PRIVATE SELBY

EDGAR WALLACE

Title: Private Selby
Date of first publication: 1930
Author: Edgar Wallace (1875-1932)
Date first posted: Nov. 21, 2023
Date last updated: Dec. 6, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20231129

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

POPULAR NOVELS

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

PUBLISHED BY

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED

In various editions

SANDERS OF THE RIVER
BONES
BOSAMBO OF THE RIVER
BONES IN LONDON
THE KEEPERS OF THE KING'S PEACE
THE COUNCIL OF JUSTICE
THE PEOPLE OF THE RIVER
DOWN UNDER DONOVAN
PRIVATE SELBY
THE ADMIRABLE CARFEW
THE MAN WHO BOUGHT LONDON
THE JUST MEN OF CORDOVA
THE SECRET HOUSE
KATE PLUS TEN
LIEUTENANT BONES
JACK O' JUDGMENT
THE DAFFODIL MYSTERY
THE NINE BEARS
THE BOOK OF ALL-POWER
MR. JUSTICE MAXELL
THE BOOKS OF BART
THE DARK EYES OF LONDON
CHICK
SANDI THE KING-MAKER
THE THREE OAK MYSTERY
THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE FROG
BLUE HAND
GREY TIMOTHY
A DEBT DISCHARGED
THOSE FOLK OF BULBORO'
THE MAN WHO WAS NOBODY
THE GREEN RUST
THE RIVER OF STARS
THE FOURTH PLAGUE

PRIVATE SELBY

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

Author of "Bones," "The Council of Justice,"
"Sanders of the River," etc.

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

INTRODUCTION

Sitting down calmly to write the story of Dick Selby and all that came to him because of the Brown Lady, his "O.C.," I am terribly tempted to skip what may seem to be the unimportant periods of his life, and go straight to that wonder time of his. But were I to plunge into the heart of my story, and were I to begin my narrative with such a phrase as "This is the story of Selby, who from being a third-rate clerk, became the——" you might well call me to task for the strain I put upon credulity.

If, reading this story, you happen upon improbable combinations of circumstances, unlikely situations, events that stand on the outward rim of your belief, I would ask you to remember that Dick Selby had up to this time lived a most ordinary life. If the Brown Lady, Elise, had been your conventional prune and prism miss, this story would not have been written at all, for I could not bring myself to the recording of such thin romance as a conventional suburban courtship would afford.

I feel, in a degree, like a conjurer who, with pardonable ostentation, shows both sides of the handkerchief to his audience and hands the egg round for their inspection, to prove that all his paraphernalia is ordinary.

My hero, then, was an ordinary young man of the lower middle classes. He had but the dim outlines of an education, and if the Brown Lady had never existed, Dick Selby would have developed into a respectable obscure member of the community. He would have rented a little villa, furnished it on the hire-purchase system, gone to church on Sunday, and brought up, under considerable financial stress, a large family. As for his wife, I can imagine her—pert, with a ready and boisterous laugh, a little *gauche*, and a reader of Miss Corelli's admirable novels.

White Magic there is, wrought by pixies, fairies, elves, and woodland brownies; Black Magic, nearly associated with imps, hobgoblins, witches, and the dark legions of devilry; but it was Brown Magic that took Dick Selby, with his doubts, his unrest, his fume against circumstance, and made him what he eventually was, raising him to a position far higher than his merits alone could have raised him, lifting him so high, indeed, that there was a moment when the world halted momentarily to see what this lodger boy from Friendly Street would do.

This story is not intended to go forth as one founded upon fact: more extraordinary things have happened and will happen than are chronicled here. But if in my desire to show the British soldier at some advantage, I wander into the realms of improbability, it may be counted to my credit that, although I have placed my soldier here in remarkable environments, I have been careful to avoid exaggeration in describing the life of the soldier himself.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This book, originally published in 1912, two years before the outbreak of the Great War, has been widely recognized as one of the most remarkable of the works which foretold a war between Britain and a great Continental power, and there is an extraordinarily close parallelism between the author's previsionings and war-time events as we have since known them. Time and again the reader forgets the prophetic character of the main plot in the convincing identity with subsequent history of much of the detail of this book by an author who foresaw while statesmen still refused to foresee.

Private Selby

CHAPTER I

Probably “Old Cull” Grain would not regard himself as an instrument of a divine Providence. Nor probably would anyone else so regard him. His face was too red, his voice was too big, he kept a greengrocer’s shop in the Deptford High Street, and, moreover, backed horses.

For it is well known by the very best authorities that the messengers and wonder-workers of Providence are of a meek and innocent disposition. Children who reconcile their estranged parents—brown-eyed maidens who bring together tragic lovers—even policemen are to be respected in this capacity; but certainly not red-faced greengrocers and sporting greengrocers to boot.

Dick Selby, passing along High Street, Deptford, one Saturday night in June, came face to face with Old Cull. Times were hard with this boy with the clean-cut face and the strong straight mouth and he was in no mood for Old Cull’s pleasantries.

It wasn’t the fact that he had lost his job—there was another waiting, he knew that—but somewhere down in the unexplored caverns of his mind there was fierce, vague discontent, an indescribable soul nausea, an intangible and irritating restlessness that he could not define or classify.

Old Cull stopped him, standing unsteadily on the edge of the pavement.

The street was alive with people on this summer evening, for this was the marketing hour. The cheap butcher hoarsely and extravagantly extolled his carrion, addressing his customers with gross familiarity, and from the fair-ground just a little way along the street came fitfully the blare of a steam organ.

This was life and gaiety and experience, and the world of Deptford went shuffling by in the thin drizzle of rain, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, soaked in the sense of enjoyment.

“Dick,” said Old Cull gravely, “gorrer good thing.”

“Oh,” said Dick absently.

“Did I tell you ‘Clarabelle’?” demanded Cull aggressively.

“Did you? Yes, I think you did, Cull,” said Dick.

“Didn’t I put you on to ‘The Wash’ when it rolled home at sevens?”

The boy nodded.

“This,” was a long recital. It entailed much explanation—husky, confidential whispering, and holding on to Dick’s shoulder. Worse, it meant Old Cull’s red face thrust into his, and the scent of his vinous breath.

It was about “The Snooker” running at Ascot in the two o’clock race on Tuesday. Old Cull had the tip straight from a publican who knew a man who knew a trainer. This was the straightest, most unbeatable gem that had ever scintillated in the summer sun, the most precious stable secret that tout had ever surprised, or publican (for a consideration) acquired.

“An’, mark me, Dicky,” said Old Cull solemnly, “this is a thing to put your shirt on, to pawn your watch on, to scrape an’ strive to get every penny you can borrow to put on—it’s a blanky snip!”

In making this emphatic pronouncement, Cull Grain played the part of Providence designed for him, and Dick left him and continued his walk slowly and thoughtfully.

A way out?

His heart leapt at the thought.

A way out of Deptford and the humdrum monotony of his work? From Laddo, and the Gills and the Makins, from the Tanner’s Hill lot, and the Creek Road lot!

It was ridiculous, of course, for a cheap clerk to have ambitions. He was not even a clerk: he checked time for Morlands, the contractors; he checked the weight of granite-laden carts, and tested the size of Aberdeen “pitchers.” A board school had turned him loose on to the world with a half-digested education. An island was a piece of land surrounded by water; he knew that. “Was” was a verb, past tense of the verb “to be,” agreeing with its noun in number and person; he knew that. And similar aids to an industrial life were hotch-potched in his mind—a disconnected array of facts.

His father he never remembered, but he had a distinct recollection of his mother’s funeral. He had lived with an aunt till he was able to earn his living, and now he had a tiny room in Friendly Street, with all a lodger’s privileges.

He went over his position as he continued his walk. One half of his brain recounted the situation, whilst the other half speculated upon Old Cull's tip.

Ahead of him, he told himself, was at best a clerkship, a small house in the suburbs. And a wife.

He flushed at the last thought.

The Brown Lady was, of course, a dream lady. A beautiful and fragrant dream that it was impious to associate with marriage, even were such an end possible. The other girl would be of his own class, loud of speech, florid as to dress, with the twang of the street, and the humour and commonplace cant of the gutter. He shrugged his shoulders. The reality must wait: for the moment he had the Brown Lady—nothing could rob him of this fairy vision. Clerk or time-checker, he could still stand on the other side of the street and watch her trip down to the brougham that stood at her door; he could still wait in the shadows, listening to her fresh voice and her rippling little laugh. It was because of her dress that he called her the Brown Lady. She always wore brown. The first time he had ever seen her she was quite a little girl. . . .

"Hullo, Dick!"

It was Laddo, of course. Dick knew the voice and turned to face the youth who had accosted him. Laddo had eyes that quivered. They never looked at you straight. They looked over you and round you, and at your boots, but never directly at you.

Laddo's face was white—a dull, dead white. He wore a satin choker about his throat, and his trousers were cut very tightly fitting indeed.

For Laddo had a reputation in Deptford, an unsavoury one it is true, but there were girls who lived in the vicinity of Creek Road who would, as the saying goes, have "given their heads" to walk with the youth who had once been tried at the Old Bailey, and against whom had been returned a verdict of "Not guilty." This was because of insufficient evidence, and not, as Creek Road was well aware, because Laddo was unconnected with the felony under review.

Dick eyed him grimly. "Well, Laddo, you look spruce."

Laddo grinned and jingled his money musically. "Out of work, ain't ye?" he asked.

Dick nodded. "You never ought to be out of work, Laddo," he said with a touch of irony.

“No,” said the unabashed Laddo, “I did a bit of a job last week.”

Laddo had a mysterious employer; it was reputed that Laddo’s master was a lenient and a powerful one. In criminal circles he was known as “Mr. Fox.”

Laddo looked round. “Here,” he said confidentially, dropping his voice, “you’re a scholar, ain’t you?”

“I can read and write,” Dick smiled.

“Read this for us.”

Laddo thrust the paper forward, then drew it back.

For once he steadied his dancing eyes, peering at Dick with narrowed lids.

“This is between you an’ me—see?” Dick nodded.

“I trust you, Dick, because you’re straight—you wouldn’t give a man away?”

Dick shook his head and took the proffered paper.

“Dear Laddo,” he read. “This comes hoping your al gay as it leaves us at present. The bloke is at 45, there’s a big kerridge drive, also brass plate on door, so you can’t miss it. So look round an’ see him, then you’ll know how it lays. Monday night, don’t forget, so no more at present, Inkey.”

“Monday night, eh?” repeated Laddo musingly.

“No. 45—big carriage drive—brass plate on door,” mentally noted Dick, with a perplexed frown.

In some manner these landmarks were familiar to him.

Then suddenly his heart gave a leap, and he breathed quickly, for he remembered a No. 45: it was the house of the Brown Lady, and curiously enough there was a carriage drive and a brass plate on the door.

CHAPTER II

At 400, Friendly Street, lived Hampson, plasterer. A curious name, yet genuine, if one might believe the painted name over the parlour window.

The bills, too, which he was wont in prosperous times to send out, were headed "Dr. to Hampson, Plasterer." The words were printed in large type, with a picture of a swallow on the wing (added by the artistic printer) as a subtle suggestion of Mr. Hampson's decorative ability.

The Hampsons were at supper when Dick reached home. They supped in state in the kitchen, Mr. Hampson in his shirt sleeves, Mrs. Hampson in her stockinged feet, for her Saturday night boots were just a little tight, and Miss Hampson in the undiscarded finery that had accompanied her that evening to the theatre.

Dick declined the invitation to the feast. Mounting the stairs to his little bedroom he lit the paraffin lamp, and sat down to unlace his boots. Facing him was a crayon enlargement of Mr. Hampson's father, and over the washstand was a text-card, "Blessed are the pure in heart" (and, in slightly smaller letters, "Printed in Holland"). There was an almanac with a text for every day in the year, and on the mantelshelf, between the two china ornaments, his little stock of books. He regarded them ruefully. Smiles' *Self-help*: the author's name suggested sardonic merriment at the efforts of the ambitious underling. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*: a literary young man had suggested this, but it bored Dick to extinction. *How to Become an Author* (2*s.* 6*d.*): there were excellent notes on the correction of proofs, but, somehow, nobody wanted proofs corrected, so the half-crown had been wasted.

He sat on the edge of the bed thinking. Laddo . . . Perhaps it wasn't the house, after all—perhaps it was a genuine job, and there was nothing sinister in the suggestion . . . but Laddo was keen on extracting a promise of secrecy. Old Cull, too. He had given him tips before, and they had "come off": sums varying in size from 3*s.* to 12*s.* had come as a result. Suppose "The Snooker" won, and suppose he raked together a couple of pounds, or even three, and it won at twenty to one! You can get to Canada for a few pounds and buy a piece of land for a song; build a hut, perhaps find gold, and make a fortune. Three pounds at twenty to one would produce £60 and your £3 back. Total, £63.

Thus he mused as he slowly prepared for bed.

He might cut himself adrift from the Laddos and the Gills, though he liked Chimmy Gill well enough. He might shake off the oppressive sameness of life, and side-slip violently out of a most appalling groove.

He blew out the light and huddled into bed, the little alarum-clock upon the mantelpiece ticking noisily.

Men have risen from the gutter to the very highest places in the land, but they started fair. They never drifted into the doldrums of respectability. They never pottered their Saturday afternoons away in slug-infested suburban gardens. They did tremendous things, such things as going to New York and landing without a copper . . . how many years might a man have to work before he acquired a fortune . . . and would he find the Brown Lady when he came back? . . . he dozed.

He had been sleeping for an hour when he suddenly awoke.

His room faced the street and he must have heard the pattering of feet and the shrill whistle.

He leapt out of bed and threw open the window as the two policemen came panting up. They caught sight of his face.

"Did you see him?" they gasped.

"Who?"

"A young feller—he couldn't have got away. He's in the street somewhere. How do these houses run? What is at the back?"

Dick thought.

"There's a narrow passage at the back; it leads from the stables at the corner," he reported.

"Get up and show us the way," said one of the policemen brusquely.

Other feet came running along the street, and Dick caught a glimpse of helmets.

He hurried into his clothes, put on a pair of slippers, came down softly, and opened the door. Mr. and Mrs. Hampson slept at the back of the house, and were apparently undisturbed.

As he came into the street he heard the constable reporting to a belated inspector.

“We took all but two, sir. One got clean away and the other we followed here—a bit of a boy, he was. He must have nipped over the stable gate and got round the back of these houses—hallo! here’s the man who can tell us.”

In a few words Dick described the topography of the place. He found himself doing this regretfully. His training, his associations, his whole life urged him to a view of the case that favoured the criminal.

It was a “Snide factory” that the police had raided—a big counterfeiting establishment near Church Street, and the haul had been complete, except for the two who had escaped. This much he learnt from the comments of the policemen.

Suddenly . . .

“See here, my lad,” said the inspector briskly, “whilst a couple of my men get over the stable gate, you go quietly through the back-yard and peep into the passage. I suppose there’s a door leading into it.”

“Yes, sir,” said Dick.

“Off you go, then,” said the inspector, “he’s only a little fellow; he won’t eat you, if he’s there.”

Dick reluctantly obeyed.

Tiptoeing his way, he passed through the tiny kitchen, with the remnants of the night’s supper still littering the table, softly unbolted the fowl-yard door and stepped into the darkness of the “garden.” He felt his way along by the fowl-house until his fingers touched the rusty bolt of the back gate, and with a heart that beat noisily he slipped it back. Suppose it was Laddo, or any of his “friends”! They were connected with some shady business or other—of that he was sure. He could not give them away.

He stepped cautiously into the inky blackness of the narrow passage-way, and at the end of the block he could hear the policemen noisily scaling the stable gate.

Then he saw something. A crouching form at his very feet; he reached down, and roughly seized it.

“Oh, please, please!” whispered a voice.

“Come in here!”

Dick pulled his captive into the yard, and carefully bolted the gate again.

“You little fool,” he muttered, for the boy in his hands was little better than a child, and Dick was bitterly angry at the folly and uselessness, and the waste of it all. He couldn’t hand this kid to the police. Had it been Laddo, or one of the “boys,” he might have got the better of his distaste for bringing a criminal to justice, but this was a child.

“Step softly,” he whispered, as he led the way through the kitchen. “Now go up those stairs, to the front room, and wait till I come.”

He joined the waiting policemen at the door.

“Seen anything?” demanded the inspector.

“No,” lied Dick promptly, and the officer seemed annoyed.

“Have you got any eyes?” he demanded querulously.

“I used to have,” retorted Dick, “but I haven’t seen ’em lately.”

“You’re impertinent, my lad,” and just then the men who had scoured the passage returned with news of their failure.

Dick waited until the police had gone, then slowly ascended to his room, pondering on a line of action.

But for the disturbance he would create, a sound thrashing suggested itself for the erring youth above; it might reform him.

Dick opened the door of his room, and closed it behind him.

“Now, young fellow,” he whispered fiercely, “what do you mean by getting yourself into this bother?”

Only a stifled sob answered him.

“Oh, it’s no good you snivelling,” said the irritated Dick, “get out of the way whilst I light the lamp.”

“No, no!” implored the boy, in a terrified whisper, “they—they will see outside.”

“Don’t be silly; the blinds are down,” said Dick gruffly.

“Don’t light the lamp,” whispered the other. “I’m—I’m ashamed of myself, sir—I don’t want you to see me.”

There was something innately delicate in Dick Selby’s composition, and he softened.

“All right,” he said, and threw himself on to the bed, dressed as he was. “Now, tell me how you got into this business.”

“I’m not,” whispered the boy eagerly. “I’m not in it; I was there when the police came, and ran away. I went because—because——”

Dick waited.

“Because——?” he asked.

“I had to—there was somebody there I wanted to see.”

It sounded very lame, and the worldly wise young man on the bed marked down his visitor as an implausible liar.

“You’d better lie down here for a few hours,” he said coldly. “In the morning I’ll smuggle you out.”

The boy hesitated for a moment.

“You’ll find my overcoat behind the door,” said Dick shortly. “If you don’t care about lying on the bed, you can lie on the floor.”

He heard the visitor stretch himself on the rug by the fireplace and shied a pillow in his direction.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he said.

He drew the blanket over himself, and dozed off . . . the dreams that the police whistle had so rudely disturbed came back to him in their serene order . . . £60 to £3 . . . Canada—a log hut and the . . . the Brown Lady with the goldy brown hair, and fearless, grey eyes . . . her sweet mouth.

He sat up suddenly.

“What the devil are you crying about?” he asked savagely.

“It’s—it’s hard here,” said a voice from the floor, with a pitiful catch, “and—and I’m so wretched.”

“Well, come up here, you young fool.”

“Are you coming?” he asked after a pause.

“No,” said the boy.

“Then stay where you are,” said the host callously, “and if you make any more row I’ll get up and smack your head.”

“Brute!” whispered the ungrateful visitor, and Dick grinned in the darkness.

He dozed again, but there came into his dreams a persistent noise like somebody drawing his breath sharply and jerkily.

Dick reached out his hand for the matches, fumbled at them, and dropped them on the floor.

Then impatiently he slipped from the bed and lifted the crying boy up.

There was a curious fragrance hanging about this midnight fugitive—a strange scent of lavender. Dick's hand trembled, and he stooped swiftly and found the matches. He lit one with an unsteady hand. Then he gave a little cry and staggered back, for there stood before him, with tear-stained face and downcast eyes, the Brown Lady of his dreams, her hair falling over the collar of her boy's coat, and her nervous fingers clasping and unclasping in her agitation.

"You—you're very unkind," she said reproachfully, "to strike a light when I asked you not to do it."

"I'm sorry," whispered the youth hoarsely, dropping the match, "I didn't know."

"I should hope you didn't," she said with severity, "or else you would not have been so horridly unfeeling. The floor is very hard. You might have taken the floor yourself and offered me the bed."

He was trying, as they stood in the darkness, to marshal his thoughts; his brain was whirling, whirling, till he felt he must be mad. This was the Brown Lady, he told himself; she lived in a big house in Lewisham; she had a carriage and servants, and was rich. All that part of it was easy enough to remember; it was the other that was so difficult. She was here in a boy's suit —in his room—a fugitive from the police—all this was maddeningly unreal. He was terribly afraid of her, or else why did he tremble so?

"Your name is Selby, isn't it?" she asked, and his heart jumped into his mouth. "I've seen you lots of times, and I asked our gardener to find out your name."

Dick made no reply, and she seemed to expect none; and for the minutes that seemed like the very space of all time there was silence in the room, save for the very aggressive ticking of the little clock.

"I suppose," she went on slowly, "you want to know why—why I am like this?"

"No." He summoned all his courage before he could find his voice, and it sounded oddly like a hoarse squeak.

"Yes, you do," she persisted. "I know you have all kinds of uncharitable thoughts in your mind; you think I'm horrid. But I won't tell you."

“I don’t want to know,” he managed to say.

There was another long pause; then he grew bolder.

“I’m going to take you home,” he said.

“They will see me.”

“No, they won’t,” he said decisively; “I’ll take you a long way round—you can wear my overcoat.”

“Have you—have you——?” she began falteringly. “Have you got a—a skirt or something I could wear?”

“Skirts,” said Dick, with a sudden realization of the humour of the situation, “are not part of my usual equipment. I’m afraid the overcoat is the nearest approach to a lady’s costume I can offer you.”

He put on his coat, and wrapped a muffler round his throat, then he went to the window and took a swift survey of the street.

“You’ll have to take your shoes in your hand,” he warned her.

Together they walked gingerly down the creaking stairs, Dick in a fret of fear lest the Hampsons should wake. He closed the door behind them. The street was deserted. Eastward a grey haze of light indicated the coming dawn. He slipped on his shoes, and the girl followed his example; then they stepped briskly towards Brook Lane.

They went by unaccustomed ways: they took the dark little path that runs alongside the Ravensbourne, and that terminates at Lewisham. Dick knew the house. It was a palatial establishment on Blackheath. He showed the way in silence.

“You walk very fast,” the girl complained, and he muttered some reply.

“You think badly of me, don’t you?” she asked, as they turned to breast the rise of Blackheath Hill.

“I think——” he began, then stopped. He could not tell her what he thought, and so he pressed his lips together more tightly.

They came to the big carriage gate that he knew so well, and they halted.

She put out her hand.

“Good-bye, Mr. Selby,” she said softly. “I am very grateful to you—and—and you have been such a gentleman.”

He did not speak, only took her little hand in his and held it for a moment.

She turned to go, then paused irresolutely.

“Why aren’t you a soldier?” she demanded suddenly.

“A soldier?” stammered Dick.

In the growing dawn she stood, a quaint figure in her boy’s dress. As she nodded, a strand of hair that she had gathered up under her cap fell across her face.

“All men should be soldiers,” she went on gravely.

The idea was revolutionary. It took Dick’s breath away. It was unthinkable. A soldier? Why, a soldier was a person in a red coat, who got drunk, and about whom music hall artistes sang comic songs. From which reflection it may be gathered how perilously near to respectability he had reached.

Then an idea struck him.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Elise,” she answered readily, “but my friends call me——”

She stopped. “Good-bye.” She gave him a whimsical little nod and smile and was gone.

They were crying the news through Deptford when Dick Selby woke the next morning. He heard the voices of the boys with the Sunday papers. “Coining Den in Deptford: Sensational Discovery.”

He dressed hurriedly, and went into the street to buy a newspaper. Would she be mentioned? He read the closely printed columns with feverish haste. No, there was no word of her. Only a string of names, for the most part too familiar, and the story of the escape of “two of the miscreants.”

He smiled a little at this.

He went back to his breakfast, re-reading the story of the raid. The voice of his landlady calling over the stairs roused him.

“Where is your overcoat, Mr. Selby, and whose is this?”

He leapt up the stairs two at a time, and took the thing the smiling woman held in her hand. It was a little gold brooch of a quaint Eastern

design.

He turned it over in his hand, inventing a story to account for its presence in his room.

“Mr. Selby, I do believe you’re walkin’ out!” said the lady of the house, heavily jocose.

Dick let it go at that.

All Sunday he searched for Laddo, and the greater part of Monday. He could afford to postpone his hunt for work for a week, especially if Old Cull’s prediction came true. He had a wild idea of calling on the Brown Lady—the brooch must be given back—but he could not summon up the necessary courage. However, on Monday, returning from a visitation of Laddo’s haunts, he found a neat parcel awaiting him—the overcoat had come back. Pinned to it was a curious note in a neat hand.

It ran:—

“When I am on Blackheath, near the Park entrance, to-morrow afternoon (Tuesday) I shall think of your great kindness. P.S.—At five o’clock.”

This note puzzled Dick Selby, who read into it every meaning but the right one, for he knew nothing whatever of the working of a girl’s mind.

As he read it for the twentieth time he was seized with a brilliant idea. *He* would go to Blackheath at that hour, on that day, and perhaps he would see her!

A brilliant scheme indeed, and one not quite unforeseen by the Lady in Brown.

CHAPTER III

Laddo was standing on the edge of the pavement near the Broadway when arrested. Cowley did the trick, crossing the road, and nodding cheerfully. At the sight of him Laddo's face went white and his lips twitched nervously.

"Cheerio, Laddo," said Cowley brightly, "I want you."

"What for, Mr. Cowley?"

"Oh, lots of things. Just step round to the station with me," said the detective.

"What is it for?" said the other doggedly.

"Smashing and——"

Laddo shot out an arm savagely.

"Take me," he said, and ran.

Cowley picked himself up and two uniformed men caught Laddo, though he fought desperately.

At the station he grew penitent, and was tearfully apologetic to the detective. Mr. Cowley was strangely good-natured, for Laddo was one of a gang that distributed spurious coin of the realm, and although most of them had been captured certain weak points in the available evidence had been pointed out by the Director of Public Prosecutions. So Laddo was treated with a consideration which at once astounded him, and aroused his suspicions. More than this, Mr. Cowley paid him a visit in his cell with the object of making the time pass. When he came out, the Inspector of Blackheath Road Police Station sent a message to Scotland Yard, which was brief and to the point.

"Laddo has turned King's evidence."

"Laddo is taken!" Somebody told the news to Dick, as he walked impatiently up and down the strip of pavement outside New Cross Station. It interested him very little. There were greater happenings that day. Not only was there a chance that he might see the Brown Lady, but he had taken the plunge. Four pounds drawn from the Post Office Savings Bank supplemented by a sovereign he had secured by the pawning of such

superfluous articles as his watch and chain and overcoat, had gone into the hands of an enterprising Middleburg bookmaker.

If "The Snooker" won . . . Canada and the new life. He would tell the Brown Lady everything—his hopes, his plans, his faith, his love. If she would give him one word of encouragement he would succeed.

A boy came blundering up the stairs from the platform, a bundle of pink papers under his arm. Dick bought a copy, and with a sensation of sickness, opened it.

2—0 (off at 2—4).

Longwind	1
Charter's Boy	2
The Snooker	3

He stared at it, read it again. Then dully and mechanically he read the betting beneath:—

"9 to 4 Longwind, 7 to 1 Charter's Boy, 33 to 1 The Snooker."

Five pounds at 33 to 1 would bring £165—but "The Snooker" had not won. Still, if it had won . . . but it hadn't. So that dream was all tumbled, and the money had gone. He was in the rut still, and there was no way out. He saw an everlasting Deptford before him, year upon year of Friendly Street.

It did not seem quite right. He read the paper again. He felt no resentment against Old Cull: the evidence of his bona fides was apparent: "The Snooker" was third.

He folded the paper methodically and walked away. He walked for a long time thinking, not, remarkably enough, of the money he had lost, but of the money he hadn't won.

He found himself climbing a hill; later, he observed half stupidly that he was on Blackheath. There was space here; space to think largely. This was the very place for generous planning. Now if "The Snooker" had won! What fine schemes might not have been evolved hereabouts!

Then he saw the Brown Lady walking slowly to meet him, and he stopped dead. It came to him then why he should be on Blackheath—he had come in the expectation of seeing her. But the downfall of his hopes had dazed him. He felt no pleasure at the meeting: he was conscious only of a dull fear.

“You have come?” she said.

He nodded. Up to that moment he had not regarded her message as an invitation.

She looked very kindly at him. “My brother has got away to France,” she said.

He did not even know that she possessed a brother.

“He was the other,” she said sharply.

She turned and looked across the heath. “We are going to leave here,” she said; “my father——” She paused, then she fixed those eyes of hers on his. “You look like a man in a groove,” she went on, “but not our groove. You may escape from yours because you have no baggage to carry, that is what father always used to say to Tom—my brother. Father was an officer till something happened. Something is always happening,” she added bitterly.

Dick wondered what could possibly happen to a man who lived in a big house, with servants and a brougham, and she must have read his thoughts.

“Father calls me the ‘O.C.’ because I have the worry and the management of it all. It is I who see the process servers and lie to them. I, who arrange for father’s interviews with half the blackguards of London. I who——” She changed the subject abruptly. “Listen,” she said, speaking rapidly, “I can trust you. You wonder how I came to be at the coiners’ when it was raided, why I was in boy’s dress—no, no!” she said, for he was protesting, “let me tell you. I went there because Tom was there, because—because my father was there”—her face was white now—“because we people who live in the fine house are criminals, coiners, forgers, the associates of thieves, using our respectability to cloak our criminal practices.”

“For Heaven’s sake, stop,” he cried, for the anguish in the girl’s face cut him like a knife.

“They took my father this afternoon—some man has turned King’s evidence. They took him because he is ‘Mr. Fox’—the head of——”

She reeled and he caught her.

They had reached an unfrequented part of the heath. Nobody was in sight and he laid her gently upon the grass.

She opened her eyes, and tried to sit up.

“Dick,” she whispered, and the name on her lips thrilled him, “help me out of my groove.”

“If I only could!” he groaned.

“You can, you can,” she said eagerly, “there is a way out for you and for me—we’ve both got a long way down the wrong road. We’ll start all over again. Dad’s gone and Tom’s gone, and the ‘O.C.’ is left without anyone to manage.” She smiled piteously. “Dick Selby, let me make you a man.”

“How—in the Lord’s name, how?” he demanded bitterly.

Before she could reply there was a crash of music behind them and they turned.

It was a gallant sight that held and fascinated them, as they knelt together, hand in hand.

A battalion of infantry, their arms glinting in the sunshine, were swinging back to barracks, behind their band. Ahead of them on a big horse, rode a man, solitary, aloof.

“The O.C.,” she whispered, pointing, “that is the man who makes men—there is the way out, Dick, for you and for me!”

CHAPTER IV

Dick Selby spent his last night of freedom in town. His good landlady paid to the last penny, he had left weeping pitiably; his clothing he had disposed of with no regret. Every debt paid, he found himself with a balance of ten shillings, on the strength of which he engaged a bed for one night at a little temperance hotel in Stamford Street.

He had no fixed plans for the evening, and when, after a modest tea, he began strolling aimlessly along the Strand, amidst the roar of traffic, it was less as the result of definite effort than from a desire to move, move, move in some direction—and think.

There were so many things to think about. The Brown Lady. She had given him the address of an aunt in Plymouth to whom she was going. Her father's conviction was a foregone conclusion; her brother was a fugitive from justice. She was starting afresh as Dick was starting. Ahead was a new and a difficult part, rough-hewn and uneven to their tread, beset by a thousand thorny obstructions—but at the end of the way, though she had not said it in so many words, was a great happiness for them both.

Two infantry men came swinging through the crowd. Dick eyed them curiously and with a new interest. They were very amused about something, and as they passed him he caught a scrap of their talk.

"So Bill sez to the 'O.C.,' 'Beg pardon, sir, I'd like a court-martial . . .' "

A curious thing to be amused about, thought Dick . . . "O.C." He flushed a little. There would be two "O.C.'s" for him—one of them had glorious, calm eyes that searched his very soul.

He watched the soldiers until they had disappeared into the crowd, noticed their erect carriage, and the swing of their shoulders; noticed, too, their well-fitting uniform, and their extraordinary air of independence.

He pursued his walk westward.

There was another man in that part of the world who had chosen a route almost identical with Dick's—only he had an object and a destination in view, and was slouching towards it, with his shoulders hunched, his hands deep in his trousers pockets, and his dancing eyes glancing suspiciously from side to side.

Laddo, released on bail, because of his supreme usefulness, was collecting evidence for the police, and came upon Dick at the corner of Northumberland Avenue.

He eyed Dick suspiciously.

"Hullo! What are yer follerin' me about for?" he asked.

Dick smiled. "Don't talk nonsense, Laddo," he said. "How can I be following you?"—he stopped suddenly—"I thought you were in custody."

Laddo grinned.

"They got the wrong feller, Dick," he lied easily. "They found out that they'd made a mistake."

"Did they? Well, good night." Dick turned away with a nod.

"Here, hold hard." Laddo put his hand on his arm. "You ain't in a hurry, are you?"

Dick was not in a hurry, but he had descended from the clouds to the solid earth with the realization that Laddo represented all that was most mundane.

"Come a little way with me, Dicky," urged Laddo, "there's a boozer round the corner. Oh, I forgot, you don't drink, do you? Well, there's a coffeeshop by Charing Cross."

"I'm afraid——" began Dick.

"I want to tell you something." Laddo was very earnest—for Laddo. "Something that'll do you a bit of good."

Very reluctantly Dick Selby turned his feet in the direction of the Strand.

Laddo did not speak until they found themselves in a deserted corner of the smoking-room of an "ABC."

"Look here, Dick," he began, "I'm on to a big thing. You've heard about me turnin' 'split' on Old Fox? Well, I had to—but perhaps you didn't hear?"

Dick had heard, and nodded.

"He's finished"—Laddo swept Mr. Fox out of existence with a wave of his hand—"done for, so there's no good worryin' about him. But there's other things——"

He paused, and for a minute or two ruminated, as though framing the exact words in which his proposition should be put.

"There's certain people," he said slowly, "who want to help him—in a way. Look here!" he burst forth, bringing his white face closer to Dick's. "Never mind about the old man—see! There's certain other people . . . an' the old man's got friends who'd help them—see? Now, you're a nice, respectable young feller, with a gentlemanly way, so when Oxstead sez to me: 'Can't you set one of your friends to persuade her?' I thought of you."

A light was beginning to dawn on Dick. Out of the disjointed and inconsequent speech of Laddo he constructed the nebulæ of a meaning.

"Go on," he said.

"It's the daughter," said Laddo, speaking rapidly, now he had made his opening. "A rare stunnin' girl—pretty! . . . In a way, but not *my* ways. I've seen her dozens of times up at the old man's house. She treated me like dirt, she did. A rare high-stepper!"

He shook his head in reluctant admiration.

"Oxstead found her to-night, stayin' in a little West End Hotel, an' booked off to-morrow to the West of England; so Oxstead, who's a reg'lar terror with the girls, said, 'No; she ain't goin' to waste herself down in Devonshire'—see me meanin'?"

Laddo smirked knowingly, and Dick went white to the lips. Not trusting himself to speak, he nodded again.

"A fine gel," Laddo resumed, "but not the sort of gel *I* should choose; but Oxstead likes 'em that way," he said vaguely, "an' he's arranged to see her to-night, an' persuade her to stop, so I thought——"

"Who is Oxstead?" asked Dick gruffly.

Laddo opened his eyes in astonishment.

"Oxstead! Not know Oxstead?" Then he remembered that Dick was an outsider. "Oh, Oxstead is quite a gentleman; fur-lined coat, big gold chain, di'mond pin, an' half a dozen di'mond rings—Oxstead's a perfect gentleman."

He shot a sidelong glance at Dick.

"Oxstead thinks she might talk; you see, Oxstead used to go to Mr. Fox's, only nobody knows that except me, an'," he shivered a little, "I ain't likely to split."

"But what does he want with—with her?" asked Dick, his voice scarcely raised above a whisper.

“He’ll do the right thing,” said Laddo righteously. “Oxstead is too much of a gentleman not to do the right thing. He’ll marry her.”

Laddo’s sly smile was very sinister.

“There’s an old woman down Lambeth way who’ll look after her till Oxstead’s ready,” he said, with his death’s-head grin.

All this time Dick’s brain was in a whirl.

“But me,” he said, “you spoke of me. What can I do? Where do I come in?”

Laddo looked round to see if there was a chance of their conversation being overheard.

“You’re a friend of the old man’s—see?” he said, dropping his voice, “an’ a friend of Tom’s, what has always been warnin’ him against his goin’s on; you’re Honest Mike, an’ you persuade her to do the right thing—see?”

“I see,” said Dick between his teeth.

Laddo rose with a thoughtful frown.

“Suppose you meet me in an hour’s time at the corner of St. James’s Square?” he suggested, and Dick nodded.

Outside, Laddo became enthusiastic. “Bein’ straight is a great thing, Dicky,” he said; “that’s why I trust you an’ say things to you I wouldn’t say to anybody else. Do you think you’ll be able to do the trick with her?” he asked with a show of anxiety.

“I think so,” said Dick grimly.

