lovers, yes, but he waited, he held back. Do we love men who are generous and honourable and masters of their own bodies? Or do we worship the animal?—the beast that seizes love by the throat and makes it nothing but a carcass? I stand by the man who has given me the labour of his hands, the man whom I love because he does good things. Have not the war and these ruins made us long for a life that looks happily at children and trees and gardens—the clean linen hanging in the orchard—the steady eyes of the quiet fellow who loves you and works for you? Envy and violence are hateful to me. I ask to be left alone with the man who healed the wounds of my home with the labour of his hands."

She stood in silence, holding out her hands to these peasants, and instantly the crowd rose to her with passionate enthusiasm. She had won them. She had given her heart into their hands, and they offered her their human and simple blessing in return. Philipon the smith was the first to give expression to the emotion that stirred them all. He came to her behind the row of chairs and kissed Manon on the forehead.

"You have shown us your heart, and we see how good it is."

The women were more deeply moved than the men, for only women know what a good man means to a woman. They came crowding round Manon, holding out their hands to her. Old Mère Vitry had tears in her eyes.

"Brave words, my child."

"We believe it all—every word."

"If he is English, what does it matter? He is a good man."

Bibi was there in the midst of them, surrounded by petticoats, furiously silent. His teeth showed in his black beard.

"These cows," he said.

Someone heard him.

"He calls us cows! We women have something to say to him."

Monsieur Lefèbre was on his feet, and his deep and pleasant voice was calling for silence.

"My children, have patience. Let us be just. Monsieur Clemenceau is here to judge; let us leave it to him."

They obeyed Monsieur Lefèbre, and stood waiting for the old man in the chair to speak to them. He had not moved, but sat there like a figure of granite, imperturbable, inexorable. His eyes were fixed on Louis Blanc.

"Let us keep to facts," he began, "the things that all of us can see and understand. Louis Blanc, I am speaking to you."

Bibi raised his blind face defiantly.

"Begin. I am ready."

"You were a soldier?"

"I was a soldier; I have a medal."

"Very good. But when you came back to Beaucourt, what did you do?"

"I wished to rebuild my hotel, but the luck was against me. There was no labour to be had, and these people had thieved the best of the stuff."

Anatole Durand interrupted him.

"That is not true. They took what lay ready to their hands—and they have repaid it."

Clemenceau smiled at Anatole.

"Please leave it to me, monsieur. Now, I ask you, Louis Blanc, did you move a single brick or use your hands to help clearing the ruins?"

"No. It is not my way."

"You are blind, now."

"Yes."

"We have been told how you came by your blindness. Do you deny it?"

Bibi's face was all white and twisted.

"You have their word for it."

"And your violence to-day tells us the truth. If you had no grudge against these people, why did you lie, why did you raise a crowd against

them, why did you try to kill this man?"

Bibi shrugged.

"It can pass," he said, and Clemenceau smiled.

"Now then, when you came to Beaucourt a second time, what did you do?"

"I put up a hut."

"Yes?"

"I sold wine."

"To the peasants?"

"No, to the workmen. I have no use for the cattle."

"You made men drunk—sometimes?"

"It is possible."

"Is it a good thing to make men drunk, to turn them into violent beasts, when there is work to be done?"

"I am not God, monsieur."

"Perhaps that is a blessing!"

"Madame Latour also sells wine, but that is nothing, I suppose! If an angel makes men drunk!——"

"I will ask Beaucourt a question. Has the village been the worse for Madame Latour's wine?"

A number of voices replied to him.

"Never, monsieur, never."

Monsieur Clemenceau had never ceased to watch Louis Blanc, but now he let his eyes wander over the faces of the crowd. For half a minute he remained silent, eyelids half closed, his head sunk between his shoulders. Anatole was holding Manon's arm and whispering something in her ear. Lefèbre looked round at these people of his, and his eyes blessed them.

Clemenceau was speaking again.

"Is there anyone in this crowd who has anything to bring against Madame Latour's partner?"

There was a short silence, but no one spoke.

"Nothing? Is there anyone here who can speak in his favour?"

Half a dozen voices were raised at once.

"Yes, monsieur, he has helped many of us."

"He worked at my chimney."

"He helped me with my roof."

"And mine."

"Without him I could never have got my walls straight."

"He has given us his hands and his head."

Clemenceau nodded. Then he sat up very straight in his chair, and made a sign for them to be silent. His eyes seemed to light up; the colour of them to deepen. His voice had a more ringing and passionate note, the voice of the man who had inspired France.