CHAPTER V

Laddo has another name, or had, at one period of his chequered life. In the finger-print department at Scotland Yard, he is docketed as "L. Brown," described as a labourer; but that, of course, is only his *nom-de-guerre*. Just now, Laddo was of especial interest to the C.I.D. men, and as he took his walks abroad, there was, curiously enough, two unconcerned men who found it convenient to move in the same direction.

When Laddo, in his extravagance, hailed a cab, these two men hailed another, and when, through an accident in Piccadilly Circus, they missed him momentarily, they were annoyed. Then catching sight of his cab racing up Regent Street, they followed posthaste, only to discover that they had followed the wrong cab, and were chasing a stout old lady on the way to a lecture at St. James's Hall.

Whilst they swore discreetly—being officers of long service, with a sense of their responsibilities—they philosophically and patiently returned to the place where he had slipped them, and began their quest anew.

In the meantime, Laddo had carried out his object, and at the appointed time, whilst Dick was impatiently walking up and down the deserted pavement of St. James's Square, a cab drove up and Laddo's voice called him urgently.

"Jump in," he said, and Dick obeyed.

They drove at a rapid rate across Trafalgar Square, down the Avenue to the Embankment, across Westminster Bridge, and dived into the maze of Lambeth Walk.

"We'll get out here," said Laddo, and stopped the cab. He paid the driver hastily, and drew Dick into an ill-lighted side street.

"This way," he said, and walked rapidly a little ahead.

They turned and twisted, through streets and alleys, across evil-smelling stable-yards, till they came to a dismal little thoroughfare made up of a score of crazy dwelling-houses, upon which—if you might judge from the boarded windows and general air of desolation that prevailed—the censure of the Borough Engineer had already fallen.

“Here we are.” Laddo knocked at one of the doors and it was immediately opened. There was a whispered conference in the dark hall, and then Laddo beckoned him inside.

“Don’t make a noise,” he whispered, “she’s here.”

Dick’s heart beat fast as the door closed noiselessly behind him, and Laddo’s hand guided him through the darkness.

“There’s a step here,” warned Laddo.

Dick was carefully counting the paces.

Six paces from the door there was a step, two more paces a door on the left. Laddo opened this, and ushered him in.

“Wait a bit, I’ll strike a light,” he whispered.

In a few seconds the rays from a candle showed them the bare interior of the room.

It was in the last stages of dilapidation. It smelt of dampness and neglect. The paper had peeled in places from the wall, a heavy blanket at the window screened the occupants from the observation of inquisitive outsiders, and the furniture consisted mainly of a small deal table and a couple of chairs.

“I’ll bring Oxstead to you,” said Laddo, and left him alone.

Dick stood by the table for five minutes, waiting. From somewhere in the house came a faint murmur of voices, and outside sounded the steady drip, drip of water.

He looked at his coat. There were beads of moisture on it, and he realized that it had been raining. He had time to think, but somehow he could not marshal his thoughts into any kind of sequence. Only, she was here, under this very roof, the Brown Lady from whom he had parted only yesterday.

They had knelt hand in hand and watched the regiment march past, and she had said something—and they had parted.

And when he had left her, he had gone back to find her again on some pretext. He wanted to see her again, to feel the inspiring magic of her presence—but she had gone.

And now she was here! In danger, perhaps. He frowned and bit his lips at the thought of his impotence. What could he do? He might have bought some weapon in the time Laddo had given him, but he had not thought of it.

He was cursing himself for a fool when the handle of the door turned and Laddo came into the room, followed by a man whom Dick instinctively knew was Oxstead.

He was a man of some height, grossly made. Stout of body, heavy in feature, with dull, fish-like eyes, beneath which were little pouches of flesh. His cheeks were red and veined, and a waxed moustache completed the disagreeable impression of flashy smartness.

Laddo had not exaggerated the splendour of his attire. His hat, pushed to the back of his head, was of the glossiest; his fur coat, thrown open to show the immaculate whiteness of his shirt—for he was in evening dress—was of the most opulent description. His hands and his shirt-front blazed with diamonds. He rolled the cigar he was smoking from one corner of his mouth to the other, and surveyed the plainly dressed youth before him with a cold scrutiny.

"This him?" he asked, and his voice was husky and coarse.

Laddo nodded.

"D'ye know 'O.C.'?" demanded the man.

"I have seen her," said Dick quietly.

The big man grunted something.

"You can see her again," he said with an oath, "and just try to knock a little sense into her head, will ye?"

He turned to Laddo.

"This fellow all right?" he queried.

"Yes, Mr. Oxstead," said Laddo eagerly, "as straight as they make 'em."

"H'm."

This was evidently no recommendation, so far as Mr. Oxstead was concerned, and he hesitated.

"If this is any hanky-panky game of yours, Laddo," he said thunderingly, "I'll bash your head in—d'ye hear?"

Laddo shrank back.

"Yes, Mr. Oxstead," he muttered.

"This gel," said Oxstead, turning to Dick, "is a fool. Her father's pinched; an' her brother's as good as pinched; an' all that's in front of her is

damned hard graft. An' I've offered to do the right thing by her, d'ye see? Marry her; an' she says—well, never mind what she says; you try to persuade her—you know the gag?"

Dick nodded.

Oxstead turned to Laddo.

"Where's young Fogg?" he asked.

"I don't know, Mr. Oxstead," said Laddo, who became strangely agitated every time the man spoke to him.

It did not need a great amount of perception on Dick's part to see that of all Laddo's shady connections this was the one of whom he stood in terror.

"I've only just come in, an'——"

"Find out," said the other abruptly, and Laddo disappeared.

"Look here, young man," said Oxstead when Laddo had gone, "I'm going to deal plainly with you. I know all about your straightness! I've met your kind before, an' I dare say you've heard of Oxstead. I don't know what your lay is, an' I don't want to know; but there's a tenner for you if you can kid the girl to do what I want. I ain't afraid of your givin' me away, because it'd be as much as your life's worth."

He thrust his face into Dick's, the better to impress him. "I run this show"—he waved his hand round the unlovely room—"I run Mr. Fox, till Mr. Fox got a bit too sassy, an' then I run him in."

He smiled crookedly at the witticism.

"Now, you're a likely lad, an' you look the part, an'——"

Just then Laddo returned.

"Well?" growled Oxstead.

"Young Fogg, Mr. Oxstead," said the palpitating Laddo, "he's out."

"Out?"

"He found a feller at Waterloo Station, sir—you know?" he nodded mysteriously.

"The soldier?"

"Yes, sir."

Oxstead frowned.

"The last time Fogg 'coshed' a soldier, what did he get?" he asked.

"But this one is all right," interrupted Laddo; "just come back from India with lashins of money—young Fogg saw him in the boozer—handfuls of stuff."

This conversation was Greek to Dick, although he had cause to remember it afterwards. He did not know how complete was the Oxstead organization—an offshoot of that terrible Borough Lot whose infamous record is the blackest in police annals. He did not know that there were lawless gangs, collections of desperate criminals, who, without the theatrical ceremony of oath-taking, were bound together by mutual interests in bonds so strong that the rope and the scaffold were alone strong enough to break them. All was fish that came to their net—the drunken artisan with his hard-earned shillings, the hilarious sailor with his back-pay, the soldier suddenly flush with furlough money, no less than the occasional swell whose pocket-book bulged with bank-notes.

Those ignorant of the underworld of modern Babylon may treat the existence of such organized villains with scepticism, but the police know.

Oxstead pulled his thick underlip thoughtfully.

"You can go," he said suddenly to Laddo.

"Now," turning to Dick, "come with me."

He stopped to blow out the light, and then led the way.

They passed up some stairs, and Dick noticed that they, like the passages, were covered with thick felt, which rendered their ascent almost noiseless.

They reached the landing, and Oxstead turned the handle of the door of what was apparently the front room.

It was lit by one gas jet and was little better furnished than the chamber he had left.

"Here's a friend of your father's, O.C.," announced Oxstead, and the girlish figure that stood by the window, gazing with unseeing eyes into the darkness of the street below, turned a little.

"It is no use——" she began drearily; then stopped as she met the warning look of the visitor.

In that one swift glance Dick conveyed to her all that he wished, and she turned her face away quickly, lest the man who stood looking down at her

should read the wild hope that flamed in her eyes.

"This is a friend of your father's—an' your brother's," Oxstead went on. He seated himself on the edge of the table, swinging his feet. "He's come to persuade you to be a sensible little girl."

She made no answer.

"What have you got to look forward to?" he asked, and flicked the ash from his cigar in disgust. "Work! Servant's work, slavey's work—up in the morning an' light the fire; bread and scrape for breakfast, leavin's for dinner. That's a nice look-out for an officer's daughter!"

"It would be honestly earned," she said, without movement.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"A fat lot of good you'll get out of that. Marry me!" he said suddenly.

"I'd rather die."

Oxstead turned to the silent young man at his side.

"Hear her?" he asked in accents of despair. "I offer her a splendid home; a flat in Maida Vale, everything that money can buy——"

"Why do you persist?" she asked contemptuously. "Marriage! If I did not know that you were already married, the offer would be insult enough."

Oxstead chuckled. "Don't let my bein' married worry you," he said comfortably. "Nobody need know. No; I say marriage, because it's a nicer way of puttin' it——"

The door opened swiftly and a man came in, and stood hesitatingly on the threshold.

"Guv'nor," he began, and Oxstead turned on him with a snarl.

"What d'ye want? What d'ye mean by comin'——"

The man at the door cowered back. His face was damp with perspiration, and drawn and haggard with fear.

"Look!" he said, and held out for inspection a short stick he had in his trembling hand.

Oxstead bent down.

"Blood!" he gasped, and stared at the man.

“I had to do it,” whimpered the man. “He wouldn’t part, an’ showed fight, an’ there was a lot of other soldiers about, so I hit him.”

“Well?” Oxstead breathed the word.

“They’re after me,” said the man; “a dozen of ’em—soldiers. Look!”

He uncovered his head and showed a cut.

“They were usin’ their belts——”

Oxstead reached out a huge hand and caught the man by the throat.

“If you have led them here, Fogg,” he said savagely, shaking his helpless prisoner; “if you have brought ’em here, I’ll break your cursed face, you dog!”

With a quick jerk he flung the man away.

“Get downstairs—quick!” he ordered. “Tell everybody to clear—get away as well as you can.”

“Now, you,” he turned to the girl, “get your hat on. I’ve lost enough time fooling with your damned scruples. You come with me!”

She stood upright, her little hands clenched, facing him. “I will stay here,” she said.

“You will come with me!” and he caught her arm roughly; but the next minute a hand grasped his collar and he was jerked backwards.

“This lady will go with me,” said Dick, a little breathlessly.

“What!”

Dick saw the glitter in the man’s eyes and caught up a chair.

“Stand back,” he said hoarsely, “or I’ll brain you!”

“You!” Oxstead thrust out his under-jaw, and all the animal in him came to the surface. “*You!* Why, you puppy——”

Suddenly, with startling distinctness, there came from the street without a wild burst of singing. It must have been under the very window of the room. Transfixed they stood, the three people in the room, as the words of the song came up.

"Here comes the Rochesters,
A-feelin' fit an' well;
They coopered up the Mahdi,
An' they beat the Boer to hell.
When they clim'ed the hills to Chitral,
On that celebrated bust,
The guides an' the Goorkhas
Couldn't see their feet for dust—
The old jolly Rochesters, they got there fust!"

There was a savageness in the roaring swing of the chorus that whitened even the face of Oxstead.

"The soldiers," he whispered, "they've come after Fogg—they've traced him here."

He made a run forward.

"Stand back!" warned Dick, and brought the chair crashing down.

Oxstead dodged it, and the blow, intended for his head, caught his shoulder and sent him staggering back.

He turned and ran for the door. "Fogg!" he yelled, "Laddo—Grein—Sam!" and Dick heard the thud of their footsteps as they came springing up the felt-covered stairs.

He looked at the girl; she stood with her back to the wall, her face tense, her shining eyes fixed on him.

Then as Oxstead turned and leapt at him, Dick sent his chair through the window.

"Rochesters!" he shouted. "This way, Rochesters!" and he heard an answering roar, and a splintering smash as they forced the door.

The next minute he was grappling on the floor with Oxstead, and though it took all his attention to dodge the blows that were aimed at his face, he became aware that the room was now filled with a mob of brawling men, some of them soldiers. He saw Laddo rush in and the man Fogg; he saw Fogg leaning over him, seeking a grip at his throat—then suddenly Fogg's cruel eyes became vacant—he had been attacked from the rear—and he staggered back and fell. . . .

Oxstead, who had wrenched himself free, dodged a whistling belt that came past his ear, struck blindly at a soldier that opposed his passage, and

sprang down the stairs three at a time. . . . The girl could wait. . . . He ran along the passage into the street, and two men caught him.

"Let go, you fools!" he cried. "I've nothing to do with robbing any soldier—can't you see I'm a gentleman?"

"As to that, Jimmy," said one of the men politely, "I am not in a position to offer an opinion," and something very cold and hard snapped on Oxstead's wrists.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"I should say," said the detective reflectively, "about seven years."

CHAPTER VI

While Mr. Oxstead, steel bands upon his wrists, alternately cursed and implored his captors, Dick, in the room above, stood explaining his position to a group of excited soldiers. The Brown Lady leant motionless against the wall with a white face and lips closed tightly, watching him with eyes that did not leave his face. Later, Dick led his lady forth into the drizzling rain, and hand in hand they walked away, neither speaking.

It was a dream walk, the exact incidents of which Dick cannot remember to this day. Only he knows that he was finding a place of asylum for the Brown Lady, and that by his side walked two jubilant men in scarlet tunics, who talked all the time.

One was a man with face like teak, with grey-blue eyes that twinkled—not like Laddo's twinkled. The other was shorter and stouter, with an absurd little moustache waxed to a point.

"Shorty," said the tall man admiringly, "where did you learn it?"

"Learn what?" asked Shorty complacently.

"That rib hook—it was fine!" He turned to Dick. "Did you notice it?" But Dick was beyond noticing the trivialities of life. If he noticed anything, it was that the little hand in his was warm and damp.

"Shorty got that arm of his to work in a most wonderful way," rhapsodized the tall man.

The little man swelled his chest and fingered his moustache.

"Nothin' worth speakin' about," he said modestly.

"Kosh!" said the big man enthusiastically, "an' over went the feller with the pipeclay dial; kosh! an' down went another!" He stopped as the party reached Waterloo Road.

"You're a swaddy, ain't you?" he asked of a sudden, and Dick started guiltily.

"No," he confessed, and the tall man shook his head reprovingly. As for the short man, he became apoplectic in his righteous wrath.

"Then what the dooce did you mean?" he demanded with great fierceness. "What the dooce did you mean by a-callin' on the Rochesters?"

“Half a mo’,” conciliated the tall soldier. “He’s a fair terror, is old Shorty,” he chuckled, “it’s a word an’ a blow with him.”

“It’s false pretences,” said Shorty, and scowled terribly.

“If you ain’t a soldier,” said Long—for, strangely enough, this was the tall soldier’s name—“we’ve made a slight mistake. Thought you was an officer’s servant in your master’s kit.”

“Civilians pretending to be soldiers!” grumbled Shorty ominously.

Then Dick found his voice. “I am sorry—I am not a soldier—yet. To-morrow I shall offer myself, and if they’ll have me——”

“Some queer things are blowin’ into the Army,” commented Shorty, with bitterness, “an’ I don’t see why you shouldn’t come in, if the wind’s high enough.”

“Shorty’s a bit annoyed,” explained the tall apologist. He looked imploringly at the girl as though begging her to find excuse for his pugnacious friend.

“Annoyed!” interrupted Shorty more fiercely than ever. “Didn’t he lead me to believe that he was a Rochester bloke? Didn’t I break in the door ——?”

“Young Harvey did,” corrected the other soothingly.

“Didn’t I give the feller that was on the stairs a push on the neck?”

“I did,” admitted “long” Long.

“Didn’t I dash into the room an’ see a chap tryin’ to choke this chap, an’ didn’t I cop him a welt?”

“Somebody did I know, Shorty,” soothed his friend. “And I dessay it was you right enough.”

Shorty waggled his head impatiently.

“It’s enough to make a man give up fightin’,” he said bitterly. “What’s the good of a feller bein’ a champion—who’s that?” He looked round suddenly.

A soldier was crossing the road; he was evidently happy. Whatever disappointments, regrets or remorse the world held for others, he was obviously satisfied with life as he found it. He announced the fact loudly in a ribald chorus, faulty as to scansion, but pregnant with philosophy.

"What's the good of kicking up a row
If you've got no work to do . . .
If you can't get work you can't get the sack . . ."

"Bill Blake," announced the tall man approvingly, "an' if there's a military policeman in the vicinity we look like being pinched."

Shorty suddenly became active. He turned to the pair and extended a podgy hand.

"Well, good night," he said with some haste, "all's well that ends well—so long."

"Wait a bit, Shorty," begged the other, "wait for old Bill Blake."

"Never mind about Bill Blake," said Shorty hurriedly, "he's a chap I don't——"

Nevertheless, he waited irresolutely till the musical gentleman came up.

He would have passed on, but at sight of the little man, obviously ill at ease, he stopped dead.

"Shorty?" he said exultantly.

Shorty coughed—an embarrassed cough.

"Shorty, the prize fighter!" said Bill Blake, with an extravagant gesture. "Shorty, the twenty-four-stone under-nine-an'-over-ninety champion of the Rochesters."

He removed his belt with great deliberation.

"I've been waitin' to meet you out, Shorty," he said courteously, "ever since that mem'rable day, as dear old Shakespeare says. I heard tell that you was makin' statements about me bein' a third-class shot."

"A joke's a joke, William," said Shorty, who had suddenly gone pale.

"Although," continued Mr. Blake, loosening the top button of his tunic, "although the support of a widdered mother an' a father more often unemployed than not, I'm goin' to risk——"

It may be that he had not seen the Brown Lady, for she had stood all this time in the shadow. As his good-humoured eyes fell on her, his flow of irony ceased, and he stammered and blushed.

"Excuse me, miss," he said awkwardly, "the fact is"—he buttoned up his tunic and clipped his belt about his waist—"the fact is," he went on

laboriously, “a little joke—Shorty bein’——” His speech ended in a sandy delta of incoherence.

It was Long who made the position plain.

“Goin’ to enlist, are you?” Bill eyed Dick Selby curiously.

“Want a braided jacket and a long sword, I’ll bet.”

Dick shook his head with a smile.

“Want a pair of spurs to clink, an’ a long-faced horse to clean, don’t you?”

“I hardly know what I want,” said Dick ruefully.

“Army Service Corps, him,” suggested Long with gloom. “Clark’s section’s got no spurs, but plenty of money; ‘transports’ get no money, but whips and spurs and tight-fittin’ trousis.”

“The cavalry,” began the truculent Shorty.

“You shut up,” said Mr. Blake, and Shorty smiled feebly.

“What about the artillery?” Bill Blake suggested, “lots of braid, busby, sword and *two* horses.”

“Stables at five a.m.,” said Long gloomily, “whilst the foot crusher is sleepin’ very slothful.”

Dick was a little bewildered at the turn the conversation had taken. He looked at the Brown Lady, but received no encouragement. He did not know that these daring infantry men were testing a future comrade. Testing him with temptation, suppressing their undying faith in *the* arm of the service; crushing down their sinful pride, that the victory might be more complete. He was—though they themselves did not know it—the novice standing before the High Altar, the colour and joy of life faithfully depicted for him by a dispassionate bishop, so that he might know to the fullest extent the attraction of the life he was foregoing.

“Medical staff’s all right,” said Bill dreamily; “quiet kit, cherry facin’s, little red cross, an’ ten shillings a week clear—a gentlemanly corps.” But Dick shook his head.

“Engineers—velvet facin’s an’ all,” Blake went on thoughtfully, “or ordnance corps with broad stripes down your trousis.”

“No,” said Dick. He began to understand the play.

"No?" repeated Bill; "well, there's only one other thing"—there was a simulation of regret in his tones—"that's the foot sloggers. The red coats an' ammunition boots; the marchin', sweatin', toilin' infantry."

Dick did not speak.

"They're all much of a muchness," said the disparaging Blake, "some have kilts, and some have busbies. Some are red, an' a few are green—which looks black. There's a certain corps"—he chose his words carefully, but spoke with an affectation of indifference—"a certain corps by the name of the Rochesters, commonly called the 'Dancing Second' owing to the 2nd Battalion changing step when marchin' past—a curious 'abit. There's no row-mance about us—them, I mean. Everyday soldiers, they are, but there was a time when the old Rochesters was the celebrated corps in the service."

He paused.

"It's a good corps, with a good O.C., but not such a good O.C. as it used to have."

Dick heard a quiet sob at his side. Great tears were rolling down the face of the Brown Lady.

"Once," said Private Blake reminiscently, "there was a little kid that commanded our battalion. Colonel's daughter she was—*he* was a perisher by all accounts and got chucked out of the service. But this little nipper used to be O.C. in the old days—'Officer Commandin',' d'ye see? Used to walk about the parade as if she owned the bloomin' army."

"She did." Long's voice was gruff.

"That's why they sometimes call us 'The Nursemaids,' " Blake continued, "but she's gone——"

"Gone, gone, gone," whispered the Brown Lady, and the men looked their amazement.

"Excuse me, miss," said Blake, and peered into her face. Then he stepped back with a cry.

"By the Lord!" he whispered, "O.C.!"

And he stiffened to attention and saluted, as years ago the Rochesters were wont to salute, half in fun, half in earnest, a little mite of a girl that walked the barrack square at Poona.

CHAPTER VII

The recruiting office at Woolwich is situated in the Artillery Barracks. Was it fortunate or unfortunate for Dick Selby that the carrying out of structural alterations necessitated the removal of the recruiting officer, with his scales, his standard, stethoscope, dot card, and the like, to the Red Barracks?

Walking up and down outside the office, he was at one time distinctly under the impression that the occurrence was unfortunate. For from a score of windows solemn eyes were regarding him. The sentry, standing at ease before the guard-room, surveyed him with an air of possession, and over the whitened panes of the guard-room window helmeted men kept watch.

Worst of all, Bill Blake and Long Long hovered round him incessantly, and in the background, like an obese ghost, flitted Shorty.

On one pretext or another these three passed and repassed with splendid nonchalance, yet flinging scraps of advice and comfort as they passed.

"Had your bath?" said Private Blake, stooping to tie a convenient bootlace; and Dick nodded.

"Had a good breakfast?"

"Yes."

Evidently satisfied that outwardly and inwardly he was prepared for the ordeal, Bill passed on.

Later came Long.

"Don't let 'em put you in the cavalry," he whispered, "nor artillery neither—say 'Rochesters' very plain."

Dick gave a sign of assent.

"Don't let 'em put you off—say 'Rochesters'!"

Shorty, with apprehensive glances to left and right, came with the same advice.

"Tell 'em," he said, in a hoarse, confidential growl, "that you've a brother in the Rochesters. Say he's in the first battalion, an' that you want to serve with him."

Dick began to have some doubts. Was it such a difficult matter to obtain admission to the Army? He had come with no misgivings on the subject. His health was good, and he prided himself upon his education. Subconsciously, he was aware of a sense of condescension towards military men and things. That the Brown Lady should want him to enlist was a remarkable thing; he had not dreamt of acting contrary to her wishes—still, it was remarkable. He brought, therefore, to his attestation, a spirit of superiority, and the mere suggestion that perhaps the Army was not anxious to receive him, set him momentarily in a panic.

He was no snob; his philosophy, crude as it was, admitted even soldiers to equality. He was wrong-viewed and his perspective was a little askew. In the world in which he had lived soldiers were rather looked down upon. His landlady had a son whose portrait adorned a wall of the parlour—a snub-nosed, vacant-faced boy, who parted his hair in the middle, and wore the uniform of the Royal West Kent Regiment. Vaguely, this portrait, with its everlasting smirk and its cheap gold frame, had represented the Army in his mind. He had had visions of line upon line of scarlet-coated, snub-nosed boys gazing vacantly at nothing, and answering to the name of Fred.

"They'll try to kid you that we're full."

Long was back again, his voice sunk to a croak.

"If they ask you to go to the Buffs, say that you'd rather wait till the Rochesters are open."

Yes, this was the Army in a new light. A profession difficult to enter, it would appear. The recruiting officers were conspiring together to keep him from the Rochesters—all this was suggested.

A voice called him—a sharp, metallic, passionless voice, and at the command in it, in the significance of its peremptory tone, he shivered a little.

"Selby!"

He went into the ante-room, bare of furniture, save for two chairs and a table on trestles. A bright fire burnt in a big grate, and there was a folded army blanket in lieu of a hearthrug.

"Strip!" said his director. This man was in blue, with faded red facings. He had on his right arm three crooked stripes and a little red cross. Dick gathered that this was the medical staff man, and that he was a corporal or something. He watched the boy strip. Then he led him through a door to a smaller room. There were two tables covered with documents, a weighing-

machine, an instrument for gauging height, a basin of water with soap and towel, and divers other things that the new recruit did not at first see.

A smartly dressed officer rose as he entered, and came to him. He tapped him scientifically, applied a dangling stethoscope to his breast and back, measured him, and weighed him.

Then there was sight-testing, and a hopping on one leg across the room.

The officer went back to his table.

"All right," was his only comment; and Dick went out to resume his clothing.

Not till the last button was fastened, and he stood in some temerity before the sergeant again, did he learn the verdict.

"You've passed," said the sergeant. "You will appear before the colonel this afternoon. Go out and get some lunch."

Then he remembered something. "What regiment are you enlisting in, Selby?"

"Rochesters, sergeant," said Dick promptly.

The sergeant looked dubious.

"You are big enough for the cavalry," he said.

"I'd rather—much rather——" Dick stammered.

"Rather go into the infantry, eh?"

Dick nodded.

"I think you're wise," said the sergeant, and Dick felt that he had a friend in the enemy's camp. He walked through the barrack gates with fine unconcern, but as he came near to the station, he quickened his steps, for he was on his way to meet the Brown Lady.

She had accompanied him that morning from London, ostensibly to cheer and support him while he underwent his ordeal. But not a cheerful or encouraging word had come from her. They had made the journey in silence, and Dick, stealing a glance at her now and then, had felt disturbed in mind. She had been crying, he thought, and when for some part of the way they had been in the carriage alone, he had longed to take possession of the slim little hand lying on her lap, but had not dared. His one comforting thought on leaving her was that they were to meet again as soon as his examination should be over.

"You've passed, Dick," she said rather than asked. "Then you must come and give me some lunch—or let me give you some."

I believe they ate their first meal together in silence. If this were love-making, if this, indeed, were courtship, surely there never was a stranger one.

After lunch he went with her to the station and put her into the London train.

"Dick," she whispered, as she leaned out of the carriage, "you will be seeing the colonel this afternoon. Dick, you mustn't disappoint me, you are all I have got now."

The train was beginning to move, but he still kept the little brown-gloved hand tightly in his.

"And you are all I have got," he echoed stupidly.

That was all he could bring his lips to say, but the look of worship in his eyes must have satisfied his "O.C.," for she smiled faintly.

"Stand back, there," shouted the guard.

The Brown Lady sank back into her seat and Dick stood with bared head as the train glided out of the station.

On his return to the barracks, Dick had to wait outside an orderly-room for the greater part of an hour, and when he was summoned to the colonel's room he found two officers there. The elder man, with a breast that blazed with medal ribbons, was seated; the younger stood by his side. They were talking as he was ushered in.

"Very sad—very, very sad," said the older man, and shook his head. Then he looked at Dick absently.

"This is the man who wishes to enlist in Ours, sir," said the young officer, and the colonel regarded him with interest.

He picked up a plainly bound book and handed it to the wondering youth. Dick thought that this was a piece of absent-mindedness, and glanced at the title.

"The Bible," he read.

"Very sad," continued the colonel "committed suicide in his cell, did he? To think that he once commanded this battalion!"

The words were not intended for Dick's ear, but suddenly it flashed upon him that the officers were speaking of the Brown Lady's father.

In a moment the meaning of her sadness, her silence was explained; and he stood shocked and dazed.

He had not looked at a paper that morning and he cursed himself for his negligence. She had been in trouble and he had offered her no sympathy: she had been silent and he had not understood her silence.

Her face rose before his mind and he looked with shrinking for a hint of reproach in the grey eyes. But there was none. Instead, they seemed to shine with hope for the future. Her words came back to him: "Dick, you mustn't disappoint me, you are all I have left now."

"And I will not disappoint you," Dick vowed to her mentally. "Whatever you demand of me—that I will pay."

And as he stood there by the table, Bible in hand, he felt himself to be entering upon a new inheritance of personal power that he had never known before. He felt at this moment of insight that the Brown Lady was more himself than himself, and he yielded himself unreservedly to her guiding influence.

Then he became aware that the colonel had risen and had removed his cap. He began to speak, and, as in a dream, Dick listened.

"You, Richard Selby, swear allegiance to His Majesty, his heirs and successors, that you will be a true and obedient servant to His Majesty, his heirs and successors, and to the generals and officers set over you by His Majesty the King, so help you God."

"So help me God," said Dick solemnly, and kissed the book.

CHAPTER VIII

It is a very significant fact that the Princess Marie Henrietta was a topic of conversation in British barrack-rooms.

Royalty and religion, even foreign religions, are topics taboo in the barrack-room. There may be an occasional bet as to the age of some illustrious personage, "pots to pints" as to the relationship of certain sovereigns, but further than that no soldier goes.

That the Princess—they called her Princess though she was already Empress of mid-Europe in defiance of the Salic law—should intrude into the everyday talk of the barracks was therefore a remarkable thing. But it would have been more remarkable if she had not.

For her extraordinary speech to the Oberhaus, her bitter, almost malignant hatred of the Island Kingdom, her militant utterances on each and every opportunity had made her Imperial Highness the most talked of woman in the world.

Even at the little depot at Marlboro', they talked of her and her wonderful soldiers, and when Dick Selby went up to Medway to join the regiment, a fully fledged soldier, he found that the second battalion, newly arrived from Woolwich, talked of little else.

All except Shorty. Shorty welcomed him and impressed upon him the fact that he might consider himself under the special protection of the finest fighter at 11-4 in the regiment. But at the same time, he confessed that outside of pugilism and art he had few interests.

"What you ought to do," said Shorty profoundly, "is to collect cigarette pictures."

Dick was sitting on a bed-cot watching a new recruit fixing his equipment with awkward hands, and rather enjoying that comfortable feeling of superiority which only the soldier with nine months' service can thoroughly appreciate.

"Why cigarette pictures?" he asked idly.

It was the hour between afternoon drill and tea, and the whole room loafed. Some dozed on their cots, others read; one unhappy mortal,

"warned" for guard on the following day, was lugubriously "blancoing" his straps.

"Some fellows," Shorty went on, "go in for photos—aunts, mothers, an' lady friends, but they're too big; besides, if a regiment moves much, they get knocked about takin' 'em down from the wall, an' stickin' 'em up again."

He was on the subject of "bed-cot decoration," and spoke with authority, for Shorty's embellishments were unique, being mainly fistic.

Tom Sayers threatened from the left side, Heenan challenged the world from the right; such lesser lights as "Fitz," Corbett and Jackson adjusted themselves to the exigencies of space.

"In my fighting days," said Shorty modestly, "there was a picture took of me, but it never got into the papers."

The newest recruit paused in his struggle to fold his overcoat to the regulation size, and laughed.

"That's a very good joke of yours, mate," he sniggered, and Shorty, breathing heavily, walked towards him with terrible deliberation.

"Name?" he asked curtly.

"Agget," said the newest recruit.

"Well, Agget," said Shorty, with ominous calm, "you've got to learn a few things."

"Go on, mate!" said the alarmed Agget.

"Don't 'mate' me, you perishin' rooster!" said Shorty fiercely; "an' kindly remember that if you want anythin' you can have it."

"Thank you kindly," said Mr. Agget gratefully, "I'd like a pint of beer."

"If you want or desire," Shorty went on, picking his words carefully, "a short arm jab in the jaw, or one of me patent by-swingers——"

"Pardon me, mate——" protested Mr. Agget, with some evidence of agitation.

"Don't 'mate' me!" thundered Shorty, and fell into a picturesque attitude.

"Hold hard, ole feller!" begged the trembling Agget; "a joke's a joke."

"Come on," invited Shorty.

A voice in the corridor outside gave explicit directions.

"Shorty's in 'B' Room—do you want him, Bill?"

"Yes," said a far-away voice, and the door was pushed open.

"Bill Blake wants you, Shorty."

Shorty became his natural self again.

"What for?" he demanded mildly.

"Come an' see," said the man in the doorway, and Shorty went meekly forth.

"Phew!" Private Agget wiped his brow and looked round the room for sympathy.

"Bit 'ot, ain't he?"

Nobody answered.

"Bit pepper, ain't he?"

Before he could receive confirmation, Shorty was back in the room again, a subdued and tremulous Shorty.

He darted to his cot, searching vainly in box and bag, under his bed, and in the folds of his bed-clothes.

"Who's seen that Sunday paper Bill Blake lent me?"

A wag at the farther end of the room remembered having seen a mythical cat eating something.

"I was takin' particular care of it," fumed Shorty. "Empress Marie——"

"Marie Henrietta?" tentatively corrected Dick.

"Yes—there's a bet on. Jim Wilkey's bet Bill she's married, an' there's a life of her in that . . . Oh, where on earth *is* the paper? Did I lend it to you, Selby?"

But Dick did not answer.

The name of this great lady had set his thoughts straying to a greater.

The Brown Lady had written to him regularly. Every other day came a note from her, containing advice, encouragement, and such scraps of news as might interest him.

These letters were very precious, but they depressed him; and, newly created, there grew an uneasy and a hateful feeling of resentment in his breast. Later, he was to recognize in this—a new-born jealousy. She referred

to people of whom he had not heard, hinted at friendships that he knew he could not share; all these things shaped for the growth of his disquietude.

For in his dreams of her, she was ever lonely, serenely, yet tragically, aloof. No bonds held her to the ruck of humanity, no ties of kinship straggled across his picture.

It was a boy's dream, an absurd idyll, for even angels have uncles, or have had them. Boyish, too, and as absurd and unreasonable, was his disappointment at finding her human.

The insistent voice of Shorty broke in upon his thoughts.

"Selby—a letter for you."

Dick returned to earth with a start.

"Dreamin'?" complained Shorty, holding out the note; "that's three times I've called you."

"I'm sorry."

"Pay a little attention; if you hadn't been a pal of mine I'd have lifted you one in the ear."

He spoke sadly, as one who regretted a lost opportunity.

Dick read the note and flushed. She was coming to see him. Evidently she knew Medway and the country about.

> "I will meet you on the river path at five o'clock. I cannot stay very long because Uncle Frank will expect me back in time for dinner." (Who the dickens was Uncle Frank? he asked himself with a frown.) "I shall be opposite the mill at five o'clock to-morrow."

He glanced at the date: the letter had been written the day previous.

"What is the time?" he asked, springing up.

"Cook-house is just goin'," said Shorty, "four o'clock."

In feverish haste, his mind chaotic with conflicting resolutions, Dick prepared himself to meet her.

She would be impressed . . . he would ask her . . . perhaps he would tell her . . .

So there came swinging along the river path that leads to Medway-on-Medway a smart young soldier. His coat was scarlet, his facings Royal blue, and on each side of his collar he wore the Silver Horse that is the badge of the Rochester Regiment. A little regimental cane was tucked under his arm, and white gloves covered his hands.

The Brown Lady seated on the river-bank and watching the flowing water absently, turned at the sound of his footsteps, and, rising, came towards him with a welcoming smile.

He did not offer his hand; it was noticeable that he did not address her by any name. He stood before her rigidly at attention.

"Why, Dick," she said, "you are a soldier already!" She viewed him critically. "Your belt is very clean—let me see it."

He took it off and handed it to her, and she examined it with an expert's eye.

"The edges are nicely done—did you clean it yourself?" she asked, as she gave it back.

He nodded.

They walked side by side for a little way.

"You think I am a very strange girl," she said.

"I think everything is very strange," he said truthfully. "Nothing seems real."

"Not the Army?"

He shook his head.

"At present it is a dream—you know the kind of dream, where nothing goes quite right, and nothing is actually wrong . . . an uncomfortable dream. . . ."

"Am I real?"

She shot a swift glance at him from under her lashes.

"You are most unreal of all," he said breathlessly, "you are a girl I used to watch getting into a carriage, and I would make up stories about you . . . then I found you in—in my room . . . and then I met you on Blackheath and you told me to be a soldier."

"Is that all?" she asked softly.

He felt suddenly and surprisingly bold. They had strayed from the river, across a little strip of meadow-land, and now they had reached a small copse and the friendly trees screened them from view.

"That's not all," he said, huskily, "there was Oxstead with his—his idea . . . I felt I must kill him because——"

He stammered.

"Yes," she said, quietly, "because——?"

"Because I love you," he muttered doggedly; he had to force the words. "I love you," he said, and his arms went round her.

She raised her pale face to his.

"Is that all?" she whispered, searching his eyes.

"I want you. God knows how much I want you!" he breathed.

He did not kiss her, though her lips were so close to his, as he crushed her against him.

There was some intangible barrier between them, some sheer wall that separated these two lives of theirs.

"I want you, too," she said, and her arm stole round his neck. "Don't you see that, Dick? I want you, dear, but——"

"But?" he questioned dully.

"Not yet—not yet!" she said, pathetically. "Listen, dear, have you ever made things? Moulded and hewn things with your hands? Taken good material and shaped it to your wish?"

He shook his head.

"Then you cannot tell what it is I am doing? Months ago—it seems years —I saw you. You used to wait for me, to watch me. I knew it; everybody knew it—the servants talked of the strange young man who watched the house, and my—my father," she faltered, "and Tom thought you had been sent by the police. But I became interested in you, and saw——"

She could not go on, and Dick stood wondering and abashed at her tears. Though he struggled to grasp the significance of this speech, he could not, only he realized that he was holding her, holding her tightly in his arms, and she was telling him that the time was not yet, that there was a task set him

“You’re a boy,” she said, interrupting his thought, “just a boy, and I want to make you a man. I want to say some day: ‘This is the man I made.’ ”

“But I don’t understand.” He released her and fell back with a perplexed frown. “I thought—you wanted me to be a soldier—and I am. It’s harder than I thought—but you wanted it——”

“I know,” she said gently, “it is hard—what is that?”

Far away an agitated bugle-call shrilled.

“It’s only a call,” he said impatiently, “orderly sergeants or——”

“Listen!”

They stood with bowed heads, waiting.

Again the call went. It was unfamiliar to Dick.

“The assembly,” she whispered, in bewilderment. Well might she be astonished, for the assembly on a spring afternoon meant an extraordinary happening.

So the meeting to which he had looked forward so much, came to an abrupt ending, with a scarlet coat sprinting barrackward along the river path, and the Brown Lady standing where he had left her, much perturbed in mind at the surprising progress of her pupil—for Dick had deliberately kissed her at parting.

CHAPTER IX

I do not blame you if you cannot understand the complications of Army life. There is a secret history to the British Army which has yet to be written. Why do the 9th Middlesex hate and loathe the 5th Hussars? Why have the Ghoorkas such an affection for the 93rd Highlanders? Why are the English Rifles the Ishmaels of the whole Army list with every hand against them?

You may search regimental records in vain for an explanation. The prejudices of the Army are inexplicable.

It is still more difficult to explain the attitude of the Rochesters towards the 1st Barnets. Both regiments are recruited in London, the one from the North, the other from the South. Both have splendid records in the field; neither has any claim to assert its superiority over the other. Never were two regiments balanced so nicely, with less cause for jealousy or envy, yet it is known throughout the Army that when Barnet meets Rochester, there is trouble of the worst possible description.

The Barnets lay at Chatham.

Now Chatham is far enough removed from Medway to engender a feeling of security in the minds of the authorities, though not perhaps sufficiently far away to allay all fear of friction.

So when the provost sergeant on town duty saw some thirty men of the Barnets arrive by train, he smelt trouble. When by the very next train fifty more arrived, most hilarious and insubordinately rude to the Rochester sergeant, he returned to his barracks with great discretion, arriving just before a dusty contingent of a hundred Barnets came into Medway by road, having walked.

Ten minutes after he arrived, a section of men who had been learning the rudiments of signalling on the adjoining hills came through the barrack gates, hurriedly. To be exact, they came running for their lives. Then the gates closed with a clang, and the bugle-call that brought Dick Selby hastily to the river gate sang its warning.

Then it changed its tune and blared out—

> “Come and do your picket, boys, come and do your guard;
> ’Tisn’t very easy, but it isn’t very hard.”

And hurriedly warned men fell into line on the barrack square.

Dick reached his barrack-room in time to hear his name called.

"Selby—Picket," shouted an orderly corporal. "Get your bayonet and fall-in outside."

He read a string of names, and men summoned from the canteen came tumbling into the room, buttoning their jackets as they ran.

"All men not on duty are confined to barracks," read the corporal, and went out at a run.

Two officers crossed the square to the men.

"Officers' picket! Phew!"

Private Blake, on Dick's right hand, whistled softly.

"This means a lot of fellers'll wish they'd never left their barrers in the Mile End Road," he said sagely.

(It is a legend that the Barnets are so recruited.)

The story of the Barnet riot in Medway is now historical. How the pickets fought them up and down High Street. How a party of twenty Barnets held the "Globe and Phœnix" public-house against three pickets for two hours; how the Rochesters stormed the hostelry, wrecking the bar, and, incidentally, a few of the Barnets; how Captain Hill-Feton caught the Barnets by the throat and threw them through the window—all these stories are part and parcel of the Rochesters' unofficial records.

One party of the Barnets were still carrying on a sort of guerilla warfare, dodging up by-streets and falling suddenly upon the smaller pickets as they passed; and to capture or disable these rioters a strong force of Rochesters was organized under the redoubtable Hill-Feton.

Dick was one of the party that fell in for this punitive expedition.

Half the force that had originally been sent out were now receiving treatment from the over-worked hospital staff, Shorty, to the general regret of his many admirers, having been laid low by a mysterious blow.

"There ain't no wound," reported Long Long, with concern; "no cut or nothin'. Pore old Shorty just give a gasp, an' down he went."

"Funk," suggested the uncharitable Private Blake, carefully wrapping a damaged wrist in a grimy handkerchief.

“Don’t say it, Bill,” pleaded the big man. “Don’t say it. I’d have give anythin’ to see ole Shorty puttin’ in his famous left cut, what he outed young Isaacs, of Walworth, with——”

“Bah!” said Private Blake. “Why Shorty’d die if——”

“Silence! Stop those men talking, sergeant.”

“Shorty! Huh!”

It is impossible to reproduce the contempt in Private Blake’s whispered tones.

“Form fours, left, by the right—quick march!”

“We’re goin’ into the country,” whispered Blake to Dick. “I suppose they are makin’ for Chatham—Hurt?”

“No, no,” hesitated Dick, “I got an awful whack on the head from a belt.”

“Let’s feel.”

Bill’s hand slid gingerly over the other’s head.

“It’s nothin’,” said Private Blake, cheerfully, “only a bump; did you use your bayonet?”

“No; the officer said——”

“I know what the officer said,” remarked Bill, derisively. “Take my tip and use the bayonet—and flat part, not the point, nor the edge, but the flat, heavy part. It’s a rare thing for knockin’ a chap out of time.”

They reached the open country without encountering the warlike Barnets; then when they were half-way on the road to Chatham they heard news of them.

The host of the wayside inn met the picket, and figuratively speaking, fell on its neck.

“Had the Barnets been there?”

The landlord pointed to his bar, and in the smashed window and the debris of the broken bottles the officer read the story of the Barnets’ passing.

“They’re only about five minutes ahead,” he wailed; “they have done ten pun’s worth of damage——”

They left him bemoaning his loss, and followed the retreating raiders.

It was quite dark now, with a thin mist rising from the valley of the Medway. There was a nip in the air that made marching pleasant, and the measured tramp of feet rang sharply on the hard road.

"What I cannot understand," said the puzzled officer in command to the sergeant who marched by his side, "is why we didn't get the mounted police from Chatham. We telegraphed for them an hour ago."

"They've cut the wire, sir," said the sergeant. "I heard the O.C. telling the adjutant just before we marched off."

"Cut the wire?"

The officer's voice betokened surprise.

"That's a curious thing for the scallywags to do."

"Very, sir," said the colour-sergeant. "It shows what wicked beggars these Barnets are."

"I'd like to know," began the officer, then stopped. "Halt!" he cried, and the picket came to a standstill.

"I thought I heard——"

From somewhere ahead in the mist came a curious noise.

"Tock! Tock! Tock!"

It was a noise for all the world like that made by a small boy rattling a stick on corrugated iron.

The officer stood listening.

"Tock-tock-tock-tock, tock-ity-tock!"

"If that isn't somebody firing I'm a Dutchman," said the sergeant in amazement, and the officer bent his head.

"Rifle fire!"

The words ran through the little party, and Dick felt a curious shiver that ran from spine to temple.

"It can't be the Barnets," said the officer slowly, "or even a picket from Chatham."

"Wires are down here, sir," said a voice in the darkness.

By the side of the road three wires trailed limply.

Ahead the firing went on, and then the sound was heard of flying footsteps coming towards them.

"Form across the road," cried the officer quickly; "get out your bayonets."

There was a swish and a snick of steel as his order was obeyed. The footsteps came nearer. Three men or more were running.

"Halt! who comes there?" challenged the sergeant, and a gasping voice answered him.

"For God's sake . . .!"

The running man came reeling into the light of the sergeant's lantern.

He was a Barnet man; he was capless, his tunic was unbuttoned and his shirt torn open at the throat.

On his livid face was the terror of death, and a great red wound gaped in his neck.

"They're coming! they're coming!" he yelled.

"Halt!" challenged the officer as three men came racing through the mist.

They stopped instantly, and one raised his hand.

"What do you want? who are you?"

The officer's naked sword was in his hand as he went towards them.

"Stop, sir!" the sergeant leapt forward, "they've got rifles!"

As he spoke the three men fired together, and officer and sergeant fell.

For an instant the picket stood paralysed, then with an infuriated roar they sprang on the men.

Dick Selby drove at the tallest of the three with his bayonet. It reached him under his guard, and he went down with a horrible cry. And then began a fight in the dark that no man of the picket will ever forget. No further shot was fired, it was work at close quarters with no time for the armed men to reload.

They might have been disarmed, were there any officer present to direct the attack, but Hill-Feton lay stone dead in the middle of the road, and the sergeant was dying.

So they hacked, and thrust insanely, savagely, and the two riflemen went down bayoneted.

“My God,” whimpered somebody, “there’ll be trouble—there’ll be trouble!”

“Bring that lantern.”

It was Dick who gave the order, and nobody questioned his right. He took it from the trembling hands of the man who brought it, struck a light, and held the lantern over the fallen man.

“Barnets!” whispered Blake in horror. “There’ll be a lot to pay for this.”

“Barnets?” Dick was examining with no qualms the things that were once men. “These aren’t Barnets—look at the serge—it’s not our khaki—look at the shoulder-straps!”

He bent over.

Something was embroidered on the broad strap—a winged lion, crowned, and beneath was the monogram, “M. H.,” floridly entwined.

“Marie Henrietta,” said Dick thickly. “This damned country’s invaded!”

CHAPTER X

It is written in the memoirs of Van Graaf, the Chancellor, that he had urged upon the Princess Marie Henrietta, in the strongest possible terms, the madness and the futility of an invasion of England. How accurate were his prognostications was shown by the failure of the attempt made by Her Highness' troops on the 17th of March, 19—. It is known now that the general scheme embraced a simultaneous landing on the Kentish and Essex coasts. The main army was to have effected a landing between Clacton and Walton, very much on the lines of the sham attack delivered during the manœuvres of the British Army in 19—.

It was unfortunate for the success of her scheme that the weather, Britain's old ally, should have come to the undoing of the admirable plan, for during a fog the transports became detached from their convoys, and the Channel Squadron, tapping a wireless message (thanks to the indiscretion of the captain of H.M.S. *Carl Furst*, who *would* insist upon sending patriotic messages to his brother officers), came suddenly upon the defenceless invading army, and captured some 60,000 men.

The brigade that chose the Kentish shore were more fortunate, however. A landing was made, but the whole story is told in the general order issued by the G.O.C. Southern Division, which I quote in part:

> "The General Officer Commanding, whilst commending the troops under his command for their splendid services on the 17th and 18th of March, which resulted in the defeat of the army of an unexpected enemy, especially praised the conduct of the 2nd Battalion Royal Rochester Regiment for the exceptional brilliance of their heroic attack upon Land's Farm. The G.O.C. mentions the fine service rendered by No. 10316 Private Richard Selby, 2nd Rochester, who, taking charge of the unarmed picket, brought it to safety in the face of an armed force of superior numbers. Private Selby, by his resourcefulness, was able to give timely warning to the garrison. The G.O.C. appoints Private Selby King's Corporal, never to be reduced below that rank."

Thus Richard Selby, a proud, dazed man, ignorant of high politics, certainly ignorant of the part he had played in the biggest game that Europe had witnessed since the allies joined forces in 1815 to crush the Corsican,

was made King's Corporal. And there was much to do in more exalted quarters, you may be sure.

A tragic figure of a woman stalked the Long Hall of the Palace in Baden-Schoss. A tall, fair woman with flaxen hair, and violet eyes, who was all a-tremble with impotent rage and baffled desire.

The men who stood grouped by the window that looks upon the courtyard of the palace watched her in silence, and when there came to them, from the great square facing the palace, the yells and execrations of a mob ripe for rebellion, they exchanged significant glances.

Suddenly she stopped in her stride, and stood before them, searching their faces with quick, keen eyes that flashed from beneath lowered brows. She saw Van Graaf with his tense, drawn face and tightly pressed lips, and knew him to be what he was, loyal to the last, but greatly afraid.

She saw the craven fear of Mickleburg's eyes, and the sneering curiosity on the face of His Serene Highness her cousin, Charles of Haughlauden. Her gaze rested longest on him, and he may have mistaken the message her eyes conveyed.

"Well, little Marie," he said easily, insolently, "you have failed?"

"We have failed," she said quietly.

She was beautiful as pale gold is beautiful, and her voice was rich and low.

"I said you," said Charles carelessly, "and I meant you; we cannot be expected to share Your Highness'——"

He stopped suddenly, for she walked to the door. A lackey came at her bidding, and to him she whispered a few words, then she came back to the group.

"You were saying?" she said indifferently.

"I was saying," he went on, caressing his moustache, "that we cannot afford to stand with you in this."

"Go on," she commanded steadily.

"You had the people with you—until this. Listen!" He indicated the yelling rabble without. "How do you stand now? There is humiliation for the people, little Marie; somebody must pay for that humiliation."

He nodded pleasantly, as though he were propounding an agreeable truism. This Prince Charles was a florid young man with small eyes. He had the appearance of one who was indulgent to himself.

"This is the twentieth century, when kingly and queenly power is delegated to Parliaments; when monarchs no longer make war to gratify private ambition. You have played a trick upon the people, seduced the Army from its allegiance to the people—Van Graaf was in this?"

He turned on the older man with a wicked smile.

"Go on," she said calmly.

"All this is twentieth century," he continued, waving his hand airily to the crowd without—"the age of jealous democracy. England has asked an indemnity of thirty millions: that means taxation."

She nodded.

"Taxation," said His Highness, "and humiliation—but worst of all, taxation."

She waited, watching him. She had an idea of what was coming.

"One private soldier in the English Army, as I understand recent happenings," said Prince Charles smoothly, "is responsible for the mischief; four of my guards may very well undo the mischief wrought."

The other men exchanged glances, all but Van Graaf, who, standing rigidly at attention, stared into the gloom that gathered at one end of the room.

"Four men," said the Prince carefully, "four stout men, who can be trusted, I can spare to escort Your Highness to the border. Special trains can be arranged and an asylum guaranteed by our cousins of Macedonia."

"Speak plainly," she said evenly; "is it abdication you counsel?"

His shrug was apologetic.

"I will endeavour to appease the people," he said, "a yearly pension from the civil list for Your Highness, the confiscation of your properties and private fortune to the relief of taxation, an interim regency until the Diet can in safety be assembled——"

"To confirm Charles of Haughlauden in the regency?" she asked.

Again the shrug.

“Suppose I suggest another way?” she said, watching him, “a continuance in the policy I have begun, offering neither apology nor repentance for my failure?”

“Twentieth century,” he murmured indulgently . . . “the Divine right of kings to govern wrong . . . No!”

She walked slowly to the table and touched a bell. For a few seconds she stood there wrapped in thought, and Charles smiled behind his hand.

Then the door opened and they came in, twenty men of the Sevonian Guard in their grey and silver, their short carbines slung at their shoulders, and Meister, the adjutant, drawn sword at hip.

She looked up as they halted. “Prince Charles of Haughlauden,” she said, and pointed at him.

Charles frowned wonderingly.

“Take him into the courtyard,” she said, not raising her voice, “and shoot him!”

Charles, white of face, drew his sword; but the levelled carbines covered him. . . .

They took him into the courtyard, and stood him against the wall, and all the time he was muttering in bewilderment, “Twentieth century!”

He was whispering this when the rifles crashed together.

Princess Marie Henrietta heard the crash unmoved, but the men who watched her saw a frown gather as though she had been reminded of an ugly thing.

“One private soldier,” she flamed suddenly, “one wretched conscript! A thing of the streets, a lover, God knows, of some dull peasant—and he did it!”

I think Corporal Selby would have been astonished at this outburst and a little indignant, for the description of the Brown Lady was wide of the mark.

CHAPTER XI

The O.C. sat in his chair, his busy pen moving over the official-looking documents before him.

A knock came to the door.

"Come in!"

The orderly sergeant entered, and stood to attention.

"Well, sergeant?"

"Corporal Selby, sir."

The O.C. nodded.

"Show him in, please."

Dick came to attention before the O.C.'s table, and the colonel greeted him kindly.

"I wanted to see you, corporal," he said. "I am rather anxious to know a little more about you. You have no parents, I see?"

He disengaged from a heap of documents the attestation paper which bore Dick's signature.

"No, sir."

"And I see that, so far, you have no army certificate of education."

"No, sir," said Dick. "I am still a recruit."

The colonel nodded.

"A very useful recruit," he said dryly, glancing at the chevrons on the young man's arm. "Do you think you could get a first-class certificate?"

The "first" is the "degree" certificate in the Army, and Dick drew a breath.

"I could try, sir," he said.

"Do," said the colonel shortly. "That is all, corporal."

Dick crossed the square to his barrack-room in a perplexed frame of mind. What did it mean?

He would ask the Brown Lady when he saw her. He had received a letter from her, short enough, but very welcome. It was a simple-worded note of congratulation, and he was glad to get it, you may be sure. But there was no enthusiasm in it, and that had chilled him. For all his innate modesty he could not but see how great an accomplishment had been his; how signal an honour were the stripes that adorned his arm. It was a promotion he had not dreamt of, and to him, at least, it represented a zenith in his career.

But the Brown Lady, Elise, had written as though this were some unimportant step, and she was a soldier's daughter, and knew what it all signified. He sighed a little wearily as he thought of this. Had she set him, in that mind of hers, some impossible task that he could never hope to accomplish . . . did she expect him to become a sergeant-major? . . .

He walked into the barrack-room, taking off his belt as he went in, and was greeted by Bill, who sprang up from his cot.

"Dick," he said in a low voice, "I want a word with you."

The two went outside on to a landing.

"There's been a feller here," he began, "who said he was the reporter of *The Journal* making inquiries about you."

"There have been dozens of 'em," said Dick resentfully.

"I know—but there's a curious thing about this one. After Shorty had told him all he knew about you and a little more besides, the chap went away. About half an hour after, another man came, who *was* the reporter of *The Journal*."

Dick frowned.

"Well—what does this mean?" he asked.

"It means that the first man was a fake," said Bill impressively—"that he came here for no good. It is all Shorty's fault," he said savagely. "We were on the eleven o'clock parade, an' Shorty was orderly man in charge of the barrack-room; there was nobody else here. What did Shorty do but take this feller up into the room to show him your cot."

"Well, there's nothing in that," said Dick.

"I hope there ain't," Bill said with an ominous shake of his head.

They retraced their steps to the barrack-room, and Dick strolled to his cot and hung his belt on the peg behind. He drew out the black box which the Government provides for the use of its soldiers and opened it.

He must read that letter of the Brown Lady's again; perhaps there was something he had overlooked.

His fingers groped vainly beneath the folded jersey, where he kept her letters.

"Why——!" he cried, and threw out the contents of the box.

The Brown Lady's letters were gone!

"I'll take my oath," said Shorty earnestly, "he didn't pinch 'em whilst I was in the room."

"But did you leave the room?" questioned Dick.

Shorty hesitated.

"Without the word of a lie," he said candidly, "I did—but only for a minute. The feller asked me to go outside to see if there was any sign of you whilst he took a sketch of the 'ero's——"

"Yes, yes," said the embarrassed young corporal, "I know all about that."

"Shorty," said Bill, wagging his head reprovingly, "you wasn't on parade when brains was served out."

"I dessay, William," said the miserable Shorty.

"You was in the front rank all right," said Bill, pursuing the simile, "when jaws was distributed, an' was first on the pay list when bounce was give away. But I've seen maggits with more sense than you."

"A fightin' man don't need——" began Shorty, with a feeble effort to hold his ground.

"A fightin' man?" queried Bill offensively; "who's talkin' about fightin' men? I'm referrin' to you."

Dick was not in the humour to listen to Shorty's protest. Somebody had stolen his letters: letters that were valueless to any one but himself. The paltriness, and the uselessness of such a theft puzzled him. Perhaps the man wanted the letters for a newspaper—but then he was familiar enough with newspapers and their ethics to know that even the least worthy of them was unlikely to print them.

He did not report the matter to his superiors; no good could come of that. Shorty might be punished, certainly, but there was little satisfaction to be

gained from seeing Shorty undergoing C.B.

All that day and the next the mystery of the thing worried him. He thought of writing to the Brown Lady to tell her, but he hesitated to confess how carelessly her precious letters were guarded. On the second day following the robbery, as he came from commanding officer's parade, he received a telegram that, for the moment, staggered him.

> "Why did you my letters lose? Meet me fifth Martello tower from Coastguard Station Frinton to Walton, six o'clock to-morrow —Elise."

It was an astounding telegram in more ways than one, and he read it three times before he grasped its significance.

When at last it dawned upon his mind that a trap had been laid for him, he paraded before his adjutant and put forward to that astonished officer a theory that made him open his eyes in wonder.

CHAPTER XII

Glad to have finished his double journey, Dick sprang from the train as it entered Frinton station before it had fully come to a standstill, and made his way hastily in the direction of the sea in response to the enigmatic telegram.

He walked briskly along the deserted cliff. A strong north wind buffeted his face, and made him draw the collar of his overcoat up about his ears. It was past the hour of sunset, and already the gloom of evening had settled on the sea. He counted the great Martello towers, the fifth lay round a bend of the crest, and the crest of its weather-stained walls showed over a slight rise.

As he went towards it, he glanced out to sea, and nodded as though some question he had asked himself had been satisfactorily answered.

Riding at anchor was a big white yacht flying the white ensign of the Royal Yacht Squadron. He looked at his watch; it wanted ten minutes to the hour; and he slackened his speed.

Remarkably enough, he did not expect the Brown Lady to keep her appointment, and, as he came round a turn of the path that brought the fifth tower in view, he was not surprised to find that there was no sign of her.

There were two men in overcoats engaged in conversation, who turned at the sound of his footsteps, and regarded him with interest.

Dick was prepared for more men than two, and shot a quick glance at the beach below the cliff. There was a boat drawn up on the shingle, unattended, save by a solitary sailor, who sat patiently regarding the sea.

He would have passed the two, but one blocked his path, raising his soft felt hat politely.

“Corporal Selby?” he asked. His voice had the faintest trace of foreign accent, and he looked and spoke like a gentleman.

“I am Corporal Selby,” said Dick quietly. The other bowed.

“I am Hermanus Van Graaf, Chancellor to her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Mid-Europe,” he said gravely, and, indicating his companion, “this is Count Zeditz, Aide-de-camp to Her Majesty.”

Dick nodded a little awkwardly, but he was surprisingly self-possessed in the presence of such magnificence.

"You can understand, corporal," said the Chancellor, "having in view recent happenings, that there should be some curiosity evinced in exalted circles as to the instrument chosen by Providence for the—er—embarrassment of—ourselves. It is written of a German criminal," Van Graaf went on, "who was also a patriot—I refer to the misguided Sands—that his curiosity was such that he sent for the headman on the night before his execution and asked to be allowed to see the axe that was to decapitate him. Although"—the Chancellor smiled apologetically—"although the simile may not appeal to you, that is the reason we have sent for you, that I might carry to my mistress some account of the man who thwarted her—I should say, the ill-conceived plans of Her Majesty's ministers."

"So, therefore, Your Excellency sent a telegram for me," said Dick respectfully.

The elder man shot a suspicious glance at him.

"Who taught you to say 'Your Excellency'?" he asked abruptly.

Dick made no answer; it would have been difficult for him to say; his knowledge, such as it was, had come to him by curious ways. He had garnered his harvest from fields of weeds. . . .

"Her Majesty," the Chancellor went on, "was desirous of knowing what manner of man it was who—did what he did. I shall report, and with every pleasure—that it was no ordinary soldier."

His attitude was courtesy itself, and Dick flushed uncomfortably. The whole situation was grotesque, fantastic. Here was an army recruit—for all his stripes he was no more—an out-of-work clerk with the smatterings of a board-school education; a youth who a year ago was saying "sir" to, and looking with respectful awe upon, a clerk of works, and happy at the recognition conveyed by a patronizing nod from a junior partner; here was this nothing listening, with more or less ease, to the praises of the High Chancellor of a great empire—hearing, too, that he had excited the interest of this minister's royal mistress!

He had come prepared for something different—that is why he had warned the Brown Lady by telegram not to come to this lonely coast, and that was why . . .

Perhaps the Chancellor read his thoughts, for he smiled grimly. "If you understood the purport of the telegram—as I do not doubt you did—you came prepared for some insensate form of vengeance," he said, with a twinkle in his blue eyes—"assassination—hein? with Zeditz here as chief

executioner? But, corporal, it was necessary to gratify our curiosity, and just now there are difficulties in the way of an open visit of inspection. Our Ambassador at the Court of St. James," he hesitated and then added whimsically, "is not at the Court of St. James." He held out his hand abruptly, and Dick took it.

"Good-bye," he said. "Good fortune—and the Brown Lady."

Dick coloured deeply, and Van Graaf 's look of amusement at the young man's perplexity aroused a sympathetic smile from the immobile Zeditz.

"You forget we have your letters," said the Chancellor. "We owe you an apology for that; they shall be returned."

As they turned to descend the winding path that led to the beach, Dick instinctively raised his hand in salute, and for one second the three men stood rigid, gloved hands to hats; then they disappeared down the steep path.

Dick watched the boat, then heard a low whistle, and saw men spring from the lee of the cliff below at the summons, heard the keel of the boat grate upon the pebbly beach and noted the alacrity and order with which they took their places.

Then, as with three sharp sweeps of the oars the boat's nose swung seaward to the yacht, he turned back to the Martello Tower.

In the shoreward face of the tower was a big discoloured door, and to this he walked. It was thrown open as he came to it, and a man stepped out. He was a young man, and, save for a revolver belt about his waist, he was in mufti.

Dick saluted him.

"Gone?" asked the officer, for such he was.

"Yes, sir," reported Dick, and the young man stepped back into the dark interior of the tower.

Soon he came forth again following an elderly gentleman, and followed by a score of others.

Dick recognized the general, but the others he did not know. He had expected some men of his own regiment in that strange guard; it was astounding to him that the Government had thought it worth while to detail twenty officers to protect him—twenty young gentlemen who at various hours of the day had strolled nonchalantly along the brow of the cliff and disappeared into the old Martello Tower.

Perhaps Dick over-rated his own significance, for it was not to save Corporal Selby that the guard came, but it was to capture red-handed an emissary of the Mid-European Government in an illegal act that they were assembled. Did he but know, he was the helpless sheep that was to lure the tiger to the hunter's shot.

"Well, corporal," said the general, looking at him curiously, "were you afraid?"

Dick shook his head.

"No, sir," he replied.

"Good." The elderly man looked out to sea. The boat was going alongside the yacht, and a white patch of foam at the yacht's stern told him that she was already on the move. He turned to the youth.

"You did very well," he said briefly. "You understand that all that happened here is confidential?"

"Yes, sir."

"That you will not breathe a word to any living soul as to this—er—experience."

"I understand, sir," said Dick, mentally reserving the Brown Lady.

"Good," said the general. Then he spoke to the group of officers. "You will also understand, gentlemen," he said, "that the restrictions imposed upon Corporal Selby apply equally to you?"

There was a murmured chorus of assent.

"Now, corporal, I don't think you need wait—oh, by the way," he said as Dick saluted, "have you got a 'first'?"

"A first-class certificate, sir?"

"Yes," nodded the general.

"No, sir, but I am going to get one," said Dick.

"Do," said the general, and the corporal wheeled about and walked back to the little town of Frinton, speculating upon the underlying significance of a question that had been put to him twice in as many days.

CHAPTER XIII

Shorty was under a cloud. He had been responsible (so a hundred kind friends reminded him) for the theft of Dick's letters from the barrack-room, and although the regiment did not grasp the exact importance of the theft, gossip—and regimental gossip is a terrible business—had magnified its seriousness.

It was a sad time for Shorty, for on top of this error of his he had committed one or two other grievous blunders.

In an attempt to minimize his fault he had belittled Corporal Selby, relying upon the average soldier's dislike for youthful non-commissioned officers. He had floundered from one slough of unpopularity to another, and as he had almost tearfully informed a new-found civilian friend whom he had met by chance at the "Barrack Arms" one evening: "The 'ole bloomin' battalion had him 'set.' "

Shorty stood disconsolately at the window looking out upon the chilly bareness of the barrack square. Then he looked back at the big fire that blazed in the grate of the barrack-room, at the bed cots ranged neatly along either side of the room, at the men who lounged or worked as the mood took them.

There was a settled air of calm, an incongruous atmosphere of restful peace in the view, but all was out of harmony with the unquietness in Shorty's bosom.

He met the mournful appeal in "long" Long's eyes uneasily; he pretended that he did not observe Bill Blake's sardonic glee; he frowned menacingly upon the youngest recruit and went slowly to his cot and stood in rapt contemplation before the lithographic presentment of his pugilistic heroes. Then he took off his coat slowly and with dignity.

"Over in the canteen," said Bill, addressing the room at large, "there's a feller who reckons he could give Shorty a couple of stone an' a hidin'."

Shorty took no notice. He picked up from the black depths of his box a pair of dumb-bells and performed extraordinary evolutions.

"Down in Bermondsey," said the reminiscent Blake, "I knew a little feller by the name of Sid Taylor who would wipe up the earth with him."

Shorty ignored the insult, proceeding with his exercise as if it were a solemn rite.

Bill changed his tactics. “There’s goin’ to be a medal give for bravery,” he said, thoughtfully, “it’s goin’ to be called ‘The Order of the Orderly Man.’ On one side will be a picture of a chap scrubbin’ tables an’ on the other a picture of a feller pinchin’ things out of a box whilst the orderly man’s lookin’ out of the winder to see if it’s rainin’.

“If,” Bill went on in the same ruminating strain, “if I’d been Corporal Selby, do you know what I’d have done?”

The information was destined never to be given, for at that moment the annoying Mr. Blake was summoned by a laconic sergeant and left the room hastily.

As soon as his tormentor had disappeared, Shorty dropped his dumb-bells with a crash, and walked across to the smiling recruit.

“Did I see you laughin’?” he asked fiercely.

“If you’ve got eyes, you did,” drawled the other coolly. He was a stocky, pasty-faced youth with unsteady eyes, that looked everywhere but at the person he spoke to.

“Do you know who you’re laughin’ at?” demanded Shorty with ominous calm.

“I can guess,” said the surprising recruit, and looked at the ceiling.

Shorty had a way with strangers which seldom failed to act. He played his trump card.

“Do you want to fight?” he demanded, and made truculent and ostentatious preparations.

The other rose. “Yes,” he said, and Shorty stepped back.

“I don’t want to take advantage of you, mind yer,” warned Shorty.

“You won’t take no advantage of me,” said the pasty-faced youth cheerfully.

“I killed a feller once,” admitted Shorty bitterly—“a feller very much like you.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” said the recruit politely. “I’m feelin’ a bit sick myself.”

“Don’t say,” said Shorty solemnly, “don’t say when you meet me down in the back field to-morrer——”

“Why not to-day?”

“To-morrer,” said Shorty firmly; “don’t say I didn’t give you every chance.”

“Why not now?” repeated the other urgently, but Shorty waved him off with a lofty gesture.

“Bein’ in charge of the room,” he said, “an’ bein’ in a manner of speakin’ responsible——”

“You ain’t afraid, are you?” asked the recruit.

Shorty smiled indulgently, and walked back to his cot. “Afraid!” He laughed, but without heartiness, at the preposterous suggestion. “Why—here, how long have you been a soldier?”

“Three munse.”

“Did you see me at the Battle of Lands Farm?”

“No,” confessed the recruit, “I wasn’t there.”

“Nor Shorty neither,” said a voice, and somebody laughed.

Conscious that the general feeling was distinctly unfriendly, Shorty said no more. He had an important engagement in town, and proceeded to dress for it. He looked at his American watch, and making a complicated calculation (based on the knowledge that at 1 p.m. yesterday it was twenty-five minutes fast, and that it gained three minutes every hour), he reckoned he had just time to meet the gentleman who had so kindly, on the previous evening, paid for sundry drinks.

He met Dick as he crossed the square. Dick was hastening back from school where he found the mysteries of history, geography, and the deciphering of illegible manuscript by no means as hard as he had imagined, and the warning picket bugle explained his haste.

Shorty greeted him mournfully, and passing through the barrack gate, turned sharply to the right, to the crooked High Street of Medway. He reached the “Barrack Arms” a little ahead of time, and ordered his drink to be brought into the bar parlour.

He sat for a quarter of an hour before his civilian friend came in. He was a gentlemanly person, rather stout, well-dressed and elaborately jewelled.

This feature had struck Shorty on first acquaintance. Something else had impressed him also, and that was a vague recollection of having seen this man's face before.

After their first greetings Shorty proceeded with "The Story of My Life," a serial which he hoped might be prolonged just so long as free refreshment could be arranged for.

As Shorty was at the point of his narrative where he had won the eight stone novice bout, his companion interrupted him.

"You seem a fairly sensible man," he said, eyeing the soldier keenly, "and I shouldn't be surprised if you'd be willing to do something for me."

"Anything in the fighting line——" began Shorty.

"Not exactly," said the man dryly. "I've got a friend of mine in your regiment—he's just joined."

"If I can look after him," said Shorty, "in the way o' takin' his part——"

"Thanks; he can take his own part," said the other with a short laugh. "His name is Ladd—Adolphus Ladd."

"White-faced chap with twitterin' eyes?" asked Shorty suspiciously.

"That's him—that's Laddo," said the gentleman. "He's a friend of mine, an' I've got another friend."

He looked the reverse of friendly as he said this, for his brows knit and his face twisted unpleasantly.

"He's a fellow," he said slowly, "who nearly got me into bad trouble, who would have got me into trouble, only one of the principal witnesses disappeared."

He shook his head with a cryptic smile. "I don't dislike him," he explained, "only, I'm—well, I'm interested in him."

"What's his name—the other feller?" asked Shorty.

"No names," replied the man cautiously, "and no pack drill, eh? Have a drink."

Shorty "didn't mind if he did," and drink succeeded drink, whilst the talkative stranger delivered himself on the subject of "trouble." How a man could get into trouble without having any idea which way he was going; how women were at the bottom of all mischief, and how love for a woman upsets the mental balance and distorts an otherwise clear-headed judgment.

Shorty, growing more and more hazy as the evening advanced, interjected a remark whenever opportunity offered.

"Now," went on his gentlemanly host, "there's a certain girl whose address I'd like to have."

"I'm sure," agreed Shorty unsteadily.

"I happen to know that she writes to this fellow."

"To ole Laddo," said Shorty wisely.

"No, you—no, old chap, to the other man, the corporal."

"Wish corp'ral?" demanded Shorty aggressively. "Abbot, Carter, Snape, Down, Selby, Sen——"

"Selby—yes, that's the name," soothed the man, "she writes——"

"I know all about that," said Shorty, wagging his head frowningly. "I know *all* about Selby's letters!" he laughed bitterly, and, it must be confessed, a little drunkenly. "Nice ole fuss there's been about 'em. In little blue envelopes they was. I've took 'em up to the room and stuck 'em in a strap of his bed cot, an' a fat lot of thanks I've got!"

"Letters from London?" suggested the visitor carelessly.

"London? No," Shorty shook his head. "Not what I've seen; from Barchester . . . post mark . . ." His head fell sleepily forward, and the man scribbled something on his white shirt cuff.

Then Shorty roused himself and staggered to his feet. He was in a mood for trouble; he was persecuted; he wasn't respected; nobody loved poor Shorty. This much he confessed, and then in a sudden accession of rage he lifted a stone match-box and threw it through an unoffending window.

The crash of the glass sobered him.

"You drunken fool!" uttered the man, clutching his arm.

There came the sound of hurrying feet, and the door of the little parlour was flung open to admit an irate landlord. Behind him stood Dick Selby and two men of the picket.

"I thought so!" snarled the landlord, when he saw the wreckage of his plate-glass window. "This comes of having soldiers in a respectable house."

"Nobody loves me," moaned Shorty, and Dick made a gesture to the men of the picket.

“Take his belt off.”

“ ’Ere! What’s this?” protested Shorty.

“You’re a prisoner——” said Dick, and saw Shorty’s companion.