"My children, it seems to me very simple. Let us look at these two men, and at their lives. On the one hand you have this Englishman who works with his hands, who is ready to help other people, who creates, who restores. Behind me is the house which all of you know so well, a house that was in ruins, but has become alive once more, a home. On the other hand you have this Louis Blanc, a man who destroys, a man who is ready to burn and to kill. What has he done for Beaucourt? Brought envy and anger and drunkenness into it, turned Frenchmen against Frenchmen, taught the religion of violence and of hate. My children, I am no bigot, no Calvinist; sometimes I have hated the so-called good men, and loved the sinners; but in this case my heart and head do not quarrel."

He looked at Bibi, Ledoux and Crapaud.

"Louis Blanc, and you others, have you anything to say to me?"

Bibi folded his arms; he was defiant.

"Nothing."

"And you?"

Lazare Ledoux's eyes could not meet Clemenceau's; he was capable of nothing but mutterings.

"I am a Red. We do not waste words on the shopkeepers."

It is doubtful whether Clemenceau heard him. He had risen from his chair. His eyes flashed; that sturdy figure of his seemed to dilate and to give a sudden impression of immense strength and passion. His right hand shot out as though he was striking a blow; he pointed at Bibi.

"That man is evil; he is a bad Frenchman; I condemn him. Hatred destroys; love builds up. What shall be done with him?"

There were cries from the crowd.

"We will not have him in Beaucourt."

For a moment the street was in an uproar. Clemenceau had beckoned to Manon, and he was speaking to her and to the three men, Lefèbre, Durand

and Philipon. The people saw Manon shaking her head. Philipon interposed, moving that heavy and emphatic jaw of his, and beating the air with his right fist as though spacing out the rhythm of his blunt sentences. No one in the street could hear what he said, but they saw the "Tiger's" face light up.

He patted Philipon on the shoulder.

"Solomon! Let Beaucourt make its own laws and carry them out to-day. But the man has property here?"

"He will sell it," said the smith; "he will be glad to sell it. Yes."

Anatole Durand had brought out his inevitable note-book.

"The site of the hotel and an orchard on the Rue de Bonnière. I will buy the property—at any time. What do you say, Monsieur Lefèbre?"

"This is justice," said the priest; "let us drive out the wolves."

Philipon took the lead in the last act of this village drama. With his hammer over his shoulder he marshalled the crowd in the Rue de Picardie, made them a short speech, and then led them to the Place de l'Eglise. Bibi, Ledoux and Crapaud marched in a bunch in the centre of the crowd, guarded by the men. When they reached the Place de l'Eglise, Philipon called a halt. He saluted the church, and standing on a block of masonry, spoke these words to the people of Beaucourt:

"Here, in the centre of our village, we condemn these men, we cast them out. Let them be accursed. Let them never show their faces again in Beaucourt. Are we agreed?"

The crowd echoed his judgment.

"We cast them out," was the burden of their cry.

They marched on down the Rue de Bonnière to Bibi's buvette among the apple trees, and here the crowd halted again with great orderliness and in silence. A dozen or so of Goblet's men were standing at the factory gate, and three or four were with Barbe in the buvette, but they were cowed, and made no attempt to interfere. Barbe, spitting like a cat, was brought down into the street. The tin of petroleum was taken from Pompom Crapaud, and Philipon, like some inexorable priest offering up a sacrifice, drenched the piled chairs and tables and set the place alight. The buvette blazed, and the crowd stood in silence, watching the flames, and knowing that an act of primitive justice had been done.

"Allons!"

Philipon marshalled them again, with Bibi, the woman and the two men at the head of the column. They moved on along the Bonnière road into the wilderness that was ceasing to be a wilderness, and where Nature and the

hands of men were making the earth fruitful and good. They held on until they reached the dead trees at Les Ormes, and here they cast off Bibi and the others into the calm and acquiescent splendour of a summer twilight.

Philipon stood like a black figure of fate, holding up his hammer.

“Outcasts,” he said, “go and learn to save France elsewhere. Never shall you return to us. We peasants are obstinate. Go.”

XLVI

WHILE the peasants of Beaucourt cast Louis Blanc out into the wilderness, two people were sitting beside Paul Brent's bed, a man and a woman. The man had a despatch box on his knees, and he was using it as a desk upon which to write. The woman was holding Paul's hands, and smiling at him with eyes of tenderness and of tranquillity.

The man who was writing raised his white head. He smiled, and passed the paper to Manon. With their heads together on the pillow they read what Georges Clemenceau had written in that room whose window overlooked the garden.

> "I ask you to be generous to Paul Brent. Let him return to us soon, for I wish to be present at his marriage. He will make a good Frenchman, for he knows how to work.
>
> "GEORGES CLEMENCEAU."

Transcriber's Notes:

Archaic spellings and hyphenation have been retained. Obvious punctuation and typesetting errors have been corrected without note. When discrepancies in spelling occured, majority use has been employed.

[The end of *The House of Adventure* by Warwick Deeping]