They regarded one another intently.

Then Dick spoke. “Mr. Oxstead, I believe,” he said politely.

Oxstead made no reply. Dick said no more till Shorty had been hauled from the room, and the two were left together.

“Some time ago, Mr. Oxstead,” said Dick. “I had the pleasure of meeting you.”

Still no answer.

“At that time you had some plans regarding a lady,” Dick continued, and the other man found his voice.

“I can’t discuss my plans, and the plans of a lady with a private soldier in a bar parlour,” he said.

He made a step to the door, and the soldier placed his back against it.

Oxstead put his hand to his pocket.

Dick’s bayonet was out of its sheath in a second, and the sharp point dropped down to the other’s throat.

“You keep your hands where I can see them,” he said coolly. “I shall not keep you very long.”

Oxstead’s face went white with rage, but his hands came back again.

“All that I want to say is this,” said the young man. “If you repeat your offer to her, if you trouble her, if in any way you harm her, I shall kill you.”

He said this very calmly, and Oxstead shivered, because he knew that somehow there had come to Dick Selby, of Friendly Street, the soul of a man.

CHAPTER XIV

"Hullo!" said the sergeant of the guard. "Not Shorty, surely!"

Shorty, indeed, it was, very dishevelled, rather defiant, dizzy. He stood in the centre of the guard-room swaying a little, with a dim consciousness that the earth revolves once in twenty-four hours, and that this must be the ill-timed moment it had chosen.

"What is the offence of this criminal, corporal?" asked the facetious sergeant.

"Drunk," said Dick, sadly surveying his erring prisoner.

"I should like to remark," said Shorty thickly, "that I'm prepare' to fight any feller in barracks, for ten poun' a-side; scratch-as-scratch-can, no bitin', no kickin', no——"

"Take his boots off!" commanded the sergeant, and took down the key of the prisoners' room.

Willing hands pulled Shorty's boots off, and the steel door of the "clink" slammed on his fiery peroration.

Dick sat at the sergeant's table and wrote out the crime sheets, which were to accompany the guard report.

"How goes the 'first,' Selby?" asked the sergeant, and Dick looked up smilingly.

"I think it is all right," he said.

"You're a lucky young man," said the sergeant, "yet I've got an idea you'll never reach the rank of sergeant."

Dick's face fell. "Why not?" he asked resentfully.

But the amiable non-commissioned officer refused to enlighten him.

Dick lingered in the guard-room till last post had sounded and the picket was dismissed; then he went back to the darkened barrack-room. He remembered the new recruit, and wondered what had induced Laddo to enlist. He did not resent that young man's appearance half as much as he would have done a month or two ago: Laddo was entitled to his chance. Which shows that Corporal Selby of the Rochesters was broader-minded

than Mr. Richard Selby of Friendly Street. As he passed Laddo's cot he heard his name called softly.

"That you, Di—corporal?"

"Yes, Laddo—you mustn't talk, old chap, after lights out."

"I know." Here Dick went closer. "Did you see Oxstead? He's in town."

"Yes," Dick answered quietly, "I saw him."

"He's up to some dog's game," said Laddo's voice earnestly. "Dick, I'm tryin' to go straight."

"I'm sure you are, Laddo. I'll do all I can for you. Good night!"

"Stop a bit. He's got a pull with me; he told me he could get me a laggin'—an' he could."

"Don't let that worry you."

Dick felt a pang of sorrow for this young criminal. Never in his life had he felt so immeasurably removed from his some-time associate as he did that night, and he thrilled at the thought that he had so far lifted himself from "the rut"; and that he could be so sure of himself as to think as he did.

"Dick"—the whispered voice of Laddo was almost pleading—"keep me straight. I want to soldier on; this is the life, an' it'll make a man of me."

Dick reached out his hand and Laddo grasped it, and no other word passed between them.

Within a week they tried poor Shorty by regimental court-martial for destruction of private property, "to wit, a window valued at 18*s.* 6*d.*, the property of etc., etc."

A court-martial was a new experience for Dick. It seemed very solemn and impressive; rather like crushing a fly with a steam hammer, he thought, as the officers comprising the Court took their oath to "well and truly try the prisoner before the Court without fear, favour or prejudice. . . . So help them, God."

The proceedings were not prolonged. Poor Shorty, found guilty, was marched back to the guard-room to await the pronouncement of his sentence.

On the next day, before the paraded battalion, Shorty, bareheaded, and standing between a guard with fixed bayonets, listened while the adjutant read the "finding" of the Court.

He had been guilty, read the adjutant gravely, of "an act contrary to, and to the prejudice of, good order and military discipline, in that at or about 9.20 p.m. on the night of . . . he had wilfully, wickedly and maliciously destroyed a window——"

In the end he was ordered to pay the cost of the breakage and to be confined to barracks for twenty-one days.

Dick was heartily relieved at the leniency of the sentence. Considering the pomp and circumstance of the trial it seemed that nothing short of capital punishment would fit the case.

"You are wanted, corporal."

The orderly-room orderly came for him as he was receiving from the penitent Shorty an assurance as to his future conduct.

Dick found the adjutant in his quarters.

"Shut the door, corporal."

Dick obeyed and waited.

"You've got a man named Ladd in your room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything about him?"

Dick hesitated.

"Yes, sir," he said reluctantly.

The officer consulted a letter he had in his hand.

"Do you know whether this man was an associate of criminals?"

Again Dick hesitated. "He was, sir," he said, "but he's straight enough now."

The adjutant shook his head doubtingly. "We don't want that kind of man in the Army, corporal," he said.

"But he is trying, sir," said Dick eagerly. "The Army is his chance, just as it is my chance and the chance of a hundred poor devils, to get away from the beaten track."

The adjutant pursed his lips thoughtfully, and looked at the letter. “This, of course, is confidential, corporal, but a man who claims to have been an associate of Ladd’s—he calls him Laddo—has written to say that on the 10th he will put me in possession of facts about the man that can leave me no other course than to hand him over to the civil police.”

There was a silence. Dick stood with his eyes on the floor, thinking.

“I am very sorry, sir,” he said with half a sigh. “I think I know the man who has given Laddo away——”

“Somebody is outside that door, corporal,” said the officer sharply.

Dick opened it. Laddo, pale as death, stood on the threshold fingering his quivering lip.

“What do you want?” demanded the adjutant.

“I want leave, sir,” faltered the recruit.

“You know—perhaps you don’t know, that a private soldier is not allowed to see an officer unless he is accompanied by a non-commissioned officer?”

“No, sir.”

“Wait outside, Ladd—outside the building,” said the officer, and the recruit withdrew.

Adjutant and corporal exchanged glances. “Do you think he heard?” asked the officer, but Dick would venture no opinion.

The adjutant walked to the table, took up a pen and paused irresolutely.

“We know nothing about the man, except what this letter tells me; if he wants leave, I see no reason why he shouldn’t have it. If he wants to bolt, so much the better—send him up!”

Dick found Laddo waiting outside the officers’ quarters, and told him to go in.

Laddo started to speak as though he were going to impart some information, then changed his mind.

Had Laddo heard? Dick wondered. He might have saved a great deal of speculation—for Laddo had heard, and the leave he asked for was preliminary to the “bolt” the adjutant anticipated.

When the afternoon post came in there was a note for Laddo from Mr. Oxstead. It was a curious note, full of detailed information regarding his future plans. Laddo knew them to be a "blind"—they were to put him off the scent. But there was one passage which bore the stamp of truth, and as he read it Laddo started up with an oath.

"Where's Selby?" his voice was harsh with excitement.

"What's biting you?" asked the man in the next cot politely.

"Where's the corporal?"

Long Long, cleaning his straps for the next day's parade, supplied an answer.

"Gone to London to bring down a batch of recruits."

Laddo swore under his breath, and reached down his scarlet tunic from the shelf above.

"Where are you goin'?" asked Long curiously, as the recruit began to dress with awkward haste.

"On leave," said Laddo grimly, "to see a frien'."

CHAPTER XV

Highbury Dene stands back from the road which leads out of Barchester, an ancient building, half farm, half dwelling-house, with its tiny patch of lawn before, and its walled garden behind. It stands there, a hoary sentinel menacing the glaring creations of the jerry builder which, year by year, thrust their bow windows and plaster porticos a step nearer.

Elise Cordray had found in Highbury Dene an asylum she little expected. In her great trouble such friends as she thought she might depend upon had vanished, faded away as snow under the sun, while from out of the Nowhere had come an invitation to make Highbury Dene a home. She had accepted the invitation as a temporary measure, to give her time to look around. Her uncle—she had vaguely heard of him—had offered her neither condolence nor patronage. Considerations of health compelled him to spend nine months of the year out of England. He had offered her the charge of Highbury Dene, and a generous salary for her services, and the girl had gratefully accepted.

She sat alone in the big dining-room before a crackling wood fire, gazing dreamily into its blazing depth. On her lap was a letter, which she had read for the second time.

In repose her expression was peculiarly sad. Her features lent themselves to this impression, for they were fragile and delicate. But there was no suggestion of weakness, either in her face or in the subtle lines of her lithe young body.

She sat fingering the letter absent-mindedly, her feet stretched out to the fire, her mind miles and miles away to her "command."

She read the letter again:—

> "DEAREST O.C. (it ran),—The 'first' seems simple. I have tried for harder things. The result of the examination will be out this week, and I will telegraph to you the marks I have made. When I have achieved this you must tell me what next I must do.
>
> "Your servant and lover,
> "RICHARD SELBY."

She let her eyes rest tenderly upon the last lines of the note, then folded it and crossed the room to where a desk lay open. She unlocked a little drawer, and put the paper inside. Then she touched a bell.

A neat maid-servant answered.

"Tell cook to lock up," she said, "it is late."

"Will you want me again, miss?"

"No, Alice, you may go to bed."

She heard the rustle of skirts in the hall, and the snapping of bolts, and sank down in the low chair before the fire.

"What next must I do?" she repeated, and a little smile played about her mouth. "Poor Dick," she murmured, "poor command!"

She sat thinking. . . . She tried to conjure up a picture of the boy she had known, in his ill-fitting suit, patiently waiting outside the big house on Blackheath to see his Dream Lady pass. . . . Somehow she couldn't imagine him as a civilian; it seemed as though he had been a soldier—her soldier—ever since time was. . . . Once he had threatened to box her ears. . . .

She woke up suddenly; she must have been asleep for some time, for the fire had burnt low. She extinguished the candles, first lighting her own, and went out through the dark hall, up the broad stairway to her room.

Here a fire burnt cheerfully enough; it had lately been replenished, and she wondered whether it was the cook or the maid who had been so attentive. There was a little dressing-room that opened from the bedroom, and at first she thought of going in there to find her dressing-gown.

Leisurely, and with her mind wandering from scene to scene, yet always coming back to one scene when an insubordinate private of hers had taken her in his arms and kissed her; wandering from face to face, yet always returning to one serious boyish face, she undressed.

She was in her night-gown and was sitting on the edge of the bed, braiding her hair, when she heard a noise in the dressing-room.

It was like no other noise she knew—and this old house was full of strange sounds—and she waited, listening tensely.

Again it came, the sound of stealthy footsteps.

There was time to fly, but she was not so inclined.

Stepping quickly to a little bureau that stood by the wall and opening a drawer, she took out a small revolver.

Then she walked over to the fire, and said sharply:

“Come out of my dressing-room, please.”

She had not to ask twice, for a door opened slowly and a man stepped into the room.

“Mr. Oxstead,” she said, without any display of emotion, and the man smiled. He glanced at the revolver in her hand and smiled again.

“Elise——” he began, but she stopped him with a gesture.

“I have no great objection to meeting a burglar,” she said coolly, “but I dislike impertinent burglars.”

Her coolness was disconcerting, although the reason was apparent to him, and he inwardly thanked Providence that he had had the forethought to minutely inspect the room before her arrival, and to remove the cartridges in the weapon which she held.

That the pistol should be in the room, he had instantly recognized as the greatest slice of luck, for since it was there he judged—and judged rightly—that she would rely rather upon the arm, than upon arousing the servants.

“Elise,” he said again, “I’ve come to continue a little conversation that was rudely interrupted by some rowdy soldiers, and to repeat an offer.”

His eyes devoured her, and in spite of her self-possession, she shivered, and drew the collar of her night-gown closer about her throat.

“I thought you were in prison,” she said slowly.

“You don’t read the newspapers, Elise,” he bantered, “or else you would have known that one of the important witnesses, the redoubtable Laddo—you know Laddo?—disappeared.”

He started walking towards her as he spoke.

“Stop!” she cried, and covered him with the revolver.

She saw the amused grin on his face, and in a flash realized her danger. She pulled the trigger with the muzzle almost touching his face. There was a click, and the next minute she was in his arms with her face pressed tightly against his shoulder.

“Listen,” he whispered savagely, “listen, you little fool—you’ve to come away from here—d’ye hear? Don’t try to shout—yes, you can bite if you like, you little devil!”

The man was strong; she felt her helplessness and ceased struggling.

She knew the futility of screaming; one scream she might give, and then that big hand would effectively silence her.

“That’s better,” he breathed, with his lips against her ear. “That’s sensible, Elise. You’ve got to come with me because I want you—d’ye hear? I’ve thought of you and dreamt of you until it seems that if I cannot get you, I’ll die.”

She heard the savage desire in his lowered voice and felt sick with fear.

“We’re going abroad, you and me! I’ve fixed Laddo—there’ll be no danger from Laddo. I’ve told him what I’m going to do—to-night!”

The last word he hissed.

“To-night, you understand? So get all those fool ideas out of your head that you’re going to be given time to pack your bag.”

The girl closed her eyes, and sank limply against him. For a moment he thought she had fainted and relaxed his grip, but with a sudden wrench she jerked herself free and fled across the room towards the door.

“Damn you,” roared Oxstead, and was after her in a moment; but as he seized her, the window of the room was thrown open, and a youth leapt in, a pasty-faced youth with quivering eyes, his slop-made suit soddened with rain, his hands torn and bleeding.

“Laddo!” cursed the man, “what do you want, you fool?”

“You—you, Oxstead,” croaked the other, “let go that girl, you brute!”

“If I do, I’ll kill you,” swore Oxstead, his face livid with anger.

“Let her go!” said the youth hoarsely, “I won’t have it—I’ve come all the way from Medway . . . when I got your letter. . . . Are you a man? Let her go or I’ll yell the house down.” He was whimpering and blubbering between terror and rage.

Oxstead, with a devilish look on his face, released the girl, and she sank swooning to the floor.

“Keep off!” screamed Laddo, and threw out his arms as the man leapt at him with a snarl.

He dodged him, judged the distance, and sprang through the window, carrying away part of the frame, and as he scrambled to his feet, he heard the thud of Oxstead behind him, and ran.

A police whistle blew, and he saw the flash of lights as he turned into a side lane with Oxstead at his heels.

Then Laddo stopped, and his pursuer closed with him.

“Now!” growled the man, and groped for his throat, “now we’ll have a settlement; you dog! do you know I’ve already told the police who you are —d’ye know that, eh?”

He shook his captive like a rat.

“I know!” gasped Laddo; “that’s why I’ve followed you. That’s for keeps!”

And he thrust the knife he had in his hand into the body of the man who held him.

CHAPTER XVI

If you cannot realize in the course of this story that the Empress Marie Henrietta made a serious attempt to land an invading army on these shores, you are in a similar case to the people of England who were one morning apprised in scare-headlines of the invasion, the next morning were informed of the defeat of the army and the capture of the enemy's transports.

Within a week the "invasion" had faded into the sphere of diplomacy, and it became a question of pounds, shillings, and pence. Indemnities, concessions, reparations, and apologies were the order of the day, and if we exclude the fillip Marie Henrietta's disastrous venture gave to the naval shipbuilding programme, and the instant increase in patriotic verse in the newspapers and on the music hall stage, there were no remarkable results.

There was no question of Britain's retaliation. That was unnecessary.

"The war ended where it began," to quote the Premier, and all that was left to do was to fix the amount of indemnity that the offending State was called upon to pay.

The beneficent effects of the "war" were mainly felt by the Rochesters, who were pardonably cock-a-hoop over their singular success, and although deputations from the Barnets, the Wessex, the Wigshires, and from the North Manchesters came to contest it, they continued in their modest claim that they were "The Fighting, Fuming, Flaming Hundred and Fifty-fifth, the Never-failing, Ever-Ready, First-in-the-Field-and-the-Last-to-Leave Rochesters."

The Barnets were the first of the aggressive and indignant soldiery who came to "take down" the Rochesters, and there followed bloodshed and riot.

Six pickets industriously attempted to quell the riot—and succeeded. There was a day of quietness with unrepentant prisoners waiting in the guard-room for the arrival of the escorts. There was yet another halcyon day when strange men from the Barnet Regiment, armed and helmeted, came to march their erring comrades back to Chatham.

Scarcely had the last of the prisoners gone, before the Wessex arrived in town. A little boy brought a message to "H" Company, which was pithy and to the point.

> "Hearing that the Rochesters (commonly called the Dirty Hundred and 55th) consider their selves a bit above class, Harry Younger, 10-stone champion of Wessex, will fite, bite, or rastle the best man they've got. Answer will oblige."

This letter enjoyed a private circulation, and, in consequence, Mick Leary, Jim Ginnett, Big Bill Sanders, and a young gentleman of "A" Company, named Haddock, formed a deputation to call upon the Wessex. They left barracks at 5.30. . . . At 6.30 p.m. the bugles called up the picket at the double.

"Rough house in town. . . . Wessex," gasped a breathless police corporal.

It will, however, serve no useful purpose to describe the riot that followed, not only in that night, but with various detachments of various regiments throughout the week.

Dick was a busy young man in these days. The riots kept him in constant employment and his mind seemed to be always on the alert. His O.C.—the man—worked him hard, and his O.C.—the woman—filled his brief leisure moments. He had little time for those amusements which in civil life had been almost indispensable, and he never read the newspapers.

Laddo, under suspicion, was a source of worry to him, for he knew that the regimental authorities waited for some confirmation of the charge laid against the lad; that his discharge lay ready for signature in the orderly-room, just as soon as Mr. Oxstead supplied the required particulars.

Dick did not know the cause of Oxstead's silence, knew nothing of the adventure at Highbury Dene, was ignorant of the fact that the man Oxstead lay desperately injured in the Barchester Cottage Hospital, but singularly reticent as to the cause of his injury.

The Brown Lady told him nothing, except that she was well and hoping to see him soon.

The longed-for first-class certificate had come. Dick had experienced the thrill of accomplishment, and the reaction when the Brown Lady's letter of congratulation had followed—for it was worded pleasantly as before, but without enthusiasm. Therefore it was with some feeling of uncertainty, as well as weariness, that Dick took his seat in a London train on the following Sunday afternoon; and the Brown Lady, who met him by appointment at Charing Cross, was quick to observe this.

After the first greeting they had turned into the Strand, and walked toward St. James's Park.

At Trafalgar Square, a racing cyclist, with a bulging satchel full of a special edition of a Sunday newspaper, came flying past. With a dexterity that was little short of marvellous he detached a quire of pink sheets and flung them into the outstretched hands of a waiting vendor, then continued his reckless flight.

Dick watched him repeat the operation half-way up Cockspur Street, and then suddenly the street was filled with the shouting of a name—and that name "Marie Henrietta."

It was the Brown Lady who bought a copy damp from the press.

"What is it?" he asked awkwardly.

I use the word "awkwardly" advisedly, because it fairly well describes Corporal Selby's general conduct when he was brought into contact with this girl.

The familiarity and the sweet intimacy of courtship had never come to him, nor that dear sense of possession. He was a mortal, permitted to enjoy the confidence of a lovely Olympian, and this did not make for natural conversation.

"It is your Princess," she smiled. "She has done something or other." As they entered the Park, she checked her walk and opened the sheet.

Dick skimmed the headlines.

MID-EUROPEAN CRISIS OVER.
SATISFACTORY SETTLEMENT.
DISPATCH FROM VAN GRAAF AGREES
TO INDEMNITY.
GENEROUS REQUEST OF THE PRINCESS MARIE
HENRIETTA.

She read much faster than he did, and he had just reached the middle of the leaded introduction when she suddenly crushed the paper in her hands, rolled it into a ball, and, in contravention of all park regulations flung it from her. He did not ask for an explanation. He quickened his steps to keep pace with her, as she led him to an unfrequented corner of the Park.

"Now, Dick!"

He noticed the sparkle in her eyes, the flushed cheeks, the air of quiet triumph, and wondered what was coming.

She sat upon one of the seats with which the deserted path was bordered, and made room for him at her side.

"Now, Elise," he was bold to say.

"I want to talk—sensibly," she smiled.

"And I—I want to talk," he said with sudden energy.

She nodded gravely, watching him.

"You don't know how I feel about you," he said huskily. "I thought I would tell you. Elise, I want you to know. It isn't that I love you, and worship you, and treasure every letter and every scrap of writing that comes from you—that's natural. But it's—it's something else."

Alas! for the first-class certificate. It had given him no words, no power to frame his thoughts into speech.

"It's another matter, Brown Lady," he went on unsteadily, "and I've got to have it out with you. Loving and worshipping lead somewhere. There is a goal, and that goal"—he hesitated, and for a moment his tongue refused to speak the audacious words—"that goal is—is marriage!"

I ask you to believe that he flushed crimson, this boy who fought off the advanced guard of the Mid-European Army. I ask you to believe also that the Brown Lady was unmoved, save for the deepening tenderness in her eyes.

"You know what I am . . . Friendly Street. . . . A board school boy of no parentage—yet if my father had been rich I should still have been the same—and you're a lady. No, no, I'm not thinking of—of the material side of it—not of the big house and the carriages. I've outgrown *that*. But you are in another world, and to me it is a dreadful thought that marriage—and all that it implies——" He shook his head, at a loss for words—"it isn't because I shrink from asking you to be a corporal's wife, to share the hardships of barrack life. It's because I dare not ask so pure, so dear a lady to be a wife at all."

She put her hand in his, and drew it under the cover of her cloak.

"Dick, poor Dick," she whispered, "you must not put me amongst the gods—you think too much, and idealize too much—I am human—oh! so very human!"

She threw a swift glance along the path—so human was she—then bent forward and pressed her lips to his.

His arm was about her, and for one moment the world slipped away from them, and they sat enthroned in a heaven of their own. Then very gently she disengaged herself.

He was trembling like a leaf, but he made a supreme effort to recover his self-possession.

"O.C.," he said, and his voice shook, "don't you think I'm a fool?"

She smiled into his face.

"No, corporal," she said.

"Corporal!" he went on, rising to his feet, and talking in a tone of perplexity, "that's the wonderful part about it! If I were Colonel Selby, or Captain Selby, or Lieutenant Selby——"

The Brown Lady smiled—something was making her very happy that afternoon—but she said nothing.

CHAPTER XVII

In clubs, in restaurants, in popular teashops, where hard-worked clerks gathered after the day's work to sip their tea and play dominoes, there was one topic of conversation. The *queues* that waited at the theatre doors, the 'bus-driver speaking over his shoulder to the smoking passenger—they all spoke of the same thing—the graceful act of the Princess Marie Henrietta.

In the service clubs and at the St. George's, where diplomats and wise attachés met, there was a whisper that the British Government had not been so greatly surprised. It was rumoured that there had been an exchange of views between ministers, and that the much-discussed portion of the Mid-European Government's dispatch had been very carefully considered and reported upon.

If there was one man in London who knew nothing whatever about this famous Dispatch No. 9, it was Corporal Selby, who went off to the Union Jack Club with a curious sense of elation, had his tea in solitude—an object of some interest to half-a-dozen soldier men who were taking their meals at the time—and retired to his cubicle at an early hour, to dream of a wonderful lady and her great condescensions.

He was up betimes in the morning, for he was due at Medway before Commanding Officer's parade. He took his bath, breakfasted, nodded a cheerful *au revoir* to the pleasant porter in the vestibule of the club, and descended the broad steps to the sordid meanness of Waterloo Road.

He looked at his watch—he had time to walk to Charing Cross—and he stepped out with the intention of crossing Waterloo Bridge and reaching the station by way of the Strand. He was in the middle of the Bridge when he came face to face with Oxstead—Oxstead, haggard of face, with a short stubbly beard, but withal prosperous.

The man stopped on seeing Dick, and the corporal had no other course but to stop also.

"Well, my young friend—if I may be permitted to call you such," began the man with a contortion of his face that was meant to be a smile, "what do you think of your work?"

"I don't understand you," said Dick, eyeing him steadily, "and I'm afraid I haven't a great deal of time to spare. If you will excuse me——"

He made as if to pass on; but the other stopped him.

“I don’t suppose you understand—oh, no!” he sneered, “I don’t suppose you sent Laddo to do me in—eh?”

“What Laddo has done to you is his own business. I know nothing about it, nor do I wish to know,” said Dick shortly.

“What?” the man frowned doubtingly, “Laddo didn’t tell you? Perhaps our dear Elise——”

“Stop, please!”

The command was neither loud nor threatening, but it was remarkably compelling.

“You will not speak of that lady in the way you have,” said Dick sharply, “because if you do I shall not consider the fact that you’re ill—as you evidently are—but I shall take you by the neck and throw you into the river.”

“You’re a fine, brave fellow, corporal,” said Oxstead between his teeth, “to threaten a man more dead than alive.”

“When you drown a rat,” said Dick coldly, “you do not trouble to inquire as to the general state of its health.”

With which he left the man standing in the middle of the side-walk helpless with impotent rage.

Dick reached the station a quarter of an hour ahead of time, to find a dainty lady in brown awaiting him.

“I thought—I thought——” he stammered.

“You thought I’d gone back to Barchester,” she said with a happy little laugh. “I *did* want to surprise you—and I wanted to be surprised.”

“You wanted——?”

She nodded.

“Tell me,” she whispered, “do you know?”

His bewilderment was very genuine.

“Do I know?” he repeated slowly, “know what, O.C.?”

“Oh! Dick, then I am surprised!” laughingly.

He would have demanded some explanation of this cryptic speech of hers, but she took his arm and they walked to the far end of the platform, where beneath them flowed the broad river, and the stately breadth of the Embankment ran from the Houses of Parliament to the musty city eastward.

"I won't tell you, Dick," she said, "indeed and indeed I won't tell you—but I want you to tell me—to write to me and tell me every detail. And, Dick, dear, you must go on loving me, and thinking for me, and planning for me—not dream castles, dear, but houses with rooms and gardens."

She talked on and Dick listened in a happy dream till the guard's warning whistle sounded and he jumped into the nearest carriage.

He leant out of the window.

"*Au revoir*," he said gaily, and he took her face between his hands and kissed her as the train moved slowly out.

He waved his hand to her till she was hidden by a turn, and then with a sigh he sank back into the cushioned seat of a first-class carriage.

"Hullo!" he thought in some alarm, for he was a law-abiding young man, and he had only a third-class ticket. Then he glanced at the other occupant and sprang to his feet.

The steel-grey eyes of the Officer Commanding Rochester Regiment regarded him with grim benevolence.

"Sit down, Selby!" he said, and Dick obeyed.

"I'm sorry, sir; I'll change at the next station."

"No need—you had better come along to Medway," said the colonel, with a twinkle in his eye. "I suppose you felt that a first-class ticket was justifiable in the circumstances?"

"No, sir," said Dick, a little mystified, "as a matter of fact, I have a third-class ticket——"

"Then you can pay the difference at the other end," said the colonel.

Colonel Stratford was a reticent, silent man, who seldom unbent, and Dick, to whom the colonel was an awful and a sacred being, aloof from and above his fellows, sat bolt upright, uncomfortably, and answered the questions the O.C. fired at him from time to time.

"By the way," said the colonel, "the lady—if you will forgive the impertinence—who saw you off. Her face is familiar to me."

“Yes, sir,” said Dick quietly; “her father commanded the Rochesters.”

The colonel’s eyebrows rose.

“Not Cordray?” he asked, and Dick nodded.

“Extraordinary—extraordinary!” muttered the colonel, and relapsed into a silence which was not broken until the train ran into Medway.

Dick lagged behind, for he had to pay the difference on his ticket, but to his surprise the colonel was waiting for him, and side by side they walked to the barracks.

Dick saluted and parted from the colonel at the barrack gate, and crossed the square to his quarters.

Once he thought the colonel must be following him, for he saw a man salute. He threw a swift glance over his shoulder, but no officer was in sight.

Then another man passed him and saluted, and he smiled, for he saw the threadbare joke. It was one of the fictions of the regiment that the King’s Corporal should be saluted.

He walked into his barrack-room, as the men were laying out their straps prior to the parade. Colour-sergeant Taylor was there talking with another sergeant. He saw Dick, then shouted—

“ ’Tion!”

Instantly the room stood to attention.

Dick stood with the rest and looked toward the door for the officer this order foreshadowed.

Then the colour-sergeant came towards him, halted at two paces and saluted stiffly.

“Your kit has been taken into stores, sir.”

“But—but what do you mean—what does this mean, colour-sergeant?” said Dick in amazement.

“Don’t you know, Mr. Selby?” The non-com. was evidently surprised at Dick’s ignorance.

He took from the breast of his tunic a paper. Dick saw the familiar heading, “Battalion Orders,” and, like a man in a dream, heard the sergeant read:

“At the recommendation of Her Imperial Highness the Princess Marie Henrietta of Mid-Europe, the following promotion is gazetted:—Corporal Selby, 2nd Rochester Regiment, to be Lieutenant 2nd Rochester Regiment as from the date of his attestation.”

CHAPTER XVIII

There was a hum of light talk, little snatches of laughter, and now and again, from the other end of the table, a loud commanding chuckle from the mirth-loving second-in-command.

The table lamps threw islands of light on white damask and glittering silver, and behind the rows of scarlet-coated men, the mess waiters moved noiselessly.

Heads and horns, trophies of many a stalk, bristled on the walls, and over the big fireplace the furled colours of the regiment were crossed.

There were black coats among the scarlet, for it was guest night in the Rochester Mess, and outside the band was playing the overture to "Faust."

Under the furled flags, taciturn, grey, severe, sat the Officer Commanding, exchanging a word now and again with Major Colley, who sat on his right, but for the most part silent.

There was noise enough at the far end of the table where the subalterns foregathered. A constant gurgle of laughter floated up, and once the colonel shot a swift glance along the smiling faces from under his shaggy brows. There was no cause for anxiety, of course. Young men are kittle cattle, but the Rochester boys were thoroughbreds through and through, and what he saw was reassuring.

The youngest of the subalterns was listening with quiet amusement to a preposterous story of prowess in big game country, from a young man, who, despite his gravity and for all his circumstantial detail, had been no farther abroad than Rome. It was all for the benefit of one of the juniors, who listened with open eyes and open mouth to the recital.

The colonel was suddenly aware that some one was addressing him across the table.

"I beg your pardon, Sir James," he said, and leant over.

"Is it a fact, colonel, that——?" He put a question and the colonel nodded.

"Yes, it is a custom of the regiment. In other corps it is the Mess President, but in the Rochesters it is the junior subaltern, the most junior."

He looked round the table, then knocked on the cloth before him with his bony knuckle. A silence fell upon the Mess as the colonel rose, glass in hand.

"Mr. Selby—the King."

Dick rose to his feet with all the coolness of a veteran. He held his glass forward.

"Gentlemen—the King," he said gravely, and the band at the Mess window crashed forth the National Anthem as the glasses rose.

As the assembly seated itself again, Sir James Brady leant forward with raised eyebrows.

"An extraordinary young man—considering," he said.

"Considering," repeated the colonel dryly.

Afterwards, when at a signal from the colonel the company rose and sauntered into the ante-room, Sir James Brady took the colonel's arm and led him to a quiet corner.

"Colonel," he said with a smile, "mark me down as an inquisitive old gentleman, but that boy interests me. He rose from the ranks, I know that; on the recommendation of the Princess Marie Henrietta, I know that, too. I gather also that the allowance that is being made him is from the same wonderful source. A remarkable lady, the Princess."

"Well?"

"Well," said the other slowly, "it seems all very fairy-like and unreal; even the boy himself isn't behaving as he ought to behave. He is one of a class—of the people. He is neither *gauche* nor shy, neither over-deferential nor over-bold. How do you account for that?"

The colonel made no reply, but waited, an amused smile hovering at the corners of his mouth.

"He couldn't have had private tuition, he——"

"That's where you're wrong, Sir James," said the O.C., "he *has*! I do not know who his tutor was—or rather is—but I can guess," he went on.

"Speaking of the Princess, what is the latest Cabinet secret, Sir James?" he bantered. "You members of Parliament, with the confidences of the Government in addition, should be able to tell poor ignorant soldiers in the back-water of a provincial garrison all the news that is going."

Sir James threw out deprecating hands. “I am the worst man in the world,” he confessed, “for that sort of thing. All I know I have learnt from the papers. She holds those people of hers by so many strings. That cousin—I forget his name—who suggested she should clear out—she shot.”

The colonel nodded.

“Another Prince fellow, Fritz of Ostein-Harbuck, she banished from her realms; she quelled a socialist rising——” He shrugged his shoulders. “However, she has had her lesson,” he said, “she has made the invasion of England an impossibility.”

The colonel made no immediate response. He stroked his white moustache thoughtfully for a moment. Then he spoke.

“Why do you say impossible?” he asked. “What has anybody done, what lesson has the country learned from its ten minutes’ invasion?”

Sir James Brady was an excellent gentleman, a painstaking politician, and a man of singularly high ideals.

“We have learnt,” he said with a suggestion of pompousness, “that there is a Providence——”

“Stuff and nonsense,” said the colonel brutally; “you can’t base your scheme of defence on the vagaries of the English weather. What has happened is this,” he went on with a volubility that bore no resemblance to his usual reserve, “you have formed a school of mutual admiration. ‘England was invaded!’ you cry; the invasion was repelled, therefore England cannot be invaded! You have slackened on the Navy, slackened on the Army, you have gone back to the dear old ‘let it slide’ days, and you’ll repent it.”

“But, my dear colonel,” expostulated the M.P., “the danger is past. The power of Marie Henrietta is broken.”

The colonel laughed softly and maliciously.

“Hang it all!” said the member irritably, “there really is nothing to be alarmed about. Marie Henrietta is well quieted. Why, she is making every effort to wipe out the memory of her *contretemps*.”

“You mean the national fête at Kier?” asked the colonel.

“Yes.”

“A fête to celebrate the commercial prosperity of her country; a grand review of the mercantile navy?”

“Surely you see nothing sinister in that?” Sir James asked irritably.

The colonel took time to consider his reply.

“When a lady of the Princess’ ambition and pride gathers some four hundred vessels of all sizes in one port,” he said slowly, “and when at the same time she mobilizes three army corps——”

“For manœuvres,” the member interjected hastily.

“For manœuvres,” accepted the colonel, “and when the three army corps are within easy distance of the four hundred ships of all size——”

“Broken—I tell you,” growled Sir James. “She’s had her lesson.”

The colonel smiled dryly.

“If England is what England seems,” he quoted, “I can well imagine her Imperial Highness may not again attempt to throw her army corps upon these shores—but you may be satisfied that her ambitions will find an outlet.”

He said little more, but walked through the crowd of chattering men, opened the big glass doors that led to the front of the Mess, and stood enjoying the soft breeze that blew down from the rugged hills over Medway.

After a while he heard the clink-clank of a sword and turned to meet the cloaked figure of Dick.

He nodded as the youth saluted.

“Orderly officer Selby?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

Dick stood waiting.

“Well,” demanded the colonel, “how do your changed circumstances appeal to you?”

“It is difficult to put my feeling into words,” said Dick with a little laugh. “I am rather hazed at present.”

“Let me see; you have had your commission six weeks now?”

“Six weeks and four days, sir,” answered Dick promptly, and the colonel smiled behind his hand.

“I hope you will carry away a pleasant memory with you, and come back to the regiment a seasoned warrior,” he said quietly.

The young officer's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Carry away, sir," he faltered, "are they going to send me away from the regiment?"

"Why, Selby!" said the colonel sharply, "surely you know that an application has been made on your behalf for transference to the staff, and that the War Office has approved of your being seconded?"

Dick shook his head in bewilderment.

"I didn't know," he confessed slowly. "I——" Then he remembered O.C. and became instantly dumb.

"Perhaps you have some friend at Court," he said, and Dick, meeting his eyes, knew that the colonel guessed his secret.

Dismissed with a curt nod, Dick made his way through the darkness to the patch of light that marked the door of the guard-room.

"First post" had sounded and the first wailing notes of the "Last post" rang out as he came on to the square. His duties retained their novelty, and he found the orderly sergeants drawn up before the guard-room to deliver their reports, with that same air of pleasant discovery that had been his the first day he had assumed his duties. He walked slowly back to the Mess after his tiny "parade" had been dismissed and, not loosening his sword-belt, rejoined the party.

At eleven o'clock he made his visit to the guard.

As he stepped briskly across the square he heard the slap of the sentry's rifle.

"Halt! Who comes there?"

"Visiting rounds."

"Stand, visiting rounds! Guard, turn out!"

He heard the scramble of men as they poured from the guard-room, heard the muttered orders of the non-commissioned officer.

"Advance, visiting rounds; all's well."

He listened with extraordinary gravity whilst Private "Laddo" recited his orders.

"Take charge of all Government property in view of me post; in case of fire, alarm the guard; turn out the guard to all armed parties approaching me

post, to all members of the Rile Family, to General Officers at all times an' the Officer Commanding once by day."

He as gravely inspected the prisoners' room, and was shocked to find a wild-eyed Shorty, who, to the horror of the sergeant, insisted upon calling his officer "Ole Dick."

Then he went back to his quarters.

He had to pass along a narrow path that ran under the high wall that separated the barracks from the street outside.

He thought he heard a curious noise, and stopped. A little ahead of him was a small wicket-gate, placed for the convenience of officers, and to his surprise this was open.

Rejecting, as unnecessary, his first idea of calling for the guard, he walked towards the gate with the intention of closing it. As he did so, a woman stepped through.

She was cloaked from head to foot, and a motor-veil hid her face.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Are you Lieutenant Selby?" she said.

Her voice was a little harsh, and there was a suspicion of a foreign accent in her tone.

"I am," he said briefly, "but——"

"I have come from a friend of yours," she interrupted him; "from Elise—she is in trouble."

He went white.

"Trouble?" he whispered. "What—what——?"

"An accident—here."

She pointed to the road, and Dick stepped past her into the street, deserted save for a carriage that waited a few paces beyond the wicket.

He heard the wicket slam behind him, and turned quickly.

He did not hear the three men who sprang from the carriage, but suddenly something hit him and he went down like a log.

CHAPTER XIX

Private Shorty woke at 2 a.m. from a troubled sleep.

He was lying on a sloping shelf of wood, his pillow was a wooden ledge, his covering a blanket. He was fully dressed, save that his belt and boots were missing. Thereupon Private Shorty realized that he was in the guard-room, and groaned. His throat was parched, and he made his way to the steel-lined door of the "clink" and hammered vigorously.

"Hallo!" said the muffled voice of the sentry without.

"Water!" croaked Shorty; "get me some water, old son—I'm dying."

"That you, Shorty?" asked the sentry unsympathetically.

Shorty recognized the voice of Private Blake, and his heart sank.

"Bill," he pleaded through the keyhole, "if you've got the heart of a man ——"

A cold, unfeeling chuckle came back to him.

"Go to sleep, Shorty," said the cheerful sentry outside.

"Water!" implored Shorty.

"It'll get into your napper," said the cautious sentry, and then a confused idea that had been at the back of the prisoner's head came to his relief. Gradually the events of the night were taking shape, and he remembered the circumstances of his carouse.

"Here," he said eagerly, his lips to the big keyhole, "I want to see the orderly officer."

"I dessay."

"I do, Bill——"

"Don't Bill me, you intoxicated feller," warned the sentry.

"I do, straight," said Shorty earnestly; "they're goin' to do him in—you remember the bloke I got the R.C.M. over——"

"You're kiddin'," said Bill Blake, but there was hesitancy in his voice.

"If I never breathe," began Shorty—then the sentry's steps died away. By and by he returned with the sergeant of the guard and there was a

jangling of keys and Shorty blinked and stared in the light.

"Bring the blighter into the guard-room," said the sergeant, and Bill led his charge into the big room where the men of the guard lay sleeping.

Shorty told his story. He had been "down-town" and had met the gentleman and a lady. She was a perfect lady because "she wore rings," said Shorty, and they had taken him to their room at the hotel and had asked him how he liked the new "ranker"; were very interested in what he was doing. When they learnt that he was the orderly officer they wanted to know what his duties were, and Shorty (he confessed ruefully) being "full as the moon," had supplied information with alarming frankness.

All this was fairly interesting, but more was to come. For while Shorty had dozed, overcome by the closeness of the room (as he artlessly put it), he had heard the gentleman say to the lady, "Why wait?—it would be as easy to fix him to-night."

Shorty did not remember much after that. He had a dim idea that he made an apologetic exit (with some reference to the closeness of the room, you may be sure), and walked into the arms of the regimental police, who, misinterpreting Shorty's faintness, uncharitably "jugged" him.

His narrative was pardonably incoherent, and the sergeant listened with doubt and suspicion.

He cogitated for some moments, then he took down the big tin lantern from the wall and carefully lit the candle. "You probably dreamt it, and there's no doubt about you being drunk," said the candid non-commissioned officer, "but come along with me."

The sergeant had no difficulty in finding a sleepy mess waiter, who, welcoming anything that savoured of variety, brought Major Harvey, the second-in-command.

Very briefly the sergeant told his story.

"It sounds very thrilling," said the major icily. "You had better put it in your guard report, and tell Mr. Selby in the morning."

"Very good, sir," said the abashed sergeant.

"Stay—I don't see why I should be disturbed and not Mr. Selby. Jones"—the officer turned to the mess servant—"run along to Mr. Selby's room and tell him I would like to see him."

The man was gone a few minutes, and he returned rather breathlessly.

“Mr. Selby is not in his room, sir.”

Instantly the older officer dropped his air of irritation.

He mounted the stairs two at a time, and they heard his heavy footfall in the corridor above.

He came back as quickly, and pushed open the door of the guard-room.

“Come out, you fellows; something has happened to little Selby.”

The three officers were in the darkened hall in a second.

“Get another lantern, somebody—one of you go across to the colonel’s, and tell him.”

The party made a detour of the mess without finding any sign of the missing orderly officer.

“He couldn’t have left barracks,” said the major, “unless he went by the wicket-gate—bring the key, somebody.”

They found the gate fastened, and the major was inserting the key, when one of the officers made an exclamation.

“Hullo! What’s this?” he asked, and stooped to pick up a small handkerchief.

“A lady’s, as I’m a sinner!” he said, and swore.

The gate was opened, and the party walked through into the deserted street.

There was no sign of life. A row of street lamps planted at intervals emphasized the loneliness.

“Nobody in sight,” said the major.

“There’s a cap, sir,” said the sergeant, and picked it out of the gutter. It was broken at the edge and damp.

“The lantern, sergeant,” cried the second-in-command. In the light he looked at the cap in his hand.

“Selby’s,” he whispered—“and caked with blood!”

The good people of Medway heard the “Assembly” go at half-past two in the morning. Later they heard the swift tramp of feet as the Rochester pickets turned out to search for Second-Lieutenant Selby, some-time of Friendly Street, Deptford.

CHAPTER XX

Dick came to consciousness with a feeling of physical sickness, and a throbbing head. He was lying on the brick floor of a poorly furnished cottage. The oil lamp that stood on the table gave a dim light to the room and filled it with a sickly odour. His white shirt-front was stained with blood, his new scarlet mess jacket torn and bespattered with mud, and his hands ached unaccountably.

He recognized the man who sat astride of the chair opposite to him—Oxstead's face he could never forget. But the other two men were strangers to him. Dick tried to move his hands, and then discovered the cause of the pain in them. His two thumbs were tied together with whipcord, and he was helpless.

"Do you know where you are?"

Oxstead's voice was mocking, and his sneer unmistakable.

"You are in Essex; I brought you here in a motor-car—listen!" He walked to the door and opened it, and out of the darkness there came in a low musical murmur and the scent of brine.

"That's the sea," said Oxstead flippantly, "the sea that sometimes gives up its dead and sometimes decently hides it."

Dick made no reply. He had little doubt as to the significance of the man's speech.

"And there are other reasons," said Oxstead, with a simulation of carelessness; "the sea offers me an open road from a land where I have already spent too much of my valuable time, and where I am in danger of spending much more than I can conveniently afford."

He took a cigar from his pocket with deliberation, bit off the end, and lit it.

"Selby," he said, "you're a fool."

Dick eyed him curiously, but asked for no explanation.

"It's because of Elise," Oxstead went on calmly. "Don't you know that when a man like me wants a thing, the best thing to do is to make it apparent to him that the thing is his for the asking, and the worst course is to put

obstacles in his way? I wasn't so keen on Elise till you put your fool nose into the business, but I'm keen now—mad keen."

He took a heavy gold watch from his pocket and examined its face.

"Three o'clock," he said, "she'll be here in less than half an hour."

He kept his eyes fixed on his prisoner as he spoke, but Dick had tight rein over himself, and if Oxstead expected some outburst he was disappointed.

"She's coming to this little party," he went on, "and, when I've settled with you, she and I are leaving—together."

He flicked the ash from his cigar as he spoke.

"I dare say you'll wonder what argument I have put forward to induce a young lady to come on a long motor-car journey across the country? You do, I can see. Well, I'll tell you—it's love."

He chuckled.

"Not love of me—that will come in time; love of you, my young friend."

Then Dick spoke.

"You've had your trouble for nothing," he said; "she will not come."

Oxstead laughed.

"You think not?"

"I am sure—if you sent her a letter, or if you sent——"

There was a whirr of wheels outside, and the purring of a motor. Oxstead sprang to the door and Dick's heart sank, for the voice of the Brown Lady, very clear and distinct, came to him.

He heard Oxstead's insolent greeting; he heard the swish of her skirts, and then she came in, cloaked and dusty and tired-looking.

She saw Dick lying on the floor, and hesitated a moment at the threshold, but Oxstead was behind her, and to avoid contact with him she came into the room, and he quickly closed and fastened the door.

"Here she is!" he said triumphantly. "She wouldn't come, eh? Why ____"

She turned on him.

“You think I have been trapped, Mr. Oxstead? You think I did not know that your message about Mr. Selby was a trick? That I walked blindly to the snare? You are mistaken.”

Oxstead took a step toward hers.

“By God! You little devil——!” he began, and stopped, for the black muzzle of an automatic pistol covered him.

He hesitated for a moment, and then in a fury of passion he flung himself upon her.

Twice the pistol exploded, and the room was filled with the scent of cordite; then Oxstead had her—Oxstead, exultant, held her in his strong arms.

“I was goin’ to make this a pleasant ceremony” (in his excitement his language dropped back to the language of the slums from whence he had sprung), “with a nice long explanation as to what I’d do when this feller was done with.” He gave Dick a vicious kick as he spoke. “But there’s no time for patter—is that boat ready?”

He turned to the two men who had been silent participators in the scene, and they nodded.

“Where’s Arthur?” he asked.

“Outside with the car.”

“Bring him in.”

The fourth man came in—a weak-faced youth in leather cap and gaiters, a cigarette drooping feebly from his mouth.

“Take his legs—you!” said Oxstead, “and you other fellows his head. Shove a handkerchief in his mouth. Now,” he said to the girl as they lifted the helpless soldier, “if you scream, d’ye know what I’ll do? I’ll blind him, I will, by God! With my own hands . . . d’ye hear? You come along!”

Terror had seized upon Elise, and she could scarcely find her voice.

“What are you going to do?” she asked in a terrified whisper.

“You’ll see,” said Oxstead, and holding her tightly by the arm he led her into the night.

It was pitch dark outside, and the three who carried Dick stumbled and swore as they made a laborious way to where the boat was made fast.

Suddenly one of the men stopped.

"Oxstead," he called in a hoarse whisper, and Oxstead hurried up, dragging the girl with him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Look at the sea."

Oxstead strained his eyes forward. He could distinguish nothing.

"What is it?" he asked again.

"Ships!" whispered the other. "Hundreds of 'em? Big 'uns an' little 'uns —look!"

Oxstead crouched and looked.

"You're mad," he said roughly. "I can see nothing but the sea."

"But they're there," urged the other. "Guv'nor, I'm used to these nights. Look! They're covering the whole of the roadway!"

"Shadows on the water, you fool," said Oxstead. "Hurry up and get this fellow in the boat and settled with."

"For God's sake, tell me, what are you going to do with him?" cried the girl, trying to wrench herself free.

"Be silent!" he ordered, but she struggled fiercely, and sent scream after scream through the silent night.

Oxstead clapped his huge hand over her mouth.

"Hurry!" he grated. "Into the boat with him. We'll——"

"*Halt! Wer da?*"

Ahead of them a commanding voice challenged.

"*Wer da?*" came the voice again, and Oxstead, releasing the girl, ran forward in a paroxysm of rage.

He saw a tall figure looming out of the night, and sprang at it. The figure shortened its arm and lunged forward. . . . Oxstead went down with a bayonet through his heart.

The little group of officers listened attentively as Dick told his story. He was back again at the cottage, released from his bonds, and the men who

surrounded him wore on the turned-down collars of their big grey coats the crowned lion of Michel-Hansburg-Altona.

This much Dick saw, and thought he was dreaming.

“A curious story,” said the clean-shaven man who had interrogated him. “What is your name?”

Dick answered, and there was a little murmur of surprise.

“This is remarkable,” said the officer, and shook his head in bewilderment.

He held a whispered conference in some language that Dick could not understand, and by and by he addressed the youth again.

“You’re at liberty to go, and with you the lady.” He clicked his heels together and raised a punctilious hand to his peaked cap. “It is an order from the Exalted.”

One of the officers opened the door. Over the sea the sky was already pearl grey, and silhouetted against the ghostly light of dawn rode a fleet of two hundred vessels of every size and importance, from the ocean liner to the tiny trawler.

As far as the eye could reach on either hand Dick saw the regiments of bivouac. Line upon line of stacked arms and sprawling men. He saw the artillery columns parked at intervals. The grey wagons, the picketed horses, and far away on the extreme right one plain, square tent, before which a thin, tapering mast rose. From this, in the morning breeze, fluttered a flag, the design on which he could not see, but could guess.

“I see you have a car,” said the officer. “I will furnish you with a mechanician and a white flag, and I will ask you to be the bearer of a message to the Officer Commanding the troops at Colchester, calling upon him to surrender.”

“Surrender?” queried Dick stupidly.

“Surrender,” repeated the officer gravely; “the troops of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress hold Essex as far as Chelmsford.”

CHAPTER XXI

London woke slowly, as London does. Sleepily, and with a rubbing of eyes and a staring out of upper windows at the weather. Milk-carts rattled through the street and weary shop-boys went about their work taking down shutters.

There was nothing in the newspapers that morning of any note. There was an account of an aeroplane trial in Scotland "from our special correspondent," and one of a company promoter's trial, which, however, was somewhat discounted by the fact that a verbatim report had appeared in the evening newspapers of the day before.

The station platform at St. John's, Lewisham, was filled with business men on their way to town, who, their newspapers carefully folded under their arms, discussed the weather, the Government, and the South-Eastern Railway.

Mr. Pettifrew, of Burton Villas, complained bitterly of each in turn.

"I wanted to send a telegram this morning to my son, who is arriving at Harwich from Holland, and I'm blest if even the telegraph wires are working—it's iniquitous!"

A tall young man in pince-nez smiled in superior fashion.

"You can't blame the Government for that, Mr. Pettifrew," he said; "it is very often a matter of climatic condition that causes a wire to go wrong. I had a wire this morning from Lord Bingham—at least," he corrected himself modestly, "indirectly from Lord Bingham, telling me to call at the Bunhill Row Armoury——"

"Volunteers!" snorted Mr. Pettifrew.

"Territorials!" amended the other carefully. "I want to point out——"

"Here's our train," said Mr. Pettifrew suddenly.

It came tearing round the curve.

"That's not ours," murmured the young gentleman with the pince-nez, "it's not stopping——"

With a roar and a shriek the train swept through the station, and the men on the platform looked at each other in astonishment.

“Now,” said the thoroughly annoyed Pettifrew, “what the devil was that? It can’t be the 9.10, and it certainly isn’t the 9.15—eh?”

“Soldiers,” said a timid voice.

“The train was full of soldiers. And there were two machine guns on the rear truck,” said the Territorial proudly.

“Soldiers?”

Mr. Pettifrew clicked his lips irritably.

“Of all the nonsensical things to do! Actually running troop trains at the very busiest part of the day! This railway is too appalling for words. Our train is already seven minutes late—hullo!”

From the branch that led through Lewisham Junction came another train of excessive length, and drawn by two engines. It was made up of trucks and carriages and came flashing through the station without a stop.

“Soldiers!” said the Territorial unnecessarily, for here the khaki-clad men were plainly to be seen. There were two field-guns on each truck, the closed trucks were filled with horses, and sitting on limber and gun and in any place that afforded foothold, were the artillery men.

“Well!”

Mr. Pettifrew had no words to express his indignation. He subsided into helpless wrath when five minutes later yet another train came through, packed with infantry men.

The stationmaster stood by the signalman in his box with a troubled face.

“Which way are they going?” he asked.

“Through London Bridge to the City at Ludgate Hill; then through Snow Hill to Moorgate Street, then back through Bishopsgate to the Great Eastern,” came the reply.

The stationmaster nodded.

“Into Essex,” he said. “I wonder what is on?”

The signalman snicked back a lever to give “line clear” before he answered.

“When did we get these ‘times,’ sir?” he asked.

“At five this morning—here comes the Medway special.”

He stood at the open window of the box as the 2nd Battalion of the Rochesters went past at forty miles an hour.

"It's very curious," said the stationmaster, shaking his head, and went slowly down the steps of the box to the platform. A clerk was waiting for him with a service telegram. He took it and read it, and his eyebrows rose. He read it again, carefully folded it and placed it in his pocket, then walked to the crowded platform, pushed his way through the interrogating throng and mounted a seat.

"Gentlemen," he announced loudly, "the passenger service is suspended until midday, when the Company hope to resume it. I cannot give you any further information than that."

He listened imperturbably whilst excited city folk expressed themselves with some freedom on the subject of railways and railway management.

"It's monstrous!" fumed Mr. Pettifrew, stamping up the stairway to the bridge. "It's the most dashed blankable thing that this unmentionable railway has——"

"Whar-r-r-r!"

A roar of wheels and an ear-piercing shriek, as another train shot past, its carriages rocking.

"Soldiers—more soldiers!" said Mr. Pettifrew gloomily. "This is a nice experience for a taxpayer!"

The City of London was already crowded with vehicular traffic when the 2nd Rochesters formed up—partly in the courtyard outside Cannon Street Station, and partly inside the domed terminus.

There was no excitement, no fuss; men fell in by companies expeditiously.

A pale young man saluted the colonel, and the O.C. nodded a welcome.

"Are you fit after your unpleasant experience?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Dick.

"Good. I got your telephone message. You will find the man Ladd in charge of your kit. Get into it and join us at Liverpool Street Station."

Dick saluted and went in search of Laddo.

City policemen held up the traffic to let the regiment pass. Later it had to perform the same service for the Wessex, the West Kents, A, Y, and H

Batteries of the Royal Horse Artillery, the 68th, 71st, 94th, 10th, 14th, and 23rd Field Batteries, and two hastily mobilized field bearer companies of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

This military activity was not to pass without notice in Fleet Street, and reporters went racing westward with news of these extraordinary events.

In the office of the *Evening Post*, the greatest of London's smart dailies, men wrote feverishly, and the linotypes clicked and thumped with particulars of the concentration.

"How much have we got?" asked the chief sub-editor of the master printer.

"We've got a column and a half 'up,' " said that unemotional man, "and another column setting."

"We'll come out with what we've got," said the chief sub.

He unhooked a little telephone that connected him with the machine-room.

"Is the billman there?—take this down. I want a three-line bill: 'Sensational Military Movements,' and——"

A telephone bell rang at his elbow, and one of his assistants took down the receiver, spoke a few words, and pushed the instrument to his chief.

"Hullo! hullo!" said the chief sub impatiently. "Yes, this is the *Post*—hey? you're Chelmsford?—yes."

Through the receiver came the words distinct and clear:

"*A Foreign Army of 100,000 men landed in Essex at midnight. Colchester has been abandoned and the troops are falling back on London . . .*"

Then the message ended abruptly, as well it might, for at that moment an Uhlan patrol cut the wires west of Chelmsford.

The chief sub was on his feet in a second. But before he could utter a word there came through the doorway an elderly officer. He wore the red tab on his collar that denotes the Staff-Officer.

"May I ask, sir," began the chief sub, as the officer, removing his cap, took his place in an unoccupied chair by the table.

"I am the censor," said the officer courteously, "and I must ask you to show me a copy of everything that is to appear in your newspaper."

“But——” began the chief sub.

“I’m afraid,” smiled the other, “I shall be a terrible nuisance.” He picked up a proof that lay before him. It was a description of the regiments that had passed through the city. He read it carefully, took a blue pencil, and marked it “forbidden.”

“But, my dear sir,” expostulated the sub, “I must—must. This is the City of London; you have no right to do this.”

“I find myself at issue with you,” said the polite officer. “The City is now under martial law and, if necessary, I shall dynamite your machinery and shoot you.”

“But—but—what the deuce am I to put in this paper?” demanded the distracted journalist.

The officer smiled deprecatingly.

“May I suggest an article on silkworm culture, or an interesting account of bee farming,” he said pleasantly.

So whilst armed men concentrated before an advancing and victorious invader the *Evening Post* mildly and innocuously dealt learnedly with “Small Holdings for Suburbanites” and the rest of the London Press followed suit.

CHAPTER XXII

"NOTICE

"During the Extraordinary General Manœuvres of the Army in the Eastern portion of England, the public is notified that neither telegrams nor letters can be accepted for any of the following cities, towns and villages, the wires being in the occupation of the military authorities, and the train services being entirely suspended to allow of the more effective operations of H.M. Troops.

"(Signed) SIDNEY BUCKLEY,
"*Postmaster-General*."

(Here follows a list of the towns mentioned above.)

Remarkable as it may seem, the people of Great Britain were for three days ignorant of what was happening in Essex. Beyond the vaguely worded notification displayed at every post office, there was no further intimation of the fact that a foreign army had stolen into England, evading the Channel Fleet by a manœuvre (so simple that it was scarcely raised above trickery), and had succeeded in establishing itself firmly upon these shores.

The events of the week ending May 17 can be categorically set down, so that the reader may follow the sequence of happenings.

I have extracted most of these facts from the curious diary of Lord Hanmouth, Principal Secretary for Foreign Affairs, whose retirement from his high office will be fresh in your mind, and whose book was withdrawn from circulation three days after issue.

May 11.—A dispatch was received from the Government of Mid-Europe (Dispatch 14-19—) suggesting a conference with a view to the curtailing of armaments.

May 12.—An urgent dispatch from Sir Francis Calne, the Ambassador at the capital of Mid-Europe, conveyed news that the M-E Fleet (as it has been derisively called) had departed hurriedly from Marieshaven and was to rendezvous north of the Shetlands.

May 13.—The Channel Fleet left Dover, steaming northwards.

May 14.—Mid-European Fleet reported ninety miles north of the Isle of Lewis.

May 15.—North Atlantic Fleet left Milford Haven ostensibly for gun practice.

May 16.—The famous Mid-European "commercial fleet," with 140,000 men and guns, sailed from seven ports. Unattended by any ship of war, it crossed the North Sea and effected a landing north of Clacton.

This was the position when the First, Second, and Third Army Corps moved out to hold the invader in check, and this was the situation that existed, but which England only guessed at and, guessing, could not believe. For the newspapers said nothing, and the newspapers had come to be the focussing point of common knowledge.

Imagine the chaotic condition of public thought. For half a century the public had been gradually abrogating its opinions, its news sources, into a dozen competent hands. It had sneered at its newspapers, derided them, professed to disbelieve them—and all the time it was becoming more and more dependent upon them as organs of its opinion. In its helplessness and bewilderment, not knowing which way to think, and what story to believe, it turned to its journals as children turn to their mothers.

But, instead of information, a bland article on "Economics" confronted the reader or a showy dissertation on "Animal Magnetism." He asked for bread and received toffee—a very unsatisfactory diet.

"This sort of thing cannot go on much longer."

It was the grey-haired young editor of the *Evening Post* who spoke in his desperation to the censor.

The officer smiled.

"It has only gone on for a day," he said.

"But they'll find out—they'll know!" said the other despairingly. "You can't keep a people ignorant of what is going on in their very midst—they've got to find out."

"It seems a curious position," said the officer musingly, "out of joint with all preconceived ideas of things; but there is no reason why they should know. Wait!" he said, as the journalist writhed in his annoyance, "we are coming against new facts, and they are hitting us hard. Fact one: News is not news unless confirmed by the papers. Fact two: Print is necessary to national thought."

He looked carelessly at the hands of the clock, closing upon midnight.

"What have you got for to-night?" he asked, and pulled a bundle of proofs towards him.

" 'Decline in Land Values,' " quoted the editor bitterly, but not without a touch of grim humour. "Over on the *Megaphone* they are dealing learnedly with 'Trout Fishing,' and I suppose the censor on the *Telegram* will sanction an exciting article on the 'Cornish Riviera.' Heavens!" he said, "when I think of the news I could put in that space! when I realize——"

The officer smiled again, and again looked at the clock.

He had on the table before him a thick envelope, sealed and taped, and his hand rested on this all the time.

"What is happening?" asked the editor suddenly.

"At the front?" questioned the officer.

The front!

The journalist shivered a little in his annoyance.

Chelmsford was the front—a half-crown journey from London! Terrible things, tragic things, things making for history were happening at his very doorway, and he was printing articles on "Land Values" and the "Decay of Agriculture."

"The front?" repeated the officer with an air of unconcern. "Oh, all sorts of things are happening at the front. Have you ever heard of the West Derby Regiment?"

The editor nodded.

"And the North Rutland?"

Again the editor inclined his head.

"Have you heard of the 108th Field Battery?"

The question was put carelessly as the officer toyed with the paper-knife.

"And have you heard of the 23rd Dragoon Guards and the Welsh Guards?" He spoke slowly, as with an effort to maintain his simulated nonchalance.

"Yes! Yes!" said the editor impatiently. "Why do you ask me this?"

The officer looked at the clock again. The hands pointed to five minutes after midnight.

“Why do I ask you?” he said, and the journalist noticed that his voice shook a little. “Oh, nothing, only those regiments have passed.”

“Passed?”

The officer rose to his feet, and began slowly pacing the room, but did not speak for a few moments. When he did he seemed suddenly to have aged. His face was drawn and white, his eyes sunken as though he were a man who had lost much sleep.

“Passed!” he cried with a sudden energy. “Wiped out. Don’t you see? Don’t you understand? Wiped clean out of existence, as though they were names on a slate under a wet sponge.”

A deathly silence fell upon the room. They sat staring at each other across the table, neither man speaking.

“When did this happen?” the journalist asked hoarsely.

“This morning,” said the other. “Just out of Chelmsford.”

“There was a battle?”

“A massacre,” corrected the officer. “A reconnaissance in force that ended in a battle. It might have ended in irreparable disaster, too, but for the Rochesters.” He nodded his head slowly and repeated, “Rochesters, again. An extraordinary regiment.”

The journalist was leaning over the table, his face tense and white.

“And nobody knows,” he cried. “We are sitting here, in London, like so many dummies, ignorant of our peril. By the Lord, major, but the War Office expects too much. They are going too far.”

He leaped to the door and quickly locked it.

“I am coming out with this news,” he cried passionately, “whatever you choose to do. Stop!” He whipped a revolver from his pocket and covered the censor. “Though I hang for it, I am going to do this thing.”

“There is no need,” said the other quietly.

He threw the sealed envelope across the table.

“You may open this,” he said. “It is a proclamation announcing a state of war telling all that is to be told, except——”

“Except what?”

“Except the Chelmsford affair,” said the officer slowly, “and I will tell you of that. It must be delicately handled,” he went on, “and the people prepared——”

“Prepared for what?”

The officer did not reply at once. With a pen he had picked up, he was idly drawing on the blotting-pad before him, and he did not raise his eyes as he said:

“The news of a great defeat, and worse—of the siege of London.”

CHAPTER XXIII

Rain, rain, rain! How it rained!

A regiment came tramping along the muddy road. Their heads were bent, their rifles were slung over their shoulders, and they were silent save for the "slug slug" of their boots in the mud underfoot.

They were toil- and travel-stained, their coats caked with mud, their faces unshaven, their boots the colour of the earth they trod. Not a word did they speak to one another. Here and there a man smoked a short discoloured pipe; one man puffed at a cigar he had taken from the dead body of a dragoon officer the day before.

Behind them there crackled and crackled a fire. Like a fire of dry wood burning miles away.

"Crackle, bang, crackle-tick-tack!" it went, if it be possible to reproduce the noise.

The regiment marched on unheeding.

There was evidence on every hand of the events of the previous day. A water-cart with a smashed wheel lay in a ditch to the left, a dead horse blocked their road in front; once they saw, laid carefully in a row, six men, stark and stiff, with caps pulled over their distorted faces.

Once, too, a dreadful thing in the shadow of the hedge shrieked out at them imploring them for heaven's sake to kill him. . . . They saw the horrible nature of his injuries, and an officer galloped to the rear of the column and found the helmeted doctor on his charger. Together they rode back to the gibbering thing that once was a man. They remained, still mounted, before him, the doctor's mask-like face expressionless, but the adjutant's face twitching, till the column had passed. Then the doctor took a pistol from his holster, examined it carefully, and leant down and took aim. . . .

"My God," breathed the adjutant between his set teeth, "and this is England . . . poor fellow, poor fellow!"

The doctor said nothing. He slipped a tobacco pouch out of his pocket and filled his pipe deliberately, before he replied.

“It was merciful,” he said shortly; “this sort of thing is horrible, but so is war.”

He half-turned in his saddle and looked back over the streaming countryside.

“What is happening?” he asked.

“Here?” The adjutant lifted his head from his chest. “God knows. The army’s beaten—you saw what they did? Turned our flank. . . . We had no support . . . none. We’re falling back on London, so they say. Hullo!”

They were riding alongside the silent-treading column, and an officer, marching steadily beside his men, spoke as the adjutant’s horse, gaining on the men on foot, came up with him.

“What is it, Selby?”

The adjutant bent forward in his saddle.

“Did you hear the firing on the left, sir?”

The adjutant nodded his head. “The main body are fighting a rearguard action,” he said. “We are a sort of flankguard—they won’t trouble us, they haven’t got so far round as that.”

He stood in his stirrups and looked across a drear, flat country to the right.

“Where are the guns?” asked the doctor.

“The guns?” The adjutant’s tired eyes surveyed him in blank astonishment. “There are no guns with us. Don’t you know they’ve gone? No, of course, you joined us afterwards. Guns!” he laughed bitterly, “the guns and prestige . . . the whole blessed thing went together. Selby,” he called back, for they had got ahead of Dick.

“Yes, sir.”

“There are a dozen infantry scouts out on your right—keep in touch with them.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was the first Dick had heard of the scouts; it was the first anybody had heard of them. The retirement had been hurried, there had been no time even to secure food, and the men were eating their emergency rations of chocolate and preserved beef.

They were marching, they knew not where, or why. Behind them the fire crackled unceasingly, and around them was desolation. Dick plunged his hands deeper into his greatcoat pockets and trudged on. His short rifle—all the officers carried rifles—hung from his shoulder by a leather sling, his pocket was filled with loose cartridges, and he fingered them absently as he marched. They were passing through a cutting, with high banks on either side, when he heard the spasmodic outburst of firing on the right. He heard a sharp order given to the company ahead, and saw it go scrambling up the steep side of the road, and then the adjutant came cantering along the line.

"Get your men up on the top of that bank, Selby," said the officer, "they've got round to our right."

Painfully, laboriously, and slipping on the smooth side of the wet bank, the company scrambled up. There was a low hedge which afforded cover, and behind this the men crouched whilst Dick searched the country with his glasses. He saw little black figures of men running towards him; they stooped as they ran, taking zig-zag turns from right to left, and he knew them for his scouts. From a copse far away on his right rear came a rattle of the enemy's rifle fire. He waited till at the end of the line a bugle shrilled "Commence rifling."

"Eight hundred yards," he ordered.

He heard the rattle of the bolts as the men loaded.

"Independent firing, 800 yards," he ordered. "Shoot when you see a man, and don't waste ammunition."

"It's less'n 800, sir," said a gruff voice from the ranks. "Nigher 600."

"Very well, try it at 600."

There was no sight of the enemy, but the fire in the copse redoubled its energy, and suddenly from out of the wood there appeared half a dozen men dragging something to its edge.

"Shoot those men down!" shouted Dick. "Concentrate your fire on them. They have got a gun."

Instantly a fusillade was poured into the wood, and the little figures of men went suddenly down about the guns.

One would like to tell the story of that fight, because it was the story of a hundred such fights that we fought during the war, by a hundred disorganized regiments, amazed and hypnotized by failure. One hundred dogged contests against an invisible foe, irritating, maddening in its futility.

For half an hour the fight raged, the crescent of flame on the right gradually enveloping the little force.

Then, from overhead, there came a strange whining noise that grew in intensity until it became a fiendish shriek. Of a sudden the wood burst into flame as the big guns of the British force, that were stationed five miles away, came into action.

Shell after shell fell in rapid succession on the wood. One saw trees flare like torches. One heard the guttural shouts of alarm from the living, and the cries of terror of the wounded, and then suddenly the firing in the copse ceased, and the Staff-Officer came galloping along the road.

"Get your men together," he said to Dick. "Have you lost any?" The young officer took a hasty survey of his company. "Half a dozen men, sir, I think," he said.

"Good," said the officer.

He meant that it was good there were no more, but it sounded almost brutal.

He swung his horse round, and was riding off, when he stopped. "Report yourself to head-quarters on your arrival in camp," he said sharply.

He gathered up his reins undecidedly.

"Selby," he said suddenly, "there's some rotten bad news for you, my friend; I hate breaking it, and I nearly funked telling you."

Dick bent his brows in a troubled frown.

"News?" he repeated slowly, "bad news? For me?"

The Staff-Officer pulled back his horse awkwardly.

"I say," he blurted, "it's about a girl—a—a friend of yours."

For a moment the world swam before Dick's eyes.

"O.C.!" he muttered, and the officer nodded kindly and with pity in his eyes.

"I know all about it," he said gently, "she was grit and pluck all through, that girl—forgive me if I speak a little crudely. Didn't you know?"

"Know what?" asked Dick hoarsely.

"She volunteered—she knew a friend of her father's in the Intelligence Department and persuaded him to let her do it."

He stopped again, nervously jingling at his horse's mouth.

"We wanted to know what is happening inside there," he waved his hand vaguely towards the enemy's lines, "so she went in, disguised as a boy with dispatches to our intelligence man, went into the camp, the military camp that no civilian is allowed to penetrate, and—they caught her."

"Caught her," muttered Dick numbly.

"Mickleburg, the Prince fellow, a brute, if ever there was one—tried her by court-martial."

"A woman!"

"He was wilfully blind to that fact—she was in boy's clothes, and——"

"And—for God's sake, what?" cried the youth in an agony of fear.

"She is to be shot to-morrow morning," said the other soberly.

CHAPTER XXIV

On the main road from Chelmsford to Colchester, and at about five miles distant from the former town, is Manor Grange, some-time the property of Sir Philip Wedding, but now the head-quarters of the invading army.

In the back drawing-room, before a green-covered table, littered with papers and plans, sat the Council of Occupation, that famous tribunal designed to rule England for a space of time.

Van Graaf sat at the head of the table, with Mickleburg on his right and Field-Marshal Schelhorn on his left. In the big room nothing had been disturbed, the furniture stood in its accustomed place and the masterpieces of Rubens and Vandyke hung upon the walls. A little wood fire burnt upon the grate, for the afternoon was chilly and a heavy rain was falling without; and save for the disorderly appearance of the table, there was little evidence that it was the head-quarters from whence were issued the orders and commands which momentarily paralysed England, overwhelming her, even in her greatness.

Mickleburg, nervously twisting his moustache, was speaking.

"We are here, I admit that. And London's in sight, and their army's retiring. But don't you remember what the German, Von Moltke, said: 'A thousand ways in, but no way out!' By Heaven, Graaf, I do not like our success. There is no way out of this damned country—no way!"

"Your Highness looks too far ahead," said Graaf smoothly.

"Seeing that the English battleships patrol this coast; seeing, too, that the fleet which brought us here has gone back to the shelter of Marieshaven, I can see no other end to this, in spite of our victories, but annihilation."

Graaf clicked his lips impatiently. "Your Highness goes too much upon precedent," he said sourly, "upon tradition, upon the old black powder axioms. We are fighting under conditions the like of which the world has never known, and the results will be upsetting to those who pin their faith to old-fashioned phrases and the worm-eaten theories of dead strategists. The country is panic-stricken——"

"That I will not believe," said Mickleburg doggedly. "The woman——"

“Woman?” Graaf frowned and Schelhorn looked out of the window as if to abstract himself from the discussion.

“The youth,” corrected Mickleburg, “says that the country is firm and defiant and capable of resistance, that forces are concentrating east, west, north and south. Naval brigades are coming up from the coast, an army of half a million Territorials ready to take the field—if this is so, the invasion at the very zenith of its success is a failure—a failure, a cursed, hopeless failure!”

He raised his voice to a screech and thumped the table before him. Mickleburg’s heart was not in this risky game they were playing. He was not a brave man, physically or morally, and the danger of this extraordinary raid was quite apparent to him.

Van Graaf regarded him coldly. “Your Highness has not grasped the essential points of Her Majesty’s plan. We cannot hope to subject England with 100,000 men. But we are here—and outside rages the greatest battle fleet the world has known. The English Fleet—useless! They cannot fly over land, they cannot sail the ditches; we have brushed aside their strength, and meet them on equal, nay superior, terms. We have crept past their iron walls, and only the feather-bed obstructions oppose us. That is our extraordinary position. Granted that we are a small force by the side of the army that England can put in the field, equally small is the stone that, thrown amidst complicated machinery, wrecks it, or, at least, stops its working. We are that stone in the complicated machinery of a domestic life that is ignorant of war and the incidents of war.”

“How long before the machinery is cleared of its obstruction?” muttered Mickleburg, drumming his hands on a plan before him.

“Who knows?” said the Chancellor philosophically. “Who knows how these things end? we have no precedent to go upon. It may well happen—it will happen, as Her Imperial Majesty foresees—that we may leave this country on our own terms. We are colossal blackmailers who terrorize——”

A discreet knock came upon the door.

“Come in,” called Van Graaf, and a mud-stained officer, with a grey sash about his waist that denoted the Intelligence Corps, entered.

“Your Excellency chose this hour,” he began, and Van Graaf made a sign of assent, and the officer withdrew. He was back in a few minutes, and ushered a boy into the apartment, a pretty boy, with short, thick, wavy hair, who wore a knickerbocker suit and looked like a touring cyclist.

The Chancellor indicated a place before the table, and there the boy took his station.

"Your name is George Dennis?" he queried, consulting a paper before him.

"Yes."

"You were found in the lines of the 2nd Army Corps contrary to the regulations issued by the Field-Marshal?"

"Yes."

"You know that a regulation printed in English was posted in every village in the country occupied by Her Imperial Majesty's troops?"

"Yes."

"Listen!" Van Graaf unfolded a poster, adjusted his pince-nez, and read:

> "1. No civilian shall hamper in any way whatsoever the movements of the army of occupation.
> "2. No civilian shall leave, or attempt to leave the house or grounds thereof, which he or she at present occupies, for any purpose whatsoever; nor directly, or indirectly, communicate by word of mouth or writing with any person or persons outside the area of occupation.
> "3. It is forbidden to discuss the situation of the forces of Her Imperial Majesty; and to communicate the same in writing to the enemy, shall be an offence punishable with death."

"You understand that?"

The boy nodded.

"Do you deny that, on your arrest, a précis was discovered on your person, giving an accurate description of the strength and disposition of our forces, the number of our guns, and the details of our casualties?"

"I deny nothing."

"Is there any extenuating circumstance you can offer that would justify a revision of the sentence already passed upon you?"

For an instant the prisoner's lips quivered, then:

"No," was the firm answer.

"If," said Van Graaf carefully, "it were discovered after you were shot that you were not what you pretend to be, your present attitude would exonerate us." He paused, expecting a confession, but no word was spoken, and he frowned.

"If you were a woman——" he began.

"If I were a woman," said the prisoner quietly, "I would not expect my sex to save me. I recognize the gravity of my crime, because—because I am a soldier's dau—child. Whatever punishment you would mete out to a soldier, let that be mine."

Van Graaf nodded gravely.

"You will be shot at sunrise," he said shortly; and the prisoner bowed slightly and was led from the room.

For an instant the three men looked at one another in silence. Mickleburg tugged at his moustache with a nervous little laugh.

"That is a deuced fine girl," he said, "and——"

Van Graaf interposed roughly.

"I know of no girls—I advise Your Highness to forget what you have said. We have a spy whom it is very necessary to kill. If it were a woman the laws of civilization would prevent us taking a life that is so dangerous to us as a man's. Fortunately, on the prisoner's own confession, he is not a woman."

Van Graaf was a casuist of a subtle type.

He waved aside the subject when the Prince would have reopened it, and drew back the curtain. The room was growing dark, and the rain still fell. He grunted at the unpromising outlook, and turned again to his companions.

Schelhorn—that strange, silent man—squat, with a great powerful head on his broad shoulders—was smoking thoughtfully.

Van Graaf addressed a question to him as he passed, and the soldier nodded heavily.

"*Ja*," he said.

"What was that?" asked Mickleburg.

"I asked if the line of communication was clear to the sea," said Van Graaf.

“Of course it is!” cried Mickleburg fretfully, “surely it is! There isn’t a danger of our being cut off? We must not risk being surrounded—hey, Schelhorn?”

The Field-Marshal shook his head and went on smoking, eyeing the picture on the wall with ruminative interest.

“We must always have the sea until we hold the Thames.” Van Graaf indicated with his forefinger the line of the Essex coast on the map spread out on the table.

“What will prevent the warships sailing up the Thames?” demanded Mickleburg suddenly.

The Chancellor smiled slowly.

“Many things,” was his cryptic reply. He paced the room, his head upon his chest, thinking deeply.

“That prisoner of ours,” he said after awhile. “I have a mind to postpone sentence for a day—to-morrow is too big an occasion in our history for executions.”

Mickleburg’s eyes narrowed, and a peculiar expression came into them.

A tap at the door, and an under-officer of Engineers came in and stood to attention before the Chancellor.

“An L.Z. message is in transmission, Excellency,” he reported.

“Wireless?”

“Yes, Your Excellency. It is the first clear message we have had. All day long we have taken; there has been a confusion of messages from the English warships—but to-night they have died down.”

The Chancellor dismissed the man with a curt nod.

“L.Z.,” he said musingly. “What has L.Z. to say?”

When, ten minutes after, the engineer returned with the written message, Van Graaf laid it upon the table, smoothed it carefully, and read over the unintelligible jumble of letters and figures.

He took from his breast-pocket a tiny book bound in morocco leather, and with infinite care decoded the telegram.

Twice he went over the short message; then, staring ahead unseeingly, he slowly folded the tiny dispatch and placed it in the very heart of the fire.

Mickleburg watched him with growing suspicion.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"Nothing."

The reply was sharp and almost menacing, and the Prince relapsed into his chair.

Van Graaf took a map from the table and carried it to the window.

"The main army is at Maldon," he mused, "the First Division at Witham —and the English?"

"Beyond Ongar," said the Field-Marshal; "they will stand at Epping."

"H'm."

The Chancellor put his hand to his head like a man in deep thought.

"To-morrow we attack London," he said.

Mickleburg sprang to his feet, his face white, his mouth working.

"To-morrow! Are you mad? Have you lost your senses?" he spluttered. "To-morrow! With an army in front of you and the rail destroyed, and an army behind you—*ach*! I know—I know! The English have landed a force in your rear! Gathered from the south and the west! We've had our victory—we've played our part, we are finished! finished, I tell you! You don't know these British. I was educated here, and I know. They will fight, and fight, and fight!—and you talk of attacking London! . . ."

They let him rave on, taking little notice of his tirade. Schelhorn's mind was fixed upon the four great airships that were at that moment in course of inflation at the Chelmsford gasworks, and Van Graaf was thinking of the madness of Marie Henrietta.

There was another man whose thoughts might be of interest to record. He was outside the house in the darkness and the rain, pressed close against the wall. The sentry on duty on the east side of the house passed him again and again but did not see him, which was a fortunate thing for the sentry, because Dick was a desperate young man, and, moreover, he was strangely armed.

CHAPTER XXV

Dawn was breaking over the invaders' camp. It was a grey dawn that looked down upon a country drenched and sodden. In the area of invasion, that compact sphere of influence which was destined to move across England like a blight patch subduing that which it covered, in this area there was a movement as of preparation.

Schelhorn's organization was perfect. Imagine a tyreless wheel with its "box" at Chelmsford, its "spokes" stretched out in every direction, and terminating with its cavalry "feelers"; imagine this wheel revolving as it did, and in its revolutions moving as slowly in this direction as the other, and you have a faint idea of the invaders' plan.

The campaign that Marie Henrietta had planned was frankly a guerilla campaign. She knew that England was well prepared for the conventional attack with its decisive issues. She knew that nothing less than an army of 1,500,000 men could hope to conquer the country, and her plan was to land a force one-tenth of that size to upset the organized life of the islands.

She succeeded, did she but know it. As Van Graaf had put it, "the grit was in the wheels."

The great systems of intercommunication were paralysed, the whole country stood in gaping amazement contemplating a happening that it could not understand, confronted with a situation which was without precedent.

Neither the Commander nor the Chancellor had ever seriously considered an attack upon London, although to-day they contemplated their unique airship demonstration. Von Moltke's reflection that London "was a fine city to sack" found no echo in the Chancellor's mind.

His sole plan of campaign was to destroy communication and avoid meeting any strongly concentrated bodies of the enemy.

He was to live on the country entirely, and it was necessary for this purpose that his army should be split into three portions, each an entity and each self-supporting.

The terrorizing of London was only part of the plan, so far as it bore upon the general demoralization of the people of England. And now the day was dawning that was to see that part of the plan put into execution.

All through the night, Dick had been crouching in the shrubbery, keeping a watch on the house that sheltered not only the two men who were responsible for the conduct of the campaign but also the girl he loved.

His position commanded a view, not of the front door—he was too much at the side for that—but of the broad flight of steps which led up to it, so that no one could enter or leave the house by its front entrance without his knowledge. It also gave him a view of the French doors which opened from a balcony into the room on the right of the house as he lay facing it.

The ground was sodden with the recent rains and he was stiff and weary with long continuance in a cramped position, but dawn was breaking at last, bringing his vigil to an end and chasing away the sick brood of fears infesting his mind by giving him a chance for action.

The sounds of unshuttering and the slipping back of bolts caught his attention, and when the hall door of the Grange was thrown open, his faculties were all on the alert and he was ready for whatever might befall.

Two men came down the broad steps and Dick recognized one of them in the growing light. It was Van Graaf, and with him was the Commander-in-Chief. The young officer's heart beat rapidly and he unslung his carbine.

For one wild moment the thought possessed him that he had the lives of these two men in his hands; that with their deaths would pass the danger under which the country lay. But . . . there were many "buts." Other men, eager, ambitious men, anxious to emulate their deeds, would fill their place. That was one "but"; the most important was Elise.

So he waited, straining his ears to catch their conversation. He might have saved himself the trouble, for they spoke in a language that he did not understand.

They came nearer, followed at a respectful distance by a group of officers, and passed from view.

Then a servant came out, looked up at the sky as if to judge the weather conditions, and disappeared.

Dick lay quietly for awhile. He wondered why there were so few people about. With the going of the Chancellor and the General the house took on an appearance of desolation and desertion.

Dick remained in hiding, his mind in an irritating condition of indecision. Had they gone for good, these people of the staff? He knew enough of the invaders' methods to know that they did not remain very long

in any one place. But there was no sign of the Brown Lady, and one thing he was assured of—the execution had been deferred.

He waited half an hour longer without seeing any further sign of life in the house. Behind him was the road and after awhile came the tramping of feet and the rumbling of wheels. Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp—it must be a brigade moving out. He would have liked to creep towards the road and see for himself what was happening, but that would have been madness. He was on a desperate mission. His colonel had hesitated before he gave him permission to penetrate the enemy's lines, and had only consented when Dick had put forward the suggestion that the rescue of the Brown Lady was essential to the safety of the army. It was a desperate argument, at best it was ridiculously ridiculous, but Dick had been dogged in his claim; and the colonel had listened with a curious expression on his face, and at last the permission was given.

"I do not know of this lady, or of your attempt to rescue her, please understand that," he had said. "You are going as a spy—nothing more and nothing less. Learn all you can, and God be with you."

He said this with a strange solemnity, as though he were commanding a man already near death.

So Dick passed through the British lines, had made a perilous way towards Chelmsford, and had succeeded in reaching the head-quarters of the enemy, taking refuge in the shrubbery of the Manor Grange under cover of dusk.

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

It must be a division passing, for there was no indication of the march ending.

He was on the point of allowing his curiosity to get the better of him when he heard a slight noise in the direction of the house.

He turned his head quickly. Carefully he pulled aside the laurel leaves that hid his view, and what he saw set his heart thumping rapidly.

On the steps as if ascending stood Elise and by her an elegantly-dressed officer with a sneering smile on his face.

The girl was pale, as pale as death. She was dressed in her boy's suit, and her hands were fastened together by two thin bands of steel.

Two soldiers, their rifles at the carry, stood impassively at the foot of the steps, and these the officer addressed in his guttural tongue.

They seemed to hesitate, and he stamped his foot angrily; then, sloping their arms, they moved away, passing the place where Dick lay concealed.

When they were out of sight, the officer turned to the girl.

“Come,” he said in a brutal tone, and grasping her by the arm, led her into the house and Dick heard the door shut behind them.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Prince opened a door on the right of the hall and drew Elise into the room. He closed the door softly and she grew sick with fear as she heard him turn the key.

"Sit there." The Prince pushed the girl into the recesses of a deep chesterfield, and seated himself facing her.

"My good friend the Chancellor," he said hesitatingly, "is curiously desirous of maintaining your incognito, because it is necessary that the requirements of military law should not clash with the requirements of humanity. You are a boy—*hein?*"

She did not answer him.

"I had a cousin—once," he went on, bending forward with his elbows on his knees, "Charles of Haughlauden—you have heard of him? He was a fool, because he built upon the sands of the twentieth-century civilization. He thought that the savagery of the Middle Ages and the rights of kings had passed with the succession of the aeroplane and wireless telegraphy. He made a mistake, for he came up against primitive forces—they were all contained in a woman, by the way—and he paid for his error with his life."

He shivered slightly as he remembered the justice of Marie Henrietta. Then he resumed.

"I, for my part, have not fallen into such a pitfall. I am *Grand Seigneur*, with all the traditions and instincts of my barbarous ancestors. I have no taste for the niceties of civilized warfare, nor for the conventions of the twentieth century."

He licked his dry lips, and looked away from her face as he went on.

"To me a man is a man, and a woman a woman. A man, a spy who has penetrated our lines, is to be shot, but a woman——"

He paused, and brought his eyes back to her.

"A woman such as you," he said slowly, "is made for love—for the fierce passion of it."

He sprang to his feet, and looked down at her.

“Shoot you?” he scoffed; “mar this beautiful flesh of yours with bullets! It is preposterous!”

He dropped down by her side on the chesterfield, and gripped her with his strong arm. She struggled, but her hands were fastened, and he caught her by the chin, and forced her face up to his.

“If you scream,” he muttered, “I will stop your mouth with kisses. Do you understand? You little fool, is not this better than death? I will send you through the lines in good time—unharmed. Isn’t life sweet to you?”

“No, no, no!” she gasped. “Not at the price.”

He laughed in her face.

He threw a quick glance round the room; the door he had locked, but the long French window stood ajar.

For a moment he released her, and walked towards the window.

She sat inert, paralysed, watching him as he stepped lightly across the room. He pulled the two glass doors wide open to disentangle the curtain. Somewhere outside she heard a slight sound like a sharp thud, then the figure at the window swayed and fell with a crash, bringing down in his stiffening fingers the curtains he clutched.

There was no sound of a report—but the man was dead, she knew that. She sat frozen with fear, waiting for a sound from without; then a shadow fell across the window and a man stepped into the room.

He was dressed in the cloak and cap of the invader, and he carried a curious-looking carbine in his hand. This he leant against a chair, and stooping over the dead man, he dragged him back from the window and closed it. Then he turned.

“Dick!” she gasped.

He nodded and came towards her.

His face was old and grey and his lips twitched, but it was not because of the thing he had done, but because of the torment of apprehension that had been his, as he lay in the bushes, cursing and fearing. He had seen the Prince and the girl enter the room, and instinctively he knew the man’s purpose. But there was an open window, and just so long as that remained open, he knew the girl was safe. It was the crowning error of His Highness to attempt to close that window.

Dick looked rather than asked the question, but the girl's eyes met his gravely. She did not trust herself to speak, but held up her manacled hands.

"In a minute," he said huskily.

He stepped back to the body by the window. The key would be there, he felt, and he was right. In a little ticket-pocket, amidst the gold braiding on the tunic, he found the tiny key, and in another moment the girl's handcuffs had fallen to the floor.

Strange, indeed, it was that though these two had so much to say, one to the other, yet neither could speak of the matters that were nearest to their hearts.

"We must get out of here," he said gruffly.

He stepped to the window and took a careful survey. There was nobody in sight, and he turned to her again.

"Put his cap on!" he said, and she obeyed. "That cloak!" She picked it up and draped it about her. It nearly touched the ground, but he was satisfied with her appearance, and after another reconnaissance, he stepped forth into the garden, his carbine in his hand, his finger touching the trigger lightly, and beckoned her to follow.

There was a path to the back part of the house, and this he avoided. He knew that there was a servant somewhere in the house. The road in front was safer. The division had passed as he lay concealed by the laurels, but there were straggling parties that followed, and therein lay the danger.

The two walked boldly along the broad walk that led to the ornamental iron gates of the drive.

The gravel was crisp to their tread and the limes were showering raindrops on them as they passed beneath. But the clouds were dispersing, the morning air had been washed clean by the rains and the sun was shining warmly.

A dim consciousness of all this mingled with the apprehensive fear that tugged at their hearts, but not a word was said by either.

As they neared the gates, one of which stood open, Dick motioned to the girl to draw back into the cover afforded by the little lodge. It had served as a guard-room during the enemy's occupation and, happily for them, was now deserted.

He stepped briskly into the road. There was no one in sight and he beckoned his companion forward.

"Our only hope," he said quickly, "is to work eastward to the sea. This part of the country will not be strongly held. The enemy will depend upon their northern and southern screens. We can cross these fields to a little lane that leads in the direction of the main road to Brightlingsea."

She nodded and followed at his heels.

They crossed the field in safety, keeping close to the tall hedge on one side. Slipping through a gate, they found themselves in the lane, which was little more than a wagon track.

"There was a sentry here," he said calmly. "I killed him."

She looked at him in wonderment. Was this the boy of Friendly Street whose education she had undertaken? Was this calm young savage, who treated death so lightly, and who spoke with such grave assurance of slaying men, the ex-timekeeper with his ordered views? Truly he was out of his groove.

They walked along in silence. At every bend of the road he would go a little forward and take observation, but nothing checked their progress till they came upon the main roads.

The bend of the lane here was sharper than elsewhere, and he went forward cautiously.

What he saw gave him food for thought. Standing with his back to the lane, with the collar of his overcoat turned up, was an infantry sentinel.

Motioning to Elise to remain where she was, Dick watched him, as a hidden cat watches a mouse.

Was he alone, or had he half a dozen fellows within call?

The man walked up and down, stopping now and then to look across the country. Once he arrested his walk and looked down at his feet. Dick followed the direction of his eyes. What he saw satisfied him.

The thing that was interesting the sentinel looked like a drain-pipe up-ended, and from it hung limply a white cord. Dick knew that it terminated in a little ball of such a preparation as the ends of matches are made from. He knew that the man was by himself, for this thing at his feet was a signal bomb, and a signal bomb would be unnecessary if there were help at hand.

This view was strengthened by the man's conduct, for he acted as one would who was free from the observation of his superiors, walking about in a slovenly fashion and whistling snatches of a song.

Dick stepped boldly into the centre of the road, his carbine poised, and the man at the sound of his footsteps turned. He hesitated, seeing the uniform; then as a gust of wind threw back Dick's cloak and revealed the khaki beneath he unslung his rifle.

Dick's carbine covered him, there was no report, only a noise like a muffled cough, and the man flung up his arms and fell an inert, sprawling mass in the road.

Dick stepped forward and broke off the touch-paper that connected the bomb with the fuse, and called softly to the Brown Lady.

She came forth from her place of concealment, but stopped when she saw the body of the man in the road.

"I thought——" she faltered, "I did not hear——"

"This is the new silent rifle," said Dick briefly; "the army will have them to-day or to-morrow. Horrible, isn't it? No noise, no smoke, lightning without thunder."

"Horrible," she whispered.

She crept closer to him, and shrank back from the thing that was once a man.

They reached the main road and crossed it, skirted a field and plunged again into an irregular lane. This time it brought them to a farm. They found a dead man lying face downward near a half-burnt building. Here again were neat rows of little earth mounds.

"There was a fight here," said Dick. "This is where the Rochesters stood. We shall have to explore this house. Some of it is untouched, and there may be food here. At any rate, there will be shelter. We must rest until night."

She was about to speak when he grasped her arm violently and dragged her to the shelter of a low building that had been used for the storing of carts.

It was open on all sides, and offered no shelter from view.

"Into the centre and stay there," he whispered fiercely, and, bewildered but submissive, she obeyed.

She looked round, but there was no sign of life, and then she heard an extraordinary humming noise and saw a big black shadow fall on the meadows beyond the farm. Then another shadow followed it, and another, and another, and the humming noise became a loud whirr.

“What is it?” she whispered.

He led her by the arm to beneath a place in the roof where the tiles were broken.

Looking upward she saw the aerial fleet of Mid-Europe, a terrifying spectacle pass in procession.

Five huge cigar-shaped balloons in splendid line, their propellers whirling, their cars filled with men, passed scarcely more than two hundred feet from the ground.

Dick pulled a compass from his pocket, and verified the direction.

“To London,” he said grimly.

CHAPTER XXVII

There was no sound save the “chic-a-chic” of the silent petrol engines, and the “whirr” of the triple propeller. Sometimes earth noises would come up from the country below—the bark of dogs and the cries of wild birds.

Van Graaf was in the foremost part of the car of the leading airship, looking down upon a toy-like world. Green and brown lay Essex beneath the car. Tiny square patches of plough- and meadow-land, little clumps of trees, midget houses, and here and there an irregular silver ribbon where a river twisted its way through the country. He saw the straight lines in dark brown that marked the railroads, the clusters of roofs that stood for township and village.

Far away on the north-western horizon a yellow haze hid the view.

“There lies London,” Van Graaf pointed, and Meisler, the engineer-colonel who was in charge of the expedition and who was standing behind him, nodded in assent.

The balloon had been rising steadily till they were two miles from the earth, and the occupants of the cars were muffled up to their ears in fur coats, for the cold was intense. They kept perfect alignment as they swept forward. There was little or no wind at that height, and whatever difficulties of aviation had been anticipated, they were not realized.

One of the officers in the first balloon uttered an exclamation and pointed.

“The army!” he said.

Beneath them and a little ahead, those in the cars saw a semicircular line with gaps at regular intervals. They caught the flutter of innumerable pennants, and saw slowly moving masses of cavalry wheeling and turning as they took position.

Then three tiny batteries came from a wood at what seemed a funereal pace, but which the watchers knew was at a hard gallop. They saw two little oblong bodies of men scatter and dissolve into thin long lines.

“Infantry taking open order,” said the officer. “It looks peculiar from a balloon, doesn’t it? For all the world like a block of brass being drawn to wire.”

The Chancellor nodded. “What are they doing?”

Meisler was studying the men below through his powerful glasses.

“They’ve no aerial batteries,” he said with what sounded like a sigh of relief; “it looks as if they were going to try rifle fire. They’re aiming upward.”

Then from the earth below came a strange wail, long drawn out, and increasing in shrillness—then silence.

The officers looked at one another in perplexity.

“What was that?” demanded the Chancellor, sharply.

“If I’d heard the report of rifles I should have said that they were firing,” said the colonel with an uneasy frown; “if that noise wasn’t made by bullets, I’ve never heard bullets.”

Again came the uncanny wail, swelling to a shrill shriek. A young officer leaning over the side of the car, searching the camp, suddenly staggered back, a streak of blood across his face.

“By heavens! they can reach us,” said the colonel hoarsely, and shouted an order.

Again the shrill wail, and something dropped into the car.

Van Graaf stooped and picked it up—to drop it again, for the bullet was hot.

“Up! up! up!” screamed Meisler, and a cloud of ballast went over the side. . . .

They were out of range now, and found it safest to remain there, for at intervals there came the whine which told of an invisible company or battalion firing.

In the car there was a bubble of excited talk.

“Did you hear the report? Are they using airguns?” There was no flash—no smoke—no noise.

A man had been killed in No. 2 balloon—this much was shouted by megaphone. The occupants could not rid themselves of the body, because without its weight the airship would have become unmanageable. So it was laid on the wicker floor of the car, and those in the other cars saw the blood dripping through the thin bottom.

There was a confusion of counsel, but to the advice that a shell should be dropped by way of reprisal neither the Chancellor nor Meisler, the officer in charge of the expedition, would listen.

"What harm could a shell do on grass land?" the latter demanded testily. "It might by chance hit a stray soldier, but it is a thousand chances to one that it would hit nothing. Perhaps it would not even explode! No, we'll wait for the solid masonry of London before we operate."

London stretched out to meet them long before the dome of St. Paul's came in sight. It stretched out yellow and red and dingy grey. It threw out a skirmishing army of brand-new villas, standing on broad tree-shaded roads. It gave the invaders a unique view of this modern Babylon, and showed them the opulent mansions of Dives and the hovels of a thousand sons of Lazarus who crowded at his back gate. It showed them palatial mansions and the festering sores of poverty that hid in back streets within the shadow of these palaces.

They stood breathless, spellbound, as mile after mile of London unrolled itself beneath them, and still the centre had not been reached. The magnitude of it, the immensity! And—as Van Graaf realized with a sinking heart—the impossibility of impressing this vast and monstrous creation with a sense of —of its littleness! Yes, that was what the invader had set himself to do, and he saw himself confronted by failure before even his scheme was put into operation.

"It's not a city," he murmured; "it's a world! Why, if I could destroy a half, the other half would go on living in ignorance of the other's fate unless somebody told them!"

Out of the mist, miles ahead, came the dome of St. Paul's, its golden cross glittering in the morning sun.

The balloon squadron was now two and a half miles above the city. The threads of streets were deserted, for London had been warned.

"We can come down now, I think," said the engineer-colonel; and, obedient to a signal from the flagship, the fleet sank nearer and nearer the earth.

Then came a stir of excitement.

"Up! for God's sake!" cried the Chancellor.

Only just in time did the airship rise. Van Graaf had been the first to detect the troops who occupied the green open space some-time known as a

county council recreation ground, but now “Defence Camp No. 117.”

“Whew-w-w!”

The air was full of bullets. They struck the car and one pierced the envelope of the balloon, and there was a sharp hiss of escaping gas. An engineer climbed into the netting, with material to stop the rent; he worked quickly and deftly.

“Whew-w-w!”

Van Graaf watching the man, saw a look of surprise come into his face, saw him shake his head stupidly, saw the bubble of blood at his lips, then he fell. . . . Down, down, down he went, with outstretched arms like a whirling starfish, and they heard the horrible “smack” of his body as it struck a road beneath.

Released of a hundred and sixty pounds, the balloon leapt up, swaying from side to side, and the engineer jumped for the valve line.

Van Graaf looked over.

The other balloons seemed as small as footballs below, and he wiped his brow with a trembling hand.

Meisler was at the other end of the car giving directions.

By and by he turned with a troubled face.

“Well?” said Van Graaf grimly, “is such an incident as that peculiar to aerial warfare?”

“Your Excellency is probably not aware that this is the first time a balloon has actually been used as an instrument of war—it is in every sense an experiment.”

The Chancellor smiled faintly.

“Fiat experimentum in corpore vili—eh?” he said. “What shall we do now, rejoin the other balloons?”

The engineer shook his head.

“I am afraid that that would be impossible, Your Excellency,” he said. “They cannot come up to us, and we can only get down to them by sacrificing gas which we cannot afford in so large a balloon as this. We must endeavour to keep with them and communicate as well as we can.”

Fortunately there was little difficulty. A special signal lanyard was rigged. And the signal given to storm towards the city.

The signal answered and the course set, the Chancellor watched in silence as the fleet turned its blunt prows in the direction of the city of London.

“I shall order Maxite bombs to be dropped from above St. Paul’s,” said the engineer.

“What do they weigh?” asked the Chancellor.

“About 10 lbs. each, Your Excellency,” said the other. “Why do you ask?”

“And how many of these shells are there on each car?”

“Fifty to sixty.”

The Chancellor nodded his head slowly.

“May I suggest that none be dropped from this airship?” he said quietly. “Having seen the extraordinary result of one man falling from this balloon, I am not anxious to experience the sensation that will come from the further lightening of the car by 500 lbs. weight.”

“If Your Excellency wishes,” said the other stiffly.

“I do not wish; I order,” said Van Graaf with a gesture of finality, and the colonel saluted.

From his great elevation the Chancellor witnessed an attack that was to have demoralized London.

Obeying the flagship’s signal the attacking balloons formed the half of a circle and with the horns leading, they moved over the Thames.

He heard the shrill whistle of bullets that greeted them, and saw through his glasses the crew of the airships preparing the bombs.

Then at another signal the grenades fell, and Van Graaf rapped out an oath.

“What are they aiming at?” he demanded.

He might well ask, for the explosions came from everywhere but St. Paul’s.

One struck the base of the ugly obelisk that stood in the centre of Ludgate Circus and demolished it. Another fell on Farringdon Street, and

blew a huge cavity in the roadway. Many must have fallen into the river.

Simultaneously with the discharge of the missiles the balloons automatically rose, and were caught by an air current and swept a little westward.

Showing an extraordinary skill, the engineers brought their huge crafts round to face the wind, and the circling propellers were a blurred circle as slowly, but surely, the fleet came about.

"It is as I feared," said the colonel with a despairing shrug. "From the height we are at—and even from the height the other balloons are at—it is impossible to get direction. You cannot drop bombs with any hope of hitting the object you aim at from this height. Look for yourself, Your Excellency. What are we above? St. Paul's, you would say, but we are above Cannon Street Station as well! The chances are that we are immediately over London Bridge."

The airships below them were coming back now, and the Chancellor was watching them intently. So intently that he had no eyes for anything else. He did not see the little white balls that rose as by signal from every part of London within a radius of four miles from the City. Little balls that came heavenward with surprising swiftness.

Suddenly the air was filled with the faint crack-crack-crack! as of burning wood, and the Chancellor felt his arm clutched, and turned to meet the white face of the engineer.

"Balloons!" gasped the colonel; "toy balloons, but filled with pure oxygen by the rate they're moving—look! look! look!"

The air below and about them was suddenly filled with these tiny spheres. Little balloons, indeed, they were, such as are used for firework displays. There were ten thousand if there was one, and each carried a long tail that crackled and spluttered, and threw out floating flakes of flame.

The airships below saw their danger, and turned to fly, but these aerial torpedoes were amongst them.

Suddenly No. 3 balloon burst into a white flame, and a roar like the crash of thunder split the air—another roar far away followed, and those who looked saw a black, shapeless mass lying on the Thames Embankment.

Then in quick succession No. 2 and No. 5 airships caught, and went whizzing down to death. . . .

"Shall we escape?"

Van Graaf's face was tense and white. He was grasping the wicker work of the boat-shaped car as it swung to left and right.

From beneath them came the infernal and never-ceasing crackle of the infernal fireworks, and a smell of burnt gas was wafted up to them.

"We can try," said the other from between his teeth. "We shall have to take our chance. I'm going to jettison the bombs."

Curiously enough, they must have then been immediately above the Thames between Southwark and Blackfriars bridges, for none of the bombs they threw appeared to explode.

Lightened, the airship mounted rapidly, till Van Graaf felt a singing in his ear, and a sensation as though some invisible force were crushing his head between giant hands. He drew the fur coat about him, shivering, and looked over.

The balloon had outdistanced the tiny destroyers, and, with propeller revolving at full speed, was returning in the direction from which it had come.

Back it flew, crossing the imperturbable suburbs, till the standard of the army of defence, set upon a pole before a tent, came in sight.

Then, at sight of the balloon, there arose from the Lilliputian figures of the soldiers beneath, a gust of cheering. Defiant, exultant, triumphant—and the Chancellor smiled bitterly, for he knew that the story of the Mid-European defeat in the air had reached them.

He looked back towards London. So it had been a failure, and it had seemed so simple. What would Mickleburg say? He did not know that Prince Mickleburg was lying dead at the old head-quarters, serenely indifferent to the ill-fortunes of his army.

Clear of the defenders, the engineer allowed his airship to fall, till it was little more than a thousand feet above the ground.

The men did not speak. Each was troubled after his own fashion, and showed his misery in his own way.

They passed over the advance line of the invading army, passed over the farm-house where two British fugitives were still in hiding, and sank lower as the army head-quarters came in sight.

Then Meisler saw a sight that pleased him, and he gave a delighted shout. Far away to the East, as yet a speck in the sky, a balloon was moving

in their direction.

"One safe at any rate," he said, and raised his glasses.

He looked long and earnestly.

The machine was moving with the wind behind it, and every movement brought it clearer to sight.

"I can't quite see which of ours this is," said the engineer in perplexity; "it can't be No. 4—she's flying our colours."

"And another," said Van Graaf, whose eyes were fixed to his binoculars, "just above the national flag."

The engineer put down his glasses.

"We shall see better when we land," he said; "if Your Excellency will hold tight——" He gave a signal, and the balloon dropped obliquely to a space in front of the great pavilion that served as head-quarters to the invaders.

A hundred hands caught the ropes, and Van Graaf descended to terra-firma with an inward prayer of thankfulness. No sooner did he touch ground than he stepped clear of the collapsing envelope and turned his glasses on the new-comer.

The engineer was by his side in a minute.

"She is neither No. 4 nor any of our fleet. I have never seen her before. She's signalling."

He took from his pocket the precious little volume that held the war-code of the Mid-European Army, and opened it. Then he looked at the flags she flew.

"C. X. O. Z." he read and rapidly turned the leaves.

"Special service of the Empress," he decoded, "and the little flag she's flying is the imperial lion."

He saluted the approaching airship with something like reverence. "Now she's making another signal." He waited till the flags went fluttering down. "R. U. L. T." He turned the leaves of the book rapidly.

"Generals of division to meet in half an hour." Then, as another signal fell. "Stand by to hold us," he repeated.

The airship came slowly down, the great bags sagging as the gas rushed out.

There were half a dozen cloaked figures in the car, and as the wicker basket grazed the earth, and the soldiers grasped the ropes, two jumped out and assisted a third to alight—and Van Graaf groaned as he recognized in the third cloaked figure a woman, and that woman the Empress Marie Henrietta.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Van Graaf stepped forward, his hand raised to his uniformed cap. He had breathed a prayer of thankfulness at reaching earth. Now he would have given half his fortune to be back in the balloon and two miles from the solid world.

The Empress faced him. Her fur cloak was flung back, disclosing a plain grey dress. The heavy veil that had protected her from the cold had hid the wonder and sheen of her hair. A cold, beautiful woman was Marie Henrietta, and in her the genius of the Corsican—with whom she claimed kinship—was revived in a startling degree.

Now, she looked from face to face, the beauty of her eyes veiled by narrowing lids.

"Well, well?" she demanded impatiently, "have you nothing to say?"

"Your Majesty's unexpectedness," stammered Van Graaf, for the first and last time in his life at a loss for words.

"Is that all?" She eyed him keenly.

Before he could reply she demanded sharply: "What of London?"

There was no reply.

"The airships—has the attack been made?"

"Yes," said Van Graaf slowly.

"When?"

"This morning."

She frowned at this.

"Where are the airships?—what has happened?—tell me!"

"So far, Highness," said Van Graaf, carefully choosing his words, "the Army has succeeded. We drove the English back—back to London. Our success was phenomenal."

"Where is the aerial fleet?" she asked again, and an ominous flush came to her cheek.

"There is no aerial fleet."

The Chancellor said this with a calmness that was in itself sinister.

"What?" she breathed.

"The aerial fleet has been destroyed—Your Majesty's fortune has not held."

"My fortune has not held!" She repeated the words mechanically.

"These English," the Chancellor went on, "have shown us a resourcefulness and a savage ingenuity which I, for my part, did not expect. To-day they did a mad, futile thing—by ordinary reasoning. They launched at us ten thousand balloons with firework attachments, at a cost, I should compute, of £15,000"—he spoke with the exactness he would have employed in presenting his Budget. "It was a haphazard method—childish, and by every law of probability should have failed. It succeeded, and this is not all."

She made no sign, and he continued:

"They have armed themselves with the Maxim noiseless rifle. Does your Majesty realize what that means?" He heard an exclamation, and turned to meet the startled gaze of Schelhorn, who had joined the group.

"It is an arm which has no greater precision than ours," said the Empress quickly.

"Pardon, Highness, though that is so, there is another aspect. I speak with a sense of my responsibility when I say that neither our troops nor any other troops in the world will stand before that fire. It is the most demoralizing, the most terrible, ordeal that a soldier has ever been asked to face."

"Where is Mickleburg?" she interrupted suddenly.

"His Highness——" began the Chancellor.

It was Marshal Schelhorn who stepped forward to reply.

"The Prince is dead, Your Majesty," said the Marshal bluntly.

"Dead!"

Van Graaf wheeled round.

"Dead!" he said. "Why, I left him——"

"He was found dead by his servant," said Schelhorn brusquely, "shot—though no shot was heard—in the head-quarters house on the Chelmsford

road."

"The prisoner—what of her?" asked the Chancellor quickly.

"Escaped."

"Then she——?"

The Marshal shook his head.

"The man who killed His Highness was an English officer. We found an identification card under some bushes within view of the house. The silent rifle explains the mystery of Prince Mickleburg's death."

"The officer's name?" demanded Marie Henrietta, her face white with anger, her hands clasping and unclasping in her fury.

Schelhorn took from his pocket a stained slip of parchment.

"Lieutenant Selby, 2nd Rochesters," he spelt—for he was a poor English scholar, and the Empress fell back a pace.

"That man again," she whispered, half to herself. "There is destiny in this."

At that moment a mounted orderly, splashed from head to foot, came galloping through the line and drew rein before the staff tent. He saw the group and came toward them.

"Dispatch for His Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief," he said, and laid a field-note in the hands of the Marshal.

Schelhorn read it rapidly.

"I have pleasure in informing Your Highness," he said, "that the officer Selby has been captured, but that the woman who was with him has escaped."

There had been something very commonplace about Lieutenant Selby's capture.

He had stolen out of the deserted farm-house to reconnoitre, giving Elise strict injunctions to remain where she was until dusk. If by then he had not returned, she was to make the best of her way to the British lines.

One fact he impressed upon her. She must, as soon as possible, change her boy's suit for one more fitting. There must be no further danger of such a tragedy occurring as had nearly occurred through her—patriotism. He

paused before the word “patriotism” and she knew that he meant “folly”; but she answered meekly, as unlike the Brown Lady of other days as this youth with the commanding air was unlike Dick Selby, the pale-faced clerk of Deptford.

Then he went out and left her, and walked straight into a picket of the Farsberg Hussars.

He could have killed one of them, perhaps two, but it would have been wanton slaying, for he was captured beyond escape. So he dropped his carbine and raised his hands.

They hurried him to a guard-room in the neighbourhood, and sent a message to head-quarters, and at eleven o’clock that night the officer of the guard awakened him from a dreamless sleep to tell him that his presence was required at head-quarters.

He rose and bathed his face.

The officer in whose charge he was, a tall, handsome young Bavarian, could speak English.

“I have to take you under heavy guard,” he said, “which means that I must handcuff you.”

“That’s all right,” said Dick easily.

“But,” the officer hesitated, “I will accept your parole.”

A momentary look of surprise crossed Dick’s face. He had hoped—a wild hope, certainly—that there might be a chance of escape in the darkness.

“Parole?” he said. It was a new word, but he was a new man. There was a lot of Deptford in his composition still, and parole with all it signified came as something fresh. But he was learning things rapidly.

“Yes,” he said, “I will give you my parole—my word of honour, that I will not attempt to escape.”

The officer bowed slightly.

“Can you ride?” he asked.

“A little,” said Dick, with a grimace.

He had had the conventional riding school practice, but he was not over-confident regarding his horsemanship.

Ten minutes later there was a clatter of hoofs at the door of the cottage that served as a guard-room, and he went out into the dark night to find two horses waiting. He mounted and looked round for his guard, and the officer seeing this laughed.

"It would be an insult to provide a guard for a man on parole," he said, and Dick nodded gravely.

They walked their horses through the dark country lanes that led from the picket's post to head-quarters, and drew rein before the pavilion as a distant church clock in the town of Maldon chimed midnight.

It seemed a short ride to Dick, for all the time he had been speculating on what had become of the Brown Lady. Would she be able to get back to the British lines in safety? She had the pistol which he had given to her, and he had faith in her ability to take care of herself.

So he did not worry; some instinct, some faith told him that no harm would come to her. As for himself he had no doubt whatever. He was a spy wearing part of the uniform of the enemy, and he would be shot. He did not resent this—he had taken the risk; he had gone into this adventure open-eyed. It was inevitable.

A year ago he might have fretted—a month ago—the idea of never again seeing this dream lady of his would have driven him to a frenzy.

But many things had happened since. He had learnt that life was nothing, that love was eternal, outliving death. Crystallizing his faith he might say with the poet:

"Life's a day, and a yesterday.
Love's to-morrow, and ever and aye."

He halted at the pavilion door and an impassive guard encircled him. Then the young officer of the picket went inside to report.

By and by he returned and said something in a language the sound of which had long been familiar to Dick, but which was quite unintelligible to him. He beckoned the English officer forward and Dick, dismounting, passed from the darkness of the night into a brilliantly lighted interior. It was a huge marquee. Three central poles supported its ridge, and it was lit by two arc-lamps—part of the portable equipment that had fallen into the invaders' hands at Colchester.

The marquee was draped with heavy scarlet tapestries, and a thick carpet, in which the prisoner's feet sank, was spread over the flooring.

There were a number of chairs, a table or two littered with books and maps, and across the farther end of the pavilion, a long table covered with red baize. At this sat five men and a woman, and Dick, recognizing the girl—for she was little more—who met his inquiring eyes with a haughty stare, knew that he was in the presence of the woman at whose freakish whim his commission had been born, and at whose word now he would probably die.

As to the exact function of the assembly at the Board of Red Cloth, Dick had no doubt. It was a court-martial.

His conductor led him to a place before the centre of the table, and courteously drew a chair forward, and signed to him to sit.

Then one of the soldiers who were present carried a small table to him, and another placed pen, ink and paper thereon.

Dick recognized the Chancellor when he leant forward to question him.

"You are Lieutenant Selby?"

"Yes."

"An English officer of infantry?"

"Yes."

"You were arrested this afternoon inside our lines?"

Dick's head was quite clear now; the unreality of the scene as it had struck him upon entering the tent had passed away.

"I am not aware that a guerilla army moving without defined purpose can have 'lines' in the same sense as an offensive or defensive force," he said quietly.

The Chancellor nodded as though in agreement.

"That is a point which I was not prepared to press," he said, "but let me put it this way. You were arrested in close proximity to our known position?"

"Yes."

"Wearing the uniform, or part of the uniform, of an officer of this army?"

"Yes."

"What was your object?"

Dick hesitated. Was it worth while telling the truth? Should he speak of the Brown Lady and her deadly peril? Perhaps it would be better, though he had little hope that his story would secure for him aught but a condemnation which he already regarded as inevitable.

They listened in silence to the recital of his adventures from the moment he left camp until the hour he was arrested. Once or twice the Chancellor frowned as when Dick told of the news of the Brown Lady's arrest being known in the British camp.

"Did your colonel suggest that we knew that our prisoner was a woman?" he asked quickly.

"Yes," said Dick, "didn't you?"

"Go on," said the Chancellor, disregarding the question.

When he had finished it was the Empress who spoke.

"You admit having killed His Highness the Prince of Mickleburg?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You have no compunction, no sorrow," she flamed, "for an act of wanton regicide?"

"None," he answered slowly. "I have come to a point where the value of individual life is scarcely worth consideration. It was necessary to kill him," he went on thoughtfully as though propounding a problem to himself, "and I cannot say that I have thought much about the matter."

"Do you know who made you an officer?" she asked.

"Your Majesty's wishes were responsible for my advancement," he said, with a little smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

"Why do you smile?" she demanded with bent brows. "Do you not know that you stand self-condemned, and that this court has but one sentence for —spies?"

"That is why I smile, Your Majesty," said the youth. "This situation has its humorous side. Your Majesty makes and breaks. Your Majesty's caprice made me—and I am grateful. But for that caprice I could not have done what I have done. Now it is your will to wipe out what might well have been an error on Your Majesty's part—I cannot complain."

For all its smooth reading, it took him some time to construct this sentence. He spoke a word—two words—three words at a time, for he was

only reaching a place where chaotic thought could find expression in grammatical English.

There was a bending of heads and a consultation at one end of the table where Schelhorn and the Chancellor sat. Then Van Graaf scribbled something on a sheet of paper and handed it to the Empress. She read it, took a pen, and after a little hesitation signed it. The Chancellor took the paper, and looked at Dick from under his shaggy brows.

"You will be shot at sunrise," he said curtly, and the guard closed round the prisoner.

They marched him to a wooden barn, and locked him in a little room that had evidently been cleared for his reception. There was a table, a chair, and a camp bed, and light came from a swinging lamp outside—a portion of the wooden wall having been removed for this purpose, and, moreover, to afford the sentries facility for observing him.

On the table he found an English Bible and prayer-book and writing material. He called at the aperture, and an officer came forward, but could speak no English. He shook his head when Dick, by motions, asked him to bring somebody who understood him.

In desperation Dick mustered his fragmentary knowledge of the one foreign tongue he was in any way acquainted with.

"A quelle heure le sol," he began clumsily, and the officer interpreting his wish, replied.

"A cinq heure, M'sieur."

"Reveille-moi à trois heures et demie, s'il vous plaît," said Dick haltingly, and the officer nodded.

There was nothing he could do, thought Dick, save to prepare himself by such sleep as he could snatch for the physical ordeal of the morning, and kicking off his boots and removing his coat, he lay down on the bed, drawing the rug up over his shoulders. He was asleep in five minutes. . . .

A hand grasped his shoulder, and he woke with a start.

"Is it time?" he asked, and looked up.

Van Graaf stood by the bed, and near the door, in her fur cloak, the Empress regarding him with curiosity. She it was who spoke.

"How can you sleep, Mr. Selby?" she asked, and the uncanny convention in her tone, the strange commonplace of the question, struck him afresh. It

was as though he were dreaming—one of those dreams where dreadful things happen and everybody takes them as a matter of course.

"Sleep, madame!" he said, and came to his feet. "I was hungry for sleep. Is it time?"

She shook her head.

"Since you are condemned," she said evenly, "and the laws of war have been observed in your sentence, I owe you an apology for disturbing you; but there was a matter on which I require information, and for which information I will pay—your life."

He bowed.

"Her Majesty knows," said Van Graaf, "that a portion of your army is armed with the silent rifle. She also knows that only one half is so armed—that either the force that is now assembling at Newmarket or the force which is being mobilized in Norfolk is equipped with the old rifle."

"I see"—the prisoner bent his head in thought. "You wish to move against the army armed with the obsolete weapon and avoid the other?"

The two exchanged glances and the Empress nodded.

"If I knew," Dick went on, "I should, of course, tell you nothing; but I do not know."

"Suppose we released you on condition you found out," began Graaf, but Dick smiled.

"If I betrayed my own people, I should not hesitate to betray you," he said dryly. "The whole thing is impracticable."

"Life isn't particularly sweet to you," the girl said quietly.

"Not as sweet to me as to you," said Dick, a dull anger taking possession of him. "I have no ambitions that need make me sin against humanity. I do not desire to walk to power over dead bodies. But you—you!" he cried, and flung out an accusing hand, "so long as you can broaden your empire, it is nothing to you that war runs like a blight through the country: so long as you can gratify your petty ambitions and your lust for dominion, it is nothing to you that women must give up their men and men must give up their lives."

He stopped. Anger could never rise to any heights of indignation before that chill, impassive form.

“Well,” she said coldly, as she turned away, “I have given you your chance.”

She passed from the room followed by the Chancellor; the door closed behind them and Dick heard the snap of the lock.

Sleep was out of the question now; he had not thought of escape up to this moment, he had accepted his position philosophically. But now this woman had aroused every faculty, his brain was alive and busy, and he turned on his bed to watch with half-closed eyes the obvious avenue of freedom—the observation hole.

He saw the sentry looking at him, and feigned sleep. The roof? It was too high. The walls? He waited until the sentry had resumed his pacing up and down; then he tapped them. They were immovable. Inch-thick planks over-lapping one another and clamped with iron.

He lay revolving plans in his mind and listening to the dull tramp of the sentry’s footsteps and their occasional stopping which told him that he was being watched through the hole. The guard, he knew, was at hand in the next compartment, but sleeping.

There was only one way out, and that was the door. How long had he got? He could not tell, but he remembered that the man who was on duty outside was the same man who had been on guard when they had brought him in. Therefore, it could not be three o’clock yet, and probably was not two.

Then he found his thoughts wandering to the Brown Lady again. Had she reached the lines? How far would she have to go? Ten miles perhaps, and if the British were still falling back, another five. Her difficulty would lie in avoiding the ever-moving “spokes” of the invaders’ wheel, the restless circling pickets that went round and round the central camp.

Then he came back to his own position; he found in his heart the roots of panic and plucked them out. If he was to “go out” he must go out smiling. There was the regiment to think of—that was a consideration. For the sake of this new family of his—the family with whom a week or so ago he had been sitting round a white-clothed table sparkling with silver and glass. . . .

Then the sentry was relieved, and he heard a distant clock strike two.

He had an hour and a half to work out his salvation—if salvation lay in life. He was not sufficiently philosophical to think that it lay in any other direction. A medley of plans, for the most part hopelessly impracticable, came to him, and he tried to marshal them . . . and failed.

He lay on his bed, his hands clasped behind his head, thinking, thinking, thinking. Why had he not thought of escape before the Empress had come? This was a problem that interested him. The Empress, too, he had been very rude to her, and he was sorry. After all, he owed her something; he flushed when he remembered that it was on the gratuity she had placed at the disposal of the Army Council that he lived, and he became uneasy at the thought of his ingratitude.

He fell asleep, and was wakened by the coming of the guard.

"Trois heures et demie," said the officer curtly.

"Merci, M'sieur."

Dick sat on the edge of the bed, walked a little wearily to the table, and fingered the writing paper absently. He yawned sleepily, not being as yet awake.

Should he write.

For answer he sat down, and wrote a letter to the Brown Lady, stopped half-way through, and tore it up.

They brought him coffee, which he drank, and at half-past four he heard the tramp of feet outside, and knew that an escort had come for him.

The world was grey and chilly when he stepped into the open. The country about was filled with strange shadows, and the silence of dawn broken by the faint twittering of a bird, somewhere in a distant copse.

The place appointed for the execution was at a little distance from the camp, and a battalion of infantry was drawn up waiting his arrival.

He expected, at first, to see the Empress; and then realized how absurd his expectations were.

The officer of the firing party came to him before he was marched on to the ground and asked him if he had any wishes. Dick thought, then shook his head. "None," he said.

"Will you be blindfolded?"

"As you wish."

It was whilst he was being marched to the chair in which he was to sit that a curious incident occurred. A man in the front rank of the battalion on guard suddenly collapsed, and fell with a crash to the ground. There was some commotion, and a knot formed about him.

“The man has fainted,” said the officer, in whose charge the prisoner was, “forward.”

They were preparing the chair when down crashed another man, and another.

An officer came running across the square with a frightened face. He said something and pointed. Dick looked and saw that the men who had fallen were lying in pools of blood, and that one of them was dead.

Then in a flash half a dozen men reeled out of the ranks together. One with a shriek as he raised his hands to his face, one silently, another with a bellow like that of a wounded bull.

“March the prisoner back!” shouted an authoritative voice, and a firm hand grasped his arm.

“We are here to carry out the order of the court-martial,” said his captor between his teeth. “Take your seat in that chair, Lieutenant Selby. Firing party, ready!”

They were the last words he spoke, for suddenly his face became a sprawling blot of blood, and he went down stone dead, as a shrill bugle sounded the alarm.

“Shoot the prisoner!” shrieked somebody, and a bullet, wildly aimed, whizzed past his head.

Dick’s hands were free, and he made up his mind quickly. A soldier sprang at him; Dick’s fist shot out and the man went down . . . then the prisoner ran. He did not know where he was going. He knew an attack was being delivered on the camp, and that somewhere, less than two thousand yards away, British soldiers armed with silent rifles were firing independently. He had to cross an open space, and the air about him was filled with the whine of bullets. Men who ran out to intercept him dodged back again to cover when they saw their comrades firing, and the path before him was clear of opposition.

He had been running towards the camp; now he turned to the left and ran with his body bent to afford as little surface as possible, and took a course parallel with the eastern side of the invaders’ position.

He heard the swift rush of feet behind him and turned. One glance he gave and his heart sank.

Troops were moving out to repel the attack, but a body of men had been detailed to follow him, and they showed no signs of tiring.

Then ahead of him he saw a squadron of cavalry moving out to bar his egress—he was surrounded. There was no escape that way. He glanced to the right, to the camp; it was his last and only chance; and he turned suddenly and made for the line of tents.

CHAPTER XXIX

"Your Majesty must go!" Van Graaf fidgeted impatiently by the side of the car. The Empress was already aboard, the engineer stood by his little machine, and the aeronaut officer was consulting with Schelhorn at some little distance.

"There is time——" she began.

"There is no time," he interrupted quickly. "They are attacking us with those infernal rifles: we do not know how many they are or where they are. At any moment they may threaten danger to Your Majesty, even now it is not safe."

"But surely——"

From close at hand came a sudden yelling and the crash of rifles.

"Quick!" cried the Chancellor. "Where is the officer in charge of the airship?"

He was not to be seen, being at that moment in Schelhorn's tent receiving final instructions.

The firing grew nearer, and Van Graaf sprang clear of the car.

"Let go!" he shouted to the men who held the ropes of the swaying car. They released their hold as a man running from a pursuing mob flung himself in their midst. As the car rose he leapt at it, caught it, and drew himself up.

"Catch the ropes again!" cried Van Graaf hoarsely, but the car was a hundred feet in the air and mounting rapidly, and the Empress Marie Henrietta was regarding with some trepidation the flushed face of Lieutenant Selby.

Dick stood at one side of the swaying car, and watched the Empress with curious eyes. She held fast to the cordage, staring at him with lips apart and a puzzled frown.

Beneath them the world was falling and the rattle and crash of the invaders' fire rang out sharply in the morning air.

She said something to the mechanician in a language Dick could not understand, and the man jumped forward to the valve line, but Dick's lean

arm caught him by the throat and hurled him backward with a jar that shook the frail basket and set it rocking perilously to and fro.

"It is madness to think of descending, Madame," Dick said quietly, "the farther you are away from earth the safer you will be. Listen."

He held up his finger to enjoin silence, and they heard the whistle and whine of bullets as they came upward.

One pierced the basket floor and whizzed obliquely past Dick's head.

The engineer was still lying where he had fallen on the floor of the basket. Dick bent over and examined him.

"He is stunned," was the verdict, "he will soon recover himself."

Behind the Empress were the two rudder lines. Dick reached to grasp them, his cheek almost touching hers, and she shrank back with a momentary display of fear.

"We will set a course eastward," said Dick. He looked over the car to make an observation of what was happening below, then, with a firm pull at the lines in his hand, swung the balloon until its blunt nose was directed to the rising sun.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked unsteadily.

Dick shook his head.

"I haven't thought about Your Highness, yet," he said, looking ahead as he manipulated the lines; "my whole mind has been occupied with—myself."

He turned a smiling face to her.

"For anything that savours of rudeness, of boorishness on my part," he said, "I would ask Your Highness' pardon. I am not yet normal, being filled with the primitive passion that represents love of living." He looked at her critically, and with wonder. "I do not even stand in awe of you," he said, half to himself, "indeed, you are only a beautiful woman, and no queen to me."

Here he relapsed into silence, the devil of self-consciousness asserting himself.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked again.

Dick shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said simply; “I suppose I ought to take you to the camp, the British camp—to London even, and hand you over to the officials at the War Office.”

A flush of excitement came into his face as the splendid possibilities of the situation dawned on him.

She saw the significant red, and her heart beat faster.

“I see,” she said slowly, “you think of the reward—the——”

“No,” he interrupted angrily—he was the more angry because she had spoken half the truth, for, in one brief second, there had flashed through his mind such possibilities as her thought had outlined.

Then he turned on her hotly.

“And why shouldn’t I?” he demanded. “Men are dying here below”—he stretched out his hand over the battlefield—“lives for which you care nothing are being yielded up, and homes beyond your knowledge or thought are being made desolate. For what? Because you are vilely ambitious, and sorrow and suffering are as nothing to you so long as your grandeur is served.”

He glowered at her, his face white, his lips tightly compressed.

“Suppose I handed you over to our people,” he said slowly, “would you be treated as you deserve? No! Because the crime of wholesale murder is on your soul you would be treated with every honour and dignity, and in the course of time would be released to work further mischief.”

She waited for him to continue, but he said no more.

Then she burst out with sudden scorn. “You fool! You prate of ambition like a hero of cheap drama, like a man who is ignorant of life and you see no further than the events which lie immediately under your eyes. The life of a man or so is sacrificed to-day and your concern blinds you so that you cannot look forward to the morrow to see the meaning of his death.”

She spoke with all the old imperative gestures and Dick felt the spell of her personality.

“But why,” she went on more gently, “why should I expect you to show any largeness of view—a man born, God knows where, bred from the people and raised from the ranks? Why should I expect, how could I expect you to understand that my ambitions were not purely personal and that the serving of my grandeur is not the mainspring of my policy?”

All scorn had dropped out of her tones, all disdain. She was dealing very simply with facts. But she produced an unintentional effect. She made Dick realize the immeasurable mental distance between them.

The command of the situation slipped from him and he felt something of the awe with which the Brown Lady was wont to inspire him. He was no longer Lieutenant Selby; he was once more Dick Selby, the clerk of Deptford. He felt that he was a fool and he ruefully realized that he looked like one. He flashed a glance at his companion. She was looking away from him across the world which lay like a saucer beneath them.

The balloon was now moving rapidly eastward. Ahead of them was the deep blue band of the sea, and Dick's plans were as yet unformed.

She turned to him again and watched the struggle that was in progress, for he was too young to have schooled his features to hide his thoughts and innermost feelings.

"Well?"

Dick shook his head irritably.

"I haven't decided," he said shortly.

"You are thinking that you owe me something," she challenged, "that I made you what you are. If you allow your personal obligations to stand before your patriotism you will be contemptible."

It was a daring thing to say, but the speech had two edges. To hand her over to the authorities would be a tremendous matter for Dick—he dare not let his mind rest on it.

Then as there came to them from below the roar of seas beating on the shore, an inspiration flashed on him.

"You made this war," he said suddenly, "you also can stop it."

She gave no answer.

"Will you?"

He was grotesquely earnest—asking for peace in the tone and with the attitude that a young lover might crave his mistress' favour.

"Will you, Madame? That would solve everything."

"I don't care much about myself," he went on, "I'm beside the question. You can reduce me to the ranks, and I do not doubt but that they will, when they learn—if they learn, that I have let you slip." Still she waited.

"If you give me an order of your own free will, over your signature, ordering Van Graaf to withdraw his forces, we would put ships at his disposal to take them away, and the other matter, the diplomatic part of it, could be settled. You—you are beaten, you know."

His boyish confidence drew a reluctant smile from her.

"But, my good man," she said, still smiling, "you have no authority to negotiate. I cannot accept the assurances of a subaltern of infantry!"

"But you can," he said eagerly. "After all, what will happen at the end of the war? We should do just what I am suggesting. We shan't eat our prisoners, or keep them on the taxpayers' money. It will come to the same thing—marching out with or without the honours of war. For God's sake, end this war. You don't know what it means; it is all theory to you. You haven't seen batteries of artillery galloping into action over dead and dying. You haven't heard the screams of the wounded as they try to crawl out of the way of the wheel or the awful crunch of the limbers as they jolt over human beings. Madame, war is worse than hell, because only the wicked suffer in hell, and here everybody, however good and innocent, suffers. I've seen little children buried in burning farms and nobody could get to them. Oh, heavens, it was awful!"

His face was white and beads of perspiration stood on his forehead.

"I've seen women—women as young as you and as fair as you, who'd been hit by chance shells——"

"Stop," she said hoarsely, "I'm not to be influenced by the accidents of war. It shall go on, it must go on."

The rudder lines were in his hands, and as she spoke he brought the balloon circling round till it pointed to the land they were leaving behind.

"What are you going to do?"

"Hand you to my superior officers," he said grimly. "I cannot hope to persuade you."

"Give me time."

"I will give you no more time," he said between his teeth. "You—are a vain, evil woman."

She smiled again at the quaintness of his phraseology.

They were half a mile from the coast, and Dick, looking down, could see on the shore a number of black specks gathered about what appeared to be,

at that distance, a little black hose-pipe. Dick was to learn later that he was taking his first view of the Denman-Coulter aerial gun.

"Since you are determined——" she began, when from the foreshore came a quick flash, followed by another, and a thin vapour spurted up.

Dick heard the "swe-e-e-e" of the coming shells, and jerked the rudder line—but too late.

Something exploded almost in his face; there was the screech of torn silk and the snap of parting cordage, and then the car lurched over.

The woman stumbled forward with blanched face and caught his arm. The sea was immediately below them.

"Jump!" he shouted, and kicking himself clear of the cordage, he flung himself over.

Dick struck the water feet foremost and went down like a thing of lead but came up confident. Then he saw something—a dark something that did not rise above the surface of the water but, looming slowly into view from the black depths, as slowly sank again. He dived and grasped his companion's cloak, and with frantic energy trod water. He brought her up after a struggle.

Luckily, the cloak was easily removable. He tore apart the golden clasp and pushed the cloak free, and five hundred pounds' worth of furs sank back into the water.

He had no time to think of the fate of the engineer or of what had happened to the balloon. He had no time to take an observation. The current had swept him out of sight of the people on the shore, for that part of the coast-line twists and turns to a remarkable extent.

The rocky shore was less than a quarter of a mile away, it looked even nearer, but his heart sank, for he knew that to cover even the short distance that separated him from safety would tax his every effort. Yet he must make the attempt. The woman he held in the crook of his arm might be dead, she made no sign of life and hung heavily as one from whom the last spark of vitality had departed, but he must get her to the shore, dead or living.

Then began a struggle for life in that calm summer sea such as wellnigh exhausted him.

Twice he was within reach of the sloping beach, once his feet touched the sand, but the outward rush of water carried him back again, and he almost gave up the fight.

The third time, he dug his feet into the sand and stumbled forward, dragging his burden with him.

For a moment he lay breathless by her side, but he pulled himself to his feet, trembling in every limb, and by a final effort succeeded in drawing the insensible girl to a place beyond the reach of the rising water.

He crouched by her, panting, and on the point of collapse, but with a mighty effort he brought himself to the work of resuscitating her.

With shaking hands, he opened her blouse its full length. He fumbled with the thin steel fastening of her corsage and stripped away the costly lace till the snow-white breast of the girl was exposed. Then he began to work the arms, and worked and worked till the sweat rolled down his brine-covered face.

At last, in despair, he stopped, for she gave no sign of life. He laid his ear to her heart and what he heard gave him renewed hope, for he detected the faintest fluttering.

Again he applied himself to his task and at last the breath that he had artificially given, came naturally in long-drawn sighs, and her closed eyelids trembled and opened. . . .

Her lips moved as though to speak, but no words came. He put his arm under her and lifted her to a sitting position.

“Try to walk,” he whispered, and brought her to her feet; then the world went round, and the cliffs above seemed to whirl in a circle wildly, and he fell insensible.

CHAPTER XXX

Dick came to himself with the stinging taste of brandy in his mouth and a feeling of sickness. Some one was bending over him.

"Are you better?" said a voice.

He looked up uncomprehendingly.

Then he began to remember. They were still under the cliff, he and the lady. He noticed dully that her long fair hair was streaming over her shoulders and that she had roughly fastened the front of her blouse.

"I had the brandy in my pocket," she said.

She looked very beautiful, he thought, but very white.

"Take some of the brandy," he said, but she shook her head.

"There is no more—you had the last."

"You're very foolish," he said stupidly.

He struggled to a sitting posture and rested his back against a boulder.

Presently the girl who had seated herself near looked towards him.

"The engineer?" she questioned.

"Gone down, I suppose," said Dick heavily.

She made no reply. She turned her gaze seaward and watched the monotonous break of the waves on the shore, waiting until her rescuer should be sufficiently recovered to make a move. For a long time they sat in silence.

Dick was getting his mind in order: re-arranging from the chaos some calm appreciation of what had happened.

When things had grown clearer to him and he had definitely settled his plan of action, he stole a look at his companion.

She had become absorbed in her thoughts and sat there apparently unconscious of his presence. Her dress was soaked, her wet hair hung loose upon her shoulders, and weariness showed in every line of her form. But her spirit was not weary. Dick felt that as he watched her. It seemed to shine out as though impatient both of the physical weariness and of the enforced

inaction. And yet, imperious and untamable as he felt that spirit of hers to be, he knew that it would yet answer to reason and be docile in the presence of love.

With all this, there was a look of sadness on her face—a sadness that was almost yearning and Dick wondered what her thoughts were. He would have reached, if he could, the spring of these conflicting moods that he saw, though mistily, reflected in her face. For into his mind there was creeping a new feeling of respect, different from the respect he had accorded her rank and her genius for statecraft—a respect that he would have found it hard to define.

She became conscious of his gaze and turned towards him.

"We shall have to stay here till night comes," he said.

She opened her eyes wide at this.

"Why?"

"If we stir now they will see us—the wonder is, they haven't searched already."

"But," she said, "I thought——?"

He shook his head.

"I cannot give you up to my people—you must go back to your country and do whatever you think is best."

"But you?"

He cut short her protest with an imperious gesture. Dick Selby might well have been Emperor and Marie Henrietta a humble subject. If it is possible to imagine two persons so strangely placed as were this queen and this subaltern of English Infantry, and if it be further possible to picture them sitting in silence throughout that day, I would ask the reader to so imagine them.

Towards evening she said, timidly, "I am very hungry, lieutenant."

"So am I, Your Majesty," said Dick grimly. "However, dusk will be here in half an hour, and I will go foraging."

An hour later a figure in trousers and shirt crept into the outskirts of a village, and entering a cottage stole a couple of blankets, a pillow and a loaf of bread.

Dick reached the Empress in safety, his food wrapped in his blankets and a big jug of fresh water in his hand.

Very solemnly they sat down in the gathering gloom to their repast, and when they had finished she asked:

"And now?"

"Now we must sleep for a few hours, then make the best of our way across country," he said vaguely.

He found a little cove in the cliff, and made a bed for her.

"And you?" she asked.

"I'll wrap myself in a blanket and sleep outside," he replied, but scarcely had he seen her safe in the cove than it began to rain.

He tried to find a shelter, but the rain came beating in from the sea.

Her voice called him. "Come inside, Mr. Selby."

There was scarcely room for two, but lieutenant and queen slept peaceably that night under one blanket, the golden hair and the short-cropped head on one pillow.

He had set his mind on two o'clock as the hour of departure, and at that hour he woke suddenly.

"Come," he whispered, and roused her.

They ate the remainder of the loaf and stole out into the night. It was cold and still raining, and Dick, tearing one of the blankets in half, wrapped it shawl-fashion around her head and shoulders and hand-in-hand they ascended the rocky path that led to the brow of the cliff. Here they paused.

Dick's plans were well defined. They were to place the queen with her own people, in the faith that she would bring about an end to this guerilla war. As for himself, he had no plans. He knew he was doing something which might be regarded as treason of the worst kind, but which, on the other hand, might be acclaimed. It depended greatly upon the result of his scheme.

They tramped through the night, and spent the day in hiding in a large plantation near Witham.

The next night they continued their tramp. They were now in the war area. The little graves by the wayside grew more numerous, the smoking

wreckage of once prosperous farms and homesteads were glowing beacons that directed them on the track of the war.

They saw bodies laid out for burial and forgotten, they heard the low groans of dying men, and once, when they had taken shelter in the upper floor of a barn, the door below was flung open, and six British soldiers staggered in bearing a heavy burden.

The Empress looked down through a crack in the floor, and saw by the light of two candles a battered piece of humanity, bearing stars and crowns of rank on his blood-caked shoulder-strap, being placed on a rough table.

She saw the uniform doctor strip his coat, and heard him talk to another officer—evidently one of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

". . . Just found him, poor chap, in a stable . . . Crawled there . . . Whew!" he whistled as with deft hands he cut away the man's clothing. "Amputation will be no good here, M'Pherson. The man's as good as dead. Still, give him a whiff of chloroform; I must try to get that arm off. . . ."

She turned away sick, and closed her ears with her hands, till Dick touched her gently.

"It is all over," he whispered. "He's dead."

On the third day they came within hearing of the firing, which towards evening grew heavier, and bullets struck the galvanized roof of the cattle shed in which they were hidden, and a battery came into action at the very door.

They heard a sharp exchange of orders and the rumbling of wheels, the pitter-patter of falling bullets, then came a sudden silence.

"Our guns have retired," said Dick with a troubled face.

They slept that evening intending to resume their journey a couple of hours before midnight.

When he awoke, the Empress was not in her accustomed place by his side.

He crept out cautiously, and drew back with an oath, for the building was surrounded by horsemen, and he knew by the challenge that came to him that once more he was in the enemy's hands.

At any rate, the queen had come to her people. So far his mission had succeeded, and he stepped forth boldly.

He was immediately seized and a voice in the darkness spoke.

"Lieutenant Selby?"

"Yes," he answered.

"I have orders to take you to His Excellency."

Dick made no resistance, but walked between the men.

"What of Her Majesty?" he asked after a while.

"Silence—*vorwarts*!" was the short reply.

They marched him to a house that stood solitary by the roadside. About it, and in the darkness, he heard the indescribable movement that told of a vast army bivouacking in the open. They halted at the door whilst one went forward and spoke to an officer who stood silhouetted in the light thrown on the open doorway. Then Dick was ordered to advance. His escort fell back, and the officer led the way down the narrow passage and stopped before a closed door.

"Enter," he said.

The Empress was alone. She stood by the fireplace and the candles on the mantelshelf behind her shone on her fair hair.

She was still in her mud-stained dress and her blanket shawl was flung over the back of a chair.

She raised her head as Dick entered and stood hesitating.

"Close the door," she said, and he obeyed.

Then she came forward and laid her hands on his shoulders.

"I have sent for you to say good-bye, my friend," she said in her rich, low voice. "I feared that you might slip away when you learnt I was safe."

She looked into his eyes steadily.

"When you leave here to-night," she said slowly, "a truce party will escort you to the British lines. Good-bye."

Dick saw the sad shadow in her eyes, and wondered.

"Good-bye, Your Majesty," he said awkwardly.

Then she took his face in her hands and kissed him. "God bless you, *chevalier*," she said with a catch in her voice.

CHAPTER XXXI

The events which led up to the Battle of Exming, or, as it is more frequently called, the Battle of Newmarket, may be briefly told.

The invading armies had landed on that stretch of land which runs from Walton-on-Naze to Little Holland.

Schelhorn had thrown a division across the Colne, cutting the railway at Witham, whilst the main body had attacked and captured Colchester.

With Colchester in hand a brigade had moved north to Manningtree and Ipswich.

Meanwhile, with all rapidity, British forces had concentrated at Epping and Hertford, covering that side of London which was threatened by the enemy, and the Third Army Corps had concentrated at York.

Upon the invaders showing an intention to avoid battle and to break through westward to pursue a guerilla warfare in the Midlands, the Army Council had directed the Commander-in-Chief to drive northward into Norfolk.

But Schelhorn had seen the danger. Already he knew of the armies that were gathering and he had marked out Norfolk as a danger-zone.

The day the British Army marched out of Hertford, he had moved his forces simultaneously westward and northward to Bury St. Edmunds, while the Yorkshire army had moved down to Doncaster and the western army at Oxford had closed in.

Schelhorn's hopes lay in avoiding all three. If he had dared, he would have worked southwards, but the brigade he had thrown out to hold his left, had come unexpectedly into touch with a British column working north from a base at Halstead and the invading wing had drawn in.

Schelhorn had not expected to find a force so close, and then and there had called a council of war.

It was in the early hours of the morning and Marie Henrietta, a silent observer, sat at her place at the head of the table. Her unexpected return to the army only a few hours before had occasioned a panic in the breast of Van Graaf—he saw complications, and a hampering factor in her presence, but

he changed his mind when he saw the effect it had upon the spirit of the army.

The story of her adventure and the news of her restoration to the camp had spread like fire through the troops and they were ready to march and fight with renewed vigour.

For Marie Henrietta was at that time the most popular monarch that had ever ruled in Mid-Europe; and especially was she popular with her army. Van Graaf saw this. His heart rose, and his keen mind sought a way out. He was keen to minimize his defeat, for nobody knew better than the Chancellor that he was beaten. He had depended upon England losing its head, upon the inscrutable forces that made for disaster, financial panic, love of credit and the like.

In the scope of this story it is impossible to deal with every phase of the situation as it occurred, but we know that England's credit stood high, that the financial crash Van Graaf had anticipated did not come. We know, too, that the allies he had depended upon to come to his assistance failed him, and that the belated movement of the Southern States was promptly checked by a British naval demonstration that sent Emperor Rudolph to his bed with quaking heart.

All this the Chancellor knew as he spoke at the Council. "Our hope lies in evading the circling armies," he said, "and in prolonging this conflict as long as possible. Every day we remain in the field without capitulating opens a greater possibility for saving something from the wreck. What Moltke said was true; there are a hundred ways into this cursed island and no way out. You can evade navies and succeed in landing forces; you can evade armies and reach a seaport, but you cannot evade the circling navy that awaits you outside—your every movement chronicled by wireless telegraphy. Your Majesty, there is only one course open to us, and that is to move, move, move and keep moving till we tire the sober Britons or irritate them into a panic."

Thereupon and as a result of the conference, the invader moved out of Bury St. Edmunds in the early dawn to seize Cambridge.

While Dick was riding through the night back to the British lines under an escort of Uhlans, a message in triple code was "lamped" from the British Head-quarters to the Rochester Regiment.

Under the hands of the adjutant it slowly unravelled itself until it read:

> "Enemy retiring W. by W.N.W.; you will make forced march to the point marked ZL02 on service map and will find transport there; am sending two guns and engineer section to your support."

"And," said the adjutant in despair, as he finished decoding the message, "what the devil they mean by 'transport' I don't know."

Weary men sleeping on the ground heard with a curse the warning bugle sound.

A dozen ragged, unshaven men, stretched under the shelter afforded by two blankets bayoneted to a fence, crawled into the open silently and adjusted their equipment.

It was pitch dark, for the night was a cloudy one, and, save for the signal lamps that winked and stared from every side, no light showed.

"Fall in on the road by companies," said an authoritative voice.

Corporal Bill Blake lit a pipe stealthily before he obeyed. Deftly he rolled his blanket and eased the breech of his rifle like the good workman that he was.

"Fall in! Fall in!"

One heard the loud-spoken commands amidst the shuffle and patter of hurrying feet and "click, click, click," of rifle bolts shooting in and out.

"Where are we?" said a voice in the ranks.

"Somewhere or other," came the vague reply. "Don't go asking silly questions, Shorty."

"It's a wonder to me," complained Shorty, "that we're anywhere—what with fightin' an' marchin' an' sleepin' out in the rain, an' hardships an' what not——"

"Fat lot of hardships you've done," said Bill Blake's voice. "You're a bloomin' wangler, Shorty."

"What's that, corporal?" asked the injured Shorty.

"A wangler is a bloke who wangles," said Bill illuminatingly. "A nicker, a shirker, a grouser—any bloomin' thing that talks a lot an' don't do much work."

"Meanin' me?"—"Meanin' you."

From the darkness a voice spoke.

“Your company ready, Captain Harding?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, march off, please. . . .”

Through the darkness along the tree-shadowed roads they went, the tramp of their feet beating regularly.

Seasoned and war-trained soldiers marching to an unknown destination, to a fight and a death, perhaps—yet none asking why or foreseeing the end of the journey.

Unconscious, uncaring, serenely indifferent, neither heroes nor conscious of so being—just eleven hundred Englishmen going about the work for which they were employed—“to destroy the enemies of the Crown.”

This is how I see the Rochester Regiment of the Line; how they saw themselves may be gathered.

“If I had known,” said a voice with gentle melancholy, “what soldierin’ really was, I’d have took the lyin’ recruitin’ sergeant that enlisted me, an’ kicked the smile off his face.”

“That you, Kinky,” asked somebody in the preceding “fours,” and a gentle chuckle ran through the ranks, for Kinky was a notorious grouser.

“Eatin’ nothin’, drinkin’ nothin’ except water what ain’t worth speakin’ about, walkin’ all night an’ fightin’ all day——”

“An’ shut up!” said a shadowy corporal. “You’d talk the teeth out of your head, an’ the hair off your face.”

“I dessay,” muttered Kinky.

There was a youthful correspondent walking alongside the men to whom the complaints sounded ominous, and when later the adjutant’s voice asked: “All right in this section?” and a chorus said, “All right, sir,” he was a little puzzled.

“I thought these chaps were complaining,” he said to the sergeant by his side, and a non-commissioned officer grinned in the darkness.

“They are only unofficial complaints,” he explained, “bein’,” he added vaguely, “a soldier’s privilege.”

Dawn was breaking when the regiment marched into the little town marked ZL02 on the service map to find, instead of deserted streets, the

whole population awaiting them.

“What is that noise?” asked the adjutant.

It was a curious humming and buzzing that came from the broad green in the centre of the town.

Just then the head of the regiment swung round the corner of a street on to the green itself.

“By George!” said the adjutant, and whistled.

For drawn up in a dozen long lines on the open space were hundreds of motor-cars of every shape and size.

From little 8-horse-power cars to huge racing cars puffing and snorting, they awaited the regiment.

The adjutant galloped across to a Staff-Officer who stood at one end of the line, and in a minute was back with his report.

“The regiment is to make a dash on Cambridge—the guns are going on the lorries, and the men in the cars.”

The story of the motor dash on Cambridge forms the most interesting passage in the story of the great invasion. We know now how, in conjunction with the Automobile Association, the British War Office had secretly organized an emergency transport of motor-cars to be used in the event of the regular forms of transport breaking down. At an appointed hour, therefore, automobiles from every part of the country concentrated at points within reach of the British troops, and were soon conveying them from all quarters and with all speed to the threatened city.

This was the situation when on a sudden there came to the Rochester regiment, speeding northward to Cambridge, Lieutenant Richard Selby, by the Rochesters regarded as a dead man.

CHAPTER XXXII

The adjutant had seen the little knot of horsemen cantering across the open. He saw, too, the white flag that fluttered from a lance carried by one of the escort, and raised a warning hand that brought the motor column to a standstill.

Then he recognized Dick and sprang out of his car with a shout.

Dick, before the colonel, gave a short account of all that had happened.

"I do not know, sir," he concluded, "how much at fault I have been in delivering Her Majesty back to her own people, but I am prepared to take the consequences. By my way of looking at the matter, I have done right."

"I think you have," said the colonel thoughtfully, "though a superior opinion to mine must decide. You had better join the column and regard yourself as under arrest, but I shouldn't let that fact worry you."

Then he saw the silent escort of Uhlans.

"How far are we from the main body?" he asked. Then he added quickly: "I don't ask you that I may profit by your information, but I don't want these fellows to get back with news."

Dick explained that he had ridden from the enemy's lines, and placed the nearest point to danger at twenty miles.

"Join a car," said the colonel brusquely, when he had dismissed the escort, "you will find your company at the other end."

As the fast-moving line of motor-cars swept ahead, Dick suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to ask about the Brown Lady.

He could not for the moment explain his remissness and the thought of it terrified him, as, when a child, the memory of forgotten morning prayers had set him shivering.

Fortunately he was in the same car as the adjutant, and that officer was able to tell him that the Brown Lady had come safely to camp, and that it was in consequence of the information she was able to supply that the attack had been delivered on the camp on the morning appointed for Dick's execution.

He learned, too, that there was a place still called London where six million of people read such news of happenings as the Press censor allowed to be issued. He had forgotten its existence. He heard of armies being assembled and vaguely of terms of capitulation being arranged.

"What we have to do," said the adjutant, "is to clear these beggars out of England on any terms. Our credit is all right so far, but how long it's going to remain all right with an invader rampaging up and down the country, goodness knows."

So they came to the outside of Cambridge to find every road leading into the ancient city alive with cars, to find ten battalions of infantry with forty light guns making ready for a march eastward. It had been wisely decided that no attempt should be made to take the cars beyond Cambridge. A motor-cycle detachment of the enemy had been seen on Newmarket Heath, and the roads were dangerous.

Schelhorn was riding into Newmarket at the head of his staff when the cycle scouts brought him the news. He bit his lip and reined his horse with a jerk.

"Motor-cars!" he said simply; "I had forgotten them."

That was all he said, but it was his confession of failure. He now made a disposition of his force in preparation for the battle which he saw was inevitable.

But, first of all, he placed his royal mistress in a position of safety.

"Madame," this taciturn man is supposed to have said at parting, "should I not see you again, you will remember that I went cheerfully to death at Your Majesty's wish."

She stood in front of the town hall, white of face but with features impassive, and nodded gravely.

Then Schelhorn, with his hand at the salute, wheeled his horse and cantered up the sloping road that led to the Heath.

In an hour his right rested on Burwell, and he held both sides of the railway, but "the Ditch" was too splendid a natural defence to despise, and the right advanced to a point between Swaffham Prior and Burwell Station, whilst his left touched the other end of the Ditch at Wood Ditton.

Virtually the great Roman rampart represented his defending line with a brigade at Cheverley Park to guard his left, and another force at Snailwell to hold his left.

The first of the seven attacks was delivered at eleven o'clock in the morning, when the East Lancashires, the Sherwood Foresters, the Northamptons and the Worcesters made a determined attack on the "gap"—at that very gap where generations of racegoers had caught their first glimpse of the Cesarewitch field as it flashed momentarily into view.

Simultaneously two regiments of Rifles, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Royal Scots and the East Kent Regiment came into touch with the brigade at Cheverley.

Both attacks were repulsed, and the Fourth Division, which had failed at the gap, was reinforced by the addition of the London Division—the King's Royal Rifles, Middlesex, East Surrey, West Kents and the Rochesters.

"They give me no time," was Schelhorn's only comment when the attack was renewed with extraordinary fierceness. He brought his Imperial Guard into action, and for a time the British were held.

Then, far away the British pompoms began their monotonous drumming, and instantly from Exming came a helio-message that a determined assault was in progress.

But the invaders fought stubbornly in face of terrifying conditions.

The British were invisible save when they came up at a run with fixed bayonets, one surging, yelling line that flung itself at the trenches as the sea upon a rocky coast, and rolled back broken and shattered before the deadly fire of the defenders.

That was to be endured—the charging battalions; but worse was the silent fire—the never-ending sobbing of bullets that came from none knew where.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the 3rd, 8th and 9th Divisions of the British force were ordered to take the Ditch. "At any cost" ran the order; and the Rochesters, at least, realized the seriousness of the task ahead.

"Let every man throw away every article of his equipment that is likely to impede him," said the adjutant, passing down the line. "Who is in command of 'C' Company?"

"I am, sir," said Dick Selby.

"You? Oh, yes, of course, poor Harding. . . . Well, Selby, there is only one order, and that is 'Go on'—the Rochesters must go to the last man—you understand?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

The adjutant turned to go, but stopped to speak to a soldier, who was standing up.

“Get down!” he ordered roughly, and the man sank back out of danger of the hail of bullets that swept overhead.

“Oh, by the way, Selby,” said the adjutant, and stumbled forward into Dick’s arms—dead.

As he had spoken a bullet had struck him through the head.

Dick laid the body down—and then a bugle was sounded.

“Rochesters—Roch-es-ters!” And the line shuffled forward.

Shorty, Long Long and Corporal Blake were behind Dick, Shorty’s complaining voice rising shrilly.

“This is what I call ’olesale slaughter—it oughtn’t to be allowed—it’s wicked.”

The terror in the man’s voice was pitiable.

“Shut up,” snapped Blake.

Then Dick felt his arm touched and turned his head to see the expressionless face of Laddo.

“Why, Laddo,” he said, forgetting for the moment the difference rank had made and remembering only the Laddo of old.

It was curious, too, how he noticed in that moment of terrible danger, such a trifling matter as the lance stripe that adorned the khaki sleeve of the other.

“I wanted to say, Dick,” said Laddo, “that if anything happens to me, you’ll forgive me for any harm I might have done you.”

“Back to the ranks, corporal,” shouted a voice at the rear, and Dick nodded.

Tramp, tramp, tramp across the rolling Heath, with the stinging rattle of rifle fire ahead. . . .

“Oh, heaven!”

A shriek behind him and he half turned—Laddo was down.

He missed a face. “Where is Shorty?” he asked.

“Killed, sir—two minutes ago. . . .”

Nearer, nearer, nearer. . . .

Out of the line ran an old man. He did not carry the rifle that officers should carry, but in his hand flashed the long straight sword of his rank.

“Rochesters!” he cried, and the men turned their faces to their colonel. “Follow me!” and he ran ahead like a boy, and with one yell the regiment broke in pursuit. . . .

It seemed like a bad, bad dream to Dick as he scrambled up the face of the Ditch. Things were exploding in his face, and his hands were smothered in blood.

He saw Major Harvey with a smile on his face as he raised his rifle and roared: “Salute the Ditch!” and then went down.

Dick saw his colonel die, and could not help him. What he, himself, did he could not remember. He had a confused idea that he moved . . . and that was all.

But of a sudden the firing ceased, a white flag fluttered from the big fort that had been hastily constructed, and from it an officer came forward peering under his brows from left to right.

“I wish to surrender to your Officer Commanding.”

“Take it, sir,” said somebody.

“But I am not ‘O.C.,’ ” said Dick.

“Yes, sir, you are.” It was a colour-sergeant who spoke. “You are the only officer left alive.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

There came to the Field-Marshal commanding the British forces a party of the enemy, carrying a white flag.

Received with a guard of honour, before the generals' quarters, they entered the tent which had been hurriedly pitched, and came straight to the point.

The Field-Marshal listened silently until they had finished, then he shook his head.

"I have no instructions to open terms," he said, "except those of unconditional surrender. At the same time, I have no desire to prolong a war that has already caused so much suffering and loss of life. I am prepared to discuss a basis of surrender, subject to the approval of superior authority."

"I am commanded to state," said the envoy, "that Her Majesty would be prepared to receive an officer of field rank to confer with her on the subject of terms."

The general nodded.

"I will transmit Her Majesty's wishes to the cabinet," he said.

In five minutes he was standing by the side of a telegraph operator, engaged in a conversation with Whitehall.

The envoys were summoned again.

"No objection is offered," he said, "and I will accordingly appoint——"

"Pardon, Excellency," interrupted the other quickly, "I find that I am wanted to convey to you Her Majesty's full desires on the subject. She specifically mentioned an officer."

"Indeed?" the general's eyebrows rose. "I shall be pleased, of course, to accede to any reasonable wish of Her Majesty. Which officer did she suggest?"

The envoy consulted his field note-book.

"Colonel Selby," he said calmly, and the general looked a little bewildered.

"Selby?" he repeated, "I know no colonel on my staff by that name?"

The envoy bowed.

“I am instructed that the gentleman on whose good offices Her Majesty would rely is at present a subaltern officer.”

“Ah! the Rochester Selby?”—a light dawned on the officer—“but he is not of field rank, I am very much afraid. . . .”

Round a big table at the War Office in London sat eight men, and at one end of the table a temporary telegraphic connection had been fixed.

“The only thing I am afraid of,” said one—the Financial Secretary—“is that Marie Henrietta will change her plans at the last moment and fight it out.”

“That is my fear,” said the grey-haired president. “It is all very well for us to say that she is surrounded. Her troops are so excellently disciplined that she could fight a way out. Her position is stronger than appears—and ours weaker”—the telegraph began clicking and the conversation ended abruptly.

The operator scribbled the message as it came through and passed the slips to the man at the end of the table.

“Selby?” he said wonderingly, “why, isn’t that the boy——?”

Again a murmured discussion rose as the proposals of the Empress came through.

“He’s not a field officer or anything like a field officer,” said the Financial Secretary, “but she’s keen on having him, so, for heaven’s sake, let him go.”

“But a subaltern!”

“Make him a colonel—it’s absurd, I know; but it would be even more absurd to let these negotiations fall through over the question of a subaltern’s promotion.”

“We might gazette him major with the honorary rank of lieutenant-colonel,” mused the president; “it’s a preposterous situation, but——”

That “but” gave Richard Selby field rank.

Dick was engaged in the sorrowful task of preparing a report of the storming of the Ditch when he was summoned to appear at head-quarters.

The old Field-Marshal met him at the door of the tent and led him inside.

“Selby,” he said, “you are to go to the enemy’s lines, see the Empress, and lay these proposals before her.” He indicated a neatly-written memorandum that lay on the table. “You will receive her suggestions, and endeavour to harmonize her wishes with ours. These”—he picked up the notes from the table—“represent our irreducible minimum. Beyond these you are not authorized to go. Unconditional surrender you will observe, but the Army will be transported back to its own shores within a month. An indemnity of £150,000,000—that’s nothing, and they can afford to pay it—the Empress to be allowed to depart freely with her Chancellor, regiments to surrender their colours—you need not insist upon that, but you can try it on, and if there is too much fuss you can make a graceful concession on the point. This treaty to be approved by the Parliament of Mid-Europe within six weeks.”

There were other stipulations, notably the now famous Mobilization of Merchant Shipping Prohibition.

It may be said that Dick listened with a slow understanding.

“Do I understand, sir,” he asked, “that I am charged with these negotiations?”

“You are—colonel,” said the general with a smile, “and you will understand also that the War Office in its wisdom has promoted you lieutenant-colonel, with the honorary rank of colonel.” He laughed outright at the astonishment on the young man’s face. “It is all very Napoleonic and big,” he said kindly; “and I daresay you feel a little like Alice in Wonderland—nevertheless, I congratulate you on your luck.” And he offered his big hand to the speechless officer before him.

So Dick Selby rode out to meet the Empress, a colonel wearing the badge of a lieutenant, and having in his heart all the quaking wonder of a full private.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Four people sat in an upstairs room at the "Victoria Hotel" in Newmarket. In the streets below, as the darkness fell, there was a crackling of newly-made fires, and a rumbling of wheels as the ambulances brought their loads of suffering humanity to the hastily-improvised hospitals.

Save these sounds there was no noise, for the men who were gathered about the fires spoke in low tones.

At the top of the town where the racecourses began, a solitary sentinel stood looking away to the twinkling lights that showed the British fires.

Once there was a stir and a fierce rustling whisper like the wind amongst loose leaves. It was when there came down the hill from the heath a jingling ambulance at a dead slow pace. At its side rode two officers of high rank, and men who squatted by the fires and men who lay at full length on the ground, rose at a word and stood at attention as all that was mortal of Field-Marshal Schelhorn was borne past.

One of the four in the upper room heard the rumble of wheels and stepped to the window to watch the ambulance in the dusk.

"That is Schelhorn?" the Empress asked gravely, and the Chancellor as gravely answered:

"That is Schelhorn, Madame."

The third of the party was the elderly officer who had filled the post of Commander-in-Chief after Schelhorn's death, the fourth was Lieutenant-Colonel Selby.

The Empress came back to her place at the table and sat with her hands folded on the board before her.

"Your terms are just," she resumed, "as just as they are hard. I can see no others possible—the concession of the colours" (Dick had granted this point) "was a kindly one."

She rose and paced the room. The Chancellor murmured something about light, but she waved the suggestion aside impatiently.

"Colonel," she said suddenly, "do you think I am a very ambitious woman?—you do, I know. And do you think that this attack of ours was wicked and unjustifiable? Listen!"

She stopped at one side of the table and spoke across to him.

“Do you know Mid-Europe? A land-locked State, with one seaport, which for seven months in the year is ice-bound. There is the secret of this invasion, that one port with its ice-floes. We have sought other ports. Once we went down to the edge of Mahometan, fought a long and costly war—but England was there waiting for us, suave, polite, but firm. We were not to have the fruit of our labour. ‘The Powers,’ said England, ‘did not deem it advisable that the balance of power in Southern Europe should be displaced.’

“Fifty years ago we found another outlet, this time over a thousand miles of barren country to an Asiatic port. But there was England—England in a white helmet with khaki-clad soldiers, and England said, ‘The Powers do not think it advisable to allow this expansion, lest it affect the good understanding between ourselves and the people of the Yellow Islands.’ ”

She spoke bitterly, and Dick felt a little of her sorrow.

“Wherever we have been, west, south or east, Britain has been waiting to bar our way. For a hundred years she has stood between us and growth. Do you wonder that we hate her? Do you wonder that we regard her as the enemy of our people?”

Dick made no reply.

“I have one satisfaction only from this business,” she went on, “and that lies in the ignorance of the British at the sentiments of my people. You, who look to see me go back to Rustenburg in humiliation, who have visions of my being torn to pieces by a furious populace, know nothing of the truth.

“Once such a demonstration was organized against me, but the man who organized it is dead. My people know why we fight—they know the risk we took and what gain there was in victory. They know, too, the price of defeat; and will pay it. You, who look for my impeachment, may very well witness my triumph.”[1]

“But what could Your Majesty hope to gain by invasion?” asked Dick. “We can give you no ports—all that happened fifty years ago is done with for good. You cannot upset the happenings of the past. Whatever might be our wishes, we could not ensure you a warm-water port——”

She interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

“There is Tabritz, Molonsk, Venence—a score of places,” she said, “but these are outside our negotiations, colonel, and—and those negotiations are

finished."

She continued walking the room, with a strange, determined stride that was almost masculine.

"As for me," she said, "I do not care——"

"Your Majesty need not think of consequences," broke in the Chancellor quickly. "Such a game as we have played, we all took part in planning. Colonel," he turned to Dick, "you have now the substance of our reply—virtually we agree on all points—with those trifling suggestions which you have noted. It remains for your Government to formally approve of the drafted articles we have accepted."

Ten minutes later Dick stepped into the waiting motor-car in the street below and was driven past guards and advanced posts to the British lines.

To his surprise, as he was about to alight before the head-quarters' tent the Field-Marshal joined him and motioned him to remain seated. Then, taking his place by his side, he ordered the driver to go on to Cambridge.

"Well, Selby, how did you get on?" he asked, and Dick noticed with an odd sense of bewilderment, that tone of equality which had sounded so unreal the day he exchanged the barrack for the messroom.

The grey-haired Marshal must have interrupted his thoughts, for without waiting to receive an account of the happenings at Newmarket he went on:

"You're going to be a puzzle and an embarrassment to us, Selby. What are you now? Colonel? And I'll swear by all the rules governing promotion you haven't got the certificates to qualify for sergeant-major." He chuckled in the darkness as the car sped on, and Dick's face went red at the annoying truth.

"I understand the circumstances of the present promotion, sir," he said, not without a hint of his offended dignity, "and I am quite prepared at the conclusion of these negotiations to revert to my original rank——"

"Stuff and nonsense," snapped the old man. "If you get a thing in the Army, stick to it—if you're not fit to have it, stick to it tighter. You're only an historical parallel—d'ye know your Napoleonic history? Very well. There are a hundred parallels for you. Carters, farm boys and lance-corporals one day. Generals of Divisions and Emperors next. You're one of the romances of war, and you're worth the money for the shining example you'll be to millions of soldiers yet unborn!"

Then he turned abruptly to the subject of the interview and Dick told him all that happened. He made no comment until the car swung into Cambridge, then he said:

"We have to go on to London with this report. If the engineers have patched up the line, we shall find a special train waiting for us."

The line had been "patched up" they found, and the train awaited them at one dimly-lighted station platform.

That run to London remained amongst the most vivid of Dick's memories, not for anything that was said—for the general slept for the greater part of the journey—nor for any startling incident that occurred; but because of a sudden, bold and resolute thought that came to him. A thought so daring that it almost took his breath away. He had no material to work upon, no knowledge of the subject save a few confused memories that he had carried with him from the room where the Empress and her council sat in darkness. Phrases half forgotten . . . had she said Tabritz? Where was Tabritz? Would there be time to find out?

The train ran into Liverpool Street at eleven o'clock that night. To Dick's surprise he found a huge, silent crowd filling the streets leading to the terminus.

Somehow the news had reached London that the bearer of dispatches was arriving in London. The station approaches had been cleared, and the platform was deserted save for officials. Dick saw a bookstall open and a placard displayed, "The History of our Quarrel with Mid-Europe." He wondered why the bookstalls were open at this hour. Then he remembered that in the days of the South African War, when special editions were arriving at every hour, some of the stalls did not close at all.

"I beg your pardon, sir."

The general leading the way stopped and turned.

"May I get a paper?"

"Certainly, Selby—why not?"

Dick stepped to the bookstall, and ran his eyes over its contents.

Yes, there it was in red and black, "Our Quarrel with . . ."

He picked it up, then remembered—

"I've got no money," he said in some surprise, as though he had made a wonderful discovery.

The clerk smiled and nodded.

“Take anything you like, sir,” he said.

On the way to the electric motor-car that was ready for them this absence of money puzzled Dick as some perfectly obvious problem perplexes a man in his dreams. It brought him down to actualities—to life, to his promotion—and the Brown Lady.

There was some little delay at the War Office. There were the rough drafts of the terms of surrender to be considered by the Council and a personal report to be made by the Commander-in-Chief.

Dick was ushered into a luxuriously-furnished waiting-room, and as the door closed behind him he drew from his pocket the sixpenny handbook upon which he hoped to build—oh, so much!

He read hurriedly. Skipping the flamboyant introduction, he turned the leaves of the little book with quick, nervous fingers. There was a map, and this from time to time he consulted.

It did not seem that he had been reading five minutes, though in reality it was an hour when the handle of the door turned and a staff officer came in. Dick rose to attention, but the officer saluted him, and the young Colonel blushed again at the realization of his rank.

“The President has asked me to apologize for keeping you so long, colonel,” he said. “If you will now come?”

Dick followed to a large room that faced the head of the two great marble stairways.

The room was quietly furnished, yet with a suggestion of solid and expensive comfort. At one end, near a fire that blazed in a big marble fireplace, was a desk with a silver ink-stand, and by its side a comfortable lounge chair. At the other end of the room was a long table, at which the council sat.

“And now, colonel,” said the wise-looking old president, “we want you to tell us something of your interview with Her Majesty. I do not doubt that there is much that you can tell us that is not contained in these.” He laid his hand upon the open sheets before him.

Dick began haltingly, hesitating now and then for a word, but soon he warmed to his subject and grew fluent to the point of brilliancy as he told of that interview, and spoke of the solid, solemn faith the invaders had in the justice of their cause.

“I am loath to intrude what are, after all, personal impressions,” he said; “indeed, sir, it is an impertinence——”

“Please say what you wish,” said the president, nodding. “For some reason I cannot help feeling, if you will forgive me—I cannot help regarding all this as an illustration of the perversity of woman-kind. The Empress has shown exceptional confidence in you.”

So Dick went on:

“Though the war is ended, though Mid-Europe is humiliated, this hatred of our country does not end. I can see it fostered and nourished and carefully nursed from generation to generation, because the humiliation is not a thing of to-day. It is a thing of the past: it is a thing of the future. It lies—not in the extraction of so much money from their treasury or in the reduction of their trade—it lies in the continuance of British policy towards Mid-Europe.

“Their way may be in Republicanism, and a Republic in Mid-Europe would be an everlasting menace to the peace of the world. It may be that Marie Henrietta will be dethroned as a result of this war. But whatever happens, gentlemen, this vast State, with its 60,000,000 of people will be the focussing point of all that continental intriguing which is directed against Britain. We can never count on her friendship until she has the thing she is fighting for to-day and will fight for to-morrow.”

Then he began his astonishing plea—for Tabritz.

He had never heard of Tabritz until to-day. Even now he had the haziest notions as to its whereabouts. He did not understand how he was coming hard against a conservative policy which had dominated every British Government since Pitt’s days. Happily he was in ignorance of international jealousies, of the pretentions of the Czech and the claims of the Parliaments of Riponia.

But he was pleading for peace for all time. He finished abruptly, feeling, of a sudden, terribly scared at his temerity.

“Thank you, colonel,” murmured the president politely and a little tolerantly.

Dick went back to the waiting-room, and sat for an hour in an agony of apprehension and doubt. Then the staff officer came and told him he might go, and that rooms had been reserved for him at the “Blitz.”

Dick slowly descended the stairs, and found himself presently in Whitehall.

As he went out two men came in. One was the Prime Minister whose picture he had so often seen.

He reached the hotel at two o'clock in the morning, and passed through an excited throng that was discussing the news of the victory, and peace negotiations, and found his way to his room.

---

[1] The Empress Marie Henrietta was singularly prophetic, for the enthusiasm that greeted her return to Rustenburg will be fresh to memory—only she could not have anticipated the cause of this singular reception.

CHAPTER XXXV

Fully dressed he lay down on his bed and stared at the ceiling.

He'd done something wrong—but had he? These highly-placed officers, what must they have thought of him? A cub with a swelled head, he analysed himself bitterly. "Private Selby," he said in self-contempt.

There came a timid knock at the door.

"Are you in bed?" said a voice, and he jumped to his feet with all thought of the War Office and its opinion instantly banished.

"Come in," he said.

And the door opened slowly.

"Is this very dreadful of me, Dick?"

How beautiful she looked, in her long grey cloak with the delicate pink of the dress showing underneath.

"O.C.!" he stammered. For answer she put her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"Only for a minute, Dick," she whispered. "I can only stay a minute, Dick. I want you to sleep for a few hours, because something great is happening—oh, Dick! you can't imagine how great!"

Singularly well informed was the Brown Lady, as I have remarked before.

"Now as soon as I have gone you must lie down and sleep; do you hear?" She shook him gently, for he was stupidly silent. "I shall come again in the early hours of the morning—it is that now, you know—and wake you."

"But, Elise——"

She was gone, leaving behind her the subtle fragrance of her presence.

A porter woke him at five o'clock and he roused himself reluctantly. Then the man said that there was a lady waiting for him, and he became instantly and actively awake.

The unaccustomed luxury of a cold bath washed the last cobweb from his brain, and he joined the girl in the vestibule in ten minutes.

“You’ve taken nothing,” she said reprovingly, and in spite of his protest she ordered coffee and rolls.

If you can imagine these two sitting amidst the ornate magnificence of the “Blitz,” taking this frugal meal, and if you can further imagine the fact that at five o’clock in the morning the hotel corridors and smoke-rooms were filled with furiously talking people, you may gather a glimpse of the disorder that war brings to life. A nation that suddenly changes its bed-time and its meal hours is a nation disorganized.

“Now,” said the Brown Lady when they were outside, “I’m going to drive you to the House of Commons.”

“Whose car is this?” he asked curiously.

“Mine,” was the staggering reply. “Dick, I am quite rich. Poor uncle died a month ago and left me everything.”

Dick was silent, and she understood him.

“The rich Brown Lady is a new consideration,” she bantered, “but don’t you know, dear, that the heroes of old tales always marry a beggar girl or a rich princess. It doesn’t really matter which so long as it is one extreme or the other. Here we are.”

She leant out of the window of the car and showed a slip of paper to the police inspector on duty at the gate.

There were more crowds here, crowds that flocked up Whitehall, and stretched back, a sea of black heads, into Old Palace Yard.

Dick followed the girl through great halls, set about with statues of dead and gone statesmen, through little corridors, up flights of stairs until he stepped down three felt-covered steps into a gallery.

Beneath them lay the House with its serried ranks of seats, packed with silent men, who listened to the white-haired statesman standing by the table.

Dick took it all in—the Speaker in his canopied chair—the big golden mace—the white-wigged figures of the clerks.

Elise laid her finger on her lips as they took their seats.

“We are just in time,” she whispered, and the voice of the minister came up sonorously, emphatically, and with that quality of authority which had earned for him his reputation as the autocrat of democracy.

". . . those terms (he was saying) are conformable to the wishes of His Majesty's Government. We cannot pay too great a tribute of praise to a beaten enemy who recognizes his defeat, and in his wisdom takes necessary action to prevent useless bloodshed and suffering. Mr. Speaker, it is not only the conqueror who can show magnanimity—the conquered has equal opportunity, and in this instance under review, the enemy has displayed a humanity which should not pass without recognition; and"—he paused—"I propose to meet magnanimity with magnanimity." And a murmured cheer swept through the House.

"As I have already told the House," the Prime Minister continued, "we have, through the offices of Colonel Selby (Dick went red to his ears), secured a great insight into the sentiments of the Mid-European people. The House may well ask how it is that with constant communication to the two countries, with ambassadorial representations, we have not the information that Colonel Selby provides. Sir, we have had that information, but we have not regarded it with the sympathy and with the insight that Colonel Selby has brought to his examination."

He went on rapidly through the diplomatic history of negotiations; he referred to the Treaty of Belgrade, the Treaty of Bayonne, and he plunged into a sea of esoteric references that left Dick appalled at his own ignorance.

"Now, sir," said the Premier, "I have examined the attitude of previous Governments in regard to Tabritz, and in my examination I have had the invaluable assistance of my right honourable friend the leader of the Opposition, and the conclusion we have come to is this: The question of the passage of Tabritz is not sufficiently important to stand as an eternal excuse for war between this country and Mid-Europe. Whatever reason existed in time past for denying that warm-water port has now entirely disappeared. Tabritz is not in Mid-European territory, but it is within reach of it, and it is, moreover, in a country with identical interests. Mr. Speaker, I propose to remove all the embargo upon the building of railways and the construction of docks; I propose to remove for ever all excuse for the horrors and miseries of war."

Dick was trembling from head to foot when the cheering House testified its approval of this plan. He felt the girl's hand in his, and heard her whisper something, and then his name came up to him from the floor below.

"Colonel Selby's work in this connection," the Premier was saying, "deserves the highest praise. A young officer who has already served his country with singular initiative and tact—his rise to fame is an illustration of

the proverb that the hour will find the man. His reward and his future may well be left in the hands of a grateful Government."

"Now," whispered the Brown Lady in the colonel's ear, "that is all you are likely to hear about yourself—let us go into the Park."

Two days later there rode on to the Horse Guards' parade to join the gaily equipped staff that was to meet the returning and victorious army a boyish-looking officer.

On his head was a cocked hat with a feathery plume. His coat was scarlet, the sleeves heavily embroidered with knots of gold lace, his long sword with its golden knot hung straight from his saddle.

The Field-Marshal, Commander-in-Chief, returned his salute with a twinkle in his eye, and edged his horse to his side.

"Well, Selby," he said with pleasant irony, "what are you to-day? Brigadier? Lieutenant-General? Field-Marshal?"

Dick smiled.

"Nothing to-day, sir," he said.

Then the old man saw something.

A tiny lace handkerchief that peeped from between the buttons of the tunic.

"Hullo, hullo!" he said reprovingly, "what the deuce is that?"

Dick's face was the colour of his coat as he hastily stuffed the evidence of his sentiment out of sight. Nevertheless, he answered boldly enough:

"That is my order of merit, sir."

CHAPTER THE LAST

The man on duty at the gate looked approvingly at the pretty lady.

"Yes, miss," he said, "he's just gone into his quarters."

"How do you feel," asked the Brown Lady adventurously, "having even as temporary commanding officer a man who was in the ranks only a year ago?"

The orderly coughed behind his hand and eyed her suspiciously.

"In a manner of speakin'," he said cautiously, "it's rum; but he's as good as the rest of 'em—as far as they go."

Then he dropped a little of his reserve.

"The point to consider, miss, is this: It ain't education an' passin' examinations that makes a good O.C. It's a sort of inside feeling that you *know how*. D'ye see my meanin'?"

The Brown Lady nodded.

"As a matter of fact," the soldier went on, "he's goin' on the staff soon, military attachy abroad. He might have had the regiment, but I don't think he likes sittin' in judgment on his old pals. The other day Jiffy Wilkes got run in for hittin' a civilian, an' he came up before Dicky—that's the colonel's name—an' Dicky says, 'Hello, Jiffy, what made you hit the civvy?' 'I dunno, sir,' says Jiffy, 'it's very dull in Medway, an' I *had* to do somethin'!' "

"And what did the colonel say?" smiled the Brown Lady.

"He says, 'It is very dull, Jiffy, an' I know it; that's why I hate sendin' you to prison for twenty-four hours, as I'm goin' to,' an' Jiffy took his punishment cheerful because he knew that the colonel *knew*."

The Brown Lady was still smiling when she came into Dick's presence in the plainly furnished quarters.

Colonel Selby turned with outstretched hands to greet his visitor.

He had never cured himself of that absurd habit of blushing when he met the grey eyes of Elise—and they were very kindly and very tender grey eyes that surveyed him.

“I wonder, colonel,” she said demurely, “if I could tempt you to come out with me this beautiful day.”

“Rather,” said the young man impetuously, and reached for his cap.

“But, Dick,” she said, in a shocked voice, “you can’t walk with me in uniform. There are things that a colonel may not do that a private may,” she smiled, “and one of the things is that.” He was not long changing into mufti, and joined her on the tree-shaded parade ground.

“Which way?” he asked.

“I know a river-bank,” she said, “where Private Selby met me once—if Colonel Selby——”

“Don’t make fun of me,” he pleaded.

To the river-bank they went and found the towing path deserted. They discovered a grassy slope where trees spread a green canopy and save for the ripple of the stream and the twittering of birds, no sound broke in upon them.

“You sit there, and I will sit there,” she commanded, and he obeyed.

So they sat facing one another.

“A thousand years ago,” she said, “I loved a boy.”

“Meaning me?” said Dick arrogantly.

“Meaning you,” she said with becoming gravity.

“Because I loved this boy, I wished to make him something—something definite and large and good, so I took command of him, made him a soldier, and became his O.C.”

Dick nodded.

“I could do all this because I—I knew him better than he knew himself,” she went on, “because I wanted the joy of seeing the raw material shape under my hands: because I wanted to command somebody.”

“Only that?” asked Dick in a low voice.

“No—not only that,” she said slowly, “but because I loved him—you’ve made me say that twice.”

She stopped to break a twig from a bush that grew at hand, and idly and slowly she twisted it round her finger.

“In our little regiment there has been two,” she said, “the O.C. and the man, and now the time has come for me to relinquish my command.”

“To whom?”

He stared at her blankly and with a falling heart, and she met his look of concern with a little smile.

“To you,” she whispered, “you must take command now, Dick—command me.”

Dick was by her side, his arms about her.

“O.C.,” he murmured, “dear O.C.! Please God, I am worthy.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Private Selby* by Edgar Wallace]